As a second/third generation American, I think that I am somewhat out-of-the-ordinary in having a
singular ancestry: Polish. My grandparents on both my fraternal and maternal sides met and married in
the United States, as did my parents, but all of them married individuals of Polish ancestry, since they
tended to live in communities of Polish immigrants. In our discussions of issues surrounding the
presentation of stories from cultures other than our own, I realized that I had very little, if any,
understanding of the stories told from the culture of my ancestors. My research project, then, is an
examination of Polish Folk Tales, Legends and Myths. The objective of my project is to familiarize myself
with the stories of my own culture. In addition, I hope to see from my research what makes a Polish tale
different from other culture’s stories. In other words, what makes them Polish?

To research the Polish tales, I have obtained materials from my local library, as well as some books
owned by family members. These materials include traditional folktales, as well as legends explaining the
history of Poland. I limited my analysis to tales from the Slavic and Gypsy populations of Poland. I
chose not to include Jewish folktales, as these are not as typically Polish as much as they are typically
Jewish in culture. In other words, the Jewish tales could be set in Russia or some other location, as they
are more descriptive of Jewish life than of Polish life.

In completing my analysis, I will be using the three following “Structures for Analyzing a Narrative (Story)”: Cultural, Story Settings and Coda. I will be comparing the stories to look for elements common and
critical to Polish tales. Settings will be compared to see if this element has special meaning or value to
Poles. And, finally, I will be paying close attention to Codas in order to improve my story completion
skills.
Bibliographic Citations:


   In a story set in a time “long, long ago”, a man-eating dragon terrorizes a small, country village, after a group of young boys awakens him from his centuries-long sleep in a hidden cave. Krakus, noted for his wisdom and learning, is sought out for his advice on how to handle the fire-breathing dragon. Krakus uses his intelligence and some sulfur to bring the dragon down. Great rejoicing ensues and Krakus is asked to rule over the village. It is named after him and becomes the city of Krakow. The hill where the dragon cave sat is covered over and a castle is built on top. This is now Wawel Hill and Wawel Castle.


   Many centuries ago lived a peace-loving, agricultural folk in the land that is now Poland. The Goths from the west and the Huns from the east often threatened the area, such that a man called Lech was able to unite the Slavs of the area and create the first Dukedom in Poland. The Duke was handsome, strong, brave and kind. He loved hunting, particularly falconry, and he longed to capture a young, golden eagle to train for hunting. When out one day, he comes upon the nest of a huge White Eagle, who is protecting her hatchlings. The Duke attempts to take one of the young and a fight ensues with the mother. Both the Duke and the eagle became wounded and bloodied. Lech stops, recognizing the bravery of the bird and her willingness to fight to the death for her brood. He resolves the White Eagle shall become the symbol of Poland, with her blood being recognized as a sign of bravery. Thus the banners of Poland, to this day, show the White Eagle on a red background. And, the first Polish capital was called Gniezno, which means “nest”.


   Adalbert was the bishop of Prague and was sent to the Baltic Sea area to convert the pagan Prussian tribes that lived just north of Poland by King Boleslaw. Close to the tribe’s camp, he meets an old widow who offers him her hospitality. He thanks her and accepts a cup of milk, but continues on toward the camp. The Prussian tribes are not interested in conversion, but immediately covet Adalbert’s jewel-encrusted cross. They attempt to take it from him, and kill him in the process. King Boleslaw insists Adalbert be returned for Christian burial, but the Prussians demand his weight in gold. Adalbert’s body is placed on one side of a balance, and gold from those sent to retrieve him is piled on the other end. But, it is way too little. The widow places a small gold dish, her only valuable, on the balance. All are amazed to see the balance jump to equal the weight of Adalbert. The Prussians are amazed at the miracle and convert to Christianity. Adalbert is buried in Gniezno, and is canonized a saint.


   The country of Poland is a Christian state, with a strong tie to the Virgin Mary. Therefore, in the city of Krakow stands the Church of Our Lady Mary. Each hour of the day the Hejnal (hymn to Mary) is played four times from a balcony on the church tower, once to each direction on the compass. The trumpeters take a vow to play the trumpet hymn regardless of the circumstances. One day, the young trumpeter was playing and spotted an invasion of Tartars from the east. He determined to play the Hejnal over and over and over as a warning to the townspeople. This change in the usual routine did alert the people of Krakow and they armed themselves against the invaders. Suddenly, the sound of the Hejnal was cut off in mid-note. A Tartar arrow had silenced the young trumpeter. To this day,
the Hejnal is played each hour from the tower. But, the trumpeters end with a broken note in honor of the young trumpeter who gave his life to warn the town of invaders.


