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GILLIAN OLECHNO-HUSZCZA

Feliks Pawel Wierzbicki in California.

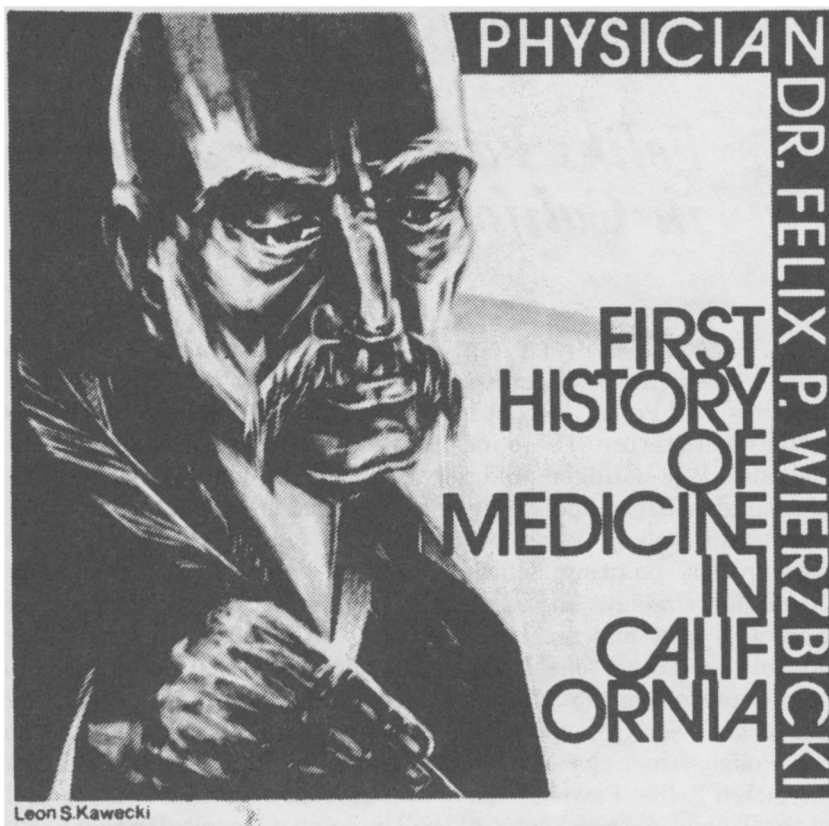
THROUGHOUT THE HISTORY of the United States men and women have appeared from time to time from among Americans of Polish descent in California to achieve national and international stature. These include Ralph Modjeski, engineer of the Oakland Bay Bridge; Andrzej Poniatowski who developed the Mokelumne River and brought hydro-electric power to San Francisco; Jan Styka, the artist responsible for the "Crucifixion," a monumental painting housed in Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Glendale; Czesław Miłosz of the University of California at Berkeley, poet and recent Nobel laureate in literature, and other notable writers, teachers, actors, artists and musicians too numerous to mention.¹ Several such Poles were numbered among California's early pioneers. One of them, little known today outside the Polish American community and a few bibliophiles, was the physician Feliks Pawel Wierzbicki. Depicted on a fresco on the wall of the Toland Amphitheatre of the University Hospital in San Francisco,² he appears slightly Mephistophelian as he gazes down upon passersby, but on his tombstone in the Presidio National Cemetery are inscribed the words "Highly esteemed by all who knew him."³

Feliks Pawel Wierzbicki was born in 1815 in Czerniawka, a village in the province of Volhynia, at that time part of Poland and

¹ For a detailed account of the history of Poles in California see Jacek Przygoda [ed.], *Polish Americans in California 1827-1977 and Who's Who* (Los Angeles: Polish American Historical Association, 1978).

² The fresco, one of several painted by Bernard Zackheim for the Medical Center at the University of California, San Francisco, surrounds the entire Toland Amphitheater, and depicts the history of medicine in California from its beginnings with the Spanish missionaries up to the date of the painting. On the extreme left as one enters the auditorium is Dr. Wierzbicki, pen in hand, holding a copy of his book on California. He stands in front of his office door which is inscribed with his name and "Hydrotherapy." He is easily identifiable as Polish from the Polish white eagle on a red background, hanging on a medallion around his neck. Further information about the frescoes can be found in *California's Medical Story in Fresco* (San Francisco: University of California Medical Center, 1939).

