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Memories of Julian Chruszczewski (1924–2010)

My father, Julian Chruszczewski was born on 31 August 1924, in the village of Kąty, a constituent part the parish of Szumsk, which in turn lay in the province of Wołyń. His father was Karol Chruszczewski, born in the same location in 1899. In 1924 my grandfather married my grandmother, Michalina Paszkowska, who was born in the Wołyńian village of Lubomirka on 11 March 1897. The parish records show that at his wedding my grandfather gave his mother's name as Antonia Chruszczewski, but his father's name was left blank. Subsequent to his arrest by the NKVD On 10 February 1940, my grandfather gave his father's name as Pawel Chruszczewski. Although incomplete, the parish and overlapping census records for Kąty and Szumsk show no indication of a Paweł who could possibly have been parents to my grandfather. As for Antonina Chruszczewski, the closest I can get is the marriage of Antonina Gabruk to Ignacy Chruszczewski in Kąty in 1878. On the other hand, the wedding data show that Michalina Chruszczewski was the daughter of Jozef and Antonia Paszkowski. How my grandparents met is unknown to me. However, I know that my grandfather at one time worked in a sawmill and that there was a sawmill in Lubomirka. It is not unreasonable to assume that it was in Lubomirka that they first encountered one another.

At the age of 18, my grandfather enlisted in the Polish Legions and eventually joined the 21 st Uhlans, where he learned how to fight with a lance, sabre and pistol. He was a superb horseman, as surviving witnesses told me in Ukraine in the early-2000s. In terms of combat, he saw action towards the end of World War One, in Hungary fighting against Bela Kun's short-lived communist regime and most especially in the war against the Soviet Union of 1920–21. On returning to civilian life, he returned to Kąty, where, as mentioned he married my grandmother. At some point in either 1926 or 1927the family moved to Załuże also in Wołyń. Poverty had clearly been

a problem. My father had a younger brother named Dionizy who died at the age of nine months in 1926. My mother once told me that my father had told her that his brother died because his mother was so under-nourished that she was unable to produce enough milk to feed him with. Breast milk substitutes were unknown. Either way, life in Załuże was infinitely more preferable. My grandfather's former commanding officer, Count Stefan Ittar employed my grandfather as a gamekeeper, a post that meant the family was considerably better off than most of their peers.

Although technically part of Załżuże, the nearest village to the forest clearing in which the house stood, was Hradki. The village consisted of 118 Ukrainian families, one Czech family and two Polish families (Including that of my grandfather). For most, living conditions were basic at best. The Hradki school photo of 1937 shows a series of boys with grim expressions: shaven heads (against the lice) and in many cases no shoes. There was neither gas nor electricity. Water had to be drawn from the nearest well. In the case of my father's family the well lay at the bottom of a steep slope; approximately 30 metres from the house. At least the Chruszczewskis had ready access to an orchard containing apples and pears: the remnants of which were still visible to me during my visits.

Family life was governed by my grandfather. My grandmother was rarely seen in the village and even then, only under escort. On Sundays they generally went to church in Lubomirka, which incidentally was so poor that in winter the villagers sometimes had to rely on handouts from neighbouring Ukrainian villages. Sometimes the family also visited Kąty. My grandfather's relations with the local Ukrainians seem in general to have been good. Having said that, elderly Ukrainian women told me that as children they were wary of him and that he was always asking to know what if anything was going on that he might want to know about. He habitually carried a pistol: either a Colt 45 or his old army issue Mauser. In addition, he possessed two rifles: one of which was a Winchester. He clearly was both strong and inclined towards violence. My father remembered an incident at Lubomirka when my grandfather managed to lift a wooden bench off the ground whilst my father and two adults were still sitting on the bench. My father also remembers shopping in Dubno market with my grandfather, when my grandfather spotted a guy on the run from the police and opened fire causing my father and assorted shoppers and stall holders to dive my cover. He also once opened fire on the boyfriend of one of my grandmother's numerous sisters. Said boyfriend (a communist) was on the run and for some reason decided to pay my grandmother a visit. Unfortunately,

