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A Lecture by Zbigniew Mieczkowski in honour of the One Hundred and Twentieth Anniversary of the birth of General Stanislaw Maczek, Old College, University of Edinburgh, 31st March 2012

I feel very honoured to give this talk today on the 120th anniversary of the birth of my commanding officer, General Stanislaw Maczek. To present his life span lasting over one hundred years in less than one hour is quite a challenging task. I will try, however, to keep to the time allotted.

The bibliographical survey which I have completed for the book "The Soldiers of General Maczek in World War II", published by the Foundation for the Commemoration of General Maczek First Polish Armoured Division, contains two hundred and thirteen publications written in the Polish, English, French, Dutch, Flemish and German languages. We have distributed a few hundred of those heavy volumes, bearing on the cover the Coats of Arms of towns liberated by the Division, to military museums and national libraries all over the world. Historians in Australia, Canada, Great Britain, USA, Russia, France, Germany, Belgium, Holland, Ukraine, Latvia, etc. are well informed of the saga of General Maczek and his troops.

It is tempting to reflect on what motivates the authors of further historical works. Piotr Potomski's biography of General Maczek, partly financed by our Foundation, was published by the University of Warsaw in 2008. Many articles and brochures have appeared since in Poland, edited by members of various historical associations. Amongst the English authors the most concise and beautifully illustrated book, with my foreword, was written by Dr Paul Latawski, Senior Lecturer at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst - "Falaise Pocket" published in 2004 (Sutton publ.). General Mike Reynolds, author of "Steel Inferno", presents in detail the battles of the Polish Armoured Division in Normandy (Spellmount publ.). Ken Tout, in "An End of War" published in 2011, even gives the Polish name to the whole chapter "Daleko do Domu" – "Far Away From Home" (Spellmount publ.)

Seventy years have passed since our battles in Normandy and fifteen years since we buried our General amongst his soldiers in Breda Cemetery, but his presence is still felt amongst us. The song "Old Soldiers Never Die" has never been more accurately demonstrated .

General Maczek was born in 1882 into a relatively peaceful part of partitioned Poland that was annexed by the Austrian Empire in 1795. Unlike the oppressive Germanisation of the Prussians and dictatorial Russification policy of the Tsars of Russia in response to

Polish insurrections, the long liberal reign of Emperor Franz Josef of Austria had assured peaceful co-existence and human rights for all his subjects.

Young Maczek was completing his secondary education at a Polish school in Drochobycz where his father, a retired judge, had his chambers. He read philosophy and psychology at the Jan Kazimierz University in Lwow (Lemberg). The dominating influence in his upbringing, however, was his mother, Anna Czerny, who was from a family of landed gentry. He spent all his summer holidays at his uncle Karol Czerny's country estate, Wielkie Oczy. In the old manor house, full of books and against the backdrop of Polish Commonwealth traditions, he read the classics of Polish literature.

Stanislaw Maczek was fascinated by the history of the Commonwealth of Poland Lithuania White Russia and Ukraine - the "Granary of Europe". Comprising almost ten million square kilometres, the Commonwealth, formed at the end of the 14th century by the marriage of the Polish Queen Jadwiga to the Grand Duke Jagiello of Lithuania, who accepted Christianity from Poland, dominated Central and Eastern European history for three hundred years.

With the end of the Jagiellon dynasty in the 16th century it became a Republic of the Nobility, the only state in Europe where the nobles elected their own monarchs - the Kings of Poland. This, the largest country in Europe, provided freedom of religion, languages and commerce to many Scottish immigrants and other oppressed people. The book "Scotland and Poland, Historical Encounters 1500 - 2010" (eds. T M Devine and David Hesse; publ. John Donald) published last year in Edinburgh with the support of the Polish Culture Institute, provides an interesting study of this period.).

The traditions of the Polish Commonwealth became the founding ideals for the Poland reborn after 1918. They were ideals based on the co-existence of various nations, as upheld by Marshal Jozeph Pilsudski and his followers of the General Maczek generation and his soldiers of the Second Republic.

With the outbreak of the First World War Stanislaw Maczek was called up for military service in the Kaiser-Jäger Regiment of the Austrian Empire. At the time he was reading the works of Plato and Aristotle, and attending seminars focussing on the analysis of human psychology in literature. - an unusual educational background for a future general!

His courage and excellent skiing skills were soon recognised by the Mountain Battalion in which he served. As a young officer decorated for bravery, he became an expert in map reading. In his book "Od Podwojdy do Czolga" ("From Horsecart to Tank", Tomar publ. 1961) he recollects that the multitude of contour lines on maps indicating the heights of the mountains helped him plan military operations in September 1939 and later the closure of the Falaise Gap.

