

GLORY TO THE HEROES!

POLSKA ABROJNA



ETERNAL BATTLEFIELD GLORY

Dear Readers,

In the glorious history of the Polish army, there were many battles where our soldiers showed exceptional heroism and sacrifice. The seizure of the Monte Cassino abbey has its special place in the hearts and memory of Poles. General Władysław Anders wrote in his order: "Long have we waited for this moment of retaliation and revenge on our eternal enemy. [...] for this ruffianly attack of Germany on Poland, for partitioning Poland jointly with the Bolsheviks, [...] for the misery and tragedy of our Fatherland, for our sufferings and exile." The soldiers of the Polish II Corps did not waste this opportunity and seized the reinforced position in the abbey's ruins, which had earlier been resisting the gunfire, bombing and attacks of the Allied forces. Polish determination and heroism broke the fierce defense line of the German forces. This victory was however paid very dearly for. On the hillside of Monte Cassino over 900 soldiers were killed, and almost 3,000 wounded. Still, the Monte Cassino success, although paid for with blood, paved the way to independent Poland.

Saint John Paul II, when talking about the Battle of Monte Cassino, said about a live symbol of will to live, of sovereignty. These words perfectly define the attitude of the Polish II Corps heroes. They proved to be determined, patriotic, and full of will to fight. They were respected and admired by the Allies, and feared by enemies. They also proved that a Polish soldier is like no other, and that the Poles love their Fatherland and are ready to sacrifice their life for it.

The story of Monte Cassino soldiers is an inspiration also today, and their attitude can be a model of a soldier's honor, the love for Fatherland and for freedom.



Mariusz Błaszczak
Polish Minister of National Defense

...from a far-away country

The title might not be original, but it perfectly reflects the Polish-Italian relations. The words were uttered in Italian, in 1978, by the Archbishop of Cracow, Karol Wojtyła, to the crowds gathered in the piazza below the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica: "I was called from a far-away country."

It is in fact far away. From Cracow, the old capital of Poland, across the Slovak Carpathian Mountains, Austrian-Hungarian borderland, through Slovenian Ljubljana, the Venetian Lagoon, Ravenna and Perugia, it is exactly 1,426 km to Rome, according to Google Maps. This, or an even longer, distance, had to be covered on foot by three hundred armor-clad knights led by the first Polish king, Bolesław Chrobry, who, in the year 1000 AD, lent out his knights to travel to Italy with the Holy Roman Emperor Otto II the Red.

According to a French chronicler, the ruler of Germany and the Polish king first went to Charlemagne's grave in Aachen, situated near the current border with Belgium. Having opened the tomb, Otto presented Bolesław with Charles's golden throne, on which the emperor's corpse was supposed to have been sitting for two centuries. Together with Otto's sudden death in his palace in Rome, the plans to build a universal empire based on four pillars – Gaul, Germania, Italia and Slovene lands, fell through. The memory of the Polish knights who fought in the

faraway Italian land over a thousand years ago was preserved by foreign chroniclers.

According to a recent theory, the father of Polish historiography, referred to as Gallus, was born in Venice in the 12th century. Poles, mainly priests, repeatedly walked across the "Italian boot," travelling to Rome, or to universities, sprouting around the country like mushrooms. Nicolaus Copernicus, as well as a famous Polish cardinal of the Reformation period, Stanislaus Hosius, studied in Bologna and Padua. The latter was responsible for establishing a Polish →



Jan Henryk Dąbrowski “Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Legions 1803.” French lithography, the first half of the 19th century



A photograph of Adam Mickiewicz (+1855). Here, like a new Moses holding his “pilgrim’s cane,” which symbolized the fate of the Poles in exile. Mickiewicz was the author of the Books of the Polish Nation and the Polish Pilgrimage, similar in style to evangelical allegories in the 19th-century catechism of many European revolutionists

→hospice on Via delle Botteghe Oscure in the Roman Sant’Angelo district. It was a kind of a pilgrim’s home organized at St Stanislaus (Poland’s patron, bishop of Cracow) church. Fragments of the saint’s relics were brought to the church after Hosius’s death. The foundation did not survive the collapse of Poland, partitioned in 1795 among three invaders – Prussia, Russia, and Austria. Three years later, on May 8, 1798, St Stanislaus Day – the day when processions from the Catholic Cracow visit the saint’s relics with great fanfare – his church in Rome was opened by General Jan Henryk Dąbrowski’s legionnaires, who later took part in a mass.

The Polish Legions (1797–1807)

Why were Polish military men in the heart of Italy again after 800 years? They were not common hired soldiers, like Lutheran lansquenets of the Roman Catholic Emperor Charles V, who three centuries earlier perpetrated the notorious Sack of Rome of May 6, 1527, butchering Swiss Guard soldiers, who died in glory protecting the Pope. The unsuccessful 1794 Polish Uprising against Russia and Prussia, led by General Tadeusz



“Historical, chronological and geographical presentation of the Poles’ activity for Polish independence in Italy.” French edition of a historical map of 1829 showing the marching routes of Polish Legionnaires in Italy during 1797–1801

Kościuszko, and the later fall of the state, forced hundreds of political activists and thousands of soldiers to emigrate. Those who stayed were conscripted into invading armies – Russian, Prussian and Austrian. Military service in occupiers’ armies remained the bane of the Polish nation until 1945, or even longer, if we include the 45-year-long subordination of the Polish Army to the Russian “guarantor” after WWII, and the service of former Polish citizens in the Soviet Army.

At the end of the 18th century, the only actual, although uncertain, Polish ally was Jacobin France, which was fighting with Prussia. This alliance remained unharmed through the Action of 6 November 1794, the founding of the consulate, and the brilliant career of the first consul – Napoleon. One of the most well-known Polish emigrants was General Dąbrowski, who in 1797 got permission from Napoleon, at the time fighting Austrians in Lombardy, to form a separate legion made up of Polish prisoners remaining in French captivity. It was to support a new French creation, the Republic of Lombardy. The legionnaires wore a Polish uniform, but adopted the Italian and French cockades, with an inscription: Gli uomini liberi sono fratelli (Free men

are brothers). Thus, a new type of army was created, civil and republican (modeled on Kościuszko’s 1794 uprising army), in which the differences in social status and descent were to be insignificant. Kościuszko himself, having been pardoned and set free from the Russian Peter and Paul Fortress by Tsar Paul I, became the symbolic leader of the soldiers. The military service, however, resulted in, sometimes dramatic, internal moral struggle. The revolutionary French army brought French occupation and war with religion under the banner of liberty and equality. Polish legionnaires wanted to fight in order to return to their country, but on top of everything they were deeply religious Catholics, especially those of peasant descent. Poles were quelling the uprising against the French in Papal Romagna, while in Reggio the savoir-faire of Polish soldiers won them popularity among the citizens. It was there that

General Józef Wybicki, one of the more outstanding Polish politicians active at the turn of the 18th and 19th century, wrote for the legionnaires the lively Mazurek Dąbrowskiego (Dąbrowski’s Mazurka), the future national anthem of the Republic of Poland, which expressed hope for returning to the Fatherland:

Poland has not yet perished,
So long as we still live.
What the foreign force has taken from us,
We shall with saber retrieve.
March, march, Dąbrowski,
From the Italian land to Poland.
Under your command
We shall rejoin the nation.

On May 3, 1798, Poles entered the Eternal City, the capital of the new Roman Republic, created on the ruins of the Papal States. It was then that the Polish St Stanislaus church was briefly opened. Later, the situation deteriorated. Some legionnaires were given up to the Austrians as foreign subordinates by a French commander of Mantua, which surrendered in 1799. The legions suffered terrible losses while covering the beaten French army retreating from the battle of Trebbia, fought with the Austro-Russians. The soldiers who survived the battle of Marengo (which sealed the success of Bonaparte’s Italian campaign of 1800), became the core of a new legion. Later, some of them formed Polish units in the Italian Republic army, and some were sent to suppress a black insurrection against the French colonial rule in Saint Domingue in Haiti. However, many legionnaires went over to the insurgents – their black descendants still live on the island today.

The undoubtedly heroic war epopee of Polish legionnaires in Italy quickly

permeated to Poland and Lithuania, under Russian occupation, entering the pages of both states’ history. Pan Tadeusz: The Last Foray in Lithuania, a national epic poem written by Adam Mickiewicz while on emigration after the fall of yet another Polish-Lithuanian anti-Russian uprising, includes a recollection of the following story:

And yet now and then, like a stone from the sky, news came even to Lithuania; now and then an old man, lacking a hand or a foot, who was begging his bread, would stand and cast cautious eyes around, when he had received alms. If he saw no Russian soldiers in the yard, or Jewish caps, or red collars, then he would confess who he was: he was a member of the Polish legions, and was bringing back his old bones to that fatherland which he could no longer defend. Then how all the family how even the servants embraced him, choking with tears! He would seat himself at the board and tell of history more strange than fable; he would relate how General Dombrowski was making efforts to penetrate from the Italian land into Poland, how he was gathering his countrymen on the plains of Lombardy; how Kniaziewicz was issuing commands from the Roman Capitol, and how, as a victor, he had cast in the eyes of the French an hundred bloody standards torn from the descendants of the Caesars.

(Translated by: George Rapall Noyes)

The descendants of the Caesars were, however, holding strong. Italy was unified under the House of Savoy in 1870, when the decaying State of the Church finally fell, and Italian forces seized Rome, abandoned by the French, making popes voluntary prisoners of Vatican City.

