

The Higgins Art Gallery & Museum, Bedford

Transcript by Heidi Seamark (Higgins Volunteer)

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Name: Irina

Gender: Female

Date of Birth:

Place of Birth:

Occupation:

Date of Interview: 23rd March 2017

Interviewed by: Christine Gaye **Length of interview:**

00 min

Can you tell us your name?

Irina Voyces

Thank you very much

Irina, can you tell me whereabouts your homeland is?

My grandfather came from Poland. On the border with Russia from an area called the Pale.

And what brought him to the UK?

He was fleeing from the Russian oppression.

Was it a time of great uprising, or what was happening at the time?

It was at the turn of the...late 1890s early 1900s. The Russians were inflicting what was known as Pogroms. They were making life extremely difficult and there were quite a few deaths.

So what do you understand about his reason for having to leave the country, his own personal reason?

His own personal reason, I think he feared for his life.

What might have happened to him?

The Russian soldiers may well have just picked him up and then he would have disappeared like a lot of them did. There was never any trace of them so presumably they were killed. Some...they would find some bodies in the street but a lot of them just disappeared.

How did he manage to escape the country when the time came for him to go?

I understand that he went across land. He went through Polish border and they went across land and then they picked up a boat, and managed to get a boat to England. I think he came up the Thames because he settled firstly in London.

Who did he travel with?

He came with a brother.

And just the two of them?

Just the two of them together.

And who did they leave behind when they made this journey?

They left behind quite an extended family. Obviously parents, there were some more sisters I think and there were obviously cousins spreading out, Aunts, uncles, cousins and all of those were left behind.

So who helped them make this journey? How did they get some help to make the journey?

They saved up for the passage and then set off together. I think the whole family helped them save up the money for the trip, for the boat. I think they started out on horseback and I think they sold the horses when they got to the port. And then the money they had from the two horses and the money that had been saved for them, paid for the passage to England.

So did they have much notice of their time for departure?

It's something that they had been wanting to do for some time, but when the opportunity arose, they just went for it. I understand that they needed to sneak through the border

And how did they do that?

I'm not very clear about that, but I think that they waited until there was...something was going on that drew their attention away from the border, some uprising or something was happening and then they sneaked through.

Did they have to do anything secretly while they were moving from home to their departure port?

Everything had to be rather secret and quiet. Moving across Poland they needed a reason to be going there, and I understand that they used to say they were taking the horses to market.

And can you tell me Irina, who told you this story, how do you have this information yourself?

It came down through my father. My grandfather died when my father was seven, but a lot of the information came via his mother, to him, to me.

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Is it a story that is widespread- known across your family, particularly the ones who were left in Poland?

There is no trace of anything left in Poland I'm afraid. We have tried but there is no trace of the family left in Poland. They would have known about it, but we can't make

any contact. The family here: I know- it was transmitted to me. I'm not sure if my cousins know, but some of my other cousins on the other side of the family know through me.

Do you know what happened to your grandfather and his brother when he arrived in the UK?

I think they found some...not family but other people in the London area. Managed to find work, and also managed to be accepted. But I think because they found more of the community.

Did they speak English?

They spoke Polish, a little Russian. I think they had just a few words of English, but having found people of their own nationality they were soon picking up English, and then he married an English woman, so everything worked out.

Where did they stay when they first arrived?

It was in the East End of London. Somewhere around Commercial Road I think.

And how easy did they find it to get some work, some way of supporting themselves?

I think that was difficult. A lot of it was market portering. That sort of thing, to begin with. I'm not sure what they ended up doing? As I say he died when my father was seven. I know that he did go to war for this country though; he was in the First World War.

And did he talk to his son about that? Was there an opportunity to talk to his son about that?

I'm not sure. I think my father was too young when he went to war. When he went to war, my father would have been three, four. He was seven when he died in 1918, right at the end of the war. I believe, I'm not sure but it was [being] involved in the war, that was his death.

He was a casualty of the war?

Yes

So his wife then was left with a young child?

