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"POLAND HAS NOT YET PERISHED"

POLSKA ZBROJNA

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The 80th Anniversary of WWII Outbreak

INVASION OF POLAND

WWII started when Germany and Russia invaded Poland. Stalin desired territories in Eastern and Central Europe; Hitler hoped to avoid a two-front war and to isolate Poland. In fact, however, the ambitions of both of them were much greater. For this reason, the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact of August 23, 1939 was a temporary solution.

The pact could have shocked many. After all, just three years earlier, the Germans had concluded an Anti-Comintern Pact with Japan, to which Italy also joined shortly afterwards. The states in question pledged to work together against the communist international community. Hitler perorated many times that it had been the "Reds" who stabbed the Germans in the back in 1918, and contributed to their defeat in the Great War. The Führer and Stalin were on both sides of the barricade in the second half of the 1930s, when a war broke out in Spain. The Soviets sent equipment and soldiers to the Republicans; the Germans did the same to the nationalists led by General Franco. There was no trace of the good relations of the 1920s, when the two world-isolated states concluded an open economic and secret military treaty in Rapallo, Italy.

"Those relations began to deteriorate at the end of the Weimar Republic due to the growing strength of the German communists. The Berlin-seated authorities saw them as a threat to state stability and democracy," explains Prof. Marek Kornat, historian and Sovietologist of the Polish Academy of Sciences [PAN] and Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw. "When Hitler came to power, he almost completely froze his contacts with Moscow. He allowed only partial economic cooperation because the Germans could not do without Soviet natural resources," he adds. Stalin was not so radical. "In the 1930s, Moscow would regularly make it clear that it could go back to [the establishments of the Treaty of] Rapallo, but the Germans were not interested. Hitler for quite a time wanted to drag Poland to his side and ultimately make it his vassal," explains Prof. Kornat. Now, it was Poland to be the first to fall prey to both dictators.

Fourth Partition

Three partitions of Poland by its neighbors – Prussia, Russia, and Austria – were held in the second half of the 18th century. As a result, the Polish state disappeared from the map of Europe for over a hundred years, to return back to it in 1919 – for twenty years.

The first signs of the rapprochement of the Germans and Soviets began to be evident at the beginning of 1939. Hitler then understood that it was unrealistic to win Poland over to follow the anti-Soviet plans. He was furious, and Stalin felt that he could enter into a deal with him. He began to organize his supporters for this. In March, at the party congress, he gave a speech, which soon became known as "the chestnut speech." He argued that the USSR could cooperate with anyone for its own good, and that the West was trying to drag its country into an unwanted war. "War-mongers who are accustomed to have others pull chestnuts out of the fire for them," he thundered.

Then the day of August 23 arrived; the visit of von Ribbentrop to Moscow and the signing of the Treaty of Non-Aggression between Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. However, the most important was not the document itself, but the top secret protocol that constituted an annex to it and concerned the future of Central and Eastern Europe. Stalin and Hitler decided that Poland would be divided along the lines of the Vistula, Narew and San Rivers. The Soviet zone of influence would include Finland, Estonia, and Latvia, which in time would be incorporated into the USSR. Germany, in turn, would seize

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In one of the most famous photographs of that time, the Minister of Foreign Affairs to the Council of People's Commissars, Vyacheslav Molotov, sits behind a desk. He holds a fountain pen in his hand. In front of him, there is a printed sheet of paper. A man leans down from the side, giving him further sheets of paper to sign. The German equivalent of Molotov, Joachim von Ribbentrop, stands in the back, slightly lowering his eyesight. The other officers also have serious faces. Joseph Stalin is the only smiling person. Thanks to the agreement that would become known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Hitler was given all he wanted. Yet, it was Stalin who gained the most from the Treaty of August 23, 1939.

Lithuania, and probably also Bessarabia. "The protocol states that the Germans and Russians would decide on the possible creation of some rump Polish state in the future. In 1939, Hitler allowed such a possibility, but since Stalin was not completely interested in it, he abandoned this idea," emphasizes Prof. Kornat.

News about the project of the next partition of Poland quickly reached the West. The first to learn about it were the Americans, who then shared the information with Great Britain, which passed it on to France. The only government that remained unaware until the end was the Warsaw cabinet.

Pact of Illusions

The pact with Stalin allowed Hitler to gain much greater access to Soviet natural resources, led to the isolation of Poland, demonstrated to Western leaders that defending Poland is not really worth the effort, and, in the perspective of conflicts with them, pushed away the threat of fighting on two fronts. "However, Stalin gained more," says Prof. Kornat. He was able to occupy large territories without starting a war with the West. More importantly, though, while standing aside, he would throw a match on the powder keg, which at that time was Europe. "Stalin stood by Lenin's theory of imperialist war. According to that theory, the capitalist states of Western Europe would sooner or later take action against each other; and after the devastating war, the Soviet Union would enter the arena, subjugate them, and install communism," explains Prof. Kornat. During the meeting of the Politburo of the Soviet party, Stalin argued: "it is in the interest of the USSR – the workers' homeland – that a war breaks out between the Reich and the capitalist Anglo-French bloc (...). For this reason, it is imperative that we agree to conclude the pact proposed by Germany, and then work in such a way that this war, once it is declared, will last as long as possible."

Stalin finally wanted to subjugate not only the Allied States, but also Germany. Hitler never abandoned the dreams of expanding the living space, Lebensraum, that Germans should look for in the East. "That is why both sides were aware that the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact was a temporary solution," emphasizes Prof. Kornat.

When on September 1 German troops attacked Poland, and seventeen days later the Red Army divisions entered Polish territory from the east, it became quite clear that the war would be long. ■

Łukasz Zalesiński,
a journalist, writes for Polska Zbrojna

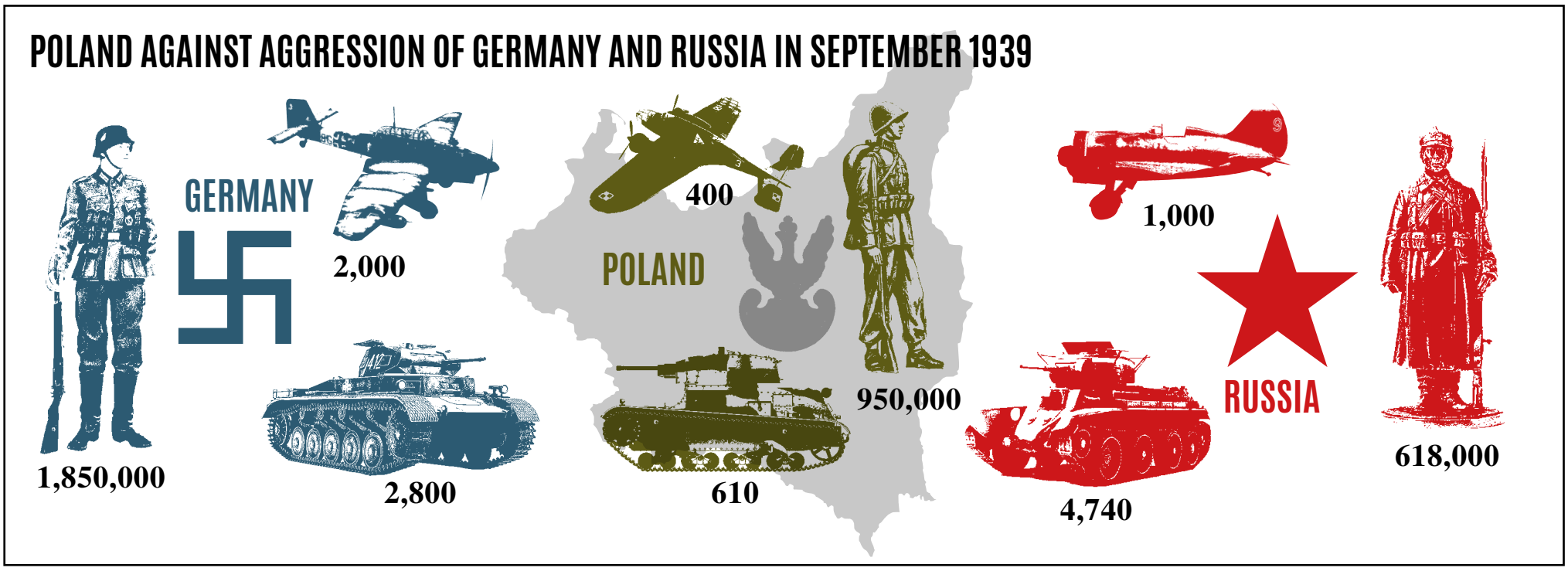
First WWII Victims

Less than two weeks before the invasion of Poland, on August 22, 1939, at the briefing of the higher Wehrmacht commanders in Obersalzberg, Adolf Hitler uttered significant words that affected the nature of the upcoming war's activities.

"Our strength consists in our speed and in our brutality. Genghis Khan led millions of women and children to slaughter – with premeditation and a happy heart. History sees in him solely the founder of a state. It's a matter of indifference to me what a weak western European civilization will say about me. I have issued the command – and I'll have anybody who utters but one word of criticism executed by a firing squad – that our war aim does not consist in reaching certain lines, but in the physical destruction of the enemy. Accordingly, I have placed my death-head formation [SS-Totenkopfverbände] in readiness – for the present only in the East – with orders to them to send to death mercilessly and without compassion, men, women, and children of Polish derivation and language. Only thus shall we gain the living space (Lebensraum) which we need. Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?" [cit. by Lochner, Louis Paul (1942). What About Germany?. Dodd, Mead & Company. pp. 11–12].

A leading role in Blitzkrieg, as the German tactics was with time called, was given to the air force. The Luftwaffe was the eye in the Führer's apple, the embodiment – besides the armored troops – of his vision of the war of the future. The aviators were to be the avant-garde of that brutal attack, as General Albert Kesselring stressed in his speech to the graduates of the military aviation schools: "As you circulate over the enemy's cities and fields, you should suppress all your feelings. You must tell yourself that the beings you see are not human. The only people are the fighting Germans. For the German Luftwaffe, there are no so-called non-military objects or emotional considerations. Enemy states should be wiped off the surface of the earth."

