

Poland and I

It's a long story, but one that I am proud and happy to tell. A little over twenty years ago I worked as a manager for a day centre for disabled adults in my home town. One day, Conrad, a young man with cerebral palsy came to my office in a furious mood. He slammed down a letter onto my desk, dumped himself down into a chair, and began to cry. Conrad has difficulty speaking, but slowly made me understand that the letter was from a national UK Dating Agency. Conrad was looking for a girlfriend, but they had refused his application to join, because he was disabled.

Conrad was very interested in computers and at the time, the BBC Master computer was the most advanced piece of technology available to the man in the street. I knew a thing or two about databases and an idea quickly formulated in my angry mind. "Conrad, would you like to start your OWN Dating Agency, especially for people who are disabled? We could use your computer, set up a national database, charge people to join ... we'll call it "Handidate" ... you can be the Director !"

Eight weeks later we received the brochures and membership forms from the printer. They looked fantastic and we were very excited. Next, publicity! We contacted the local and national press and organised a small launch party for the new agency.

Fast forward a month or two and we had made national newspapers, magazines like Cosmopolitan, popular tv and radio shows and crucially ... it seems our story had been reported abroad !! One day, we arrived at the new office to discover the mother of all mailbags. We opened it to find, amongst the usual membership application forms, dozens of letters from Poland ! They were all handwritten, and looked very strange to our eyes ... there seemed to be different alphabet letters in use. Always ready to accept a challenge, we pulled the telephone directory off the shelf and turned to section 'P'. "Po ... Pol ... Polish Priest !!!

Father Gregory was priest for the local Polish community, and he agreed to meet us both that afternoon. One by one, he kindly read the letters to us. Disabled people from all over Poland had seen the report about Handidate, and were asking to join. What had we gotten ourselves into? We couldn't possibly cope ... but neither could we turn our back on anyone who was asking for help. Amongst all the letters, one letter stood out. It was not from a disabled person, but from a newly trained physiotherapist called Zbigniew. He was concerned, that with the imminent breakup of the communist regime, disabled people throughout Poland would no longer have the so called 'jobs' to go to each day ... they would be the first to lose out in a free-market system.

With the help of Father Gregory we hatched our next plan. We would go to Poland, to Częstowchowa, to meet Zbigniew and some of the disabled people he was working with. But how do you get to Poland in the days before cheap flights? In fact 'where' is Poland?

We put a tent in the back of the day centre car and set off for the three day drive, heading

vaguely east. Conrad's friend would look after the Handidate paperwork whilst we were away. We camped in Holland, Berlin and finally on the third night, somewhere just inside the Polish border. This would allow us to arrive bright and breezy in Częstochowa on the morning of day four.

Zbigniew was charming, but didn't speak any English. He introduced us to an elderly woman who would provide us with accommodation. She was tiny, with a weather worn face that told many stories, some very sad. We came to learn that her sister had been taken to Auschwitz during the latter part of the war years and had never been seen again. But I am getting ahead of myself. Zbigniew had approached an English language teacher, Barbara, at a local school, and so at convenient times, we were able to meet with her and actually begin to communicate. Stage two of this organic plan was beginning to emerge. Zbigniew was invited to come to England ... but he was to organise and bring a group of disabled people from Częstochowa ... they would be guests and hosted by disabled people from the day centre here in my home town! Easy !

"It was impossible" Zbigniew told us. The Polish economy was weak, no one could afford such a trip, there were medical issues to overcome, and there was of course, the language barrier. I winked at Conrad and told him not to worry.

We returned home to the UK and started fundraising. Within a few months we were able to write to Zbigniew and tell him to gather twenty disabled people ready for a flight to the UK. We had raised enough money to pay for the flights and cover most of the other expenses. We had prepared a special bi-lingual welcome guide, including one hundred of the most useful words translated not only between English and Polish, but also with sign language diagrams for those with hearing difficulties. So please Zbigniew, apply for those visas!

The visit was a great success. We met the local Mayor, visited local special schools for disabled children, visited various day centres which provide support to disabled adults, and of course took everyone for tea at Buckingham Palace, well, in the cafe opposite. The local Polish community were very supportive of course ... without their help it wouldn't have been possible. Alongside this main visit, Barbara also brought a party of school children, who were hosted by students at a local school.

Some months later, twenty disabled people from the UK were flying to Poland, to be hosted by our new friends in Częstochowa. We saw Jasna Gora, paid our respects at Auschwitz, and travelled by cable car to the peak of Kasprowy Wierch. We ate pierogi, discovered Żywiec, fought the Wawel dragon ... and formed some life long friendships along the way.

Two such exchanges took place, during which time the Berlin wall was dismantled, the visa requirement for Poles to visit the UK was scrapped, and the 'factories' for the Polish disabled people were closed. We had been dumbstruck to see that some disabled people in Poland were spending their day assembling black and white tv sets. In 1992. So, although it might have seemed like an uncertain future for our new friends, we were happy to see this change.

I have stayed in touch with some of the Polish group over all these years, making occasional visits, always going down to Zakopane. With their help, I've been able to buy a bacówka near Nowy Targ. This needs regular upkeep and maintenance ... oh dear ... now I have to visit three or four times a year !! What could be better ? Nothing. Well, it would be better if I could speak a little more Polish ! One hundred words are useful, but I now need to buy hammers, nails, screws and wood preservative !

Handicate went on to great success and ran for about twelve years. During that time, over 50 disabled couples were married. It's life but, three even went on to get divorced and rejoined the agency! Conrad himself never found a long lasting girlfriend ... but his determination and spirit have always been a great inspiration to those of us who know him.

Martyn Allen
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