

Three London Decades of Piotr Czerwinski

In the spring of '89, I had long hair and a mere seventeen years under my belt. Poland was readying itself for the now infamous June elections, set to kill off communism, though my father suspected that instead of freedom they would bring a swarm of Soviet tanks into our streets, not unlike previous such attempts had done in other parts of Central Europe, where they had tried to win their democratic freedoms the peaceful way. My father was a freedom fighter by trade, this of course before he learnt other, less confrontational forms of employ. He'd spent the last great War firing his home-made machine gun and blowing up trains. Unfortunately, the freedom fighting movement he had signed his life up to was supported by the Polish Government in Exile, then based in London. When the War ended and Red Rule begun, it was replaced by a government which did not look kindly on the likes of my father and his fellow partisans, all because they liked their freedom so much they were willing to fight for it.

And so, that fateful spring of '89, my father took my seventeen year old self aside and said: Son, we are sending you on a little trip to London. When the tanks get here, you will stay over there, in exile, just like those lads who recently escaped in a long-distance lorry, and all will be well. Don't worry about us, we'll manage somehow.

A trip to London in those days was one hell of a treat. Only a handful of travel agents organised such jaunts, mostly to language schools, something only the kids of black market profiteers and party bigwigs could afford. A couple of decades earlier, even that little was impossible, our borders shut against anywhere that wasn't fellow Soviet Block Bulgaria. Come June '89, my parents decided on a more exotic location to exile me to. They emptied their bank accounts of what meagre savings they had managed to accumulate, and bought me my ticket to the West, first to Glasgow and then London. I packed all my best gear: twin-Velcro strap trainers, a marble-grey body-warmer and a bandanna bought off a market stall in Warsaw. Back then, few in the East had ever seen a wicked bandanna. As my visa allowed me to stay for up to six months, I spent the whole summer in London, waiting for the tanks to hit my now-distant homeland.

London at that time looked to a Polish teen like one giant [Pewex](#) shop. You could buy bananas and Coke in cans on every corner, with no little [Fiat 126](#) or even the bigger, classier [125](#) to be seen anywhere, everyone wearing original, as opposed to fake, blue jeans and speaking English, as if I had suddenly found myself living inside a film. There were far fewer Poles in the capital then, meaning each encounter with a fellow countryman was a chance to stop and talk about the old country. Most "old countrymen" were to be found back then in [POSK](#), along with the now legendary "Wailing Wall", a mid-sized display cabinet filled with job offer notices. Next to this was a phone booth where one could dial the numbers off the Wall and seek happiness in washing dishes, Hoovering carpets or digging holes. Experts held the Wall was best approached at seven am., as no less than fifteen minutes later none of the ads displayed on it would still be valid.

The West was so absolutely Western, it felt like a different planet. I even found the fact we were breathing the same kind of air surprising, or that the lawns were thick with the same kind of grass we had back home. My first purchase in this capital of dreams was a can of some soft drink whose brand I won't now bother to recall. Back home we collected empty drinks cans from the West, even bought empties at fairs for souvenirs, so I struggled when it came to discarding said treasure in some pavement bin. London also had a McDonald's; I diligently collected the



paper they lined their food trays with, intending to one day have them decorating the wall over my Warsaw bed.

All the time hoping to follow the fate of *those lucky boys who escaped in a long distance lorry and got refugee status* I approached what was then known as Government in Exile, which was still very much in exile and still apparently governing. I remember introducing first myself, then my unfortunate situation, repeating myself in English just in case. I did not omit to bring my father and his freedom fighting past into the conversation, a fight this exiled government had once supported so bravely. I was counting on a little pity and mercy their end, but the lady who let me through the door seemed unmoved. - We are a government - she replied proudly - not a refuge for teenage exiles.

