



norfolk polish heritage group
polonijna grupa z norfolk

Summary Dr Phillip Kirby's life story
Interview and recording
by Adrian O'dell (NPHG) – 30th January 2024

Doctor Phillip Kirby was born on the 1st of February 1947 and has lived in Norfolk since 1991 after spending time in Australia. He has Polish roots but was not aware of those for the majority of his life because his father had refused to discuss anything about his earlier life, claiming in fact that the family was Irish. His father left home when he was 15 and had joined the Royal Navy in 1927. He joined the RAF in World War II serving in the Aden Protectorate and then at Biggin Hill where he met his mother where she worked in catering. Phillip's father was the Imperial Services boxing champion in the 1930s and had wanted to become a professional boxer.

The family travelled around the UK and Phillip attended ten primary and secondary schools because his father had been unable to settle after the war. Young Phillip contracted TB and was in the Great Ormond Street Hospital for one year and it was thought that he might die from the disease.

After he had recovered and left school he trained to become a town clerk but then became a litigation clerk for British Waterways Board. Then a friend persuaded him to get into teaching and he started training in 1966 at the College of St Martin and St John in Chelsea. His subjects were history and theology and he became a primary teacher in 1975 in Surrey but, after a series of promotions, he became very interested in Learning Resources in schools and found a job as a media resource officer in a large secondary school in Clapham.

He and his wife Heather were living in Brighton at the time which meant he had to commute daily to London and that was not ideal so he switched jobs to become a Director of Library Resources at a very large comprehensive school in East Grinstead but was then appointed to become a senior lecturer at Essex Language and Reading Centre. At that time the Western Australian Government were head-hunting for someone to set up a brand new institute in Bunbury, WA to train students for teacher-training and Phillip and his wife upped-sticks and signed a three-year contract, focusing on literacy and children's language development.

Although they had wonderful housing and living conditions they found the climate unbearable but at the same time Heather's father's health was deteriorating and their children had not settled well. A major bush fire was another major contributor to making them feel uncomfortable so they decided to return to the UK and in particular to Norfolk where Phillip became head of Norwich Teachers' Centre in September 1991. They were able to find house with a large plot of land and Heather found a job at a local primary school.

Although it was something he did not want to do, he was obliged to become a full time OFSTED inspector of primary and nursery schools even though he did not agree with the policies being put in place by the government. All the problems he had had with OFSTED exacerbated his health condition as he had been born with a narrowing aortic valve which had contributed to atrial fibrillation. His medical consultant had

warned him of severe consequences including a heart attack or stroke if he did not slow down so he resigned from his teaching and lecturing positions.

Phillip is a highly qualified individual with BA, MA and PhD degrees, a collection of educational research papers and published books. He has devoted himself to investigating his Jewish roots and, fortuitously, he made contact with a supposed friend of his father who turned out to be a blood relative. It was she who told him about his Jewish ancestors. With the help of some distant cousins they set up a website and also contacted the Society of Genealogists in London and found information about the death of his five-times great grandfather, Samuel Crawcour (1727-1813) a surgeon-dentist and apothecary from Krakow, Poland.

Following further research he suddenly found out that the Crawcour family had links to Norwich and Samuel had visited the city in 1791. More significantly, he learned that his son, Barnett, settled in Red Lion Street in 1808 and then Magdalen Street, both in Norwich until his death in 1834. Barnett established the Norwich Synagogue in Tombland in the 1820s. Even today in 2024, his cousin Rabbi Robert Young is the visiting rabbi at Norwich Synagogue. As well as the older historical links, Phillip has connections with some celebrated contemporary Jews; Nigella Lawson, Lord Keith Joseph, Peter Mandelson and the Samuel Jewellery family.

Phillip only found out about his Jewish/Polish family in 2001 at the age of 54 but as he came to conclusion of story, he revealed that in 2020 he suffered a stroke which has seriously affected his short-term memory. In addition to losing the thread of conversations, he has “jumbled words” syndrome and also forgets to turn-off appliances. He is now unable to drive as he cannot distinguish between left and right. In spite of these limiting conditions, Phillip was able to give a remarkably comprehensive and revealing account of his fascinating life-story.

Thorpe St Andrew's, Norwich

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