

TRAILS OF HOPE

THE ODYSSEY OF FREEDOM

THE FATE OF POLES DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR



☒ A young cadet, Middle East (Photo: AIPN)



Trails of Hope
The Odyssey of Freedom



INSTITUTE OF
NATIONAL
REMEMBRANCE

THE ATTACK ON POLAND

The German attack on Poland on 1 September 1939 initiated the Second World War. Two days later, Poland's allies – Great Britain and France – declared war on Germany. On 17 September 1939, the Soviet Union attacked the Republic of Poland, in this way fulfilling the provisions of an agreement concluded between the USSR and the German Reich on 23 August 1939 (Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact). Its secret protocol drafted the division of Poland and defined the spheres of influence of the Soviet Union and Germany in Central and Eastern Europe. Poles became engaged in a heroic and unequal fight. On 17 September, after the Soviet attack, Polish state authorities crossed the Polish–Romanian border. Thousands of Poles eager to continue the fight for freedom used the same route to flee to Romania and Hungary. The Germans and Soviets inflicted terror and mass repressions in the country they occupied, yet Poles quickly embarked on building the Polish Underground State encompassing the undercover structures of state administration, education, the police, and the army.



✎ The Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars of the Soviet Union and Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs signing the German–Soviet non-aggression pact (known as the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact), Moscow, 23 August 1939 (Photo: AIPN)

✎ Internment camp for Polish soldiers in Targu-Jiu in Romania, 1940 (Photo: Stanisław Sarek, Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London, courtesy of the KARTA Centre Foundation)



✎ Warsaw in September 1939 (Photo: KARTA Centre Foundation)

✎ *Schleswig-Holstein*, a German battleship, shelling Polish positions at Westerplatte in Gdańsk, 1939 (Photo: AIPN)



POLISH NAVY SUBMARINE "ORZEŁ"

Remember that the only right way to return from the netherworld is to travel first class.

Jan Grudziński

Jan Grudziński - Captain in the Polish Navy. Having escaped internment in Tallinn in 1939, he guided the ORP Orzeł submarine and commanded her crew, with no maps and working navigation equipment, to England across the Baltic Sea and through the Danish Straits. As the ship's commander he continued fighting and regularly patrolled the North Sea. On 23 May 1940, ORP Orzeł left port on its last mission to patrol the area around the Skagerrak and has never been found since (Photo: Naval Museum in Gdynia)

The Naval Jack of the Polish Navy in 1917-45 (Photo: public domain)



THE TERROR OF THE OCCUPATION

The purpose of German repressions in occupied Poland was the physical destruction of the nation in labour camps, concentration camps, and, finally, in death camps, which were intended for the extermination of Jews. In this part of Europe, as opposed to occupied Western Europe, any aid offered to Jews was punishable by death. Collective responsibility for such deeds meant the murdering of whole families.

The most destructive form of mass repression the Soviets resorted to was deportation to remote areas of the USSR. At least 315,000 Polish citizens were sent there in the years 1940–1941. Each individual tragedy started with a several-week-long railroad journey in cattle cars, often in the extreme cold of winter or the scorching heat of summer. Many children, along with the sick and the elderly, died on the way. Exposed to extreme weather conditions, many of the deportees were worked to death in the forests and mines.

Polish officers and policemen interned by the Soviets in 1939 were transported to special NKVD camps in Kozelsk, Starobelsk, and Ostashkov, and subsequently killed upon the order of 5 March 1940, issued by the highest Soviet authorities. Over 7,000 civilians, who had been arrested and imprisoned by the NKVD after the Soviet attack on Poland in September 1939, also fell victim to this crime.



☑ A group of women at work clear-felling a forest near Sverdlovsk in the USSR, 22 November 1940 (Photo: KARTA Centre Foundation, courtesy of Halina Karny)

☑ Polish deportees sent from Złoczów to the USSR visiting the graves of their loved ones who had died while in exile. Left to right: Julia Fedak, Jerzy Fedak, and Zofia Hosowska, Janushevka, Kazakh SSR, 1942 (Photo: KARTA Centre Foundation, courtesy of Jerzy Fedak)



