

Poland and me

A journey towards fulfillment

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I grew up on a farm in southern Manitoba, one of the western provinces that make up Canada. My family, along with many other families in our community, were the descendants of immigrants who came from Galicia in the decade between 1895 to 1905. During that time, the Canadian government encouraged eastern Europeans to come to the prairies and help the country develop its agricultural potential.

Thousands of ethnic Poles and Ukrainians took up Canada's invitation and left their Galician homeland in search of a better life. My great grandparents Piotr and Ewa Gołębiowski, along with their five-year-old son Adam were among them. Despite the fertile soil, southern Manitoba was infested with mosquitoes, had brutally cold winters, and most of the land still had to be cleared before crops could be planted. Thankfully, my ancestors were able to find support and a new sense of community in others who had also come from the same region in Galicia during this time. Eventually, they began to prosper and with every new generation, our family expanded and thrived as Canadians citizens.



My great grandparents, Ewa and Piotr Gołębiowski

I had never known any of my great grandparents as they had passed away long before I was born. I only knew them through some old photographs and a few letters written in Polish. I grew up in a typical Canadian environment speaking English and we had the benefit of living in a democracy. I never really understood the history and culture of my ancestral homeland, or the struggles my great grandparents would have faced in Galicia. The rigours of everyday life made such things seem unimportant. Yet, as I now reflect on my life, I am now able to recall slivers of evidence of my ancestors and their culture.

As a child, I recall my grandparents gathering together with other relatives and friends from their generation. They would often speak to one another in a strange language. It was Polish! It was also evidence of their own upbringings in Polish Canadian households. I grew up with many traditional foods and still get to enjoy my mother's wonderful Polish cooking. My father was an accomplished violin player who played many traditional songs. Members of our family are buried in the same rural cemeteries as our great grandparents whose headstones are inscribed in Polish. Even my surname is obvious evidence of my roots which I had never significantly considered over the years.

As I entered my fifties, I began to feel that this collection of memories was part of something larger that I had not yet discovered about myself; I now had many questions. *What is my real ethnic background and history? How much of my culture was lost through assimilation into Canadian society? What was the connection between Poland and me and could we still have family in "the old country?"*

With the assistance of another relative who had meticulously poured over Polish church records pertaining to my ancestors, I started to learn more about my past. To stay focused, I concentrated on the "Golebioski" side of my family. I learned that my great grandfather Piotr was one of ten siblings. They lived in the town of Narol, Galicia, which is in South-East Poland. I learned their names, birthdates, and in many cases, marriage and obit dates. Armed with this information, I made inquiries through social media to see if there were members of our family still living in Narol. To my surprise, I was able to locate a young lady with the last name of "Gołębiowska" still living there. As we exchanged messages, I provided her with the documentation we knew about our family. She told me she would inquire with her family and get back to me. While I was amazed that there was actually a "Gołębiowski" still living in Narol, I knew I had to restrain my enthusiasm. After a few days, I received a response from her. The message left me stunned. After speaking with her own family, she confirmed that her own great grandfather was Piotr's youngest brother, Władysław. She expressed a mutual sense of excitement which further fueled my need to learn more. After all that has happened to Poland, I thought to myself *"could a branch of our family be still in existence?"* My head was spinning, and I developed an overwhelming drive to pursue this possibility.

And so it was, after retiring from thirty years of public service, I was now able to begin my personal journey. In the spring of 2018, my wife and I traveled to the land of my ancestors. I would be the first member of our family to do so in the 118 years since Piotr and Ewa had left. Coincidentally, we arrived in Kraków on May 2nd, the same day that they had boarded a ship in Hamburg and left Europe forever.

Once in Poland, we made our way to Przemyśl where we met our Polish interpreter. The three of us then drove to the town of Narol. I was excited and hesitant about meeting the Gołębiowski family. I was afraid of any disappointment about who these people may be. I wondered if they would be similar to the family I had known my whole life in Canada. Upon entering Narol, I reflected on the fact that after sixteen hours travelling by plane, three hours by train, and then an hour and a half by car, we had arrived at a location that was part of my family's origins. It was almost too much for me to comprehend.

As we pulled up to the Gołębiowski home I saw several members of the family coming out to meet us. The greeting we received was something I had never experienced before. Their warmth and love was overwhelming. It was as if time and distance had melted away.

We spent the next few hours learning more about our families and consuming a never-ending variety of home cooked food. This generosity was all too familiar to me as food and celebration always went together in my own upbringing. The afternoon was fulfilling beyond what I had imagined, yet I was unaware of what was to take place next.

The family then informed us that they wanted to take us somewhere. My wife and I got into our interpreter's car, and we followed the family in theirs as they drove through the small streets of Narol. We stopped in a small back lane which bordered the town cemetery. As we got out of our vehicles, they motioned for us to follow them. They walked into the cemetery and continued between the various plots, all beautifully adorned with candle holders and flowers. I looked in the direction we were walking and started to make out the letters of a surname on a headstone. I suddenly started to feel a release of adrenalin that increased my heart rate and breathing. *What was happening to me?* A few steps further and the family gathered around this particular plot and gestured for me to come in front of it. I was struck with what was before me. The beautiful granite headstone, along with the inscriptions and dates on it left no doubt. It was for Władysław Gołębiowski, my great grandfather's brother; their grandfather and great grandfather. Also identified was one of Władysław's sons, Karol. By now, I had memorized virtually all my great grandfather's siblings' birth and death dates, including Władysław's. Yet I could not believe what I was now seeing with my own eyes. With shaking hands, I flipped through the pages of the records I had brought with me, and found the entry pertaining to Władysław. I compared the dates. With a choked voice, all I could say to my wife was "the numbers match". I struggled to fight the effects of adrenalin and emotion as I sensed my family members looking at me, unsure of how this realization had impacted me. I heard our translator say something to them which I assume was the Polish version of the words I had just uttered. As I stared at that headstone, I was coming to the full realization that the very ground I was standing on, and the people that

were surrounding me, were a part of my very essence. These people, whom I had met only a few hours prior, had just connected my present with my past. They helped link all my life's experiences back to this culture and country.



The headstone for my great grandfather's brother Władysław and his son Karol

That day had a significant impact on my life. I'm still a proud Canadian and thankful that Piotr and Ewa sought out a better life in Canada. But I am also thankful that I was able to discover an important piece of my life that was waiting to be explored. I feel more fulfilled as a person and have an insatiable appetite to learn about Polish history, culture, and the language. I now also understand that the memories from my past are not the last remnants of a forgotten culture, but rather, part of a path that was guiding me forward towards an ancestral homeland that will forever continue to shape my future.