

## IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE POLISH ARMS – Austria, Hungary, and Poland – an educational youth camp and an unforgettable adventure

— *Sylwia Wadach-Kloczkowska*

The *Living History Lesson Program “In the Footsteps of the Polish Arms”* 2025—an educational camp organized by the Nowodworski Foundation—was a step toward young Poles living in the United States. For the 25 participants, it was not merely a time of fun and entertainment, but also an opportunity for learning, conversations in their native language, and discovering the shared historical destinies of Austria, Hungary, and Poland.

The goal of the historical camp was to deepen historical knowledge through direct contact with sites of national memory and monuments of European culture, as well as to shape civic attitudes and national identity. Another important aim was the development of creativity and artistic skills through visual-arts classes and thematic workshops. Equally essential was the integration of participants and the building of intercultural relationships.

The entire journey lasted 21 days, from June 27 to July 18, 2025. The President of the Foundation and at the same time the Director of the Educational Camp—Jerzy Leśniak—spent months designing the travel plan, organizing logistics, making reservations, and assembling the program in such a way as to capture the most important cultural and historical sites, while also highlighting key tourist attractions of each city.

The educational staff included: Elżbieta Popławska—a journalist who has worked for many years at *Nowy Dziennik*, a popular weekly newspaper in New York; Magdalena Grzymek—a teacher at Public School 71 Forest in New York; Sylwia Wadach-Kloczkowska—a teacher at the Polish Language School of St. John Paul II in Boston and a correspondent for the Polish-American newspaper *Biały Orzeł*; Kinga Leśniak—co-organizer of the Nowodworski Foundation and the camp’s Artistic Director; and Mateusz Kruszewski—an intern.

### Vienna – the cradle of the waltz

After a long journey, the first stop on the route was Vienna—a city of music, imperial splendor, and authentic Viennese cake. As Karl Kraus once put it: “*The streets of Vienna are paved with culture.*”

Participants of the educational camp visited St. Stephen’s Cathedral, one of the largest churches in Europe, as well as Kahlenberg—a hill rising 484 meters above sea level, associated with the Battle of Vienna in 1683, where Polish forces defeated the Ottoman army. A key role in this victory was played by King Jan III Sobieski. The triumph halted Ottoman expansion into Europe and is considered one of the most significant events in European history. It was there that Sobieski uttered the famous words: “*We came, we saw, and God conquered.*” The church and monastery on Kahlenberg later became a Polish sanctuary of patriotism.

Participants also visited the Belvedere Palace—now a museum housing a magnificent collection of works by Gustav Klimt, including the famous *The Kiss*. Another highlight was Schönbrunn Palace, the former imperial summer residence, renowned for its beautiful gardens and richly decorated interiors. The day concluded with an evening concert of Vivaldi’s *The Four Seasons*

and works by Mozart at the Musikverein Philharmonic Hall, which moved everyone with its aesthetic power.

## **Budapest – the city on the Danube**

The name Budapest comes from the fusion of two words: Buda and Pest. The name Buda dates back to the Árpád dynasty and referred to a settlement built on the site of the former Roman city of Aquincum. As for Pest, one theory suggests it derives from the Greek word *Pession*, meaning “fortress.”

The Hungarian capital impressed participants with its monumental Parliament building, Fisherman’s Bastion, and the Gellért Thermal Baths. The Gellért Baths are a famous spa complex, known for their striking architecture and indoor and outdoor thermal pools. After a hot day, all participants enjoyed relaxation and great fun there.

It is impossible not to mention St. Stephen’s Basilica, where participants could see the relic of the right hand of St. Stephen I of Hungary, the country’s first king.

During their time in Hungary, participants studied the lives of important historical figures whose biographies were closely examined throughout the journey. Among them were General Józef Bem—the hero of three nations; the Hungarian princess betrothed to the Polish duke Bolesław the Chaste—St. Kinga; and Jadwiga, daughter of Louis of Hungary and Elizabeth of Bosnia, who later became Queen of Poland.

This historical knowledge was further enriched by a visit to the Polish Institute, operating under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where participants met with Director Jarosław Bajaczyk, who spoke about the Institute’s history and activities and even gave the youth a short lesson in the Hungarian language. The “cherry on top” was a brief swim in Lake Balaton, often referred to as the “Hungarian Sea” or the “muddy lake.”

## **Lesser Poland and the Beskids**

On the way to Poland, participants traveled in great spirits, and when the bus crossed the border, cheers, loud applause, and joy filled the vehicle as they entered their homeland.

Kraków was the next stop on the camp map—a city that holds the heart of Polish history. As Wilhelm Feldman once said: “*Whoever wishes to understand the soul of Poland should seek it in Kraków.*”

Wawel Castle, the Main Market Square, and the Cloth Hall inspired admiration and reflection, while the beloved Wawel Dragon was, as always, immortalized in photographs. Participants compared the Gothic architecture of St. Mary’s Basilica with Vienna’s St. Stephen’s Cathedral, recognizing their shared European heritage.

The Princes Czartoryski Museum, housing European paintings from the 13th to the 18th centuries and examples of European and Islamic decorative arts up to the 19th century, made a special impression—particularly because it is home to Leonardo da Vinci’s *Lady with an Ermine*.

An important stop was viewing the building of Bartłomiej Nowodworski High School from the outside—one of the oldest continuously operating secondary schools in Poland, also known as the Nowodworski College or *Nowodworek*. Notable alumni include polish king Jan III Sobieski, Jan Śniadecki, Jędrzej Śniadecki, Jan Matejko, Józef Bem, Joseph Conrad (Korzeniowski), Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, Stefan Banach, Gustaw Holoubek, Sławomir Mrożek.

