

Sarah Pawlak

Poland & Me

Growing up in the USA is a funny thing. In the USA, I'm considered "Polish." Anyone who asks me "what are you?" is expecting an answer that isn't "American." No, they want to hear about your ancestry, not citizenship. And for me? Poland was my ancestry. Perhaps then, the person who asked and I would briefly speak about how delicious "pierogis" are, and that no, I didn't speak the language. They would always ask, "Oh, but you've been there?" Again, the answer was always no. But, despite my ignorance of Polish culture and language, my answer to the question "what are you?" could be nothing but "I'm Polish." How strange, to have Polish history running through your past, Polish blood through your veins, the words "I'm Polish" leaving your lips, and yet knowing less than nothing about the country and the language of which you claim to be a part.

As I grew older, I began to wonder what it all meant. What did it mean to be Polish: this answer I was giving to nearly everyone I met for 21 years? I wanted, I needed, to explore this component of my identity I so blindly had been repeating. And so, I guess that's where my Polish journey begins, with me on a plane to Kraków in the spring of 2016, feeling an equally motivating combination of nervous and excited. Would I like what I found in Poland? Would I be able to learn Polish? What if I was uncomfortable in the country my grandfather once called home? What if the language was too difficult? Questions of uncertainty raced through my mind.

My first class at Glossa was, to be honest, a little overwhelming. Both Iwona and Jerzy were patient and engaging teachers that believed strongly in their method of teaching, a method that involved refusal of speaking English! At first, I initially felt frustrated with the situation. It was just me and one other student in the classroom; she already spoke at least four languages and I felt overwhelmed by her lingual experiences. She just seemed to be getting it so much faster than I was. But, little by little, I felt myself starting to think in Polish, starting to understand better, starting to catch on to Polish rules and vocabulary. I was becoming more confident in myself and my abilities, as well as having a great time learning. I always enjoyed waking up and going to class.

However, on the street, every Polish person I met kept asking me the same thing, "Why did you come here? Why are you learning Polish when you're a native English speaker? This is the hardest language in the world, you know." At first my answer was immediate: my grandfather was Polish. But soon, days arrived during when people asked me why I was learning, and I just wasn't sure anymore. I wanted to honor my heritage, learn about my culture, but the level of difficulty was hindering my confidence and motivation. People's negative attitudes toward my ambition left me suffering and wondering about my own goals.

But, the joy I continued to feel while improving was insurmountable and kept me going. I remember when I had my first conversation in Polish with a taxi driver about two weeks into the course; I was so incredibly happy. I spoke about it to everyone all day long. I was seeing progress and it felt so meaningful. I was beginning to feel closer to my past. When I finished my three weeks at Glossa, I felt inspired to continue. I left Poland with this feeling of inspiration, only to return (this time to Warsaw) for my job opportunity three months later.

My answer to the question “Dlaczego uczysz się polskiego?” then changed when I began dating my current boyfriend. The Polish language that was once an insight into my ancestry and past was now also an insight into his life, culture, and family. Polish was a part of him I felt I needed to learn, a piece of the woven fabric of his life that I didn’t want to be left out of.

I continued with Krok Po Kroku, this time in Warsaw with a private tutor. I was determined to now have an insight not only into my family’s past, but also into my boyfriend’s life. To this day, I know we could probably just speak in English; honestly, I think he’d probably be okay with that, even. But, the experiences I’ve been able to have without translation, due to my Polish lessons, have been monumental for me. I was able to learn family recipes from his mother, who, like the rest of his family, doesn’t speak a word of English. I was able to speak with his grandmother, and hear her devastating story of life in Auschwitz. I was able to partake in family traditions and trips without feeling left out or left behind due to a language barrier.

Polish also allowed me and my family to have one of the most incredible experiences of a lifetime. We traveled to Zakopane and then to the village just outside of it where my grandfather was from. Polish allowed me to communicate enough with the locals, leading us to the doorstep of my grandfather’s cousin and his family! It was an unforgettable reunion of two parts of the family: joyous and emotional. We learned that just as we had been searching for them all these years, the family my grandfather had left behind in Poland in his journey to reach the USA, they also, had been searching for us. My Polish proved to be the connection between the two sides of the family; through me, they were able to share their stories, stories that had been buried in distance all these years.

Don’t get me wrong, I still get frustrated. I still cry sometimes. But I know the fear of speaking can be overcome. I no longer ask myself: what’s the point? I know the point. I know why I’m learning this. I’m learning this for me. I deserve to have a link to my past, to have an intimate view into my boyfriend’s life, and to enjoy my life to its fullest in Poland.

Polish isn’t something that is just going to come to you. At least, that wasn’t my experience. I found it so frustrating when a friend from back home would remark, “You must just be quickly picking it up from being over there, right?” Uh, no, exactly the opposite. Polish takes hard work, and commitment, but if you change your thinking and view the language for the beauty and history it reveals, it’s beyond enjoyable and your goals are quite reachable.

To those embarking on their own journey of Polish, I say this: Polish will challenge you. There are days when you’ll just have to accept that aspects of it just don’t make sense to you because they are so disconnected from your native language. There are times when you’ll rack your brain for the right form of a word or the correct phrasing. There are times when someone else, someone random, might try to make you feel inadequate for not being perfect. But the joy you’ll feel? When you finally learn all your cases, when you’re finally able to partake in cultural activities, when you are able to hear stories that allow you to learn about the new country you call home, perhaps the country of your forefathers or the person you love? That feeling of joy will be worth the challenge. And you will arise from it all with a smarter, stronger, more determined character. Trust me, learning Polish is a task worth taking, a joy worth feeling, and challenge worth conquering.

Now, when I am in the USA and someone asks me, “What are you?” I am able to say “I’m Polish, and yes, I speak it,” with pride.