



Summary of Klaudia James' life story

Interview and recording of Klaudia James (née Borzych)
by Tessa Black (NPHG) – March 7th 2019

Klaudia James (née Borzych) was born in Poznań, western Poland in May 1958. She had had a happy childhood in a country that was under a communist regime but eventually came to England in 1981. She had had a passion to learn the English language and that was the principal reason for her coming to this country. In December 1981 martial law was imposed in Poland by General Jaruzelski and Klaudia's father wrote to her advising her not to return there. Tanks and militia were on the streets of the cities as a result of the strikes in the shipyards of Gdańsk, which had threatened the stability of the country. The intention of the government had been to eradicate the Solidarność movement.

The Polish economy was in very poor shape; food supplies were limited and life was uncomfortable for the population. Klaudia remembers that, as a child, she went to the shops to buy butter and they were only allowed four packs of butter for a family of five for one month. In order to get a roll of toilet paper one had to bring in 5kgs of newspaper to be recycled. In 1977 meat was rationed and she recollected that when her grandmother had died the family was then allowed an extra kilo of pork for the wake.

After arriving in England, aged 23 she started to develop a new life. She met and married Michael James in 1982 and the couple lived in London until 2005 when they moved to Norfolk upon his retirement. She continued her work with the John Lewis Partnership in the Swaffham branch of Waitrose and has been employed there continuously over the last 14 years. In 2016 she joined the Norfolk Polish Heritage Group (NPHG) and her involvement with the group has included interviewing and recording stories of Polish people in the county. She is a committee member and the aims are to put on events celebrating Polish culture (for example Polish Independence Day). In 2019 the group will hold a concert given by the Polish National Folk Choir.

The NPHG first met at the Norfolk Record Office (NRO) when the Norwich historian, Frank Meeres, told the story of a Polish couple who had died in a drowning incident after he had discovered their grave at Earlham Cemetery, Norwich. The NRO had then suggested that a Polish group should be established to collect and record Polish stories as no such collection existed and the NPHG was founded in April 2016. One of the activities carried out by the NPHG is a Polish Conversation group to offer pupils a chance to learn and speak the language.

Klaudia then reminisced that when she had arrived in London in 1981 it was exactly one week after Prince Charles's wedding to Lady Diana Spencer. She was introduced to "apricot jam" but it turned out to be English marmalade. She hated the taste and today still does not like it. In order to sustain herself she took a job as an au pair girl working for a divorcee who had two children. She was only paid £16.00 per week but did have food and accommodation included. They were lovely kids but very hard work. She then lodged with some Australian girls and found work in a shop where she only earned £1.00 per hour. She had to work a 60 hour week to make ends meet. To be able to get a visa to stay in Britain, she and her Australian friends had to learn English. Klaudia studied under a Cambridge University course. When she took the exam in April 1982 she passed with flying colours.

All of that early experience was pretty hard going but she was 22 years old with the world as her oyster... she doubts that she would do it again now.

She and her husband love living in Norfolk and would never go back to London. There is a sense of security here and the ability to go to cinemas and theatres, something that was sometimes too expensive to do in the Capital.

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