That Familiar Feeling by Mat Jasieniecki

In December, I received an email from the Associate Director of REEEC Alisha Kirchoff about a National Guard unit stationed in Illinois that was interested in a lecture on Polish language, culture, and history. I must admit, I was pretty incredulous. Why in the world would a National Guard unit out of Central Illinois want a class on Poland? Random did not begin to describe the request. About a week later, I was contacted by the unit’s administrator, an employee of UIUC named Karen Hewitt. Apparently, Alisha nominated Jack Hutchens, a Ph.D. Candidate in Slavic Languages and Literatures, and me to lead the lecture. My incredulity ceased.

Ms. Hewitt explained that the unit inquiring about Polish lessons was a BEST unit. BEST stands for Bi-lateral Embedded Support Troops. The purpose of a BEST team is to work hand in hand with America’s foreign military allies and make sure they have the logistics necessary to complete their mission, whatever that may be. This particular BEST team works exclusively with Polish forces in Poland and/or Afghanistan. After a few emails, Jack Hutchens, Ms. Hewitt, and I agreed on a lecture date: Sunday, February 3rd.

Admittedly, I had no idea what I was supposed to talk about. Luckily, Jack was contacted to teach the language portion, which was the hard part. That left me with history and culture. I basically decided to talk about historical events and cultural differences that I felt were important for any American to know. After I put the final touches on my Power Point presentation, something hit me: my past and my present had finally collided.

I was born in 1985 in Proszowice, Poland, a small town of about 6,000 people located 30 kilometers away from Cracow. With a little luck, my mother and I were able to leave the country in 1989, three months before the fall of the Berlin Wall, to join my grandparents in Chicago. I spent most of my childhood growing up in Burbank, a southwest suburb.

After graduating high school, my life reached a dead end. My senior year was spent partying and doing everything I could to get out of class. My allergies to trigonometry aside, I still wanted to attend college. My ACT score was above average and I still finished with a 3.5 GPA, despite my terrible study habits. However, my family did not have the money to send me to college and financial aid would only take me so far. At the time, I was living with my grandparents. They packed my things for me one day about two months after graduation and told me I needed to move out (I had it coming). Long story short, I had nowhere to go, so I did what thousands of young people in my position did throughout the years: I joined the U.S. Army.

The following six years were by far the most rewarding of my life. I had the chance to travel and live in some of the most exotic places on Earth. I worked with
Kurds who fought against Saddam Hussein’s forces way before any Americans did. As a mechanic, I repaired experimental vehicles before they were used in major combat operations. Oh, and I got to play with grenades, C-4, and .50 caliber machine guns. Far better than working at my local fast food joint!

Needless to say, I was awash with nostalgia when standing in front of that class full of officers and non-commissioned officers. The lecture went very well. The audience was motivated and interested; people participated as much as possible. I could not have asked for a better group to lecture to. I later found out that most of the BEST team had spent time with Polish troops in Poland so many things that Jack and I talked about were familiar. The BEST team enjoyed the two hour lecture so much that they invited Jack and I back for another session.

As I mentioned earlier, my two worlds collided on February 3rd, 2013, and this was beyond rewarding. Most of my friends in Urbana-Champaign either study engineering or computer science. So the legitimacy of my Russian and East European major naturally comes into question sometimes. I have always defended REEES as a field necessary in the facilitation of good international relations in both business and politics. Many people from our field have used their education to broker peace and implement defensive strategies to minimize bloodshed. Talking and teaching the BEST team reinforced my feelings about REEES and made me feel very proud to be part of such an amazingly diverse department.

Mat Jasieniecki is a Senior Undergraduate in Russian and East European Studies. His academic interests include the history, business, economy, and the IT sector of Russia and Eastern Europe. Mat is on track to graduate in May 2013. He intends to work in the private sector for 2 to 4 years before going back to school for an MA or MBA. Mat is also a U.S. Army veteran who has served 6 years, including in a combat deployment to Iraq from August 2005 to December 2006 with the 172nd Stryker Brigade.