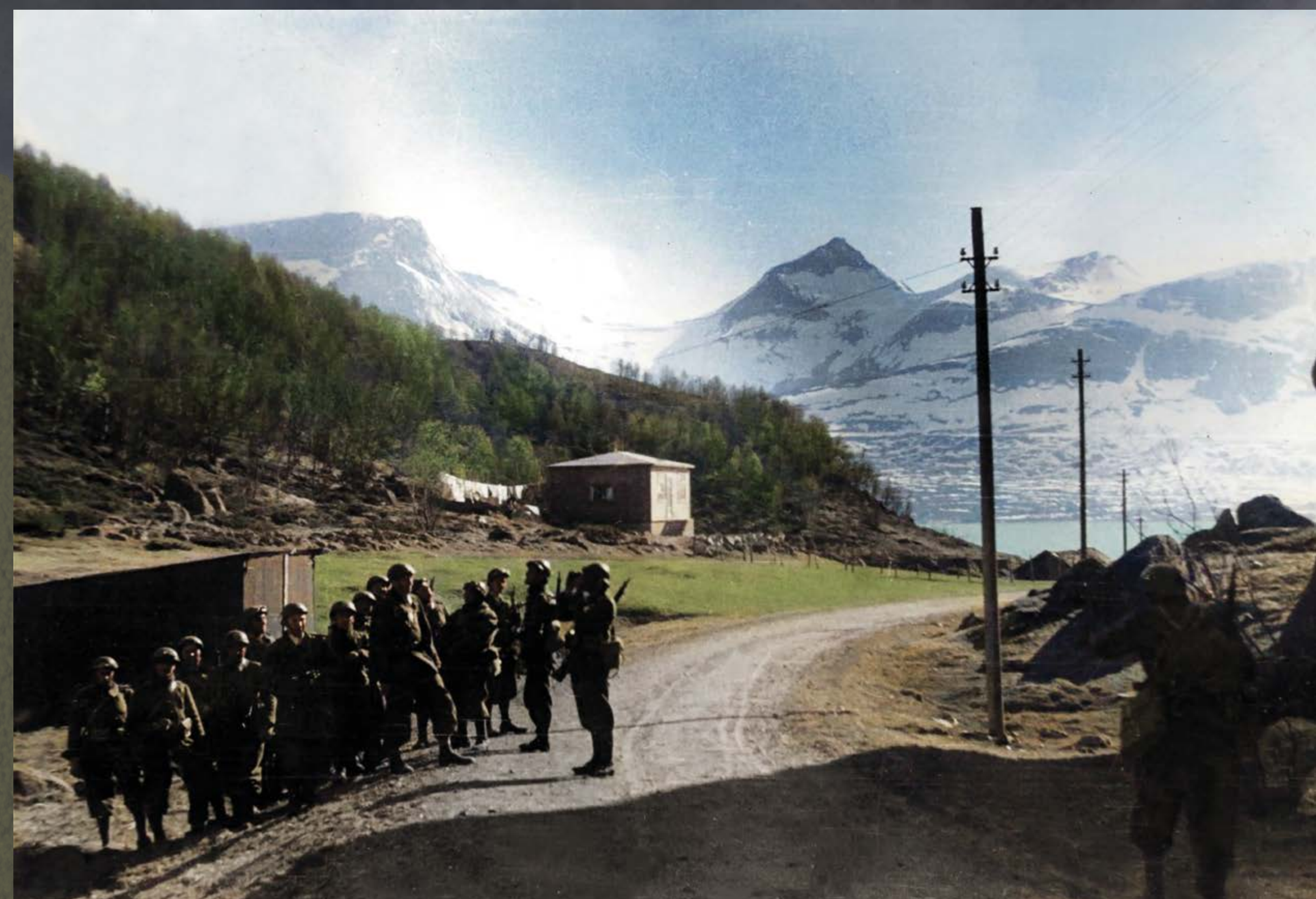
1940 – BLOOD, SWEAT AND TEARS

In the autumn of 1939, the Polish Army, consisting of Poles who had fled the country or had been in Western Europe at the time of the German-Soviet attack on Poland, was functioning in allied France.

On 9 April 1940, the Third Reich invaded Denmark and Norway in order to secure supplies of raw materials. The Polish Independent Highland Brigade formed in France fought for Norway, demonstrating great bravery in the battle of Narvik.

On 10 May 1940, Belgium, the Netherlands, and France became the targets of German aggression. After the Germans broke through the Allied lines on the Meuse, Somme and Aisne rivers, they could no longer be stopped. The evacuation of Polish troops to Britain began three days prior to the capitulation of France.

On the order of the Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Armed Forces, General Władysław Sikorski, the Polish I Corps was formed in Great Britain. Polish air squadrons took part in the Battle of Britain. Poles joined the fight when the world's biggest air battle entered a decisive phase. The Allied forces prevailed owing to the cooperation of airmen from many German-occupied countries. It was thanks to their sacrifice and devotion that the invasion of Great Britain was prevented.



📍 Soldiers of the Polish Independent Highland Brigade in Norway, May 1940 (Photo: Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London, courtesy of the KARTA Centre Foundation)

