

Duninow and Karolewo

or: A Trip to the Past

by Evelin Stein

Translated from German by Jutta Dennerlein

Evelin Stein lives in Saxony, Germany. She and her family accompanied her mother to a trip to Nowa Wies, Duninow, Karolewo and Sanniki – the areas on the left bank of the Vistula, West and South of Plock, where her mother had been living till 1956.

The trip to Poland becomes a trip to the past and the different generations sometimes seem to see things a different way ...

Recently the visits home regularly ended up in talking about the "old days". My mother's parents were born and had lived in the area of Wloclawek – Gostynin – Plock.

So in time our family developed the ambition to visit the part of Poland where our mother came from. We wanted to see the village where grandfather's farm and mother's home had been. Maybe we could still find something that pointed to the existence of our ancestors in this area.

After finding a Wloclawek hotel that offered an underground car park through the internet and making the appropriate reservations we could start a more detailed planning and from then on nothing could stop us:

So on an early Friday morning in August 2003 six members of our family started in two cars for the borderline at Frankfurt/Oder.

After crossing the borderline we followed the E30 as far as Poznan. The E30 is one of the main East-West connections, heavily used by truck drivers from Poland, Russia and all the other states in the east. It's a two-lane road full of rain grooves and potholes. Passing other cars or a truck is adventurous and it happens that there are four cars passing each other at the same time using the hard shoulders to build up a temporary "Autobahn".

In Poznan we decide for a longer break. Using the time for exploring the beautifully restored old part of the town and having lunch. Since our mother accompanies us we don't have any difficulties with the language. Her knowledge of Polish is still very good even if she doesn't know some of the modern words.

In the early afternoon we continue our journey in direction of Konin. For this part of our way we can use the newly build motorway – boring after the adventurous E30. But for a change there is a toll gate. We have to pay ten Zloty for each car – not too much.

After leaving the motorway we have to stop because of road works. Immediately the cars are surrounded by boys who want to clean the windshields. My mother just can't believe what she sees: "Back then they would have beaten us up if we dared to speak a German word – and now this!"

For my mother this trip is anyway kind of hard. It is not only a trip back to her childhood and youth, it also reminds her merciless of suffered injustice, years of insults and heaviest physical work.

Passing Kutno and Gostynin we finally approach our "area of research". In Skoki we leave our cars near the Vistula bank and take in the first glimpse of the river and the surrounding landscape. Having a nice cup of coffee we discuss first impressions and discoveries. Twenty five years ago my parents had already visited this area. Many things have changed since then. Leisurely we continue our way in direction of Wloclawek letting the place names and the landscape take effect on us.



The Vistula at Skoki

After a short hunt around for our hotel at Wloclawek we finally arrive and can check in. We are somewhat surprised when we see the "underground car park". It turns out to be a kind of shed in the yard of the hotel, secured by a padlock. The yard is secured by a barrier also secured by a padlock. So parking always will take some time but our cars are save!

Our hotel is absolutely nice, offering large, clean rooms. There is also a Restaurant where we can have our breakfast. But for dinner we go to other places we find on our strolls through town. On Saturday nights the Restaurant of our hotel is often used for weddings. The local wedding receptions include live music till 6 a.m. So a room to the back will be the right choice for these nights.

On Saturday morning we start for Karolewo, my mother's birth place. On our way we stop at Nowa Wies – Neudorf. We try to find the place where the old Lutheran church of Nowa Wies once has been located. But the place on a hill is hard to find. The trees and thick brushwood have overgrown the whole area. The church has been pulled down in 1946 or 1947 and the locals used the stones for their houses. One of those houses we would see later on.

After leaving the hill without having found anything we try to find better results in the village of Karolewo. We succeed to find the right turn and leave the cars outside of the village. We pass several houses that bring memories and old stories back to my mother's mind.



Farmhouse at Karolewo

Then we come to an intersection and are lost. It's difficult for my parents to recognize the places. Everything has changed so much within the last decades: trees had grown so high, roads had disappeared, new fields had been laid out. There seems to be a completely new landscape. But then we find the way to the village center.

We come across some people. Obviously it already got around that strangers are in the village. My mother approaches an elderly woman and asks her for former friends and acquaintances. Soon the elderly woman realizes who my mother is and information about

many already dead persons is exchanged. The elderly woman shows astonishment but also some delight about this unexpected encounter.

The building that has been my mother's home doesn't exist anymore. Actually there is nothing left at all of our grandparent's farm. The only remainder seems to be a little overgrown hill that covered the cellar. The neighbors say that no German house is left in Karolewo.



Only the cellar is left of our grandparent's farm

We pass a farmhouse where a younger woman is working. Mother asks for a Polish friend that had been living there. It turns out that this woman is the daughter and that her mother is working on the backside of the farmhouse.

We are asked inside and my mother's friend cannot believe who had come to visit her. Within the shortest time a huge amount of information is exchanged – actually two life stories are told. Everything is very interesting for me and mother is translating parts of the conversation for me. Her friend is very surprised to learn that I don't speak any Polish!

It almost caught my breath when my mother's friend asked if mother did not have to work much in her life. I know from her narratives how long and under what conditions my mother had to work since she had been nine years old. Work for the Polish farmers and later for a state-owned estate. From my own experience I know how much she has been working in her later life – and now this question! But of course, compared to this woman who must be at my mother's age, my mother looks 20 years younger.

Later I learn that this woman's father had been the farmer who had taken over grandmother's complete property and who made grandmother and her two children work for him without any payment for a long time.

Again I'm surprised about my mother. There is no resentment in her voice when she tells me that this woman then had been wearing her dresses: "She had been just a child and wasn't responsible for what the grownup people had done".

After finishing some more gossip about old acquaintances we have to leave because the rest of the family is still waiting outside.

We go to the former Lutheran cemetery of Karolewo. There isn't much left of it. Some cast iron grave borders can be identified and two or three inscriptions are still legible. The rest is rampant growing of weeds and bushes. It won't be long till there is nothing left of the cemetery.

When we come back to the main street we are relieved to find our cars untouched – what stupid prejudices we sometimes have!

Our next stop is Neu-Duninow / Duninów Nowy. My grandmother's parents had been living here. Great-grandfather had been estate manager on the estate of Baron von Ike till he was deported to Russia during the First World War. He had died only a short time after returning from Russia in 1921.



Living quarters at Duninów Nowy

We have a good look at the old living quarters where our Great-grandmother had lived, at the mansion and at the Catholic cemetery. Here we find first traces of our ancestors. Our grandmother's sister had married a Pole and had staid in Neu-Duninow.



Duninow mansion

Afterwards we drive to Sanniki. Here our grandmother and her two children had to work on the state-owned estate from 1950 till 1956 when they finally were allowed to leave the country. We visit the castle park where Frederic Chopin had been promenading. The house where grandmother and her two children had shared a room hasn't changed much.



Castle at Sanniki

On our way back we visit the old parts of Plock.

On Sunday morning we start for home, but we don't miss the opportunity to visit the medieval town of Torun before we leave Poland.

One thing is for certain: our next visit will be more detailed in visiting all the places where our ancestors had lived. Within the last months our intensified family research has brought up many more places that have to be visited.

I think we can generally recommend such a "trip to the past". We experienced only friendliness and always felt welcome in Poland. But it should also be considered how emotionally challenging such a trip might be for persons who have their own memories of the past.