Wieluń, a town of 15,000 inhabitants located twenty kilometers from the Polish-German border of that time, could not boast of industrial or military facilities, apart from a small sugar factory. It was also not a transport hub; there were no units of General Juliusz Rómmel's "Łódź" Army operating in this area, and no military fortifications were built around the town. Theoretically, many people could feel relatively safe, and count on the fact that the main border fights would avoid their hometown. However, thanks to General Wolfram von Richthofen, the former Commander of the Condor Legion and the German Assault Air Force Commander, it was different in 1939. It was Richthofen – the cousin of the famous "Red Baron," the German Ace of the Great War, Manfred von Richthofen – who led the air raid on the Spanish Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. Now, his subordinates were to be reminded



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

Stauffenberg in Wieluń

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 Galwina, 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. ■

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"Westerplatte still fights on"

The Poles lost that first battle of World War II. However, even before the guns' clattering faded, the history of their resistance became legendary.

The Defense of Westerplatte shows the Polish soldiers' great determination in combat and their sense of duty despite their fading hope. However, this operation is also an example of good organization, which allowed them to resist the attack of a much stronger enemy for a long time.

Captain Franciszek Dąbrowski, Deputy Commander of the Military Transit Depot on Westerplatte, wrote down: "A new blaze of fire and iron falls on us at daybreak. The artillery fire is harassing; it keeps longer on the barracks. The cannonade begins at 7.00 in the morning. The attack now is cautious, and of a reconnaissance nature. The Germans test our possibilities of defense. Next, there was a relative lull."

The attack goes on and off for the following, almost seven, days. The blaze of cannons, the bang of explosions, the clouds of dust covering everything and everyone, the creeping tongues of fire here and there, the cries of the wounded. And then – silence that foreshadows yet another calamity. Hope and doubt, extreme exhaustion, but also a sense of duty smoldering in their heads that makes them pull themselves together, and once again stand up and fight. Poland was drowning in a wartime inferno. The Polish radio broadcast another message, "Westerplatte still fights on!"

In an old photograph, a soldier, stretched out like a string, looks straight into the camera lens. Behind his back, you can see a boarded-up gate, next to a white eagle with a crown and an inscription: "Military Transit Depot on Westerplatte". It is the winter of 1926, and the soldier belongs to the first Polish guard unit on the peninsula. With his colleagues, he guards a 60-hectare piece of land about which the reborn Republic of Poland has great hopes.

Six years earlier, our country had gained access to the sea. However, the 140-kilometer stretch of coastline lacked a real port. The Poles were dependent on the marina in the German-dominated Free City of Danzig [Gdańsk]. After numerous operations in 1924, the League of Nations decided to grant the Republic of Poland an area at the mouth of the Dead Vistula River to

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that tactics (some had been with him in Spain) or be baptized in combat in the battle of Wieluń. They wanted to test the latest model of the diving bomber, the Junkers. The intelligence data indicating that a cavalry brigade was to be deployed in Wieluń, and that the enemy's headquarters were located in the eastern part of the town, were the pretext to attack Wieluń.

Captain Walther Siegel's squadron, which was a part of the German 4th Air Fleet, was assigned to conduct the first air raid under Operation Ostmarkflug, i.e. the air attack on Poland. The second attack on Wieluń was carried out by Captain Friedrich-Karl von Dalwigk zu Lichtenfels' squadron; the third one was carried out by Major Oskar Dinort, a well-known pre-war sports pilot. Worth mentioning is the fact that one of other pilots in this air raid was Horst Scholle, a German graduate of the junior high school in Wieluń.

Twenty-nine Junkers led by Captain Siegel appeared over Wieluń on September 1, 1939, at 4.35 a.m., and from the altitude of two thousand meters, dive flew on to the defenseless town. The raid had occurred ten minutes before the German Schleswig-Holstein battleship started firing at the Polish guard on Westerplatte located in the Free City of Danzig. Today, some historians believe that Second World War began in the sky of Wieluń, and not on a fragment of the Polish Baltic coastline.

The first bombs fell on the All Saints Hospital, clearly marked – as witnesses recall – with the symbols of the Red Cross. Thirty-two people died in that attack. The head of the hospital, Zygmunt Patryn, recalled, "I ran into the building, the southeastern part of which was in ruins. There, a nurse sister came running to me from the infectious diseases building, with her hand partially torn off. I ran to the obstetrician's building, which was also collapsed. Returning to the main building, I came across the corpse of two dead people. The operating and dressing rooms were in ruins. I ordered the sisters to tear their underwear and dress the wounded. We put mothers and newborns on the wagons, and sent them to Sieradz. The midwife took two births in the hospital park."

The second air raid – on the eastern part of the town – took place half an hour later. During the third raid, the hospital was attacked again. All in all, the Germans, methodically, not disturbed by anyone, dropped 112 50-kg demolition bombs and 29 heaviest incendiary bombs, weighing half a ton each. At the same time, they performed diving flight for the first time in combat conditions. Apart from the hospital, they pulverized the parish church, the synagogue and the historic buildings of the Old Town.

It was estimated that 75 percent of the town buildings was demolished, and the loss of human life was estimated at about 1,200 people. None of the perpetrators was held responsible for the death of civilians and the destruction of the town that was completely devoid of military significance. Lieutenant Colonel Walter Siegel died in 1944; Major von Dalwigk zu Lichtenfels died in 1940. Major Oskar Dinort, who, after the attack on Wieluń, boasted in the German press that he had dropped the last bomb directly on the market square, was decorated with the Knight's Cross as an air ace. After the war, he settled in Cologne and died in 1965. ■

Piotr Korczyński,
historian, publicist, journalist for
Polska Zbrojna. Historia quarterly

A Polish guard at the gate of the Military Transit Depot on Westerplatte in the Free City of Danzig (1926)

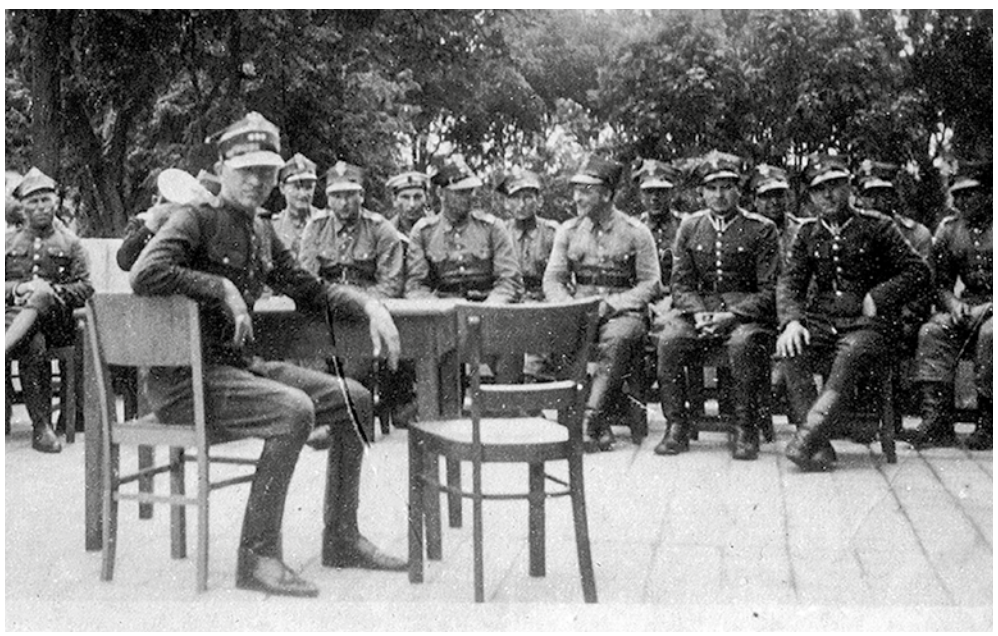
the Gulf of Gdansk. A depot that would facilitate the reloading of weapons and ammunition was to be built there. The League agreed that the facility should be guarded by a unit of maximum 88 soldiers; however, they could not wield heavy weapons. Along with the expansion of the new Polish port of Gdynia, the military importance of the depot diminished. The Polish army's presence on Westerplatte, however, retained its prestigious character. "It emphasized the Polish rights to Gdańsk and Polish presence in this part of the Baltic coast," recalled the Polish historian Jan Szkudliński in an interview for the polska-zbrojna.pl portal.

Don't Be Taken by Surprise!

Soldiers from Westerplatte were aware that they were a Polish bridgehead in an increasingly hostile territory. In the first half of the 1930s, the Ministry of Military Affairs prepared a plan for them in the event of a German coup in the Free City of Danzig. If the Germans had captured the city and hit the depot, the post would have to defend itself – up to twelve hours at the most. Then the military relief should come by land or sea. However, in the summer of 1939, it was already clear that the Germans did not intend to limit themselves to Gdańsk. They wanted a great war. Westerplatte had to get ready for it.

The crew of the depot was secretly reinforced to the state of just over 200 soldiers. It also received more weapons, including a 76.2-mm gun, two 37-mm anti-tank guns, and nearly 20 heavy machine guns. Under the cover of night, the Polish crew built additional entanglements and fortifications, and cut down trees that could hinder fire. Before the war, the fortifications of Westerplatte consisted of modern barracks surrounded by a system of five concrete guardhouses with the so-called outposts in the foreground. There was also an anti-tank barrage, rows of entanglements and so-called stumbling blocks against infantry; fortifications made of wood and soil. On August 31, Major Henryk Sucharski, who commanded the depot, was to hear from Lieutenant Colonel Wincenty Sobociński, Head of the Military Department of the Polish General Commissariat in the Free City of Danzig, that the next day Germans were to attack, and he must not be caught off guard. It is said that the Major also learned that he should expect no relief.

