

# Chapter of "With Love from Poland"

## Chapter Eight

*JUNE 1939*

Each June in Cracow, everyone joyously celebrated the Wianki (wreath) Midsummer Festival. In other parts of Poland, Zielone Swiatki was celebrated, otherwise known as the Whitsunday Feast. Either way it was a ritual of fire and water honoring St. John the Baptist and the Sun, on the longest day of the year. There would be fireworks, bonfires, and boat parades, musical acts and singing and dancing until midnight.

The highlight of the annual event was when the maidens dressed all in white with flower wreaths in their hair launched candle-lit wreaths from the banks of the Vistula River at sunset.

Helena enlisted the help of all the women and girls in her family to prepare the items on the menu. They'd had a family planning session the week prior. It was decided that Helena would prepare the main course comprised of kielbasa, bigos (hunter's stew) and golabki. Jan's Mama would prepare all the desserts with her only granddaughter, Julia. She loved all things domestic now that she was eighteen years old and hoped to have her own home and family soon. They decided to bake mazurek, almond pound cake (babka migdalowa), and of course Jan and Helena's favorite sand cake. The two also baked breads including crescent-shaped wheat buns (lucky buleczki) and rogi, better known as butter horns.

Mary Kaminski was now part of the Jasinski-Pawlowski family since Jozef the Hero married pretty little Sophia Kaminski who wasn't so little anymore. She was twenty-three years old, and besides playing the bells, she was a nurse working in her Papa's busy medical practice alongside her Mama, also a nurse.

Jozef and Sophia had been married for four years and just one month before, they had welcomed their first child. Mariola Pawlowski was born on May 7, 1939 looking very much like her Mama with blonde hair and sparkling blue eyes. Jan and Helena's twins, Piotr and Julia, celebrated the same birthday and everyone agreed Mariola was extra-special for that reason alone.

For the Wianki meal, Mary Kaminski volunteered to make the traditional pickled beet soup (barszcz kwaszony z burakow), borscht with mushroom dumplings and kutia. Kutia was one of her specialties and she wanted to make it this year in honor of the birth of her granddaughter - it was a symbol of good luck.

Jozef had transformed his adventures into hunting. Just days before he'd brought home a bear from his hunt. Bigos was best prepared with the rich fine grain of bear meat. That was his contribution to the meal. It took Helena six days to

slowly cook the bigos. She added herbs and vegetables from her garden. Their cottage smelled divine.

Of course, no meal was complete without pierogi. All of the women cooked their best recipes at the last minute, so they'd be hot and fresh. The pouches were filled with beef, cottage cheese, mushrooms, potato, cheese or even bilberries topped with sugar and cinnamon for dessert, as if there was not enough to eat already.

Jan's Uncle Stan could be counted on to toast before every meal (but only after grace had been said) "Jedzcie, pijcie i popuszczajcie pasa" meaning "Eat, drink and loosen your belt".

Jan and Helena's cottage housed almost the same kin in 1939 as it did in 1930 except Jan's Mama was back in her own home with Big Jan since he'd retired from the mill in Austria, leaving the room she'd slept in to be used as a den or a guest room once again. Jozef and Sophia had moved into her parents' home after they married.

Franz now had the entire loft area of the cottage to himself. He used the loft room that Jozef had slept in as his private office. No one was surprised when he decided to become an architect, specializing in historical buildings. He contracted himself to cities and towns throughout Poland and other European countries, so he traveled a good deal of the time. As it happened, he was home for this year's Wianki Festival.

Helena's best friend, Julia had written months earlier that she and Kazi would be in Cracow for the entire month of June. They had gotten married in 1921, soon after Kazi and his family arrived in America. Sadly, they were unable to have children, so they made themselves happy by leading their church youth group. They enjoyed celebrating holidays, doing fun projects and going on field trips with the children.

Julia had taken a cue from Helena by studying languages. That enabled her to get a job as an interpreter for an import-export company in Yonkers. Kazi worked as a carpenter/painter and stayed very busy. Buttons lived a long and happy life as their "only child" and died peacefully in his sleep of natural causes at the ripe old age of fifteen, which is one hundred and five in dog years.

