



The Memoirs of John (Jan) Drewniak

September 9, 1919 - October 18, 2014



WW2-2 Korpus Polski
3 Carpathian Rifle Division, 1 Company





John (Jan) Drewniak
Circa 1987

DEDICATION

I would like to tell my story, as well as I can remember, of the places that I have been and of the roads that I have traveled and how I arrived in Canada from that far country called Poland. This I do for my children, grand-children and their children.

PROLOGUE

All of these experiences have been stored for many years in my memory. I wish to relate them to you, while I can still remember. I shall just start at the beginning.

My grandfather, that is my father's father, was born during the Austrian occupation of Poland, also, my father, mother, my sister Magdalena, my brother Michal and my brother Stefan. Poland at that time in history was divided by partition amongst Austria, Prussia and Russia for over one hundred and twenty years.

My grandfather's name was Feliks. He owned much land and was rich. He was married and had four sons and two daughters. My grandfather from my mother's side of the family had one daughter, who was my mother, Anastazja. My grandfather's name was Bartholomew. I remember very little of him and my grandmother. Their family name was Dobriski. Bartholomew served with the Austrian army for over thirteen years.

In 1914, the First World War broke out and my father, Jozef, went into the Austrian army where he served until the war was over in 1918. During World War I, the Russians overran our land and destroyed our farm and burned everything to the ground.

My mother and sister Magdalena took Michal and Stefan, who was just a baby and escaped to another town leaving everything behind. My mother's parents went with them.

Four years later, World War I had ended, and they returned back to the land. There was nothing left. Only two or three houses were still standing untouched. Our house had only one wall still standing upright. Mother and Magdalena started to build a shelter around that wall to live in it. My father returned from the war and then that was the time that I was born, September 9, 1919. This is also the time that Poland regained its' Independence as a sovereign country.

I was born in a neighboring house. Our house was not ready to move into. I remember our old house, as it had only one room with a little porch. My youngest brother Kacper was born in our house.

Two years later, my mother passed away leaving my brother Kacper, not quite two years old and me, about three and half years old, motherless. It was very hard for us two boys because we were so little.



Jozef

Shortly after, my mother's parents also passed away. My sister Magdalena was fifteen at the time and she looked after the two of us. My father never re-married.

When my mother was still living, my father traveled to Canada for one year to visit his brother Kacper who lived at Buffalo, Alberta. Another of his brothers, Nicholas, lived in Oshawa, Ontario. My father returned back home to Poland because life in Canada was very difficult during the nineteen twenties.

At seven years of age, I started school. The school was about a half kilometer from my home. After grade two and during the summer season, I had to look after the cows, taking them to the pasture and back home for two months until school started again. I skipped grade four and in grade six, I finished my schooling. I was twelve years old. This was when I started helping out on the farm. We made a living; but, for spending money, there was none. You could not find work anywhere, so, we had a tough time making a living. Later, we built a new house, three small rooms. We moved from the old house to the new one. There was much more space in the new house.

My sister married Jan Rekut and stayed with us for awhile, then she and her husband went on their own. We had to cook for ourselves. My father baked bread. We washed our own clothes and mended our pants. Many times we came into the house and there was nothing to eat. A lot of times we cried, my brother Kasper and I. There was no mother to cry to. We were smaller and suffered the most.

At sixteen years of age, I had no money to go to a school to learn a trade. I liked carpentry. There was an excellent carpenter near our home. I went and worked with him for a period of six months for no pay, to learn how to build houses, doors, windows and other useful things. Later, I worked on my own.

Across the road, a neighbor kept a lot of bees. I used to go there, watching him extract honey. Liking bees very much, I purchased three hives. Honey production was good, until 1939.



Magdalena

World War II broke out!



INVASION OF POLAND, FALL 1939

German troops invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, triggering World War II. In response to German aggression, Great Britain and France declared war on Nazi Germany.

It was Sunday, September 1, 1939. After Mass, a large celebration was held in the park. Children were playing games and in the late afternoon, a dance was held out in the open. Suddenly, news came that the Germans had invaded Poland. The Polish Army Reserves were re-called to active duty. My brother-in-law was re-called that very day. All the fun was broken-up that day. We lived at Postolowka, close to the Polish-Russian border, no more than 18 kilometers away from Russia.



Two or three days later, we had another surprise! One morning, my father woke us up at approximately three in the early morning and said, "Get up! Something is happening outside!" We went outdoors and saw the sky full of flashing lights with a sound like thunder. The Russian artillery was bombarding the border.



In the morning at 10 o'clock, we saw the Russians coming in columns of cavalry, wagons and many army tanks. They were about a half kilometer from Postolowka. There was no fight, because no one suspected an attack from the Russian side of the Polish border.



The first year passed under the Russian occupation. There wasn't much civil law at the time. People carried on and were working as usual. Then, the supplies in the stores were sold out and not replenished and after you could not find hardly anything. Even shoe laces and shoe polish, because no one was re-supplying the stores.

Landlords that owned a lot of land had their land confiscated and the land was given to the poor people who had worked for the landlords. The Soviets were coming to the landlord's homes at night, knocking or breaking down doors, saying, "Come out! Take all you can carry with you!" Then, the Soviets loaded the landlords onto the waiting trucks and transported them to labour camps in Russia. All the belongings that were left behind were taken by the people, piece by piece, until nothing was left. The Soviets called this action, "Roshkulasly", that is, "Take from the rich and give to the poor."



Russians Marching into Poland

Many people could not sleep at night, as they did not know when their own door was going to be knocked down. Life went on, people were getting married, babies were being born and christened. One of the pleasures of life - liquor, was not readily available. My friend and I started to make home brew and sold the brew to those people who were in need. After awhile, laws were enforced by the Russians and this act of making home brew was forbidden. The year was 1940.

In 1941, I was twenty-one years old. I found myself a girl friend. We liked each other, but, the relationship did not last very long. On a Sunday in April, in springtime, while I was attending Holy Mass, some men came looking for me. They gave me a piece of paper from the Russian authorities and said, "Come with us to the Military Office! You have to go to the army, the Russian army!" The Russians were conscripting all the young men from the occupied territory, into the Russian army, in Russia. Only four of us boys were taken at that time. For me, it was very hard to understand! I could do nothing. The date to go was April 17, 1941. I was ready to leave home. We attended Holy Mass and received Holy Communion. I remember, Michal Dobrus and my other friends., all of us thought that this would be our last time together. My gunny-sack was half-full and I was ready to go.



