



## 3.2 Roma Oral History Story 2



### Elzbieta Glowacka

Elzbieta is a Polish Roma woman from Mazowieckie County. Her Roma name is Jaruska. As a child, she travelled in a caravan and lived in forests. Her family survived the Second World War.

After she got married she had 9 children and at the age of 64 she moved to the UK and finds life easier here.

Elzbieta Glowacka ©RSG

#### Life in Poland

Born in a forest near Nidzice in 1949, Elzbieta had 6 brothers and 2 sisters. From the age of 8 Elzbieta had to look after her disabled father, who accidentally injured himself while cleaning his gun and she had no time to play with other children or go to school.

Childhood life was spent travelling with her family and her relatives in a horse-drawn caravan. They lived in forests from spring to summer, and rented a room in a village in winter. The men travelled to the towns making money by tinning caldrons, and making butchers' meat hooks. The women cooked, did the laundry and the ironing. Clothes had to be boiled to make them clean and then ironed with metal irons heated on the fire.

Elzbieta's mother cooked in a big aluminium pot placed on a 'graifusy' (a metal stand with legs) over a fire. They ate meat stews, potatoes, dumplings, pancakes, crumpets, mushrooms, cheese, eggs and fish. Boys were in charge of picking mushrooms and fishing, and the women and girls picked blueberries, which they made into compote and preserves.

At night, half of the family slept in the caravan, and the other half in a tarpaulin tent. Inside the caravan, they had water glasses, white pillows made of batiste cloth with frills and inserts, and silky featherbeds. She remembers her life in the forest with fondness.

At the age of 17 Elzbieta married one of her childhood friends. Her brothers opposed the marriage but she ran away with her husband-to-be and lived with her parents-in-law. Then they moved into their own home where they reared geese, hens, ducks and pigs, and bought their first TV. Elzbieta cannot read or write and when she had her 9 children, she was adamant that they all go to school. Sadly, one of her sons died when he was only 12 years old during a school swimming accident.

Elzbieta believes in God and lives according to Catholic principles so it was important that her children attended religious classes, which meant walking for 7 kilometres to the church. All her children are baptised and have received their first Communion.

## **Second World War**

Growing up Elzbieta listened to many stories about World War II. Her grandmother had 5 sons who were captured and lined up for execution. They escaped when their mother “looked into the German officer’s eyes” and began telling him stories about his “unhappy marriage”, his “crumbling life”, and questioned his conscience about doing the execution. This upset the officer very much and he walked away, allowing them to escape.

Elzbieta’s disabled father and his brothers who used to sell meat were also captured. The brothers managed to escape but her father was left behind and suffered beatings during interrogations about his meat trading. His brothers managed to rescue him by pulling him through a window of the prison.

When World War II began, Elzbieta’s own mother had 3 sons. One day, one of her sons was so hungry for some bread, he cried inconsolably. To stop him crying, she went to a woman who was baking bread and offered to exchange one of her gold earrings, a wedding gift from her mother, for a loaf of bread. The woman gave her only half a loaf. Elzbieta’s mother then took out her second earring and gave it to the woman in exchange for a bowl of milk.

When the War was over, and after the Soviet invasion (Communism), travelling and living in caravans was banned. Elzbieta’s family went to live in a city in the Masovian province and rented a flat concealing their identity. Eventually, her father found a job as a janitor in the block where they lived in, and her mother ironed the clothes of an old German lady.

## **Coming to the UK**

In 2013 one of Elzbieta’s sons, Kaziu, who lived in the UK, returned to Poland and bought a ticket for Elzbieta and her youngest daughter Klarysa to come to the UK to join the rest of the family. When Elzbieta was 64, they didn’t want her to be in Poland on her own and she came to London and lived in Stratford with Kaziu.

At the age of 69 Elzbieta had to leave her son’s house because she couldn’t climb the stairs anymore. She has now been moved to a ground floor flat in Newham.

Elzbieta likes being in the UK because people are friendly and feels life is easier here. However, because she doesn’t speak English, she finds it difficult to integrate and needs her youngest daughter to be with her all the time. In her spare time she likes to sew aprons.

## Romanipen

Romanipen is a set of rules that Roma ought to follow, such as respecting one another, being honest, behaving honourably, getting married before living together. Elzbieta feels that Romanipen is in Roma people's soul, they are born with it, and they either choose to follow it or not.

## Elzbieta Glowacka's Photos



Elzbieta and her husband on their wedding ©RSG



Elzbieta's children's baptism ©RSG



Elzbieta's deceased son (left) and other son (right) ©RSG



Elzbieta's daughter Klarysa's Holy Communion day ©RSG