



A Brief History of Schneidemühl, Prussia

Our Krueger ancestors lived in Schneidemühl, Prussia, now Piła, Poland, before they emigrated to the United States in 1854.

In the 1850s, Friedrich Ottomar Krüger (Krueger), his second wife Auguste Haver, and three children emigrated to the United States from the village of Schneidemühl, then in the Kingdom of Prussia, and later in Germany. The village had changed hands between Poland, Prussia and Germany a handful of times, and today it is the city of Piła, Poland. At this writing, I have little information on any of their ancestors in Schneidemühl or elsewhere.

Early Polish History

The land that is now Poland was once populated by a number of tribes, including Germanic, Baltic and Slavic tribes. Christians from the Holy Roman Empire made an effort to Christianize the tribes to their east.

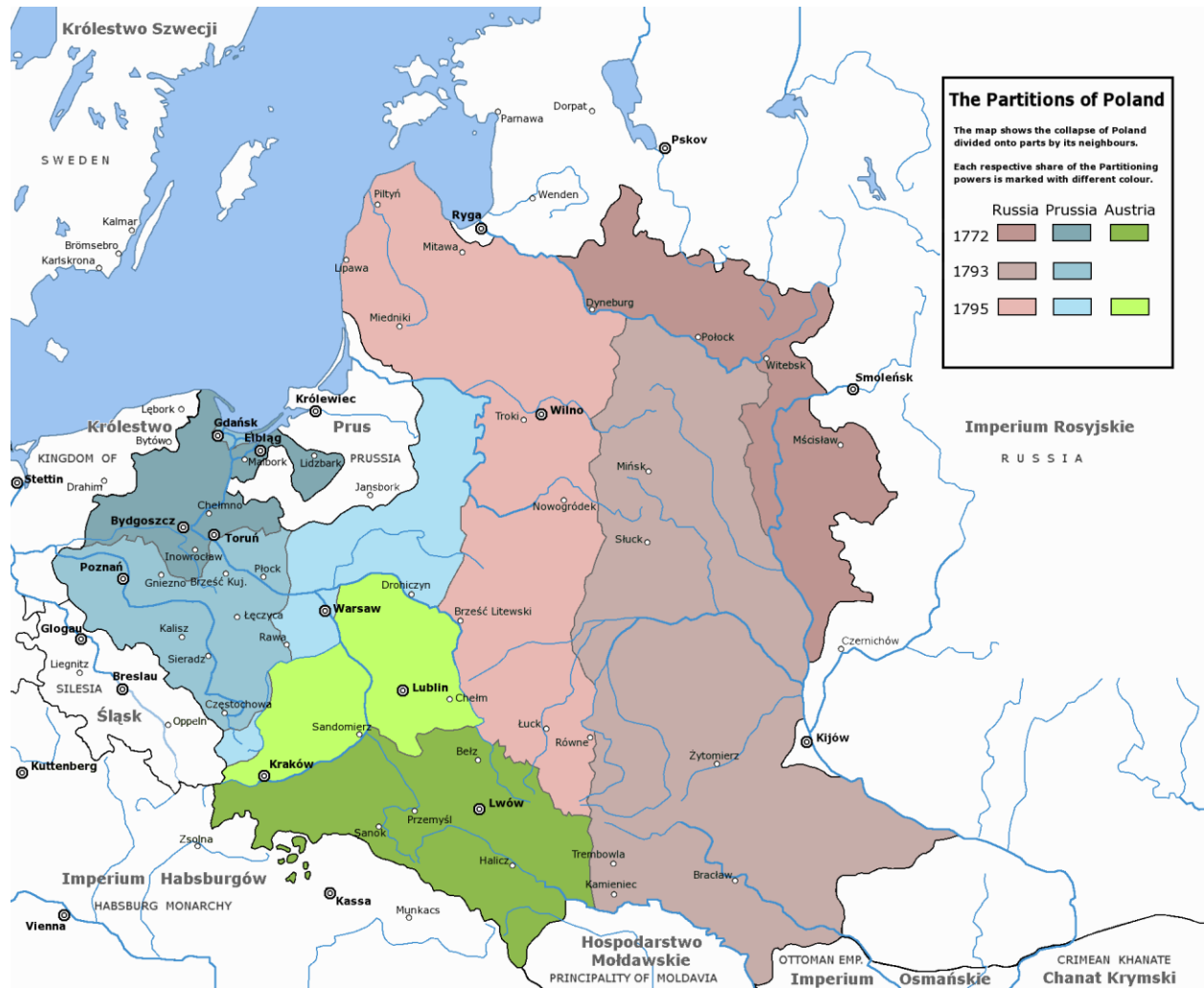
It was in the middle of the 10th century AD that Poland began to form as a distinct territorial entity. The ruler of the Slavic Polans tribe, Mieszko I, accepted Christianity under the Roman Church. He founded the first independent Polish state, then known as the Duchy of Poland. His son, Bolesław I the Brave became the first crowned king of Poland. It was under Bolesław that the land where Piła would eventually be established became part of Poland.

