

Świętej Pamięci Zofia Szyman

Born in November 1922 in a village called Niechniewicze in the province of Nowogródek in Poland, which now lies within the country of Belarus, Zofia was the eldest child of Jozef and Anna. Together with her brother Stefan and sisters Wanda and Irena, the family lived humbly working their farmstead.

Zofia was just sixteen years of age when in September 1939 Russia invaded the eastern borderland of Poland. Knowing Russian soldiers were approaching, and fearing Zofia's vulnerability at their hands, her mother sent her further west to stay with her aunt in a small hamlet called Kupiski Stare near Łomża. Soon after leaving her father was arrested and imprisoned. Zofia would have no further contact with him until the end of the second world war.



It was during the night of 10th February 1940 that Russian soldiers banged on the door of the house in Kupiski Stare and forcibly evicted Zofia and the rest of the occupants. They had little time to collect any belongings. The soviet soldiers took them by lorry to a large hall where they spent several days before being taken to a railway station and herded onto cattle trucks along with many other Polish civilians. They didn't know their destination but the journey took weeks, travelling through vast expanses of uninhabited terrain. Hard wooden planks provided the sleeping facilities whilst the toilet was a hole in the floor. There was little to eat or drink and death began collecting a heavy harvest. The train headed east towards Siberian Russia, a journey which took them through Minsk, Moscow, Vologda and Arkhangelsk. The track ran right up to a forested place called Soluga in a district named Barachyka and here Zofia was assigned barracks and made to work as forced labour.



During her time in the forest gulag, and irrespective of the season, Zofia undertook heavy work, moving shaved logs with the help of a partly blind and underfed horse. Only by meeting her work quota was she able to receive small and precisely measured amounts of bread to sustain her. The vicious circle of lack of food and strength was the cause of further death and misery around her.

By some miracle of God, Zofia discovered that her family, whom she had not seen since being sent west by her mother, had also been deported to nearby Vologda. She pleaded incessantly to be reunited with them but the requests were constantly dismissed until one day, completely out of the blue, her mother, brother and sisters arrived at her camp. For them, conditions worsened but they took heart from simply being together.

Salvation came in the summer of 1941 when Germany invaded the Soviet Union.

The proposition that General Sikorski, the Polish Army Commander-in-Chief, put to Stalin for the Polish people to be given amnesty and for Polish prisoners to be released to form an army to help the Soviets oppose Germany was agreed and freedom ensued.

Zofia wanted to travel south and sold her only material possession, some gold earrings which she had kept from her days in Poland. She travelled to a town named Osh where there was a Polish agency and she helped attend to the sick in a clinic located there.

At this time, only military families were allowed to depart Russia. Zofia had no idea of the whereabouts of her father, but an upright young man had been drawn to her and he kindly put her name down as part of his family and Zofia's passage out from Krasnovodsk in Turkmenistan across the Caspian Sea to Bandar Pahlavi in Iran and onwards to Teheran was secured.



It was in Teheran that Zofia was finally reunited with her family including, by a stroke of complete fortune, her father who was sick with dysentery in the Indian hospital located across the street from their own refugee camp. Her mother and siblings were subsequently sent to British East Africa but Zofia, having joined the Polish army under British command was sent to Egypt to train as a nurse.

It was as a nurse that Zofia finally made her journey to the UK, leaving the port of Alexandria in Egypt and arriving in Scotland to work in the military hospital that had been set up in Taymouth Castle near Aberfeldy in Perthshire. There, amongst others, she tended to a Polish officer named Ignacy who had been injured in the fierce battle for Monte Cassino in Italy. She told him he would only leave the hospital with her on his arm! Ignacy was moved from Aberfeldy to Wrexham and then finally to Manchester and Zofia followed him all the way. They were married on 15th May 1950 and had three sons, Jerzy (George), Janusz (John) and Andrzej (Andrew).

Zofia was always active and resourceful. As well as being a full-time housewife looking after the children and the family council house in Wythenshawe, she took on various part-time jobs, including assembling cardboard inserts for handbag manufacture, and cleaning at the local catholic primary school. For many years she was the nursery class teacher at the Saturday Polish School in Moss Side. She was involved with the Polish Scouting movement and often helped with supervision at the annual "kolonia" summer camp in Penrhos, North Wales. She remained active within the Polish Church and Community throughout, having once been a member of its choir. One of her most abiding privileges was to have had a private audience

with Pope John Paul II. She remained involved with the Polish Ex-Servicemen's Association, SPK (Stowarzyszenie Polskich Kombatantów) attending meetings as regularly as assistance with transport would permit. On 19th September 2017, the Polish Consul in Manchester, presented Zofia with the Złoty Krzyż Zasługi (Gold Cross of Merit) awarded by the President of Poland for her services to the State; a testament to her loyalty and achievements.

Zofia's greatest pleasure came from her family. Whilst she was finally reunited with both her parents and her three siblings in the UK after the war, her brother died tragically in a car accident and her two sisters eventually moved to Australia and Spain. Unfortunate to lose her husband to cancer in 1971 her matriarchal instincts prevailed. She drew immense satisfaction from seeing her sons use their solid upbringing and education to good effect and she was very proud to see them become family orientated upright citizens and develop successful careers. She loved her grandchildren, Michelle, Ben, Nicola, Tom, Sam, Adam, Eric and Conrad and derived so much joy during her latter years from her one great-grandchild, Jessica.

Her life experiences taught her not to be materialistic and to value what we often take for granted – food, family, security and, most of all, freedom. Her sacrifices were many and we are all indebted to her. Those who knew her would appreciate her forthright views, her generosity and her willingness to help and do the right thing. She was the rock upon which the Szyman family in the UK was built and she will always be our inspiration. She lives on and shines in our hearts.

