



Summary of Alan Harrison's life story

Interview and recording of Alan Harrison by
by Adrian O'dell (NPHG) – 28th March 2022

Alan Harrison was born in Norwich, England on 1st August 1930. For seventy-one years he believed he was a full-blooded Englishman but in 2002 he discovered that he had Polish-Jewish roots. While visiting his cousin Linda in Acle, Norfolk she revealed that one of her aunts on Alan's father's side of the family had mentioned that the family name should have been Urbinski and not Harrison!

After some research, Alan discovered that his grandfather was called Louis Urbinski who had been born in Suwalki, Poland which was then part of the Russian Empire. Records show that Louis came to Britain in the 1880s, arriving in Sunderland. That was probably a key route for immigrants via the Baltic Sea. After a short period he moved to Newcastle and then on to Norwich. There is no documented explanation why he came to Norfolk but it might have been that he knew of other Poles in the county.

He became a successful photographer in the city with a studio on Gentlemen's Walk near Davey Place and seemed to enjoy life here. He must have met many influential people who wanted to have their portraits taken and records tell of the naturalisation process he took to become a British citizen. He had to obtain statements from local worthies attesting to his good character and his attitude towards the Norwich community. After a period of some months, Her Majesty's Government granted him citizenship in 1891.

At some stage he met an attractive young woman called Mary Muskett. For some reason they were married in Antwerp, Belgium and Alan believes that the large Norfolk farming family would not have been keen to have their only daughter marry a foreigner, particularly as he was of Jewish stock. They returned to Britain as Mr and Mrs Urbinski but apparently knew another Pole in Great Yarmouth who had changed his name to Harrison, so Louis and Mary opted to change their names as well!

A son was born in Glasgow in 1903 and named James Henry Harrison who in turn became the father of Alan Harrison. James had known nothing about his father's Polish-Jewish roots. It appears that a fire had destroyed the photographic studio in Norwich and Louis then travelled around Britain as an itinerant photographer and ended up in the city.

After that, the story became very blurred. It seems that James's early life was not a happy one as he was boarded-out with various aunts in the Norfolk area, while a younger brother, Walter, was born in Belfast in a workhouse. By this

time, the Polish grandfather had "disappeared" so his wife Mary must have experienced some tragedy in her life.

Apparently Mary remarried and moved back to Norfolk and Alan can only remember meeting his grandmother once when he was six and he had been awarded a scholarship to attend the City of Norwich School (CNS). To his surprise and pleasure she had told him that she would give him "half a crown a month" towards his schooling. The next time he visited her was to see her in a coffin.

Alan lived with his mother and father in a greengrocer's shop in Rupert Street Norwich until he was five. The family moved to a bungalow in Thorpe and his father became a "clicker" in Haldinstein's shoe factory. Aged 11, Alan started school in 1941 at the CNS, then one of England's best state grammar schools. He enjoyed History and Geography along with French, Latin and Geology.

He left school in 1949 and spent two years doing National Service, mainly in the 'Canal Zone' of Egypt and then went to the LSE to read Economics. He was not a "serious student" but he decided to become a teacher at a comprehensive school in Coventry. Although he enjoyed the work he didn't feel happy there because he missed the sea, sailing and Earlham golf course in Norwich (in the days before it became the UEA campus).

He spent some time at Ipswich Civic College as a lecturer but then re-established contact with the Jewish refugee girl his parents had taken in at the start of World War II. Her parents were murdered at Auschwitz but she had moved to Washington DC during the war. Alan managed to visit her and her family there in 1963 after he was able to get on the Fulbright exchange programme.

He and other participants from around the world were invited to the White House when President J F Kennedy was the incumbent. He met and shook hands with JFK in the Rose Garden, "the most exciting moment of his life". The President was assassinated three months later.

Alan returned to Norwich and joined the CNS as a teacher of Economics where he worked until his retirement in 1992. Since then he has travelled around the world to visit many different countries and most of the USA.

In 2003 and aged 72, Alan met June, a young Chinese woman from Beijing "with the most beautiful long dark hair" and the couple have been married now for the last seven years.