

Poland's Lighthouse of the Geese

54° 14' 40" N

15° 52' 30" E

By Elinor DeWire

Summer on the Polish coastline is typically pleasant—plentiful sunshine and clement breezes off the Baltic Sea, with temperatures in the low 70s. Baltic summers are similar to those of my home in the Pacific Northwest, where days are cool, dry, and sunny. But in July 2010 a heat wave gripped Europe. When it reached Germany, Poland, and Russia it stalled for several weeks, driving temperatures into the high 90s. The unseasonable spate of hot days happened to coincide with a U.S. Lighthouse Society tour of Poland's lighthouses.

The morning of July 16, 2010, on the Western Pomeranian Coast of the Baltic was the hottest, but it would be a memorable day in many ways, not the least being the society tour's visit to Gąski Lighthouse. It lies about nine miles east of the old port city of Kołobrzeg, called Funkenhagen by the Germans during their imperial dominion over this part of Poland. The Parsęta River makes its way out of the interior of Poland here and creates a deep estuary at Kołobrzeg. The city was so important to trade in the days of Poland's Hanseatic League membership, a light was placed on the harbormaster's quarters as early as 1666.

Several iterations of crude beacons and simple towers followed until 1909 when a handsome, hexagonal brick lighthouse was completed beside the pilot station at Kołobrzeg. A victim of German aggression during World War II, it was blown up. At the end of the war, the Kołobrzeg Lighthouse was rebuilt on top of the port's 1836 fortress, a round brick tower with sandstone lintels and embellishments. It continues in operation today.

But mariners needed another guiding light when approaching Kołobrzeg from the east, since the port light shone only about 19 miles. A lighthouse stood at Darłowo some 45 miles east of Kołobrzeg, but the dark space between the two cities presented dangers as the shoreline curved south and then turned west. Gąski, about halfway between Darłowo and Kołobrzeg, seemed the best place for coastal light.

Gąski means "flock of geese" in Polish, and it's a name well-earned. During spring and fall migrations, many birds stop in the area around the lighthouse to rest and feed in the nearby fields be-



An old postcard shows Gąski Lighthouse as it looked not long after its commissioning in the late 1870s. Gąski means "the geese" in Polish. The Germans called this light Funkenhagen, or "the spark." Courtesy of Michel Forand.

fore taking flight again over the Baltic to end their travels in Scandinavia. As at all lighthouses, they sometimes perch on the tower or tragically collide with it. The spattered roofs of the buildings affirm the presence of avians. As I step from the bus, several green sandpipers flit by, on their way to the beach too.

It was not until the Third Partition of Poland in 1795 and Prussian takeover of Western Pomerania that serious thought was given to placing a substantial lighthouse near Kołobrzeg. Nearly a century would pass, however, before anything was done.

Apoloniusz Łysejko, a retired Polish naval officer who served as one of our tour guides, writes in his book *Polish Lighthouses*:

Construction began in 1876, and much of the materials needed had to be brought in by sea. A circular tower of dark-red facing

Facing page: An aerial view of Gąski Lighthouse shows the brick wall surrounding the compound. The duplex quarters sit opposite the lighthouse. At far left is the stable. Courtesy of Zygmunt Grabowiecki.



brick was erected on a foundation 7.4m in diameter. The walls are 2.3m thick and the tower is 50.2m tall. The building was completed in the winter of 1877-78.

My journal entry, scribbled in a spiral-ringed notebook on the bus ride, describes the approach to the lighthouse at Gąski:

The morning is already unbelievably hot. To the south huge white wind turbines wheel slowly in the Baltic's hot breath, sending their energy into the Vestas power grid. The road is narrow and bumpy, passing wheat fields and a riot of wildflowers of yellow, lavender, and white. We shoot through tree tunnels of oak and beech and linden, the famous tree of poets. I recall some lines of Wilhelm Müller's poem, "Der Lindenbaum" ("The Linden Tree"), which I had to sing nearly forty years ago, in German, for a class in college. Franz Schubert wrote the melody:

<i>Und seine Zweige rauschten,</i>	Its branches bent and rustled,
<i>Als riefen sie mir zu:</i>	as if they called to me:
<i>Komm her zu mir, Geselle,</i>	Come here, come my companion,
<i>Hier findest du deine Ruh!</i>	Your refuge I shall be!

The road ahead is a mirage of heat. A man on a bicycle appears to float, his legs roiling beneath him. At a stop sign, a mare and her colt stand beneath an old linden sleeping and swishing their tails. A train clanks and rattles by us on the opposite side of the road with sleepy passengers at its windows.

As we enter the small seaside village of Gąski, cars are parked alongside the road. Soon, I see signs and bright umbrellas and vendors. Half-clad Poles are walking to the beach to seek relief from the heat...

