

ACADEMIA BEHIND THE IRON CURTAIN—1978

Warren Staebler

Editor: A teacher of English—Perkiomen School (Pa); University of Kansas; a Taft Teaching Fellow at University of Cincinnati; Miami University (Ohio) and finally professor of English at Earlham College, Richmond, Indiana—Warren has had a rich and varied life. On leave of absence from Earlham in the early 1950s, he was head of the mission of the American Friends Service Committee in Italy. In 1978 he applied for a Fulbright Teaching Fellowship in Europe and ended up in Poland. He gives us here a story of his two years teaching in that communist country. He is also a music student and has tried his hand at composing what he calls "several fugitive pieces of music."

"Mr. Staebler, if you will pardon me for saying so," said the woman's voice at the other end of the line, "I don't understand why you persist in applying for England or France or Italy. You haven't a chance in any of the three. There are too many applicants for too few places, and most of those applying have reputations with long lists of achievements. Why not apply for one of the central European nations? Most applicants don't want them and there are a fair number of good places. Think about it."

I was talking to one of the fine administrative persons in the Fulbright offices in Washington. And the time was early spring of 1978. In June of that year I was to be retired, after 32 years, from Earlham College. I talked the matter over with my wife and we were of accord.

I called back the next day, filled out the forms and, in a matter of weeks, was appointed as Senior Fulbright Lecturer in American Literature at the University of Wrocław in western Silesia. We went, Patricia and I, and stayed two years, returning in July 1980, shortly before the strikes broke out in the shipyards of Gdansk, culminating in the ascendancy of Lech Walesa and the formation of Solidarity. Our experiences there were as memorable and deeply-influencing as our years in Rome in the early 1950s.

Entering by train from East Berlin, Poland was indeed a discovery. It is about the size of New Mexico and contained 35 million persons, including only 6,000

or 7,000 Jews. Ethnically it was almost homogeneous, as well as being 93% Roman Catholic. The Poles were thorns in the flesh of the Soviet Moscow authorities. They were intractable individualists and had thwarted Moscow's plan to make a model collectivist nation in Central Europe. They had resisted efforts to eradicate Roman Catholicism. Seventy-two percent of the arable land in 1978 was in the hands of private farming enterprises, and barely a quarter operated collectively. The Poles had quietly continued to go to their churches, and their priests to preach. And in 1980, on the death of John Paul I, his successor turned out to be, astoundingly, a Pole. The entire population was both jubilant and proud. At last the world paid attention to Poland.

Poland's universities, although woefully behind their western counterparts in equipment and financial means, were vigorous. A mathematician friend of ours at Earlham told us before we left that most of the major innovations in mathematical theoretical thought since 1950 had been made by Polish academicians. And another friend, an internationally known reformer in the teaching of chemistry, who had visited Polish universities in the 1970s, reported that his Polish colleagues, although working in rudimentary laboratories with ingeniously self-made instruments, developed advanced methods and thoughts receptive to his own. Poland, of course, was the land of Copernicus. It was internationally known in the music world for Paderewski, Penderecki, Lutoslawski; in theater for Tomaszewski and Grotowski, and in literature for its Nobel Prize-winning writers Czeslow Milosz and Sienkiewicz. So we found ourselves in a country of considerable cultural distinction.

Wrocław was founded in the late years of the 11th century as a Polish city, but, conquered in the 13th century, it passed into the hands of a Germanic people, and in the early 17th century into the possession of Austria, and then became a part of Prussia. When World War II ended, Germany (old Prussia) was forced to relinquish a slice of Poland, including Wrocław (called Breslau by the Germans) and all of Silesia. Victorious Russia helped itself generously to a large part of eastern Poland, including the important city of Lwow. The

faculty of the University of Lwow then had to emigrate westward to Wroclaw and rebuild the university there. ("Rebuild" literally because Wroclaw was mostly destroyed by the retreating Nazis— next to Warsaw the most-damaged Polish city) . These emigrants put together a few buildings for classrooms. When I arrived in the late 1970s many of my faculty colleagues as young students had been eager to enter the University in 1945-6 and told how they had assisted their professors in those years in the arduous rebuilding task.

Divisions of study were housed in Institutes. I taught in the English Institute, whose curriculum included courses in linguistics, English literature and, recently added, American literature. American literature had become increasingly popular. No books in English were allowed to be published in Poland, and no imported ones were on sale in the numerous book stores. But English Institutes were allowed in the universities and could stock English books in their small sparse libraries, and students were free to read them without police looking over their shoulders. Thomas Jefferson, Walt Whitman, H. G. Wells and John Stuart Mill were there. What better counter-agents to Marxist doctrine could there be?

Poland, as Patricia and I soon learned, was a land of strange contradictions and inconsistencies, of crazy logic, where "no" often meant "yes" and two could easily become three. The Voice of America, for example, was effectively blocked, yet individuals could own short wave radios and easily listen to the BBC every day, as we did. Eligible persons were not deterred from owning two-way shortwave radios and talking directly with people in England, and even in the United States. One friend, an important executive in the Polish equivalent of our GE, told us that he was the head of a national committee for certifying new shortwave ham operators. He cited the names of some of his nightly British and American radio contacts. "My favorite of all," he said, "is Barry Goldwater. If I ever go to the United States, he is the first person I am going to look up."

My students were all third and fourth year undergraduates who had already had six years of English.



