

# Notes on the life of Ron Pither

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I honour the bravery and memory of the crew of the Liberator EW250L

Lt Dennis O. Cullingworth, SAAF, Pilot  
Lt Charles S. S. Franklin, SAAF, 2<sup>nd</sup> Pilot  
Lt Kenneth J. McLeod, SAAF, Navigator  
Lt George Ray-Howett, SAAF, Wireless Operator  
Sgt Jack E. Speed, RAF, Bomb Aimer  
Sgt Desmond P. Richmond, RAF, Wireless Operator or Gunner  
Sgt Ronald C. Bowden, RAF, Beam Gunner  
Sgt Ronald T. Pither, RAF, Rear Gunner

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# ***Ron Pither's Story***

## ***Introduction to the life of Ron Pither***

This is the story of Ron Pither (Pictures 1 and 2) who was an RAF rear gunner flying from Brindisi, Italy in 1944. While returning from an operation to drop supplies to the Polish partisans during the Warsaw Uprising, his plane was shot down near Kocina in the province of Kielce, about 40 miles north-east of Krakow, Poland. He bailed out and was hidden by the Polish Home Army (AK) until his eventual return to Britain five months later. The incredible story of his survival and concealment in enemy occupied territory is recounted here, as told by Ron himself in tape recordings he made for his family (*Ref 1* at end of this document).

## ***Ron's early years***

Ronald Pither was born on 6<sup>th</sup> March 1922 as the fourth child in a family of nine children. They lived in Brighton, England, where Ron's father ran a small grocery shop from the front room of their terraced house (Picture 3). The back room of the house was their kitchen and living room combined. There was very little space for a family of eleven, and Ron and his six brothers shared beds in one bedroom, sleeping "top and tail" to fit them all in. This was a hardworking family, and from a very young age all the children helped with family chores and assisted their father in his business. If any of them were placed in detention at school their father would demand their immediate release, saying he needed them to work in the shop or to make deliveries for him.

In 1936, at the age of 14, Ron left school and joined his parents and older siblings in the family business which later expanded to three small grocery stores. Their success was short-lived unfortunately as bigger grocery chains began to emerge and Ron's father was not able to compete with their lower prices. Eventually the family's shops had to close. Following the demise of the business Ron's father became a milk roundsman, and Ron and his siblings found other employment locally. At first Ron worked for Rayners, an opticians, then later at a dry cleaners.

In his teens Ron joined the Boys' Brigade which was a boys' club similar to the Scouts with local evening meetings once a week, and he later became a leader of his local group. When he was seventeen years old he met Evelyn Wright, his wife to be, at the local Salvation Army church in Brighton. That same year, in September 1939, Britain joined the war. Ron was still too young to join up at that time, but just over a year later at the age of eighteen Ron enlisted in the RAF.

## ***RAF training and missions***

As with every serviceman, Ron was trained in several locations and for various purposes in the war effort. Ron's service record is shown here with any information we have about what he was doing in each location, and any anecdotes passed down to the family that related to his time in these places.

His service record is also listed more concisely in the References section at the end of this document (*Ref 2*).

**27/1/41**      **Enlisted RAF**

**28/1/41**      **Reserve**

Ron enlisted in the Royal Air Force on 27<sup>th</sup> January 1941 at eighteen years of age, and was placed on reserve the following day.

**26/6/41**      **RDV or RDW (printing not clear on letter)**

**2/7/41**      **10(S) RC - 10 Signals Recruit Centre, Blackpool, England**

Five months after enlisting, on 26<sup>th</sup> June 1941, Ron was called up. By this time he was nineteen years old. On 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1941 he began a Signals Course at 10 Signals Recruit Centre in Blackpool (*Ref 3*), where he studied to become a wireless operator. He found learning Morse code interesting, and weekly tests took place at a building owned by Burtons the tailors on Blackpool seafront. The students would gather on the stairs, each with their ear phones on, ready to go into the testing room as a group. Once inside they were played Morse code with interference and had to pick out their own particular notes. At the end of the course, to everyone's surprise, they were informed they had all failed. The students were then given a pep talk and told there was a special "secret" job they could volunteer for instead if they wished. Ron said they heard afterwards that the "powers-that-be" had decided they had sufficient wireless operators for that moment and needed these men for a different purpose, so they had failed the whole group and offered them the mission required. It worked. With the excitement of this secret job and no alternative on offer, it didn't take long for them all to volunteer as expected.

In preparation for their new posting they were sent to the Isle of Sheppey, Kent for training on Parachute and Cable (*Ref 4*). Although this course was supposed to be top secret, it greatly surprised the airmen that the window cleaners on the camp spent much of their time peering through the windows observing the instruction and no one seemed to mind. After a few weeks they were informed they would use their new-found skills somewhere in the Middle East, and at the end of the course the necessary arrangements were made. Vaccinations were given, and they were told to collect an overseas kit from the stores.

The men passed along in single file in front of the counter at the clothing store and were impressed with the expertise of the distribution staff. With only a quick glance at each young man they seemed to know exactly from which pile to take a shirt or pair of shorts, and handed them over as each one passed along with his arms outstretched in front of him. Heavily laden, and bubbling with excitement and enthusiasm, they all returned home for embarkation leave. This was Ron's second leave since being called up, and news that he was going overseas was a blow to his family and girlfriend Evelyn.

**3/12/41**      **Egypt, Middle East**

**23/1/42**      **103 MU**

**24/10/42**      **RAF Aboukir**

On 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1941 Ron and his group were sent to an RAF maintenance unit, 103 MU, at RAF Aboukir near Alexandria in Egypt (*Ref 5*). They travelled from England to Port Said in a convoy of about fifteen to twenty ships carrying troops and food, and were escorted by several destroyers and two large gunboats travelling down the west coast of Africa. As the weather improved from British winter to Saharan sunshine, the RAF men

needed to change into their desert uniform. This presented a problem, because to the dismay of many the “carefully selected” kit they had received from the stores had turned out to be in all the wrong sizes. Some swapped items... shirts, shorts and hats, but others couldn't find a swap and didn't know what to do. Ron, with another airman, set up a tailoring service to adjust the mismatched clothing. His family upbringing, and his work at the dry cleaners, had equipped him with a wide range of skills. The men queued up for the necessary alterations and Ron set-to with scissors, sometimes cutting shirts and shorts open from top to bottom much to their alarm. Concern turned to relief though when he skilfully removed sections and sewed the garments back together in a much more appropriate size.

A potential danger arose one day as they journeyed off the Gold Coast, now Ghana. One morning they awoke to find the rest of the convoy gone. Their engine had broken down in the night and they were left completely on their own, unprotected, in dangerous waters. Thankfully it was possible to make repairs, and they were relieved to be able to continue their voyage without any attack or further incident arising. On 27<sup>th</sup> December 1941 their ship crossed the equator.

Once they arrived at Port Said they were taken by train to RAF Aboukir (*Ref 5*), where Ron would remain for over a year. His job was to protect the airfield using the Parachute and Cable system (*Ref 4*), in addition to other duties. While there Ron also received some engineering training and took a test to become an aircraft mechanic. Their base was sufficiently close to Alexandria for the men to be able to spend most of their free time in the city.

During this period Ron was promoted from AC (Aircraftman), which is the lowest rank in the RAF, to AC1 (Aircraftman First Class). This may have been on 24<sup>th</sup> October 1942 when Ron's posting according to his War Department record changed from 103 MU to RAF Aboukir, although his physical location remained the same.

### **2/5/43      UK**

On 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1943 Ron was posted back to the UK. He left Port Said for a ten day boat trip to Durban, South Africa where he remained for six weeks while waiting for a ship to take him back to the UK. During this time he was sent to Salisbury, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) to attend an Air Training school and was accepted for aircrew. He was then able to attach white flashes to the front of his forage cap to show he was aircrew under training. When they left Durban the troops and airmen expected to sail north along the African coast, but instead they found they were on their way to South America. This route was taken in order to avoid the usual shipping lanes which held a greater risk of attack from U boats. The crossing was far from pleasant however, as they experienced dreadful weather with icicles hanging from the superstructure. Apparently the men kept themselves entertained on the voyage by learning German war songs until they reached the South American coast. Their ship then turned north, sailed to New York, and from there returned to England.

### **No date      Abbey Lodge**

Once back in the UK, and perhaps after a short holiday at his parents' home in Brighton, Ron was sent to the Preliminary Air Crew Training Wing at Abbey Lodge, St. John's Wood, Regent's Park, London. Abbey Lodge was a block of luxury flats that had been commandeered by the RAF (*Ref 6*).

**4/10/43 14 ITW**

On 4<sup>th</sup> October 1943 Ron was posted to No 14 Initial Training Wing which at that time was at Bridlington in East Yorkshire. 14 ITW had responsibility for the initial service training of air gunners (*Ref 7*).

It might have been here that Ron was taught how to use a parachute. Over the years he described this experience to us in conversations at various times; creating a vivid picture of what took place. With the other trainees he was taken to a swimming pool where they all changed into flying gear and a "Mae West" life jacket. They were then instructed to climb the steps to the top diving board and jump off. From that height it looked a long way down. The sergeant stood at the bottom pointing to each one and shouting "Come on! You! You! Alright... You!" just willing them to jump, with most of them holding back and crowding the top board. They all jumped eventually. There weren't enough flying suits to go around so they had to share by putting on a wet flying suit before their jump, which was most unpleasant.

More practice took place in a hangar, where they went up a terrifically high flight of steps wearing a parachute harness and were clipped onto a wire. This wire was attached to a frame that went down and forward at the same time, to give them experience in landing safely should they ever have to bail out. They landed on mattresses with an arm bent up to protect their heads, and rolled over. It gave them a bit of confidence, but they hoped they would never need it.

**No date 2 AGS. No 2 Air Gunners School**

Ron's next destination was No 2 Air Gunner's School (*Ref 8*) at Dalcross near Inverness, now Inverness Airport.

Ron told us that when he was learning to be an air gunner the training was done with a plane towing a drogue. The students shot at the drogue from a second plane flying alongside, using bullets which contained a coloured dye. Each student's bullets were a different colour so their individual accuracy could be assessed. He said it was very difficult as the drogue moved about quite erratically, and at first many students missed altogether. They persevered however, and with practice passed the course.

The extract below tells about training at Dalcross, although please note this is not Ron's own story but that of another RAF airman in training. I credit and acknowledge the copyright of this text to [Jenni Waugh](#), writing about Sgt Bernard Lazenby RAF. Article ID: A7895352, contributed on 19 December 2005. BBC WW2 People's War stories. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/52/a7895352.shtml>

*"Off again on lectures for 3 days before the real job of flying began ... Flying took place over the Moray Firth. Strong winds were normal and a hazard to the Anson taxiing (sic) to the runway for take off. A trainee supported each wing of the plane on the perimeter, to prevent it digging in during a gust, then boarded the aircraft for the exercise. Each of the three trainees had their own coloured bullets, usually red, green or yellow, and fired 200 rounds at a drogue towed by an accompanying aircraft approximately 400 yards away. On return the trainees collected the drogue from the drop zone, taking it to the parachute*

*section. The three types of coloured holes were counted and cancelled with a black stamp. A card, with each trainee's score was taken to the gunnery section for end of course assessment on conclusion at each firing exercise. Cine cameras took the place of guns on some exercises, when a mock attack took place. These films were also assessed. ... In the hectic life of training there were no weekends if the course was behind schedule, so often I was unaware of what day of the week it was. An Oxford aircraft training unit for pilots shared the 'drome with us. When they were on night flying (circuits and landings) they kindly took us up for an hour or two to give us some idea of night flying set up".*

Ron told us stories of his air gunner training which were exactly the same as this airman's story.

**18/4/44      5 PDC**

On 18<sup>th</sup> April 1944 Ron was sent to 5 Personnel Dispatch Centre at Heaton Park, Manchester. This was a camp where aircrew were held between courses and postings. Apparently the Nissen Huts here were particularly uncomfortable, and freezing cold (*Ref 9*).

**30/5/44      1675 HCU Heavy Conversion Unit**

On 30<sup>th</sup> May 1944 Ron was posted to the Heavy Conversion Unit at RAF Station Lydda, Palestine now Israel. This was to convert his general air gunner training to the specific planes he would be flying on, which were Liberators (*Ref 10*).

**13/7/44      34 Sqn SAAF**

Ron joined 34 Squadron SAAF (*Ref 11*) on 13<sup>th</sup> July 1944. This was a heavy bomber unit that operated in Foggia, Italy from July 1944 until the end of the Second World War. He was assigned as a mid-upper gunner to Liberator EW250L (Picture 4) piloted by Lt. Dennis Cullingworth and Lt Charles Franklin.

When 34 Squadron SAAF arrived in Foggia, the airfield was already an established American Air Force base which was well organised. 31 Squadron and 34 Squadron SAAF were given an area on one side of the airfield and began to set up their own living and working facilities with their comparatively basic equipment. Generally the SAAF base consisted entirely of tents, though over time some shacks were built from packing cases. Their camp was never sophisticated though and tents predominated throughout. Leisure facilities were shared with the Americans, who allowed the SAAF to attend their cinema and concerts.

As part of the crew of Liberator EW250L Ron flew on many operations; dropping bombs and propaganda leaflets and jamming radio signals across the Balkans and southern Europe. Usually there would be four to six planes on an operation but sometimes they were joined by RAF Wellingtons from other aerodromes. On one occasion over one hundred planes from several squadrons flew together. They flew in layers fifty feet apart with planes above, below, in front and behind. It took considerable skill on the part of the pilots to remain in formation. Ron remembers being in the mid-upper gunner position at the time, and at one point he looked up and saw the Liberator above was only a few feet

from their own. If they had touched, both would have crashed out of the sky taking out the planes below them. Not wanting to invoke a sharp reaction from the pilot, Ron spoke calmly over the intercom to the skipper suggesting he reduce his altitude a little as the aircraft above was too close. The pilot looked up and was alarmed to see it almost on top of them, so gently eased their plane down a few feet to a safe position. He couldn't descend much or he would have hit the one below them.

In contrast to that large operation, they would occasionally fly solo. The crew were always uneasy about this. They were particularly vulnerable as a single plane because the anti-aircraft guns and fighter planes had only one target. One night they flew alone dropping propaganda material over Hungary, flying very low almost at rooftop height back and forth around the streets. Every member of the crew secretly thought they wouldn't return from that op. They said nothing to one another during the flight, but on their return they each admitted their feelings of relief to be safely back at base. The experience galvanised a decision for the rear gunner of the time, who upon landing declared he wouldn't fly again. He had a wife and child and felt the risks were too high. All aircrew were volunteers and could withdraw from flying duties at any time. This freedom of choice was essential as they relied upon one another entirely in the air. Each man needed to do their own job with courage and confidence, and be assured their fellow crew members would also be doing theirs to the best of their ability. Ron said that his crew, and every other aircraft's crew, were loyally close. Bound together by the dangers of their common task they willingly accepted one-another's strengths and weaknesses, and that of their own Liberator. They never wanted to fly with another aircraft's crew, nor in another Liberator, and if it was ever required they would be most unhappy about it. If one member of a crew were ill it was generally accepted that the whole crew would be stood down if possible.

Upon the previous rear gunner's departure Ron moved to that position (Pictures 5 and 6). Rear gunner was generally considered the most vulnerable place in the plane as most attacks from fighters came from below or the rear. In an attack it was thought the rear gunner would often be the first to go, but Ron didn't feel that was his experience thus far. From what he had seen aircraft either came back or didn't come back. He hadn't personally seen them return with their rear gunner injured or lost, so he felt the risks for that position were no more than for the rest of the crew. With youthful optimism, and despite some evidence to the contrary, Ron was happy to take up his new role.

