

“Poland and Me”

My Polish story begins in Poland, in Ostrow Mazowiecka and the area surrounding Ostrow Mazowiecka. My grandmother Bronislawa and my grandfather Franciszek came from two small villages outside Ostrow Mazowiecka, Babcia from Biel, and Dziadek from Niegowiec. I did not know my grandfather as he died prior to my birth. But I do know that he immigrated to America in 1911 shortly after the birth of my oldest aunt, Leontyna in Poland. He settled not far from Ellis Island and in Cliffside Park New Jersey. Babcia Bronislawa and Ciocia Leontyna followed in 1913 and arrived at Ellis Island with \$12.00 US dollars in her possession.

Once they were back together they set out to fulfill the American dream, they had eight more children, which included my mother Leokadia, her five sisters, Leontyna, Stanislaw, Janina, Zophia, and Helena.

My mother’s sisters and brothers spoke fluent Polish, as it was spoken in the home and at the Polish Catholic School at Sacred Heart.

Babcia and Dziadek were able to purchase and maintain three two family homes until Babcia died in December 1968. All their children lived in one of these homes until they could afford to buy their own home. In the case of my mother and father this would take sixteen years before they could finally buy their own home in 1964. This took us only a few miles from the Polish neighborhood, but it was in another town and was far enough to remove my brother and I from the daily interaction within the Polish neighborhood and more importantly it took us away from the Polish parish at Sacred Heart. This would have an impact on us learning and using Polish as second language. I think this was a disappointment for our mother, who always offered and tried to teach me Polish once we were in the new neighborhood. But like most children I did not realize what was being offered to me at the time, and I rejected any offers by mother to teach me Polish. It would take me almost 40 years to correct this mistake, but more about that later.

During my youth I would see Babcia and my mother speak in Polish along with my aunts and uncles. I was always fascinated when I heard them speak in Polish and was quite proud my mother could speak a second language and that it was Polish. When Babcia passed away, my mother, aunts and Uncle Edward had to empty out Babcia’s home and sell it. In Babcia’s possessions were many things from Poland, documents in Polish, her Polish Bible, and more importantly there were envelopes, letters, and pictures of our family in Poland. I can still see these items on our dining room table and being excited as a young boy that we had relatives in Poland. But these envelopes, letters and pictures would soon be placed in storage and lost to time for a little over forty years.

Found Again

In 2012 our Mother’s health began to deteriorate and my brother and I had to place her in an assisted living facility.

My brother and I met at the house and started in the attic and there we found an old steamer trunk, much like the one used when Babcia came to America from Poland in 1913. We opened it and tucked neatly in the corner and on the top were the letters from Poland that I had seen when I was a young boy after Babcia passed away.

My language Journey

I decided to learn Polish and at the same time I decided to search for our family in Poland as I had these envelopes, letters, and pictures of family in Poland. My first course in Polish was at the Polish Cultural Center of Philadelphia, after that I took a conversational course at our local community college. After this course I knew I had to find another way to stay in touch with the language and I contacted the Polish school in Trenton, New Jersey to see if they were offering an adult course and if not if they knew of a recent Polish immigrant who might want to do a language exchange. I was very fortunate that the Director told me she knew someone who might want to do it. A few days later I met with Ryszard Druch at his art gallery in Trenton. Ryszard became fascinated with my family's Polish story and even sponsored an exhibition about our family in his gallery. From the start Ryszard asked me to go to Poland, but I had to wait, because I had a daughter in college and could not afford to go.

Currently I am attending the Polish School at American Czystochowa. My instructor is Joanna Mikoluk, and my Polish has improved dramatically since attending this course. I attend every Thursday and drive almost 100 miles to attend this class.

Sukces

In the late summer of 2013 I was finally able to locate our family in Poland with the help of Dorota Brosztek, a reporter for the former newspaper Nowy Kurier.

Gosc w Donmu, Bog w Domu

In October of 2016 and with the urging and support of my wife, Ryszard and I finally were able to make the trip to Poland. We landed on Monday 17 October 2016 and I was met with flowers and gifts by cousin Malgosia, her husband Slawek and Ciocia Halina. From there they drove us the 100 kilometers to Ostrow Mazowiecka. In Ostrow Mazowiecka, we went straight to our hotel, Hotel 17, where many of my family were waiting for me. This was a very emotional moment for all of us, as we had saved, I think the last chance of us reuniting.

At Hotel 17 I again experienced Polish hospitality. When the owners of the Hotel, Pan and Pani Banaszek found out I was coming to Ostrow Mazowiecka to reunite with family they literally opened the doors of the hotel to Ryszard and I. They let us stay at the hotel free of charge and provided all meals free of charge. It was amazing.

On Tuesday, we went to the village of Biel where Babcia was born and lived prior to leaving for America. The local people of Biel pointed out some of the houses that were still standing and even occupied to this day, that were around when Babcia was living in Biel. We then drove to Jasienica to visit the church my grandparents were married in, again this was an emotional time for me.

We then headed back to Ostrow Mazowiecka where we stopped at the Srodowiskowy Dom Samopomocy. Here we were given a presentation by the residents, on Christianity coming to Poland. My one cousin has twin boys who participate in this program and it was here that I made many new

friends and to this day talk with them on Facebook. For me this was a moving time and I felt I was really getting to know my family and the people of Ostrow Mazowiecka.

In the afternoon we went to the Ratusz to meet the Mayor and had a public gathering with our family and some of the residents of Ostrow Mazowiecka. For me this was one of the highlights of our family's reunion together, we presented gifts to the Mayor and he in turn gave us gifts. This event can be seen on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OoZkNscIVJ8&index=16&list=WL&t=6s> . We then returned to Hotel 17 for the dedication of a plaque in the memory of Witold Pilecki, for which I was one of the guests of honor. After the dedication we retired to the hotel banquet hall for a presentation of gifts to the hotel museum. I donated my Army dress uniform along with a set of battle fatigues with helmet to the museum. And we did a brief question and answer period with the teen agers and their parents. Then the door was closed to only family and we sat down to a wonderful Polish meal in the banquet hall of Hotel 17.

For the next few days I really got to know our family in Poland and for some reason we connected as if we had known each other all along. But time for my visit came to an end it was time to move onto a weekend in Warsaw with my cousin Malgosia and her husband Slawek. After my weekend in Warsaw it was time to go to Opola and meet with Ryszard and his family.

During my time in Opola we did a presentation at the Opola library on my family, I was a guest at the University of Opola where Ryszard was involved in the dedication of a Tablet to Polish poet Norwid, I visited Krakow, which was amazing. But for me the highlight in Opola was being interviewed on 25 October 2016 by TVP 3 OPOLA. I was invited to speak to a high school class and prior to the class was interviewed by TVP 3 Opola. The next day the school Director informed us that the interview was seen nation wide in Poland and that a school in Poznan and Warsaw called to see if I was available to come speak about my Polish roots and reunion.

Learning Polish for me has opened doors that otherwise would have remained closed. It was one of the greatest things to find, visit and reconnect with our family in Poland. We are in constant contact now and communicate via Facebook daily, we now know each other's challenges in life, the joy, and the sad moments too. Our reunion provides me with the motivation to continue with my Polish language studies at the Polish School at American Czestochowa in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. My wife and I are planning to return to Poland in October of 2018.