

WRITERS MOSAIC

What We Leave We Carry

Maria Jastrzębska

"I just automatically stood next to two Asian kids, and I always remembered that because I couldn't speak English; all I could say was 'Hallo,' which I said to everybody. But the kids I went and stood next to where I felt safest, were these two Asian kids. I didn't know what to say to them either, other than 'Hallo'."

- Maria Jastrzębska

[Music]

Presenter: This is *Writers Mosaic*, *What We Leave, We Carry*, the series that tells the true-life stories of migration to the UK. Here's Maria Jastrzębska reflecting on moving from Poland to the UK as a child in the 1950s.

[Music continues]

Maria Jastrzębska: I was actually going to be called Konstancia, which I'm very glad I wasn't. But I was going to be called Konstancia because that was my grandmother's name, my maternal grandmother's name, but my grandmother intervened and said she thought I should have the protection of the Virgin Mary.

[Music]

I was born in Warsaw. 1953. I was very big as a baby and then I nearly died in the hospital straight after being born. I had some kind of brain haemorrhage. I don't know whether it was because of the forceps or a difficult birth, but there was a chance that I would, you know, there was a strong chance that I would die, which made everybody very anxious. I think there was a lot of anxiety around anyway, but I think the fact that I suddenly nearly died would have, you know, made my mum's anxiety skyrocket.

[Music]

I was the second child. My brother, who is seven years older. I think the gap was to do with the fact that they were thinking of leaving Poland.

[Music]

First of all, my mother was separated from her mother, because my maternal grandparents were in England, in London, and she was really missing them, and

they were really missing her, and they wanted her to come over here. So, that was one pull towards the West, but also more broadly, things... life in Poland was difficult after the war. It was still the time of communism. There was a lot of pressure on my father to join the Communist Party and to tow the party line. As he went up the career ladder, that pressure was only going to get stronger and stronger.

I think they felt that England was the land of freedom and democracy. And for themselves, and also for us, for the children, they felt we'd have a much, much better life over here.

You know, there was all kinds of pressure after the war. You know, the communist regime was still very strong at that point. Ironically, after we came to England, things relaxed a little bit. But at the time that we were living in Warsaw, there was very much a sort of stranglehold on the Poles to tow the party line and to go along with whatever the government was dictating.

And so, they all felt that. Also, my father, because he'd been an insurgent in the Warsaw Uprising, that was all very hush hush. You couldn't talk about that, particularly if you'd been a member of the Home Army. If you'd been a member of the People's Army, which was the left-wing faction, that was just about okay. But if you'd been a member of the Home Army, you were seen as a threat. So, the

Communist government didn't want anybody who was well-organised, who had a mind of their own; they, they wanted a pliable population.

So, former insurgents were considered dangerous to that. So, nobody could talk about their experiences. So, you, you sort of had this double trauma where you've, you've been through this awful war, but then you can't talk about it because, you know, for fear of reprisals; some people were imprisoned, some people were killed, just because of their role during the war.

So, you had to be very, very careful. And I think that, that was affecting them as well.

[Music]

I was barely four. And I don't think anybody explained anything to me. I think I was clueless. So it was a great big adventure because we went on an aeroplane. Obviously, I've never been on an aeroplane. But we went on two aeroplanes, actually, because we had to go through Brussels, because there weren't direct flights to London.

I remember we were given things. We were given these tiny little toys. They were those interlocking plastic toys that you could take apart and put, put together. I think we were given some of those. I think we were given some sweets, which was great excitement because they would have been wrapped in shiny gold paper.

I've been told that I ran up and down everywhere, but I don't remember very much. I think I remember the hotel in Brussels. I think I remember the... the shelf, you know, where they keep the keys, with lots of little... the cubby hole. That's right. I remember seeing a cubby hole, and I probably had never seen one before.

