

Transcript

Anna begun this interview reading her story describing her father's experiences as a prisoner of war and her family's life after the war. This story is attached separately.

00:15:27 Speaker 2

Is there anything that you've included in the story that he didn't tell you that you've heard from from somebody else about his experiences?

00:15:34 Speaker 1

No, I haven't included it in what I've been writing, but there is lots of lots of, obviously, there's lots more information which came from other members of the Polish community in Yorkshire, and things that my mother told me as well. Yes.

00:15:56 Speaker 2

You said that your brother's looking at doing a family tree and looking into his past.

00:15:59 Speaker 1

My son.

00:16:00 Speaker 2

Your son. I'm sorry, your son. Has anybody in your family ever managed to make contact with his brothers and sisters or any of his Polish family?

00:16:09 Speaker 1

Yes, yes. And I've we've all been to Poland, I think except my younger sister, Nella [?]. We've all been. I went with my brother two weeks after my dad died and only before he died himself. My brother was killed on a motorbike. And it was still Communist then. So it was utterly harrowing. And we went back to the farm and we met all his brothers who were very old by then and also very, very damaged by the war physically and mentally again. And they lived in even worse poverty. They didn't have toothbrushes or underwear or painkillers or anything. I mean everything we took, even all our clothes and our toothbrushes and my makeup, everything, we just left everything there and we just came back with what we stood up in because they didn't have anything. My godmother gave her auntie Zosia her bra. That was how desperate they were. Yeah, and my two older sisters, Christina and Maria, they went about three years later, together, and I financed one of them going because she didn't have any money. She'd just separated from her husband. And so they went. So we did all finally meet all those people. And there was one significant thing that happened during my dad's lifetime. The Soviets let one of my uncles out, my youngest uncle Teddy. So my my father's youngest brother, they let him come to England for nearly a month, I think it was, because they had five children and they knew that he would come back. They didn't let anybody out unless they had a way of making sure they came back. And so my father had about a month on the farm in the summer with his younger brother, who was his favourite, and he was like a different person. He was astonishing. He was so happy and they talked all the time and they cried and they hugged and they did all the haymaking together. And my uncle Teddy was so different to my dad. He was very happy and funny and loving. He used to sing to us and sit us on his knee, and all kinds of wonderful things. And while he was in England, he and my father built a cabin in the back garden of the farm, in the backyard of the farm. A full-size one, like a Polish house, out of the wood that my dad had accumulated over 15 years for just that purpose. Nobody knew why he had these massive piles of beams everywhere. And he built it exactly as they built in Poland with dovetail corners hacked out of

the the beams, and all piled up, and then, you know. There are accounts of exactly how you do it in *Little House on the Prairie*. Yeah [?] built one exactly the same.

00:19:09 Speaker 1

And then then he went back to Poland at the appointed time and we never saw him again, until after my father died. And not long after we went to Poland, my uncle Teddy moved to America because the Communists lost their power. And my other two uncles who were a lot older died. They'd died by then. So a lot of the Demkowiczs and the Januses [?], because we have two different family names, they are all over the world now. Lots of them in America. Lots of them have a great deal of money and have risen very high in their professions. A lot of them are hugely academic and travelled.

00:19:53 Speaker 1

So my my son recently found a man who has who is called Demkowicz-Dobrejanski, and he is a professor at the university in Canada, but that was in the COVID year, and my son hasn't actually established any further contact with him. Although they mean to, obviously.

00:20:11 Speaker 2

So he kept the second half of the last name?

00:20:13 Speaker 1

Yeah, my my father had two names, neither of which his brothers got, because my father was first-born. He took his mother's original family name before they could stop him, because my grandmother, my father's mother, came from a very smart family, and they owned thousands and thousands of acres of forest and farmland and towns, but she married a peasant farmer. She ran away from home, married a peasant farmer, my granddad, who was illiterate, and and lost everything. And her family just her family abandoned her. And so she named my father before her family realised what she was doing. So the other boys were just called the equivalent of Johnson in English. Janus. But when he came to England he lost the kind of smart part of his name because people just couldn't be bothered.

