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Elizabeth Rynecki
Filmmaker

Shadows of the Past and the Winds of War

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There's an opinion piece by Anne Applebaum making its way around the internet, "[War in Europe Is Not a Hysterical Idea](#)." In it she talks about looking at photographs of Polish families from the summer of 1939 and wishing they had dropped everything and RUN. She then writes, "I realize that this question [should Ukrainians and central Europeans run right now?] sounds hysterical and foolishly apocalyptic to U.S. or Western European readers. But hear me out, if only because this is a conversation many people in the eastern half of Europe are having right now." I am taking her words to heart and keeping a very close eye on the situation in Ukraine and its potential to grow.

I am scheduled to go to Poland in the middle of October to continue filming my documentary, *Chasing Portraits*. I am going to Warsaw to see more than 50 of my great-grandfather's paintings held by museums and in private collections -- works that my family thought were lost in the aftermath of the Second World War. Plans for my trip started almost a year ago. My plane ticket is set (SFO-Frankfurt-Warsaw), my AirBnB apartment is paid for in full, my film team is ready, and interviews (more than 10) are lined up and confirmed. And yet, I am worried about whether it is safe to go. The other day I spoke with my father, a Holocaust survivor, about the news out of Ukraine. I said, "If things look bad I won't go at all. If things look safe and I go, and then things get bad, I'll grab a train or a rental car out of Warsaw and head toward Germany." And my father said, "These are the winds of war. Things change quickly. Poland is part of NATO and that bodes well for you, but you're only going to make a movie, and you need to keep a good eye on the news. Things can change very, very quickly." And then he added, "Your American passport may help, but there's one thing it cannot do -- it cannot stop bullets." Again, like Anne, like my darker fears, perhaps my father sounds too negative or too apocalyptic, but as a Holocaust survivor, his words give me pause.

For many years, I've had a fear about traveling to Poland, but previously, it has always been about my vision of the past colliding with the reality of the present, not about fear of war or destabilization in Eastern Europe. My fear has always particularly focused on my desire to visit the art supply store my great-grandparents owned at 24 Krucza Street in Warsaw. In my mind, their building, once a romantic-looking architectural delight straight out of black and white photos of Warsaw -- the Paris of the East, a sophisticated metropolis, is still

standing, and is a place where I can visit and have a touch point with the past. But the truth is that their building was destroyed in the Second World War.



I've always known this, but the point was driven home about a year ago when I was sent a photograph of the current building put in its place -- a 21st century structure with a bank on the ground floor. My hopes of visiting Warsaw and stepping back in time via the building, to see where my great-grandparents lived and had their store were never realistic, but the fantasy of doing so was completely shattered by the image of a modern building with the old address, "24 Krucza," staring out at me. It took me awhile to accept the reality that "the old country" existed only in my mind, and it was just one aspect that reinforced the emotional intensity of my prospective visit. Until recently, in my mind, the question about many sites in Poland was about my emotional state in visiting them -- e.g. can I step into the bank and not cry? While this question is still on my mind, the shadows of the past color my thinking about the present, to the point where I am actually more concerned about my safety in traveling to Poland than I am about dealing with the emotions of the past.



I started drafting this post in fits and starts on the 31st of August, the day in 1939 that German radio reported Polish soldiers attacking a radio tower at Gleiwitz (Upper Silesia, Germany at that time. Today it is part of Poland.) This was, of course, an event staged by Hitler. The "attack" was carried out by SS officers posing as Poles. The next day Hitler declared he had no choice but to use force to protect the citizens of Gleiwitz, and this then became the Nazi excuse for invading Poland on September, 1 1939, the start of the Second World War. The irony of the date and events in the news, Russia's countless denials of invasion on one hand, coupled with Putin's not-so-subtle threats that Kiev could fall in two weeks on the other, is not at all lost on me.

There's a lot of speculation in the media at the moment about what will happen. And what appears most likely, most rational from a Western perspective, is that the situation won't escalate too much further in the intermediate term, that Putin's primary goal is the destabilization rather than occupation of Ukraine. Of course, after the occupation of Crimea very few would have predicted Russian armored columns in Eastern Ukraine several months later. And Poland is a member of NATO, which would likely stay Putin's hand even if he wanted to reassert Russian dominance across former client states. Of course, it must be admitted that so too are the Baltic states, which *might* be targets for further destabilization at some point -- we just don't know. It's a question of Putin's intentions, where he thinks the West will actually draw a line in the sand, and where that actually might occur. Without the benefit of hindsight, the situation is both very unclear and very fluid. At the present moment there does not seem to be a threat of war beyond Ukraine, and it looks safe for me to travel to Poland. But the shadows of the past hang over me, and despite my attempts to rationalize them away, make me very nervous about my trip, and about the future.