

Pawel Labaj (“PL”) born 1st March 1986

Interview with Judy Caine (“JC”), 1st September 2018

PL: I was born in Krakow, which is the ex Polish capital.

JC: Something I can tell you are very proud of!

PL: Yes *[laughs]*.

JC - When did you come to Corby and why?

PL: I came the year after we joined the EU – so that was 2005 – and I remember the exact date, 6th July. I decided to come because a lot of my family and friends were actually driving buses. My father was a bus driver in Poland, and a lot of them were living in London and they invited me to come and live with them. However, when I came to England it was not as bright as I thought it would be because of the language. But with my broken English I did actually manage to get a job as a cleaner in Matalan and since then I’ve actually made a lot of progress and I’ve lived in Corby for 12 years now. It’s been a great journey.

JC: What made you come to Corby?

PL: Well, I think it was Corby that chose me. I didn’t choose Corby! I was working in Matalan – 2 hours a day, 7 days – as a cleaner because it was the only job I could get without a National Insurance number. Every time I went for a job they asked for this and it was a real Catch 22. So I phoned the job centre and asked them how to get one. They told me I had to work. So I couldn’t get a job because I didn’t have a NI number and I couldn’t apply for one because I didn’t have a job!

JC: So how did you eventually get one?

PL: I did eventually get it because a person who employed me – he was a foreign guy, Eastern European, I believe he was Latvian – he was running this company and he employed me and once I had this employment I could apply for this number. It was more like self-employment, although I didn’t know at the time, but I got the number. And once I felt more confident with the language, I was still learning from this lady who was Indian, so it wasn’t the clearest English, however I made some progress, and I went to an agency in London and had an interview and did the paperwork and the next day they phoned me, “OK you’ve got a job. Be ready and we’ll come and collect you.” That Friday a van picked me up and dropped me off on Melford Road, not far from Morrison’s, Oakley Vale. So, that’s how Corby chose me.

JC: Did you come over by yourself or with family?

PL: By myself and I met my wife while I was here. Once I had this job with this agency, there wasn’t many agencies at the time and they were putting a lot of Polish, well not just Polish people – Slovakian and Latvian as well – into the warehouses. I soon realised that we were all talking Polish and I wanted to improve my English, so I started to look for another job. I met a lovely man, David, at



Job Centre Plus and he helped me to find a job where I could only speak English in a printing company, and I was quite confident within a year.

JC: How involved are you in the Polish community in Corby and how important do you feel it is to keep your traditions, your language, your culture alive living in a foreign country?

PL: Yes, I believe it's important. When I was slightly younger we didn't have much interest in our community [*culture*] because we were young we were going to lots of parties and had a different lifestyle. But, once we started having a family, kids, my wife and I, we realised that if we did not show them the heritage of Poland, they probably will never know it. They probably would be having a good life like anyone else, but it's good to know your roots, where you come from and they will be proud of them. So, we've started quite a lot of projects and that's mainly thanks to Paul Balmer who help direct me to where I was heading but I didn't know. So, we started off the Polish Film Club, screening Polish movies at the Corby SAVOY – that's a great project because it's getting people out of their houses which fights against the social isolation, which I think is slightly higher within the foreign community than within the British, because people are not always confident with English and are not going to go to the cinema because they won't understand what is happening on the screen, and also they will not be going to the parties because they will be feeling like not part of the community because they cannot communicate with others. So, that is why we started different events as well like International Children's Day. We are hoping that this will become an annual event, and we will be able to celebrate that day like we do in Poland. We have lots of attractions for kids and the families can meet together for a picnic and they can see a lot of dance displays and I think we can also showcase the different cultures, not only Polish, because the aim was to get multicultural big event where all families can come in and have loose discussion and it doesn't really matter where they come from.

JC: Is your wife Polish as well?

PL: Yes.

JC: How often do you manage to get back to Krakow?

PL: Not often, because when we were younger, and we didn't have family, it was easier for us just to get a plane and travel. Now mainly because of the school term, we cannot go whenever we want to because we have to respect that, his learning. The other one is not yet at nursery, she's two, so that's not a problem. However, we are trying to go as many times as we can at least once a year so he can meet the grandparents and the cousins and all that because, well, he loves it.

JC: What do you miss most about Poland?

PL: Well, I think it's family, because you don't get to see them as often as you probably don't get to see them as often as you would if you lived there. But I think it makes you understand how important the contact with family is once you don't have them at the reach of a hand, because you know that you don't get to meet them not too often and you enjoy every single minute you're going there.

