

**Malgorzata Nikodem (Gosia) (“MN”) born 16<sup>th</sup> October 1972**

**Interview with Judy Caine (“JC”), 31<sup>st</sup> October 2018**

**JC:** What is it about Polish names? Everyone I’ve spoken to has a long name and short name. What is that about?

**MN:** I don’t know. I think it’s just the language features in English you have a few names that you can make short but in our language there are many names you can make short and many variations of one name. It’s quite nice too because you can express if you like someone, if you don’t like someone, by the way you say the name. It’s giving the emotions as well.



**JC:** Tell me how you came to be in Corby?

**MN:** My first town in England was Wellingborough. I lived there for 2 years, but because I was a single parent, I applied for a house through the council and I got a house from a housing association and it was in Corby, so I moved.

**JC:** What made you move to England from Poland?

**MN:** It’s not really a pleasant story because it was after a divorce and I was really desperate to leave. Because I had some friends here, in Wellingborough, and they are the godparents of my daughter, I just asked if we could come and stay with them for a few weeks with them. They said okay but we can’t guarantee to you any job or anything. You’ll have to sort that yourself. So, I said, “Fine. That’s okay.” and I just came. I didn’t speak any English at that time (2009). I came to Wellingborough and I found a job pretty quickly and one month later I found a room because my daughter came to join me. I came here late September and start to work on 21<sup>st</sup> October and a month later my daughter came to join me. My friends only had a small house and they had a son as well and I didn’t want to be a burden with them. You know, I still wanted to be friends.

**JC:** How old was your daughter when you came over?

**MN:** She was 13. She went to school in Wellingborough. It was hard. She was learning Polish in Poland since she was six, but she would come back from Poland and say Mum I don’t understand a thing. It’s completely different. They will teach you literature and all that but there is not really ‘live’ language, if you know what I mean.

**JC:** How did you find living in England? Was it different to what you thought it would be?

**MN:** It was funny because in the past, when I was 22, I was in Germany for half a year. I studied German for two years but again it wasn’t really the live language, but I found that quite difficult and I expected the same here. It was hard. I expected quite a hard life. But, unexpectedly, it was quite easy. The life is so easy here. I said to my friend, “Where is the catch?” because even if you don’t speak the language you can get a job here, you can fill in all the papers because you have help from the Government, from people who already live here. It’s just easy. It’s much easier and for me I think as well the language is how you think. You know, every language has its own way of thinking. You have to think in the language, its own traits and it reflects the behaviour and I think English people

are more laid back. They have time for everything. Even if you are late for work you think, it's only five minutes it's not the end of the world. But, in Poland it's very different. Everyone is always in a rush, everything has to be done. And it took me about half a year to get used to it. Even on the road, the driving. The style of driving in Poland, it's like in London, quite aggressive, very in a rush all the time. But the rest of England, everybody has time.

And I think when I started to learn English I had to learn to think in English because you can't really translate everything. For me it was strange because you were talking backwards for me.

**JC:** So, you had your house, a job, your daughter here. How long was it before you decided you were happy, and you wanted to stay, and what were your hopes for your daughter, your future?

**MN:** In the beginning for me it was just survive and see what happens. It took me about three years to have my own house. Well, it was not my own but a place where I could live forever, and a car. My daughter had a good school and it took me about three years to stand on my legs (get settled). I left everything in Poland. I came here with one suitcase, my daughter, and borrowed money and no language skills. It took me three years to learn the language to be able to communicate and get a decent job. Because during this time I started in a re-packaging company in Burton Latimer. It was night shift and it was cold packing fruit and veg. They paid minimum wage and it's quite a chill environment and night shift was horrible for me. But standing for 12 hours I decided, "No, I'm not going to do this." and I had to think what to do to get a better job with decent money. There was a lady at the agency (she used to drive the bus to pick people up and drop them off [at work]) and she was a hairdresser and she was cutting my hair and we were chatting and she said to me that they were looking for a new driver because she was going to resign to start her own business in her home and I just said. "Maybe I can drive?" I already had a car and I'd learned to drive in England. She said yes, but you have to know English. And so I just forgot about that job and didn't think about it anymore. And about two or three weeks later another lady from the agency called me and said, "Gosia. In 2 days' time you have an interview with Peter, the boss, about the job - driving the mini-bus." I said. "What! I thought I had to speak English?" I could understand, just the speaking was difficult. Anyway, I got the job and I did it for about two years. But it got to the point when it got to be 24/7 and again, I was thinking, what can I do to get better job and better money. Because my daughter was growing up and she needed some things. Actually, I checked online, what kind of jobs I could do around Corby, and very popular was the warehouse job and because I didn't speak the language I couldn't really think of anything else. And there were a lot of jobs for forklift drivers. And I thought it's quite an easy job, just operate machine and why men doing it and getting better money. So, I did the licence and started the job. It was quite hard to get a job because it was not just the course that they wanted you to do, they wanted some experience as well. But finally, I asked in agency if they could give me some forklift driving job instead of bus driving but they were quite reluctant. So, I left and started forklift driving job through another agency in 2011. It was quite hard to find a job in 2011 and I was registered with 15 agencies and working through 5 or 6 agencies.