## **Sidzina – the heart of tradition and folk art**

Sidzina is a small village located in the Żywiec Beskids, surrounded by pine and spruce forests, known for its unique microclimate and healthy mountain air. The youth adapted very well to the Youth Hostel, whose rich infrastructure allowed for the organization of engaging activities. Workshops held in Sidzina enabled participants to experience the authentic beauty of folk culture. Artistic, journalistic, and poetry workshops led by educators were not merely activities, but forms of active rest, reflection, and self-expression. There was also time for relaxation, games, sports activities, discos, and singing with a guitar.

The hostel was excellently adapted to the needs of children and youth. The management and staff were always helpful and accommodating, while the cook—Mr. Krzysiu—made every effort to “pamper the tourists’ taste buds.” Most of the youth lined up well before mealtime.

The open-air museum in Sidzina can be called the “Pearl of the Region.” Hidden behind a forest curtain, this mysterious complex of wooden buildings is extraordinary and still undiscovered by many. Crossing the footbridge over the stream that separates the museum from the rest of the world feels like stepping into the land of ancestors—among old wooden farmsteads, one can sense the spirits of past generations and figures from fairy tales and legends, forever carved into wood.

In addition to sightseeing, bread-baking workshops were held, in which the youth actively participated. Freshly baked loaves were sliced and served with butter, cottage cheese, and Inka coffee. The excitement over an “ordinary” slice of bread is impossible to describe.

## **Tricity: Gdańsk, Gdynia, and Sopot – three cities, one metropolis**

### **Gdańsk – the City of Freedom**

Traveling across Poland, participants observed how the country’s landscape, terrain, and even architecture change. Gdańsk, located in the Pomeranian Voivodeship, is an important historical, economic, and cultural center, known for its seaport and rich tourist attractions.

Under the guidance of their tour guide, Ms. Beata, participants visited Długi Targ (Long Market), the Museum of the Second World War, the Crane, the Great Mill, and Westerplatte—places filled with history and emotion. Seeing these sites helped participants understand Gdańsk’s significance as a birthplace of freedom and dialogue.

It is worth noting that amber is one of Gdańsk’s hallmark products. Participants admired these “Treasures of the Baltic,” as amber is often called, at the Amber Museum and in St. Kinga’s

Basilica.

## **Sopot and the Forest Opera**

Sopot is known as a spa town, famous for its beautiful sandy beaches and the longest wooden pier in Europe. Camp participants were delighted to walk along the pier, taking selfies and group photos—some even dared to immerse themselves in the cool waves of the Polish sea, led by the Foundation’s President himself.

A Holy Mass in the beautiful Oliwa Cathedral followed—a moment of focus, spiritual reflection, and shared prayer.

The Forest Opera welcomed participants on a rainy evening, which added a sense of nostalgia and mystery to the performance of Richard Strauss’s opera *Salome*. The audience was greeted by Tomasz Konieczny himself—a renowned Polish opera singer with an international career, personally involved in the development of the Baltic Opera in Gdańsk. It was a true cultural feast.

## **Gdynia – the capital of sailing**

In Gdynia, participants strolled along the harbor and admired the moored ships—the *Dar Pomorza* and *ORP Błyskawica*.

“It’s amazing to see ships with such history with your own eyes,” said one of the participants.

## **Warsaw – the capital of memory and the future**

“Cracow was not built in a day, but Warsaw was rebuilt from the heart,” Janusz Korczak once said about Warsaw.

After arriving from Gdańsk, participants quickly settled into their final hotel and set off to explore the Old Town. One of the first program points was a visit to the Polish Community Association (*Wspólnota Polska*), where the youth and their educators were welcomed by National Board Chairman Tomasz Różanek, Vice President Zenona Bańkowska, and engineer Piotr Zolynski, coordinator of investment projects.

The following day, participants admired the Palace on the Water—a classical Łazienki Palace set in a beautiful park, home to the famous Chopin Monument. Warsaw revealed itself as a city of contrasts, where modernity intertwines with rich history.

A youth delegation, together with the camp leadership, attended the International Polish Youth Rally, where the campus of the Warsaw University of Life Sciences transformed into a space of dialogue, learning, culture, and integration. Participants learned, among other things, why it is worth studying in Poland, how recruitment from abroad works, what scholarships and support are available for Polish diaspora students, and how to effectively engage in Polish-American communities.

Wilanów Palace captivated all participants, and the romantic story of King Jan III Sobieski and Queen Marysieńka deeply moved everyone. The palace was the final stop of the remarkably rich program. It was also there that a symbolic knighting ceremony took place—each new participant was dubbed a Nowodworski Knight by President Jerzy Leśniak, who touched the camper's shoulder with a flag. Each participant received a commemorative “mini” *Szczerbiec*—the coronation sword of Polish kings.

## Summary

The entire journey lasted 21 days and was filled with moving moments, admiration, joy, and deep reflection on the history of Poland. Guides brought to life the stories of great figures, places of worship, and sites of immense historical importance linking Austria, Hungary, and Poland. The educational camp *Living History Lesson Program “In the Footsteps of the Polish Arms” 2025* was not only a history lesson, but also a workshop of contemporary culture, an opportunity for self-expression, and a chance to build international bonds. The young participants returned enriched not only with knowledge, but also with a sense of community, creativity, and pride in the heritage they had discovered.

The children experienced intense emotions—from excitement to homesickness—but could always rely on their educators for help, conversation, and support when needed. It was an experience that will undoubtedly remain in their memories for a long time. This was not an ordinary journey—it was a story written by life itself, full of unforgettable moments.