

How was the reconstruction of Polish Hill River?

We will depart, but the trees will remain...

(memory of Stanisław Skrzypczak)



– It's not us! If it weren't for Father Miksa, none of this would exist! It is thanks to his foresight and intercession that in 1971, Archbishop of Adelaide James William Gleeson promised to donate the two acres of land previously given to the Church, as well as the church and school in Polish Hill River, and – *"as long as at least one Pole wants to take an interest in this property, it will remain Polish,"* assures Stanisław Skrzypczak. He adds: – "It was Miksa who first looked at the ruins of the church, without windows or doors, with hay inside, because a local farmer had turned it into a barn. He encouraged the faithful during Polish services to spare no money or effort in the reconstruction of our historical monument, because *'these pioneers, in such difficult times and hardships, managed to build, and we?! Can't we even rebuild?'*" He personally went to various companies and asked for donations, such as paint, which later the 83-year-old Mr. Bejker used to paint the church and then the shelter.

How important this place is for us, the Polish diaspora in Australia, Father Tadeusz Miksa knew from Marian Szczepanowski, a historian who managed to determine the whereabouts of Polish emigration in the 18th century. When Marian Szczepanowski first saw the ruins of the school and the Polish church turned into a barn, he expressed his sorrow that no one wanted to save it. His pleas were almost ignored. It was only when Father Miksa arrived in Adelaide that everything changed.

– Poles organized themselves, collected money... I repeat: the initiator of this undertaking was Father Tadeusz Miksa, and the chairman of the Reconstruction Committee was Major Mieczysław Wolański. Mr. Władysław Rogowski and Mr. Tadeusz Zakroczyński provided immense help. I was not there! I came to Polish Hill River when the church, rebuilt by a Latvian company with funds collected among the Polish community, already stood there like new.

I once tried to find out where the name Polish Hill River came from, which means 'Polish River of Hill' (or perhaps: 'River of Polish Hill'?). This name seemed senseless to me, and to this day, I believe we should have named this place Polish Hill. However, it turns out that this is an old name, already used in 1870. The owner of the land through which the stream flowed was a certain Hill, so the name Hill River became established. When the first Polish settlers arrived in the area, they soon bought the land from him and established their farms there. They named their settlement Polish Hill River.

My family and I dedicated twenty-five years of our lives to the further reconstruction and development of Polish Hill River. But... it was, it has passed, there is nothing to talk about; people do not remember it, many documents have been lost... – Stanisław Skrzypczak waves his hand. – At least a hundred people worked on this construction. But... no one recorded their names! The list I reconstructed from memory together with Bronisław Kędzior is incomplete, which I regret. It is a list of people who worked on the reconstruction

and development of Polish Hill River from 1977 to 1986, so it was then, when progress in these works was the greatest and most visible.

Maybe you're not right, Mr. Stanisław? People remember a lot, and perhaps you will still be able to add to this list? I've heard more than once that 'Gniezno' stands thanks to you! That this construction exists because of your rationalizing ideas and patents – I won't give up.

Mr. Stanisław, please, tell us how it was with 'Gniezno'?

– It all stemmed from our Polish need for common gatherings and fun. This took place in the 1970s. Władysław Rogowski was in charge of 'Tatr' at that time, and he also held the position of president of the Polish Association. One day, he planned a picnic for the members of this group and its supporters. He thought about it and did it. The first such picnic, which was very successful, took place at Clair Caravan Park, near the Polish Hill River. At that time, I was the president of the Pastoral Council. We also organized events. The secretary of the Council was Bronek Kędzior, and one day at a meeting he reported that the Polish Association was asking for material help and moral support. They had come to the conclusion that instead of holding picnics on 'someone else's' land, it would be better to have their own place for such events. This own roof over their heads could be built at Polish Hill River on land purchased by the Polish Association and the Polish School Foundation.

One day, Rogowski found out that a company in Adelaide was selling a huge metal shed and was asking for 4 thousand dollars for it. I don't know how Rogowski did it, but he brought the price down to \$1,200. However, the metal had to be taken apart and transported to the site.