When Julia and Kazi arrived in Cracow on June 5<sup>th</sup>, Helena met them at the train depot. Franz offered to drive as Helena did not have a car, nor did she know how to drive. There had been no need for a car as her life was based at home and she walked wherever she needed to go.

In the nearly twenty years since Julia and Kazi had moved to America, they had come back home only once. That was ten years earlier when Julia's beloved Babka had died of pneumonia. Julia had traveled home by steamship and rail with her Mama. During that visit, Helena and Julia had very little time together because Helena had the twins and two-year-old Jozef to care for, and Jan's Mama had moved in with them by that time. Besides, Julia and her Mama could stay only for the three-day funeral.

At the cemetery, as Helena and Julia were saying goodbye, Julia pushed up the sleeve of her heavy winter coat and showed Helena the bracelet that her Babka had given her before she left Cracow in 1920. The black onyx absorbed light while the sterling silver reflected it back. It was a beautiful harmony between light and dark, life and death.

Julia and her Mama left immediately after the burial that day. There was now another sad tombstone in their church cemetery. The light of another beloved family member had been snuffed out, leaving a hole in the fabric of their community and in their hearts.

Since then, Julia and Helena had kept up with each other's lives by letter. They were excellent letter writers and were always delighted to receive news of each other's changing lives.

Helena spotted Julia the moment she emerged from her train car. She ran to greet her and gave her a great hug even before Julia's feet hit the ground. They were laughing and crying at the same time. So much time had passed and they'd missed each other desperately.

Kazi waited patiently on the train steps behind Julia until Helena realized that the poor man was carrying all of their suitcases and he could not get off the train until they moved out of the way.

Franz stood by watching the exchange between his sister and her friend. He had to try hard not to let his tears show. He put his emotions into greeting and helping Kazi with the suitcases. It was good to see Kazi and Julia; Franz remembered them from when he was just four years old. They were family to him and to the rest of his family.

The four of them talked nonstop and all at once on the short ride home. Julia and Kazi's arrival was such an exciting event!

Helena had insisted that Julia and Kazi stay in their now vacant guest room, small as it was. She wanted to spend every minute possible with Julia. And Jan would be more than happy to have another man his own age in their cottage.

While Jan was at work, Kazi and Franz enjoyed long talks about building. Kazi had become quite a master of carpentry working for his Papa in Yonkers and the surrounding towns. Franz could never get enough of building and architecture. The two became bonded during that visit.

When Jan and Jakob returned from work, the family enjoyed nightly dinners together. Julia and her namesake, Helena's Julia, helped to gather vegetables in the garden and to collect canned fruits and jams from the cellar for their meals.

The threesome had so much fun cooking that it did not seem like work at all. Every dinner was a mini-feast that was devoured by all. Every bit of food and companionship was savored.

The Wianki Midsummer Festival was just about a week after Julia and Kazi's arrival. All was in readiness, including their family maiden, young Julia. It was tradition for maidens to wear white and to have a wreath in their hair. Piotr's twin, Julia was the only maiden in the family. Therefore, she was the Star of the Day. Julia looked so very beautiful and precious as her Mama placed the delicate flower wreath on her head for the festival. Helena's best friend stood by and witnessed the simple ritual, knowing that it was a rite of passage. She remembered her Mama placing the Wianki on her head so long ago. It also reminded her that she would never place a Wianki on a daughter of her own. Helena intuitively knew what her friend was thinking and asked

her to help to pin the wreath in Julia's hair. It was a moment to be treasured by the three of them.

The stroke of 5 meant it was time for the Wianki dinner feast. The table was expanded to its full length and there were seventeen places set, enough for the Jasinski's, Pawlowski's, Kaminski's and the Wolowicz (Julia and Kazi). Mary Kaminski had given her daughter some beautifully embroidered table linen as a wedding gift and that was the linen used for this special feast.

Helena's Papa said grace before dinner. He thanked everyone for joining in and helping with the meal. All eyes turned to Uncle Stan and he did not disappoint. He gleefully gave his toast – his brand of grace!

With his last word, the dishes that had been set in the center of the massive table began to be passed to the left from north, south, east and west. Within two minutes, there was no more chatter as appetites were sated.

As was the practice in their family, the men repaired to the living room while the women cleaned up the kitchen and the table, and then re-set it with a dessert buffet and fresh linen that would rival a royal table.