my grandfather turned up unexpectedly and taking exception to his putative brother-in-law opened fire on him as he was fleeing the house. As a gamekeeper my grandfather worked closely with the local police, who were particularly anxious about Ukrainian nationalist activity. For example, celebration in May of the Ukrainian national hero Taras Bulba was expressly banned by the Polish authorities. This formal ban had little impact upon the local Ukrainians who simply melted into the surrounding forest to hold their festivities: until, of course, the Polish authorities caught up with them. Neither was my grandfather afraid of using his fists. He and my grandfather were once waylaid by some Ukrainians whilst on their way home from a local dance. Apparently, the would-be assailants were left in a heap. Similarly, my father remembered going to a wedding with his parents. During the celebrations my father got something in his eye and started to cry. When another guest asked my grandfather to stop my father's whining he responded by knocking him out. My father also remembered the same treatment being meted out to a couple of guys who were sidling around my grandfather's six beehives. A final incident worth noting is this: one day my father came home from the village school complaining that a Ukrainian boy's father had given him a slap in order to break up a fight between him and the Ukrainian man's son. My grandfather's response was to saddle up one of his three horses and ride into Hradki. He went into the Ukrainian's house, sat down at the table, took out his Mauser and informed his host that if he ever touched any of his three children again, he would blow his brains out with said weapon.

As mentioned earlier, life in Hradki was generally good. My grandmother gave birth to two more sons, Wacław (Bob) in 1928 and Czesław (Cesiek) in 1929. Interestingly enough, although my father, who by the age of around eleven had learned how to catch fish in the river Ikwa by tickling them, was fluent in both Polish and Ukrainian (after all nearly all the children in the villages were Ukrainian), neither of his brothers had much knowledge of the language. At some point, my father had a lucky escape having been bitten by a rabid dog. He was loaded onto a horse and cart and driven to Dubno railway station: a good hour away. From there he was taken by train to Lwów and from there to a hospital where the doctors administered 14 injections. As for the dog: one of the villagers shot it dead. Suddenly, in the late summer of 1937, family fortunes took a turn for the worse. Count Ittar like all landowners enjoyed a life of luxury and employed both full time retainers, such as my grandfather, supplemented by casual labour as and when needed. During harvest time, hewould employ day labourers at 20 groszy a day, plus food. I once showed my parents a five Zloty piece from

the period of Piłsudski's rule. My mother said she had never seen one before and my father remarked that he had maybe one or twice. That gives you some idea of how little these people were paid. The day labourers were on occasion supplemented by the inmates of Dubno prison. One of the newest prisons in Poland it primarily housed political prisoners, mostly Ukrainian nationalists. One day during the harvest of 1937, a piece of agricultural machinery jammed. My father sought to rectify the problem and in the process lost his right arm. No one was ever able to determine whether or not it was an accident. However, there was a lingering suspicion that one or more of the Ukrainian prisoners had sabotaged the machinery. In the wake of the accident, my grandfather kept his job and learned to shoot with his left hand. I think it's fair to say though, that things were never quite the same. In 1938, my father obtained entry to a grammar school in Dubno, about twenty miles from Hradki. From what I have discovered on my visits to Hradki, my father disliked school and rarely did his homework, preferring to copy it from a Ukrainian friend on the way into school of a morning. Despite that he was naturally bright and according to my mother, it was sponsorship from Count Ittar that enabled him to take up the place. Given the distance between Dubno and Hradki and the lack of public transport, a daily commute was out of the question. So my father stayed with one of his mother's siblings in Dubno. Although he had visited the town on many occasions, this was a whole new way of life, which as far as I can make out my father eagerly accepted. He would go home at weekends and holidays, but he was now free of his father, with whom he was increasingly at odds.

Then on 1 September,1939, one day after my father's 15th birthday Germany invaded Poland and having within six days had all but defeated the Polish armed forces that opposed them suddenly halted their advance. The details of the German-Soviet alliance were unknown to all but a tiny number of people privy to secret intelligence. However, most adult Poles must have realised that some kind of deal had been done with an increasingly belligerent Soviet Union, whose propaganda machine made great play of the oppression by the 'Polish landlords' of Ukrainians and Belarusians in eastern Poland. According to my Uncle Cesiek, my grandfather heard news of the Russian invasion of the 17 September on the radio whilst at work. Given the decision by General Sikorski to withdraw as many units as possible to Romania (I have stood on the bridge where they crossed), resistance quickly crumbled. My grandfather immediately withdrew my father from school and brought him back home. He also took steps to hide his military service, rightly convinced that the NKVD would be searching for former