Spring of Nations (1848–1849)

The unsuccessful Polish national uprising against Russia made thousands of refugees escape Poland in 1831. They were the elite of the Kingdom of Poland, bound by a personal union with Russia from 1815. It was the time of the so-called Great Emigration – great not because of the number of exiles, but their status. Officers, the Sejm of Congress Poland deputies, the Polish National Government members, renowned landowners, romantic poets, journalists and publicists, all went to the west and south of Europe, spreading rebellion and revolution germs along the way. Politicians and soldiers, representing almost all parties existing at the time, from die-hard conservationists to communist radicals, were all bonded, against their own will, by one thing – the strong desire for Poland to regain independence. In practice, this could be possible only after seriously disturbing the European political or social order guaranteed at the 1815 Congress of Vienna by the Holy Alliance Treaty. In Central and Eastern Europe the moment came much later, in 1918, after a sudden fall

of three monarchies – the Tsarist Russia, the Imperial-Royal Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Imperial Germany. Up to that moment, all European cabinets mostly perceived Poles as incorrigible dreamers and, at the same time, dangerous revolutionists.

The agricultural and overpopulated Italy, divided between the Austrian House of Habsburg in the north and the Spanish House of Bourbon in the south (The Neapolitan Kingdom of the Two Sicilies), with the State of the Church in the middle, impatiently awaited social revolution and Risorgimento – national regeneration. Virtually, the only significant domestic dynasty that aspired to leadership in Italy was the Royal House of Savoy, ruling over Sardinia and Piedmont. The very popular new Pope, Pius IX, could not become the leader of the new Italian state even if he wanted to. The Spring of Nations, which spread across France, the German states, Austria-Hungary, and the Polish territories between 1848–1849, also broke out in Italy. Just like in the Napoleonic era, the Republic of Venice and the Republic of Milan were created in the north, fighting with Austrian control, and the House of Savoy sent their forces to provide help.

Polish petitioners for a long time had been knocking on the door of the Roman Curia, asking for the Pope’s patronage over their political activity. Prince Czartoryski, the former foreign affairs minister of Imperial Russia, the first president of the Polish National Government during the anti-Russian uprising in 1831, the main Polish emigration diplomat called an uncrowned king of Poland, strove to obtain the Pope’s support and create a Polish legion in the State of the Church. The same was demanded by a well-known Polish romanticist and a political activist, Mickiewicz, who, having been granted an audience in the Vatican, shouted at the Pope that the Holy Spirit is present in the blouses of Parisian laborers, causing general consternation. The democratic and socially radical legion created by Mickiewicz, referred to as a heretic and a revolutionist,



One of the headstones at the cemetery of Italian soldiers in Warsaw to commemorate six generals murdered by the Germans in Greater Poland in January 1945 during the march to the West of the Italian POWs saved from an evacuated Oflag

was eventually accepted for service by the government of Milan, and fought Austrians along a relatively unimportant sector of the front on Lake Garda, with a famous Camaldoli Hermitage.

Polish General Rybiński, the last commander-in-chief in the anti-Russian uprising of 1831, became commander of the Venetian armed forces, but unfortunately the agreement he signed with the Venetian government did not enter into force. After Austrian victories in northern Italy, a number of Poles withdrew to Piedmont, and some started to serve for a famous Italian revolutionist, Giuseppe Garibaldi. General Chrzanowski, Prince Czartoryski’s man, which meant he was conservative, became the actual commander-in-chief of the Royal Sardinian Army, and managed to subordinate Mickiewicz’s radical legion. However, Piedmont’s defeat in the

fight with the Austrians, and the king’s abdication for the benefit of his son, meant the end of Polish units in the service of the House of Savoy.

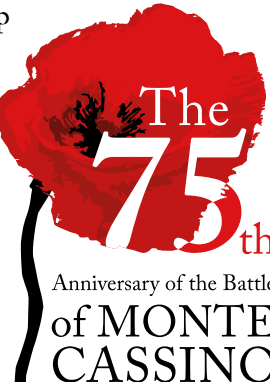
One more Pole came to be known in the south. It was General Ludwik Mierosławski, famous and admired, but an insanely ambitious dabbler, who took command of a military district in Sicily, revolting against the Neapolitan Bourbons. Also in that case the mutinous forces suffered defeat.

Some of Mickiewicz’s legionnaires went to Tuscany, whose government offered them short-term military service, and later to the Roman Republic territory, fighting to protect it. The Pope, earlier admired by the Poles, escaped to Gaeta. Giuseppe Mazzini, the dictator of the Republic – the revolution’s last bastion, announced the creation of a new Polish legion, a unit officially allied with Italy. Garibaldi became the commander of the joint forces. The Republic’s territory was taken by the French, the Habsburgs, and the Neapolitan Bourbons. Polish legionnaires bravely defended Rome, but on July 3, 1849, the French forces entered the city, restoring the Pope’s power. The remaining legionnaires and Italian soldiers boarded a ship, nomen omen “Pius IX,” and went to the Ionian Islands with a plan to cross the border to Transylvania, where the Hungarian Army, commanded by a well-known Polish General Józef Bem, fought with Austrians and Russians. However, their plans fell through.

To some extent, that Polish-Italian relationship ended together with the French and Italian participation in yet another anti-Russian uprising, which broke out in the Kingdom of Poland in 1863. Colonel Francesco Nullo from Bergamo, Garibaldi’s friend, a participant of the Italian Spring of Nations, came to the Polish Cracow (at the time part of Habsburg Austria). Earlier, he had drawn up a testament. Appointed general by the insurgent National Government, he led the French-Italian legion across the Austrian-Russian border near Cracow on May 3 – a Polish religious and national holiday, commemorating the day of →



The formation of the Polish Army in Italy: the former Polish POWs from the Italian camp in Piedmontese La Mandria di Chivasso after the end of WWI, December 1918



→announcing Virgin Mary the Queen of the Polish Crown (1656), as well as adopting the first Polish constitution (1791). Nullo was killed two days later in a battle fought with Russians. He was buried at a cemetery in Olkusz, in Lesser Poland.

Two World Wars

At the beginning of the 11th century, a quite impressive number of 300 Polish armor-clad soldiers are supposed to have arrived in Italy. Polish legions in the service of Napoleon’s protectorates were all several thousand men strong, which was a lot considering the relations between the small Italian states. Besides, a 10-minute charge of one squadron of Polish light-cavalrymen on Spanish batteries at the Somosierra mountain pass in the Guadarrama Mountains, which

in 1808 opened to Napoleon a passage to Madrid, proved that numbers are not the most important thing, that ambitious and very loyal hired soldiers may achieve more than domestic heroes. Foreign legions in Italy created during the Spring of Nations period usually numbered only several hundred Poles. However, Polish officers played a very important role in the Republican forces. The memory of those days is not as distant as we might think. My own grandfather told family stories about the Spring of Nations in the mid-1950s. They were part of a living family tradition and captured the imagination of a little boy from the Polish Galicia (which up to 1918 was a part of the Habsburg Austrian Monarchy), whom he was at the time:

“My earliest childhood memories go back to my grandpa’s stories on what happened in Lviv in 1848. I still clearly

remember the tales, especially those about Lviv being hit by cannons located at the High Castle. (...) The year 1848 long remained in the minds of people from my grandfather’s generation – the Hungarian Revolution, and the passage of Russian forces across Galicia to Hungary. Two of my grandfather’s brothers took part in the Hungarian Revolution. One stayed in Hungary, the other one emigrated to Turkey. These were well-known events from the history of the minor [Polish] gentry of those days.”

At the beginning of 1918, as an 18-year-old high-school graduate, still in his uniform, he joined Polish Auxiliary Corps, a formation in the Austrian army. However, the Corps revolted and was consequently dissolved, and my grandfather, a trained artilleryman, was sent to the Italian front in the Alps. When

in October the Austro-Hungary K.K. Monarchy started to fall apart, he and his friend drew up a falsified leave order, and returned home to Lviv, the capital of Austrian Galicia. Other Polish recruits were not so lucky. Before the fall, about 60,000 were taken to POW camps in Italy, as Austrian subjects. In the meantime, the allied Blue Army was created in France, and its units at the last moment managed to take part in the fights with Germany in Champagne. General Józef Haller, the Commander of the Blue Army and from October the Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Armed Forces, supervised all Polish voluntary formations, from Canada to the Russian Vladivostok. Soldiers from Italian POWs began to enlist in the allied Polish army. There was already a Polish company fighting on the Italian side, formed at the camp

in Santa Maria Capua Vetere in Campania. Another such camp was situated in Piedmont, in La Mandria di Chivasso. Altogether, 35,000 volunteers were enlisted among the prisoners, who formed regiments under the patronage of the already mentioned heroes – Dąbrowski, Kościuszko, Mickiewicz, Nullo, Garibaldi. The soldiers were then transported to France, from where in 1919, they set off to their own country. After 123 years of captivity, the words of *Dąbrowski’s Mazurka* became reality: “from Italy to Poland.”

The year 1939 proved to be catastrophic for Poland, defeated by both Germany and Russia. Italy, supporting Hitler,



stayed neutral towards Catholic Poland and remained fond of its citizens. Up to 1940, masses of refugees and volunteers wanting to join the newly-created Blue Army in France, moved across the Italian boot. The Polish ambassador in Rome, Bolesław Wieniawa-Długoszowski, was appointed President of Poland by President Mościcki, interned in Romania, but could not take office due to French and English objection. Two famous Poles who lived in Rome were the Primate of Poland August Hlond, who was on his way to France, and Field Bishop Józef Gawlina, who arrived in Rome after visiting his uncle at the Camaldolese monastery at Lake Garda.

