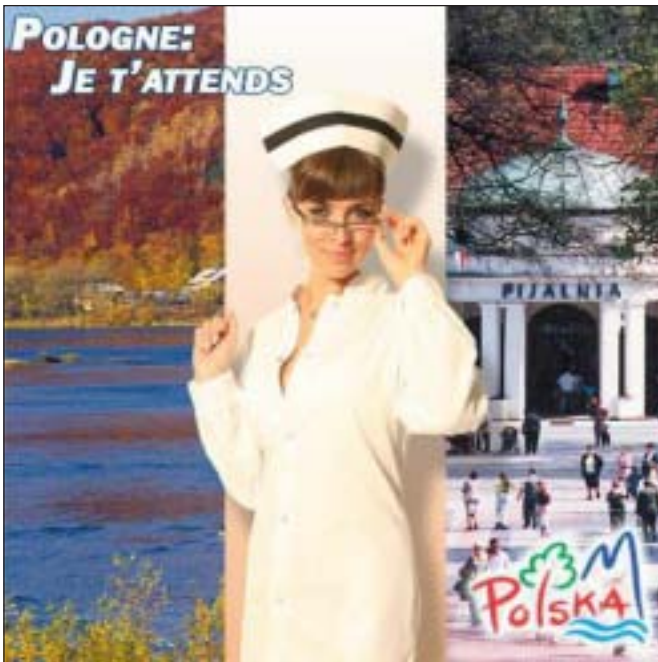


# POLONIA TODAY®

A Part of THE POLONIA MEDIA NETWORK®

AUGUST, 2005  
VOL. 94 NO. 8  
\$2.00

DON'T MISS THE  
SPECIAL SOLIDARITY ISSUE  
IN SEPTEMBER



**"POLISH NURSE" TAKES OVER  
FROM "POLISH PLUMBER"**

**POLISH MUSEUM SPONSORS  
SOLIDARITY CONTEST**

**ST. LOUIS CHURCH CONTINUES  
TO RESIST TAKEOVER**

**FAREWELL RECEPTION FOR  
CONSUL GENERAL ADAMCZYK**

**RESEARCHING  
SILESIA ROOTS**

**WARSAW UPRISING  
SAGA CONTINUES**



**FACT WITHOUT FAVOR - TRUTH WITHOUT FEAR**

Published on the 15th of Every Month Since 1911

# RESEARCHING SILESIAN ROOTS

By George Albrecht

Retirement offers up a myriad of opportunities. Planning an extended European vacation had been on my mind for a long time, and when the days of 30-mile commutes and getting up before dawn finally ended, I was ready to travel. When I received an invitation to visit friends in Warsaw as part of my journeys, not only was I thrilled at the invitation, but I immediately asked my significant other, Brigitta Werner, about her family's roots. Hadn't her father said he and his siblings had been born and raised in Breslau, a major city in what was then German Silesia? Indeed, he had. But Breslau was now Wroclaw, and was part of Poland—in the area known as Slask. What were the chances that any research in former Silesia would yield success? And for a non-Polish speaker, I wondered.

Silesia, like many parts of Europe, has a very long, diverse, convoluted, and sometimes bitter history. Since the middle ages, it has been settled by a cultural mixture of German and Polish populations. Over the centuries, it has been Polish, Bohemian, Prussian, was partitioned by the League of Nations after World War I, was annexed by the German Reich, and was returned to Poland after World War II, when many ethnic Germans were forcefully expelled from the area. Finally, in its 1972 non-aggression pact with Poland, Germany abandoned all further claims to ownership of or influence in Silesia. Was there really anything left to find? After Brigitta's family immigrated to the States in the late '50s, her father contended his birthplace had most certainly been destroyed during World War II.

