

Caught Between, Never Home

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SUMMARY

It is not a secret that music and singing can heal trauma. If Małgorzata didn't find out some old Jewish and Balkan songs, and didn't start to perform them, she would feel helplessly wounded, unable to embed her heart and soul within an identity marked not only by the ordeal of war, but also silence. For centuries, Poland was home to millions of Jews in the very heart of Europe. Decades after the horrors of the Holocaust, questions of lost identity and hidden memories have arisen. What is it like if one wants to face them and understand one's family, their choices and, last but not least, oneself? What is it like not to overcome such dilemmas, to try and deal with them but fail in the process? Małgorzata was born into a mixed, Polish-Jewish family in the late 1980s. She says being a Jew in Poland today means people think you are neither truly Jewish, nor Polish. She is just one of the thousands of third-generation Jewish people across Central Europe attempting to make sense of an identity that cannot be changed, reversed or erased. However, it can be understood, even if it means facing trauma, transmitted from one generation to the next. Her story shows that war never ends. She draws energy from breathing and music – not even from the words she sings, but more from moods, emotions, and spirits. Notes and melodies that were also transmitted from generation to generation.

Caught Between, Never Home

00:00 music

00:04 John (narrator)

There are nearly eight thousand people who declare their Jewish nationality in Poland a country numbering some 38 million people in the heart of Europe.

Generations of past since the horrors of WW2 were perpetrated by the Nazi German occupation of the country, not least on the Jewish population – the largest in Europe prior to the war.

Now though, in the 21st century, what does it mean to be a Jew in present-day Poland? I am Joh Beauchamp and this is Heart and Soul on the BBC World Service.

End of the music

00:42 Małgosia

Always I am stressed because I was taught at home to use very particular words. Words which are accurate and in the same moment save. I cannot make mistakes because I will be punished. Not from my parents, from the word. The world is just waiting to cut you.

01:07 John

Małgosia Wosińska was born in the late 1980s into a mixed, Polish-Jewish family. She belongs to the third generation after the Shoah, and was brought up already in a free non-communist country which Poland was for almost four decades following WW2

FX door phone

She feels that she is now ready to confront her silence about the post-genocide trauma which has accompanied her family for years.

FX door phone, steps

I meet Małgosia in her flat located in the Warsaw district of Muranów – quite close to the very centre of the Polish capital. She lives here with her partner and a cat called Aviva.

FX door closes, cats meows

01:50 Małgosia

Everything was about war in my home but nothing was directly about the war. Everything was about the Jewishness but nothing was directly about the Jewishness. Everything around the Holocaust but nothing was about our history and the Holocaust. It was so embodied... so there was never a moment when my mother would sit with me and say 'oh, you know, we are, you are Jewish'. I knew it. And they chose the best school for me, and it was a Catholic school. Only because languages: English, French, just to have all these skills. And it's not about being petit bourgeois. I think it was exactly that: my mother was living in such a fear whole her life that she wanted me to at least have

all skills, professional skills... to survive in this difficult world, I think. And it's very Jewish, it's very post-Holocaust that you have to be, in the outside world, perfect. Just not to be harmed. Just not to be displaced, removed.

So it's always about the decision. And my decision was I want to be on my side. And why? Oh, now I will say something stupid but... I don't want to say that I'm doing it for my ancestor... but I do believe in collective trauma. And I do believe in breaking circles of collective trauma.

03:22 FX preparing coffee

Małgosia

Let's say two spoons for one person. It's new coffee, we buy it in a Lebanese shop.

FX pouring boiling water

And now we are adding hot water.

03:40 John

Małgosia is a cultural anthropologist and psychotraumatologist.

FX Małgosia saying 'spieces'

John She lectures extensively on the subjects while her research explores the identity of genocide survivors.

FX Małgosia saying 'three times'

John

She had a happy childhood, although she had to find out many issues by herself.

