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Deaf and HOH Advocacy in Poland

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We are continuing our personalities series about active and interesting persons who work for the cause of deaf and hard of hearing in the countries of former communist bloc. Next on the list is Poland.

What can we recollect about Poland? Instead of an introduction, here are some aspects of Poland as a country in a period of transition:



Poland is an ancient nation that was conceived near the middle of the 10th century, a nation with an interesting history and a strong national identity. In 1980, strikes at the Gdansk shipyard led to the first independent political movement within the Soviet bloc. Today Poland is still emerging from its communist past, but unemployment and deprivation remain high. The country is currently being led by the twin brothers, Lech Kaczynski, the president, and Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the prime minister. Both are members of the conservative Law and Justice party, which is promoting traditional catholic values.

Poland joined NATO in 1999 and the European Union in 2004. With its transformation to a democratic,

market-oriented country largely completed, Poland is an increasingly active member of Euro-Atlantic organizations.

Damian Dudala who is my main source of the news from Polish deaf community, works in the International Institute for the Study of Culture and Education (IISCE) at University of Lower Silesia of the Association for the Advancement of Education in Wroclaw (www.iisce.org). He is a project manager on projects devoted to disability and human rights, and is a Vice President of the non-governmental organization "Together Poland Foundation" (www.network-together.eu). In the network, with support of his friends, he organizes various projects for young people with disabilities, several of whom are youngsters with hearing loss. Apart from this, he studies deaf education at the University.



Damian at the conference on Human Rights Education

Damian works with people who are responsible for formal and non-formal education activities for youth with disabilities. His tasks include working with students with disabilities, among them people who are deaf or hard of hearing, in the University, and assisting the Plenipotentiary Rector of the University - which is responsible for students with disabilities.

"The IISCE is an interdepartmental, academic, and research center mission charged with fostering education built on the culture of pluralism, which is critical to participative democracy and thriving civil society in East Central Europe", explains Damian. "Central themes of the IISCE are ethnic and cultural

About the Author

Karina Chupina is a freelance international trainer, consultant, and writer from St. Petersburg, Russia. Karina



became interested in international matters and writing during the year she spent at an American high school in Tecumseh, MI, while participating in a student exchange program. She went on to earn an M.A. in International Journalism (St. Petersburg) and an Executive MA in International and European Relations & Management (Amsterdam).

Karina has authored articles on themes of disability, minority participation, mass media, human rights education, culture and social inclusion. She is the only trainer with a disability in the international Trainers' Pool of the Council of Europe Youth Sector (www.coe.int/youth).

Karina is deeply involved with local disability youth organisation and IFHOHYP, the International Federation of Hard of Hearing Young People, and serves as its President. She has been project leader for several of such international projects and training programs, as "Integration through Arts and Education", "Disability and Sport", "How to Make a Campaign on Hearing Disability", "Building Communication for Hard of Hearing Youth: Breaking Down Barriers and Stereotypes", the Russian Deaf Art Exhibits and more.

Karina continues her postgraduate education in Political Science & Sociology (St. Petersburg and Berlin) and in her free time, enjoys carefree bicycling, theatre, and dancing.

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pluralism, human rights and human right education, disability rights, gender equity, and conflict resolution specifically in the context of school curricula and teaching practice."

The Institute has broad experience in organizing open seminars, national conferences, training courses, workshops that give participants a chance to work on hearing loss issues, and work with/for deaf and hard of hearing people who participate in the projects. Deaf and hard of hearing students sometimes help to organize the activities.

"In Poland, the majority of deaf vocational schools train students to become dressmakers, bookbinders, car mechanics, or carpenters. Through the deaf educators we meet at these seminars, we're starting to see an increase in the number of deaf young people who want to study computer specialization, information technologies, education (especially deaf education), or psychology. I think it is a good sign. For example, when it comes to deaf education, we do not have enough deaf or hard of hearing teachers in Poland (in 2000 we had just 33 teachers who are deaf!)."

In Poland, a country with 5.5 million people with disabilities, the majority - 84 percent - lives on social security benefits such as disability allowances. Work is the main income for only 8% of them; a significant number of people with disabilities do not have enough money for subsistence.

"According to the statistics, we have about 100,000 deaf people in Poland, and other sources mention 4 million people with hearing loss. Every year 650 children are born deaf or hard of hearing," says Damian.

High unemployment is also a plaguing issue. While it's diminishing slightly now, that rate reached 14.9% in December. "We do not have anti-discrimination legislation or regulations to employ assistants or sign language interpreters to support deaf and hard of hearing people in the workplace. The Polish Disability Act was changed 45 times within a few years! Obviously, this shows government's irresponsibility. Another important thing to consider is that the deaf community in Poland is not considered a minority and Polish Sign Language is not an official state language," explains Damian.

When I asked if there are any famous deaf people in Poland, Damian cited as examples Feliks Peczarski - artist and painter from 19th century, writer and poet Petronela Pawlowska, and finally, Bogumila Gawronska whose poster won first place in the international competition in the 5th Congress of the World Federation of the Deaf 1967 and 6th Congress of the WFD in 1971.

Damian, who admires Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and re-read for 9 times his favorite Polish book by Stefan Zeromski "The homeless people" (about Doctor Judym whose selfless help to people stems from his own challenging life experiences), is a young worker on hearing loss issues with an acute sense of injustice that even I had rarely observed.

Damian identifies himself as hard of hearing and, contrary to some young people with hearing loss, does not question his identity. "To people I say, 'Please, speak slowly and clearly.' My identity always was, is, and will be closer to people who hear. I never lose faith in it. When I worked for two years in the Polish Association of the Deaf, many times my suggestions and ideas were rejected by deaf people. Why? I could not fully understand it. Perhaps because of my poor sign language? Or, because I am more 'hard of hearing' than deaf? It is my identity, it is my right - and I decide about it. Yes, I admit, my identity is not always pleasant for myself. I try to understand the Deaf community, and I do have respect for them, for their culture, and for their language. But I can not accept an intolerant attitude just because I am not 100 % Deaf."

At the same time, Damian wholeheartedly acknowledges the biggest success of the Polish Association of the Deaf. They started dialogue with the Polish government to give official status to Polish Sign Language and to recognize the Deaf community as a minority.

"An inevitable process had started and we can hope its effect will be positive," Damian tells with optimism. "It is very important," he stresses again, "because with minority status, like the deaf community has in the U.S., the deaf community in Poland will have rights and may get campaign support from the government. As a minority group, they can have more possibilities to protect themselves, their culture, and language."

In the next article, we'll learn more about Damian's path to active work -

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which extends beyond his home country to the European continent, as well as other reasons and challenges that encouraged his deep involvement in education for and with people with hearing loss.

SOME FACTS ABOUT POLAND:

Location: Central Europe, east of Germany

Border countries: Belarus 407 km, Czech Republic 658 km, Germany 456 km, Lithuania 91 km, Russia (Kaliningrad Oblast) 206 km, Slovakia 444 km, Ukraine 526 km

Area-comparative: Slightly smaller than New Mexico

Population: 38,536,869

Ethnic groups: Polish 96.7%, German 0.4%, Belarusian 0.1%, Ukrainian 0.1%, other and unspecified 2.7%

Religions: Roman Catholic 89.8% (about 75% practicing), Eastern Orthodox 1.3%, Protestant 0.3%, other 0.3%, unspecified 8.3%

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