00:21:09 Speaker 2

Yeah. Yeah, it was a the hindrance, almost, rather than a societal boost, having it, yeah. I'm I'm I'm probably displaying my ignorance here, because I know Tod has got there's a there was a large Ukrainian population post-war, refugees and... and I'm just curious how [...] you were saying that your father was very isolated, and the Polish community were very isolated. Was there there was no sort of...

00:21:47 Speaker 1

Interaction? Not really.

00:21:45 Speaker 2

Yeah, I don't know if it's because of the why the Polish were here or why the Ukrainians were here, like, if it was a different way that they, if one group was accepted more than another? Like, I don't know what the dynamics of those relationships were.

00:21:59 Speaker 1

Well the Poles came after the war, and obviously so did the Ukrainians, but the Poles came, the male Poles anyway, came because they were in the British Army. So they automatically came here. They did have a choice. They were giving a choice as to where they wanted to go because they couldn't go home. And a lot of people went to America, Canada, various places in Europe. People went back to Italy, where they had spent some of the war. And my dad actually wanted to go to Canada. They had to have somebody in one of these other countries who would vouch for them and say that they

would support them until they got on their feet. And my father wrote to somebody, some relation in Canada, saying that he wanted to come there, it was a woman, and she refused him. So he came to England because somebody had said to him that the north of England was like the Carpathian Mountains, which indeed it is. I've seen both!

00:22:57 Speaker 2

Well yeah, you'd be more qualified than me to say!

00:22:58 Speaker 1

But however all these people ended up in Britain, the Ukrainians, the Germans, they tended to keep apart for reasons to do with the war again. The Poles hated the Ukrainians because when the Germans looked as if they were going to win, the Ukrainians came across the border into Poland and they murdered people, including all the people in the village where my father was born, because they thought it would be a good thing for them when the Germans took over.

00:23:31 Speaker 2

Yeah. 'Look what we did.'

00:23:32 Speaker 1

Yeah. So so they were not big favourites and obviously nor were the Russians. Obviously the Germans weren't, although my father hated the Russians much more than Germans.

00:23:42 Speaker 2

Well, it makes sense because of his personal experience, yeah.

00:23:42 Speaker 1

Because they had taken him and they had taken his country eventually. Yep. So they had separate, there was a Ukrainian club, there was a Polish club. I don't know about other nationalities. They were much smaller than, the poles and Ukrainians were the biggest factions, you know, in in England, in the north of England,

00:23:57 Speaker 2

Yeah, I think we didn't have any Belgian refugees in World War 2. They were World War 1 that they came to Tod, that there was an influx, yeah. Yeah, I was just curious about that because I didn't know if it was, I didn't know if there would be a camaraderie in oppression, or if there was more, but yeah, as you say, it's a more complicated dynamic than just, well they're both separate, it's well yeah, but also there was this other thing happening. That's made me lose track of the other question. I should have scribbled them down as I was thinking of them, but I thought 'They're giving an answer, and I won't!'

00:24:38 Speaker 1

It was a huge Polish community in Tod. And nearly everybody worked in the mills, including all our godparents, they all worked in the mills, or **signally** [?], they worked at Acre Mill where everybody got asbestosis. So they all died as a consequence.

00:24:52 Speaker 2

Ohh God yeah. I was thinking I didn't know there was, I was slow in catching up what that meant, but yes.

00:25:00 Speaker 1

My godfather, Uncle Boris, I can't even remember his last name. He was absolutely barking mad and I was terrified of him. And he and his wife, Kasia, they both worked at Acre Mill, and they both died of asbestosis and they eventually got hundreds of thousands of pounds compensation, but he was already dead by then and she was in the home, and died shortly afterwards, so they never realised any of this newfound wealth that they were given. But the Polish club was a massive thing, and we

spent Christmases and Easter there. We also went to Polish school for a short while on Saturday mornings, but it didn't work out because a lot of the boys who went to school, it was held at the Polish club, they were teenagers, and we had a very young, beautiful Polish woman as a teacher and it was a very bad combination. So it didn't last. I did learn the Polish alphabet and a lot of very basic words. So now, even now, so long after my father's death, and I've had very little contact with Polish people, I can still understand exactly what people are talking about but I cannot join in. Because I haven't the conversational skills. But I know what they're talking about, and I know what their opinion is on any given subject that comes up, and I can say please and thank you, and I can ask for different foods and comment on the weather. So I can get by. And when I was in Poland, I discovered I could almost speak it, whereas my brother was completely dumb all the time we were there.

