Migrant memories, migrant lives: Polish national identity in Leicester since 1945

by Kathy Burrell

This article considers the development of the Polish 'community' in Leicester, starting with memories of Poland's occupations and subsequent population displacements during the Second World War, and finishing with the establishment of formal and informal Polish institutions and networks in the city in the post-war period. Using extracts from oral history interviews undertaken with local Poles, it charts the survival of a very strong Polish national identity within the community, illustrating how this national consciousness has been based primarily on a shared sense of history that has been cemented by the common experience of war-time suffering.

Introduction

While migration is not a new phenomenon, it is generally accepted that since 1945 international flows have increased in intensity, reflecting both the growing mobility of labour and an ongoing catalogue of population displacements triggered by conflict and natural disasters. As Stephen Castles argues, 'international migration is part of a transnational revolution that is reshaping societies and politics around the globe'. For Britain in particular, post-colonial migration and refugee movements have transformed society at national and, more particularly, local levels, challenging established notions of Britishness and altering the cultural geography of the nation. The old cotton mill towns of Lancashire and Yorkshire, for example, are now recognised as much for their Asian populations as for their role in the Industrial Revolution, as local histories become increasingly entwined with the histories of their migrant communities. However, despite considerable academic interest in the various migrant groups across Britain - of which Leicester is a good example - there is still a tendency to view these migrants purely as 'immigrants', neglecting the significance of the migration process itself. All the migrant communities in Leicester, for example, have their own distinctive histories, memories and narratives of migration. Unsurprisingly, it is these particular histories that have significant ramifications for the types of community networks that are subsequently created, and the processes that are used to maintain national identity away from the homeland territory.² In the case of the Polish community in Leicester, migration to

S. Castles, The Age of Migration - International Population Movements in the Modern World, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993, p. 5. See also R. Cohen, Global Diasporas - An Introduction, London: UCL Press, 1997.

A good overview of theories of nationalism and national identity can be found in U. Ozkirimli, *Theories of Nationalism - A Critical Introduction*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000. For a specific discussion of the role of territory and national identity see G. H. Herb & D. Kaplan (eds.), *Nested Identities - Nationalism*, *Territory, and Scale*, Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999.

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Britain was caused by displacement during the Second World War, making the Poles here refugees rather than economic migrants, a distinction which has fundamentally shaped their ensuing perceptions of, and relations with, the homeland. This article aims to show how Polish national identity in Leicester survived the transition imposed by forced migration in World War Two, and how the memories and institutions of the local Polish community have been underpinned by a very strong Polish national awareness.

The Polish Community in Britain

Post-war Polish migration to Britain resulted predominantly from the dual German and Russian occupations of Poland in 1939, a traumatic episode in Polish history that is well documented.³ A significant number of those Poles who ended up in Britain served in the Polish army throughout the war, and eventually fought under British command, contributing in particular to the Battle of Britain and intelligence advances. The other major 'route' to Britain involved those who had originated from eastern Poland and were part of the 1.7 million Poles who experienced forced deportation to Siberia by Russian troops in 1940.⁴ Eventually the survivors were released after an amnesty with the Russian government in 1941, and those of suitable age and fitness were drafted into the Second Polish Corps under General Anders. The remaining civilians spent the rest of the war in Polish Red Cross transit camps throughout India, Africa and the Middle East. At the end of the war, as Poland fell to communism and the eastern territories were lost to Russia, it became clear to the Polish forces and refugees abroad that a return to the homeland was unrealistic, and that staying in Britain was one of the only viable options. As a result, by 1951 the Polish population in Britain had risen from 44,642 in 1931 to 162,339.⁵

The Polish community in Leicester is numerically very small, particularly in the context of Polish settlement in Britain generally. While by 1951 Greater London had attracted 33,500 Poles, Lancashire 14,500 and West Yorkshire 13,500, the total in Leicestershire stood at 3,200, with 1,000 of those living in Leicester itself.⁶ The city's Polish population peaked in 1961 at 1,509, and by 1991 the census enumerated only 833 first generation Poles in Leicester.⁷ In contrast, Leicester's New Commonwealth migrant population in 1991 was estimated at around 90,000 and still rising.⁸ Although small in size, Leicester's Polish population has a strong and distinctive history, and since 1945 has had a tangible, if less visible, impact on the cultural landscape of the city.

Oral History

Inevitably the most useful resource for researching the Polish community in Leicester has been the Polish people themselves. While the census and newspaper archives have

- See particularly N. Davies, Heart of Europe A Short History of Poland, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.
- The exact number is contested and will never be known see K. Sword, Deportation and Exile Poles in the Soviet Union, 1939-48, 2nd ed., Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996, pp. 25-7.
- See C. Holmes, John Bull's Island Immigration and British Society 1871-1971, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988, pp. 168, 211-212.
- Regional figures taken from J. Zubrzycki, Polish Immigrants in Britain, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1956, pp. 69-70. Leicestershire figures found in 1951 Census Report, Leicestershire.
- Figures taken from 1961 Census Report, Leicestershire and 1991 Census Report, Leicestershire.
- Figure taken from D. Nash & D. Reader (eds.), Leicester in the Twentieth Century, Stroud: Alan Strutton, 1993, p. 187. A good recent study of Leicester's African Caribbean population can be found in L. Chessum, From Immigrants to Ethnic Minority- Making black community in Britain, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000.

provided useful background information, it is the oral history and in-depth interviews that have shaped this study. Twenty-five interviews were undertaken with first, second, and third generation Poles, and while every effort was taken to achieve a representative balance between gender and ages, finding people willing to share their memories of the traumatic experiences of war was not particularly easy. Interviews were therefore arranged with those comfortable with being questioned rather than on the basis of their age or gender, with further contacts being found through personal recommendations. Most of the interviews were conducted on the understanding of complete anonymity, and so respondents have been referred to as a 'first-generation Polish man', and so on. While this may appear impersonal, it avoids identifying the people involved, and also prevents any misunderstanding that may be caused by using assumed names. Throughout the interviews inquiries were based around broad themes, such as coming to Britain, contact with Poland, and the community in Leicester. Set lists of questions were avoided, allowing the interviewees to talk freely about the issues that they felt were the most significant for them.

