



On Secrets and Freedoms.

2016-01-26

I am a writer in brief residence - four days in Krakow, which is twinned with Edinburgh and like Edinburgh has UNESCO designations both for World Heritage and as a City of Literature.

It's the end of Day One, and I am sitting on my own in Restauracja Pod Gruszką, the Pear Restaurant. It is a good traditional Polish restaurant, just off the main square, Rynek Główny, where the fancy tourist restaurants have fancy tourist prices. But here in the Pear I can still see from my first floor window booth the vast open space of it, the largest square in Europe and even in October full of milling visitors.

The restaurant is however almost deserted. This rather old fashioned room, its parquet floor crammed with old brown tables and empty captain's chairs, feels like an abandoned speakeasy. There is an upright piano against one wall, lid closed, beneath a huge brass effigy of a pear. I get the sense that it hasn't been played, that the room hasn't been decorated (nor the menu revised - I have ordered pork and dumplings) for a long time.

The only other diner in the room leans over and strikes up conversation. Am I a journalist? (He has seen me making notes.) Do I know where I am? (No.) It seems that I have stumbled upon the Soviet Era headquarters of the Association of Journalists of the Polish Republic. Founded in 1951, the Association opened a Press Club here in 1955, perhaps the last time the premises were refurbished.

Suddenly this hollow dining room is packed to the varnished skirting boards with the ghosts of journalists and party officials of sixty years ago, trading privileges and stories in clouds of toxic Russian cigarette smoke. You may not write this. You may write this. You may tell the people this. You must never tell the people that. It's a secret.

And now my fellow diner is telling me stories. That building across the square, he tells me, now a branch of Deutsche Bank, was in Soviet times the headquarters of the Propaganda Buro. His father, my companion tells me, was an eminent physicist and used to illustrate lectures there about space exploration with smuggled film about the *American* missions. When the party complained about this use of capitalist propaganda, his defence was he could not get hold of Soviet footage. It was secret.

It is no wonder that story-telling and literature have such resonance in Krakow. Things have been very different, very recently.

When I reach the far side of the square, my heart is lifted. Like a flower placed in the barrel of a rifle, someone is projecting *poetry* onto the side of the Propaganda Buro. Poetry, not propaganda. Books, not bombs.

It's a project of Krakow UNESCO City of Literature. Every night they project a different poem by a different author, one from each of the eleven cities in the network. I return to this spot on all three nights of my visit, and read verses from Reykjavik, Iowa City and Dunedin. On the fourth day, in Britain, it is National Poetry Day and on the Royal Mile in Edinburgh the Scottish Poetry



**Magiczny
Kraków**

Library unfurls a banner the size of a building, 25x8m, carrying the poem *Spiral* by Elizabeth Burns, a descendent of the more famous Robert.

Each city in its own way celebrates the importance of poetry in its heritage, and both countries enjoy a high degree of freedom of thought and speech. Maybe in Scotland, politically stable for so long, we don't value our freedom of expression as much as we might, or use it as thoughtfully.

By Colin Salter.

Further information:

Edinburgh City of Literature, <http://www.cityofliterature.com/>

Krakow City of Literature, <http://krakowcityofliterature.com/>

Scottish Poetry Library, <http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/bigwords>

Pod Gruszką, <http://www.podgruszka.pl/history-krakow-restaurant/>