

Reflections on the Ursuline Contributions to Windsor and My Life Gratitude

by Steve Polewski



The first word that comes to mind when I think of how the Ursuline Sisters of the Agonizing Heart of Jesus have influenced my life, and beyond my personal experience - all the young people that have been shaped by their didactic presence in the Windsor area – is GRATITUDE. I think of all the instructional words of wisdom and their loving actions that helped form me as a person, and by their presence from Windsor extending to Chatham, London, and Ottawa.

My earliest memories are of the Polish Day Nursery program we refer to as the "Przedszkole". I cannot say how old I was when I started; but seeing as how the sisters arrived in 1965, it must have been in 1969 when I was four years old because I know that it was just before I attended the regular kindergarten of the English Catholic Board. Some of my fondest memories started in the environment created by Sr. Maria. I remember the singing, the story time, the arts and crafts, and of course the delicious snacks prepared by the sisters - specifically Sr. Luiza. As school advanced, the next set of memories was born of classes, instructed by Sister Daniela. Those were indeed fun times! Although my English classmates had the pleasure of sleeping in on Saturday mornings and watching cartoons, fellow classmates and I gathered for Polish School. It was a magical time - although we had no idea how that time would impact us for the rest of our lives. Fascinated by the stories of the beginning of Poland with Lech, Czech i Rus, the Polish Kings like Mieszko I and Boleslaw Krzywousty, we learned of the sacrifices of Polish people at battles like Grunwald and the expansion of the Polish kingdom to a time when Poland stretched from the Baltic to the Black seas.

Thanks to the creativity of the presentations, we were-mesmerized by a land that had been born in simplicity and grew into a mighty nation. Blessed by stunning geography from the Baltic seashore, to the mountain beauty of the south, we learned of the treasures of Wieliczka, the winter wonderland of Zakopane, the historicity of Krakow, and the valiant fighters who fought unto death to save Warszawa in World War II. Immersed in this cultural heritage one could not help but believe that "I am Polish and proud."

Having studied the history, the culture, the songs, the music, we as young people became aware of the breadth of Polish identity. The impact that this had on a young and developing mind and person is hard to summarize. To be aware that as a Pole, I continue in the long line of artists and craftsmen like Wit Stwos, musicians like Fryderyk Chopin and Ignacy Paderewski, scientists like Maria Sklodowska-Curie, and revolutionaries like Tadeusz Kosciuszko, how can one not be inspired to greatness?

With role models like these to follow, the burden of responsibility to achieve greatness was fostered. In a young person, a desire to leave a lasting legacy was born. To want to hand down to future generations something of value was instilled. The thought that we do not just live for ourselves, but for future generations became a motto that directed our lives. This motto of altruism was coupled with a faith rooted in the Church. To live well, not just for yourself, but for God was linked with national patriotism. Although people like me have been born in Canada and call Canada our home, our hearts have been reared in two places. From the shaping by our parents, grandparents, and specifically these Polish women of the Ursuline Order - who made the idea of Polish Heritage come alive in our textbooks, the slide shows, the Jaselka, "Trzeci Maj" productions, and church celebrations - we often felt more Polish than Canadian. Our citizenship was Canadian, but our culture was Polish.

The greatest gift of the Sisters that I would like to express my gratitude for, but simple words cannot describe, is the profound gift of a strong and unwavering faith in God and being part of His Church. Having travelled throughout the world, I feel at home in every church that I enter. I know that I am in my Father's house. The languages may be foreign, but I know that I am at home.

I cannot say that I remember my baptism for I was an infant. But from that moment of being held in the arms of my godparents Halina Bender and Jozef Ostrowski, I was raised in the faith of a community of believers. The journey of faith that saw me pass through the Sacraments of Confession, First Communion, and Confirmation would not have been possible without the instruction and care of the Polish Ursuline Sisters.. They explained to us the wonder we were about to experience. Through the attendance of Sunday masses, First Friday of the Month Devotions and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, the recitation of the rosary in front of the statue of the Blessed Mother - all of these were elucidated by the

Sisters that guided us as altar boys. Great thanks to Sister Samuela! In addition to the training that we received as altar boys, we were blessed to have the contingent of girls - the Sodality of Mary and Krucjata with us at the altar.

In fact, the two groups of church celebrations and Polish school affairs were so intertwined that there hardly seemed to be any difference. On Saturday you went to Polish School, on Sunday you went to church. During the week there were Polonez Orkiestra rehearsals, once a month jaselka practices, or if it was spring - eastern pageant or the Third of May practices. With the selfless and unlimited patience of Sr. Maris, Mrs. Mary Niec, Pani Zehaluk, ks. Stanislaw Nierychlewski we were a community linked by faith and by tradition.

So what can be said of the contribution to Windsor and young people now across Canada and the world by the nurturing and educational contributions of the Polish Sisters? No word can express the gratitude I feel for instilling in me a lasting faith and pride in being of Polish descent. These women helped shape the person I am today. Of course my thanks must also be extended to my parents Tadeusz and Emilia Polewski for their time and effort in driving me and my three brothers Ted, Ed, and Mark to all the practices and hours of instruction. But I would be a remiss if my gratitude as well was not extended to Msgr. Lawrence Wnuk for it was he who was responsible for inviting the Sisters to join the Windsor community and establishing a chapter of their convent here in Windsor. Fifty years later, I certainly hope that they feel rooted enough here to call this place their home. Although I am certain that they too - as we did then and do now - feel a divided loyalty. Divided between Poland, the land our culture, and Canada, the land where we make our lives today.

My thanks go out to you, dear Sisters of the Agonizing Heart of Jesus for all the wonderful memories that you have given me. I treasure in my heart the rehearsals, the performances, the bells and smells of church celebrations, and the trip to Poland, "Nasza Ojczyzna", where I was finally able to touch, taste and see all the things that I had heard about for so many years. You brought to me a country that I was only able to visit once, but that through your ministrations I have held close to my heart my whole life long. That, coupled with a faith in God who journeys with me daily, are how you have shaped a life. God bless you all, and may you continue to affect others in so positive a way for years to come.

- Stefan Polewski