

# Did You Say Poland?

## Tea Break Travels, No 5

*This story covers several trips to Poland not long after the fall of the communist regime. It is the time of Lech Walenska, Father Popieluszko, hyper inflation, and a rapidly changing country. It was a unique experience, including computers from the 1960's running ATMs, trips to Gdansk and Krakow, and the best meal in town for less than 5 UK Pounds per head. I feel privileged to have seen it. (approx 2800 words)*

*It is one story from a series of travel related short stories called "Tea Break Travels". They are designed to be read in a short break from work or whatever, and cost around the same as a biscuit! Some are true, some embellished, and some fictional. Some are from near 20 years of too much business travel, or our holidays, others are relayed from friends and acquaintances, yet others are just plain made up! Enjoy.*

Yes he had. I'd spent many years travelling around Western Europe at the whim of my company and although the Berlin Wall had come down it was a little surprise to find that the next day I was off to Warsaw, or should I spell it Warszawa because that what the letters emblazoned across the airport terminal building said.

It was 1990 (I think!) and "Eastern" Europe was opening up to Western commerce. The company I worked for was not going to be left out and an early contact in Poland seemed to offer a good opportunity. So I was part of team that would go investigate, negotiate and hopefully set up our Polish subsidiary.

At that time Warsaw airport was still designed to give a communist welcome. Strapped by slow administration (although recently the USA is doing a good imitation), the dark wood panelled immigration area made me feel less than welcome. And that is after the wait to get a visa issued at the Polish Embassy in London. Still, even then they seemed to have a good idea only recently copied here – you could buy duty free in the Pevex (foreigners' shop) on the way in, a trick only recently added at Gatwick. The company we were negotiating with did actually have some significant computer operations. Like around 3,500 peoples' worth of computer operations spread across the country. And all run on less computer power than the PC this is being typed on!

Over the next few months I was to spend most of my time in Poland and this is a collection memories of a country undergoing a massive time and political change. I found it a sad, beautiful, mixed up, surprising land, full of friendly, intelligent and innovative people, people rushing to be part of the west. I feel privileged to have seen it in this way, for like a butterfly it has passed quickly by.

The currency is obviously something that you notice instantly on a business deal. The Zloty was trading at 20,000 to the pound when I started and topped 40,000 just a few months later. Later on it was re-valued to make some sensible numbers on notes! On

my first trip I had settle a hotel bill – just a few days and a meal or so – for just short of 20,000,000. The figures just made it into the box on a Master Card slip. I just prayed they noticed the “Z” at the front! With inflation running so high, the taxi drivers were given a dream ticket. They could not recalibrate the meters quickly enough, so the meter ran at normal “speed” and then the driver had a set of multiplier cards that acted on the meter reading. So the meter said 100 zloty, but the driver would then produce a card saying 100 times, giving a 10,000 zloty charge. Do the sums, it’s still only 50 pence. But the high numbers have an impact, I remember early one morning arguing with an unofficial taxi driver that took from the national airport terminal to the office over what was around 20 pence. Well they do say treat the company money as your own!!

Call me a sceptic, but I do suspect that the multiplier varied depending on your nationality or whether driver liked you or not. I base this on a never to be repeated visit to the “café” that served our offices. Our hosts had found office space for the joint negotiating team in a compound near the airport that was previously occupied by some part of the secret police. (The taxi drivers still flinched when you asked to go there). In the grounds was a hut, which served some form of hot lunch each day. The most expensive meal on the board was less the 100 groszy – and 100 groszy equalled 1 Zloty. It was amazing that you could produce a coin to represent one 2 millionth of a pound, let alone produce food on a plate, with a knife and fork for one two hundredth of a pence. It wasn’t very good by the way.

Most of the time was spent in Warsaw, but early on we wanted to see one of the out of town places and Bydgoszcz was identified as our first day trip. It may have been a left over of communist times, still very fresh on both our and their minds, but there was an immediate assumption our prospective partners would provide transport. ‘No way’, we say, we’ve already hired the car, just give us directions. They were horrified, but off we went one misty October morning. Driving wasn’t that bad. The roads were not busy, most traffic was trucks that the Renault 18 made short work of overtaking. We took a break in Torun at the suggestion of our English / Polish colleague. It was market day which added some colour, but that didn’t make the memories for me. The smell of coal smoke was the first thing, lost now in the UK with gas central heating but instantly recognized from my Midlands built childhood memories. Then there was the cathedral. I believe Torun has two famous children. Copernicus was born there, but back in 1990 it was Father Popieluszko that was better known. He was murdered in July 1984 for his support of the freedom movement and the shrine in the cathedral was still a blanket of candles and flowers. We later found that on our return journey we had driven the road on which he was stopped and shot. The final memory was the gingerbread man, a local signature confection. On my return I shared it with a Polish friend, much to his delight.

