



# Polish Icing on a German Cake

by Thomas F. Coleman

One of the primary goals for my recent trip to the Mormon Research Library in Salt Lake City was to find out more about my Polish ancestry.

Fortunately, I did make some progress on that, especially with the help of an expert researcher who also has Lukaschewski ancestors of her own.

Some of this information I already had acquired before my trip to Utah. But while I was there I did find the birth record of Rudolph Lukaschewski (my maternal great grandfather) and the marriage record of his parents.

The wonderful woman who I fondly remember as "Grandma Steil" was born as Catherine Julia Lukaschewski. Catherine was married to Frank W. Steil, a talented and loving man whose parents immigrated to Detroit from Neuerburg, Germany.

Catherine's father, Rudolph Wilhelm Lukaschewski, was born in Oliva, Poland in 1863. Oliva is a suburb of a town that was then called Danzig (now Gdansk) Catherine's mother, Anna Janzen, was born in Danzig in 1864.

We do not know whether Rudolph and Anna knew each other before they immigrated to Detroit. Perhaps they did, since the Oliva-Danzig community was small, maybe 2,000 people or so at that time.

When Rudolph was 24, he came to the United States with his mother, Louisa. It was 1887. His brother, Albert, also immigrated to Detroit that year, but it is unclear whether he came on the same ship since his name is not listed on the ship's register next to that of his mother and younger brother.

Passenger records from 1881 indicate that Anna Janzen (Grandma Steil's mother) traveled alone from Hamburg to New York on the Weiland ship. She was only 16 years old. How brave!

Anna and Rudolph married in Detroit on April 25, 1891. The marriage register shows the names of Anna's parents as Arnie Janzen and Annie Reband. Rudolph's parents are listed as Franz Lukaschewski and Louisa Kohnke.

While I was in Salt Lake City, I found the birth record for Rudolph. It shows he was born on April 10, 1863. I also found the marriage record for his parents, Franz Lukaschewski and Louisa Kohnke. They were married in Oliva in 1852. Kohnke is a German surname.

Census records in the United States suggest that Franz and Louisa had five children, but three of them died,

probably in Poland. The Detroit City Directory listed Louisa as the widow of Franz, and since she came to the United States without her husband, it is logical to conclude that he died in Poland before she and Rudolph and Albert immigrated.

The names of the parents of Anna Janzen indicate that Anna was not Polish. Janzen, the surname of her father, is German with some Danish influence. Reband, the maiden name of her mother, is French.

So even though the maiden name of my grandmother, Lukaschewski, suggests that her ancestors were Polish, the Polish influence may be less than the "ski" implies.

Today, the area where her parents were born and raised as children, is Poland. But in the 1800s the primary influence, culturally and linguistically, in Oliva and Danzig was German.

In addition to the heavy German influence on these two adjacent towns, other nationalities have had a major impact on this area. Over the preceding centuries, Danzig was invaded and dominated by Sweden, France, Russia, Germany, and Poland.

Eventually, the city of Danzig was granted the status of a "free state" which meant that it was both a city and a state -- one with residents who were French, Russian, Slavic, Swedish, and German. The German influence appears to have been the most prominent.

Now that I have more information about the ancestors of Grandma Steil, and about the history of Danzig, I would say that her heritage was primarily German, but with some Polish influence. (I wonder whether she used a Polish recipe for the delicious icing on the German chocolate cakes she was famous for baking.)

Her ancestry is much more complex than her maiden name, Lukaschewski, suggests. Although Lukaschewski was the surname of Catherine's father and of her grandfather, the ancestry of Catherine's mother was Danish and French and her grandmother's ancestry was German.

Don't get me wrong. The Polish connection is definitely there, but it is not as dominant as I once thought it was. The German aspect of genetic and cultural makeup of Catherine Julia Lukaschewski is much more prominent.

Perhaps that is why Catherine changed her last name to Lucas as a teenager and why her family attended a Catholic Church in Detroit that was primarily a congregation of German, not Polish, immigrants.

– May 17, 2013