



Hieronim Derdowski: Patriot, Poet, Publisher

Talk given by Charles Sieracki at the Polish Museum, June 14, 2023

Good morning! Welcome everyone. Dzień dobry! Witamy naszych gości z Bytowa.

In 1892, my grandfather, Nicholas Sieracki traveled to St. Paul, Minnesota, with Hieronim Derdowski to serve as a witness for him in a trial where he was being sued for libel. Thank you, Jeff Turkowski, our new director of the Polish Museum, for allowing a Sieracki again to bear witness to the good character of Hieronim Derdowski.

I would also like to thank the two people from the Winona International Friendship Association who made this whole week with our guests from Poland possible: Michelle Alexander and Tim Breza.



City of Bytów

We welcome our visitors from Bytów. They are the leaders who will extend and deepen the relationship between Winona and Bytów.

Hieronim Derdowski was born in Wiele in 1852 and died in Winona in 1902. Wiele is only a short distance – about 27 miles - from the town of Bytów. People from this area formed the bulk of the Kashubian immigrants to Winona.



Let's demonstrate Winona's connection with Wiele. I am going to read the names of people who were inhabitants of Wiele in the late 19th and early 20th century. Please raise your hand if this name is in your family or if you know of someone with this name in Winona: **Bruski, Rogala, Kiedrowski, Kozłowski, Przytarski, Lipiński, Pepliński, Kukliński, Drażkowski, Knopik, Wardyn, Libera, Łangowski, Breszka, Thrun, Kaldunski, Repiński, Lewiński, Lesmann, Łosiński, Derdowski, Sieracki**. These families immigrated to Winona from Kashubia and very likely from Wiele.

Hieronim Derdowski in Kashubia

“Hieronim Derdowski (1852-1902) – the most famous Kashubian poet in the world”
(Józef Borzyszkowski, The Kashubs, Pomerania, and Gdańsk, p. 7)

At the end of the 19th century, a giant wave of people immigrated to Winona from Kashubia. Jeff's presentation on the emigration from the Kashubian region provides an important political and social context for a discussion of Hieronim Derdowski.

During the lifetime of Derdowski, Poland as a country did not politically exist. The region of Kashubia was controlled by Prussia. And Prussia was making life difficult for Kashubians. Chancellor Bismarck was trying to turn Kashubia into a part of Prussia. The Kashubian way of life, Catholic religion, the Kashubian language, and economy were being threatened with annihilation. Young men were being drafted into the Prussian army. My great-grandfather's brother was drafted into the Prussian army.

As you would expect, Kashubian leaders reacted to this threat. But resistance was a daunting challenge. There was no region-wide political organization. Small towns and villages were isolated from each other with limited travel or means of communication.



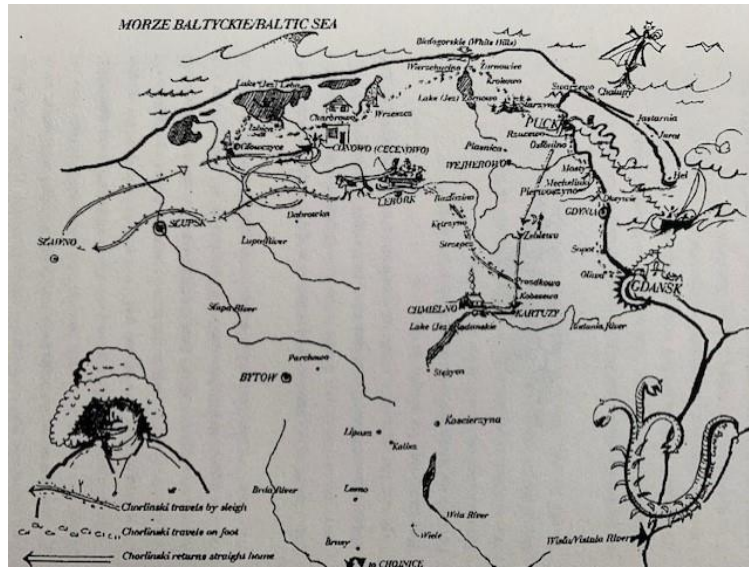
Florian Ceynowa (1817-1881)

