

The Last Shop in Earlsferry

This article is based on a talk about the Obarski Family given by Irene Stevenson to the Elie and Earlsferry History Society on 13 February 2020 (the difference in the name Obarski and Obarska is explained by Polish convention of female surnames ending in ...ska when the male form is ...ski).

I have been asked to give a talk on the village experiences of the Obarski family. This will be mainly about 'Henry and Elsie' as most people in Elie and Earlsferry will remember them. My name is Irene Stevenson. My Maiden name was Urquhart and Henry was my step-father, my mother's second husband. I realise that quite a lot of people do not know that, and it is a credit to my family that I was recognised to be very much part of the Obarski family. I think I still qualify as the only person to give this talk! Below are some photographs and will be how most will remember Henry and Elsie.

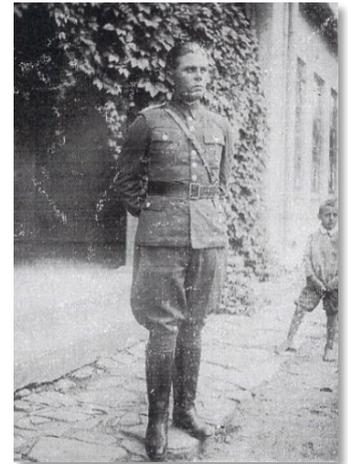


Henry came here during the war and like many others, he never talked about his war experiences. I do know that he was involved in Operation Market Garden at Arnhem. I have read much about this but I am not here to give a talk on Arnhem. If you have seen the film "A Bridge Too Far" or read the book, you will know about the awful things that happened there. I was well aware that he did suffer terribly from shell-shock. We had to be so careful not to make sudden noises, bang doors, etc.

However, I think a little background as to how Henry got here might be helpful and interesting. Henry was born in Kielce in central Poland in 1910 and was called up in August 1939. In mid-September, as the German invasion in Poland progressed, orders were received to evacuate to east Poland. Then the Soviet Army unexpectedly moved into Poland and orders were given to evacuate to Hungary (a neutral country) on the 19th September. He was disarmed and interned there until

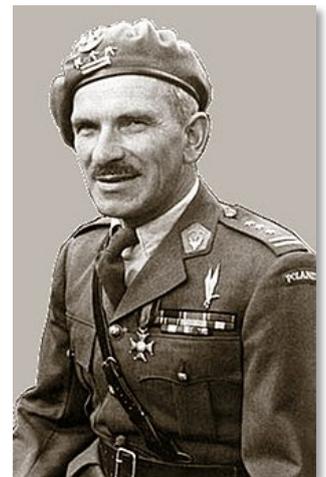
end of March 1940. He made his way to France, via the Balkans, where he reported to the Polish Army Camp and came under French command from April 1940.

During my research, I found a report which says that in 1940, as part of that journey, Henry had escaped from Hungary through Czechoslovakia in a coal truck buried beneath the coal and eventually arrived in Yugoslavia. He sailed from Split to France. After the fall of France in June of that year he was evacuated to UK and came under British command from July and was posted to the 4th Cadre Rifle Brigade. He served in the UK until 1946. He was promoted to Captain in March 1944



The 4th Cadre Rifle Brigade was sent to Scotland to defend our country against a threatened coastal German invasion on the south shores of East Fife. When the threat receded their Commanding Officer, Colonel Stanislaw Sosabowski had other more ambitious plans and set about giving his men something more challenging to do other than guard duty on the beaches. They were to be trained as paratroopers.

In June 1941, after preliminary training at Largo House, 'volunteers' were sent to the parachute training school at Ringway in Manchester and on their return, the Brigade set up its own preliminary training ground in the park of Largo House, which was their Headquarters. It became known as the Monkey Grove! All of the training contraptions were invented and constructed by their own men. I quote – *"It was replete with hellish contraptions, obstacle courses, ropes and trapezes, swinging from treetops, jumping from platforms and towers. Devices for both physical and psychological conditioning. The skill, fortitude and imaginative daring of a paratrooper is hard to equal"*. Colonel Sosabowski had 500 men aged between 20 and 52 and he meant to make them an elite formation. It grew in strength until, in 1944, it had 3,100 men.



