

POLAND, 1998

Draft by Edward Ordman 2/16/2010

In 1998 my wife and I spent a few weeks in Poland. We taught English for two weeks at a children's summer camp in a rural area near Seidlce, in eastern Poland. We found the trip in a Elderhostel catalogue but it was actually organized by an organization called Global Volunteers, which recruits volunteers to help with charitable projects overseas. One consequence of such trip sponsorship is that if the principal purpose and activity of the overseas trip is to do volunteer work, then costs directly associated with that (including travel costs) become tax deductible as charitable contributions.

The location and camp

Seidlce is in a farming area about half way from Warsaw to the border of Belarus, then part of the Soviet Union. It is about 90 kilometers east from Warsaw to Seidlce and roughly the same distance to Brest on the Belarus border. The camp was 20 kilometers west of Seidlce and 6 kilometers south of the train tracks and the main road, International Route 2, running from Berlin to Moscow. The location, and building, had an interesting history. Władysław Reymont (1867-1925) was a Polish writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1924. Many of his books concerned the plight of the poor in Poland and their suffering under various foreign occupations; his most famous novel is "Peasants." He died before he could use the Nobel prize money to establish a country home for himself. His widow purchased and modernized to 1926 standards a country estate, at a place called Chlewiska. The home is now called Reymontówka, pronounced "Raymontooofka."

In 1981 the home was acquired by the then communist government, and operated as a rest home for artists and scientists. Following the fall of the communist regime, it remained the

property of the county government which was trying to find economically productive uses for it, and during the summer it was serving as a summer camp. There were about 50 children, age six to twelve. For a couple of hours each morning and afternoon Eunice had a group of five eight- and nine-year olds and I had four ten- to twelve-year olds. They had studied English in school, but it was almost all how to read and write a very simple vocabulary, with almost no speaking. Remember: their teachers had grown up during communist times, when travel to English-speaking countries was impossible and listening to English-language radio or television would have been very dangerous for political reasons.

We had brought a supply of maps and of English-language comic books. The pupils were amazingly strong on geography: on a map of the United States with state outlines but no names, they could name all the states, name the state capitals, and sketch in and name the major rivers. Our experience with many foreign school systems is that often the students memorize far more than American students, but have less experience in discussion, analysis, or facing problems that are not like those “in the book.” The children adored our informality and the way that we expected them to make suggestions and express their own preferences. Among our discussions were relative locations of places and how you would get from one place to another (“Go two blocks and turn left”) and we had them read Donald Duck and similar comic stories and discuss what the characters did and why. We also used simple songs and poems and a lot of games of the “Simon says” variety. A couple of the young people were more adventurous: I had a great deal of fun teaching one of them jokes based on Lewis Carroll’s description of the four basic arithmetic operations: ambition, distraction, uglification, and derision.

At the end of the camp period, the students were to put on a show for their parents.

Among the complications, of course, were that few of the parents could understand English. Eunice and I combined our groups, and they wrote a script to use a relatively large cast for a performance of Little Red Riding Hood. The advantage was that their parents all knew the story, so they could follow it even if they didn't follow the words. The kids had a wonderful time with very broad comic acting, and a few flubs that occurred in rehearsal brought such laughter from the kids that they decided to incorporate them in the final performance. For example, when the hunter picked up his gun (my red-and-white cane) and pointed it at the wolf, the wolf immediately went into a very theatrical act of falling down and dying in great agony: only after that did the hunter announce "Bang, bang."

Camp diversions

Some of the field trips were also remarkable experiences. On one, the children were driven to Warsaw. They did see a museum, but none of them were the slightest bit interested in telling us about that. From their point of view, the purpose of the trip was to visit Warsaw's brand new McDonald's hamburger stand. The individual kids had strong preferences for what they wanted, and even some differences in financial standing - so even though they all got the same thing purchased from the camp lunch budget, there was a great deal of "swap my french fries for your hamburger," "my marbles for your hamburger", and the like. One of my students apparently acquired ten hamburgers, and of course threw up before he finished all of them. I couldn't resist telling the tale which I had learned from a comic book in my childhood of the time that Jughead bet someone at ten one morning that he could eat twelve pizzas. They went to the pizza stand at noon, and he found that after ten of them he could manage no more. He then said, "I don't understand it. I came over here an hour ago, and ate twelve of them, just to be sure I

could.” That got us into quite a joke-telling session, with several jokes being so popular that they had to be translated for the younger kids whose English wasn’t good enough yet.

