

2010 Poland Tour – My Blog



By Leon G. Konieczny

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2010 Poland Tour – My Blog

Poland Day 1 – Gdansk!

Posted on [August 31, 2010](#) by [lkonieczny](#)

Well, I made it to Poland today. We arrived at Warsaw generally on time. It was mostly cloudy there when we arrived and there were some drops of rain on the plane windows. We eventually went through passport control and then another security checkpoint and then a bus took us out to our waiting puddle-jumper for the next flight, from Warsaw to Gdansk. I have no idea whether or not it left on time; I was not worried about that, just happy to be here.

Our flight to Gdansk was just under an hour. I had a window seat. At first when we took off I could see a bit of rural Warsaw, but then as we moved into the clouds it was cloudy. But after about 15 minutes or so, there were breaks in the clouds and I could see a fair part of the countryside. It is beautiful and very green now as they've had lots of rain. Well, green and brown, brown where fields have been recently harvested. The roads are all small and winding with houses clumped here and there and fields extending out to the next road and its houses. There are occasional larger clumps, little villages. It's very pretty. There are a fair number of forests as well.

We arrived in Gdansk to partly cloudy skies though a bit chilly. I'm not sure what it was, but barely into the 60s I'd guess. Still it was better than forecasted and better than rain. We got our luggage rather quickly (yes, it all arrived from Chicago or the other places it came from, miraculously). Then we met our tour guide and the bus driver and headed into town.

The trip into town was very stop and go for quite a bit because of all the celebrations today. It is the 30 year anniversary of Lech Wałęsa and *Solidarność* signing the deal by which the Communists recognized their union and movement. Essentially, it really was the beginning of the end for Communism, but of course quite a few of you youngsters will not understand what that all means except from passionless history books. At any

rate, traffic sucked! But eventually it cleared out. The ride to our hotel was about 30 minutes and we arrived around 2:10 local time.

Upon arrival, we were told we'd meet at 5 to get a walking tour, and then have dinner together at 7:30. But two of us decided to take our own tour and so took off at 2:30, just enough time to open the suitcase and plug in my netbook to charge it!

We are only a block or two from the Market Square, which is really not square, but a very long rectangle. When we got there, we found two others from our group already enjoying a *Żywiec*, so we joined them for a bit. Then we headed out and just took a leisurely tour all around. We arrived back at the hotel in plenty of time to meet our group for the 5 PM walking tour. Cousins Pat and Sonja stayed back at the hotel during the first impromptu tour to rest, but confessed later that they ended up relaxing by playing some cards!

Our 5 PM tour was just a little tour. We learned a bit about amber and changed money at the Kantor. We also learned that what we saw on the market square is totally rebuilt as it was very much demolished in World War II. We saw a few pictures of that destruction. Eventually we ended up back at the hotel and had dinner.

Dinner was very nice. We started with some *Krupnik*—yumm! The dinner was buffet style. We all started with the *Żurek* and everyone agreed that it was very good. For fruits and vegetables there was a lettuce salad, some watermelon, some honeydew. There was herring which was very good and a few other things that I forget or didn't know what they were. For main courses there was pork tenderloin with apples, pierogi (sauerkraut and mushroom), and chicken in a creamy sauce, and salmon in a lemon cream sauce. Everything was very good. Of course, not having had much to eat all day made it taste all the better.

Now it is almost 9 in the evening here but feels like—well, I'm not sure. But at 3:20 AM our tour bus is leaving—for those of us who want to go, to attend a ceremony commemorating the start of World War II. It started at 5 AM so that's when we'll be there. The president of Poland and other high officials will be there. Chris has arranged to have a wreath laid—it contains poppies from the American Legions in US as well. He had some meeting with the mayor about that today. He does get around. So I am planning on going to that.

I took lots and lots of pictures today. The market area has an old town European feeling to it, added to by all the foreign languages being spoken there, and there were quite a few. Lots of places to eat too, and street vendors and a very busy place. It was a lot of fun. Tomorrow we will have a more formal tour with a tour guide who specializes in Gdansk, among the other things. I'm sure that will be a very full day, too.

The room at the hotel here is very nice, no complaints at all. It is quite modern in look and feel and furnishings, though seems a bit cold to me. I have the heat on but it's not getting too warm too fast. Oh well, i can survive that. I stopped by the bar on my way to my room and got a bottle of Żywiec for 12 PLN (about \$4)–highway robbery–but it sure tastes good. I am tired now as I've only had a few hours of light sleep on the plane.

Sonja and Pat are doing just fine as well. They did lots of visiting on the plane and played cards for a while. The both were on the 5 PM walking “light” tour tonight and both enjoyed their dinner a lot. I'm sure they're tired like me and I know they did not sleep much on the plane if at all. But they're young, they'll recover too. More when I have it!

Poland – First Impressions

Posted on [August 31, 2010](#) by [lkonieczny](#)

It is very early in the morning here, just after 2 AM, but I am wide awake. I had about 2 1/2 hours or so of sleep earlier, then woke up and since I was wide awake, decided to get up. Just got out of the shower and have some water heating now for *kava* or maybe some *herbata*. When in Rome.... I was thinking about my first impressions of Poland, so here goes.

First off, if you're going to read my blog, you are going to either (a) know some Polish already, (b) be left wondering what some of those strange *italicized* words mean, or (c) learn some Polish by either looking them up or guessing them in the context they're used. My favorite for online simple translations: <http://translate.google.com>. So if you're not sure, look it up.

From the air, though it was a somewhat overcast day, it's a pretty country, lots of green fields and forests, cut through by winding roads, scattered houses, and villages

and towns here and there. Occasionally there are larger towns and in the big cities you see the usual factories and the like

Warsaw airport: somewhat utilitarian I'd say, in a sort of stark, modernistic, glass and steel approach. I understand it's been remodeled and upgraded. It seemed to be well laid out; at least this bewildered, tired, and foreign tourist was able to make out the signs and the way to go without any problems.

Gdansk airport: small, but comfortable. Also seemed quite busy, perhaps in part due to the *Solidarność* celebrations today, or perhaps that's just normal.

Traffic: Well, at first on leaving the Gdansk airport, it really sucked, but we were told that was in large part due to the *Solidarność* celebrations. And once we got away from that area, the traffic was fine. There is a lot of road construction; however, I noticed that both from the air and from our drive in.

Construction: From what I've seen so far, there is a lot of construction in Poland. It seems to be a country that is very busy expanding and enhancing its infrastructure. My guess is that it's in somewhat of a boom time recovering from the years of Communist domination where everything was cookie-cutter, by the book, and utilitarian. And also lots of infrastructure repairs ignored. Not now, I'd say, there is a lot of building going on.

Our Hotel: Our hotel, The Novotel Centrum Gdansk, is very nice. The room is quite comfortable though a bit chilly for me being a Florida boy. There is a small safe and a small refrigerator as well as a TV. I have free Internet Wi-Fi access which is a big deal to me (and allows you to read this seconds after I post it). It's got a separate toilet and sink/shower. Everything a person would expect in a hotel room, right down to the little soaps and shampoos. Oh yeah, and don't forget the hot water pot with teas and instant coffee, as well as *smetana* and *cukier* (get out that Google translate!). The lobby is very modern and the restaurant/bar area as well is nicely done up. It's got a little business center (computer with printer) as well as exercise room with a treadmill or two. Very nice. No pool, but it's too cold for that anyway!

The city: Well, so far I have only been to the market square area, and a few points nearby. It is quite quaint, a bustling place with street vendors, shops, and lots of

restaurants. Being famous for amber, there are plenty of merchants there as well, as lots of other stuff, everything from candies and fresh fruits (including *Borowka Amerykanskaja*), to ceramics and clothing. And of course, plenty of restaurants as well. The market square is pretty well totally rebuilt from the destruction of World War II, but done in the “old way,” like it was before the war. It is vibrant and full of life, a very fun place. Time willing, I’m sure I’ll be spending some time there just having a *piwo* (or two) and watching the people go by.

Clothes: I could have got by with shorts, at least in this touristy area. Plenty of guys wearing shorts, though not necessarily the majority. Lots of Blue Jeans too. But, the weather was chilly out of the sun and I’m glad I dressed a bit warmer. But I still look like a tourist with my big ole DSLR camera. Oh well, I am a tourist!

Westerplatte

Posted on [September 1, 2010](#) by [lkonieczny](#)

Well, chalk up another first for me, today I have seen the president, live and in person. Oh, not the one you’re thinking of. No, I saw the president of Poland, closer than any of you will probably ever get to any US president. But it was for a somber occasion, the remembrance of the beginning of World War II, 71 years ago today.

Yes, 71 years ago today a great battle started. A German battleship opened fire on a Polish garrison at Westerplatte, a small piece of land that protects the entrance to the harbor at Gdansk. It was defended by about 200 Polish soldiers. The Germans attacked it with a battleship’s bombardment, then with 1500 SS troops as well as 225 marines, and then with dive bombers. It took them 7 days to conquer this small Polish force. The Poles lost 12-18 men killed and maybe 50 wounded. The Germans lost 200-400 or more killed and wounded. The story of the battle is one not of great heroism, but of heroic defense of one’s country. There are other great stories of the defense of Poland when the Germans invaded, but all tell of a nation that is very proud.

Today I was at a ceremony that commemorated this event. The festivities started at 4:48 AM, so our bus left the hotel at 3:20. There were a lot of people there. There was a mock re-enactment of some of the battle’s highlights and it was broadcast on big screens for

all to see. There were some fireworks to simulate all the bombardment. Then eventually there were speeches, first by the President of Poland, Bronislaw Komorowski then by some other dignitaries including the Archbishop who actually prayed. Aloud. At a public function. With public officials present. That made me proud to be of Polish ancestry.

The ceremonies and festivities were impressive. I did not have to understand what all they were saying to know of what it was they were speaking: a love of freedom, a love of independence, and a fierce loyalty to their nation and culture. It was very moving, especially when they played the Polish National Anthem, *Mazurek Dąbrowskiego*, often known as *Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła*. A very powerful moment. Later on they played taps. And then there was the ceremony of the wreath laying. Many officials, politicians, historians, consuls, etc., laid wreaths, beginning with the President. And even our delegation was represented. Chris had arranged with the mayor of Gdansk and he and several veterans in our group laid a wreath on behalf of the people of Lublin and Wisconsin. It was a touching moment.

So, it has been a busy day already. A very moving day as well. I have always been very proud to be an American of Polish ancestry, and never more so than today. Knowing what I know of the history of Poland and the Polish people is....well....it's amazing, there are not words to describe a country that has been through all Poland has been in the last 500-1000 years and still bounces back from tribulation and leads the world in its love of freedom.

Yesterday was a celebration of *Solidarność* and the fall of Communism, triggered by Poles, today a celebration of the spirit which helped the west triumph over the enemies of freedom in World War II, led by Poles. Wow, how much better can this trip get?

My Amazing Day

Posted on [September 1, 2010](#) by [lkonieczny](#)

I have so very, very much to write about, as today was the most amazing day for me. It was truly a day in my life that is a turning point, one to take note of and remember for a long, long time.

But first, let me tell you about what I'll write about later, or at another time. We went to the Gdansk shipyards today and saw the birthplace of *Solidarność*. Yes, we saw the place which helped begin an enormous big change—a good and great change—in our world. One which we should never forget.

And we had a tour of Gdansk and saw the basilica which holds 25,000 people and has something like 6,000 people buried under its floor. Then we had a tour of Wrzeszcz and Oliwa and heard an organ concert at the Cathedral of St. Mary with its over 7,000 organ pipes. Very impressive. And we had lunch that included bread and *smalec, barszcz*, and a Kaszubian beef dish which was very good. And after that we had a walk on the pier at Sopot and walked out to the Baltic Sea on a blustery day.

But that was not the highlight. After we got back I managed to buy stamps at the Post Office from a non-English-speaking worker...perhaps my few words of Polish did work, she smiled-and I got my stamps!

And later I walked along the Gdansk Square and met up with some other people from the tour, including Sonja and Pat, and we all had a few beers...and then a few more. But that was not the amazing part of my day, not at all.

We got back from the Square and I was pushing Sonja in her wheelchair and Pat was just egging us on, and we were having a good time, fueled by a few *piwo*, I'm sure. There were few other people in the hotel lobby as we entered, but we didn't pay any attention.....

So I got to my room and in a few moments there was a knock on my door. I wondered what Pat or Sonja had forgotten.

And then the amazing part of this trip started. There was a woman at the door with her oldest son and her husband. It was my third cousin Alicja with her husband Wojtek and their son Bartek.

