Poland and Me

He hadn’t been asleep very long. But he was in a deep sleep. After all he was exhausted. He had worked in the fields all day. Suddenly, there was shooting. He forced himself awake. Mother and Father called to him. Michael, get up quickly! Soldiers are coming. Although Michael was only a teenager, the soldiers wouldn’t care. They needed conscripts.

Quick! Hide in the barn. Michael scrambled down from his sleeping loft and stumbled out the door. The cold night air woke him up to the terror of the reality. He hid under the hay, next to his horse. Soldiers burst in looking for him with only their lanterns to guide them. They were getting closer. Michael knew that they would find him soon. What should he do? He jumped onto his horse and cantered out of the barn. In his escape, he ran over the Captain. Don’t look back, he told himself. He just kept going. Cracks of firearms rang past his ears.

He hid in the woods all night. Exhausted as he was, he didn’t sleep. The panic from his close call kept him awake. When daylight broke we made his way to his uncle’s house. He told Wujek what had transpired during the night. Wujek said “You must get away, somewhere safe”. But where? America! I will make all the arrangements. Before Michael knew it he was on a dirty, crowded steam ship alone, on his way to America.

Mary had always loved learning. Even though she was the youngest of 12 children, she was the only one who had completed school. How did she accomplish this? When the time came for her to get a job, to help support the family, she got a job as a tutor. The “rich” family in town was scandalized to have their children sit in a classroom with the common folks’ kids. So they paid the tuition for Mary. She went to school and then tutored her sponsors’ children.

After graduation, she had a pretty good job as a secretary to a lawyer. She had a boyfriend who loved to ski and had a little black dog. They hadn’t talked of marriage, but she knew that eventually their relationship would go there. One day she came home from work. Her mother met her excitedly at the door. Your sister, Victoria wants me to come live with her in America. I need you to take me there. Out of respect for her mother, she agreed to take her.

Before she left Poland, she told her boyfriend that she was going to America. “But I will come back”, she promised. He didn’t believe her. No, he said, “you will never come back.” After several delays with getting passports and the proper paperwork, she and her mother finally made it onto a steam ship to cross the ocean.

They had waited too long. By now it was late in the season. The North Atlantic waters were stormy. The voyage was rough and most everybody was seasick. The closeness of the quarters and crowding made it worse. Mary went up on the upper deck to get some air. There a sailor saw her and noticed her beauty. He struck up a conversation with her. His company helped her to pass the time as the passage dragged on and on. He even gave her an orange, which she gave to her mother.

Then one morning, everyone crowded up on the deck. Through the ocean mist they could see Lady Liberty. They had made it to America! She was processed through Ellis Island, a modern day Tower of Babel. Since she could write, she sent letters, not only for herself, but other immigrants. These letters, informed loved ones that they had arrived.

When Mary finally made it to Philadelphia is was Halloween. She saw children going door to door. There they were given pieces of fruit or nuts. “This must be a rich country” she thought to herself. They are giving away treats!

All did not go as planned. Mary’s mother had a difficult time adjusting to the new country. She had a poor disposition and she couldn’t get along with Victoria’s husband. He had been gassed in the “Great War”. Since then, he was never the same. Before Mary knew it, they decided to marry her off. Then someone else would have to deal with Mama. They even arranged a match for her. When she met with the priest, she told him that she did not want this marriage. So he refused to perform the ceremony. But Mary continued to feel the pressure to get married and take her mother with her.

The church was her refuge. She centered her life around mass, devotions and parish events. It was at a church picnic that Michael first saw her. Her beauty captivated him. She seemed so refined and educated. He approached her anyway. As time went on, he realized that he was lonely. Mary filled this void in his life. At the same time, Mary saw that he was respectful with her mother. Even if she berated him, he would quietly take it. He respected Mama precisely because she was Mary’s mother. With the pressure on her to marry, Mary eventually acquiesced. She wrote her boyfriend back in Poland one last time. She let him know she was getting married. Secretly, however, she kept his photograph. From time to time, she would gaze at him and his little black dog.

Michael and Mary had a hard life. But they shared it together. They had two daughters, Helen and Stella. Both of whom, married and each had 5 children. Mary would visit each daughter every week. She would help them with housework. With each visit, she would bring treats to her grandchildren, usually white chocolate and purple gumballs. She always brought rye bread. We called it “Babcia bread”. She often told us stories. Her favorite stories were about life in Poland. She would share stories about how poor they were there. She told scary ghost stories. She believed that since Europe was an “old country”, there actually were ghosts. Most of all, she told her grandchildren of the importance of the Blessed Mother, especially Our Lady of Czestochowa to Poland.

She explained that, soldiers had taken the picture of Our Lady of Czestochowa and put it on an ox cart. Out of the evil in their hearts, they decided to deface the picture. With a sword in his hand, one soldier cut Our Lady on the face. He left two slashes on her cheek. Immediately, blood gushed forth from the picture. We all gasped at her mention of blood. Through her story she shared her own love of the Blessed Mother. Whenever, I am at the American Czestochowa Shrine I think of my grandmother and remember her story.

