



America's Newspapers

REMEMBERING POLAND Reassuring roots in an immigrant's garden

Oregonian, The (Portland, OR) - Sunday, August 13, 2006

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When I moved to Portland in June and rented a second-floor apartment in a Victorian house, I inherited a garden plot. Half of a plot, to be exact.

My downstairs neighbors were already cultivating squash, beets and lettuce on their half. One of their five tidy rows of black earth swelled with a large purple-green plant, which soon birthed a sinewy pepper. Nearby towered several tomato plants, sagging with emerald fruit.

My half was overgrown with weeds.

In the evenings after work, once the shade engulfed my garden plot, I swung a borrowed hoe high above my head and dug its teeth into the earth under the weeds' roots. I unsettled the soil under the roots, then kneeled and pulled at the weeds, as if in prayer.

The roots were enduring; the weeds didn't want to leave the earth. After I excavated their bulb-like bottoms, the weeds revealed rivulets of tiny white shoots that sprang forth in a tangle, and burrowed deep into the soil. There were so many of them --like white arteries --I knew I couldn't remove them all.

I picked at these tiny roots in awe, I, an immigrant to this place. Very little binds me to this new city, to this earth under my feet. Silently, I admired the weeds' hardiness. I left my native Poland as a teenager, and moved many times in the last 15 years. It's been difficult for me to grow roots.

I dug my hands into the cool dirt. The earth smelled humid, fresh. It reminded me, strangely, of the rabbits my grandfather raised in my country of birth, and of the large apple tree he tended. It reminded me of my grandmother's garden plot in the small town of Namyslow, of her strawberries covered with dirt, of her well water and her wooden garden shed.

How many times I'd watched her toil the earth! Weed! Water! Shovel dirt! I swung the hoe again, bringing it down with force deep into Portland soil, replicating the memorized movements of my grandparents' bodies.

Mlecz, koniczyna --the common weeds of my home country. I don't know their English names. I don't know many other names, either. I once had a long memory and could call out all types of plants, trees, birds, even weeds. Now, I must learn everything like a child --that hoe is hoe --and try to grasp anew the spelling of shovel or sprout.

Sure, I am fluent in English, but it's the words I don't often use, like those of a gardening vocabulary, that still escaped me after all these years in the United States.

Still, the overturned earth and the mounds of drying weeds smelled the same as they did in Poland --reassuring, strong. I raked the soil, noticed more tiny roots still clinging down below, let them be, then shaped five rows of soil.

I planted slowly --and I was happy, because I knew some of the names of my plants. I pronounced them under my breath: green pepper, broccoli, dill, squash . . . pietruszka, no, parsley! Then I transplanted the flowers, yellow and pink, the same ones my grandmother grew in her garden. I don't know what they're called --in Polish or in English.

But maybe it's all right, this namelessness. Sliczniutki, I called to the flowers, beautiful ones!

By early August, my flowers and vegetables pushed up tall. As I water them every evening, tiptoeing between

elevated beds, I marvel at their strong stalks and vivid blooms. The weeds have come back, too, and I tenaciously pull them out again.

I don't know if I will grow deep roots in this city. With family members, friends, an apartment, a passport and an identity both in Poland and in the United States, I'm still suspended between two continents. There's uncertainty about whether I'll move again.

Maybe it doesn't matter. My garden is a beginning, a small token of permanence --and I've created it. Life exists right here in the hoe's reliable movements, in my soil-darkened hands, in the smell of the earth.

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Edition: Sunrise

Section: Commentary

Page: F01

Record Number: MERLIN_8413506

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