



# Telling Our Stories, Finding Our Roots

## Interview with Peter Szytko

Interviewers: Jolanta Wilson, Margaret Conkey

Jolanta: Today is 22nd of September 2020. My name is Jolanta Wilson and today my colleague and myself will be talking to Peter, who has kindly agreed to share the story of his father, for the 'Telling our Stories, Finding our Roots' project. And, to set the scene, could you please tell us your full name and your Dad's full name and his date of birth. And where would you be joining us from. Thank you.

00:46

Peter: My full name is Peter Aleksander Szytko. My father's name was Aleksander Szytko. Although it's not as straightforward as that, because his name did flip from one name to another early in his life, which I can go into, if you like, in a minute, briefly. And I'm in Sheffield. I think that was all the questions you asked, wasn't it? [laugh]

Jolanta: 01:18

Thank you. And what is a special object or a photograph that you would like to talk about today? If it's an object, could you please describe it? And if it's a photo, could you please tell us what it's showing? Or whom it's showing?

01:39

Peter: Yeah, I think if it's an object, then it has to be his bravery medal. If it's a photograph, then it's got to be the photograph of him on the grounds of the camp, at Okehampton, with the Oaklands mansion in the background. So I don't mind which one you want me to talk about. Or both? [laughs]

Jolanta: 02:11 Whichever you would like to talk about, both possibly.

02:16

Peter: Okay. Well, this bravery award. We didn't know anything about it until the early 1980s. Because my father didn't want to talk about anything to do with the war. And he was a very modest person. He was a very quiet person anyway, even at the best of times, but he certainly didn't want to talk much about the war. And he went to a reunion of Polish naval personnel who were in the war, in London, in the late 1970s, early 1980s, I believe, and it was brought up in one of the presentations there, apparently. I think he was quite embarrassed by it all. And he went with a couple of friends of his from Exeter, who were also in the Navy. I think two of them were on the same ship as him, the ORP 'Piorun'.



And they brought it up and mentioned it to my Mum. And I got to hear about it that way. And he still wouldn't sort of give any details. But apparently, he was at the Battle of Jersey on the 14th of June, 1944. And he helped save the ship from serious damage and loss of life when an enemy shell landed in an ammunition store, and it caught fire. And with others, he risked his life by disposing of shells overboard that were likely to explode at any moment. Now, we asked him about the medal and he said that he had his medal and uniform stolen. I got the impression it was when he was still at Okehampton, actually. So we applied for a replica from the Polish authorities at the time, and we got one through in about 1981, something like that. And we still have that.

**[SECTION REDACTED: 04:12-04:21]**

Yeah, so basically, we've got that medal to this day. And it's very important to us as a family, I think, especially as he wouldn't talk about it.

As far as the photograph is concerned, I just think we didn't know where this photograph was or anything, or where it was taken. We've got a few other black and white photographs of him on the ships. But this one had this building in the background and I didn't know where it was. And in my research, I was going to look at all sorts of places in this country. And then my brother, who happened to be walking around Okehampton a lot, because he likes to do that, he lives in Exeter now with my mother. And he happened to be high up on the moor coming down one day, and he saw this building and he was looking at the rugby ground, which is where the Okehampton camp was. And he thought, I'm sure that's the building that's on the photograph. So that was quite an exciting moment for me. And I was able to immediately work out roughly the date, because he'd got his Able Seaman stripe on the — on his sleeve. So I knew it must have been about October 1946. That was his second stint at Okehampton. He was there in 1945, when he was between ships, when it was still a training camp. And that's what they did when they went from one ship to another, and it took a bit of time, where to put them. So he was there then, but he wasn't promoted at that time. So I was able to work out that it would be roughly about October 1946 when he first came off the ship. So that's quite exciting as well.

06:16

Margaret: Peter, can I just ask you, because I think that there's a theme running through your father's life, that he didn't speak very much about what had happened to him. And obviously, our focus is very much on the Okehampton sort of time. But did you ever get any impression from him about why he didn't want to talk about it? I know, that's difficult probably to explain, but did he ever give you any indication as to why that might be?