JC: What do you remember as a child about Polish culture? What were you taught as a child – songs, nursery rhymes, dances, Christmas/other celebrations? If there was one bit of Polish culture you'd like to pass on to your children and the next generation, what would it be?

PL: In Poland it was tradition that once you get slightly older you don't celebrate the birthday, because you don't want to count another year so you celebrate the anniversary of the name which is called 'Imieniny' which means name day.

JC: Tell me about Imieniny?

PL: It's a big event in all families in early 90s that was popular. Whole family, even including the local priest, would come together to celebrate and it was usually followed by Rosal, which is traditional Polish chicken soup and Schabowy – Polish Breaded Steak*. So, a lot of people would meet together and there would be singing and dancing.

*[*Kotlety Schabowy – breaded pork cutlets]*

[Imieniny (lit. "Name Day") is a tradition in some countries in Europe, Latin America, Catholic and Eastern Orthodox countries. It consists of celebrating a day of the year that is associated with one's given name. The celebration is similar to a birthday and it is particularly popular in Poland. (Source: Wikipedia)]

JC: So, tell me what a typical Imieniny day would be like?

PL: Well, in the morning, most of the family members, usually female, get together to prepare food and they made different sorts of food, suppers and lunches. The celebration would last for about 6 hours so there needs to be a lot of food and drinks prepared. So they would mainly be meeting in the morning or maybe the night before so that everything could be prepared for the day. They invited all of their friends, not only family, but all their close friends who live nearby for this celebration. When the people come we sing and dance and whoever had an instrument they played and made it more fun because there were no record labels at that time. Later came cassettes and LPs but at that time there were none and we could not have afforded them anyway. And we'd celebrate for all of the evening and most of the night.

JC: Sounds wonderful. So, what age do you stop counting the years and just celebrate the name?

PL: I've never been told that, I'm still counting years! I don't think there's any fixed year. Just when you feel you don't want to count the years anymore you switch into Imieniny instead of birthday.

JC: You mentioned instruments. Were they traditional western instruments, folk instruments? And what songs do you sing?

PL: They were traditional – guitar, clarinet, saxophone, whatever people had at home. Instruments were expensive. My father, for example, was part of a little orchestra and whenever there was a celebration in the church and we had a parade to celebrate he would play. But he was lucky because the instruments were available in the church, as they were expensive not everyone had them at home but they were only allowed to come in and practice before the parade.

JC: Do you play an instrument?

PL: I did in the past, I played clarinet and piano. But I stopped training when I was 14 and I don't think I'd be able to play them now. I would need a good refresher to be able to play.

JC: Songs. Do you remember any songs and if so will you pass them on to your children?

PL: It's more likely my wife. She does a lot – lullabies and all then at bedtime.

JC: You don't remember any your mum sang to you?

PL: No.

JC: What else can you tell me about Polish culture and why do you feel is important to pass on to people in Corby? You are clearly very passionate about Poland and do so much in your community – film club, national children's day. What drives you?

PL: Well, I think it is driven by seeing the need of helping people to get out of their homes, so they can do something different. I think that is mainly what it is, because they don't spend time together, they don't socialize, they stay away from events and I think I just wanted to change this. Maybe I'm a dreamer, I don't know. But I'm heading where I am heading and I hope it will work.

For example, when I was young and we went to the main market in Krakow. Every day at 12 o'clock there was Hejnal [*pronounced Heynow*]. Basically this bloke on a trumpet would play a hymn. It was a celebration – it was a tradition. When Turkish people were attacking Poland, Krakow was a big capital and had a castle and a trumpeter was locked in a little tower and when he saw the enemy coming he played that hymn and it cut through. It's not played to the end because when he was playing to warn the people he was shot by an archer and never finished the hymn.

JC: Do they still do it now?

PL: Yes, it's very powerful. It's culture. It's heritage. It's lovely. And all of this tradition we've got in the main market in Krakow we've got a place called Sukiennice, (Krakow's market place). It's always been a market. In past times they exchanged fruits and veggies and they were exchanging all the products for the different goods. You could buy cows, chickens etc. Now, it's actually been kept pretty much the same way, however, you can buy all the touristy things as well, folklore costumes, jewellery, amber jewellery is popular in Poland, all different varieties of mugs, t-shirts, all sorts.



JC: Tell me about the costume. What is the traditional costume in Krakow?