00:26:36 Speaker 2

Did you learn more from the school than you did from at home?

00:26:40 Speaker 1

No, I learnt from listening to my father speaking to all the other Polish people, either at the Polish club or in other people's houses. Nobody really visited us because we were well out of the valley, virtually nobody had a car, and a lot of his friends were in places like Manchester, Rochdale, Halifax Bradford, and generally speaking he went on his own to be with his own kind of people really. But occasionally he took us with him, mostly me and my brother, and we used to sit on the tables and listen. So yeah.

00:27:12 Speaker 2

OK right. I wasn't sure how much was spoken at home, because you were saying your dad's English was never really that good but.

00:27:19 Speaker 1

Nothing, because my mother well my my parents didn't understand each other. My mother had an incredibly broad Southern Ireland accent. She was she came from Tipperary, and my father had virtually no English, and they misunderstood each other constantly, which was a massive source of trouble. And it meant that you were both much lonelier than they would have been had they married somebody from their own nation. Particularly my father.

00:27:45 Speaker 2

Or even just not moved to where they lived, like just being around other nearer to other people.

00:27:49 Speaker 1

Yes. If they'd worked in the mills, they would have learned English. My godmother who came from Poland after the war as well and had no English, she spoke quite good English with a very heavy accent. Both Polish and northern England, so it her accent was bizarre to say the least! But she understood everything and you could have a real conversation with her and laugh and joke with her, and that was because she worked in the mills. She also lipread, which they all did in the mills.

00:28:18 Speaker 2

Yes, yeah, because it was so noisy. Yeah.

00:28:21 Speaker 1

So I often wonder whether people in the mills learned to lipread, learned a lip-read language to do with mill-working, even though they couldn't speak English. Do you know what I mean

00:28:33 Speaker 2

Well I was I was thinking about this. Like it's hard to imagine learning another language, but also learning to lipread another language. That's quite an achievement to be able to do that.

00:28:41 Speaker 1

Yes. Yes And if you can't hear what's being said, what they're mouthing at you can't ever be made into language, but it may be that you can understand it. So somebody says 'Do you want a cup of tea?' and you go, and they go. Then you know that that noise, 'Do you want a cup of tea', that movement of the lips, means 'I'm offering you cup of tea'. And I often wonder about this. You need a you'd need a linguist, a well-informed linguist, to to fathom that out, I think.

00:29:15 Speaker 2

I really I want to keep talking about that but [?] Yeah, that's fascinating.

00:29:28 Speaker 1

My father didn't talk about, while we were children, he did not talk about what happened to him during the war ever to us. But obviously, he'd talked to my mother about it when he first met her and before he got married and after they got married and she told him what happened to her in the orphanage in Ireland, they were the most unfit, unsuited couple. Because my mother was brought up by nuns. She virtually never met any men until she was 16, and then she came out of there, all the other children went to be nuns, all the other girls, and she changed her mind at the last minute because she wanted children. So she came to England as a companion to an elderly woman in Halifax. And she met my father at a dance. And he was so handsome, and he danced so beautifully, that even though she couldn't understand anything he said, she was totally smitten with him immediately. And it was the beginning of another dreadful life for her after the orphanage, and and a very short life.

00:30:37 Speaker 2

Yeah, I was gonna say she died really young.

