

MINISTRY OF NATIONAL DEFENSE
REPUBLIC OF POLAND

WWII OUTBREAK ANNIVERSARY

1939

POLAND First to Fight

SEPTEMBER 1 - SEPTEMBER 17

THE BEGINNING



*The day was called September the First.
The kids were off to school now it was autumn.
The Germans raised the red-and-white striped
barrier of the Poles, and the droning tanks,
like fingernails on silver-foil for chocolate,
flattened the cavalry.*

*Top up your glasses
with vodka for the lancers where they stand
at the front of the assembly of the dead
when the register is taken.*

*Still on the wind
the birches rustle and the leaves are falling
on the discarded caps of the uhlands,
on the roof of a house without the noise of children,
where the clouds are crawling with a rumbling sound
across the rolled-up windows.*

Joseph Brodsky, 1967
Translated by Glyn Maxwell

1st SEPTEMBER



A 12-year-old Kazimiera Kostewicz
leaning over the body of her sister Anna
killed in an air attack on the outskirts
of Warsaw on September 9, 1939.
Photo by AIPN/ Julien Bryan's collection

Not so long ago, when witnesses and participants of the events were still alive, September 1 was associated with an apocalypse into which the whole world plunged in 1939. On the same day, one of the most famous modern English poets, Wystan Hugh Auden, a disillusioned participant of the Spanish Civil War, wrote prophetic words while sitting in a New York bar: "Accurate scholarship can / Unearth the whole offence / From Luther until now / That has driven a culture mad, / Find what occurred at Linz, / What huge imago made / A psychopathic god: / I and the public know / What all schoolchildren learn, / Those to whom evil is done / Do evil in return." (*September 1, 1939*). The war which Hitler wanted to locate in Poland, a state left to the mercy of Germany and Russia, inevitably spread across all continents, bringing unimaginable pain and suffering to many other nations. The words of Auden's poem are still topical and sound equally dramatic: "We must love one another or die."

PHOTO: JAKUB SZYMCIUK



MARIUSZ BŁASZCZAK
DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER
MINISTER OF NATIONAL DEFENSE

FIRST TO FIGHT

Dear Readers,

On September 1, 1939, World War II started when Germany invaded Poland. While repelling the enemy in the west, on September 17 we were attacked by the Red Army from the east. The alliance of evil symbolized by a swastika and a hammer and sickle was sealed. Polish soldiers stood up and fought, and the Polish nation from the first days of the war experienced the brutality of the aggressors. Poland stood no chance in the fight on two fronts, without any military support of the allies. Nevertheless, we never laid down our arms, and the phenomenon of the Polish underground state with the Home Army until today remains unrivalled. Despite five years of occupation, terror, mass extermination of our nation, dishonoring our land by German factories of death – German concentration camps, we never lost hope that Poland, once again, would regain its independence. This war is a collective, tragic experience of many countries in Europe and in the world.

But for us – the Poles – who bled out fighting on two fronts with brutal forces of Germany and the Soviet Union, who fought with devotion on almost all fronts of the world, the end of the war with Germany was the beginning of a new, Soviet domination.

There is no external power in the entire world which would ever force us, Polish people, to reconcile with enslavement. Our nation has never mentally submitted to the influence of lies, violence and disdain for human life. World War II is still an open painful wound for us. It should also be a lesson for all to realize that it is not worth to compromise with evil and give way to it just for the sake of short-term peace. A currently ongoing war proves that, as the Ukrainians, supported by free nations, are heroically fighting with the eternal Russian aggressor.

We are analyzing this threat and we are responding to it. We are reinforcing our armed forces. The modern Polish Armed Forces are strong, professional and equipped with advanced weapons. We are an important and appreciated ally.

Polish soldiers guard the security of our Homeland. They are motivated and they remember our history. We are proud of the Polish soldiers' courage, valor and devotion. They inspire admiration, respect and gratitude. Poland will never forget their sacrifice.

Honor and Glory to the Heroes!

*God
Honour
Fatherland*





Adolf Hitler,
Leader of the
Third Reich



SEPTEMBER 1, 1939

BROWNSHIRT K

“A sad day for all of us, and to none is it sadder than to me.” – these were the first words of Prime Minister Arthur Neville Chamberlain’s address to the nation on September 3, 1939, in which he announced that the Kingdom of Great Britain was at war with Germany. With that, Hitler’s attack on Poland officially became a world conflict.

Contrary to the pessimistic mood of Chamberlain and his ministers, the news about Great Britain, and later France, joining the war, caused an outburst of enthusiasm in Poland.

Unfortunately, Polish hopes were soon shattered. Despite having declared war, the Western powers did not provide any effective help to their ally in September 1939. Poland was left alone in the fight first against the German, and later also against the Soviet aggressors. However, a world war guaranteed that the Polish cause would not be immediately buried in the diplomatic offices of global powers. Before his death, Marshal Józef Piłsudski advised his closest associates to do everything in their power to “ignite the whole world” in the event of a German attack. In spite of all, they actually achieved it with the French, and above all the British, guarantees given to the Polish Minister for Foreign Affairs Józef Beck right before the outbreak of the war. It must however be noted that regardless of the British and French guarantees, their decision on declaring war with Germany took a long time to brew, and was still brewing even after a German battleship had opened fire at Westerplatte in the early morning of September 1, 1939, and when first bombs had fallen on Polish cities. It is enough to trace back the events of that day in London to see how difficult it was for Western politicians to come to terms with the fact that their policy of peace at any cost in the end proved to be futile.

The campaign that was beginning at the time went down in history as the “strange” or the “card-playing” campaign, because, according to reports, instead of fighting, the French and the British soldiers were playing cards and emptying wine bottles, while the Polish army was bleeding out in the fights with the Germans and later with the Soviets. It is not an entirely fair judgment, because despite the fact that the French and British land and air forces did remain quite static, the situation on the sea was different. The British navy, from the first moments of the war with Germany, began to inflict heavy losses on the German vessels – particularly transport ships, and at that point any form of armistice was already impossible. Hitler’s hope that the war with Poland would remain a local conflict was ultimately shattered, and some more acute German commanders, such as Admiral Canaris, the Chief of the Abwehr, realized that Germany was heading towards yet another catastrophe. A global character of the war that began in 1939 undoubtedly gave Poland hope it would not be left entirely to the mercy of its two totalitarian neighbors. It was confirmed by the prompt establishment of General Władysław Sikorski’s government, and the rebuilding of the Polish army in the West. That, in turn, also provided the impulse to almost immediately form the anti-German and anti-Soviet conspiracy in Poland.

Piotr Korczyński

German forces in 09/1939: 1,850,000 soldiers, 2,800 tanks, 2,000 aircraft

LLERS



Did You Know...?

On the early morning of September 1, 1939, Germany attacked Poland.

At 4:45 a.m., the Schleswig-Holstein battleship, docked at the port of the Free City of Danzig, began shelling the Polish **Westerplatte** peninsula, where the Polish Military Transit Depot was located. It was the personnel of the depot that took on the first attack of the war. They managed to hold the outpost for seven long days. Their heroic defense of Westerplatte became a symbolic beginning of that terrible war.

On the same morning, the Germans attacked the building of the **Polish Post Office** in the Free City of Danzig. Fifty employees of the post office, who only had hand guns and a military training, until late evening successfully defended the building against the German police and SS units equipped with armor, artillery and flame throwers. The Polish survivors were later shot to death by the Germans on the strength of a military court decision that recognized them as "illegal combatants."

On the same day, before dawn, the German air force bombed a sleeping town of **Wieluń** in Greater Poland, which was in consequence razed to the ground. World War II began.

