



Poland for beginners and advanced

How to connect cultures and
generations through shared activities

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The publication you are reading collects the experience of the Polish Migration Forum Foundation and the Association of Creative Initiatives „e” from the joint project „Poland for beginners and advanced”.

When we started our project in 2020, the reality and presence of migrants in Poland looked very different. PFM has worked with migrants for years, and „e” has worked with seniors. Inspired by experiences from abroad, we thought to combine these two environments. The success of the project based on building relationships through conversation exceeded our expectations. It turned out that these two groups can give each other a lot – not only skills and knowledge, but also friendship and support. After the outbreak of war in Ukraine, activities creating conditions for integration became even more important. This publication is directed to community workers, cultural organizers, educators, and employees of public institutions and NGOs, as well as to informal groups. We believe our experiences will help others. We plan to develop a model of our operation – those interested in similar solutions are invited to contact the Polish Migration Forum Foundation and the Association of Creative Initiatives „e”.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**Thank you to all of the project participants
- you are the most important of all.**

ORGANIZATIONS IMPLEMENTING THE PROJECT

The Polish Migration Forum Foundation has been working to support the integration of people with migrant or refugee backgrounds in Poland since 2007. We provide support to about 5,000 people a year, 60% of whom are migrants, mainly in the Mazovia region. Our main area of activity is direct counseling and integration work with foreigners. We offer our clients free psychological support, legal counseling, integration counseling, vocational counseling, trainings and workshops (e.g. about writing a CV or paying taxes). We run (and willingly undertake new) specialized activities, such as intercultural birth schools, support groups for migrant mothers, psycho-oncological consultations, support for people with disabilities – working with these types of targeted groups is our specialty. We employ intercultural assistants to support schools with children with migrant backgrounds. All services aimed directly at the migrant community are free of charge.

Our work with Polish citizens includes educational activities for children and youth: we conduct intercultural lessons, workshops, and city games. We also train psychologists, educators, teachers, and other people who deal with migrants, such as workers and security guards at centers for foreigners. We create expert groups working in specialized areas, such as in the development of treatment standards for children with post-traumatic disorders related to forced migration. The PFM Foundation is part of the Grupa Granica and

actively works to respect the rights of refugees on the Polish-Belarusian border. We are also co-creators of the Consortium – a network of organizations dealing with shaping local and national migration and integration policies.

In response to the war in Ukraine and the needs of refugees, we launched:

- a helpline operating 7 days a week with psychological help in Ukrainian and Russian – tel. 22 255 22 02 (daily from 12.00 to 20.00),
- migration helpline operating 5 days a week – tel. 22 110 00 85 (Mon – Fri, from 10.00 to 18.00);
- we have significantly expanded our team of Russian and Ukrainian speaking psychologists. Intervention work takes place in shared accommodation centers.
- we provide extensive legal advice, integration advice, and advice related to setting up a company in Poland,
- our social workers identify people from vulnerable groups and provide personalized help.

Our current projects can be found on the website: forummigracyjne.org/projekty. They concern, among others, the integration of foreigners, support for people as they go through asylum procedures, anti-Islamophobia actions, and intercultural education.

Association of Creative Initiatives „e” is a leader of organizations working for seniors. To date, it has incubated more than 500 projects in areas such as senior volunteering, civic and intergenerational activities, support for dependent elders, U3A activities for the community, designing offerings and services for older adults, and needs assessments. It supports cultural institutions in creating an active community of seniors (e.g. TR Warsaw, National Museum, Museum of Contemporary Art). It tests solutions with participating seniors (for example, the „Tandem. Mentoring of people 55+” program) and shares knowledge (such as the e-learning course on intergenerational practices). Its Network of Flying Cultural Organizers has visited over 800 institutions and organizations, implementing activities with seniors and intergenerational groups. In the project “Archipelago of Generations. Cadres of Culture” 20 leaders of cultural education from Mazovia prepped to work for the benefit of seniors. With the support of the City of Warsaw, it has initiated the “Designing Old Age” project, addressed to cultural organizers and educators from cultural institutions. In 2016, it incubated social innovations for elderly dependents.

Innovators from various backgrounds created solutions that responded to challenges such as loneliness of the elderly, poor social ties, and deteriorating fitness.

