

Summertown Monday Bulletin No. 26

People often ask me where I'm from, given the peculiar name with its multiple zeds (Krys is the short form of Krzysztof). The answer is, of course: London. Where my parents came from, well, that's another matter entirely. Erica suggested that I should tell you all a bit about how my father landed up in the UK. It's a bit of a long story, but not uneventful. I am somewhat hazy on a lot of the details, since my father didn't like to talk about it all too much. All I can offer are some fragments.

My father Edward Aleksander Kazmierczak was born in 1912 in Poland, a country which did not exist at the time, having been carved up between its Austrian, German and Russian neighbours. The country regained its independence when he was still a young lad in 1918. At some point in his teens, my grandparents decided to send him to a seminary to train to become a priest. He wasn't very happy there and ran away. This was the first of what proved to be a number of escapes!

In due course he went to University and by the time World War II broke out on 1 September 1939, he was an official in charge of the postal services for a province in Eastern Poland. He had had some military training and, like all Poles at the time who had studied at University, he was an officer in the Reserve Army, so he was called up. The Russians invaded Eastern Poland on 17 September 1939. Poland was once again torn apart by its two powerful neighbours. The Red Army hugely outnumbered the Polish forces and, along with many many others, my father was fairly soon captured and herded onto a train to an unknown destination in Russia.

Have you heard of the Katyn Massacre? Well, this is the name given to a set of mass executions of captured Polish officers and intelligentsia carried out by the Soviets in early 1940. Some 22,000 captive Polish army officers, police, officials and other 'important and influential persons' were murdered in and near the forest of Katyn in the Smolensk District of Russia – and this is quite probably where my father's train was headed, although he didn't know about it at the time. For many years the Russians denied responsibility for the massacre and tried to blame the Nazis, but they finally admitted it in 1990. There is a detailed article on Wikipedia at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katyn_massacre

Coming back to my father, he and a friend on this train decided that wherever it was going to, it wasn't going to be a good place. Somehow, they both got into the toilet and managed to jump out through the very small window at a point when the train wasn't going too fast. My father suffered some bruises but was otherwise unhurt, but his companion was injured, although fortunately he could still walk. They set off to head back west but after some days were once again captured and put into a prison or camp, still in Russia. My father related that they pretended that his friend was more badly injured than was actually the case, and he was allowed to take him to a neighbouring hospital. Here a very kindly Ukrainian nurse allowed them to slip away.

It can't have been easy making their way across Europe, and the next episode that I can recall was one of my father's worst experiences of the war when his friend, who was ahead of him, trod on a mine and was blown to pieces.

Eventually, my father made it down to Hungary, where he managed to make contact with the Hungarian Resistance. Since he was fairly fluent in French, they equipped him with forged French papers and a train ticket to France. The plan went well as the train journey progressed through Austria and Germany. The Germans didn't detect any accent. However, once he reached France, he was rumbled. Unfortunately, this was an occupied part of France, so he was interned in a prison camp. Here, in spite of being warned not to drink the water, he gave in to insufferable thirst, which resulted in a dysentery that affected his stomach for the rest of his life.

Not one to rest on his laurels in an uncomfortable situation, he managed to escape and continue his search for freedom by walking south and crossing the Pyrenees into Spain. Safety at last, you may think. Well, no, actually. Spain was officially neutral but in practice supported the Axis powers, and so my father once again found himself in various prisons and prison camps in Spain, where he spent much of the war. This included the notorious Miranda de Ebro Concentration Camp, where prisoners were used as forced labourers. He related spending a few weeks at large at one point and not being able to find anything to eat in the fields except onions. Unsurprisingly, he was never very keen on onions in later life.

I think it was 1943 by the time he eventually managed to get to Gibraltar and freedom. From there the logical destination was London, where the Polish Government-in-exile had its headquarters. Here he was given responsibility in their offices, and that was where he eventually met my mother, who was also Polish, when she came to work for him. After getting married (see the picture below), they settled in London ... so that's how I came to be born there.

Doubtless, if I had extracted more detail from my father and put it all together, it might have made a good book or even a film, if one concentrated on the 'action'. The reality was, however, gruelling and difficult, with much of the time spent lying in some horrible overcrowded prison staring at the ceiling with nothing to do, as he put it, except to try to keep warm and watch the bugs falling off the ceiling.

He was never very keen on cards, so we never had any card games at home when I was very young. He had apparently witnessed throats being cut over gambling with cards during the war.

If you'd like an idea of part of what my mother went through as a teenager growing up in occupied Warsaw, there is a very good film called *Kanal*. This pretty much mirrors her experience during the 1944 Warsaw Uprising as she helped a wounded resistance fighter to escape through the sewers beneath the city. The film won the Special Jury Award at the 1957 Cannes Film Festival. You can see a short extract at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Za7r82hRXRA>, or I have a DVD copy of the full version (with subtitles) which I can lend to anyone who would like to watch it.

As you now realise, I owe my existence to the fact that my parents survived the war. Many of their friends, family and comrades didn't. One of my grandfathers was put in a gas chamber by the Nazis because he was a magistrate, the other was taken away to Siberia by the Russians, never to return. For me the main *raison d'être* for the European Union has been to create a Europe where peace may prevail between nations. This Brexit business has therefore been very saddening.

Keep happy. Stay safe.

Krys

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