

Krzysztof Cieszkowski

Growing up Polish

Being a child of Polish parents in London in the 1950s was a mixed blessing – often it was a privilege I could have done without. Much of childhood consists of striving to avoid standing out from those around you. Not that there was any racial prejudice against Polish people – at least we weren't black, or Irish. There was clearly an accepted hierarchy of ethnic origin – the English were near the top, below the Americans, whom we all envied; Poles were situated below north-west Europeans such as the French or Dutch or Scandinavians, but above southern Europeans such as Italians and Spaniards; below these were the Maltese and the Greeks, and the Irish came below them, just above Arabs and Asians and blacks. So Poles were quite high up in the hierarchy. If you had to be a foreigner, it was not too bad to be a Pole – and there was still much residual sympathetic feeling towards the Poles from the war-years (alongside the resentment at all the wartime Polish soldiers and airmen who, invariably claiming to be from the land-owning class, had scythed their way through the English female population, breaking countless hearts and marriages).

But the names! Somebody would ask your name, you would reply, and they would look at you as if you had lost the power of rational speech. There was a boy in my class at school named John Gill – why couldn't I have had such a straightforward name? It made you stand out in ways that I didn't like. And inevitably you were given hurtful nick-names that derived from

your unpronounceable name. I can understand why Mr. Goszczyński and Mr. Dobrowolski changed their surnames to Mr. Gee and Mr. Dee.

Our part of London, Clapham, was not one of the main agglomerations of Poles, not like Ealing or Hammersmith (pronounced “Hahmer-smeess”). There was no Polish church there, but there was a Polish parish, run by Ojciec Cynar, who said mass for the Polish community at one o’clock in St. Mary’s church in Clapham Common, after the English and Irish Catholics had had their masses. The church was always full, and there were many frail, elderly people – in retrospect, I regret that I was never curious how they had come to spend their last years in south London, what experiences had washed them up there. Ojciec Cynar was a remote, rather patrician figure, whose sermons were remarkably brief. Once finished, he would launch into a detailed discussion of what was clearly foremost in his mind, namely the financial investments he was making on behalf of the parish, which were delivered like a directors’ report to a company general meeting. Notices of deaths and marriages were given short shrift at the very end. On a couple of occasions, he suggested to my parents that I should serve at mass, but fortunately nothing came of this.

The Polish hymns were less than inspiring, particularly as, no matter how slowly the organist played, the congregation would sing even more slowly, so that protestations of a robust faith sounded like the weary droning of people who wished they were elsewhere. But the great exception to this was the closing hymn, “Boże, coś Polskę” – whether as a result of relief that the weekly chore of mass (missing which was still a Mortal Sin at that time) was at last over, or of a release of patriotic longing and emotion, this hymn was sung with volume and gusto, rising to a tremendous chromatic climax with the (I understood) confrontational words “Ojczyznę wolną racz nam wrócić, Panie”. I never failed to be moved by this moment, and used to wonder what people passing the church thought of such powerful singing coming from inside – did they realise this was something other than mere religion?

We lived first in a Displaced Persons’ Camp, in wartime Nissen huts, which I can barely remember; then in Edith Grove, and then in Albert Square, near Vauxhall, in the basement of a large house owned by Mr. Len, a taciturn, white-haired Silesian. At the time of the Coronation of Queen

Elizabeth II, in June 1953, every house in the square was covered with flags and royal portraits, but ours was by far the most richly decorated – it was as if the Polish refugees in the square had something to prove, somebody to convince.

