

Kashubian Fisherman's Village on Lake Michigan

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Jakub Muza, who came to Milwaukee together with other fishermen in 1872 thought that this island will be valuable for fishing. There were nine or ten houses on the island when he first saw it.



Pan (in English, Mr.) Muza decided to settle on the island; he bought a little house from a man named Gottlieb Truher together with rights to unoccupied land on the island. As soon as he moved in, he wrote to his family back in Kaszuby to come to Milwaukee telling them he had free land for them. He split the island between those who arrived and they helped him to protect it against the storms and to drain it whenever necessary. soon the new settlers began to build a breakwater from the lake side. The wood they used for it was brought to the island by water, and women collected it. The foundation of the breakwater was made from barrels that were filled with stones and put down on the ground. During the trial of Pan Muza vs. the Illinois Steel Company, they dug in the spot indicated by Pan Muza and the barrels were found indeed. It was to prove that Pan Muza with his family had enlarged the island from the lake side, and therefore were the lawful owners of the island. Prior to the construction of the breakwater, every storm was a threat to the fishermen's properties since it could get damaged easily.

Pan Muza also build a breakwater on the river side, and a road that cut the island from the north of the south. This road goat a 'big' name--Grand Avenue. After every storm the road had to be repaired, and the ruts made by the water had to be filled with dirt.

The village of Jones Island, right be the side of the big city where streets continue for miles in a straight line, has one characteristic besides the aforementioned Grand Avenue. There are no other streets, and for good reason too. The settlers sent to Poland for more and more people to come over. The newcomers would get a little piece of their own land to start with, and therefore houses were built wherever it was convenient, not paying any attention to a formal street layout. Years ago the island was cut with a network of ditches for the drainage after storms. The islanders used them as convenient roads as well.

That is how the Kashubian village on Lake Michigan started, as the hard working fishermen who drained the swampy marsh land, build breakwaters against the lake waters and storms, and created the village that resembled villages in their old homeland. The did not think for a moment that someone could take this all away from them. But they did not know the greed of industry. More than twenty years ago, rich Illinois Steel Company started to push the Kashubs out of the island, stating that the island belongs to the company. When the threats did not help, the company used a trick. They sent agitators to the island who were to persuade the fishermen to sign leasing contracts with the company declaring that they were renting the land they occupied. This would amount to a renunciation of all the fishermen's rights to their own properties. But the islanders were smarter than that, and armed with their brains, drove the agitators away from the island.

But this was not the end of the trouble for the islanders however. The rich company did not let go; they sued the fishermen, every single one of them is separate suits. The first trial against Alexander Budzisz lasted many years. On the 5th of November, 1902, the verdict was issued on appeal by the Wisconsin State Supreme Court forcing Pan Budzisz to move out of his house. Then they continued with more trials. But, because Kashubs are stubborn, it was hard to predict when the trials would be over. They involved a lot of monies too. It cost both the fishermen and the company dearly.

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The main reason for Kashubs to loose their trials was their honesty. When one was selling land to another they did not have anything written since they thought it was not necessary. They would shake hands as a sign that the contract was being made and the case was over. This was the key argument of Illinois Steel Company, that argued such contracts had not been legally made. During the trials, a few lawyers got very sick. Two of them died from work overload, they said, and some got very ill.

Not long ago the Milwaukee Council decided to build water cleaning reservoirs on Jones Island and bought some land from the people. The city deposited some money with the court, and whoever wins the trial gets the money from the court.

Therefore, pretty soon the fishermen of the village of Jones Island will not exist, and the citizens will be scatter. Some have already moved to different parts of the city, but it is still unknown at this time what the fishermen still living on the island will do. Maybe they will move to different neighborhoods and change their professions, but is it possible that they will be able to find another place suitable for fishing? It will be very difficult to leave the island that they had built themselves, and that they love regardless of the many difficulties and discomforts.

The man that had spent his entire life on the water, and had been breathing the clear lake air will have a hard time to get accustomed to new conditions, for example, to work in a dirty and full of smoke factory where every day he has to do the same repetitive work that someone else assigns to him. It will not be an easy task, especially that up until that point he was his own boss, and worked independently. But a man, if he has to, can get accustomed to just about anything, and our fishermen will have no choice but to reconcile with this sad reality.

The fishermen from Jones Island played an important role in the history of Saint Stanislaw Parish. Who knows Kashubs knows about their attachment to the faith of their ancestors. In the old country, the Churches are often spread twenty American miles apart. Every Sunday, however, people hurry to their Church to stand in front of their Greatest Lord and get relief in their grief and get encouragement for the future. Every year, in May, there are many Kashubian pilgrims coming to *Kalwaria* (Way of the Cross) near Wejherowo. It is a common meeting place for Kashubs from over the sea with the Kashubs living as far as Kosciierzyna lying ten European miles south of Wejherowo.

Fishermen from the Hel Peninsula worship God's Mother of Swarszewo the most. They tell many legends about her. All Kashubs worship also Saint Barbara who is the patron t of a fortunate death.

One could think that Kashubs who arrived in Milwaukee in a small number, and were thrown into different realities will forget about traditions and customs of their homeland, and will loose some of their characteristics on the new ground. But, that is not what has happened. The fishermen from Jones Island are devoted to the Church and retaining their holidays there were celebrated years ago in Kaszuby. And so, every year they but a Mann is honor of Saint Barbara, and everyone who can hurries to Saint Stanislaw Church for the celebration.

We had mentioned that many Kashubs were in a group that started this Church, the oldest Polish Church in Milwaukee, and also they were helping with the development of this parish, and did not withhold the money to pay off the parish debt. It would be a great disadvantage to the parish if Kashubs, after they left Jones Island, would move away and become parishioners in different churches. But they were so attracted to their Church that they were trying to move near by it, and helped their Parish to develop even more and Kashubs generously matriculated with golden letters in the history of this Parish.