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The One Who is Known

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A photograph of a grassy field with a herd of sheep and four children running towards them under a clear blue sky. The children are in the foreground, running on a dirt path. The sheep are scattered across the field. A line of trees is in the background.

the one who is known

amy lunman



Amy Hinman// 12 December 2013// Fredrik Meijer Honors College Senior Project// Grand Valley State University
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dziękuję

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Much love to you all.



On a rippling dirt road, my childhood home lies burrowed between corn fields and chapped barns, forests dappled with sugar maples and elms, with the Raisin River snaking half-heartedly between the trees. The property is home to a boxy white farmhouse traced by rambling flowerbeds, several barns, and rolling field and pasture. The sun rises rises from the woods and sets behind a scraggly tree line in the old railroad bed where my brother Ross and I played as children. The driveway is sloping and pebbly, and visitors wind around a pasture and between several flowerbeds before arriving at the back door, where the are greeted by the smell of garlic being fried, several barn cats and a duck, if not by a human being.

The house is less than ten minutes by car from town, but after a few miles on dusty roads marked with potholes and the occasional flattened animal, the distance pauses to stretch, pushing the little town of Clinton gently aside. On these roads, to come home means more than to leave Grand Rapids. To come

home means to forsake, for just a little while, my ability to sink myself into the fragmented city sidewalks. At home, the sky is bigger and the earth is flatter and suddenly I am essential part of something kindred that won't allow me to slip down between the cracks in the sidewalk. With my family—a patchwork of Polish Americans scattered in and around the east side of Michigan— my presence is as logical as the tongue and groove floorboards that fit themselves together on the sole of the kitchen floor.

Our family have been farmers and gardeners and makers and doers for as long as anybody remembers. Each generation, from the southwest corner of Poland to the southeast cornfields of Michigan, has been marked by a farm with stains that don't wash off. The habits of creation are so engrained that removing them would be like changing to writing primarily with ones foot. The most prolific creator was my mother, Jones. She could cook for an army, and in a classic Polish fashion, is enamored with playing host. During the summer in particular, friends and family traipsed into the house,



lingering in the kitchen, caught by the narrow passage between the fridge and the island. They were fed salt and vinegar chips and coffeecake, homemade pickles and pizza, orange-glazed chicken and buttery corn on the cob. My high school friends in particular willingly remained in the kitchen, even after the food was long gone. The room was sunny, with its foot-worn cherry floors and walls the color of cucumber soup, caught people in the corners, on the countertops and in chairs, and there we lingered until Jones, wandered in and told us to “go trespass or something already.”

It’s no surprise that the relationships my brother and I had in high school revolved around the kitchen. My tiny grandmother, Loretta, is the queen of the kitchen and will resolutely maintain that “we’re Polish. We feed people. And that’s just the way it is.”

I’ve always considered myself very Polish without any real concept of what it actually meant; my childhood was idyllic, and very much all-American. Hamburgers (from our own steers) and corn on the cob and ice cream cones were more present than pierogi

and pickled beets at the dinner table. I am in fact, half-Polish, and it never really struck me that my father’s lack of definite nationality neutralized the Polish customs that would have been present in my childhood had both my parents been of the same origin.

Despite my own oblivion, I was very proud of the heritage I knew very little about. For my eighth birthday, Loretta gave me a gray sweatshirt with the words “Polish Princess” embroidered across the chest in shiny red thread. Red being my favorite color, Loretta being my favorite person, and Polishness being my favorite thing to flaunt (“you’re Irish? Well that’s boring.”) I loved that sweatshirt more than a lot of things in life, and wore it regularly—to school, to church, to bed. When I was still shorter than Loretta, I sat on her lap as our family played rummy together after dinner, and she scratched my sweatshirt-clad back and told me what a pretty little Polish Princess I was.

“You’re my girl,” she said, manicured nails lulling me into a groggy post-dinner haze, “you’re my girl.”

Loretta was petite—she complained about weighing a slight 106 pounds when she got married at 26— and it wasn’t long before I outgrew her lap-sitting. Instead, I perched on the counter in her tiny burgundy



kitchen, watching her steam broccoli and mash potatoes with a grumbly electric mixer that she's had at least as long as I've been alive. As a second generation immigrant, her childhood was a juxtaposition of Poland in the States. She grew up speaking Polish first, then English, working in the garden with her mother and siblings, never knowing she was poor because everyone was poor, following the tradition of breaking communion bread at Christmas, of making sausage for Easter. Just by breathing she and her family kept the traditions from the Old World close. At 90, Loretta still gardened, and occasionally called to complain to me about how her back ached after hauling 40 pound bags of mulch out to her flowerbeds. She still cooked, too, when there was someone to cook for. Since her family of five was slowly reduced to one and a miniature dachshund named Roxy, she spends less time in her little burgundy kitchen, and will often buy the traditional foods that she once made with her husband from the store. She moved out of Warren, her Polish community dispersed, cards and beer cans long since swept away.



The card games around our kitchen table didn't look like the weekly poker matches my grandparents played in when they lived in Warren, but when we all played gin rummy together, we fell into a nostalgic sort of rhythm; the glassy black nights spent leaning into the kitchen table playing cards were sacred. The swinging light cocooned us in a glittering bubble of safety and warmth and acceptance and the distinct sensation that on



the other side of the bubble were as many possibilities as there were petals on the flowers in Jones's garden. Humming, the lightbulb over the kitchen table reflected brightly off my mother and grandmother's beer cans. Loretta swore more during cards than a good Catholic should, and Ross and I kept track on our fingers, squealing "Grama! What would *God* say?" each time she got dealt a bad hand and let fly an "aw shit." We huddled around the table, laughing at Ross's impersonation of my dad, at missed rummies, at Loretta winning again, and the tradition of family hung in the air so tangibly that if I wanted to, I probably could have pocketed some for later.

Eventually, a patchwork identity grew out of faded cookbooks, friendly neighbors, and old stories of church basements littered with PBR cans, cigarette butts, and stray playing cards. As a child, I was very interested in making my own heritage more tangible. In third grade, after receiving a small notebook from my teacher as a reward for good behavior, I set out to fill it with Polish vocabulary, grammar, and important phrases. I knew how to pronounce pierogi and golumpki, and in my nine-year-old head, that was as good a place to start as any.

The first half of the book was filled with scribbles—complicated words and phrases spelled



phonetically, simple words spelled wrong. Loretta taught me the essentials to start, words like grandmother and grandfather, phrases like “I love you,” (“kocham cię”) and “mother dear, give me a kiss” (“droga mamo, daj mi buziaka”). Loretta spoke Polish with her husband Leonard at the dinner table, much to the frustration of my aunt, uncle, and mother. But she valued her ability to tell her husband secrets in front of the children, so her well-meaning attempts at teaching me were misguided, and lost momentum after a few months.

With my grandmother, then, is where the language will die. The years of secret dinner conversations never imparted understanding in my mother, my father isn't Polish, and all my attempts to learn my native tongue were halted by Spanish classes in middle school. The language will die slowly, and quietly. Little by little, Loretta will forget—is forgetting— vocabulary, grammar structures, syntax. The struggle to exist will end passively, as the routes travelled by the old world words will slowly be overgrown by a garden of English and eventually become choked out altogether. Still, she remembers some. She can tell me that she loves me, that she is my busia, my grandmother. She can swear still, although she won't teach me those words, and she never lets us mispronounce pierogi the way the rest of the non-Polish world butchers it. I wish I could find my little notebook to remind her, in some small way, that the flowers she spoke first are only sleeping, not dead. But I don't know where my notes are, and my flowers are dying too.

In this way, I believed perhaps too whole-

heartedly in the inherent quality of our traditions. I appropriated my mother's stories of sauerkraut soup and Polish-speaking grandparents and decided their influence was deeply engrained in the ways Jones taught me to fold the top sheet back when I made the bed, and fostered a crippling dependance on garlic, onions, and salt. I drew my own lines between past and present, drawing my heritage to myself when I decided red was my favorite color because it was the color of the Polish flag, when I watched Jones chop onions. And I started talking to my mom and grandma. I asked them about church on Easter, about busia's garden behind the garage, about how many generations of men worked in a factory in Detroit. I started turning over the distant heritage that lay as dormant and groggy as my third-grade self during a back scratch.

My mother grew up in an almost entirely Polish neighborhood in the suburbs of Warren, Michigan, just outside of Detroit. Polish was spoken regularly in her neighborhood. Almost everyone on her brick house lined block had a last name ending in -ski, except for —ironically— the Hinman's. Her maiden name, DeBell, was shortened when my



great-grandfather Feliks Dybalski was naturalized in 1888. He met his wife Lena, who was also Polish, in Chicago, eventually moving to southeast Michigan. My grandfather, Leonard, was their seventh son.

Loretta's genealogy is more documented. One of my distant cousins in Virginia had an account with a website that tracks genealogy; I could trace my family back to the birth of Joseph Strzelzyk's birth (my great-great-great grandfather) in 1842, and follow it up until the present. His daughter, Mary Koscielski, was the last one to be born in Poland, in 1876. She grew up in Poznan, a small city in the western-central Poland. Her husband, Ludwig (changed to Louis upon arrival in the States) Koscielski, was born in Kornik, a few miles to the north, in 1862. Poznan, when translated, means "the one who is known," and Kornik means "henhouse." The translations are oddly fitting, as a charming little farm is exactly where Mary and Ludwig's descendants ended up.

Mary and Ludwig's daughter, Connie, we called *busia*, Polish for grandmother. Loretta is her daughter.



Jones, is an "all Polish" second generation immigrant, is the one that experienced the inherent culture that I was so sure of as a child. She learned to cook from watching Loretta in the kitchen. My aunts and uncles were always coming and going, there was always someone to feed, always a table to be set and cleared, always something to chop or fry or stir. Leonard cooked too, making the majority of what Jones calls the "weird" Polish food—the duck blood soup, the glossy cabbage rolls, the sleek kielbasa. They cooked for the same reason my parents, and their parents, and their parent's parents farmed. Farming, like cooking, was a necessity as much as eating. Full-fledged farms were replaced by sprawling urban gardens that consumed backyards and filled dinner plates.

