

Harcerstwo Roots

(Scouting Roots)

Introduction:

Life histories are threaded with beautiful beads of anecdotes that encapsulate events of great meaning to our lives. Several of my “memory beads” come from my experiences as a ‘harcerka’ (Polish Girl Scout). Harcerstwo is a Polish organization that I have been a part of from second grade up until my second year of college. Those 12 years have fed my personal growth in terms of character, personality, social interactions, and mental and physical strength. While I am not part of the organization any more, I do keep in touch with old friends and the teachers/ leaders of my local Harcerstwo organization. Knowing how transformative my journey through Harcerstwo was, I wanted a new perspective of what else Harcerstwo could mean to someone else. I reached out to a lady that we call ‘druchna’, who has truly been a role model and friend during my time with the organization, and even now after my experience with Harcerstwo has halted. Druchna was with us only for the last few years of my time in Harcerstwo but she has made the biggest impact on me compared to the impact from any other leader figure I have known in Harcerstwo. Since I knew what she meant to me and the other girls in our group, through this interview I aimed to explore what we meant to her and what Harcerstwo meant to her. She had been involved in the program on and off since a child therefore I knew that some bond with this program existed and I wanted to explore it. I hoped that the pictures she chose would provoke emotion and discussion, and maybe give me a peak into what my Harcerstwo experience will mean to me, years down the road. I wanted to discuss Harcerstwo culture, the values behind the organization, what leads to forming a Harcerstwo family, and any other positive or even negative influences from Harcerstwo.

Methodology:

To conduct this interview I reached out to Druchna and asked for an opportunity to interview her. We chose to meet at her house in the afternoon to flip through pictures of our overlapping time in Harcerstwo. Visiting her home was a comfortable choice as she treats me as a ‘family-friend’ and I have visited her home before for projects, or just talking to catch up. We have been on multiple camping trips together in group contexts, therefore I did not think of the meeting as too intimate or formal, and not as too casual either since I think of her as someone in a leadership position. At her home we sat at the big kitchen table; I took out my laptop where we pulled up the pictures and I took out my notebook to take notes, and lastly I brought out my phone to use it for audio recording. She agreed to audio recording our conversation, and this was very helpful for picking out useful quotes and acting as a digital transcript. I started off the interview by explaining the purpose of the project, and I explained that it was very open ended and that she could take the conversation anywhere and discuss anything she was passionate about in terms of Harcerstwo. I asked about what Harcerstwo meant to her in her childhood and what it means now, how our girl group has impacted her, and where her personal journey in

Harcerstwo has brought her. We also discussed the bad things that we wish didn't negatively affect our journey. In interview was successful in my opinion because we discussed Harcerstwo culture and also Polish culture and what Harcerstwo has added to our personality and identity. The advantage of having a close relationship with my research partner was that I could ask more intimate questions about her experience without making her uncomfortable or un-wanting of sharing (although she is an open book always ready to share her opinions with strength and confidence). The negative side of this situation would stem from my involvement in Harcerstwo which could ultimately bring in biases that lead me to make assumptions or skip over questions that I might think I know the answers to. To ensure that I collect my data with accuracy I tried to always ask if she agreed or disagreed if I made an opinionated statement about Harcerstwo. Using audio recording as a digital transcript also helps keep the authenticity and accuracy of the interview, in case of bias from my notes. Compared to other anthropologists like Melissa Landsman (conversations with Pablo), my interview also consisted of a preexisting relationship with the 'research partner', and took place in an environment that we were both familiar with and comfortable in. Like Melissa, I do think that I brought in some bias to the interview, but it was a bias due to similarities rather than stereotypes or ethnocentrism. Our interview styles also differed because my interview used pictures as props and picture can spark different emotional responses compared to the emotional response of a verbal question, therefore I suspect that the two situations also promote different types of answers from the research partner. This interview was conducted for the goal of documenting a photo-ethnography.

