

Polish Heritage Center at Panna Maria

Visitor Experience, #20 in Series

Wesołych Świąt Boże Narodzenia!

Merry Christmas!



Fr. Leopold celebrating the first Mass with the first arrivals under the oak tree
on December 24, 1854

There Is Never Enough Tribute Paid

By John Cebrowski

This is a tribute story. It's my tribute story.

When my brother and I were in grammar school, and through the first years of high school, we would spend 5 to 6 weeks every summer at our grandparents' farm in Simsbury, Connecticut. Essentially, it was a "private camp." We were lucky, and we knew it.



We fed the chickens, collected the eggs, dug potatoes, watered the tomatoes, helped with haying, built dams in the brook, harassed the dog, walked a half-mile to the post office to retrieve the mail, chopped firewood, scavenged in the barn, went foraging for blueberries, washed *Dziadzi's* [grandfather] car, mowed the massive lawn...and above all were inoculated with values that held us in good stead for the rest of our lives.

After collecting the eggs, we had six eggs and a half-pound of bacon apiece prepared on a wood stove. Then after a rigorous morning doing what boys do, and after preparing a monstrous lunch for us, *Babci* [grandmother] would quietly retire to the dining room, and kneeling behind a chair in front of a picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus she prayed the Rosary...every day. (We could peek around the corner and see her.) When my brother and I served in Vietnam, Navy and Marine flyers respectively, unknown to us at the time, she sent a donation through her family in Poland to the national shrine in Częstochowa, the Jasna Góra monastery home of the world famous icon of the Black Madonna. We both survived numerous close calls and to this day credit *Babci* and the Blessed Mother.

We were in awe of their pious participation at Mass on Sunday. After the ritual midday chicken dinner, we all retired to the front screened porch, our grandparents in their rocking chairs, and my brother and I on the constantly squeaky "glider." (We thought that it would irritate them, but they never said a word.) *Dziadzi* nursed a single shot of whisky and *Babci* knitted. And then the stories began...always about their parents and their siblings, their growing up, and their beloved Poland. And we learned a lot more by observing their actions. They were fiercely patriotic...with great respect for both Poland and America. In later years, we often thought that if they hadn't emigrated they both would have been partisan fighters and be either dead or in Siberia.

When I was in high school in New Jersey, rather than walk a mile home for lunch every day, I would often opt for my paternal grandmother's, whose home was less than half the distance. During those personal lunches, most often home-made pierogi, I listened to her stories of growing up on a farm in the village of *Helenówka*, and I was touched by the constant reference to her mother whom she obviously loved and missed very much. Over and over she had me practice, in Polish, how to count, the days of the week, the months of the year, colors, and simple social phrases. I would often purposely mispronounce a word just to rile her up. "Friday", or "Piątek", in Polish, was my favorite target. After she scolded me, we both would laugh. My paternal grandfather died several months before I was born so, unfortunately, I never knew him.

All four of my grandparents emigrated from Poland to the US about 110 years ago. Two landed at Ellis Island, in New York harbor, where millions of immigrants have entered and 700,000 are now memorialized in a permanent *Wall of Honor* exhibit of individual or family names in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty. One grandparent landed in Baltimore, and one in Wilmington, Delaware. They met and were married here.

In 1990, when I became aware of this new *Wall of Honor* I immediately made a modest investment to memorialize, honor, and pay tribute to my grandparents. I couldn't believe I had this opportunity to say THANK YOU in such a very public way. Quite simply, that was a no-brainer. Pictured right is a photo of my Mom, a year later, pointing to her father's name, my grandfather from Simsbury, **Wacław Siekierski**; my life role model.



As a result of my grandparents' and parents' influence I have always been a student of Polish history and current events in Poland. For example, I

always read *Zgoda*, the regular publication of the Polish National Alliance, the biggest Polish fraternal in America. It was through *Zgoda* when I was in grammar school that I first learned of Panna Maria. When our youngest daughter and her family relocated to San Antonio 10 years ago, we came to visit them a couple of times a year, and on one of those early visits we drove down to Panna Maria. We toured the little museum and visited the Historical Society shop and bought a couple of mementos. It was very fulfilling.