Westerplatte sign shot through by the Germans. On the photo: the 2nd Battalion of the 18th Infantry Regiment Museum Group of Historical Recontruction, active from 1998 *in Sochaczew with Jakub Wojewoda as a leader*



Capt Franciszek Dąbrowski at the briefing of the officer and non-commissioned personnel of the Westerplatte Military Transit Depot (1939)

Was this the case in fact? It is difficult to tell as we do not know the exact course of that conversation. There is, however, one thing that is certain: the Polish watchtower on Westerplatte was vigilant and ready to fight back. It didn't let the Germans catch it by surprise!

Poles Resist First Attacks

The Schleswig-Holstein battleship stands in the harbor canal. It faces Westerplatte with its side, and clouds of black smoke hover over its powerful cannons. It has just started firing. This is one of the most famous photographs from September 1939. It documents the moment of transition between silence and noise, peace and war, the old and the new world. A moment that changed almost everything in the history of Europe.

At the same time, this yellowed picture does not actually convey anything. In fact, can a paper picture tell the story of the 330-kg bullet whizz slashing the silence of the morning air and of the powerful explosion tearing up tons of earth, steel and concrete? Can it show the bustle of soldiers, express the snoring sound of hasty commands? Can it tell us what was going on right next door, on a piece of enemy-surrounded land that had fallen under the hurricane artillery fire?

The Germans attacked at 4.48 in the morning. First, there was the ring of eleven guns of the Schleswig-Holstein that at the end of August came to Gdańsk under the pretense of a courtesy visit. In total, on that day, the battleship's guns "spoke" three times – for seven, thirty seven, and twenty six minutes. Only during the first strike, a few hundred missiles of various caliber were fired at Westerplatte.

When the firing from the battleship ceased, special troops of German marines and SS Heimwehr Danzig set off to attack from the land – in total, about 200 soldiers. The assault was directed at the "Prom" outpost. Yet, the Poles managed to stop it. The operators of the largest Polish gun on Westerplatte destroyed several nests of German heavy machine guns. The Germans withdrew after an hour and a half.

They attacked again before noon. First, Schleswig-Holstein started shooting again, then the infantry moved on. The defenders lost the 76.2-mm gun, which made it easier for the Germans to fire at the depot from the buildings in Nowy Port. Moreover, Lieutenant Leon Pająk, who successfully commanded the "Prom" outpost, was seriously injured; but the Poles again repulsed the attack. The second German strike came to a halt at 12.30 p.m.

On the Polish side, the first-day fight losses balance account was four dead and ten wounded. The Germans lost forty soldiers, and tens were incapable of further fighting. At the same time, they were strongly surprised by such strong Polish resistance. The defenders of the depot showed that they were well prepared, and extremely determined to fight.

Air Raid Didn't Break Them

The real hell was about to begin, though. The Germans assumed that they would take Westerplatte in stride. That is why the first day of Polish resistance surprised them so much. They had to cool down after it, and reach for completely different means. They called on the Luftwaffe for support. The first of the 58 Junkers started to arrive over the Polish depot at 6 p.m. The next few dozen minutes cannot be described in any cool way. Suffice it to say that in that time on a piece of land of the width from 200 to 500 meters the aircraft dropped 26.5 tons of bombs! One of them, weighing half a ton, completely smashed guardhouse number 5, killing seven and seriously wounding two more Polish soldiers. Other bombs damaged the barracks, destroyed the mortars, and broken telephone communications. The air raid was to finally break the morale of the defenders. The Germans were so convinced of their victory that they did not plan another attack.

The events that took place on Westerplatte after that air attack are still concealed in a veil of mystery. It is said that a white flag flew over the barracks for a moment, but it was quickly torn off. It is said that the commander of the depot, Major Sucharski, suffered such a strong shock that his deputy, Captain Dąbrowski, had to take over the command of the facility. It is said that there was a fierce conflict between the officers, which reached its peak after the air raid. In this tangle of facts and speculations one fact iss certain: the Poles still defended Westerplatte.

Order Has Been Carried Out

For the following days, the German infantry conducted reconnaissance by fighting. Its short excursions were to check the defenders' vigilance, make them tired, and stifle them. The Poles were being shot at from mortars and field guns, from deck cannons of the battleship and machine guns set up on the buildings behind the port canal. On September 4, the bullets that came from the Gulf of Gdańsk fell on the peninsula. They were fired from a 100-millimeter cannon of the T-196 torpedo boat and from the Von der Groeben minesweeper. On September 6, the Germans made two attempts to set fire to the forest that covered

Westerplatte. Cisterns filled to the brim with oil were rolled into the peninsula. However, the defenders running on the rest of their strength triumphed once again. They were helped by an accurate shot from a 37-mm cannon and a massive fire of their machine guns.

On September 7, at 4.30 a.m., Schleswig-Holstein again opened fire; the MMGs clattered silently; the German infantry approached the depot walls; their flamethrowers sprouted fire. A hail of bullets fell on them from the Polish fortifications. The Germans were forced to withdraw by a few hundred meters. After a while, however, they stroke again. Hitler himself had allowed for a general assault attack to wipe Polish defenders to dust. Meanwhile, the Polish "Pomerania" Army already retreated to the south, towards Warsaw; whereas Gdynia, Kępa Oksywska and Hel Peninsula kept fighting on fiercely – besieged from all sides; the commonly expected aid from France and Great Britain never came. The Polish soldiers on Westerplatte were already very exhausted; the wounded were in a terrible condition. The enemy still had a crushing advantage. But the order had been carried out – not twelve hours, but six days of Polish resistance passed at dawn that day...

On September 7, at 10.15 a.m., Major Sucharski gathered a group of officers. He had decided – "We surrender." Along with two soldiers, he took the white flag and set off to the German side.

Westerplatte Fights Aftermath

While defending Westerplatte, about 20 Polish soldiers died, nearly 40 were wounded. The Germans lost a few tens of soldiers. Most probably, 100–150 German soldiers suffered injuries, although, according to some estimates, this number could reach a few hundred. After the battle, the Polish soldiers were sent to POW camps. Major Sucharski, who died in Italy in 1947, was allowed by the Germans to carry a saber in captivity. They began to call Westerplatte kleines Verdun ("little Verdun").

The Defense of Westerplatte remained a symbol of soldierly courage, generosity and a sense of duty. It is also an illustration of good defense organization, which allowed for effective resistance against an attack of a much stronger enemy. ■

Łukasz Zalesiński

Surrender. Gen Friedrich Georg Eberhardt pays tribute to the Polish commander on Westerplatte, Maj Henryk Sucharski (September 7, 1939)

A twelve-year old Kazimiera Kostewicz (Mika) leaning over the body of her older sister Andzia, killed by German aviator. The area of the Powązki Cemetery at Tatarska street in Warsaw's Wola district, September 14, 1939. Photo by Julien Bryan, American reporter

WARSAW CRIES

In one of the most moving photographs of September 1939, the photographer captured a desperate girl leaning over the massacred body of her elder sister lying on the grass. The woman was a victim of one of Hitler's sky-high knights who never missed an opportunity to sow death with their modern machines.

From the first days of the war, Warsaw became one of the main targets of the Luftwaffe. The capital of Poland was a fortress for the German command, as the army was stationed there. For this reason, as General Johannes Blaskowitz put it, a blind bombardment of the center of the city with over one million inhabitants was not a war crime. The Commander-in-Chief of Luftwaffe, Marshal Herman Goering, planned a similar to the air raid on Wieluń attack on Warsaw, but those intentions were fortunately thwarted by the fog prevailing at many German airports. In the first week of the aggression, German pilots could not boast of too many victories over the city. Warsaw had an effective anti-aircraft defense, and the sky above it was defended by one of the best formations of Polish aviation – Colonel Stefan Pawlikowski's Pursuit Brigade. However, on September 7, it was moved to the region of Lubelszczyzna, and a day later the enemy armored units approached the capital of Poland.

From that moment, the Germans intensified their air raids. Again, the German pilots proved that their favorite targets were hospitals and churches clearly marked with the Red Cross sign. On the bloody Sunday of September 17, at Hitler's personal request, the air force aircraft and the artillery destroyed the symbols of Warsaw – bombs fell on, in particular, the Royal Castle, St. John's Cathedral in the Old Town, and the National Theatre. The proof that religious holidays were important for the Luftwaffe, because then the number of victims could be much higher, can be the air raid on the Jewish quarter on September 22–23, during the Yom Kippur, the holiest days of the year in Judaism. For the citizens of Warsaw, however, the worst was only to come.

On September 25, 1939, at 7.10 a.m., an observer from the anti-aircraft defense post on the roof of the State Social Insurance Institution at Kopernika street noticed an approaching wave of bombers. He counted that there were about 150 of them; they were flying at a high altitude. A moment later, hell broke loose over Warsaw. For twelve hours, 1,200 German bombers, wave after wave, dropped nearly 630 tons of demolition and incendiary bombs on the capital. More than two hundred fires broke out in the city. The Germans

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did not spare medical facilities; bombs dropped on the Holy Spirit Hospital and injured 700 patients, most of whom died. The main streets of Śródmieście district – Nowy Świat, Marszałkowska, Królewska, Chmielna streets – were set ablaze... The city was shrouded in thick clouds of smoke and dust, into which subsequent bombers dropped their deadly charge blindly. "It was dark," recalled Doctor Ludwik Hirszfeld, "from the smoke of fires and soot; the houses were shaking and collapsing. People were running from house to house, from shelter to shelter, it was pure madness. Lying on the streets – the killed and the wounded; horses next to people. This is how the end of the world may look like." This was not enough, however; as an Italian war correspondent noted, "the air force dropped bombs on barricades and fired at barricades in the streets with their machine guns. For the first time in the history of wars – aircraft fought against barricades." On that occasion, the Luftwaffe also bombed its own infantry positions in the northwestern city suburbs, which caused such a fierce argument between the army and Luftwaffe commanders that the Führer himself had to intervene. On that Black, or Wet Monday, as the inhabitants of Warsaw called it ironically, 10,000 people died and 35,000 were wounded. In total, the siege of Warsaw brought death to 40,000 civilians, the destruction of one tenth, and the damage to two fifths of the houses of the Polish capital. ■

Piotr Korczyński

AMERICAN REPORTER IN BESIEGED WARSAW

Bryan and Kazimiera shortly after the photo was taken

Julien Bryan was a well-known American reporter who documented everyday lives of people around the world. In the summer of 1939, he stayed in Romania. When he found out about the outbreak of war, he immediately boarded a train and set off from Bucharest to Warsaw. He reached the capital of Poland at the last moment, on September 7. He stayed there for two weeks, and the result of his work was more than six hours of film tape, and 700 photos. In 1940, he edited the famous documentary, Siege, on the basis of the collected material. From Warsaw, on the waves of the Polish Radio, he asked U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt for aid to Warsaw inhabitants dying under German bombs. Some of his photographs were published on the covers of world newspapers at that time, becoming a permanent fixture in the history of Polish wartime photography. On September 14, during his trip to the northern suburbs of the capital, near the Powązki Cemetery, he started to photograph the bodies of people killed in the air raid. As he mentioned later, "When I was photographing the bodies, a ten-year-old girl came running, and stood – as if paralyzed – over one of the dead. The dead woman was her older sister. The child had never seen death before, and could not understand why her sister did not speak to her.

