

Agnieszka Paruszevska ("AP") born 13th October 1991

Interview with Judy Caine ("JC"), 20th August 2018

JC: When did you come to Corby and why?



AP: Next November I will have been here for two years, which is quite unbelievable because my first plan was to come here for only a year.

JC: What made you come?

AP: Well, my friends were here and I think many Polish people will say the same we are kind of a gathering people and we are going where we have someone. I was working quite hard in Poland for the last couple of years before I came to Britain, and I wanted to stop, calm down, think about myself, make some plans for the future, and because my best friend with her husband was in Corby, I decided

I wanted to come to them. It wasn't so much about Britain as it was about them at the beginning to be honest, but as well because it was Britain I new I could improve my English and it was one of my dreams to become an English teacher, to travel around the world and teach English. But because I had no language skills I thought that would be impossible but when I came here I found it's about being able to talk to people and use the language and when you are not learning at school and you are learning in life, things stay in your head. There are loads of benefits apart from friends here but that was my main reason.

JC: If I may say so, your English is excellent.

AP: Thank you. I put loads of effort to get it to that point.

JC: So, when you came to stay with your friends and you started to learn English, what were your hopes for your time here?

AP: Well, I wanted to get into British culture, to get to know them [*the people*] and soon after I got here I realised that my great grandfather from Torito [*in Krakow*] during the Second World War actually joined the Polish army that was in Britain, the Anders' Army. So he was fighting for Britain in the Second World War, and I thought 'Wow!', so there is a kind of a root here for me. So I wanted to get to know the people, the culture, because I'd heard loads of stereotypes about British people, we have loads of jokes, probably about every nation, there is loads of jokes [*laughs*]. But yes, I wanted to get to know the people. So, actually I avoided Polish people here, apart from my best friend and her husband, I was avoiding all the Polish people here and trying to get into the British society as soon as possible. So, that's why I joined the gallery and they got me involved with the Deep Roots Tall Trees project, and I was just running away, and wanted to get involved with as many creative arts things with people from here, local people, to get to know them.

[General Anders' Arm: The formation of the Polish community in UK was the result of population displacements, brought about by World War II. The war itself started in Poland in September 1939, with a coordinated attack by the armies of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. In Soviet-occupied eastern Poland, the Soviets almost immediately embarked on a policy of genocide and ethnic cleansing. Prisoners of War were massacred at Katyn Forest, and nearly 2 million civilians were deported to Siberia and Kazakhstan. Within 18 months half the deportees were dead. The German invasion of the Soviet Union in July 1941 forced the Soviets to seek Western assistance, and resulted in the release of all surviving Polish detainees. 114,000 joined the Polish Armed Forces in the West, commanded in the Soviet Union by General Wladyslaw Anders, whose great historical achievement was to evacuate his army and its civilian dependents to safety in Iran. They then fought alongside the British in the Middle East and were victorious at the battle of Monte Cassino in Italy, where they remained for some time after the war, unable to return to Soviet-occupied Poland.]

JC: So, how did you get involved in the Polish Supplementary School?

AP: Ah well, that was quite unexpected. One of the teachers called me and asked me if I could teach for a while because they were struggling for teachers. There were not enough teachers of Polish language here. Because it's not actually a well-paid thing, you are just getting a small amount of expenses for petrol and it's a Saturday so there are not so many adults that would like to give their time. People are having families, so it's not so easy. So they are struggling all the time for teachers. I think a friend said something to someone and they rang me.

JC: And you're teaching the young people Polish?

AP: Yes, we are teaching kids who came here when they were very little, or they were born here, about Polish language, Polish culture. You know, sometimes they come back home to Poland but kids prefer to speak English because they live here and always they chose the language where they are. So I think the parents just want to push them a little bit more so they can speak the language to their grandparents and the family when they are in Poland, you know, when they go for a holiday or the parents are perhaps hoping to go back home one day. They are just trying to push the kids as much as possible.

JC: You mentioned culture? How do you define Polish Culture?

AP: For me, it was always variety. Because I'm coming from a part of Poland where freedom and art were very important. Gdansk is the home of Solidarity, Lech Walesa, and I feel you can still feel in my home city this freedom spirit - it is in the air and there is loads of artists. There is this huge theatre festival in Poland going across the country with all the street artists with all the different cultures, so it's very vibrant. I would say a very colourful culture. But on the other hand there is a part of Poland that is very closed and we like to keep each other very close and we don't want to get too far from our safety box. So, you can find all the colours a little bit everywhere and I think that's the most defining thing because Poland went through a lot. I would say that people are very self-protective and you can feel it when you are watching Polish movies and theatre plays and everything and then if anything is breaking that safeness then it is very visible, so I think that is the strongest part.

