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Poland And Me

THE STORY OF THE PIECES

It is told in a touching story, where a proud young man learned from a wise old man, that the most beautiful heart is not a scarless, shiny one, but one made of many small pieces. Each piece represents the love that one shares: when we give others pieces of our hearts and they give back pieces that fill up the empty space. These pieces are never exactly the same, as nobody loves different people the same way. The most beautiful heart, thus, is one with uneven edges from many unique pieces that make up the heart, and even gouges, because sometimes there are no pieces given in return.

The story touches me the same way the pieces of opłatek on Poland's Christmas Eve do. There is a common sense to reckon with, that perfection and beauty are made of completeness and smoothness. However, both the old man in the story and the customs of Poland have proved that true beauty can only be made from pieces of love. Every piece of opłatek shared by every family member represents a piece of their heart. Sometimes these pieces are shared with joy, happiness and smiles, other times with regrets, sadness and tears. No matter what, they are shared out of empathy and love. The breaking of opłatek is to form another kind of perfection, a more complete one, because while there are no perfectly scarless people for us to love, we still can always love others in a perfect way.

This whole new perception of perfection dawned on me upon receiving a piece of opłatek from my Polish teacher and getting to know the meaning behind it. As a native speaker of Polish, it was not out of the ordinary that she is a teacher of the language in my foreign-language-oriented university. It was extraordinary, however, that she delivered a much more in-depth learning experience than I could ever ask for.

What she has been teaching us is beyond grammar and vocabulary. She proved to us that this language has its own heart – one made of cultural pieces. I have come to realize how warm-hearted and generous she is for having travelled alone across the world to teach us Polish. Since Christmas is not a traditional holiday for Vietnamese people, the class continued

throughout Christmas and New Year; therefore, pani Ewa stayed with us. Instead of coming home for Christmas, she brought Christmas to us, delivering Polish traditional flavors directly to my learning journey. For me, having Polish cuisine made with Vietnamese ingredients does not only represent us – pani Ewa and her students – sharing pieces of our hearts, but also symbolizes our two cultures flowing into one.



New Year's Eve party with pani Ewa

There is another thing I love about the story of the most beautiful heart: the small pieces are precious only when they are together and make up an entirety. The old man arranges all the pieces into his heart and appreciates each of them, not only because they are pieces of the people he loves, but also because they are now his own.

In today's unstable world of threatens, weapons and wars, Poland characterizes itself as a magical land, where all wounds would be healed - not only the wounds of Polish history, but also all the wounds from darker parts of the world's history. Where else on Earth can the Jews and Germans visit Auschwitz and shed the same tears for the past; can Americans, the French and the Vietnamese share corn poppy flowers instead of gunpowder? It is in Poland that all these different national and ethnic identities live in harmony, as Poland does not distinguish one from another, but rather treats each one as a piece that completes its heart and for that, this heart beats strongly and peacefully.

I learnt about this beautiful diversity of Poland from books, along with the memories of Vietnamese people who used to live in Poland, who are also good friends and colleagues of pani Ewa and furthermore, from the events I luckily took part in at the Polish embassy in Hanoi, hosted by pan Gerwel. These events had Polish together with Vietnamese guests. They are ambassadors, secretaries, professors, teachers, and also students from all age groups, from two countries that are 8000 kilometers apart. They are all different pieces connected by the love for Poland, in the center of Hanoi – the heart of Vietnam.

Moreover, it was my greatest honor to have been able to touch their hearts with my translation of “Mazurek Dąbrowskiego”, the proudest melody of Poland in form of a poem, on the 101th anniversary of Polish National day. Rewriting “Mazurek Dąbrowskiego” in Vietnamese gave me another perspective on Poland’s national anthem: it is now also a poem composed of sincerest words that are also used in “Tiến quân ca”, the national anthem of Vietnam. It was out of my expectation that the poem received a lot of positive reactions as it could make both Poles and Vietnamese feel the verses. Overcoming all language boundaries, these feelings directly touch the heart and imprint in the mind.



With pan Wojciech Gerwel on 101th anniversary of Polish National Day

To some, the question of why I did what I did may come up, considering I had only two months of learning Polish prior to the event. The idea came to me as natural as the most asked question by pani Ewa: “Co to jest po vietnamsku?”, when she wants to make sure we all understand what we have learned. I also did ask myself that question when she taught us the anthem. I wanted to make sure that I understand the cultural pieces pani shared with me, and above all, I, too, want to give a piece in return. Lectures after lectures, the Polish language, culture and customs tie up with the Vietnamese parts in me, as delightful as łańcuch on the Christmas tree.