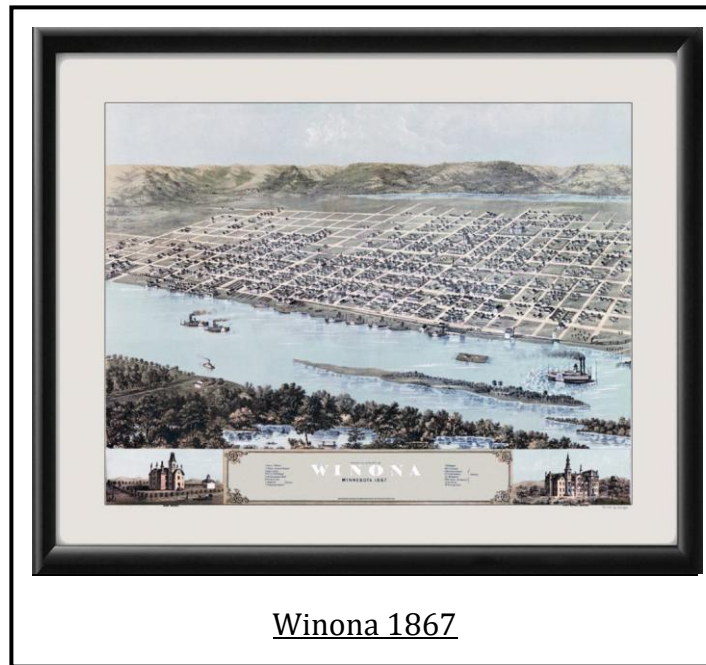


## **Kashubian-Polish Immigration to Winona** **by Charles Sieracki**

On June 30, 1873, my great grandparents, Jósef and Marianna Sieracki, arrived at the port of New York aboard the steamship, Baltic. They had left forever their little Kashubian village of Wiele and were on their way to Winona, Minnesota. After their escape from a life of poverty exacerbated by the oppressive policies of the Prussian government, they were hoping to find a better life in America. During this period, America was expanding westward across the continent and business was booming, so good farm land was available and jobs were plentiful. And perhaps equally important, America was offering freedom to European peasants. Now, 150 years later, we must not lose sight of the legacy our ancestors have left us. A review of the experiences of our Kashubian ancestors' experience suggests that they successfully grafted a Kashubian village way of life into the East End of Winona.



Moving to a new country abroad with no hope of return was a daunting venture, but Jósef and Marianna Sieracki were not venturing forth alone. Jósef's mother, and his brother Franciszek and sister Julianna came later with their spouses and others from Wiele. Because of the faltering economy and lack of farmland and employment opportunities, Chancellor von Bismarck was

allowing some Polish families to emigrate. And, in turn, the United States was welcoming the new source of labor. Shipping lines facilitated the passage of “steerage” passengers to enhance their profits. Most of the Polish immigrants to the United States in the 1870s went to the big industrial cities of the Midwest. However, the destination of choice for thousands of Kashubians - including my family and poet and publisher Hieronim Derdowski -- was the bustling little city of Winona, Minnesota.

