

Even if I wanted to I could not even begin to express how much I enjoyed my visit to Poland. I was completely bowled over with the hospitality I received. My preconceived ideas of Poland as being a rather dull country, not long out an oppressive regime were completely shattered. The people were vibrant with life, I enjoyed their company and just watching people interact was enjoyable, even if I could often not understand the conversation. I count myself as being extremely lucky to have experienced first part of the Polish Exchange 2006. I have met some very pleasant and hospitable people on my travels, but the people I met in this beautiful and interesting country would really be difficult to beat in regards to hospitality, kindness and warm heartedness.

I know that I will never forget my visit, but nevertheless I have written out the following diary of events.

### **Tuesday 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2006**

Robert Cotterill, Rachel Jackson and I travelled from Sheffield to Poland via Stanstead Airport. The Flight to Poznan Airport was less then one hour and thirty five minutes. We were met in Poland by David Thomas and other Polish Probation Officers. I was introduced to Sylvia who in turn would come to stay with me in September. Sylvia was with another Poznan Probation Officer, called Agnes. Rachel was introduced to Dorada who will also be visiting Sheffield in September.

From Poznan Airport I travelled up to Mielno with Sylvia and Agnes. Mielno is a four hour drive to a seaside town on the Baltic coast (to the right of Kolobrzeg on the map). The drive took four hours and was interesting in every way – landscape, architecture and Sylvia’s driving. Sylvia told me a number of times during the visit that I could close my eyes if I wanted, I said OK but asked her to keep hers open! When we arrived at the location of the Probation conference I was introduced to other members of Sylvia’s team and we chatted over drinks for the rest of the evening.



**Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> May 2006.**

Early morning run along beach and coastal road.

Went to conference and took notes of various lectures.

Then went to seaside town of Kolobrzeg with Sylvia's team and escaped from the last part of the conference. It turns out that we were not the only ones as we met other Polish Probation Officers enjoying the seaside town too. Sylvia pointed out different buildings and facts about this health resort. Later Agnes guided us through the port with the intention of taking us over the river to the other side. However, to everyone's amusement the bridge was missing. Agnes assured us all that there used to be a bridge there. In this picture of the missing bridge from left to right there is: Agnes (Probation Officer), me, Anya (Probation Team Leader), and Sylvia (Probation Officer).



We then stopped at a small café and each had the largest cake that you ever did see. I noticed that I was the only one who managed to finish all six pieces of this Polish delicacy!!

Went back to Mielno and had tea. Afterwards we had a disco. I enjoyed this evening very much. Probation Officers, Police, and Judges all enjoying the conference evening. Sylvia translated the words of one Polish song which spoke of us being just one family which I thought to be quite appropriate to the atmosphere of the evening.

**Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> May 2006.**

Early morning run with Robert along the sandy beach towards Mielno.

Conference in morning with various speakers from Poland, England and USA.

Then went to Dobrzyce horticultural centre. A large garden centre that contained different miniature, themed gardens such as: an aroma garden; a Japanese garden; a water garden and a rose garden. Anya the Probation Team Leader obviously liked gardens and we compared English and Polish names for different plants. I was pleased to see some lovely plants that I had in my garden at home. Here in the picture from left to right are Anya, Sylvia, Anya (team leader) and Agnes who are all Probation Officers from Poznan



Then for the evening there was a barbecue with another disco outside. The later we moved into the evening the more I was inclined to dance in order to keep warm. (...)

**Friday 26<sup>th</sup> May 2006.**

Early morning run with Robert along beach. Felt a little groggy from the night before. These runs were quite tough on the legs due to soft sand, but we felt they gave us a good start to the day.

Today was the last day of conference. Various speakers.

Went to seaside town of Mielno in the afternoon with Dorata and Rachel. We had a meal, lasagne for me, at a hotel on the seafront. It poured with rain then cleared up

and we were able to walk back to the training centre. On the way we bought nuts (sugared almonds and hazel nuts). We decided to get an ice-cream from a shop. We were the only customers as we looked at the menu, but as we looked a party of about 30 children queued up for ice-creams before us! Sylvia pointed out that our timing could have been a little better! Then in the evening we walked back to Mielno once again. This time via the beach, where we saw a couple of surfers using two very large kites to propel them over the sea.



