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Surviving Warsaw 1939—1945

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A report for the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust

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'The beloved dead are our task.'

Carl Jung

'The soul of Poland is indestructible and ...she will rise again like a rock, which may for a spell be submerged by a tidal wave, but which remains a rock.'

Winston Churchill, October 1939

'When preparing yourself for the future, you need to take your thoughts back to the past, but only just as far as one, who is preparing to jump over a ditch goes back in order to get a good run up.'

Adam Mickiewicz

Introduction

The award of a Winston Churchill Memorial Trust (WCMT) Travel Fellowship has enabled me to begin a task which at one time appeared to be the equivalent of looking for a needle in a haystack. The task is to unravel the threads of my family's hidden Polish and Jewish history during the first half of the twentieth century, a history which led to my birth in Britain rather than Poland. My aim is to write a book which gives a snapshot of Polish history from a personal perspective in order to shed light on a complex era, capture people's imagination and challenge stereotypes.

I have long had a deep interest in how historical events shape people's lives. In primary school in England I was fascinated by stories of the Roman Empire, the legions, the Caesars and the occupation of Britain. But gradually I realised that this was not directly part of my personal story, and that I would have to look elsewhere to find the events that had shaped my particular European family.

However my parent's home city, Warsaw, was not a city I ever expected to see. Until the fall of the communist regime in 1989 going there seemed an impossible dream. I learned about it instead from my father Witold's tales of life during the darkest days of the Nazi occupation of Poland from 1939-45. He talked of the Gestapo, Warsaw Ghetto and Warsaw Uprising, of being a POW and of the pain of never seeing his home or parents again. I heard similar stories from his friends and my Polish friends' parents. I thought that every family had such stories, that this was normal.

My father also talked to the wider community, especially young people, about his experiences. He wanted them to understand why the cruelty of the Nazi regime drove thousands of people to join the wartime resistance, and take part in the hopeless but heroic 63 day Warsaw Uprising in 1944. Poland had only been independent for 21 years following 125 years of domination and partition by the Russian, Prussian and Austro-Hungarian empires from 1793-1918. My father's generation wanted their capital city back. They wanted their country and their freedom back. Pre-war Warsaw had been optimistic, multicultural, cosmopolitan, with cafes, theatres, cinemas, summer and winter sports, and a rich Jewish heritage (approximately one third of the 1.3 million population was Jewish).

Witold wanted to keep memory and truth alive in Britain where it was misunderstood, and in Poland where it was repressed during the communist era. He also wanted to capture complexity. He had had the rare opportunity - and misfortune - to see life in and outside the Warsaw Ghetto from 1940-42. He never failed to point out that he saw inhumanity and heroism on all sides, determined not by nationality, but by the choices people made about how to behave in the circumstances they found themselves in. In his quieter moments he reflected on the things he wished he had done differently, and his frustration at never having the chance to find out what his father and friends had really got up to. There was so much unfinished business.

Then the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. I visited Poland for the first time to give a lecture at Opole University. Witold also went back for the first time in 1989 for his sister's funeral, followed by my mother Barbara in 1990. We eked out bits of information during further regular visits. So much was missing it was difficult to know where to start. Warsaw had been almost totally re-built. The Palace of Culture and Science, Stalin's 'gift' to the Polish people, is on top of the house where my family lived during the Nazi occupation, and where my father hid his camera and cigar boxes full of undeveloped

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films. As they were in the cellar they could have been burned or discovered, or they could still be buried there. Who knows?

With the death of my parents in 2008 I lost the original sources of the stories, and the connections only they could make. In 2010 I took part in a celebration of 100 years of Polish Scouting. On the anniversary of the August 1 launch of the Warsaw Uprising we gathered in Warsaw. I spoke to 2,000 young people of Polish origin from all round the globe about my father's experiences as a scout during the Nazi occupation and the Warsaw Uprising. I told them how many people of their age carried out heroic acts with no thought for themselves. I drew on my personal connections and knowledge of the city to illustrate why history is not irrelevant. Afterwards many people of all generations came up to me saying they were inspired. They urged me to write it up.

I realised that not only did I have unique tale to tell, but that as an only child I was the sole keeper. My knowledge, however, was incomplete. I needed to find the missing parts of the jigsaw puzzle to verify the facts that I had, and to learn more about the bigger picture. All I had to go on were my memories of conversations, several boxes of documents, a handful of photographs and medals, a bookshelf of books about Poland, a few contacts, and three precious tapes recorded for me by my father, which told some, but not all, of the story.

My 8 weeks in Warsaw, backed by the WCMT, were fantastic. It gave me the credibility to approach institutions and individuals, and precious time to follow up leads, to chat, to think, to remember, to put the pieces together, and to go back to people to ask further questions.

Aims

I aimed to document and verify the stories I had been told, gather further information and learn more about the wider context. I also aimed to make a start on my book, time permitting.

I knew from discussions with Witold that my grandfather Stefan had written a version of his life story before the war as part of an application for a Polish independence medal in the 1930s, and that it was probably in the **Central Military Archive (Centralny Archiwum Wojskowy)** in Rembertów on the outskirts of Warsaw. I suspected that there would be records of his service in the police in the **National Archives - Twentieth Century (Archiwum Akt Nowych)** and the **Police Museum**. There might be something about him in the **Museum of the Wola District of Warsaw**. Stefan was born in Wola in 1889 and lived there during the early part of his life. Witold was born there in 1922.

I also thought it would be useful to talk to a Warsaw academic, who specialized in Polish history from 1918-1939, about the wider context of my grandfather's life. I also wanted to go to the **National Library** to search for newspaper cuttings about Stefan.

I knew that there were records regarding Stefan and his third wife Anna and their daughter Lilka in the **Jewish Historical Institute** in Warsaw, and that both women were listed as Holocaust survivors. I also thought the **Russian Orthodox Church in Wola** might help me shed light on Stefan's missing daughter Eugenia, who was born to his first wife Stefanida in 1911, and that **Wola Catholic**

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Cemetery, where Stefan is buried, might help me shed light on the fate of my father's sister Lucyna. She died shortly after birth in 1927 along with her mother Maria (my grandmother), who was Stefan's second wife and my father's mother.

I was also aware that a fragment of film from the Warsaw Uprising which featured my father existed somewhere. He had seen it once in the 1990s in London but had not been able to track it down. I thought the **Warsaw Uprising Museum**, **Warsaw City Archives (Archiwum Miasta Stołecznego Warszawy)** and the **Warsaw 1939 Foundation (warszawa1939.pl)**, which runs a particularly informative website cataloguing the buildings and architecture of 1930s Warsaw, might be a good place to start, and also the **Home Army Museum (Muzeum Armii Krajowej)** in Kraków.