Polish soldiers. At some point he and my father disassembled his guns, greased the parts and buried them. They remained hidden until the1960s when locals armed with a metal detector unearthed them. Of greater importance to the locals was the real object of their search, Count Ittar's hoard of coins, which had presumably been buried by my grandfather and his employer and which thirty odd years later were unearthed alongside the guns, which so as I was told, were donated to a local museum. Incidentally, Count Ittar, unlike his wife, managed to evade the NKVD. At some point however, he returned and managed to flee together with the Countess who had become a servant to the Soviet forces in what had been her own home. In the village contact with the occupying forces was occasional. My Uncle Bob recalled a Soviet soldier asking my grandfather how he had come to lose an arm. My father recalled having seen Red Army 'wives' parading around in Dubno wearing nightdresses during the day, presumably thinking they were the latest fashionable item in terms of ladies' fashion. He also never forgot an encounter with a Red Army officer who informed my father that the Red Army would go wherever the revolution took them, be it Warsaw, Berlin, Paris or London. He also recounted how his father told a visiting Soviet official that my father would not be going back to school as he was needed in the house and on the estate. All in all, it was an uncertain time. Then at 4.00 AM on 10 February 1940, their world and that of tens of thousands of others was completely and irrevocably shattered.

In one night, the NKVD rounded up approximately 220,000 people. Planning had begun within hours of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact being signed in Moscow on 24 July 1939. By early February 1940 the machinery of deportation was in place and so the NKVD struck. My father's family were ordered to pack warm clothes and nothing else. For reasons unknown to me, one of the NKVD men shot dead the family's pet Alsatian, Oskar. They were then herded into a truck and driven to Dubno railway station. From there they and hundreds of others were herded into trains comprised largely of dozens of cattle trucks. The trucks contained makeshift bunks, straw, some fuel that for a heater that emitted more smoke than heat and a hole in the corner that served as a latrine. My uncle Bob recalled how the train pulled into Równe station heading north-east. The doors were opened to a sea of humanity that was pushed into the trucks by the NKVD men, whose regard for human life was pretty much near zero. As a guard once told my father: 'Your life is worth seven kopeks'. Seven kopeks being the price of a bullet.

The train then zig-zagged its way in a northerly direction. The adult men quickly realized that they had something in common. They were largely

ex-servicemen who had fought in the war of 1920–21. Stalin was now exacting his revenge, for a having lost a war, in large part due to his incompetence as a military strategist. Conditions in the trucks were abysmal. Unless the train was stationary in the middle of nowhere, the doors were opened only once a day for a change of straw and a supply of rations. In exchange the old straw and the dead were taken out. Invariably the corpses were doused in petrol and burned by the side of the railway tracks. The train seemed to meander as if it had no fixed destination. In all probability this was due to the fact that the GULAGS were unable to cope with such a massive influx of prisoners. My father and his family all survived, although my father was lucky to escape with his life in Smolensk. The train pulled into a station and someone noticed a stall selling bread on the opposite platform. Somehow (presumably by wriggling through the latrine) he managed to get out of the truck. He ran onto the platform, grabbed as much bread as he could and headed back to the train. In the meantime, the train had started to roll and the station militia had opened fire on him. Despite everything he made it back onto the train.

In March the train reached Kotlas station in northern Russia. The distance travelled was approximately 2,374 kilometres or 1,475 miles. My father's family were ordered off the train and eventually onto sledges. The last two or three days were covered by these sledges, heading northward into the bitter cold. Eventually they arrived at their destination: an all but nameless village that was part of the Kotlas GULAG 113 complex. Although they did not know it, the entire family had been sentenced to 10 years exile in a 'Special Resettlement Colony'. The charge? No doubt the Soviet legal code had something that fitted. At first the family slept under tarpaulins, whilst they and other prisoners set about building the makeshift cabin that passed for home. The camp wasn't a closed institution, but there was an armed NKVD detachment. Besides which there was nowhere to run to. My father was set to work lumberjacking. The prisoners were a mixture of Soviet citizens, Balts and Poles. According to my uncle Cesiek, at first rations were passable but were one day arbitrarily cut. This may have been due to the fact that both Bob and Cesiek refused to attend the makeshift school after the teacher told the children that there was no God, but that Stalin could provide them all with sweets: at which point some goon in the roof space opened a trapdoor showering the baffled children with sweets. Either way, my grandfather was only able to perform light duties and my grandmother was exempt from working. This in turn put enormous pressure on my father, who at 15 was all that stood between starvation and survival. If he

