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The Fighting Poles

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Damon L. Smith
Smithfield, Utah
December 6, 2018

“The Fighting Poles” Material Culture

Informant:

Damon L. Smith is my husband and an active duty United States Air Force officer. He is currently the Operations Flight Commander of the AFROTC detachment 860 on Utah State University campus. Damon has been in the Air Force for 18 years and was deployed to Tikrit, Iraq in 2011. He served a two year mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints to Hungary. He has maintained his language skills and has made several trips to Hungary and Europe to stay fluent. We’ve been married 20 years and have 2 boys and a dog.

Context:

Damon has been well aware of my collection project (stories, legends, and traditions pertaining to USU) for my Folklore class (Introduction to Folklore - English 2210) for a while because I complain about all the transcription I’ve had to do. Damon has around 50 military challenge coins he’s been given over the years and I asked him if he would pick his favorite one and tell me about it. I was surprised when he picked the Fighting Poles coin because it seems like a lowly coin in comparison to some of the ones he’s been awarded by high ranking military officials of the United States and other countries. But after listening to why he chose that coin it makes perfect sense; the values the coin represents are things he holds close to his heart.

Damon talks about the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and the bravery of the Polish people who dared to fight back. It is a history worth knowing. Damon was in Warsaw at the 70 year remembrance of the uprising. He was given a tour of the buildings that the Poles fought from and was told stories of bravery and despair by one of the surviving Poles who fought on the first day. The name of the symbol he talks about is kotwica which is Polish for “anchor” and was used by the Polish Underground State and Armia Krajowa (home army) as an easy to use signal to others in the fight. It has become the symbol of Warsaw.

Military challenge coins are a long-standing tradition of carrying a coin that symbolizes unit identity and recognition. Each piece usually bears unique unit symbols or mottos that identify the group in which they represent, and are often traded, presented, and collected between unit members. A military member is always expected to have a coin on their person - if they are challenged as to if they are carrying one and they aren’t, they have to buy beers for everyone. If they are challenged and they do have one, the person who issued the challenge has to buy beers for everyone.

Text:

RS: Oh! We’re recording. I’m with Damon Smith, my husband. This is December 6, 2018.

DS: I hold in my hands a challenge coin, it's a little bit different than normal ones because it's, it's not round [pause] it [pause]

RS: I'll take a picture of it so you don't have to like [DS: OK] describe it the picture [DS: OK] can be in there.



DS: It's, uhh, dual sided on one side- and I got it, I got it when I [pause] was on an immersion in Europe alone for six months, I spent two months in Poland and one of those two months I spent in the embassy. And so this coin comes from the embassy specifically from the Marine who use it to raise funds for their annual, uhh, Marine ball. But what makes this coin really interesting and my favorite coin is that [pause] it is a symbol as opposed to a circle and this symbol [pause] says [pause] the Fighting Poles. And it has historical significance in his- Polish history. They used to use this as graffiti [pause] in the uprising between the Poles and the Germans in Warsaw. So they would spray this on buildings as sort of a visible act of defiance and it's continues till today. You can still see, on occasion, this spray painted on buildings in Warsaw. And it's a bit of [pause] graffiti that has a little bit of national honor and reverence this

symbol is also, uhh in the form of a statue that uhh is very significant to the Poles as well. So the fact that it started from graffiti still resides as a as a revered form of graffiti and uhh kind of helps remind me of my time in Poland and also the fact of how [long pause] how brave and loyal and, umm, valorous the, the Poles are.

RS: Thant's great. Thank you.

Texture:

Damon was pretty somber when telling me about the coin. He took several long pauses to gather his thoughts to best be able to represent what the coin means to him and the Poles in words.

Damon got the coin when he was away from our family for 6 months. It was a hard time for our family and I think he was thinking about that as well. He also went to the Auschwitz concentration camp while he was in Poland and I think he was thinking of the things he saw there.

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Professor Lynne S. McNeill, PhD
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