



norfolk polish heritage group
polonijna grupa z norfolk

Summary of Bolesław Piętocha's life story
Interview and recording of
Maria Piętocha (daughter) and Janice Morter (step-daughter)
by Adrian O'dell (NPHG) – March 29th March 2023

Maria Piętocha is the daughter of a celebrated Polish man and his English wife. She was born in Norwich in September 1955. Her father Bolesław came to Britain at the beginning of World War II with a few possessions packed into a small suitcase which fell into the sea when he was disembarking from his ship, so he actually arrived with nothing. He was born in January 1911 but unfortunately there is no record of his birthplace. It's also sad that the family knows very little about his early life as he did not wish to talk about it while he was living. They do not know if something unfortunate had happened to him as a young man which perhaps was why he did not wish to talk about those days. He also told them that he would not go back to Poland after the war.

He was in the Polish Air Force and served as a medical officer as he had trained as a doctor in Warsaw. When hostilities ended in 1945 he continued to work as a psychiatrist in England. He had been seconded to several different Polish Air Force squadrons and had a lot of Polish friends who visited him and his English wife, Stella, in their house in Norwich.

In fact Maria's parents didn't get married at first which she thought was strange as there were no wedding photographs but when he retired he wanted Stella to qualify for his pension. When Bolesław arrived in Britain his documents showed that he was married to a woman, a friend of his, in Poland. He explained that he had wanted that woman and her child to benefit, should anything happen to him during the war.

So he had to go through a formal divorce process with the woman in Poland before he could marry Stella who had lost her first husband but who already had two children from that earlier relationship. Those step-siblings, Janice and Gerald, were teenagers when Maria was growing up and the former, Janice Morter, was also present during the interview.

After the war ended thinks he was demobbed from RAF Coltishall and was "resettled" (as part of the 1947 Polish Resettlement Act) in St Andrew's Hospital, Norwich which was then a home for displaced Polish and other European nationals. It was a large institution which also functioned as a psychiatric hospital and Bolesław became a resident psychiatrist there. Before going on to discuss his life after the war, Maria and Janice reminisced about finding a medal hidden in a bedside drawer in their house. When they had asked what it was, Bolesław refused to tell them but they subsequently they found out that he had received the MBE for an act of conspicuous bravery in attempting to free a pilot from a burning plane. He was so modest about the award that he had not even told Stella when he was invited to London to be presented with the medal by King George VI at Buckingham Palace and she only found out a few weeks later from friends.

He was a shy man but very generous and kind to people. Janice explained that many of the Poles in Saint Andrew's hospital had been traumatised and were suffering from PTSD and, on one occasion Bolesław had given his own coat to a resident who had none but who was cold. Also, acquaintances or patients would knock on the door of their home and he would give them small sums of money to help them out.

He was employed at St Andrew's Hospital for all his working life until his retirement aged 65. Both he and Stella were then closely involved with the Norwich Anglo-Polish Club. Marian and Janice remembered many happy times there, particularly the dances, New Year's Eve parties and wonderful buffets featuring Polish food. In the summer there were garden parties with games and Polish traditions such as floating little rafts with candles down a stream.

With regard to going back to Poland, Maria feels that the country would have changed so much under the Communists that her father would have been uncomfortable there. Her mother and sister did visit the country on two occasions, once to do some skiing in Zakopane. At the time of those visits, Poland was suffering economically and they took basic items such as tea and coffee as gifts. In spite of the reluctance by Bolesław to return to Poland, he never relinquished his Polish citizenship and did not opt for British citizenship. Maria explained that he was always a very modest man and not driven or ambitious but was just happy with the status quo. He turned down the offer of a promotion to become a registrar at the hospital but he remained a senior houseman, working very long hours and dedicated to his patients.

His principal hobbies were playing card games, stamp collecting and fishing on the Broads. He was a keen gardener. He maintained his very strong Polish accent all his life but taught himself Spanish and Italian in his later years. Bolesław died in 1984 aged 73 but his wife, Stella survived him until 2010.

Recorded in Mulbarton, Norfolk on 29th March 2023