Oral history comes into its own with a subject such as this, recording memories and emotions that may otherwise be lost, and allowing others an insight into communities normally viewed from without. ¹⁰ It matters less if some of the respondents make wild claims or historically inaccurate statements, than that these perceptions are voiced, whether they are seriously held beliefs, or said with the intention of projecting a certain image. Trying to pretend that there are no tensions in the community when other interviews testify that there are, for example, reveals more about the desire for the community to be viewed as cohesive, than the community itself. Oral history is also particularly valuable for the study of migration, automatically giving migrants a voice as pro-active agents of change rather than as helpless pawns in a wider process over which they have no control. ¹¹ Allowing migrants to talk openly about their lives illustrates how temporally significant the act of migration is felt to be over a life time, with memories being divided into everything that happened before moving, and everything that has happened since. ¹² For survivors of forced migration, the memories recorded in interviews like these are especially poignant.

Migrating the Nation

While the experiences of the Poles in Leicester are wide ranging it is clear that Polish national identity in the city is inextricably bound up with feelings of displacement and exile, and was affected fundamentally by the upheaval of the Second World War. Whether experienced personally or by relatives, all of the interviewees showed a sharp awareness of the traumatic nature of Polish migration to Britain, and reiterated feelings that the community in Leicester had developed only because it had not been possible to go back to Poland. What also became clear through the interviews was that the most common experience in the community was deportation to Siberia from the eastern territories of Poland, and although this was not shared by everyone, it had almost

- An excellent introduction to the methodology, theory and uses of oral history can be found in R. Perks & A. Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, London: Routledge, 1998.
- See P. Thompson, The Voice of the Past Oral History, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. Mary Chamberlain emphasises the value of interviewing for recording emotions in M. Chamberlain, Narratives of Exile and Return, London: Macmillan, 1997.
- See A. Thomson, Moving Stories: Oral History and Migration Studies', Oral History, 27 (1999), 24-37.
- See A. M. Findlay & F. L. N. Li, 'An auto-biographical approach to understanding migration: the case of Hong Kong emigrants', Area, 29 (1997), 33-44.

become the dominant narrative in the group, providing a powerful tool that joined people together through collective memories of suffering; as one lady explained: 'Many of us here in Leicester, most of us came through the same road, were taken to Siberia'.¹³

The interviews demonstrated that even after sixty years, memories of Siberia are fresh and alive. As this same lady told her account of the day the Russian troops came to deport her and her family, it became clear through the detail of her recollection how significant this event had become in her narrative of the war:

It was very snowy, the snow was over a metre deep, frost was very severe, 10th February 1940. They were getting ready and the partisans and the Russian soldiers came with the guns, with the rifles. They gave my mother half an hour to get ready, that was at 4 o'clock in the morning. I was awake. They came in and told us to take warm clothes, nothing else but warm clothes. Unluckily we had no bread because my mother was going to make it, so we couldn't even take any bread. My brother took a knife and killed some chickens and we put them in a sack. We didn't know where we were going, but it came out that it was Siberia. We had two solid weeks going by train in the cattle trucks to Siberia. 14

Those too young to remember this event for themselves have had this memory passed down to them, and validated by other members of the community, as illustrated in the testimony of another lady:

It was just my mother, my three year old brother and myself, I was eighteen months old. In the middle of the night they came and told us to pack the things, and they were quite nice because I have heard other people weren't allowed to take anything. My mother even took all the photos, the ones where my father wasn't in uniform, and personal things like the most treasured possessions, and I even had my birth certificate which later I found out is a rarity. So we went to Russia, I don't remember that at all. 15

The initial deportation was only the beginning of the ordeal, as one man recounted:

After we arrived in Siberia we were just thrown out of the train onto the snow and were told by the Russians, "here you live and here you die", which to me it meant nothing. But I realised what they meant, because there was no food, no shelter, people were freezing to death, and one third from the transport, about a third died off. And the Russians sent everybody to the working camps.¹⁶

Another interviewee shared her earliest memories, those of being in a Russian nursery:

I remember a little bit when we first came to Russia, because I was placed in a nursery, and I remember the boredom. I was three years old and we weren't allowed to move about, we were told to sit, I think it was something like a bed, a cot, and you couldn't run around, had to sit all the time. Then I don't remember anything afterwards until we came to Africa, I think it was because a lot of children died, especially at the age I was, or those that survived were very malnourished.¹⁷

After the 1941 amnesty, although the Poles were officially free, the nightmare was still not over. Movement to refugee and army camps required long and arduous journeys across the Soviet Union, and the Poles had already been weakened by hard labour and disease. As Keith Sword comments, 'by a sad and tragic irony this second, 'voluntary' translocation probably resulted in the deaths of more people than the enforced uprooting which had brought them to the Soviet Union up to two years earlier'.¹⁸

- ¹³ Interview with first generation Polish woman, Leicester, 16.2.01.
- ¹⁴ First generation woman, 16.2.01.
- ¹⁵ Interview with first generation Polish woman, Leicester, 26.2.01.
- ¹⁶ Interview with first generation Polish man, Leicester, 23.8.99.
- ¹⁷ Interview with first generation Polish woman, Leicester, 22.11.00.
- Sword, Deportation and Exile, p. 44.