Mieszko and his descendants, known as the Piast dynasty, ruled Poland until 1370, although succession issues created a great deal of political turmoil, fragmentation and reunification efforts. A brief union with Hungary was followed by the Great Poland Civil War.

A partnership with Lithuania that began as a personal union through marriage in 1386 was formalized in 1569 as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, one of the largest and most populous countries in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. Internal problems and external conflicts steadily chipped away at the commonwealth's territory.

The Partitioning of Poland

As the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth continued to weaken, it was partitioned three times between 1772 and 1795 by the neighboring Kingdom of Prussia, the Russian Empire, and the Austrian Habsburg monarchy. By 1795, Poland and Lithuania had disappeared. Neither was reestablished as an independent country until after World War I in 1918. (Lithuania was absorbed by the Soviet Union in 1940, but regained its independence in 1990.)



The 1772, 1793 and 1795 Partitions of Poland put Piła/Schneidemühl in Prussia.

Piła

Piła began as a small fishing village on the Gwda River in a heavily wooded area in what is now northwest Poland. There may have been a settlement of Slavic woodcutters there before the village was established. “Piła” is a Polish word that means “saw”.

Although the local population was initially Slavic/Polish, the area saw an influx of German settlers. Some communities in this area were also known by German names, Snydermole and its variants, in this case, early forms of Schneidemühl, the German word for “saw mill”.

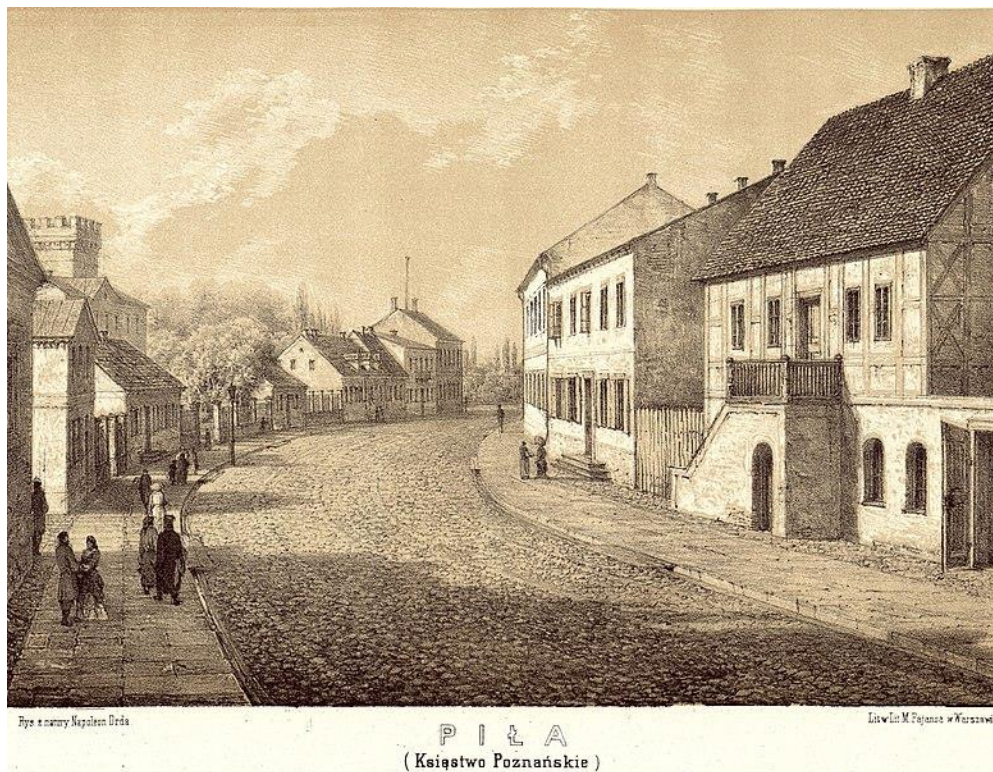
Piła appears to have been elevated to town status in the 1380s, founded by Queen Jadwiga of Poland, the first woman to be crowned Polish monarch. Piła was owned by a series of noblemen and Polish monarchs over the next centuries.