From the rear turret, planes above could usually be seen fairly easily even at night against a lighter sky; but fighters below were particularly difficult to spot in the darkness. The view towards the ground was often completely black, and the task of the rear gunner would be to hopefully notice the slightly blacker shape of an enemy plane below, against that very dark backdrop. Ron said the process of night observation for rear gunners was to divide their visual area into imaginary squares and search each one in turn, hoping to be examining the correct square at the time of an enemy fighter's appearance. Even with great diligence it was very much a case of luck if they were looking in the right place at the right time to detect the slightly darker speck below which indicated an enemy approach.

On their return from each operation, after being debriefed, the crew could go straight to the canteen and have any food or drink they wanted. It didn't matter what time they returned (and it was often four or five in the morning) the canteen was always open for them with hot food prepared and ready. This level of service from the ground staff reflected the high risks taken by aircrew.



After about ten operations Ron was given a week's leave with a choice of going to Rome or Sorrento. Ron only recalls this one period of leave, and he chose Sorrento. They were given accommodation in a hotel that was run by the military for the military, but with some local labour. The hotel was on the cliff edge, with very steep steps which resembled a rope ladder leading down the cliff face to a delightful private beach. Ron said he had a very pleasant week there in the glorious Italian sunshine, visiting Naples and other towns nearby. In their café he remembers the song *Torna a Surriento* (Return to Sorrento) was broadcast almost continuously. The refrain stayed with him, and decades later we would hear him singing it at the top of his voice as he worked.

In addition to the leave in Rome or Sorrento, the men would occasionally visit Manfredonia if they had a day off as it was the nearest town to Foggia. Being a sergeant, Ron was permitted to go to Motor Transport and ask to borrow a lorry; all he needed to do was sign for it. On one occasion Ron and his friend Jack Scott went to Manfredonia together and decided to take a lorry. Neither of them had much driving experience, and none at all of driving a huge lorry, but that didn't deter them. Jack suggested that Ron drove and they set off. As soon as they were out of the gates they saw the road was lined with servicemen hitch-hiking, because unless you were a sergeant or above you couldn't get any transport of your own and had to hope for a lift. In no time Ron had a truck full of service personnel and they trundled along happily towards their destination. At one point, proceeding at speed, they approached a level crossing. The train tracks were in a dip and it didn't occur to Ron with his limited driving experience that it would be advisable to slow down. They reached the level crossing, dropped to the tracks, and after the rise on the other side they all took to the air. Upon landing the men in the back were thrown to the lorry floor, but fortunately none fell out. Ron stopped, checked they were all okay, and apologised. No doubt the men considered it to be just part of the rough and tumble of service life, but Ron remembered the occasion with embarrassment all his days.

There was a constant risk on trips to Manfredonia that tyres, wheels, or even whole lorries would be stolen while the men were enjoying their day off. If the lorry was left unguarded it could be stripped of everything of value by the time they returned. Not only did someone need to guard it at all times, but they needed to watch all sides at all times or things would be stolen from one side while they were guarding the other. So either one man had to walk around the lorry constantly and not allow himself to be distracted (perhaps by a child, which was a common ploy), or else two men would guard it together. Fortunately Ron's lorry remained intact and he was able to get it signed back in safely on his return.

Although there were the occasional pleasures of leave, most of the time their focus was the war. In addition to their other bombing activities, from 13<sup>th</sup> August 1944 planes from both 31 squadron and 34 squadron SAAF flew to Poland during the Warsaw Uprising. Their mission was to deliver weapons, ammunition and medical supplies to the Polish partisans. Some Polish officers had arrived at the base in Italy to take charge of packing containers with these supplies to be dropped over Poland. The flight to Warsaw stretched the Liberators and their crew to the absolute limits of viability; requiring eleven hours of flight, and almost every drop of available fuel. To cap it all, the majority of the flight would be over enemy occupied territory.

In Lawrence Isemonger's book giving the history of 31 Squadron and 34 Squadron SAAF, "The Men Who Went to Warsaw" (Ref 12) Chapter 14, Lawrence Isemonger describes the briefing directions given to the crews:

*"From Brindisi the Liberators would climb to 15,000 feet and follow a route that would take them over the Adriatic Sea, through Yugoslavia, Hungary and Czechoslovakia to the Carpathian Mountain range. Once over these mountains, when north-east of Krakow, they would descend to 8,000 feet to identify the Vistula River, their sole guide to Warsaw. Nearer the capital, they were to fly still lower, following the course of the river as it swung through the city and, when the last of the four bridges spanning the Vistula had been reached, to turn west for two minutes. Then drop to roof-top level and jettison the supply canisters in areas identified by a cluster of white lights with red flashes. These areas were indicated to our men on a town plan map of Warsaw, virtually a street address in the heart of the city. Tension in the briefing room mounted as the aircrews learned that to release the supplies where needed meant that their Liberators would have to drop to a height of 500 feet. They would also have to fly close to the stalling speed of 120 mph so as to ensure that the canisters, equipped with small canopies to arrest their fall, would hit the ground with as little shock as possible. Such a manoeuvre called for half-flap and precluded any evasive action. If spotted, the Liberators would be the answer to an ack-ack gunner's prayers. It was a long way to go. A round trip of 1,800 miles. That would take about eleven hours, ten of which would be over enemy-occupied territory, and with no fighter protection. It was little less than suicide"*

#### **9/10/44      Discharged to Commission**

Presumably this entry in Ron's service record means he was discharged from the ranks and given a commission as Pilot Officer. Ron was unaware of this however when he embarked on his fateful mission to Poland a few days later on 16<sup>th</sup> October, and didn't learn of his promotion until he returned to England many months later. After some time in Britain he was promoted again from Pilot Officer to Flying Officer number 186093.

#### **16/10/44      Shot Down**

On 16<sup>th</sup> October 1944 at 4.40pm, Ron's crew flying in Liberator EW250L took off from Italy on a mission to drop supplies to guerrillas in a forest near Radomsko, Konskie; about 120 km north east of Krakow. Despite reaching the target position they didn't find the agreed light signal identifying the drop-zone. At about 8.55pm Polish local time, as they were returning to Italy with the canisters still aboard, they were shot down near Kocina-Krzczonow; about 70km north east of Krakow.

#### **17/10/44      Reported missing**

According to the Ministry of Defence, Ron was reported missing on 17<sup>th</sup> October 1944.

### ***Shot down and hidden in Poland***

On that tragic night of 16<sup>th</sup> October 1944 they were returning to base following their unsuccessful mission when a fighter came up from below in the darkness. Neither Ron nor

the other gunners noticed his approach. The first Ron knew was a huge bang. His ears were ringing and his canopy was shattered. Momentarily stunned, Ron was confused as the sky seemed to have disappeared and all he could see in front of him was a pitch-black wall. He suddenly realised he was looking at the metal of one of the two tail fins of his plane, which were either side of the rear gunner turret (Picture 5). The impact had caused the turret to swing 90° to face one of the fins. As this was the American-made version of the Liberator, communication with the pilot was by throat-mic. Ron tried to contact the skipper but the system wasn't working. He then tried the back-up communication system, which was to press a button and speak into a mic, but that was also dead.

Ron knew he had to get out of the shattered turret and into the main part of the plane urgently as there was clearly a serious problem. In order to achieve this he needed to align the exit point in the canopy with the corresponding entrance point in the fuselage, then clamber backwards through the small gap that linked the two. This would only be possible if the turret faced exactly rearwards, not at 90° to it. Ron endeavoured to turn the turret to the required position but it immediately swung back towards the tail fin. The hydraulics were damaged and unless he got out before they failed completely he would be trapped there, at the mercy of whatever fate awaited the plane. So once more he rotated the turret, this time manually holding the lever steady as he wriggled backwards through the small hole into the body of the plane.

Once in the main fuselage Ron was able to see the extent of the damage. There was a small fire in the nose of the plane, and looking through the openings to the side of the aircraft where the beam gunner stood he could see fire coming from the two port engines. Ron tried once more to contact the skipper, this time using the beam gunner's mic, but still nothing was working. The plane had four engines but could fly on two in an emergency if the correct procedure was followed. In the event of a fire the pilot would normally feather the engines to put out the fire, and open the bomb-bay doors as a precaution in case it was necessary to bail out. Neither had been done. Although the plane appeared to be just flying along, Ron knew that with two engines on fire it would be descending. They had been flying at 12,000 feet, but it had taken Ron some time already to get out of his turret and he knew they would now be losing height rapidly. So having assessed the situation to the best of his ability, Ron was of the opinion that the pilot and co-pilot were incapacitated since the normal emergency procedure hadn't been implemented. It would have been inadvisable to go to the nose of the plane to verify this because to do so he would have had to remove his harness in order to squeeze between the canisters of supplies they were carrying. If he had done that, and then returned to the emergency exit point, the plane would then have been too low for anyone to escape by parachute. Urgent action was required.

The beam gunner was still standing at his position in the middle of the plane. Ron knew it was the young man's first operational flight so he was inexperienced and probably shocked by all that was happening. Ron told him they should bail out as the pilots appeared to be unable to respond to the situation. The young man was reluctant however and said he was sure the skipper was still in control, and would get them back. Ron didn't share his confidence. After a few moments trying to persuade him this was their only chance, Ron unbolted the plate in the floor of the fuselage, which was their emergency escape hatch, and cast it to one side. He put a parachute on the beam gunner and one on himself. Having reminded him of the procedure for jumping Ron encouraged the beam gunner to go first, but he refused. So Ron told him to watch what he did and follow as

soon as he was clear of the plane. Then Ron rolled out through the hole as he had been instructed, hoping his fellow crew member would do the same.

Ron had no memory of pulling the ripcord. The wind, or perhaps impact with the plane itself, had rendered him unconscious. As he came around he heard dogs barking below, and looking up he was amazed to see the enormous white silk canopy of his parachute billowing above him. He wondered what had happened to the plane and could hear explosions in the distance. Pulling on the cords of his parachute to turn himself around as he had been taught, he could see a huge fire on the ground a short distance away and explosives going off. There was no time to contemplate the fate of his fellow crew at that moment however, as his own landing was imminent.

It was too dark below for Ron to see the ground approaching, but suddenly he landed. He found himself in a ploughed field which he felt sure was in Poland, but knew it could be German occupied Poland so he needed to be on the alert. Ron gathered up his parachute and tried to kick earth over it so it wasn't so visible, though he was nearly blacking out each time he bent down. He was in some discomfort as he had been injured in the attack on the plane and from the parachute jump. He did the best he could to disguise the white silk, then quickly went through his pockets to make sure he didn't have anything on his person that shouldn't fall into enemy hands. He tore something up, scattering the tiny pieces in the wind. Much of his flying gear was missing. Such was the strength of the wind during his descent that he had lost his helmet, flying boots, and even the front of his RAF watch, which had been ripped off. He still had the strap and the back, but everything else had disappeared.

When his eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness, Ron looked around and began to walk in the opposite direction from the plane. Not wanting to be silhouetted against the night sky he went towards a line of trees which was not far away. He then saw there was also a row of cottages nearby, so he walked between the trees and the cottages for camouflage. As he came nearer to the cottages he could see people standing at their garden gates watching the plane burning in the distance. He later realised they were under curfew and weren't allowed to leave their properties.

The account of the next two weeks differs a little depending on who is telling it. The variations are slight and are probably due to indistinct memories passed down to following generations of friends and family. All versions have merit. I have described the events as remembered by Ron in his recordings, or in conversation with us at other times.

Ron noticed that there was a cottage on one end of the row where there was just a solitary man in his garden and no one else nearby. He decided to go to this man rather than to a group of people where there might be a greater chance of one of them being a German sympathiser. The man, who we now know to be Stanisław Widłak (Picture 7), stood alone gazing in the direction of the burning aircraft. Ron approached him and said the one word he had been told to say if he was in this situation: "Anglichanin", "Englishman". Ron thought this was a Polish word, but later discovered it was Russian. Fortunately he was still understood. The man put a finger to his lips indicating Ron was not to speak and hurried inside. A few moments later he came back with another man who said in perfect English "So you are an Englishman are you? Welcome to Poland". Ron was amazed that despite the strangeness of his situation someone would come to him who could speak such perfect English.

“The first thing we must do is find your parachute” the man said; so Ron was taken inside the cottage and hidden in the loft. Ron doesn't mention on his tapes that he was hidden in Stanisław Widłak's loft, but we know this from family conversations. Two men soon arrived to escort him back to the field to look for the parachute. They supported him because he could hardly walk as he had injured his back and chafed his legs with the parachute harness during the descent. He had also sustained injuries to his arm, face and neck from bullets and shrapnel when the plane was attacked, so had lost a fair amount of blood.

They were unable to find the parachute, and Ron was in such pain that after a while they had to bring him back. It's unclear whether Ron was taken back to the home of Stanisław Widłak for a short while at this point, or to a different cottage which was a few doors away from the first. This second cottage was the home of Mieczysław Janiec with the code name “Lot” meaning “Flight” (Picture 8), who was the head of the local Home Army group (AK). As we have pieced together Ron's story, we think he was probably taken straight to the home of Mieczysław Janiec on their return from the field; and that the questioning described below took place there.

The men sat Ron at a table while they waited for the arrival of Mieczysław Janiec “Lot”. There were several people in the house but they couldn't communicate because of their different languages, so could only look at one another as they waited. When Mieczysław Janiec “Lot” arrived he asked Ron if he spoke French, which he did a little, so the two men spoke together in French throughout the interrogation. Ron's French was not very good and they went over and over the same questions. During this time blood was dripping from his chin and he was in great pain. After a while Ron felt that his story wasn't being believed, and he needed to see a doctor. If not a Polish one, then it would have to be a German one. So he asked to be handed over to the Germans if necessary. Suddenly Mieczysław Janiec “Lot” was satisfied that all was well. Understandably he had needed to be sure of this before the Home Army and others in the village risked their lives by hiding Ron. Mieczysław Janiec then left the house, and we think he went to fetch a doctor or nurse from Kamienna, a nearby village.

In the meantime another local nurse arrived and she and the family attended to Ron with first aid, making him feel comfortable and welcome. When Helena Homolacs the nurse from Kamienna arrived, she spoke very good English which enabled Ron to explain more fully the circumstances of the tragedy while she was treating his wounds. Once he had been cleaned up by the nurse he felt much better and was taken up into the loft of Mieczysław Janiec's home for the night. The loft contained a great deal of straw and two large feather-filled mattresses. One mattress was placed under him and the other over him, and he was warm as he slept that night.

Ryszard Ruta, the nephew of Mieczysław Janiec, was a child who lived in the house at the time and has described his memories of their first meeting with Ron and the days he stayed with them. His writings entitled “The Guest From The Clouds” (*Ref 13*) are a fascinating insight into this period of time. They show the great kindness and bravery of the Polish people who protected him in those early days, and also Ron's distress at the loss of his fellow crew. Unfortunately in this article Ron is reported to be called “Peter Rogers”. The reason for this is unknown, but the story is most definitely Ron's.

Mieczysław Janiec's cottage, where Ron was hidden, is described by Marianna (Maria)

Jach who was Maria Wilk (Picture 10) before her marriage. She was the teenage cousin of Ryszard Ruta and often visited the house, so remembered it well (Ref 14).