She was left with five. She had six, one died; she was left with five children. The girls were older, and she went into service and they helped. My father and his brother the youngest two unfortunately went into foster care.

And what happened as a result of that?

I understand from my father that he wasn't very happy in foster care. He was not happy at all.

He was fostered as a young boy?

Yeah, yeah. But they did move back in with mum eventually, as they got older. And the family did keep in touch and keep together as far as their mother was concerned.

And has that been the case since then? That there is still good family connections?
I'm still in touch with my cousin. The eldest daughter, my father's eldest sister's child, I'm still in touch with John and Bob which is the second girl's son as well. But yeah we sort of do keep in touch. I'm more or less in touch with those two but I hear about the others through them.

And when the family became established in Great Britain, is this now what you regard as your home?

Yes. Definitely. My father regarded it as his home as well. Yes I think this is home to us. We were born here, English is our first language. I don't speak Polish funnily enough; it was thought I would never need it. Now it would be a help! *chuckles*

What do you feel about that connection with Poland having diminished over the years?

I think it's a shame. And I think another language, to be able to speak another language fluently, is an asset. It helps you learn a third language as well. But I'm not the only one, other people have said that they should have learnt the language of their parents or grandparents, but you just accept that it's happened.

10 mins

And do you feel that you still have any connection with Poland?

No. as I say we did try and see if there was anybody left, but we can't find anything at all. War has disposed of records and you know we've looked back. And my grandfather changed his name when he came to this country, to be more English, and its difficult now to trace back.

What are your feelings about having lost that direct connection with what was your grandfather's homeland?

I think it's a shame, I regret it. Obviously we just move on and this is my country and this was where I was born, but it is a shame not to have some sort of connection.

Is that something you feel deeply about?

It's something I try not to think about, but yeah I do miss it. I don't feel completely British; although this is my country and I certainly wouldn't go back or try to move to Poland. But just every now and then, something happens and you think 'that's the Polish way, not the English way' *chuckles* and you think 'well if I had a link to Poland, I'd be able to explore that'

How do you feel about your grandfather and his brother making that escape?

I think they did the right thing. I'm certain they did the right thing. Poland has been torn apart and put back together again so many times. Ruled by Austria, Russia, divvied up between other countries and it's the Polish people who have paid the price every time. I don't think they would have survived, to be honest. I think they were on someone's radar, they felt they were and they got out and I think that was the right thing

And you don't feel any regrets now that that was the action that they took?

No because I wouldn't be here. So yeah I think they did the right thing, at the right time and I'm here. *laughs*

That sounds like a good ending doesn't it?

12.38 mins

So can I ask you about your life here in the UK? You're not comparing it with anything you might have known in Poland because you've been here all your life.

What aspects of being in the UK do you particularly value?

Freedom of speech. Being able to say what I feel, what I think, without being cruel or nasty to anybody, but to be able to say to somebody, 'no I think you're wrong, I disagree with that, I think this, I think that'. That is the most wonderful freedom that anyone can have. And this country is one of the very few. And I appreciate that.

Are there any aspects of daily life that you particularly value?

Having the freedom to travel within the country wherever I want to go, without people stopping me and asking for papers. Yes occasionally you might get the police asking if you've got an MOT certificate or something but not personal papers and things like that. I understand that that was regularly the case in my grandfather's Poland, I think it is still the case in a lot of countries. And yeah the freedom of movement. I think that's great. The choice of things we have to buy here are different. We have a lot more choice. Yeah I think this country...there are things wrong with it but there are anywhere. On the whole this country is a brilliant place to be.

And what hopes do you have for the next generation of your family, moving on?

My son is doing very well. He did well at school. He's now got a very nice girlfriend that I approve of, she's lovely. He's doing well, earning well and everything looking well, I only have the one son, but everything is well for my son and the next generation. Yeah I think...everything looks good. I'm pleased and hopeful for the future.

And how does he view his ancestry?