**JC:** What did you do in Poland before you came to England?

**MN:** Just before I came to the UK I was working as an insurance seller for quite a big company.

**JC:** What are you doing in England now, are you still fork-lift driving?

**MN:** No, I did that job for four, five years, something like that, but because of my health conditions it was time to leave. My daughter started uni and I thought it was a good time to change. I actually couldn't do forklift driving anymore because I have osteoarthritis and it's very painful and I can't do it anymore. So, I thought, "What can I actually do?" So, I checked the jobs online and my English of course was much better than in the beginning, so I found that children's support/care worker was quite a demanding job but I thought I'd apply and I applied in 2 agencies for this job. And I got the job through one agency, but it was not a good job. They did not pay regularly and there was always some pay missing. So I moved agency and after one month I got a fulltime job in one house and I work in Kettering now as a residential children's support worker. But, I don't want to do this for the rest of my life because it's quite draining. It's not physically hard but it is mentally draining because you have to deal with young people from different houses whose life isn't that good.

**JC:** You've actually gone back to college, haven't you? What are you studying?

**MN:** Yes. It's a new course at Tresham – Creative Art and Design. It covers four areas: creative art, graphic design, media and photography. It's a one-year course and after that I would like to go to agency HND in Graphic Design.

**JC:** Are you enjoying it?

**MN:** Yes, because I was always into creative jobs like drawing, refurbishing furniture, painting. I like creating something from nothing and things like that and I was thinking that because of my condition – osteoarthritis - I have to think about the future. I don't want to rely on benefits. I have to think what I can do if I can't get up from bed. Graphic design would be good because you can work from home and you don't need to go every day into the office. You can go once or twice a month.

**JC:** Can I take you back to Poland? What do you miss about Poland?

**MN:** Of course my family and friends but, everybody went somewhere. They went to cousins to different countries and actually they are all over the world. Only my close family are still in my home town – Klodzko, near the Czech Republic.

**JC:** Did you bring your daughter Agnieszka up there as well before you came to England?

**MN:** Yes.

**JC:** Have you and Agnieszka bought any Polish traditions with you to England?

**MN:** Actually the most important days are Easter and Christmas time. In our country it's time for family and of course lots of food.

**JC:** What happens at Easter?

**MN:** It's similar to here. Eggs, bunnies, chocolate, things like that, but as well we have some breakfast, mainly eggs and sour soup. It depends where you come from.

**JC:** So do you put the eggs in the sour soup?

**MN:** Yes, you can put the eggs in the soup. It's hard to explain *[laughs]*. Some people eat the eggs separately, and sausage – fried sausage. I like it that way.

*[Żurek, or żur is a soup made of homemade or store bought sourdough from rye flour. It is garnished with boiled white sausage / boiled egg halves. In remote times, żurek and herring were the main pre-Easter Lent fasting food staples. By the time of Holy Saturday, sick and tired of these dishes, people would give them a festive burial. A pot with the soup would be either buried in the ground or spilled.]*



**JC:** Does everybody tend to go to church on Easter Day?

**MN:** Yes. The day before everybody goes to the church and the priest does prayers of thanks for what we have got. It's like a thanksgiving – thanks for the food and the life we have got.

**JC:** Before Easter do you have Lent like we do here? 40 days where you give something up.

**MN:** Yes, yes, and we have calendars with chocolates.

**JC:** Ah, like we have the Advent calendars here at Christmas

**MN:** Yes, like for 40 days. Every day we have a little window with a chocolate – an Advent calendar.

**JC:** What do you call that, because I thought Advent was Christmas?

*[JC and MN discuss Advent and Lent and worked out that in Poland they do have both Lent and Advent calendars.]*

**MN:** It's something new. We still have to be strict with some food but for the children it's little treats.

**JC:** Do you remember many songs or dances from Poland?

**MN:** There are many, but I am really rubbish with singing *[laughs]*. I would not dare to try.

**JC:** What I'm interested in for this project, which is looking at Polish culture (and maybe you don't associate song and dance with culture. What do you associate with Polish culture?