But I don't remember very much, and I don't think I was told, and I was probably told that I was going to meet my grandparents. But given that I'd never seen them, I don't know what that meant to me either, because I remember us arriving and I remember us seeing them, but as far as I was concerned, it was these two strange old people that I'd never seen before. And obviously, you know, my mum was really emotional at seeing them because there'd been a gap of over a decade; whereas to me, it was the first time I'd ever met them.

They were somewhere where there was an escalator. I don't know if that was the airport or if it was a station, but there was an escalator. And again, I'd never been on an escalator. I had no idea what an escalator was. So, it was a thrill, but my grandmother made it rather scary because she said... I've actually written about this, but she said that if you don't jump off in time, the moving stairs will chop your leg off.

That's what she said to a four-year-old. So, I was a little bit nervous getting off. I'm sure I enjoyed the ride because I liked anything moving, but I probably didn't enjoy getting off.

[Music]

So, then we went to my grandparent's house in Ealing, and we lived there for a while in a room in her house.

Somehow lots of Polish people gravitated to that part of West London, so the areas around Ealing and Hammersmith. Some in Earl's Court, there was some in Balham. I suppose it's one of those things where some arrive and then others come, and people help each other. And it's known as an area where there are already Poles. So, Ealing was like Little Poland. Eventually there was a Polish shop, there were Polish masses, there were, you know, Polish Girl and Boy Scouts, lots of sort of organisations sprang up.

She had lots of lodgers. So, she and my grandfather, my step grandfather, lived there. There was a sort of family friend cum lodger, who lived there as well. That was all on the ground floor. And then upstairs, there were lodgers who would have been single men in bedsits.

The received philosophy at the time by Polish landladies was that you didn't rent to women because women would be more domesticated.

They would want to wash clothes; they would want to cook. That would take up a lot of space; it would create a mess. They'd be in the house more whereas single men would just go to work; perhaps they'd eat out. They certainly wouldn't be you know cooking or doing anything homely. So, they were easier to manage, less demanding, less mess.

[Music]

They, like most people in that phase of migration, came just after the Second World War. So, my grandparents would have fled at the end of the war, and they would have fled because my grandfather had been involved in politics before the war.

So, not only was he on a wanted list by the Gestapo, but he would also have been on a wanted list by the Soviets, the Communists. So, at the end of the war, as the Communists had taken over Poland, he would have been very much persona non grata and he didn't feel safe in Poland at all. So, they went to the West. As far as I know, they went via Romania.

There would have been various transports of people escaping and bribes to get across borders and all of that, and they went to England. And part of the reason they were in London is because a government in exile was formed in opposition to the communist government in Warsaw. And my grandfather was active in that and

for a period of time, he was the prime minister and then just stayed involved in supporting that.

So, they would have had a role in London. I don't think he would have had any financial remuneration from that. So, I don't really know what they lived on other than these lodgers or some sort of small pension.

[Music]

What I remember in England is a lot of caution about what you say to people, which I think sprang from all of that; all the secrecy and all the undercover stuff.

In particular, I remember my mother saying to me, and I think to my brother as well, to be very careful what we said to English people. And I think that was a fear that we'd get sent back. So, she told us, in no uncertain terms, she said not to criticise anything in England, but to appear very positive about England and the English, and be, show that we were very grateful for being allowed to live here.

[Music]

Some Polish people talked loads and loads about the war, for example, and you know, battles they had taken part in. My parents tended not to do that, and I think that was partly a hangover from having lived for a decade under communism where you couldn't talk about those things. So, although I knew that they had lived

through the war in Warsaw and lived through the Warsaw Uprising, I didn't have that many details.

One thing that really brought it all home to me was when I inadvertently discovered a handbag; a leather, black leather handbag that belonged to my mum. And I found it in an upstairs cupboard where we kept spare blankets and things. And I showed it to my mum, and she was very emotional. She reacted very emotionally to me having found it. And it turned out, because it looked quite ordinary this bag, and it turned out to have a false bottom, a little compartment inside it which you wouldn't normally see and which she remembered how to release. And it turned out that this is how she carried secret documents all through the war, working for the resistance. And I hadn't known that she had taken part in the resistance in that way, and it was such a physical reminder of what she had been doing and the danger that she had been in working in liaison.