06:52

Peter: Yeah, I think there's several strands to this. I think number one, of all the — I mean, my father had quite a lot of other Polish friends in the Navy and the army in Exeter. And they all tended to be a bit more extroverted than him anyway. So he was very quiet as a person anyway. You know, he lacked confidence throughout his life. And he was quiet. Not like me! So I think there was that. But I think, from

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what I gather, he never said this, but it all makes sense, when they came off the ship, when they first came to this country, they were all interviewed by MI5, apparently, and told that in no uncertain terms that must you talk about your life before this, especially if there's any connections with Russia. And there were lots of connections with Russia. There were a lot from East Poland who had to go over to the gulags, of which my father was one. It was sort of a gulag, it was a labour battalion. And I think that that kind of — you know, I think there was the threat was there that he'd be arrested or be thrown out of the country if he spoke. So I think he tended to extend that a bit further than he needed to - so I think there was that as well.

But also, I think a lot of people who actually fought on the front line just didn't want to remember. This is the third thing, isn't it really, they didn't want to think about it too much, because they saw horrific sorts of incidents. And, you know, this applies to the English who fought in the Second World War as much as the Polish. You know, the people who really were on the front line were the ones who didn't want to speak about it. The people like Uncle Albert in 'Only Fools and Horses' wanted to speak about the war all the time. But I suspect he'd probably never fought on the front line! [laughs] So I think probably it's a combination of those three, Margaret.

Margaret: 08:49 No, I think you're absolutely right. He was one of many, probably tens of thousands, of people who really didn't want to talk, as you've explained. So thank you for talking us through that. Okay.

Jolanta: 09:05 So how did you conduct the research into your Dad's life? If he did not really wish to talk about it? How easy or difficult was it to find all the documents and —?

09:25

Peter: It all really started ... I mean, I must admit that throughout my 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s - I'm 62 now, by the way - I didn't take a great interest really. I think I was put off because if I asked my Dad a question, he would cut me very short, so there were two elements to it. But I've always been interested in history anyway, history in general. And I think it was when we had an opportunity to see his birthplace in Belarus, it's now Belarus, not Poland, and I won't go into the details of that at this stage. In — Two years ago, almost to the day, when we saw his village for the first time, and spoke to some of his cousins, who now speak Russian, by the way, not even Polish. So there's a complication there. But luckily, we had someone who could translate for us. That was when it all kicked off, really. And I immediately thought, we must get hold of his military records. And I did some research into that. And that was quite easy, actually, to get the military records from the Polish section of the Ministry of Defence. When those came through, there was quite a lot of information there. Some of it chimed with the vague information Dad did give at various times. I'm not saying he never said anything, because he did. But you know, you couldn't stitch it together very well. But seeing everything on the military records did help me to start stitching things together. And I also went to the Sikorski Museum and they had quite a lot of information on his ship. And I've also gone to the National - the Kew. What's it called? The National - Archive at Kew, for information on Okehampton and the resettlement camps, and there's

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some stuff there. So I've really quite enjoyed forensically putting it all together. And I've spoken to other people whose fathers were in a similar position, and they were able to impart little bits of information from their fathers as well. So it's about stitching it all together, I've really enjoyed that. It's almost been - I've almost feel like being a bit — I suppose it's always been almost detective-like. And then I think a lot of it is facts, based on what's in the military records, but a lot of it is sort of assumptions on the balance of probabilities, as it were, Margaret, if you get my drift. So, you know, on the research I've done on my father, and I haven't finished it by a long way, there are times when I'm actually saying that. I'm saying, these are the two options it could be, but on the balance of probabilities, I think this happened rather than that! [laughs] So I've quite enjoyed that. So in one way, I'm frustrated that my father never spoke about any of this, you know, his early life, World War Two, resettlement corps, Okehampton and all that. But in another way, it's quite exciting to do it this way. And to gradually find things out bit by bit and think, 'ah, that now makes sense, and this makes sense'! Joining the dots.

Jolanta 12:44 So in your research, what did you find out about Okehampton camp? And later, when it became a resettlement camp?

12:55

Peter: Yeah, there's quite a lot that I have found. But there's still very little on it compared to most of the other resettlement camps in this country. And I don't understand that. But it seems to me that it became — there was always a British army camp near Okehampton, from the late Victorian times, and it's still there now. But I think in 19- around about 19- — at the beginning of the Second World War, they needed an overspill area for the British Armed Forces. And I think that was when it was first opened up, and they started erecting these Nissen huts there very quickly, and log cabins and what have you in that area which is now the rugby ground and the school, and the area going in that field right up to Oaklands. And then in May 1943, it was handed over to the Americans in preparation for D-day, which was - what? - just over a year later, wasn't it?