Expeditionary Italian forces, supporting the Germans on the eastern front, were welcomed with kindness when passing through Polish territories occupied by the Germans, and so were the Spanish and Hungarian units. Those war-time Polish-Italian relations were perfectly grasped by Stanisław Lenartowicz, who in 1964 directed the Polish comedy entitled *Giuseppe w Warszawie* (*Giuseppe in Warsaw*). Lenartowicz was himself a Home Army soldier and a prisoner of a Russian concentration camp after the war.

The tragedy of the Italian nation had its morbid culmination between 1943–1944. Those who survived Stalingrad, died in Russian camps. The tragic history was portrayed with humor by Giovanni Guareschi in his 1963 novel *Comrade don Camillo*, where an Italian camp survivor

stayed in an Ukrainian kolkhoz after the war and married a Russian citizen, daughter of Polish peasants.

After Italy had joined the allies in 1943, most Italian soldiers abroad were put in POWs and concentration camps by the Germans. In the Warsaw district of Bielany, there is an Italian Military Cemetery. It is the final resting place for over 1,000 Italians who were German prisoners during WWI and died in POWs on the Polish territory. There are also remains of over 1,400 Italians fallen or murdered in WWII in Nazi POW and concentration camps. A meaningful plaque that can be seen at the cemetery commemorates six Italian generals murdered on the Polish territory by the retreating Germans in January 1945. ■

Jacek Żurek

THE EXCEPTIONAL POLISH II CORPS

“Soldiers! My dearest Brothers and Children! The time of battle has come. Long have we waited for this moment of retaliation and revenge on our eternal enemy. We will fight shoulder to shoulder with the British, American, Canadian, New Zealand divisions. The French, the Italian, and the Hindu will also fight.”



A volunteer in the Polish Army in the Soviet Union, 1941–1942



The Polish Army soldiers in the East in Palestine, 1942–1943



Propaganda poster showing the marching route of the Polish II Corps in Italy during 1944–1945

These words were uttered by General Władysław Anders in his order given before the Polish detachments attacked the Monte Cassino hill, the keystone of the German Gustav Line, stretching across the Italian Peninsula and guarding access to Rome. The attack was carried out by the soldiers of the Polish II Corps, which between 1944–1945 fought Germans in Italy, participating in the fights for Rome, Ancona and Bologna.

The Way to Monte Cassino

The Battle of Monte Cassino is referred to as the Battle of Nations for a good reason. There were many more reasons than those General Anders mentioned in his order, but compared to all formations made up of soldiers from around the world, the II Corps was a truly remarkable phenomenon. None of the big corps that took part in the battle had been through

the hell that the Poles had suffered. For most of them, the world fell apart on September 17, 1939, when the Soviet Army attacked the eastern regions of Poland to help Germans in their plan to destroy the Republic of Poland. Thousands of Polish families were suddenly thrown out of their homes and taken to the infamous “Gulag Archipelago” to die in the Soviet concentration camps, in the taiga, at the Polar Circle, or in the desert steppes of Kazakhstan. It seemed that the only thing awaiting the destitute Poles was death of starvation and exhaustion.

Their fate changed suddenly and miraculously with the outbreak of the German-Soviet war in June 1941, when the former allies, the 3rd Reich and the Soviet Union, became mortal enemies. A month or so later, the Polish Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief in exile in London, General Władysław Sikorski, succeeded in concluding with the Soviet government an official alliance

agreement, as a result of which the Polish Army was to be formed on the territory of the Soviet Union. The army was to be joined by hundreds of thousands of Poles released from camps, prisons or deportation places. General Władysław Anders was appointed commander after having been released from the infamous Moscow’s Lubyanka prison. He was still curing the wounds he had suffered while fighting the Red Army in September 1939, and his soldiers were to be the same people who had been stripped of all hope on September 17, 1939. Human shadows in ragged clothes started to flock to camps where the Polish army units were to be formed. Many had died on the way or in the happy moment of catching a glimpse of the white-and-red flag fluttering over the military camp’s gate. There were also those who had not been informed about the forming of the Polish units and who thus remained Soviet prisoners. Out of those, who rose from the dead and put

on the Polish uniform, General Anders began to form the Polish Army in the Soviet Union.

Eventually, he never entered Poland with his army using the shortest way to the west. Stalin’s intrigues and British interests in Iran were the reason why the Polish Army was evacuated from the Soviet republics in Southern and Central Asia to the Middle and Near East. By September 1942, about 115,000 people, including 78,500 soldiers and 37,000 civilians and military families, had been transported to Iran; the Soviets did not agree to release more, so several thousand Polish citizens were forced to stay in the Soviet Union. Among the evacuated, there were 18,000 children. The survivors to the end of their lives were grateful to their commander for taking them away from this inhuman lands. In Iraq and Palestine, these nomad soldiers joined the elite of the Polish Army, namely the Carpathians (the Independent

Carpathian Rifle Brigade) who were famous for their fights during the Siege of Tobruk and the Libyan Campaign. “The Buzuluks” (Buzuluk is a Russian town, where at the break of 1941/42 the headquarters of the Polish Army in the Soviet union was located), along with the Middle-Eastern “Ramseses,” formed the new Polish Army in the East. Part of it, in July 1943, became the II Corps, which under Anders’ command in December 1943 arrived at the Apennine Peninsula occupied by Germany. According to General Anders’ plan, the Polish POWs or Wehrmacht deserters could also join Polish troops, because Germany on the occupied Polish western territory annexed to the Reich in 1939 (Silesia, Great Poland, Pomerania) obligatorily Germanized Polish citizens, and made them join the German army.

The Polish II Corps became the formation of Poles coming from all territories of Poland, but the Eastern

Borderline (Kresy) customs prevailed in this army, both as regards the names of military units and regiment traditions. The Corps’ panzer units called their tanks with proper names, among which the most popular were the names of two capital cities of the eastern regions of Poland, namely: Lviv and Vilnius. With those names, they would go from victory to victory, starting from the seizure of Monte Cassino on May 18, 1944. This victory was followed by another one in the Battle of Ancona, and by capturing Bologna. General Anders’ soldiers believed that this victorious campaign would make it possible for them to “march from Italy to Poland,” as the Polish legionnaires in the service of Italian republics sang 150 years earlier. This desire is still inscribed in the stone at the Monte Cassino Polish War Cemetery: *For our freedom and yours, we, soldiers of Poland, gave our soul to God, our life to the soil of Italy, our hearts to Poland.*

Italian “Blue Berets” in the Polish Commando

The first commando squads during World War II were formed by the British, and they would soon become international elite of Allied forces. Next to the British commandos, there were the French, Greek, Yugoslavian, and even German and Austrian commandos, who fought in the anti-Hitler coalition. In the Polish commando company fighting in the Polish II Corps in Italy there also were soldiers of other nationalities who had decided to fight in the ranks of the Polish army.

At the beginning of December 1943, the 1st Independent Commando Company (also known as No. 6 Troop, part of the international No. 10 Inter-Allied Commando) arrived at the Italian front as the first Polish military troop in this war. The commandos were sent to the Central Apennines, near Capracotta town in the mountains at the Sangro river, which along with the Garigliano and Rapido rivers formed the primary line of German defense. When in the spring of 1944, following the commandos’ footsteps, the Polish II Corps arrived in Italy, its troops used the help of Italian volunteers. They were joining Polish ranks quite willingly, as the Polish soldiers treated Italian civilians very well, providing them with food and medical assistance. At the same time, the Poles lacked soldiers to protect military facilities, bridges, roads or warehouses, which was a crucial argument for forming in March 1944 the 111st Bridge Protection Company at the command of the 3rd Carpathian Rifle Division. It was to be an Italian guard and technical unit with Polish commanders. The privates were the highlanders from the very region where the Polish commandos were operating, i.e. South Abruzzo and Molise in the Central Apennines. The company initially numbered about forty Italian volunteers, and seven Polish officers and NCOs.

The fate of the company was affected by the Battle of Monte Cassino, where the Polish II Corps suffered enormous losses during attack. The Polish command, trying to figure out how to complement the ranks of the Corps thinned in the bloody battle, thought of Italian highlanders who dedicatedly served the commandos as guides and carriers. ➔



Volunteers from the cartography platoon of the Polish II Corps at the Monte Cassino Polish War Cemetery celebrating the second anniversary of the battle, May 1946

→ They had proved to be very useful in that role also at Monte Cassino. For that reason, the 111st company was not to be wasted for guard duty tasks, but rather transformed into a combat troop, or even more – into a commando troop. What was left from the original purpose of this unit was only its name – the 111st Bridge Protection Company. The name was left to disinform the Germans as to its actual tasks, and calm the Italian Allied forces in case of their potential protest against recruiting Italian citizens to foreign combat military forces.

