

Poland and Me: An adventure by bicycle

By Linda Forrest

- Checesz cebuli?
- Co?
- Mam 5kg. Potrzebuję tylko jedną.

Marcin raised his eyebrows at me across the table of my little kitchen in Milicz, mouth twitching at the corners. The truth was, I'd only wanted to buy one onion but apparently, I'd said something else when I was trying out my Polish at the market and been presented with a 5kg bag that I didn't know how to refuse. I had been living in Milicz for a couple of months so far, volunteering at a local school and trying to learn Polish along the way. Living in a flat-share with people who didn't do a lot of cooking, the 5kg bag would take us months to get through without outside help. I put some onion soup down in front of Marcin and opted for a swift change of topic:

- Gdzie jedziemy rowerami w weekend?

Since I'd arrived in Poland, one of my favourite things to do had become exploring the local area by bicycle. The Barycz Valley is wonderfully flat and teeming with birds – I'd already seen crested grebes, green woodpeckers and many a jay – all quite rare in my hometown of Edinburgh. Marcin, my downstairs neighbour, with a warmth of welcome characteristic of the Polish people, had taken it upon himself to try and find new places for us to explore. We'd already been on several cycles to nearby lakes and forests and by the time Marcin set off for home that evening (with an onion in each pocket and another in each hand), we had agreed on our most ambitious cycle trip yet for the following weekend: a 60km trip around the lakes of the Barycz Valley.

The autumn day dawned beautiful and sunny. We packed our bags full of kanapek z serem and two big slabs of homemade plum cake from Marcin's mum. Once we had reassured Marcin's dad that yes, we had our rękawiczki, czapki and okulary przeciwsłoneczne, we set out into the sunshine, spirits high. The roads were quiet and we listened to the birds trilling *śpiewu* from the tree tops as we pedalled along.

Soon, our route took us onto a track between the lakes. Trees lined the path and created a canopy of oranges and yellows above our heads. The path was a carpet of the same colourful autumnal hues and we bounced along over the ruts and grooves formed by the tracks of bikes before us. As we progressed, the path became a little rougher... and then a little sandier... until we were trying to cycle through deep sand. This. Was. Hard. Work. We slid and slithered over the fine granules, puffing and sweating, and sliding some more until we were all out of puff and agreed that it was time to walk, getting off the bikes and pushing them next to us through the sand. The going was slow and sluggish, the bikes still sinking into the sand as we walked. We distracted ourselves from the effort of walking with a game of 'I Spy' and plodded on.

Finally, we saw brown earth emerging from beneath the sand on the trail ahead of us and whooped with delight, jumping on our bikes once again and feeling joy at the wind on our faces as we pedalled along the track. Until...

'Linda! Zaczekaj!'

I turned around. What now? Marcin was walking his bike again. It was my turn to raise an eyebrow, why was he walking here? The path was perfect. But Marcin only pointed to his front tyre. It was flat. With cycling impossible once again, returned to walking our bikes next to us, now growing a little anxious about how we would get back – from here, it was 30 kilometres home in either direction.

On we walked, pushing our bikes and – mindful of the time - stopping only for lunch. After this, we continued our journey by foot, still wheeling our bikes alongside us on the empty path and hoping that we would come across *someone* who would be able to help.

Through the trees, a rooftop emerged, then another... We increased our walk to a trot, and as we came around the corner, we saw a small village ahead of us. It was deserted, but for a few chickens scratching by the side of the road. Curtains were drawn shut across the windows, with no signs of life within. We stood, pondering which door to knock on, when a growling sound altered us to an enormous dog emerging from the house closest, followed by a woman wearing an apron and carrying a pair secateurs. Marcin explained our situation, enquiring as to whether she had a pump we could borrow, while the dog and I eyed each other up from a distance. Suddenly, the dog's growl turned into a bark and as it started to run towards me. The woman shouted something in Polish - whether to me or the dog, I wasn't sure - I just ducked behind my bike for safety. This only prompted good-natured laughing from the natives. Marcin translated:

- The dog is safe.

Maybe they thought so, but I wasn't convinced. I emerged from behind my bike and looked down at the dog once more; it looked up at me with round black eyes. Then it jumped up and rested its paws on my legs. The barking stopped and we both started to relax, I gave the dog a scratch behind the ears and a pat on the head, watching as its tail started to wag from side to side. Marcin and the woman continued their discussion about the pump.

It transpired that the woman in the apron didn't have a bicycle pump, but her neighbour had a bike, maybe he had a pump? It turned out he didn't, but there was a man a few doors down, he had a pump for car tyres... would it work? Before long, it felt like half the village was rummaging about their garages, looking for a bike pump. The dog wandered off and settled in the shade. Someone produced some apple juice, fresh from the apples in their garden... someone else had been using their apples to make jabłecznik and before long we were sampling both. The juice had a wonderful tang; the jabłecznik was sweet and delicious. Around me the conversation continued in Polish, and I listened attentively, picking up the odd word here and there that I understood. An older man approached me, wearing a cap and leaning on a gnarled walking stick, speaking rapid Polish.

- Przepraszam. Nie rozumiem. Nie mówię za dobrze po Polsku.
- Skąd jesteś?

- Jestem ze Szkocji.
- Ahhh! Mam córkę w Anglii! W North Hampton? Wiesz, gdzie jest North Hampton?
- Tak. Wiem, ale nigdy tam nie byłam.
- Mam troje wnuczków. Mają 3, 4 i 6 lat.

Two bushy grey eyebrows furrowed into a frown as he continued:

- Oni znają tylko Angielski i nie rozumieją Polskiego.

It seemed to me so sad that this grandfather could not communicate with his grandchildren. I continued with the conversation in my halting Polish, privately wishing I could speak more and vowing to redouble my efforts to learn Polish so I could understand people's stories more easily.

By mid-afternoon, after several more rounds of homemade cakes, with Marcin's bike now fixed and our stomachs pleasantly full, we say goodbye to the villagers, thanking them for their help and set out once again on our trail.

We arrived home exhausted but content. It was pitch black outside by the time we wheeled our bikes down to the basement and climbed the stairs to Marcin's apartment. We opened the door to a warm welcome from Marcin's mum, carrying an enormous plate of homemade krokiety.

I learned two things that day: Polish people are generous with both their assistance and with their food, which is always fresh, homemade and delicious.

Four years later, the romance that blossomed between me and Marcin during my year of volunteering in Poland continues today and we now live together in Edinburgh, enjoying regular holidays to visit Marcin's family in Milicz. We are always greeted with a warm welcome and plates of delicious homecooked food. I continue to learn Polish and have, since the time of the events in this story, purchased the desired number of onions successfully in Polish on several occasions! My main motivation for learning Polish, however, lies with my desire to be able to communicate with my Polish family. I hope one day Marcin and I will visit them with children of our own, and that when we do so, grandchildren and grandparents will be able to converse easily together in Polish.