

Susan Jackimowicz Bishop

MUSZYNA SERENADE

It's not quite dark yet as I step off the bus onto Muszyna's Rynek. After a day of late or non-existing busses, and a backpack that seems to be taking on more weight with each step, there are only two things I want to do: take off my shoes, and lie down on a bed.

When I spot two big hotels on a hill, my feet know exactly what to do. I don't expect that anything could interfere with my walk up that hill. Then I hear some haunting music that seems to be coming out of the air. My eyes follow the sound to a green tree-covered hill directly across the river from the two hotels I've set my sights on.

There are no instruments or people visible, but the music is so impressive that without a thought, I forget about the bed and try to find the source of this celestial sound. No luck. As close as I am to the hill, I can't figure out which direction to climb to get to it. It's time for that bed.

Later that night, at a local coffee bar with a view of the musical hill, the owners tell me all about it. It's the first of May, beginning the month of Mary (Majowe). I am told that Muszyna has a unique and beautiful tradition of honoring Mary with music, played by local volunteers, at the top of the hill that is home to the ruins of an early 14th century castle. This music can be heard every night in May at 7:00.

I've come to the Beskid Sądecki region in southeast Poland to see the cerkiew, the amazing wooden onion-domed churches built in the 18th and 19th centuries by the Lemki. This part of Poland is the westernmost territory populated by the Lemki (from an overused word in their own dialect Lem, which means 'only' or 'but') who migrated to this region from Ruthenia mainly in the 16th century.

The helpful manager of the sanatorium/hotel where I am staying recruits her son and his wife to drive me to some of these churches in the villages of Powroźnik, Złockie and Szczawnik. This guided tour, which includes a stop in nearby Krynica for a taste of some potent natural waters, is an unexpected and much appreciated gift.

These Greek-Catholic churches represent the Uniate Church, which accepts the supremacy of Rome, but retains the old eastern rights and religious practices. The wooden cerkiew are topped with the classic onion domes, often painted a silver that seems to outshine the sun. Some of the domes are detailed in colors that give them an Alice in Wonderland look. Many of the churches I visit are under reconstruction, surrounded by scaffolding that in itself is so rustic and artistic, that for me, it doesn't detract from the beauty of the churches. And, although only one church I visit is open for entry, the architecture is so stunning. I never feel that I am missing out on anything. The beauty of the outside of the churches more than satisfies me.

There are four churches in neighboring villages that I still want to see. I hire a bike so I can combine the visit to these churches with a cycling trip through the beautiful

Carpathian foothills. Cycling west of Muszyna, there are incredible views of green hills, mountains, rivers and farms on the way to the churches in Milik and Andrzejowka. I am rewarded with fresh spring water spilling out of the rocks on the side of the road whenever I seem to need it most.

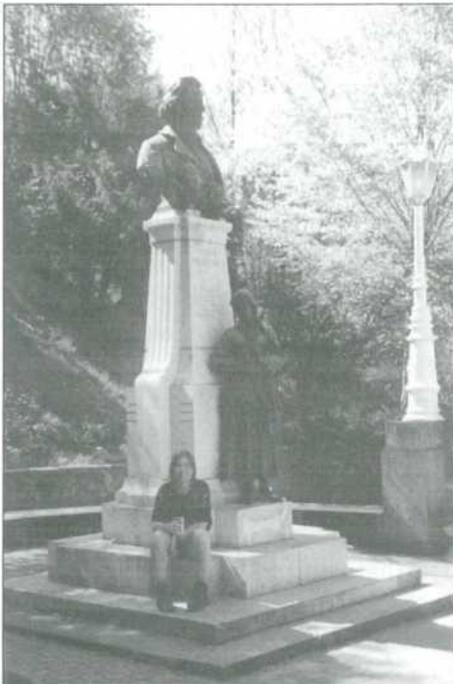
I cycle with my passport as the next part of my route follows along the Poland-Slovakia border. In fact, when I stop at the small shop, the shop keeper is unable to make change from my 10 PLN note. I notice that her cash drawer is full of Slovakian currency. On my way into Leluchow, passing by a border-crossing for walkers and cyclists, I take a peek into Slovakia.

To reach the last church in Dubne, first you must cycle to the middle of nowhere, but that isn't quite far enough. Picture this. You are on a long winding country road, and you cycle past a few farms, but it is likemostly trees and open land. The sun is high. How badly do you want to see this church? Then you turn a bend, and there it is, up on a hill shared by chickens and what looks like wild turkeys, the most perect wooden structure with a blinding light reflecting off of its silver domes. It's worth it.

Besides the churches, the very kind people, and the scenery of the foothills, this area is rich in mineral water springs and sanatoriums which offer health-rejuvenating services such as sauna and massage. I believe that air here alone can cure.

My last night in Muszyna I hike to the top of the hill that serenaded me upon my arrival. People are smiling, singing quietly to themselves, and saying the rosary, some with tears in their eyes, as the music floats into the air.

My future visits to Muszyna will always be in May.



Susan is in her second year of living in Gdansk and working as a teacher of English. Her other home is in the United States, in Salem, Massachusetts.

*Susan pod pomnikiem Mickiewicza w Krynicy
(fot. Susan Jackimowicz Bishop)*