

## Slow Road to **Muszyna**

*In August of last year Learning Disability Wales took part in a Contact Making Seminar in Poland.*

*Information Officer Kai Jones, who attended the event with Director Jim Crowe, took along his Bill Bryson travelling pen to tell us about it.*

It's testament to the power of the Internet that we're currently in deepest Poland, discussing the good and bad about social care and the voluntary sector across Europe with like-minded people from organisations as far away as Iceland, Portugal and Lithuania.

We are in Muszyna, a village high up in the Tatra Mountains and on Poland's southerly-most tip. Any further south and we'd be breathing Slovakian air. It's late in the evening and we're all exhausted from our various flights and the long three-hour journey from Krakow Airport – a legacy of Poland's slow, awkward road system. But as we meet and greet each other, we manage to push the exhaustion to the back of our minds, more interested we are in finding out about our various organisations and getting down to the business of the week.

### **Sharing Ideas**

A Contact Making Seminar is a way of bringing together various people from the same field to talk about common aims, share ideas and best practice. It's a great opportunity to find out about exciting initiatives in Malta or

frustrating attempts to take leaps forward in Greece and form future working partnerships with organisations from countries that would have been difficult to get in touch with otherwise. And it's thanks to the fabulous Agnieszka from Poland that we are here. A voluntary worker with the European Association of Young Regionalists (ESMR), Agnieszka has assembled a dozen forward-thinking organisations in the learning disabilities field from all over Europe to this beautiful part of Poland.

Agnieszka's research has been very impressive. We don't know how she has managed to bring together such a great cast of participants but our invitation certainly came out of the blue following Agnieszka's discovery of our website – proving how crucial a good website is to promoting your work and forging new links and without a doubt the very reason that Learning Disability Wales is representing our country at the seminar.



### **Aims**

Agnieszka has brought us all together for this Contact Making Seminar with the following aims: establishing links of co-operation, forming future common projects and creating a scheme for a training course. We are in Poland for five days and with two of these set aside for travel, we are due to work well into the evenings on the other three days, but we're all looking forward to it. It's Tuesday and our first full day. A quick glimpse out of the window of the training room window onto the hill directly behind the modest hotel we are working and staying in and I catch sight of a farmer cutting the grass in his field, working meticulously with an old fashioned scythe alongside his horse and cart. It's a fascinating sight. Agriculture in Poland still forms a big part of the Polish economy and when you drive through the largely untouched landscape you almost feel as if you're seeing a snapshot of life as it was in Britain before the industrial revolution. It's not uncommon to pass a couple of cows on leads as their owner takes them to graze on the village's common land.

### **Presentations**

Luiza, our excellent trainer, is leading us through the concept of the seminar, introducing us to the work of ESMR and some of the projects they have recently delivered, before we gather together to find out about the work of each of our organisations, in the form of informal presentations. I'm still amazed at the quality and variety of people that Agnieszka



has brought together. In total there are fourteen organisations from eleven countries: Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Turkey and Wales. There are people who work in education, from supported employment agencies and from youth groups. All the presentations are thoroughly enjoyable, especially finding out about the different ways of working in other countries.

Our presentation seems to go on for ages as Jim and I soon realise that there's so much to cover about Learning Disability Wales's work – our policy and campaign activities, our projects and different publications, the information service, as well as the accessible information we have produced – but there's a great response from everyone and within minutes copies of the various CD's, video's, factsheets and publications that we have brought with us have been snapped up.

### **Real work!**

Wednesday, and the real work kicks in. Luiza splits us into groups and asks us to think about some of the common projects we would like to set up. Independently of each other we all design projects involving social inclusion and the arts. Spooky, perhaps there's something in the Polish water? Luiza also gives us a presentation on how to access European money to fund the projects, including setting up preparation visits and creating resources to review the final project, which in turn can be used to share best practice with other organisations looking to do similar projects or simply people interested in the work. The day is very inspiring and we work well into the evening. There's a satisfaction that we have all come up with solid ideas for future projects that could really make a difference to people's lives. Amazing, considering we have only known each other for less than 48 hours.

