
I RISE AFTER EVERY FALL!

As a teenager she lost hearing and had a mental breakdown. When a cochlea implant helped her to hear again, she helped herself - she overcame the feeling of powerlessness and difficulties with relationships with other people. She discovered a passion for lonely travels and love for the remote North. "The further northward, the closer to the Universe" - says our patient Kila (Kate) Zamana, a traveller, photographer, enthusiast of sled dog racing.

I can hear:

You were the only Polish participant of the 2015 Fjällräven Polar exploration. Together with a group of 20 people from all over the world you covered 300 km through arctic tundra with a sled and dog-team. Why such an extreme expedition?

Kila Zamana: I learned about it from the mushers I know. I was qualified, although I sent my application at the last minute. I owe my love for sled dog racing to my dad, who is a sportsman himself (Cezary Zamana - Polish champion in road bicycle racing, winner of the 2003 Tour de Pologne, editors' note). Dad knew Andrzej Wilczopolski, a world champion in this discipline, and took me to such a race when I was 15. He hoped that I would like it and develop passion for sport that would help me to overcome my emotional problems. He hit home.

I remember that before setting off on Fjällräven Polar expedition we gave interviews to the Swedish TV. Everyone was asked to tell something about oneself, about what drove him/her to take part in the expedition. I said: "I'm here to overcome my weaknesses!" And I told about the barriers I erected in my head. The biggest one was fear of contacts with other people. As later turned out, during this expedition I had to confront that fear once again.

S.: What is the source of your fear of relations with people?

K.Z.: As a teenager I suddenly lost hearing. Nobody could tell me why. Nobody knew how to help me. I had depressive states. As you know, being a teenager is a difficult time. A time when you come to terms with yourself, a time of extreme emotional dysregulation. On top of that, I had to recover from the trauma of hearing loss. I retreated into myself. I refused to go to school. I didn't know how to establish contacts with my peers, so I deliberately built a distance. I didn't understand what

they were saying to me and was unable to explain them how they should talk with me.

S.: Did you try to seek support among the deaf?

K.Z.: I got to know this community, but I didn't fit in. I felt that I'm different from them, that we don't have a common ground. So I lived as if in suspension, not belonging anywhere. I decided to take a risk and choose a more difficult option - functioning among normally-hearing people.

S.: Did a cochlea implant change anything, make it easier for you?

K.Z.: Thanks to the cochlea implantation conducted by Prof. Skarżyński, I regained hearing in one ear, but it didn't solve all my problems. In fact, my first impressions after I had a speech processor connected were not uplifting - the sounds were completely different, with an echo. I couldn't accept that. But the most difficult thing was to accept my new self. I had to resign from earlier plans and dreams. Like for example to become a plane pilot. For a long time, I hid the fact that I had an implant. I was ashamed of it, perceiving it as a stigma, a visible evidence of my disability. In hindsight I know it was a mistake. However, back then, despite support from my parents and a psychologist, I couldn't overcome my issues.

S.: Was it so bad?

K.Z.: At some point even going to a post office was a huge problem. I also quit my studies in Polish-Japanese Academy of Information Technology. There was a typical rat race in this school, pressure to be the best. I wasn't psychologically prepared for that.

S.: How is it possible that being afraid of contacts with other people you decided, after quitting studies, to go away to the United States alone?

K.Z.: This was indeed a leap of faith. But I intuitively felt that I had to help myself. Fortunately, my parents never tried to stop or restrict me. I had a go-ahead from them.

I took advantage of the contacts I made on the Internet publishing my graphics. In the virtual world I already was a quite well-known artist. A girl from the United States invited me to visit her. Unfortunately, although I knew English, we had huge problems communicating. I was born in the United States and lived there with my parents for several years. But in the implant, English sounded completely unfamiliar. I had a very difficult time. But after returning to Poland I thought that it was a good trip. Hard, but interesting. I was confronted with situations where I had to rely on myself. I benefited from it more than from a therapy with a psychologist.

