



## Summary of Jan and Irena Bączkowski's life story

Interview and recording of George (Jerzy, Kuba) Bączkowski (son)  
by Adrian O'dell (NPHG) – March 26<sup>th</sup> March 2019

George (Kuba) Bączkowski first came to Norfolk in 1948, went to university in 1957 and returned to the county in 1971 to work for Air Anglia. He came back to retire here in 2001. Both his parents were Polish: his father was Jan Bączkowski, born in 1898 in Dębsk-Korfa, near Warsaw and his mother Irena (née Zabłocka) was born in 1902 in Kiev, Ukraine. In those times there was no Polish state. Jan Bączkowski was a boy-soldier in WW I and later became a professional Cavalry officer. He was heavily involved in the scouting movement which was an underground, political organization in the pre-Polish state period. His mother came from a very powerful landed-family in the Ukraine.

Jan Bączkowski served in the Infantry under the Russians and against the Germans. After WW I he went to military school and then spent his whole life in the Army. He married Irena in 1938 and she worked for the Polish government as an agricultural specialist in horticulture and animal husbandry until the onset of WW II. Both Jan and Irena were captured by the Russian Army at Białystok and were held in a holding camp in Latvia. They were fortunate to escape from the Russians, Irena first while working as a nurse and she persuaded Jan that they had to flee via Estonia by fishing-boat to Sweden. Some of Jan's colleagues in the Latvian camp were later taken and murdered at Katyn.

The Polish Embassy in Stockholm gave them passage by air to Brussels and from there they made their way to Paris where Jan joined General Sikorski as a staff officer in the newly-formed Polish Free Army. He was the 47<sup>th</sup> recruit to join-up. When France fell to the Germans the remnants of the Polish army along with British and French forces made their way to Cherbourg and Jan was evacuated from there by a Polish naval destroyer. That evacuation took place in June 1940, after the Dunkirk operation and in contradiction to Churchill's orders that it should not take place.

Meanwhile, Irena was trapped in Paris because her son, George, had been born two months earlier. She stayed for just long enough to watch Hitler's victory parade and then walked across France with her baby son to Nice and fell into the hands of the Red Cross, staying in Antibes for nearly two years. As the Germans advanced south through Vichy-controlled France, she and others walked across the Pyrenees and headed for Madrid. The Spanish authorities were sending immigrants back to France but, because she was a mother with a young child, she was given passage to Lisbon where she was fortunate to be put on a Sunderland flying-boat to Britain. George Bączkowski still has the receipt for that flight costing £375.00 and paid-for by his father. George believes that, as his mother had worked for the Resistance while in Nice, she might have been given documents to take to London.

While Irena had been in France, Jan was in charge of running 'B Train' on the Dymchurch to Romney line, a miniature armoured train used by the Department of Petroleum Warfare in the construction of PLUTO ("Pipe Line Under The Ocean") and intended to supply fuel to the Allied forces after the D-Day Normandy landings. Following that episode he was sent to Scotland and became involved in training and was camp commandant for two Polish resettlement camps. Jan was awarded Poland's highest military award, the 'Virtuti Militari'. During this time Irena, who was a very well-educated woman, taught horticulture and English. She was a true linguist and able to speak seven languages fluently.

When the Polish forces were demobbed in 1948, the family moved south to Norfolk and took up farming. They chose this county because, "it reminded them of Poland". Agriculture still had a horse-and-cart culture then, as it had been in Poland, and theirs was a mixed-farming enterprise; some cattle, arable crops, blackcurrants and poultry. After five years, Jan developed cancer and became seriously ill. At this stage, their partner on the farm pulled out and the business became bankrupt so the family moved to Long Stratton and Irena took up teaching at the Notre Dame School in Norwich as a biology teacher until 1958. That was the year that Jan died, aged 60. Enfield in London became the family's new home and Irena lived in Ealing amongst the large Polish community until she died aged 107 in 2006. She had been a writer and a poet and held in high esteem.

George Bączkowski, their son, had his primary education at Findo Gask in Scotland where the resettlement camps commanded by his father had been located. They lived in Nissen huts (which were freezing cold in the winters) but he remembers his time there with great fondness. He attended Diss Grammar School and then went to university in Hull where he studied Economics and Industry. University life did not appeal but his time there "served a purpose". He had always been fascinated by aviation and wanted to work in the airline industry so he learned to be a pilot with Hull University Air Squadron. He declined an offer to join the RAF opting instead for employment in the commercial sector. He worked on the ground at Heathrow with TWA for three years after which he was persuaded to go to the US where he flew for a community airline on the East Coast corridor.

He returned to the UK, obtained British licenses and joined BEA but the cultural difference between flying with the Americans versus the stiff-upper-lip and 'old-school-tie' attitudes at BEA were not to his liking. That is when he switched to Air Anglia and move to Long Stratton, Norfolk with his wife Anne (née Pritchard) whom he had met in London where she worked as a stewardess for BEA. They have two children. Anne embraced Polish culture and was very empathetic towards Poland and the Poles. Air Anglia was the pioneering airline for the North Sea oil industry flying between Norwich and Aberdeen. George was compulsorily retired from big-jet flying at 60 but he was able to continue flying turboprops for Eastern Airlines from Norwich Airport until he was 65.

Now 79 years old, George flies for fun in his "antique aeroplane" and tows gliders from Tibbenham Airfield, Norfolk. He also loves to sail which he learned to do with the Polish Scouting Association, 'Polesie', on the Norfolk Broads but also sails in the Mediterranean each year. Proud of his Polish roots, George considers himself to be a European first and a Pole second but he carries a British passport. It's five years since he was in Poland but plans to return in the not-too-distant future.

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