– I'll go and take some tools because they will definitely be useful – I thought. – I'll go with you. With you and with the machine – said Leon Kolecki (a well-known Adelaide businessman).

It was Australia Day in South Australia, so we had time off work. Twenty-five guys gathered at Polish Hill River to help Rogowski. It was the middle of summer. The grass was dry, and the ground was as hard as concrete, and we had to dig holes to set the frames of the shed. Fortunately, Leon Kolecki and his son came with a machine... In fifteen minutes, the hole was dug! The machine made ten holes. Well, but how do we insert the frames, which are several meters high and weigh a ton, into the holes?

I can't quite imagine it, because you practically only had your hands to work with.

– We managed. I made a metal triangle four meters high. Despite our best intentions and enthusiasm, we wouldn't have been able to lift those spans vertically. Fortunately, Józef Glapa's truck was also on site. So, I set the triangle at an angle, tied some ropes to its tip, and we hooked everything to the truck. I remember it like it was yesterday; Piotr Rola was driving it. Slowly, very slowly... The span – nine meters high, sixteen and a half meters wide – stood upright in its place! – Hooray! – we exclaimed.

And now, imagine this: People are pouring concrete, and it's heartwarming. Rola grabs a grinder and starts cutting pipes, sparks flying everywhere... And then it happened. A fire! The flames were reaching Mr. Rzeszkowski's property. What to do? I then ordered everyone to gather branches and grass to make torches. We lit these torches and placed them a hundred meters in front of the fire. When the main fire reached that area created by the torches, the grass there was already burned away, and there was nothing left to catch fire. This way, the fire died down. Rzeszkowski was saved. But we saw that on the other side, the fire was starting to reach a field sown with barley! However, local farmers arrived with a pump and water and put out the fire. When the police arrived, we hid the welding

machine. They yelled at us thoroughly and threatened, Let this be the last time!

At the end of the workday, Władek Rogowski asked, "Will you come back next Saturday?"

– Yes. – Well then, Mr. Skrzypczak, take this construction into your own hands! – I heard from Rogowski, who had to go to Perth with the 'Tatras' for Polart at that time. – Next Saturday, the work will be led by Skrzypczak! – he announced before I even expressed my consent.

And that's how it all began... As you say, we only had our hands for work and a few tools. But we needed to build a huge metal shed, so we had to think about how to do it. For example, I came up with a machine (an electric drill, gears, and a rope) that lifted the blocks to the upper floor. We set up four spans using that contraption, which Janek Deptuła was tightening at the top...

So you took charge of the construction committee?

– No! I didn't care about the 'paperwork'! I only wanted to take the grinder, drill, and welder in hand... Józef Glapa took care of the documentation. Leon Kolecki arranged for new roofing sheets. The old sheets covered the side walls. Bronek Kędzior worked in a factory where they produced pipes. He talked to the director and bought them for us five times cheaper than on the market. Thanks to that, we managed to install the plumbing.

And so, at a low cost but with hard physical work, you built a huge shelter that is still serving us well today?

– Yes, not only for picnics and various important meetings of the Adelaide Polish community, but also for worship. For example, Father Lipski organized the Stations of the Cross there, and many people came, and the bank account increased... The church still organizes important services there today. At a picnic, it can accommodate up to a thousand people! Let me tell you one more story.

Please do.

– We were having lunch: Mieczysław Wolański, Władek Rogowski, Piotrek Rola, and I. – You know what, I can't look at those stone ruins overgrown with grass next to the rebuilt church – I said. Władek replied: – We don't have any money! Besides, it's a job for someone who knows how to work with stone. I've already asked two 'contractors'. One didn't know how to do the job, and the other waved his hand, saying it's not worth touching.

And what did you say to that?

– That I would rebuild the old Polish school whose ruins are haunting us! They just smiled. But I thought to myself, if we managed with the shelter, we could handle the ruins as well. It was 1981. At the meeting, I explained my new method of strengthening the old foundations, which had been flooded with water for fifteen years.

You say that your wife and son worked...