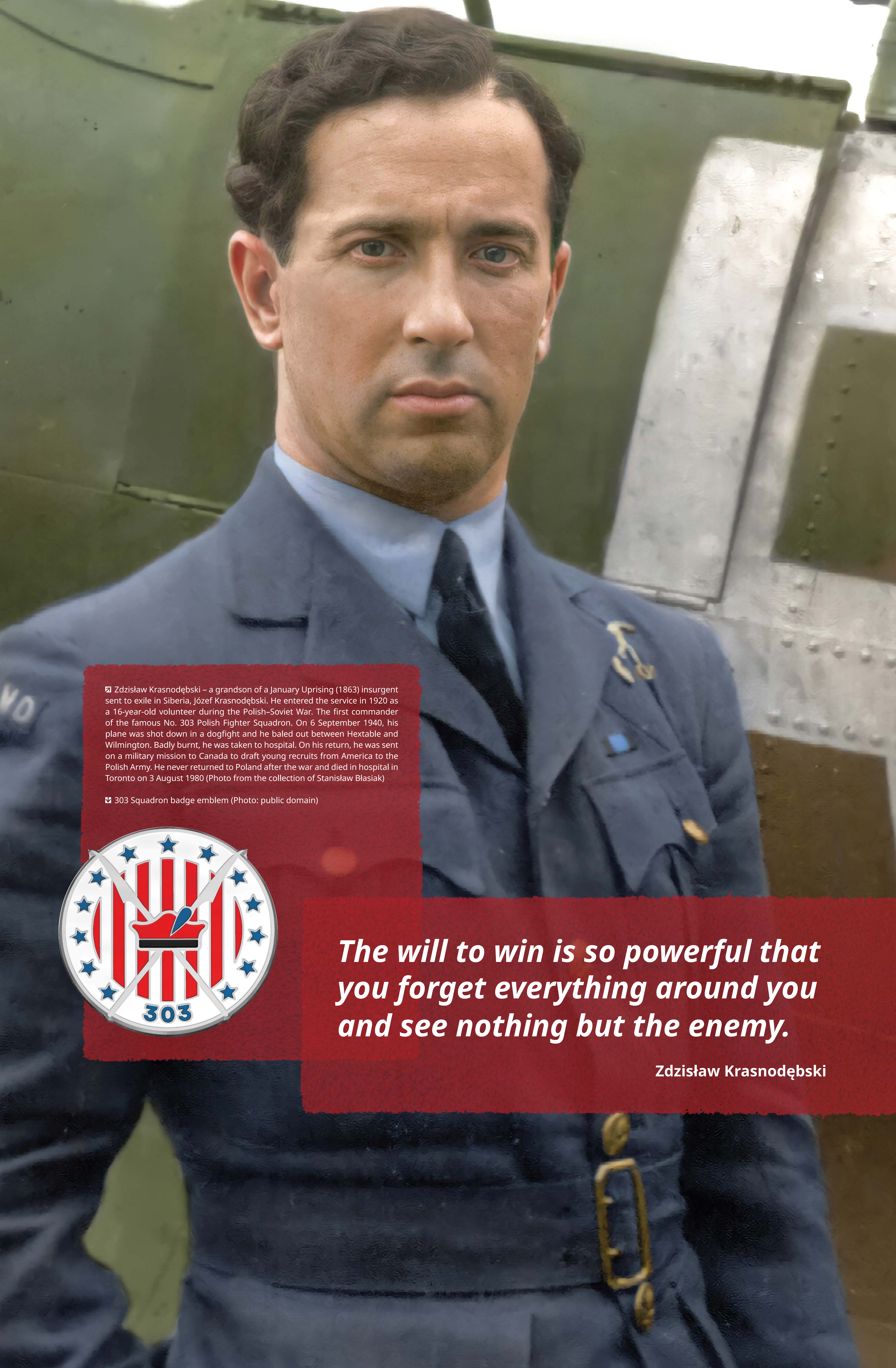


📍 The planes of No. 303 Squadron RAF, UK, 1942 (Photo: Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London, courtesy of the KARTA Centre Foundation)

📍 Polish armoured troops – Renault R-35 tanks of the 3rd Company of the 1st Polish Tank Battalion of the 10th Armoured Cavalry Brigade during the campaign on the Marne in France, June 1940 (Photo from the collection of Krzysztof Barbariski, courtesy of the KARTA Centre Foundation)



ON WINGS



☑ Zdzisław Krasnodębski – a grandson of a January Uprising (1863) insurgent sent to exile in Siberia, Józef Krasnodębski. He entered the service in 1920 as a 16-year-old volunteer during the Polish–Soviet War. The first commander of the famous No. 303 Polish Fighter Squadron. On 6 September 1940, his plane was shot down in a dogfight and he baled out between Hextable and Wilmington. Badly burnt, he was taken to hospital. On his return, he was sent on a military mission to Canada to draft young recruits from America to the Polish Army. He never returned to Poland after the war and died in hospital in Toronto on 3 August 1980 (Photo from the collection of Stanisław Błasiak)

☑ 303 Squadron badge emblem (Photo: public domain)



The will to win is so powerful that you forget everything around you and see nothing but the enemy.

Zdzisław Krasnodębski

THE WAR SPREADS

The year 1941 brought radical changes in the progress of the war. The outbreak of the German–Russian War on 22 June broke the Nazi-Soviet alliance and forced the USSR to change sides and to join the Allies. This had a bearing on the position of Polish citizens in the territory of the USSR.

The Polish Independent Carpathian Rifle Brigade, commanded by General Stanisław Kopański, was sent to fight on a new front in the war, namely, in North Africa. In late August 1941, it was dispatched from Egypt to Libya, besieged by the German and Italian forces, to reinforce the fortress of Tobruk. In October, the Poles took over the longest and most difficult Western defence sector. Fighting in Tobruk continued until December 1941, when Allied Forces relieved the siege.

