



We are not Polish...

Let me start with a confession: my Father was not Polish. All the time people would ask, 'Is your Father Polish?' To confuse them, I would reply, 'No, my Mother is Irish.' While not actually Polish, he was a long-time member of the Anglo-Polish Society of Wolverhampton, West Midlands Branch, nominated and duly elected as Cultural Secretary - on the grounds that his son, yours truly, had made a career from obscure artistic activities. With baffling central committee logic they said to themselves, Like son, like Father. He held this position for many years before finally being promoted to Chair of the Association. In his capacity as Cultural Secretary he organised the raffle, bingo sessions and various coach trips to the seaside, to English Stately Homes or to country pubs with bowling alleys, as well as volunteering to be responsible for booking the guest speakers for the annual commemorative event at the Katyn Memorial Stone in Cannock Chase, north of Birmingham. This stone is in the middle of what was originally, in medieval times, a Royal Hunting forest, and is now a leisure park for outdoor pursuits - for serious ramblers, casual walkers with or without dogs, picnics, deer spotters and mountain bikers. The forest also contains a large German Military Cemetery, where the bodies of aircrew shot down over Britain during the Second World War were gathered and laid to rest.

I once asked my Father where his particular fascination with Poland had originated. He told me he had always been interested in the history of Poland as a young boy and that, of course, not long after his 11th birthday, Great Britain declared war on Nazi Germany to safeguard the independence of the Second Polish Republic. This was the defining moment of his generation. Though it is interesting to note that throughout his 1939 copy of Odham's Universal Knowledge A - Z (1144 pages long) the entries circled in pencil are almost exclusively locations to be found in the North Americas – Fundy Bay, San Bernadino, Fredericksburg, Bedloe's Island, Waterbury, Nova Scotia and many others. Warsaw is not circled, nor any Polish heroes – not even Joseph Conrad, though I know my Father read his books. He seemed more interested in Covington, Kentucky – *'It is notable for its great suspension bridge and for its manufacture of X-ray apparatus.'*

Perhaps it was easy to mistake my Father for not being English. His facial features leaned towards those of Central and East Europe; he was tall and thin – invariably the word used to describe him in his youth was 'lanky'. His nose was highly prominent - a Roman nose, he called it. He was also big-boned and his hands were large, hands made from a family lineage of hard labour, from working in the mines or for working the earth. When I pointed out the fact he was actually brought up in the colliery village of Silverdale in Staffordshire and not Silesia, I remember one woman saying, 'But he was so tall and distinguished looking, like all those young Polish airmen.' Here then is beginning of another fiction. Let me be clear: my Father did not serve in the Royal Air Force, though many people to this day still have this impression. Perhaps they were aware that, throughout my childhood at least, he kept a flying helmet of worn leather on the back window of his car and so began a series of assumptions and fabrications.

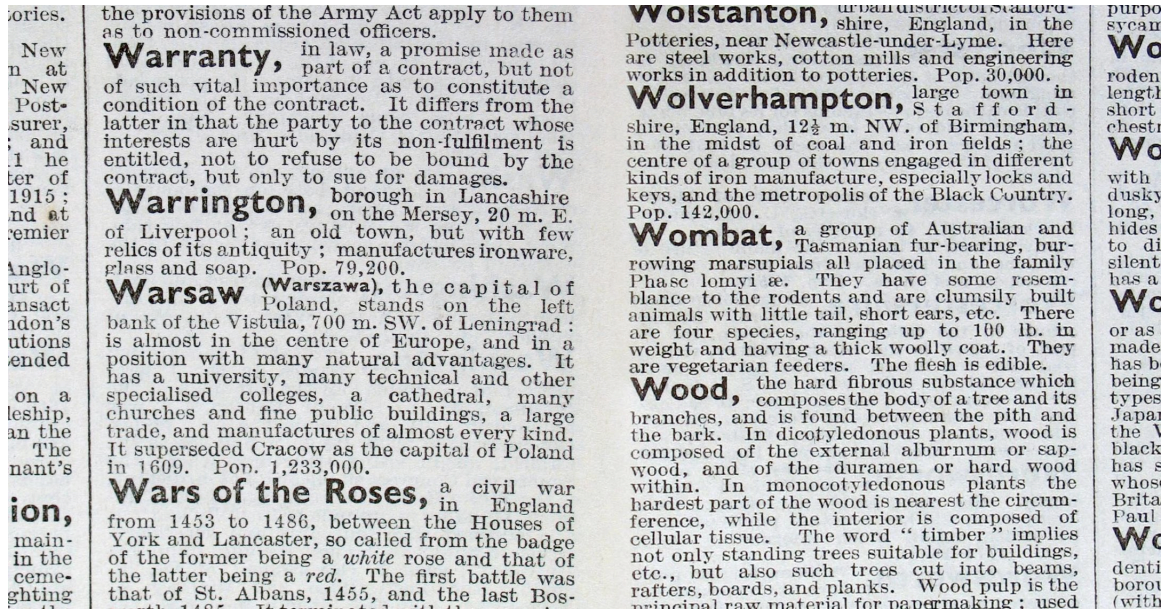
On long car journeys, travelling by night through Wales towards the ferry terminal at Holyhead or down to the south coast, I would lie on the back seat wearing this helmet several sizes too big for my childish head, looking out at the stars and I imagined being in the belly of an aeroplane. My Mother asleep in the front, my Father happy to indulge this fantasy, as the pilot of our old crate, indulging his son with all the murmured instructions required to keep us in the air, trimming the rudder, adjusting the pitch and