But it was not only the physical well-being of the deportees that was challenged by deportation; their very Polishness was also attacked: 'I was given a Russian name. I was forbidden to speak in Polish. I was forbidden to pray because every time they saw me pray I was punished'. In spite of this suppression, the evidence demonstrating the survival of Polish national identity in exile is compelling. Throughout the time spent in Siberia contact was maintained with Poland and parcels were received from friends and family who had escaped deportation. After 1941, those who had not joined the Second Polish Corps travelled to the scattered Polish Red Cross camps where the Polish language was spoken openly, the Polish version of Catholicism was practised and traditions were continued. Eventually schools were set up, even where there were no suitable books, and children were taught the basics of Polish religion, history, and literature. As most of the men had joined the army it was the women (often regarded as the primary transmitters of national culture) who organised this, passing on Polish national identity to the next generation outside the homeland. One lady recalled her experiences of education in the refugee camps:

I started schooling there, with nothing, no teachers, nothing. Very quickly Brownies and Guides were organised, but there were no professionals. Whichever woman was educated or had experience in teaching, they were organising the schools for children, it comes naturally for women to take care of the youngsters. We had no text books, nothing at all, those people were teaching us what they knew, they passed their knowledge like mothers do ... History, geography, literature, there were no books for literature ... They were pretty strict, religiously they kept us in a good shape.²¹

As another lady confirmed, Polish national identity was so strong in the camps, that even though she had no recollection of Poland itself, she grew up knowing she was Polish: 'I was born in Poland, and I was deported to Siberia at the age of three with my family, so therefore I don't remember Poland, but I grew up in Polish environment, in the Polish hostels, I grew up in Africa'.²²

Despite some assertions in the interviews that almost everybody in the city had come from eastern Poland and shared the same fate, not all the Poles in Leicester experienced this passage through Siberia; at least one female interviewee had been sent to a German labour camp, another had fled to Czechoslovakia, and three of the first generation men had originated from western and central Poland, and had joined the Polish army at the outbreak of war. What has united the community more than anything else, however, is the common ordeal of wartime suffering, the after-effects of which still show after sixty years. As other research has revealed, Poles in Britain generally have displayed above average susceptibility to mental illness as a result of their wartime distress.²³ Many in the Leicester community were young children during the war, but being young, or not having the same memories as the older members, has not cushioned them from holding the same feelings of trepidation towards the past, and the knowledge that their lives were turned around by something terrible; as one lady shared, 'Even though I don't remember what happened, it has affected me my whole life'.²⁴ Given these

¹⁹ First generation man, 23.8.99.

For a discussion of the relationship between gender, nationalism and national identity see F. Anthias & N. Yuval-Davis (eds.), Woman - Nation - State, London: Macmillan, 1989.

First generation woman, 16.2.01.

²² Interview with two first generation Polish women, Leicester, 3.8.99.

²³ See M. Winslow, 'Polish Migration to Britain: War, exile and mental health', Oral History, 27 (1999), 57-64

²⁴ Interview with first generation Polish woman, Leicester, 2.7.01.

circumstances, it is unsurprising that religion and the Polish Catholic church have played a key role, both in keeping the Leicester community together, and providing much needed comfort:

Church and Poland, they are a very similar thing, intertwined. Even in our community here I often think ... where would we be in here, without the church?... And I'm sure that was something that helped people to survive, because without it you have no roots, and if you have no family and nothing really, it's very easy to have a nervous breakdown. So that was a very good stabiliser.²⁵

Wartime trauma was inevitably compounded by the eventual realisation that after years of waiting to go back, or years of fighting for Poland's freedom, Polish independence was lost again, this time at Yalta in the Allied concessions to the Soviet Union's sphere of influence. Whether return was possible or not after 1945, nothing could sway the widespread perception that going back would be dangerous. As one man explained, it was assumed that returning would lead to certain death:

Some went back to Poland, but as you know when the war finished, Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin signed an agreement at Yalta, and part of Poland has become under Russian occupation, and there was a Polish communist government. Only a few went, of those in the airforce who had fought for Britain about one hundred people went back, and they were exterminated in Poland when they went there, they were just murdered and went to prison. All knowledge of them disappeared, even today we don't really know what happened to them. Many officers were murdered by the secret police.²⁶

Another man voiced similar misgivings of going back to communist Poland:

When I was in Siberia I was planning in my head to run to Poland, because in Poland at that time I enjoyed my time very nicely. Siberia was terrible. I was dreaming of going back to Poland, I would have gone on foot. At the end of the war I was hoping we would go back to Poland. But at that time my territory was occupied by the Russians. Well, who wants to go back to the Russians when they gave me so much suffering in my lifetime, who wants to go to Poland when the Russians were occupying? If Poland was free I would have gone when the war finished.²⁷

Furthermore, a large number in the community who had lived on the eastern side of Poland literally had no homes to go back to, as land that had been Polish in the interwar years was absorbed by the Soviet Union, later becoming the Ukraine and Belarus: 'All of us, with the exception of one or two percent were from eastern Poland which is now in Russia, the southern part is Ukraine, the upper part in Belarus. We couldn't go back there, so to go back to a Poland that we hardly knew, that wasn't an option really'.²⁸

The joint experience of war and exile have had such an impact on the Poles in Leicester that their lives are now remembered in terms of 'before' and 'after'. Starting a new life proved to be a difficult challenge, especially as people still hung on to the nagging hope that an imminent return would somehow become possible. One man remembered how he felt, trying to build a life in Leicester after the war:

²⁵ First generation woman, 22.11.00.

²⁶ Interview with first generation Polish man, Leicester, 28.2.01 p.m..

²⁷ Interview with first generation Polish man, Leicester, 28.2.01 a.m..

 $^{^{28}\,\,}$ Interview with first generation Polish man, Leicester, 26.2.01.

Oh my God, the beginning was really bitter. You couldn't go to your own country. You very often had tears in your eyes. Only we were young, as ex-soldiers, so we somehow managed. If we were old then perhaps we would break down, but when you are young you've got energy, and ideas, and so it was all right ... It was hard. Today when we talk about it we just laugh, but it was not a laughing matter.²⁹

For some the hardest part was wondering what their lives would have been like, if they had never had to leave - as another man explained, 'I never got to do what I was meant to do, what my predecessors did'.³⁰

The Vulnerable Homeland

These primary and second-hand memories of forced migration and displacement have had a significant impact on the way Poland is viewed by the community in Leicester. Their experiences of deportation and war fit very easily into a wider impression of a Polish history which emphasises the traditional vulnerability of both Polish land and people to malign outside forces. The exile from the homeland felt keenly by the Leicester Poles echoes the ordeals that Polish nationals faced during the period of partitions in the nineteenth century, when Poland was occupied by Russia, Prussia and Austria. Obvious parallels are seen between the Second World War and the partitions era when thousands of Poles were forced to flee what had been Poland and Polish culture was suppressed. In both cases Polish national identity was sustained underground and outside the homeland. Just as the Polish language was oppressed in Siberia, the interviewees recounted what they knew about Poland in the nineteenth century: 'you were forbidden to use your own language. It was all underground. Parents taught their children in the home, in secret, Polish language, Polish literature.'³² Another man corroborated this perception:

