

The Wartime experiences of the Gryff family

Following the death of Stefan Gryff on 3rd June 2017, Neil Hendry asked Chris Williams to write an obituary for the **Ian Hendry website**. Chris says he did a lot of research but found very little information. Later, Chris decided to dig a little deeper. This is his account of what he discovered.

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There was no explanation of how the Gryff family survived wartime Poland and ended up in Australia. In December 1946 Stefan was still in Poland but came under the protection of the OSE (a Jewish organisation for the health and welfare of Jewish children) and I managed to get hold of the file. That is where the photo came from of him as a child aged 8 years old. On the application form for aid it clearly states that his father (listed as Feliks Gryff) was deceased in Russia, but Stefan had survived the War with his mother. I dug around some more and began to see references to a book called Red Hell written by a Felix Gryff. It was self-published in 1997 in Australia. I tracked down only 7 copies that were in either state libraries or in University libraries. USA, Germany, Israel, and Australia. I contacted them all but no one would lend it to me and none of them had a digital file.

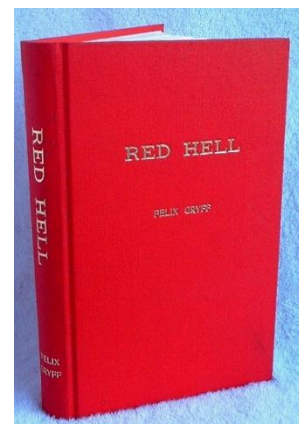


Stefan Gryff with Michael J Bird at the wedding of Bird's daughter Jane



The International inter-library lending scheme was very expensive and highly restrictive, but libraries in this country seemed very reluctant to help anyway. The library in Munich were able to tell me (via a friend) that the book had been loaned out by the *Staats Kriegskriminal Gericht, Hamburg*, (War Criminal Prosecution Unit, Hamburg) for use in the trial and the appeal hearing of Oskar Gröning at Lüneburg. They had it from 2015 until August this year and the library had only just got it back. Oskar Gröning was a guard at Auschwitz-Birkenau and is 95 now. He was sentenced to five years for War Crimes. Felix's book clearly played a part in his conviction.

More research and I came across a family genealogy website that listed the Gryff family. The entry was by a Michelle Fletcher. She turned out to be a second cousin of Stefan Gryff and the great niece of Fajvel Gryff, better known as Felix Gryff. It was him. He was author of the book Red Hell, but how could that be if he was listed as dead in December 1946? I contacted her and asked her if she had a copy of the book. She didn't but offered to try and find one in Sydney. Eventually she emailed to say that she had found one in a Synagogue library and that she had purchased it for me. I sent her the money and postage and two weeks later the book arrived.



This is the amazing story I discovered...

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The Gryff family were farmers and lived peacefully in Poland growing crops. They had land and lived quite well. Matis Gryff and Basia Gryff were Stefan's grandparents and they had seven children of which Felix was one. He was born in 1910. He studied law at university and was well educated. He married his wife Halina in 1933 and in May 1938 Stefan was born, their only child. In Sept 1939 Germany invaded western Poland and Felix was evacuated to eastern Poland believing it was safer, but the Germans had done a deal with Russia (Soviet Union) and later that month they invaded from the east. The country was effectively split down the middle and Felix found himself and his young family on the Russian side. The rest of his family were still in the west. The Russians basically stole everything they could find and it was sent back to Russia. The Polish currency was devalued so that what they did pay for was a fraction of its real value. Somehow Felix and his family survived during the occupation. Felix was arrested many times but always released.

In late 1943 things changed dramatically. The Germans were implementing 'the final solution' and Russia (under Stalin) realised they had complete freedom to do whatever they liked with Polish people. Felix was arrested by the NKVD (Russian Secret Police) along with millions of others, and charged with 'anti-Soviet activities' and of being a spy. He was tortured and told to sign a confession, but he would not yield. He was put before a 'court' where he had no defence or representation. He was found guilty and sentenced to death. His family were informed and that was that.

He was taken to a prison pending execution. He was treated brutally, malnourished, and kept in a filthy cell with eight other condemned men who all had various diseases. After two weeks Felix succumbed to disease as well and his skin broke out in painful weeping blisters. Men were kept for weeks and then taken away, never to be heard of again. Eventually Felix was ordered out of his cell and taken away. He found himself on an overcrowded train and he was told that his death sentence had been commuted to 15 years hard labour. He was on his way to a labour camp, or Gulag, in deepest Russia.