JC: What is important to you to pass on to the younger generation?

AP: I think it is really important to know your roots, and I was thinking a lot about this as a teacher and as a person who's really into working with kids. I am a fan of freedom and I was always teaching kids to express themselves, how to feel their freedom and power. But to be fully free you need to know yourself because otherwise you will just follow your instincts without even noticing them and you will be a slave to yourself and your needs. So, it was always important to pass that knowledge to

the kids to teach them what is Poland. So they could choose how close they want to stay to their home country or how far they want to get from it. Because knowing the point A is actually helping you to define the point B – where you want to get to.

I guess that's the best answer I can give - to know your roots and be free to spread your branches as far as you can.

JC and AP together [laughing]: "DEEP ROOTS TALL TREES"

AP: Exactly.

JC: Were you ever involved in the DRTT choir or just the Dancetheatre?

AP: Just the Dancetheatre.

JC: Ah, I've seen you dance and you're very free in your dance. Did you study dance in Gdansk?

AP: Never, and I've actually been diagnosed with balance problems. I've always been very closed, and it was actually through theatre when I opened myself and learned how to be free. So far, I can manage to be like that on stage. Because stage is like a safe-box so I can be safe and very free and crazy on a stage. I'm not so sure I could get to that point without the protection of being an artist at the minute. It's like a cloak, you're an artist and you can cover yourself, and it doesn't really matter if the stage is on the street or you have people around you who are totally unprepared for it but as long as I have it in my head that I'm an artist now, I can be whatever I want. I've never studied apart from the group I found here (DRTT) which is really amazing – I never expected a theatre group working with such open methods in Corby.

JC: You're going to be going back to Poland in October, what is the biggest thing you are going to take back to Poland from here?

AP: Respect for others and kindness. This is the thing I absolutely love when you are on the street in Britain. The kindness of people. I know it's not absolutely honest kindness, I am aware of that and I've seen it many times, but the way people clash with each other in a random situation on the street is just amazing. Not clashing with each other in a negative way but interacting with each other – that's a better word. It's just beautiful, the way they act with each other, even unconscious procedures – on the bus, in the street, the way of saying sorry even when you are just crossing lines with somebody. It's just like, "OK, I'm not here to offend you.", this kind of attitude, you know.

JC: How does that differ from Poland?

AP: It's really different from Poland, because in Poland you could say they are really open and smiley but it works different. It's a very subtle difference. I have to think how to describe it properly. Many people, Polish people, will say that Poland is a very grumpy country, with lots of grumpy people, and that is true but you will see loads of kindness. But you will see especially old people, and you can't blame them really because of communists. I think communism was a kind of system that was teaching people really wrong emotional things - like don't trust each other, don't trust your neighbours, don't trust people on the street. Everyone will try to take everything they can from you – you have to protect yourself. So you can see many older people who just don't want to speak to people around, "I deserve to have that seat in the bar. It's my duty. So you should just stand up and

walk away". You know this kind of attitude because I still feel like I have to protect myself, because everyone around can hurt me. We still have loads of that in Poland.

JC: There's an English saying, "innocent till proven guilty" I don't know if maybe it's something to do with this attitude because I'm English, but we do tend to always "give people the benefit of the doubt" here, rather than think something negative first?

AP: Yes, I think so, I've seen it many times, especially on the street when you are meeting people randomly on the street, strangers, there is not so many arguments on the street because someone just did something to me and I'm going to show that person what a big ego I've got, and you can see this situation sometimes in Poland when say someone just passes someone and hits there elbow and an argument starts around that. Although you will still see lots of hospitality and kindness, especially towards foreigners.

JC: Well, I have to say every Polish person I have met in Corby has been utterly charming.

[Brief chat about Corby Big Film Week and the Polish Film Club.]

OK, if I was to go to Poland and I wanted to learn about the culture, what would you tell me to go and see or to go and do?

AP: Hmm. You mean places or cities?

JC: Can we stick to dance and music for now because of the Deep Roots Tall Trees project? I know that's a big question because of all the different styles, but what would you say is traditional and what is now, and are there any cross-overs?

