

Jon Augustyn's Amazing Story of Survival

The following biography written by Sarah Newton is based on six interview sessions with Jon Augustyn during the summer of 2012. The biography was last updated in November 2016.

Next time you walk up Third Street East, poke your head under the hedge just before you reach Mackenzie. You will find a neatly organized vegetable and flower garden, and most likely, you will see Jon Augustyn working. There is a lot more to this man than his garden. He holds much wisdom and history. Many parts of his soul have been left in desolate parts of Russia, North Africa, Asia, and Italy. His story is one of miraculous survival.

Jon, born in 1919, is 97 years old and lived through the great depression, was a prisoner in communist Russia and a soldier during WWII. His life is a story of survival during one of the most terrifying and dangerous eras of modern history.

In 1939 when WWII war started, Jon was in the Polish cadets, and wasn't qualified to go to the frontline. Instead he was made a soldier on the Russian border, only two kilometres from his house. Very soon after the war started, the advancing Russians took Jon prisoner. This began a harrowing trip that was months long and of nightmarish proportions.

Something worse happened soon after his own capture. In January 1940, the advancing Russian troops then took his parents and all his siblings prisoner and ordered them into boxcars for a brutal three week trip to slave labour camps in Siberia. His family was dumped in the desolate Siberian landscape with nothing but the clothes on their backs, leaving behind a working farm with 72 chickens, a big work horse, all their tools, a milking cow, an entire life. All that they owned was taken over by the Russian army. The family was never able to return to the farm they had worked so hard for, even after the war.

Jon's own incarceration started with a similar trip when he and more than 800 other Polish soldiers were loaded into boxcars with little to eat or drink to be used as slave labourers in an iron ore mine. The trip took weeks as the boxcars shunted around western Russia, finally arriving at the mine near the Turkish border. It was now winter and working underground was better than the freezing temperatures and lack of shelter on the surface. Jon remembers everything being red with mineral dust, even the wings of birds. The Polish prisoners worked 200 metres underground in wretched conditions with little food and no word about their civilian families who had been sent to Siberian labour camps.

A fortuitous event happened during his internment at the mine. Jon had an accident where a rock fell and injured his leg. Since he was injured, he was ordered to help a female mining engineer load props for the mine. Once the truck was loaded, he would sit beside her and watch her drive. He watched her very carefully and after a while she trusted him to drive the truck. She taught him how to drive, giving him the driving experience that would determine his role when he joined the Allies in North Africa and Italy.

After working in the mine from October 1939 to May of 1940, the Russians suddenly moved Jon and his fellow Polish prisoners. They were packed in boxcars and didn't have a clue where they were going. They spent two weeks on train with nothing to eat. Once in a while the Russians would open up their wretched boxcar to give them water. There were 80 men crammed into the boxcar with no toilets or blankets to keep them warm against the cold.

At one point, hearing whistling from a steam engine, the prisoners knew that they must be in a large centre with other trains. From a tiny window in the boxcar they spied a big station. They stayed there a few days, having no idea where they were or what they were doing, but their train kept moving back and forth on the line until they were finally moving again. Their uncertain future and lack of food caused fear and despair to spread amongst the men.

The prisoners never spoke to the Russian soldiers, fearing their brutality, but one morning, Russian civilians brought the water. Between the prisoners, some spoke Russian. When they asked what station they had arrived in, the Poles were astounded to find out that they were back close to the frontier with Poland, and that they were going to be let free! It turned out that the Russians had joined the Allies. Stalin had been convinced to give amnesty to all Polish prisoners who were soldiers. They would be used to fight the Nazis.

The whole group of Polish prisoners stayed in Poland, not in slave labour camps, but still imprisoned by the Russians. Jon and the others worked on roads, crushing rocks for at least eight hours each day. They worked in dismal conditions with no gloves, subsisting on a starvation diet, and working grueling shifts with constantly bleeding fingers and constant exhaustion. The difference between this work and what they endured earlier was that now they had hope of freedom and survival. Freedom, however, was a long way off.

The men were taken to work at a dairy farm with about 100 milking cows. This was a good thing, a much easier life. Living conditions were still very primitive. The prisoners slept in a barn – they simply took out the mangers, put some bunks in, and the Russian soldiers gave Jon and his crew two thin blankets. Manure and urine filled a ditch in middle of the barn. With only two lanterns in the whole barn, the men could hardly see each other when they were finally allowed to rest. The starvation, overwork, and darkness for so many hours a day took their toll. The men felt that they were in a hopeless situation with no end in sight. Their hopes had been raised with talk of freedom but then it seemed to have been taken away. The men were devastated.

At this point many men committed suicide. The most common method was to run into the fence surrounding their enclosure, and then they would be shot. Still others hung themselves in the washroom. Jon said, "I always had courage. I told my friend, something is going to change. Never give up."

At this point, Jon received correspondence from his family members who were still in slave labour camps in Siberia. Jon's brother Ted was given amnesty but the camp where he was working was so far from Poland that he could not return. He joined an Allied regiment but, shortly after, the Germans blew up his tank, killing him instantly.

After working at the dairy farm, Jon's group was suddenly moved to an airport, to Lwof (Lvov), as town that is now in Ukraine but was then part of Poland. They were made to build the runway so the Russians could use it for heavy-duty bombers. While the prisoners were working on the runway, the Germans invaded Russia. It was June 21, 1941.

After three days of working at the airport, they heard German artillery pounding the Russians nearby. Jon recalled, "Russian soldiers come on motorbikes and they yell at us, 'Out, out!' Immediately we start marching away from the airport. We were under guard as we left. A slave labour force is a valuable and protected asset. We marched night and all day, and another night, without any food or water. The Russian guards are scared too. They can see and hear the Germans overhead bombing. Destruction is everywhere but by some miracle we never got touched. The Germans wanted to destroy Russian military installations and troops, not a potential labour force for themselves, so we were spared."

