

My father's story

My father was born in 1908 in Poland. He qualified as a vet at Warsaw University and by 1939 he was working as a District Veterinary Officer in the Katowice area. On September the first he was in a village later to become notorious called Oswiecim (Auschwitz). Mobilization had been

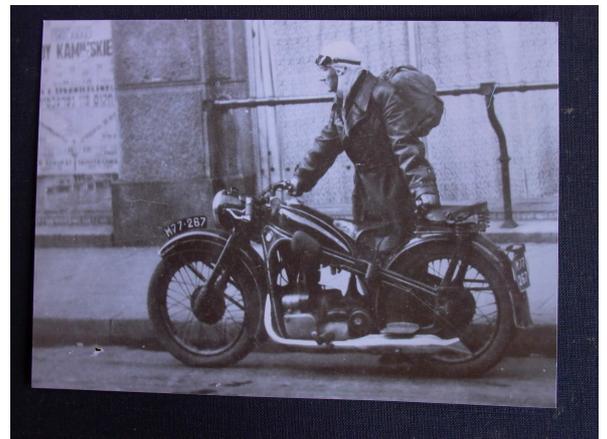


ordered for the coming war and cattle were being directed to slaughter to provide meat supplies for the next few weeks. War had clearly been expected for some time and he had immobilised and then buried his second best motorbike, a BMW, in the orchard at his home, keeping the valve lifters in his knapsack.

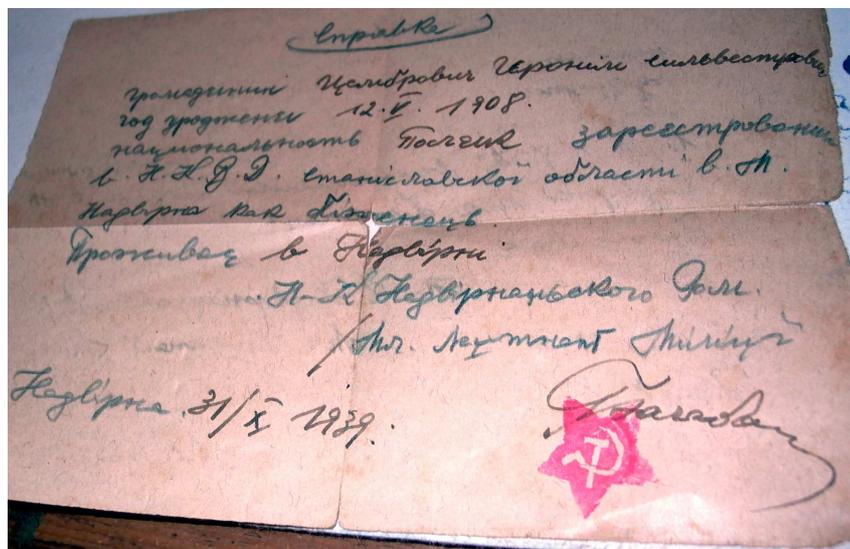
The front line was suddenly overrun by the German Blitzkrieg and he recalled that there were German tanks in the fields, 40 miles behind the front line.

Roads became choked with refugees and his

unit's lorry set off eastwards with his belongings on board. He followed behind on his other motorbike, a Swiss-made MotoSacoche, but the clutch burnt out in the traffic jam of refugees. Clearly the thing to do was to chase after the lorry with his pack on and retrieve the parts to start his second bike. He had his post office savings book with him and was able to take enough cash out to buy a pushbike, upon which he pursued the lorry eastwards.



Alas, he never caught up with them and arrived in Rumania where he and other Poles encountered front line units of the Red Army, who were then invading Poland from the East. He was arrested and interrogated by the NKVD, Stalin's secret police force. He was by great good fortune given a laissez-passer, written on a scrap of paper with blue crayon and this allowed him to travel



onwards. Others were less fortunate and his roommate was among the thousands of victims arrested, later to be shot by the NKVD in the Katyn forest. He travelled on to Hungary where again he was arrested and detained in the castle of Pesht, twin city of Buda.