Colonel Sosabowski, c. 1942

In September 1941, the first airborne exercises were carried out by the Brigade at Kincaig. They proved conclusively the Brigade's seriousness of purpose and Sosabowski's talent for bringing out the best in men.

To receive the recognition and respect of the British, Colonel Sosabowski organised an exercise which included a drop of Paratroopers to 'attack' the heavy artillery battery on Kincaig. This was a historic moment, not only for the Polish Army but also for Scotland, when a company of paratroopers descended from the skies over the shooting range and fields of Shell Bay. The whole of Elie turned out to watch and picnicked on the hillsides. Heavy transport planes came from Leuchars and, I quote, *"Suddenly a stream of bodies fell out and parachutes would open like flowers and fall silently down carrying their men so gently to earth"*. This would be quite different when done for real in Arnhem in the not too distant future.

It was a historic moment for the Brigade as the Polish Prime Minister, General Sikorski, pronounced them to be known as the 1st Polish Independent Parachute Brigade. The event was celebrated with a great party at the Beach Hotel in Elie (which became Hycroft in Lodge Walk).

After the war, there was no Poland to go back to and in 1947 the Brigade was disbanded. Several of the soldiers returned to Fife where they settled and raised families. The photos below were taken in Methil Museum in 2004. I later donated Henry's uniform to St Andrews Museum.



Henry's uniform and medals.



While in Fife, the paratroopers were billeted in various places. There were several billets in Elie – Earlsferry House, Earlsknowe, along with the Beach, Queen's and Golf Hotels. Henry was in Rockcliffe House (at the top of Golf Course Lane backing on to the tennis courts, now belonging to Anne Johnson).



Left and above - Rockcliffe, Links Place, Elie

At that time, this house belonged to my mother's Aunt (Mrs Thomson). The Polish paratroopers all called her 'Auntie'. Through this connection, my mother would have met Henry and she would have visited Rockcliffe often. Their friendship obviously blossomed as they were married in December 1947 in Elie Manse (now Avernish, belonging to Lady Cater). Elsie would then be known as Mrs Obarska (...ska being the female form of the surname ...ski).

After they were married, they rented No7 Rankeillor Street. I was 7½ at the time. To be able to earn some money, Henry briefly took a job (anything!) at the foundry in Leven. I could never understand how he coped with so much noise there when he suffered from shell shock.

A year after they were married, they had a son, Andrew (photo below). They moved to Earlsferry in 1949, renting Beachfield/Waldeve (now demolished and rebuilt three years ago). During this time,



Irene with new brother Andrew at his Christening.



they negotiated the purchase of 29 and 31 High Street, 29 being a 2-storey house and 31 a single storey greengrocer's shop. This would be ideal for converting the shop to become a business for them both. Elsie, having trained as a hairdresser in Glasgow (Mary London's), would have her own hairdressing salon and Henry would look after the gift shop. I, along with many others, remember the gift shop as being full of treasures – toys, Coronation coaches, jewellery, china, and those wonderful musical teddy bears, etc. As you can imagine, I used to love to help unpack any deliveries of goods when they came. On rare occasions when my brother got a toy from the shop, his reaction was, "Why? Is it broken?" – it usually was, having been damaged in transit!

Elsie was the sole stockist in the area for Helena Rubenstein cosmetic products. In those days no-one else was permitted to stock these speciality products within a certain radius of another. Perhaps the nearest would be St Andrews or Dundee.

'*Civility and Service*' was the strapline printed on their business cards and they strived to live up to this. The customer always came first. Elsie built up a very good clientele with an interesting cross-section of ladies, near and far, regularly attending to have their hair done.

I remember the excitement of the Lord Mayor of London's wife coming, along with her two daughters and two large Labradors – all at the same time! As for an American Senator's wife coming to have her hair done – this was so exciting for a wee place like this!



But it was her regular local ladies who came every week – some of them twice a week- that she enjoyed so much!



Remember Mrs Brown?

Sometimes she would cut men's hair in the kitchen where they could not be seen! Even my children had their hair done sometimes when we came for weekends!

At weekends, she would be seen cycling with her bag of tools over the handlebars, to get to the homes of those who could not manage to get to Earlsferry (remember Mrs Moon and Mrs Hogg). I do wish she had kept her old appointment books!

