

## **Lipiec: A Month to Remember**

### INTRO

When I applied to the Wisconsin Study in Poland Scholarship, I had two goals: reconnect with my past and pave the way for my future. My grandfather's pride in his Polish heritage, even though he himself is a third-generation immigrant, stimulated my interest in the language, country, and culture. My studies in sociology have left me interested in culture, religion, and in-group/out-group interactions; Poland's unique history means that it currently has a very interesting religious mix and is a perfect subject for my future studies. At the moment, I am considering doing a master's program at the University of Wroclaw (with the ultimate goal of pursuing a PhD at the University of Michigan), with Poland and religion as a main focus. Now that my time in Poland has ended, I would say that I have definitely achieved those two goals, as well as a few that I was not fully expecting.

### IN OVER MY HEAD? INTIMIDATION AND GROWTH

Walking into that first class was intimidating. I was placed in the A2 class, which I felt was probably correct as I'd finished my A1 class the previous year. However, this class was very different from my previous class. My university technically did not offer Polish, but I was able to take it as a courseshare with the Ohio State University, meaning the other girl taking it and I went to a room on campus and video chatted in twice a week to another university's course. My previous experience learning Polish had therefore been relatively individualistic; all of my speaking practice was with Grace, the other girl from the U of M, and I only ever spoke with others over video chat. My first class in Krakow was so immediately different. All of the sudden, there were many unfamiliar people around me, many of whom seemed to speak much better than me.

That first day was incredibly difficult for me. I was worried that it would be too fast-paced for me, that everyone else had a much better vocabulary than me, that I had somehow been placed in the wrong class. The teacher spoke only Polish, and while I could generally follow along, I had a lot of difficulty when she asked me a direct question. I felt anxious and nervous and I just kept thinking about how scared I was to stay for a whole month. Could I really handle a whole month of uncertainty? Of feeling like I was not good enough?

I was genuinely considering trying to switch to a lower level, but I sat myself down and decided that no. I had not come to Poland to have an easy time. If I didn't want to challenge myself, I would not have come. I just needed to remind myself that when I feel like the others in the room are all smarter than me, this does not mean I should leave the room; this just means that I have an even greater opportunity to learn. I figured that if the others were starting out with a better vocabulary than me, I needed to make a greater effort to practice the vocabulary we learned in class. For every vocab set, I made a Quizlet set so that I could practice. I looked over grammar, I did all my homework on time, and I made more of an effort to make sure I was keeping up with the course material. And it paid off—after a few days, I was starting to excel in the class and no longer felt like I was in over my head.

After speaking with some of the other students, I also learned that a lot of them had parents who were from Poland, meaning they had practiced with family for a while and grown somewhat familiar with the language at home. One girl was actually surprised to find out that I had only been learning in class. It made me reconsider what I had felt on that first day. I had initially felt

inadequate; after hearing more about everyone's personal history with Polish, I felt immensely proud of all the hard work I had put in. I had been thrown into a new setting with less experience than a lot of the others; rather than letting this scare me out of the class, I pushed myself to rise to their level, and this challenge meant that I learned a lot over the course of the program.

This program raised the bar for me. After a year of learning with Duolingo or through video chat, I was suddenly in a place with highly advanced speakers. It was intimidating, challenging, and scary at first—but it also gave me the opportunity to push myself more than I ever would have before. I know that I not only improved my Polish, but also my confidence and my learning skills.

## ENHANCING EXTRACURRICULARS AND STEPS TOWARDS THE FUTURE

My favorite thing about the program was the extracurriculars that were offered to us. I was particularly excited about the history course and a course called *The Jews in Poland*. I also took part of the literature course (until *The Jews in Poland* began) and *Contemporary Polish Society*.

I have heard a few times now that Poland is a country that sometimes gets stuck in its own history—the effects of the partitions, WWII, and communism still live at the forefront of Poles' minds, and it has a very large impact on how they see themselves and their country. Therefore, in order to understand the way Poland is now, one must take a look back at their history. Of course, it is impossible to fully understand this impact, but taking this history class helped me to begin. For me personally, it was especially important to learn more about WWII because the American understanding of this event is so drastically different than the Polish. The way we learn about WWII is very much focused on the Western front, and it is more a tale of American heroism than anything else. Understanding the loss that Poland suffered and that for them, the troubles did not end in 1945 is vital to understanding modern Poland. Additionally, being able to learn about the country's history made me directly link it to my family's personal history. My great-great grandmother left Poland in 1913, just a few years before WWI. At the time, Poland was not even a country. She was not technically leaving Poland, she was leaving a section of the Austro-Hungarian empire (she lived in Jaroslaw, a city relatively close to Krakow). Knowing what was happening in the country at the time made me feel closer to my family because it helped me put our personal history into a broader context.

