

Conversations with the Polish Land

Atava Garcia Swiecicki

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Environmental Intimacy

Instructor: Dr. Kimmy Johnson

University of Creation Spirituality

In October of 2002, I made an ancestral pilgrimage to Poland, the homeland of my paternal grandparents, the Przybysz (pronounced shi-bish) and the Swiecickis (pronounced shvee-en-tsee-skee). Each day in Poland, I interacted with the spirit of the Polish land. The Polish soil, plants, trees, rivers, forests and mountains were my companions as well as my ancestral research partners. The Polish land taught me about my Polish heritage by welcoming me into the landscape which shaped the character and culture of the Polish people.

The Story Begins: Making Offerings

Barbara Dean¹ and I arrive in Krakow Poland, on October 4th, 2002. It is mid-afternoon, and the sky is bleak; the air crisp and cold. We have been taught by our Indigenous Mind teacher, Dr. Apela Colorado about the importance of making an offering to the ancestors of the land when arriving in a new place. Although we are delirious with jet-lag, I intuitively know we must make our offering to the Polish land before doing anything else. Fortunately, our Hotel Wyspianski is across the street from a city park. We stumble out into the chilly autumn air and walk to the park in search for the right place to make our prayers and offerings. Tall trees, decorated in their autumn colors, line our path. I recognize some of the trees to be oak. The oak trees stand proudly, solidly rooted in the damp earth.

In my research on the trees and plants of Poland, I had discovered that the oak tree was sacred to the Slavic people. In her book *Polish Herbs, Flowers, and Folk Medicine*, Sophia Hodorowicz Knab writes, “Revered since ancient times, the oak has

¹ Barbara Dean is my Polish friend and classmate, with whom I traveled to Poland.

always been a symbol of strength.”² The oak was sacred to Perun, the Slavic god of thunder: “He (Perun) was worshiped at tall oak trees, and when they were cut down by the missionaries, the people expressed that they no longer knew where to go and pray, or where to find their god.”³ I feel heartbroken as I imagine what it had been like for my Slavic ancestors, devastated and confused over the destruction of their sacred groves. Here in Poland, I feel like Barbara and I can help heal this ancient wound by making our prayers to these sacred oak trees.

Barbara and I find a nice oak tree in a quiet place in the park. The tree has a rugged, thick trunk. Its bark is coarse, patterned in various shades of grey, silver, brown, and black. The oak stands sturdily in the strong autumn wind. Its energy feels protective and masculine. We each make our prayers and introduce ourselves to the ancestors of the Polish land. We tell the ancestors that we are Polish-Americans, who have traveled to Poland to more deeply understand our Polish heritage. We give the names of our Polish ancestors: “I am Atava Garcia Swiecicki, daughter of Julia Garcia and Michael Edmund Swiecicki, grand daughter of Michael Edmund Swiecicki and Helen Przybysz, and great-granddaughter of Josef and Stephania Przybysz and Nicolas Swiecicki and Catherine Goder of Poland.”

As we pray, we make the traditional Polish offering of bread and salt at the base of the oak tree. I know in my heart that we have begun our journey in the right way. I can feel a shift in the energy around us. It as if the veil has opened between us and the dimension of spirit. My vision is unusually sharp and clear; in fact, all my senses feel

² Sophia Hodorowicz Knab, *Polish Herbs, Flowers, and Folk Medicine* (New York, NY: Hippocrene Books, 1999), 144.

³ Hildiwulf, “Perkunas/Perun: Thunder God of the Balts and Slavs,” *Thunder Issue 3*, Summer 1997. www.thorshof.org/thunder3.htm.

incredibly awake and alive. All that surrounds us (the oak trees, the twilight sky, the cold, damp earth, and the crisp fall air) seems to be pulsating with magic. To document this beginning moment of our journey, we take photos of ourselves with this magnificent grandfather tree. Later, when we have our pictures developed, I noticed a white blurry light next to me in the photo of myself and the oak. Could this white light have been an ancestral spirit showing up for the camera?

Descent into the Underworld

I am excited and thrilled to be in Poland. The next afternoon, we take a tour to Wieliczka, a Polish salt mine. We arrive at the mine on a tour bus with a group of other English speaking tourists. This Saturday the mine is crowded with tourist groups. Our group waits in the lobby until we can be escorted into the mine with our own English speaking tour guide and a Polish miner. Our tour begins with a steep descent into the mine. We walk down hundreds and hundreds of steps until we are 327 meters underground, in the womb of Mother Earth, or Matka Ziemia, as she is called in Polish.