The first major Kashubian activist in the 19th century was Florian Ceynowa. Ceynowa recognized the life of the culture was being squeezed to death by the Prussians so he tried to awaken his fellow Kashubians to the value of their culture and the need to preserve it. Most everyone in Kashubia spoke Kashubian, but no one published anything in Kashubian. Except for religious publications such as prayer books and hymnals, there was no written literature. So Ceynowa took it upon himself to translate and publish literature in Kashubian. He created and published a Kashubian dictionary and grammar, and he organized the Kashubian Movement for the preservation of the Kashubian culture.

Hieronim Derdowski

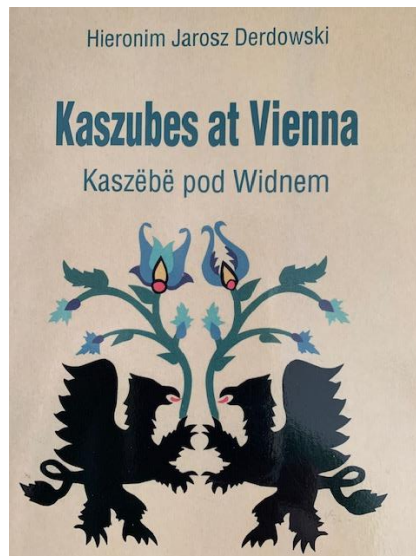
The next two major Kashubian activists were Hieronim Derdowski and Aleksander Majkowski. They were the first two writers who wrote literature of outstanding merit in Kashubian. Today, we are talking about Derdowski. Unlike Ceynowa, Derdowski did not advocate armed insurrection. He saw that Kashubians were in no position to win anything in battle. That lesson was made clear by Ceynowa's planned attempt in 1846 to storm a Prussian garrison with 100 Kashubians armed with the most dangerous weapon farmers owned – scythes. They all returned to their farms before the battle even started. But Derdowski was imprisoned by the Prussian authorities on five or six occasions because what he was saying and publishing was illegal.

Derdowski tried to make a living in the publishing business. He worked at a bookshop in Poznań, worked as a tutor, a translator and finally as a journalist. in Toruń. While he is working as a journalist, he wrote his two most famous literary works. The first is About Pan Czorliński Who Went to Puck to Buy Fishnets (1880). And the second is Kashubians at Vienna (1883).



About Pan Czorliński Who Went to Puck to Buy Fishnets (1880)

Czorliński is a kind of anti-hero. He is a comical character who does nothing heroic. He is a fisherman who takes his horse and wagon from Chmielno to Puck on the Baltic Coast just west of Gdańsk to buy new fishnets. It should take 2-3 days to get to Puck and 2-3 days to get back home. But due to circumstances and superstitions, he wanders throughout northern Kashubia for 3 weeks and still isn't back home. He gets into various mishaps with funny characters that Kashubians recognize and appreciate. Finally, his wife sets out to find him – not in jail or ill, but helping to celebrate a Kashubian wedding. It is a satiric masterpiece. In the course of the story, Czorliński sings a patriotic song that many Kashubians have adopted as their patriotic anthem.



The second major work of Derdowski, Kashubs at Vienna, published in 1883, is about the participation of Kashubs at King Jan Sobieski's victorious battle against the Turks who were besieging Vienna in 1683.



Hieronim Derdowski in Winona

Unfortunately, all this activity does not produce enough income for Derdowski to get married and settle down. So in 1885, he joins the wave of Kashubians who gamble everything on a new life in America.