went under: the rest of the family was liable to go with him. The work was relentless at six days a week. At one point my father worked his horse so hard that it died on him. Luckily the overseer was so impressed with my father's efforts that he simply congratulated him for his endeavours and told him not to worry: he'd get him a replacement. As for recreation there wasn't much. The camp's political commissar presided over a 'Red Corner' at which he tried to convince anyone who was interested that the Soviet Union was destined to lead humanity towards a better, just world based on equality as opposed to the selfish capitalist model. My father went along a few times. Partly because he was interested in politics and was seeking an explanation as to why his life lay in ruins. In part, given the strain he was under, I suspect he also wanted to get away from his family, particularly his father. My father's relations with some of the NKVD men were quite cordial. He was even once invited to the sauna but fled on seeing the naked flesh of the 'wives' of some of the camp guards. The camp commandant was apparently a fairly reasonable man, unlike his deputy, who my father described as a 'bastard'. In fact, the commandant once offered to release my father. He told him he could fix him up with a place at a party school in Moscow. My father refused saying that he couldn't abandon his family. As I learned on my first visit to Hradki, my father once managed to send news to his friend Dennis on a birch bark letter. It read: 'I am in Russia. I have to work hard to get bread. Julek'. Sundays provided some respite. My father and his brothers would sometimes forage for berries. My father would always warn his brother Cesiek, who was 10/11 years old:' Whatever you do, don't sit down and start eating your berries. There are bears around and they are hungry too'. Sure enough one Sunday uncle Cesiek cracked and a bear came bounding out of the forest. Cesiek fled leaving his berries to the bear. My dad and uncle Bob just stood there and laughed. It remained a sore point for the rest of their lives.

On 22 June 1941, The Germans and their allies launched Operation Barbarossa and invaded the Soviet Union. Or as my father put it: 'Adolf Hitler saved my life'. A day or so later, instead of being ordered to work, my father and the other prisoners were summoned to a piece of cleared ground that served as a muster point. As soon as the camp commandant appeared that it was obvious from the look on his face that something serious had happened. As he gave the news, the overwhelming reaction was one of grim satisfaction.

As yet, they had no idea of exactly how the news might affect them. What they did not know

was that several hundred miles to the south east in Moscow, General Anders had been dragged out of his cell in the Lubyanka prison and had begun direct talks (whilst still wearing his pyjamas) with the Soviet authorities with regard to the fate of surviving Polish prisoners, whose numbers now totalled anything up to one million. The subsequent 'Anders Agreement' was signed on 30 July 1941. It allowed for the release of men of fighting age (18) together with their families. The freed prisoners were to be given safe conduct passes and allowed to head for Tashkent in Uzbekistan. From there a Polish army was to be formed and the released civilians were to be allowed to leave the Soviet Union. As for the army itself, its eventual site of operations was left open. Stalin wanted the army to operate from within the Soviet Union. Anders refused. He rightly assumed that the only reason Stalin had made any concessions at all, was because he was desperate for help from any quarter. Anders demanded that when the army was ready that it be transferred from the Soviet Union to a safe third country and then to the western front. Of course, the Agreement was never honoured in full. Some prisoners never received word of it and others were refused release. Many died en route and others arrived in Tashkent after the Anders army had left. They together with others who doubted the feasibility of Anders plan, later formed the nucleus of the Berling army, which operated alongside the Red Army.

A few days after the Anders Agreement was signed, the news got through to the Poles in GULAG 113. My grandfather elected to head for Tashkent, some 2,914 kilometres (1,811) miles from Kotlas. In order to facilitate the release of the entire family, my father suddenly added a year to his age. He and a handful of other young men plus one young woman were released on 21 September 1941. They were given safe conduct passes and told to head for the River Dvina by way of forest roads. From there they were told to start hitching lifts. At first by boat, then by train, truck, horse and cart and if no transport was available then on foot. They were told that their families would follow, which in my father's case was true. By and large the journey passed without any major hitches, although on one barge he came across a group of Korean prisoners in chains. Food was scarce, but whenever they teamed-up with Soviet security personnel or other released prisoners it was usually forthcoming. On at least one occasion my father ate donkey and camel meat. His opinion of both was low, but remarked that of the two, donkey was marginally better. At some point my father was once again given the option of heading for Moscow and enrolling in a party school, once again he refused. Unsurprisingly washing facilities were primitive at best,