I was..... I was.... I was.... words cannot describe what I felt.

I am at a loss for words, I don't know what to write. Alicja is my third cousin. Her great-grandfather was a brother to my great-grandfather, Alex Symbal.

I had written to her kinda late in my preparation for my trip to Poland, and my friend Ewa translated it and also sent it to her. Well, earlier today, unbeknownst to me, Alicja got my email. So she came to find me. Just like that. Because that's what family does, and that's what family is all about.

I got Pat and Sonja and they joined us in the lobby. First off, Bartek speaks great English, so he was a great translator. Second, Sonja remembers more Polish than she thought. And Wojtek has very good English as well. And with my two or three words of Polish, well...

Next year I am coming back to Gdansk for a week or two, and will be the guest of my 3d cousin and her family. And anyone who wants to join me. And in the next year or so, her family (which includes a current 3-year old who was with the baby sitter tonight, understandably) will be visiting with and staying with me in Florida.

We had an extraordinary visit. Words cannot do it justice. I am overcome with emotion at this time, it was so wonderful. And to top it off, tomorrow morning we are meeting Alicja's mother and Alicja's niece, they are coming here to the hotel at 7 AM to meet us before we leave at 9 AM. How wonderful is that.

So, I could say so much more about this exceptionally extraordinary day, but I could not begin to do it justice. Let it be said that there is nothing like family, and nothing better than finding family that you've not seen for a long, long time, if ever. Life can't possibly get any better than this. Today was an exceptional, extraordinary day. How fortunate I am!

Postlude to an Amazing Day

Posted on [September 2, 2010](#) by [lkonieczny](#)

After last night, I don't know what more to write. But I know that after I meet Alicja's mother today, and Alicja's sister, that I will have more to say. Bartek will also be there this morning; he is a very good translator! He did a good job last night of taking care of several conversations at one time!

Yesterday was a lot of fun. I wish I had let Alicja know much earlier that I was coming; it was just one of those tasks that I had in my mind but did not take care of in a timely fashion. But so it goes, it is what it is and we met, that's the important thing.

You cannot believe how nice Alicja and her family are, they are wonderful people. So warm and welcoming. And I have been asked to come back next year and stay with them, and they will show me around and take me to Ukraine where our common ancestors came from.

I also learned that there are many from the family here in the Gdansk area. I believe it was Alicja's grandfather who was resettled to this area after the war, and maybe some more, I'm not sure. But there is a lot of family here. I am so excited to meet some more in a few minutes.

Our day yesterday was very good, though long and tiring. I at least got about 5 or so hours of sleep last night, a good thing, too. Today will be an exceptional day too, I know. We will see the castle at Malbork and learn more history. Yesterday we heard all about *Solidarność* and the visit of Pope John Pall and the fall of communism from someone who lived through that time, it was extremely fascinating. I am so full of information and new things that I saw, it is literally breathtaking.

Tonight we will be in Mrągowo. And if all goes well I'll have Internet connection and can write more then. *Do widzenie!*

Two in a row — more amazement

Posted on [September 2, 2010](#) by [lkonieczny](#)

Today was a very long day, but also a very good day. And the amazement part of it from last night continued.

At 7 AM, Pat, Sonja, and I were in the lobby, and in walks in Bartek (see previous post) with two others. Today, Alicja's mother, Jadwiga, came to visit along with her son Marek's daughter, Paulina. With Bartek and Paulina to translate, and with Sonia's lapse into pretty darn good Polish, we had a truly wonderful and amazing visit.

Bartek brought along some pictures that his mother Alicja sent along. He has promised to scan them and send me the copies. Some are very old pictures, but they are all, of course, family pictures and quite valuable.

Jadwiga is the mother of Alicja and the grandmother of Bartek and Paulina. The first thing that I thought was that she looked like my great grandfather Alex Symbal. Yes, she had that Symbal look. Suffice it to say that the time on the clock passed way too fast. We continued our visit over breakfast and were very sad when we had to end it to board our tour bus at 11 AM. But, this too was truly an amazing visit. I am so excited now and cannot wait to come back to visit, and I know that I will, very soon.

We did have time for some pictures once again and probably after my trip I will post them. But, we had to say goodbye after many hugs and kisses and a most enjoyable morning. The amazement cannot fit into words, you cannot imagine it all, and it's just too much to say any more about....

Poland Day 3 – Malbork and more

Posted on [September 2, 2010](#) by [lkonieczny](#)

Well, the experience of Poland continues. As you read in my first post for this day, early in the day I met more family. There are no words to convey the great joy that was a part of that meeting. But eventually we had to move on, so now I'll tell about today's journey.

We left Gdansk a bit after 9 AM today. Our goal was the castle at Malbork. But first we had to travel there. We left Gdansk and soon found ourselves in some low lying land, about 5 feet below sea level to be more precise. Very fertile and very wet farmland with many drainage ditches. The house style here is reminiscent of the Netherlands with good reason—many people from the Netherlands at one time settled here. It's a very pretty area. Eventually we left the flatlands for the rolling hills which we saw both before and after Malbork. Some interesting things I noticed:

- The trees and plants are lot like those found in the upper Midwest
- There are war ruins, never rebuilt, that are seen from time to time.
- The roads at times are very rough and narrow, but in places there is also a lot of road construction and improvement.

- There are some really, really nice homes that appear to be recently built.

Eventually our travels took us to the Castle at Malbork. It is the largest brick castle in Europe and was built in the 13th and 14th centuries by the Teutonic Knights. In 1410 which is exactly 700 years age, the Teutonic Knights were defeated by the Poles in the Battle of Grunwald. I suggest you look that up in Wikipedia, it can give you a lot more info than I can, and more accurate. I suggest you check it out to learn how the Poles decisively defeated these ferocious warriors that they'd previously invited, but who overstayed their welcome. The Castle is quite a marvelous site. You can actually see a picture of it because it is the graphic you see at the top of my blog, currently. Yes, that is the castle at Malbork. Quite impressive, isn't it? We had a guided tour of the castle and all I can say is "wow." It is an amazing place. It received quite a lot of damage in World War II but a lot has been restored and more is in the restoration process. It is awesome.

After that, we again journeyed through the countryside, driving several hours in some rain at times, but eventually we arrived at our "lunch" destination. Well, time is defined a bit differently here as it was after 4 PM when we got to our destination, but what was in store for us was well worth the wait.

We arrived to some location just outside of the city of Olsztyn and parked on the roadside by two waiting horse-drawn wagons. The first had an accordionist and a trumpeter. We got on and were given an enjoyable though bumpy ride through the countryside. At one point near the end we stopped and a group of four on horses entertained us with some horsemanship tricks and showmanship.

Eventually we arrived at our "lunch" location, a farm. We gathered in the barn where we had a wonderful and entertaining meal. The food and drink included beer and *wódka*, pickles, excellent bread and lard (*smalec*), *bigos*, steak, a vegetable salad, grilled *kielbasa*, sweet *pierogi*, more *wódka*, a sliced meats plate, and coffee and cake. During all of this drawn out affair (it lasted 2-3 hours) we were treated to music, singing, and audience participation including dancing and the like.

It is hard to describe. The atmosphere included some horsemanship with food and music and had a wedding-like theme as well. It was very much fun, quite entertaining, and a wonderful time.

Eventually, we had to leave, it was getting near dark and we were not on the road long before darkness came, so we did not see a lot more scenery, and the area we're at now is supposed to be very scenic. But after another 1 1/2 hours, we made it to our hotel. After checking in and getting all my electronic devices attached (camera batteries are in need of charging), I headed down to the bar where I had *dwie piwo* with some of the others.

And that was my day. I am very tired, having got up early today for the continued amazement, but I figure I can sleep when I get back to the US...if I return. Yes, I am having that much fun. And I also want to report that Sonja and Pat are having very, VERY much fun as well. But, to some extent, I should not comment further. We've all agreed that "what happens in Poland stays in Poland! *Dobry Wieczor!*

Poland Day 4 — Ancestral Amazement

Posted on [September 3, 2010](#) by [lkonieczny](#)

Another long day today, but a good day. Also a productive day. And, for three of our group, an amazing day...but more about that later.

I didn't sleep the best last night, probably from a large meal later in the day which followed a day of only a few pretzels, and then a 1.5 hour ride and nap on the bus. So I awoke just not feeling 100% in the middle of the night, but eventually got back to sleep and slept well. However, tonight I am taking the advice of our tour guide who passed out stomach remedies on the bus yesterday. It's called *Wódka Żołądkowa Gorzka* or "bitter stomach vodka." It is supposed to be what is needed after a long flight such as we had at the start of the week. I'm sipping it now; I'll let you know how it works!

Our day today was visiting some ancestral villages in north eastern Poland in the Olsztyn area. This was at one time an area of the Teutonic Knights, and then of Prussia. But in World War II the Germans moved most of the Poles out and after World War II the Russians moved most of the Poles out. Who was left, I wonder.

The countryside is somewhat reminiscent of rural Wisconsin, though here there are a few much older buildings and even some ruins. In some places there are rolling hills, in others it's flat. In some areas the soil is quite good, in others, it's poor and sandy. There

is not a lot of industry, it's mostly farming. Dairy in some areas, other crops in others. Very varied.

The one thing very different than Wisconsin is the roads. First, even the "main" roads are barely two lanes wide. When we pass a truck or other vehicle, I could easily reach out the window and touch it! I am glad I'm not sitting in front. Another thing is the curves....more like sharp turns. You cruise along a bit, and all of a sudden you brake and turn, then speed up, then brake and turn.

And in the towns, they seem to love rotaries, which work very well, actually.

This is *grzyby* season, and we saw some in the forest, one of our party actually picked a few and a few people tried it. And on the roadside there are stands of people selling mushrooms here and there.

We had generally very nice weather today but on the cool side. There were a few periods of showers, but all came when we were driving and none lasted too long. We got home right at dusk.

We saw a number of trucks of logs today, and even a few sawmills. All of the buildings are made of brick however, so I'm not sure what all the logs were for.

Our first stop of the morning was at Mikolajki, a town on the junction of two lakes, one the largest in Poland. It's a quaint town. We unloaded at the square (very town seems to have one) and walked by the marina. Then later we stopped at a store. Having learned our lesson yesterday about "lunchtime" (which was about 5 PM), we each got some snacks and water to tide us over. It was a smart move, as today's 3 PM lunch was early...it was at about 4:30 PM! We've also learned the important lesson to use the bathrooms when we can, especially if they are free—they are not always free. One of our group paid 5 *zloty* today, another 2 *zloty*, just to use the bathroom. But, when you have to go, you have to go.

So we saw a lot of interesting scenery, for sure, and I took a fair amount of pictures. Most of our travels today were on a quest for some ancestral information for three of us on the tour. We went to Kolno, Pupkowizna, and Myszyniec. We visited a few cemeteries looking for some tombstones, and a few churches and rectories, looking for some information. We were directed to another town, Lyse, and headed there. On the road we

found a girl walking, and she actually knew some info about the surname we were searching for. She directed us, and we stopped by a small sort of convenience store where a guy there said “follow me.” a kilometer or two later we pulled into a driveway at a farm. For Chris and Harold and Missy from our group, that was a distant relative. It was quite an amazing event for them, and so nice to be a part of it. They visited there a while and exchanged information. It was the first lead they had on some of their relatives and they were on cloud nine.

After all that, we headed to “lunch” which had really turned into “dinner.” We ate at a very local and quaint restaurant. New foods that I tried included sour milk. It’s actually kinda good. It was good on the potato pancakes, too. We had tomatoes (in season), goat milk cheese, bread, pickles, etc. And that was just some appetizers. We had some of the most delicious *Zupa grzybowa* I’ve ever had, a beef broth based mushroom soup with a very wonderful mushroom flavor (remember, they are in season now) and some potatoes. It was absolutely, divine. Then we had *pierogi*. Finally! Yumm, they were good. Some were sauerkraut and Mushroom, others were *mięso*. Both were good though I preferred the meat. It was a lot of food. And then for dessert we had a coffee cake. We sure ate a lot.

To go with my meal I had an unpasteurized *Łomża piwo*, it was very, very good. I’d have it again, but stopped at one. After the great meal, we got back on the bus for the drive back to the hotel which was about an hour. I dozed a bit.

Once back here I had a bit of a walk, down to the water and back. It’s not too far, but 150 steps—short steps which is even harder to walk, if you ask me. By then the sun had set but it was still dusk. I needed the exercise. I will probably go out for a bit one of the bars here, I’m sure some of the others will be there. But it will not be a late night for me, as tomorrow is a very full day, and we leave for Warsaw at 8 AM!

