



# Chairman's Column

By: Aloys Notzon, PHC Chairman and President

On behalf of the Board of Directors of the Polish Heritage Center at Panna Maria, we wish each and every one of you a blessed Christmas. For us, it will be a holiday filled with bittersweet memories.

Sam Kotara, Vice Chairman of the Polish Heritage Center Board, will be sorely missed. Sam has been a part of the development of the Polish Heritage Center since the first meetings with Bishop Yanta in 2010 and has been an active member of the Board as an officer since its beginning. Please read his obituary by Susan Moczygamba-McKinsey on the third page of this newsletter. What a wonderful celebration of the life of Sam Kotara in Panna Maria Nov. 3 – 4 - a beautiful tribute by his daughter Amy Davis and a rosary led by Fr. Wieslaw Iwaniec on Sunday, and then on Monday, Amy gave the introduction for a Mass of Resurrection celebrated by Msgr. Frank Kurzaj, Fr. Damian Jaje, Fr. Scott Janysek, and Pastor Fr. Wieslaw Iwaniec. Alex Kotara, his son, read a note of condolence from Robert Rusiecki, the first Polish Consul General in Houston, and invited attendees to a reception in the Polish Heritage

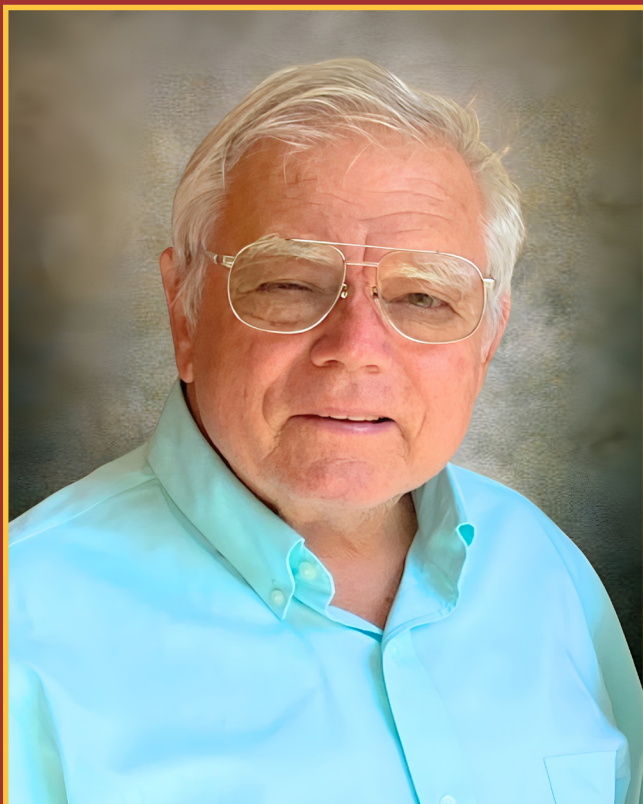
Center in honor of his dad's outstanding efforts on behalf of the PHC. More than 200 people came. Sam was buried at sundown, as he requested, with Fr. Wieslaw Iwaniec conducting the burial services.

While Sam, the premier tour director of the PHC, the Church, the Museum and the Visitors Center, has gone to his just rewards, he will always be a part of our Center. Sam is in the lobby mural (the young man kneeling holding the banner in front of the participants in Bishop Yanta's first trip for descendants of the Polish immigrants back to Poland) and he is also in the Center's movie.

On a happier note, we thank the Consulate of the Republic of Poland in Houston for their invitation to a delightful concert celebrating Polish Independence Day on November 7.

As always, many thanks to our donors for supporting the many activities of the Polish Heritage Center. Please consider the PHC in your giving plans as we end this tax year. Executive Director Alice Poore has an article on giving in this newsletter.

Have a wonderful and Blessed Christmas.



(left to right) John Cebrowski, Consul Andrzej Fařara, Dr. Jim Mazurkiewicz, Aloys Notzon at Polish Independence Day Celebration and Concert in Houston

# Contributing to the Polish Heritage Center

By: Alice Poore, PHC Executive Director

We are almost at the closing of 2024, and it is a perfect time to consider a tax-deductible donation to support PHC and help us move forward into the new year with our plans to expand our educational program, increase the awareness of our Polish heritage through new and amazing exhibits, enhance technology and genealogy capabilities and expand our media footprint internationally.

Last year, you were introduced to a new and easy way to help PHC accomplish our goals. We incorporated a new method, a **QR Code**, to make supporting the PHC quick and easy.

Just follow these simple directions:

1. Point your phone's camera at the **QR CODE** to the right.
2. When your camera scans the code an icon, donor perfect.net, will appear. **TAP** it.
3. This will bring you to a screen called Donation information.
4. Follow the instructions on the phone to make your donation.
5. You will receive a receipt at the end of the transaction.



Please remember any amount, large or small, helps our mission continue. With over 4,000 visitors to the PHC in the last fourteen months, it is evident that we are moving in the right direction. It is because of supporters like you, the Foundation will be able to follow the vision of our founder, Bishop John W. Yanta, by providing a unique experience that will rekindle a new generation's interest in their Polish heritage. Thank you all so much for your continued support and I look forward to meeting each of you on your next visit to the Polish Heritage Center.