As we entered the lighthouse compound, walled entirely in brick, I was struck by the completeness of the place. It seemed to have most, if not all, of its buildings. There was a sturdy brick duplex residence for the keepers, though I learned later that as many as four men sometimes were assigned to the site. Garden plots, now filled with flowers, once provided subsistence for the crew. Several antique garden tools were on display. The area was known for its wheat, potatoes, and strawberries, as well as fishing. The horse stable doors were ajar. Three cats lazed on the concrete pad outside the stable, and a few chickens roamed the grounds.



Named for the birds that stop here on their travels to and from Scandinavia, 165-foot Gąski Lighthouse is an imposing obstacle. Photo by the author.



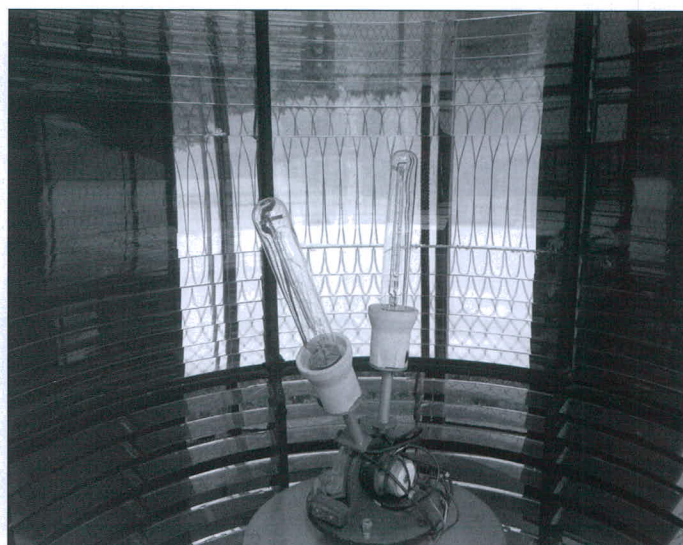
The pastoral Polish countryside is evident at Gąski Lighthouse, in a scene captured for an old postcard. Note the wheat field and famous linden trees flanking the road to the lighthouse. Courtesy of Apoloniusz Łysejko.

Accompanying us on the tour was Andrzej Mazuruk, whom we simply called Andrew. He is in charge of aids to navigation operations in the Szupsk Maritime Office on Poland's middle coast, including Gąski Lighthouse and Kołobrzeg Lighthouse. His insights added greatly to the experience of touring the station. He told us two crewmen still lived at the lighthouse up until June 2010, but more as caretakers than lightkeepers. The place had been completely restored in 1995-96 and needed a human presence to deter vandalism. The site has been open to visitors for more than a decade and has a small museum. Today, a private group manages the museum and tours. Outside, on the grounds of the complex, vendors have set up shops selling food and souvenirs. There is a small arcade too.



A view from the beach, or *Strandseite* in German, shows the lighthouse and the signal mast. Ships were alerted to various weather conditions using signal flags. The men in German Navy uniforms, or *Reichsmarine*, are most likely the keepers. Courtesy of Apoloniusz Łysejko.

Andrew told us Gąski is the tallest sentinel in his ken, with 226 granite steps. The tour's climb was exhilarating that morning, since the interior of the tower was cool. I was impressed with its lovely porthole windows and learned that all the windows had been replaced in the 1980s due to leaks, and the tower masonry had been



Above left: The original second-order lens still operates and is constantly monitored by the naval base in Szezecin. Eclipsing screens produce a group-interrupted flash characteristic. Two of the screens can be seen in the photo at right, outside the lens.



Above: Visitors like to write their names on the bricks of the tower's inner column, which was once used as a drop tube for the weights of the clockworks that turned the eclipser. Below: Form follows function, but sometimes beautifully, as seen in an ornate porthole window in the lighthouse. A crossbar prevents visitors from climbing into the window well. All photos on this page by the author.



strengthened in the 1950s with injections of concrete. I was discouraged to see so much graffiti on the inner brick walls though. This was the case at many Polish lighthouses. Andrew said it was difficult to prevent it and then added that he thought it actually added some character to the place, suggesting visitors' need to tell others they had been here.

In the lantern, much hotter than the stairwell, we edged around the second-order lens, keeping close to the windows to avoid the eclipsing apparatus. Andrew pointed out that the lens remained stationary while a screen moved around it, powered by a motor and rope belt, to produce a white, group-interrupted signal. He said the belt on the eclipser used to be leather, but it wore out quickly and a rope was installed. It, too, would wear out over time. He hoped someone would replicate a leather belt. The complex characteristic showed a fixed light with three pauses over a 15-second period.

I asked about the original power source for the eclipser. Andrew and Apoloniusz conferred for a moment, in Polish, and then said they weren't sure how to explain it in English. I guessed it was a clockwork system of some type, and their eyes lit up. "Yes! A clock with chains and a pendulum." They pointed to the central brick column under the lens.