And then when the Americans left in June 1944, they obviously decided it would be a good idea to move the Polish training naval base at Bickleigh, near Plymouth, up to that area in Okehampton. And that was about November, December 1944, I believe. But it wasn't just going to be a naval cadets training place because as I mentioned earlier, it was used for people like my father who were between ships. He was there for seven weeks in 1945. I'm not sure what he did. He might have done some retraining, perhaps, although perhaps he didn't need to by that stage. So it's difficult to know exactly what they did. It wasn't just training cadets there, it was used for other purposes.

14:58

After that, it was — yes, my father, almost everyone left their ships round about August, September 1946, they were decommissioned. A lot of them were handed back to the British. Others were just not used anymore. And at that point, for the next six months, my father and others were again at the camp. And I think at this stage, they may have already started being deployed in placements to help the country regenerate after the war. So there was a lot of help. There was — The country needed a lot of assistance from people like my father, in agriculture and building and all that sort of stuff. So he may have done some of that. He may have done some semi-military work in that time as well, like

disengaging mines on beaches and stuff like that. So that was six months, that takes us up to March '47. And that was when the Polish Navy in the West disbanded completely. And the camp became one of the resettlement camps, which was part of the Polish Resettlement Act that came in that year, which allowed displaced Polish people like my father to essentially have the option to stay in this country and become British citizens, as the situation in Poland, especially East Poland, but West Poland as well, was a situation where you had a communist regime. And they feared imprisonment or even worse by going back. And if my father escaped from the labour battalion; he would certainly have been in that category, which I think might have happened.

17:00

So from that point, I think what my father ended up doing was being ... I think there were several elements to it. They got them to — They could be there for two years, and basically, it was about readying them to be able to have jobs in this country without any assistance from the armed forces. So they were part of the British Army still, as the Polish Corps. And one of the things they did there was they had English lessons. Another one was that they had lessons in English culture. Another thing they did was they had vocational courses there. And that could be anything from, I don't know, shoemaking, to tailoring, to anything that they fancied doing. I think my father may have done cookery there. Again, he didn't actually say that directly, but we've got enough evidence to suggest that may have been the case. And of course, during that time, they would have gone on work placements, or 'detachments' as they called it then, but sort of placements. So I think my father, with his agricultural background in Poland before the war ... he basically worked for a few years on his father's farm. I think, well, I know that one of his earliest postings that he got was at a farm somewhere in North Devon doing agricultural work. Apparently he did say to my Mum that he hated it. And I think it's probably because he got a hard time from the British indigenous ... the workers and the management there, and the locals, to be quite honest with you. He would have been on his own. I think with my father, he felt it was 'safety in numbers' at Okehampton. There would be 600 there at any — at one go. It was like a little Poland, and he felt safe there. I think even later in life, my father liked to mix with the Polish, Ukrainian and Belarusian community a lot, for that reason, because he didn't feel as though the British treated him very well. Especially when you have to be — when you're hounded by police all the time, and being checked on, even when you've got a job in this country. And you know, every time you change your job, you have to report it to the police, all that sort of stuff. So I think, you know, it was probably all of that. I can't remember the original question you asked, I've gone off on a tangent, I think!

Margaret: Don't worry. Don't worry.

Peter: This is what happens.

Margaret: 19:43 Can I just ask you as well, while we're talking very much around his time in the town. If we can come forward quite a few years. The first — Can you describe how you felt, and perhaps he also expressed how he was feeling, about your first visit with him to Okehampton, and do you remember the year that happened?

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20:06

Peter: Do you know, I've taken him to Okehampton, and we never talked about it, once. We didn't even bring it up. So how weird is that? I think my brother went with him on another occasion. And my brother seems to remember him saying, 'I can't find the camp where we used to be'. But that's about it, you know?

Jolanta: 20:32 Why do you think that was?

20:40

Peter: I've got no idea really, it's difficult to say, isn't it? I can recount the fact that he did take my mother to Okehampton in the mid-50s, when they started courting, he used that expression for the first time. I think they met in 1955. And I know he took my mother to Okehampton for a day trip in the days when you had the train. And he walked her around Simmons Park. I'd done some research by then, and I'd already worked out that Simmons Park was next to the Drill Hall, which was where they used to do — used to go to dances. The American troops first, and then the Polish troops after that. It's now the Conservative Club. I thought, this is a very romantic park, what with all the sort of waterfalls and the wooded walks and all that. So I asked my Mum, this is fairly recently in the last few months, I said, 'Did he take you to a park then, when you went to Okehampton?' 'Oh, yes, he took me to a park.' So I suspect that the Polish, being single like they were, would have romanced some of the English local ladies in these places, like the Drill Hall, and then taken them for romantic walks in the park. That's one of those sort of assumptions that I make, on the balance of probabilities, Margaret, that I'm on about! [laugh] It makes sense, doesn't it?

