

Dzień 7. Opoczno

It's ten-thirty. I haven't woken so late for a long time. The skin on my left hip reminds me of a raw pork chop. Big blister on my right heel. I lie down, raise my foot up. I hold a safety pin. I have three such pins, for drying underwear and 'just in case'. Now there is such a case. I impale the blister with the open pin. It slides in. It hurts a little, but no big deal. I press further. Some liquid flows out. Again. It's just an ordinary procedure in a pilgrim's life. I'm lucky I wasn't forced to do it until now. The hip is another thing. I cannot remedy it. It hurts when touched. I think, what's next? The bottom line is I won't go anywhere today. I need to rethink everything. I had exaggerated. I had exaggerated with lightheartedness, with romanticism, what I thought it would be. It is what it is. The world. Poland. There's no place for jokes here. Reality is ... on that road, at night, in time of pouring rain, I could be seriously injured or worse. I've walked so many hours, went kind of berserk at the end. Fortunately, I hadn't got lost and finally reached Opoczno. The price for the whole experiment is a ragged hip, blister and a bill for the night at the hotel. All in all, the price is small. I can't however. I can't allow this to happen again. I could be less fortunate. I could stumble on the way. Some driver may not notice me, because of a girl, because of the party, because of the night. Things can happen. I need to be predictable, I mean, what I do has to be more predictable. In case of a lack of free accommodation, I need an alternative. An alternative provided by civilization, by business, by services. In short, I need to have some space to sleep, even if I have to pay. Wild Polish fields without a backup or a tent are not for me. Not anymore. Never again.

I look for a parish in Opoczno on the internet. Calling. Yes. I'm a pilgrim. It's a pilgrimage of Saint James. Yes. To Santiago. Could I? I wait in suspense. Yes, a positive answer. The world starts to look brighter. I have another nights stop in Opoczno. I will stay here, in this town. I would have stayed anyway, even in this hotel if needed. Today I'm just unable to move on. I make an inventory of my belongings. I'm surprised to discover the lack of knee-breeches. Definitely took them from home. I call. They're not there. I pack things up. I'll go to the city and then to this parish. The city is ordinary. People are busy. Some Chinese shop keepers sell clothing inside a big store. I buy short trousers from them. Solid. Cotton made. They'll serve well. It rains then stops. Rain, stop. In the afternoon I reach the parish dedicated to Saint Bartholomew. I wait in the corridor for a parish priest who is conducting some duties. The priest is kind, tall, dignified. He leads me to the part of the parish where I'll be sleeping. There is a toilet and a bed. I won't sleep on the floor. I'm grateful. I thank him. I'll leave the key tomorrow in the proper place. I'm alone. Based on the map and the internet, I make a list of potential places to sleep during my way to Wrocław and Zgorzelec. I look for a parish in the places on the route. Using the internet from a cellphone is not easy or pleasant, but it can be done with some patience and effort. I call. Ask. Talk. I've figured out what to say, not to be rejected after my first words. The priest from Zwolen had told me:

"You must learn to ask. One needs to know, how to ask."

Duh. Truth. One has to consider carefully what to say, to get what he asks for. The priests are afraid of tramps, rovers who want to use their credulity. So in the first sentence of the phone conversation I say what's what. That I walk from Lublin. From the Dominicans. That this is an act of pilgrimage, not my personal, private whim. Maybe the priest just hasn't heard of it ... I get a positive answer. Sulejów, thirty kilometers from here, the Cistercian monastery. A perfect fit, almost directly west of Opoczno. I call places further on. I get a refusal. Now to Bełchatów. It is very far, forty kilometers beyond Sulejow. Maybe even more, depending on the parish in which I would like to stay. "Do you have a letter of recommendation?" asks the priest from Bełchatów.

“I have a pilgrim passport issued by the Dominicans”. Actually, I'm not sure if I can say that. I got this passport at the Dominican monastery, I have their stamp in it, but... did they issue this passport? I don't know.

“So, you may come” - the answer comes after a moment of hesitation.

