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After my Polish grandmother died, I did not speak her native language for 40 years

My grandmother taught me Polish. After her death, I stopped speaking it. Then, 40 years later, my childhood language resurfaced

Joanna Czechowska
The Guardian, Thursday 16 July 2009

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Joanna Czechowska, who learned Polish as a child from her grandmother Photograph: Frank Baron

As a child growing up in Derby in the 60s I spoke Polish beautifully, thanks to my grandmother. While my mother went out to work, my grandmother, who spoke no English, looked after me, teaching me to speak her native tongue. Babcia, as we called her, dressed in black with stout brown shoes, wore her grey hair in a bun, and carried a walking stick. She was the hub of our household – she could cook Polish delicacies, play Chopin on the piano and make paper storks. I adored her.

My father, Jerzy, had escaped from Poland after the Germans invaded, travelling on foot across Europe to England, where he became a pilot in the RAF. At the end of the war, he met my English mother at a dance organised by my maternal grandfather to help lonely young Polish pilots. In 1957, he arranged for my grandmother, Maria, who was living in a tiny flat in Warsaw in increasing distress under the privations of communism, to come to the UK.

Like other Polish families in the area, we spent our weekends in the vast Polish club that kept our community's culture alive. My father helped to establish Dom Polski (Polish House) in the 1950s and it was known as the air force club because the founders were pilots. It provided a focus for all those old comrades and their history. I remember one woman at the club who had a concentration camp number tattooed on her arm, and another whose husband and daughter got off the train transporting them to Siberia to buy bread, only for the train to leave without them. She never saw them again. There were people who had been taken east through Russia as slave labour, others who were taken west to provide a workforce for German farms and factories.

The walls of the club were covered with black-and-white photos of Polish pilots, and a huge propeller from a Spitfire was fixed to one wall. On Saturday mornings my sisters and I would study Polish at the school it ran, and on Saturday nights, my parents would go dancing. On Sundays, we played tombola there over lunch.

But my love affair with Polish culture began to fade when I was five – the year Babcia died. We had been so close that when she was dying, her last words were to ask that I should be looked after. I couldn't believe she was dead, and went from being confident and cocky to a very quiet child.

Without Babcia's childcare, my mother had to give up her full-time job and take part-time work in a school across the road. I was placed in the reception class and, accustomed to being at home alone with Babcia, I hated it. I don't remember making a conscious decision, but in shock I refused to speak Polish until I saw Babcia again.

My sisters and I continued to go to Polish school, but the language would not return. Despite the efforts of my father, even a family trip to Poland in 1965 could not bring it back. When six years later my father died too, at just 53, our Polish connection almost ceased to exist. I left Derby and went to university in London. I never spoke Polish, never ate Polish food nor visited Poland. My childhood was gone and almost forgotten.

Then in 2004, more than 30 years later, things changed again. A new wave of Polish immigrants had arrived and I began to hear the language of my childhood all around me – every time I got on a bus. I saw Polish news-papers in the capital and Polish food for sale in the shops. The language sounded so familiar yet somehow distant – as if it were something I tried to grab but was always out of reach.

In Derby, Dom Polski had closed down. The building was decaying and up for rent; the old soldiers and air force men were almost all dead, and the second and third generations too busy to worry about it. But my memory had been jogged. I began to write a novel about a fictional Polish family and, at the same time, decided to enrol at a Polish language school.

Each week I went through half-remembered phrases, getting bogged down in the intricate grammar and impossible inflections. When my book was published, it put me back in touch with schoolfriends who like me were second-generation Polish. And strangely, in my language classes, I still had my accent and I found words and phrases would sometimes come unbidden, long lost speech patterns making a sudden reappearance. I had found my childhood again •

Joanna Czechowska

The Black Madonna of Derby is published by Silkmill Press at £7.99 (also available in Polish under the title Goodbye Polsko)

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