The other thing about the Okehampton leisure life, which I know about ... again, with Dad, he never spoke about what the conditions were like, you know, what the Nissen huts were like, anything like that. But I think that the local pub that they used to go to, and this is from what I can gather from his other Polish friends who were in the Navy, who were there at the same time, it was the London Inn on the main road. And they used to play cards there all the time and drink the night away, that sort of stuff. And they used to talk a little bit about fights going on. And I think it's all got a bit mixed up. And because this is — Again, you can imagine, and I've read this from other sources, that with American troops there and Polish troops there, that there would have been competition with the British there, with regarding local ladies and all of that! I'm sure, after they'd had a few drinks, on both sides, tensions would have arisen and there would have been minor skirmishes. But I think they linked it in somehow, this is my 'balance of probabilities' theory again, they linked it into the very famous reported fight, which I think you know about Jolanta, don't you? which happened in September 1945, involving the Polish Navy that were there then and the British Air Force personnel, and it was in the Market Hall. And it broke out into the streets and it was reported by the local paper, wasn't it?

Now, I've done some research into that, and neither my father nor any of his friends, because I've got their military records as well, were there in Okehampton in September 1945. So they weren't there. But they would have known about it. And knowing the way that they used to be able to spin a good yarn,



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they would probably tie in what were then minor skirmishes outside places like the London Inn, in with this, to make it a better story. They knew how to spin a good yarn! And that's probably the most I can tell you about my father, in terms of his experiences at Okehampton.

Jolanta: 24:41 If you were able to ask him any questions about his life, what would they be?

24:51

Peter: Well, I think definitely ... the main area I'd like to ask him about is the missing link between the time he left his village in May '41, to the time that he joined the Polish Army in March 1942. And there's some big questions here, and I'm still working on it. And I'm trying to go to the Russian authorities, which is not an easy task at the moment. So I haven't given up on it, but it's like an ongoing project. Where did he go initially at that point? I think it was somewhere near the Black Sea. And he had to go in the Russian army for six or seven weeks. So he was forced into the Russian army. What happened to his brother? But most importantly, in March 1942, did he definitely escape from that labour battalion? I did have a conversation with him about this once, when I was very young. I called it a concentration camp. He said, 'Yes, I was there', Siberia? 'Yes'. All this sort of stuff. And I'm sure I asked him whether he escaped and I'm sure he said he did. Or, was he released by the Russians? Now the Russians shouldn't technically have not allowed him to be released, because they wouldn't have seen him as Polish. Jolanta, you kind of understand this, don't you? They would have seen — The Russians would have seen his nationality as Belarusian. But the Polish saw him as Polish, because he was a Polish citizen, throughout his ... from about the age of two, right up to the Second World War. So I'd love to know that.

And I think the other thing I'd love to be able to ask him about would be the bravery incident, and exactly what he did. I mean, I've read a lot on it, but his name doesn't crop up. And I'd like to see a report with his name on. I'm still working on that one. So there's probably loads of other questions that I would ask him about the war in general, but I never got a lot out of him. I think he was probably a little bit confused where he was at times himself, actually! I remember once I asked him about ... he said he was in Naples for a while, and there would have been a Navy camp, the British Navy would have been in Naples, in Italy. I said, 'Do you remember a volcano?' Because I was mad on volcanos and all that. I said, 'Do you remember Vesuvius, and all that?' He said, 'No, not really!' [laughs] So, yeah, it was hard work.

Jolanta: 27:50 And how do you, yourself, feel after discovering what you found out about the background of your family, and your Dad, and all the connections with Belarus now? How do you feel about your own heritage?

28:09

Peter: Oh, I think, I'm very proud of my ... I get emotional. [laughs] Sorry. A lot of us do, Ann's the same. I'm very proud of it, actually. If you think about it, there may be a million people in this country who have Polish connections. Because if there were 150,000 who stayed here, and you think about the

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children, and then the grandchildren, and a lot of the grandchildren are quite a good age now as well. You're talking a lot of people. And we're a very important fabric of, you know, present-day society I think. So it makes me feel very very proud.

