

Slav Pilus (“SP”) born 8th May 1980

Interview with Judy Caine (“JC”), 6th October 2018

JC: How long have you been in Corby?

SP: I’ve been in Corby for 13 years now.

JC: Where did you come from?

SP: I came from Poland a small town, city on the Czech border. It’s called Skoczow.



JC: What made you come to Corby?

SP: It was really for financial reasons. Poland, small town, back then there wasn’t really many job opportunities I could pursue. The border being opened the year before there was a lot of talk about the opportunities you can have here so I packed my bags and came over.

JC: That was very brave of you. Did you know anybody in Corby?

SP: I did. My wife’s uncle lived here for a few months. So I had a link.

JC: So, you were already married when you came here?

SP: I was married, yes, with one child.

JC: Did you all come over together?

SP: No. Initially I came by myself to get things started, to get a flat, and a job, get things ready for them to come, and they followed me four months later.

JC: Did you find it difficult to get a job when you came over here? Was it what you expected?

SP: I guess it was in a sense [*what I expected*], being able to find a job fairly quickly. Back then the local economy was in the need for labour. It was very obvious. Wherever you went they would take you. I guess it’s a bit different now but back then there was a need for people. So, from that point of view I was pleased to get a job very quickly. Obviously, everything around me was very different, the language barrier was there. Even though I had my English lessons throughout school in Poland, the actual language spoken in English is obviously different from what we had been taught. That was a big shock to me.

JC: What was your job in Poland and are you now doing the same job or something different?

SP: Just before I left Poland I worked as a barman in local bar. I’ve been doing my masters at the same time, so it was part-time, almost full-time, but in addition to my studies. I was studying anthropology. Back then, education was different so there was no first degree and master, it was all in one go. So, I was in the last year of my studies when I left.

JC: What did you hope to do with your masters and are you hoping to do it here?

SP: I don't think I will ever be able to do anything with it so I never work in anything to do with my master. It was really good eye-opener – I was very passionate about it. I learned a lot about it but never applied any of it. Here it was just factory work that I could get. I would never think that I could do anything with my degree. Essentially, I've abandoned it if you like. I mean it's still close to my heart, that's for sure. It was a really good 5 years of my life, because that's how long the course took.

JC: What do you think about projects like this where we are looking at different cultures in an effort to understand and integrate. Do you think there is a validity in these sorts of projects?

SP: I think those projects are vital for people to start to integrate. The problem is they are alright for people who come to the country. The problem starts when they are left in an enclave and they are just left alone to talk to each other and they cannot progress themselves. They cannot integrate and probably find that they [*projects like Changing Corby*] are a good way of opening them up. There are people around them. They are curious about them. Being Polish is not something they need to hide. It is something to be proud of. It is something that other people are interested to know about. So yes, it's good.

JC: Did you feel made welcome when you first came to Corby?

SP: Not necessarily, no. I think the problem with mass migration is shock to both parties. There is shock by being in a new environment and there is shock from the locals who are shocked with the number of strange faces. I think employers were over the moon with having the hands to do work for them. That was the reason we all came. I've heard stories about people being mistreated and such but I think it faded out quite quickly. I think it was just people at the start were trying to work out how to live with each other and that kind of fades out quite quickly.

JC: Do you feel now that both you and the Polish community have integrated well within the Corby community?

SP: I think it's better than it used to be – I think time helps. The biggest barrier for integration is language. You can't integrate without it, simple as that. So, more and more years here helps with this and the barriers come down. Some people are better than others.

JC: You mentioned you had children. How old are they?

SP: We have Sophie, 14 years old, Oliver 10 and Ruby who is 10 months.

JC: Do they all speak both Polish and English?

SP: So, Ruby aside, Sophie is speaking both, is bi-lingual. Oliver is mainly speaking English. He understands Polish but doesn't show any interest in speaking it.

JC: Did you send either of them to the Polish Supplementary School?

SP: No, they never did.

JC: May I ask why? Not a criticism, I'm just interested.

SP: I guess we never actually felt the need for it. It's an extra day of school essentially and I can't imagine that they would be very happy if I suggested it.

[Brief comment on fact that as both Slav and his wife are Polish the children get to hear Polish at home; very different situation from when one of the parents is English and the child does not get the opportunity to speak Polish in the family.]

SP: Yes, I image that if the everyday language would be English in the home, unless the partner is willing to learn Polish. So, yes, initiatives like that *[the Polish Supplementary School]* give them some kind of formal education. I'm not quite sure how formal it is as I've never been there.

