

Telling our Stories, Finding our Roots, Exeter's Multi-Coloured History Interview Transcript

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Tell us about your parents

My parents – I have to go back to the beginning of the 2nd World War. My mother came from part of Poland which I think is now Lithuania and she came from a town called Grovnov which is near what is now Vilnius. My parents both lived in places which bordered Poland and my father came from the part of Poland which is now the Ukraine and that was the city of Lvov – I mean it has changed the spelling has altered because after the war all the lands that had belonged to Poland were changed and what was Poland was Ukraine as well and that has now all changed.

What are the names of your parents?

My mother's name was Wacława and her surname was Zambrzyka. My father's name was Dominik and his surname was Maciejko which was Ukrainian although both my parents were Catholic so they considered themselves Poles.

Roughly when were they born?

My mother was born in 1914 and my father in 1905.

As I say, they both lived along the borderlands although they never met. My mother had quite a privileged childhood although her father had died before she was actually born and she lived with her mother up until she was 7 and then she went to live with her Aunt and Uncle as my grandmother lived out in the middle of nowhere and mother went and lived with her Uncle who had two children and they were actually taught at home. My mother went to boarding school when she was 11. My father came from a very poor background. I often say to my grandson, because he says of people who live in social houses they are unemployed and poor, and I say you don't know what poverty is. My grandfather had a tiny bit of land and what he grew they ate.

They lived in a tiny little hut which the Poles call 'hawupa' a really tiny dwelling and my father had two sisters one was older than him and one a lot younger. My father did really well at school, he got scholarships and went away to a boarding school run by priests, the Jesuits, and he was very academic and literally dragged his family out of poverty. When he finished school he got scholarships and went away to university at Lvov to law school there and practised as a lawyer in Lvov and he actually got married to his first wife and they had a daughter and I think life was very good for him.

With my mother, she got engaged when she was about 20 but it never came to anything. As I say she had a very privileged life and everything went on very well

until 1939 when war broke out and part of Poland was actually invaded by the Germans and the other part was invaded by the Russians because the Russians and Germans signed a pact, a non-aggressive pact, and the borderlands which were actually invaded by the Russians they transported - and I mean not just pack your bags and get put onto the next train to Russia – they arrested a lot of anyone they classed as intellectuals, any government officials, policemen anyone who had any land they arrested and put on cattle wagons. There were even times when babies came along and they died on the journey because it was thousands and thousands of miles.

They took them out into the middle of nowhere into Kazakhstan all over Siberia and my mother and my grandmother and my mother's fiancée's grandmother, because by that time my mother had been engaged again but her fiancée obviously joined up and he was killed because in those days there was actually a cavalry section in the Polish army and my mother's fiancée was killed in the first few weeks of the war. But anyway the three of them, my mother, my grandmother and my mother's mother-in-law to be, they were literally given about half an hour to pack a few things and on the cattle wagon, no reasons given just they met all the criteria of the people the Russians wanted to get rid of. And they were put on a train and I think the journey and all must have taken, I don't know how long – my mum was never sure how long it took because they were only let out once every 48 hours so you can imagine what the conditions were like on these cattle wagons. Anyway so I think the journey took about 4-5 weeks and in a way they were the lucky ones. There were loads of kids with their mothers – not many men because the men as I said had been arrested and put through interrogation, a lot of them were actually shot just put in basements and shot against the wall. My mother and granny and her other old lady were just dumped in the middle of nowhere in a settlement with about 100 other Poles, there wee children - a lot of them got dysentery, typhoid and literally they were just dumped in the middle of nowhere in a place where there were forests but nothing else. But luckily there were local peasants and mum always used to say they were very helpful and they managed to get them into some sort of settlements.

Do you know where they were?

It was somewhere in Kazakhstan I know that and now I've got to go to my father's side of the story because what happens to the Poles that had gone with my mother, their future was affected by where my father was, and my father was taken, he was in Lvov and he was arrested and like a lot of people from my father's background who had education they were actually arrested and interrogated and put in prison .. There were also Polish army officers and a lot of them were shot my father hadn't joined the army. And when he was transported to somewhere in Siberia – he didn't like talking about it but his conditions were even worse than my mother's and granny's because he was carted off to hard labour. The men were digging railways, they were put in mines and then in 1940-41 the Germans decided that they wanted to invade Russia and that's when the Russians decided that they wanted to join the Allies, because I think by that time America had joined the war.

No, it was a bit later.

It must have been about 1940-41-42 as I say when Germany started trying to invade Russia the Russians panicked and they did want to become Allies with the Brits and later with the Americans and there was one particular General, General Anders who

was Polish but I think he originated from Sweden, but anyway he was a Pole and he managed to get a Polish army together in Siberia, because at that point what the Brits said was "OK Stalin you can come in with us and you can be our Ally but you have to let all your political prisoners go" which meant all the people that they transported from Poland, Czechoslovakia as well.

