

Finding Family While Following In My Forefathers' Footsteps

Jacob T. Muklewicz

In my previous article, I examined the history of my family's journey from Chwaszczewo, Poland to Steubenville, Ohio. My family's journey did not end when my great-grandfather immigrated to the Ohio Valley. Instead, the journey continues with me and my children as we are coming full circle by literally walking in our forefathers' footsteps and renewing family ties along the way.

My Early Years

Throughout my youth I always cherished my Polish roots and heritage. My grandfather, Stanisław Jakub (Stanley Jacob, called "Staś" by friends and family) Muklewicz, died while working on the afternoon shift at Weirton Steel's Steubenville Plant on December 16, 1971 at the young age of only 54 years.

Almost three years later, I was born on September 17, 1974 at the Ohio Valley Hospital in Steubenville on the hill overlooking the steel mill where my grandfather labored and died in the tin mill. When I was born, my grandfather's brothers, my great-uncles – Wincenty ("Uncle Bill") and Ignacy Józef ("Uncle Joe"), and sister, my great-aunt – Jadwiga ("Aunt Ida") visited the hospital and said that I looked just like my grandfather Staś when he was born on July 24, 1917 at the family's home when they still lived on Market Street near the High Shaft Coal Mine where my great-grandfather Adolf worked before moving to Oak Grove Avenue where the family opened its own shoe shop.

When I was a young boy, at least once and sometimes twice a week my dad took me to visit Uncle Bill and Uncle Joe at their home on Oak Grove Avenue. Each time I entered the house, Uncle Joe would instruct me to take off my shoes (a Polish custom still observed to this day), and then after tickling my feet he would ask me to come to the kitchen where he would sit together with me at the table and speak to me in Polish.

My father, Paul, and his brother, my Uncle Stanley, both were born during the "Baby Boom," a time when many in Steubenville's Polish community were trying to assimilate into Americana. When my dad was young he recalls that Father Chester Szymański, who served for many years as the rector of St. Stanislaus Catholic Church in Steubenville, encouraged the older parishioners during the 1950s to assimilate into the American way of life in order to avoid the Red Scare of the McCarthy era following World War II.

Consequently, instead of speaking Polish and observing Polish traditions in the home like his father, my dad grew up speaking only English, watching Westerns on television, and playing sandlot football. Many other baby boomers in Steubenville's Polish community grew up in a similar fashion, as the doors to St. Stanislaus's grammar school closed and members of the older Polish-speaking generation left this world into the eternities.

Realizing that my family's heritage and native tongue would become extinct unless it was passed to the next generation, my Uncle Joe always spoke with me in Polish. In 1976 during the height of the Cold War and when the U.S. celebrated its bicentennial, I remember that Uncle Joe invited two of his female cousins from Poland to visit us in Steubenville. After arriving to the U.S., they intended to defect and seek asylum. However, because the oppressive communist authorities threatened to harm their families if they did not go back to Poland, they returned after visiting us through the summer of 1976.

After our cousins departed, I remember that each time I saw Uncle Joe and Aunt Ida, they always mentioned how important it was for us to continue sending medicine, clothes, and other necessities to our family in Poland, where oppressive communistic economic ideologies caused shortages of food, medicine, and clothing.

In October 1978 Karol Wojtyła, a Polish native, assumed the papacy in the Roman Catholic Church becoming Pope John Paul II. Even though I was only four years old at that time, I remember sitting with Uncle Joe at the table in his kitchen when he began crying and told me that although he probably would not leave to see a free and independent Poland, that during my lifetime I would be able to fulfill his father's, my great-grandfather Adolf's dream of returning to his home village of Chwaszczewo. Only four months later, in February 1979 both my Uncles Joe and Bill completed their earthly sojourns

Because of family disputes following the deaths of my uncles more than a decade passed before I re-established contact with my Aunt Ida, who lived on Talbott Drive in Wintersville next to what was then Canella's Grocery Store. One day after school in November 1990 I was walking home from Wintersville High School when I saw my Aunt Ida in Canella's parking lot. I greeted her in Polish saying *Wesołych Świąt! Niech będzie pochwalona Jezus Chrystus!* "Happy Holidays! May Jesus Christ be glorified!" The latter is an old fashion Polish greeting that Uncle Joe had taught me when I was a child.)

Aunt Ida responded to me in Polish inviting me into her home, thinking that I was a cousin visiting from Poland for the Christmas holiday. She asked me who I was, and I told her that I was the great-nephew that she used to visit every week with Uncle Joe more than a decade ago. She asked me in Polish, "You are my favorite brother Staś's grandson, Jacob?" When I responded *Tak*, which is Polish for "Yes" she burst into tears and told me how much she missed her brothers and parents, all of whom had already passed away.