He doesn't seem to take much store or notice of it all or make much store by it but then, he's young. As he gets a little older he will want to know more about his past and where he's come from. Youngsters don't seem to worry too much about that and he certainly isn't bothered at the moment.

In what ways do you help him keep in touch with those roots?

I have a small box and I have a matryoshka, little Russian doll, I've got two or three of those. Those I am keeping because I know he will throw them away, but when I go those will be passed on to him. Now he's got this really lovely girlfriend, I know she will keep them *chuckles*.

What is the story of the dolls then?

One came from my mother when she died and I presume it's come down. The other one, I came across in an old second hand shop, and I connected it and saw it for what it was and added it to my one.

Can you describe them for us?

The one that is handed down is the normal red and green lady with the red shawl around her, very faded. Inside they are fine, but the outside one is very, very faded.

What are they made of?

It's wood and painted. There are eight in that one. It's quite a multiple Russian doll. As I say, it's seen better times. It's old, it's come a long way I have a feeling, but yeah it still works.

5 mins

So how do you use those to explain your family background?

It's not something that I talk about an awful lot. Where I live I have...I have a second generation Pole two doors up. He and I often do talk about-his father was Polish and my grandfather being Polish we do often talk about the Polish connection and his dad. The other side next to me I have a second generation Pole girl but I don't know- she doesn't seem very communicative at all. But as I say the guy two doors up and I do talk about it. I have actually shown him my Russian doll and he was quite interested in it.

And are these important memories for you? Sharing them with a neighbour?

Yes, yeah yeah. It's nice to share, but it needs to be somebody who has an interest because most English people are not that interested about something that they don't connect with. And I can understand that, it's my history not theirs. But Tony two doors up does. His dad was Polish and I knew his dad as well. So yeah we sometimes reminisce a bit *chuckles*

So the thought of maybe having grandchildren at some stage, how would you feel that you'd want your son or yourself to be able to communicate those family ties to them?

I think it's probably something I would sit there telling tales like grandma does. If I've gone then hopefully the items will tell the tale for me and that my son will say 'oh yes that was your grandma's and it came from you great great grandfather' and then tell them. I hope anyway.

So is it important for you that that story does continue that it's never forgotten?

I'd like it to go on to my son's children. Whether it's relevant further down the line than that, I don't know because then it gets very far in the past and tenuous. But I think it will be relevant to his children, because we need to encompass all nationalities. We need to care about each other.

Why did you choose to say yes to the invitation to come today and make this recording?

I think people need to know that we can make a good home here. That we can become British and uphold British values, which was why we came in the first place or rather my grandfather, came. He knew he'd be safe here. I think we need to be very much aware that we need to love one another and care for one another, no matter what colour, race, religion, nationality we originally were. We need to stand together and that is particularly after yesterday's attack on Parliament. We need to hug each other and care for each other and don't let them win.

That's lovely Irina, than you so much for talking to me today.

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Summary of Irina's story

Irina's Homeland is Poland. Her grandfather was Polish, from an area called the Pale of Settlement, which is bordered with Russia, and fled Poland at the turn of the 20th century. He was fleeing the Russian Pogroms (violent riots aimed at the massacre or persecution of the Jews), because he feared for his life. He fled with his brother, having saved up the money for his passage, went across Poland and caught a boat to England. The journey was dangerous. Everything was kept secret and they had to sneak through when uprisings were happening and the authorities were otherwise distracted, so as not to get caught. They left behind a lot of family and it is unclear what happened to these.

Once they arrived in England, Irina's grandfather initially settled in the East End of London and found others from the Polish community. He found work and eventually married and had a family. He fought for the UK in the First World War and was killed in 1918 when his son, Irina's father, was seven. Irina's grandmother was left with five children, the two youngest (one of which was Irina's father) had to be placed in foster care. The oldest girls followed their mother into service. Eventually the family were able to come together and live as a family again. The family history has been passed down to Irina through her father and grandmother. They have tried to see if there are any traces of the family left behind in Poland, but due to the World Wars and other situations there does not appear to be any traces of the family left.