That meant at that point there were a lot of fairly high-ranking Polish officers that had been shot in a wood in a forest called Katyn and there has been lots of books written about that incident, there's also been a film so I won't bother going into that, so when the Russians changed sides they said we are going to let all our political prisoners go and when the Brits said OK when you let them go if any of the men or women want to join us in the army they should be allowed to. Now there was a Polish government in exile by that time in London and they were in touch with General Anders who did his utmost to get as many men from Siberia together, march them across Russia in a very, very long journey.

They then ended up in what was Persia which is now Iran and the thing was he had no money, no equipment – a lot of these men had suffered awful conditions and there was a lot of what would have been termed a lost generation of children that had been just plucked out of Poland at the age of 5/6 so they had no education, but anyway General Anders managed to get this Polish Army together and they were formed into what was called the Polish 2nd Corps. I do have to say he saved thousands and thousands of people in Siberia, he just didn't get the men together, he also said if I can't take the women and children out of Russia then I am not going to take the men out so you have got no choice and he did get help from the Brits and he marched thousands of them through Siberia and into Persia.

Including your parents?

Yes my mother and my granny, my mother's future mother-in-law of course she died. It was mostly children and old people, they just didn't make the journey – there was no proper health care, the food was very sparse and a lot of children died and the same goes for the old people and there was also a case – I read a book – there was a mother and her son, he was only about 7 or 8 and I find this quite emotional when I talk about it. The mother was very ill and she knew she was dying and couldn't make the trip with the Polish army and she just said to her little boy just walk and go as long as you are alive. I gave that book to my daughter and she said she could hardly read that chapter without crying. It's strange as people get older and read about these things, it is very sad and anyway apparently the little boy walked and he was picked up by another family, but it's just the way his mother said: 'Please darling, just leave now, I'll always be with you as long as you are alive'.

So anyway the end was that all these Poles, my mother, my granny, my father by that time had obviously joined General Anders' forces although they didn't know one another then my mother and father ended up in Persia.

Did they walk?

They walked part of the way, part of the way there were trucks. It was a horrendous journey it really was, and I think that unless you were there yourself, because I am just describing what people have told me what other Poles have been through with my mother, I had a distant cousin of my mother who was taken to Siberia, she had

three children and she gave birth to her 3rd son about 3 weeks before the Russians arrested her and she had two children, one was about 3 and the other 5, son and daughter and of course she had this baby in her arms and when the Russians came she pleaded with the woman, the nanny, to look after the little baby because she knew it wouldn't survive, so she left the baby with the nanny and took the two children with her through Russia and, to this day, my cousin Alex, who can't forgive his mother for leaving him behind, but he's talked to people and read up things and he now agrees that if his mother had taken him with her, he wouldn't be here today and he spent most of his life in Poland after the war living with his grandmother and he only came to England when he was 15 in the 60's. So he did manage to develop a bond with both his siblings but he did find it difficult to develop a bond with his parents who had come to England after the war because they had both been through Russia. I keep saying to him had his mother taken him he wouldn't be here today.

And did she survive and the other two children?

Yes, the other two children – unfortunately the older brother died about 8 years ago, but he still has a sister in the States and he is very close to his brother. But you know these are stories and there are thousands of stories like it, and of course the people who were taken to Siberia there are very few of them because most of them have died. Like my mother and my cousin Alex's mother have died so really it is just histories that are put on paper and on record.

-end of part 1 -

Tell us a bit more about your father then - so you said he joined Anders army...

He joined Anders army and as I say, the army didn't have, they were given the title the Polish 2nd Corps but they were attached to part of the British forces and when Anders finally managed to get all his men together and all the family and got them into Persia they set up camps and that's when the British came in and they were marvellous, they provided medical care, they sorted out the youngsters because obviously there were boys between 16 and 18, they were really eager to join the army but they haven't even finished their education so Anders formed a committee - a Polish committee and the Brits gave them money to set up school and these kids were taught Polish and English because obviously English was going to be the main language especially if they were going to join the army.

My father at that point had joined the army and he was in the PR section - Public Relations - 2nd Corps and from all the photographs and from what they say I think he thoroughly enjoyed his time. After being in Siberia - I think on average people had been there for two years - it was like coming into paradise, because you had food, the climate was wonderful and there was hope because all along the way the Poles wanted Poland back and that it what the Allies, the Brits, were saying, that we went to war so that Poland and Czechoslovakia could be free.

But unfortunately along the way what the Poles in Anders' army and Anders himself and the Polish Government in exile in London thought, was how can Britain accept the Russians as allies when it was the Russians who invaded them. Because again there was another story, the part of Poland that was invaded by the Germans, everyone knows the history what the Germans did the camps they erected, they killed millions and millions of people just for the religion they were, the Jewish

religion. But there was always very little publicity and knowledge about the other side that went through Russian hands and they were just mostly ordinary Poles that unfortunately had just been transported.