This trip was the beginning of the new me - I started to learn self-confidence. Then, next trips came. As a graphic designer I engaged into cooperation with a company based in Los Angeles. It involved trips to the United States, where I visited Alaska, among other places. I also went to Bali Illustration Workshop in Indonesia. During these voyages I learned to "hear in English" and spoke this language with more and more ease.

I think that if I had not taken a risk and gone on my first trip alone, I would be in a cocoon of fear to this day, unable to leave behind my comfort zone. And only by leaving this zone, you can truly grow as a person!

S.: I know that Fjällräven Polar isn't your only trip to the remote North. Is it the need to leave behind your comfort zone that attracts you to regions that are so unfriendly to a human being.

K.Z.: A warm beach, a comfortable bed - it's fun only for a few days. Then it's getting boring (laughter). I love the North, because I am an outsider, and the North is a world that is inaccessible for many people and living creatures. Contrary to how this place is perceived, it is safe there. Take for example the seemingly friendly world of the warm climatic zone - In Africa you can find more plagues, diseases and famine than for example among the Inuit living in the arctic areas of Greenland, Canada or Siberia. For me, in the South everything is in excess. It is a world abounding with vegetation, overpopulated, chaotic. The North is ascetic, but not dead. I even have the saying: "The further northward, the fewer people, the closer to the Universe." What the life is rich in can overshadow its essence. While exploring deserted and unfriendly regions of the remote North, I feel most fully... the real life.

S.: You said that during Fjällräven Polar expedition you had to confront your fear of contacts with other people once again. What happened there?

K.Z.: Already at the beginning of the expedition, a severe snowstorm broke. But it wasn't blizzard that scarred me. I didn't understand the instructor who gave us instructions. Everything happened very fast. There was no time for additional explanations, questions. We had to react immediately. And I didn't know what to do! And nobody wanted to help me. At that moment my demons from the past woke up. I once again felt utterly lonely and helpless, dependent on others. Today I know that I confronted not people but my expectations from them. Being inexperienced and maximally stressed out, in that extreme situation we focused on ourselves. Including myself. Except that I - due to my hearing limitations - expected special treatment. And I learned another valuable life lesson - a lesson about a human being, social relations. The harsh North revealed the fragility of the "civilisational uniform", deprived us from illusions about ourselves.

S.: Were you not tempted to give up, resign from the expedition?

K.Z.: For a moment. After the incident during the storm I even complained to the instructor. His advice was that instead of thinking about difficulties I should focus on my strengths. He said that my asset is knowledge of dogs' nature and a good contact with them. So I started to help other participants with the dogs. Slowly, we were building relations - this time the real ones rather than the imagined, culturally defined.

S.: What exactly is a good contact with dogs?

K.Z.: A real passion about animals is not only about possessing, stroking, hugging them or admiring their beauty, but fascination about the less pleasant aspects, behaviour. It's not enough to like dogs to have a good contact with them. You have to get to know and understand them, but from their, not our, perspective. Applying a human way of perceiving the world, human feelings, to animals often leads to misunderstandings. For example, you grin broadly at a dog, show your teeth, look in its eyes. For us, it's a sign of friendly intentions, but for the dog it can mean a warning or a threat. It was wolves that helped me to understand the nature of dogs. In a pack of wolves, there is a strong hierarchy. The same hierarchy can be seen among semi-wild husky sled-dogs.

S.: Famous polar explorer Marek Kamiński wrote the following sentence in one of his books: "In reality, a human being embarks on a journey not to discover the world but to discover himself/herself in the world." What did this expedition give to you apart from the opportunity to see beautiful yet harsh landscapes of Norway and Swedish Lapland?

K.Z.: Thanks to my travels, not only the one we are talking about, I started to discover what it really was that didn't function well in me. And it wasn't my hearing. When I compare my present self with Kila from the past, that is from before my travels, I can't believe what a person I was! I considered myself a shy and retreated person, but I turned out to be a completely different person. Travelling revealed traits in me I wasn't aware of!

