

Warsaw Tales



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New Europe Writers Ink

Cultural Exchange

Introduced one day to a director of the Warsaw Metro, then but two unfinished stations on the city's only metro line, I was offered a conducted tour by his twenty year-old daughter. Monika was a painter fluent in English, a not quite stereotypical blonde with vibrant blue eyes. She became my guide on a journey into another world that really only began after we'd left the underground.

In the early evening, we went to a tiny café for a drink, then to a large one in a Stare Miasto basement that served only wine. Amongst the austere white walls of the smoke-filled room lined with park-like bench tables, we ordered wine and pretzels. A group of gypsy musicians surrounded us and started playing, their nylon-string guitars old and worn, and none of them could sing. I asked Monika if I should give them something, and she said "Five dollars." I was in shock. "It's only one dollar per musician," she explained. I balked: few would think of paying that to bar musicians in the United States, let alone ones who cannot sing in tune. Five dollars was a few days' earnings for the average working Pole! To my utter amazement, she humiliated me by pulling from her purse a five dollar bill and handing it over. She told me that she lived from washing dishes in Holland so she could return to Poland and concentrate on her painting. Naively embarrassed by her gesture, I offered to pay her back, but she refused it. The gypsy musicians saw what was happening, and a young woman at the next table remarked that Monika was trying to get rid of them. "But just the opposite" I said. "She's hooked them!"

They started playing fiercely. One who had obviously scented the opportunity of the moment leaned over and said closely to my face, "Five dollars." Then a forty-ish dark-haired, bearded man leaned over the table and pressed a sticker onto my watch - "Solidarność" in the usual painterly red lettering. As he did, he said, "Sir! What is your name?" I told him and asked his.

"I'm Nobody," he said.

Monika ordered more wine. I still had half of a glass left. She told me that she knew the man and didn't like him, and tried to interrupt our communication. But now he was hooked too. Things grew rowdy. Without asking, he began drinking our wine. People started to sing with Nobody, who started dancing. Monika began to sing with him, the same man whom she had just proclaimed she didn't like and had tried to stop me from talking to. By now the gypsies were playing and dancing on the bench table in front of us. The wine bar had transformed into a wild party in the pursuit of hard cash.

The bar suddenly closed without announcement. It was only 8 p.m. I paid for several drinks, including Nobody's. Monika and I walked up the stairs to the narrow snow-covered street between old buildings, occasionally illuminated from the outside by Kerosene-style lanterns. The gypsies were already outside in the street playing. Nobody again tried to persuade me to pay them more money. I repeatedly refused.

Monika and I held each arm-in-arm as we passed through the iced-over walk street, the musicians continuing to serenade us from far behind. I said to myself that no more romantic moment could have been planned, just as Nobody handed me some cheap earrings to give to Monika. Seeing the source, she refused them. He said, "Wait a minute, Sir!" and entered a bar. We continued to cling to each other in the snow, perhaps for no other reason than to keep from falling. Again he appeared with something for Monika, this time a bunch of dried flowers. She said, "They're awful!" and refused them, too.

It was clear to me by then that Nobody had assumed the role of Cupid-manager to nurture a romantic atmosphere between me and Monika, whom I had not known before that day and for whom I was not feeling particularly romantic, especially when she showed me up with a five dollar bill. I could not help but laugh at that moment, because it was too beautiful a scenario, right out of a vintage film: the cheap earrings and flowers; the gypsies playing behind; the little lights from lanterns and store windows reflected on the snowy walk street in Warsaw's Old Town; arm-in-arm with a pretty young woman. I soon began to suspect an orchestrated scheme to separate one American fool in Warsaw from his money. It could not have been achieved with more romantic kitsch, a precious mirage surely worth a thousand zloties!

The musicians finally realized that they weren't going to profit further and gave up on playing. In search of another place to go we entered a restaurant. To my chagrin, Nobody, another man, and two women from the wine bar were sitting at a big table with couples dining on either side. Seemingly, everyone had an assigned and well-rehearsed role in our film as they ordered an elaborate assortment of brandy, wine and gin the moment we entered. The couples got up and danced to slow music. Nobody insisted that Monika and I dance, but we got up just as the last song ended. Nobody convinced the restaurant staff to play one more last song, just for us, and as we danced, Nobody began working his charms on another couple.

The restaurant closed. "Home!" Nobody proclaimed. Whatever he meant, we walked together out of the old town to a slick modernist bar with a black and white interior, decorative artwork and

a grand piano. Nobody insisted I play. "I don't play piano," I said. We walked down a winding stairway into the basement where there was a young man taking coats and hats. Then we climbed back up the stairs to a second level where there were black leather chairs and sofas, black and white tables and black and white walls. To my surprise, comfortably seated and awaiting us was the band of gypsies!

Drinks were ordered, by whom I wasn't sure. This time it was whisky for everyone. As if preordained by my presumed patronizing heritage, Nobody handed me the bill. I opened my wallet and showed him that all I had was one twenty dollar bill, impossible to exchange so late at night. Like lightning, Nobody reached across the table, grabbed the bill from my wallet and began running down the stairs. I chased him.

Down he scampered to the coat room in the basement, where, he handed the bill over to the hat check guy and asked for change. If a five dollar bill was a bit excessive for unsolicited gypsy musicians who couldn't sing, could the cost of hanging coats in the cloak room cost three-week's salary?

However, in exchange he was given a stack of Polish zloties, which Nobody then proudly handed over to me. Now he had become a self-appointed finance manager too! As I finished counting the money Nobody said, "Sir! This isn't a good deal!" He grabbed the money, handed it to the coat check guy, demanded back the twenty dollar bill and ran up the winding stairs. I chased in mad pursuit as he dashed out of the front door and into the snowy sidewalk. I repeatedly slipped and fell. Nobody ran up some iced-over steps to the door of a restaurant. I lunged towards him, attempting to grab his coat whilst I held desperately onto an iron railing on the steps to keep from falling. The door was locked shut, so he ran back down the steps to a big Mercedes which seemingly out of nowhere had parked at the curb. Mysteriously, the big front door swung open, Nobody handed over the twenty dollars and held the exchanged bills, exclaiming "Sir! I got you a better deal!"

This time Nobody didn't immediately hand over the bills to me. Out came the bartender onto the street, where a good amount of money was quickly lost, to pay for everyone's drinks. By then I had resigned myself to becoming the pigeon in an old fashioned slapstick. I couldn't get angry because I was too busy laughing. But if that wasn't enough, Nobody then said "Sir, could you please give me money so I can get home by taxi?" I refused. He replied, "You think incorrectly, sir!"

I tried to think correctly. I said to myself, "If I give him a 10,000 zloty bill, I will be through with him and this whole story." As I handed one to him, to my disbelief he said, "Sir, sorry, but this isn't enough money to get home!" Just then Monika entered the street, overheard us, then asked for money to buy a bottle of wine from the bar. I started to feel like Santa Claus. "I know that this is enough to get to anywhere in this city!" I said. "He doesn't live inside of Warsaw!" she exclaimed.

That's when I began to suspect that Monika had masterminded the whole scam.

"Will 20,000 zloties do then?" I asked. As he agreed to take the money Monika then chipped in, "You are not at ALL metaphysical! All you talk about is money!"

And as if possessed at that split second by an other-worldly spirit, I pulled out of my wallet another 20,000 zloty bill.

Before the stunned faces of Monika, Nobody, the bartender and several of the gypsies who had come onto the street, I tore it in half.

"After tonight...that's as metaphysical.....as I can get."

Frederick Abrams