The collapse of the former partition powers in 1918 brought Lieutenant Maczek under the colours of Jozef Pilsudski's Army, fighting for the restoration of the Polish Republic. Captain Maczek formed a rapid assault unit conveyed on horse carts, known as Lotna

Kompania (the 'Flying Company'). This was the threshold to his future in motorised warfare.

When in action in the defence of Lwow, his university town, he met Jozef Pilsudski, the future Marshall of Poland and victor of the Polish-Russian War of 1920, which for two decades halted the march of Communism into Central Europe. "The Decisive Battles of the Western World" by J F Fuller (Granada publ. several editions) gives an accurate account of those heroic struggles that determined the frontiers of the Second Polish Republic and the fate of Western Europe.

With the growing threat to Poland's independence Major Maczek remained in the military service of his country. The Locarno Conference in 1925 assured the stability of the Franco-German frontier, but opened the way to another "Drang nach Osten" (German eastwards expansion). It was ironic indeed that the British Foreign Minister, Mr Austin Chamberlain, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for an agreement that led directly to the Second World War.

After long service at the Front, Major Maczek, recipient of the Virtuti Militari Cross and Poland's other highest decorations, finally achieved some well-deserved respite. In 1928 he married Zofia Kurys, descendant of a family involved in the 1863 Polish insurrection against Russia. Their children, Renata, Andrzej and Malgorzata were eventually to live with their parents in Edinburgh. Dr Andrzej Maczek became a senior academic at the University of Sheffield.

In 1930, after completing a two-year course at the Polish General Staff College, Colonel Stanislaw Maczek, took command of the 81st Regiment of Rifles in Grodno, and in 1935 was nominated Second in Command of the Seventh Infantry Division at Czestochowa. These were happy days of family life and military service. Held in high regard by his superiors, his strategic solution at a War Games Conference attended by Marshal Pilsudski was publicly acclaimed the best by the Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Forces.

Anticipating conflict with Germany, the modernisation of Poland's armed forces resulted in the formation of the First Motorised Cavalry Brigade. At the time, Poland envisaged possible hostilities only against Soviet Russia. Her eastern borders consisting of poor country roads, the Pripet Marshes and enormous forests were unsuitable terrain for the operation of mechanised troops. For defence in the east the Polish Rapid Deployment Forces numbered forty regiments of Cavalry. The conflict with Germany, however, demanded preparations be made for modern warfare.

In 1938, Colonel Maczek was nominated C.O. of the 10th Motorised Cavalry Brigade. This unit consisted of two dismounted cavalry regiments on trucks, a reconnaissance unit, anti-tank unit, artillery unit, battalion of engineers, a squadron of British-built Vickers tanks, a squadron of Polish-built light TKS tanks – so-called 'tankettes' - and auxiliary services. It had a total strength of 4,000 men led by 175 officers.

In my book "The Soldiers of General Maczek" I have inserted a copy of a letter written to me on 6th June 1989 by former British Prime Minister, Lord Home. I quote: "Certainly, the Polish [military] action in 1939 changed the face of Europe and the course of its history".

Poland's decision to make a stand against Nazi Germany in 1939 changed the course of the Second World War! Had she accepted Hitler's proposals to protect Europe against the march of Communism, as she did alone in 1920, the initial German offensive against the West would have altered the outcome of the conflict and reshaped the balance of political forces in post-war Europe. Hitler was proposing Poland should join with Italy and Japan in an alliance called the Anti-Comintern Pact, an alliance of countries opposed to Communism. Until the end of March 1939, Hitler hesitated as to whether to attack the West or Poland first. His decision was made after Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister, made a statement in the British Parliament on 31st March 1939 extending a military guarantee to Poland should her independence be threatened (this eventually led to an Anglo-Polish treaty of mutual assistance).

The British and French initiative was obviously made with the aim of diverting Hitler from attacking the West. Polish resistance was purposefully backed by her powerful Allies. In August 1939, contrary to his original plans, Hitler made an alliance with Russia instead of Poland.

The decision of the Western powers to oppose Germany had unforeseen and tragic consequences for Poland. Left unaided in September 1939, in spite of prewar promises and guarantees, and deserted by the Western Allies at the end of the war, she, alone among the victors, sustained complete defeat.

The Second World War was the most dramatic episode in Poland's entire history. Hitler's revenge for Poland's refusal to cooperate with his plans matched Stalin's settling of old scores. To understand, one would have to go back to the 17th century, to the old struggles between Russia and Poland for dominance in Eastern Europe. Very few people realise that after the fall of Communism in 1989 Russia chose in place of May Day Parades to celebrate her National Day on the date commemorating the liberation of Moscow in 1612 from Polish forces which had occupied it for four years. Three hundred years later, in 1920, Poland halted the march of Russian Communism aiming to conquer Western Europe.