Another interesting day was the time that a company of dancers and film makers arrived at Reymontówka. They were making a film about Polish folk dances and wanted to use the historic front yard and facade of Reymontówka as a background. This was fascinating to watch, although not actually a good way to watch a folk dance. They’d get in position, perform five steps, move the camera, perform the same five steps, and move the camera again, over and over for an hour at a time. I’d often watched movies and wondered - how can they position all those cameras and hide them so that one camera never accidentally takes a picture of another? Now I know.

The camp was, as I’ve indicated, pretty isolated. One diversion was to walk through the forest on a dirt trail two miles west to the nearest village. This was a farming village of about twenty small houses, surrounded by potato fields, with chickens and an occasional hog visible in the farmyards. The individual fields surrounding the village were very long and narrow, perhaps twenty feet wide, in contrast to the rectangular fields common in the United States. There were also horses. This county of Poland according to the most recent census available at that time had over four times as many horses as it had tractors, and the farm equipment we saw resembled the small horse-drawn equipment that was still common in the United States in the 1930’s. We were told that the village had one telephone. The children were friendly, and several of the local adults made efforts to communicate with us but none that we met spoke much English. Eunice sat on a bench by the road and had an hour-long visit with a local grandmother, both clearly enjoying an animated conversation that took place despite having no words in common. How many children,

how many grandchildren, about how old, were all achieved with hand gestures as to size and counting on fingers. The local grandmother then explained to Eunice about the village stork. Located on the top of a high-voltage electric pole was a platform built especially to allow bird nests. This year a stork had built a nest there, which the locals considered a sign of very good luck. There had initially been five baby storks, according to her gestures; one had fallen out of the nest and now there were four.

On one of our walks through the forest - we call it that, although it was fairly neat and with little underbrush - we were passed by a small tractor towing a rough wagon as a trailer. The men gestured to ask if we'd like a ride. We climbed into the trailer and rode perhaps halfway home when the men indicated that we should get out, and then turned off the trail into the woods. Interested to see what was going on, we followed on foot. Once out of sight of the trail, they set about sawing down a tree. The woods, we had been told, were a government preserve planted in an effort to rebuild the Polish forests after the war, and cutting a tree required a special permit. We don't know if the men had such a permit, and the location of the work made us wonder if they were stealing the tree in order to use the wood for some farm project.

Judaica

The time at Reymontówka did have one real disadvantage. With a dozen English-speaking volunteers (from the United States and Canada) and few other English-speaking staff, the cook served us our meals in a separate room from the kids and the Polish-speaking staff. So we didn't get to make the close Polish friendships we'd hoped for. Still, we managed to make a few.

The camp doctor, a young man, spoke English, and was fascinated to discover that I was

Jewish. He had heard of Jews from his father, and surprisingly had a very favorable impression of Jews - but this was his first chance to really interact. He took us one day on a visit to Seidlce, pointing out sites associated with Seidlce's Jewish community, which had been destroyed in World War Two. In particular, the Jews had been herded into the synagogue and into the Jewish hospital, whose locations he pointed out to us - and then both buildings had been burned, with the Jews inside. He commented that there had been one objection from the local residents - burning the Jews they understood, but why had the Nazis also destroyed the hospital? In a small wide place in the street near the former hospital location was a small memorial, with plaques memorializing the destruction and murder of the Jews. The plaques were in Polish and Yiddish, and since I speak German and know the Hebrew alphabet I could read a fair amount of the Yiddish. I had to pause and sound out one word, describing the war. It was called "Hitler's War" and I'd never before seen the name "Hitler" written out in Hebrew characters.

The doctor then took us to an isolated corner of a city park, where among the trees and tall grass were a few broken tombstones with Hebrew inscriptions. He said that this park, which covered several acres, had been a Jewish cemetery before the war; it had been plowed up during the Nazi occupation, and he believed that the workers had simply overlooked these few tombstones hidden by the trees. Apparently before the war Jews had been about a third of the population of Seidlce. I knew, but he apparently had not known, that Jews had been deliberately settled in eastern Poland and what is now Belarus a few centuries ago when these areas were ruled by the Russian Czars. The area became one of the major centers of Jewish population and culture. The Jews were definitely not loved by the majority of Poles, and in the view of many the Poles welcomed the effort by the Nazis to dispose of the Jews. The Jews with the foresight to

leave eastern Europe before the war had influence on Jewish culture that is conspicuous throughout the world. The worldwide Chabad movement, which built a large synagogue building in Memphis built just a few years ago, originated in Lubavitch, now in Belarus, around 1800. Unlike many other countries dominated by the Soviets, Poland retained a strong Catholic culture throughout the latter half of the twentieth century.

