

Koz Syndrome

by [Armando Simón](#) (June 2024)



Two Friends– Andreas Georgiadis Kris, 1965

One fine day in early autumn, young Alexander woke up speaking Polish, which is no big deal if one *is* Polish, or for that matter, happens to be living in Poland, but *is* a big deal if one lives in Florida, and one speaks English—has spoken *only* English all of one's life—and has not even taken a foreign language course in high school and has never even so much as heard Polish being spoken in all of his life.

Naturally, his mother was annoyed.

She thought that he was doing it just to get attention.

At first, his family did not realize that he was speaking Polish since they did not understand Polish, it sounded like gibberish to them, of course, which annoyed his mother even further because she thought that he was making fun of her (for what possible reason did not matter: she was a very bad tempered woman).

As to Alexander himself, he slowly began to feel scared. But, at first, he did not feel any different from usual. He thought that he was speaking normally, that is, in English. And he certainly understood everything that was being said around him, and to him. But, as his mother's and brother's irritation grew, his own irritation, and frustration, at what he thought was their game of pretending to not understand him, gave way, slowly, to an alarming feeling that they really did not understand what he was saying. For one thing, there was not the slightest indication in their faces that they were pulling his leg, not in the corner of their eyes or mouths or in the way that they were looking at him, or their foreheads—you know how people try to look serious when they're pulling your leg, but are still trying to look serious, some little thing in their expression gives them away.

His mother was about to whack him one for good measure—she was a firm believer that a solid slap in the face, or a more generalized beating, was a sure-fire solution to any

problem—when his brother Bobby noticed the expression on Alexander’s face.

“Ma, wait! I don’t think he’s fooling. Look at him, he’s scared!”

Their mother would have preferred to have gone ahead and hit him anyway, but even she was now struck at Alexander’s expression, which clearly showed that her teenage son was, indeed, terrified. She lowered her hand, which had been holding a large kitchen pot.

“Boy, you’d better not be fooling, if you know what’s good for you. Now: do you understand what I’m saying? Nod your head if you do.”

He nodded his head.

“Now ... say something. Say that you want to go wash the car.”

He said something that was unintelligible to them. She frowned.

“Alex,” his brother asked him, “is what you’re saying making sense to you? Nod your head if it does and shake your head if it doesn’t.”

Alex nodded, wide-eyed.

“Well, it ain’t making sense to us,” Bobby said. “Ma, I think that he may be sick or something.”

His mother peered at him closely, as if by doing so she could detect the real cause of his problem, maybe see the nasty little microbes at work.

“Mmm, he’s too young to have a stroke. Guess I’ll have to take him to see the doctor. Do you feel sick, boy? You in pain?”

Alexander shook his head. She put a hand to his forehead to see if he had a temperature.

At the doctor's office, she told the physician what they knew so far. The doctor examined him and spoke with him, frowning at the curiosity.

"This is really odd," Doctor Koz said. "I find nothing wrong with him physically, though I want to run some more tests at the hospital. He's too young to have suffered a stroke to the speech areas of the brain, yet that's the only explanation that I can think of. I want to run a Cat scan, and an MRI on him."

So they did and nothing out of the ordinary turned up.

Alexander had been speaking from time to time, trying to get himself understood about something or other, and it was during one of these occasions that one of the technicians turned and looked at him.

"Doctor Koz ... I think ... he's speaking Polish."

"What?"

"I think so. At least, it sounds a bit like it."

"You mean that he's speaking another language?"

"I'm not sure," said the technician, whose name tag showed him to be Michael Pietraszewski. "I can try. My grandmother was from the Old Country and that's all that she could talk to us, so we picked up a few words and phrases, but it's been awhile since I spoke any of it."

"Try anyway."

"Ah, you understand, ah, I, I, I mean me?" he asked the boy haltingly in Polish.

"Sure," Alex said. "No problem,"

"What, ah, your name? No, you live where?"

Alexander responded with his name and where he lived.

“How old are you?”

“I’m seventeen. My birthday was two months ago,” he replied in Polish.

Mister Petraszewski turned to the others, amazed. “He really *is* speaking Polish!”

“Not only that, but he understood you in Polish, just like he understands us in English. But, he only speaks in Polish. That’s ... unheard of. Wait! Alexander, take this pen and pad of paper and write a few sentences—anything.” The boy did so and handed it back to the doctor, who gave it to the technician. “Look familiar?”

“Yep. Lots of Ws and Zs and Ys. That’s Polish, all right! I mean Polish is the hardest European language that a person can try to learn. Must be some smart kid.”

Alexander was now beaming at this incontrovertible proof of his intelligence.

Doctor Koz whirled around to face his mother.

“Say, ma’am, what are you trying to pull here, anyway?” he asked her, obviously annoyed. “Why didn’t you simply tell me that he had been studying a foreign language?”

For an answer, she whirled around and smacked Alexander outside his head with her fist.

