

Why our ancestors left Poland

by Larry Plachino



One of the most pervasive questions to come up in researching our family tree is: Why did our ancestors leave Europe? All four of my grandparents decided to leave the land of their ancestors behind, board a ship, and come to America. They were certainly not unique. One reference says that more than four million people left ethnic Polish lands between 1870 and 1914. Another report indicates that 174,365 Polish people arrived in the United States in 1913.

There are at least three general and obvious reasons behind much of this European migration to America. The first reason is the traditional human need to seek a better life. The second reason was the attraction of the United States as a land of opportunity. A third reason was that in many parts of Europe, population had increased faster than agricultural technology. The result was occasional famines and not enough food to go around. For example, the potato famine was a major factor in people leaving Ireland. In Poland, there were several additional factors, most of which were a result of the country's unique geography.

Poland is bordered on the north by the Baltic Sea. Poland's south border is the Carpathian Mountains which extend west to Germany and southeast to the Black Sea. Much of Europe to the south of Poland was not easily accessible because of the Alps and other mountains. As a result, the Baltic Sea and Carpathian Mountains acted as a funnel with the Polish plains being the easiest and most obvious route between

Europe and Asia. On the one hand, this was a blessing because some of the earliest trade routes between Europe and Asia passed through Poland. Even today it is possible to ride all the way from the Atlantic Ocean at London, England to the Pacific Ocean at Peking, China on only three trains that pass through Berlin, Warsaw and Moscow.

An interesting side note is that all of this traffic to and through Poland made it one of the most metropolitan countries in Europe. The Slavonic tribe known as the Polanie (which means the people who dwell in the fields and open country) gave Poland its name. They were joined by groups of Celts, Balts, Goths, Huns, Swedes, Germans, Russians, Ukrainians, Tatars, Armenians and Latvians. The net result being the Polish people have quite a diverse heritage.

On the negative side, Poland's geographic position as the crossroads of Europe and Asia made it a prime target for war and occupation. Virtually every European dictator or leader, including Atilla the Hun, Julius Caesar, Napoleon, Catherine the Great, Hitler and Joe Stalin, occupied or controlled Poland to some extent. In between these major problems, Poland often found itself simultaneously fighting off Germany on the west and Russia on the east. Poland's times of peace and self-government were often measured in years rather than centuries. It is interesting that in spite of these conflicts, the Polish people not only retained their national identity but also became a major influence on neighbor-

ing countries. For example, the Lithuanian people gave up their own Byelorussian language and adopted Polish. I find it significant that Poland was the first of the communist countries to return to democracy, thus paving the way for a domino-like collapse of communism throughout the Soviet bloc.

All of the above negative factors, and more, were present in Poland during the 19th century.

Certainly, the worst of these problems was that Poland did not exist as an independent nation at any time during the 19th century. The first two Polish kings of the 18th century were notoriously incompetent. The last Polish king, Stanislaw August Poniatowski (who ruled from 1764 to 1795) was essentially a puppet of the Russian regime and particularly Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia.

An anti-Russian rebellion broke out in Poland which led to the partitioning of Poland in 1773 and an increased partitioning in 1791. An armed Polish rebellion under the leadership of Tadeusz Kosciuszko, a hero of the American War of Independence, failed and the third partition of Poland in 1795 divided the remaining Polish territory.

While later efforts by Napoleon were to provide a brief respite, it can be said that Poland was divided into three parts in 1795. Russia occupied a large eastern section of Poland as well as several surrounding countries including the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Byelorussia. Prussia (essentially Northern Germany) occupied Western Poland and what was then the north central section east to Grodno. The area south of Warsaw, which included Malopolska (Little Poland) and Borzécin, the home of our ancestors, was occupied by Austria.

William Hoffman, the author of the book on Polish names and current editor of the newsletter of the Polish Genealogical Society, described this situation as “. . . living under foreign emperors who regarded their new subjects as little more than tax-paying cannon fodder.” This was an era of rebellion and petty wars. Among other offenses and affronts, the Polish people in these occupied territories were heavily taxed to pay for these wars and their young men were conscripted into military service to fight these wars for the occupying countries. Prussia continued an ongoing

war with France for most of this century. Russia battled Turkey, France and the British Empire in the Crimean War. The Russians then got into a battle with the Japanese where many Polish men were forced to fight.

