

Hi, this is Ross from Learning without Borders and today we're going to talk about Poles in Britain.

There are currently over one million Polish or Polish-British people living in the United Kingdom, with the Polish language ranked the second most widely spoken in England and the third in the UK, after Welsh. Many Poles came to live and work in the UK after Poland joined the European Union in 2004, however this was far from the beginning of Polish emigration to Britain.

Polish-speaking people are recorded in Britain as far back as the ninth century, these people were called Wends and they settled in the area of England ruled by Vikings, before either England or Poland existed as countries. In fact, one of the most famous ancient kings of Britain, Cnut the Great, was the grandson of Mieszko I of Poland, and the nephew of Boleslaw the Brave. Although the English crown was later taken by the Normans in 1066, some of this Polish blood survives today in the line of Queen Elizabeth II.

Later, after Jan Sobieski's legendary victory at the Battle of Vienna, a pub in London's Soho area was named "The King of Poland" in his honour. The street on which it stood was later renamed "Poland Street" and remains so to this day. It was on this street that many Protestant Poles settled as they left Poland during the counter-reformation of the eighteenth century.

The next century saw more refugees arriving from Poland, this time fleeing the country after the failed 1831 uprising against Russian rule in their homeland and, as the twentieth century arrived, many Polish prisoners of war held in Britain during the First World War decided to make the country their home once they had been released.

It was the Second World War, however, that saw the first large-scale arrival of Polish people on British shores. Having contributed enormously to the allied war effort, particularly during the Battle of Britain, around 200,000 Polish soldiers and airmen chose to stay in Britain after the war instead of returning to their Soviet-occupied homeland. These troops were largely from the eastern regions of Poland which had been seized by Stalin to be added to the Soviet Union and so in many cases had no home left to return to. It is a little known fact that the Polish government-in-exile, formed after Hitler's invasion of Poland and based in London for much of its existence, was not officially dissolved until 1990, at the time of the first free elections in Poland after communism.

It was partly because of these historical links that the UK became the destination of choice for many young Poles upon accession to the European Union. The Polish speaking population grew rapidly in size, particularly in areas of west London such as Hammersmith and Ealing. As the economy has improved in Poland, as well as various other political forces coming into play, many Poles are now returning to their homeland. However many have also settled, intermarried and raised children in their adopted home, meaning that the history of the Poles in Britain seems far from over. We can only speculate as to the influence the Polish community will have on the development of the United Kingdom in the next century.