

A saint, a father and a Cold War

This Holy Week carries greater meaning than most, as it includes preparing to leave for Assisi and Rome the day after Easter, as part of a Catholic Review-sponsored pilgrimage that culminates in the April 27 canonizations of Blesseds John XXIII and John Paul II. Other than a few days in Venice in 1980, I have never been to Italy, let alone Vatican City, and my reading has led to some head-shaking coincidences and connections.

My late father was born May 15, 1920, in Western Pennsylvania. Three days later, Karol Józef Wojtyła was born in Wadowice, in southern Poland. Both were insatiable readers. Both disdained bias against Germans that lingered after World War II: John Paul as a prelate in Poland, where he angered some by promoting forgiveness of a people whose invading armies had a role in the killing of 6 million and sent priests, along with the Jews, to Auschwitz; and my Dad, in 1980, when he discovered that my older sister's father-in-law from Bavaria, who had been conscripted into service by the Third Reich, had come within a few kilometers of one another during the Battle of the Bulge. They became fast friends.



At the monastery of Jasna Gora in Czestochowa, Pope John Paul II greets throngs of Poles waiting for a glimpse of their native son during his first trip to Poland following his election. His visit came in early June of 1979. It was the second of 104 trips the pope would make outside Italy. (CNS photo/Chris Niedenthal)

My father had taken ill in 1976 and had to back out of a family trip to the Summer Olympics in Montreal, where the men's gold medal volleyball match remains the most riveting athletic contest I have ever witnessed. At the height of the Cold War, 20,000 North Americans and a few well-heeled tourists from Japan cheered on the underdog, as Poland came back from deficits at every turn to defeat the mighty Soviet Union. We've seen hordes of Ravens' fans celebrate after a Super Bowl victory, but nothing compares to the singular smile on a lone man running laps around the Montreal Forum, carrying the flag of Poland after its gold-medal performance.

I didn't gain a complete appreciation for that moment until earlier this year, when I opened Tad Szulc's "Pope John Paul II, The Biography." It had sat on my bookshelf since 1995, when I ordered it through a membership in the Book of the Month Club – remember that? I was ignorant about Poland's origins as a Catholic nation-state in the 10th century, the persecution of Poles and how John Paul began his studies for the priesthood in secrecy, thus on multiple mornings around St. Patrick's Day, I

asked Chris Gunty and George Matysek, who have considerable knowledge of Polish heritage and culture, why Ireland seems more celebrated in the U.S. than Poland. Its struggles, and John Paul's role in them, are particularly pertinent as Ukraine, another former satellite state of the Soviet Union, combats the aggression of Russia and Vladimir Putin. The late pope's 1979 visit to his homeland is regarded as a pivotal moment in the eventual collapse of communism, the partition of Germany and the Soviet Union, which Putin seems determined to re-create in one form or another. As we head to Rome, I pray that John Paul's spirit helps the people of Ukraine hold on to the freedom and stability he helped bring to Poland.