

A Poland Story
by
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I first met Anita in 1997 not long after I arrived in Poland to teach English in a high school as a Peace Corps volunteer. At 67 I was a recently-retired psychotherapist, divorced, and looking for a late-life adventure. Anita was a part-time teacher of Polish in the school and sat across from me in the teachers' room. Though she was introduced along with other staff, I don't recall that we ever exchanged more than a few greetings my first year. Not that I didn't notice her friendly smile. Struggling as I was to learn Polish, I was reluctant to speak to anyone other than the three Polish teachers of English. It wasn't until the summer between my two years of service, when I was looking for a new tutor, that a friend told me he knew someone I might like to work with.

On a sunny June afternoon in the city's central marketplace, or Rynek, where people had gathered for some kind of city-wide celebration, I was surprised that it was Anita to whom I was being introduced.

"Hello," I said, "we already know each other, sort of. I wasn't aware you spoke English."

"Yes I do, and I hear you are looking for a tutor to improve your Polish."

"I am indeed. But how come you never spoke much at school?"

"I think I was too shy to speak in front of my colleagues," she said.

"Well, I think it's finally time we got acquainted. I invite you for a beer in one of these outdoor cafés."

"I would be delighted."

I guessed that Anita was in her twenties, but in spite of the age difference I felt at ease with her outgoing manner. Petite, pretty and clearly very bright, she conveyed an air of self confidence that I found reassuring. After an hour of easy conversation we agreed to meet on a weekly basis at her apartment that she shared with her partner Artur.

The city of Swidnica (pronounced Shwidneetza), population 65,000, is located in southwest Poland not far from the border with the Czech Republic. With the demise of the communist regime, the Polish Ministry of Education contracted with the Peace Corps in 1990 to send Americans to teach English for the next eleven years.

The first few months for me were not easy. I had a lot to learn about classroom discipline. I felt isolated and lonely. Making friends came slowly. Improving my Polish came even more slowly. I didn't need it in class since we spoke English, but I wanted to be able to talk with my colleagues, most of whom didn't speak English. And I wanted to be able to navigate the world around me. The Peace Corps began our Polish instruction during the previous summer of training, and it encouraged us to continue studying by offering to reimburse us for the cost of a tutor. I had two tutors during my first year who didn't work out. My eventual sessions with Anita felt like a breath of fresh air.

By the time I was meeting with Anita later that summer of 1998, she had quit teaching and was working as a reporter for a local newspaper. Journalism would become her passion and career.

Anita's partner Artur was working at the time in Germany, so I didn't see him very often. A few times when he was home he joined Anita and me for a beer after my lesson.

A hefty, intense man, he was a good storyteller, but he spoke no English. So it was quite a scene with Anita and Artur speaking Polish, Artur and I speaking German, and Anita and I speaking English with a bit of Polish thrown in. Laughter is the same in any language. Anita and Artur wanted to get married as soon as they had saved enough money. It would be sometime yet before the vows were said.

In our sessions Anita was mercifully patient, since I found Polish agonizingly difficult. But she was encouraging as well. “Your pronunciation is very good. Better than most foreigners I would say.”

Though Anita and I were conscientious about my lessons, there was always time left over for conversation in English, which to my amazement she spoke almost flawlessly and with no discernible accent. Besides discussing everything from politics to films, we sometimes talked about her problems at work. On a few occasions I asked her advice about difficulties I had at school. In time she would become one of my best friends in Swidnica.

We met outside her apartment only twice, once in December when I gave a holiday dinner party for my Polish friends at a local hotel and again at the end of the year when I took her to lunch a few days before my departure from Poland in June of 1999.

We said goodbye on a street corner a few blocks from her office. We hugged. “I’ll miss you very much,” I said.

“Me too.” She paused. “Don’t forget about us here,” she said softly.

I had no expectation of returning to Poland. However, Anita and I promised to keep in touch via e-mail. In 2002 came the news that she was pregnant and not long after the

announcement of her daughter's birth. Then a few months later came a wedding invitation from a former student. Sylwia had been in one of my classes my first year and had visited me a year after I left Poland. She also was a good friend of Anita's, having worked with her as a photographer on the same newspaper while still in high school. I was heading back to Poland.

Anita had insisted that I stay with them. The household now included eight-month-old Alexandra, who went by the nick name of Ola. I was beginning to feel very much a part of the family as we drove to a small church nestled in the beautiful Polish countryside where we would join in Sylwia's celebration.

The invitation to Anita and Arthur's wedding came three years later. There was no question about my attending. Theirs was a civil ceremony and I had the honor of being one of the signers of the marriage certificate. Anita was stunning in her long white dress. Three-year-old Ola drew almost as much attention in her frilly outfit. In his dark blue suit, Artur was a handsome groom.

During the ceremony I became acutely aware of the affection I felt for this young family. In addition to my close relationship with Anita that had developed through our on-going correspondence, I had been heartily welcomed into the family by Artur. It felt to me almost like a mutual adoption. I also realized that they were filling a gap in my life now that my three children were long gone from the nest.

In 2008, the year I published a memoir about my time in Poland, Anita volunteered to arrange a book signing for me at a Swidnica bookstore. This happy occasion was muted

by the unsettling news that Artur's health was not good and he was missing work. After a year of examinations and several hospitalizations, the tentative diagnosis was a chronic inflammation of the spleen. When I visited the family in 2011, Anita and Artur were still hopeful that his condition would improve, but it was clear that he wasn't doing well. Then in March of 2012 came the news that Artur had been hospitalized due to complications and had died the night before.

Artur's death was hard for me to absorb. I felt sad for days. I worried about Anita. But in the months that followed, I could tell through e-mails and occasional talks on Skype that with great resilience Anita was working through her grief and life was slowly returning to normal. "Ola and I are doing pretty well. Work has been my salvation."

Anita had been the chief editor of her newspaper for several years. She told me more than once how much she loved her job in spite of late nights to meet her deadlines. She also took on extra writing projects to supplement her salary. I began to think about what I could do to offer a beneficial change of scene.

In December of 2012 I wrote to Anita, "How would you and Ola like to come to Italy with me next spring?"

"We would love to," she replied. "I've always wanted to see Tuscany."

And so a trip was planned for April to spend a week in Florence. Afterward I would return to Swidnica for several days with Anita and Ola. This would be their first time flying.

Our visit was blessed with warm, sunny days. Guidebook in hand, we roamed this dazzling Renaissance city from one glorious art treasure to another. We even worked in a half day visit to the nearby village of Fiesole with its Roman ruins and a day trip by train to Pisa. Anita happily took on the role of map reader, since I was useless in this department because of impaired vision. I happily took on the role of providing an avuncular presence.

I was not surprised that the three of us got along so easily. I was also delighted to see Anita and Ola enjoying them selves. Anita was now 39 and Ola 11. At first Ola was a bit reserved with me, but soon she was chatting away in both English and Polish.

We reveled in a different restaurant each evening. Once during dessert I looked up from my dish of gelato and said, "I want to tell you both that, as you know, I have traveled a lot, but this trip is without a doubt one of the most enjoyable I've ever had."

Back in Swidnica, while Anita was at work and Ola in school, I visited with other friends and former colleagues catching up on their lives. Sylwia had become a sought-after wedding photographer.

One evening when Anita and I were recalling our trip to Florence she said. "What a wonderful time we all had. And Ola is so happy with the bracelet you bought her on the Ponte Vecchio."

In thinking back on these two weeks and my relationship with Anita and her family, I am reminded once again how love weaves its way through our lives. I feel a deep sense of gratitude to have given and received such a precious gift.