The political situation sounded very uncertain at that time and he and his friends (known as "Sikorski's Tourists") were able to escape through a "small tunnel" (which sounds like a sewer to me) beneath the floor of their prison. They crossed Hungary then Yugoslavia during the winter months, and recalled having to swim across the river Drava on 20th March 1940. He arrived in Split on the Yugoslav coast and caught a



train from there to Trieste, then across to France. He was then stationed at Saumur where the Cadre Noir, a crack cavalry squadron, had its HQ and a 1,000 bed horse hospital. When the phony war ended and the blitzkrieg rolled across France in May 1940, the vets' last job was to cut the nerves to the feet on the lame horses in hospital, enabling them to walk a few more miles. The Poles were then evacuated south, as the French Government fled from Paris to Bordeaux. He was picked up in Arcachon by a Scottish freighter which carried him and many colleagues to Scotland, despite being straddled by Luftwaffe bombs en route. In Scotland he was stationed at Fort William and Port Patrick to begin with. He recalled how generous the Scots were to the newly arrived Poles - a large army of armed, dashing men who must have been welcome as protection against any



German invasion. "There's mair in the cupboard" he remembers his kind Scots hosts always saying, despite the rationing, when he and his friends were invited to tea.

He was fortunate enough to be able to attend the Polish Medical School in Edinburgh which opened up in March 1941 recognized by both Edinburgh University and the Government in Exile in

London, with émigré staff, teaching Polish vets and dentists as well as doctors. He needed to nostrificate - to take his degrees again in English, and was later able to obtain his MRCVS at Liverpool University. Towards the end of the war he obtained a place at Cambridge to take his Ph.D. in Animal Reproduction. He studied at Fitzwilliam Hall, now College, and remembered the kindness of the Warden, Mr Thatcher. At this time he met my mother, a Cambridge girl, and they married in 1946. I was born at the end of 1947 and when I was 6 weeks old we travelled down to Somerset where Horlicks Farms and Dairies were starting up a Cattle Breeding Centre, with the support of the Ministry of Agriculture. He worked at Horlicks til his retirement, supported by 2 fellow Poles, his Head Stockman Steve Kierstan and Lab Technician Paulek Bud-Hussein. He became President of the Taunton Deane Anglo-Polish society, and I well remember travelling round the Displaced Persons camps in my mothers 1952 Hillman Minx to collect children from as far as Churchinford and Westonzoyland to come to the Polish Saturday school where we learnt Polish, sang Folk songs and eat Polish food - Liver sausage, Krakowska, Rye bread and Salami, made locally or sent down from London. My mother would do her best to cook some Polish specialities;



bigos was my favorite. We also enjoyed pickled herrings, gherkins, sauerkraut, poppyseed cake and barszcz.

When I was quite small we lived in Curry Rivel and we raised a couple of pigs in a sty in the garden. They would get out in the daytime and rampage around the garden, with my mother and I fearfully barricaded in the house, while I watched them through the letterbox, tearing through the flowerbeds. Father would come back from work, rattle their feeding pot, and they would race back into their sty, waiting for their dinners. The one day something tremendous happened and the pigs were no more. With the help of a local Polish porkbutcher Father built a smokery in the garden and cured the bacon himself.

We always tried to have a Polish Christmas eve, starting with the first star, and including barszcz and many fish courses. The Polish priest would arrive all the way from Trowbridge doing his rounds at great speed crammed into a tiny A35, bless us all and chalk K+M+B+ over the door (for the Three Kings, Kaspar, Melchior and Balthazar). We would break the communion wafer sent over from Poland and share it between us. One Christmas - I must only have been about 5 or 6 - I recall great excitement as a young man came to our Wygilia who was apparently going to be parachuted back to Poland. Alas, we never heard from him again; I have often wondered what happened to him. Did he really go to Poland? Philby, Burgess and Maclean were active in those days and British agents in Eastern Europe were rounded up in droves, betrayed at source.

