

#NWConnect: In Conversation with Diana Forster and Dr Katherine Lebow Transcript

Kim: Hello, and welcome to North Wall Connect.

Amelia: A podcast series where we talk to amazing artists featured here at The North Wall Arts Centre

Kim: brought to you by your hosts Kim

Amelia: and Amelia.

0.22 **Kim:** In 1940, at the beginning of the Second World War, Stalin's troops invaded Eastern Poland. A million* Polish people were forced from their homes at gunpoint and sent to labour camps in Siberia. Artist Diana Forster's mother and grandparents were among them. In her upcoming exhibition "Such a Long Journey", Diana finds new ways of engaging audiences through formal qualities which draw the viewers' attention while the work is gradually understood. Today, I am thrilled to be able to introduce Dr. Katherine Lebow, Associate Professor of Modern History at the University of Oxford, in conversation with Diana Forster. So welcome both of you; we're so excited to hear this fascinating discussion.

Diana: Hello, I'm Diana Forster. I'm an artist based in or near Oxford; I work in the area of art and conflict.

Kate: My name is Kate Lebow. I'm a historian at the University of Oxford and Christ Church college working on modern European history with a focus on 20th century Poland. Diana - "Such a Long Journey" draws on the experiences of your mother in World War Two, who, together with her family, was among up to 1 million* Polish civilians arbitrarily deported to camps and gulags in the Soviet Union following the Soviet occupation of Eastern Poland in 1939. Before we move to those events and how they affected your family, I'm wondering if you can tell us a little bit more about your mother's family before the war - if you can set the scene as it were.

1:51: **Diana:** Yes, my mother's family - so my grandparents and there were seven children (and my mother was one of seven), lived on a smallholding outside a village, just North East of Lwów or L'viv. My grandfather had been given this small patch of land outside this village because he had fought with the Polish army against Russian troops who were trying to invade Poland in 1920. I think this is a period of history, an event in history that's not really well known. But the Poles defeated the Russians, they stopped the advance of Russian troops into Poland and, as a reward, those soldiers were given patches of land, small areas of land outside some villages in Eastern Poland, and my grandfather and grandmother set about building up a little smallholding - so they had some animals and fruit trees and so on.

3:01 **Kate:** Right. So, when the Soviets established an occupation in Eastern Poland in 1939, certain groups were particularly singled out as suspect among the population and the so-called settlers were among them. The fact, of course, that your grandfather had fought in the Polish-Soviet War would not have endeared him to the Soviet occupation. So, that does help to explain why they were caught up among these very large numbers of civilians who were summarily deported eastward. I'm wondering how this actually happened in your family's case?

Diana: Well, when the Soviet soldiers arrived, they just had lists of people that were to be taken from their little farms to the nearest railway station, and then taken into Russia. So, as far as my family was concerned, there was just a knock on the door very early one morning, and the Russian soldiers were there and gave them just a few hours to collect together some food a few belongings. And then I understand that they spent the first night in the primary school in the village, and then they were taken on by sledge because this was February, in the bitterly cold winter (or perhaps it's always cold there!) but they were taken by sledge to a railway station and then put on to or pushed into cattle trucks on a train. They didn't know where they were going. And the train then set off. I think it probably took a couple of weeks for them travelling across, probably through Belarus and into Russia, and heading north east of Moscow to Kotlas which is actually in Archangel Region, so not Archangel city itself, but the Archangel Region which is all forests. So not geographically Siberia, but they always refer to it as Siberia because it's kind of a psychological thing rather than a geographical area. They were deported to Siberia but in my mother's case, it was actually Archangel.

5:26 **Kate:** And indeed, there's this expression in Polish – 'na sybir', which goes back to the 19th century even, when, sort of, Polish patriots were deported by the Tsarist authorities for participation in the pro-independence movement. So yes, I think the idea of Siberia as a metaphorical state of exile as well, must have had a lot of power for people in those days. So, what happened once they then arrived in Arkhangelsk province?

