

# Uncovering Roots: A Journey into My Polish Heritage (Colleen Zenk)

## THE SPARK THAT IGNITED MY GENEALOGY RESEARCH

My genealogy journey began with my mother. She was the “historian” in the family and kept records of every birth, death, anniversary of relatives and community members. I’m not sure why she started doing that, but she created notebooks with all this information. Each of my parents had one living sibling and neither was nearby. My mother was the repository of the stories and records of her family history, and she started writing things down, creating scrapbooks, and saving photographs.

My dad’s side of the family was all Irish, and that is what we celebrated when I was young. My mother’s side was Cornish (grandfather) and Polish (grandmother). We knew quite a bit about the Cornish heritage but not much about the Polish heritage of my grandmother. There were scandals and interesting stories, and I think that is what intrigued me. I am fond of good mysteries, which are my favorite reading material. That helped foster my interest in family history. In the late 1990’s I invested in Family Tree Maker Software and started doing some research on my own. This was early days of internet access, so it was frustrating to find useful information. The biggest obstacle was the surname of my Polish ancestors – Fiyol. My mother and I found the name of a researcher and wrote asking for help. We did receive a reply, but he couldn’t find the name either.

## GENEALOGY RESOURCES

As happens with many of us, life got in the way of our research. My parents died in 2003 and 2006 and by then almost all my mother’s relatives were gone too. I ended up with all the documents and photos, which would prove helpful in researching my Polish roots. But I was too busy to do much more with it. I sporadically kept an Ancestry membership but kept dropping it when I didn’t have time to use it. I had let my Family Tree Maker subscription lapse too. However, I discovered the free Family Search site, so it was easier to come and go without extra cost. But I didn’t have the time to devote to research, and it all seemed overwhelming. Another site that I found helpful was “Find A Grave.” Even though I knew where most of my mother’s relatives were buried, I did find a few others with the help of that website.

I also sent in a DNA sample to Ancestry, and the results intrigued me further. I expected to be 50% Irish, 25% British, and 25% Polish. It didn’t quite turn out that way. Ancestry tweaks that profile periodically, but what has remained steadfast is my Eastern European heritage at 25%.

About two years ago I decided to get serious about uncovering my Polish heritage. I had rejoined MGS and joined PGS-MN. I also reviewed my entries on the Family Search website and renewed my Ancestry subscription. I took some online classes that were offered by Family Search, and Family Tree University, specifically “Finding Your Polish Ancestors,” offered by FTU. I knew very little about Poland as a country and this class gave me a better understanding of Polish history and immigration, an overview of websites to use, research strategies and other tips for finding records. I took a series of one-hour sessions from Family Search that guided me in how to use their website. And another on how to utilize Ancestry better. I also have a subscription to Family Tree Magazine which has many helpful articles, and I just purchased the newly released Family Tree Maker Software, which is now internet-based. I really wanted my own database, so I am in the process of adding information to that program.

Around the same time, I stumbled across a post on Facebook that said, “Find the origin of your surname”, hosted by Genealogy Tours Poland. I didn’t have any expectations for results but was surprised by a prompt response from a researcher. She couldn’t find the name either but asked for any other information I could give her. I responded with the sparse details I had along with one record from the Family Search database. I also shared some variations on the spelling of the name. With that information, she uncovered a treasure trove of information for me. Preliminary information was complimentary, but beyond that there was a fee. I felt the fees were very reasonable. I now have a better foundation for further research.

#### FROM POLAND TO MINNESOTA

My great-grandparents, Albert and Lucy, came to the U.S about 1885 and settled in Minnesota Lake which is in southern Minnesota near the Iowa border and south of Mankato. The city is mostly in Faribault County. Hwy 22 splits the town so part of it, including the church cemetery, is in Blue Earth County, which created some confusion when I sought records. They came with a daughter, Caroline, who was about 3 years old. Family records told us that Albert and Lucy had two older children that had died as infants in Poland. They had 8 more children here and one of them was my grandmother, Mary.