Soviet Conscripts in training

The next morning, good-byes were said to my father, sister and brothers; Magdalena, Michal, Stefan and Kacper. Michal did not come to say good-bye, he felt so bad. Stefan called me religious. They said that I would not survive because I was so quiet and never asked for anything. The wagon and horses were ready. We picked up the others and traveled eighteen kilometers to the train station. The Soviets gave us our medicals, a shave, haircut and bath. All of us boarded the train. Our destination was Koliepiatz, where I was assigned to my army company. I met a lot of boys from different parts of Poland.



Russian Army Platoon
Jan Drewniak center second row

Shortly after, the Russians called us outside and asked us, who had relatives in America or Canada and to step forward. Because I had two uncles in Canada, I stepped forward. The Russians from that time on did not trust us, especially to send us to the front lines. They took our army equipment away and transferred us to the labour battalion. We were sent to a city close to the battle front called Horol. There was a small forest near there and we stayed in that forest. A civilian camp was nearby in the forest where men were waiting for equipment, army clothing and weapons. From the civilian camp those men were sent directly to the front. In our camp, we lived in dug-outs, under ground.

One day, I went to the kitchen for breakfast and I heard the sound of German planes approaching Horol, bombing the airfield which was near the city. The people were terrified and started running into the forest and open fields, some with belongings, others with nothing, leaving behind everything that they owned. After the attack was over, we were sleeping outside in the fields on the bare ground for two nights

Because Stalin had killed so many Polish officers at Katyn, not trusting them, he was short of military instructors to train his army. A few days later, the Russian Company commander gave me a platoon to train.

Three months later, we received letters from home, saying, "Swallows are laying eggs, already!" Translated, meaning, that the German planes were attacking the Russians; but, the Russians at Koliepiatz did not know what was happening at the time we had read the letter.



Operation Barbarossa - Nazi Germany's
invasion of the Soviet Union

Later, from Horol, they shipped us by train to a new location where we were to build a new airfield. One evening, they unloaded us at a train station called, Proceizna. It was dark and we had had no supper. We began looking for a place to sleep with loose dry leaves or grass, to make a mattress on the ground. It was very cold. That same night, we found and moved into an old empty house.



Cold Russian Winter

The airfield was built by hand, pick and shovel. We loaded dirt onto the horse-drawn wagons. Russian girls were driving these wagons, because all of the men were serving in the Russian army to fight the Germans. The girls dumped the dirt into the low spots to level the ground. They also hauled rocks from the demolished churches from the town. The Russians told us to crush the rocks by hand using hammers to make gravel for the airfield runway. Two labour battalions worked on this airport. They were stationed about one kilometer apart. My friend Michal Dobrus was there and I visited with him.

Winter came. Living in a tent, it was very cold. There was no mattress or blankets to sleep on – just the ground. The temperature dropped to below zero, Fahrenheit. We went to a nearby village to steal straw and went to sleep in that straw, just like pigs. The next morning, I stuck my head out from that straw and saw that the straw was white from the frost.

Inside, it was much warmer. The house was built of timbers and it had a wooden floor. In our possession, we had a piece of candle to light a room. When we settled down, the light was extinguished and we went to sleep. A few minutes later, everyone started talking, that something was wrong. I started scratching my neck, squashing and smelling something terrible! Then one of my friends, re-lit the candle and we saw thousands of bed bugs running into the cracks of the floor! Quickly, we moved outside into the cold. Later on, we found a more pleasant and permanent place.



Russian Airfield

The next day, we started digging a hole in the ground, six feet deep and ten feet long, by twenty feet wide. The top was covered by timbers and dirt. Then, we built a stove, using stones. There was lots of wood in that place. A fire was started and made it warmer inside.



Dugout Shelters

Our food was very poor, fish soup and one slice of bread, every meal. Not far away there was a potato patch. In the dark, we went there and dug up the potatoes and baked them in a fire and ate them. The Commanding officer found us out, he saw us and kicked and scattered our fire and potatoes all over the place. Now us fellows had to hide in the bush. My friend and I would go into the heavy bush at night and cook soup made from the potatoes and some water. We added stolen salt from the kitchen, made two gallons of soup and ate it! The soup made our bellies so full, we sometimes found it very difficult to walk.

The Russians moved us further East, as the Germans were pushing them very hard and fast. A lot of refugees were coming from the West and with them, all the factory machinery that the Russians did not want to leave behind for the Germans. The Russians moved this machinery over the Ural Mountains to a place called, Nizhny Tagil, where they setup and built a factory that produced military armaments such as Soviet Tanks for the war in the West.



T-34 assembly line in the factory no. 183, Nizhny Tagil, Russia

One day, the Russians loaded us onto a train, in box cars, like cattle. Thirty men to a box car, we headed East. It was very cold! The snow was on the ground and then we headed Northeast, where it got even colder! All that time, we did not even have one blanket among the thirty of us. A week from the station and further and further, until one night, the train arrived at Switlovsk and stopped a short time. The train backed out and took a different track. From Switlovsk, we traveled to Nizhny Tagil where the factories were built and awaited our arrival for us to work in them. There were no buildings to live in.



Train Transport to Work Camps



We moved into dug-outs that the Russians called, "Zamiyankie." Twelve men to one dug-out. Again, no mattress or blankets! Just wooden boards on the ground! In the morning when we got up, we could see the frost on the underside of the boards. The toilets were located outside, just a hole dug in the ground, with wooden posts across them to sit on. A board wall surrounded the place for some privacy, but, the top was open and people from the second or third floor of the factory building could watch down on you when you sat there doing your business below.

The kitchen where they cooked food for our meals was about 300 yards distance. If you had a can and a spoon, you could then get some food. If you did not have these items, you would go hungry. We used to make our own utensils, the cans and spoons and these we carried close to us on our belts. Even at night, we carried them so no one would steal the utensils. There never was enough food to eat. Macaroni soup mostly, sometimes a little meat, beer and one slice of bread at every meal.