although in one puzzling incident the group of ex-prisoners my father was with were herded into some kind of base, given proper food and allowed to use the bathing facilities. They were then sent on their way. On another occasion, somewhere in Kazakhstan my father's group spotted a local herders camp. They noticed that the herders seemed to be drying pumpkins above the smoke holes at the top of their yurts. Hungry as ever, they decided to wait until nightfall. My father being the youngest was given the job of shinning to the top of the yurt in order to start throwing the pumpkins down to the remainder of the group. He reached the smoke hole ok and then promptly fell through it onto the floor of the yurt. He spotted the opening and rushed through it past the astonished residents. The group ran for it as the herders took pot shots at them in the dark. Luckily, they survived intact. The cold was also a regular problem. One night as they were crossing the Ural Mountains, the temperature hit minus 50 Celsius (according to a detachment of Red Army men they were with). Everyone just walked through the night. If you stopped you would die of hypothermia within minutes. No-one stopped.

My father and his family were reunited at some unknown point before they reached Tashkent. The journey from northern Russia to north-east Uzbekistan via western Kazakhstan, had taken the best part of six months. Problems quickly arose between him and my grandfather. My father was deeply suspicious of the Soviet regime and didn't trust them to keep their word. One day he and some other young men decided to make a break for Iran. After all, they had got this far, so why not try it? They were quickly caught and taken back to the ever-growing convoy. My father was drafted into the Anders army on 15 April 1942. In Tashkent life was better than in Kotlas, which isn't saying much. Food was still scarce and my father was always on the lookout for anything he might be able to steal or scavenge. One day he went on an expedition with my uncle Bob to a large market. For some reason they decided to steal a sheep. My father told his brother to distract the vendor whilst he snuck up from behind and stole a sheep. The plan went wrong and my uncle ended up punching the Uzbek in the face. All hell them broke lose, but the two of them made it to safety carrying what turned out to be a ram. They took it back to the temporary camp in which they were resident. My grandfather slaughtered the animal, which they promptly cooked and ate. Shortly after that both my grandfather and father fell ill and were admitted into hospital. Although my father recovered my grandfather dis not. Kidney failure was -given as the cause of death. He was buried in Tashkent. All attempts by me to trace his grave have failed.

Eventually in May 1942 the word came that the army (such as it was), was to head for the UK. The route across Iran to Turkey and then the Mediterranean was deemed to be too dangerous, by Stalin, if no-one else. Civilians were to follow the army by an extremely circuitous route. My father headed towards the Caspian Sea by way of Samarkand, where he visited the Blue Mosque. On reaching the Uzbek coast they boarded a ship headed for Iran. Prior to reaching Iran my father fell ill with typhus. The ship landed at the port of Pahlavi. From the Iranian shore they headed for Tehran. By this time my father was seriously ill and had at times to be carried on a stretcher. In Tehran he was admitted to a disused factory that had been converted into a makeshift field hospital. Whilst lying there, somehow his mother tacked him down. Even more strange was the fact that she managed to produce a bottle of homemade Żubrówka vodka, which she gave to him as a present. It was the last time they saw one another. From Iran the embryonic army made its way to Iraq. Whilst in Baghdad, my father had an encounter with my uncle Cesiek. My father discovered his brother in a tent housing boy refugees. The meeting did not go well. Just prior to my father's arrival in the tent. My uncle got into a fight with a Jewish boy who accused my uncle of having made a cross of sand on his kit. My uncle always denied the allegation. Either way, in the midst of the fight my father walked into the tent. The fighting stopped. My father announced to the group of boys, whilst pointing at his brother: 'That's my brother. He's always getting into trouble. Cesiek, I'm headed to London. I'll be in touch'. They didn't see one another for the best part of ten years. From Iraq my father crossed into Syria and then Palestine and Egypt. For amusement they would sometimes catch scorpions and place them into sealed bottles. The next stage would be to get hold of some fuel and pour it into a horseshoe shape in the sand. They would then set it alight and take bets on whether the scorpion would escape alive. In Palestine a number of Jewish soldiers, simply disappeared, and headed for Jewish settlements. Among their number was Menachim Begin who would later become prime minister of Israel. From Egypt they were taken to South Africa, where enticed by the local Boers, further desertions took place. The next port of call was the British colony of Sierra Leone. Finally on the ship my father was on reached the UK on 27 August 1942. The sea journey all the way around Africa from Egypt was very approximately 21,300 kilometres or 13,200 miles. The overland journey from Tehran to Alexandria in Egypt was 2,700 kilometres or 1,677 miles. In total since leaving Hradki he had travelled approximately 29,300 kilometres or 18,200 miles in conditions that killed many and left many more

