

Pilgrimage to Poland - Recollections and Reflections

August 13 - August 22, 2016

Prologue

Where to begin writing about the incredible pilgrimage to Poland that Rick and I had the privilege of taking? How can I convey, in mere words, the richness of our experiences during those 8 days? Is it possible to help others understand the profound connection to our everyday lives? I don't know the answers to these questions. What I do know is that reflection through writing is my primary way of processing and remembering. And that it's an honor to share these reflections with anyone who's willing to take the time to read them. So I'll just jump in and start. Like *The Sound of Music* verse says..."Let's start at the very beginning - a very good place to start". Then see where it goes from there.

Background

In October of 1988, Rick and I took a trip to Europe, and Poland was one of our destinations. We wanted to visit Mirka, a young cousin who, 11 years previously, my maternal grandpa had brought to the United States for a 6 week visit. Although Poland was under Communist rule at that time, we didn't care. We were young (late 30's), naive, and certain that we could meet any challenge that faced us. Unaccompanied and not knowing the language, we blithely boarded a train in Cologne, Germany, went through the Berlin Wall, and eventually arrived in Bydgoszcz, Poland to spend 3 memorable nights with Mirka and her young family. What an adventure! It was a great opportunity to visit and develop relationships, while experiencing the ugly chains of communism up close and personal.

Fast forward to now - 2016. Eager to observe the results of Poland's 27-year journey from communism to capitalism and, longing to see Mirka once again, we jumped at the opportunity to sign up for a "Footsteps" Pilgrimage to Poland with leaders Steve and Janet Ray. After all, we'd already been on three of their trips, and had no doubt that their careful planning would provide a rich, rewarding and reverent experience. It did. My intention now is to reflect on those experiences and to share my reflections. This will be a mighty, but rewarding task. It will also bring closure to, and provide a record for, an incredible journey.

Day 1 - Part 1 of 2 Arrival in Warsaw

When we departed from Poland in 1988, it was from the Warsaw Airport on an (approximately) 30 passenger “prop” plane. I remember being shocked at how small and dated our aircraft, (complete with round, porthole style windows) was, and remarked to Rick that since no one back in the States knew we were boarding (communication in Poland during communist rule was difficult, if not impossible) - what if we crashed? How would our families find out?

As in Mirka’s town of Bydgoszcz, I noted a strong air of discouragement among the sparse number of people in the small, drab airport as they quietly went about their business. The building was dim and gray with next to nothing to choose from at the food counter. And although a man stood behind the counter, he could have cared less whether we bought anything or not. This was typical of other service people we had encountered in Poland at that time, and it was obvious to us that although unemployment under communism was zero, so was entrepreneurship, enthusiasm and pride.

And so it was with great excitement that in 2016 we emerged from the plane - and eventually the large, bustling airport - eager to see the changes that had been made since our last visit. It was indeed an entirely different place! The aura of darkness that had surrounded everything had been lifted, replaced with a mantle of prosperity, hope and, above all, freedom. People on the streets wore colorful, stylish clothing and chatted animatedly. Contrasted to the dearth of 1988, there were modern cars on the roads, tons of restaurants, malls and shops of all types. The busy boulevards, expansive squares and blocky buildings gave downtown Warsaw a Gotham City ambience.

Although we were exhausted from our journey, we were all eyes as we traveled through Warsaw to our hotel. The atmosphere in this bustling city, virtually destroyed during World War II, was now vibrant and modern. Despite these surprises however, I was stunned when we arrived the Westin Hotel, the place we would spend our first 2 nights. The exterior of the building, with a glass elevator rising to the 10th floor, was amazing. The beautiful, bright and spacious accommodations, upscale dining room, incredible bar and gorgeous circular staircase leading to a glass dome equalled any hotel Rick and I have ever stayed in.

We were delighted to find we had been given a seventh floor corner room, overlooking the city streets. What a cool place to rest our travel-weary bodies, and to refresh ourselves for the Pilgrimage that was awaiting us.



Warsaw's Westin

Day 1 - Part 2 of 2 Activities in Warsaw

There were approximately 70 pilgrims on our tour, and we were divided into two buses - the "red" and the "green". Olga was the interpreter/guide on our bus, and Alex served that role on the other. I was eager to learn as much as I could about the history of the country they so deeply loved, and to hear stories of the many courageous martyrs and saints who died for their Catholic faith during years and years of persecution. As our travels unfolded, I was not disappointed. Olga was a font of knowledge. She not only personally shared information, but supplemented it with DVDs packed with history during some of the longer rides.

A special "blessing" of all Steve and Janet Ray Pilgrimages is that, in addition to interpreters, at least one priest and deacon travels with us. Which means we are able to celebrate Holy Mass each day, usually in a very special place. Today we were at the Church of St. Stanislaw Kostka. Born in 1550, this popular Polish Jesuit priest had a special devotion to the Blessed Mother. Afterwards (on the same grounds), we visited the museum of one of the country's late 20th century martyrs, Blessed Father Jerzy Popieluszko.

Father Jerzy was a priest who, although not political, often celebrated Mass for the striking steelworkers involved in the Solidarity Movement* of the early 1980's.

**Solidarity Movement - The first independent, self-governing labor union in a Soviet-bloc country. Started by Lech Walesa in September 1980, it gave rise to a broad, non-violent, anti-communist social movement that, at its height, claimed some 9.4 million members. It is considered to have greatly contributed to the fall of Communism.*

As a result, he became an enemy of the State and a target for assassination. He was ultimately beaten to death (and his body thrown into the river) in October, 1984, in an attempt by the Polish Communist State to destroy Solidarity. This horrible act however, had the opposite effect. It instead solidified resistance to the authorities. Despite the dangers of attending this hero's funeral, an estimated 1,000,000 people showed up - a testament to the bravery and defiance of the Polish people and nation.



Lech Wałęsa and Solidarity

Late afternoon of our first day, I had my first travel meltdown. After approximately 14-1/2 hours of actual travel, (not including days of preparation and time spent in airports) and

“hitting the ground running” once we arrived, I simply wasn’t excited about visiting the largest park in Warsaw, viewing the “Palace on the Isle”, or even having dinner at Belvedere, an exclusive restaurant and one of Warsaw’s premier dining locations. Instead, Rick and I “chilled” in our room for a few hours, took a short walk, then caught up on the sleep we had been so deprived of during our journey. Although we had missed “special places” we knew the next day would be full, and we wanted to be prepared.

Day 2 - Part 1 of 3 Niepokalanow and Fr. Maximilian Kolbe

After an early morning breakfast buffet at the hotel, we boarded our buses for the (approximately) 91 mile ride west to the Niepokalanow Monastery (also known as “The City of the Immaculate Mother of God”). What an amazing place! Founded by Fr. Maximilian Kolbe in 1927, it originally consisted of no more than a few shacks with tar paper roofs. But under his leadership it quickly flourished and became one of the largest friaries in the world, with over 800 members. In time, it also became a center of communication to the outside world as new products and procedures were adopted in their print house and they began producing a daily Catholic newsletter. A radio station followed in 1938 and the Lourdes Hymn, played by the friars’ own orchestra, became the signature tune. (Years later Polish bishops sent an official letter to the Holy See, claiming that these efforts had prepared the Polish nation to endure and survive the horrors of the war that was soon to follow.)