Professor Staebler in a pensive mood

(They had all had to study Russian as their second tongue since the beginning of elementary school, but were doing their best to forget it. They strenuously refused to read Tolstoy and his great contemporaries in Russian, maintaining that they were much better in Polish). When in secondary school they had at last had the privilege of electing a second language and had eagerly chosen English.

The Polish universities were open to all graduates of secondary schools. Yet to enter an

Institute for four years of specialized training they had to pass a rigorous examination. A personable young man who loved animals and aimed at being a veterinarian somehow failed the Veterinarian Institute exam. Learning that the English Institute exam had not yet been given, he dashed over, took that exam, passed it and, being quick witted and highly intelligent, became one of our best students in American Literature.

Needy students received monthly stipends from the government depending on their circumstances. Married students with a child obviously got more. After four years, however, a student would be informed that he owed the government 140,000 zloties (27 zloties to the dollar in 1980) which he should begin to repay promptly, unless he had a job! Payment was required only if he was not working!

The logic of this seemed characteristically absurd. "If you are not earning anything, start repaying. If you are earning, don't bother." But I came to see that the state had a point. In the Communist economy there is no such thing as unemployment. So if you are not working it must be because you don't have to, which means you have money, so "fork over" at once. The state was in earnest. If a female graduate married an Englishman, for example, and went to England to live, her parents were forced to sign on to the debt and make the monthly payments.

The English of my third and fourth year students was extraordinary and I never ceased marveling at it. They all took lecture notes, wrote their examinations and their senior theses in English. What proficiency! Almost none of them had been to an English-speaking land and probably never would. It was British English since their teachers had been trained through a series of programs and workshops initiated throughout Poland by the British Consul in Warsaw. A few students had been able to spend time in England as "au pairs" or as workers at harvest time. A few, with relatives in the United States, had gotten visas and six month green cards to work here and save money to take back to Poland. The government encouraged this influx of dollar currency, as the returnees opened their dollar bank accounts back home.

Back to my teaching. My fifty students were divided roughly 50/50 between juniors and seniors. For the junior group I gave a year long summary course on American Literature and another two courses of one semester each on 18th Century Political Idealism and on Romanticism in America. With the seniors I concentrated, say, on American Realism and Naturalism, 1840-1950, and added a survey of American poetry up through Frost and Sandburg. In both there was particular emphasis on individual novelists and poets. I gave a weekly lecture in each course and then, dividing each section into small groups of from nine to twelve, met them twice a week in tutorial sessions.

I wanted to break through the traditional authoritarian barrier separating the professor and the neophytes sitting under him whose sole duty was to take voluminous notes from his utterances to memorize for examinations. I deplored the adversarial relationship of the stereotyped ancient classroom. In the tutorial sessions I had us sitting around a table and, as amicable guide, I prompted conversation about the work before us, each student having his own copy open in front of him. I got them to probe individual passages, difficult or enigmatic. What exactly did each mean and how did it relate to the whole novel, short story or poem? I prodded them to express their own thoughts and to question passages they found unintelligible, to challenge one another or supplement another's interpretation. We talked critically and amicably. But it was hard, very hard, to break the ice and took a long time.

I always insisted on a ten minute break for tea—the girls taking turns preparing and serving it. Tea several times a day was a regular refreshment among the Poles—as indeed it was among all the Slavs, and it was always served in a glass, never in a cup or mug.

At least once a term I had students in groups of eight or ten to a little party in our apartment, which Patricia prepared. So she, too, got to know a number of students. Polish students dressed for their university classes. The girls, all handsome or pretty it seemed to me, were in dresses, stockings and high-heeled shoes; the boys in trousers, shirt and tie, with jacket or not depending upon the weather. I must say all this pleased me immensely after the careless, slipshod, "unbuttoned" dress of both sexes, with unwashed hair, which was *de rigueur*, on American campuses. The Poles had manners as well—in carriage and speech.

Bright and quick as they all were, my students had two faults. All spoke and wrote impressively but could not develop ideas, and, second, some had no scruples about plagiarism. As for the first, it was not an innate fault, simply the result of their never having had to write in all their years of schooling on any topic at any length. As for the second, I learned from my colleagues that they had always been praised by most faculty members for having memorized passages from printed texts and then, in oral or written tests, spouting them forth without acknowledging any indebtedness.

In either case, for me it was a challenging task of "reeducation". So I worked assiduously with every one of my youngsters, especially in their last year when each was due to write a thesis. "Tell me first the ideas you are aiming to discuss in your work. Then together we'll draw a crude outline, distinguishing the major ideas from the less important, in logical order. I note that on the one page statement of your topic you wrote last week the first paragraph was fine. But you gave no indication of where you were going and the rest of the statement meandered meaninglessly." And so it went. Outlines, regrouping of ideas, writing and rewriting, writing and rewriting.

The fruits of this were many. First, since we were working as partners it brought me much closer in friendly fashion to the young people. I had the supreme

satisfaction through repeated encouragement of seeing the less sophisticated do something they were sure they could never do. And to be sure everybody, some just barely, passed the oral examination, a defense of their theses before three Institute faculty members. Second,

our friendship continued for a good decade after graduation through correspondence, and with some continues to be alive. With one, in particular, who has since become one of the foremost lexicographers in Poland, with work published by the Oxford University Press.



Another '97 view of '33 P-raders Ernie Chamberlin, Josh Billings, Bob Keidel, Lorna Shinn and Marian Green (in background) with unidentified charmer on the left.

*One 33'er to another: "Do I look 86 years old to you?"
Answer: "Not any more."*