Her description and sketch of the cottage can be found at: [https://liberatorew250.com.pl/?page\\_id=757](https://liberatorew250.com.pl/?page_id=757)

An English translation of her description is given on the website above, and this has been reproduced here as shown on the website; by permission:

*"I remember what this building looked like - there was a residential left and right side, which was separated by the entrance hall, with a door at both ends (from the yard and the garden and the rural, unpaved road, mercilessly dusty after every ride on it by a car, and muddy on rainy days) therefore, most often the door to the flower garden - the roads were closed and the entrance was from the yard. To enter the house, you had to enter through the gate near the entrance gate (wooden structures) then go under the windows of the room where the aviator was staying - that is why these windows were covered .*

*The larger room had a kitchen with a bread oven, a larger table, benches and sleeping beds.*

*The entrance to the small room was also directly from the yard and the entrance door was right next to the door to the hall. In order to enter the small room from the yard, you had to go through the pantry (chamber) with a small kitchen and a descent to the basement, the so-called a dungeon, a deep hole in the ground with stairs, where the temperature was constant all year round, go through the internal door and enter a small room. In this cellar (dungeon) an aviator was kept... In the hall there were wooden stairs to the attic, where some plants or seeds requiring a dry room were often stored.*

*The house was built of wooden construction, thatched (rye straw), plastered with clay and lime mortar and whitewashed with diluted, burnt lime, which was bought at the market in Wiślica and fired in the vicinity of Chmielnik."*

When Ron awoke in the loft of Mieczysław Janiec's home the following morning he could hear shouting outside. Looking through a gap in the boards he could see several German soldiers below. Some were standing around, while others were helping some farm workers to push a horse-drawn cart that had become stuck in rutted mud. There was a great deal of shouting, swearing and cracking of whips as they tried to free the cart. The scene he was witnessing confirmed to Ron that he had landed in a rural area of German occupied Poland.

We have been told by Stan Widłak, son of Stanisław Widłak, that the day after Ron's arrival some German soldiers came to his father's cottage where Ron had first made contact. They put a gun to Stanisław's head and demanded to know where he had hidden the airman, saying if he didn't answer within ten seconds they would shoot him and send his family to a concentration camp. Stanisław suspected one of the villagers was an informer and had told the Germans about Ron's arrival. Luckily a local lady, Mrs Nowakowski, was working as an interpreter for the Germans at the time and told them that Stanisław was a good employee who worked hard for the Reich. They believed her, thankfully, and eventually left the cottage. Stan thinks these were the worst moments of his father's life, and may have been the reason why he didn't want to speak about the story in later years. Ron was unaware of this event.

Ron had been instructed to stay in the loft at Mieczyslaw Janiec's house and keep out of sight. Some time later that day a man popped his head through the trap hatch of the loft and introduced himself. Speaking with an American accent he said he was a reporter for the partisans' newspaper and wanted to know his story. We now believe this was Michal Sobol who in later years became the mayor of the Czarkowy commune. He had learned English at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, and in the USA, and spoke the language well. Michal told Ron that his parachute had been found by a dishonest German soldier who fortunately had sold it immediately to a Pole. The black market price for a piece of silk that size was considerable. He was also able to tell Ron that the Germans were no longer looking for anyone else from the plane as they had now found all the crew that they expected from a Liberator. What the Germans didn't know was that Ron's plane had been carrying an extra man, the beam gunner, for added protection during their flight. So Ron's existence was not suspected, especially as they had not discovered the parachute.

The cottage in which Ron was hidden was occupied by Mieczysław Janiec's family (Appendix 2) who worked each day on the surrounding farmlands. Ron thinks he was brought meals first thing in the morning and last thing at night. Every day was similar. The workers rose, washed, and went to the fields in the horse-drawn cart under the watchful eye of the Germans. Soldiers would have stood guard all day to ensure all the food produced was accounted for and didn't find its way onto the black market, as most food was destined for the German army.

After dark the families were under curfew so had to stay in their cottages. In the evenings, with the helpful cover of blackout blinds, Ron was able to sit with the family downstairs and talk. It was amazing how much communication could be achieved without a common language. Ryszard Ruta (in "The Guest From The Clouds" *Ref 13*) described the happy family evenings with Ron that took place during these times, which were filled with laughter and warmth. As everyone only spoke to him in Polish, Ron was soon able to reply with a few words of Polish himself.

During this period at Mieczysław's house Ron was visited regularly by the nurse who tended his wounds. We now know this was Helena Homolacs aka "Helenka" (Picture 11) who was living at the Manor House at Kamienna, near Kocina (*Ref 15*). She spoke good English and gave him a tiny Polish/English dictionary which has since been presented by Ron's family to the AK Museum in Krakow.

After a while it was decided that Ron should be moved to another location. His health had improved sufficiently for him to be able to travel, and it was becoming increasingly dangerous to keep him where he was. More and more people were getting to hear about him and everyone's safety was at risk. It was arranged that on 26<sup>th</sup> October he would be transferred to the home of a wealthy landowner some distance away. On the day he was to leave Ron was lent a coat, scarf and hat to blend in with the other workers and to hide his injuries and bandages. Underneath the coat he wore his RAF flying tunic. Ron had lost his flying boots, gloves and helmet during the jump, although he still had his electric shoes so was able to wear those. His arm was temporarily taken out of a sling and his bandaged neck and head were disguised by the scarf and hat. More details of this event are given by Ryszard Ruta in "The Guest From The Clouds" (*Ref 13*).

At a given signal a cart was half loaded with farm workers, harrows and a plough, then Ron was hustled out between two others and bundled onto it. In the cart there were at least four other people. Ryszard Ruta in "The Guest from the Clouds" (Ref 13) says Ron was accompanied by Mieczysław Janiec "Lot", Jakub Motyka who had the code name "Kuba", Ryszard Ruta himself and his teenage cousin Marianna (Maria) Wilk (Picture 10). The men carried guns under their coats. The children, Maria and Ryszard, provided an image of normality by their laughter and playfulness together as they travelled along. The cart set off and when they had travelled about 10km it entered a small copse near the village of Rzemienowice where it stopped for Ron to get off. It then immediately started again and reappeared from the copse so that from a distance it didn't seem to have stopped at all. Waiting for Ron amongst the trees was a man who we now believe to be Tadeusz Wrobel with the code name "Oracz" meaning "Plowman". He would take Ron on the next stage of his journey.

Tadeusz was about thirty years of age and appeared very secretive. He hardly spoke at all, and then only in Polish. Together they made their way through the woods and fields on foot, with the man often indicating to Ron to wait silently while he went on ahead before beckoning Ron to follow. His job was to lead Ron through the countryside to his next rendezvous point. On the way they stopped for several hours at an isolated cottage in the forest. As they approached it Ron could see that the side of the cottage that faced the sun was completely covered with great bunches of tobacco leaves drying in the warmth. This was the home of a very friendly old lady who chatted away to them in Polish while they waited for nightfall. When it was time to leave she insisted Ron took a large bundle of tobacco leaves with him to cut up and smoke later. Ron and his guide then continued through the woods during the night, arriving at the other side early in the morning.

Beyond the woods was a road, so they stayed a little way back, out of sight. Eventually they heard the sound of a horse-drawn vehicle approaching. When it came into view Ron could see it was a beautiful wooden carriage drawn by two horses. The young man who got out spoke perfect English. Ron later found his name was Steve and he worked as a courier or messenger for the partisan movement. He was a very capable man who lived by his wits; laughing and joking his way through dangerous situations. The first thing he did was tell Ron to swap his RAF tunic for Steve's jacket before putting their overcoats back on. Ron thought he just wanted to arrive wearing RAF battle dress as a joke, but it may well have been a safety measure by Steve. If they had met any Germans during the journey with Steve wearing the jacket he could have laughed off any questions.

They got into the carriage and the driver drove off over the fields until an impressive property came into view. This was clearly the Lord of the Manor's house which Ron later learned was at Rachwałowice near Kosice (Picture 12). Ron was alarmed to see a German soldier on guard at the large iron gates, and suddenly wondered if this had all been an elaborate trick. Steve hadn't warned Ron there would be a German guard, which was perhaps an indication of his sense of humour. The guard obviously knew Steve and they exchanged waves as he opened the gates to let them through. Once inside Ron could see impressive steps leading to the front door of the house, where a second German guard was stationed. As they pulled up this guard opened the carriage door, and Steve jumped down. These two men then started chatting and joking happily together, slapping each other on the back with great hilarity. Ron was bemused by this. Eventually Steve shuffled Ron into the house via the servants' entrance. They walked through several long corridors before finally entering the main part of the house.



In the lounge most of the family were waiting to greet him. There was the Lord of the Manor Henryk Gawroński and his sister, her daughter, an uncle and two guests. The guests were a Count who had been displaced by the war, and his mistress. After he'd met most of the family, the hostess Idalia Gawrońska (later known to Ron as Dala) made a spectacular entrance. Beautifully dressed, she swept into the room and was grandly introduced to Ron. He was delighted to find that she spoke excellent English. Her husband Henryk spoke French, but only very few words of English. Both Henryk and Dala (Picture 13) had degrees, and both came from respected Polish families.

Ron was told that half the house was occupied by a garrison of German soldiers; ten or possibly twelve men were there. The family didn't usually come into contact with them unless the Germans wanted to use the telephone which was on the Polish side of the house. The soldiers would then just walk in unannounced through a communicating door, so there was no privacy for the family. It was perhaps strange that the family were allowed to keep the phone on their side but there may have been practical reasons for this, plus the Germans thought Henryk Gawroński was a collaborator (Picture 14). He had owned all the surrounding land before the occupation, and although the Germans had confiscated it they had allowed him to continue to run the estate and vodka factory on their behalf. For this they paid him well, albeit in the German version of the Polish zloty. He was allowed any amount of goods, could host parties, and go out at night despite the curfew. The Germans' job was to guard the vodka factory and ensure that the farm produce was sent to the German authorities for the war effort.

From the German point of view it made sense for the garrison to be in this house as it was effectively the local administration centre, so needed to be monitored and controlled. Furthermore, comfortable accommodation could be made available for the soldiers and there was plenty of vodka. This apparent "cooperation" with the Germans was the perfect cover for Henryk who was in fact the local leader of the Polish resistance with the code name "Piorun" meaning "Lightning". Dala may have had the code name "Ilka", possibly meaning "Bright, shining one". Apparently they had a secret radio hidden in the loft. We are told that in later months Ron operated this radio occasionally, so his Morse code training came in handy after all.

Ron was shown to his room where he was told they had managed to find him a pair of boots. This was significant as boots were almost impossible to obtain during the war. Socks were also in short supply so they used foot sheets which were a square of cloth, like a large khaki handkerchief, which would be folded over the feet. There was also a smart suit waiting for him, which apparently belonged to Henryk (Picture 15). His RAF uniform was taken away and hidden under floorboards somewhere else, not in the house, and Ron didn't see it again until he left the house after the Russians arrived.

Although they were all Polish, the language used in the house was French as that was the language of the intelligentsia. They also all spoke a little English. Speaking English was banned by the Germans, so as an act of defiance they were all learning the language and were pleased to practise their skills with Ron. Occasionally Henryk would learn a new sentence which he would say to Ron with a flourish to demonstrate his newly acquired English vocabulary.

During this time at the Manor House Ron learned quite a lot of Polish. Although Henryk would be busy on the farm, Ron was able to practise constantly with the rest of the family as they didn't work. Days were spent playing cards, going for walks, and entertaining each other by playing the piano and singing. Ron had never imagined that some people had nothing to do and was amazed that such a lifestyle existed.

One important role of his hosts was to receive requests for assistance from the local people. At this time Polish areas were run as serfdoms, and so as "Lord and Lady of the Manor" people came to see them if they were in need of anything, such as a doctor. Often however, access to Dala and Henryk was refused and the request would be dealt with by junior staff. Only a few were permitted an audience with the Lord and Lady as they were very much revered and respected. Ron remembered when riding in the carriage with Dala that women would run from the fields and fall on their knees to kiss her hand as she passed. Dala wouldn't look at them but would leave her hand hanging over the side of the carriage for them to kiss. Such was the feudal system in Poland at that time, with the Lord and Lady treated almost as royalty.

Henryk, the Lord of the Manor, wasn't interested in people kissing his hand. He dressed in sturdy farmers' clothing and rushed from place to place on horseback running the farm and making decisions. He was called "Mr Engineer" because he also oversaw the complexities of the vodka factory, which made vodka from potatoes and plums. Although Henryk had staff and managers for everyday work, some tasks couldn't be delegated. He was responsible for interaction with German officials which would often involve bribery, black market dealings, and the exchange of large sums of cash. When the vodka and farm produce was taken by the Germans it was normal that they would write down less than had actually been produced, so the family could sell the remainder on the black market. Possibly the German official concerned was bribed, or maybe he shared the profits, but the result was that the family had a considerable income. Although Henryk always carried large wads of cash, he told Ron that the currency was considered a joke because it was a German version of the Polish zloty. The Germans printed as much of it as they liked and the money was only useful while the Germans were in occupation. Everyone knew it would be worthless afterwards.

There were several servants in the house: two young women serving at table, an old lady in the kitchen and probably others. On one occasion when Ron wanted a cup of tea he went down to the kitchen to get it himself instead of ringing for a servant. While he was there a peasant woman came to the kitchen door asking for help because her young child was hurt. She wanted some vodka to bathe a wound. Vodka was used both to clean wounds and to give as medicine. Ron had been told never to speak to anyone in case his accent was noticed, even though he could now speak some Polish. If spoken to he had been told to point to the bandage around his neck and grunt or nod. The family would explain this to anyone important by saying he was Dala's cousin who had been injured in Warsaw, and now couldn't speak. To those considered unimportant though, such as the workers, no explanation was apparently needed. It was generally understood that people living in the Manor House could just nod, or even completely ignore people who spoke to them. Ron was surprised this was acceptable. When asked for the vodka Ron momentarily forgot his instructions and instinctively said "Wait" in Polish to the peasant woman, then went to get someone in authority. Later he was told never to do this again as it was very dangerous. Ron greatly regretted what he had done. He had been caught off-guard and his natural response had been to reply when asked a question.

On another occasion Ron made a similar mistake. He was half-way down the corridor to the kitchen when he saw a soldier coming the other way. This was a Ukrainian who had joined the German Army. The Ukrainians were so anti-Russian, that when they had to choose between Russia or Germany many chose to fight for the Germans. The Germans particularly used these soldiers in Poland because the Ukrainian language is sufficiently similar to Polish that they could communicate with the Polish better than most Germans. As the soldier walked towards him, Ron panicked. He had the family dog with him which was jumping up, so he spoke to the dog as a distraction saying "Get down" in Polish. The man then asked Ron, in Polish, "Where is Mr Engineer?". Ron realised the man had now heard him speak to the dog, so he couldn't pretend he was unable to talk. So he replied, also in Polish, "To the left and to the right..." and directed him to his host. When Ron returned to the main living quarters the family were aware he had spoken to the soldier and were very annoyed. They reminded him that he must never speak to outsiders as all their lives were at stake. In particular he mustn't speak to Ukrainian soldiers because his accent would be noticed. Knowing he had again done them a great disservice in his panic, Ron was very relieved that no harm had come to anyone because of this.

Having successfully hidden Ron until now, Dala and Henryk thought they would let him have his hair cut by a German. Every now and then a soldier would be sent from some distance away to cut the Germans' hair. When he arrived the family would also go in to have theirs cut too. They said Ron could just go in as part of the family; he wouldn't need to say anything. They would tell the barber what style he wanted, and would give Ron's cover story that he was injured in the fighting in Warsaw and now couldn't speak. They were chuckling about this and said that when Ron went home he could say that he had had his hair cut by a German soldier. On the day however there was some problem and they decided it was unwise. Ron was disappointed as he was looking forward to it, and it was unlike the Polish to back out as they did all sorts of daring things just for laughs.