In typical Polish fashion, she bluntly told me that although I knew how to speak some Polish words, my Polish accent needed improvement. She then asked me if I could read and write Polish. I told her that after Uncle Joe and Uncle Bill died, the only connection that I had to the Polish language was my dad's biweekly Polish language newspaper, *Zgoda*, published by the

Polish National Alliance and a weekly Polish language program broadcast on a Pittsburgh radio station each Sunday.

Although my dad gave me Polish dictionaries for Christmas, the language was too difficult for me to master on my own, especially in the days before the Internet. During my teenage years, I spent many hours in the Schiappa Memorial Library near the Fort Steuben Mall combing Polish dictionaries and even requesting inter-library loans for Polish grammar books. Nevertheless, without some to teach me how to properly speak Polish, the task always seemed daunting.

Aunt Ida told me that when she was a young girl, her mother, my great-grandmother Agata Muklewicz (maiden name Rzeszutko) corresponded with her nephew Tadeusz Wawryszyn. After my great-grandmother's sister Maria died in Poland, she corresponded with her sister's son, Tadeusz, and sent the family medicine and food each month during and following World War II. When Tadeusz died from an unexpected heart attack in the early 1950s, my great-grandmother continued corresponding with Tadeusz's daughters, Ewa and Krystyna.

As my great-grandmother Agata began losing her eyesight and suffering from arthritis, she asked Aunt Ida to continue corresponding with Ewa and Krystyna in order to maintain contact with our family in Poland. Aunt Ida, who was in her early 70s when we reconnected in November 1990, told me that she needed me to read and write letters on her behalf in order to continue corresponding with her cousin Ewa in Poland.

Aunt Ida told me that she would dictate letters in Polish, and that I would have to write in perfect Polish everything that she said. If I made any mistakes, Aunt Ida would crumple up the letter, and we would start all over again. Aunt Ida insisted that this was the way that she learned to write in Polish and that the best way to learn is just to do it, learning from the many grammatical and spelling mistakes along the way.

I would also read Ewa's letter to Aunt Ida, who would constantly correct my pronunciation and accent. Aunt Ida said that she like Uncle Joe wanted me to speak Polish like a native, as I would be the last in the family to speak the language of our ancestors.

Every day after school I would spend at least 2 hours learning to read, write, and speak Polish with my Aunt Ida. On Saturdays after doing seasonal chores such as mowing grass, raking leaves, or shoveling snow, I would spend another 3 hours with Aunt Ida not only learning Polish, but also listening to stories about how my ancestors lived in the Old Country and their journey to America.

Aunt Ida often told me that her father's and brothers' dream, especially my Uncle Joe's deepest desire, was to someday return to Poland and walk through the forest and fields surrounding Chwaszczewo, the village where my great-grandfather Adolf was born.

My Mission Call to Poland

After graduating in 1992 from Wintersville High School, I attended Brigham Young University (“BYU”), where my dad 20 years earlier earned a football scholarship and played offensive tackle for Lavelle Edwards during his first year as head coach. While attending BYU, my father came into direct contact with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (“the Church”), whose members are often incorrectly called “Mormons.” Although my dad had verbally committed to accept a football scholarship from the University of Miami in Florida, after visiting BYU’s campus in 1971 he decided to play for BYU. During that time many students at college campuses were not only protesting the war in Viet Nam, but they were also were experimenting with drugs.

At first my dad told his fellow teammates and coaches that while he respected their religious beliefs, he was satisfied with his Roman Catholic religion. He came to BYU only to play football and not debate religion or politics.

In December 1971, my dad returned to Steubenville to spend the Christmas holiday with his parents. However, my grandfather Staś unexpectedly died of a heart attack and was buried only two days before Christmas.

After returning to BYU, my dad began pondering the meaning of life and death, which ultimately led to his conversion to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. After returning to Steubenville, he taught me the tenets of this faith, including deep devotion to and love for our ancestors.

When I departed for BYU in August 1992, my dad reminded me how much my grandfather and great-grandfather both sacrificed so that I could obtain education and create a better life for myself and my children. My dad also encouraged me to serve a mission for the Church after I completed my first year of college at BYU and reached 19 years of age, which at that time was the minimum age required for male missionaries.

After completing my freshman year of studies at BYU, I returned to Steubenville in April 1993 and began working at the K-Mart near the Fort Steuben Mall in order to earn money for my mission. Every day after work I continued visiting my Aunt Ida and learning Polish.