The Gypsies were camped at the foot of a mountain during the winter, long, long ago. A woman with white hair, blue eyes and very white skin came to them during a blizzard. She was the Queen of the Snows and the daughter of the Fog King. She had heard humans knew how to love and she craved the love and warmth they provided. She married Korkoro, the Lonely, had twenty children, each of them with her Lighthair, and became more human in appearance. But, her father, the Fog King, became jealous, and wanted her back. She was forced to return to him, but left behind her children where they would be safe. They married and had children of their own, all with blond hair.


Young Joseph Charnetski arrives in Krakow during the 15th Century. His family is fleeing the Ukraine after their home and all they own has been burned. But, they do not find the safety they seek in Krakow, as their relative has been killed and his family left the city. Pan Andrew, Joseph’s father, is carrying a very famous and valuable item, the Tarnov Crystal, to pass on to the King. But those who burned their home know about the crystal, and, therefore, their lives are all in danger. Pan Andrew, his wife, and Joseph take assumed names, as well as the very honorable job of sounding the trumpeted Hejnal, hymn to the Virgin Mary, from the Church of St. Mary tower. Joseph meets Elzbietka, and jokingly tells her if he is ever in trouble, he will play the Hejnal all the way through, rather than breaking off at the traditional “broken note”. But, despite his joking, Joseph finds he must use the signal when he and his father are attacked. Elzbietka alerts others that Joseph and his father must be in danger, since she heard the change in the Hejnal. They are saved and are able to pass the Tarnov Crystal along to the King of Poland.


Lech, with his brothers Czech and Rus are contented in their village, but are running out of space for their families. They travel with their troops to find a new place to live. Each takes a different direction. Lech travels straight ahead, down a mountain to a beautiful plain. There by a lake he sees a fantastic White Eagle leave her nest. As she flies, the setting sun turns her wings golden with its light. Lech determines this is the place to settle, and he calls it Gniezno, or “nest”. The people stay and call themselves Polonians, or “people of the field”. They create a flag with a White Eagle on a Red background. And, this is how Poland got her start.


The miller had three lovely daughters; the eldest raven-haired, the middle one a redhead, and the youngest a blond. The eldest spent all her time admiring herself and making herself as beautiful as possible. The middle daughter spent all her time dancing and having fun. The youngest loved to learn and to work. When an old woman stops by their cottage and reads them stories, the parents ask her to teach their daughters to read. Only the youngest actually learns. Each of the daughters in turn is tricked into marrying an enchanter and going to his castle. The two eldest disobey his orders and peek into the forbidden room, which is filled with birds. The youngest finds her sisters turned into birds, and locates an enchanted book, which helps her to break the spell on her sisters and all the young women who were turned to birds. In addition, she turned the enchanter into a mouse, which was promptly eaten by the family cat!

The young Prince asked his father for a jester of his own, and the jester and prince became good friends. But, when the King and his jester die, the new King finds that his jester is unable to make the court members laugh. The jester is getting old and is not trained for any other type of work, so the King keeps him on. But, he is pressured by his mother and the courtiers to release this jester and obtain a better one. The jester determines he will leave the following day, but that night has a horrible dream during which his tears cause great floods. When the King begs him to stay the next day, the jester cries, which the King has never seen before. He convinces the jester to try one more time to be funny for the court. This time the Jester is so funny, the Queen and the courtiers beg him to stop as they are doubling over with laughter. He determines that learning to cry has also taught him how to laugh and to make others laugh.


The small village, which eventually became Krakow, is brought to depression and sorrow due to an Ugly, which inhabits the town. One look at the Ugly can cause death. Slowly, filled with fear, the town loses all its joy, and laughter and singing become punishable offenses. A young stranger arrives in town unaware of the circumstances, and proceeds to sing and laugh, being filled with the joy of life. He is sentenced to be hanged, but bargains with the villagers to let him see the Ugly. They agree, since viewing the Ugly will kill him anyway. The young stranger takes out a mirror to check his appearance, when the Ugly sneaks up behind him. The Ugly sees its own reflection, and dies. The young stranger teaches the villagers how to laugh and sing, and to once again enjoy all the small wonders of life.