Both aggressors were aiming to eliminate for ever all those opposing their plans. Therefore, the Polish intelligentsia: university professors, clergy, landowners and other people representing Polish national institutions were the first targets for extermination.

In 1939, from a peacetime strength of 40 infantry divisions and 10 cavalry brigades, Poland confronted a German army of one million men. Well-disciplined and patriotic, the Polish Army inflicted on the Germans, who were twice their number and far superior in equipment, losses greater in tanks and equipment than the Germans sustained when they defeated the Anglo-French forces in 1940.

The 10th Motorised Cavalry Brigade under General Maczek fought defensive battles in Southern Poland against the XXII Panzer Mechanised Corps. Maczek's tactics were to launch surprise counter-attacks, preventing the enemy forces from emerging from the mountain passes and deploying for action. After two weeks the Brigade was still attacking the Germans attempting to approach Lwow. General Maczek was often seen amongst his troops, praising their skills and courage.

On 17th September, when Poland was stabbed in the back by the Red Army, the Brigade, still a 1,500 men strong fighting unit with regimental colours, was withdrawn and ordered by Marshal Smigly Rydz, C-in-C of the Polish Forces, to cross the border into Hungary. From there, by various ways and means, its men made their way to France.

Half of the Brigade took part in several engagements in June 1940 in the Champagne Region of France. The Battle at Montbard was the last Brigade encounter on French soil. With no petrol available, the Brigade destroyed its vehicles and marched in small groups to unoccupied France.

General Maczek, now 48 years old, led his group on a cross-country march, often bivouacking under the noses of the German occupying forces. After eighteen days, the whole group, still in uniform, arrived in Clermont-Ferrand. To their surprise they met there, the C-in-C of the French forces, General Weygand, who thanked General Maczek for his outstanding leadership in the defence of France.

By the end of 1940 the Brigade had reassembled in Scotland under the same Commander, General Maczek, who had made his way to Britain via Algiers disguised as a labourer.

In 1940 the Polish Army in France, 80,000 strong, fought in various regions. Only 20,000 of these combatants were evacuated on Polish liners to Great Britain. The Polish Navy and the merchant fleet had sailed to British ports in 1939. We arrived as Polish soldiers, not exiles, but as troops carried by Polish ships belonging to the sovereign territory of Poland. After a hazardous journey we reached Plymouth.

It is difficult to find words to describe the hospitality and warm welcome we were given by the Scottish people in 1940. In great camps of tents at Crawford, Douglas and Biggar we embarked on a new chapter of our history. We were visited by Winston Churchill, General Sikorski, and, in 1941, we marched past in the presence His Majesty King George IV and Queen Elizabeth who had come to inspect our defences along Scottish shores against possible invasion from Norway. The I Polish Corps was defending a two hundred kilometers long stretch of the Scottish coast from Montrose to the Firth of Forth.

General Maczek's 10th Cavalry Brigade, with Headquarters at Carmyllie in Angus was defending the port of Arbroath and the beaches of Barry Links controlling the approach to Dundee.

Apart from these military operations, our second pre-occupation was forging Scottish-Polish friendship links which manifested itself in many love affairs and marriages.

In 1944 we were again ready for action. The Polish Armoured Division landed in France in July as part of the British Army of liberation. Field Marshall Montgomery, to whom General Maczek presented all Polish senior commanders, visited us on 5th August. Heavy fighting around Caen, and heavy casualties sustained by the Division, marked the battles in Normandy. It culminated in the closure of the Falaise Gap.

Falaise was the Second World War's 'Battle of the Nations'. The German armies were confronted by Americans, Canadians, English, Scottish, French and Polish troops. The Polish Armoured Division played the dominant role in this encounter. Acting on the direct orders of Montgomery it penetrated deep behind the enemy's front line and closed the last German escape route out of the area by occupying the dominating hills of Montormel near Chambois.

For three days we were surrounded, fighting on one side with the 70,000 strong Germany army groups now physically isolated in the pocket, and on the other side being attacked from behind by the II SS Panzer Division attempting to open the road for those trapped in the pocket. We were cut off from all supplies of petrol and ammunition, as neither the Canadians nor the Americans could reach our position.

On the evening of 21st August the 4th Canadian Armoured Division fought their way to our position, whilst at Chambois another Polish combat unit made contact with the Americans. A few months later, Montgomery, when decorating General Maczek and other soldiers of the Division, said "In Normandy we closed the Germans into a bottle and your Division was the cork of that bottle".