³ Lyman found his grave in the Laurel Hill Cemetery. Haiman even supplied a photograph. Other sources name the National Cemetery in the Presidio, where indeed his grave is to be found. Cemetery records state: "Discharged November 24th, 1856. Disinterred from Laurel Hill



A characture of Felix P. Wierzbicki by Leon S. Kawecki, printed with the permission of the artist.

now part of the Soviet Ukraine. At the age of 15, possibly while preparing to enter the Medical College of Warsaw, he took part in the November Insurrection (1830-1831) against Russian domination.⁴ The regiment in which he served retreated into the Austrian occupied portion of Poland, where it was allowed to remain until

Cemetery and re-interred on August 6th, 1936." Probably in response to the re-publication of Wierzbicki's book in 1933, the American-Polish Citizen's Club in San Francisco reconstructed his grave in Pioneer Memorial Park in 1936. This cemetery was later condemned by the City of San Francisco, so the Club obtained permission from the War Department to transfer the remains of Dr. Wierzbicki to the San Francisco National Cemetery in the Presidio, and the new grave was dedicated on Decoration Day, May 30, 1940. Today the headstone still stands, surmounted by the Polish eagle, a memorial to "a man who gave his time and knowledge to the people and the country of his adoption." See Stanley Walchak, speech delivered in Polish Hall, San Francisco, in April 1941, which is in the possession of the Society of California Pioneers.

⁴ Mieczysław Haiman, *Feliks Pawel Wierzbicki i jego "California"* (Chicago: Dziennik Zjednoczenia, 1933).

1833. At that time Austria entered into an agreement with the other two partitioning powers to maintain vigilance over the former participants in the insurrection in case they should stir up new revolutionary movements. Because of this agreement, about 400 Poles were interned in the fortress of Brno (Brunn). Austria gave them two choices: they could return to Poland under an amnesty from the czar, or they could emigrate to the United States at the expense of the Austrian government. Many of them would have preferred to join the "Great Emigration" in France, but the French King, Louis Philippe, was becoming nervous about the number of foreign revolutionaries on French soil, so most of them opted for the second choice. They were sent to the port of Trieste and on November 21, 1833, 234 of them were shipped on two Austrian frigates, the *Hebe* and the *Guerriere*, to the United States, docking in New York harbor on March 28, 1834.⁵

While still on board ship, having unanimously decided that they were exiles against their will and not willing immigrants, they made an agreement to remain together and to that end formed a committee to represent them in their dealings with the Americans. The initial action of this "Polish Committee" was to draft a petition to the United States Congress asking for a grant of land and saying in part: "Although pilgrims in a foreign land, with nothing but the sad recollection of the past and hopes for the future, we wish to live a life of active industry and become useful to the country of our adoption." As each one left his ship he was given the sum of \$33.00 by the Austrian consul.⁶

Committees were formed in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore, and other cities to aid the exiles, and the new arrivals were gradually moved away from New York in small groups. As for the land grant requested for a "New Poland" or "Little Poland," the Congress stipulated that the exiles would have to pay \$1.25 per acre for a township of land of their choice in either Illinois or Michigan. They could pay for it over a long period, but would have to provide their own transportation and farming implements. The "grant" was for the original group of 234 and not for anyone coming in the future. The vision of a "New Poland" ultimately disappeared and by 1840 was nothing more than a shattered dream. Although there were many who awaited the first chance to return to Europe or to go to Mexico or South America, many of those who remained did manage to achieve a measure of success, becoming teachers, musi-

⁵ Jerzy J. Lerski, *A Polish Chapter in Jacksonian America: the United States and the Polish Exiles of 1831* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1958).

⁶ Joseph Wiczerzak, "Pre- and proto-ethnics: Poles in the United States before the immigration 'after bread,'" *The Polish Review*, vol. 21, no. 3 (1976), pp. 7-38.

cians, cartographers and engineers.⁷

Attempts to complete the recorded knowledge of Wierzbicki's life in the United States have resulted in many speculations and generalizations which have been repeated and expanded to the point where it is sometimes difficult to separate fact from fiction, but by piecing together the various narratives and documenting the evidence we can make some reasoned deductions which serve to fill some of the existing gaps, so that gradually a composite picture emerges.⁸ It was always assumed that upon arrival in New York Wierzbicki went to Illinois. George D. Lyman even says that "peniless and alone he was unable to develop his land."⁹ Rev. Ladislas Siekaniec, in his short but thoroughly researched and documented account states that the "medical school where he studied and whether he actually earned a doctorate in medicine are still unknown."¹⁰ Dr. Alexander Rytel says that "due to lack of funds he left Illinois for the Medical Academy of New England."¹¹ There is no evidence that he went to Illinois; the known dates of his other activities do not support this claim.