“We started out on the march as 150 prisoners. After 700 miles we were now 800 prisoners marching away from the front, prisoners from all over the area were gathered together as we walked to get further inside Russia, away from attacking Germans.”

By this time, it was late July. “We didn’t get water for many days,” Jon said. “It was the summer and we were so hot that I couldn’t speak. So dry, and many of the men die. Finally we got water running from mountains from a trough. We drink and drink. My belly was full. I listened to the water. It sounded beautiful, sounded so lovely. We stopped only briefly and then continued the march.” That sound of fresh running water is something, like the sensory memories of blood and death, that lives with Jon to this day.

Anyone of Jon’s group who couldn’t walk was shot or killed with a bayonet. This threat lived with the men each hour of every day. One thing that kept the men going was the German planes flying very low overhead, and the men could see the pilots waving at them. The pilots knew they were prisoners, and therefore wouldn’t shoot at them. They were flying so low. It left an indelible impression on Jon to see friendly pilots during such a horrendous march.

Jon tells of one prisoner who, near starvation, strayed from the line just far enough to pick some peas growing on the side of the road. He was immediately shot without warning. If you stepped to the left or the right, you were shot. No exceptions. Jon tells of how the Russian soldiers “meant business” and were ruthless in their duties.

The Russians were moving their troops to the front and the German air force was constantly engaged in dogfights with them. The prisoners’ column was marching very close to the fighting and was often in the middle of the attacks. Often, when the fighting surrounded them, Jon and his fellow prisoners would plow into a ditch, one on top of each other. One fellow fell on the top of Jon. An aircraft gunner had shot the man right through his chest. Jon felt something warm on his face and chest. His first thought that he had been shot too but, after a few moments, he realized that he could still move and felt no pain. It was the blood of his friend, covering him as he lay in the mud and filth of the ditch.

When the fighting finally stopped and the prisoners were able to get up, Jon couldn’t move, his compatriot was still lying motionless on top of him, immobilizing Jon. Jon finally rose and was immediately ordered to march again. Jon managed to push the body aside and continued on, covered on his clothes and skin with the drying blood of the unfortunate prisoner.

As they marched from the road, they passed the station that had been the target of the recent German bombing. Jon recalls seeing nightmarish images of human bodies hanging off trees, a horse’s head in ditch, the smell of blood and ammunition. Even though they were starving, many wretched as the sight made them physically ill. Jon recalled “marching past this with blood all over my face, nowhere to wash, the blood dried hard in my nostrils and ears. We were still many friends, helping each other, walking together, hand in hand, hand over shoulder so you don’t fall, so you can sleep a few seconds, minutes. Hanging on each other, so tired. If we couldn’t walk, we would be shot.”

Finally, Jon’s group reached a place far from Germans, marching with little sustenance and many brutal deaths along the way. At this point, in the Russian city of Strabelisk, the group was finally given amnesty. The irony was not lost on Jon. After starving them, marching them and working them nearly to death, their Russian captors were finally freeing the Polish prisoners. The group was set free with a Russian orchestra and a gift of 500 rubles.

Even more ironic was that the Russians living nearby had next to nothing themselves. There was nothing to buy, the war had been very hard on both the Russians and the prisoners. Jon recalled looking in shop windows and seeing nothing to buy. He saw Russians waiting in line at three o'clock in the afternoon, in temperatures of -40 degrees, for bread. The Russians tramped their feet to keep warm and, when bread finally came, the last few people in line got nothing. With all the hardship that Jon endured, he felt great compassion for the Russians around him. Throughout all the interviews, Jon took pains to distinguish between the kindness of regular Russian people and the brutality of the Russian military and Stalin himself.

Jon speaks with frustration of the wait for freedom. "We were waiting for the order from Stalin for him to let us go free. Roosevelt and Churchill put pressure on Stalin to free them. Finally, Stalin gave us the green light." Since their Russian captors granted Jon's group amnesty, they began the process of being made into a fighting force for the Allies against the Third Reich.

Jon recalled how the Russians found them a commander. "They release our commander from prison, General Walter Anders. They offer him champagne, cigars. He was almost dead, starving. Stalin said 'you know, you know, you are free now, give you a car, a cook, you listen? You going to be leader of a Polish Army, a force of 200,000.'" Anders became the leader of this Polish Allied force, a rag tag, starving group of prisoners.

In the spring, the group moved from where they were (about 150 miles north of Moscow) to Uzbekistan, near the border with Pakistan and Afghanistan. Jon contracted severe malaria and more than 70 of his comrades succumbed to the same ailment. Luckily Jon made a full recovery.

The trip to a British military installation was not easy for the severely weakened men, but in August 1942 they reach the Caspian Sea. "Finally we go by train to Caspian Sea port of Krasnovodsk (now Turkmenbasy). They load us on a freighter, a squeaky, leaky boat. I was so sick, laying on the deck. Lots of us were like this. Going to Persia took only 24 hours to cross. But I remember the rats climb over us, bite my nose, ears. A fellow die beside me, they throw him overboard. I was so afraid it would be me."

This memory still haunts Jon. He was so exhausted and malnourished that he could not lift his head from the ship deck. He was close to death, yet fought to live, knowing that he would be thrown overboard if he could not stay alive and visibly mobile.

