Jones Island – A Milwaukee Kashubian Settlement
(Paula Colwell)

My husband and I attended the Polish Festival in Milwaukee this summer and found it to be enjoyable. After we left the festival, we decided to seek out Jones Island, which is where a group of Kashubians settled on the shores of Milwaukee in the 1870's. I learned about the settlement when I was working on the PGS-MN website a few years ago and I have always had a curiosity about it, especially since my ancestors were Kashubian.



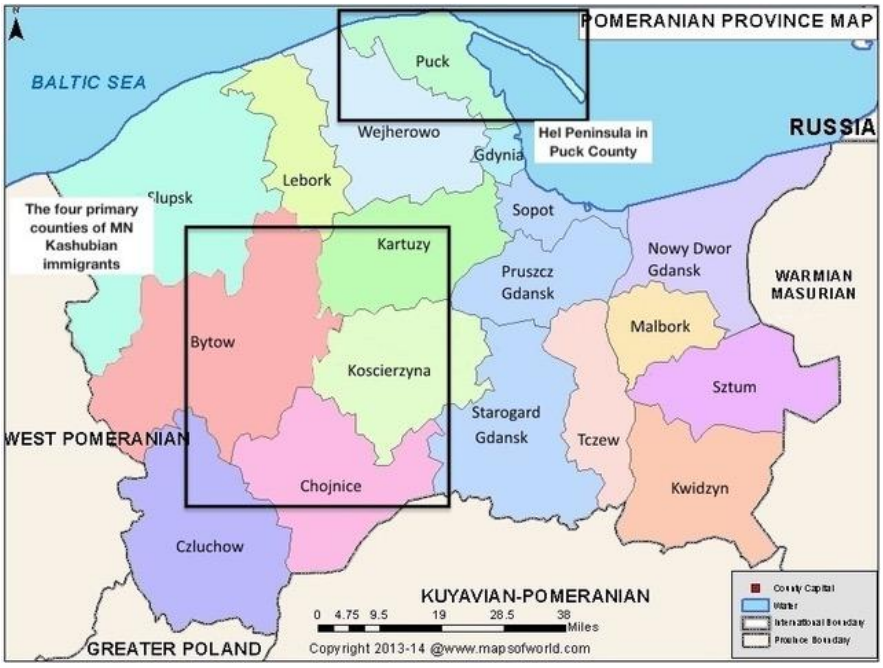
Location: Jones Island (it was actually a peninsula) was a marsh area where the Menomonee River, the Milwaukee River and the Kinnickinnic River all flowed out to Lake Michigan. In 1854, shipbuilder James Monroe Jones established a shipyard there and the location was named after him. As Kashubians began arriving, they drained the marsh and created their own community in the space, which grew into a busy village. A small group of German Lutherans from Stettin and Scandinavians lived alongside them, but the Kashubians dominated the island.



The area has since been filled in and is now totally industrial, dominated by a wastewater treatment plant, freight yards, petroleum storage tanks, salt and sand piles for snow removal, as well as other industrial businesses.

What remains of the Kashubian settlement is a patch of about ten trees (the only trees in the entire area), an anchor, a few picnic tables and a small plaque identifying it as a city landmark. It is described as being the size of a basketball court (60 by 100 feet), with a sign designating it as "Kazube's Park." The park is the last reminder that Jones Island was a living community of a unique group of fishing people. Today, Kashubian descendants continue to hold an annual picnic in that tiny space each August.

The Kashubians who settled there were mainly fishing people. They came from the Hel Peninsula, in the Puck Powiat (county) on the Baltic Sea, north of Gdansk. Hel is a unique area of Kashubia and very different from the homeland of the Minnesota Kashubian farmers, who came mainly from the central part of Kashubia.



Initially, the Kashubians on Jones Island fished from small rowboats and set their nets close to shore. Eventually, they obtained motorized fishing boats and went further out onto Lake Michigan. At their peak, they caught two million pounds of fish in a typical year, including lake trout, whitefish, herring, perch and sturgeon. Fresh, smoked and salted fish was sold through wholesalers as well as door to door on the mainland.

At one time, over 1,500 Kashubians lived on Jones Island and their homes were built randomly, many of them just small shacks made of scrap wood. As the mainland of Milwaukee grew with advances such as streetlights, trolleys, indoor plumbing, electricity, and phone service, the Kashubians were still living as they did in the 1800s, with small wooden houses, dirt roads, kerosene lamps, and outhouses.

Culture: In addition to managing their households, the Jones Island women sold the fish, and many were weavers. They made the fishing nets as well as hammocks and other types of nets.

The Island was a network of interrelated families who supported social clubs, a baseball team, a chorus, and eleven saloons, each with its own version of a Friday night fish fry.

The Jones Island Kashubians founded St. Stanislaus Bishop and Martyr parish in Milwaukee. Families could be seen dressed up on Sunday mornings, rowing across the Kinnickinnic River to attend Mass. The original church was built in 1866, and the present larger church building was built in 1874 to accommodate the growing Kashubian population, on the corner of 5th and Mitchell Street. The church was the "Mother Church" of the South Side Polish community.

My husband and I were lucky to have arrived at the church as they were locking the doors after the 4:30 Saturday Mass. We received our own tour of the church from a committed parish member. She told us that the Mass is held in English most of the time, but in Latin one Saturday each month (as it was on the day that we were there). The parishioners raised funds to restore it and maintain its history. It is a beautiful church, and the original baptism font is still being used.



End of an Era: By 1910, as Milwaukee's population grew to 400,000, there was an urgent need for a sewage treatment plant and an outer harbor. Jones Island was the obvious location for both.

Unfortunately for the Kashubians on the island, they were considered squatters and did not own any of the land they had lived on for so many years. There were lawsuits trying to protect their rights on the property but in 1914, the city condemned the land. At that time, there were only 300 families living there. By 1922, it was down to six families. The fishing continued for some, even when they moved to the mainland, but many took factory jobs in the city. Their lives had changed dramatically.

There were a few holdouts, one being Felix Struck, a saloonkeeper who also sold smoked fish. He was the last person on the island and was finally removed in 1943 for security reasons along the port during WW2. In 1974, the site of Struck's saloon was made the only public space on the island (which is the park described at the beginning of this article).

For More Information: There are a number of articles and an informative video about the Jones Island Kashubians in the *From Poland to Minnesota* section of our website (go to Members Only/From Poland to MN/Poland/Kashubia/Kashubian Emigration).