**Poland and I - Caroline Tomiczek**

Poland is a place which for me conjures up much more than a country on the map. Indeed this has been the case for many Poles throughout history at times of strife when it was not named on the map and when borders shifted in seismic upheavals.

For me, a child of Polish refugees raised in a faraway place called Australia among the Polish and rest of Eastern Europe Diaspora, where post war ‘new Australians’ laid foundations for a new life for themselves and their Australian children and left behind the chaos of post second world war Europe, Poland to me as a child in the relative security of my parents adopted homeland was a country of dreams and nightmares. Back then there was no chance of seeing family or visiting the mother country because of history, politics, memories and distance. There were few visual images even if you could get a book on Poland. Communication was drawn out compared with the instant digital world we now inhabit. To say that I loved to see my parents faces light up (or shed tears) on receiving the long awaited letters and formal looking photos from this other world is an understatement. Who were all these people? They were my family whom I did not meet until adulthood. More importantly they were siblings and cousins to my parents. I recall the parcels and money sent over the long distances from the seemingly wealthy western relatives and the complex bureaucratic procedures that this entailed. My child’s English and basic Polish were called upon to act as translator completing forms at the post office.

Throughout my childhood and teen years Poland was very close yet somehow far away from my identity. I wondered were wolves as plentiful in Poland as kangaroos in Australia? How could anyone live in such cold? Were the forests of my father’s recollections really so beautiful? Could they compete with the magical Australian bush? Years later I found out that this kind of thinking was not unique to me but was part of the pattern that formed the multi-cultural new world Australia that exists today.

Polish was the first language I spoke yet it was rapidly overtaken by English in the assimilating Australian society except in my home and ‘family community’ where it took on a ‘hybrid’ character combining (what I later discovered) older Polish with increasing use of English. However in her wisdom and better education, my Polish ‘matka chrzestna’ insisted that her front door opened into the Polish world of language and culture and ensured that my parents maintained their language with their children who speak it with varying degrees of competency to this day. Reading and writing however is a completely different matter. Even my parents did not have much access to the written Polish word.

In the bicultural world of Australian post war migration we were as Polish as the other many migrants and refugees were their mother countries’ nationality and ethnicity. The adults shared a world that their children were estranged from. At university I studied languages but, at that time, there was no Polish which today is available in most Australian universities, otherwise I would have jumped at the chance like a kangaroo.

Then on arrival in Europe the magnet of Poland and to meet relatives ‘behind the Iron Curtain’ was irrefutable. It was one of the most significant trips in my life. It was confirmed. Poland ran through my veins as soon as I arrived. In part it was the country of my imaginings but it was also something completely new and different. My brother had a similar experience when he finally made the pilgrimage to the motherland. The ‘ciocia’ I met looked to me then ‘exactly like my mother’ and my father’s ‘siostra’ welcomed me as one of her own. For the first time in my life I met ‘real cousins’. The vibe of the country was familiar yet nothing like the ‘free world’ I inhabited. I understood why there were so many unspoken stories that my parents could not pass onto us children and some even into adulthood.

Let us now fast forward to life in London during the 1980s. I have difficulty recalling simple words like ‘maslo’ hearing little spoken Polish being so far away from family and the Polish community in Australia. I attend a Polish Women’s Conference and realise that I am a mere teenager language wise even with my University education listening to academics, Lech Walesa’s secretary and authors speak. Fortunately I am not alone as there are lots of ‘language teenagers’ at the conference. I keep abreast of the changing face of the country of my ancestors and what changes! High profile figures that impact on the world, becoming household names and changes that bring tears to mine and the eyes of my ‘ojciec’ whose name is Karol and who has an uncanny likeness to a more famous Polish Karol. Poland is indeed on the international map.

Then another revolution takes place. Post 1992 and I live among a growing Polish community in London and in my travels around the country. Poland has mutated again in its largess and gives me the opportunity to absorb some of the new Poland to which I introduce my children. I feel connected across the world to my family and my faulty command of the language returns. I have Polish family, friends and neighbours and am surrounded in my professional life by Poles (especially as some of my work is in the community organising English classes and also working with the construction industry!). There is finally daily opportunity to communicate in Polish wherever I go. I love it! However badly I do it I am taken to heart by those who appreciate our exchanges.

I take my daughter on a journey through time and space to the beautiful city of Krakow and across Galicia where she learns of her roots and my parents past, as do I. We have an extra-ordinary time especially as it takes place to include the week around ‘Wielkanoc’ . I improve my Polish and my daughter learns so much and even uses the experience in school. What an education she has.

Alas, my level of understanding is never matched in reading or writing or the level of competency that I, as a language student, know I could have in the Polish language. My mother points this out when she says ‘you speak well but your grammar!’ and ‘it would do you good to study Polish’. It is not her fault, her own education being brutally curtailed.

It has always been a dream that I now have the time to fulfil - to greatly build on the language and culture that resides deep within, to become more like a ‘true Pole’ and to participate more meaningfully in the life of the country.

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