But, before they all got bogged down in arguments, Bobby brought it back to the crux of the matter.

“But, why can’t he speak English anymore?”

Before anyone could say anything, the patient spoke slowly. Pietraszewski translated.

"He says ... he has not been studying it."

"He's got to! You just don't pick up a new language overnight without being taught! It's unheard of! It takes years to learn another language. Can you tell what his proficiency is in speaking the language?"

"He's speaking fluently, sir."

"And why Polish? Why not German? Or Latin? Or Italian?" Bobby asked.

"He's got no business speaking Polish," his mother muttered. "Why can't he learn French or Spanish, like anyone else instead of a language that nobody speaks. It's like learning Korean—why bother? What's the point? What's the use of learning to speak Polish, I'd like to know."

Pietraszewski appeared a bit put out. "For your information, madam, if you've ever read anything other than Harlequin Romances, some of the world's best science and literature has come out of Poland and over a dozen Nobel Prizes have been awarded to Poles. Brodsky, Siekewicz, Conrad, Nowakowsky, Milosz, were all great Polish writers."

"Conrad wrote his novels in English," Doctor Koz pointed out.

"Well, yes, that's true, but—"

"—Excuse me," Bobby interrupted, "but can we get back to the problem that my brother has?"

"Sorry," the technician said.

"Ah, yes," Doctor Koz admitted, somewhat embarrassed at being sidetracked. He had willingly gone off on a tangent because he simply did not know what else to do next.

The doctor next wanted to pop open Alexander's skull and dissect his brain, so that they could find out the solution to

the puzzle, but for some reason, Alexander would have none of it, much to the physician's disappointment.

His mother spoke up.

"OK. He's learned Polish. Can't say much for his choice of languages. He can speak it and understand it, but he refuses to speak English. Nothing that a good whipping can't cure."

"I don't think that it's that simple," the doctor explained patiently. "More like he *can't*." He grabbed the pad of paper and his pen. "Alexander, *in English*, write the words cat, house, dog, school, car."

He wrote them in Polish and gave the pad back, shrugging, but keeping a wary eye on his mother in case she decided to haul off and smack him one, just for good measure.

"You don't suppose it's catching, do you?" Bobby asked, edging away. "I mean, am I going to wake up tomorrow morning and start speaking Polish too? Or maybe Chinese?"

"I doubt it. I think it's unique. I'm certainly going to write a paper on it for a medical journal. Hey! Maybe they'll call it Koz's Syndrome!" He smiled in proud anticipation.

Since there was nothing more to be done, they ended up going back home.

His mother wanted to keep him at home, locked in a closet, hidden from society, but the school authorities insisted that he attend school since the condition was neither contagious nor life threatening.

Needless to say, Alexander made a big splash when he went back to school.

His steady girlfriend, Cassie, immediately dropped him like a hot potato, thinking the eternal female question, "What will people think of me?" referring to be seen with him.

This hurt his feelings.

It was two weeks later that “public opinion” in his Ocala high school began to noticeably shift in his favor and it was due to something trivial, as is so often the case. It turned out that since he could only write in Polish, there was no sense in giving him essay exams (which everyone hated), and, at the same time, he could not be singled out, unfairly, to take an easier multiple choice test, so in all of his classes everyone was given the preferred, easier, multiple choice tests and everyone’s grades consequently improved. Everyone voiced his gratitude towards him. On such trivial matters does popularity sometimes hinge.

A week later, something happened that clinched it and changed the way people viewed him 180 degrees.

He became...

Famous.

A Celebrity.

It turned out that Doctor Koz’s report, because of its oddity, against all precedence, was *immediately* published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, instead of the usual eleven months’ wait. The popular magazines *Time* and *Newsweek* picked up on it right away and sent herds of journalists and photographers to Ocala and his story was written up nationwide, along with his picture. Hard on the heels of the magazines were the national and state television newscasts which sent journalists in droves to do news spots on him. Doctor Koz, his mother, his brother, the principal and his two good friends, Billy and Ty, were interviewed.

The principal thought that Alexander probably had a great future in the American Embassy at Warsaw once he graduated.

His mother described herself as being very supportive of her

son's plight.

He was also flown for tests at John Hopkins Hospital, Baltimore's *only* redeeming feature, gratis, but no conclusive answers came from their efforts either.

Alexander began to feel the effects of being famous. He had always been in the habit of wearing a blue bandanna around his neck; now, dozens of boys began to wear blue bandannas around *their* necks. His little mannerisms of snapping his fingers of both hands followed by pointing them like guns to somebody or something of interest, spread to the whole school. As to the girls, he now began to be constantly cornered and waylaid in and out of school. Cassie, who now tried to get back in his good graces, found herself having to forcefully elbow out other girls if she even wanted to get so much as close to him. As to having a date with him, he was booked solid for the next three weeks. She threw such a fit of rage that she bit a scarf of hers to shreds.

