

FEATURE

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Partisan, pilot, hero: Stirring story of no ordinary Joe

It was 30 years ago when a man called Joe, gathered his thoughts, and started to tell the story of his war... what emerged was a brutal, savage, harrowing and at times heartbreaking account of a boy and how he survived hell on earth at the start of the Second World War.

Now, thanks to his family, his extraordinary words have been turned into a book. It is not for the faint-hearted – this is a rare and raw insight into what happens to innocent victims when two countries go to war. At times the appalling acts of cruelty beggar belief.

Through the words of Antoni Zozef Podolski, who became well known and loved across Norwich and Norfolk as 'Joe', a larger-than-life character, we get a taste of what conditions were like for those in Poland who were trapped between two invading armies – the Germans and the Russians.

A terrible time when people had to kill, or be killed. When lives were taken and property destroyed without a second thought.

The story of how he escaped and ended up in Norfolk where he found love, peace, comfort and happiness is quite astonishing. From hiring out washing machines to putting on flying displays, Joe lived a life like no other.

Back in 1984, and after suffering a stroke which nearly killed him, he got a tape recorder and dictated his memoirs. His solicitor at the time, Keith Flatman, offered the services of his secretary to put his words onto paper.

For years he tried to get his story published but failed and when he died in 1999 at the age of 76 he willed the manuscript to his grandsons Jeffrey and Jeremy. Now, they have finally published the book which has a foreword written by their father Nigel.

There was a time when Joe, like so many, rarely talked about his war. Questions by his sons and friends about how he escaped Poland and came to England as a pilot flying out of RAF Coltishall and RAF

Horsham St Faith were brushed aside as if they were of little or no importance.

Now his story is published for the first time and it is one which deserves to be read, highlighting the evils of war and the barbaric treatment of those in the way of advancing soldiers in mainland Europe at the start of the Second World War – and his great escape to England.

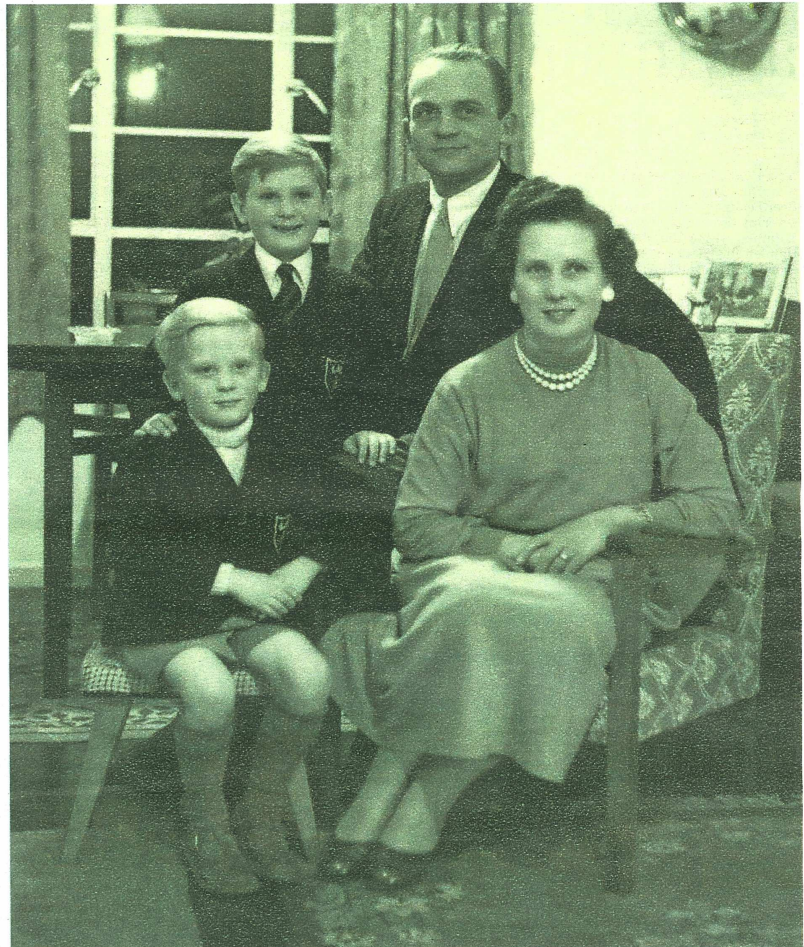
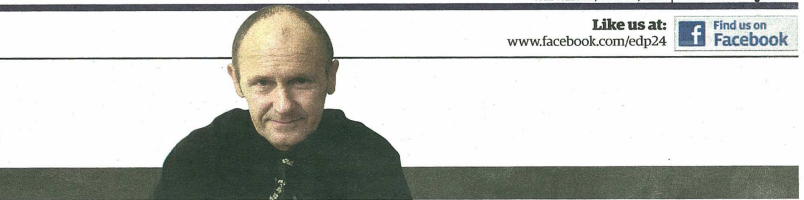
As his son Nigel writes: "He experienced many horrific events but survived and made a new life in England, a country that offered him asylum. He learnt a new language, married and made a happy and successful life for himself and his family. In writing this he has created an everlasting link from the most traumatic times of 1939, to you dear reader, today."

