Can a person have a more intimate, direct knowledge of living in a country, than just by living in that country? Yes, if they both live there and know her personally. In my case, I both live in Poland and know Polonia personally.

I don’t mean ‘Polonia’ in the nowoczesny sense of the builders and waitresses that could be found scraping a living in pre-EU London (or the doctors and media people doing very well there post-EU), but rather the national personification of Poland, that fabulous lady that Matejko portrayed so beautifully in his oil-on-canvas rendering of the tragic aftermath of the failed January 1863 Uprising.

The Polonia of 2012 was born in Wrocław and currently resides in Kraków – from an area of national dispute to the centrum of national repute. Her name now is Agnieszka, that most distinctly and indivisibly Polish of names. She is an ambitious university graduate with several degrees, speaks English and German fluently, and wears her hair long and my patience short.

I’d been in Poland eight years already before I met Polonia. We were colleagues in an office in town, and I was there to advise her on different aspects of her work. I knew my knowledge of język polski was sub-standard, but she was the first person to tell me so, in a typically uncompromising way. Prior to that, Poland had always been surprised and happy that I spoke any Polish, and had greeted all my efforts with smiles and an earnest attempt at understanding. But Polonia, unlike many of those that came before her, demanded more. She offered much more in return too, but she was moving forwards into her future, reconciling her differences and looking for opportunities, and there was no time for lazy or un-motivated people.

I had tried learning the language before, several times at several different places, but my lazy mind, fickle Gemini nature and the fact that my entire existence here depended on the sharpness of my English skills, always kept me from making the leap from *Nie źle* to *Kurda!* I know I could have really impressed Polonia if I’d put my foot down on the Polish accelerator, but instead I decided I could win her with really top-quality English instead – her being a polyglot and incredibly well-read, it seemed like an easier goal. But I had underestimated her. Polonia’s fluent, easy way with my own language was an amusement for her, something to utilise when she had to and enjoy if she must. Better would have been to embrace her in her own language, because no matter how much she rambled on about Austen, Thomas and Amos, her core was solidly Mickiewicz, Leśmian and Grzechuta.

Of course, the rest of Poland was moving forwards too; iPhones and IKEA, BMWs and Blu-Rays finding happy homes amongst the żurek and Żubrówka, parquet and PolSat of every aspiring young family from Bytom to Bydgoszcz. Polonia embraced the new technologies and could perhaps be called the first of the Facebook Generation. She was enamoured with her gadgets, and the shinier their cases and glossier their screens, the happier she was. Endless rounds of parties and falling-down drunk social butterflying punctuated bouts of intense studying and chasing delinquent, necessary-evil professors and absentee tutors, glued together by Tweets and Status updates. Her smartphone was never far from her hand, and halfway through any meeting with her an inevitable call was made or received to the lucky winner of the next spotkania.

# In the impatient darting of her eyes and eagerness to meet new people and experience new things, I found my home, both spiritual and pragmatic. When I came here the second time (the first having been a year-long toe-dip in the shallow waters of Dolny Śląsk), I brought with me only a little of what I owned from my previous life as a Londoner (cor blimey), having sold the entirety of the rest of it to fund the trip and find a home. The first year here in my newly-adopted Kraków was a dream, of course. Fun, exploration, integration. Challenge, satisfaction and disappointment. Being new, I was easily forgiven, and being English, not easily forgotten. Poland welcomed me with a surprised look. ‘When will you go back?’ it asked me, not expecting any foreigner to stay longer than their profitable, everything-paid-and-provided-for limited-term business contracts usually kept them. My constant answer of ‘Never!’ provoked happy laughter, and led to many beer-fuelled explanations of how I had found my place amongst Poland’s lush, feminine beauty, her moist Mazurian eyes and inviting Tatran hips.

# No one disagreed that the canvass was perfect, but most agreed that the palette with which it had been painted over the last century was rotten, although some still shook their heads and hinted wistfully at some kind of golden age under Communism. Certainly the signs of old, cracked paint were apparent anywhere someone offering a service met someone with money and need. It was frustrating to find electricity, gas, telephones, tax and driving licenses, passports, permits and papers of all kinds guarded with a curmudgeonly ferocity that felt no age nor generational gap. But what was really different about that, than it was anywhere else in the world? In Britain, they smile at you all day long. They smile when you come in and sit down, they smile as you explain why you’re there, they smile when they take your money and they smile when they send you on your way again, dissatisfied and out of pocket too. (Polonia likes to hear that, and always laughs when I explain this. It’s a great opportunity to casually snaffle the last juicy piece of śledż that everyone’s too polite to take). No, what I like about you, my dear Polonia, is that when I go in to complain about my bills being too high or get a form to fill out for the fifteenth time, the bat behind the counter makes no pretence about it. Our Polish civil servants get no respect, and offer none in return. It’s an honest exchange, refreshing and vital in its simplicity and with none of the usual fiku-miku about Isn’t it Great to be Alive and Queuing in the Post Office for Forty Minutes?

# Polonia and I drink long and talk hard about such things (she is not so interested in the problems of the past, unless they’re packaged in cool, bitter-sweet ‘classic’ film comedies that it’s obligatory to be proud of). Nothing can be done, she says firmly, reaching for the bowl of crinkle-cut ogórki slices. No wonder everyone is leaving for Dublin and London, Dortmund and Lisbon! Cheer up Polonia, I always reply, pouring plentiful piwo. It’s nothing that doesn’t happen anywhere else too. You’ve got the money now to take your family on holiday to Egypt and Portugal, but these young ones don’t yet. So they’re going to go and earn it somewhere else, see the bit of the world that they didn’t see in-between lyceum and university because you have no tradition of years-off. Then, and *then* they’ll come home and they’ll speak foreign languages to each other over red wine and rosół. That’s as it should be.

# Well, Polonia is a hard one to convince, and despite all my wordy, worldly spiel, these evenings often end in tired resignation. Imagine my delight, then, upon discovering Polonia that wintry autumn of 2008. As fresh as lettuce from Legnica and keen to be alive. Smart, vivacious and funny, she is the Polonia of lore, the admirable, lusty woman whose Commonwealth united millions in peace and prosperity before being shackled by the Russians and ground-down under the Communist heel for decades. She is Poland with ideals and intentions, the necessarily self-serving of which she flaunts rather than hides, and if I call her on a Friday afternoon about a Saturday evening, and she’s already double-booked, then I can find her on Sunday morning in Każimierz for eggs and kawa.

# This is my Polska. I love her, and I will never leave her, even though she insists I don’t need a dowód osobista and then asks me for one every time I need something, *kurka wodna!*