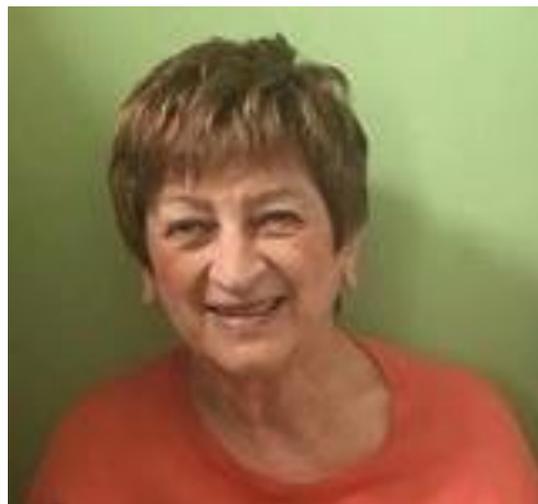


**Maria Rowe (“MR”) born 24<sup>th</sup> February 1953**

**Interview with Judy Caine (“JC”), 9<sup>th</sup> August 2018**

**JC:** How long have you lived in England and why did you come to Corby?

**MR:** I’ve lived here exactly 30 years now. I came because I was educated in Poland as an English translator and teacher – I got a degree in English at a Polish University in Warsaw. I used to come every few years just to brush up my spoken English. In those days you didn’t get much contact with ‘live’ English, so to speak.



**JC:** Did you come straight to Corby?

**MR:** No, I came to London first to a relative for a few months and then I met my future husband and then I stayed.

**JC:** Was he from Corby?

**MR:** No, he was English, not from London, but that is where he stayed.

**JC:** What made you come to Corby?

**MR:** Well, it was quite prosaic, you know. Just house prices in London were horrible and my husband had a very good friend in Corby so we decided to move after about a year.

**JC:** What year was that?

**MR:** January 1990 we moved to Corby. So I’ve been here for over 28 years now.

**JC:** There’s quite a big Polish community in the town. What is it about Corby do you think that has made the Polish community gravitate here?

**MR:** Work! It’s always the case. It’s work. In 2004 the borders opened to Polish people to travel around Europe and I think Tony Blair was quite generous for Polish people to be able to come here to work. To be honest, I was quite surprised that so many people came because I’ve lived through really hard times in Corby and I was surprised that there was so much work available.

**JC:** Tell me about the Polish Community in Corby.

**MR:** I know a lot of Polish people, and a lot of people know me. I meet people and they say, “Oh, I’ve heard of you.” which is quite funny but really nice obviously. The Polish community, as I said, 2004 people started coming, and I was teaching English at Tresham [local FE college] then. Before [2004] I was teaching English to Serbian and Portuguese people. Through my teaching career I could see the waves of people coming. And from 2004 there were more Polish people coming. Also, what was nice was the food. English people could not live without fish and chips and I was missing Polish food. Before I had to go to Peterborough or Wellingborough to get some Polish food. It wasn’t something that was available and then there were chaps who did Polish food. They weren’t Polish, but they did

the food. So I started advertising my services as interpreter and teacher of English to the Polish. So I was meeting a lot of people through that.

**JC:** What is the Polish food scene like now in Corby?

**MR:** Oh, it's brilliant. It's just fantastic. There are so many Polish shops. They are not always run by Polish people but the range is fantastic. If you go to a Polish shop and see the meat counter for example, it's about four metres long or three metres long, all sorts of sausages, different kinds of stuff.

**JC:** You mentioned fish and chips. What's the Polish equivalent?

**MR:** There are a few. One is "bigos" – it means really "a mess", if you want to translate it to English because it's lots of things. It's cabbage and sauerkraut – I don't know if everybody knows what sauerkraut is but it's pickled cabbage. I'll just give a quick recipe for bigos. Basically, it's half and half fresh cabbage and pickled cabbage and you fry all sorts of meat, sausages. You can add whatever you want with it and then you stew it for hours and hours and the longer you stew it the better it is. So that's one Polish dish. Another one is "kotlet schabowy" (pork chop). But specific thing about it is that you beat it with a mallet just to soften it and thin it a bit and then put it in egg and with fresh breadcrumbs and then you fry it.

**JC:** A bit like schnitzel?

**MR:** Yes it is. It's lovely. And then there's cakes. Polish cakes. We love our cakes.

*[Chat about apple cake – called Strudel]*

**MR:** Think German food, because it's very similar. My friend who studied English with me. She said when she came to England none of the food was very familiar. But when she went to Germany it was very similar because it's cabbage, meat, cakes, you know, sausages. So that's Polish food.