For 15 years, the association has been running the “Seniors in Action” project with funds from the Polish-American Freedom Foundation: 350 initiatives were created with the participation of over 10,000 elderly

people, 4,000 young cultural organizers and over 1,300 volunteers. As part of the project “U3A for the community”, it supports senior activities for the benefit of local communities.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

The Polish Migration Forum Foundation and the Association of Creative Initiatives „ę” decided that there is value in creating shared activities between two communities – migrants and seniors. The project was conceptualized in 2020 and implemented from early 2021 to spring 2022. Recent months have been a time of war in Ukraine, with over two million refugees from Ukraine arriving in Poland. Solutions that build integration and solidarity with people with refugee backgrounds are becoming increasingly important. The close relations established by the participants of our project have not only a personal dimension, but they also contribute to shaping attitudes of openness, breaking stereotypes, and creating a sense of community.

The challenges and opportunities we saw

Lack of support at an advanced stage of integration

Organizations working for migrants mainly offer intervention support (legal, psychological, etc.), securing foreigners at an early stage of integration. In our opinion, the offerings for foreigners lacked activities that would strengthen their role in local communities and promote volunteering for their own groups and self-advocacy.

Changing age structure of migrants

For several years, we have been observing an increase in the migration of older people to Poland. This is confirmed by conversations with employees of family assistance centers: more and more people receiving international protection are people aged 55+ with a difficult health situation and no close family. There is also a visible phenomenon of parents being brought to Poland by their children – migrants who have already put down roots in Poland. According to the Office for Foreigners, over 16,000 people aged 60–79 received a residence permit in Poland in 2019 alone. The integration of senior migrants is particularly difficult because they are missing a key factor facilitating integration: having children in educational institutions. They remain on the margins of social life due to difficulties in establishing contacts and uncertainty in the use of the Polish language. According to UNHCR data from March 2022, 20% of female refugees and refugees arriving in Poland are people over 65 years of age.

The intersecting needs of migrants and seniors

Foreigners, including the elderly, have a need to create bonds in a new environment, to get to know the new city and the opportunities it creates. At the same time, senior citizens in Poland lack an offer that would engage them in social life and connect them with other groups, also differentiated by age. The experience of the Association of Creative Initiatives „ę” shows that people 60+ are great volunteers: persistent, creative, and responsible. We wanted them to support foreigners who may have difficulties in establishing new relationships.

Attitudes of seniors towards foreigners

As the research on the attitudes of Poles towards foreigners shows, seniors are much more open-minded. According to a 2017 CBOS report, as many as 62% of those under the age of 35 were against accepting refugees, while among those aged 60+, between 48% and 52% of respondents held a similar view. This means that seniors are more likely to integrate with foreigners.¹

Support networks and volunteering

Despite the growing number of foreigners settling in Poland, there are still no proposals to involve them as volunteers in the activities of non-governmental organizations, cultural institutions, etc. The offer for foreigners is concentrated in „bubbles” related to organizations working for them, but their potential and skills are rarely used in initiatives for the community.

■ What was our purpose

It was important for us to improve the situation of people with migrant backgrounds by involving them in society, and we wanted to involve senior women and men in competence-based volunteering that would bring about visible change and satisfaction.

■ Senior-migrant tandem conversations

One of the most important things for people who come to Poland to live, work, or learn is the knowledge of the Polish language. It is easier then to find a job, deal with official matters, go to the doctor or a school interview, and above all, feel that you are at least a little more at home here. Based on previous

experience with volunteers 60+, we decided that after some training, they will be perfect for one-on-one language conversations, i.e. conversations in Polish in pairs with people who already – to a greater or lesser extent – speak Polish, but would like to speak better.

Recruitment and training for volunteers

Based on the contacts of „e” Society of Creative Initiatives in senior circles, we were looking for open-minded people, curious about the world and people willing to act for the benefit of others. It was important for these individuals to have at least minimal use of instant messaging/messengers, as it became clear that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most activities would take place online. At the same time, we offered them technical support.

We invited willing people to two blocks of training, which were conducted by experts from PFM:

- Intercultural workshops

The first part dealt with the question of what is culture and what are cultural differences. In the second part, participants learned about possible reasons for the decision to leave their country, psychological processes at different stages of adaptation to new conditions and difficulties associated with the situation of changing the place of residence.

