

**William Kostecki**  
**Interviewed by Sarah Campbell, 2/28/1994**

This is an interview with Mr. William Kostecki of Montague Massachusetts, taking place on February 28, 1994. My name is Sarah Campbell.

Sarah: Why don't you tell me who you are and who...you came from where?

Ok. My name is Bill Kostecki and my dad's folks came from Ukraine. We've done some tracing of the name back and the name Kostecki does seem to go back to Poland, so it is probably of Polish origin. My theory is, there are, since Poland owned most of Ukraine at that time, the either Polish citizens or somebody who just worked there just got left behind. They came over here, 4 brothers at once, came by way of I guess Austria. That was the only way of getting out of Europe at the time. This was about 1912, as far as I can figure.

Sarah: So they came as a group. They didn't have somebody who paved the way?

No. Four brothers came and at my fathers, after my father's funeral, I was talking to my relatives, to my aunts and uncles. They had said that my grandfather had worked his way over on the boat by being a chef onboard ship. When he got here, I guess they all landed at Ellis Island. Two of the brothers stayed in New York, New York City, while 2 of the brothers came to Deerfield.

Sarah: Do you know if they had any kind of contact in Deerfield or if this sounded good?

Nothing that concrete. I know that brother Theodore bought a farm first in Pine Nook area. It's kind of on a hill on River Road. It's still there- a white house, many owners after he left, and my grandfather, which is William, settled later, further down the road in River Road, East Deerfield, and bought a farm there. That's when the family feud started because the older brother wanted, the younger brother had the bottom land and the older brother had top land which was rocks and he suggested that they just exchange. The older brother should have his first choice, but I guess my grandfather told him where to get off and the feud started and the only thing was that I guess he forbid his kids from speaking with his brother's kids. They changed their name by just changing the ending from an "i" to a "y", and that was about the only thing we could go by the "i", which I guess is the Polish spelling. The "y" was kept for the other family, still relatives.

Sarah: So, your information- you knew your grandfather..

I didn't know my father's father. They had died when they were early 40's. My grandmother had died. They had both died in the 20's, 1920's. My grandmother died of breast cancer. My grandfather died a few years later of stomach cancer. He had taken a second wife after she had died, a widow with children and had 2 girls by the 2nd wife and my father, after his father had died, he had, was left with his whole entire family of 2 brothers and a sister from the original family, 2 half- sisters and then all the step-children and mother to bring up himself.

Sarah: He was the oldest?

He was the oldest. We figure he was either 19 or 20 years old, and he had all of this. He didn't go far in school for an education, about 7th grade. He and his next brother in line both worked the sport [?] family railroad which was River Road and they, my grandfather, had tended steam engines and so 2 of them did his job to try to make, keep his job, to keep some money.

Sarah: In addition to the farm

Yup, in addition to the farm. I found out my grandfather was also a musician. He had brought over an accordion from the old country and he used to play weekends, had got together some of the immigrants who had instruments and they'd run around playing the church fairs and church picnics and things, which was really an interesting thing. I never knew until fairly recently that he was a musician, so I don't know too, too

much about my father's side of the family, only what he told me because they had died long before I came along and my mother's side of the family came from Poland. She was the only grandmother I knew. [That] grandmother had, would have children, have a child in the morning, leave the child with the older girls to take care of and she'd be out in the field hoeing in the afternoon. That's why my mother had one die in her arms. It was her brother, but they lost their farm of course during the Great Depression. There was not much coming in.

Sarah: That was here in Montague?

In Montague, yeah, and my mother had told how going to school here in Montague Center. The school before this one was little. They had to walk all the way down Ferry Road. All the kids, they'd have to carry their shoes so they wouldn't wear them out and when they got to the main road, then they put them on, walked to school because that pair of shoes had to go to the next one in line and so they would try to hold them as long as they could possibly hold them. My grandmother, we figured out, she was married at 13-14 years old.

My [maternal]grandmother, my mother's mother, the only grandmother here who I knew really well, she spoke a very broken English, mostly Polish, so I had to learn how to understand her. You spoke when you were spoken to. She was very strict. She was, wasn't quite 5 foot tall. She was probably almost as wide as she was tall. She had a way about her which, very excellent cook, couldn't read, but everything with feeling and she cooked very well, like a master chef. If someone would get sick she had these herbal concoctions that she'd come up with which should do the trick.