Diana: Well, the camp, my mother said the camp had been established for quite a long time because people were incarcerated there after the Russian Revolution so people who were against communism were sent there. And so were actually fortunate they did have - not great, I mean it was awful accommodation - a roof over their head when they got there. Those conditions was dreadful because some people who were deported were just kind of dumped in the countryside and had to fend for themselves which was appalling. But, no, this camp, which was called Kopytovo was actually established and their job was to cut down trees in the forests and they then transported the logs to the river, because Kotlas is there on the confluence of three different rivers. So, the logs would then be transported by the water downriver to sawmills further downstream. And it was very hard work because they didn't have power saws, they were chopping these trees down and hauling logs, and sawing them. What few images I have are a few of women with a long saw, women either end of a long saw - two women sawing logs. And, yes, it was, it was very hard. And they had to do it in temperatures that were minus 30-40 degrees below and my mother, one of the stories that she told (and she had dementia in later life) but this was one story that just kept coming up was that she fell off one of those logs. She was on the river, I don't know, pushing these logs around, and she fell into the river. And she could remember falling into the water and sinking and terrified because people used to come up under the logs and not actually be able to surface and then they would just drown. But fortunately, she came up somewhere where people could fish her out. And she was allowed to go back to the camp for the rest of the day and not work. But they say 'he who does not work does not eat'. So, everybody had to work. And if you couldn't work, you didn't get your ration. If you were ill or too old to work then your family had to share their ration with you. And it was just bread and very little else. No hospital, no drugs. You just had to kind of sort yourselves out if you got ill.

Kate: How old was your mother when she was there?

Diana: She was 16 – 16/17.

9:17 **Kate:** And the rest of the family?

Diana: My grandparents were in their early 40s. My mother's brother I think he was slightly older than her so a slightly older brother. Then my mother, then a sister who was probably about 14 and then two much younger brothers who were only eight or nine. They were the youngest and they went to school. They weren't expected to work but school was just, you know, they were to be taught about communism and turned into good little communists. One of her brothers was a very naughty child and my mother tells the story of him writing a very rude verse about Stalin on the blackboard. And, of course, this was a terrible thing to do. And the teacher went to see my grandmother, and she beat the poor boy to make sure he never did it again because it was a really dangerous thing to do. I don't know what might have happened to the family if it had happened again, or I think they were very lucky. My mother used to quote what he'd written on the blackboard but I can't remember what it was!

Kate: Sounds like a very close call, actually! The family managed to stay together throughout the time in the Soviet Union?

Diana: Yes, they did. Apart from right at the end, which was really, I don't know how my grandmother did this but when Stalin joined the Allies and it was agreed that these people could be released from the camps, my mother's sister, Zosia, was too ill to travel. I think they were all being encouraged to just leave when they could, you know, Stalin had opened the gate so, quickly, let's get out. So Zosia was left behind. My grandmother had to decide to leave her behind but there was a family who took her in and looked after her. I think they said: 'Look, we'll send her on, we'll travel as soon as we can'. But that never happened, because Stalin then closed the gates, he decided no more would leave. I think something went wrong with this decision to free all these people. I think it might have been when the Polish soldiers began to ask awkward questions about the officers who were then you know, they were killed at Katyń anyway, I'm not too sure about that.

So, there was my grandmother, my grandfather and four of the children made the journey south from Kotlas. Because, south in Uzbekistan, recruitment centres were being set up for these men who were leaving the labour camps, and also prisoners of war who'd been released from prisoner of war camps. They were travelling to these recruitment centres to form the second Polish Corps who would fight with the British because the war was still on. And these people who've been in camps of one sort or another, they could fight - some of them had been in the army like my grandfather. So, yes, they formed the Polish second corps starting at these recruitment centres, and of course, the families travelled with them. Sadly, conditions at these recruitment centres were so bad and the men were in such poor physical condition after more than a year in a labour camp, 18 months in the labour camp, they were getting typhoid and other illnesses, and my grandfather died. He signed up but then he died.