London in the early 1950s was a dark, dreary, damaged city. There were bomb-sites everywhere, and pre-fabricated cabin-like houses that housed people for many times the five years that they were supposed to be left standing. There was a local hooligan, aged about twelve, whom my father labelled an “andrus”. What confused things for me was that I knew that his surname was Andrews, and I believed for many years that nothing good could come of this surname. Wartime austerity continued for almost two decades afterwards – I remember brown-uniformed park-keepers of indeterminate gender chaining up the swings on Clapham Common late on Saturday afternoon, and undoing the chains only on Monday morning. Making the Sabbath as nasty and as miserable as possible seemed to be a pre-requisite of 1950s life in Britain, which was ruled by people who wanted a return to the patriarchal days of the 1930s. The pre-war Fascist leader Oswald Mosley was in self-imposed exile in Paris, but his thug-gish followers kept his existence alive through slogans scrawled on walls. There were fogs so thick and so intense that, walking back from school, if I stretched out my arm I couldn't see the ends of my fingers, and had to feel my way along walls and fences in order to get home – for a severely asthmatic child these greenish-brown fogs were a nightmare. A single piece of legislation, the Clean Air Act of 1956, put an end to them – much to the disappointment of present-day tourists visiting London.

My parents never learned English. In the case of many Poles whom the war had deposited in London, I knew that these believed that this sojourn would be a short one, that circumstances (possibly, even hopefully, a Third World War?) would allow them to return to Poland and assume the places at the head of society that they knew to be theirs, and so learning English was an idle luxury. I don't think my parents ever thought this way. My mother went to English classes for a while, and volumes 1–3 of Eckersley's “Essential English” were among the few books we had at home, and whose line-drawings I copied again and again. My father picked up a smattering of English, enough to run a small bookbinding firm (although clients were often puzzled

to be asked to “come back yesterday” to collect a book). Like so many Poles of his generation, he was convinced his English was considerably better than it was, and I would often have to correct what he said to people. Or else his linguistic isolation from his environment made him oblivious of prevailing social habits. After our West Indian neighbours had been playing their music loudly for several hours, I would have to accompany him next door to protest – but my translation into English of a speech in Polish that began “Neighbour, this kind of behaviour may be all right in the jungle”, was creative rather than literal. (I wonder if the seeds of my second, post-retirement career, that of translator into English, lie in this experience?)

Both my brother (four years older than me) and I knew no English when we went to school, but teachers in the mid-1950s had the time and the enthusiasm to help and encourage the sole non-English-speaking child in their first class – gentle Miss Cullen (who certainly is in heaven) was kindness itself, and explained to a laughing class that my reading the “th” in the word “lighthouse” as a diphthong was a mistake anybody could make. By the end of the first term I was speaking English easily, and my reading progressed rapidly. The nuns who ran my Infants’ school (St. Anne’s R.C., Vauxhall) were kind and gentle – if you misbehaved, Sister Anne, the headmistress, would look at you for a moment, slowly shake her head, and mutter “And such a lovely mother!” Reduced to abject tears by this emotional blackmail, you would vow to be a paragon of virtue for all your remaining life, and would do so in all sincerity.

Half the Infants’ School was English, and half Irish. On St. Patrick’s Day, the latter would all come to school with bunches of shamrock pinned to their lapels, and guerrilla warfare between the Irish and the English children was the order of the day. Being one of only a handful of children who were neither Irish nor English (this was before the great waves of immigration from the Caribbean and East Africa), I knew that I could not stand aside from this fearful playground conflict. My decision was a simple one: the Irish children tended to be stronger and rowdier, and so, for one day every year, I was as patriotic an Irishman as you could find on or away from the Emerald Isle.

My parents wanted to know what I was learning at school, but I tended to keep school and home apart – one was English, the other Polish.

I remember my mother instructing me that, should anybody dare to say that Copernicus, Chopin, Wit Stwosz or Marie Curie were not Polish, I had a solemn duty to put them right. But the only famous Pole that most English people knew was the one with the funny Irish name, Paddy Roosky.

St Anne's Infants' School was a gentle introduction to English life. The nuns were kind, the teachers helpful and supportive, and my move at the age of seven to Junior school came as a shock. St Mary's Junior Boys' School, in Clapham Common, was a hell-hole, a church school in which the systematic, officially-sanctioned brutality of the teachers would now have them all behind bars. If Miss Cullen is in heaven, then Mr. Wilson, Mr. Owen and Mr. Coleman are definitely in the other place. The fact that I learned, many years later, that one of them had served a prison-sentence for interfering with small boys on Clapham Common, and that this news gave me a feeling of intense satisfaction, is evidence of the hatred I still feel for them, sixty years later.

