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## Who Were the Kashubes?

By Ruth Kriehn

I HAVE an undying love affair with Jones Island. It all started five years ago when I retired after twenty-seven years of teaching at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Faces from old photos of my Jones Island forebears were begging me to let them live again. Gravestone markers were saying, "Once I too lived and loved."

As a child in Two Rivers, Wisconsin, I knew my father's family had fished on Jones Island from 1880 until 1910. I remember the wonderment in his voice when he said, "Oh! those Polish weddings!" I was intrigued by the fact that he had lived in a house on poles because the lake sometimes washed right over the island. I knew that he had gone to a German parochial school. I was acquainted with some of the families, and I knew many of the names of the German families who had lived on the island. With that my knowledge ended.

The day I discovered Frances Stover's article, "When Jones Island Was Squatters' Paradise," I was in paradise myself. What an island! After reading John Gurda's thesis, "Change at the River Mouth," I was hooked. What started out as simple family research has exploded into the gigantic task of resurrecting the story of the lives and loves of the people of a unique island community which has vanished from the earth. The following is the background story of the Kashubes, the close neighbors for thirty years of my forebears Franz, Wilhelm, and John Kriehn.

A goodly number of Milwaukeeans know that the Kashubes (pronounced Kah-shoobs) were a unique group of Polish fishermen from the Baltic Peninsula of Hel who settled on Jones Island in the late 1800s. Only a handful of Milwaukeeans know that these settlers were the only living representatives of a body of Slavonic tribes who, some ten centuries ago, peopled the whole territory of eastern Germany as far as the Elbe River, and that in their language and culture they were the only remaining specimen of that part of Europe before its Germanization. Although the Kashubes remained in contact with the superior civilization of their Teutonic neighbors for centuries, they never lost their ethnicity, namely, the language, customs, and domestic organization of their forefathers. Many of those distinctive



*A panoramic view of Jones Island when the fishing industry was the prime source of income for its inhabitants.*

characteristics were retained by the Kashubes who immigrated to Milwaukee a hundred years ago.

What is the origin of the word Kashuby? No one knows. Around the year 1500 the Danzig chronicles applied it to the lower strata of the rural population of northern Pomerania. The name stuck. For centuries the Kashubes considered it a mocking epithet; educated Poles and Germans turned up their noses at the mention of the word. The Kashubes fared no better in their adopted country. Milwaukee Poles considered them bare-footed peasants. They spoke an unintelligible dialect; they had no written language; some could neither read nor write. Local reporters visiting Jones Island had a field day describing them as picturesque oddities two hundred years behind the times.

What is the background of these scorned people who eventually became a mainstay of the Milwaukee fishing industry and the backbone of St. Stanislaus Church? Some details about their origins will provide an illuminating background of this distinctive ethnic group in Milwaukee.

A 1935 map by T. Lehr-Splawinski shows that "Kashuby," the Polish word for the region in which the Pomeranian (Kashubian) dialect was still spoken, stretched about 125 miles west from Gdansk and about 275 miles south to the city of Chojnice. A smaller area where the Pomeranian dialect was found was around Lake Leba, a more highly Germanized, Lutheranized region.

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The Kashubes had no upper class. Napoleonic wars, economic difficulties, gambling and neglect resulted in the ruin of big estates. The poor land with its run-down buildings was settled by small farmers, farm laborers and fishermen. These people lived and died in the village in which they were born with little contact with the outside world. Consequently, there developed more than seventy-six variations of the Pomeranian dialect. All attempts to create a common written language failed. The language of the educated classes was Polish; the peasants and fishermen spoke in their local dialects. The official language was German, but German officials interfered little in the everyday life of the Kashubes. Germanization occurred primarily by the influx of German settlers.

In 1872, after having unified Germany, Bismarck put an abrupt end to the relative freedom of this forgotten out-of-the-way people who lived on land no one else wanted. The powerful Prussian state relentlessly began its program of Germanization by force. It decreed compulsory German education for every child; the teaching of Polish was strictly forbidden. The persecution of the Catholic element in the clergy began in 1873, and the Bismarckian expulsion of all foreign Polish citizens from the eastern provinces commenced in 1885. Even Polish last names were often changed to German. These measures, plus military conscription and fiscal exploitation, were reasons the Kashubes immigrated to America.