During Fjällräven Polar expedition I learned that contrary to popular opinion, it's not physical fitness that is key. Above all, you have to be well prepared mentally. The most important thing is ability to quickly assess the situation and take decisions, control yourself and your emotions. On the one hand, you have to be completely independent, while on the other hand - cooperate with the group. During Fjällräven Polar expedition I became more self-confident. So much so that I accepted the instructor's proposal who wanted me to lead a certain stage of the expedition. I rode

as the first, paving the way for the others. It's a huge responsibility, but I succeeded. Thanks to this expedition I also started to fly.

S.: Fly?

K.Z.: Yes. When I completed it I thought that everything was possible. I returned to my dreams about piloting. One of the journalists who interviewed me was passionate about flying. He talked me into a paragliding course. And once again I experienced setbacks... or rather turbulence, because this time it happened in the air (laughter).

S.: What did you have to confront this time?

K.Z.: My hearing and its real - unfortunately - limitations. After the theoretical course, which I completed without any problems, it came time for a practical test. I was to take off and the instructor was to give me instructions through a special radio. The problem was that I didn't hear him. He said that until he could contact freely with me in the air, I wouldn't fly. I was determined. For many hours every day I listened to the radio learning its characteristic sound. When I started to understand most instructions, I got a permission for take-off. However, I was told that by the exam I had to understand 100%.

S.: Did you succeed?

K.Z.: Yes! I also noticed that paradoxically hearing loss gave me some advantage over other course participants. Having information gaps, I started to react more instinctively to what was going on in the air. I was also maximally focused on what I was doing, paying attention to every word of the instructor. It paid off. I passed the exam with the best result! Now, I'm dreaming about a glider course.

S.: I get an impression that everything is possible for you...

K.Z.: I try to make it so (laughter). Hearing loss gave me determination to fight for my dreams. Maybe - paradoxically - now I have better chances of becoming a pilot than before... Because comfort can make you lazy.

S.: You work as a graphic designer, photographer, you help to organise sled dog racing, travel around the world all the time. Do you manage to find time for your friends?

K.Z.: I haven't got many of them. I like people who are interesting, with passion, and I mainly choose my friends from among such types. These are people who aren't afraid of my otherness, understand my a bit wild nature. Anyway, those who don't accept me, I don't care about them any more. I realised that It's their problem, not mine. As for my friends, I always try to find time for them, especially when I stay at home, in Warsaw.

S.: All true travellers claim that after returning home they enjoy ordinary, day-to-day life only for a short time. Then, a strange unrest compels them to go exploring the world again...

K.Z.: I know that feeling. That's why even when I don't go away, I spend time planning a trip. This time I'd like to join Sirius, an elite Dutch patrol that goes around Greenland on dog-sleds. They live in extreme conditions for many months. Unfortunately, only people with Dutch citizenship can work in the patrol. Therefore I have no chance for official engagement. Sometimes formal barriers prove to be the most difficult to overcome. But I thought that maybe I could approach it in a different way. I established contacts with people from the patrol, made friends. The idea of a polar expedition in cooperation with the patrol was born. I would have 1500 km across Greenland to cover, with dogs as my only companions.

S.: So this time it won't be relationships with people that will be the greatest challenge...

K.Z.: It won't be loneliness either! What I fear most is simply that this expedition will never come true. The most difficult part is the stage I'm currently at, that is preparation from scratch until the last details are arranged. These are thousands of elements that need to be put in place like puzzles. I have to consider every detail of formal, physical and mental preparation. As I see it, this is where the biggest risk of failure lies. When I'm finished with that, it will be a piece of cake.

S.: But sometimes there are hurdles on the way and every step takes huge effort. Do you consider yourself a strong woman?

K.Z.: It depends what you mean. Physically, I'm tough and strong. But psychologically? I don't know. I have crises, breakdowns. But every time I find courage to get up and move on. Maybe that's what it is to be strong? To turn your weaknesses into challenges. Even if it sometimes means overcoming your own limitations and involves pain. •