



Emily

from

Mississauga

to

Poland

“Miles Away but Never Closer”

Cześć!

Six months is a long time. Half a year, a semester in school. Six months is also a very short time. If the average person in Canada’s life expectancy is 81 years, then six months is only 1/162 of their life.

This 1/162 of my life has been the most interesting one I’ve had. Hands down, without a doubt.

Before I left for exchange, I thought of a year as a long time. But now that I am half way through one, I have realised that it is just a drop in the bucket. Just another way an exchange changes your perspective, I guess.

In November, the week after I wrote my previous one of these, I went to the capital city of Warsaw. I went with a group of the other exchangers from my city along with one of their host parents. We flew there, which was nice because the flights were cheap and much shorter than the five-hour train or bus ride to get there. The shorter travel time made it so that we had more time to actually explore the city, instead of in a bus or train car. While we were there, we got to visit the Copernicus science museum, Złote Terasy (one of the biggest malls in Poland, and where several companies have their only stores in the country), the Palace of Science and Culture, which was a gift from a Soviets after WWII, and from which you can see most of the city, as well as the Museum of the Warsaw Uprising.

The 1944 Warsaw Uprising was a failed attempt at over throwing the occupying Nazi Regime. Despite a lack of resources and an overwhelmingly larger opponent, the Polish Home Army managed to last a full two months before falling. It was the largest single military effort by any European resistance army during WWII. The resistance, despite having failed, is a point of pride for many Poles for the soldiers of the Home Army’s bravery. Visiting the museum was one of my favourite parts of this trip, because of how well thought out the entire museum is.

A few weeks later, all of the exchangers in Poland met once again in Wrocław for our Christmas meeting. We were all very excited, as we hadn't all seen each other in three months. We got to explore the city, which, in my opinion, is one of the most beautiful in Poland, as well as attend the closing ceremony for Wrocław as the European Capital of Culture for 2016. We also got to visit a castle called Książ, as well as take part in a formal dinner with the Rotary Club of Wrocław. After the dinner, once most of the Rotarians left, the Rotaractors who were running the weekend threw us a dance party. I may not be much of a dancer (several of the Mexicans tried to teach me to no avail), but it was one of my favourite nights.

Then came the big event: Christmas! Christmas is an important time in Poland as Polish people as a whole tend to be deeply catholic. What we think of as Christmas in Canada—the gifts, the family meal and the celebration—are done on the 24th of December instead of the 25th. This is what is called Wigilia. There are a lot of traditions surrounding Wigilia, like keeping one place at the table set but empty, in case of an expected guest who may need it. The food is also steeped in tradition; on Wigilia, no meat is eaten, except for fish. There are also twelve traditional dishes, to represent the twelve months of the year. The dishes also tend to contain a lot of poppy and cabbage, as they are common in Poland. And of course: pierogi galore!

My favourite Christmas tradition, though, is a short ceremony of sorts called opłatek. It's when each member of the family takes a thin piece of wafer similar to communion wafer from the table and stands up. Then, everyone goes around the room to each person and greets them. They then tell the person all the hopes and wishes they have for them that year. After both people have said their piece, they each break off a small piece of the other person's wafer and eat it. This continues until everyone's wafer is gone. I find this tradition especially lovely because it gives you the opportunity to specifically greet and give love to everyone around you.

As in Canada, Christmas is a time for family. For my host family in particular, we had a lot of family visiting. My host mom's mom, aka my babcia, as well as my host mom's sister and her family (her husband and two sons) stayed at our house for about a week. One of my host mom's nephews had studied in the UK and currently lives in Sweden, so he had excellent English. This was really nice to have, as he was very interested in my perspective as a Canadian on the Syrian refugee crisis, political correctness vs censorship, as well as just the differences in general between life in Canada, life in Poland and life in Sweden. I genuinely enjoyed having these discussions with him, and they were also a nice reminder that I am an ambassador for Canada when I am abroad, and that people take what I say into account when they think about Canada.

With Christmas being a time for family, this is also the time in the exchange where a lot of people tend to get homesick. I was lucky. I have yet to feel homesick during my time here. This is mostly due to my personality type, as well as having found the right balance for contact with my family. Something I have noticed however, is that some exchange students see homesickness as a sign of weakness. Before we leave, we are so often told that we are brave and fearless and exceptional for taking on a challenge like this. We create an image of ourselves in our minds as these courageous, worldly adventurers, with passports full of stamps and cameras full of pictures from around the world. Homesickness is dissonant to this idea that we and others have of who we are. But if there is something I've learned during my exchange, it is that homesickness is nothing to be ashamed of or to hide. Missing what is familiar is a very human feeling. If anything, homesickness is a sign that we are pushing ourselves outside of our comfort zones, and experiencing things that we never could have at home, which is the very point of exchange.

January was a fairly quiet month for me overall. Because of the way the Christmas and Winter holidays fall in my area, I only attended school for two weeks during the month. However, I feel that this was the month I truly hit my stride in Poland. My Polish, although still fairly rough, has helped me to communicate more easily with my classmates, as well as allowed me to talk to people I wasn't able to before. I also noticed emotional and mental changes within myself during January, most definitely for the better.

At the end of January, I went with Rotary to Saalbach, Austria for a ski trip. I was really looking forward to this trip, first of all because I had never been skiing before and was really excited to try something new, and second of all I couldn't wait to see the rest of the exchange students who were going. The first few days were hard, mostly from all of the falling and crashing we all did, but were so much fun that the time flew by. I am still in no way an expert skier, or even a marginally good one, but I definitely want to continue to try and learn when I get back to Canada. We also got to try various Austrian foods, such as Schnitzel, Tiroler Gröstl (fried potato hash with bacon, onion and a fried egg on top), and my personal favourite, kaiserschmarrn (torn up pancakes with icing sugar and served with apple compote). Yum!

Exchange is a year of paradoxes. You become a local in a land where you're a foreigner, you feel at home while missing your homeland, and most of all, you feel closer to your country while being farther than ever before. Patriotism has never been a sentiment that I have strongly identified with. I loved Canada, but I had never felt a strong emotional connection to my country. That has changed with this year. I have never felt more proud to be Canadian. I think that it takes being somewhere where you need to promote and explain your country's culture in order to truly appreciate what you have. I have learned just how much Canada has to offer the world, while at the same time learning about how we can improve our country and learn from others. I now wear my maple leaf proudly on my sleeve. The Polish inbound last year, Misia, told me once, "I have never felt more Polish than I have in Canada". I didn't truly understand it until now.

As for the next few months, they are looking like they will be the busiest of my exchange. I have several trips coming up, such as Euro Trip, during which I will visit France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Monaco and Vatican City, as well as other trips to Frankfurt and Prague. Within Poland, I will be going to Warsaw again, as well as Oświęcim—or as it is more commonly known by its German name, Auschwitz—and Mielno. With only about four or five months left of my exchange, I am slowly running out of time, with the list of things I want to do while on exchange growing as fast as I am crossing items off. But such is the nature of exchange: we will never feel like we've had enough time, no matter how long we've been here.

Na razie i dziękuję!

Emily