



Letter From Poland

by James H. Bowden

Graveyard Vigil

Probably the most moving event of my year in Poland so far was my visit to the Powązki Cemetery on the evening of All Saints. It is an old cemetery, with nothing like it that I know of in America. Indeed, the most similar I can recall is found in Maple Grove, the old cemetery in Russellville, Kentucky (north of Nashville), where I stopped off a few years ago to pay my respects to the small anthology of ancestors of mine that were there. Doing so always brings to mind my first visit there, with a maiden great-aunt who was in charge of such things: my father wasn't there then, nor my grandmother, but other people I should meet were, and I was introduced. I, young and gauche, noticed *her* stone was in place, though there she stood beside me. It was shortly after June 3rd, Confederate Memorial Day in Kentucky, and there were small flags stuck around here and there, exciting my child's eyes, as though there were massed and waiting armies, diminutive, in the grass.

There were no such flags on our set of graves, since the Bowdens were the Village Republicans. (My great-grandfather went to France to avoid having to fight his relatives, then on returning rode overland to San Francisco and back again, so no one could rightly accuse him of cowardice.) His in-laws, the Mortons, were all Democrats and pro-slavery, and they were nearby. One of them I often mention when trying to explain in classes why Americans don't believe in Original Sin: Here was a fellow of modest means, at least to begin with, who before he died came to own over 60 slaves, and, they say, "never whipped a one." How, I ask, when someone can so obviously rise from little to much, can we possibly believe that we are Innately Depraved?

In 20 years of telling the story, I

have yet to find a student who smiled at or even discerned the irony. We simply don't believe in sin.

As for my maiden great-aunt, whose stone was set there with her name and birth but no death date—like a late poet in the *Norton Anthology*—I asked of her why hers was there. She answered not at all, frogs jumped into hidden pools, birds turned their heads and coughed. I was, I suppose, trying to be polite, and though I have thought on it many times, I cannot conceive of her silence as anything but rude. We don't believe much in death either.

Poles aren't like that. Our new cemeteries—probably even the one in Russellville, though I've not seen it—are Disneyland-for-the-Dead, and the newer Polish ones look a bit that way now, but it's only because there hasn't been yet added the patina of time. Ours deny death; theirs don't.

And they are proud of their dead, putting their most famous along a certain wall they've built just to set off their graves. Of course, the very most famous Polish tend to die in exile—there was no Poland from the late 18th century until Woodrow Wilson insisted there be another one in 1918—but the best they can find are here. The ones they seem to like best are the artists, the actors, the writers, with an occasional aviator or other idiosyncratic thrown in. I think the biggest tomb in Cave Hill, in Louisville, is Colonel Sanders'.

Cave Hill isn't a bad place—quite nice, in fact—but no one, I think, puts candles on the grave of the Colonel on All Saints and All Souls, nor on any other graves there. This is not the case in Poland. Half of Warszawa seemed to be out there at Powązki on 1 November, with special buses routed there, with candle concessionaires and scouts (mostly male) in conspicuous numbers.

Every grave had candles on it, none with only one, as if the Poles knew that relatives of each one would have been

there if they could, so they set out a candle on behalf of anyone who couldn't do it himself. Respect for the dead, prayers for the dead—that sort of thing. Most of these candles were set in little white boxes, affording them extra dignity, more stability, and some protection against a gusting wind, though the candles seemed tough, able to gutter and flare again against the Eastern chill.

Even, I was told, did the graves of the Soviet soldiers have at least one candle on each, though a University friend of my son—he's with me for the academic year—suggested that they didn't need any since Russians had no souls. Aleks was smiling when he said it, though, and he held that Russians were people too, only the System that owned them was depraved. I didn't see the Russian graves, they being somewhat apart. I suppose Party members saw to the candles being there. (At Maple Grove, slaves were buried on the other side of a road dividing the cemetery.)

It was a cold night, just above freezing, with mists tangling in the trees lit by the candles at their feet. Poe would have loved it, and I was warmed by it myself, except that *my* feet were cold. Or were till I got to the grave of Grzegorz Przemyski, a student beaten to death by the Milicja. (Milicja means "Police," but the Communists dropped that bourgeois term when they seized control.) Or rather that is what Poles believe, though the official inquiry decided that the ambulance attendants did it. I suppose ambulance attendants are pretty much the same everywhere, like Communist courts.

Grzegorz was guilty of partying after passing his high school examination and being accepted into the university, something that means more here than at home. He was rowdy, and died of the beating. A grave was found for him along one of the main walks at Powązki and on All Saints 1985 many people paused there to pay their respects and, I suppose, to pray. I did so,

too, and was able to warm my chilled feet at the same time: a mathematician acquaintance estimated the number of candles then burning at 70,000.