ruined. Given that he was part of the Anders army, the Eighth Regiment of the light artillery to be precise, he was sent for further basic training in an army base in Auchtertool, Fife in Scotland. He hated it. He had tried to enlist in the paratroopers but had been turned down on account of his health problems. A life in the infantry beckoned, until one day a recruiting officer for the Polish navy arrived at the camp. My father needed little persuading and by 9 September was in Plymouth in south-west England undergoing his basic training. In fact, a total of 695 men located at the camp volunteered to transfer to the navy. On 16 November my father was officially sworn in. His first ship was the ORP Garland, a destroyer. The ship was stationed in Greenock just outside Glasgow. He and a group of other recruits were to travel by train direct from Plymouth to Glasgow and then take a local train to Greenock. The journey to Glasgow should have taken around nine hours. Owing to German air raids it took 48 hours. Having arrived at Glasgow Central, the next task was to find a train to Greenock. As my father had already picked up some English, he got the job of gathering the information which he duly did. On his return he found his shipmates engaged in a game of cards with some locals. Luckily for all concerned not much money had changed hands, so the game was broken up with a minimum of fuss. Having eventually arrived in Greenock they somehow made their way to the naval base and proceeded to look for their ship, which they eventually found. Once on board my father received a surprise. He told me the crew resembled a bunch of pirates. On top of that he was surprised that the ordinary sailors didn't salute their officers and that as a rule neither did the officers expect it. As he learned the point was that they were a unit that worked on the basis of mutual aid and respect.

His second ship was a cruiser, the ORP Dragon, which he joined on 8 June 1943. He was promoted to Able Seaman on 1 May 1944. Exactly 13 months to the day of his original embarkation on the Dragon, whilst off the coast of Normandy, the ship was hit by a mine planted by a German torpedo boat crewed by a single sailor. On the night of 12/13 July my father was supposed to stand watch. He had been awake for 48 hours and was exhausted. A shipmate of his agreed to swap watches on condition that my father rolled out his mattress on the deck so that if trouble broke out, he'd be right there. At approximately 4.00 AM on the 13th, my father awoke having felt a shudder. He noticed that his shipmate was lying on the deck. My father called out to him but got no response. He noticed a trickle of blood coming from the man's mouth, so my father went to pick him up. He told me that it was like picking up a piece of jelly. Every bone in the dead man's body seemed to

have been broken. By this time, it was clear that the ship had been hit and was in serious trouble. Eventually the captain ordered the crew to abandon the sinking vessel. The survivors left 37 of their shipmates dead in the wreck. Some 50 years later in Brighton at my uncle Bob's house, my father met up with one of his old shipmates who had been on the Dragon that night. It turned out that when this guy had been demobbed, he was fined for having lost his kit on the Dragon and wanted to know if my father had encountered the same problem. My father confirmed that he hadn't and they both had a good laugh about it. Having to inform wives and girlfriends of the death of the loved ones hadn't been as amusing to put it mildly. It was also whilst serving on the Dragon that my father received the news that his mother had died (5 March 1944). At some point in Iran, she had been separated from Bob and Cesiek. She together with other women, very young children and the elderly were transported by land to Karachi, today part of Pakistan; then part of British ruled India. From there she had been transported to Mombasa in today's Kenya and then to Masindi in the vicinity of Lake Albert in modern-day Uganda. Quite why the British made this decision is beyond me. I can only assume it was because they didn't know what to do with people who were of no potential military value, so they were simply shunted around the empire. The cause of my grandmother's death is unknown to me. As for the effect it had on my father it was difficult to judge. All I know is that talk of my mother could change his mood instantly, so I generally avoided it. He joined his third ship the ORP Conrad, which was also a cruiser on 4 October 1944. With the naval war in Europe winding down, life was less eventful than it had been on his previous two ships. When the German surrender came through on 8 May 1945, my father was in the cells for having sworn at the British liaison officer who was annoyed that my father and his shipmates had returned said officer's rowing boat to the ship later than had been agreed. My father blamed fog: but the officer wasn't having it. Around the time of the German surrender the Conrad became involved in what is now referred to as a 'friendly fire' incident. All ships were warned to be on maximum alert in case of kamikaze attacks by German U- Boats and a series of passwords and signals was given to all officers on all the ships based at Scapa Flow. A couple of days later, a submarine suddenly surfaced nearby the Conrad without giving any signals or passwords. The Conrad opened fire and by the time it was realised that it was a British submarine, two of its crew lay dead. After war the ship was based in Bremerhaven for a short while, where my father witnessed Soviet citizens, some of whom had switched sides and fought with the Germans, being herded onto trains

headed towards the Soviet Occupation Zone, where for the most part all that awaited them was a bullet.

