



## **SPEAKING WITH SHADOWS**

### **Transcript of Series 2, Episode 5: The Polish Special Forces Soldiers of Audley End**

Josie: Thanks for listening to Speaking with Shadows from English Heritage. I'm Josie Long. And this is the series where we peer into history's shadowy corners to uncover angles and stories that challenge what we think we might know about our past.

Today I'm lifting the lid on wartime secrets here at Audley End House in Essex, then known as Station 43. Today, we will hear of the heroes who came to British shores from Poland to play a vital role in Allied victory in the Second World War. But they didn't share in its spoils. Many put their lives on the line for their country, and incredible feats of bravery, the training and tasks they undertook tested the very limits of human capacity and mental endurance.

[clip] It's a very narrow path that you tread, when you're at war, you know, the small mistake can be fatal.

[clip] The Pole said to him, 'All we want to do is to get back and do something to help our homeland.'

Josie: They trained as elite special forces soldiers in top secret locations across Britain and Europe. These were officers who volunteered to go above and beyond and were chosen for their excellence and their skills.

[clip] Most of them who were here were almost bespoke agents. They were answering a call back from Poland saying, 'Send us someone who can do photography and micro-engraving and can speak Russian and Ukrainian.'

Josie: Who were the Polish heroes of Station 43, and why were they kept secret for so long?

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So we're just outside Saffron Walden in Essex. This is really something. I've just walked through the main gate and immediately you're in this expansive beautifully kept estate. Suddenly, you're on these sweeping lawns of this beautiful water feature. And then in front of me is Audley End itself, and it's such an impressive and beautiful building. And it's here that I'm about to meet Dr Peter Moore, who's their Curator of Collections and Interiors. I'm really glad to have you here because this looks like such a big place. It really feels like you could get lost there.

Peter Moore: Believe it or not, it was actually originally about three times the size of what you see today.

Josie: Three times the size!



Peter: So there would have been a huge outer court stretching from the front door, all the way across this lawn towards the river Cam.

Josie: That's astonishing.

Peter: Well, in its heyday when it was first built it was one of the greatest houses of early 17th-century England. This is when James I was on the throne. And Thomas Howard, the 1st Earl of Suffolk, who built Audley End, he was the king's treasurer, and he inherited this site essentially and rebuilt the house on this absolutely monumental scale. The kind of scale that you'd expect for a royal palace. And then over the 18th century and the 19th century it was improved and altered by various members of the family. So we're talking about the Braybrooke lords here, and it was lived in by the descendants of that family until the Second World War.

Josie: I should say, we're not here to talk about lords and we're not here to talk about King James I. We're here to see something entirely different, really. What is it that you're going to show me today?

Peter: Well, if we just stop here for a second, this memorial urn in front of us provides a bit of a clue. Although it wasn't placed here until 1983, but you might want to have a look at the inscription to get an idea of what it commemorates.

Josie: 'Between 1942 and 1944 Polish members of the Special Operations Executive trained in this house for missions in their homeland. This memorial commemorates the achievements of those who parachuted into enemy-occupied Poland and gave their lives for the freedom of this and their own country.' Wow. Yeah, that's a story, isn't it?

Peter: Audley End played a really important role in World War II, especially for the Polish people, and also for Anglo-Polish relationships. So during the war, Audley End was known as Station 43. It was a specialist training school for the Polish section of the Special Operations Executive or the SOE.

Josie: How did they come to choose this place for something so important and so covert?

Peter: Well, the SOE was set up by Winston Churchill in 1940 for espionage, sabotage and subversion in enemy-occupied countries, and they needed places to train these SOE agents. So Audley End was absolutely perfect – huge grounds around it, nestled in the countryside. It was a perfect setting, really, to train these people.

After Lord Braybrooke died in March 1941, that's when Audley End was acquired for war use. The interiors in the house were boarded over, artworks and furniture were put into storage, electricity was installed, and it became part of an international training programme for elite soldiers. And firstly, it was occupied by the British soldiers from the local area, but by June 1941 it was being used by SOE as a holding station for agents, who were about to be sent out into the field. And these were mostly Dutch, Belgian and Danish agents.

