

Pilgrimage

Where did you go?

Is it a place or country that we know?

-- Jan Kochanowski, Lament 10

I had mixed emotions as I boarded the flight out of Portland to Poland for a three-week program on Polish language and culture at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow. As I reached the end of the jetway at the airport in Portland, the pilot, morning coffee in hand, greeted me at the door and asked where I was headed. "Poland," I said. "Well, you have a big trip ahead of you," he said. Indeed.

I have read many memoirs about women churning through their childhood or family history for a sense and structure that may be lacking in their contemporary lives. I find myself obsessing about the future – how can I best prepare for the inevitable transition from youth to adulthood, from independent woman to wife and mother? Yet it is in the past that I seek the substance that will help give shape to my life and define my future in ways unimaginable to me now.

The task of exploring and recording my family history comes from a true love of stories that I developed growing up with many siblings and a rich family lore. Stories – about weddings, parties, anniversaries, jobs and funerals – link the family together across many miles and many generations. As I feel the weight of passing time, I feel a deep sense of responsibility to capture these stories so that they may sit on a nearby shelf as a connection, a companion to me, to the people, places and remembrances that define me and my family.

Krakow 1997

When asked and, sometimes even when I wasn't asked, I told my friends that I was travelling to Poland for three weeks to "talk to the dead." The dead includes my grandmother – Kunegunda Kowalik – and also the many souls that have called Krakow and the surrounding area home.

After making several trips to Krakow over the years, the place and its people seemed more mysterious to me and more intriguing – the culture, the history, and the recognizable faces of the people of this country resonate deep within me. The threads of my heritage – the pierogis my grandmother made, the polka music we danced to at

my wedding, the casual friendliness that is so Polish to me – draw me to this place with a deep sense of curiosity and reverence.

I had visited Poland on two other occasions. My first trip was in 1989. I traveled with my sister Christine, with two very heavy backpacks in tow, from Vienna to Prague and then on to Warsaw and Krakow. We explored the country during a momentous time: the collapse of the Soviet occupation and the beginning of an independent post-war life in Poland. What this meant for us – in addition to exploring restaurants and parks – was an incredibly inexpensive and easy trip as we stayed in comfortable accommodations and ate well on just a few dollars a day.

Most of my family traveled together to Krakow in 1991 and visited the farm where my grandmother grew up in Rusocice, about 40 kilometers west of Krakow, before emigrating in 1914. There had been periodic communication with the family that lives on the farm now. Stacia Hajto had taken care of my grandmother's sister Stephanie in her later years. Her family welcomed the three cabs full of Americans but also seemed a bit nervous about the many questions we asked about the history of the farm and the connection between our families. They may have thought our enthusiasm to connect with our heritage had an underlying motivation. There were many stories about families attempting to reclaim land that had been lost during various occupations.

I returned to Krakow with my husband for several days during Christmas in 1995. We stayed in a friend's apartment in Kazimierz and enjoyed the sights. It was a magical time to be there. The streets were covered with ice and snow. We spent hours walking around the city, visiting museums, and enjoying kielbasa cooked outdoors over large grills in the main city square.

The trip to Rusocice

One week into the program at the Jagiellonian University, which I attended with my niece Jessa, my parents arrived for a long weekend. A trip to Rusocice was planned. We had been in touch with our connection there to make arrangements, though there was some concern about the massive flooding throughout the region. We called the same cab driver, Lucian, who had accompanied the family on the trip six years prior and he arrived on Saturday morning with his son Chester, a police officer in Krakow, ready to take us to Rusocice.

We took a two-lane highway toward Auschwitz following the Vistula River west out of town. The road winds through the hills of

the Krakow Plateau, with small houses and farms on both sides. A grand church perched high on a plush meadow towered over the road. It didn't take long to leave the urban Krakow area and enter into the outlying area. Soon the smaller towns gave way to huge fields of potatoes and cabbage.

After traveling for about 20 minutes, we arrived at the village of Chernichow. The parish church, Church of the Holy Trinity, stands at the main crossroads on top of a hill in one of the greenest and most wooded parts of the small town. We walked through the entrance in the limestone cobble wall and descended several steps to the church grounds and then several more to enter the pale yellow church. The exterior was simple and well kept. The interior spoke to a baroque past – gold statues of angels, gilded pillars, dramatic paintings at each of the many side altars. It was a stunning show of extravagance in this quiet farming village. We walked around the church on a narrow sidewalk and peaked inside several of the small exterior chapels housed in a series of slant roofed sheds with slatted doors. In each, a very large crucifix loomed over the small space, which also included other religious icons, bunches of both fresh and silk flowers, and the sweet scent of candles. The air was heavy with years of accumulated Our Father's and Hail Mary's.

All was quiet except for the sounds of birds chirping and a rooster crowing in the distance. We could glimpse a view of the swollen river and the road to Rusocice through the trees. It felt timeless. Generations of villagers had been walking up these steps and along this path for hundreds of years. My grandmother and her family would walk to church for weddings and funerals. According to Stacia, they still walk the route for funerals, arriving first at the church and then on to the cemetery with the priest leading the procession.

Would my grandmother have wanted me to return to this place that she left when she was 19 years old? She had never talked about her childhood or this village, but I couldn't help but think that Rusocice would hold, in the very land that she grew up on, some sort of connection for me to her. I missed her since her passing a decade earlier.

Our next stop was the cemetery in Chernichow, a five-minute walk from the church down the western slope of the hill. The cemetery lies at the end of a one lane dirt road with a group of three houses along the left, giving way to expansive fields of tall green grass on both sides. The cemetery is surrounded by the same limestone wall

from the church and offered expansive views of the farmland and villages below. A dense green forest laced with many trails bordered the cemetery on the right. Crickets chirped in the distance.