I knew from conversations with my father that both he and his father had been POWs in Lamsdorf, now known as Łambinowice near Opole in Western Poland. There might be records in the **Central Museum for Prisoners of War (Centralne Muzeum Jeńców Wojennych)** located there. I suspected there were also records on both of them in the **Institute for National Remembrance, (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej)** the repository for communist era secret police files and Nazi wartime records.

I also knew that if I sat with some of my relatives and asked the right questions they might remember useful snippets of information.

Itinerary

10 August 2011 - 1 October 2011

I lived in Rembertów on the outskirts of Warsaw and worked in the Warsaw Uprising Museum. It is truly a beacon for people interested in how to bring long neglected and suppressed history alive for the modern generation through interactive exhibitions, blogs, cartoons, educational games, rock concerts and sporting events. From here I arranged visits to the above institutions and individuals (also listed in the appendix).

I visited Kraków on 27-29 August and the Central Museum for Prisoners of War in Western Poland on 30-31 August.

I also had 4 hours of detailed recollections taped by my father transcribed by an expert recommended by the Warsaw Uprising Museum. This has been hugely helpful. It might be of interest to the Trust to know that Winston Churchill is mentioned twice when my father recalls his father's faith in Churchill's ability to bring the war to a quick end!

It took considerable effort and time to find the right people and arrange visits. It would have been extremely difficult to have done all this in the limited time I had without being bilingual, having a working knowledge of the city and drawing on the advice of contacts and kindred spirits nicknamed 'Varsavianistas' (lovers of Warsaw – perhaps the English translation is Warsawophile!).

Findings

The Ruined House in the Woods

One of my most moving discoveries was triggered off by visits to the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, which is the major repository of documentation on Holocaust survivors, life in the Warsaw Ghetto and pre-war Jewish culture in Poland. In the Jewish Genealogy and Family Heritage Centre at the Institute I found questionnaires filled in by Holocaust survivors immediately after the war, including my grandfather's third wife Anna and daughter Lilka. I knew that Anna's maiden name was Wachtel and that she and Stefan met while she was working in her uncle's delicatessen, where he shopped. Anna wrote, intriguingly, that during the Nazi occupation she called herself Eugenia Szablewska and lived for a time with a Mrs. Gajewska in a guest house called 'Carmencita' on Ulica Parkowa in Podkowa Leśna, a garden town on the outskirts of Warsaw. Lilka also gave this as one of her wartime addresses.

This tallied with my father's story that Stefan realized that Anna and Lilka were at great risk when the Nazis took control of Warsaw. When it emerged that their house was inside the Jewish Ghetto planned by the Nazi occupiers they swapped houses with a Jewish doctor, Dr Weinkiper (also a Holocaust survivor) who was forced into the Ghetto. Stefan and Witold lived there while Anna and Lilka lived 'somewhere safe'. Witold recalled visiting their hiding place in Podkowa Leśna (he never remembered the exact address) and that 'something terrible' (he never knew what) had happened at some stage.



Anna photographed in 1950.



Lilka photographed in 1950.

It is important to note that of all the territories the Nazis occupied, it was only in Poland that there was an edict stipulating that those who sheltered Jews would be executed along with their families.

I scoured a map of the town and found the street but not the house so I made contact with an organisation called The Friends of Podkowa Leśna. They put me in touch with Oskar Koszutski, the retired curator of the Iwaszkiewicz Museum, named after a famous 20th century Polish novelist who lived in the town. When I explained what I was looking for Oskar sent me extracts of wartime accounts of the Carmencita story.

It transpired that in either June or September 1943 the gardener from Carmencita banged on the door of Iwaszkiewicz's house in great distress, saying that the Gestapo had just dumped a woman's body in the woods outside their garden. It was Mrs. Gajewska, the owner of Carmencita. Mrs. Gajewska's real name was Carmen Achmarańska. She was born in 1893 in Odessa to a Russian

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mother and a Spaniard. She married and moved to Poland with her husband, a builder who built the villa Carmencita in the 1930s as a guesthouse. They had one daughter, Helena, adopted, of Spanish origins. Her husband died during the 1939 invasion of Poland in Warsaw.

A popular and charismatic hostess, she entertained a wide variety of guests. It appears that in 1943 two Gestapo officers had gone to Carmencita and ordered her to give them food and drink. Suspecting something was up, she had the presence of mind to send everyone else in the house away while she continued to entertain them. At some point early in the morning they accused her of being Jewish. She told them that although her original birth certificate issued in Odessa 50 years ago had gone missing, she could take them to Warsaw to meet people who would verify that she was not Jewish. They appeared to agree to do this. She got into the car with them. They shot her in the head, dumped her body and drove back to Carmencita for more drink.

Locals were horrified, even more so when orders came to 'bury her like a dog' by dumping her in an unmarked grave. They did so, but tended the grave with flowers, much to the irritation of the authorities, who repeatedly removed any tributes. Her selfless actions saved her daughter Helena, her friend Ziuta (the second wife of Helena's real father), two members of staff – a cook and a maid - and two guests. I presume that Anna was the cook or the maid but have no concrete evidence as yet.

I decided to find the ruins of the house, which burnt down in the 1950s. I took the electric train to Podkowa Leśna and met Oskar, who led me through beautiful woodland to a spot close to a memorial marking the 'foundation stone' of the town. Just behind it was a fenced-off triangular plot filled with trees. We found a hole in the fence and crept in. Ten meters from the road, poking through the undergrowth, were the foundations of the villa. Steps led up to what was probably an entrance hall. Stone columns lay overgrown and broken. It was a little like discovering a lost city in the jungle, a very moving experience, as we reflected quietly on Carmen's bravery and sacrifice.

After the murder Anna and Lilka lived on 14 Próżna Street in the centre of Warsaw with a relative, according to the papers in the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute. I presume that they felt that life might be a bit safer for them because the Nazis thought they had successfully eliminated all of Warsaw's Jewish population when they destroyed the Warsaw Ghetto in April 1943, and were no longer on the lookout for people like them. Or perhaps there was simply nowhere else for them to go. (By a bizarre twist of fate 14 Próżna Street was also the house used as an HQ by my father's company during the Warsaw Uprising in 1944). During the Warsaw Uprising Anna and Lilka moved back in with my grandfather Stefan as it was safe to do so while Warsaw was under Polish control. My father also said they spent time in another town on the eastern edge of Warsaw, where Stefan and one of his brothers had a small plot of land with a dacha (wooden summer house) on it, but I have no evidence to back this up.

I often walked along Próżna Street during August and September 2011. It is the one of the few remaining streets from the Warsaw Ghetto that has survived with the original buildings relatively intact. A programme of sensitive historical renovation is planned in order to preserve the original features. As I walk I conjure up a map and vision of 1930s Warsaw in my head and superimpose it on the rebuilt city.