How did these emigrants find out about the swampy little peninsula called Jones Island? The first Kashubian to set foot on the island was Valentine Struck, a fisherman. He is reputed to have visited the island before the Civil War, liked what he saw, returned to the homeland, and came back with his family after the war. Word spread about the free land and good fishing in surroundings much like those of the Peninsula of Hel. In 1872 Jacob Musa came to Jones Island from the village of Ceynowa on the Hel Peninsula, August Budzisz no. 2, also arrived in 1882. In an excerpt from a court case, Budzisz recalled, "I heard there was an island and there was water all around, and I was born near water and that is why I went there too. When I came there it was all water in a marsh. Then I had no place to live and I lived with other people for several days. Then I borrowed money from Mr. Parchim and I went on the lumber yard and bought myself lumber and began to build. It was all water and mud. Yes, I built my house on piles, and I built a fence and hauled sand so the water couldn't get in so much. I had boards laid so I could get into the house."

Joseph Parchim, who came in 1875, said he had friends on the island. He came to the island the second day and met with Jacob Muza. "Well, we drank some beer and we were old friends and he said I could build there on that ground, about 200 feet from him. The ground was fixed up a bit, but there was lots of water."

Joseph Paczocha, who came in 1884, said a brother came first and he came next. When his father and mother wrote they were coming, his brother bought a house for them.

Anton Konkel, who had just finished his stint in the Germany army, received a steamship ticket from his parents to come to the island. His three brothers had preceded him. With variations this was the Kashubian style of immigration.

What had the life of these immigrants been like before they made their momentous decision to come to so inhospitable a piece of land? Historically, their life had been one of extreme hardship and poverty. They were a peasant-fisher folk from earliest times, living on barren unproductive soil, their work hampered by long winters and late springs. Agricultural methods were primitive. In some areas wooden ploughs were pulled by a cow or even pushed by a peasant in wooden shoes. Pine needles were the only fertilizer available. The soil was too poor to grow anything but potatoes, rye, and buckwheat. Most households had pigs, one cow, chickens, and geese. It was common for poor families to have a goose sitting in their kitchen. The people lacked a written language and were isolated from the outside world. Schools and medical help were frequently non-existent; small-pox epidemics wiped out whole villages.

Fortunately this desolate land was richly sprinkled with ponds, lakes and rivers. Fisheries were known from time immemorial; land-owners gave their serfs the right to fish in these waters. Commercial fishing in the 1870s flourished on many of the bigger inland lakes. It was, however, off the Peninsula of Hel, on the Bay of Puck and on the open Baltic Sea, that the most intensive fishing was done. It was from the Peninsula Hel that the Jones Island fishermen emigrated. The entire peninsula population lived by fishing; dozens of fishing villages lined the shores on the Bay of Puck. The inhabitants were Kashubes with a scattering of enclaves of Germans. Only the village of Hel at the southern-most tip was predominantly German speaking.

A unique aspect of this society was the growth of cooperative fishermen's organizations. These organizations alone made possible a life without hunger or dire want. Twelve to fifteen members gathered at the cottage of their leader to make decisions regarding affairs of the society. They might decide on each member's contribution toward the cost of a new net, or they might discuss the admission of new members. Every society was assigned exclusive rights to fish in a particular place, which varied from year to year.

Their catches consisted of three main kinds of fish: salmon, flounder and eel. Salmon were caught in spring, flounder from Whitsuntide until the end of July, and eel from the middle of September to November. A special organization was formed for the catching of salmon and eel.

Salmon were caught in a big drag net which had a net bag in its center with two wings on either side. To each of the wings was fastened 100 to 200 yards of line. A large boat took the net out to sea where it was lowered. The boat returned and the net was pulled in by the two lines. Men, wives, and children over ten years old took

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part in the work. The salmon were taken out of the net and given a blow on the head with a wooden cudgel. Some days the net was cast six times, and at the end of the day the fish were divided. Each society male got a whole share, widows and grown children a half share, and young children about an eighth. The priest, the teacher, the widows and the sick also were taken care of. Not every catch brought in a big haul. Wind and tide and luck played a big part. One society might have a rich catch, another right next to it, nothing at all. Weather frequently made it impossible to fish for long periods at a time.

Eel were caught with eel bags in funnel-shaped double nets which were fastened to four stakes. Every society had 120 to 150 eel bags which were put out in the shallow water that stretched along the coast of the Bay of Puck. In the morning the bags were examined, the eel taken out, and the bags were put out again.

Flounder were caught with a seine net at night. It took three men to handle one net.

