

Niedrunger Villages

or: Our Trip to Poland in October 2002

by Annegret Krause

Translated from German by Paul Work

It's always the same: What? You want to visit Poland? Do you want to get your car stolen? Many people are surprised when we tell them we're traveling to Poland. Reactions run the full range from astonishment at one extreme, to prejudice and a complete lack of understanding at the other. This will be my fourth and Hannes' third trip, and we have only had good experiences.

Well, what do we want to do there anyway? What is it that fascinates us about this country?

It's not only my interest in my family's roots. First and foremost I'd like to see the landscape surrounding the Vistula (a large river in central Poland), where my ancestors lived. I want to learn about the lifestyle they experienced as they cultivated their land. I want to understand what they meant with the expression "fruit orchards in full bloom" in their stories. Tending the fruit orchards wasn't only a way of life but also a metaphor for an attitude towards life.

I also wanted to know what it was like to live next to such a large untamed river like the Vistula. To adapt oneself to the necessities of the ecology, the open areas and the cultivating of the fertile alluvial soil all the while living with the danger of floods.

Poland is also a "flashpoint" of European history. Nowhere but here can you experience its fractures and contradictions so close at hand. The peaceful coexistence of different ethnic groups and cultures on the one hand and the fierce enmity that flared up intermittently on the other. Poland appears again and again in the pages of the history books. Over and over again it was occupied, divided, displaced or even erased from the political maps of Europe.

And yet it has preserved its culture through the centuries, one of the great European cultures with important contributions in literature, music and art. Poland boasts four Nobel Prize winners in literature, the composer Chopin came from Poland and world-famous film directors like Andrzej Wajda and Roman Polanski, began their careers in the Motion Picture Academy in Łódź. The literary leaders of Poland also had a political function: during the 123 years of partition between Russia, Prussia and Austria, together with the church, their literature worked to preserve their national identity.

The most impressive evidence of Polish culture lies in their magnificent restorations. Some years ago we were struck by the restorations in Danzig and Masuria. This time it was the complete reconstruction of the old town, the mediaeval center of Warsaw.

My final reason is my interest in and enjoyment of the Polish language. Sometimes I think other people consider me a little bit eccentric. At the very least they consider it to be an exotic hobby. Why do they think this? It's really something quite normal to have a desire to understand and speak the language of a neighboring country. But after WWII we have been so strongly oriented towards the West that very few people considered checking out what lies to the East.

Tuesday, 1 October 2002

After we confirmed for our lodging reservations with the "European Center for Ecological Agriculture and Tourism – Poland" by telephone, we started our journey at 10 a.m. We planned to take two days for the drive. According to the trip planner it's only 845 kilometers, but it also estimated the total driving time to be 13 to 14 hours! There are very few divided highways in Poland and the route Berlin – Warsaw is heavily traveled.

The drive was correspondingly exhausting. Many trucks, large ruts in the roads and a few crazy drivers who obviously thought the object of driving on these roads was to risk one's life. Some people's driving was simply horrifyingly reckless.

At the border we encountered the usual wait while we endured the sluggishness and indifference of the customs officers. From time to time they would beckon someone out of the line and exercise their authority. How lovely it will be after Poland is admitted to the European Union and one can drive straight through!

We drove on to Konin and stopped there, with about 200 km remaining for the second day. I remembered reading about Konin in a book of the same name some years ago. The Jewish author, through years of meticulous research, reconstructed the Jewish inhabitants of the city. Unfortunately I've forgotten the author's name, and I lent the book out some time ago and haven't gotten it back. Doubtless a jigsaw puzzle similar in difficulty to the problems I have encountered in my family research.

So we expected an old town, full of nooks and crannies. But the reality was very different: the old town center could only be found with great difficulty, it was almost completely hidden in the middle of the blocks of apartment buildings, most of them built in the manner of the socialistic row houses, breathtakingly ugly!

We found our hotel after quite a bit of asking. Goodness! I can certainly ask for the way in Polish, but the answers!!! Up to the next intersection I understood fairly well, but then I always got lost with only a vague impression of which direction to go next. Our hotel had the same socialistic "charme" as the rest of the town. Ironically it was called the "Sonata" and it stood in the "ulica Chopinska" (Chopin Street). But it was in good shape. Like all the upscale hotels in Poland, it had a parking lot with a 24-hour guard (this to the topic of stolen cars) and it only cost 50 € for a double room. That's quite cheap by our standards.

I read in our tour guide that the population in this town had increased seven fold over the last few decades. In Konin, the major industry is strip mining for lignite (brown coal). And we could smell it! It smelled like Salzwedel right after the wall came down. (Salzwedel is a town near us and was located in the former East Germany. They used to heat their houses with lignite.)

Wednesday, 2 October 2002

After a hearty breakfast we set off. In Kutno we left the main road and headed towards Płock. Crossing the bridge over the Vistula we got our first impressions of this magnificent river. The town is situated high on the northeast bank; the old town is very picturesque, and the historical buildings are in good shape as in most other cities. In the pedestrian mall we looked for a bookstore, searching for some good topographic maps that we wanted. In Germany it would have taken 6 weeks to special order one of these maps. But we weren't successful and so we had to postpone the purchase until we got to Warsaw. For the time being the printouts of the detailed maps I downloaded from the Internet will have to do.

