



BY Ellen Sidor

(This account of a 12-day visit to Poland in May was written by Dharma Teacher Ellen Sidor, Editor-in-Chief of PRIMARY POINT. She was in Poland for the first time in 1982 with Soen Sa Nim, experiencing one of the famous "60 people and only one bathroom" retreats which Soen Sa Nim calls "matchbox practicing".)

Am standing in line at the Warsaw airport customs with hundreds of other travelers trying to get my bags inspected, so I can join the sangha friends I haven't seen for three years. They are waiting on the other side of the glass partition, periodically waving flowers. The official stamps the form without looking at it and waves me through. I stagger out through the glass doors into the arms of Andrzej and Teresa: Andrzej, Abbot of the Polish Kwan Um Zen School, Bodhisattva monk and old Dharma friend, and Teresa, a brand new friend but there is a compelling sense of having known her before, maybe for years. Several days later she confides she had the same strong feeling about me: instant family! Everywhere on this trip it is the same, mutual feelings of familiarity and affection.

We arrive at the Warsaw Zen Center in the middle of a work retreat. The good-sized house with the brand new Dharma hall attached to it sits in a very large grassy yard with flower beds, a small vegetable garden and huge piles of bricks and lumber covered with bright blue tarps. Andrzej explains they are preparing for a big Buddha's Birthday ceremony with all the Buddhist sanghas in Poland in four days and are expecting around 300 people. The Dharma room must be finished in case it rains and the ceremonies have to be held inside.

The bricks and the lumber are for building two small family cottages on the far side of the yard. It is very hard to get building materials in Poland, so projects don't get started until all the materials have been procured. We go into the new Dharma hall to bow to the Buddha: new pine floors and walls, clean-smelling, lots of windows. Good light, good feeling. Bowing on the bare floor in my traveler's clothes, a sense of coming home again.

Andrzej and his wife Ala and their two toddler daughters live on the second floor of the Zen Center in a small apartment with a hot plate and a sink in the bathroom. The visitor is put up in the Master's room, an airy, spacious guest room with plants on the windowsill. From the window you can see the roof of the new Dharma room and the backyard, where children are playing in a huge sandbox. There is the sound of hammers and drilling. People are working after supper to finish the electrical wiring in the Dharma hall.

Later that evening after a brief rest from the day of traveling, I sit in the old Dharma room with the retreat group. They are wearing robes and chanting strongly. The Heart Sutra in Polish is a real tongue-twister, but I use my "cheat-sheet", a phonetic guide to pronunciation that Polish friends and I worked

out in hilarity three years ago. Already we are at home with each other. Soen Sa Nim's genius: having the same form in all these different places, so anywhere you go, you are at home.

A short talk by the visitor, then questions. Head Dharma Teacher Ola Porter translates for me. What is happening with Kwan Um Zen School in America? How many people live at Providence Zen Center? When is Soen Sa Nim coming again, and Jacob Perl? How long can I stay?

And then more personal, intense questions: what can I say to my family who don't approve of me practicing Zen? How can one discover one's karma and use it to help others? Why do we have to use these strange robes and chants? Can one get enlightenment if one doesn't live in a Zen Center? The same questions are asked in America, Brazil or Korea.

After a day of letting me settle in, Andrzej and Ola present my schedule: visit all the Polish Zen Centers and one of the groups in the next nine days! It would mean traveling to a new place almost every day, returning to Warsaw for the ceremonies and the monthly School Council meeting, then leaving again for three more days of traveling. I groan but agree.

The first side trip is to Lodz. I feel a bit nervous, traveling alone with only a Polish phrase book and some creaky French, but the sangha has arranged greeters at every point who meet me with flowers. (In Poland flowers are very popular and are sold on many street-corners.) The train ride to Lodz is beautiful: the Polish landscape unfurls like a mosaic, with fields greening and fruit trees in bloom.