This love in devotion in the kitchen that I inevitably inherited. Whenever there was a coffee cake to bake, or pancakes on Saturday morning, or a batch of noodles to be made, I was there, rinsing steaming noodles, or sticking my fingers in the batter. The majesty that was the blooming garden transferred smoothly from ground to stove to plate in the same way my long-dead ancestors slipped quietly from one continent to another. They shook of the dirt around

their roots, huddled into cargo holds and over crowded ships, and when they arrived in Michigan, sank their foundations into factory jobs, into industry, into the sandy soil of an adopted peninsula.

And slowly, I began to realize just how old my habits really are. Through a friend, I got a job at a small farm in Ada, Michigan. During the summer season, I spent sometimes up to 11 hours a day weeding, harvesting, and occasionally falling in mud. In the arching rows of Green Wagon Farm, I began to wonder what it meant that my great-great grandparents were probably farmers before they left Poland for the States. Polish farmers sought lives in the New World so their family wouldn't have to be tied to the land, and years later, I began seeking out a plot of dirt to plant my feet in, therein embedding myself in the same culture that Ludwig and Mary Koscielski relinquished all those years ago.

Their arrival in the United States was momentous. By claiming Polish as their spoken language was a victory, both personal and national. Poland did not exist as a state between 1795 and 1918, and the borders continued to flux during the second world war. To be Polish has always been a fight against something, or someone: poverty, the Lutheran Germans, or borders that were continually being dissolved and redrawn.

A significant portion of the Polish immigrants to the United States ended up in Detroit and the surrounding suburbs. From the mid-1860's to the 1890's, the total number of Polish immigrants spiked to around two million. Drawn by industry, the community in Warren that my mother grew up in was just under nine miles north of Detroit. In the United States,



factory jobs were an easy fit, as the entering Poles were happy just to have work, even if it meant working on an auto-assembly line.

Leonard, who died when I was three, was a part of this movement. A printer by trade, he worked for Chrysler. My Connie's husband Stanley was part of the auto industry as well; after spending a decade at Plymouth Motors, he eventually opened a service station while his wife ran a flower shop. Poles typically love flowers and bright colors. Her vegetable garden too, was impressive, and so abundant that Loretta and Leonard quickly abandoned their garden behind the garage so they could help—and steal—vegetables from Connie.

This side of the family has been in East Michigan for as long as they've been in the United States. They also represented one of two kinds of Polish immigrants—the poor. The richer immigrants came to the United States to make money, and returned to Poland rich. The poor, “for bread” immigrants left Poland when they could no longer sustain their lifestyle—usually farming. Owning land was a sign of stability and for farmers, losing that stability was a major blow to not just their lifestyle, but their mental state as well.

Owning and working land was a source of pride and self-sufficiency that was devastating to most families as their financial situations turned sour.

Even though she grew up in the suburbs, my mother always knew she wanted to farm.

Throughout college, she was in and out of barns across the United States—from Michigan to Kansas—and even into Europe, where she spent five months working on a hog farm in Brønderslev, Denmark. After she married my dad in 1989, it didn't take them long to settle into a 62 acre farm in Clinton, a village with more bars than stoplights in the southeast corner of the state.

During the summer, the my parent's garden exploded out of the ground. Both my mom and dad were teachers, and their summer vacation stretched into sun-tanned days filled with planting, watering, and weeding. Our poor man's dinner wasn't cabbage, but yellow squash and zucchini. There are a hundred different ways to make squash—broiled, baked, pan-fried, stir-fried, breaded, baked into bread. Our family, not quite rich but never quite poor, found prosperity in what we produced—meat, eggs, vegetables—and that is what we ate. My mother was in shrewd cook; everything she made tasted like the one sautéing cared, and used garlic with a heavy hand.



I too learned how to cook by watching Jones. She didn't directly instruct me. Rather, when I watched my mother meticulously slice the zucchini into rings, I discovered how to hold a chopping knife without cutting off all my fingers, how to separate the two parts of a chicken breast in one pass of a peeling knife, how to peel potatoes and not my knuckles.

"I was always in the kitchen when your mother was growing up, always setting the table," Loretta muttered, stirring lentil soup and pretending to be grumpy about the long hours she spent cooking.

"Someone said to me once, 'you're always making something!'" and I said "that's because there are always people to feed!" So there was never a dull moment, and never a hungry person. So I set the table, they would come in and eat, and leave, so I'd wash the dishes, and by the time I got everything taken care of, it was time to do it all again."

Perhaps the most lasting method that Loretta imparted was a crippling love for and dependence on garlic, onions, and salt. There is nothing glamorous about a head of garlic or an onion bulb or even a palmful of salt. They are pungent and make you cry. But they are also magic. Perogi—a simple cheese dumpling—becomes warm and comforting when seared sunny gold in a pat of butter and onions. The flavors expand, rounded, and the dumpling becomes warm sunshine and earth and salt.

"Oh," Loretta throwing her nobby hands in the air, looking like she was swatting flies. "I can't cook anything without garlic."

The poor in Poland have always been considered the best cooks. When there was little culinary variation at their disposal, those without made do with what they had. The poor chef's creativity eventually led to nobles hiring cooks from the lower class to work for them in the kitchen. What are now considered traditional foods—including pierogi and golumpki—were once eaten strictly by the poor.

A traditional Polish diet is heavy in vegetables, fresh and cultured dairy, and starches, often spiced with garlic and salt. Potatoes and cabbage are a part of almost every dish due to their versatility and ability to withstand long-term storage. Cabbage is easily fermented into sauerkraut, a staple that is baked and fried into dozens of recipes. While most rural Poles were probably largely vegetarian, due to the costliness and limited number of animals available for slaughter, they were hardly close to vegan. A plethora of dairy and eggs meant many dishes with humble roots often called for dozens of eggs at a time. Preserving the abundance meant everything that could be pickled or fermented, was cured for later consumption.

Sour cream is as much a fermented staple as cabbage. It is served on everything from pierogi to



fruit soup, even finding its way into a few variations of pierogi dough recipes. Butter, milk, cream, and cheese are used heavily, and often in combination with an exorbitant amount of eggs. One of the most egg-heavy desserts is “nalesniki z serem i owocami,” a sweet crepe-like dough filled with an even sweeter cream cheese filling, requiring the efforts of a small flock of chickens.

Our childhood desserts were not so elaborate. Sometimes Jones splurged and bought ice cream, or made a coffee cake, but more often than not, we filled little glass bowls with raspberries or blueberries or strawberries from the garden, and poured fresh milk over top. Berries and milk became our own ritual, our own devotion to using what we had to make what we didn't.

My father, despite his German-English heritage that is decidedly un-Polish, is resourceful in the way that characterizes so many Polish immigrants. Living in the country does that to a person. Provision takes time, and something my father was incredibly devoted to. He also loved to create, and I used to sit and watch him make things out of wood in his little shop in the garage.

In his shop, I watched his chapped hands cradle antique maple hand planes, gently sanding down boards that he salvaged from burn piles and old barns. Layer after layer of wood curled off, shedding splinters, sliding into a trundle bed, or a cabinet, or a counter top. His hand planes whizzed along the wood with the same hushed rush that the blade of Jones's chef's knife made as it cut through an onion. I watch the boards become more and more shapely, just as I watched the onions get chopped into beautiful ivory cubes, pale sawdust settling into my hair.

Like I helped dad with his woodworking growing up (by drawing pictures in the sawdust on the shop floor) Jones used to assist her father, Leonard, make kielbasa in their kitchen growing up. Apron clad, Leonard ground up pork fat and pork butt in their little yellow kitchen, stowing the meat in a big white tupperware bowl in the back of the refrigerator (also yellow). As the mixture marinated, Jones helped prepare the casings—pig intestines packed in salt. With deft fingers, Jones helped her father hook the intestines around the kitchen faucet, watching as the stream inflated the curves of the viscera, washing out the salt and filling the sink with a curling creamy water-snake. After attaching the clean casing to the grinder, the machine filled the tubes with the spiced meat. Jones, armed with a pin, pricked air bubbles, winding the finished product back into the bowl.

Kielbasa is one of the more distinct aspects of Polish food culture, and one that has been appropriated by grocery stores across the world. Originally, kielbasa was made at home, in the kitchen, and had a special place during the Christmas holidays and at weddings. In the States, meat became more available, so immigrants were able to enjoy homemade sausage more regularly. Homemade kielbasa could be cured, frozen, or eaten fresh. Leonard froze his in dinner-sized portions instead



of curing the links with smoke.

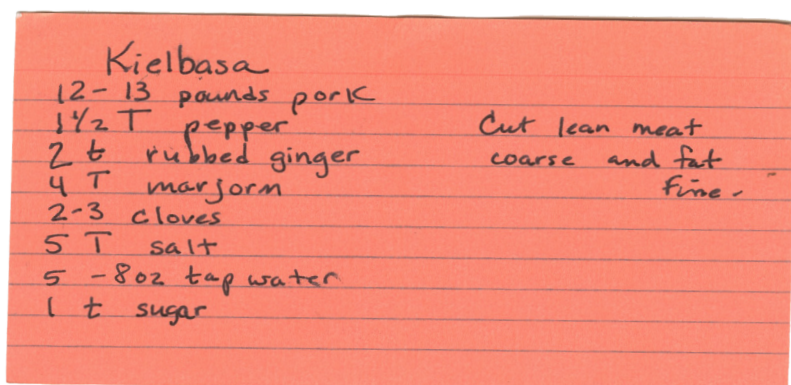
“I told dad to write the recipe down,” Jones told me, “because he didn’t have a recipe. He just did it. There was nothing like his kielbasa, and I said to him “you’d better give it to me, or you’ll take that recipe to your grave.”