This holy place also provided shelter to refugees from Greater Poland and, during World War II, hid up to 2,000 Jews and Poles from Nazi persecution. In February, 1941 however, Father Kolbe was arrested by the German Gestapo and ended up in Auschwitz as prisoner number 16670.

Several months after his arrest, a German officer ordered men from his barracks to assemble. A fellow prisoner had escaped, and now ten persons would be chosen to die in reprisal.

When an officer stood in front of Franciszek Gajowniczek and this young man realized that he had been one of the 10 chosen to die, he desperately cried out: “I am losing my wife, and my children will now be orphaned”. That’s when Father Kolbe stepped forward and spoke these words: “I want to take the place of this man. He has a wife and a family. I am a Catholic priest, I have no one”.

Surprisingly the officer in charge let this “switch” take place. The chosen 10 were stripped naked and marched off to Block 13 - “the Death Block” - where they were put into a small cell and left to the ravages of starvation and dehydration. After several weeks passed and some (including Father Kolbe) had not yet died, each was injected with carbolic acid so the Nazis could make room for the next batch of victims. Injection to Kolbe’s heart produced instant death.

The story of this simple priest who had secretly heard confessions and shared his meagre rations of soup or bread with others echoed through Auschwitz. In that desert of hatred, he had sown love. His courage brought hope to the prisoners, and new life and strength came in to the darkness of the camp. (Note: Franciszek Gajowniczek attended Fr. Kolbe's canonization in Rome in 1982 and made it his life's mission to tell the story of the saint who had stepped in to save his life. He died in 1995 at the age of 92.)

So far we've heard the stories of 2 courageous priests - Fathers Maximilian Kolbe and Jerzy Popieluszko - who gave their lives in service to others and became beacons of light and hope to their fellow countrymen. This brought me to a troubling question: Am I that deeply passionate about my faith? Would I be willing to give up my life in the face of great persecution? At this point, the sad answer is that I'd need a total transformation of self before I could rise to that level of holiness. A saint I ain't. But rather than focus on how much time and effort it would take to be one, let's change our pace and talk about our visit to Warsaw's "Old Town".

Day 2 - Part 2 of 3 Warsaw's Old Town

Warsaw's Old Town is the oldest part of the capital city, dating back to the 13th century. Situated on the banks of the Vistula River, it is one of the most prominent tourist attractions in Warsaw.

Much of the district was badly damaged during the Invasion of Poland in 1939, when the German Air Force heavily bombarded the city's residential areas and historic landmarks. Although parts of the area were rebuilt, it was then systematically blown up by German troops during the 1944 Warsaw Uprising*, during which a quarter million brave Poles were killed while the Soviets sat on the other side of the Vistula River and watched.

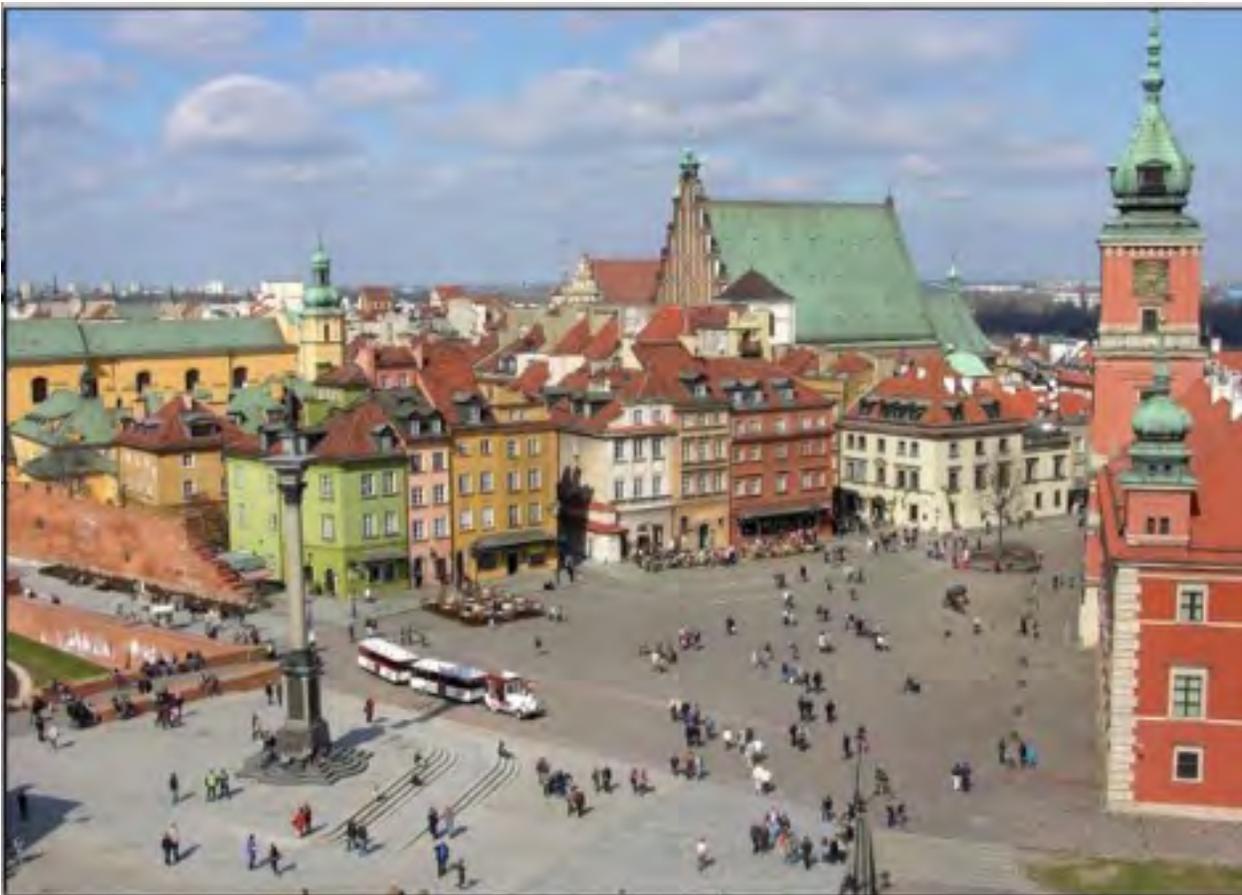
**A major WWII operation by the Polish Home Army to liberate Warsaw from Nazi Germany. Timed to coincide with the Soviet Union's Red Army approach to the eastern suburbs of the city, and the retreat of German forces, the Soviet advance stopped short. This enabled the Germans to regroup and demolish the city while defeating the Polish men and women who fought for 63 days with little outside support. As one of Polish heritage, I'm proud to say that this uprising by these brave people was the largest single European resistance effort during World War II.*

Unfortunately for Poland, the Red Army then marched in and claimed the pile of rubble that was once Warsaw. The city was once again under siege - this time by a different force. By 1945 nearly 2/3 of the city's pre-war population was dead and not a building was standing in Warsaw's Old Town.

