

Palace in Poland

By Jippe Witteveen, July 29, 2024

On my second day of cycling in Poland I came into contact with Charles, a Frenchman who's living there with his wife Pola and their two little boys. I had sent him a message through Warmshowers, which is a community where cyclists offer or find a place to sleep, and he quickly replied that I was welcome to come over. When I looked up the address on Google Maps, I noticed that it coincided with a monumental building labelled as 'castle.' When I arrived, I indeed found myself in front of what to me looked like a palace. Charles opened the door and was beautifully dressed; I felt a bit out of place being all sweaty from the bike trip. Though when we started having conversations I quickly felt at home.

The building

The construction of the building was started by count Von Schweinitz in 1723, when the area was part of the Habsburg Empire, and completed by his son. Initially it was a place for hunting. In 1813, during the time of the Napoleonic Wars, Von Schweinitz' great grandson became the Prussian ambassador to Russia. This was a prestigious position but not a well-paid one. The ambassador had to cover his expenses by himself, and could not afford the palace anymore. It was sold to the Austrian family Von Harrach. A few generations later, in the 1930s and 1940s, Wilfried von Harrach owned the place and he was an officer in the German military. When Nazi Germany went to war, Wilfried was first sent to the Western front and then to the Eastern front. When the war started

to go bad for the Germans and the Russians started creeping closer, Wilfried's wife and children fled westward. They had not heard from him for a while, and would rather be captured by the Americans than the Russians.



After being looted by the Soviets, the palace became property of the new communist government of Poland. During the time of communism it served some different purposes. First it became a prison for women, then a school for children with special needs, and then the headquarters of a huge collective farm. The building wasn't maintained well and when the communist system crumbled it too was slowly falling apart. It was at this time in

the early 1990s that Charles' family bought the property.

De Nicolay Family

Charles' family history goes back much further than that of the building. He traced it back to the Italian peninsula in the 13th century, where some of his ancestors were servants of the pope. When the papacy moved from Rome to Avignon for a time they also moved there, and stayed in what is now France even though the papacy returned to Rome. Centuries later, Charles' ancestors served the French royal family. After the French Revolution, the new Robespierre regime persecuted those who had worked with the *Ancien Régime*. Several of Charles' ancestors were beheaded by the guillotine; others fled abroad, mostly to Switzerland. After Napoleon had reinstated the monarchy they were able to return to France. The room in which I was having the conversations with Charles, had a large painting of king Louis XVIII on the wall.

Currently, Charles has family living all over Europe. Most of them also live in palaces. His parents live in a chateau close to Waterloo in Belgium. Ironically, close to the place where Napoleon was defeated. This is also where Charles spent his early years. Though he has lived in multiple European countries, identifies as French, and from an outsider perspective seems to be living a sort of 'high society' kind of life, he does feel very connected to Polish society.

Giving back to society

In February 2022, Charles' wife Pola gave birth to their first child. Two weeks later, the Russian army invaded Ukraine. Refugees started heading for the Polish

border in great numbers. Pola wanted to go to the border to help out, but Charles suggested that this might not be the best idea after giving birth. They decided to help out in another way. Since they live in a big house with a lot of empty rooms, they decided to open their doors. Nine families came to live there for six months. Not only was this the moral thing to do, Charles also recognised that some of his ancestors had had to flee for wars. Charles and Pola helped the Ukrainians to get started in Poland by helping them to enrol their kids in schools and things like that.

Charles has a friend at the Belgian embassy in Warsaw, and when he was there one time the news came that a missile had fallen on Polish territory. All the official people there were busy calling their fellow diplomats. Was this an attack on NATO? It was a very stressful time. (Only later it became known that this was a rogue missile from the Ukrainian air defence, not a Russian missile.) Other people in Poland have also told me how stressful the war in Ukraine was and is for them. People don't rule out the possibility of escalation. Charles and his family started making plans for what to do in that case. They would go to Charles' parental house in Belgium. But they knew they could not leave the Ukrainians in Poland in that scenario, so arrangements were made to transfer them in buses to Belgium as well.

Afterword

What I am trying to get at in this article is that we can all be decent human beings, doing our best to have a positive influence on the world around us. For this it does not matter what your social standing is. Often I have felt that people who have less

actually give more. When I saw the big house and Charles' beautiful dress, I was afraid for a moment that we had such different standards that it would be hard to connect. But this was my own baseless prejudice, which was quickly proven wrong. What I admired about Charles is that despite the seeming luxury from the outside (though a big old house like that can also be cold and hard to maintain), he loved 'unluxurious' things such as cycling and camping (which was why he was on Warmshowers). One of the people working and living at the property used to live on the streets before Charles took him in. He welcomed refugees and travellers like me. Charles might one day need the help of other people, and thus sees it as a duty to help out others while he can. "Today we have this big house. Tomorrow we might not have it."