She handed me an orange index card. Instead of the thin squiggle of my grandpa’s handwriting, Jones’ neat script listed ingredients (procedures conspicuously absent).

“What happened to Grandpa’s recipe?”

“Oh that is his recipe. He didn’t think he could write it down, so he just dictated what he would have done.” Jones shrugged. “But you’d better be careful with that; don’t lose it. That is the only place I have his recipe—that anyone has his recipe—written down, so you’d better not lose it or it’ll be gone for good.”

My grandparents cooked together, so it was no surprise that Leonard cooked like Loretta did—with guesstimates and approximations and the palm of the hand serving as teaspoon and tablespoon. Leonard was the official Polish food chef, and often a trip to



the Eastern Market—an indoor market space where the Polish community sourced their fresh meat, as the stomachs of the more conventional delis were too delicate—to secure a duck for dinner.

“He made such good *czernia*,” Jones tells me, eyes glazing a little in recollection. “It didn’t even taste like blood at all.”

Czernina, duck blood soup, was a childhood legend. It was impossible, or so it seemed, for a dish so strange, so vile, to possibly exist. In fourth grade, when mom first mentioned her fondness for the dish, I remember my stomach flipping as a bright image of sloshing red soup appeared in my mind’s eye. It became a joke, a legend, the rhetorical “is it tomato or is it blood?” every time Jones made red soup. And yet, years later during a trip to the Polish neighborhood in Chicago, I found it, nestled behind plastic tubs sauerkraut soup and shredded beets with horseradish.

Czernia is brown, and in the container, looked like it had gelled over; it didn’t slosh along the sides when I held the tub up to the light. Rather, the glob leaned when I tipped it, held solid by cornstarch and blood. My stomach again flipped, knowing that, as it was my mother’s favorite soup growing up, there was no way I could walk out of Endy’s Deli without it.

Duck blood soup is dish native to Poznań, where my great-great grandmother Mary Koscielski was born in 1873. During this time, if a suitor’s attempts at wooing a girl were not welcome or successful, her parents gave the gentleman some of the soup as a way of communicating that he should take his sentiments



home to his wife and family in a Mason jar.

After returning to my apartment in Grand Rapids, I heated my *czernina* up on the stove. It bubbled thickly, bubbles making loud slurping noises as they burst. There was more fruit in the soup than I expected—raisins, prunes, plum. They rocked to the rhythm of the bubbles, all the while looking very much like tiny vital organs in an impossible pool of oxidized blood.

Eating it was difficult. Even heated up, the soup was still gelatinous. Jones was right about the soup’s sweetness, but I didn’t expect the subtle sour after taste that lingered just long enough at the edge of my tongue and teeth. Had I not known that the first ingredient was the blood of a duck, I might have liked it. Instead, I chased the first taste with glittering Polish beer. Taste gone, I called Jones, feeling a little self-satisfied.

“Mom, guess what I am eating.”

“Mushrooms?”

“What? No. *Czernina*!”

“What is that.”

“Duck blood soup?” I felt my face flush as I botched the pronunciation.



“Oh. Czernina. No shit!”

“Jones, how in the world was duck blood soup your favorite?”

“I don’t know. It’s sweet. And dad never told us he used blood.” She paused. “I think it’s something you have to grow up with.”

Chicago is a little over two hours from Grand Rapids, and has the largest Polish population outside of Poland itself. Milwaukee Avenue in October stretched into curving mile after mile of square brick buildings, painted red, painted white, naked and russet as cars and cyclists zipped past. Chicago was the color of ash, and the thick clouds lingered around the points of skinny skyscrapers, enveloping the Polish Museum of America in a delicate haze. The wood floors in the library flexed with age, sending hollow groans scampering up the walls to ricochet in the rafters.

Skinny bookshelves packed pull swayed slightly as I maneuvered between them. After a few hours of browsing cookbooks and history books, and books on Polish culture, my stomach began to cramp with hunger. I approached the desk. A Polish librarian named Margret peered over her half-rimmed glasses at me, rounded shoulders leaning forward over scattered piles



“What do you need, dear?”

“Where is a good place to go for lunch?”

“You want Polish?” I nod. “Ok, there is a very good Polish restaurant, very traditional, just down the road on Milwaukee Avenue.” She leaned across the desk and grabbed a paper takeout menu for Podhalanka. She flipped it open to their phone number.

“Do you speak Polish?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Ok, that’s fine, I’ll call for you. They are very nice, they can give you a sample platter of all the good Polish food.” A voice answered on the other line in Polish. “And don’t worry,” she reassured me, hand over the mouth piece, “they speak very good English.”

The front windows of Podhalanka were small and squat. From the outside, the block-glass are dirty, like someone has been meaning to clean them and forgetting for the last 20 years. Adding to the general layer of dust were four large aloe vera plants pressed against the inside of glass. The door, heavy red wood, swung inward to a bright, bare square room. Tables were covered in red vinyl tablecloths, and each space had a vase of silk flowers, salt and pepper, and a yellow bottle special Polish seasoning sauce. The place was



empty, save for a man that emerged from the back, wiping his hands on dark jeans. He had a salt-and-pepper flat top and one gold earring.

“Hi,” I began, “the library —” but he gestured to a spot at the bar before I could ask.

“I know, I know, you’re from the library. Sit here. I’ll tell you what you’re going to have. I’m bringing you the sample platter, except with extra samples. You will have the four most popular perogi, golumpki, potato pancake. Here is some rye bread. Have you tried the bread? Good. Are you hungry? Good, because this will be a lot of food. Are you thirsty? Good. Here is some juice, we make it ourselves, there in the back.”

Through a door, I could see three squat Polish ladies wearing *babuskas*. Part of me wondered how much this man was paying all the grandmothers on his street to cook.

“Are you Polish?” I nodded. “Do you speak Polish?” I shook my head. “Move to the city of Chicago. Then you will.”

At this, I blushed and looked at my hands. I had wanted Loretta to teach me Polish, but any attempts at

learning were pushed out by Spanish classes that began in middle school. I wanted to tell this man that I wasn’t a stupid American, that I spoke another language, but I held my words as he returned to the back of house, and I was left to examine, rather mournfully, the bar where I was seated in silence.

The bar, like the tables, was adorned with fake flowers and seasoning, and a Polish soccer match was playing on the flatscreen television attached to the mirrored wall behind the bar. The wall was lined with wooden shelves piled high with gold-leaf plates, a herd of white plastic elephants, cans of Coke, and decorative cornucopias. Attached to the bottom shelf were several dozen postcards of different origins: India, Tampa, Washington State. A large poster of a pheasant hung in the middle, and a print of Pope John Paul II waved over us all.

“Now,” the man said, emerging, “You are hungry I hope.” I nodded again. “Good. Now, here is some sauerkraut soup, and some white borsch.” He slid two enormous bowls across the countertop, pulling rolls of silverware from the front pocket of his jeans and setting them beside the soup.

“Put this in it,” he said, and splashed a generous

helping of Polish Worcestershire sauce into the bowl. The soup's surface rippled as the brown liquid dispersed. He stirred for me, leaving the spoon in the bowl.

"Now put some pepper on it."

I put some pepper on it. The man nodded with approval.

"Ok, you tell me how you like it."

He tapped his knuckles on the counter twice, nodded again, and walked back to the kitchen before I could thank him.

Polish hospitality is legendary, and if one is traveling in the Polish countryside, any humble inn is regarded as the best place to get a meal. Among family members, the home is a shared space. Jones remembered fondly the Christmases and Easters of her youth, when family members gathered and shared tables piled with dumplings and soup, cakes and crullers. I couldn't help but regard this man's friendliness as part of that tradition. Margret the librarian didn't consider his cockiness as endearing as I did, and shook her head when I told her about lunch.

"Typical Polish uncle. Overbearing and condescending. They act like they know it all."

But the food was good, and it kept coming. Plate after plate, I sampled potato latkes with apple sauce, sauerkraut soup, four different types of pierogi, and shredded beets with creamed horseradish that was "on the house." I wanted to talk to the man that served me, but between striding from bar to the back to the fat swarm of ladies that made their way into the restaurant, he didn't stop to answer many of my questions. When I

asked where he was from, his chest swelled a little under his turtleneck, and his gaze got a little more direct.

"I am from the beautiful city of Krakow, in the south," he said, rolling the r's around above his tongue.

"It is small, have you heard of it?" I nodded.

"Good. I'm sure you'll go there someday," he said, and slid the next round of food across the bar.

After encountering duck blood soup, I was determined to find good kielbasa while in Chicago. I continued down Milwaukee Avenue, but I walked, the more the neighborhood seemed to be shedding skin, trading the clean, bare brick storefronts for flashy primary colored *tiendas* as a new immigrant population began to settle into the neighborhood. As I walked, I caught bits of Spanish conversations that grew quiet as I passed. The storekeepers avoided eye contact, hovering over their goods. In passing between a *taquería* and an old Polish bar, I felt a fleeting sense of loss; I belonged to neither and both place at the very same time. After years of studying Spanish, my understanding of Spain's



language and culture is far more in depth than my knowledge of my own heritage. And yet, should I have entered that Polish bar, I would have looked like I belonged, so long as my mouth was shut. If I had eaten at the *taquería*, I could only imagine the raised eyebrows at the sound of fluid Spanish leaving the lips of a white girl.

Eventually, I reached one of a handful of remaining delis on the Milwaukee strip. The door to Endy's Deli blew open, and I was enveloped by the warm smell of roasted meats, spices and baking bread. The only room was long and narrow, and cut almost entirely in half by a shining meat counter. Carefully, I pushed my way up to the counter between more round-shouldered Polish couples doing their shopping, arms and hand baskets full of sausage links, rye bread, dried mushrooms, honey crisp apples. The glass case was filled with meats of all shapes, all colors—fat burgundy tubes of freshly ground beef, pale snaking sausages of pork and cloves. Every flat surface—wall included—was covered with kielbasa, on trays, in baskets, hanging from wooden pegs. An unsmiling attendant began to address me in Polish.