We moved on towards Warsaw following the right (northeastern) bank of the Vistula. Along the side of the road we saw long columns of parked cars, and all around we saw people with big buckets full of mushrooms they'd collected in the woods.

At Wyszogród we crossed the Vistula again, turned left and took the road through the countryside to Secymin. The first village we passed was Sladów. Here August B. had owned a windmill before he and my great-aunt Olga departed for the West in 1919, when they bought the mill in our village. But we couldn't find any evidence of the local mill. Later we learned that it was located at the border between Sladów and the neighboring village of Kromnów.

And now things started to get really exciting. Our destination, Nowy Secymin (formerly Secymin Niemiecki, Deutsch Secymin), isn't shown on some maps. It's located right next to the Vistula levee, 45 km west of Warsaw, and it extends over several kilometers. These old settlements in the Vistula flood plain are nothing like our idea of a village. Each farmhouse

is located in the middle of the land belonging to it, so the distance between the houses is quite large.

First we came to the old wooden church. It stands right next to the levee and is fairly well known as a historic monument in Poland, according to information from the Internet.

We followed the road that paralleled the levee. It is little more than a gravel track about halfway down the side of the levee, and we got a first impression of the way of life that my grandparents and my father's older siblings led here. The farmhouses were built high atop earthen mounds (to protect them from flooding) in the middle of the pastures or farmer's fields. Some old buildings were still there, but most of them were in poor condition. The traditional houses and barns were made of wood and the roofs were previously covered with thatch or reeds, which had been later replaced by tin. Residential buildings and stables often shared the same roof. We also noticed how small the living space was and we wondered how families with up to ten children (which was the norm) could have managed. Nothing resembles the imposing farms that we were familiar with in Lower Saxony.

The countryside is very flat and wide, with ditches dividing the land into sections. The only interruptions are old willow trees, obviously pruned fairly recently, tall poplars, some oak trees and small islands of bushes.



Pastures near Secymin

About three kilometers further on we stopped a passing car and asked for directions to our accommodations. Shortly thereafter, we arrived at a small farm. The stables and barns on the premises looked a bit unfinished, as if still under construction, but the old residential building was lovingly styled.

I stood in front of the door and began to mentally prepare some Polish sentences, but K., our landlady (I should really refer to her as our host) beat me to it. She welcomed us in fluent English. Her husband S. spoke English fluently, too. That was nice, because that meant that we would have the opportunity to learn and understand much more than we could have hoped for.

K. showed us to our room. It was very simple and best described by the word "chamber". A tiny room right up against the roof, it had wood paneling, one bed, one table, and two chairs. The door didn't close properly, it is an old house after all, but on the door it said "Proszę pukać – Please knock". That will have to do – and so it did.

The central point of life in this house was the large table in the cozy kitchen. One could see K.'s handiwork in the beautiful decorations here.

In this kitchen M., "the soul of the house" worked. She was an immigrant worker from the Ukraine. She provided us with delicious food whenever we were hungry, kept the house sparkling clean and was always friendly.

Her presence and that of two other Ukrainian workers on the farm gave rise to a new language barrier. They didn't speak Polish very well, but they could understand it, and the Polish people could generally understand Ukrainian because they were both Slavic languages. But we weren't Polish, so we had to make ourselves understood with only few words and short sentences, and that worked somehow.

In the afternoon we got our bicycles out that we brought with us and rode down to the Vistula on a journey of discovery. The landscape around the levee looks remarkably different from what I had expected; it's very different from the land around the Elbe River in Germany. Here the land is predominantly covered with trees and undergrowth, occasionally interrupted by small meadows. We found a narrow path hidden in the bushes that led us to a gigantic sandbar. A real beach! The dimensions here are different from those that we are familiar with on the Elbe: The Vistula is broader at this point and there are large islands in the middle of the river, which had also been cultivated in earlier times.

On the opposite bank we saw the silhouette of the Romanesque-Gothic basilica in Czerwińsk nad Wisłą (Czerwinsk above the Vistula), standing high atop the steep bank.

Two fishermen in a boat tried their luck. As a big swarm of black birds soared up, they called out to us that those were cormorants. Competitors? I think the Vistula has more than enough fish for all of them.

When I asked, K. explained to me that the situation with the Vistula had improved considerably over the last few years. Air pollution is not a problem in this area because the large Kampinoski National Park, which lies immediately to the south, filters out many of the pollutants. In the evening we went on a little trip to the edge of the park and decided to explore this area more thoroughly on a more ambitious biking expedition at a later date.

When we arrived "back home" later that evening, another guest had arrived: William from Holland, 34 years old. He was hiking through Eastern Europe, accompanied by his dog. He set aside half a year for his journey and walked without a map, staying wherever he liked, sleeping occasionally under the open skies, guarded by his dog, or, as now, on a farm. His next destination? He didn't know. Maybe Belarus, maybe Lithuania, he'd see. In any case he wanted to make it to Scandinavia eventually, primarily Finland. He seemed a very likeable fellow, an open, thoughtful and interesting man. He didn't have any of the traits of an eccentric "screwball". He said he liked to hike because that way he saw the most. He was probably right about that.

After dinner S. offered to show us a hidden path to a huge sandbar the next day. We had to laugh. We'd already found it! On our journeys it was often like this: Hannes and I tend to have a good nose for these hidden beautiful spots.

