

Our Shared Heritage

Ernestyna Skurjat-Kozek

By a wonderful twist of fate, we Sydneysiders found ourselves in Adelaide (SA) just in time for the celebrations marking the 10th anniversary of the opening of the Polish Settlers Museum in Polish Hill River. We thus had a fantastic opportunity to see the Polish Hill River Church Museum with our own eyes, showcasing exhibits—remnants from the pioneers of 1856 and their descendants.

The 10th anniversary celebration coincided with the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II and the 65th anniversary of the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising. After a solemn Mass, there was a picnic during which we met a multitude of compatriots: curious, friendly people very passionate about preserving Polish heritage in Australia.

While Polish Hill River is located in South Australia, it is worth remembering that this is our shared heritage—and a common concern. It is worthwhile to visit and explore. We must also help to maintain it. Of course, it will be easier to sustain if the facility is visited by mass tourists and pilgrims.

I returned from Adelaide with an armful of books, brochures, documents, leaflets, photocopies, clippings, recordings, and hundreds of historically valuable photographs. From the curator of the Museum in Polish Hill River, Krystyna Łuzna, I received a valuable booklet titled "150 years of Polish Settlement in S.A." From Waclaw Szymaniak, I received as a gift a publication titled "In an Unknown Country," in which he presented profiles of well-known activists of the Adelaide Polish community. Krystyna and Jerzy Misiak were kind enough to donate two books published by the SPK: "The Katyń Monument" (located in front of the Polish House in Adelaide) and the great work "The Association of Polish Veterans in Australia (1950-1992)." Andrzej Strzelecki prepared a complete set of documents he dug up from family archives, detailing the famous interwar history of the quest for inheritance after Paweł Edmund Strzelecki. Thanks to these "finds," I may have a chance to become a specialist in the history of the Polish community in South Australia and a few other areas. Heartfelt thanks to all the donors who so wisely "invested" in a journalist from Sydney.

St. Aloysius Church in Sevenhill, built by the Jesuits in 1875, is unique in Australian history: the crypt beneath it, containing the ashes of Father Leon Rogalski and other Jesuits, is the only crypt of its kind located under a parish church in the country. The first Jesuit buried in the crypt was Brother George Sadler, who tragically died in an explosion at a nearby quarry, which provided the sandstone for the church's construction.

We stand in contemplation by the grave of Father Leon Rogalski. How can we, in the presence of these silent remains, imagine a man fluent in eight languages? What drove him to leave behind Lviv, Tarnopol, Łańcut, and Kraków? He arrived here in March 1870 (making history as the first Polish priest in Australia), and for the next twenty years, he worked tirelessly: hearing confessions, baptizing, officiating weddings, teaching hymns, and instructing Latin, French, and English in Australian schools. He also lectured theology students and visited Catholics afflicted by illness, offering them comfort in Polish, German, and English.

Yet, his own illness took its toll: first rheumatism, then paralysis. The last five years of his life were spent confined to a bed of pain. He passed away on June 6, 1906. He rests in this crypt, so far away from Lviv...

We are now going up to the church. Surprise! From hidden speakers, Benedictine chants

are quietly flowing. To the left of the altar hangs a painting of Stanislaus Kostka with the tiny Jesus. This valuable artifact arrived with the first Polish settlers. For many years it hung in the church in Polish Hill River (as long as that place was alive), but then it was taken to Sevenhill, because, as Mrs. Krystyna says, it is safer here.

We go outside. On the left, it's sunny, and on the right, there's hail. So I walk to the left, towards the chapel with the statue of the Virgin Mary. As I just read in the tourist brochure, there used to be a smokehouse here... The Jesuits were quite industrious! Not far from here, there was also a blacksmith shop and a dairy. Behind the chapel—a surprise. A picturesque valley covered in lush green grass and weeds blooming in purple... and in the valley, ruins that make my heart ache with emotion and curiosity about who lived here and why everything has decayed...

We took photos of the ruins, not knowing their history, and only now do I learn from the brochure that this beautifully sad ruin is the house where a farmer from Silesia, Franz Weikert, once lived. He came to Australia in 1848 with a group of over a hundred Catholics. The group was accompanied by Jesuit priest Aloysius Kranewitter, who began building the “Weikert House” in 1865. In this house, next to the Jesuit farm, lived old Franz with his wife, as he was no longer able to manage the work on his farm.

The road through the valley leads to a hill on which stands a strange building. The chapel, referred to in the guide as the St. Ignatius of Loyola Shrine, was built solely from stones, without a gram of cement mortar, by the Danielewicz and Lenz brothers in 1870. A lovely temple for contemplation. You can sit on a log and pray to the Virgin Mary (her image is here) or meditate while looking at the portrait of St. Ignatius. The builder of the chapel, Brother Danielewicz, is buried in the crypt beneath the church. And Silesian Franz is surely resting in the cemetery, which is accessible via a cycling tourist route.

The historic cemetery in Sevenhill is located on a slope covered with a thicket of yews and a few very old pines. A large stone cross stands over rows of neglected graves. The clayey, red earth covered with a thin carpet of moss sinks beneath my feet. I feel as if I might fall into a tomb at any moment. It has rained recently, and it is wet. A strong wind begins to blow, and rain starts to fall. However, we must walk among the graves in search of Polish surnames. And there are quite a few of them. There are very old graves—those of our pioneers, as well as those who died a few years ago.