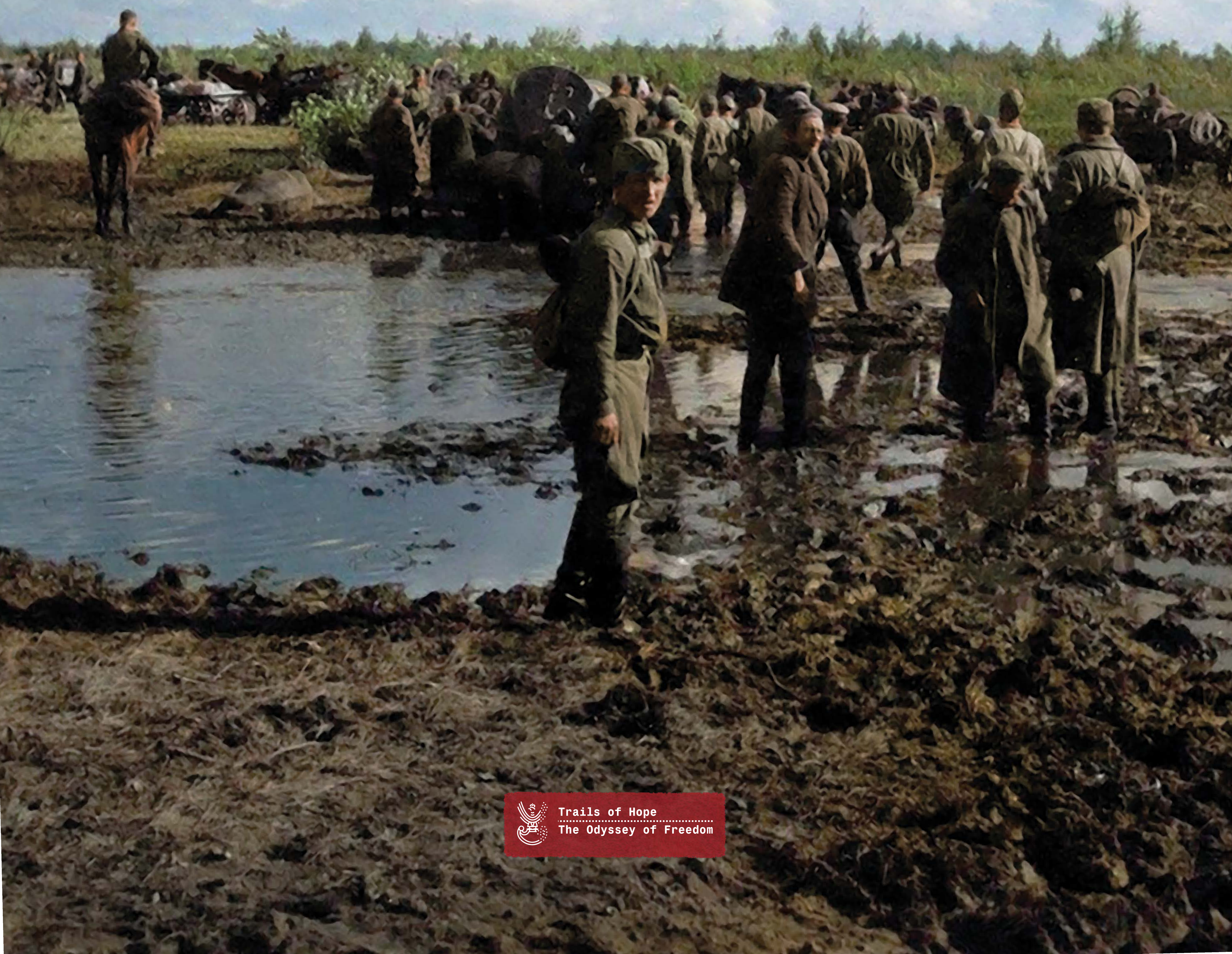
In December 1941, with the United States entering the war, the balance of power on the front changed. The war had now expanded to nearly every corner of the world.

✎ The destruction at Pearl Harbor after the Japanese air raid of 7 December 1941 (Photo: National Archives and Records Administration)



✎ Soldiers of the Polish Independent Carpathian Rifle Brigade on the front line in the desert near Tobruk. Libya, December 1941 (Photo: NAC)

✎ A column of Soviet prisoners of war near the fortress of Brest, 1941 (Photo: KARTA Centre Foundation, courtesy of Stanisław Blichiewicz)



THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC



The Second World War continued on many fronts, including that on the Atlantic Ocean, intersected by the main routes connecting both the Americas and Europe. Dominating those could change the course of the war in Europe and in the world. Beginning in the autumn of 1939 Polish men-of-war and merchant ships supported the Allies in convoys and key military operations.

📍 Training the seamen of the Polish Merchant Navy College in the United Kingdom (Photo: NAC)

*Now is the time of strong and daring people,
for only they can gain victory and liberate
the world from tyranny.*

Władysław Sikorski

A SPARK OF HOPE

The 30 July 1941 Polish–Soviet agreement re-established mutual diplomatic relations. It included an amnesty for Polish citizens throughout the USSR. This allowed the release of thousands of people from camps and places of exile. The signing of a further military alliance, the provisions of which defined the principles of operation of the Polish Army in the USSR (being a part of the Polish Armed Forces), took place on 14 August. Poles were given a spark of hope that they would return home. The command of the army was entrusted to General Władysław Anders, whom the Soviet authorities had released from prison. A decision to expand the Polish Army and then send it to the frontline was reached during the visit of General Władysław Sikorski to Moscow in December 1941. At the same time, the Polish authorities began an intensive search for the Polish officers taken prisoner by the Soviets in 1939 and placed in the NKVD's special camps.