Another example of the Poles' sense of humour came one day when Ron was walking in the countryside, which he frequently did. He was never allowed out on his own and on this occasion he was accompanied by a man named George, who spoke excellent English as well as several other languages. While walking across the fields they met a Gestapo man coming the other way who was lost and asked for directions. There were very few roads in that area and it was normal to go from place to place by walking over the fields, however this made finding your way difficult if you were unfamiliar with the area. George spoke to the man at length in German and Ron was terrified he would be asked a question. After he had left, Ron asked George why he had spoken to him for so long as it was dangerous. He answered that he did it just for fun to see how Ron would react.

After Ron had been at the house a few weeks the wound in his neck became swollen so they called for Doctor Stanisław Marzyński from the village of Morowianka. We believe this doctor later practised in Szczecin until his death just before 1980. A drain was put in the wound but after a few days Ron became very unwell with a high temperature, and it was decided he should go to hospital in Krakow for an operation. For this Ron needed Polish identity papers.

Rather than forging the papers, which they could have done, the Poles decided to obtain genuine identity papers for him. So they broke into the local official's office and stole the relevant application form. They then filled it in using the name Jerzy Petrovski, which was

a common Polish name, and attached a photo of Ron with his thumbprints. It was decided to apply for a pass for him to go out after curfew at the same time, along with other passes that would give him the same privileges as the family members and other perceived collaborators. They then broke back into the official's office and put the completed forms into his "in tray", from where they were duly signed and sent back to Ron. From then on Ron had genuine Polish identity papers and a variety of passes.

Elaborate preparations were made for the trip to the hospital in Krakow. On the arranged day Ron was dressed appropriately and a carriage brought to the house. A young man from the farm who was "in the know" was to accompany him. It had been decided that they would be met at the other end by a specific doctor who was to perform the operation. They briefed Ron on what people would say and what he had to do as they went through various checkpoints on the way. Just before they left, the doctor he had been seeing at the Manor House checked his temperature and it had returned to normal. The doctor accused Ron of taking tablets to reduce the temperature but Ron assured him he hadn't, and didn't even have any tablets. As his temperature had dropped so much the doctor called the whole thing off, right at the last minute. Strangely Ron had been very ill just the previous day but suddenly was much better. The high temperature never returned and his health improved from that day forward. The wound gradually healed and by the end of his time in Poland he was completely restored to health, without ever having needed to go to hospital. Ron kept the bandage around his neck even after the wound was healed, so he could keep up the pretence of not being able to speak.

Now that Ron had a pass to go out after curfew, the family took him to dances at other grand houses. These occurred about once a week and were attended by Counts and Countesses, and other people of high standing. The family told him not to bother eating basic food such as potatoes when there, but to concentrate on caviar and luxury foods. They knew this lifestyle was fragile and may not last, and wanted to make the most of it while they could. At some parties Ron was told he could talk to everyone as they were all conspirators and knew he was an RAF man; on other occasions he was told to only talk to the family, or not at all if they weren't sure about some allegiances.

As it was winter they often had to travel through the snow, so horse-drawn sleighs were used which gave a very comfortable ride. The skill of the drivers was evident after heavy snow as all the roads and tracks disappeared, so the drivers had to navigate by the location of trees alone since they were the only things left visible. This lifestyle seemed the epitome of a fairy tale with lavish parties, horse-drawn sleighs, and a vast countryside covered in crisp, fresh snow. It contrasted vividly however with the constant risk of discovery and potential death for all involved.

On their return from the parties the German soldier at the front door to the Manor House would open the carriage door and salute the Lord and Lady, and the family, as they got out. It amused Ron that the soldier saluted him too, completely unaware that he was "the enemy".

Knowing that Ron would eventually return home, the family made him a present. They commissioned a local craftsman to melt down some of their silver items and make a silver cigarette box as a memento. Ron kept this and brought it home, and we still have it to this day.

A few months after Ron's arrival they were told that the Russians were pushing forward rapidly and would arrive soon. The family were very unhappy about this because all the time the Germans were in control everything was comfortable for them. The Germans looked after them well. They could obtain anything they liked from the Germans, and could even steal from them. They knew that when the Russians arrived all this would end. They would no longer be honoured and respected as the intelligentsia and part of the ruling class; instead this position could make them a target for greater persecution. They would certainly be dethroned from their place of importance and privilege, and at best become commoners. Potentially, their fate could be much worse.

Towards the end of January 1945 they began to hear distant gunfire, and the first Russians arrived at the house. These front line troops were from the far east of Russia and were bloodthirsty, trigger-happy soldiers who lived off the land taking anything they wanted from the people they overran. This was not only food and drink, but jewellery and any other valuables they could carry. These rough, brutal men shot anyone and anything that got in their way as they moved through the country, and acted like animals as far as the Polish and Ron could see.

The soldiers arrived in ones and twos, having walked across the fields. The family would hear gunfire; the door would suddenly burst open; then a Russian soldier would appear dressed in his thick, coarse clothing with his sub-machine gun in hand. He would go through the house demanding things; shouting 'FOOD!', 'TOBACCO!'. Any food given would be grabbed and scoffed hungrily. Some asked for vodka, which they were given. The family put out wine glasses with the vodka, but the Russians swept the glasses off the table, smashing them on the floor. They demanded tumblers instead, filling them with vodka and gulping it down. The Russians were equally unimpressed with the tobacco that was provided. The family's tobacco leaves were cut into slices with a razor and stored in tall tins with a little vodka in the bottom of the tin. Whenever the tin was opened the aroma would be delightful. This was given to the intruders along with the necessary cigarette papers, but the Russians didn't know how to smoke tobacco in that way. They found the papers too thin to roll. Instead they would tear off strips of newspaper and roll the tobacco in them; smoking these huge cigarettes as if they were cigars. The family had been warned that when these rough troops arrived they should just give them anything they wanted and let them go on their way. Better quality troops would follow.

Sure enough, close behind them came much more organised troops in smarter uniforms, with officers. When these troops arrived their Russian officers entered the house and the family entertained them with food and drinks. After a drinking session however, the Russian officers told them they must leave the house or they would be shot. This outcome had been anticipated. Holes had previously been dug outside, and all the family silver and other valuables had been buried in marked places in the hope that they would be able to come back for them some time in the future. In fact, they never did retrieve their belongings. They were dug up shortly after their departure and taken by the Russians.

So the family made preparations to leave their Manor House and beautiful possessions. Everything had to be abandoned and let go. Their magnificent horses, carriages and horse-drawn sleighs; not to mention the entire village and estate which they owned; were left behind. A new and uncertain life lay ahead. As they packed they included a hand sewing machine amongst their belongings which they thought might come in useful as a means of earning a living. The future was going to be a big change from their previous

lifestyle. They decided to go into Krakow, but to split up so they would be less recognisable. Dressed in workers' clothes to make themselves look poor, they each took a few possessions hidden under rags and made their way to the city in old carts driven by their servants. In this way Ron went into Krakow with the hostess Dala to her mother's home.

This was a dangerous journey to undertake. Even during the German occupation there had been threats from armed marauding bands who stole what they could from both Poles and Germans alike. Ironically the German garrison stationed at the Manor House had in fact provided protection for the family from these violent gangs. So on this journey to Krakow Ron and Dala were concerned about possible attack not only from these armed robbers, but also now from Russian soldiers as well. Previously the German checkpoints would have offered at least some protection, but the Germans were now in retreat on the other side of Krakow and the Russian soldiers who had replaced them provided no protection at all.

When they reached Krakow they went to a house where Dala's mother had a flat. The cart which had been driven by one of their servants had to be taken back to the village, but before the man returned they all went into the house for a meal. Ron was surprised that the servant ate in a separate room from Dala, her mother and Ron. They said this was for the benefit of the servant as he would feel uncomfortable eating with the family. Ron felt the social order had changed and they were now all equal. The other members of the family went to different properties in Krakow, so that they couldn't easily be traced.

Ron was told to lay low until the Russian forces and their officers became organised. Many people had come to Krakow as the countryside was overrun. Families had been split up and people were trying to find each other and move from one place to another. It was chaos. After a day or two the Russians set up an office in Mikołajska Street to issue passes for travel from one part of Poland to another, but Ron continued to wait for more order to be established. During this time he and Dala would go for walks in the park, though even this simple pleasure wasn't without incident. On one occasion they were followed by a couple of Russian soldiers with their sub-machine guns over their shoulders. As they got close to Ron and Dala they opened fire in the air just to scare them. At night there was constant gunfire and no-one felt safe even though the Russians were supposedly their allies. The dark sky was often lit up with machine gun tracers, mostly from Russian soldiers enjoying shooting into the air. Not all gunfire was in fun though. There were still a few Germans trapped in Krakow, and as they tried to escape under cover of darkness there were gunfights in the streets between the two armies.

When they decided the time was right, Ron and Dala went into the centre of Krakow for Ron to register at the travel pass office in Mikołajska Street. Ron was wearing his RAF uniform so Dala said it would be best if they didn't appear to be together, and advised him not to say goodbye but to just peel off as they reached the office. Ron went in alone and joined a throng of people six or seven deep. There were Russians in uniform behind a long counter, all asking questions and writing things down. After a while Ron got to the front and asked if the soldier spoke English. He said he didn't. Ron asked if he spoke Polish and he said "A little". Then a Pole behind Ron said he spoke both English and Russian and would translate for them. So Ron told the Russian he was an RAF flyer and wanted to get back to England. The Russian looked up unconcerned and said "Right, just go to the far corner over there and join the Russian Army. You will fight with the Russian

Army until they reach British lines and then you can go to England". Ron replied that he definitely didn't want to join the Russian Army! So instead he was taken along the road to a building that had previously been a nunnery, at 21 Mikołajska Street (Pictures 16 and 17). We believe there was another entrance in Na Gródku Street but Ron entered from Mikołajska Street.

In the nunnery were people from several nations, most of whom had been conscripted as labour or had volunteered to work for the Germans. They were being held until they could be repatriated. Ron didn't notice any guards on the way in; just one officer and a female soldier who took some details from him. He was informed they had several nationalities there, each held in separate areas, but no British. There were French, Armenians, Greeks and others; and Ron was asked which nationality he would like to join. He said he would join the French, as he spoke a little French, so was shown into a very large room which was completely full of men, all standing and wearing their overcoats.

Once inside he introduced himself to a few others and asked what happened there. They replied "We just wait here in this room." Ron asked "Where do you sleep?". "Right here" they replied, "We just try to find enough space to lie down in the place where we're standing". Ron was appalled; but they said he would be fed and they would wait there until some transport was arranged to take them home. Ron's first reaction was that he must have come to the wrong place and needed to get out of there. He asked to see the female soldier and told her he would like to leave, but she was surprised and assured him that this was the best place for him, saying "Don't worry, we'll take good care of you here until you can go home. You're British and one of our allies. Some people in here we aren't sure what to do with, but we know you're our friend and you'll be fed and looked after well". So Ron returned to the room and made the best of it. The room kept warm because there were so many people in there, and at night they tried to find a space on the floor to lie down. Sanitation was extremely basic at the nunnery. There were no facilities for washing and the toilets were just trenches dug in the garden with boards to sit on, and absolutely no privacy. For meals they were given soup and a black pudding which was typical for the area, however Ron wasn't used to this food having lived with Poles who had a much better diet. Not long afterwards he, like many of the others, found himself spending hours sitting on the boards over the slit trenches in the garden as his stomach objected to the unfamiliar food and lack of hygiene.

Perhaps the Russians thought these were good conditions, but Ron thought it seemed a very unpleasant place compared to where he had been living previously. He wanted to get out, but on going to the front door found a Russian soldier with a sub-machine gun was now stationed there. Ron felt he couldn't just walk past him in case he didn't reach the end of the driveway alive. So he went along to the office to see the female soldier who cheerfully asked: "Is everything alright? Are you getting plenty of food?". Ron asked her again if he could leave as he knew one or two people in Krakow and could find accommodation there, but she said there was to be an Officer's Inspection soon so he couldn't leave just yet. Ron felt he had walked into a trap and was now a prisoner of the Russians. They were very friendly, but there was no means of getting out.

After Ron had been there a few days a man came to the door of the room Ron was in asking questions in Polish. They were always very suspicious of anyone who came to their door as they never knew who they might be, and were concerned someone would be whisked away and never seen again. However, as this conversation continued, Ron

wondered if this was something he should be interested in. So he went over to the door, and on listening-in heard this man say something about an Englishman... that he was wanting to find an Englishman who was there. The Frenchman was putting him off, saying "There's no Englishman here". He knew Ron was there but was protecting him from this stranger. As the conversation went on Ron detected that the man was speaking Polish with a Scottish accent. So he took a risk and spoke across the conversation saying "You're not a Scotsman are you?". The man replied "By Jove I am!". Ron felt it was marvellous to hear a Scotsman after all this time. Apparently the man had heard about Ron being in there and had come along to get him out.

Ron asked how he had got in, and how he would get out. He said he had a pass and had been in and out several times already. This Scotsman was a very capable man who had broken out of a prisoner-of-war camp. He had befriended a Polish girl and they were living together in Warsaw when the insurrection started, so had decided to leave in the confusion. They had walked towards Krakow with him disguised as a woman, but on the way they were stopped by the Germans and made to dig trenches against the oncoming Russians for several days. Eventually the Germans let them go and they had continued on into Krakow.

Having arrived there the Scotsman had been looking around for other British servicemen. He heard of the nunnery where people of various nationalities were being gathered by the Russians, and had an idea how to get himself in. Taking a half-bottle of vodka to the officer in command he said he wanted to check if there were any British there and would need a pass; and one was duly provided for him. With this pass he could then come and go as he pleased. The Scot was confident he could get Ron released, so they went down to the office together. After chatting casually with the female soldier he asked her if Ron could leave, but she repeated that there was going to be an inspection by a very senior officer and nothing could be done until after that. Ron was on their records, and he would have to be accounted for. Undeterred this chap said to Ron "I'll bring more vodka tomorrow and we'll get you a pass like mine from the officer in charge instead".

Next day he was back with another half-bottle of vodka and declared "Right, you're getting out today, no matter about this inspection". So he went downstairs to see the officer in command, gave him the vodka, and asked for a pass for Ron expecting one to be issued immediately as before. However this officer repeated that it was impossible before the important inspection, but said if they came back after that he'd help. This was unacceptable to Ron's new friend, and he assured Ron "Don't worry, we're still getting you out today".

He decided what they would do was walk together to the front door. He would show his pass which would get him out, and Ron would flip open his overcoat showing his RAF brevet. Then Ron would confidently say "Anglichane" which is "English" in Russian, or "Anglik lotnik" which is "English flyer" in Polish. The Scot said to Ron, "The chap at the door won't know what to do and we'll just walk off along the drive and hope he doesn't sort himself out before we get to the end. If he shouts and makes a lot of fuss we'll just have to come back. He'll shout before he shoots, so we should be alright".

Ron was trembling with fear as they went down to the front door. They opened it and there was the well-padded Russian soldier with his sub-machine gun across his chest. The soldier turned to the Scotsman, who produced his pass. The guard looked at it and



nodded. Then Ron confidently flashed his brevet and said “Anglichane, Anglik lotnik” in a firm voice, and they walked off along the drive talking merrily to each other. They walked briskly but without rushing, chatting casually as they went with the gravel crunching under their feet. It felt like a long, long, driveway. Eventually they went through the large gates at the end of the drive and turned the corner. There was still a grating through which they could be seen, so they continued walking until they reached the obscurity of the brick wall at the end. Then, they didn’t look back, but ran as fast as they could down the street and around the corner. Free at last!

