

Visit to Klodzko, Poland 11<sup>th</sup> April to 15<sup>th</sup> April 2011 by Lyn Bostock, Celena Byng and Rosie Drake

Our visit to Poland began with an early flight from Stansted Airport to Wroclaw on Monday 11<sup>th</sup> April. Wroclaw airport was small, with only two immigration officers on duty and only one baggage claim area just other side of the immigration booth. The baggage arrived almost as soon as we walked through Immigration unlike in the UK.

Monika met us and as we drove out of the airport, she explained that the airport was being expanded and new roads were being built in preparation for the European Football competition in 2012. We could see dual carriageways or motorways under construction as we drove along. Most of the 50 mile journey from Wroclaw to Klodzko, was on a single carriageway road. There were long stretches of rural countryside with occasional villages. There seemed to be many near derelict houses, but it became apparent that these buildings were still occupied, probably with several tenants in one property. We drove past village cemeteries, all of which were full of vibrant coloured floral tributes. Along the route there were many roadside shrines which were quite substantial and elaborate, usually consisting of a large angel or crucifix. At first I thought they might be shrines to saints, but Monika said they were for people who had died in accidents. You could imagine there might be many accidents on this road as drivers (including ours) would take any chance to overtake a slow moving lorry. There were not many farm vehicles but in one place I noticed a man with a large, horse drawn old cart – the sort not seen in our country for perhaps 50 years or more.

The countryside started off wide and very flat, but gradually we moved towards a more mountainous region. As we drove closer, Monika pointed to one flat topped mountain and told us we would be walking up it in a day or two. I was struck by the number of trees with balls of mistletoe growing in them. I have never seen so much mistletoe in one tree! Small groups of deer could be seen in the open fields alongside the road.

As we approached Klodzko, we came to an area with several blocks of flats. The buildings did not have small signs identifying the name of each block, as in England, but instead had huge signs which shouted out the building's number – such as "28". They did not look quite as soul-less as the great swathes of grim communist looking buildings we had seen from the air as we approached Wroclaw, as they were arranged around an area of young trees and a grass play/community area with small shops around the edges. There was an 'out of town' shopping area with a cinema, which was not unlike the type of places we have in the UK, but on a smaller scale.

Monika drove us around Klodzko town centre which was small, seemed Germanic and a bit like Prague in places. She took us to the hotel which was located in a semi residential, semi light industrial area not far from the town. We noted the closed down 'night club' close by. Inside, the hotel was extremely clean, with a folky/rustic look. The two restaurants were on the ground floor whilst reception was on the first floor. There was no lift. Our rooms were basic but with excellent bathrooms. The floor throughout the hotel was stone tiled, consequently it all was a bit 'echoey'. My room had one single bed, whereas the others in the Comenius group had 2, 3 or 4 beds in their rooms. We ate in the hotel most evenings. The menu was helpfully written in English as well as Polish and German. The food was interesting and tasty, with borscht, dumplings (which were more like large ravioli) and other Polish treats as well as more standard meat and vegetables type of meals. Breakfast was typically continental with cold, cooked meats, pate, cheese, coleslaw, cottage cheese,

tomatoes and cucumbers and some wonderful rustic breads. Scrambled eggs, sweet pancakes or smoked sausages covered with cheese were also served.

The day we walked up the mountain, we had lunch in a cafe at the top, with a rainy view over the Czech Republic and Poland. Some of us chose Monika's recommendation of Zurek soup with bread. This is a Polish soup traditionally eaten for breakfast on Easter Day which consists of a broth made from a fermentation of rye, with bacon, smoked sausage and hard boiled eggs with some herbs added. It was quite a salty and slightly sour soup, which I really enjoyed. The paths we walked and climbed were well used and signposted routes with steps and hand rails along the more vertical climbs/descents. Some parts were quite challenging for members of our Comenius group.

It was on the way back to our minibus that Katrina, one of the French party sprained her ankle. We stopped off at a hospital so that her ankle could be looked at. We expected to have to wait for hours for Katrina to return. Instead she was back on the bus within an hour and a half having been seen by a doctor, X-rayed and bandaged. The treatment cost about £50 but her prescription was much more expensive. As Katrina had to rest her leg she was prescribed daily Warfarin injections for 14 days, which I do not think would have happened in the UK.

We had a visit to the fortress in Klodzko and also to the caves some miles away in the mountains. We travelled through the small villages alongside the river on a cobbled road. In 1997 there had been a dreadful flood which had reached the first floor of the buildings in Klodzko. We imagined these villages must have been devastated by the floodwater. As we got closer to the caves it started to snow and by the time we got out of the cars to walk the last 20 minutes or so it was snowing so hard that three to four 4 inches of snow fell.

On the third day we visited the school. We had to catch the school bus at 7.20 a.m. as school started at 8.00 a.m. Fortunately there were two teachers who caught the same bus as us, so we knew we were on the right bus. It was interesting that the driver had an assistant who presumably was there to keep control, but the children were so well behaved I am sure he was not often called upon. With 10 extra adults boarding the bus, there were few spare seats for the children we picked up along the way. No one seemed bothered that there were 3 children to a seat or that some people were standing. We had the feeling that Health and Safety controls had not yet reached rural Poland! This was also apparent concerning the railway line. There were no fences to prevent anyone straying onto the line, and in fact there were well trodden paths where people had taken short cuts across the line. Level crossings only had warning lights and were without barriers of any kind!