Poland Day 5 — Warszawa!

Posted on [September 4, 2010](#) by [lkonieczny](#)

Wow, day five in Poland and I’m already feeling overwhelmed. And at home, too. It is a very amazing feeling.

We started off the day very early, just after 8 AM, when we left the hotel after breakfast and piled into our mini-bus to head to Warsaw. Our main target was a 5:30 PM dinner that was scheduled.

We spent a fair amount of time on the road, but Marek, our tour guide, is an endless font of knowledge, which he was more than willing to share with us. The main story that captivated our attention was that of his parish priest and confessor of years ago, Father Jerzy Popiełuszko. This was a Catholic Priest who dared to hold monthly masses for *Solidarność*, the young Catholic priest who became the chaplain to *Solidarność*, and then dared to hold monthly Masses which were attended by thousands of people. But I cannot tell the story that well, I encourage you to look it up on Wikipedia, but have a handful of tissues handy, because the Communists kidnapped, beat and killed him in 1984. But so big was the public outcry that the people who did it were caught and sentenced to prison. It is a sad story, and yet a story of heroism, I encourage you to read all about it. Let's just say that the Communists killed him, but his spirit lived on and emboldened the people of Poland. And he was recently beatified, on his way to becoming a saint. The site of his burial is most impressive and visiting it was a very sobering experience. I cannot say more if I want to continue to type this. Suffice it to say that he embodied the heart and soul of the Polish people with his desire for a Poland that was a proud nation again. He was a true martyr.

After that somber visit, we saw the apartment of our tour director; he lives in a building owned by his family, a building which suffered various degrees of destruction in World War II, but which he is currently fixing up in magnificent fashion.

After that it was a tour of Warsaw, and then we were let off at *Łazienki* Park. We walked around the park and saw all the old buildings, many very old. We took lots of pictures for sure. But you'll have to wait until I get back to see them. Somewhere in the midst of this day, I filled the 1 GB card from my small point-and-shoot camera and exhausted the battery on my digital SLR. Thank god I had a second! All is charging now.

Eventually we made our way to our hotel. I am on the 12th floor. I thought a hotel in the heart of Warsaw would be small and quaint, but I'm on the 12th floor and the other elevator does floors above 17 I believe! Wow a huge hotel, but I sure have a view out of my window. We had a short time to get all dressed but I put on my best, a nice shirt, tie and sport coat. All the men and women in our group were dressed to the 9s, how nice

that was. Then we set out for more of a tour before eventually ending at our Dinner destination, a fine restaurant just off the market square in Warsaw.

We were expecting guests from the embassy for dinner, and indeed we had them. It was a pleasure to dine with three representatives of the US government who each told us a bit about what they do. All had very positive things to say about Poland and the relations of US companies there. And, as it turns out, I went to high school with a girl who is the sister of one of them! What a small world.

Dinner was very good, though the portions small—not that it was a bad thing! We started with a delicious salad and some bread (after a tall *Żywiec, piwo*), then a wonderful main course of a nice *Bigos*, some *ziemnaki*, and a breaded cutlet, and finally a sweet apple dessert. Oh, and throw another *piwo* in there. And some *kawa*.

After dinner a few went back to the hotel but a number of us chose to walk the mile or two (maybe three!) back to our hotel. Some were a bit afraid of getting lost but not me, and i was right, we found our way fine. We stopped a few times for various stuff. At one point we stopped for some *piwo* in the market square. That was fun. Later on I stopped for some *ruska z kremem*, yum!! Ask me some time about the guy who called me a bad word in Polish—thinking I did not know Polish, but I did. I told him that was a very bad word and he smiled. I was quite a comical moment to me.

Eventually we made our way back to the hotel, but a few of us were not ready for bed and so we went to the bar and had a few drinks. I had a vodka, and then a *Wódka Żołądkowa Gorzka*—to make sure I felt good in the AM. Finally I came up to my room and that's what I'm up to now.

We leave at 8 AM, just over 7 hours from now. So it will be a short night of sleep for me. Tomorrow we are on to Sandomierz for a night, so another long day of travel. Well, I can sleep then.

This has been the most excellent trip. I cannot wait to come back here next year. Maybe you are interested in coming here with me? If so, let me know, it would be a great time. The people are friendly, they speak English (the guy sure did laugh earlier when I tried to order in Polish though), and the place is relatively save and very clean. And, for the

first time in a long time, my bed is being made up every night by people who speak the language of this country! It's really a great place to vest.

Oh, and if you are wondering, Pat and Sonja too are having the best time ever. Sonja thought she'd sit some things out, but our group is having none of that and wheeling here wherever we are going. She is not going to be a party pooper, we won't let her. It's a great time, for sure.

Poland Day 6 — From Warszawa to Sandomierz

Posted on [September 5, 2010](#) by [lkonieczny](#)

We saw a lot of Poland today, though generally under cloudy skies. But no matter, we had mostly inside stuff to do anyhow.

We started out with breakfast at the Novotel Centrum in downtown Warszawa, then about 8 or so we all piled back into our small bus and off we went with our luggage in tow in a trailer behind. Our first stop was somewhat impromptu. But we stopped to see the home of Josef Pilsudski. This was the man who was responsible for bringing Poland back together as a nation in 1918 after World War I, and for repelling the Soviet/Communist/Bolshevik invasion in 1920. Back in the 1400s or so, king Jan Sobieski, at the request of the Pope, was responsible for stopping the Turkish/Islam invasion of Europe. And in 1920, Josef Pilsudski of Poland was responsible for stopping the Communists from overrunning Europe. Both "saviors of Europe" done by the Poles. But, you do not have to take my word for it, check it out on Wikipedia, read what the modern history books over gloss over, ever so slightly! It was the Poles who've saved Europe, not only once, but twice!

After that, we were on the road to Kazimersk where we had some time to walk around this old city. Some of the buildings are from the renaissance times. I climbed to the top of a huge hill—not an easy feat—but was rewarded not only with a spectacular view of the city far below, but also of the Wisła River, far below, but also far outside its banks due to recent flooding in Poland. It was an impressive sight.

Later, we continued on to the mineral springs at Nałęczow, where we had a most excellent meal! The first course was soup, a clear broth with some sort of sausage meatballs in it, and carrots and a few turnips. It was delicious.

The second course was some various salads. They were all very good. We had roasted beets with some sort of sweet note, possibly pear. And a celery root and tangerine salad. And a romaine, dill, corn, red pepper, and scallion salad. All were excellent.

The main course was roasted pork loin with mushroom gravy. The mushrooms were absolutely fantastic, best I've ever had! With that we had delicate *kopytky* or maybe they were *pyży*—they were excellent. And we also had some mixed fresh vegetables, carrots, squash, broccoli, Cauliflower, beans, carrots, and maybe even a few others...very good.

Dessert was a very filling crepe-like thing. I think it has some cheese in it. It was topped with cherries and powdered sugar and was fantastic.

Add to the meal the mineral water we had, and we all had an excellent meal and a great time.

After that, we had a bit of time to wander around this spa, but then it was back on the bus and on to Sandomierz.

The trip to Sandomierz was pretty quiet, probably because I got in a bit of a snooze. We arrived here around 6 or so and found our hotel. It's a very nice place, though a bit older. But still a very nice facility with lots of charm and character. After I checked in I managed to get my Internet connection settled, then set out. Quite a large contingent of our group was heading to church, but I opted to go my own way instead and explore a bit.

I walked around the old city a bit but there were lots of young kids around attending some sort of rap music festival. Yes, Polish Rap music. I did not venture to far into that but eventually ran into Dennis and Janet, two of our group. We had a beer together at one place, and then went to another.

At the second place, when we couldn't communicate well with the waitress, a very attractive young man came to our rescue and translated. We had some *Wybrybowa* (vodka) and then another. Eventually we got a table. We each ordered a sort of salad and some *nalesniki*, which was very good. Then we had another beer. When in Poland....

Eventually I made it back to the hotel. I found Pat and Sonja having a good old time with a part of the tour group. Eventually they ate some food and had a good time.

So we had a very exciting day today, even though it was a lot of travel. Saw some hops being grown and also some tobacco being grown and cured....very exciting stuff. But tomorrow, after breakfast, we get a tour of the old town, and then it's on to Rzeszow for two nights. It will be another busy day of travel.

So, you may wonder, how am I doing? Well, I am doing very well. The stories of the vodka may seem excessive but it is not so at all. It's a very great tour and I'm having a very great time. I am learning a lot more of Polish history and also gathering a great appreciation for this wonderful race, these wonderful people, my ancestors. I become more and more proud to be Polish each and every day. I love it here. Oh sure, I'll go home, but I hope to come back many times here over the next few years!

Agriculture and Farming in Poland

Posted on [September 6, 2010](#) by [lkonieczny](#)

Since I have a bit of time this morning, I'll tell a little bit about the agriculture and farming of Poland, based on what I have seen so far.

Much of Poland seems very rural, with towns of varying sizes scattered here and there between very small villages. Villages are just some clusters of houses, maybe a few small shops, sometimes none at all. The roads are all quite winding, following the natural lay of the landscape for the most part. There can be sharp turns and even some steep grades. I won't even mention the way people drive, but I'm glad I'm not sitting in the front seat!

The farms all appear rather narrow and elongated. The houses and other farm buildings are along the roads, and then the fields stretch way back, eventually bordering on some

other farms located on another road. Since the roads are curvy and winding, the farms are not necessarily rectangular either. But often the crops are planted long and narrow too. That is to say, a hay field may be next to a grain field, both rather narrow, then more of the same, alternating. I suppose some is for drainage and erosion.

The types of farming are quite varied by region and also by soil type. I've seen dairy farms and cows, lots of those. I've seen an occasional goat, and a few flocks of geese, even some swans. I have not seen any pigs, however.

As for crops, this is just a partial list of what I've seen:

- Apple orchards
- Raspberries
- Strawberries
- Currants (black currants, I believe)
- Elderberry
- Wheat
- Rye
- Hay
- Corn
- Potatoes
- Cabbage
- Hops
- Sugar beets

...and many more that I'm forgetting at the moment. And perhaps more to come, we've only seen a part of Poland so far.

So, Poland has a great deal of diversity in their agriculture and farming, which is very good as it makes them a very self-sufficient nation. Add to that their abundant mineral features such as coal, etc., and you have a quite productive country.

With the recent downturn of the world's economies, I am told that only Poland and Poland alone did not suffer any decline. That is to say, they did not lose value such as their stocks, etc. The ceased to grow much, but never went below where they had been, such as the US stock market decline. Of the European Union, Poland alone did not go

below zero, how amazing that it. And a lot of it is a testament to very hard working and productive people who are proud and glad to be free, and show it every day. It is truly an amazing country.

Poland Day 7

Posted on [September 6, 2010](#) by [lkonieczny](#)

We had another full and busy day today, starting our day in Sandomierz and ending up on Rzeszow, but via a circuitous route. Among the highlights were two cathedrals, healing water, a nice palace, and some Żubrówka. Ahh, how good this life is!

After breakfast, we started our early day today with a walking tour of Sandomierz, a very old city that was not destroyed in the war. We walked to the Cathedral where it had been prepared to let us in for a quick look, a very nice church inside and out. And very old. Then we walked around the square a bit and hit a few stores. I got postage stamps, but don't expect to get any soon, they say it takes a long, long time for mail from Poland to the US. Eventually we began to make our way out of town, but first we stopped at the Church of Saint Paul (*Święty Paweł* in Polish)—it is where the grandmother of one of the people in our group was baptized. The most notable thing there was two cannonballs that are embedded in the side of the church right in the walls, a remnant from Swedish bombardment in the 1400s. Yes, it's that old, and quite beautiful, though we only had another quick peek of the interior.

From Sandomierz we eventually made our way to another castle, a small castle sometimes called the "small Wawel," this castle called *Baranów Sandomierski*. It was very cool and we had a chance to look around. At this time it's privately owned, and there was a wedding and/or reception to be held there later today. The castle is quite nice and the grounds very neatly maintained.

From there we headed to the healing waters of the Basilica at Leżajsk. All I can say is Wow, what a magnificent structure—baroque architecture, I believe. The inside is very, very ornate. I took lots of pictures, i hope some turn out in the dim light. It was a very cool place. We also got some of the healing water from that place. There is a whole story and Chris Kulinski who organized this tour can attest to its healing powers. But aside from that, just seeing the inside was quite a treat.

