

*A Polish Son in the Motherland*

Sample Pages

Copyright 2005. Published by Texas A&M University Press

*A Polish Son in the Motherland*



## *Back in the Old Country*



I brought my mother here to Poland in 1988 to see the motherland, the place where her parents were born. We rented a taxi in Warsaw. In those days you could hire a cab for an entire day for twenty American dollars. The grateful driver chauffeured us to Nowe Miasto Lubawskie and then to Boleszyn, towns I remembered from the little cedar box my grandmother kept in her dresser. The box held letters from family, letters that stopped coming after her husband died in 1950. It was a quick tour, and we marveled at being on the same land where my grandmother was born, where she had run as a little girl. That was before I learned that her village was Sugajno, a couple kilometers down the road.

It had been three-quarters of a century since my grandmother's feet had touched this ground and sixteen years since she had died. My mother surprised both of us with the Polish that came automatically from her lips, welling up from some floppy disk in her brain, the file corrupted with English and bad grammar. But for the most part we were strangers in a foreign land, connected to it only by some idea of Polishness that relied largely on *kielbasa*, vodka, and the sound of accordion music.

We walked through the cemetery in Boleszyn, even found a Bryszkiewski grave. Two old women tending flowers told us they believed there were still some relatives with that name living "somewhere far off in that direction." And then we went back to Warsaw and the next day back to the United States.

Before we left, however, I vowed to come back. I want to know what I missed by being born in America, to understand what it means to lose two thousand years of history in the time it takes to buy a ticket on a ship leaving “the old country” for the new.

So I have returned to Poland, this time not to pass through but to live here, where my grandmother lived, to see if any threads of Polishness still dangle from that severed connection. What happened to the people in the few old pictures and letters I have packed in my suitcase? And why did they stop writing fifty years ago? Little mysteries. Every family has them.

To escape the chilly winter drizzle, I duck into the underground passages near my hotel on Jerozolimskie Avenue and follow them to Warsaw’s central train station. Below the streets, dozens of stalls bulge with merchandise—not at all the way they looked the first time I came to Poland—in 1981. The colors of fruit and vegetables, compact disks, and videocassettes announce themselves against the gray concrete walls and floors: “This is the new Poland of plenty, where American marketing is king.” The old women selling flowers will give you a special rate on roses if you buy more than a dozen, and the brassiere stand advertises its abundance with an ambiguous two-for-one sale.

At the ticket counter shuffles the characteristic Polish queue, a funnel of bodies elbowing their way to a crabby cashier behind a window, through which it is impossible to hear and with an opening too low for anyone but a ten-year-old. This part of being in Poland has not changed since my first trip here, when the shops were stagnant but the air was electric with change.

My destination isn’t posted, so before I get to the window I tear a little piece of paper out of my notebook and write down in Polish that I want to buy a ticket to Nowe Miasto Lubawskie for tomorrow at midday, and I ask the woman behind the glass to write down what she is telling me and from what platform the train will leave. But she is impatient. I am stuttering, trying to remember the right words, and a man in a dirty sweater is leaning his face into my *złoty*. The cashier passes the paper back with my ticket and tells me I must catch the train for Gdańsk and get off at Iława. “Next,” she barks, and the man in the sweater has already lowered his face to the hole in the glass.

Oh well, I rationalize, this aggravation is part of what I came here for, and it is merely a taste of what it must have been like for my grandmother when she arrived in America in 1913, a strange land with people babbling impatiently in a different language.

Dusk arrives just past five o’clock, and I head back to the hotel to settle in for the night. From somewhere comes the unmistakable smell of cooking cabbage. I make up Polish sentences in my head, for practice. A young woman

lets rip with a laugh that could curdle milk, as if she can hear my mistakes. Up and down Jerozolimskie Avenue wafts the inexplicable sound of Peruvian pipe music from some source at the Metro stop near the Palace of Culture and Science. This edifice, Stalin's gift to Poland, stands like a grotesque reminder of the big ideas, the big plans Russia had for the pigheaded Poles, who seem able to wear down the biggest of them, complicating everything—even the purchase of a train ticket—with persistent disorganization.

The next day I begin my journey to Nowe Miasto, regretting that I did not listen more closely and ask more questions when I lived with my grandmother and she talked about her life in Poland. On the train I share a compartment with a man named Cezary, a former shipyard worker from Gdańsk, who is traveling with his daughter, Katarzyna, and just happens to be reading *Moll Flanders* in English. He hands me his card. They both speak my language fluently. "You are going to be considered quite exotic in Nowe Miasto," Katarzyna advises.

I am caught up in their predictions and questions and suddenly realize we have stopped for Iława, and my three enormous bags are still on the shelves above our seats. Cezary heaves the largest to the floor. Katarzyna rushes into the corridor, yelling "Wait! Wait!" out the window to the conductor. She and her father jump off the train as I hand luggage down to them and follow. But the train won't wait and starts to roll away without them. "Stop! Stop!" demands Cezary, and the wheels screech and scrape to a halt while they hop back on.

