

A Polish Interlude

Impressions of a Member of an Official British Commission

By J. B. Priestley

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POLAND may be said to have begun for us within hailing distance of Tower Bridge. There, distressingly small at first sight, lay our ship, of some two thousand odd tons, and she belonged to the Polish-British Steamship Company. Her interior was Polish and was decorated with notices in that mysterious language, which appears to have been invented merely in order to be foreign, as if for theatrical purposes. At the sight of our cabin our hearts sank. True, there were four berths in it, and only two of us, but what berths!—what a distance from fresh air!—what an atmosphere! We told one another that the voyage would only last three or four days, but there was a gloomy languor about our unpacking. In our dreams, as prospective guests of a Government, we had seen no such cabins as these, which had the air of being oubliettes in a cheese factory. But our spirits revived when we climbed to the deck and the oxygen heights again, and the Thames sparkled at us. It was, we pointed out, an adventure; and then we prowled about the decks and secretly took stock of the other members of the party, who were busy taking stock of us and vainly imagining they were doing it secretly. By the time the ship passed under Tower Bridge, we were all convinced we detested one another.

Long before we left the Thames Estuary, however, we were all friends. This was because we had all marched into a foreign country together. We did this at dinner time. This was when Poland really began, when we were all seated round the dining table, with the large, smiling captain at the head of it; and the stewards, Poles to the last astonishing consonant, set before us colossal stacks of *hors d'œuvres* and liqueur glasses filled with neat whiskey. In Poland, you begin a meal by tossing off a few little glasses of neat spirits, and the stewards imagined that we should prefer whiskey. I may say that the nearer we drew to Poland, the more mountainous these *hors d'œuvres* became and the wilder the choice of spirits. These stewards had a passion for opening bottles and filling glasses. Long before we reached the Baltic coast, I noticed the Professor complacently drinking cherry brandy with his sardines and eggs, and such gentlemen as Trade Papers and Economic Expert could be seen swigging vodka like Dostoevski characters. All

these countries round the Baltic seem to have adopted the same principle in dining, which is to fill you up, leaving you either dazed or hilarious, before you have even reached the soup. The remaining courses you eat in a vague dream of conviviality.

The next day, Saturday, remains in my memory as a day of bitter strife, my opponent being the Polish Cigar, which had made its appearance, out of sinisterly brilliant boxes, late the night before. As a cigar, the Polish has its charms. Given the Thames Estuary, the Kiel Canal, or any other calm stretch of water, the Polish Cigar is a welcome companion, a friend. But on that Saturday we were crossing the North Sea; it was very cold and rough; and the boat, lightly loaded, pitched abominably. I always call myself a fairly good sailor, and so I am under ordinary conditions; but I had never sailed before with the Polish Cigar. No matter what corner of the three decks I found, there, within a few minutes, Trade Papers would arrive, bringing with him the Polish Cigar in full blast. Three of us, a faint smile on our green faces, tried to make out a sort of handicap list of our opponents, beginning with the whiff that floated out of the galley from time to time. Even while we were doing this, the heavy tread of Trade Papers was heard, bringing with it the inevitable blue cloud, and we groaned in chorus: 'The Polish Cigar—game and set!' and reeled away.

The first thing we heard, the next morning, was the blare of a band and some cheering. We looked out and saw green banks on each side. We were in the Kiel Canal. The band and the cheers were from a passing boatload of German excursionists. We were all the morning ambling down this street of water; the sun came out; the Polish Cigar was tolerated, even welcomed; and now the voyage took on that spacious air which properly belongs to a journey by sea. Time broadened, allowing us to exchange long reminiscences of travel and the sudden confidences of the boat deck. The Baltic was merely a pleasing backcloth, against which we ate largely, told stories, and drank toasts. The stewards—especially the bullet-headed, smiling one with the gold tooth—opened bottles like mad. The captain, who had sailed the Black Sea for twenty-five years and seemed to have popped out of one of Chekhov's more cheerful stories, stroked his long, fair moustache and made jokes in the odds and ends of six languages. It would take pages and pages of artful sentences to capture the unique flavor of this expedition, its fantastic conviviality, its genial idiocy.

