



Telling Our Stories, Finding Our Roots

Interview with Tony Olszowski

Interviewers: Jolanta Wilson & Nicole Redfern

Jolanta [00:01]

Hello. My name is Jolanta Wilson and this is a remote interview for Telling Our Stories Finding Our Roots project and I'm here with my colleague Nicole Redfern and we're going to be talking to Tony. Could you please, to set the scene, tell us your full name and your father's name and where where are you going to be joining us from this morning.

Tony [00:42]

My name is Anthony Olszowski. I'm the son of Stanislaw Olszowski and I'll be talking to you from Nunthorpe, Middlesbrough in North Yorkshire.

Jolanta [00:57]

What is the special object or photograph that you would like to share with us and if it's a photograph please could you let us know describe who's it, who's it depicting or what it is. What is it showing and, if it's an object could you please describe it to us?

Tony [01:21]

It's a photograph of my father when he was based in Okehampton Polish Resettlement Camp just shortly after the end of World War 2.

Jolanta [01:37]

How did your father come to be in Okehampton?

Tony [01:42]

He was in the Polish Navy throughout the war and at the end of the war he was asked to go to Okehampton to prepare members of the Polish forces for life outside the, you would you say the theatre of war, for life afterwards in civil in civil jobs.

Jolanta [02:10]

So what what what was the camp about? What was the purpose of of of the people, why were the people living there? What was the rea..the role of the naval camp?

Tony [02:30]

There were two premises to the Naval Camp. There were first of all based at the camp was a land ship called ORP Baltyk which was used to train Polish officers and Naval ratings. Throughout the, towards the end of the war and also it continued for a short while after the war and my father was involved in in in that aspect of the training and also when the camp the Polish naval camp was dissolved as such he then went to join the Polish Resettlement Corps.

Jolanta [03:13]

Did you did your father talk about his time in Okehampton?

Tony [03:19]

He did to a certain extent. As you can see at the rear of this photograph you can see it clearly is a barbed wire fence. He once referred to it as a as a almost like being in a concentration camp.

Jolanta[03:38]

Oh [unintelligible]

[03:54] Sorry, can you hear me ok?

Tony [03:58]

Can't hear you very clearly

Jolanta [04:00]

Can you hear me clearly now?

Tony [04:01]

Yeah. Is that, is that something that is not an indelicate thing to mention (laughs). I just mentioned that...

Nicole [04:16]

No, no it's fine so I was going to ask a question which is that I imagine based on where your father came from in Poland, he would have been very aware of concentration camps so when you referred to Okehampton Camp as reminding him of that, what do you think he might have been thinking about or aware of?

Tony [04:38]

I think it was the uh probably he felt that he probably was imprisoned there as such because there's behind behind the Polish resettlement camps what was happening at the time in in Great Britain there was a great feeling that these Polish people that were left behind at the end of the war they would be taking employment away from the returning British people and

there was a great push to to to get them to go back to Poland . They were offered incentives to go back there or to go and emigrate to other countries. So I think that that background and the camp the camp was a secure camp let's say as it needed to be during the war but he probably the feeling was such that he felt imprisoned by it and somebody in a foreign land he'd fought he'd fought to a in war for to liber..you know to go back to a free Poland and there he was in a camp at the end of the war but he did he did meet my mother in 1946 so obviously there was no intention to return to Poland. That was a feeling, he didn't say it to me directly. He said it in a video I have of him when some Polish students came to Teeside in the 1990s and and during the speech he refer he referred to Okehampton as being like a concentration camp.

Jolanta [06:38]

How long was your Dad there?

Tony [06:41]

Well he was there, he was in the Polish Resettlement Corps for until until 1949 which was when it was disbanded so he he he was spending time in industry training to become a draughtsman so and also because his wife was was living in Darlington. My my mother was formerly in the Wrens and she she left at the end of the war. She went back to live with her parents in Darlington so he was he was living in the camp but also returning and getting employment actually in the area of the North East in Darlington and also he started to attend to local college, Constantine College, to get further qualificat...engineering qualification so he was coming backwards and forwards from the camp.

Jolanta [07:40]

So was that the same for most residents that they would acquire some qualifications through training and then would they be sent for work detachments? Did your Dad tell you about it?

Tony [08:00]

He was I can only I can only say what I know about friends that he like Zubkowski that some of them went on to serve in the Merchant Navy afterwards so they obviously. Some of the documentation I have of my father that I got from the subsequently from the MOD, his war records indicate that he qualified as well in in to to be well a First Mate and then a Second Mate so he was training as if he was intending, there was a possibility that he would join the Merchant Navy and in that man, that gentleman's case Zubkowski he ended up going into the Merchant Navy the same as other Poles Polish Officers and and the ratings did. So they were they were they were obviously obtaining those qualifications as well as being based in Polish Resettlement Camp. My father did an English language course at Cambridge University obviously to acquire more in the language.