Life History:

The life story of 'druchna' is one that could not be summarized within black ink on a white page. Life histories are extensive and intriguing, so for this photo ethnography we (my research partner and I) focused on a single topic of Harcerstwo (Polish scouting) to extract meaning from that part of druchna's life. We discuss meaning behind the Harcerstwo events she participated in by revisiting photographs and explaining their significance or exploring what they remind us of. Below are attached both pictures and quotes from our interview conversation, so that druchna's Harcerstwo life can not only be read but also seen. The more ways we share culture, the more senses we stimulate, the closer we are to understanding and respecting the cultures of others.

Interviewer: Let's talk about Harcerstwo. We can talk about the beginning, how Harcerstwo was before you met any of us (our girl group), and over time what it has become, or anything that pops into your head.

Druchna: I've always had a strong affinity towards Harcerstwo. I started out as a zuch (Cub Scout), but we didn't have an osrodek (place for meetings), but my mom's friend was part of the organization at the time and allowed me to go to a yearly camp that is held for Cub Scouts for two weeks, and that was my first experience with it [Harcerstwo]. Looking back I could not wait, could not wait to go back every year to this camp called Kolonia, to advance and become the line leader for the Cub Scouts, to go to obuz (older scout's camp); the amount of friends you meet and the amount of people you could meet, and

they are all like you – which is really cool. You know, Harcerstwo is a combination of everything you like to do that is outside of your culture, like we all go to polish school but not everyone likes polish school. But Harcerstwo is everything you like to do as a kid, the games, the singing, the laughing, and it's all allowed; it allows you to be a kid. It was a place where everyone was just being themselves. On top of that, we were all first generation born in America from Polish immigrant parents, so I met people who were just like me. I had my American friends, which I value but this was something different. One of my girlfriends told me when I got older, that she was always in a sense jealous because I lived in two worlds, and I could escape to either which one. [Druchna explains how Harcerstwo widened her social network greatly and she was really happy and appreciative about that aspect of Harcerstwo].

As a child, your parents controlled a big part of your environment; Harcerstwo widened my horizons in terms of people that I met, so I made friends outside of my immediate neighborhood bubble.

[We talk about how years ago when druchna was growing up; your “bubble” was your neighborhood, which is where your friends were, where you hung out, where social interactions flourished. Recently one of the Scouts she talks care of told her that she only has one friend in the neighborhood that she lives in because she goes to school across town and that is where her social ‘bubble’ is. This is a weird phenomenon for druchna where she sees how social networks and interactions differ generation to generation.]

Druchna: One of the cool things with Harcerstwo is, first of all I love everything about Harcerstwo in the sense that I love what it teaches. It teaches young girls independence; an ability to fend for themselves, to make decisions on their own. If they make the wrong decision they are in a safe environment, they realize the consequences. If it's a wrong decision they realize the consequences but it is okay because it happens in a safe space.

Interviewer: Would you say it is like parenting but without the “parents”?

Druchna: Its guidance. Its parenting without having the “helicopter mom” on you at all times.

Interviewer: Did you feel this way about Harcerstwo when you were a zuch (Cub Scout)?

Druchna: I felt super independent at Kolonia (camp). Nobody was on my back, my suitcase was my suitcase, my bed was my bed; it was mine and I was responsible for it. But I also understood the implications of ‘if I didn't have my stuff together’, that it affected my entire group. So it was team work in that sense. When they called us for a meeting and I was the last one there, I knew it was points off for my team. I knew that I had to listen to the leaders in charge. If they heard us speaking English we would get points taken away too. But this was because of the simple fact that we grew up in this generation where our parents left the country (Poland) where they were forced to speak Russian, forced to learn Russian, you know Communism and everything, and this was just the place to be like “I'm so proud” to be Polish, and we all felt that. In this environment we were just very proud and patriotic. And it was fun, Harcerstwo was fun.

Interviewer: Where did that gap happen from when you were a child in Harcerstwo, to when you joined again as an adult?