- Language workshops on teaching and learning Polish to adults

During the workshops, participants learned the specifics of learning Polish and ways to make it more

¹https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2017/K_001_17.PDF

effective, as well as the principles of building relationships in a conversational pair. They received ideas for conversation topics along with materials and e-books for learning Polish, as well as answers to their questions and concerns.

WHY DID I APPLY

I like new challenges, new acquaintances, new topics. I [...] have been looking for projects other than just those related to the environment. Ecology is also about sustainable human relationships, regardless of background, gender, race, culture or religion.

The desire to be needed, to prove yourself in a new role.

I have time and skills that are useful to refugees/migrants staying in Poland.

Because of the novelty of my previous volunteer activity.

I was simply interested in the opportunity to meet and get to know kind people with interesting content to share in a natural way.

Recruitment of migrant participants

We reached out to migrant men and women with information about the project through a network of contacts with other non-governmental organizations, schools attended by many people with a migrant background, and through our social media. The need to learn the Polish language is great, and the idea for the conversations was met with great interest, including among migrant women 60+. Particularly important for all of them was the opportunity to learn through practice via an individual approach and adjusting the schedule to their needs, which is not possible in group courses.

Information was available in four languages (Polish, English, Russian, and Ukrainian).

In order to participate, they needed to know the Polish language on a communicative level, as well as to have access to the Internet and a computer or a phone with a camera.

WHY DID I APPLY

**For the Polish
language.**

**I had problems with speaking
and between the pandemic
and having kids at home all
the time, there was no other
way to make local contacts.**

**At that moment,
I had this need.**



RULES FOR VOLUNTEERS

1. Tasks performed in the project are voluntary work and are free of charge.
2. The volunteer signs a volunteer contract for a specified period of time.
3. Volunteer's task is to conduct conversations in Polish on a three month cycle. After three months you can (if there is a need or desire) continue conversations with the same or another person.
4. Before starting the project activities, the volunteer will take part in workshops on intercultural issues and language learning.
5. You can resign from volunteering at any time. Inform the coordinator if you want to end the volunteering period as soon as possible.
6. Conversations should last at least one hour per week. The exact duration of the meeting can be adjusted according to the needs of the participants.
7. Conversations take place online via a communication platform of the participant's choice.
8. The volunteer will keep in touch with the coordinator and follow up after each conversation meeting by sending a text message confirming that the meeting took place.
9. The volunteer will not enter into financial relationships with their conversation partner (no lending money or buying things).
10. The volunteer does not provide other services (if the partner reports needs to the volunteer that go beyond the project activity, the volunteer immediately passes this information to the coordinator - the volunteer is not alone with the problem).
11. The volunteer maintains discretion regarding the personal affairs of the conversation partner and contacts the coordinator if a problem is perceived.
12. If the volunteer has to cancel or reschedule the conversation for any reason, he or she should contact his or her partner as soon as possible.
13. The purpose of the meetings is conversation, not Polish lessons. We do not give grades, we try to establish a dialog. We will not ask for feedback on your progress, but rather monitor how your communication is going.
14. If you have any concerns or problems, please reach out to the coordinator.



RULES FOR PARTICIPANTS

1. Participation in the project is free of charge.
2. The project includes three months of participation in conversations. After three months, there will be an evaluation. If there is a need or desire, conversations can be continued in the next cycle (until the end of the project).
3. You may withdraw from the project at any time. If you decide to withdraw, please inform the coordinator as soon as possible.
4. Conversations should last at least one hour a week. The exact duration of the conversation can be adjusted as needed by the participants.
5. Conversations take place online via a communication platform of the participant's choice.
6. If a participant has to or wants to cancel/postpone the conversation, he or she should contact their partner as soon as possible.
7. The participant will not enter into any financial relationships with their conversation partner (no borrowing money or buying things).
8. If you have any concerns or problems, please reach out to the coordinator.

Matching tandem partners

We prepared conversation rules for both volunteers and migrants.

We signed Volunteering Agreements with volunteers, and Declarations of Participation in the project with people with migrant backgrounds. We spoke with each person individually to check the language level of the participants and their preferences and needs.

In a short survey, we asked about interests, experience, availability, and preferred video communication platform (a question that was especially important for seniors). Based on the information from the questionnaires, we selected individual pairs.

