

The First Polish ITW, March 1994

by Paula Oleska

Tadeusz, a tall trim man, is standing in front of the class feeling nervous and haltingly explains the theory of five elements. Then he instructs them how to use it for balancing. When the students follow, he sighs with great relief. "All my life I preferred to stay in the background and let others take charge," he says. "Maybe that wasn't such a good choice. I think I'll be teaching classes now."

Tadeusz is 86 years old. He is one of the 17 participants of the first Instructors Training Workshop in Poland. Out of about 70 people there who took TFH 1, 2, and 3 from me during the last two years, these individuals chose to commit the time and money (almost a full month salary by Polish standards) and to come to this village of Opolnica from all over Poland to become instructors and spread their fascination with TFH. They all have their miracle stories to justify their interest. Krystyna, for example, helped a man who was diagnosed with a lung tumor. After several sessions he started to cough up pieces of it and eventually x-rays showed he was clear.

These people are very committed and work really hard. In fact one of my big tasks is to help them relax and experience that learning (and TFH and life) do not have to be so hard. They grow visibly more relieved daily. They finally believed me that there would be no exams and that no one would fail.

And the class becomes fun. They love playing games, especially "the twister" which in Polish we call "the pile." They love the kinesthetic way of learning and the safe environment.

Note: Twister is a game wherein each participant touches a muscle on one person with one hand and another muscle on another person with the other. As the caller calls out muscles and hands, the group twists into interesting shapes, since one cannot have both hands on one person. An excellent way to learn the location of muscles.

The house we are staying in adds to the fun atmosphere. It feels like a dorm, with people popping in and out of each other's rooms, gathering in small groups to "cram" or tell jokes

till dawn. The buzz of conversations is spilling into the hallways. Sometimes everybody hangs out in the classroom downstairs to sing with a guitar. But tonight everyone is "cramming." They are preparing for their big day: teaching a real class, with real people in it. (We call them "guinea pigs".)

The big day is Saturday. They are all very nervous; tense faces, shaking hands. Some forget everything they have learned. Some shine. They have a chance to learn from each other now. At the end of the class – lo and behold! – the "guinea pigs" can actually balance some muscles. They feel relief from various aches or stiffness and they want to learn more TFH! The instructors taught a good class.

When we discuss the results, Olga sums up what needed to improve: "We were so nervous. We wanted to look good. What we need to do is help our students look good!" Everybody smiles and relaxes – now they really "got it."

After dinner we celebrate with an evening of singing. I sing, we all sing. Tadeusz (the man from the beginning of our story) surprises us by singing duets with his wife, Marysia, 82, also tall and trim, a retired executive of a large state factory. (Marysia has also been the head TFH coach for the last two years, having been the first to memorize the material, and has been helping her classmates tremendously.) They tell us a story of how his singing saved Tadeusz's life in a concentration camp.

In Poland everybody who is over 48 (almost everyone in this group) has lived through the horrors of World War 2, and has their own stories to tell. But neither that nor the harsh years of communism dampened their spirits. And this ITW helps bring them out. They become more alive. They learn to communicate, to follow a new path by establishing their business. They become new people.

When we explore communication skills, they discover that having helpful intentions often does not prevent one from blocking the communication by preaching, commanding and comforting. We discuss how being helpful often disables the

receiver of help. They discover with amazement that listening is an art that takes a lot of skill – and that if their partner listens to them correctly even for a few minutes they can solve their own problems. Good communication skills can actually restore autonomy!

When it comes to conflict solving, they struggle to form “non-blaming descriptions of the other person’s behavior” and realize that blame sneaks in through the back door as sarcasm or hostility. There are almost no models for non-authoritarian communication they can think of. They feel very excited about transforming communications within their family and professional environment.

When it comes to marketing, we need to overcome the legacy of communism, a distrust of financially successful people (“they must be crooks”) and a thwarting of individuality. Also, since everything used to be owned by the state, there was no need for marketing. As we cover the step-by-step process of building a business I can see the lights go on in their heads. They enthusiastically brain-storm in small groups to create their own business plans. So much enthusiasm! Poland, watch out! These seventeen people of all ages and professions have designs on you. And now they also have their (hard earned) diplomas. They are ready to move into action.

As I fly back to New York a few days later I look back at their glowing faces and each one’s

unique contribution. I think of Adam Kolacz, who has kept TFH alive in Poland by himself for several years and has made all my classes possible in his center. Of his wife Ania, quietly working behind the scenes to make sure everyone is taken care of. I do feel taken care of. They have become dear friends. And as they drove me to the airport through a hailstorm, we were already making plans for future classes.

I am very happy and proud to have worked with all of those people. To kindle their enthusiasm, to help them find a new meaning in life, to share in their excitement. They are very grateful and they show it. So even though financial rewards are negligible (because of the rate of exchange of the Polish zloty to a dollar), the emotional rewards are tremendous. And the sky is the limit.

As the plane approaches New York, my home, I give them all an imaginary hug and wish them a “broad road” – that is what we say in Polish in the beginning of a journey.



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P.O. Box 2102, Cathedral Station
New York, New York 10025
(212) 864-4507