

WESTWORD COLUMN

The last time I had been in Warsaw was the summer of 1988. I was lodged in a room in the Writers Union hotel, with a lozenge-shaped window overlooking Castle Square. One morning when I returned from grocery-shopping (yogurt, bread, fruit, maybe a bunch of lilacs bought from a stolid *baba* standing in her gum boots on the sidewalk, a third-world vision of *Primavera* herself), I was challenged at the hotel entrance by a couple of soldiers who demanded to see my ID and then accompanied me to my room. They were interested in my window: through it you could see straight down onto the square. They warned me to stand back of the window for the rest of the day, and then they left without any further scrutiny.

It was the day of Mikhail Gorbachev's official visit to the People's Republic of Poland and he and his wife Raissa were scheduled to "go walkabout" among the citizenry. I stood glued to my window to watch. (Silly soldiers thought the window was the problem; didn't they care whether I had a gun?) There they were, right below my window (I could see Gorbie's trademark wine-stain of a birthmark on his skull), glad-handing Warsovians. The Poles seemed genuinely pleased to shake hands with this General Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR and his clever, modern wife who were the personification of the breath of change whistling through the Soviet world in the 1980s – *perestroika*, rebuilding: *Communist! What have YOU done for perestroika?* – and I was thrilled too, at my watch at the window, to be so close to these *dramatis personae*.

This May, 2004, I stood at the edge of Castle Square and looked up at that lozenge-shaped window, the only clue I really had that I had not dreamed up the whole little episode. For there was nothing else recognizable to me from that last visit 16 years ago. (Not even the hotel, once a bit shabby to tell you the truth but now spiffy with plate-glass windows and sleek chrome fixtures.) How could any of us innocent bystanders have predicted that, within a year, Poles would be voting in a multi-party election that included Communists and Solidarity trade union activists (unbanned for the elections), and that Solidarity would win, and be allowed to win?

Sixteen years later I can find no vestige of the 46-year-long Communist era; even the, after all indestructible, Stalinist confection, the Palace of Culture looks elegant, rather than sinister, in its bath of creamy floodlights, especially compared to the hideous big box supermarket and parking lot now squatting at its base. Offending place names are gone and of course I cannot remember a single one as I navigate by new maps: Solidarity Avenue, Holy Cross Bridge, John Paul II Boulevard. I note the new monuments of the martyrs of the Communist era (a lot of priests) alongside the hundreds of memorials to the dead of World War Two that were always here: the hostages shot against walls, the hanged and garrotted in the torture chambers, the Resistance warriors in the sewers and the burning ghetto, the deported and enslaved and exterminated:

even the Communists honoured these, although we all had to wait until the collapse of their authority to read officially that the Jews of Poland were the Nazis' particular target and not just uncounted millions among the "victims of fascism."

I had not rushed back to the new Poland; the truth is, I had grown disgusted over the years with the choices Poles had made about their liberated lives and politics. In my mind, the heroes - men and women, intellectuals and trade unionists, dissident Communists and anarchists and feminists and radical priests - who had persevered for so long in risky and often deadly oppositional tactics to the regime, should have formed the post-Communist governments. But liberated populations have a way of turning, ashamed, on the very people who had refused the compromises they themselves made readily; nobody wants a daily reminder of one's own moral laxity! Soon enough my "heroes" found a way to co-exist anyway, and soon it was all business as usual for nations reborn into capitalism and consumerism. Economic shock therapy. Disinvested state enterprises. Massive unemployment, New billionaires. Crucifixes in the classrooms. Starving poets. Bah, humbug.

But when I was invited to be a keynote speaker at the Third Congress of the Polish Association for Canadian Studies and the Third International Conference of Central European Canadianists in Cracow, and to lecture in Warsaw, Torun and Katowice, I knew it was time to take another look.

