

Visiting Poland in 2010?

By: **Robert Strybel**,
Polish/Polonian Affairs Writer

At this time of year, summer vacation may be the last thing many people want to think about. But it is really not too early to give it some thought, especially if an overseas trip is being considered. The weeks and months will fly by in no time and soon it will be summer once again.

Most Polish Americans not "made of money" and want what they spend on their vacation to be a good value. Most will vacation in the States, others may head north or south of the border, sign on for a Caribbean cruise or maybe even visit London or Paris. Why would anybody want to spend their vacation in Poland?

There are as many different reasons as there are visitors. Some are motivated by simple curiosity or an interest in their cultural heritage. Others hope to visit relatives and maybe sing out something more about their ancestral roots. There are Pol-Ams with specific interests such as touring old castles, visiting religious pilgrimage sites, collecting folk art, communing with nature, restaurant hopping or viewing historical re-enactments. And many represent a combination of these and other interests.

Many soon come to realize that Poland is not just another foreign country. A common observation among US-born Polonians is that in the Old Country they have re-experienced many of the sights, sounds, scents and tastes from the time they were growing up. That is especially true of those raised in or near an old Polish neighborhood. It is likewise not uncommon to encounter familiar looking facial types that remind Polish-Americans visitors of some proverbial Mitch the druggist, Chet the butcher or this or that postman, neighbor, priest or nuns

remembered from their Pol-Am childhood.

What about value? The only way to answer that question is to compare the prices of tourist excursions to other places for the same period of time, and those can be found on the Internet, in newspapers and at local travel agencies. As for the prices of things once you are in Poland, they are in general more reasonable than what you would pay in Britain, France, Germany or elsewhere in Western Europe. Here is what a few common items may now run:

- ◆ Basic restaurant meal – \$5 - \$10
- ◆ McDonald's cheeseburger or small fries \$1.09
- ◆ Beer half liter (over 17 ounces), store price – 72¢ - \$1.10
- ◆ Beer half liter (over 17 ounces), pub price – \$2 - \$3
- ◆ Cup of Coffee – \$1.80 – \$2.18
- ◆ Men's haircut – \$7 - \$12
- ◆ Airmail letter to the US – \$1.16
- ◆ Taxi cab (entry and 1st kilometer or .62 mile) – \$2.36 - \$2.76
- ◆ Movie ticket – \$5.80 – \$7.60
- ◆ Cigarettes (pack of 20) – \$2.90 - \$3.60
- ◆ Flower (carnations, roses) – 72¢ - \$1.09 apiece

These are Warsaw prices which are usually somewhat higher than in other cities. The cost of most things is usually lowest in small towns and rural areas. For visiting Pol-Ams what they actually pay will depend on how many zlotys they get to the dollar when they visit. In 2009, the dollar was worth more than three zlotys at the start of the year and dropped to 2.75 in December.

To most potential visitors the most important is what is there to do and see in Poland. Major attractions include:

WARSAW: The capital of Poland was rebuilt after World War II almost from

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Christmas in Katyń

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My good friend and former Orchard Lake colleague, the late Monsignor Zdzisław Peszkowski shared the following experiences both orally and in his written memoirs. A 21-year-old cavalry captain in 1939, he was among the some 22,000 Polish officers captured by the Soviets and one of a handful who survived the ordeal that would later become known as the Katyń Forest Massacre.*

The great importance those POWs attached to their Catholic faith and Polish tradition may be an eye-opener to those Polonians who have drifted away from one or both. The Poles imprisoned in an abandoned Orthodox monastery-turned-dungeon at Kozielsk, took considerable risks to secretly hear the Word of God, receive the sacraments and uphold their ancestral heritage without their Soviet captors' knowledge. In that way they were a lot like the early Christians worshipping in catacombs.

When Christmas 1940 was approaching, the then Captain Peszkowski asked the friendly prison cook Wańka (Russian for Johnny) for some flour for opłatki. Wańka's eyes mysteriously lit up and he asked Peszkowski him to step outside into the snow. He looked about to make sure no-one was watching and then whispered "Ojczy nasz, któryś jest w niebie...", and then went on to recite the Hail Mary in strongly eastern-accented Polish. He too was a Pole whose family had been Russified, because admitting to being Polish or Catholic back then was not looked upon kindly by the Soviets, to say the least.

