

Poland and me

Szczecin, three o'clock in the morning. I reach out to turn off the alarm clock on my phone. It took me a while to find it in the pocket of my coat, the one I was wearing the previous night when we went out to Pinokio, a sacred party place for us, Erasmus students. We tell each other "Let's go to Pinokio" as if we were about to go to the grocer's to get some eggs for breakfast the following morning.

Even if our last night out had passed without any relevant consumption of Zubrówka, we felt exactly the same way we did after our first week in Poland, when we were given a warm welcome in the form of a one-week long party session. By this time, we got quite used to this spirit of theirs, so despite knowing what was awaiting us the following day, we decided to join our friends for a couple of hours in the club.

Which was another bad decision I made in a short period of time, I am thinking as I glance at my screen.

Probably this is the earliest time I have ever set my alarm clock in my entire life. We (my friend Dorka, poor victim of my rather reckless idea and I) have a couple of minutes left to leave for the first PólsiBus to Poznań. After throwing the sandwiches prepared the last evening into our backpacks, we silently walk out of our dormitory to take tramwaj 7.

Two weeks ago, on our first visit to Poznań, we were wandering Stary Rynek, amazed by the colourful tall buildings I never grew bored of during my stay in the country. It was a few weeks before Christmas, so the square was enchanted by festive sounds, smells and colours, creating a pleasant atmosphere that completely made it up for the cold weather.

We were mustering the stalls to have something for lunch after the goats' famous noon performance when my eyes suddenly fell upon a couple of strangely familiar words on one of the stalls. I am sure everyone knows the joy of randomly bumping into words you learned in the language classroom "in real life", but this time not this was the case. They were familiar in the sense that they were actually written in Hungarian! All those letters with accents unknown in this environment were calling tourists to try our delicious *lángos* and *kürtőskalács*. Personally, I had very soon fallen in love with Polish cuisine, so I was not in the mood for food of any other origin, but out of curiosity (how come they were selling these Hungarian specialities hundreds of kilometres away from my home country?), and for the prospect of having a chat with Hungarians again, we made our way to our compatriots.

A few hours later, after visiting a few more sites, we were sitting on the bus to Szczecin. We were killing time by flipping through the photos on my camera, as if we took another tour in the city. As we reached to those taken in the square, Dorka suddenly turns her head to me.

- I can't believe we are going to sell *kürtőskalács* with them the next weekend!

I couldn't help but agree with her. This proposal was even more unexpected than spotting the Nierozpoznani monument in Park Cytadela.

So one week later, here we are again -- sitting on a PolskiBus, in such an early hour we can't see but our reflections in the window. After arriving at the station, we have a quick coffee in the neighbouring mall gleaming of Christmas lights, then rush to the already familiar place to get down to business.

Needless to say, being an Erasmus student is fun. So much fun one actually tends to be half-hearted as a student. But even if economics studies fail to catch our attention in an such a new and interesting environment, I have one class I always attend as prepared as an enthusiastic first-grade pupil: besides the obligatory courses held in English, we were given the chance to take Polish lessons. As a language enthusiast myself, I was more than happy for this opportunity, which I would have probably accepted even without them offering credits for the successful completion of the course.

Even though we very soon recognised it was not going to be a piece of cake, I highly enjoy the process of acquiring the basics of a language again. The ones I already know I have been speaking for years, so memorising a whole new alphabet is something I have not done for quite a while. As far as enthusiasm concerned, I can't tell much about the others, but thanks to the clear and fun lessons held by our cool and friendly teacher Dorota and despite all the pronunciation and grammar nuisances, we have been all making a decent progress with Polish.

But. I may be proud of myself for being able to talk about my family in Polish, but telling that "mój tata jest kierowcą" does not necessarily make me a successful *lángos* seller in Poznań. Still, it did not seem impossible at all, so after we were told the Polish equivalents of different flavours of *kürtőskalács* and toppings for *lángos* and quickly revised the numbers up to 100, we armed ourselves with our most winning smiles, and turned to the first client, "Proszę".

That weekend, I came to some important conclusions. Understandably, it took us a while to get used to this whole new situation, and my command of Polish might have caused a minor financial loss (and unexpected flavours) to some of our clients. But this experience has shown how incredibly important it is to learn a language on the spot. It was a rather specific environment, but I am sure I will never forget the use of the instrumental case (*lángos z serem*) -- and the terminology, of course (we have since been thinking about starting our own business of orzechowy delights). And, maybe more importantly, we had the unique opportunity to interact with Polish people that once again showed how incredibly friendly and open-minded people they are. During my six-month stay in Poland, I have seen it several times.

Warsaw, a weekend trip with Erasmus students; Saturday night out in a busy club. As I am standing in line for a beer, a Polish guy comes up to me. There is incredible noise, so we only exchange a few words. When he finds out I am Hungarian, he cheerfully shouts the following words to me (which I think make a perfect closing line):

- Polak, Węgier, dwa bratanki!