But anyway when they all came together in the Middle East the Second corps was set up and eventually they went on to fight at the battle of Monte Cassino and my father actually went as well and he was very badly wounded, I've actually got a photograph of him in a plaster-cast on his arm and anyway he was so badly wounded he was in hospital for about 3-4 months and when he was better obviously at that time I think the Brits had problems with Palestine and a lot of the army went there but my father actually stayed in Italy and he went back to his PR desk and he loved that because he was very much a people person and he got to travel and pick up news and he loved it.

And anyway eventually my mother and grandmother they were in Persia for quite a while 18 months to 2 years, they were eventually moved to Beirut and my mother got a job as a translator with the Allies and she also taught Polish school. Granny at that point was quite poorly, she lost an eye from a haemorrhage - she was in a hospital run by catholic nuns so mum really went out and she worked and she loved her work, the teaching of the children. These were the Polish children - a lot of them were orphans because going through Russia many people died of dysentery, TB. A lot of these kids came out of Siberia with TB so had to be treated, so it wasn't just teaching them it was looking after their private lives and these kids were kept in what would be termed an orphanage but mum said it was handled beautifully with care and consideration for these children, and that is when she met my father.

I think he had come to Beirut and he was actually stationed at Beirut for a while and they met up. But unfortunately, or fortunately for my mother, my father was already married and he left his wife and daughter in Lvov when he was arrested in 1939 and we are talking now 1943, my parents met and obviously they got on fabulously and I think my father tried to trace his wife but it was next to impossible. I think the Red Cross was doing what they could but were finding it very difficult because at that time the Germans had entered the part of the land that the Russians had occupied and the Russians were forced back so there was no way my father could trace his wife.

He also left his parents and he had two sisters, and one of the sisters was married and she had a son, she couldn't trace them and anyway things went on like that and eventually the war came to a conclusion and unfortunately because the Russians were taken on board as Allies, there was a couple of meetings with Churchill and Eisenhower at that time and Stalin and it was more or less the old story, the old thing they were going to carve up Eastern Europe between them. So this was at the end of the war, it would have been 1945 and the great shock was that Poland lost its borders. The Russians in effect had taken the part of Poland where my parents lived, the borderland - they wanted all of Poland - but basically they said they would give the Poles free elections, the Polish government in exile said no we are not standing for this, we want our country free that's why the Brits and Americans went to war.

It was all very political and, I do have to say, up until a few years ago there was a lot of bad feeling with the old emigres, the old people who had emigrated here like my parents, there was a lot of bad feeling saying that the Allies, the Brits and Americans had let them down. Basically in 1945 it was agreed that the Poles who fought with

the British forces, and it wasn't just General Anders, there was a Panzer division that was stationed up in Scotland, there were quite a few Polish RAF pilots.

There was a squadron in Exeter, I understand?

Yes, I think it was 303 Squadron, I'm not sure, so there were a helluva lot of Polish and Czechs, and the Poles were very bitter because their country in effect was non-existent, Poland didn't exist as it had before the war and basically Churchill and Eisenhower had completely handed over their part of Poland to the Russians. Looking back on it, and I am second generation, I can see how that happened - what were they expected to do, go to war with Russia again? Very difficult and the Russians even had part of Germany and they were promising the Americans and the British that they would be giving free elections to these countries but, as it turned out, there were no free elections, the elections were pre-arranged and prime ministers and government were put in place in Poland, Russia and Eastern Germany and they were really like satellite countries of Russia and the rest people know.

But anyway, a lot of Poles that had fought in the British forces and the families that were brought through the Middle East, a lot of these families did end up in places like South Africa, Australia, New Zealand. Quite a few went to Canada, some even went to Argentina and I actually found a form that my father had filled in, now this must have been filled in in 1945 and it asked the serviceman where they would eventually like to live and my father had actually put South America as his number one country but I think that was before he knew he couldn't actually trace his first wife and I think my parents were then arranging to get married when my father could trace his wife and get a divorce.

So at the end of the war in 1945, they were both in Beirut?

They were in Beirut.

They weren't married?

No they weren't married. My mother was teaching and interpreting for the Allies and my father was in the British forces.

What rank?

He ended up as a Captain and as I say he was still in PR and he was actually sent to London to work alongside the Polish government in exile. So that was his last station, you could call. My mother was still with granny in Beirut with the understanding that once my father was settled, he would eventually get them to England. And at this point, people were being moved on to South Africa, some were moved to Australia but my mother wanted to stay with granny in Beirut until my father could get them into England. Then my father was de-mobbed end of '45 beginning of '46 and I think that was when some of his real problems did start because he wasn't getting his army salary anymore although he was a qualified lawyer and bear in mind he was well into his forties by then, he couldn't practice law in England it wasn't like it is now, now they come over as long as you are in the EU as long as you are a doctor or dentist (I still don't know about lawyers) and you can practice. In those days you had to re-qualify and I could see why.

My mother had a friend who married a doctor and they came over here and he was 50 and he had to re-train, he had to do three years at medical school and he had been an established doctor and he had to start from scratch. But my father was lucky in that he had contacts in England and he didn't go back to university although there was a Polish university in exile set up in London and that was funded by the Polish government in exile which actually came to an end because Churchill said we can't have two governments - one here with a President and one in Poland after the so-called elections had been run. So as far as the Brits were concerned, the only legal government was the one in Warsaw which was Communist.