But that left my grandmother and the four children. They had to work all the time, I don't know who organised that, once in Uzbekistan they were working. My mother, it's on the Silk Road, so she was feeding silkworms to earn a living. And slowly, as these soldiers were joining up, they were with General Anders, who was in overall charge of all of this process. The soldiers were then being moved westwards to Iran to fight with the British in Palestine, and eventually Monte Cassino in Italy. So, they had to cross the Caspian Sea and then into Iran (what was Persia then) so there were boats, I think they were mainly horrible, coal

transporting boats, horribly overcrowded with the soldiers and their families across the Caspian Sea.

Once they reached the other side of the Caspian Sea, that was freedom, they were out of Russia. And that's when the Red Cross stepped in. They were looked after, as well as possible. I mean, people were still dying. People died on the trip across the Caspian Sea, which I think was two or three days. And there wasn't really room to sit down on the boat and conditions which were just dreadful. But yes, once in Persia, there were camps established for them. I think that's when they had to have their heads shaved because they all had lice and they were given clothes by the Red Cross to wear. My mother said that they'd run out of boys' clothes so her younger brothers were in dresses because that's all that there was. And then they had to get onto trucks and travel, right the way down to Karachi which was still in India then. So, a terrifying journey through mountains, down to Karachi. And then the last leg of the journey was from there, down the coast of East Africa, to British colonies, because I think Churchill had, because Stalin was now with our allies and things have all been sort of discussed and organised. Camps were established throughout the British colonies of British East Africa and Rhodesia, as it was then, these camps consisted of huts which the Africans built for them. So typical mud huts with thatched roofs, and my grandmother and the four children, actually, I think, by this time, though, the older boy Jan had actually signed up to fight. And he went off, and he fought at Monte Cassino and actually survived. The others ended up in a camp in Tanzania (Tanganyika as it was then). It was the largest one - it was called Tengeru. There were 4000 Polish people in that one. There were 1000s of Poles in those camps in British East Africa. They were dotted all over - in Uganda and Kenya.

And from there, they slowly got work. They travelled to Nairobi. So, my mother worked as a nanny for a British family in Nairobi. She spoke no English when she arrived, she'd learned some Swahili. So linguistic skills - Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, Swahili! And then she had to learn English. But yes, she looked after these children and my father was a friend of the family so that's how she met him. And they eventually got married and stayed in East Africa. A lot of the Polish people did actually stay there and the camp at Tengeru didn't close down until about 1954. So, a lot of the Polish people came to live in England, some went back to Poland, and didn't fare very well. But that was, that's kind of the potted story.

17:44 **Kate:** Quite a story. I've been wondering this whole time, what happened to Zosia?

Diana: Well, it was a very happy ending a long time later, we were still living in East Africa. We didn't leave until 1960 and I remember my father coming home from work one day with a letter - we didn't have a postman, you had to go to the post office to collect your mail. He came home with this letter, and gave it to Mum. And he said, you know, this letter's from Poland. She opened it and started crying - and it was from Zosia. She had eventually got back to Poland. And I think when Stalin died, there was an opening up, things got a bit easier. And I think that's when Zosia might have been able to get away from the camp - she was probably stuck in the labour camp all that time. I tried to find out exactly what happened but I don't speak enough Polish to have asked my aunt - I did meet her a couple of times - but I'm trying to find out more from her children. But they don't seem to know very much either about that period of time. It's like my mother and perhaps Zosia didn't want to talk about what had happened. But yes, when she wrote to Mum, she was living in the west of Poland, the part that had been given by Germany after the borders shifted after the war. Where my mother was born, became part of Ukraine behind the Iron Curtain and part of Germany was given to Poland. That was populated by Polish people and Zosia went there