After World War II however, a five-year reconstruction campaign by its citizens was done. As many of the original bricks as possible were reused, and the rubble was sifted for items that could be carefully reinserted into their original places. The result was a beautiful and meticulous restoration of its churches, palaces and large market place. This painstaking restoration reminded people of the prewar glory of their Polish capital. The phoenix of Europe had risen.

The Old Town Market Place, which we visited on this day, actually dates back to the end of the 13th century. It is the true heart of Old Town and, until the 18th century, was the heart of all Warsaw. The town hall (built before 1429 and reconstructed a number of times because of enemy attacks) was where the representatives of guilds and merchants met, and where governing was held.

Warsaw's Old Town has been placed on UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites as "an outstanding example of a near-total reconstruction of a span of history covering the 13th to the 20th century".



Warsaw's Old Town Market Place

This marvelous Pilgrimage was not only a trip of viewing, but also of learning about the history of Poland. Hearing of the cruelty inflicted upon this country (one of the largest on the continent) by different entities for so many years made me sad. For you see, I am of 100% Polish origin and, as a teen and young adult, had to learn to smile as uniformed folks made jokes about the stupidity of Poles. I actually became ashamed to admit my nationality. This journey however, has helped me to recognize - and to take pride - in the resourcefulness, spiritedness, courage and spirituality of my ancestors. I now realize that those cruel remarks were made out of ignorance and thoughtlessness, and were just another form of abuse inflicted upon good people.

I can only image what it was like for the 3 of my 4 grandparents who immigrated from Poland in the early 1900's as young people, undoubtedly with hopes and dreams for better lives for themselves. Although the US provided this, hearing of the devastation that was being inflicted upon their country and their people in their absence must have been heartbreaking. Middle aged and raising families of their own, there was nothing they could do to help their loved ones back home. My maternal grandpa's heart had to have been broken when he heard his only sibling, a sister named Bernis, was killed (along with thousands of others) during World War II.

Day 2 - Part 3 of 3

Mirka and Family: Then and Now

In 1915 Aleksander, my beloved maternal grandfather, immigrated to the United States from Poland with nothing but a small trunk. Only 20 years old, he left behind his homeland as well as his parents and sister, whom he never saw again.

In the early 70's he returned to Poland where he met, for the first time, his deceased sister's granddaughter Czeslawa Zdeb, and her young daughter Miroslawa (Mirka). Several years later, after the death of Czeslawa my grandpa who, though not wealthy, had sent money to Poland to help his family, generously paid for 17-year-old Mirka's 6 week trip to the United States.

Although she didn't speak a word of English, our entire family embraced Mirka fondly, and she us. So much so that 13 years later our European vacation plans included visiting her and her young family in Poland. It simply didn't matter to us that her country, was under the menacing thumb of communist rule. We wanted to see Mirka.

Now having grown up in "the land of the free", we weren't at all prepared for what we would see and experience in that troubled country where, just 7 years earlier, martial law had been declared and, just 3 short years later, Father Jerzy had been brutally beaten and murdered. We were ignorant of all this. But given the hushed sense of darkness and hopelessness we felt on the train ride from Poznan to Bydgoszcz, and Mirka and Greg's whispered warnings to never mention politics in public, we began to realize that we weren't in Kansas anymore.

Mirka and Greg's home was on the fifth floor of a masonry building that was exactly the same as every other Soviet-era building as far as the eye could see. Their government issued television, furniture and appliances were simple but adequate, and few personal touches were afforded. Although small parking lots were behind each building, there were few cars. We found that we had to walk, taxi or take a bus anywhere we wanted to go. On one of our days together a group of us went to Mirka's dad's farm, out in the country. It was a Sunday morning and as we walked several blocks to the "cab stop", we were amazed to see a long "vodka line". Once at the stop, Gregoszcz had to wake up one of the drivers sprawled out in his car. The other was "busy" reading his newspaper, and neither driver was particularly enthusiastic about being roused to work. This was our first example of how motivation and job pride become negated during communist rule. Even though everyone is assigned some task, few seemed excited about executing their responsibilities.

On that 1988 visit Mirka and Gregoszcz expressed surprise and grave concern when, the first day we were there, we told them that we hadn't made advance arrangements to leave Poland when our visit was over. As a result we ended up standing in line for a half day with 2 student interpreters at Orbis, the government run, "only place in town" travel agency. It was here that we learned (from unenthusiastic, incompetent counter persons) that we couldn't leave the country on a train for at least a month, because such tickets simply weren't available. To our dismay, we ended up having to take a train to Warsaw then fly to Cologne, Germany on a 30-something passenger "prop" plane from the small Warsaw Airport. (Communication wasn't easy during those days, and the concern was that no one back in the States knew that we were boarding that old, outdated plane. What if it crashed? How would they find out? Obviously it went fine, and we were grateful when we landed in Germany (another "land of the free") and got into a Mercedes Benz taxi. What a startling difference!

There are so many stories that could be told about the 3 days that Rick and I spent in this communist country in 1988. And perhaps I'll write more about those adventures in the future. But that's not what this blog is about. I'm just supplying background so that my readers can understand the difference that 28 years, coupled with the fall of communism, has made in Poland.



Mirka and I at dinner together - September, 2016

Although we didn't have the opportunity to visit Mirka, Gregoszcz and family in Bydgoszcz this time around, she and her (now) 37-year old son Radek took the train to Warsaw to have dinner with us. Communication through Google translator, coupled with a new-on-the job waitress who didn't speak a word of English, was frustrating and difficult, but we still loved spending time with that precious branch of my family. Mirka proudly gave us a colorful, well-done booklet (put out by the Chamber of Commerce) that extolled the beauty and attractions that Bydgoszcz now has to offer. It was printed in both Polish and English! I'm sad that we weren't able to go there during this trip, and hoping that some day - God willing - we can go back and do justice to the part of Poland where my maternal grandpa was born. And perhaps even explore the areas where my other grandparents - and Rick's paternal ancestors (Slovakia) - were raised as well.

Day 3 - Part 1 of 2

Częstochowa and The Monastery at Jasna Gora

This morning we left the Westin Hotel for a long but interesting bus ride. The first leg of our journey was to Częstochowa, 135 miles southwest of Warsaw.

Our tour leader Olga spent a great deal of time telling us about Poland, past and present. She pointed out how plentiful the shops and malls - open 7 days a week - are, and I smiled when she labeled her fellow countrymen "shopaholics" (it must be in my blood). During communist rule, people literally had to wait for hours to purchase necessary items that may or may not even have been on the shelves once they got to the front of the line. (A scarcity that Rick and I observed when we were there in 1988. There was only one grocery store in the complex where Mirka's family lived, and there was hardly anything on the shelves.) Because of shortages and inflation, it became a habit for people to buy as much as they could of whatever was available, and then swap items with their friends and families. Now, despite much improved economic conditions, old habits die hard and Poles continue to love to shop.