Before the First World War people were not even allowed to speak Polish, that was on the Russian side and the German side. You had to speak the language they taught, German or Russian. Young people didn't like that and they tried to organise themselves as uprising groups. Many of them were shot and sent to Siberia. People were trying to fight for freedom.³³

Once again, religion and the church were viewed as saviours of Polishness and the guardians of Polish national identity: 'I'm sure that religion was very important in the fact that it survived, the Polish history, the Polish identity'. 'Ju Unsurprisingly, educating the younger generations in Polish history is considered to be one of the most important tasks of the community institutions. The Polish Saturday School, therefore, has spent the last fifty years ensuring that all the young Poles in Leicester are aware of this turbulent history, and are able to recite unaided passages from the exiled Polish romantic writers and poets of the nineteenth century, particularly the early verses of Adam Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz*. 'Jo

- ²⁹ Interview with first generation Polish man, Leicester, 26.1.01.
- First generation man, 26.02.01.
- For an account of this period see particularly N. Davies, God's Playground, A History of Poland Volume II, 1795 to the Present, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981.
- Interview with first generation Polish man, Leicester, 24.1.00.
- First generation man, 28.2.01 p.m..
- First generation woman, 22.11.00.
- For an introduction to the work of Poland's national poet see S. Helsztynski, Adam Mickiewicz, 1798-1855: Selected Poetry and Prose, Warsaw: Polonia, 1955.

Concern for the freedom and independence of Poland has clearly shaped Polish national consciousness in Leicester. Several interviewees were quick to explain the drawbacks of Poland's geographic position. For example, as one man commented:

Well you see Poland unfortunately lies in the centre of Europe, which means any expansion of the west to the east goes through Poland, and any expansion from the east to the west, if it was Genghis Khan, or any other power, Poland is more or less the gate to Europe or from Europe. So we are unfortunately placed in Europe, but we can't help it. We would rather prefer to be like Spain or Italy, to be surrounded by sea, or England for that matter, but we have been placed there by our forefathers, and there we are going to stay.³⁶

Added to this there is a strong belief that Poland, although historically weak in the face of attack, should still have been considered part of western Europe, and never have been associated with the eastern bloc.³⁷ While vulnerable to invasion generally, it is Poland's eastern enemy, Russia, that seems to be deemed the most dangerous. As the same man continued:

Culturally, and economically, politically, we belong to western Europe. Very often people don't understand. They think Russia they say Europe. Well Russia is not Europe. If anybody thinks that the Russians are Europeans he needs his head examined. They belong to a different world. They try to invade western Europe many times before, and they don't succeed. We belong, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, we belong to western Europe, European civilisation. That's why we are sometimes very bitter about the ignorance displayed here in the press.³⁸

Throughout the communist era, the Leicester community was focused on the fight for freedom in Poland. While migration had transformed the Poles from active participants in Polish domestic affairs to close but critical observers, the safety of the homeland remained a priority for the group until the fall of communism in 1989. Archives of the local newspaper the *Leicester Mercury* testify to the concern felt for Poland and the effort spent keeping the lines of communication open, with numerous stories in 1980 and 1981 illustrating the group's growing fear of possible government responses to the growth in stature of the independent trade union Solidarity.³⁹ People were encouraged to donate goods to be sent to distressed friends and relatives; for example, the Leicester Polish Youth association issued the following appeal in January 1981: 'Anyone willing to donate money or non-perishable foods such as tinned meat, coffee, baby food, should take it to the Polish Centre anytime between 6 p.m. and 10:30 p.m. Tuesday to Sunday'. At times the situation in Poland dominated the thoughts of the local Poles, often taking precedence over their lives in Leicester. As one lady explained:

I think that we as refugees here, we were much more concentrating on what was happening in Poland than making our way here. A lot of people had their families there and so on. I think with the elderly generation they certainly had not thought how to make their living in the best way, because they were forever preoccupied with helping their families.⁴¹

- First generation man, 26.01.01.
- A discussion of this issue can be found in Davies, *Heart of Europe*, pp. 342-344.
- First generation man, 26.01.01.
- A good account of Poland in the communist era can be found in G. Schopflin, Politics in Eastern Europe 1945-1992, Oxford: Blackwell, 1993.
- ⁴⁰ Leicester Mercury, 17.1.81., p. 14.
- First generation woman, 22.11.00.

In December 1981 the different organisations in the community published the following statement in the *Leicester Mercury*, condemning the introduction of Martial Law in Poland, which was claimed had,

... resulted in many killings, thousands of arrests and imprisonment of our fellow countrymen, on a scale reminiscent of the most cruel and repressive period of Stalinist and Nazi rule in our country ... We appeal to all the free nations of the world, to their parliaments and governments and to all the appropriate international organisations, to give their moral, economic and political support to our oppressed nation in its time of crisis and suffering. 42

Whether effective or not, the community took its role during the communist era very seriously, as another lady explained:

The people living outside the country were more or less ambassadors for the people who were living within the country, who at many times couldn't say what they felt. So we were able to speak for them. We were also, the people living overseas, like ambassadors talking about the situation that was in Poland, we were like the official spokesmen for what was happening.⁴³

In fact, Polish freedom and independence proved to be such an all encompassing, unifying aim that when the communist regime did finally fall in Poland, people in Leicester found it difficult to adapt. One man described how this development had a particularly negative impact on the morale of the Ex-Servicemen's Club, an association that had been almost entirely structured around the need to save the homeland:

The aim was for freedom, for liberty. It was a crusade, a fight to pass down the generations. But now it's lost. The Ex-Servicemen's club has had to re-establish itself. It's lost its whole momentum and aim. Its whole ethos was tied up with being a combatant, the fight for freedom.⁴⁴

Once this freedom was restored, and the political enforcement of exile removed, the prospect of actually returning to Poland permanently did not result in the anticipated exodus from Leicester. Referring to the first generation, one man commented that, 'it's too late now for the older generation they are all in their eighties, and I'm sorry but a little bit in cloud cuckoo land. They want the free Poland and I thought if Poland would be free the boats would go, but things are complicated for them'. After fifty years living abroad, exile had become a 'natural' state for the Poles, less disruptive emotionally and physically than the prospect of uprooting again and returning to a potentially very different country.