As luck would have it, I arrived in Warsaw during the so-called Summit of European ministers, meeting in the lead-up to Poland's entry into the European Union on May 1. My friends had warned me that the city would be in chaos, no one was allowed to come to the airport, Zone One of the city (the centre) was under a complete security shutdown (university classes were cancelled on the central campus), and an anti-globalism march was expected to be violent. (In the end, it was peaceful to the point of tranquilization.) As my taxi sped along emptied roads lined with police and zipped easily through the unpeopled centre - plywood sheets had been installed in all the store windows - I thought of a city under curfew, and compared this ruefully to the excited, swirling throngs of Warsovians in the wake of the Communist Gorbachev.

I had read *The Warsaw Voice* on the plane. "I don't have to enter the debates in order to be an active politician," quoth Henryk Lewczuk, a parliamentary deputy for the Reconstruction of Poland party, who for two-and-a-half years has not spoken in any debate or put any question. "We should wonder whether by supporting accession to the European Union we are strengthening the destructive forces annihilating Christianity, or whether on the contrary we are helping to save the remnants of the Christian civilization still defending itself in western Europe," opined Deputy Antoni Macierewicz, leader of the Catholic-National Movement. "Did anyone catch me? I consider it a success when you cheat and they don't catch you," contributed Slawomir Izdebski, a senator, when

asked whether he had cheated at the high school graduation exam he passed several weeks earlier. (I frowned – only to be greeted by the uproar about Ralph Klein’s plagiarism on my return to Canada.) As the magazine’s editor cautioned: now that they will be members of the European family of free nations, “Poles will have to take a crash course in functioning according to EU standards.”

They certainly have nothing to learn in the way of consuming according to EU standards. A magazine for visitors distributed at the main tourist office is crammed with advertisements for the Marriott Hotel, Paprazzi Café Bar, London Steak House, table dancing at the Fenix Night Club, real estate offices, banks (former Party buildings), a production of “Shirley Valentine.” The city centre is very clean, the city buses are new and efficient, cars jam the sidestreets, internet cafes offer cool music and beer or vodka, the parks – always Warsaw’s jewels – are extremely well-kept and now feature Security men in bright yellow vests to scare away the rapists...well, you get the picture. It has finally sunk in for me, a decade after everyone else, that Warsaw, last seen as a wobbling outpost of Soviet power, is a normal European city. (Outside the large cities, however, it’s a different story.)

And so, like so many other Europeans, young Poles want to study Canada. Why? Sometimes, it was explained to me, Canadian Studies represents a less rigorous discipline than British or American Studies because of the relative lack of Theory in its syllabus; sometimes it is simply the inevitable complement to studying English-language literature. And sometimes it is even seen as exotic, compared to the overly-familiar canon of the Brits and Americans. But mainly they study us because they want to understand how we do it, “it” being the survival, even flourishing, of a small culture alongside a global behemoth.

The generation is too young to have learned any tips while Poland survived alongside the shaggy Soviet beast; they look to post-modern us to see how it’s done, this as-Canadian-as-possible-under-the-circumstances. They’re not so sure “Europe” is the best model; in fact many of the students I met were quite ambivalent about the consequences for Poland of joining a Union in which they already feel second-tier (“German town struggles to welcome Poland’s entry to EU,” as a *Guardian Weekly* headline put it). They’re twitchy about American power : already 75% of Poles are in favour of their troops being withdrawn from Iraq. They’re even ambivalent about Poland: “It’s not what we thought it was going to be,” a young woman at the Cracow conference said to me, speaking of her generation. “Poland is too nationalistic and too Catholic. We want to leave.”

Whether they will actually get to Canada is moot at this point. In the meantime they are studying us. Here, for example, are some of their conference papers: *Community, Language, and Ethical Dimension of Cultural Identity: Charles Taylor and Challenges of Post-modernity*; *The Presence and Influence of the Myth of the Undefended Border in Contemporary Canada*; *Louis Riel: Undiscovered Hero*; *Canada. What a Good Idea: Fixing the World in Thomas King’s ‘Green*

Grass, Running Water. There was even a paper about Yours Truly: "Loops of Time and Territorial Expansion in Myrna Kostash's Nonfiction." Who knew?

This new Poland is a very interesting space.

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