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The Russian Orthodox Marriage Certificate

How did Anna get away with her calling herself Eugenia? She did so because Eugenia was the name on a 1911 Russian Orthodox birth certificate verified as real by the Nazi authorities in 1941. I have a copy of it complete with its swastika duty stamps (partially visible on the front cover of this report). The real Eugenia was the daughter of my grandfather's Russian/Ukrainian first wife Stefanida. It would seem that Stefan had obtained a copy of his first daughter's birth certificate from the Russian Orthodox Church in Wola so that his third wife Anna could legitimize herself with a non-Jewish birth certificate, a very clever move. Eugenia was born in 1911. Anna was born in 1906. This small difference in ages made the whole deceit believable.

But had Eugenia really ever existed? If I followed up the meagre details I had on Stefan's first marriage I could begin to work out if Eugenia was real. All I knew was that Stefanida had disappeared by the end of WW1 in 1918 when Poland regained independence and the Russians left Warsaw. Perhaps Stefan's military service and imprisonment in a POW camp had kept him away from home for too long, and she felt isolated and vulnerable as a Russian?

I visited the Russian Orthodox Church and cemetery in Wola, where I came across a young Polish Russian Orthodox priest who looked through old records for me. They were incomplete. (During the Warsaw Uprising many parishioners were murdered during the 'butchery of Wola' by Nazi SS units led by the notorious Oskar Dirlewanger. When they ran out of bullets they destroyed everything in their sight, including church records.) After looking intently at Eugenia's birth certificate the priest confirmed it was signed by the parish priest in charge in 1941. He also recognised the name of the printing works which had produced the pro forma for the birth certificate as it was owned by the Orthodox Church. Were the priest and the church involved in forgery in order to save lives?

I mentioned that I also had an official notice of Stefan's divorce from his first wife Stefanida in a small cutting from a 1919 newspaper in my father's papers. The address of the Catholic Bishop's Episcopal Court was given in the notice. The priest pointed out that this was odd. If the marriage had been Orthodox, it would have been unusual for it to have been dissolved by a Catholic bishop. We concluded that the marriage must have been Orthodox as the birth certificate for the child was Orthodox.

The priest suggested that I continue my search for the marriage and birth certificates in the Catholic Bishop's Episcopal Court, now the residence of the Catholic Bishop of Warsaw. Unfortunately when I went there I discovered that all their pre-war records were destroyed during the Warsaw Uprising. The staff suggested that there was a small possibility that some surviving records might be in the offices of the Military Cathedral for Warsaw. So I went there and talked to a military chaplain who confirmed that there was nothing there either.

My last hope was the Warsaw City Archives, where finally I accessed Stefan and Stefanida's marriage certificate, but not Eugenia's original birth certificate. The marriage certificate was written in old ecclesiastical Russian, as Russia was the ruling power in Warsaw during the era of the 1793-1918 partitions. It showed that Stefan and Stefanida married on 19 September 1910 in the Orthodox Church in Wola and that Stefanida came from Poltava in the Ukraine. She must have been pregnant

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as Eugenia was purportedly born on 15 Feb 1911, according to the Nazi-verified version of her birth certificate. At last I had something concrete to work on.



Stefanida & Stefan (back row from left to right) photographed with Stefan's brothers and families in 1910

The Many Life Stories of Stefan

Was Stefan printing birth certificates, creating false identities for and offering refuge to Jewish people during the Nazi occupation of Warsaw? There is little hard evidence but it is plausible given his career history, and my father's memories of the people who passed through the house between 1939-44.

I looked for evidence on Stefan's exploits in the National Archives (Twentieth Century) and Central Military Archives. I found four different life stories amidst voluminous correspondence about the police pension that was due to him, including a curious receipt from March 1943 showing that the German authorities were still paying out pensions to former Polish police officers during the Nazi occupation, presumably in order to keep civil society going. It was a wonderful experience to go through long untouched letters written in fountain pen and folded in dry, crinkly envelopes decorated with faded 1920s and 1930s stamps.

Crucially each version overlaps but emphasises different things, depending on the audience at which it was aimed and the circumstances under which it was written.

In the Military Archive were two different versions of his life story, one handwritten. These were both parts of applications for the Polish Independence Medal, which was awarded to people who had worked towards independence in 1918. They were written in the early 1930s shortly after Stefan had left regular police work. Both detail his political activities before Poland's independence in 1918. He belonged to the Polish Socialist Party, an illegal organization striving for Polish independence, whose members organized strikes and demonstrations and distributed information. Later, after the Polish Socialist Party split into factions, he joined the Revolutionary Faction of the Polish Socialist party. This was an organisation oriented towards the independence of Poland, rather than an all-European worker's revolution. It was led by Józef Pilsudski, who he admired.

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Also listed is his imprisonment for three months by the Russian Tsarist authorities for organising a May Day strike (under the direction of Tomasz Arciszewski, a future Prime Minister of the wartime Polish Government in Exile in London). Also featured are his conscription to the Imperial Russian Army, imprisonment in Lamsdorf POW camp, escape, and participation in the successful 1918 Poznań Uprising in the Prussian partition of Poland, where he did reconnaissance work on enemy positions. One of the life stories also includes an otherwise unverified report of his involvement in the assassination of a spy who had infiltrated the Polish Socialist Party in 1910.

I am not sure if Stefan was actually awarded the Polish Independence medal. Although I have a medal and a 1940s document containing a serial number for it, which I will check on a register, the documents in the Military Archives state he was not awarded one. I wonder what the real story is? I am also liaising with the Museum of the Wola District of Warsaw about the wider historical context of the independence movements in the industrial part of Wola during 1900-1918. Exhibits in this museum such as fragments of wallpaper from the printing works where Stefan was employed, and yellowing Polish Socialist Party strike leaflets, evoke the spirit of the times beautifully.

The life stories in the Military Archives are at odds with two other life stories in the National Archives (Twentieth Century), which were written for verification purposes after the war when Stefan was applying for work with the Railway Police (SOK). He had to prove that he was a good citizen of the communist Polish People's Republic, and that he had not collaborated with the fascist Nazi regime during WW2.

One of the two life stories is in the National Archives (Twentieth Century) collection of files on former National Police employees. Amongst the reams of documents on Stefan is a questionnaire he submitted in 1950 detailing his employment before and during the Nazi Occupation, the organisations he had belonged to and the addresses at which he lived. It shows that he joined the newly formed National Police after Poland regained independence in 1918, and left on the grounds of 'ill-health' in 1930. He wrote that the real reason was that had just uncovered and reported corruption – theft and bribery - amongst high-ranking police officials from the Eastern Borders of Poland. My father remembers him talking about this. He also claimed that his refusal to take part in coercion during parliamentary elections led to him leaving the police force. The questionnaire also outlines how he was arrested and searched by the Nazis during the occupation on at least two terrifying occasions because they suspected him of hiding his Jewish wife and other Jewish citizens.

