

PROFILE

# Face2Face

## with Sylwia Machej

**Paul Gateshill** caught up with Sylwia Machej, originally Polish and living in one of the Focolares in Welwyn Garden City.



**How long have you been living in the Focolare community?**

I have been living in Focolare for eighteen years. Five years ago I arrived in England after living in Poland, Italy, Switzerland and Germany.

**Tell me about your childhood**

I was born in Poland in a little town called Cieszyn on the border with the Czech Republic. My family consisted of mum, dad, myself and my brother. Sadly though my brother died in a car accident while crossing the road. It happened just before Christmas, a Christmas I will never forget. It was a crisis for my parents because they felt responsible. My father was coming back from work and he saw the accident happen. As a result of this tragic loss it was very hard for the family. However, we felt supported by all our neighbours. There was a strong bond with them as we were all in the same boat – nobody had anything. We borrowed chairs, or whatever we needed from the neighbours and they from us. We felt supported by them.

**Before the death of your brother what was life like for the family?**

Very simple, very religious. We are Roman Catholic and my father worked in a mine. The Communist State wanted



Photo: ©Paul Gateshill



*When you love somebody you want this person to be happy and I want you to be happy...*



the miners to work on Sundays. In order to go to mass together we went at five in the morning. The mass was so early because many people worked 12 hour shifts.

Our life centred around the church. There were no other activities you could join in with. When I was young, faith was something I just took for granted. It wasn't until after the death of my brother that I made a choice of faith.

### How did you meet the Focolare?

After my first year at University I received a scholarship to go to Germany to improve my German. I should have gone to Cologne but ended up in Ottmaring, which is one of the small towns of the Focolare. I lived with a family of five children. Even though my family was beautiful there was something very special about this family. I couldn't work out what it was. They introduced me to the Word of Life (see page 12). One year later I came back to Ottmaring to live with the Gen, the young people of the Focolare. One day Fons, who used to be responsible for the Focolare in Germany came to visit Ottmaring. While visiting the Gen he asked me: 'What would you like to do with your life?' I felt as if it was Jesus asking me to follow him.

On my return to Poland I was asked if I'd like to go and help with the Focolare little town, 'Mariapolis Fiore', that was being built close to Warsaw. There were some buildings which were very basic: one meeting house, a little house which was our Focolare. In the winter we had to use hairdryers to thaw the pipes.

At the beginning I did decorating and cleaning before working in a school where I taught German.

My parents found this choice of mine very difficult at first, having lost their son – now I had gone too. However, when I left Poland and went to Loppiano in Italy my parents came to visit me and they were so taken by the atmosphere, that after their visit, when they phoned they didn't ask me how I was but they asked after all my companions! They had found a larger family.

All my life I wanted to give myself to God and before meeting the Focolare I was engaged and went with my fiancée to the Marian shrine in Czestochowa. There I wrote a letter to Mary asking her to help me find my vocation. I also looked into the options of several religious orders, but I understood they were not for me. After I had understood that Jesus was asking

me to follow him in the Focolare community, I went to explain this to my fiancée. He cried. I cried too. We had been going out for five years. Later, when I was leaving for Mariapolis Fiore I met him on the street and he said to me 'when you love somebody you want this person to be happy and I want you to be happy.' He is now happily married and has a family.

### That's quite a choice after being engaged and then to give up marriage and raising a family.

The voice inside me was very strong and I couldn't say no! I remember in my first Focolare we didn't have a lot of money but we had a lot of love. One time there was nothing in the fridge. There was a knock on the door and one of our friends brought us half a cow! Through this extraordinary gift we felt the love of God.

### In your Focolare now, there is quite an age range among those you live with. Is that an issue?

I feel that everybody is important and has the same importance, the older members can't live without us and we can't live without them. There is an age difference of forty years but we're all one family. We can learn a lot from the wisdom of older people. Also they pray for everything I'm involved in.

### I hear you have received some important news recently?

I have been asked if I can go to Syria for two weeks this summer to support the Focolare there. At first I said no because I thought about my family and what they would feel about me being in a potentially dangerous situation. However, during the Mariapolis this year one of the focolarini shared his experience about being asked to leave his country and saying 'Yes' to Jesus. Listening to him I understood that I couldn't say no.

So, I am going to Syria to help prepare the Mariapolis there. When I phoned the Focolare in Syria they told me: 'It's not about bringing material things. Coming from the outside will show the Syrian people that they have not been forgotten by the world.' I'm sure I will receive more than I will give. When I told my colleagues at work they were stunned and straightaway one said: 'Let me give you something to take.' I don't feel that I shall be going alone. 🍷