Jacob, Abbot of Lodz ZC and a Bodhisattva monk, and Olek, Head Dharma Teacher, meets me at the station at midday. We go to the Zen Center, a small neat apartment on the sixth floor of a building in a massive complex of apartments which houses maybe a thousand people out on the fringes of the city. I soon discover that all of the Polish Zen Centers (except Warsaw) are on the top floors: many steps! Lodz is an industrial city, a mixture of grand old European architecture and gray apartment complexes with no trees. Sometimes it takes years to get an apartment. The Lodz sangha has been waiting two years for a larger place, so they can hold bigger retreats and live as a group.

In the afternoon we go to the ruins of an old Jewish cemetery where many famous Polish Jews are buried. Many gravestones are broken or defaced. There are memorials to martyrs and victims of the massacres that occurred in the 1930's and 1940's. Old signs of war show in stones pockmarked by machine gun fire. Jacob says there are very few Jews now living in Poland, after

THE FLOWERING OF THE



Bodhisattva Monks Andrzej Czarnecki, Dorota Krzyzanowska and Jacob Brzezinski

the terrible experiences of the war. As we walk back through another gray apartment complex built on the site of a Jewish massacre, Jacob said many of the residents feel uneasy, living over a mass grave.

DHARMA COMBAT

At a large Catholic monastery on the rural outskirts of Lodz, a new seminary is being built for the training of Franciscan monks. Soen Sa Nim gave a talk here in the fall and the monks were amazed to meet their first Zen Master. We are guided through the building by a young monk whose eyes shine as if he has just finished a long meditation retreat. When word gets out about the American Zen visitor, we are invited to tea. An old monk appears and slyly asks how long I have been teaching Zen in the United States.



Then he begins asking questions. What can Zen offer the Western mind? How can rational thinking people put down thinking, and of what use is such a practice? How can Eastern and Western philosophy truly meet, with such radically different approaches to life? Little do I suspect that I am to be drawn into full-fledged Dharma combat! This old monk, a good speaker and well-educated, asked the same sharp questions of Soen Sa Nim. As we drink tea, I slice the apples we brought and answer his questions, Jacob translating with great poise. The energy in the room becomes intense. More monks keep slipping into the room, as word of the Dharma sparring match gets around.

Why we don't eat meat becomes an intense topic. I find out later that the patron saint of this order, St. Francis, was one of the very few Catholic saints who stopped eating meat after his enlightenment. As the combat went on for over an hour, I was very grateful for Soen Sa Nim's teaching of "Just now, what are you doing?" When it is over, we go outside for a photograph, monks and Zen students together. My companions embrace me. By some miracle I have not

disgraced them!

The confrontation with the old monk is very helpful, as it points out how important it is in Poland for Zen students to build good relationships with Catholics. Poland's unusual degree of freedom of religion is largely due to the vigor and power of the Catholic church. Poland is almost unique in Europe in that its number of Catholic monks is growing. Many of the young people in our sangha have been brought up in Catholic homes and have broken away, so it jars them a little to be reminded of the debt they owe to the Catholic church, in being free to practice Zen.

In the evening we got to the sangha meeting in a rented classroom at the local "house of culture," which rents space to such diverse groups as musicians and martial arts classes. Our room is on the music floor, so our practice is punctuated by the sound of trumpets and pianos. We sit Zen for 30 minutes, then do some Tai Chi style exercises. More questions: how do you deal with severe depression and feelings of meaninglessness? What about parents who are opposed to your practice? How universal these issues are!

BUDDHA'S BIRTHDAY

The next morning I return to Warsaw by train, sleep through the correct stop, go 40 miles into the countryside and have to get off and buy a ticket for the next train back. At last, a rare chance to use my Polish phrase book! The sangha is so efficient that everywhere I go, they have provided an interpreter. During my Warsaw stay, Ola Porter worked tirelessly in this capacity in addition to being Head Dharma Teacher, running the work retreat, playing a major role in the ceremonies, and having a few minutes to be with her three-year old son when her husband brings him to the Zen Center.