Thank God. I've arranged accommodation for the next two nights. I find my way in this new reality. I won't be searching at the last minute. No more. From now on I will always try to have something arranged. And if not, I'll go through civilized areas. Counting on a shelter in the villages will remain in the past. I allow myself to think back about what had happened to me. Terrifying. Maybe I had just bad luck. Maybe my experience was just an exception to the norm. Such consideration is reasonable in one's own warm room or lying comfortable in the bed. When it's cold and dark, and it rains out there, all considerations must stop. There is necessity instead. And one is responsible for answering this necessity. I buy some food in the store. Eat it in my room. I don't meet anyone. Going to Mass in the afternoon. The church is big and beautiful. After leaving, I meet several young priests, or maybe clerics. They ask me who I am and what I'm doing here.

“I walk from Lublin to Santiago de Compostela” - I explain.

“So, there is a long way for you to go.” - I hear in reply. I'm a bit stung by this answer. I heard the same words in Zwolen and Skaryszewo, and yet I've walked so many kilometers since then. Don't they count? On the other hand – actually - they're right. Reaching my goal seems so vague and doubtful. Till now I've walked just a tiny piece of the journey. I say goodbye, smiling. That would be all about “mine” Opoczno. Tomorrow, again, the road. This time, more predictable. And it'll be that way till the very end.

Day 8. Sulejów

It rains. I walk along the highway. I'm wearing a poncho. Cars pass by me, raising clouds of water fog. Fortunately, I don't walk on the road's edge, just by the road. There's a bicycle path along the highway. I put on my second pair of shoes. These are much lighter than the first ones. They get wet very easily in the rain and dry quite fast. Actually, they are designed for this type of condition. Of course, assuming that there is sun after rain. And that it'll get warm. Puddles ... here and there. When I walk in the rain I become smaller. I'm kind of shrinking. I'm less in the fields, over the meadows, among the branches of trees, between the affairs of people and the world. I'm waning, falling into my poncho. I become a sense of sweat and effort. I dwell only here. In my cover. I move. More effort. Regular steps. To some degree, it's easier to march this way. Nothing gets your attention. Don't think about anything. One can hear the drumming of the rain on the dark green hood, the cover material flowing down your back and shoulders. Outside, just behind a thin layer of fabric, it's so unpleasant. There's nowhere to sit. Nothing interesting or attracting attention. So one's shrinking. And walks. A man becomes a march, an effort. Because of that, one loses the feeling of time and its flow normally marked by events and images. Time as if it falling into the shadow, moves away to a further, invisible space. Stops absorbing consciousness. There's just walk. It's not even a journey or travel, these are related to overcoming terrain and landscape. It's just a rhythm, a rhythm that repeats itself and sustains itself. Sure, on the one hand, it's not pleasant, because man becomes wet, at least the legs

and feet. On the other, however, the road becomes somehow vague and thus it's easier.

Finally it brightens up. Poncho lands in my backpack. The sun dries my trousers and shoes. The way is straight as an arrow along the main communication route. It slopes slightly downhill, so it's easy to walk, though the distance of thirty kilometers is still a challenge for me. Colors appear with the sun beams. The flowers emerge from non-being. The rooves show up against the bright blue sky. The whole world emerges as if out of the fog, stands in front of my eyes, takes attention with its beauty. Although the shoes still "creak" because of water inside them, it's better with each step. Only the backpack hurts my hip, which I injured during the crazy march to Opoczno. Sometimes the pain is difficult to bear. I unbuckle my hip belt then. I lift it slightly. I keep my backpack on my shoulders for a while. As long as possible. Green. The color of Poland is green. Sometimes sprinkled with the colors of flowers or grain. You can let the eyes rush over the vastness of grasses and fields. Enjoy these colors of plants, sky, flowers petals. They're still somehow important to me. In the rush of an ordinary day when it's work, home, work, we pass all of this, we have other things in front of our eyes. Our things. Our life or whatever we consider our life to be. These shoes have much thinner soles than the ones I've walked in so far. Because of that every step hurts a bit. I walk on the pathway paved by asphalt or concrete blocks. This is not the optimal surface for the feet. Especially when the soles don't isolate properly. I become a movement. The elements of pain and kind of peace mix themselves inside of me. Kilometers pass through me one by one. The sun is ahead, the sun behind, the sun around me.

