Utopian Unitarians in 1569:

Views from a Pilgrimage to Poland in 2019

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento
September 29, 2019

Hymns: #118, This Little Light of Mine; Name, Unnamed (Wren/Walden version); #159, This Is My Song.

Music: "Aria," K. Penderecki (piano, violin); "Romance," H. Wieniawski (piano, violin); Andante Spianato, F. Chopin (piano).

Reading: "On Death, without Exaggeration," poem by Wislawa Szymborska. See this link.

Here's a line of poetry by Vergil, the ancient Roman poet: *Not for yourselves do you birds build your nests*. In Latin, these words were inscribed on a doorway inside a chapel in Poland nearly 450 years ago. The chapel was built by members of the first Unitarian movement in Europe. They called themselves the Polish Brethren. The movement began in the mid-1500s, early in the Protestant Reformation. It flourished for a less than century before it was wiped out by the Catholic rulers of Poland.

The Polish Brethren existed long before the word *Unitarian* was coined. However, without them, Unitarian religious ideas would not have spread in Europe or made it across the Atlantic to New England.

Not for yourselves alone, do you build your nests. This past summer, I read those words on a chapel wall during a brief tour in Poland with an international group of UUs.

I'd like to tell you about the Polish Brethren, but first I want to mention a few things I learned about Poland in general. In the late 1700s, Poland was carved up and controlled by its neighboring empires: Russia, Prussia, and Austria. That means that Poland didn't appear as a country on a map for 123 years. It was restored as a nation in 1918, after the First World War. Two decades later, Nazi Germany invaded Poland and began to make a colony out of it. The Nazis closed universities and executed intellectuals, professors, artists, clergy and activists. In many cities, they walled Polish Jews into ghettos and took away their property. On a walking tour of the Jewish quarter of the city of Krakow, I stood on a broad stone plaza. That's where Nazis rounded up Jewish people at gunpoint. Healthy people were taken away to labor camps, the weaker ones taken to death camps.

Jews had lived in Poland for eight centuries. They had survived segregation and suspicion, and periodic violence in pogroms by non-Jewish Polish people. They had made Poland the Jewish cultural capital of the world. During World War II, however, three million Jews died in Poland, half of the total number killed in the Holocaust. Another 1,900,000 non-Jewish Poles also died in the war. After the war ended in 1945, Poland fell under the control of Soviet Russia, which expelled Polish citizens of German origin, who had lived there for generations. Communist repression persisted for more than four decades. Now, 30 years after the fall of Communism, tourists visit Poland from all over the world… to enjoy the charm of its preserved old cities, the energy of its rebuilt ones, and its arts, music, and natural beauty.

In July I was part of a group of 20 Unitarian Universalist pilgrims to Poland. Among us were several North Americans, and a few each from Germany, Great Britain, and the Transylvanian region of Romania—plus one friendly teacher from Bulgaria. There's a newer group of UUs in Warsaw, Poland's capital city. Some of them came to join us in Krakow for the trip. I especially enjoyed Justyna, a charming woman from Warsaw. She brought along her teenage daughter and her elderly mother. On our first morning, Justyna told us: "I hope this is more than a tour for you, but also a pilgrimage."

She added that our visit was important because it shows local towns that foreign tourists are interested in the history of the Polish Brethren. She hopes to spur local authorities to realize it's in their economic interest to fix up and care for the remaining Unitarian historical sites. To make sure we were a visible group, she gave each of us a bright orange tote bag, imprinted with a chalice and the words *Polish Brethren* in both English and Polish.

The Brethren were a small movement of utopian radicals and Christian heretics. As they understood it, the core message of Jesus and his disciples was nonviolence--love of your neighbor *and* love of your enemy. So, like other pacifist religions, they refused military service. They opposed violent punishments for crimes. In the Acts of the Apostles in the Bible, after the crucifixion of Jesus, his Apostles keep his ministry going. In so doing, they share all possessions in common.[1] Following this model, the Polish Brethren congregations shared their property too, and held it in common— a sort of small-scale communist economics, or maybe it felt like family to them.

On theological questions, the Brethren didn't require uniformity of belief. Honoring the freedom of conscience, they exchanged their beliefs and questions openly, sharing disagreements with respect and love. What made them heretics to the Catholic Church and the larger Protestant groups is that the Brethren did not see Jesus as part of the Trinity. Jesus was holy, they said, but not the same as God.

In spite of this anti-trinitarian heresy, Polish Brethren congregations flourished for nearly a century in the city of Krakow and in smaller towns in the middle of Poland.

Here's what made it possible: Starting in the 1600s, nobles began electing the Polish king. Each king could serve a life term, but his children couldn't inherit the throne. This gave the nobility lots of power. They had control over the lands they owned. Each noble could decide what religion the tenants and workers on their lands would practice. The more enlightened or generous nobles allowed their tenants and workers to choose their own faiths. Members of the Brethren movement made their homes on several estates and built chapels there too.