Josie: What about the Polish soldiers? What were they doing here?



Peter: So between 1942 and 1944, 527 Polish army soldiers completed the training course here for the Cichociemni, which is what they were known as. And that loosely translates as the silent unseen.

Josie: The silent unseen! Oh, that's cool.

Peter: It's quite cool, isn't it. Well, this referenced the fact that soldiers would disappear overnight from their units to volunteer for the Special Operations Service. And their modus operandi was to appear silently where they were least expected, play havoc with the enemy and then disappear from where they came unnoticed and unseen. So it's kind of like the equivalent of the British SAS, you could say.

Josie: I also feel like it's the opposite of how I live my life. It's not something I can do. I've got a loud voice ...

Peter: Noisy and seen ...

Josie: Yeah, yeah, noisy and seen – that would be my military unit! How come there were these Polish soldiers, especially in this kind of elite unusual regiment? How did they come to be here?

Peter: That's a really good question. And maybe we should start with a wider context. So, during the Second World War, Poland was divided into different territories. And that meant that the government had to go into exile, first in France and then in Britain. And the nation being partitioned meant that Polish people were subject to both the ethnic cleansing of the Nazi regime and imprisonment and persecution by the Soviets. And when the Germans took hold of Poland completely in June 1941, millions were killed. It was absolutely horrific. And the Polish government in exile formed a resistance movement made up from many different organisations and activities who were operating in Poland, and this became known as the Polish Home Army or the AK you hear it more commonly called. And the government in exile in Britain ran these resistance operations from afar, but someone had to relay messages and carry information to and from its secret delegation in Poland. And that's what required specialist, covert operatives who are those trained and briefed from here in Britain, at places like Audley End.

Josie: So how did those soldiers get from Poland to Audley End?

Peter: In most cases it wasn't straightforward at all. At the fall of Poland it was possible for some Poles to escape via Romania and the Balkans to France. But when France also fell, they again had to escape to England and even this wasn't an easy passage. You'd think that getting from France to England wouldn't be too problematic, but some people had to take boats to other nations completely in the opposite direction, and long circuitous and arduous routes, just to get here safely.

Josie: So then when people did get to England, was it the case that Polish citizens were sort of gravitating towards finding the government in exile?



Peter: Yeah, well, ending up in England, I think it was natural that displaced Polish citizens might wish to support their exiled government and the resistance movement in any way that they could, often. Some of these soldiers were selected for the training scheme we're talking about today.

Josie: Once they'd been selected for the programme, what kind of things were they being trained for here?

Peter: Essentially to be dropped by parachute at night into Poland. Then rendezvous with local operations, evade capture crucially, and then provide a range of intelligence back to the UK. So this was incredibly dangerous work. Many of these officers had already escaped capture or imprisonment. And as we've already heard, had to flee Poland in the first case, which it's almost a superhuman endurance that was needed, both physically and mentally, to have gone through that already before then embarking on these missions.

Josie: What do you think motivated them to take on this incredibly dangerous role?

Peter: Well, these men and crucially one woman – Elżbieta Zawacka – yeah, she's a phenomenal character – they all did this to serve their country. And there were 316 in total who were dropped into Poland. One hundred and three were either killed in combat or executed by the Gestapo. And another nine were murdered by the Communist regime in Poland after the war.

Josie: Can you tell me a bit more about how the Polish contributed to the Allied victory?

Peter: They played an absolutely crucial role in the Allied war effort. One hundred and forty-five Polish pilots fought in the Battle of Britain. And by 1944 there was even a separate Polish Air Force. The intelligence network played such a vital role in the war effort – it's astonishing I think to know that 48 per cent of all of the intelligence reports received by the British Secret Service came from Polish operatives.

Josie: Wow, half of everything!