“Hi, uh...”

Without shifting her facial expression, she switched to flawless English.

“Hello, what can I help you with?”

“I’d like one of those,” I pointed to a tray of mahogany sausage on top of the counter, too embarrassed to attempt the pronunciation.

“One or two?”

“One set of two links, please.”

“Are you sure?” I wasn’t sure, but I nodded

anyway.

“And two of those, the second from the end.”

I pointed again at a thinner rope of kielbasa that resembled the beef jerky. The woman nodded her large head, and weighed out the links, wrapping them in white butcher paper.

“Anything else?”

“No, thank you, this is good. *Dziękuję.*”



In a fit of determination, I decided to try making the traditional food conspicuously absent from my childhood. In my kitchen in Grand Rapids, I carefully rolled out a yellow sheet of egg noodle dough on my kitchen counter. We didn’t call these noodles kluski when I was growing up. We called them nifflies, and made the German version of the noodles with what looked like an enormous garlic press. These noodles, after several hours of pressing, scooping, and sampling, were enjoyed with sauerkraut and keilbasa that had been slow-cooked in mom’s dappled crockpot all day when we were at school. The kitchen, smelling sour, salty, and roasted, became warm and close and inviting.



Always one of my favorite nights, I heaped my portion high with the pale, stinky kraut and oblong sausage slices, sliding several large scoops of the buttery, salty noodles as well. Ross and dad pinched their noses in disgust.

“Do you have to eat the sauerkraut?”

“I don’t even understand how you like that stuff.”

“That seriously does stink.”

But I didn’t care. Somehow, the savory-salty-sour worked in harmony, and I took careful forkfuls of each ingredient, measuring my bites until my plate was clean.

My egg noodles were *kluski*. Making egg noodles—even without a press—was simple. There were only four ingredients: flour, egg, water, and salt. The pasta is simple, and hearty, and makes basic ingredients into something that tastes much less humble than it actually is. After the noodles finished boiling, I seared left over kielbasa from Endy’s in butter, adding the squiggly white noodles and sauerkraut—also from Endy’s—to the pan, where it sizzled and popped, and the old familiar sour-salty smell wafts up from the front burner on the stove. Almost all the food in front of me was yellow, from the noodles, to the sauerkraut, to the steadily fizzing beer to the left of the stove, waiting. Except for the steaming kielbasa, which remained a bright, brick red.

The sausage, tasty and warm in my comfort-food laden dinner, carried cultural weight beyond the kitchen and Christmas time. For Easter Mass, especially when her children were small, Loretta took an enormous wicker basket full of kielbasa, fruit, bread, hard-boiled

eggs, horseradish, and sweets, to mass on Easter Sunday to have it blessed.

“Oh we always too a basket to have it blessed,” she tells me over the phone.

“Is that a Catholic thing,” I ask, “or a Polish thing?”

“Oh,” Loretta begins, and her voice gets stronger at the other end of the line, “That’s a Polish thing.”

The basket-blessing was a matter of parading ones wealth in the old world, and a matter of practicality in the new. The items in the basket were daily staples as well as Easter treats, and their blessing would ensure future prosperity. As with most Polish food, enticing, and resisting the urge to prematurely partake often required exorbitant amounts of self-control. Leaving the food in the basket meant that there would be food in baskets to come.

Catholicism and all it’s traditions has long played an essential part of Polish culture. While my immediate family is now Protestant, Loretta still attends mass, and is the last of our family to do so regularly.



The majority of Poles are still, to some extent, Catholic. Poland declared Catholicism as the official religion in 966, and has helped set the Polish peoples apart from their neighbors, namely the Lutheran Germans, who were continually invading, and causing boundaries to shift unpredictably. Feasting, for example, is a lasting influence common in Poland due to the Biblical celebrations that lasted for days on end. Around the time my great-great grandparents emigrated, the majority still professed the faith. My ancestors are no exception, and they carried their reverence with them to the new world.

Despite widespread Catholicism, there is a healthy spirit of superstition that lingers on, especially in the countryside. Many “pagan” folk stories have been married to Catholic saints and traditions, and The Feast of Our Lady Jagonda and the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary is a direct example of the cultural blending.

As the story goes, the Virgin Mary went to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John the Baptist at the time. While on her way, she walked through a Polish forest. The women who lived in the forest, in order to not deprive the Blessed Virgin on her travels, were forbidden from eating any of the fruit. The woman who gave this infamous mandate was called Our Lady Jagonda, the Blessed Virgin of the Berries, and



the deity responsible for women’s fertility. Because the women left the blueberries and strawberries, raspberries and currants, blackberries and grapes for Mary, she could continue on her travels, and successfully visit her pregnant cousin.

I have always loved berries—blueberries, strawberries, mulberries. If I could pick it, I did so with fervor, staining my fingers, lips, and soles of my feet a rainbow of pinks and purples. Had I been a girl in the village when the Virgin was passing through, I imagine I would have tried to ignore Our Lady Jagonda, and gone into the woods to pick illicit berries. Self-control has never been a strong point of mine, not when it comes to fruit, especially when Ross and I picked berries with my mother. As kids, Jones cut the spout off of plastic milk jugs, and threaded bairn twine through the handle. This she knotted and placed around our necks, championing Ross and I her begrudging berry-pickers. Under her careful watch, we traipsed out to the garden together, stood before the berry bushes, and received our





marching orders.

“Alright. I want enough to make jam. This means not eating everything you pick, and I’m talking to you now, Amy.”

I remember looking guiltily into my empty milk jug. For my mother, food preservation was a way of life. Every fall, we loaded the creaking chest freezer in the garage with bags of corn and green beans, broccoli and peas. The hutch in our laundry room slowly filled with shining mason jars of spaghetti sauce, blackberry jam, sharp dill pickles. Her canning and freezing is a small reflection of the mania that possessed my ancestors to make sauerkraut. Frugality in the present and saving for the future meant we ate summer sunshine all winter long.

During a recent visit to my parents house, my mother was particularly enthusiastic about making homemade blackberry jam. She found an enormous wild blackberry patch down the road from our house. It was a tangle of berry bushes and trees, slick grass and goldenrod. The berries were wild; small, and more bitter than sweet. We circled the exterior, reaching delicately into the tangle of thorns to pluck the little fruit from the branches. An exodus from childhood evolved into more sophisticated adult berry-wear; we tucked

the handles of plastic pitchers into our belts. As we I picked, the jug flopped awkwardly against my thighs. I entered the patch, stepping over slim trees and bowed picker bushes, ducking under branches, craning my neck, marveling at the branches above that have been dusted with bruise-colored berries. Yellow sun tumbled between the branches; the pitcher filled slowly. After an hour of picking, we walked away with two gallons worth of fruit.

In her kitchen, we spilled the berries into colanders, rinsing off dust and lingering insects, picking out leaves and twigs. We plucked off remaining stems, and begin to boil the fruit, mixing in sugar and water and pectin, cinnamon and vanilla.

“Loretta used to can all the time,” Jones said, plucking a twig out of the mass of purple in the bowl.

“Everyone did. Busia was always making jam and things.”

“Did you help?”

“Oh yeah. We always had jobs. Of course looking back on it now, I didn’t enjoy it because I was a kid. They were making me do it, you know? But I learned by watching, and I can because they did. They showed me how.”

I’ve found old recipes for Polish blueberry

cake, pierogi with berries, with plums, berries in alcohol, berry jam over toast and cottage cheese. Unbeknownst to me as a child, my downfall is my heritage. Cookbooks suggest that Polish people are just as obsessed with berries as I am. If the legends are true, if the stories have a basis in fact, then berry-gathering would have been inevitable. I might have celebrated the feast of The Blessed Virgin of the Berries, as a child, I might have mourned the day when we had to leave all the berries for The Virgin Mary. As a wife, I might have prayed to Our Lady Jagonda for fertility.

But I did not, and I do not. I did not consider the Mother of God when I filled my milk jug with fruit, or the repercussions when I disobeyed my own mother by wedging handfuls of berries into the pockets of my cheeks. I did not worry about my transgression; there was always enough fruit. Because the secret to picking raspberries is simple; only pick the ones that are ripe. The ripest berries are deep red, shiny, and between two fingers, slide right off. Unripe berries are not as sweet, and crumple when little fingers yank them off the branches. When we all picked together, Jones peered into our jugs regularly, rooting around with her hand, checking for uniformity in color, making sure we were leaving enough of the unripened ones behind.

“If we pick them all now,” she chastised us, “there won’t be any tomorrow.”

There are still some people in Poland that pray to Our Lady Jagonda as she is also responsible for a woman’s fertility; the patron saint of making more.

We didn’t pick all the blackberries in the patch. Once off the branch, blackberries don’t ripen. If they



didn’t rot first, the berries would stay eternally pink, lightly sour, inedible. We left the blackberries, like we left the raspberries, so there would be more tomorrow. We saved them to save ourselves, to save for berries and milk for dessert, to save the bees and the ants and the ladybugs that pass through the berry bushes as well. We prayed to Jagonda with our hands when we saved, and when we reaped the multiplicity. We sustained the fertility of the plants when we pruned what didn’t produce, when we harvested what was there. And we gave thanks when we returned to gather the gifts from the day before.

When October dew begins to linger on the garden far into the morning, plants begin to die. The temperatures, once they dip below freezing, cause the cell walls to burst, leaving the insides of the plant ragged. The raspberry branches shrivel, brittle, and lose their leaves. The corn turns gold and rattling, and any remaining greens wilt. Tomatoes turn pallid and soft, drop from the branches, and dissolve into gray. This is when the garden dies. In order to protect what produce remains at the end of the season, everything must get harvested. No tomato is too green or too small to get tossed—gently—into wooden crates, wood weathered

gray after a dozen seasons of tomato-cradling.

