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Letters from Abroad

Poland in the 1980s: Developing Downward

JOHN BATCHELDER

My first study-trip to Poland with Grand Valley students was ten weeks during March-June 1980. Grand Valley was then on the term system. I have returned to Poland with students for six to seven weeks during the summers of 1984, 1985, and 1988. Over these nine years I have seen some changes.

There have been improvements. Bus 105 which runs from Merkury, the Akademia Economiczna's dormitory, to the downtown train station is now a clean, sleek Hungarian built tandem, often with empty seats. In 1980 the evil smelling 1950's vintage bus would be so bursting with people that the frame would rub on the back tires. If the crush pushed you over the wheels the soles of your shoes would become sticky from the friction heat. Another improvement: some of the renaissance buildings around the Rynek, the main market square, are getting a fresh coat of pastel pink, yellow, or blue. Also there are more public gardens now and the lawn in front of the Opera House is mowed once a month rather than never.

But below the cosmetic the changes that I see are mostly depressing. The economy is sick and getting sicker, and society is disintegrating. And the tragedy is that all of Poland’s problems are man-made and, therefore, man correctable.

I. The Economy: Why Isn't Poland Spain?

In lecture after lecture the weaknesses of the Polish economy were explained to us by the Akademia professors. With maddening consistency the planners have made one wrong decision after another, starting in the 1950’s with a huge capital-draining steel complex at Stalinograd, now mercifully renamed Katowica. Then, in order to proletarianize the bourgeois intellectual city of Krakow, a second steel complex, named after Lenin, was constructed on a nearby hill where it spews pollutants into the Wisla River and makes the sky over Krakow perpetually gray. Also draining investment capital are the sprawling shipyards in Gdansk, named too after Lenin, that produce super tankers that the world doesn’t want.

Thoughtful Poles are now comparing Poland's economic performance with that of Spain, a country with about the same population and even less natural resources. The economy of Poland which starves agriculture while producing redundant steel and tankers generates a per capita income of $4,670 which is falling. Spain's per capita income is $5,500 and rising.
For the first time, this year several of our students were asked by Polish students of economics “Why are you here? What can you learn from us?” My feeble response to this question is an analogy. If you want to study mental disorders you go to a mental hospital. If you want to study economic disorders you can go to Poland.

In the 1970’s the planners, under Party Secretary Edward Gierek, decided to borrow their way to prosperity. The result was mindless, chaotic building. Today the tallest structure in Krakow is called “The Gierek Memorial.” It is a red, rusting grid of girders that uselessly rises thirty stories high. To protect pedestrians from falling debris, until the city fathers can find the funds to tear it down, “The Gierek Memorial” is fenced in.

II. From Doors With Two Locks To Doors With Four Locks

A friend of mine from 1980, Elizabeta, invited me and five of my students to her flat for a Sunday buffet lunch. She, her husband and two sons had been waiting nine years to move up to this two bedroom apartment. To get there was a 30-45 minute tram and then bus ride from the Rynek. Elizabeta called her apartment complex “a typical new socialist slum.” I wouldn’t contradict her. Sidewalks were in, but there was no landscaping and none was planned. We watched two pre-school boys in their Sunday shorts and shirts playing with toy trucks in the piles of sludge and hardpan.

The inside of the flat was roomy by Eastern European standards, but as always in these prefab cement boxes the floor was uneven and the windows leaked. In the living-dining room there was a folding metal grid, similar to those of inner city liquor stores in the U.S., that can be pulled across the glass window and locked at night. The Poles have become very security conscious the last few years. “You can’t trust neighbors any more,” I was told.

I was given the same one bedroom flat on the fifth floor that was mine in 1984 and 1985. But this year my landlady presented me with four keys instead of two. She had added a lock to the street door and a second dead bolt to the door she and I shared. “You can’t be too careful”, I was told.

III. The United States: The Country Poles Hate To Love

In the last nine years I have also seen changes in the way Poles respond to Americans. They are not as friendly as they used to be. During my previous stays in Poland I was invited out at least once a week by Akademia faculty. This year in six weeks I received only one dinner invitation.

The Polish students in the dorm also were less cordial than in other years. Again...
students into the dorm. The answer was a long story, with a mention of hardpan.

I tried to borrow the tallest student to bar the door, but the only girders were sawed, until we were fenced in.

Locks

She said to her9616; dozen going nine minutes to the complex "a minute," but there were five in their neighbor's hardpan.

They were always in the livingroom and the neighborhood store was a sight. The Poles like Americans neighbors

in 1984 and

She had

Love

the conversation stopping question: "Why are you here?" What is the problem? First, Poles resent our unearned wealth and their undeserved penury, both accidents of history and geography. For centuries Poles have had to struggle to live, squeezed between rapacious Russians and murderous Prussians. We Americans have to go all the way to tiny Nicaragua in order to find an enemy.