AUGUST 23

Foreign ministers of the German Reich and the Soviet Union – Joachim von Ribbentrop and Vyacheslav Molotov – conclude a secret pact in Moscow, dividing the region of Central and Eastern Europe between their two states. It is a condition necessary for Hitler to begin war with Poland

SEPTEMBER 1

Germans use all their forces to hit Poland in the north and west, and in the south from the territory of Slovakia. The western border of the Reich is left with practically no defense

SEPTEMBER 3

Great Britain and France declare war on Germany, but they do not take any armed action on land

SEPTEMBER 17

The Soviet Union attacks Poland from the east. Polish government officials leave the country

SEPTEMBER 22

In Lviv, occupied by Germans and Russians, a resistance movement is created for the territory of the future Russian occupation

SEPTEMBER 27

In Warsaw, besieged by the Germans, a resistance movement is created for the territory of the future German occupation

SEPTEMBER 28

The Polish capital, Warsaw, surrenders. Germany and the Soviet Union sign a non-aggression pact – western and central territories of Poland are annexed by Germany, and eastern regions by Soviet Russia, which incorporates them into the Byelorussian and Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republics

SEPTEMBER 30

A new Polish Government-in-Exile is formed in Paris

OCTOBER 6

The last Polish military units capitulate, attacked by the Germans and the Russians in the Battle of Kock in the Lublin region

OCTOBER 8

Hitler issues a decree proclaiming the annexation of the western territories of Poland into the Reich



SEPTEMBER 17, 1939 **RED** **AGGRESSION**

“A stab in the back!” – shouted the headline on the front page of the British Times A day after the Soviets attacked Poland. The headline perfectly reflected the actions of the Red Army, which fulfilled the Soviet Union’s allied obligations towards Wehrmacht, but at the same time took advantage of the aberration of Poland’s Western allies who left the country at the mercy of its two totalitarian neighbors.

Saturday, September 16, 1939, was a black day for the SS units fighting in Poland. Hitler’s forces were significantly decimated by the Polish soldiers. First, Gen Kazimierz Sosnkowski’s units, on their way to relieve Lviv, defeated the SS-Germania Regiment in the woods near Jaworów, and later, near Sochaczew, a single battery of the 17th Light Artillery Regiment stopped an attack of the entire 4th Armored Division, including the elite Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler Regiment. Several Polish guns damaged and destroyed 22 German tanks and armored vehicles! This news spurred outrage at Hitler’s headquarters. He had the right to be furious – despite his commanders’ guarantees that they would seize Warsaw within a few days, the capital was still defending itself, and the Polish army was still capable of fierce attacks. To make matters worse, Stalin kept postponing the execution of the obligations given in the Ribbentrop – Molotov pact, and did not attack

Poland from the east, regardless of increasing pressure from Berlin.

Kremlin’s Chimes

Stalin delayed the attack on Poland, because despite his alliance with Hitler, he still reckoned with the opinion of the West. He knew the Red Army, after the purge among its commanders he himself ordered, was not yet ready to fight the allied forces. However, on the same day that the Polish soldiers were destroying SS regiments, the French and English staff officers decided during a conference in Abbeville they would not provide armed support to Poland, which was quickly reported to the Kremlin by Soviet agents. Hearing the news, Stalin immediately stopped hesitating and ordered to send messages to the Soviet forces, deployed on the western border of his country.

In the early morning of September 17, the Soviets summoned Wacław Grzybowski, the Polish ambassador



**Soviet
forces in
09/1939:
618,000
soldiers,
4,740 tanks,
1,000
aircraft**

in Moscow, and handed him a note stating that “the Polish state and its Government have actually ceased to exist. Thus, the treaties concluded between the USSR and Poland have lost their validity [...] Also, the Soviet Government cannot remain indifferent to the fact that the “brotherly” Ukrainian and Byelorussian people living on the territory of Poland are defenseless and have been left to their fate. Therefore, the Soviet Government instructed the High Command of the Red Army to order the troops to cross the border and take under their protection the life and property of the population of Western Ukraine and Western Byelorussia.” The statement that the Polish state did not exist was to protect the Soviet Union in the event of a reaction from Western powers and create the appearance of neutrality in the conflict between Germany and France and Great Britain, which actually turned out to be a successful plan.

Even more so that despite the fact ambassador Grzybowski refused to accept the mendacious note, the Polish state authorities, pressed by the Western allies, backed off and did not officially announce that they were at war with the Soviet Union. The West still counted on winning over the Soviets. Polish civilian and military authorities, on the other hand, were surprised with the Soviet attack, although the Polish intelligence had long reported on the concentration of Soviet troops on the border.

On the night of September 17/18, the Polish president and government made their way to Romania. Marshal Rydz-Śmigły and his staff soon followed, which was outrageous for a significant part of the Polish society, and gave rise to accusations that they had abandoned the still fighting army.

Fights with the Soviet Giant

The Soviet forces attacking Poland had been formed into two fronts. The Byelorussian Front under Army Commander Mikhail Kovalyov, in the first hours of attack counted 15 infantry and cavalry divisions, and seven armored brigades (over 2,000 tanks and armored vehicles) – over 200,000 soldiers in total, and this number increased in the following days. Semyon Timoshenko's Ukrainian Front initially had 16 infantry and cavalry divisions, and eight armored brigades (almost 3,000 tanks and armored vehicles), i.e. over 265,000 soldiers, supported from the air by about 1,000 aircraft. On top of that, the regular units of the Red Army were supported by sabotage groups, formed and armed by the Soviet military intelligence and NKVD, and comprising of Byelorussian, Ukrainian and Jewish citizens of the Republic of Poland.

These massive armies were met in the Eastern Borderlands (Kresy Wschodnie) by incomparably smaller Polish forces of 400,000, which were left by the military command to protect the region. The border was directly protected by almost 12,000 soldiers of the Border Protection Corps, organized into 25 battalions and seven cavalry squadrons. Most of these units, despite the overwhelming superiority of enemy forces, engaged in the fight.

However, the Polish forces did not stand a chance of stopping the Soviet giant. From September 23, the Russian newspaper Pravda began printing maps with the line dividing the German and the Soviet territorial gains, proving without any doubt that the Third Reich and the Soviet Union were engaging in the fourth partition of Poland.

Piotr Korczyński

UHLANS CHARGE TO FREE WARSAW



The tactics of the Polish cavalry in 1939 anticipated that Uhlans, the Polish light cavalry, would fight on foot. The times of charges on horseback were considered long gone, and horses were primarily used for transportation. Yet nothing surprises the enemy on the battlefield as much as breaking a set pattern. The brave decision to attack the enemy from the saddle let the Polish Uhlans defeat the Germans on the outskirts of Warsaw and reach the city.

From mid-September 1939, the German Army gradually tightened its grip around Warsaw. According to given orders, numerous and still unbroken Polish detachments tried to advance on Warsaw to defend it. One of them was the 14th Jazłowiec Uhlans Regiment, led by Col Edward Godlewski. On September 19, the regiment reached German positions blocking the way into Warsaw from the west. Col Godlewski decided to surprise the Germans with an attack they did not expect – a cavalry charge.

The Uhlans began their horseback charge towards German fighting positions located inside the woods. Col Godlewski and Lt Marian Walicki, 3rd Squadron commander, led the charge along with the colors. The Germans responded with heavy fire, but the Uhlans managed to reach them, sabers in hand. Taken aback, the Germans were unable to face the charging cavalry.

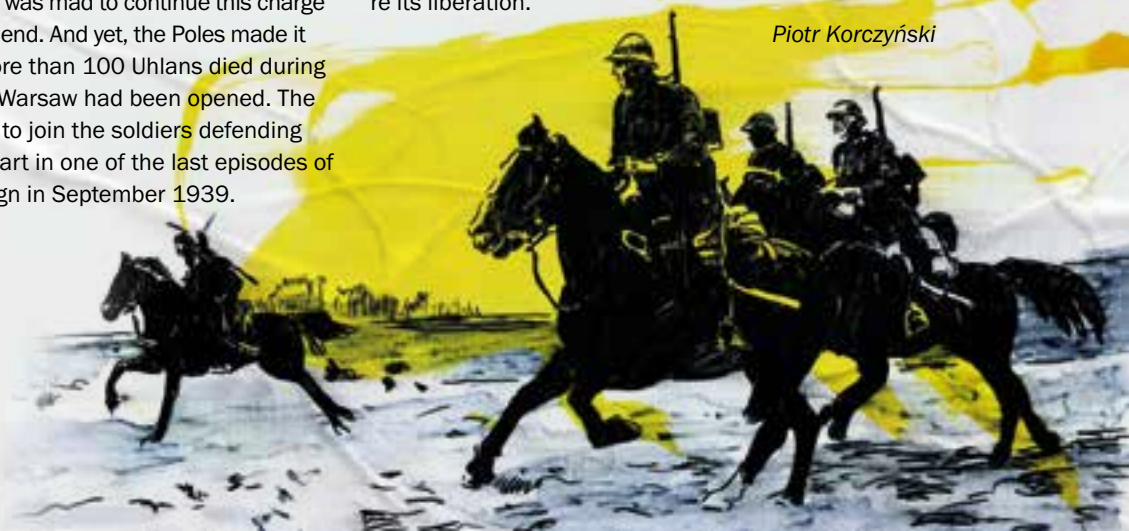
An astonished Italian war correspondent, attached to the German troops, wrote: "Polish cavalry charged at full speed, like in medieval drawings! Their commander was galloping in the front with a raised saber. The distance between the group of Polish cavalry and the wall of German fire was closing. It was mad to continue this charge and meet death at the end. And yet, the Poles made it through!" Although more than 100 Uhlans died during the battle, the way to Warsaw had been opened. The cavalrymen managed to join the soldiers defending the capital and took part in one of the last episodes of the defensive campaign in September 1939.

