

# Suddenly I'm back in fashion

Barbara Hulanicki, founder of Biba, on life by the beach and her return to the high street

**B**y 6am I'm awake, and I head straight out for a trot on the beach while the sun rises over the sea. At that time it looks like a huge red ball. The beauty of beach living is that you don't have to put much effort into choosing your outfit. I throw on black trousers, a black top and flip-flops, and get to work between 8 and 9am. My day starts with a torrent of e-mails. People always want information on Biba and all sorts of things. I often think how lucky I am to be sitting in a little office on the beach, communicating with the rest of the world.

It's a lovely life in Miami. I've been here for over 20 years, so I'm well settled. But I miss my friends terribly. Any friendships that I make with work colleagues are usually only transient, because they all go back to London or New York after two or three years. I often wish I had a dog for company, but because I travel so much it wouldn't be fair.

I love going back to London to see everyone, and I feel very much at home there. I usually stay with friends or at the Rockwell hotel in Kensington. While I'm there, I always do a skim round Topshop, Harvey Nichols and Portobello Road to see what's new. I'm very excited about going back into fashion, with my new line coming out in Topshop this spring. I love getting the job done in a couple of weeks and moving on to the next thing.

Some days I spend lunchtimes in the office — there's a huge fridge with plenty of food for everyone who works here — and other days I grab a takeaway. I like the office to have a comfortable and homely feel. I'm not much of a cook, but there are so many good restaurants that there's plenty of choice. I try to eat a considerable amount of fresh fish, which I would typically choose if I were going out for a meal.

My work ethic has always been very strong in whatever project I've



been involved in, and I think that's down to my Polish roots. Poles just keep on going. I've never known an entire nation to work so hard; I think it's a built-in national characteristic.

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When I first came to the UK in 1948 at the age of 12, Poles were not liked much and I hated having a Polish surname. I was anyway going through a hard time. I was raised in Palestine, as my father was the Polish consul-general. One day he

was taken away and assassinated. We never saw him again. I felt I had to keep it all inside and hide my emotions, but the trauma of losing one's father and one's sense of

security and then moving to a foreign country was very hard.

Those kinds of experiences shape you, and later on, when I was designing clothes for Biba, the image of seeing my father for the very last time remained in my mind.

I was inspired to design exactly the same chalk-stripe suit he had been wearing the last time I saw him.

I don't tend to think about the Biba era that much these days, although people always want to talk about it. People will come up to me and tell me more times than not that they stole something, and I say: "Good for you!" A high-powered executive once came to me in Italy and said: "I stole a ring from Biba." I laughed so much, because she looked like she was so relieved to have told me after all this time.

From time to time I go on exercise binges, because I hate routine. I don't smoke, which is a delicate issue because of my late husband, Fitz, who died 12 years ago of lung cancer. My son and I would get very angry with him for smoking so much. My son, Witold, is now 41 and he's a yoga instructor in New York. We still have a very close relationship and we talk a lot.

When Fitz died it was terrifying: it took about five years to get used to being on my own, and now I quite enjoy being completely free to do whatever I want, but it's no substitute. I was lucky: I was living here in Miami when it happened, and I went back to work with Chris Blackwell, doing interiors, designing for many of his hotels in Miami and the Bahamas. It helped a lot to be able to focus my energy into work.

After a long day, I turn the telly on to unwind and often pick up a takeaway. I'm an avid reader of magazines and a telly buff. I love watching reruns of series like *Nip and Tuck*. I'm one block away from the sea, and as I drift off to sleep I can hear the waves crashing. It's a very nice atmosphere, because everyone is on holiday and it's a little bit hyper and happy ■

**Barbara Hulanicki's new collection is available in Topshop nationwide from April 20. Interview by Natasha Higgins. Photograph by Laura Pannack**