Finally, the ship arrived on the western side of the Caspian Sea, at the port of Phleve in Persia. The relief at being delivered into the hands of the British Army was one of the happiest moments in Jon's wartime experience. "Finally we get to Persia, and ambulances of British paramedics, load us and take us to the hospital," he said. "We stay in Bamboo tents because there are so many of us and all in such poor condition. They took all our old clothes. I couldn't even stand up anymore – a skeleton – and there were hundreds of us like this. They washed us, disinfected us, gave us intravenous, vaccinations, good medical care, all by the British Army, I tell you, we thought we were in paradise. After so much medication I fall asleep. In the morning, nurse comes and said 'AH! I thought you were dead!' And I said, 'Not so fast!'"

Later that afternoon, a nurse came to Jon's bedside with broth. Much to his surprise, he could not eat it. He had to be spoon fed. After almost a week, he had gained enough strength to be transported to a bigger hospital in Tehran. He spent more than a month there to make his recovery. The highlight of his stay in Tehran was the sheer joy of being able to eat all day long.

Jon has fond memories of his time in Tehran, recalling it as a stunningly beautiful city. The British camp where he stayed for his convalescence was 15 kilometres from the city centre. He

described the wealth and abundance in the city, such a world away from the deprivation he had just left behind.

“We would sneak out to see the city sights, over an eight-foot wall. Take a horse taxi. We couldn’t believe it, after such deprivation. First thing we went for was the beer. After a few beers, four of us were of course talking in Polish. Then there is an American pilot, an officer, a captain. He said, are you Polish? He was American Polish, and he could speak Polish. He talk and talk. He said, ‘boys I am going to take you for a treat.’ He took us to French restaurant called The Bristol. The mirrors. The fine food! It was heaven. The waiter and U.S. captain ordered everything in English. First thing, fancy bottle wine, fancy appetizers, some kind of paradise. He ordered and we were thrilled. A big dish with a big cover, fancy steaks. We helped ourselves. A great supper! After that night out with us, he had to fly out the next morning. We still had to be back in the camp that night. We take the taxi back, right through the gate! Not over the fence, sneaking right in through the front!”

Once well, Jon used his driver’s training to find himself a niche in the British ranks. Few people could drive automobiles at the onset of WWII. The skill probably saved his life. Driving was arguably much safer than being on the front lines as an infantryman. A major took Jon as a driver, sending him on forays back and forth to Iraq, moving troops and supplies. He recalled his first truck. “It was like a 747, such a nice truck with a canvas top. I was a big shot. I was so happy. No one bothered us drivers. We did our job.”

Jon’s driving career was interrupted when he was ordered back to his signal battalion. “I pretty near cried,” he said. “The discipline there was a lot harder, always being told to be at attention. I was to be stationed in Ismailia (Egypt). Not a nice place. The signal battalion was stationed in tents. It was not a nice city like the troop truck headquarters.”

Once again luck was on Jon’s side. A corporal recognized him from being in prison together in Poland. Jon explained that he had been forced to quit his job as a driver. The corporal felt indebted to Jon because Jon had helped hide him from the Russians – officers would have been killed. The corporal left and, when he returned, told Jon to get his gear and return to the driver corps! “I was so happy I could kiss him. I was so lucky to get away from the signal battalion. I was back to supplying groceries for the battalion. I got to stay at the British depot, back to the nice, big tents. That was the start of my happiness.”

Another fond memory of this time was when Jon was ordered to train 20 young Siberian women as drivers. “I thought I was in heaven! The girls had never driven before. They give me 50 cigarettes from their rations and then buy me another 50. Also, they got big chocolates for me.” The women were desperate to pass their driver’s exams and hoped their gifts would improve their chances of getting more training in the trucks with Jon.

After training the women, Jon went back to driving supplies to the battlefield. Driving not only helped Jon avoid being shot as a soldier on the front lines, it also had other perks. Jon remembers one memorable trip. “It was so hot, 120 degrees. I had a run of 28 kilometres to deliver ice for supplies. After I deliver to the officers, I got one block free! My guys in my platoon loved me. Ice for everyone. And it was so hot. Even our truck engines only last 10,000 miles because it would seize up in the heat.”

In September 1942, Jon and his platoon moved to Palestine. This was a British territory and much better than the harsh desert environment of Tehran. Jon liked the climate, the food and the infrastructure. It was also far enough from the fighting that the relatively good times continued. Staying there, Jon had a chance to visit famous places such as Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Bethlehem.

As a driver he had access to vehicles on his days off. He would drive, and his fellow soldiers were the happy passengers.

That November, Jon was moved to the Egyptian desert, about 80 miles from Cairo. His brigade was fighting in Tobruk and he drove ammunition and other supplies to the front lines. This was terrifying as there was nowhere for him to hide on the roads through the desert when planes attacked his convoy from overhead. During an attack all Jon could do was dig a hole in the sand away from his truck, hoping to avoid the spray of bullets aimed at the convoy. Each trip was more than 100 kilometres and he was lucky to have survived his many forays.

From that camp, Jon moved north to the Egyptian port city of Alexandria. Here the group awaited the green light to go to Italy, where the Allies were pushing the Axis forces north and out of Italy. The Allies tried to fool the German planes by having the ship convoy sneak across the Mediterranean when they were not expecting Allied movement. Normally this is a ten-day trip to Italy, but in wartime it was longer because the ships would change course often and erratically to avoid enemy planes and U-boats.

The destination for Jon's convoy, with 36 Allied ships, was Taranto in southern Italy. "Two days from Italy we heard that U-boats were around. We 20 drivers were in a room under the deck. It was also a storm. Me and a friend were talking and watching the waves. We hear an explosion, and to the right, another ship sank almost instantly from a U-boat torpedo. Boom, another explosion, another ship was hit. Didn't sink instantly, took about seven minutes to sink. It was dawn, and the foam from the explosion made it impossible to see anyone trying to escape."