03:59 Małgosia

My mother, her sister, so my auntie, probably my grandfather and my grandma... they never felt flexible and relaxed after the Second World War. I can tell you: my grandfather, he survived the Holocaust... He was extremely intelligent man. He was very sensitive man probably but he was extremely difficult. And he had obsession not to be discovered as a Jewish person. But after the war he was so broken that... he was walking in this way like... like waiting for the bullet, laterally. He walked with a slumped, very fast. Like an animal, like little a fox in a forest, and never... never looking back. When he was stressed, he was walking around the flat, the room. You can feel the fear of being shot, of being observed, of being caught. Of being somehow trapped.

05:15 John

Małgosia's grandfather survived the war as a forced labourer in a German farm [on the territory of the Third Reich]. He never healed his trauma.

05:23 Małgosia

And when my mother realized that she is Jewish [laughter], she was probably overattentive to everything what's going on at home, so she was reading. And reading was a kind of therapy for her and... she was reading book about war and then she asked her father, my grandfather, is he is Jewish. For my mother it was obvious as well when she was young a child because the reaction of my grandfather was... extremely impulsive. He was violent, physically, to her. And then my grandma decided that she had to divorce. And I think this is a kind of story of Holocaust people don't want to hear that trauma could lead you also to be perpetrator. My grandma used the war story to recreate her life. She was doing everything for my mother and my auntie and she converter herself to Catholicism as well because she wanted to be... to have all skills to survive [laughter].

I would do everything, I would do everything not to see my mother so vulnerable. Not to see my grandma so powerful but not always in this [laughter] spontaneous and affective, and sweet kind of way.

I would like to see them free.

06:49 FX city amto

John

Muranów, the district where Małgosia lives, was historically a Jewish quarter. It was razed by the Nazi Germans after the Warsaw ghetto uprising during in the spring of 1943.

Małgosia

In early spring you can see the rubbles, you can see the bricks till now because the earth is working. And every time I see it I am just touching the stones and the bricks and yes – I have a connection but it's not a crazy connection not like shamanic connection but it's a kind of... I don't know... compassion maybe? It's about compassion, it's about... tenderness.

John

We're in the centre of Muranów which is the heart of the old Warsaw ghetto and the former Jewish district of Warsaw before the war. We're not in a socialist realist block built in the 1950s on the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto and just below me, we're on the second floor balcony here, we can see a monument which is dedicated to the history and commemoration of the Ringelblum archive situated in the Warsaw ghetto during the occupation, the Nazi occupation of Warsaw where all the most important documents, historical documents, what was going on in Jewish Warsaw and in the ghetto were held right here and it's literally 10 metres away from where I'm standing now.

Małgosia

Theirs is some kind of, of course, story about Muranów full of ghosts but not for me. Opposite. I feel like I am back at home. And I know it could sound strange that I feel flexible and relaxed but this district is so beautiful, so full of life, so full of greenery, so full of cats and dogs, and life. And this was the idea of Lachert and Szanajca, the architects responsible for this district after the Second World War, to create this district as a living memorial, as a living monument. So it's about... death but it's for life, it's on the side of life. The story is unbelievable: I am living in the place where the Ringelblum archive was hidden. And it was very specific time when I found this flat I knew that I had

to resign from job and I was very sad ending my little, little 'carrier'... you know, I'm joking a bit. Okay, at least I will try to make my mood better and just check on the internet maybe... you know, I like observing announcements about flats. So I was doing it just for fun and just to relax. And suddenly I discovered a very beautiful flat full of light but they didn't give any exact address. And this flat was this flat where we are now. So there was a queue of people who wanted to buy this flat of course, but I won the competition! Because they asked me, the owners, 'oh, what is your background? Do you know what is here?' I know, it was a place where the Emmanuel Ringelblum archive was hidden. 'And the flat is yours then'. I bought a flat, I resigned from job and then I met my love. So you see, sometimes it's good to decide that you are not afraid of ghosts.

10:10 FX doormat, door closes

John

Małgosia, apart from her background in anthropology and psychotraumatology, graduated from music school. She particularly enjoys singing in the pentatonic scale.