I completed and submitted my mission application papers during the summer of 1993. In the mission application papers, the Church asks whether the applicant speaks any foreign languages. I answered that I spoke Polish, but that I had also learned Russian and Spanish in high school.

Because the Church’s growth in Latin America was and remains strong, many members and leaders of the Church opined that if I were called to serve a mission abroad, the odds were that I would most likely serve in a Latin American country and speak Spanish. Missionary applicants do not get to choose where they serve. Instead, missionaries serve in areas where they are called by the spirit of revelation granted to the Church’s highest leadership, which is the First Presidency comprised of the Prophet and the First and Second Councilors, as well as the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

Despite the well-intended counsel of Church members and leaders not to get my hopes up about serving a mission in Poland, where the Church had established a small mission only three years previously, I knew that I would serve my mission in Poland. Ever since I was a young boy sitting at the table with Uncle Joe, who wanted me to fulfill his and his father's dream, I diligently prepared myself to realize that dream and to honorably serve God in Poland.

In August 1993, I received from President Ezra Taft Benson a mission call to serve in the Poland Warsaw mission. Below is a photograph of my arrival on December 16 (the same day in 1971 when my grandfather Staś passed away), 1993 to Poland. On the photograph I am standing between President John Martin Cyrocki, an accomplished Polish American from Jackson, Michigan, and his wife, Colleen Cyrocki (maiden name O'Brien), who fondly served as our Irish mission mother.



As indicated above, the President of the Church and Quorum of Twelve Apostles assign the country where missionaries serve. After missionaries arrive to the mission field, the mission president assigns the city where they will labor.

Because Chwaszczewo is a small village in a province with a sparse population, I knew that I would not be assigned to my great-grandfather's birthplace. Nevertheless, I hoped that President Cyrocki would send me to the nearest large city, Białystok, the regional capital with around 300,000 inhabitants, which would have allowed me to visit Chwaszczewo on preparation days allowing missionaries a half-day for shopping and sightseeing.

My first area assignment from President Cyrocki was to serve in Wrzeszcz, which is a suburb of Gdańsk along the Baltic coast, a place where none of my family lived, or so I believed. During the week between Christmas and New Year, my companion, Elder Dewayne Lazenby, who was the Zone Leader for our area, decided to meet with our area's District Leader. As they were proselyting near the Neptune Fountain in the Old Town, an older woman asked for Elder Lazenby's card, which also included my name. The lady said that she wanted the card because her boss at the Tax Office was Zbigniew Muklewicz, and that the name Muklewicz is not common in Poland. The lady wanted to pass the card containing my contact information to her boss.

Shortly thereafter I received a telephone call from Zbigniew Muklewicz, who over the phone asked me about my family's home town or village in Poland. After telling him that my great-grandfather was born in Chwaszczewo, he explained that his father was born in Janów, separated only a few kilometers from one another by a dense forest.

Zbigniew invited Elder Lazenby and me to his home, where Zbigniew and I compared our genealogies. My great-grandfather Adolf from Chwaszczewo and his grandfather from Janów were cousins. In only a week and a half of my arrival to the Poland Warsaw Mission, God lead me to a relative living in a large city where I never would have expected to find family.

Below is a photograph of the initial meeting with my relative, Zbigniew Muklewicz, in late December 1993.



After serving only two months in Gdańsk, I was transferred to Gliwice, where I served for 4 months in Silesia. In June 1994, I was supposed to Praga Południe on the eastern bank of the Vistula River in Warsaw. It was not until December 1994 during a missionary preparation day that I had the time to visit my cousin Ewa, whom I had known up until that time only through correspondence. Below is a photograph of the first meeting that I had with Ewa Wawrzychyn and her mother, Maria, in December 1994.



Only one month after this picture was taken, I was transferred to Bydgoszcz in northern Poland, and Ewa's mother, Maria, died. President Cyrocki gave me permission to attend Maria's funeral, where I was Ewa's only relative representing her father Tadeusz's family. While attending Maria's funeral I felt a close connection with my great-grandmother, Agata, who insisted that each generation of our family in Steubenville continue corresponding with her sister's family living in Poland.

After serving in Bydgoszcz, I completed my mission while serving the final six months in Dąbrowa Górnicza in southern Poland. During my two-year missionary service in Poland, the Church never assigned missionaries to Białystok near Chwaszczewo, my great-grandfather Adolf's birthplace. Because I was focused on serving God and the Church instead of pursuing my own personal agenda, during my mission I never visited Chwaszczewo. Nevertheless, after establishing personal contact with my family in Poland, I knew that I would again visit Poland and finally fulfill my great-grandfather's dream of returning to Chwaszczewo.