Schneidemühl in Prussia and Germany

With the First Partition of Poland in 1772, Piła and the surrounding area became part of the Kingdom of Prussia. The Prussians renamed the town Schneidemühl.

However, a Polish army recaptured the town, and it became part of the Duchy of Warsaw in 1807 after Prussia was defeated in the 1806 Greater Poland Uprising, an effort to help Napoleon liberate Poland from Prussia.

With the defeat of Napoleon, Prussia regained the town in 1815 after the Congress of Vienna. It remained in Prussian and then German control until the end of World War II.



A lithograph of Schneidemühl in the 1800s



Schneidemühl's Kirchen Strasse

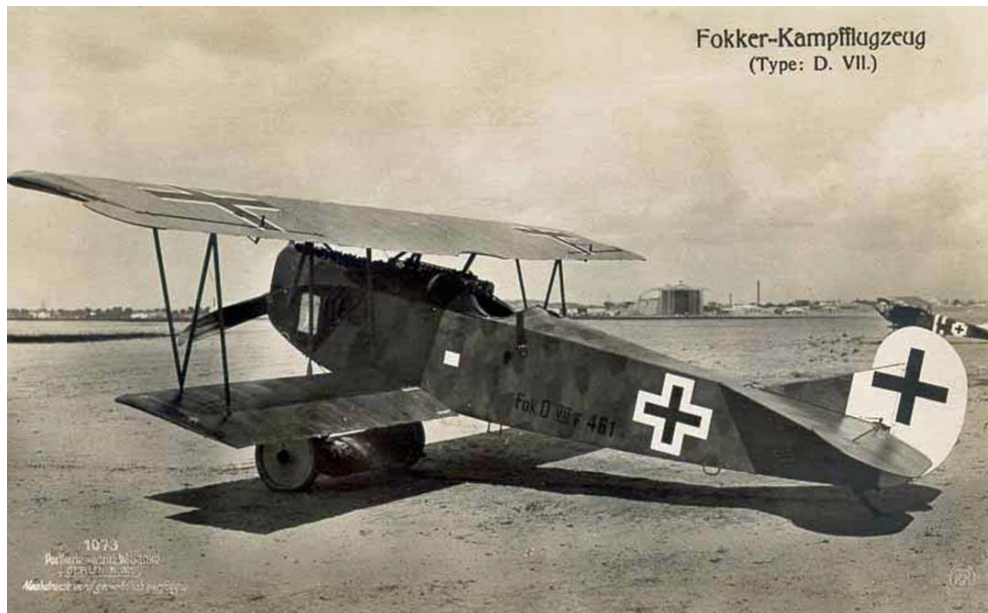


Schneidemühl's Mühlen Strasse

The Prussians instituted a Germanization policy to replace the town's Polish identity with a German one. The Polish language was restricted, and there was a significant influx of German settlers. The city would go on to become a major railway center, but also a Prussian military garrison town.

Prussia led the effort to establish a new Germany Empire. In 1871, Schneidemühl and the rest of Prussia became part of Germany.

Schneidemühl also became an increasingly significant manufacturing center. This continued into World War I, where Schneidemühl factories manufactured planes for the German Army through the war, including the famous Fokker D.VII fighter plane.