PL: Well, Krakow was part of posh Poland. It was the capital and we had, well we still have, a lovely castle. So these costumes were very posh. They are mainly sleeveless jackets, to the length of the knee and decorated with sequins, and wool – tassels. Usually men were wearing white shirt with stripy red and white trousers with high heeled boots. Also they had a hat that was decorated with a black stripe all over and a peacock feather, which was quite expensive and so that looked very posh.

Source: Google Images

All of the costumes from Poland are very colourful so it doesn't really matter which part of Poland they were they all look so amazing. Also the girl's costume there are a lot of flowers all over the dress and the girls also wear boots a third of the length of the leg and on top of that they had a white shirt plus like a waistcoat with more flower accents and on top of that a flower, Yanki (garland).



Source: Google Images – “Yanki”

Also there is a tradition when the girls get older and their mothers want them to marry they have an event. I don't remember the date

but it was called the Vyanki. All the girls went out into the town with the garland on their head and they would throw it into the Wisia (Vistula River), and all the people in the village would know she is to be taken now.

JC: So they put their garlands on and went out and it let people know that they was available *[for marriage]*?

PL: Yes. Strange tradition, but you know, actually it's still going on in Krakow and it's a huge celebration each year. It's not exactly the same as it was but a lot of people still cultivate the tradition so we are not going to forget about it.



Source: Google Images

[Brief conversation about Vyanki being similar to the English May Day celebrations, which although mostly about celebrating Spring and wishing for a good crop, many mothers saw it as a way of advertising their daughter's availability for marriage.]

PL: Yes, there are a lot of traditions. For example, we have a celebration which is the Monday after Easter Sunday. We have Lany Poniedzialek - 'wet Monday'. What we were doing when we were youngsters, we went into the church for the main service and afterwards we got buckets of water and threw them at the girls. However it was for single men to attract singles girls and say it's time to actually get married.

JC: By throwing buckets of water at them?

PL: Yes, *[laughs]*! People just do it for fun now and it doesn't really matter whether it's boys or girls, it's just having fun, soaking each other, but before it was to say now it's time to get married.

["Wet Monday takes place annually on Easter Monday in Poland where people get water thrown on them. Traditionally guys soak girls on Monday, and Tuesday is time for revenge, with girls soaking the guys. It is said that if you don't wake up early on Wet Monday, you will be awoken by having water poured on you. This happens all over the country in family homes, universities and flats. The festival dates back a few



Source: www.theculturetrip.com

centuries. Boys would sneak into girls' rooms on Easter Monday and throw buckets of water over them while they were still in bed. After that, the boys would spank the girls with pussy willows. In some Polish regions, boys

would chant “Dyngus, dyngus, po dwa jaja; nie chcę chleba tylko jaja”, which translates, more or less, to “I don’t want bread, only eggs.” It is also said that the girl who gets soaked the most will be the next one to get married.” Source: www.theculturetrip.com]

JC: Fascinating. Thank you. Is there anything that you want to tell me that I’ve not asked you about?

PL: Well, I’m not sure but I think it is important to cultivate the traditions that we remember so that people can see that we’ve got our own traditions. We’ve got a lot of heritage as well to show and for my kids as well so that they can understand where I’ve come from because they might choose not to cultivate it in the future. However, they will know when they go back to Poland to see their grandparents where all of these things came from. So it’s not going to be a surprise to them, and think, “Oh, my God! What is happening? They are weirdos in Poland!”, because we will never ever have the chance to fully show them what it is like so at least we can give them like a little taster.

JC: So, are you giving them options in a way, when they grow older, if they decide to stay in England or go back to Poland, they will be equipped?

PL: Yes, but it’s not only if they go back to Poland, because I think everything is changing. People can travel and it doesn’t really matter where. However, whether they identify with Poland is actually down to them. So, we are just going to give them options as to whether they want to be Polish, born in England, or whether they want to become English.

JC: Do you think you’ll go back to Poland?

PL: I don’t know. It’s a strange question. My heart’s in Poland but everything we now have, it came from England. So, if you balance it out, more is in England. I know more of the family are in Poland but the closest family I’ve got in England. We might go somewhere else, but we don’t know. We don’t have these plans yet. At the moment we want our kids to grow up in England and we don’t plan to go anywhere.

JC: I’m very pleased to hear it. I enjoy the Polish Film Club and the International Children’s Day, and as ever, if there is ever anything I can do to help, just shout. I think that’s it. I have no more questions.

PL: That’s good.

JC: Just thank you very much for your time. I really appreciate it.

PL: My pleasure. Thank you for inviting me.