

# **A long, long time ago... That's how most fairy tales begin. However, I do not wish to write about a fairy tale today, but rather about something that truly happened.**

**Kamilla Springer**

The descriptions won't be strictly chronological, as their aim is merely to capture the atmosphere of those years and to introduce the main topic, which is the Gala Picnic. Let's transport ourselves to the 19th century.

More than 150 years ago, in search of a better life, around 130 Poles left their native village of Dąbrówka Wielkopolska and embarked on the journey of their lives. After months spent aboard a ship, they arrived at the port. The ship was called "August," and the port – Misery (now Port Adelaide).

The wanderers were given ox-drawn carts and set off towards their settlement destination near Seven Hill. There was room in the carts only for the children, so most of the adults walked. How long did they journey? We don't know exactly, but they were led by the hope that life would be better here, that their children, and later their grandchildren and great-grandchildren, would find a new home and country.

They settled in Hill River, about 120 km from Adelaide. At first, they lived in dugouts and the hollowed-out trunks of hospitable trees, then they began building huts, but they knew that a roof over their heads was not enough. For what is a home without God? So they built a church and invited a priest from Poland. The church was dedicated to St. Stanislaus Kostka and was consecrated. Thus, 140 years ago, the first Polish Catholic church in Australia was established, with the first Polish priest in Australia, a Jesuit, Fr. Leon Rogalski. Over time, a small school was added, where, it is said, sisters from the congregation founded by Australia's future first saint, Mary MacKillop, taught.

Everyone led lives that were perhaps not easy, but secure. Slowly, they integrated into the lives of their Australian neighbors, also contributing elements of their own culture. Over time, Hill River earned the nickname "Polish," and the name Polish Hill River permanently appeared on Australia's map.

Then came drought, harder times arrived, and the residents gradually left their homes, moving to other parts of Australia in search of a better life, just as their Polish ancestors once did.

The church remained, but Masses were no longer celebrated there, until it was eventually deconsecrated. In the abandoned House of God, local farmers began to store hay.

## **Let's return to Poland and Europe for a moment**

World War II broke out. Polish soldiers fought on all its fronts, marching along many battle routes. They shed blood and gave their lives for a free Poland and other countries. But when the war ended, the world not only failed to thank them but also handed their homeland into yet another form of enslavement.

Soldiers and prisoners of German camps were unable to return home to Poland. Once again, they set out on a journey. Some of these wanderers were led to Australia. Some settled in Sydney, others in Melbourne, and a portion of them arrived in Adelaide. The second "wave" of Polish emigrants found a new homeland in Australia. Just like their predecessors, they built homes, established Polish schools and clubs, and prayed at Polish masses.

But the longing for Poland remained strong. And suddenly, it turned out that thousands of kilometers away from their beloved homeland, near Adelaide, there was a small piece of Polish land, Polish Hill River. It didn't matter that the buildings had fallen into ruin and everything was overgrown with weeds. The most important thing was that this land bore the traces of Polish settlers. It was a part of Polish history.

The Poles from Adelaide formed a reconstruction committee, went to the bishop, and received a deed of ownership for two acres of land along with the ruins of a church. Nothing could stand in the way of restoring it to its former glory. They quickly got to work, dedicating every free moment to the restoration and covering the costs themselves. They organized picnics, with the proceeds going towards purchasing building materials, among other things. The church received a new roof, the walls were restored, and the adjacent school was rebuilt. As more and more people began visiting Polish Hill River, additional acres were purchased, and a large metal hangar was erected, which was named "Schronisko Gniezno" (Gniezno Shelter). Masses and special services are now held there, and in the other part of the building, there is a kitchen where meals are prepared for pilgrims.

In the meantime, volunteers established contact with the descendants of the first Polish settlers, and together with them, they founded a museum in the school's rooms.

## **And so, we have reached the present day**

Polish Hill River is no longer as lively as it was 150 years ago, but picnics are still held here, and every year residents of Adelaide come for a Lenten pilgrimage. Now, the journey by car takes about two hours.

However, the most important and unchanging elements of Polish Hill River are the Museum, where documents and photographs showcasing over 150 years of history of this Polish place on Australian soil are collected, and the small church, a witness to all these years, but above all a testament to the fact that for us, Poles, God and faith are the foundation of our existence. We entrust our fate to God, and we base all our actions on faith.

But let's take a step back in time once more.