The Polish economy

A couple of the camp counselors in their late teens or early twenties spoke some English. When we asked one girl whether there had been any real changes visible to her since the change in government in Poland, she did not hesitate: "There are so many more things in the stores. You have so many more choices. When I go into a toy store I see all kinds of toys children can have now that they did not have when I was a child."

Driving along the highway in Poland, a few things stood out. There were a large number of mixed freight trains going by on the main rail line, and a lot of trucks on the main highway. Many of the trucks, we were told, were going from Berlin to Moscow, or at least from central or West German cities to Russian destinations. We saw a great many women who appeared to be hitchhikers, especially around the truck stops. We were told that they were in fact prostitutes, since the truck drivers had at least some hard currency.

One way of making money in Poland in the late 1990's was to drive to Berlin or to West Germany, fill up your car with things available in the West, and drive back to Eastern Poland. The things you brought could be sold at a considerable markup.

In trying to return to a so-called capitalist economy - at least one that included privately-owned businesses - Poland and some other countries of eastern Europe had a big advantage over

the Soviet Union. The Polish economy had included private businesses until about 1948. People's grandparents, if not their parents, had owned or run or worked in such businesses, recalled how they operated, and regarded them as a reasonable and honest way to earn a living. The Soviet Union had largely abolished such businesses within a few years after its revolution of 1917, so that experience had been lost from the population there before the revolution of 1991, and restarting small businesses was much more difficult for them.

There were many houses that seemed partly constructed, but with no evidence of active construction in progress. The explanation was interesting. Since there was no effective lending or mortgage system, one could not buy a house on credit or with a mortgage. One had to save the money. But since there was unpredictable and probably high inflation, saving money in a bank or mattress would never catch up with the price of a house. So whenever someone had some money, they bought what they could: bricks this month, a few windows another month, a roof beam or a door if they found one at a good price and could afford it when it was available.

We were reminded of a joke we had heard from a Polish faculty member who was teaching with us in Denmark a decade earlier, when Poland was still communist: "Poland is just like the United States. In the United States, you can stand on the steps of the Capitol and criticize the government of the United States, and no one will arrest you. In Poland you can also stand on the steps of the Parliament building and criticize the government of the United States, and no one will arrest you. In the United States you can buy anything you want if you have enough dollars, but no one will sell you anything for Polish zlotys. Also in Poland, you can buy anything you want if you have enough dollars, but no one will sell you anything for Polish zlotys."

Elsewhere in Poland

On our three weekends in Poland, we had no duties at camp and were able to travel. The weekend before the camp we spent in Warsaw. Warsaw was largely destroyed by the Soviet army in the last days of the Second World War but had a few old surviving prewar shopping streets, still showing considerable war damage. The countries dominated by the Soviet Union after the war never experienced the major rebuilding and rapid economic recovery that took place in Western Europe. My wife and I are very strongly aware of one phenomenon that followed World War Two: when the United States occupied Germany and Japan, we worked hard to rebuild them and to give them well functioning economies. The Marshall Plan for rebuilding Europe included giving many countries credit for rebuilding their industries. This usually took the form of credit to purchase machine tools and even whole factories in the United States. This was a win-win scenario: it made friends for the United States overseas, and created jobs in the United States for our millions of returning servicemen. The result is that Germany and Japan rapidly changed from being our enemies to being our strong allies, and a friendship that survived over sixty years. In my more depressed moments, I've sometimes observed that we have never made that mistake again: our government seems to have figured out that making friends overseas is not as profitable for our armaments industry as making enemies overseas. But wouldn't it have made sense in our great recession starting in 2008 to spend government money building trucks and bulldozers and whatever other equipment will be needed to rebuild Iraq and Afghanistan?

While the United States was building factories in the western zones of Germany and western Europe, the Soviets were often dismantling factories in eastern Germany and eastern Europe and shipping those factories into Russia, to try to rebuild Russia at the expense of the populations of the satellite countries. Every one of our trips into Eastern Europe has shown that

this did not make people friendly toward Russia.