Did You Know...?

In 1939, Germany brutally invaded Poland. In response, the Polish Underground State was created, comprising of the Service for Poland's Victory in the occupied country, and the Union of Armed Struggle abroad. In February 1942, these were transformed into the Home Army. In its peak period, the Home Army counted 380,000 soldiers – men, women and children – operating underground or fighting in partisan units.

Col Edward Godlewski, under the nickname "Garda," became an officer of the underground Polish Home Army. He died as a prisoner of the German Mauthausen concentration camp in May 1945, just a few days before its liberation.

Piotr Korczyński





POLISH “UR”

AGAINST GERMAN TANKS

In 1939, Polish Army units started receiving wooden boxes marked “Do not open! Measuring device.” In July, the leadership finally ordered the mysterious boxes to be opened. It turned out that they contained UR anti-tank rifles. This weapon, produced in Poland, came as a complete surprise to German armored forces.



After Poland regained its independence in 1918, the country faced a great challenge of industrialization. Industry had to be quickly rebuilt in order to satisfy the needs of society. The Polish Armed Forces had massive equipment deficiencies, using armament of foreign origin. Thus, without developing a technological base, building a strong army was simply impossible. Domestic production was a real challenge, but made possible thanks to the passion and talent of people like **Józef Maroszek**, one of the best known rifle manufacturers of the interwar period.

Maroszek's most famous design was the UR anti-tank rifle. Developed at the end of the 1930s, the weapon was truly excellent. It was capable of penetrating 15-mm

armor at a distance of 300 m, and up to 30 mm at a distance of 100 m. URs became a threat to most tanks used by European armies during this period. The rifle proved its effectiveness across the battlefields in September 1939. Wherever Polish soldiers used URs, German tankers had to be very careful.

The production of the new weapon was kept secret. Its name, UR, is an abbreviation for Uruguay. In order to confuse foreign intelligence, it was meant to suggest the product was to be exported specifically to Uruguay. Even Polish Army units received the weapons in secret.

The weapon developed by engineer Józef Maroszek was capable of effectively penetrating the armor of most tanks used by the Germans at the time.

Maciej Chilczuk





ALONE AGAINST A COLUMN OF TANKS

Germans were advancing from the west in a large column of about 60 tanks. They dominated with both superior technology and a greater number of troops. Poles had only one goal – resist the attack for as long as possible in order to let the main forces retreat to defensive positions.

The soldiers of the 85th Vilnius Rifle Regiment selected an area that was fit for defense – a small hill on the verge of a forest between the village of Moszczenica and the town of Piotrków Trybunalski. The soldiers hid in shallow trenches, behind trees, and scattered across the meadow on the verge of the forest as they waited for the Germans. Even though they expected tanks, they did not have any heavy anti-tank weapons to engage in a well-matched fight.

Stefan Karaszewski, a 24-year-old platoon leader and resident of the nearby town of Tomaszów Mazowiecki, waited for the enemy at one of the defensive firing positions. All he had was a heavy machine gun, a box full of hand grenades and certainty that he was fighting for a good cause.

The fight started when the first tanks entered the heavily mined meadow. PltLdr Stefan Karaszewski, with his HMG, took a position near the railway track and from there shot at the approaching German tanks. It was a lost battle from the start – the disproportion of forces was too great. Aware of the danger, LtCol Jan Kruk-Śmigła, the commander of the 85th Regiment, decided to withdraw eastwards. Stefan Karaszewski announced he would stay and cover his retreating fellows.

With only a heavy machine gun and a box of grenades, Karaszewski fought alone for more than two hours. He successfully eliminated at least six tanks. However, the lonely fight could not last forever – Karaszewski was running out of ammunition, so he decided to keep the last grenade for himself.

Robert Sendek

Did You Know...?

A team of Polish cryptologists, led by **Marian Rejewski**, worked out the way the famous cipher machine Enigma encoded messages. Due to this breakthrough discovery, the allies were able to track the movement of the German forces. Breaking the Enigma code substantially shortened WWII and saved the lives of millions of people. The Polish officers, keeping a military secret, never spoke about their achievement. The world took advantage of that, falsifying history and omitting the key role of the Polish scientists. Until this day, the false myth has been preserved in many blockbuster movies.

1939



THE POWER OF AN OFFICER'S OATH



Poles were facing a continually charging German force that was 40 times stronger than their own. Ammunition was running dangerously low and casualties were rapidly increasing. It was clear that Poles had no chance of winning the battle.

Capt **Władysław Raginis**, troop commander, finally ordered his men to surrender their arms. He himself did not leave the bunker. He promised his soldiers he would defend the redoubt until death and he kept the last grenade for himself.

Preparing for the impending war with Germany, Polish leadership had to take into account the threat that lay in wait in East Prussia, a German enclave on the Baltic coast. An effective charge from that direction would let Germans attack the rear of the main Polish forces defending the western border. In order to secure that region, Poles decided to build a fortified line that was supposed to stop a likely German attack and prevent the Poles from being surrounded.

The construction of the fortifications started in the spring of 1939 on the line of two rivers, Biebrza and Narew. The weakest point of the whole strip was located near the village of Wizna. German intelligence must have known about it, as their main line of attack ran exactly across Wizna.

On September 7, 1939, a famous German General, Heinz Guderian, arrived in Wizna with approximately 40,000 troops and 350 tanks. Opposing them were 370 Polish soldiers hidden in multiple bunkers. The Poles were heavily outnumbered. The fate of the battle was sealed.

However, Polish soldiers knew they occupied decisive terrain and they had to defend it for as long as possible.

Did You Know...?

General Guy Simonds, Commander of the Canadian II Corps, within the structure of which the Polish 1st Armored Division fought on the fields of Normandy, while visiting the battlefield near Falaise where **General Stanisław Maczek's** soldiers for several days repelled attacks of the German armored divisions, said with astonishment that he had never witnessed such a slaughter of German armor. From that day on, the allies started calling the Falaise Pocket the "Polish Battlefield," and the Poles themselves nicknamed it "Psie Pole" (Dog's Field).

In order to raise the soldiers' spirit, Raginis officially pledged to defend the position until death. The Poles bravely resisted heavy artillery and air-to-ground fire, until finally Capt Raginis accepted the surrender proposal. He ordered his men to go out of the bunker and give up, but he kept his word and stayed put, leaving the last grenade for himself.

Maciej Chilczuk



SS-GERMANIA'S POLISH NIGHT

It is not true that after the Campaign of 1939 Hitler removed the SS-Germania Regiment, defeated by Polish troops, from the German Ordre de Bataille. However, it is true that the defeat was a huge blow to Hitler's elite. Elated with the hitherto easy wins, the SS men, with their hands covered in the blood of Polish civilians from Sosnowiec and Katowice, did not endure a 30-minute attack of the Polish bayonets.

The Germans, certain of their technological advantage that was clearly confirmed in the initial days of the war, were nevertheless scared of Polish bayonet attacks. If the Poles managed to get through the machine gun and artillery line of fire, nothing was able to stop them. Surprise attacks were even worse, and that was exactly the tactic adopted by Kazimierz Sosnkowski's Małopolska Army divisions when they met the SS-Standarte Germania troops attached to Wehrmacht units blocking Sosnkowski's way to Lviv.

The hitherto actions of Hitler's elite mechanized regiment, SS-Germania, involved more executions than actual battle achievements. For the first three days of the war, the regiment was stationed in Gliwice. On September 4, it was transferred to Sosnowiec, left by the Polish army, where it immediately joined the arrests and executions conducted by Bruno Streckenbach's Einsatzgruppe I. The troops from SS-Germania participated in, among other things, the mass executions in Panewniki forest near Katowice, where over 150 people were murdered. A part of the regiment would pay for those and



other similar "combat operations" very quickly, on the night of September 15, 1939. To be exact, they were the detachments supporting the 1st Mountain Division, taking positions in the villages of Przyłbice, Mużyłowice,

Mogila i Czarnokońce. Mużyłowice was the seat of the regiment's command, along with the 3rd battalion and auxiliary detachments. The village became the main arena for Nemesis, whose fury came down on the Germans on this fateful night.