and met her husband there and was living on a collective farm. So yes, she survived. And the two children that were left behind when the Russians came – the two oldest siblings - one of them was staying with relatives (the girl Maria was staying with relatives in another village) and the eldest boy, Joseph, was doing some sort of apprenticeship in the middle of Poland. So, they never lost Joseph because he had an address in Poland. So, my grandmother could write to that address and they discovered that he had survived the war. He had married, and his three little sons had died - they'd got ill with various things and they hadn't survived. But Maria was left behind in Ukraine. Well, when the borders shifted, and their village was swallowed up by Ukraine, it was then very difficult. My grandmother wrote letters, they all wrote letters to the old village. My mother's cousin (she had one cousin) and he had never been deported. He was Ukrainian, he didn't have this close contact somehow, he wasn't really part a close member of the family. And he had found his way to Canada and then got his parents and wife out of Ukraine. And of course, they knew of Maria, they knew they were still seeing her in Ukraine, they knew she was there. And then some chance meeting in a bar in Canada or, you know, an exchange of names. And they discovered that, yes, they could then get in touch with Maria. My mother met her again but unfortunately, my grandmother never saw her again. Because although Mum and I went to Poland in in the early 1970s, still under communist rule, and we tried to go to her village but, of course, they wouldn't let us go. So, she couldn't see her sister. It was only much, much later, when Maria managed to leave Ukraine and visit Poland, my mother flew over to see her.

22:08 **Kate:** These are incredible stories. But of course, they're not atypical, are they, of Polish experience in World War Two. There was so much mobility and dispersal, even among those who were not deported to the Soviet Union, for example, and this is one of the really sort of fascinating features of modern Poland, is that almost any sort of family is not living today in the place where their ancestors lived before the war. But that's a whole other topic, I suppose. Now, going back to your own engagement with your mother's past, how you first learned when you were growing up about the difficult experiences she had been through, and when this first became part of your consciousness.

Diana: I think, growing up in Nairobi, we were surrounded by her Polish friends. So even though my father was an Englishman, Mum had still so many of the people she had made this journey with. They were in Nairobi, and we used to meet with them, we'd all meet up and have parties and things. So, I was aware of the Polish people who were refugees who'd been through something terrible, without any specific stories. I do remember one occasion, because they'd all been through very different experiences. Mum had a friend who had a number tattooed on her arm. And I remember saying: why has Mrs. Oganowska got a number tattooed on her arm? I can't remember what my parents said, I don't remember a specific answer. So, there were little things like that, where, you began to realise, and it was only much, much later when I was a teenager, and I started reading about Auschwitz and so on, I remembered that. But those people didn't tell their stories to us, to the children and because I didn't speak Polish. But I don't think they were even talking about them in Polish and I didn't understand. They just got on with life. That was the extraordinary thing looking back. I only know of one person (or heard about so I didn't know her) - she had such terrible experiences that she never kind of recovered, she had to be looked after. My mother had Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, though it didn't have a name then. I remember there were mornings when my father would get my brother and I ready for school and get us sorted out and he'd say: 'your mother's not very well'. And I overheard my mother on the telephone to some friends of hers saying to them (and I still remember the words): 'I had these flashbacks, and I wake up in the night sweating and sweating'. And clearly, that's what was

going on but no help was available. You just had to - she just had to kind of work through it, I suppose. And she did. I mean, she stopped having those episodes. She was always nervous and one of her younger brothers, Ted, was a bag of nerves all his life, I remember that. But he had, on their travels south, and perhaps the younger one, were in an orphanage for a while so I think they got fed well if they were in the orphanage. I don't even know where the orphanage was but one morning, Ted woke up, the child on one side was dead and the one on the other side was dead and he ran away he ran back to the family, he couldn't stand it. So yes, they were, they were all affected, even though they managed to carry on with life. I think my mother must have been very resilient, really - extraordinary when I think about her now.

Kate: I've been thinking a lot, in looking at your work, about this idea that we now live in, as one historian, Annette Wieviorka, puts it, we live in an "era of the witness". This is her phrase, by which she means that we focus very much on, in order to come to grips with the past and with difficult histories, we focus on eyewitness testimonies by ordinary people, privilege these as giving us some way of accessing these almost unimaginable pasts. And she also speaks of an assumption in today's society, of a kind of moral imperative for those who have not had such experiences, to listen to the witness, to listen to their stories. But this is something very different from what you're describing as your mother's experience, which I think was also the experience of many, many other people who had survived atrocity in that period. Often those who, who migrated to the West, to the United States or to Britain, were not invited to speak of the hardships that they had experienced. And it was a very different sort of set of cultural expectations. I'm wondering then - you lived in Kenya until you were about 11 and then your mother was in her early 30s when you migrated to the UK. Did anything change at that point for her? I mean, she's leaving behind this sort of community of Polish exiles. And how did she adapt to this new environment where of course, there was a very different set of experiences in the war and a different set of narratives?