With my departure date drawing near, I still had quite a few tasks to accomplish: The first was to figure out where I could stay while I did my investigations. After searching the Internet for the usual hotel accommodations in Breslau/Wroclaw, I found Hospitality Club at <<http://www.hospitalityclub.org>>, a worldwide organization dedicated to bringing people together by offering lodging, sightseeing or advice to travelers. I finally established contact with "Margo" (Malgorzata) and her husband after what seemed like an interminable wait (Hospitality Club screens all its initial e-mails to protect members against Spam or other come-ons), and now had a confirmed place to stay.

Next, I had to dig deeper into what was already known about the family's roots. Luckily, Brigitta's brother had written down a great deal of oral history from their grandmother; he was also in possession of forms from a dreadful

period of Germany's history: the ancestral history forms needed to prove Aryan purity and family lineage. Though alarming, they contained authenticated information regarding birth, baptism, and marriage dates and places. But they also proved her father had not been born in Breslau, but in a town called Slawa, Kreis Gross Strehlitz. And where was that? I turned to my friends in Poland for help.

Teresa is the daughter-in-law of my Warsaw acquaintance. When she heard of my predicament, she let me know that Gross Strehlitz was now Strzelce Opolskie. Looking at the map, I saw that Strzelce Opolskie was far removed from Breslau/Wroclaw and further searching yielded no place named "Slawa." I realized that accommodations in Wroclaw with Margo and her husband would not be feasible because of travel distances, so I e-mailed her regarding what I'd found out. In her response, she told me how disappointed they were that I would not be visiting them. Then she mentioned that her husband was a cartographer, and that she had attached a file that was a detailed map of the Gross Strehlitz/Strzelce Opolskie area. On it, her husband had found Slawa!

Armed with this information, Teresa began telephoning various government offices in the former Silesian area. After many investigative calls she was able to reach a Polish official who actually confirmed having a record of Brigitta's father's birth! It had been registered in the local administrative district.

Margo's map had identified Slawa, but the rest of the names weren't German; they were, well, POLISH. And none of them, except for Slawa, looked even remotely like the names I'd gotten from Brigitta's brother. Pre-World War II name changes had been common in Silesia. Polish names were mostly Germanized, sometimes left alone or often changed altogether. After the war, names reverted to the old Polish spelling or were transposed from German back to Polish. Gross Strehlitz/Strzelce Opolskie and Breslau/Wroclaw were the only combinations I knew. It appears Slawa had remained Slawa for centuries.

The Internet proved again to be invaluable. I found <<http://www.kartenmeister.com>> extremely helpful in translating old Silesian town names into today's Polish names. Now the names of towns around Slawa began to take on "1922-significance", the year Brigitta's father was born.

Finally, I knew a Polish-English translator would be a necessity. Back to the Internet, where I found a chat room on Silesia and German genealogy searches. As luck (and a whole bunch of investigative e-mails) would have it, I found "Stan" (Stanislaw). Recommended by a couple of "satisfied customers" who had also been searching for Silesian roots, Stan is an English teacher who lives with his family in Himmelwitz/Jemielnica, about 10-20 kilometers from Slawa. We agreed to meet in his hometown after my visit to Warsaw. At last I was off to Europe.

I met Stan as planned, thanks to the young man "at the fork in the road", who was on the lookout for my red Renault Megana rental car. He guided me to Stan's house, about 50 yards down the left branch. We had exchanged information via e-mail in the days before I departed for Warsaw; now we greeted one another in person and sketched out a plan



Translator "Stan" and family

Forms indicating lineage

of action. First item on the agenda: lunch! Stan, his wife Urzula, and their two young daughters were gracious hosts. In fact, when my attempted reservations at the German Gasthaus-style hotel in St. Annaberg (now Gora Sw. Anny) failed to materialize, Stan offered me lodging at his house for the next two nights.