'What happened!,' she screamed. She leaned over, touched the dead girl's face, and stepped back in horror. 'Oh, my beautiful sister!,' she sobbed, 'What have they done to you! You are so ugly!' Then, after a few seconds, 'Please, talk to me! Please, please! What will happen to me without you!' The child looked at us stunned. I held her shoulder and hugged her tightly, trying to comfort her. She cried. I cried, the two officers who were with me cried too. What could we, or anyone else, tell this child?"

The girl who, as it turned out, survived the war, was Kazimiera Kostewicz. They found each other after the war, as she answered Bryan's advertisement which he placed in 1958 in Warsaw's "Express Wieczorny," looking for heroes of his photographs taken during the siege of Warsaw. ■ *żur*

Crushing the

The Germans were sure of their technical advantage, which was confirmed already in the first days of the war, but they were afraid of bayonet attack of Polish soldiers. Once Poles managed to break through the firewall of machine guns and artillery, nothing could stop them.

These kind of attacks were even more dangerous when enemy was taken by surprise, as experienced by the SS-men from the SS-Standarte "Germania" Regiment, assigned to the Wehrmacht units, which were blocking General Kazimierz Sosnkowski's "Małopolska" Army divisions the way to besieged by the Germans Lviv, the capital of the Little Poland [Małopolska] region.

COL BRONISŁAW PRUGAR-KETLING

Col Bronisław Prugar-Ketling (1891–1948), the Commander of the 11th Carpathian Infantry Division, whose soldiers smashed the German SS "Germania" Regiment near Mużyłowice in Eastern Little Poland region; then the Commander of the Polish 2nd Infantry Rifle Division which he led in the French campaign in 1940; unwilling to capitulate before the Germans, he crossed the Swiss border; in 1945, he returned to Poland. Photo: early 1930s

In the actions of Hitler's elite mechanized guard regiment, the "Germania" soldiers had more executions than combat achievements to their credit. During the first three days of the war, the regiment stationed in Gliwice, in the German Upper Silesia; on September 4, it moved to Sosnowiec in the Dąbrowa Basin, abandoned by the Polish Army, where it immediately became involved in the arrests and executions carried out by the German Operational Group (Einsatzgruppe I). The SS-men from "Germania" participated in mass executions in the Panewicki Forest near Katowice, the capital of Upper Silesia, where over 150 people were murdered. For those and similar combat deeds, part of the regiment paid a high price, and indeed paid quite soon, already in the night of September 15/16, 1939, in Mużyłowice in Małopolska. It was this town that became the arena for Nemesis on that fatal for the Germans night.

Fix Bayonets!

At his briefing on September 15 in Sądowa Wisznia, currently located in Ukraine, General Sosnkowski decided to break through with his army to Lviv. For the commanders of his subordinate divisions, this meant giving orders to attack the German units blocking their way. In the evening of that day, the regiments of the 11th Carpathian Infantry Division led by Colonel Bronisław Prugar-Ketling and the 38th Reserve Infantry Division led by Colonel Alojzy Wir-Konas set off for battle. The German mountain riflemen and motorized SS-men were struck by waves of Polish infantry. The greatest battle credit in that clash fell to the 49th

They Bore Witness to the Russian Crime

The participants of delegations organized by the Germans in 1943, which were to certify the responsibility of the Russians for the murder of Polish officers in Katyn, became inconvenient witnesses to the authorities of the Soviet Union.

After the war, they were accused of collaborating with the Germans, hunted by way of wanted persons lists, and imprisoned in their native countries that fell under Russian occupation; some of them died in unexplained circumstances," says Tadeusz Wolsza, a historian specializing in modern history.

After discovering the graves of Polish officers in Katyn in the spring of 1943, German authorities organized delegations that visited the crime scene. What was their purpose?

The Germans wanted to exploit the murder of Polish officers by the Soviets to provoke a conflict between the Western Allies and the allied Soviet Union. In order to

SS "Germania" Regiment

Hutsul Rifle Regiment under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Karol Hodała. When General Prugar was informed by one of the local inhabitants that there was a staff of an SS-unit in Mużyłowice, situated near Wisznia Sądowa, he ordered Lieutenant Colonel Hodała to capture the village during a night attack. At the same time, he ordered the soldiers to unload their weapons. This was to assure a moment of surprise for the attack, which could have been lost by an accidental or premature shot.

Lieutenant Colonel Hodała's soldiers were like ghosts when they pounced on the SS-men after midnight on September 16. They would prick them with bayonets in total darkness and in silence occasionally interrupted by a German machine gun, hushed right away by acting under combat frenzy Polish soldiers. The Germans were so terrified, they did not even try to ask for mercy. They died in an attack they had not expected, and the kind of which they had faced for the first and last time in their lives. The corpses of SS-men, which Polish officers saw after the battle, looked horribly. "The terror, in the midst of which they died, never faded from their faces," wrote Prugar in his report after the battle.

Gen Kazimierz Sosnkowski (1885–1969), the Commander of the Southern Front in September 1939. After the unsuccessful rescue of Lviv, which capitulated to the besieging the city with the Germans Russian troops, he crossed the green border to Hungary, and then to France. From 1940, he stayed in England with the Polish government, and in 1943–1944, he was the Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Army; then, he emigrated to Canada where he died in 1969.

Remains of the German SS Regiment "Germania" in Mużyłowice in Eastern Little Poland region (September 1939)

One-of-a-Kind Victory

Colonel Prugar-Ketling reached the battlefield in Mużyłowice only at dawn. "In the ever-brighter smudges of the morning dawn, we could distinguish houses, trees, fences, and then... cannons, caissons, tractors, cars – single ones at first – then groups, then whole parks. We did double take to make sure it wasn't an illusion. A large, rich village, with wide courtyards and gardens, was flooded with equipment and war material to the brim." In Mużyłowice, "Germania" lost almost all heavy equipment, including eight 105-mm howitzers, an anti-aircraft gun battery, most mortars and machine guns, and all cars.

Unfortunately, the heavy equipment could not be used due to the lack of properly trained drivers and soldiers. Thus, the bomb squad destroyed it on the spot. For the SS-men, though, the loss of people was much more painful. High-ranked officers died from the blows of Polish bayonets, and the regiment's panicked staff escaped from the village; its German soldiers scattered around the whole area took a few days to gather.

In his memoirs written during the internment in Switzerland, General Prugar-Ketling noted that Hitler had gotten furious when he had heard about the massacre of his regiment, and had ordered to remove it from the army status list. In reality, however, most of the regiment's forces got concentrated already on September 17; then, they were deployed to cover the wings of the 17th Army Corps, and they remained in that capacity until the end of the campaign in Poland. After the end of the fighting in 1939, all the "Germania" troops reunited, and the regiment was moved to the territory of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, which was annexed to the German Reich. In the following years of the war, "Germania" was a part of the 5th SS Panzer Division "Wiking."

Aftermath

The victory over "Germania" and other units of the German 1st Mountain Division lifted the morale of General Sosnkowski's soldiers. However, they did not have much time to rejoice in the victory. The next heavy battles awaited them on the way to "the most faithful city," – as Sosnkowski called Lviv during the briefing in Sądowa Wisznia. On the night of September 20–21, 1939, Colonel Prugar dissolved his 11th Carpathian Infantry Division, ordering the soldiers to scatter and push in small groups towards the southern border, to Hungary. Some of the soldiers, including the Colonel himself, managed to get to France; but most of them were taken prisoner by the Soviets and Germans. Lieutenant Colonel Hodała, awarded with a Virtuti Militari order, thus the highest Polish military order, was one of the officers of that division murdered by the Russian NKVD in 1940. The soldiers and the few officers who survived Russian captivity found themselves in the ranks of the Polish Army in the USSR, which was formed in the Soviet Russia by General Władysław Anders. This was made possible by the aggression of Germany against Russia in June 1941, thanks to which Poland transited unexpectedly, for a short time, from an enemy to an ally of the Russians.

Paradoxically, the defeat of Hitler's SS-minions was exploited by their Wehrmacht competitors. Its superior commanders, hostile to the SS, emphasized in their reports the inadequate training and lack of experience of the SS-men. The defeat of "Germania" was a strong asset in spoiling the blood of Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler, who had to admit that his subordinates still lacked much to join the military elite of the German army, and the fanaticism and experience gained during the genocide of Polish civilians was not enough to fight against the good and determined soldiers – the subordinates of General Kazimierz Sosnkowski. ■

Piotr Korczyński

do so, however, they had to convince the world that the Soviets were responsible for the crime, especially since the authorities of the Soviet Union immediately accused the Third Reich of committing it. They needed an independent and credible institution that would examine the bodies, establish the date of the crime, and identify the perpetrators. They turned to the International Committee of the Red Cross, which, however, refused to send a delegation to Katyn.