Conversation meetings

The first meeting of each tandem was attended by a representative from one of the organizations, then the pairs met for an hour once a week on the communication platform of their choice at individually determined times. We were in regular contact with participants to provide support and assistance.

Despite some earlier fears of the volunteers concerning their lack of pedagogical training or foreign language skills, it soon turned out that conversation is something that comes naturally and brings extraordinary results and satisfaction to both sides.

The pairs met online, but at times when pandemic conditions allowed, some were able to meet at a coffee shop, took walks, and visited galleries and museums. The acquaintances made during the conversations often grew into closer, friendship-based relationships.

■ What else happened in the project

Migrant volunteering

The offer for people with migrant backgrounds interested in volunteering was a big success. Over the past year, we have visited several non-profits and cultural venues together to show what you can get involved in beyond the foundation. On Refugee Day we jointly organized a neighborhood picnic for the residents of the Targówek district.

As part of the support network at PFM, individuals from Ukraine, Venezuela, Peru, Belarus, Australia, the United States, India, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and many other places have assisted other migrants and engaged in

community initiatives. Some acquaintances have turned into friendships.

We focused on the individual potential and initiative of the participants. Some of them translated the available specialist consultation content at the Foundation, others helped to obtain PESELs or city cards, taught English (to other migrants, but also to seniors), took care of children, and much more. People who came to Poland several years ago, shared their knowledge and experiences, and could be a support for those who came here recently and, especially in the era of the pandemic, have difficulties integrating and getting to know new people and places.

Meetings

During the almost year and a half of the project, we met on walks around Warsaw along routes prepared by the participants and organized meetings responding to current needs, including those related to the humanitarian crisis on the border with Belarus.

Cooking dishes together from different parts of the world enjoyed the greatest interest and success – it turned out that even online is a great way to get to know each other's traditions and customs, establish relationships and have fun. The meetings were open and we also invited people from outside the group of project participants.

WHAT DO I ASSOCIATE PROJECT PARTICIPATION WITH?

satisfying acceptance I will learn enjoyment interesting integration
I look forward to the conversations culture cultural differences generosity
development friendly world developing novelty understanding edifying help
recognition not too heavy inspiring security
exchange of experiences helps to open up forward-looking good work new skills usefulness
migrants help ingenuity valuable spontaneity
helpful in difficult situations self check in nice super knowledge new friendships
openness community diversity educational agreement outstretched hand sharing
connecting generations friends friendship the best sense of humor sisterhood
empathy helpful kindness we are all one pleasant
meetings a new perspective of the Polish language love needed
enriching experience trust creativity effective
interest I will speak cooperation peace future inner self
curiosity awkwardness professional person beneficial developing laid-back
tolerance Warsaw history adventure very helpful people
challenge excellent intriguing enthusiasm
warmth helpful support punctual being helpful unpretentious
new people continuation recommended support punctual being helpful rewarding

WHAT PARTICIPATION IN THE PROJECT HAS GIVEN ME

I expanded my circle of friends, met people from other cultural circles, and found out tangibly how good my conditions are here and now.

Nice new people, nice meetings, nice conversations, and all without any pomp and stiff formality. In addition, there is the possibility of finding out about the life and culture of people from other countries as well as sharing various tidbits about Poland in return.

Developing social skills like intergenerational and intercultural integration. A sense of usefulness, personal growth, and mutual acceptance.

The opportunity to see the other side of the people I came to live with.

Getting to know the person, their way of thinking, their attitude towards the world and various events.

A sense of time well spent.

It's a win-win for the participants. I help my student to learn the language and understand our culture, and on the other hand I get to know the heritage of his country and better understand his problems related to emigrating to Poland.

Getting to know new positive foreigners/ migrants, super project coordinators and other volunteers. Building a good relationship with a young Turkish student despite a 40+ year age difference. Mutual learning about cultural, social and religious similarities and differences between Poland and Turkey.

I have learned that what seems linguistically obvious to us, Poles, causes a lot of trouble to people of other nationalities. Helping others makes me feel that I am still needed, despite my gray hair.

Concerns about my unfamiliarity with the methodology of teaching Polish as a foreign language turned out to be premature. The training that was provided, the prompting of conversation topics and advice on how to proceed has given me confidence and I now know I can do it.

Learning about the culture, customs, and history of another country.

Satisfaction that I could help someone.

The conviction that I can still be useful.