Russian Dugouts

One day, the Russians asked if anyone knew how to repair boots. My friend and I volunteered and took on the job. Instead of going to work at the factory, we stayed in the camp and repaired the boots. We received a little bit more food for the two of us which was given to us in separate portions.



Every night, we would go to the factory to unload the heavy cold sheets of steel which were used to build army tanks. It was so cold that our leather boots would freeze to the steel when you stepped on the sheets.



Boot Repair



Unloading Coal

One day, we were unloading coal at the dumpsite. The coal chute door was open; but, the coal was jammed and was not going through. I went to the top to break the jammed, frozen layer and dislodging the coal, I went through the coal chute door, down the chute with all the coal, right to the bottom.



Checking the Waste
Barrels for Food

Sometimes, working very late during the night shift at midnight, we had a meal, too. After shift, some of the fellows were checking the slop barrels for bones, potato peelings and such. They would bring this stuff home and make soup from it. I could not bear to eat this stuff! Maybe, I am still alive today because of that! Other times, we used to go to a restaurant. They would sell you soup and two hundred grams of bread. We would buy three or four portions just to have some bread for the next day. Other fellows were stealing the spoons and the next time we went to the door of the restaurant, there was a man that took our caps and handed us a spoon. When we left the restaurant the man exchanged our caps for the spoons.

Winter was very cold! The ground was frozen almost six feet deep! All we wore was light clothing and leather boots. The boys were still eating from the slop barrels, bones, peelings and molasses from the factory, that was used for making machine parts and molds. Their bodies started to swell like balloons. They got Typhoid and started to die. One friend from my dug-out, Jozef Konoptka, went outside and fell down and died.

The next day, the Russians asked us to dig a grave for him and we received four loaves of bread. Four of us went to the graveyard to dig. We dug and dug but the ground was frozen so hard that for two days we had only gone one metre deep. We buried our friend in that grave. A woman came at that time, carrying a small box with her dead baby in it. She asked us to bury her dead child in the fresh grave. We buried her child for one loaf of bread.



Burying the Dead

Days passed and I met a friend from my home town. The Russians had sent him to this place to work.

Spring came and it was much warmer. One day, the Russians took our whole company to a river to wash our clothes. There was no soap and no clean change of clothes, and the clothes that we had, had been worn and had never been washed for over six months. The clothes were infested with lice. When we finally got to the river, we took off our clothes and washed them in the cold water. We sat on the grass, naked and waited for our clothes to dry. Then, we put these clothes back on, still with the lice, because they refused to swim in the cold water. We wore those clothes back to the "Pigsty", where we lived.

Two or three times, we went to another place that had a steam bath. After undressing, we tied up our clothes in bundles and put them in a hot air furnace to kill the lice. While we were taking a steam bath, there still was no soap to wash ourselves. The picture wasn't very pretty, you could easily see the naked bodies of many friends, swollen so badly from the belly-Typhoid. The Russians released the sick men and let them go free to wherever they wanted to go, knowing that these men were going to die somewhere along the road and there was no cure for them.



Bathing in the River

Since the Germans were attacking the Russians, the Russians were now looking for assistance. General Sikorski, a Polish General, exiled in London, England, approached and spoke with Stalin and asked him to organize a Polish Army in Russia. Stalin agreed and gave General Sikorski permission. General Sikorski placed Lt. General Wladyslaw Anders in command and organization of the new Polish Army.



General
Wladyslaw Sikorski



Lt. General
Wladyslaw Anders

General Anders started the organization in Posuluz. In Russia there were a lot of prisoners from the Polish Army and many more Polish civilians

Before the Polish Army was organized, the Russian-Soviets had killed approximately fourteen to fifteen thousand Polish officers in the Katyn forest. This was Stalin's secret massacre which was revealed at a later date by the Red Cross. The German's discovered the massacre when they captured Katyn. The International Red Cross opened the mass graves and saw that all the Polish officers had been shot in the back of the head with their hands bound behind their backs tied with barbed wire.



Katyn Forest Massacre - final toll 22,000
Polish Military Officers



Now the Russians started to release the Polish soldiers from the concentration camps
and the civilians, too.

The new Polish Army was formed in Russia!

Then, one day, four Pod-officers came to Nizhny Tagil to sign up the Polish lads into the new Polish Army. We who were Polish signed up; but, some Ukrainians wanted to sign up, too, but, the Russians refused and would not allow this to happen. We waited three days and then, the train was ready to take us to Pozulok where the army was organizing. Again, we were in the box cars! Forty men to a boxcar. We were so crowded with no place to sleep. If you wanted to go to the bathroom, well, that was a tricky job! You had to keep the door open, just so much, so you wouldn't fall off the train! There was a small heater in the center of the boxcar to keep it warm. At every station, we had to steal some coal. Nothing was given to us. For two weeks we traveled with very little food, just a little dry bread. From the bread we made a soup, putting the dry bread in hot water.

Every time the train stopped at a station at night, we looked around to see if there was anything on the next track. One night we discovered that a box car next to ours was transporting dried peas and everyone made a dash for those dried peas. Soon after, everyone was cooking peas. I think that those peas saved us from starvation!



Train Transporting Poles to their new Polish Army Base

On another day, during a night stop, the lads discovered a sealed box car on the next track. Two fellows from my boxcar, Jozef Keilba and his friend, broke the seal on the boxcar door and brought back a sack of flour, spilling a trail right back to our boxcar. They tried to sell the flour to the other men. Early the next morning, the guards came and tracked them from the broken-in boxcar to our track, because the flour trail led them directly to us, so easily. The guards took the two culprits and the sack of flour with them.

All the time, we were arriving closer to our destination. I again met up with my friend, Michal Dobrus. He gave me a jacket. We arrived at the place where the Polish Army was gathering for organization. After signing up, I went to the market to sell my old jacket, since I did not need it any more. I sold the old jacket to a Cossack for 130 rubles. Some of the money was used to buy tobacco to trade for bread. You could not buy bread for money. I purchased two glass measures of tobacco and placed the rest of the money in my pocket, not knowing that there were a lot of pick-pockets around. A little while later, I placed my hand into my pocket and discovered that someone had stolen all my money.