The summer was beautiful that year. Unfortunately, Soviet tanks failed to materialise in Warsaw's streets and it seemed communism would be allowed to die a natural death. I therefore returned to Poland and finished my schooling, as if nothing had happened. By the end of my trip out West, I had run out of all funds and spent the last two nights of freedom sleeping on a park bench, in a picturesque place called [Golden Square Garden](#), with a group of punks who had then still represented a major tourist attraction and plied their trade in posing for photographs on nearby Piccadilly Square. I will always recall descending the steps down to the Tube, heading for the airport. As I negotiated step after step, deeper underground, the Eros Statue became ever smaller, until it looked like a tiny statuette, then vanished altogether, closely followed by the grey sky behind it.

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Almost exactly a decade later, as I was nearing thirty, Warsaw itself had become one giant Pewex shop. You could buy bananas and Coke in cans everywhere, everyone still wearing the same jeans, only now they were originals, not fakes. We were now breathing the same air as in England, and our grass was now just as green. I had by then become an editor in a lad lifestyle magazine and was eventually sent to London, to a business gathering of editors of the same magazine published in other parts of the globe. Polish magazines of the time were also rip-offs of those in the West.

Therefore, having put on a suit to make myself look more human, I flew to GB's capital for the second time and took a taxi, one of those classic, black London cab jobbies, to Golden Gate Garden. I sat down on my old bench, where time stood still and stayed there for what seemed like all eternity, smoking cigarette after cigarette. Dicing with my own thoughts, which were stubborn and refused to respond in any way. There were no more punks, in the Square or anywhere else in London; the world of entertainment was by then occupied by techno-strobe effect advances. I also had the feeling the Evening Standard street vendors had vanished, the ones I incessantly asked for directions when lost there as a teen. Or perhaps it was too early for them to start plying their trade yet. Even the neon signs on Piccadilly Circus seemed newer and a lot more strobe-like than before. And that little rock'n'roll museum, with its wax Hendrix up on a balcony overlooking London Pavillion, too had passed into for ever. Afterwards, at our biznes banquet, seated at a table with other editors from around the world, one of them asked about my day.

- I've spent most of it in the year nineteen eighty nine. - I replied, but they didn't quite get me, being, thankfully, by then quite drunk "on account".

Before returning home, in the bustle of Piccadilly Square tube station someone stole my wallet, and a little later someone else had cable installed in their Warsaw apartment, having used my

ID. London then was already more Polish than it had been in '89.

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Another ten years had to pass before I was to visit London for a third time, now approaching forty. This time, in early 2010, I had myself arrived from the West, Dublin in fact, in the guise of a migrant writer. Migrant writers tend these days to fly in from such exotic locations. I stood inside the POSK centre entrance hall for half an hour before the literary event being held in my name. History clutched at my throat as if had swallowed my own heart. My suit was long gone. I was wearing my ordinary khaki jacket, the one I now wear everywhere I go, though it's not exactly what you'd call evening attire. Wearing it I feel as if I had spent the whole day sitting in a café on Montmartre, even when just hanging around, blocking the way in a POSK corridor. The good people who had invited me there were talking books. I listened in, but deep inside I was talking to myself again, reviewing much of the life I had already lived. Saying to myself - you've not done badly, son. Whichever way you look at it, we've made it. Arrived. The long hair I'd once had all gone, but then there is a price to pay for everything.

Later, sitting before my audience, I blurted out various wise words. I answered questions, signed some autographs, accompanied by a talented young poet, singing songs which he himself had written. After the event, I was approached by a senior representative of the local Polonia, one of those who had got here the last time the world had been at war with itself. He said not to worry. Said that history always repeats itself in cycles and that we will always emerge out of any kind of oppression, we are Poles, after all, it is our duty. I thought to myself: dear sir, you would have to had to have lived through all my various incarnations, be a living, fragmented embodiment of our country's history, exhaust three decades of your life before abandoning it for elsewhere, like me, to finally understand that Poland hasn't fallen yet and never will, and only we exiles know it, because true Poland is not situated by some Vistula, but in our own tired imaginations.

For my own sake, I decided not to make that third pilgrimage to Piccadilly Square. Instead, I spent three intense days in Hammersmith and Acton, surrendering history, neon signs, benches, Trafalgars, bobbies and other ghosts of the past. And free of all that, I had the impression that no matter how often I happen to visit this town, it will always be for the first time.

by Piotr Czerwinski



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