The language is not that difficult, but my low exposure to Polish added to the Poles low exposure to English made it necessary to use interpreters at all times. After the “yes”, “no”, hello / goodbye – the same word – and thank you, the real business was done via an intermediary. A trip to Gdansk provided a memorable event. Having gone through a 30 minute presentation that took 2 hours, then a bout of questions, all translated, one of our local hosts said, “I want to thank you for making the effort to come to Gdansk, and for

listening to our ideas.” He said it in perfect English. Our long suffering interpreter immediately turned to me and delivered his message in a stream of Polish!

And talking of Gdansk, what a place to go to. Those who lived through the early and mid ‘80s will undoubtedly remember grainy news coverage of the strike at the Gdansk shipyards. Solidarity, Lech Walenska and the shipyard gates with men straddling the cross bar over the gates. I stood looking at those gates late in a December afternoon. The yard was closed down even then. The area outside the gates cleared to make a triangular open space, paved, with three back to back crosses soaring skyward as memorial to those that fought and died in this bitter standoff. In the shipyard wall is a shrine. In silence I studied it. I had deep and emotional thoughts then as I do now writing this. These ordinary people, welders, labourers, electricians, defeated communism and they did it right here. It wasn’t the CIA, SIS, the West’s military might, it was these workers putting down the spanner and hammer, starving and being determined. Gdansk burst the bubble and the rest of Central Europe followed with in months. Gdansk is worth a visit in many other ways. The old town is still a walled enclave – it was celebrating St Nicholas the evening I was there with basically what amounted to a town wide street party. Even the weather joined in delivering light, Christmasy snow flurries. Of course, Gdansk, or Danzig as it was previously called, had hosted another world changing event. On 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939, Germany invaded Danzig, then a League of Nations Free Port. They besieged the mainly Polish postal workers in the main post office. A fierce battle ensued which resulted in the death or capture of the all of the postmen. Those captured were later executed. It is widely recognized as the start of World War II. Outside the main post office is the monument to those postal workers who tried in vain to resist. One town, two epic events within 40 years.

A little geeky moment now, well going there was all about computers remember! Computer exports to Poland from the west were banned, but that didn’t stop the Poles getting computers. There were copies of IBM 360 mainframes called Riads, and ICL 1900 machines called Odres. There were some genuine early Honeywells there as well, adapted by the local engineers to run ATMs. They must have been 100 times, at minimum, more efficient than the western equivalents. The inventiveness and talent was everywhere. At one centre we found a team that had obtained an IBM 4300 machine, complete with MVS and DB2. Sorry if your not a (well, an old) computer geek – but basically this is very, very complex software. Alas their prize did not include a single manual. They had it up and running by interpreting the code and sheer determination! Most centres had an engineering department that made all spares needed. And one centre had a very Polish twist. Computer rooms are traditionally sterile, clinical places. But they were not immune to the Polish love of plants. One centre had a towering rubber plant thriving next to the operators’ consoles.

Plants remind me of the flower shops; they were everywhere. Flowers seemed embedded in the social culture. If you visit somebody, take flowers. And other forms of plant also had a special meaning at that time. Fresh fruit and veg. Just about all the harvest was canned, so the fresh variety, and especially imported delicacies like bananas where

snapped up quickly whenever they appeared. Our hosts came into the office proudly carrying apples one day and on one occasion a pineapple!

Towards the end of the negotiations it was necessary to visit a number of the other centres dotted around Poland. This time our hosts were absolutely insistent that they would provide a car and driver, and planned a full week tour of 4 of the centres we had not yet seen. Time just did not allow such a relaxed pace, so we renegotiated a swifter grand tour. We left Warsaw in the evening, drove to Krakow, visited their Krakow centre, then Katowice and Wroclaw the next day, stayed there overnight, visited Poznan and back to Warsaw the day after. Hectic you may say. Impolite I suspect was the reaction of our hosts and their staff.