I was amazed to discover how similar much of Poland's terrain and climate is to that of Michigan. In the north we viewed green, tree covered hills and in the center of the country flat, fertile farmlands where potatoes, apples, cabbage and berries were grown. Containing a remnant of the immense Medieval Forest that once stretched across the European Plain however, there are also beautiful sandy beaches and dunes fronting the Baltic Sea. The Vistula River, which runs through Warsaw, is 651 miles long and the Oder, which forms part of Poland's western border is 531 miles long. Teeming with thousands of small lakes, Poland's waterways are only second in number to Finland. Like Michigan, it's actually quite the water wonderland.

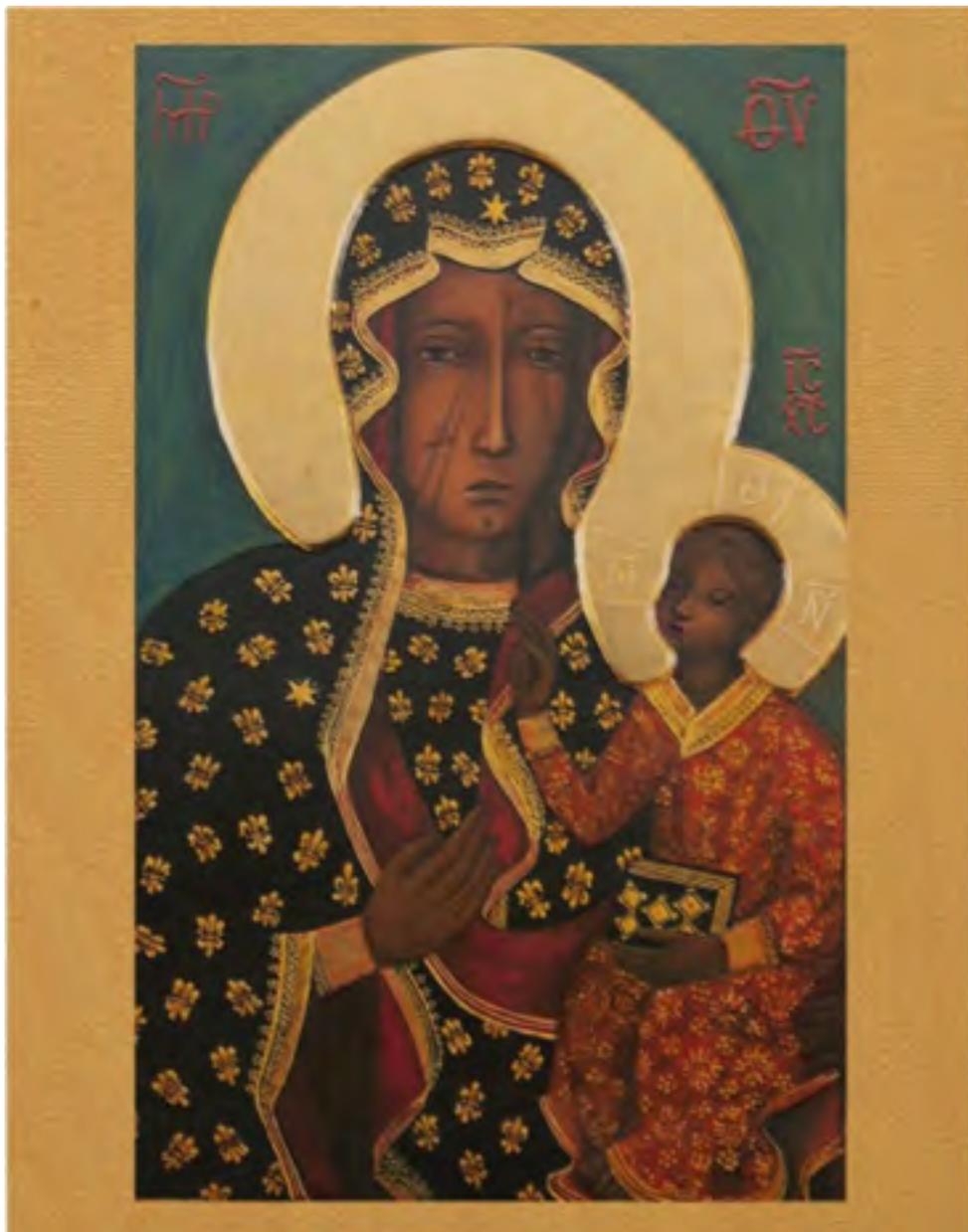
Their cold winters and warm, often hot summers are greatly effected by oceanic air currents from the west. Polar air from Scandinavia and Russia dominate in the winter, with frosty temperatures and heavy snowfall at times. Summer and autumn months are influenced by a dry, sub-tropical air mass from the south, bringing warm weather. We experienced a few hot and humid days while in Warsaw, which made it feel just like we were back home in Michigan.

Roads once bumpy and awful during the Soviet era are now nice, due to the European Union's pumping in money for improvements. Influenced by the deep religiosity of the people, there's lots of shrines along the roadways (as there are in Mexico). Freeway systems are modern, not much different from what we see in the U.S. Unlike the few dinky cars we saw 28 years ago, recent model, pricey cars abound in Poland.

Olga's detailing of Poland's history from World War I to the end of the communist regime was sad but fascinating, as were the DVD's we watched about the destruction of Warsaw, once the biggest Jewish community in Europe. As Rick commented, it's frightening how oppressive government can be when political power runs amok. But the courage and pride of the people, along with their deep Catholic faith, turned their country into a

“phoenix risen from the ashes”. The story of their strength and determination is absolutely remarkable.

Located in Częstochowa the Jasna Gora Monastery, is a famous Polish shrine to the Virgin Mary and a traditional place for pilgrim groups. Miraculous powers are attributed to the icon of the Black Madonna, also known as as Our Lady of Częstochowa, the monastery’s most precious treasure. And thanks to Steve Ray, our group of 70 had Holy Mass in the intimate chapel, in front of this beautiful painting (and where Pope John Paul II, after his election as Pope in 1979, prayed). Bunched up closely due to little space, our worship was coupled with curiosity as we watched long lines of pilgrims passing in the aisles alongside the icon, traversing through the anterior of the shrine on their knees. A sign of respect for the Patron and Queen of their country. The one they had turned to during their times of turmoil. The one to whom their devotion carried them through.



Day 3 - Part 2 of 2 Arrival in Zakapone

Our 3 hour (239 mile) afternoon drive south to Zakapone was pleasant. Informally known as “the winter capital of Poland” this town, located at the base of the Tatras Mountains, not only offers alpine skiing, cross-country skiing, snowboarding and ski jumping. In the summer it’s popular as a climbing, hiking and spelunking (wild cave exploration) destination. What intrigued Rick and I most, however, were the turn-of-the-20th-century wooden chalets - an architectural mode inspired by the arts and traditions of the Carpathian Mountains, and now considered a core tradition of the Góral (Mountaineer) people.



A typical "Mountaineer" chalet in Zakopane

It was evening by the time we arrived at the Mercure Kasprowy Hotel. We were grateful for our small room with windows that opened into the fresh air and which afforded a wooded view. Our European style bed (two twins pushed together) had individual light-weight down comforters. (I really appreciated that - there was no need to “tug” the covers over to my side. My comforter was mine, and I could do with it as I liked.)