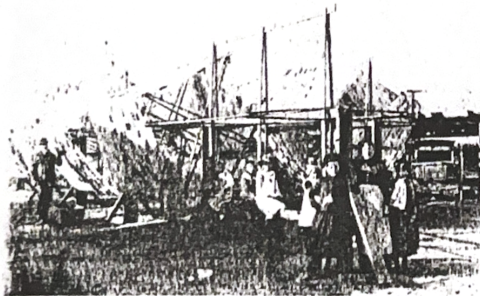
How did these fisher-folk dress? A parson who lived on the Peninsula of Hel from 1872 to 1887 described their costumes. He said that the men preferred dark blue clothes, consisting of trousers, a short jacket, waistcoat, and a cap dashingly pushed backwards. Tanned boots were worn at work. The women wore colorful skirts of no uniform cut with jackets and kerchiefs of equally colorful material. Gold embroidered caps had been replaced with black caps sometimes of silk, with small hems from

which many broad ribbons fell down on the shoulders. A broad band of white and red or white and blue was fastened to it in front. Similar headgear was worn in the neighboring parishes on the mainland. Woolen kerchiefs which had come into use only a few years before were worn as an alternative. Originally these had all been black, but now they were also red, white, and blue, or even varicolored. This same kind of dress could be found on Jones Island in the 1880s.

The Kusbubian fishermen were a fun-loving people who celebrated exuberantly with song, dance, and beer. Wedding festivities lasted several days. It is interesting to compare an early Kashubian wedding with a Jones Island wedding of 1898.

The Peninsula of Hel weddings with their touch of superstition always took place in the forenoon on Tuesdays, Fridays or Saturdays. The bridesmaids, six to ten in number, came early in the morning to dress the bride. The putting on of the wreath was always the most solemn moment. The bride was seated in the middle of the living room surrounded by the wedding guests. One of the bridesmaids brought the myrtle wreath adorned with red ribbons on a plate; another held a dish of holy water. The mother blessed the wreath, using the holy water sprinkler, and placed it on the head of the bride. Meanwhile, the fiddler played the hymn, "Who commends himself unto the protection of the Lord." With that everyone broke into tears.

Then came the procession to the church. The bridal party usually drove to church, the musicians in front and the carriage of the bridal couple in the rear. The Catholic Kashubes entered the



*Jones Islanders stretched their nets to dry before the next fishing trip.*

74



*The Badger Yacht Club was located along Jones Island's shoreline.*

75

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church immediately upon arrival, the bride walking between two bridesmaids, the bridegroom beside the wedding bidder as the groomsman. They met at the altar.

During the marriage preparations, a number of customs were observed to guard against misfortune and to ensure prosperity. While dressing the groom turned the wisps of straw in his boots, and the bride put on garters of pure flax. Both wore their shirts inside out. During the ceremony the bride and groom knelt close together so that nobody could pass between them. After these precautions, witches and evil men could not harm them. When they left the altar, they turned their faces towards each other. If the candles burned brightly during the ceremony the marriage would be successful. To gain mastery of the marriage, the bride slipped a needle in the collar of the groom.

After the dinner, the wedding dance was led by the wedding bidder. (A wedding bidder was a hired, professional matchmaker who also took charge of the entire wedding celebration.) At eleven o'clock the bride's dance began, and she danced with everyone present. Two plates fitting into each other were placed upon a table. Each guest threw the wedding present into the upper plate. It used to be a thaler (coin), thrown with such force that the plate cracked. The more fragments the more successful the marriage.

The ceremony of removing the wreath took place after the bride had danced with everyone. As she sat in the middle of the room, an elder relative took it off and replaced it with a hood, the symbol of matrimony. Then the couple was conducted into the bridal chamber, the door locked and the guests went on feasting until broad daylight. Festivities lasted several days.

The Milwaukee Kashubes were not to be outdone by their European kinsfolk in the singing, the dancing, and the uninhibited quaffing of beer at weddings. The most highly publicized wedding celebration ever to take place on the island was that of Valentina Budzisz to Anton Kanski. Valentina's parents were Kashubian net-makers. She had left home to become a housekeeper for a priest in Danziger, but when the family emigrated, she joined them on Jones Island. There she worked as a housekeeper for Anton Kanski, a restaurant-saloon keeper, and a widower with two small children. In 1898 she married her employer, the man affectionately known as "Governor" of Jones Island. It was a high style wedding.

A pre-nuptial dance lasted into the wee hours of the wedding day morning. By nine o'clock a big scow pulled the whole Kanski wedding party, dressed in all of its finery, across the Kinnickinnic River. Accompanied by band music, the whole entourage, as was the Polish custom, marched the considerable distance to St. Stanislaus Church. The groom was accompanied by two groomsmen dressed in black with white boutonnières; the bride, gorgeously arrayed in a gown of blue-green changeable silk, was accompanied by two bridesmaids dressed in white and carrying white flowers.