Jolanta: 29:05 Yes, the Resettlement Act was the result of the direct, great contribution that Polish people made in the war effort. So that is quite right, that you might be feeling as you do. [Peter laughs]

Margaret: 29:35 Has it come as a surprise to you, Peter, that I suspect a lot of us who live locally to Okehampton are really absolutely amazed at what has come out as a result of the project? Not least, but also I'm sure in past years, because you've been researching it for a long time, but — have you thought to yourself about discovering, and local people discovering, all this information?

30:08

Peter: I think it's fantastic that local people need to know about this, don't they? I think I read somewhere that the ... do you have a mayor in Okehampton?

Jolanta: 30:21 Yes.

30:22

Peter: Yeah, the mayor didn't seem to know about this. When that book came through in 2013. Jolanta will know about this, because she's translating it, that the mayor didn't seem to know anything about any connection with Poland whatsoever. And he said, 'I started doing some research, and I realised there's a lot.' That's something I'd like to know: I'd like to know where his research took him, because we're struggling with getting too much out of the Town Hall, aren't we, in places like that? There's a lot more there that needs to be said and told about it all. Where is the plan of the camp? It was a huge camp with 600 people. We've got a satellite photograph, which I managed to find; an aerial view of it in the 1940s. And, you know. But there should be a plan, shouldn't there? There must be one somewhere.

Jolanta: 31:17 Can you tell us more about the photo that you have? What area is it showing?

31:25

Peter: The one that Dad had is to the north-east of the rugby ground. I think the rugby ground was probably the parade area; then you've got the school. And then about five minutes' walk, roughly, you can get to that field. And it leads up to a river that goes ... it used to have a big pond in apparently, a lake. And then you've got a hill that goes up to Oaklands. And my father's photograph was taken just on where the lake is now. It looks as though it had been drained out in 1947, by the look of it, because he's standing quite deeply in it. And when I went the other week, I couldn't get that low really. And if you look at the satellite photograph, you can see there are quite a lot of Nissen huts in that field. There's about 24 Nissen huts in that field alone. There's about another ... I've counted about 60, actually, on that satellite photograph, and I don't think that covers the whole area, because it doesn't go as far as the rugby ground. We're assuming that the rugby ground was part of it, because it says so in various bits of



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information. But I'd like to see the plan of the whole area really; that would be really good if we could do that. And it looks like a posed photograph as well. That's the other thing about that photograph that I find a bit mystifying. It looks like, as you know, he's got his full ... he's got all the medals, the British and Polish medals he won during the war in ribbon form. And it's very smart, he is wearing a dress uniform rather than the uniform he'd wear on the ship. And I'm surprised that others that I've come across whose fathers were there haven't got photographs like that. That's a complete mystery to me. I've spoken to about half a dozen people now at least. And none of them seem to have a photograph like that. That's quite surprising to me.

Margaret: He certainly looks very smart, doesn't he? I mean he does, yeah. Very much so.

33:57

Peter: I think the close up that I've got on the front of that book, Jolanta, is probably from the photograph session, don't you, indoors?

Jolanta: 34:07

Yes. So what do you think that photo meant? What was it? What was the meaning of that photo that is so unique? Was it a special gesture, a special time, for your Dad to decide to take a photo like this?

34:28

Peter: I don't think my Dad would have, for the moment, knowing him the way I did, there's no way that he would have said, 'Please take a photograph of me' to anyone. That's just not what he would do. He wasn't like that at all. I'm pretty sure it was meant to be an official photograph. Just as he was de-mobbing. It was probably the last time he wore the naval uniform. Because the sort of type of work he would have done in Okehampton from September, October 1946 onwards, would have been mucking out in the stores and labouring kind of duties around the camp, or placements out to these farms, to help British agriculture, that kind of thing. So I'm pretty sure. That's one thing I'd like to know a bit more about. I think Tony is another person who I thought might have a photograph like that, because his father was an officer. Tony Olszowski. I've seen his photographs of Okehampton, and they're very good ones. But it doesn't ... you could still say they could be anywhere, because you haven't got a building like that to define it definitely ... that's 100% Okehampton. So a lot of people have got photographs of what they think are their fathers in Okehampton. But, it could be anywhere, couldn't it, that's the thing, without —? That's the thing. Some of the Polish people I noticed were very good and wrote things on the back of photographs, and others didn't. My father didn't! Ann's father did. Stefan's father did. [laughs] A lot of them didn't, and it's frustrating when there's nothing written on the back of photographs, isn't it?