On Friday it rains heavily. The yard gets sodden. We pray for good weather for the Saturday ceremonies, knowing the Dharma room will hold 150 people at most. The yard was sodden. Saturday arrives sunny with blue skies and a breeze which quickly dries everything out. Men from the different sanghas arrive and begin making temporary bleacher seats out of bricks and beams. A vertical altar is constructed and covered with silk. A small bronze standing Buddha is installed in a large porcelain bowl on the altar.

The Vajrayana students put up gaily colored streamers in all the trees. Kap-leau Roshi's students arrive with a huge "fish moktak" and a large Japanese bowl bell. These are two young Tibetan monks, elegant in their russet-colored robes. Indoors, the tiny Zen Center kitchen is crammed with people making huge pots of rice, a farmer's cheese dish and tea.

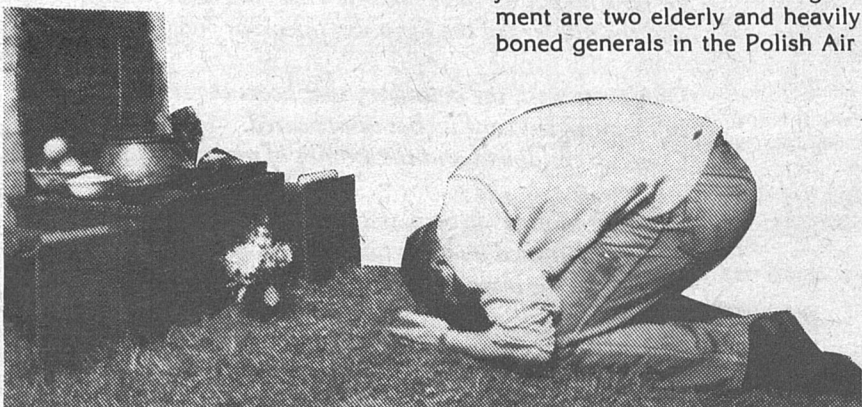
Around noon guests begin arriving in greater numbers. Families appear with backpacks, bicycles and young children, who immediately head for the sandbox in the far corner of the yard. A registration table has been set up just inside the

POLISH DHARMA

gate. A table of Dharma goods (beads, incense, Tibetan tankas and various books) is doing a brisk business. A cheerful hum of talking and laughing arises, children and dogs play in the grass, the streamers wave in the breeze.

Over 350 people attend the ceremony. Members from six different Buddhist sanghas (Kapleau Roshi, Zen Master Seung Sahn, the Tibetan Kagyu lineage, Maezumi Roshi, Sotetsu Sensei and Jodo) sit in a big semi-circle facing the altar. There is chanting from each tradition and prostrations to the Buddha, with parents leading children up to the altar for ritual drinking and pouring of sweet tea over the Buddha.

KUZS Director Dorota supervises a group of children presenting flowers to the Buddha. Moments before boisterously at play, the children stand awkward and shy in front of the large



audience. A mischievous little red-head, toddler daughter of the man in charge of the Japanese bell, does many antics in front of the crowd, trying to crawl into the bell and hiking up her pinafore to the general dismay of her father and the hilarity of the audience. In closing, the Tibetan monks, now wearing bright saffron kasas over their robes and holding incense, lead the entire assembly three times around the large yard, chanting "Shakymuni Buddha."

KUZS Abbot Andrzej is pleased with the turn-out. He feels the sanghas are working well with each other and is proud that the Kwan Um Zen School can host such a gathering at the Warsaw Center. He gives the opening speech, resplendent in a bright orange Bodhisattva monk kasa. Also representing the KUZS School in ceremonial bows to the Buddha, are two other Bodhisattva monks, Dorota and Jacob.

After the ceremony people stayed around for hours, listening to music and enjoying the warm spring weather. Highpoint of the afternoon is a free concert in the Dharma hall given by Ola's English husband, John Porter, one of Poland's foremost rock stars. The Dharma hall is packed and more people stand on tiptoes at the windows to see and hear John and his electric guitar.