The present author believes, based upon her research, that the family which, according to Lyman, took him in and sponsored his further education, was actually the family of a physician under whom he served his apprenticeship and that the Medical Academy of New England, for which no records exist, was in fact what was then called the Medical Institution of Yale College. Contrary to Mieczysław Haiman, the noted Polish American historian, who claimed that Wierzbicki did not attend Yale,¹² correspondence with the Historical Librarian of the Yale University School of Medicine reveals that some years ago a scholar there compiled a list of graduates, non-graduates and honorary degree recipients between the years 1814 and 1860. Wierzbicki is listed among the non-graduates for the year 1835-36. In all probability he also served at least a partial apprenticeship before that. Whether he graduated with an M.D. degree in the sense that we know it today is doubtful, hence the listing under non-graduates. However, medical education at that time was largely based on apprenticeship and how long a

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 16-18.

⁸ General biographical information about Wierzbicki was obtained from Haiman, *Wierzbicki*; George D. Lyman, introduction to Wierzbicki's *California as it is and as it may be, or, a guide to the gold region* (San Francisco: Grabhorn Press, 1933); Ladislas J. Siekaniec, *The Polish Contribution to Early American Education* (San Francisco: R & E Research Associates, 1976).

⁹ Lyman edition of *California*

¹⁰ Siekaniec.

¹¹ Alexander Rytel, "Dr. Feliks Pawel Wierzbicki-first geographer and medical historian of California," *Polish Medical Science and History Bulletin*, vol. 5 (July, 1962), pp. 83-88.

¹² Haiman, *Wierzbicki*.

student spent in formal studies varied with the qualifications he wanted. According to the requirements of the Medical Institution of Yale College, every candidate for practice was required to spend three years in professional study with an experienced physician (two if he had already been to college) and attend one course of lectures at the Medical Institution if he wanted a license to practice medicine. If he wanted a degree he was required to take two courses, one of which had to be taken at the Medical Institution.¹³ Therefore it seems likely that Wierzbicki obtained a license rather than a degree. That he subsequently appended the initials M.D. after his name may have been a personal vanity as there was little or no control over licensing in those days.

For the next few years he was presumably completing his apprenticeship, teaching French and establishing his medical practice. We can assume that in 1841 he was living in Providence, Rhode Island, as the preface to his pamphlet *The Ideal Man* is inscribed with his initials, that date and Providence, Rhode Island. He is listed in that city's Directory for 1844 as F. P. Wierzbicki, physician.

According to Rev. Siekaniec, Wierzbicki, even though living in Providence, either kept in touch with Polish activity in New York City, or the Polish groups in that city called upon him for special events and functions. In November, 1844, a public mass meeting was held under the auspices of the recently formed [1842] Association of Poles in America [Towarzystwo Polaków w Ameryce] to commemorate the fourteenth anniversary of the Polish November Uprising of 1830. The meeting was held in the Stuyvesant Institute of New York "amid much splendor," and among those who gave speeches in English was Wierzbicki, who was also considered one of the Association's commissioners. In his speech he attacked the Polish gentry and the Jesuits as contributing to Poland's downfall. His stand naturally contributed to dissension and caused a split in the organization between those who supported his view and those who supported the pro-monarchist stance of an organization called the Third of May Society [Towarzystwo Trzeciego Maja].

Wierzbicki also helped to organize the Polish-Slavonian Literary Association which was founded by Caspar Tochman in New York State in 1846 "to promote the diffusion of knowledge of the History, Science and Literature of the nations of the Slavonic race." Theodore Sedgwick, Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe and Horace

¹³ Herbert Thomas, *The Doctors of Yale College, 1702-1815, and the founding of the Medical Institution* (Hamden, CT: Shoe String Press, 1960); Whitfield Bell, "The Medical Institution of Yale College, 1810-1835," *Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine*, vol. 33 (1960-61), pp. 169-83.

