

## A Tour of Our Ancestral Villages



As we move through the various stages of our lives, we define our personal identity in different ways. As children, we identify with our homes and family. At school our identity is shaped by our friends and our studies. Then we are shaped by our profession and colleagues. Through it all, our family and the community of our youth have a life-long influence. However, to appreciate the fullness of our identity, we need to acknowledge the influence of the families of our parents and grandparents. They shaped the history and the individuals that we are. On May 12, 2025, my two sons Jeff and Matt, and Jeff's son Dalton flew with me to Poland, the homeland of our ancestors, to discover the land and the way of life that they left behind when they immigrated to Winona in the 1870s.



Matt, Dalton, and Jeff Sieracki

We landed in Gdańsk, Poland's major port on the Baltic Sea, and stayed in a luxury apartment Matt found for us in the heart of the Old Town. A University of Gdańsk history professor who had visited me in Charleston and his wife joined us for dinner.



The boys enjoyed viewing the historic architecture during the day and the dazzling lights of the city at night, to say nothing of the casino.



The next morning on the way to Bytów, we stopped in Kościerzyna to take pictures of the statue of the famous character Remus. from the novel of Aleksander Majkowski. Remus was a quixotic book peddler who had visions of awakening Kashubians to their rich cultural heritage. One family connection to the town is the fact that our cousin Franciszek Sieracki, a major in the Polish army, also served as mayor of Kościerzyna. When the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939, they began murdering the leading citizens. Franciszek was on the assassination list, but the Nazis never caught him. More details about him can be found in the "In Search of Cousins" tab on my website: [sierackifamily.com](http://sierackifamily.com)



In Bytów, we stopped for coffee at the home of Ryszard and Grażyna Sylka. Along with the coffee, we were treated to some snuff. Ryszard has an extensive collection of snuff boxes. But the star of the collection is a huge Kashubian woodcarving of a Kashubian head that yields snuff when the staff is pounded on the floor.



On their coffee table, Ryszard and Grażyna had very thoughtfully displayed Grażyna's family tree. Many years ago on this very tree, Ryszard noticed that the uncle of Grażyna, Alfons Lonski, married Ewa Sieracka. And he raised the question whether or not Ewa was a distant cousin of mine. Some genealogy work revealed that Grażyna's aunt Ewa and I are both descended from Szymon Sieracki, born about 1755. This made me a member of the extended family of Ryszard and Grażyna, and it also opened the door to meet dozens of my cousins in Poland.



