

EULOGY – STEFAN WITYK: A TRIBUTE FROM SUE, TOM & JO (From funeral Mass 2nd September 2024 following Dad's passing on 31st July 2024)

Dad was born to Thomas and Francesca Wityk on the 11th of February 1924 in Ostrow, Poland, a small village in the south east of the country close to the Ukraine border. He was the youngest of five children – he had three sisters and one brother. Dad often talked of his happy childhood in Poland with his family. His father was a market gardener and much of their family life was spent in and around the home and on the land. They were more or less self-sufficient, keeping a few animals too, and Dad often talked of taking the horse down to the river 'San' to swim. When he was only 10 years old his father died after a tragic accident on the farm. His mother then faced a life alone with the children, trying to work on the land and support the family. The family's Catholic faith always played a huge part in their lives, and this continued for Dad throughout his own long life.

As a young boy Dad went to school in the village and enjoyed learning. He was a good pupil (or so he told us!) and often told us stories of his school years. Like most young boys he didn't always do as he was told. On one occasion he was meant to do an errand for his mother but instead decided to go down to the frozen river and play on the ice! Inevitably, the ice gave way and Dad fell in. Just by chance a young lad was walking on a nearby path and heard his cries for help and pulled him out. On another occasion a fall from a tree resulted in a broken arm which, unfortunately, was not set correctly. Apparently, in later life, when he met Mum, and just before they were engaged, he told her that he had something important to tell her. "I've got a crooked arm" he confessed. Luckily it didn't bother her and she didn't see it as a valid reason not to get married.

Growing up Dad, along with his siblings, helped as much as he could to earn a little money. He had a Saturday job working in a coffee shop grinding the beans, which he really enjoyed, then packaging them up and taking them along to the local Post Office to send away to distant customers.

When Dad was 15 years old Poland was invaded by Germany and so began the Second World War. It didn't take long for the occupying troops to reach Ostrow and Dad recalled that some of the first troops to arrive in the village were Slovaks. In April 1940 the German policy of forced labour came into effect and this meant that every family had to send at least one family member to work as a slave labourer in Germany. As dad's older brother Walter was in employment, and therefore more able to support his mother, Dad made the decision himself that he should be the one to leave home and go to Germany. He felt the family had more chance of survival if Walter was able to stay at home. Dad arrived in Wurzburg, Germany in late April 1940 and was collected by a farmer and taken to a small village called Struth to work the land. Life was not easy for a young Stefan. He was lonely and frightened of what might happen to him. Added to this the work he had to do was extremely demanding and food was sometimes in very short supply. In later years he finally opened up to us all about what had happened to him and the dreadful hardships he experienced at that time. He said that he often cried bitterly because he missed his mum, the life he had left behind, and the security of his home village. Life would never be the same for him.

Dad tried to make the best of his time in Germany by always working extremely hard. He also started to speak some German and eventually became fluent. By the end of the war he would also be able to speak Russian, Italian and of course English. He and his fellow labourers were subject to regular checks by the Gestapo to make sure they were indeed working hard and that none of them had absconded. He was required to wear an armband with a letter P on it when he was out and about on errands so that the locals could see who he was. This resulted in some aggression towards him but he always told us there were a few kind people who showed some empathy. One example of how he was typically treated was when he had very bad toothache and needed a tooth removing. When the dentist saw he was a Pole he refused to use anaesthetic because he said he didn't want to waste it. The tooth had to be removed without any.

Dad had been away from home in Germany for nearly four years when, one day, the authorities informed him that he had to report back to his home town. With the war going very badly for the axis forces the military were starting to recruit anyone who was remotely qualified to join the army. With a distant relative apparently being German Dad and his brother were to be conscripted. Upon arriving home Dad apparently knocked on the door of his house and, although his mum was there and could see him through a window, she refused to open the door as she thought it was a salesman (or worse). He had changed so much in appearance that she didn't recognise him. Dad obviously had no choice but to accept conscription. He knew that he and his family would have to face the dire consequences of not doing so. However, he always knew that at the earliest opportunity he would try to escape. He started his months of training in August 1944 and travelled extensively around occupied Europe, spending time in Aalborg Denmark and, by the end of that year, the town of Trenčin (pron. Tren-chin) in Slovakia. It was there that his platoon (made up entirely of other Polish boys) mutinied and refused to be posted to the front. This resulted in transportation to a concentration camp but, as luck would have it, a German officer who had overseen some of Dad's training saw the Platoon waiting at the station there, and intervened. He saved them from almost certain death by arranging to split them up and post them to regular German units. Fortunately Dad and his brother were assigned to the same unit.