Peter: It is amazing and I don't think many people really recognise that. We've all heard of the Enigma code, right? And they were absolutely vital in unravelling that code which as we know was used by the German military. Their intelligence was crucial to the location and destruction of V1 and V2 rocket facilities. They even captured a failed V2 rocket and smuggled vital parts back to Britain for analysis. So in all these different areas of intelligence, we couldn't have really done without them.

Josie: It's a relatively small group of people making such a huge difference to global events. I'm so curious to find out more about what happened here at Audley End.

Peter: Well, let's go into the house and we can meet Denise, who's a research volunteer who's been doing an incredible amount of work on researching this area for us recently.

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Josie: Peter's just taken me behind the velvet rope down one of the corridors which is not normally accessible to the public. And we've come into what seems like quite an unassuming room at the moment. But this used to be the briefing room, and we know this in part because on the wall, there's quite a large fragment of a schedule that looks like it's been hurriedly torn down. And I'm very lucky because I'm here with Denise Hall, who's a research volunteer at Audley End.

So Denise, when you come into this house, the first thing that strikes you is how much beautiful art and decoration there is. But this wasn't what the Polish soldiers would have experienced when they were here, is it?

Denise: Absolutely not, no. It would have been more like a barracks for them. When they came here, the whole house had been changed and it was boarded up in many places. Areas were sectioned off, the woodwork, the plasterwork – panelling all over it. So it was completely different and they had no idea what a beautiful place it was.

Josie: Wow, so the whole house was having this double life at that time.

Denise: Absolutely, yes.

Josie: What about the landscape and the gardens? How was that used?

Denise: Well outside, they had an assault course, they had areas where they had a tank and they would blow things up there. They had a shooting range. They had to cross the river. So Alan Mack – that's his English name, Alfons Maćkowiak – was one of the people here who was in charge of their hand-to-hand fighting and their physical skills. He firmly believed that their physical fitness would save their lives. So he worked them very hard. And also, I think, one of the lovely things about the grounds is that it provided recreation, because these guys were under immense pressure, emotional and psychological and physical, and they needed to let off steam. So there are wonderful photographs of them out there having sports days.

Josie: What's really exciting is you've got a lot of photos here that allow us to kind of put this modern space into that context. It must have felt like a very big time in the lives of these people.

Denise: Yeah, absolutely. And not just a big time but a time when they are fighting for their country and they're so proud of their country. They want to do anything, they can't get back there to support the underground army. And most of them who were here were almost bespoke agents. They were answering a call back from Poland saying, 'Send us someone who can do photography and micro-engraving and can speak Russian and Ukrainian.'

Josie: Wow, so they had to order up the right person.

Denise: This was their finishing school. So there's this lovely phrase that it's a high school of falsehood. And I think that is so great – absolutely wonderful. So this is a school, a school with a curriculum unlike none other, you know, hand-to-hand fighting, sabotage, explosion, and it's a basic course for everybody in that they will have to know Morse code. A lot of them did radio work because couriers



and radio communications people were the chief requests that were coming in. So they had to have those skills. So out on East Park, they would be practising with their S-phones and their radios. And then they would be coming back in the house, checking on their codes and ciphers making sure they could do those. And one of the things that went on in these rooms was the learning of your legend. So every person had a pseudonym or more than one pseudonym and a code name.

Josie: Peter mentioned to me that there was one woman in particular who was a part of this group. Could you tell me a bit more about her?

Denise: Are you talking about Elżbieta Zawacka?

Josie: Yes, I think so.

Denise: Ah my goodness. She's a very exciting lady. She's the only woman to have parachuted back into Poland and therefore can be classed, in my mind, as one of the Cichociemni, but she would have been a Cichociemna, feminine. Elżbieta's codename, she was sometimes called Zelma, she had multiple personalities – British, German, Russian. And her common code name was Zo, Z O.

Josie: Do we know if Elżbieta actually trained here?

Denise: We know that she flew out on 9 September with two agents that I can categorically say were here at Audley End. There were other females. So, if she was here, I think she would have been billeted with them – members of the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry, often called FANYs. Everybody laughs at that, don't they.

Josie: Sorry, I'm a child!

