

Franciszek Heczko (1924-2012)



Frank Heczko on 23.06.1979.

Franciszek or Frank as he was known in his Rotherham days was born in the small town of Skoczów on 09.07.1924 in the south-west of Poland, near the Czechoslovakian border. He was the fourth of seven children, having two sisters and four brothers. His father Paweł, worked in the leather factory and his mother, Filipina, ran a small grocery shop in the town. Paweł was also proficient at making wheels for carts and barrows and was often called upon by the other residents of the town to supply these items. Another of his skills was cobbling shoes and he was a well-respected member of the local community, helping others whenever he could. Although relatively poor, Frank's memories of his childhood were of happy times spent swimming in the river Wisła and running barefoot through the surrounding fields. He held especially fond memories of upholding the Polish tradition of 'wetting' the girls at Easter time (throwing cups of water on them) as they walked home from church, a tradition which he kept up within his own family until his death. Frank and his brothers participated in the Christmas tradition of dressing up as the three kings and visiting neighbours to earn a few 'grosze' (a small coin, a 100th part of a 'złoty', equivalent to a penny). The whole family existed on a basic diet throughout the year, but a special effort was made at Easter and Christmastime and they all looked forward to the extra meat and the traditional Polish cakes, which they did not enjoy during the rest of the year. In his early teens, Frank contracted typhus and was taken to hospital in the nearby town of Cieszyn. It was a severe infection which affected the digestive system. The only course of action was to be placed on a severely reduced liquid diet, resulting in dramatic weight loss. Frank used to beg the nurses relentlessly for food, but this would have killed him.

Despite all the odds against him, Frank survived and returned home after several months in hospital. In 1939 Frank was only fifteen years old when the Germans invaded Poland. He had left school and had been working on the railways, maintaining signals and communications on the local railway lines. It was at this time that Frank injured his right hand. He and his friend found a bullet and placed it in a bench vice at home to see if it would fire. It certainly did and tore into the muscle and tendons of his outer palm! This injury affected the growth and use of his last two fingers on that hand. Eventually the occupying Germans ordered that Frank be taken to Germany as 'forced labour', to help support the farmers with food production targets. His manager on the railways fought hard to keep him, especially now he had an injured hand, but to no avail. Frank found himself transported away from his family to work on a farm in southern Germany. He worked hard and for long hours, but at least the farmer rewarded him with plenty of good food and kindness. Frank enjoyed working outdoors with the animals, but missed his family greatly. Around 1941 when Frank was about seventeen/ eighteen years old, he was told he was to be enlisted into the German army. The injury to his hand meant that he was categorised as second-class fitness and was given duties involving communications, similar work to what he had done on the Polish railways. It was an order you could not refuse, as those who did were summarily hanged or shot! Frank recalled an incident earlier on in the war when a distant cousin of the Heczko family was hanged in the town square in Cieszyn for refusing to fight for the Germans!

Most of the memories that Frank did share with his family of the time he spent in the German army were about the dreadful rations they received. Fatty gristle mutton stews and rotten potatoes were frequently on the menu, if they were lucky... Not much is known about where Frank saw action, but eventually he found himself at the terrible battle of Monte Cassino in early 1944. He was not actually deployed in the defence of the monastery itself (which claimed many lives), but was in a supporting role behind the German lines. Eventually the Allies broke through and the Germans retreated north. Frank and his comrades were captured by a small Italian unit and ordered to surrender. They were lined up by the roadside and stripped of all their possessions and valuables; Frank realised what was about to happen and that this might be 'the end'. He was just deliberating whether to run for it, because he did not want to just stand and be shot, when an American unit arrived on the scene. A big, black American Sergeant chewing on a huge cigar intervened and an altercation ensued between him and the Italian officer. This resulted in the American striking the Italian officer square on the jaw and knocking him to the ground. Frank and his small unit were saved that day by the intervention of the American Sergeant and were taken prisoner. Frank was eventually placed on a boat and taken across the Mediterranean Sea to Scotland and a P.O.W. camp, where he was held until the end of the war in 1945. He considered himself very lucky to have survived, but what was even more astonishing was that his parents and all six siblings also survived. After many interviews, the interrogating British and Polish officers agreed that Frank's story of forced conscription was true, being able to corroborate the details using the time and dates supplied. He spent the next two years travelling from camp to camp in Scotland and Northern England de-commissioning no longer needed army and air force barracks. He spent some time in Barrow-in-Furness and Grange-over-Sands in the Lake District.

When fully demobbed in 1948 (Polish Re-Settlement Corps) he was given a choice of employment in Britain or a return to Poland. The jobs offered involved mining, farming or road maintenance. Frank chose to stay in England and began a career working as a coal miner.

The remaining paragraphs are available in the book.

This account was kindly provided by Anuska and Graham Lewis, Frank's daughter and son-in-law.



Family photo taken around 1934, Franek is the one standing in the white top.



Forced conscription into the German Army, 1941.



In the German Army Communications Corps, first from left, around 1941.



In the coal mines, Frank Heczko is on the right, 1950s.



The Heczko Family; back row: from left: Fay, Frank, and Mark. Front row: Christopher, Anuska, and Paul.



Receiving his SPK medal with Anna Zaleśna on his left.