On our trip we visited several chapels—some still on private estates and others falling apart in small rural towns. If a chapel building had two stories, the minister lived on the second story; meetings for worship, education and intellectual interchange took

place on the ground floor.

We saw a couple of estates where the current owners have restored their chapels. One afternoon a retired chemist and his wife hosted us at their home. Though he is Catholic, he's fixed up the chapel on his property filled it with books and pictures from the Polish Brethren history.

In spite of their small numbers, the Brethren were able to spread their Unitarian ideas because they owned a printing press, and they founded a religious academy. They located these in the city of Rakow, which they also founded. Back then, it was a bustling city. Now it's only a small town, which most folks in Poland currently have probably never heard of.

Our visit coincided with Rakow's 450th anniversary. Surrounded by hedges and flowers in the center of town is a well-maintained one-story white building.

Originally it was the Mayor's House. Now it houses the local history museum. We arrived there one afternoon for a reception—held in our honor. The waiting crowd of Racovian citizens offered snacks and beverages. Youth dressed in period costumes were demonstrating crafts and chores of days gone by—hammering a horseshoe, scrubbing clothes on a washboard, copying documents with a quill pen. Displays on the wall showed people from Rakow's history, including the Polish Brethren, but also Catholics and the sizable Jewish community that had lived there for centuries.

The town of Rakow, founded by heretics, is now Catholic. A tall stone Catholic church stands on land that used to house the Polish Brethren's chapel. Fortunately, the local historical society, and the mayor, and a few of the city council members think it's important to celebrate the city's *whole* history. They were there to greet us officially. Our organizer and historical guide for this trip guide was the Reverend Dr. Jay Atkinson, a UU minister and historian who lives in the Bay Area. Jay presented a framed letter of support and friendship to the town's dignitaries from the Reverend Susan Frederick Gray, the president of the UUA, our American denomination.

Here is a picture of me with the mayor, holding the letter. (I had no official part in it but saw the photo opportunity.) The letter conveys our UUA president's "congratulations and kindest regards to the residents of Rakow as they celebrate

the 450th anniversary of the settlement of their town." Susan also thanks them for the work they are doing "to preserve the memory of the history of the town … and to educate the children of Rakow about the historic influence of their town in the religious history of the Polish people and many others around the world."

Our Polish friends hope the letter hanging in the museum, and the sight of tourists with our orange tote bags, might sway the sympathies of the less friendly politicians in town.

What happened to the Brethren is this: The combination of a newly strong Catholic monarchy and the growing intolerance of the Catholic nobility expelled them for heresy. Actually it gave them a choice—convert to Catholicism, leave Poland, or be killed.

In the museum is a small copy of a painting that appears on the ceiling of the palace of the Catholic Bishop in a nearby city. It commemorates the judgment against the heretics. It celebrates their expulsion.

On our first morning together on this tour, we had breakfast in the big city of Krakow, then piled on a motor coach and headed out. On our way to Rakow, we'd stop and see two chapels in the countryside. Our bus driver made a stop at a gas station so we could buy snacks or use the restroom. While outside the bus, Jay Atkinson fell and hit his head. As he lay on the ground, a few folks attended to him, and the rest gathered nearby. He had a cut on his forehead and a black eye. Justyna, our friend from Warsaw, called an ambulance to take Jay to an area hospital to make sure he'd not had a brain injury.

Two paramedics arrived and spoke to Jay in English as they checked him out before taking him to the hospital. Justyna went along with Jay. The rest of us got on the bus to visit the next chapel.

Since it was a Sunday morning, Jay had planned a brief worship service in the next chapel we'd see. Now Jay was out of commission. "No problem," said Jarek, a UU from the group in Warsaw. As our local organizer, Jarek was in charge. He said, "I'm sure the other ministers in this group will come up with something." I quietly slid down in my seat in the bus. I'd barely just met this group and was not inclined to put myself out on a limb for a Sunday service. We got off our bus and walked through high grass. We entered the brick chapel. The air was cooler inside and light came in through a high open window.

We took seats on a few rows of bare wooden benches. Jarek covered a table with an embroidered fabric and set a vase with flowers on it. He placed a red, egg-shaped candle on a saucer as the chalice.

A person behind me leaned forward and whispered to me: "Are you going to say something?"

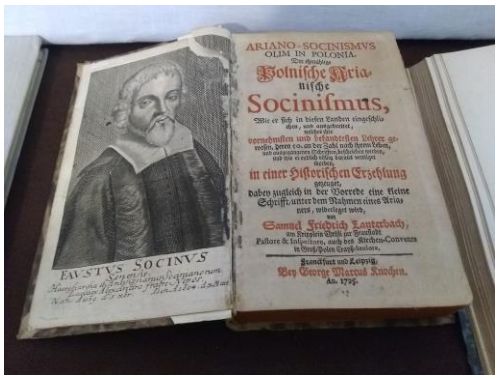
"Uh, we'll see," I replied. "I'd rather not."