So anyway, the Poles have always been very good at adapting because Polish history goes back 200 years, the country was divided between the Austrians, the Prussians and the Russians and at one point you weren't even allowed to speak Polish. When you went to school if you were in the Russian part you spoke Russian if you were in the Austrian part you spoke German and the same in the Prussian part and there was a great joke saying that because it had been split three ways and the borders were always changing (this was pre-1st World War) and there was even a book written by a Pole, an army officer called *The Man in Three Uniforms* because you went to bed as a Russian and you woke up as an Austrian because overnight the borders had changed!

So anyway the Poles were always very good at organising themselves and a lot of Polish organisations suddenly came to life, there was the Polish Red Cross, the Polish Catholic Society and the Polish University in Exile and my father had contacts in London and he did his law articles and he qualified after three years by which time my mother and grandmother had come to England and they were placed in, it wasn't a displaced persons camp, it was really several camps were set up and there was still one up and running in Newton Abbot, there was one in North Wales near Pllwhelli, in Penross, and altogether about 500 of these camps scattered all over England and Scotland because there was a lot of Poles that had settled in Scotland and anyway, as soon as my father got his law articles

Which camp were they in?

Near Liverpool, and my mother was always very quick to do things and her very first job was in a fish & chip shop and obviously granny was very unwell and she was in a nursing home run by nuns again, this is where the Catholic church really came into it, they set up hospitals and homes for displaced persons, and there was even - the British did this - I only learned about it a couple of years ago, they set up a psychiatric hospital just for Poles because there were a lot of Poles with mental health problems - they'd lost their families - what would now be called Post Traumatic Stress.

And anyway granny was in a nursing home in Liverpool and my mother was in the camp working and my father got his first job as a solicitor, although he was always very active in the Polish community, and there was a massive Polish community in London I do have to say, they set up their own newspaper which, to this day, I still get, it is printed in England but is printed for Poles and it is actually called *The Polish Daily* and the *Soldiers Daily*, because originally it was edited and printed for the Polish soldiers and their families.

And my mother came to London and my parents got married by which time my father sorted out his first wife, although I tried to trace my half-sister and I still can't trace

her. I think it could be anything, I'd like to think that she finally got married after the war, changed her surname obviously and that's why I can't trace her. But, you know, the likelihood is that she never survived the war as a baby. But anyway, my father got his first job as a solicitor, my parents married.

When did they marry?

They married in 1951 in London and my father bought their first house which was leasehold. I was born in January 1952 at Queen Charlotte's Hospital and my mother only ever had good things to say about the hospital she found it an absolute heaven to give birth in. As I say, they bought their first house in 1952-3 and I can just remember that house because they had tenants on the first floor and in those days if you bought a property which was leasehold or freehold you couldn't get rid of the tenants so we lived on the ground floor and the tenants lived on the first floor and they were Irish and there were always problems with them.

But anyway, once my parents were settled in that first house in London they got my granny out of the nursing home and granny came and lived with us, then in '54 we moved to Shepherds Bush - I can really remember Shepherds Bush, that's where I saw my very first film when I was about 3 and a half or four it was Lady and the Tramp and granny lived with us although she was completely disabled, she had had a couple of strokes and she was obviously blind by then - she had lost an eye when she was in Beirut. It was a lovely time although I knew I had to go to school but because a lot of our friends were Poles my English was non-existent. Then in 1956 my sister was born.

What's your sister's name?

My sister's name is Grazyna, although most people call her Anna, her second name which is easier. She arrived in 1956 - granny was still alive. Mum was a real stay-at-home Mum, although she had a really good friend, mum always said the friends she made during the war and she made a lot of friends in the Middle East (Polish ladies), they were more or less like family, because a lot of them had lost their families. We had a friend of my mothers, we used to call her Pan Hanka because her name was Hanka but in Polish we don't automatically, like in English you either say you and it doesn't matter like I'm asking you 'would you like a cup of tea?' - in Polish you wouldn't say would you, because you is very personal like in French or German so if you don't know the name you would either call them Pun (Mr) or Pani so we called her Mrs Hanunka and she helped my mother look after my sister and of course look after me.

So in 1957 I started school which I hated, absolutely loathed, I think I could speak 2 or 3 words in English and I was very unhappy, it was a Convent in Notting Hill Gate. Luckily they were very small classes (I've still got a photo of it) there were only about 10 or 11 girls in my class and I cried every day for the first year, I couldn't speak the language, my father used to drop me off and I was always terrified that he wouldn't come for me in the evening. I don't know where that idea came from but I can remember to this day playing games and doing things and in the back of my mind was that dad wouldn't come for me and I would have to sleep here.

Anyway that was in the first year and in the second year I had a really delightful teacher and she said to me "when you are here at school I am your mum and if you have any problems you can come to me", and in the second year I picked up English. How on earth I picked it up I don't know because one day I couldn't speak it and the

next I could, it just clicked. And I was very happy at that school from the second class onwards.