Sarah: And she kept the old ways.

The old ways.

Sarah: She kept her language and she her cooking and everything else, was that..

Yup. She belonged to the Polish church in Turners- Our Lady of Czestochowa, sat in the same pew all the time. Had to be there in the seat at a certain time, every time. She had told about when she came here how, about the houses in Hatfield. We were always interested in how come there was a little well, looked like a cupola or something that you could stand on, on top of the roof all built in. You could get into from the inside and she said this was a lookout for the landowner so when he came here there was big plantations and you would work, and you would work and they would stand up there with a telescope and whoever would lift, stand up straight, would get docked in pay, and this is how they kept...

Sarah: They could see everything around.

Everything, yeah. It's the only way they could tell whether you were working or not working, by if you stood up, and she said it was tough, tough work. You didn't earn very much at all.

Sarah: so she came originally with her brothers and worked the farm...

She was the youngest.

Sarah: until she was married and I assume she continued to farm.

Yup, whatever she could farm. When we lost the farm there, then she was like a, hired out as a tenant farmer or whatever, a helper on farms because she knew the work. King Tobacco was still in existence in the valley and she worked in tobacco, and potatoes. The time came that she would work on potatoes- very strong lady. I had never seen anybody pick up hundred pound bags like she could pick up a hundred pound bag, put it up on her back and carry it.

Sarah: Did she talk about before she came over at all?

Very little- just that she would say that in her country she didn't like the Russians when they were in existence because they made you speak Russian, not Polish and she was Polish and she insisted on it.

Sarah: She was as opinionated when she was very young when she came.

Yup, but my sister remembered that she said that her father was an officer in the Polish army at one time. He had lived to be about 100 years old, but a lot of ties with Poland were cut when they came here, but my mother had written back and forth to a cousin which they found again and relatives over there and they would write back and forth-send clothes or whatever you had, which was not much.

Sarah: So she didn't talk about the people she had left behind.

No.

Sarah: She had a life and she had gone on.

Right, that was it when she came here. I knew all her brothers had visited. It wasn't like today but she never visited. Back then, you would figure Sunday and you would go that Sunday to visit this person or that person. You would go around, you'd visit. When gasoline was tough in the 2nd World War, we'd figure ways to get here, there and everywhere. It was interesting at that time.

Sarah: How about specific holidays? You said Sunday would be an important day of the week, but how about, I know Easter is...

Easter, yes, we celebrated the Polish traditions at that time. Christmas is probably the biggest thing I remembered. We always had it- the whole family would gather. Aunts and uncles which were in the area could come, would come. We would, when we came to Montague Center, my mother had inherited half of the farm, which we're sitting on part of it here. This is from her godfather. Then she and my father had to buy out the other half of the farm from the other bachelor that lived together with her godfather, and so we got this farm and we moved to this section, but she would always go to the barn and gather hay from the cows and sprinkle it on top of the table and put down the best tablecloth we had and everything had the pierogis made and always had fish. We had, well, we couldn't have meat on that day. That's still a Polish tradition, and had different flavored pierogis they'd make. Kids were usually kicked out of the kitchen, especially me, getting in the way all the time, but that day was special, the breaking of the bread, and we kept it up as long as we could while my father was still alive, and it was quite a nice thing. She had a lot of superstitions, very superstitious person, goes back to some of the old traditions that I'm still reading about in Poland. After the wiglia was over, all the hay was taken away from underneath the table and given back to the cows, which is supposed to be like a blessing to them, old, what would you say, old stories of ancient poems at that time, if you gave the hay to the cows, and you waited 'til midnight, snuck in the barn, you could hear them talk.

Sarah: Oh, yeah. I've heard about that.

Yeah, but she would tell us these stories over and over again. She remembers some of the songs which she would sing all in Polish. The thing I can remember about her, every time she would hear the Polish national anthem, she would break out and cry. I guess it was still under control by somebody, Germany and Russia, and she always swore that some day it would be free, and it did.

Sarah: How long did she live?

She lived to be 72 years old and she died in about 1961- 62. We had built a little place next to her so she could have some privacy of her own in the next house down, and took care of her there.