roll, talking to ground control or other invisible members of the crew about meteorological conditions, requesting details of the flight path from the nameless navigator, describing the pitch-black landscape over which we flew, as we drove the slowest possible route to our destination. You see, we always travelled on those circuitous A and B roads and never motorways – my Father had an irrational fear of those – so these journeys seemed never ending. We always flew at night, guided by distant stars.

In reality, my Father was too young for military service, though he did try to enlist on more than one occasion, only to be discovered and returned home. One of his best friends did succeed in deceiving the authorities, travelling by train to a recruiting office much further afield where no one could identify him. This friend, barely sixteen years old, flew for a few short weeks in a Lancaster bomber, as a rear gunner - the ‘Tail-end Charlie’. On his second mission, the plane went down in flames over Düsseldorf, another casualty of the ruthless and relentless destruction of the cities of the Third Reich. My Father, instead, joined the Air Training Corps, which prepared more of those young boys for war, and he finally took to the air in a Wellington bomber on a routine training flight. The plane had barely landed when the war in Europe was declared over and people’s thoughts turned to demobilisation and reconstruction. He kept his flying helmet as a souvenir and years later - in the 1960’s - it adorned the back seat of the family car, firstly a Ford Anglia, which looked like a small tank, then later a Ford Zodiac, more truly a representative of the Space Age now upon us. One day it simply disappeared, never to be seen again, and my Father grumbled about it for years afterward. It is a memento I regret not having in my possession. Only recently my Mother admitted how, sick of the stories surrounding it, she secretly took it and threw it unceremoniously into a neighbours’ bin.

My Father romanticised the air war, preferring to ignore some of the brutal facts; that sixty out of every hundred crews lost their lives in the RAF bombing campaign. A voracious reader, he had numerous books on the subject and sufficient familiarity with the topic that many people, on the fringes of his acquaintance, came to believe that he had indeed served in the Royal Air Force. And to think that perhaps he was also a little

Polish, as there were also many books on the Polish 2nd Army, the Battle of Monte Cassino, the Warsaw Uprising, the Crime of Katyn. Despite gentle disavowals, this myth persisted. ‘Oh, I’m sure he was Polish, wasn’t he?’ Even some Poles thought he was Polish. Perhaps some modesty disguised the truth of the matter, but to add to the confusion his given Christian name was Ivan. Though he is dead some years, to this day people will ask me how did I end up being called Brendan when my Father came from Poland?



In Wolverhampton, in the late 1940's, it was easy to meet many Poles, freshly disgorged from the Armed Forces, inhabiting huge military and resettlement camps in nearby rural Staffordshire and Shropshire. Many of these Poles were from the Eastern Settlements of pre-war Poland, vast tracts of land then taken by the Soviets and submerged into the U.S.S.R. Dispossessed of their home towns and villages, they found themselves in a post-war limbo. Borders had been reshaped, torn asunder, and Poland itself firmly locked behind the Iron Curtain, a satellite state controlled by Moscow. Of this time Adam Zamoycki wrote, ‘They had not only been consigned to Hell; they were supposed to enjoy it.’

There were over 220,000 men in the Polish Army under British command in 1945, the majority of whom made their home in these England, Scotland and Wales, alongside women and children who had arrived from refugee camps in Africa and the Middle East. I

went to a Catholic primary school with a register that recorded the names of these exiles and escapees. Called out each morning - and most likely incorrectly pronounced - they echoed down the polished hallways. *Kisiel, Mita, Lappo, Dobrowski, Frank, Malinowski, Smolinski, Swiderski, Syska, Cieslik, Pilecki, Bardza, Malinowski, Kowalczyk, Sachanowski, Szizechowska, Cebertowicz, Magnuszewska, Wozmirska*. To me, compared to *Hill* or *Clark* or *Guest* or *Barry*, they sounded wonderfully exotic. The ‘continental shop’ run by a Polish couple on the market was the height of ‘otherness’ in late Sixties Wolverhampton; that and one man who always wore beads, John Lennon sunglasses and a flowery shirt amidst the factory and shop workers at the early morning bus queue.