Despite all that my history class taught me, my favorite class by far was *The Jews in Poland*. As a sociology major—particularly one who is interested in religion and in-group/out-group dynamics—this class was extremely relevant to my studies. It went over Jewish history in Poland, from their expulsion from Israel to the modern Jewish revival happening in some Polish cities. This is an aspect of Polish history that is not always discussed. When it is discussed, it is generally focused on the Holocaust and the loss of the Jewish community; however, it is presented from an ethnic Polish perspective. This class was so beneficial because it gave me access to the history—a more full, complete history—of the Jewish people in Poland.

Beyond the class, I also gained access to a wonderful professor. I appreciated Annamaria Orla-Bukowska on the first day for her no-nonsense attitude and the respectful way she spoke about Jewish history. She did a good job of pointing out the nuances and examining Jewish/Christian relations from both parties' perspectives. She also complicated the very notion of Judaism by pointing out different sects, movements, and attitudes within the religion. I also learned early on that she was in the sociology department. As I had mentioned in my application for this

scholarship, I am considering going to graduate school in Poland to research religious minorities; finding a professor that conducts research in that very area was therefore a wonderful discovery.

I enjoyed her class so much that I actually decided to attend her other class, Contemporary Polish Society. Although it would not be possible to get credit for the class (my program ended before the class ended), I just wanted to attend and soak up as much information as I could. I also decided to go grab coffee with her one day to talk more about her research and my interests. We spent over an hour discussing how she first came to Poland, how she got interested in her research, the swift political changes she watched the country go through first hand. We also discussed my future. I intend on moving to Connecticut in just a couple weeks to start working in the Department of Children and Families. After gaining some real-world experience, I plan on going back to school for my master's and then ultimately my PhD. She had a similar experience; she gave me advice for my job and encouraged me to pursue education. When I mentioned my interest in the University of Michigan, she mentioned knowing a professor there—Geneviève Zubrzycki, who wrote *The Crosses of Auschwitz*. I was immediately excited; that book had been recommended to me by a professor at my home university when I told her I was interested in Polish sociology. Furthermore, she told me she would be happy to write a letter of recommendation for me and speak with the professor if I do ultimately decide to apply there. Finally, we talked about a potential research topic: comparing the decline in religion in Spain post-Francoism and the continued strength of religion in Poland post-communism. Once I've finished learning Polish, it would be an ideal project for me, given my ability to speak Spanish and background knowledge on Francoist Spain. The whole conversation was wonderful. I knew that studying abroad would be beneficial to my future, but I had not imagined just how directly beneficial it could be. Connecting with this professor stimulated my curiosity and provided me with a resource that will help me in the future when I decide to apply to graduate school. Whether I apply to the University of Michigan, the University of Wroclaw (or both!), I will be a stronger candidate now that I have had this discussion. I will definitely be keeping in touch with her over the next few years, and I am so grateful for the chance to get to know people in my desired field of research.

## CONCLUSION

My time in Krakow helped me grow as a person and as a student. It was so scary—my first day of class left me extremely outside of my comfort zone—but overcoming the challenges left me stronger and better prepared for my future. The extracurriculars let me learn more about Polish history; as a sociologist, I love placing my own personal and family history in a broader context to understand the influence of societal forces. My history class let me do just that, and it helped me feel closer to my family once I better understood the reasons why we might have left. Furthermore, I was able to connect with a professor that is directly involved in my desired field of research. Talking with her left me even more excited about the possibility of studying in Poland and maintaining Poland as a key point of research. Without the Wisconsin Study in Poland Scholarship, all of these experiences would not have been possible. I am so grateful for the chance to study in Poland. In addition to everything I listed above, I also got to meet people from different cultures (my roommates were from Hong Kong and the Czech Republic!), explore historic sites I had previously only read about and imagined, and gain practical knowledge about a country I care deeply about. My July was memorable, but it will not live only in my past. I will take the knowledge and connections with me into my future, and I will treasure it in my heart always. I am reminded of what my host mother from Spain told me before I left to go back to the U.S. In Spain,

they do not say “adios” (goodbye), they always say “hasta luego” (until next time). So although it will not translate directly, to Poland, I will not say “do widzenia.” I will only say, “do zobaczenia.”