***Małgosia** sings a traditional Jewish song*

10:56 John

She has worked with broken bodies and dead bodies. Not only with Jewish corpses. And not only in Europe

FX the song ends

11:13 Małgosia

Why I did go there? So I was thinking about it. And think that I know. I think that somehow somewhere I know. But it's not coming from the intellectual sphere of my life, it's rather coming from the emotional trials to understand what's going on. So probably I went to Rwanda because I wanted to have a chance to give a name to difficult reality. And I wanted to confront myself with difficult reality. Myself, besides my family. And Rwanda definitely gave me that because Rwanda gave me cultural heritage which I wasn't aware of – beautiful cultural heritage. And the nature. And the beautiful language Kinyarwanda which is one of the most beautiful languages I have ever heard. Amazing. I was very young when I went to Rwanda, I was 24 and...

... the smell of mass graves. Being completely honest, sorry. I know this something which is not affirmative and you asked me about the strongest feeling. And why am I... I don't know why I'm telling that, okay I'm telling that because you can adapt to this smell very easily. I remember that smell and I remember that I stopped to recognize that smell also as something normal. And it's not normal.

*12:41 **Małgosia** takes a deep breath*

Małgosia

So breathing... when you are under stress, and I used to be so working in the field, in Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo... you are breathing... like my grandfather was walking. It's just about breathing as a mechanical survival, adaptive mechanism. Nothing connected with your body.

John

But as Małgosia points out, trauma can also be an addiction

13:16 Małgosia

Because during a traumatic event your body starts to produce hormones, particular hormones like endorphins even. And endorphins which are not only hormones of happiness but also hormones of death. Because they are natural opioids. So it helps you not to feel pain when your life is really at risk. You are in flight-or-fight mood. But the problem is that when you don't need to use this defence mechanism because you are in a safe situation sometimes your mind, your brain misses this trash. And trauma is an addiction. So my country, my nation is addicted to trauma. I am asking question to myself if I am addicted to trauma

14:10 FX steps in the flat, the cat meows, Małgosia kisses the cat and says in Polish 'hello, Aviva, hello kitty'

14:33 Małgosia, leafing through notes

Of course I know all these text by heart I was performing these pieces live years ago. In every text, almost in every texts in traditional music –doesn't matter if it's Jewish or Bulgarian, or Serbian, Bosnian, Macedonian, Polish, Ukrainian - you are dealing with the fear of death. And from this point of view when I am thinking of the Jewish music, there is no difference between Jewish music and any other traditional music for me. When you are really touching the point which is how to manage your own fears of being invisible, of disappearing, of losing your relatives, of being loved and love others... and because of many reasons I am close to Jewish music but also because of many reasons probably I would say I am close to Balkan music and then you can ask me why and I will tell you I don't know but my body feels it.

15:38 Małgosia singing a Balkan song about the youth and the old age; the cat meows in the background

16:27 Małgosia

And I could work there because I knew that my family somehow accepted my choices. My mother... I remember when she was saying 'goodbye'... and I saw that she is crying but... this is the price also for her, she paid for having independent child and giving me freedom to be independent somehow. Because she... she gave me this freedom to go to the conflict zone and post-conflict zone and she trusted that I will be back. And this is really amazing.

When I was there, I was also somehow responsible for my family, for my mother. And she is very fragile. But in the same moment she gave me this freedom so she is also full of courage. So somehow probably I wanted to secure her, secure my family and.. I was hiding all these fears from the field in myself. It was a big mistake.

17:37 FX city atmo, people gather at a city square in Gdańsk,

John

It's 9th November 2022. We are in Gdańsk where Małgosia lived before moving to Warsaw. She has come to her home city to take part in a commemoration of the 84th anniversary of Kristallnacht, a pogrom against Jews carried out by the Nazi Party's paramilitary throughout Nazi Germany in 1938. It also hit Jews then living in Gdańsk, a city under the influence of the Nazi regime, although formally not belonging to the German state.

18:09 FX announcer greets all gathered (in Polish)

The commemoration has been organized by the Jewish community of Gdańsk. Małgosia's grandparents settled here, in this post-German space after resettlement from Vilnius which after the WW2 belonged to Soviet Lithuania.