Back on the bus and our next stop was a palace, the palace at Łancut. Quite a nice palace but not a fortress. But we had lunch scheduled there. As these things go, we ate lunch at 4 PM. But it was a nice lunch. For soup we had a chicken or clear broth with some rice and a few hamburger balls. It was OK. For salads, we had three, all very good: the first was a carrot salad, the second beets, and the third coleslaw or cabbage. Each was very unique. The main course was some rice and fish with a white cream sauce. Again, it was OK, but not spectacular. For dessert we had an apple covered with Crème Anglaise and a bit a chocolate sauce. It was a spectacular setting in an old palace and a fun time.

After that it was back on the bus and headed to Rzeszow. Eventually we arrived at our hotel. And that's when the fun began! Well, not really. I got settled in, checked email, and then went to the lobby. Turns out a group of us was going to go out, so i joined them. We walked around the square which is literally right out the door of our hotel, and eventually settled on a beer garden, or outdoor beer place. We all had a drink there. Yes, Sonja and Pat too! They even tried a sip of my *Żubrówka* (vodka). After a bit, we decided to head to the *Zimne Kot* for dinner and drinks. More *Żubrówka* and *Piwo* (Lech) there, followed by dinner. In general, all raved about their dinners. I ate light, having some *Polendwiczki BBQ*—breaded and baked chicken tenders in BBQ sauce. They were good, nothing too fancy, and nothing too Polish, but it was rather light and hit the spot.... and was especially good on top of that second *Żubrówka* and second *piwo*, and we're talking *duży piwo* too, none of this *mniej* stuff.

I saw something new for Poland today...pears! Yes, pears on a trees. Also saw lots of tomatoes. And we saw people digging potatoes by hand! No fancy machinery here, they were doing it the old fashioned way.

Our tour guide, Marek, is excellent, and along the way he told us many things about the history of Poland. It is quite fascinating. Poland is such a unique nation, a nation of people that time and again was tried to be put down, and time and again they did not allow themselves to be put down. At times the Nazis and Communists even outlawed speaking in Polish in public and the like but today Poland is a shining star and a leader in the European Union. When so-called friends like France, Britain, and even the US turned their backs on Poland, both before World War II and after, it did not matter, the spirit and pride and sense of self-worth of the Polish people managed to shine through and overcome all manner of oppression. It truly is a wonderful nation of great people, people who truly are dedicated to freedom.

But it's not over yet—tomorrow is another day. We will visit some very picturesque and quaint villages, and hopefully there will be piwo and wódka waiting for us in the evening. A shot of very fine Vodka, *Żubrówka*, cost a whole 6 PLN tonight, and a *duży* piwo (tall or 1/2 liter) glass of *Lech* (*piwo*) cost a whole 6,50 PLN tonight. PLN = *Zloty*, the local Polish currency, and the current exchange rate is about 3 PLN per dollar. So about \$2 for a tall beer? Wow, I'm gonna drink all I can at those prices. But tomorrow is another day. I hope you are enjoying my blog. Be sure to leave a comment or two if you are, or feel free to email me. *Dobranoc!*

Our weather in Poland

Posted on [September 7, 2010](#) by [lkonieczny](#)

I have a few minutes before our next “hop on the bus” moment and so will tell you a little about the weather here in Poland.

First the big picture. We have crossed the *Wisła* River a number of times, first near its end near Gdansk, later near Sandomierz, and a few times on our way to Rzeszow. It is way over its banks, and there is a lot of flooding. Our guide was talking to a local person at one point who told how they had to evacuate their home and their first floor got flooded. And we've seen lots of fields with standing water. So that is a problem for agriculture as well.

As for us, we've enjoyed fairly pleasant weather so far, though a bit chilly. Mostly our highs have been in the 60s and into the 40s or 50s overnight. We've had generally partly cloudy to partly sunny weather. We have not really gotten rained on at all....yet. The one time there was a bit of rain I'd left my umbrella in the bus. We've had some rain while traveling in the bus, but never very heavy, and never for long. A black cloud will come up, put out some rain, then move on and next thing you know we're seeing some sun. However, it is definitely fall and definitely jacket weather here, too.

There, now you know about the weather here. Of course, you can always go online and find out about it as well. *Dzien dobry!*

Poland Day 8 — More of this Amazing Adventure

Posted on [September 7, 2010](#) by [lkonieczny](#)

Today was a day where we had a chance to look into the interior of Poland, into its heart and soul by looking at the people as they live in the countryside, in the little towns and villages.

It was quite a productive day on so many different levels. As always, we started the day with breakfast here at the hotel. I am eating less breakfast but trying to have some fruit and yogurt each day along with the less than healthy spot of eggs and piece of polish sausage and maybe a bit of bacon. But I have also learned and again today made a small sandwich that was my lunch on the bus, since dinner was not scheduled until late this evening.

We saw a bit more of Rzeszow on our way out of town. We learned that during the Communist times, Rzeszow was one of the dirtiest cities in Poland, just filthy. But in the past 20 years, it has made an amazing turnaround and now is one of the cleanest cities in Poland. Well, we sure did see a clean city.

We started the day's bus tour with an hour or hour-and-a-half bus ride to the south and east of Rzeszow. Almost immediately we entered some more hilly terrain, and eventually we were in some fairly hilly terrain. We had to take a roundabout route today as several bridges were washed out by the flooding that occurred in June. Along the way we saw something unusual—Oil wells! Yes, that's right. Though Poland is still dependent upon Russia for about 90% of its oil needs, it does produce about 10% of its needs right here in Poland. That actually started in the days before electricity when the Oil was refined for kerosene for lanterns.

Eventually we arrived at our first stop, the town of Pilzno. Pilzno is on the Wistoka River. There we visited a church, a very fine and ornate church. It was amazing inside, absolutely amazing. Later on we walked around the town square for a bit. It's a very picturesque town set in the rolling hills of south Poland.

Eventually we made our way to Bielowy, only a village or two away. There we saw a small, newer church. I believe someone was checking on some records there, but we did not stay long.

Finally, we made it to one of our main destinations for the day, Lupcza. Lupcza was not at all easy to get to for two reasons. First because of all the bridges that had been washed

out by the floods, and second because we had to take the back roads which by this time had become quite steep and narrow. It became a very hilly area. We stopped several times to ask directions, and at one point a local man even led us by car to where we had to go, a good several miles away. People are in general very friendly and helpful. But after quite a lot of turning and twisting, we made it to our destination at Lupcza. It is the town where the grandparents (or maybe it was great grandparents) of one of our group, Christine was from.

By this time we were deep within the middle of nowhere, places where normal tourists don't adventure, places where time seems to have stood still. We saw lots of small farms carved out of steep hillsides, and a lot of land being cultivated with various crops. We even saw some sheep here and not many cows at all. At times we saw people in the fields as well. It was really, really rural Poland. About like what Lublin or Withee is in Wisconsin. Very rural.

Eventually we made it to the church, but it was locked. It took some doing, but eventually our tour guide, Marek, convinced the wife of the Sexton that we were honest people and she opened it for us to take a look. It was another marvelous church, quite ornate and very beautiful.

After that, we made our way to the cemetery. It turns out that Christine's relatives are very numerous in this area, almost like Smith in the American phone book! We saw lots of graves of her relatives. It was quite a big cemetery. It was also like all the other cemeteries we saw in Poland, the people are buried in the ground, but then elaborate monuments are placed on top with very nice headstones and then there are flowers and candles and all sorts of things everywhere. We heard that there was to be a funeral later that day and indeed even saw the open hole, freshly prepared, awaiting its new casket. Eventually, though, we had to move on.

It was at that point that the highlight of our day happened, and it was quite by accident initially, though our tour guide, Marek, had a hand in its instigation. We'd been driving a long time and a few people needed to use a bathroom, but there was really none around. Now maybe one or two of the guys used a tree in the cemetery—I could not say—but that was not sufficient. So Marek decided we'd stop at the school that was nearby and ask to use their facilities.

What happened next would surely never happen in most schools in the USA, most definitely not! But, the teachers and or the administrator welcomed us into their facility and said, sure, go ahead. It was the end of lunch time and so all 300 or so students of all levels were milling about. They certainly gave us some looks of inquisitiveness. I'm sure many had never seen a foreigner before, being from such a rural area.

But then, Marek talked to some teachers and administrators and volunteered that we'd be happy to talk to one of their English classes. And so it happened that us 18 or so American tourists went to an English class in a Polish school, a class of 15-year-olds, I believe. One of us talked a bit about why we were there. The students then sang *Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła*. Then they sang another Polish Song. Then we said a few more words and then sang *America the Beautiful* for them. Then the teacher had them break into groups for a bit, and after that they asked us some questions. They actually spoke pretty good English, and all of this conversation was taking place in English as well. Towards the end, they sang a few more songs, and then so did we, *Old MacDonald Had a Farm*, and *Roll Out the Barrel*. They enjoyed it thoroughly and will probably be talking about it for some time.

But in the middle another amazing thing happened, the teacher asked if there was anybody in the class with the same surname that Christine was searching for...and there was, a 15-yearold boy named *Slava*. So Christine met a distant cousin of hers as did he. I believe they exchanged email addresses.

On our way out, the Principal (Administrator actually) had us all get together and we had some pictures taken. Actually, since I had the fancy camera, I have the pictures. I will send them to the teacher later.

We had a most excellent time in this school. The student were all very well behaved (though of course, they were still kids and somewhat silly and giggly). They were all very friendly as well as very curious as to what all was going on. As I said, many had probably never seen a foreigner before. For us it was a very rewarding experience, as I hope it was for them.

With that impromptu and amazing part of our day done, we hit the road again. We journeyed back through this amazing and picturesque countryside, but it was a long trip. We went through *Jaslow* and then had a short stop in *Krosno*, a town of about 50,000.

We stopped at the town square, of course, the place where everyone hangs out. Both cities, by the way, have refineries (though I admit to really missing *Jaslo* due to a slight nap!). It was about 4:30 or so when we made it back to Rzeszow and our hotel.

When we got to the hotel, we were all told to wait outside and stay together. Of course, I knew the reason for this as Marek and Chris had made the arrangements earlier in the morning. When we went in, Pat had to go first. You see, today was her 75th birthday. So the hotel had a little like a cake with a candle for her. They all sang *Sto Lat* and then we all sang *Happy Birthday*. I believe she was pleased though earlier in the morning she begged Sonja and I that we not tell anyone it was her birthday. Too bad, huh? We even had gotten a card (thanks, Janet) a few days earlier for her.

After this, I quickly went to my room for a bit, and then took a walk in the gorgeous, warm, and sunny afternoon on the square. I ran into Janet and Dennis, two of our group, who were soaking up the sun over a beer, and I joined them for a beer. It was just a perfect afternoon out, not hot, but sunny and pleasant. It does not get much better than this.

At 5:45, about a dozen of us gathered for a tour of the underground. You see, starting in the 14th century—yes, that long ago—they began excavating under the market square and under the buildings on it, creating storage rooms, other rooms, tunnels and passageways. So we took a tour. In tough times when there were invaders, villagers and warriors would take refuge here, it was very easy to defend. And in good times, they would use the rooms for storage, for workrooms, and the like. During World War II a group of Jews were hidden there from the Nazis, though unfortunately they eventually perished, I believe from starvation (that Nazis were not very nice people, you know).

At 7 PM we all gathered in a large room around one large table for dinner, about 20 of us all together including our guide and driver. We had a very nice meal there as well. We started with a wonderful soup. I learned it was a leek soup though the leek flavor was very mild and refined. I detected a bit of turmeric in it as well. It was absolutely wonderful, I could have eaten several bowls of it. Our main course was a stuffed pounded chicken breast. The stuffing was a carrot and leek stuffing and it so was very, very good. There were also some delicately boiled potatoes with a bit of dill and a white cream sauce. Accompanying that were some green beans, cooked and seasoned to perfection. I'd say this was one of our best meals yet. And to top it off, we had a

wonderful dessert. A yellow angel food type cake base was topped with a chocolate mousse, then some vanilla wafers, then a pudding that was creamy and not too sweet, and then topped with a pineapple slice embedded in cherry jello. There was a dollop of whipped cream and a bit of chocolate ganache on the side. It too was very good.

At the end of dinner we once again brang in the small cake Pat had had earlier and again sang happy birthday, then eventually devoured the cake, though by this time none of us was hungry.