Attached to this questionnaire were testimonies of his character and good socialist background, plus several mentions of him having helped Jewish people during the Nazi occupation. One of the testimonies appeared to be from Dr Margulies, a Jewish doctor who had known Stefan since 1919 and helped him when Witold was very ill. He changed his name to Michał Kowalski after the war. He stated that '*citizen Szablewski*' was '*a person of leftist views free of racist attitudes*', who during the Nazi occupation '*protected his wife from death and helped other citizens of Jewish origin.*' Another Jewish doctor testified that Stefan had helped him regain material possessions taken away during the Nazi occupation, and survive. He extolled Stefan's virtues as a good '*anti-fascist*', who was '*free of any racist attitudes*'. A third testimonial suggested that Stefan's marriage to a Jewish wife was '*inconvenient*' and this was the reason he left the police.

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The other life story is written up in a questionnaire submitted in 1947 about his Second World War activities with the Polish Socialist Party, and its part in the resistance movement. It claims that during the Nazi occupation and Warsaw Uprising Stefan was a quartermaster in the Polish People's Army (PAL), a resistance group made up of socialists. It gives details of his commanding officers, some of whom I traced and verified through the Warsaw Uprising Museum, and others, all with names beginning with 'L', who I suspect could have been made up. It also claims that he was in a group under the name of 'Odwet' (Revenge) which I have only recently been able to trace. Most of this unit was under Home Army (Armia Krajowa or AK) command during the Warsaw Uprising, as they were unable to link up with their own command structure. It is difficult to get to the bottom of information regarding some of the non-Home Army (AK) resistance groups, as there is a deal of fabricated information. Such fabrication was common practice during the postwar communist era because the Polish People's Republic approved of the resistance activities of the communist-linked People's Army (AL) and Polish People's Army (PAL) comprising pre-war Polish Socialist party members, but not the larger Home Army (AK) linked to the Polish Government in Exile in the West. In postwar Peoples Republic propaganda the Home Army (AK) was referred to as 'the spitting reactionary dwarf' or simply as 'reactionary thugs'.

This life story also contains the line *'he organised safe houses or accommodation for people who were hiding along with the fabrication of identity papers, and also hid radio receivers, arms and medical supplies.'*

All the evidence suggests that Stefan had the skills, resilience and resourcefulness needed to protect his wife and daughter and other Jewish people. He had plenty of 'know-how' developed through his undercover insurgent and detective work. He had acquired printing skills while working as a printer in Wola in his teens. In fact he often used the code name 'printer' during conspiratorial activities. He worked as a housing manager for landlords during the 1930s. This involved arranging lets in housing blocks and collecting rent. He had a huge network of contacts. My father remembered scores of different people coming to and from their home in the 1920s and 1930s, and seemingly endless evenings of smoking, drinking, card games and political discussions.

The issue for me as the researcher is that there is no hard evidence apart from Stefan's handwritten testimony and Witold's stories. Witold often said they were incomplete because Stefan kept his own counsel. Perhaps the secrecy that prevented my father and now me from uncovering what really went on was the key to Stefan's survival in turbulent times?

Stefan the Skoda storekeeper and undercover detective

Stefan was involved in one other particularly intriguing episode that he never wrote up, but journalists did. After leaving the police he worked as a storekeeper in the Skoda factory in Warsaw from 1930-31. It manufactured telecommunications cables and aero plane engines. My father remembers feeling totally bewildered by this career change and drop in status. He enjoyed having a policeman as a father who trained his detectives by tasking them to follow his mischievous son to school and report on his activities en route!

It appears that Stefan was actually working undercover and caused a deal of trouble when he revealed that some directors were defrauding the company by falsifying analyses of cable

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composition, which led to the scrapping of good cables (and unofficial selling off of them to make a large profit!) He was involved in the court case and counter court case. Shortly afterwards the Polish state nationalised the factory. Again I have little direct evidence, but historians I have spoken to agree that he could have been working undercover for the state. I have finally found out who to contact in the National Library about the newspaper cuttings on the subsequent court cases, which my father told me he had once read.

Similarly I have found out who to talk to in the Police Museum, which has re-opened, and am working my way through papers from the Institute for National Remembrance.

The Missing Grave

Polish history is not just about high drama. It's also about family life and the mini tragedies of birth and death that must have been common in an era before modern medicine when life expectancy was low and maternal mortality high. Stefan had plenty of these, including the death of his daughter Lucyna in Warsaw shortly after birth in 1927. His second wife Maria was sent to her home village of Lewiczyn near Warsaw to recover from an infection picked up in the hospital but died soon after. Maria is buried in Lewiczyn but Lucyna is not listed. A letter in 1956 from Stefan's third wife Anna to my father, mentioned that Stefan was buried in the same grave as Lucyna. I looked for her in Wola Catholic Cemetery, where Stefan is buried, but she is not listed there either. Perhaps the original cemetery records, now in the Warsaw city archive, may hold the key.

A Fleeting Image on a Film

And what of my father? Witold is not mentioned once in any of the above documents, probably because he belonged to the Home Army (AK), which was out of favour during the communist era, and lived in Britain. Mention of him may have made life difficult for both him and Stefan.

However there is one single document – a photo ID card showing that Witold belonged to the Polish People's Army (PAL). He never did. Presumably this was created by Stefan to protect Witold should he ever return to Poland after 1945 and needed to legitimise his activities during the Nazi occupation to the postwar communist authorities.

Although my grandfather had been brave in his youth he and my father fell out in 1944 over my father's youthful desire to be brave in his own way. My grandfather had burned out after years of struggle and wanted to protect his family. In contrast Witold was young, angry, energetic, idealistic and desperate to get rid of the oppressors who made life in Warsaw so unbearable. Stefan had felt just the same when the Russians were the oppressors. At the age of 16 he had taken part in a violently suppressed protest against conscription to the Imperial Russian Army during the Russo-Japanese War on Plac Grzybowski in Warsaw in November 1904.

Soon after Witold turned 16 in 1939 the Nazis occupied Warsaw. Stefan banned him from leaving the house because he suspected he would join the resistance and thought it was too dangerous. He

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employed a tutor to educate him after the new Nazi authorities closed all Polish secondary schools. After several months he realised Witold was going stir crazy, relented and let him work as an apprentice toolmaker in a specialist metalwork company near their home in an area which was soon to become the Warsaw Ghetto. Initially the factory was under Polish management. In 1940 Nazi managers were brought in when the factory was incorporated into the Ghetto.

