Playing bridge in Poland: Part One

I have just returned from a visit to the village in which my father was born. He was not actually Polish but his village is located in the south of modern day Poland. His father had emigrated there from Ukraine at the turn of the twentieth century. His mother belonged to a race of people known as Lemkos who had mostly Ukrainian/Russian backgrounds and had immigrated to that region centuries earlier.

Before heading south to visit the village, my family and I spent a week in Krakow, the cultural capital of Poland. Of course, with that much time in the city, and with Poland’s reputation as one of the most populous bridge countries in the world, I had to locate a bridge club.

With the help of the Internet, I easily made contact before leaving Canada. I was in touch with Witek Stachnik, president of the Krakow Bridge Association, and he very generously offered to be my partner on the day arranged.

The day I played was the most popular of the week on the Krakow bridge calendar. Twenty four tables were in play and the setup on this day was quite different from the setup in North America. Witek talked of it as a “tournament” and in fact, because of the size of the field, it did seem more like a tournament than a club game. The scoring was “Barometer” style; this means that all players played the same boards at the same time. Of course, this requires many sets of boards, often a difficulty for local clubs but seemingly no problem for the Krakow club.

Before the game started, one of our first-round opponents was called away because of a fire at his office! When his partner chose to leave and not play with the director, Witek and I were left without opponents on the first round.

This posed quite a problem for the technician who was running the game. He and Witek spent the first round in the back room trying to sort out the movement that they would have to use to accommodate the gap that had been left by the retirement of this pair.

When we returned to our table for the start of round two, this was the first hand I picked up in my sojourn into what already seemed a little bit like a Twilight Zone atmosphere: ♠ J-10-7-5-4 ♥ 5-4-3-2 ♦ J-9-5 ♣ 10.

What a way to greet a guest! The bidding soon sounded as if it had actually been crafted by Rod Serling. My RHÔ opened one notrump (15-17), I passed, and my LHO bid two clubs. Witek doubled and my RHÔ passed.
I knew we were on dangerous ground here. I inquired, with Witek’s translation, if the pass were conventional. I quickly learned that they had no agreements about how to handle this situation. With that knowledge, pass seemed the best option.

But, it got worse! My LHO redoubled and when Witek and my RHO passed, there I was again. Thanks, Rod. What now?

Since Witek knew what he was getting into when he doubled, I simply passed, hoping for the best. And the best occurred. Witek’s clubs were K-Q-9-5-4-3 and he also held the ace of hearts. But I held the key card in whole deal – the jack of diamonds! We nipped the contract one trick for an absolute top. Witam z Polski! (Welcome to Poland!)

After the round, we checked our scores and saw that we were in third place. Scores are posted after the second round and then after each subsequent round when using Barometer scoring. Also, your next seating assignment is posted at the same time.

This makes the game very long. A round of three boards lasts 25-30 minutes compared with 20 minutes in North American clubs using our Mitchell or Howell movements. The game started at 5:15 but didn’t finish until well after 9:00.

I’ll continue my tale next week.