AP: Definitely in Warsaw, the National Polish Theatre is definitely the place that is making the biggest shows as the capital. They are doing the most modern things at the minute, which are a sort of combination of old times and modern ideas. So, I would say definitely about theatre and dance all the theatres across the main cities. Almost every city in Poland has worth seeing theatre, to be honest, and you will find loads of dance theatre sessions over there, loads of classic performance, even Polish Opera is something that is happening almost everywhere. We are still into that culture so it is really difficult to give you just a couple of places to see. In the main theatres you will find all the variations of theatre and dance performances.

JC: Are there any songs or dances you remember from your childhood?

AP: There is. Quite a lot. There is a dance called Polonez [*Polish word for Polonaise*], which is a dance performed by all the students at the end of High School. It is a traditional thing at the end of High School, 100 days before the end of exams, at the end of High School, we have a ball for all the students, and all the students from school (or just the best students from the school) are chosen (it depends on the size of the place they will hire) they will all go and dance. You will see many examples of YouTube for that, the best and the worst and it is still a traditional thing that is still very likely in Poland. From my childhood we used to sing loads of silly kids' songs and I realised later that they were actually folk songs. For example, Gdansk was claimed as the capital of a region called Kashubia. They have separate language. It's not really because it's just like north and people from that region north and Gdansk don't really like each other. But officially it was claimed as the capital

because it was the biggest city. I used to learn their traditional hymn. I don't even think I can remember all the words but it was like:

SINGS: Kaszubski Hymn

[Only reference found online to the Kasubiki Hymn is the national anthem of Kashubia - also known as the Kaszubski Hymn – a song “Zemia Rodnô” by Jan Trepczyk (1907-1989), who is also the author of music.]

The Hymn is going with the most different words between Kashubski and the Polish Language. It's part of the Slavic languages. It is not a dialect. It's a separate language. They have loads of common words. They use more or less the same sounds, but it's a different language. Although people from Kashubia will speak Polish language fluently always, but you can tell they have a kind of accent. But they will speak Polish fluently.

JC: Do you pass anything on that you learned in Poland as a child the children in England that have not been to Poland?

AP: I did. Just a bit of stories and just some atmosphere. But I didn't work at the Polish school for very long. It was just 2 months. So I didn't have so many chances to pass anything big for those kids.

But we did a couple of lessons about the Polish Constitution because that was a big thing, it was the first constitution in Europe. But soon after that Poland disappeared from the maps for over 100 years. But we have been trying to show kids that Poland is a very open country and I think Poland is the only country in the world that has never had laws against homosexuals and never had laws against other religions. I know Poland does not appear like that at the minute but we never had official law against people who are LGBT. Which now in Poland we are fighting for those people because of the government and the Catholic atmosphere are just closing people's minds. It's a bit strange, but I know it's not working together.

JC: That's something to be really proud of *[the no laws against LGBT and the openness]*.

AP: I think so, yes. We used to be a really open and multicultural country with loads of people from different religions, Muslims, you know, absolutely open, because there were so many paths going through Poland from Europe to Asia, and the shipyards in Gdansk, with all the ships coming from so many different countries, it kept people open-minded. So this is definitely something to pass on to kids and I was trying to show them that we are definitely an open-minded country and it's great if we all get that back again because it's about the youth to do it. Because I know that because of the war, because of the previous history, the last generations they become a bit closed minded, but it's mostly because of the things they went through. So, it would be so great if the youth would travel around the world and bring this open mind again to Poland, because I think that it's really needed.

But, you asked about my childhood and I can remember my Great Grandma. She was a person who lived with 12 brothers and sisters in a house built of clay. They were a really poor family of farmers living on the other side of Poland where I am now. She met my Great Grandfather and they moved to Gdansk together and they built family and built a house with their own hands, and my family is still living in that house. It wasn't the easiest thing to buy land during the communist times, or to buy a house. You had to prove why you had money and from where and it wasn't fully yours. So, my Great Grandfather was working in a place where they built trams, they did servicing of trams and

everything. He was not one of the highest position workers but one day the company was giving out land, that's what the socialists did, how they dealt with those things. Management and those high up they would give plots of land, just for a house and a garden. My Great Grandfather, wasn't entitled to that by my Great Grandmother, she went through a rough childhood so she knew how to fight for herself and she went to the office of the guy who was doing the ground sharing and she actually fainted in front of him. She was crying, there were some crazy stories, she was throwing things. And that's how my family got the land.

JC: This is clearly where you get your dramaticism from. I think I'd like your Great Grandma.