Margaret: It is and the date and the place is just so important, isn't it? You know.

Peter: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. So this is why it was such a 'ping' moment for me - if I can use that expression - when my brother said, 'This is where it is'.



Margaret: 36:51 And were you surprised about the book that had been presented to the town?

36:59

Peter: Yeah, I was surprised because it came out of the blue I think, you know, you're talking decades of where nothing seemed to happen. And then suddenly, it was about 2013, I think - wasn't it? - when that book suddenly came in the post?

Jolanta: 37:20 Well, that was an anniversary, it was handed to the mayor, presented to the mayor as a special gift, as a way of gratitude that in exile there existed a school and the place where Polish naval personnel were able to stay and train. And so the continuation of education was possible, even during the war, where Poland was — in wartime, so that the Polish navy and Polish education, the naval educational college was able to continue here.

38:27

Peter: It's a pity we can't get ... we tried to get hold of someone who was a cadet either at Bickleigh or at Okehampton, because that would be interesting, wouldn't it? - to get their perspectives on things.

Margaret: Yeah, very much so. Yeah.

Peter: A lot of them may have gone back to Poland. I don't know. I don't know. But there must be some in this country, somewhere. [laughs] Hopefully, this project might get people to come forward. The more of this type of project we do, the more people are going to come forward. It's a bit like those two projects that - I don't know, Margaret, whether Jolanta's mentioned the two projects that were happening in June - where — Well, one was a project, Michael Perrett's Facebook programme on the Polish contribution to D-day, where my father got a mention. Mostly because Michael Perrett knows my brother very well. And then it was on the Spotlight Southwest programme as well, wasn't it? It was briefly on there. And one or two people did come forward out of that, didn't they?

Jolanta: 39:48 Yes, projects like this are so important, that bring people together.

**[SECTION REDACTED: 39:56-42:20]**

Margaret: 42:19 They very much are, yes. And just out of interest, do you have — either of you have grandchildren?

42:29

Peter: No.

Margaret: 42:32 No. Well, these recordings and the archive material that you've been working on will be even more important, I think, in that stead, for future generations.

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42:47

Peter: Yeah, my brother has a son, so I'm sure he'll start becoming interested at some point. He's in his early 20s now. I think it's when you get to early middle age onwards that you start to become more interested in this. That seems to be a pattern here, with people that I've met who are in similar circumstances to me?

Margaret: 43:14 Yeah I'm sure you're right, yeah. Jolanta, is there anything else you'd like to ask Peter, before we give Peter the chance to sum up, if he'd like to do that?

Jolanta: 43:26 No, not really. I just wondered whether there was anything else that Peter would like to share with us?

43:35

Peter: Yeah, there was one thing that I was explaining in the pre-interview, that I never got out quite the way I wanted to. And I'd just like to say this now, for clarity. And it's about how I see my father as unlucky and lucky. Going back to 1941, or '42 – after the Russians invaded East Poland, basically. And he was lucky that he wasn't imprisoned and deported to a gulag in 1940. And anyone that the Russians considered ethnically Polish, and they were young and male, they ended up there. And we're talking tens of thousands who were in that situation. Because the Russians would have considered my father Belarusian; they would never have recognised his Polish citizenship. So he remained on his farm for another year, almost. It wouldn't have been good, because it was the Russian regime and it would have been collectivized. And then, as we said in 1941, the Russians forced him into the Russian army. But within a short space of time he had to be sent to a labour battalion, which was as bad as a gulag. It was captivity, it was forced labour and it was in Siberia, and he was there for eight, nine months. I think he was unlucky compared to the others, like Ann's father and Stefan's father, and lots of others that I've come across, because he would not technically have been granted the amnesty by Stalin in 1940, was it about July or August 1941? - off the top of my head - allowing the Poles to be released from the gulags and sent to the — and enlist in the Polish Army being formed in Russia at that time. So, he had to escape from the labour battalion and then bluff his way into the Polish Army. And what would probably have happened, because there were quite a lot of Belarusians and Ukrainians who did end up in that army, he would have claimed he'd lost his documentation. He would have spoken and written in Polish, because he could do that, his schooling was in Polish. He would have used his Polish name, Szytko. And he would have said he was Roman Catholic, and not Eastern Orthodox. So these were the giveaways. At the Polish enlistment site, there would have been what we would term now a KGB presence. So the Russian police were overseeing it, so he shouldn't have been able to get in. So he's unlucky in that sense; it was harder for him to get into the army, compared to the others. But he was lucky that he didn't have to suffer imprisonment before going to a gulag. Imprisonment would have been horrendous, wouldn't it? There would have been interrogations, torture, beatings, all sorts. But I just wanted to make that clear. I didn't make it clear before, [laughs] for the record. But that's nothing to do with Okehampton, of course! [laughs]