After the meal I took a walk out on the square and in the surrounding area. I found a liquor store that had a small bottle of my new favorite, Żubrówka vodka. It is a half-liter bottle, so about a pint, and was a whopping 22 PLN....about 7 dollars US. Can you believe that? And here we were paying at least 4-6 PLN for just one shot. So I am having just a wee bit of that tonight, but not very much as you can see, because I can still type! I'm not sure that anyone was going out tonight, but I know that I was not, it will be nice to get a nice night's sleep. Tomorrow we leave at 8 AM for our long journey to Zakopane with a stop at the Niedzicza Castle on the way. We'll have a "late lunch" there too. We should go through some very picturesque scenery tomorrow as well as well be into the Tatras, the Carpathian Mountains. I am excited for that as well. So, I will finish for now, but you never know when I will choose to write some more. I am having such a wonderful time and know that even after my return I'll be able to go back and read this blog and be transported back to that moment. And, I have so very many pictures I'll eventually post, too! *Dobranoc!*

Sniadanie w Hotelu

Posted on [September 8, 2010](#) by [lkonieczny](#)

What can I tell you about breakfast at the hotel?

So far, all of the hotels we've stayed at have had nice breakfast buffets. Some at the larger hotels were a bit more extensive than others, those at the smaller places a bit more limited. But all in all, they have been very nice.

There are some common elements across the board however. First is *jajka*, scrambled, poached, and sometimes boiled. The scrambled eggs tend to be a bit watery, but are in

general pretty good. Next is meats, always some sort of sausages and bacon. We've had veal sausages, mini-*kielbasa*, and even *kiszka* at one place. As a matter of fact, Dennis who is not Polish and has never had *kiszka* in his life tried some and loved it. He wants more.

There are also assorted breads and rolls, and various fruits. Even more interesting, there are often veggies such as tomatoes and cucumbers. There are usually some assorted cheeses and always a cold cuts assortment as well—that's how I build my lunch sandwiches. Grapefruit and orange slices are popular among the fruit. There's yogurt (Dannon!) and various dry cereals as well. And juice. Among the better juice I've had is black currant...now that is great.

And of course there is *kawa i herbata, i mleko i smetana. Cukier* is at the table.

So as you can see, we've had great breakfasts each day, a great way to start the day and a necessary way, given our group's propensity for "late lunch."

Poland – Day 9

Posted on [September 8, 2010](#) by [lkonieczny](#)

We had a long day today of travelling and not travelling. We started out with breakfast, of course, but then all gathered about 8 AM to say goodbye to Rzeszow and begin our long trek to Zakopane. Of course there were some stops along the way, too.

We took a different route to the south and east today. Our first stop was the picturesque town of Strzyzow where we visited the market square. As with most towns, it was very picturesque.

Then it was on to Biecz. In the 14th century, Biecz was a rather large town—it had 3000 people. To compare, at that time the very large city of Krakow was a city of 10,000 people. So Biecz was large and important. Today it is a town of about 4700 people. While there we of course started at the *rynek*, as we usually do. Then we walked a bit and found an old church with a very old wall near part of it. This was a defensive wall and was very thick and very high up. Some of it still exists. While there we also saw the church. It is a very nice church inside. Very ornate, typical of the churches we've seen.

The people of Poland are deeply religious and it shows in the care they show for the churches and in the decorations they have. They obviously spend lots of time and money on their churches. It was very nice and I took lots of pictures.

Back on the road, and eventually our next stop was Nowy Sacz. We drove through this good-sized town and did drive along and around it's town square, but did not stop. The word "*nowy*" in Polish means new, so we journeyed on to the nearby town of Stary Sacz. Guess what "*stary*" means! So we stopped at this old town. Guess where we stopped? You got it, at the rynek! There we went to the old church called St. Kinga, or in Polish, Kunegunda. It is a church and a convent and the tower is undergoing construction—a new copper roof is being put on. Someone came by and opened the church so we could look inside. Guess what? Another very ornate church, very pretty inside. It was very enjoyable.

Eventually we took our leave of Stary Sacz, heading to our next destination, Niedzica. By this time, we were getting well into the foothills of the mountains. We even caught some glimpses of the mountains. They are spectacular, with high, snow-covered peaks. Unfortunately, it was quite cloudy and at times a bit foggy today, so the view was not exceedingly clear, but they were there for sure, nonetheless.

Eventually we arrived at Niedzica where we were scheduled for "late lunch." True to form our 1:30 lunch took place closer to 2:30 or 3:00. However, it was worth waiting for. We all sat at one long table and had an excellent lunch. Our first course was *zupa*, and this one was called *basznica* [I have no idea how to spell that, but I'm sure my friend Ewa of the Polish spelling *policzka* will set me straight on it]. It was sauerkraut in a very flavorful broth and had a bit of smoked rib in it. I think it was pork, but it lent a delicious flavor to the soup. There were also some *ziemnaki* in there, fitting because along the way we saw some farmers digging *ziemnaki* by hand. The soup was excellent, and I ate every drop.

Next was the main course. We had little *pyży* and some exceedingly tender meat covered with a brown *grzyby* sauce. The *grzyby* were outstanding—I'd guess they were picked locally as this is the season. Their flavor was outstanding. Add to that the great flavor of the meat, and this was very good. To go with this we had a trio of salads. One was a carrot salad, finely shredded carrots with a sweet and acid type dressing, very good. Another was a cabbage based slaw, it was very good as well. Finally there was a third

salad, but at this moment I can't remember what was in it—I'll have to look at my pictures to remember. But I do know that I ate them all, they were all quite good.

Dinner was finished off by dessert, a braised pear covered with a tapioca pudding sauce—it was very good, absolutely delicious. After that we had some *kawa c mlekom*. And of course *cukier*, as the *kawa* tends to be very strong.

After that, many of us went on a tour of the Niedzica castle. There were a lot of steps there and it was raining a bit, so some of our group decided to forego the trip to the cold castle and remain in the warm comfort of the restaurant. The tour was very good. This was actually a Hungarian castle. In its history, it belonged to Poland only one time. It's a beautiful old castle built and expanded ever since the 1300s. Imagine how old parts of it are. It is undergoing some renovation at the current time, too. It was a neat tour. Eventually we made it back to the restaurant, rejoined our group, and hit the road yet again. The castle, by the way, overlooks the Dunajec River, and on the other side of the river somewhere are the ruins of a Polish castle, because at one time the Dunajec River was the border between Poland and Hungary (though not it is the Czech Republic across the border).

Eventually we hit the road again, winding through the mountains with more glimpses of the Tatras, first getting to Szaflary, then Maruszyna where one of our group found some distant relation. Now Maruszyna is probably not too big of a town, I would not know as we never got there. When we got close, our bus, which was also towing a trailer with our luggage, pulled to the side of the road. It was decided we could not get any further. For about an hour, maybe less, we sat and waited while several were off in search of their roots. When we eventually got back together, we attempted to turn the bus—with trailer—around. It was no easy task. Eventually the trailer was removed, and some people from the back of the bus moved to the front since the hitch kept hitting the ground. But eventually, due to great driving skills by our driver, Andrzej, we made it turned around.

After that—it was by now quite dark—we headed the last 20 km or so into Zakopane and checked into our hotel. As luck would have it, their restaurant was closed for a private party tonight. But a few of us went to a nearby hotel and had some *piwo* and some food and a good time.

So, today was a very long day of travel, way too much bus time, but so it goes. Hopefully tomorrow we will have more time just to look around and shop and see the local sights—I think that is true. And hopefully the weather will clear up a bit, but you know how easy it is to control the weather.....

Poland Day 10 – Daytime fun

Posted on [September 9, 2010](#) by [lkonieczny](#)

It is early 6 PM in Zakopane as I am writing this, and my legs are sore—or more properly, my knees. It had been a rather full day so far. And in about an hour or so we will once again board the bus and head out for our dinner which is going to include some local food as well as some *Górale* music. Not sure just what all that will entail, but I'm sure it will be great fun.

It has been a busy day so far, but the *Warka piwo* I had a bit ago on *ulica Krupowki* and the *Leżajsk piwo* I am having right now are helping relax me, for sure. Breakfast was served starting at 8 AM and I was there pretty much for the beginning of it. We boarded the bus about 9 and had a tour of Zakopane first, and then a few side trips. One was to a very old *Górale* church, it is very beautiful and very small, but I do have pictures. Sorry it is too difficult to put them on the web now, but I will after my return and you will be amazed at them. The architecture in Zakopane is very interesting. The “real” buildings, that is, the older ones, are all wood. I mean all. As in everything. Except the door hinges! Yes, no nails were used, the rain gutters are wood, and they used wooden “nails” to put it all together. And the roofs are wood shingles too. Now some of the newer buildings “cheat” with metal rain gutters, using nails, and with tin roofs, but all wood is the original way, way back when.

By the way, the *górale* are very religious people, and when they heard of the assassination attempt on Pope John Paul II, they gathered at this church and prayed for his recovery, and promised god that if he recovered, they would build a shrine. Thus our next stop at the *Sanktuarium Matki Bożej Fatimskiej*. It too is very beautiful and again, I have pictures I'll post at some later date.

This region, part of the *podhale*, is famous for its *oścypek*—unpasteurized goat's milk is made into cheese, formed into shapes with wood molds, and then smoked for 6 days to

cure it. We stopped at a farm and saw one of the houses or huts where they do the curing. And also bought some. I believe a very tiny piece or two (and I mean very tiny) could possibly become entangled in my dirty socks (but the piece safely wrapped in very durable plastic) and make its way into the US. But only if I forget about it, I cannot promise. And if there is a problem, I hope you will send me bail money.... Anyway, I did get a few small pieces and one to eat as well. It is awesome. So we saw a place that makes it.

After that, we also journeyed to a wood carver's shop. Very interesting. The guy does great carving. Again I have lots of pictures. And his son is also learning the trade, I managed to get a few pictures of him carving too.

Finally, after all of that, it was on to the funicular. We took the funicular up to Gubałówka. I have not words to describe what I saw, nor the emotions that went through me. You see, I saw the Tatra Mountains. These are the same mountains that my great grandfather and great grandmother saw. They left this "god's country" for America to make a better life, which they did, and for which I am forever grateful. There was a lot of good emotion going through me to see this sight, it is awesome.

The bus left us off near the funicular to Gubałówka, but to get there, we had to walk through a flea market. I did buy just a few things there. Oh and by the way, for all my friends and relatives, you should know me well by now and know that I'm not much of a gift and/or trinket buyer, so my apologies in advance. Maybe a few of you will get a postcard if things work out right, but that may be weeks away. But I did look at the stuff in the market and buy one or two things. After the trip to the mountain top and the walk back through the flea market, I continued up Krupowki Street which is a pedestrian way with lots of shops. There is a little *oścypek* stand on every corner it seems, but I already had some. I did sample a few things, however. I did get a *pączek* with a chocolate filling, though I have only eaten part of it. Later I had a *placki ziemnaki* as well, though again, I only ate part. I did wash that down with a *piwo*, the brand was *Warka*.

In the midst of all this, I actually walked all the way back to the hotel and left some stuff here, then went all the way back, quite a lot of walking. And I did buy one thing for myself, a thing I really wanted. I got a *ciupaga*. It is too big for my suitcase so I've no idea how I'll get it back. Chris says to mail it, so I'm expecting him to help me do that. We'll see.

So it has been a very full day so far and I am glad to be sitting down, resting my knees, and enjoying a *piwo*. Besides Zakopane, we've been in Kościelisko and Chochołów and perhaps a few others, quite a tour of the mountain area. I should also note that we visited another small church and also a cemetery here in Zakopane. That cemetery is "reserved" for people of some note, area people who have made a difference. There is even a plaque in Polish that proclaims that Poland and the world in general may forget these people, but Zakopane will not. Pat found a bunch of tombstones with the last names of one of her relatives on the Urbas side, though at this moment I don't recall the surname. But that was very cool too.

If you have read this far, you are a real trooper! For those who leave comments, it gives me great joy to know that you are reading this, so keep it up. And you may have noticed that I sometimes post things more than once a day, so do read them all and don't miss a thing. I really am having the time of my life here. My "real" life back in Lake Mary and with work and all seems so remote (though I do miss my house and friends just a little, but know I will be back there all too soon!). I really do love it here and am thinking how I can come back next year. Since I work for AT&T and will get a nice bonus if the company does well this year, you can help finance my trip if you use their services! LOL Well, I tried. But seriously, I'm having an awesome time. I cannot wait to get some of my pictures online, but that will happen in due time, and I will write here when I do that as well. So, there is more of this day to write about, but for now, I will quit and give myself a bit of a rest..... *Dobry wieczor!*

Poland Day 10 – A Górale Evening!