Bayonets On!

During the briefing in Sądowa Wisznia, on September 15, General Sosnkowski decided that he and his army would push through Janów Forest to Lviv. For his division commanders, it meant ordering their soldiers to attack the German units blocking their way. On the evening of that day, the regiments of **Col Bronisław Prugar-Ketling's** 11th Infantry Division and Col Alojzy Wir-Konas's 38th Infantry Division (Reserve) went into battle. Waves of Polish infantry hit the German mountain riflemen and motorized SS men. The most distinguished unit in the battle was LtCol Karol Hoda's 49th Hutsul Rifle Regiment of the



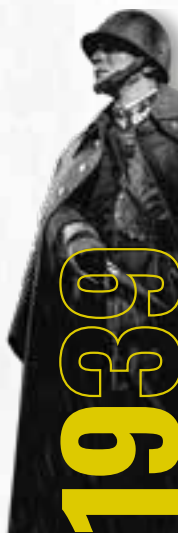
11th Carpathian Infantry Division. When General Prugar-Ketling learned from one of the local inhabitants that the SS unit's staff was located in Mużyłowice, he ordered LtCol Hodała to seize the village in a night attack. He also instructed for the soldiers appointed to execute the attack to unload their weapons – this was to provide the attack with an element of surprise, which could easily be lost due to an accidental or untimely shot.

LtCol Hodała's Hutsuls came down on the Germans like ghosts after midnight on September 16. They stabbed the SS men with their bayonets in total darkness and silence, at times interrupted by a German machine gun, eliminated immediately by enraged Poles. The rage was so uncontrollable that the Germans did not even try to ask for pardon. They died in an attack they had not expected, which they experienced for the first and the last time in their lives. The corpses of the SS men, examined by the Polish officers after the battle, were terrifying to look at. "The fear they felt was still on their faces" – wrote Bronisław Prugar-Ketling, a future general, in his post-battle account.

The Only Such Victory

In Mużyłowice, SS-Germania lost almost all its heavy equipment, including eight 105-mm howitzers, a battery of anti-aircraft guns, most mortars and machine guns, and all vehicles. Unfortunately, the seized heavy equipment was of no use to the Polish army due to the lack of appropriately trained soldiers. It was destroyed on the spot by sappers. However, the losses in people were much more painful for the SS.

General Prugar-Ketling, in his memoirs, written during internment in Switzerland, wrote that having heard about the defeat of his regiment, Hitler got furious and ordered for it to be removed from the army ranks. In reality, though, most of the regiment forces were concentrated already on September 17, and later used to cover the wings of the



Did You Know...?

General Stanisław Maczek, Commander of the 1st Armored Division, did not lose a single battle, starting with the 1939 September Campaign in Poland, through the French Campaign of 1940, Operation Overlord in France in August 1944, fights in Belgium and the Netherlands, up until capturing the German Naval Shipyard Wilhelmshaven in May 1945. Already in 1939, the Germans, having suffered heavy losses at the hands of Maczek's armored troops, nicknamed them "Black Devils."

XVII Army Corps, which role they played until the end of the September Campaign in Poland. After the end of the fights in 1939, all SS-Germania units were joined together again and the whole regiment was redeployed to the Czech Republic. In the following years of the war, SS-Germania formed a part of the 5th SS Panzer Division Wiking.

Aftermath

Paradoxically, the defeat of Hitler's favorites was cunningly used by the "competition," i.e. Wehrmacht. Its higher commanders, antipathetic towards the SS, emphasized in their reports that the SS men were undertrained and lacked experience. The defeat of SS-Germania was a strong argument, mainly used to annoy Himmler, who had to admit that his "elite" still had a lot to learn, and that fanaticism and "experience" gained from exterminating civilians were not enough to stand against excellent and determined soldiers, such as General Sosnkowski's subordinates.

Piotr Korczyński



A POLISH TANK THAT LOST THE RACE AGAINST TIME



The appearance of tanks on the battlefields of the Great War completely changed the way wars were waged. Military leaders pressed development of such weapons.

Like most respectable armies, the Polish Army also began developing their armored forces, which lasted until the outbreak of WWII.

The core of the new armored branch was to be a Polish construction, the 7TP tank, considered one of the best tanks in the world at that time. Regrettably, the conflict broke out too early, when the number of already manufactured tanks – only 132 – was too insignificant to turn the tide of the war.

The 7TP originated from the Vickers E battle tank, a British tank built in Poland under license from the early 1930s. The British construction, however, had a number of flaws, so the Polish engineers began modifying and improving the Vickers. The leader of the team was a soldier and a designer **Rudolf Gundlach**.

The ineffective gun was replaced with a 37-mm Bofors gun produced in Poland under license from Sweden. A 37-mm round could penetrate the armor of almost all tanks used at the beginning of WWII. The 7TP was also equipped with a Diesel engine – it was the first Diesel tank produced in Europe. Using Diesel instead of gasoline increased safety of the crew because it has a much higher flash-point than gasoline. The new engine was also 20 horsepower stronger than the one it replaced, and significantly lighter thanks to its aluminum-alloy construction.

Gundlach's personal input to the construction of the 7TP was the revolutionary Gundlach Rotary Periscope which made 360° vision possible without changing position inside the tank. Gundlach's patent was later used by manufacturers all over the world.

Maciej Chilczuk

Did You Know...?

The "Polish Mine Detector," developed in 1942 by two officers, Lieutenant Józef Kosacki and Lieutenant Andrzej Garboś, contributed to the victory of the allies in the North African campaign.

The "Devil's Gardens," as the enormous, terrifying minefield in North Africa was called, was cleared with the help of this Polish invention, before the final defeat of the German Africa Corps. The Polish patent was utilized by armies around the world until the 1990s, when it was also used during Operation Desert Storm.





PANZER ACE

When you are fighting a panzer battle and have a smaller force comprised of inferior tanks, you are fighting a losing battle. However, the defensive war of 1939 proved that if you are able to outsmart your enemy, it can turn the tide to your favor. This is how **Edmund Orlik commanded his platoon.**

Officer Cadet Edmund Roman Orlik stopped his tankette right before a sandy road, one of many that ran across the Kampinos Forest. The woods were a great ally of the Polish armored forces. They had too few tanks to truly threaten the German detachments in a fire exchange. Nevertheless, after fourteen days of fighting, Edmund Orlik had already destroyed three German tanks of the 4th Panzer Division.

It turned out this was only the beginning of his successes. Scanning his surroundings, Orlik noticed fresh tank tracks in the sand. Three of them were fresh, so it was possible the tanks would be taking the same route back. He ordered his machines to move back into the forest and wait in silence for the enemy. His instinct did not fail. When two German PzKpfw 35 and one PZKpfw IVB appeared on the road, Orlik immediately ordered his men to open fire. He was aware that if he hesitated for even a short moment, he would not stand a chance against enemy tanks with much

stronger guns. The first German tank was rendered powerless after the first salvo. Three further shots eliminated another one. After a short pursuit of the PZKpfw IVB, a precise shot into the rear armor set the enemy tank on fire. This time it was the German 1st Light Division that suffered a quick, violent loss. On the following day, September 19, Orlik confirmed he was a true panzer ace. His group of tanks engaged in a fight near Sieraków and managed to destroy as many as seven German tanks.

Utilizing the element of surprise and taking full advantage of his tanks' capabilities, Edmund Orlik managed to inflict serious losses on the superior German forces.



Piotr Korczyński



THE CRAZY MAJOR – WWII'S FIRST PARTISAN

When on October 5, 1939, Nazi Germany organized a military parade in the streets of Warsaw in the presence of Adolf Hitler himself, there was still a detachment of the Polish Army fighting in the Świętokrzyskie Mountains under the command of **Major Henryk “Hubal” Dobrzański**. He had promised his soldiers he would die in his uniform.

In September 1939, Henryk Dobrzański simultaneously fought the Germans and the Red Army with the remains of his 110th Uhlan Regiment. He and his men were moving from north-eastern Poland in an attempt to reach Warsaw and relieve the city. Unfortunately, on September 28, before his troops managed to get to the capital, he was informed that the city had fallen. He collected his most loyal soldiers and moved south to the Świętokrzyskie Mountains to form what he called a Separated Unit of the Polish Army. “We will wait for spring and the French-British offensive, organizing resistance at the back of the German forces” – he told his subordinates.

