

Random Thoughts from Poland, 2015

I have seen more nuns in less than two weeks in Poland than in twenty years in the Cincinnati area. Polish nuns are a lot younger too, on the average, than American nuns. Of course the nuns in Poland wear habits, not modern clothes. Poland may be the last European Catholic country, as far as practicing their faith is concerned. We went to Sunday Mass at Holy Cross Church in Warsaw and the church was full. (Holy Cross is where the heart of Chopin is buried, the rest of him being in Paris.) In the center of Madrid a year ago, I counted 30 faithful at 7:00 pm Saturday Mass. They were all old people (including us). In Warsaw, there were young men and women, couples with children, as well as seniors.

In Wadowice, the birthplace of Karol Wojtyla, the church (Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary) had no less than nine confessionals, and there was a long line for the one that was open, on a Thursday morning. In Krakow, right off Market Square, is St. Mary's Basilica. Val and I went to 10:00 am Mass on a Friday. Again, the pews were full. There is a Mass every 30 min., on the hour and half hour, all morning. The Mass lasted exactly that, 30 min. As far as we could tell, the preceding and succeeding Masses were also fully attended. There was another long line at the confessional, with a lot of young men and women waiting. The duration of the Mass reminded me of my Catholic school days in Manila. The faster the priest finished Mass, the more well attended his Mass. Val says that is the same thing she remembers about Masses growing up in Chicago.

Jasna Gora is a Pauline Monastery in Czestochowa, a town about the size of Cincinnati. The 14th century monastery contains the Black Madonna, Poland's most revered icon. We were given a private tour by Fr. Simon Stefanowicz, OSPPE, a monk for 51 years. I haven't talked to a monk lately, so I don't know what the rules are for the Pauline order. But Fr. Simon sure gets around. He spoke Tagalog, often visiting the Pauline seminary in San Pablo (St. Paul) city outside Manila.

We got a front row seat at the chapel of the Black Madonna, in time for the 2 pm uncovering. The chapel was packed and I'm sure the faithful had been waiting for a while. But Fr. Simon took us up to the front, right there with the monks conducting the service. Before the uncovering, some of the faithful went around the chapel on their knees. It reminded me of a similar custom of worshipers at the Quiapo church in Manila, where the patron saint is the Black Nazarene. Fr. Simon knew all about this and other Filipino traditions as well. Traversing from the entrance to the altar on their knees was quite common in the Philippines, but what I saw in Jasna Gora far exceeded what you see in the Philippines today. I have never seen this practice in the United States.

There is no separate public or Catholic school. Since the country is overwhelmingly Catholic, nuns run a lot of the public schools. Religious instruction goes with it. That explains all the nuns we saw. Wait till the ACLU gets wind of this. We were in Krakow Sept. 1, which was the first day of school. The students were all dressed up in suits and dresses. They also dress up on the last day, but go casual in between.

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We saw more families with children and fewer families with dogs. The reverse is true in other European countries.

Poland has a more homogeneous population than other European countries we've visited. It is rare to see Africans, Asians or Hispanics. I guess that's the result of not having any former colonies, or a Mediterranean shore. But Poland is under pressure from the European Community to accept migrants from the war torn Middle East and Africa. It will be interesting to see how that plays out. Our guide ranted on about not wanting migrants. It would certainly be a culture shock for both sides.

There are lots of Italian restaurants and pizzerias, with occasional Vietnamese and Mexican. Chinese restaurants haven't invaded Poland en masse yet, thank goodness. Of course the Chinese have probably already claimed they invented the *pierogi* (dumpling). I like pierogis, and Chinese dumplings as well, called pot stickers in U.S. menus.

Warsaw is the least traffic congested major European city we've experienced. Buses and streetcars run minutes apart. Moscow is the worst, with fender benders a regular daily occurrence.

I would like to know how the Polish language evolved. They use more diacritical marks. Even the L has a version with a forward slash, Ł. They can't seem to spell a word without throwing in a w or a z. While the Hawaiians cut the Roman alphabet in half, the Poles added more letters.