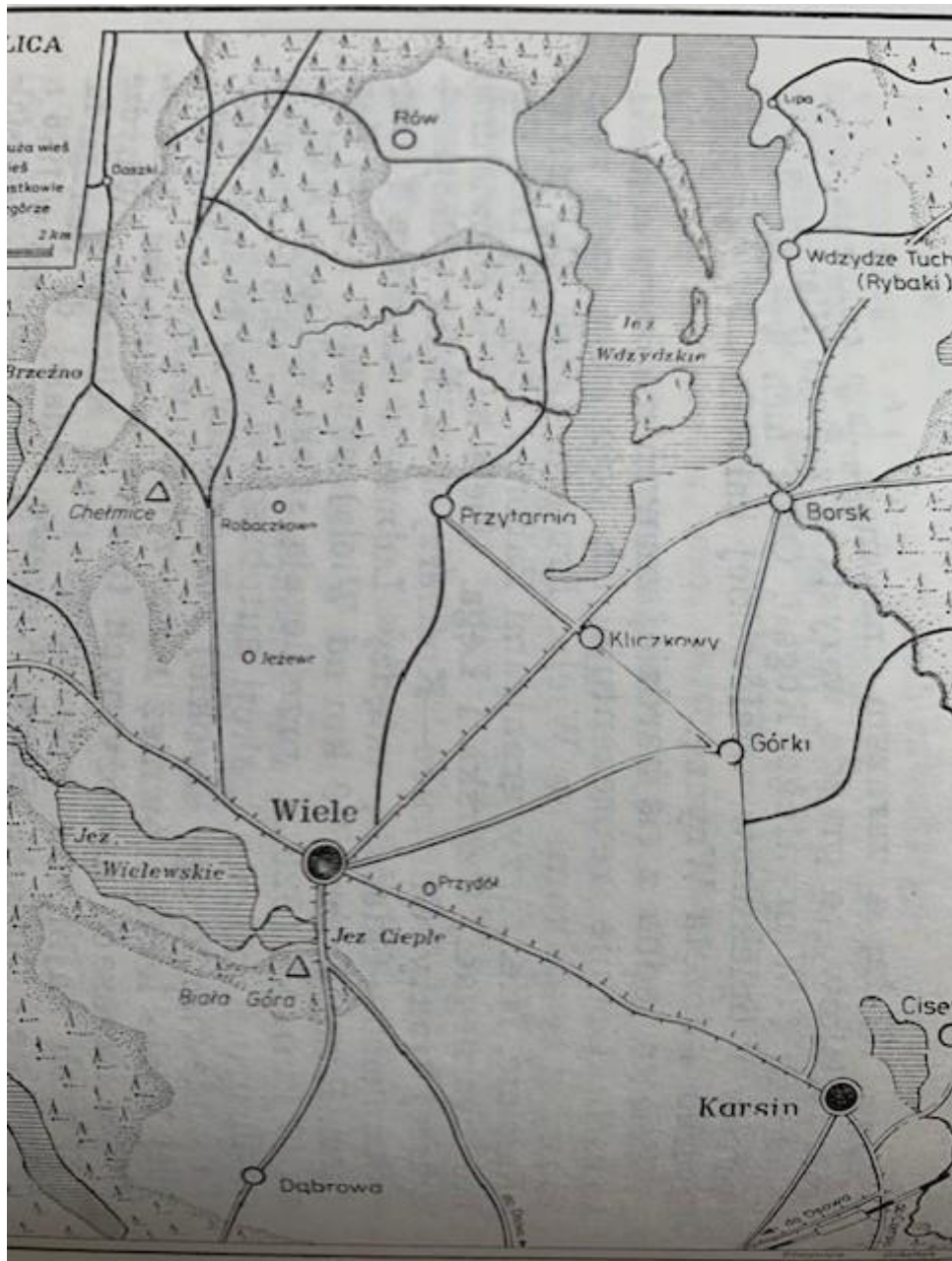
Photo by Potonaco

That afternoon, we toured the Castle of the Teutonic Order in Bytów, which featured a museum of Western Kashubia. The museum exhibits which portrayed daily life during the 19th century were explained to us by Dr. Jaromir Szroeder. This was an important moment because the next day we would be driving through the rural villages of our ancestors with these visual images fresh on our minds.



That evening, May 14, at our hotel, Ułan SPA Center, Matt was treated to a fabulous birthday party with the Poles he had met years earlier when they were touring Manhattan. The guest of honor happily absorbed every minute of the festivities which included endless main courses, sides, and desserts, a birthday cake with a volcanic candle, and generous pours of vodka and Scotch whisky. We were happy to get a few hours of sleep before setting out in the morning for our road tour of the villages of our ancestors.

After a lavish breakfast at the hotel, we set off from Bytów to claim our cultural heritage. The Sieracki boys were coming back to the villages their ancestors left in the 1870s.



We drove through the little villages of Borsk, Wiele, Karsin, and Osowo. Like most Kashubian settlements, they are street villages where homesteads are mostly grouped around a main road.

The oldest records that have survived indicate that my fourth great-grandfather Szymon Sieracki, born about 1755, married Rozalia Klaman in 1783 in Wiele and died in Kliczkowy. Until our great-grandfather Józef Sieracki emigrated to Winona in 1873, our ancestors lived in this small group of villages clustered around Wiele where their church was located. Imagine that you poke your fingers into the wet sand at the beach, and you see how close together the holes are. This is analogous to the locations of our ancestral villages. Less than five miles from the most northern to the most southern village - easy walking distance. This little space encompasses their entire world. The villages they were born in, the church they worshipped in, where they met their wives, raised their families, worked, died and were buried.

The villages lie about 44 miles southwest of Gdańsk, a major port on the Baltic Sea. They are located right between the lake district of Kashubia and the region covered with forests called Zabory. Wiele lies next to a small lake, Jezioro Wielewskie, and Borsk lies just south of Lake Wdzydze, one of the largest and most distinctive lakes in the Kashubian Lake district. The farmland surrounding the villages had been cleared out from the pine forests. Such clearings, "pustkowie," are a characteristic feature of settlements in Kashubia. Life in the pustkowie was for the most part self sufficient. The food you ate, the wood to build your houses and make your tools, the flax and wool to spin fabric for your clothes - all were sourced in the local lakes, forests and fields.