We explain our interest in family history to S.. He immediately picked up the telephone and asked an old inhabitant of Secymin for the farm of my grandparents. But she wasn't familiar with it. My grandparents had left the village prior to the end of WW I to settle farther down the river, first in Zochowo near Sierpc, then in Rosenau near Kulm (today: Różnowo near Chełmno), further on to Schoenau near Schwetz (Przechowo near Swiecie) and finally first in Neuhof and then in Sausgoerken (Suchawa) in East Prussia. From there my grandmother came to Lower Saxony in 1945 – a true odyssey.

At first I was very hesitant, talking about these things with a Pole. But my fears proved to be totally unfounded. Today they deal with their history and the intertwining with Germans very naturally. S. said that most Poles "are feeling friendly" towards Germans. And this was confirmed to us during the following days.

S. explained to us how the agriculture had developed in this area after the war. At first the people believed that everything was only temporary: The Germans would come back to their farms and they, many of whom had come from the eastern regions of Poland (annexed by Russia), would return to their homes in the East. That's why they didn't develop things, taking only what they needed.

During the Communist reign private farming was also treated fairly harshly. The young people didn't stay on the farms but moved to the cities.

As before, the small farmers still have a hard life. Previously the typical practice was dairy farming, but that doesn't pay much nowadays. There is a lack of capital and support from the government – despite declarations to the contrary.

Meanwhile, people from Warsaw would come out and buy farms to live on, but they don't cultivate the land. And it showed. It may be good for nature, but it hurts to see so much fertile land lying fallow.

Thursday, 3 October 2002

"You have to find the Kaiserstrasse." Before our departure I had asked my Aunt Amanda about her hometown of Wionczemin. "That's where my farm and that of the Krause's is located." She qualified that by adding: "Well, today the road is probably called something else". Of course!

Our destinations today were the former German settlements near Płock. Here, in Zyck, Wionczemin, Sady, Troszyn, Nowosiadło etc., some of my ancestors lived out their lives for almost 200 years. They were Dutch, Poles, Huguenots from Salzburg, and settlers from Brandenburg.

And now a little bit of explanation: Beginning in the Middle Ages several waves of western European immigrants settled in this area of Poland. In the 16th century, they recruited the Dutch to settle the low-lying areas around the Vistula so they could make the swampy areas next to the river arable. The Dutch were familiar with the techniques necessary to convert the land: they built levees, dug ditches to drain the land, and above all, bred cattle for dairy farming. Many years later people still called the settlements that were laid out in this way "Hollaendereien" (which meant "after the manner of the Dutch"), even if the inhabitants could no longer trace their roots back to Holland. These areas were uninteresting for the Polish landlords, so the settlers, unlike the Polish peasants, were not forced into being serfs, but were relatively free to work their farms.

The desire for freedom from serfdom was also the driving force for further settlement waves. German farmers escaping feudal rule in Germany, or those second, third, or later sons of free farmers (with no rights to inheritance) came to Poland seeking freedom and an escape from social decline. Many also came for reasons of belief: Protestants from Austria, Holland and Germany.

The requirements were light: A prospective settler had only to explain his intentions and describe the goods or produce he intended to develop on the farm. He was then assigned a piece of land at a low price. Which section of land a settler was assigned depended on his origin and his experience with the soil found in the area: land in a flood plain or the lighter

soils found at higher elevations where the land was wooded. Each settler was given a set of conditions, for example contributing to the building of levees and paths, laying out orchards, etc. In all other respects, the settler was free to run the farm as he saw fit. After twelve years he would receive full ownership with all the associated rights (selling, inheritance).

In this fashion, more and more German colonies were founded throughout the low-lying areas, working their way up the Vistula over the years. This pattern carried on into the 19th century, with the German settlements segregated from the Polish villages. Wionczemin Niemiecki was founded in 1759, Secymin Niemiecki about 1800. The settlers kept up their language, built schools and Protestant churches, and they showed little tendency to assimilate themselves with the native Polish people.

At the Congress of Vienna in 1815, Central Poland was designated as the "Kingdom of Poland", in personal union with the Czar of Russia as the King. For all intents and purposes, however, it belonged to Russia until the end of WW I. That meant that the German settlers also had to serve in the Russian army. Initially the official language was Polish until 1868, and Russian from then until the end of WW I. The church books were correspondingly written in either Polish or Russian, the latter even in the old Cyrillic script. That makes the research much more difficult. That's it, very briefly, about the historical background.

On our trip first we came to Sladów, an extended row house development along the levee. B., to whom I'm distantly related by marriage, and who provided me with many facts about my family, had told me, that there should be an old cemetery at the end of the village. If it still existed, it would be overgrown by bushes or trees. When the Germans had to leave Poland towards the end of WW II, there was no one left to take care of the graveyards and so nature had taken possession of them. We kept our eyes peeled for any overgrown area near the village, but there wasn't anything that looked like an unkempt cemetery.

So we turned towards the levee and found a large monument. It loomed up in front of the levee, and some simple benches sat in front of it. We imagined school classes, gathered around, listening to their teachers' stories. The inscriptions on the monument honor the inhabitants of the village and the soldiers who lost their lives in September 1939 fighting the invading German troops. The German troops had reached this area in the first weeks of the war, and in this region north of Kutno they concluded the "Blitzkrieg", which ended with the defeat of Poland and – according to the Non-Aggression Pact between Hitler and Stalin – resulted in another partition of Poland, this time between Germany and the USSR.