Jolanta [09:18]



Would you be able to tell us more about the research? Did you did you learn all the facts about your Dad through what he told you or did you need to conduct any further research to find out about your family background?

Tony [09:37]

Well my family background I know very well from visiting Poland through the sixties having met all my all my Polish grandparents and uncles, aunties, cousins etcetera. From from a research point of view I've found out a lot more after my father died in 2009. I've uncovered through contacts through in Poland and also obtaining his war record from the Ministry of Defence has told me a lot about what he actually did, details of dates and where and where he was he served with the Polish Navy and where he went to. One thing in particular that I through a gentleman in Poland that I've got is a film that was taken of a handover of a Polish of an American submarine to the Polish Navy in in November 1941 in Connecticut and there's a video of the Polish crew boarding the submarine and the raising of the Polish flag and my father is on that video, that film. Unfortunately, he didn't live long enough when I found that information to to show him but it's something and he was twenty one years of age at the time but it was his first posting as a naval officer.

Nicole [11:05]

Tony did he so so before the Okehampton camp became the resettlement camp we know that it was a training camp for for officer cadets in the Polish Navy. Did he visit the camp at that time at all or did he just live there when it was a resettlement camp?

Tony [11:20]

He obviously was at the camp well my father was was served on a number of Polish naval craft and then at the end of the war through 45 and through to 46 he was, his last ship he served on was ORP Garland and he previously had trained as an officer on ORP Baltyk which was in the port of Devonport and and also at the naval the naval headquarters there. So he was undertaking his training there and then I think about 40, 42,43 it was decided to move that naval base training base to Okehampton. I believe that was that became the concrete ORP Baltyk as they call it. No I don't believe my father ever went there during the war but at the end of the war he obviously had spent time there and I believe he was he was training Polish officers because I have photographs of him outside one of the one of the huts if you call them, one of the huts there with with actually Army personnel but also fairly high-ranking naval officers so he was he was there in 46 for sure undertaking training of Army Army personnel. **[13:05]** I've lost the sound now.

Nicole [13:09]

Jolanta. Do you have another question there? **[13:18]** Have we got sound from Jolanta there?

Tony [13:22]



I can't hear.

Jolanta [13:28]

I, I have now. What happened to your Dad after the war?

Tony [13:34]

Well my father having married my mother in March 1946 decided to make a home in this country. He did consider emigrating but as my brother was born in November of that year he stayed in the area of Darlington having done some training there as a draughtsman. He set up home, first of all living in Darlington with my English grandparents and then attended a local college, Constantine College in Middlesbrough and obtained a Higher National Diploma. They then was offered the possibility of becoming a part-time lecturer at Constantine College which he took up in the 50s and then he was offered a job full-time as a lecturer which he took in the 55 56 and he stayed at Teeside, well Constantine College which became a Polytechnic and latterly is now Teeside University. Then he went on to specialise in fluid mechanics, mechanical engineering obviously a harking back to his days in the Navy where he was a navigation officer. He then obtained further qualifications. He got a Master of Philosophy and ended his career as a principal lecturer at the Polytechnic when he was around 70 and retired and lived on Teeside ever since.

Nicole [15:25]

That's quite an amazing journey.

Tony [15:28]

It is. For the son of a coal mining engineer from Silesia who went and joined the Navy in 1938 and told me that he when I asked him: 'Why did you join the Navy being so far from the sea?' and he said 'Well, it seemed an exciting thing to do.' I think, I think the imminent outbreak of war had or the potential for the imminent outbreak of war had a lot to do with it though. I think there was a great call for people to join the Forces. When I visited Gdynia Academy where my father trained. In Gdynia 2016 I asked the same question to the Rear Admiral the the the Head of the Academy and he said perhaps it was something to do with the connection of Silesian coal to Gdynia because all the coal was sent to and exported out through the port of Gdynia. Perhaps that had something to do with it but I think my father being a spirited sort of person and he was always very keen to teach. As well, when he was a youngster in the gymnasium he actually taught other other other students at the school to earn money for the family. So it was in his calling to teach which he obviously went into in later life and and possibly that was one of the reasons he he did what he did at Okehampton.

Nicole [17:14]

Thanks Tony. I'm also wondering if your father ever talked about the process of adapting to a new life in a new country and what that was like.