After picking up children along the way from hamlets and villages we arrived at the school which seemed to be in the middle of a small housing estate. The headteacher came out to greet us all and quickly ushered us inside the school. Immediately there was someone with a mop cleaning the floors after us. The school was very clean. We were taken to the small staff room. The sign on the door seemed to say 'rest room for teachers'. In the staffroom there were Easter decorations of lambs, rabbits and chicks made out of bread. We were told we could leave our bags in the staffroom as it would be locked. Whenever we returned we discovered that it had indeed been locked, but with the key left in the door every time!

The school was on two floors throughout, with a new extension which had only been opened for about a year. The new building felt spacious with wide corridors and had a lift for disabled children. Easter displays of branches decorated with painted eggs and hand crafted

paper flowers could be seen in the corridors. On every wall or window sill there were pieces of art work or decorations of one sort or another. Each classroom had pot plants. There were many posters with English wording. Most classrooms had something to do with Comenius on display as well as a map of the world. In one class where the children were pen friends with Patrick's class in France, they had a display with their letters and photos. Every classroom had a crucifix and the Polish crest on the wall at the front of the room. The cloakrooms were rooms with a door which could be shut. This helped to keep the school looking tidy. It was possible for people to enter the building freely as the offices were situated away from the main entrance and security did not seem to be an issue.

As we entered the classrooms, the children got up and said 'Good Morning' to us in English. They all seemed to be much taller for their age than our British, French and German counterparts. There was no school uniform and the classes were small with only 15 or 16 children. Monika asked one of us from each country to say a few words in our own language to the class so the children could guess which country we came from. The results were mixed! The older children were encouraged to ask us a question. They were enthusiastic and friendly. We watched children making a traditional spray of flowers (a combination of branches and greenery with paper flowers attached) which they would take to church on Palm Sunday. The sprays would not be left in church but would be taken home again. In one room the children sat patiently down either side of the classroom as two children competed at the front on a computer dance/co-ordination game. Another group of children were enjoying Karaoke as a regular part of their time at school. We watched a performance of Goldilocks and the Three Bears in English which was very entertaining.

Apparently parents have to pay for the workbooks used in schools, but there is help with the costs if parents cannot afford to buy them. We observed a maths lesson where the children were working through a workbook. It was interesting to see that in Poland the mathematical symbol for 'times' was '••' (which in the UK is '×'), whilst 'divided by' was shown as '•÷' instead of '÷'. The German teacher said they used the same symbols as in Poland but would also recognise the English/American symbols. The children's handwriting seemed to be of a very high standard using a 'cursive' style. I observed a lesson where children were cutting out pictures of farm animals, trees, grass, the sun etc and then sticking them on to a large piece of paper on the blackboard to make a secular Easter scene. It was interesting to see that the teacher chose where everything should be placed rather than letting the children choose. All the cutting and gluing things were cleared away incredibly quickly before the class moved on to trying to name, in English, the objects in the picture.

The children were excited by our presence and became more and more daring in their efforts to speak to us in English or to get our attention as we walked past them. It was amusing to note how children are the same throughout the world when something different and of great interest happens in their school!

The school library was significantly larger than ours at Brize Norton. It was similar in size to Emi Grant's classroom, but with three full height aisles of books plus shelves around the sides of the room as well as an office full of shelves of books. On looking at the spines of the books, I recognised many international authors of classic novels. Some of the titles gave me the impression that children were reading books of quite 'weighty' subject material. Many of these were used as group reading books.

We visited the secretary's and the Headteacher's offices which seemed less hectic than ours at Brize. In the Headteacher's office I noticed a used ashtray and commented that we are not allowed to smoke on school premises in England, to which I was told (with great amusement) that it is the same in Poland, but it was the Headteacher who smoked!

The school had 4 interactive whiteboards, and 2 computer suites which could be used by children or staff. Both the Headteacher and the Secretary had their own PC. There was a room for before and after school care, as well as a room where children with spinal or orthopaedic problems were taken through an exercise or physiotherapy routine. We did not see any play equipment outside, but Monika showed us an area where play equipment was due to be installed during the next year for the younger children. The sports facilities were more like a secondary school or college with a huge sports hall with climbing frames, electronic score boards and showers. As the winters are long and very cold, children cannot go outside for P.E, or breaks so a large sports hall was necessary. The school had two short snack breaks but there did not seem to be enough time to go outside to play in the breaks.

We had a tour of the catering facilities, which included an office and staffroom for the staff, as well as a place for them to change. The food preparation and cooking part of the kitchen was modern with a separate area for washing up. We stayed for lunch which was broth with butter beans, potatoes and swede, followed by a homemade pork rissole, mashed potato with a dressed cucumber salad. As the end of the school day was at 2.00 p.m., we boarded our bus for the return journey. During our time at the school the children had become more and more enthusiastic about saying hello, good morning and good bye. By the time we got on the bus with them they were very chatty, with lots of waving and goodbyes as we got off. For me, our visit to the school had been a special and moving occasion. I felt privileged to have had this experience.

On our last afternoon the whole visiting Comenius group went shopping in Klodzko. Not many people in the town spoke English but we managed quite well with our 6 words of Polish. We discovered that shopkeepers do not have a lot of change and found it difficult if we paid in notes. The Comenius group were particularly keen to buy amber, which is a speciality of the area, pottery, hand decorated eggs and other crafts and of course chocolates. Our shopping trip was followed by a final Comenius meal in the restaurant Oregano in town.

The next morning Monika drove us back to the airport. It was on this journey that we observed that Wroclaw showed definite signs of spring whilst in Klodzko it was still winter. We asked Monika how Poland had changed since the fall of Communism. She told us that she had been 13 at the time. Under Communism, people had money, but there was nothing in the shops to buy, and everything had to be queued for. Now there was so much in the shops, no queues, but no-one had the money to buy anything!