Denise: Yeah, you have to. But yes, I would love to think that Elżbieta was here.

Josie: It would make sense. It's not outlandish.

Denise: It would, yes. This was a holding and dispatch station. You came here for your last four to six weeks before you went to Poland and it's likely that you would do the up-to-date training. Now, from Elżbieta's point of view, she had a lot of current intelligence material that she brought with her.

Josie: So alongside the Polish soldiers, there were other people resident here at Station 43. Who were they, and how did they get on with each other?

Denise: There were about 47 British personnel based here underneath the leadership of Terence Roper-Caldbeck. He was the person in charge for the British and their job was to be orderlies, to be on the guardroom, to supervise the site, to transport people backwards and forwards. But alongside the men, there was a really important group of women. And those were the FANYs, who were brought in to do some logistics work, to do some secretarial work. But I think one of their key roles was just to keep an eye on the boys and to pass back to the commanding officers, both British and Major Hartman, the Polish commander here, if they had any concerns about the emotional state or the



psychological state of them, so that they were just keeping watch. Because everything those agents were doing was constantly being logged and reported on and tagged, and if there was any suspicion that they wouldn't be able to stand up to the pressure, then they went to the cooler in Scotland, and that was it.

Josie: Of course, I mean. Yeah, they couldn't risk...

Denise: No. No.

Josie: So the smallest things would be able to give you away – the smallest error in judgement, but also I imagine standing out would be a problem.

Denise: Yes. So the clothing that the agents had to wear was really carefully tailored. We had a tailor shop in the north turret because the light's really good up there. And it was their job to make sure that the clothing that the agents would take with them could pass for typical Polish clothing, and often when Poles came here as refugees their clothes were collected, donated in a sense, and then brought here for the tailor to actually adapt and change. So everything could be absolutely right. And the last thing that happened before they left was at the actual air base there would be a FANY and they would go through every single thing they were wearing, the suitcases, everything they had, just to check once again that there was nothing at all that would betray the fact that they were not authentic Polish people. Right down to the fact that, before they left, the fillings were changed: a Polish dentist would visit, and he would make sure that the fillings were the right sort of fillings that you would have got in Poland.

Josie: Oh God, that's brutal levels of detail, but I suppose, if that's the difference between ...

Denise: Life and death.

Josie: Denise, tell me a bit about where we're going now?

Denise: We're in one of the corridors that's on the second floor of the house that was used by the agents as classrooms, really. They had lectures up here. So it's a bit gloomy, isn't it? But each room had a specific use. You might have gone in a room and found a huge map hanging on the wall, a map of Poland, so that they could do some orientation there. In another room they'd have been speaking German because they had an instructor to make sure their language is up to date. In one of the rooms they'd have been sitting under the windows practising their forgery.

Josie: It's sort of got a Harry Potter energy to it. There's something really...

Denise: Got a lovely view over East Park there, haven't you.

Josie: Oh, wow. Look, let's go into one of these rooms.

Denise: A few of the rooms had to be dormitories as well. So there was somewhere that they had to sort of stay and call their own.



Josie: Again, it's so interesting thinking about the many lives of this house, isn't it?

Denise: Yes, it's all these things. Can't see any nails in the wall here – oh yes, there's one up there look.

Josie: Yes. This would have been one of the classrooms. You can see that there must have been things attached to the wall.

Denise: Yes. Yes, something stuck up there. Some of the photographs show pictures of saints on the walls. And then, in another room there are lots of propaganda pictures, because one of the classes was to understand how to create propaganda, black propaganda, particularly subversive when you're back in Poland.

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Josie: Thanks to Denise for sharing a little bit more about what life was like at Audley End for the Cichociemni.

Before I head out into the training grounds, let's hear a story of one individual, who passed through here during that time. Antoni Nosek served in the Cichociemni and was awarded the Polish Cross of Valour four times. He also received the King's Medal for Courage in the Cause of Freedom and the Gold Cross of Merit with Swords for Deeds of Bravery and Valour – an incredible list of accolades for a highly skilled, but humble man, who passed away in 2007. His daughter Danusia told us his story.