Why?

All interested parties would have to agree to such a survey, and one of them was the Soviet Union, which, of course, did not agree. The Germans then formed an International Medical Committee (called the Katyn Commission), which included over a dozen prominent forensic specialists from the countries occupied by the Third Reich – Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, the Netherlands, Finland, the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, Romania, Slovakia, Hungary, Italy, and also neutral Switzerland. However, doctors invited from Spain, Portugal, Sweden and Turkey did not reach Katyn. From April 28 to April 30, the members of the commission carried out their work in Katyn, setting the date of the crime, i.a. on the basis of examining the sediment formed on the corpses of the murdered. The dates on letters, photographs, newspapers, notes and diaries found with the bodies did not go beyond March 1940, indicating that the executions had taken place in the spring of 1940, which proved that the crimes were committed by the Soviets. Having concluded their work, the commission prepared a report, pointing to the Soviets as the perpetrators. Slightly earlier, delegations of journalists had arrived in Katyn; the first one came from neutral countries –

Continuation on the next page

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 Kozielsk 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. ■

żur

Spain, Switzerland, and Sweden. In total, in the spring of 1943, the graves in Katyn were visited by a few hundred civilians and over 30 thousand Wehrmacht soldiers. The sight of the bodies of Poles murdered by the NKVD was supposed to encourage them to fight more courageously against the Red Army.

Was the report of the International Katyn Commission signed by all the doctors?

Yes, all of them, and it wasn't forced by the Third Reich. The Germans gave this document the widest possible publicity by bringing it out in the form of a book in Germany and occupied France. Furthermore, each member of the commission talked about the crime in their own countries – giving interviews, writing articles, or participating in scientific conferences.

The scholars also took from Katyn things such as fragments of ropes with which the hands of the officers were tied, their shoulder pads and buttons, and Dr. Helge Tramsen, a Danish surgeon, took away the skull of one of the murdered...

Dr Tramsen of the Copenhagen Department of Forensic Medicine obtained permission from the Danish resistance movement to travel to Katyn, and on his way back to Denmark, he smuggled the shot-through skull of one of the victims, Major Ludwik Szymański. The skull remained at the Department, and only after sixty years did they manage to find the son of this officer, Jerzy Szymański, who resided in Australia. Upon his request, the remains of his father were buried in the Katyn Chapel of the Field Cathedral of the Polish Army.

If the blame of the USSR had been confirmed by specialists, what was the purpose of sending a delegation of allied prisoners of war to Katyn in May 1943?

Most of the doctors and journalists came from European countries occupied by Germany, so they could be unreliable for the United States or the United Kingdom. To confirm that Polish officers were killed by the Soviets, the Germans forced a group of English-speaking prisoners to attend the exhumation of the mass graves of Polish officers. The eight-person group comprised officers from Great Britain and its subordinate dominions, and two American officers: Lieutenant Colonel John Van Vliet Jr. and Captain Donald B. Stewart. Before going to Katyn, both of them were certain that the Germans were behind the murder.

What convinced them that the Germans were not lying?

The documents found in the graves, as well as the barely worn out shoes and uniforms. Of course, the findings of the doctors and the talks with delegates of the Polish Red Cross, who at that time were also staying in Katyn (the Red Cross organization, as one of the very few legally existing Polish institutions, was permitted to operate in the areas of Central Poland occupied by the Germans), also contributed to that. Shortly afterwards, the American officers were sent to Oflag (POW camp for officers) No. 64 in Szubin near Bydgoszcz, on the Polish lands incorporated into the Reich, from where they would send encrypted messages concerning the Katyn massacre to the US military intelligence service, confirming the Soviet crime. After the liberation of the camp in May 1945, Van Vliet filed a report with the Pentagon, in which he reiterated that the Soviet Union was responsible for the Katyn massacre. The document in question was classified by the American authorities.

The corps of Polish officer exhumated by the Germans in Katyn in 1943.On the left, an arm of a person supporting the corps for picture taking

The Germans also organized visits to Katyn for journalists and writers from occupied Europe, who were later to spread information about the crime in their countries. Józef Mackiewicz, a Polish writer and publicist, who had been previously sentenced to death by the Polish underground court, was among them.

He was accused of collaborating with the Germans. Mackiewicz allegedly wrote a few anti-communist articles in 1941 for the German-controlled Polish-language gutter newspaper published in Vilnius, called Goniec Codzienny (the Vilnius Region, which today belongs to Lithuania, was a part of Poland before the war; in 1939-1940 it was occupied by Lithuanians, in 1940-1941 by Russians, and from June 1941 by the Germans). However, Sergiusz Piasecki, the head of the underground cell executing sentences, refused to follow the order, because he had doubts as to Mackiewicz's guilt. Then, Lieutenant Colonel Aleksander Krzyżanowski, Commander of the Vilnius District of the Home Army [Polish underground army], reviewed the case file and decided to revoke the sentence. In the spring of 1943, with the consent of the Polish underground authorities, Mackiewicz traveled to Katyn. At that time, the Technical Commission of the Polish Red Cross under the direction of Dr. Marian Wodziński also worked at the crime scene, exhuming and identifying the murdered. After Mackiewicz's return to Vilnius, Goniec Codzienny published an interview with him under the title "I Saw It with My Own Eyes," declaring the guilt of the Russians. Another delegation, supported by the Government Delegation for Poland, that is the underground government, acting in agreement with the Polish Government-in-Exile, was also attended by Ferdinand Goetel, a well-known Polish writer, who, after his return, also produced a report. It is worth noting that the reports prepared from the Soviet crime scene were sent to the Polish government in London quite promptly by the authorities of the Polish Underground State.

The graves of the Polish officers were also seen by Robert Brasillach, a French poet and prose writer.

During the German occupation, Brasillach wrote for the collaborative Parisian daily "Je suispartout." The Germans asked him to visit Katyn, hoping for his involvement in proclaiming the guilt of the Russians. In fact, many of his texts on the subject were later published in the French press. Not only his texts, for that matter. In general, we can say that Katyn was a "smash" of the Parisian 1943 spring season. Brasillach was arrested after the liberation of Paris and sentenced to death by shooting in January 1945 for collaborating with the Third Reich. He was executed on February 6. There is an opinion that he was killed in an act of revenge of the communists for proclaiming the truth about Katyn, which is not entirely accurate. I believe that his entire attitude presented during the war may be considered reprehensible. He supported fascism and was fascinated with Hitler. Moreover, he believed that only the National Socialist Germany could save Europe from Bolshevism.

After the war, the participants of visits to Katyn became inconvenient witnesses for the Russians.

In Denmark, Dr. Helge Tramsen was harassed and accused of collaborating with Germany. Nevertheless, he did not revoke his statements. He wrote articles on Katyn and was a guest of the Polish Section of Radio Free Europe. He also testified about Katyn to a U.S. Congress committee. But he always feared Soviet revenge. In 1970, his daughter Elizabeth arrived at the Chopin Festival in Warsaw, where she died in a car accident. Tramsen claimed that she had been murdered by Soviet agents, which seems likely. The fate of Vincenzo Palmieri and François Naville was similar, although not so dramatic. Their research careers in Italy and Switzerland were for some time hindered by communist intervention.

Were other members also repressed for having been on the Katyn Commission?

Yes, almost all of them, to some extent. After the war, some of them, including a Czech, František Hájek, and a Bulgarian, Marko Markov, ended up in countries occupied by Russia. Both of them, accused of collaboration and threatened with the death penalty, withdrew their signatures from the minutes of the International Katyn Commission and declared that the murder had been committed by the Germans. František Šubik of Slovakia refused to change his decision despite being imprisoned for two years and, after his release in 1952, fled abroad. Professor Ferenc Orsós, President of the Hungarian Medical Chamber, also fled his country. He then abandoned his medical profession and became a painter, using motifs connected with the case of Katyn as a basis for his paintings.

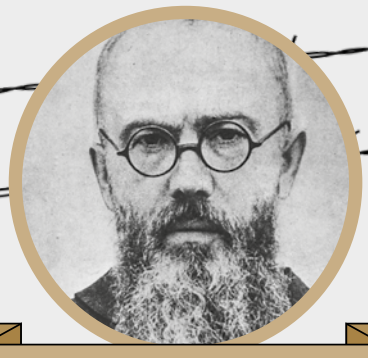
What happened to Mackiewicz and Goetel?