Hubal, acting against conspiracy principles, did not let his soldiers change their uniforms to plain clothes. They were to fight in uniform to show the local society and enemy forces that the Polish Army had not dropped their

weapons yet. “Seeing them was deeply touching. They gave us hope that if the Polish Army was still there, Poland would be free again” – said inhabitants of the region where Maj Dobrzański’s unit operated.

Having destroyed several German units, Hubal proved to the German leadership that they were too fast to announce their victory in Poland. The “Crazy Major,” as the Germans who chased Hubal nicknamed him, struck them again and again, even though at the beginning of 1940 SS and Wehrmacht sent 5,000 troops against him. Support from the local population, bravery of soldiers, and Hubal’s innate intelligence let him sneak out from numerous attempts at his life.

On April 30, 1940, Maj Henryk Dobrzański was finally hunted down and killed. The remains of the heroic leader have never been found.

Piotr Korczyński



THE GREATEST ADVENTURE STORY OF WORLD WAR II

When British Prime Minister Winston Churchill heard about the escape of the ORP Orzeł submarine from Estonia to Great Britain, he allegedly described it as “the greatest adventure story to come out of WWII.” The story had a number of heroes, but **Lieutenant Jan Grudziński** was probably the most significant one.

In September 1939, ORP Orzeł, whose task was protecting the Polish coast, docked in Estonia due to her commanding officer's sickness. At the insistence of Germans and Soviets, the Estonian government interned the submarine. The crew was deprived of almost all navigation aids and most of the armament. Nevertheless, they decided to seize the boat and escape. On the night of September 17/18, 1939, under the command of Lt Grudziński, Orzeł broke away from Tallinn and evaded Estonian search vessels. For roughly 30 consecutive days following their escape from Tallinn, the crew navigated Orzeł across the Baltic (full of German vessels), the Danish straits, and the North Sea to Great Britain. The crew was successful thanks to their remarkable courage and determination. The navigation officer, Marian

Mokrski, remarkably managed to navigate the submarine to Great Britain by reproducing the map of the Baltic Sea from memory and an old list of beacons.

After their brave escape, the crew kept on fighting the Germans – now alongside the Royal Navy. Among others, Orzeł sank the German troopship Rio de Janeiro, killing hundreds of Wehrmacht troops preparing for an attack on Norway. In May 1940, Orzeł, still commanded by Lt Grudziński, went missing during a patrol in the North Sea.

For his heroism as the commander of ORP Orzeł, Lieutenant Jan Grudziński was posthumously promoted to the rank of lieutenant commander and awarded with the Golden Cross of the War Order of Virtuti Militari (1940).

Lukasz Zalesiński

Did You Know...?

Two Polish submarines – ORP Sokół and ORP Dzik, due to their outstanding performance in the fights with the German Kriegsmarine in the Mediterranean Sea, earned the honorable nickname of “Terrible Twins” from the allied command.



1939



POLISH SOLDIER IN

POLAND 1939–1945

910,000 soldiers, **600** tanks, **400** aircraft and 15 warships fought with the Germans and Russians in Poland in September and October 1939

380,000 soldiers were in the Home Army on the territory of Poland under the German and Soviet occupation during 1939–1945

NORWAY 1940

5,000 Polish soldiers of the Polish Independent Podhale Rifle Brigade fought with the Germans in Norway as part of the allied forces in May and June 1940

FRANCE 1940

50,000 soldiers of the Polish Army fought with the Germans as part of the French forces in May and June 1940

ENGLAND 1940

2,200 aviators of the Polish Air Force fought in the Battle of England as part of the Royal Air Force from July to October 1940

LIBYA 1941–1942

4,900 Polish soldiers of the Polish Independent Carpathian Rifle Brigade fought with the Germans and Italians in Libya as part of the British forces from December 1941 to March 1942

ITALY 1943–1945

56,000 soldiers of the Polish II Corps took part in the Italian Campaign as part of the British forces from December 1943 to May 1945

NORMANDY – THE NETHERLANDS – BELGIUM – GERMANY 1944–45

16,000 Polish soldiers, **380** tanks, **470** guns and **5,000** vehicles from the 1st Armored Division took part in the fights in Normandy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany as part of the allied forces from July 1944 to May 1945

2,200 Polish soldiers of the 1st Independent Parachute Brigade participated in assault landing in the Netherlands as part of the allied airborne forces in September 1944



ABSENT AMONG

**In the great Victory Parade
marched along the streets
the representatives of o
– the I**

WORLD WAR II

RUSSIA – UKRAINE – POLAND – GERMANY – CZECHIA 1943–45

186,000 soldiers of the Polish Army in the USSR and the 1st and 2nd Army of the Polish armed forces fought with the Germans on the eastern front as part of the Red Army from September 1943 to May 1945

20,000 soldiers of these formations deserted, as they did not want to serve in a communist army

IN THE AIR 1943–1945

13,200 tons of bombs and **1,500** tons of mines were dropped by the Polish Air Force bombers on the territory of Germany and occupied countries as part of the Royal Air Force during 1940–1945

1,600 tons of equipment and **692** paratroops were redeployed by the Polish Air Force bombers to the occupied countries during their service in the Royal Air Force in the period of 1940–1945

ON THE SEA 1939–1945

3,880 Polish marines and 18 ships of the Polish Navy participated in 787 convoys and fights on the Atlantic and the Mediterranean Sea as part of the Royal Navy during 1939–1945

ON LAND 1943–1945

254,000 soldiers were in the Polish Army which fought as part of the British Forces from 1940 to 1945

49,000 soldiers came to Great Britain from France and from occupied Europe in 1940

11,000 soldiers joined the Polish Army in Great Britain, France and both Americas from 1940 to 1945

83,000 soldiers were in the Polish Army in the East and in the Polish II Corps in Italy from 1942 to 1945

89,000 Polish deserters from German units joined the Polish Army between 1943–1945

22,000 Polish prisoners of war from German camps joined the Polish Army between 1944–1945

Did You Know...?

The most effective allied unit in the Battle of Britain was the Polish No. **303 Squadron**, ranked among the best fighter units of WWII. It claimed the largest number of shot down enemy aircraft. The Polish pilots defended the skies over Britain from 1940. The commander of the squadron was Witold Urbanowicz, a Polish fighter ace who shot down 28 aircraft. He was a living legend. The Polish and British pilots nicknamed him "Cobra".

Did You Know...?

The Polish II Corps, commanded by **General Władysław Anders**, emerged victorious from the Italian front, defeating the Germans in the Battle of Monte Cassino in May 1944, which opened the way to Rome to the allies. The Polish soldiers also won the Battle of Ancona, a strategic port, and brought freedom to the inhabitants of German-occupied Bologna.

THE VICTORS

of the Allied Forces, which
of London on June 8, 1946,
one nation were missing
POLES

**WHEN THE EARTH
WENT DOWN INTO HELL**

CZESŁAWA KWOKA

EYES OF WAR

Czesia (petty name for Czesława) was brought to KL Auschwitz, then separated from her mother, her hair was shaved off and she was forced to wear the striped prisoner clothing.

When she failed to understand the command of the German capo (a prisoner functionary), she was hit in the face with a stick. The girl wiped the blood and tears off her face. A moment later, the camp photographer took a photo of her.

The child was killed three months later with a phenol injection into the heart.



**GERMAN
DEATH
CAMP**

Immediately after the Germans invaded the Polish territory, they began mass arrests of Poles. The Poles were sent to confinements, which were later expanded into a system of concentration camps, known as "factories of death." In this way, the Germans transferred to the territory of occupied Poland the methodology of holocaust, which had been functioning in the Third Reich against political opponents from 1933. The death industry was supervised by the SS-Totenkopf controllers, the "death's heads," famous for their brutality and sadism. Their goal was the extermination of the Jewish nation and reducing entire

German Concentration



A girl from a small village in the region of Zamojszczyzna. The Germans prepared this land for German settlement. Polish residents were murdered, their property burnt. Women and children were transferred to concentration camps and then killed.

Slavic nations, mainly the Poles, to the status of unpersons-slaves. The executors were criminals, mainly German capos and other civil prisoners, whereas in the concentration camps for Jews, they were groups made up of the Slavic auxiliary formations from the East.