We received new British equipment, new clothes, blankets and much better food. Our Polish commander started organizing transport out of Russia, before Stalin had any second thoughts. The Polish commander tried to take more people than normally possible, both soldiers and civilians. The ship was ready and waiting for us. Soldiers, civilians and families were loaded onto the ships, healthy or sick.

After two days, on the Caspian Sea, it was so crowded on board the ship that the people were sleeping on deck, men, women and children were using the same toilets. There was always a long line-up for the toilets. Drinking water was scarce and the people were pulling up and drinking seawater! After that there was a lot of diarrhea attacks.



CASPIAN SEA • MAZANDARAN SEA • KHAZAR SEA

Escape - Crossing The Caspian Sea to Iran

Two days later, we arrived and landed in an Iranian camp at Pahlavi in Iran. There, we had supper after sunset. I felt blindness and I could not see. This was caused from malnutrition and the affliction lasted for about one week. Later, I regained my eyesight after eating the better and more nutritious food.

In 1942, when we had moved from Iran to Palestine, we joined the Polish Brigade from Tobruk and re-organized, stayed in Izdud and trained there. Our next move was to Iraq through the city of Baghdad, to Mosul and Qayyarah where we stayed a longer time. (Note: During the evacuation of Polish civilians from the USSR in World War II, some Polish military personnel under General Władysław Anders, were evacuated to Iraq.)



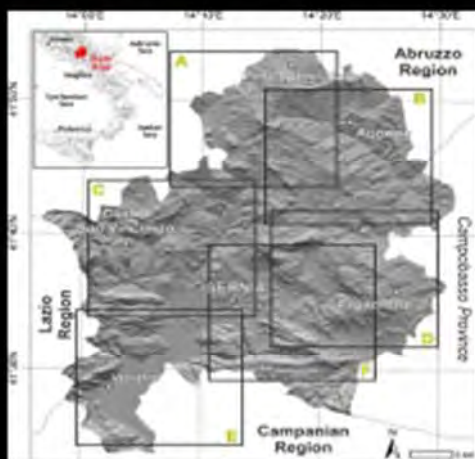
Jan Drewniak
third from right



Jan Drewniak
center

I completed my Pod-officers school and there on that desert I received my Roman Catholic Confirmation. From Qayyarah we went to Damascus in Syria. From Syria we again returned to Palestine and stayed in Haifa. From Haifa we moved to Lebanon where we trained for war in the Lebanese Mountains. Then we knew that our Brigade was going to Italy. In Lebanon, I completed my course for operating motorcycles. Staying in Palestine, I had the opportunity to visit the Holy Places in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. We then moved to Egypt at Port Said and from Port Said it was straight to Italy where we landed at Tarranto.

It was 1943. From Tarranto we moved up the Adriatic to Isernia and relieved the front line of British troops. My company occupied a school (gymnasium) that was vacant. From Isernia we drove twenty kilometers every day to the front line at Vianarro.



Isernia, Italy



Isernia, at the time, had been badly bombed and lay in ruins. Thousands of people had died under the ruins very close to where we were living.



Italian Campaign
1943-1945

There were civilian houses where we took our clothes to wash. We had a lot of soap; but, the civilians had none. They wanted to wash our clothes, just for a little soap. We gave them our clothes to wash, some soap and we paid them, too. Without knowing the Italian language, we tried to make conversation with them, using our hands. At one house, where I was washing my clothes, I met your mother, Lucia Materiale.

Our company stayed in Isernia for a couple of months. We fed a lot of people, old and young, those who had lost their families under the bombed ruins. These people used to sit by our kitchen window, everyday, waiting for some food.



Lucia & Jan Top Right

As time passed by, our Allied troops advanced closer to Monte Cassino and they could not advance any further. Monte Cassino is about thirty-five kilometers from Isernia. The Germans had occupied the town and monastery grounds and were entrenched heavily on the top of the mountain. On the top was a huge monastery and from that height, the Germans had visual control of all the important roads joining Naples and Rome. It was very difficult to capture that position. Many soldiers died there, English, French, American, African and "Gurkhas" from India.



Monte Cassino - Before



Monte Cassino - Re-built



Monte Cassino - Destroyed

The time came, it was our turn to go to Monte Cassino. The British Eighth Army commander chose to put the Poles to do the job! This was top secret and the Germans did not know who they were going to meet up against this time. We moved to the front line.

Because I had been trained in explosives, mines, booby-traps and bridge building, my friend and I were assigned to one platoon of Infantry to clear the roads free of explosives when necessary. All night we waited in a deep ditch for our fighting orders. Somehow, the orders were delayed and about two o'clock in the afternoon, we began moving up the mountain, passing alongside the dead mules used for delivering food and ammunition.



Polish Assault on Monte Cassino

We passed an old house used by the field medical doctors who administered to the wounded soldiers that were brought down from the mountain. There was a narrow pathway made by the soldiers so that the medics could transport the wounded on stretchers from the mountain to that little old house down below. In that old house, the medics changed the bandages and loaded the wounded soldiers onto ambulances transporting the wounded to the main Army field hospital.



Mortar shell blast

While we were ascending the mountain, following the narrow trail in single file, separated about twenty feet apart from each other, the whistle of mortar shells sounded and the explosions peppered alongside the mountain trail! Immediately, we fell to the ground. Behind me, seven men had been hit! Three of them died where they fell. One minute later, a mortar shell burst just beyond me, about thirty feet away. I was hit! The shrapnel had pierced through my upper right leg!



While the medics were bandaging the wounded near me, I had to wait a few minutes before I was assisted. The medic carried me to a shell crater that was nearby and there I waited for an empty stretcher for almost two hours. Two medics came and took me down the narrow trail, to that old house.

I was then transported to the army field hospital where I stayed for fifty days. All of this happened on May 14, 1944. Four days later, Monte Cassino was captured on May 18, 1944 by the Poles and the road to Rome was opened.



Army Field Hospital



While I was in the Army hospital, the Polish army moved to Ortona, near the Adriatic Sea to relieve the Canadian Army. All the time, the Poles pushed the Germans back alongside the Adriatic Sea. When I was released from the Army Hospital, my company was stationed at Senegalia where I re-joined them there. Two days later, I was placed back on the front line.