**MN:** Actually, I haven't thought about this for a very long time because I live here.

**JC:** Don't worry. I just wondered if you have any memories of perhaps songs you used to sing as a child?

**MN:** Well, yes, it was usually at Christmas time when everybody sat at the table – all the family – full of dishes and we were singing the Christmas carols. We've got actually the same songs, same music, similar words, just translated. We all come from the same church, the Catholic Church. When you go to the church here actually all the mass has the same order, the same things the priest is doing, the same praise, songs. It's quite similar.

**JC:** Is it nice when you find things that are the same?

**MN:** Yes, yes!

**JC:** Why?

**MN:** It's like something familiar, if you know what I mean. It's like a continuation of the tradition from Poland. It's just a different language.

**JC:** Can you just relax?

**MN:** Yes, it's like, well okay, just something the same ... because there are many things you have to learn. The law too is pretty similar, probably because of the EU. I mean when you go to somewhere completely different like Africa it's all very different and you have to find a way to co-exist. But here it is easier, our cultures are similar, not the same, but pretty similar and the climate and the food. It looks the same, but it isn't the same!

**JC:** Do you like Polish food? Are you able to get Polish food?

**MN:** I mix it now. At the beginning when I came here there were not many Polish shops. I needed to find some things that I could substitute and actually now it's nice to have a few Polish shops in one town because you have more choice. Some things I can only buy in Polish shops, but I have to admit that supermarkets like Morrisons, ASDA and Tesco, they do include some Eastern European food, Polish foods, and it's quite a good choice.

**JC:** Okay thanks. Enough looking back. What are your hopes for the future, both for you and the Polish community in Corby?

**MN:** I just would like to have a different job for myself, and for my daughter. She's at uni now and I'm really pleased that she is there, she's doing really well. I'm not sure if she would do that in Poland. I spoke to my daughter about the differences in schools between Poland and England and she said that here in schools the teachers are more helpful. I know that many people complain about the education system here, but I have to admit it's really good because you have many choices. Maybe some things are better in Poland, but I think if you want to do something and you are willing to learn, here you can find many ways to do that and it's much easier.

**JC:** Do you think you and your daughter will stay in England?

**MN:** Yes, I think so. I don't really think I'm in my own country. But when I go to Poland now, I don't feel any more as well that I am in my own country – I'm somewhere in-between.

**JC:** A woman of the world!

**MN:** Yeah, and I think even if I have to emigrate some day in the future it would not be to Poland. It would be to another country.

**JC:** How often do you get back?

**MN:** Once or twice a year.

**JC:** Do you stay with family when you go back?

**MN:** Yes. For a few days I stay with family and then for another few days always try and see some sights of my country because it is very, very big and I've still not seen many, many things. It's so interesting. I've already seen a lot, but I'd like to see more.

*[Brief chat about how much JC has enjoyed doing this project and learning about Poland. JC says she had not realised how big the country was.]*

**MN:** Yes, it's massive. It's much bigger than England, the UK *[laughs]*. We've got sea, we even have deserts – close to the seaside I think.

*[No, it's not a mirage: there really is a desert in the middle of Poland. The Bledow desert - or, as some prefer to call it, the Polish Sahara - has been flummoxing visitors for centuries. Its sprawling sands are entirely at odds with an otherwise verdant country that boasts four lush lake districts, and 30% of which is covered by thick forest.*

*More bizarre still is the conservation project funded by the EU to preserve this barren anomaly. Multi-million-dollar financing has been provided to help safeguard the Polish desert, through deforestation and the eradication of native plant life. The desert is shrinking, thanks to the return of native fauna, such as pine and fir trees. Money from Natura 2000 - a European Union-wide initiative to preserve fragile ecosystems - is trying to stop it. (Source: CNN)]*

**MN:** We've also got sea, mountains, lakes, huge forests, desert, many caves you know, many mines. You can visit them as well.

**JC:** Snow-capped mountains?

**MN:** Yes, and sometimes where we used to live in my home town my daughter was attending the sports class and every week they visit them to ski. In the summer the lakes and the mountains are very nice as well. And I can recommend this that if you are ever in Krakow go to the salt mine. There are two routes – the tourist route and the miner route. In the tourist route you can even wear high heels. It's so easy. But I really recommend the miner route as well. They will give you all the safety gear – helmet and oxygen mask – but they will give you a guide. It's really interesting. It's not that easy. Trainers will be the best and there are things to do. You can do some mining of things. You can try the salt water. The walls are covered in salt, everything is salt.