Wearily we attended a buffet dinner in the dining room with the others, then quickly fell into bed and asleep. Although it was our 3rd night in Poland, we'd been active every day and it was time for some good sound rest. We also knew that the next day (as most Steve Ray days) would be packed with adventure, and were eager to explore Zakopane.

Day 4 - Part 1 of 1 Touring Zakopane

Zakopane is in a region called "The Podhale" (which literally means "under the meadow mountains") in the extreme south of Poland, near the border of Slovakia. Sometimes referred to as The Highlands, it's characterized by a rich tradition of folklore, and is the only region in Poland where folk costumes are used for everyday living.

The mountaineer residents, well-known for their regional pride, are wonderful wood carvers and artists. Just 60 miles from where Karol Wojtyła (aka Pope John Paul II) was born and raised, he loved to take his students to this picturesque recreation area to hike, ski and generally "hang out".

We began the day with Holy Mass at Our Lady of Fatima Church, built and dedicated to the Blessed Mother as an offering for her intercession during the 1981 assassination attempt on Pope John Paul II. His deep and loving devotion to Mary was evident in all that he did, and he credited Our Lady, specifically Our Lady of Fatima, with miraculously saving his life. ("It was a mother's hand that guided the bullet's path.")

Afterwards we rode the funicular up to the top of Mt. Gubalowka. Unfortunately this happened to be the one foggy, rainy day on our trip, and it was difficult to enjoy what we were told were panoramic views of the various mountain ranges.

Rick and I made the most of our time on the mountain by going into a chalet type restaurant and enjoying a cup of Mountaineer's Tea, a hot drink made of tea and cherry vodka. It certainly warmed us up and, because I liked it so well, we even purchased two bottles of cherry vodka to take home with us and put in our tea.

Our next stop was the rustic Zohylina Wyznio restaurant for lunch, where we had a delicious traditional meal which included bread with lard (actually delicious) served with cranberry sauce, Highlander's (sheep) cheese, sauerkraut soup, baked chicken, boiled potatoes, a coleslaw made with shredded carrots and apples, an assortment of cream-based pastries and an even more potent version of Mountaineer's tea.

The rest of the day and evening was left to our discretion. Many of our Pilgrims chose to go back to the very large marketplace to shop, but Rick and I returned to the hotel to socialize with newly made friends on the deck overlooking the mountains. Rick longed to hop into a taxi and make the 50 mile or so trek into Slovakia, the country from which his paternal ancestors came. Not knowing the language however, it seemed like a risky

thing to do and I discouraged him. If - God willing - we ever return to this part of the world, a trip to Slovakia with a guide will definitely be part of our plans.



Zohylina Wyznio Restaurant

Day 5 - Part 1 of 3 Wadowice, Birthplace of St. John Paul II

After breakfast this morning we checked out of our hotel and departed for Wadowice, the small town where, in 1920, Karol Woytila (now known as St. John Paul II) was born. We spent 90 minutes walking through the modest home where he lived with his father and older brother Edmund, 13 years his senior. (Karol's mother had died during childbirth when he was 8 years old.) It's now a very well-run and informational museum, with lots of pilgrims passing through each day.

Living directly next door to the Catholic church, Karol could look out his kitchen window and gaze at a sun clock painted on the wall. While visiting his home town as Pope years later, he made the following comment: "When I looked through the window of my house, I could see the sun clock and the inscription "TIME IS RUNNING OUT; ETERNITY IS WAITING". Obviously that inscription meant a great deal to him, and helped to shape the man he became.



Rick and I in front of the Basilica of the Presentation of Our Lady, Wadowice
(Karol's birthplace is on the right, and his school on the left)

In 1938 Karol and his dad moved to Kraków, so that he could study at Jagiellonian University. There his talent for language blossomed, and he began a quest to learn foreign languages. He eventually mastered 12 in all, 9 of which he used extensively as Pope. He also performed with various theatrical groups and worked as a playwright.

But in 1939, after invading Poland, Nazi German occupation forces closed the university. All able-bodied males were required to work and so, from 1940 to 1944 Karol did various types of labor to avoid deportation to Germany. After his father's death in 1941 though, he began to seriously think about the priesthood and started attending courses in the clandestine underground seminary run by the Archbishop of Kraków. It was a bold move because, had he been caught, he would have been arrested.

What a privilege it was to visit the town that St. John Paul II grew up in, and to hear about his life as a young person. After our visit to the historic sites, our group had lunch

at a restaurant where we were served golabki (stuffed cabbage), boiled potatoes and cream cake. Things that Karol would have eaten as a youth. It was excellent!

Day 5 - Part 2 of 3 Mass at the Calvary Sanctuary

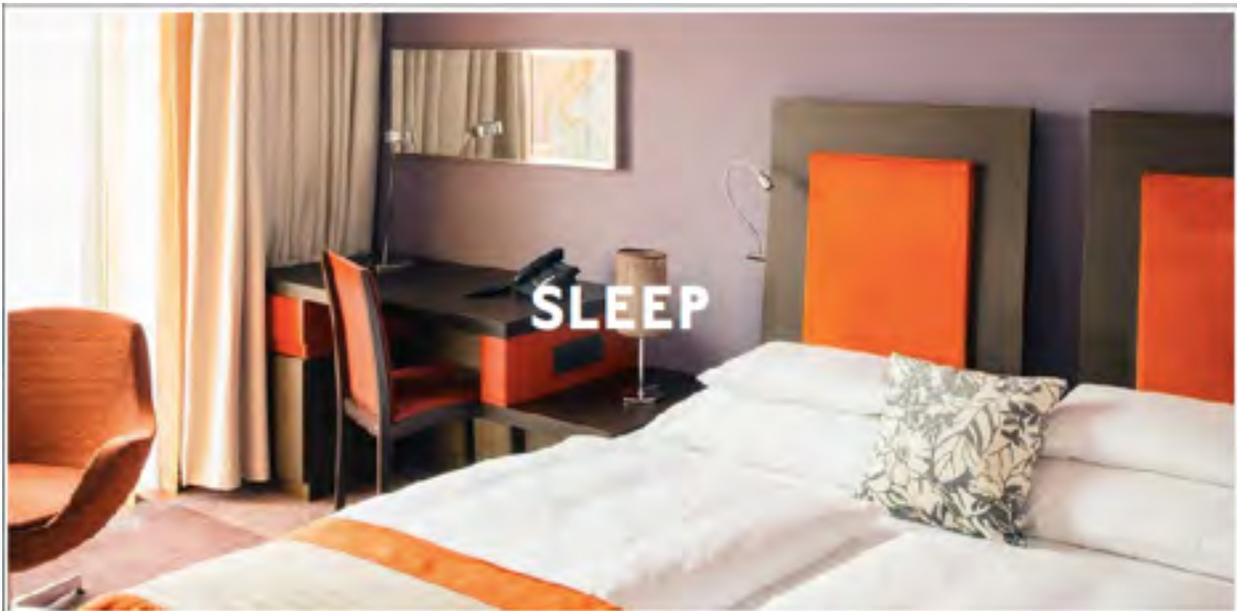
Next we visited the Calvary sanctuary in Kalwaria Zebrydowska, a town in the Carpathian Foothills, southwest of Kraków. Dubbed “The Polish Jerusalem”, it was built in the 1600’s to provide pilgrims with an alternative to Jerusalem which, at that time, was ruled by Muslim Turks.