As we emerge into the underground caverns, I am breathless with awe. I can feel the presence of something very sacred down here in the bowels of Matka Ziemia. The air smells like moist earth and salt. The cave walls are dark and shiny. My hands instinctively reach to touch them; their surface is cool and smooth like glass. I taste my fingertips; they taste salty. The salt is translucent; its crystals glow when placed in a ray of light. The temperature in the cave is comfortably cool; much warmer than the air above ground. The tour guide tells me that the temperature underground stays the same year round.

I lag behind the tour group, taking my time to enjoy the stillness and magic in the cave. The only person behind me is the Polish miner. The miner's job is to insure that no one wanders off or gets lost in the labyrinth of the mine. He seems to enjoy showing me the unique features of the cave with his flashlight. We exchange wordless gestures, as neither one of us speaks a word of the other's language.

Ancient people (the Slavs and other tribes) had settled in the area of Wieliczka and have been harvesting salt since the Neolithic times.⁴ The first shaft of Wieliczka, a mine continuously owned by Polish nobility, was dug in the late 1300's. The abundance of "grey gold" in the Wieliczka mine became well-known, attracting miners from all over Poland. Mining was very dangerous work, which "made the miners more religious than other social groups."⁵ The miners constructed underground shrines and chapels where they could pray for protection and to honor those who were killed in the mine.

In 1697, after an underground chapel burned down, the royal commission prohibited any flammable religious statues or pictures in the mine. In his book on Wieliczka, Polish author Janusz Podlecki writes: "Paradoxically, this prohibition resulted in developing the unique tradition of rock-salt sculpture which has been kept up in the mine for three centuries."⁶ Hundreds of feet underground, these self-taught miners carved elaborate statues, shrines, and even an underground cathedral.

We see many of these sculptures on our tour. These sculptures remind me of my father. I feel a resonance between my father and these miners who carved elaborately in the rock salt. As a hobby, my father has built a beautiful garden and fish pond in his backyard out of rocks and boulders he has gathered from all over California. His artistic

⁴Janus Podlecki, *Wieliczka, A Royal Salt Mine* (Cracow: Publishing House Karpaty, 2001), 1.

⁵ Ibid.,4.

⁶ Ibid.

medium is rock. I believe that my father shares the mystical talent of these Polish miners, who were able to see the spirit images hidden in the rock salt, and who would carefully work to bring these images to life. I am excited to have made this connection between my father and our more ancient ancestors down here in the mine.

As I walk slowly behind my group, I know I am in a sacred place of the underworld. This reminds me of a time on the Big Island of Hawaii, when Hawaiian elder, Mr. Hale Makua, brought the Indigenous Mind students to the lava tube. He guided us to take our time walking through the lava tube and to open all of our senses. As we walked through the lava tube slowly and mindfully, fully engaged with all five senses, dozens of other tourists quickly passed us by. I was struck by the parallel realities in which we co-existed: as students we were engaged with the ancient spirit of the lava, the darkness and the moistness of the cave; and on the other hand, the tourists were engaged with the clock; they seemed to be in a rush to their next destination. How much of the cave did they really see? Today in the salt mine I apply this teaching. I try to be mindful, watchful, and fully engaged with the spirits deep in the womb of the earth.

There are many legends about the salt mine. Our tour guide speaks of the “Treasure Keeper,” the guardian of the mine, also called “The Warden.” The Warden would warn the miners of impending danger and help rescue lost miners.⁷ The miners would offer him treasures in exchange for his help and protection. To insult the Treasure Keeper could be dangerous: “To evil persons or those who insulted them, they have been known to send tunnels crashing down upon them or push them into dark chasms.”⁸ On our tour we also see sculptures of gnomes, legendary beings who helped the miners in

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ainsley Friedberg, “Slavic Pagan Beliefs”, *Slavic Paganism*, 6.
<http://www.members.aol.com/hpsofsnert/gods>

their work. Our tour guide tells us that the Poles, like many other cultures, have a legend like Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.

At the end of our tour, we reach the underground souvenir shops. We have about twenty minutes to walk about freely and shop. After I buying some salt souvenirs, I take advantage of the free time to make an offering to the spirits that dwell in this cave. I find a private corner where I will not be noticed by the other tourists. I pray and thank the spirits in the mine, and put down my offering of bread and salt (which feels humorous, to offer sea salt to a salt mine).

