

UK (Urszula Zasun) ("UK ") born 13th December 1970

Interview with Judy Caine ("JC"), 20th October 2018 (with translator Maria Rowe).



JC: Can you tell me what brought you to Corby?

UK: Eight years ago I came here for a few reasons. My husband was here four years before me, I had two adolescent sons, so we needed to decide whether we stay in Poland as a family or come here. It was a very hard decision because I was working in Poland at a school and it was my passion. But I was the victim of bullying at school in Poland, so I decided to come here.

JC: Why Corby?

UK: Because my husband was working here.

JC: You now run the Polish Supplementary School which was started in 2007 by Maria Rowe who is translating for us today.

UK: Yes.

JC: When did you take over?

UK: I started as a teacher here in 2010 and in 2015 became the Head.

JC: How many students do you have here now?

UK: 127 students, 10 classes.

JC: What is the age range?

UK: Four to thirteen.

JC: What subjects do you teach here?

UK: Generally, Polish language, literature, grammar and Polish culture.

JC: That's interesting. For me language and culture are very much linked. What is it that you feel is important about the Polish culture that you teach the children, and can you do it without the language?

UK: I graduated from Polish University and as you said the connection is massively close between culture and language. So we teach the language, Polish literature and we organise events of Polish culture.

JC: Is it only Polish children who come here?

UK: Generally yes, the majority, but there are children from mixed families, Polish/Portuguese. There was one student whose both parents were English, but he had Polish friends as his stepmum was Polish.

Usually the mother is Polish and the father is from another country. But there are also parents who are both Polish, but they do not speak Polish at home to the children. The problem is the school in England it starts very early and it is very dominant – five days a week, six hours a day. So, they even speak to their Polish parents in English, but they want to speak to their Polish Grandparents.

JC: You mentioned that we start school very early in England. What age do you start going to school in Poland and is it five days a week?

UK: They start at age six in Poland, five days a week but usually fewer hours – four hours a day. Not six.

JC: So do you have nursery schools, kindergarten?

UK: Yes, the nursery schools are not compulsory. The compulsory schooling is from age six.

JC: So what age do you take children at the Supplementary School?

UK: From four, which is the English school age.

JC: You are clearly wonderfully passionate.

UK: Oh, thank you.

JC: What is it that you really want to pass on to these children and why?

UK: The school is a wonderful place for the children to learn to speak and read and write in Polish. But it's also a centre of Polishness.

JC: What is "Polishness"?

UK: We cultivate our traditions, generally to do with Christmas. For example, with the Christmas tradition as a school we always organise a nativity and the children take part in it and the parents come to see it and there is this tradition that you probably don't know about – a wafer. It's hard to say because in England you don't have it. But you share this wafer with your friends, your family on Christmas Day. It's a very moving tradition – I can say this as myself, as Maria Rowe, that I introduced it to my English family.

[Internet research: The Wafer — Oplatek. Its name comes from the Latin word 'oblatum' and means 'offering'. It is 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 we 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 must 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: I understand that Christmas in Poland is really big on Christmas Eve. Tell me a bit about that and do you pass that on to the children here or is that up to the parents.

UK: It's both. Parents and in school. The traditional Christmas Eve Supper we have in our families, we have white tablecloths and there is also some hay to celebrate Jesus being born *[in a stable]* – not in every family, but it is traditional. We also share this wafer on Christmas Eve. Christmas Eve is the most important.

[JC clarifies that the wafer is traditionally shared on Christmas Eve in Poland but Maria Rowe does it with her family on Christmas Day because in England it is Christmas Day that is the most important day.]

UK: So, when we share the wafer, we wish each other all the best, and we eat traditional Polish Christmas Eve supper. There is no meat on Christmas Eve. We have something called Pierogi which is small dumplings with mushroom and onion and borsch, which is beetroot soup, a clear beetroot soup and we sometimes put the dumplings in the soup. They are called 'small ears' in fact because they are very small dumplings. Cabbage Bigos (no meat) – fried, stewed cabbage – it varies from region to region, but Borsch and dumplings and fish are important. In my family, normally we would have fish, but my husband doesn't like fish, so I do Koulibiach, a bread filled with cabbage - stewed cabbage, not a raw filling. And then poppy-seed cake.

JC: So what do you do at the school to celebrate?

UK: We sing Christmas Carols, we do the nativity play and we obviously invite the parents and share the wafer and sing carols together after the nativity play. So it's like a sharing event for everybody.