Tony [17:26]

Again, I refer back to the to the video for that I have of him when he was when these Polish students came to Teeside and in a long speech that he made one of the things that he said was it wasn't very easy. It was it was a difficult a difficult time. Obviously I've I've not I didn't discuss with him the situation with a Labour government at the time and their feelings towards these thousands of Poles that that they had on their hands but clearly he he felt maybe uncomfortable in in that situation that he was in a foreign land and there were he wasn't wanted here but he applied himself to the task and he he obviously he was married at that time and he found a position in in industry so he he coped with the situation but he obviously he had he had feelings which lasted lasted all his life obviously to refer to them when he was in his in his seventies at that time. [19:04] I've lost the sound again.

Jolanta [19:09]

Oh. Can you hear me? I'm sorry. When you were growing up did your Dad, did your Dad talk about his Polish family family background and maybe family back back home.

Tony.....[19:26]

Well as I mentioned he he did but as I mentioned we visited personally. I was ten when I first went to Poland 1962 so I and the year prior to that my Polish grandmother came from Poland and stayed for a couple of months so I got to know to know my my family that way. Obviously as a child I would ask ask about them but it it wouldn't wouldn't it didn't register as it did obviously going to Poland and meeting all my Polish family. Through the eyes of a ten year old child obviously you see you see certain things but things don't register with you. In later life obviously I've I returned to Poland and I I know where he was born and the and and the town that he was born in and I'm now discovering more about his his roots if you like, the family roots and why they were in that area of Poland. They were, in fact my father was born in in Germany a place called Sośnica which is very close to Kvica in 1920 so he was he was a Pole but in Germany because in 1918 Poland hadn't existed for 123 years as a as a country on the map and and through the three years from 1918 to 1921 the area where my father came from was subject to the three Silezian uprisings and the the land, that area, was being fought over because its its resources, basically coal and and other such things, mineral resources and it wasn't until 1921 that it was decided the Polish border was decided in that area of Silesia. My Polish grandfather took Polish citizenship and they they moved just over the border into what was then the Second Republic of Poland. He was the only one of the family by by the way to take Polish citizenship. The rest of the family remained in Germany [22:02]. I've lost the sound again.

Jolanta [22:05]

Are up? Sorry Tony. Are you in touch with any of the family members in Poland or ?

Tony [22:19]

Obviously all my relatives now have passed on, my grandparents, aunties, uncles as that generation has and the cousins that I met in Poland in the sixties I met one of them in the early 2000s when I visited Poland again. I didn't I didn't go back to Poland until 2006 and visited again obviously and living in the UK and having a family and and a life over here. I didn't I didn't go back. The last visit was 1969 so it was some years between. I met my cousin and we we keep in contact. My other cousin that's his brother lives in Hamburg. He he decided to move to Germany for for other reasons and left Poland, that area of Poland. My other cousin I didn't I didn't meet. She lived in Posnam but unfortunately she died a few years ago.

Jolanta [23:27]

So once you have discovered your family background how how does that make you feel about you heritage?

Tony [23:40]

I'm I'm very proud of my heritage. I've I applied for Polish citizenship last year and obtained Polish citizenship because I felt it was my birthright and and I have more, a greater affinity with Poland obviously, being half-Polish. More so I think than, more so now than than I ever have felt felt before.

Jolanta [24:10]

And how do you think your father might have felt if he knew that you were conducting all this research and learning about Poland and his background? What do you think he might be thinking?

Tony [24:28]

I would have thought he would be very proud. I'm I'm probably the only one that really is so interested in. My brother does family research but I'm the one that does the Polish family research and I'm I'm very sure he he'd have been very proud. In fact I was, the things that I've discovered and and got to know about about his naval career etcetera and I'd love to have discussed it with him. Unfortunately that opportunity's been lost. He did return to, you know, he had a great association with, he was part of the Polish Naval Association that was based in London after the war and he he he did a lot of work with them and he visited Gdynia a number of times and reunions in this country and reunions there with his colleagues that he was in the Navy with and I was very aware of that and familiar with it but on the periphery. Obviously, those sort of things and experiences they would discuss among themselves which I would I only got to know a little bit about his experiences through the war. Obviously, as a lot of people that were involved with the war they they kept it to themselves. Some don't want to discuss it and others would, they would discuss it among themselves because it was their unique experience.

Jolanta [26:11]

And why do you think they were not very keen to share it or talk about it?