Once they were out they went their separate ways. Ron and the Scotsman thought they would meet up again soon but in fact they didn’t meet again until they were on the train to Odessa about a fortnight later. The Scot went back to his girlfriend, but Ron needed to find somewhere to live. He could have returned to Dala and her mother but he was young and fancied an adventure, so thought he would see what other options were available. He had no concerns about finding somewhere to live because he only had to talk to a few Polish people and someone would invite him back to stay. The Polish were keen to meet British people at that time.

It was then that someone introduced him to a brewer who had an English speaking family. This man had two daughters who were a little older than Ron, and his whole family were well educated and spoke good English. Ron was invited to the brewer's home where he was welcomed and entertained. They told Ron they were being allowed to continue to run the brewery for a while but eventually they would be replaced when someone else could be found to manage it. Then, like Dala and Henryk, they would be ousted from their large, beautiful accommodation in Krakow and would have to find some other work. Until that time, while they still had their fine accommodation and good food with which to be generous, they were happy to share it; and Ron was very grateful to accept their kind hospitality.

After Ron had been staying there a few days he heard that a prisoner-of-war camp had been released down the road and British soldiers were entering Krakow. He went into the street and sure enough there was a British Army man perched high up on a horse-drawn cart with a young female Russian soldier sitting beside him. This man confirmed that many others had been released and were coming into Krakow on bikes, carts and on foot. Although these British soldiers were entering Krakow as unarmed ex-prisoners rather than conquering troops, nevertheless they had each played their part in the victory and were warmly welcomed into Polish homes.

Ron wished it were the British Army that was liberating Krakow instead of the Russians. The Polish people would have been rejoicing in the streets and full of hope for the future. There would have been celebrations and flowers everywhere. By contrast there was a mood of apprehension amongst the Poles. “Liberation” by the Russians didn't feel much like freedom, and their future looked very uncertain.

An Army sergeant who had arrived from the prisoner-of-war camp decided that although it was pleasant to be well entertained by the Polish, they needed to get back to the UK. He went to the Russian authorities to see when they could arrange transport by train and boat for his men. He then set up an office in the YMCA building in the centre of Krakow from where he began to record the names and addresses of every British soldier in the area. Word was passed from person to person, and soon everyone registered for the journey.

When Ron arrived at the YMCA he told the sergeant he was RAF, but the man informed him that the transport would be for British Army personnel only. He would need to be “one of them” meaning he had to be in the British Army. The sergeant's solution was to give Ron the name and identity number of an Army soldier who had died in the prison-of-war camp. While Ron was registering under this new name, another man arrived to give his details. This man spoke with an Oxford accent which was so perfect that the sergeant thought he was a Pole. At that time Polish people who spoke English often spoke it so perfectly that they stood out from the British. So the sergeant winked at Ron to indicate that this was a Pole trying to get to England. He was happy to sign him up as long as he didn't get caught. The soldier gave his regiment and rank, and said he was a private which also seemed unlikely as the accent was unusual for that rank. As it turned out, when they got to Odessa, Ron found that this man was indeed a private in that regiment just as he had said.

While Ron was waiting for the Army sergeant to organise transport home he continued to stay with the brewer's family. It was still winter in Krakow and there were often great snow falls. Some nights two and a half feet of snow would fall and they would open the front door and have to shovel it away before they could get out. It didn't feel cold because the air was so dry, but when going out they would have to pull the ear flaps down on their hats to stop their ears from freezing and getting frostbite. The roads weren't cleared of the snow. Wheels would be removed from the vehicles and replaced by runners to convert them into sleighs; making very efficient modes of transport.

At first life didn't change much. The Polish people still had plenty to eat and as far as Ron was concerned everything appeared satisfactory. Shortly afterwards though, the Russians became more organised and issued their own currency. Suddenly things were different because the Russians said that after a certain date only their own currency could be used. Each person was allowed to have one Russian note worth about £2 and that was all they would be given. It didn't matter how much Polish or German zloty anyone had, everyone was allocated the same amount of Russian money; just the one note. Thereafter, if anyone wanted more money they had to work for it. So suddenly everyone was poor and had to start afresh. The barter system continued though and became the main means of survival during this difficult period. This was still reasonably simple for those who lived in the countryside, but it didn't work so well now in the towns where nothing was grown, and industry had faltered. Fortunately food was still coming into Krakow from the countryside via friends and relatives. The Russians hadn't yet become organised in controlling food from the farms, and sufficient was being brought into the city surreptitiously. This could then be bartered in the usual way for other goods.

Ron collected his note, as did the rest of the family he was staying with, and passed it on to his hosts. Ron knew of one man who was looking after several British soldiers and was feeding them on bread and jam. When the money allocation was announced the man sent every soldier to collect their notes for him, but this meagre amount wouldn't keep even the supply of bread and jam going for long. Although everyone had their one note, Ron didn't see much of this Russian money being used. People mostly hid their note away and still relied on using the barter system which gradually became better established again in the city. Some Poles were selling large amounts of German issued zloty to black marketeers in exchange for a few American dollars. Dollars were considered a stable currency.

Presumably the black marketeers would take the German issued zloty and rush forward beyond the Russian lines to the German areas of Poland to exchange it for goods. Or possibly they went into the countryside where the Russians hadn't yet issued their currency, and exchanged it for goods there.

Sometime prior to this, when the Russians had first arrived in Krakow, they had erected loudspeakers on the trees from where they played constant martial music. They would stop the music every half hour to give a news bulletin on the war, saying how well the Russian army was doing and how the German army was being pushed back. They also said that the other Allied armies were just playing football and doing nothing. At first the Poles said this was just typical Russian propaganda, but after a while the broadcasts began to have an effect and they wondered if this was possibly true. After the war Ron discovered to his dismay that at a conference in Yalta a deal had been made between the Allies that each of them would have specific finishing lines. It was arranged that when they had occupied their designated amount of territory they would stop advancing. The British and American armies had reached their lines and, to their frustration, could go no further due to this agreement. The Russians, however, continued to advance until they reached the territory they had demanded in this deal; which included Poland.

Eventually the Poles realised that some arrangement must have been made, and told Ron that the Allies were foolish to allow the Russians to occupy so much territory. They said the British and Americans didn't know the Russians like they did and would live to regret it. This was certainly true when it transpired that the countries Russia "freed" from the Germans, including Poland, then remained under Russian control for decades rather than the short transitional period that was intended by this original agreement. It proved to be an ongoing tragedy for the Polish people, who endured years of suffering and hardship before finally regaining true freedom. In later years Ron was saddened to realise that the people he had flown to help, and had grown to admire so much, would continue to live under the shadow of the Russians for so long. Having experienced life under Russian occupation himself he knew only too well what a misery that was.

Once transport had been arranged for them, the British soldiers were told to assemble on 5th March ready for a train to take them to Odessa. The train arrived on time but didn't depart for a couple of days, which was useful as some British hadn't heard the train was due and had to be rounded up. Others had gone off to the countryside as life was easier there. No doubt some were left behind and had to find their own way home. When the train finally departed there were about three hundred British on board. The men were relieved to be on their way home, but were unhappy to find Russian soldiers with sub-machine guns constantly patrolling the train. Despite the British disquiet, the Russian presence was probably necessary to protect them from the gangs of armed robbers in both Poland and Russia. Although they were experienced soldiers, the British were unarmed so could provide little protection for themselves. The men didn't see it that way though and felt they were being treated as prisoners rather than being protected.

The soldiers travelled in cattle trucks which had large doors on the side to let the cattle off. They were very basic and had no seats. Throughout the journey the train would stop from time to time, sometimes for five or six hours. The British would ask the train driver how long they would be stopping for, and he would just shrug his shoulders. So they would get the tea pots out, fetch water from the boiler of the train and have a brew-up in typical army style. Sometimes while they were making or drinking their tea the train would suddenly set

off without warning and they would all run and jump on as it was leaving. Fortunately the train took some time before it got up to any great speed, so they could easily catch it up.

Sometimes the train would stop near a well or just outside a village. The soldiers would jump off and dash along to get water from the well, but it was often surrounded by villagers getting water for themselves. The soldiers knew they may not have long before the train would leave so were desperate to get access to the well, but the Russian women would be uncooperative despite knowing the soldiers' urgency. After this had happened a few times it became clear that the villagers had been fed anti-British propaganda. When the men finally got access to the well, they would pump frantically on the pump above it. With only one or two pumps available, and all the soldiers on the train wanting water, it was usually difficult to get sufficient water for their needs before the train left.

From time to time the soldiers would lean out of the sides of the train to barter some of their clothes with local villagers in exchange for food. The British service clothing was much better quality than the Russian peasants had, and they willingly traded their eggs and other foods. On one occasion as this trade was in full flow with villagers all along the train, the peasants suddenly gathered everything up, ran off into the fields, and disappeared. The soldiers were puzzled until they saw in the distance two members of the Russian secret police approaching with guns over their shoulders. The soldiers doubted that the locals were doing anything wrong, but the peasants were so scared of the secret police that they had taken no chances and disappeared before they reached them.

After many stops on their long journey of 1,200km (745 miles), they finally reached Odessa on 16<sup>th</sup> March 1945. Overall they arrived in fairly good shape, in spite of the stomach troubles that many of the men experienced from the unfamiliar Russian food which had been supplied for the journey.

Some of the soldiers had been married by a clergyman in Krakow and had brought their Polish wives with them on the train. As they had genuine marriage certificates the intention was to get the Polish girls back to Britain with their new husbands. On the journey some sort of separation had been arranged within a few of the trucks so these married couples could have some privacy from the rest of the men, especially at night. Although most doubted these girls would be allowed to leave, everyone hoped it may work as they were legally married and did have a certificate to prove it. Unfortunately, when they got to their destination the wives weren't allowed to leave with their husbands. Ron had no idea what became of them. They were just left in Odessa hundreds of miles from home.

On arrival at Odessa they had to go to a place which looked like a laundry, but was in fact a debugging area. Both the Russians and the British had to go in. The men had to take off their clothes, walk naked to the showers, and then collect their clothes again at the other end. Meanwhile their clothes had been baked to kill any insects and fleas. The odd thing was the place was staffed entirely by women. As they had often experienced in Russia, it was the women who did most of the work. So the men had to strip off and walk completely naked past these women to the showers. Once clean and dressed they were marched off to the quayside.

There, beside the quay, was a British ship with a British flag and British merchantmen hanging over the side shouting to them in English. It was a marvellous sight and an immense relief to think they were finally going onto a British ship. The ordeal wasn't quite

over yet though, as they were still being escorted by Russian soldiers with sub-machine guns. Throughout their long journey the Russians would frequently tap their guns and say threateningly “Good machine-gun”, “Good for shooting”. So as they lined up on the quayside with their Russian guards, their anticipation was tempered with anxiety lest anything should go wrong at the last minute.

As they waited there, to their amazement, rows and rows of unarmed Russian soldiers walked off the ship. These men were then lined up alongside the road and Russian soldiers with sub-machine guns guarded them on both sides. The British didn't understand what was happening. To see Russians coming off the boat escorted under arms was very odd. As all the Russians moved off, the British were allowed onto the boat. They felt elated and so relieved to walk onto this British ship. They hadn't realised just how tense they had been with their Russian escorts, and were overjoyed to leave them behind.

Later Ron discovered the men coming off the ship had been White Russians who had deserted the Russian Army and joined the German army. They had mostly been conscripted into the Russian Army against their will, and as soon as they had the opportunity to defect they had done so. No doubt they hoped that by joining another army they would have the opportunity to leave Russia altogether. These men had eventually been captured along with Germans and held as Prisoners of War. The Russians however insisted that these soldiers were handed back in exchange for the safe return of the British.

Although arrival at Odessa was bad news for the White Russians, for many of the British soldiers it was the end of their war. As they marched onto the ship they were very cordially welcomed by the crew. It was a great relief to be on a British ship even though they were still in Russian waters. As soon as they were on board they found it was a normal troop ship, with hammock accommodation on the lower decks. Straight away they had to register so the crew knew who was on board. Ron was an unusual passenger being RAF rather than Army. He was also a sergeant so perhaps slightly higher in rank than many of the soldiers. For this reason once the passenger list had been established he was assigned responsibility for a deck. Some order and control was needed with so many men on board.

They were in harbour for four days loading supplies before, on about the 20<sup>th</sup> March 1945, there was a “Toot Toot” from the ship and they sailed out of the harbour. They were so pleased to finally be away from the threat of the Russians.

Although the soldiers on the ship were mostly British, Ron found there were quite a lot of French on board too. These Frenchmen had obviously been handed over by the Russians in the same way as the British. The ship had specifically been sent to collect British soldiers though, and Red Cross food parcels had been brought to be distributed after a few days at sea. When it was announced that food parcels were available, all the men went on deck excitedly to receive them. It transpired though that these were only for the British soldiers and not the French, as they had been supplied by the British Red Cross. Ron felt this was a great shame. Once all the British had received a parcel any remaining were given to the French to share, but Ron says the British made sure their French allies didn't go without chocolate and other treats.

The food on board was much more to their liking than the Russian food they had recently endured. They particularly enjoyed the white bread which Ron hadn't eaten since he was shot down. It was wonderful to have familiar food again.

When they reached the first British military base they were permitted to send telegrams home to their families. These had to be in the guarded form which meant they had to select certain words or phrases from a permitted list. Nevertheless, they were pleased to be able to finally tell their families they were safe and on their way home. For many families this would have been the first time they had confirmation their loved one was alive, let alone safe. These messages would arrive before any communication from the War Department so they were important. Having selected their wording, the telegrams were then taken ashore to be sent to Britain.

The ship continued its journey through the Mediterranean Sea, past Gibraltar, then turned north along the coast of Portugal and on to England, arriving on 1st April 1945.

## ***Return to the UK***

When the ship docked on 1st April many journalists were on the quayside wanting to hear war stories. Rather than have a disorderly disembarkation the captain decided to invite the journalists onto the ship and selected a few British to be interviewed. Ron was one of those chosen, though he didn't think there was any particular reason for that. He thinks it was just because he happened to be in the vicinity at the time. About fifty soldiers were invited into one of the ship's lounges where they mingled with the journalists. One asked Ron what prisoner-of-war camp he was in and Ron told him he hadn't been in a camp but was an evader. "That's interesting, so what happened to you? What's your story?" asked the journalist. Ron explained that the Polish had hidden him in a German garrison and he lived there without problems for many months. The journalist thought this was ridiculously exaggerated, indicated he thought Ron was lying and walked away. Ron decided to moderate his story and gave a more believable, if bland, version the next time he was asked. He could have said he was shot down, hidden with the gentry who posed as collaborators, attended lavish parties and was saluted by German soldiers. He decided the truth was more than would be accepted; a bland version would have to do.

On arrival in England Ron was probably given repatriation leave as this was common for returning POWs. We know that when he returned to his home in Brighton, the whole street was expecting him. Neighbours had put up bunting to welcome him, and everyone was on their doorsteps when he arrived. He went from house to house shaking hands with everyone.

At about this time a lady wrote to Ron saying he must be confused as he was her son, and he should come home to her in Manchester. We don't know why she thought this, though it is possible her son was the man whose identity the Army sergeant had given Ron so he could secure travel on the train from Krakow to Odessa. Sadly that soldier had died in the prisoner-of-war camp. In any event, this lady was so convinced of this that she kept writing asking him to come home to her. Eventually Ron took a train to Manchester to meet her to show her that he wasn't her son.