"About seven or eight minutes later, our ship gets hit. We never expected this kind of attack. We were pretty near thrown off the deck. Panic was on the ship; we didn't know what to do. From the explosion we were almost paralyzed. I got sort of numb. My friend fell down right on the deck from the explosion. I couldn't hear nothing, couldn't talk. The propeller and engine room was gone. Our ship was moving back and forth. A British destroyer comes all of a sudden to our rescue. Right up beside us. They throw us a rope bridge, even though both ships were moving all over. The first four drivers who went ahead of me all fell in as they tried to get to safety. My friend and me tried to go across crawling, and the sailors hauled us up as soon as we got to the ship. Twelve drivers tried to get across and drowned. Only eight of us drivers were saved by the destroyer."

The mayhem on board and throughout the convoy was terrifying: booming explosions, flames, waves crashing relentlessly over the deck, smoke filling the air and the lungs, the cacophony of screaming crew and rescuers, the deck slanting underfoot. These visions still haunt Jon.

Once on board the British destroyer, the depth of the trauma inflicted upon Jon by the attack became obvious. "The destroyer officers offered us coffee, but I couldn't even open my mouth. I was in shock. The officer knocked me hard and I finally I was able to open my mouth to drink. Then I could drink, but I couldn't hear anything. We stayed in the same convoy, but they took us to another freighter. We are just about to Taranto and there were fires all over the port. The Germans had bombed the port and the ships in it. So we stayed in Sicily and went back to Taranto when the fires were out. I tell you I kissed the ground when we got off that ship."

Immediately after disembarking in Taranto, Jon and his corps were moved to Santa Sophia, about four kilometres from the port. He was issued a transport truck to drive and was based there a few weeks until his orders came through. Jon easily recalls the names of the small towns that he moved through. "We get the order to go to Motolla only about 20 kilometres up in to the mountains. Then we move to Campo Basso, a nice city in the mountains. Still snow in the

mountains, but we make it with our trucks. We were about a month there and then we move to Rocco Mandolphi, training and getting ready to go the first line, closer and closer. Closer to Monte Cassino.”

Monte Cassino was one of the longest and bloodiest battles of World War II. Hearing Jon’s personal account is very powerful. Jon’s job during the assault on Monte Cassino was to deliver ammunition, food, and medical supplies to the front line. This was around the end of April. In short order, Jon lost three trucks because the Germans were looking to ease the assault by cutting off the Allied supply lines. The Axis airplanes repeatedly hammered the trucks with heavy shelling. Jon’s convoys travelled on narrow, exposed mountain roads. Anti-aircraft guns couldn’t get them, so the Axis airplanes would come over the mountains and get the convoys.

Jon tells of his convoy memories. “During these supply trips the second driver would watch for planes. If he saw one, I would turn off the engine and if we were carrying ammunition we would jump far from the truck. If there was food in the cargo we would just hide under the truck, One of us on each side.” This was the practice because munitions on board would mean the truck would most likely explode if hit. If the truck only had food, it was safer to seek cover under the truck, than risk being exposed by jumping away from the vehicle.

“One time my partner was hiding beside the truck, not under it,” Jon said. “I called him and he was injured with two bullets in his chest, blood was spraying from his mouth because his heart was still pumping. It was so hard. I was ordered to leave him. I was told that the ambulance would come, but I never saw him again. I was not injured but to leave him was horrible.” Imagine, being ordered to leave a friend, someone you knew was not dead, and that there was no way to help him? This memory haunts Jon to this day.

From their vantage point high above the convoys, the Germans could see everything from the mountains. One day, as the Allied guns tried to get the Axis airplanes, Jon’s convoy was weaving its way under the protection of rock bluffs. Jon’s truck was hit by flying German bullets and it felt like anything they hit caught fire. They hit Jon’s gas tank, he and his partner jumped away and saw that truck burn to the ground. Luckily the truck was only transporting groceries so there wasn’t a huge explosion causing injury. A direct hit to the gas tank in most cases would have caused it to explode; yet it didn’t. Another miracle. Once again Jon was given a new truck and returned immediately to his duties as a driver.

Jon’s description of the defeat of the Axis forces at Monte Cassino is like a picture painted in front of me. Jon’s group was one of the first inside the hilltop stronghold. “They put the Polish flag and Union Jack on the top of Monte Cassino. I went inside the next day. Lucky we didn’t step on a mine, so many around. I will never forget when we got there. German bodies on top of Polish bodies, Polish bodies on top of Germans, tanks burned up, blood everywhere, ammunition laying all over. I saw Germans without heads, Polish without legs. That day was awful, I will never forget that. It is over 60 years ago, but it is like I am still there. And that smell, I will never forget. Blood, ammunition, burning, tanks, exploded, grenades, burned alive bodies. I will never forget that. When we got to our camp eight kilometres from Monte Cassino I couldn’t eat nothing, I was so sick from what I saw. Even my uniform stank of the smell of Monte Cassino.”

After the hard-won victory at Monte Cassino, Jon’s troops moved toward the Adriatic Sea, opening an Allied route to Rome. He was given a few days holiday after their experiences taking Monte Cassino. He and his friends decided to go to Naples. Jon was a popular member of the corps because he was given a truck to drive everyone. Next they were moved to the Adriatic towns of Pescara and the small fishing village of Porto San Giorgio. As an aside, Porto San Giorgio

is a small fishing community south of Ancona, and the home of all my Italian relatives on my mother's side of the family. Jon described his greeting in Porto San Giorgio, "That was July and August, can you imagine. We had a good time there! So nice, on the ocean. The people from there, they came with glasses and gave us wine, they were screaming and kissing us, young girls too. I enjoyed this part after what we went through!"