They both fled to Italy. The Peer Tribunal of the Association of Polish Journalists cleared Mackiewicz of the accusation of collaborating with the Germans. In 1948, the writer participated in the edition of the publication Katyn Crime in the Light of Documents, and a year later he published his own book on the crime in German. The attempt to publish the work in the USA was unsuccessful. Both positions played an important role in spreading the truth about the Soviet Union's responsibility for that murder. Goetel wrote many articles on the subject and carried out an invaluable interview with Ivan Krivoziercev, a Russian peasant living near Katyn, who in the spring of 1940 witnessed the NKVD bringing Polish officers to the Katyn forest in trucks; he also heard from the local people about digging holes in the forest, and he fled with his family to the West in 1944. He was murdered in 1947 in Great Britain. Both writers also testified before a special investigative committee of the American Congress established in 1951 in the USA to investigate the Katyn Massacre [precise name: The Select Committee to Conduct an Investigation and Study of the Facts, Evidence, and Circumstances of the Katyn Forest Massacre]. In total, the committee, chaired by Congressman Ray Madden, interviewed several hundred witnesses, including both officers from the USA and a number of doctors: Tramsen, Orsós, Naville, Palmieri. In 1952, it published a final report on its work, in which it indicated that the Soviet Union was responsible for the Katyn murder. ■

Interview by Anna Dąbrowska

Prof. Tadeusz Wolsza, historian and political scientist; specializes in Stalinist crimes in post-war Poland, and Katyn Massacre history; his book Encounter with Katyn *was awarded in the Janusz Kurtyka Foundation competition, and in 2019 was published in USA thanks to the efforts of Carolina Academic Press*

There Were Millions of Them - Victims of German Extermination Industry



1894-1941

FATHER MAXIMILIAN MARIA (RAJMUND) KOLBE

LIFE FOR LIFE

"My Dearest Mother, at the end of May, I was transported to the camp in Oświęcim. Don't worry," writes in 1941 Father Maximilian Kolbe, a Franciscan already at that time legendary in Poland. He becomes No. 16670. In July 1941, he was standing on the camp's roll-call square with others. The SS-men were walking between the rows of prisoners and selecting ten random people to be killed by starvation. One of them was Franciszek Gajowniczek. He cried in despair. Father Kolbe bravely approached the surprised German soldiers, and said, "I am a Catholic priest, and I want to die for this man." He was dying for two weeks. On August 14, he was finished off with a lethal phenol injection into the heart. He is a Roman Catholic Saint. ■

1917-1944

ZUZANNA GINCZANKA (GINCBURG)

POETESS. SUPERSTAR

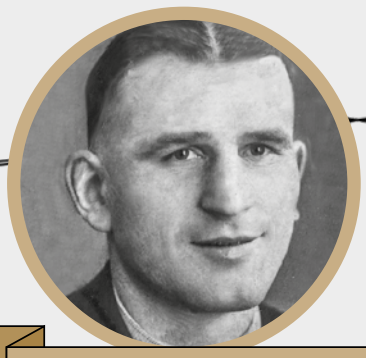
When the war broke, one of her friends told her to always carry poison with her. Zuzanna Ginczanka (Sara Polina Gincburg), a young poetess, was in a literary world of a prewar Poland like a fresh breeze. Beautiful and talented. She was 22, when the first German bombs fell on Poland. She was hiding for months for the fear of being recognized as Jewish. Gestapo traced her in Kraków. After brutal interrogation, she admitted to being of Jewish origin. It was like signing her death sentence. In May 1944, she was sent to the camp in Płaszów. Probably right after she crossed the gate, she was shot to death. ■

1928-1943

CZESŁAWA KWOKA

WAR'S HELL SEEN IN HER EYES

Expelled from her own house. First, dozens of hours spent in a cattle wagon, standing. No food and drink, but still with her mama. Then, the camp's gate. Guards yelling out, separated families crying. She wanted to be brave, although now without her mama. Pushed around, with her head shaved, wearing dirty, oversized striped uniform. She stood in terror, looking in the angry face of a shouting German female guard. She couldn't understand her screams, she was Polish. To punish her, the German guard whipped the child's face with her all might. Wilhelm Brasse, who in Auschwitz would photograph prisoners for documentation, recalled that before Czesia sat down to have her picture taken, she wiped her tears and blood off her face. Three months later, Czesia Kwoka was killed with a lethal phenol injection into her heart. She was almost 14, and had a tattooed number of 26947. She came to Auschwitz in December 1942, in one of the first transports from the region of Zamość, which the occupants planned to transform into the holiday region for the Germans. During this operation, about 110,000 Poles were deported, including 30,000 children. ■



1912-1943

JAN MELLER

BOXER WHO PUT HIS FOOT DOWN TO THE NAZIS

In a pre-war Gdańsk, Jan Meller was an onboard mechanic on SS Polonia ship, which would regularly sail to New York. His passion, though, were daring fights in a boxing ring. As a middleweight boxer, he would score one victory after another. When in 1939 the German troops entered Gdańsk, Meller was placed on the Gestapo wanted list. He had to hide. He was caught, because he wanted to surprise his wife and children – right before Christmas of 1942, he visited home with his present, a Christmas tree. When in prison, the Nazis gave him choice: German citizenship or death. His honor did not allow him to yield. He died, tormented in the Stutthof concentration camp, walking on the so-called "death path" organized by the camp guards. He had to keep on walking, and the German guards were beating him until he died of exhaustion. About how he died, his wife and children found out by accident. Several years after the war, a stove setter came to their house. He told them his camp memories. "I had a wonderful friend there, Janek, who was a boxer, and who put his foot down to the Germans. Before he died, he asked me to tell his family how he died – but I don't know where to find them," he said. The woman who was listening to him fainted. She was the wife of Jan Meller. ■

German Concentration Camps on Polish Territory

The Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Western Europe, American General Dwight D. Eisenhower, future President of the United States (1953–1961), after a visit to Buchenwald near Weimar, had the truth about German concentration camps documented on film. He then publicly promised that those guilty of the crime would suffer well-deserved punishment.

As part of the re-education of the German civilians who lived near the places of execution, Eisenhower ordered a forced tour of the camps. German Concentration Camps. Factual Survey was supposed to be the name of a full-length documentary about the camps liberated in 1945. It was not fully executed. The reconstruction of Europe from war damage after the war was a priority. The film was to be completed later. However, fragments of shocking images from film chronicles with piles of skeletons of human corpses have survived to this day. "I felt as though I had peered into hell," said one of the cinematographers. Fragments of this film were used in the trial of the Nazi leaders of the Third Reich in 1946 in the German city of Nuremberg. The material evidence in the form of chronicles and witnesses' testimonies about the German camps essentially contributed to the indictment by Robert H. Jackson, an American prosecutor, against the German war criminals who managed to be brought before the International Military Tribunal. The Court recognized the crimes committed in German concentration camps as crimes against humanity that are not time-barred.

Camps in Poland

After the outbreak of World War II on September 1, 1939, the Germans built the largest network of concentration camps in occupied Europe, serving the extermination of Poles and Jews. Soviet POWs were held there, too; from 1943, Italian POWs were also held there. It is estimated that

Auschwitz-Birkenau German concentration and extermination camp on the territory of Oświęcim. Sonderkommando (special unit of prisoners) is burning the corps

in the years 1939–1945, the total fatal losses of Polish citizens under German occupation amounted to about 5,500,000 people, including about 2,800,000 citizens of Jewish descent. The majority of Polish Jews died in concentration camps and death camps. Poland therefore suffered the greatest loss of population in the Second World War among the warring parties in terms of the total population of the state.

The first transport of 135 Poles from the Free City of Danzig reached the

Continuation on the next page

camp in Stutthof (Polish: Sztutowo) already on September 2, 1939. In 1942, it was transformed into a concentration camp – a place of murder of Jews, Poles and civilian prisoners of war. KL Stutthof was the last such camp liberated by the Red Army; the liberation took place the day after the end of the war, on May 9, 1945. In the General Government, i.e. in the central areas of Poland which were not incorporated directly into the Reich, the leaders of National Socialist Germany established three concentration camps: in Lublin in the district of Majdanek, KL Warschau in Warsaw, commonly known as "Gęsiówka", and KL Plaszow in Płaszów near Kraków. On the western lands of Poland incorporated into the Reich, at the turn of May and June 1940, the Konzentrationslager Auschwitz (later Auschwitz-Birkenau, Polish name: Oświęcim-Brzezinka) was established, which later became the largest German KZ-lager in occupied Europe. The first prisoners of Auschwitz were of Polish origin, while political prisoners were arrested for their conspiratorial activity – a transport of 728 people arrived there from the German prison in Tarnów on June 14, 1940. From 1941, Auschwitz-Birkenau also served as an extermination center for Jews from the territories occupied by the Third Reich and from European countries allied with it. The extermination was carried out as part of the plan for the Final Solution of the Jewish Question (Endlösung der Judenfrage). A year later, pseudo-medical experiments were carried out on prisoners, including on Soviet prisoners of war, in that camp.

Leben für Leben

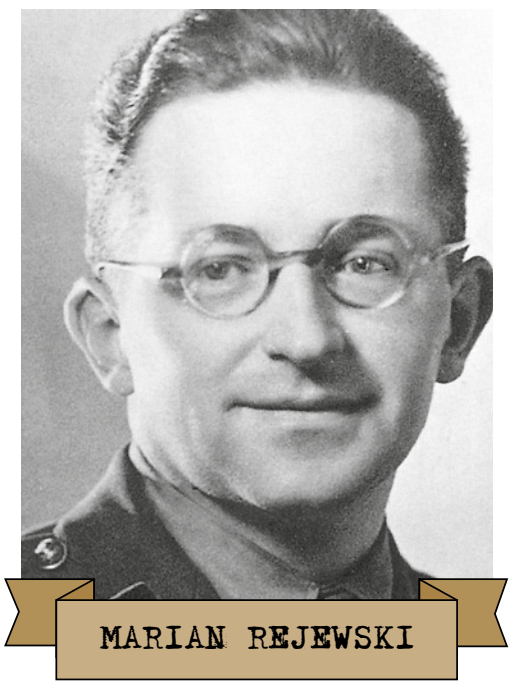
Life for Life is the title of the famous feature film about Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish Conventual Franciscan friar, who decided to give his life for Franciszek Gajowniczek in July 1941. Kolbe sacrificed his life for an unknown fellow prisoner, father of two sons, sentenced by the Germans together with other prisoners to starvation in retaliation for the escape of one of the prisoners from the camp. He died on August 14, 1941, finished off with an injection of poison into his heart in a bunker in Auschwitz. His body was burned in the camp crematorium.

Gajowniczek recalled this moment as follows: "Ten prisoners from my block of flats were selected to die. The camp commander, Fritzsch, accompanied by Rapportführer Palitzsch, made a "selection" (choice). The unfortunate fate also befell me. With words, "Ah, I feel so sorry for my wife and the children I am orphaning," I went to the end of the block. I was to go to the starvation death row. Father Maximilian Kolbe, a Franciscan from Niepokalanów, heard those words. He came out of the ranks, approached Lagerführer Fritzsch and tried to kiss his hand. Fritzsch asked the translator, 'Was Was wunscht dieses polnische Schwein?' ('What does this Polish pig want [from me]?'). Father Maximilian Kolbe, pointing his hand at me, expressed his wish to go and die instead of me. Lagerführer Fritzsch moved his hand and said, 'Heraus' ('Get

Entry gate to the Auschwitz-Birkenau German concentration and extermination camp for transports with prisoners. On railway track, scattered personal belongings of the victims

Mathematicians Who Saved Millions

Marian Rejewski together with a group of cryptanalysts cracked the Enigma, a German rotor cipher machine.