Druchna: Well when I found out that there was a Harcerstwo group nearby where I lived, when my daughter was young, I couldn't wait I was so excited! When I was little my last year was the summer of 1986, that was my last Kolonia camp. I remember always asking my mom to drive me far for scout meeting, but we just lived too far so that was the reason I fell off from Harcerstwo. When I would run into old friends from Kolonia I would be jealous because I still wanted to be a part of it. When I found a place near us having the Polish scout meetings, and my daughter was at the right age for Cub Scouts I automatically signed her up. I signed her up and she went for 2 or 3 years, but she didn't take to it, and I knew the reasons why.

[We talk about the issues with leaders of the program and lack of effort put in for the events lead in this specific Harcerstwo group, what druchna's involvement in trying to make it better was, and how she once again departed from the organization (this time because of disagreements of how to act and what the values of the organization were.)]

[We got onto the topic of family.]

Druchna: I can't imagine being in my mom's shoes and leaving my mom, at the age of 17, to leave her family and everything she knew, to come over here – that is bravery.

I'm 10 miles away from my mom now and that's far. And also being around grandparents is one of the greatest gifts you can give your kid.

So, when I sit there and I think about how much they (mom and family) gave up, how much they sacrifice for us to have better lives here, it just reconfirmed and solidified the need to continue the tradition and culture within my kids – to know where they came from.

One of the things I don't understand is why as us the first generation (polish people), most of us marry outside of the Polish community, and we quickly we forget certain things or water them down, and change around the culture. I find that interesting, that it happens for us Polish people, yet you don't see that with Jewish people, with Puerto Ricans. You know those kids don't go to Puerto Rican school every Saturday, but yet they know how to read and speak and write, they keep their culture alive. How? Why? Even when they marry outside of their culture, they still keep it alive.

Interviewer: How do you know this occurs for sure? Do you friends of different cultures share these stories with you?

Druchna: I don't know, that is just the impression I get, from observing things.

[We talk more about our opinions on this topic and how druchna came to this conclusion.]

[Back on the topic of Harcerstwo]

Interviewer: So how does Harcerstwo influence your adult life?

Druchna: Harcerstwo gives me a chance to escape from what my responsibilities are. I'm goofy and joking around –at work I'm a completely different person.

Interviewer: Let's look at the pictures and tell me how they make you feel and what they remind you of. Which are your favorites?

Druchna:

This picture is very important to me because this is when you guys received these little crosses and we had our first group hike. It was the start of something great.

Not only were we excited for our journey as scouts, the crosses were also blessed in a church in Poland, which makes their symbolic meaning that much more significant.

This day I remember being nervous because I didn't know you girls yet. I thought okay, I have to take responsibility, I have to step it up. This cross I still have with me, I carry it on every hike.

Druchna:

I love the traditions that are still kept in Harcerstwo. I love that as Wedros (older scouts), you guys still wanted to be part of the organization, that you were putting in work and cared about it. I remember my first obuz (camp) that one of you girls was in charge of the younger ones. I remember she put in so much hard work and thought, and really tried to give the younger scouts a great experience. This was the first time where there was no harsh control over what she was doing (issue with previous leader) and I think that they ended up in 5th place but I was so proud of



Figure 1



Figure 2

them because this was probably the first time I think that they were allowed to do it by themselves, so for them to come 5th out of 11 or 12 groups, I thought that was awesome and I was so proud in that moment.

Druchna:

This was the morning when we went to go see the sunrise! I like that picture, it was a good day. None of us wanted to go that morning but we forced ourselves to, as soon as we got there we knew it was totally worth it. If it wasn't for you guys being my first group coming in, I don't know how my journey would



Figure 3

of went, I don't know if I would have stayed. When it was just our group, when we went on hikes, biwaki (camping), I would think, alright this is why I'm here. I'm not here for the drama, I don't care about being in control (of the organization), I don't want to have that position.

Druchna:

This was the last time we were all together, this was our last group camping time. I liked the hike that trip. This girl group, as my first group that I lead, was my first Harcerstwo experience in a while; I'm thankful for the experience.



Figure 4

Druchna:

This picture right here, this says it all (figure 4). This is a meeting that I had with the new harcerka (girl scouts).

We had a girls sleepover this meeting and this was taken as the first person that was leaving, when their parents came to pick them up in the morning. Everybody jumped around and hugged the first girl leaving.