[Music]

So that, I think, was part of that whole worry of, 'who would know what?'

And I think it, it's something that has stayed with me all through my life; is, you know, on the one hand, it's, it's a, it's a contradiction for me because I am naturally a communicator.

You know, I love language; I work with language, I've always worked with other people. So, it's natural for me to want to chat to people and talk and open up, but then there's this other part of me that is fearful, and, and I think that very much stems from that, you know, other things have, have worked their way into that, but I think early on it was, it was that admonition to be really careful and consider what you say to others because, you know, you could get into bad trouble.

[Music]

I don't think my parents were timid; I think they were... I think they were often frustrated.

I think there was this caution and the feeling that you had to be very polite, very cap in hand, more than timidity; a sense that you're the outsider, that you've got to, I mean certainly for my... my father who then tried to pursue a professional career, you know, he was an engineer. I'm sure he, he had to work very hard to, you know well, first of all, he had to learn English and learn all the engineering terms in English.

So, there's definitely that sense, I think, more than, more than the timidity. And for my mother, I think, who was very articulate, very erudite person, and I think for her, there was a constant frustration of not being able to express herself properly in

English. And of course, some people around would think you were stupid if you were a foreigner and there was that equation, wasn't there?

You know, you don't speak properly, or you don't, you know, so I think that there was that, that frustration. And often she would say to us, "Oh, you're so lucky. You know the language. You can do anything, you can communicate, you can get through. I can't, you know, I can't express myself. I can't get through to people. I can't get things done because I don't know the language."

[Music]

My mother, my brother, and myself, because we came over first, my dad came over later, we were travelling on a holiday visa. So, we couldn't be seen to be taking the kitchen sink because we were supposedly just going for a short stay and then coming back. So yeah, the stuff remained.

We had my father's parents: my paternal grandparents were in Warsaw, and my mother's two aunts. So, my great aunts were also in Warsaw, and they were charged with looking after our things there. I don't know what happened exactly to the things, but presumably, eventually our flat had to be vacated once my father came over, because he came over later that year.

And when people began to be allowed to visit the West, these great aunts and my grandmother came over to visit us. I think because they were older women, it

wasn't seen so much as that they might want to leave Poland and work in England. You know, there wasn't quite so much suspicion on them. So, they were able to get visas to come and visit us, and they would bring things over for us.

They would bring over clothes. They would bring over paintings, rolled up as canvases. They would bring over jewellery, kilims, you know, which are tapestries, wool hangings. They would bring over icons, books.

I mean, they would roll everything up in their clothes and obviously not mention what they were carrying. You know, they would, they would hide it, smuggle it past any border controls.

And I don't think you were encouraged to bring valuables or anything of value over to England. Partly, I suppose there would have been the possibility of having to pay customs. And also, I don't think the Polish authorities wouldn't want you to be bringing things over. After all, they were just going on holiday. So, you weren't supposed to be bringing items that would help someone live or set up home; you were only supposed to be bringing your holiday clothes over, or maybe a book to read, and that was it.

[Music]

They were my older relatives, but they were very sweet to me. I mean, we never spoke English at home, at all. Some families did. Some families felt that that was

beneficial and that that's what you should do to help children learn English. Luckily, my family didn't subscribe to that. So, we spoke Polish at home, and they tried to encourage us to read Polish. Otherwise I, I would have lost my first language. And I'm very glad that I'm bilingual. You know, I've got that, that wealth of two languages at my disposal, which, you know, some children didn't have growing up.

So, there was excitement about them coming over. They also corresponded with us, and they would also in the interim of their visits, they'd send things over. So they, for example, they would send me Polish comics, and Polish children's books, which again, at that time, you couldn't really access that in England, so I had access to a whole other world through them.