AP: I liked her too. She actually passed away when I was nine so I got to know her quite well. I was the first great granddaughter in the family. She was dreaming about a girl, and I came along. Then there were two sons. But, I was her favourite and she used to give me money for ice cream and my mother would make me a meal and she would say, "Oh come on, I have a second one for you." So it wasn't the worst. She was just giving all her love.

JC: You mentioned food. I don't know much about Polish food. Is there a Polish national dish?

AP: Well, the easiest answer is dumplings. That is a very Polish dish. We call them Russian dumplings. They are made with potato and white cheese. You don't have this type of cheese here – well, I've never seen it in grocery stores or supermarkets. You can only get it in Europe or in Polish shops. It's a little bit like feta but it's not salty. So, you mix them together and then you have dumplings. And then you have Bigos, another thing, a cabbage thing, quite heavy.



[Bigos is considered by many to be the Polish national dish. Traditionally, there was a pot with some bigos cooking almost all the time. There is no strict recipe and variations are endless. Hunters use to come back from a hunt and would put the meat they brought back in the stew, making it a different stew every time. One particularity of this dish is the use of sauerkraut and the sour flavor it gives to the stew. The original recipe calls for kielbasa sausage, but substitute with another kind of sausage if you can't find a good quality kielbasa. All the meats used can be substituted for what you have available, it's the spirit of this stew.]

AP: But, I think the most traditional thing for me that you will find on every Polish table at least every Sunday, if not every day, is mashed potato, cucumber, salad and chicken breast in breadcrumbs. This is the most traditional thing and the easiest meal that my mother would do every other day, or so it seemed.

JC: And what about deserts?

AP: Yeah, cakes, Polish cakes. I think we are good at that.

[Brief chat here about a type of soft squidgy apple sponge cake and plums in dark chocolate.]

AP: We have loads of traditional Polish cakes and things like that, cakes for Christmas, gingerbread and things like that.

JC: What are your Christmas traditions, because our Deep Roots Tall Trees Sharing is happening the week before on 16th December?

AP: Well it's a family Christmas and we celebrate more on the Christmas Eve. And there is actually two and a half days of celebration that starts on the Christmas Eve. I think most of the people will start by decorating the Christmas tree in the morning, or if parents are working it might happen the day or a couple of days before - but mostly on the Christmas Eve. Then the family will gather for a huge meal; tradition says that when the first star appears, then the meal can start, but it depends on people's abilities of course and their work. But the tradition was to start when the first star appears in the sky. There is always 12 meals on the table. We used to put a bit of hay under the tablecloth out of respect for Jesus who was lying on the hay.

JC: So, always 12 different dishes on the table?

AP: Yes, all without meat – all vegetarian. It's a day of fasting. Next day you can eat meat but on that day we are fasting. Well, of course we are not fasting completely, just without meat. You can have fish, and I think carp is the most traditional fish at the minute, for Christmas, because during the communism, the last 100 years, it was the easiest fish to get so it became traditional fish, but it's not a long tradition. So we always have carp on the table, and I remember from my childhood having a live carp in the bath, swimming there, or even two or three, and then Grandma's were always coming around and *[makes chopping sound and action]* chopping their heads' off and preparing them in jelly - carp in jelly.

Or it was a Greek fish with loads of vegetables. You will generally find loads of vegetables on the Christmas table in Poland but they are usually cooked and processed in some way. Like fresh salad, the dumplings or cabbage and peas which is another traditional thing.

JC: Is that boiled cabbage or sauerkraut?

AP: Boiled cabbage with peas and loads of herbs. It depends always on the house. We have also vegetable salad, which is another thing, always cooked, cut vegetables with cucumber in brine and apples and with mayo *[mayonnaise]*.

And we always have a spare table set, plate and cup and everything, for a stranger that might come in the night. There is always one set more than the people, or there should be! And we are always unpacking gifts just after the meal. We are not waiting till morning. It was always Santa Claus that would be bringing them on the morning or Christmas Eve and then by the night kids could open them after the meal.

In my family, even though we are not the most Christian family, we used to always read the Bible before sitting down at the table. It was always the oldest person in the family that was present that day would read the part of the Bible about Jesus being born – the Christmas story.

And then we have this kind of a Christian bread, the one you have at the end of a service.

JC: The wafers?

AP: It might be the wafers, I don't know. It's flat and crispy and everyone has a bit of it and we all share it and we all make wishes as we are cracking it and then we go into the meal.

[Brief chat about wafers, bread, waffles etc.]

