

From Lukaschewski to Lucas: The Americanization of a Polish Family

As the United States was in the process of transforming from an agricultural to an industrial society, the nation opened its doors to large numbers of immigrants from Europe. According to researcher Julitta Grocholska, Poles were among the first major wave of immigrants to the United States from 1880 to 1930.

The number of Polish immigrants in the 1860s was 30,000; by 1890 it was 500,000. Grocholska explains that the Poles who immigrated to America before 1890 were from German-controlled areas in northern Poland. The city of Danzig, now Gdansk, was located there.

Although Danzig was home to many Polish-speaking Poles, Jewish Poles, and Dutch, the majority of residents were German-speaking. Over the course of many generations, Danzig fell under control of foreign powers, such as Sweden, France, Prussia, and Germany. The city became part of the German Empire in 1871.

From 1871 to 1878, Otto von Bismark, chancellor of the German Empire, instituted a siege of terror against the Catholic Church. Hundreds of priests or bishops were imprisoned or exiled. This was a difficult time for Catholics who lived in German-dominated areas of what had formerly been Poland.

Tired of the political turmoil of endless occupations, and lured by economic opportunities in America, many residents of Poland immigrated to urban areas of the United States in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Many settled in Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Michigan.

Rudolph Lukaschewski and Anna Janzen were residents of German-occupied Poland in the 1870s. Anna lived in Danzig and Rudolph in the town of Oliva. Anna immigrated to Detroit in 1881 at the age of 17. Rudolph, then 23, immigrated along with his parents in 1886.

Rudolph and Anna married in 1891. The marriage record shows the last name being spelled Lukaschewski. From 1894 to 1899, Detroit city directories spelled Rudolph's last name as Lukaszewski.

The census taker in the 1900 census wrote the name down as Lukaszewski. The birthplace of Rudolph, Anna, and Rudolph's mother were all listed as German Poland. Ten years later, the census taker spelled the family's last name as Lukashewski and listed the birthplace of Rudolph and Anna as "Ger German." Some neighbors were listed as being from "Ger Polish." The 1920 census form shows the last name as Lukaschewski and the place of origin as Germany.

A declaration of intention, a document filed by Rudolph with the United States Department of Labor, states that

he was born in Oliva, Germany. His signature clearly shows that he spelled his last name as Lukaschewski. Two years later, his petition for naturalization says he was born in Danzig, Germany, and that he immigrated to the port of Baltimore from the port of Bremen, Germany, in 1887. He signed his name Rudolph Lukaschewski.



Rudolph and Anna

Although Rudolph and Anna had immigrated from an area that once was part of Poland, various records and government documents show that the Polish connection, disclosed once in the 1900 census, disappeared after that. This is not surprising given the fact that Danzig was a city in Poland that was settled by neighboring Germans and that German was the language used by most residents of Danzig up to the 1880s.

But despite the fact that Rudolph and Anna identified with their German heritage and were born into a family that spoke German, the spelling of their last name – Lukaschewski – probably caused people in Detroit to believe that they were Polish.

Perhaps trying to avoid anti-Polish attitudes in Detroit, members the Lukaschewski family began to drop the Polish identifying "ski" from their last name.

The invitation sent by Rudolph for the Catholic wedding of his daughter Catherine to Frank Steil referred to him as Rudolph Lukas. Catherine's brother, Frank, also assumed the last name of Lukas, as evidenced by cemetery records from Mt. Olivet Cemetery where several members of the Lukaschewski family are buried.

Catherine Steil, wife of Frank, mother of Kathleen, and grandmother of Kathleen's nine Coleman children, referred to her maiden name as Lucas. Kathleen's birth certificate lists Catherine Julia Lucas as the mother.

The Lukaschewski name was unknown to the Coleman children until 2001 when they accompanied Kathleen on a "trip down memory lane" for her 80th birthday. A stop at Mt. Olivet Cemetery included a review of cemetery records which showed the name Lukaschewski. When prodded about the name, Kathleen sheepishly told her children that, from time to time, she would hear her father refer to her mother as "my little Polish girlfriend."