Greeley (editor of the *New York Tribune*) were also members of this group.¹⁴

It is possible that Wierzbicki remained in Providence until 1846 (this is according to Haiman), writing and practising medicine, although there is no certain evidence for this claim. Whether or not he took the advice to "Go West, young man!" it is not surprising in light of his revolutionary activities in Poland and his continued political activism after his arrival in the United States that we next hear of Wierzbicki when, encouraged by his friend Colonel Francis Lippett, he joined Stevenson's New York Regiment of Volunteers in September, 1846, to participate in the Mexican War. However, he applied too late to receive a commission and at his own request was assigned instead as a steward with Company H on a hospital ship with the rank of sergeant. He received a promise that as soon as a vacancy occurred he would be given the rank of surgeon. Upon his arrival in San Francisco on March 26th, 1847, when it was determined that the hospital ship was no longer required, Stevenson violated his promise and Wierzbicki lost not only his position but also his rank. With this, Wierzbicki wrote to General Kearny requesting release from the service. Stevenson wrote in response: "I have no hesitation in saying that he is perfectly useless as a soldier and in that capacity can be of no further use to the government" and agreed that he might be better occupied in some other profession. With an honorable discharge and this doubtful blessing, Wierzbicki once more entered civilian life.¹⁵

Haiman says simply that Wierzbicki then "attained the rank of Assistant Surgeon, U.S. Army, his second discharge being dated 1855," giving no reason for this peculiar state of affairs. However, according to military records, Wierzbicki entered into a contract with the Army on November 21, 1847 in Santa Barbara, to act as surgeon to approximately 69 soldiers for which he was to receive the sum of \$30.00 per month since, as the record states, "no other competent physician can be obtained at a lower rate." At that time he must have transferred to Company F under Colonel Lippett, which was immediately assigned to Santa Barbara upon its arrival in San Francisco.¹⁶ His duties cannot have been too arduous, in fact they appear to have been almost a sinecure, for he managed to take a four-month journey throughout the state, write a book about his

¹⁴ Lerski; Wieczerzak, p. 21.

¹⁵ Mexican War military file record for Feliks Pawel Wierzbicki, Company F & H, 7th New York Volunteers, August 1, 1846-August 18, 1848; Mieczysław Haiman, "Polish Pioneers of California," *Annals of the Polish Roman Catholic Union Archives and Museum*, vol. 5 (1940), pp. 39-43.

¹⁶ Medical officer file for F. P. Wierzbicki, November 21, 1847, in the United States Adjutant General's Office.

travels, acquire several lots in San Francisco, and become active in the political life of that city, all within the space of about two or three years.

He became involved in San Francisco civic affairs almost immediately upon his arrival in that city. His first step was to present a copy of his treatise *The Ideal Man* to General Marian Guadalupe Vallejo, well-known leader of the Mexican faction in California who was well-disposed to Americans living in the area.¹⁷ On June 14th, 1847, a public meeting was held in the city at which a committee was appointed to seek evidence against the fitness of John C. Frémont to serve as governor.¹⁸ Wierzbicki is listed among the "prominent" men appointed to that committee. Soon thereafter came the publication of his book *California as it is and as it may be; or, A guide to the gold region*, in mid-1849, and such was the popularity with which the work was received that Wierzbicki added two chapters and a second edition appeared a few months later. In today's terms it was a "best-seller." He wrote it following his journey throughout the state because he had become so totally disillusioned by the false information and expectations which had been given to those who had flocked to the mines that he determined to rectify the matter. While giving practical advice on how to prepare for mining gold, Wierzbicki made it clear that the future of California lay not in gold but in other minerals, and that the country was also eminently suitable for farming. He called for government assistance for those who wished to develop the state. Joseph Augustine Benton, called the "father of Congregationalism" in California, delivered a sermon on Thanksgiving Day, 1850, with the title "California as she was; as she is; as she is to be," the contents of the sermon bearing much resemblance to Wierzbicki's book.¹⁹

The book initially sold well, but as Wierzbicki's advice and prophecies took hold, the price fell and by 1853, according to Haiman, it had dropped to 25¢ per copy. Since that time, because of its rarity and place in the history of California, the price has risen considerably, and on one occasion even reached as high as \$600.

Wierzbicki requested Ferdinand Ewer, an acquaintance, to write a review of his book and have it published in the *Pacific News*. Ewer apparently did so, and as a result, during talks with Charles Eames, then editor of the newspaper, Ewer was offered the position

¹⁷ Haiman, *Wierzbicki*.

¹⁸ Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of California and Pioneer Register, 1846-1848*, vol. 5, p. 774.