You asked about the Polish Community. People, a bit like me, felt very much like a fish out of water in Corby for a long time till I could do the job I'm doing now, that I'm really happy about. But a lot of people came to Corby and there were jobs about but quite poorly paid and a lot of them were highly educated people. So, I was meeting through my teaching English, mainly, a lot of really intelligent people who came here with families or they wanted to start a family and they just accepted the jobs that were here – factory, warehouses or the food industry. A lot of them were overqualified and I'm sure you will find many examples of this from other people you interview. People who really had to pull themselves up to do what they wanted to do or within the companies they started and progressed to management or medium management jobs. So, they are now very comfortable – it's been 14 years - and they have now bought houses here, you know. It's very diverse the Polish community. There are people who are happy with the job they've got and are happy to just make ends meet and have a decent life, you know.

**JC:** How much do you think the Polish Community here value their Polish heritage and how important is it to pass it on to the next generation?

**MR:** I can speak about myself, how much I value it enormously. I started the Polish Saturday School in Corby, Jan 2011. I thought it's been seven years since Polish people started coming and I felt it was my duty, my ambition as well. I am the one who was best qualified to start this school. I didn't necessarily want to run it and I did eventually leave it to other people. But I did start it and run it for

three months. But then somebody else ran it, and they had other heads and it's still being run very well. Mrs Urszula Zasun is the current head and she's been running it for five years now, very well.

I went to the 10 year anniversary of the school and I was just so proud. So, this proves how I value it and also how other people value it. They have about 100 children now.

**JC:** What are the main subjects they teach there?

**MR:** Urszula will be able to tell you more but I know they have different age groups there. They teach writing, which is quite important, because not all parents have the time to sit down with the children and teach writing. Speaking is not so much of a problem especially if both the parents are Polish. Usually speaking is not a problem but it can be because at school they speak English and don't want to speak Polish. Polish spelling is horrendous. I know English spelling is not great but Polish spelling is not very phonetic. Definitely that and also some history, geography and literature. So, the aim is to be quite flexible about what they teach – they can't teach the whole curriculum because it's only Saturday for three hours.

**JC:** I will talk more to Ursula about that but tell me why you started it. Was it just to teach the language?

**MR:** Yes. Firstly, as I said they have to be flexible, but if the family decide to go back to Poland I think it important that the child is prepared [*with language*] to be able to go to Polish School. Second, Polish culture. Polish culture is so engrained in Polish people. It gives children identity, so they are not hanging there, to teach them, to give them roots.

**JC:** So what is the essence of the Polish Identity then? What makes you feel Polish?

**MR:** It's the history. I grew up in communist times. We had a lot of politics drummed into us and we had to be resistant to it. So, there is a massive tradition of resistance to politics being imposed, the imposition of foreign ideas. We've had a whole history of it. Poland was out of the political map for nearly 150 years basically – end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the finish of the First World War Poland was non-existent. It was not on the map. It was part of Russia, Prussia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, all divided. But Poland survived as a culture. There is a long tradition of Polish culture. Literature is extremely important. We've got it in us, the culture, the history and also the tradition of resistance to foreign cultures imposing stuff on us – obviously 'Solidarity' – it started in Poland. For me especially, my parents were taken by Russians to Soviet Labour Camps. In fact, they met in prison, in Russian prison, and later on they found each other after the war. So, all these things massively impacted on me and many other people.

**JC:** Tell me about Polish literature?

**MR:** Polish literature is very rich. Basically you've got 1066 when the French invaded. We've got 966 when Christianity came to Poland. I can't remember when England got it, maybe 9<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> Century, a little earlier, but Poland was really quite early into Christianity. So obviously Christianity is very important to our culture. We are 95% Catholic. There is a joke which I can tell you. Being very political as I was, even as a child, knowing how my parents ended up, there was masses of political jokes. The joke was: "What's the difference between Italy and Poland (you know in those times)? The Government in Poland are communist but 95% of the population are Christian, and in Italy it's the other way round. The Government are Christian but 95% of the population are communist. Something like that. I think I may have missed out the joke but you know [*laughs*]. I mean sometimes it's over dominant, which I think it is now.