28:16 **Diana:** I think it was very hard, looking back. Fortunately, she did have close family because her mother and the two younger brothers had moved to England, they were allowed to settle in England after the war. So, my grandmother had brought them to England. They were living in Bradford - amongst the big Polish community in Bradford. So, Mum did have them when we came to live in England. But I think having left her Polish friends behind in Kenya, where they kind of got happy, it was such a lovely place to live. It was warm. And after all they've been through, they come into this lovely place to live. And then we moved to near Liverpool which is where my father was from. And I think the culture shock - my brother and I felt it because, you know, it wasn't the same as living in Kenya. But my poor mother, trying to sort of make some friends amongst neighbours. I remember this when we first came - she said it's so strange. You know, you knock on the door of an English person and they keep you standing on the doorstep. In Kenya, that door would be flung open and it would be "come in!". She found that very strange and I think she got depressed. I do remember. We'd only been living in England for a couple of years and she would be getting us ready for school. She always looked she always wore the same cardigan and look so down somehow. She was getting on with what she had to do. I think she was depressed. My father, his family were very nice to her but they were all very much older. My father was much older than she was. He had brothers and sisters living around. They were very nice to her. I think what changed things for her was that she got involved with the Girl Guides. She'd been involved with them in Kenya in the refugee camp that somehow established girl guide companies and scouts. So, she volunteered to help with the local Girl Guides and met some lovely women who ran the girl guide company and they became very warm friends. And I think she might

have talked to them about it a bit because they certainly knew a little bit about her experiences. But a friend of hers (I'm afraid she died earlier this last summer) she told me that she got a job with the building society when she, like my mother, had married an Englishman and came to live in England, got a job with a building society. And a woman she worked with said, you know, how did you come to move to England? So, she told her the whole story and this woman wouldn't believe her. She said: "What, if you went through all that how come you're still alive?" And I think a lot of people would have met that because it was so outside the experience of the person they were sitting next to in an office. They couldn't believe it. I think this lovely lady Irena probably thought, Well, I'm never going to tell anybody else. You get that response, people don't believe you. And you've just told them something that's probably quite difficult to tell anybody. I don't know if that happened to my mother. I don't know if she ever tried telling anybody who then just stopped listening. Yeah, I think that was probably another thing. People might have just switched off if it had been too much.

31:59 **Kate:** Yeah, that's fascinating and it actually it leads right into the question of your approach in your own artwork. Because another thing I've been thinking about in terms of this idea of, of witnessing, is it's not just a question of what is witnessed. But how. And this is something maybe as historians we don't pay as much attention to because we're accustomed to certain kinds of documentation, for example, a written testimony or an oral testimony that's captured on video. But it seems to me that in your work, you really do grapple in very interesting ways with how to convey an individual's experience in a way that can be meaningful to someone who has not lived through that. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about that.