I started talking and overcame speaking barriers.

I feel the satisfaction of having fulfilled my assigned duty. I met a lot of interesting people.

Knowledge of the Polish language and Poland.

Finding meaning in life

Joanna Mikulska
spoke with
Ania Pielińska
and
Yulia Chistyakova.

We met at the bus stop in the center of Warsaw. Yulia and Ania greeted each other with a warm, long hug, after which they talked to each other, standing close together and looking deeply into each other's eyes. They were seeing each other in person for the second time in their lives.

How long have you been talking to each other?

Ania: From autumn 2020 to the end of summer 2021. We met regularly every week.

Tell us about how you started.

Yulia: When I joined the project, I was asked who I would like to meet and what topics I would like to talk about. At that time I was studying at the university and I was very interested in Polish culture, literature, and history. I put in that I would like to talk to a university professor.

A: And I am associated with the university because my husband has been a lecturer for many years. And for many years I was a history teacher and school director. The project coordinators brought us together and it was the first time we met online.

Jaki to był dzień tygodnia?

A: Do you remember?

Y: Wednesday.

A: In the afternoon. I have lunch at 3PM; we talked at 4PM.



Kojarzy mi się to z pierwszą randką.

A: The emotions were similar! As part of the project, all Polish seniors were prepared in advance for these talks. We had meetings with an expert from the Polish Migration Forum, who introduced us to the area of cooperation with foreigners. She explained how to talk so as not to offend them, so that they would feel taken care of. We also had several meetings with a person who showed us tools for learning Polish for adults. Yulia already knew Polish and just wan-

Our meetings reminded me of conversations with a friend, the kind about finding meaning in life. An important kind of support in everyday life.

ted to fine tune it. And we were a great fit here, too, because as a retired teacher I didn't feel like going through the classic process of teaching a language. We both gladly gave that up. Nevertheless, I sincerely hope that Yulia has gained some linguistic benefit from our meetings.

Y: Of course. We agreed that during the conversation Ms. Ania would correct me, because I still find the endings difficult. Although I must admit that Ania's stories about her life in Warsaw were more important for me than practicing proper grammar. I write stories and I found a lot of important inspiration in those recollections. During the interviews, I was working on a story about Warsaw and it was very important for me to learn as many details about life in the city as possible.

Conversations with experienced seniors seem ideal for this.

A: Yulia graduated from the Academy of Photography in Warsaw. She also did a Russian-language screenwriting course and is working on a screenplay for a film. And she is a microbiologist by training.

Y: I am very curious about the world and it seemed to me that science would allow me to understand it. It later turned out not to be. Speaking of the film, I remembered that Ania helped me translate a song about Marzanna from Old Polish. We got along very well when it came to our interests. Our meetings reminded me of conversations with a friend, the kind about finding meaning in life. An important kind of support in everyday life.

A: And imagine that despite the fact that Yulia is with me all this time, she still says „Ms. Ania”, although I have repeatedly proposed to switch to something less formal.

Y: To me, „Ms. Ania” is like one name. I say „Ms. Ania,” on a first-name basis.

What helped you build your relationship?

A: I think the chemistry that was between us.

And how can you define it?

Y: Common topics, books, worldview, similar political views

A: For example, we both read and we like Olga Tokarczuk very much.

Y: I tried to read it in Russian, but then it's a completely different book. Different senses, different feelings, I did not feel the atmosphere created by the author. That's why I read in Polish, I prefer the original.

A: We are both sensitive. We are very attentive to what is happening around us. It brought us closer.

Anything else?

A: Maybe we both like to dress well and we could talk about it freely. I'm seventy-one years old and there's a forty-year difference between us, so it seemed like we might have completely different tastes, but that fear didn't come true.

Do you remember a specific story?

A: I'll give you an example. One time I found my dream shoes in a store. Above the ankle, lacquered, in a burgundy rose color. Unfortunately, not only their appearance, but also the price knocked you out. I hesitated about what to do and asked my sister-in-law for her opinion. In the end, I decided to buy them. I told Yulia the whole story and showed her the shoes during the online conversation.

Y: When I saw them, it turned out that I have similar ones! It made us laugh. For me, clothes are an expression of my interior. It is an important part of information about a person.