Deported Jews and Gypsies were transported to Poland from almost all over Europe, and then killed in the death camps. From 1941, another multimillion group of foreigners, starved to death in Poland, were the prisoners of various nationalities from the East, for whom

stalags were located, among others, on the territory of the General Governorate for the Occupied Polish Region.

Throughout the war, the Germans killed 6,000,000 Polish citizens, i.e. one-fifth of the Polish population, including 3,000,000 Polish Jews. The bodies of the victims were burnt, and their ashes were used to fertilize the soil. After the war, most of the war criminals escaped justice, and lived the rest of their long lives in peace.

Anna Putkiewicz

Camps in Occupied Poland



WITOLD PILECKI

VOLUNTEER TO AUSCHWITZ

Germans set up the first concentration camps in occupied Poland in October 1939. Germany's motive for exterminating Eastern Europe's population was to prepare the area for German settlers who would arrive after the Nazis successfully conquered the world. The most horrifying camp – Auschwitz, was set up in 1940. By the end of the war, approximately 1.1 million people were murdered there, including Jews, Poles, Gypsies and Russians.

Pieces of information on what was occurring within the camps started leaking out. Polish resistance leadership began to think of ways to help the captives. However, to take any action, they needed first-hand information, so they decided to send an intelligence agent inside the camp to collect it. Witold Pilecki volunteered to take up the suicide mission. In September 1940, he let German police catch him. He was put in Auschwitz as prisoner number 4859. During his three-year stay in the camp, Pilecki created a network of underground activists who collected information on German crimes in Auschwitz, organized a system of aid for the prisoners and facilitated escapes. Unfortunately, their activity caught the attention of the

camp Gestapo. Pilecki and a few other prisoners managed to escape from the camp at Easter 1943.

Later, Pilecki fought in the Warsaw uprising. His most important task, however, was to hand over the information he compiled on the camp. In the famous "Pilecki's Report" he provided a detailed description of Auschwitz organization and crimes committed by Germans. The Home Army leadership handed over the report to western allies. Unfortunately, just like in the case of material gathered by Jan Karski, it did not change the fate of those imprisoned. In post-war Communist Poland, Witold Pilecki was accused of espionage for the western allies and seen as an enemy. He was arrested in 1947, tortured, and sentenced to death in a show trial.

Maciej Chilczuk

German Camps 1933–1945



STANISŁAWA LESZCZYŃSKA

I WILL NOT KILL CHILDREN

A Polish midwife, a KL Auschwitz prisoner, who never agreed to murder newborn babies.

The German camp system demanded for newborn babies to be drowned in a bucket. Even when she had to face Mengele, the mad doctor, the master of life and death in Aushwitz, she would not change her mind. In the conditions outraging all human dignity, she delivered several thousand of babies. And she would always, even if only for a second, put a baby in the arms of the emancipated with starvation mother.



MAKSYMILIAN MARIA KOLBE

I AM DYING TO GIVE YOU THE COURAGE TO LIVE

I am a Catholic priest. He has a wife and children. I want to go in his place – such was the justification of the decision taken by a Polish prisoner, a Franciscan priest, when he was offering his own life for the life of Franciszek Gajowniczek, who had been sentenced to death.

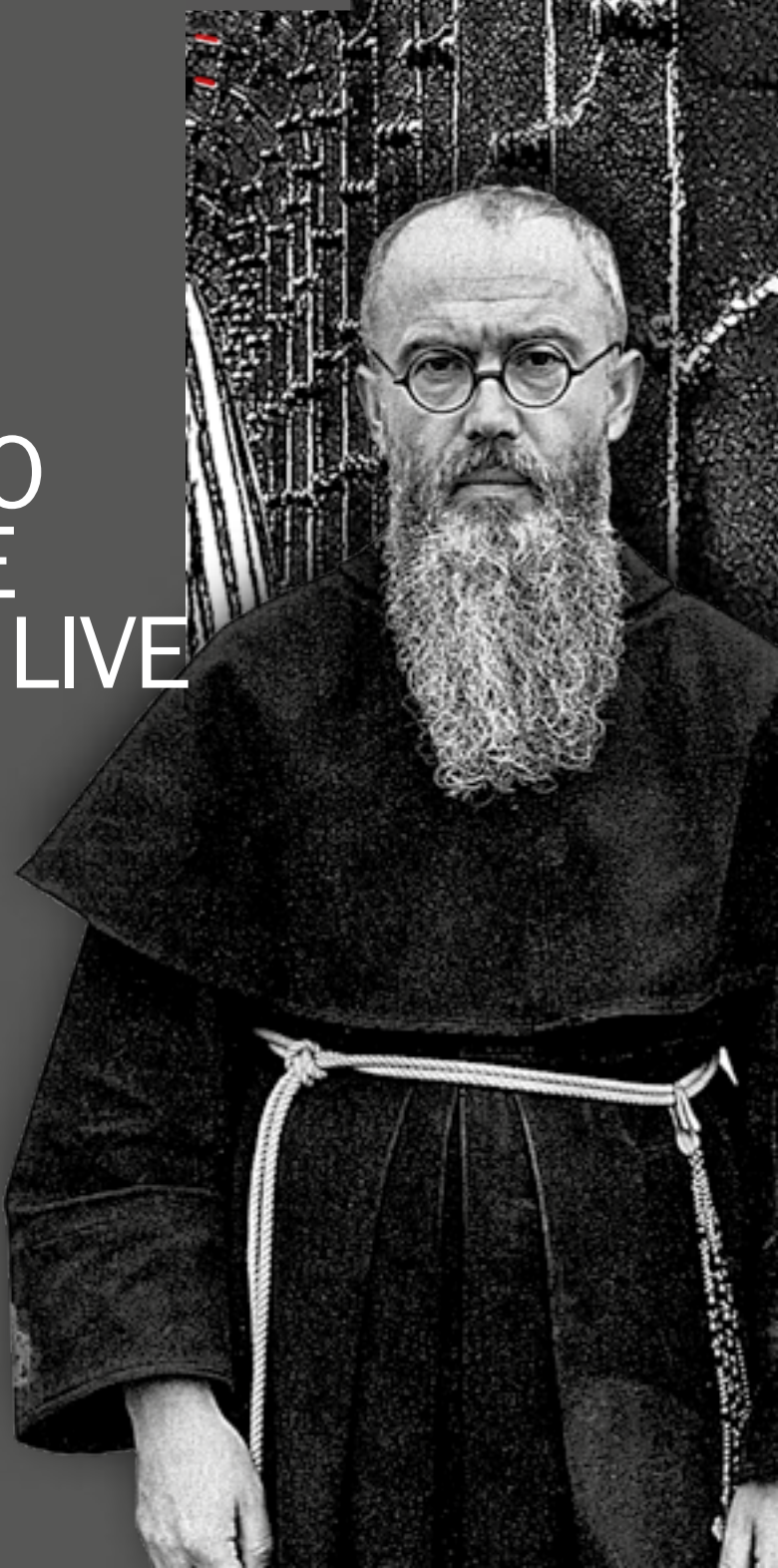
Kolbe died two weeks later from starvation and a phenol shot in the heart. Franciszek Gajowniczek survived the war, and right before his own death, he asked to be buried near the monastery in Niepokalanów, where the Germans had arrested his savior.

Saint Maksymilian Maria Kolbe: a missionary, a martyr, a saint of the Catholic Church, a publisher, and the founder of the *Rycerz Niepokalanej* catholic magazine, which is still published around the world

Light Illuminates Darkness

In this hell, brought to Earth by the National Socialist Germany, in the conditions of the most profound disregard for human life, true humanity was still heroically defending itself

Anna Putkiewicz





JAN KARSKI

WITNESS OF EXTERMINATION

He presented the allied leaders with evidence on German crimes in occupied Poland. He appealed to the world to stop the Holocaust, unfortunately in vain. No one believed Jan Karski, the emissary from occupied Poland, the emissary from hell.

In July 1943, Jan Karski was in the USA. Before an audience including the most powerful man on earth, he was to detail the gruesome fate the Germans were dealing to people in occupied Poland.

The US President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, asked him right away: "Is the situation in Poland as bad as they say?" "I provided examples of the planned policy to destroy the Polish nation – starvation food rations, lack of medicines, corrupting the youth, huge levies imposed on farmers." – recalled Karski. "He asked me to confirm information regarding the persecution of Jews. I explained it was not persecution, but a planned destruction of the entire Jewish nation. I provided

examples and mentioned what expectations Jews had of the allies." The President suddenly stopped Karski's monologue and said: "We will get even with the Germans after the war. Mr. Karski, Poland is an agricultural state, isn't it? Don't you need horses to cultivate your farmland?". That was when Karski realized his efforts were futile and the effects would be nonexistent, just like after the meetings with politicians in London.

