

The Struggles for Poland, 1939–1945

By Jan Chlapowski



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Jan Chlapowski was born in Poland, which he left in 1947. He finished his education in England with a degree in Chemical Engineering from Borough Polytechnic (now University of South London).

The majority of his professional career involved engineering design and engineering management of energy related projects such as petroleum refineries and conventional or nuclear power generating facilities. He spent 37 years working for an USA-based international engineering and construction company on projects in Europe, the Middle East, and North and South America.

He eventually settled in the United States and is now retired. He lives with his wife in Fayetteville, Pennsylvania.

He is a past Treasurer and Secretary of the Waynesboro Torch Club and is now a member of the Chambersburg Torch Club. He has made presentations on a variety of topics mainly related to international politics.

“The Struggles for Poland” was presented at the May 9, 2016 meeting of the Chambersburg Torch Club and was inspired by the obituary of Mr. W. Bartoszewski.

To begin, let me tell you about Wladyslaw Bartoszewski, who was ten years my senior and died in April 2015. His experiences in World War II epitomize the period I am going to write about.

In the early days of the German occupation of Poland in 1939, Wladyslaw Bartoszewski was ensnared in a street roundup and sent to Auschwitz as prisoner 4427. He was an employee of the Polish Red Cross, and they managed to eventually obtain his release. He then joined the Polish underground movement and organized secret help for Gestapo prisoners held for interrogation at the Pawiak prison in Warsaw.

One of my cousins spent time at that prison and later was sent to Ravensbrück concentration camp for women. Bartoszewski’s network may well have been responsible for the occasional news my family received about my cousin’s fate.

He was also active in Zegota, a resistance group devoted to helping Jews. (Zegota was a code name for “Council for Aid to Jews”.) In recognition of his work he was given honorary citizenship of Israel in 1965 and was honored as “Righteous Among Nations” at Yad Vashem memorial.

Wladyslaw fought in the ill-fated uprising in 1944. His wartime and post-war activities earned only scorn from the Polish communist regime set up after the war. He spent some seven years of the post war in jail (“The Great Survivor”).

The story I am going to tell is will be based on my recollections of this period, not only of what I directly

experienced, but also on my memory of conversations and discussions with my family.

Germany Invades Poland

Nazi Germany invaded Poland from the west on 1 September 1939. Sixteen days later, Russia, without a declaration of war, invaded from the east. The invasion and battle ended on 6 October 1939 with the two-way division and annexation of the entire territory of the Polish Republic.

The Polish forces had been mobilized on August 21, but with the delay by France and Britain in opening a second front, they could not withstand the double incursion. In early October all military action ceased. There was no formal surrender to either attacker. Therefore, Poland remained in a state of war: a unique situation among countries under occupation in World War II. Hence its citizens were duty bound to resist occupiers; circumstances allowed for no collaborative civil government.

Remnants of the military forces and of the civil government escaped to neutral Hungary and Romania and eventually made their way to France, where they regrouped and fought alongside the French. After the fall of France, they once again regrouped in England in time to participate in defense of Norway and in the Battle of Britain. Supplemented by former emigrants and people deported to Russia before it became an ally, Polish forces in the western armies numbered some 114,000 men and women. All service branches were represented.

Many countries became victims of Nazi Germany’s onslaught, but most of them were not subjected to a treatment that threatened their existence as a

nation. In the case of Poland, there was a conscious attempt by the Germans to exterminate their national existence.

Occupation, 1939-45

In Poland, the Germans took 400,000 prisoners but kept only the officers as prisoners of war. The Russians, however, who took 200,000 prisoners of war, separated the officers into camps and spread the rest into labor camps as far away as Siberia. They were joined by dispossessed families of politically suspect elements, i.e., the officers, professionals, and landowners. In 1940 the NKVD (the Soviet political police) executed 5,000 officers from the Kozielsk camp and then another 3,000 in the Katyn massacre. There are 10,000 men unaccounted for to this day. In 1945 Stalin rejected cooperation with the Polish Government-in-Exile rather than allow a Red Cross investigation of responsibility for Katyn.

Poland was split into three parts. Eastern Poland with its 13 million people was incorporated into Soviet republics, thus extending Stalinist rule, with all the repression that implied. The central portion of Poland, with about 22 million people, was declared a “General-Governorate” (GG) under military rule. The western part was incorporated into the German Reich.

In the Reich, Poles lost all their rights and could not even speak Polish in public. Most prominent members of the community or of the civil authority were arrested, and some were publicly executed. Landowners were dispossessed of their property and replaced by Germans. Unfortunately, friends and members of my family fell into both categories. The Catholic church was heavily targeted: 80% of the clergy were deported, and 500 priests from that area alone ended up in concentration camps. Those Poles who were not employed by Germans were slated to be deported to the GG. Until my grandmother got a permit to

take me to Warsaw, we were under constant threat of eviction. Since evictions usually took place at night, for a while I went to bed half dressed with a small suitcase packed and ready by my bed.