On Sunday the School Council meets in the old Dharma room all day and into early evening. I was asked to present an update on KUZS activities around the world then answered questions, mainly about Soen Sa Nim's plans for the next year, the development of new Zen Centers in Paris and Seoul, and the timing of Master Dharma Teacher visits to Poland.

For all the work it entails, there is clear satisfaction in setting up and running a Dharma organization that can help people practice.

REUNION WITH AN OLD FRIEND

The next morning Dorota and I rise at 4 and walk to the train station for the 4½ hour ride to Gdansk. Dorota was my roommate on my very first visit to Providence Zen Center almost four years ago. She was learning to be a Dharma Teacher so she could go back to Poland to help organize Zen practice. Now she is Director of the Kwam Um Zen School of Poland and has many responsibilities. She comes to Warsaw as often but lives in Gdansk to help her mother and the Gdansk Zen Center. Most of our train ride is spent catching up, talking in the dinner car over innumerable bottles of juice and tea. In our seating compartment are two elderly and heavily beribboned generals in the Polish Air Force,

so talking under the direct gaze of their icy blue eyes is not so comfortable!

Gdansk Zen Center is a short bus ride from Dorota's mother's apartment and is located next to a block-long military installation. Sangha members have just finished interior renovations to the tiny center, which consists of a small Dharma room, (now appearing bright and spacious after renovating), a small utility closet, a bathroom, and a sink in the hallway which functions as a kitchen. Like all the other sanghas, Gdansk is trying to get a larger place and to support it financially.

Dorota and I find many parallels between the experiences of the American school and the Polish school. One amusing example is the conviction of each Zen Center that the "real practice" is going on in their center, not believing for a moment that the head temple in Warsaw is anything more than a place for ceremonies. In turn, the head temple feels that nobody else really understands how much work it does as the center of the organization. Soen Sa Nim's idea of establishing a separate school in Poland, rather than just a branch of the American School, has proven to be an excellent one. It has strengthened the sanghas in each city by making their jobs very specific. Also it has given the whole sangha a distinctive and well-respected identity among other Buddhist groups. There is so much business that the School Council meets every month in Warsaw.

Dorota tells me that KUZS has many friends in other Buddhist sanghas so that they work together, particularly during ceremonies and when any of the teachers come to Poland. One man who



has helped the sangha on many occasions is Genpo Sensei, Maezumi Roshi's Dharma heir, who just moved to Amsterdam and will be teaching more in Europe. He rented the Warsaw center's new Dharma room in June for an 8-day retreat and KUZS students were able to sit with him. Another good Dharma friend is Ole, a Tibetan teacher from Sweden who comes to Poland often and has many students.

From Gdansk I fly to Krakow and am met at the airport by Anthony Szoska, one of Soen Sa Nim's first students in Poland. As a result of meeting Soen Sa Nim back in 1978, Anthony and Andrzej went to Korea and America, an unheard of circumstance for Poles. Anthony and his wife and two sons, all of whom are talented artists, live in a small neat apartment on the outskirts of the city. After serving me a delicious lunch, they all show me their work.

The Zen Center is in a charming old neighborhood with Italian architecture, flower pots on the window sills, and many old shady trees. With its many art schools, bistros and shops, Krakow is considered the "San Francisco" of Poland.

A welcoming party is held at the home of an editor of a Krakow newspaper, whose wife is a Zen student. The editor and I swap shoptalk, and he has many questions about Zen practice and Soen Sa Nim, whom he has heard speak. He tells me that Zen is a real curiosity in Krakow and people don't know what to make of it. Is Soen Sa Nim interested in attracting thousands of people and getting powerful? I tell him Soen Sa Nim is only interested in waking people up.

PUBLISHING THE DHARMA

In the morning I meet with the Dharma publishing group, one of the most exciting developments in the Krakow sangha. Dedicated to publishing Soen Sa Nim's teaching, the group has just brought out the first newsletter of the KUZS in Polish: a goodlooking soft-bound booklet with some pictures, a Dharma talk by Soen Sa Nim, information about practice and the location of the Zen Centers and groups in Poland, as well as news of the international sangha.