Poles also see Americans as semi-educated and uncultured. A favorite putdown is to ask us how many languages we speak. After tea Elizabeta dutifully showed me and my students the correct way to turn the pages of an art book.

Poles bitterly resent the way the U.S. dollar is almighty in their country and the way that it distorts their lives. A single dollar bill will discover a free table at the Stare Polska when there is none. A mere fifty cents will activate an off-duty taxi cab. The largest and busiest department store in Krakow is the PEWEX where the only tender is the legal and illegal dollar. A gifted student will debate for hours with his parents about dollars and his future. Should he become a doctor, or a professor, or a doorman at an Orbis hotel where he can pick up dollars?

Yet Poles want to come to the United States. The line for Visas at the U.S. Consulate in Krakow is always two blocks and six hours long. Every year at least one of our students is proposed to. This year Vincent was approached by a distant cousin who insisted on staying in his room when she invited herself for a visit. To her stringent marriage demands, and I was a witness, Vincent stammered what to her were irrelevancies. "I don't know you. I don't love you. I'm only nineteen." This nubile coquette was as subtle as an Amazon piranha.

In spite of the exotic things our students casually toss around their dorm rooms, such as Oshkosh B'Gosh denims, Micky Mouse T-shirts, sun powered pocket calculators, and dollars, this year we only had one dorm robbery. About three in the morning a Pole snuck into Chris and Mark's room and snatched the 3 x 5 foot "Old Glory" American flag that they had tacked on the wall. I think this theft was a compliment to the United States. Grudgingly, with qualifications and many reservations, Poles like Americans and the country we come from. Some Polish "spiderman" climbed up "The Gierek Memorial" and spray painted in bright white letters "U.S.A."

IV. Quo Vadis?

Quo Vadis? is the title of a book by the Polish author Henryk Sienkiewicz who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1905. It is still a good question. Where is Poland going? There are some hopeful signs. Our seventy-one year old guide in Zakopane who skimmed
over the rocky mountain trails while we youngsters stumbled behind tells me that life in Poland is improving. The most recent visit to Poland by Pope John Paul II (in Poland he is Karol Wojtyla) was covered from start to finish by government controlled television. And now a full mass is carried every Sunday. The two policemen who tortured and killed Father Popieluszko were brought to trial and convicted. It is also clear that the Soviet Union under Party Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, retreating from Afghanistan, is not about to invade Poland. The message from the east is clear. “Do your own thing, Poles, with an occasional genuflexion to Pan Marx and Pan Lenin. But keep your riots small and don’t go bankrupt.” Also, General Jaruzelski seems to be the right person to be leading Poland. Poles don’t dislike him and traditionally career army officers are the most respected people in Poland, after the clergy.

But there are also discouraging signs, such as the breakdown in the sense of community represented by the extra locks. The most troubling development that I have seen over the last nine years is the growing pessimism among Polish young people. At a picnic Andrzej, a student of architecture, was talking to Grand Valley’s Andrew about a forthcoming trip to Australia. Polish Andy asked American Andy “Have you ever thought of defecting?” What strange words to the American ear. From what? Why? And to where would American Andy defect?

A recent study conducted by the Polish Center of Public Opinion Research shows that fully seventy percent of university students see no future for themselves in Poland. Sadly, for Poland, Andrzej’s trip to Australia may be a long one.

**Weimar And The G.D.R.**

CARL KOBERNIK

Is it impossible to have culture shock by going from Germany to Germany? It doesn’t seem probable, but that must be what I experienced. Three weeks I had spent in East Germany. Excuse me. In the German Democratic Republic. In Weimar, city of culture, the city in which many notables of German literature, thought, and music had lived and worked, among them Goethe and Schiller, regarded by many as the greatest German authors, and others of somewhat lesser renown, such as Wieland and Herder. J.S. Bach was active in the area, as was also Martin Luther. These men helped mold and shape German thought and culture. I had visited the places where they had lived and worked for so many and times.

During my time in Weimar I had spent several days there. From the dirty, untidy, with private enterprise, with a touch of the GDR — there’s a new spirit in the air, and the best there. I was somehow able to pick up some cauliflower and some unripe strawberries from somewhere near the city. The Transparents were everywhere, walking the counter, with a woman standing near, wanted, and some cauliflower.

Now I was walking down the eastern streets. I was, in fact, in a different society, and could see the bins full of oranges, all the way to the edge of walking. It is a story, a story, a story, a story. I was, in fact, in a different society, and could see the bins full of oranges, all the way to the edge of walking. It is a story, a story, a story, a story. I was, in fact, in a different society, and could see the bins full of oranges, all the way to the edge of walking. It is a story, a story, a story, a story. I was, in fact, in a different society, and could see the bins full of oranges, all the way to the edge of walking. It is a story, a story, a story, a story.