I was walking down a street in Sejny, in North Eastern Poland, near the border with Lithuania, taking some snapshots, when a policeman posted outside the Lithuanian Cultural Centre stopped me and asked me what I was doing. I am assuming this is what he asked as I speak no Polish and he had little English – he was pointing at my camera and shaking his head and finger. He indicated he wanted to see my passport, which I was not carrying. He paced up and down shaking his head and finally let me go to retrieve it from my lodgings. Sitting in his booth, he looked it at for a long while and meticulously wrote down details in a logbook. He then said, ‘Father name?’ and pointed at the passport, flicking through the pages as though he wanted me to indicate the location. I tried to explain that there is no part of my passport which contains any official mention of my Father name. He continued to insist, ‘Father name!’ - as though it must be in there somewhere. I insisted with equal determination, ‘Nie father name!’ He telephoned someone and had a long agitated discussion. At the conclusion of this, he said again, evidently more aggravated, ‘Father name!!’ I shrugged. He tapped me on the chest and shouted, ‘FATHER NAME!!’ Finally, I took out a piece of paper and wrote down IVAN JACKSON and gave it to him. ‘Father name,’ I said confidently. ‘Father name?’ he muttered, pulling a confused face. ‘To Ruski!’ he exclaimed. ‘Nie!’ I insisted, ‘Irish!’ He looked at me disbelieving, then lectured me for a while - clearly with some kind of admonishment - before eventually dismissing me with an exhausted little wave of his hand.

My Father only carried three forms of identification – his driving licence, and membership cards for the Anglo-Polish Society and for The Albright & Wilson Working Men’s Social Club, this latter crumpled little card only until he retired. His Mother, Edna, was - in the late 1920’s and early 1930’s - a card carrying member of the Communist Party of Great Britain and her Father, William - at the end of the 19th century - had been an organiser in the local trade union association for mine workers. Despite this pedigree, I suspect my Father voted Conservative, though he never had a good word to say about any politician or party. As for the origin of his Christian name, it was unlikely that his parents were stirred by the Bolshevik propaganda poster by Ivan Malyutin ‘*To the Polish Front*’, or were keen readers of Ivan Turgenev - though it is possible that they were inspired by seeing the Hollywood movie ‘The Tempest’ that year, a Russian Revolution story which starred John Barrymore as Ivan Markov, a peasant soldier who becomes an officer in the army. I knew my Grandmother to be a keen Barrymore fan in her youth.

At school, Ivan was particularly good at Maths so when he left full time education, at the age of 14, a life underground was somehow avoided. His interest in the perfection of numbers meant that he often served as Treasurer on miscellaneous committees, though his first and only business venture – running a shoe shop in Darlaston – failed miserably. Apart from working as an unsuccessful shoe salesman, he was a travelling insurance agent, a clerk for the Great Western Railway, a pork pie salesman, and later worked in the wages department of Lucas in Birmingham, operating huge banks of punch card computers. He spent the last decade of his working life at the Albright & Wilson chemical works in Oldbury. He appears in a 1988 Health and Safety video for the company, ominously clad in gas mask, helmet and overalls, pointing stiffly to the emergency exit.



Though a travelling salesman in his early years, mostly in Staffordshire, Cheshire and Lancashire, he was not well-travelled. He went to France twice and to Ireland a few times. Mostly, he went on occasional holidays to Scotland and to Dorset, always drawn to Dorset. He seemed to relish the experience of life second-hand, gleaned from books and acquaintances. Perhaps he seemed unadventurous, fixed and static. His older brother – who shared the same birthday, two years apart – went away to the Army at age 16 and then to East Africa, leaving Ivan the nominal head of the family, with an ill mother and a younger sister to care for. Their Father, Horace, had long disappeared in slightly mysterious circumstances, of which I know little. After army service, his brother travelled further afield and had his own business, and my Father suffered in comparison. Malcom was ‘full of himself’ and Ivan was ‘insecure’; both were pig-headed, as stubborn as a brick wall, both were always right no matter what the facts of the matter. Malcom, the elder and apparently more worldly-wise brother, liked fine whiskies and - as he moved up the higher echelons of the business world - wines of managerial quality. In the late Sixties, he sported a goatee and wore narrow cut dark polyester pants and turtlenecks, as though modelling himself on the character Illya Kuryakin, the Russian agent in the Sixties TV series ‘The Man From U.N.C.L.E’. By this point, my Father had lost any sartorial elegance he once might have had, recycling two grey work suits from Burton the Tailors. He always seemed to bear a grudge against his more cosmopolitan brother, falling out with

him and rarely seeing him for over thirty years. He was not a beer or wine drinker and not much of a drinker at all. His preference was for vodka, smothered in lime cordial, which seemed wrong to me, even from the earliest memories.

