

Oksana and Graham's Trip to Poland

April 4-10 2016

Most people take photographs of their foreign travels. I have always been an exception, to the despair of my second wife. I prefer to write.

Oksana and I took a one-week trip to Poland with our son Eddie the first week of April, 2016. We had had several objectives as we discussed the trip for almost a year. She got a five year Schengen visa through Rotary. I was the Kyiv club president. Our intent had been to visit some Polish clubs. That motive fell into a cocked hat when I resigned from Rotary abruptly in December over a matter of integrity. However, Oksana still had the visa. Eddie has an American passport that we had never used. Our biggest motive was thus simply to make sure we could do it.

A second motive for both of us was to visit Toastmasters clubs in Poland. Oksana is the current president of the Russian speaking club here in Kyiv. Our Ukrainian Toastmasters joined the Polish district last year, and we will be hosting our first international conference in mid-April. She wanted to extend an invitation and see how they work. Lastly, Oksana has an interest in the Orff pedagogy for teaching music. Orff instruments are available in Poland, not Ukraine. She wanted to buy some.

I don't like flying with little kids. A train gives more freedom for the kid to move around than an airplane. Besides that, the train tickets are relatively inexpensive. Most trips are overnight, so you don't have to pay for hotels on the nights that you travel.

The taxi picked us up about 9 PM on Monday the fourth. We had a three-berth sleeping car. It was my first experience with this configuration. It was amazingly cramped, but somehow adequate. I took the top berth, Oksana the lower one and rather than pull down the third one, which would have meant that she could not sit on her bed, we let Eddie sleep on the floor.

We set our watches back an hour to 9:10 upon arriving in Warsaw. We bumbled around the train station trying to find a Wi-Fi hotspot. The locals pointed to McDonald's, which indeed worked. We had booked an apartment through Air B&B. Check in time was 3:00. Oksana and my difficulty working together to plan things will be a consistent theme throughout this account. In any case, after booking the apartment we had not followed through

with plans to get the key. So here, from the McDonald's, I sent an email. I also called via Skype.

That's where the first bit of the magic of this trip evidenced itself. I got an incoming call on Skype! It was Jan, the landlord. How did that happen? It dawned on me that I had bought a Polish number through Skype last winter for a totally unrelated purpose. Skype must have put that number on my caller ID, and he was able to call me back. He said we could get in the apartment at noon. Meet him there.

That left us only a couple of hours to kill. The family likes to walk, so we walked north out of the train station in the general direction of the apartment, carrying our luggage. We had a large wheeled suitcase, a smaller one, the maximum carry-on size, a backpack full of food and Oksana's small purse/backpack. Leaving behind is a trail of disappointed taxi drivers, all of whom hated to see a fare actually walk, we started walking north on Allee Joan Pavel II (John Paul II). The name of the first Polish pope – and one of the most successful popes of the 20th century – is everywhere to be seen.



Outside of Starbucks

Oksana and Graham's Trip to Poland

April 4-10 2016

We encountered Hotel Mercury, which looked to me like a place that foreigners might go. I asked Oksana to run inside and grab a map. She demurred. "No, no – you're the foreigner. You do it!" I did exactly that. As in almost every hotel in the world, they had a rack of literature for visitors. The first thing I touched was a city guide advertising restaurants. Inside the back cover was a map of downtown Warsaw. I had a great feeling of relief that I could orient myself.

As we continued our walk, we came to a Starbucks. I told Oksana what Starbucks meant in the United States. Totally overpriced coffee drinks, highly caloric but delicious desserts, and the relentless social justice messages from founder Howard Schultz. It had been several years since I had given said Mr. Schultz any business, so I figured it wouldn't hurt to introduce Oksana to something of American culture. She was presented with a difficult quiz: did she want the honey Mayberry sugary Iceland surprise tea, or the Malaysian koala bear furry delight tea? They condescended to give her ordinary green tea. I somehow managed to order ordinary black tea. Having thus violated the tribal rites of Starbucks, we brought ourselves back into the fold by ordering one of their cheesecakes. I have to confess it tasted good.

We had killed about enough time, so Oksana flagged a taxi. Polish is quite similar to Ukrainian, and everybody in Warsaw seems to speak at least a smattering of English. We had no trouble establishing where we wanted to go. We had it written on a piece of paper. The issue was, where is that? After much ado, we found the name on a detailed street map. It was only a kilometer's ride. When we got there, however, we still couldn't find the street. I recognized from the map in my hand and the location I recalled from the Internet map that we could not be more than a block away. Oksana insisted that the taxi driver bring us there. However, we had no idea exactly where "there" was. It was a matter of asking people. With great reluctance, she let me pay the taxi and we walked down the street. Finally, within less than 100 meters, we found one of the locals who was able to point to a street sign saying Garbarska. After all the confusion, we were right on time. Our host Jan arrived on the dot of 12:00.