The night time drive south to Krakow was enlivened by some hair raising overtaking manoeuvres by our driver. After following a lorry for mile after mile he would suddenly decide to overtake. As we pulled out and came level with the lorry he would change into 5<sup>th</sup> gear, and we would complete the overtaking at about an inch a mile. No so bad until headlights appeared coming the other way. As they closed in there was still no attempt to speed the car up. Several times the driver being overtaken saved us! We later found out that the driver had to return a certain kilometers per litre average for all journeys, and if he did not he had to pay. If only he had said we'd have gladly chipped in a few 100,000 Zs for overtaking petrol!

Still we did get to Krakow around 10 pm and checked into to the Pod Rosa hotel in the old town. In our haste to get underway, we had neglected to change more money so were a bit short of zloties. Hoping to charge to the room we asked for the hotel restaurant. There wasn't one. So we asked to change money; they did not do that. So around 10:30 we set out into old town Krakow not just looking for an open restaurant but one that took credit cards! It took a while but we finally saw the Mastercard sign in the window of the Grand Hotel. We were in like a flash. The dining room was two storeys high with an upper balcony. A piano player was touching the ivories, there was silver service and a very pleasant atmosphere. Two courses, some Bulgaria wine, a brandy afterwards, and then we asked for the bill. We checked it three times. For three of us we had hit the grand total of 13 pounds.

The Pod Rosa was not just in the old town, but next to the Cathedral. Being ignorant of the history of Krakow I thought nothing of this and gratefully went to bed and into a deep sleep. At 1 am somebody is blowing a trumpet outside my room. After a few rallies it stopped abruptly, and I assumed somebody equally as annoyed as I had dealt with it. The next morning I find out this a tradition of Krakow. When the Turks besieged the city in the 1600s a watchful citizen saw them starting to advance late at night. To warn the city he climbed the tower and blasted away on a trumpet. The sudden end commemorates the fact that he was slain by a Turkish arrow. We had little time to appreciate Krakow, but it is a very historic place. The old town was undamaged by the war and boasts historic building after historic building. I've always sworn to go back, but just haven't got round to it yet.

Katowice was an eye opener. Heavily industrialized it sprawled for mile and after mile. Foundaries, petrochem works, gas works, pits, it reminded me of the Black Country of the late fifties to early sixties. The smell was awful and obviously the air contained something more than just a whiff. Few houses had a chimney stack left standing. Most lay as a heap of bricks on the roof. The mortar that should have kept them upright had been eaten away by the chemicals in the air. We were told that it can get so bad that people chose to sleep deep down in the salt mines to get cleaner air.

We did manage our schedule that day and saw all three centres. One little thing amused us however. Our hosts were expecting us to be American, but we happened to all be British. To make Americans feel at home they had acquired some genuine Coca Cola, in the traditional bottle. At the first stop we declined it in favour of tea. Strangely at the next stop there were 3 bottles again. By the third stop we had concluded that it was the same three bottles and they were being rushed from centre to centre as soon as we left!

Just to prove we did not have time for the planned week long version of the tour, I had to break off at Wroclav and fly back to Warsaw, leaving my two colleagues to continue. Lot Internal was still operating Antonov AN4's at that time. Nice smooth fliers, very stable but very noisy. However it was the flight announcements that got to me. As we approached Warsaw the landing announcement was made in Polish followed by Russian by the cabin attendant, and then an English language tape was used to abide by international law. So a cultured British voice advised us that the captain had switched on the no smoking signs, and in preparation for landing we should fold away our tray tables and return the seat back to the upright position. Fine, except the flight was no smoking in any case, there was not a tray table of any description to be seen, and the deck chair like seats were fixed in a single position!

I have far too many memories of being in Poland at such a crucial time to write up in one go. Things like the chimney sweeps in Gdansk, dressed in black suits and top hats, the superbly restored old town in Warsaw, the vodka, people in the UK thinking I'd just got back from Walsall rather Warsaw, and many others, so perhaps I'll weave them into other stories later. What about the deal? Well it was not to be. Throughout my time there I noticed a pattern to the conversation with many of the people. In a single discourse they went through great optimism that Poland was now free, to regretting the loss of some things of the past, and ending up in pessimism that it will all go wrong. Our negotiations mirrored that with a great start, but then suddenly stopped as some of our hosts literally disappeared overnight, and an investigation into fraud started, totally unrelated to us or the business we were looking at I must stress. At that moment I could appreciate why those people felt that way.

Remembering the vodka, Sto Lat Polski – or hopefully longer than that!