

# Written in stone

Evan Croker August 2012 (Canberra)

---

I first heard Adolf Krol in 1958. His halting attempt to read the cute children's book, *The Saggy Baggy Elephant*, drifted over the fence from old Mr Polson's backyard into mine. Adolf's reading became a regular feature of life, a companion to my Hills Hoist visits, and I found myself taking unnecessary time with the laundry, or even sitting down to have a listen. Mr Polson would often (and not too gently) correct Adolf's heavily accented, stop-start reading. One Saturday I stole a look through a gap in the wooden fence. Why was one grown man reading aloud to another?

Mr Polson, somewhere in his seventies, sat up straight on an incongruously well-presented dining chair, sinking a little into the lush green grass. The chair was a beautiful, polished...oak, maybe, clearly brought outside from the dining room. Adolf, a weather-beaten mid-thirties, sat on a wooden crate, a children's book open before him on a dilapidated outdoor table.

It was my first glimpse of the teacher with his pupil and the memory is always sweet.

Their routine seemed to be three classes a week, twice after Adolf's work (Mr Polson was long retired) and a longer session on Saturday afternoons. Sometimes the irresistible aroma of barbecued steak and onions drifted over to finish their Saturday; other times Adolf brought creamy-looking European dishes that Mr Polson dismissed.

It was my wife, Carrie, who first set me straight about Adolf as I mused about him on yet another evening. 'He's not German. He's Polish, I think. He sounds like Mr Dudak the butcher. There's no German accent there.' She appraised me for a minute. 'And stop spying on them.'

#

The classes continued and the reading improved. The complexity of the pieces Mr Polson gave Adolf to read increased. One hot Saturday Adolf tackled the headlines of newspapers, another he mangled a magazine article on science. The piece was full of complex jargon and Adolf had little chance. He left despondent that time.

#

One day I came home from work to find Carrie weeding by the backyard fence where weeding wasn't required. Her head was cocked towards Mr Polson's yard, and Adolf was reading Shakespeare. He wouldn't have passed an actor's audition, but a more enthusiastic reading of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* I am yet to hear.



My wife leapt when I touched her shoulder.

'How's the weeding going?' I enquired. 'Are you after those terrible invisible weeds threatening our neighbourhood?'

The glare in return could have come from a Bengal tiger.

'So you caught me eavesdropping,' Carrie whispered. 'Revel in your victory, then take out the garbage.'

Over dinner she raised the kitchen window and we ate in silence as the sun slowly set and a crescent moon rose. Adolf attempted Hamlet, and there were tears in Carrie's eyes as he got to 'to be or not to be'.

Mr Polson said it 'wasn't all bad'.

#

There were basic literacy exercises too. Adolf ran through the alphabet, forwards and backwards. I was amazed at his ability to do it backwards; I doubt I could. He wished that the letter 'w' could sound like a 'v', and that the English letters didn't have to look different when capitalised. Looking back now in this post-literate age, when all our tweets and Facebook entries don't bother with capitals half the time, I guess he got his wish.

Regardless, it was a tailor-made series of classes to help an adult read. And the day came when the homework for Adolf was to write. Mr Polson started him with a paragraph describing the backyard, and the resultant prose was rather dull.

'Some nice adjectives though,' Carrie whispered, joining me sitting beneath the clothesline.

'I've never heard a barbeque described as "hot and hairy" though.'

'You haven't lived until you've tried a hairy barbeque,' she replied.

#

I did admire Mr Polson's approach. It was fair and reasonable, but demanded results. He would happily criticise Adolf if he thought he wasn't giving his all. And after many smaller writing exercises came Adolf's thesis. The big one. A page-long essay on 'My Life to Now'. I had to see Adolf's face.

My wife was first to the gap in the fence -- she broke Betty Cuthbert's Olympic record run of two years before.

'How's he taking it?' I asked.

'Terrified.'

#



I wanted to congratulate Mr Polson for his work with Adolf but just walking up to his door for a chat would be awkward (when he became our neighbour two years before, I walked past him at his letterbox and invited him in for a beer. I got something between a scowl and a roll of the eyes).

A chance presented itself while he was weeding his lawn one Friday. I pulled our FJ Holden into the driveway and pulled out groceries. My mouth was forming the first syllable of 'hello' when Mr Polson stood, swayed dizzily and suddenly pitched forward. I ran to his aid, still holding onto a loaf of bread for some reason. He had fainted dead away and as I pulled him onto his back I called to Carrie, and she attended to a nasty cut on his forehead. He came to fairly quickly...and didn't care for being in our arms. It was the first time Carrie had seen him up close. He dismissed us both and marched inside.