The apartment was immaculate. What a relief! Our first experience with Air B&B the summer of 2014 in Odessa

had not been terribly pleasant. This one was excellent. Everything clean and in working order. Wonderful documentation for how everything worked. There was even breakfast cereal and a bottle of water in the refrigerator. It was totally first-class.

As per our usual excellent planning, we had nothing in mind to do that afternoon. It turned out that the zoo was right on the other side of the bridge over the Vistula, about 15 minutes away. Eddie absolutely adores zoos, and I like them myself. We two have gone to the Kyiv zoo about once a month for the past couple of years. Oksana had never joined us, but she enjoys animals as well.

The zoo is large, immaculate, and seems to conform to all of the modern notions of zoo management. Oksana suggested that we make a plan for how to traverse the zoo so we could see everything. Although that seemed a little bit over-the-top, it turned out that we pretty much did exactly that.

Our first priority was to see things we can't see in Kyiv. The kangaroos were lolling in the springtime sun, not hopping at all. They look totally kangaroo-like. In the end Oksana took my word for the fact that they are pretty fast when they want to go someplace. We wandered past cages of parrots and other birds down to the ape house.

The ape exhibit was truly amazing. We saw chimpanzees scrambling around a very large outdoor space, where they had everything in ape could desire to swing on. As we arrived they were just going indoors. There was a troop of about six of them. They were doing typical things that chimpanzees do, grooming one another – pretend, for I am sure the zoo does not allow them to have lice – and scratching and lolling and playing. Whereas the two chimps in the Kyiv zoo have little space and only each other, this seemed like a real society. We spent quite a while watching them. There were three gorillas in the enclosure next door. These guys are union employees. They get paid the same whether they are entertaining or not. Since they are well fed, the two adults seem to spend their time lolling on their backs and scratching their bellies. Their kid was at least up and walking around a bit.

They had some magnificent black and white Eagles from the Bering Sea. They had Bengal Tigers whereas the Kyiv

Oksana and Graham's Trip to Poland

April 4-10 2016

zoo has Siberian Tigers – one of our better exhibits. They had a lion who must earn money on the side posing for MGM. The most leonine lion I have ever seen.

We gave the animals a chance to observe human play. Warsaw does not have many children's playgrounds, but when they do it, they do it right. Eddie spent about 20 minutes on some really neat playground equipment. The one thing that was totally new to me was a slightly inclined rotating disk. He laid down on the disk and I spun it. Later I saw some other kids using it as it is probably intended. If you run uphill on the disk, you can use it just like a treadmill. But if you are a kid, is fun, not work.

It turned out that with a knowledge of English and Russian the Polish signs in the zoo were pretty easy to read. There are a great number of cognates between Polish and Ukrainian, a number large enough to be useful between Polish and Russian, and some similarity to the Western languages such as German. After our day in the zoo I had a distinct feeling that if we were to live in Poland I would be at home after a couple of months.

Oksana loves to visit the opera wherever she goes. We went back to the apartment and changed, with the understanding that I would take Eddie and she would see some Polish folk production that was on that night. Per the map, the opera was only about five minutes away, though not via any route one could drive. When we got there it was sold out. Oksana hates taking no for an answer and went at them from one angle or another, sure that for her there must be some kind of exception. After five minutes of feint and parry I finally convinced her to give up and come with the two of us to dinner. She does not easily admit defeat. Even after we had sat down at an Italian restaurant, she walked back and badgered them a bit more before finally joining us for dinner. That kind of interplay makes me thirsty. I rather greedily drank my first beer. Eddie ordered a tomato linguine, which was pretty good. I had a carpaccio that was excellent. Oksana, when she arrived, had another pasta plate. The dinner was satisfying and we walked back to the apartment. I was very glad to get a shower and a good night's sleep in a real bed.

We breakfasted on the oatmeal we had brought and the cornflakes provided by our host and then set out through old town. Although this part of Poland is rather flat, the

river does rise to a bluff, I'm sure no more than 100 m, which probably afforded the settlers some kind of protection against waterborne invaders. The old town runs along the bluff on the left bank of the river. That would be the West bank; the Vistula flows north. The government buildings are located here. The old imperial palace, the modern presidential palace, and a number of ministries. They fit in pretty well. Few of the buildings appear to be more than a couple of centuries old. Nonetheless, they are attractive and the shops are full of the kinds of stuff that you find in such touristy places.

We stopped for a snack at a chocolate store. Oksana was fascinated by a group of schoolchildren, 10-11, decorating sweets. The school sponsored, but parents paid for, this artistic experience for their kids.