– My whole family worked there – my wife Helena, my son Roman with his wife Irena, my daughter Joasia and her husband Mietek Liszewski. We would take cabbage and potatoes to the car and go to Polish Hill River for a week to work. Our son's friends also came. One time, they manually sifted 12 tons of sand for the foundations! In one classroom, we set up a bedroom. The kitchen was functional, with a sink and a stove for cooking. We managed to live like that. Many helped us because Father Lipski announced during sermons that people should come to help rebuild the school where the pioneer children studied.

Did some of them still live then?

– Jan Rucioch, the last living descendant of Polish emigrants, whose mother lived to be 95

and he lived to be 97, liked to sit with us, pass bricks, and move stones... He ate with us, warmed himself by our stove – a "żelaźniak" – and was happy that it was warm for him, as he was cold in his own house. So we got interested in why it was cold in his home. My wife, Staszek Chlebowski, Czesiek Dąbrowski, and I went there. Our hearts sank at the sight! The roof and ceiling of his house were made of corrugated metal. When the sun heated the metal, the room felt like a furnace. But in winter, it was unbearably cold inside. The fireplace in that house was open, so even if you lit a fire in it, it would consume a large log in ten minutes. The walls were just whitewashed with lime... It was truly a picture of misery and despair! That poor old man, who spoke Polish fluently, lost everything in a fire – four cows and twenty-five sheep. Only two little dogs remained with him. This misfortune broke him. So we decided to help him. We bought an iron stove (we made that decision at a meeting), installed its pipe into the chimney, and bricked up the fireplace. Helena, Staszek, and Czesiek painted the walls in his house. Józek Powalko managed to get some plywood, and we added a special aluminum foil to protect against the heat, creating a ceiling. One time, we organized a birthday party for Mr. Jan... He was born on March 27, 1901, and died on July 3, 2000, in Clare. During the funeral mass, the Polish national flag was displayed.

But you know, I almost didn't start this work to rebuild the school in Polish Hill River at all.

How is it possible?

– Father Lipski asked: – Skrzypczak is going to Polish Hill River, help him as well!

However, no one bothered to show up for that first meeting regarding the school reconstruction. So I decided to head back home. We got into our car and suddenly I saw an approaching vehicle. "I'm Marek Brymora! I live nearby. I'll help you." This man appeared literally at the last minute... So I stopped, and that stop lasted a few days. The stones were just flying! My son and his family also came. The temperature in the shade was almost 40 degrees Celsius. So we slept in the church, and the mice were stealing our bread... And that's how the building went.

Later, did you also take care of the church's decor?

– We had to think carefully about it, as there was only an old image of the Mother of God in the church, probably brought by the pioneers, and a cross that Bishop Szczepan Wesoly hung up after the church was renovated. There are benches in our church made by Mr. Witek from a wooden barrier from the nearby Blyth. We received other benches and figures of saints from the Farrell Flat church.

And what about the reconstruction of the barracks? In the document, I read, among other things: "paint the rooms in a human color." What does that mean?

– The barracks were built practically without foundations, directly on the clayey ground. When it rained, it sank in water, and began to crack. The gutters were overgrown with grass, the external doors were not secured from the rain, and those dark blue walls in the rooms had to be painted in a human way, meaning a light, nice color. Bronek Kędzior painted them three times because that cursed blue kept coming through. A few people worked there. I remember Waclaw Szymaniak was particularly "greedy" for that work.

Have you already mentioned all the work you did there?

– It's impossible to do that in a short conversation. We built the 'Gniezno' shelter. We rebuilt the damaged school walls and put on a roof. We acquired decorations for the church. Should I also tell you about the construction of showers and toilets? About installing three septic tanks? About pouring concrete over the stone rubble in the yard and around the church? We got those stones almost for free from the owner of the company, an Italian by descent. Instead of several thousand, he took a symbolic 50 dollars from us.

There's more to tell about how Józef Glapa poured concrete floors in the school, kitchen, shelter, toilets, and showers. How we created a new entrance, roads, fences, and a gate... So many people worked hard on all this: Zenek Sobiecki, the Golak family, the Koziol family, the Liszewski family, the Horwat family, the Kodym family, the Ratusznik family, the Wiwatowski family, the Zieliński family... A hundred people put in hundreds of hours. Everyone contributed what they could and could afford.