After I finish praying, I look around for my tour group. Suddenly, out of a dark corridor in the cave emerges the Polish miner. He is walking towards me and holding something between his two hands. As he reaches me, he empties a handful of giant salt crystals into my open palms. These crystals are very unique; I had not seen anything like them for sale in the souvenir shops. I am stunned and grateful for his gift. I squeak out the only Polish words I know, “Djenkuje Bardzo,” (thank you very much). The miner beams a smile back at me.

The energy of those salt crystals pulsates in my hand like a living heart. Had the miner, the guardian of the salt mine, recognized that I was communicating with the ancient spirit of the mine? His gift to me, a precious handful of “grey gold”, came exactly after I had made my prayer and offering to the cave. My skin prickles with goose bumps. Something mysterious and sacred has occurred. I feel like the spirit of the mine has responded to my prayers, and has thanked me for seeing Her with my whole mind.

Matka Ziema: Moist Mother Earth

In Polish, the word “pole” means field. The ancient Slavic tribe who settled Poland was called the Polanie, literally meaning the people of the fields.⁹ Poland means the land of open fields, and a Pole is a field dweller. Encoded in the name “Poland” is a key to the original earth medicine of the Polish people. The Polish peasants and farmers have been farming the rich Polish land for hundreds of years.

My journey to Poland was organized by a group called The International Coalition to Protect the Polish Countryside (ICPPC). Founded by Polish woman Jadwiga Lopata, ICPPC helps small organic Polish farmers to retain both their traditional culture and their traditional farming methods. In the ICPPC brochure, Lopata writes:

THE RURAL VOICE MUST BE HEARD

As never before, the future of the Polish countryside hangs in balance. On one hand, the thousands of small family farms that fan out across the length and breadth of the country hold the key to maintaining the wealth of biodiversity for which Poland is renowned. On the other hand, the forces of globalization and agribusiness are attempting to establish a factory-farming monoculture on this same land..... Poland stands as a bridge between the first and third world, offering a model of self-sufficient and sustainable farming skills to both.

ICPPC sponsors “eco-tours” of Poland, in which a tourist can vacation at small family farms throughout the Polish countryside. The eco-tourism benefits the farmers by generating new sources of income, and educating outsiders about their way of life. The eco-tourists, like myself, benefit by having the opportunity to be immersed in the cultural life of Polish farmers. Eco-tourists are provided with three delicious organic meals per day, room and board, and guided tours of local sights.

A member of our first host family has graciously offered to pick up Barbara and me from our hotel in Krakow and to drive us to his family’s farm in Lekawica. Marcin, a

⁹ Krystof Dydynski, *Poland*. (Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications, 2002), 13.

twenty-five year old graduate student, has lived in the US with American relatives. He speaks fluent English and would soon become our most cherished interpreter. On the drive to the farm, Marcin tells us that, for the most part, Polish farms have always been organic. The farmers simply could not afford the expensive fertilizers and pesticides. Recently, as organic farming was making a comeback in Europe, many Polish farmers were converting back to organic methods. Marcin's family, the Masters, have been farming for generations. The Master's farm is located in a pocket of southern Poland where small traditional family farms still outnumber their modern agribusiness cousins.

We arrive in the Polish countryside on a rainy night. The Master's family warmly greets us with big smiles and strong handshakes. After we are shown to our room, we are invited down to the kitchen table for *obiad*, the Polish evening meal. The pretty red plaid tablecloth is covered with heaping platters of bread, cheese, cold cuts, and vegetables. Barbara and I savor this delicious offering from the Polish fields, barns and orchards.

The next day is bitterly cold and wet, but I am itching to walk outside and see the Polish countryside. Even in the wind and cold, my eyes delight in the landscape. I see green, rolling hills dotted with farmhouses and distant mountains surrounded by forests. The soil of the newly plowed fields is rich, dark and fertile. I remember that the Polish name for the Mother Earth is *Matka Ziemia*, which translates to "Moist Mother Earth."¹⁰ *Matka Ziemia* had always played a central role in the lives of the early Slavs. She represented fertility, agriculture, healing, protection, divination, and justice.¹¹ Renowned scholar and Goddess archeologist, Marija Gimbutas writes: "For centuries, Slavic

¹⁰ Okana, *Singing Back the Sun: A Dictionary of Old Polish Customs and Beliefs*, (Edwards, NY: Okana's Web Publishing, 1999), 34.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

peasants settled legal disputes relating to landed property by calling on the Earth as a witness. If someone swore an oath after putting a clod of earth on his or her head or swallowing it, that oath was considered binding and incontestable.”¹²