There was Pwomicek and Pwomic. Pwomicek was for younger children, and it means 'little flame.' And there were all sorts of cartoon stories in it, including one about a little goat, Koziółek Matołek; and he gets into all kinds of scrapes, and he's always, you know, getting into trouble and... so, so there were things like that, which otherwise I, I just wouldn't have had any access to. And I certainly wouldn't have had access to Polish children's literature because you know, in England that just wasn't available. And in English school we didn't learn anything about, well we didn't really learn anything about other cultures or other countries. So, I didn't learn

anything about Poland at all, but my parents made me go to Polish Saturday School.

That was locally. What the Poles did was to rent out an English school quite near to where we lived, Grange School, and they rented out the classrooms on a Saturday morning when it wasn't in use and set up a school there. And obviously I really resented having to go because it was Saturday, and all my English classmates could play and have free time and I had to go to school and do lessons.

You learned Polish language, grammar. You learned Polish history, kings, and queens. Same sort of thing that you'd learn in English history lessons, but all to do with Poland. You learned Polish geography. You know, the towns, the principal rivers. I can still draw, more or less, draw a map of Poland. We learned songs.

They're a bit mixed up with the songs I learned in Polish Girl Scouts because I also went to that. I mean, we did live in a, a whole Polish world in Ealing. It was a whole community.

There were Polish newspapers. There was a Polish newspaper called the *Polish Daily* and the *Soldiers Daily*.

I guess because most of that community had come over just at the end of the war. And so, it was with a mind to the veterans of World War II. And it was, it was for them. It was a regular newspaper.

It had news about what was happening in Poland, obviously very critical of communism; news about what was happening in the world; some historical and literary things. It was, you know, it was a proper newspaper but very much from a Polish perspective.

[Music]

I think at that age, unequivocally, I'd say I was Polish. I'd say Poland because I was mixing, I was still very much part of a Polish world. And I think it was so drummed into us that we were Poles.

And also there was... we were brought up with a pride in that; that we were Poles, we knew a little bit about the Second World War, we knew we'd been occupied. So, there was that whole notion of being proud of your country. We knew that our parents had taken part in that war. So yes, at ten, I was very, still very proud of being Polish.

I didn't think of myself as, as English. Much later on, I began using terms like Polish British or British Polish, but not at ten.

[Music]

I think there were things that we thought of as Polish. Again, it was a very sort of glorified image of our people. What kinds of, well, obviously bravery and courage,

hospitality, generosity, and maybe something argumentative, devil may care, reckless, whereas I think we saw the English as being more... calmer or more reserved or less feeling. Something like that.

[Music]

I was always drawn to any foreigners, in the loosest sense of the word, in any group. And that, that was the case from day one at English school, where I just automatically went and stood next to two Asian kids. I didn't know a word of English; I'm not sure if they did either. That's where I went and stood. And I've always remembered that because, you know, I, I didn't know, I didn't, I couldn't speak English.

All I could say was 'Hallo,' which I said to everybody, but the kids I went and stood next to, where I felt safest, were these two Asian kids.

I didn't know what to say to them either other than 'Hallo,' and I don't know that they had any interest in me as this, you know, little white kid going up to them. But to me, they were my safety, so I always had that. I was always drawn, you know, into friendships with anyone who was different. Sadly, I don't think the older generation felt like that. I think they very much felt they were superior to other migrants. I don't think they made common cause. And that was always, I was always bewildered by that and deeply disappointed by it; because it seemed obvious to me

that we were all in Britain. We weren't always getting a friendly, you know, sometimes we got a friendly reception, sometimes we had an absolutely hostile reception here. So, the obvious thing was to make common cause, whereas I think a lot of the older generation saw themselves in competition with the other migrant group.

I think by the time I was a teenager, I probably argued about it with my parents. And they would say, "Oh, well they're not our sort of people. They're not as cultured as we are." I think there was a huge emphasis on us being European and cultured.

