

Leamington Poles

These days we're getting used to hearing the Polish language, and seeing the odd Polish shop, on our streets. My own Polish language skills do not stretch much beyond *djenkuye* and *dobri den*, but I'm perfectly prepared to throw them in to impress a waitress or a shop assistant.

Then I find that she's from Bulgaria.

Worse still, when I try to use Polish it sounds like Russian, which was the only Slavic language I learnt at school. This doesn't go down well.

Nevertheless, a Polish community has very definitely been added to the galaxy of peoples that make up the West Midlands.

But by no means did this begin with the implementation of European employment law in 2004. Polish people had been a presence in the region long before that. Many of the Jews who inhabited Birmingham's back-to-back courts in the middle of the 19th Century were, if you wished to put a nationality on them, from Poland, running from the pogroms of Eastern Europe.

(The Poles, by the way, call this Central Europe; it's just that the UK that is way out west.)

There's probably no better to see the Polish community maturing and putting down roots than in Leamington Spa. You only have to look at their community centre in the High Street, occupying the most impressive piece of neo-classicism in the old town. Dating from 1830, this served as Leamington's town hall until something much grander (but less stylish) was cooked up across the river in the new town. Today the old council chamber is a Polish Catholic church.

When the then mayor of Leamington officially opened the converted centre back in 1969, he was quick to point out (call this good briefing) that Leamington Spa and Poland went back a very long way together. Well over a century earlier - in 1838 - the town hall had hosted a reception for Prince Louis Napoleon (the future Napoleon III), and among the guests was the Prince's constant companion, Colonel Kazimierz Oborski.

Oborski himself had commanded Napoleon Bonaparte's personal guard during the infamous invasion of Russia, and fought in the Warsaw Uprising of 1830. Without a country to return to, Colonel Oborski had chosen to settle in Leamington instead, living in a house in Russell Street. His last resting-place is in the town.

But the good colonel, for all his obvious strengths, could not be called a community. That had to wait for the Second World War. In 1939 Poland found itself in the middle of a none-too-pleasant sandwich, with the Hitler on one side and Stalin on the other, neither of whom had much time for Poles. Somewhere around 110,000 Poles joined the Allied forces, fighting in the Middle East and Italy, as well as in the Air Force. As it happened, Leamington was the headquarters of the Free Czechoslovak Army

during the war years.

Once the war was over, and Poland was swallowed up into the Eastern Bloc, Ernest Bevin offered all those who had fought for the West an open invitation to settle in the UK. Some 160,000 Poles took up the offer.

The invitation was easier to arrange than the accommodation. The first Polish man to arrive in Warwickshire found themselves temporarily housed in one of the War Agricultural Committee camps, principally the one in Greatheed Road, and it was here that the first masses were held in Polish.

By 1960 there were around 250 Poles in Leamington, enough to support a Polish language school and a community organisation known as "Polskie Kolo Katolickie v Leamington Spa". As the title implies, at the hub of the community was inevitably the Catholic priest. Jozef Golab arrived in the town around this time, a remarkable survivor of the concentration camps at Buchenwald and Dachau, and Golab led conducted services in the town for a quarter of a century.

It was Jozef Golab, more than anyone, who was responsible for establishing the Polish community centre in the Old Town Hall, partly using the compensation money he had received from the West German government for his wartime detention.

By a process of natural selection, the Leamington community was fiercely opposed to the Communist regime at Warsaw, and therefore the celebration of Independence Day each November was the principal means to express their dissent. Such days regularly included a visit by a member of the "Polish government in exile", based in London, including the unofficial prime minister, Kasimierz Sabbat, who came in 1977 and 1979.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall the number of Polish people permanently settled in Leamington began to decline. Indeed, the numbers had been dropping for some years before that, as its members spread more generally across the country. The Polish language school itself closed in 1985 under the pressure of falling rolls and an ageing population. The same was happening to Polish communities across the country.

The last few years, of course, has seen an injection of new blood, and Polish centres and churches across the Midlands have been revitalised by new arrivals, the majority of them in their twenties.

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