JC: How many of your children get involved in the nativity play?

UK: So far, we involved all the children. Because we have so many we don't involve everybody in the nativity play itself, but all the children are singing the carols and at the moment there is a rehearsal going on for the nativity play.

JC: You mention carols. Do you do singing, dance, drama as a regular part of the school or is it mainly literature and language?

UK: We have three events during the year, Nativity, Mothers' and Fathers' Day (together) and then at the end of school year, the prize-giving

JC: When do you celebrate Mothers' and Fathers' day?

UK: We celebrate according to the Polish Mothers' Day which is the 26th May, Fathers' Day is a little bit later – a month later, 23rd June – but we celebrate together.

JC: What do you enjoy most about being Head of the school?

UK: I'm really pleased because the number of children is growing. Also, the quality of teaching is getting better and better because we try to recruit fully qualified teachers and there are more and more fully qualified teachers. As I am a qualified and fully trained teacher I do training for our teachers as well and this is very important to continue training. It does happen that there are children on the waiting list because we don't have room.

JC: Do you follow your own syllabus, or do you try and follow the Polish schools' syllabus to prepare children who might go back to Poland to go into Polish schools?

UK: It's a mixed programme. We need to prepare the children for example so that they can take GCSE Polish here in England or if they are going back to Poland, so they can achieve Polish qualifications. My son who attended the schools just got Polish GCSE A star.

JC: Is this Polish school part of a whole series of Polish supplementary schools across the UK, or is it independent?

UK: We are not part of a group of Polish schools, but we are part of an association of supplementary schools, an organisation that is based in Northampton [*official title is the Association of Northamptonshire Supplementary Schools*].

JC: What about funding? Does the association fund or do you have to raise all the money you need yourself through fees and so on?

UK: Everything is financed on our own.

JC: That must be hard?

UK: Yes.

JC: Do parents pay for their children to come here?

UK: Yes.

JC: What are the school hours here for the children? How long do they come here on a Saturday?

UK: 36 Saturdays a year from 10am to 1pm and there are some afterschool activities – drama and English for the parents as well.

JC: I'm in awe, impressive. Well done to you both [*NB: Maria started the school originally*]. Is there anything I haven't asked you that you'd like to say?

UK: We are very, very pleased that we can teach the children Polish and the association of supplementary schools is very helpful. They really support us. All the teachers that come here to teach, they need to be really admired for their work, because practically, it's not financially rewarding. They do it for the love of it.

JC: If there was one thing that you wanted your students to take away from the school here, what would it be?

UK: This year especially we pay most attention to children reading in Polish and understanding Polish because this is getting increasingly difficult with the English school being so dominant in their lives. What happens at school, the children talk to me in Polish, but among themselves they speak English, so we really need to monitor that, so they do speak English in the Polish school.

JC: So you don't have a rule that you have to speak Polish at the Polish school?

UK: Yes, we constantly remind the children that you come here for three hours on a Saturday to speak and learn Polish! So, we just constantly remind them.

JC: When the children go back to Poland, or maybe go for the first time, and they come back firstly are they excited that they can speak Polish to their family, and secondly do they come back with Polish, books, papers, magazines to share?

UK: It depends. Generally, they are excited by the ability to speak to their grandparents in Polish, but children do read in Polish as well.

JC: In England I feel that we sometimes don't value the older generation. Is that different in Poland? Do people generally respect and listen to the elders?

UK: I think it is very similar to England. Television, young people watch telly, and we forget about the experience of older people.

JC: Do you teach Polish history at the school?

UK: Yes. We do teach history because Polish literature it is extremely connected with history so without knowing the historical facts they would not understand.

JC: Is that the same with Geography because the geography of Poland has changed throughout history?

UK: We teach elements of Polish geography two important holidays in Poland. 11 November 1918 – for English people it's just the end of the First World War, but for Polish people it's regaining independence after over 100 years of not having Poland as a country. So that's one, and also 3rd May is Constitution Day, which is again connected with history. Poland was partitioned at the end of 18th century and there were three phases of partitioning. In the second phase (I think) in 1791 there was an attempt to write a constitution, and this was even before any French Constitution during the French Revolution [1799]. So this was quite a significant event. So, it is celebrated in Poland.

JC: So is it a bank holiday in Poland?

UK: Yes, it's a bank holiday.

JC: Great, thank you. Well, that's all my questions. Have I forgotten anything Maria/Ula?

UK: No, I think that's it.

[JC thanks and ends interview.]