Finally, the end is coming, I see Sulejów now, to the right. I follow the GPS directions. I see some large buildings. Construction stretches many meters both to the left and right. In the middle there is a big gate. Hotel "Podklasztorze" - the description says. Did I find the right place? The monastery? I ask an elderly woman.

"Yes, that's here," she replies and shows the direction with a hand gesture.

The gate leads to a large room one passes through into the inner courtyard. Students are performing or staging. I don't know, I don't care, I'm not here for this. I'm tired and looking for accommodation. I

go to the courtyard. At some distance I see the church. It's made of stone. Beautiful. How different from those built of bricks. It's such a beauty, especially in the rays of the sun, which bring out of the boulders, the colors of rust and very delicate orange, all against the background of the French *écru*. I go into the church. Quiet, gentle. I sit on a bench. Creaks. Blue and gilding. There's some element of sublimity in this small church. After some time I get up. Opposite, the presbytery. The door is open. I'm greeted by a middle-aged bearded man. Father Prior is not here yet. That I called? It's possible. I have to wait. A small pleasant hall. I sit down. Always more convenient. I take off my backpack and put it next to me. Sticks also. The table is made from a dark, brown wood. It shines. I can hear voices on the right. Get up.

“God bless. I called about staying at night”.

There's an older, tall, slim man standing in front of me. I see the wrinkles on his face. He has completely gray, slightly wavy hair.

“Follow me, please”.

We enter a small room. A tiny desk packed with books and gadgets.

“Do you have your identity card?” asks the friar, sitting at the desk.

“Yes, certainly.” I give him the ID card and the pilgrim's passport. The first time someone asked me for my identification document. But I understand. A bit of caution won't hurt. Prior, I think he's is prior, I don't know it, bends over the desk and writes something. The chamber is very modest and a bit cramped. The entire presbytery is very small. Those buildings that I went through, going to church, are probably the former buildings of the monastery, from the time of its magnificence. I guess. I do not know for sure. I notice a book.

“Oh ... - I say - "Blessed guilt”.

“Do you know it?” asks the friar, lifting his head from the desk.

I smile.

“Sure, I know it. It's about Kodeń. My family comes partly from Kodeń.” - The monk looks with interest, so I continue: “It describes how Prince Sapieha stole the painting from the Vatican and brought it to his residence. A beautiful book”.

The prior nods.

“This is probably the only theft in the history of the world, which made something good” - he states.

I don't think it's the only one. God intertwines events in life, sometimes in such an incredible way, that their simple interpretations fail. That was the case with the story described by Zofia Kossak. Sapieha was excommunicated for his act. But because of the painting he brought to Kodeń, miracles began to happen there. The Pope had to do something about it. So the Polish magnate went on a penance pilgrimage to the Vatican, where he received forgiveness. A painting... Well. The painting to this day is in a church in a small town on the bank of Bug River. I don't know if miracles still happen there. Maybe they depend on the degree of faith of those who pray for them? Everything is diluted now. Faith too. I know that buses go there. Tourists, in their colorful clothes, get off to enter the church and for a moment to touch the story from so many years ago. Would anyone steal such a painting today to put it in his own church? How different and amazing were those people?

I get a picture of the local Virgin Mary from the priest. In Poland there are a number of sanctuaries. Every a little bit different. I put the picture in a little bag hanging around my neck. It will travel with me.

“It will protect you” - prior says.

I don't take it seriously. But who knows? In the end, it won't hurt. Although every gram of weight more counts for a pilgrim, I just added one gram more. The monk shows me a small room upstairs. I have a bed and a table. It's tight, like everywhere here. Modest but warm. In the evening I go to holy mass. I informed him that I had attended mass already in the morning, but the prior waved his hand.

“You can go on a pilgrimage twice a day” - He meant communion and mass.