There were about as many around the Katyn monument, recently erected: it consists of a large but simple and rough-hewn cross in an area surrounded by a low fence. Someone had defaced the cross by painting on it—at night, I was told—a fairly professional 1940. That was all that was on it, and all that needed to be on it. The question has always been who murdered some thousands of Polish officers at Katyn, officers who were prisoners of war. The Soviets blame the Nazis, but the Nazis were not occupiers of that territory until 1941: in 1940 it was occupied by the Soviets.

Various hand-lettered placards were here and there along the fence and inside it; the one I liked best, itself lit by many candles, read in Polish that “If we forget them, God will forget us.” Some might already have despaired of God’s memory in regard to Poland, and not only because of the six million of them who died at Nazi and Soviet hands in World War II. Most who died then were murdered by the former, of course, especially the three million who were Jews. (Historians often cite six million victims of Nazi extermination camps, but the figure is incomplete: six million Jews so died, but so did six million Gentiles—about half of them Poles.) The Soviets did kill quite a few, though, especially while establishing hegemony after World War II.

The country has been much fought-over—in military terms, it’s what is called “good tank country”—yet the Poles seem to think God has them in mind. Indeed, much is forgiven the Church because it has for so long been the preserver of Polish consciousness, sometimes against Lutheran and Orthodox neighbors, and now against Communist neighbors and visitors. There are more applicants at present than places available at seminaries. The Church, quite simply, is *the alternative*.

And so a quiet night of reverence and civic and religious piety came to an end. Scout troops marched off to buses, a few girls in their numbers, all looking as military as they could (whole troops of them died fighting in

World War II). I paid my respects at the graves of Home Army (that is, non-Communist) officers and men, and I too left. The graves of the Home Army people, some of whom were buried long after their military service, were well lit, marked by uniform birch crosses.

As I left I recalled a bit of family folklore passed on by my grandmother, learned by her, I suppose, from her husband’s mother’s folk (it was *her* father who never whipped a one of his 60 slaves). After the War—the War—Federal troops made the slaves leave; but after the bayonets were out of sight, the ex-slaves returned. I think my great-grandmother thought it an endorsement of her father’s vanished world instead of its condemnation—condemnation because it actually turned people *into* slaves.

The Poles are not good slaves. Good slaves, after all, achieve only the gratification of their owners, making the owners feel justified in what they’re doing. The Poles on All Saints and All Souls show at Powązki and I suppose at other cemeteries that they’re not so good at giving the desired gratification.

James H. Bowden is associate director of the American Studies Center in Warsaw, Poland.

Letter From the Heartland

by Jane Greer

Save the Children

Suddenly, we may receive a son—a six-year-old, our first child—and we may get him in weeks. My small worries grow immense.

Some background on one of them: My husband and I have what has been called a “mixed marriage” (sort of a hot dish, like franks and beans). He is firmly Catholic; I, by upbringing, Protestant: a lukewarm Presbyterian, dropped off at Sunday school, in my youth; a more staunch Episcopalian in adulthood. We worship together, alternating churches, and enjoy it. (So we aren’t your textbook conservatives.) I love the old enclaved Roman Catholic tradition he grew up in (“I was 18

before I knew there were people in the world who weren’t Catholic, Bohemian, and Democrat,” he brags, not a bit sheepishly), and he likes the intimacy of my small church in a state rife with large, unwieldy Catholic and Lutheran congregations. I chose Episcopalianism because it seemed to offer all the ritual I hungered for, all the history and pomp and tradition, yet lacked the few Catholic beliefs that kept me from converting.

Still, I often deplore—loudly—what I see as a growing *horizontality*, a sideways thinning, a puddling, of tradition and, with it, religious conviction. (My husband is concerned, too, but he’s not a complainer.) My grievances have become clichés to be found in nearly every conservative journal in any given month. In my husband’s large, modern church, few “hymns” that we sing were written before 1979, it seems (when we come across an anomaly dating all the way back to the 1960’s, he elbows me, points to the year, and smirks), and no one has bothered to make them rhyme—or scan, for that matter. They’re unmemorable, strictly for sanctuary use, not for humming in the car. There are no quiet times unmolested by guitar or organ or singer or “commentator.” We are requested to sing a ditty as we kneel in preparation for receiving the Holy Mysteries and as we make our way forward. We play the whole service by ear. At my little church, which looks as if it has been lifted in rapture from the English countryside, the situation is similar: Oh, we sing the great old hymns most of the time, but have the irritation of unrestrained children running amok in the aisles to “worship” noisily in their own way, sometimes with balloons. (To his credit, my priest has never held a Clown Mass, although he has allowed teenagers with guitars from time to time, after whose “performance” we must clap.) At neither church do we waste much time on confession or meditation.

But, as I say, this is old news, the long-standing but mainly private objections of mainstream America, those of us too polite or embarrassed or cynical to grumble out loud. Joining a particular church is like marrying: One doesn’t get a divorce just because one’s husband’s relatives lack aplomb—and the Bridegroom is ever con-