

Pilgrimage, Partitions, and Patriarchy

Polish Women and the Virgin Mary

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Marysia Galbraith describes a religious pilgrimage as a collective experience that is physical, emotional, and spiritual—where pilgrims share hardships of the journey as well as a faith that carries them to their destination.¹ In 1937 and 1938, a teenaged Katarzyna “Kasia” Kolenda completed two pilgrimages to the sacred icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Ostrobrama in Wilno, Poland.² Steeped in Marianism, Poles looked to Mary as mediatrix and intercessor to God.³ Walking the eighty kilometers from her village of Kamienczany, Poland, Kasia prayed for the fulfillment of a special intention—that she return to her birth country of the United States with its opportunity for a better life.⁴ In 1939, an arranged marriage provided the means to this end, for just three weeks after her wedding, she was traveling to America, her prayers seemingly answered.

The outbreak of the Second World War interrupted the emigration of her husband, however, and months of waiting become years. In 1959, Kasia and her husband Władysław Kwacz finally reunited, their two decades apart reaffirming them as

¹ Marysia Galbraith, “On the Road to Częstochowa: Rhetoric and Experience of a Polish Pilgrimage,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (2000): 61.

² At the time of these pilgrimages, the icon of Our Lady of the Gate of Dawn (in Polish, *Matka Boska Ostrobramska*) in Wilno was within the borders of Poland. Following the redrawing of borders after the Second World War, it was within lands annexed by the Soviet Union, and later, Lithuania.

³ Brian Porter-Szűcs, *Faith and Fatherland: Catholicism, Modernity, and Poland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 363.

⁴ Kasia was the third of four children born in the United States to Polish émigrés John and Emilia Kolenda. The family of six relocated to Poland in 1922. Kasia’s US citizenship was an appealing aspect for potential suitors.

Confluence

strangers. New roles actuated by the bond of marriage now came into play. After twenty years of independence, Kasia assumed the role of a dutiful Polish wife—submissive, obedient, and, at times, accepting of emotional suffering, “gracefully and without complaint.”⁵



Katarzyna “Kasia” Kolenda and her best friend, ca. 1938.

relinquish her independence for subordination to an unfamiliar partner? I believe her Polish Catholic faith—with the Cult of the Virgin Mary at its core—was the source of the moral protocol she followed and influenced her actions. During times of tribulation, Catholicism also provided her with comforting rituals in which to engage, such as praying the rosary.



Wedding photo of Katarzyna Kolenda and Władysław Kwacz, January, 1939 (Personal collection of Kristina Kwacz).

As her only child and daughter, Kasia’s choices puzzled me for many years. Why did my mother agree to marry a man selected for her by her family? Why did she remain married to a husband an ocean away, and with whom a reunion became less certain with each passing year? Most importantly, why did she

This personal example inspires questions regarding how and why Poles came to revere the Virgin Mary so deeply and what impact this has had upon Polish women. My research suggests that there are several factors to consider. Turbulent times in Poland’s history afforded opportunities for the Polish Catholic hierarchy to build the Church’s influence among the people. These leaders promoted the

⁵ Porter-Szűcs, *Faith and Fatherland*, 382. Porter-Szűcs summarizes the messaging in Polish Catholic sermons that reinforced the suffering of women as noble and necessary.

Blessed Virgin Mary as protector of the nation, especially during the period of Poland's partition by three oppressors.⁶ They also presented Mary as a feminine role model for women to emulate, defining her as a patient and humble servant while filling the roles of wife and mother. In turn, this reinforced a patriarchal system with distinct roles for men and women that became so ingrained it hindered the development of a women's movement in Poland.⁷

Some thoughts on the Cult of Mary from a feminist perspective provide a backdrop for this study. Scholars and theologians agree that there are limited references to Mary in the bible. This scarcity of information allows for the construction of her characteristics and qualities by individuals who have varying goals in mind. Theologians have developed and promoted Marian doctrine and declared key dogma, including the divine motherhood and virginity of Mary.⁸ The latter, contends Maurice Hamington, "was a function of her constructed nature, created to meet the social, political, and theological needs of those (males) who contributed to it."⁹



Statue of the Virgin Mary
(Photo by Lisanne Jensen).

Hamington frames his argument with the male hierarchy of the Church in mind. He asserts, "religion is the fundamental

⁶ Beginning in 1772, Russia, Prussia, and Austria engaged in territorial divisions of Poland that progressively diminished the nation's area. The second partition took place in 1793, and the third, which completely removed Poland from the map, began in 1795 and lasted until 1918.