Diana: Yes. I started to think about making artwork around my mother's experience, because when I when I retired, I studied Fine Arts at Oxford Brookes University, and we had to come up with projects, you know, big projects, and I was just thinking about what to do. And I, I just remembered this story that my mother had told me about the cabbages. That story had always made a huge impression on me, mostly because of the circumstances in which she told me. I'd gone into the kitchen one day and she was nibbling at cabbage leaf and laughing. And she said, when we were in the labour camp, the guards had a garden and they grew cabbages, which of course, we weren't allowed to eat but the children, they'd crawl on their hands and knees at night and nibble the cabbage leaves. So, it just looked like to the guards that it was rabbits or animals or some animal damage. So, there's no punishment. Punishment would have been awful. But she just was laughing about it. And I mean, we always ate a lot of cabbage. Somebody said to me once, so she probably never wanted to eat cabbage again, but we always ate a lot of cabbage. And also because it wasn't a horrible story, and it had this kind of humour behind it when she was telling me, that's when I thought about how can I turn this into a piece of artwork. So, in the end, I built the cabbage patch, and made the cabbages by nibbling savoy cabbage leaves and then stretching this plastic material over them. And then I showed it and people were, I was astonished at how moved they were by this piece. Because I did set out to make it beautiful. It wasn't going to be in any way a difficult thing to look at. It was going to be beautiful. And people looked at it in that way. Some of them looked at it and then read the wall text and were completely confused. You know, they had appreciated an artwork for its aesthetic qualities. And then they'd read the wall text which explained what it was all about. And then they looked again at the cabbage leaves and saw the nibbles. And I mean, that really made me think about how to show difficult experiences in war. I wanted to pull away from artwork which is shocking, and really very difficult to engage with. In fact, people then don't engage

with it - pictures like, starting with Goya's Disasters Of War, which even now I can't look at. A lot of contemporary artwork made about war is in the same vein, you know, it's horrific. So, you might cast a glance at it, and then turn away and you don't want to engage with it. And the same with some photographs. So how do you make work which can give people a space to think about the whole thing. So that was why I then decided, yes, to create more work that was beautiful, that drew people in and gave them space and time to look at the work and like it, and then enjoy it. But then for the story behind it to just slowly unfold in a very unthreatening way. So, people could then have a chance to think about the stories. And that's what I've carried on trying to do that with all my work. And especially, that's why I like to make installations which are very kind of immersive, you can actually go into a space and look at the work, almost feel it, you're kind of surrounded by it, not just looking at a picture on the wall. Yes, I think, to give people that opportunity for quiet reflection and contemplation. And there are other artists who've done this really well - Cornelia Parker with her war room, which is a wonderful piece of work. I just think the role of art in educating future generations or telling future generations about the horrors of war, so that, we can't, it's not going to stop war. But you know, you let people know what the consequences of war can be, consequences of hating the other lead to this, but how can you do this? How can you represent these issues to the next generation without turning them off or without them just becoming completely numb to it? I mean, that's what's happened to us a lot of time - we see distressing footage, and where we've seen it before, we can't look at it again. So, to try to continue to engage people with these issues in a way that they will engage, they'll stay, they'll spend time, they'll think, yes, I find this fascinating. So, you know, from starting with just telling one of my mother's stories, the emphasis shifted slightly to how do we deal with conflict in art, so that our viewers can really engage with it.

38:21 **Kate:** Yeah, and what I really love about how that works, say, in the cabbage piece, is that you invite the viewer in to become, in a sense, a co-teller or co-creator of the story, because they have to sort of use their imagination to make some connections like, you know, how, how important the small amount of vitamin C in the nibbled cabbage leaf must have been for the survival of those children, without which they may have perished, right? You don't spell it out. But you allow those who are engaging with the artwork to use their intelligence and their imagination to imagine themselves into that space.

Diana: So yeah, I think that's part of it really. I am presenting them with a narrative. But within that, yes, they can build their own little narratives around what they're seeing. They can, yes, use their imaginations. I think that's so important, because something somebody said about artwork is that it is shocking and horrific. Very representational art about conflict that's shocking and horrific just can turn people away. It leaves no room for reimagining. And the person who's seen it has this image locked in their head and it can be very difficult to get rid of; it's just stuck there. And nothing else is happening apart from a desire to get rid of the image. So, to try and offer something that allows, yes, their own kind of little narratives to develop and their imaginations to work, viewers' imaginations to work is something that, yes, I want to go on doing really.

40:27 **Kate:** I also thought of the work of other artists who have attempted to engage with family stories of trauma, not by presenting a literal image of the past but by in some way, again, sort of inviting the viewer to use their imagination. And one of the artists I thought of was Art Spiegelman. Maus, which portrays his father, who was a Holocaust survivor, his parents were both Holocaust survivors, as mice who are being chased by cats. Yes. Very, very sort of obvious metaphor, but surprisingly powerful. Oftentimes, his work has been

discussed in the context of this idea of post-memory, of how the second generation of Holocaust survivors, for example, have absorbed what they have gleaned of their parents' traumatic experiences, and how central it has become, in a way, to their own sense of self. And I'm wondering if that idea of post-memory has any relevance for your own work.