¹⁹ Joseph Augustine Benton, *California as she was; as she is; as she is to be*, a printed Thanksgiving sermon delivered in the First Church of Christ (Congregational), Sacramento City, in 1850.

of editor, which he assumed on January 1, 1850.²⁰ Whether the review was ever published is not clear. Copies of the *Pacific News* available in libraries today are incomplete, and the issues prior to January 1850 are scattered. As far as can be determined, the review does not appear after January 1. On January 3, 1850, the *Pacific News* carried this advertisement:

New work for sale at this office — *California as it is and as it may be; or A Guide to the Gold Region* by F.P. Wierzbicki M.D. A work that should be in the hands of every person visiting the country for whatever purpose. Price \$3.00

A few days later, on January 12, Ferdinand Ewer wrote: "We would inform our readers that Dr. Wierzbicki has decided to place the price of his valuable work on California, for today and Monday, at half price (\$1.50) in order to accommodate those of the public who would wish to send the work home to their friends." Again on July 7, 1850, the original advertisement appeared, this time in the *Alta California* with the price back at \$3.00. A century later, Hugh Baker, discussing the book trade in California between 1849 and 1859, says that the book's title illustrates the early Californians' interest in factual rather than exaggerated accounts of their own region, while the book itself marks the beginning of publishing in San Francisco.²¹ It was translated into German the same year and published in Bremen, Germany.²² Also in that year, Edwin Bryant, one time Alcalde of San Francisco, who travelled all over the world, wrote a book about his experiences in California. During a trip to the South Pacific he took the time to stop in Tasmania where he arranged to publish this book, in which he incorporated Wierzbicki's treatise, claiming in his preface "the following pages are reprinted from the latest published work on California....It is believed that this publication will supply the *desideratum* so much needed in the Australian colonies, and to meet the numerous enquiries with reference to the new state of California."²³

Wierzbicki formed a lasting friendship with the Reverend Ewer and his wife Sophie, and in January 1859 he commissioned the artist Fenderich to paint a portrait of Ewer which he presented to Sophie

²⁰ Henry Raup Wagner, "Life of Ferdinand C. Ewer," Part I, *California Historical Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 4 (December, 1934), pp. 296-97.

²¹ Hugh Baker, "History of the Book Trade in California, 1849-1859," *California Historical Quarterly*, vol. 30 (1951), p. 101.

²² Felix Pawel Wierzbicki, *Californien wie es ist und wie es werden Kann* (Bremen: Loning und Comp., 1850).

²³ Edwin Bryant, *What I Saw in California; being the Journal of a Tour, by Edwin Bryant Esq., late Alcalde of San Francisco. To which is added California as it is, and as it may be, by Dr. Wierzbicki, San Francisco* (Launceston: Henry Dowling, Jr., 1850), contains a map of the gold regions.

as a gift.²⁴

In 1856 Wierzbicki was invited to participate in the formation of the California Medical Society and must have been held in some regard for he was appointed as a member of the Standing Committee on Practical Medicine, Medical Literature and Hygiene. He was one of the invited speakers at the initial meeting and was instrumental in establishing the Society's journal, to which he contributed an article on the history of medicine; although, since he did not submit it on time, it did not appear in the first issue.²⁵ Unfortunately the journal lasted only two years, since in spite of the exhortations of the president, the members were delinquent in paying their dues. Nevertheless, Emmet Rixford called it the first quality medical journal published in California, constituting by far the most interesting and important volume in the history of medicine on the Pacific Coast.²⁶

At the initial meeting of the Society, Wierzbicki described the effects of poison oak (*Rhus Diversilobum*), and, according to Lyman, was the first to coin the term "California fever." In his book he described it as a confused type of all fevers, including "ague" and "gold," to which he ascribed the great mortality among those recently arrived in the goldmines.²⁷ His article on the history of medicine was the first to be published in the state, and was a brief overview of the discipline. The chapter which he added to the second edition of his book, "Medical observations upon the people and the country," was the first report on medical practice in California written in English and forms the second known published medical treatise on California in point of time; the first, written by Dr. M. Rollin, was published in Paris in 1798 but was written in French.²⁸

²⁴ Henry Raup Wagner, "Life of Ferdinand C. Ewer," Part II, *California Historical Quarterly*, vol. 14, no. 1 (March, 1935), p. 78.

²⁵ Minutes of the Medical Society Meeting, Friday, March 14, 1856, are in *California State Medical Journal*, vol. 1 (July, 1856), p. 13. Another Polish physician, Christian Brevoort Zabriskie, also attended the meeting.