After briefly working for newspapers in Chicago and Detroit, he is invited by the pastor at St. Stanislaus Father Romuald Byzewski to come to Winona to edit the new newspaper, Wiarus. So this Kashubian activist, who was imprisoned several times, who traveled in France and Italy, who spoke Kashubian, Polish, German, and then English, who worked as a journalist, and who wrote two of Kashubia's most important literary works comes to America and focuses all this creative energy on this fledgling newspaper in the little city of Winona. What happens next?



He is immediately successful with running the newspaper. He purchases the newspaper within two years finally earning enough for him to get married. His true love Joanna Labowiecka, an opera singer, emigrates to the U.S. in 1887, and Derdowski marries her almost immediately after she gets off the train in La Crosse, Wisconsin. They have four children. Thadeus and Halka die as babies from diphtheria. Harriot Hieronima Derdowska dies in 1928 age 32 and she is buried alongside her father.



His wife Joanna dies on April 3, 1929, and has a separate tombstone. Their fourth daughter Helena Derdowska Zimmewicz is born in 1892 and dies in 1981. Her great-grandson, Andrew Lisson, was a Winona State student and Winona fire fighter in 2017.

How do we measure Derdowski's achievements with his newspaper *Wiarus*? Let's remember the situation in the U.S. when he arrived in 1885. No radio, no tv, no telephone system. You can send a telegraph if the lines reached your city, but even short messages were expensive. Derdowski from his office in Winona turns his weekly into one of the leading Polish newspapers in the country – sold throughout the Midwest and the East Coast. If Americans wanted to know anything about events outside their cities, their only source was the newspaper. And Polish immigrants who did not read English wanted to read in Polish about their town, about the Polish community in the U.S. and the old country. "This Winona weekly was published for almost thirty-four years (February 11, 1886-December 16, 1919), which was a significant achievement on the American press market at the time when the majority of immigrant periodicals were ephemeral, lasting anywhere from a couple of weeks to a few years" (Kierlańczyk). Maybe it is accurate to say that for Kashubian Poles in Winona, *Wiarus* was not only THE newspaper, it was the tv, the telephone and the internet.

Karolina Kierlańczyk did an exhaustive analysis of what was published in *Wiarus*, and here are her conclusions ([The American Polonia through the Eyes of Hieronim Derdowski: A Study Based on the Wiarus Weekly Magazine, 1886–1902](#) by Karolina Kierlanczyk). "The *Wiarus* consisted of editorials, fragments of novels, news from Europe and the United States, as well as letters from the Polish diaspora, poems, obituaries, words of wisdom (złote myśli), jokes, and advertisements." As he had encouraged Kashubians in Prussia to learn Polish, he encourages Kashubians in America to learn English to become successful citizens. But he especially encourages them to continue to observe both Polish and Kashubian traditions. Kierlańczyk identifies three major categories in which Derdowski, as a leader of American Polonia defended Polish and Catholic values and shaped the opinions of Polish Americans.

First, he Supported the parochial school system and eagerly recommended these institutions to his readers. He believed that they implanted "Polishness" (polskość) in their pupils, both through the instruction of the Polish language and the cultivation of the Catholic faith and traditions (28). Derdowski complained about the lack of proper preparation of the nuns to teach in Polish schools and their nonexistent Polish language skills. He called them "geese in

holy habits,” who act towards Polish children not as mothers, but rather as “cruel and barbarous stepmothers” (32).