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At the start of the war Joe was living the good life with his family in eastern Poland. Then the Germans invaded from the west and the Russians came in from the east. Life was turned upside down.

Young Joe became part of a partisan resistance group fighting against the brutal Red Army. The Russian occupation force most feared was the so-called NKVD, nicknamed the 'Robins', which were the secret internal forces of the Red Army. They were ruthless, and according to Joe: "A bigger collection of perverted thieves and murderers were never bunched together before."

And Joe should know. They put him through mock executions while in prison. "I had so much hatred in my heart that I wished I had a grenade in my hand, I would have



■ Former Polish RAF pilot Joe Podolski with his family, wife Mil, Nigel, then six, and Andrew, eight, at their Norwich home.

Picture: SUBMITTED

pulled the pin out without a second's hesitation to take them with me," he wrote.

One Robin with much blood on his hands was known as the "Red Butcher" who raped and shot many women.

"My hatred of this man bordered on the insane. Twice I tried to shoot him and twice he got away. I shot the peak off his hat but he lived," said Joe.

At the third attempt, after the secret policeman had raped another young girl – Joe did kill him.

Joe's book records his fight, his capture, imprisonment and brutal interrogation and beatings before being sentenced to die. He spent 23

days on death row in a grim prison at Orsha in Russia where many prisoners killed themselves.

A reprieve condemned him to the Vorkuta Gulag in the Arctic Ural Mountains. He managed to escape to England via Finland then returned to Europe by submarine through Lithuania.

Finally a reunion with Polish forces in the Middle East was made possible after the Nazi invasion of Russia caused the Soviets to become an uneasy ally of Poland.

A spell with the Polish commandos was followed by a return to England, and this time he became a fighter pilot with the Polish Air Force based in Norfolk, where he was

stationed at Coltishall and Horsham St Faith. He was still only 23.

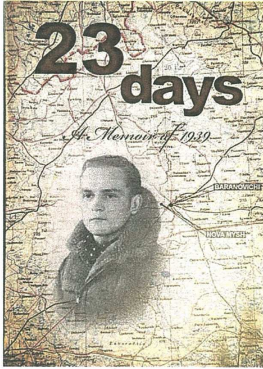
Demobbed in 1948, he settled in Norwich, where met his wife Mildred (Mil) at the Samson & Hercules ballroom in Norwich following the war and they were married at St John's RC Cathedral in 1948. The couple lived in Norwich and Mulbarton. They had two sons, Andrew and Nigel, and four grandchildren, Greg, John, Jeffrey and Jeremy.

Joe had an astonishing range of careers. He worked as a coach-builder at Churchill Constructors, Salhouse Road, was self-employed hiring out washing machines to housewives in and around



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Lakenham; made cabinets; was a wooden pallet repairer with Colman's; and taught himself how to repair jewellery and established The Little Shop at St Andrew's Hill, Norwich.

He also became a boat-builder, trading under the sign of the Yellow Wheel at Harford Bridges making high-quality glass fibre and mahogany fishing boats which can still be seen today on Sheringham Beach. Joe turned his hand to fence-making across the county, and even to repairing and inspecting gliders for the Norfolk Gliding Club and others.

He also found time to be a founder member of Norwich Judo Club where he taught dozens of Norwich police officers the skills of unarmed combat he had acquired to survive the war.

Joe was occasionally called in to act as interpreter for Norwich Speedway Club for visiting Polish and Russian teams.

