Reflection by DARIA PIENIAZEK

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Gdansk. September 27th. 5 am. I am standing in a line of passengers at the airport, waiting for my turn to have the ticket checked. I am wondering what Belfast is going to be like. I have never been to any English-spoken country before so my fear of being not understood or not understanding others is almost paralysing. Apart from that I will be there on my own with no one I really know and no one who really knows me. I am absolutely scared. This feeling is so overwhelming that bottles up the excitement and curiosity of what awaits me in the other end of Europe.

And now I am here in Belfast. Hours are ticking away, only two weeks left to see my country again. It is time to look back on those almost three months I spent in the capital of Northern Ireland.

As far as academic study is concerned I chose subjects that would help me not only develop my skills as a future teacher but also my general knowledge and myself. It was quite hard to choose subjects that would overlap with those Polish ones as in Poland English is taught as a foreign language while in Northern Ireland it is a mother tongue for most people. But finally despite all difficulties I signed for English Curriculum classes which I enjoyed. It was a wonderful opportunity to learn about education in Northern Ireland, techniques used during lessons, ways of assessment etc. (some of them are being introduced in Poland, like for example holistic approach toward teaching). I found also many ideas very useful in my further teaching like for instance ‘Literacy Hour’.
And although it has many opponents, I will definitely take several elements of this method back to my country and make use of it during classes. The teacher was very supportive and her classes were one of my favourite. By using various resources like videos, transparencies, handouts and others, she presented the material in a very comprehensible and interesting way. The most precious topics for me concerning teaching language by using literature were also included and discussed in the classroom. Writing about English Curriculum classes I have to mention my School Experience at St John the Baptist Boys’ Primary School which lasted three weeks and gave me a great opportunity to experience school life personally. I have to admit that before the Teaching Practice I had been very sceptical about teaching children and even a bit afraid of their spontaneity, energy and liveliness. Even in Poland I preferred to do my Teaching Practice at Secondary School not Primary so imagine when I was confronted with children that did not even speak my language at all. But the very first day I just fell in love with Primary 6C that I kept company through next three weeks. Their enthusiasm and fresh view on the world won my heart immediately. I spent also two days with Primary 4 as my teacher was sick and could not come to school (that is why I joined another class for some time). I was amazed at how quickly boys started to chat with me and almost treated me as one of them. We played ‘Hide and seek’ at the schoolyard during Lunchtime and had fun. Even boys from other classes, although they did not know me, did not feel shy or intimidated and talked to me or shouted ‘Hi’ every time they saw me (it was really sweet and flattering for me to be noticed by them). I should not forget about the teacher Mr Sam Murray who reminded me of Santa Claus with his pupils as elves. He was a wonderful man who found a balance between being a respected teacher and a friend with whom you might have a good laugh. I think boys adored them. I would like to find one day this golden mean and become such a teacher.

In the end of my School Experience we had a little farewell party with sweets, songs, role-plays and others. I took some pictures and promised to send them together with a postcard from Poland. I should also mention that I liked the classroom very much, it was well equipped, colourful and student-friendly. I will definitely take back to Poland methods and ways of managing the class that I could see. And although it might be difficult to putting it into practice in Poland where the education system is different from the one here, I will at least try to adapt some of them to the Polish reality. To sum up I think it was the most enjoyable part of my stay in Belfast and I really mean it. I think I did not enjoy anything here as I did at St John the Baptist.

Moving further, lectures on Anglo-Irish literature were another subject I chose. Thanks to them I managed to overcome my fear of reading James Joyce. The lectures covered the most influential and towering figures of twentieth century Anglo-Irish literature. Some of them I knew only by name heard on TV or radio. Here I could learn something much more about them, get to know their biographies, cultural and historical background of their works. Although I found some pieces quite difficult to understand due to their tight connection to Irish history and mythology I could get through this layer with a help of lectures’ content and books available in library.

Classes on ‘Europe and its neighbours’ helped me to understand the world around me, especially Europe. Poland is a fresh member of European Union so those classes were very useful for me. I have never been interested in politics, especially recently due to the myriad of affairs involving leading Polish politicians revealed by mass media. The classes made me realise that I should not turn blind eye on it or switch off TV while
news because it us – the society – that should take interest and care in the world we live in.

