

BY CLAYTON DEKORNE

From Poland With Love

Over the past year, the pandemic had been for me a tragedy played out only at a distance. But this changed dramatically in January when my father-in-law, who lives in Wrocław, Poland, was admitted to the ICU in critical condition with COVID-19. Shortly after, in early February, we pressed pause on life in the U.S. and boarded a plane; my wife, Ola, had to be home.

Her father, Andrzej Zybur, is a former ship captain with a burly stature and powerful presence. I have to look up to address him, but he is not intimidating; he is one of those humans of radiant warmth who instantly draw you in close to explain, teach, reassure, and inspire. It is this nature, I imagine, that makes him so successful on the building projects he is constantly at work on in his “retirement.”

He is something of a master of building logistics—an expeditor on projects that have to be done “without compromise.” He strategically inserts himself into a project to train the installers, talk with suppliers, and smooth over changes with the architect, the city inspectors, the utility companies—whoever needs to be involved to make sure the changes he sees that need to be done, do get done, all while keeping the job on time and on budget. He does this for hire for friends, for referrals from friends and relatives, and for contrac-

tors who fall behind and eventually get referred to Andrzej, who, if he takes the job, becomes their friend.

As I walk the neighborhoods near Ola’s family home, I think a lot about Andrzej. You don’t see cheap houses here. They are standard middle-class homes—a few from the 1500s and following centuries, but the majority from the 1920s and 1930s. Unlike most other neighborhoods of the city, this area survived the 1945 siege by Soviet artillery forces trying to rout the Nazis who had occupied the city since 1939 and were making Breslau, as they called it, their last stand in Europe. Even the newest homes built after the war weren’t thrown up quickly. They were built to the same pattern that homes had been built in Poland since the Middle Ages—with thick masonry walls, deep inset windows, steep tile roofs, and wide overhangs. Every roof has wide steel or copper gutters and downspouts that connect to storm drains.

Modern changes have been made, though: High-efficiency gas boilers for hydronic heat are ubiquitous. Nearly every window I see is triple-glazed. The exteriors now have 4 to 6 inches of continuous insulation covered with traditional stucco. There is a quiet resilience to these homes, and as I walk, admiring them, I think about Andrzej, praying that he too endures to see them again.



Some common building details on homes in Wrocław ensure durability and energy performance: wide, powder-coated steel gutters (1) that connect to storm drains; R-20 to R-30 continuous exterior insulation clad with traditional stucco; the generous overhang and let-in drip edge of a stone windowsill (2); triple-pane, tilt-and-turn windows situated mid-wall (3).

Photos by Clayton Dekorne