We had Holy Mass in the beautiful 17th century baroque-style church of the Angelic Mother of God (pictured below), the starting point of several overlapping pilgrimage circuits throughout the grounds. These circuits housed 42 tiny churches in all, each representing a Jerusalem site prominent in the New Testament and/or the Christian tradition. In addition, the hills and streams throughout the sanctuary bore such names as Zion, Golgotha and Mount of Olives. A quite marvelous and unique attraction, despite the light rain we encountered while there.



Day 5 - Part 3 of 3 Arrival in Kraków

Arriving in the ancient, bustling and beautiful city of Kraków toward evening, we checked into our upscale hotel in the central area (Andel's Vienna House), had dinner with our group, then retired for the night - knowing that we'd have yet another adventure-filled pilgrimage day tomorrow. And believe me...we slept well. The hotels in Poland are very nice, and the rooms quite comfortable. The photo below, taken from the hotel's online website, looks just like the room Rick and I shared. It was spacious and comfortable and, once again, I liked that each of us had our own personal blanket and down comforter.



Andel's Vienna House Room

Day 6 - Part 1 of 2 "Be Not Afraid"/St. John Paul II Center, Kraków

After a wonderful buffet breakfast at the hotel (breakfasts throughout this entire pilgrimage were incredible), we visited the "Be Not Afraid"/St. John Paul II Center. Established by the current Archbishop of Kraków to commemorate the legacy of "every Pole's favorite Pope", construction began on this new, ever-expanding and evolving complex in 2008. We had the opportunity to visit his relics in the lower church, and to see the blood-stained cassock he was wearing the day of the assassination attempt (photo below). In the upper church we admired the bronze doors depicting Pope John Paul II, accompanied by saints and the blessed consecrated.



The blood-stained cassock Pope John Paul II was wearing the day of the assassination attempt

Day 6 - Part 2 of 2
Divine Mercy Shrine, Return to Hotel, Off and On Our Own

The Divine Mercy Shrine, a Roman Catholic Basilica, is the final resting place of Saint Faustina Kowalska, who spent her postulant and novitiate years in the 19th century convent next door, and who was the recipient of the messages and image of the Divine Mercy. Our itinerary called for the celebration of holy Mass in the St. Faustina Chapel.



Divine Mercy Shrine, Lagiewniki, Poland

Now those of you who know me well know that, although I can appear quite outgoing, I'm an introvert at heart. And that the strain of prolonged socialization and activity inevitably leads to a "crash". It was Day 6 of our pilgrimage and I suddenly hit a wall - I could no longer sustain feeling like I needed to be "on", day and night, and my "melt-down" was beginning.

When I told Rick I had to go back to the hotel, he insisted on accompanying me. Already having broken from our group however, we couldn't figure out how to find a taxi. Here we were in Poland with no working cell phone. And even if we had one, who would we have called and how would we have communicated? After all - we don't speak Polish.

Luckily we came upon Alex, one of our pilgrimage guides. He kindly took the time to call a taxi, walked us to the assigned meeting place, gave our Polish speaking driver instructions for our return to the hotel, and told us what the cost would be. God bless that sweet man. As far as I'm concerned, he and Olga were the two best tour guides in all of Poland.

We rested for an hour or so in our room, then decided to go off on our own. Steps from our hotel was the large Galeria Krakowska shopping mall, containing 600,000 square feet of retail space, 53,000 square feet of office space, and touting 270 specialty shops, cafés and restaurants on its three floors. Just walking in the door and experiencing the immensity of this place was more than a little intimidating to us small town folk. But typical of Rick and I, we managed to find the food court that had a McDonald's. It was time to just sit down for a while, eat our burgers and fries, and watch the world go by.



The immense Galeria Krakowska, as seen from the outside

If the throngs of people - both young and old - weren't speaking Polish, we would have thought we were in the USA. Dressed fashionably, people were chatting, smiling, hurrying, lingering, carrying bags containing purchases, talking on cells, posing for "selfies" - everything you might see while people-watching in a food court back home. What a difference from the bleak grayness we had experienced in Poland 28 years ago. It was like night and day. And we loved every moment. Go Capitalism!!!

Wandering the streets later, we found a cigar shop for Rick (his new, late-in-life hobby) and a jewelry store for me (I learned that Striped Flint Stone, known as "the Polish diamond" is a composition of Chalcedony and Opal. It can only be found one place on earth - and that's in Poland, on the Vistula River. In the days of the ancient Greeks, this stone was placed in their beds to protect them against nightmares and negative energy.)



Me in front of one of the lovely buildings in the square just outside of our hotel

We eventually ended up in one of the Krakow Squares, where we found a large white tent that contained a marvelous free exhibit dedicated to the life of St. John Paul II. It had been set up especially for World Youth Day, which had ended just weeks earlier. Although we had missed a few of the pilgrimage activities planned that day, we felt blessed to have discovered something really special, something that was just ours.

We returned to our hotel toward evening to have a very nice dinner, just Rick and I. This afternoon and evening was exactly what I needed in order to jump back into things tomorrow. Thanks for doing that with me, Rick.

Day 7 - Part 1 of 5 Mass at St. Stanisław on the Rock

We began our day with Mass at an ancient church located on the banks of the Vistula River, dedicated to St. Stanisław, the bishop of Kraków who was murdered in the original church on this site by order of the king in 1079. This beautiful Baroque church and monastery is now run by the Pauline Fathers, and the crypt located under the church has become the final resting place for many well-known Polish writers and artists. St. Stanisław's relics, however, lie in Wawel Cathedral, which Rick and I visited later.



St. Stanisław on the Rock Church and Monastery

Although we pilgrims spent a considerable amount of time on the buses, moving from one attraction to the next, it was well spent. Our guides would tell us tales of Poland, past and present, or an educational DVD would be played. Obviously we each had a choice as to whether we would be attentive to what was being presented, or “tune out”. My choice was to stay engaged. I was interested to learn as much as I could about Poland and its history, and I wasn’t disappointed.

Kraków, called by some “the heartbeat of Poland” was - and still is - known as the country’s cultural and intellectual center because of Jagiellonian, the research University founded in 1364 by Casimir III the Great. One of the oldest universities in the world, it’s where Karol Wojtyła, later to become Pope John Paul II, studied in 1938.

A year later however, on November 6, 1939, 184 professors were rounded up and deported to concentration camps following the Nazi invasion of Poland. The university, along with the rest of Poland’s higher and secondary education, was closed for the remainder of World War II.

