



Summary of Józef Gawlina's life story Interviewed by Adrian O'dell (NPHG) 26th February 2019

Józef Stefan Gawlina was born on 2nd September 1924 in Nowy Bytom near Katowice in southern Poland. He came from a family of five brothers. His father was a metalworker in a factory and his mother was a housewife. He was at school for eight years and after leaving school he started training as a cadet as he wanted to become a pilot because everyone knew that War was coming. When the Germans invaded Poland in September 1939, fifteen year old Józef left Kraków with many other Poles and headed for Czechoslovakia in trucks. When they could get no further by truck they had to get out and walk. They then had to head east to Romania and Bulgaria and were moved on to Turkey.

There were many escapees, all trying to flee from the Nazis and they worked their way down in small groups through Palestine, stopping and camping on the way until they reached Egypt. He never reached Cairo but knew that it wasn't far away and then his group crossed the River Nile and they travelled into North Africa. During his journey he had little knowledge of the date and was unable to communicate as there were so many different nationalities and he spoke only Polish. The whole situation was disorganised and chaotic; nobody knew where or when they would be on the move again. He had no real fear but all he wanted was "to be alive". Everyone lived in tents but they were fed but he could not remember how that was arranged. No one had contact with families back home and he later discovered that his family thought he was dead. His father had been taken to northern Germany to work in a factory where he was mistreated and beaten as they believed that Józef was alive and working for the Polish resistance. As a result of the beatings his father lost his sight.

By this time the Germans had been pushed out of North Africa and he was able to leave by fishing boat while all his and others' personal effects were taken onwards by submarine. They had probably passed through Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco as they were close to the Atlantic and they set sail for Britain where he arrived in Dumfries. He believes he stayed there for about a year, living in Nissen huts in a camp. The Poles were all in one hut but there were other nationalities, including German POWs. Gradually the displaced persons were despatched to different locations and Józef was sent to Blackpool to be kitted up with a new Polish air force uniform.

Józef was then sent to Shrewsbury for further training where he spent time in munitions and armaments factories. He thought that was a bit of a waste of time but when he decided he would like to be a driver he returned to Blackpool where he became a fully-qualified driver. Following that he was moved to RAF Faldingworth in Lincolnshire, home of 300 Squadron with its Lancaster and Wellington bombers. On one occasion he was co-opted into becoming a rear-gunner as they were so short of personnel. "They would take anybody", he said. He finished his war service in Norfolk at RAF Coltishall in 306 Squadron which flew Mustang fighter planes and in 1947 he met and married Lucy Anne Farrow, a Yorkshire girl but who was then living in Norfolk. They had two daughters and the family lived initially in a Nissen hut in Worstead. Józef was demobbed in 1948.

He worked in a timber mill in Hoveton for six years but the company went bankrupt and he returned to his driving profession after which time he worked as a manager on a chicken farm. He has lived in the same house in Tunstead since 1950 and feels that, although he had many uncertainties in his early days and survived many difficulties, it had been a happy life with his wife and family.