At last we found ourselves in the mouth of a river, and I was thrilled to learn that this was no other than the Vistula. After that, no matter in what part of Poland we were—and we travelled hundreds and hundreds of miles—wherever there was a river, it was the Vistula. There was no escaping that stream, sluggish though it seemed; you could go east one day, two hundred miles or so, then as far from your original

starting point toward the west the next day, but the Vistula went with you. Yet when I remember that first thrill, I forgive the Vistula its ubiquity. It brought us first to Danzig, a city that pleased me immensely, if only because it is full of curly buildings, Gothic vistas, old wood, and beer. Given a steady supply of English tobacco, I could write a book in Danzig.

Our first show place, however, was not Danzig but the neighboring port of Gdingen, where we were taken to the town hall in a body and solemnly addressed in several languages. We were then put into a bus, taken out and put into a tug, put into a bus again, and shown the docks. The Poles are very proud of Gdingen, and they have every right to be. Only a few years ago, it was nothing but a fishing village. Now it is a real port, to say nothing of its being a seaside resort, almost entirely filled with young men wearing comic hats. It has grown nearly as fast as those famous Klondike towns. It is growing now. All the officials we met there were extremely energetic, voluble, and proud, and I am sure they are all happy men. They are creating something, seeing the thing grow, and not hanging about, reading Spengler. It was good to see a port coming into existence, after seeing so many ports sinking into a decline. Even when those Poles insisted on my examining their methods of cleaning rice or storing tinned apricots (and it was one of those hot, tiring days), I still admired them.

They had put the same energy and exuberance into the official lunch they gave us, a lunch that offered one enough food and drink and speechifying for two or three wedding breakfasts and a conference. It ended about four, and then, pleased but dazed, we were put into a large launch or a small steamer, only to find that its saloon was crammed with more food and drink, the very sight of which sent us reeling back, affrighted. Dimly I remember that launch or steamer, that shadowy vessel, making its way back to Danzig, where an optimistic young man in a raincoat tried to explain to us something about the docks, little knowing that we were all moving about in the haziest of dreams. If you imagine from this that we were unappreciative visitors, you are wrong. The fact is, that when you have lunched until four on a hot day, after a morning's hard sight-seeing, and have drunk all the toasts proposed to you, it is almost impossible to give a coal shoot the attention it deserves, say, at about half past five. We were nothing but a party of somnambulists.

Early that same evening, we caught a train that was due to land us in Poznan (once Posen) in the small hours. It went roaring across an enormous plain, and then we shut out the night, told stories, sang songs, and did conjuring tricks with pennies. Curiously enough, none of us was sleepy by this time, though we all felt we had been up and awake for at least several days. It was rather like being back in the War

again, or in the pleasant part of it. By eleven or so we began to feel hungry, and then discovered there was no dining car on the train. Something had been arranged, however, we were told, and quite suddenly, in the middle of the night, at some mysterious halt, that something happened. A number of white-coated men suddenly swarmed into the corridor of our coach, and they carried plates of steaming *wiener Schnitzel* and fried potatoes, bottles of beer and glasses, dishes of wild strawberries and cream, napkins and cutlery. There was our supper, done to a turn, miraculously arriving out of the unknown darkness. In a few minutes, not a white-coated man was to be seen, the train was rattling on again, and we were eating and drinking away, enjoying the strangest picnic. Could anything so pleasant ever happen to visitors to this country? I doubt it.

AT POZNAN, we stayed at an hotel that had been specially built for the exhibition. This hotel was a capital example of modern architecture, and the rooms were superbly comfortable. But something had gone wrong with the service. (May I add here that the Pole, like the Englishman, makes a bad waiter, from which you may argue the future greatness of Poland?) On the very first morning, after we had been traveling half the night, I could not discover any breakfast. It was one of those mornings when it is impossible to live, to come to terms at all with life, without breakfast. I rang bells, without anything happening; and finally descended into the entrance hall. There I was seized upon and promptly introduced to about ten smiling officials from the exhibition. They were excellent fellows, I could see that; they had clearly been waiting for us, in that entrance hall, for about an hour; it was a shame; but the fact remained that I wanted some breakfast. At last I found a room in which about six of our party were just finishing their coffee and rolls. They told me that there had once been talk of an omelette, but that as there were no signs of it ever arriving, they had contented themselves with coffee and rolls. I too ordered coffee and rolls. The others departed. I sat there, waiting for my coffee and rolls. Half an hour passed, not very pleasantly. Then a waiter entered, triumphantly, one huge smile. He was carrying the largest omelette I have ever seen, about two feet long and six inches broad, and this monster he proudly set down before me, on the bare table. An omelette had once been ordered; an omelette had now arrived. Ah!—the genial lunacy of those days.