At the beginning of this year, members of the Polish Hill River Church Museum committee formed a subcommittee tasked with preparing a celebration for two anniversaries falling this year: the 140th anniversary of the consecration of the church in Polish Hill River and the 175th anniversary of the proclamation of the state of South Australia. This event was named the "Gala Picnic." I also had the pleasure of working on this committee at the invitation of Mrs. Krystyna Łuzna. This invitation was not only an honor but above all, an opportunity to collaborate with many people who devote their free time to Polish Hill River.

## **After many months of preparation...**

...the awaited day arrived. On October 1st of this year, the Gala Picnic ceremony took place. Many distinguished guests attended. The Premier of the South Australian government was represented by Mrs. Jennifer Rankine, while the opposition was represented by Mr. Stephen Wade. Mr. Witold Krzesiński, representing the Polish Ambassador Andrzej Jaroszyński, flew in from the Polish Embassy in Canberra, as the Ambassador had to travel to Poland for family matters. The Federation of Polish Organizations in Australia and its president, Mr. Janusz Rygielski, were represented by Mr. Leszek Wikarjusz from Brisbane. From abroad, we were honored by the presence of Archbishop Szczepan Wesoły from Rome and the Honorary Consul of Poland in New Zealand, Mr. John Roy-Wojciechowski. The event was also graced by Mr. Dariusz Ross,

Honorary Consul of Poland in South Australia, Clare Mayor Mr. Allan Aughey, and Mr. Michael Atkinson, former Minister for Multicultural Affairs and a long-time friend of Adelaide's Polish community.

Among the guests who arrived at Polish Hill River were also pilgrims from Melbourne, accompanied by Father Tadeusz Rostworowski. Special thanks are due to Father Wiesław Słowik for organizing this group and for his long-standing support and commitment to the Polish Hill River community. The residents of Adelaide did not disappoint either, as they represented our state's Polish community in large numbers. They arrived in four buses and private cars. It was lively and joyful, just like in the good old days at Polish Hill River.

The ceremony began with a concelebrated Mass, led by Archbishop Szczepan Wesoły, who came especially from Rome. Also at the altar were Archbishop Leonard Faulkner, Father Zenon Broniarczyk, Father Marian Szablewski, Father Tadeusz Rostworowski, and Father Leon Czechowicz. The "honor guard" was held by young people from our wonderful "Tatry," the pride of Adelaide's Polish community. The musical accompaniment was provided by Mrs. Jola Kozak and her choir "Polanki."

The Archbishop based his homily on the words of Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński: "A nation that does not want to remember its history is doomed to extinction." During communist times, efforts were made to obscure this past. We must be able to prove our faith, and to do so, we must know the foundations of our faith. The Archbishop also quoted John Paul II, who, during his pilgrimage to England, said to the Poles, among other things: "I do not see you as an emigration, but as part of the Polish nation living outside the country's borders. You are the ones who preserve the consciousness of our past, our history. And if it weren't for publications in exile, this consciousness would indeed have been obscured." As the Archbishop said, our nation survived the partitions because it had its culture, rooted in Christian values. He went on to say: "We live in a world that has questioned all Christian values, and that is why, in today's world, we must make our profession of faith, not only in words but, above all, in actions. This small group of Poles from Polish Hill River built a church, then a school, which transmitted not only knowledge but also faith. The interdependence of faith and intellect ensures that a nation will not succumb to oppression, and that is why we are speaking about it here."

Referring again to John Paul II, the Archbishop quoted a passage from His speech to the young: "You, the young, cannot forget your roots, because awareness of your roots enriches you in your self-awareness, in your dignity. I can speak in various languages, but as Archbishop Nosal said, beyond the language of bread, there is also the language of the heart – and this language of the heart is spoken only through prayer." Many of us know well the language of the country in which we live, which we use at work – the "language of bread." But few pray in that language. We pray in Polish – the "language of the heart." "I thank all those who made the effort, both financially and materially, to rebuild this church and this school, which are a heartfelt expression of the faith of those people and their attachment to both Christ and Polishness. That is why we gather here and pray, so that our generation too may stand not only in defense of the elderly but that the young may be aware that it is possible to walk with Christ and with Polishness. Amen."

At the conclusion of the Holy Mass, we heard a beautiful poem titled "The Church," recited by Mrs. Lucyna Mrotek, who always finds the perfect piece from her vast repertoire for every occasion and celebration, delivering it in such a captivating way that even the flies stop buzzing and listen to her recitation.

After the spiritual and religious commemoration of the anniversary of the church consecration in Polish Hill River, it was time for the official speeches. The event was overseen by Gosia Skalban, who welcomed everyone in both Polish and English.

