**Szkocki Stasiu – Ja a Polska**

Having friends and family living in Poland is something quite special and has a number of benefits. When travelling to Poland (and I say when and not if, because everyone should visit Poland in their lifetime) you will be welcomed with open arms in an unfamiliar space. It means to have a bed for the night (or a week) without question, and it’s a certainty you’ll never be hungry! My ever-patient wife-to-be, Kasia, has answered the many questions I’ve had, and she has been my history teacher, cultural expert, travel guide and translator for all things Polish for the past 3 years. When I think about the question ‘what does Poland mean to me’, three things come to mind: Polish culture, inclusion into Polish communities at home and abroad, and the Polish language. My journey with all three, has just begun.

What follows are some of my experiences, and what has stood out for me. Some of these points may be useful for those visiting Poland for the first time, and what you could expect.

**Never visit Empty-Handed (and wear slippers)**

If there is one piece of advice I could give to anyone visiting Poland - don’t go empty-handed when visiting a friend or family member! Take flowers, chocolates, or some cake if you are invited for Obiad (lunch) – these will be well-received by your host and show your appreciation for their generosity. The first Polish family member I visited was Granny in Slupsk. Under the advice of my fiancée I bought flowers on the way to her house from the train station. When we rung the bell and Lodzia opened the door; I was greeted like I had been part of the family forever. Ushered inside, 3 kisses (just like in France) and shown the cupboard for shoes. Despite the language barrier, I could understand that I was also required to wear a pair of slippers. For as difficult as a native English speaker finds Polish syllables, the reverse is also true.

Me: “Nazywam sie Stuart”

Granny Lodzia: “Stu… Stu… ahh.. Stasiu! Tak, dobrze!”

Acceptance into my Polish family started with being ‘born again’ in Poland, as Stasiu.

**Time to Celebrate!**

I have been honoured to be part of many celebrations that, without being included in the Polish community, I would not have had the opportunity to attend. Birthday parties, Christmas, communions, anniversaries and weddings – all completely different to the stereotypical concept of these celebrations in the UK.

We attended a wedding of a family member. Polish weddings are over 2 or even sometimes 3 days. The groom was a firefighter, which meant he had a guard of honour for him and his wife leaving the church from all of the firefighters with their axes. When their car left the church for the wedding house the fire engines used their hoses to create an arch of water for everyone to drive through. On the way to the wedding house, the caravan of cars had to be stopped at ‘checkpoints’ along the way, so the groom could buy safe passage for him and his bride. The function after the ceremony was at a wedding house, a concept relatively uncommon in the UK, however is a big market in Poland. This is event space designed for holding wedding parties. The food was a combination of buffet style, and also new, hot dishes being brought to the table every couple of hours or so. There was the ‘chata sołtysa’ (a sort of cart) full of homemade smalec, kiełbasa and bimber, all of which was very good! All the tables were big long benches which again, I had never experienced at a wedding before. A wedding is a celebration of two people joining together, and I can really say it was a great party!

**Food and Drink**

Food and Drink in Poland (and in Polish communities) is pretty different to the dishes you would consider typical in the UK. Tradition appears to still be strong, and the art of preserving food you have now, for later has not been lost. From what I have experienced, there is a greater connection in Poland of ‘farm (or garden) to plate’ than in the UK. I have seen how Kiszone ogórki (pickled gerkhins) are made, made my own biale kiełbasy (white sausages) and foraged mushrooms in the forest (with guidance of course, not to choose the wrong mushrooms!). These skills and knowledge are a precious piece of tradition at risk of being forgotten with the increase of supermarkets and food ‘on demand’. Poland – please do not lose these skills and traditions!

When cakes or bread aren’t made at home, you have two separate types of bakeries depending on what you are looking for; go to a Cukiernia if you are looking for light and delicious cakes, or a Piekarnia for breads or other savoury bakes. Poland has a staggering choice of cakes, breads and other baked goods which are too good to miss out on when you visit!

Lastly, it is customary to drink spirits (Nalewka) neat – beware! These can be stronger than you would expect!

**Polish Language**

For me, the language is the code is the remaining piece of the ‘Polish Puzzle’ I have yet to crack. When I do, I feel it will open up a new world for me; I am excited for a time where I am able to communicate with friends and family directly, holding a conversation without the need for translation, understanding signs and labels, listening to Polish radio or watching TV and understanding what is being discussed. At the moment, I do not have this level of comprehension and I feel I am missing out, on the sidelines to a certain extent. I have tried learning with apps which have produced limited success; these allowed for lots of practice of conjugation, I found I was missing the explanation of *why* I was doing the task in the first place! I didn’t understand the theory behind the Grammar.

After a recent trip to Poland I found myself frustrated with my progress with the language and was honest with myself that without more help I would never learn Polish to the level of fluency I wish to achieve. Fast forward 3 months and I have made excellent progress; I’ve enrolled in classes at Edinburgh University, which uses the Krok po Kroku textbooks in their syllabus. I have put together an education structure that works for me. I am able to talk and make mistakes without being embarrassed in a group of people in a similar situation to me. At home, Kasia will sit with me and I read aloud from the textbook, to help with my vocabulary and dictation. When I’m travelling to work, I have the online portal questions and quizzes to help embed the knowledge I have already learned.

For me, Krok po Kroku is the key to unlocking the puzzle of the Polish language and ‘gaining’ friends and family as a result of studying in a method that works for me.

To the writers of Krok po Kroku - Thank you, for helping to bring these people closer to me.

Dziękuję Serdecznie,

Stasiu