The Polish National Exhibition at Poznan is nearly as large as Wembley, and far prettier. The Poles are proud of it, and I do not blame them. For a new country, still suffering from the effects of the War, that exhibition is a triumph. I met men who had worked, almost day and night, for two years or more, organizing it, and I admired

them. I did more than that; I walked miles and miles in their exhibition, passing places that offered one iced beer and shaded chairs without so much as a wistful glance. I looked at exhibits until I was dizzy, and some of them, more especially the peasant costumes, the wood carving, the drawings, I thought enchanting. What I would not do was to stay for the second half of the revue to which we were taken, the first night. I am sorry now that I did not stay, that we all did not stay, for it appears that the leading lady and the leading gentleman, learning in advance that a party of English visitors would be present, had gone to the length of learning a duet in English, with which to astonish and delight us. This duet was performed in the second half, and—alas!—there came no burst of hearty English applause, for we had gone. I still feel sorry about this. If I had known, I would have submitted for another hour or two to those hard wooden chairs, that close atmosphere, the elaborate jests in Polish, and the frantic and alarming disrobing of the Koszutski Girls. It was much more amusing at the *Merry Village*, where there were huge switchbacks and waterchutes and all the fun of the fair, gloriously spangled in electric lights under the deep blue of the midnight sky. It was here that Foreign Affairs and I won our crimson rosettes, which we wore in our buttonholes for the rest of the visit. We were awarded these for knocking down four little dummy men with a football, a feat that each of us performed three consecutive times, to the great content of the onlookers. I am not sure that this was not the great moment of the whole delightful visit.

The next day was grimly hot, and we had one of those official lunches that lasted from one-thirty to four, and had to drink toasts, make speeches, and talk in the wreckage of three or four different languages to our amiable but exhausting neighbors. These lunches were always very tiring; moreover, they always began with vodka, and vodka of many different colors; with the result that they never failed to introduce what might be called a subjective element into the remainder of the day's events. That is why I cannot be sure that I did not dream that visit to the chateau place. I remember driving from the restaurant back to a remote corner of the exhibition, where we saw, in an atmosphere of Arabian heat and dust, some wonderful Arab horses of a kind that were being bred in Poland. I remember taking my place in a car, and being grateful for the rest and the cool air that flowed round us once the car began to move. Then I fell asleep, and when I opened my eyes again we were standing in front of this chateau place, miles from anywhere. We might have been in the middle of the Steppes.

The sun seemed fiercer than ever, and it was pleasant to climb the large staircase and find oneself at last in a long apartment, shaded, and cool as a cellar. Still dazed, I stared at swords and manuscripts and suits of armor. Even when you are at home, a nap during the afternoon

leaves you dazed for a while; and this was abroad, most fantastically abroad, and I had fallen asleep in one place and awakened in another, and how long we had been, how far we had come, where we were, I did not know. I wandered out on to a balcony, which overlooked a moat, still filled with water, and a wide avenue, flanked with noble old trees and so long that it seemed to dwindle to a green pin point. Everything was still: it might have been a back-cloth. Only the shimmer of heat disturbed the scene. I might have been dreaming in a hothouse. There were voices behind me, and I discovered, in the nearest room, the rest of our party gathered about the owner of the place, Countess somebody, a delightful old lady in sweeping black clothes. She was speaking in English, but in a curious sing-song tone, which made events already remote in time remoter still; and she was talking about an English governess she had had and her childhood in the 'sixties. Then there were tales of the old generation of aristocratic refugees, in a shadowy Paris. And the queer, half-chanting, half-querulous tones went on and on, and nothing I heard, nothing I saw, seemed real.