Imperial Russia annexed 73 percent of then-existing Polish lands. Following a Polish insurrection in 1863, the Polish language was prohibited and a Russification program began. Catholic churches were persecuted, peasants who caused trouble were deported to Siberia, and many villages were burned. It is noteworthy that Russian Czar Alexander II was assassinated in 1881 by a bomb thrown by a Polish engineering student. Much of this land was eventually ceded to Russia in 1945 following World War II.

Prussia occupied 15 percent of Polish land including most everything from Wielkopolska (Great Poland) to Gdansk Pomerania and including the northern coast on the Baltic. The Polish people were treated very badly here and most sources indicate that the Polish people in Prussian-occupied territory fared worse than those in the Russian- and Austrian-occupied areas.

Traditional Polish courts were annulled, land was taken from the Polish people and given to German settlers, use of the Polish language was prohibited, and children were beaten in the streets if they protested. German people were brought in to govern the towns. Most of them were not prepared for any administrative work but used their positions to enrich themselves at the expense of the local Polish residents. Separate schools were maintained for the Catholic and Lutheran children, with the Catholics being primarily Polish and the Lutherans being primarily German, which frequently caused open conflict between the students.

However the local people attempted to maintain their *Polskosc* which translates as “Polishness.” By the 1860s there were bands of rebels roaming the area who got into armed actions with German soldiers and administrators. Local Polish people supported the rebels and there were actual underground transport systems to get weapons and gunpowder to the rebels forces. Although the armed conflicts diminished in later years, the Polish people in this area did create several Polish societies to protect and encourage their *Polskosc*. It is interesting that these societies eventually led to the Solidarity movement

that brought Poland out of Communism a century later.

The territory occupied by Austria amounted to only 12 percent of Poland and hence was the smallest of the three occupied areas. Two different sources indicate that the Polish people in the area occupied by Austria, which includes most of our ancestors, were probably treated the best of the three occupied areas. The policy of the Austrian government was to eliminate everything Polish including place names. As a result, the area was named Galacia from the old Roman name for nearby Ruthenia/Ukraina. Hence, the Polish people living there frequently used two names to identify their region: the traditional Malopolska in Polish, and Galacia while under Austrian rule.

Rosemary Chorzempa says that Galacia had the highest birth and death rates in Europe and reportedly also had the highest income tax rate. In addition to heavy taxes, the Austrian regime imposed censorship, a police state to terrorize the residents, and a complex bureaucracy with its numerous minor laws designed to antagonize the poles.

By the mid-1800s, many of the Polish people became fed up with the occupation and began to leave all three sections of Poland. While the occupation was bad enough, other problems came up that did nothing to improve the situation.

Galacia suffered heavy flooding in 1836. I have yet to locate any specific record pertaining to grandpa's and grandma's town of Borzécin. However, Borzécin is located on the Uscwica River, a major tributary of Poland's greatest river, the Wisla. Hence, it would be a fair assumption that Borzécin and Jagniówka suffered substantially from this and other floods. Even today, most the rivers and major streams in the area have dikes along their banks to eliminate or at least reduce the impact of flooding.

Galacia was not alone in suffering from severe health problems during this period. Medicine was still in its infancy and knowledge of germs and antiseptics was still in the future. Children were delivered at home by midwives and many failed to survive. Those that did often failed to reach adulthood because of lung diseases or malnutrition. There were also numerous outbreaks of cholera. The first Asiatic cholera epidemic was recorded in 1831. There were out-

breaks of both cholera and typhus a few years later, in 1847 and 1848. The year 1854 is remembered for The Great Cholera Epidemic. Throughout the remainder of the century, there were additional outbreaks of Cholera in Poland and Galacia, particularly in 1866, 1873, 1884 and 1892.

Add to this the fact that Poland, and particularly Galacia, suffered from poor crop yields and resulting starvation. The decade from 1846 to 1855 witnessed poor crop yields in Galacia. Rosemary Chorzempa says that the resulting starvation and epidemic diseases claimed the lives of 200,000 people in Galacia. There was also a substantial famine in Galacia in 1907. It is significant that this same year witnessed the largest number of immigrants coming to the United States.

If you take all of this into consideration, it becomes obvious that there were several reasons for people to leave Poland. Most of those who did leave came to the United States because they knew that there were opportunities here and relatives or fellow countrymen were already in America.