

Walthamstow Avenue

Stan Gerula (1914-1979)

Stanislaw Eugeniusz Gerula was born February 21, 1914, in Poland at Dzików under Tarnobrzeg. His first club was *Falcon Tarnobrzeg*, where he established himself as a smart, talented goalkeeper.



Shortly after his 20th birthday he went to *Wisla Krakow* who are one of Poland's foremost clubs. He played his first game in front of their home crowd on 24 June 1934. Between then and 1936 he played only six matches for *Wisla*. This was because he was in the club's third goalkeeper and had no chance of playing regularly. As a result, he decided to leave and parted from the club without regret.

After leaving *Wisla Krakow* he played for *Junak Drohobych*. This club was established in 1931, and its activities ended with the outbreak of World War II when, following Soviet attacks on Eastern Poland, it was disbanded in the Autumn of 1939 by the Soviet occupying authorities.

In the early months of the war, members of *Junak Drohobych* created the *White Couriers*, a boy scouting organization which smuggled hundreds of persons from the area of Lwow to Hungary, across the Soviet-Hungarian border in the Carpathians.

The club is enrolled permanently in Polish history. After the outbreak of the war almost all the players of the club fought in the ranks of the Polish Army in the West.

Initially, *Stanislaw Gerula*, like the others was a 'White Courier' safely escorting people wanted by the Germans to Hungary. Then, he and colleagues took advantage of the contacts they had developed in Hungary and Yugoslavia and went to Syria, where he joined the newly formed *Polish Independent Carpathian Rifle Brigade* that went on to serve with distinction in Palestine, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Egypt and Italy .

After the war, *Stanislaw Gerula*, together with other *Junak Drohobych* player survivors

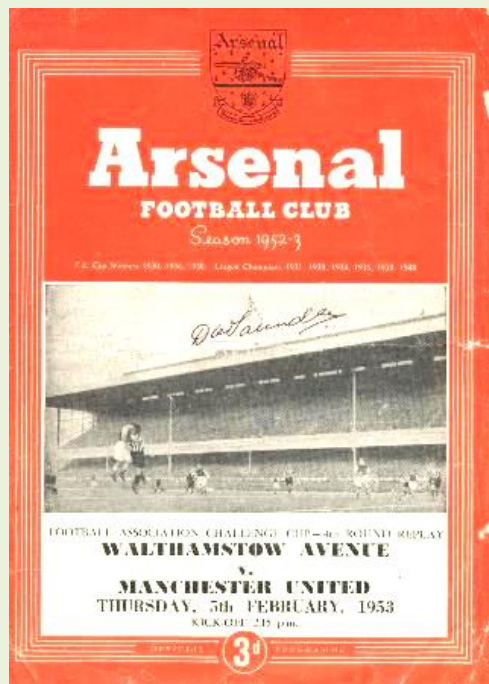
formed a soldier's football team called Carpatian NS in England. He was the goal keeper of this team of Polish soldiers between 1946 and 1947. His brilliance in goal aroused the interest of English clubs and in 1948, *Stan Gerula* signed an amateur contract with Leyton Orient, where he played for two years.

In 1950, he joined Walthamstow Avenue who were the UK's leading amateur club. In April 1952, Walthamstow reached the finals of the London FA Amateur Cup playing against Leyton at Wembley and Walthamstow won 2-1 scoring the winning goal in the last few minutes of extra time. *Stan Gerula* was the first Pole to play in the famous stadium and it is worth noting that at the time of the final at Wembley, *Stan Gerula* was 38 years!



WALTHAMSTOW AVENUE (1951-1952 Amateur Cup winners)

Later that year Walthamstow Avenue played Arsenal at Highbury in the 1st round of the London FA challenge cup. The result was a 2-2 draw



English fans best remember the Polish goalkeeper from a match at Old Trafford, January 31, 1953, when Walthamstow Avenue met with Manchester United in the fourth round of the FA Cup. *Stan Gerula* was the hero of the match, defending dozens of shots on goal from the Manchester star footballers. What was supposed to be a formality for the home team, was a nightmare with the match ending in a 1-1 draw and had to be replayed. Because Walthamstow's stadium was too small, the re-match was held at Arsenal's Highbury ground. There were 53,000 fans at the match expecting to see Walthamstow Avenue being annihilated. The game was played at a thrilling pace and resulted in a 5-2 win for Manchester United.

This was the time when sport was still divided into 'amateur' and 'professional' players. Amateurs took part in sport without recompense, while professionals were paid. This meant that most amateur players were part time players had to carry out other paid work to earn their livings. Generally the two didn't mix and played in their different own leagues and competitions.

But, times were changing and leading amateur teams like Walthamstow Avenue were actually semi-professional teams. In a practice known as 'boot money' (Because, in the dressing room, money allegedly was stuffed into a players boot) they made under the counter payments to their best players and *Stan Gerula* was also given a token job as the groundsman at the club)

Throughout the 60's the distinction between 'amateur' and professional players gradually changed until the rule against paying players in amateur clubs was relaxed. It was this process that marked the beginning of the end for top amateur clubs.



In the 1960's although now too old to play at top level, *Stan Gerula* remained associated with football and with the immigrant Polish community. He organized football clubs for



young people and sought sponsors for the development of Polish sport in exile. In 1963, he visited Poland with his young football team and played matches against local teams..

He continued to live in London and died on August 29, 1979. His body was taken home to Poland and he was buried in the Rakowice Cemetery in Krakow.

Bill Bayliss

October 2014