***Polska I ja / Poland and me***

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***Lessons in Polish… Conclusions in English***

*Why, on earth, would a Greek woman with an Armenian Name ever learn Polish*? As a teacher of English for the last 25 years, I have never had to explain my decision to learn English. In the last three years, though, I have had to explain why I decided to teach myself Polish in almost every discussion the topic has come up. In our hectic, technologically advanced era, our minds are geared towards the practical and we always want to find the purpose our actions would serve. Well, sometimes doing something just for fun and just for the sake of learning can be equally rewarding and more motivating.

I started learning Polish in September 2014 and I made the decision on the train while reading a book that has healed and shaped me entitled *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert. Much like me at the time, the writer was coming out of a difficult marriage and an acrimonious divorce. Unlike her, I did not have the luxury to leave my home and roam the world writing, praying, loving or eating. Her fascination about the Italian language got to me, though. I was reading about her trying out sounds, words and structures and the new language seemed like an oasis of new opportunities at a time when life seemed to be closing doors, rather than opening them. My ex-husband and I had shared a language. I think this happens to most married couples: they form their own code. Once the relationship is gone, though, there is no one left to speak that language with and the emptiness this leaves behind is hard to endure. I needed a new language to replace the one I had lost. *And why Polish?*  I can hear the argument coming. Well, at the time I was planning a journey to Kraków, during which I would be staying with a Polish family and meeting Polish people. It seemed ridiculous to even think that one could learn any sort of decent Polish to hold a discussion within the space of two weeks that I had ahead of me but I felt it would be nice to be able to greet people in Polish and show them that a complete foreigner appreciated and respected their heritage to such an extent that she would learn their language.

So, there I was with my decision made to start learning the language but no actual plans as to how to do it. As a very well-connected teacher of English, I knew all the usual places to look for information but it seems Greece is too far from Poland because there were no schools where I could learn Polish in my native city. And that inspired me even more. My professional quest merged with the hobby of learning a new language and a hypothesis was formed: can adults use the tools the internet provides (platforms, books, audio, YouTube, podcasts,) to create a Personal Learning Network (PLN) in order to teach themselves how to learn a language? How long would that take? Would it be feasible? Would the teacher feel comfortable becoming a student and how would she react to being corrected when making mistakes? The project was becoming more and more interesting….

To cut a long story short, I started with YouTube videos which helped me learn how to pronounce the sounds and a few basic words. I grouped everything creating thematical words and posters for myself, much like I did for my students. Then, I felt I needed a book and I searched Amazon. I found lots but I decided that *Krok pr Kroku A2* was a great start as it took place in Kraków. The trip had been cancelled by then but it didn’t really matter. People do not learn languages for a single purpose or for that one trip. Learning a language is a life-time commitment to understand the people who speak that language, their culture, their habits, their History and it is an exercise in sharing and respecting. When my books arrived and I started studying more formally, I realized that there was a lot more in common between Greek and Polish than I had understood at first glance. Some grammatical structures in Polish hold traces of Ancient Greek verbs. I have found similarities in vocabulary and even in intonation, with my favourite being the informal question ‘’Rozumiesz?’’ which sounds exactly like the Greek ΄΄Κατάλαβες΄΄ (/katalaves/) that means the same.

Very soon after I got my books, I started trying to find simplified readers and I was fortunate enough to find one with a strong audio component that I could download on my mobile phone. I listened to these stories on the bus or while driving to work. They became part of my everyday life although at first it was difficult to get the grammar. One might wonder why I was not more focused on grammar but that was mainly because of my preferences as a teacher. Having been trained to teach languages communicatively, I wanted to dive into the Polish language and then to start analyzing the bits. Facebook, Pinterest and YouTube were my allies in that. Facebook, provided me with groups organized by teachers of Polish who posted charts, answered our questions and urged us to write. Gradually, I got to have friends who wrote in Polish on Facebook, and that was an exercise. At first, I could read nothing. Then I could understand some things but it was mostly disappointing. Now, I try to read everything for gist and I am satisfied with what I understand.

As a teacher and as huge admirer of the Natural approach, of Stephen Krashen and of his 7+1 input theory, I knew that I had to expose myself to the authentic language through listening. That’s how Radio Rodzina came into my life! I tried to get Radio Kraków but the connection would not work. It does help to remember from time to time, that there are about 7-8 countries between Greece and Poland. I tried a couple of other stations but there were mostly music ones, so there was little linguistic gain. And then I found Radio Rodzina. I knew it was a religious radio station and I liked that. I knew the word ‘’rodzina’’ so that made it feel familiar. What did I get at first? Nothing much, just a lot of noise and maybe the days or months and numbers but later noise turned into words, words into sentences and gradually meaning was there. I still cannot understand details but I can get a general idea which is what one expects at A1 A2 level. Radio Rodzina was a revelation for me. I was always religious but for me the real transformation, the serenity and the peacefulness came when I first got to listen to Koronka Do Miłoserdzia Bożego. I can vividly remember the first time I heard the most wonderfully soothing hymn. I could not understand the words but gradually I managed to find the text and by listening to it every day *świety Boże, świety Mocny, świety Niesmiertelny* became a daily prayer. More than that, listening to the live transmission from Sanktuarium Bożego Miłoserdzia made me want to find out more about the Monastery and Siostra Faustina.

The most amazing thing is that a year after the cancelled trip and with no acquaintances to visit any more I had the chance to visit Kraków. Despite the fact that I was nervous about my Polish, my grammatical accuracy and being corrected by strangers, I ventured out and used what I knew. I was amazed by the warm welcome of the Polish people. I enjoyed the surprise they got when I addressed them in Polish and it was great to turn a professional trip into a learning opportunity. The best part of the trip, though and a moment I never forget was that I got to visit Sanktuarium Bożego Miłoserdzia and prayed there at at three o’clock. It was an emotional moment to know that noise had turned into so much meaning that the ignorant listener of the year before had found her way to that serene place of worship. There are no words to describe the feeling when walking towards the chapel I saw the familiar *Jezu, ufam Tobie* in so many languages and especially in Greek.

When this journey started I was on a journey and trains are always painful, lonely places. The real issue is how we all manage to turn pain and negativity into gain and for me Polish has been a kind of ‘’band aid’’. It has soothed, it has driven my attention to the positive and it has re-shaped my idea of the world. I have grown through it emotionally and professionally. In the coming years I am planning to present my experience of learning Polish at a teachers’ conference.

I want my last words to be ones of gratefulness. When this deeply esoteric journey started I thought that it would be a very silent one. I was wrong. My journey has been filled with vibrant Polish cities, a lot of delicious food, great and inspiring Polish films, amazing Polish songs I could sing all day and most importantly the rewarding feeling of learning and using a demanding but also amazing language.

Bardzo dziękuje za to!