Apart from academic study I took part in several cultural activities organised by St Mary’s University College. I had a wonderful opportunity to meet people from Islamic country during Irish Evening, which was meant to introduce a delegation of students from the Kingdom of Saudi-Arabia into Irish culture. It was followed by a spontaneous lesson of traditional Irish dancing. Some of Erasmus students and students from Saudi-Arabia also presented their national dances which met a very loud applaud. On the next day thanks to presentation about the Kingdom of Saudi-Arabia I learnt more about lifestyle, culture and education of a very exotic for me part of the world. The formal part of presentation was followed by a friendly chat accompanied by original Arabic coffee spiced with cardamom (tasted well... different), served with biscuits and dates (that was yummy!). It has been the first time I met people from Islamic country and I really enjoyed talking to them. Experiencing culture (I knew mainly from books or TV) which is so different not only from Polish but also European was an amazing feeling. And I still remember that ‘Shukran’ means ‘thank you’ in Arabic. Speaking about college activities I have to mention Eurovision Night. Believe me, the mere idea of singing in front of people makes my knees jelly-like and shake. So it took me long time to pluck up the courage and perform knowing there are people watching me. Although it was a huge challenge I can say I enjoyed it. Apart from that I enjoyed my first match ever which happened to be ‘The International Rules – Ireland v Australia’ and took place in Dublin. The atmosphere, the excitement of thousands supporters dressed and painted, shouting and crying was absolutely stunning. I have to admit that I found Gaelic football really interesting and believe me that is something because I hate sports, especially football so if I say I enjoyed it I must have gone mad or I really had fun! I also discovered my dark side as I felt the thrill of excitement watching players of opposite teams fighting, kicking and banging each other every fifteen minutes (not to mention the famous dog that ran into the pitch!). I should also mention the trip to Giants’ Causeway which was impressive and I have to say that it felt a bit funny standing in the place that I knew only from postcard or photos. Also mural trip all over Belfast organised by Mr Peter Collins was unforgettable (what a pity, it was so short!), it helped me to understand the idea of murals and the conflict itself, it made me realize how easy is to start almost a regular war that spread all over streets of Northern Ireland and how the spiral of violence and vengeance turned into a vicious circle that people got trapped in. Thanks to my co-ordinator I also visited Belfast Castle, Giant’s Ring and graves of Polish soldiers at the local cemetery – it all contributed to building my own picture of Northern Ireland with its painful history, marvellous landscapes and cultural heritage.

Regarding entertainment... Well... I am a typical loner and introvert so the whole idea of socialising and meeting new people always fills me with fear. Perhaps that is why my list of ‘party-stuff’ will not be very impressive although it does not mean that I did not enjoyed myself. Rather than parties and discos I prefer other ways of spending my free time. I have to admit that I got a bit discouraged after the Mystery Tour. I thought that Poles drink a lot but it showed me how wrong I was. I do not mind people drinking but looking at students falling down on the floor, getting stripped or doing really silly things did not belong to the most pleasant views (rather pathetic) and actually spoil the whole evening. Instead of partying every night I walked a lot around Belfast. Those lonely walks gave me the opportunity to look at the city from a different, non-tourist point of view. On many occasions I spoke to people, even in shops (especially those small ones)
I had some friendly chats, which was a really nice surprise for me because I do not experience it in Poland very often. Even such tiny things like asking for the way usually turned into a conversation and what I need to say is that people here would do anything to help you - they are really doing their best and are extremely polite. It is so different from my country where people more and more turn their back on you when you try to get some help.