✉ The signing of the Sikorski–Mayski agreement reinstating diplomatic relations between Poland and the USSR, London, 30 July 1941 (Photo: Imperial War Museum)



✉ General Władysław Anders (Commander of the Polish Army in the USSR) and Col. Leopold Okulicki (Chief of Staff of the Polish Army in the USSR), 1941–1942 (Photo: NAC)

✉ Polish soldiers taking a break after military exercises, Jalal-Abad, Kyrgyzstan, USSR, February 1942 (Photo: Wiktor Ostrowski; Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London, courtesy of the KARTA Centre Foundation)



OUT OF THE LAND OF SLAVERY

In 1942, the German Army was around 150 km away from Moscow, and the front line stretched from Leningrad in the north to Rostov-on-Don in the south. The Soviets were finding it increasingly difficult to conceal the murder of thousands of Polish officers. The newly-formed Polish troops lacked basic supplies. Further enlistments were suspended by the Soviet authorities. Poles were turning into an increasingly troublesome ally for the USSR. Due to the lack of food rations for the Polish units, talks on relocation from the USSR to Iran began. In March 1942, the Soviet government agreed to the transfer of some Polish soldiers and civilians remaining with the army. The decision to relocate the entire Polish Army was reached in August and the process continued until early September 1942. The Poles were overjoyed. Often, whole families were saved. The journey home had, however, only just begun. Civilians found shelter on four continents, venturing as far as East Africa, India, Mexico, and New Zealand.

Nonetheless, due to the Soviet authorities' objection, many Polish citizens could not take part in the evacuation and remained in the USSR. Some returned to Poland in the ranks of a Polish army under full Soviet command, while others could only return many years after the war.

✉ Soldiers of the Polish Army in the East on their way to military exercises (Photo: AIPN)



✉ Children who made it to the Anders' Army. Vrevskaya, Uzbekistan, USSR, May 1942 (Photo: Wiktor Ostrowski; Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London, courtesy of the KARTA Centre Foundation)

✉ A group of Polish exiles taking a rest on the border between the USSR and Iran, 1942 (Photo: Józef Piłsudski Institute of America)