The war in Italy was far from over. Even in so-called 'liberated' areas, the war was not far off. Jon told me of his rescue of a superior officer not far from Porto San Giorgio. "When traveling, we had troubles. All the bridges were destroyed, had to take detours, through San Julian. This was a town where they made accordions before the war. We went through that area and I had a full truck of groceries. The mine-clearing personnel missed a mine, and we drove right over it. I somehow missed it with the front of the truck, but hit it with the back wheel. There was a huge explosion, tipped the truck right on its side. The staff sergeant was with me, sitting on my left because we had right hand steering. The truck tipped over on my side. The mine exploded on his side, knocked him right out, glass everywhere in his face. I panicked because he fell on me and the gas tank was leaking on me. I can't open the door, because he was unconscious on top of me. When you panic you get twice as much power. I somehow pushed out the windshield and got glass cuts all over me. I crawl out and reached back in for his head, he had curly thick hair. I tried to pull him, but I only got a handful of his hair. I finally manage to pull him by the shirt, and pull him out. I don't know how I did it, he was a big man! My major said how the hell you do that? When I get there and pull him, and I pulled him as far as I could. I finally got him out. Then I hit him in the face too and he woke up! I see my truck, I had a grocery order, what a mess, explosion of food. The gas was still leaking but it didn't explode. Yet another miracle. Next day, new truck, keep going..."

The Axis forces did not give up central Italy easily. When the Germans retreated, the Polish and other Allied forces moved into the towns that they formerly occupied. Sometimes the Axis troops pushed back and it was the Allies' turn to retreat. Jon recalls one bloody push and pull that he was involved in. "The Germans were in Ascoli (near the Adriatic Sea), and close by there was a highway that passed through farmer's fields. The Germans had hidden their tanks, Panzers. They dig the tanks in, leave the turret out, cover the rest with camouflaged trees, get expert shooter, someone from the Russian front, and a crew in the tanks. Next comes New Zealand tanks, they had no idea that the German tanks were there, they thought the fields were safe. Eighteen New Zealand tanks rumbled through. The Germans shot four-inch artillery right through the New Zealand tanks, and made a huge explosion. The whole New Zealand crew burns up to death."

"When the Germans have to abandon the buried tanks, they would oversize the shell to make their tank no good to anyone. They would then run away to their line. The second day after this happened, I went with my truck to supply the front, and the New Zealand tanks were still burning. We were so stupid, because my sergeant, said, you not going closer, but I did. There were mines everywhere still. I look in the tanks, saw only the driver's hair and the heels of his shoes, nothing left of the tank crew, the stench was unbearable." Jon wishes he had not gone near that tank. The memory of what was left behind of the brave New Zealand soldiers has left a permanently etched image in his memory.

When the war finally finished in 1945, Jon and his Polish corps stayed on in Italy. They moved to Ancona and worked to rebuild the devastated Italian infrastructure. The British forces were completely spent. They suffered such terrible losses overseas and at home that they left Italy for the Polish army to help rebuild. The Italians liked the Poles and saw them more as comrades than conquerors, Jon said. They both suffered from the actions of bigger, more aggressive forces.

At one point in Ancona, Jon encountered the growing communist movement flourishing in central Italy. His fresh memories of the insanity of Stalin's version of communism made his hair stand on end at the communist meeting in Ancona. Jon recounts what he witnessed. "We went into a meeting and saw a picture of Stalin and the hammer and sickle, and we were just there (in Russia). The Italians got mad, but we were just there, and we knew the horror of Stalin. We Catholics, we had to go to mass, we went to Italian church with our chaplain. No one was there at that church in Ancona, everyone was a communist. No Christians in the church, just soldiers. Orders not to go to restaurants because the communists would kill us. We were ordered not to go there." It was hard for Jon to believe that the brutal forces of Stalin could seduce the long-suffering Italian population.

Soon after, Jon and the Polish contingent were ordered to move to England. They arrived in October 1946 and stayed for eight months. Jon was 26 years old. This was a happy time for Jon, with dances each Saturday and girls lining up at the dance-hall gate to dance with them. "We only took one, two would be trouble! We danced all night, lots of beer, we had so much fun.

But a serious decision needed to be made. The British offered the Polish soldiers a new life in whatever Allied country they wished. I asked Jon if he considered going back to Poland. He said they were offered this choice but only the men with families went back. Shortly after returning to Poland these men disappeared. Jon heard that Stalin found them and took them away.

Jon was instrumental in convincing a number of his countrymen to choose Canada. He knew a little about Canada from school in Poland and from Polish immigrants who settled in Canada. Jon had heard that Canada was a free country, a good place to live. The Polish immigrants, sent word back to their relatives that Canada was nice. So Canada trumped other options, including the U.S.A., Brazil, Australia and New Zealand.

Jon remembers the transition from military to civilian life with mixed emotions. Perhaps the realization that life would never be the same, and that there was no home to go back to, was always in the back of his mind. He would have to make his way in life and make his own future. His actions could finally dictate the value of his future. Finally, decisions were not being made for him for the first time since he was a young man guarding the Polish Russian border.

The first step into civilian life was handing over his truck. "I would go to Liverpool with my truck for supplies but in April 1947 I had to give up my truck. I was sad, pretty near crying, I was so attached to it and to my job. We then went to Yorkshire to get civilian clothes. There was a place to stay overnight, a tailor came and measured us, gave us a nice woolen suit, shirt, tie and shoes, and hat. Nice clothes, that was some change! Still in army uniform, gave us boxes full of our new clothes, went back to camp, and wait for our turn, for our boat to be ready to take us to Canada."