Uncle Stan's voice could be heard above the others as he told the story of one of his workers in the mine. The young man had not followed directions and gotten lost for an hour in the mine shafts. The lad was shaken up but promised that he'd learned his lesson. He'd had to endure the snickers of his coworkers and his ego was seriously bruised.

Then Kazi took center stage, so to speak, telling about living and working in America. The elder Jozef was especially interested in hearing about field trips that Kazi and Julia chaperoned with their youth group. They'd even visited Bear Mountain, north of Yonkers.

In the kitchen the talk was all about baby Mariola Pawlowski. With both Grandmamas present, no one could get a word in edgewise, but no one really minded.

Sophia was sitting at the kitchen table breast-feeding Mariola. All the family members marveled at what a natural Mama Sophia was, and that Jozef was a perfect Papa. But then, both had exemplary role models for parents. Jozef had been old enough to remember his Mama when she died, and he still felt the piece of her heart she had left to him with her dying breath. It gave him peace, and enough love to pass on to Sophia, Mariola and any other children they should be fortunate enough to have.

By the time they had devoured dessert and cleaned up the kitchen, it was 7:30 – time to go down to the riverbank for the festivities that would begin at sunset.

Piotr said he would escort his maiden sister to the festival, lest any of the young men get the idea that she was unprotected from their advances, as he put it.

Just as they were leaving the cottage, Julia's Papa called to her, "Julia, my beautiful girl, come give your Papa a hug."

Piotr and Julia stopped and walked back into the dining area, now vacant. Jan wrapped his arms around his only daughter and said, "Julia, please take care this night. I love you, now go have fun and stay with your brother."

He then turned to Piotr and said, "I am counting on you, my eldest son to keep your sister safe. Do not let her out of your sight for one moment. Do you understand?"

"Yes Papa. You can count on me." Piotr began to get an uneasy feeling about the night. It was very unusual for their Papa to voice warnings about their safety.

Jan reluctantly let go of Julia. He added, "Your Mama and I will be waiting up until you return. If you are not back by fifteen minutes past the midnight finale, you will be in a great deal of trouble!" They nodded. With that, Jan hugged Piotr and sent them off to the festival. As they left, Jan noticed that Julia had to re-set her head wreath which he'd accidentally pushed sideways when he hugged her.

Helena wondered where Jan was. She found him staring at the back of the closed front door. She said, "Dear, is something wrong?"

Jan did not want to worry Helena unnecessarily. However, he knew her well enough to realize that if he did not tell her of his intuition about Julia that she would figure it out anyway. So, Jan said, "Lena, I have a very bad feeling that something could happen to Julia tonight. I told Piotr not to let her out of his sight and that they are to be home directly after the finale."

Just then, the rest of their group was approaching the door where they stood. Not wanting to let anyone else know of their concern, they shared a quick kiss. Helena opened the front door and invited everyone to walk together to the banks of the Vistula River, across from Wawel Castle to watch the evening's fun.

Jan, Helena and Piotr were on high alert for reasons they did not understand. Julia was all caught up in the fact that as a maiden she would be launching a candle-lit wreath from the riverbank. She loved being the center of attention; dressed all in white with a bit of paradise in her hair. She was hoping that the young and dashing Michal Kinski would notice her. They were in the church youth group, they went to school together and shared a love of hiking and bird watching.

The Jasinski twins were popular wherever they went. They were often seen together so tonight was not unusual. But Piotr knew that his responsibility toward Julia would somehow take on new meaning tonight.

They spotted their youth group and walked toward them. It was a pretty sight - all the maidens in a circle dressed in white, with flowers in their hair and holding their candle wreaths waiting to be lit.

All the young men outside of the circle of white were laughing and joking about the school play that was to take place the next week. The play was appropriately timed with this event - A Midsummer Night's Dream. When the boy who was playing the role of Puck saw Michal making goo-goo eyes at Julia from afar, he loudly proclaimed, "Lord, what fools these mortals be!" They all knew that Michal was Lysander in the play and that Julia played his love interest, Hermia.

Laughter, hoots and hollers filled the air. Piotr pretended to be amused along with the other boys, but he was busy watching the crowd for danger.