**JC:** Who are your favourite authors, just going back to the literature?

**MR:** One person comes to mind, very prominently, Jan Kochanowski.

*[This is the name given in the interview, but later MR corrected this to, Mikolaj Rej. Mikolaj Rej, 1505 to 1569, was a Polish poet and prose writer of the emerging Renaissance in Poland as it succeeded the Middle Ages, as well as a politician and musician. He was the first author to write exclusively in the Polish language and is considered to be one of the founders of Polish literary language.]*

Because of Christianity, until his time, there is a lot of literature in Latin basically. One of his poems is drummed into pretty much every Polish child: 'Wizerunek własny żywota człowieka Poczciwego' or 'The Image of a Good Man's Life'. It moves me every time I think about it. There is a line in it about 'Polish people are not geese. We have our own language'. This is also the motto of the Polish Supplementary School in Corby. Though geese have got their own language of course, although a bit limited *[laughs]*.

So, he was really the first person who wrote beautiful things in Polish. So, this was early 16<sup>th</sup> century and just slightly before Shakespeare although the output wasn't maybe as much *[as Shakespeare]*. But it's similar, Renaissance in language, so that's one author.

Another thing, again when Poland was non-existent on the map, there was another author, Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855), and he had to emigrate to Paris. He wrote because there was lots of uprising against the Russians and he wrote lots of famous things. And again, well I hope a lot of children still learn it by heart. Lithuania was part of Poland then and he wrote a famous poem, "Pan Tadeusz", saying 'My country, little Lithuania, you are like health, you only value it till you are not well'. So basically those two names are very important but there are lots of others.

Culture was a survival mode and thanks to culture Poland survived – it was in the minds of people. The same thing happened in communist times. Lots of very good authors. Czeslaw Milosz won the Nobel Prize for literature in Communist times and others. So the tradition of culture is really important.

*[Adam Bernard Mickiewicz was a poet, publisher and political writer of the Romantic period. One of the primary representatives of the Polish Romanticism era, a national poet of Poland, he is seen as one of Poland's Three Bards and the greatest poet in all of Polish literature. He is also considered one of the greatest Slavic language or European poets. He has been described as a Slavonic bard. He was a prominent creator of Romantic drama in Poland and has been compared both at home and in Western Europe to Byron and Goethe. He is known primarily as the author of the poetic novel, "Dziady", and national epic, "Pan Tadeusz" which is considered the last great epic of Polish-Lithuanian noble culture. Mickiewicz's other influential works include "Konrad Wallenrod" and "Grazyna". All served as inspiration during regional uprisings and as foundations for the concept of Poland as "the Christ of Nations".]*

**JC:** What about dance and music as part of the culture?

**MR:** You might have heard of Jerzy Grotowski. He was a theatre movement, theatre person. Music obviously as well. You could mention lots of names, Penderecki, in communist times and another one, Szymanowski, in between the wars. Ballet, maybe not so much, Russia is dominant there.

*[Krzysztof Eugeniusz Penderecki (b. 1933) is a Polish composer and conductor. Some have called him Poland's greatest living composer. Among his best-known works are 'Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima', Symphony No. 3, his St. Luke's Passion, Polish Requiem, Anaklasis and Utrenja.]*

*Karol Maciej Szymanowski (1882–1937) was a Polish composer and pianist, the most celebrated Polish composer of the early 20th century. He is considered a member of the late 19th/early 20<sup>th</sup> century modernist movement, "Young Poland", and widely viewed as one of the greatest Polish composers.]*

**JC:** What about folk music – not so 'high-brow', if you like? The music and dance of the people?

**MR:** Obviously Chopin (not many people know *[he is Polish]* because of his name. He had a French father and Polish mother). He definitely felt Polish. His music is infused with folk music. That is a very good example – he composed Mazurka's – the Mazurka is a Polish dance.

*[The mazurka is a Polish folk dance in triple meter, usually at a lively tempo, and with strong accents unsystematically placed on the second or third beat.]*

*[Brief chat about a recent Chopin concert at Laxton Hall, an old stately home that now runs as an care home for older local Polish residents.]*

Folk music – if you think folk music in Communist times, it was just banged on and on and on, so a lot of people are very ambiguous about it. They are not very happy about Polish folk music because there was a lot of it on the radio as a patriotic thing. Folk music is like English folk music is very, I don't know, I've always liked English folk music. This was like you had to have it. There were probably attempts to hijack this very schematic way of thinking of folk music.

I remember as a child there was a children's dance group. I wanted to join it dancing traditional Polish dances – mazurka, polonaise, traditional dance, obviously. If you think Chopin mazurka, polonaise, he was using that. So, if they were really well done, those dances and singing, it was interesting, but it was a bit political sometimes.

*(The polonaise is a dance of Polish origin, in time. Its name is French for "Polish." The polonaise has a rhythm quite close to that of the Swedish semiquaver or sixteenth-note polka, and the two dances have a common origin. The polonaise is a widespread dance in carnival parties.)*

**JC:** So, what music and dance from Poland would you want to pass on to the next generation living in Corby now?

**MR:** Again, I think it would be best to talk to Ursula because I don't know if she is doing any Polish singing and dancing at school. I know other communities are doing dance. In Corby I don't think there is a Polish dance group.