⁷ Frances Pine, "Uneven Burdens: Women in Rural Poland," in *Women in the Face of Change: The Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China*, ed. Shirin Rai, Hilary Pilkington, Annie Phizacklea (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 73.

⁸ Four dogmas concerning the Virgin Mary include the divine motherhood and virginity of Mary, the Immaculate Conception, and her Assumption into Heaven. See Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), xxii, and Hamington, *Hail Mary? The Struggle for Ultimate Womanhood in Catholicism* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 16–20 for a fuller discussion of these dogmas.

⁹ Hamington, *Hail Mary*, 65. The author describes St. Jerome's assertion that Mary was a perpetual virgin on 63–65. See also Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 50–67, for a discussion of sexuality through the eyes of the early Church, especially concerning Mary's virginity.

institutional vehicle of moral discourse in society.”¹⁰ Because men control this sphere of influence and its messaging, they have the capacity to create and promote Mary as a model for women to emulate. This results in a gendered construction that “is a dynamic projection of every woman’s experience,” whereas for men, it presents Mary as an ideal woman—an untainted virgin and nurturing mother.¹¹ In the latter, she is “truly ‘other’—other than human and other than God”—idealized and unattainable.¹²

Mary’s acceptance of the incarnation makes her an active participant in God’s plan. Sarah Jane Boss reasons that this conveys a moral as well as physical agency, “and so is doubly active in the process of humanity’s redemption from sin and death.”¹³ The goodness of Mary is contrasted with Eve, who brought about the Fall of humanity and original sin. “Mary, conceived as the New Eve, creates an impossible moral dichotomy for women. She is the model of moral perfection, and Eve’s evil deviance is cast for everyone else,”¹⁴ Hamington writes. The outcome of this, he suggests, is the perception that women are culpable for conflicts in domestic situations and retribution against them by men is justified and, further, that their suffering is “a mysterious part of God’s divine plan.”¹⁵

Mary’s role as mediatrix—“the primary recipient of intercessory prayers and devotion”—is also an important aspect of her construction.¹⁶ Endowed with maternal characteristics, she considers the character of the individual and his or her repentance if a sin was committed. Hamington offers the metaphor of a family, where “God is the omnipotent judge and father of the house. Mary is the approachable, nurturing mother who can hold back the father’s wrath.”¹⁷ She upholds God’s laws, but can and does intervene in response to the appeals of the penitent.

¹⁰ Ibid., 3.

¹¹ Ibid., 51.

¹² Ibid., 44.

¹³ Sarah Jane Boss, “The Development of the Virgin’s Cult in the High Middle Ages,” in *Mary: The Complete Resource* (London and New York: Continuum, 2007), 158–159.

¹⁴ Hamington, *Hail Mary*, 146.

¹⁵ Ibid., 149–150.

¹⁶ Ibid., 90. See also Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 130–136.

¹⁷ Ibid., 119.

Applying the process of inversion—where a seemingly positive aspect is in actuality devalued—is an appropriate summary to this overview. Hamington writes:

Mary is hailed for her virginity; however, her virginity is equated with biological impossibility. Mary is hailed for her sinless nature; however, sinlessness is equated with an acquiescent, submissive, nurturing woman. Mary is hailed as mediatrix, but her power is purely relational and subordinate. ... the result is a patriarchal definition of Mary, and, by implication, women, that maintains a system of domination and subordination.¹⁸

Before considering the role of Mary in Polish Catholicism, it is relevant to outline key events in Poland's history. In the minds of many Catholics, Poland has always been exclusively Roman Catholic, notes Brian Porter-Szűcs.¹⁹ The conversion of Mieszko I to Christianity brought Catholicism and reverence of the Virgin Mary to the nation more than a thousand years ago. Yet during the medieval and early modern eras, Poland was religiously diverse.²⁰ An attack of the Swedish Army upon the monastery of Jasna Góra, however, elevated Mary's position in the view of Polish Catholics.



Icon of Our Lady of Częstochowa.

Failure of the 1655 siege, attributed to the protection of the icon of Our Lady of Częstochowa, inspired King Jan Kazimierz to crown the Marian icon the “Queen of Poland” the following year.²¹ Jasna Góra became the most popular destination for pilgrimages, and

¹⁸ Ibid., 160. Hamington credits Gail Paterson Corrington and other feminist scholars for their observation of this pattern.