Then in the early 1960’s Mary and her sister Victoria flew back to Poland for a visit. It was during the Cold War. I was under 10 years old and had heard about the “Iron Curtain”. In my child’s imagination I thought it was real, like the Berlin wall. I was amazed that anyone was even allowed to go to a Communist country. I asked my mother, Stella. “Why isn’t Dziadzii going with Babcia?” He is afraid to go, she explained. He thinks that they won’t let him leave again. Then she told me about the incident in the barn with the Captain. He ran him over with his horse, he may have been killed. Dziadzii doesn’t really know because he never looked back.

When Babcia returned, she brought me a Polish doll, and a Polish vest. My Mom made me a skirt to go with it. It was pure white with colorful ribbons sewed around the bottom. I wore it for my Halloween costume that year. As I went around Trick or Treating, neighbors would ask me what my costume was. I am a Polish girl I would state proudly. When I became a mother, myself I gave the vest to my daughter, Julia. She in turn gave it to her daughters Marie Stella and Lucy.

Later, one of Mary’s relatives sent her a photo album of the trip. It not only had photographs but beautiful artwork. There were captions for all the places she had visited. The writing was all in Polish. So at the time, I didn’t know what anything was. She pointed out to me pictures of her childhood home. It was a one room house. There was a sleeping loft for the children. The house was very small but she was proud that they had a shingled roof. Apparently, my grandfather’s house, only had a thatch roof. There were also pictures of the garden. Babcia and Ciocia Vicky were napping on the ground. “Babcia, why are you sleeping on the ground?” I asked. It was a hot day and the grass was cool, she answered. We always slept on the ground. I was amazed. Didn’t the bugs crawl on you? Babcia just laughed.

The pictures all fascinated me and in my child’s mind I decided that one day, I too would go to Poland. I would take the album with me and retrace all my grandmother’s steps. Tucked in the middle of the album was a photo of a man with skis and a little black dog. “Who is this?” I asked. It was then that my mother told me about Babcia’s boyfriend back in Poland. When she was there she found out that he had never married. She had been the love of his life.

Sometime after her return from Poland, Michael became sick. He had developed cancer. He was a very irritable patient. Mary would sneak him some whiskey into the hospital to keep him calm. Unfortunately, it became apparent that his time was short. I remember visiting him one last time. Each grandchild took turns “sitting” with Dzidzii. He died at home.

Babcia went on to live until 1975. She was always a source of love and affection for the whole family. Then one night she had a dream. Michael came to her and told her that he was coming to bring her home to him soon. Babcia visited her daughters one more time to say goodbye. But you are not even sick, Helen protested. Maybe it is Ciocia Vicky, she’s older than you and sick. The next day, Mary fell ill. When she didn’t answer the telephone, all day, my mother became worried. She called her sister. Helen drove over to check on her. She found her upstairs. She had died in her sleep.

The next Christmas, we wondered. Where will we celebrate Wigilia? We had always celebrated it with Babcia. So my mother took up the tradition. From that point on, every Christmas picture of the family had pink, red beet soup on the table. I have continued to celebrate Wigilia with my family and now, my daughter’s family. This year, my youngest grandson, baby Michael, had his first opłatek.

In her later years, Helen developed Alzheimer’s. As a result she lost her ability to speak English, her second language. Stella went to visit her in the nursing home. Her Polish was rusty, because she hadn’t spoken it in 20 years. But she understood her sister. Bunny, Helen’s oldest daughter asked her, “Ciocia Stella what is she saying?” All the grandchildren had been Americanized and only spoke a few Polish words. My mom reassured her that all she was saying was the Hail Mary over and over. She was praying the rosary. I realized through this experience that my parents are the only ones left who speak Polish. If something happens to their English language abilities, there is no one to translate for us. So I began to study Polish.

Since there is not a lot of demand to learn Polish, in America, it was difficult to find a quality program. First I took classes at The Associated Polish Home in Philadelphia. There I learned Polish history and culture. They also offered an introductory course of the Polish language. But the language component was limited. So I kept looking around for another class. I tried the Rosetta Stone program. But the lack of instruction especially in grammar was frustrating. I could see with my eyes, word endings changing in sentences. But I didn’t know why. Finally, I found a class at The American Shrine of Our Lady of Czestochowa. We are using Polski Krok po Kroku. This course has helped me not only to grow in Polish vocabulary and grammar but also in my listening and speaking skills. I must admit I still feel like a beginner but I can see that I am making progress.

There have been surprising benefits from learning Polish. Through this whole experience I have felt closer to my departed grandparents. As I learned the expression “Dobranoc” I remember Babcia kissing me on the cheek and saying this to me. Now I understand what she was saying to me. Now that I am studying at Czestochowa I cross the grounds and feel my grandmother strolling with me. I walk the rosary path and see the Mysteries posted in English and in Polish. As I pray, I palpably feel my Babcia praying with me, in Polish. The desire to go to Poland and retrace her steps has reignited in my heart. Instead of going to tourist destinations, I mostly want to go to her home town of Romanow and see her childhood home. Maybe I will even nap in the grass. Even, if bugs crawl on me.