He arrived in frozen northern Russia. The conditions were terrible. Below freezing all day and up to -40^o at night. He was put to work felling trees with basic tools. Each man would have to do his quota or 'norm' or he would be put on half rations as a punishment and spend three days in the punishment cells. The work was back breaking and their clothing was little more than second hand rags. Heavily armed soldiers with dogs kept them working. The food consisted of poorly baked bread, a thin watery soup made with scraps of vegetables, and occasionally dried salted fish. Their daily intake was less than 1000 calories. There were beatings and brutal punishments. Most succumbed to disease and the cold, others just gave up and were beaten to death where they fell. 20-30 people a day died, but this was of no consequence. More prisoners arrived every day from Soviet occupied territories. They try to recruit Felix as an internal spy to make weekly reports about who was saying what and to whom. He refuses and spends several days in the punishment cells.

Felix seems to be endlessly transferred from camp to camp and treatment and conditions are as hard as ever. He is transferred to a brick factory in Central Asia. He mines clay and makes bricks by hand. Conditions are terrible and deaths are frequent as the mines regularly flood when the water pumps break down. From there he is transferred yet again.

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After a long journey lasting days with days of waiting in between, he arrives at Omlag camp working for the Omskroy organisation constructing an electro-heating station and an oil refinery. Stalin dies and Malenkov is now president and promises reform but it never comes. Pressure from International countries forces Malenkov to release political prisoners. Payment for labour camp workers is promised under a new system but they are cheated out of it and received only a fraction of what they were owed. What they do get is stolen from them anyway or they have to use it to buy bread at grossly inflated prices. Documentation disguised the fact that forced labour was used, and prisoners' nationalities and status were changed to hide the truth. Conditions are less severe, but the slightest suggestion of anti-Russian talk was severely punished. He is now able to put in a written complaint about his sentence, but it's just a paper exercise. The Soviets are determined to keep their slave labour camps, but International pressure is mounting.

There was an escape from the camp and all hell broke loose. For days the camp was turned upside down. Eventually the escapees were found and shot, their bodies left at the front gates for three days as a warning. Even these prisoners could only take so much and strikes and resistance were frequent now as their hopes were raised by the news of the pressure from other countries. There was even a hunger strike. The Russian military MVD dealt with it harshly but the strikes continued and interrupted the work. There were even acts of sabotage. Felix is about to be transferred yet again, this time to the copper mines of Dzaskazgan.

The Soviets are forced by international pressure to release the labour camp prisoners and allow them to return to their natural countries. It's a long and slow process, halted and stalled at every opportunity and Felix is transferred many, many times. Conditions are much better now and life is at least bearable, but it's still a repressive existence. Felix writes to his wife Halina but never receives a reply.

Eventually in 1955, after much prevarication, false starts, delays, moves to other camps, tricks and lies, Felix finally arrives back in Poland. He is released. His wife is there to meet him after being told of his release. She has waited faithfully for him to return even though they were told he was dead. She never gave up hope. Stefan has had tuberculosis and spent time in a sanatorium, but they have both survived with great difficulty. As the wife of a convicted political prisoner she suffered enormous hardship.

Against all the odds Felix has survived too, but Poland is not the same country he left. Although he is back and totally innocent of the false charges brought against him in 1943 that put him in the labour camps, he is greeted by the Polish authorities as an ex-prisoner, someone who had committed political offences against a friendly country and considered an unreliable element. He was refused residency in Warsaw and offered work in a coal mine.

He discovers that his parents were murdered by the Germans on arrival at Treblinka extermination camp in 1942. Many of his other relatives suffered the same fate at other camps. Stefan's Aunt Franca (Felix's sister) was sent to Poniatowa concentration camp. Conditions were reasonable and she worked making German Military uniforms. When the camp was closed the workers were forced to dig 'anti-aircraft' ditches, unaware of their true purpose. When they were completed the workers were lined up in groups and shot in the back of the head falling onto the dead bodies of the workers that had been

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shot seconds before. In total, on 3–4 November 1943 some 43,000 male and female prisoners were shot over a long line of these fake anti-aircraft trenches.

Having read the whole book I can see there is a coded reference to his wife and son. He refers to her as Mrs H and says he knows her husband very well. He describes her plight in Poland whilst he is in the labour camps, but it's very brief. Stefan is only mentioned by name once but it's clear that he contracted tuberculosis aged 12 and was in a sanatorium. His wife had no contact with Felix for 12 years and did not know if he was dead or alive.

Felix decides to leave Poland and go to Australia. This involves a six month stopover in Rome waiting for acceptance. This is where he writes the book. They move to Australia and start a new life. Felix builds a successful textile business and Stefan goes to University to study law and later moves to England in 1967 to take up acting. The book however is not published. Felix was warned on pain of death to never talk about his time in the labour camps. He must have feared for his life even then, and the safety of his family. He seems to have only published the book after his wife's death in 1996. Perhaps she forbid him to do so, again fearing for their safety. Felix died in Oct 2000 aged 90.

In the photographs you can see the startling resemblance Stefan has to his mother. She clearly gave him the Captain Krasakis raised right eyebrow that we all know so well.

Millions of Polish Jews suffered similar fates as well as other nationalities. Red Hell is one such survivor's account.

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