

"Tisbury I Call Champion

A brief insight into the courage and determination of a Polish war veteran who lives in Tisbury, England and whose remarkable life of self-sacrifice has spanned most of the twentieth century.

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I was first introduced to Josef Bobrowski by a friend at last year's village VJ celebration picnic. Two Polish VCs: a Distinguished Service Medal, three Crosses for Valour: the bronze, silver and gold Crosses of Merit with swords; and the Polish war medal featured among his 28 medals. When I asked if I could photograph him in front of the 1942 US Army Willys Jeep (Type MB) which was parked on a raised platform, he gladly agreed. Considering Josef's advanced years, I was amazed to see him leap up some steps to stand next to the vehicle.

Josef was born in 1904 in Szawlany, eastern Poland of landowning parents who made a living from a small parcel of land. In 1914 he had his first experiences of war when the Russo-German front line ended only a few miles from his village. Chaos reigned and the villagers sheltered in hovels which they built deep in a nearby forest. When the front fell in 1917, the locals gathered and hid some of the arms which the retreating Russians had abandoned. Shortly afterwards, groups of Bolsheviks terrorised and murdered the local Polish population whose remnants, the youthful Josef among them, retrieved this cache of arms and organized the home guard which was later incorporated into the regular Polish army.

When the Braclaw area was incorporated into the new Poland in 1919, Josef put up his age slightly and joined the Polish infantry which protected the inhabitants of the Wilno region from Bolshevik, German, Lithuanian and Russian armies. Even though the regiment was very poorly equipped and had no standard uniform, morale was very high.

About six years later, Josef joined a platoon which belonged to the First Regiment of Krehovice Uhlans and served the Eastern Border Guards' Corps whose task was to maintain order along the border. After graduating with distinction from the Cavalry Officer Cadet School in Grudziadz—here his skilful horsemanship secured numerous victories in inter-regimental contests—he became an instructor in servicing heavy automatic rifles.

As second in command of the squadron of heavy automatic rifles in Augustow on 1st September 1939, the day of Hitler's invasion of Poland, he shot down two German bombers and during the regiment's long trek from Zambrow to Kock three days later, Josef received a VC for his part in the battle at Olszewo.

On his return home a month later to the Braclawska region, which was then under Soviet occupation, he joined the Underground Movement (first called ZWZ then AK, i.e.

Home Army) but due to penetration of this movement by NKWD (the forerunner of the KGB) he was captured and interrogated. Luckily he knew Russian and said that he was a shoemaker and had nothing to do with the army, so he was released. After a spell in hiding, he was ordered to organize the HQ for forest rangers who protected the forest (and were all active A.K. Officers!) in the village of Zamosze near Braslaw. A month later he was betrayed and subsequently arrested by the Germans who imprisoned him for just 24 hours as a friend had bribed them with gold, but on being released his post was dissolved.

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He served in the A.K. for the next three years and in April 1944 led his detachment into battle against a very heavily armed German battalion sent to "pacify" the Braslaw region. This action saved the entire Aleksandrowo estate and three villages from destruction and their inhabitants from execution and earned him a second VC.

Two and a half months later, the A.K. commander ordered him to move with his family to Suwalszczyzna and they had to use a horse and cart as transport for this 200 mile journey which took two days and nights. Before being forced by German gendarmes to dig trenches at one point along this treacherous and very arduous route, he told his wife to take his children to a nearby village and then proceed to Augustow, promising to join her after the war.

After escaping yet again, he found refuge with an A.K. friend's family. A subsequent chance encounter with a train guard who was also a sworn A.K. member changed the course of this war. On hearing a clandestine BBC broadcast of the Polish Army commander in chief's orders to move to the West, both men decided to try to get to France, the railway official promising to hide Josef on a train and later pass a message to his wife.

The train journey from Suwatki was subjected to Allied bombardment and lasted a month, meandering along a route

of burning German towns and cities via Berlin until it eventually reached Marseilles at the end of August, 1944. Many passengers who were conscripted to build French fortifications then escaped and joined the French Resistance Movement.

On Josef's request the Resistance then took him and several other Poles to central Italy where they planned to rejoin the Polish contingent. On reaching a British Army Camp he was taken to the second Polish Corps and subjected to several days of interrogation as his stay was quite incredible. Josef said of those days: "they treated me as if I were a horse touched with contagion".

Eventually his story was accepted and he was allowed to rejoin his Krehovice Regiment (no longer cavalry, but now a tank regiment!). Being put in charge of a platoon of light tanks, he was soon engaged in combat. His last battle was at Bolonia-Corticielle in April 1945 where he suffered severe concussion: his tank and several others being destroyed in action.

Shortly afterwards in May 1945 he realised that he wouldn't be able to return to Poland as it had surrendered to Stalin. Even though the British Home Office later granted permission for his family to come to Britain in 1948, he was separated from them for a cruel twelve years as the Communists didn't allow it until 1956.

Having the same battle honours for his service in Italy as General Sir Patrick Howard Dodson, it is obvious that Josef's great military brain was never allowed to fulfil its true potential. He was made a member of the Queen's Own Hussars Regimental Association in 1985 and is the oldest living cavalryman of the Krehovice Regiment.

Before settling in Tisbury in January 1971 where he is very happy amongst his many friends, Josef lived and worked in Grantham, Lincs., London and Edinburgh. He collected money for the Polish National Front from 1950 to 1990 and is an avid supporter of Lech Wajesa as the first non-communist President. In 1989 and 1990 over 862 pounds (170,000 pesetas) was collected in the Tisbury churches for the Polish cause—a staggering amount for a village and the highest amount per capita out of 30 places which included cities and counties such as London, Cardiff, Huddersfield and Devon.

"Lots of people here were giving donations to help fight for freedom for Poland . . . Tisbury I call Champion . . ." mused Josef in heavily Polish-accented English pointing excitedly to Tisbury's place at the top of the list of collectors, places and donations.

A present-day philosopher recently wrote: "There is no nobler spirit than the spirit of self-sacrifice. In it life rises to its highest level . . ."

It was very humbling to meet someone who has devoted almost all of his life, which has spanned all but three years of the twentieth Century, to the cause of liberty and justice. Having read Josef's inspirational life story of courage and determination, I asked him what kept him going during the endless catalogue of battles and set-backs. His reply of "My



love of homeland and freedom" just about sums up this very sprightly and jovial old gentleman who refers to the Second World War as having the greatest influence on him in that it wrecked his whole life. His main regret is that the Communists weren't overthrown earlier because he feels that he is now too old to visit his beloved Augustow for which he is still homesick.

However, Augustow's sad loss has definitely been Tisbury's proud gain. It has been privileged to have a resident whose resilience and tenacity embodies the great human virtue which defeated the evils of fascism in Germany and over half a century later, communism in the Soviet Republics.

Winston Churchill referred to the Allied forces' objective in the early days of the Second World War as: ". . . Victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror; victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory there is no survival." (Speech, *Hansard* 13 May 1940, col. 1502).

Those of us fortunate enough never to have lived through the sheer horrors of global hostilities or under political oppression are indebted to the likes of Josef and his generation for their relentless perseverance in the face of tyranny. •