I suspect the pendulum was actually a weight. Andrew noted that kerosene containers were pulled up and down in the column too. A 130-volt motor now runs the rope belt, so there's no need for kerosene or a weight. As the eclipser whirled past us, as it does 24 hours a day, it created a little welcome breeze—a small remedy for the building heat of the day.

I searched for a maker's plate on the lens pedestal but didn't find one. Tour leader Chad Kaiser, who has a great deal of knowledge about lenses, said he thought it could have been a Sautter. The putty anchoring the prisms was crumbling in places, and there were a few chips here and there and some dents in the frame, but for a relic approaching 140 years old, the lens seemed in good shape. Like all Polish lighthouses, the entire illuminating apparatus was automated. Two electric bulbs controlled by light sensors and connected to a remote monitoring station in Słupsk now do the work, casting the light 23 miles. Kerosene lamps were used until electricity was installed, probably about 1925, Andrew thought, when the station underwent renovation. Apoloniusz added that the inside walls were



Above: The handsome 1909 lighthouse at Kołobrzeg stood at the entrance to the Parsęta River beside Fort Münde and the pilot station. The lighthouse and parts of the 1836 fort and pilot station were destroyed during World War II. Courtesy of Fort Münde Museum.

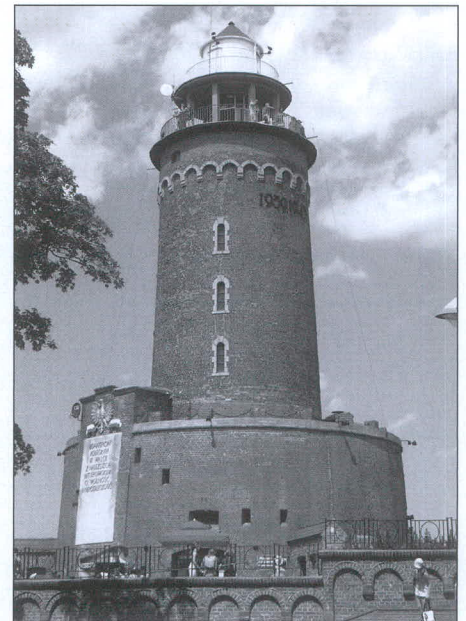
moisture sealed in 1964 and that in 1995 a synthetic sealant was added to the exterior.

These repairs and amendments to Gąski Lighthouse seem inconsequential today, when we consider the destruction Poland suffered in World War II. Several of its lighthouses were ruined. Kołobrzeg suffered heavy damage during the Battle of Kołobrzeg in March 1945 as the Germans smashed through the city toward the Soviet army. Andrew told me 80% of the city's buildings were destroyed—including its lighthouse. By this time, of course, many Poles had been forced into labor camps or exterminated in concentration camps; their homes were gone and starvation was rampant. Kołobrzeg became a German stronghold and was forced to participate in a Nazi propaganda film called *Kolberg*.

The Gąski area was less ravaged. Though German soldiers used the lighthouse as an observation tower and operated its beacon only to their advantage, it survived the war undamaged and was relighted after German expulsion. Standing on the lighthouse's lantern gallery in July 2010, taking in the splendid panoramic view of dense forest, tawny beach, and the cobalt-colored Baltic Sea, it was hard to imagine the cruel years of the war when the Poles and their beautiful landscape suffered so miserably.

We started down the lighthouse stairs single file, passing visitors

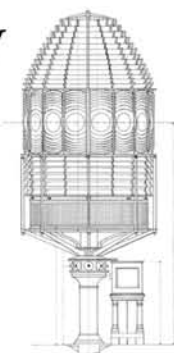
on their way up. Our voices echoed eerily inside the old brick tower, and jokes were exchanged about ghosts and restless spirits. I asked Andrew if the lighthouse was haunted. He chuckled and threw up his hands in a gesture of uncertainty: "Poland has many ghosts!"



Kołobrzeg Lighthouse was rebuilt after the war, a handsome round brick tower atop the old fort. It is open to visitors. Photo by the author.



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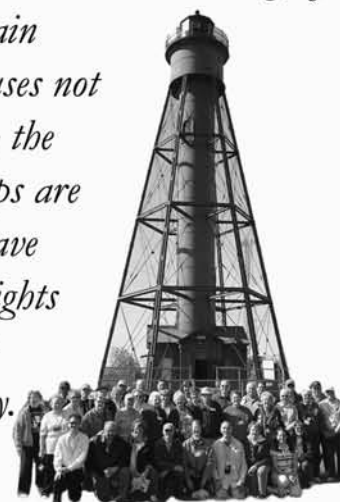
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