

## **Poland and Me**

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Italy

Cześć! This is not the only thing I can say in Polish (I promise), but I prefer to write in English for now. So, please let me tell you a story.

Dawno dawno temu (well not so dawno, something like two years ago), Andra, a 23-year-old Romanian girl who lived and studied in Italy decided to go for a volunteer program in far and cold Lublin, in Poland. She knew nothing about the country, language or culture, she only knew she would visit Polish schools in little towns and villages around Lublin and talk with students in English about stereotypes and Italy. She saw it more like a “come learn about my culture” thing than an actual chance to learn something about other cultures. At least at the beginning.

It didn't take her long to realize that living there was already a full immersion in the Polish culture. It didn't take her long to realize that she was falling in love with Poland.

First of all, with the Poles. Ah, such nice people, always ready to have a good laugh (and a drink), always willing to offer her a lot of food (pierogi) and to make her feel as comfortable as possible when they hosted her. She was starting to feel at home among people that were talking a weird language full of consonants and were gazing at her with heart-shaped eyes whenever she talked about Italy. Yes, soon enough she learned that Poles loved everything that had to do with Italy.

Then she fell in love with the Polish food (ah, pierogi!). She was skinny when she first got there, but after a couple of weeks all the love of the host families and the generosity of the school canteens were starting to turn into fluffiness around her waist. She also learned that in Poland people drank a lot of hot tea, but she wasn't ready for the true meaning of this concept: tea at breakfast, tea at lunch, tea at break time, tea at dinner, tea instead of water. Not so bad. Then she discovered kompot. More or less same situation.

Finally, she fell in love with the language. Wait, what? That “weird language full of consonants”? Tak! The first word she learned was “pączki”. Yes, plural, she ate a lot of those. Then “dziękuję”. After all she had to learn how to thank for all the doughnuts she bought. Then she began to feel curious about what students usually talked about during her classes.

She had the feeling that their chitchats weren't always about her presentations. So, she downloaded an app on her smartphone and started to learn some Polish. Wow, it was harder than she thought! But she wasn't too worried, she knew she could use English whenever she wanted in order to communicate. Until she met an elderly lady who could only speak Polish. And this lady really wanted to talk to her. That was her chance. That was the moment she discovered the potential of language learning. She realized she could connect with people and learn stories that otherwise would remain buried in the sound of incomprehensible sentences. She let go of her insecurities and pronounced a couple of words in Polish.

"Jestem z Włoch" (again, heart-shaped eyes).

"Nie mówię po polsku" (and the lady's eyes came back to their regular shape).

And that was a big accomplishment for her. The beginning of a love story that would last a lifetime: Andra and Polish. A potem żyły długo i szczęśliwie!