Moving further, I should mention visiting Botanic Gardens. I regret that I could not see it in spring or summer when all the flowers were blossoming and the plants were lush and vivid green. Straight from Botanic Gardens I went to Ulster Museum to see the exhibition 'The Art of Gardens' which was absolutely fabulous. I just fell in love with J.W. Waterhouse's and A. Hughes's paintings. The colours and the way they built the magical atmosphere on canvas were fantastic, marvellous, gorgeous (I am running out of adjectives☺️). Those paintings trapped me and kept glued to them for a pretty long time as I just could not go further. Although I found the rest of works fascinating as well I could not resist the feeling that my heart belongs now to those two painters. Apart from exhibition I walked around the whole museum and had wonderful time admiring contemporary art of glass, Egyptian mummies and thousands more. I have always associated museums with boring school trips and squeaking voice of the guide but Ulster Museum was far from that, actually miles, miles away. It was just so enjoyable! The knowledge was presented in such interesting, attractive and ‘digestive’ way that I would recommend it to everyone. And I am not saying that you should go there only in educational purposes but just for sheer pleasure. Another place I should mention is Colin Glen. I went there as boys from St John the Baptist said that it was a must☺️. And they were not wrong. The forest park was beautiful and much bigger than I thought in the beginning, I was wandering around it till (of course) I got a bit lost (congratulations, Daria!) but soon thanks to my scout skills (just kidding☺️!) I found my way back. I really liked it, it reminded me a bit of home as I live near forest and often go for a walk there. I should not forget about St George’s Market that I had an opportunity to visit both on Friday and Saturday I was stunned by delicious smells of bread, cheese, fresh fruit and vegetables and many many more surrounding me from every side. Speaking about food I should at least mention the way of beating calories so it is time for sports. I was really surprised to find myself playing volleyball or going to the gym because I am a typical couch potato and a famous opponent of moving limbs, especially if they are mine☺️. It gave me a lot of fun and thanks to volleyball trainings I met Valerie to whom I own a lot. She and her family not only invited me and Caroline for dinner to their house in the country but also kept cheering me up when I was really down and homesick. I have no words to express my gratitude. They did for me so much. I think thanks to them I experienced Irish hospitality in the purest form. Just to sum up, although my night life was not as diverse and glamorous as other students I do not regret those perhaps a bit quiet but interesting months. Trips (including the one to Derry – the place I knew only from U2 song ‘Bloody Sunday’ which is one of my favourites), walks, going to the cinema (finally, I had no choice as to watch the film without the tempting option of switching on Polish subtitles ☺️ which I practice at home. Here I was confronted only with English and believe me or not I improved my listening skills which belonged to my weak points) gave me the opportunity to not only enjoy myself but also to experience different culture.

As far as tips for new comers are regarded. Firstly, I should warn you about the sockets. Forget about those two-pins, here the ones that rule are three-pins so you had better
have one with you. I spent really long time looking for a perfect plug (Noel Grimley’s staff might say something about it). It reminded a quest for Holy Grail, I was looking for it and looking for it and could not find. So if you want to spare yourself trouble, get this ‘islandish’ plug now!

As a conclusion, I can say that ‘looking back over my shoulder’ as one group used to sing, I see those months spent in Belfast as... well... Perhaps I should put it this way. It was a tough lesson of life for me. I have never left home alone for such long time. It was a very drastic way of cutting this umbilical cord between me and my family and although I can feel I grew stronger I cannot say that those months were easy for me. I enjoyed some moments but to be honest I struggled not to give up myself to despair. During my stay here I had this persistent feeling that I simply do not fit here, that this is not my place, that it is too big for me, too scary, too overwhelming. I know that I had a lot of people around me but it was not the case – actually I was trying to avoid people as much as I could because I felt so lost and did not want anyone to know about it. I know that when I come back home I will be more self-reliant and independent. I had to take care of myself here, prepare meals, wash clothes, think ahead about everything – I am glad about that, this is my little success. I wanted also to write something about studying here. I was not prepared for such relaxed and pleasant way of studying. I am used to discipline, frequents tests, assignments and exams and here I could forget about it. On one hand I was glad to have three months off Polish way of studying but on the other I got a bit lazy. I was also surprised with the relations between students and teachers in the college. I have been always taught that there is a border between those two and I should respect teachers and never cross this thin line. It might sound strange but I treat teachers as some ‘above’, someone I look up to. I am not able to chat with a teacher or joke or say things I say only to my peers. That is why I was surprised at very relaxed and friendly relationship between students and teachers. I think I failed as far as this matter is considered. I could not overcome my old habits and often remained silent in presence of teachers which they could see as impolite (but believe me I did not mean that, that is just the way I am, the way I was taught). The other thing I found interesting was the attitude towards life. I have the impression that people here (at least those I met) live from one party to another, from one weekend to the next one. Even in magazines I could read long articles evolving round just having fun, fun and fun. Well... Perhaps I am getting old because I am talking like my own grandmother. All in all, I regard time spent in Belfast as a precious experience (even though living in Bostock House seemed impossible in the beginning). It gave me the opportunity to meet people from various parts of Europe, to get to know their opinions, views, thoughts and colourful personalities. It was a good lesson while which I could confront many stereotypes about other nationalities with the reality and find out that people are much more than just a bunch of fixed views in our heads.