A: I realized through that story that we made direct contact with each other extremely quickly. I was used to an intergenerational relationship based on a student-teacher hierarchy, and here I experienced a partnership. I was also able to unabashedly share the topic of taking care of my health. I am on a very specific diet that is the defi-

ning feature of my life. I cook everything myself and eat at regular times, hence lunch is always at 3PM. But the conversations with Yulia-especially as they took place at a time of heightened pandemic restrictions-were also a powerful break from focusing on health issues.

I am full of admiration that you have been meeting remotely so regularly all this time.

A: The pandemic and Zoom encounters with Yulia were very instrumental in expanding my online skills, as I'm in the generation that has had to learn how to handle all of this media. When we started our conversations, it was when my husband and I didn't leave the house at all. All the time just the two of us. The only diversion for me at that time was arguing with each other. I remember it as something terrible. That's why at least on those Wednesdays I could say, „Krzysiek, I'm going on Zoom." And for an hour I disappeared.

Meeting in person was such a real celebration, and I saw then that we are both very petite women, we have that in common too.

Did you know how to use it before?

A: Prior to that, I didn't know what Zoom was at all. My son came over by us - both of us wearing masks. He installed it all for me and taught me how to use it.

What else did these conversations give you?

A: That a young person has placed their trust in me and that is very valuable to me. Yulia talked about her challenges related to living in Poland and I felt that I was a rock for her in this difficult challenge of being outside her country. Even then, when the macabre situation we have now was not there. However, at some point our contact broke off.

Y: I'll explain this. I felt that there was an assumption of exchange in our relationship: we give each other attention, we listen to each other. And I was in a very uncomfor-

table life situation at the time. I react to stress in such a way that I don't want to talk to anyone and I'm focused on problem-solving. I was searching intensively for a job and couldn't find one. I worked odd jobs in addition to my studies, but I was sick of it.

A: And that was also the theme of our conversations for a while: whether you found something, whether you sent something, whether they wrote back

Y: It was very difficult to find something that wasn't just manual labor that I would be interested in and would also provide me with legitimate employment. At one point I already had the idea to go back to Ukraine. To my mother. Until finally, thanks to a friend, I found my dream job.

When you start talking about it, you smile immediately.

Y: The sun has finally come out! Immediately after that, I initiated a live meeting with Ania. I knew it was important to tell her about what was going on with me and that it was okay.

A: I was very worried about what was happening to her and asked the coordinators. Yulia was on my mind the whole time, but I decided to stay on the sidelines. Meeting in person was such a real celebration, and I saw then that we are both very petite women, we have that in common too.

And how did the outbreak of the war in Ukraine affect your current situation?

Y: I come from Odessa, I also lived in Sevastopol for several years. After the annexation of Crimea, I returned to Odessa. But the war in Donbass began not long after that. And in order to live, I need to be able to breathe, to be able to write, have peace. That's why I left for Poland. But my mother stayed in Odessa, and when Russia attacked Ukraine, I decided to bring her here. We had a problem with transportation, but we finally made it. Ms.

Ania immediately called to ask if she could help somehow.

A: I could do something for a specific person. Yulia wrote: I don't have a blanket. I'm task-oriented, so right away I asked my son: do you have an extra quilt? Yes, does this one work? Here's a picture. Then I asked about pillows, about the bedding. We packed it all up and drove it over. Then it occurred to me that I have a friend at the aid point on Kwiatowa Street and told Yulia about it. She is on my mind all the time, I have a person that I am specifically helping in this situation. I have grandchildren who live in Poland and I do it for them too, to show how important it is to share what we have with others.



Better than a language course

Joanna Mikulska
spoke with
Olga Stupnitskaya
and Małgosia Wróblecka

After a year of conversation, Olga and Małgosia saw each other live for the first time. They exchanged gentle hugs, their voices sounded a bit dazed: – You look exactly like on the phone screen! – Olga said cheerfully. – And, to my surprise, you are taller than me – Małgosia noted with a laugh.

What were your first conversations like?

Małgosia: They took place in such a way that Olga took her youngest son Adrian to kindergarten and talked to me outside the kindergarten while sitting in the car.

Olga: It was very loud at home then. It was the middle of a pandemic and the other three kids were in remote learning and I had everything I needed in my car – silence, no one was there.

