

Remembering Grand Rapids' Polish American Veterans on Nov 11th

By Richard Panek

Veterans Day, November 11th, is a day of commemoration offering a solemn opportunity to honor the courage, sacrifice, and patriotism of those who have served in the United States Armed Forces. Among the many communities that have contributed to America's defense, Polish Americans from Grand Rapids, Michigan hold a proud and distinguished place. Their legacy—rooted in both service to their adopted country and devotion to their ancestral homeland—deserves special recognition.

Grand Rapids has long been home to a vibrant Polish American population. The first Polish settlers arrived in the mid-19th century, many from the Poznań region, bringing with them skilled trades and a deep sense of community. Over generations, they built churches, cultural halls, and civic organiza-



Polish Blue Army Monument at Holy Cross Cemetery

tions that preserved Polish heritage while embracing American ideals. When the call to serve came—whether in World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, or more recent conflicts—Polish Americans from Grand Rapids have answered with distinction.

One of the most notable contributions came during World War I, when over 20,000 Polish Americans nationwide joined Polish General Józef Haller's "Blue Army," a volunteer force fighting for Poland's independence alongside the Allies. Many of these volunteers hailed from Michigan, including Grand Rapids, where Polish immigrants saw military service as a way to support both the United States and the rebirth of a free Poland. Polish Army in France recruitment records show that 72 men from Grand Rapids served un-

der Haller. Their dual loyalty was not a contradiction but a powerful expression of transnational patriotism. The Blue Army Memorial located at Holy Cross Cemetery on the West Side of Grand Rapids is dedicated to their service.

Anton Otto Prusinski, grandfather of PHS Board Member Rosemary Maciejewski, also served in World War I but for the United States, and impressively, all five of his sons served in the military during various wars. Maciejewski recalls the following: "As a second-generation American with first-generation immigrant parents, I grew up on Grand Rapids' northeast side, in a well-established Polish/Lithuanian community and Saint Isadore's was my home church. My family and neighbors included veterans from World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam."

In the decades that followed World War I, Polish American veterans continued to serve with honor. During World War II, Grand Rapids' Polish community sent hundreds of young men and women into the armed forces. Some served in Europe, others in the Pacific, and many returned to build postwar America.

Local hero Ted Szczepanski was one such example. Ted was born and raised on the Westside, on Alpine Ave, between 6th and 7th streets. He attended St. Adalbert Grade School and completed two years at Catholic Central High School. Economic hardship unfortunately forced him to leave high school to support his parents financially.



Theodore E. Szczepanski

Szczepanski went on to serve in World War II in the US Army 95th Infantry Division, march-

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PHS Event Schedule

Ethnic Festival at GR Public Museum, Sat, Nov 8, 10 am-4 pm

PHS Board Meeting Mon, Nov 10, 6 pm at Polish Falcons. Open to all members

Malbork Performance at 6th Street Hall, Sat Nov 15 contact malborkdancegroup@gmail for tickets

Wigilia Celebration, Sat, Dec 13. Reservation form on page 4 of this newsletter.

**Polish Heritage Society
of Grand Rapids**
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<https://polishheritagesociety.com>

Email us at:
phsgrandrapids@gmail.com.

The Polish Heritage Society of Grand Rapids promotes Polish/Lithuanian culture in the metro Grand Rapids. The Society meets on the 3rd Monday of every month except for December and general meetings in June and October. The society publishes this newsletter monthly. We invite story ideas and content contributions. For more information, please contact Richard Panek or Marilyn Lignell by writing to: phsgrandrapids@gmail.com

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ing through France, retaking one city at a time. The 95th's objective was to recapture the city of Metz, France, the historic "Fortified City". The 95th earned its famous nickname, "Iron Men of Metz," from the German fortress commander, General Heinrich Kittel, in recognition of the division's tenacious and unyielding combat. The capture of Metz was a major victory that cleared the way for the Third Army's continued advance toward the Saar River and into Germany.

Many of the 95th were captured in France, moved by train to Germany and held in Stalag 2A. One of them was Corporal Theodore E. Szczepanski who was a POW for six months before being liberated by Allied forces.



US GI's in Metz, France

The 95th Division's crucial role in the battle is still honored today, with monuments in Metz and events commemorating the liberation.

Szczepanski's service experience, like that of other veterans across the country, helped shape American institutions on their return. After returning home from the war, Ted and his brother Harry started their own business, Thierica Studio, on April Fool's Day in 1948, which later became Thierica, Inc. Ted, an American Hero, lived to the age of 105.

Another notable local hero was Rosemary Maciejewski's father, Master Sergeant Harry



Harry J. Prusanski Sr.

Jerome Prusinski Sr. He was a recipient of two Purple Hearts, two Bronze Stars, and a Silver Star, with service in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. As the father of eight children, of which three also served in the military, he was distinguished by his notable sense of humor. Known as "The Fox", he passed away at the age of 78 on November 7, 2003.