Julia heard what the playful Puck had shouted and she blushed in contrast to her white dress. She hated that part of being blonde and fair-skinned. It was nearly impossible to hide emotion. She smiled at Michal.

The bell was struck three times signaling the start of the evening's events. That meant that all the maidens should light their candle wreaths. The eldest maiden had the task of lighting the first wreath from which the other wreaths were then lit, one by one around the circle. When all the wreaths were aglow, the girls walked to the riverbank and prepared to send their wreaths afloat.

By this time, all the townspeople had gathered around to watch the ritual of the maidens. The young men were allowed to stand just behind the maidens so that they could choose the young lady that they wanted to watch the fireworks with later on.

The riverbank was sloped offering the onlookers a good view. Helena and Jan stood on the bank together holding hands. They were feeling a little more comfortable now that they could see that Julia was safe and that Piotr was right behind her. The bell was struck again; only once. Each maiden launched her candle-lit wreath. It was a magical moment. The crowd oohed and aahed and cheers erupted. The maidens then turned toward the group of young men hoping to be picked by the boy of their choice.

Piotr, still behind Julia, was now in front of her as she turned. Michal took a giant step toward Julia just as she saw him; they smiled at each other in acknowledgment. Piotr, seeing Michal's approach, turned to his right to greet him.

Suddenly, a boy ran up from Piotr's left side and in that instant had enough time to get to Julia and knock her backwards into the river. Julia never saw him coming, her eyes were on Michal. Piotr and Michal lunged toward Julia to save her, allowing the boy to escape capture. Julia jumped up and out of the river. She was unhurt but very angry that her night was ruined. She stomped up the riverbank. Piotr ran behind, trying to keep up with her. She was mad at everyone, most especially Piotr who was supposed to keep her safe.

Back at the riverbank, the crowd was atwitter. Those who'd seen the boy push Julia into the river agreed that they'd never seen him before. Then he disappeared so quickly that no one knew where to begin to look for him. The big question on everyone's mind was why would anyone be so unkind to Julia Jasinski?

Julia's family tried to press forward through the crowd to get to her. From their position on the slope, they'd viewed the entire episode. It happened so fast that they were in shock. It seemed surreal.

Their group got separated in the confusion. As Helena tried desperately to get to the river, she was forcefully grabbed around her waist and dragged kicking and screaming in the opposite direction. Her screams could not be heard, and no one even noticed. Before she knew it, she was unceremoniously plopped down on the front steps of her cottage.

Panic blurred her vision and her recognition of the man who had stolen her away from her family. He was a very large man. That accounted for the ease with which he'd carried her off.

Helena realized the man was speaking to her in a language not her own. She tried to focus her thinking and to slow her breathing. As she became slightly calmer, she first recognized his voice, and then she tried to place where she'd heard it before. It had a

kind, refined tone to it. In the next instant she knew – it was Professor Georg Stein; her language instructor and he was speaking German to her!

Recognizing this man did not make Helena feel much easier. She tried to catch her breath to speak, to get answers, to understand.

What neither Helena nor the Professor knew was that Franz had stayed behind while the others went to the festival. He was in his loft working when he heard strange sounds coming from the front steps. He peeked out of the upstairs windows just above the steps. He did not understand why Helena seemed to be upset and why she was with this strange man. Intuitively, he felt that he should listen and not take action yet. It took him a moment to attune his ear to the fact that the man was speaking German. The man looked like Professor Stein, the well-liked language professor at the university. While that did not make any sense to Franz, he trained all his senses on the words he would hear next.

The Professor had to speak louder than normal because he wanted to be doubly sure that Helena comprehended his message completely. There was no time to repeat his words.

Helena was sitting on the steps and the Professor was bending over her. He put his hands on her shoulders and said, "Helena, I apologize for carrying you off but there is something of great import that you and your family must know. First, Julia is perfectly safe. In order to get you alone, I used her as a diversion. The boy who pushed her into the river is my nephew who is visiting from Lodz. No one would have recognized him. Now, what I need to tell you is that a conversation was overheard between some foreign students in our town square just last week. They assumed that because they were speaking German that no one would know what they were talking about. However, my German class had just ended and some of the students came across these foreigners who seemed to be surveying the buildings for some reason. Two of my students sat near to them speaking Polish but of course they understood most of what the other students said in German. What they were able to make out is that there is a plot involving a Nazi takeover of Poland, with Cracow being a central government staging post for their operations.