Diana: I'm not sure about that. When I first started reading about it, I just, sort of, felt a distance from that whole idea. And I think it's because, well, I know how, within post memory, images are seen as very important. So, if you've been talking or your parents have been talking to you about their experiences, and you've been learning about their experiences, you've had lots of images of their experiences. Like the concentration camps, there were images taken actually in the camps, and then on liberation, the journalists were there, there was footage, there was all that to build into your parents' memories but I didn't see it, there were no images of the labour camps. So even when my mother was telling me these stories, I had no images of the camp, no images of the journey there, there was very limited footage. I mean, there might be more in Russia now but we can't get at it. And my parents had, my mother had, no photographs at all of all those years - three or four years of her life, there were no images at all. That coupled with the fact that she couldn't talk about her experiences, meant that I was always seeing this, her experiences, her life, at a distance, somehow. There was this, it wasn't something immediate for me at all, it was something that had happened to her and to her family. It was it's very strange, really, there was just always this kind of gulf really, between what has happened to her. I suppose also that she just wanted to get on with her life, she seemed to want to leave that behind. She married an Englishman, she was going to do her best to not become English, she couldn't, but to adapt to his culture, really and leave that all behind. It was only after he died, that she sought out the Polish community on the Wirral where we were living, and became more involved with Polish community again. And it's only since I began to see some images on the Internet of that journey, there are a few, and there are a few of the labour camps and there is some footage that I've seen that I've begun to really connect in a way with what she went through. And now people have been writing memoirs as well, because for a long time, nothing was written down by ordinary people that you could read about this. I don't know if there were academic papers on it, I don't know. But just sort of ordinary people writing. The first one I saw - a friend of mine who asked me about my mother and how she came to live here and I told him - he was a historian, he'd never heard the story. He, sort of, almost dismissed it. And I thought well alright if he wants to do that. But a few weeks later, he came around with a copy of the Financial Times. And in it was an article written by one of their journalists whose mother had gone through the same experiences as my mother had. And he said, I think you ought to read this. And I did, and I cried. It was the first time I'd seen her story written down, and it almost seemed as if, gosh, it really did happen, you know, it's been written down. It's very strange because, perhaps if you don't see images and you don't read about it, you just keep hearing just stories from people. How real is it these days, until you see pictures, and read about it? Because the more I read now (because there is a lot more to read and a few more images are coming to light but not a lot) the more I can imagine what my mother went through, not imagine, understand what she went through. And now it's becoming, not horrific, but I'm thinking how did she go through all that, how did she manage? She nearly died at one stage, she was really ill with typhoid on this journey from Kotlas down to Uzbekistan, and she was in a hospital, there were no drugs, but she somehow survived. But, you know, I actually sort of try and think about exactly what it must have been like. I'm also appalled I was a horrible teenager. None of this understanding, you know, you sort of think, how could I have said that to her, this woman who'd been through all these dreadful experiences? I didn't understand. Nobody told me.

46:44 **Kate:** She probably didn't want you to understand, because she wanted you to be sheltered from that horror. There were actually thousands of written accounts by Poles deported to the Soviet Union that were collected in the refugee camps by the Polish government-in-exile during the war. And the irony is - it's actually a tragedy as much as an irony that - for example, that these accounts - 1000s and 1000s of accounts - of people like your family members (in fact, maybe even among them are accounts by members of your family) are not well known. And that's a legacy precisely of the Cold War and of the dislocation and disruption of this community, that these documents ended up in California, at the Hoover Institution, by a very circuitous route where, until the 1980s-1990s**, no researchers actually discovered what riches they contained. So, this is a somewhat particular situation (and this is actually my own research) that Poland had a tradition of collecting ordinary peoples' stories, which dated back to the 1920s, with these memoir competitions that sociologists would organise for peasants and workers and unemployed people, and that those techniques were used by teachers and other officials in the camps, to collect written accounts by the people who were in transit, just as the same techniques were used by the Polish Jewish Historical Commissions that were established in Poland right after the war among the surviving remnants of Polish Jewry. So, at that particular moment, there was a huge ingathering of peoples' stories and a sense that these stories were extremely crucial. But it was as if there was no one to hear them. And it's only recently that we've been rediscovering these bodies of documents.

