

Embroidering History: An Englishwoman's Experience as a Humanitarian Aid Volunteer in Post-War Poland, 1924-1925. Derby, UK: DB Publishing/JMD Media. (2011) ISBN-10: 1-78091-143-2, ISBN-13: 978-1-78091-143-4

We may think of humanitarian aid as one of the great international movements of the late 20th century, when big events like Band Aid and Live Aid seemed to be breaking new ground. But the reality is that the first big aid agencies, like the Red Cross, have their roots in the middle of the 19th century, and several of the most prominent aid agencies now active began with large scale programs helping the civilian victims of the First World War.

Embroidering History: An Englishwoman's Experience as an International Aid Volunteer in Post-War Poland, 1924-1925 provides a glimpse inside the inner workings of an early humanitarian aid project through the lively letters of a middle class English woman who steps out of her depth into rural village life in post-war Poland of 1925. She leaves teaching to volunteer with a Quaker project providing income generating work for refugee peasant women. Along the way she encounters recalcitrant Belarusian peasants, manipulative local government officials, excitable bourgeois Poles, and altruistic American Quakers. And few of them really meet her British expectations of how things ought to be done!

By May 1925, Margaret Tregear had six months experience as a humanitarian aid worker. She was beginning to doubt the economics of her project which involved importing English embroidery cotton, buying local linen, and then paying local women to embroider items which were sold in England and America. How could this industry be sustainable if the local moneyed classes didn't value items produced by peasants, and the peasants themselves didn't need to buy what they could make?

In this episode, Margaret sets out from her base in the small village of Horodec to set up an exhibition stall to test the market for embroidery in the regional centre of Kobryn. Her letter home opens with her frustration with the lack of an English sense of order and time.

The exhibition was to begin at 9 a.m. on Sunday morning so we took the morning train on Saturday, and arrived at the office about 11. After some searching we found the man ... and he took us to the office while we waited for horses to take our luggage to the station. It was a small and crowded place; people hurried in and out making hectic enquiries, - the secretary himself seemed in a feverish state of losing his temper continually, and only just managing to recover it; none of the cards were ready, and we had to wait while the typist received instructions as to how to register us. After about an hour the ... man said that horses were there, so we followed him to the station; another weary wait of forty five minutes and we succeeded in getting our goods; by the time we got back to the office the committee member in charge of accommodation had arrived, - and he proceeded to allot us our rooms.

Hungry, and a little weary, we sought some lunch, and then inspected our room. Bare boards, a wooden box with an enamel basin of doubtful cleanliness for a washstand, two chairs, and a table covered with American cloth, with a wardrobe in a corner to give an air of respectability to the place. It might have

been much worse, - but the price they had the cheek to charge!!! They charged for the room, for each set of sheets, for each towel, for electric light, which was not available, so much for taking away your passport for registering, three times as much for returning it, so much for service, so much for a town tax for something else, - I've forgotten what, ... and with the total you probably could stay in a first class hotel anywhere else. Luckily we had a slight reduction on account of being exhibitors.

Margaret didn't learn any Polish and, despite having a good interpreter, she was often perplexed by her inability to understand what is going on.

Hotel inspection finished, we returned to the exhibition, seized our luggage, begged to know where we were to put up our stall, but the committee member who arranged places had not arrived, so there we sat the whole afternoon waiting for the gentleman and cussing loudly at intervals. Many people had already found out their sites, I do not know how, and were busy erecting stalls of putting out their machinery. The ground was just a waste yard, with big white washed barns round it, and a great many young birch trees had been cut down and stuck round to try and make it look more elegant; finally at half past four we were shown our corner, and began to have a stall put up. No tables were provided.

We had to employ our own carpenter, - and though this of course delayed things because he had to saw every bit of wood he was going to use, and was more expensive, the three tiered arrangement he erected was far more effective showing off our things. We had our choice of two halves of a space, and bagged one with a wall behind just a foot or two higher than the table, and it made a fine background of rug. Above that still we hung a line for one or two of the choicest things we wanted to display, and in the corner at the back we hung some of the woven curtains. The whole effect was most satisfactory.

There was an elaborate programme prepared, but of course as stall holders we had little chance of following it; we decided however to attend the church service which began the proceedings, and arrived at 9.15 to find mass going on, and a crowded church. We stood at the back, for a little while, and then I sat outside and waited for Miss Wrzeszcz; as you may remember I mentioned that the beginning was to be at nine, so you will appreciate the point when I tell you that, near the exhibition itself, we met the procession with band setting out, - at about a quarter to ten for the service.

There were a fair number of people that morning, they came and looked and questioned, but hardly anyone bought. The aristocracy here despise embroideries as being peasanty, - and though they are willing to admire them as work, do not prize them as possessions, and it was rather comical to see them nearly all drift towards the table next to us, to admire a sickly table centre, on canvas with pink roses and bilious green leaves.

Like many international workers in a trying situation, Margaret found relief in a good restaurant meal when she could get one.

During the morning we had two invitations to lunch, - the first from the Doctor who had attended to Miss Golonowska, and whom we had seen a good deal of during the week, and the second from three of the local youths; they were fearfully annoyed that they had been forestalled, hung about until they met us going off with the Doctor, and joined us without being invited, which I thought extremely cool; I think they did actually feel ashamed of themselves when the Doctor insisted on paying, to the extent of a whole weeks pay, as they very well realized. For he did us proud. I had special Polish things – a kind of jellied fish, with tiny tiny lobsters, which I couldn't manage at all, then a cold soup, made of pink cream, and thick with bits of cucumber, spring onion, shell fish of some kind, and I don't know what else; it was very sumptuous but too rich to consume it all so I skipped the meat course, and ended up with a strawberry Melba.

Back at the exhibition it seems the only consolation for poor sales was a brush with fame.

... There were fewer people on the ground the second day, and all together we only sold about three pounds worth of things; in the afternoon the great Pilsudski visited the exhibition; he, unlike all the other people was there half an hour before he was reported to be coming so Jane and I were having tea, instead of by the stall, where he admired a red cloth for nearly five minutes, according to Miss Wrzeszcz. (In case you don't know who Pilsudski is, I may inform you that he is a celebrated Polish President, - I did not know, before I came to Poland.) We saw him afterwards quite plainly; he looked inexpressibly weary, - his eyes were utterly lifeless, but he has a dignified and soldierly bearing.

The only sequels to the exhibition are that they charged us for half as much space again as we reserved and the official who invited us ... disappeared without either arrangement or apology; we heard it rumoured on the Monday that our stall had been awarded a prize, - apparently several people have heard so, but it hasn't materialized to date.

Margaret worked for the project for three more months and then went back to teaching in England, but she was bitten by the travel bug, and worked again internationally for long periods during the rest of her life. In 1945 she worked again with the Friends helping refugees after WWII in France, Austria and Germany. The Friend's embroidery project in Poland continued to function until 1937, when it closed in financial collapse. After 1939 most of the local gains made by the project were wiped out as the region was again engulfed in war. Margaret's letters open a window on challenges facing humanitarian aid workers in the inter-war period, but they also speak to universal issues of economics, culture and power - perennial challenges that face aid workers today.



Photo caption – Although Margaret’s photo image is blurred by time, her prose remains crisp and immediate, taking the reader into a world where her frustrations are matched by an intense curiosity and a desire to share her experiences. *Embroidering History* brings typed letters from the 1920s into the e-reader of the 21st century, bridging time and technology to make history accessible and relevant to history buffs and modern aid workers alike.