



norfolk polish heritage group
polonijna grupa z norfolk

Summary of Barbara Nadel's (née Korwin-Piotrowska) recorded life story

Interview by Adrian Żółkowski-O'dell (NPHG) 03.11.2022

Barbara Wanda Elżbieta Korwin-Piotrowska was born in 1950. Her father, Waclaw, was born in Kiev in 1913 which was then part of the Russian Empire. His brother and sister died at a very young age from meningitis and he and his parents then moved to Mołodeczno, now in Belarus. Waclaw. He became an army cadet in his early teens as had always been his intention and he proceeded to the Artillery Officer Academy in Toruń where he graduated as a Second Lieutenant in 1936.

When Poland was invaded in September 1939, he took part in the very last battle between the Polish army and the Germans at Kock and Barbara remembers him telling how he had to swim across the River Wisła (Vistula) under gunfire in an attempt to escape. He and many others were captured by the German forces and then held at several prisoner-of-war transit camps (Radom, Kielce and Stargard) until being transferred to *Oflag IIB Arnswalde* in northern Poland, where he spent the entire rest of the War until May 1945. That was a camp a camp for officers, academics and teachers and it was highly-disciplined.

Waclaw and his compatriots decide right from the start that they were going to survive the imprisonment, putting on educational courses, forming committees and taking part in cultural events including an opera. The inmates learned how to write creatively and draw and even established their own "Olympic Games" at which he won two medals. Although the camp was apparently run under 'Geneva Conventions' he had friends who were shot for trying to escape. The food was also terrible; cabbage soup with an occasional potato supplemented by Red Cross food parcels.

After the War, Waclaw also wrote-off the six years he had spent in confinement as six years of lost life, even telling his wife-to-be that he was that number of years younger than his true age. After the Liberation, he spent two years with the Polish Army in Matera, Italy before opting to come to Morpeth in England. He had always been very artistic and then did a course in paper sculpture as well as studying maths and accountancy.

He met his wife to be, Elizabeth, at a hen party in Edinburgh. She was engaged to an American and they were due to sail to New York the following week to get married. But when she met Waclaw, she fell in love with him instead! Her parents were very angry that she had chosen an impoverished Pole. The couple moved to London and it was there that Barbara was born, in a flat in Kensington which was at that time in the heart of a large Polish community. They shared the apartment with Polish twins who were so poor they only had

one knife, fork and spoon between them and those had been “borrowed” for Lyons Corner House.

The family lived in the flat until Barbara was about 4 years old and Waclaw had a number of jobs, with British Railways and Walls in Acton amongst others. There were many Poles who had been demobbed from the military and they brought their discipline with them; no individual was allowed to sit down to eat in the canteen until the most senior-ranking ex-officer was seated. Surrounded by his compatriots, Waclaw was able to continue life as a Pole and absolutely refused the take-up British citizenship when others about him began to do that.

It used to frustrate the rest of the family because, when they travelled abroad on holiday, he always had to join the ‘Aliens’ queue, taking much longer to have his papers checked. He did not return to Poland for fifty-three years after he received a new Polish passport. When the family disembarked from the plane in Warsaw, instead of kissing the ground like the Pope, he found the first girl in the airport and said, “I’ve waited fifty-three years to do this” and kissed her.

Barbara and her family had to move into a larger house when her grandmother who had been exiled in Siberia during the War was brought to England by Waclaw. Barbara went to primary and secondary school in London and following that she joined an advertising agency where she met her future husband David Nadel. They had two children (names?) but as they grew up she was unable to return to her work in advertising so retrained as a teacher.

The family’s first introduction to Norfolk came about when they rented a cottage from a friend for a holiday and that became an annual event, to such an extent that they decided to move to the county, although they were unable persuade their now-widowed mother move with them from London. The dream for Barbara was that she could become “a lady of leisure” while her husband continued commuting to London for his work in advertising.

Unfortunately David died very suddenly and so Barbara had to go back to work. She was with Norfolk County Council teaching Maths, English and ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) around the county from her base in Great Massingham. Her daughter had come to live with them there, rather grudgingly at first and initially for three months, but then decided to stay for twelve years but now has a house in Kings Lynn.

On the question of Britain’s recent relationship with Europe, Barbara feels that her father would have been distraught when Brexit came; he was very much the true European. In fact her whole family felt that connection and Barbara’s mother Elizabeth had learned to speak Polish because the dominant culture in the household was Polish. Barbara feels that young Poles today do not share the romantic ideals of earlier generations: they are much more grounded and modern and perhaps even cynical, while her father maintained his faith and hope for the future. Also, the pressure put on Poland because of Russia’s aggression towards Ukraine has encouraged a sense of antagonism in the country towards immigrants, characterised by the tightening of border controls between Poland and its neighbour to the east.

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