It was whilst serving on the Conrad that my father inadvertently almost ended up on a flight to Warsaw. After hostilities had ended, the Conrad made a number of runs to Norway. On one such occasion my father bought a bottle of hooch from a street hawker. The next thing he knew was that he was in a cell in a Norwegian police station. At some point a Norwegian policeman walked into the cell accompanied by a Soviet military attaché. Said Red Army man then offered to fly my father to Warsaw. In response my father told the Norwegian policeman to get hold of the British military attaché and refused to speak to the Soviet officer. Eventually the British attaché arrived, heard my father's story and arranged for his release. Moreover, he informed my father that a plane was due to fly to Edinburgh later that day, so he should actually be back in port before the Conrad. However, owing to adverse weather conditions, the plane could not leave. So instead, he was flown to Copenhagen and then to Brussels, where he stayed in the famously upmarket Europa Hotel. At no point did he have to worry about money. Wherever he went drinks and food were on the house and the British government paid his hotel bill. Eventually he was flown back to The UK and landed at Croydon airport in London. When passing through immigration control he gave his date of birth as 31 August 1924, forgetting that in his pass book it was given as 31 August 1923. My father explained the discrepancy and the official accepted his explanation. However, it was only when my father was approaching retirement did the British authorities finally straighten out the dates. As for the journey to Edinburgh from London, it was pretty uneventful. When he walked up the gangplank almost two weeks late, his shipmates gave him a series of ironic cheers. The captain didn't see the funny side of it. He told my father that had the war still been on he would have been facing a charge of desertion. As it was, he gave him 28 days in the cells. My father spent some time on Mediterranean convoys running to Malta. On one occasion he was manning a Lewis gun as was one of his shipmates and somehow one of them managed to bring down a Stuka dive bomber. No-one could be sure of which sailor did it, so it was credited to them jointly. As far as I'm aware this is the only known occasion when a Stuka was brought down by a Lewis gun. He also spent time as part of the range finder crew, either gauging the distance to shore for the gunners or trying to gauge where a U-Boat might be lurking. In addition to the Mediterranean, he also spent time on Murmansk convoys, the irony of which was not lost on either him or his shipmates, many of whom like him had survived deportation

to the Soviet Union. Finally, within this context, he also served on Atlantic convoys. One particular incident in the North Atlantic never left him. One night whilst crossing the Atlantic, a wolfpack got right in among the convoy. So many ships were on fire that it was almost like daylight. On top of that here and there you could see small pockets of flame on the sea, which were emitting screams. My father realised that the pockets of flame were in fact men who had jumped off sinking ships and now awaited death. As my father learned on his first North Atlantic convoy, when two men were swept overboard: you never slowed down or turned round. If a man fell overboard their only chance was that a passing ship would throw them a line, which my father's ship once did to a merchant seaman, who, it was discovered had been left adrift twice. Inevitably my father and his shipmates got involved in the usual scrapes for which sailors are notorious. In once incident in Plymouth the local vicar complained to the captain about my father's relationship with his (under-age) daughter. My father claimed that she had told him she was 16 and that he had no reason to doubt here. The captain sided with my father. In another incident in Govan, the startled crew were taken aback at the sight of two half naked crewmen running towards the ship being pursued by a group of irate Glaswegians of both sexes. The sailors made it up the gangplank, followed by the Scots. Some sailors held them off until the captain arrived and threatened to shoot the first man who attempted to board his ship. At that point the mob slinked away. Quite what had happened to have caused this incident was unclear, but the fact the two sailors were only partially clothed offers a clue. He once got involved in a mass brawl with miners in Newcastle and another in St John's in Newfoundland. Despite notionally being on the same side, the Scotch-Irish locals, who were descended from people forced into migration by the British government, had no time for Crown forces. This even extended to trying to bar thirsty sailors from bars. The result was that eventually on one run the sailors lost their patience and instigated a mass brawl that involved a few hundred sailors, the Canadian Mounties and sundry civilians.

