

Telling our Stories, Finding our Roots
Interview summary Transcript

Name of interviewee **Magda from Poland**
Name of interviewers Chantal Kouadio and Di Cooper
Date of interview: 27/2/13
Location of interview: Magda's home
Transcribed by: Di Cooper

Topic

Introduction about project

Start of interview

Name - Magdalena – people call me Magda, am 33, born in 1979
Come from Poland-Poznan a city in Western Poland.

Does your name have a special meaning?

Not aware, traditional to connect name to saint's name, link to Mary Magdalene– second name is Eva, also has biblical connection.

Any family in Exeter?

In-laws, have my husband's family in Exeter, my English family,
Own family and friends are in Poland.
Only me here, not my parents, no relatives here.

Coming to Exeter?

Came here in December 2004, probably dark and wet on that day, arrived by coach as not so many cheap flights, now flights to all main cities in Poland
24-hour journey from Poland to London Victoria, then to Exeter.
First impressions of Exeter very positive, hadn't lived anywhere else in England, came as had friends here
Then travelled quite a lot through other parts of England, good, increased knowledge of England.

Why chose Exeter?

No particular reason, couple of friends here, just graduated in Poland, borders opened, Poland joined EU 2004, came because I could. Strange, but had travelled quite a lot in Europe, studied languages, spent holidays abroad. Opportunity to come and live somewhere, with bunch of people I knew, they had happened to choose Exeter, I followed.

Living here?

First thing, size, used to Poznan - a city the size of Bristol, with quite a lot of everything, Exeter a miniature, different scale. Only one university, only one theatre - Exeter seems more like a town, things happening but sometimes wish there was a bit more.

Back to Poland, any special celebrations, festivals? Any you import from there to here?

Around Christmas, marrying into English family, they now have extra holiday.

Celebrate Christmas Eve, special meal, with special food and symbols. Brought this with me, to share with my husband's family. They come over to share the celebration with us.

Special occasions?

Wedding important, knew our wedding had to be in Poland, did not like fact that people would have to buy own drinks in England, very strange tradition. For a wedding in Poland bottles of vodka on every table, people dancing to 4 – 5 a.m.

17 guests travelled to Poland, quite cultural exchange, never travelled to Poland before. Really interesting for them to come to see, over long weekend.

Polish community in Exeter

Well organized, a lot came after 2004 and stayed. Polish Saturday school, 2-3 Polish shops in Exeter, good network of knowing one another, hanging out together. Know through work, friends of friends.

Setting up Polish association, called 'Polonika', great fun, met couple of like-minded people who wanted to do something together.

Is Association still going?

People now very busy with lives. Did put on events, did things in school, did things at Sidwell Centre, 3 Christmas Eves, carol singing.

At first need for people to get together, needed help. Those deciding to stay now settled very well, not so much need. Children in school, have flats, houses, better jobs. Not such need, as in early days.

Early days everyone had same problems, a lot of practical stuff.

Rules and formalities not aware of.

People from Citizens Advice Bureau, came to explain formalities, banks, NHS, things like that.

People now gone back, 2007-08-09 economic migration, could earn 3-4 times more. Earn money to send children to university, clear plan, currency changed, £ not worth so much, contributed to return.

Are you going to stay?

Difficult about going back. Happy and fulfilled here in Exeter, but still missing home feeling.

Sometimes don't think about it, at certain times of year feel it more, always there.

Think might go back, but not in near future, settled here, husband here, family here. Everything going really good.

Children?

Don't have children, have step-children.

Very difficult to go back, have to start from scratch back home.

Work?

Work for self, on contract basis, lead different projects for NHS. Project to run, organize, plan, health & social care, lot of flexibility, great.

Changed jobs many times. First job in bowling centre, working in bar, shows entry point for everyone coming.

Move from bar work to social work?

Easy in sense, done it, but not easy. Bar work, but wanted office based job. Applied and got job

in language school, worked as assistant to receptionist, photocopying, typing.
Job as secretary, admin. At University, 2 years, springboard to something else. Always been happy & lucky with people worked with, meet people on way who could help with next step. Importance of having knowledge of English, but still had to work through glass ceiling, at every work place.

Now, as freelance manager, get asked less and less where come from. When came, everyone asked, why am here, people tried to find common ground, 'knew someone Polish'.

In which part of the city have you lived?

Now in brand new part of Exeter, been here 2 years, being built – The Rydons. Lived in Pinhoe and Polsloe, now have own house here.

Are you afraid of being in any part of the city?

