



Summary of Rysia Bane's reminiscences of her parents Zofia and Jan Wiszniewski

Interview and recording of Rysia Bane nee Wiszniewska
by Adrian O'dell (NPHG) – October 10th 2018-11-03

Ryszarda (shortened Rysia) Bane nee Wiszniewska has lived in Norfolk for forty years but was born of Polish parents in Persia (now Iran) in 1942. Her father, Jan Wiszniewski, was born in Warsaw in 1900. At that time Poland was partitioned and Warsaw was under the rule of the Russian Empire. Jan joined the army and in order to become an officer had to spend some time at the Russian Academy for officers, probably in St. Petersburg. He was there when the Russian Revolution broke out in 1917 and, with a group of other officers, they tried to make their escape by sailing from the port of Archangel to France. In the process of escape he was shot and wounded in the leg by a dum dum bullet. Fortunately his leg was saved. Once in France the group joined a Polish brigade under the leadership of General Haller in order to return to Poland and take part in the Polish Soviet war of 1919 -1921. From 1921 to 1939 Jan worked in banking, meeting Zofia Bizon, a professional ballet dancer and marrying in May 1939.

On 3rd September when the Germans invaded the country, Jan had already been called up and Zofia who was visiting a friend was unable to return to Warsaw. The Russians had made a non-aggression pact with Germany in August 1939 and when Germany invaded they too crossed the eastern border and began capturing and sending people to concentration camps and forced labour camps in all corners of Russia. Zofia and her friend were taken as forced labour to Georgia to work on the land. The labour camp was in an area which grew tea, citrus and other fruit and tobacco. The work was hard and the food provided very meagre. Despite an abundance of fruit, the workers were forbidden, under threat of imprisonment, to take any produce from the fields but to show that the workers were not prisoners the Russians paid them a small wage and occasionally gave a pass to visit the nearby port of Batumi.

To lighten their forced separation from their beloved homeland the two friends and others would pool the money they had received and obtain a pass to Batumi to visit one of the better hotels in the town. They would indulge in a good meal and then pay the pianist to play the Polish national anthem. Eventually due to the lack of fruit and vegetables Zofia developed scurvy. She was told by the doctor that the only cure was to eat as much fruit and vegetables she could find. Thus started a game of cat and mouse with her friends trying to obtain as much of the fresh produce growing in the surrounding fields. One such incident concerned water melons. The water melons were all numbered and the field was patrolled by security guards. However, Irene her friend was still able to pick a watermelon from the middle of the field in the dark of night, not only once but on several occasions and never get caught.

In January 1940 Jan was captured and miraculously was also sent to Georgia but not to the same labour camp. As an accountant and speaking fluent Russian he was able to persuade the camp authorities to put him in charge of book-keeping, which they did. One day in late 1940 or early 1941 Jadzia, Zofia's friend from Poland, had gone to Batumi on her own. Walking along the street she met Zofia's husband, Jan. He went back with Jadzia who by now had married a Georgian doctor and Zofia was living with them. She went into Zofia's room and told her that she had a visitor and in walked Jan. He vowed that he would not go back to the labour camp he was in and was able to arrange a transfer to the labour camp where Zofia worked.

When the amnesty took place on 30th July 1941 Jan was one of the first to hear the news. At once he started planning for them to leave and make their way to Moscow where General Anders was forming a Polish army. Jan and Zofia were unable to persuade any other people to go with them. Irene, who would have gone, was in prison serving a sentence for beating a security guard. She told them not to wait for her, because once free she would also make her way to Moscow. On 9th August Jan and Zofia with all the necessary passes left the Chakvi tea plantation and travelled to Batumi and then took a train to the capital, Tbilisi. En route the train stopped at a station where Jan saw peaches for sale on the platform. He got off the train and, while he was buying the fruit, the train moved on. Knowing that this was the only train that day he called to Zofia and told her to get off in Tbilisi and wait for him. A coal train went by and Jan was able to jump into one of the wagons, arriving in Tbilisi very late at night covered in black soot from the coal.

Zofia in the meantime had been ordered to leave the station and, not having any money she found a place in a doorway and spent the night in the open while Jan booked himself into a hotel. They were reunited the next day and after resting and made their way to Baku and then onto Moscow, arriving just before the end of August. They reported to the Polish authorities there and Jan was promoted to Quartermaster. Around 10th September 1941 he flew with General Anders and other officers to Buzuluk to set up the headquarters for the formation of the Polish army. There was absolutely nothing there but a stark, large empty building. Supplies were virtually impossible to obtain, even such basics as nails. What made the greatest emotional impression on General Anders and his staff was the sight of the Polish flag someone had hoisted above the building. The arrival of the Polish people was pitiful; men, women, whole families and orphaned children streamed in daily in the most appalling condition, starved, in threadbare clothes and some even without shoes. They told how the Russian authorities were making it difficult for them to travel at times even mis-directing them.

Zofia became a nurse working in the Polish army hospital and when typhoid broke out she and the other nurses and doctors worked tirelessly with very little medication to save the sick. Many died but many more were saved. Sadly Zofia contracted the disease and was not expected to live. She was put in a small side ward with instructions that she should not to be fed. Jan and some of their friends visited her on what they thought were her last hours and brought a bottle of wine. Although semi-conscious she told them she was thirsty so they gave her a glass and spent the evening reminiscing about their beloved Poland, not expecting her to last the night. But she did.

The atmosphere between the Russian KGB and the newly formed Polish army became intolerable and finally General Anders managed to convince Stalin and some of the Russian army generals that it would be in Russia's interest for the newly formed army to be transferred to Iran. This was eventually agreed and the first evacuation commenced in March 1942 and was completed by July 1942. The transports went by train to Krasnowodzk and then by ship to the port of Pahlevi in Iran. With good food, proper clothing and efficient weapons along with very hospitable local people, training began in the mountains near Teheran.

In 1942 part of the Polish army was transferred to Iraq and Palestine and eventually some were sent to Italy and took part in the battle for Monte Cassino, described by the very famous Polish song "The red poppies of Monte Cassino, instead of dew drank Polish blood."

The remaining army including Jan was transferred to Africa where they fought with the British forces. Two further daughters Maria named Mysia and Krystyna named Krysia were born and the family was settled in Southern Rhodesia and remained there until 1948 when the Polish army was demobbed. Polish Soldiers were transferred to the United Kingdom under the Polish Resettlement Act and the family began a new life in the West Midlands.

Jan died in 1962 and Zofia in 2005 having led adventurous and eventful lives.

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