In mid-May of 1944, the commando company was transferred to Oratino near Campobasso in Molise, where new volunteers from the region joined it. Additional officers and NCOs of the 3rd Carpathian Rifle Division and the instructors of the 1st Independent Commando Company were also tasked to start intensive training of Italian soldiers. After the training ended in mid-June 1944, the 111st Bridge Protection Company counted 68 Italian volunteers and 23 Polish officers and NCOs. The Poles took commanding posts at the team level and higher. The company commander was an experienced line officer, Lieutenant Feliks Kępa, and the second in command was Lieutenant Commander Edward Zalewski. The youngest soldier in the company – barely 16 years old – was Mino Pecorelli, who after the war became a renown attorney and journalist. Just like the Polish company, the Italian one was also divided into three platoons. Instead of green berets – commonly worn in commando units – Italian commandos wore blue berets with Polish eagle insignia and red Poland patches on their arms. With time, Italian commandos were referred to as “the Blues” (“Bławaty”), and this name clang to them until the end of the fights along the Adriatic coastline. Moreover, unofficially, the 111st Bridge Protection Company was called “the 2nd commando company” or simply “the Italian company”. The very good training results affected another decision of the II Corps’ command, namely the formation of the 1st Commando Group by joining the 1st Independent Commando Company and the 111st Bridge Protection Company.



The Polish II Corps soldiers in Italy, second on the right is Brunon Jankowski (rifleman)



The 3rd Carpathian Rifle Division soldiers. From the left: Antoni Łapiński and Ryszard Kaczorowski, a rifleman and the last Polish President in Exile (1989–1990)

Major Władysław Smrokowski (the hitherto commander of the 1st company) took the command. While the Italian volunteers were intensively training commando fight, the II Corps was tasked by the Allied command in Italy to independently carry out an offensive towards Ancona. The 1st Commando Group was engaged in the operation, and on June 21, 1944, it was

deployed from Oratino to the Adriatic coastline. At the beginning of July, the unit arrived at the Monte Lupone frontline via Monte Pagan and Porto San Giorgio. The group was assigned at the tactical level to the Polish 2nd Panzer Brigade and was deployed in the Castelfidardo region, but was not engaged in the first fights for Ancona. On July 8, General Anders allocated the Group to



Ułhan Józef Kowalczyk, 1944

the 3rd Carpathian Rifle Division. Both companies of the Group occupied the frontline between Villa Virginia and the bridge near Numana, manned with the soldiers of the Carpathian Uhlán Regiment, under the command of which they remained. On the next day, the Italian company had their combat baptism. Its two platoons and the 1st Uhlán Squadron hit with bravado the enemy-manned hills of Monte Freddo and Hills 119 and 107. Seizing this important for the entire Carpathian regiment position was paid for with the death of two soldiers. In the battle, commando Atilio Brunetti heroically saved his wounded commander, Sergeant Zygmunt Piątkowski, transporting him on his own back several kilometers away from the frontline. Brunetti was later decorated with the Polish Cross of Valor.

The first fight of Italian volunteers proved how unjust were the opinions about the reportedly low value of an Italian soldier, and the battles that followed only cemented the new Polish-Italian brotherhood of arms. Not incidentally, the first troop to enter Ancona as the forward guard of the Carpathian Uhlán Regiment through the gates of Santo Stefano on July 18, 1944, was the 2nd commando company.

By the end of July 1944, the Polish and Italian commandos separated. The Polish 1st Independent Commando Company was deployed to be formed again in the south of Italy as a result of a decision on transforming it into the 2nd Commando Motorized Battalion. The Italian company returned under the command of the Carpathian Uhlán Regiment and fought along with its soldiers until the seizure of Pesaro on September 2, 1944. It was then that the decision on disforming the 111st Bridge Protection Company was taken. The Italian company – under Polish command until October 18, 1944 – lost 14 soldiers in total (10 of them Italian), and 29 soldiers were wounded. General Anders, in recognition of the valor of the Italian commandos, decorated them with Polish combat insignia: out of all 19 decorated Italians, 17 were awarded with the Cross of Valor (nine of them posthumously), one with the silver and one with the bronze Cross of Merit with Swords.

Polish Lot

The Japanese Bushidō code says there is no greater solitude than that of a warrior who survived a battle and reached the end of his road. It’s true. A soldier, whom the Providence allowed to live after a bloody fight, becomes a different man.

Such people function as if they were living in two parallel worlds: in the present and in the time of the bygone war, which persistently, as a palimpsest, pierces through reality. It is not only and exclusively about trauma. On the contrary, those soldiers are often characterized by calmness and softness of mystics. I met such people – all of them were veterans of the Polish II Corps, and they fought in the Battle of Monte Cassino. They had come to the Corps from all over the world, and their lives after the war were very different. Still, each of these meetings left me deeply moved, and at the same time quite uplifted by the awareness that I had been lucky to meet a good man.

All of the veterans, with no exceptions, always began with: “I am no hero. Those who died are heroes, but not me.” I heard that every time. It is the true modesty of soldiers and wisemen who have looked death in the eye. The first soldier I met was Colonel Wojciech Narębski, living in Cracow, Little Poland region, a professor in geochemistry and petrology. In Italy, he served in the 22nd Artillery Supply Company, famous for its special soldier – Wojtek the Bear, who used to carry munition boxes. As they both had the same first name, the Professor jokingly told me his fellow soldiers called him Little Wojtek to distinguish him from Wojtek the Bear.

Released from a Soviet prison camp in 1941, he was told he had very little chance to survive. “I became a soldier, but – above of all else – I was alive, although I left this ruthless land as a human wreck,” he told me with a calm smile.

I found another veteran of the 3rd Carpathian Rifle Division in Rumia, in the Kashubia region. Brunon Jankowski at Monte Cassino served in... Luftwaffe. Being a Pole from the Pomerania region, he was forced to join the Luftwaffe anti-aircraft battery, and was sent to the Italian front. In the hell of Cassino, he ran away to the other side of the front, and joined the famous Carpathians. He recalled: “I remember, as if it were today, the moment I got off the truck and saw a Polish white-and-red flag on a long flagpole. I thought: Finally! I am among my fellows.”

After my visit in Pomerania, I went to the other end of Poland, to Podhale – to Orawka near Nowy Targ. There, after many years of exile in the West, Józef Kowalczyk found his own harbor. He was the ułhan of the 12th Podolian Uhlán Regiment, whose soldiers were the first to plant their victorious flag in the rubble of the abbey. When asked about the Battle of Monte Cassino, he replied, tears in his eyes: “Let me remind you the inscription over the gate of the Monte Cassino Polish War Cemetery: *Passer-by, go tell Poland that we have perished obedient to her service.* I remember the German artillery fire decimating my team on Hill 593. The Germans replied to our attack with well-aimed and powerful gunfire; I remember

how my fellow soldiers, wounded and dying, groaned in pain. Only two soldiers from my team survived this attack – myself and one more soldier. During short breaks in fights, the stretcher-bearers would come to take the wounded only, as there was no time to take the killed. Only after the battle ended, they could take the fallen, although many a time it was hard to identify the remains... I was in this hell for twenty days. I got wounded several times, but I didn’t pay attention to it at all.”

I also visited Colonel Antoni Łapiński in Warsaw. His great sense of humor and serenity hit me from the start. The Colonel was a young soldier in the 3rd Carpathian Rifle Division, and he so recalled the day of their triumph, May 18, 1944: “For me, this day was especially happy. In the early morning, our troops entered the ruins of the abbey at Monte Cassino. About 9:00 a.m., I was standing near the Doctor’s House, looking at the seized ruins of the abbey. That night, I had managed to take a three-hour sleep, resting my head on my medical bag. Suddenly, I saw a group of seven soldiers coming from ‘the Ravine’ (‘Gardziel’), led by some officer. When they got closer, just a few meters away from me, I recognized the officer, the second lieutenant: it was my brother Józef! He looked exactly as when he was released from a forced labor camp a few years before – skeletal, unshaved, in a dirty, tattered uniform. This however meant nothing compared to the fact that my brother survived! Saying goodbye, he pointed to his soldiers and said: »Look how many alive men I was able to gather after my platoon’s attack on Mass Albaneta and the ‘Ravine’.« Before the fight, the platoon counted thirty men and was part of the 6th Infantry Battalion of the 2nd Carpathian Brigade. The second time me and my brother met, he told me that ultimately over a dozen more soldiers from this platoon were found alive later – which made up a total of 18 survivors. All other young soldiers in his platoon were killed on the Monte Cassino slope covered with red poppies.”

In the famous scene of Andrzej Wajda’s movie *Popiół i diament* (*Ashes and Diamonds*), Maciek Chelmicki is standing at the bar counter and talking to his friend Andrzej; in the background Sława Przybylska is singing *The Red Poppies on Monte Cassino*. Maciek sends the vodka shots to Andrzej, shooting them across the counter, then kindles the drinks – Andrzej pays tribute to their fallen friends by naming the shots: Haneczka, Wilga, Kossobudzki, Rudy, Kajtek... He blows out the match when Maciek wants to kindle the last two vodka shots, and says: “We’re still alive.” Maciek bursts into manic laughter. Here, again, the song lyrics can be heard: *They went to avenge and to kill; on the enemy’s destruction, bent; to their honor they harnessed their will.* After each of my meetings with the veterans, like a *déjà vu* I would replay this scene in my mind. It is thanks to my Heroes – in spite of their protests, I will be calling them that – I did experience the scene in real life.

Piotr Korczyński

Polish Children of Indian Maharaja

“Deeply moved and distressed by the sufferings of the Polish nation, and especially of those who are spending their childhood and youth in the tragic circumstances of this most terrible of wars, I wanted to contribute, and in some way improve their lot by offering them refuge in a country that is far away from the ravages of war. I am extremely pleased that I have the opportunity to alleviate the sufferings of these children.”