In 2016, my wife **Amanda** and I relocated to San Antonio to be near our daughter and her family. In July of this year, a mutual friend introduced me to **Bishop Yanta**. I was impressed with his passion; he had the eye of a tiger. It caused me to visit Panna Maria again...and WOW, again, I couldn't believe what I saw in the process of being built. My Polish pride immediately kicked-in, and I told the **Bishop**, "I'm all in, how can I help?!" I'm honored to help this visionary leader, and yes, I'll be making another investment here to pay further tribute to my grandparents.

That's *my* tribute story.

You also have an opportunity to carry out a very public tribute of your own. If you haven't already done so, please think about it in the context of this Polish Heritage Center right here in Texas. Ladies and gentlemen, stop and think and pray long and hard about what those forebears endured, accomplished and their impact on you. This is a fleeting moment in your family's history, a window of opportunity is open, and the next step is yours. Think about how your ancestors would react to your actions. Please share this story, and this newsletter, with your children, siblings, and friends. Thank you.

What is *your* tribute story? Would you like to share it in a future edition of this newsletter? Please reach out to **John Wojtasczyk** at wojtasczyk@sbcglobal.net to do so.

God bless you, or as we say in Polish, *Bóg zapłać!*

Our Beautiful Medallions!



On the front of the Heritage Center, you will see two beautiful 4-foot ceramic porcelain medallions. On the left, in the red background with blue edging, is the white Polish eagle, the symbol of Poland. The inscription around the edge announces that we are of Polish decent. And on the right, in the blue background and gold ring, this medallion tells the story of the people who immigrated. First, what kept them strong was their Christian faith, symbolized by Mary, mother of God and the name sake of their new home. The church was the first building in the community. **Johann Rzeppa** and **Francis Cebula** constructed a cross upon which **Johann** hung a Christ figure which he had brought from the Old Country; this crucifix stands in front of the church today. The bell was also commissioned by the **Rzeppas** and produced in Silesia, and it still rings today in the church! The plow represents that they worked the land. Around the edge, the inscription proclaims that they were from the region of Śląsk, or Silesia!

We would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and give thanks for those who have supported the Polish Heritage Center since November 1st:

Kevin & Kelly Kennedy, Margaret Kolodziej, Michael J. Kolodziej, Melvin Kolodziej, Karl P. & Stephanie Gager, Alois J. O'Berg and family, Elizabeth Burda, Ronnie Bitterly, Guadalupe & Carlos Ontiveros, Dwight & Pamela Mitchell, Sandra Kiolbassa, The Sells Family Trust, Geraldine B. Yanta, & Margaret A. Little.

As this year comes to an end, we reflect as **John Cebrowski** did on his parents and especially his grandparents. We see not only the role that they played in his life but more importantly the treasure that he received. The faith and values that John possesses is clear to everyone that meets him. Who **John Cebrowski** is today is a reflection of his parents and grandparents! Are the faith and values of your parents and grandparents visible in you? Celebrate your parents' and grandparents' heritage today by memorializing them in the Polish Heritage Center. Share and be proud of your tribute to your parents and grandparents. Do not let their effort fade. Promote your Heritage!

Help support the Polish Heritage Center today!

Bishop and the Monday “Cabinet” Board Meeting



Bishop Yanta with (from his left going clockwise): **Joe Yanta**, **Al Notzon**, **Robert Morkovsky**, **John Cebrowski**, and **Mickey Schott**. Here **Robert Morkovsky** (architect) is presenting the recommendation for the engraving of the center’s name onto the cast stone which will be on the front center of the building. The name in cast stone is due to be installed during December.

I will remember your families, living and deceased, in my Christmas Masses as we enter the New Year. I wish you God’s loving blessings for 2018.

Bishop John W. Yanta

EACH DAY, THE SHELL OF OUR CENTER DRAWS NEARER TO ITS COMPLETION!



Summary: Phase II – Construction of Exterior

Bid awarded to Boyle Construction:	\$3,373,000.00
18 th Month completed Construction Cost (April '16 – Aug '17):	\$2,409,986.70
8 Months payment by Polish Heritage Center:	\$1,114,376.21
10 Months payment by Falls City National Bank Loan:	\$1,295,708.76
Interest Payments paid to Falls City National Bank for loan:	\$45,091.74
Construction cost for first 18 months (including payment #19):	\$2,593,063.45
19th Month payment due December 30th, 2017:	\$183,076.75
Remaining Construction cost after 19 months paid:	\$779,936.55