

TELLING OUR STORIES, FINDING OUR ROOTS ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW SUMMARY FORM

Date of interview	22nd September 2020
Location of interview	Remote
Name of interviewee	Peter Szytko
Name of interviewer	Jolanta Wisonn & Margaret Conkey
Length of interview	00:51:47
File format, storage format	WAV, hosted on Soundcloud. Digital copy obtainable from DDE.

Tags:

Polish naval camp ; Polish Resettlement Act ; second generation story ; ancestors ; heritage ; research ; identity ; family ; Belarus ; Russia ; Poland ; World War Two ; Okehampton;

Interviewee's wishes regarding use of interview

None.

Interviewer's notes / any issues on recording

None

Linked objects/photographs.

Peter talks about a medal his father won for bravery, and a photograph of his father standing outside the Okehampton military camp.

Key themes and topics covered in the interview

Theme / topic	Timecode on recording
Medal and Photograph	[00:01:39 - 00:06:16], [00:31:25 - 00:36:51]
Aleksander's Resistance to Discussing His Past	[00:06:52 - 00:08:49], [00:19:43 - 00:20:42]
Peter's Research Project (Generally)	[00:09:25 - 00:12:44]
Research Into Okehampton Camp	[00:12:55 - 00:19:43], [00:30:08 - 00:31:17]
Aleksander's Life and Leisure Time in Okehampton	[00:20:40 - 00:24:41]
What Peter Would Like To Know About	[00:24:51 - 00:27:50]
Peter's Heritage	[00:28:09 - 00:29:05]
Hopes for the Research Project	[00:38:27 - 00:39:48], [00:48:35 - 00:53:39]
Aleksander's Life Story	[00:43:35 - 00:48:03]

Interview highlights

"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 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 present-day society I think. So it makes me feel very proud." [00:28:09 - 00:29:05]

"There's a lot more there that needs to be said and told about it all" [00:38:08].

Interview summary

Peter Szytko lives in Sheffield and is currently undertaking a research project to find out more about the Okehampton military camp, and his father, Aleksander's life there during the Second World War.

Peter begins the interview by telling the stories behind his father's medal for bravery and a photograph of his father standing outside of the Okehampton military camp [00:01:39 - 00:06:16].

Then Peter discusses his father's resistance to talking much about his life before and during the Second World War, noting three reasons why this might have been, including that "when they first came to this country, they were all interviewed by MI5, apparently, and told in no uncertain terms that they must not talk about their 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." [00:06:52 - 00:08:49].

This leads Peter to describe how he came to start researching Aleksander's history after seeing his birthplace (which is now part of Belarus, rather than Poland) two years prior to this interview. [00:09:25 - 00:12:44] Peter then talks more specifically about his research into the Okehampton Camp and other military camps like it, linking his research as he does so to his father's personal history and experience in Okehampton. [00:12:55 - 00:19:43].

Peter then asserts that, while he had visited Okehampton with his father, Aleksander, "we never talked about [the camp], once. We didn't even bring it up" [00:19:43 - 00:20:42]. He then continues to elaborate on what he has assumed of his father's leisure time in Okehampton, including taking Peter's mother for walks in the park, and time spent in the London Inn [00:20:40 - 00:24:41].

If he were able to ask his father more about his life, Peter asserts that "the main area I'd like to ask him about is the missing link between the time he left his village in May 1941, to the time that he joined the Polish Army in March 1942", including what happened to his brother during this time, and Aleksander's spell in a labour camp and how he came to leave it [00:24:51 - 00:27:50]. He also wonders within this about the details of the incident that led to his father's receipt of the medal he showed at the beginning of the interview.

Peter then talks briefly about his thoughts on his own heritage after conducting his research into his family history. He notes that: "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 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 present-day society I think. So it makes me feel very proud." [00:28:09 - 00:29:05]. Peter then notes that "There's a lot more there that needs to be said and told about it all" and briefly mentions his struggle to get more information from Okehampton Town Hall regarding the camp [00:30:08 - 00:31:17].

Interview summary

Peter returns then to describing in more detail the photograph of his father standing outside of the camp [00:31:25 - 00:36:51]. He mentions a book about the history of the camp that was presented to the town in 2013 [00:36:51 - 00:38:27] and notes his disappointment in being unable to contact “someone who was a cadet either at Bickleigh or at Okehampton, because that would be interesting, to get their perspectives on things,” but also his hope that his research project might encourage others to come forward and share their knowledge [00:38:27 - 00:39:48].

Next Peter explains his father’s history in more detail, and how he feels that his father was both “unlucky and lucky” in his life [00:43:35 - 00:48:03]. This includes mention of his father’s nationality being changed and perceived differently by different nationalities of people after the Russian-Polish War, and his eventual release or escape from a Russian labour camp into the Polish military.

Peter concludes by discussing his hopes for the future of his research project, with Jolanta adding more detail about plans for a physical exhibition of their findings. Peter notes that “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.” [00:48:25 - 00:53:39].