After existing for only 21 years a sovereign Polish state, this country had once more disappeared from the political map of Europe.

During the years of war that followed, Poland lost 17 % of its population, more than any other country in the world. Outright murder, extermination in concentration camps, casualties of the German bombing raids, forced labor and deportation to Siberia took their toll on the Polish people. Of the 2 million Poles, who were deported to Siberia, for example, less than half survived the first year.

As we stood at such places, we began to wonder if we were perhaps a little naïve in our search for traces of our ancestors. Would we be reopening old wounds? We didn't know what kind of reception we would get. But S. might be a good judge of that ("They are feeling friendly!").

We walked along the levee for a bit, enjoying the breadth of the countryside in the unbelievably warm autumn weather. On the bank we took some photos of this wonderfully beautiful river. Pictures such as these should be framed! An old apple tree had lavishly given away its fruit, many apples lay there in the grass, red and appetizing. We picked up some of them. They tasted very sweet, having very little acid. What a pity, we didn't think of taking some back to Aunt Amanda; perhaps she would have recognized the type.



The Vistula near Sladów

Our next stop was Wyszogród, also situated on the steep bank on the opposite side of the river. It's a small sleepy town. We would have liked some coffee, but we could find neither a bar nor a café.

There are two churches in Wyszogród. At one of them we took a closer look and sure enough, it was the former Lutheran church (an info sheet confirmed our speculation). Here too, relatives of mine were married, probably my grandparents too. Next to the church we saw an overgrown piece of land. I discovered a small iron cross, rising up out of the bushes. A cemetery? That's what we wanted to know. And there it was, beneath the undergrowth, in a jungle of nettles and blackberry bushes we found a few grave borders and some gravestones with German inscriptions. But the names were meaningless to us.

We found another monument on the north end of the bridge by Wyszogród and a map posted by the monument gave us more detail about the battles from the 17th to the 19th of September 1939. It must have been a real hell.

What kind of behavior did the Germans who were living here at that time display? That's a difficult question that even the Polish and German historians struggle to answer. An attempt to explain in this abbreviated format runs the risk of oversimplification and may provoke the one or the other side to disagree vehemently. But it is necessary, and I want to try in spite of the difficulty:

If one believes the reports published on this subject, between WW I and WW II the German settlers obeyed the laws of the new Polish state, just as they had done while under Russian rule prior to WW I. They served in the Polish army and some of them even fought against the invading German troops.

Nevertheless there were – from this distance – tendencies towards an idealized image of Germany. During the thirties the tensions between Poles and ethnic Germans increased. People, who up to that time had been good neighbors, began to feel increasingly threatened by the other side. This increasing tension eventually led to the murder or kidnapping of ethnic Germans immediately prior to and shortly after the war began, but not on the scale that the Nazi propaganda broadcast (which was used as one of the excuses for invading their neighboring country).

At first, many of the ethnic Germans in Poland greeted the invasion of the German army as a welcome release from the life-threatening situation.

Later, as the Nazi demagogues with their unspeakable and incomprehensible injustices replaced the troops, many of them distanced themselves again. A quote from a spiritual leader in Posen illustrates this: "We were looking forward to the arrival of the Germans and we greeted them cheerfully, but what we got were the Nazis, and they are not the Germans that we had known."

And therein lies the question that grew out of the occupation of Poland. What was the relationship between the "superior race" as defined by the Nazis and the "sub-humans"?

Many of the ethnic Germans also experienced the reverse of this in 1939 and again at the end of WW II when the Poles viewed them as representatives of the Nazis. They felt the bitterness and the often-bloody revenge of the Poles. There was horrible suffering on both sides! So many difficult, depressing questions, and we still can't answer them adequately.

But it was getting close to noon, and we still wanted to visit Wionczemin!

So we crossed the bridge again and turned right on the 575, which connects Płock with Warsaw along the south side of the Vistula. The first larger town was Iłów, which, next to Gąbin (which we unfortunately didn't have time to visit), was one of the few Lutheran congregations in the area for a many years. The church was, like nearly all churches in Poland, in excellent condition structurally. (Note: It was the catholic church. The Lutheran Church does not exist anymore) We took a quick look inside: Here marriages and christenings were celebrated. Funerals, however, were carried out in local cemetery chapels.

In a small shop we bought supplies for a little picnic, and then we traveled on. In Wymyśle Polskie we turned right again towards the Vistula. The small road took us through Juliszew, Sady, Nowosiadło, and Swiniary to Wionczemin, names that I knew very well as the birthplaces, homes, and burial places of my great great grandparents and their families.

Wionczemin. We needed to find the Kaiserstrasse! At first glance the task appeared hopeless and absurd. We found only tracks through the fields and occasional houses, all part of the sad remains of a dilapidated collective farm, the Polish equivalent of the LPGs in the former East Germany.

One other clue that we heard over the telephone after we left was that the old German church could serve as a landmark. We could see the church across the fields, and we tried to drive closer. We tried several paths through the fields, but after a little while we gave up. Every path that we tried ended in a field or got too rough for the car.

There must be a way to get to the church, said Hannes. Yes, there should be you would think. We pulled back and decided to try an approach using the levee road.