Up until the end of his life, at meetings across the USA, Israel, and Poland, Jan Karski talked about the mass extermination of Jews during the war and about his attempts to make the world aware of this tragedy.

Piotr Korczyński

Konzentrationslager Auschwitz

Matr.Nr.:	Frankreich	Heimat:	5112
Name:	Terno		
Vorname:	Hella		
geb.:	Königsberg, Ostpreußen, 12.4.1908		
beruf:	Hausfrau des Fleischer Kf.		
Wohnort:	Schwarzwasser		
Bemerkung:	Wohn. d. Elternteile		

**GERMAN
DEATH
CAMP**



Jan Karski, arrested and tortured by the Gestapo, freed by soldiers of the Polish Underground State, twice found his way to the Warsaw Ghetto, and then, wearing a Ukrainian guard's uniform, entered a transition camp from which Germans transported Jews to death camps.

JANUSZ KORCZAK PEDAGOGUE WHO WENT TO DIE WITH HIS CHILDREN

Known as the Old Doctor, a Polish-Jewish doctor from Warsaw, a pedagogue and a writer, he founded two orphanages for Jewish and Polish children. He treated every child seriously, as a partner, and not someone of lower position – it was a new approach to children upbringing and education, which he widely discussed in his papers. In 1939, he refused to obey the German order for the Jews to wear bands with the Star of David on their

sleeves, and he wore a uniform of the Polish Army soldier, as he was a Polish reserve soldier. In August 1942, about 200 children from the Jewish Orphanage were transported from the Warsaw ghetto to the German concentration camp in Treblinka. Janusz Korczak and ten housemasters did not seize the opportunity to save their lives. They did not leave their children alone, and they stayed with them to the end.

Anna Putkiewicz

HELPING JEWS IN POLAND WAS PUNISHED WITH DEATH

Occupied Poland was one of the limited number of countries, where the Germans introduced death penalty for helping Jews. The penalty could be carried out – on the strength of collective responsibility – immediately, at the “crime scene,” upon discovering that a Polish tenement house or a farm was used as a hiding place for Jewish residents.

That was how at least 5,000 Poles were killed. It was the German response to the attitude of the Poles who were helping the Jews to survive the permanent German “hunt for Jews” that lasted throughout the war. Polish people, although they themselves suffered the terror of the occupier, provided the Jews with food, shelter, and false documents – which altogether saved the lives of thousands of Jews. The underground Polish humanitarian and resistance organization, known as Żegota (the Polish Council to Aid Jews with the Government Delegation for Poland), was engaged in helping the Jewish community. The activity of Żegota was supported by the Catholic Church, and underground civil and

military authorities. Today, however, as part of mass disinformation, the myth of “Polish anti-Semitism” is being populated, which reportedly resulted in the holocaust of the Jews. The heroic Poles are being forgotten, and instead, the negative examples are being emphasized.

Almost 120,000 Polish Jews survived the German occupation in hide-outs or with false Catholic baptism certificates, with the help of around a million of their Christian neighbors. Up to January 2020, for the help provided to the Jews, the honorific of the Righteous Among the Nations, used by the State of Israel to describe non-Jews who risked their lives during the Holocaust to save Jews from extermination, was awarded to 7,112 Poles.

Anna Putkiewicz



THE ULMAS FAMILY

Polish peasants, Józef and Wiktoria Ulma and their seven children, were murdered by the Germans for hiding Jewish families.



MATYŁDA GETTER

A catholic nun from Warsaw, Jewish children called her their mother.

IRENA SENDLEROWA

A Polish nurse, who saved thousands of Jewish children. She was a member of the Polish underground organization, which was helping Jews under German occupation.



1939 POLISH VETERANS

Compiled by Piotr Korczyński

“OUR DECK WAS COVERED IN BLOOD, AND WE KEPT ON SHOOTING

What I remember very clearly and what I still have nightmares about is the blood-covered deck of “Gryf” and the remains of my friends’ bodies scattered around the deckhouse. Those were horrible moments, but after the initial shock, we started to operate just like we did during maneuvers. When Captain Kwiatkowski was fatally wounded, we were commanded for some time by one of the CPOs. He controlled the gunfire, and then he also got heavily wounded. He lost his arm, but he remained on the deck for another hour or so, with a wrapped stump, and still kept shouting orders! Adrenaline was pumping. For several days, we repelled air raids, and at the same time engaged in a fight with two German destroyers. We would hit so effectively that both German vessels finally withdrew after releasing smoke screens. In those initial days of the war, we truly passed our naval exam – we successfully confronted the enemy that predominated not only in the air, but also had one of the greatest navy forces in the world.

Stanisław Pyrek, sapper on ORP Gryf



“I WAS A SNIPER

Having experienced what the 10th Cavalry Brigade was capable of, the Germans threw substantial forces against us. At that time, they had already called us “Black Devils,” due to the color of our berets. For us, motorcycle messengers, the increased number of enemy forces meant that our rides with orders or reports could at any time end with going into an ambush and dying, or being caught and imprisoned. Later, we were given an additional task – to find a free way or passage to get out of the enemy’s grip. Well, that was truly playing hide and seek with death! There were more than a few situations from which I was incredibly lucky to get out alive. You not only had to be a really good rider, but also think on your feet to outsmart the Germans. My shooting skills proved useful near Jordanów. The Germans had a sniper who shot several of our men from a distance of about 800 yards. The officers gave me a rifle with a telescope. I took out this German with my first shot – I saw him fall off the tree and we were hence free of snipers.

Tadeusz “Pancerz” Lutak, soldier of the 10th Cavalry Brigade, later a Home Army soldier



MESSENGERS OF DEATH

It was a real massacre – aircraft rained machine-gunfire on the frantic and horrified masses of people. I jumped into a potato patch and watched the aircraft arrive in endless waves, open fire at people, and turn around just to return moments later and again dive into the innocent crowd. It's truly hard to describe. I was only seven years old at the time. I raised my head and then I saw her – a barefoot woman, in a linen dress, lying on the edge of the forest. Next to her, a kneeling child, pulling at her and shouting: "Mom, stop sleeping! Mom, wake up! Mom, get up!" The mother was dead. To this day, whenever I see Chelmoński's painting – Indian Summer, I instantly remember that barefoot woman in a linen dress. I can't stand to look at this painting! A few yards away, there was a river with a wooden bridge thrown across it. Two columns of refugees met on that bridge – ours, going to the east, and another one, escaping to the west. That bridge was the place of the worst bloodbath. People threw themselves into water; the river, red from all the blood, was full of dead bodies, bundles and suitcases, slowly carried away by the current, and in the middle of all this a tiny woman was standing with her cow, shouting: "People, save my only provider!" Imagine the surrealism of the scene: a river of corpses, frantic masses of people on the bridge, maddened with fear, tossing under the fire of dive bombers and fighting with one another, and among them this simple woman, begging to save her cow...

Zenon "Wilk" Kasprzyk, a scout of the Grey Ranks (Szare Szeregi), a prisoner of Buchenwald

Did You Know...?

One of the most effective British Special Operations Executive (SOE) agents during WWII was a winner of the Miss Polonia beauty contest, **Krystyna Skarbek** (nom de guerre Christine Granville). She was the first woman in history to have completed His Majesty's agent training course. As a secret courier, she was sent to an outpost in Budapest, Hungary, from where she travelled across occupied Europe, crossing green borders. She collected information on the movement of German forces and the German crimes. She managed to obtain the plans for Operation Barbarossa – German invasion of the Soviet Union. She completed a parachuting course after which she was redeployed to France to support the local resistance movement. After the war, forgotten by the allies, she died a tragic death.



RED PLAGUE

Wehrmacht did not reach us in Łuck, lying far in the Eastern Borderlands (Kresy Wschodnie). Instead of the German soldiers, the Soviets came after September 17. I remember well the arrival of the Red Army, in particular its shabbiness, which was a really depressing sight. Ragged uniforms, characteristic pointy hats with big red stars, and long rifles hanging on pieces of ropes or cords. Their horses – awful nags. The contrast with our army was all the more striking given the fact we still remembered the great maneuvers from the summer of 1938 and the ride of the Polish cavalry – on beautiful horses, in elegant uniforms, with excellent gear and sparkling clean weapons. I remember that several Red Army soldiers walked into our apartment and asked if we had any weapons. My father said no, so they went away, but he soon noticed that his pocket watch disappeared together with the unwelcome guests. One of the troops must have seen it, and grabbed it before they went out.

