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Poland and I

I am ten years old. It is a hot summer's day and I sit in the sunshine, reading. I read all the time. My mum says that when I have children one day, I won't bring them up, but just carry on reading and let them get on with it themselves. When I am ten, I do not yet know how things will be. For today, I am engrossed in the imaginary world of a vicar's daughter in Northumberland in the 1960's. The book has a Polish character in it called Freddy. He seems to be the only outsider in the community and somewhat mistrusted. He behaves differently, looks different I guess. I have never met anyone from Poland, but above all else I think they must be foreign, exotic and unlike other people I have met in my ten years.

I am twenty years old. I have a place at university and make new friends. I meet some who have Polish names- Toni, Marta, Janek -whose lives open up to me a previously unknown world. A world of wartime emigration, Catholic traditions and unpronounceable surnames. Toni speaks Polish at home. Marta prays to St. Anthony when she loses a possession and has a pearl rosary. They discuss food I have never heard of before: bigos, kabanos, kapusta. I still find them exotic and foreign, but now they are known, funny, familiar.

I am thirty years old. I marry a man whose parents are Polish and whose unpronounceable surname is now also my own. He is quiet, patient and kind.

His mother explains that I should use “a” for my surname ending, to signify gender. She shows me how to make golabki and mix cherry vodka. Sometimes she tells us stories of her childhood in Warsaw and how her family lived through Russian and Nazi invasions. She is a window onto the world I have only read of. She is vivacious at seventy- five and belies the hardship and changes she has known. She teaches me to sing Sto Lat for birthdays. Those who had previously been foreigners and outsiders to me are now family. They are funny, familiar, precious.

I am forty. My family and I visit Warsaw and meet our Polish relatives. They are kind, clever, hardworking. The young people live in a post-communist world of opportunities and possibilities. They are prey to the material invasion of the West and drink Coca Cola at breakfast. They are funny; they become familiar and strangely precious.

I am fifty. I speak little Polish and write less. Since there is a night class in my local university, I join and begin to learn. French and Spanish are no help here. We are shown how nouns and adjectives agree; how verbs decline; how to recognise a perfective or imperfective aspect. It is an eccentric language, which sits awkwardly on my tongue. It takes me a year to say the number three correctly. My husband laughs and is oddly proud. We buy a Polish Bible and I learn some of the twenty- third Psalm by heart. ‘Pan jest pasterzem moim...’.

It is a strange and complex journey, the road to Poland and I. Now we are linked not just by a story, but by friends, family, travel and learning. I reflect on the route to here and am satisfied. I write not as an ending, but as a looking out for the signposts that will mark the rest of the way.

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