Sarah: You say the family had a very strong influence. You talk about visiting and things. Was there also a feeling of a bigger Polish community than just the church? You said your grandmother would go to the Polish church.

Yeah.

Sarah: Did you, growing up, have Polish holidays or picnic celebrations at that time?

Whenever we could. We came from quite a poor family. We couldn't do a lot of church celebrations. One thing I do remember- they had a, I don't remember what the Polish name was for the celebration at the end of the year and after harvest festival, it comes to me later, but if you could contribute money you could, there was a big indoor picnic, big feast, and since we were farmers, we contributed the vegetables, bushels and hundreds of pounds of whatever we could, potatoes and cabbage, whatever we had and this is quite an interesting thing.

Sarah: Where was that?

It was held in Turners Falls by the, Our Lady of Czestochowa, but they did own a place where the Elks had gotten- a place we called Pulaski Hall and we, that's where it was held in the whole building. Usually had pretty big turnout, but other than that, didn't take in any Polish picnics until I[ ???] to get old enough...

...We had pictures of when my father was young, probably 12, no more than 13 years old, with his sister and his brothers, looked like Our Gang comedy series with the clothes and all but..

Sarah: I have a great one of my father who looks like he just fell off the turnip boat you know- wool coats and wool hats.

But the Ukrainian side of the family never did have much to do with it at all. My father spoke several languages. He spoke fluent Polish. He was born in this country, in New York, but he spoke several languages. He spoke a fluent Polish, fluent Ukrainian. He could get along in Czech and some Russian and he was quite proud of it with only a 7th grade education, but, so we, whatever was spoken in the house was primarily Polish. My mother didn't want Polish to be the orig-, the main language of the household, so whenever they wanted to keep something from us, it was in Polish. I had got to learn it long before my brothers and sisters came along. They don't know the other language but I do, which seems to be coming back to me because I haven't spoken or had to read it or do anything with it in 35 years, but it is starting to come back.

Sarah: How did your parents meet? Did they live near each other?

Real romantic. I told you my mother lived at the end of Ferry Road here and my father lived directly, well, across the river, just probably half a mile down, so he would paddle a canoe across the river up to where she was, here, and they would court this way and when he wanted to go home, he said he just pushed the canoe out and he'd just float back down because the current was that way and he'd land up on the other side. He said it was very inexpensive. He didn't have to use the car, just muscle power for that canoe. They were both great swimmers. They both loved to boat- never taught us kids how to swim. My brother has learned how to swim through necessity. I'm the oldest in the family and of course, he's the 3rd in line, but he had to learn how to swim [???] The, I can remember through the Deerfield area, when King Tobacco was around, how to learn, how to work on tobacco- 9 years old. I learned how to drive at 9 years old and quickly developed it to better and better over the years. By the time I was 12, I was pretty good but like, I guess most of the farmers here are really glad that King Tobacco finally died. I think that was a, that was a big gamble that had ruined a lot of people's health. Maybe you'll make it this year, maybe you won't and just...

Sarah: Yeah, real dependent on the weather, rain, and how hot is the sun.

and you may have had a good crop, but the buyers didn't like what they saw, or they were paid not to like it, or something, so it was a gigantic gamble. It seems everybody made more on cucumbers and potatoes than we truly did with tobacco, but maybe next year. We raised tobacco, we raised cucumbers, were the main crops.

Sarah: And that was right here?

Right here. I think we raised beets one year; we raised cabbage one year for a main crop. Usually, the strange thing about the valley, everybody had a, you'd think you had a bright idea, nobody else will think of this idea. I'll put in this crop this year, but suddenly everybody had the same idea and killed the market so you had nothing. Like most family farms, you raised chickens for yourself. You raised your own pigs, you raised your own beef cattle, and you did your own butchering and everything else so you could live fairly inexpensively by necessity. You raised everything and you made a lot of things yourself but learned to, kicked out of the kitchen as I said before, because my grandmother and mother, and later my sisters were making kishka, blood sausage- they'd make kielbasa in the kitchen and I was too nosey, so they'd throw me out of the kitchen and give me other jobs, but that was women's work, is what they would say, women's work to do the cooking. Stay out in the field.