Several television shows invited him to appear, along with a Polish-English interpreter, for which he was paid very good money. Proposals of marriage from beautiful girls throughout the United States, Canada, England and even Poland that he had never met were forwarded to him, along with pretty photographs of themselves. Alexander showed these letters and photos around to his friends and girlfriends in amazement. Cassie had another fit of rage and bit one of her blouses to ribbons. While driving her car to school, she tried several times to run over some of Alexander's girlfriends.

Billy and Ty found that association with fame can be just as advantageous as being famous oneself. There is a sort of reflected glory. They were known as "Alex's buddies," and jokingly as "Alex's bodyguards," and some girls found *them* enticing and they, too, had many dates.

But, as someone, somewhere, said, all good things must come to

an end.

A teenage girl in Hazlehurst, Mississippi, found herself suddenly speaking Hungarian.

This was quickly followed by the discovery of a twelve year old boy in Key West, who began to speak fluent Lithuanian and another boy of Alexander's age in Salina, Kansas, who now began to speak Armenian.

A boy in Provo, Utah, in mid-conversation, began to speak Norwegian. He was also a teenager. So was another boy in Missoula, Montana, who began to speak Macedonian.

Twin girls in Tulsa both began speaking Flemish.

In Quito, Ecuador, a girl began to, overnight, speak Tibetan. In Lima, three boys, at the same time, each began to speak Sundanese, Xhosa and Makasar. In Pinar del Rio, a girl began speaking a language that could not be traced to any known language; some thought that it was a dead language while others simply said that it was gibberish, an attempt on her part at attracting attention. In Buenos Aires, two cases each began speaking Tagalog.

"Why these languages?" Doctor Koz wondered. "Why not the main languages?" By this, he meant French, German, Spanish, Russian, Chinese or Arabic. But, this line of investigation was cut short with the discovery of two German speaking Koz Syndromes, one in Calgary, Canada, and the other in St. Augustine, Florida and a Spanish-speaking Koz Syndrome in Ottawa.

In the meantime, a boy woke up in Topeka speaking Hawaiian.

About a couple of additional cases were eventually reported from Europe, from a boy in Narvik, Norway, who woke up speaking fluent English, to a girl in Kiev who spoke Greek, to a boy in Helsinki who began to speak Gaelic. In Osaka, Japan a

girl spoke in an unrecognizable tongue until a scholar realized she was speaking in Latin.

Not everywhere was benign curiosity the mood towards the cases. In Saudi Arabia, a girl who began speaking Spanish was publicly stoned to death by the religious police. In Cairo, a boy who began speaking Russian was stabbed to death on a fatwa issued by a mullah and carried out by his followers. In Tehran, a Shiite imam ordered that two girls who were found to have Koz Syndrome and were speaking Cantonese and English be hacked to death.

The numbers remained small. All adjusted successfully, as long as they did not live in a Muslim country.

In the end, this is what happened:

Neither the etiology of Koz Syndrome, nor its cure, was ever found. They all learned their native tongue as a second language.

As to Alexander, he, too, learnt to speak English much as you learn a foreign language, so that he came to fluently speak both Polish and English equally well. No, Alexander's popularity did not disappear with the advent of these new cases. For one thing, in a continent of 300-million plus people, Koz Syndrome remained a rarity. To be sure, his uniqueness did decline somewhat as a result, but Alexander found, like all famous people find (and infamous people as well), that the aroma of fame lingers on for a very, very long time.

He took the principal's offhand remark very seriously and pursued a career in the State Department and in a few years was actually appointed ambassador to Poland, the youngest ambassador ever in history (this was a radical departure from the usual practice of Presidential candidates selling ambassadorships to individuals with no qualifications whatsoever, but who have given great financial contributions

to their election campaign; it was actually a shrewd, popular move on the part of the new President). There, he found that, by one of those odd curiosities of human nature, the Polish people knew of him, so that he found doors open to him, from Gdansk to Krakow and was a major force in friendly Polish-American relations, not only because of his previous fame, but also because of his innate intelligence, sensitivity, sense of humor and his proverbial honesty. As luck would have it, it all came very useful a few years later when there was an international crisis involving half a dozen countries, including Poland and the United States.

He never forgot his friends, Billy and Ty, and they became his well-paid assistants in the Polish capital and they, in turn, discharged their duties well.

His brother, Bobby, started a business in Biloxi, Mississippi, right around the time of the second casino building boom, wherein he did very well, indeed.

His mother, prior to Alex turning eighteen, had sold the movie rights of their experience to a Hollywood film company. She did not like the way that she was portrayed in the movie and, during the movie's premier, went out to her car, brought back a tire iron into the movie theater and proceeded to beat senseless both the director and the actress who portrayed her. They had to be rushed to the hospital and were put in the Intensive Care Unit, where they slowly recovered.

As to Cassie, she ended up in a mental institution, where she continues to pose a problem with her incurable habit of tearing clothes and bed linen to pieces with her teeth. She walks around with cloth fibers visibly sticking to her teeth.

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