And what of Poland? It was an impossible distance away. My parents, who had been in the AK and fought in the Warsaw Uprising, could never go there, and neither, at the time, could we. True Poland was the Polish mass in church and the boy scouts and the government-in-exile in London – the Poland sandwiched between Germany and Russia was a fake Poland, invented and imposed by the Red Army, a tyranny with nothing at all in its favour. The only true Poles were the ones who had got away. They were leading the miserable, alienated lives of exiles in London, generals and landlords and intellectuals working as hotel-waiters and railway-workers and park-attendants, but they alone embodied all the values of the True Poland. Some of them believed they would return, we didn't, and in time the idea of return became a chimera for a whole sad, deeply hurt generation.

By the beginning of the 1960s, it became possible for the children of Polish emigrés living in London to visit their families in Poland – the carrier *Fregata* arranged couriers who took trainloads of us to Warsaw, where our shabbily-dressed relatives would meet us at Dworzec Gdański, and help us experience a month or two in what we had been taught was our homeland. My first impression was shock at the fact that everybody around me was speaking Polish! And people commented (and occasionally

laughed) at the fact that my Polish, learned from my parents in London, was an anachronistic, pre-war Polish, so different from the coarser Polish of the PRL. My relatives seemed to live in the memories of the Poland that had ended in 1939. My aunt repeatedly told me that she had once danced with Wieniawa – it was many years before I understood the significance of this memory.

And then the drabness, the militia, ORMO, the dreary shops with hardly anything in them, the tired and listless people, the sense that they were living in an occupied country, the absurdities we listened to on Polish radio and television and read in the newspapers. The political slogans spontaneously proliferating on 22nd July (“Niech żyje 22ego Lipca!” was my favourite one, a wonderfully goofy statement), the fake celebrations which everybody had to attend, the constant talk of eternal Polish-Soviet friendship or “German Revanchism”, the bile constantly directed at America and West Germany, the sense that everybody in Poland was only going through the motions of what the authorities demanded of them. A lack of trust between government and governed, a pretence of unity, a refusal to recognise the intense and unspoken opposition that we children perceived behind the words that our relatives said to us and to others. A withering contempt for anybody who had joined the PZPR. And the numerous people, known and unknown, who begged even us children to send them letters of invitation to England, evidence that the only thing most people wanted was to get the hell out of People’s Poland.

And Polish Catholicism seemed even weirder than its Anglo-Irish version. A hysteria seemed barely under control at mass and at processions, the singing often sounded like atavistic wailing. People kept talking to me about “Bozia”, which female-gendered term I understood to refer to the Virgin Mary. I soon came to the conclusion that, whereas in England Catholics worshipped Jesus and/or God, in Poland they worshipped the Virgin Mary – a mistake nobody ever corrected, and which subsequent experience in Poland has on the whole led to me to recognise to be more or less the truth.

Back in London, we had the church, and Polish schools on Saturdays (I’m glad to say I wasn’t forced to attend one), and the boy scouts. The “harcerstwo”, which seemed to have nothing in common with the Eng-

lish boy-scout structures in London, which concentrated on knot-tying and doing good deeds. The Polish version was intensely patriotic, you learned pre-war songs and heard pre-war stories, and everything was centred around Polish identity and Polish values, defined solely in pre-1939 terms. There was druh Śledziwski, and Wiesław Nowak (who designed coats-of-arms for his charges, on the basis of their surnames). I wasn't keen on the harcerstwo; it seemed simplistic and emphasised the group to the detriment of the individual (i.e. nobody there seemed to read any books). There were summer-camps, including in Stella Plage, just across the English Channel in Pas-de-Calais, where the beach was littered with massive concrete German pill-boxes and rusted barbed-wire, there for the taking. We sang "Pod żaglami Zawiszy" and "Kiedy ranne wstają zorze", and Father Rytko made sure we stood to attention as the Polish flag was raised and lowered, but it all seemed rather pointless to me. Adults having fun indoctrinating kids with anachronistic and sentimental values, children pretending to be little soldiers. My brother took the harcerstwo seriously, and I remember him and other Polish scouts visiting the elderly Generał Haller, and being photographed standing around him in their scouts' uniforms.

