



norfolk polish heritage group
polonijna grupa z norfolk

Summary of Elisabeth Koźmian's recorded life story

Interview by Adrian Żółkowski-O'dell (NPHG) 21.06.2022

Elisabeth Koźmian was born in Warsaw in 1944 during the Uprising. Her mother, Lily Tkaczyk was a beautiful young woman who came from a modest Warsaw family. Her father, Jan Koźmian (born 1896), was a wealthy gentry farmer and he fell in love with her. Her mother used to sing in cabaret and they met at one such event.

The Koźmian family came from the countryside of Lubelskie, near Lublin whose landscape and agriculture is very similar to Norfolk but it is remote from the sea. Jan inherited a 1,500 hectare (3,700 acres) estate when he was six from a maternal uncle, in spite of the fact that he was the youngest of five siblings. Elisabeth knew only her maternal grandmother who used to read her grown-up stories when she was a tiny child.

Before WWI, Jan studied Agriculture at Vienna University but hostilities interrupted that activity. In 1920 he wanted to enlist for the fight against the Bolsheviks but he had poor eyesight so he became a translator for the French Mission which was helping the Polish Army. He managed his huge estate very well but was also able to travel widely abroad, writing about his adventures which included a safari in Africa in 1933.

He did not join the military in WWII as he had to keep farming but he was obliged to accommodate German officers on the estate. While he was doing that he assisted Polish independence fighters living in the forests risking his life in the process. Many of the German officers he accommodated had anti-Hitler sentiments and they didn't want to go to Russia to fight there.

After the War, Elisabeth was raised in a tiny flat in Warsaw, now nearly completely destroyed by the Germans. The family had planned to return to their property near Lublin but the Communist authorities sized their land without any form of compensation. Her parents were friendly with some American diplomats who wanted to take the family back with them to the U.S.A. in 1949 but her father was determined to stay in his homeland.

Elisabeth went to one of the best state high schools in Warsaw and her favourite subjects were History, Geography, Polish and French languages and Art. She went to Warsaw University and spent two periods in France, which she loved. In 1964 she was invited to go to London by her uncle Andrzej to improve her English. She had decided to stay abroad for two or three years but didn't tell her parents or friends.

Unfortunately her uncle died of cancer just before she set off to the UK but she still went and stayed with distant relatives. She enrolled for English lessons but was frustrated because she couldn't understand British television or English speakers. However, with practise she began to improve and found a job as an au pair and then earned a qualification

teaching English as a foreign language and she also graduated with a BA Honours degree in French and Art History at London University Birkbeck College in 1971.

As a teenager, Elisabeth had enjoyed painting and drawing and also loved the cinema but her parents would not let her study that. However, in London she managed to get a place at the International Film School and became a documentary film editor, working mainly in the Soho area with small film companies. She married a fellow student, Peter Sinclair, and became a British national, at that time having to give up her Polish citizenship. The relationship did not last long.

Elisabeth continued with the film editing self-employed; then there was not work (in the 1970s) and she had to keep moving, staying with friends. But she got a job in the British civil service film department, a life-saver and later made her own documentaries, focusing on women artists. Then she met her current husband, Peter Ledward, an architect. They wanted to have children but only on the condition that Elisabeth would be allowed to continue with her work and they were very fortunate to have a son and daughter who have both led fulfilled lives. The whole family legally adopted the surname Kozmian-Ledward. Also, Elisabeth was able to regain her Polish citizenship.

When her parents died in 1975 she was given a small inheritance and Peter and Elisabeth decided to buy a holiday cottage near Lavenham in Suffolk. While there, they started exploring Norfolk and found Norwich particularly appealing. First of all they moved to Loddon and Elisabeth began work there as a full-time visual artist while Peter commuted to London.

He had always dreamed of converting a large barn and by chance they spotted an advertisement in a free newspaper about such a building "in the middle of nowhere" in the hamlet of Wickhampton. They were entranced by the barn, the local residents and particularly by the beauty of the medieval church with its 14th century wall-paintings.

The couple planned to organise art exhibitions and workshops in their barn and over the subsequent years held many successful events. Elisabeth loves Polish Folk Art, something she enjoyed from being a small child and one of her favourite areas of work is teaching children and adults to make colourful Polish paper-cuts. Her artwork has been very prolific including the publication of books featuring her work.

Recently she and Peter moved into Norwich as their huge barn had fulfilled its role and they needed to downsize. They have found a perfect house with a wonderful Monet-like garden, complete with her own studio nestled by a delightful pond complete with water lilies, newts and dragonflies.

Elisabeth plans to continue her colourful and artistic life with her husband Peter in their new home in the fine city of Norwich.