*Mary and Tenka Kanski, the children of Anton Kanski, "governor of Jones Island." His second marriage to Valentina Budzisz was a major social celebration for island residents.*

Nine hundred children from St. Stanislaus School and hundreds of friends witnessed the ceremony as the bridal pair, with bridesmaids and groomsman on either side, knelt and said their marriage vows in Polish. Following the ceremony, High Mass was sung by the priest accompanied by a chorus of twenty.

On the trip home the bridal couple rode in a carriage drawn by high-stepping white horses decked out in Polish fashion with embroidered streamers of red, white and blue.

Back on Jones Island a wedding breakfast was waiting, with dinner served later in the day. The dance hall was gaily decorated in green, red, white, and blue. Hoops full of candles were hung from the ceiling to give adequate light. The dancing, the music, and the free flow of beer never stopped. The highlight of the evening was the bride-dance ceremony. Everyone could dance with the bride by putting a cash contribution into a box. Valentina was swung by 500 partners before the evening was over. Dancing and feasting continued for two more days.

There were many similarities between the earlier wedding customs on the Peninsula of Hel and the customs on Jones Island. The wedding celebration was the most important religious-social

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event in the lives of each community. Both groups loved pageantry, the wedding procession to and from the church with musicians, the horse-drawn bridal carriage, and the many guests. Red, white and blue were favorite colors. Jones Islanders decorated their horses and their dance hall in these colors. The Peninsula of Hel women wore red, white, and blue streamers on their caps, and the bride had red ribbons in her wreath. The Jones Islanders retained the bride-dance tradition and, like their kinfolk, feasted, danced, and enjoyed their beer.

Undoubtedly a number of Germans who lived near the home of Governor Kanski saw the Kashubian wedding party leave on the scow and waved it on, and a number of them probably took part in the evening's merriment. About a third of the settlers were German. During the same years that the Kashubian colony from West Prussia immigrated to America, a German colony from the fishing village of Altdamm on the Dammscher See, five miles from Stettin, settled on the island.

How did these two ethnic groups, historically hostile toward one another, get along on the island? "Mind your own business" was their attitude. They lived next to each other; they bought houses from each other; they bought fish from one another; their children played together; they went to the same island dances; they supported each other when lake tragedies struck. And after 1897 it was their twenty-year-long struggle against the Illinois Steel Company, the struggle to avoid eviction from their homes and land, that united them. (The Illinois Steel Company claimed it owned a good share of Jones Island because it had paid taxes on the land. The island squatters claimed it was theirs because they had lived on it when no one else claimed it, and they had made it livable only through back-breaking work. A David-Goliath battle raged for twenty years between the two combatants.)

Because of the uncertainty of the outcome of this fight, the City of Milwaukee had neglected to build a school on the island, making it necessary for children to be ferried across the river to school. In 1896 the city had to act because one-third of the children were getting no education whatever. It is interesting to note that when the school opened in 1896-1897, one-half of the Polish students volunteered to study German. The 1872 Prussian edict establishing compulsory German education meant that most of the children of West Prussia who came to Jones Island after that year would have been taught in German. That might account for their interest in German. After four years in the Jones Island School, the Polish children invariably transferred to St. Stanislaus School where learning Polish was mandatory. Thus a whole generation of many Jones Island children became trilingual.

How prevalent was the Kashubian dialect on Jones Island? It is one hundred years too late to fully answer that question. The older settlers were bona-fide Kashubes from the Peninsula of Hel. Valentine Struck settled on the island in the late 1860s; and those who arrived in the 1870s included Jacob Muza, Michael Budzisz,

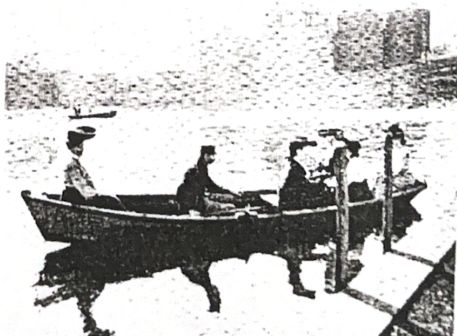
John Bolda, Joseph Parchim, Bartkowski, and August Ciskowski. Among the families coming in the 1880s were the names of Bielot, Bialk, Buschke, Cenova, Dettlaff, Jeka, Kolp, Konkel, Lenz, Patok, Pazchocha, Rotta and Zelin.

Court records and interviews with former Jones Islanders reveal that a few of these families spoke only German; a few spoke only Polish; some of the older settlers spoke only Kashubian. There were also many who spoke two and three languages. Anton Kanski and his wife spoke German fluently, Kashubian occasionally, and only English with their children.

