

Goodbye Polsko, Hello Anglo

Joanna Czechowska Speaks with Joanna Kosmalska¹

(University of Łódź)

JOANNA KOSMALSKA: You're a British writer but you have Polish roots. What is your connection to Poland?

JOANNA CZECHOWSKA: My father was Polish. He came to the UK during the war in 1942. He fled Poland when the Germans invaded and almost literally walked across Europe. He headed west through Germany, then France, and eventually arrived in England. Here he joined the air force and became a paratrooper and a pilot. He was stationed in Newark, Nottinghamshire. Near the end of the war he met my mother at a dance for service men. They married in 1948 and settled down in Derby. Then my father arranged for his mother to come over from Warsaw and live with us. She was a widow, had no other children and was living in very sad circumstances. My grandmother had been living with us when I was born. She looked after me. She couldn't speak English, so she spoke Polish to me, and it became my first language. I don't remember her dying but everyone tells me I was extremely upset and full of grief. Reportedly,

I refused to speak Polish until I see her again. My father decided to take me and my family over to Poland to see if it would comfort me. This was the first time he had been back since 1939. Up to 1965 he would have been in danger if he'd entered the country. I think he was a bit nervous about going back. He was very anti-communist, and he disapproved of the direction the country had been heading towards.

JK: What were your first impressions of Poland?

JC: We stayed with my great uncle in Warsaw. Poland in those days was very different to how it is now. Everyone had a very difficult life. My childhood memory of the country is that of queuing for food and a tiny flat we stayed in. The old building had bullet marks from the war on the outside. Inside, there was just one room, a kitchen and a bathroom. The beds hung down from the walls. In daytime they would go up and would be put down at night-time. The family had no television, no car. But they owned

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a little garden, which was a separate allotment. You had to walk to it. There was a little summer house, where you could sit in and read. It smelled of fruit and vegetables that they grew. Different countries have different smells. The smell that reminds me of Poland is dill, which is not that popular in Britain, although amazingly where we are, Dulwich means “a field of dill” in Old English. We went back one more time before my father died in the summer of 1970. I remember somebody telling me that the best view of Warsaw is from the top of the Palace of Culture because from there you can’t see the building itself. But obviously the country has changed so much since then.

JK: Have you visited Poland since your childhood?

JC: I’ve been there a few times. I have a cousin in Gdańsk, and I stay with her every time I visit. She’s also a novelist, Anna Kanthak. Her penname is Hanna Cygler. Poland of 1965 was very different to the country I saw when I went in 2000 or 2004. My cousin and her husband have built this beautiful, open-planned, very Scandinavian-looking house to their own design. There is a supermarket nearby that has got something like 74 check-outs. I’ve never seen anything like that in this country. There are beautiful beaches with nice restaurants serving lovely food. Gdańsk is a really lovely city.

JK: Do you have any Polish friends living in England?

JC: I know people like me, second generation Poles, whose parents came to England during the war. A lot of my school friends had at least one parent that was Polish. My father and his colleagues started a Polish Club in Derby that was called Dom Polski. Similar clubs sprang up all around the country. They were founded by Poles who came here during the war. As they couldn’t go home, they established what to them would be like a little home from home, a little Poland where they lived. The club offered a variety of weekend activities: Polish classes for children, girl guides, boy scouts, a Polish mass on Sundays, dances in the evening, a restaurant and a bar. My father was actively involved in that.

JK: Can you see any differences between the immigration waves of Poles in the UK?¹

JC: Yes, we tend to call them “old Poles” and “new Poles.” The old ones were refugees really. It was a forced immigration in a lot of

¹ The estimated number of Polish immigrants in Britain runs to over 532,000, and Polish is currently the second most popular language used for communication in the British Isles. The Polish diaspora is much larger if we account for two previous emigration waves, the former in the aftermath of World War II and the latter in the 1980s.

ways. They escaped the brutality and stayed here because they couldn't go home, often even for a visit. They hadn't expected to come and they had to make the best of it. They worked hard, put down roots, set up their communities and tried to live a life. It all happened against their will. I don't know much about those who emigrated in the 1980s. I know only one person who came in 1982. But those who have come recently did it voluntarily. It's their choice and they can go back whenever they want. It is a different situation.

I've heard there is some hostility between the old Poles and the new. There might be some jealousy behind it. The old Poles feel that they had no choice but to work hard to establish a community and try to fit in. The young ones don't experience any suffering and are free to do whatever they want. When I was interviewed on the Polish radio, we talked about the Polish clubs in London. The interviewer said that they seemed so old-fashioned with the crowned Polish eagle, like a time capsule, something from centuries ago. They represent a Poland that does not exist anymore, a fossil. It is like an isolated group that is no longer connected to the mainstream culture. As to what the young immigrants think of the old ones, I do not know. With new immigrants it's hard to fit them into any of the social groups in the British class system. They might be cleaning here but they would have

a degree in physics from the Kraków University. They are doing low-paid jobs but that is not really what they should be doing. Most British people would be aware of that and admire their bravery to come here.

JK: How do the British perceive Polish people?

JC: A popular idea is that Polish people are very hardworking and trustworthy. I remember a comedy sketch on television. The setting is a house. A woman comes in and starts talking to two workmen about putting in a shower. She seems happy with their arrangements. The two men speak with a very strong accent. Then she goes out and they start talking to each other normal English. It turns out they only pretend to be Polish to get the job.