Mine Clearing



One night, we approached very close to the Germans. Our mission was to clear the road of mines to prepare for an early morning attack. The road was heavily mined. We removed the mines and piled them on the side of the road. There were a lot of dead Germans there, too.

After, we had a rest we moved to Fredappio and from there, one officer suggested that we should go to visit Isernia for a few days. It was Christmas. Some of us had girl friends, so we loaded food for ten days on a large army truck and on we went. It was a delight to see people that we already knew. Then, something happened, there was a heavy snowfall that blocked all the roads around Isernia. We were stranded. Food and cigarettes had run out. The officer contacted Company Head Quarters which in turn sent us food. By the time they came, the road was cleared and we returned to our company. From that Christmas visit, I was constantly writing letters to my girl friend, your mother, Lucia. At that time, she did not entertain thoughts of marriage.

Shortly after, my friend, Lucien Michalski and I were assigned to instruct infantry soldiers on the handling of explosives, mines and booby-traps. I was later assigned to a group for eight months, to train for operating and guiding pontoons with sections of a bridge attached to them. I operated four motors on a pontoon. This bridge was to be constructed on the Po River. At Capua, we practiced our manoeuvring of the pontoons on a river near there. That is where I heard the bad news that my friend Lucien had died by stepping on an anti-personnel mine. We had been very good friends.



Convoy Crossing River Po on a Pontoon Bridge, April 1944

Later, my company moved on again until we arrived at Castrocano where previously, "The Duce, Mussolini", had a villa there. We checked all the villa buildings for mines and booby-traps. For two weeks we stayed there. I passed a course to drive trucks and received my first drivers license.

Once in awhile, I returned to visit my friends in Isernia, the Materiale family at Via Marianino, No. 11. Your future grandfather Francesco Materiale and future grandmother Leonarda had two girls, Lucia and Wanda; and one boy, Tomasso who was thirteen at the time. Today he lives in Canada with his own family.



Bologna, Italy April 1945

Shortly after, the Polish Army moved again, pushing the Germans towards Bologna. We saw a good sign, the Germans were pulling their tanks and trucks, one behind the other. They were low on Gasoline fuel and some of the vehicles they had abandoned in the ditches. We had advanced very near to Bologna.

One morning, our soldiers entered the city of Bologna and the war for us in Italy was over, it was May 5, 1945!

I was very fortunate that the bridge on the Po River was not required to be built anymore. We then, returned South to Porto San Giorgio for a rest. This town was very close to Isernia. My friend Wladyk Koschewa and I went to Isernia, catching rides on trucks and trains, through the mountains-hitch-hiking to see our good friends.

The war was over and Italy was free; but, still in Poland the battle was being fought. In Warsaw, the Polish Army was fighting the Germans. The Russians and the other Polish Army was also advancing on the Germans. My three brothers and brother-in-law were joined in the battle against the Germans. My brother Kacper was a Captain in that Polish Army. As we all know today, Poland is now a Communist Country. Berlin was captured shortly after. Then the Yalta Conference of the Big Three was held, Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin. This is where our Allied friends betrayed the Poles, Churchill and Roosevelt gave to Stalin parts of Poland.

The Yalta Conference,

also known as the Crimea Conference, held 4–11 February 1945, was the World War II meeting of the heads of government of the United States, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union to discuss the postwar reorganization of Germany and Europe



Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin



The territory where I used to live and call my homeland, where I was born, grew up and lived for twenty-one years was given away to Russia. Most of us Poles, on Italian soil, did not have a homeland to return to. At the time, I did not know where my immediate family was and I didn't know for five years more. I did not know whether my family was dead or alive.

The time came for the Polish Army to be moved back to England and for the soldiers to be discharged back to civilian life. The soldiers could immigrate to wherever they chose. The British Government would pay the expenses.

To keep from going to England, I requested my officer to stay in Italy. I remained with the trucks and equipment which was being transferred to the Italian Army. I asked for this detail, because I planned to be married. Already, I had begun to make the proper documents while our headquarters was still stationed in Italy. I requested the Italian government for a "Soggiorno", to stay in Italy. I received permission to stay and I stayed in Isernia with the Materiale family that I had known for three years.

I asked Francesco and Leonarda Materiale, to marry their daughter Lucia. There was a lot of hesitation, for at the time, I had no home and they still didn't know that much about me. Somehow they agreed. I married Lucia Materiale on August 8, 1946, in the same house that I had met her for the first time. From my side of the family, I had no one at our wedding, no friends, only myself, because all of my friends had left for England.



Leonarda



Francesco



After the wedding, Lucia and I left for my company at Porto San Georgio, hitch-hiking and carrying our luggage on Army trucks and changing trucks, once in a while.

For me it was easy, I was used to this; but, for my new bride, well, she had a real experience. To this day, I do not think that she has ever forgotten that experience. We arrived at Porto San Georgio. Many soldiers were married to Italian girls, from many different parts of Italy. We had a huge kitchen cooking for us, in a building that used to be used for a school. The room in which we stayed was very large and twelve married couples stayed there. Each bed was divided by a curtain of blankets. We stayed there for a little while.

Shortly after, we moved to Grotto Mare, a different town, and stayed there for a while, too. From there we went to Macharatta where I was discharged from the Polish Army. I received civilian clothes and a little bit of money. We returned to Isernia to my wife's parents. Lucia was expecting our first child, it was 1947. My wife gave birth to a baby boy and named him Joseph after my father.

In Isernia, I worked at carpentry and upholstery; but, there was not much work. We moved from the old house in Isernia to a newer one, all of us, my wife's parents, their family and our little family, until my little family immigrated to Canada. My first cousin Phillip lived in Canada and our decision was to go to this new country. Money was a problem as we did not have any.



Lucia & Joseph

Joseph just began to walk at this time. He was fourteen months old. We packed all our meager possessions, I didn't have any, just the clothes that I wore, the ones with the empty pockets. My wife had a mattress and some sheets. We packed those things and we were ready to go.

The belongings had to be shipped to Genoa; but, we had no money. Your grandparents, the Materiales, borrowed 10,000 Lire and paid for shipping our belongings to Genoa, for us. We said good-bye to Isernia and everyone else and left for Torino. Near that city, there was a camp and we waited there for the transport approximately two weeks.

