

Trails of Hope. The Odyssey of Freedom

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Karolina Lanckorońska (1898-2002)

An art historian, Home Army soldier, inmate of the Ravensbrück concentration camp, press officer of the 2nd Polish Corps of the Polish Armed Forces.

Countess Karolina Maria Adelajda Franciszka Ksawera Małgorzata Edina Lanckorońska from Brzezine, bearing the Zadora coat of arms, was born in Buchberg near Gars am Kamp, Lower Austria. In 1917, she started studying art history at the University of Vienna. After defending her Ph.D, she left for Rome where she studied Italian art of the Renaissance and Baroque. She also worked in the library of the Scientific Station of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences [Polish: *Polska Akademia Umiejętności*] where she organised library and photographic materials donated by her father Karol Lanckoroński.

After his death, she settled in Lviv where she taught history of modern art at the Faculty of Humanities of the John Casimir University in Lviv from 1934 and obtained her habilitation. She was the first woman in Poland to receive the title of assistant professor [Polish: *docent*] in art history, and was employed as head of the Department of Art History at the Faculty of Humanities at Lviv University. She also served as secretary of the Society for Polish Historical Research [Polish: *Towarzystwo Polskich Badań Historycznych*] in Lviv.

The outbreak of war found her in Rome but she decided to return to Lviv. She did not stop working at the University even though she was repeatedly interrogated by the NKVD after the arrival of the Soviet troops. She also became involved in pro-independence activities and joined the Union for Armed Struggle [Polish: *Związek Walki Zbrojnej*, ZWZ] on 2 January 1940.

On 10 April 1940, she was dismissed from her job at the University and was to be arrested that same day, but she managed to hide at the home of some friends. On 3 May 1940, she made her way to the German occupation zone. She settled in Cracow where she continued to be active in the ZWZ. As a volunteer nurse, she became involved in the work of the Polish Red Cross and, when ordered by her superiors, took part in the work of the Main Welfare Council [Polish: *Rada Główna Opiekuńcza*] which operated with the consent of the occupation authorities. General Tadeusz Komorowski ordered her to break off her previous underground contacts and to conduct only overt

activity.

On behalf of the Main Welfare Council, she took care of about 27,000 people imprisoned in Cracow, Tarnów, Jasło, Sanok, Nowy Sącz, Częstochowa and Piotrków Trybunalski. From January to May 1942, in Stanyslaviv, she coordinated the organisation of help for 17 districts of Eastern Galicia.

On 25 April 1942, she was arrested and interrogated in Stanyslaviv, but she was released after a few hours. She was arrested again on 12 May 1942 during a meeting of the Welfare Committee in Kolomyia. In the prison in Stanyslaviv where she was taken, she was interrogated by the Gestapo chief Hans Kruger personally. Karolina Lanckorońska, thanks to the intervention of members of the Italian dynasty, was not executed and was taken to the prison in Lviv. There she gave an extensive account of the information she had heard from Kruger (the murder of professors of Lviv University in 1941). For this reason, on 26 September 1942, she was taken to Berlin to testify in a disciplinary case against Kruger who was accused of disclosing state secrets.

On 8 January 1943, she was transported to the women's concentration camp in Ravensbrück. She was isolated from the rest of the inmates and was entitled to medical care, better food, German books and press, and walks. Taking advantage of her position, she demanded extra food which she then secretly gave to other inmates. At this time, she also managed to send encrypted information about the camp conditions and her stay at Ravensbrück to Cracow.

On 5 April 1945, thanks to the intervention of Carl Jacob Burckhardt, the President of the International Red Cross in Geneva, Karolina Lanckorońska was released from the camp together with a group of French women prisoners. She was transported to Switzerland where, in Geneva, she gave a detailed report on German crimes at the Ravensbrück camp and the medical experiments conducted there.

After the war, she went to Bologna where she joined the Polish army, was promoted to the rank of lieutenant and, as press officer of the 2nd Polish Corps, organised higher education for the soldiers of the Corps. In November 1945, together with Father Walerian Meysztowicz, she established the Polish Historical Institute [Polish: *Polski Instytut Historyczny*] in Rome. After the war, she supported Polish researchers in the humanities through the Karol Lanckoroński Fund and then the Lanckoroński of Brzezine Foundation.

Karolina Lanckorońska donated the entire family estate for public purposes. Not only did she care for Polish culture and the development of Polish science, but she also helped many Poles, both in exile and in their home country.

She was honoured with many Polish and foreign awards, including the Commander's Cross of the Order of St. Gregory the Great with Star, the Grand Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta, the Cross of Valour, the Cross of Merit with Swords, and the Home Army Cross.

She died in Rome on 25 August 2002 at the age of 104. She is buried in the Campo Verano cemetery in Vecchio Reparto, Rome.

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Karolina Lanckorońska during her service in the Polish Armed Forces. Public Domain Photo