Witold needed an official permit to go in and out of the Ghetto. He was issued with one - and made full use of the opportunities it afforded him. He joined the Home Army (AK), which was by far the largest resistance organisation in Poland. He was involved in making parts for guns called 'Błyskawice', which were copies of British Sten guns. He also developed, processed and distributed reconnaissance photographs, and carried letters and cash to and from people in and outside the Ghetto. He did not smuggle parcels as that was more risky.

His code name was Zygfryd but his friends nicknamed him Lucky because he managed to cheat death many times. He was questioned on several occasions, at gunpoint, by the police and the Gestapo about Anna. He got out of it by lying, saying that she was a cruel stepmother who beat him, that he did not know or care where she was. He had many other narrow escapes. Once he even pretended to be a plain clothes Nazi, puffed out his shoulders and walked arrogantly past soldiers pointing guns at prisoners!

In July 1942 he found himself delivering a message hidden in a bread roll to the chairman of the Jewish Council in the Warsaw Ghetto, Adam Czerniaków. Suddenly the Gestapo arrived, surrounded the building and forced Czerniaków to begin organizing the gathering of Jews at the Umschlagplatz for deportation to the East (in reality death in the concentration camps). Someone gave my father a Star of David armband. He picked up a broom and pretended to clean the toilets while the Gestapo shouted at and beat people in the offices upstairs. He always maintained this was the most frightening experience of his life. If he had been discovered he would have been killed on the spot. Three days later Czerniaków committed suicide when it became obvious that he would win no concessions from the Nazis

Witold also tried to help Anna's family as much as he could. He took in money to enable them to buy food from the Ghetto shops. Stefan asked him to try to get Anna's sister Wanda out as she did not look Jewish. A date was set and a guard bribed, but when she reached the Ghetto gates she said she was too frightened to walk through. The moment was lost. Witold had to keep on walking, and never saw her again. My father told me many other stories, gripping, horrific, insightful, which I will write up fully in my book.

On 19 April 1943 the remarkably brave Warsaw Ghetto Uprising by Jewish Resistance groups broke out. Armed with limited weapons, the insurgents held out until 16 May. They were brutally crushed by Nazi SS units led by SS-Gruppenführer Jürgen Stroop. His final act was the destruction of Warsaw's great synagogue, followed by the obliteration of the entire Warsaw Ghetto. (He was executed for his war crimes in 1953.)

On 1 August 1944 the Polish population rose up, launched the Warsaw Uprising and reclaimed large swathes of the city. Despite limited assistance from Western allies, and no assistance from the Soviet Army on the other bank of the Vistula River, less than a mile away, they held out for 63 days rather

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than the few days they had originally planned. My father fought in the 9th Company of the Home Army (AK) 'Kiliński' Battalion, taking part in the seizing of the Telephone Exchange, and helping protect the front line near the Saski Park. Over 250,000 people were killed, many of whom were civilians.

When they ran out of food, water and weapons they surrendered on Oct 2. All the insurgents were taken prisoner of war and a few days later the entire civilian population of the city was forcibly removed. It was at this point that the pre-meditated and systematic looting and destruction of Warsaw and its cultural heritage began, leaving behind a mass of ruins, where once a thriving capital city stood. Around 85% of the city centre was raised to the ground. This destruction continued right up until Jan 17 1945 when Polish Communist and Soviet forces finally entered the city.

There is plenty of evidence of my father's participation - his stories, diary, official Home Army (AK), POW and British Army records, eye-witness statements, POW dog tags and a medal from the Polish Government in Exile in London. He also kept in contact with other ex-combatants and scouts who took part in the Warsaw Uprising. On 20 August 2011 I attended a gathering marking the 67th anniversary of the battle for the Telephone Exchange and talked to veterans who knew him.

But there are no photos. Except possibly one, a still from a film. In 1987 Channel 4 in the UK produced a series of documentaries called 'The Struggles for Poland', which stirred up controversy in the post WW2 community in Britain. The Federation of Poles in the UK decided to produce a film entitled 'Poland – A European Country' to depict their version of events. It was directed by a Polish émigré film maker, Witold Zadrowski. When my father was shown a rough preliminary version, he recognised a scene showing a wounded German soldier on a stretcher, surrounded by a group of Polish insurgents outside the Telephone Exchange on 20 August 1944. To his amazement the following scene showed himself approaching the group and telling them to leave the prisoner alone as the wounded man did not have long to live. My father remembered this incident and recalled that there were a number of Home Army (AK) film units present. However when the film was finally released this scene had been cut. My father tried to contact Zadrowski in Paris and then later in Poland in order to track down the missing fragment but failed. Zadrowski died in 2005. He also contacted the Sikorski Institute in London but that particular piece of footage did not appear to have been returned.



Witold's wartime driving licence photograph .



Image taken from film footage from the Warsaw Uprising Museum. Film taken just after the battle for the Telephone Exchange on 20 August 1944.

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I have watched almost all known Warsaw Uprising film footage, apart from one missing film in private hands in the USA. During the communist era some of the films were edited for propaganda purposes but have since been restored fully. I have never come across the clip my father told me about again, although I have seen other footage of the Telephone Exchange battle and aftermath, and photos that my father verified were of the German prisoner on the stretcher.

During my time in Warsaw Ryszard Mączewski from the Warsaw 1939 Foundation told me that he was identifying the locations of buildings on short fragments of off-cut film for the Uprising Museum. We spent several hours going through all the Telephone Exchange footage trying to find the missing clip or an image of my father. It was to no avail. The stretcher scene did not feature. However a fragment we looked at showed German POWs standing in a courtyard, hands held above their heads, guarded by resistance soldiers. One of the guards standing in a doorway wearing a pre-WW2 Polish army helmet bore a striking resemblance to the photo of my father in his wartime driving licence. This short clip only a couple of frames long is not yet a positive ID but is undergoing analysis.

The Forgotten 34th Warsaw Scout Troop

I also tracked down my father's scout troop. He could never remember the number. Finding it was not just a fact finding exercise. Scouting was a huge part of his life from when he joined in 1935 until his stroke in 2005. Scouting's focus on self-development, resourcefulness, patriotism, duty and thinking of others shaped not only his ethos, but that of many of the people who took part in the resistance movement. Poignant reminders lie in the section in the Warsaw Uprising Museum on the young scouts who ran the postal service, delivered letters, fought on the front line and provided first aid. There is also a statue of a 'Little Insurgent' in the Old Town in Warsaw.