All the speakers emphasized the immense importance of Polish Hill River (PHR) both for

the Polish community and Australia as a whole. Ms. Jenifer Rankine expressed her admiration for the courage and determination of the immigrants who choose to come to such a distant country with a different culture and language. Mr. Stephen Wade shared the biography of Saint Stanislaus Kostka, the patron saint of the church in Polish Hill River.

Mr. Witold Krzesiński mentioned other Polish heritage sites in Australia, with the most well-known being Kosciuszko National Park, home to the highest peak, Mount Kosciuszko. On maps, one can also find about 30 places bearing the name "Strzelecki." In South Australia, in the beautiful Seven Hill region, there is Polish Hill River and Polish Hill Valley, the "Father Rogalski Loop Trail," and Pawelski Road.

Mr. Leszek Wikarjusz proposed supporting the Polish Hill River Museum by having the Council of Polish Organizations in Australia recognize the nationwide significance of the site. On behalf of the Council, he suggested supporting grant applications for the museum's expansion to be submitted to relevant institutions in Poland, as well as the publication of a colorful English-language bulletin dedicated to the Polish Hill River Museum, which would be recommended to Polish schools in Australia.

The members of the Polish Hill River Church Museum Committee received many congratulations. In particular, a letter from the Council of Polonia in Western Australia was a very nice touch to the celebrations of the anniversary of the church consecration in PHR, and above all, it was an acknowledgment of the work of the volunteers there. Below, I am quoting its full content:

Dear Sir/Madam,

*On the occasion of the 140th anniversary of the construction and consecration of the first Polish Catholic Church in 1871 and the 175th anniversary of the proclamation of South Australia as a self-governing state in 1836, we sincerely congratulate you on your long-standing work for the Polish community in South Australia, particularly for preserving the Polish Hill River Church Museum. The Polish Hill River Church Museum, which combines sacred values, Polish cultural traditions, and Australian history, belongs to a small group of monuments of great significance for many generations of Polish settlers and the Australian society. Please accept our heartfelt congratulations and expressions of appreciation for your efforts in preserving this wonderful museum, which is a source of pride for all of us. President of the Council .*

Halina T. Szunejko  
Secretary - Danuta Pałysz

After the official part, everyone was invited to lunch. The meal for the pilgrims was prepared by the Buksiński family. Entrusting them with this task turned out to be a very good decision. I apologize for not mentioning all the people who helped them on Saturday with serving the meals, as I fear I might overlook someone. However, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to everyone, especially those who agreed to help at the "last minute." I will allow myself to mention the individuals who, at the request of Father Zenon, and previously Edmund, come every year to clean the shelter and prepare everything for the arrival of the pilgrims. Without them, we might have been nipped by spiders lurking under the chairs and tables, and dust would have been floating in the air.

We would like to express our heartfelt thanks to Mr. Józef Oleszczak, an indefatigable caretaker of the church garden in Unley (despite his age and health issues), Mrs. Lucyna Mrotek, who, with one arm temporarily immobilized, helped as much as she could, Basia and Leszek Borkowscy, and Mr. and Mrs. Zofia and Zenon Parojus. We also want to

extend our sincere gratitude to all the wonderful volunteers who regularly care for the Polish Hill River area and the Museum, without whom this place would have fallen into ruin again.

Every picnic includes stalls, games, and lotteries, and there was no shortage of such attractions at our picnic. We had the pleasure of enjoying a performance by the Polanki Choir and beautiful dances by "Tatr." At the stalls, one could purchase various items, including books, handmade crafts, a special calendar published for this occasion about the Museum in Polish Hill River, and wines from Mr. Dariusz Ross's winery, who prepared commemorative labels marking the 140th anniversary of the consecration of the church in PHR. The lottery also drew great interest.

However, the main attraction of the Gala Picnic was the opportunity to visit the Museum. Both guests who were here for the first time and those who regularly visit Polish Hill River eagerly explored the meticulously collected exhibits.

My friends were impressed by the conversation with one of the descendants of the first Polish settlers. For them and their children, it was a living lesson in history. Suddenly, the memorabilia and documents displayed in the showcases were no longer just museum exhibits; they took on concrete meaning. They helped to imagine life in those ancient times. Every year, the museum enriches itself with new materials, so it's worth visiting often to discover something new.

**We thank everyone who works here, especially Ms. Krystyna Łuźna, whose spirit could be felt at every turn, even though she could not be with us physically during the ceremony.**

The Picnic Gala has now become history. But the stone chapel and the Museum are here and will remain. They will endure thanks to the efforts of many wonderful people. They will survive if we, Poles living in Australia, often visit this place. Because the goal of this Museum is to preserve history for future generations. "A nation that does not wish to remember its history is doomed to extinction."