

## Thinking of May Day and my Polish Heritage

by Shirley Mask Connolly

When I read BARRY'S BAY THIS WEEK newspaper and saw the full page spread titled GET SET FOR POLISH DAY (April 28, 1998, page 3) and then THE OTTAWA CITIZEN newspaper article titled CELEBRATE MAY DAY AND COMMUNITY'S POLISH HERITAGE, (Saturday, May 2, 1998 - written by Jim Bishop), I wished that I could have gone home to the Wilno area and joined in the festivities. And also it brought back nostalgic memories of the wonderful May Day weekend that I spent in Poland last year.

Most of the Wilno area Canadian "Poles" are descendants of the Kashubs who live in northern Poland, south of Gdansk. This was where I, my husband and my father, Louis Mask, spent May Day weekend last year. In Poland, this weekend is a "big deal", like our July 1<sup>st</sup> but with a religious element as well! We were lucky that we had booked accommodation well in advance, or otherwise we would have been out of luck.

May 1<sup>st</sup>, is the day the Polish celebrate the 1791 Polish constitution and it fell on a Friday last year. May 3<sup>rd</sup>, the religious feast day, was on the Sunday and so the Polish people enjoyed a long weekend. Absolutely everything was closed on May 1<sup>st</sup>! And it was indeed a beautiful day not to be at work. In fact, this year in Ontario we caught up with the early Polish spring where the grass was green, leaves were out and apple trees and lilacs were beginning to bloom. The Kashubs were working in their gardens, hoeing and cleaning up, spreading manure in their fields and planting potatoes. A lot of the farm work was done in the "old way" with a team of horses. We saw few tractors in Kashubian Poland. Still my dad was impressed by the farms which were stone free!

We visited a church located on a little hill in a village called Parchowa. The view did not match that of our St. Mary's in Wilno, but it was indeed pretty. Many of our Canadian Kashubs have connections to this parish and names like Gutowski, Cybulski, etc. were quite common in the cemetery on the slope of the hill. Several large pines and tall birches gently swayed in the wind as we walked through. Many parishioners were working in the cemetery, raking and sweeping the plots and planting pansies, mums and other flowers on the graves. We met a lovely lady by the surname of Krefit (like our original Mrs. Jacob Peplinski who was a Krefit "from home"). She talked to dad in Kashub as I toured the church where some of the local ladies were on their hands and knees scrubbing the slate slab floor. The main altar area was decorated in a way that reminded me of the designs Father Pick had painted in St. Casimir's in Round Lake - kind of circular medallions or buckles. I thought this rather appropriate since at least one member of his family originated in the parish of Parchowa.

But the most impressive aspect of this church, at least to me, was the old and ornately carved confessional at the back of the church. It was painted a "Wilno green" and edged with gold.

As we drove through the Kashubian countryside, wending our way to Lipusz and Lesno, we came in the back way to the small village of Tuszkowy where a couple of fellows were redoing the thatch roof on an old farmhouse. The Kashubs are no longer allowed to build homes with straw thatch, because of fire regulations, but they are allowed to maintain existing roofs. There are still many buildings with these golden caps.

Tuszkowy has special significance to me, because the Mask family originated in this village at least as far back as I can ascertain - the mid 1700's. We visited the last remaining Maszk family in the town and felt rather amazed by the difference between our worlds. Although we felt like we had stepped back in time as we passed through the door into their sparsely furnished but pristinely clean kitchen, we were surprised to see a tv in these simple surroundings. Still pretty well all the Kashubs have TVs and small white satellite dishes are a common sight, even on thatched roof farmhouses!

When our ancestors left the old country, Tuszkowy was a bustling village. Today it is a small and scenic spot with a dozen or so homes, a general store, a brick school, and a kapliczka. Every village in Kashuby seems to have either a kapliczka, which is a small wayside shrine, or a large wooden cross. Some have both. And these are still used. It is with gratitude that I look on the efforts of Martin and David Shulist of Wilno as they work to preserve our Wilno crosses and possibly to restore one or two of the lost ones.

In Kashubian Poland the crosses and kapliczkas were decorated for the May Day weekend with colourful ribbons and flowers. In Kalisz, which is probably the village that contributed the majority of Kashubs to Canada, we witnessed the continued use of these religious sites as a couple of dozen people knelt beside one in prayer. It was just after six o'clock. I wondered if my Lipinski and Kulias ancestors, who had lived in this village, had also bowed their head to pray at this same place?