So when did you come to Exeter?

Right, Exeter, basically in the late 50's my mother always wanted us to have proper holidays so I think it was 58 or 59 my father he was an executor to someone who had a house in Devon, in Newton Abbot and he wanted to see the house because it had to be put on the market and we all came as a holiday and we stayed with some friends who lived in Devon and when my mother saw the house, it was a little two-up two-down, she said I want that for my girls so we can come here and have holidays.

And my father was a bit dubious because he was the executor and executors aren't allowed to make a big profit from the will he was looking after. Anyway as it was my mother had a bit of money saved and the house was in an awful state and mum bought the place and we used to come to Devon on holiday every year, we used to come for 6 weeks in the summer and 2 weeks at Easter. We had friends in Exeter and mum just absolutely fell in love with Devon and the first thing she said was you come down in the train and the first thing you see was the beautiful cliffs with the red soil, and she loved it and she said this is where I want to move and my father said Oh God no no!, I'm working and the girls are at school. He said we've got this little holiday house and we are quite happy and mum said No, no I'm not happy I want to move.

The strange thing is, I think it was 1962 or 3 they had these friends in Torquay and they were selling their house they wanted to downsize because their two kids were quite a lot older than us and they wanted to move out into their own space, and my parents then decided to buy this house in Torquay. Unfortunately my father had to work out a notice for I think it was 6 months so I was sent down ahead of them and I boarded for about two terms at the school I eventually became a day girl when my parents moved down. I hated it I have to say and anyway so I moved down first and then my parents moved down and we lived in Torquay up until really my father died in 1969 and that's when my mother moved to Newton Abbot. In '71 I came to Exeter to do my nurse training at the old RD&E in Southernhay

Dean Clarke House?

Then it was called the Royal Devon & Exeter Southernhay because the RD&E was in Heavitree as well so there were two large hospitals, but the main hospital was Southernhay hospital.

Could you just go back a little bit? Which was your school first?

Right my school was Croft Lodge and Stoodleigh Knoll it was one and the same school. Stoodleigh Knoll was, is, in Wellswood in Torquay and that was the boarding school and Croft Lodge was in Torquay and that was the day school, it was the same order of nuns, it was the sisters and the convent.

And do you have any memories, particularly of Exeter, when you first came down here in the late 50's early 60s?

Yes I thought it was a lovely city. If you plonked me down now, do you know Exeter at all? it was just completely different, like a lot of cities they changed in the late 60s 70s. I can remember you could walk through, I remember my father driving through Exeter he actually parked somewhere, and he must have been one of the first people to be given a parking ticket by a warden, because I think these traffic wardens appeared in the mid 60s and I can remember to this day my father was quite gobsmacked because as far as he was concerned you only got parking tickets from a policeman. And coming to Exeter to do the shopping and dad was parked and this 'wasp' appeared (because they used to wear yellow and black) and he slapped a ticket. My father couldn't believe because usually he was quite quick off the mark with remarks. And I remember it because it was the first time we ever saw a traffic warden. And I remember Bobbies which was then Debenhams, but it was called Bobbies on the corner, which is now John Lewis and I remember the House of Fraser but I don't remember what they were called.

Dingles?

No, pre-Dingles it was something else, it was a local family who owned them and my father went when he moved down from London, he actually took early retirement because at that time he would have been late 50s, but he did do part-time work with a firm of solicitors in Newton Abbot and one of the solicitors there had married a 'girl' whose family owned a big store, but for the life of me I can't remember the name of that store but it became Dingles and is now the House of Fraser.

So we used to go in there quite a lot and there was, and still is, on the green a tea-rooms, the one that has netting up and I can remember going in there as early as 61/62 I used to go upstairs and they used to have this huge buffet and my sister and I used to eat ourselves sick. It was just little memories that keep flooding back, downstairs was the tearoom but if you went upstairs they had this huge buffet.

Can you remember how much it cost?

I don't remember, but I can tell you something a gallon of petrol in the 60s was 3/6d but I can't remember that, obviously my parents would have paid for the meal but it was really cheap when you think it was still the old money.

What were the things you particularly liked in the 50s and 60s in Exeter - you know as a teenager and young adult?

I made a lot of friends, I do have to say I loved the seaside so we spent a lot of time by the sea. We used to walk along the river and I can remember where the arches are now, it was all storage and garages and all sorts of things. I can remember walking down there with my parents and the dogs and in those days you could let the dogs run free. I can remember Exeter of old and it has really, really changed. It's funny because sometimes I think 'I must have walked past here somewhere to go down to the river and must have passed this block' and to think years later I would be living here. Because I can remember Stepcote Hill, I can remember as a kid the steps being very steep and very tiring.

Can you tell us a bit about your time when you trained as a nurse?