'Pride cometh after the fall...' my wife observed drily.

#

My better half and I, of course, had front row seats for Adolf's reading the next Saturday. How would he go reading out his own work, and something as personal as a life story?

'My Life to Now,' Adolf began, barely audibly.

'Louder, clearer!' Mr Polson barked.

'My Life to Now,' Adolf managed, a little louder. Certainly not steadier. 'By Adolf Krol.'

'Did his parents name him after Hitler?' I whispered to my wife.

'I doubt the Poles cared for the invading Nazis, my dear,' she replied, with the kind of you-intellectual-peasant look that only a wife can truly perfect. 'Though he may have been a soldier in the war, I guess.'

Suddenly the old wooden fence surged toward us. 'If you two insist on being in the audience,' Mr Polson roared at us, looming over the fence, 'at least have the courtesy to be QUIET!'

There was a certain satisfaction seeing my spouse turn a wonderfully vibrant shade of scarlet. I stood calmly from our crouching position and gazed levelly at Mr Polson.

'I'm sorry,' I said, turning to Adolf. 'We're intruding.'

Adolf fingered the single, well-thumbed page in his hands nervously.

'But it's true he needs an audience,' Mr Polson said. 'Yes, it's time. Come over. Listen to him.'

Carrie found some powers of speech. 'I think that is Adolf's decision to make...'



Mr Polson's eyes narrowed. 'I am the teacher and I know what is right for my students!' he barked. 'I knew what was right for you, and what is right now for Krol. You come over here, Miss Snow!'

So there it was. Mr Polson was my delightful bride's old teacher. Automatically she did what was ordered of her, and I haven't stopped reminding her about it in the decades since.

#

After Adolf gave his consent we sat in front of him, my wife and I on our beach chairs hastily grabbed from the garage, and Mr Polson on his dining chair.

'Commence,' Mr Polson ordered.

'1934 Poland I was born...'

' "I was born in Poland in 1934",' Mr Polson corrected.

I did the calculation in my head -- Adolf was only 24, but looked a decade older.

'My family is commanded to ghetto Piotrków Trybunalski in 1939. I am five years old, never get to school. We are Polish Jews. Matka...mother...she dies soon. Not from Nazis, just bad luck with horse cart. But I do not blame this horse.

'Two years later my father and brother do not come home. The family who care for me say they are far away. But I know they are killed by Nazis. Every day someone killed by Nazis.

'I am very small, as no food, so good at running from ghetto. I steal food for new family. I sell things on street of Piotrków. We live this way.'

It was like the world had stopped to let Adolf speak. He suddenly became aware of us, and lost his nerve.

'Go on,' Mr Polson said, gruffly.

'There comes the time when Nazis come early. They want all of ghetto. I am outside ghetto in the city, getting food; I come home and see the soldiers. Old kobieta...this means woman...sees me coming out of sewer and waves for me. "Go back! Go back!" And I run to country. I am now eight years old in 1942. I hide on a farm but caught stealing eggs and kielbasa.' He noticed our blank looks. 'Kielbasa -- sausages. They are so very good. I love sausages. Today I think kielbasa I think of...' He gazed at Polson's barbeque. 'I am thinking, I am free. Best taste in the world.

'Then I am in Ravensbruck. It is the worst place of world. Ghetto is better -- I cannot believe I say this. In ghetto many people sick and die but I'm lucky. In Ravensbruck the Nazis push in the more and more prisoners. So many like sardynka, like sardines. I get typhoid. No medicines, no doctor. Then Russia arrives. So very happy. So very happy!'



Carrie was squeezing my hand.

'Prisoners go mad. They kill Nazis guards. I have never seen so much killing.'

Adolf dropped his page. As he knelt to pick it up he was clearly shaking.

'I wish you never see such things. But I do not blame them. Then the Red Cross help me. I come to Australia in 1948. I am 14 and cannot speak English. But school doesn't help me. They do not like my name, Adolf -- they say I am Hitler in Australia! They draw the Nazi sign on my bag. They draw the Nazi sign on my face. I cannot do the studies. I cannot read the English! I leave school and get the job in printing shop. You imagine?'

He looked at us with suddenly laughing eyes.

'Adolf who can't read and write...in printing shop?'

Mr Polson laughed, I think despite himself.

