The legend of Szczepan, the fisherman who founded the village of Stepnica

The story that I am about to tell you has never been written down in any chronicles. It was sung by waves on a lake as they beat against the shore. And by birds flying high in the sky. It was inspired by the rustling of leaves in a primeval forest.

Once upon a time, on the shores of the Little Sea, as Szczecin Lagoon used to be called, there was a small hut, where a fisherman lived. His name was Szczepan. He was skilled in his craft and knew the area and its inhabitants like no one else. Diligent and resourceful, Szczepan would constantly seek ways to improve his skills and methods of fishing. As could be expected, he always came back with his net full of fish. He never bragged about his good fortune, for he knew fortune could easily turn against him. He dried and smoked the fish so that they would last longer. Whatever he did not use up, he would exchange with traders for other necessary items. Everyone who paid him a visit could count on his hospitality. No one ever left his house hungry or thirsty.

Szczepan was known throughout the land. Merchants and wanderers who were lucky enough to visit his hospitable household would tell others about this unusual man. On the roads or in roadside taverns, you could hear people talking about Szczepan – the lucky fisherman.

But none of them knew the truth that Szczepan was hiding. For a long time he had been on good terms with old Aquarius, who had taught him to respect water and its marine life. He showed Szczepan how to catch different species of fish. Aquarius would often visit Szczepan while he was mending his nets and the two would chat about water and its secrets.

Days went by, busy, but good. And yet Szczepan would sometimes sit by the doorstep and feel a certain longing. He would stare at the water and sigh heavily, lost in his thoughts as if drowning in the depths of the sea.

Once day in June, on the shortest night of the year, when a fern flower is said to bloom, a beautiful wreath of aquatic plants became tangled in Szczepan's net. The young man did not know that he was being watched closely by a water maiden – a siren. Wodyca, was the youngest daughter of the Baltic Sea. She watched Szczepan and found him to be a righteous man who would return even a small fish washed ashore back to the water. She could see that he was diligent and kind. She knew he had a great respect for water – her home. Noticing how hard he worked, she decided to give him a helping hand, to make his life a little easier. From that moment, she would always accompany him whenever he went fishing. Szczepan quickly realised who was helping him and was grateful. He watched the water closely, and when he noticed the siren on the port side, he directed his boat there, knowing that there would be a bountiful catch. In turn, he knew he was in danger when the siren appeared in front of the bow with her hands clasped behind her head. That was a sign to quickly return to the shore.

They would come across each other every day, often for no reason, apparently by accident. Genuine smiles, a glint in the eyes, quiet sighs, ... this was enough to awaken the oldest magic in the world. Love blossomed between them, and like a water lily broke through the surface of the water to reveal its beautiful flower. Wodyca did

not listen to her father, who tried to convince her that a relationship with a human would destroy her. Her love for Szczepan was stronger. With the Lord of the Waters' permission, she relinquished her fish tail for her lover and went to live ashore. Szczepan, who knew the old myths, knew what to do and hid her tail in a large chest. Soon a large wedding was held on a full blue moon night.

Happiness moved in to stay in their hut and shortly after a long-awaited boy was born. Several years later, Wodyca gave birth to another child – a girl this time. The four of them lived in harmony with everyone. Old Aquarius, who lived nearby, would often play with the children and told them all kinds of fairy tales. Before the children started to walk, they already knew how to swim like fish. Szczepan was ecstatic, as finally his dream of having a loving family had come true. He spared no effort to ensure a decent living for his wife and children. Wodyca supported him in everything and was a pillar of support in the fisherman's hard work.

But nothing in human life can last forever. Everything is constantly changing. The same was true for Szczepan's life. One day, when he took his son fishing, Wodyca was cleaning up the hut. She found a chest hidden in the shed. When she opened it, she saw her fish tail, and tears welled up in her eyes. She heard a water call that she could not resist. Driven by the power of the element, she took the bundle and went to the shore to put on her skin. She dived into the water never to be seen again. The Lord of the Waters hid her in the depths. When Szczepan returned home, he realised what had happened. He had to hide his tears from the children so as not to make them sad. From that moment, the fisherman had to take care of their upbringing all by himself. Soon after, the children started to help him. The daughter would take care of the household, while the son often took on his father's duties.

Time flowed by like the nearby river. The children grew up and started their own families. Soon after Szczepan was blessed with grandchildren, who would often sit on their grandfather's lap, listening to fairy tales, legends and stories about the water.

Feeling death approaching, Szczepan entrusted his son to take care of the entire family and set off on a final journey never to return. People often said that he had joined his beloved wife, Wodnica, to live with her in the depths.

The fisherman's children built their homes around the fisherman's hut, and later their own children, as well as the following generations did the same. The best fishermen were always descended from Szczepan's family, and passed on knowledge and secrets about the water from generation to generation. People from distant lands also started to settle there. The village grew and with time began to be called Szczepanowo – to commemorate the fisherman who first lived there. Over the centuries, the name has changed, and nowadays the small town on the shores of Szczecin Lagoon is known as Stepnica.

Rumour has it, on the nights when the full moon shines bright in the sky, you can see an old boat on the waters of the lagoon, which carries Szczepan and his beloved wife, Wodyca. Lucky is the man who catches a glimpse of this sight, for fate will always be in his favour.