His flying skills were put to good effect as chief instructor at Norfolk Gliding Club at Tibenham for 25 years, where he taught hundreds of pupils and other instructors. He was also chief instructor at Rattlesden Gliding Club.

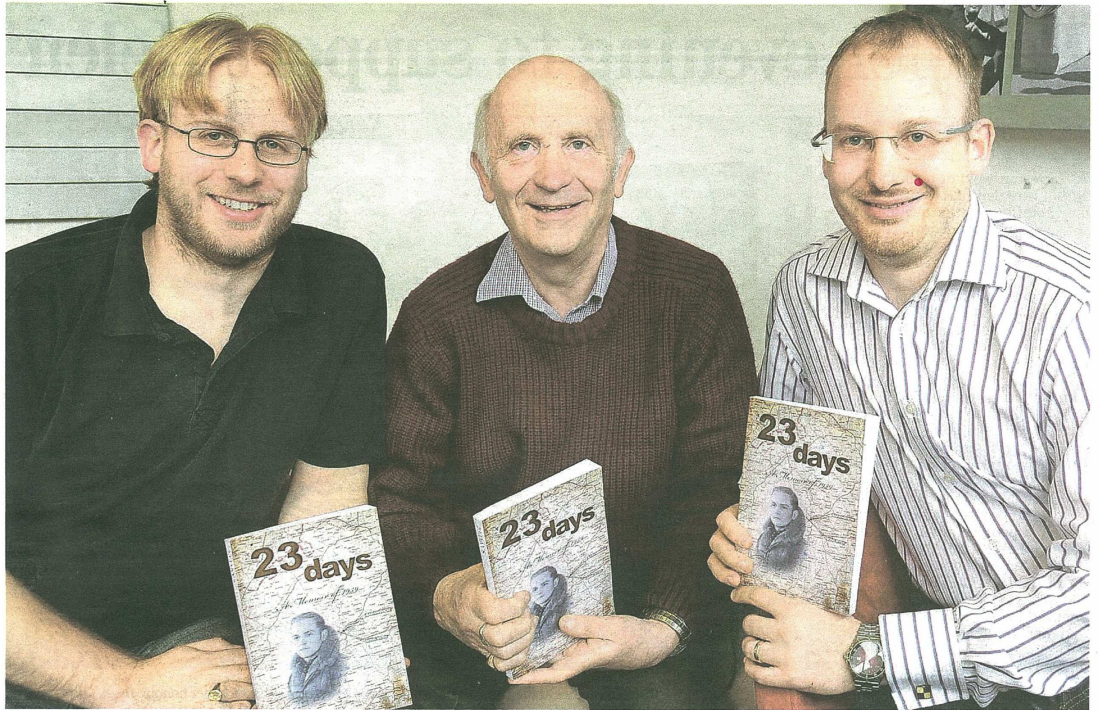
Joe was also an aerobatic flyer with the Norfolk and Norwich Aero Club at flying displays, and for the RAF at their open days.

And he could never stand by if he saw people in trouble. He was given the Royal Humane Society Award for rescuing a 10-year-old drowning boy at Lakenham Swimming Pool in the 1950s, and also received an award from the Chief Constable of Norfolk for going to help a policeman being attacked by hooligans in Dereham town centre during the 1970s.

A remarkable life – a remarkable man.

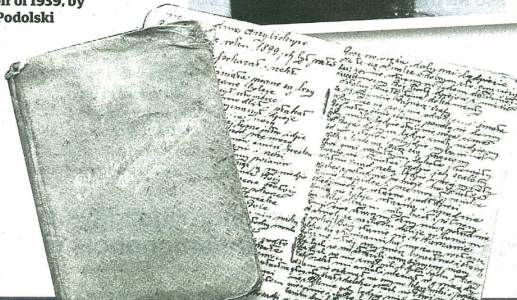
And he never went back to Poland.

■ **23 Days, A Memoir of 1939**, by Antoni Jozef (Joe) Podolski is published by Yellow Wheel Publishing (family members) and you can order on line at www.23days.eu. It is also on sale at Jarrold, Tombland Antiques, Cringleford Post Office and Stoke Ferry Corner Shop.



■ Nigel Podolski with grandsons, Jeff, left, and Jeremy, with their book. Below, Joe Podolski at RAF Coltishall in 1945. Bottom, his wartime diaries.

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