Imagine the uncertainty about his future and the sadness to be leaving behind a world completely changed by the destruction of World War II. Worst perhaps was the knowledge that he couldn't return to Poland to look for the remnants of his family. It wasn't until Jon's second year in Canada that he found out exactly what happened to his family. He had been in contact with his niece who had been communicating with the United Kingdom Bureau of Displaced Persons. She found Jon and was able, through correspondence, to tell him about the rest of the family.

Jon's father had died in a slave labour camp in Siberia. His brother was given amnesty and rejoined the army, only to be killed in a tank soon after. His mother survived and resettled in a new area of Poland with his younger siblings. Once Jon made contact with his mother, he tried to help her as best he could. He sent her fabric, clothes, money, and other supplies they needed.

Poignantly, Jon said, "I feel guilty, to tell you the truth. I should be there, with the thousands of white crosses over there. I am a miracle, survived so many things, while others did not."

The voyage to Canada was six days long. He travelled on the *Aquitania* and they made landfall in Halifax, Nova Scotia at Pier 21. The *Aquitania* was a historic ship, having served in WWII, just like Jon. Jon felt a kinship with the ship, knowing they had both served the war effort well, and had both survived, when many other good ships and good men had not.

Jon told of a special time on board the *Aquitania*, of relief, camaraderie and plenty. "We were still in uniform. We slept in hammocks. They opened up the bar on the ship, and each day, 3 p.m. to supper, there was Canadian beer, Molson. Oh I tell you, the sailors were laughing, when the bar closed for the night we would fill the table with glasses. That was good beer, eight percent and so tasty. Not like beer now, so nice. On board the ship you could buy cigarettes, fifteen cents a package! No duty. You could buy however many you wanted. I took about 50 packages!"

The transition to civilian life could be very difficult for soldiers leaving six years of war. Most would have suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. Luckily for Jon, his battalion captain prepared the men for their reentry into a society that knew very little about the trauma and the devastation they had lived through. Jon took the advice seriously and remembers the speech to this day. "The captain of battalion made a speech. He said 'you going to new country, civilian life. You gotta get used to it, make your mind. Everything you have been through in the war, it will stay with you all your life.' He was a good commander, we shook his hand, we were crying. The disasters, prisons, bombing, attacks, shooting, killing, war, everything you went through, all of a sudden finished. It was a difficult thing to do, this transition to a normal life."

The Canadian government ensured that foreign Allied war veterans (non-commonwealth) could become Canadian citizens if they worked one year on a farm. Jon still has the temporary identification card with his fingerprint. It was issued in Halifax when he stepped foot on Canadian soil for the first time at Pier 21. Jon, with the group of Poles, were given first-class berths on a CPR train for the four-day trip to their farm hosts in Lethbridge, Alberta. Jon was impressed that waiters asked what they wanted for breakfast and there were sleeping cars just for them. A far sight from a thin wool blanket on the ground in Russia!

Jon looks back with humour on his greeting in Lethbridge and his financial stability. "We get there, the police chief and an army colonel welcome us. We also had an interpreter. I knew English from being with UK army in Italy and the girls in England. There is a big celebration with the Canadian officers. The interpreter made sure we understand everything. You are free for two days, privileged to do this. We get discharged there and we got \$270 each. I could have bought a model A car for that price. It was a big day! Army pay was a lot less, so this was a big deal! I had saved up \$600 in a bank in England. I transferred it to Canada. So I had lots of money. I always saved money. I was a big shot, as a driver, and able save money. The British army, I was corporal, didn't want to be promoted because I would lose my truck and all the perks and privileges that went with it. I was paid 36 dollars Canadian a month as a driver in Italy. It was good money."

That was it. Jon was now a Polish immigrant in his new country and, finally, a civilian. The farmer he was posted with was a good man, a Swiss farmer by the name of Gilbert Petersen. His farm was 36 miles north of Lethbridge, in the hamlet of Turin.

Petersen had prepared a fully-equipped and, in Jon's eyes, luxurious cabin for the four Poles. There were bed linens, a stove, with all the equipment the men needed. They took turns cooking for each other in the kitchen of the cabin. Jon tells of the first day, when Petersen picked them up after the ceremony in Lethbridge. "He thought we would go right away with him. No way. We

went to bar after the celebration. Petersen went with us. It was only four in the afternoon. We were young men, wanted to go drinking, to celebrate, we were happy to get to our new country. Pretty near 6 o'clock, 'we got to go', the farmer said."

"We said, 'we are not going anywhere.' We told him we take a room for us above the bar, and we would pay for a room for the Petersen. 'My wife, is going to kill me tomorrow!'" the farmer said.

"That farmer, he liked to drink, but scared of his wife! We drank at the bar until they shut down at ten. We sleep all night at the bar. Then breakfast. Ten o'clock open up bar again. We went to liquor store, beer and whiskey and again to the bar. At noon, the farmer was pretty near crying. I said 'we had to go!' When we got to Petersen's farm, his wife was standing on the steps. We fixed it (the trouble the farmer was about to get into). We shook hands with her, hugged her, kissed her, she softened up! And everything was fine, the farmer was happy we did that. It was a sugar beet farm. Petersen had five children – four boys, and one girl. Chrissy was the name of the older girl, maybe."

Jon described Turin as having one church, a few stores, including a general store about 500 metres from the farm, where the men went to get groceries with their pay each month. Jon went to church and worked in the fields. Jon learned every aspect of sugar beet farming, from planting to maintaining the machines. The four Poles had 30 acres to look after and he was proud of how quickly they mastered the farmer's system and did a good job at this next phase in their lives.

Jon's work on the farm was varied and satisfying, probably just the therapy his war-weary body and mind needed. There was endless weeding to be done, cutting and threshing and cleaning the grain, plowing fallow fields, driving combine harvesters, and maintaining farm equipment. Jon made eight to 12 dollars a day doing this. He made additional income by working for other farmers in his spare time. One of the perks was all the meat they were given to eat, an absolute luxury compared to the ration diet of Europe during, and even after, the war.