Fears for Poland's future safety and prosperity have not gone way with the collapse of communism, and the homeland still retains an aura of vulnerability in the eyes of the interviewees. Primarily it is believed that the economic legacy of communism has given Poland an immediate disadvantage, both domestically and with regard to eventual participation in the European Union. As one man stated:

Unfortunately, my country being behind the Iron Curtain, it's economically poorer than it should be ... Poland for example wants to get to the Common Market, but in Brussels they say you have to adjust economically to us, you earn only a quarter of what people

⁴² Leicester Mercury, 30.12.81., p. 14.

Interview with first generation Polish woman and Polish priest, Leicester, 3.8.99.

¹⁴ Interview with first generation Polish man, 16.9.99.

First generation man, 23.8.99.

earn here, so the economy is very poor, and there are 18% of unemployed people. The European people here say why should we get those beggars in here and help them out?⁴⁶

It is not even universally agreed that entry into the European Union would be in Poland's interests, rather that it could leave her western borders even more in the line of expanding German economic interests:

There is a fear now, the population are afraid of joining the Common Market, the reason being it will make it easier for our neighbours, for example for Germany, and they are doing it all ready, buying land very cheaply, buying it illegally through the back way. And there is a fear that once you lose your land you lose your independence again. So there is a fear that joining the Common Market, they will gradually lose what they have, and lose it in another way, not in war, in a peaceful way.⁴⁷

A second generation respondent shared similar views:

When Germany reunited, as much as I was happy, and I always said it was down to Solidarity, my first thought was are they going to rise above us all again, and when they talk about the Common Market I do worry how big Germany is going to get. That worries me because I have heard all the history about how Poland and Germany have always fought.⁴⁸

In addition, there is widespread disquiet about the state of domestic politics in Poland, and anxiety that opportunities arising from the newly found freedom and independence are being squandered by the politicians. From afar, the Poles in Leicester have a different perspective on Polish politics, their prime concern being the apparent hold on power still held by members of the old regime. One lady shared her observations:

I think the unfortunate thing is that the people who were in power are still there, and they know how to rule. Although there was an election, they are the people who rule still, because the opposition are not given enough publicity, and I think in a lot of cases there is still the power in the old hands.⁴⁹

Similar frustrations were voiced by another interviewee:

It makes us angry here that they just don't know how to use their freedom, how to get together in government, not to fight one another. Perhaps from the distance we look in a different way. I know all the parties, the people in those parties. But some people just get annoyed because in Poland there are many people who seem to have forgotten the past, how they got the freedom.⁵⁰

Most of these concerns were raised by first generation Poles. While second generation interviewees consistently showed a detailed knowledge of Polish history and an awareness of the nation's difficult past, it was the older respondents, those who could remember the war years however vaguely, who appeared to be the most passionate about Poland's future. Obviously the first generation would naturally have stronger ties to the homeland than their Leicester-born children. It is clear, though, that experiencing Poland's fragility first hand has heavily influenced the subsequent perceptions of Polish history and where Poland goes from here. Poland might have been a powerful, aggressive nation in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, one of many countries to be

- First generation man, 26.1.01.
- First generation woman, 22.11.00.
- ⁴⁸ Interview with second generation Polish woman, Leicester, 12.2.01.
- ⁴⁹ First generation woman, 22.11.00.
- First generation woman, 2.7.01.

occupied in the nineteenth century and afflicted by war and totalitarianism in the twentieth century, and may well stand to benefit from closer ties to the rest of Europe in the future, but this does not matter.⁵¹ What is remembered and engraved on the psyche of the Leicester community is an image of Poland as a uniquely tragic motherland, populated by people who have risked their lives throughout history to keep the Polish spirit alive.

Transnational Links

Memories alone are not enough to sustain strong bonds with the homeland, especially when the country in question has undergone such radical change in the last sixty years. Ever since their settlement in Leicester in the late 1940s and early 1950s the Poles have managed to retain contact with Poland, in spite of the practical difficulties created by the communist regime. Visiting the country brought with it a risk of being stopped and questioned by the authorities, and although this did not stop trips being taken to Poland, the potential danger was never far from people's thoughts. One man described his first visit back to Poland in 1967:

My first holiday, with my first earned money I spent going to Poland, although I was only allowed two weeks annual leave. I enjoyed, well my roots, visiting the country, I went up right to the north and the Baltic to the south, and my holiday dragged on for over three weeks. My boss was worried that I was missing in Poland. My friend asked me, was I afraid to go to Poland? Yes of course I was frightened, but I was at first inquisitive and the fright came after that. Yes, they kept me for twenty four hours in Poland, interrogating me through the night and half day, asking me who my parents were before the war, and obviously I said I was four years old I don't remember. But that wasn't sufficient for them, they wanted details, why I didn't go back to Poland after the war, that my place was in Poland. They said every time you change your address from town to town you have to report to the police, and that was uncomfortable because I knew that in the hotels they had listening devices in the walls.⁵²

Telephoning Poland could also be an uneasy experience, as another interviewee commented: 'There was a time in our past when you were talking they couldn't say exactly from Poland what they wanted to say. They used all sorts of ways to say what they wanted'.⁵³ It was even difficult getting hold of reliable media material directly from Poland, and so the Poles had to depend on the London based *Polish Daily* for domestic information. As the same respondent remembered: 'There was some contact but it was through the *Polish Daily*, they were telling the truth, because in the Polish papers in Poland everything was altered, many things were not mentioned'.⁵⁴ A visiting priest from Poland described how difficult it had been for the church in particular to publish any dissenting material during the communist regime:

Everything was censored. Whatever the church wanted to print, it had to be approved by the state. I was also a director of the publishing press, when I look through the old papers, there was not enough paper allocated to us, so we didn't get the material to write on. The censorship, it was so controlled by the communists. We couldn't buy the

An excellent discussion of mythology in Polish national identity can be found in N. Davies, 'Polish National Mythologies', in G. Hosking & G. Schopflin (eds.), Myths and Nationhood, London: Hurst, 1997, pp. 141-157.