Following his leave Ron was sent to a dispersal unit for reassignment. The airmen assembled and a roll call was made. When they called for Pilot Officer Pither, Ron waited with interest to see if this person was a relative of his. When no one else responded and they called again, Ron called back that he was Sergeant Pither and was told he had been commissioned in his absence and was now Pilot Officer Pither. He was not reassigned to flying duties as far as we know, and apart from a short course for newly commissioned officers we don't know what he did next, nor where he was posted.

While still with the RAF, on 12<sup>th</sup> May 1945, Ron married his sweetheart from before the war, Evelyn Wright (Picture 18). During the war Evelyn had been an aircraft plotter with the Royal Observer Corp. On the wedding certificate Ron's profession was recorded as Pilot Officer 186093 Royal Air Force (Dry Cleaner). The "Dry Cleaner" reference related to his job before the war. By the time he left the RAF several months later he had been promoted to Flying Officer.

The RAF had arranged some talks about various civilian careers for men who would soon be demobbed. As the time drew near for Ron he decided to attend one about teaching, which was presented by staff from several teachers' training colleges. Many teachers had been killed during the war and there was a great need for replacements. The Government introduced a special one-year teachers' training course to help alleviate the situation, and Ron was encouraged to apply for this.

Service personnel were demobbed at varying times after the war because there were still many places of concern, such as Berlin and West Germany. Additionally there was unease surrounding the beginning of the Cold War. Some service personnel were retained for several years with release dates being decided by length of service and age. Ron was asked if he wanted to continue in a peacetime RAF with a commission, but he declined.

Ron's last official date of service was 17<sup>th</sup> March 1946, but as he had three months' leave due he was actually demobbed on 18<sup>th</sup> December 1945.

## ***Civilian life after the war***

Having been demobbed in December 1945, Ron had to wait for the start of the next academic year before he could begin his teacher training course. As this would not be until September 1946, he looked for work while he was waiting. At first he tried to return to what he had been doing before the war, which was working at the dry cleaners. When they realised Ron had become an officer however, they said they couldn't employ him to operate the steam press as it was too junior a position for an officer. Ron then found a job as a carpenter even though he had no formal training or experience in this line of work. His upbringing had been very practical though, and he seemed to be able to turn his hand to most tasks with reasonable skill.

One notable job he was given as a carpenter was to construct a new roof on the bomb-damaged Odeon cinema in Kemptown, Brighton (*Ref 16*). There were three of them employed to construct the roof: an older experienced man, a younger man, and Ron. The older chap stayed on the ground and told the younger two what to do. Ron and his co-worker then went up to the roof and cut and fitted the timbers as instructed. After a few days Ron arrived at work to find his adviser missing. The boss told him that he had been

watching them and saw that the older man did nothing while the other two did all the work, so he had sacked the older man! The two young men finished the construction together without their mentor. The cinema reopened and stayed in use until 1960, so presumably they did a good job in spite of their lack of experience.

During Ron's time as a carpenter Ron and Evelyn lived at Evelyn's parent's house at 12 Seville Street, Brighton. It was here that Ron received a letter and brooch from the Caterpillar Club in recognition that he had used a parachute to escape a burning plane during the war (*Ref 17*).

From 9<sup>th</sup> September 1946 to 6<sup>th</sup> October 1947 Ron trained to be a teacher at Leavesden Green Teachers Training College, Hampshire; from October 1947 to December 1947 he taught History, Science and Biology at Burgess Hill County Primary School, Sussex. From 13<sup>th</sup> January 1948 to 19<sup>th</sup> March 1948 he returned to training at Shoreditch Teachers Training College, London and gained a Handicraft Teachers Certificate. On 6<sup>th</sup> April 1948 he became the Handicraft Master at Ringmer County Primary School which was twelve miles from Brighton, and continued to teach in Ringmer for many years. He also attended evening study in "Building Science" and "Carpentry and Joinery" from 1948 to 1949 at Brighton Technical College, to increase his skills. Ron taught at Ringmer County Primary School for several years before changing to teach woodwork at Ringmer Senior School which was almost next door.

Ron and Evelyn were still living in Brighton when their first child Trevor was born. Ron would travel to Ringmer each day by motorbike, riding a tiny ex-military Corgi scooter which had been designed to be dropped by parachute during the war (Picture 19). It wasn't very reliable, which may have been why they eventually moved to Ringmer and lived in a small prefabricated house there. This was one of many similar post-war emergency buildings (Picture 20). During this time Ron and Evelyn's other two children, Malcolm and Janet, were born. After a few years Ron bought half an acre of land and had a bungalow built there. The builder he appointed was the mayor of a nearby town, who unfortunately sub-contracted the work to other builders. Ron would often come home from teaching to see poor quality work which he would correct. On one occasion, on seeing a badly constructed wall, he demolished it and rebuilt it himself. In later years bricklaying became one of the subjects he taught his pupils. After living in that house for a few years Ron built a pair of bungalows a few doors away (Picture 21). This time he did all the work himself in addition to his teaching. A few years later Ron and the family moved back to Brighton from where Ron commuted to Ringmer by car.

In 1960 Dala Gawrońska visited Ron and our family in Brighton (Picture 22). They had been in contact by letter for some years, and had sometimes exchanged gifts at Christmas. Regrettably we have no clear memories of Dala's visit as we were children at the time. We were all too young to understand the significance of this reunion, and the important part Dala had played in our family history. The photograph is therefore a valued record of the occasion.

A few years later Ron and Evelyn considered emigrating. Ron had loved his time in South Africa in 1943 and would have liked to move there. Eventually though they decided upon South Australia, and in the summer of 1965 the family moved to Adelaide. While there Ron became head teacher at the Mitchell Park Boys Technical High School, where he taught woodwork, metalwork and plastics. Although they had planned that the move to



Australia would be permanent, when Evelyn's father died they felt they needed to return to the UK to look after Evelyn's mother. So in September 1967 they arrived back in Brighton.

On their return to England Ron resumed his teaching career and began to teach mathematics, technical drawing and building skills at a secondary school in Newhaven, near Brighton, Sussex. In 1977 he retired early to care for Evelyn who died of cancer in June 1982 at the age of 60. Ron then continued to care for Evelyn's mother until her death many years later.

Having left teaching, and not being one to fully retire, Ron set up a business in Brighton buying houses and letting them to students. He was noted for his kindness and generosity, often giving help and money to those in need. This included his tenants on occasions, many of whom said he was like a father to them. Ron loved to work and keep busy, and greeted each new day with enthusiasm. He continued working as a landlord, carrying out all the repairs and modifications to his houses himself, until he died suddenly of a heart attack on 27<sup>th</sup> September 2004 at the age of 82. Even on the day he died he was still working, and was found to have a list of the day's jobs in his pocket. Ron was cremated, and there is a plaque in his memory at Brighton Crematorium (Picture 23).

## ***After Ron's death - meeting the descendants of his crew and rescuers***

Shortly after Ron's death we were contacted by Lynda Coates-Flecknor who had been looking into the history of her own father, Freddie Coates. She had become aware of Ron during this process and had managed to trace him. She had also been in contact by email with Stan Widlak, the son of Stanisław Widlak who was the first man Ron had met in Poland. Stan had been trying to trace Ron for several years. Lynda left a message explaining this on the answering machine at Ron's house; which we, Ron's children, picked up. It was incredible news to us, and we were sorry to have to tell her that our father had died very recently. Lynda was able to introduce us to Stan, and we began to email one another. We had never known the names of Ron's first rescuers in Poland. Our father had always been very concerned about his Polish friends and never gave their names, even to us. The only ones we knew of were Dala and Henryk, because our family had had contact with them. We hadn't imagined that these people could be traced, nor that we would ever meet their descendants. Even Ron's own story wasn't clear to us at that time. He had told us many short anecdotes but never the complete story, and we hadn't been able to fit these snippets of information into any sequence of events. As we continued to clear Ron's house though, we made a discovery.

We knew Ron had begun to record some of his experiences onto a tape many years before, because our mother Evelyn had wanted to write about them in a book. She felt the story of his survival was so incredible it needed to be told somehow. Ron had agreed but was worried that, as the Russians were still in control of Poland, his friends might be punished if what they had done to help him ever became known. So they decided that although the book would tell his story, all the names of people and places would be changed so that no one could be identified. Ron then recorded a basic account of his memories, to be a framework for Evelyn to follow as she wrote. No doubt they planned that he would provide more information to her as it became needed in the writing process.

Our understanding is that after this tape had been made our parents travelled to London to find some accurate information about his squadron. Unfortunately what they discovered was very bad news. Ron was so grieved to learn how many of them had died in the war that he lost all interest in the book, and stopped recording. We were told of this, and therefore never asked to listen to the tape out of respect for him and his decision. Presumably some years later he decided to continue his recordings after all, and we were very surprised and excited to eventually find four tapes in the loft of his house. Sadly our mother's book was never written. She became seriously ill and only managed to draft a few pages of it before her death in 1982. The legacy of the tapes made for her benefit were a treasure to find after Ron died, and they enabled us to begin to piece together his story. We would have loved though to listen to them while our father was alive, and ask him the many questions that arose from hearing them.

After Lynda Coates-Flecknor's introduction we began to exchange emails with Stan Widłak who told us, to our amazement, that Ron's flying suit was on display in the AK Museum in Krakow. So in 2006 my brother Trevor and his wife decided to go to Krakow to see it, and to pay their respects to his crew members who had died. They were surprised to see Ron's flying suit was labelled as belonging to "Peter Rogers". Trevor explained it was Ron Pither's suit, but at first there was confusion over this. Later it was confirmed to be Ron's. Where the name of Peter Rogers came from is a mystery. Somehow over the course of time Ron's name had become changed in some people's memory to Peter Rogers, and that is the name used in Rzygard Ruta's description of the events in his writings entitled "The Guest From The Clouds" (*Ref 13*). We don't know how this confusion with names could have happened, but this was definitely Ron's suit, and his story.

In May 2007, at the invitation of Stan Widłak, I (Malcolm) and my sister Janet visited Krakow with our families. Stan had extensively researched the events of that fateful night and the following months, and was able to give us exciting and detailed information that we didn't previously know. Some of this has been incorporated into this account. Our family also had information Stan was unaware of, including Ron's memories of events at the Manor House at Rachwałowice. We were able to compare and swap stories excitedly. It was an occasion of great emotion as our family histories came alive. Naturally some of the details of the story varied between us as they had been passed down between generations, but the essence of it was the same. Stan took us to several of the Krakow "landmarks" in Ron's story, and we were also able to visit the graves of Ron's fellow crew in the Rakowicki War Cemetery to lay wreaths. On this day we were introduced to Jacek Janiec son of Mieczysław Janiec "Lot" and his sister Urszula-Małgorzata at the AK Home Army Museum in Krakow. It was wonderful to meet Stan, Jacek and Urszula-Małgorzata; the descendants of the men who had risked their lives for our own father.

During this visit we heard a little of what had followed in later years. Although the war was officially over, Poland sadly remained under Russian control and many members of the Home Army were arrested. We were told what had happened to some of the Polish people who had helped Ron.

Stanisław Widłak was arrested by the communist secret services NKVD and accused of being an agent of the British Intelligence Service. He was imprisoned for a month. A certificate he received from the local Polish authorities honouring the part he played in saving Ron is shown in Picture 24.

Mieczysław Janiec "Lot" was interrogated by the NKVD after the war and accused of being a member of the Home Army, which was a great crime at the time. He was later released, and in 1946 received an official letter of thanks from the British Embassy in Poland for the help given to Ron and other service men (Picture 25).

It was humbling to hear the price these men paid for their bravery and kindness to our father, and we were relieved to hear that they had not remained in custody for long. Other members of the Home Army were not so fortunate. Some were tortured or even killed during those difficult years of Russian control after the war.

Ron's flying suit was apparently hidden by Mieczysław Janiec in a recess in his house for some years. This was a very daring thing to do as its discovery would have had serious consequences. Later when he moved to Krakow, he took it with him and concealed it there. Eventually the flying suit was donated to the AK Home Army Museum in Krakow by his son Jacek Janiec, on behalf of his mother Józefa who was the wife of Mieczysław Janiec. The suit is still on display at the museum.

Stan Widłak was able to tell us that silk from Ron's parachute was later used to make a wedding dress for his mother when she married Stanisław Widłak. That dress was further modified in the 1950's to make an everyday dress, this time for Stan's sister. This was a delightful piece of information. Ron's parachute had been very appropriately used.

Our second visit to Krakow was in 2014, when Jacek Janiec and some of our other Polish friends had arranged a tour of places from our joint history. While there we were honoured to be introduced to some prominent Polish people including the renowned Senator Gil, along with members of the AK Home Army and villagers from Kocina. Their stories of the troubles and bravery of the Polish during and after the war were sobering to hear. On this visit we were joined by Jonathan Franklin, son of Lt Charles Franklin the co-pilot of the plane, and his wife. It was a privilege to share this time with Jonathan, whose personal story had sadly been so different from our own. Our hosts took us to the site of the crash, where we laid a wreath and lit candles in memory of Jonathan's father and the other men who had perished there. We were told by Jonathan that after the war Ron had written to his mother, the widow of the pilot Lt Charles Franklin, and expect therefore that Ron also wrote to the families of his other crew members if he was able to trace them. We felt a great unity with these people whose fathers, mothers or townsfolk had shared wartime experiences with Ron, just as we had on our previous meeting with Stan Widłak.

This journey also included a visit to the location of the Manor House at Rachwałowice (Picture 12). The house itself had unfortunately been destroyed by fire in the 1990s, but we were able to walk around the remains of the vodka factory, and visit the beautiful small church (Picture 26) located opposite. It was very moving to stand in this old church where Ron would no doubt have attended services with the family all those years before.

## ***Memorial to the crash***

On this same occasion in 2014 we also heard details about the plans to erect a monument commemorating the loss of the Liberator EW250L. This would be to honour both the memory of the Airmen and the Home Army members who had rescued Ron. A local committee which included Jacek Janiec and other Polish friends had been set up for this purpose, but it would take several more years of planning and negotiations before they could achieve their aim. The process of acquiring permissions and organising the cenotaph itself would prove to be a huge undertaking, requiring great dedication from them and their associates to bring it to completion. During our visit we met Stanisław Jarkeiwicz who had witnessed the crash as a boy; his son Adam Jarkiewicz; and Dominik Kościelny. They, with the others on the committee, worked tirelessly to see this tribute constructed.

The long-awaited day of the unveiling arrived on 14<sup>th</sup> October 2018, in time to mark the 74<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the tragedy (Picture 27). My sister Janet and I (Malcolm), with some of Ron's grandchildren and great grandchildren were pleased to be able to attend the occasion. An impressive ceremony had been arranged which included full military honours for the fallen, with a gun salute and wreaths laid in their memory. The event was attended by military and AK Home Army representatives, political figures and local dignitaries. Appropriately there were also contributions from the villagers of Kocina itself, both young and old, for whom the memorial will be a constant reminder of this moment in their history. The day was a fitting and respectful tribute to all involved. Jonathan Franklin was unable to be there on the day but was represented by his sister Vanessa Bristow. Vanessa had spent years researching the life of Lt Charles Franklin who had been her mother's first husband, and was very attached to his memory. At the ceremony we received certificates and badges from the AK Home Army as a symbol of our shared history. This significant monument now stands as a permanent testimony to the courage of everyone involved in this tragic event: the Airmen, both those sadly deceased and the only survivor Sergeant Ron Pither; the Home Army soldiers who risked their lives to rescue Ron; and the people of Kocina who played their part in hiding him. We are forever grateful to them all

## ***Notes on the character of Ron Pither***

Ron Pither was a cheerful and kind man who was extremely generous and caring towards others. He was optimistic and positive, a natural teacher, and a great encourager. He lived simply, without extravagance. Ron had tremendous energy. He was always busy and loved physical work, even in his old age. His enthusiasm for each new day never diminished. He relished the prospect of what "tomorrow" would bring, and enjoyed every moment of "today". No doubt his experiences during the war, and the gift of life given to him by the Polish people, contributed to his great appreciation of life and humanity. After that fateful night of 16<sup>th</sup> October 1944, Ron always said "Every day is an extra day".