"When my students came to me with this information, I immediately went to our local government. I have been asked to gather my best foreign language students to begin forming our underground security effort. Helena, *you* are my best student. Will you help with the underground formation? Helena! Do you hear me, do you understand?" He released her shoulders and stood up.

When the Professor took his hands off her shoulders, Helena's mind suddenly cleared. She'd heard and understood every word and she was completely prepared to do anything and everything in her power to protect her family and their town from the Nazis.

She stood up in front of this messenger of doom and calmly said, "Yes, Professor Stein, I will help with the underground formation. There have been rumblings for the past two years that the Nazis plan to control all or part of Poland. I will do what I can to help and I know that my family members will do the same. My brother, Franz is an architect and can

travel throughout Europe on business without raising suspicions. My other brother, Jozef is an investigative journalist and will be a wonderful asset to the effort too."

Helena saw that the wet Julia, with Piotr trailing behind, was getting close to home. She said, "Go quickly now before you are discovered. Thank you for taking the risk to bring me this information, although I truly wish that my Julia did not have to be the diversion."

The Professor said, "Yes, I am sorry for Julia too. I will go now and when you come to class on Monday, I will find a way to let you know the time and place of our first meeting."

Franz backed away from the upper window and sat heavily on his bed, alone in the dark. Although he was not surprised at the news of the Nazi plot, he did not expect to be so immediately and directly affected. He had a feeling of deepening dread that spread from his gut to his heart and back again. He then began compiling a mental list of contacts that would surely help with the monumental tasks that they would all soon be facing. He had met quite a few influential people in his travels; people who had the power to be very helpful indeed.

The Professor disappeared into the night just before Julia ran up to her Mama and threw her arms around her, sobbing. Piotr stood looking helpless and Helena softly said, "Piotr, go ahead and wash your face. We will be in shortly." Gratefully, Piotr obeyed.

Julia was incapable of intelligible speech, so Helena calmed her by saying, "Julia, let us put this night behind us. I am sorry this had happened to you, but it cannot be undone. One day you will tell your children all about this and it will not seem so bad. You will see, my darling girl."

It was not so much the words that Julia's Mama spoke, but her soothing tone. She felt so much better after being in her Mama's presence. It was just like when her Mama had told her that she had felt about her own Mama . . . secure and supremely loved.

Julia went into their cottage, dried off and changed into her nightgown. She got into her nice warm dry soft bed and was asleep as her head touched her pillow.

Piotr changed into his night clothes. He knew that Franz was in his loft and he ascended the ladder, hoping he was still awake. He was surprised to find Franz sitting in the dark. He said, "Franz is everything alright?"

There was a long pause in the darkness. When Franz finally answered, he said, "No, Piotr. I'm afraid that everything is not alright."

Knowing that Piotr would soon be finding out what was about to befall them, Franz told Piotr all that he'd overheard just moments before. When he'd heard all there was to hear, Piotr asked Franz if he could sleep on the floor in the loft that night. Franz said, "Of course, I will be happy not to be alone tonight."

Both young men were lost in their own thoughts and fell off to sleep before the rest of their family arrived back to the cottage after having cut short the night's activities.

Jan and Helena went into their bedroom to talk privately. She told him why she disappeared just when Julia was pushed into the river, and all that Professor Stein had told her.



Before Jan responded to this news, he told Helena that Michal and Kazi tried to catch the boy who did the pushing, but they lost sight of him almost immediately. Michal wanted Julia to know that he ran after the boy.

Jan was glad to hear who the boy was and the reason that Julia was targeted, although he felt bad for her having to endure the embarrassment in front of the whole town. So now he knew why he had such a feeling of foreboding for Julia before she left their home that night.

He wrapped his arms around his wife and said, "Lena, are you hurt? You must have been terrified to be carried off with no one to help you! Please, tell me that you are unharmed, my sweet."

Helena smiled, feeling safe in the arms of her husband. She said, "Yes, Jan I am physically unhurt but mentally I am working very hard to maintain my equilibrium."

Jan nodded. He realized that Helena's news was just the beginning of some very bad times for all of them.

End of Sneak Peek Chapter of "With Love From Poland"

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