Maharaja Jam Sahib with the Polish children

The above words were spoken by Jam Sahib Digvijaysinhji, Maharaja of Indian Princely State of Nawanagar, to the Prime Minister of the Polish Government-in-Exile, General Władysław Sikorski, in London in 1942.

By virtue of a Polish-Soviet agreement signed in 1941 by General Sikorski, about 400,000 Polish citizens deported to and imprisoned in the Soviet Union were granted “amnesty,” after which “the Polish Army in the Soviet Union” was formed under the command of General Władysław Anders. Not only women, but also thousands of children – many of them parentless – were coming to the military units being formed. In 1942, about 115,000 of people were evacuated from the Soviet Union to Iran, including over 75,000 soldiers and almost 40,000 civilians, mostly members of military families, among them almost 20,000 children. Some of them became part of the army, e.g. women in the Women’s Auxiliary Service, or boys and young men in the Student Soldiers Units (Oddziały Junackie), which accompanied the Polish Army all the way to Palestine and Egypt, and then to Italy, where the Polish II Corps fought with Germany. This way, a decision of Soviet authorities on keeping the majority of Polish citizens in the Soviet Union could have been, at least partially, evaded. However, for the young survivors, some place safe had to be found to keep them there to the end of the war. In response to the request of the Polish government in London, several countries offered refuge to Polish children, among them Mexico, New Zealand, and the British colonies in Africa.

However, the first one to have offered help was India. The Indian prince heard about Poland for the first time in the 1920s during his stay in Switzerland. There he made friends with his neighbor, Ignacy Paderewski, a Polish pianist, composer and politician. During World War II, Jam Sahib was one of the two Hindu delegates in Great Britain’s cabinet war rooms in London where he met the Polish prime minister.

The Maharaja took a liking to Polish people, and when he heard about the fate of Polish children, he decided to give them shelter. Not far from his residence, at the seaside in Balachadi near Jamnagar, in today’s Gujarat state, he built the Polish Children Camp. “Do not consider yourself orphans any more. You are now the Nawanagaris, and I am Bapu, the father of all the people of Nawanagar, so also yours,” he said in his welcome speech.

Good Maharaja

In the period of 1942–1946, about 1,000 Polish children were brought up there, and they called Jam Sahib their good maharaja. “India provided shelter for us, not only did we have a place to live and food to eat, but we also had a school, scout teams, drama and sports classes,” said Wiesław Stypuła, the oldest living resident of the Camp, at the first screening of the Polish-Indian movie called *Little Poland in India* in 2013. The Maharaja not only offered the children refuge, but also often visited his guests, was interested in the Polish culture, watched the plays staged by children, and hosted them in his residence.

Near the end of war, the Communists, who took power in Poland, requested →

→that the children come back to their Fatherland. In order to prevent that, the children were officially jointly adopted by the Maharaja, Jeffrey Clark (British officer) and Franciszek Pluta (a Polish priest and camp commandant). The camp in Balachadi was officially closed in November 1946, and the kids were transferred to Valivade, the largest Polish camp in India, near the city of Kolhapur. In the Polish town lived mainly women with children. There were also a hospital, a post-office, kindergartens, schools, a church, a firehouse, and a community

center; and the scoutmaster of the scouts was the young Zdzisław Peszkowski, later a Catholic priest, well known in exile and in Poland. In total, it is estimated that about 5,000 Polish children survived the war safe in India. Almost half of civil Polish refugees from the Soviet Union, which is about 18,000 people, found their shelter in the British colonies in the East and South Africa. There were about twenty camps for the Polish refugees. Three largest ones were located in Tengeru, Tanzania, on Koja peninsula by Lake

Victoria in Uganda, and in Masindi district, Uganda. The refugees lived in villages in huts covered with pearl millet or banana leaves. In the camps, there were churches, hospitals, kindergartens, schools, handicraft workshops, and farms. “It was our Little Poland, and we were free and happy,” wrote in one of his blog posts Artur Woźniakowski, who during the war lived in the Koja camp with his mother and brother. Almost 1,500 Polish refugees, including over 800 children (mostly orphans), found their shelter in Mexico. They lived in the

Santa Rosa hacienda near León city in the center of Mexico. They were provided with medical care, education, and there were a theater and two swimming pools. New Zealand also offered help to Polish kids. In the fall of 1944, over 730 of them – and 100 of Polish personnel – arrived at the Wellington Port. A children camp was settled in Pahiatua, and it stayed opened until 1949. After the end of war, most Polish refugees were afraid to come back to Poland ruled by Communists. From Africa, only 3,000 people returned to

Poland, and the rest left to live in other countries. The majority of residents of Mexican Santa Rosa found their home in the USA, Canada, and Great Britain. Some children found their parents. The new Polish government demanded that the minors return to Poland, despite the fact that their local fatherlands – pre-war eastern districts of Poland – had been in 1945 annexed by the Soviet Union. The governments of the countries which hosted the children decided however to protect them against obligatory comeback to Poland, and the minors could freely

choose their future country of residence. From among the camp residents in New Zealand’s Pahiatua, only several dozen people decided to return to Poland, the rest remained in New Zealand. Also from India, barely several hundred people came back to Poland. Others, after they came of age, chose to live in Canada, the USA, or Australia. The Maharaja ruled the Princely State of Nawanagar until February 1948, and when India gained independence, he became one of the first representatives of his country in the United Nations. He

died in 1966. When asked during the war by General Sikorski how Poland could repay him for his kindness of hosting a thousand homeless Polish kids, Jam Sahib said: “In independent Poland, please name one of the Warsaw streets after me.” Today, a square in Ochota – the district of Warsaw – is called “Good Maharaja,” and there is also a statue of the Maharaja there. He is also a patron of Warsaw’s “Bednarska” School Group. In 2016, on the 50th anniversary of Jam Sahib’s death, the Polish parliament celebrated his

memory. “The Sejm is paying a tribute to the Maharaja for his great contribution and remarkable disinterestedness he showed when he saved over a thousand Polish children from hunger and suffering,” the resolution says. In Indian Balachadi, in the buildings of the former camp, there is now a cadet school, and the stay of Polish refugee children is remembered in the form of a statue erected in front of the school building by ex-residents of the camp. ■ Anna Dąbrowska

ON THE ITALIAN FRONT

In 1944, the units of the Polish II Corps were transported by the British to the Apennine Peninsula (under German occupation since September 1941) from the Middle East.

The Polish II Corps, along with the American and British forces, was to join the Italian Campaign. The Corps was commanded by a Polish General, Władysław Anders.

Cavalryman

Anders is one of the most famous Polish commanders – a talented officer, who organized the army, an ideological and political leader of post-war immigration, an uncompromising opponent of the Soviet Russia and Polish communists. He was born on August 11, 1892, on the territory of Poland deprived of independence and partitioned between three occupants, on the Russian-occupied territory of the Vistula Land (Kraj Przywiślański, which is the Russian name for the central territory of Poland). Władysław Anders descended from a family of German-Swedish-Hungarian roots, but he felt closely knit to the Polish culture. Just as his three younger brothers – Karol, Jerzy and Tadeusz, he pursued his career in the military, which he started in the Russian army during his studies at Riga Polytechnicum. During

WWI, he proved to be a great officer, distinguished by personal courage and superb commanding capability. As a result of his daring cavalry raids, he gained recognition of the Russian commanders, promotions to higher ranks, and was awarded many military decorations. Following the 1917 February Revolution in Russia, he left the ranks of the occupant’s army, and joined the Polish I Corps, a voluntary formation allied with the Russian army commanded by Polish General Józef Dowbor-Muśnicki, who hitherto had also been in the Russian service. After the Corps’ demobilization in 1918, forced by the Germans occupying western governorates in the Russian Empire, he got through to Warsaw. Here, he joined the Royal Polish Army (Polnische Wehrmacht), a military formation subordinate to the authorities of the Kingdom of Poland, which was formally a vassal of Imperial Germany and Austro-Hungary. At the moment of collapsing of all three occupants in November 1918 and regaining independence by Poland, Anders became an officer in the new Polish