In Poland, Matka Ziema is honored throughout the year, but particularly during harvest time. Every August, She is celebrated during *Dozynki*, the Feast of the Assumption. This feast day honors both the Virgin Mary and the harvest. This festival represents the curious blend of pagan and Catholic rites in Poland and the connection between Mother Earth, *Matka Ziema*, and the Mother of God, *Matka Boze*. Friedberg writes: “Earth worship was most adamantly clung to despite the Christianizing of the Slavic world. Earth worship was transferred to the cult of Mary and is why she is such a central part of Slavic Christianity.”¹³ Gimbutas also refers to this phenomenon. She describes the connection between the veneration of the dark, fertile Earth Mother and the popular worship of the Black Madonna. Although the color black was associated with death and evil in Christianity, to the ancient Slavs, black represented the goodness and fertility of the earth. Gimbutas writes:

*The fact that black madonnas throughout the world are focal points for pilgrimages, are regarded as miracle workers, and are among the most highly venerated of all Christian religious symbols indicates that the blackness of these miraculous madonnas still evokes profound and meaningful images and associations for devotees. For instance, the shrine at Czestochowa in southern Poland, known as the Polish Lourdes, housing the black Madonna, is the holiest and most visited religious shrine in Eastern Europe.*¹⁴

Later in my journey, I will travel to Czestochowa to visit this legendary black Madonna. She is a fierce, somber Virgin. Her dark eyes look both watchful and

¹² Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess*, (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1989), 159.

¹³ Friedberg, 11.

¹⁴ Gimbutas, 144.

sorrowful. Her right cheek is slashed with scars from a legendary invasion by the Swedes in 1655. She is attributed with many miracles, including the many times that she rescued the Polish people from brutal invaders.

Throughout my travels in Poland, I am fascinated with the devotion that the Polish people have for Our Lady of Czestochowa. If She represents something other than Mary the Mother of God, the Polish people don't talk about it. The Poles I meet are strict and devout Catholics: they go to mass every Sunday (at least); they don't eat meat on Fridays; their lives revolve around the rituals and celebrations in the Catholic Church. Yet, the power that Our Lady of Czestochowa holds in the hearts of the Polish people is awesome. Her image is in every house I visit; she overshadows Jesus in importance on church altars. People walk in pilgrimage for hundreds of miles to her sanctuary at Jasna Gora. The only devotion of this kind I have ever seen before is that of the Mexican people for their beloved Virgen de Guadalupe. If this devotion to Czestochowa is indeed transference of the worship of the Mother Earth, I would guess that it is a largely unconscious process in the hearts of Polish Catholics.

Dreamtime: Harvest Dance

As Barbara and I continue our walk in the Polish countryside, our boots squish on the muddy paths. I recognize in the fields many of my herbal allies: plantain, yarrow, red clover, yellow dock, comfrey, nettles, chicory, wild oats, and calendula. What a thrill it is to see some of my favorite herbs growing in the Polish countryside, many of which I had grown in my own garden. As I walk through these Polish fields, I remember a dream I had last April called "Spring Festival with Songs and Herbs": *"I am at a big gathering*

of people.... I notice the tall oat straw and red clover, as tall as I am. I wonder if we will dance (a crop circle) to press it down into the earth. (4/12/02)” I wonder if this dream took place in Poland, and if this ritual dance with the fields of red clover and oat resembles any ancient spring time custom of the Poles.

Later, when doing more research for this paper, I discover some interesting connections between my dream and the ancient harvest festival, *Dozynki*. Like the festival in my dream, this Slavic holiday “had a character of a feast and a dance.”¹⁵ In Poland, another name for the harvest festival is *Okrezne*. The word *Okrezne* comes from the Polish word “to circle”, “referring to the rite of walking round the fields.”¹⁶ These harvest rites “used to be initiated in a particularly ceremonial way,” in which “the reapers, very neatly dressed on that day, decorated their tools with flowers, then prayed and finally began their job moving in a set order.”¹⁷

Together my dreams, the Polish land, and a Polish ethnography book have helped me re-imagine this ancient rite. I imagine the dancers, decorated with flowers and ribbons, carefully stepping across the fields. They dance together in a sacred circle, as their bare feet press down the stalks of grain. As they sing and pray, they gather the last sheaths of the harvest: the oats; the rye; the wheat and buckwheat. The aroma of fresh baked bread mingles in the air with the scent of ripe berries and fruits. Laughter echoes in the air with the clip-clop of

¹⁵ Barbara Ogrodowska, *Polish Rituals of the Annual Cycle*, (Warsaw: State Ethnographic Museum, 2001), 108.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

horses' hooves, and the mooing of contented cows. The community has come together to celebrate the miracle of the harvest.