Story Analysis

In order to analyze the tales from Poland, it is important to understand some of the history and geography of this fascinating country. Poland is mostly plains, with mountains only in the very southern part of the country. Today Germany flanks Poland to her west, Russia, Lithuania and Belarus to the east, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and the Ukraine to her south, and the Baltic Sea to the north. Her location and flat lands have made Poland an easy target for invaders, as well as a desirable pawn during times of war.

In 966 Prince Mieszko adopted Christianity and decreed it would be universal throughout the land. This is considered the origin of the state of Poland. Christianity, specifically Roman Catholicism, has been the dominant religion of Poland since this time, and plays a major role in both the stories and daily life of the Poles. Poland was the first Christian country in Europe, and took pride in defending the faith from the invasions of pagans from the east, such as the Tartars in the 13th century. Currently 96% of Poles are Roman Catholic.

The 16th century saw a golden age for Poland with political stability, prosperity and great cultural achievements. The country was renowned as a center for culture and learning, and education became very important to the Poles. Fine foods, luxurious appointments for the wealthy, and scientific discoveries, such as those by Copernicus, placed Poland at the top of European culture.

But, by the eighteenth century, Poland had become a puppet of Tsar Peter the Great and the Polish life was filled with war and internal strife. During the latter part of the century, Poland was completely divided up by Austria, Prussia, and Russia, which in effect eliminated a Polish state for almost 100 years. This era was wrought with revolution and rebellions. The second Polish State did not arise until after World War I. However, the invasion of Poland by both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union signaled the beginning of World War II, and an end to Polish independence. Poland came under the Nazi’s during the war and the Soviet Union, through communist rule, after the war. In 1989, Poland separated herself from the Soviet Union and elected the first post-communist prime minister.
Once this historic and geographic information is understood, it is then possible to recognize some of the important and recurring themes in the Polish legends and folk tales. The first major theme to appear is that of the brave and noble underdog becoming triumphant or, if not winning in fact, winning a moral victory. This is true in each of the stories included in this research paper. Often the underdog wins through the use of their intellect or due to their fine character, or a combination of the two. Krakus defeats the dragon by feeding it a sheep covered in sulfur. The sulfur causes the dragon to drink from the Vistula River until it explodes. A common theme in many Polish tales is this concept of brains over brawn. The youngest of the miller's daughters in the Enchanted Book is able to save all of the young maidens from the enchanter because she took the time to learn to read, while others did not. The Trumpeter of Krakow wins a moral victory because he has been able to stay faithful to his vow to the Virgin Mary, and thus save his townspeople. Likewise, the Queen of Snows sees a moral victory in the blondes that now people the earth. A type of "what goes around, comes around" theme is often seen, as with the Jester and the widow in the St. Adalbert story. Their kindness is rewarded: the Jester with a loyal King, and the widow with the opportunity to participate in a miracle.

A second theme recurs in the Polish tales, which I believe stems from the "Golden Age" of Poland. Individuals may be underdogs, or victims in the stories, but they are often well educated and cultured. In the Kelly version of the Trumpeter of Krakow, Joseph and his father are both well-educated, land-owning, cultured individuals, who play music well enough to be given the honor of playing the Hejnal from the church tower. They may be temporarily humbled, but their faith, their honor, and their refinement will serve them well when the time comes to be restored to their rightful position. This theme is so recurrent in Polish tales, that it appears to reflect the feelings of the Poles during their times of subservience to other countries or regimes.

This leads to another major theme of Polish Nationalism. In each legend, pride in country and a willingness to put all on the line for Poland are shown over and over. This is also true of religion. In the stories, vows taken to the Virgin Mary or to Poland are taken very seriously, and everything is done to live up to these high standards. Historically, the Poles have often been the downtrodden, but have kept loyal to their country and their faith. Take into consideration the communist attempt to ban religion in the Soviet bloc countries. They were never able to succeed in Poland, and finally just accepted that the Poles would retain their Roman Catholicism. And, Poland has bounced back as a state multiple times after being eliminated as a country, invaded by conquerors, and ruled by outside forces. They were the first communist bloc country to obtain their independence from the Soviet Union, and the first to become economically successful after the separation. Soon Poland will become a member of NATO, and is expected to become a member of the European Union.

