

*Three of Us, Three of You:
The Quieter Moments in Poland
August 11-22, 2014*

by Fr. John Shimchick



Vera, Nadezhda, and Lubov

I knew about the three sisters from the letters. My grandfather, George, had left his village of Siderka, about an hour north of Bialystok, in 1912 and never returned. Throughout especially the last twenty years of his life, his brothers Vladimir and Makary had sent him letters. Last year my Uncle Walter gave me their letters in a cigar box and I began the work of getting them translated.



It wasn't so easy. They were hand-written in "po-nashomy" — a combination of Belorussian, Ukrainian, and Polish — basically in what might be called — "the language we speak." With the help of Fr. John and Matushka Ludmilla Prokopiuk I was able both to understand their content and with the assistance of their clergy friends discover family members who still live in

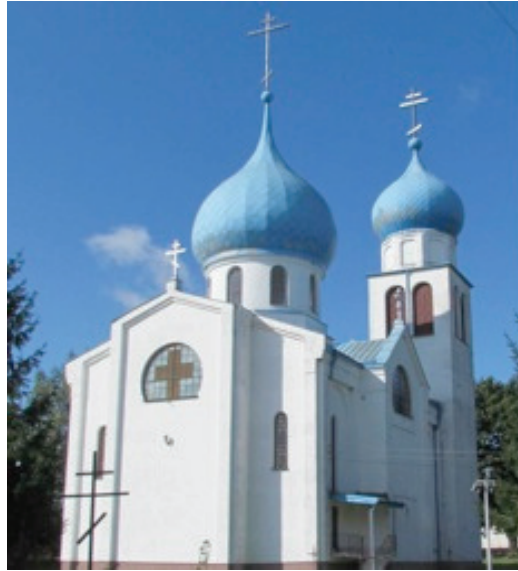
that area. One in particular, Mariola Rybinska, teaches English in Bialystok and was able to communicate with me weeks in advance by email and was a great help in conversing with relatives.



Mariola, Bishop Michael, and my son, John

I learned from Makary's letters that he had four daughters: Vera, Nadezhda, Lubov (Faith, Hope, and Love) and Maria. The recent email from Jan Szymczyk confirmed that but for Mary, the three sisters were still alive and living in the area of Siderka, grandfather's village. He had written one letter which for some reason was never mailed. It was addressed to the Orthodox priest in the village of Jaczno, the only functioning Orthodox church that he knew still existed in that area (his native parish in Siderka had become Roman Catholic following Polish independence in 1918). It was to the Church of the Holy Resurrection in Jaczno that my son, John (Jan in Polish) and I would head.





The community's pastor, Fr. Peter Omelczuk, was aware that we'd be coming and was very kind and hospitable. Speaking only Russian, he invited me to serve as "first priest." At the end of the liturgy I addressed the community and explained how and why we were there.





I mentioned the letters that grandfather had received from his brothers throughout his life. From my perspective, they revealed two important things: They came from particular locations, giving us a sense of where to go. They also revealed that he and perhaps they had known and had wanted to know even more about grandfather's family, his wife, his children, and grandchildren. They asked for information and photos. They invited him to visit. I ended by saying that no doubt with his blessings, love, and best wishes — John and I had returned in his place.

The sisters were the first relatives I greeted and looking at them, and their reliance upon each other, I thought of Leo Tolstoy's story, "The Three Hermits." An Orthodox bishop travelling in a ship approaches an island and hears from a fisherman about an encounter he had with three hermits who lived there:

"And did they speak to you?" asked the Bishop. The man replied, "For the most part they did everything in silence and spoke but little even to one another. One of them would just give a glance, and the others would understand him."

The bishop went ashore and met the hermits. He had heard that they were holy men and he was interested in their way of praying: "'We pray in this way,' replied the hermit. 'Three are ye, three are we, have mercy upon us.' And when the old man said this, all three raised their eyes to heaven, and repeated: 'Three are ye, three are we, have mercy upon us!'" The rest of the story is available online.

Now, I didn't speak with the sisters about prayer, but we shared a meal with the other family members who had gathered. We discussed as much as we could about family history, creating

more questions with the answers. We exchanged photos. We visited and enjoyed additional food, drinks, and conversation at the house of their father, Makary, where Lubov still lives. We went to the cemetery where their parents and other family members were buried. This is the view from outside of the cemetery.



Upon returning I explained during a sermon at my parish about the intensity of our trip. We certainly didn't see everything possible, but we did see and experience about as much as we could each day. We heard a great deal about the tragedy of Polish history — the “land of a thousand battles” — especially as it has influenced Orthodox church history: battles with Roman Catholics, Greek Catholics, governments, Nazis, and Soviets — not to mention, secularism. We understood the great historical connection that has gone on for over a hundred years with the immigration of lay people and clergy to America. We saw the incredible work of renewal and restoration taking place within churches, communities, and in the liturgical arts of music and iconography. Here the efforts and encouragement of our host, His Eminence Abel, Archbishop of Lublin and Chelm must be acknowledged. We were overwhelmed by the crowds of all ages, especially young people, who not only prepared and journeyed to the great Pilgrimage to Grabarka, but were empowered to control the crowds and be leaders. We observed the great reverence shown to the relic of St. Mary Magdalene that was brought for veneration on a tour of Poland by monks from the Simonas Petras monastery in Greece. We were swept up — it almost seemed literally at times — in a great and energetic liturgical and spiritual movement.

All of that was very powerful. I mentioned in the sermon about the significant emphasis given in almost every church to the Prophet Elijah. It is usually suggested that with his summer feast day and God-given ability to both hold back and send forth rain, he would naturally be popular in an agricultural environment. He was also known to experience God's presence not just in the excitement of events or the times — within wind, earthquake, or fire — but “in a still small voice” (I Kings 19:11-12). Looking back I was particularly moved even more by the quietness of Grabarka when the thousands of pilgrims had left. I was entranced by the peace and beauty of the liturgical singing, generosity, and delicious food within the women's monastic communities of Grabarka, Turkowice, and Zverki. We spent a few hours with the Monk Gabriel at his Skete of SS. Anthony and Theodosius in Odryniki/Kudak. The area floods to such an extent each year that the facility is surrounded like an island. He is the only monk there and is renowned for his spiritual wisdom and knowledge of holistic medicine. A group of lay people gather around him and he receives many visitors. I had not seen such an evening sky in quite a while, rich with stars and galaxies — the only light was provided by a small generator and I secretly wished that

it would go out and we could have experienced the night in all of its wild glory. Then there was the simplicity and strength of the three sisters.



At the Skete of SS. Anthony and Theodosius

So, the journey of our small group of pilgrims to Poland — His Grace our Bishop Michael, Fr. Wiaczeskaw Krawchuk, John, and I — ended up being everything and more than we could have hoped.

Special thanks to our host, His Eminence, Archbishop Abel, Diocese of Lublin and Chelm, for his kindness and generosity.

PS: Those interested in seeing what we believe is the area of my wife's family in Hanczowa might find this link and the church tour it provides very interesting. I have some photos from our stop there, but this site is even better.

http://www.cerkiew-hanczowa.pl/Start/Wirtualna_wycieczka_files/Wycieczka_Hanczowa.html