We boarded a Polish ship, "The Sobieski", at Genoa and departed for Canada. The ship sailed through the Mediterranean and passed Gibraltar. That part of the journey was not too bad; but, later on the open Atlantic crossing, now, that was really something else! Your mother got so sick on the rough ocean, she could not get up from her bed. She could not eat either. Lucia and I were separated for two weeks. The women slept in one place and the men in another. During the daytime, we could come together. All that time, I was washing Joseph's diapers until we arrived at the Port of Halifax at Pier 21, our first stop in Canada. The date was December 1, 1948. Our pockets were empty, not a penny to our name.



The Sobieski



Pier 21 Halifax, NS
Canada

We passed the Custom's inspection on the land and the Canadian Government gave us thirty dollars to buy food on our journey by train to my cousin's farm at Lanfine, Alberta. We boarded the train and headed towards Winnipeg, Manitoba. There we stopped for one day. We arrived on a Saturday night and the weather was very cold! Mother and I had some warm clothes; but, Joseph had come to Canada in shorts. I had to go to a store and buy warmer clothes for him. I found a store where a Ukrainian speaking girl worked. We talked in Ukrainian and I had asked her for a snowsuit and paid \$3.60 for that suit.





Train at Winnipeg Station

Finally, we arrived at our destination, Lanfane, where my cousin, Phillip Drewniak was waiting for us. The night that we arrived, the weather was very cold. Phillip took us to his house on the farm. In 1948, there was no electricity, only kerosene lamps for light. We stayed at Phillip's farm for about one month. I helped Phillip with his work on the farm, feeding the cattle and milking the cows.

From the first day, Joseph was not feeling well. He cried a lot, at night. My cousins were annoyed with all the noise. We began looking for some place else to go. We went to my cousin Barbara's at Sedalia. There we stayed for a few days. Mother stayed for two weeks with Joseph. I found a job in Cereal, Alberta and went to work on the Canadian National Railways track as a section man. I worked at Cereal for one month and then moved to Hanna, Alberta and I worked there for three weeks. No house could be found to rent. In Hanna, we lived in a rooming house – all three of us in one room. There wasn't any place to cook or wash clothes. We ate at the restaurant, three times a day and it was very expensive. From Hanna, we moved to Chinook, Alberta. There was an empty bunkhouse for a CN employee. One room, a single bed, a table and the wood stove heater in the middle of the room. We moved in. Joseph slept with his mother and I slept on the table every night for two weeks. When I went to work, I was as stiff as that table!

Later, my cousin Phillip brought us the mattress that we carried from Italy. It was much better to sleep on. When I received my first CN paycheck, \$74.00, I thought I was rich! Three months later, I bid on a more permanent CN job.

Then, I bought food for four days and the money was going low. We still had a week to go. Each time the train stopped, I would go and buy some bread and sausage to eat. Joseph was eating bread, dipped in coffee and milk. We only had one warm meal on the train.



L to R: Joseph Drewniak, Maude (spouse of Phillip) Steve Drewniak, Katherine Drewniak, Phillip Drewniak

In 1949, I was stationed at Pinkham, Saskatchewan. I did not even know where that place was. I went first, leaving mother and Joseph in Chinook. I figured that if I went first, that I would find a place to rent and then call for the others. I was surprised again! I found no house to rent, especially in such a small place!

Again, we moved into a bunkhouse. We stayed in Pinkham for six months, then we moved to Alsask, Saskatchewan in the year 1950. Again no room! Again, we moved into a bunkhouse! My second son, Francis was born July 31, 1950 at Oyen, Alberta General Hospital. In the meantime, I purchased a house in Alsask that had been damaged by fire and I rebuilt the house. We lived there for one and a half years. A CN man had been laid off and I was moved again.

In 1953, we moved to Kindersley, Saskatchewan. Once more, there was no room and no house for rent! We did manage to find a little shack with two little rooms, no water and no toilets



Kindersley Main Street, 1953

In 1955, Thomas Materiale came to Canada from Italy and he stayed with us. Shortly after, in 1957 my only daughter, Annamaria was born on September 17, 1957. We decided to sell the house in order to build a larger one. Again, we built a new house from scratch. The second house is located on Fourth Avenue West in Kindersley, where mother and I are presently living.



CN Bunkhouses in the 1940's



Francis

Michael

Michael, my third son was born September 5, 1953 at the Kindersley General Hospital. We sold the house in Alsask, saved some money and mother went to the Town of Kindersley to buy a lot on 2 Avenue. I built a new home that had two bedrooms, a living room, bathroom and kitchen. Mother had a hard time, not knowing how to speak good English and doing all the chores around the house, while I was on the CN job and working on the new house until late at night.



Annamaria

All of you children finished High School and graduated in Kindersley. In 1961, I bought my first car a 1959 Fairlane Ford. It was easier to get around. In 1966, I was promoted to Section Foreman with more pay! I worked the CN track until 1984, when I retired in September with thirty-five and a half years of service. All of you children have grown up and have married with your own families and homes.



1959 Ford Fairlane



Joseph



Francis



Michael



Annamaria



503 4th Ave



Jan Drewniak
Retirement Party 1984

From the beginning, there were only two of us and today only two of us again. We watched our children grow and now our grandchildren, looking towards their own futures. We pray for their happiness and peace in the City of Calgary, Alberta.

Addition to the Aforementioned

The war was over, I had had no news from home. My family did not know where I was, whether dead or alive. One day a letter came from within Canada from my good friend, Michal Dobrus. While I was still living in Italy, Michal had gone to Canada before me. His father had written to him from Poland and he had told Michal that he had seen my brother, Stefan. Stefan had given his address to Michal's father. I at last made contact with my family. We wrote letters to each other. I found out that they had left everything, the house and land for the Russians and that they had moved to the West and settled on land given to them by the Polish-communist government. My father was staying with my sister Magdalena. My brother Michal was with his family, living in Becholivice near the Czechoslovakian border.



Jozef DREWNIAK

My father died in 1950, the year that my second son, Francis was born. My brother Michal died, years later and also, Stefan. My sister Magdalena is eighty-two years old and still lives at the same place. My brother Kacper was a Captain in the Polish Army and now lives in Sczecezin and he has two sons.