M: See how educational it is! In the past, it seemed to me that I could only make a video call at home, in front of the computer. Although it's quite comfortable in there, I never considered the car, it never occurred to me. I realized



that when I made an appointment with someone, I don't have to run home, but I can easily sit down in the car or on a park bench and have such a conversation there. It was a real discovery for me: eureka! I also remember that at the beginning of the meetings I was afraid that I would not be able to cope linguistically. I have never taught anyone Polish.

And yet you made up your mind.

M: I admit that I was helped in making the decision by a clear message from the organizers that we can quit if we are unable to cope. That was important to me. But it wasn't necessary at all, because Olga speaks excellent Polish.

Did you have any other concerns?

M: The idea behind this program was based on seniors talking mostly to people much younger than themselves.

And despite my positive experience with these kinds of meetings, I was a little worried about possible differences due to the fact that we are different ages. For example, that we won't have anything to talk about. At first, I thought to protect myself and have some sort of list of topics.

O: First of all, I did not know if my Polish would be understood. I remember when I read about this project that the native speakers would be senior citizens, I wondered if they would need support from us. I wasn't sure I could do it here either. On the other hand, I knew I didn't want predetermined topics because I associated it with a language course I had already taken. I badly needed a spontaneous conversation. The project began in the spring of 2021, in the midst of the second wave of the pandemic. Back then, I could only hear Polish in stores and it was on the basis of: hello and goodbye. I had very few opportunities for direct live communication and I wanted to pass the Polish language national exam at B1 level, and I had the greatest difficulty in speaking. But when we started to meet, I heard that I was understood. It also turned out that Małgosia is a very active person and apart from Polish I can learn a lot from her.

I remember that at the beginning of the meetings I was afraid that I would not be able to cope linguistically. I have never taught anyone Polish.

Could you support each other?

M: I think we drew from each other. I remember writing projects for the civic budget in Piaseczno, where I live, and Olga immediately sent me a link to a similar project in Wawer. I can search, but it takes me time, and Olga is very fast. I certainly benefited from her skills, but beyond that I was impressed by her knowledge and stories about living in Belarus and coping in Poland.

What topics have brought you together?

O: Certainly about food and cooking

M: Olga doesn't eat meat, and at my house, the kids have converted to vegetarianism. We discussed what could be cooked and how. Olga is also interested in Indian cuisine, it was new to me. Apart from cooking, astrology is also very interesting for me, in which Olga coincidentally specializes, and I did not know ahead of time.

Tell me more.

O: I have been learning astrology for over five years, it is a kind of hobby. It's the knowledge of the stars that involves building cards, wait a minute, card is the Russian word! Correction: building maps. Based on the exact date and time and place of birth, I create a personalized map of the person who comes to me and show the possible impact of the stars on their life.

And despite my positive experience with these kinds of meetings, I was a little worried about possible differences due to the fact that we are different ages. For example, that we won't have anything to talk about.

M: We devoted several meetings to this topic. I am a fairly rational person and at first I thought astrology was simply predicting the future. But I've found that the point here is that your date and place of birth determine your specific predispositions, and you can use them to avoid going against the tide. Am I saying that right?

O: Yes. By making this individual map, you can see at what point in a person's life they are at risk for disease when it is a good idea to move

When you decided to move to Poland, did you take the star system into consideration?

O: I knew that the whole family had to move on a specific date, because it would be more difficult after that. Howe-



ver, the arrangement of the stars was only one aspect. We came from Belarus to Poland two years ago as we intuitively suspected what might be happening there during the

I knew I didn't want predetermined topics because I associated it with a language course I had already taken. I badly needed a spontaneous conversation.

presidential election. My grandmother came from western Belarus and was Polish, she spoke Polish at home, Polish traditions are very close to me. That is why, together with the children, I have a Pole's Card, thanks to which we

could easily obtain a residence permit here. On the other hand, the decision to leave home and loved ones – parents and friends – was very difficult. But we knew we were in danger if we stayed.

For what reason?

O: My husband had been going to anti-government demonstrations for a long time, even in his school days. We knew that open opposition to the authorities in Belarus would eventually have consequences. For this reason we left.

M: I admire such decisions. Olga came here with four children in the midst of a pandemic, where it was impossible to find anything out. She found them schools, kindergarten.

O: I managed because I had to.

How are you adapting?