When Dad was sent to the front (in Italy) he finally took his chance to surrender to the Allied Forces. His brother had been injured and taken to the field hospital after a particularly heavy bombardment of the German positions. When his unit was ordered to retreat, he stayed put and when things quietened down he left his position and walked towards the American lines waving a white handkerchief. He was fired on almost immediately and a bullet passed close to his head. He always said that at that moment he just left everything in God's hands and he continued walking. Miraculously, a Polish speaking American soldier heard his shouts of surrender, and he was taken into custody. After interrogation his captors realised that he was indeed a Polish boy and was not a true German soldier. He was then repatriated to the British 8th army and was finally free. Luckily, the day he was again sent to the front (serving now as a British soldier) the news came through that the Germans had surrendered, so marking the end of the war in Europe. Dad remained with the British army in Italy for a further year. He loved Italy and had many happy stories of his time serving there.

After the war 'displaced' people were given the chance to return to their homeland or they could settle in one of many countries around the world. As Poland was now under Communist rule Dad would have faced imprisonment on his return (due to his time in the German army) so he decided that he would settle in England as his mother had always told him not to go too far away from home. Sadly he would never see her again. He arrived in Glasgow by ship and he travelled down to the south of England by train, and was stationed in Essex for a while.

He finally settled in Histon, Cambridge along with other ex-Polish soldiers after being offered an apprenticeship in Orchard Management at Chivers Farms. All the men lived in nissen hut accommodation onsite. Dad decided not to pursue this as a career and, although he enjoyed his time at Histon, he was persuaded by his manager to find some 'proper' lodgings so he could be better looked after. After leaving Chivers he did find lodgings with a family in Mowbray Road Cambridge and they cared for him like a son. He spent time working at both Jesus and Queens colleges and then as a cabinet maker for a company in Coldham's Lane. Eventually he joined Ridgeons as a wood machinist and would spend over 25 years there.

In his spare time Dad taught himself to dance and would often go to the dance halls in Cambridge including The Embassy, The Rex and Houghton Hall (the Catholic Church organised Sunday evening dance venue). It was at Houghton Hall that Dad would meet his future wife, our Mum, Betty. Mum's sisters had managed to arrange that Dad would end up dancing with her and it was after this that they started dating. Dad was a perfect gentleman and their romance blossomed. They married at Our Lady and The English Martyrs Church on Boxing Day 1956. Dad was overjoyed at the birth of his first child, Susan, just over 12 months later and then, in consecutive years, Thomas & Josephine arrived and his family was complete.

Dad was a very smart man and those who knew him well will remember that he always wore a white shirt, suit and tie. He insisted on the tie even in boiling hot temperatures and always said "I don't feel dressed without one". Only in his 98th year did he relent and stop wearing one. He became a Eucharistic minister at this church, something he was very proud of and spent a lot of his retirement assisting the Parish Priest here.

Dad cycled everywhere but never learnt to drive. In later years when he had to give up going around the streets of Cambridge terrorising the neighbourhood on his mobility scooter he was able to spend many happy hours sitting in his armchair looking out of the lounge window waving to many passers-by or listening to music – Mario Lanza and Pavorotti were special favourites.

Gardening and growing vegetables in particular was a passion of Dad's in his slightly younger years. His vegetable patch was always meticulously laid out. To this day we still haven't tasted new potatoes like his. Dad liked football and followed Cambridge United for many years until his knee pain stopped him from standing on the terraces.

Always a family man, Dad had many stories about his brother and sisters and his home in Poland. He kept in touch with them by letter after the war and did manage to visit his sister Catherine in France many times. He also visited Canada twice to see his sister Josephine once she had managed to leave Poland. He never saw his other sister or his brother again.

The birth of his grandchildren Mark & Paul brought him the greatest joy. He and Mum absolutely loved taking them out to play football and cricket on Parker's Piece. He also enjoyed family holidays with them, particularly times spent away by the sea at Christmas. In time he saw his family grow when Mark met his fiancé Kayla, and Paul his wife Louise. Not only was Dad a loving Grandad and father-in-law he was also loved by all his nieces, nephews and friends, many keeping in touch regularly.

In all his 100 years the only time spent in hospital was that last week in Addenbrookes before he passed away. The only medication he ever took was paracetamol. He truly was an amazing man! He was always there for us and for that we will always be grateful. We can all say that we were very privileged to have him for so long. Dad, your lovely smile and gentle nature will always remain with us. You will be greatly missed. Thank you for everything.