Kraków, like most Polish cities, suffered dramatically in human terms during this war. But its physical structure wasn't damaged as much as other cities - particularly Warsaw - because it soon became the headquarters of the Nazi General Government. It's overseer was Hans Frank, who took Wawel Royal Castle, the ancient seat of Polish royalty, as his base.



Wawel Royal Castle, Kraków

Day 7 - Part 2 of 5 Nowa Huta, The "Ideal" Socialist City

In the 40's, immediately following World War II and Nazi occupation, it was Poland's misfortune to fall into the hands of the Red (Russian) Army. Ultimately, life under the Soviets was just as oppressive as life under the Nazis had been. This new entity cracked down on any political dissent or form of Polish Nationalism and cultural expression.

But a substantial percentage of the intellectual and middle class population in Kraków put up resistance to the Soviet regime. In an effort to dilute this non-compliance without causing the government embarrassment Russian authorities began, in 1949, to build an industrial town near Kraków, a place where they could bring people of lower socioeconomic backgrounds to live. Row after row of colorless Soviet-era apartments were put

up for these peasants and working class people, and the plan was that they would work in the steel mill being built. Nowa Huta, developed to correct the “class imbalance” of Kraków, was a blatant attempt by the Soviets to undermine Polish culture and replace it with communist ideology.



An example of the Soviet-era apartments put up in Nowa Huta and much of Poland and other Communist-controlled countries

Since this “ideal” socialist city was to be atheist by definition (after all, communism’s aim is to eliminate religion, treating it as something dangerous), its design didn’t allow for plots on which to build churches. Now this policy didn’t go over very well with the Catholic locals who, backed by Bishop Karol Wojtyła began fighting for a permit to erect a place of worship for themselves.

The proper papers and permissions were finally granted in 1956, and a large wooden cross was erected and consecrated on the chosen site. But once ground was broken for the foundation, the communist authorities rescinded their permission and the site was re-designated for a school.

Anticipating a conflict with the locals, special armed forces rolled in from across Poland, closing the city and sealing it off from central Kraków. This resulted an all-out street war between police and some 4,000 “Defenders of the Cross”, lasting several days. Water

cannons, tear gas and dogs were unleashed on the civilian protestors. The number of injured or killed in this conflict is unknown, although almost 500 were arrested.

The planned school was ultimately built on the original church site; however, the cross was allowed to stand in order to appease the people. The power of the cross in Poland reached beyond the walls of the church and stood as a symbol of resistance and nationhood.

The city remained without a church until 1969, when Archbishop Wojtyła laid a foundation stone from St. Peter's Basilica in Rome and the locals, using simple, almost medieval methods, began to build their church by hand. It took years. In 1977, shortly before he became Pope, he returned to consecrate the newly built Arka Pana church to "The Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Poland".



"Black Crucifix" in Arka Pana Church

This church, like the cross before it, became a focus of protest against the communist authorities as much as a place of worship. Major battles and demonstrations took place outside in 1982 and 1987. Although I wasn't impressed with the ultra modern "black crucifix" prominently displayed (as pictured above), I loved how the church looked like an ark from the outside. And the interior is beautiful indeed.

Day 7 - Part 3 of 5
Tour of St. Mary's Basilica, Kraków, Lunch in Market Square

The Church of Our Lady Assumed into Heaven (St. Mary's Basilica) in old Kraków is a brick Gothic church rebuilt on existing ruins after Tartar raids in the 13th century left the original church in a heap. In the early 15th century the towers took on the iconic form of today, as the northern tower was raised to 262.5 feet tall and made into a watchtower for the city. It is from here that the city's famous bugle call, one of the city's more enduring traditions, is played every hour on the hour. This tune, which ironically breaks off mid-melody, is in honor of the mythical trumpeter who was shot in the neck while belatedly warning the city of Mongol invaders.

The magnificent 15th century wooden altarpiece, the stained glass windows of the nave and the blue, starred ceiling of this Basilica took my breath away. We reverently walked around for quite some time, exploring the many different chapels, but didn't go up the 275 steps into the bell tower to see the view of the city. Perhaps next time...



15th Century Wooden Altarpiece in St. Mary's Basilica



Stained glass windows and the blue, starred ceiling in St. Mary's Basilica

Lunch outdoors in an Old Market Square café with friends Donette and Rich, Geoff, Ed and Emily was refreshing delightful. Although I stuck with simpler fare, Rick totally enjoyed trying out all the traditional Polish dishes. During this particular meal, he and our buddy Rich had a Polish stew served in a half loaf of bread, along with a couple of brewskis. Never do we go hungry on a Steve Ray trip.

Day 7 - Part 4 of 5 Auschwitz

Although I was aware that Auschwitz was on our schedule I tried to put it out of my mind. I wasn't looking forward to contemplating the cruelty that had occurred there during my parents and grandparent's lifetimes. On the other hand I felt a moral responsibility to witness and mourn this horrific era in our world's history. Like it or not, I was about to face it.

At the time I didn't realize that:

- It was first constructed to hold Polish political prisoners.
- 1.25 million people died there during its 4-1/2 years of existence. (This is more than the British and American losses of WWII combined.)
- In addition to Jews, 150,000 Poles, 23,000 Romanians, 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war, homosexuals and Jehovah's Witnesses were deported to Auschwitz.

I've also learned since that:

- Bayer, famous for producing aspirin, bought Auschwitz prisoners to use as research subjects for testing new drugs (they made a public apology years later)
- Josef Mengele's "scientific" experiments often involved studies of twins (If one died, he'd immediately kill the other and carry out comparative autopsies)
- The company that created Zyklon B, the gas used to kill prisoners, still exists as a pest control company
- Of about 7,000 staff who served at Auschwitz, only 750 were ever punished.



As we walked past train tracks (as seen above) toward the compound, we were told by our guide that prisoners from all over Europe were forced onto cattle cars and taken to this labor and death camp, located about an hour from Kraków. The vast majority would never return. Trainloads pulled in daily, and new arrivals were subjected to the cruel selection process during which the majority - including all children, pregnant women, the elderly and the “unfit” were sent to be gassed and cremated. Those who survived the selections would become workers and, in most cases, die of starvation, overwork and/or disease.

Our group fell silent as we approached the main gate, over which was inscribed the infamous: “Arbeit Macht Frei” (Work Makes You Free). We then stood in the spot where a band of 7 prisoners, forced to play music for the emaciated inmates as they left for and returned from work, stood. Their instruments, seized from neighboring towns, included a violin, contrabass, accordion, trumpet, saxophone and percussion. Apparently the marching rhythm provided easier control over the prisoners.



Auschwitz - The Main Gate

We heard story after story of cruelties inflicted, saw the small cells that some prisoners were packed into (standing room only) as “punishment” and stood in the gas chamber where Zyklon B was dropped in through the roof, killing up to 2,000 people at once (About 1/3 died immediately, though death could take up to 20 minutes). We saw the chimney of the crematorium where the bodies were taken (up to 700 at a time), and heard that the stench that could be smelled for miles around.

