

Poland and I

As for Poland – well it's all Bandit's fault. Well – not really his fault but it was him who brought the whole thing about. He's one very shrewd cat is Bandit- he always knows exactly what's going on. He was sitting beside me on the garden bench – a favourite spot for both of us – contemplating the wonderful view of the Pyrenees mountains in the distance. This particular little corner of the south of France is stunningly beautiful.

“So what's eating you then?” he asked.

I looked at him but he hadn't moved a muscle. He was looking directly forward at the view, his paws neatly together, the tail tidily curled round his feet, every hair of the smooth white fur in place. For all the world like a pottery cat. If I hadn't known better I would think he hadn't spoken, he was so still, but I knew Bandit well. He had the knack of suspended animation, something all cats cultivate along with the hunting instinct.

“I wasn't aware that anything was eating me” I replied slowly

“Oh don't be silly – this is me, Bandit, you know we cats know things without being told.”

“So if you know so much you must know what it is.”

“It's Poland isn't it.”

It was a statement, not a question and my silence was all the affirmation needed,

“So what are you going to do about it? Why don't you just go?”

“It's not as easy as that Bandit - there are ...issues...you see it's all tied up with the past – it's difficult...”

“Well tell me about it-perhaps we can clear some of the 'issues'.”Bandit settled down cozily in the sphinx position, tucking his paws firmly underneath him and waited. So I told him.

Well it all stems from when I was little. My parents were Polish (but then you know that) although I was born and brought up in England. Being born and raised there made my life an odd amalgam of cultures and beings. At home I was Polish – but not totally – my parents never encouraged me to speak Polish. It was the post war years and they wanted me to become as English as possible – to settle into the wonderful land of opportunity that was England. And so I did – but Poland forever haunted me, like a missing link. Both my parents were staunchly patriotic – you can't be Polish without being a patriot – it's something in the blood.

It was my father I felt most sorry for – he'd fought two world wars for Poland and there wasn't a day went by that he didn't reminisce about his life there.

But it was my mother's tales that I loved the best She would sit of a winter's evening in front of the fire, warming herself and peeling apples for us or sewing, recounting tales of the past while I listened agog. How I loved those tales – I made her tell me again and again – about the time she went skating barefoot on the ice in the winter because she didn't have any shoes. How it was so hot in the summer that she used to sleep out in the hayloft because it was too hot indoors. How in the winter she slept on top of the big stone stove under a big quilt made of pure down. How her father used to keep the cherries in a bucket down the well in order to keep them fresh. And how she went with her brother to set traps in the river for the langoustines. Stories of her older sister who had a leg deformity but who used to teach her to sew and read and directed the housework while sitting at the table. Tales of looking after the cows and the chickens and pigs and going to the town with her father on the cart. And how she played cards with her sister and brother. (To the end of her days my mother was an astute card player – I don't recollect ever winning a game over her.)

And the dances – it seemed that there was always dancing – Her brother played the accordion so he

was much in demand for the local dances. Meeting the young men - telling me about her 'dates'. Sometimes she would get up and, humming a tune, would dance around the room showing off the steps and movements, swinging her hips with her hands on her waist, lightly pirouetting this way and that, my father clapping his hands and joining in. And then she would collapse self-consciously into the chair laughing with all the jolly memories of the past. And fleetingly I would glimpse the young girl in the older and careworn face. Sometimes we would all laugh together – laugh until helpless at some Polish joke until the tears rolled down our faces. In later years I quickly learned that Polish humour simply doesn't translate into English – I never found any English person that laughed at all those things we found so funny.

And other times they would sing – wonderful, emotive songs that moved me to laughter or tears. Some languages lend themselves so well to certain music. Songs about daily life, cutting the corn, working the land, war, weddings. My favourites were the famous Biala Sukienka and the Christmas song 'Wrso'd Nocnej Dzisiej. And to this day it brings tears to my eyes when I hear it sung in Polish. Because we Poles cry very easily. Emotion is always there – just below the surface – waiting to well up until the big hot tears roll uncontrollably down. Not for us the British stiff upper lip.

And then of course there were the sad tales – ah- so many of them! The war years, the evacuation to the gulags in Siberia. The young Russian soldier who made her pack everything he could find for her to take in spite of her protestations and tears that she didn't need all that fine linen – and how she blessed him in future times when she sold the items for a little food. The special cow that she had raised and bottle fed which mooed plaintively until she was out of hearing on her way east to Russia . The excruciatingly hard work in the gulag cutting trees and dragging them to the river to await the Spring thaw when they went downstream to the mills. The hunger. The cold. The deaths of her family, how she dug and scraped out a shallow grave to bury her children in the frozen permafrost earth. The hardships. The degradations. I don't suppose there is a single Polish family who doesn't have a similar history or tale to tell. Some of the tales were horrific – they gave me bad dreams – It wasn't until I'd grown up that I understood that my parents were trying themselves to come to terms with and heal the past – a past which I hopefully would never experience.

But in spite of the past she was so cheerful and jolly. And so determined to move forward. She kept one eye on the future as well as one eye on the past. And her courage and fortitude were always respected by all those who knew her.

I paused.....remembering a now long dead great lady....

“And you're just like her” Bandit said softly.

Maybe...a little....I'd like to think that I had even a small part of her courage and life skills. None of us know of what we're capable until we're tested but it seems to me that the Polish people are an exceptional nation who have learnt to rise above their sufferings. They grab life by the throat and move forward. Their sufferings seem to have honed their appreciation of life to a fine art.

But after all these years I find there is still a void to fill – Poland still haunts me and I need to see this almost mythical place of my origins - I'd like to see Poland as it is today – to experience Poland – it's language and it's people, it's smiles and it's tears, to understand not only where I come from but to firm up the background that I have never been able to put my family into. To work out what I'm made of and to understand something of the past. Sometimes you have to go back a few steps in order to move forward. The recent changes in Poland have made that possible. At last the nation is not only no longer under Russian rule, it is now part of the European community – what a wonderful turn of events – something that my parents fifty years ago would never have dreamed of in their wildest dreams – my

father listening to the barely audible Polish news in England, his ear close against the wireless set as he strained to hear, the words drowned by the anti-information machines of the post-war communist era would be proud to think that 'his' people had at last brought about their salvation. Suddenly everything has changed. On recently passing through Stansted airport in England I was enchanted to hear the Polish language spoken so often. The world has opened up – not just for Poland but for the rest of Europe who are prepared to be enchanted by this special nation.

“So that's settled then” said Bandit. “When are you going?”
“I didn't say I was going did I?”

“Didn't you? Well,” he said sleepily – “you've been doing all the talking but you haven't been listening to yourself have you?” He turned round twice very carefully on the bench making himself into a comfortable ball. And then yawning slowly he tucked his head into his front paws and fell asleep.