He's doing beautifully. Along the walls, in the space of the altar, there are strange wooden seats. Like tree hollows, slightly directed towards the tabernacle. Everything painted, peeling here and there, with blue paint. My guess is that these seats were built for monks. They sat in them during the prayers. I sit in one of them, although there are ordinary benches nearby. Two meters away, on my left, an older woman sits down. The monks wear robes. Quite unusual. The dark hooded habits have bright, almost white covers on them. The whole picture,

when I look at it, reminds me of Star Wars ... Jedi Knights. They lack swords only. But who knows, maybe they hide them under their frocks? Or maybe the American director found inspiration for his characters in the medieval costumes of the monks? Words of prayer resonate in a small church. Decay. Everything is slipping into ruin. Such thoughts come to my mind. Now there are two Cistercians here. And once? The church and a small presbytery are all that's left of their monastery. A little further on some ruins remain. The hotel, placed in what was the previous abbey building, has become a place of life. It's there where are events that thrill people's emotions take place. It's there, where life bursts and runs in all directions, following people's desires. Here, the two monks hold time on their shoulders. They cultivate their small island in the river of modernity. They appeal to God, whom no one really cares about. I submerge myself in a prayer. I pray for all who have helped me so far. I pray for every such a man. For everyone. I have no idea if it makes sense or does the prayer work. I don't even know if God exists, whether I invented Him or whether He was invented by others. I pray. I don't even know if I believe. I'm trying. But ultimately it's probably not important to me. Nothing is important. I pray. That means, I speak out. Who am I talking to? To God? Who is God? I'm talking to Jesus. I think, somehow, He's alive. Somewhere there. Or maybe not at all. Maybe here. I don't know. I talk to God, that is, to the Love that created me, that has brought my consciousness from the vastness of life. I just turn myself to Him. Ask for the others. For He care about those I left at home. That they would be healthy and happy, if possible. That he would remember those who helped me. That He would become the way for them, the way that omits dangerous places. Then... the next words of the mass. The Canon, which every Catholic knows by heart. How much of it is just a repetition from memory, how much is of a real awareness, a conscious intention?

I leave. I walk to my place. I'm going to sleep. Tomorrow I will have to get up at five o'clock, because I'll have to walk forty kilometers to Bełchatów. It'll be a very hard day. But it will be tomorrow. Today I am closing the world with my eyelids. I hear loud music and screams coming from a hotel nearby. The party goes on.

Day 9. Belchatów

The cell phone alarm wakes me up. Half asleep I pack my backpack. It takes so long every morning. It would be much faster if my rucksack had a separate pocket for the sleeping bag on the bottom. But it hasn't. It's optimized in terms of weight. It's five-forty-five a.m. when I go down the stairs. I leave the presbytery. Everybody's sleeping. At least I don't see both monks. I look again at the church. The morning is a bit foggy. I walk towards the exit, meaning the gate in the long building that is now used as a hotel. A young man, a boy rather, passes to my left. He has a shirt hanging out of his pants, unbuttoned around his neck. He holds a bottle of vodka in one hand and a piece of meat in aluminum foil in the other. He stops. Can't keep his direction. Yells something to his companions sitting nearby at the tables. Food is everywhere. God, how would I like to sit down and eat it. But I'm a different kettle of fish. I wear a backpack, shoes and poles. I pass them by. They're a group from the party last night. What are they doing? They drink, though they really can't any more? Does it still please them? Is it cool? Or is it just a desperate clinging to that state of mind in which, for a moment, everything looks a little brighter and better, in which the world seems to be okay, in which it's easier to breathe and walk? Because everyday reality is contorted by injustice, human mindedness, hundreds of troubles and threats one has to deal with, although we don't know exactly how. They don't joke, they don't laugh. They roar and mumble to each other. I go through the gate. I move forward. A long distance awaits me. I'll walk along the road. I won't go to the rural areas. To charming villages, with a dirt road, and "Stone Will" of people living there. I prefer a

city, a town, a civilization. At least this civilization ensures conditions for survival. If anything happens.

