

## **Arek - Free to be me**

[My arrival in Leicester] was quite magical because I came here to a place where not only did I not know anybody, but I did not know the places, I did not know where I would like to live. I was completely new, and I felt vulnerable, and I felt lonely even though I came to do very much a people's job. But gosh, I do not know what happened, but I just felt at home in a matter of weeks. All I got here [in Leicester] was just people wearing their heart on their sleeve. And that applies to the people at the church, that applies to the neighbours, that applies to people from all different communities that I immediately clicked with, mainly through my day job but also, I have got a side hustle, I am also a gym instructor on the side. I teach gym classes in the evenings. The people from those different gyms immediately took me as one of their own.

A big thing happened in me – I would like to call it a healing process.

When I was much younger, in my early 20s and living in Leeds, I went through some CBT therapy and that was because I was dealing with a lot of anxiety. That anxiety was amongst other things caused by the fact that I somehow worked myself up about the fact that I am an immigrant. I really struggled with that migrant identity and for a long time I tried to hide my accent. I tried so hard to blend in. I was very pleased with the fact that I am white because that means that unless I open my mouth, nobody suspects a thing. I can just slide under the radar and people presume that I am from here. It is only when I open my mouth and my accent comes out, that is when they know that I am a foreigner, I am a migrant, and that is when the othering starts, even if it is just in my head. So, I had a lot of anxiety when it comes to that and that anxiety manifested even in silly things like going to Morrisons and craving the sort of comfort foods that I knew from home, from the Polish section in the supermarket, and deciding not to buy it because I did not want anybody to see that in my trolley. Because that would be like a red flag highlighting that I am a migrant. It is ridiculous but that was the kind of anxiety that I had.

And then as time progressed obviously my outlook was changing, and I began to grow more and more confident in my identity. I have even come to love my really weird accent, which is sort of Polish with a little bit of Yorkshire twang to it and God knows what else, that really always confuses people. I stopped caring about that and so it was not until I came here to Leicester, and I realised what a big Polish community there is here, that I think the last part of that wall that I had built around me crumbled.