What interested me most, though, was why, when Generał Anders entered a hall on the occasion of some ceremony or "akademia", everybody stood up in deeply respectful silence and pride as he strode to the front and took his place, while the entrance of Generał Bór-Komorowski, who invariably sat to one side, near the back, was also met with silence, but everybody remained seated. I asked about this, but was never given a satisfactory answer. It puzzled me and seemed to embody deeper questions which everyone thought I was much too young to understand. Later, my father sent my brother and myself as his representatives to the funeral of Generał Bór-Komorowski at Gunnersbury Cemetery, but he himself did not go. The wound of the Powstanie and its aftermath were evidently too raw, even then.

There were Polish organisations and institutions – the SPK, a government-in-exile, the Ognisko, in a palatial white house in Kensington, Dakowski's restaurant (called "Daquise" to confuse the English) also in Kensington, the place from which the notorious landlord Peter Rachman

conducted his violent business. There was the “Biały Orzeł” club, which burned down, and everybody was convinced that it was arson, and nobody had any doubts who was responsible. There was a Polish church in Devonia Road, where I was christened, but never otherwise attended. Later, our elders tried to start a club for the Polish “młodzież” (what a rebarbative word that seemed at the time!), called “Pod Parasolem”, but the community elders decreed no alcohol – so no młodzież.

Every few years, “Mazowsze” or “Śląsk” would visit London and appear at the Royal Albert Hall, and their performances invariably included a mock-lecture about historical links between Poland and Britain, how Bonnie Prince Charlie married Jan Sobieski’s daughter, etc. – which was rather redundant, since 95% of the audience was Polish, and knew all about these things. It was a link with the other Poland, the one located between Germany and Russia, but it was also a link with the Poland that had existed before 1939.

My brother and I spoke Polish to our parents, and a Polish-English patois to one another – I remember saying I had to go upstairs “to make a porządek” of my things. We used English as a weapon against our parents – the important childhood matters that concerned us were incapable of being expressed in Polish. Our parents tried incessantly to get us to speak Polish at home, but the English world of the school and the street and the radio was far more alluring than the world of the Polish emigré community, which we could sense was drifting sadly into anachronism and obsolescence. English books seemed more relevant than the Polish books that they remembered from their childhood and pressed upon us – “W pustyni i w puszczy”, “Miasto mojej matki”, “Historia żółtej cizemki”, “Koziołek Matołek”. But I adored Jan Marcin Szancer’s illustrations to Andersen and Krasicki and Mickiewicz, and adore them still, perhaps even more so.

Our parents could never understand the things that really mattered to us – the radio serials on “Children’s Hour” (“The Eagle of the Ninth”, “The Midnight Folk”, “Moonfleet”), the comedies (“The Goons”, “Hancock’s Half-Hour”), the wonderful radio plays (“Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde”, “The Duke in Darkness”, “The Satan Bug”), the records of Johnny Ray and Buddy Holly and Elvis Presley. The 1950s and early 1960s was a golden age

of BBC radio, and nothing that we heard on Radio Free Europe (“Monachium”) seemed to recognise our presence – the comedy on “Podwieczorek przy mikrofonie” seemed dire. But “Monachium” had its fascination – the reading of endless lists of names of people who were still searching for other people, whom the war had separated; and the moment when “They” began jamming the radio-output with what sounded like heavy drilling. I regret being too young to understand the talks of Zygmunt Nowakowski, and finding the news from Poland difficult to comprehend.