[Briefly tells Slav about her visit to the Polish Supplementary School's 10th anniversary celebrations – lots of books, reading, singing, talking, dance etc.]

JC: What do you miss most about Poland?

SP: Family. I think that's the thing that I can't replace with anything. Luckily we do have each other and we have some extended family out here and cousins, so it's not too bad. But obviously my side of the family is all in Poland so we don't get to see them very often.

JC: How often do you get back to Poland?

SP: Once every couple of years. Obviously with a family of five it's quite a journey. The parents come to visit us more often than we go to them.

JC: Can I ask you about Polish culture? What to you is Polish culture and what do you miss about it?

SP: Books. I try to supplement by having e-books or ordinary books. I read a lot and I make a conscious decision that every second book I read is in Polish, so that I don't lose the link.

JC: Who's your favourite author?

SP: Oh, I can't tell you that! I don't know. It's just too hard a question. I consume a lot of books *[laughs]*. I don't think I have a favourite author. I have some 'classics' things that I keep coming back to every few years. Polish books, Henryk Sienkiewicz.

[Internet research on Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846 – 1916): Henryk Adam Aleksander Pius Sienkiewicz was a Polish journalist, novelist and Nobel Prize laureate. He is best remembered for his historical novels, especially for his internationally known best-seller Quo Vadis.]

JC: What is it you like about Henryk?

SP: He was writing in the late 19th and early part of the 20th century and he writes about the troubles he had and a lot of historical books based on Polish history. So, medieval times also ...

JC: Are they quite political – about communism?

SP: No, that was before the 2nd World War.

JC: So further back about medieval times?

SP: Yes, medieval but also about history of Poland being dismantled by three big neighbours. So there was no Poland and they struggled to get it back and all those histories he wrote about.

[Brief chat about Polish history - Latvia being part of Poland at once point, the Communist times, the Germans etc.]

JC: How does it make you feel as a Polish man – about how Poland was carved up by these other countries? Are you angry or proud of what you have now?

SP: Obviously the fact of moving borders, it wasn't a nice thing to do however you look at it. There were people's lives involved and there were masses of them. But, it is history. It was generations ago. When you read books about it, yes, it is moving, but it is not like it happened yesterday.

JC: For you, what does being Polish mean?

SP: That is a very tricky question! I think it is the roots you've got yourself, all the memories, language, family, history, culture. So even talking about culture, I don't necessarily mean the high culture, the folk, just every day, even having Christmas in a Polish way, Polish Food.

JC: Tell me about Polish Christmas? No one has told me about Polish Christmas yet.

SP: Well it's quite different. It has a different spin in essentially when we do things. Obviously the reason for it is the same. The biggest difference is when we do it. We do it on Christmas Eve rather than on the Christmas Day and there is a big supper.

JC: What does that consist of?

SP: Well, traditionally there is no meat whatsoever. There is fish and a lot of vegetables in different combinations.

JC: Is it a particular type of fish or can it be any fish?

SP: I think these days it is any, but traditional it is Carp. And traditionally there is 12 dishes on the table for the Christmas Eve Supper. I remember from my childhood that was definitely the case. There was a conscious decision to make the 12. 10 was not good enough.

JC: Can you remember what the 12 dishes are or shall I google that?

SP: Oh, I can't really. A lot of stuff I remember. The thing was you should try everyone even if it was just a little spoonful.

JC: And did that include deserts?

SP: Yes, everything.

[Internet research: 12 Dishes of a Traditional Polish Christmas by Malgorzata Purzycka: “In Poland, Christmas Eve dinner is the most important celebration of the year. The supper traditionally includes twelve dishes and desserts and lasts for a good couple of hours. Meat is not allowed and dinner is followed by an exchange of gifts. Christmas Eve dinner starts when the first star appears in the sky. Nothing may be eaten until all members of the family have broken the Christmas wafers together and exchanged wishes for good health and prosperity. During the meal, all guests should taste a bit of everything. According to traditions, bits of hay are spread beneath the tablecloth as a reminder that Christ was born in a manger. The 12 dishes we eat in my family are:



1. Red borsch with ceps raviolis

Christmas Eve dinner often starts with a beetroot soup (red borscht) - probably the most popular soup for that day. This traditional Christmas borscht usually is served with tiny dumplings stuffed with a mix of soaked (and then nicely chopped) dried ceps (mushrooms) and fried onion. These are called “uszka,” meaning “little ears” in Polish.

2. Mushroom Soup

3. Fried Carp

Carp is the Christmas Eve must-have in many families. Christmas Eve carp is often accompanied by hot sauerkraut with dried mushrooms, a vegetable salad or potatoes.