AP: Actually churches give them for free in Poland, for Christmas, or you can donate some money. Some places are selling them also of course but mainly they are getting them for free and all the Grandmas are bringing their own and they are all over the place and there are always too many, and at the end of the meal all the kids are eating them. There's not any flavour. It's kind of a neutral thing so everyone will like it actually because there is nothing you can have against it. It's more about people coming together, and you taking a bit of their waffle and them taking a bit of yours, eating them and saying wishes for the next year. So I remember it as always the nicest and the most embarrassing moment of Christmas Eve. To come to all the people you don't see very often and tell them what you wish for them.



[Oplatek (wafer): Its name comes from the Latin word 'oblatum' and means 'offering'. This is nothing but a thin piece of baked wheat flour. Sharing of bread has its roots in pagan traditions and with time, it passed permanently to the Christian traditions. Today Poles share oplatek before the Christmas Eve supper exchanging Christmas greetings and forgiving. Everyone holds a piece of oplatek, and sharing means that when somebody wishes you, you have to brake a small piece of his/her wafer off and eat it. It continues until all of you gave each of the rest their best wishes. Face to face, braking off the oplatek.

Then Poles sit down to the dinner at peace and with pure hearts. Oplatek tradition is also known in Lithuania and Slovakia.]

JC: What do you do on Christmas Day? Do you have a Turkey or different meats?

AP: We have different meats and we eat what is left over from the day before. In my family we used to travel between Grandmas. We'd have breakfast with one Grandma, dinner with the other one and then supper coming back to the first. Somewhere in between, we'd always go for a walk somewhere or sliding in the hills, which I loved as a kid. Because normally winter in Poland, when I was younger, winter was very snowy, but now we seem to have snow more in January/February, it's not so much in December. People are laughing that now we have Easter Christmas – that Easter is more wintery than Christmas itself. But, from the childhood I remember I would go sledging at Christmas time and long walks because we would be so full of food. My Dad would always be the one to say, "C'mon, let's go for a walk". I think most Polish families do that.

JC: I only have one more question I'd like to ask you, unless there is something you want to tell me I've not asked you about. Is there a big sense of community in Corby amongst the Polish, because there are quite a large number of Polish people here? How does that work?

AP: I'm not sure if I can really answer that question because I've never got into that community.

JC: Hmm, yes, you did say you were trying to focus more on the English idiosyncrasies.

AP: I did always and I feel it's a huge shame that the Polish community is not so open. And I can see in Poland, something that is perhaps the same everywhere. Polish people have one positive and negative thing at the same time. When we are together we are always fighting and bitching about each other, quite a lot, but if there is any enemy or a problem facing any one of use then we are the first ones to protect each other – really.

JC: Solidarity big time.

AP: *[Laughs]* Huge solidarity. So Polish websites and Facebook in Corby are very lively to be honest and there are loads of people asking for advice and help and there are loads of answers. Not all of those answers are polite. Some people say, "Oh, you should know that." or "Why are you not doing that?" Many of them are a bit teasing or even a bit sometimes bullying. Although you will get a huge reaction and there will also be many people who like to help and there are always loads of helpful voices.

JC: That's interesting because I've had that said to me about the Scottish community as well, and I think you get that with any group of people who either migrate, or are displaced or emigrate to a different area, they will always be very welcoming, because they know what it is like to go to a new place and they will always look after their own when the chips are down. I think that's a very human thing. Maybe I'm wrong?

AP: I agree with you and I can feel it's about all immigrants. Because when you look at it, when the people are growing, they are gaining knowledge that is the easiest and strongest, when we are little. Everything we knew when we were kids appears as the safest, the easiest to be surrounded with. So, when you are travelling abroad you are trying to get as many things to make the situation easier for you. So, you are seeking for the people from your own country, for the food, for the products, the traditions, everything to make it a little bit easier for the brain because you are surrounded by all the new stuff...

JC: To be back in your comfort zone...

AP: Yes...

JC: Yo be back in your little box, I think you called it earlier...

AP: Exactly *[laughs]*! I think it is like that for all immigrants, as you said, how the human brain works. We just can't stand to have everything new because that is actually like learning the world from the very beginning. And even if England is still a country of humans there is loads of very subtle differences that you face every day and it's for every culture like this. Just details, the first choice that people will do intuitively would be different from a Polish person to a British person.

JC: Is there anything you'd like to say that I've not asked you about?

AP: I don't know. I think that's covered it all.

[JC thanks and ends interview.]