Posted on [September 9, 2010](#) by [lkonieczny](#)

Well, the evening turned out to be pretty spectacular as well today. We had an excellent meal and were also entertained. How much better can it get?

We left our hotel just a bit before 7 for the short drive to Sabata, the restaurant where we had dinner. We were seated at one large table in a side section of the restaurant, so basically had that area to ourselves. Our dinner there was fantastic, and was some typical *górale* food, though I do not know the proper names of all that we ate. But I know it was good and I can still describe it for you!

Our meal began with bread and lard, or *smalec*. OK, I know what you're thinking, but you'd be wrong. This is not just ordinary lard, this is pork fat that has been rendered. You know that Emeril says "pork fat rules" and his is right. Now I only put a little bit on my bread, though some put on quite a layer. But however you do it, it is a little bit of heaven with each bite, I'm telling you. The Polish people know how to cook and eat, and there are no overweight people in Poland that I could see, either.

For our *zupa* course, we had some sort of meat soup that was absolutely wonderful. There were chunks of pork in it and perhaps just a few dumplings. But the broth was the star. It was meaty and heavily flavored with paprika, primarily. I could have drunk this nectar of the gods all night, it was that good. I even had seconds, that's how much I liked it.

For salads we once again had a trio of fresh veggies. One was a red cabbage slaw. It was not very sweet which was a good thing, but it was tasty. The second was a coleslaw, shredded cabbage with some carrot and red pepper and a few other things, it was quite tasty. And the third was a celery root (celeriac) slaw, this was also quite a hit. It had a few raisins in it to give it some sweetness and a bit of acid, a nice balance of flavors. I didn't leave any on the plate.

Our main course was a good ole meat and potatoes course, but certainly not at all ordinary. The potatoes were oven fried/roasted and seasoned with a bit of caraway, they were very good. And the meat... well, it was anything but ordinary. A thin cutlet of, I think, pork was topped with just a tiny bit of sauerkraut, then a thick piece of country ham/bacon, and then some slices of *oścypek*, and baked/broiled. It was divine, absolutely divine. Again, I didn't leave a speck on the plate, it was that good.

Finally, the desert. Well, we did have *kawa* with our dessert. But the dessert itself was a cheesecake, nice and flavorful but certainly not very sweet, which was nice. I am not sure what kind of cheese was in it, but it was very good and topped with a crumb topping. By this time in the meal, I was pretty full and I am sad to report that I did not quite finish the cheesecake, but only because I'm not a big dessert fan and I was already quite full.

But that is only half of the story. We also had entertainment! There was a *górale* band at this place and they came and played for us three times, a total of at least 6 song, and not

short songs either. They were dressed in traditional *górale* garb and sang and played for us, three violins, a bass, and an accordion. They were very good. Christine, one of our group members, has a lot of *górale* music at home and recognized several of the songs as well. It was excellent entertainment.

We had a good time this evening, and now I am back at my hotel, enjoying a nice cold piwo and writing in this blog. I have to get packed and ready this evening as well, as in the morning we leave very early for Krakow, but have a number of stops to make on the way.

I am glad for all of your comments and/or emails and glad that there are a number of people out there enjoying my blog. I have a lot, lot more to say about Poland, just not enough time in the day to say it all. But suffice it to say that Poland is a wonderful country, I can well see why Poles are so strongly nationalistic and why they as a culture have lasted for over a thousand years. Not many other cultures on this earth have such a long and rich history as has Poland. And in today's world, they are just coming of age as a country, it is truly amazing to see this happening right before my very eyes. You cannot imagine how it is, you cannot. You'll just have to come over with me on my next trip to see it for yourself! But for now, *dobranoc!*

Color in Poland

Posted on [September 10, 2010](#) by [lkonieczny](#)

Poland is very beautiful and colorful, and I'll tell you why. This beauty is well enhanced by the abundance of *kwiaty* everywhere. This is one of the first things that I noticed when I got here, and it has been consistent everywhere we have been.

The "yards" in Poland, at least in the cities and villages, are for the most part very narrow and long, as are the houses in some areas. But the front yards (when the house does not sit right up on the road) are generally taken up with one of two things, flowers or a garden, or both. There is not a lot of lawn and when there is, it is usually green more from weeds than from any cultivated grasses. In my whole time here I have only seen one or two lawnmowers, so most lawns are somewhat shaggy, though that could be due to the recent abundance of rain, too. In one area I saw someone attacking an overgrown lawn with a weed whacker. But outside of gardens which are somewhat prevalent and

extensive, there is an abundance of flowers, flowers everywhere. I see a lot of marigolds, zinnias, roses, and just a wide variety of flowers, but marigolds seem to predominate, both yellow and rust colored varieties. These flower gardens appear well maintained to. I have come to the conclusion that Polish people love their *kwiaty*, which explains my mother's love of flowers as well, and my sisters', too.

The town here are filled with the sign, *Kwiaciarnia*. But these shops sell another type of flower that is very prevalent but only in certain areas—plastic flowers that are used to decorate graves. Yes, the cemeteries are filled nearly to overflowing with flowers decorating the graves. True, there are also other live plants sometimes planted at a gravesite, but almost always on the raised stone monuments there is an abundance of flowers as well as votive lights. Polish people show very much respect for their ancestors and in each of the many cemeteries we visited, most of not all of the graves had flowers on them. Yes, they may be a big faded with time, but it would seem that at least annually these are renewed with fresh plastic flowers. There were a few graves, very well maintained, with fresh cut flowers as well, but that is not as common.

So, Poland is a very colorful nation from the perspective of all the flowers in the yards and in the cemeteries and in the parks and on the streets. I even saw some sort of shade shelters where the roofs were made of potted flowers, very beautiful and well maintained. Ingenious, I thought!

But there is another source for all the color, and that is the houses themselves. Most all are built of brick with the exception of the mountain areas. But many of the newer ones, and some older, are plastered over the brick and all very brightly painted. The colors are very warm and cool at the same time, very soothing. Certainly there is nothing like deed restrictions and the property police here, but the people paint the houses with a good sense of color as well. I've taken lots of pictures of these homes and will certainly post some when I return.

So two things about color in Poland: houses and *kwiaty* in the yards. Polish people love color and know how to use it in balance and harmony—no bright pinks or hot reds or painful greens, just soothing and mellow colors, all enhancing what is by nature a beautiful country, a beautiful place.

Poland Day 11 – The Amazing Journey Continues

Posted on [September 10, 2010](#) by [lkonieczny](#)

There is a party going on in the hall just outside my room. These Polish, they are very smart. If you have a group of American tourists who've been riding, walking, and touring all day and just want to relax, but them all on the same floor in the small hotel. I believe there may be 8 rooms on this floor, and they are all occupied by our group. I earlier made a beer run for them, Chris had a bunch of his own, and I just saw missy who was going for a wine run. They are having a good time, a nice way to relax after a long day, for sure.

So let me start at the beginning because there were more amazing things that happened today. We started our day with an early breakfast and were on the bus and ready to go shortly after 8. Our first stop was Szaflary, as Marek (our tour guide) and Jeanne had an appointment with the priest. Jeanne is looking for the birth record for her grandmother, I believe. This priest was very helpful and looked through a number of old books and was about to give up when he found the record they were looking for. So Jeanne got her information as well as the promise of the priest that he would look further for other records for her, a very helpful priest.

The parish at Szaflary, by the way, is one of the oldest in the area, it is 660 years old this year. Yes, you heard me right, six hundred and sixty years old! The church building itself is not that old, invasion after invasion and war after war saw to that. But still very amazing to have something that old.

Our next two stops were dear to my heart. First we stopped at the city of Ludźmierz, at *the Sanktarium Maryjne w Ludźmierzu*. This city has a shrine at which Pope John Paul II prayed the rosary in 1997. It is a huge place with outdoor Stations of the Cross, gardens, and a huge church. In 2001 it was declared a basilica. The city of Ludźmierz, however, is notable for several other reasons, too. It is the oldest city in the Podhale, and is the city where my great-grandmother, Wyktorya Sopiarcz, was born in the latter half of the 1800s. So it was a very emotional visit for me. I even lit a candle and prayed a bit for her and for my parents there.

But there is more, because after that we journeyed up the road a kilometer or so to the next town, Krauszow. This is the town from where my great-grandmother's husband,

Franciszek Szczęch, came to the US in the very late 1800s. It was wonderful just to see this town. But we stopped at a sklep, and it turned out that a man named Józef Szczęch was there! So we met and I had my picture taken with him, and I have his address. I am not sure if or how we are related, but he did say there are a bunch of different Szczęch families around. That was so very cool. I will publish the pictures and you can be the judge, but I thought I saw a resemblance to my grandfather Joseph Szczech. It could be so...

After that, it was back on the road again to head to Kraków. On the way, we saw a sight that brought me back to my much younger years and reminded me so very much of my grandfather, Joseph Szczech. We saw a farmer in a field cutting hay with a kosa, just like my grandfather used to do. But even more amazing, while we were watching, he stopped, checked the blade, decided it needed a bit more sharpening, and sharpened it right there with a few strokes. Who knows, maybe it really was my grandfather in that field, cutting that hay. He had everything grandpa had going for him except no bib overalls. It was an amazing sight! And we continued on to Kraków.

Kraków is a very old city and until the late 1700s was the capital of Poland. It escaped major destruction in World War II and so there are buildings in the old city that date back all the way to the 13th century. On the way into the center of town, we stopped at the mound that was built to honor Tadeusz Kościuszko, but did not have time to climb it, maybe on Sunday on our way out of town. After this we stopped at the hotel only long enough to get our rooms, throw our stuff in them, and use the bathrooms (when you have to pay for bathrooms all the time, this becomes very important!) Then we went to lunch.

We had a hurried lunch at a very nice place whose name escapes me right now. But it was very nice. We were seated in a room in the underground area, an area that in olden days probably was storage for a shop above. There we had an excellent vegetable soup. It has bits of broccoli, cauliflower, carrots, and rice in it, as well as a number of other things. It was delicious. And then we had our main course, and again, we had a wonderful meal. Our main course today was *goląbki*! A meat and rice mixture was wrapped in cabbage leaves and served with a nice and acidic tomato-based sauce, along with a few bits of oven-baked potato wedges. This was very, very good and we all agreed on that. I ate every last bit of it. But, we were behind schedule, and so we postponed dessert and coffee until later, as our tour guide for a tour of Kraków was waiting.

The next few hours were filled with a wonderful tour of old town Kraków. We went up the hill to Wawel Cathedral and saw that church, inside and out. Words cannot begin to describe it, nor the feeling of being there. This is where the kings of Poland were crowned and buried. Even the last president of Poland, killed in the tragic plane crash 5 months ago today, is buried there. We saw the crypts and sarcophaguses of saints and kings. It is truly an amazing place. But on top of that, we saw quite a few other churches and even a basilica (maybe two, I lost count). We saw other sights too, such as the Jagellonian University which gave rise to many famous people. It really was overwhelming, so hard to take it all in. The short time we are here is only a taste of all there is to see, but now I am hungry to see more, very hungry....

After our tour, we headed back to our restaurant for our missed dessert and coffee. Oh My God! The dessert was to die for. I have to find out the name, but it was two pastries with a filling of the most delicious crème or pudding. But it was not ordinary filling. This was to die for. It's said that this was the favorite dessert of Pope John Paul II and I can see why—it is like eating a little bit of heaven.

Eventually, we were all done and we all split up to do whatever we wanted to. I was a glutton for punishment, but first I made my way to the hotel. The rest of my evening was a series of excursions around Kraków. First I went down a few blocks and found a street full of people, so I explored that. Then I went to the old cloth store area- the *Sukiennice*- and looked at the vendors there. By this time it had begun to rain so I returned to my hotel for my umbrella.

Venturing out again I walked up a ways and found a small store where I bought several cans of beer—this is an important staple of my diet by now! LOL. So I got my beer and was returning it to the hotel when I stumbled upon my cousins (once removed) who were heading down the street our hotel is on, but away from it. I asked where they were going and they said “to the hotel.” I said “it’ll be a very long walk if you go that way!” Well, they had gotten a bit turned around but as luck would have it, I stumbled upon them. Or maybe it wasn’t luck, who knows? So I got them back to our hotel. And on the way met a few more who had gotten turned around. Imagine a town where the streets go at angles, and stop and start, and are all centered around a square (that is not really square) and was “laid out” 600 or more years ago. Yes, it is easy to get lost, I’m sure. So I got them back safely, and then after a bit of rest (and a *piwo*, yes!) I headed out again. But by this time some of our group was in the hallway about to play cards. The begged

me to go on a beer run for them, so I did. Luckily I had my umbrella, but I went down a few blocks and bought them a bunch of beer, some cokes, and even some munchies.