Peszkowski got some coarse, rye flour for the opłatki and communion wafers. Amongst those imprisoned at Kozielsk was a priest, whose identity fellow-prisoners had kept a secret and referred to him only by his rank as "the captain". (Peszkowski himself would not be ordained until a decade after the war in America). Every so often the word would go around that that "the captain is going for a walk" and prisoners would scurry to

join him. That was the only way they could make their confession. That seemed to take forever, because only one person accompanied the priest at a time, and the walks were few and far between.

As Christmas approached, the Soviets twice carried out unannounced searches and roll-calls. Nevertheless, the prisoners managed to clandestinely prepare opłatki which turned out brownish, brittle and similar to Jewish matzoh.

"We sent the youngest man present to see if the evening star was shining, according to our Polish tradition," Peszkowski recounted his Wigilia in Soviet captivity "The oldest man read an extract from the Bible which I had copied from the missal of a certain major." Someone was always posted on watch outside. Bits of food were placed on a bed-sheet pretending to be a table-cloth, and there were even tiny gifts for everyone. But their attempt to quietly sing kolędy failed. Some of the prisoners shared their experiences of the preceding Christmas, but most wanted to be alone with their thoughts and returned to their bunks.

Midnight Mass was not even attempted. During the long months as a Soviet POW, Peszkowski was able to attend a clandestine mass only a handful of times. Such masses were sporadically attended in turn by small groups of prisoners who had to appear to be sitting around and chatting. On that Christmas Eve the Soviet guards and politruks (political-indoctrination officers) arrived at 10:30 p.m. "They only shook their heads in disgust when they saw spruce branches in the middle of the room between our bunks and the white sheet with our wafer and carved wooden crib which had taken one highland (Góral) lieutenant a month to create," Peszkowski recalled.

Nobody seems to have been interrogated or punished for engaging in such "illegal propagation of religious superstition", as the Stalinist penal code referred to religion. Did the Soviet POW camp officials already know what fate was in store for the Polish POWs and were under orders not to unduly torment their captives?

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„Drży gwiazda i światło jest bliżej”

*Wigilia, Noël, Christmas, Boże Narodzenie,
te słowa są zaczarowane.*

Groźny Bóg stał się dzieckiem,

znalazł do nas drogę przez czułość i wzruszenie.

Błogosławi nam rączką wśród śpiewu pasterzy.

My byliśmy też jak dzieci, obrazki z palmami,

z Matką Bożą na ośle i świętym Józefem

to pierwsza nasza podróż w egzotyczne kraje,

pierwsi wygnańcy jakich poznaliśmy,

szukający schronienia przed krwawym despotą.

Betlejem dziwnie swojskie, palmy, a śnieg polski,

kolęda radosna i rzewna zarazem,

jest w niej rytm krakowiaka i krok poloneza.

O północy pasterka. Buchnęło światłem i śpiewem.

Bóg się rodzi, moc truchleje, Pan niebiosów nad ziemią.

Na choince pierniki, jabłka, szklane kule,

u szczytu anioł prosi w naszej sprawie,

pod choinką podarki, w sieni kolędniczy,

na stole postne dania w wielkiej obfitości

i opłatek, za którym idą dobrych życzeń krocie.

W blasku świec pojawiają się łagodne twarze

nieżyjącej już matki, dziadków, wuja, ojca,

wszyscy nam wybaczyli, chcą znowu być z nami

i tacy piękni dzisiaj i tak uroczyści.

Przy stole jedno miejsce dla kogoś w podróży,

łezka skrycie wylana, potem dużo śmiechu,

przy ciastach i kompocie rozwijanie paczek,

pokój tonie w papierkach, sznureczkach i wstążkach,

wspominanie przyjaciół odeszłych na zawsze.

Myśl cofa się wciąż dalej, opłatek zesłańców,

wilie okupacyjne, w więzieniach, w obozach,

wilie internowanych, wilie zatrzymanych,

na obczyźnie spędzone, biedne lub obfite.

Śnieg skrzypi i na oknach mróz rysuje kwiaty.

Czas przystaje, drży gwiazda i światło jest bliżej.

**With this beautiful poem by Julia Hartwig,
The Consulate General of the Republic of Poland
in Los Angeles**

wishes you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year 2010.

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