

OUR VISIT TO POLAND

by

Clyde Bramlett



Whenever I mentioned going to Poland the response would be -- Poland? Why are you going there? Marian and I went to Poland because we were invited by the Polish Home Army Veteran's Association. I was a B-17 bomber pilot in the 8th USAAF flying out of England in 1944. My 95th Bomb Group was one assigned to air drop supplies to the Poles in Warsaw. We would drop them by parachute, then continue on into Russia to land since we would be flying for approximately 11 hours, and would be too far from England to return without refueling. All WW2 Allied veteran airmen who participated in this effort to help Poland in its uprising against the German occupation forces in 1944 would, along with their wives, be guests of the Polish Air Force. They wanted us to be a part of the commemorative ceremonies on the 50th anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising so they could express their appreciation to us.

On our arrival at Warsaw's Okecie Airport, our group was greeted by the President of the Polish Home Army Veterans Association. We were escorted through the airport, bypassing Customs, and we followed a leader who carried a large United States flag. At the Victoria International Hotel, one of Warsaw's finest, we were introduced to an Air Force Major (George), a Captain (Andrew), and a young girl (Katerina), who worked for the Air Force. They would be our constant escorts, in addition to Tad Sokolowsik, a Polish Home Army veteran, who now lives in Illinois. A bus and driver were put at our disposal, along with a professional photographer, who would video tape all our activities while we were in Poland.

The day of our arrival we were taken on a bus tour of Warsaw, and visited the Museum of Polish History. We were impressed with the wide, clean streets lined with lovely old trees, and with sidewalks wide enough for cars to park. We marvelled at the magnificent architecture of the ancient buildings, and the landscaping with flowers everywhere. The city was peaceful and busy, but not congested. It was almost impossible to realize the horror and persecution the Polish people endured under the Nazi occupation for the beauty of the ancient buildings gave no hint of the destruction the city had undergone just half a century ago.

The Polish History Museum was very interesting. The Curator briefed us on the history of Poland for the past 1,000 years. We had never seen anything like the historic relics and armament. How Poland has preserved these is amazing. The Poles are very patriotic and proud of their history. They have always been a peace loving nation, but have been attacked by every country on their border except Hungary - more than once by Russia and Germany. The Curator told us that every time Russia and Germany shook hands Poland trembled, for they knew the first thing their enemies would do would be to plan how to divide Poland.

After this first busy day we were royally entertained. We couldn't believe all they had planned for us. The young Air Force Officers couldn't have been more concerned for our welfare and enjoyment had they been our own sons.

Before the Anniversary ceremonies began in Warsaw, we were taken on an overnight weekend bus trip to Deblin, the home of Poland's Air Force Academy. In addition to our regular escorts, a doctor was sent with us - just in case anyone became ill or was hurt. On the way we drove near the Russian border where we saw a large roadside market. Our guide told us the Russians had to cross the border to Poland to make money selling their goods because the Russian people are so poor.

We were taken on a long boat ride down the scenic Vistula River before arriving at Deblin, and enjoyed our mid-day meal at an old restaurant in an ancient village. At the Air Force Academy we were officially welcomed by the Commanding General, his wife, and all his staff in a long receiving line. We were then escorted into the ornate old palace, which now houses the Officers Club and a Grand Ballroom. There they had prepared a banquet for us, and afterwards we were treated to a concert of the music of Chopin, performed by a famous Polish pianist.

The Air Force Academy is housed in an ancient nobleman's palace and surrounding stronghold buildings. We spent the night in the old palace, which is now used by the Academy as a guest hotel. These facilities were used by the Nazis during WW2 as a

prison; reportedly some 80,000 Poles were brutally executed there. The next morning we learned that armed guards had walked the halls as we slept. We later attended Mass at the lovely Garrison Church.

That afternoon the Commanding General (with his interpreter and staff) gave us a tour of the Air Base. They are very proud of their Academy and the training given their airmen. The cadets are required to speak three languages - Polish of course, along with mandatory English, and they may choose a third one. After a tour of the flight line the General and his staff saluted as we drove away.