The Fokker D.VII



Russian prisoners of war at a camp on the outskirts of Schneidemühl during World War I

After the war, the region that included Schneidemühl experienced the Greater Poland Uprising against German rule. This effort influenced the Treaty of Versailles, which reestablished Poland as an independent country using land from Prussian Germany and Austria-Hungary. Schneidemühl remained in Germany, but it was now just a few miles from the Polish border.



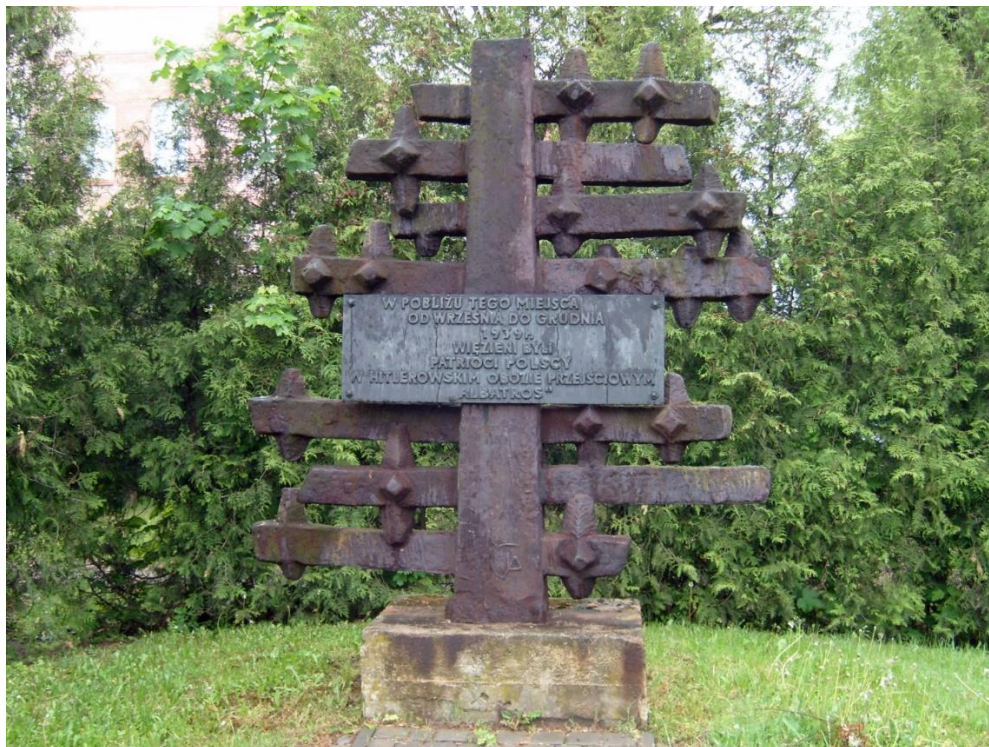
Schneidemühl between World Wars I and II

Germans left the new Poland, and many settled in Schneidemühl, nearly quadrupling its population. High unemployment during the Depression led to increased support for the National Socialist German Workers' Party a.k.a. the Nazis.

Once the Nazis came to power, the Nazis cracked down on Jews and other racial and political undesirables. The Nazis destroyed Schneidemühl's synagogue during the pogrom of November 9/10, 1938, known as Kristallnacht. This also included the mass arrests of Polish activists in 1939. The Nazis established Camp Albatros to temporarily house political prisoners until they could be moved to concentration camps. In 1940, the remaining Jews in the city and surrounding region were rounded up and eventually sent off to Nazi camps.



Schneidemühl's synagogue was consecrated in 1841, but destroyed by the Nazis on Kristallnacht, November 1938.



A monument to those Poles imprisoned in Camp Albatros

As a major railroad junction and manufacturing center, Schneidemühl became one of the Allies' key bombing targets. By the end of the war, 75% of the city had been destroyed, including about 90% of Schneidemühl's historic center.



A joint Polish and Soviet force captured Schneidemühl on February 14, 1945.



The bombed-out city center at the end of World War II

The Reemergence of Piła

As a result of the border changes agreed to at the 1945 Potsdam Conference, Schneidemühl was once again part of Poland, and its name was changed back to Piła. The remaining local German population was expelled, and the city was populated with Poles expelled from parts of eastern Poland that were shifted into the Soviet Union.

