

WELSH NEARLY COST HIM HIS LIFE:

William Roberts and Joyce's mother Jean.



HE WAS shot during his escape from a German war prison and then arrested as a spy on his return to British soil – this is the remarkable story of Assembly Member Joyce Watson's father.

Welsh speaker William Roberts escaped with his life – minus one toe as a result of the shooting – but upon entering Scotland on a British ship his hopes of survival hit a new low when he was arrested on suspicion of being a German spy because of his inability to speak fluent English.

Almost 70 years later his daughter, Assembly Member for Mid and West Wales Joyce Watson, has spoken of her father's World War II ordeal and how it resulted in her never being taught Welsh as a child.

"My father was just 21 years old and working on Cwm Pen farm in Llanbrynmair when he was called up to the Royal Welch Fusiliers in 1940," explained Joyce.

"He used to attend Llanbrynmair school on a mountain pony because the road stopped three fields short of the farm. As a result, and you have to remember that they didn't have things such as television, he was very much cut off from outside life.

"He was taught through the medium of Welsh and as a result was a first language Welsh speaker with a poor grasp of English. "When he was called up to the army he was told he would be given three months to learn the English language, but the war being the war he found himself setting off to serve his country on the frontline after just three weeks of tuition. "He was captured during the D-Day landings and was made a prisoner of war in Poland. Treatment was harsh but his farming background helped him survive as the Germans needed skilled shepherds.

"His prison job gave him some freedom to move around the camp and one night he cut a hole in the fence and escaped. Despite being shot at and losing his big toe as a result of his injuries, he eventually found safe haven on a British ship which was headed to Scotland.

"But when the ship docked he was faced with another ordeal when he was arrested as a spy because he responded better to the authorities when they asked him questions in German than in English.

"It was only by luck that someone then realised that the language he was speaking was Welsh."

Growing up as child Joyce Watson was banned from speaking Welsh at home and her father went as far as refusing to teach her the language.

"My father's experience convinced him that he didn't want his children to go through the same thing.

"He had eight children (four sons) and like many other people of his generation he was convinced that there would be another war so he refused to speak Welsh at home," added the Labour AM.

But as an adult Mrs Watson, Labour's Rural Affairs Spokeswoman, has made it her mission to learn her father's native tongue. She has also sent her children to Welsh language schools.

"I lost out on my heritage because of my father's experiences," she said. "I'm proud of his achievements, but I wish he'd taught me Welsh as a child. I had a real desire to learn Welsh as an adult.

"I am proud of the revival in the language and I think it is important to speak Welsh in terms of understanding our cultural heritage."

During Mr Robert's time as a prisoner of war in Poland he discovered a talent for learning foreign languages quickly, and by the time he returned to Britain he could speak Polish, German, Russian, French and Italian.

Having discovered this flair for languages he put this talent to good use, working for the British Army as a translator. He remained in active service as a staff sergeant until 1964.

While on service in Scotland in Camp Hamilton in Stranraer he met his future wife Jean. In 1947 the couple were married and settled in Pembrokeshire to raise their eight children – four daughters and four sons, while he served with the Royal Artillery in Manorbier.



William Roberts & daughter Joyce Watson

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