Magdalena & Jan Rekut & family



Kacper DREWNIAK



Kacper, Magdalena &
Jan DREWNIAK (re-united)



Jozef Budda, Michal Dobrus
& Jan DREWNIAK



Michal DREWNIAK

After thirty-five years, from 1941, I visited Poland to see them for the first time since the war. I brought my brother Kacper to Canada for a thirty day visit, so he could see how we live here. They were surprised when they came and saw what we have, especially our freedom. I went back to Poland twice, with mother and made four trips to Italy.

The time is overdue, to thank my traveling companion,
that has been with me all these years.

*Lord, When I recall,
All these things from the past,
In my mind I see,
You were always with me.*

*From my native land,
On that Russian train,
Through the Ural Mountains and its plain,
There, where no one would care,
You were with me there.*

*In the places where I did weep,
And the places where I did sleep,
On that bare ground,
In my clothes so torn,
It was You, Lord who kept me warm.*

*Everyplace that I went,
Sleeping below zero in that tent,
There where no one did care,
You, Lord were with me there.*

*I saw those small Spruce trees,
Where I was once on my knees,
At the end of each and every day,
That's where I went to Pray,
By that little Spruce tree,
I knew Lord, You were with me.*

*I saw Lord that you had a plan,
To deliver me a slave in that Russian land,
As in the Bible, I did see,
You placed me in a boat on the Caspian Sea.*

*Through so many Arab lands,
Over the hot, dusty desert sands,
Across the Jordan to the Holy land,
A land full of thorns,
I saw Bethlehem where You were born.*

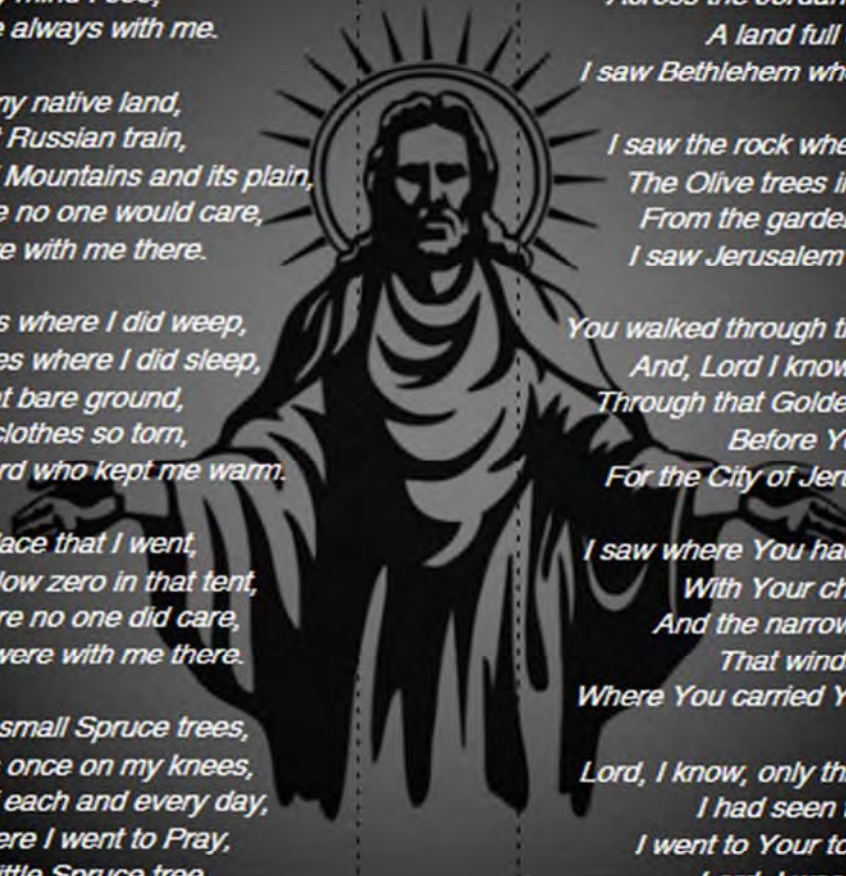
*I saw the rock where You did pray,
The Olive trees in Gethsemane,
From the garden very straight,
I saw Jerusalem's Golden Gate.*

*You walked through this gate many times,
And, Lord I know Your last walk,
Through that Golden Gate, you took,
Before You died,
For the City of Jerusalem, You cried.*

*I saw where You had the Last Supper,
With Your chosen ones,
And the narrow crooked road
That winds up high,
Where You carried Your cross and died.*

*Lord, I know, only through Your Grace,
I had seen that place.
I went to Your tomb, for I care,
Lord, I was very glad,
That You were not there.*

*Thank You, Lord,
For the so many thousands of miles,
That you traveled with me,
Showing me the things that I may see.*



*From Palestine,
Over its hot desert sand,
You went with me to the Egyptian land,
Then across the Mediterranean Sea,
To Tarranto, Italy.*

*When I lay wounded on the ground,
So scared, Lord, You were with me there.
Even after, You cared for me,
Again, across the Atlantic Sea,
No sand, to Canada, My promised land.*

*Now, I stop and think awhile,
I thank You Lord for so many thousands of miles,
Over the land and sea,
Thank You for traveling with me.*

*From the first mile, when I did start,
I thank You, Lord, with all of my heart.
Today, I am old and gray
Please travel with me Lord, the rest of the way.*

*Blessed be You in Your Glory,
For giving me a chance to tell my story.
Just the same, Lord, Blessed be Your Holy Name.*



March 16, 1987
Jan Drewniak, Age 67

MILITARY RECORDS

Page 1



MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

APC POLISH ENQUIRIES
Building 28 B, RAF Northolt
West End Road
Huislip
Middlesex HA4 6NQ
Telephone: (01 833) 8000 Fax: (01 833) 7999

Mr Joseph Drewniak
9412 Academy Drive SE
Calgary, AB T2T 1A7
CANADA

Our Ref: 3/1919/30/III/APC/POL
Date: 2 December 2005

Dear Sir

Thank you for your recent letter. I am pleased to confirm the following particulars of the military service of:

1919/30/III LANCE CORPORAL Jan DREWNIAK

Born on: 9 September 1919 at Pustolówka, Horodnica, Kopyczyńce, Tamopól, Poland

Parents: Józef and Anastazja née Dobrycka

Marital Status (while serving): Single

Nationality: Polish **Religion:** Roman Catholic

Civilian Occupation (prior to Army Service): Carpenter

Service with the Polish Forces under British Command:

from 26 April 1942 to 1 May 1947 (Honourably discharged)

Service with the Polish Resettlement Corps: Enlisted on None
Commissioned

relegated to:

Class "W" Register on /
Unemployed List

finally discharged /

relinquished commission on
(honourably discharged)

Conduct: Good

Former Service and History:

Prior to 1939 lived in settlement Pustolówka, parish of Horodnica, district of Kopyczyńce, county of Tamopól, Poland – which after the 1939 September campaign in Poland was occupied by the former USSR. Being of Polish nationality he was deported to the former USSR in 1940 (exact date and place(s) of the deportation within the former USSR – not recorded).

