



International
feature

The Polish Woodstock

“By the time we got to Woodstock, they were a half million strong And everything was sound and celebration”



... Joni Mitchell stole my thoughts nearly 40 years before I had them but her sentiments remain apt, nevertheless.

This Woodstock was not Yasgur’s Farm in upstate New York but Kostrzyn nad Odr in Poland, a few kilometres from the German border and in the middle of what has been the scene of so much historical bloodshed.

But violent conflict was the last thing on the agenda at the Polish Woodstock. The festival is held annually in August to bring together Poland’s progressive youth for a weekend of music and fun and to poke a finger in the eye of the likes of the Catholic fundamentalist *Radio Maria*, which rails against the gathering before, during and after the event.

At first sight, the Polish Woodstock was a little daunting. The approach road was flanked by the beginning of an immense multicoloured tented city on the right and utilitarian washing facilities and a very long row of portable toilets standing like a guard of honour on the left.

The road threaded through a long corridor of stalls, offering all kinds of helpful advice, including from the Red Cross and the Polish and German police, whose officers amiably shared a tent and cheerfully listened to music from who else, but Police. Other stalls proffered information on trade unionism, gay and lesbian rights, disabilities, Aids and sexual health while yet more marketed all manner of t-shirts and much-needed headgear to counter the strong sun.

One of the key stands, of course, was run by our Polish friends in Never Again, who did a brisk trade in back numbers of their magazine *Nigdy Wiecej*, stickers and anti-racist music in all manner of styles.

Never Again is a key part of the organisation of this mammoth gathering, which promotes “Music against Racism” and demonstrates in practice, by means of a



An on-the spot report from Graeme Atkinson in Kostrzyn nad Odr with special thanks to Rafal, Natasha, Jacek P, Aleks, Sybille and Artan





64-team football tournament using only Fair Trade footballs, how its football campaign bears fruit by bringing mainly working class Polish youngsters together to indulge in their favourite sport and at the same time show their detestation of racism and other forms of hate and opposition to drugs.

Never Again's dedicated young activists had travelled long distances to be there. They represented every kind of musical taste and following, including a sizeable number of anti-fascist skinheads and some leftwing Catholic priests. I joined some of them on their journey when I travelled the nearly 700km from Krakow to Kostrzyn in one day with *Searchlight's* Polish correspondent Rafal Pankowski and anti-fascists from Moldova, France and Kosovo.

Beyond the stalls and information stands, came the crowded main field in front of the massive central stage, one of three huge podiums, where the whole gig was opened by none other than Roman Polanski ... not the internationally renowned Polish film director, but a local railway worker who takes it upon himself to set off the event each year.

The warm humour behind this ceremony set the tone for three days of rock music, enthusiastic beer drinking, lots of delicious food provided by *inter alia* Hare Krishna devotees and an occasion of peace and solidarity, laughter and joy. And there was not a hint of violence.

Polish Woodstock is arguably now Europe's consistently biggest anti-racist event. Around 150,000 people with an average age of about 22 took part this year and it was a privilege for *Searchlight* to be so well received by our Polish friends, whose GAN (an anti-nazi group) Music against Racism and football campaign t-shirts were worn, by my estimate, by one in every five people present, a testimony to the impact of their grassroots work. *Magnificent!*