I think they meant table manners because that was instilled into us. I think they meant reading books. I don't think it was so much... I think it was about a level of education more than, say, going to the opera. And I think there was a lot of racial prejudice, there was a lot of class prejudice, there was, yeah, I mean, I, that may not be typical of everybody, but it was certainly there in my family and some of the other families I came across, that there wasn't that sense of solidarity.

[Music]

There's always hierarchies. There's always hierarchies. I think the people who came after the war saw themselves very much as political. Some of them saw themselves as émigrés rather than migrants. They saw being an emigre as an act of rejection of

a political regime. Whereas, I think migrants, later phases of migration, I mean there was a political migration also around the time of martial law in the early '80s.

That's a whole other phase of people who left Poland often because they couldn't go back, or they were facing imprisonment. It's quite complicated, but broadly speaking, [they] couldn't go back for fear of reprisals. But there's also a kind of superiority over people who are just economic migrants because they're seen as, well, they haven't got any ideology, they've just come here to make money.

And so there is rivalry, and there's also who's truly Polish and who isn't [Polish]. And I think there's, there's all of that.

[Music]

Before the war, she was, you know, her mother was quite upper class, definitely posh. And so my mother was looking forward to at least a middle-class lifestyle in Poland. She was educated, she was privileged. Then the war came along, and everything was sort of destroyed, really.

And when she came to England, she was seen as what the English would call 'bloody foreigner.' So suddenly, she was at the bottom of the heap. She didn't know the language. She got a job working as a cleaner. You know, we didn't have loads of money. So it was, it was a completely different class position. You know, what I would call 'immigrant class.'

And I think, for her, it meant she hung onto anything that would make her feel better than someone else that she, she could do because she felt she'd lost so much.

[Music]

My parents didn't go back to Poland 'til I think it was 1985. Because we hadn't left legally, because they no longer had Polish passports, there was a fear that two things: one, simply that they'd get locked up, or that they wouldn't be allowed back out. And so, if they left their home here in England to go on a holiday to visit people in Poland, they might get stuck there and then they'd lose everything in England.

[Music]

I couldn't really remember anything other than my Ealing life because I could only very dimly remember my life in Warsaw. So, I suppose if you'd asked me what home was, I probably would have said it was Ealing.

I think the dis... the sense of dislocation was there. I think, I don't think I had words for it as a child. I knew that I belonged in this other place that I couldn't go to. I don't know if you're familiar with the hymn, another, 'and there's another country. I vow to thee my country.' That's the one. And, and then the, I think the second verse is, 'And there's another country, I've heard of long ago, most dear to them, something, something.' It's based on a Holst melody from the Planet Suite. And we

used to sing that in English school. It was one of the hymns. Well, of course, every time the verse, 'And there's another country I've heard of long ago,' came up, well, that was a mythical Poland in my head.

It wasn't about heaven or any spiritual realm; that was my homeland.

I couldn't really picture it, other than from storybooks, from what people had told me, from the comics, from the, you know, reading, learning to read books that we had in Polish Saturday school.

So, I had images of it, but they didn't relate to anything. But the older generation, my parents and my grandparents would talk about one day when we go back. So, there was this notion that one day we would go back to this mythical place, which of course, as they were talking, was changing, and evolving and becoming something very different from what they remembered.

So, my loyalty was this place that was half made up and half based on their memories from before the war. So, it was a completely mythical place but that was one of my, that was [my] real home. That was where we were going to go back to.

[Music]

I went there in; I think it was 1973. That was amazing. So, I was 20 and I discovered a whole Poland that I didn't know at all. And it was a bit of a, it was a bit of a clash of

cultures really because, and also, I discovered that there was family there that I didn't really know about.