On the basis of the Sikorski-Maisky (Polish-Soviet) agreement of 30 July 1941 released for the purpose of joining the Polish Armed Forces, which were being organised in 1941-1942 on the former Soviet territory. Enlisted in the Polish Army on 14.03.1942 and posted to 10 Engineers Battalion, 10 Infantry Division.



Lance Corporal
Jan Drewniak

MILITARY RECORDS

Page 2

Together with the Polish Army units crossed the Soviet-Iranian frontier, was evacuated to Iran. Via Iraq was transferred to Palestine where he came under British command with effect from 26.04.1942, as above.

On the reorganisation of the Polish Army in the Middle East, his postings were as follows:

26.04.1942 - Reserve Command, Polish Land Forces in the Middle East)
12.05.1942 - Engineers Command, 3 Carpathian Rifle Division, 1 Company)
13.05.1944 - Wounded at Monte Cassino, Italy)
13.05.1944 - Hospitalised at No.2 Polish General Hospital, Italy) 2 Polish Corps
06.08.1944 - Returned to his unit)
• Seconded for a Training Course (Bridging) at Training Centre in Capra, Italy) 8 British Army
• 11.03.1945 - Promoted to the rank of Lance Corporal)
09.04.1945 - returned to his unit)

Served in the Middle East 1942-1943 and Italy 1943-1946. Due to a gradual demobilisation of the Polish Forces under British command was finally discharged on 01.05.1946.

Theatre of Operations: Italy 13.12.1943 - 02.05.1945

13.12.1943 - 23.04.1944	-	Action on the rivers: Sangro and Rapido/Southern Apennines.
24.04.1944 - 13.05.1944	-	Battle for Monte Cassino/Gustav- Hitler line of enemy defences.
13.05.1944	-	wounded in action at Monte Cassino and hospitalised
06.08.1944 - 04.09.1944	-	Battle for Ancona/Goths line of enemy defences.
05.09.1944 - 09.10.1944	-	Rearguard of the 8 th British Army.
10.10.1944 - 01.01.1945	-	Action in the Northern Apennines.
02.01.1945 - 08.04.1945	-	Action on the river Senio.
09.04.1945 - 02.05.1945	-	Battle for Bologna/Lombardy Plain.

Medal Entitlement:

Polish: Honorary decoration for wounds, Cross for Valour, Cross Of Monte Cassino Cert. No. 3908, Army Medal.

British: 1939-45 Star, Italy Star, Defence Medal, the War Medal 1939-45.

Yours faithfully

M GODDARD (Mrs)
APC Polish Historical Discourses



Military Medals displayed
were prepared by son Joseph

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Eldest Son Joseph helped dad put his memories of such a tragic childhood and young adulthood upbringing onto paper for all of us to see, read and reflect on. The sacrifices our father, your grandfather and great-grandfather made in order to survive the atrocities of war are incomprehensible today. These were the realities of his memories of what dad had to carry with him all his life. He never once shared his deep held feelings while we were growing up, he didn't want us to know when we were young, growing and enjoying the freedoms he helped to obtain and cherished. But now we know more intimately. Thank you Joseph for helping dad share his memories with the rest of us.

Joseph also managed, with a bit of research and digging to obtain any missing medals and Military Service Records of our father "Lance Corporal Jan Drewniak".

Dad's life and our lives centered around his leadership, hard work ethic, his love for us all and his and mom's faith in God, his Lord who walked with him during his tough times as a young man. Through it we learned how to be resourceful, hard working, and the importance of family and friends and to always trust in our God to walk with us when ever we need Him or feel lost. Today, even as our family is spread out and raising families of our own, these values that were instilled in us by our parents, are the cornerstone of our own lives today and we hope and pray that our children and grandchildren will grow, prosper and live from these lessons in life that your grandfather and great-grandfather lived through.

I would also like to thank Wally Skappak, his son Michael Skappak and Alan Skappak for their contribution of the photo of dad's cousin Phillip Drewniak along with his brothers & sister. Greatly appreciated to have additional family memories to complete this book.

I would like to acknowledge that with the help of the internet archival of many of the pictures depicted in dad's memoirs were a way to put into a visual perspective the atrocities of war! Sometimes reading and seeing are two different ways of acknowledging what someone is trying to convey to each of us. Some of these pictures are in no way the actual pictures of dad's exact travels but pretty darn close and some are archival pictures of actual events. Those that have dad in them are the true pictures.

I am most certain that dad would be weeping today to see a repeat of what is happening with the Soviet invasion of the Ukraine. "Niech Bog zlituje sie nad ich duszami." (*May God have mercy on their souls*)

Michael Drewniak

May 2023



DREWNIAK, John (Jan)

John Drewniak passed away peacefully at the Chinook Care Hospice on Saturday, October 18, 2014 at the age of 95 years.

John is lovingly remembered by his:

Children: Joseph (Devra), Francis (Donna), Michael (Sandra) and Annamaria Drewniak;

Grandchildren: Tracey, Andrew, Theresa, Carrie (Chris), Robert, Alexandra(Tom), and Angela (Justin).

Beyond his grandchildren, he is remembered by his nine great-grandchildren, adding to those names are numerous nieces and nephews within Canada, Poland and Italy.

John was predeceased by his mother, Anastasia; his father, Joseph; brothers, sister, son Anthony, and 2010 he said goodbye to his loving wife of 63 years, Lucia Drewniak nee Materiale.

On April 7, 2021 son Francis passed away.