I remember one October in particular when I was quite young, dad insisted that we all go as a family and finish picking the tomatoes the afternoon before the hard frost that would come that night. The rows were long and low, and I was feeling very miserable as I poked my cold hands into the plants, feeling for tomatoes. I was wearing gloves—the cheap knit kind that aren't very warm, but keep you fingers from freezing. They were red and blue stripe, and had a white clydesdale printed on the backs—a farm logo. I don't remember the farm, but I remember loving those gloves. As I picked, fingers a few degrees away from becoming popsicles, I thrust my hand into the tangle of the plant, having spotted a particularly ripe tomato. Upon coming into contact with something horrifyingly cold and slick, I whipped my hand out of the bush only to see it covered in rotting tomato guts. From that moment on, I hated tomatoes. The smell, the texture, even the sight of them reminded me of the decay, and my ruined gloves. I avoided them like they were a grenade that was missing the pin, relenting only for spaghetti and Loretta's golumpki.

Tomatoes are a relatively recent addition to the Polish diet, but are still present in some dishes, like golumpki sauce. Polish cuisine is marked by a few

signature ingredients; mushrooms—a staple that grows wild in Poland's forests—is an example, farmers cheese is another. Potatoes too, are common boiled or mashed, and generally served alongside a cut of pork. Cabbage, being hardy and versatile, can be used in everything from dumplings to soup.

Many of these staples, however, were imports. Potatoes originate in the Andes region of South America. The tomato has roots in the Americas as well, and only made their way to Europe in the 1500's. Many Europeans were superstitious of the new crops. Not only were they foreign-looking, but many upper-class citizens ate off of pewter plates. The high acidity of the tomatoes caused the lead in the plates to seep into the food, making people sick. The peasants who ate off other materials like wood were, of course, perfectly fine, and enjoyed their tomatoes in good health.

Europe is cross-hatched with a variety of well-worn trade routes, bringing everything from tea to tomatoes from Old world to New. The woman responsible for bringing the tomato to Poland was Bona Sforza. A well-educated noblewoman, Bona became the second wife of Sigismund I the Old and the Grand Duke of Lithuania, effectively becoming the Queen of Poland and Grand Duchess of Lithuania in 1518. Bona was Italian,



and was married off in order to regain the family honor and possessions lost after the death of another ruler in the family. Bona brought a shrewd mind and a sharp intellect with her to Poland, as well as a garden—tomatoes included—that still remains at the Wawel Castle. She went on to have several children and a robust political career until her death in 1548, when she was poisoned by one of her officials who was acting, as the story goes, on the behalf of King Philip II of Spain who couldn't pay the queen what he owed her.

The tomatoes at Green Wagon, the farm I work for, are nothing short of comical in their extravagance. There are ten rows at least 30 yards long with plants taller than I am. These plants hang heavy over their support wires, arching with too much fruit, rustling lightly in the wind. I lost my grudge against tomatoes in these rows. The aisles were long and warm, and the tomatoes—straight off the vine—taste like salt and sunshine. Each row was a different variety: purple dappled Irish Rose's, orange-streaked Amish Pastes, Green Zebras that look and taste like limes.

The work at Green Wagon was hard—the hours were long and often unpredictable, so farm hands came and went. The flux of workers was balanced by a few people that stayed for the whole season. Mark and Emily were two coworkers-turned-friends at Green Wagon. Friendship began slowly, sitting in mud in the field,



discussing left-wing healthcare and the growing time of swiss chard, and whether or not Emily should get her masters degree in Psychology or not. Mark and I raced around the driveway, barefoot, dodging chickens and potholes, lugging totes of vegetables from the truck to the wash station. In the field, we threw tomatoes at each other across the rows, staining dusty t-shirts as the skin split and spilled. We ate them too, but only the ones that are too disfigured to sell. Squatting next to the plants, I poked my arm inside the tangle of branches, exploring the interior in a way that was not unlike the tomato-picking of my youth. But that time, in that place, it was happy work.

Like the plants at Green Wagon, my parent's tomatoes are incredibly prolific. Tomatoes, especially at the end of September, began to erupt off the vines, causing the branches to crack sadly, breaking under the effort of supporting such heavy fruit. Dad was their caretaker. He spent every morning in the garden, kneeling in the dirt, carefully weeding rows, pruning limbs that no longer produce, making sure that everything is well watered, well taken care of.

"It's nice," he told me, shrugging. "I just go out there and think, or I think about nothing, or I pray. It's

my time to get away from everything.”

My dad was raised farming, and so did his parents. Rex and Jean grew up in Galien, the same small town they raised my father in; the population never peaked over 750 residents, and their childhoods were spent working during The Depression on farms that were “basically Amish.” To say they were no stranger to hard work is an understatement—hard work as invited to stay for dessert, for coffee, for lunch, for a lifetime of roots in the land, for leather work boots, for potatoes for dinner again. My father’s family are simple people. They know their work intimately, all other unnecessary information is shrugged off and left in the field. They are pretty sure they’re of German and English descent, and my dad is fairly positive that “we have some Jewish in us,” but “I don’t know where that comes from.”

The food culture my father brought to his marriage with Jones was as vastly different as their up-bringsings. When my mom was slurping on homemade *czernina*, my dad was chomping on Little Debbie’s and Whoopie Pies. Instead of five-gallon crocks of sauerkraut in the basement, there were butter sandwiches before bed. There are no old cookbooks in another language, no secret dinner conversations. Quietly devoted to their work, steadfastly committed to the traditions of “we work hard because that’s what we do,” my



father’s family has quietly remained the same. They are because they have always been.

In keeping with unintentional tradition, my father came back to the farm. It would be impossible to deny his past and forsake the land that sprouted his family’s existence, so he weeds and he waters and he feeds the steers, patting warm velvet noses and scratching behind ears. He remains of the farm, with his chapped work boots and patched overalls. He quietly crossed the old trade routes of love’s labor when he weeds, when he maintains the broccoli and arugula and carrots. His devotion then, is part of a larger culture that comes from understanding what it means to need land. It is this culture that spans the space between childhoods and forgotten history. In this blooming space with rows of corn and beans and onions and tomato, that teaches me more about what it means to have history than what it means to have heritage.

Even though my father characterizes the work ethic of the thousands of poor Poles that came to the United States, he is not Polish. Many of the traditions that my mother grew up with in the kitchen have fallen away because dad refused to eat sauerkraut, because he wasn’t Catholic, because what he has always done has never included making white borsch soup. The Old Country that my father comes from is more in the south-

west corner of Michigan than Europe. And by refusing, however unintentionally, to pick up my mother's traditions, many of those traditions got left behind. And I, understanding more the heritage of the country than the heritage of having a country, fell into line with my ancestors, Polish and otherwise. I found a farm.

In the summer, the muddy hills at Green Wagon rolled in different shades of green and gold and red, from emerald chard to honey-colored dill flowers to burgundy streaked okra. The sun rose pink from behind the corn. The land was softer, in the sunrise. There were only a few of us in the field this morning—Mark and Emily and I—and we were quiet as we harvested. Before the sun rose, icy dew saturated layer upon layer of clothing, sticking to skin that pricked into goosebumps and maintained a permanent chill. Mark blew hot breath into cupped hands, fingers pink from harvesting dew-coated kale. Emily pulled leaks

and her silhouette dipped and rose as she shook the plants loose from the earth. She too was covered in water and dew, and she too was up to her ankles in mud. But no one complained. Even though the sunrise was cold and wet, it was still beautiful in a way that carried more weight than the mud sticking to our soles.

On that particular morning, I harvested cabbage alone. I was barefoot, and I picked my way down the row, feeling the tops of the heads for firmness. If the cabbage was firm, it was fully mature. With two hands, I pushed the thick outer leaves away from the head, and slipped my steak knife-turned-harvesting-tool between them. With a few quick strokes, the head broke away from the stalk, and I tossed it into a plastic tote.

There are several different varieties of cabbage, and they are significant ingredients in a number of diets across the world from Asia to Europe. Central Europe, though, is where the cabbage is thought to have first been cultivated. The vegetable, with thick waxy leaves





that crumple around themselves in snug layers of green and white. They do well in full sun and can survive rugged terrain.

On the farm, not all of the cabbages that get tossed into my bins are perfect, or even market-worthy. Deer had an annoying habit of munching on half of the head, until they became bored, full, or both, and moved on to the next row of produce. If they deer didn't get the cabbage, the cabbage worms did, leaving lacy holes along the leaves. But it was these damaged cabbages that found their way home with me.

After the worm-eaten leaves were discarded, and any remaining mud washed off, what was left was a pale little cabbage barely bigger than a brain. In my small rented kitchen, I lined them on the vinyl countertop, washing any remaining dirt off my hands. Summer days at the farm were dirty; we were no strangers to mud and dust and the juice from a tomato vine that stains skin a silver-green. Chef's knife in hand, I began chopping the heads up to make sauerkraut.

Sauerkraut, or some variation, has been eaten for thousands of years across a wide range of cultures. The dish most likely found its way back to Europe sometime during the thousand years after the Great Wall of China was finished, after Gengis Kahn rampaged through China. The Dutch ate sauerkraut to fend off scurvy, and the Germans began fermenting it with

salt. Now, it is enjoyed as a main dish, appetizer, and topping on everything from soup to hotdogs. Although sauerkraut is cheap and easy to make, Jones used to buy it from the store in big glass jars that looked like a barrel. Each time she came home with a new jar, she popped off the lid, stuck in a fork, and ate the kraut raw, juice dribbling down her chin as she hovered over the kitchen counter. The room was flooded with a sharp, sour smell that forced Ross and dad—those with a lesser obsession for sour foods—out. Dinner on such occasions was simple. The morning before, Jones filled her speckled crock pot with the sauerkraut that had survived her nibbling. She pan-fried (in bacon grease or lard) spiced pork kielbasa. The briny-smelling kitchen was breeched by garlic and onion, warm oil and crackling animal fat. These pieces were too deposited into the crockpot, along with some cracked pepper. After school, the whole house was filled with, in my eyes and nostrils, magic.