Death and Regeneration

After we have meandered across the fields, Barbara and I find a small grove of birch trees, another tree sacred to the Slavs. Hodorowicz writes: "Birch was used by the Slavs as a harbinger of Spring and as a symbol of eternity. It protected against witchcraft and the evil eye, bringing people good fortune and happiness."¹⁸ According to legend, the Wila, the beautiful and fierce fairy-like women, live among the birch trees.¹⁹ The energy of the birch trees feels very feminine to me. As the wind dances through their branches, hundreds of golden leaves tumble to the earth. On the bark of the birch trees, I see many eyes. These eyes of bark make the birch trees appear both watchful and wise.

Growing in the shade of this birch grove are some angelica plants. Commonly referred to by the Poles as the "Herb of the Holy Ghost," angelica has been growing in Poland for over 2,500 years.²⁰ Angelica has been traditionally used in Poland to treat lung conditions, for labor, and for drawing out poisons from the body. Medieval Polish doctor and herbalist Syreniusz writes that angelica, when hung around the neck, "will drive away cares and cause a merry heart."²¹ Wild mushrooms sprout from decaying tree trunks. I imagine that

¹⁸ Hodorowicz Knab, 93.

¹⁹ Friedberg, 7.

²⁰ Hodorowicz Knab, 89.

²¹ Ibid., 89.

fairies could be dwelling in these magical circles of mushrooms. In one area of the grove, I noticed a pile of garbage. Had this been used as a dump?

I attempt to roll some tobacco to make a prayer offering, but the wind is too strong, and keeps blowing out the match. Perhaps, I think, tobacco is not the appropriate offering for this site. I offer instead bread and salt as I make my prayer. The strong icy wind makes it too cold for me to sit still and pray for very long. I feel a mixture of emotions. I am excited to be here in the Polish countryside, and am happy to recognize many plant friends. I also feel heavy and sad about how disconnected my family is from this Polish land. What have we lost as immigrants living now on foreign soil? What is our cultural identity living apart from the land which has defined us for centuries? How are our souls affected by our modern, urban lives, in which we live so separate from our *Matka Ziemia*, Mother Earth? I wonder also about the garbage, especially the empty beer cans and vodka bottles. It feels to me as if a sacred site has been desecrated. I feel the presence of the alcohol which has poisoned the bodies and spirits of the Polish people.

As we exit the sacred birch grove, I notice two crows flying overhead. According to Marija Gimbutas, the crow is one of the symbols for the Goddess of Death and Regeneration. I reflect upon all that has been lost in my family and in my culture: the language, the connection to the land, the ancient rites and ceremonies, the songs, the healing remedies. In this way, the appearance of the crows represents the death aspect of the Goddess. But at the same time, the crows fly with the promise of regeneration. My return to the Polish land heralds a time

of healing and regeneration of my Polish roots. With each step I take on Polish soil I am reconnecting with and remembering my roots. Hawaiian elder Mr. Makua once told me that one meaning of the word “remember” is to *re-member*, to literally put back together the broken and fragmented pieces of what was once whole.

In my own remembrance process I am gathering together the fragments of my indigenous Polish mind. Many missing pieces come to me as I traveled through Poland; some fragments appear in dreams; much information comes to me from books; other valuable links I discover in conversations with Polish friends. Even as I write this paper, I am re-remembering the scattered and lost parts of my ancestral story. I am weaving together my stories from the Polish land with other stories I found in archeology books, history books, Polish museums, and in Polish myths and legends.

Poland is a rich, fertile land of plains, rolling hills, mountains, rivers, lakes, and magical forests. Each day that I traveled in Poland, I spent time interacting with the Spirit of the land. Each place held a different teaching for me. The oak trees taught me about the significance of sacred groves to my Slavic ancestors and about the importance of making offerings. Deep in the salt mine of Wieliczka, I explored the mystery and magic of the underworld. The fields of herbs reminded me that I do carry ancestral memories of these Polish plants in my DNA and in my dreams. In the birch grove, I discovered the shadow of alcoholism and my own buried grief. The crows came to remind me of life’s endless cycle of death and rebirth. Finally, the beloved Mother Earth, *Matka*

Ziema, nourished and protected me as She has done so for countless of my ancestors. The memories of all these special places and beings still continue to inform and teach me.