As we went along, we decided to pause and check out the banks of the river. Again, we were enchanted with the beauty of the river and the land in front of the levee. Across from us lay an island, known as a Kępa in Polish. This island had also been tilled earlier, and some of the islands had also been inhabited. In the summer the cows and horses were

brought to the sweet meadows of the islands explained Aunt Amanda. Not with a raft! No, she said, the animals can swim. The farmer simply tied the lead cow's tether to a rowboat and the rest of the herd simply followed obediently, swimming next to the boat in a well-behaved manner.



Farm at Troszyn

As we followed the levee road further, we were unable to find an intersecting road that led to the church. Instead, we arrived at the neighboring villages of Troszyn Nowy (formerly known as Deutsch Troszyn) and Troszyn Polski, which lies on the way back to Wionczemin.

Our final attempt to reach the church by car ended in frustration, and we finally parked it on the side of the road, choosing to approach the church on foot.



The church at Wionczemin

As we got nearer, we saw that there really was no road that led to the church, only a footpath across a pasture. The small brick church stood in the middle of the fields without a proper road leading to it, and it was clear that it was no longer in use.

Right next to it stood an old, somewhat run-down house, perhaps the former rectory? (Note: It's the former school)

Several barking dogs greeted us in a manner that wasn't exactly friendly. On the grounds, we met a young woman who assured us that this was indeed the old German church. A year was inscribed on the main gable. It looked like the church was built in 1935. In the mean time, an older woman emerged from the house. She appeared to be happy for the interruption and explained a little bit about the church. She said that the church was no longer in use, and very few people came to visit. Of course! After the Germans left, there were very few Poles who had converted to the Lutheran faith. Fewer still had been interested in using the church for religious purposes. Nie ma klucz, there is no key, she said. So we climbed onto a section of the wall and had a look inside the church through a broken window. Some of the interior had been cleared out, but the pews and a simple altar were still there. Hannes poked the camera through the window and blindly took a few pictures of the interior. The older woman had clearly enjoyed our encounter so Hannes took a picture of the two of us, and we took our leave.

(Note: After the fact we learned that Wionczemin had once had a church made of stone. After the big flood of 1924, it developed a large crack, and they decided to rebuild from the ground up.)

On the way back to the car, Hannes suddenly stopped dead in his tracks. There was a stone cross poking up out of the undergrowth! Lilac bushes! The cemetery! We hadn't known that there was a cemetery here. We must have had blinders on as we approached the church. Even now, we almost walked right by it again.

We couldn't hold ourselves back, and we



Grave at the cemetery in Wionczemin

plunged into a true archeological adventure. We fought our way through stinging nettles and brambles and discovered one gravestone after another. Lots of familiar names: Rinas, Witzke, Neitsch, Hauer, Kühlmann, Ratz, but unfortunately, no Krause.

We cleared away the overgrowth from the gravestones as much as possible, in order to take some photographs. We could have made good use of a saw and a machete! H. and D., my American "cousins", who had sent me so much information about my family, will be very happy. Here lie, not only my relatives, but also theirs.

Such a cemetery tells stories about the people who lived there. Many were children, who often died at an early age, many of diphtheria and in the 19th century also of smallpox. Many young people also died of tuberculosis. They had large families with many children, often more than ten. Frequently only half of them would reach adulthood. And the wives! They must have had a very hard life! Many died young, as did my great-grandmother at age 38, presumably at the birth of her 15th (!) child.

One gravestone touched us especially deeply: Edmund Ratz, born 1924, died 1934.



Medaillon of Edmund Ratz

An inset oval should have carried a picture of him, but it had been destroyed. Youthful vandalism? Or an expression of hatred for everything German? We will never know.

We found no other signs of deliberate destruction. Some gravestones were missing, but perhaps they were taken away simply to serve as a stair step or part of the foundation of a house for example.

This cemetery was not a sad place, but rather a comforting one. The signs of the settlers have not been completely erased. These people are still here. They belong to this land just as much as the people who live here now. And that's the way it should be. A place without history is empty, without depth.

Upon emerging, we looked like a pair of pigs, but we were very happy. We left the cemetery behind and set off to find Aunt Amanda's old farm. Her directions got us totally lost. Finally, on one path, we stopped, pulled out the cell phone, and called her at home: "Where are you?" "In Wionczemin, out in the fields. We found the cemetery and the graves of your grandparents!" She was totally overcome, and asked us to describe our location. She then told us exactly where to go from there. It seemed like she still had a photographic memory, even though she is 80 years old.

And thus we finally arrived (at the Kaiserstrasse! - it's a gravel road that's still in use) at her old farm. Everything fits: the two ponds that were created when they built the mound to protect the house from floods (it's the highest mound in the village), the orientation of the house, the wood storage area, and the old trees. The old house has been torn down. It had been a solid structure built with five-inch timbers (as she had proudly explained to me). It has been replaced with an impressive stone house. All in all, this home gave us the impression of a flourishing owner – in stark contrast to the many others in the area.

From this point, we should have been able to find the farm that belonged to the Krause family. It was supposed to be the fifth lot on the left side of the street. But it's getting dark; we'll have to come here again at some other time. And so we drove back to our accommodations, full of our experiences of the day.

Friday, 4 October 2002

Today, for a change, we traded our jeans and casual jackets for some upscale clothing and drove to Warsaw. It's only 45 km away on the main road. Shortly before the city itself began, the road transformed into a six-lane divided highway that followed the left bank of the Vistula straight into the old city. In the years since the fall of Communism, Warsaw has been transformed into a European metropolis. On the outskirts, we saw many new

businesses and tall billboards. Here things are happening, here there is investment. No shabby tin huts, few makeshift structures here.

