**Poland and Me**

50. That is the approximate number of times I have been to Poland. I wish I could remember the specifics of each trip, but it has been so many times they just blur together. However, I can tell you that I have been all over the country from Gdansk to Zakopane, from Bielsko to the Mazury, and everywhere in between. Except, Rzeszów. I used to see a lot of people at Luton Airport flying there, but I have never met anyone from there. In fact I have never heard anyone ever use Rzeszów in a sentence in English or Polish for that matter. Quite odd, really.

To reach that 50, WizzAir and I became great friends in 2010, to the extent I even ‘liked’ the airline’s Facebook page, a rarity for me. However, I am very thankful for that airline. It was usually on time, had decent service, but most importantly it allowed me to court my future wife on a budget. It got me from London to Warsaw safely and back sound as a pound. I didn’t mind the 6am departure from Chopin airport because I am proud to say that I had immigration down to the minute. Wake up at 4.20am, out the door and into an Ele Taxi by 4.40am, arrive at the immigration desk at 5am. I was not even an EU passport holder for most of those 50 times, and can tell you that Katarzyna (this was usually her name) the immigration official, would question me less and less. Sometimes I just got the stamp and the nod, and I was on my way. As an aside, I wonder how many ‘Katarzynas’ or ‘Kasias’ there are in Poland. I bet it is over 1 million, because that is only 5% of the female population. Considering I know about 20 Polish women, and 7 of them are named ‘Kasia’, I actually think this is possible.

Anyway, I travelled a lot to the ‘Phoenix City’. There were numerous times I was in Warsaw flying back to London on a Wednesday, and would fly back to Warsaw Friday night. The Kasia’s didn’t even know I had left only to reappear Friday strolling into U Kucharzy to tuck into the fabulous steak tartar they create in front of you. Foodie lovers should take notice at this is one special restaurant. Sit in the kitchen, order the tartar, followed by the duck with plum sauce, all presented at your table. It is always a treat, always served with a smile and a grace that only people with passion could deliver. In fact, I would sit in the office in London, and salivate at the thought of that meal which I knew I would have in a few hours’ time. Many times I wanted to chat to the WizzAir pilot and tell him to ‘step on it!’

I don’t hide the fact that I am a foodie, but I am definitely not a pretentious one. I look for value, and in Poland, you can get excellent quality food for the money. I recall spending 3zl in a hole in the wall in Krakow for an espresso. Walking in the cold snow and getting a wonderful coffee for 3zl, literally through a small opening in a wall, will always be a winner in my book. Karczmas are also a fantastic idea. Where I am from people get rubbish food fast, and eat in their cars trying to drive down the highway. However, in Poland, spot a Karczma, pull up a wooden table, have a huge meal with the best rosół, meat, pierogis and dessert around, and just enjoy time spent with family and friends. I believe there is no better place than being a foodie in Poland. In all honesty, I don’t think the Polish people know how good they have it. Auchan even delights me, especially the kielbasa section. Incredible sight.

My wife showed me one day an infographic that the Polish language is the hardest language to learn in the world. I wonder if these people have ever seen or heard Chinese! How can anything be harder than that? But trying to follow my wife’s family conversations over the Christmas table or Easter breakfast, I finally realized the people who designed that particular infographic are geniuses. All my lessons in Polish so far have been informal: tandem lessons in Starbucks or through conversations, so with limited structure. This is unfortunate, but whilst I have been told that my vocabulary is small, I am also told my enunciation is very good. In fact I can make any random Polish person smile when I say ‘Nazywam sie Grzegorz Brzęczyszczykiewicz’ or ‘Gram na skrzypcach’. I get giggles when I say them back to back.

A country’s culture is about many things, but food and language define much of a country’s identity. Poland has changed my life for the better in terms of family and friends, but also has enriched my life with the variety (and volume) of food, as well as the language. Later in life I will slow my travels to Poland because I will call it home soon, and considering I will live on a street with a name I can barely pronounce, I need all the help I can get.

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