FX people walking down the street

We meet at the Golden Gate and walk through the old town to a place where the synagogue stood before the war.

Małgosia

I have some kind of inner fear to be in public with my identity and narration and this in exactly how I feel right now and it's not a metaphor. I am feeding my fears right now, a little re-traumatisation.

18:50 FX announcer (in Polish) invites to listening to Małgosia's singing

John

It's Friday evening, the Shabbat has just begun.

Małgosia will not use the microphone.

The first song she chose is about the moment when day becomes night.

*19:16 **Małgosia** sings, city traffic in the background*

20:16 John

Małgosia decides to perform one more song. It's a wish of a safe return to home for everybody present. She asks all gathered to sing together with her.

*20:29 **Małgosia** sings and says 'shalom' to everybody*

21:05 FX stepping on leaves, old door opens and closes

John

Małgosia invites us to a small village 35 kilometres from Gdańsk, to a cottage house her parents built several years ago as a refuge and a hideaway – surrounded by forests, little hills and lakes.

FX stepping on leaves

21:16 Małgosia

It's something very humanistic to be here as a Jewish people in post-German lands... I mean we lost so much as a family... in Vilnius, around Vilnius, in Warsaw, around Warsaw... so my grandma, she was a Polish Jew from Vilnius, her family bought a land very close to Vilnius, it was a summer place. Panerai – Ponary. During the war the family decided it would be safer to move from Vilnius to Ponary. Panerai, and probably you know what had happened in Ponary. In Ponary there was one of the biggest massacre of Jews people. So my grandma, she survived in Ponary. And it was a miracle. So they were witnesses of death of their own colleagues and friends from Vilnius. The clue is that Wilno, the city, didn't belong to Poland any more. So the reason why my grandma left Wilno, her hometown... I think the most important place for her identity as Polish Jew, was to stay in Poland. And Gdansk was a kind of coincidence of course. It was, of course, a post-German city and it was somehow free once. again and empty abandoned. And they didn't think about the processuality of the heritage, of the post-German or post-Jewish, or whatever. I think that people were really dedicated to live their lives. And... to forget.

And what's very interesting, my grandma, she is visiting Vilnius and Ponary, Panerai, almost every year. And when we went to Panerai together with grandma I could see my grandma happy. And I could not believe. She was a witness of such a massacre and she is happy there... and then, two years later, my sister asked me: 'Do you know Małgosia that grandma gave an interview to the Washington Holocaust Memorial Museum about Panerai?' and I didn't know it. And then we found this interview because it was published. And they were asking my grandma about Panerai story... And, I would say, 70 per cent of this story was about the beauty of nature.

Raspberry and mushrooms, and blueberry, they were collected, and the sun... And I say: how is it possible, I mean, that she was asked to tell the story of the Holocaust, of the Shoah, and she's still on the side of life. She is somehow processuating this place via beauty, via love.

24:32 John

We reach finally the place where the pre-war farm house once stood. It was owned by a German family. Only the foundations remain.

Małgosia 24:42

I was growing up in post-German officer home with Jewish identity and here we are on a post-German post-Bauer farm. You can really imagine people living, sitting under this tree and they have even a little pond here and also we can see the sides of the garden. There are roses here and flowers which are not typical for the forest of course... Roses are there! Many, many roses there! How to hold these plants, post-German plants to grow? We are much more interested in this than to fight for heritage which was taken from us as a statement, as a political act, as an identity act... and I think the nature...

... the gardens, animal, trees... I mean it's creating a kind of bridge and helps us to heal ourselves. Aviva! Aviva, she is my little star. Yes, she is my princess! She is very clever and she is very brave. Oh, but she is also very sensitive.

FX Małgosia calling Aviva

music 26:07

John

Małgosia Wosińska spoke about being a Polish Jew in present-day Poland to me, John Beauchamp and the producer Bartosz Panek. You've listened to Heart and Soul... it was a Free Range and Overcoat Media co-production for the BBC World Service.

end at 26:29