

Motto:

Jacek Kleyff – Up the barrier !!!!

Servas – how it all started in Poland

Do you remember the film "Case" (or "*Blind Chance*") by Kieślowski? It is similar in life. Sometimes you manage to hop on the running train, sometimes you don't. Apart from the political context of the film, I jumped into SERVAS by accident.

The first secretary of Servas Poland, Mrs. Irena Wyrzykowska, together with her husband Marian, a professor at Warsaw University of Technology, had a summer house in Klarysew, not far from us. They were friends of my parents. At some point, it was probably at the turn of the 60s and 70s, Ms. Irena asked me for help to guide around Warsaw her guests from abroad, members of Servas. It could have been a young couple from Indianapolis traveling around the world or a student of architecture from Germany (Federal Republic of Germany) following the trail of wooden churches. And so it began.

Servas Poland did not exist formally. Ms. Wyrzykowska's address and phone number were known to Servas secretaries in other, so-called western countries. Servas travellers eager to visit Poland appeared in Warsaw, often without notice. After the first night at Wyrzykowskis family apartment, when she knew the wishes and needs of guests, Ms. Irena called us, ordinary members and we agreed, as we say today, on the logistics of stay. And so, for example, when driving the GAZ car (Russian jeep) to Żuławy, where I was testing drainage machines at that time, I took a young Belgian to Gdańsk. I had the impression that the ride was already a strong experience for him. The GAZ drove a maximum of 60 km / h, but then it was terribly noisy. It was better to go around 45km / h.

In summer 1973, a young, beautiful, filigree Japanese came to Poland. At that time, the Wyrzykowski family stayed in their summer house in Klarysew. On the other side of the small street was a high metal fence with live wires at the top. Behind that fence lived the then first secretary of the PZPR (Polish United Workers' Party), Edward Gierek. He was protected by various open and secret formations. The Vistula Unit of the KWB was non-secret, with navy blue insets and officers' shoes lined with nails.

The Japanese woman arrived in Klarysew by local bus from Mokotów Station, and with her, in the same bus came a private KBW, coming back from the pass. They must have gone uphill together, because both the cottage of the Wyrzykowski family and Gierek's villa were on top of the hill. The next day, on Sunday afternoon, the soldier appeared in the cottage in a special uniform, the rose in the hand, slamming his heels and seeing the professor in the terrace chair, he proposed to the Japanese girl. I remember that the guy was very determined, it took a long time calm him down. Anyway, the Japanese didn't want to marry him. It's a pity because they made a beautiful couple. He was probably twice as tall as her.

Servas Poland's activity at the time was aimed at receiving guests. Going abroad, i.e., behind the iron curtain, was an exception. This only changed after the so-called Final Act of the CSCE Conference in Helsinki where they also discussed the free flow of people and ideas. In the “Democountries”, i.e., the countries under the Soviet sphere of influence, only Poland, to certain extent, fulfilled those decisions. From 1973 we could apply for a passport to go to the West and apply to a bank for the right to buy 100 or 150 US dollars for travelling. An invitation from abroad was not needed. It was a breakthrough. Thousands, mostly young people, set off to the West, working black and bringing back foreign currency, usually more than they had taken with them.

I believe that those massive trips to the West were one of the incentives encouraging Poles to join the Solidarity movement on a massive scale. The others being: the Polish Pope, the Church and private farming. One short stay behind the iron curtain was enough to become immune to the communist propaganda.

I mentioned earlier “real money” (foreign currency), because travelling in the West and visiting Servas hosts was, in today's sense, impossible. I actually only made two trips in my life, both in the '70s. The first one, in 1973, was related to my apprenticeship at the FAT Taenikon Institute in Switzerland, where I got, to tell the truth, informally, as between friends. I borrowed a bicycle and spent many weekends with Swiss Servas hosts, sometimes pedalling 100 km each way. I still remember a visit to a cheese maker near St. Gallen, producing Tilsitter cheese. I remember being explained that the recipe came from somewhere in Eastern Europe. It turned out later that it was Tylża cheese still popular in Poland today. Tylża (Tillsit) is a town in today's Baltic enclave of Russia.

Then I got the so-called passport barrier (for refusing to be a secret informer). I kept submitting new applications for a passport. Once I even signed up for an interview with the Interior Minister. I wanted to go to Fujiyama. A secretary let me in, looked at my application and said: "Very few Poles ever went to Japan, you don't have to either. Next one, please!". But in the end, after 5 years, after an argument with the authorities I got a passport. I went, or rather flew to England, or rather, as Norman Davies teaches, to Great Britain. I got employed in a B&B and, having a roof over my head, meals and free afternoons, I began a systematic tour of London. I visited the then Servas coordinator in London, Mr. Graham Tomas, and took part in the annual meeting of Servas hosts from the London area. A funny story happened to me then. When I was introduced, a middle-aged Englishman approached me and began to touch the material of my jacket as if to find out what kind of fabric it was. Graham hit his hand and apologized to me. Well, I was a wild man from the East.

I worked at the hotel for a month and then took my first real Servas trip. It led through Oxford, Newtown, Aberystwyth, Holyhead and Chester. I hitchhiked, crossed the overgrown Welsh pastures, climbed Cadar Idris and Snowdon. I was at the railway station in the town with the longest name in the world. Everyone received me extremely warmly, fed me, gave

me a tour, gave advice on how to get to the next host. Perhaps the most interesting to me were the hosts living somewhere deep in the empty mountains of Wales, probably a few hours walking from the asphalt road. A young couple, he was a German who refused to serve in the Bundeswehr, she was English. They were vegetarians living without electricity, cultivating a hand-dug piece of land. From time to time he would go down to catch odd jobs, buy matches, salt, an axe and came back to dig, sow, collect, dry. A real trapper's paradise.

Speaking of Cadar Idris. Some years ago I was sleeping on the floor in a mountain shelter in the Tatra mountains next to the Englishmen. Well, they were under the table, where no one stepped on them. When I mentioned that I was on Cadar Idris, "hats off," they shouted. To be a traveller, you had to have a Letter of Introduction. In Poland we didn't have LOIs or stamps. Anyway, a stamp was a huge amount of money for us then. As an assistant researcher at a research institute, I earned a monthly equivalent of \$ 25-30. Ms Irena came up with a sort of ID card – a permanent letter of recommendation. It was a Xerox copy on a thick, green paper, with a photo, personal data, interests and signature. It looked a bit like an old international driving license. I travelled with this ID card and my hosts never questioned it.

At that time (the end of the 70s), I only remember one meeting of Servas Poland, in Saska Kępa, in the apartment of Mr and Mrs. Wielanier. About 10 people came, the majority did not know each other. Irena asked everyone to introduce themselves and say a few words about themselves. When it came to a middle-aged gentleman, he said his name was Piotr Sommer and, slightly offended, he only added: "my name speaks for itself". I wanted to meddle in saying "summer", but luckily I bit my tongue. Sommer was a poet and translator. In those years I felt, probably others too, that it was better not to know anyone and do not use the name Servas. The place where the questions were always asked was the passport office; when submitting the application or collecting the passport or especially when returning it. The main questions concerned meetings with Poles outside Poland. I soon became more insolent and answered such a question: - "when I hear somebody speaking Polish abroad, I quickly go away".

In the 80s, especially at the beginning, we didn't think of travelling, we were busy plotting against the communist authorities. Probably in 1980, our first year of freedom, please correct if I am wrong, there was an attempt to legalize Servas in Poland. From what I remember, we were refused. And then, after the 1989, the new Servas era started.

Amen.

Michał Olczak