Wiele lay at the center of this little world. It is where people came to get married, baptize their children, attend Mass on Sunday along with all of the activities of the liturgical year. It was also the hub for the roads connecting the Zabory region of woodlands with the cities of Chojnice and Gdańsk.

Our tour of the villages of our ancestors ended with visits with our cousins, those who are also descended from Szymon Sieracki. Our first stop was to visit Elżbieta and Piotr Powalisz. Elżbieta had shared with me her genealogy research regarding the family portrait in front of the Inn at Osowo that resulted in the article featuring Franciszek Sieracki. Highlights of the visit included Elżbieta's delicious pastries and a tour of their fabulous garden. In the picture below from right to left are Elżbieta and Piotr Powalisz with Kornelia, Paweł and Maks.



We celebrated the end of this memorable day by having dinner with more cousins in Bydgoszcz. Standing outside the restaurant are Waldek and Remigiusz Wandzinski, Matt Sieracki, Robert Kościanek, Dalton Sieracki, Joanna Kościanek, Kasia Wandzinska, Charlie Sieracki, Ewa Lonska, Jeff Sieracki, and Marietta Wandzinska. Taking the picture was Karol Kościanek.



Bringing together three generations of Sieracki relatives from the States and from Poland after such a long separation in time and space is a moment to be treasured. I hear the melody of the Polish national anthem as the words come to mind: “Poland has not perished yet, While we are still alive.”

## Historical Perspectives

What was life like for our ancestors in these villages and what were the deplorable conditions that ultimately drove so many people including my great-grandparents to emigrate to America in the 1870s? The story of these villages is in many ways the story of Kashubia itself.

## Daily Life in the Villages

The daily life throughout the year of Kashubian villagers in the 19th-century was ordered by the demands of the farming seasons and the liturgy of the Church. The economy was based on agricultural produce, and most people worked on farms. The soil was sandy so cereal crops that were best suited included rye, barley and buckwheat. However, the light, sandy, and acidic soils common in the Kashubian lakelands and Zabory lands were perfectly suited for potatoes. Growing potatoes started there during the lifetime of Szymon Sieracki in the 18th century, and by the middle of the 19th century the practice was widespread. They produced far more calories per acre than cereals, making them ideal for sustaining the dense, growing rural population and providing a reliable famine buffer. They were also used for the production of vodka and feed for the pigs.

Animals were crucial for labor and food, though they were often small in number due to a lack of good pasturage. Oxen, sometimes cows, were frequently used to pull the plow and carts because horses were scarce. Hogs were universally kept, and geese, chickens, and ducks were very common. Geese were an important food source and were sometimes used to clean up dropped grain after the harvest. The primary tools were simple, like the scythes for cutting rye and wooden plows.

The diet was subsistence-based and generally poor, consisting mainly of potatoes, rye, turnips, cabbage, beetroot, millet, and buckwheat. Farmers would often sell or barter any excess produce like butter, milk, meat, poultry, and eggs to gain a minimal amount of cash, meaning the family rarely ate these more valuable items themselves. Wild mushrooms and berries from the surrounding woods supplemented the diet. Peasants were not allowed to hunt animals in the forests, and expensive state licenses were required for fishing in the lakes.

The household was largely self-sufficient. Most tools, implements, and clothing were produced within the home. The entire farming family participated in the labor. Landless laborers worked for a farmer in exchange for a poor cottage, fuel, a small garden plot, and minimal cash. At harvest time, the laborer's wife and any older children were also required to work. To supplement farm income, home industries were common, especially during the long winters. Men would engage in wood carving (spoons, soles for wooden shoes, crucifix figures, and snuff boxes), and women would do embroidery and weaving. Both men and women were skilled at basket weaving using pine roots. Due to the lack of economic

opportunity, many men would temporarily migrate to lowlands or industrial parts of the Prussian state to work for wages and send remittances home.

Typical occupations of those living in the villages included innkeeper, miller, brewer, blacksmith, shoemaker, weaver, and tailor. There is documentation that Szymon Sieracki was a miller, his grandson Józef Sieracki was a shoemaker, and a cousin, Józef Sieracki, owned the inn at Osowo in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The Catholic Church was the central pillar of the community and daily life, providing a sense of cultural identity and resistance against the predominantly Protestant German state. The family was the core social unit. Marriages were important community events. The farm, or title to it, typically passed from father to the eldest son or daughter upon marriage. This transfer of property included the burden of supporting the parents for the remainder of their lives with cash, lodging, fuel, and a share of the crops. Coexisting with the dogma of the Church, age-old superstitions were widespread: many believed in devils, goblins, and a host of local myths and legends, which were nurtured in the relatively isolated villages surrounded by woods nearby lakes.