Witold was inspired by his troop leader, Jerzy Wilhelmi, also an insurgent in 1944. Perhaps it was the scouting ethos that prompted him to share a priceless scrap of bread with a starving Jewish youth during the Warsaw Uprising. Years later at a veteran's reunion in 1994 someone came up to him and said "You shared food and saved my life – thank you." It was that youth, later in life a prosperous and successful adult living in Florida. They had not seen each other for 50 years!

The Prisoner of War Camp in the Forest

After the Warsaw Uprising my father was transported to a POW Camp in Lamsdorf (Stalag VIII-B) in what was then Silesia in Germany. It is now known as Łambinowice in Poland near Opole. Interestingly this is the same camp where my grandfather was imprisoned during World War One. I knew that some of the buildings in which the Home Army (AK) prisoners had been kept was still standing and open to the public so I set out to see this place for myself.

It is a vast sprawling complex which now houses the Polish National POW Museum. Originally it was built as a POW camp for the French prisoners of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870. Since then it has housed Russian prisoners during World War One, British Allied, Polish and Soviet prisoners during World War Two and German prisoners after 1945. The museum has a small display about the camp's history, including details of the horrendous conditions in which the Nazis kept the Soviet prisoners of war (the Soviet Union was not a signatory of the Geneva Convention). The prisoners were put in a

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muddy field and left to fend for themselves, in contrast to the British POWs, who were much better treated. The museum also has models of the camp, a mock-up of prisoners' bunk beds and mementos of former prisoners. I looked around the terrain in which the prison huts sit. It is now mostly forest but several monuments have been erected, including one to the German prisoners who were imprisoned by the Poles after World War Two. A memorial to Home Army (AK) prisoners is located a couple of kilometers from the museum buildings and next to a group of huts surrounded by the original World War Two barbed wire fence. Two huts have been restored. The site was extremely evocative. Being behind the barbed wire on the prisoner's side was a stark reminder that this sort of existence had been reality for thousands of individuals like my father.

The museum staff found the transport records for my father's journeys to Lamsdorf and then POW camps in Bad Sulza (Stalag IX-C) and Ziegenhein (Stalag IX-A). I knew about his final POW camp, Burg Ludwigstein, a castle near Kassel, where he and nine other POWs maintained engineering workshops and carried out labouring work in a school for the sons of high-ranking Nazi officers in the castle. At night, as if in a fairytale, they were incarcerated in the round castle tower. We visited it together in 1996 as it had been a place of sanctuary. After the horrendous conditions of the disease-ridden Stalags, and the war zone that was Warsaw, Ludwigstein was a huge relief. "This place and these people saved my life," my father would often say. "They treated us like human beings." This was the place he was living when the Second World War ended. It has now reverted to its pre-war purpose and is a lovely youth hostel.

During this trip I also hoped to visit the Home Army (AK) Museum in Kraków but it was closed and undergoing refurbishment.

'Joker', 'Super', the Jewish Policeman and the 'Volksdeutsch' who refused to fight

One of the benefits of my WCMT fellowship was the chance to give the Warsaw Uprising Museum and Warsaw 1939 Foundation two bits of information about two of my father's resistance comrades. They met in Italy after Witold had been finally liberated from Burg Ludwigstein by the Americans in 1945. After his release he served with the American Military Police in Nirmsdorf, worked his way from Germany to France, and then travelled to Italy with one of his father Stefan's friends, Józef Czapski, a well known artist, to join Polish forces, the Second Corps, in Italy.

One of Witold's comrades was Jurek Pieńkowski, a huge figure of a man, whose resistance code name was Joker. In 1943 while on a resistance training exercise near Wilanów in Warsaw he was caught in possession of radio-transmitting equipment by Nazi soldiers. They took him to the notorious Pawiak Prison and then the Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz as a political prisoner. With some outside help he managed to escape through the sewers in the Buna factory in Auschwitz 3 with two other prisoners. After an arduous journey on foot back to Warsaw he had his prison number burnt off and hidden under a plaster cast. He rejoined the resistance and took part in the Warsaw Uprising. Like my father he ended up in Italy then England in the Polish Resettlement Corps (19 Komp. Warszt. Camp 657) in Hardwick Hall near Chesterfield. Unlike Witold he decided to return to Poland, where he was arrested several times by the communist authorities, and had a hard life.

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He and Witold lost touch and only made contact again in 1993. During a visit to us in Sheffield he told the story of his remarkable escape from Auschwitz, which Witold recorded. The tape lay in a drawer until I re-discovered it after his and my father's deaths, prompted by an article in the Warsaw monthly historical magazine 'Stolica'. I saw Joker, distinctive as always, staring out at me from a photo of a group of young people in 1942. I contacted the author, Krzysztof Jaszczynski from the Warsaw 1939 Foundation website, and gave him a copy of the tape when I was in Warsaw in 2011 to help him with his research. The full story will be published and broadcast in 2012.

Witold's other comrade was Janusz Kulesza, whose code name was Super. This was inspired by his work in a radio factory with 'Superhead' radio receivers! Like my father he ended up in England in the Polish Resettlement Corps in Hardwick Hall, Chesterfield, and moved to Sheffield, where he took the name John Kenning. When his daughter was sorting out his possessions after his death in 2010 she came across a beautiful illustrated handwritten diary of his experiences in the Warsaw Uprising and as a POW. She gave it to me to translate into English. With her permission I passed on a copy to the Warsaw Uprising Museum when I was in Warsaw in 2011. They used it to shed light on unknown episodes of the Uprising. They also pieced together information about his unit called 'Chwaty', who used radio transmitting equipment and loudspeakers to broadcast appeals to German soldiers to lay down their arms. The Warsaw 1939 Foundation team found several photos of 'Super' with his megaphone.

It has proved more difficult to find out what happened to two of my fathers' closest school friends. Jerzy B was Jewish and became a policeman in the Warsaw Ghetto. We do not know what happened to him and my search through dozens of lists of Jewish policemen in the Jewish Historical Institute proved fruitless. Michał M belonged to a family who claimed they were 'Volksdeutsch' – ethnic Germans living outside Germany – in 1939. This gave them privileges, such as trading with the Warsaw Ghetto, and access to a radio. He avoided conscription to the Wehrmacht but reportedly suffered ill health after the war and died in the 1950s.

Survivors' lives after 1945

- *Stefan, Anna and Lilka* – after the Warsaw Uprising they were forcibly removed to Germany to a labour camp at Falkensee, a sub-camp of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, to build Templehof airport in Berlin. After they returned to Warsaw in May 1945 they found the house they had lived in was a burnt out shell. Stefan, building on his socialist past, secured a job with the Investigations Department of the Railway Police. He retired in the 1950s and died of TB in 1956. Anna died in 1958. My father told me that Lilka was not permitted by the authorities to study medicine and ended up as a geological surveyor working for Warsaw City Council. She suffered from breast cancer and pioneered an organisation and shop called Amazonka to provide advice, prosthetics and clothing to women with breast cancer. She also wrote recited and broadcast poetry. She died in 1989, leaving a husband who died in 2002 and a son, my cousin Andzrej born in 1956 shortly before Stefan's death.

