

Polish Day – July 2nd 2017



On July 2nd, the Rural Life Centre opened its doors to the local Polish community. It was a day full of music, laughter and traditional Polish experiences. It was a chance for everyone to take a trip to Poland without travelling, taking us to the heart of the country... in the middle of the English countryside.



We were lucky enough this year to be joined by the Polska Szkoła Sobotnia, a Polish Sunday School based in Farnham. This day was an ideal day for them celebrating the end of the school year; Polish schools often finish the year much earlier than British schools. The school aids children from nursery to A Levels. The Head teacher and her colleagues believed it is very important to connect with the British community as well, combining both British and Polish cultures with mutual respect.

During the morning, they presented certificates to every student for completing the school year, which showed every subject they took and how well they performed, as well as giving them a small award including Polish books and Polish posters for the younger children. The school then showcased the students' talents in a talent show, where there was dancing, gymnastics, dramatic pieces, playing instruments and singing both in choirs and solos. This was an opportunity for the students to showcase what they had learned that year as well as being important for their parents to proudly see their children, who were mostly born in Britain, performing in Polish.

After the school's celebration, a Polish band took centre stage and played a multitude of songs including traditional Polish songs. It was lovely to see couples and children dancing together and having a wonderful time.



A Polish food tent was set up for the entirety of the event, with the Polish Deli, London serving sausages in baguettes with various fillings including pickles and potatoes. As the event went on, the area got so busy that people started to sit on the floor! The air was filled with the wonderful smell of Polish food and really added to the atmosphere.



At 1:00pm, Wies Rogalski, who was running the event, held a talk in the Polish Camp exhibition on site, Tweedsmuir Polish Camp. He gave a fascinating presentation on Poland's position towards the end of the war and how the soldiers and civilians were treated by the Soviet Union and other European countries, including Britain.



Until the age of 6, Wies and his older brother Zen (who was nine) lived ‘an idyllic childhood’ in Tweedsmuir Military Camp at Thursley, where Poles and their dependents displaced by the War were housed between 1947 and 1960. The camp was built as a depot by Royal Canadian Engineers and it is thought that thousands of Canadian troops passed through on their way to battles in occupied Europe. After the war, the camp was used for the Poles. Zen and Wies, along with their parents eventually left the camp to settle in Clapham, London.

The brothers have never stopped in their quest to find out all the stories behind this early chapter in their lives and lives of the other Polish people in Britain during the 20th century. In 2010, they found the Thursley History Society who got in touch and offered them to do a talk. Someone at the talk had contacts with the Rural Life Centre and introduced them to us. They wanted to set up an exhibition that would teach everyone about Poland, that would be exciting but also educational. So, in 2012, a replica barrack was built in the Rural Life Centre. Zen said: “The Rural Life Centre is a perfect place for our exhibition, which will be housed in a timber building similar to the barracks in which we lived. Ours is a social history of a small group of people intertwined with this area of Surrey.” The opening ceremony was attended by the mayors of Godalming and Farnham as well as the Polish ambassador, who cut the ribbon. This was an immensely proud moment for Wies and his brother. This exhibition, which includes the ribbon and personal family photos is open for visitors all the time when the Rural Life Centre is open.

Wies and his wife, Alex also wanted to set up a cultural day at the Rural Life Centre to celebrate with Polish community. They really wanted Polish schools to attend and celebrate with them, allowing both the younger and older Polish generations to commemorate the occasion together. 2017 has been the 5th year the event has taken place and has been by far the most successful. Wies and Alex hope that the event will go from strength to strength and continue to grow in the coming years. Wies currently has a book out entitled ‘Divided Loyalty: Britain’s Polish ally during the Second World War’, talking about the Political side of the Polish war. Wies and Alex were also in charge of a Polish shop stall, which was selling all kinds of Polish merchandise from keyrings to fabrics.



Everyone thoroughly enjoyed the event and is looking forward to the coming years. We hope that next year, the celebration will be even bigger and better with even more people.