Eugeniusz Praczuk, soldier of the 1st Armored Corps

IT WAS THE BEGINNING

In mid-September, before the Soviets marched in, we were ordered to evacuate to the south-east. They wanted to redeploy all our battalions to Romania. We made it to Mikołów, around 19 miles from Lwów, and there we were turned back. There was probably no chance to get through to the border at that point. After we returned to Lwów, we once again settled in our outposts, and then the Germans surrounded the city. We were redeployed to the Podzamcze district, where we took defensive positions at the railway station. Heavy air raids began. We made it through several of those, but the news that the Soviets had also arrived near Lwów was actually much harder for us to bear. The Vilnius regiments had managed to get through to Lwów from the side of Brzuchowice and organize defense, but that couldn't in any way improve our situation of facing the Soviet forces. We were again ordered to relocate. At the new spot, Lt Świdorski gathered us and said: "Boys, we're done here. Each of you knows every corner of this city, you know where to hide and wait for all this to end." After that, he ordered us to change into civilian clothes and disperse.

Franciszek Tokarz, soldier of the Lwów National Defense



SEPTEMBER 1, 1939

FIRST WWII VICTIMS

The view of the bombed Wieluń led to the following confession of Claus von Stauffenberg, the future national hero of the new (?) Germany: "The [Wieluń] population is an incredible mob, so many Jews and crossbreeds. It is a people who feel good only under a whip. Thousands of prisoners of war will serve us well in agricultural works" (from a letter to his wife). A Polish journalist described his impressions from his visit to Stuttgart, near which Stauffenberg was born:

"Anyone who takes the trouble to visit the Stauffenberg Memorial Chamber in Stuttgart can see an album with photographs from the 1939 campaign by Klaus Werner Reerink, a friend of Stauffenberg's from the same unit. The Polish viewer must be disturbed by the picture taken in the apartment in the destroyed by bombs Wieluń, with the corpse of a dead Polish victim looking with the blind eyes in camera's lens in the foreground. It is difficult to think calmly about officers who consider such photographs as an interesting souvenir."

Every year on July 20, in memory of the unsuccessful assassination attempt on Hitler, for which Stauffenberg paid with his life, the Bundeswehr recruits take an oath in Berlin. The assassins had a military goal – to end the war in the West after the Führer's death, and to move all their forces to the East. They also clearly set their political goals – maintain power and restore the eastern border of the Reich to what it was in 1914. Independent Poland was not included in their plans.

Józef Gawlina, a Polish military bishop, unable to find understanding in the Roman curia at the beginning of the war, asked the Pope:

"Is it possible to distinguish between a soldier and a woman, between shepherds and the army, at the altitude of 500 meters?"

"Yes, it is."

"Therefore, German pilots who bomb women and shepherds should be punished individually for their crimes."

Our moral theology (...) passes on (...) the responsibility, and thus the consequences to the commanders. Meanwhile, there are too many individual crimes going on, the punishing of which is only just and right."

We know that those – the most common – war crimes did not find their finale after the war before the Nuremberg Tribunal, which tried only selected officials and only for crimes 'against humanity'. The Russians, like their former German accomplices, never had such scruples, as well as the Western allies made the Germans and the Japanese taste their own medicine. For all of them, what counted the most was to end their planned campaigns through the incineration of entire cities and towns, starting from Wieluń full of the Mischlings to Nagasaki, the capital of Japanese Christians. In 1943, Leonia Jabłonkówna, a Polish writer of Jewish origin, published her most Christian poem, The Prayer, in the underground press:

*For the grave that shines like a temptation
For those who get weaker in the martyr's days
Lord, save women and children
From the burning fires of Hamburg.*

*For the cross blasphemed in the chapels
For the wrongs done to the cemetery ashes
Preserve towering Gothic churches
In the enemy's capitals.*

[transl. Barbara Wierczyńska]

However, it was a voice that was both exaggerated ("cut your coat according to your cloth") and – isolated.

Jacek Żurek



The Polish border town of Wieluń bombed by the Germans on September 1, 1939



SEPTEMBER 22, 1939 VICTORY PARADE

Soldiers of the Wehrmacht and the Red Army with the Soviet propaganda poster of Joseph Stalin in the background in the city of Brest on the Bug, Poland, on September 22, 1939. That day, the soldiers of both armies participated in a parade there, which was to celebrate a victorious war campaign in Poland.

The parade was welcomed by two tank commanders – General Heinz Guderian (German army) and General Semyon Krivoshein (Soviet army). Polish commander, who defended Brest against the Germans, General Konstanty Plisowski, was arrested by the Soviet NKVD, and then murdered in 1940 in Katyn.

Robert Sendek

POLAND

WAS THE FIRST VICTIM IN WORLD WAR II

**On September 1, 1939,
Hitler's Germany invaded Poland**

**GERMAN
NATIONAL
SOCIALISTS WERE
RESPONSIBLE
FOR THE DEATH
OF 6 MILLION
POLISH CITIZENS**



**In extermination camps,
pacifications and
executions – 3.577
million people were killed**



**Thousands of children – mentally ill,
intellectually and physically
disabled and those unborn – were
murdered**



**In prisons,
concentration camps
and other places of
confinement, 1.286
million people died**



**Germany with their Nazi
collaborators murdered 1.8 million
people on occupied eastern
territories of Poland: 95,000
in eastern Lithuania; 500,000
in western Belarus; 1.2 million
in western Ukraine**

Population of Poland



before the war – 35 million



after the war – 24 million

Following the 1944 uprising, the capital of Poland was razed to the ground by the Germans

On September 17, 1939, Stalin's Russia invaded Poland

RUSSIAN COMMUNISTS HAVE LED TO THE DEATHS OF 150,000 POLISH CITIZENS



In April and May of 1940, 14,600 Polish officers – prisoners of Soviet war camps in Kozelsk, Ostashkov and Starobilsk, were murdered by a shot in the back of their heads



In June and July of 1941, after Germany attacked the Soviet Union, in the Soviet prison camps and during death marches thousands of prisoners were murdered



In exile in the far lands of the Soviet Union, 58,000 people died of exhaustion, diseases and drudgery



KATYN MASSACRE

As a consequence of the Russian aggression against Poland in September 1939, tens of thousands of officers and soldiers of the Polish Army were taken prisoner, and another tens of thousands of civilians, reservists and professional soldiers were imprisoned after the annexation of eastern Polish territories by the Soviet Union. Upon the decision of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist [Bolshevik] Party of the Soviet Union (the Politburo) of March 1940, signed, inter alia, by Joseph Stalin, Vyacheslav Molotov, the Soviet Foreign Minister, and Mikhail Kalinin, the nominal leader of the Soviet Union, it was decided to murder at once about 26,000 persons from

among Polish prisoners of war and political prisoners who were deemed potential enemies and who constituted the elite of the Polish nation. The mass murder took place in April and May 1940. The bodies of about 4,400 victims, Polish officers from the Kozelsk POW camp located in Western Russia, were discovered in 1943 by the Germans who occupied the area after their aggression against Russia one and a half years earlier. The corpses of the restrained victims, piled up in layers, killed by shots to the back of the head and blows of bayonets, were resting in several mass graves in the vicinity of Katyn near Smolensk.

Robert Sendek



**POLSKA
ZBROJNA**

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POLSKA
ZBROJNA**

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in "Polska Zbrojna" and "Polska Zbrojna. Historia" magazines,
and "Polish Heroes" special issue

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Photo source: Institute of National Remembrance (IPN), National Digital
Archive (NAC), Military Publishing Institute (WIW), Getty Images
(cover photo: Polish Parade circa 1939: a Polish infantry regiment),
the coloring of Julien Bryan's photo by Mikołaj Kaczmarek, Mateusz
Szpytma's collection / The Ulma Family Museum, Cezary Pomykało,
Istock Photo, Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum, public domain, private archives

Advertising and promotion: WIW Marketing and Promotion Department

Wojskowy Instytut Wydawniczy / Military Publishing Institute

Warsaw 2022

Print:
Drukarnia Kolumb, ul. Kaliny 7, 41-506 Chorzów

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