There was another Nowakowski, Marian Nowakowski, whose resonant bass-baritone voice was a wonder to us children when he sang at Polish occasions. He had sung at Covent Garden, and we were proud of that. Long before my voice broke, I tried to sing “Cyt, cyt, cyt” just as he had sung it, but my brother’s howls of laughter put a stop to that. Marian Hemar was a habitué of the Teatr Polski at the “Ognisko” in Kensington – when my actor-friends in Toruń played his comedy “Piękna Lucynda” a decade or so ago, I was proud to inform them that I had been present at the premiere of the play, back in 1967, at the “Ognisko”. The leading actor in plays put on at the “Ognisko” was Roman Raczka, who delighted everybody, but never subordinated his personality in that of the role he was playing. Christine Paul-Podlasky, who later acted in films by Zanussi and Bareja, appeared in plays at the “Ognisko”; I remember her as Wawrzyniec in a play by Fredro. Another prominent Polish figure was Feliks Topolski, whose Kokoschka-like expressionistic drawings were used in the BBC Television interview series “Face to Face”, and who managed to publish in Polish publications such as “Przekrój” as well as in English ones. When I tried to draw in his wildly expressive manner, I was told that he was not a good example to follow.

An even worse example was Picasso. The Polish community in London all read the “Dziennik Polski”, which combined beleaguered right-wing politics with extremely conservative aesthetic views, and would fill in any spare space with a diatribe against Picasso and any other modern artist whose name they had encountered. As a result, my father forbade me ever to visit the Tate Gallery, even though it was the closest public museum to where we lived, because it contained works by Picasso. I don’t know how my father would have reacted to the fact that I went on to work at the Tate

Gallery, for almost all my working-life. "Dziennik Polski", run as it was by elderly, ex-military men, conducted a crusade against obvious charlatans in the field of Polish culture such as Szymanowski, Witkacy, Penderecki and Kantor – any artist more original than Matejko, Moniuszko and Sienkiewicz was immediately suspected of being either un-Polish or anti-Polish.

Polish society in London was moribund, and we knew it. We (my generation, those born in the years immediately after the war) had no difficulty in breaking free of our parents' values and beliefs – we spoke English, they didn't. We rejected their habitual, almost instinctive anti-Semitism, their scornful demeaning of black people, their belief that Communism, Socialism and the British Labour Party were all one and the same thing. When I say "We", I am talking about myself.

There were more important things to think of at the time than whether Sikorski was justified in launching an investigation in 1940 into whether the Sanacja authorities lied to the Polish people about the country's military preparedness for war – there was opposition to American aggression in Vietnam, there was the demand for civil rights in Northern Ireland, there was the rise of the National Front in Britain, there was the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Russian (and Polish) troops.

I made no positive decision to distance myself from Polish emigré society – rather, a cumulation of factors led to my feeling that it had nothing to give me. There was the sour-faced lady in the book-shop in POSK who, on my asking whether they had any books by Tadeusz Różewicz, told me they didn't, because he was "reżymowy". There was the "Dziennik Polski" with its rabid condemnation of any opposition to American policy and interests. There was the hostility of many Polish emigré institutions to the rise of Solidarność, and their refusal to allow the Polish Solidarity Campaign (left-wing, trade union activists), with which I was associated, to hold meetings at their venues – and I felt nothing but contempt when, after 13 December 1981, the Polish emigrés suddenly identified completely with Solidarność and belatedly welcomed us to POSK and elsewhere – hostile to a radical movement which failed to acknowledge their historical right to rule, they were happy to identify with it, once it could be subsumed into the wider category of Polish Martyrology. (This is cruel, I know, but I have to say that, when I read Philip Roth's howl of protest at his Jewish background in

“Portnoy’s Complaint”, at the incessant demands made of him by his children-of-immigrants parents, I found so much that I could identify with.)

There were others whom I recall, boys in my class in junior school – Leszek Konopelski, Wiktor Roszkowski, Leszek Polaczek, Jan Bieńkowski, a boy named Wiśniowiecki whose first name I don’t recall. Our parents all pushed us to be top of the class, and some of us were, but one of us took his own life because the pressure his parents put on him was too great. I still recall the hurt I felt when my father told his friends that I had come top of the class, and that this was an important achievement for a Pole. I wanted the praise for myself, not for the Pole that I happened to be. We were supposed to succeed, and some of us did, but not in ways that our parents imagined.