**JC:** How does your daughter feel about Poland? Does she speak the language?

**MN:** Yeah, actually, with her, I did everything in Polish. She was 13 when she came here and she started to forget the grammar and she called me the grammar terrorist because I always corrected her. In fact, I think I found it the same because we speak two languages it's like we start to forget some Polish words, especially the ones we don't use all the time. I don't say you will forget all the language, it's not really possible, but you start to forget some words, or you start to forget some pronunciation or grammar as well. I often find myself when I am writing in my own language thinking how do I spell that?

**JC:** What do you think about projects like this where an English choir and dance group look at other cultures to try and foster understanding?

**MN:** I think it's very good because we can learn from each other. We can learn from English people how to exist in this country and they can learn from us different things. I work with English people and sometimes when I cook something, or have some ideas how to do something they say, "Ah, I would never think about this." It's a new experience and I think it opens our eyes as well to other cultures, other peoples. I know that sometimes there can be misunderstanding. If you don't know one culture and we do something they can find it offending but we don't know and when we talk, we can find a way to communicate to cooperate and actually to know that this and this can be offending in our country but it can be alright in another country.

**JC:** How involved are you in the Polish community in Corby and what does it mean to you to be involved in that?

**MN:** To keep in touch with my own country, own culture, own language. Yes, sometimes I'm missing something like meeting a group of friends, you know the bigger group. Not necessarily a party but, doing something together.

**JC:** Do you think the Polish community does enough in Corby for Polish people? Are you involved in the film club, the church and things like that?

**MN:** I think it's quite a lot, but the problem is that Polish people usually like to stay at home. There are some people who go out but it's like that when you try to involve them into a project it's quite hard.

**JC:** Why do you think that is?

**MN:** It's because work, family, children and everybody has different goals. I think the most involved people in the community are people who want to stay here and because they want to stay they are more involved in the community. But people who just came here to work, save the money and then go back they probably would not be too much involved because their mind is still in Poland, it's not here really. This is what I see.

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

**MN:** No, I don't know. My head is empty now *[laughs]*.

**JC:** Okay, no problem. There is actually one other thing I would like to ask. You said you don't feel entirely English, you don't feel entirely Polish. What is it, in your opinion, that makes you feel Polish or English?

**MN:** I think I try to get the best things from both.

**JC:** That's a great answer. What are the best things then?

**MN:** For example driving. I like the style of driving in England. It's calmer. Most of the people are nice to each other, they let you go. But, in Poland, it's like in London, I'm first! It's quite aggressive. When I go there and drive it's quite hard now. I got my driving licence in 2005 and in Poland I was driving for four years, here I've been driving for nine, twice as long here than there. It's quite weird for me when I have to drive in Poland now. I like the roads here – I like the motorways. Because here

there's four or five lanes that you can change. In Poland it's just two lanes and I don't feel confident to drive so speedy over there.

**JC:** So what the best bit of Poland you can combine with the driving in England?

**MN:** In Poland I like the food. I can find some English food pretty good but not many and I prefer our style of cooking because I see in England there is so much 'ready to eat' food and that has so many preservatives and all that, which I don't think is very good for health so I am always very carefully reading the labels. In Poland we cook from scratch and I think that way is better. Even in my work place I always cook from scratch.

**JC:** What is your favourite Polish dish?

**MN:** I'm not really fussy. I eat the lot – the meat, the veg, fruit – and there are many ways you can cook them. And it's funny at work people are watching me and they say, "Oh, I would never think that you could join that veg and that thing together" you know! I say why not – and I think they like my cooking!

*[JC thanks and then MN thinks of something else.]*

**MN:** Also, I prefer houses in Poland because you don't really hear your neighbour. Here your walls are so thin. You can hear everything, even the normal talk. In Poland, not really – maybe in the big flats – but not as much as here. Here it's quite annoying that you can hear the TV or your neighbours talking when you want to go to sleep. That could be improved in England – the way the buildings are built. The walls just need to be a little bit thicker.

**JC:** I'll pass that on *[both laugh]*. So if you could combine the English driving with the Polish houses that would be perfect?

**MN:** Yes, (laughs)

*[JC thanks and interview ends.]*