Danusia: My name is Danusia Kellett, but my father was Antoni Nosek, who was a member of SOE Polish Section. And he parachuted into Poland on the night of the 4–5 May 1944 and returned back to England in the autumn 1945.

His experiences during the war came out in dribs and drabs. So we always knew Dad was a soldier because in fact he was a professional soldier before the war, but he never really discussed the Cichociemni aspect – that perhaps came out in the 80s we think. Dad was very modest really about his achievements and what he did. So for us, it was perfectly normal – you know, everybody's Dad did this, didn't they? You know, none of them, if you met the Cichociemni, they were very, very modest, polite men. They weren't full of themselves. You would never have known what they had done really. But they had a very strong bond for life. They were very, very good friends.

My father was involved in the September campaign. So he was in the artillery helping the infantry when the Germans surrounded Lwów [Lviv], but then the Russians came. And so there was the capitulation of Lwów and part of the conditions of the capitulation was that the Polish officers had to get together and come to a certain place where they would be given passes to return to their homes. My father's commanding officer said, well, I know the Russians from 1920 and I don't trust them, and I recommend that you don't go there. And my father respected this older man and decided that he would not go either. That was one area where his life was saved, because all those officers were taken to Katyn and





shot. So my father realised that it was actually after that, it's a very narrow path that you tread when you are at war, you know, the small mistake can be fatal.

And then they escaped from Poland. There was sort of a bit of a black market in escaping, because so many people were escaping, but they made it through the mountains into Hungary where they were arrested by the police, and they were taken to Budapest and interned in the Citadel there. They were then segregated and sent to an internment camp on the river Danube where they stayed for a few weeks. But in January 1940 the river froze, and so they could walk across and escape back into Budapest. And then with the help of the Polish Mission, they managed to get to Yugoslavia. And from Yugoslavia they took a ship to Marseille and then they joined the French troops and then we had the retreat. So he went to La Rochelle and then was put on an English boat and sailed to Plymouth. And from there the Polish forces were taken up to Scotland for training.

They were getting impatient with being in Scotland. They were thinking they weren't helping the war effort. They were doing training, yes, but they weren't doing anything practically. And so, when this opportunity came up, that they would be transferred back into Poland where they could be on active service again – well, that was what they particularly wanted to do, but I suppose you had to have a certain mentality to actually want to do that.

Audley End was vital to their survival. In Scotland it was mainly fitness training and parachute jumps, so they were with the parachute regiment. But at Audley End it was more the interrogation tactics. There was obviously fitness training with Alan Mack. And they also received their papers – the Kennkarte, the Arbeitkarte. So my father's identity was changed to Antoni Niechrzyski, and he was a car mechanic in Warsaw. So this was totally false. So a completely different identity of schooling and everything.

Six of them went into the aeroplane. He had his money belt. They had two pistols, a Colt 45 and a Colt 32. They had their knife and those who wanted it had a suicide pill. And in fact, some of the Cichociemni unfortunately did have to use their pills. And they also had either whisky or cognac, they could choose. And it was a long flight – several hours – but then they had to jump out of the aeroplane as quickly as possible. So it was like 'action stations' and then the light went green and it was go and one after the other had to quickly jump out so that they weren't scattered, because that would have made it very dangerous for themselves and for others. And they were quickly picked up by the local Home Army, given food.

Down to the flight itself, when my father actually landed I think that was a very moving moment for him. He dropped into a softly ploughed field and he saw the aeroplane, you know, moving away and there he was on his own and it was a new chapter of his life. They had to wait until they were picked up by a courier, which was always a lady. And she would then, she would search them, make sure that they didn't have anything on them that could be linked to England.

My father arrived in Warsaw a day before the uprising. He was caught in a round-up of the civilian population, and they were all put on a train, but weirdly the train actually stopped at one of the stations outside of Warsaw. And so what my father did was he when the guards weren't looking, he quickly got out of the train and then pretended to look into it like he was really interested who was in the train. And so the guards shooed him away and that's how he escaped. His training would have



taught him to keep his cool, and then, you know, have the ability to escape rather than ending up probably in a concentration camp.