First generation man, 23.8.99.

First generation woman, 2.7.01.

First generation woman, 2.7.01.

printing, the typing, to exchange and renew the equipment. The buying of the typewriters or the printing machines, we had to have the okay from the ministers, we couldn't buy them.⁵⁵

A combination of the fall of the communist regime and the increased globalisation of communications in the last ten years has had a dramatic impact on the relationship between Poles in Britain generally and Poland, allowing new links to be forged with the homeland. While it was always possible to visit Poland, the frequency of trips undertaken by the Poles in Leicester has increased considerably, although unfortunately for many affected by old age and ill health the change came too late. Generally though, easier access has encouraged those who are still in good health, or who came to Britain when they were very young, to rediscover Poland and no longer rely on outdated images of the country. For some, seeing Poland as it is now is a shock, with the magnitude of change undergone in the last sixty years hard to accept. One man recounted how he felt on his first return visit, fifty years after he had left:

When I went for the first time, after fifty odd years when I first got the chance to go for a holiday, actually I took the ashes of my wife to Poland, and buried my wife in my parent's grave, and so for the first time when I went to the village where I was born and where I went to school, I looked at it and I said to my sister, what have you done to the country? I remember my part of the country where I come from it was more or less the richest part of Poland, and when I went there, oh my God. Nothing painted, nothing repaired, they think everything is OK, and I say everything is not OK, it's not.⁵⁷

Facing up to the reality of contemporary Poland has not been a wholly negative experience however, as this same man was anxious to explain. All of the people interviewed had only ever known a small part of Poland as children, and had never had the chance to travel more widely within their country. Regular trips back have at least recompensed for some of the opportunities that were lost to the war and the communist regime:

I am going regularly now, once or twice a year, to visit my family, to visit my own country. When I left Poland I was nineteen, and I didn't know the country, because you see before the war people didn't travel as they do now, and so each time I go to my country I go to one or two days to see my sisters, and then I travel places and see places, and historical sights, so slowly we are getting somewhere. So this year I am going again to my own countryside.⁵⁸

Imparting knowledge about Poland to the third generation has also been aided by the chance to visit more often. As one interviewee explained: 'Now it is easier for young people, because quite a few of them are going to Poland on holiday, to see their relatives, to see their cousins, which didn't happen in the past in the communist times'.⁵⁹

Probably the most popular development in homeland contact in the past ten years has been the establishment of satellite television links with Poland, in the form of the television station T.V. Polonia. The community generally has access to this at the parish and Ex-Servicemen's clubs, but most of the elderly Poles have T.V. Polonia at home.

- ⁵⁵ Polish priest, 3.8.99.
- For an introductory discussion of the impact of transnational links on migrant communities see B. Anderson, 'Exodus', Critical Inquiry, 20 (1994), 314-327.
- First generation man, 26.1.01.
- First generation man, 26.1.01.
- ⁵⁹ First generation woman, 2.7.01

As one man commented, 'many houses have the dish now on the roof and they receive the Polish programmes'. ⁶⁰ This television station has proved to be an influential transmitter of Polish national consciousness, not only broadcasting exclusively in Polish, but showing traditional folk singing and dancing concerts, documentaries about Polish history (particularly the communist era) and programmes focusing on specific regions and cities, in addition to extensive news coverage. Now the Poles in Leicester can follow Polish politics, watch Polish culture, and learn more about their country without even having to leave their own homes. As one lady explained, the information that these programmes disseminate is invaluable for filling in the gaps of the often patchy memories and knowledge that people have of Poland:

It does help because what we have been taught at school and by the books, the television helps a great deal. We didn't know much about the countryside, different parts of Poland, what they looked like. We read about it, heard about it from stories from people's mothers, fantastic stories, so colourful. But when you see it, it makes it closer and you understand much more. I can see that there is something there even though I don't remember anything from Poland, I was only born there.⁶¹

Building home and community in Leicester

Although the orientation towards the Polish homeland has always been strong among the Poles in Leicester and memories of the war are alive in people's consciousness, a community could never have developed in the city without the recognition of the more pragmatic need to survive and build a new home in Britain. New histories and memories have developed alongside the creation of new Polish spaces in Leicester, ensuring that fifty years of settlement has left most of those interviewed now feeling more at home here than anywhere else.

During the course of the interviewing process it became increasingly clear that the early years in Leicester were very hard, partly because the nature of their migration here had left them with nothing. Before any institutions could be established the Poles themselves had to concentrate on securing accommodation and employment, often sharing houses with other families to reduce costs. One man described the determination he observed in his friends, as they struggled to build a new life from nothing:

Poles like their freedom ... They always wanted their own four walls. When they started with the poorer accommodation, terraced houses, they used to take other families, and they shared costs, and the ones that were living with them saved up, paying cheaper rent, and they went out and got their own houses. Nobody was given it, what's theirs is theirs, they work for it. I admire them. 62

Another woman added her own testimony of the difficulty of the early years: 'Nothing was given to Polish people, they had to earn and work hard. I remember at one time we had ten lodgers at home. Do you know how hard it is cooking for ten lodgers, having a little child?'. Additionally, finding work was not always straightforward, despite the potentially good prospects offered by the local factories, particularly in the textile industry. Another respondent shared his experiences:

- ⁶⁰ First generation man, 26.1.01.
- ⁶¹ First generation woman, 2.7.01
- ⁶² First generation man, 23.8.99.
- ⁶³ Interview with first generation Polish woman, Leicester, 26.8.99.

