**Poland and I**

So - I've been In Poland 24 hours, and I'm on the front page of the "Kurier Poranny", Bialystok's local paper. I can't read the article; my Polish isn't good enough, but I can understand the headline: "Musialam tu byc" - "I have to be here".

Let me tell you how it all got started......

My connection with Poland and Polish people goes back a long way - to my primary school days, when I chanced upon a biography of Marie Curie. I must have been nine or ten, and I remember that I instantly, passionately, identified with the child Manya, who became so real to me I almost felt I *was* her. So absorbed would Manya become in a book, I learned, that her brothers and sisters once crept up behind her whilst she was reading and built a tower of chairs behind her, so that it crashed to the floor when she stood up. That could have been me - I was always lost in a book as a child. I would go to the library, take out three books and have read one of them by the time I got home, having been unable to resist the temptation to read it whilst walking along the street. The traffic was lethal: it's a miracle I was never run over!

I also felt for - with - Manya when the Russian inspectors came to her school and she was picked to answer their questions. Not that my teachers were risking their careers teaching forbidden Polish history, of course, but it was a safe bet that if any visitors came to our school I would be picked to answer their questions. Like Manya, I could be relied upon to get the answers right, and whilst I didn't have to speak another language, I did have the correct BBC English accent which reflected well on the school. There was no affectation in this: I spoke the way my parents spoke, but it did rather single me out in the poor inner-city area we lived in. When Many cried and wished she didn't speak Russian so well, I knew *exactly* how she felt.

So it gave me a special thrill, when I finally got to visit Poland for the first time in 2009, to make my way along the Ulica Manya Sklodowska. (And yes, I do realise pretty much every town in Poland has a Manya Sklodowska Street, but hey, it was still special to me.)

Why am I in Poland in July 2009? I am here for the World Esperanto Congress, taking place in Bialystok this year because Ludwig Zamenhof, creator of the language, was born in Bialystok 150 years ago. I had started learning Esperanto back in 1993, and soon found my dormant interest in Poland and all things Polish being rekindled. Once again I found myself identifying with a Polish child: with the child Ludwig, frightened by the racism he witnessed on the streets of his home town and dreaming of a better world.

As a child I was certainly a dreamer myself, but I never dreamed of going to Poland. Europe was divided by an Iron Curtain; we never thought it would come down in our lifetime. And I never even thought of learning Polish. English children don't learn Polish. They do French and Latin and possibly German.

I studied all three of those languages at school and was also exceptionally fortunate in being able to learn a bit of Russian when I was in the sixth form. My heroine Manya would have given anything *not* to learn Russian, of course. However, when I started to think about learning Polish, many, many years later, a smattering of Russian gave me a headstart with the vocabulary. I'd forgotten most of it, but it's amazing what comes back, especially the songs. Play me the intro of "Katyushka" and the first verse at least springs effortlessly to mind: "Rastvietali, yablani y grushi......"

Fluency in Esperanto was also helpful when I began to think about learning Polish: Zamenhof drew from all the major European languages when forming the vocabulary base for his own, so I found myself recognising what I thought of as "Esperanto words in Polish" - but of course I knew they were really Polish words in Esperanto.

My attempts to learn Polish as an adult were, to put it mildly, sporadic. From Daniel Wolski, a boy in my tutor group when I taught at a boys' school in Gloucester, I learned a few basics: I could give my name and profession and count to five. With this trivial amount of knowledge I foolishly suggested that, as part of our schools' celebration of International Mother Language Day (Feb 21st), some of us might try singing a song in Polish. We had a sort of a contact in Luisa Patorski, who had just left the school, but stayed in close touch, and her mother, who was keen to set up a stall for the day and display Polish artefacts and serve Polish food. Luisa worked part-time at Cheltenham library and they had a selection of Polish books and tapes - she could find me a selection of songs.

Well! I tried, I really did. I listened to that wretched tape about 85 times. The book was no use to me, as I couldn't read the lyrics - all I could see was a whole lot of ws, ys and zs, as if the Poles, in a fit of thriftiness, had decided to gather up all the left-over letters that no-one else wanted, collect them all in a bag, shake them up well and tip them out over a page. I couldn't understand a word of the song, either, so it was rote learning of random syllables as far as I was concerned. I could just about manage to sing it myself but knew I didn't have time to teach it to any pupils, so we compromised: Mrs. Wolski kindly translated it, I wrote a metrical version in English, and on the evening Luisa and I sang it in Polish and the boys sang the translation. I won't say we brought the house down, but it worked, and my ability to sing a quick chorus of "Katolinka" has provided a useful point of contact with Polish people ever since.

So there my knowledge of Polish rested for a few years. I did try borrowing "Teach Yourself Polish" from Cheltenham library, a listening to it in the evenings, but teaching full-time is quite a tiring occupation: I found the most likely outcome of sitting down in the eveing and listening to a tape was that I would fall asleep. Not a great success, really.

Then came the expansion of the EU. Suddenly, there were Polish people living in our local community. I would meet them at the bus stops and strike up a conversation. I even started helping one of them, Ella, with her English on a regular basis, and she helped me expand my repertoire of Polish phrases to include, "I am teaching myself Polish, but it is a very difficult language." Sadly, Ella moved away before I got much further.

