*“Ja też”*

*With these two words I bonded with the young girl whose family had so graciously agreed to host me, an unknown foreigner, for two nights.*

*Newly arrived in their home, she eyed me cautiously. Her mother and older sister had been speaking to me in English, and although she was learning the language herself, she seemed unsure about this disruption in the family routine.*

*Mom bustled about in the kitchen, preparing dinner and chatting with me. Her sister had disappeared somewhere upstairs. She busied herself with activities at the dining room table.*

*At one point, she skipped into the kitchen, said something to her mom in Polish, and pressed a sticker from her book onto her mom’s shirt.*

*As she turned to skip out of the room, I said, “Ja też?”*

*She stopped, looked at me, and a smile grew across her face. A moment later she was at my side with her sticker book, inviting me to choose one. With two words I made a friend.*

*I had arrived in Poznań that morning with literally 13 hours of Polish language instruction; 26 days of a 30 minutes a day audio program. Only hours before, I had practiced a single phrase over and over in my head, nervously preparing myself to speak to fellow passengers as my train lumbered to a halt, to be sure I was alighting at the correct stop. Yet, in this moment those two words tumbled out easily, with no English pre-thought.*

*The desire to learn languages and travel has been growing inside of me like a sleeping tiger since I was very young. I had an “It’s a small world” calendar as a child. It had holidays and basic words and phrases from many countries in many different languages. I spent hours trying to pronounce those strange words and imagining going to those far-away places where children wore the fanciful, colorful costumes illustrated.*

*I am only third generation American, my paternal grandfather’s parents being born in Poland in the late 1800’s. A story my father told of his grandmother animatedly scolding him in Polish when he promptly took the silver dollar she reverently bestowed upon him and exchanged it at the corner store for a paper sack full of candy, made me wish I could have known her; to have been exposed to the Polish language early on and to hear her stories of her own childhood in, what seemed to me, such a magical, far-away place.*

*When, finally, the opportunity to learn another language presented itself in school, it was either Spanish or French. I chose French, it being the other dominant line of my genealogy.*

*I studied French for six years in school, picked up a smattering of Spanish from friends who were studying that, and taught myself a bit of Italian when a district manager at one of my jobs was Italian and I wanted to impress him. A few years ago, wanting to exercise my brain, I decided to learn some German. Despite feeling some affinity for learning languages, Polish somehow still seemed elusive.*

*In January of 2016 I turned 50, entering that magical time of life when you realize time is running short and you’d better start working on that bucket list! Time to backpack Europe!*

*I surrounded myself with travel-related books, audiobooks, and videos. It soon became obvious that Poland was calling me. Even though I didn’t know exactly where in Poland my great grandparents were from, I knew I needed to set foot in the country; to feel it.*

*In that moment of knowing, the trip became a pilgrimage. I didn’t say, “I’m thinking of going to Poland.” I said, “I’m going to Poland”. I told everyone. Strangers who offered the smallest conversational niceties were let in on my plans.*

*Amazing things happened in the months that followed. Some would say co-incidences. People who either had recently been, were originally from, or had family in Poland entered my life with great frequency.*

*And that elusive Polish language? Well now I had a strong motivation, for it is my firm belief that when in Rome at least attempt to speak the language. I was delighted with myself once I began hearing and feeling my great grandmother’s language on my tongue. Many of the people I encountered who had ties with Poland also provided an opportunity for me to speak a few words in Polish! Poland was calling and I was on my way!*

*My goal was to leave as much of my time as possible unscheduled to allow for pure exploration. I knew I wanted to be more than a tourist. I wanted to really BE there. The first evening in Poznań, in the warm, welcoming home of a host family, embodied what I hoped for. In retrospect I wish I had organized more host-family accommodation.*

*In Warsaw I had reserved three nights in a hostel which turned out to be amazing thanks to the people I met there. A young student showed me parts of Warsaw I would not have found on my own, particularly the beautiful parks.*

*I was only in Kraków for about four hours, most of which I spent walking in the old town. I splurged on a white carriage ride and imagined myself back in time in this beautiful city.*

*I then spent a day walking the streets of Gdańsk. I had just stopped to take some photographs of a beautiful church when I noticed how many people were headed that way. I realized it was Sunday. “These people are going to church.” As I continued to walk, I remembered the promise that I made to myself to really BE here. I packed my camera back into my backpack, turned around and entered the church. The service was, of course, in Polish, but I was familiar with the structure of the mass, and was thus able to follow along. During the offering of peace, three nearby parishioners, turned and included me in their offerings. I felt a swell of belonging that sent tears down my cheeks.*

*Gdańsk was my last stop in Poland. My pilgrimage was drawing to a close and I felt that I had not unearthed the reason for why I had been so irresistibly drawn to come. As I reviewed my time, I felt elated and accomplished for having embarked upon such a monumental journey. I had navigated myself half way across the world to a country where, although the home of my ancestors, I was alone with only a handful of language with which to elicit the kindness of strangers. I felt proud of myself for using the handful of language I did have and encouraged by natives who expressed surprise and appreciation for my attempts.*

*Yet, I also felt I fell somewhat short of my goal to not be just a tourist. I would like to have explored a bit further away from the cities. I was disappointed with the times I let the lack of language modify my behavior to the point where I didn’t do things I wanted to do. So, when people first asked me upon my return, “how was your trip?”, I replied, “It was a good first try. I need to go back.”*

*Equipped with such an encouraging, preliminary experience of this beautiful country, it’s people, and its language, I am eager to return. My appetite has been whet. My desire to live, even for just a little while, in Polish, continues to grow. I know I have only scratched the surface of what is available to expand my understanding of how my Polish heritage influences who I am. It’s not just my obviously Polish name, which I proudly proclaim, but also my desire to connect to this ancestral homeland so that I can foster a love and respect in my grandchildren of their heritage, that inspires me to bridge the gap between here and there. As evidenced by my experience, that bridge can begin with something as simple as two words, “Ja też!”.*

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