

Summary of Stefan Żółkowski-O'dell's recorded life story

(Interview with Adrian (Żółkowski)-O'dell by Tessa Black- 11/05/2018)

Stefan Zdobysław Żółkowski was born in Siedlce, eastern Poland in 1909, the son of a bank cashier. His mother died when he was a very young child but he had a happy childhood along with his brother, Jan. He left home and went to Warsaw, the capital, when in his twenties and set up business as a printer although he had been educated in aeronautical engineering.

He was a reserve officer (a Kapitan – Flight Lieutenant) in the Polish Air Force. When the Germans invaded Poland in September 1939, he was called-up but in a matter of days he and his fellow servicemen were ordered to leave Warsaw and head for the Romanian border. They embarked on a journey by train south-eastwards across Poland and into Romania. Many days were spent trying to obtain exit papers in Bucharest and eventually they arrived in the port of Constanta on the Black Sea.

They boarded a ship which sailed for Beirut, Palestine through the Dardanelles and via Athens. The journey continued through Alexandria, across the Mediterranean and into Marseille from where they were taken by train and bus via Lyons to Bron Aerodrome near Limoges. Bron was a huge facility for building and repairing planes and was a base for hundreds of refugee Polish air force personnel helping with the war effort against the Germans who occupied northern France.

As the Germans began to move south, Stefan and his compatriots were forced to flee again, via a port near the French-Spanish border and they were trans-shipped to Oran in Algeria and then over the Atlas Mountains to Marrakesh and onto Casablanca where they boarded a coal ship heading for Glasgow, Scotland. Upon arriving there they were sent to a Polish Air Force re-distribution centre in Blackpool and it was there that he met his wife-to-be, Winifred Ward and a nurse in Blackburn Lancashire, at the Tower Ballroom and swept her off her feet.

He was transferred to Norfolk and was stationed at RAF Swanton Morley as a technical trainer specialising in Mosquito and Spitfire aircraft. He moved to RAF Coltishall and eventually to Horsham St Faiths (now Norwich Airport) where he was demobbed in 1948. He decided to stay in Britain and he and his wife changed their name (by choosing it from a phone-book) to O'dell and they set up home in a rather dilapidated house in Ber Street, Norwich with their two sons, Julian and Adrian. They had no money and very few assets but the house also had a shop at the front and Stefan would drive to the Potteries in an old van he bought to buy plain white china crockery which Winifred hand-painted with floral designs which they then sold.

Their business was called "Stefan" and they eventually owned two Glass and China shops in Norwich, two in Great Yarmouth and one in Ipswich. In the 1950s they were co-founders of Norwich International Club (which welcomed refugees and students of all nationalities) and, in the 1960s, the Anglo-Polish Club, a vibrant social club which maintained Polish traditions.

They returned to Poland and were re-married after twenty years at Częstochowa. He was devoted to his wife and she to him. At her funeral she was referred to as "the most Polish of English women" and he was devastated when she died in 1999. He had always anticipated that he would die first and his last four years were an unhappy time for him but he was a strong man, both physically and mentally and died in his beloved Norwich in 2003.

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