CHILDREN

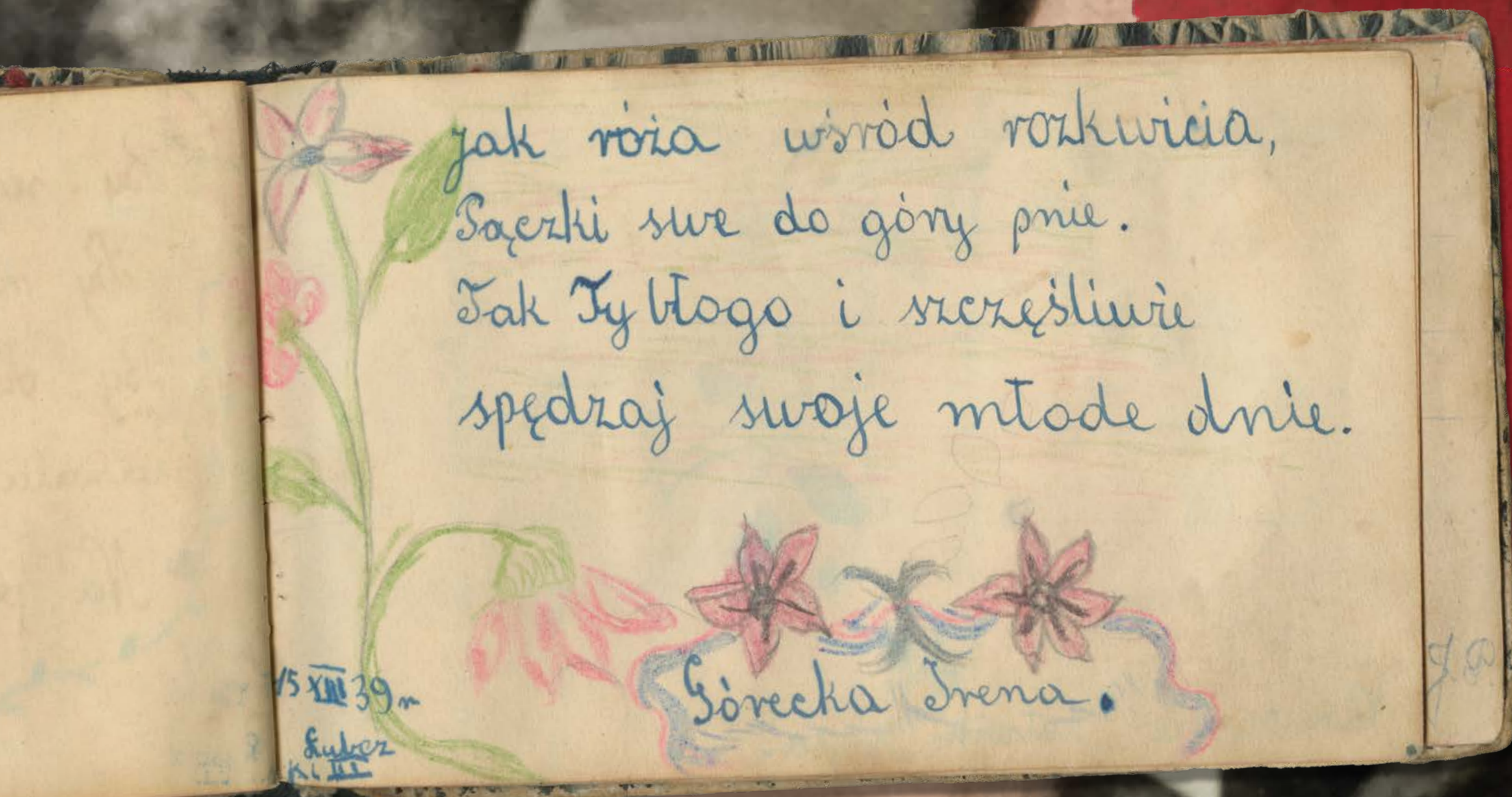
Young by age, mature by suffering

Hanka Ordonówna

Hanka Ordonówna is the stage name of Maria Anna Tyszkiewicz, a Polish singer and actress. Arrested by the NKVD, she became a prisoner of the Gulag in Uzbekistan in 1940. Evacuated from the USSR with an orphanage, passing via Bombay in India to arrive in Beirut in Lebanon in 1942, she organised aid for the orphaned children of the Polish deportees. Ordonówna died in Beirut during a typhoid outbreak in 1950.

📖 A girl rescued by the Polish Army and evacuated from the USSR in 1942 (Photo: Józef Piłsudski Institute of America)

📖 In 1938, Helenka Czulkw started a diary in which she collected entries from her friends. It accompanied her not only in exile but also on the way back to her homeland (Photo: Memorial Museum Siberia)



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FROM PALESTINE TO BOLOGNA



The decision to separate the Polish II Corps from the structures of the Polish Army in the East was made in June 1943 during a visit of the CINC Sikorski to the Middle East. The units were reorganised and trained in the territory of Palestine. The soldiers of the Polish II Corps fought in the Italian Campaign. Starting in early 1944, the Allied troops tried to break through the line of strongly fortified German positions. The road to Rome led through the mountain passes of the narrowest neck of the Italian Peninsula. The American, British, French, New Zealand, and Indian forces had made many attempts to break through, but it was the Poles who succeeded in overcoming the fierce German opposition and captured Monte Cassino in May 1944.

The Polish troops went on to fight at Piedimonte San Germano, and later along the Adriatic coast, where they liberated Ancona on 18 July 1944. The combat trail of the Anders Army ended with the liberation of Bologna on 21 April 1945.

☑ Italians welcoming the soldiers of the Polish II Corps. Standing in the car second from the left is General Klemens Rudnicki, Bologna, Italy, 21 April 1945 (Photo: Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London, courtesy of the KARTA Centre Foundation)

☑ The Polish army was transported to the Italian front from the Egyptian sea ports. Polish soldiers of the 2nd Armoured Brigade by the Pyramid of Khafre. Giza, Egypt, 1943 (Photo: NAC)

☑ General Władysław Anders with accompanying officers. Ruins of the Monte Cassino Monastery visible in the background. Cassino, Italy, May 1944 (Photo: Felicjan Maliniak; Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London, courtesy of the KARTA Centre Foundation)



PUSHED TO THE LIMITS OF ENDURANCE

***No one has the right to bargain
the honour and dignity of Poland.***

Władysław Anders

The training carried out by the Commando units was extremely demanding. It comprised rock and mountain climbing, driving motorboats, all aspects of sea landing, navigation and orientation, tactics, disguise and camouflage, moving in all types of terrain, and night and hand-to-hand combat. The objective of the special units was to harass and engage the enemy forces through raids and subversive operations. In the Italian Campaign, Polish Commando units operated e.g., around Taranto, Naples, and Monte Cassino.

➤ 1st Motorised Independent Polish Commando Company on exercises (Photo: AIPN)

➤ Commando unit patches (Photo: public domain)



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FROM NORMANDY TO WILHELMSHAVEN

The 1st Polish Armoured Division was formed in the United Kingdom on 25 February 1942, and its command was given to General Stanisław Maczek. The division shed a great deal of blood near Falaise in Normandy and then blocked the German escape route from the Chambois pocket, again at the cost of heavy losses. The Allied commanders were convinced it needed to be withdrawn from active fighting. Nevertheless, replenished, it participated in a daring pursuit of the enemy, liberating cities in France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. The slogan 'Priority for Poles' became known to all Allied soldiers. While capturing Ypres, General Maczek forbade the use of artillery fire in cities, saving the lives and property of Belgian and Dutch civilians. The burden of the fight was transferred to the riflemen, who cleared the territory of enemy units. The locals have fond memories of General Maczek's decision. In 1945, after the bloody campaign in the Netherlands, the 1st Polish Armoured Division entered Germany, ending its combat trail in Wilhelmshaven.