Henry grew cut flowers in their small garden so that, as often as possible, there would be fresh posies in the salon. Taken for granted nowadays, they insisted on having up-to-date magazines for the ladies and, as well as the usual ones, they always had to have Harpers' Bazaar and the Tatler for

those who came from London to be able to keep up with society news there. They decided they would sell newspapers on a Sunday, too, again providing a service for those in Earlsferry.

Enterprising as always, Henry started to make shell boxes – collecting shells off the beach and covering wooden boxes, varnishing the shells and lining the boxes with padded satin. I wish I had kept one. They also had a large shed put into their garden to allow them to store second-hand prams, cots, etc. for renting out to the summer visitors. That's where our children's ones went!

In Poland, before the war, Henry had been a History and Geography teacher. He was so disappointed and couldn't understand when I failed my history exams! I did better with Geography thank goodness. He also could not understand how I could not differentiate between different composers when listening to classical music. However, I did go on to pass my Higher music so redeemed myself a bit there!

He could not teach in this country – he would have had to go on a 'refresher' course at University but I think language was the problem. Although he was content with his business in his shop, as time went on, my mother became anxious that he should be doing something to stimulate his brain a bit more. At that time, there was a sub-Post Office in Earlsferry (in Kenilworth) run by three people – a brother and two sisters called Bowie – and they were about to retire. Elsie thought this could be something Henry could perhaps learn to do (I presume he had to pass some sort of exam for this). Anyway, he did become a sub-postmaster and managed somehow to squeeze another counter into the small shop! I always remember we had to keep well out of Dad's way at whilst he was doing the weekly balance! No computers in those days!

In the early 1960's, they were able to buy another shop across the road at No 4 High Street, next to Brattesani's ice cream shop. Henry moved the Post Office over there and had more room for all china, toys, beach toys, windbreaks, etc and he started to stock hardware. If anyone came to ask him for something he did not have, to be able to satisfy the customer, he would never say he didn't have it. Instead his reply would be "Not at the moment but I could get it for you by the afternoon". This meant that he – or, during school holidays, very often, I - would be 'volunteered' to go to Leven by bus to get whatever it was, whether it be a pail or a nail, he would go out of his way to provide a service.

With Henry moving to No 4, it gave them the chance to develop the shop at No.31 by making the hairdressing area larger and the gift shop smaller. This allowed my mother to have staff. They built an extension on to the back of the house to give them a larger kitchen and staff area.

Henry really enjoyed chatting to people who came to his shop and they both loved when all the summer visitors returned to Elie for their holidays. There is still someone here in the village today who says, as a young lady, the first thing they wanted to do on arrival in Elie, was to go to Mr Obarski's shop where there would be a click of the heels and a kiss of the hand from him – I think all the Poles did this. His manners were impeccable and we, as children, were always made aware to watch ours! He would be horrified today if he heard me speaking about my parents by using their first names! He would not allow me to call anyone older than I was by their first name!

It was a proud and happy day for them both when my husband and I were married here in Elie Church in October 1963 when Dad walked me up the aisle. Our reception was in the Lundin Links Hotel. Our own children were a great joy to him and it is so sad he did not know them in their later years as he would have related so well to them and be interested in all their activities and learning. They were only 10, 7 and 5 when he died.



Henry and Elsie both found time, somehow, to integrate into village life. Henry was a member of the Improvements Association, he joined Rotary in Anstruther (Elsie joined Inner Wheel) and he was a member of Hercules Curling Club. He was thrilled to pass his driving test and buy himself a car.



Despite being very busy people, they managed to keep in touch with their Polish friends and the highlight each year was to attend the formal Polish Dance at Christmas time in the Lundin Links Hotel. He enjoyed the best of things especially eating out at the Marine Hotel. We were never allowed to buy cheap clothes (“we cannot afford to buy cheap clothes”) - a trait I still try to tell my husband about and continue to live up to! My mother and I would have excursions twice a year to Cairds or Draffens in Dundee to buy our outfits.



They would travel to the north and west of Scotland for a week's holiday in October but they always had to get someone to cover for the Post Office.



Sadly, very suddenly, in 1974, Henry took a massive stroke, only surviving two days before he died in Kirkcaldy Hospital, aged 64. On his bedside table was the book 'A Bridge Too Far' – perhaps this was a book too far for him to read.