Jon explains the harvest. "Then the beet harvest starts. The farmer has a machete, with a sharp hook on the end. We worked like machines with a machete cutting the heads off the beets. Big, long, white, they weighed four pounds each. We worked so fast harvesting, like a machine! Farmer comes with truck with special machine to load beets on a truck. Then take them to the railroad. Dumped everything in a pile by the railroad. They pile them up, wait until the freeze. This brings out the sugar, when they freeze up. The train would take the harvest to a sugar factory that was located 15 kilometres from us."

The farm work was good and the four decided to renew their contract for another year. They liked the farmer, the abundance of coal for their stove, and the fresh milk, eggs, and meat were pretty attractive too. Petersen was good to the men, Jon said, adding. "And I tell you, he liked beer! He would sneak to the cabin to drink with us!"

Petersen hoped the four Poles would stay because they were such great workers and friends, but they were young and needed a change. On the suggestion of the Lethbridge unemployment office, the Poles set off to Fernie, British Columbia, to work in a coal mine. Sixteen Poles from Lethbridge made this move, all former soldiers who had been working on the sugar beet farms. Their departure for Fernie must have been a deep loss to the small community of Turin.

Jon probably regretted his move to Fernie but, in his usual upbeat attitude, he tells of the good times and reminisces only briefly about the backbreaking work. He stayed in the Royal Hotel in Fernie. Ukrainians owned the hotel and Jon and his friends paid 60 dollars a month for room and board. Their work at the open pit coal mine earned them ten dollars a day. From their rooms

above the bar they could smell the beer emanating from below, and Jon noted that the other miners worked for beer, working all day, then drinking all night and on the weekends too. Jon and the other Poles got fed up with the situation. They met a Doukhobor man who gave Jon some excellent advice that shaped the rest of Jon's life in Canada. He told Jon (in Russian) "Why don't you buy a power saw, go in the bush and make lots of money?" And that is exactly what Jon did.

The Doukhobor told the men to go to the Nelson unemployment office and ask for help to find a new job. The five Poles told their mine boss, a Scotsman named Jack, that they were going to quit their jobs, right then and there. They jumped on a Greyhound bus to a large mill in Passmore, British Columbia. The men didn't get the falling jobs that they wanted and instead worked, as Jon says, like dogs, doing manual, unskilled labour. The men quit after a few days and the realization that the Doukhobor foreman only gave the good jobs to his people. After quitting, the five Poles made their way to Nelson to pick up their pay cheques. The Passmore mill was owned by a father and son. The father turned out to be a retired British army officer who realized that they had all fought together in the same area of Italy. That father was friendly to Jon, hoping to convince them to stay longer. Although the Poles did not agree to stay, the father did take them out for the night to a nightclub. The next morning they took another bus to Vernon.

The group arrived at the end of June, 1950. They stayed just three days. Jon asked, "Well guys, what are we going to do?" They went to the unemployment office and asked about finding a falling job. Luckily for them there were openings for four fallers at Rogers Pass. The unemployment office arranged for the Jon and his friends to be picked up and taken to the train for the journey to the site. They arrived just before daylight in Revelstoke and were greeted by the foreman who took them the five kilometres to the work camp. The camp had a cookhouse with a great cook that met their approval. They started working the next morning with a giant cross-cut saw. Every night the giant saw was sharpened by a Swedish sharpener hired for only the purpose of keeping the blades in prime shape for the next day of work. They worked through the fall and into the start of winter at different locations on the Big Bend Highway through to Passmore and Golden.

The group headed to the Prairies for the winter to visit friends, living on 12 dollars a week of unemployment pay. By spring, there was no work at Rogers Pass because high water had taken out a key bridge. The four Poles piled into a 1938 Ford and went through the Big Bend Highway, all 250 kilometres of it, to Revelstoke. At the unemployment office they were matched up with Walter Shiell, a small contractor who put them to work at Beaton. Jon worked five years for him.

Finally, in 1952, Jon started work at the big Selgar logging company that owned timber from Mica to Nakusp. Jon ended up working 33 years for this company as a faller, grader operator, and construction foreman. After a long and happy time with this company, Jon retired in 1984.

1952 was also the year that Jon married Amalia Vettori, a nurse from Milan who he met in Canada. They were married in Lethbridge and, afterward, they piled all their wedding gifts in Jon's 1952 Chevy and drove to Revelstoke. They rented a room in what became the Heather Hut on the corner of Mackenzie Avenue and Third Street. Jon and Emily had two daughters, Delores and Christine. Delores was born on September 15, 1956 and Christine in September 21, 1957.

In 1962 Jon made his first visit back to Poland since leaving in 1939 as a Russian prisoner of war. Nothing was the same, and while it was wonderful to finally see his remaining family, it was hard to see what had become of his country under communist Rule. He visited his two sisters and his mother in the house the government had given them in Powochietza, about 100 kilometres from Chechen. The old family farm in eastern Poland had been given to Ukrainian immigrants and was

unrecognizable to Jon. While visiting Poland, Jon heeded advice to not mention anything about his past, as the ruling communists did not like people with his history. Jon could buy anything in Poland because of the strength of the Canadian dollar. Things like train tickets, beer and sandwiches were pennies compared to prices in Canada.

Another visit in 1978 was even more sobering. At this point there was no heat on the buses, in hotels, nor in people's homes. There was nothing in the stores to buy and nothing to eat in the restaurants. The country was very poor now. Jon did realize that one good thing occurred under the communist government: his mother was able to give a good education to her younger children. His two sisters went to university in Poland for free.