Returns to My Ancestral Homeland

When I returned to the U.S. after completing my mission in Poland, I resumed my undergraduate studies at BYU where in April 1998 I earned a Bachelor's degree with a major in international relations and a minor in Russian. While still an undergraduate student at BYU, in December 1996 I married my wife, Alma Delia Serrano Flores, a beautiful and talented woman from Mexico.

After graduating from BYU, in August 1998 I began my studies at the Ohio State University College of Law in Columbus, Ohio. Every weekend my wife and I would visit the Ohio Valley and take Aunt Ida grocery shopping or to the doctor.

On December 21, 2000 while still in law school, Alma and I had our first child, daughter Mikaela Muklewicz. After graduating from law school in May 2001, while practicing law at a large corporate firm in Columbus, Ohio I received a telephone call from the Winterville Police Department explaining that Aunt Ida was calling the police station at least three times a day. The police officer said that after inspecting the home, it was apparent that there were concerns about Aunt Ida living alone.

I called Aunt Ida and asked her what she wanted to do. She could either move into an assisted living facility in Steubenville, or she could come and live with us in Hilliard, Ohio. Aunt Ida asked if I would speak Polish with her if she were to live with us. After assuring Aunt Ida that I would speak Polish with her every day, she agreed to move and live with us. While living in Hilliard we had two more daughters, Agnieszka and Paulina. Every day Aunt Ida would read stories from a Polish fairy tale book to my daughters.

In 2005 we moved from Hilliard, Ohio to Goodyear, Arizona, where I took an associate attorney position with a smaller law firm. We moved to Arizona so that we could live closer to my wife's parents, who live in Caborca, Sonora, Mexico. Only one year after moving from Ohio to Arizona, Aunt Ida passed away. According to her wishes, we had her funeral mass celebrated at St. Stanislaus Roman Catholic Church in Steubenville, and she was buried in Mt. Calvary Cemetery next to her mother, my great-grandmother Agata Muklewicz, as well as my great-grandfather Adolf and Uncles Joe and Bill.

The following year in January 2007 my only son, Jakub Józef, was born. A year later my youngest child, daughter Jadwiga (named after Aunt Ida whom we fondly called *Ciocia Jadzia* in Polish) was born.

It was not until 2015 that I was able to finally take my wife and children to Poland, where my son wanted to be baptized. (In the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, the minimum age for baptism is 8 years.) My son wanted to invite to baptism extended family members in Poland, where the Church's Poland Warsaw Mission was also celebrating the 25th year anniversary of its founding. Before departing for Poland, I explained to my children that during our trip we together would finally fulfill my ancestors' dream of returning to Chwaszczewo.

When we arrived to Warsaw in June 2015, Ewa greeted us at the airport. The next day in accordance with Polish norms of hospitality, Marek Kaczmarek, Ewa's cousin through her mother's second marriage following the death of her father, my relative Tadeusz, invited us to his home for dinner with his family. Below is a photograph of Ewa and Marek together with me and my wife in Warsaw.



The next day I took my children to Warsaw's Old Town Square and explained to them the history of the city, which according to legend was founded on the banks of the Vistula River by a fisherman who had fallen in love with a mermaid. The city crest of Warsaw is a mermaid wielding a sword over her head in defense of the city's inhabitant's. Below is a photograph of me together with my dad and children in front of the mermaid statue on the Old Town Square in Warsaw.



After visiting family in Warsaw we went to visit family members in Kraków, Poland's ancient capital where many kings and dignitaries are buried at the Wawel Cathedral. When Ewa was younger, she and her family always took photos in front of the Wawel Cathedral. Ewa never imagined that one day she would take a photo in front of Wawel Cathedral together with her family from America.



Following our sightseeing tour in Kraków, we traveled to Bolszewo, where my cousin Zbigniew Muklewicz now lives together with his wife, Irena, and son, Michał. Because Zbigniew married Irena after I completed my mission in Poland, this was the first time that I met her and Michał. Nevertheless, again in accordance with Polish custom a traditional banquet was waiting for us when we arrived to Bolszewo. Although over 20 years had passed since I last saw Zbigniew, it seemed as though no time at all had elapsed as Zbigniew and his family embraced us as family.

Below is a photo of me and my daughters, Mikaela and Agnieszka, walking together with Zbigniew and Irena Muklewicz and Ewa Wawryszyn. Evening walks with the family in the beautiful Polish country side is a great way to burn off excess calories from a delicious Polish banquet.