When I went back as a 20-year-old, I was very lefty here in England and I went back and by a quirk of circumstances, I decided I didn't want to stay with my family, because I thought they'd all be really boring, they'd all be right-wing, church going people, which of course they weren't, but I didn't know that; and they'd just be, you know, boring and conservative, just like my family. So, I didn't want to go and stay with my family. So, I ended up staying with this other family, with this young woman whose father happened to be a hack member of the Polish Communist Party, who was a drunkard and a disillusioned communist.

So, to the horror of my family, I stayed with, in his home. So, that was just a complete culture clash whereupon he was convinced that I'd be this very right-wing anti-communist person from England. So, he set about in his drunken way trying to convince me of the gains of communism, while I was sort of, "Oh! No, no, I think communism is great," because I was very innocent and naive.

So, we talked at complete cross purposes, which is not surprising really, because when you've grown up in a different country, the misconceptions abound. His misconceptions about me and us in England and my misconceptions about people

in Poland, there were so many of them that I'm not surprised that we were talking at complete cross purposes and not understanding each other.

[Music]

And then the other, I think the other factor in the whole thing was that by the age of 20, I was also discovering my sexuality. Now that in Poland was completely taboo. And I think that also made me nervous of going back because I didn't know, I, I had, I didn't feel there was anybody I could come out to as a lesbian, as a bisexual woman, as anything in Poland.

To my parents, also not, but within British society yes, because there was the Women's Liberation Movement, there was gay liberation, there was the British left. There was all that counterculture sort of at the end of the hippie era, there was a political counterculture, so I could find a home there in terms of sexuality, not so much as a Pole. So, that was all contradictory as well. And then in Poland, I could find a home as a Pole. And in the eighties, I met with members of my extended family who happened to be socialist, which was great and were much more sort of, I could talk to them in ways I couldn't talk to my parents, and they had Jewish connections and all sorts of really exciting things, but I was very nervous of coming out to them. So, I never quite fitted in anywhere, all of me.

[Music]

I've always written a lot about childhood and growing up. And because I grew up in little Poland, it's always going to be there.

So, that's one way that it comes through. You know, even if I'm talking about what food we ate or anything, it's always going to be, you know, it's going to be Polish pirozhki rather than, I don't know, sausages and mash or something. So that's always there. The other thing that's always there is the sense of not fitting in or doing or being different from people around me for whatever reasons. So, there's always that sense of there being contradictions; there's always that sense of being an outsider; there's always that sense of walking between very different cultures. And the people in those cultures think they've got nothing in common, but I can see links, you know, I can see links between a very closed migrant community, and I can see a link between that and say a closed queer community because they're both minorities and they're both holding on to each other for support. And, you know, so I can see those links, they're crystal clear to me, but to the people within those communities, they think, "Well, I've got nothing in common with them."

[Music]

I mean, one thing that's different now is that you can travel back and forth. So, that's an advantage to Polish families bringing up children here, which we couldn't do. But, you know, travel's expensive.

So again, that selects out who, who gets to benefit from that. You know, if you've got to travel with three children to Poland, that's, you know, you're going to be bankrupt. It is very expensive, all of that.

[Music]

When I'm in Poland, I, I am often seen as a foreigner. And the gap between how people see things here and how people see things there is so big. I'm very nervous. I'm much more nervous doing a reading in Poland than I am here because I think, well, I don't know if I've caught the zeitgeist; I don't know if they think what I'm saying is just really, you know, not hitting the nail on the head.

And I think because of the subject matter that I'm now dealing with, which is the Second World War, particularly the Warsaw Uprising and the occupation of Poland, in recent years, that has been so appropriated by a very right-wing government with its, with a very nationalistic, racist agenda, that people are quite wary of that whole narrative.

And I think, you know, my job, I feel, is to say, well, let's grab hold of that narrative. It doesn't just belong to people who are going to be antisemitic, racist, you know, and manipulate it for their own purposes. That narrative belongs to everybody, and my take on it, you know, is as valid as anybody else's, but it's a challenge.

[Music continues]

A recording of this transcript can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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