

Nick Sieracki Reminisces: A Short Story

When my father needed a bigger house for his growing family, he bought his father's house at 507 E. 2nd Street in Winona, Minnesota. And my grandfather, Nick Sieracki, continued to live in this home with all of us. My memories of my grandfather are very shadowy because I was so young – only five when he died in 1950. But here is a description of a visit with him that I can only wish had really happened.

I was in the kitchen and heard the unique sounds of the Polish language that were coming from the basement. I went down the stairs and found my grandfather listening to the Polish radio station broadcasting from Chicago. He was sitting at a table rolling cigarettes with a little green contraption and methodically putting them into empty packages.

When he noticed me, he leaned over and moved a stool next to the table. I took that as a cue that he wanted a little company, so I sat on the stool, put my elbows on the table, and held my head up with both hands under my chin. He looked at me and I looked at him. The light from the table lamp made his thick white hair seem to glow, and it brought out the faded colors in his old cardigan sweater.

After we had sufficiently sized each other up, he asked, "Well, Charlie, what's on your mind?"

I was intrigued by the exotic sounds of the Polish language, so I asked if he spoke Polish when he was little.

He put a new cigarette in his mouth, lit it with the butt of the previous one, and carefully extinguished the butt in the full ashtray.

"Oh yes! Everyone in this house spoke only Polish when your Dad was a little boy like you."

The smile in his eyes invited me to ask another question: "What it was like in the olden days when everyone spoke Polish?"

He raised his eyes to the ceiling while he thought for a moment and said: "Well, the most exciting times were in the 1890s when I worked as a typesetter for Mr. Derdowski at the Polish newspaper Wiarus here in Winona. He was always feuding with someone. You know he was a very big man with long black hair and a big moustache. Not the kind of guy you want to argue with.

I went with him one time on the train to St Paul to be his witness in a libel suit in the courthouse. He talked to me the whole way. He told me about the little Pomeranian village of Wiele where he knew my father, and he said he was so happy to live in Winona among so many other people from Kashubia. He told me that he trained to be a typesetter like me, and that gave him the idea to write articles, poems and novels himself. But what really bothered him was the way that the Prussian Chancellor Bismarck was taking away the land, the language and even the Church from Kashubians. So he did what he could to resist the Prussian oppression. And when he left and came to America, he continued his crusade here to encourage Kashubian immigrants to keep our holy faith, our language and our traditions.

“What happened at the courthouse?” I asked.

Grandpa laughed and raised his hands in the air: “The case was dismissed!”

Grandpa didn’t want to stop talking. He seemed to be transported to a time long ago. and I did not want to interrupt him.

“Our pastor at St. Stanislaus, Fr. Byzewski, had asked Mr. Derdowski to be the editor of the *Wiarus* newspaper. But then what does Mr. Derdowski do? He immediately published criticism of some Catholic priests, and Fr. Byzewski promptly asked him to leave. But eight weeks later, the new owners convinced Mr. Derdowski to return – and with good reason. Polish people just loved to read his news and clever comments. He sold so many newspapers not only in Winona but in Milwaukee, Chicago, and Detroit, that he made enough money in three years to buy the newspaper.

Then Grandpa’s eyes squinted and his face darkened.

“But, you know, sometimes Mr. Derdowski went too far. He supported his good friend, Fr. Domalgowski, the pastor of St. Stanislaus and often published his controversial articles in the newspaper. The parishioners became fed up with Fr. Domalgowski to the extent that the Bishop in 1893 let him resign and leave. But Mr. Derdowski continued to write in favor of Fr. Domalgowski. The other typesetters and I were so disgusted that we quit our jobs. So Mr. Derdowski had to take the train all the way to Chicago to find typesetters to replace us.

I could see that all this turmoil wore down Mr. Derdowski. I was in his office when he read the personal attacks against him by the parishioners of St. Stanislaus in Chicago that were published in the *Polish Weekly of Chicago* in 1895. They said that Mr. Derdowski’s criticism of their pastor, Fr. Barzynski, were poisonous seeds to their morals. Well, when Mr. Derdowski read this, he pounded the desk and shouted, ‘How dare they attack my morals when I am trying to defend Holy Mother the Church?’ His face turned red and his eyes glared.

His wife, Joanna, was very worried about the bad effect all this stress had on his health. She stood behind him and gently rubbed his temples. To calm him down, she began to sing the “March of the Kashubs,” which he had written in his novel, On Mr. Czorlińsci. He loved listening to that song, especially when Joanna sang it. She had a wonderful voice.

Charlie, you should remember the words. And he hummed some of the lyrics.”

There where the Vistula from Cracow

Into the Polish sea flows,

The Polish faith, the Polish language

Will never perish.

Never to extinction

Shall the Kashubs come.

Grandpa's voice turned into a whisper. "Those were the exciting good old days in Winona. On Sundays, the priest would stand in the pulpit at St. Stanislaus and give his sermon on how to behave. And on Thursdays in his newspaper office just down the street from the church, Mr. Derdowski would be publishing his opinions on how Poles should be faithful to their traditions. I still miss our Kashubian warrior. We all do."

I saw that Grandpa had a far-away look in his eyes as he put another cigarette in his mouth and lit it with the butt of the previous one. I knew our conversation was over, so I reluctantly walked upstairs where only English was spoken.

Grandpa died shortly after this and my window to the good old days was closed forever.