¹⁹ Porter-Szűcs, *Faith and Fatherland*, 5.

²⁰ See Jerzy Kloczowski, *The History of Polish Christianity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000) for a broad overview.

²¹ See Porter-Szűcs, *Faith and Fatherland*, 364, and John J. Bukowczyk, “Mary the Messiah: Polish Immigrant Heresy and the Malleable Ideology of the Roman Catholic Church, 1880-1930,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 4, no. 2 (1985): 20–21 for a fuller discussion of this designation.

from this point on, writes John Bukowczyk, “patriotic Poles forevermore would associate a feminine Poland with her patroness, the Blessed Mother.”²²

A number of scholars concur that the partitioning of Poland during the nineteenth century—with the nation’s lands divided between neighboring Russia, Prussia, and Austria—was a pivotal time for Polish Catholicism.²³ Kevin Hannan writes that the Catholic Church “was viewed as a prime foundation of Polish society, and it was the only Polish institution to continue to function in all three partitions.”²⁴ Anna Zarnowska supports this contention, declaring, “in a country deprived of democratic and national institutions...it was one of the few cohesive structures enabling society to organize itself.”²⁵ Without a Polish state in existence, adds Zdzisław Mach, Polish national identity was “created on the basis of ethnic culture: language, religion, mythologized history, memories of the past victories and the lost sovereignty.”²⁶

The Church also served as the only place outside the home where people spoke the Polish language, its use in public prohibited during the partition era.²⁷ “In the Russian and Prussian parts of Poland,” writes Anna Zarnowska, “the individuals...were deprived of national self-identification, the right to have their own

²² Bukowczyk, “Mary the Messiah,” 20–21.

²³ For an opposing viewpoint, see Porter-Szűcs, *Faith and Fatherland*, 8, and Brian Porter, “The Catholic Nation: Religion, Identity, and Narratives of Polish History,” *Slavic and East European Journal* 45, no. 2 (2001): 296–296.

²⁴ Kevin Hannon, “Polish Catholicism: A Historical Outline,” *The Samaritan Review*, no. 1 (2004): 1011.

²⁵ Anna Zarnowska, “Family and Public Life: Barriers and Interpenetration – Women in Poland at the Turn of the Century,” in *Workers, Women, and Social Change in Poland, 1870–1939*, ed. Anna Zarnowska (Aldershot, Great Britain, Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 480.

²⁶ Zdzisław Mach, “The Roman Catholic Church in Poland and the Dynamics of Social Identity in Polish Society,” (2000): 5, [http://www.humanityinaction.org/files/279-](http://www.humanityinaction.org/files/279-The_Roman_Catholic_Church_in_Poland_and_the_Dynamics_of_Social_Identity_in_Polish_Society.pdf)

[The_Roman_Catholic_Church_in_Poland_and_the_Dynamics_of_Social_Identity_in_Polish_Society.pdf](http://www.humanityinaction.org/files/279-The_Roman_Catholic_Church_in_Poland_and_the_Dynamics_of_Social_Identity_in_Polish_Society.pdf). See also Łucyna Stetkiewicz, “The Role of the Catholic Church and Polish Religiosity,” *The Journal for the Sociological Integration of Religion and Society* 3, no. 3 (2013): 5.

²⁷ Jacek Kurczewski, “The Family as an Institution of Polish Civil Society: Church, Parties, and a Constitution in the Making,” *Polish Sociological Review* no. 116 (1996): 326. Brian Porter-Szűcs, however, argues that Poles had other ways to preserve their ethnicity, and asserts that Polish-language publications remained in press, staging of plays and operas took place, and some commercial business was conducted. See Porter-Szűcs, *Faith and Fatherland*, 8.

cultural institutions, being educated in their mother tongue, and using this language in daily life.”²⁸ The parish therefore provided an alternate venue for socialization, especially for youth.²⁹ Parish activities also offered women opportunities to participate in activities outside the home, despite the Church’s goal of keeping them focused on their families. “As a result,” adds Zarnowska, “religious life, especially at the parish level, became an alternative form of public life.”³⁰

Within the home, the partitions of Poland “cast a long and lasting shadow over Polish women’s lives,” declares Bianka Pietrow-Ennker.³¹ The traditional, patriarchal family was dominant in all social groups in nineteenth-century Poland, and the rights of women were severely limited. “A wife was fully subordinated to her husband,” writes Zarnowska, even with regard to parental rights, which the husband retained in full.³² Kurczewski notes the partitions “strengthened the role of the male patriarch by treating him as the legal representative of the household.”³³