Stan moonlights as an English teacher in addition to his real teaching duties. He had a constant flow of students through his house during the time I was there. In fact, Stan gave Johanna, one of his students and a high school English teacher in her own right, the "homework assignment" to accompany me on an afternoon's research trip. After a few false leads, and in the midst of a raging thunderstorm, Johanna eventually introduced us to a priest in the rectory at Rozmierz (formerly Angerbach), a place-name found in some of the documents I had in my possession.

Although preparing for a funeral that afternoon, Father "K" agreed to take a few moments and crosscheck some names and dates. From a large safe he withdrew the ancient "*Kirchenbuecher*" (church records) that contained the births, baptisms, marriages and deaths of the surrounding villages for the past few centuries. Knowing birthdates made our search easily bureaucratic. Within moments, I had in front of me the original entries for Brigitta's grand- and great-grand-fathers.

The next day was filled with more research, helped by Father "K". That afternoon, Stan and I decided to drive to a neighboring town that had been part of Brigitta's family legend. Alt Siedel (now Siedlec) was where her great-grandfather had allegedly worked for one of the Grafs Strachwitz in the 1920s. Stopping two elderly ladies on the street, Stan asked them if they knew of any "Werners" living there. In minutes, we found ourselves in animated discussion with George Werner and his cousin, Klara Kiklaisch, whose mother had been a Werner. Klara confirmed the story of the Graf, the mansion, the mighty stonewall that delineated the Graf's holdings, and the vast lawns and gardens where her grandfather had worked as a caretaker. George's mother (Klara's aunt), who was now 94, still sharp as a tack – but now the last of her elderly Silesian generation, had finally moved to Germany to be with two of her daughters. During the latter days of my trip, I interviewed her in Aulendorf (south of Ulm) for yet more family information. Over the years I also have realized that many of my German friends' families originally came from Silesia, many more than I would have thought.

I was exceptionally lucky in my Silesian research. Many people I have spoken or corresponded with have confessed that their research

has come to naught—the "links" just didn't pan out. Part of researching Silesian roots is certainly luck, but part is also good background searches mixed with good trip planning. Polish government bureaucracy remains one of the hardest nuts to crack. Many Poles contend that the worst remnant of decades of Russian influence is their bureaucracy. But there are ways to beat (or at least mitigate) the system.

The good news is that the people of the former Silesia are friendly, open, and many of them (especially older folks and the clergy) still speak German. Many of the younger ones, of course, now speak English. And, in this time of the falling dollar, this area is still a European travel bargain—until the Euro becomes the official currency! Travel is basically unhindered and although the roadways are sometimes narrow, crowded and "adventuresomely" bumpy, the time and distance from Warsaw's international airport to the heart of Silesia (Breslau/Wrocław) is an easy day's drive.

Before you go on your genealogy hunt in Silesia, you first must prepare at home:

1) Accumulate as much knowledge about your forefathers as is possible—names (maybe cross-cultural, i.e., Ivan=John=Johann), event places and dates, known or assumed relationships (relatives remaining after World War II, for example)

2) Search as many Internet sites as possible – those listed in this article are not all-inclusive, and some are tenuous in their availability <<http://www.kartenmeister.com>> is often "down"—don't forget the "normal" helpful genealogy sites, such as those maintained by the local branch of the Latter Day Saints (Mormons), or Cyndi's List at <<http://www.cyndislist.com>> or similar sites.

3) Search reputable chats and forums regarding Silesia—learn from others.

4) You will need lodging (most likely in some fairly out-of-the-way places—hint: Poles now do "eco-vacations" for reasonable prices), and you will most likely need the services of an interpreter (set up your contract ahead of time if you can). A rental car is almost indispensable as you bounce from place to place checking out leads. It is much cheaper to rent "from America" than it is after arriving in Silesia (look for dependable car discounters or consolidators that serve the Silesian area—caution: many German-based rental agencies will not let you take cars into Eastern Europe).

When you arrive in this lovely land, be sure to concentrate your genealogy efforts among the common folk and the clergy. And whatever you do, bring your camera!



**Father "K" checks records**