The German regarded the GG as a gigantic labor camp and breadbasket for their benefit. All manufacturing and agriculture was under German control and geared to serve their needs. The farmers had to provide mandated quotas in produce and livestock. For Poles, food and clothes were rationed at below subsistence levels. This created a lively black market, or “dealing on the left” as it was called, by many practically considered a patriotic duty. The dearth of goods led to the creation of a multiplicity of relief organizations sponsored by religious groups or by clandestine resistance groups. Perhaps as many as 25% of the population was supported by the Swiss Red Cross and the Vatican.

The Gestapo immediately started a reign of terror against any potential organized resistance. Arrests usually occurred in the middle of the night under the cover of the nightly curfew. In these roundups or house searches, any link found to a clandestine, anti-German organization meant arrest or torture to obtain information. Execution or the concentration camp frequently followed. The network of seven concentration camps was started in 1940. From 1942 onward, four were exclusively devoted to extermination of life, mostly of Polish and European Jews.

As the German labor shortages mounted, there were increases in random arrests and street roundups of able-bodied persons. This was done by closing off two ends of a busy street and arresting anyone in sight. If your documents were in any way suspect or you could not prove exempt employment, you ended up in forced labor in Germany, living in abysmal conditions,

always identified by a violet letter “P” on their garments. Over 1.6 million persons from Poland ended up in Germany as forced labor. During the war Poland lost 45% of its dentists and doctors, nearly 60% of its attorneys, 15% of its teachers, 40% of its professors and 20% of its clergy.

The majority of ex-military or professional people that avoided arrest became exactly what the Germans feared—the backbone of the underground resistance movement—and entered into the constant death dance of avoiding detection.

The Armed Resistance

Starting in 1939, various groups began preparing clandestine organizations to resist the occupiers. Eventually most were consolidated under a unified command as the Home Army (HA) with ties to the Government-in-Exile in London. The Home Army coordinated sabotage, intelligence gathering, anti-German propaganda, and distribution of news. In addition, it coordinated small armed units secreted in the countryside and helped Jews and other escaped prisoners. The Home Army also provided an underground judicial system to punish traitors. Nearly 400,000 men and women were registered members of Home Army and unaffiliated resistance units such as the communist People’s Army. Most members carried on with their lives to support themselves and their families, participating in HA activities on the sly. The Home Army was careful to limit direct confrontation with the German military, for acts of sabotage and assassination by the Home Army could result in savage reprisals on the civilian population.

After the Soviet Union became one of the Allies, it was pressed to agree to form army units from the survivors of the Polish detainees. In all, about 115,000 were rounded up and left Russia to join other Polish troops in

The Partitioning of Poland, 1939



Source: The International Staff Ride, "The Invasion of Poland." (isr2016.github.io)

North Africa and eventually fought in Italy as the 2nd Polish Corps. At the assembly points, all former detainees were accepted: men, women and youngsters became soldiers, nurses and cadets. Those Poles that did not make it out at that time formed Polish units under communist leadership and fought alongside the Russians all the way to Berlin. Their number reached 44,000 men and women.

As the Soviet forces pushed the German army back and advanced into eastern Poland, Polish communists established a "Committee of National Liberation," a de facto civil government that immediately started suppressing the HA or any other potential challenge to their authority. Polish exiles in London were particularly excluded.

As the front moved close to Warsaw and the Russian troops entered the eastern suburbs, HA decided on an uprising, led by civil and military

organizations allied to the Government-in-Exile, to liberate the capital. This infuriated Stalin. The Russians halted their advance and left the Germans to quell the uprising. Over 200,000 Polish combatants and civilians perished, including some of the youngest and brightest of that generation. It took German army sixty-three days to force surrender of the lightly armed Polish combatants; in recognition of their fighting spirit, they were given the status of military prisoners of war. Nevertheless, Hitler ordered Warsaw to be totally destroyed. What was still standing was systematically demolished after the non-combatants were herded out and spread out around the country still under German control. Succeeding generations have been split over the wisdom of the decision for armed insurrection.

I was in Warsaw at that time, and when the time came to leave, we were assembled in the street, surrounded by German soldiers. After being formed

into a column, we were marched off to an assembly point. As we proceeded down the middle of the street, we had to avoid rubble, dead bodies and burning buildings. Eventually we were dispersed to various places that could accept homeless refugees.

My family was allowed to leave the assembly to join my great uncle in a small village within commuting distance of Warsaw. My uncle, the Archbishop of Warsaw, had been relocated there by the Germans.

Epilogue

The accepted figure for World War II deaths in Europe is approximately 60 million persons or about 10% of its pre-war population. Of that 60 million, 6 million were Polish citizens, nearly half of which were of the Jewish faith. No other country in Europe lost such a large proportion of its leading citizens and its professional class. I wish I could say that the Allied victory over Germany was also good news for Poland, but the Polish people had to wait close to fifty years before Poland was once again free. Yet in spite of these losses, and in spite of the difficulties of the Cold War and the oppression of the Stalinist regime, Poland survived.

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