When the Pope died, the visitors' book at church filled up with the names of local Poles. One of them started attending services regularly: Jacek. he had a wife and children in Poland, he told us, and was working hard to earn enough money for them to join him in England. His English wasn't very good: he was pleased to meet someone whose grasp of Polish extended to offering tea or coffee after the service. At a language fair in London I had picked up a truly wonderful book and CD in English and Polish. It was called "Jedz, piescu! Jedz!" ("Go, dog! Go!") and was right on my level, having only a few words or sentences per page. Page 1: Pies. Page 2: Duze pies. Page 3: maly piesek......... It taught me phrases I'm never going to use, such as " A blue dog on a red tree...." but never mind. I can tell red wine from white wine on a Polish menu now, and it's all thanks to "Jedz, piescu! Jedz!"

Then, Jacek's wife, came over to join him, and she *really* didn't speak English. For the first time, I was trying to hold a conversation entirely in Polish. We understood each other, but I'd exhausted all my phrases in that first conversation. I could see it was time for some serious study. I ordered my own copy of "Teach Yourself Polish" and set to work

Luckily, help was at hand. A Polish shop had recently opened in my town (Stroud, Gloucestershire), and I had the bright idea of putting up a card on their noticeboard asking if anyone would be willing to give me Polish lessons. Severin, who worked there, immediately offered to teach me, in exchange for me helping him to perfect his English.

So for three months we met once a fortnight, on a Thursday evening, and I really did make progress. We used a range of books I'd bought from Grant and Cutler in London. I think it was about this time that I bought an excellent Polish phrasebook, and a copy of Routledge's "Colloquial Polish", which I found suited me better than the "Teach Yourself" course. Sadly, Severin moved after three months, and I've never really found a replacement for him.

All in all, despite the stop-start nature of my Polish studies, I at least had some grasp of Polish when I set off for the Esperanto World Congress in July 2009. I went by train, carrying my phrasebook and "Colloquial Polish", and soon found amateur language teachers all around me, eager to encourage this strange English person who was learning Polish just because she happened to like it. They also offered practical help with buying my ticket, finding the right bus when I got off the train and getting off at the right place.

I arrived in Bialystok the day before the Congress and decided to walk out to the University. I didn't hang around long once I'd got there, as people were very busy setting up for the next day, but just as I was leaving, it started to rain, and I hastily took shelter, together with a young woman in her thirties. I assumed she was a fellow Esperantist, but her panic-stricken expression when I addressed her in that language set me straight on that and I switched to Polish. I got no further than "Jestem Angielka" when her expression cleared: English, she culd handle! She turned out to be a journalist from the local paper, covering the Congress, and Wow! here she was talking to a real, live foreigner who'd come all the way from England - could she interview me, please, and take a photo, preferably by the statue of Zamenhof in the town centre?

So that was how I achieved overnight stardom in Bialystok - well, the front page of the local paper, anyway. It made a good talking-point for the rest of the week with my fellow-Esperantist. "Look, there are two famous Esperantists in Bialystok: Zamenhof and me." The journalist, Aneta Boruch, practically adopted me: we had lunch together on Wednesday, and on the Saturday evening I had dinner at her house with her husband and young son.

I had a completely brilliant time in Bialystok. The glorious weather helped, and finding the right insect repellent to see off the midges! But there was more to it than that. I have been to other World Congresses, but never to one where the local people made us feel so welcome. I suppose World Congresses of this and that are two a penny in Florence and Rotterdam, and rather more of an event in Bialystok. Also, the town is proud of being the birthplace of Zamenhof: they have a statue, a mural, a street named after him, a museum - and in anticipation of the congress they had run features in the local paper teaching the language, so that when I asked in a roadside shop for "butelka voda mineralnie" I was answered in very creditable Esperanto!

As well as our Congress, Bialystok was hosting a folk music and dance festival, so I was really in my element as I love music and dance. I had hoped to learn some Polish folksongs: Esperanto Congresses always offer lessons in the local language. Unfortunately, although Marta, our teacher, had brought along some photocopied lyrics and a CD, she didn't feel confident enough to sing for us herself, and the CD was too fast. On my "day off" (Wednesdays are always a free day, to allow a bit of sightseeing) I prowled the local bookshops, and found a sympathetic shop assistant who helped me choose some children's books and CDs to help me with my studies. I explained my frustration over the song I was trying to learn, and she looked at the photocopy, said "I know this one," and promptly sang it for me, right there in the shop! "Gdie jest ta ulica, gdie jest ten dom....."

So my experiences of Poland that summer were tremendously positive, and I have continued my language studies, but it's very hard to make headway without a teacher. I have befriended a couple of local Polish people , but their English is so much better than my Polish that we mostly end up using English, and they haven't really got time to teach me. I'm reduced to listening to CDs whilst I do the ironing,

Then, just the day before yesterday, I got an email about this scholarship. I simply dropped everything and poured out my thoughts in this essay. The prospect of having two weeks in Poland to learn Polish - well, I had to give it a go, didn't I? "Musialam tu byc"!