Polish mathematician and cryptanalyst, Marian Rejewski (1905-1980), who in 1932 broke the code of German Enigma

Their discovery enabled the Allies to track the movement of German forces, end the war sooner, and save millions of lives.

A young man is looking at us from a black and white photo. A jacket, a tie, a serious expression on his face, short hair, and round glasses. First impression? He must be a clerk, maybe a scientist, and certainly a bookworm. No one would guess that this inconspicuous guy had a huge impact on the course of World War II.

In the mid-1920s, the German military began coding their messages using the Enigma. The device consisted of a 26-key keyboard and a set of rotors. Whenever a letter key on the keyboard was pressed, a rotor turned, an electric circuit was closed, and the letter was replaced with a different one. Of course, it did not happen on a "one-to-one" basis. The rotors kept moving, and each letter could be substituted with a different letter each time it was used (e.g. an "a" could be replaced with a "z" and later with an "m"). The key to deciphering the code was determining the initial setting of the rotors, and the Germans changed the setting every day.

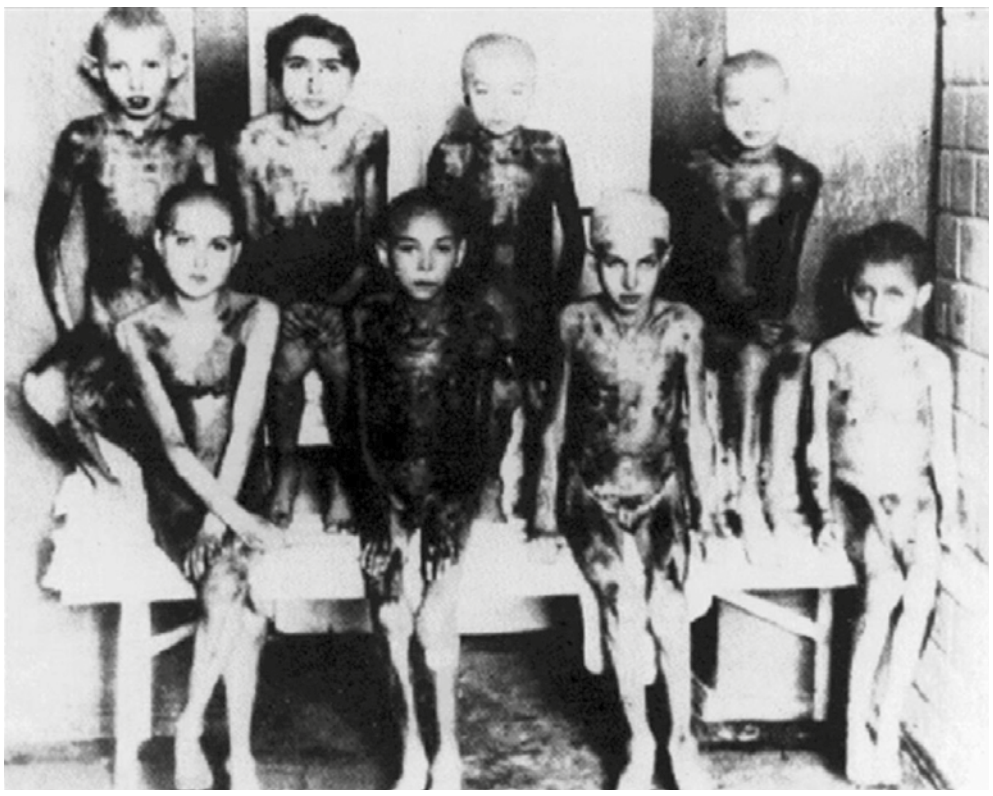
Counterintelligence specialists from the Polish General Staff knew linguists would not be able to break the code. They needed mathematicians, and Capt Ciężki from the Polish Cipher Bureau decided to look for the most talented mathematicians at the Poznań University. Three young people were recruited: Marian Rejewski, Jerzy Różycki, and Henryk Zygalski. In 1932 they broke the Enigma code, and shortly after they even built a replica of the machine. The Germans were unaware of the Poles' success, but nevertheless kept improving their security measures. Polish mathematicians did not fall behind the German technology and built "Rejewski's Bombe," a special deciphering machine. It was a prototype later used and developed by a genius British mathematician, Alan Turing. In July 1939, mathematicians from the Polish Cipher Bureau shared their knowledge about Enigma with the British and the French. After the war broke out, the cryptanalysts were evacuated to Romania, then to France, and finally to Britain where they kept working on cracking German codes. Breaking the Enigma code enabled the Allies to track movement of German forces. Today historians agree that due to their efforts, the war lasted two or three years less than anticipated. As a consequence, millions of human lives were saved.

Rejewski ended his military career in the Polish Armed Forces in the West as a lieutenant. In 1946 he returned to Poland and worked as a clerk in a factory in Bydgoszcz. He could not talk to his friends about what he had done during the war as it was highly classified. He finally revealed the truth in 1967. At that time, the Polish role in the breaking of the Enigma code was marginalized and often not even mentioned. Historians attributed success to British cryptanalysts from Bletchley Park. This false image was also reinforced by film makers and their work, e.g. the Hollywood production "Enigma" with Dougray Scott and Kate Winslet.

Fortunately, this tendency is slowly changing. The merits of Marian Rejewski were appreciated by the Americans who posthumously awarded him with the Knowlton Award, recognizing individuals who have contributed significantly to the promotion of Military Intelligence. ■

Łukasz Zalesiński

Enigma encryption device used by the German army from 1926



Children prisoners, victims of the Auschwitz-Birkenau German Nazi concentration and extermination camp

out'); he ordered me to step out of the line of convicts, and my place was taken by Father Maximilian Kolbe. A moment later, they were escorted to the death row, and we were ordered to leave to the blocks. At that moment, it was difficult for me to realize the enormity of the impression that had overwhelmed me; I, a convict, am to live on, and someone willingly and voluntarily sacrifices his life for me. Am I dreaming or is it really happening...?"

Gajowniczek, saved in that way, remained in Auschwitz-Birkenau until October 25, 1944, and then was transported to the concentration camp in Sachsenhausen near Berlin. In May 1945, he and other prisoners were released by the Americans. He lived to see Kolbe declared a saint of the Catholic Church by the Polish Pope John Paul II in 1982. Gajowniczek died in Poland in 1995 at the age of 94.

Jews

Between 1941 and 1944, a total of about 900,000 Jews were killed at Auschwitz-Birkenau, half of whom were Hungarian Jews who were exterminated in 1944 after Germany had seized the territory of their country. At the same time, 202,000 people of other nationalities, especially Poles, Russians, and Romani, died in Auschwitz. The total number of victims of the two camps is 1,100,000.

The second largest and most significant death camp in Poland was Treblinka in Podlasie. Between 1942 and 1943, the Germans murdered 974,000 people there, including 300,000 Jews who lived in the Warsaw Ghetto. On August 6, 1942, Janusz Korczak, a famous Polish educator and writer of Jewish descent, together with 192 children from the Orphanage, of which he was the director, were taken by the Germans to the Warsaw Umschlagplatz, from where they were transported in a cattle wagon to Treblinka. In other death camps in central Poland, in Bełżec and Sobibór, the Germans murdered nearly 2,000,000 people.

In Free Poland

The memory of the victims of German concentration and extermination camps is alive. There are museums and memorial sites, the largest of which are in Oświęcim [Auschwitz] and Majdanek in Lublin. The museum was established in November 1944, i.e. during the war, as the first museum commemorating the victims of the Second World War in Europe. To this day, Poland celebrates the anniversaries of the camp liberations. There are commemorative publications and occasional exhibitions. All this to keep on reminding not to ever again repeat the nightmare of the 20th-century concentration camps where – as Zofia Nałkowska, a prominent Polish writer, wrote about war and occupation time – "people doomed people to this fate." ■

Bogusław Kopka, historian and academic teacher, author of Struggle and Suffering. Poland 1939–1945 (2019, *with Paweł Kosiński); writes about WWII and post-war history of Poland*

They Saved London

It was one of the most daring operations of the Home Army. Polish intelligence captured an unexploded ordnance of the famous V2 rocket, one of the greatest military secrets of the Third Reich.

A bit after midnight, July 25 to 26, 1944. The whirr of a heavy airborne machine pierces the silence of the night. A transport Dakota C47 belonging to the British 267th RAF squadron appears over the meadows of Tarnów. George Culliford, a New Zealander, steers the beast. After a while, the machine lands on a secret airfield code-named "Butterfly." The door opens, and the second pilot, Lieutenant Kazimierz Szrajer of the No. 1586 (Polish Special Duties) Flight at RAF, appears at the door. Operation Wildhorn III begins.

"The aim of the flights to Poland from the airport near Brindisi in the Italian region of Puglia was to transport couriers, soldiers, weapons, mail, and secret documents between Great Britain and the occupied country," explains Marek Jankowski, a Polish historian. In 1944, two Operations Wildhorn were organized: on the night of April 15–16, and on the night of May 29–30.

That time, four people arrived in Poland, including the Polish Government-in-Exile (which seated in London) emissary, Jan Nowak-Jeziorański. From Poland, the machine took five passengers, including Tomasz Arciszewski, a politician of the Polish Socialist Party, who would become Prime Minister of the Polish Government-in-Exile in November that year.

Most importantly, however, onboard that aircraft – in the care of the Home Army intelligence officer, Captain Jerzy "Rafał" Chmielewski – a mysterious cargo was to be transported. British orders gave the officer priority even over the future prime minister. Hidden in special containers and bags, the Captain carried data about Hitler's secret weapon – the V2 bomb, as well as parts of that missile, intercepted by Polish intelligence.

