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GREAT BRITAIN

## FOR THERE IS HOPE: POETRY, STORY-TELLING AND BIOGRAPHY TO RAISE AWARENESS OF THE POLISH-SCOTTISH HERITAGE

I was born in 1959, fourteen years after the end of the Second World War, into a Polish-Scottish family living just south-east of Glasgow. I mention the fact that it was relatively close to the end of the war because it is relevant to my subsequent future interest in the Polish side of my heritage.

The fact is that as I grew up as a child in the 1960s I thought of the war as ancient history, even though I knew my father Jan Stepek had been involved in the conflicts. So the war seemed to have no connection to me and my life in Scotland, despite the fact that as kids we played soldiers, British versus Germans, bought and played with plastic toy soldiers of the Allied and Axis troops, notably Brits and Germans again, also Americans and sometimes Japanese. No Russians, no Poles, despite the fact that the people of these two countries suffered the greatest losses, the first in absolute terms, the second in the percentage of the population. And we bought and read war stories in comics and comic books. So much for a child's perspective that the war played no part in growing up.

Similarly, I had no conception of being Polish or part-Polish. This, despite the fact that my father employed about half a dozen Poles in his family business, that they and other Poles came round to our house in Hamilton on a regular basis, maybe monthly on average, and spoke both Polish on the one hand, and English with a Polish accent that you could cut with a knife, as indeed did my father and my Polish aunt and un-

cle. We mimicked my father and his fellow Poles but never thought Polishness related to us as children. We were – that is, my nine siblings and I – Scottish, like my mother and my Scottish relations. It was only later that I came to realise that even with regard to my mother I was deluded. With a first name of Teresa and a maiden name Murphy, my mother may have felt Scottish but clearly her family origins lay over the Irish Sea.

It was only after I reached the age of forty, in January 2000, when my father had three strokes in just over a year, that I was jolted into the awareness that I knew little about his early life in Poland and how he came to settle in Scotland. I knew he had been taken to Siberia by the Red Army and that his mother had died as a result, but was somehow buried in Teheran. So I determined that should he survive and recover sufficiently I would glean from him as much as I could of his pre-Scotland life. And so I got hooked on the astonishing story of Poland's history, from its earliest days through its expansion to the glory centuries, then to the wars and partitions, then to the two World Wars, independence, a fourth partition, post-war Soviet domination, and up-to-date with Poland in the EU and NATO and a global market with all its opportunities, flaws, and problems.

As I developed my understanding I started to notice how little my fellow Scots knew about Poland and Scotland, including Scots of Polish descent like myself. It is an astonishing feat to have a country's entire armed forces headquartered in your small country, with 60,000 troops camped outside major towns and cities, and for this to be mostly forgotten even while many of the Poles and Scots who experienced these events were still alive. Thus, my father became one of Scotland's best-known entrepreneurs but no one could connect him to the historic events which brought him here.

I decided to share the little but growing body of knowledge I had gathered, both online and in talks. A by-product of my interviewing my father about his life was my writing of a series of poems about his family's experiences, mostly in Siberia, and some reflections I made about these. I read a few in Glasgow and was surprised when a publisher came up to me and asked if she could publish a book of the poems. The idea of what became *For There is Hope* was born.

I told my family story from partition days to settling in Scotland at Glasgow's Sikorski Club in around 2007. There was a full house and half of those present had no Polish connections but were just curious to hear a story. They left knowing that hundreds of thousands of Poles had been deported to labour camps in Russia and other parts of the Soviet Union. They learned that survivors living in Scotland had watched their family members die, had buried their little brothers and sisters as children, had contracted typhus, dysentery, and malaria – my father had all three in succession in 1942 – and yet recovered fully.

I got involved in a small but growing family research group, called Kresy-Siberia. It was there that I found out what Kresy means, and that this was the term used

to describe the eastern border areas of pre-war Poland, the regions annexed by Stalin and which now form part of Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania. The group grew from around a hundred to over a thousand and I was one of twenty members who formed a virtual steering group leading to the creation of the Kresy-Siberia Virtual Museum which collates the stories, memoirs, photographs and documents of those who were deported. The charity proved successful, yet most of us had never met in real life, only on Skype.