Poland remained an independent country, albeit one under communist rule and Soviet domination. In 1980, local factory workers participated in anti-communist strikes that led to the creation of the Solidarity Union. Communism collapsed, and Poland today is a Western-style democracy.

I visited Piła in 2007. Because of how the city was rebuilt after World War II, and because of the understandable animosity that the Poles felt towards Germans at that time, I didn't expect to find much in the way of historical sites in the city, and little to nothing in the two German cemetery sites.

There were few maintained graves in the cemeteries, but most headstones were missing or destroyed.



The old German cemeteries in Piła; if Friedrich Ottomar Krueger's parents and other ancestors lived in Schneidemühl, they were likely buried in the cemetery where I found the broken headstone on the left.

I didn't find any Krüger headstones in these cemeteries, but I found a photo of one online, although I have nothing that suggests whether or not these Krügers were distant relatives of ours.



This headstone memorializes a pair of Krüger brothers who died in World War I. Copyright Pavnlo, 2005

Photos of Piła, Poland, formerly Schneidemühl, Prussia



Piła coat of arms on the city hall



Piła's main train station



The birthplace of Stanisław Staszic is now a museum, Staszic (1755-1826) was a leader of the Polish Enlightenment, and possibly the most important figure to come from the town.



The Church of the Holy Family



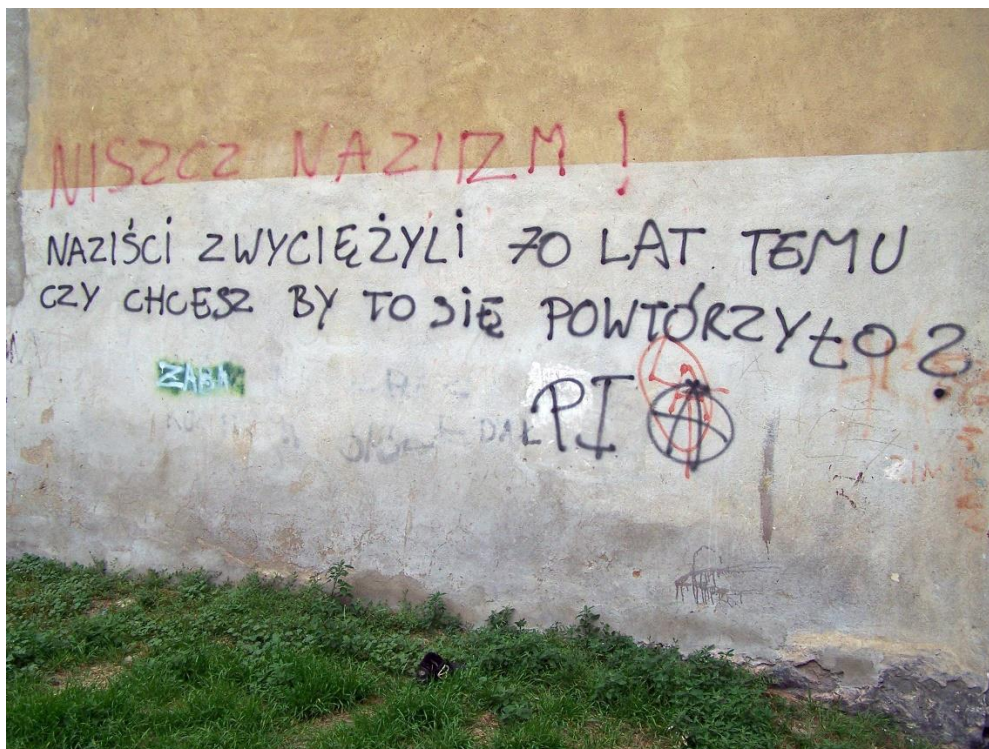
Piła apartments



Piła apartment towers



The Gwda River



Anti-Nazi graffiti ("Destroy Naziism. The Nazis won 70 years ago [late 1930s]. Do you want them to win again?")



The only place I found the name of Schneidemühl during my visit to Piła was this marker noting that Cuxhaven, Germany is a sister city.



Map of Pita

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