## **Comments regarding the tape recordings made by Ron Pither**

Ron's time in Poland, is described in the audio recordings he made (Ref 1) and can be heard at:

[https://liberatorew250.com.pl/?page\\_id=608](https://liberatorew250.com.pl/?page_id=608)

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Ron's tape recordings were created simply as an initial framework for our mother to refer to as she wrote her book, and certainly weren't intended to be heard outside his family. The book was to be based on Ron's real experiences, but with all names and places changed to protect people's identities. As a result the recordings lacked detail, and names were often omitted completely. This was particularly noticeable on the first tape, when Ron was less comfortable with recording his story. Ron planned to supply more information to our mother as she began to write, but sadly she became ill and died before she could do so. Had Ron known these tapes would be heard by others, especially the descendants of his crew and rescuers, we're sure he would have made the recordings very differently. He would have taken care to name and describe the people, both airmen and Polish, and explain his own feelings of both sadness and gratitude with greater clarity.

The first tape was a difficult one for Ron to record as it covered the harrowing subject of the crash. It's puzzling for us to hear Ron trying to remember how many men were on the plane, but we hope the listeners will understand that it can be very distressing to be the only survivor of a tragedy, and everyone copes in their own way. It would seem that Ron had blocked much of this memory from his mind. There's no doubt that he was deeply saddened by the loss of his crew, and the report by Ryszard Ruta "The Guest From The Clouds" (Ref 13) on the website for Liberator EW250L [https://liberatorew250.com.pl/?page\\_id=127](https://liberatorew250.com.pl/?page_id=127) reveals our father's real grief over these friends at the time of the tragedy.

As this recording was made just to give an 'overview' of his story for his wife, there was no need for Ron to engage with the emotions of this traumatic event at this time. Ron describes the crash factually, and as if he were simply an observer. He keeps a distance from the loss. Although Ron didn't tell us personally anything about the men he flew with, he did say they were a very close-knit group. A report of the sorties carried out during October 1945 show that Ron flew every time with Lt Cullingworth, Lt Franklin, Sgt Speed, and Sgt Richmond. Two of the others, Lt McLeod and Lt Ray-Howett, joined the crew on several occasions. Sgt Bowden was tragically on his first flight on the night of the crash. Ron seldom spoke to us about his experiences of war itself. The anecdotes he recounted were usually about his training, and his times with Polish friends. He never named or spoke about any of his many friends who hadn't returned from the war, and he would never watch a war film. His comment was always "War is not entertainment".

When Ron began to record these experiences Russia was still in control of Poland, and he was always concerned that his Polish friends could still be punished if what they had done to help him became known. This is why our parents planned to change all the names in the book to protect people. Ron would often tell us stories of his rescuers' bravery and was extremely appreciative of all they had done for him, but he never told us their names. Nor does he do so in this recording. The only ones we knew were Dala and Henryk. Our family remained in contact with Dala Gawrońska for many years, but sadly this communication was lost when we emigrated to Australia in 1965. Ron was eternally

grateful for the courage and kindness shown to him by the Polish people, and always spoke with great warmth and admiration for those who had risked their own lives to help him.

## ***Names associated with Ron Pither in Poland***

Ron was given the name Jerzy Petrovski by Henryk and Dala when they applied for identity passes for him while he stayed at their Manor House. This name was chosen because it was a very common Polish name and they hoped the Germans wouldn't even consider checking his identity. The logistics of tracing anyone with that name would have been extremely difficult.

Later, in Krakow, a sergeant gave Ron the identity of a deceased British Army soldier in order to return to the UK, as the train to Odessa was for Army personnel only. Unfortunately we don't know what that name was, but wonder if it could be the reason the lady from Manchester thought Ron was her son. Perhaps she had received information that "her son" had boarded the train and ship to return home.

There is also a name that is incorrectly associated with Ron. This is in the written account "The Guest From The Clouds" by Ryszard Ruta (Ref 13). In this story Ron has been referred to as Peter Rogers from Manchester, England. The origin of this confusion is still a mystery. His flying suit also bore this name when first displayed in the AK Home Army Museum, presumably as a result of the same article. We have tried to think how this inaccurate memory of Ron's name and home town could have originated; but there is no conclusive explanation for this. It's possible, of course, that "Peter Rogers" could have been the name of the deceased British Army soldier whose identity Ron assumed for the train to Odessa, but even if this were so it would not really explain why this Polish account would confuse those two names. We feel that Ron's Polish friends in Kocina would probably have been unaware of the arrangement he had made with the Army sergeant in Krakow, and would therefore not have known the temporary name he used for that journey. The most likely explanation remains to be simply that the passage of time caused memories to become dim, with the result that Ron's name and home town were remembered incorrectly when the account was written many years later. Even though Ryszard Ruta's article cites the wrong name it is definitely Ron's story, and it has given us a great deal of valued information about the events of that period of time for which we are extremely grateful.

We know there was no confusion over Ron's name or home town in the years shortly after the war because we have evidence of various communications that took place which are mentioned below.




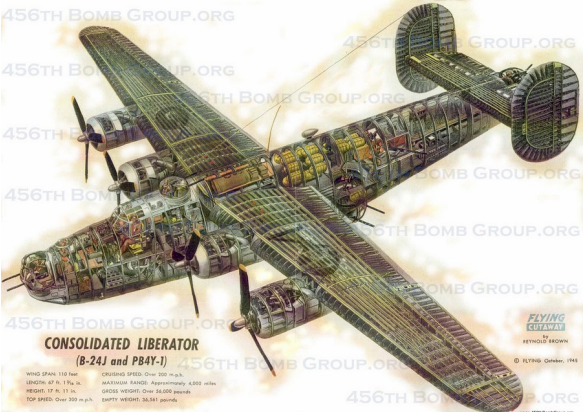
Dala Gawrońska wrote to Ron several times, and over a period of years they exchanged letters and Christmas gifts. In 1960 Dala, Ron, and Evelyn met in person in Brighton, England. We have a photograph taken at the time on Brighton Seafront (Picture 22) which is a record of this wonderful reunion.

Henryk Gawroński used Ron's name accurately in 1980 when he described the time Ron stayed with them in a letter (Appendix 3). We don't know who the recipient of the letter

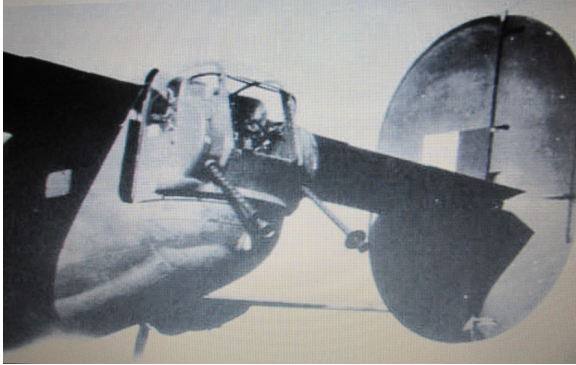


was, but Henryk's recollections of Ron and the situation in the Manor at Rachwałowice at that time provide interesting information.




Helena Homolacs (Picture 11), the Red Cross nurse who attended to Ron's injuries, wrote to him shortly after the war. Although we don't have her letter to Ron, we do have a copy of a short excerpt of his reply to her in 1946 (Appendix 6); kindly supplied to us by Dominik Kościelny. This excerpt was included in a letter (Appendix 5) which Helena Homolacs wrote to a Dr Donald Lithgow in response to an advert he had placed in the Polish magazine "Przekrój". Donald Lithgow was trying to find information about his brother, Jimmy Lithgow from 31 Squadron SAAF, whose plane had also crashed on 16<sup>th</sup> October 1944. His enquiry was entitled "What happened on the night of October 16, 1944?". Helena Homolacs was unaware that a second plane had crashed on the same night, so inadvertently replied to the advert with information about Ron's plane. She expressed her confusion that Dr Lithgow named the survivor of the crash as Colbert and, not realising it was a different crash, gave evidence to Dr Lithgow that the survivor was named Ron Pither by including a portion of Ron's letter in her reply. Although Helena Homolacs' letter was of no use to Donald Lithgow in his search for his brother, it provides us with further information about the crash of Ron's plane and his stay in Kocina. The circumstances surrounding this advert are described fully in the book *The Men Who Went To Warsaw* (Ref 12) Chapter 32.

# Picture Library

1		Ron Pither 1945, age 23
2		Ron Pither 2002, age 80
3		Ron's childhood home in Hendon Street Brighton, England as seen in present day. The loft room has been added in recent years
4		Liberator, not specifically Liberator EW250 L



5		View of a Liberator rear gunner position.
6		Rear gunner, not Ron
7		<p>Stanisław Widlak</p> <p><a href="https://liberatorew250.com.pl/?page_id=730">https://liberatorew250.com.pl/?page_id=730</a></p>

8		<p>Mieczysław Janiec "Lot"</p> <p><a href="https://liberatorew250.com.pl/?page_id=382">https://liberatorew250.com.pl/?page_id=382</a></p>
9		<p>Mieczysław Janiec's "Lot"s cottage as described by Marianna Jach. See:</p> <p><a href="https://liberatorew250.com.pl/?page_id=757">https://liberatorew250.com.pl/?page_id=757</a></p>
10		<p>Marianna (Maria) Jach, previously Maria Wilk before her marriage. She accompanied Ron on the cart as he left Kocina</p>

11



Helena Homolacs, the nurse who tended Ron's wounds while he was in Kocina.

12






Drawing of the manor house at Rachwałowice. The manor house was destroyed by fire in the 1990's




13



Idalia and Henryk, know to Ron as Dala and Henry



14		Dala and Henry with German commander at the manor house
15		Dala, Ron and Henry. Ron wearing Henry's suit
16		Entrance to the Nunnery at 21 Mikolajska Street




17		<p>Outer courtyard to the Nunnery. There may have been an inner courtyard.</p>
18		<p>Ron and Evelyn on their wedding day, 12<sup>th</sup> May 1945</p>
19		<p>This is similar to the ex-military scooter used by Ron.</p> <p>1951 Corgi Mark II 98cc Folding Scooter  <a href="https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/17318/lot/124/?category=list">https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/17318/lot/124/?category=list</a></p>



20		<p>Prefabricated house similar to Ron's at Broyle Close, Ringmer.</p> <p>Picture courtesy of <a href="https://museum.wales/stfagans/buildings/prefab/">National Museum Cardiff</a> Wales.</p> <p><a href="https://museum.wales/stfagans/buildings/prefab/">https://museum.wales/stfagans/buildings/prefab/</a></p>
21		<p>The pair of semi-detached houses that Ron built in Ringmer</p>
22		<p>Dala with Ron, Evelyn and daughter Janet in Brighton, England in 1960.</p>
23		<p>Memorial plaque to Ron and Evelyn in Brighton Cemetery.</p>

24		<p>Certificate awarded to Stanisław Widlak by the local authorities for his part in the rescue of an English aviator shot down by the enemy.</p> <p><a href="https://liberatorew250.com.pl/?page_id=730">https://liberatorew250.com.pl/?page_id=730</a></p>
25		<p>Certificate awarded to Mieczysław Janiec "Lot" by the British Embassy in Poland</p>
26		<p>Small church next to the Manor House at Rachwalowice</p>



27		<p>Memorial in Kocina to the crew of Liberator EW250L, including Ron, and the Home Army soldiers. Unveiled October 2014.</p> <p><a href="https://liberatorew250.com.pl/?page_id=627">https://liberatorew250.com.pl/?page_id=627</a></p>
28		<p>The temporary grave of the airmen described by Helena Homolacs in Appendix 4 as “Under a great quantity of splinters”</p>
29		<p>Head stones in the military section of Rakowicki Cemetery marking the combined graves of the airmen from Liberator EW250L</p> <p><a href="https://liberatorew250.com.pl/?page_id=251">https://liberatorew250.com.pl/?page_id=251</a></p>





## Appendix 2 - Families living in the Kocina cottages

The diagram below represents the row of cottages that Ron approached as shown on the map on the previous page. Kocina has more houses than these, but these were on the edge of the village. This numbering system is to help explain who lived in which cottage, to the best of our understanding. Please note that these were not the actual house numbers and were not used in 1944. Apparently these cottages have since been demolished.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Occupants:

1 = Stanisław Widlak's family. In June 1945, after Ron's departure from Poland, Stanisław married a young lady who lived in cottage 3. Her wedding dress was made from the silk of Ron's parachute. Some years later Stan and his sister were born.

3 = Stanisław Widlak's future wife and her family.

7 = This cottage had two sides divided by a hallway. On one side lived the senior member of the family, Marianna (Maria) Janiec (then a widow) and her two children Helena Ruta (also a widow) and Mieczysław Janiec "Lot". With Helena were her two children Ryszard and Jadwiga. Mieczysław was unmarried at that time. On the other side of the cottage lived Marianna Janiec's other son, Jan Janiec, with his wife and their children. This information has been obtained from Maria Jach's description (*Ref 14*), and Ryszard Ruta's "The Guest From The Clouds" (*Ref 13*).

Later Mieczysław Janiec married Józefa Buczac, and they had a daughter Urszula-Małgorzata and a son Jacek.

Please note that the family tree of Marianna Janiec below is to the best of our knowledge and may contain inaccuracies.

Senior family member	Next generation	Next generation
Marianna (Maria) Janiec (widow)	Jan Janiec and his wife Stanisłowa	Stanisław Janiec
		Iska Janiec
		Janusz Janiec
	Helena Ruta, widow of Józef Ruta	Ryszard Ruta
		Jadwiga Ruta
	Mieczysław Janiec "Lot". After the war he married Józefa Buczak	Born after the war, Urszula-Małgorzata Janiec now married to Henryk
		Born after the war, Jacek Janiec. Married to Małgorzata

Stanisław Widłak in Cottage 1 was the first person Ron approached when he landed in Poland. Ron was hidden briefly in Cottage 1.

Mieczysław Janiec "Lot" in Cottage 7 was the leader of the local Home Army unit. Ron was moved from Cottage 1 to Cottage 7 and hidden there for about 10 days.

The people in Cottage 7, and others, were involved when Ron was moved from Kocina to Rachwałowice.

The following people from these cottages made major contributions to this story:

- Stanisław Widłak's son, Stan Widłak
- Mieczysław Janiec's children Jacek Janiec and his sister Urszula-Małgorzata
- Mieczysław Janiec's nephew, Ryszard Ruta in his story "The Guest From The Clouds" (*Ref 13*).

### **Appendix 3 - Henryk Gawroński's recollections of Ron's time at the Manor House**

This letter from Henryk Gawroński was written in 1980 to an unknown recipient, and was kindly supplied to us by Stan Widłak. Please note that the spelling and grammar is authentic to the letter.

Letter from Henryk Gawroński written in 1980 (supplied by Stan Widłak).  
Recipient unknown.

Copy from the letter of M. Sc. Henryk Gawroński 30-009 Krakow, tel-nr 325-95  
ul. Friedleina 14 / 5 dated 4 January 1980

This information concerns saving a British pilot who was shot down.

