

2009 GLOSSA Scholarship Awards

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I saw her for the first time on a quite Glasgow street just before midnight, her cheeks were rosy and her smile was broad, 'hi' I stuttered, 'hi' with a giggle her friendly response, her thick foreign accent resonated in my mind. She was beautiful, that is for sure, a trait she seems to share with many of similar origin. That was the first of many meetings, I could replay every one step by step but I don't think the reader would appreciate that, so I'll keep it brief, and hopefully relevant.

I have never before been so enchanted and intrigued by such a person, there must be more about her, and what about this place she comes from, Poland? And why is she here? And for that matter why are so many Polish people here? Glasgow is terrible! What would convince any foreign national that coming here would be a worthwhile pursuit? Needless to say I am exaggerating the despair which I am bequeathed by my maternal city.

Through her own compatriots did I meet her, a big Polish fellow by the name of Maciej, one of six other Poles I was acquainted to by profession, chef in an Italian restaurant dominated and run by Poles, I was an outsider in my own city! The job which curiously doesn't stoke too much surprise among friends of mine was one in which English is certainly the minority language.

Having met this young lady, the embers of intrigue inside were stoked to flames of eager fascination. Before this my only concern with Poland was that it had been the birth place of two of my favourite football players, plying their trade in the fair east end of Glasgow. So let's see, the flag is red and white, eh, the capital is Warsaw, eh, it borders Germany to the east, what else is there to know, I didn't plan going there what was I supposed to know?

My language skills in the dominant tongue of the kitchen did not exactly flourish more like stumbled and stuttered into a very poor and slow progression into understanding the basic pleasantries, which before I continue I feel is no mean feat given the complex nature of the language in question. 'Szybko, Szybko!' balled the crazy bearded man from Mazury, without really understanding what was going on I would jump to attention and deliver all the food I could muster in the short space of time available. The six foot Polish nut case was one not too be reckoned with, although outside a gent, in the kitchen a daemon along the same lines as Gordon Ramsey, but really if I had to choose I would much prefer the tame in comparison Scot!

'yak she mash?' is that Chinese or Polish? Roars of laughter followed, 'your Polish is rubbish!!' followed by more roars of laughter. More words followed 'jin dobry, so swihach, spoko, narazhy' to put the readers mind at rest I am aware the spelling is wrong bordering on ridiculous but written skills were not really an issue where I was. Anyway, back to the story, armed with my new arsenal of impressive polish words to charm said young lady, and reengaged the target upon our next meeting. Surprisingly more roars of laughter, granted a little less brash and a little more reserved I could still see she was more amused than shocked, but never the less impressed by my efforts.

'So where are you from in Poland?' this was a question which took weeks to get my head round, and here it comes 'Jasjdfafgh zdrojas', 'what?' was my appropriate and confused response, once again 'Jastshoowwnnbbbye zdrooy', not even on mars do you have such places with such weird and fantastic names. I tried to change the subject quickly but to no avail, she quickly interjected with 'so let me hear you say it?' This was not a welcome question by any stretch of the imagination, but I did attempt, after quickly checking to make sure no one else

was watching, here it goes 'yastsshooowwnnbye zdroooyy', the delight was clear to see painted all over her face.

I can assure the reader, if in fact a Polish native whom I can only suspect, such tongue twisters to foreigners are extremely difficult but I have progressed and feel more comfortable with place names now.

Alas with great strife the young Polish lady was not a permanent fixture in Glasgow, her immanent return to 'Polska' lead me to the first voyage over the English Channel to continental Europe and eventually to sub zero temperatures in Silesia. My first impression, other than the fact that there seemed to be more than a few model looking women just walking around the airport, was that it was cold, really cold, the Hawaii shirt underneath my jacket was not quite appropriate for the climate nor did it impress my Girlfriend, or here seemingly bamboozled father, who I can only imagine assumed me to be some crazed, surfer who got on the wrong plane. Such shows of inappropriate dress and unpreparedness are a speciality of mine, so was impact was not to unfamiliar.

Oh kielbasa! Kielbasa, kielbasa, kielbasa! I think I could eat it forever, the four hour journey on plane then by car was well worth it in the end. Some Kielbasa Slask awaited me in the homely flat on the third floor of a tower block, of which I notice there were a lot of, but strongly enough they didn't have the threatening vibe so familiar with similar buildings in my own city and in fact where I was brought up. The polish hospitality, as I had read in the lonely planet guide, on the plane journey over was overwhelming, I remember one apt phrase from the book and goes something like this 'a guest in the house, a God in the house' or something of similar sentiment. I couldn't wait to see the rest of the place, if everything was as good as my first impression then I was in for one amazing holiday, which might have reached as far as the beginning of a flat hunting escapade, it really was that good.

I find myself struggling to convey in correct proportion the emotions and feelings I had whilst in Poland, of course the girl in my company took up a lot of my thoughts, a characteristic she contrived to improve upon over time despite my best efforts to prevent such occurrences. I always had one thing on my mind though whilst there, surely Ill get to the bottom of the reason for the mass exodus and invasion of my own city. What did I really expect to encounter, the people in Glasgow were of a very similar culture to ours, lots of beer and enjoyed a night out. Could the place be all that different? But oh my confusion was about to deepen, my first introduction the the 'Rynek' in Krakow was met with a slighty gapping jaw and a loss for words. 'This place is amazing' was my eventual outburst. Sitting in a hidden restaurant, just out of sight of the Market square in a dimly lit tavern, with some Tyskie in my glass and pierogi on my plate, I can only begin too wonder, 'why would anyone leave this place to come and work in Scotland?'

More of the same followed in Wroclaw and Opole, beautiful places with even better night clubs. A young mans dream, good beer, better food and night clubs open till five in the morning. Can this place get any better? With haste I purge forward in my praise of this new found land but a warning I received from the burly men in sharp suits decorating the perimeter of most dance halls in the big cities, there glare enough to ensure I understood that I was on foreign soil, but I was on holiday after all and I still enjoyed the nights, being nearly the only guy on the dance floor surrounded by Polish women, who seemed confused by my lack of conversational skills.

There was only one thing left I just had to do before going back home, football is a passion in Scotland and as I understand in Poland as well, this message I got loud and clear. Now before I proceed with the final part of this short recollection I would like to ad that the 'Sektor A' part of the football stadium in Opole is best avoided. Thus we begin; the game was exciting, a tight affair with only one goal going to the visiting team from lodz. The tickets we purchased outside were randomly chosen due to the cheapest price, which makes sense in

hindsight. The stocky men, nearly twice the size in both height and width that I found myself surrounded by made me feel like a small flower in the black forest, if the trees could sing and swear in Polish with alarming aggression and frequency. The adrenaline in the crowd was immense and I couldn't help but be caught up in the atmosphere. My joy was short lived though, my lack of singing did not go unnoticed by my peers, nor did the sheepishness of my friend who could understand better than I what was being shouted. To save any use of further language lets say the exit was reached in a time any sprinter would be proud of, and I got to see the rest of the game, with the kind graces of a chuckling security guard amused by our predicament.

So what do I think about Poland? All in all I don't know anywhere quite like it, its Enchanting cities, tasty food, quality beer, beautiful women and passionate football fans, well I loved every second of my visits there and I learn something new every time, except for the language which still seems to evade me despite my most profound efforts. Well the only solution I have is to persist, and look forward to spending time there very soon.