00:30:39 Speaker 1

She did, but she did most of the farm work because my father had so many physical problems and he was a shocking tyrannical bully with everybody. So she did most of the work and at one point she had five small children, 3000 chickens and 20 cattle [?] by hand night and morning. And that was why having a bad back came about and that was why she died of it, because her back was so damaged from carrying bales and buckets of water that she just died on the operating table. There was no real account made of it. So she was 48; very considerably younger than I am now, nearly 20 years younger than I am now. And my dad was only 69. But although he still didn't have totally grey hair and he was still handsome, he was absolutely knackered physically. So and he died very tragically, because he'd just sold the farm and moved back to Halifax where, and he wanted me to come with him. And I said no, you know, you buy a a house in Todmorden and I'll come and live with you there. Because I was a nanny living with the people I worked for, and I knew I couldn't stay there forever, and I tried to persuade him to buy a little house in Tod and I could stay in Tod and work here where everybody was and my brother was, but he wouldn't have it. He was fixated about going back to Halifax, where presumably he'd first been happy in England. And he went back. He bought a brand new house, not 100 yards from the old house where he'd first lived, and he was off for about 18 months, and he didn't get to know anybody. He came to visit once a week or so where I was a nanny. And he died in the street, and because he couldn't speak English, he couldn't make anybody who tried to help him what the problem was. And he was outside the house and he had the drugs to jump his heart again. And nobody understood and so he died in the ambulance on the way to hospital. And he had no identification, so I didn't find out for four days that he was dead when somebody found a letter in his pocket, which was to an estate agent. It was a legal document saying that the estate agent was suing him for the money for the sale of the farm, which my dad was

refusing to give him, and it was that estate agent who was in a massive financial battle with my dad who came to tell me that he was dead. And I wouldn't let him in and I didn't believe him. And he just he just pushed pushed past me into the house and said 'Sit down, because you have to hear because I have no one else to tell'. So that was how I discovered that my dad was dead. But I did very happily, unlike all my siblings, I all three of my family who are dead, my mother and my father and my brother, I saw all of them. I was the last person to see them. And in all of their cases, the last thing I said to them was 'I love you'. My mum in her hospital bed and my dad when he came to see me where I was a nanny. And he said 'I'm old and nobody cares.' And I said to him 'I love you'. And my brother, I hadn't seen my brother for a year because we'd had a falling out. And my sister persuaded me to go and see him at work. And the day after that, he was killed on his motorbike going to work. And he said to me, 'You look after yourself' because I was heavily pregnant with my first baby. So I I directly had a better finale with my dead family members than any of my siblings, which I'm glad about. I wish they had had it, but I'm glad that somebody had it. And I'm very glad that I got to know my dad as a different person.

00:34:46 Speaker 2

Yeah, you got to see him sort of, I don't wanna say unshackled because that makes him sound like his family were shackles but he he finally didn't have that burden, whatever that burden of everything was, it was, yeah.

00:34:54 Speaker 1

That that's right. That's right. But I do I do also acknowledge that what happened to him that made him change was that, when my mother died, we'd all left home by then, apart from my younger sister Nella, who had a terrible time of it, and after my mother died, he just had nobody to bully. He had nobody to vent his fury on. So he just deflated. He just calmed down and the real person came through, instead of all that all that absolute fury that he felt all the time. And the other thing that is worth saying about him and my relationship with him was that, even as a child, although I was terrified of him and I hated him, and I don't remember him ever showing any affection or kindness or consideration, I always understood that he couldn't help it, and my mother used to tell us that. She used to say 'Your dad can't help it. He's ill because he had a terrible time in the war. You can't imagine'. So I always tried to make excuses for him. A couple of my sisters were very angry with me about that because they always maintained that he killed my mother, which indirectly was true. And also they're very hostile because I went spent three years visiting him, and spent time with him, and I liked it, and they didn't like that either. So, and as you know, I don't see my other sisters. I see one of them occasionally, but all of it, all of this animosity that there is between us goes back to this. It's a direct result of my father's experiences in the war and what happened to him and the way he meted it out to us. Because he had no other way of venting his anger. And it was sad, but it happened to millions of children like me. Probably all over the world.

00:36:51 Speaker 2

His trauma, inherited trauma type thing, yeah. It's

00:36:55 Speaker 1

And if he could have gone back after the war his life would have been completely different, if the Soviets hadn't taken Poland. His life would have been a success story because he was educated, intelligent, came from a good background.

00:37:09 Speaker 2

Good-looking, charismatic.

101977 TOD012 Anna Demkowicz Todmorden, 24/11/2023

00:37:11 Speaker 1

Very good-looking. All of that. And he would have been a lovely man. He would have been a lovely man.