The picturesque old town stands high above the banks of the Vistula. We had no difficulty finding it, and parked our car in one of the parking lots with a 24-hour watch. We let the flow of people carry us around, and the wonderful buildings astounded us over and over. The palace, the university, the splendid and richly decorated period homes on the Stary Rynek, the old town market. But all this glory is but an illusion. None of these houses is as old as it appears. The Polish capital was flattened to the ground at Hitler's order. Hardly one stone was left standing on the other. Old photographs, mounted unobtrusively in some of the windows reminded passersby of what had happened.



The destroyed Rynek

After the war, the old town was completely rebuilt with no detail left out. Old paintings by Canaletto were used as guidelines. The results astound the observer. The Polish restoration craftsmen rank among the best in the world. And again, just as we had in Danzig on an earlier trip, we asked ourselves: What drives some people to undertake such an enormous task? Especially during a time when, as we know all too well, the survivors had other worries on their minds: where the next meal was coming from, wondering what the next day would bring, and finding a roof to put over their heads. I read once what a priest from Danzig had said "A city must have a soul!" Is it really that simple? Perhaps.

In a café on the edge of the palace grounds we met a congenial older couple from Johannesburg, South Africa who were making a trip through Europe. Prague, Bratislava and Budapest, some of the most beautiful cities on this continent, remained on their itinerary.

They shared our enthusiasm. He was an architect, and he, an expert, reinforced our admiration.

We felt so comfortable on our own that we declined to participate in any of the organized tours. There would be so much to see: The palace, Vilanova, Museums, the Praga on the other bank of the river, Łazienki Park, the area of the former Warsaw Ghetto. We decided to reserve an entire day for the sights. Unfortunately, nothing came of this. We'll have to go back on our next trip; I wouldn't mind that at all. We simply wandered through the city, taking in the atmosphere as we enjoyed the small streets, the views, and the antique and jewelry shops that were hidden behind the small windows. Nowhere was the façade broken with a large commercial window. Everything was consistent.

Finally, we began looking for a bookstore so we could buy the topographical maps. We've wanted them for quite some time. In the third or fourth store, near the university, we found what we were looking for. The maps showed every path and almost every building in the villages we were interested in.

I also bought two poetry collections, one by Julian Tuwim and one by Wisława Szymborska, whose stark verses I enjoy so very much. She received the 1996 Nobel Prize in Literature for her lyric poetry. Poems represent a wonderful chance to get to know another language more closely.

Late in the afternoon, we finally reached our limit. Our heads couldn't take in anything more, and so we drove back in the soothing stillness along the levee.

That evening, I chatted with K. in the warm snug kitchen with a cup of tea. We talked about Warsaw, and the trend towards a more western style, which she doesn't like: The high-rise buildings, the blaring advertising, Coca Cola, McDonald's, and IKEA. She described the tranquil life in Secymin. It's so peaceful here, she said. Yes, we agree.

Saturday, 5 October 2002

Oh these misleading maps! It was so exciting to look over the maps that we had purchased in Warsaw, so we let them tempt us into another "archeological" expedition. We found quite a few locations on the maps marked as "Cmentarz kolonistów" (colonist cemeteries) in the villages we were interested in. Among others, we found one for Śladów, which B. had mentioned, but it was located somewhere else in the village from where she had thought. We hadn't planned to get this deep into the research on this trip, but now we had itchy fingers.

We asked William, the Dutchman, if he thought we were a little crazy. Not at all, he replied. He had a great big tolerant heart, and if two slightly idiotic teachers from Germany had nothing better to do during their holidays than crawl around Polish cemeteries, then that was fine with him.

Unfortunately the weather had turned on us. The rain fell in a fine mist almost the entire day. We hoped for a break in the clouds and watched S. for a while as he worked making cheese. In his small dairy production, every piece of cheese was made by hand. It took 10 liters of milk to make each block of cheese. First, he let it ferment, and then he pressed the liquid out by hand. Every drop of moisture must be removed, as well as any remaining fat. The result is a wonderfully fresh block of cheese that weighs about one and one-half kilos. Some of them are smoked to produce an especially fine variety.

In the mean time the weather hadn't improved at all, so we gave up waiting and began our explorations anyway. S. had told us last night that the Catholic priest in Secymin had begun to restore the old German cemetery there. We found the cemetery without any problems on top of a hill next to one of the entrances to the village. In the cemetery, the undergrowth had been cleared away from the gravestones, and they were clearly visible from the road. Unfortunately, very little was left intact. I found a few familiar names, but none from my immediate relations. In the back of my mind I had hoped to find the graves of my father's three siblings who had died very young. I had also hoped to find the grave of my great-grandfather. But we weren't completely disappointed. We were grateful that someone (who was a Pole, and a Catholic, what a wonderful gesture!) had cared for this site. A proper wall was under construction, and several corner posts made of brick were already in place.

Our next stop was Sady, a neighboring village to Wionczemin. This time, we approached by way of Piotrkówek und Zyck. My great-grandmother was born in Sady, and my great great grandparents had lived here: the Gatzkes, Dobslaws and Gurskis. According to the map, the cemetery lay somewhere in a field near a small stream. Unfortunately, the map didn't show any roads or paths that led to the site. That meant that we had to go searching again. We found the stream, and we hiked over some fields, searching through some underbrush as the thick soil clung to our shoes (which are already soaked through), but we didn't find anything.