In the second half of August (I do not remember the exact date), after the dusk, me, staying on terrace, my wife and many others numerous persons staying with us, we heard the sounds of artillery on the west in relation to our house. As it appeared later, they came from the line of Nowy Korczyn-Kocice-Czarkowy, Pińczów administrative district, in the area of German-Soviet front.

The same night, it appeared that AK (Home Army) intercepted injured British pilot. We have agreed that he shall be transported to our house. Property of Rachwałowice Koszyce commune, Pińczów administrative district, then Miechow administrative district. The situation at our house was specific. AK Command and radio monitoring was located at our house, there was a Jewish person hiding, two Soviet soldiers, fugitives from prisoner camp in Rosenberk in Czechoslovakia, many persons displaced from the terrains of Poland included to Reich, as well as - what might have been good then - permanent German security post, 12 soldiers for protecting spirit warehouse of own distillery.

The shot down British pilot, first sergeant of RAF: Ronald Pither, 24 years old, was a air tailgunner from Liberator aircraft, who was flying from allied base in Brindizi with weapons

drop for Warsaw. Injured British pilot was treated by AK surgeon, doctor Marzyński, from Morowianka village, Bejsce commune, Pińczów administrative district. After the war, this doctor worked in Szczecin, where he died recently.

Ronald Pither told us (my wife spoke fluent English) that the aircraft had five board members, out of whom only he has survived by jumping with a parachute, and as far as he knew other planes were shot down too. He was saved by an older man, who let him know that "Germans" are around. He luckily had hidden in the attic, where he was taken by AK soldiers and transported to my house. Ronald Pither was dressed in my casual clothes. During the stay - half a year, until the Germans were gone - Ronald Pither was neither hidden or isolated, everybody thought that he was a cousin of my wife, who was injured in Warsaw Insurrection. He was eating with us, accompanied us everywhere, because like he said, he wanted to know such brave nation that he had only a slight idea of.

In the beginning of the second half of January we were forced to leave our house, taking Ronald Pither, upon his request, to Krakow. Ronald Pither went to registration point for allied soldiers, which was located at Mikołajska Street, in a monastery. Ronald Pither left this place with the first transport through Odessa, Cairo to London.

#### **Appendix 4 - Ron Pither's report to the British War Department**

I was on my way to a forest near WARSAW to drop supplies on the night of 15/16 Oct 44 when my aircraft was hit by fighters. I baled out (sic) and landed near KOCINA about (20?) miles from KRAKOW. I walked into the village of KOCINA and told an old man I was English. He took me to some POLISH partisans who lived in the village. I was wounded and the partisans brought a doctor who looked after me. On 26<sup>th</sup> Oct 44 I was moved to a house near KOCINA where I was operated on by a Polish partisan doctor and I lived as a civilian. There were Germans living in the same house, who were not suspicious as I had my throat bandaged and they were told I could not speak. This house was owned by a local landowner who was the district leader of the Polish Resistance Movement. I remained in KOCINA for 4 months until the Russians liberated KRAKOW in Feb 45, when my host was turned out of his house by the Russians because he was a landowner. I left with his family for KRAKOW and reported to the Russian H.Q. in KRAKOW and told them that I was English. They wanted me to join the Red Army and fight till they met the British. I was the only Englishman in KRAKOW at this time and they put me in a camp with refugees of all nationalities. I was confined to the camp for a week, when a British soldier managed to blag his way into the camp, and as I wore my uniform, managed to persuade the Russian guard to let me out. I went to the Grand Hotel in KRAKOW and was put up in a flat, where I stayed with a Brewer until 3 Mar 45. While I was there I made contact with some ex POWs who were entering KRAKOW from German camps. Registered with the Russians as a POW and on 5 Mar 45 a train arrived to take 300 of us from Krakow to ODESSA. We were about 12 days on the train arriving in ODESSA on 16<sup>th</sup> Mar 45. We left the port about 4 days later on a British ship. We were wel (sic) fed at ODESSA, and there were Red Cross parcels for everyone. I arrived in the UK on 1 April 45.

## Appendix 5 – Letter from Helena Homolacs to Dr Donald Lithgow via the magazine Przekrój.

Please note that the spelling and grammar are authentic to the letter.

“HELENA HOMOLACS  
BYDGOSZCZ  
ul. KOPERNIKA 12/4

Bydgoszcz 17.xi.1959

### MR DONALD M. LITHGOW

I have read your letter printed in the magazine “Przekrój” and send you some details about the tragedy of the British aeroplane “Liberator” shot down by Germans the 16 October 1944.

I stayed then in the farm KAMIENNA. Near 21 o'clock we heard a strong explosion, and the care-taker which was in the yard saw – as he said “a moment before the explosion a fire on the sky”. After them we heard a long time many explosions of gun-balls. The aeroplane was loaded with arms, munition and medicines for Polish Patriots.

We got to know the next morning that it is an English aeroplane shot down and fallen on a field of the farm KRZCZONÓW, about 1½ km (1 mile) far from Kamienna. People related that they hardly could gather some medicines (which they have handed to the Red Cross station), than Germans immediately surrounded this field and put the people away.

Germans were lodging in all this villages. In the afternoon I was called to go to a house of peasants where an english airman is hidden in the village KOCINA. He had a splinter in the right palm. The wound was not dangerous. I dressed it during his sojourn (10 days) in Kocina. His name was RONALD PITHER, 22 years old, the address of his parents house: BRIGHTON, 25 HENDON Street. After 10 days it was to dangerous to remain longer in Kocina for the reason of the presence of Germans, he drived with the help of the Patriots to a farm in a sufficient distance. After the entrance of the Soviet Army he had the possibility to return to England.

I send you the copy of the interesting part of a letter I got in August 1946. - I lived in this time in Cracow. After have married he changed the address, which was in 1946: BRIGHTON, 12 SEVILLA STREET.

Mr Pither alighted with the help of the parachut 1.5 – 2 km (1 – 1.5 miles) far from the tragic place, and he was convinced that nobody else of his comrades did jump from the aeroplane – the aviator said then it is not necessary to jump because he will alight. All this villages are situated about 3 - 5 km (2 - 4 miles) in west of CZARKOWY (not “CZARKOWKA” as it is printed in Przekrój).

Mr Pither was very kind and cordial to his hosts, and left a good remembrance. If you will enter in correspondence with him, please transmit to him cordial greets from my part. Probably he had forgotten my name, but I am sure he remembers the Red-Cross sister from Kocina. I should like to hear something about him and his family.

After 2 or 3 days I was on the place of the tragedy. Under a great quantity of splinters was a grave. People told it contains the rests of all the dead airmen. But I was astonished that

the grave was so small, smaller than graves of adult men on a cemetery. We prayed for their souls. Now I think it was the grave of your brother.

In March or April I shall visit my family in Crakow. I shall try to find the grave of your brother and send you a photo. Enclosed with this letter in the envelope I send a "souvenir" from the tragic aeroplane. (I don't know the right name). About the lot of your brother, the second dead in cause of the unsuccessful jump and the two prisoners I knew nothing.

I do not understand why the name of the airman saved by Polish Patriots you mention in the letter to "Przekrój" is "Colbert" and not Pither. It is a pseudonym? "Pither" is the right name because I got answer to my letter.

With best wishes to get some informations you seek.

Helena Homolacs

Excuse my English is not to good."

Helena Homolacs' description of the initial burial place of the airmen as being "under a great quantity of splinters" seems confusing, but a photograph taken of the scene (Picture 28) helps to explain this comment. After the war the bodies were exhumed and laid to rest in the World War 2 military portion of the Rakowicki Cemetery in Krakow (Picture 29).

## **Appendix 6 – Portion of letter from Ron Pither to Helena Homolacs**

As mentioned in Appendix 5, this is a portion of Ron's letter to Helena Homolacs. She wrote out the relevant portion of the letter she had received from Ron, and enclosed it with her reply to Donald Lithgow. Her letter began with this sentence of introduction:

"Copy of the letter from Ronald Pither to Helena Homolacs send from Brighton 1.viii.1946"

She then copied Ron's words as follows:

"...It is good of you to send greetings from Kocina, please give my kind regards to all my Kocina folk.

They were very kind to me and gave me a good idea of the spirit of the Polish people. I wish them success and a happy future, for they deserve this.

You will notice that my address is now 12 Seville Street, but 25 Hendon St will also find me.

I am out of the service now, and going to work for my living. I married a nice little girl I met 7 years ago and things are going well for me just now.

Since I have been in England I have met many Poles who have relatives in Poland whom I

have met and of course these people are very glad to see me.

Wishing you the very best from Evelyn and myself. I'll say

Cheerio

Yours sincerely,

R. T. Pither.”

## **Appendix 7 – Related websites and links**

### **“The Men who went to Warsaw: The Warsaw Uprising Airlift 1944”**

This film provides a background to Ron’s story.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=alz8zYjmRLw>

**Bryan Jones’ story.** This is a film about the experiences of Bryan Jones, SAAF B-24 Liberator navigator, who was shot down over Warsaw. His aircraft was the first SAAF bomber to be shot down during the Warsaw supply drops which began in August 1944.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-7vfmDyNtEU&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR2y52wMoArhn03qKA7yzglEoJC9bxgdNHnmPE49LqhHOw0jhtqBUvVBQrY>

Ron’s flying experience would have been similar to Bryan Jones’ but his escape was very different.

**Ron’s story as told by Jacek Janiec,** son of Mieczysław Janiec “Lot”, commander of the Home Army unit that organised Ron’s rescue operation. Jacek Janiec is a patron of the AK Home Army Museum, Krakow. The film shows Ron’s flying suit and other items. The film is in Polish.

<https://vod.tvp.pl/video/kryptonim-muzeum-szlak-amii-krajowej.odc-12,34940383>

### **Website for AK Home Army Museum, Krakow**

<https://muzeum-ak.pl/>

### **Website detailing the crash of Liberator EW250L and the rescue of Ron Pither**

<https://liberatorew250.com.pl/>



## References

1	<p><b>Ron's time in Poland is described in the audio recordings made by him for his family and can be heard at:</b></p> <p><a href="https://liberatorew250.com.pl/?page_id=608">https://liberatorew250.com.pl/?page_id=608</a> Copyright © 327887</p>
2	<p><b>Ron's war service postings, as supplied by the Ministry of Defence on 31<sup>st</sup> January 1978:</b></p> <p>27/1/41      <i>Enlisted RAF</i>  28/1/41      <i>Reserve</i>  26/6/41      <i>RDV or RDW (printing not clear on letter)</i>  2/7/41        <i>10(S) RC</i>  3/12/41      <i>Middle East</i>  23/1/42      <i>103 MU</i>  24/10/42     <i>RAF Aboukir</i>  2/5/43        <i>UK</i>  No date      <i>Abbey Lodge</i>  4/10/43      <i>14 ITW</i>  No date      <i>2 AGS</i>  18/4/44      <i>5 PDC</i>  30/5/44      <i>1675 HCU</i>  13/7/44      <i>34 Sqn</i>  9/10/44      <i>Discharged to Commission</i></p>
3	<p><b>10(S) RC - 10 Signals Recruit Centre, Blackpool</b></p> <p><a href="https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/64/a6672864.shtml">https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/64/a6672864.shtml</a></p>
4	<p><b>Parachute and cable</b></p> <p><a href="https://www.kenleyrevival.org/content/new-contributions/parachute-and-cable-schermuly-not">https://www.kenleyrevival.org/content/new-contributions/parachute-and-cable-schermuly-not</a></p> <p><a href="https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/64/a6672864.shtml">https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/64/a6672864.shtml</a></p>
5	<p><b>3/12/41      Middle East</b>  <b>23/1/42      103 MU</b>  <b>24/10/42     RAF Aboukir</b>  RAF maintenance unit at RAF Aboukir near Alexandria in Egypt.</p> <p><a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RAF_Aboukir">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RAF_Aboukir</a></p>



6	<p><b>2/5/43 UK</b>  <b>Abbey Lodge</b></p> <p><a href="https://www.stjohnswoodmemories.org.uk/content/amenities/clubs-societies/lords-cricket-ground/royal%20air%20force%20in%20st%20johns%20wood%20in%20the%202nd%20world%20war">https://www.stjohnswoodmemories.org.uk/content/amenities/clubs-societies/lords-cricket-ground/royal air force in st johns wood in the 2nd world war</a></p>
7	<p><b>No 14 Initial Training Wing</b></p> <p><a href="https://www.rafweb.org/Members%20Pages/Unt%20Histories/Ground%20Training%20Units/ITWs.htm">https://www.rafweb.org/Members Pages/Unt Histories/Ground Training Units/ITWs.htm</a></p> <p><a href="https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/52/a7895352.shtml">https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/52/a7895352.shtml</a></p>
8	<p><b>2 AGS No 2 Air Gunners School</b></p> <p><a href="https://www.forces-war-records.co.uk/units/115/air-gunnery-school-dalcross">https://www.forces-war-records.co.uk/units/115/air-gunnery-school-dalcross</a></p> <p><a href="https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/52/a7895352.shtml">https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/52/a7895352.shtml</a></p> <p>A picture of the airfield at Inverness Airport which was Dalcross:</p> <p><a href="https://www.abct.org.uk/airfields/airfield-finder/dalcross-inverness/">https://www.abct.org.uk/airfields/airfield-finder/dalcross-inverness/</a></p>
9	<p><b>5 Personnel Despatch Centre</b></p> <p><a href="https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/87/a1080587.shtml">https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/87/a1080587.shtml</a></p> <p><a href="http://www.rafcommands.com/forum/showthread.php?15318-Location-of-5-PDC">http://www.rafcommands.com/forum/showthread.php?15318-Location-of-5-PDC</a></p>
10	<p><b>1675 HCU Heavy Conversion Unit</b></p> <p><a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_conversion_units_of_the_Royal_Air_Force">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List of conversion units of the Royal Air Force</a></p>
11	<p><b>34 Sqn SAAF</b></p> <p><a href="http://www.historyofwar.org/air/units/SAAF/34_wwII.html">http://www.historyofwar.org/air/units/SAAF/34_wwII.html</a></p>
12	<p><b>Book describing the Warsaw supply drop in 1944</b></p> <p>“The men who went to Warsaw” by Lawrence Isemonger, ISBN 0-958-4388-4-6</p>

13	<p><b>Article “The Guest From The Clouds” written by Ryszard Ruta the nephew of Mieczysław Janiec.</b></p> <p>The airman described in this story was actually Ron Pither, but was mistakenly named as Peter Rogers.</p> <p>This article was written in Polish and published in the magazine entitled “Crumbs Of Memories From The Years Of Flight And The Home Army's Martyrdom” Number 37 Issue 10 Cracow 2001</p> <p><a href="https://liberatorew250.com.pl/?page_id=127">https://liberatorew250.com.pl/?page_id=127</a></p>
14	<p><b>Mieczysław Janiec's cottage as described by Marianna (Maria) Jach, who was then Maria Wilk</b></p> <p><a href="https://liberatorew250.com.pl/?page_id=757">https://liberatorew250.com.pl/?page_id=757</a></p>
15	<p><b>Helena Homolacs' home at the Manor House at Kamienna, near Kocina</b></p> <p><a href="https://liberatorew250.com.pl/?page_id=690">https://liberatorew250.com.pl/?page_id=690</a></p>
16	<p><b>Newspaper article from The Argus Brighton</b></p> <p><a href="https://www.theargus.co.uk/news/13717852.looking-back-at-the-kemp-town-odeon-bombing/">https://www.theargus.co.uk/news/13717852.looking-back-at-the-kemp-town-odeon-bombing/</a></p>
17	<p><b>Caterpillar Club</b></p> <p><a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caterpillar_Club">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caterpillar_Club</a></p>