Do you miss those years?

– Oh, I don't have to miss them! I'm still there, although my wife asks me to let it all go. But I feel sorry for it because our trees are growing there, so I'm still looking after the trees.

Trees?!

– Because, ma'am, trees are very important. We will leave, but they will remain. That's why we have been planting them since the moment we renovated the church, the school, and built the shelter. When we needed to put up a fence, I borrowed money. But the most important were the trees. The first three – planted in front of the church – were personally planted by President Sabath and his wife, as well as Engineer Hardy. The youth from the Polish Educational Society planted those trees. My son bought twelve saplings with his own money and also planted them behind the property. And everything would have been fine if those Tasmanian blue gums wanted to live there, in Polish Hill! But they often dried up due to lack of water and poor soil conditions. I consulted experts on what to do with this "problem." When they heard that we were planting trees straight into the heavy, clayey soil, they were shocked. They advised us to dig deep holes, fill them with good garden soil, and only then plant the saplings, and to water them thoroughly until they take root. I am not a gardener; I knew little about this, but I eventually learned all of it. I was most sorry about the sixty dried-up maples that my neighbor Andrew Pike donated three times, twenty at a time. At that time, the pump failed, and Andrew informed me that something was wrong with the trees. They dried up, and he lost about a thousand dollars in this way. Nothing came of the oaks either. To get water to irrigate the trees, we dug a well forty meters deep. For its drilling and the installation of a motor, Mr. Casey, a member of the South Australian Parliament and then Minister of Tourism, a descendant of Polish pioneers, put in three thousand dollars. But the well was not enough. So we started digging ditches on eleven acres of land (5.5 hectares) and laying plastic pipes that distribute water to the saplings. There are a total of two thousand meters of these pipes, watering one hundred thirty trees of the spotted gum variety, which grow best there. Pines have also taken root in this area. On top of all that, we also installed twenty taps underground. I then constructed a machine from salvaged parts for digging ditches and burying pipes. Staszek Chlebowski helped me a lot with this, as well as in hauling away tons of garbage that people dumped here. Sometimes it was old mattresses or beds "because they would be useful in Polish Hill River." Now my wife and I often go there with Mrs. Teresa Kodym to take care of those trees, maintain the watering equipment, and clean the pipes that get "dirty" from mineral-laden water.

You mention Andrew Pike. I understand that a few residents of Polish Hill River are interested in what happens in the "Polish area"?

– Oh, yes. And when the need arises, they help us. Local authorities have been a tremendous help by providing heavy machinery almost free of charge to level the land. Polish Hill River is located in a valley famous for its wine, in Clare Valley. Dr. Willson, the owner of a well-known winery, has released "Poldolinka" ("Polish Valley"?). There are many examples. The residents of this area shake their heads in amazement at what the Poles have accomplished here.

Mr. Stanisław, you are a representative of the post-war emigration, and the

reconstruction and development of Polish Hill River is genuinely your achievement. Are subsequent Polish emigrants who have arrived in Australia interested in what is happening in Polish Hill River?

– Generally, yes. Once, four skilled professionals came to me asking how they could help us, saying they would "do what is needed." Among them, as I remember, was Mr. Wilk and Jurek Dziedziczak, who still collaborates with us. He suggests, for instance, that members of the taekwondo club "Biały Orzeł," led by Mr. Zbigniew Kruk, come here for relaxation and to showcase this martial art. I hope that this will come to fruition one day. Representatives of the so-called "Solidarity" emigration are also actively involved in organizing various meetings in this area, contributing to the collections in the Polish Hill River Church Museum, etc. But someone else should tell you about that.

Mr. Stanisław, when did you have time for your professional work, being an electrician, singing in a choir, performing in a theater... Why do you do all of this?

– Because I am Polish. I will do everything for Poles and Poland.

Thank you for the conversation.

Interviewed by **Lidia Mikołajewska**