As men engaged in more public roles—especially political activities—women tended to familial and household tasks. In the process, their role as mothers took on greater importance in the context of national awareness, for “women came to represent the transmission of culture, in the form of language and Catholicism, within the home,” asserts Frances Pine.³⁴ Despite the confines of this stateless period, Polish men and women maintained faith in an independent Poland. “Poles came to regard their children—the next generation—as held in sacred pledge against a future to be spent in national freedom, and the task of raising them in the spirit of Polish ideals fell to the woman,” declares Pietrow-Ennker.³⁵

It is during this period that the *Matka Polka* (Mother Poland or Pole) appeared as “a self-sacrificing maternal figure of courage and great moral strength,” writes Bozena Tieszen.³⁶ Inspired by the

²⁸ Zarnowska, “Family and Public Life,” 471–472.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 476.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 480.

³¹ Bianka Pietrow-Ennker, “Women in Polish Society: A Historical Introduction,” in *Women in Polish Society*, ed. Rudolf Jaworski and Bianka Pietrow-Ennker (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 11.

³² Zarnowska, “Family and Public Life,” 477–478.

³³ Kurczewski, “The Family as an Institution,” 326.

³⁴ Pine, “Uneven Burdens,” 73.

³⁵ Pietrow-Ennker, “Women in Polish Society,” 11.

³⁶ Bozena Tieszen, “*Matka Polka* (Mother Poland) and the Cult of the Virgin Mary: Linguistic Analysis of the Social Roles and Expectations of Polish Women,”

poem “Ode to Mother Poland” (*Oda do Matki Polki*) by Adam Mickiewicz, *Matka Polka* represented the characteristics of Mary as Mater Dolorosa—bearing suffering and loss—for the greater good.³⁷ Pietrow-Ennker writes:

Both the Church and society at large joined forces to commit women to setting an edifying and emotional example. In line with religious tradition, the qualities sought from women were self-sacrifice and self-abnegation; these were now invested with new prestige—as exemplified in the person of *Matka Polka*, the divine protectress and patron saint of the nation.³⁸

Service to others was paramount, as *Matka Polka* gave up “her own pleasures and dreams so that the nation might survive,” adds Porter-Szűcs.³⁹

Despite this passionate nationalism among the people, the Catholic hierarchy discouraged rebellion against the oppressor nations.⁴⁰ Two uprisings of Polish citizens were unsuccessful, and with the third partition, Poland’s elimination from the map was complete. Porter-Szűcs argues that formulating a Catholic historical narrative was the first step in directing Poles’ recognition “that the country’s misfortune’s came from God for a reason.”⁴¹ Church leaders conveyed to the Polish faithful that, “the partitions...were God’s way of telling the Poles that they needed to reflect on their sins and learn from their mistakes,” and encouraged them to pray for God’s assistance.⁴² “With this understanding of divine agency,” Porter-Szűcs contends, “Catholic patriots could both make sense of the partitions and trace a path toward national resurrection; they could imagine political change without violating their commitment to obedience and authority.”⁴³ Comparing

in *Language and Religious Identity: Women in Discourse*, ed. Allyson Jule (Houndsmills, Basingstole, Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 220.

³⁷ Porter-Szűcs, *Faith and Fatherland*, 377, 381.

³⁸ Pietrow-Ennker, “Women in Polish Society,” 11–12.

³⁹ Porter-Szűcs, *Faith and Fatherland*, 376–377.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 224.

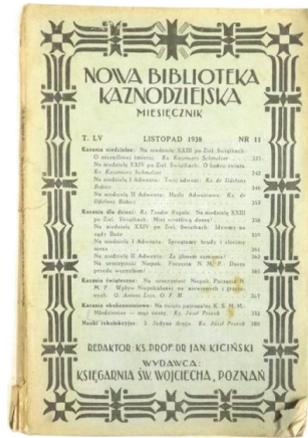
⁴³ *Ibid.*, 228.