Secret Weapon

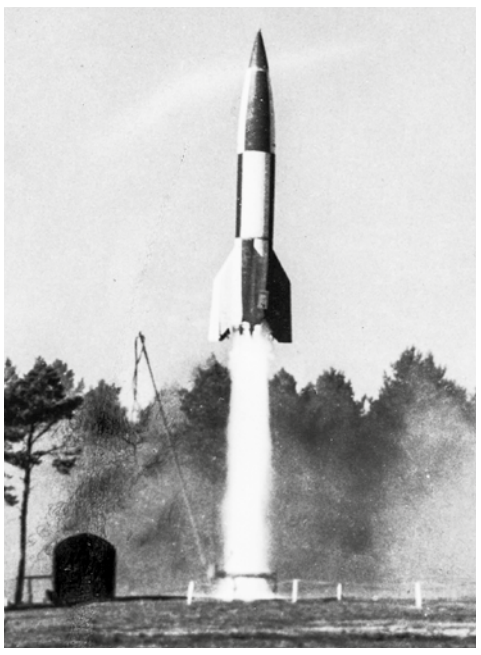
V2, Vergeltungswaffe-2 [Retaliation Weapon No. 2] was the first in history ballistic missile. It was tested by the Germans in 1942, and its mass production was launched a year later. A secret military plant in Peenemünde (Polish: Pianoujście) on the island of Uznam (German: Usedom) on the southern coast of the Baltic Sea, where V2 was being developed, was targeted by the Home Army intelligence service in February 1943. After the Allies destroyed the facility, the Germans relocated the production to the inland Reich, to the Harz Mountains. The rocket, with a range of nearly 400 km, which was fired from the occupied Netherlands, was used by the Germans to attack English cities. In 1944, they also bombed in this way Paris, Brussels, and Antwerp liberated by the Allies. During the war, 5,500 of these missiles were fired, and caused the death of more than 7,000 people.

The Home Army Intelligence determined that the tests of new weapons were carried out by Germany on a training ground in the region of Sarnaki in the Polish region of Podlasie. On May 20, 1944, Polish partisans managed to seize a V2 unexploded ordnance. After dismantling the rocket, Janusz Groszkowski, a Polish radio technician and engineer, deciphered its control system, and Marcel Struszyński, a professor of chemistry at the Warsaw University of Technology, analysed the rocket's propulsion. The V2 plans, microfilms, results of analyses by Polish scientists and key parts of the missile were transported to London as part of Operation Wildhorn III.

Take-Off

"First, the flight was prevented by heavy rains, which drenched the airstrip. Then, two German reconnaissance aircraft landed on 'our' meadows; they tested take-offs and landings there. Fortunately, they flew away on July 24," reported Lieutenant Colonel Kabat, the commander of the grouping covering the landing field. At the last moment, just before the operation, in a nearby village, there appeared a squad of about a hundred German aviators with anti-aircraft cannons. "We decided not to change the plan; we only got ready to respond to a possible attack," recalled the deputy commander.

The unloading and loading of Dakota itself took the Home Army a good few



German V2 rocket

minutes. When everything was ready, the pilot started the engines, but the aircraft wouldn't start. Two take-off attempts were unsuccessful. In despair, the soldiers thought of burning down the machine. Ultimately, it turned out that wet terrain caused the machine to burrow into muddy ground. After unloading the aircraft, trenches were dug under its wheels, planks were placed, and after the third attempt the Dakota set off. "In a few minutes, we were in the air, taking the direction of the Tatra Mountains and Brindisi. The whole operation took almost an hour and a half instead of six minutes," recalls the second pilot.

Stealing away the secret of Wunderwaffe, a wonderful weapon, and giving it to the British was one of the most important operations of Polish intelligence during the war. Its participants were believed to have saved London. Such an inscription can be found on the monument commemorating them, erected in the area of the muddy airfield near Tarnów. ■

Anna Dąbrowska, journalist for Polska Zbrojna

No. 303 Squadron

During the Second World War, Polish pilots from No. 303 Squadron RAF destroyed at least 200 German aircraft. They were the most effective unit in the Battle of Britain. The Poles, praised by the British media, became legendary in their home country thanks to the famous book by Arkady Fiedler, *Squadron 303*, which has been published more than thirty times in Poland.

Lt Mirosław Ferić, Capt John Kent (Canadian pilot, Squadron A commander), Lt Bohdan Grzeszczak, 2ndLt Lieutenant Jerzy Radomski, 2ndLt Jan Zumbach, 2ndLt Witold Łokuciewski, Lt Zdzisław Henneberg, Sgt Jan Rogowski, Sgt Eugeniusz Szaposznikow (1940)

"Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few," said British Prime Minister Winston Churchill referring to the pilots taking part in the 1940 Battle of Britain. The pilots of 303 Squadron were particularly proud of that recognition. Their contribution to saving the United Kingdom was invaluable. In a clash with the power of the Luftwaffe, the German Air Force, they proved to be the most effective unit of the Royal Air Force.

The history of 303 Squadron began on August 2, 1940. It was then that a squadron, which inherited the tradition of the 1st Air Force Regiment stationed in Warsaw before the war, was formed on the territory of London's Northolt. "Most of its pilots came from Warsaw and took part in September 1939 Warsaw defense battles. After the September defeat, they served in France. Then, they were to face the Germans again," emphasizes Grzegorz Śliżewski, who has authored historical books about the squadron's pilots.

The 303 Squadron pilots were to reach their combat readiness on August 31. They had their first score, however, ... a day before. During the training flight, Lieutenant Witold Paszkiewicz noticed the enemy's planes. He disconnected his Hawker Hurricane from the three-machine formation, and shot down the German Messerschmitt. Less than a month later, he died in a dogfight. He was buried in Northwood, and posthumously promoted to the rank of captain.

Meanwhile, the squadron was included in the units involved in the Battle of Britain, and it quickly began to be recognized prominent. Finally, by the autumn of 1940, Polish pilots, according to the calculations of the time, shot down 126 German aircraft. After the war, some researchers declared that the number in question was inflated. "In the decisive moments of the Battle of Britain, a huge number of aircraft operated in the sky. In such conditions, it is often difficult to decide which aircraft hit the enemy. The situation is dynamic; there is also stress," explains Śliżewski. "During such aerial battles, it often happens that a couple of pilots report shooting down the same aircraft. So I wouldn't argue much about that," he adds.British newspapers reported the achievements of Poles with appreciation; they were widely acclaimed by the public radio. However, Arkady Fiedler, a Polish writer and traveller, contributed the most to building their legend. "My father was in England at the time, and thought it was a fantastic story. While Poland was under occupation, our boys beat up Germans and everyone talked about them there," recalls Arkady Jr., the writer's son. "He set out to write a book about them. He headed off to see General Sikorski, although he was convinced that there was already a considerable contingent of war correspondents in line. It turned out that he was the first one. He was allowed to go to Northolt, where he was warmly welcomed by the pilots," says Fiedler. That is how the book Squadron 303 was conceived; a book that has been published more than thirty times in Polish (the first four editions were published in Poland under German occupation, as underground editions), as well as in English, French, Portuguese, Dutch and German. "In total, all of them sold in over a million copies, and the book had been on the list of school required readings for years. Now, it is a supplementary reading," reminds the writer's son. The pilots of the squadron confirmed their mastery during the fighting offensive over France, Operation Overlord, i.e. the Normandy landings, the invasion of Germany. They also took part in Operation Big Ben, which consisted in destroying the V1 rocket launcher. Over time, the Hurricane Hawkers were replaced by Spitfire fighters, and at the end of the war, the unit was equipped with Mustangs. The 303 Squadron pilots completed their last task at the end of April 1945. In total, during the Second World War, they shot down over 200 German planes. "There were 238 pilots passing through the squadron," notes Śliżewski. More than 40 of them died, and ten were taken prisoner. Poles lost 90 machines. No. 303 Squadron was disbanded on December 11, 1946. Most of its pilots decided to emigrate. The First Commander, Zdzisław Krasnodębski, who had earned the rank of colonel, lived in Great Britain, the Republic of South Africa, and Canada. For some time, he worked as a driver, then as an inspector in an aviation company. Another commander, Witold Urbanowicz, who at the end of his life was promoted to the rank of Brigadier General, was arrested during a visit to Poland after the war by officers of the Security Office, a communist political police, but once released, he managed to return to the West. He lived in the United States and worked in the aerospace industry. On the other hand, Jan Zumbach, who earned the rank of lieutenant colonel, chased the life of an adventurer and troublemaker. As a mercenary, he arranged the aviation of the Congolese Katanga and Nigerian Biafra, and fought against the government forces of the Congo, Nigeria, and even the UN air force. He died in Paris in unexplained circumstances.

Today, the traditions of the squadron are inherited by the 23rd Tactical Air Force Base near Minsk Mazowiecki, a town located east of Warsaw. The fighters have been painted with images of the most renowned WWII pilots. ■

Łukasz Zaleśiński

THE "ZWIASTUN" PROGRAM

For over two years now, the Polish National Foundation (PNF) has been implementing the "Zwiastun" ("Herald") educational program for NATO soldiers stationing in Poland. "The program is to present Poland as a modern, safe country which is developing all the time, but which also remembers its history," assures Cezary Andrzej Jurkiewicz, member of the Board of the PNF. Within the program, the Foundation organised numerous lectures and educational trips. A few thousand soldiers participated in them, and they all emphasise that it helped them to know Poland from various perspectives. "This is a valuable opinion, because after they return to their homes, they will be natural ambassadors of Poland," he adds.

The PFN continues to develop the program. In the following months, the Foundation plans to organize the Moniuszko concert, give lectures devoted to General Ryszard Kukliński and the indomitable soldiers. There are also plans to engage soldiers from other garrisons, not only in Orzysz.

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