Leonard and Loretta made sauerkraut together. It was easy to make, only requiring a cabbage and some salt. There are variations, of course, as Jones very fondly recalls eating *kaputsa*, a sweet version of sauerkraut made with mushrooms, sugar, and apple cider vinegar, or mushrooms. Like the duck, Leonard got his cabbages from the Eastern Market. Together, my grandparents shredded, mashed, and packed the cabbage

into giant crock pots. I followed their methodology, chopping my cabbages up entirely, and piling the pale pieces in a large ceramic bowl.

Sauerkraut is fermented naturally by the salt and liquid released by the broken pieces of vegetable. I kneaded the slivers until the firmness broke and they released water, adding salt and pounding more and more until the slivers were small in the bottom of the bowl. With my fist, I packed the kraut into mason jars, adding more salt to every layer, squashing the cabbage in as far as it will go and releasing the brine—the salty liquid that will ferment the cabbage into sauerkraut in about a month.



“We made sauerkraut all the time,”

Loretta tells me, during a phone call in which I asked for her recipe. “I just can’t believe you’re doing it too.”

Loretta and Leonard kept their crocks of fermenting sauerkraut in the basement. They covered the crocks with water-filled plastic bags that held the cabbage within the brine. The cabbage must not touch the air until it has finished fermenting, or it will rot, and the weight of the water sealed the probiotics in and the mold out.

My grandmother was surprised when I told her that I did for fun what she once did out of necessity. Progress was marked not by tradition, but by the shrugging off of unnecessary things, things I didn’t want to let go so quickly.

“We only did that in the old neighborhood,” she told me. “Can’t you get sauerkraut at the store?”

I sighed, covering the mouthpiece with my hand, and thought of the dozens of rows of produce at the farm.

Cabbages were heavy. The rows at Green Wagon were long, and the muscles between my shoulder blades tensed and cramped as I hoisted the bin of harvested heads up into my arms. When I gathered too many to carry, I dragged the tote along in the mud, sloppy wake covering the footprints behind me. Bits of mud splattered the backs of my calves, and the thin clouds split open into a brilliant golden sunrise that warmed my face,.

I am sure that my family grew cabbage. Jones still does—her cabbages are monsters, so large they can barely be carried alone. Loretta doesn’t remember what *busia* grew in her garden, except for tomatoes.

“She grew all the vegetables,” she tells me. “You know. Tomatoes and such. Do you have tomatoes on your farm?” I think of the dozen rows of strung-up tomatoes, hanging heavy down endless rows.

“Yeah Gram. We have a few.”

One of the more outstanding uses of cabbage and tomatoes are golumpki. *Gołąbki*, or golumpki, are



pigeon-sized cabbage-dumplings. Even though the majority of my family's recipes are stored mentally rather than written down, I managed to get Loretta's *goląbki* recipe from her once. It wasn't a recipe, not really, more like a set of loose instructions. I didn't bother to find a pen and paper as she gave me directions.

"You make rice," she told me "and then mash it up with ground pork. Do you have ground pork?"

"No grandma, just a couple of pounds of hamburger."

"Well, that'll work. But ground pork is better, so get that next time. So just cook that how you like it, and then you mash that all together with some chopped up onion and garlic and salt and pepper. Then you wrap it up in steamed cabbage leaves. Do you know how to steam cabbage?"

"Sure. I know how."

"Good. Then you put a spoonful of your hamburger—unless you have ground pork—in the leaf and roll it up. Put them all in a big baking dish—I keep mine closed with toothpicks— and cover all that with tomato and cream of mushroom soup mixed together, and then bake it for an hour or two, or until it's done. Sound good?"

"Sure, sounds good."

The first few layers of leaves were large and waxy, a beautiful green, and the thick center stem snapped loudly as I forced the leaves into the pot of boiling water to steam them. The innermost cabbage leaves were stiff and crumpled, and when they were done being steamed, could barely unfurl at all. They were best eaten over the stove with a small wedge of butter, and some salt and



pepper. I nibbled on these steamed cabbage leaves when I made golumpki. Jones didn't notice my snacking, because she was busy calling all her Polish friends, asking for their golumpki recipes. She can't remember if we should include cream of mushroom soup in the sauce or not, and she can't decide whether or not the meat should be browned first. As with most traditional recipes, there is no one way to make cabbage rolls. Loretta maintains that you cook the meat before making the filling, but our neighbor (who is not Polish, but has been making golumpkis for years) makes hers with raw meat. Half of the Polish cookbooks sided with Loretta, instructing the reader to first brown the pork with garlic and onion. Joni shook her head at this.

"Mom never browned the meat. She's remembering wrong. Just mash it all together. Besides, it's one less pan to wash."

There was another discrepancy in the sauce; cookbooks, friends, and family all swear by any combination of tomato puree, tomato soup, cream of mushroom soup, and plain tomato sauce as a topping. None agreed. Tradition says that a "tomato based broth" should be used, but my mother's opinion again won, and I drowned each pan of naked cabbage rolls in a mix of cream of mushroom soup and a quart of mom's canned tomato sauce. The golumpki are baked "until they are done" in an oven at "the usual temperature, you know."

Forty-five minutes later (a lucky guess) and I pulled two pans of steaming cabbage rolls from the oven, admiring the translucent leaves and swirled sauce. They were beautiful.

Just as golumpki is a vegetable-laden comfort food, Pierogi are just as warming, but without any illusion of health. Initially a lower-class dish, they were made in tremendous quantities. Pierogi were time-intensive in preparation, but take about five seconds to wolf down with a dollop of sour cream. Their roots are distinctly eastern European, but not definitively planted in any one country. They are most easily recognized as a Polish dish, although every Slavic country in the region has some variation of the dumpling, and every country will try their best to claim the pierogi as their own invention.

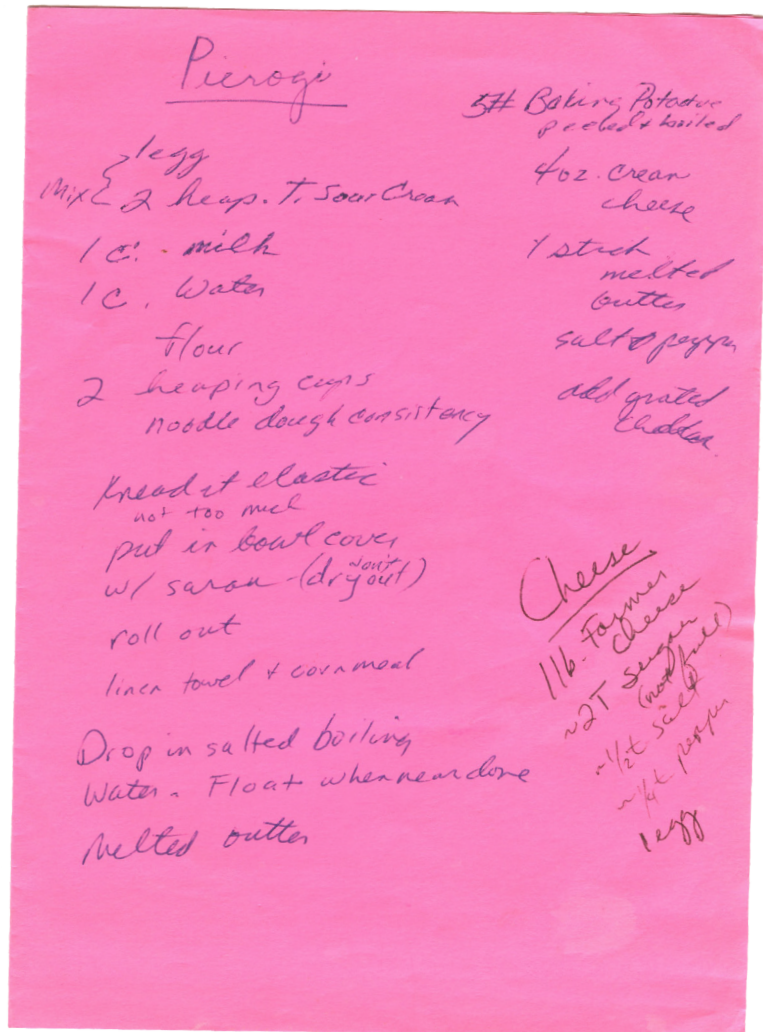
I never made Polish pierogi with my family, because, as Loretta and Jones will both maintain, they

are a “pain in the butt.” I asked Loretta for her recipe, and was disappointed to find out that Loretta let her sister-in-law make pierogi for her. Desperate, I thumbed through my mother’s recipe box, but found nothing. Making pierogi seemed to be first on the list of things to not do. Eventually, I found the recipe in a cookbook Jones gave me from the church she attended in Warren. In it, there was a special section devoted to “Polish Traditions and Treasured Recipes.” Between the yellow pages—dog-eared and flecked with cooking oil and coffee—was a half sheet of paper with a scribbled pierogi recipe on one side.

The directions are concise to the point of bare minimum, and subjective instructions like “knead it to elastic (not too much)” are only effective if the cook is somewhat versed in Polish cooking or noodle-making. Jones said I could keep the book, and upon returning to my apartment, propped the pages open with a carton of eggs and tubs of store-bought sour cream.

