

My grandfather, Tadeusz Jerzy Pietruszko, was born on Friday the 13th of February 1925 in Łomża, Poland. He lived with his parents and two sisters in a modest family home on ul. Zdrojowa where they tended to a small farm on the banks of the river Narew.

In 1942, at the age of 17, he hid from the occupying Germans in a small barn with a few friends during the round-up of young Polish men in the area. His missing status did not go unnoticed and a note, stating "he was to present himself within 3 days or they would begin by shooting one of his sisters", was pinned to the door of the family home. His father, Jan, came to tell him of the news but would not force him to present himself. Unsure of his fate, he presented himself on the 17th of July and was promptly placed on a transport with just the clothes on his back. His mother, Bronisława, prepared a package of strong boots and brought them to him. Angry that he thought his mother was not upset at this situation, he threw the boots back in spite.

He was transported a short distance to a Mill. There he could not stand the forced labour very long. He was homesick and not too far from home. He wanted to leave and devised a plan to escape when the new moon was at its darkest in a few days. Unfortunately, the very next morning, they were rounded-up and herded into train carriages designed to carry cattle. Over the next 3 days they were transported hundreds of kilometres only stopping 3 times to eat. Some managed to escape by unscrewing and removing the wire on the small openings to the carriage. When it was his turn to climb through, the train was coming to a stop. Again, he had missed his opportunity to escape.

They arrived at a forced labour camp just outside of Dortmund, Germany and were given a number replacing their name indefinitely. Their first instructions were to begin assembling the prefabricated barracks to be their living quarters unless they wanted to sleep outside in the open. There he spent the next 3 years working in a coal mine both above and below the ground. The traumatic experience of hurtling hundreds of feet down a mine shaft every morning was enough to cause anyone severe nausea. He spoke to the foreman explaining that he couldn't work in the mine shaft any longer. Instead of being beaten or far worse, he took pity on him. He was told he could potentially operate the crane which loaded the barges with coal on the Dortmund-Ems Kanal. With no experience whatsoever he proved he was up to the task and survived the rest of the war as The Crane Driver.

In 1948 my grandfather met my grandmother, a German of Polish decent. They were engaged at Easter in 1949 and married on the 26th of December 1949. During this time my grandfather was working with the British and Canadian Allied forces. When these armies were disbanded, together they made the decision to leave behind the devastation of Europe and Communism in Poland. My grandfather had family in the United States and organised two tickets for sponsorship through the Baptist church. Upon writing to his Uncle in Buffalo, he was told he was more than welcome, but his German wife certainly was not. Greatly upset, he returned the tickets and as a displaced person chose to emigrate to Australia.

For the next 3 weeks they were held in a holding camp undergoing medical tests before being able to board the 4th ship out of Bremerhaven, the Anna-Saleu. Their journey by sea took approximately 36 days in less than favourable conditions on a crowded ship of 2,300 people where men and women were segregated. Upon landing in Melbourne, the train trip

to Sydney reminded my grandfather all too much of the transports throughout Europe to the various camps.

In Sydney my grandparents slowly began to build a new life. My father, their first child, was born on the 17th of July 1952. My grandfather, now at age 27, shortly after purchasing a parcel of land in Granville, began building their family home in his free time after work. Despite the many joys life in Australia now offered them they were terribly homesick and wanted nothing more than to return to their families. They would write to them often and one response cemented their decision to stay. My grandfather's father said "If you have a good life and opportunities in Australia then don't come back to Poland. It isn't what you would expect anymore, and it would break your heart."

As my father grew, his first words were Polish and German. His father is multilingual, but his mother speaks German. Similar was mine and my brothers' experience when our grandparents cared for us during the days our parents continued to work. I have a particular memory of my grandfather writing a letter at his desk, "What's that? It looks funny." I said. He told me it's Polish. "Cool. Can you teach me to do it too?" I asked. He said he didn't think he could, "It's very difficult."

Fast forward to more recent times, my brothers and I have greatly embraced our respective heritages. Later, we embraced our German roots. As a result I have a great understanding of the German language and enjoy the experience that is continuing to learn and converse with my grandparents and family here and abroad.

In my personal life I have had the opportunity to travel all over the world. When planning a trip to Europe I have always considered my destinations. These of course included places like London, Germany, France and Italy. But Poland... "Why would I want to go there? My grandfather came from Poland, but other than some distant relatives I don't know anyone there. I haven't heard any stories other than the war." I thought to myself. Needless to say my first experiences in Europe did not include Poland.

Similarly my professional career has also offered me the experience to travel abroad. In the winter of 2017, I was offered the choice to move to Europe temporarily to work on a project. The customer was based in Poland but I would commute somewhat regularly from our new base in London. I hastily accepted and set off to prepare myself for life in London.

My first visit to Kraków after leaving the airport was "This place is kind of grey and old looking." and marvelled at someone shovelling coal on the sidewalk but I was excited to be there. It looked nothing like the rest of the world I had seen with my own eyes. I was in awe when I first laid eyes on Wawel Castle, The Dragon of Kraków and Stare Miasto. I felt like I had been transported back to the 1600s. It was fascinating that all of this still stood unscathed despite the atrocities and devastation that occurred all too close to where I now stood. A visit to nearby Auschwitz hit me like a wrecking ball when I came face-to-face with the reality of all I'd seen and heard from family and documentaries.

Those few short weeks in Kraków, during the summer, left me with the feeling that I wanted to return here immediately upon departure. There was so much more to experience. I was

picking up bits of the language and testing it on my colleagues while a big grin spread across my face as I saw their surprise and jubilation that I was attempting to pronounce these words. As luck would have it, the project intensified and the client requested my presence onsite full-time. I moved from London to Kraków in mid-September where I would spend the next 3 months.

During this time I remember never before feeling such a strong urge to explore random streets and markets and engage in small talk with anyone who would listen to what little I could say in Polish. I had mastered the word 'Dziękuję' to the point where I was mistaken for a native speaker, leading to longer more complex responses I couldn't hope to understand at their speed.

In these moments I felt so strongly about learning this language that I set out to buy whatever resources I needed to teach myself in my spare time. It quickly dawned on me exactly why my grandfather told me this language was so difficult. Yet I was determined to prove to myself I was up for the challenge and when I return home my grandfather will be so proud of me.

Unfortunately, my grandfather has since been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and now lives in an assisted living facility in Blacktown catering predominantly to the German community. On our family visits I'm all too happy to greet him with 'Dzień dobry! Jak się masz?' which brings a smile to his face and a chuckle. I often think these small exchanges offer a little comfort to him in a place and amongst strange people he often doesn't recognise.

Recently I've been thankful for the number of Polish people I've met and call my close friends. Although my grandfather won't be around forever and what I can hope to learn from him may have since passed with his progressing illness I take comfort in knowing that through my Polish community and my connection to him will always continue and will forever strengthen as I embrace learning his native language.