Josie: What a remarkable man. Antoni set up a skeleton artillery division towards the end of 1944, and continue to train partisan units in ambush and tactics before being promoted to captain. After further capture and interrogation by the Russians in 1945, Antoni was released and escaped Poland. Antoni met Danusia's mother in London, and they had three children. Although the war years were just a few in a long life, from them were born relationships within the Polish community that lasted a lifetime.

Danusia: My father always said, you know, 'I am freedom fighter', and we always used to laugh at him. But, you know, in reality he was a freedom fighter, you know – he went, he volunteered and he fought for the freedom of Poland.

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Josie: In a little corner of the grounds by the river is the Elysian Garden. And today it's such a pleasant shady area and it was once planned out as a flower garden. But I'm told that there are a few clues to be found around here about how this watery part of the grounds became a training ground for Polish officers during their time here. Ian Valentine has written about the SOE's Polish section at Audley End in his book *Station 43*.

Ian: Nice to meet you.

Josie: So Ian, we're in the Elysian Gardens and they're really pleasant and really relaxing. But why did you choose this spot to tell me about the hardcore training that went on here?

Ian: I think of all the places in the grounds at Audley End, perhaps this is the most interesting in the extent that you're looking around here, you see these patrician plane trees. It's a beautiful landscape – Capability Brown. And I like it because it takes a leap of imagination to see what it was like during the Second World War. And when people were training here, during World War II, there was a fuselage of a bomber down here and also a Valentine tank, which the SOE used to train up service folk for operations in occupied Poland.

The training here between 1942 and 1944, first of all that comprised the underground warfare course, which had various syllabuses. And once candidates passed that they went on to the briefing course.

Josie: Yeah, I can imagine that sort of training would be gruelling.

Ian: So the underground warfare course, it comprised quite a lot of facets, which had to be passed. I do have a couple of reports from the National Archives.

Josie: Oh, wow.

Ian: Which gives part of the syllabus. These reports were done in 1944 and they're very succinct. They give whether a candidate had passed or failed. Just looking at it, you can see there's at least 15, 16



areas of training that a candidate had to do and these included physical training, field craft, close combat, weapon training, explosives and demolitions ...

Josie: Assassination, breaking and entering. It's so funny too that they're learning these things that, you know, you would hope in peacetime to always avoid and yet they're having to build these skills as well.

I've heard the name Alan Mack mentioned by a couple of the people I've talked to. Can you tell me a bit more about him because he sounds like such a character.

Ian: Alan Mack was a very interesting individual. He was small, slight, but strong and you could tell that he was the person to do the physical training here. He also taught weapons training as well. So he served previously before coming here as a training instructor and I think he had 14 medals by the time he finished his wartime career. He expected to go on operations because he had all the facets. But Colonel Hartmann who was the commandant at Station 43 at the time said, 'I'm afraid, Alan, that you can't go on active duties because you're far too valuable here, just to train up the rest of the candidates.'

Josie: So I'm looking out over the river and whilst there is a bit of algae in it, you can imagine it being a very pleasant place at different points of the history of the building. But this is where people had to crawl through and clamber across.

Ian: Beyond the waterfall I think there was a rope swing, which Alan devised, that went across the river. There was a tank down here which they used for communication as well. A lot of the physical work would have been running as well around the estate, not just in the Elysian Gardens. It was obviously under the guise of as much secrecy as possible. The British contingent here did have an input with the training which often took part outside the grounds. Alan did one of them himself, which was he had to raid one of the local post offices. And he did so: he had this great ruse that he would dress up as a woman to do it, so he could move around less obtrusively as it were, he thought. The postmaster of the post office was informed about this activity a half an hour before Alan went to the post office, held up the counter with a pistol, and he had to have a stamp to take back to Audley End House to prove that he'd undertaken the job. So they were all these sort of strange irregular warfare activities to prove that a candidate could do a huge array of different activities.