Army. In 1919, he was engaged in forming the Polish forces in Greater Poland region, western part of Poland, where an uprising broke out against the German rule. As the chief of staff of the Greater Poland Army (Armia Wielkopolska), he proposed a daring offensive towards the north, via Polish Pomerania, to open the way to – very much desired by the Poles – the Baltic Sea coastline. Later on, as a commander of the 15th Poznań Uhlands Regiment, he had a number of successes in the 1920 Polish-Soviet War. Anders’ achievements on battlefields were significant. As a result, he was sent to study at the French Ecole Supérieure de Guerre, and then deployed to the General Cavalry Inspectorate (Generalny Inspektorat Kawalerii). His career was not disturbed even by his fight against Marshal Piłsudski during the military coup d’état in May 1926, when he supported the government and the president, who put up armed resistance to the rebellious forces commanded by the Marshal. On the contrary, Piłsudski gave Anders command of the 2nd Independent Cavalry Brigade, and in 1934, he promoted him to the rank of brigadier general. When commanding the Nowogródzka Cavalry Brigade during the fights with Germany and Russia in September 1939, he was wounded twice, and was taken prisoner by the Soviets. He was born Lutheran, and here is his recollection of how he was welcomed in a Moscow prison: “I was ordered to get off in the yard. It was clearly the prison’s yard. They led me through the nooks and crannies. I was body-searched several times. After the first body search, they took all my things, including my suitcase. What I was left with was a blanket, a soap, a toothbrush, and a cup. My clothes, shoes – all cut up and ripped. At some point, they

found my little medal with an image of the Holy Mother. They gathered around my medal. I heard this boorish laugh: »We’ll see if this b... helps you in the Soviet prison.« My holy medal was thrown to the floor and trampled out. I can’t recover from it to this day – I still remember that terrible feeling. Afterwards, in prison, I used to have dreams about my medal. In my dreams, I saw a little face of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa, very often similar to the face of St Teresa. I felt her constant care. My faith in God was deepening with every atheist laugh I heard around me. My faith gave me strength to overcome human weaknesses in my hardship.” Severely battered and brutally interrogated for almost two years, he was released from the Russian imprisonment in Moscow’s Lubyanka in August 1941, after the signing of the Polish-Soviet agreement. He then became a commander of “the Polish Army in the Soviet Union,” formed out of a mass of Polish citizens released by the Russians from concentration camps, prisons or from exile. The Army – as Anders himself defined it – was a “nomadic little Poland,” which in 1942 was evacuated from the Soviet Union to the Middle East. From there, part of it – now as the Polish II Corps – still under Anders’ command, got to the Italian front at the break of 1943/44. By the end of World War II, Anders took the duties of commander-in-chief, and held the post until June 1945. The demobilization of the Polish Armed Forces fighting in Western Europe took place during 1946–1947, but Anders had already lived in London, where until 1954 he was the General Inspector of the Armed Forces, and during 1954–1970 – a member of the so-called Council of Three, i.e. a collegial body created



LtCol Władysław Bobiński in the M4 Sherman tank during fights for Ancona, July 17–18, 1944

by the Polish Government-in-Exile with prerogatives of the President of Poland. Władysław Anders never accepted the communist rule in Poland; he demanded that the truth about the fate of thousands of Polish officers murdered by the Russians in 1940 (the Katyń massacre) be revealed. For that reason, he was considered as the primary enemy by the communist authorities in Poland. He was deprived of Polish citizenship, slandered by propaganda, but nevertheless continuously respected by his former subordinates, particularly the soldiers of his army saved from the Soviet gulags in 1941. In the Soviet-enslaved Poland, Anders personified hope for regaining freedom and was the symbol of persistence in the fight for the sovereignty of his Fatherland. The General did not live to see it – he died in exile in 1970, and according to his last will, he was buried among his subordinates at the Monte Cassino Polish War Cemetery.

The Poles at Monte Cassino

And they planted their red-and-white flag in the rubble amid the clouds – Feliks Konarski wrote in his song *The Red Poppies on Monte Cassino* – a poignant story about sacrifice and devotion of Polish soldiers in this bloody battle. During WWII, the Germans fortified the mountain massif with the famous Benedictine abbey, including it in the co-called Gustav Line – the line of fortifications cutting the Apennine

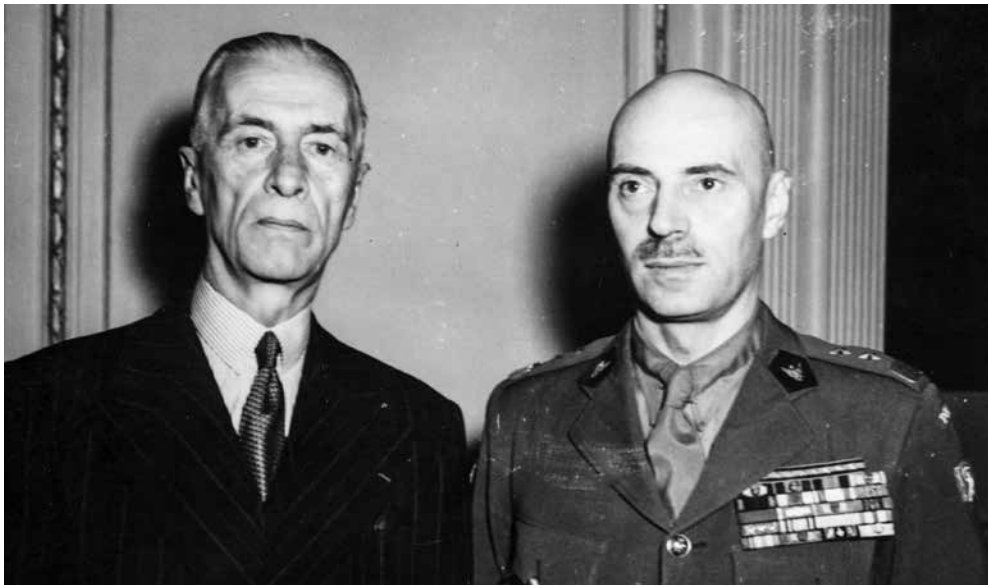
Peninsula into half, and shutting off the way to Rome. The key to this lock was Monte Cassino. The defense of the region was the task of the elite 1st Parachute Division, which decimated American forces trying to seize Monte Cassino in January 1944, and the British units (Hindu, New Zealanders, English, Irish), which were attacking the mountain in February and March. As it turned out, it was nonsensical for the US air force to bomb the abbey into ruins as it was free from military quartering by virtue of political agreements: only after the abbey had been destroyed, the Germans took their positions in the ruins. When the Allies decided to renew the offensive in the spring, they chose to send a newcomer in Italy to the frontal attack: the Polish II Corps. General Anders took this unrewarding task in the hope that the potential success could be later used in the game for keeping Poland’s sovereignty, since as of January 1944, Polish territory had been occupied – for the second time in this war – by the Red Army. The attack, which was to distract the Germans’ attention away from the activity of the Allies, was preceded by very detailed preparations, such as building the famous Polish Sappers Road (the Cavendish Road). On May 11, 1944 at 11:00 p.m., the drum artillery fire launched Operation Honker – the assault of the British 8th Army and the US 5th Army on the Gustav Line. The assault fire in the Polish sector by three hundred guns weakened the enemy only slightly, and when the

infantry attacked, the German forces opened well-aimed mortar and machine-gun fire. The Polish forces, although temporarily, managed to occupy some of the hills, but rapidly growing losses and German counterattacks halted the assault. A difficult, mined area, and artillery fire hindering the engagement of the reinforcements and tanks, forced Anders to withdraw back to their initial positions. Although the Poles did their task, blocking significant enemy forces, thus

creating a passage for the British XIII Corps to get into the depths of German defense in Liri Valley, it was Anders who decided to make one more attempt to seize Monte Cassino. The second assault, launched on the night of May 16/17, this time ended in victory. Despite hard-fought resistance, the Polish forces partially broke off the German lines, and when the attack started to break down, the last reserve force – an improvised battalion of drivers, clerks, and soldiers of auxiliary forces – went to fight. On the morning of May 18, Mass Albaneta and Hills 593 and 569 were seized, followed by capturing the abbey’s ruins on Monte Cassino deserted by the Germans. About 10:00 a.m., the patrol of the 12th Podolian Uhlan Regiment planted the white-and-red flag there. A bloody epilogue of the battle was the fight for Piedimonte San Germano, fought by the Poles between May 20 and 25. It ultimately paved the way to Rome, and the US forces entered the Eternal City on June 4. Polish losses were heavy – as many as 924 Polish soldiers were killed or died of wounds, 2,930 were wounded, and 345 missing. The fallen were buried in 1946 at a war cemetery built on the hillside between Monte Cassino and Hill 593. Soon after, it became one of Polish mausoleums. When approaching the tombs, visitors are treading on a monumental inscription on the pavement slabs at the cemetery’s gate: *Passer-by, go tell Poland that we have perished obedient to her service.* →



The soldiers of the 15th Poznań Uhlan Regiment of the Polish II Corps welcomed by Ancona residents



Left: Władysław Raczkiewicz, Polish President in Exile during 1939–1947. Right: General Władysław Anders, Polish II Corps Commander. London, March 1946





A sapper of the 3rd Carpathian Rifle Division during the Battle of Bologna, April 1945

A tankman of the 6th "Lviv Children" Panzer Regiment at Monte Cassino

→ **Ancona and Bologna**

The fights between the Polish II Corps and Germany in Italy started in February 1944, and the Battle of Monte Cassino in May were their peak. However, in total Polish soldiers participated in this campaign for 15 months, fighting in the mountains and coastal areas, forcing the rivers and fortification lines.

After the battle, the Allied offensive sped up. The exhausted II Corps was initially to be withdrawn from the front for a month, but the commander of the 15th Army Group, General Harold Alexander, deployed it to the Adriatic front to conduct pursuit activity. From June 4 to 25, the detachments were being deployed to the eastern edge of the Italian boot. However, before the deployment ended, they had received an order to launch attack towards Ancona. The chase



An Italian girl on the M4 Sherman tank with the soldiers of the 1st Kresowce Uhlan Regiment after the Polish II Corps entered Bologna, April 21, 1945

A POLISH BISHOP AT MONTE CASSINO

“On May 18, the Ascension Day, I celebrated the second mass, with the first one said by Father Bocheński. I did not know that the Polish flag was then already fluttering above the abbey ruins seized by our soldiers.”

Józef Gawlina was born in the Prussian Silesia in 1892. During the Great War he served as a German soldier on the western front, and later in Palestine. Gawlina was a Polish Roman Catholic priest, a social activist and a journalist in the interwar period, a general and a field bishop of the Polish Army; after the war – an important archbishop in Rome, providing pastoral care to the Polish diaspora scattered around the world.