Not afraid of any part, I love city centre, especially with Princesshay shopping mall.

Things you like?

Sushi bar, very happy. Can buy things I like. There are the Polish shops if I want Polish things.

Friends?

Most friends Polish to begin with, lots through work, circles of friends started to grow, invited to different things.

A lot through Polish assoc., like-minded, still in touch. Easy to make friends for me.

What do you do in your spare time?

Favourite thing to do now, walk dog, finding different places, parks, places where can walk with dog, like to walk on Quay.

Schools?

Don't know anything about schools, since do not have children.

Are you member of a faith group?

Catholic, attend church in Heavitree Rd., met people there. Also had Polish masses in South St. once a month. Met Polish friends.

What radio, tv programmes do you like to listen to/watch?

Watch anything on English telly, also have Polish telly, important, special box for Polish channels.

Do you take part in sport?

Do not play any sport. Basketball when young. Do enjoy Zumba, do every Mon. and Friday, also swim. Try to keep myself active.

Do you watch sport?

No. Sometimes watch world cup, important Football with husband.

Other languages?

French, and Swedish, this was other language chosen when studying. Not used for many years. French, not spoken for some time either, could not do this interview in French.

Do you use internet?

Yes, Skype, emails, keep in touch with everyone.

Have you been on tv or radio?

Not on tv, been on radio, here in Exeter. BBC Devon wanted interview on what like to be as migrant worker. Very interesting but asked lot of leading questions, not very nice at all. Myths about people coming here and taking jobs, not very nice, not very friendly. However, felt must be doing something right if on Radio Devon. But very stressful experience. People could not understand why Poles had come over, trying to find out more.

Are any of your own family here?

All family in Poland. Have brother who has been over here, several times. He stayed for couple of months, tried to work, see what was available. He is an artist, wanted to interest people in his work, portraits, sculptures, not good idea, 2 months not long enough to make good contacts. Friends do come over to visit. Husband and I go to Poland every year, my mother coming over for Easter. Easy way for me to go to Poland, flight from Bristol. Also keep in touch through skype, quite easy to keep in touch now.

(short break)

Coming back – question about how do you consider yourself, Polish...?

100% Polish. Next, European, quite important to me, it's difficult to explain, perhaps to understand, when my country joined European Union possibilities of movement across Europe, people my age, studying together, we were ready to spring and travel abroad, ready to take opportunities. Different friends moved to Sweden, to Germany, natural to us, borders opened, could travel with having ID.

If could explain, before opening up, if coming to England, need to apply for visa, get visa. When landed, two queues – EU / non EU – have to go through non EU, fourteen times longer than EU queue. People just go through that queue. Need on arrival to show bank statement to show you have 'x' amount of money in your account, produce address, name of person you will be staying with, and they would phone that person to ask if this is true. Very unpleasant.

Similar when went to Sweden, accepted on language course, then exactly same process, two queues, there for hours, eventually reached guy who then checked every single detail, which language school, every detail, found it very humiliating. Marked very clearly difference between those with freedom to travel, and those from non EU countries, just felt horrible. When changed made things easy, free, now I am Polish but have the European experience too.

Further questions about interview with BBC Radio Devon - notion of Polish people coming to take people's jobs. How do you feel about that?

Horrible, leading questions. What trying to do was address people's concerns, a lot of Polish people came, Exeter had 4,000 people arriving in very short space of time, suddenly was an issue. Guess it is against any group, of any other nationality, ethnic group, who comes over, to any country in the world. Completely natural, unfortunately, thing to see them as threat, 'We need to have jobs, this is our country', want to protect. That will never change, there will always be discrimination.

What did your family feel when you decided to move down here – for you as a young girl?

Think for long time they thought I would come back, kept asking, when are you coming back? Would tell them had really good job, just a bit longer, then met this amazing guy, actually asked me to marry him. Once that happened, really meant I was settling here for good. Think they understood, They miss me a lot, but they know that I am very settled, am very happy.

Have people been rude to you because of your origin?

I haven't met anybody rude, think English people always very polite, but don't necessarily tell you what they think to your face, it's important to be polite
Also because of work, because office based, only very short time when working in bar, then moved to office jobs where everyone very friendly. Annoying to always have to spell my maiden name, ten times a day. Funnily enough, mentioned already, glass ceiling with jobs, quite difficult, difficult to move on to job where could use qualifications, what qualified to do.
On discrimination, really difficult to explain, done in really good faith. Really big thing – my employer wanted to set up BME (black and minority ethnic) network, for employees. This fine but invitation only sent out to people who had foreign-sounding last name. Not open to anyone generally. I was sitting in an office with guy, doing finance, from Holland, lady in marketing from Canada, and my boss half American. I was only one who had letter. If looking at ethnic minorities, they would be in same boat. They were not picked up. I was very upset about it, as being singled out because I had funny-sounding last name. Just because had funny-sounding last name, would have something to talk about, quite ridiculous. Very upset.
Boss recognized how upset I was, and suggested that I should do something about it. Or asked if she should feed it back? Yes. Person responsible came down, had not thought that it would upset people. Quite interesting. Always felt equal, suddenly singled out.

