

Anna Rankowicz, born to Janusz Karol Rankowicz-Debrzanski<sup>ski</sup> and Annie O'Flynn in 1958 at IXX General Hospital. I'm the middle child of 5 - 4 girls + one boy. We lived at Gable End Farm, Cross Stone Rd, Todmorden, a hill farm on the moorline opposite Stodley Pike, which saw the most vicious kinds of weather in winter - no electricity due to ice on the overhead lines and no water when the searings froze in the ground or dried up the heat. The farmhouse was late 18th century with no heating, loose pieces of thin glass in the windows, terrible damp and a leaking roof. We had 17 acres of very steep, poor land; boggy in parts, heavy clayey soil, swept most of the time by vicious winds all year round. We were extremely poor; everything in the house, everything we wore, was second hand. My father had been a farmer, and we were mostly off rabbits and fowls which he shot, with veg he grew in a huge garden. There was no time or point in growing flowers.

Janusz Karol Rankowicz (he was persuaded to drop the 'Debrzanski' when he came to England, where people were unwilling to make the effort to pronounce or remember the true names of these 'foreigners'. Most of them became JOE POLE, an old Englishman once told me) was born in the village of Dobrze in Poland's bottom right hand corner of the map, just a few miles from the Ukrainian border to the south and the Russian border to the east. He too was born on a farm in a heavily forested area; one of 4 boys, he was the eldest, a position of respect and importance. He hunted bears + wolves in the forests and skied 7 miles to school. He was highly intelligent and extremely creative - could build, make, draw, anything. All my creative skills come from him. He was very well liked and admired as a young man, and was extremely handsome, with film star good looks - dark skin and jet black hair. In the army, he was a sergeant at 24; I have a photograph of him in uniform, looking grave and very beautiful.

The family were, of course, devoutly Catholic. I don't know where my father was educated, but in the Polish community of Todmorden he was held in high regard and his advice and opinions sought on all subjects. He was a fully trained mechanic and engineer by the time he arrived in the North of England, ~~coming~~ into the South, spending his first few years there.

His situation at the outbreak of war when Poland was invaded by Germany is not clear to me - whether he was still in the army or not - but he said to me, when he was an old man, that he was at their farm visiting his mother when the Russians came over the border and

He developed mental health problems which were little understood, and was diagnosed at some point with Paranoid-Schizophrenia. This caused ~~long~~ periods of black depression, sudden mood swings, fits of extreme violence + irrefragable temper. He imagined insults and offences where there were none from his own young family, and domestic violence was frequent + extreme. Along with this + as a direct result of the malnutrition of the Soviet Camp, he developed heart problems, Rheumatoid Arthritis and, eventually, chronic Diabetes, a few years before his death at the age of 69 for which he self-administered daily abdominal injections for the remainder of his life.

My father <sup>for</sup> pined for his country, his mother and brothers all still in Poland, and never to be seen again in his remaining 30 years of British residency.

He - and we - lived a life of almost total isolation from English society, mixing only with other Poles at Christmas and Easter, at the Polish Club on Rochdale Rd in Todmorden or their houses down in the Valley. All the Polish people we knew were very poor, like us, spoke little English because of ghettoisation and self-isolation and worked in lowly occupations for the rest of their lives, looked down on by the indigenous population who saw them as foreigners, as strangers, as interlopers and peasants. Like my father, most of them had chronic physical + mental health conditions which further diminished them in the eyes of the average, ignorant, small Northern town, working class ~~capital~~ Yorkshire man.

He possessed an 'Aliens passport', a kind of identity card which, for the first few years of his life here, he had to present at the Police Station each month (the reason for this is unclear to me, as are many of the facts and details of his life in Poland, in the army, and in Britain).

Being a farmer meant he was further disadvantaged by not having to mix with any actual English people. This meant that his grasp + use of the language was extremely poor. His inability to communicate frustrated him, but there was no time for any kind of education; life was already full and demanding.

He bought the Farm somewhere around the 5th year of his residency here, having spent perhaps 3 years in Halifax working as an employee in one of the local mills. He bought a small house on Browning Ave. in 'Siddal', married my mother because she was pregnant with their first child - though I think that it was a true marriage of love at the outset; my mother loved him deeply + went on doing so, despite his violence + tyranny over her and us. When she was dying in hospital at the age of 48 her only concern was for her husband, ill and alone on the farm. (Go and see your father) she said to me (he's very poorly, and doesn't like being alone) when I said, Oh, suggest him, she said, Don't talk about him like that - show some respect. She was 20 years younger than him, from an Irish Orphanage and as she said, ~~horrible~~ (Cecilia de C...