One feature of central Warsaw was a huge grey building in what is called “Stalinist Gothic” architecture. This stone building with many spires, occupying an entire central city block, was a “gift” from the Soviet Union to Poland. These buildings, generally regarded today as quite ugly and impractical, were constructed in many places by the Soviet Union. I think they were partly the result of the Soviet Union’s fierce pride in being “the biggest and best” which often expressed itself in wanting to emphasize “big” in a way that would put any Texan to shame.

Tours devoted to the memory of the Warsaw Ghetto - there is a monument, but little of the actual ghetto remains - were of interest primarily because the guides can now be more frank about the treatment of the Jews. In Soviet times, the guides usually spent much of the time downplaying the harm done to the Jews and emphasizing the undeniable fact that the number of Russians killed in the war was several times the number of Jews killed. John Hersey’s novel, *The Wall*, is a lengthy but remarkably evocative story of the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto.

One Warsaw building not reminiscent of Soviet times was the rebuilt Royal Palace. Poland for many years had a bizarre form of elective monarchy, with an extremely weak king often chosen from another country and most decisions made by the nobles. The art in the palace was hidden before the war and returned afterwards when the building was rebuilt, and some of it was exceptional. An entire room was devoted to oil paintings of Venice, in the style of Canaletto. Several walls were completely covered, floor to ceiling, with the paintings. The most remarkable feature was that the perspective in all the paintings was correct. That is, paintings near the floor were painted to allow for the fact that they were near the floor; paintings ten feet above the floor had been painted to allow for that fact. The guide told us that somehow Canaletto had been

contracted to paint the paintings especially for this room. A dozen years later, in Memphis, we met the curator of a visiting art exhibit, “Venice in the Age of Canaletto”, who had a far more plausible explanation: Canaletto’s nephew and student, Bernardo Bolletto, whose style was almost identical to Canaletto, had been hired to actually come and work in Warsaw for a number of years, and had painted the pictures on site for the room in the palace.

On an intermediate weekend of the camp, we visited Cracow. Cracow did not suffer the massive destruction that Warsaw did during the war, and has a great deal more of its historic center surviving. The city was having a Jewish Film Festival that week. This surprised us, as the almost complete destruction of the Polish Jewish population during the war means that Poland has few Jews today. Clearly the end of the Communist period and the arrival of western tourists had increased the interest in Poland in things Jewish and the days when Poland had a very large Jewish population.

We visited the concentration camp at Auschwitz, near Cracow, which was captured by the Allies largely intact and where one can visit the buildings and see the barracks, gas chambers, crematory ovens, and rooms of such objects as suitcase, shoes, and hair “harvested” by the Nazis. A week later we visited the camp farther north at Treblinka, which the Germans succeeded in almost completely destroying, and even plowing under the remains, before the Russian army arrived. What is there now is part of the train station and a memorial in the form of a huge sea of symbolic gravestones, labeled with the names of the Jewish communities destroyed by the Nazis.

The place near Cracow that was most unexpected to us was the huge salt mine. One goes down a very deep elevator shaft and then through a long system of underground tunnels and caverns, some huge rooms, dug out over the centuries by the miners. In one place the miners

carved out the entire interior of a cathedral, far underground. In another place they dug some small chambers to serve as guest rooms. I've traveled enough in the eastern United States to have seen a few "George Washington slept here" signs, but somehow I'd never expected to come across a sign that said "Copernicus slept here," especially in a cave far underground.

Looking Back

As a child, I was fascinated by cowboys. I had a cowboy suit and hat and a six-shooter cap gun, and played "Cowboys and Indians" regularly. It wasn't until a few years after our time in Poland that I met a retired man at a college reunion and asked "what did you do?" and got the surprising answer "I was a cowboy."

I couldn't resist asking more. "What was the most interesting part of being a cowboy?"

"My time in the Navy."

"Huh? What did you do in the Navy?"

"I was a cowboy."

In World War Two, most of the farm animals in Europe were killed. The farms had to be restocked with animals brought across the Atlantic. Navy cargo ships were not really designed to carry cows, and the Navy had to recruit cowboys to care for the animals on shipboard and get them on and off the ships. This doesn't figure as prominently in the public consciousness as rebuilding the factories of Europe, but I now realize that it was a very important part of restoring the economies. Being in Poland in 1998 we felt, at times, caught in a time warp: it was only now going through the rebuilding that Western Europe had been through 40 to 50 years earlier. But the people felt that with hard work they could catch up, and we were left with a strong feeling that they were well on the way.

Edward Ordman