

POLAND AND ME!

Caroline Lewis

Introduction

I make my submission to you, demonstrating the depth of sentiment which Poland, its people and its culture, holds for me.

My Father was Polish, and my Mother was English. I live in England and I have been learning Polish for 2 years. My teacher, Edyta Malinowska (email contact details above) who resides in Warsaw, meets with me twice a week by video conference.

My Father, Janusz

My connection with Poland, its people and culture, spans two lives and three generations, dating back eighty years. At 4am on 13th April 1940, at just 18 years of age, my Father Janusz and his whole family (seven people in all) were deported at gun point from their home in Rohatyn, a village near Lwow, in Poland, to Siberia with the clothes they stood in and what they could pack in one hour, to carry on foot. They journeyed for three weeks in cattle trucks with no food, only water, before being deposited in a hostile land. They had left a comfortable home where both my Grandparents were teachers. They had to abandon various farm animals and a dog, Ace, a big, beautiful Alsatian, who was my Father's best friend, and who they had to leave chained up for fear that he would follow them to the rail track. Over the next three years they suffered all manner of deprivation and were never to return. The loss of their homeland and all that they had known, engendered an even greater love of Poland and one which was passed on. This is of course the story of many Polish families.

Thanks to continual prayer and some very good fortune, the whole family survived the ordeal, and by several different routes and over a period of months, each found their way to England.

Janusz joined the Polish Airforce in Britain and, after the war, he married an English girl, Hilda, who he had met in the very famous seaside town of Blackpool, not long after he had arrived in England. He asked her to marry him on their first date and it is clear from their letters that theirs was a very sweet love story. My Mother helped Janusz to learn English which he achieved to a very high standard and, eagerly responding positively to all opportunities, he went on to be awarded a degree in Electrical Engineering and pursued a successful career as an Electrical Designer. Janusz and Hilda went on to have two daughters, myself and Kathleen (Kasia).

My Father died in 2015 at the age of 93. He was magnificent, a proud, patriotic Pole and devout Roman Catholic all his life and Poland was never far from his heart or our home.

My own Polish identity

I am very proud of my Father and of what he achieved in his life, despite all the hardships which befell the family during the War. His family never lost hope of freedom, and optimism was an admirable feature of my Father's character. Janusz settled down in a foreign country and made a good and happy life.

When we were children, my family did not have a television, but my sister and I did not need one. As for entertainment, we were captivated by our Father's tantalizing stories of growing up in Poland, his dreams of a career as a veterinary surgeon, his love of horses, the long Polish summers and, in his words "a land of milk and honey". Through these stories, my Father gave my sister and I a part of Poland, its colour, music and culture. My Mother sought out Polish recipes and often cooked Polish food. In central Manchester, we grew up eating pierogi, Krakowska and gherkins in brine and lots of Polish bread! Each Friday my Father met us at our front garden gate with Krowki fudge he would buy,

if they were available, from a delicatessen on his way home and which, amusingly, I now buy regularly at Sainsbury's. By the time I was 5 years old, I could count to ten in Polish – but that was about it!

The significance of learning the language for me rests on the ability to communicate, but much more than words. My Babcia and my Auntie lived together in England and never learnt to speak English. They were isolated in their own World of memories and loss. When we visited them, my Father would translate, both ways. Apart from a few words, My Mother, did not learn Polish. She found the relationship with my Babcia a challenge, and I suspect this is largely because they could not communicate directly, and their life experiences were so different.

Since I was a very little girl, I have cherished a very strong Polish identity. As the years went by, I was saddened that I did not learn Polish with my Father when I was a child. However, since my Father died, I have sought to strengthen my Polish identity and to understand my own Polish character. I am delighted and appreciative that learning the Polish language has opened a window for me into my Father's world.

Learning the Polish Language

Learning another language is a privilege and an opportunity for so much more. When you meet someone whose mother tongue is different from your own, you may exchange words by you speaking in their language, but you only truly hear the depth of their voice and understand their character and thoughts when you hear them speak words to you in your own native tongue. For me therefore, there is something unique about learning the Polish language and achieving a better understanding of being Polish, experiencing a closer affinity with the country, both modern day Poland and its years of complex history, its culture and its people.

My Father maintained that Polish is the most difficult language to learn and I suspect he was right! I have found that Polish requires a great deal of conscientious commitment and I have worked hard to achieve the point I have reached so far in that journey of learning.

Visiting Poland

In 2018 my husband and I visited Poland for the first time. I found it a very emotional experience. In Krakow, a city I knew my Father had visited when he was a child, I was overwhelmed both by its beauty and the knowledge that I was walking on the same cobbles which his feet had touched, so many decades before.

Later in 2018 we returned to Poland and visited Krakow, Zakopane, Warsaw (where we met up with Edyta) and Gdansk. It was a wonderful tour with so many highlights. There was the beauty of the Tatra Mountains, the wonders of Krakow's main square and the Wieliczka salt mine, the buzz of Warsaw and its museums, restaurants and music, including a Chopin piano recital in Lazienki Park and the scenes to be recalled in Gdansk at Westerplatte.

At present we are all living with the limitations of Coronavirus Covid-19 but, when this danger has passed and the travel restrictions are over, Poland will once again be our destination of choice.

Conclusion

My submission is made to you in the knowledge that I would relish the opportunity which intensive studying would provide, both to increase my progress in learning the Polish language and to advance my search for being Polish.