Now finally, I was able to take another walk. Oh, by this time of day my knees are hurting, but no matter, I am going out, and so it did. I was looking for a bar I read about on the Internet, one that has more than 4 dozen beers on tap. I found it but did not go in. But instead I walked around some more and made several important purchases. I got a t-shirt from Hard Rock Kraków. How many of you can boast that. And a few other things. And also a small 100 ml bottle of Wódka Żołądkowa Gorzka which I am working on right now (to make sure I have no stomach problems in the morning, remember, this is preventative medicine!).

So, it has been a very long day, but also a wonderful day, most wonderful. I have visited a number of amazing places, but by far Kraków is my favorite. I feel the spirit of Poland here, I really do. Here I feel what it means to be Polish, and I feel something special inside of me, something that's been speaking to me my whole life. I know I'm Polish, and now I understand what that means a whole lot more. What an amazing day this has been...but also, what an amazing tour this has been.....

Krakówian Night Life!

Posted on [September 10, 2010](#) by [lkonieczny](#)

Kraków at night...what can I say. I was just out a bit ago for a walk around Kraków at night, and I loved what I saw. First of all, it's a damp and rainy night, a slight rain—almost a mist but certainly wet, has been falling constantly since about 7 or so this evening. So it's not the most enticing weather. But it's also a Friday night. On my latest walk I basically walked down to the square (the *rynek*) and walked around it. There are a lot of people out and about. At one point I had a few people speak to me, but I'm not sure what their intentions were, I more or less ignored them. At another point, two nice young ladies who spoke great English introduced themselves to me. Again, I was a bit skeptical and just wished them a good evening. But all in all, it's a very vibrant city at night, I was totally amazed. The bars and restaurants seem to be doing a fine business at this time of night.

I cannot imagine what this city and these people endured for many years under Communism, but I do know that it is a failed ideology. I know that today's Poland, the modern Poland, is full of hope and idealism, hope for the future and the belief that Poland will prosper. I'll tell you, based on the last thousand years of history, I have every reason to believe that will happen. So

tonight, seeing all these people out and about, enjoying themselves, it gives me a big dose of hope for the future of Poland. Well, that along with a lot of other things I've seen on my amazing journey her. I'll say it: Poland is a growing country, one to be watched, one to be admired, one to be invested in, be it time, money, or only the heart. I foresee great things for Poland, based on my limited experience of the past 10 days or so. But it gives me great hope for the future.

So, I saw a lot of people, mostly younger, out and about tonight. This is the future, this is the future of Poland. And I think it's again a great future for a great race of people. I am so happy that I am a part of that race, that culture, that people!

Poland Day 12 – Weliczka

Posted on [September 11, 2010](#) by [lkonieczny](#)

[I solved my Internet connectivity problem by going up the street to McDonald's, buying a cup of coffee and some "apple crisp," and getting on their internet, so here goes!]

This morning, we went to Weliczka. Weliczka is the home of the famous salt mines. Long time ago, like in the 13th century or so when they were discovered, salt was a very important commodity, sometimes more valuable than gold. After all, you cannot eat gold, but we all need our salt. And Poland discovered a huge vein of salt, deposited several millions of years ago when what is now Poland was a sea which eventually dried up leaving salt, a vein of nearly pure salt that is about 10 miles long and a mile or so wide. Starting in the 13th or 14th century, Poland started excavating this salt. It is amazing to see how they did it. As a matter of fact, the mine was in operation until just about a dozen years ago, and still employs over 1000 miners who preserve this.

Ah, but we're not just talking salt here, there is more to the story. But first, it's important to know that this mine which I guess belonged to the king was a source of great richness. The salt from this mine is what financed the building of the spectacular Wawel palace and churches.

Mining salt is not easy work and it developed over the ages, but at one time it was estimated that 25% of all miners would die in the mine from some sort of accident. But to be a miner meant you could get some salt for your family, so it was a very good paying job for the time.

But there is more to the story, as these people did not just mine the salt...they carved in it. Words cannot describe some of the beautiful carvings that I saw today. I did not take any pictures because without proper lighting and equipment, they would be dull and boring pictures. But there are plenty of pictures on the Internet of Weliczka, look it up! There is a beautiful church carved right out of the salt, including an altar, podium, pulpit, priest or bishop's chair, and the like. It is truly amazing.

And, remember, it is a mine, so underground. The whole mine extends down 9 whole levels, to over 350 meters deep (do the math, it's over 1000 feet!). But we were only down to the third level, still an impressive 135 meters or about 500 feet below the surface. Of course I had to pee there, because that is a record low pee for me! Yes, I can be silly at times, I am on vacation. Oh, but I did use a regular WC or bathroom, don't worry....

We started out by taking an elevator down, then we had a guide for our tour group of about 16 people. But then we ended up descending something like another 400 steps. So we were really down in there. Fortunately, the way out is with an elevator of sorts... more like a sardine can, but we made it to the top. In case you are interested, yes, both Sonja and Pat went on this tour.

So that was our tour. I encourage you to look up Weliczka on the Internet—Wikipedia is always my friend—and learn some more about it, it is an amazing and fascinating place, and I'm glad I went.

Poland Day 12 – Krakow Square

Posted on [September 11, 2010](#) by [lkonieczny](#)

I got back to the hotel from my trip to Weliczka to find Chris, our tour organizer, busy wrapping the *ciupaga* I got a few days earlier. He'd promised he had a way to send it and he was true to his word. There were some other parcels of Chris's to that were being wrapped. His friend Anna from Krakow was over and helping as well. So I helped him finish wrapping and eventually we went to the Post Office with about 7 packages to mail. There we had a very efficient clerk who took very good care of us. My *ciupaga* should be arriving in about a week to my home. How nice. All told, the various packages we mailed cost just over 800 zloty, but some were books and quite heavy.

After that, I took off for the center of Kraków. I wandered around for a while but eventually found a great place for lunch, a place called *Restauracja Jadelko*. I had an excellent lunch there. I will write more about it in my food blog at <http://lakemaryfoodcritic.blogspot.com> when I have a chance, but it was a good Polish lunch. I started off by telling the waitress, *Pierwsze, piwo, duży!* But for my meal I had *barszcz czerwone z uszkami, pierogi ruskie*, and coleslaw. It was all very good. The *barszcz* was a bit too salty for me and, honestly, the *barszcz* I made last *Wigilia* was better, but this was very damned good too, as were the *uszki* in it. The *pierogi* were also quite good, as was the coleslaw. The atmosphere was very nice, in an old storage cellar, underground. I'm sure there was a history there but I was not about to ask!

After that I did more wandering and the like, then I went to the church on the corner near here. I forget the name at the moment, but it is very historic and very old. This church was here and in this building when the Turks (or was it Mongols, I forget) came to invade in the 13th or so century. Legend has it that the lookout in the tower saw the Turks invading and sounded the alarm with his trumpet, but the invaders killed him with an arrow. Now, each day, and every day, and every hour, even through the night, a trumpeter plays out of the windows in the tower, once to each direction, North, East, South, and West, and sounds the alarm, but the song ends in mid-note to commemorate the sudden death of the trumpeter. And yes, this is played at the four directions 24 times each day, on the hour. I have heard it myself a good half dozen times.

So guess what, you can actually climb this tower. And I did. All 237 steps up. And they are not easy nor shallow steps. It's quite a trip up and equally treacherous on the way down. But apparently in Poland they don't have all the scummy trial lawyers and the ADA to deal with. Poles are reasonable people and I knew to be careful. It was quite a hike up—and down. But a beautiful view, even on this cloudy day. I'm glad I went.

Yes, it is cloudy and rainy at times today. Well, not a real rain, but a drizzle. But that's OK. And even in the midst of this less than ideal day, there are tons of people on the streets. It appears that Krakowians know to carry their umbrellas. So there were things going on in the square, rain or shine. It really is an alive place.

After my climb to the top of the church, I sat under a big umbrella on the square and people watched for a while—and recovered. And I had a *Żubrówka* and a *piwo duży*. That went down well. Then I shopped. I found some very nice stuff and I may go back

for more. I found some *wycinanki*, a *szopka*, and a few other trinkets. Look out to see how I decorate this year for the holidays! I did a lot of walking today. At times I just wandered down some streets to see what was there and where they'd take me, no set goal in sight. It was a lot of fun and I had no fear of getting lost. Of course I have my iPhone for a backup plan.

Speaking of getting lost, what happens in Poland may stay in Poland, and I won't mention any names, but several of our party had a bit of a challenge getting back to the hotel last night after our tour and dessert. I won't mention any names, but I ran into two of our party whose initials are Pat and Sonja. I was walking down *Ulica Święty Tomasz* toward the hotel, and they were coming towards me. They said, thank god we found you. I asked, "Where are you going." They said "to the hotel" I said, "well, then you have a long way to go because the hotel is the other way." Now in all honesty, someone gave them bad directions. But it was funny. And they were not the only ones. But for some reason, I've had an easy time finding my way around her. I am confident that next time I'll be able to explore even further off the beaten path. I am looking forward to that.

So now I am back at my hotel, at least for a bit. I may go out again before we go to dinner. I'm actually going to dinner a bit early with Chris and his friend Anna and some of this other friends. They may all speak Polish, but after a few vodkas, as Anna said, she'll speak and understand better English and I'll speak and understand better Polish. Oh, and our dinner is at Wesele. Even I have heard of that before. Look it up, it's a somewhat famous restaurant here in Krakow and famous in the world, I believe. Or at least, I've heard of it before for some reason. It will be an enjoyable dinner, for sure, and you know I'll write about it when I can. But for now, it's time to rest...or maybe have a *piwo* or some *wódka*, we'll see!

Poland Day 12 – Wesele

Posted on [September 11, 2010](#) by [lkonieczny](#)

Tonight I had dinner at Wesele. This is a fine restaurant in Kraków, right on the *rynek*. It is only a few blocks from our hotel. Yes, we are very fortunate in that we are right in the heart of things for all our hotels. That is very good.

I went to dinner early with Chris as he was meeting some friends there. Anna, who helped us mail stuff earlier, was already here, and we walked over. A short time later several other friends of Chris' joined us. Now most of them did not speak English, though Anna speaks some. And later Yurik came, and he spoke very good English, having lived in Chicago for 11 years. But even though I was not sure what all was being said, it was fun and interesting and occasionally I'd catch the gist of the conversation, or someone would catch me up.

Wesele is a very interesting restaurant, and it has a bit of a history. According to my Polish-but-not-in-Florida friend, Ewa,

“Wesele restaurant (Wierzynek in Polish from the name of the first owner many centuries ago) is a historic institution. The latest history – during the early 20th century all Polish intellectual elite: writers, painters, journalists, philosophers, etc., representing so called period of ‘*Młoda Polska*’ gathered there, drank, and discussed the meaning of life to no end, and created. They were mostly poorer, the ‘church mouse,’ so often they paid with their painting or poems, that were worthless then, but cost millions today. Kind of like Paris was an impressionists Mecca. Fascinating people, fascinating times. My favorite art periods: art deco, art *nouveau*. *Młoda polska*. I dined there once. It was an awesome experience.”

So we dined at a place with a “history” as it were.

We dined on the second floor. It is very nice there and looks very “Polish.” You will have to see my pictures whenever I get to it, I have some. Since we were there early, we started with a bit of Chopin (vodka) and I had a beer. Eventually the rest of the group arrived, many of them fresh from the afternoon tour of Oświęcim (Auschwitz). But we will not discuss that today. Our meal was very good.

We started with a soup. I am not sure the name of it, but it had a tomato base but no cream, and had short pieces of angel hair pasta in it. I believe also garlic and paprika. It was good and was a huge bowl. Of course there was also some *chleb i masło* to go with it.

Prior to our next course, several small salads were set out on the table. The each consisted of a bit of mixed salad greens, quite a variety and very fresh. The salad was dressed lightly and was very good. Our main course consisted of three elements. First as

hand mashed potatoes, the kind with the little lumps in them, with dill. They were very good. Then there was a bed of braised red cabbage—it was excellent—and on top of it two slices of pork loin. I thought the pork loin would be dry but it was not, it was very tasty. Overall, it was a pretty good dish.

For dessert we had a type of maybe a cherry bread pudding, I'm not sure exactly what to call it. But it was very good. It was garnished with a piece of star fruit (carambola) that was not at all ripe but looked good. And of course we had *kawa* and *herbata* for those who wished.

