

Ja a Polska – A red and white love story

For a long time, I thought my life would have little connections to Poland. I didn't know how wrong I was.

True, there have always been some connections: My father was technically born in Poland, in a town called Grosstuchen (nowadays Tuchomie) near Bytow in the North of Poland in 1942. At that time it belonged to Germany but it got Polish after the second world war. My mom is from Switzerland where I was born and grew up. On my parents' Swiss wedding certificate my father is wrongly registered as Polish because of the fact that his birth town lies in nowadays Poland. Also, judged by their last names some of my ancestors were most likely of Polish origin. However, that was pretty much the whole picture I had of Poland - apart from that Polish people steal cars maybe. =)

It was funny to be able to tell people that born and raised in Switzerland I was half Swiss from my mother's side, half German from my father's side and probably had some Slavic blood in me too. Point. Visiting Poland simply never occurred to me let alone learning the language. But life had other plans.

I love learning languages I must say. After high school, I went to Vancouver for nine months to bring my English to a proficient level. You could say 'polish' my English. =) There I learned how valuable language exchanges can be. Meeting all these people from so different origins and learning about their cultures and habits was more than just enriching one's life. It meant becoming more open and more tolerant. And having a lot of fun.

I had always had good grades at school in languages but still found learning them rather tedious and somehow artificial. Learning English in Canada showed me learning languages from a different perspective. Being able to actually use and need what I had learned at school in everyday life created a whole new love for languages in me.

After my exchange year, I had to decide in which direction my studies should continue. Despite my affinity for languages, I decided to study in a more technical field and started studying Computer Science at the Technical University of Zurich. Although I finished my Bachelor Degree there, I was never fully happy with this choice and started wondering if I should not have studied something else.

During university, I spent again a lot of time learning languages. I went to France to a language course which I again enjoyed a lot. I took some basic Russian courses, learned some Italian through visits in Italy at my step-mother's olive farm and finally took a Swedish language course at my university since I was planning to do an exchange semester at a Swedish University. Learning languages gave me this satisfaction that computer science somehow couldn't. It became almost a hobby and I thought about learning Japanese maybe one day - something very exotic and not Indo-European - or Portuguese since my cousin is half Portuguese. However, Polish was still not on my do-to list for languages. This changed in 2016.

In January 2016, I boarded a train and got on my way to Uppsala in Sweden to start my semester as an exchange student. There on my very first day at the university of Uppsala, on a campus called Polacksbacken (Swedish for 'The Polish hill'), named after a Polish regiment who had been stationed there, I met - live can be so ironical - a Polish guy - the Polish guy, who would change my relationship to Poland forever.

Damian was a PhD student in Image Analysis and destiny let us end up as lab partners. When he told me that he was Polish, I told him about my father's connections to Poland and we soon started chit-chatting almost forgetting our assignment.

Long story short, not much later we became a couple and for Easter 2016 I went with him to Poland to visit his family. My first time in Poland!

Damian's parents don't speak English so it was soon clear, that I would have to learn Polish. I checked which course book the Polish course at my former university in Zurich used and ordered that one since I found the language courses there of high quality, and hence, the course book must be a good one too I figured. It was *Polski Krok po kroku 1*. I ambitiously started working through the book and found that I made good progress with it. The fact that I had a Polish boyfriend made me confident. What could be a better help to learn a language than being closely engaged with a native speaker? And anyway, I had already learned so many languages and picked up new ones usually quick. Not even the fact that Polish belongs to the couple of hardest languages in this world - as I had learned by now - made me worry.

However, learning Polish was nothing like the other languages and during my first time in Poland I had a hard time making any sense out of what was spoken and I felt like the only two words I was able to say were 'dziękuję' and 'proszę'. Most words did not sound anything like German or any other languages I knew and I had a hard time remembering them. Then there were all these s-sounds and endless consonants following each other - 'Pszczółka' - and I never knew whether to write a word with sz, rz, ś, ź or ż. It sounded all the same to me. Even the so simple and important word 'dziękuję' seemed too hard to remember in the beginning.

I discovered that food was very important in Poland. We basically spend Easter sitting by the table, eating one meal after the other followed usually by cake and tea. So, by the end of my stay I could at least name many types of food with their proper Polish names. =)



Easter in Poland: Bunny, Easter eggs and 'Happy Easter' in many languages



Skiing in the Tatry Mountains



Sailing in the Mazury Region

In Summer 2016 I sub-rented my flat in Switzerland, unregistered there and moved officially to Sweden with Damian.

More visits to Poland followed and I learned how much this country had to offer. We went skiing in the Polish mountains, sailing in the Mazury Region, climbing in the Jura Krakowsko-Częstochowska, visited the beautiful old towns of Toruń and Kraków with its fire spying dragon and tasted delicious Polish food like pierogi and slowly but surely with



Climbing in the Jura Krakowsko-Częstochowska

every visit my Polish improved too. While sailing I learned vocabulary for sailing, while skiing I learned all sorts of vocabulary connected to skiing and winter and so on.

At one of my visits I acquired a t-shirt at the clothing store Reversed - the only Polish store which had made it to Paris as I learned. The shirt pictures two geese and the words: 'Mówię po polsku. A jaka jest twoja super-moc?'. I felt like I didn't really deserve this shirt yet but bought it nevertheless to have it as a symbol for my goal for the Polish languages.

Meanwhile a genetic test which my father, who had always been very interested in genealogy, ordered for my sister's birthday revealed that I actually had a much bigger part of Polish ancestors than expected: Half of my ancestors on my father's side came from the area which nowadays exactly covers Poland. The other half were Scandinavian, from South Norway. On my mother's side most were Swiss and some originated from near the Mediterranean sea (Italy, Spain and Portugal). Surprisingly, basically none came from nowadays Germany. I was not only becoming more and more connected to Poland, I had already been partially Polish myself more than I knew.

Visiting Poland has helped me a lot to improve my Polish language skills as well as the endless telephone conversations Damian tends to have with his family. However, by far the best teacher has been my now seven months old half-Swiss half-Polish son. He doesn't even speak Polish himself yet, but he loves to listen to his Dad reading him Polish books - "To gąska gę, gę, gę gę gę" - and talking to him in simple Polish language such that Mama can profit and pick up quite a few words on her own, every day one or two more. Krok po kroku. Maybe some day I will be proudly able to say: Mówię po polsku. A jaka jest twoja super-moc?



Fire Spying Dragon of Kraków



Little and big Polak: My two favorite Polish guys. =)