We saw a fantastic jewellery shop which gave me the idea of buying presents for Jane and Elizabeth. We finished off the evening with a meal (Halibut and salted cabbage for me, which was lovely).

### **Saturday 27<sup>th</sup> May 2006.**

Picnic breakfast of cheese, bread, ham and tomato. We then went to a lighthouse. It resembled a fortress with strong house and perimeter wall. I counted 135 of the 220 steps before having it pointed out the steps were actually numbered! It was interesting to see that the lighthouse had originally started as a lamp hanging on a crude wooden scaffold.

We then went to Kolobrzeg. We went to various shops. I bought milk and green coloured, amber necklaces and earrings for Jane and Elizabeth.

We then visited a Cathedral that displayed gothic architecture. The Cathedral was huge and made me feel small, and the stained glass windows were very beautiful.

We then wandered around the port till lunchtime where Rachel and I accompanied Sylvia and Dorada to different eating venues. Sylvia introduced me to here favourite fish dish, which was fried, battered salmon with chips and salad. We got a little carried away with conversation and Rachel and Dorada were back long before we had finished.

Sylvia then accompanied Rachel and me on a boat trip from the pier. It was interesting to see the curve of the coastline with strategically placed lighthouses, and

feel the motion of the sea beneath our feet. In a way it was like entering a different world and I did think I partly understood why sailors could fall in love with the sea. Rachel pointed out that she had never seen swans, about twenty of them, swimming together in the sea. In the photo below are Sylvia and Rachel as we moved slowly over the Baltic Sea.



After the boat trip the coldness of the early evening encouraged us to seek out hot drinks in a beautiful restaurant on the promenade. Dorada and Sylvia explained life in communist times. They related how chocolate was made in Poland, but only exported, and that it was not made available for the Polish people.

We then drove back to the training camp and on the way we stopped at Mielno for coffee and to observe the sunset. Unfortunately, the clouds did not give us the best picture that day, but the coffee was lovely. We concluded with day with bread, ham and cheese, apple juice and music.

### **Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> May 2006.**

We were awakened early by two drunken men. I never did understand why they were in the training camp. I was quite amused because I had only pointed out to Sylvia the day before that I had not seen much evidence of drunkenness at the seaside which we sometimes witness at the UK resorts. However, Dorada was not amused and threatened to call the police.

We ate breakfast, packed our bags and Sylvia's car for the journey back to Sylvia's and Dorada's homes. On reflection I think I could have travelled more lightly than I

did – my case was nearly as big a Sylvia's car. After a long journey of four hours and having dropped off Dorada and Rachel, Sylvia and I arrived at her parents. Here started the beginning of my real education with Polish food. The food was lovely and plentiful!



**Monday 29<sup>th</sup> May 2006.**

In the morning we went to a reformatory for young men 15-21 years of age in Trzemeszno. This secure prison houses 24 inmates and is especially for those who had disorganised the running of other reformatories. The regime is very strict and disciplined. I was reminded of the Detention Centres I had attended in the 1980's. The facilities were out of this world. The reformatory had quality facilities and plush furnishings. Some of the furnishings had been made by the inmates themselves.

We then went to an open air museum in Dziekanowice which has on display an old settlement of old buildings which is set on the lakeside of Lednica. Here we saw building from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century - barns, church, chapel and homes of the rich and poor. Below is the picture of a wooden chapel which was erected in 1765.



We then went to the city of Gniezno, which is a household name in Poland. The city is visited by tourists and pilgrims and has plenty of history and religious significance in the country. Firstly, went to the court house where previously young Polish children were sent to prison and who were often beaten for speaking the Polish tongue by Germans.

After this we went to Gniezno cathedral, which is famous for its twelfth-century, two-winged bronze doors decorated with scenes of martyrdom of St Ableard. On some days visitors can climb to the high tower, but our guide informed us that she would not be going as she said the steps were too horrible, even though the view was wonderful.

After another huge meal at Sylvia's home Sylvia and I went to see the DaVinci Code at the cinema at Poznan which was a very impressive building housing various leisure

activities. I think there were at least 20 screens. The seating was very plush. I couldn't help laughing at a young lady carrying the biggest bucket of popcorn you could ever imagine. Her boyfriend had gone for the pisa option. The film lasts for around three hours, but this couple looked like they were planning to stay for a week!