Pierogi dough, much like kluski dough, must be rolled out thinly. It was stretchy, and each time I pushed the rolling pin over the elastic lump on my countertop, it immediately sprang back into place. Finally, after patient pushing and stretching, the dough spanned an area of a few feet. I cut the dough into circles using a drinking glass, and wished that my family was there to help. Generally, an entire family will host a pierogi making party in order to make a year’s supply of dumplings on one day. At such events, there is a pierogi press that, when fully loaded, can form dozens of dumplings at a time. Making them by hand is more time consuming, but alone in my kitchen, it was easy to fall into a rhythm piling the little circles with a spoonful of filling, wetting the edges a little, and then pressing them closed.

The most popular varieties, as experienced at my family Christmas, are the potato and cheese, the sauer-





kraut or kaputsa, or mincemeat. Fruit is also a popular filling, with berries being common, and whole prunes (stone and all) possible as well. Due to their humble origins, the fillings are as basic as current resources allow for. The recipe that I found in the Jubilee Cookbook gave instructions for both the sauerkraut and the cheese varieties.

During the summer months, livestock would have more access to grass and forage, and as a result their production, be it milk or eggs, would have increased as well. Many Polish dishes, and desserts in particular, take advantage of this surplus, but pierogi in particular do so well. The easiest filling is a combination of farmers cheese, sugar, an egg, and a small palmful of salt and pepper. With a fork, I mashed the egg, salt, and pepper into crumbly farmers cheese. They blend quickly and smoothly into a yellow paste that resembles cake batter. After sealing the filling inside, pierogi are boiled and fried lightly in butter or baked before serving. The outcome pulled every string that nature ordained as essential for survival—sugar, salt, fat—with sweet dough, warm cheese, and salty butter.

Perhaps it was a good thing they were so annoying to make in large quantities. If they were easy to prepare, I would eat them all the time, and probably go up several pant sizes within the first month.

However, making my small batch of pierogi—limited to roughly 60 dumplings—was not as stressful or laborious as my mother and grandma led me to believe it

would be. The rhythms of rolling the dough and blending the cheese filling was pleasantly monotonous, and reminded me of weeding. My hands worked in circles, bringing the dough back around, cutting rings, cutting the same patterns and filling the same spaces that have been filled for generations before me.

Even though I had never made pierogi before, the patterns of kneading and filling made sense in the same way that learning to ride a bike made sense after I did it enough, the same way that learning Spanish made sense once I learned how to chew unfamiliar sounds and spit them out again. I have watched these returning patterns with my mother and grandmother as they spent all those years cooking, all those years doing old things in new ways, and as I kneaded, the old familiarity doubled back again.

For an assignment in 6th grade English, my brother decided to make “American Pierogi.” His project exploded into a floury mess of dough, splattered mashed potatoes, and shredded cheddar cheese, leaving my parent’s bright kitchen a dusty shade of tan. After obtaining Loretta’s pierogi recipe from Jones, he decided to take the filling into his own hands. There were two varieties. The first was fruit-filled, and the only ingredients that I can remember

him including were unripe gooseberries and cinnamon. Gooseberries aren’t particularly sweet, even when they are mature; unripe gooseberries are tiny striped bombs of an unexplainable sour flavor that make even the most hardened sour-food eater pucker. He denies making these horrific pierogi (“I think mom did that,”) instead bragging about the success of the other filling.

Face dusted lightly in flour, his little-boy





fingers carefully spooned globs of potato into the dumpling, pressing the edges closed with a fork. His smorgasbord of ingredients that belonged more in a baked potato than a Polish dumpling made me a little sad, even as a middle schooler. I resented the changes he made without a second thought to the way they were made before. Sauerkraut, blueberries, and farmers cheese were dismissed in his process without a second thought. Ross, somehow, was different. He doesn't like sauerkraut, or horseradish, or cheese pierogi. We came from the same roots, and he was my antithesis. He let history and present blend. He is my father's son.

Ross eventually grew taller than me. His auburn hair curled around his ears and he was thin, and smart, but he let his talents carry him farther than his ambition. He was irreverent in the way that he enjoyed the new; he thought in present tense. Past and present ran as a continuous streak behind his eyes, moving too quickly together to really be able to say if they are a solitary color, or two that blend together. The two were certainly inseparable in his recipe. My brother gave his nod to tradition with conventional dumpling dough and mashed potato filling. But tradition too entered the American mixing bowl, as well as several handfuls of

cheddar cheese, taco seasoning, and chopped up bacon. Ross, still fond of his creation, nodded exaggeratedly in satisfaction.

"Oh yeah. Those were so good."

Most of the tired metaphors for the United States, and her history as a country of immigrants involve food. Melting pot, mixing bowl: add "American" and you get put in the star-spangled bowl for the tossing. And it is this great bowl that I find myself swimming in. I navigate the attitudes, the histories, the cookbooks with the idea that I am Polish in the front of my mind, but the more I swim, the more I read and learn and cook, the more certain I am that I am not Polish. My identity has been built in the framework of Michigan, not Poland. I am a stranger to her customs, the rhythms of her habits. She is a long-lost friend that I've never met. She is seeing myself from behind without using a mirror. I am at best a Polish-American, and at least, an American of Polish descent. I still love sour food, I still eat horseradish on my kielbasa, I still know how to pronounce *perogi*. But those are old habits, deep habits. And habits aren't special when you don't know anything else.

I never thought that my parent's house was especially beautiful until I left. The house is white vinyl, the barns are peeling red and gray, the cats are thin and lean into the wind when they walk. The grass is patchy because mom and dad refuse to water something that isn't food or flowers during the annual July scorch. Maples and pines and oaks are clumped together around the perimeter of their property, and

stack of fire wood is taller than I am, a precarious fortress of rings and bark and splinters next to a little red furnace that sends soft curling smoke up over the tree line.

The roof of the chicken coop is one of my favorite places. It is not a glamorous place—one is only afforded so much glamour when dealing with chicken coops—but it is beautiful. Hoisting yourself onto the lowest ease of the roof is tricky, but shimmying up to the peak is not. Bare feet stick to pebbly shingles and slide sideways, but when I climb, I keep my weight low and centered, and soon I am perched with my butt on the peak of the roof and my entire childhood world is before me in panorama.

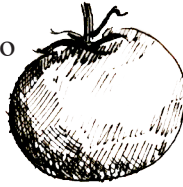
From my roof, the sun sets dusty blue and pink over the tops of now-rattling cornstalks. It is mid-September, and the warmth of summer is just being washed out into the inevitable gray smear of winter. From my roof, alone with the chickens and a great glassy sky and God, I can't decide if the little girl with her butt perched on the roofs peak needs to be a little Polish girl.

But I'm not sure what the difference would be; what experiences would I gain outside of the satisfaction of knowing that I could flex my family's dormant muscles? What makes chatting with my grandmother about her childhood in a language that lives on the tip of her tongue and just past my reach, the language that is quietly slipping into the gray of forgetting in her head, so essential? I want to belong to something deeper than the hot tar of shingles under my toes in summertime, besides only knowing how to pronounce a handful of words in what should be my first language, besides the

rows of cabbage and tomatoes and raspberries in a garden that whispers that I belong.

And I do belong, but more to the people who planted the garden than to the plot of earth itself. I belong with the people who stood with their feet in the mud whose story begins in places that is a henhouse and is known. These generations of diggers invite me to be part of a profound love that I don't think being Polish, or not being Polish, could change. I don't think that I would love my grandmother any less, although I would miss her golumpkis. The fervent sense of work and loyalty and love that my family has shown me through making me feed chickens when I didn't want to, through giving me coloring books and pencils, through good food and bike rides down pot-holed roads and long hugs isn't a Polish thing. I curl my toes, collecting grit beneath my feet. Love isn't a Polish thing. It's a human thing. And I think my family is just exceptionally good at being human. Should I have children, they will know they are loved more than they will understand that they're Polish.

My memories of home are separate in their sensory details, and largely monochrome according



stretch majestically along the driveway. There is a mulberry tree for good measure, for berry-picking, for purple soles, and for climbing. By the barn, my father's to season. Winter is one long streak of gray, with a few splotches of green, or blue, or brown. May is the pale green of a pea shoot, June is stretches into apricot sky that pinky-promises summer, July is a blistering gold of dead grass and bare feet and exultant sunshine. August is warm and wet and a deep green, and September is red. October is red too, but only for a few weeks, before quickly fading into brown, and then gray in a swift gust of wind.

But September has always been red—my favorite color. It is the red of one the maple leaves that we burn (without permission from the fire department) in the driveway after the trees shake them off. September is the red of thousands of tomatoes in crates, stacked on the back porch, spread across every flat surface in the laundry room and kitchen, bobbing in every sink, being blanched and boiled and run through the press and magically appearing as spaghetti sauce on the other side. September is the red of the Zinnias that Jones wraps in a plastic shopping bag for me to take to my teachers on the first day of school. September is the red in Leonard's war medals that I admire, nose pressed close to the class of it's display case at Loretta's house at Thanks-

giving, the red of the Polish flag that snaps in the wind above it. September is my mother's lipstick, the laces on my father's work boots, the dirty ball cap that he wears to do chores. September is the light that bounces off Ross's curls as we raced out of the woods, to the house for dinner. September is the sprawling sunset I watched dip below the tree line, elbows perched on my the windowsill in my parents bedroom, at nine years old. Forehead pressed up against the glass, I asked to take a picture, to remember the red that was bleeding up from the horizon and into the great black bowl of the night sky.

But Jones told me no, there will be a thousand other sunsets, and this is only one. I reflected on the immense beauty of that particular sunset, and how it was too much for me to remember on my own. I sat, pouting, elbows digging into the cool marble of the sill, and resolved to remember the sunset better than my camera. Unblinking, I traced the skinny silhouettes of trees with my eyes, I let the color fill in the spaces behind my eyelids, content for a moment in my solitude with the sunset, the moment of intimacy that didn't matter if I had a camera or not, if I was Polish or not. I blinked, and knew that what I was watching would soon be an all-red memory of a dream of a dream.