He emigrated in 1939, and later could not return to Poland under the German and Russian occupation. He spent the war with the Polish forces in France, later in England and Scotland, in the

Middle East, in Africa, and afterwards again on the European continent. As he wrote about that period of his life: “A field bishop does not even have a dwelling place. My palace during the war was always a stranger’s house, and many a time not even a house. It was a room in a convent in Paris, a closet attached to a Polish church in London, a haystack during my escape, a cattle wagon in Russia, a tent in the deserts of Persia and Mesopotamia, some ruins near the front line, an aircraft during my travels.” He was the only Roman Catholic bishop who was given permission (in 1942) to travel to the Soviet Union, where he visited the newly created Polish Army, and later,

[Józef Gawlina, *Memoirs*]

just like the Army’s units, travelled from Uzbekistan, across Turkmenistan, Persia, Mesopotamia, and Palestine, to Egypt. He took part in the Italian campaign of the Polish II Corps in 1944. On the way, he visited the Polish communities in America, and he still made it to the liberation of the Netherlands by the Poles, and the Lower Saxony campaign, which ended in May 1945. After the war, he wrote memoirs covering his entire life. Below are fragments regarding the fights near the Benedictine Abbey of Monte Cassino, dedicated mainly to the memory of the Polish Army chaplains.

Deeply religious and brave, like all Silesians, he died suddenly in Rome in 1964, during a Vatican Council, in the middle of a dispute with other bishops regarding the respect that is due to the Blessed

after the withdrawing along the coastline German 278th Infantry Division turned out to be very difficult, because the enemy’s delaying activity was extremely skillful, blocking in effect the narrow (just a few kilometers in width) littoral passage, available for the motorized forces. Only as late as on July 1, the army succeeded in seizing Loreto with its famous Basilica of the Holy House (sanctuary of the Virgin Mary), the bridgeheads behind the Musone River, and started their struggle for Ancona. In the first week-long phase of those fights, called the Battle of Loreto, the Polish forces ultimately pushed the enemy away, who however did not break off, called for reinforcements, and formed a new defense line.

Anders used the break in the attack to arrange the detachments, replenish supplies and prepare for direct attack on Ancona. According to plan, on July 17, the Polish 3rd Carpathian Rifle Division launched feigned aggressive activity, which was to engage German forces, while at the same time the 5th Kresowa Infantry Division, supported by the 2nd Panzer Brigade and the British 7th Queen’s Own Hussars, performed the main attack to the west of the city. Despite fierce resistance, Polish detachments were gradually pushing the enemy away, successively seizing towns and breaking off enemy defensive lines by the end of the day. At eight in the evening, Anders ordered the Polish panzer forces to turn towards the sea, and cut the enemy off to prevent retreat. The German forces however managed to withdraw part of their troops from Ancona. On July 18, at 2:45 p.m., Polish commandos, supported by the 15th Poznań Uhlan Regiment, entered the undefended city. They succeeded to achieve one of the main

goals of the allied offensive – capture an undamaged port, at which five days later the first supply ships arrived.

The Ancona offensive was the only operation that was independently planned and carried out by Polish soldiers only. During this operation, General Anders commanded not only the Polish II Corps, but also – subordinate to it – the Italian Liberation Corps, and the British: 7th Queen’s Own Hussars, and 17th and 26th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiments. This enormous success was however paid dearly for: in direct fights for Ancona, 377 soldiers were killed and wounded, and during the entire offensive on the Adriatic coast – 496 killed, 1,789 wounded, and 139 missing. The bodies of the fallen were buried at the Polish War Cemetery in Loreto near the sanctuary of the Virgin Mary.

After the exhausting chase in summer and fall of 1944, the Polish II Corps shifted to defense activity at the Senio River. In March 1945, the Corps launched preparations for a new offensive to damage German forces in northern Italy. One of the main tasks for the 8th Army was given to the Polish soldiers who were to force the Senio river and – after breaking down German defense – outflank towards Bologna and cut the enemy off. They launched a successful attack on April 9 with the support of the British corps and engineering units, artillery and aviation. While chasing the enemy, the Corps was forcing consecutive water obstacles, and on April 21, it seized Bologna. This success significantly contributed to disrupting German troops in Italy, and in consequence, to their capitulation and ending the Italian Campaign by the Allies. During the spring offensive, the losses of the Polish II Corps reached over 200

killed, over 1,200 wounded, and over dozen missing. The killed soldiers were buried at the Polish War Cemetery in Bologna.

The Italian campaign of the Polish II Corps took place in the shadow of – incomprehensible to the Allies – tragedy of its soldiers. The eastern territories of Poland had just been annexed by the Russians: these lands were homeland for most Poles, who in 1942 left the Soviet Union with Anders’ army. That meant their return to Poland was not possible. In August 1944, Warsaw Uprising broke out against the Germans, and the Red Army, standing on the other side of the front, did not help the insurgents, waiting at ease for the Nazi to annihilate this birthplace of Polish mutinies. At that time, Anders sent from Italy a message to the Polish Minister of National Defense and to the Commander-in-Chief in London: “A soldier does not understand the purposefulness of the uprising in Warsaw. Nobody here had any illusions about the Bolsheviks helping Warsaw, despite their continuous promises. In these conditions, Warsaw – despite unprecedented examples of heroism in history – is doomed to be destroyed. We consider evoking the uprising as a heavy crime, and we ask who carries the responsibility for it.”

In 1945, Polish detachments in Italy were very close to rebellion against their previous allies. Ultimately, in the next year, the army was demobilized – the British agreed to transport the Polish army to England and Scotland. From there, Polish soldiers, having adapted themselves to civil life, left to eventually scatter around the world.

This soil belongs to Poland, Though Poland be far from here. ■ *Wojciech Markert*



The Sturmgeschütz III (StuG III) German panzer cannon destroyed by the 6th "Lviv Children" Panzer Regiment during the fights for Montoro near Ancona, July 6, 1944

the II Corps, who told me: »Bishop, it’s time.« Ten minutes later, we set off to Venafro. On the way, I found out that Chaplain August Huczyński fell at the Main Dressing Station, that Father Józef Król crashed while taking off from England, and that Chaplain Franciszek Lisowski’s tongue and jaw were torn off by a shrapnel. (...)

I am one of those old soldiers, who have more than once looked death in its morbid face, and have taken part in many battles. I myself have been wounded several times, I know something about the apathy of the heavily, and the talkativeness of the lightly wounded. I have heard their unavoidable complaints on officers, and their merciless judgment on »those sawbones« – the stretcher-bearers. However, during that particular battle I witnessed something unexpected, which made me reconsider my hitherto experience. The mood of our wounded was quite different. They all asked one question only: – Has the Abbey been seized already? How are things on the front? I could not believe my ears. Everyone praised their officers, and even the stretcher-bearers. They particularly appreciated the chaplains: »Our chaplain walked among us like Santa Claus, distributing fruit, even treated me to a glass of whisky.« There was not one wounded that did not have in his ‘army passport’ the signature of a chaplain with the annotation ‘provided for.’ (...) Chaplains Joniec, Grzondziel and Walczak are especially praised. (...) A man

from Warsaw lamented that he had been wounded in »a body part that I can’t name or show to the Bishop, so they didn’t let me stay to the end of this party.« (...)

I was afraid I would find the severely wounded Father Lisowski in agony, but I had been mistaken – this tongueless and jawless man had a truly unbreakable spirit. He was quite moved for a second or two, but he immediately started writing his questions: Has the Abbey been seized? (...) Does the English report – with unflattering insults directed at our allies – finally mention Polish participation in the Battle of Monte Cassino? (...)

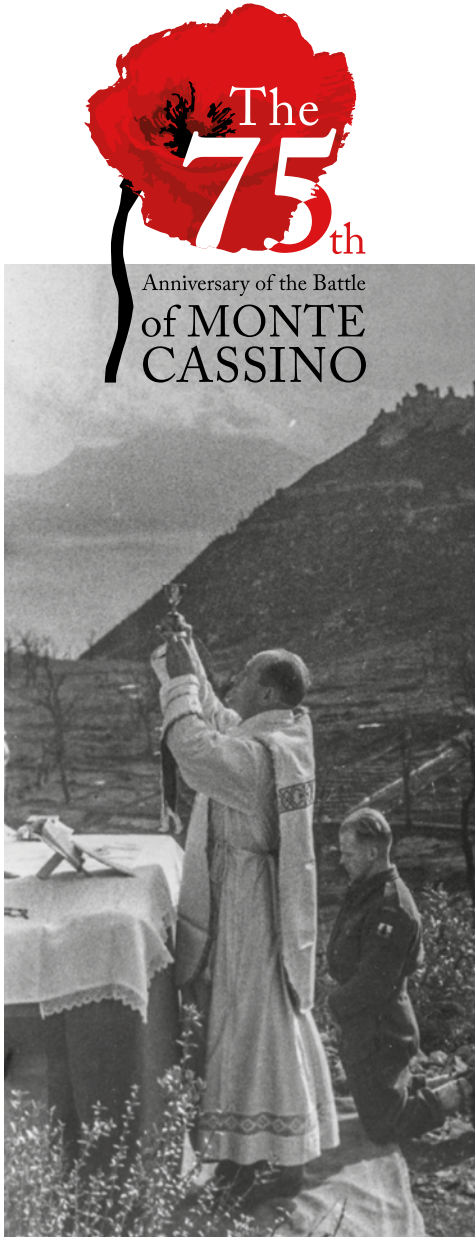
Further along, at the Main Dressing Station, worked the truly dedicated Chaplain Bas. There were many dying there. (...) I helped dress their wounds. Kneeling beside one of those people, giving him absolution, I was startled by the division pastor, Father Wiktor Judycki, asking me if I would like to »throw myself into the fire.« We went despite the protests of Father Dean Cieński, who had been appointed to watch over me. Helmets on and forward, through the Inferno Track, under heavy German fire. Shrapnel shells – somewhat obsolete munitions – were bursting over our heads. When we exited the Track, everything around us was obscured by artificial fog. A symphony of ear-splitting booms and bangs! The Germans must have noticed us, because we were clearly targeted. The driver was going like crazy: »They won’t get us.« Soon, we reached the

6th Advanced Dressing Station, where the indefatigable Bernardine monk, Father Łuszczki, worked. The house was full of wounded soldiers. Doctors looked ghastly, unable to stand firmly on their feet. The building shook with every grenade explosion. Having made sure that the wounded are tended to, and the administration worked well, I decided to look around. (...) Unceasing rumble and noise of grenades – as if a whole glass pavilion were gliding through the air – could be heard, coming at us from three sides. We were in fact very close to the abbey, about which I found out later from the very top of the hill. (...)