Question whether friends experienced any racism?

Yes, really think depends on type of work you do, a lot of people in factories, production line, cleaning companies, manual work, or farming, they experienced horrendous discrimination. These sorts of places where bosses abuse their power. I had support when I was upset about my experience. Know of some horrible stories of not being paid, being paid below minimum wage. People who have had accidents, no insurance. Sacked because they're pregnant. A lot of discrimination in the workplace. Definitely depends on workplace, and who you meet.

What's your impression of the Police?

Love fact they have horses. Not have had much to do with police. Took me some time to see that police completely different here than in Poland. Concept of being approachable, and friendly on street. Also practical stuff, crime detection. Guess again easier, because of work I was doing. When in community development work, invited police officers to talk to group of Polish people on how can feel safe in Exeter, that police can help them.

How are police in Poland different?

Because when Poland still communist country, police were part of the oppressive state, so they were basically seen as the enemy. Changed in the nineties but takes a lot of time to change the culture. Think much better now.
As example, approach to domestic violence. I supported Polish ladies here around this issue. Have found police response brilliant in comparison with what may have expected in my country. Very well organized. That my experience second-hand. Still not first port of call for many people. People from Poland get on with things themselves.

How do you find the council?

Council fine, never had much to do with them. If asked anyone who needed housing benefit, different story. May be tell you that no interpreter available, may be that were not treated in totally appropriate way. If in position of not speaking language, do not know rules, it's easy to feel lost or be very open to discrimination. Wrong information, people dismissing you, that was why Polish Association so important. Actually entitled, this is how you can do things.
Polish Association would talk about role of police, how to approach things if have problems, if entitled to benefits, how to go about it. How to get kids to school. How to ask for translator.

Some organisations do not have help but with Health Service can ask for interpreter. Information is there, but people not aware of it. If do not know language, or only in limited way, that's where problems come.

Authorities very helpful when setting up Association, very easy to set up organization. Offering venues. At this time, when many Polish people coming, city council wanting to reach out to Polish community, don't think that's case any more. At that time, a lot of agencies wanting to respond to 'x' amount of Polish people asking about same thing.

Do you support a political party?

No.

Views on national debates? Gay marriage, that kind of stuff..

Not very much into that at all.

How do you see communities in Exeter? Together?

Think they come together, see it in Respect Festival. Favourite event in Exeter, so vibrant, see how multicultural this place is, really like it. Lot of hidden communities, hidden people, not connected, but are some ways and community centres where people can get together, at multi cultural events, and clubs.

Cultural question? A song, can you sing song in Polish?

Cannot really sing.

Something to contribute to our night? Something for the new generation of migrants? Not really.

Question about bi-cultural marriage?

Depends on individual and person. Lucky enough to have in-laws and family who have incorporated some of Polishness with me. Have bi-lingual Christmases, bring Easter traditions to family did not have before. Easy for me because live in England, take part in everything. Challenge to maintain this, to make it happen, real effort to keep it up, no one else thinking about the same things as I do. Have to make effort to make it a bi-cultural marriage, not English one. Be very easy for it to just be English one as we are living in England.

Pets are bi-lingual. Talk to cat and dog in Polish. Definitely bi-lingual. Husband is bi-lingual, but perhaps knows same no. of words as dog and cat. Not many, but can communicate in basic way. That's nice.

What message do you have to Exeter people?

Something about being just open to the changing history. Would like to see Exeter as place which is actually proud of different nationalities and people who live here. In every place, every work place, rather than just ones I had chance to be in. Celebrate it a little bit more. Everybody forgets how we contribute to the way it is, a really nice place to live.

How to make this happen?

Would love Respect Festival to be twice a year, to last longer, to have greater effect on people. Such a nice celebration, rather than everybody going back to just the way they used to be. Be open. Happy about fact that people come here and want to live here.

Is there anything else you would like to say?

Think have covered it. Think that's that.

Thank you very much. This has been great pleasure. Thank you for your time.

End of interview