their traumatised digestive systems, and many people died as a consequence of this. At the time, never having been seen before in Europe, it was not understood that too much, too quickly, would kill the ravaged skeletal frames of these survivors of the Siberian camps. My father, who at some point in his earlier life had decided, medical training (possibly in the Polish Army before the war) ate little and often, and tried to get others to do the same. 'But', he said, 'Nobody listens, so they die'. These survivors, my father among them, went on to fully recover - so it seemed at the time - and they duly became members of 'Anders Army', the Polish section of the British Army, and were put into khaki uniforms + shipped or trucked all over Europe, the middle East and Africa where they fought like tigers, always with the notion of defeating the enemy and freeing their own country from oppression so that they could go home. My father fought in major battles at strategically important places such as Tobruk and Monte Casino, during the remainder of the war. He was a 'big-gunner' operating, repairing and firing from up to 3 miles behind the front lines of battle, a piece of solid iron artillery as big as a row of Tothmorden terraced houses. I have a photograph of my father standing on the carriage of his gun, dwarfed by its towering formidable mass of green metal, the barrel of which was several times his own height in length. They literally pounded the Germans into the ground, Monte-Casino being the most notable + concentrated bombardment - the Poles succeeded where the British and Americans had previously failed. When told to cease firing, the Poles continued, taking out their fury on this massive edifice of solid rock + a veritable mountain into which the Germans had tunnelled a fortress ~~which~~ they thought was impregnable + ~~that~~ it was - until my father and his associates arrived with their big guns and their raw fury. They were unstoppable and they won the prize. My father's memories of this time in his life were very happy ones; he was with hundreds of his fellow countrymen, travelling the world, apparently healthy again and beating away at tyranny and occupation so that they could eventually go home, victorious. This was not to be. The ~~Russ~~ USSR took and kept Poland for themselves. It seemed that no one argued with this outcome, too busy trying to restore their own countries, to fight for what was considered an unimportant nation in an insignificant land, too far away to matter to the west. Any Poles who had the determination and timidity to try to return, were never heard from again, either shot at the border by the Russians, or sent back to the camps of Siberia to perish. This terrible realisation broke my father's heart, and ultimately, his health. As this year in Britain passed



took thousands of Poles, young + old, men + women, to the concentration camps in Northern Siberia where temperatures fell to  $20^{\circ}$  below zero in the winter, they had poor prison clothing, very little to eat and no contact with the outside world. His 'sentence' was for 12 years. I don't know what he was supposedly accused of, officially, probably crimes against the state. But in reality he was guilty only of being Polish, educated, ~~and~~ educated and quite insistent that Poland belonged to the Poles. The Soviets wanted no one likely to influence lead or train the Poles to resist their occupation. He was in the camps, living in log built dormitory-like cabins, for almost 3 years, working in the immense forests alongside his fellow Poles - including women, felling trees and logging + dressing the wood. It was a harsher existence than modern western people can imagine, barely fed enough to stay alive, wearing rags, their feet bled in rags inside, weak boots, supplemented by tree bark and anything they could scavenge. Most people died within the first 2-3 years - but then this was the plan - to completely obliterate the Polish Nation systematically, to work and starve them to death. They ate anything they could lay their hands on - there were no animals left in the surrounding forest. He remembered eating boiled grass and leaves which at least gave a feeling of temporary fullness before being vomited back up, it being indigestible to the human body. He once recalled that fresh raw meat suddenly appeared in the camp when any other food was non-existent and they were urged to eat it. He told me he would not eat because he knew it was human flesh taken from people who had died in the previous few days. Because he refused to eat he was beaten by the guards with iron bars, but was never persuaded to do so. He said to me, 'I'm eating people, is terrible'. When we woke in the mornings, he told me, there was a big advantage in being the first, for one could go quietly round the hut looking for those who had died in the night ~~to~~ get their blanket. Each man being issued with only one terrible fight broke out to win ownership of additional bedding. His life was saved by the British Government persuading the Soviets to free all able-bodied men from the camp. The Soviets to free all able-bodied men from the camp joined what was later named the Death March, a journey of thousands of miles, made partly by train, partly on foot, down to the middle eastern countries where they were placed in huge 'tent hospitals'. I have photographs of long rows of bodies layed out on the hot sand, wearing only loin cloths, and turning their skull-like features to the camera. To be so thin and yet still alive was miraculous; this was my father. As with the Jewish survivors of their Holocaust, they were given too much food, too rich, solid and heavy for

I will always be grateful for the 3 years I had with my father before he died. My sisters all lived away by that time - only my brother and I lived down in the valley, within 3 miles of the Farm. Before my mother died (I saw her late the previous night, she died during an operation early the next morning), she made me promise to go and see him; make sure he was OK. She expected to be home, and well again in a few weeks - no one expected her to die from a 'bad back'. And so, after her death, and bound unwillingly by my casual pledge - made only to comfort her as she lay in hospital, getting some rest at last from the back-breaking farm work which ultimately caused her death, and which my father had committed her to - I did as she insisted - I visited him at Gable End Farm, seat of all misery and fear. Visited the mad man who had led her + us a very unmerry dance, she with the Catholic marriage from hell, we with the hoods of cold poverty, and error of the ~~the~~ ~~some dreadful~~ ~~to~~ ~~for~~ ~~the~~ ~~mar~~ on the hill above Tadmorden. And there - at Gable End Farm - I found my father.

Those 3 years gave me a true understanding of the man he would have been but for the war. Talkative, clever, funny, informative and, ultimately, loving.

He told me of hunting in the forests of the Carpathian mountains, building log cabins, wrestling Johnny Chasov ~~farmers~~ in the gym (who later was seen on TV at the Farm) and having his nose broken, dancing in Italy with beautiful women, eating dogs and cats in Tbrak, playing with the small black bear which was playing with mascot, being sick through the calf by a pique German sniper while he was riding a bicycle on a country road. He told me jokes which, though totally unbelievable, traits - later so badly were hilarious for the same reason and made both of us laugh till we cried - he would wheeze through, streaming tears, saying, "you understand, yes, you understand?" And I would say, "no-but I but" it would be funny, if I did.

We spent hours in the garden, weeding and watering, and sitting shelling peas into old mounds, enjoying the sun in each others company. He told what little I knew about life in the camp of Siberia too - hauntingly, quietly. Such intensity of feeling by the open fire, each with can mug of tea and our difficult memories.