Reflection

The idea for this project started my freshman year of college when a professor quipped in class “you are who you are because of other people.” I took into consideration Professor Buckridge’s words, pocketed them, and brought them out again for this project. After spending a semester in Spain, those words came back again. While traveling in and around Europe, most of the people I met were surprised at how my friends and I conducted ourselves. On more than one occasion, we were told “you aren’t like any Americans we’ve ever met before.” The question then became, “if I’m an American, but I don’t act like one, then what am I?” My brightly Polish family was my first thought, and their distinct food-loving culture sounded like as good a place as any to start answering my questions of identity.

Upon formally starting the project, I was immediately struck with the question “where do I even start?” “Polish food” is such a broad topic, that it would be possible to write an entire report on cabbage that would easily fill 50 pages. My own unfamiliarity with traditional food, customs, and even the names of my great-grandparents were big, hairy roadblocks. After discovering album after album of family photos from 1920 to the present (there were a startling number of miniature dashound pictures) I felt like I had a very brief idea of what my family was, but no way to dive into how they came to be where we are.

Thankfully, my grandmother is relentless. After telling her about what I was working on, she called every single member of her extended family, looking for someone who knew something, anything, about immigration. Eventually, she found out that a distant cousin in Virginia had a MyHeritage.com account, and after several frantic phone calls, he gave me access to the site. While many of the specific immigration records I was looking for were absent from his records, knowing where my relatives came from and what they did when they got here was warm and reassuring. Between using the site and the photos, it wasn’t hard to guess that they were farming people too.

After my research was completed, connections like farming, sour food, and frugality are definitely present in my family, and tie us back to Poland. But after some writing and reflection, I’ve come to the conclusion that those things aren’t what makes a culture. My dad isn’t Polish, the distinctly Polish habits that my mom would have continued to do had she married someone of the same ethnicity would have continued in my brother and me. For that reason, this project was difficult. It was difficult to keep believing that I was as Polish as I thought I was when I was a child, and the more I dug into my writing and research, the more I became convinced that my own ethnicity was something that faded quickly and quietly, and trying to regain it at this point would be pulling at strings. I had to face this reality even more after the first round of revisions; I’d written a large portion of the essay in an irreverent voice that verged more on smart-aleck than sincere. By peeling back the layer of supposed humor, I exposed my own lack of security in the identity I was slowly uncovering. It was painful—I am too fond of my own wit and my family’s sense of humor—and while there is a definite place for humor, a nostalgic isn’t it.

Going to Chicago was a big turning point in coming to this conclusion. Besides being asked every two blocks if I spoke Polish, how Polish I was, if I’d ever been to Poland, or if I was learning Polish now, I found myself more able to identify with a *different* immigrant group than the one that raised me. In the Polish restaurants and delis, the smells and tastes were warm and familiar, but I felt like I had guiltily invaded something private and was calling it my own. During the trip, I went to an art opening in the Pilsen neighborhood, and met a Mexican poet/sculptor. Talking with him was thrilling. We chatted—in Spanish—about his work, and after the conversation, I was giddy with my own ability to communicate outside of English. I learned in a very direct, unfiltered way, about how his ideas came into being, how he wrote first, and built second, and how the two worked together.

Upon leaving the art gallery, the weight of the disconnect was blunt. I inserted myself into the Mexican art/sculpture/poetry world and lingered there, resolute. I held my own in a way I never could in the Polish Museum of America, or in Endy’s Deli, or in any of the Polish restaurants along Milwaukee Avenue. Facing that reality was hard. I don’t truly belong in either world. What this project inadvertently accomplished this semester was an

identity-strip. The Polish-American I thought I was does not exist. I am a regular American. I was raised on a farm, I owned multiple pieces of clothing with the American flag printed on them, and I learned my second language in school. But is that important? What difference does being or not being make?

I don't think there are any good answers to that question, and trying to find them would be at least a whole other semester's work. But there are two things that are comforting to me as I settle into my conclusions. First, that as a Christian, my identity is in Christ Jesus, as stated in the Bible in the book of Galatians, chapter two, verse 20. "*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*" My life, then, should be about showing love and care to those around me, more than it should be about making good pierogi. Second, Poland's fight for existence has never been an easy one. The country has been on and off the map since the beginning of history, and many immigrants entered the States claiming Polish as their language without being able to claim Poland as their country, simply because it did not exist. In my case, I am the opposite of my immigrant forefathers—I have a country, but no language. And in a way, my own lack of culture is fitting. Perhaps I am the generation without a border. I am the generation that had its lines pushed back, dissolved, and claimed for someone else. And in that case, I am about as Polish as you can get.

annotated bibliography

Allhoff, Fritz. *Food & Philosophy: Eat, Think*. 1st ed. Blackwell Publishing, 2007. Print.

“Food and Philosophy” is a collection of essays about food and our different perceptions of it. This book was helpful in the way that it got me thinking about how food is perceived in different contexts, whether it’s in another country, or another state of mind.

Butcher, Amy. “All We Had.” *Paris Review*. (2013): n. page. Web. 4 Dec. 2013.

<<http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2013/12/04/all-we-had/>>.

“All We Had” is an essay focusing on the author’s family tradition of dumpling-making. She laments over the loss of her grandmother, but celebrates the recipe that’s been passed down through the generations. She also describes how it feels to make the dumplings, an aspect that is very central to how a lot of my family cooks as well.

Curtin, Deane W. , and Lisa M. Heldke. *Cooking, Eating, Thinking*. 1st ed. Indiana University Press, 1992. Print.

“Cooking, Eating, Thinking” brings to light the psychological aspects of eating food. Many of the essays were related to other aspects of consumption, namely, eating disorders, but addressed what we think in relation to what we eat, and how that can define a food culture, regardless of ethnicity.

Firestone, David. “Holidays Holding Hands: When Thanksgiving and Hanukkah Collide.” *New York Times*. 24 Nov 2013: n. page. Print. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/06/dining/when-thanksgiving-and-hanukkah-collide.html?smid=fb-nytimes&WT.z_sma=DI_WTA_20131106&r=1&>.

“Holidays Holding Hands” was yet another article discussing the collision of old and new. American has become a crossroads now more than ever, and the traditions that have been and the traditions that are becoming are evidenced in families like the authors; he and his family were ingenious with their two-holiday meal, blending traditional Jewish food, like a certain kind of jelly-filled donut, with Thanksgiving by adding pumpkin preserves instead of jam. This blending has permeated American culture and is discussed beautifully in this article.

Lukowski, Jerzy, and Hubert Zawadzki. *A Concise History of Poland*. 2nd Ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Print.

“A Concise History of Poland” laid out all the basic information about Poland as it existed/exists as a country from the beginning of history. In the book, many, many wars and conquests were discussed, and although much of the history was dry and not directly transferrable to food culture per say, the overview was helpful in the way that it put Poland as a country into context. The multiple conquests are important to understand, even briefly, the strong sense of identity that is associated with the country as well as the food.

Mayhew Bergman, Megan. “Turkey-less on Turkey Day: The vegetarian’s Thanksgiving struggle.” *Salon*. (2013): n. page. Web. 4 Dec. 2013. <http://www.salon.com/2013/11/26/turkey_less_on_turkey_day_the_vegetarians_thanksgiving_struggle/>.

In “Turkey-less,” the author gave her take on being a vegetarian on Thanksgiving. While I have gone back and forth between eating and avoiding meat, the principles of tradition—eating turkey because you always eat turkey—is a theme that is not only central and relatable, but something that is transferrable to other aspects of food culture and family identities as well.

McWilliams, Margaret, and Holly Heller. *Food Around the World: A Cultural Perspective*. 1st ed. Upper Saddle: Prentice Hall, 2003. Print.

“Food Around the World” allowed for a more overall perspective of food in Poland’s region, and laid out some basic ideas that I came to elaborate on as I got further into my research. Namely, the use of cabbage and dairy in cooking, and the heavy influence the Russians and Germans had on the local cuisine, an influence I began to notice even more the more I cooked and ate.

Nickles, Greg. *The Poles: We Came to North America*. 1st ed. New York: CrabTree Publishing Company, 2001. Print.

Even though “We Came to North America” was a children’s book, it still shed light on a number of central issues and ideas related to my paper. In general, the material spelled out well how and when immigrants made their way to the United States from Poland, and confirmed my suspicions that many of them were indeed poor farmers before they left. The little book also gave me a solid, if not basic, level of understanding of my own culture and what to expect in my research.

Smith, Jeff. *The Frugal Gourmet: Our Immigrant Ancestors*. 1st ed. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1990. Print.

“The Frugal Gourmet” served as a quick reference for basic Polish recipes. The book included about a dozen dishes that were both easy and simple. When I cooked from it, there were only a few ingredients that I didn’t have on hand. “The Frugal Gourmet” also included a brief history of Polish immigrants and immigration. This was one of the first books I read, which gave me a good foundation for understanding how and why my ancestors came to this country.

Ochorowicz-Monatowa, Marja. *Polish Cookery*. 13th ed. New York: Crown Publisher, Inc., 1975. Print.

“Polish Cookery” was one of the first cookbooks that I got my hands on. It is a treasure trove of information, and the introduction is full of so much vibrant history that I wanted to include it all. Besides the mini history lesson, “Polish Cookery” explained a lot of how Poles cooked, as well as the details of what they actually prepared. A turkey stuffed with 12 partridges is an extravagant example of how hospitality was important—important enough to spend that much time and energy stuffing bird with birds. (A paté of peacock brains was also a traditional dish of the wealthy; the recipe calls for over 1,000 brains. Not so practical for the everyday.) “Polish Cookery” also included an enormous amount of detail that was incredibly helpful as well, especially when it came to categorizing the different types of food. With this cookbook, I could read about everything they did with plums, from putting them in dumplings to letting them marinate in pure alcohol and serving it over ice cream for dessert.