The Polish Navy was wound up in 1946 and my father was enlisted into the Polish Resettlement Corps in March 1947. Throughout the latter stages of 1945 and into early 1946, he was in and out of the naval hospital in Plymouth and the Polish naval camp in Okehampton with lung problems. His days in the navy had effectively ended in December 1946, when whilst on another Norwegian run he was diagnosed as having tuberculosis, from which he recovered as much as anyone can from the disease. He was discharged from the Resettlement Corps in November 1948. His records show

that all the captains under whom he served regarded him as a good sailor, who was particularly skilled with regards to artillery.

Shortly after the war he married a woman from Brighton in southern England, with whom he had a daughter. I have no idea of my sister's name and have no desire to discover it. I simply hope that she and her mother had happy lives. As for his brothers, a few years after the war they both made it to the UK. Bob spent some time in South Africa where he was in enrolled into the army cadet corps. He was transferred to North Africa and then to Italy, by which time he was a regular soldier. The Germans surrendered as Bob's unit was heading towards the front. He eventually settled in Brighton in southern England, after having transferred into the British army when the Anders army was wound up. As for my uncle Cesiek, he got stuck in Palestine, where the British conscripted him into the military police. He was part of the detachment that found the hanged British sergeants killed by the Irgun in Netanya in July 1947. He settled in Northumberland in the north of England after having been sent to a displaced persons camp located near the Scottish border. My father's subsequent relations with Bob (who died in 2013) were closer than with Cesiek, who himself died in 2006. Relations between the three were volatile and fist fights were not unknown.

My father eventually started to work in engineering and after a few years became a qualified inspector of precision aircraft parts. His health never fully recovered from the effects of having to cut and haul lumber in sub--zero temperatures whilst clad in flimsy clothing. No doubt, his encounter with tuberculosis, alongside his encounters with pleurisy and typhus, not forgetting the snow blindness could all be put down to the regime he endured. Either way, in 1954, the tuberculosis returned and he was admitted to a special hospital unit in Godalming in Surrey, south of London. There he met my mother, a trainee nurse and herself a refugee from Poland but under circumstances although different to those of my father, were no less harrowing. They married in July 1955 and settled in Greater London. I was born in June 1956 and my sister Julie in October 1964. My father changed the family name to Cordell in 1967, partly in recognition of the fact that the path back to Hradki had been closed to him. As of the time of writing (June 2025), my 95 year old mother is still with us. As for returning to Poland, my father didn't express much interest in the idea. In part, I think it was because he despised the regime of the Colonels, whose incompetence, he (in my opinion) rightly felt had contributed to his own personal tragedy and that of millions of his compatriots. He returned only once, in the late 1990s for his then -sister -in law's 80th (?) birthday in Rzeszów. He didn't

have much to say about it afterwards. Anyway, where was he supposed to have returned to? The villages that he knew as a boy? Luckily for him, it was I who, after my father's death, discovered the grim reality of what had occurred after he was deported to Kotlas. Hradki and Załuże still exist. In 2010/11 there was still a handful of elderly Ukrainians in both villages who to various degrees expressed their total astonishment upon realising who I was. Two old ladies I met in Załuże, told me that they had assumed that when my father's family disappeared, they had been taken to the local NKVD killing field, known as ''The Well', and murdered. As for the house in which my father had been brought up, it was gone. What remained in the vicinity was a network of trenches built by the UPA, who had used the house as a command centre. It was a logical choice given the commanding views from the hilltop on which the house stood. Lubomirka where the Paszkowski's lived on 17 April 1943 as part of the Wołyń Uprising, which was supposed to create the fundament for an ethnically pure Ukrainian state, a UPA unit from Galicia approached the village and slaughtered all 147 inhabitants. As for Kąty on 2 May 1943 as part of the same operation a UPA detachment attacked the village. The Polish defenders managed to hold them off until the following morning. As the UPA resumed the attack a passing Wehrmacht unit heard the gunfire and headed towards the village. They fought off the UPA and then herded the survivors onto trucks and deported them to Germany as slave labour. Neither village exists today. In Lubomirka, as I have seen all that remains are the stone footings of the Catholic Church and one house in which the village's sole Ukrainian family resided in before the night of the massacre. My father died in July 2010. He never bothered to collect the four medals that he had won, two of which are with bar. In July 2011 at my bidding, he received a military funeral at the naval church in Gdynia. I made this request because I took and still take the view that successive Polish governments owed him at least that.

Bóg, Honor, Ojczyzna!

Karl Cordell, born Karl Chruszczewski, Plymouth, June 2025.

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