There are so many stories from the War - the family doctor, Dr Fiebig, back home in my father's village had been to

Heidelberg University, so was fluent in German, and had duelling scars. When he needed plasma and morphine for a wounded partisan he went to the station and stopped a German Hospital train returning from the Eastern Front. The penalty for delaying one of these "closely observed trains" was death, but he asked to see the Senior Medical Officer who it turned out



had also been trained at Heidelberg, and was happy to help a fellow alumnus out with medical supplies for, as he thought, a woman in labour.

We still had rationing when I was a small boy, but I can remember our sending food parcels to Poland in the early years - and again in the 1980s when Martial Law was at its height.

There was an annual Anglo Polish Society Ball, and I recall a Colonel Wielkopolski swirling his romantic cavalry cape around the dance-floor at the County Hotel in Taunton. There was much chivalry at these dos; heel clicking and hand-kissing were the order of the day.

My attempts to learn Polish weren't very successful - it wasn't my mother-tongue - though I can at least order a meal; I'm proud to say my 2 daughters have both worked and studied in Poland and are fairly fluent.

We always took part in the Wreath - laying ceremony on Armistice day, November the 11th, and I felt very proud and poignant to see the small band of Poles in mufti among the uniformed forces personnel, medals pinned to their overcoats. The Anglo-Polish society had some very kind English supporters - I recall our being invited to Pixton Park, the home of the remarkable and aristocratic Herbert family, one of whom, the aesthete Auberon, had joined a Polish regiment as a trooper during the war, while his father the diplomat and intelligence officer Aubrey had twice declined the job of King of Albania, having played a major role in its liberation.

Father never quite made the decision to take out British nationality; as a result he had no passport but used Travel Documents all his life. When I was young I recall annual visits from the Aliens' Officer, a uniformed policeman who checked his papers. And I was told - is this really true? - that my own British passport didn't prevent me from the Polish call-up for conscription. (Perhaps fortunately, the call to arms never came).

The local Poles in the Taunton area were from diverse backgrounds - farmers, factory workers, building workers and a few intellectuals. One sold fire extinguishers which he demonstrated most memorably by setting fire to the petrol tank of his Austin 7, then extinguishing it. Another friend of father's was an Olympic showjumper. They had come to England via Siberia, North Africa, Monte Cassino; some had been aircrew with Polish squadrons, others had been in the Army; a few had been through the Warsaw Rising. How they must have missed their homes, friends and families - underneath the charm and flair there must have been much melancholy too.

Father wasn't able to return to Poland until the early 1970s, 30 years after he left so quickly. He took a length of tweed with him and had a suit made very reasonably, though the cut wasn't quite as expected - we subsequently referred to it as his Kruschev suit. After that we took holidays there with our Polish relatives, though by then they probably regarded him as partly English. We drove over several times, across the Iron Curtain, scrutinized by sweating Volkspolizei border guards with machine pistols, and through East Germany on Hitler's deserted autobahns. The smell of Eastern Europe at that time was unforgettable - a mixture of 2 stroke exhaust, cheap "Sport" cigarettes, and brown coal. Once when we crossed into East Germany we heard that an Italian lorry driver had been shot by the Volpos for arguing. And the next time I drove to Poland the Wall had fallen - the watch towers were populated by laughing tourists, and we chipped bits off the Berlin Wall as mementoes.



Father went on working - doing cattle breeding fertility problems for farmers around the South West, visiting many farms, and lecturing on fertility problems at Bristol University Vet School at Langford House - until shortly before he died aged 80. Mum died this year, 20 years later, and they are buried together in Hatch Beauchamp churchyard, under the inscription "Fortunes of War".



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