Within the walls of the cemetery, every area was covered with hundreds of graves of many shapes with a variety of distinctive markers. Ornate iron crucifixes -- standing six feet tall at the heads of most of the sites -- the marble or cement encasements, the fresh and silk flowers, the burning candles, and the overgrowth of wet weeds combined to create a sort of chaos amidst the simple landscape. We searched for the area that would contain the older graves from the late 1800s but we only found newer sites, most from the 1970s and 80s. After 40 minutes of wading through waist high weeds and climbing around tombstones in the mud, we were able to identify the graves of several common family names from the village: Hajto, Starowitz, and Kapusta, but no Kowalik. So we left for the farm.

The road to Rusocice is marked by a large hill in the distance with a distinctive limestone rock formation, a "skalna." It serves as a timeless beacon marking the direction to our destination: the farm. Many small religious shrines marked the road between Chernichow and Rusocice. These, like the many others we saw in our travels through Poland, were well tended. Some were just a simple platform with a small statue and fresh flowers. Some were lavishly constructed of wood in the shape of a beacon or tower.

We arrived at the farm of Jan and Anna Starowitz, parents of Stacia Hajto, our connection there. Jan peeked curiously over the fence to see who was arriving in the cab from Krakow. He came through the gate with his grandson and greeted us heartily. Their brick farmhouse sits on the original site of the homestead where Kunegunda grew up. The front door faces the limestone rock.

A mother duck and her ducklings and several chickens roamed to the simple yard. A barn sheltering the farm equipment stood to the right. The simple brick house featured two main doors: the one on the left leading inside the home and the one on the right to an area housing the livestock including a pair of very loud cows. The door to the home was protected by long strips of colored heavy cloth. Hay was piled in front of the livestock area. An apple tree provided shade.

Jan hugged and greeted us and Anna, summoned by the grandson, quickly left her garden in the back to welcome us. She smiled wide

and looked deeply into my eyes and hugged me. Her shape and mannerisms caught me by surprise. It was so much like my grandmother's touch that I was disoriented for a moment. I stood before her and returned her smile and offered her the small bouquet of flowers I had brought. She wiped her hands on her apron and lovingly accepted my gift.

My parents, using the little bit of Polish they could remember after many years, explained that we were headed to Stacia's house, just up the street. Stacia was our connection to the area. She would write letters to my grandmother, and over the years, we would send provisions from the United States. Jan and Anna joined us.

Stacia, her husband, and two children welcomed us we entered the two-story modern house and sat at their living room. Stacia began preparing food and tea. We had brought beer and cakes from Krakow and set them on the table. Stacia rushed around getting out the cloth napkins and slicing bread. She busied herself in the kitchen and the four of us were left with the two children – a boy age 12 and girl age 9. They looked closely at me and Jessa and giggled. They answered Mom and Dad's questions: How old are you? Where do you go to school? Stacia finally entered with a plate of open-faced sandwiches – ham on rye bread with thinly sliced cucumber, tomato and butter with a dash of salt and pepper. It was good. We laughed and talked and ate our lunch.

We began asking questions about the farm and Kunegunda's mother, who shares the same last name as Stacia. Stacia and her father explained that Hajto is a common name in the village and that indeed there is no relation between our family and theirs.

Stacia warmly agreed to return to the cemetery with us to find the graves we had searched for earlier in the day. The cab driver dropped us off at the front gate and we entered the cemetery. Stacia led us confidently around the cobblestone path and turned left into the high weeds. She walked to the far corner on the left and there against the wall was an unmarked grave with an iron crucifix marker identifying a simple mound with zinnias neatly blooming on top. There was no nameplate. Stacia crossed herself and explained that this was the grave of Kunegunda's sister Stephanie who died in 1986. She told us that Anna travels to the cemetery often to tend to the flowers and the grave. Stacia then pointed to the grave of Stephanie's husband, Albin, several rows away. We had heard that Stephanie and Albin never got along and never had any children. His grave stood alone overgrown with weeds.

Stacia explained that the grave sites were often recycled with the newer graves replacing many of the older ones. Every foot within the cobbled walls was full of graves and grave markers.

As we were leaving Stacia pointed to a couple of the sites with the largest and most ornate grave markers along the cobbled path. These were the graves of the priests from the village and also the burial site of the mother of one of the priests. Also along the pathway very near the front gate stood a series of very small very old slabs marking the place where the young children from the village were buried.

I savored the experience of being there, holding the visit to the cemetery, church and farm with a gentle reverence. And yet, something was missing.

We drove the road back to Rusicoco in silence. The hill with the limestone marker was our guide. When we arrived at the farm, we had a chance to walk around and gather our things before returning to the city. I ventured into the backyard and wandered through the bunches of Queen Anne's Lace growing near the fence that marked the end of the yard and the beginning of the farm's pastures. I opened the gate and walked along a small creek toward a field of wheat and corn.

In the distance, I could see Anna working in the garden. She saw me and stood up. I could just make out the shape of her shoulders and the color of her apron. She waved her arm slowly and deliberately above her head. I waved back. We both stood looking at each other across the field. For a moment, she became my grandmother: her height, her build, the motion of her arm, her gray hair. And she was calling to me. A light breeze brushed my cheek as I stood silently in the shadow of the hill, staring at the land that was once home to my grandmother and is my land, too. In the very soil of this place, I touched my past and my future. Kunegunda's home – my pilgrimage complete.

Lisa Orkisz Scardina
1997