

"Of Shrines and Sacred Places"

THE "MADONNA OF CZESTOCHOWA" AND THE NEARBY AREA

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I'd always imagined Czestochowa to be a Polish Assisi or Loreto, so I was surprised upon arrival there during my three-week trip to Poland in August to find it a large city, the country's 13th most populous, 128 miles southwest of Warsaw and 62 miles northwest of Krakow. My ignorance was probably due to having seen exclusively photographs of the hilltop Jasna Góra Monastery there, the famous shrine to the Virgin Mary and Poland's most important place of pilgrimage.

Its name meaning "Bright Light," this monastery is a citadel within Czestochowa, not the whole city. Founded in 1382 by six Pauline monks who'd come from Hungary at the invitation of Wladyslaw, Duke of Opole, for centuries it's been a pilgrimage destination.

A side chapel of its Basilica is home to an icon depicting the Mother of God with the Christ Child. Known as "The Black Madonna of Czestochowa" due to centuries of smoke from pilgrims' candles, or "Our Lady of Czestochowa," she is widely venerated and credited with many miracles. Among these is her having saved the monastery in the winter of 1655 during a 40-day siege by the invading Swedish army of 12,000 hostile soldiers against only 300 defenders, although the city below was completely destroyed. The next year, in the cathedral of Lvov, Jan Kazimierz, the King of Poland, solemnly consecrated the country to Her protection and proclaimed Her the Patron and Queen of his kingdom. He also declared Jasna Góra the "Mountain of Victory"



and the spiritual capital of Poland. Since then there's always been a reproduction of "Our Lady of Czestochowa" in every Polish church. Three Popes have recognized her image. Pope Clement XI issued its canonical coronation through the Vatican Chapter on September 8, 1717. After the crowns were stolen on October 23, 1909, Pope Pius X issued another canonical coronation on May 22, 1910, and Pope John Paul II still another as a native of Poland, on August 26, 2005. In June 1979, only months after his election in October 1978, John Paul made his first visit here and returned in 1987, 1991, 1997, and 1999. On May 26, 2006, Pope Benedict XVI also visited Czestochowa.

As for the four-foot high icon, its Wikipedia entry cites both legends and facts. The legends: "The icon of 'Our Lady of Czestochowa' has been intimately associated with Poland for the past 600 years. Its history prior to its arrival in Poland is shrouded in numerous legends. They trace the icon's origin to St. Luke, who supposedly painted it on a cedar tabletop from the House of the Holy Family. The same legend holds that St. Luke's painting was discovered in Jerusalem in 326 by St. Helena, who brought it to Constantinople and presented it to her son, Constantine the Great. The facts: Art historians say that the original painting was a Byzantine icon created between the sixth and ninth century. They agree that Prince Wladyslaw brought it to the monastery in the 14th century. [However, its origins] and the [exact] date of its composition



Above: The icon of Our Lady of Czestochowa; to the left, a view of Jasna Góra.

Opposite page: Kalwaria Zebrzydowska.

Opposite page, below: a statue of Pope John Paul II carved of salt by Stanislaw Aniol and his team in 1999. His Holiness had visited the mine many times before becoming Pope. He was scheduled to come here during his last trip to Poland, but had to cancel because he had the flu

are still hotly contested among scholars [because] the original image was painted over, after being badly damaged by Hussite [iconoclasts] in 1430. They broke the wooden boards, which backed the painting, and slashed the canvas. Medieval restorers [in Krakow] unfamiliar with the encaustic method found that the paints they applied to the damaged areas 'simply sloughed off the image' according to the medieval chronicler Risinius. Their solution was to erase the original image and repaint it on the original panel. [Thus] the original features of an Orthodox icon were softened; the nose was made more aquiline." These transformations gave the image characteristics of Gothic art.

The oldest documents from Jasna Góra state that the picture traveled from Constantinople via Belz [in Russia]. Eventually it came into the possession of Władysław Opolczyk, Duke of Opole and advisor to Louis of Anjou, King of Poland and Hungary.

A popular legend recounts that, while fleeing from Belz under attack by Tartars with the painting in his possession, Władysław was passing Czestochowa when his horses refused to go on. He was advised in a dream to leave the icon there and hence founded Jasna Góra.