My mother continued the business, selling the shop at No 4. Her job meant that she always had people and friends coming to her every day, which really was a saving grace for her – and us as we lived in the West of Scotland. She even kept the Sunday morning papers going, getting up at 6.30 in the morning to bring them in – especially if it was raining. It gave her the opportunity to speak to

different people – especially male customers – giving her a chance to discuss different matters. She was a very small person and eventually the effort required to lift heavy bundles of papers meant she had to give this up in 1996.



Presented with flowers to mark the end of the Sunday papers in 1996.

She retired in October 1999 and we invited her clients/friends to her shop for a small party.



Did she close the shop that day? No! The door was open as usual the next day. Gradually, she sold off anything that was left and closed the doors, finally, just before Christmas. **This was the last shop to close in Earlsferry.** After discussions with her, she decided that she wanted to

remain in her home for as long as possible and we said we would convert the shop area for her to be able to live on the one level. However, 4

months later, in February 2000, she died. She really could not cope without her shop.



As far as my brother and I are concerned, we did not see very much of one another in our early years. As I said, there was 7½ years difference in age so I was finishing Primary school when he was starting and likewise, I was leaving Waid Academy as he was starting.

Andy went to Edinburgh University in 1966 to study to become a Chartered Accountant, which took six years. He came to stay with me and my family in Milngavie when he worked in Glasgow with Coopers and Lybrand so we only then got to really know one another better then. He married in 1977 in Glasgow, but immediately they moved to Jersey where Andrew took up work with Coopers and Lybrand there. He and Morag divorced 12 years later with no family.



My brother remained in Jersey and was there for 40 years in total as an Accountant. My mother enjoyed her trips to Jersey as often as she could, as we did with our family

Latterly, he unfortunately suffered from poor health resulting in his losing a lower leg in 2014 due to Diabetes. Unable to have an artificial leg fitted, he was confined to a wheelchair. With rheumatoid arthritis and lack of physical exercise, he developed cardiac failure and died two years ago in February 2018 aged 69. I, being his only relative, continued in Jersey to wind up his estate. It also meant bringing Dad's medals back here to be looked after.

As far as my side of the story goes, I was at schools in the area and during holidays I would help where possible in the shop. After leaving school in 1959, I went to Edinburgh Royal Infirmary to become a Chartered Physiotherapist. This took three years, after which I worked for a year before getting married. We had three children. I had a break from work for 10 years – as you did in those days! - when our third one started going to nursery school. We have six grandchildren. My husband, also called Andrew, and I retired in 2002/03 and decided to continue with the renovation of my parents' house and retire to Earlsferry. As my husband is also from this area it seemed the natural thing to do.

Researching for this talk has been quite an emotional roller-coaster for me, but I know more now than I did before I was asked to do this. It has been good for me to focus on this story. I have been proud and privileged to have been part of this wonderful family.

Henry was buried in Kilconquhar in 1974. We renewed the headstone last year, adding my mother's and my brother's names. I brought my brother's ashes back from Jersey. Sadly, the Obarski name in this country has now come to an end.

On the next page are pictures of the Polish Memorials at Earlsferry and within the National Arboretum.



Polish plaque on Earlsferry Town Hall

“Polish Paratroops to the Royal Burgh of Elie and Earlsferry as a token of friendship and gratitude 1940-1943”

“The Polish 1st Independent Parachute Brigade was formed in Scotland in 1941, under General Sosabowski to assist in an anticipated uprising in Poland against the Germans. Instead, the Polish Parachute Brigade was ordered to participate in Operation Market Garden in September 1944, a bold but ill-fated airdrop at Arnhem to help hold the bridges of Holland for an allied armoured thrust into Germany. There the Brigade lost 23% of its fighting strength, while covering the British withdrawal across the Rhine”.



National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire.



For more information about the Polish 1st Independent Parachute Brigade please visit:
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1st_Independent_Parachute_Brigade_\(Poland\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1st_Independent_Parachute_Brigade_(Poland))

For more information about Colonel (later General) Stanislaw Sosabowski can be found at:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanis%C5%82aw_Sosabowski



The Elie & Earlsferry History Society would like to thank Irene Stevenson for sharing this remarkable story. It was published on the Society's website on 8 May 2020 as a fitting tribute to commemorate VE75.