Poland to Mary, Poland suffered “a Christ-like martyrdom,” adds Bukowczyk.⁴⁴

Porter-Szűcs suggests the Catholic hierarchy asserted their authority over the Polish faithful with “the claim that the Church is the bearer of truth and the means of salvation.”⁴⁵ He references an extensive number of primary sources, including Catholic publications, homiletics, speeches, and sermons that conveyed and reinforced this message. Key among these sources was the magazine *Biblioteka Kaznodziejska* (The Homiletic Library) which priests used as a guide in writing their weekly sermons. Bearing the imprimatur of the Church, Porter-Szűcs argues that it “can be considered a representation of what Church authorities wanted rank-and-file priests to say,” and it underscored that the Catholic faithful must “treat their priests as unerring authorities.”⁴⁶

In the latter half of the partition period, sermons conveyed the message that the many hardships people bore in daily life were a path toward the rewards of heaven.⁴⁷ *Biblioteka Kaznodziejska* “encouraged the poor to embrace their status” and asserted “material deprivation led to humility, trust in God, and honesty.”⁴⁸ The writings of Catholic publisher and philosopher Eleonora Ziemięcka were in a similar vein, claiming “all suffering, whether physical or moral, [should be] accepted with humility as a punishment from God,” because and it was “for our essential good.”⁴⁹

With Mary defining the Polish Catholic prototype for ideal womanhood, this messaging carried particular significance for



Nowa Biblioteka Kaznodziejska.

⁴⁴ Bukowczyk, “Mary the Messiah,” 21.

⁴⁵ Porter-Szűcs, *Faith and Fatherland*, 19.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 56–67.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 124, 121.

⁴⁹ Eleonora Ziemięcka, *Michał Ciemniowski, b. Kapitan B. Wojsk. Polskich: wspomnienie Pośmiertne*. (Warsaw: J. Unger, 1859), 8, quoted in Porter-Szűcs, *Faith and Fatherland*, 59.

women.⁵⁰ Porter-Szűcs describes Ziemiecka's seemingly contradictory perspectives—advocating for women's education and their equal intellectual treatment with men, while urging women “to embrace a life of service and suffering, even within the family.”⁵¹ She writes:

It is not a woman's place to judge her husband. God will someday take account of his soul. His coldness, and even his errors, do not justify her perversions [*zbozczenie*]. The only option for a Christian wife is complete subordination to all the consequences of her irrevocable pledge.⁵²

Some sermons chastised women if they lamented their situation, and went so far as to assign them culpability in abuse at the hands of their husbands.⁵³ Women were therefore to accept the brunt of suffering within a family, while displaying the virtues of Mary—humility, obedience, meekness, and patience—“bearing that pain gracefully and without complaint.”⁵⁴

Education based upon Mary primed the next generation about the traditional role they were to fill.⁵⁵ Urszula Chowaniec highlights a popular reference for the education of girls, first published in 1819, that “promoted the image of a submissive and inferior woman who was supposed to be totally dependent on her male provider and owner.”⁵⁶ Beyond educational or parochial settings, Bukowczyk notes that female socialization also provided opportunities for the transmission of Marianism. Irrespective of the setting, he asserts:

⁵⁰ John Bukowczyk, “Holy Mary, Other of God: Sacred and Profane Construction of Polish-American Womanhood,” *The Polish Review* 48, no. 2 (2003): 199. See also Frances Pine, “Uneven Burdens,” 69.

⁵¹ Porter-Szűcs, *Faith and Fatherland*, 68.

⁵² Eleonora Ziemiecka, *Mysli o wychowaniu kobiet*, 283, quoted in Porter-Szűcs, *Faith and Fatherland*, 68.

⁵³ See Porter-Szűcs, *Faith and Fatherland*, 381–383, for several examples of these messages.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 372–373, 382. See also Bukowczyk, “Holy Mary,” 199, for additional itemization of Mary's virtues.

⁵⁵ Tieszen, “Matka Polka,” 221.

⁵⁶ Urszula Chowaniec, “Listening to Women's Voices: Historical Overview of Women's Right to Write in Poland,” in *Women's Voices and Feminism in Polish Cultural Memory*, ed. Urszula Chowaniec and Ursula Phillips (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 28. First published in 1819, the book of advice was written by Klementyna Tańska-Hoffmanowa and entitled *Keepsake Left by a Good Mother, or her Last Advice to Her Daughter (Pamiętka po dobrej matce)*.

As Polish...girls and young women were taught to venerate and emulate the Blessed Virgin Mary, they were presented a template for thought, behavior, comportment, aspiration, demeanor, and feeling out of which they could construct—or be constructed into—the Ideal Polish Woman.⁵⁷

Coming full circle, Mary's construction by the Polish Catholic hierarchy corresponds with Hamington's argument that she meets "the social, political, and theological needs" of the contributing body. Viewed through the lens of radical feminist theory, the Church employed strategies and messaging during the partition period of Poland's history to "assert and maintain power over women."⁵⁸ The patriarchal system that it reinforced ensured women remained subordinate to men.