Another popular version about why the icon is in Jasna Góra dates to the Hussite plundering of the sanctuary in 1430. The icon was among the treasures the plunderers tried to steal, but after putting it in a wagon, their horses refused to budge. Consequently, the Hussites threw the portrait on the ground and broke it into three pieces. Then one of the looters slashed it twice with his sword, but before he could strike another blow he fell to the ground writhing in agony and died. Despite numerous attempts to repair these cuts to the Madonna's right cheek and one to her throat from a Tartar arrow while still in Belz, all three are still visible.

Thus every year since the Middle Ages, thousands of Poles in pilgrim groups visit Jasna Góra, especially on her feast day, August 26th. My latest statistics, reported on *Wikipedia*, date to 2011, when it's estimated that 3.2 million pilgrims from 80 countries came during the year. Around 830,000 of them, organized in 228 different pilgrimages, were Poles from all over their country. Of these, 143,983 reached the monastery on foot. The average distance for a Polish pilgrimage group to travel was about 217 miles over 11 days.

Another very popular Marian pilgrimage destination, also in southern Poland some 20 miles to the southeast of Krakow, is Kalwaria Zebrzydowska, the oldest Calvary in Poland and the largest in Europe. It was commissioned in 1600 by Mikołaj Zebrzydowski, the ruler of Krakow and an ardent Catholic, whose plan was to replicate the layout of Jerusalem. Built between 1602-32, the Calvary, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, consists of some 40 churches and chapels as well as a basilica and Franciscan monastery set on the surrounding hills. The most distinctive chapels are the work of the Flemish architect and goldsmith Paul Baudarh. Some have unusual shapes; the House of the Virgin Mary takes the

form of the Mystic Rose and the House of Caiaphas that of an ellipse. The Calvary attracts thousands of pilgrims every year, especially for the Passion plays during Holy Week and the Feast of the Assumption on August 15th. Pope John Paul II made several visits here during his pilgrimages to his homeland. It was at the monastery here that he entrusted to the Madonna his entire papal mission with his famous motto: "*Totus Tuus, Maria!*" "*All Yours, Mary!*" In the United States there is a shrine dedicated to Our Lady of Czestochowa in Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

According to his Apostolic Letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (2002), Pope John Paul II borrowed the motto from the Marian prayer found in the book *True Devotion to Mary* by Saint Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort (1673-1716). The complete text of the prayer in Latin is: "*Totus tuus ego sum, et omnia mea tua sunt. Accipio te in mea Omnia. Praebe mihi cor tuum, Maria.*" ("I belong entirely to you, and all that I have is yours.

I take you for my all. O Mary, give me your heart.")

In his book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* published in 1994, Pope John Paul II had written that he'd discovered the text when he was a factory worker during World War II, under Nazi occupation. He defined his motto as an expression not only of piety, but also of devotion that's deeply rooted in the Mystery of the Blessed Trinity.

"I understood that I could not exclude the Lord's Mother from my life without neglecting the will of God-Trinity."

Although not a Marian destination, a visit to the unique salt mine at Wieliczka, another World Heritage Site in this town only 6 miles outside Krakow, is a must. (I've never seen anything like it in all my many years as a journalist.) The mine was opened some 700 years ago and is still being used today. Don't be put off by the 56 ramps of 10 wooden but sturdy steps each, which lead down to where the tours given in many languages begin, c. 400 feet underground. Luckily, you can take an elevator back up post-tour. Three different itineraries are available, each lasting approximately 3 hours: the tourist route, the hands-on mining route where you can test your professional skills, and the "God Bless" pilgrims' route with a Mass at the end. The mine's several underground chapels decorated with reliefs and freestanding religious statues, almost all carved by self-taught miners, make it the only underground pilgrimage route in Europe.

The huge most impressive chapel, where even the chandeliers have been carved of salt, is dedicated to the Hungarian-born Polish Queen St. Kinga (1224-92; Pope John Paul II canonized her on June 16, 1999); others to St. Anthony, the Holy Cross, and St. John. These chapels are the perfect venue for weddings as are many of the other chambers for several types of receptions: proms, balls, family celebrations, anniversaries, and jubilees. The mine also serves as a health spa. You can stay at the luxurious Grand Sal Hotel, right by the mine's entrance. For more information, click on www.wieliczka-saltmine.com. ☉



Gregorz Galazka photo