Tourism isn't as big yet in Poland. You don't see the ubiquitous tour buses like in Paris, Madrid or London. The number of tourist arrivals in Spain is four times that of Poland, France more than five times. Poland remains a bargain. In Warsaw, you can book a room for little more than \$100 a night, even at hotels like Marriott and Hilton. A cab ride from Warsaw's Chopin airport to the city center runs \$10. Our 3 room apartment in Warsaw cost us about \$95 a nite, breakfast included.

Public transportation is inexpensive. We traveled the 300 km. between Warsaw and Krakow by Polski bus. It cost about \$7 each. They had free WiFi too. Speaking of WiFi, Poland is wired. There are hot spots just about everywhere. If you wish to criss cross Eastern Europe and the Baltic countries via Polski bus, you can do so for less than the air fare between Cincinnati and Chicago.

In terms of prosperity, Poland appears closer to western Europe than any of the former Soviet bloc countries. I would venture to say that they're much better off than the Russians. That is sweet revenge. On the ride from Warsaw to Krakow, the small towns had attractive houses with new tile roofs. We didn't see shacks like we did in Russia, Serbia, Romania, etc. Poland doesn't have the ugly public housing built by the Russians in other Soviet bloc countries at least in the two major cities that we visited.

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It is easy to realize that one isn't in the United States. Very few people are overweight, and it is rare to see an obese person.

There are few panhandlers and beggars. There's a handful of buskers. We only saw one Roma (gypsy) family, in Warsaw's Old Town, with a couple of kids playing an accordion and aggressively pursuing people.

The tallest building (if you count the spire) in Warsaw is the Palace of Culture, a building reminiscent of the Soviet era buildings in Moscow. During our Russian trip two years ago, our guides called the architecture Stalin Gothic. The Palace of Culture is now surrounded by modern glass and steel towers, but remains imposing. The building was a "gift" from the Russians during the Soviet era, designed by a Russian architect. The building only looks good from a distance. The Poles seem content to let it decay. It could use a good scrubbing. Sandblasting would be better.

Outdoor restaurants still allow smoking. It is rare to see a shaggy haired young Pole. A popular haircut seems to be cut close on the sides, military style, with the top longer and combed across. They don't wear their pants low either. Dziekuje!

Krakow has the best "Old Town" we've seen. The buildings are original, some dating back to the 15th century. The first building of Jagiellonian University (alma mater of Nikolaus Copernicus and Karol Wojtyla, separated by 450 years) is still there, converted into a museum. While Warsaw was totally demolished in the wake of the Uprising and its aftermath, Krakow escaped unscathed from World War II. The Polish Home Army in Krakow decided not to follow the lead of Warsaw's Uprising, not attacking the German garrison. After the Russians crossed the Vistula, the Germans decided not to defend Krakow, and withdrew. The only other city that gives Krakow serious competition is Venice.

Judging by the number of monuments, no event seems to tug at the Polish psyche more than the massacre at Katyn. Hundreds of miles from Poland's eastern boundary, past Ukraine and into Russia, Katyn was the site where more than 20,000 Polish intelligentsia, military and police officers were massacred by the Russians in 1940. While walking around Krakow's Market Square one evening, we chanced upon a two foot plaque at ground level. Since the square is about ten acres, you won't see this plaque unless you're looking for it. Or in our case, stumbling on it. The plaque commemorated the act of self immolation by Walenty Badylak, on that spot, in 1980, the 40th anniversary of the massacre. A Polish army veteran, Badylak was protesting the lack of awareness and the cover up by the Russians, who at the time were de facto rulers of Poland. More than ten years later, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Russians finally fessed up.

Poland was carved up by surrounding empires, non-existent as a political entity for 125 years, and brutalized by two extreme ideologies from the east and west. But Poland, like the phoenix, has risen. Niech żyje Polska!

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