



Summary of Walentyna Shepherd's life story

Interview and recording of Walentyna Shepherd
by Adrian O'dell (NPHG) – April 26th 2019

Walentyna (Tina) Shepherd was born in Sieński, Eastern Poland just 70 miles from the Russian border in October 1947. Her father was Seweryn Jegorow (born 1913 at a time when Poland did not exist on the map but was part of the Russian empire) and her mother Wiera (née Kuczynska born 1921). Both her parents were farmers and they were the third largest farming family in the neighbourhood. It was a mixed farm with livestock, arable and fruit crops.

Her father had to do his national service but when the Russians invaded from the east on 17th September 1939 many of his compatriots were rounded-up and taken by train to Siberia. Seweryn however had managed to escape and tried to flee south through Romania with many other Poles but he lost contact with them and had to return to his village.

Tina and her two sisters had a happy childhood in spite of the war. She went to a primary school close to the family farm for seven years and then progressed to high school in Warsaw between 1961 and 1966 on the recommendation of her auntie. Her favourite subjects were always geography and maths. Tina's auntie had a friend whose husband was a consultant at a hospital where a new lab was being built. He advised her to go to medical school after which she might get a job in that lab. She did that and studied microbiology, biochemistry, haematology, histochemistry and serology before graduating with a Diploma in Medical Studies in 1967.

She was employed in the Polish Academy of Science in the department researching tissue culture, working on very technical projects. In 1975 she decided to change direction and moved to a teaching hospital, also in Warsaw and worked alongside a professor of neurology.

At that time, Poland was in the throes of the Solidarność movement and all her colleagues and she were very enthusiastic in its support. They helped with fund-raising for the activists who had been imprisoned by the authorities, distributed leaflets and attended demonstrations. All of this activity was taking place around the country, not simply in the Gdansk region. On 13th December 1981 martial law was imposed by General Jaruzelski and Tina and the rest of Poland were shocked by the severe limitations and controls placed upon them by the state. Poles called it "the Third World War". Food was in short supply and rationed but, in spite of the need to queue continuously, nobody went hungry. It was a time of great upset which lasted until 1989.

Tina was furious about life in Poland and wanted a change. In 1982 a delegation was sent from Benghazi, Libya looking

for medical staff and Tina grabbed the opportunity to go for an interview at which she was accepted for a position. She and her young son headed for the north African country and they lived and she worked there for a period of two years before returning to Poland. She felt she needed a break from life in Libya and joined the research team in a Warsaw hospital for a further two years.

Two years later she went back to Libya and the same hospital with the same staff which she had left behind in 1984. When asked about her ability to communicate in that country she revealed that she had spoken good French but also learned English "in three months" through necessity. She was also able to speak basic Arabic to patients in the maternity hospital. By this time her son Paweł was six years old but she had separated from her Polish husband. He had been a professor of physics who travelled the world and was in the USA when Martial Law had been imposed in Poland; he chose not to return home to his family after Tina declined to join him in America and they decided on an amicable annulment of the marriage.

It was in Benghazi for the second time that she met her English-husband-to-be and, after her work-contract ended in 1989 the new family Shepherd returned to the UK and settled in Letchworth. After just three months her husband was posted to Hong Kong and then to Nigeria and Saudi Arabia. Tina visited him for holidays in those places but then found the need to consider other possibilities for her life. She found employment at the Lister Hospital in Stevenage as a phlebotomist, something she was over-qualified to do. However, she did not have the right qualifications to match her aspirations so she applied for a job in Welwyn Garden City and began studies at the University of Westminster, graduating from there with a BSc in Biomedical Sciences in 1996.

She then came to King's Lynn in Norfolk, bought a house and worked at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital from 2000 to 2016. By that time she had fallen out of love with King's Lynn and so moved to Hempton near Fakenham and fully retired from work the same year.

Tina met her current partner, Melvin, who lives in Norwich. He refers to Tina's home as his "holiday cottage". The two of them still travel a lot, following Tina's lifetime of visiting countries all over the world. Her other hobbies include classical music, opera, theatre and the cinema. She is also a committee member and Treasurer of the Norfolk Polish Heritage Group which she very much enjoys.