It was the RD&E and got its royal charter in I think it was the late 1800s. Exeter funny enough wasn't my first choice, Bristol was my first choice and I went up to Bristol to the hospital up there and, in those days, if you were accepted as a student, they made up your uniform and everything from scratch and then I came across someone, I came across a doctor in Exeter and he said to me why on earth are you going to Bristol? You have your mother in Exeter and it's going to be such a long way for you to go. Why don't I give Exeter a ring, I've got a friend who actually runs the school of nursing and, the next day, I went to see the Nursing Officer (then the matron) and she interviewed me and said yes we can offer you a place for training at Exeter.

I think I started in January 1971 and I remember the day I started, the evening I got there, it was snowing and I'd driven up from where my mother lived in Kingskerswell in the snow and I must have got there about 5-6 in the evening and I came in the doors and the matron was welcoming us, I think about 15 of us new nurses, and there was a phone call from my mother saying I had to find out if you got there safely. I remember we all went out that evening, all 15 of us, and we went to the Ship. We walked across Southernhay and the snow was quite thick and I thought to myself, I'm really pleased I am here.

I really enjoyed it. It is a lovely city for young people. It had the nightclubs down on the quay, although in those days there weren't as many. There was one night-club (you remember it Rog?) the Bag of Nails and that was just off South St where the White Hart is, on the corner there is a hairdresser and you go down that lane and there's this really old building which is held up by timber props

On the left just before the underpass?

That's right, and that used to be called the Bag of Nails and in those days the duty time if you were on the day shift would finish at 10 o'clock and we'd be down there at half 10.

In uniform?

No, no definitely not in uniform it probably took me about 15 minutes to get out of my uniform and into my party gear, and we'd run down there literally and in those days they used to close about 12 half 12, but we'd still get about an hour and a half of dancing.

What kind of music?

Oh it was all sorts of music. In those days, what was it? Rock & Roll, Motown. We used to go to the White Hart because that was a lovely place to meet up, especially if you wanted a meal as well. Then I remember after we, because in those days the training was different to what it is now, when you started you did eight weeks in nursing school which was based in the hospital and then you went on the wards, after 5-6 months you went into what was called nursing school again for 4 weeks and at each end of that particular training block, our tutor would take us down for a meal and we would go down to the Prospect, the one down by the river?

At the bottom of the steps?

Yes, opposite the covered market and we would go there for a meal and I don't remember whether we paid or she did - I think you put it in a pot and then she paid. And then I thoroughly enjoyed my training.

Was it for 3 years?

It was 3 years, and then I went to Germany and I worked there for about a year.

Was that with the forces?

No, I worked for a doctor there, and I came home and met my husband, Roger, whose family had lived in Exeter since '64/65. We got married. We went to Coventry because my husband was doing voluntary work, then to cut a long story short, he went to Poly because he wanted to do Biology. Then I had my daughter and we ended up in Exeter again. I had my daughter in 1975. Yes we got married in 1974, had my daughter in 1975 and moved back to Exeter and we've been in Exeter ever since.

So it works for you?

Yes, I think it's a lovely place to bring up a family. You've got all the amenities here. It's still fairly quiet and safe. My daughter went to school in Exeter.

Where did she go?

She went to St Nicholas Primary School which is a Catholic Primary School, then she went to St Sidwell's which is CofE and then she ended up at St Thomas High School and then she did a couple of years at Exeter College, the Tech. I think she was OK with education. She liked Exeter but at the end of her A levels she, like a lot of kids, she wanted to leave home and she went to Worcester she was going to do Geography there at the Uni there. I think she did a year and decided it wasn't for her and she came back to Exeter and worked in Exeter, stayed with us for a bit. It's only recently, I think the last 18 months that she works at Exeter at an Old People's Home, she is what they call an Events Organiser.

Linking everything you told us about your family and your parents and your grandparents, and this long story about Exeter, to what extent do you consider yourself to be Polish or British?

Right, I will say this, in my heart I'm Polish, I always will be Polish, but in my head I am British, definitely.

And how did that work, in your heart, Polish?

I think I am quite emotional, sentimental. As I was saying before, my roots are very important to me. I think as long as I had my parents, they were my country and when they died, I think there is something about the last parent going, no matter what nationality you are, you do feel rootless. But I think, and I have spoken as I say to this cousin of mine who came over here in '56/57, he still goes backwards and forwards all the time because he sees people he knows in Poland and he said to me I love Poland and of course he stayed in Poland a longer time, a completely different

history to mine, but there is no way I'd want to stay there, he loves Britain and I love Britain have to say I really do too.

Have you been to Poland?

Yes, when I was a lot younger before I met my husband. There is a huge Polish community still in London and it's almost like - they call themselves the Polish London. My mother didn't want to have much to do with them because she thought, like my father, that once you are in a country you have to start living within their culture, not to say that you forget your culture, but you have to start living. And I can remember now when I started school I couldn't speak any English, but as soon as I started school the first thing my father did, which I found very upsetting, is he got rid of all our Polish books, yeah. And he said from now on, English. But, he still spoke Polish at home. My parents still read Polish books but, as children, I had all my Polish books taken away from me.

