

Trails of Hope. The Odyssey of Freedom

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Józef Czapski (1896–1993)

Painter and writer, co-founder of the Paris "Kultura" magazine, Major of the Polish Army, pseud. "Marek Sienny", "J. Cz.", "jcz"

Józef Czapski (actually Count Hutten-Czapski) was born on 2 April 1896. (Czapski himself always indicated the date as 3 April) in Prague, in the aristocratic family of Jerzy Hutten-Czapski and Józefa Leopoldyna, née Thun-Hohenstein.

He spent his childhood on the family estate in Pryluky (Belarus), but from 1911, he was studying at a gymnasium in St. Petersburg, at the same time taking drawing and piano lessons. It was there that he started his studies for a law degree. In September 1917, he began service with the 1st Krechowce Uhlan Regiment. In October 1918, he arrived in Warsaw and began studying at the Academy of Fine Arts, but in November 1918 he rejoined the Polish army. This is because he was tasked with finding 5 Polish officers of the 1st Krechowce Uhlan Regiment who had been captured by the Russians. After a few months in St Petersburg, he established that the captives had been executed. In 1920, he took part in the Polish-Soviet War, and after the campaign was awarded the Cross of the Virtuti Militari War Order and promoted to the rank of second lieutenant.

After the end of the war, he resumed his art studies, this time at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków. From 1924 to 1931, he stayed in Paris, and on his return to Poland, he settled in Warsaw and actively participated in artistic life. He exhibited his works and, as a critic, participated in discussions on art. His first published sketches, appearing, among others, in the "Głos Plastyków" illustrated magazine devoted to the visual arts, date from this period. In 1937, he also published a monograph on the work of Józef Pankiewicz.

In September 1939, he was drafted and assigned to the 8th Uhlan Regiment. After the Soviet Union's aggression against Poland, he was taken prisoner by the Soviets at the end of September 1939 on the border of what was then the Lwów Voivodeship. He recalled:

"We were assured that privates would be released; today it

seems wildly blind that we did not realise immediately what the Soviet troops were after".

He was initially interned at Starobilsk, but at the beginning of March 1940, when the decision was taken to liquidate the prisoners of war from the three special camps, including Starobilsk, he was transferred to the camp at Yuchnov (Pavlishchev Bor). On the list of prisoners of war at the Yuchnov camp, Czapski was listed under number 205. "Czapski Józef s/o Jerzy. D.o.b. 1896, case No 2369. Cavalry Captain without function". In the box revealing the reason for the transfer, there is a note: "German embassy". Next to other names, the following notes were added: "request of the Fifth Department of the GUGB (Main Directorate of State Security) of the NKVD of the USSR (intelligence)", "Lithuanian mission", "an order from Merkulov" and "German by origin". - Czesław Madajczyk, *Dramat katyński*, Warsaw 1989.

In 1941, after the signing of the Sikorski-Mayski Agreement, he joined the army of General Władysław Anders, which was forming in Totskoye. He became head of a staff unit that collected the names of those missing and conducted searches for Polish officers taken into Soviet captivity. He gave an account of his explorations in "Wspomnienia Starobielskie" ("Memoirs of Starobielsk", 1945), and later in the book "The Inhuman Land" (1949).

With the Polish Army in the East, as head of the Propaganda and Information Department in charge of cultural and educational affairs, he travelled the combat route through Turkestan and Persia to Iraq, where he stayed until 1945. While working for the Polish army, he devoted his time to writing columns for Polish newspapers published in Baghdad: "Orzeł Biały" and "Kurier Polski".

In 1945, he went to Rome, and in 1946 to France, where he became involved with the milieu of the Polish "Instytut Literacki". Together with Jerzy Giedroyc and Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, he co-edited the Paris "Kultura" magazine (from 1947 until his death, he lived in the house - the editorial office of Kultura - in Maisons-Laffitte at 91 Avenue de Poissy). Józef Czapski's entire oeuvre as a painter and writer, due to censorship during the communist era, was not made public in Poland until after 1989.

He died on 12 January 1993 in Maisons-Laffitte. His life has been documented in an exhibition designed by Krystyna Zachwatowicz and Andrzej Wajda in the Józef Czapski Pavilion - a branch of the National Museum in Krakow.

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