



## Summary of Romuald Gurklis's life story

Interview and recording of Romuald Gurklis  
by Tessa Black (NPHG) – November 27th 2018

Romuald (Romek) Gurklis was born in Nowogródek, a small town in eastern Poland (now Navahrudak, in Belarus) in 1925. His parents were Stanisław and Aleksandra Gurklis and he had one sister, Regina, whose remains and those of his mother still lie in Russia. At the beginning of World War II he was a schoolboy in his home town. When the Russians invaded Poland in September, 1939, he with his mother and sister were deported to Siberia by train along with tens of thousands of other Poles. A friendly Russian Army Lieutenant advised his father, Stanisław, to leave Nowogródek and not go with the family to Siberia, so helping him escape the clutches of the Russians.

The friendly lieutenant accompanied the Gurklis family and others by train to Siberia but once there they were handed over to the Russian police and made to live in tents. The Poles had to do heavy forestry work, felling huge trees. They were given a loaf of bread each day and scrounged other food to satisfy their hunger but they didn't starve. When the Polish-Russian Amnesty took place in 1941, they were told that a Polish Army was being formed in southern Russia and Romek, now aged fifteen and a friend decided to join up. They set off by train and when they arrived (*possibly at Totskoye*) they were given a medical check. His friend was accepted into the Army straight away but Romuald was told he was too young to enlist. But a Polish officer who had been a friend of the Gurklis family intervened when he recognised Romek and said, "I used to bounce him on my knee" so the fifteen year old was signed up there and then.

He was "a baby in the army" which was poorly equipped, only having wooden guns but it later joined forces with the 8<sup>th</sup> Army which was fighting in North Africa and Italy. He fought at Monte Cassino where the Poles helped capture the German-occupied heights. Over 55,000 Allied soldiers were killed including 11,000 Poles in that campaign. One incident he remembers is when he had to take cover from sniper-fire by jumping into a crater. Inside, he found a black British soldier, the first ethnic African he had ever seen and was so taken aback that he fled the scene and "never jumped in another hole again". He survived many near misses and remembers bullets hitting the ground beside him and fellow soldiers being blown up next to him. However he felt that, on occasions, it seemed that some German soldiers were not shooting to kill as they were skilled marksmen and could easily have shot him. He survived intact.

After Monte Cassino and at the end of the War, he and thousands of his compatriots came to England. He was sent to London Road (resettlement) Camp, in Brandon, Suffolk and in 1947, aged 22, he married a 19 year old Brandon girl, Doreen Branch. Together they had two children, Christine and Ronald, who still live in Norfolk. Romek moved to Sprowston in Norwich and became a carpenter helping with the reconstruction of Norwich which had been badly damaged by German bombing in 1942.

One of his enduring possessions is a wooden case he made for his War decorations. "It isn't a big box" he argues very modestly, "as it only hold three or four medals." He concluded the interview by apologising if he had forgotten to mention anything but what he had recounted was all he could remember.

November 2018