4. Cabbage Rolls



5. Pickled Herring

Herrings are very popular in Poland at any time of year, and they are also served at Christmas Eve. The most popular preparations are classic herrings fillets in oil, or with cream, sour apples, chopped onions, usually served with potatoes.

6. Mushroom and sauerkraut dumplings

7. Mushroom cutlets

8. Fried fish and carrot salad

9. Poppy seed roll cake

Poppy seed cakes are eaten by Poles year round, but the traditional Christmas poppy seed cake is a bit different – the of the dough should be thinner and the layers of the sweet seed cream should be thicker.



layers poppy

10. Dried fruit compote

11. Gingerbread

12. Christmas pudding (kutia)”]

JC: Do you have a tradition of present giving?

SP: So the present giving is just after supper *[on Christmas Eve]* but I know different families do it differently. The Christmas traditions do vary throughout the different regions of Poland. There are some local anomalies, if you like.

JC: What were some of your local anomalies?

SP: My father comes from the part of Poland that is now known as Ukraine. One meal I remember is something called Kutia, something that my Mother's family had not heard of. It is essentially a lot of nuts and seeds mixed with honey. It was so good. Not every family probably knows it. Maybe these days you get recipes on the internet but traditionally it was from my father's side of the family and he is from the East.

JC: What about music and dance as part of Christmas?

SP: Well, we do sing carols. Well, these days we actually don't sing but we do put them on throughout the supper on the radio in the background, so it creates a happy atmosphere. I don't think there is any dancing.

[Brief chat about the Deep Roots Tall Trees Choir working with Anna Plaminiak teaching them carols and the event on 16th December 2018. Slav is invited, and hopes to come.

When JC mentions the stalls at the post sharing event and mentions traditional Polish Christmas crochet decorations....]

SP: Ah, yes, I know them. My mum and my grandmother used to make them.

JC: Oh, do tell me about them?

SP: Well, it's not necessarily decoration, but they do quite a lot of tableware.

JC: Tablecloths and the like?

SP: Yes. They can spend hours on it every day, but they are retired now so that's all they do. Put the telly on, or even not telly, just sit in the room, talk to each other and crochet.

JC: What is it you would like to pass on to your children about Poland and about their heritage?

SP: If I could, I would like them to at least understand and speak Polish. But this is a challenge. But Sophie, she was born in Poland and for the first few years she was just with us speaking Polish and she picked it up quite naturally. With Oliver, his sister was already in the school, she started to play with other children in English and she brought this English back home and started to play with him in English. Therefore, he understands but is not interested that much in speaking it. So, that's a bit of a shame, I have to say. But there is nothing you can do about it. I think it's a natural thing. People say that the second generation is dual-lingual but the fact is it's usually gone.

JC: Yes, you have to speak the language where you are, don't you, to get on in every day. I appreciate that.

SP: Yes.

JC: Is there anything else you want to tell me that you are passionate about that we haven't spoken about?

SP: I'm not quite sure. It's nothing at all to do with being Polish or not. My everyday work is a passion of mine but there is nothing Polish about it at all. No, I don't think so. But one thing I would say those initiative are really, really good [*i.e. Changing Corby project*] and we need to get another. But if it wasn't for the people conducting it I would not have known about it at all.

JC: So how can I communicate better with the Polish community? I put it on Facebook. I put posters in the Polish shops and supermarkets. How else can I get that information out?

SP: I don't know. It's a tricky one. I haven't seen the Facebook page? Do you have a budget for advertising?

JC: [*laughs*] Just look around [*DRTT office*]. Does it look like I might have a budget for advertising?

SP: [*laughs*] I understand. It might be a challenge.

JC: If I were to get posters and leaflets, where would you suggest would be a good place to put them?

[General chat about possible ways to advertise: schools, community centres, mags, Northants Telegraph, radio etc.]

SP: ... because the problem is quite a lot of Polish communities is around the church, but not everyone. And having been in England for almost 13 years I've pretty much replaced all the Polish food also, so I don't go into Polish shops. Therefore I miss all those so maybe schools would be the best places.

JC: So, do you consider yourself pretty much completely integrated into English culture then?

SP: Yes I would say so. I've got pretty much the same amount of English friends as Polish. Yes my whole career is English-based. To be honest if someone ask me about my work, if I had to explain it in Polish, I would struggle because all of the vocabulary for what I do I've learnt in English. I work for a web company – I'm a programmer. So that's what I do. I never learned it in Poland. I learned it all in English.

JC: I totally understand. Clearly from the way you speak you think in English.

[Brief chat about how we learn language.]

[JC thanks and ends interview.]