Since 2004, Poles are everywhere, even in small towns. This is a completely new thing, almost revolutionary. As a result, now we are much more familiar with Polish culture. There are Polish shops "Delicatesy" everywhere and we learnt more about their food and drinks. A lot of people really like the Żubrówka Vodka. They know about Polish cakes and lunch meat. Kraków has become a popular holiday destination. This old, beautiful city is often compared to Prague.

During their trip to Kraków, British tourists sometimes visit Auschwitz. My father's first wife was a messenger in the resistance. She was caught

and sent to the camp. When I mention it to people, they assume she was Jewish, which she wasn't. They are not aware of many Polish Catholics who died in the concentration camp.

JK: What was an inspiration for your novels *The Black Madonna of Derby* and *Sweetest Enemy*?

JC: There is a quite established culture of novels about immigrant groups in the UK. There is a novel *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* that came out just before mine. The author of the book, Marina Lewycka, wrote to me a couple of times and said she really enjoyed my book, which was flattering. There is also a novel called *Small Island* about black newcomers from the 1950s and *Brick Lane* about Indian immigrants. There are things that link those novels because every human being that comes from one country to another feels lost and isolated. It's similar for all immigrant communities. But I didn't know about any book that was written about the group of immigrants that my father belonged to. The story hasn't been told and I thought it was worth telling.

JK: The publication of your first novel coincided with the new wave of Polish immigrants. Was it planned?

JC: No, I didn't plan it. I had this idea a long time ago, when I was in

my twenties. I wrote two chapters and a synopsis, then I forgot about it for years. When I found it again, I read it through and thought this could be a good story. I went ahead and wrote my first novel. People say it's quite complex with a lot of twists and turns but it all makes sense in the end. I tried to find a British publisher but had no success. I sent a copy to my cousin in Gdańsk. She contacted me saying she liked the book and was going to translate it and find a Polish publisher. It was published under the title *Goodbye Polsko* and I did a few promotional talks around Gdynia and Gdańsk in 2006. We ended up in Warsaw where we had a reception at the British Embassy. The English version came out in 2008.

JK: What is the story behind the books' titles?

JC: I was originally going to call the first novel just *The Black Madonna*. There is a copy of the icon in St. Mary's Church in Derby, which is one of the first Catholic churches built in England after the Reformation. The icon was a gift to the people of Britain as thanks for giving Polish communities a safe haven. I remember seeing it as a child. We did go to Poland one time to see the real painting. Then I decided to combine Polish and British aspects of the book in the title and call it *The Black Madonna of Derby*.

The first book begins in 1964 and ends in 1978, the year the Polish

pope was elected. The sequel, *Sweetest Enemy*, is set in the 1980s and 1990s and describes the Solidarity era in Poland and the years of Margaret Thatcher in the UK. I thought it would be interesting to bring the two countries and the two ideas together with the background of this Polish family, called Baran, who were still living in Derby. We were so used to this idea of a divided Europe, we never thought that would finish. The Soviet Union turned out to be more of a house of cards than we realized. The title *Sweetest Enemy* hints at key antagonisms illuminated in the novel. One of them is a painful relationship between the two main characters, Zosia and Wanda. They are sisters who have very different points of view on life. Because of it, they are enemies but they love each other, too. They are the sweetest enemy to each other. There is also a father and his son, who are opposed to each other. On the one hand, they have a loving relationship, on the other an antagonistic one. Finally, you could broaden it to the connection of the Baran family with the two countries. They have a strong link with Poland but their life is in England. The parting with the country is a sweet sorrow. “Love” and “hate” like “sweet” and “sorrow” don’t really go together. There is a conflict in terms.

JK: What part does language play in the books? Have you tried to mirror the way Polish people speak?

JC: Language plays a great part in the books. It is a feature that distinguishes immigrants. You wouldn’t necessarily know that they are different if it wasn’t for their language and their names. I wondered for a long time how to indicate in the book that somebody is speaking another language. At first, I thought about changing the typeface to make it seem different. But it didn’t look right. In the end I’ve just used about four Polish words, which, of course, no English person would understand but if I kept using them in context, the readers would work out their meaning. I would just put these four words in to indicate that the character is now speaking a different language.

There is a significant scene in the book where language becomes a weapon. Two sisters meet in a restaurant. They are opposed because one celebrates her Polish heritage while the other denies it. They haven’t seen each other for a while but when they meet the elder sister would just speak English while the younger one will only speak Polish. I remember a lot of children of my generation who would start to reject their culture. Parents would speak to them Polish and they would answer English. The mother wouldn’t give in on speaking Polish, and the child wouldn’t give in on speaking English. I’ve taken that scene and made it a part of the conflict. And there is the youngest child in the family, the boy, who forgets Polish altogether.

JK: What sources did you depend on while writing your novels?

JC: I had to research historical events to make them accurate. I didn't do a huge amount of research because it was not meant to be a textbook, but fiction and entertainment. The hardest challenge was to fit in the fictional figures with the true historical events. For example, the book starts in 1964. This is the year when the first film of the Beatles, *A Hard Day's Night*, was released. The eldest granddaughter, Wanda, is 14 so she is the right age to be interested in

the band. It was quite complicated to make everyone the right age for the events. You have got a fixed truth, fixed historical events in the background, and you have to get it right. Historical facts should be as accurate as possible to make people believe in the story. I had a lot of reviews saying that I captured the 1960s London very well and accurately. I was a small child living in Derby, so I don't remember it. But it's nice that people believe it.

JK: Thank you for taking your time to talk to me.

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