Before Piotrkow Trybunalski I encounter the first big interchange. The road is going up, rising above the terrain. It's connected by driveways and ramps, all full of cars and trucks. I can't pass around it. I have no time to spare. I have forty kilometers to walk today. Will I break the law? Will my vest protect me? I look to the right and left. I would have to make a few kilometers detour to avoid walking through this interchange. I brace myself. I go ahead. Big trucks pass me too close. But I can't move away because of the steel barrier which is all along the overpass I entered. I walk ahead. At all costs I try not to pay attention to what's around me. Drivers are lenient. Nobody toots. The space between the road and the railing shrinks to twenty centimeters of sloping concrete gutter. I enter this gutter. Turning, I'm walking sideways. A big truck passes next to me. I don't look at the driver. I wouldn't know what to tell him. Some madman walks on the overpass of the interchange? Coming down, I feel the tension release. I feel it physically. As if I had a wetsuit attached to my skin, which now falls away. I breathe even deeper. I walk forward. My feet bounce off the asphalt. My leg hurts again. I slow down. Try to give some relief to myself. I relocate more of my body weight onto my sticks. Piotrkow Trybunalski. At the crossroads, a man asks me:

“Where are you going?”

“To Santiago de Compostela.” Silence. “It's in Spain.” I add.

“Oh, this is a long way ahead of you.” I nod. “But now you rather ease off? Meaning at ease?” asks the man, probably seeing me walking slowly through the city.

“Not so at ease, I'm going from Sulejów to Bełchatów.” - I reply.

We chat for a little while. It's good. It's good to speak to another man. It is not about the content of the conversation. During these past few days of my journey, I got a growing sensation of loneliness. I go out at six, walk ten to twelve hours. There's no one to speak to. Repeated effort. Repeated pain. And loneliness. Among people. So, I greet these few words with satisfaction. My leg is slowly recovering. I walk faster. Leaving Piotrkow. Another viaduct is ahead of me. Huge. A north - south highway meets here the east - west route. I have no way to avoid it. I can't. I won't take an arduous detour to skirt

around an interchange. It's unspeakable. So tight. Cars have no place to pull off. I walk uphill. This part of the roadway goes up straight into the air. There is nowhere to get away, no possibility to get off. I take my next few steps. Further. Further. "It's crazy" – sounds somewhere in my head. But now I have no other choice. I walk between the moving stream of cars and the low barrier of the viaduct. In the end, I walk downhill. One more kilometer and I sit on the ground. My feet burn. I let them rest. Look at my watch. I have to move. I must reach Bełchatów today. Accommodation awaits me there. I can't rest anymore. Just have to go. So I get up, put my backpack on and walk again. With this one thought in my mind "I have to make these forty kilometers today". It's difficult for me. Very difficult. Especially as I want to reach it before seven o'clock.

Rests and furious effort merge into one inside of me. Walking upon the asphalt is fast, only my feet hurt. In the end, I arrive. The priest greets me kindly. Stress subsides.

"You will sleep in the church. I lived there before." the priest explains and leads me to the church building. We climb the stairs outside to the second floor. The room is beautiful. Just beautiful. Maybe it wouldn't have impressed me before, but after a few nights in tight conditions, it's amazing for me. I'm tired beyond words. I fall into an armchair. Feel blood throbbing in my feet.

"Is there a shop nearby? I would go and buy something to eat. Some bread rolls at least." I ask.

No way. "Everything is closed now." I hear. I get some bread, however. That's all they have. I eat. I chew. A white and gold chasuble hangs on the wall. I feel the mouthfuls of bread falling into my stomach. They dissolve and the bread's energy flows right into my body. Undressing seems hard. I pull out my sleeping bag. I like its color. It's so wonderfully red. A few minutes later I fall asleep. My body activates repair processes without any role of my consciousness. Special teams of cells rebuild what was worn out, conserve damaged muscles and joints. They clean up what's unnecessary. I know nothing about all of this. Do we exist when we're in a sleep and sleep deeply? Or we don't? Where are we, when we have no dreams? Who is this organism that breathes and performs its' extraordinary work even when we're unconscious? I don't know anything about it. Cause there is no

“me” anymore. I dive into a sleep, which means non-existence. I do it without fear, because I’ve done it so many times. Because it's natural. Because I’ve become used to it. Will it ever be my one last time to dive? Then what?