O: The children acclimatized quite quickly, despite the fact that Belarus has a slightly different educational system. If a child is gifted, has talent, he or she can learn for free in various schools. Starting in the first grade, you can already choose a school profile: visual arts, theater, and music. Our children went to an art school. Here we found no such schools. For this reason, they also attended art classes. But this year the eldest daughter entered her dream



art school. One year she had to study hard, but now it's great. I'm adapting slower, but the large group of parents of my children's friends that I have around me is the group that I think I speak most Polish with and it's a great support for me.

M: I remember Olga once telling a funny story related to this. The daughter was invited to dinner and Olga said that she would come after dinner. And a friend's mom says she'll have dinner ready. "Poslie obieda" in Russian means „in the afternoon." These language differences are sometimes very subtle and cause a lot of comical situations.

And how was it with your language, did you set up the rules of learning?

M: As you can see, Olga speaks excellent Polish, the only thing that sometimes happens is wrong endings. I only now realized how difficult they are. My language is colloquial, not literary, but I recognize the correctness of the endings effortlessly.

O: Certainly correcting helps, but I also learn a lot when I hear how things need to be said. And that's why it's so important that we talk so much about everyday topics. Now about the war in Ukraine, for example, how to help most effectively.

What effect has the war had on your relationship?

M: The wartime perspective made me realize how complicated the situation of immigrants is. I can imagine and feel the situation of someone who comes here with children, tries to find a job, set up a life, learn a language. I welcomed ladies from Ukraine for a few days, who came to Poland with only suitcases, because they couldn't take more with them on the train from Kyiv. The-

The only thing we can do is just get involved in helping and show our attitude.

ir husbands stayed in the country, they're fighting. And they had never traveled without their husbands before! Olga was able to make the move calmly, the situation of refugee women and refugees is much more dire, but nevertheless there are similar elements: arrival in a foreign country and the desire to adapt.

O: Yes, in both cases it is not a voluntary migration. The war in Ukraine has exacerbated stereotypes. I heard about friends who were dismissed from their jobs because they are from Belarus. My husband is ethnically Ukrainian, he has a family in Ukraine, but his citizenship is Belarusian. I have a hard time making sense of it all myself.

Have you had any trouble?

O: We used to walk down the street with the children and talk to each other in Russian. And a man suddenly started shouting at us why we didn't speak Ukrainian to the children. He probably thought we were refugees from Ukraine. It's hard to imagine what people feel after two months of war, pain, and violence. They may not want to hear the Russian language and I understand these poor people. I myself have strong Slavic roots, from various countries: from Belarus, Poland, Ukraine, Russia. I didn't have any really difficult experiences, but I covered up the Belarusian flag on the registration of our car with a sticker, because there are mentions in social media that plates from Belarusian or Russian cars are being torn off. The only thing we can do is just get involved in helping and show our attitude. My children help a lot at school, because Ukrainian children have come to class, they also do not know the language, so my children help translate from Russian to Polish.

After a year of talking, when I went to the exam, which also includes the spoken part, I was very calm and didn't have to prepare.

M: People often come unprepared. They think our languages are similar, but the details are different, which is confusing. Sometimes the words are similar, for example “bread”, but in the store we will say: “a loaf of bread, please”. It sounds completely different in Russian or Ukrainian. Although at least it is easy to learn Polish thanks to the similarity.

Do you agree with that?

O: Not so easy! After all, learning a language is a huge job, but I am very grateful for these meetings. After a year of talking, when I went to the exam, which also includes the spoken part, I was very calm and didn’t have to prepare. Besides, I think, I don’t know how to say it...that when a person begins to get to know, and more importantly to understand, another culture, then they learn the most.

Maybe with the help of Russian it would be easier?

M: Oh no, sorry, but I disagree. During the preparatory course for classes, they sensitized us, native speakers, to talk to our partners only in Polish. We were advised not to use any other language, even if we speak a little Russian or English.

In that case, I take back my proposal.

O: Yes, I like it in Polish. There should be as many such projects as possible, because it is a great integration through establishing relationships, better than the Polish course. Because we not only learn the language, but also start to speak without a language barrier.

M: For me, participation in it was important for one more reason: I felt needed and it is an uplifting feeling. In addition, I believe that this model of meetings should be implemented on a larger scale, especially now that we have so many people from Ukraine who are looking for a safe haven in Poland.



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