

Urszula and Witold Gąsiorski (1922- 2014) (1921-2003)



Urszula and Witold Gąsiorski, Blackpool 1946.

My father Witold Tadeusz Gąsiorski was born in the small village of Myskowice, Eastern Poland (now in the Ukraine) in 1921. Even though his father died of pneumonia when Witold was a baby, he had a happy childhood, going to the local school, playing and swimming in the nearby river Seret with his older brother Zbyszek and their friends. Growing up, he was fascinated by the developing science of aviation and as a teenager was delighted to be accepted at the Air force cadet School based in Warsaw, for him a dream come true. Unfortunately this adventure wasn't to last and in 1939 during his pilot training, the Russian army invaded Poland from the east. Seeing the young men as a possible threat to their plans for occupation they forcibly took the cadets, along with as many Poles as could be rounded up, on a long and gruelling journey by cattle truck to the Vorkuta prison camp in Northern Siberia to work as forced labour. They were made to work from dawn to dusk, hard labour, and with nothing more than black bread and watery soup to sustain them, and even once resorted to eating dog meat to stay alive. It's no wonder that my father once described this time in Siberia as 'hell on earth'.

After two years, when the Russians changed their stance and joined the allies against Hitler, Witold was allowed with some of the other Poles, to board a ship bound for Silloth (a very small port town in Cumbria) where they would be able to join the Polish Division of the military based in Britain. They were all in a very bad way indeed, nothing more than skin and bone and sadly many perished on the journey, their cruel treatment of the previous two years finally taking its toll.

Witold just managed to cling on to life and, on his arrival, was taken straight to hospital where he spent six weeks recovering from severe malnutrition. Once his strength returned, he was bitterly disappointed to find he had missed the chance to join the pilot training course, but determined to be airborne, he trained first as a gunner, then a wireless operator and navigator. He joined the Polish Squadron 304 rising to the rank of Warrant Officer and flew fifty operational sorties, predominately in Wellington Bombers, sinking a U-boat in July 1944. He was decorated with: The Cross of Valour & two bars, Polish Air Force Medal, the 1939/45 star, The Atlantic Star, and War Medal. Many of these equally brave airmen didn't survive and a poignant photograph my father kept shows a sad testament to the young lives lost, some after as little as two weeks of being placed on active service.

Although fraught with danger and touched with sadness at losing his dear comrades, Witold enjoyed his time in the Air force and during his free time loved to attend the dances that were organized for the members of the forces, apparently for a tall man he was pretty light on his feet, and although quite a modest person he once told me how his waltzing ability had been much admired, particularly by the ladies! At the end of the war the borders of Poland changed and the village Witold grew up in became part of the Ukraine now ruled by Stalin's oppressive regime. The freedom of their country for which the Poles had fought so bravely unfortunately did not become a reality, so along with many others he made Britain his new home.

He married my mother Urszula Burger in 1945, their families came from neighbouring villages in Poland and as children they knew each other well. Urszula and her family had also been taken as forced labour to Russia where she, like many others, tragically lost most of her family, due in no small part to the gruelling regime they were forced to endure. In 1942 Urszula was evacuated from the labour camp and with the other displaced Poles taken on many long and arduous journeys over land and sea. From The Soviet Union to Teheran to various refugee camps in South Africa including Durban, Bulawayo, Livingstone and Johannesburg, along the way contracting both malaria and jaundice.

Urszula and Witold had three children: Peter, Leon, and I, Diana. They have six grandchildren and six great grandchildren; happily my mother is still with us, my father died in 2003, aged 82, of a stroke and we all miss him immensely.

The remaining paragraphs are available in the book.

This account has been very kindly provided by Diana, Witold and Urszula's daughter.



Villagers building themselves a community village hall; Witold Gąsiorski is on the far left, Myskowice, Eastern Poland now in the Ukraine, 1937.



The poignant photograph showing the young lives lost, some within as little as two weeks of being placed on active service. The fallen are denoted by the crosses added by Witold Gąsiorski, first on the right on the second row.



The WAAFS (Women's Auxiliary Air Force) situated in Hucknall nr. Nottingham, Urszula is second from right on the front row, 1944.



RAF Group photo with Polish pilots only, Urszula is third from left on the front row, Sealand, nr Chester 1944.