I had to start here, in a poorer way because living in a different country, just after the war, we hadn't been welcome. Everywhere you went you were a bloody so and so, you'd get quite a lot of that. Today it's all forgotten, but that's how it was. You needed a job, work, to live, and you went to all the factories, 'Poles don't need to apply'. It was very bitter, they needed every working hand there, but 'Poles don't need to apply.' It left a feeling.⁶⁴

The search for jobs and houses went far deeper than economic necessity. After the dislocation of the war, the priority had to be to make a home somewhere safe and secure and to try to undo some of the psychological damage that years of being effectively homeless had done:

You had to start from nothing, from scratch. I think we were more determined, because of our background, we were more determined to find a place of our own, because we didn't fancy living in somebody else's place, or move about. I think it's still important to me, the feeling of being in my own place, having something of my own. I think the difficulty was with moving around like we did, my childhood, I remember being in so many different places that eventually you feel that you don't know where you belong. There still is this sense, I think it is like a tree, it needs to have deep roots, and we have been transplanted in too many places to really feel that you belong somewhere. I think that is why it was important to be in the Polish community, that gave us the stability, I think without that it would have been very difficult for people.⁶⁵

Steadily a community began to establish itself in Leicester, apparent in the development of both formal institutions and more informal networks of friends and family. While being Polish did not depend on participation in these circles, those interviewed welcomed the formation of designated areas where Polish national identity could flourish. The Polish Saturday school was set up in Highfields in 1952, and four years later the Ex-Servicemen's Club was opened at 11 University Road. By 1961 the school was teaching over 200 pupils, and a regular Polish service had been established at the Dominican Holy Cross Church on New Walk.⁶⁶

Eventually, after years of fund-raising, St. Paul's church on Melbourne Road, Highfields, and the adjoining club buildings on Dale Street were bought in 1965, officially becoming the Polish parish church and club. It was clear in the interviews that the first twenty or so years in Leicester, despite being difficult at first, are now remembered almost as the golden age of the community, as a period when the clubs were always full, church attendance was always high, and the Polish traditions were always carefully followed. As one woman explained:

We as a community, we have existed here for over fifty years, organised community, and it was the support that has always been there, the church has always been there, the masses and the priest, and our life really always revolved around the Polish community. When I was younger I used to go dancing every weekend, every Friday they were there. Sunday you went to church, then you had choir practice, so you had another chance to go to the Polish community, all my social life revolved around it, my friends were there, so it was most important.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ First generation man, 26.1.01.

⁶⁵ First generation woman, 22.11.00.

⁶⁶ Leicester Chronicle, 20.10.61., p. 3.

⁶⁷ First generation woman, 3.8.99.

First generation man, 26.1.01.

Another interviewee shared his perceptions about the Polish clubs, claiming that, 'they used to be busy, we used to have parties and dances and so on, but now we are declining and running into the red all the time'.⁶⁸

While the community may not be as thriving now as it once was, it is evident that the children of the first generation Poles in Leicester were born into a distinctively Polish environment, and were always heavily occupied with community activities:

Children were involved all the time in the club, in the church ... Around the Polish centre there is the Girl Guides, there is the Scouts, and there was the junior choir for the children, and the Saturday School. Polish children were never bored. There was more than enough to do, it was a matter of fitting it into their school timetable.⁶⁹

As one second generation woman recalled, it was very easy to live almost exclusively within the Polish community:

We had this big extended family in Leicester, and the community was like this even bigger extended family. There was a Polish shop on Narborough Road where you could buy Polish sausages and things like that, other Polish people went there as well, so you would see them there sometimes. You would go to a Polish doctor. I think that there was this sense that you were helping somebody out by giving them business, giving them a helping hand. Most of the people you knew were Polish. Our early life was very Polish.⁷⁰

Throughout its existence, the Leicester community seems to have been held together not only by church attendance figures, membership of various clubs and shared experiences of war dislocation, but also by a common set of core values deemed to be particularly Polish in nature. Significantly, all of those interviewed saw their religion as a binding feature, and something that stretched further than the church building, providing the pivotal focus for annual events and celebrations, and setting out a moral guide to live by. Although Poland had been home to many different religious groups before World War Two, most notably the Jewish population, everybody in the community shared the common belief that being Polish equated to being Catholic:⁷¹

I think the community that I experienced revolved around the church. Religion was really important, the religion was something that defined you as being Polish. I always remember being told that something like 98% of the Polish population was Catholic. If you had a special day you would always go to the mass and people would turn up with their flags, banners, standards. People would do speeches, recite poetry, and we were always taught to do the Polish dancing, and sing songs. It was part of making sure you knew where you belonged, I'm sure it was. It was very deliberate.⁷²

It was this religious commitment that also shaped the popular Easter and Christmas festivities, where the distinctively Polish traditions were carefully reproduced across the Polish homes in the city, as well as in the church.⁷³ Whether carried out independently

⁶⁹ Interview with two first generation Polish women, Leicester, 24.2.00.

Interview with second generation Polish woman, Leicester, 9.2.01.

Norman Davies covers this point in Davies, *Heart of Europe*, pp. 336-342.

⁷² Second generation woman, 9.2.01.

For a discussion about the significance of traditions in constructing and reinforcing national identity see E. Hobsbawm & T. Ranger, The Invention of Tradition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983. Good coverage of these Polish traditions carried on in Leicester can be found in V. Davies, Leicester Celebrates: Festivals in Leicester Past and Present, Leicester: Living History Unit, 1996.

or collectively, the knowledge that others were simultaneously celebrating the same customs would have been a powerful reminder of Polish national identity.⁷⁴

The moral well-being of the community, carefully overseen by the church, was further reinforced by a strong sense of collective responsibility, particularly towards the children who were watched closely by everybody in the group:

It's a very closely knit community. For example, if I have seen a Polish child do something wrong, I could say to that Polish child stop doing that, I'm going to tell your mother, or simply I'll tell the mother or the father what I have seen, and the parent would be grateful of that. It's like a responsibility, I would never say to my children you must never misbehave because you are my child but because you are a Polish child, it's a kind of national pride. And I know that a mother would be grateful if I would notice a Polish child and pre-warned her that there could be a problem, it wouldn't be taken badly, it would be like thank you for telling me, I didn't realise the situation. It's a responsibility, indirectly it's helping together. To

