

## St. Mary's Cemetery, Winona



Tombstone of Joseph and Marianna Sieracki

My cousin Paul Libera once explained that William Hamilton, candidate for mayor, donated part of the land at St. Mary's Cemetery for free burial plots for Polish people of Winona. When I cut grass for a summer job at the cemetery in the 1960s, the oldest section was still called the "Polish Section." Part of it was on a hillside and not easy to cut. Nearly all of the names on the tombstones there are names of those Poles who came first to Winona. St. Mary's Cemetery is the final resting place for generations of Polish families in Winona.

My father told me that he used to cut grass at the cemetery with a push mower. My older brother Robert also cut grass at the cemetery before I did. He was a good worker and this may have influenced Clare Gappa, the supervisor, to hire me when I applied. It was a mixed blessing. The weekly paycheck was welcome but it reflected five and a half days a week of walking behind a loud, smelly power mower for a dollar an hour. Walking again and again over every grave all summer long beat out of my mind any fears of the supernatural. On the contrary, the hillside setting of this exquisitely-landscaped cemetery in the Mississippi Valley was a pleasant place to work. And I was intrigued by the names on the tombstones, many of which I was familiar with. I was not able to put the pieces of the puzzle together, that is, to understand that many people there were related to me, until Paul Libera explained the history of our family. Marianna Sieracki came from Wiele, Poland, to Winona with her two sons, Joseph my great-grandfather, Franciszek and her daughter Julianna Sieracki Repinski.

Along with Marianna Sieracki and her family, other relatives from nearby villages came to Winona. Many of their descendants are buried in the cemetery. My ancestors were joined by thousands of others coming from Kashuby to create another Polish community in Winona. One early nickname for this community was "Little Warsaw." A more apt title would be "Little Kashubia." Here are the family names of some of the earliest Polish emigrants to Winona: Bronk, Eichman, Bambenek, Kaldunski, Libera, Leterski, Losinski, Pehler, Pellowski, Rudni, Walenski, Wejer, and Wnuk.

Whenever I look over the thousands of tombstones, it occurs to me that here in their final resting place, the Polish of Winona have formed a third community. Here are gathered all those who made the journey to Winona and their descendants who built the East End of Winona and worked hard to raise their families so they in turn could have a better life. Cousins, family members, friends and neighbors are gathered together in eternity. They are not gone. They live on in our memory and their legacy continues in their descendants.

In Poland, people feel this connection with cemeteries. They often go to the cemetery to pay their respects to those who have preceded them. On All Souls Day, news stories feature pictures of cemeteries glowing with the light from thousands of candles. When the Mayor of Bytów and his cousin came to Winona, they insisted on a visit to St. Mary's Cemetery to see the tombstone of Hieronim Derdowski, a famous Kashubian poet and publisher of the Polish newspaper in Winona, *Wiarus*. We found the tombstone and paused in a moment of silence and prayer. Then I witnessed a little ritual I had never seen before. Taking snuff is an old custom in Kashubia. The Mayor and his cousin took out their fancy snuff boxes, tapped some snuff on the tombstone and then took some snuff themselves in show of solidarity with the poet. Next, we visited the tombstones of my great-grandparents and my parents. In front of the tombstone of my parents, the Mayor and his cousin lit a candle in their memory.



Tombstone of Hieronim Derdowski