However, Hamington reveals a conundrum, for "Mary is centrally important to both the structure of traditional Catholicism and to the women who wish to be liberated from within that tradition."⁵⁹ Polish Marianism portrays a duality of strength and power with femininity and domesticity.⁶⁰ During times of siege, Porter-Szűcs notes, Mary "guides the nation to victory even as she demonstrates how to sustain the national hearth and home."⁶¹ Her position as the Mother of God allows her to serve as Mediatrix and intercede on the behalf of the penitent faithful. As Exemplar, her maternal bond with believers guides them toward a moral and righteous path.⁶² Yet via *Matka Polka*, Mary emphasizes "service, selflessness, sacrifice, and suffering" in a domestic sphere.⁶³

Countless numbers of Poles have prayed the rosary, engaged in Marian pilgrimages, and lifted prayers and hymns to the Blessed Mother. The earliest documented Polish hymn, "*Bogu Rodzica*," recognized Mary as "She Who Bore God" and invoked her role as

⁵⁷ Bukowczyk, "Holy Mary," 199.

⁵⁸ Annie Phizacklea, Hilary Pilkington, and Shirin Rai, *Women in the Face of Change: The Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 3.

⁵⁹ Hamington, *Hail Mary*, 49.

⁶⁰ Bukowczyk, "Mary the Messiah," 20.

⁶¹ Porter-Szűcs, *Faith and Fatherland*, 361.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 371.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 390.

mediatrix on behalf of believers.⁶⁴ Icons of the Virgin Mary deemed miraculous inspire pilgrims to walk for days to sacred sites. Religious rituals such as these contribute to systems of meaning in the life of the faithful, suggests Mary Spencer-Arsenault.⁶⁵

My mother Kasia believed in such rituals. At a minimum, she prayed three rosaries a day. She explained that one cycle was for the deceased members of our family, the next for those who were still living, and the last for the well-being of the two of us. When strained with worry and fear, she silently completed additional cycles, lips moving, fingers shifting slowly from bead to bead. This daily ritual provided her with great comfort until her death at age 92. At the funeral home, I displayed a dozen of her rosaries in a large frame. Many were broken, but casually repaired with bits of yarn, thread, or safety pins. To me, it spoke volumes—this was a visual depiction of her faith, as she literally prayed her rosaries to pieces.

I began this study with several questions concerning my mother's early years. Through my research, I found the answers I was seeking, and though some of the information was heartbreaking to read and reflect upon, it allowed me to better understand Kasia's choices. Of course she accepted an arranged marriage; of course she waited twenty years to reunite with her husband; of course she remained silent when he became angry,



Kasia and Kristina Kwacz, 2006 (Studio portrait by Ken Bovat).

accepting emotional suffering gracefully and without complaint.

Kasia embodied all the messages she received from the pulpit, from her elders, and from Polish society regarding the Marian virtues of meekness, obedience, and humility. She revered and emulated the Virgin Mary and believed in the rewards of the afterlife. In my youth, I was frustrated and angry that she did not

⁶⁴ Composed in the thirteenth century or earlier, a mass singing of the hymn was held at a 1910 event commemorating the five-hundredth anniversary of the victory at the Battle of Grunwald. See Kloczowski, *A History of Polish Christianity*, 78–79, and Porter-Szűcs, *Faith and Fatherland*, 364.

⁶⁵ Michelle Spencer-Arsenault, "Mother Mary: The (Re)Construction of a Female Icon," *Sociology of Religion* 61, no. 4 (2000): 481.

defend herself when my father hurled verbal assaults her way. I now recognize the great strength her choices required.

Hamington writes, “Men do not have to ‘free’ each generation of women to accept Mary. Catholic women who train their daughters in the faith perpetuate the tradition.”⁶⁶ My grandmother trained her daughter well in this regard; as she endured suffering at the hands of her husband, she demonstrated how such a familial burden should be borne.

Kasia outlived her husband—my father—by 24 years. She lived modestly, faithfully, and generously, and was content with her life. Whereas the objective of my mother’s physical and spiritual pilgrimages was to find a way here, to the United States, mine was an intellectual and emotional journey to find an understanding of her. We both reached our destinations.

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⁶⁶ Hamington, *Hail Mary*, 153.

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