'You forgive me now, Mr Polson, my writing is more than one page?'

'You may continue.'

Adolf produced another page from his shirt pocket and continued to read. 'The print man knows quickly I am no good with English. One day Mr Polson comes in. He wants me to leave note for boss.'

'A former student of mine,' Mr Polson explained to us.

'Please, Mr Polson,' Adolf says, 'whose is this story?'

Carrie and I erupted in laughter. How long had Adolf yearned to put Polson in his place, just once?

'Ah, forgive, forgive,' said Mr Polson. 'It is your story. Continue.'

'Mr Polson can't believe it,' Adolf continued. ' "Write down this for boss," says Mr Polson. "I can't," I say. "You can't?!" First time Mr Polson angry with me.'

Carrie laughed but was silenced by a sideways artillery shell of a glance by Polson.

'Mr Polson says if I cannot write at my age that is terrible. "Can you read?" he is saying. "No." "In Polish, at least?" "No. I never have school. Nazis are a problem for me.'

The light was getting dim and Adolf took his last paragraph over to the naked light bulb blazing above the barbeque, which was beginning to attract many insects.

'When Mr Polson finds no English school for me, he says: "I will do this school for you." I say, "I have no money." He says, "What skills can you barter with me?" '

' "Barter", I think,' I added helpfully.



‘ “Barter with me?” ’ Adolf continued. ‘ I want to know what this word “barter” means, and it means I do Mr Polson’s lawn and he teaches me English.’

Adolf suddenly threw his papers into the embers of the barbeque. They swelled in flame, illuminating his prematurely aged face.

‘Mr Polson is good man,’ Adolf continued, looking into the fire. ‘Mr Polson makes me realise the world has more than Nazis. Mr Polson teaches me to read and write so I can get a better job. And not one time has he asked me to mow his lawn.’

Adolf walked to Mr Polson and hugged him.

‘You are a good man. You don’t like anybody, but you are good.’

For the first time Mr Polson was speechless. My wife rose to give Adolf a hug, and he burst into sobs. Years of hardship almost visibly lifted off his shoulders and rose into the cool evening air.

#

Months later I noticed Adolf arriving at Mr Polson’s with a parcel from Mr Dudak, the butcher. He gave me a tentative smile as he walked inside. Later in the day new odours wafted from Mr P’s backyard and I stole a look as I hung out the sheets. There was a pile of exotic sausages on the hot plate -- thick, different colours and sometimes in the shape of a circle. I took them to be kielbasa, a delicious mix of Polish sausages. An egg and cream dish accompanied it and I heard Mr Polson say, ‘Not bad, Adolf, not bad at all.’

Their dinner and conversation lasted much longer than usual that night. And somehow I knew it was their final class. It was graduation.

#

Christmas came and went and the next time I saw Mr Polson he was sunning himself on a brand new wooden recliner in his backyard. An actual piece of outdoor furniture! Perhaps it was a gift from Adolf. When I saw Polson in the exact same position early the next day, I knew what had happened. I leapt the fence but he was stone cold. Later the policeman asked if I knew the next of kin. I could only think of Adolf.

#

Perhaps, in Adolf, Polson saw a fellow man dealt life’s lesser hand of cards. Mr Polson had slipped through life’s cracks too, in a way. I don’t know -- Polson was not an easy man to befriend. And I never saw a wife, girlfriend, friend or any kind of relative visit in the time we were neighbours.

Adolf put the death notice in the newspaper. It was simple and to the point. I stepped up to pay for the funeral when it was discovered Mr Polson had left no estate behind to speak of, apart from the very nice oak dining setting, willed to Adolf. His house was a rental.



The day of the funeral had a perfect, mid-twenties temperature and an achingly blue sky, looking down on the small cortege comprised of a priest, Adolf, an old fellow teacher of Mr Polson, Carrie and myself. Two gravediggers stood a discrete distance away.

Adolf made the final words over the grave. 'I can read this eulogy today,' he said, 'because you, Mr Polson, taught me not just how to read, but taught me what a friend is.'

A quick gesture brushed aside a tear.

'By learning we teach,' he said, 'and by teaching we understand.'

---

*Winning entry in the short story writing competition "It's Never Too Late ... To Learn To Read", funded by the Australian Government Department of Industry, Innovation Science, Research and Tertiary Education, through Adult Learners' Week 2012 National Grant Funding. The competition was a partnership between the National Year of Reading 2012, and Tasmanian Writers' Centre.*