It was no coincidence that many young returning servicemen, full of youth and optimism, like Szczepanski and Prusinski, formed veterans service organizations. One such example is the American Legion Post 459 in Grand Rapids. They, among others with names like Rusilowski, Lewakowski, Stalec, and Potapowicz also reflected the strong Polish-American heritage of the Northeast side of Grand Rapids. These motivated veterans quickly turned to the streets and families of their youth to fill the roster of what they called the "Northeastern Post".

Their efforts started with meetings at Diamond Hall in 1947, after which the Post was chartered, elected officers, and found a home on Michigan Street N.E. In 1953 the Post added the American Legion

Ladies Auxiliary, and in 1963 they chartered a group named the Sons of The American Legion.

Post 459 is currently home to approximately 260 Legion veteran members, 210 members of the Ladies Auxiliary, and 170 members of the Sons of The American Legion. Their members contribute time and resources to charities such as Children's Miracle Network, Special Olympics, and the American Cancer Society. Post 459 also contributes to the Grand Rapids Home for Veterans, awards scholarships, and participates with other religious and local civic organizations including Pulaski Days.

As you reflect on November 11, remember that the story of America's veterans is also a story of immigration, identity, and belonging. The Polish American veterans of Grand Rapids exemplify how ethnic heritage can enrich national service. Their legacy is not only in medals and memorials but in the enduring strength of a community that has given so much to both Poland and the United States.

Veterans Day in Grand Rapids will be marked by a Parade organized by the United Veterans Council of Kent County on Tuesday, November 11, 2025. The parade begins at 6:00 PM downtown and concludes with a commemorative ceremony at Veterans Memorial Park on Fulton Street. Plan to attend.



Veterans Memorial Park



Malbork Dance Group's Annual Pierogi Fundraiser



Let's spread the Polish tradition of eating pierogi. These stuffed dough dumplings are loved by all.

Pierogi come in 1 lb. frozen packages with cooking instructions at \$8/package. Each package has 12 pierogi +/- depending on weight of filling.

Flavors: Sauerkraut, potato-cheddar, potato-farmer's cheese

Order forms & monies are due by December 2nd.
Pick up will be December 11th at 7pm at Diamond Hall.

Place orders by emailing
sarahdeemer@gmail.com
or call 206-482-7400.

Make checks payable to Malbork Dance Group and mail to
1824 Wooster Ave SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49506.

PIEROGI FUNDRAISER



Polish Heritage Society Membership News and Events



Current Busia Queen Laurie Lesiewicz with family supporters at the Pulaski Days Parade

By Marilyn Lignell

Hello members! The Polish heritage Society welcomes two new members this month. Carrie Albright joined with a family membership and Margaret Peric joined with a business membership. The Polish Heritage Society has steadily been growing in membership the last couple of years.

We currently send out 302 newsletters each month. The writing of the newsletter, the preparing of it for mailing and the actual mailing is handled by volunteers each month! Most of the main stories are now written by Richard Panek, but we are also fortunate to have members that contribute their interesting and engaging stories.



PHS at Pulaski Days Parade

Mary Ann Bergevin and I meet every month to label and prepare the newsletter, but it is Mary Ann that makes the trip to the Post Office every month to make sure they are mailed out correctly.

I am continually grateful for all of our members that volunteer in some way, you keep this society going! However, even if you are only able to maintain your membership, read this newsletter and attend our activities, you are contributing to the vitality of this society. Thank you.

Happy Birthday wishes to Wanda Lehman, mother of lifetime member Mary Panek. On November 7 Wanda will turn 93 years old!

The PHS participated in the Pulaski Days parade with the star of the show being Busia Queen Laurie Lesiewicz and her family.

Several members of the PHS recently went on a tour of Poland and according to Lucy Preston it was downright amazing. Here is a picture of

four American "queens" in front of the Malbork Castle.

Charlene Czarnecki was awarded the West Catholic Falcon by Choice Award for her profound impact on West Catholic. Joining her at the award ceremony were her son Capt. Kevin Czarnecki and his wife Christy.

A reminder that we make hand-made ornaments for all the guests at Wigilia to take home and you are invited to participate in making them. The Wigilia Committee will hold a crafting session on Saturday, November 15, from 10 a.m.-2 p.m. at the home of Rich and Mary Panek's, 6620 Knockadoon Dr., Rockford, MI 49341. A brunch will be served. Please reply to Mary Panek marylpanek@gmail.com or 616.550.4413. Space is limited to 20 guests.

The Grand Rapids Public Muse-



Lucy Preston, Grazyna Castillo, Judi Serba, Dolly Pelton

um is hosting their annual Cultural Heritage Festival on Saturday, November 8, from 10 a.m.-4 p.m. This special day is a vibrant celebration of community, featuring music, dancing, and hands-on activities. The PHS will be there with a booth and we would love to see you!



Falcon By Choice Award recipient Char Czarnecki with Christy and Kevin Czarnecki