Interviewer:

How did that make you feel when you saw this happen?

Druchna: It felt good. This is what it is all about. That

connection happened. This was for the girls to get to know each other, to be comfortable around each other. Some of them knew each other, but they had little cliques and it wasn't a group dynamic.



Figure 5

Druchna:

This picture, when you made that (a flower crown). This was when we had our last meeting before camp in 2017. I was teaching you guys how to put the tents together and we had one of our first hikes here.



Figure 6

Druchna:

This picture is also from the day of the sunrise trip. I remember the struggle of getting up but when I sit here and look at this picture it makes me think like, these are the things that I'm glad that I can do for the girls, to create moments like this. A moment of peace and serenity. That was a good morning. We were meant to be there at that time. We didn't know if there would be a nice sunrise but it worked out. Those are the things I enjoy doing for the girls in Harcerstwo. Harcerstwo gives me opportunities to see things like this and do things like this.

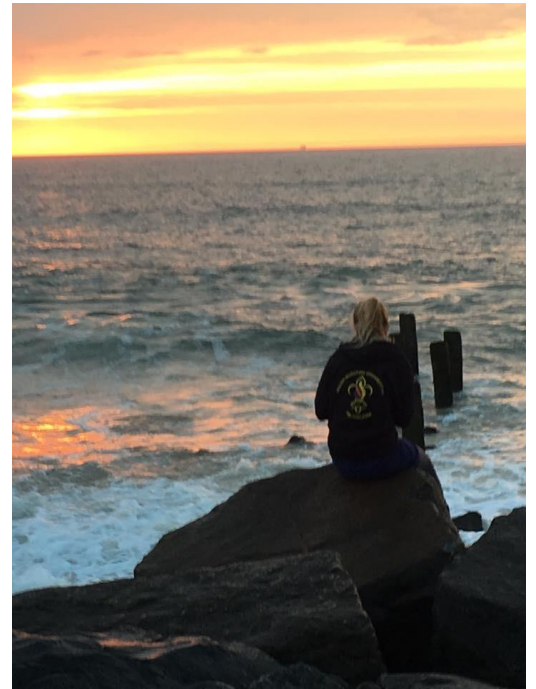


Figure 7

Druchna:

This hike was a nice bonding experience too. I actually took my wendro girls this year (new group of girls) on this same hike. It's a funny comparison because this group complains more but it was a very nice hike, because after it the girls felt accomplished even though they liked to complain while we were walking.



Figure 8

Summary and conclusion:

From this interview and discussion of photographs I can say that a picture can worth a thousand words. Photographs are special because they not only capture a split second situation but along with them, our brains are able to tie in emotion, energy, mood, and many other reactions. A photograph can resemble the mood of an entire day or entire trip. It can represent a whole relationship, or by comparing two pictures you can see how a relationship has grown over time. Face expressions, body language and plot, all add to meanings behind a simple picture. The lady we call druchna opened up to me about these meanings from photographs taken during her trips or our trip together. I had seen many of these photos already, but what they meant to her, allowed me to see the photograph with a fresh pair of eyes. Although the pictures were all taken within the last few years of our Harcerstwo related interactions, through our discussion it was clear that Harcerstwo was a lifelong influence for her. To her, Harcerstwo influences spread beyond the physical organization but permeated her social life, her cultural life, and her personal life in terms of character and life goals. Harcerstwo has helped form her identity through her experiences of it as a child, where she grew socially and also grew in independence. Later on in her life Harcerstwo has taught her leadership, responsibility, care, trust, and expanded her social relations as well. She grew up with leaders that she looked up to as a cub scout, and now she has transformed into a leader herself. She has formed a second kind of family that she cares deeply about, and one that cares about her too. She acknowledges that Harcerstwo pulls her in because of her love for her 'home' country of Poland, for the language, and for the values the organization holds. The culture of Harcerstwo intersects with that of Polish culture, but it is also a strong force on its own. I was intrigued by the meanings behind the pictures that were shared with me during our interview.