

This weekend sees the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Polish Ex-Combatants Sheffield branch. But why did they come here? Reporter Jan Vass asks one emigré...

One man's odyssey



Home and away: Bronislaw Turzynski, right, in Rome in 1946 and, above right, at his home in Stannington



BRONISLAW Turzynski clearly doesn't know the meaning of the word excitement. He did not want to be interviewed, he said, because he didn't have much of a tale to tell.

Jumping out of windows to avoid Russian soldiers? Hiding in the woods with Jews and Ukrainian partisans? Not your average adolescence. But then, within South Yorkshire's dwindling band of Polish emigrés, Bronislaw's story is far from unique.

Tales of bravery, narrow escapes and fortitude in the face of adversity are common place. It is the story of a community forcibly removed from its own country in war, required to endure incredible hardships and sent on a journey halfway around the world to find peace.

Within this world Bronislaw's modesty is not misplaced. But for the rest of us who take life's mundane comforts for granted it seems like shyness bordering on obsessive privacy.

Arriving in England on a raw morning in 1946 he was not impressed by what he found. "We landed in Liverpool and I can remember how miserable it was first thing in the morning," said Bronislaw.

"I noticed there were queues everywhere and that the dockers were hardly moving."

Ungrateful? Not a bit of it. After what he had been through, even the austerity of post war England seemed like blessed relief.

Bronislaw was born in Równe near the Ukrainian border. In the ever-changing geography of the east these were disputed lands, eyed covetously by a hungry Soviet Union desperate for prime farmland.

Like many ex-servicemen Bronislaw's father had been given a piece of land to farm by the newly-formed Polish government. "There were a lot of settlers and the Polish government allocated about 40 acres to them."

The rural idyll was not to last. Unknown to the Poles, in secret meetings the Nazis and the Communists, the strangest of bedfellows, had divided up their country. On September 1 Germany invaded from the west, plunging Europe into war.

A few days later the Russians attacked from the east. They soon got to Równe. "When the Russians arrived in 1939 they arrested all of the men. They were still classed as army blokes because every so often they were called into the reserves."

Bronislaw's father had escaped because he was visiting an uncle at a nearby farm. Bronislaw was sent to warn him, making his escape through the window.

NOVEMBER 11 is always a bittersweet day for Sheffield's Polish community. As well as marking Armistice Day at the end of the First World War, the 11th is also Poland's national day.

That annual memorial will be extra special this year as it coincides with the 50th anniversary of the Polish Ex-combatants Association's Sheffield branch.

Based at Dover Road off Ecclesall Road since 1954 the club was first formed in the Woodlane Camp by Polish soldiers in December 1947.

Language difficulties and the lack of a regular meeting place hampered relations with the local community and it was not without a struggle that the club was finally founded.

After initial financial difficulties and wrangles with the city council the club got the local authority stamp of approval when the Lord Mayor was the guest of honour at the opening ceremony in 1954.

Since then the club has been a focus for the retention of a Polish identity in the city, especially during the years of communist party rule in Poland when travel to and from the country was fraught with difficulties. A Polish Saturday School helps children keep in touch with their language and culture.

Events this weekend include an anniversary dance tomorrow night and a jubilee mass at St Marie's Cathedral on Sunday at 12.30pm.

"My mother said if the Russians saw it was just her and my two sisters and younger brother they may not take them away – but they still took her."

They were taken to the railway station and loaded on to cattle trucks bound for Siberia. After speaking to Bronislaw, his father decided to join the rest of the family. "He had a job to prove he was the husband of my mother."

Bronislaw, just 15, decided to stay and like hundreds of others across the centuries he headed for the refuge of nearby woods. It was there he found work as a lumberjack.

Eventually the Russians were pushed out by the invading German army but Bronislaw stayed in the woods, safe. Eventually it became too dangerous even there.

The woods became a hiding place for Jews escaping Nazi persecution and for Ukrainian nationalists who wanted their own state. There were also Polish partisans opposed to occupation first by communists and then by Nazis.

These were hunted by Cossacks and Hungarians who were sympathetic to the Nazi cause. "I managed to get a job on the railway and stayed there from 1943-44."

It was to be his salvation – and, in some ways, his undoing. As a vital war worker Bronislaw was forcibly removed from the east to Germany to avoid the advancing Russian army.

It was a railway journey which took a month to wind its way across Europe calling at the likes of Auschwitz en-route where they

were fed and watered out of sight of the death camp.

He ended up imprisoned in Germany. "I was in Saarbrücken for nine months until I was liberated by the Americans in 1944. I then joined the Polish army and went to France and then Italy."

In 1946, desperate for news of his family, Bronislaw contacted the Red Cross in Beirut. He learned they had all survived, undertaking an incredible journey to safety of their own.

After the Russians switched sides, the Poles were allowed to leave Siberia, travelling via Uzbekistan, Iran and Iraq to India and eventually Africa where they were granted refuge for the duration of the war.

As displaced persons they were allowed to settle in Britain. Bronislaw decided to join them there and so, in 1946, in the company of other men from the Polish army, set sail from Italy to Liverpool.

From there it was on to Cannon Hall, Barnsley, and an army transit camp before he was demobbed and moved to Penistone where he worked in a garage.

"At that time we could only get the most menial jobs in the coal mines and textile mills, jobs like that. They did not like us. In places like Maltby they would not let us work down the pit."

"In Sheffield I could be a policeman but not a bus driver or a road sweeper."

Not all the locals were unfriendly, however, and Bronislaw met future wife Violet at a New Year's dance in Barnsley in 1949.

They married in 1951 and had three children. They now have five grandchildren. Now aged 73, Bronislaw has retired from his job in engineering and lives in Rivelin Park Crescent.

But every September he meets with fellow Poles from the same region to talk over old times. A book, in Polish, has been published about their experiences. There are plans to translate it and publish it here next year.

Like many Poles Bronislaw will not be returning home to live. Równe is now in the Ukraine and his family's farm was destroyed by forced collectivisation by the Russians. What were once houses are now fields.

Worse, Poland itself has changed beyond recognition in the intervening 50 years. For people like Bronislaw they face a life permanently as displaced persons. Sheffield is now home, for better or worse.