

VIEWPOINT

Belonging and identity

I recently attended a large conference in Italy. Walking into a crowd of over three hundred strangers is never easy but having a badge does help! When

Michal Siewniak reflects on his family's mixed heritage and how it has enriched their overall sense of identity.

I arrived, I was asked to write down my name and the country I was 'representing'. Not for the first time, I was a bit unsure what to write. I am from Poland; however, for the last thirteen

years I have been living in the UK. Although this is now my home, I am still very proud of my roots.

Our mixed heritage

This week my eldest daughter, Maria, had a non-uniform day. All the pupils had an opportunity to express themselves. They did so in many different ways. Our Maria decided to wear a Polish top and a Croatian scarf. Her mum comes from Croatia whereas I'm Polish. She was really happy dressed in this way as she feels proud to be British, Polish, Croatian, not to mention European. I asked Maria, whether she is comfortable being a child of 'mixed heritage'. I was delighted when she replied: 'When I talk to my friends, I always say that my dad is from Poland, mum from Croatia (who also has Italian grandparents!) and I was born in the UK.' I said: 'so why is it important for you?' She replied: 'Because I have many opportunities to travel, learn other languages & spend holidays (without spending loads of money!) with my relatives in different parts of Europe.' We were really proud of her.

I often ask myself whether I lost a bit of my 'Polishness'. Life was so simple when I was growing up. Being only ten when the Berlin Wall collapsed meant that I hadn't really had a chance to travel, study or work abroad until 2001 when I left Poland for Croatia. Being Polish often meant: being predominantly white, being

a member of the Roman Catholic Church, being from Eastern Europe and having a rich but troubled history. There was no such a thing as 'mixed heritage', and having a foreign girlfriend sounded almost surreal. I feel that most of my 'childhood' was pretty special and it helped prepare me for my future 'life adventures'.

Enriched by diversity

I feel totally blessed in so many ways. In 2001 I received a scholarship and I went to study in Zagreb. After completing a University and Masters' Degree, I moved back to Croatia where I was already seeing my future wife Ana. This period in my life was probably the most important. It most definitely shaped me and helped me to see other people from a very different angle. I remember seeing a mosque for the first time in my life. I remember people from many different faiths living side by side. Each of these moments helped me to realise that we all belong to one 'human family'. It was all so natural for my Croatian friends, whereas for me it was such a huge discovery. Although, as a history student I had to read a great deal, I had not heard a lot about the Muslim community, and this 'meeting of religions and cultures' immediately fascinated me.

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Michal Siewniak with a civic award for his contribution to public health and wellbeing.

This experience and our one year in Italy prepared us well for Britain. I had already seen ‘multicultural society in action’, and, despite some challenges, it does work in my view.

Civic engagement

So if I say that I am from Poland but I also feel Croatian, British and European. Does it diminish my ‘Polish identity’? Does my children’s upbringing in a diverse society mean that they don’t have a clear-cut sense of belonging? I think that I am actually more Polish in the UK than I would have been back home! I have tried very hard to demonstrate (and prove to myself!) that Poles are actually nice people! I have stood in the local elections and won a seat, I have been involved in countless community activities. I have helped develop an exchange programme between Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council and Poland. I have organised a ‘Hatfield Polish Day’ ran an event to mark the ‘Battle of Britain’ and so on. The list is long! For me, life in the UK is all about challenging stereotypes and assumptions. It is about promoting and cherishing diversity. It is about showing that we all matter. It is about demonstrating that if we want, we can change lives. Patriotism for me means that I can be proud of my roots whilst recognising that I am also enriched by other cultures.

Life is an adventure

There is so much negativity about diversity today. I know that my family wants to continue being residents of ‘one big global family’ – a family which has so much to offer; which enhances us all as human beings and enriches our lives by meeting and being with other people from different backgrounds. I am pleased that I have not ‘stagnated’



and still look at life as an adventure which allows me to grow socially, culturally and spiritually. I am delighted that my family, especially my children, are thriving and loving the fact that they are so foreign! I had a fantastic childhood but wish I could experience what they are now being exposed to at such a young age.

We all have layers of identify. We all want to belong, however, we can’t allow ourselves to be simply categorised in one or two boxes. If there is anything I have learnt in the UK, it is not to generalise, stigmatise and label people. Not because it is ‘politically incorrect’, but because we are all unique and each one of us contributes to that uniqueness. 🍷