Josie: And so what did the locals think was going on here?

Ian: I've thought about this a lot because a lot of people said that the locals wouldn't have known anything, but I'm sure in such a small community during the Second World War, soldiers with different accents – I think they would have had an inkling that Audley End was being used for some military purposes.

Josie: So what do you think people's motivations were deep down for undergoing this?

Ian: I think they would have volunteered because the Poles would have seen exactly what was happening in occupied Europe and in their country. And they really wanted to get back there and do as much as they can, to splinter the German war machine, because all their families were there and they



hadn't heard about their families, what was happening to them. It was always in their minds. I remember my father was in the Air Training Corps during the war and he had a flight with a Polish pilot in a Dominie but the Pole said to him, 'All we want to do is to get back and do something to help our homeland.'

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Josie: It's a very windy day today and I've come into a sort of hidden walled garden. Beyond the hedge are the sweeping lawns and expansive grounds, which I now know were where people played football, and people did their climbing through the rivers and all kinds of outlandishly different things. I'm privileged to be joined by Anthony Massey, whose father, Lewis Massey, was a part of the Polish Special Operations Executive in Britain and Poland. Anthony. Hi.

Anthony: Hello there.

Josie: Your father made an incredible contribution to the smooth running of the Polish Special Operations Executive around the UK, didn't he?

Anthony: Yes, he did. And he was very well placed to do that because he, although he was British – he was born in this country – he was actually half Polish by birth. His mother – my grandmother – was Polish and he was brought up in Poland between the First and the Second World Wars, and he and my grandparents only left Poland when the Germans invaded at the beginning of September 1939 and so they came here as refugees, if you will. He was the liaison officer, the person who represented SOE to the Polish government in exile in London and the Polish military authorities who ran the resistance in Poland, and who then could pass on their concerns and their information back to the SOE.

Josie: And how did he get recruited?

Anthony: It wasn't a job you could apply for even within the Army. He was already in the Army, in the artillery, but just as an ordinary gunner, the equivalent of a private soldier. And he'd done his basic training on Salisbury Plain learning how to fire big guns, and then they were about to send his unit to Burma of all places. So that's about as far away from Poland as you could possibly wish. And literally his unit were forming up and marching off to the docks to get on a troop ship to sail off to the Far East and he was told 'Er, not you Massey', and he was left behind. And he's put on guard duty for several weeks and then he went for an interview with a major who he knew vaguely from before the war. And they, as he said to me, the interview was so oblique, so obscure, he had no idea what the man was talking about. And there was talk of working in a requisitioned stately home – turned out to be Audley End – among other places; of using his languages, which the Army had previously ignored, so that was a good thing; and maybe using codes, which he found a bit baffling. And then he was asked what he thought about parachuting. And he said, Well, if he had a choice, which he realised in the Army in wartime you didn't, he'd be happy to stay on the ground. But you know, he'd do what he was told. And then some time later he was told to go to an office in Baker Street, in London, the headquarters of the Inter-Services Research Bureau. And he was then given a pass for the Inter-Services Research Bureau, told he'd now joined the organisation, filled in various forms, but he wasn't told what it was or what it did. Then he was taken into another office with a colonel and some other officers and told that



the Inter-Services Research Bureau, which he'd never heard of, was the cover name for Special Operations Executive, SOE, which he'd also never heard of.

Josie: It's so covert! Layers upon layers.

Anthony: Exactly. But that he would now be working with the Polish government in exile in London and the Polish military authorities in London, and helping the AK – the Polish resistance back in Poland. And he'd heard of all of them and that was the outfit he'd actually come to join.

Josie: So he would have been through the same training as everybody here at Audley End.