When I kept pressing Jon about what might have helped him develop this attitude of survival, I thought he might mention the standbys of religion or family. I got an entirely different answer. Finally he let the cat out of the bag: growing up poor helped him survive such deprivation. He laughed when he recalled what some of the upper-class Poles said to him during their imprisonment. They wished they had been poor like him so they could deal better with lack of food, not knowing what tomorrow would bring, the endless physical labour, bitter cold, death, wet and unsanitary conditions and, worst of all, the brutality inflicted each day. The strong work ethic and ingenuity instilled in him by his farmer parents gave him the skills and outlook to survive. He chuckled when he thought of the lack of these skills in today's population.

You may have seen him 'tinkering' around his home on Third and Connaught doing anything from repairs to gardening. Jon is a wonder to behold. Each day that I interviewed him I was stunned at what he was up to. The highlight was the day he had a grinder with sparks flying, taking a stripped screw out of his snow blower engine. Jon's reflections on what makes him resilient are beautiful in their simplicity. He told of his love of humour, how being useful gives value to life, the importance of having a partner, the meaning of friends in times of strife, and having a positive outlook. These are all things money can't buy. Jon awakens with the beauty of each day, saying how thrilling it is for him to know that he is now truly free in Canada, and that each day is one more day to live. He says he doesn't make plans for the future, but we both laugh when I point out his compost, seeds he is saving for next year, and the rows that are fallow in his garden.

Here are some random thoughts from Jon, as he reflects on his experiences.

- "I am happy I survived, but right away after the war, so many friends died, people that I went through disaster after disaster with, that knew the same misery. Those experiences made my Polish army friends closer to me than brothers or sisters. No one else can understand or truly imagine what we went through."
- "When I finally arrived in Canada, I was so happy. It is a free country. People here have no idea what that means. Freedom is something you can't buy with money. You pay with blood, and lots of it. Freedom and freedom from starvation are precious. I wouldn't wish what I went through on my worst enemy. It should never be repeated."
- "Every day when I get up, I thank God, another day! At my age, another day is a gift."
- Jon still has nightmares about his experiences; they come frequently and are deeply disturbing. The nightmare that comes most often is a vivid memory of when Germans tanks were so close and the Russians were desperately trying to stop them. "We were prisoners, so helpless. Caught between the fighting, so bad. Thought we would never make it. Artillery, mortar, gunfire, rockets. We went in the ditch on the left side, guys who went

in ditch on the right, 58 died, so many wounded. To this day, they just left the wounded there, crying and screaming and we just left them. One shell exploded on the bank on the side of the road, covered us with dirt. Still a lump in the throat. I couldn't even cross myself, face in ground, men laying on me, I couldn't even move. The wish so strong to have the earth open up and swallow me up. My prayer was to die instantly. Saw so many people with legs, arms blown off, and stomach opened up screaming, and they are just left there."

- Another nightmare that repeats itself is the noise of explosions. "It will drive you crazy, your mind going, I lay there, you wait for it to be you who get it. I couldn't even cross myself (make the sign of the cross). Many times the attacks from the air or the other side go on and on and on. Sometimes even today I just about hear them. In my dreams it is just like I was there again. Today even. One night I was right there again. Trying to hide myself, going into the mud, so deep to escape the attacks. But I cannot sink far enough, I cannot become part of the mud to escape. I get so scared, I can't even move. I am paralyzed. This happened to a guy behind me, I kicked him to get him going. You would be surprised to know what you can do to survive. Even now, I don't know why I was stronger than others."
- I asked Jon to consider what signs of compassion he witnessed throughout the war. He talks about helping an impoverished woman in Ancona, when she had nothing to feed her baby. He reminisced about the ordinary Russian people. He found them so good, noting that they would share their last piece of bread with prisoners. Jon was shocked to see over and over that the Russian people were suffering as badly as the prisoners. They had threadbare clothes, not enough to eat, no heat in their homes, and were often as displaced as the Polish prisoners. Jon saw a vast difference between the everyday Russian people and the Russian soldiers and members of the communist party. "The Russian government controlled everything. Everything controlled from how much you could eat, what you could grow, to where you could travel. The members of the party, and the army, they had everything. In winter, prisoners were better than civilians in Russian. Jon can still see the Russians lining up at 4 a.m., stamping their feet, at -40 degrees, for food. The people at the end of the line most often were turned away because there was nothing left for them."
- I ask Jon if he believes in god? "Oh yeah. Must be something, because I am here. My survival through so many times when all the others died, it is a miracle of God. I prayed a lot in tough times."
- What are you most proud of? "My family, my wife. I am so proud that I made a good life for them. I came with nothing, no money and no connections. It was up to me to make my life and I did it. I start with nothing and I make this good life."
- What would surprise people about you? "Lots of people ask me the secret, the secret to long life? Even with such a hell experience. I just tell them, I tell jokes, I eat well, and Emily is a good cook you know. I exercise. I have a routine to keep busy. If you sit and do nothing, you are nothing. I have a young wife. This keeps me going, to have someone to share life with, to be with. I went to Vernon for cataract surgery and I missed her. It was only two days. I missed her voice. When I come home from surgery, I was so happy to hear her voice again. We are a team. I cheer her up, she cheers me up. When old, more than ever, it is important more than anything else, to have a partner. She cares for me and I care for her."

- Jon likes to tell jokes, make people laugh. One of Jon's favorite jokes is when he was working at a logging camp and a friend had had only baby boys. Jon and Emily had just had two daughters. The friend has asked Jon his secret for having girls. Jon leaned over, and in a serious tone, told this joke. "I tell you friend, here is the secret to having a baby girl. This is what you do. You tell your wife to put on a little bit of perfume, and then you send her to me!"