### Historical Challenges

To understand the difficulties of Kashubian life that led my great-grandfather, Józef Sieracki to emigrate in the 1870s, we have to begin with an explanation of the difficulties faced by the people during the lifetime of his great-grandfather, Szymon Sieracki, in the 1770s. To do this, we would actually be looking into how life was lived in the Middle Ages, because during the century between 1670 and 1770, Kashubia was a "living museum" of medieval social structures. While Western Europe was moving toward the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, Kashubia experienced a "re-feudalization" often called the "Second Serfdom." During this era, many social practices from the 12th and 13th centuries were not just remnants—they were the legal and daily reality for the vast majority of the population.

When Szymon was born about 1755, Kashubians were living under the rigid political system of feudalism. The Polish king, local minor nobles (szlachta), even the parish churches owned most of the tillable land and the villages. The vast majority of the population were serfs, ethnic Kashubians, who were legally tied to the land. They could not move, marry, or change occupations without the landlord's explicit permission.

Although the village of Wiele and some nearby manorial farming estates (folwarks) were nominally owned by the King, Stanisław August Poniatowski, they were governed by a noble appointed by the king (starosta) out of the nearby town of Tuchola. The Starosta, as the de facto landlord, operated the folwarks for his own profit and was only required to pay a certain percentage of the revenue back to the Crown treasury. As the de facto landlord, the starosta collected rents, labor duties (pańszczyzna), and taxes.

The parish church in Wiele held its own land, essentially operating a small church folwark. This land was worked by "church peasants" who provided labor to support the priest and the church infrastructure. All the serfs, the majority of the population had to pay tithes (mostly in grain or other farm crops ) to support the parish church.

Together with the royal and parish folwarks, there existed some small farms that were owned and worked by peasants as well as people who claimed to have the status of minor nobility.

The vast majority of farm workers were serfs who had some rights to live in a house and farm a small plot of land for themselves. The most economically vulnerable were the hired farm workers who had few rights no property, and miserable seasonal wages.

The economy of the region, that is to say the wealth of the landowners, was based on large-scale manorial farms that produced grain for export through the Baltic port of Gdańsk. The main way that landowners generated income was by selling grain. Most of the people who did all of the work on the manorial farms, large and small, were serfs. The nobles believed serfs were born to serve their entire lives on the farm where they were born. Three to six days of labor per week per household was required. Serfs tended their own little plot of land in whatever time was left. The serf had to contribute produce from this plot of land to the lord who owned the land and give his tithe to the parish church. Another source of income for the nobles was the sale of alcohol. Only the noble landlord was allowed to brew beer and distill vodka. The serf could only buy these products at the inn owned by his lord. Often there was a minimum amount of alcohol that the serf had to buy. Peasant families had to be almost entirely self-reliant. They grew their own food, spun their own thread, and built their own furniture in the few hours remaining after their feudal duties were fulfilled.

The political system maintained the power and wealth of the aristocratic landowners. They alone had a voice or vote in the national government. As far as the local government was concerned, they were the government. Wiele and nearby royal estates were governed by the Starosta and his appointed village leader (wójt). For nonroyal estates, the aristocratic owner of the land was the police, the prosecutor, and the judge. The serf was legally considered subject to the landlord's personal jurisdiction with power over their tenant's property and body. All disputes involving the serfs—such as arguments over field boundaries, petty theft, debt to the village tavern or refusal to perform the labor duties—were settled in the manorial court, usually held in the manor house or the village tavern.

The feudal system in Poland evolved into a unique "Noble Republic" that eventually paralyzed the state. While the Szlachta (nobility) enjoyed unprecedented democratic rights, their fierce protection of these privileges—specifically the liberum veto, which allowed a single deputy to dissolve parliament and nullify all legislation—rendered the government incapable of reform. This systemic gridlock prevented the creation of a modern treasury and a standing army, leaving the nation vulnerable. The monarchy was elective and weak.

Furthermore, the vast majority of the population lived in agrarian serfdom, stifling the rise of a middle class and industrial innovation. Neighboring absolute monarchies—Prussia, Russia, and Austria—deliberately funded internal Polish dissent to maintain this instability. By the late 18th century, despite last-minute attempts at reform like the Constitution of May 3rd, 1791, these powers orchestrated three partitions (1772, 1793, and 1795), effectively erasing Poland from the map for 123 years. During the lifetime of Szymon Sieracki, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth ceased to exist.