On May 18, the Ascension Day, I celebrated the second mass, with the first one said by Father Bocheński. I did not know that the Polish flag was then already fluttering above the abbey ruins, seized by our soldiers. (...)

The moment the battle ended (...), the grayness of everyday life returned. The true Polish nature stepped in again. (...) The representatives of the infantry regiment accused me of being unfair to the infantry yet again, because I had relocated their chaplain. Still tense after the battle, they even became enraged; and when I tried to calm one of them down, saying: »Wait a moment, my dear boy,« he stood at attention and replied: »I beg to report that I am no bumpkin, but a Monte Cassino battle hero.« ■

(Gawlina, Józef, Memoirs. Myszor, Jerzy, ed. Katowice, 2018)



Priest Józef Joniec at Monte Cassino

YOU DON'T DANCE TO THAT TUNE

Almost every Pole remembers a scene from the *Dom (House)* TV series, where a tipsy laborer tries to drag one of the main female characters to the dance floor in a post-war Warsaw taproom.

The orchestra is playing *The Red Poppies on Monte Cassino*, and the laborer is quickly grounded by a grumble coming from other guests: "You don't dance to THAT." The scene shows what the victory at Monte Cassino meant to the Polish nation oppressed by the German and Russian occupiers, not only during the war, but also for many, many years after.

The song, commemorating one of the most glorious moments for the Polish Army during WWII, became a symbol, with an aura of holiness around it, targeted against both occupiers' propaganda. *Biuletyn Informacyjny* (Information Bulletin), the official, main underground weekly published covertly in occupied Poland during the war, was the first to give the news on the Polish victory on May 25, 1944, one week after the fights for Monte Cassino ended. The first page of the weekly read: "A grand event has taken place: the Polish Army has achieved one of their greatest victories in this war." Later, it was explained to the Polish readers that: "As we know, the initial success streak of the English and American forces in Italy ended suddenly at the lower bank of the river Liri, where the Germans had built a line of first-class fortifications in the already inaccessible mountainous terrain. They had erected the so-called Gustav Line, which for



Ruiny Klasztoru Monte Cassino
od strony północno-zachodniej

Monte Cassino abbey in ruins.

Sketch drawn by the geographers of the Polish II Corps, 1944

The Red Poppies on Monte Cassino

lyrics by Feliks Konarski, music by Alfred Schütz

Do you see the rubble at the top?
There, like a rat, lurks your foe!
You musn't stop, you musn't stop
But from the clouds the enemy throw!
And so, onward and upward they went;
They went to avenge and to kill,
On the enemy's destruction, bent;
To their honor they harnessed their will.

The red poppies on Monte Cassino
Drank Polish blood instead of dew...
O'er the poppies the soldiers did go
'Mid death, and to their anger stayed true!
Years will come and ages will go,
Enshrining their strivings and their toil!...
And the poppies on Monte Cassino
Will be redder for Poles' blood in their soil.

The forlorn hope charged through the fire!
More than one was struck and felled...
Yet like the horsemen at Samoisiera,
They charged with a force unrepelled,
Like those at Rokitna years ago.
And they made it, and carried the day.
And they planted their red-and-white flag
In the rubble amid the clouds.

The red poppies on Monte Cassino...

Do you see the white crosses in a row?
That's where the Poles pledged their all.
The farther, the higher you go,
The more you'll find them fall.
This soil belongs to Poland,
Though Poland be far from here,
For 'tis crosses measure freedom's span —
That is history's lesson dear.

The red poppies on Monte Cassino...

A quarter-century has passed,
The dusts of battle no longer rise,
And the monastery's walls at last
Once again climb, white, to the skies...
But memory of those nights terrible
And of the blood that once flowed here —
Echoes in the monastery bells
That toll the fallen to sleep!...



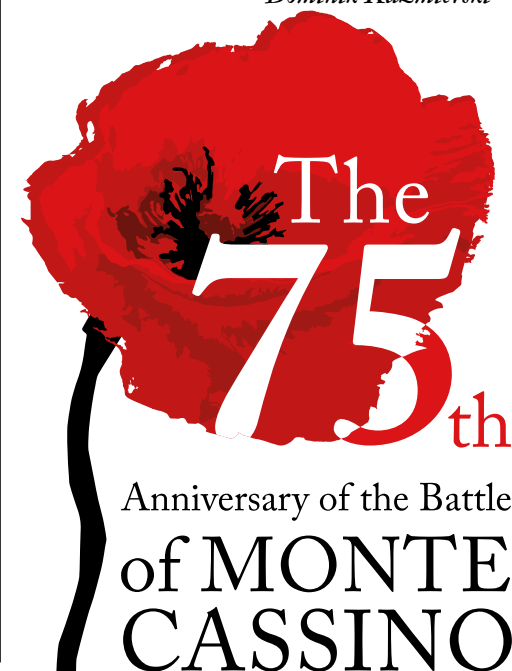
The soldiers of the 5th Kresy Infantry Division of the Polish II Corps
attacking Monte Cassino

seven months halted the march of the allied forces." After this introduction, people could finally read the news they had been waiting for – the official military announcement on the victory of the Polish soldier: "In the afternoon of May 17, and at the night of May 17/18, the detachments of the Polish Corps in Italy broke through enemy defense at the hill complex of Monte Cassino, San Angelo, and Hills 563 and 569, and repelled a series of fierce enemy counter-attacks, supported by concentric artillery and mortar fire. The defeated enemy attempted to flee from the vicinity of the abbey and the city of Monte Cassino. At 9:20, the Polish flag was raised over the ruined walls of the abbey."

According to witnesses, the announcement was like balm for the tortured Polish soul. News of such great Polish victories were rarely found in the press during WWII. It is no wonder then that the moment stayed in the Polish minds for a long time. After the war, in the dark night of communist oppression and propaganda, Monte Cassino became a symbol recognizable for all people who identified themselves with free Poland, while the song praising the Polish victory acquired emblematic significance, becoming a melody to which one should not dance, but stand straight and listen attentively. Almost like the Polish national anthem.

Biuletyn Informacyjny published the address made to the Polish soldiers on May 19, 1944 by Gen Kazimierz Sosnkowski, the Commander-in-Chief in exile: "Soldiers of the Polish Armed Forces at home and abroad! Our deeply moved thoughts reach out to Italy, where the II Corps has given new splendor to the Polish Army. Glory to the victors of Monte Cassino! Soldiers of Poland – wherever you are; observe a minute of silence in memory of the heroes that fell at Monte Cassino, and in honor of the living exclaim: huray!"

Dominik Kaźmierski



POLSKA ZBROJNA **HISTORIA**
POLSKA ZBROJNA

Project supervised by Anna Putkiewicz
Translation and copy editing by Anita Kwaterowska, Dorota Aszof
Factual accuracy review by Jacek Żurek
Graphic design by Marcin Izdebski

Illustration on page 1: photo by Cezary Pomykało, Marcin Dmowski,
Wydział Składu Komputerowego i Grafiki WIW

Photographs: 100 lat z mapą. *Z dziejów Geografii Wojskowej*, Warsaw 2019,
Central Military Archive (CAW), Library of Congress, National Digital Archive (NAC),
National Library of Poland, Polish Army Museum, Regional Museum of the Limanowa Land,
B. Jankowski, J. Kowalczyk, A. Łapiński, J. Żurek

Photo coloring by Mirosław Szponar

Printed by Wojskowe Zakłady Kartograficzne sp. z o.o., ul. Fort Wola 22, 01-258 Warszawa

wiw

Wojskowy Instytut Wydawniczy
(Military Publishing Institute)
Aleje Jerozolimskie 97, 00-909 Warszawa
Director: Maciej Podczaski
Polska Zbrojna (monthly)
Editor-in-Chief: Izabela Borańska-Chmielewska
www.polska-zbrojna.pl
Polska Zbrojna. Historia (quarterly)
Editor-in-Chief: Anna Putkiewicz

WWW.POLSKA-ZBROJNA.PL

Patron

POLSKA
SPÓŁKA GAZOWNICTWA

Partner

Związek Harcerstwa
Rzeczypospolitej