## That's entertainment

If we're exhausted we're all hiding it. A good thing, as there's a great evening ahead of us with ESMR having planned a cultural exchange evening for us. Each organisation has brought a sample of their country's culture to share. Not surprisingly, most of this is that great cultural ice-breaker, alcohol, and the next hour is spent tasting Lithuanian mead, Irish whiskey and a lethal Icelandic spirit, aptly called 'Black Death'. Michael, one of Agnieszka's colleagues in the ESMR programme, introduces me to a Polish spirit called Krupnik, a kind of honey-laced vodka that is so gorgeous it makes your insides all warm and gooey, even though you know it'll probably strip paint at a hundred yards. I make a mental note to take a few bottles back to Wales.

Our hotel might be modest by our Western standards, fitted out with Butlins-style chalets and the smallest bathroom I've ever seen,

but it boasts a large wooden hut in the grounds with a barbecue suspended from the centre. And whilst the warmth from the barbecue mixes with the conversation, two locals in traditional dress who play evocative Polish folk music serenade us throughout the night. Every now and then they hijack one of us and sing a piece from their never-ending repertoire that reminds them of that person, whilst Luiza translates the story to us. Apparently I remind them of a famous Polish King and referring to my blonde spiky hair, they sing: 'the goose has laid his golden eggs on your head'.

## Cultural visit

We wake on Thursday for a short trip to Krynica, a spring town not far from Muszyna. After a cable car ride up into the mountains to see the stunning views of the Tatra Mountains, we descend for a short walk through the countryside and a

brief visit to Krynica itself, a charming market town. It seems like a break from our work, but this cultural visit also gives us another chance to get to know each other better, to form greater bonds. It's this careful planning that makes a Contact Making Seminar such a success. In the last few days we have seen us build a trust and respect for each other that will no doubt serve us well in our future projects.

## Fresh perspectives

Agnieszka's excellent planning for the week also includes a fresh perspective on training that I have never seen before. Every so often we will break from our work for a group exercise, led by Edyta, a brilliant motivational trainer. Edyta will lead us through a fun game or take us outside into the Polish air and have us run back and forth in teams trying to beat each other back to the winning post. Again, it seems a nice break from the work, but Edyta has an inspired motive: whenever we start to flag these exercises perk us right back up and we miraculously feel fresh again.

Stalin once said that implementing communism on Poland was like trying to saddle a cow. On the bus ride back from Krynica, I begin to understand what he meant. This is a country that has felt so much history, so much of it painful. Yet maybe it's only because I know this that I think every field and every person I pass seems to be breathing out this past. In fact, the Poles chat on street corners just like we do; and even though some of their methods may be old-fashioned and endearing, the farmers still work their lands with the same hard work.

## Invaded

These lands that have been invaded by Swedish and Austro-Hungarian empires, that suffered under Nazi occupation during World War II, that witnessed the worst of the holocaust, that were swallowed-up by communism for four decades. Poland has stubbornly emerged from all this heartache, scathed but with the determination to move on. Stalin was right. And it's inspiring.

The rest of the day is taken-up reviewing the projects and then as the group starts to break up for those of us with early morning flights to get the long overnight journey back to the airport, we bid our fond farewells, exchange contact details and promises to see each other soon.

The few that are left talk well into the night. This is my first Contact Making Seminar, with Poland forming the perfect backdrop, but any organisation can set-up their own seminar in their own country or look to participate in one taking place in another. Available funding ensures that a large part of the costs are met, whilst the potential links with other organisations can be extremely beneficial. As a direct result of Agnieszka making contact with us, we have already arranged for one of Learning Disability Wales' members, Viva!, to take part in another ESMR project a few weeks after ours.

Months from now our work here will start to see fruition. Preparations for a drama therapy project in Berlin and work on a Greek version of Having A Say, our interactive CD-Rom on participation, will start to move

forward. But for now I will stay up through the night with new-found friends from Romania, Portugal, Greece and Poland as we talk about our collective goals, our common interests, our work and our countries. Eventually we will see the sun rise on another fresh Polish morning, not wanting the week to end, the memories of a

successful and memorable Contact Making Seminar fresh in our minds.

If you are interested in organising or taking-part in a Contact Making Seminar contact Learning Disability Wales for more information.

*Kai Jones, Information Officer, Learning Disability Wales.*