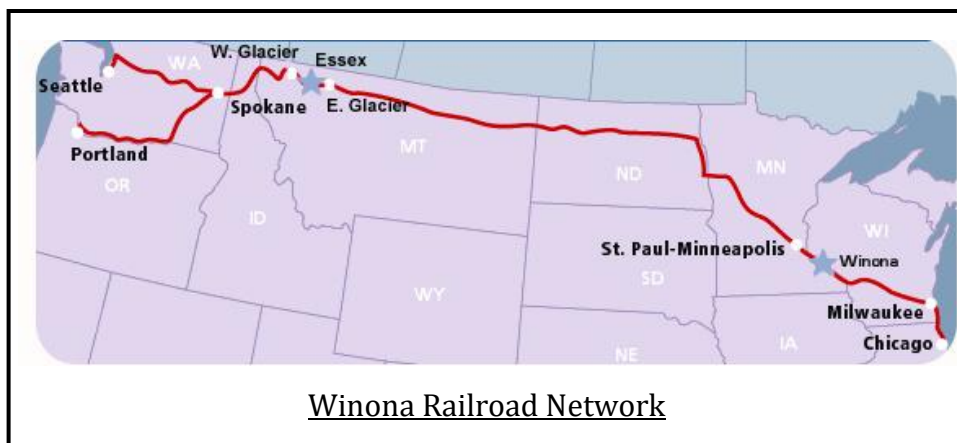


Paul Libera reported that the first two Polish families, the Bronks and the Eichmans, who settled in Winona arrived in 1855. They had sailed to New York, took the train to St. Louis and finally sailed by riverboat to Winona (“History of Polish People, Winona, Minnesota”). Joseph Hughes pushed the date to 1859 and included the additional names of Felckowski, Kiedrowski, Kukowski, Libera, Pelowski, Reszka and Walenski ([bambenek.org](http://bambenek.org)). Their letters sent back home encouraged an estimated twenty-five more Polish settlers mostly from Kashubian villages such as Ugoszcz, Borzyszkowy, Brusy, Leńnice, Lipusz, and Wiele. Larry Reski has documented that “on May 14, 1859 the ship Elbe left Hamburg, Germany bound for Quebec with several related families: Mathias Piekarski, Rosalie Platowna, Catharina Libera, Martin Galewski, John Walinski, Joseph Bronk, Frank (Runsavage) Rzenszewicz, Mathias Kistowski, Michael Konkel” ([Poland to Pine Creek, Wisconsin](http://Poland to Pine Creek, Wisconsin)). Before

the end of the century thousands more had arrived. American railroads, advertisers, land agents, emigration agents, Polish American Societies, international shipping companies, German emigration societies, and most important of all letters sent back home all played a role in facilitating emigration from Prussia.



Winona Transportation Advertisement



Winona Railroad Network

Winona had much to offer our Kashubian ancestors. It was surrounded by good farmland, made available for American settlers through the Indian treaties of 1851. Following the Homestead Act of 1862, this farmland was essentially free for the immigrants. For a nominal filing fee, a head of the household aged 21 years or older could claim up to 160 acres of land. And after building a home, making improvements, and farming the land for five years, the homesteader got title to the land. A historic wave of immigrants rushed to claim the land. They needed a transportation system so they could sell their farm produce and in turn buy the goods and services they needed. Nearby was the port of Winona, strategically located between the Twin Cities, Milwaukee and Chicago, so it was served by major railroads as well as Mississippi River boats. By 1871, there was regular train service between Winona and St. Paul. In the early 1900s, fifteen daily passenger trains from five railroad companies connected Winona with St. Paul, Milwaukee, Chicago and other cities. Winona was the gateway for an ever-increasing flow of commerce between the industrialized East and the farmlands of the West. And farm produce found eager markets. By 1870, Winona was a major wheat milling center and the fourth largest wheat shipping port in the country. Logs from Wisconsin forests were floated to huge lumber mills in Winona. Lumber production peaked in 1892. Consequently, jobs were plentiful as well as small business opportunities for entrepreneurs. Finally, Winona had a climate similar to what the Kashubians were used to as well as game to hunt in the forests and fish to catch in the Mississippi River watershed.



Wieczorek Grocery Store



Sieracki House

The Kashubian immigrants built little wooden houses for their families near the lumber mill and the flour mill so they could walk to work. Lumber

and the small plots of land were cheap, and the simple frame houses were easy to build. As the streets became filled with houses from Front Street, to Second Street, and on to Third Street a little Polish community was formed served by Polish shop owners, and then by the Polish Church on Fourth Street - St. Stanislaus. The first church building was constructed in 1873. To serve the rapidly-growing population a bigger church building was built in 1894.



Hieronim Derdowski

Thanks to Hieronim Derdowski, Winona Poles were served by the local newspaper, Wiarus. Small businesses were established within easy walking distance of the homes to take care of everyday needs: grocery stores, taverns, and barber shops, pharmacies and beauty shops. More specialized stores and services were also within walking distance, such as, furniture stores, funeral homes, jewelry stores. This community was affectionately called “Little Warsaw” clearly indicating that the immigrants had successfully created a community that maintained their Polish language, Catholic religion, and culture.