Second, Hieronim Derdowski Passionately supported the role of the Catholic Church in the Polish community. Derdowski got involved in the parishoners’ disputes with the Pastor of Saint Stanislaus Parish in Winona. (For details, see Bambenek.org) On a wider scale, Derdowski criticized the schisms developing in the Catholic Church, that is, pastors acting independently of Vatican rules. He felt that these schisms were caused mainly by priests and their lust for fame and recognition within the ranks of the Church, as well as by their too great an intimacy with parishioners and favoring some church-goers above the others (51). For this reason they were called in the Wiarus the “fallen priests,” “career seekers,” and “bright students of the master of all lies, Satan,” that “purposefully push the common people into an abyss and sacrifice them for their own personal goals” (52).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the American Polonia started to organize fraternal and mutual aid institutions. They supported the Catholic faith, the Polish language and traditions, and they provided financial help in case of member’s illness or death.⁶⁹ The third major category in which Derdowski exerted his influence was to Supported the Polish National Alliance over the rival organization, the Roman Catholic Union of America. But his support of the PNA was qualified. ⁹⁰ He complained about the organization’s bad fiscal politics, its frauds and thefts, too great a focus on insurance matters, destruction of unity and solidarity among the Poles in the United States, and promotion of American public education in place of Polish parochial schools (91). Kierlańczyk states that what also irritated Derdowski about the PNS was its openness towards “agnosti[c]s, [J]ews, [P]rotestants and socialists” (92). I am sure Derdowski’s readers eagerly awaited each week to see who he was going to praise or attack. One might conclude that if Hieronim Derdowski owned` a television network today, he would outstrip both Fox News and CNN.

The Legacy of Hieronim Derdowski in America

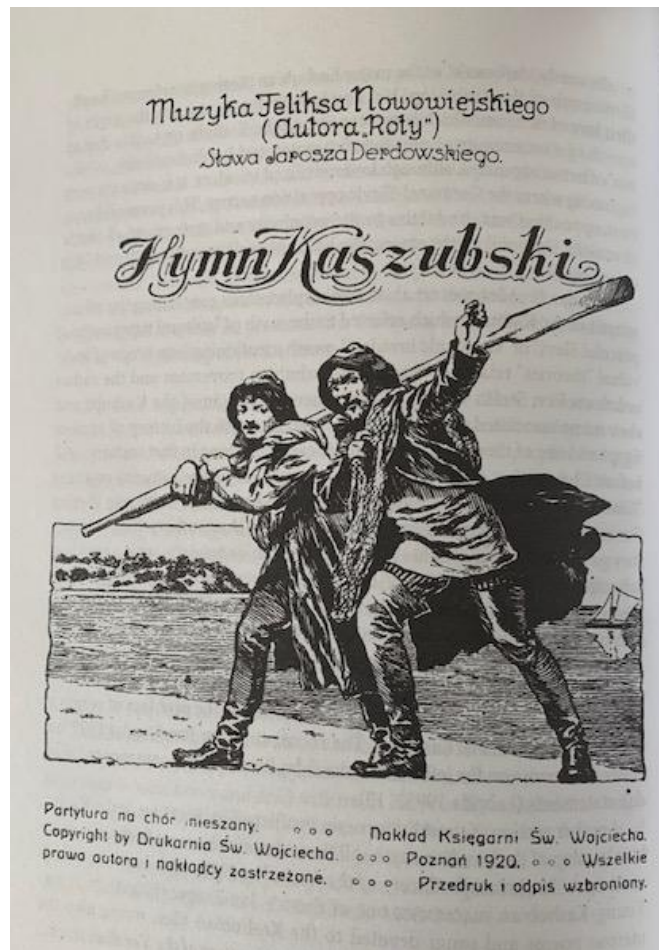
Hieronim Derdowski is one of those rare people who have made a lasting impact in Poland and in America. As Kierlańczyk put it, Derdowski played a significant role as a teacher and leader of the American Polonia, a guardian of the Polish language and traditions, and a defender of the Catholic faith. Because of his journalistic skill, he was able to connect with Polish immigrants and become their voice in debates over issues they faced in the United States of America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Our Kashubian cultural values, our identity as Kashubian Poles in the East End of Winona were shaped by leaders such as Hieronim Derdowski.

The Legacy of Hieronim Derdowski in Kashubia



From the perspective of his impact on Kashubian culture and people, I think he is at the level of such famous leaders as Tadeusz Kościuszko, Ignacy Paderewski, and Józef Haller. In Kashubia, he was one of the great patriots who awakened Kashubians to appreciate and nurture their history and culture. He was the first great writer in Kashubian. His work is still read in Kashubian and is used as material for students learning Kashubian. Quotes from his poems are often cited in throughout Kashubia. “Never to extinction the Kashubs shall come” can be found displayed in many Kashubian locations. “We remain with God” can be heard at each Kashubian major meeting (Cesary Obract-Prondzyński, The Kashubs: Past and Present, 114).