General Stanisław Maczek, commander of the 1st Armoured Division (left, speaking into a laryngophone), in a Cromwell VII tank of the Staff Squadron. Captain Tadeusz Wysocki on the right (Photo: NAC)

The 1st (Polish) Independent Parachute Brigade was formed in the UK in October 1941 to fight in Poland. It played a major role in the largest airborne operation in history, fighting near Arnhem in occupied Netherlands in September 1944 (Photo: NAC)

Allied infantry troops land on Omaha Beach. The Polish Air Force, the Polish Navy, and the Polish Merchant Navy participated in the operation, 6 June 1944 (Photo: National Archives and Records Administration)



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THE SILENT UNSEEN

(...) I pledge allegiance to my Fatherland, the Republic of Poland, to guard her honour steadfastly, and to fight for her liberation with all my strength, even to the extent of sacrificing my own life. (...)

an excerpt from the oath taken by the Silent Unseen and the soldiers of the Home Army



Cichociemni (The Silent Unseen) were not a separate military unit, and as such had no banner, colours, or patron. They were trained as lone operators and commanding officers. They executed top-secret orders and missions commissioned by the Polish government in London. General Elżbieta Zawacka, nom-de-guerre Zo, was a courier for the High Command of the Home Army, and the only woman among the Silent Unseen.

▣ The Parachute Badge of the Home Army (Photo: AIPN)

▣ Elżbieta "Zo" Zawacka (Photo: General Elżbieta Zawacka Foundation)



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THE BITTER TASTE OF VICTORY

The tragic death of General Władysław Sikorski in a plane crash in Gibraltar in July 1943 weakened the position of the Polish Government in London. With his position strengthened after the Battle of Stalingrad, Joseph Stalin began to form the structures of a future communist Polish state, fully dependent on the USSR. In February 1945, the soldiers of the Polish Armed Forces learnt of the resolutions of the Yalta Conference, which placed Poland in the Soviet sphere of influence, forcing it to forfeit Kresy, its eastern territories, to the Soviet Union, and stripping the legal government-in-exile of all authority. The news led to a crisis in Polish-British relations but the Polish troops went on fighting the war until Germany surrendered. Despite great and numerous successes on the Second World War fronts, heroism and sacrifice, the soldiers of the Polish Armed Forces did not participate in the 8 June 1946 victory parade in London. The British government had not invited them, fearing a negative reaction from the communist-controlled government in Warsaw.

Former soldiers of the 2nd Warsaw Armoured Division are leaving the Polish Repatriation Camp in Ayr. They have just been discharged, and one of them is already wearing civilian clothes (Photo: NAC)



The Yalta Conference in 1945. Sitting, left to right, are British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin (Photo: public domain)

The London Victory Parade, 8 June 1946 (Photo: Alamy)



THE END OF A DREAM

In the spring of 1946, the British informed Polish commanding officers that the military would have to be disbanded – and got the demobilisation underway despite the protests of the government-in-exile. The Polish Resettlement Corps was set up, with the task of preparing the soldiers for civilian life. The symbolic date marking the end of the Polish Armed Forces was 10 July 1947, when the banners were deposited in the Sikorski Institute in London. In September 1946, the government of communist Poland wrongfully stripped over 70 officers, including generals Anders, Maczek, and Kopański, of their Polish citizenship.

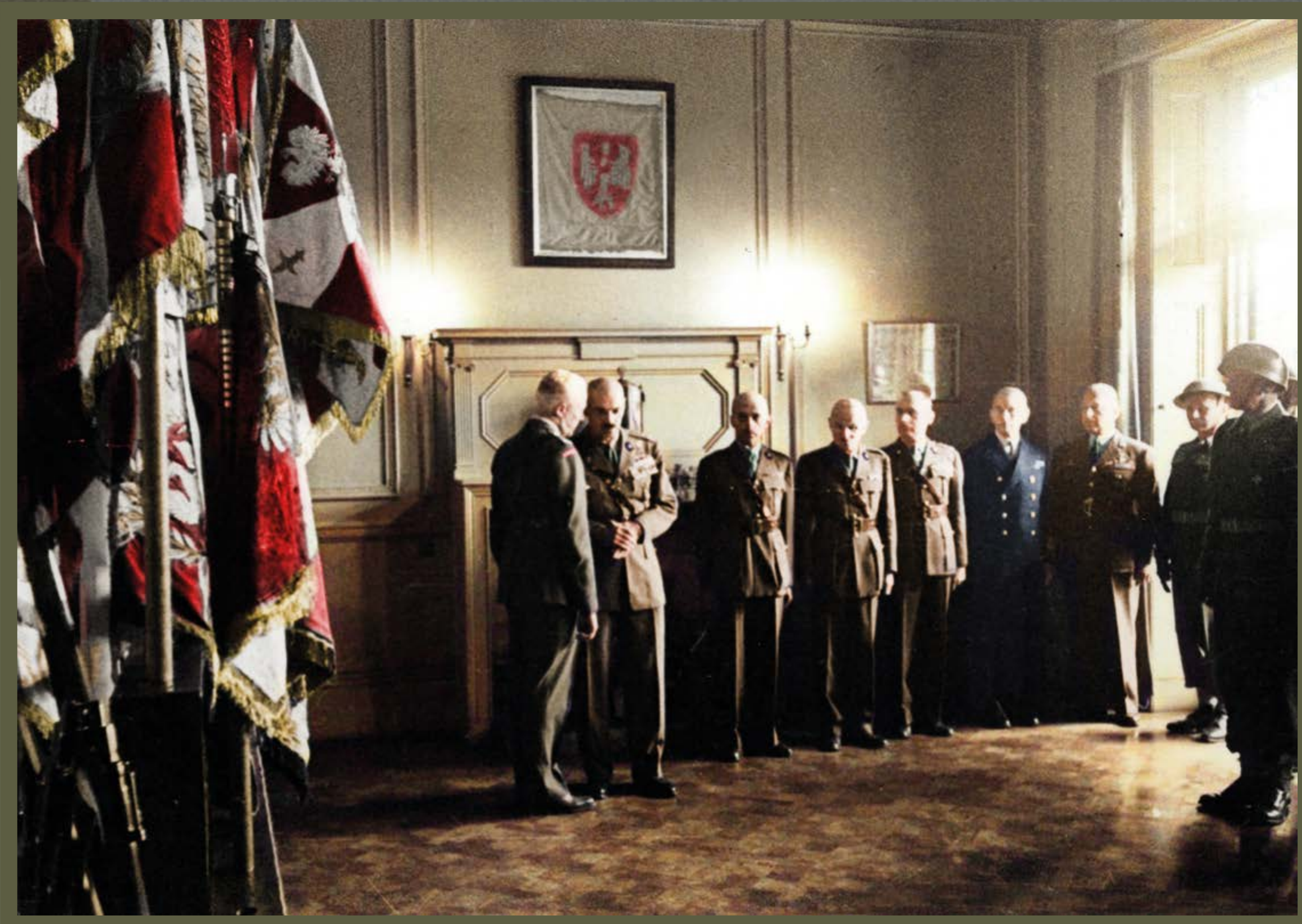
The soldiers, having quite recently proved their courage on the battlefield, faced a dilemma: they could return to their country, ruled by communists, or stay. In Poland, they would be watched and persecuted. Some decided to remain abroad, where they made their homes and started families. They found a safe harbour, yet they would always miss their country. Only a handful lived to see a free and independent Poland.