Chocolate decorating

After a long morning's walk Oksana was quite specific about what she wanted for lunch. She wanted soup. We looked at a dozen different restaurants along the way, but nothing seemed quite appropriate. Our resistance (read, my resistance) had diminished by the time we came across an Italian restaurant. The proprietor welcomed us in with the kind of unctuous bonhomie that characterizes an Italian restaurateur. I had an excellent black linguine and Eddie an asparagus soup. Oksana got her soup and a fish dish besides. It was more food than she had wanted, and the bill came to \$50, certainly the most we spent on the trip. She expressed regret for the waste of money several times thereafter.

Oksana and Graham's Trip to Poland

April 4-10 2016

The oldest English-speaking Toastmasters club in Poland was meeting that evening. I called to confirm the address, a short tramway ride and then two metro stops from where we were. It was well attended: about 20 people they had a very elaborate agenda prepared by a piece of software that budgets time down to the minute. There was a lot of that budgeted time: the meeting ran about two hours. Afterwards we retired to the bar, for what they also call an after-party, where we enjoyed a beer and some conversation before going back to the apartment.

Checkout time Thursday morning was 11 o'clock. We took a leisurely walk along the Vistula River where we saw among other things some sort of an arbor arched over a fire pit. It was made of living willow trees, planted in nine clumps on the perimeter of a circle 6 m across with tall thin trunks no more than 8 cm wide elaborately braided together into a wreath at the top, about 5 m high. We talked with the fishermen, a woman who was walking a delightful but somewhat disobedient beagle, and some workmen who were putting together a zip line circuit through the trees.

The Warsaw train station is called Centralna, which is pretty easy to translate, or alternatively Glowny. With my new appreciation of the Polish language, knowing that W is pronounced as V, it dawned on me that that means Russian Главный, glavni, or main. Oksana stood in line to buy tickets as I went and changed some money. Tickets for the 290 km trip on the intercity train to Katowice cost only \$25 apiece, and it took only two and a quarter hours.

The train had a Wi-Fi connection – naturally – so I called our friend Olena Toktarova whom we were planning to see when we got there. Once again, the caller ID worked its magic, and she called me back when we had gotten to our hotel. It turned out that she had arranged to be the Toastmaster that night in honor of our arrival, and she was on her way to the train station to meet us. We arranged instead to meet at the hotel – half a kilometer south of the train station – and walked to the Toastmasters meeting.

Oksana took the role of table topics evaluator. As in Warsaw, all of the members spoke pretty good English. Their level of experience seems to be generally somewhat less than in Kyiv, but they get along okay. As in Warsaw, the meeting was long. It ran about 2 ½ hours, with a 10

minute break in the middle. And, as in Kyiv, they retired to a pub afterwards for some drinks and conversation. One of the members gave us a ride. Fortunately, it was back toward the center of town, and we had only a 10 minute walk back to the hotel when it was over. As was true throughout the trip, I was overwhelmed with the sincere hospitality of the Polish people.

We breakfasted in the hotel, a modest but cozy affair called the EuroResidence, and walked back to the train station. It turns out that for the hundred kilometers from Katowice to Kraków the bus is faster than the train. Upon arrival, we left our baggage in the train station and walked to Elena Zhivonovna's apartment. She had received a shipment of four boxes of musical instruments for Oksana, and she had asked us to buy some Ukrainian medicines for her. On this trip the hotel map turned out not to be as useful. The map we found credited some French artist with its layout. In any case, it was highly decorative but not very informative. However, Oksana had had the foresight to ask me to plot our route on Google maps, save it as a JPG file, and send it to her iPad. I actually made two maps, one of the whole route from the train station and another one of the immediate neighborhood of Elena's apartment. We needed both.

Our plan had been to buy some dinner along the way. Surprisingly, the route that we took afforded no restaurants whatsoever. It was only when we were almost to Elena's house that we found a little place serving some sweets that would tide us over. While we were eating I pieced together the picture map I had gotten from the hotel and the map we had on the iPad. They hardly overlapped; the iPad map adjoined the north side of the paper map. Aha! That explained it. We were north of the old town. Kraków has a beautiful old town, and that's where the restaurants were.

The four parcels we picked up from Elena, added to the backpack I was already carrying, made quite a load. We stopped in a bicycle shop and bought a couple of bungee cords so I could strap these things to myself. We made kind of an odd procession, but it worked and we were able to walk through old town. Oksana and I had seen it when we were there in 2010. It was even more impressive the second time. As we walked along, Oksana encountered the church of St. Peter and Paul where they had a concert

Oksana and Graham's Trip to Poland

April 4-10 2016

starting at 7 o'clock. She insisted on going. The cost was \$15. I emphatically did not want to go. Eddie was becoming noisier and noisier about the fact that he was hungry. I wanted a quiet place to have a beer.