Finally we asked a woman who appeared on a bicycle (carrying a milk canister) if she knew where the old German cemetery was. "Certainly!" came the immediate answer. Everyone we asked knew where these places were. It's in the "middle of the village" she said and pointed off in a direction. In the middle of the village, that was really funny! We only saw individual homes scattered across the landscape. We had no idea where one village ended and where the next one began. Where then would the middle of the right village be?

But we were undaunted, and we turned off the main road into a path that took us to a farm. Barking dogs greeted us, and a friendly young woman came out of the house. We asked about the cemetery, and an older woman came out of the house. She sent us behind her farm across a wet pasture. She pointed out a run-down wooden building on the next hill. The cemetery should be next to this house.

We left our car at their farm and made our way. Our feet were already wet, and our trousers were getting wetter and wetter also, but we didn't mind. We passed a lonely cow tethered to a stake, and we learned later that this was the only cow that the family owned.

The small wooden house had been repaired several times and a garden surrounded it on the hill. An older woman who apparently lived there by herself beckoned us to come around the house, and when we approached, we explained to her why we had come. She showed us the entrance to the cemetery and explained that the building had once been a school and had also served as a chapel. We asked if we could take some pictures and she shrugged her shoulders. So we went ahead. (Note: In the mean time I learned that my great-great-grandfather Johann Friedrich Gruening was the schoolteacher in Sady. That would have been around 1840. Could this have been the very school where he taught?)

In the cemetery we didn't find as many gravestones as we had in Wionczemin, but there were several that interested us. Two Dobslaws, although not direct ancestors (they were much too young), they're probably related. One Gleske, that would make H. happy, as well as some Rahn, Klatt, and Kühlmann graves.

When we returned to our car, the women and their family were waiting for us, and they invited us to have tea with them. We gladly accepted. And now we learned all over again what Polish hospitality is like.

They led us into the living room and gave us the seats of honor. The room was full of children and young people who watched us with friendly and curious glances. The older woman pointed to them proudly: She had ten children and one grandson. And now we learned what it means to have "tea". We were served bread, sausage, and warm Kasza (which is another kind of sausage) on the side. Our protests were swept aside; we had to eat. To do anything else would have been very impolite and disrespectful. We were impressed with the friendship that these people showed us. One could see that they weren't the richest of people. We thought about the one and only cow.

We conversed as well as we could, and we occasionally reached for the German-Polish dictionary to help get our ideas across. Finally we took everyone's picture and promised to send a copy in a letter as soon as we got home.

Our farewell was heartfelt, but we had to hurry now. We wanted to return to Wionczemin one more time to try and find the Krause farm and then go on to Borki.

As we drove along I began to regret not having taken a picture of the house from the outside. We felt it would be disrespectful and we decided not to. Who knows, we could have eaten dinner in the living room of my great great grandparents, and just maybe Aunt Amanda would recognize it. It could be, but then again, it might not.

The weather was still bad when we got to Wionczemin. The dreariness weighed us down: the bare land underneath a gray sky, the missing old-growth trees and orchards. No, this was no longer a nice place to live, at least that's the impression we got. For those who once lived here and left it all behind in 1945/46, it must be a bitter picture. But we of the next generation have a different perspective: We were glad, after almost 60 years, to find so much that was recognizable.

We drove down the "Kaiserstrasse" once more and carefully photographed every house and building that was still there. They lay somewhat distant from the road, and we weren't sure how well the pictures would turn out, but perhaps Aunt Amanda's memory will help us out. It looked like some of the houses had been torn down. The mounds were still recognizable, but no structures could be seen on some of them. It looked like this part of the village had fallen victim to the collective. Whatever got in the way was cleared out.

Sadly, we were unable to figure out with any degree of certainty, which one corresponded to the fifth lot from Aunt Amanda's house.

So we traveled on to Borki, the birthplace of D.'s mother. I wanted to take a few pictures of the village for him. Here too, an old cemetery was depicted on the map. We located the cemetery quickly and found a few gravestones with familiar names.

But time pressed on. We had arranged to eat lunch in Secymin. In Poland, they ate their main meal at 3:00 PM. That meant we would have to forgo visiting Gąbin, the religious seat of these villages.

M. had prepared a wonderful mushroom dish after the Polish style, very filling, with lots of cream, mainly consisting of the smaller mushrooms that one finds in the fields. Apparently they are so numerous they can be mowed with a scythe. And of course, potatoes, salad and a special Polish kind of fresh vegetables as side dishes.

Today was dedicated to cemeteries, and that's how we wanted to spend the rest of the day also. Still missing from our "collection of cemeteries" were those in Sladów and Piaski Duchowne. I only knew that my grandmother's parents came from a village called Piaski,

but I didn't know if this was the right one. But it was nearby, so I hoped that the old cemetery there would give us some information, perhaps even a "nugget" in our search for "gold".

With the map in hand, we found the Sladów cemetery right away. It lies in the middle of a veritable forest of tall trees. On the ground, a thick carpet of groundcover (*Vinca minor*), the typical flora for cemeteries, covered the area. We found a few gravestones, but almost all the names were unfamiliar. Plastic flowers and candles adorned some of the graves. Astounding. We tried to take some pictures, but the light was so dim that getting a good shot was difficult. The gravestones were glistening wet, and the glare of the flash was reflected back. We hope in spite of this that the pictures will turn out reasonably well.