🚩 The gate to the Military Repatriation Camp for former soldiers of the Polish Armed Forces, Gdańsk, 1947 (Photo: NAC)



🚩 Soldiers of the Polish Armed Forces aboard a ship, returning to Poland, 1946 (Photo from the collection of Marcin Rudziński; KARTA Centre Foundation)

🚩 Depositing the banners of the Polish Armed Forces at the Sikorski Institute (Photo: Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London, courtesy of the KARTA Centre Foundation)



WITAJCIE RODACY W WOLNEJ POLSCE



Poles on battlefronts of WWII

- destinations of Polish troops in 1939
- relocation and combat trail of General Anders' Polish Army
- combat trail of the Polish Independent Highland Brigade (1940)
- combat trail of General Maczek's 10th Armoured Cavalry Brigade (1940)
- combat trail of the Polish Independent Carpathian Brigade (1940-1942)
- combat trail of General Maczek's 1st Armoured Division (1944-1945)
- the greatest extent of the Axis Occupation
- areas controlled by the Allies in late 1942
- neutral states
- Union of Soviet Socialist Republics



'Trails of Hope' is the story of the mass odyssey of Polish citizens during the Second World War. These journeys – both military and civilian – resulted from the efforts of the legal authorities of the Republic of Poland, and were guided by the idea of restoring Poland's freedom and sovereignty.

☑ A soldier of the 2nd Warsaw Armoured Division by an apple tree, 1945-47 (Photo: NAC)



THE TRUTH IN NUMBERS

CA. **315,000** DEPORTED INTO THE USSR IN FOUR BIG DEPORTATION WAVES

POLES EVACUATED WITH ANDERS' ARMY BY 25 AUGUST 1942

78,631 **37,912**
SERVICEMEN CIVILIANS

POLISH ARMED FORCES PERSONNEL IN MAY 1945

3,840 **19,400** **170,000**
NAVY AIR FORCE ARMY

✉ Military exercises of the 1st Independent Parachute Brigade of the Polish Armed Forces in the UK, 1943 (Photo: AIPN)

LOSSES

43,430 INCLUDING **7,608**
SOLDIERS WHO DIED OF WOUNDS

CA. **120,000** REPATRIATES

☑ Soldiers of the 3rd Carpathian Rifle Division are hoisting the Polish flag on top of Torre di Asinelli, Bologna, 1945 (Photo: NAC)

Exhibition prepared by the Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation, for the “Trails of Hope. The Odyssey of Freedom” international project.



**INSTITUTE OF
NATIONAL
REMEMBRANCE**



**Szlaki Nadziei
Odyseja Wolności**

Пути надежды
Одиссея свободы

Wege der Hoffnung
Odyssee der Freiheit

Trails of Hope
The Odyssey of Freedom

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szlakinadziei.ipn.gov.pl/sne

Save the memory of Polish heroes! If you are in possession of related photographs, documents or decorations, please donate them to the Archive Full of Remembrance.
For more details, visit:

archiwumpamieci.pl

Listen to the accounts of witnesses who remember the Battle of Monte Cassino and went down the “trails of hope”:

opowiedziane.ipn.gov.pl



1918 · 2018

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