Several members of the group have advanced degrees and have already translated several of Soen Sa Nim's books and some teaching articles from PRIMARY POINT. In addition, one man is compiling a Buddhist dictionary. They hope to make a right livelihood business by publishing Dharma books.

Stopping later in the great plaza of Krakow for ice cream at an outdoor cafe,

we have an interesting incident. There are no free tables, so we wait by a table of four people who were speaking English. Three of them leave and the fourth, a young Asian woman, invite us to join her. In the course of conversation, I volunteer that I have come to Poland to visit my Zen student friends. She is astonished. A Cambodian Buddhist, she is married to an American who has come to study in Krakow on a Fulbright scholarship. They are both meditators and have been looking for months for a group. By now they have become very pessimistic about finding anyone. Now she is sitting here, talking to the Abbot, Head Dharma Teacher, and former director of the Krakow Zen Center, which is just minutes away from her new apartment! It is a good lesson about not being shy in mentioning Zen practice.

The last 24 hours in Poland are hectic. I fly back to Warsaw and almost miss Teresa coming to meet me in a taxi that took a wrong turn on the way to the airport. Back at the head temple, preparations are underway for a farewell party and I still have not packed. But amid all the emotions of leavetaking is a sense of our relationship. I have come with very little agenda, just to visit my friends, and have been treated most royally. It appears that Poland, for whatever karmic reason, is one of my true homes.

Going to the airport the next morning we all pile into the old green Zen Center van, in the pouring rain. Heavily laden with the Polish sangha's presents for the American sangha, I am again separated at the airport from my friends. On the other side of the barrier they talk and occasionally wave.

Finally someone appears, puts stickers on my bags without even opening them. A last goodbye wave to my friends, quick frisk at the security check station, and twelve days in Poland are gone like water.

In discussing the trip afterwards, KUZS Director Diana Clark remarked that it was interesting that I had gone to Poland on my own, with no particular plan or idea of my reception. I was not being sent by anyone or going as an official teacher. I was just going alone.

"Maybe that's what Zen is all about," she said. "Just being able to let things happen without making anything special about it. Just being able to be with people. In Poland they don't have teachers coming very often, so they learn from each other and teach each other. Maybe that's the trend in Zen as it comes to the West, that it will be "just us folks" instead of charismatic teachers from the Orient who will all disappear one day.

Zen has been based on the idea of hierarchy, but it teaches becoming independent. As people wear out their need to have father figures tell them what to do, maybe it will be all of us teaching each other, sharing our Dharma. Poland is a far-out place to do that, because Zen is so new there."

For some of us there is a strong connection with Poland. When we find connections like that appearing in our lives, we need to honor them. Clearly, some kind of energy pulled me to Poland after three years of obstacles. Something is definitely happening there. Everyone who goes there feels it.

Now we are meeting many Poles who have the Bodhisattva mind, which means making an effort even when you are tired, frustrated and depressed. Many Poles are practicing daily, struggling to establish centers and groups so they do not have to practice alone. Everywhere that we look beyond our own situation, we connect with others in the great ocean of suffering.

It must be time for this particular flower to bloom, the flower of Polish Dharma. It's like a blade of grass forcing its way up through a crack in a cement sidewalk. Nobody told it that it was the right time, but it came up. If we can trust that energy and not ask questions, just go with it when it appears, many wonderful things will happen.

It was a terrific visit. Thank you, Polish sanghal

Richard Shrobe, C.S.W., A.C.S.W.

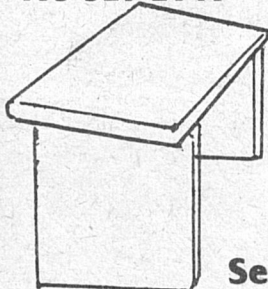
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