Mom’s notes told me that Albert and Lucy came from southeastern Poland east of Krakow. Our records said they were married in 1871 at St Sebastian’s Church in Radomich, Poland, which was near Tarnow. I knew nothing of the geography of Poland, but I was readily able to find Tarnow on a map. I could not locate Radomich, Poland, in that area, but there were similar names. I also couldn’t locate St. Sebastian’s Church.

#### AMAZING DISCOVERIES IN MY FAMILY HISTORY RESEARCH

The major surprise was that my grandfather was married previously, and one of the children attributed to Albert and Lucy was from Albert’s first marriage. I received a full report from the researcher which included copies of birth records for Albert and his siblings including the names of the two generations before him. I now had 2nd and 3rd great-grandparent’s names and details. The information about my great-grandmother Lucy was minimal but she was able to locate their marriage record, and death records of her parents and a brother.

Most of my grandmother’s siblings did not marry or have children so I have few cousins on this side. I did share the report with them, and they were thrilled to receive it. I have also been able to uncover more information about my great-grandparents’ lives here. For instance, in early 1900, my great-grandmother Lucy, bought some land with her “egg money” and moved with the children to Mapleton. She left Albert behind. I am still digging into the reasons for that split, but she was a strong woman, determined to provide for her children. I suspect that he couldn’t do that anymore, but the circumstances remain unclear.

#### BRICK WALLS AND HELP FROM PGS-MN

At a couple of early programs held by PGS-MN I chatted with others about my difficulties identifying the original spelling of the surname. Both Karen Brill and Terry Kita gave me some clues as to where to look and how the original name might have been spelled. It was a simple solution. The name I grew up with Fiyol, but the middle letter had been a “j.” So, the spelling I needed to find other records was Fijol. There are a lot of variations in census and other records. Once I shared that with the researcher, she was able to find records more easily.

## STORIES BEHIND THE PICTURES

My grandmother was born in 1889. She married my grandfather in 1913. He was Methodist and was a widower, with 2 teenage sons. He was a mortician and there are many other stories about that relationship. My grandmother was Catholic, and a “mixed marriage” just wasn’t done at the time. They lost their first child at birth. My mother was the next child. When she was 4, my grandfather deserted the family and filed for divorce. Now my grandmother had another “scandal” to live with. However, she was also a strong woman and determined to support her two young daughters. She did that by working as a telephone operator for 30 years.



Grandmother Mary at the telephone switchboard

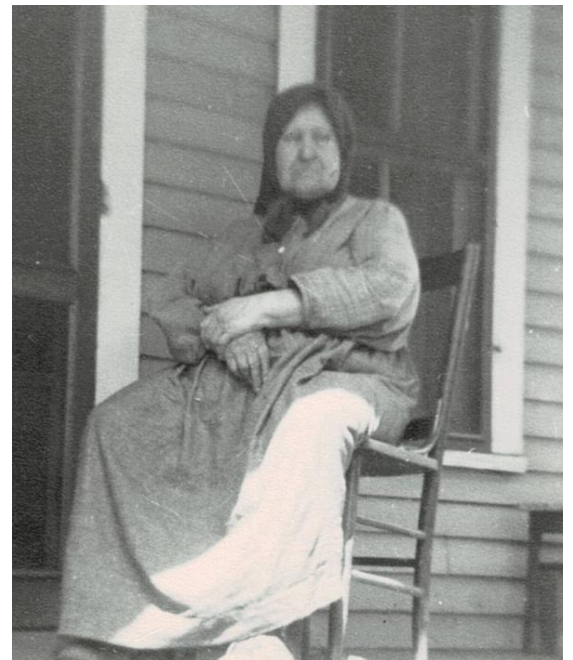
### EDITOR'S NOTE:

Colleen was the presenter at the September PGS-MN Program Meeting, sharing her journey of Polish genealogy research. If you missed that meeting, it was recorded with the link on the PGS-MN website in the Members Only section in Program Meeting Archives.

We encourage PGS-MN members to share their stories of genealogy research, challenges and their family history. Newsletter Committee members can help you with writing articles. If you are interested, send an email to: [PGSminnesota@gmail.com](mailto:PGSminnesota@gmail.com) with “Newsletter Article” in the subject line.



Grandmother Mary with my mother and her sister



Great-Grandmother Lucy