So, how much Polish language do you retain?

Quite a bit. I have to say that the Poles who come over here now - you've probably noticed there are quite a few Polish families here - I hear the Polish and it brings back so many memories but then I think to myself, I hope to God, the kids learn a bit of English before they start school because I would not want a child to go through what I went through. It wasn't physical, it was mental but I think schools now have all sort of teaching assistants like that. But I think with my sister, she's lucky she was 5 years younger than I was and she picked up quite a bit of English from me and I think my parents had learnt their lesson and my sister started school and it was quite a normal start for a child. But with me, I will never forget not being able to understand or to speak and this awful thought in my mind that dad was not going to come back for me.

There were no other Polish speaking children in your school?

There was one girl and I remember her name to this day: Margaret Ostrowska and she was lucky, she had an English upbringing in that her mother (her father was dead) worked full-time and she had an English nanny and she was a saviour for me because she started the following term after I started and her English was quite good and I used to tag along with her and I think if it wasn't for her and that teacher in my second year infants, I don't know. But I think children do absorb languages, but I think there comes a point when they can't absorb them. I know this cousin of mine Alex he said. how shall I put it, his outlet was athletics, he was always very good at sport. But I think the younger you teach children, they do pick up language very quickly.

Could you tell us something in Polish?

I shall say what I said in English a few minutes ago. [speaks in Polish] Which means in my heart I am Polish but in my head I think I am British. That's about it Roger, isn't it that describes me. I am very nostalgic but I do have to say I don't, like my cousin, I don't think I'd like to settle in Poland because this is my home. And I know when I worked in Germany, when I was coming back on the plane, to hear proper English voices spoken, was lovely. You know, I thought great, English!

Are there any practical ways in which you express Polish, being Polish - food, or festivals or culture?

Temper, I think temper... Festivals, Christmas even to this day although my parents have gone now and my sister, my husband and I and my daughter and grandson we exchange presents Christmas Eve because Poles usually have this big Christmas meal which is called Vigilia. It's like 'the vigil' and you are supposed to go to church, midnight mass, but we have our meal Christmas Eve and it's a mostly fish and we exchange presents. We celebrate Christmas day the same, you know, with another meal.

What else do I do that's Polish? The food, the cooking, although my husband doesn't like a lot of the stuff like cabbage, beetroot.. you love Polish sausage, don't you when I get it? And of course I'm spoilt for choice now because there's a massive Polish shop on Exe Bridges. When I went down there, I went down last year the day before Christmas Eve and they'd just moved in there because they were in a smaller shop on Bartholomew St and they'd just moved in and there was a queue, like a massive long snake and it started outside the shop and all I wanted to get was some red cabbage, a few little bits and pieces, like candies and cakes and I thought it isn't worth queueing, but yes I queued and it took me 45 minutes! From the end of the queue to the counter, and there was Polish voices with dialects from all over Poland. There was even a Ukrainian voice there and I thought: my God, you know. But now there's even another Polish shop along Sidwell Street and I went there and got a few things the other day.

And how do you feel about this new wave of Poles?

I don't think they are anything like I was or my parents or family were. They are here primarily to make a life for themselves financially. We were here because we had no country to go back to. We had no choices we had no country to go back to, we had to make England our choice, our land. What the Poles formed in the 50s and 60s was their own Poland and up until a few years ago, Ilford Park, Stover Park near Newton Abbot, a lot of the Poles there are very old without people to look after them or else a lot of Poles which were illiterate - they weren't literate in their own language never mind English.

There was a BBC film about it?

Yeah, there was another camp in North Wales that we used to go to – my father was a Governor there – it was the same sort of thing- it was Polish peasants normally they'd come across because a lot of the men had been in the forces, when they were de-mobbed, they didn't really have the initiative to move out. My mother moved out of the camp with granny in Liverpool because she married my father and my father managed to make a really good life for us all. But there were families who needed help and they were all based, this was a few years ago, at Ilford Park. Now it's a massive building because before it was like little huts, little hawupas, as I call them, and it was like a village. Now I think it's purely for the elderly and a lot of the elderly Poles will go there to retire. I think they also have tourists going there and as I said the one in Wales is even a step up because that became a Trust and I think the residents could buy the flats and their little houses.

The people that have come in now from Poland they are totally different, they are here, a lot of them are single young men and single young girls, some of them will stay, a lot of them that have got qualifications will stay. I have to say in the bank in Exeter Lloyds TSB, they had a Polish girl, girl early 30's, and her English was marvellous. I used to say to her, you are so good and she said I took English when I was very young when I was 7, and she rose up through Lloyds TSB and she started here but I think she got moved on to London somewhere. She handled my accounts which was really nice.

Then there was another Polish girl in Vision Express - she was going to stay in England because she said there was a good career structure in Vision Express. Then the dentists - we went to a Polish dentist in Heavitree and he did quite well for himself - he set up a practise in Exmouth with a friend of his. So, yes, I think the Poles are very adaptable but they are lucky, this generation of Poles coming here, when push comes to shove, they can go home.