"Come and see us in Gdańsk," Cezary yells. "We'll go sailing!"

The hotel in Nowe Miasto has sent a man named Marek to meet me, and he is waiting inside the train station. He looks like Tadeusz Kościuszko, Polish hero of the American Revolution, in a jogging suit. He eyes me for a moment, then welcomes me enthusiastically, grabs my heaviest bag—now handleless from being dragged through the train station—and leads me to his little Polish pickup. Marek inquires politely about what I am doing here. I tell him my grandmother was born in Sugajno. Helena Bryszkiewska. "Don't know the name," he says.

The hills and lakes around Nowe Miasto are dusted with snow as if someone had sprinkled powdered sugar over them like *chruściki*, the delicate egg confections you see in every Polish American bakery. The river is overflowing with the early spring thaw, and water sits along the banks in half-frozen pockets visible through the birch and linden trees.

Beyond the town, over the bridge, a cheery blue, modern building appears down a long gravel driveway, now mud packed from the thaw. Behind an old

brick building that clings to the road like a piece of burned pie crust is a sports complex, complete with a stadium and a soccer field, where loud young men are grunting in huddles. My “hotel” is a camp for high-school athletes.

Ewa at the front desk smiles and welcomes me and assures me every time I open my mouth and begin to sputter that I speak wonderful Polish. Marek shows me to my room. “Everything works,” he says, nodding at the crude holes cut into the walls and floors for pipes and wires. There is no phone, no television. A painting of some unidentifiable tourist destination hangs high on the wall. The door between the tiny vestibule and the bedroom won’t close completely. In the halls, young men giggle and chatter about girls and games, their speech casually peppered with variations on the word *kurwa*—whore.

Ewa directs me to the Ratuszowa restaurant on the Rynek, the town square, for dinner. It’s cold outside. I put on two coats and wonder why I expected Poland to be warm in March. A short walk up the road, a bridge crosses the river Drwęca. Beyond stands the town, where it has stood for hundreds of years, through one hundred fifty years of partitioned Poland, through two world wars, and through the loss of so many people to America. To get to the square I must walk past an old brick tower, five or six stories tall, part of a medieval wall that once surrounded the town. This square must have once hosted a market. It’s easy to imagine the stalls and horse-drawn carts that carried produce to town from Sugajno and the little farm where my grandmother was born. Nearly a hundred years ago she walked the streets of Nowe Miasto. I remember her telling me about the wonders to be found in “such a big town.” Each building makes me ask: Was it here then? Did she see this? Her nationality was officially German; it said so on the ship’s manifest when she came to America. Poland was no longer a nation; it was an idea, a memory that lived only in the minds of its people.

Twice around the square and I give up and stop at a store to ask where the Ratuszowa restaurant is. “In the center,” I’m told by a friendly woman in a *delikatesy*. The building in the center of the square is not a church, as it appears, nor the town hall, as its name says. It is a cinema through the front entrance and a restaurant through the side door.

Snow is falling now like tiny crystalline doilies that disappear into my dark green coat, and early darkness has left the entrance in shadows. Three men in suits pace outside, chatting and smoking. I excuse myself and pass them to swing open the heavy wooden door. The bright lights blind me for a second, but then I see that every head in the place—and there are at least fifty of them—is turned toward me. I see flowers, more men in suits, women in evening clothes, tables arranged in long communal seating. There are twelve

thousand people in Nowe Miasto, I have been told, and one restaurant. The evening I arrive, it's booked for a *wesele*, and I blunder into a Polish wedding reception at an apparently crucial moment. Everyone is staring at me as if to say, "And who are you?" before I realize my mistake and gently shut the door.

I trudge back to the delicatessen and the smell of sausages and dairy. I buy a small package of *pumpernikiel* bread and another of *morski* cheese and a jar of *musztarda*. At the counter I ask for a little ham, and she says something I don't understand except that it has to do with weight. I agree, and she starts to wrap a huge stack of slices. I try to tell her that it's too much, to give me half, and she looks perplexed, as if thinking, "He looks Polish. Why can't this man talk right?"

In the morning, heavy footsteps and young voices in the hall remind me of where I am. More snow has fallen in the night, and frost decorates the window wall. Outside, a cluster of buildings sits stiff and gray across the lawn and beyond a shabby concrete fence. Here an overturned wheelbarrow, there a wire clothesline, clothespins stuck to it like tiny sleeping birds. There is no early spring here, as I had hoped. I will have to buy a hat.

The sun tries to break through the clouds, and a determined crow waddles across the tilled yard behind a cement house. I make my way out of my room, and two blonde young women, smiling behind the glass reception area, seem to know already that I am here. They show no surprise, but I see curiosity in their faces. The strange American has emerged, they seem to be thinking, the man of whom we were warned. He'll need a lot of help.