### **Tuesday 31<sup>st</sup> May 2006.**

Went to Court House Poznan in the morning and met the Chief Probation officer. She informed us that there were 922 probation officers in Wielkopolska. People travelled to Poznan court from different towns and villages within the area. The case load for each Probation Officer was well over one hundred. I witnessed Sylvia looking anxiously at the pile of new cases that had been allocated to her and which she would have to start dealing with the following Monday.

Sylvia also took me to another large court building for minor cases. We walked around many small court rooms and I understood why the Probation Officers in Poland are so busy as there seemed to be hundreds of small courts in session within that building.

We then went to Sylvia's Probation Office where I met her team once again in the city. Where they explained their work to me and asked me questions about my work and the criminal justice system in England.

After tea we went to a tower on a hill, built by a German man who built the tower as a memorial to his daughter who had died. Here with me are Anya, Sylvia and Agnes who are all Probation Officers in Poznan.



We then drove through National Parkland to Puszczykowo. Here Agnes informed me that the houses were very expensive. We had some extremely nice ice cream at a local café.

We finished the day off by going to Eva's home where we had a barbecue and lovely meal. I had a local speciality of cheese and potato and a number of beers. Here I met two very pleasant and intelligent men - a Probation Officer and Lawyer, both with PhD's and some of the questions were above my ability to answer.

### **Wednesday 31<sup>st</sup> May 2006.**

We went to a ETE establishment run by various charities that train young people in working skills for a year. To get a place a person needs to be unemployed for over a year, but many had been unemployed for much longer than that had issues with both drugs and alcohol. Here there was training as sewing machinists, builders and carpenters. There were classes to improve education and basic skills. Sylvia and I referred a number of people on supervision and had been very impressed with the positive changes to the lives of her clients. This establishment produces a magazine like the big issue which is sold by the trainees for 4 zloty's (2 for the cost of the magazine and 2 for the seller).

Went to the prison below which holds 130 prisoners, but which should only house a maximum of 101 offenders. The Governor showed us the control room. Every door in the prison was opened from this control room. Here we saw the armoury containing machine guns and hand guns. We went around the cells, classrooms, kitchens, exercise yard, laundry and kitchen. The Governor had worked in prisons for 13 years, and for 6 years of those years he had served in his present role in this prison. During this time there had been no escapes. The Governor suggested that the security of the prison might be likened to Alcatraz. I pointed out that maybe it was more secure as Alcatraz had lost a few!



The Governor took us to a very pleasant restaurant where we were all given huge meals. I went for chicken, chips and vegetables.

In the afternoon we went to Karnik Castle. A noble home built on an island that contains many treasures. The gardens held thousands of different trees. Here we were told the story of the White Lady, a ghost who appears only to men. She didn't appear to me and so I'm maybe not a man! No one suggested we wait for her to appear so we all went home for tea.

After tea, Sylvia and I went to the Furniture shop in Swarzedzkie called Meble where the standard of the furniture easily matched Coles in Sheffield. Only this shop had much more on display. Sylvia and I concluded that we preferred the lighter woods and less decorated pieces.

After this I met Sylvia's brother for the first time. He is a manager of a supermarket and talked very enthusiastically about his work and his studies.

#### **Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> June 2006.**

In the morning we went to the Police Station in Sylva's home town. The Police were enthusiastic about their work, even though they had poor resources and facilities. One police officer told me that her firearm was older than she was. They showed me a floppy disk with all the domestic abuse cases. However, the computer was not networked with others in the building or nationally. The police officer did voice the concern that criminals would develop technically faster than the Police.

We then went to visit one of Sylvia's clients. He was on supervision for an arson offence. He suffers with depression and has mental health issues. The landlord wanted this man out of his premises because of his offence. The court had decided that he could stay in the flat until he could be given a new flat, which might take up to a year. This man was divorced and had no contact with his daughters who had moved to the USA. He told me that Poland was going to beat England 2-0 in the World Cup.

We then met another client at the Probation Office. He had spent two years in prison for debts and failing to support his children. He had disobeyed a court order which resulted in this sentence. On release he was given 7 days to report to the probation office. He was told that he must not drink and that he must take steps towards getting employment. Failure to comply with these obligations would result in him being returned to prison.