After dinner we were entertained. Well, a Polish “Krakovian” group played and for another group near us, so we got to enjoy as well. There were I think three instruments and two dancers, whooping and hollering. It was very entertaining.

So once again we had a nice meal, this time in Krakow. You cannot say we starved to death or did not eat well, we've eaten all too well. But we're on vacation and will do it again a few more times, I think. Thankfully....

Poland Day 13

Posted on [September 12, 2010](#) by [lkonieczny](#)

I do not have a lot to write about this day, but still it was a fun day.

I went down for breakfast at 7 AM only to find that it didn't start until 7:30. Perfect! I went for a walk to the Kraków square. It was strangely silent there, a testament to the importance of Sunday, the Lord's Day, in Poland. There were a few people about but not many at all, not like Saturday morning. I did see quite a few pigeons sleeping, that was about it.

Eventually I had my breakfast and then we were on the bus and off for our first adventure of the day, a stop at the mound dedicated to Tadeuz Kościuszko. If you do not know who he is, then shame on you. He is one of the heroes of the American Revolution, a Polish military expert who helped us gain our independence from the English. Of course he came to the colonies and helped us, hoping that in return we'd help protect Poland from those who were preying on her at that time. He was mistaken, not the first

time that the United States left Poland to the dogs, so to speak. But we in the US owe a lot to his military expertise....like our freedom!

The mound is an amazing place, a big man-made hill, made up of dirt that people brought to honor him after his death, not only from Poland but from all the battlefields he fought on in the American colonies. I climbed to the top of it and saw quite a spectacular panoramic view of Krakow, even on a cloudy day. Quite impressive. Also there was a wax museum there that we visited, depicting a number of Polish heroes. Believe me, if you are Polish, even just a part, you have an awful lot to be proud of.

Eventually it was back on the bus and headed to Wrocław. But first a stop at Opole for lunch. We had a very nice lunch here in a Manor built in the early 19th century by a German landowner. After World War II, the Germans in the area were “relocated” to Germany. But after the fall of communism in 1989, this place was eventually bought and restored and now is a very nice place where we had lunch.

Our soup was a *żurek*, and it was very good, full of egg and *kielbasa* and all kinds of great flavor. For our main course we had chicken and potatoes, covered with a white mushroom sauce, and nice, fresh Polish mushrooms. It was outstanding. Wow, what flavor. I wish I could take home a gallon of that sauce. We also had some carrots and broccoli with the main course. Our dessert was a layered dessert of cake, a coconut flavored layer, and a pudding type of filling that was absolutely delicious and contained some nuts, I’m not sure what they were. All I know is that it was very good. We also had coffee/tea. A very good meal, and quite filling.

Then we hit the road again, and arrived at Wrocław about an hour later, this time at the home of some friends of Chris. Talk about Polish hospitality. We had quite another feast there, from fresh peaches and blueberries, to Polish sausage and *kabunosi*, to cheese and candies and pickles, quite the feast. We topped it off with beer and coffee, and finished with some very good dessert. It was very nice to be welcomed into their home and to have this wonderful feast.

Eventually, we had to leave and got to our hotel, not very far from the square near downtown Wrocław. Once settled in a bit, I went for a walk with Pam and Jeanne to the square where we had a beer and enjoyed the atmosphere. Once back at the hotel, Pam

and I had another beer (OK, I'll admit that I also had a *Żubrówka*, I think I'm addicted to that stuff), and for now, that's the end of the story of this day.

However, some of our group are playing cards on the first floor, so I think I'll wander down there with my camera and take a few pictures. I've had a full day and am tired, but there is so little time left. I know I can sleep on the plane and when I get home, I don't want to miss a minute of whatever I can see here in Poland!

Poland Day 14

Posted on [September 13, 2010](#) by [lkonieczny](#)

I am sad to say that today is my last full day in Poland—for the time being—but it is certainly not the last I shall write in this blog. First I will tell of the first part of the day. Any maybe later I will write again about the dinner we'll have tonight—our farewell dinner. But then there are quite a few other things I want to write about, lest I forget them all, especially about the people here, the history and culture of Poland, the roads and construction, the automobiles, the cleanliness, the politeness...the list goes on and on. With your encouragement and continued kind works, I know there is lots more to write down, this is an amazing and, yes, enchanted and blessed place. I know it. I feel it. I've experienced it.

After breakfast this morning, we had a 9 AM start for about a 4 hour or so tour of Wrocław. Our tour guide for this particular tour was very competent, spoke very good English, and was also funny. It was a good tour.

We had a nice tour all around the older parts of the city with a number of stops. Wrocław used to be known as Breslau, and it's a very old city, over a thousand years old. But at various times it's belonged to the Czechs, Hungarians, Russians, Prussians, Austrians, and just about everyone else you can think of, besides the Polish and Poland. But at the end of World War II, it became a part of Poland and many Germans from the area were "resettled" by the Communist Russians. Such was the way of the world that Truman and Roosevelt bartered away with Stalin. But, you can look up that history if you want....but make sure you read the truth, not just what some people would tell you.

As that “last” city between Moscow and Germany, the Germans in World War II defended it heavily, and so there was a lot of destruction. Not quite to the extent of Warszawa, but close. So a lot of what we saw today was rebuilt, though some original structures remain. The cathedral here dates back nearly a thousand years as well, can you believe that? It is very pretty inside and out. And old.

We also walked along and around the town square, the second largest on in Poland, second in size only to that of Kraków. It is very nice and full of life. I sure wish we had town squares back home in the US, they are a very cool thing.

There are many bridges in Wrocław as well. Sometimes it’s called the Venice of Poland. It has a lot of canals and the like too over 100 bridges, maybe 138 was the number, but a lot. The Odra (Oder) river runs through Wrocław. It is the second biggest river in Poland, after the Wisła, of course.

Eventually we went to a museum where there is a huge panoramic painting of the Battle of Raclawicka. This is a very famous battle in Polish history because it’s where Tadeusz Kosciuszko led the Polish insurrection against the Russians—and defeated them. Hundreds, maybe thousands, of Polish peasants armed with sickles managed to defeat the Russian army with their artillery. Unfortunately, though the battle was won, the insurrection failed and Poland remained partitioned between Austria, Germany, and Russia for another hundred years. But it serves as a memory to every Pole that “yes we can.” See, the Poles invented that phrase, not some American politicians who merely think they can (or thought they could). But I digress. The panorama is 15 meters high and 115 meters long, a huge artwork. It is very impressive and tells a great story. I was very moved by it.

So the battle depicted in the panorama, though a win in a loss (won the battle, lost the war, so to speak), still speaks for the feeling all Poles have of the love of their country and their desire to be free. If it was not for that spirit that came out in 1980 and subsequent years, the world would be a very different place today. Because of that spirit, the oppressive socialistic, leftist yoke of communism was eventually thrown off and the result was not only a free world for much of Eastern Europe and more, but an end to the cold war that existed from the end of World War II. So this panorama speaks to the heart and soul of the Polish people, and I felt that today.

After the tour, I returned with my “stuff” to the hotel, then walked back to the square, maybe $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile away. I met some of the others there at Karczma Lwowska, a very nice restaurant (and coincidentally right next to Dwór Polski where we are having our farewell meal later.). I had *dwa drugie piwo* and the *Talerz pierogów mieszanych*. It was very good, and the *pierogi* dough was very homemade like. Excellent food, but I could not eat all 12 of them. Oh well, I had my fill!

After that, I did some more souvenir shopping, picking up just a few trinkets here and there. More stuff that I didn't need but wanted. Oh well. I will return with an empty wallet but a full head—and stomach!

So that is pretty much the end of this travelogue, but not the end of the story. Actually, it's only the beginning. I've had a sweet taste of something very good, very intoxicating, and very addictive. I know I will be back....I have to come back, I just have to. And I will. But for now, I will continue to tell some of what I learned about this amazing country, the land of my ancestors. In learning about it, I also learn more about myself. How amazing is that?

Poland Day 14 — Just the beginning

Posted on [September 13, 2010](#) by [lkonieczny](#)

Today is not the end, but is only the beginning. We had a fabulous “last dinner” this evening with lots of good food and good times. But I will write more about that at a later time as currently the Internet connection at the hotel is down...thank god for my iPhone!

Suffice it to say it's been a great trip and one I will never forget but only the beginning. I will be back, most assuredly. And I will continue the stories of my amazing travels very soon, I promise!

Poland Day 15

Posted on [September 14, 2010](#) by [lkonieczny](#)

This will be short as I'm using the computer in the lobby at the hotel. Interesting using a computer where the icons are all in Polish. But I speak the universal language of Windows! LOL.

In a short time we leave for the Wroclaw airport, fly to Warsaw, and then later fly from Warsaw to Chicago. And later yet I'll fly from Chicago back to Orlando. It will be a very long day for me with a 6 hour time zone change. But it'll have been worth it, every bit. I had a wonderful time here, a real dream come true. But I'm sure just the beginning. My appetite has been whet and I can't wait to visit again. There are so very many things to see and do, just as there are in the US, true. But it's special here, the people are special. I will write more about all that in this blog in coming days, weeks, and months, so check back in every so often to find out what I learned. And when I get my pictures posted, I'll put a link here, too.

So to Poland i say do weidzenia, and "see you again soon!"

Poland Tour Postlude

Posted on [September 15, 2010](#) by [lkonieczny](#)

Our tour of Poland may be over, but the memories, impressions, and feelings will long live on. We had an early breakfast yesterday and then for one last time, boarded our tour bus, this time headed for the Wrocław airport. As airports go, the Wrocław airport is very small. I think maybe they have 8 gates. But there is also a lot of construction in the area. A new road to the airport is being built, and there are plans to expand the airport itself. Yes, Poland is a growing country, and growing quite quickly, now that it's thrown off the shackles of nearly 50 years of socialism.

We had some farewells at the Wrocław airport as our tour guide, Marek, and our driver, Andrzej, were driving back to Warszawa. They took very good care of us on our tour and I believe we all rewarded them handsomely for their expert care. They were truly wonderful.

After our short, 50 minute flight to Warszawa, we bid farewell to three of our group. Chris Kulinski, organizer of tour, as well as Jeanne and John, were staying on for a few

more days. Well, Chris for a lot longer. But he was going to help Jeanne and John with some continued ancestry research.

Finally, the remainder of our group boarded our LOT airlines plane for the long ride home. It was over a 9 hour trip. For me, it was a long trip. I had maybe two 45-minute naps, but that was about it, even with the help of some Żubrówka on the plane (\$2 or 5 PLN each, quite a bargain!). But I did have one amazing experience—I saw Greenland from the air, and it was fascinating. First I saw it in the distance, looking like mountains. But then as we got close i saw the bare rocks covered with snow, the glaciers, and the icebergs that had broken off. It was an amazing sight, something I've never seen before. It alone was worth the 9 hour plane ride.

Eventually we landed about on time in Chicago. Polish people applaud when the plane lands, by the way. I'm not sure, they just do! Anyway, we got to Chicago, then had to go through immigration (passport check) and then customs. It was a painless experience, the just asked a few questions and that was it.

After that, it was on to our respective destinations. For Sonja and Pat, Sonja's daughters Debbie and Sue were there to pick them up. It was nice to see them and we had lots of good hugs and goodbyes (and maybe if you're a friend you saw the pic of us three Poland-travelers on Facebook). For me then, it was on to my flight to Orlando. But first I managed to find the rest of our group and was happy to see that they all arrived safely at their gates.

Finally, about 22 hours after the day began for me, my flight to Orlando touched down and my friend Creighton picked me up and took me home. What a long day. My sense of time is still messed up a bit, but that's OK. I can honestly say it was well worth it.

I thoroughly and immensely enjoyed every second of my time in Poland. I hated to leave. It is a wonderful country with a rich history and culture, and filled with the most wonderful people on earth. From my fledgling studies of Polish history, I understand why my Polish ancestors left this wonderful country and came to the USA to make a better life, and they succeeded. But now I think life in Poland is improving greatly and quickly while in the USA, things are stagnant and even going downhill. So Poland is a very attractive place right now, full of hope and promise, maybe what the USA was 100 years ago for my ancestors. I have nothing but the highest respect for the people of

Poland; they have persevered through all kinds of toil and pain and have come out on top once again. It's a wonderful place to visit, and I cannot wait to go back again. And so the title of this, my blog, *Moja miłość do Polski*—My Love of Poland—makes perfect sense to me.

But this is not the end, this is only the beginning.....