In Lesno we attended evening mass. This was the second largest parish of origin of our Canadian Kashub families. The beautiful old wooden church has parts that date back over 400 years. Can you imagine the emotion that overcame me and my dad as we knelt in the place where Michael Maszk married the widow Bembenek? The church was cold and damp - heating is kept to a minimum- but the lavish gold decoration on the wooden altars made the interior glitter. Afterwards we had a late dinner with the Grajkowski family who live across the road from the church; her grandmother was a Wysocki, or as we would say, Visutski.

their loved ones. This is done to commemorate an anniversary at any time of the year, but it is intensified in honour of the May 3<sup>rd</sup> religious celebrations. The effect of hundreds of twinkling candles is incredibly beautiful.

The next day we visited the parish of Wiele, the third largest parish of origin of our Winlo area families. My dad had lots of fun talking to two Narloch (Norlock) ladies. Again the cemetery was one of the liveliest places in the town as everyone worked on cleaning and beautifying the graves. Two huge stone angels acted as guardians of the sacred place. Unfortunately most of the Kashubian graveyards have few monuments dating prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Our ancestors' graves are unidentified much like those of many of our original Winlo pioneers in the "old Winlo cemetery". Once upon a time, we too planted flowers on graves and lovingly tended these plots, but in the last fifty years, many of the old wooden crosses in the pioneer cemetery have rotted and disappeared and so the exact locations of many were forgotten. Luckily we have concerned people like Eddie and Ambrose Chippior who took on the task of resurrecting wooden crosses on identifiable graves.

In Poland the graves of our ancestors are lost forever. Many were originally around the churches. This was the case in Lipusz, the largest parish of origin of our Canadian Kashubs. Today there are two cemeteries in Lipusz, both filled with stones inscribed with the Kashubian spelling of our names, but none of these monuments are old enough to be our ancestors! While in Lipusz, I slipped into the lovely brick church for evening mass. Father Wladyslaw Szulist, who visited Winlo and Barry's Bay this past summer, was assisting at the May Day weekend masses, and he gave me communion. I was surprised that it was done in the modern fashion and not at the communion rail like in Lesno and many of the other Kashubian churches. This church was built in the mid 1860's - just before many of our people left Poland. Its varnished wood ceiling and touches of gold will always stay in my memory; I would imagine it never left the dreams of our ancestors who emigrated to Canada.

On May 3<sup>rd</sup>, we witnessed the Kashubians' strong faith in the town of Brusy where the church and even the front yard was jammed with worshippers. Everyone dresses up for church - leather jackets certainly seem to be the "in thing". As we drove out of Kashuby towards Warsaw, we stopped in still another church in the large town of Swiecie where the Wisniewski/Wisneskie family hailed from. Again the church had standing room only. The parishioners carried huge bouquets of cut flowers to place on the graves of their departed loved ones. I was astonished that the cemeteries which had been swept in preparation for the May Day ceremonies were now littered with cellophane.

Somehow, a year has passed by so quickly and the first weekend in May here again. I only wish that I could have

been in Winlo this year to celebrate May Day and my Polish heritage - because May Day weekend will never again be just an ordinary spring weekend for me! ☘

#### WHO'S WHO IN POLISH AMERICA

*The following biographical sketches for Kashubs are extracted from Who's Who in Polish America by Rev. Francis Bolek (1943)*

**Bambenek, Dominic.** Industrialist. Born and educated in Winona, Minn. With his brother Joseph, organized a concern in 1919, known as the Peerless Chain Company. Resides in Winona, Minn.

**Bambenek, Joseph.** Industrialist. Born and educated in Winona, Minn. With his brother Dominic, started an enterprise in 1919, known as Peerless Chain Co., which employs 175 workers. His firm manufactures passenger, tractor, and truck chains, commercial chains and wire products. Resides in Winona, Minn.

**Biernacki, Rt. Rev. Msgr. P., P.D., P.P.** Pastor of St. Hedwig's Parish, Barry's Bay, Ontario, Canada.

**Kropidowski, Nina M.** Teacher. Engaged as a teacher by Winona School Board, Winona, Minn. Teaches at Washington-Kosciuszko School. Address: 177 East Sanburn Street, Winona, Minn.

**Patubicki, Rev. John S.** Clergyman. Director of St. Joseph Orphanage, Omaha, Neb., for several years. In 1940 appointed pastor of Blessed Sacrament parish, Omaha, Neb., where he stays until present time. Address: 6304 North 30th St., Omaha, Neb.

**Pelowski, Louis.** Attorney-at-law. Born in Buffalo, N.Y. Education: Transfiguration parochial school; Masten High School; University of Buffalo. Married Stephanie Krystyniak. Member of the Polish Lawyers Ass'n. Offices: 849 Fillmore Ave., Buffalo, N.Y.