In Warsaw the biggest ceremony was the Allied Day Commemoration, attended by thousands. It was held at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. President Waleska and representatives from all Allied Countries attended, as well as representatives from Russia and Germany. The German representative asked forgiveness for what his country had done to Poland. Vice President Gore was the U. S. representative.



Later, at a garden reception at the American Embassy, we were welcomed by Ambassador Key and met Vice President Gore, after which we attended the premiere of the opera oratoria "Quo Vadis" at Warsaw's spectacular Grand Opera House. "Quo Vadis" portrays the persecution of the early Christians in Rome, and our hosts felt this was an appropriate parallel to the persecution of the Poles during WW2.

The highlight of our visit was the American Day Commemorative Ceremony held at Lomianki Memorial Park where there is a monument to the American airmen. One of our 8th AAF planes crashed at this very site, and the names of the eight young Americans who died there are listed on the monument. Vice President Gore and a Polish General were the main speakers. The five of us who later were awarded medals were asked by the American Embassy to stand on the platform with the speakers as they spoke.

It is amazing that we lost only one plane over Warsaw that day for we were flying much lower than we normally would on a bombing mission, and the flak from the anti-aircraft guns was extremely heavy. As we approached our drop zone where many Poles had risked their lives to mark the streets and buildings with white paint, we were fired on by the Germans and as we crossed the Vistula River flying toward Russia I'm sure we were fired on by the Russians. We could see Warsaw burning and the devastation was horrible.

Eighty-five percent of this spectacular city was totally destroyed by the Nazis at Hitler's command. Street by street and building by building was dynamited and burned, reducing most structures to piles of rubble. During the six weeks of the uprising effort, over 200,000 Poles were killed, including more than 125,000 civilians. In all the Germans killed over 600,000 Poles from 1939 to 1945.

Immediately following the ceremony at Lomianki Memorial Park, five of us, two who were members of my crew, were awarded the Polish Uprising Cross with a certificate signed by President Waleska. The medals were presented to each of us by the Commanding General at Air Force Headquarters

After the official ceremonies ended in Warsaw, we were escorted by bus to Zelawawa Wola, where we visited the home of Frederic Chopin, Poland's famous composer. Chopin wrote much of his music here, surrounded by a fabulous garden and park. Also we toured the Baroque Palace of Nieborow, which belonged to the Radziwell family for a long period of time; now it is a branch of the National Museum of Poland. During WW2 this palace was used as a German Headquarters.

A walking tour through Old Town seemed to take us back in time to the 12th century. The fabulous Royal Castle is located here, high on the west bank of the Vistula River. It housed Poland's royalty until 1791, when Poland installed a democratic government. Poland was the second nation in the world to establish a democracy, a fact of which they are extremely proud.

When Germany invaded Poland in 1939, the people began stripping the Royal Castle, the museums, churches, and other historic buildings, and buried what treasures they could outside Warsaw, hoping to get them back after the war ended. They even had enough foresight to bury the original design plans of their magnificent buildings, hoping they could retrieve them some day and rebuild. Unfortunately, they didn't have time to complete this salvaging before the Nazis stole the most valuable treasures and carried them off to Germany. After war's end, Germany was forced to return them; then the Russians stole them. Finally Russia too had to return this wealth of art, gold, sculpture, etc. when its Communist government fell. Some treasures had also ended up in England and these too were returned to Poland.

Beginning in 1945, the Russians allowed the Polish people to rebuild Warsaw. What had originally taken hundreds of years to build was almost totally rebuilt in only 15 years - from 1945 to 1960. Almost everything has been restored just the way it was before the war. They have done a magnificent job. Today's Warsaw looks very much as it did prior to 1939.

Would I go back to Poland? Yes, if I had the opportunity, because it is a country worth knowing, and we were always treated as welcome guests. Some of the RAF veterans who had been back to Poland several times since the war said the Polish people always made you feel welcome. They are right - I had never shaken so many hands or been hugged so much in my life. I learned the Polish word for "thank you" because I heard it so often - even from people on the street when they learned I was in the battle for Warsaw 50 years ago.

I salute the Polish people for their undaunted spirit, their patriotism and their faith.