We are going to make history today. We are going to do something that has not been done since Derdowski walked these very streets in Winona, the Kashubian Capital of America.



We are going to hear the poem that Derdowski wrote, now considered the Kashubian anthem, recited in the Kashubian language in a public meeting. Ryszard Sylka, Mayor of Bytów and a native speaker of Kashubian, will read for us the Kashubian anthem in Kashubian. In turn all of us are going to stand today and recite in English line by line the Kashubian anthem. As we join our voices together, we are symbolically uniting the Kashubian community here in Winona with the Kashubian community in Bytów our Sister City. As we read the lines, we will feel the patriotic love of Derdowski for Kashubia, and we will better understand the cultural heritage of the Kashubian Capital of America.

"Marsz Kaszëbsczi"

(sł. Hieronim Jarosz Derdowszczi)

Tam, gdzie Wisła òd Krakòwa

There where the Vistula from Cracow

W pòlsczé mòrze plënie,

Into the Polish sea flows

Nasza wiara, nasza mòwa

The Polish faith, the Polish language

Nigdë nie zadżinie.

Will never perish.

.....

Refrain:

Nigdë do zgùbë

Never to its defeat

Nie przinda Kaszëbë,
Will Kashubia submit.
Marsz, marsz za wrogiem!
March, march against the enemy.
Më trzimómë z Bòdżem!
We hold fast with God.

.....

Më z Miemcama wieczy całé
We with Germans through the ages
Krwawé wiedzë wòjnë,
Bloody wars waged.
Wòlné piesnie wiedno brzmialë
Free songs always echoed
Bez górë i chòjnë.
Through the mountains and pines

.....

Przëszed Krzëżòk w twòrdi blasze,
The Teutonic knight in hardened steel came,
Pòlël wsë i miasta,
Burned villages and towns,
Za to jegò cepë nasze
For this, our flails battered him
Grzmòcëlë lat dwasta.
For two hundred years

.....

Nòs zawòlòl do swëj rotë
Us, the Polish King Jagiello
Pòlsczi król Jadzëllo,
Called to his army.
Tëj w miemiecczëch karkach gnòtë
Then in the German necks
Trzeszczalë jaż miło.
The bones cracked pleasantly.

.....

Gdze król Kazmiërz gnòl Krërzòka?
Then King Kazimierz chased the Teutonic Knight,
Gnòl gò pòd Chònice!
Drove him to Chojnice!
Bë gò zgniòtlë, jak robòka,
To be crushed like a bug
Kaszëbszczë klonice.
by Kashubian stanchions.

.....

Czëj rôz naju ókråtama
When once the Swedes
Szwedzi najechali,
Invaded us by ships,
Më żesmë jich kapuzama
We with our caps
Z Pùcka wenëkalë.

Drove them from Puck

.....

Krzěžã swiãtym przëżegnóné

Blessed with the Holy Cross,

Sec, sécëra, kòsa,

With sickle, ax, scythe,

Z tëm Kaszëba w piekle stónie,

The Kashub will arrive in hell

Diôblù ùtrze nosa.

And outdo the devil.

.....

Nasz Stanisôw Kòstka swiãty,

Our St. Stanislaus Kostka

Co sã ù nas rodzël,

Who with us was born,

Nié dopùscy, bë zawzãty

Will not long allow

Wróg nam dlùgò szkòdzël.

Our bitter enemy to harm us.

.....

Placzą matczy nad sënama,

Mothers mourn their sons,

Placzą dzys dzewice,

Today, maidens weep,

Hòla, jész je Bóg nad nama

Behold, God is still among us

Dòł cepë, klonice.

He gave us flails and stanchions