Within families a feeling of bitterness sometimes developed when one branch of the family chose to speak German in the home in preference to the cherished Kashubian heritage. John Kolp was treated coldly by his brothers Anton, Frank, and Joseph because he spoke German and the children attended a German parochial school rather than a Polish-speaking school.

When children who had picked up Kashubian from their parents or grandparents enrolled in Polish parochial schools, their classmates frequently taunted them with, "Here come the fish-belly Kashubes!" Their strange pronunciation of Polish words was always cause for great hilarity. Americanization of these children inevitably led to the demise of the Kashubian dialect.

Jacob Muza, the "father" of the Kashubian community, who came to the island in 1872 and encouraged other families to join



When a public school opened on Jones Island, teachers were ferried to and from the island in a row boat.

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## I AM A POOR FISHERMAN

him, promised them free land and help in building their houses, spoke only German. In court he was questioned in Polish:

- Q. How old are you?  
A. I don't understand that. I don't want to make a mistake.  
Q. Don't you speak Polish?  
A. I don't talk Polish. I talk German.  
[A German interpreter was called in.]  
Q. Where were you born?  
A. In Ceynowa, Germany.  
Q. That's on an island, isn't it?  
A. No. It's on a peninsula. It is seven miles from Danziger on the Peninsula of Hel.

In questions concerning the transfer of property he said, "I am Polish. I speak German. I say 'deed' in German. It is 'deed' in English."

Whatever the explanation of his German-speaking background, it was with the help of Jacob Muza that the Kashubes brought to Jones Island their dialect, their fishing skills, their particular dress, their song and dance, their birth-marriage-death customs and their feeling of group responsibility. The feeling of caring for their own was exemplified by Jacob Muza himself. He consistently helped newly arrived Kashubes find a spot on the island on which to build, helped them measure off their property, and helped them with enough land-fill to drive in piles for their house. As on the Peninsula of Hel, the fishermen and fish peddlers saw to it that the poor were supplied with fish. As a fish peddler, Anton Kanski always filled the market baskets of the nuns of St. Joseph's Orphanage to overflowing; they thanked him heartily with, "May St. Anthony bless you, Anton!" If a poor neighbor could not afford to donate to the church when the priest called, he would say, "Go to Anton. He'll give you some money." The Kashubes' generosity was particularly demonstrated in their support of the church. As thanks for being spared in a devastating island storm, they gave an ornamental rood to St. Stanislaus Church. It can still be seen today.

The community fishing organization of the Peninsula of Hel was not developed on Jones Island. Rather, fishing became an extended family affair with relatives organizing to build shanties, to buy nets, and to buy ever bigger boats.

The Kashubes' joy in dance and song never flagged. Anyone visiting an island saloon-dance-hall in the 1890s on a Saturday night would have seen Kashubian families enjoying folk dances, waltzes, and of course polkas played on accordion and piano. One might have heard them break out into song with the popular "I Am A Poor Fisherman."

Strange to say, this song was also sung in German by the German men's chorus of Jones Island. It was sung in Stettin and even in Hamburg, Germany. a rough translation of its words follows:

A poor fisherman I am indeed  
I earn my money dangerously  
But when Sweetheart waits on shore  
Fishing is never a bore

She has a rose-red mouth  
breasts apple round  
hands delicate and soft  
and teeth like ivory

When we go out to sea  
and throw out our nets  
each fish, big and small  
is eager to be caught

When we pull in our nets  
and return from the catch  
Sweetheart slips into  
her bedroom to sleep

Early the next morning  
a knock is heard on the door  
Get up young fisher so brave and good  
It's back to fishing you must go

And when the month of May has passed  
and fishing stops  
Sweetheart stands at the wedding altar  
Long life to the happy fishing pair

What happened to the Kashubian and German fishermen who sang this song on Jones Island? They prospered. At the time they were evicted from the island to make room for the new harbor and sewerage disposal area after World War I, many were fishing on a large scale with big steel tugs. They moved their operations to the mainland, merged with city life, and lost their unique identity.

Today descendants of the early Kashubes come to Jones Island from all over the country once a year to commemorate the pioneers of a once-thriving fishing village. They gather on a little hard-to-find pocket-sized piece of land called Kazube's Park, near 1400 South Car ferry Drive, designated by the City of Milwaukee as a historic site. They relax under the shade of the two remaining beautiful willow trees planted by their forefathers. And they remember. The old-timers of today recall stories of the old-timers of yesterday, of frightful lake storms, of lives lost, of lives saved; stories of the successful fight against the million dollar steel corporation, and stories of the fights between the Barclay Street gang and the Jones Island gang.

Nostalgia is broken by the beginning of Polish dancing, Polish singing and the aroma of roasting Polish brats.