

Summary of Jan Ebelewicz's recorded life story

Written by his son, Andrew Ebelewicz, February 2017

Jan Ebelewicz (1914 - 1998)

My father, Jan Ebelewicz, was born on 7 February 1914 in Środa, a small town about 20 miles southeast of Poznan. At the time, the area was part of Germany, formally Prussia, following the final division of Polish lands between the three major European powers of Prussia, Russia and the Austro-Hungarian empire in 1795.

As he was only four years of age when Poland regained independence in 1918/1919, he didn't, unlike his older siblings, have to learn German at school. At some time between 1914 and 1930, the family moved a short distance to the smaller town of Książ, which was still less than 50 miles from the border with Germany, which was further to the east than it is today. Being 18 in 1932, he was called up for National Service in the mid-1930's and then, as the likelihood of war increased, he was recalled to the armed forces shortly before it began.

Geography enabled the Germans to invade, not only from the west but also from their northern province of East Prussia (separated, at the time, from the rest of Germany by the Polish corridor), while their pre-war occupation of the western area of Czechoslovakia and their alliance with Slovakia meant they could also enter the country from the south.

When on 1 September 1939, the Germans crossed the borders, they moved quickly and, supported by their air force, caused the Polish population to panic, with civilians pushed eastward alongside the armed forces. Over the next two weeks, as Jan's unit were forced to retreat, they no doubt saw a lot of action as Polish units were either surrounded or destroyed. However, with good fortune, he reached the south-east corner of Poland (now in the Ukraine) where the Polish government had ordered troops to prepare for a last stand. It was thought that the Poles could hold this area against the Germans for several months, during which time it was anticipated that a British and French attack on the western border of Germany would cause the Germans to reduce their forces in the east to protect their own country.

However, such action didn't materialise and then on 17 September, in line with a secret pre-war agreement between Germany and the USSR, the red army crossed the border in the east of Poland. They entered areas of Poland, now incorporated into Belarus and the Ukraine and surrounded and disarmed Polish army units, with the intention of deporting them to Siberia. Jan's unit was now trapped in the south-east corner of the country with the Germans to the west and the red army of the USSR to the east. With the defence of Warsaw now almost over, the Polish government, which had been airlifted to Romania, ordered these Polish units to cross the border that then existed with Romania and Jan reluctantly, along with over 100,000 Poles, left his homeland.

The welcome in Romania was indifferent. Initially the Poles were interned in camps where conditions were poor and medical support inadequate. At some camps, security was tight, at others somewhat lackadaisical with the guards, particularly if bribed, turning a blind-eye when the Poles tried to escape. They were told to remove their Polish uniforms and, dressed in civilian clothes, they marched, hitched rides on trucks, stowed away on trains and gradually made their way south, Jan towards the border with Yugoslavia and on to Split on the Adriatic Sea, where the Polish Government-in-Exile had arranged for ships to take them around the Italian coast to Marseilles.

When they arrived in France, they were quickly organised into a new army of about 80,000 men and into the Polish Air Force and they anticipated fighting with the French and marching triumphantly back to their homeland. However, after Germany attacked France, which surrendered on 22 June 1940, the Polish Government-in-Exile, which was now based in London, arranged for the troops to board ships bound for Britain and Jan sailed across the English Channel in late June 1940. The Poles were initially based on the Isle of Man and Jan was enlisted into the RAF on 26 July, 1940 and reported for regular service from that day on. He served in the RAF for almost seven years, based for a time at RAF Coltishall and finally at Parham in Suffolk from where he was discharged on 30 April 1947, deciding, along with thousands of Poles that it was safer to remain in the UK rather than return to their now Soviet-dominated homeland.

The Germans, who had entered Książ during the first days of the war, had made their presence felt on 29 October, 1939, as they did in other surrounding towns and villages, when they executed a group of 15 men in the town square. Fortunately, his siblings had survived this event and his sister and one of his brothers were taken to work in factories in Germany. After the war, they had all returned to Książ and in 1951, telegraphed Jan to say that his mother had died.

Jan was offered a job in Ipswich and decided to make his home there. He met an English tailoress, Ellen, at work and in 1952, they married. Together they started their own bespoke tailoring business, believing that they could make ends meet and the couple started a family. They had three sons, Tadeusz, born in 1953, Stanley in 1954 and then Andrew in 1959. Jan, who had also served an apprenticeship as a blacksmith and worked as an aircraftman in the RAF, would turn his hand to anything, even building a caravan, including welding the chassis together, during his spare time. One of his tailoring contracts included some work for Harry Darby, based in Opie Street in Norwich.

In March 1960, he applied for and completed the British naturalisation process and then later that year, with his British passport, he took his young family 'home', by train, for the first of many visits. In 1964, Jan drove the family to Książ. Taking the night boat from Harwich to the Hook of Holland, they landed at Gam and set off on the 600-mile journey. The car was loaded with produce, coffee, sugar, clothing and other items, the relatives had requested in correspondence with Jan. They stayed overnight in West Germany and then crossed the iron-curtain, the transit visa giving them just four hours to cross East Germany. Jan and Ellen would save as much as possible and every few years the family would have their holiday in Poland, each trip providing some interesting experiences. In 1986, Andrew, who worked for the Norwich Union, moved with his young family to Norwich after accepting a job at the Head Office. Jan and Ellen travelled to Norwich many times over the years, Jan helping with many DIY jobs and Ellen helping in the home and with the children. Jan died in July 1998 at the age of 84, leaving his widow, three children and six grandchildren. Ellen, at the age of 94 still lives in Ipswich, while Andrew still lives and works in Norwich.

February 2017