**TAX ALERT: Still need to take your 2024 RMD (required minimum distribution)? Consider having a portion sent to the Polish Heritage Center. Ask your tax professional how this can help you to save on taxes today!**

## Veterans' Exhibit Opens at Polish Heritage Center

By: Lauren Robinson, PHC Librarian/Archivist

The Polish Heritage Center is excited to announce the opening of a new temporary exhibit, "Honoring Our Polish Texas Veterans." It honors Polish Texans who fought for the United States in conflicts from the Civil War to Operation Iraqi Freedom, featuring veterans from several communities including Panna Maria, Yorktown, and White Deer. The exhibit displays a number of different objects, including photographs, military uniforms, Purple Hearts, various documents, and vintage firearms.

We are extremely grateful to the families of the veterans and other community members who have kept such incredible artifacts and have donated or loaned them to the Center. The goal of this exhibit is to educate visitors about the history of American warfare, and honor those who sacrificed their lives for America's freedom. By showcasing individuals and their stories, we hope to inspire visitors with a sense of pride.

The exhibit will run through April 2025 for our visitors and students on field trips to enjoy. Find out more about this exhibit and other news from the PHC by following us on Facebook and checking our website.



# Remembering Sam Kotara

By: Susan Moczygemba-McKinsey

Simon "Sam" Kotara Jr., known to everyone as Sam Kotara, passed away the evening of Oct. 31, 2024, surrounded by his family. He was 76 years old.

Sam was born on August 25, 1948, the firstborn of Simon "Sam" Kotara Sr. and Faustina "Tina" Woytasczyk. He grew up on the family farm outside of Karnes City, TX, and would live and work there for the rest of his life. Sam graduated from Karnes City High School in 1967. He attended Bee County College, "before it had sidewalks," and Southwest Texas State, "before it grew up into Texas State University," but his allegiance rested with Texas A&M. He bled maroon. A grandchild's Aggie ring ceremony was a must-attend event, more important to him than birthdays.

In his early 20s, Sam went to work for Father John Yanta, a priest from nearby Runge who was serving in San Antonio, establishing neighborhood youth programs, among many other projects. So began an association that would last both of their lifetimes.

Father John had great hopes that Sam would enter the priesthood, but those hopes were dashed once Sam met Susie Grothues. They were married February 7, 1976. Their union, filled with great joy, heartbreaking sorrow, hard work, world travel and grand adventures, would last 48 years. They were Sam and Susie, the inseparable couple. When you got one, you got the other and loved them both. Together they raised Alex, Jessica, Amy and Joseph. They lost Joseph at age 13. They went on to enjoy eight grandchildren.

Settled in Karnes County, Sam continued to work the family farm while Susie taught in nearby schools. He also worked night shifts as a lab technician for Aqualon. For more than thirty years, Sam served with the Karnes City Volunteer Fire Department, many of those years as Fire Marshal. He served as a board member for the Karnes County Emergency Services District.

Sam was proud to be a fifth-generation descendant of the original Polish immigrants who settled in Panna Maria in 1854. He was there when the first group of local Poles flew with Father Yanta to visit Poland in the early 1970s. (Sam didn't actually make the trip; he was bringing Father Yanta some forgotten papers and ended up in the photo now recreated in the PHC lobby mural.) Sam and Susie worshipped at Immaculate Conception Church in Panna Maria where Sam, with his great love of history and heritage, also volunteered with the Panna Maria Historical Society. They made many trips to Poland over the years.

Sam retired in 2008, about the same time now Bishop John Yanta, also retired back in San Antonio. Bishop Yanta would soon come calling with his vision to build a center in Panna Maria that would honor the original immigration that resulted in the first and oldest permanent Polish settlement in America. Sam was on board for the whole decade-long endeavor, scouting locations, raising money, doing whatever job needed doing. He served on the Polish Heritage Center Board of Directors, first as Secretary and then as Vice Chair.

For years, Sam gave tours of Panna Maria and the PHC. He was simply the best of the best - a wonderful storyteller who would make the history of Panna Maria come alive for school kids, elders or foreign visitors. He loved engaging his visitors, talking to them, learning from them as they learned from him. He was cheerful, attentive, and so very kind.

Sam was buried at sunset on November 4 in Panna Maria Cemetery, next to his beloved son Joseph. Family and friends watched and listened to the fire department tributes, the hymns sung by Father Wieslaw Iwaniec and Dr. Jim Mazurkiewicz, "Taps" played by lifelong friend Charlie Salge. And we wept. It was beautiful and fitting, but hard to say goodbye. As one of his friends said, Sam was simply a good, good, good man.





**THE  
POLISH HERITAGE CENTER  
AT PANNA MARIA**

13909 N FM 81  
PO Box 25  
Panna Maria, Texas 78144



PHC Hours: Wed. – Sat. 10 a.m. – 4 p.m.  
[www.polishheritagecentertx.org](http://www.polishheritagecentertx.org)  
(830) 310-8612

The Polish Heritage Center at Panna Maria  
Foundation is a 501(c)(3) tax deductible organization.

TAX ID: #46-0561240



**Merry Christmas**  
from the  
**Polish Heritage Center at Panna Maria**

