‘Poland and Me’

The school I attended was a good one but it only offered one main language, French. I was also in the sole Latin class. I was not taught to speak French conversationally (as my Mother had in the 1920s). Furthermore, my teacher was Canadian. I learned no accent. I wish now that Mother had taught me German but schoolwork was enough of a struggle. Latin proved immensely valuable as it was inflected. From whence I know not, but I became interested in Slavic writers and had the Army accepted me, I would have learned Russian. I joined the Navy.

A few summers ago one of my sons introduced me to his new friend. I took to Monika instantly. She had given up a good job in Poland to learn English and find suitable work. I was impressed by her determination and also, the way she assumed that I could do anything. I was given boots and shoes to alter that no English shop would touch. I altered dresses and she gave me recipes. I made coffee in the cup as she did and horrified my colleagues. My former interest in the Slavic tongue was reawakened. I bought some simple books and CDs. They were useful of course but I needed to understand the grammar in the way I was schooled. I remained for long hours after work downloading and printing the whole of Oscar Swan’s First Year Polish. This was far better than phrase books and I enjoyed his dry observations on all things Polish.

Monika became my daughter-in-law. I made my wedding speech in Polish although then I had to memorise it. I met all her Polish friends and we concluded the celebrations in Warsaw. I managed to get by in halting phrases but I did not use English unless her friends wanted to help me along. Over there I bought a set of books and CDs from about the time of redenomination of the złoty. It was a kind of soap opera and quite challenging as a language course.

I began to read Polish history. It is essential in understanding the Poles and why they are so determined. From the States I obtained a History of Poland (1945) and a Historical Atlas of Poland (600-1983). I learned how large the country had been in the time of Bolesłaus the Brave and the Jagiellonian Realm. I understood the many ‘firsts’ that Poland had made in democracy, sciences and civilisation. I also saw how Poland had defended all Europe and then, eventually, themselves as invaders took advantage of periods of weak governance. In the Nineteenth Century Paris became a refuge for those fleeing the many failed uprisings at home. Then in the Twentieth Century my own country’s politicians sought to maintain the balance of power in Europe by supporting either Germany or Russia, all at the expense of Polish territory. How can I be proud of my country when having invaded so many other countries we then allowed Poland to be overrun in 1939? The Poles had warned us that Hitler should not be allowed to enter the Rhineland unopposed. During the War and especially the 1944 Uprising we never seriously assisted Poland, because of our deference to Marshall Stalin. I remember well the bombsites in London, untouched for fifteen years but Warsaw was the only city intended to be wiped off the map and much was still in ruins when I was born. When my parents were buying their first house entire communities in Poland were changing hands for new owners. I was never taught this. Britain wanted to forget the past and our politicians at the time were in love with the USSR. Monika’s parents had a tough time post war. Only when liberty was openly expressed did we hear of East Berlin, Budapest, Prague, Gdańsk. I do not diverge. History is as important as language. I listened to Monika expressing her frustrations at innumerable failed uprisings in literature but where I have wandered haphazardly, bought ices, coffee, avoided the skateboarders or listened to a student one Sunday morning playing a violin on Nowy Świat and then imagined the scene in ’44, it is important to look back.

So many sights I have to see that I have read about, even in stories. I have wanted to see the Masurian Lakes since my school days. I am no skier so Zakopane would be less immediately fulfilling . I love hiking in the hills and soon I will be heading for Bieszczady. Owing to the flight times I have no time to spare for Kraków but it will still be there. Perhaps when my grownup children stop asking me for financial help then I can visit more often!

So, I have explained why I am attached to Poland but there is a joy in travelling that is more than galleries and collections, good though they are. The things I most remember are accidental glimpses of ordinary folk, going to work or shopping or in their houses. A tour guide will arrange baggage, hotels, what to see, where and when to go. I want to make my own plans and change them if I so desire. I have a sister who rarely leaves a tour, speaks only English and makes observations based solely upon what she has been brought up to expect; therefore she thinks it is the right way. I told her that I wanted to install Polish windows opening inwards so I could clean them and I asked why her new house had such low ceilings (as in most modern English houses). Other countries have such sensible ideas. English travellers a long time ago copied other peoples’ ideas and even manner of dress. Things have changed. I admire the practical way that the Polish adopt new words just as we freely incorporated words (often from the countries we occupied).The French, by contrast, have to invent whole glossaries for a subject such as computer science. My sister is a bit like the farmer who lives all her life on one farm and believes she is a judge of soils!

I bake bread in the Polish manner, with the windows open to admit the yeast from the air for the soughdough starter. I am becoming expert at rolling Makowiec and I have chosen the most appropriate country because I am passionate about homemade soup. Polish is now our second most spoken language. I go to Polish shops where the radio is on all the time and I never hear English spoken.

I do have a problem thinking quickly enough to speak in full sentences and not to make silly mistakes. For sure, one can learn to read and write Polish without leaving this island but unless one is a genius (which I am not), I have to be in Poland. Polish people speak quickly and run words together and I think it will take years to listen properly and not to have my acquaintances scratch their heads over my utterances. I am certainly not going to learn this at a spa hotel or in a coach party. Maybe I will not have any plan. Perhaps I will go cycling (as I did in Latvia), and end up anywhere; perhaps Piątek in the centre of Poland or in Łodz or Torun or even my friend’s town of Zielona Góra (I have a 1970s guide book). I often enjoyed small guesthouses just because I liked the look of them. Studying the language is like turning a door key. Once inside one discovers all sorts of odd things. I keep the stamps I have had from Poland, zodiac stamps, Piłsudski, Peace Race and other cycling events. I collect banknotes: pre-war, war-time, post-war, some of which I gave to Monika (who no doubt, found them useless). Because I cannot sing, I sing Polish songs alone, whilst driving. I have a strange mixture of books too; some are hard to read. I have short stories from the 1940s, plays from the 1920/30s (some avant garde), that crazy novel Ferdydurke, love poems and legends. Mickiewicz reminds me of Sir Walter Scott’s novels. I had to read Miłosz ‘The Captive Mind’ in English to understand the control of literature in the ‘40s and ‘50s. I admire Wajda’s films. How he managed to get permission for some of his works I cannot guess.

Well, here ends my small testament to a growing love affair. I conclude my rambles on paper and look forward soon to further rambles of a different kind, on two legs, of course, on Polish soil.

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