Underpinning this mutual respect was the genuinely hospitable nature of Polish culture, which dictates that strangers should always be made welcome and guests treated well. One particular phrase continues to be used, 'gość w dom, Bóg w dom', literally meaning 'guest in the house, God in the house', which was explained by one interviewee:

There is a saying there, 'guest home, God home', they treat you as a God, they cannot refuse you hospitality ... If you come to me for the first time to me, I'd say come on, make you welcome, 'gość w dom, Bóg w dom'. Even to a stranger, even if I didn't know, it's your duty to make them feel at home, it is your duty. And mind you, the rare cases if they don't, word gets around and neighbours will ostracise them. So it is up to you to make sure that the guest is looked after.⁷⁶

As another respondent illustrated, this culture has successfully been translated to community life in Leicester:

With us it is quite common to go and see each other, invite each other for a coffee, for dinner, or a chat. If I was living in a cul-de-sac with a few Polish houses we would be visiting each other, and inviting. We would probably fall out with somebody, but you certainly would never feel that you were isolated. In England there is the isolation that is the problem, people tend to stay in their own houses, their own castles.⁷⁷

In spite of the obvious closeness in the community, there are inevitable problems with the harmonious image that is projected of the group. Some of the people interviewed admitted that there have always been quarrels in the community, and there appear to be ongoing tensions between the power and influence of the parish and that of the Ex-Servicemen's Club, something that Keith Sword has observed in his research into the Polish community in Britain.⁷⁸ At one point the group split, running two different communities from the same buildings. Interestingly, although twenty five interviews were undertaken, with questions asked about the closeness of the community, this was only mentioned once:

People like to argue a lot. There have been rifts ever since I can remember. There were even two parishes at one time. They shared the same church, but they had different

- ⁷⁴ See A. P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, Chichester: Ellis Horwood, 1985.
- First generation woman, 24.2.00.
- First generation man, 24.1.00.
- First generation woman, 3.8.99.
- K. Sword, Identity in Flux. The Polish Community in Britain, School of Slavonic and East European Studies Occasional Paper, 1996.

priests. Some people had fallen out with the priest who was there. If you were on one side you didn't communicate with the other. There were two Polish schools as well. That's one of the things that's put me off really. 79

Extensive involvement in the community also attracted increased scrutiny from other Poles:

There is a lot of pressure and there is a lot of bickering. I presume it's in every community really, because of the closeness everybody gets to know everyone else's business, there can be a lot of back biting ... But we try our best, I stuck it out for a long time, one of the longest, but it does grate, it is very wearing actually. When you put yourself out you become a target. If you sat back and nobody saw you then you wouldn't get criticised. It's living with that really, I know a lot of people can very quickly get disillusioned and upset by that.⁸⁰

A further division in the community that is rarely voiced highlights the immense intergenerational differences that have arisen from the amount of time the older people have devoted to thinking about Poland and remembering the past. While sympathetic to the ordeal their parents and grandparents faced during the war, the younger members display a tangible frustration with their perceived unwillingness to live in the present: 'They always say, "but remember we've suffered, we've been through Russia ... To the old people, history stood still. Poland is at it was in 1939. The Poles really are in this time warp".⁸¹

Membership of the Polish community does not necessarily define people as Polish, as it is possible to be Polish without being associated at all with the parish and clubs.82 Some of the second generation have chosen to distance themselves from the other Poles, but still claim to feel Polish, marking Polish days and religious events at home in their own way, rather than joining in with the official celebrations. T.V. Polonia has also made it possible to keep strong links with Poland without needing to be part of the community. Of course the term community itself presents difficulties: the 'community' in Leicester may draw inspiration from the past, but is still a fluid structure, allowing people to attend certain meetings and not others, mix in formal or informal circles, involving people at different life stages in different ways. While some of the third generation children attend the Saturday school, the elderly members visit the club on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, it being perfectly possible for the two groups to meet only rarely. The 'community' is made up from individuals, and although participation in community life can be pressurised, in adulthood involvement is ultimately voluntary. As one second generation woman commented: 'I think it depends entirely on the individual how strongly they keep it up. Some people can't be bothered anyway. I think it does depend on the individual. There are probably lots of [Polish] people who have never set foot inside the Polish club'.83

Conclusions

Rather than weakening migrant Polish national identity, it seems that forced migration has enhanced, even romanticised Polishness within the community. Being Polish in

- ⁷⁹ Second generation woman, 9.2.01.
- 80 Interview with second generation Polish woman, Leicester, 31.8.99.
- Second generation woman, 12.2.01
- This issue is explored in B. Temple, "Gatherers of Pig-Swill" and "Thinkers": gender and community amongst British Poles', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 4 (1995), 63-72.
- Interview with second generation Polish woman, Leicester, 16.9.99.

Leicester, as elsewhere in Britain, automatically brings with it a history of personal displacement which links very easily into the broader historical plight of a nation struggling for freedom and independence. The Poles have always been transnational in their outlook, choosing to remember the homeland even when visits were difficult and information scarce. Satellite television links have brought Poland closer in the last ten years, but memories of the country were never far away anyway for many of the older Poles. Perhaps, however, underneath this celebrated national identity there is a more pragmatic reality, that of people actually quite divorced from Poland, and now strangely more comfortable in Leicester than back 'home'. No amount of church going and television watching can disguise the fact that these Poles have lived very different lives to those in Poland over the last fifty years. The Poland that is imagined and commemorated is not completely the Poland of today, although it has taken a long time for many to accept this:

Unfortunately my home is here. Down there I don't belong, I've been here for so many years. Even when I went down there they could tell from my accent that I was a foreigner, but I'm not. I've realised with several trips to Poland that I didn't feel at home there any more than I do here. If the truth be known I feel more at home here. I haven't probably realised it myself how much I have adopted the English way of life. 84

Personal Details

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