The settings of the tales and legends also provide some insight to the Polish culture. Almost all of the stories are set during what would be either the early years of Poland's existence, or during the "golden era". During these time frames the Poles were living mostly agricultural lives, and many stories are set in rural villages and are outdoors. The farmers are humble peasants, but are educated and of good character. Stories set in the cities often explain how the city came to be, or how individuals came to rule over Poland. The main characters of these stories are often rulers who are kind and gentle, with a very loyal following, such as Lech and King Boleslaw. They bring gentility and prosperity to the people, and encourage education and culture. Bravery and intelligence are recognized and rewarded in each story.

Finally, the theme of The Time of the Ugly recurs in many Polish tales. This is the importance of overcoming "ugliness" through laughter and finding the joy of everyday living. In the Trumpeter of Krakow, the trumpeter looks down on the city with pride and with a joy in life as player of the hymn to Mary. The youngest daughter in the Enchanted Book finds great joy in learning every new task and begs to be taught. The Jester and the Prince find laughter each day as young men, and support each other as they age. The Queen of the Snows marries a human so she can know love, warmth and a joy in living. As a people under the control of a foreign power, the Poles had to look to everyday life for their joy, and laughter to help them get through the horrors of war.
In most of the stories, the setting is real, such as those set in Krakow, or the village that will some day become Krakow. The legends are set in real locations, as most of the legends tell how the place came to be, such as the story of Lech, and his establishment of the town of Gniezno, meaning “nest”, based on his admiration for the eagle defending her nest. When set in a mythical location, the location is often simply an unnamed castle or village, but could be true of many villages within Poland. None of the stories I read place the reader outside of Poland. In most instances, the story tells of the bravery of those who defend Poland, and make no mention of Poland on the offensive. However, history does show that Poland did at one time rule over Lithuania, Bohemia and Hungary, and must have been the initiator in some battles.

In reviewing the Coda for each of the stories, I find no consistency, except across those told by the same author. However, the theme of the story often is highlighted in the Coda. For example, the Time of the Ugly ends with the stranger teaching the townspeople to once again laugh and enjoy life. The Legend of Lech and Gniezno ends with the explanation that the White Eagle on a Red background demonstrates how the brave men of Poland defend their country as the eagle defended her young and her freedom.

Another form of Coda helps to bring the main character back to their normal state. Often, an item which has caused great trouble, or which has great power, is placed away safely so it cannot be used again for evil. This is true of the Enchanted Book and the Tarnov Crystal in the Trumpeter of Krakow. In both instances, the item could provide the holder with great power. The main character chooses to set aside this power and return to their normal lives, rather than risk the corruption of power.

Summary

The completion of this research project has helped me to achieve my objective: to learn more about my culture as an American of Polish ancestry. My parents, as did many others of their generation, strove to raise good Americans. They did not teach us the Polish language, and provided very sparse information about Poland and the Polish culture. Polish traditions were occasionally maintained, but often without us having a full understanding of the reasons for them. This project has, therefore, been very enlightening. I have been able to learn more about my family and myself. I feel a sense of pride in being of Polish descent, and now find the history and people of Poland quite fascinating. Next spring I will be spending a week in the city of Krakow, Poland and hope to discover more about my ancestry.

Another thing learned in the process of completing this project is how readily available information is about Poland, Polish culture, and Polish tales. I live in a city that has long had a large Polish-American population. If I had found out of its existence sooner, I would have made use of a private Polish-American library located in Northeast Minneapolis. While planning my trip to Poland, I will check out this resource. In addition, I have found a few more books on this topic available at Amazon and will be ordering them for future reading on Polish Folk Tales, Legends and Myths.

Finally, I would like to pass along some of these stories to my family members. I will spend some time learning them, and will find an opportunity to tell them to my nieces and nephews. I took this course to improve my skills as a storyteller in a professional library setting. But, I may find that the best use I can make of training is to pass on my culture to the next generation of my family.