## Telling our stories Finding our roots

Margaret: 47:14 Well, if he hadn't done all that and come through all of that, he wouldn't have come to town, would he? Thank you.

Jolanta: 47:25 It's quite an amazing story. What an amazing young man. How old would he have been? How old would he be?

47:41

Peter: What, In 1941 he would have been 23. A lot of them were a lot younger than that. Yes.

Jolanta: Absolutely humbling experience.

Margaret: 48:03 Well, I think we both feel, Peter, and I'm sure Nicole as well, and people in the project, acknowledge how proud you can be of your father. It's an amazing story, which as you say is ongoing, it's a work in progress, isn't it, and —?

48:25

Peter: Yeah, I'm still finding more and more things out as I go along. There'll be a point where I say, 'That's enough, move on to something else!' And then look at it in 10 years' time and think, 'Oh, this is quite good, isn't it?' Because I think when you're in the middle of something, you don't get a feel for how good it is. So it's useful when I send stuff to Jolanta, like my Dad's military records — because there are 37 photographs there in chronological order, isn't there?

Jolanta: Yes.

I've done a slightly different thing with my Dad, I'm thinking about doing something similar that I did for Ann's Dad, for my Dad, eventually. But it's useful to have genuine feedback from people like yourself, Jolanta. And I don't mind criticism if it needs to be, in order to get things right.

Jolanta: 49:22 But I think once the project is completed, and there will be information online, I am certain there will be more feedback and more people will come forward.

Peter: Hopefully.

Jolanta: That is the value of projects like this one. So there will be more information, more research, and it will just grow and grow, hopefully.

49:52

Peter: Yeah. Hopefully. And the plan at the moment is still that we're going to have a physical exhibition. Hopefully in November time, is that right? Is that still the plan at the moment? I know that things might change with the COVID situation.



Jolanta: 50:11 I think there will be six strategically-positioned banners around the town with information printed and graphically designed, with photographs and quotes from more information on the website. And I think that's what would be — what we're describing now, as an exhibition. There will be a walking leaflet informing where those banners are positioned. I know, for instance, that one will be in the area of the Museum of Dartmoor Life. And I think one will be outside Town Hall. But there will be more information as we progress. So there will be photographs and quotes. So that instead of we were supposed to — the original plan was that there would be a special event, and we could all gather in one place, but now because of the restrictions, it only needs to be outside. And it will be advertised. And so we are all going to assist or help. I think the plan is, as Nicole mentioned, it probably will be already on the display in town, possibly at the end of October maybe. So that will be just a focus where we could maybe get together and meet people, hopefully, if we can. That has changed since the original plan. But we are really grateful that something like this is still happening and that the people can communicate on Zoom and through emails, and the project and all the findings will be available online.

52:52

Peter: Yeah. It's better than nothing, isn't it? By a long way - which is what we were thinking back in April, May, June, July.

Margaret: Yeah, very much so.

Peter: I think one day, it would be lovely, let's say in two or three years' time when it's all clear, to have a big exhibition hall and have all that, and make it really worthwhile for a lot of people around the country to come down to it. Because, you know, people like Ann and myself, I've been there anyway, there's lots of people, and I know Tony will come across, Stefan from Exeter, lots of people, if it's something on that scale.

Margaret: 53:39 Well, that's a good thought for the future anyway. Okay, right. Well, Peter, I just say thank you so much for sparing time to share your father's story and also your impressions and your thoughts and feelings. It's been a very enjoyable interview, very informal, which is nice. We've very much enjoyed hearing about him, with all the work that Jolanta's been doing as well. It's been a real voyage of discovery.

**[SECTION REDACTED: 54:22 – 56:31]**