Do you still have friends, you talked about the lady Pani Hunka?

No, she died just after my father died, in 1969. She popped her clogs in 1974. She had friends in London that she wanted to stay with and I used to go and see her on a regular basis and my parents, especially my mother, she kept in touch with lots of her Polish friends and they used to come down here for holidays and things. Since my mother died I have lost touch with a lot, but having said that my mother's generation now would be in their 80s and 90s. I haven't really kept in touch with her but there was a girl I knew for years and years - her parents were friends with my parents - the father was a pharmacist and she runs two or three pharmacy shops now - she did pharmacy at college - and she married a Pole like myself, who was born over here and when I spoke to her a few years back - we were talking English and Polish - and she said days go by that I don't utter or hear a word of English because the community that her shops are in, it's all Poles and Middle Eastern people and she says there are days when I don't hear English spoken.

But that doesn't apply in Exeter, I suppose?

No, do you know, apart from Poles there are very few other nationalities - there are quite a few Chinese and Japanese, but I think they come over here to learn the language, don't they, I don't think they settle here?

If there was something you wanted to say, if there was a message you wanted to give to Exeter about that kind of multiculturalism and people living together and that sort of thing, thinking about your life experience and this wonderful journey, the distance that your parents travelled was extraordinary.

It wasn't just my parents, there were thousands and thousands and I think something like 100,000 which now doesn't seem a lot, but then it was because obviously the population of Britain was a lot smaller then, the native population was a lot smaller, was quite big, loads of Poles and I think there are still places, and I say London because I think this is where they seem to come from they venture to Exeter and Bristol and places like that, there are still places where you can exist without knowing English and I think that the diversity and the different nationalities are lovely and I love hearing these Polish voices in Exeter, I really do and I think it must be over 3 or 4 years and I go into town and I hear Polish voices on average 2 or 3 times whether

its single people or Polish families together and I want to say to Exeter welcome all these people but one thing, if you are going to stay in a country, you have to start learning the culture of that country, because until you do eventually you can become very isolated. But yes, please Exeter, welcome as many as possible and I am talking now of that 5-6yr old who was very unhappy. I wouldn't like any child to go through that now.

Thank you Bozenka, that was a pleasure. Is there anything else you want to tell us?

Yes, one thing I would love to say and it's not just about Exeter but about the whole of Britain, especially the English, I love their love and concern for the welfare of animals and I think that is the reason why I would not want to go and live elsewhere - it sounds sentimental but that sort of nurture and welfare of animals, because I think it says a lot about people who care for the welfare of animals are going to be interested in another human being and you know that says a lot about the English and a lot about Exeter, because Exeter is still mainly English isn't it? .

Wonderful!

Well it's been a real pleasure, because I've been wanting to get this down for a long time. I wanted to do it for my daughter and grandson as well and also there is, I must just say this, this is by-the-by, one of these Polish organisations is the Polish Museum, now what are they called, they are based in London and they keep all the records of all the servicemen who served in the British forces and they do keep a lot of records and I think when my father died, my mother sent a lot of stuff up to them because they do keep records.

So they have got stuff about your dad?

Yes about everyone and in actual fact I got in touch with them and I wanted my father's army records because I wanted to send to my sister, and they are really good, they pointed me in the right direction where all these service records are kept and it took her a couple of months but they sent me all my father's details, his last address even a little couple of sentences to say my father had worked for a paper in Lvov as a journalist.

You said your father was in PR in the army, so was he helping to publicise the role of the 2nd Corps?

Yes, what it was, I think he was trying to link up a bit like personnel because obviously the British army was involved and I think he was like a link between the British and the Polish.

A Liaison Officer?

Yes, because I have got some sort of letter of authority to say my father has a camera and he is allowed to take photographs of certain places, so yes I think it was just a Liaison Officer, Public Relations literally. Because of course a lot of these people who have come couldn't speak very good English and a lot of these young children who hadn't had much of a Polish education because of the war, but they also had to be taught English. My father wasn't the only one, I think there must have been a whole department in the Second Corps who dealt with liaising with the British what

was going to happen eventually, what was going to happen there, who was going to be moved on to South Africa, elsewhere. India was another place apparently where a lot of displaced Poles went and then from India they would either go to Canada or England. But my father was lucky in the sense that he had been posted to London at the end of the war and he was there when he was de-mobbed and he was just lucky that he had contacts so he could get a job.

May I take your photo?

Have you heard about Wojtek, the Soldier Bear?

Yes, it appears in the paper all the time.

Did your dad know about it, him?

No, you know I don't think he did. Father wasn't very forthcoming about animals and things. I always remember because we always had dogs and I was mmmm and dad would say you don't love animals you only love people. And I was only about 12 and I said well I love you then. But the name was Wojtek? the animal the bear was, he was with soldiers but I don't think my father had anything to do with that. But he became something like a symbol didn't he? There's a lot of it in the Polish Daily paper about it.