What we found was not exactly what any of us wanted, what it was providentially what we seem to need. A little place that called itself a pub. I liked the name. It had no beer. It was simply a cafeteria style restaurant. After a minute's discussion, it was decided that we would take our chances with the food and worry about beer later. The food was simple, cheap and excellent. Eddie had mashed potatoes and a pork cutlet. Oksana and I had some sort of a macaroni soup, which was quite filling and delicious. She also got a plate of vegetables. Included a fresh carrot salad, sauerkraut, and shredded beets that had been prepared like sauerkraut. The beets and sauerkraut were absolutely excellent. The first demonstrated to Oksana what I had long been suggesting, adding caraway seeds to the sauerkraut we make at home. The beet dish, fermented by the same salt fermentation process by which you make sauerkraut, was new to me and absolutely wonderful. We resolved we will make it ourselves at home.

Oksana took Eddie to the concert while I looked for a simple bar to have a simple drink. You don't do that in a tourist quarter. There are restaurants on every side, but it is not a place to sit down and simply drink a beer. I found a quiet restaurant and bar with no customers. The comely and intelligent barmaid didn't have anything to keep herself busy, and she enjoyed an hour's conversation while I sipped my beer. I reconnoitered with Oksana and Eddie at the appointed hour and we went to the train station, picked up our luggage, and took the overnight train from Kraków to Lviv.

This compartment turned out to be a somewhat better configuration of a three berth sleeper. The top berth was lower, a bit over a meter beneath the ceiling. In the train to Poland it had been only about his 70 cm, so little that I had had to roll sidewise to get into it. Oksana was content to be on top, and Eddie and I slept below.

We arrived in Lviv and at six in the morning with exactly as thorough of a plan as we had employed throughout the trip. None at all. Two taxi drivers got into a shouting match on the platform as we debarked from the train, each telling

us what we should do. I had a hard time convincing them that we had no idea ourselves. In the confusion, they lost what certainly would have been a fare if they had just let us make up our minds. As it was, we progressed forward like a gypsy caravan. I had made a train of the two wheeled suitcases, the big one in front and the little one behind. I had the backpack with our food on my back, and attached it with a bungee cord was the largest of the four parcels of musical instruments we had bought. The next largest was strapped with another bungee cord to the big suitcase. Oksana had her purse/backpack and two plastic bags with the remaining musical instruments.

There was a flight of about 20 stairs down to the tunnel underneath the tracks leading to the train station. It took three relays to get all of our stuff down there. By this time I was pretty confident – I didn't even want help. Another 20 m and I repeated the process going upstairs. We reassembled the whole train and walked to the middle of the train station. Oksana followed my suggestion and went to the information desk to ask about a hotel. It turned out that there is a hotel in the train station, just enough of one to shower and change clothes. However, it was all booked up.

As we were standing there debating what to do some woman came up offering an apartment for the day. The price? 250 hryvnya, about \$10. We took it. Zoya – her name turned out to be – arranged for a taxi and told us that her husband would meet us there. Lubomyr did meet us, and what a lovely thing we had stumbled into. They had an old house, built during the Polish Europe before World War II. They gave us a large room with a double bed. We were able to have some breakfast and drink tea in the kitchen, wash up, leave our luggage and go into town by tramway.

We spent all day at the huge outdoor architectural Museum, Shevchenko Gai. It is a grand exhibition of the way Ukrainians lived a couple hundred years ago. We saw spinning wheels, looms, a full range of farm implements, threshing machines, a blacksmith working his forge, a potter who made an amphora in front of our eyes, and we had some traditional food. It was a day extraordinarily well spent. Eddie takes his time, but he is willing to walk anywhere. We returned to the apartment, where Oksana was disappointed to find that the opera had already

Oksana and Graham's Trip to Poland

April 4-10 2016

started. Not one to be discouraged, she took Eddie and they went on the intermission. I relaxed in the apartment and caught up with the Internet. Oksana returned, and we took a taxi to the train station.

There was no drama whatsoever about the train. We were early enough that we were able to easily schlep all of our baggage onto the car. We had an SV (translation of the German Schlafwagen, or sleeping car): a compartment with two beds. It turned out to be better than the three bed arrangements. We put the big suitcase between the two beds, laid one of the two mattresses on top of the suitcase, and Eddie slept as cozily as could be. When we arrived in Kyiv this morning (April 10) we were happy to pay the asking rate to the taxi driver who greeted us on the platform soliciting business. He helped carry the baggage to the taxi and we had a delightful trip home. Oksana was feeling expansive – we gave him 200 although he had asked for 150. He was a slightly older guy, very helpful and a great driver. I was proud of my wife. It was the right thing to do. It was the end of a wonderful trip.