Sarah: Were you aware of other ethnic groups? Was it the Yankees and the Polish or were there different groups that you were aware of?

I don't know. At that time, they had said a lot too, that the people in town, especially the Yankees in town, didn't particularly take a liking to the Polish because they were different, different or whatever, I don't know. Perhaps later in history. or when you look back at history, that a lot of farms through the valley belonged to British owners of British descendants and then when the Great Depression came along, they had hired all the Polish to work the fields, who didn't spend a dime, lived dirt cheap, saved everything that they had, and when the time came they were, the mortgage was due, they couldn't pay up. All the Polish had the money and so they bought the farms and that's why you see a lot of the farms have Polish names throughout the whole valley, but I don't know.

Sarah: Do you have any artifacts in the family, objects that have special [?]

About the only thing she had was a picture, couple pictures of Our Lady of Czestochowa, which she really carried everywhere and she had a very strange object- a photograph, but it was more than just a photograph. It looked like small figures with ladders, whatever else, in this religious thing. I only have faint memories of that. It was a very strange-looking object. It was a picture, probably 2- 3 inches thick, but it had the figures inside of this, which was made up to look like a picture. It wasn't painted on- only the very background.

Sarah: a shadow box

Yeah, right, and what this was, I haven't done any research into it I've only seen one other like it in folk art, and she carried that everywhere she went. She made one move from here, there, and everywhere. This was the first thing that was packed and she was off, but being such a short lady, she carried a lot of weight in more ways than one.

Sarah: She threw her weight around, did she?

She really did.

Sarah: Any other special holiday foods?

She really didn't make too much pastry, didn't have the time. I had aunts which made kushtiki, which they call angels' wings, very delicate stuff that around Christmastime, and later on, my mother was able to make cookies, but she would make mostly pies. Her favorite was making pies, as well as my grandmother made pies. Didn't make cakes too often- but pies. Everything was just a wholesome-type food. We always thought

the foods that we got growing up as kids were very poor food, but we just had to look at it today that it was quite good that we raised everything. We had asparagus when asparagus was rare. The price of asparagus today is sky high. We had cabbage, had so many kinds of soup I complained to Carol that I've had so many kinds of soup I don't want to see another soup, but we had all kinds of soup, new inventions even, for soups.

Sarah: Combined everything

Combined everything, yeah, cabbage soup and beet soup so many times that... I don't know, plus, they threw all kinds of things into it, changed the flavor every week.

Sarah: Did you get the idea that your grandmother had ambitions for her children, or you know, that she was working hard to give them a better life, that type of thing?

It didn't seem so. She just would work for an existence.

Sarah: Because you worked, because you worked.

My mother had, was the one who had all the ambitions for the kids. She wanted to see everybody make one step higher than the previous generation.

I guess on Sundays and some of the holidays, they used to have like, the whole neighborhood, or everybody on that whole road that was Polish, used to end up in one place and it used to be their house at the end of the road. So they had all these activities going on, music probably going on, and of course, some drinking, which is popular with the old immigrants. This was a hospitality thing and you offered a drink to someone which was probably made in the back.

Sarah: I was going to say, out in the woods...

My father always told of how his, his father used to make apple jack and it was so strong that one shot glass would knock you out if you stood up and it would go down like water, but he was quite interesting... from what I hear, my grandfather, my namesake, William Kostecki, was quite interesting, just learning bits and pieces from my aunts and uncles, quite an amazing fellow.

Sarah: So you kind of recently were getting bits and pieces..

Getting that sense, yeah. My father always tells it, had told the story that when he was just a youngster, probably 8, that they were mischievous in ways and my grandfather and his little band were playing out for one of the church fairs, they had dances around Deerfield at that time. They went out while they were playing. They went to this touring car and wondered what were all these little things sticking out of the tires, which were valves for the air, and they pushed one of them in and they said the air came out and they stuck something into it, a piece of stick, and watched the air come out and they thought this was great until they pulled all of them went flat. My grandfather came back and was trying to find out, trying to find out who let the air out of all the tires. It wasn't his car and of course, they would deny everything, but he said we knew better. There isn't too much else I could tell ya.

\*Some sections deleted to [end of tape]