My Mother quoted Canon Weekes, an ecclesiastic authority from Ireland on the art of drinking, whose recommendation was that only women should drink vodka because 'it doesn't smell on your breath.' She said, 'If you're not a whiskey drinker, then whiskey smells awful on your breath. Ivan couldn't stand the smell of whiskey.' His supply of vodka came primarily from his good Polish friend, George Kisiel, who used to add a little pepper to his vodka glass. 'Whenever he had a vodka anywhere he was with us,' said my Mother, 'he'd always ask for the pepper pot. We'd get some funny looks.' Funny looks were surely a minor inconvenience to a man like George who, like so many of his compatriots, had lost his home, family and country. Little Englanders have a long tradition of giving people funny looks of one kind or another. I am not sure if these are looks of apprehension or pity, utter disdain or a lack of empathy, or whether they simply express a fear of some kind.



Here is a photograph of George Kisiel, taken shortly after his arrival in Wolverhampton in 1947. This man from Poland - yet again cast as the tragic, romantic doomed country, betrayed by Roosevelt and Churchill at Yalta and tossed into the open arms of Stalin and his fearful minions – this man from gallant yet lost Poland arrives at the railway station and sets out in search of the Resettlement Camp at Wrottesley Park, where he will find Poles, Hungarians, Dutch and other displaced nationals living in hastily converted barracks. Freshly discharged from the army, with his navy blue demob suit and £75 in his pocket, he walks the streets of this provincial town, savouring this moment of freedom. As witness to the armageddon on the European mainland, he is a little surprised to see that the physical structure of this place is barely damaged by the war, despite a preponderance of factories supplying aircraft and motor vehicle parts and the huge Goodyear tyre plant (where so many Poles will soon find work). Food is still strictly rationed and there are sallow and gaunt looking faces on each street corner; this is the age of austerity and will be for some time to come. At first, he keeps himself to himself. Both trade unions and left wing activists, still in love with Stalin, have conducted anti-Polish campaigns; but now the Polish Resettlement Act has passed through the English parliament and offers assistance to those who wish to return to Poland, those who wish to emigrate to the Commonwealth or other countries and those who wish to stay. It offers, at least, a measure of security he and his compatriots have not known in many years. (The Act was intended as a temporary provision but remained on the statute books for the next 60 years.) And so George wanders these streets - no longer a pawn of a huge military machine - and considers his options.

He finds himself outside a motorcycle showroom near the Molineux Hotel, adjacent the Wolves football stadium. Given pride of place in the window is the latest model of a Norton-Villiers bike, produced by a local firm. This is surely the decisive moment - as he feels, rising from suppressed depths, a desire to possess this gleaming mechanism. It represents a new beginning and, more than anything else, it promises the future. As an engineer, George appreciates the fine tooling of this elegant bike and, having

ridden them throughout his army years, respects the reliability of the Norton design. He goes inside and ascertains the price, which is astronomical by his standards. Still, he agrees to pay the deposit, which nearly drains his demob pay.

You understand demand is very high, this is strictly a cash purchase, the salesman explains, and so George must return within two weeks to pay the full amount or lose both his precious deposit and the bike. He returns within the allotted time with the money and the bike is his. He never reveals how he obtains the cash – hard work, avarice, card games, favours, a little black market dealing, who knows now? To mark this moment he poses for a photograph astride the bike, in this foreign town he will come to call home, the Polish part of his life set behind him. Did he yearn for the territory of former Poland? Perhaps, but it was, increasingly, a chimera, a country that whispered its name in dreams, that existed in the recesses of his heart only, a place to flee from. He speaks in Polish less and less and his three children grow up without learning the language of their forefathers. Instead, he learns the mother tongue of business, of negotiation, of contracts, of management theory.

I knew the story behind the photograph long before I saw the actual physical object itself, and only then some years after his death. While attending a social event at the Anglo-Polish Club, George had a heart attack. He died on the dance floor, jiving. This surviving photograph remains, as solid a memorial as a stone in a forest.