"Proszę," they sing out, which means everything: "What can I do for you?" "Please take this." "I need your answer." I reply by asking if I can have coffee. "And what about breakfast?" one says.

Minutes later I have a hot cup of coffee in my room and food on a white plastic plate with matching white plastic fork and knife, a tiny, tissue-paper square, three slices of rye bread, packets of Danish butter and plum jam, and a tablet of *kurczak w galarecie*, cold chicken and vegetables congealed in gelatin. Also on the plate is a shot glass containing a bitter-smelling liquid. Vodka at eight o'clock in the morning? Well, this is Poland, so I take a sip. If it's vodka, it's the worst I have ever tasted.

I carry the little glass out to the reception desk and ask the young woman, "Co to jest?" What is this? To drink? I make drinking motions. Both the women laugh with alarm. "Nie, nie, ocet." I find the word in my dictionary: vinegar. "To pour on your *galareta*," the blonde explains.

In my room I flip the plastic container upside down on the plate, and the *galareta* slides out with a smack. It looks like chicken soup that has been in the

refrigerator overnight. I pour the vinegar over it and poke it with a plastic fork. Peas and pieces of corn and carrot tumble out. In the center a sliced egg sits captured amid pieces of its mother. I try, but I am not hungry enough to eat it. So as not to seem ungrateful, I throw the galareta into the toilet, where it sits on the peculiar ledge that Polish toilets have where water should be. After several flushes it remains, like a clump of rubber, impervious to the water slushing around it. Finally I must force it down the drain with a stick.

A wave of homesickness passes over me as I contemplate my next move—to mass, drawn by the clanging of bells that persists for twenty minutes.

Sunday morning finds what looks like the entire town walking to church in a gentle snowfall—stylishly dressed women, self-conscious teens, obedient children, trickling in from sidewalks and around corners in every direction. Small groups feed into larger streams, past the Rynek, and around the corner, now hundreds strong, all flowing into the enormous stack of bricks and stucco bathed in sunlight made brighter by the new snow.

Inside the church, giant baroque and rococo constructions of wood and metal hang on the columns that brace the arched ceiling, possibly sixty feet high. The stained-glass windows let in only enough light to emphasize that the chandeliers are not lit and to give hazy illumination to the dozens of altar statues. Elaborate frescoes on the walls and paintings on the altars depict the lives of saints and the Blessed Mother.

From my seat at the back I watch as the church fills to capacity. It is like St. Florian's in Hamtramck, Michigan, where my mother was born, only much older. The people look the same—modern, dressed in fur-trimmed coats and woolly hats. But the differences soon show themselves. The kneeler in my pew is worm eaten and half broken away. The church is freezing cold, yet no one seems to mind. As they enter, the faithful do not merely genuflect, they kneel firmly on the stone floor for many minutes, young and old, meditating. All the while the priest at the front altar quizzes a row of children about how best to serve God. They recite with sincerity: “I will help the poor and those who have nothing,” one little girl's voice resounds through the hall over a microphone.

The mass proceeds to the spot where a mandatory handshake and “Peace be with you” make for awkward touching and smiling in American churches. But here it is different. The congregation mutters something about “to all” into the air. The man on my right and the woman on my left nod suspiciously at me, their hands at their sides; then they turn their eyes heavenward.

For dinner I brave the Ratuszowa restaurant again. This time it is open for business, with its fake flowers, aluminum foil wrapped around the old church columns, flimsy salmon-colored paneling. It is all somehow familiar, like Pol-

ish restaurants on Milwaukee Avenue in Chicago. I order at the counter, where a polite and pretty young woman with a child playing at her feet recommends a schnitzel. I ask for a salad, and she assures me that something that sounds like “white cabbage” is quite *smaczna*, delicious. I find a table and listen to the grease sizzle as another, older woman scampers about behind a pass-through. From loudspeakers above, the BeeGees sing “To Love Somebody.”

At the next table a quiet young couple wearing wedding rings gulp their hamburgers, cheeks bulging, even as they open wide for another chomp. When they get up to leave, the young man has turned his cap rim to the back, like my cousin in New Jersey. Except this cap is tweed and of the old-fashioned golf variety.

Three more young men stumble in from the cold. Every one reminds me of a cousin in America.

The woman behind the counter cheerfully delivers a plate of steaming schnitzel and boiled potatoes to my table, along with a big bowl of slaw, a bottle of beer, and bread and butter. When I tell her yes, I do want a glass, she looks perplexed, as if to say, “Where are you from?” But she never asks and then smiles and seems glad to see me. “Smacznego,” she says, Polish for “bon ap-pétit.” Every morsel is delicious, and it all costs about three dollars.

On the way back to my room, I stand on the bridge looking at the swollen banks of the Drwęca. For all its distance from Michigan, it looks exactly like the Coon Creek of my childhood, where I heard my grandmother’s voice call loud and sweet, “Lenuś! Lenuś!” And I knew it was time to put on my shoes and come home for lunch. Our farm must have seemed to her a remote outpost in a distant land without a past.