

Treeton Local History Group - June meeting report

Written by Kevin Atkins

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On Thursday 28th June the History Group welcomed guest speaker Janina Derrick, who gave a talk entitled 'The Long Walk To Freedom'. This was an unusual meeting in that Janina's subject was something that she had herself experienced, as a refugee from Poland in the last days of the second World War.

Janina gave us a fascinating first-hand account of the trials and tribulations of her family, who originally lived in Lvov, then in Poland, which was briefly held by the Germans before being re-taken by the USSR and, of course, is now in the Ukraine. She told us how her father, with an intrepid group of friends, escaped from Poland to Britain as his native land fell to the Nazis, and how he fought as a Spitfire pilot in one of the Free Polish Squadrons that took part in the Battle of Britain. Of course, this meant that his wife and his child Janina, then around 7 years old, were left with her grandmother to fend for themselves in war-torn Lvov. Having already lost a close family friend (who was Jewish) during the German occupation, the family found the block of apartments that they called home occupied by the Russian high command in the form of the well-known Marshall Zhukov' who was at the time leading the offensive that drove the Germans out of what was to become Soviet territory. The Russian occupation was little or no better for the Poles than the German, so seizing the last opportunity before the borders closed, the small family made their way on foot and by truck to Poznan in Western Poland.

Sheltering in cramped conditions with their extended family, a message somehow got through to them from her father, who was by now based with the RAF in Germany as the war drew to a close. With the help of a courier paid by her father, and desperately sad to leave her beloved grandmother behind, Janina set off with her mother to make the dangerous trek, largely on foot, from occupied Poland through devastated Germany to Berlin, and thence onwards through the divided city to the airbase to the South where her father was waiting for them.

Janina's account of their travels and the tribulations she and her mother went through, was fascinating, not least because her mother chose to take responsibility for a fellow traveller in the party who was epileptic, with all the additional burden that entailed. Eventually of course the family was reunited at the British airbase after a number of close scrapes at checkpoints on route. Even at the airbase the ordeal was not over, as Janina fell ill with Scarlet Fever and by the time she had recovered her father's squadron had been moved on, and they faced yet more red tape before the family was finally reunited in England. Sadly the reunion was to be short-lived as her father died relatively young in 1952, but Janina's story was both moving and inspirational.