

Gerald Seligman

FAKING BRITISH ACCENTS IN CZESTOCHOWA, POLAND, 1982

In the summer of 1982, I took the train east from Berlin to Warsaw and then down to Czestochowa, in the south of Poland. General Jaruzelski had declared martial law in an effort to tamp down the growing protests from the Solidarity movement. But I was looking for history, family history, for Czestochowa was where my Grandparents were born and lived until their late teens and early twenties.

I'd spoken to my Grandmother and gleaned all I could, even a home address. As a foreigner alone in a town inimical to tourism, all the more one who had declared himself a journalist on his travel visa, I was followed for the first days, so when I hailed a taxi and showed him the address, two cars pulled away from the curb. I anticipated a short trip, that he'd take me a few streets at most. My grandmother spoke of being near the main square, down by one of its narrow ends. She'd related the strange sight of pilgrims on their knees entering the square to crawl the final length to the famed 'Black Maria' icon in the cathedral at the other end, the Jews in town selling them religious trinkets.

But the two cars left the main square, drove up a broad avenue, then on for a mile, two, more. I knew it was wrong but the driver couldn't, wouldn't understand my plea to go back. He finally entered a country lane, nearly suburban, and pulled up to a house with a well-tended lawn and trim bushes.

I got out and he sped away. So too, strangely, did the car that had been trailing us. Birds tweeted, I looked up and down the road, down the hill, across the fields, wondering how I'd get back to town.

Soon a door opened at the house and an old woman peeked out. She called to me in Polish and I pantomimed, then shouted back, "Sorry, I don't speak Polish." She thrust her arm up, palm outstretched, hastily signaling me to wait and retreated back in to the house. The door opened again and she beckoned me to enter.

Inside was a lean old man, immaculately dressed in a tweed jacket, pressed slacks, starched white shirt, knit brown tie. He walked with a cane and shook my hand warmly as I entered the home. It, like him, was stodgy and formal.

"Do come in, please," he said in a stilted English accent.

How very odd, an Englishman living on the outskirts of Czestochowa.

"Thank you," I replied. "You're English... And living here?"

His brows furrowed. He didn't seem to understand, but waved me into the sitting room.

I tried again, "What brought you to Poland?" I asked.

He looked at me, puzzled, uncomprehending. "Spot of tea?" he asked, as his wife came in with a tray, balancing a porcelain teapot, two cups and saucers, some biscuits.

"Certainly, thank you," I said, thinking of the blessedly unexpected encounters of travel. But why didn't he understand me? "Very nice home, thank you," I said.

He looked confounded. "We don't get many visitors out here," he said. "All the more, English-speaking visitors," he added, but now with the inflection of a question.

"No? Do you have many English friends here?"

He didn't reply, then stood up suddenly, more quickly than I would have thought him able. He motioned me to sit in an overly-padded wing chair by a small record player. Up went a finger, gesturing wait.

He eased a record from a sleeve in a folder of 4 or 5 disks, placed it on the turntable and lifted the heavy arm onto the record. From the crackles emerged a perfect English voice on an ambient English street asking directions from an English bobby. "I say, good sir,' the voice said, "would you be so kind as to direct me to Covent Garden? I have tickets for the opera." The bobby replied, "Most certainly. It is just down the street to the main square, and then your first large building on the left."

We listened for what felt like a very long time, before the old man handed me the records. "Learn English," it read. "From Native English Speakers." I turned it over. From the 1950s. The old man wasn't English at all, but had learned to speak from these records. He got the accent just right. But why couldn't he understand me? Had he never had a dialogue before? Or was it my American accent?

I thought I'd experiment. "I say, good sir, this tea is simply delightful," I sang in an exaggerated accent that sounded more Monty Python than Queen's English.

His eyes lit up and he pressed forward.

"We only bring it out on special occasions," he told me. "Special guests."

"I am deeply honored, my good man," I replied.

"It is you who honor us, sir. We have so few guests for tea."

On the record, the dialogue threatened rain and recommended a 'brolly.'

And so we passed an hour speaking in 1950s English accents, an old Pole and a young Yank uttering, "Scrumptious" and "I say" and "Indeed, indeed..." until it came time for me to go.

But how?

"It would be my pleasure to accompany you to your transport," offered the old man.

"Why, that would be most kind, most kind, but I do hesitate to inconvenience you," I sang in my self-effacing, mid-century English way. "I'm sure I can find my own way, ol' chap."

"Wouldn't dream of it," he countered and walked me to the bus stop for the ride back into town. As we stood there, he broke ranks and whispered conspiratorially, "Communism... frightful," thrusting us back from the English 1950s to martial law in Poland, 1982.