

“Poland and me”: Love at Second Sight

My story with Poland was a matter of accident and if someone had told me I'd have the relationship with this country I now have, I wouldn't have believed them at all. In 2010, I was only happy to spend my Erasmus year abroad in Edinburgh, unaware of how my life would be changed by this country. My Erasmus stay was briefly interrupted by a Holy Week break back in Seville, and I thought I'd be taking my flight back to Edinburgh on April 15th.

Up until that time, whatever I knew from Poland came from overdone WWII films, stuffy documentaries recounting the fall of Communism, and crazy stories from friends getting drunk with Polish construction workers.

On April 14th, fire and smoke coming straight from the deep cracks of the Earth's crust made my return impossible. The volcano Eyjafjallajökull volcano coughed up tons of dust particles and consumed my hopes of completing my year abroad.

It was during that very short stay in Seville when I met my first Polish friend. She was on her Erasmus year as well and became one of my best friends at university. Had it not been for this capricious turn of fate, I would have never met her, together with her impressive talent for music, singing and irony. We got on so well she invited me to her home in the surprising city of Łódź, dark and mysterious on the surface, but brimming with life, comfy cafes and lush parks that made one feel part of a Sienkiewicz novel. Even a short visit to the Manufaktura museums reminded me that behind this zest for life, Polish cities bear the everlasting mark of the Polish nation's past struggles for freedom and sovereignty under the yoke of many foreign powers.

Through my friend Aleksandra, I discovered a new world that had been in hiding: the freshness and hospitality of the Polish people, their ability to laugh in the face of adversity, and the opportunity to strike up an enduring friendship that lasts until today.

It was at that time when I first learned new Polish words and how to pronounce them correctly. What had seemed to me like a nonsensical string of words conjured up by an evil sorcerer, now started to make sense, even in all its complexity. “sz” and ś sounded almost the same to me, until I started realizing that the tiny nuances between them were quite significant. But soon enough, and even when I still kept in touch with all my new Polish friends, the thought of ever learning the Polish language in earnest became less urgent and I put it at the back of my mind as something that could be done at some point in the distant future, along with things like being able to prepare good pierogi ruskie, or the idea of go on a cruise around Masuria and its crystalline lakes.

The seeds of my interest in Poland had been sown long ago but were to remain dormant for many years. Funnily enough, the UK had everything to do with the reawakening of my interest. I had to go on a research stay in London for just three months, and I was looking for an affordable room which would allow me to survive these three winter months in the cold, wet British weather. But chance was toying with me once more, I had the opportunity to spend these three months in the great company of Polish workers. They did not have as much contact with me at first, and were reluctant to talk to me, maybe because they were not comfortable with the English language, or just because I had interrupted their own world. They often talked about their daily life in Polish, their fears and misunderstandings at work, and the moment I heard the Polish language, again, I started remembering all these words that had been buried deep in my

mind for so many years: “Did you have some problems at work then?”, I interrupted, and they gave me a bewildered look. “But, do you understand Polish?”, they said. After that exchange, they started to talk to me as if I had known them since childhood. My lack of Polish language skills was not an issue, and only the very few words I knew opened their hearts and minds so wide I spent these three months as if I had been living at home. But my connection with this country was only going to strengthen, growing slowly but deeply as I was getting to know Anna. Unlike Szymborska’s famous poem, ours was not love at first sight, but one of those dreams you slowly sleep yourself into after a rainy evening by the fireplace. She was the best friend and flat mate, and the love of my life before I could think about what it would mean for our future.

From that moment on, my life changed completely. My holidays no longer had any other destination but southwestern Poland, and I always spent any extra free time I had on my hands thinking about how I could spend more of my time with her. Anna had just started her studies and it was impossible for her to transfer to any other medical university in Spain. My life now revolved around long flights with many stopovers and the pressing need to have a stable job who could allow us to settle together as soon as possible. With my winter holidays always came the joy of being able to be spend my time in Lower Silesia, the happy evenings enjoying krokiety, barszcz and the warmth of Anna’s family. These years have not been a bed of roses, as the long distances took a toll on us both: fights over trifling matters, insecurity, and the simple fact that we were years away from being together as a couple were just examples of the myriad of problems that plagued our relationship. Among all these difficulties, our language problems stood out as perhaps the most important issue. The desire to express our feelings was muzzled by the lack of a common mother tongue, which became an even harder problem while communicating with our close family members and friends. We needed something else, and we promised to learn each other’s first languages as fast as time would allow.

And that way, my journey with the Polish language became more serious. I bought the series *Czytaj* by Anna Stelmach, and I started reading through her clear stories, not fully conscious about the existence of declension, but quite curious about why word endings changed so often due to the arcane workings of Polish grammar. I felt I was picking up speed and I started reading *the Last Wish* by Sapkowski, but I had to put it down because it was way beyond my current level, which forced me to go back to the grammar tables written by Iwona Stemppek and Anna Stelmach just try and see how I could let all these grammar rules sink in faster. As I got better, I could hold simple conversations with my girlfriend, and the arguments that were usually triggered by the slightest confusion became nothing but a shade of what they used to be. We had made a compromise to learn about our countries and languages, and this bond was stronger than distance itself. When I bent the knee to propose to her last Christmas, I was nervous but full of confidence about what I was doing. I was fully determined to spend the rest of my life with her and proposing was another step leading to that goal.

Nowadays my learning curve is still slower than I would like to, but I feel that my improvements are more solid and sure footed. I am now able to watch the *Wiedźmin* TV series in Polish with Polish subtitles and can also talk to Anna’s family about simple topics, something which has made my trips to Poland even more fulfilling. Our last trip to Kraków and its sights now made complete sense, and I realized how much I had been missing out on without the knowledge of the language of Mickiewicz. Not only did I learn more about Poland, its history and culture, but I also learned more about Polish culture in my own country, a culture that had extended its tendrils to Spain thanks to authors such a Edyta Niewińska and her deep love of the culture of southern Spain from its distinctly Polish perspective.

As I am writing these last words, the threat of a world pandemic has become a new obstacle between Poland, my fiancée and myself. Despite having put off our wedding and married life due to this quirk of destiny, my journey through Poland and the Polish language has taught me one thing. Language barriers can be broken, and just as we like to pursue the most difficult paths, this long lock down will also have an end, and we will enjoy the fruits of our effort with our loved ones. Learning a language and understanding a new country may be a long, dangerous journey, but one that brings invaluable rewards. I have chosen the untrodden path, and I am sure you will do it too if you are as lucky as I have been.