

**PENSIONER WHO FLEW TO POLAND FOR SURGERY**

**RETURNED FULL OF FAITH**

## Hip op that became pilgrimage of grace

Kind and caring: Margaret pictured with a member of staff from the Polish hospital



■ By **GERALDINE DURRANT**

**AFTER suffering from polymyalgia for ten years, 65-year-old Margaret Stevens is no stranger to pain.**

And she's never been afraid of a challenge either.

Widowed young, Margaret eventually remarried and became a first-time mum in her early forties. Her career has included work as a translator and as a teacher involved in 'special needs' and home education. And at 60, when most of her contemporaries were quitting the job market for a quieter life, Margaret used her teaching experience to launch her own business, supplying reading materials and course work for gifted children.

But last winter, when she began to suffer crippling pain in her left hip, Margaret knew that she would not be able to carry on. Travelling by train to London from her Buckinghamshire home was increasingly difficult,

and as the months went on, and Margaret became less and less mobile, the effort left her exhausted.

She was referred to Stoke Mandeville for treatment but by the time doctors there had diagnosed the problem, Margaret was almost bent double, and looked - in the words of her husband Geoff - more like a 90-year-old than an active business woman 25 years younger.

The good news about her eventual diagnosis was that a hip replacement would restore her quality of life. The bad was that Margaret would have to wait several months to see a consultant on the NHS, and then would have to go on an 18 month-long waiting list for the operation.

The prospect of spending another two years in pain appalled her, so Margaret decided to explore the alternatives. A private hip replacement operation in the UK costs up to £10,000, but Margaret found out that the same operation in Poland would cost £4,000 less.

"I knew of someone who had been to Poland to have a knee replace-

ment operation. She had nothing but praise for the care she had received, so I made up my mind not to wait," Margaret recalled.

Polish medical staff in the UK examined Margaret before she left, and door-to-door travel arrangements meant she would be collected from home, taken to the hospital and delivered back to her own front door four weeks later.

The operation itself was to take place at a hospital in Krakow, and would be followed by a month-long period of convalescence and intensive physiotherapy to get her walking again.

The idea of spending a month alone in hospital, in a country where she didn't speak the language, should have been a daunting one, Margaret admits. But from the moment she made up her mind to go, Margaret felt entirely at peace with the idea.

### Adventure

And when the taxi arrived to take her to the airport, Margaret waved goodbye to her husband and son, placed herself in the hands of God, and decided to accept whatever adventure was in store for her.

"As a Catholic, going to Poland was brilliant. From the moment I arrived, I felt cherished and cared for - although when I told admission staff I was Catholic, the nurse said: 'Oh, I didn't realise there were Catholics in England.'"

Margaret's operation was handled by internationally-renowned surgeon Professor Ranczuk, and she felt confident she was in safe hands.

But it wasn't just the medical care which made such an impression on her, it was the kindness of the staff and their scrupulous attention to every aspect of patient care from ward hygiene to food.

A priest came to visit on a daily basis, there was a crucifix by her bed, and once her operation was over, Margaret was



Haven of faith: where Margaret stayed in Krakow

able to attend Mass with her fellow patients.

"I can only describe the atmosphere in the hospital as spiritual. If you wanted to see a nurse or a doctor, one came straight away and the pastoral care was first-class. The nurses were kind and took their time, and nothing was too much trouble."

The language difficulty was overcome with laughter and a crib sheet which allowed patients to ask for anything from painkillers to fresh laundry.

And although the idea of a month-long convalescence so far from home seemed a lonely one, Margaret was delighted to be visited by a local English-speaking couple and a former au pair.

And for the first time in her busy life, Margaret discovered that having some time away from her family, friends and the demands of her working life gave her time to reflect on other values.

"Being in hospital was very much like going on a retreat, and I realised that I had been given a rare chance to get closer to God. I was in good hands, and I had nothing to worry about."

Instead of a life crowded with the daily demands of living, Margaret found time to immerse herself in the books and cassettes she had chosen carefully for her trip, and to reflect on her life.

"I had to spend several days in bed after the operation, and I was in some pain. My world had suddenly shrunk to what I

could reach with my arms or my eyes - my books, tapes and the crucifix.

"Having always been active, I found myself helpless and I had a great sense that sometimes we need to find ourselves in a position where the only thing to do is to throw ourselves completely into the hands of God, because we can't do anything else."

### Mobile

Thanks to the after-care she received, Margaret is now back home and fully mobile again.

Regular follow-up visits, which take place in the UK, have monitored her progress, and she is now able to walk, swim and climb stairs without a second thought.

The spiritual benefits of her month-long 'exile' remain with her too, which is why she decided to share her story with fellow Catholics.

"The idea of travelling abroad for medical care is one which a lot of people would find worrying, but I felt valued and cherished in an atmosphere which shared my Catholic beliefs.

"I have undergone a lot of pain over the last ten years, but I have always tried to stay independent, and my health problems had never before left me so helpless.

"It was only when I came to the end of my tether I realised how dependent we are on God - and that was an experience I will never forget."