Diana: It's really interesting, because I had no idea of all of that. And also, my grandparents weren't educated people. My mother's friend Irena was - she came from a completely different background in Warsaw and got caught up in all of this because she was visiting her grandfather in eastern Poland when they were, you know, but my grandmother was a very simple woman, she could read and write, which the Russians apparently found astonishing, a peasant woman that could read and write! But they wouldn't have had any inkling of any of that, they were just on their smallholding, and then suddenly they were deported. And so, my grandmother in the camps wouldn't have been able to talk to her children about what might have gone on in Poland in the 1920s, in the way of collecting stories or anything like that. And also, you know, when those Poles finally ended up in England, at the end of the war and were allowed to stay, they were sent letters, asking them not to talk about their experiences because Stalin finished the war on the side of the Allies, he was "good old Uncle Joe", the propaganda all had to be very positive, not that he's responsible for these dreadful war crimes. And then the Polish soldiers who had fought with the British, like my uncle Jan - they weren't allowed to march in the victory parade at the end of the war, because it would have upset Stalin. So, then the Polish airmen refused to march as well because the soldiers weren't allowed to march. There has been an apology, somewhere along the line that this wasn't supposed to happen, but it seemed that they didn't, people like my mother didn't want to talk about it anyway. But it was wonderful when I could read these stories, and I'm still reading them, I'm buying books. I'm digging it all out as much as I can. I just wish there were more images. Because I'm a visual person, I'd love to see more images. I've got some lovely photographs of the refugee camp in Tanganyika, Tengeru, because that's when photographs were being taken of groups of them, of individuals. And my father went there with my mother and took some photographs. But that's, that's where the photographic story starts.

51:35 **Kate:** Well, there's a whole other story to be told there. I'll wrap up with one last question, and it's a somewhat personal question, so feel free to take a pass if I'm prying. But

I'm curious to know if you've ever fantasised about what it would be like to show your mother the artwork you've produced around her stories? And if so, how you think or hope she would react?

Diana: I yes, I did show her photographs of the cabbage patch. But I'm afraid by then her dementia was too far advanced. And she didn't really know what she was looking at. And I tried to tell her, but it would have been lovely to be able to sit with her while the ideas for making the work were, you know, while I was having them and to be able to talk to her about it. But yes, that wasn't to be. I couldn't show her the work in a way she could understand. So, her friend Irena, I was able to show her more of my work. And I certainly talked to her a lot, because Irena's memory was really sharp until the last couple of years of her life. So, I went to see her a lot, and heard her stories which are wonderful. So, I've got those as well. But now I'm afraid she was my last living link, all that generation that I know personally or had a real connection with, they've all died now.

Kate: Well then it's all the more, I think, hopeful that the stories are being transformed and reinterpreted and passed along. So thank you for that.

Diana: So, yes, I think it's important to keep them alive.

53:14 **Kate:** To hear you talk about how really experiencing these stories as something purely private, in isolation, it sounds like a big burden to carry that in a way may have been lifted slightly by gaining access to this broader community of voices. So, it's really sad for me in a way, that you had to carry that burden. But also, it's reaffirming of what we do as historians to know that that can also actually make a difference for people.

Kim: That was amazing. Diana, you have such a lovely way of retelling your story that makes it highly accessible when it is really difficult. I think many people really appreciate it. And Kate, likewise, thank you so much for bringing into the discussion your expertise and knowledge which fuelled the conversation and I know it's going get a lot of people thinking.

Diana: Really great to have your level of scholarship brought into it.

Kate & Diana: Thank you. Thanks.