The Prussians who took over Kashubia immediately started to change the social structure and system of land ownership to assert their control of the area. They abolished feudalism and set the stage for capitalism. Serfs were emancipated from their bondage to the land and their required days of service, and they were to be paid wages. The nobles no longer controlled the judicial system. This new land policy was not purely economic; it was also a tool of Germanization and political control. The primary goal was to modernize agriculture, generate wealth, and create a class of loyal, independent, tax-paying German citizens.

The eradication of feudalism was a prolonged legal and social process that began with the Stein–Hardenberg reforms. Here is a brief explanation of how the legal process played out.

1. The October Edict (1807), issued by Baron von Stein abolished "hereditary subjection" across Prussia. This meant that peasants were no longer legally "owned" by a lord. They gained the right to marry, move, and choose their profession without seeking permission. However, while the people were free, the land was not. Peasants still had to perform *corvée* labor (unpaid work on the lord's land) to keep their farms.
2. The Regulation Edict (1811 & 1816) by Karl August von Hardenberg expanded the reforms to address land ownership. To become full owners of their farms, peasants had to "buy out" their labor obligations. In many parts of West Prussia, this was done by surrendering a significant portion (often 1/3 to 1/2) of their land to the state or the local manor.
3. A subsequent law in 1821 accelerated the conversion of labor duties into cash payments, which was often difficult for the cash-poor Kashubian farmers.
4. In the specific region of Wiele and Borsk, the final "liberation" and settlement of land rights occurred between 1835 and 1836. During these years, the communal lands were partitioned, and individual farmers were granted full title to their properties. Because the soil in this part of Kashubia is sandy and poor, the "liberated" farmers often found themselves with small, unproductive plots. They were legally free but economically vulnerable.

The dissolution of feudalism undermined the political power of the Polish nobility by dissolving their traditional feudal relationship with the peasantry. The judicial power of the starostas and private landlords over the peasantry was abolished. Nobles lost the right to judge their serfs for all crimes and most civil disputes. In the Wiele region, the starosta of

Tuchola instantly lost the judicial control he had maintained for centuries, meaning peasants were no longer subject to the arbitrary judgment and corporal punishment of the manor administrator. The Prussians introduced their highly codified legal system that replaced the patchwork of Polish local customs and statutes, providing a complex but uniform legal code for civil matters, property, and criminal law. The Prussians established a clear, centralized hierarchy of state-run courts staffed by salaried, trained judges.

The emancipation of the serfs forced the Polish gentry to transition from a labor-based estate economy to a capitalist wage-based system. Many nobles were inefficient or heavily indebted and could not afford the transition, leading to financial ruin. This financial instability led to Kashubian land being systematically purchased by German settlers and German land banks. This trend accelerated in the 19th century when the Prussian government implemented aggressive measures to reduce the Polish presence and increase the German population in the eastern provinces.

Peasants (former serfs) gained personal freedom and could become smallholders or free tenant farmers. This was a major shift from labor obligations to rent or tax payments. A number of wealthier peasants emerged who were now free citizens and owners of their land.

However, the process of gaining full ownership (land enfranchisement) was complex and often required peasants to pay a large monetary sum or to give up a significant portion of their holding to the former noble landlords. Many farmers who owned small plots of land faced a crisis: they could not afford to buy more land, but their farms did not generate enough income to support their families. This led to the emergence of a large class of landless or small-holding agricultural laborers, forced to work for wages on large estates or to migrate to cities. Although these peasants were personally free, they suffered from increasing poverty and a complete lack of any social security.

In addition to its efforts to take control of Kashubian territory, the Prussian government's attack on Kashubian culture begun during the lifetime of Szymon Sieracki continued with ever increasing pressure to the time of his great-grandson, Józef Sieracki, my great-grandfather. The Kulturkampf legislation sought to undermine Kashubian culture by making it illegal to use the Polish or Kashubian language in public, especially in church. It even led to the imprisonment or exile of priests.

The German Empire's policies culminated in a crisis for Kashubians in the 19th century. The economic and social displacement combined with the assault on their culture made their old way of life unsustainable. This triggered a massive emigration of families from the Wiele and Borsk region - including my great-grandparents - to the United States.