We then spent some time in the administration office with the secretary who explained something of her role and we went through various forms and letters in use within the probation office.

In the afternoon we went with Richard (a state university professor of mathematics) and his wife Henrika (Probation Officer) to a museum of musical instruments in Poznan where it was emphasised to me that Chopin was Polish and not German! Then we went to a presentation of the development of Poznan as a city, from settlement to present day. We concluded this by going to a café and I had coffee with ginger and honey, and ice cream dessert. In the photo below are some of the houses on Poznan's town square that face the beautiful Town Hall.



Richard painted a picture of life in Poland prior to 1989, with control and lack of freedom. He spoke the positive changes but also of the negative aspects of high unemployment and the difficulties with state education.

### **Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2006.**

We travelled up to Czarnkow for a multi agency conference on domestic abuse. Here I listened to the speakers and did not understand very much, but got the impression that the speakers were quite academic. Here Rachel and I were interviewed by television reporters. I then gave the report that Jane, my wife, and Katherine West had helped me with. It's difficult to gauge how the translation was received, but at the end of the day, I felt I understood more about changes in the area working with domestic abuse in my country even if nobody else did!

Went for a lovely meal in the town square with Sylvia and then met Anya for a drink. We then joined up with Richard and Henrika again at Malta Park which is on the Warta River, a beautiful park indeed. On the lake regattas competitions take place. The park was well used and there is a dry ski slope and different things for all the family.



Then for the rest of the evening it was a case of food upon food. First we went to Richard and Henrika's lovely apartment where we met Eva the probation officer from Sylvia's team. Then it was back to Sylvia's parents and yet another table of food! Sylvia had invited the chief probation officer and we had a lovely evening where I tasted more new foods.

### **Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2006.**

We went to the shops at Poznan where I bought gifts and presents. The shopping centre was modern and very well presented and even had a football game on the ground floor.

For the evening we went to the Citadel Park. It was destroyed in 1945, and the remains of the fortifications house the Museum of the Poznań Army and the Citadel Museum, which has open-air displays of military equipment. The rest of the area the fortress occupied is now a large park which again was well used by walkers, runners and people using roller blades. A cemetery lies on the south west of the park boundaries. A commonwealth graveyard includes the remains of allied airmen shot down over Poland during WWII and is also the resting place for several of those captured during The Great Escape. Other sections of the cemetery are dedicated to Red Army soldiers killed during the 1945 siege. Jammed in between Soviet and Commonwealth memorials are plots dedicated to Poles killed during the 1956 Wielkopolska Uprising. In the picture below is a monument of headless bodies commemorating that uprising, along with the headed bodies of both Sylvia and Dorada.



After this walk in the park we went to Poznan centre and met the chief probation officer and another senior officer who took to one of their favourite pubs on the town square. These two officers had served as probation officers for 65 years between them.

**Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> June 2006.**

After breakfast, Sylvia and I felt we had done enough shops the day before. So instead of going to the plaza with Dorata and Rachel we chose to go to a heritage museum. Here there were beehives of all shapes and sizes. The museum building was very interesting and displayed various equipment used in the production of honey and silk from silk worms. Here Sylvia struggled with the translation of a hive that looked like a big, ugly black bear when she described it as a “teddy bear”!



Then back to Sylvia’s home and family for lunch. With sadness I said my farewells and left for the airport and met Robert and Rachel. We said our good byes to our friends and returned to Sheffield with a good uneventful journey.

Somebody told me that for a Polish person a guest in the home is like a god. Well all I can say is that the polish people I met certainly live up to there reputation for kindness and hospitality.

Somebody also said the war ended in 1945 for some countries but for Poland it was 1989. The UK has had longer to develop than Poland, but having said that I witnessed

so many good qualities in Polish culture, families and traditions that in my opinion leaves the UK trailing behind.

I have visited quite a few countries now, but my work trip to Poland has been by far my greatest exploration of another country because I was able to engage with the customs, culture, language, food, history, architecture and of course people in a way that I had not achieved with previous visits to European countries.

Rachel, Robert and I had a good, uneventful journey back to South Yorkshire and it was good to be re-united with my family and to be able to share each other's experiences.

All in all, I feel that it has a privilege and very special experience to be part of the first part of the Polish Exchange 2006.