Anna's family - by an amazing coincidence the Jewish chaplain for Durham University in 2011 was Rabbi Mati Kos, born and raised in Warsaw. He told me that his mother had worked in the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw for many years and suggested that I talk to Jan Jagelski, an expert in Warsaw Ghetto photographs. When I finally met him in Warsaw we discussed Anna's family. I said I didn't know what had happened to them. He said "You do know what happened". He was right. As my grandfather's 1950 questionnaire in the National Archives (Twentieth Century) subsequently revealed it appears that her two brothers, sister and parents were shot in the Ghetto in 1943 before it was razed to the ground.

- *Carmen Achmarańska's daughter Helena* – apparently she fled to Warsaw after her mother's murder. I am liaising with Oskar Koszutski, the retired curator of the Iwazkiewicz Museum in Podkowa Leśna, about ways of following this up.
- *Eugenia Szablewska* – my father recalled a telephone call from America in 1930s. It appears that Eugenia had returned to the Ukraine with her mother Stefanida, grown up, married a Soviet diplomat and used the opportunity of a trip to the USA to ring her father Stefan in Warsaw. No further contact was ever made. She probably never knew that her identity was used by someone else and helped save lives. I am planning to pursue archives in Poltava in the Ukraine in order to find out if I can trace her and unearth another branch of the family.
- *The Jewish people my grandfather helped* – it is very difficult to trace them. Secrecy was the key to survival. According to my father's tapes one was the child of a jeweller who had made an ornate sceptre for Marshal Józef Piłsudski, and the other was a pharmacist from a town near Warsaw. As a result of the radio interview I gave on Polish Radio, which included a clip from my father's tapes, I was contacted by the pharmacist's grandson. It transpires that he was not Jewish, but was involved via the Home Army (AK) in organising shelter for Jewish people. I am planning to dig deeper, and also to go back through all the paperwork and correspondence from my aunt Lilka in my father's boxes to see if any hints emerge.

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- *Dr Margulies/Michał Kowalski* – it is proving very difficult to trace what happened to him. He survived the war.
- *Witold* - after the war, while he was in Italy, he managed to make contact with his father and family via the Red Cross. His relief at knowing they were alive was tinged with sadness at the memory of the bitter argument he had with his father the last time he saw him. His father had wanted him to pretend to be a civilian in order to avoid being taken prisoner of war. He insisted on revealing himself as an insurgent along with all his comrades and becoming a POW. He never saw his father and stepmother again. His sister visited him, my mother and me in Britain on a couple of occasions. His first visit back to Poland was for his sister's funeral in 1989 shortly after political change was underway. Despite his success in Britain he suffered from depression. He tried to put it to positive use by taking part in research into mental health issues with Polish war veterans and co-writing a book. He also attended the 50th and 60th anniversaries of the Warsaw Uprising. When he died he was buried in the Powązki cemetery in Warsaw, amongst his comrades from the Uprising, with a full military funeral. Among his papers I found an obituary for my grandfather published in a Warsaw newspaper. It named those who were saddened by Stefan's passing, his wife, daughter, son in law and grandson, and Witold, referred to not by name, but as his '**absent son**'.

Dissemination

- Updated my father's biography on the Warsaw Uprising Museum's website http://www.1944.pl/historia/powstancze-biogramy/Witold_Szablewski
- Featured in a Polish National Radio documentary November 2011 <http://www.polskieradio.pl/80/1007/Artykul/475600,Podroz-w-przeszosc-Urszula-ZoltowskaTomaszewska>
- Contributed to a Polish National Radio documentary about Jurek Pieńkowski's escape from Auschwitz broadcast in February 2012.
<http://www.polskieradio.pl/80/1007/Artykul/345981,Ucieczka-Jokera>
- Used elements of this story when talking to a Scout group from Stara Miłosna, near Warsaw in September 2011.
- Featured in WCMT press notice January 2012.
- Gave talks about my WCMT experiences at St Aidan's College and St Chad's College in Durham on 29 February and 8 March. Further talks planned in Durham for summer 2012.
- Presented a poster at a Durham University Celebrating Success awards dinner at University College in Durham on 7 March 2012.
- Will send links to this report on the WCMT website to a wide range of organisations and individuals who have voiced an interest in my project.
- Will continue to give talks to Polish scouts, Polish children and children of Polish origins about their heritage.
- Will offer to give talks to young people in secondary schools in Durham from autumn 2012 onwards
- Will continue to work on my book 'The Absent Son and the Missing Daughter' (working title).

Recommendations

I hope this report and my talks inspire people to find out more about Poland and its history.

Books to read include:

- Waclaw Zagorski, *Seventy Days*, Panther, (1959). ASIN: B0042K64J0
- Diane Ackerman, *The Zookeeper's Wife*, W.W.Norton, (2007). ISBN 0393061728
- Gunnar S. Paulsson, *Secret City: The Hidden Jews of Warsaw, 1940-1945*, New Haven: Yale University Press, (2002). ISBN 978-0-300-09546-3
- Andrzej K. Kunert (ed), *Poles – Jews 1939-45*, RYTM, (2001). ISBN:83-88794-23-X.
- Kazimierz Moczarski, *Conversations with an Executioner*, Prentice-Hall, (1981). ISBN 0131719181
- Marek Edelman, *Resisting the Holocaust: Fighting Back in the Warsaw Ghetto*, Ocean Press, (2004). ISBN 1-876175-52-4
- Marian Apfelbaum, *Two Flags; Return to the Warsaw Ghetto*, Gefen Publishing House, (2007). ISBN 9789652293565
- Norman Davies, *Rising '44. The Battle for Warsaw*, Pan Books, (2004). ISBN 0-333-90568-7
- Norman Davies, *Heart of Europe: The Past in Poland's Present*, Oxford University Press, USA, (2001). New edition ISBN 0-19-280126-0
- Witold Szablewski & Michelle Wilmslow, *Polish community cultural awareness: information and learning pack*, published by Sheffield Libraries, (2000). ISBN 0863212344
- Witold Pilecki, *The Auschwitz Volunteer: Beyond Bravery*, (to be published in 2012).
- Jack Mayer, *Life in a Jar: The Irena Sendler Project*. ISBN 098411131X
- Eric Heuvel, *A Family Secret*, published by the Anne Frank House, Resistance Museum of Friesland, and Macmillan's Children's Books, (2009) ISBN 0374422656

This last book, a graphic novel, depicts the complexities of courage, resistance and survival in the Netherlands during WW2 brilliantly. I would love to see a Polish version produced one day.