Anthony: Yes. One of the first things he did as a new recruit to SOE was to do the complete course that all the resistance fighters did, because they made that, they made all the British officers who were running the organisation do the course, both so that they could go into the field themselves if necessary at any point – they'd be up to speed – but also so they'd know what they were asking other people to do, as it were. So he did commando training in Arisaig in the Western Highlands of Scotland. He did parachute training in Manchester Ringway, now Manchester Airport. He did, you know, code skills. He came to Audley End. He did the whole thing. Later went back to all these places, accompanying recruits, Polish recruits, so he could both be their mentor and someone they could talk to, in Polish, about the whole experience and also be one of the people assessing them and seeing if they were really the kind of material that was needed.

Josie: Was your father celebrated and decorated for his work? What kind of a life did he live after the war?

Anthony: Oh, a very quiet one, and celebrated and decorated – absolutely not. He didn't get any medals and didn't seek them. He never thought he'd done anything particularly interesting, actually. He didn't talk about it very much. He talked about it to us in the family all the time. I think it's fair to say that his time in the Second World War was one of the defining period of his life, as happened to a lot of people in the war, and certainly the experience of being a refugee from Poland in 1939, 1940 and taking eight months through occupied Europe to get back to England – that was a defining experience.

Josie: It's so hard thinking about how hard done by Poland was, especially getting, quite literally, both sides.

Anthony: This was the great frustration of being in the Polish section of SOE because by the time you got to the Warsaw Rising in August 1944, it was clear that Poland would not be free at the end of the war. So my father actually ended up resigning from it in December, and going and doing other things because it got as far as SOE could go.

Josie: And so, did your father ever return back to Poland after the war?

Anthony: Yes, he did. He left the Army and joined the Foreign Office. And he was one of the first two diplomats to go back into Poland, in 1945, to reopen the embassy. So, he worked there for a number of years and he was also the interpreter on the first British diplomatic mission to visit Auschwitz. His



parents, my grandparents, who had lived and worked in Poland, actually briefly returned to the same house, which survived the war, in western Poland, and my grandfather resumed his job at the university there until the Communists decided that they didn't really want a prominent Anglo-Polish family living in western Poland working in the university. So he was sacked from the university and definitively came back to England in the mid-1950s. My father likewise.

Josie: It's so hard to hear about big things just completely shifting the course of somebody's life so many times. Did people stay in touch after the war?

Anthony: Yes. Yes. They did. A lot of the Poles, precisely because they had been fighting for a free Poland, couldn't go home. And so they settled all over the world. One of my father's close friends from SOE went to America and then to New Zealand. Other stayed in Britain, but they had a particular bond with this.

Josie: Well, as well, it wasn't something that they could just share with anyone.

Anthony: Exactly. Exactly.

Josie: So how did he see himself in terms of his identity? Did he always see himself as having that dual identity?

Anthony: Yes, very much so. I mean he was a British citizen. He never had Polish citizenship, especially once Poland became Communist. That would have been out of the question. But he spanned two countries and two cultures and belonged in both. I asked him which language he thought in and he said, well, depends, but he certainly thought in Polish as well as in English. And to the end of his life – and he died aged 101 – he was doing crossword puzzles in English or Polish depending on which newspaper he was reading.

Josie: Oh wow.

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Josie: What stands out for me today about the stories I've heard is the fact that people who by and large were not trained and were not experienced in these kinds of fields took on such an incredible challenge at such great peril. And it's such a privilege to be able to give voice to these heroes. When you think about the number of people who were parachuted in and who actually made it out again – it's so stunning to think of ordinary people doing such extraordinary things during that time. There's so much of this experience that was so unusual and involved the suspension of normality. So you can really see how it was so formative for people.

2021 marked 80 years since the first parachutists were dropped into occupied Poland. Each year an annual ceremony of remembrance takes place at Audley End, and thanks to people like Danusia and Anthony their fathers' stories will be shared and remembered for centuries to come. That's also one of the reasons the team here at English Heritage are working on an ambitious oral history project to



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capture the memories of the families of former Cichociemni and of other people who have memories of Audley End from the 1940s.

You can find out more on these stories by going to the website [English-Heritage.org.uk/speakingwithshadows](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/speakingwithshadows), and visit Audley End yourself to follow the story of the Polish Special Operations Executive [here](#).