What disturbed me most, however, were the huge glass cases containing shoes of all sizes and types; the beautiful china that the wealthier prisoners had carried with them, believing they were only being relocated; and the human hair cut off after death in the gas chamber, to be sold and used for textiles. These images, especially of the dead women’s beautiful braids, will haunt me forever. All of this symbolized ordinary people who, by a twist of fate, were caught up in one of the most horrific “man’s inhumanity to man” crimes of the 20th century. This was the country where my forefathers had been born, lived and died. It is sad to think that some of them very well may have been victims in this great tragedy.



Shoes of all shapes and sizes, worn by prisoners during transport to and entry into the camp.



China that had once belonged to victims who believed they were being relocated and that their belongings would be returned.

The other image that will remain with me forever is that of the block wall where prisoners were randomly and spontaneously lined up and shot by a firing squad. Following is a photo of our friend Donette walking away from this wall after having had paid homage to the folks who died there.



Donette leaves the wall where prisoners were executed randomly and at will

Although Auschwitz was not the highlight of my Pilgrimage, it was a necessary part. Bearing witness to this great tragedy was a grim but somehow satisfying experience. It was my small way of honoring the victims and keeping that horrible tragedy in mind forever.

Day 7 - Part 5 of 5 **Dinner in Kraków with Friends, and a Carriage Ride**

Dinner was on our own that evening, and we spent this precious time with our dear friends Rich and Donette Jablonski who we originally met on our Footsteps of St. Paul cruise in 2015. We sat at a lovely outdoor restaurant that bordered Kraków square, sipping drinks and chatting about various things, listening with delight to their story about arriving in Poland a few days before our Pilgrimage began. It turns out Rich discovered family he had never met (or even known about) in a small village near Warsaw. The blessings we'd all received on this trip were so abundant that it was difficult to believe.

Afterwards the four of us took a ride around downtown Kraków on a horse-drawn carriage. What a delightful evening with absolutely wonderful friends. The fact that they live in Nebraska and we in Michigan keeps us from being together often, but our time spent together is always so precious



Donette, Rich, Judy and Rick on an evening carriage ride in Kraków

Day 8 - Part 1 of 2 Wieliczka Salt Mines

What an amazing place this “Underground Salt Cathedral of Poland” is! Reaching a depth of 1,073 feet and 178 miles long, these salt mines produced table salt continuously from the time it was built in the 13th century until 1996, when commercial mining was discontinued due to low salt prices and mine flooding. Now a museum, its attractions include an underground lake, as well as dozens of carved historical statues and mythical figures and several incredible chapels.

In order to enter the actual mine we were tightly loaded into small elevators, 9 to a cell, for the 30 second descent down. We had been warned that the temperature would be about 20 degrees or so below what we had been experiencing (59 degrees Fahrenheit), and so we dressed accordingly.



Elevator Cells in the Salt Mine

The fact that the miners worked underground in constant darkness and danger, away from their families, resulted in their being quite religious. So in their spare time they created chapels where they could pray and gain strength before facing the challenges that awaited them. Splendid altars and magnificent carved figures (many of them patron saints of the underworld), fill the space with an appropriate sobriety, as well as with a coziness and warmth.

St. Kinga's Chapel, the Wieliczka Salt Mine's "crown jewel" is the most remarkable of all the chapels. Unfortunately, there's no way either my words or photos can do justice to its splendor.

Located 331 feet underground, its dimensions are 102 feet by 49 feet, and can hold up to 400 people. It is indeed a dream location for a Holy Mass, a wedding, solemn ceremonies or a music concert. As you can sort of see in the photo below, it's adorned with chandeliers made of elaborate patterns of salt crystals as well as numerous sculptures and bas-reliefs done in breathtaking detail. Inspired by Biblical themes, this work is the tribute paid by the miners to the centuries-long tradition of Christian faith in Poland.



St. Kinga's Chapel, Wieliczka Salt Mine

Note: St. Kinga, Patroness of Poland and Lithuania was born in 1224. She became princess when her husband ascended the throne as High Duke of Poland. Kinga became involved in charitable works such as visiting the poor and helping the lepers. When her husband died in 1279, she sold all her material possessions and gave the money to the poor.

Legend has it that Kinga threw her engagement ring into the Maramures salt mine in Hungary. It miraculously traveled along with salt deposits to Wieliczka where it was rediscovered. On the spot the miners erected a statue of St. Kinga, carved entirely from salt. It is 331 below the earth's surface.



Illuminated mythical carved figures at the bottom of St. Kinga's mine shaft

Day 8 - Part 2 of 2 **Farewell Dinner at the 14th Century Wierzynek Restaurant**

Steve Ray trips always end in style, and this one was no different. Dinner our last evening was held at the 14th Century Wierzynek Restaurant, located in the "historic tenement" in the heart of Kraków's old city.

Housing eight rooms, each of different decor and size, this palatial restaurant presents an exceptional atmosphere filled with royal heritage. It's almost like being in a castle.

Bearing the distinction of “the oldest restaurant in Poland”, Wierzynek epitomizes old world elegance, and its latter-day status as central Europe’s renaissance jewel through its impeccable decor, perfectly laid tables bearing white cloths and old-school top service.

The many courses (from elegant Polish delicacies through dessert) of our traditional meal were served by suited waiters who brought out the main entree - duck - covered with silver cloches that were removed with a flourish! Both the presentation and execution of the meal were beyond perfection.

Rick and I, along with friends Rich and Donette sat at a table for eight. We were joined by Mike and Ann, who had also been on a previous pilgrimage with us, and Michael and Tara, lively new acquaintances from Florida. As the wine flowed our conversations grew louder and laughter throughout the two rooms where we were seated abounded.

After dessert Deacon Jim got up and began to play the accordion, and it wasn’t long before several couples - including Rick and I - got up to polka. It was a grand evening filled with great food, amazing people and lots of fun, and a wonderful way to wrap up a special time together and a celebration of many new friends.

One of the many exquisite dining rooms in the Wierzynek Restaurant



Day 9 - Our Trip Home

Our trip home was long and fairly unremarkable. We had flown from Detroit, so we had to make the 5 hour drive north once we landed. We talked about only going partway and spending the night somewhere, but ended up biting the bullet and driving the entire way. We were quite exhausted by the time we arrived at our house. But it was nice to sleep in our own beds that night.

In Retrospect

The resilience of the Polish culture and the warmth of the people inspired me. I believe that Poland, despite their overwhelming challenges through the years, endured and survived due to their deep Catholic faith and devotion to the Blessed Mother. Once home, my enthusiasm spurred me to volunteer to lead a small 6 week women's self-guided retreat at our church. The material studied was very much along the lines of what we had experienced on the Pilgrimage. What a rewarding experience! It helped me reach a new depth of understanding on many levels, and I made 4 close friends along with way. There are no coincidences, and what a blessing!

In Closing

This was the fourth Steve and Janet Ray Pilgrimage that Rick and I have been on. Steve's tremendous knowledge of the Bible due to his Baptist background, along with his passion for Catholicism and the outstanding guides he secures is the frosting on the cake of amazing sites we see and wonderful people we meet along the way. We plan to be on the October, 2017 Pilgrimage to Lourdes, Fatima and Santiago de Compostela. Perhaps you might want to consider joining us?

Warmly,

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