

## In brief

Father Leon Rogalski



**On June 6, 1906, Father Leon Rogalski passed away after his third stroke. He was buried in the crypt beneath the church in Sevenhill.**

After his death, the settlement of Polish Hill River was left without a priest or teacher, even though the church and school were key to maintaining Polish identity in the area. Despite this, Polish culture persisted in Polish Hill River, making it the only instance of such long-lasting Polishness among the Anglo-Saxon population of this continent—60 years, from 1854 to 1914.

The settlement gradually became depopulated, but even in the 1950s, many descendants of Polish pioneers still lived around Sevenhill. They carefully preserved the mementos of their ancestors. However, they were unable to maintain the church, which was deconsecrated and closed in 1950. A local farmer used the building to store hay. The school was also shut down.

Father Józef Janus, who visited Sevenhill in 1954, later wrote that he viewed the remnants with a heavy heart—empty houses, many reduced to crumbling walls, with the church and school in ruins and the library falling apart.

The history of the Polish settlement caught the attention of historian Marian Jan Szczepanowski (1916–1981), who arrived in Australia in 1951. He collected documents and relics from the early Poles of Polish Hill River in his home. He shared his knowledge on the subject with Father Tadeusz Miksa.

Father Miksa described his first impressions of Polish Hill River in early 1971 as follows:

*Among the weeds stood the old, primitive, torn walls of the former church, abandoned for years in nearly uninhabited fields! That was the first sight—ugly. And the first impression—somewhat sad. But neither the sight saddened us nor did the impression discourage us. Quite the opposite. We carefully walked around these walls from all sides. Very damaged, but symbolically and historically almost venerable. The foundations were still strong. They were fit for repair, rebuilding, and restoration of the entire structure. We touched these walls with reverence. And they seemed to call out to us: Don't abandon us! Without words, we promised: Our courageous, vibrant Polonia will bring you back to life! We will restore you! From that visit in the fields of our decision, nothing could shake our faith in Polonia—not a single opposing or doubtful opinion.*

In 1971, on the initiative of Father Miksa, a 20-person committee was formed to restore the church at Polish Hill River, with Mieczysław Wolański as chairman.

Negotiations were held with local Australian and church authorities. Father Miksa spoke privately with Archbishop James Gleeson of Adelaide to convince him to allow the restoration of the buildings by Polish hands and at their own expense, despite the fact that the structures were owned by the diocese. The Archbishop agreed, transferring the church and land to the Polish community under the condition that the external appearance of the church remain original, and that an image, cross, and altar would be placed inside for occasional services. The legal status of the building was changed to secular, and it was designated as a religious, cultural, and historical monument. Ownership of the property was transferred to the Federation of Polish Organizations in South Australia.

After completing the necessary formalities, the organization of the work began, including fundraising, purchasing materials, and so on. The Polish community of Adelaide took on the hard labor. Thanks to their tremendous dedication, the church was rebuilt in two years, and trees were planted.

**Since then, the site has been known as "The Cradle," "Sanctuary," or "The Mecca of Australian Polonia," a place of pilgrimage and significant Polish community celebrations.**