It was a day or so before I really recovered from that break with reality. The trouble was, one never had a chance to take hold of things properly, standing no nonsense from them. That very night we were shot round to a station that seemed to have more people in it than any station I have ever seen, people wearing side-curls and beards, strange hats, and riotous shawls. We climbed into a coach filled with sleeping berths and then talked excitedly in the corridor for half an hour. The train went swaying into the dark. I undressed, performed a short acrobatic act, which landed me finally in an upper berth, and then lay awake for an hour or two, during which time the train seemed to be moving at an appalling speed. After that, I dozed off, occasionally waking when we stopped, and hearing mysterious sounds and still more mysterious voices outside, where lanterns were being waved about in unimaginable stations. Deep sleep must have come to me at last, however, and I awoke to find the train moving quietly through the full flush of morning. Only four of us were left, the remainder of the party having left the train at an earlier station, to visit coal mines and zinc works. But we were going straight through to Kraków, and that is how we got there. Can you wonder that I shook hands limply with those smiling people who came to welcome us at the station, and could only mumble at them? I don't mean merely that I was tired (though I was); but these pleasant people were obviously convinced that they were real, and that Kraków was solidly there; whereas I was far from feeling sure about these things. The rest of the morning I moved about quite cautiously, for the whole business was still too brittle, and if I wasn't careful, why, Kraków might break like an eggshell!



AS OTHERS SEE US

DEBUNKING AMBASSADOR DAWES

THE SPEECH MADE by Ambassador Dawes before the Pilgrims' Club in London, where he made his first public plea for Anglo-American understanding, attracted derisive comment in the columns of the *New Statesman*. It should be explained, however, that, although the *New Statesman* nearly always supports the Labor Party, it has a definite anti-American bias. Its editor, Mr. Clifford Sharp, preaches a curious mixture of radicalism and imperialism and he seems to have transferred his almost personal animus against Mr. Coolidge to the new ambassador at the Court of St. James:—

It is very difficult to estimate with confidence the value of public declarations dealing with the future peace of the world. On the face of it, the speech of General Dawes, the new American Ambassador, at the Pilgrims' Club was pure guff—there is really no other word. He talked, for example, of the great principle of equality in naval strength between Great Britain and America, and said that it was 'a soul-satisfying fact' that this principle was 'upheld, sacred and inviolate, in the consciences and hearts of the two great English-speaking peoples.' He asked us, in short, to regard some understanding as to whether cruisers should have 6-inch or 10-inch guns as something which is 'sacred.' It is extraordinary that any public man should feel able on a great occasion to talk such nonsense.

THE BROADWAY MELODY ENCHANTS THE PARIS BOULEVARDS

THE JEALOUSY that American motion pictures arouse in other countries has been intensified by the advent of the talkie, and the European cinema industry is girding its loins to meet Yankee competition. It is therefore surprising to find the leading weekly literary journal in Paris, the *Nouvelles Littéraires*, commend-

ing the technical and artistic merits of a rather dreadful 'all talking—singing—dancing' picture, *The Broadway Melody*. M. Alexandre Arnoux, the regular movie critic on that paper, consecrates a long essay to praising the new art that the United States has produced:—

While we have been hesitating, changing our minds, and jabbering to no purpose, these Americans have thrown themselves into their work, heart and soul. Of course, they have more money than we, but money alone does not explain their success; they haven't spared themselves in any respect. When one thinks of the difficulties of such an adventure, of the chances of failure, of the numerous problems to be solved, of the inevitable surprises that arise in such an unexplored field, one is utterly confounded. Engineers, directors, actors, and authors have had to form themselves into an enthusiastic bloc saturated with determination to see this venture through. Discipline, imagination, and science, the three cardinal virtues of movie production, have had to prevail and never falter. The results have justified the efforts expended. All the reproaches we could level against the talkies, all the just objections we might have raised fall to pieces in the face of this film.

A VIENNESE VIEW OF AMERICAN FLAPPERS

ONE YEAR AGO last spring a thirteen-year-old schoolgirl called Elizabeth Benson won momentary fame by writing a book entitled *The Younger Generation*. The extraordinary thing about this book is not that its youthful author boldly debunked the sex question, the liquor question, and the question of religion; the point is that she was only thirteen and therefore represents the generation that will be called younger when the flaming youths of to-day have been reduced to embers.

But certain Europeans—and particularly Dr. Freud's fellow townsmen in