

## Dorota Glowacka

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Dorota: My name is Dorota Glowacka. I came to Canada from Poland via the United States and I crossed the border in 1993.

### **Leaving Poland**

Dorota: The immediate trigger was wanting to continue my education and develop myself professionally. [01:00:30:22] But there were also a number of other factors. I didn't quite feel comfortable in Poland. In 1989, that was a time of great change in Poland, of downfall of communism. And actually, people were not leaving anymore. On the contrary, people were coming back.

But I somehow never felt at home in Poland strangely enough. I just wanted to leave. Leaving for school was a great way to do it. [01:01:01:02] Part of it is probably related to the fact that I'm half Jewish and I identify with the Jewish part of my identity. I don't want to say that Poland was overtly anti-Semitic, but undoubtedly part of that discomfort was with the Jewish part of my identity which I didn't feel was accepted in Poland.

### **First impressions**

Dorota: [01:01:29:12] It's important to remember that I got to Canada via the U.S. which did not turn out to be the promised land that my husband and I thought it would be. We experienced a lot of hardship. We were professionally well established in Poland. We had something like an apartment. It was a small apartment, but it was our own. We had a family life. We had friends.

And in the United States, we experienced abysmal poverty, a lot of xenophobia, a lot of comments. [01:02:05:14] "If you don't like it here, go back where you came from." And that was especially painful for my husband. These high expectations of leaving Poland behind and having a wonderful new life free of the stress that we had been experiencing in Poland collapsed.

So that's the background against which we experienced our Canadian immigration and the experience of moving into Canada. [01:02:34:15] So on the one hand in contrast to Poland, on the other, in contrast to the United States, and this is perhaps why our first impressions of Canada which is marvellous.

It was just very liberating to come to Canada and settle here and be free of those comments and the sense that we didn't have the right to breathe as full human beings. [01:03:02:01] The contrast to our experiences in

the U.S. as legal aliens, which was the official label, was coming as landed immigrants in Canada was just a very positive experience.

## **Challenges**

Dorota: Every day I'm very much aware that as a couple, we've been very lucky to come to Canada and actually settle back into our professional careers that we left in Poland. [01:03:33:10] My husband was an engineer in Poland. He's an engineer here in Canada. So in that sense, it's a story with a happy ending.

So the challenges for us were the challenges of cultural, for my husband, also language. I know English well enough and I know French somewhat, so the language barrier was not a problem for me personally. [01:03:58:22] But after awhile, when we sort of settled, made a home and so forth, it was the cultural difference that really began to kick in, belatedly.

Culture shock is not something that hits you right when you cross the border. It's when you settle down and you sort of overcome those barriers in terms of making a living and having a home and buying your furniture. [01:04:28:07] And then you invite your friends, and you see that you're not quite on the same page. The difference in culture and the difficulties with acculturation are things that have been really hard on me. I'm sure it has been on my husband to an even greater degree.

## **Citizenship**

Dorota: It was really important to me to be able to vote. I vote in every election, in federal elections, municipal. I wanted to have a say politically [01:05:01:07] and be a political subject in Canada.

I also had a sense that, I had chosen to become a citizen here rather than being born in a country, as I was in Poland. To have a sense that I have chosen to become a citizen of the country was empowering. It was an important symbolic act for me.

Obtaining citizenship was also an interesting process and a positive one. [01:05:35:23] I had to learn more about the country, about its history, its geography. I knew more after I studied than a lot of my colleagues who are Canadians. We were laughing about that. The citizen ceremony was very festive and something I will cherish for maybe the rest of my life because it just felt good to feel empowered and to feel that I am a full member of this society. [01:06:09:00] I actually felt quite different when I went to work the next day.

After that, my behaviour and my attitude in the classroom has changed slightly 'cause until I became a citizen, I felt pretty much like a guest in this country, and very grateful for the hospitality. [01:06:30:19] After I became a citizen and could say we Canadians, in the plural, I felt that

now I have a right to not just express my gratitude for having accepted me, but also to be critical of a number of aspects that need to be improved again, and they could only be improved if I can participate politically, vote for the politicians I believe in and somehow participate in that transformation. [01:07:03:06]

### **On Canadian values**

Dorota: I believe that as Canadians we are open to differences among people. That is important in the sense that unlike my experience in the United States where we were shunned for our difference, we did feel that our difference in Canada was embraced. Of course, on many occasions, that's a superficial acceptance. [01:07:39:08] But the fact that there was this openness made a huge difference both with respect to my European experience and my American experience.

I don't use the word tolerance because I think of tolerance as barely tolerating somebody's difference. That's why I say openness and embracing of difference. [01:08:01:19]

I find that in Canada, when you point them out to people and you say, "Well perhaps you think you are open minded, but if you just pay attention to what you are saying, maybe you should reconsider your attitudes," I find Canadians are really willing to listen maybe because they think of themselves as so open minded, they want to live up to that label. [01:08:31:21]

It's quite fruitful to engage in these discussions here in Canada.

### **The importance of sharing stories**

Dorota: It can be extremely empowering if you have immigrant children in the classroom who are unsure of themselves. I know stories of teenagers, which is a very vulnerable age, who come to Canada and [01:08:59:20] they have no peer group to identify with. They are really caught between family, ethnic values and Canadian, mainstream values. It's very difficult for them to find themselves and to have that moment of identification with other stories and to hear stories of overcoming difficulties.

[01:09:29:10] They are not always success stories but I think of my story as a success story. I felt that way when I taught in Toronto and I could tell my students, who were scrambling and could say three words in English, "It was hard for me, but now I have a degree. I'm all right. You are going to be all right." I think it's extremely important.

[End of recorded material]

*Dorota is a university professor in Halifax, Nova Scotia. She recently published, *Disappearing Traces*, a book about Holocaust literature and art.*