Films to watch include:

- *In Darkness* (2011) by Agnieszka Holland
- *The Pianist* (2002) by Roman Polanski
- Andrzej Wajda's Trilogy of War films: *A Generation* (1954), *Kanał* (1956) and *Ashes and Diamonds* (1958)

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Websites to visit include:

- <http://www.Warszawa1939.pl> (*a growing collection of pre-war photos of Warsaw*)
- <http://www.warsawuprising.com/> (*a website in English about the Warsaw Uprising*)
- <http://www.spp-pumst.org/> (*The Polish Underground Movement (1939-1945) Study Trust*)
- <http://www.polishresistance-ak.org/21%20Article.htm> (*info from the Polish Underground Movement (1939-1945) Study Trust in London on the role of Polish Scouting in the Resistance movement*)
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2DrXgj1NwN8&feature=related> (*a brilliant animation showing 1000 years of Polish History in 8 minutes, which was created by Tomasz Bagiński for the 2010 EXPO in Shanghai*)

Places to visit in Warsaw (mainly) include:

- Warsaw Uprising Museum www.muzeum1939.pl - on *Ul. Grzybowska*
- Czerniaków Mound - *a monument to the Warsaw Uprising built on a huge mound created from the rubble of Warsaw on Ul. Bartycka*
- Warsaw Uprising Monument - on *Plac. Kraśińskich*
- Memorial to Heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto - on *Ul. M. Anielewicza*
- The last remaining piece of the Warsaw Ghetto wall - *at Ul. Żłota 62*
- Former Gestapo HQ, now the Mausoleum of Struggle and Martyrdom (a branch of the Museum of Independence) - *25 Al. Szucha*
- Museum of the Pawiak Prison (a branch of the Museum of Independence) - *Ul. Dzielna 24/26*
- Museum of the History of Polish Jews www.jewishmuseum.org.pl/en/cms/home-page/ - *due to open in April 2012 on Ul. M. Anielewicza*
- Jewish Historical Institute www.jewishinstitute.org.pl/en/home/index/0.html - on *Ul. Tłomackie 3/5*
- The new Museum of Second World War in **Gdańsk** www.muzeum1939.pl - *due to open in 2014*
- The Home Army (AK) Museum in **Kraków** www.muzeum-ak.pl
- The Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in **London** www.pism.co.uk
- Central Prisoner of War Museum in **Łambinowice-Opole** www.cmjw.pl

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This last museum is not an easily accessible or comfortable place to visit. However it is worth it as it really needs support. It is a significant attempt to bring to life the fate of POW over the ages, something which we do not often consider when thinking of the consequences of war. While writing this report I watched 'Escape to Victory', admittedly not a serious film, about British POWs and a football match. I was gratified to note that the fact that the Slavs who were POWs had been particularly badly treated was included.

Conclusion

The story which I investigated in the course of my time travelling detective work is not unique. It is not the story of those in power making the decisions and calling the shots (or firing the shots). It is the story of an ordinary family's survival, a story in microcosm which illustrates aspects of the history of central Europe over the course of the twentieth century, and which resonates with truths which are still important today

Our story touches on the occupation and partition of Poland 1793-1918, the resilience of Polish identity and culture, the First World War, the gaining of Polish independence, the Second World War, the Holocaust and political migration to the West while Poland was dominated by the Soviet Union. There are also universal themes, the idealism of youth, the tiredness of age, split loyalties, truths and half truths, survival, longing, regrets.

However this report only scratches the surface. The risk of family research is that we play up the positive and play down the negative. When I started I was worried about what I might find. My cousin and I discussed the possibility of unearthing information we would rather not know. We knew that Stefan must have had to make difficult decisions during his life. We decided that I should go ahead.

Who are we to judge what he did or did not do in incredibly complicated circumstances? How we would have acted if we were in his shoes? The more I investigate the more I realise we cannot judge with 21st century eyes, and that earlier generations were compromised by circumstances in ways we will never understand. I also believe that as the last witnesses to World War Two die it is incumbent on the next generation to remember and tell their stories, to educate and inform.

The destruction of Warsaw in 1944-45, and the separate directions my family members took after that were clearly events which shaped us all. The world continues to change and movements of people, genocides and political ideologies which do not allow self determination and freedom continue to disrupt lives and shatter dreams. The labeling of people as 'other' for whatever reason is often the beginning of such tragedies. We must be watchful. Although we cannot change the past, we can learn from it, to make the future better.

If this is an extraordinary story I still have another to investigate! My mother's family originated from Poland and the Ukraine. Her father's father was the last in a long line of Russian Orthodox priests. He was buried alive and murdered in the Ukraine during the Bolshevik revolution. But first I need to finish this story about 'the absent son'.

Appendix

Institutions visited

Warsaw Uprising Museum	www.1944.pl
Warsaw 1939 Foundation	www.warszawa1939.pl
Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute	www.jewishinstitute.org.pl
Museum of Wola District of Warsaw	www.muzeumwoli.mhw.pl
National Archives (20 th Century) City of Warsaw	www.warszawa.ap.gov.pl
Central Prisoner of War Museum in Łambinowice	www.cmjw.pl
Institute of National Remembrance	www.ipn.gov.pl
20 th Century Archives (Archiwum Akt Nowych)	www.aan.gov.pl
Central Army Archives	www.caw.wp.mil.pl
Powązki Cemetery (Former military)	www.cmentarzekomunalne.com.pl/cmentarz_wojs.html
Russian Orthodox Parish, Wola, Warsaw	www.prawoslawie.pl
Iwaskiewicz Muzeum, Podkowa Leśna	www.stawisko.pl

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All the other dedicated professionals too numerous to mention by name in the Warsaw Uprising Museum, the National Archives - Twentieth Century (Archiwum Akt Nowych), the Central Military Archive (Centralny Archiwum Wojskowy) in Rembertów, the Central Prisoner of War Museum (Centralne Muzeum Jeńców Wojennych) in Łambinowice, the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute, the Museum of the Wola District of Warsaw and the Warsaw City Archives (Archiwum Miasta Stołecznego Warszawy).

The inspiring veterans of the 'Kiliński' Battalion of the Home Army (AK) from the Warsaw Uprising and of the 'Szare Szeregi' (the clandestine scouting organization during the Nazi occupation and the Warsaw Uprising).

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All those in Durham, Sheffield, London and Polish Scouting around the world who have inspired, supported or simply been interested in this work.

My wife and children for being brilliant!

DISCLAIMER: Please note that I am not a professional historian and that this report is a snapshot of historical events through the eyes of one family. It does not in any way attempt to give a comprehensive overview. However it does try to convey the complexity of survival during tumultuous times.