But Jarek persisted: "We have three ministers here. Surely they can come up with something." So the three of us went behind the table—me from the US, one from Northern Ireland and one from the Unitarian Church of Transylvania. We conferred about what to do. I said I'd light the chalice! Before I did, I said, "We light this flame today to honor our brave ancestors in faith. May they inspire us to look toward the future with

courage." Then I asked the crowd, "What should we sing?" After a few nominees, the guy from Bulgaria said, "Most people can sing *This Little Light of Mine*!" Then he recounted the verses of that that African American spiritual. After we sang it, the Unitarian minister from Belfast, Northern Ireland, read a passage from the Book of Jeremiah, on his smart phone. The prophet Jeremiah speaks in the passage about the stones set into building, and how the stones will be enduring witnesses for the community. The minister then spoke of the old, worn stones under our feet. He reminded us that our ancestors had assembled right here, over these stones, for worship and conversation regularly and peacefully. Next, a minister from the Unitarian Church of Transylvania sang a solo for us of a hymn in Hungarian, and we took a few minutes of silence. After he ended the silence, I spoke once more, inviting people to join me in spoken prayers, adding their own sorrows, concerns and joys. I said: "We ask for healing—first for our friend Jay, and for all others in our lives who need healing. And we ask for healing for Poland, this country we are visiting, this land which has endured so much violence and pain for so many centuries. So many people here, and all over Europe, have suffered repression, cruelty and killing over the centuries. Let us pray for peace for their land, and peace for everyone in every land."

After the service, we went to lunch at a local restaurant. Then Justyna called from the hospital. Jay was still weak, but he'd not had a concussion. His forehead was stitched up and he was ready for us to swing by and get him out of there. Other than the historical events we learned about, Jay's accident was the only point of drama on our tour.

In the 1500s, the most significant contributor to Unitarian religious thought was an Italian scholar named Fausto Sozzini. He traveled around Europe to preach and teach, but he spent most of his time in Poland.



Thanks to the printing press at the Polish Brethren's academy in Rakow, the writings of Sozzini and other non-trinitarian thinkers were distributed around Europe and made it into Great Britain. Consequently, his ideas had a lasting impact on liberal religious history. In Latin his name is Faustus Socinus, and his theology is called Socinianism. You could say that *we* are Socinians.

In 1550, he moved to the city of Krakow, where he preached at a Polish Brethren church. Sozzini lived there 48 years, until it became too risky to stay. In 1591 his church was destroyed by rioters. In 1598, a mob dragged him out of his home, burned up his books, and nearly threw him into the river. Professors in the nearby university rescued Sozzini, and he fled from Krakow. He was given a warm welcome and refuge on the estate of a noble family in the town of Lusławice.[2]

On our last full day in Poland we rode out to see that estate. Lusławice is an hour or so from Krakow. Though it's a small town in the country, since 2005 Lusławice has been home to the European Music Center, a large training academy founded by the famous composer Krystof Penderecki. Early in the service, Irina and Mary played his instrumental piece "Aria." Though we did not meet Penderecki, he had allowed us to visit his estate.

Here's a picture of part of the enormous grounds of the place (above). Here's a picture of his manor house (below).

It was to this property in 1598 where Sozzini fled and where he found refuge. For the next six years, he lived and worked in the chapel on these grounds.

Sozzini died in 1604. He was buried in the nearby town, but an angry mob desecrated his grave and dug up his remains, and nobody knows where they are. Historians and UUs from within and beyond Poland salvaged his tombstone, erected a monument to Sozzini on the grounds of Penderecki's estate, and put the tombstone there for people to visit.

We made a pilgrimage to that monument. We placed a bouquet of flowers with a ribbon honoring his bravery in the cause of religious freedom.

We took a minute of silence. Those of us who knew the hymn *Spirit of Life* sang it for the others. For nearly a century, the movement of the Polish Brethren flourished, and then they were wiped out. Yet their spiritual gifts have endured for centuries—a free faith based on the principles of love, a model of sharing burdens, needs and resources in community, and a legacy of open dialogue and religious exploration.

The poet Vergil says to his feathered friends: *Not for yourselves alone do you build your nests*. Our Polish Brethren ancestors found these words inspiring enough to put them on a chapel wall. I do have an idea of what guidance they found in those words. At least this is what I take them to mean:

Honor the revelations of the spirit… in you *and* in everyone else. Listen to the call of your spirit, and heed the call, for your own sake and that of others. Remember that in this world we do not live for ourselves alone. We are connected with all people and all beings who share this life with us, and with all who will be here after we are gone.

Not for ourselves alone do we build. Not for ourselves alone do we act and speak, give and receive. Not for ourselves alone do we hope for peace or build a world where peace can thrive.

So may it be. Amen.

[1] Acts 4:32-25. See https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+4%3A32-35&version=ESV

[2] David Steers, blogpost on Velvet Hummingbee, accessed Sept. 27, 2019. For great essays and pictures of our trip, take a look at his posts: https://velvethummingbee.com/2019/09/13/fausto-sozzini-the-polish-brethren-and-krakow/