Tony [26:20]

And I think there's lots of sort of they have lots of feelings about it. There's there's a great deal of resentment about the way they were they were treated. I think after the war they had expected to go back to a free Poland and that wasn't the case. There were obviously decisions to be taken at various stages that that wasn't going to happen. The Gover...The communist Government. So there was a sort of feeling as a background I think. There was also I think they feel like a unique community because of their experiences as well and and also the the horrible things that they must have experienced even as young as young men . And young men can be extremely tolerant, I know ,I've been there, of conditions but they saw things that, experienced things that were horrific and I and I suppose that's that's what makes the those things are sort of sealed in their memory and and and adopt an attitude towards towards life. There's a great resurgence I find on on the internet when I look, of second ,third generation Poles that the way they the way they feel about about their country.

Jolanta [28:00]

And Okehampton Okehampton Navy Camp seemed like a turning point in your Dad's life. Did he did he ever return? Did he ever visit places here or...?

Tony [28:18]

I don't believe he went he returned to to visit Okehampton after the war. He did he did go back to places that he that he was based because my father was part of what they would call it was called the Norther Fleet so he was based in Scotland and on on Rosythe and also in Greenock on the Clyde so and also he was he he was involved on a camp in in Scotland near in a place called Crail. So he was he had. My father'd written in, when I mentioned the Polish Naval Association my father had written extensively in their magazine Nasze Sygnaly about his experiences of individual experiences throughout the war so they're all they're there but for a selective audience if you like, for the Poles. It being in Polish it's difficult for me to understand. Some I have managed to get translated so that gives me a feeling of , you know, of understanding of what he felt like. But he did, talking of going back and visiting places he he went back to Glasgow and I can remember having holidays in Scotland, not realising why we went to Scotland during the fifties. Now I know why. He met my mother there who was working with, she was in the Wrens and based in Glasgow and that's where they met, Glasgow, one of the places we visited. And also I can remember when we were driving down the Clydebank at side of Clydebank, he pointed across at a naval yard at one of the ships and he said: 'That's my ship', and it was actually King George 5th which was undergoing, was being scrapped basically at that time and that was one of the ships he he served on as a midshipman that was involved when it was involved in the sinking of the Bismark.

Jolanta [30:23]

So he was a very young man then when the battle with Bismark happened?

Tony [30:32]

Yes. He was well it was 19 1941. It was prior to him becoming an officer so he was, his birthday would have been the 25th of April 19, well he would have been 21 in 1941, yes.

Nicole [30:55]

And Tony. You mentioned about there were various things you would like to ask your father now if you could. What would they be? What would you like to ask him about if you could?

Tony [31:08]

Well, more more about his his war record that I have. The specific dates. He, particularly there was about the incident he, when he became an officer, his first posting, as I mentioned was to collect a submarine from the American Navy and it was his first posting as a Navigation Officer and he came to they they they sailed the submarine, if you can call it sailing it, to the UK and then eventually was the first action that he saw with that submarine was to escort convoys to Murmansk to to Russia in 1942 and, unfortunately he was attacked by allied ships. It was taken to be a German U-Boat and he was injured and spent spent some months eventually in Archangel in a Russian hospital and I'd just like to ask him some more about that experience and his time in also his time in America because he was taken in by the the whole Polish crew was taken in by the Polish community there in in Connecticut, New London Connecticut, because in his, in his war record interestingly they make out a last will and testament to say, if anything happens to them, they died as a consequence of action, who they would like their belongings sent to and the first person was his mother Rosaria in Poland but there was another person mentioned, a Henrietta Wieczorek and when I checked the census in in she came up in the census of New London. She was, I think, a 19 year old girl at the time. So that would be an interesting question to ask him. Who who what was the relevance of this young woman? Obviously it was before he met my mother.

Nicole [33:33]

Jolanta, you're muted

Jolanta [33:40]

Oh, there we go. Well is there anything Tony that you would like to share with us about your father or yourself? Anything else?

Tony [34:00]

I can't think of anything. I mean everything I can talk about is is my father's war record and what he did. He he recovered from his injury and returned to serve on a number of Polish ships. As a consequence of what he did he was awarded a Cross of Valour by the Polish Navy and then latterly he was recognised by the Polish the Polish Government and was awarded the rank of, well I can't say it in Polish, Podporucznik Komandor which is sort of the equivalent of a Naval Commander or a Major in Army ranks in the UK so he was



recognised for what he did and his post post world war Polish Navy and Polish Naval Association.

Jolanta [35:24]

Well that is is a very interesting story and well thank you very much for sharing it with us. Perhaps that that is probably the the very nice way to end out talk . Well thank you very much for your time and we hope to be in touch and there will be follow up on the website and

Nicole [36:16]

Jolanta. I'm just going to end the recording there. Then we can talk to Tony about the next steps. Let's finish the recording there.