²⁶ Emmett Rixford, "Early California Medical Journals," *California and Western Medicine*, vol. 23, no. 5 (May, 1925), pp. 604-07. There were several attempts during the second half of the nineteenth century to establish medical journals in California, many of which lasted no more than a year or two. Wierzbicki's article has been variously credited to the *California Medical Gazette*, published in Sacramento in 1868-70, and therefore after his death; the *California State Journal of Medicine*, which began publication in 1902, and after several title changes is still published as the *Western Journal of Medicine*; and the *State Journal of Medicine*. The journal of the California Medical Society in which Wierzbicki published his article on the history of medicine was actually the *California State Medical Journal*.

²⁷ George D. Lyman, "The Beginnings of California's Medical History," *California and Western Medicine*, vol. 23 (1925), pp. 561-76.

²⁸ M. Rollin, "Physiological and pathological monograph on the Americas," in Charles N. Rudkin [transl. and ed.], *The First French Expedition to California: Laperouse, 1786* (Los

It has been well established that *California* was the first book to be published in the English language in the State of California. The evidence is incontrovertible; from 1860 to the present the book has been consistently and authoritatively credited as such.²⁹ It has ensured a degree of immortality for its author and is an exemplary measure of what can be achieved by persistence and perseverance through foreign customs, a completely different language and often difficult living conditions. Indeed, these very conditions, as described by Wierzbicki, were quoted by Josiah Royce, one of America's most distinguished philosophers, in his classic nineteenth century account of the Far West.³⁰

One of the most remarkable aspects of Wierzbicki's writings is the quality of his English prose. He is easier to read today than many of his American-born contemporaries. His style flows, his grammar is correct and there are few of the minute linguistic errors which so often characterize the writings of those whose mother tongue is not English. The hallmark of an educated man of that time was his familiarity with the classics, and the writings of such men were apt to be ornate, full of allusions to Greek mythology, grandiose and flowery. Wierzbicki was no exception, but he was somewhat more practical in his approach and did not use an ornate style to cover up lack of substance, as was sometimes the case with other writers.

Wierzbicki achieved no glamor, apparently never married and had no progeny, yet what he achieved did not perish with him. In New York he was an unrelenting campaigner for Poland, and whatever his opinions may have been he did not hesitate to express them. He consistently espoused the cause of liberty, and his writings on the history of Poland have as much relevance to events today as they had to the events of his time.

Ultimately what had begun as a hobby during his visits to the gold mines became an extension of his everyday work. In the 1858, 1859 and 1860 San Francisco directories we find him listed as a weighman in the U. S. Mint (his name being spelled variously as Wierbricker, Wiersbickie, and Wierzbicki). In the *State Register and Yearbook of Facts* for the year 1857, published in San Francisco, he is listed under physicians and as a member of the San Francisco Medical Society and the San Francisco County Medical and

Angeles: 1959).

²⁹ Bancroft and Lyman, among others.

³⁰ Josiah Royce, *California, from the Conquest in 1846 to the Second Vigilance Committee in San Francisco: a Study of American Character* (Santa Barbara: Peregrine Publishers, 1970), p. 298.

Chirurgical Association as E. P. Wiersbicki, and is listed under Physicians in the 1858 city directory, although not in the 1859 or 1860 editions. Did he cease to practice medicine, and if so, why? He was only forty-four years old at the time, so had probably not retired. We shall probably never know, for on December 26, 1860, Wierzbicki died, a victim of his own remedies, as his death notice indicates.

DEATH OF DR. WIERZBICKI. — Dr. Wierzbicki, of the U.S. Branch Mint, died at 2 o'clock A.M. at his residence on California Street. Dr. W. was well known throughout the United States as the author of the first work on California's mines, he having arrived here in 1848, and made, on the discovery of gold, the treatment of precious metals his special study. He was a Pole by birth, and was, at an early age, exiled on account of his revolutionary action. He was the author of several elementary works on the French, German and Polish tongues, as well as a host of scientific subjects. Dr. W., like most medical men, had a hobby as a specific, and that hobby accelerated his death. For some weeks past, he had been confined to his room with congestion of the lungs, but it appears he had little confidence in his own profession, for he did not take any of the prescriptions his medical adviser left. Strange to say, he was gradually recovering when he conceived that a vapor bath, a favorite Muscovite remedy, would cure him. He tried one, without the knowledge of his physician, and was remonstrated with. On Monday, in all the rain, he went out and took a vapor bath, and on returning home he took an emetic. He gradually sank under this severe ordeal, and died as stated. As a scientific man, Dr. W. had few superiors.³¹

³¹ *Alta California*, December 27, 1860.