Sharing findings from the Kresy-Siberia group led to growing interest in Scotland, as in the rest of the UK and worldwide, from non-Poles. Sometimes their responses were in line with the received version of the war: „So they were Jewish, your family, and the others who were deported?“, to which I had to reply: „No, my family were Polish and Catholic, but many Jewish Poles and Ukrainian Poles were also deported to Russia“. Which led to the puzzled comment: „But surely the Russians were on our side against the Nazis? Why would they deport Poles?“ and so on. It is truly hard to tell someone the truth and have it received as such when the story doesn't fit with the paradigm already framed in people's minds.

The same was true when I would explain how Britain and France entered the war to liberate Poland, ended it with Poland still occupied but this time by another neighbouring state, and that the Poles were forbidden to join the Victory March in London when the war in Europe ended. The phrase „does not compute“ best explains most people's reactions to these facts.

And I met with much the same response when I ventured to suggest that „the Poles“ were not predominantly fascists as had been the propagandist view put forth by Stalin during and after the war. Especially in Scotland where the positive trait of egalitarianism is still strong, there remains a romantic view of communism amongst much of the left. For them the notion that the Poles were as a whole anti-Semitic and supportive of the right-wing regime which ruled over Poland in the late 1930s was taken for granted. When I mentioned that an order had been written to place my grandfather in the notorious concentration camp of Bereza Kartuska in 1937 because of his opposition to the right-wing government – an order which was subsequently cancelled by a family friend within government circles – people again assumed that only Jews would suffer such a fate in pre-war Poland. In fact, it was mostly Ukrainian militants and politicians who suffered this fate.

In short, I have found that there was mostly ignorance of Poland's history or of how the Poles came to Scotland and Britain, and skewed views from those who thought they did know the history. History, as everyone here will know, is always complex, nuanced, so not really conducive to a quick summary.

It therefore came as a great relief and support when I found a coterie of young post-EU accession Poles, mostly centred around Edinburgh, who wanted to create a Polish-

-Scottish Cultural Festival. I got involved as a volunteer advisor particularly when they started to create a website called the Polish-Scottish Heritage Trail. They made films, did oral history projects, organised exhibitions and talks. They were energetic, free from historical prejudices on my generation or the previous one, but amazed to learn when they came to Scotland that there were already Poles here from the war. The stunning fact that one in six Poles from the pre-war population were no longer in Poland at the end of the war was not taught to the Poles who remained in their homeland.

This group has transformed the understanding of Polish-Scottish history and heritage in Scotland, and to some extent in Poland. More and more academics, such as David Worthington at the University of the Highlands and Islands, Professor Robert Frost at the University of Aberdeen, and many others have popularised Polish-Scottish history by linking with the Polish-Scottish Heritage Trail project.

It has been fascinating for me to witness and play a very small part in these developments over the past decade, and I have a feeling it has only just started. The Poles who came over to Scotland since 2003 have for the most part settled down, many into professional careers, some into academia, others in business. They are highly educated, articulate, IT-advanced, and want to learn and share this unusual but mostly warm and synergetic cultural mix that envelops the relationship between Poland and Scotland. We work with Scottish Government ministers and members of the Scottish Parliament, we have initiated trade missions and helped plan formal ministerial visits in both directions.

I think it is fair to say that there has been a rekindling of a strong bond of friendship and camaraderie between the people of Scotland and Poland, and it has been thrilling to see it.

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MARTIN STEPEK

**BO JEST NADZIEJA: POEZJA, OPOWIADANIA  
I BIOGRAFIE PODNOSZĄCE ŚWIADOMOŚĆ  
DZIEDZICTWA POLSKO-SZKOCKIEGO**

STRESZCZENIE

**A**utor urodził się po II wojnie światowej w rodzinie polsko-szkockiej w Glasgow. Jednak odniesienia wojenne i polskie są istotne w jego biografii. Autor wspomina, że kiedy zgłębił losy członków rodziny, poznał ich tułaczkę po Syberii i Kresach. Zaczął pisać o tym wiersze i opowiadać na spotkaniach, objaśniając także skomplikowaną historię Polski przedwojennej. Jego działania doprowadziły do kolejnych przedsięwzięć polsko-szkockich.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Polska, Szkocja, Syberia, Kresy, II wojna światowa, wspomnienia