I never worked out whether I was Polish or English, and I don’t think it is important. My wife (born in Toruń) insists that I (born in London) am English, because I think and behave like an English person. She is probably right. English society at that time made assimilation easy, England readily and generously supported my education and my studies, I speak English with no hint of a foreign accent, and the people I meet invariably take me for an English person, by birth and by upbringing. At work, I simplified my name to Kristof, and signed myself by my initials, KZC, and, to the best of my knowledge, my colleagues forgot that I was descended from Polish parents and had a Polish name. Often the name is the only thing that differentiates me from mainstream English society, and there were times when I seriously thought about changing it, for convenience’s sake.

The Polish emigré society in London that I knew no longer exists. Whereas Poles in London were few and somewhat exotic, now they are many, and I am happy about this, and welcome their enterprise and vitality (only I wish young Poles in London would not talk about their personal lives quite so loudly on public transport, in the belief that nobody else understands them). I hope Britain’s disastrous Brexit adventure does not hurt them, or curtail their youthful enterprise.

Reading accounts of the Polish community in London in the 1950s, I find little that I can identify with. I was not a keen boy-scout, nor a member of any other Polish grouping, religious or political or social. The politics of the Polish emigré community, both internal and external, seemed

light-years away from me, and from reality. The ex-military organisations seemed hermetically-sealed, elderly gentlemen slowly rising in rank as they aged. I never believed that the whole appalling system of the Soviet Union and its colonies would ever end – the Iron Curtain seemed as permanent a geo-political entity as it was possible to imagine, and I watched how successive attempts to gain just a modicum of freedom and dignity were crushed by Asiatic-faced troops at the behest of zombie-like elderly granite-faced men in heavy greatcoats. My parents' generation lost both its past and its future. It suffered unspeakable things, and fought back, and lost again and again. Most of them lie in cemeteries scattered around London – only a handful have been disinterred and reburied in Powązki.

And there is a regret. Every child is living through history, but the history that shaped my childhood was transient and contested, vital and destined for oblivion. I regret not asking the right questions, not asking about what life was like for my father in a small, backward town in kieleckie during the inter-war period, what factors made some people join the AK and others retreat into a life of quietude, what were the feelings of Polish exiles in London a year after they arrived, five years, ten years later. There are so many questions that I was not bold enough to ask, so many evasions that I could perhaps have got beyond, so many things that I might have known, and now cannot know. So many memories lost for ever.

There are two definitions of history that impress me as embodying a kind of truth between them. The first is: history is just one damned thing after another. The second is: history is what happened – and what it felt like at the time. I know what happened, I now know why the people stood up for Generał Anders but not for Generał Bór-Komorowski. But my great regret is that I don't know enough of what it felt like at the time – the experience of my parents' generation, lost to me since they came to lie in bleak London cemeteries, in Kensal Green, St. Pancras and Islington, Lambeth and Gunnersbury, with strangely incomprehensible names on gravestones that the London rain weathers from year to year towards illegibility and oblivion.

My parents lie in Earlsfield Cemetery, a bleak, unlovely place with a busy railway-line on an embankment alongside. There are no other Polish names nearby, but there are one or two elsewhere in the cemetery. My

father's book-binding firm no longer exists. My parents' names appear in the registers of the Muzeum Powstania Warszawskiego. Their generation was inevitably disappointed in how little mine was willing to carry on the institutions and structures they had brought into being in cold, distant London. They saw everything in terms of the struggle for a free Poland, and isolated themselves from the society that had welcomed them. They made their mistakes, I made mine.

I now read as many books in Polish as I do in English, and my interest in Polish history, literature and art increases with the years. In my retirement, I translate books on Polish and Jewish art and architecture into English. My wife insists I am English, but my commitment to something abstract named "Poland" is intense – not so much a place, or a political construct, as a way of being, and a past, a painful and contested past. History is what happened, and what it felt like at the time. I am aware that, like every other being on the planet, I lived through history – and the present text is an attempt to describe, from a subjective and relatively insignificant viewpoint, what it felt like at the time.

At the time, though, it seemed just one damned thing after another.