**JC:** I think the butcher in the Maxim performs with his family.

**MR:** Yes, he performs some Highland dances in traditional costume. They have a special tradition. The Highland tradition is very specific. They have a whole culture, even their own separate Christmas carols. It's really, really interesting. They speak with their own dialect. It's a really interesting tradition. They are Polish but separate. So, I'm sort of more into literature culture because I studied

English literature and film as well has to be mentioned. Wajda, Andrzej Wajda and Pawel Pawlikowski, who did "Ida".

*[Andrzej Witold Wajda was a Polish film and theatre director. Recipient of an Honorary Oscar, the Palme d'Or, as well as Honorary Golden Lion and Golden Bear Awards, he was a prominent member of the "Polish Film School"*

*Paweł Aleksander Pawlikowski is a Polish filmmaker, who has lived and worked most of his life in the UK. He garnered much acclaim for a string of award-winning documentaries in the 1990s and for his feature films Last Resort and My Summer of Love, both of which won a BAFTA and many other European awards.*

*Note re Corby connection with IDA: "Ida" was the Polish film that HD Media screened at the first Corby Big Film Week in 2015 as part of the International Film Day - JC is the joint Festival Director with Paul Balmer). MR suggested "Ida" would be a good film to show. From this screening, MR and Pawel Labaj started the Polish Film Club at the local Savoy cinema in Cobry – it is still running today.]*

**MR:** Pawlikowski's most recent film is "Cold War" and I'm hoping we can get it to Corby soon.

So film, again, film is literature and theatre is extremely strong in Poland. In communist times lots of theatre, very good directors, actors, plays. I could make a big list of names.

In communist times culture was very much, "How do we beat the communists?", by illusion, by hook or crook, "How do we get some information in?". There was lots of censorship so in spite of censorship they had to put in some messages that they sometimes managed to do.

**JC:** What do you miss most about Poland?

**MR:** Generally the Polish people, my friends, my family. But I'm so grateful that Polish people came to me in Corby, because I've got a really good job and I've got friends and it's really great.

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

**MR:** I don't know. I want to say my regret is about my son that he doesn't speak Polish. If he was born in 2004 he would definitely have spoken Polish because I would have had lots of Polish friends here. But when he was small we didn't have Polish people around us and when he went to school he just started speaking English and didn't want to know. He's 23 now. He just has no interest in language. If I could spend all day learning languages I'd be happy but he is just not interested. But I think I always tried to get some information into him so he does have some pride in being half Polish.

The only thing I want to add. You asked what was the aim of the Polish school? You have to talk about it that there is some racism everywhere, and another aim is to give young Polish people some pride in being Polish so they can resist any stabs into their self-confidence/self-esteem. People need to know their roots. Also, it's a social thing too. People come into Corby and they don't know anybody and it gives them friends and so on.

**JC:** What's your hope for the futures of the young Polish children living in Corby today?

**MR:** Some of them definitely will go back to Poland, because their parents want to go back. But I know a lot of young people who want to stay here because they have better job prospects here and I

just hope they remember their roots. It's like a common saying that you only know how Polish you are if you go abroad to live.

*[JC thanks MR and turns tape off but MR remembers she wants to talk about integration. Recording resumes.]*

**MR:** Integration is extremely important for me. In fact, I don't do a lot of things. Like I don't run a school and I'm no longer involved in the film club, but I see myself as a link to help people integrate, to help Polish people integrate into the English community and keeping the links between the two. Because so often Polish people live in a ghetto, I know, and I do everything I can to help people break this. For example, there are Polish Facebook pages and I always advertise events in Corby, things like the Grow festival, so that people can come and be part of Corby basically, and I like to get people in touch. Like, for example, the Deep Roots Tall Trees project about singing Polish songs, I thought great, fantastic, so I found someone who is going to run this workshop, she's a qualified musician.

**JC:** Is that Anna Plaminiak *[teaching the DRTT choir Polish songs]*?

**MR:** Yes, Anna. So, I see this as my mission to do as much as possible to get people in touch. I am Polish, but I'm into culture. Really culture is the key word for me. I think culture is so important. Culture can help integrate people, I'm very much into culture, whatever culture, Polish culture, English culture, world culture, and I see it as my mission to help people get this as well. So, it's like I see myself as a link at the moment. It's my main aim.

*[JC thanks MR and interview ends.]*