Jakob Stefan Drachenberg (1802-1888)

And now on the way back, we came to the last place: Piaski. Again, we couldn't find anything at first. We wandered around near an old, dilapidated wooden shed and found a broken gravestone in a pile of rubbish. This refreshed our somewhat diminished zeal. The landscape behind us fell off into wetlands, and we had also learned in the mean time that

the cemeteries were located on hills here in the floodplain to reduce the possibility of high water ruining the graves. Therefore it couldn't be here.

We spied an older man who came up the street towards the nearby bus stop and asked him. It's obvious that the bus would take a while to arrive, and he had a bit of spare time also, and how!

Naturally he knew the way to the place we were searching for. He was overjoyed to learn of our search and the fact that he could practice his German language skills, which he picked up during a visit to Germany 30 years ago. He bent over backward to express himself in the old formalities of Polish hospitality with their flowery language and bowing to the women. He insisted on personally helping with the research, asking what names we were looking for and our address. He promised to send us more information later. We'll see I guess.

He engaged us for with his chatting for so long that it grew dark and we had to postpone our intentions to the next day. But we enjoyed the old courtesy; it was very nice.

Sunday, 6 October 2002

This was now our last day. After breakfast the sun was shining again and the landscape was glowing in autumn colors. We straddled our bikes and departed on a longer trip through Kampinoski National Park. In the park we found extensive pine forests, wetlands, sand dunes, and richness in both flora and fauna. It's said that elk, beavers and lynxes were native to this area. At the southwest corner, in Zelazowa Wola, the house where Chopin was born, is still standing. Today it's a museum and in the summer season piano concerts were held every Sunday morning until the end of September. Unfortunately, we are too late in the year. It would be too far by bicycle anyway, so we decided against it.

The path through the forest made up for this disappointment. We rode through the pine trees, and found oak trees growing up among the junipers. In the mossy carpet we saw a wide variety of mushrooms and we also saw people out collecting them. Actually, collecting mushrooms was forbidden on weekends, but it seemed that no one paid attention to that rule.

Near a forestry house we came to a barrier with a sign: No through traffic! I wondered if that applied to bicycles too. Probably yes. But we saw some tire tracks, and decided to go forward. We simply lifted our bikes over the barrier and rode on. We were well behaved, quiet, and we didn't stray from the path....

Now we were in the restricted area of the park. It was a primeval forest. All was left undisturbed; dead trees were left where they fell, overgrown with moss. Here one could

imagine meeting an elk. But we weren't interested in meeting one, and they probably weren't interested in meeting us either.

Kampinoski National Park has a second, more gruesome claim to fame. In the early months of WW II, many of the Polish leaders, members of the intelligentsia and the resistance movement were murdered by the Nazis and buried in mass graves in these inaccessible woods. Approximately 2000 sets of bones are said to lie in the ground here. We passed two markers (in the form of crucifixes) bearing memorial tablets, which reminded visitors of these horrible events.

And that's the contrast we often experienced in Poland: It's as if the surroundings were viewed through a pair of oppositely polarized lenses. Simultaneously you see past and present, good and bad, beautiful and sad, inspiring and depressing, harmless and dramatic. It all depends on one's perspective. And it's important that we experience as many of these facets as possible.

When we at last exited the woods, the rain had started again – and we still had at least 15 kilometers to go. In spite of our best efforts, raincoats and all, we got thoroughly soaked. It was a great relief to find a small grocery store that was open, and we replenished our energy reserves with chocolate. After that the last part of the journey was much easier.

After eating a proper Sunday dinner and taking a short nap in our cozy den, we again set off in our car.

Piaski proved to be a flop. We had to make our way through thorny sloe bushes. I was worried about my favorite Gore-Tex jacket, but it survived the experience without scars – and I did too. It's soon clear, that although the graves were there, there were no gravestones or tablets. Unfortunately, we found no "nuggets" here.

We moved quickly on, passing through Śladów, where we took some photos for B. (what a pity that it was still raining and everything was looking very gray). We crossed over to the other side of the Vistula once more and arrived at Czerwińsk nad Wisłą, which we had seen shining in the distance all the while.

On the bridge we stopped one more time. We didn't want to let this view of the river slip away. When it's gray and foggy like this the landscape has its own melancholic charm.

Dusk had arrived when we came to our destination. In the foregrounds of the basilica we came to a stop, astounded. We had no idea it would be so massive and huge. Built in the 12th century, it was unmistakable with its Romanesque style, massive walls and Gothic filigree sections.

Beside the cathedral, a large monastery stretched over a wide area. The entire complex was situated on a prime site high on the steep bank of the Vistula with wonderful views of the river and the countryside south of the river. Visiting hours were now over, so we concluded this chapter of our journey.

Monday, 7 October 2002

We packed our luggage, enjoyed our last breakfast, bid a heartfelt farewell to our hosts, and got on our way. We planned to drive all the way back in one day and therefore chose another route: via Płock, passing Torun and Bydgoszcz, through Piła, and crossing the border near Kostrzyn / Kustrin. This decision proved to be fortuitous: better roads, fewer trucks, and the landscape was more beautiful. We drove relatively relaxed, and arrived home after twelve and a half hours, safe and sound.

And what did we take with us? The true richness of new experiences, impressions, and the determination, that this will not be our last journey to Poland.