Zbigniew wanted to take my family on a tour of the city of his birth, Gdańsk. Below is a photo of my kids in front of the city's Neptune Fountain, where my missionary companion Elder Lazenby 22 years earlier contacted Zbigniew's secretary who noticed the name "Muklewicz" on our business card.



When spending time with family, time seems to pass much more quickly, and soon it was time for us to bid farewell to the Muklewicz family in Bolszewo. Below is a photograph of our departure at the train station in Wejherowo, Poland.



Before leaving, my dad wanted to take a picture of the Muklewicz men.



After visiting Zbigniew and our Muklewicz family in Bolszewo, we took a train to the Podlasie province, where we would stay in Studzieńczyna with the Moniuszko family, whose ancestors a century before had married into the Muklewicz family. In 2007 and 2008 I had traveled to Poland by myself on business. During those trips, while researching my family history and visiting Chwaszczewo on my own I discovered the relationship between the Muklewicz and Moniuszko families. My “Uncle” Stanisław or Staś lives in his family home which is just on the western side of the forest separating my great-grandfather Adolf’s village, Chwaszczewo from my cousin Zbigniew’s family village of Janów.

Below is a picture of Uncle Staś’s home in Studzieńczyna.



I could not wait to walk with my children to Chwaszczewo through the forest and fields, upon which rays of sunshine descended as if our angelic ancestors in heaven were showering upon us their approval and contentment







Adolf Muklewicz's descendants together realize his dream of returning to the village of Chwaszczewo in June 2015, nearly 113 after he fled persecution at the hands of the Russian tsar's army. While walking through Chwaszczewo with my family, we stopped at the village's small grocery store, and while buying something to drink I learned that the store's owner is Marek Kostecki from the village of Nowinka just a few kilometers to the north of Chwaszczewo.

My great-grandfather Adolf Muklewicz's mother was Zuzanna Kostecka from Nowinka.
Below is a photograph of me together with my distant cousin, Marek Kostecki.



Before taking my family to Chwaszczewo during our trip in June 2015, I researched online interesting activities for the kids. I discovered that Marek Szyszko operates a traditional workshop where he makes from the trees in the forests surrounding Chwaszczewo traditional sculptures. I called Marek and asked if my kids could tour his workshop. He asked from where we were visiting, and when I told him that we were coming from the U.S. he was shocked that American visitors would want to visit Chwaszczewo, a remote village in northeast Poland near the border with Belarus. I told him that my great-grandfather Adolf Muklewicz was born in Chwaszczewo and had immigrated to Steubenville, Ohio in 1902.

As fate would have it, relatives on his mother's side of the family had married into the Muklewicz family. After visiting Marek's workshop, he presented me with a nativity that he made from trees surrounding the village of Chwaszczewo – for me a priceless gift.



While staying on our Moniuszko family's farm, my children had the opportunity to feed their cousin Maciek's and his wife Karolina's cows, cut hay on a tractor, and spin wool on traditional looms in the neighboring village of Wasilówka.









A few of the women in villages near Janów continue weaving traditional double-warped tapestries, which form reflective patterns on the opposite side of the cloth.

After visiting Teresa Pryzmont's workshop in Wasilówka, I requested that she make a traditional pattern commemorating my family's first visit to our ancestral homeland. Pursuant to my request she made a pattern depicting a celebration of song and dance in the middle of the forest between Janów and Chwaszczewo. Ms. Pryzmont explained that when my great-grandfather used to live in Chwaszczewo they would hold celebrations in clearings in the forest for special occasions such as weddings, christenings, and special family events.

As Ms. Pryzmont described this local custom, I immediately recalled the clearing on Angel Trail just above St. Stanislaus in Steubenville. Uncle Joe and Aunt Ida often told stories how their parents and others from the Old Country made a clearing in the woods where they played music and danced after weddings in the church. Below is a picture of the double-warped rug that Ms. Pryzmont made for me – reminding me daily not only of my family’s first trip to Chwaszczewo but also of my great-grandparents celebrations in the woods along Angel Trail above St. Stanislaus church in Steubenville.



Ever since my great-grandfather left his beloved Chwaszczewo in 1902, he passed to successive generations a deep fondness for his homeland, which is not only the beautiful forest and country side, but above all a loving family.

As I followed in my forefathers' footsteps, I have not only experienced with my physical senses the same sights, sounds, smells, and tastes that my ancestors also experienced, but I have felt with my heart the love that binds our family together through several generations over vast oceans and continents.