The victorious march through Northern Europe is well illustrated on a map indicating towns and villages liberated by the Division. A great many streets and squares bear General Maczek's name. In March 1945, the Division entered Germany, facing strong resistance from those who continued to defend their country. On 5th May Germany capitulated. On entering Wilhelmshaven we captured 1,900 officers, 32,000 other ranks and in the port over 2,000 vessels of the German Fleet were taken over by the representatives of the Polish and English occupational forces. In the campaign through France and Germany the First Polish Armoured Division suffered five thousand casualties, killed and wounded - almost one third of its total strength.

In 1945 General Maczek took leave of his Division and was promoted a Lieutenant General, becoming the Commanding Officer of the I Polish Corps based in Scotland. Polish plans for the I Corps and General Anders' II Corps to be transferred to Germany, to form the Polish Army of Occupation, though favoured by Churchill, were not accepted by the new Labour Government. The Yalta Conference divided Europe and for almost the next half century Poland remained under Soviet domination. General Maczek, deprived of Polish citizenship by the Communist Government, refused to return to the Polish People's Republic. His beloved Lwow and the country of his childhood were incorporated

into the Soviet Union. He decided to settle in Edinburgh with his family. Scotland for the next fifty years became his adopted country. Those were hard times for the hero of the Second World War. His attitude to the outside world could only be admired, employed as a manual worker, then as a barman in an hotel belonging to his former sergeant. Perhaps the study of Plato's philosophy inspired the General to adopt an objective view on, once again, a new way of life. It amused him when the hotel guests, his ex-soldiers, stood to attention when ordering double whiskies.

The Communist authorities in Poland, well informed of the General's financial situation, tried unsuccessfully to bring about his return. It would have been a blow to the Polish Government in exile and patriotic emigré circles. This attitude changed radically with the collapse of Communism in 1989 and the rebirth of an independent Poland. The ultimate accolade, to add to his many military decorations, was his investiture by a special decree of the President of Poland with the Order of the White Eagle.

In Poland General Maczek will always be a source of pride and inspiration to future generations but amongst his soldiers he is remembered with special affection. As one of them I would like to express not only great admiration to my Commanding Officer, but also my gratitude for his friendship demonstrated on many occasions when attending together numerous anniversaries of his victories in Northern Europe. In my book "Horizons - Reflections of a Polish Emigré" I have inserted some of the General's letters to me. The last one, dated 15th April 1994, was addressed to President Lech Walesa. It was introducing me to the President of Poland as Chairman of the committee for building the monument to the Polish Armoured Division in Warsaw. In consequence, the President extended his patronage to our project. The Monument was unveiled on 30th September 1995 - to our sorrow, a year after our General's death.

The Monument in Warsaw bears General Maczek's message to us, when entering the action in Normandy. "The Polish Soldier fights for the freedom of other nations, but dies only for Poland". It also bears the coat of arms of the Capital of Scotland. I hope that the memorial to General Maczek, planned for Edinburgh this time, will soon be realised. It will bring back memories of the days of hope and glory and Scottish-Polish friendship in the past and for the future.

For further reading:

1. Warsaw 1920: Lenin's Failed Conquest of Europe, Adam Zamoyski (Harper Press 2008).
2. Churchill, Hitler and the Unnecessary War, Patrick J Buchanan (Crown Publishers, New York 2008)
3. Poland Betrayed, David Williamson (Pen & Sword 2009)
4. Poland Alone, Jonathan Walker (The History Press 2008)

5. Rising 44 - The Battle for Warsaw. Norman Davies (Macmillan 2003)
6. Europe at War 1939-45, Norman Davies (Clarendon Press Oxford 2008)
7. Behind Closed Doors, Laurence Rees (BBC Books, Television Programme 2008)

About the author

Zbigniew Mieczkowski was born in Poland into a family of centuries old traditions of struggles for the independence of their country. In 1939, at the age of 17, he joined the Polish Army under General Sikorski in France and at the time of the French Armistice he was evacuated with his unit to Great Britain.

In 1944 as a young officer of the Polish Armoured Division he fought in Normandy and thereafter with the British Liberation Army in the 1944/45 campaign entering Germany.

After the War he settled in England. In his book "Horizons - Reflections of a Polish Emigré" Zbigniew Mieczkowski describes the years of the Cold War, his involvement in the political life of Polish Diaspora and the important contact he established with prominent members of the British Government. As a successful businessman he supported various cultural ventures of the Polish community in Great Britain and after the fall of Communism he established the Foundation whose aim was to commemorate the achievements of Polish Forces in the West.

In the book "Soldiers of General Maczek in World War II" he presents the contribution of Poland to the final victory and brings back memories of the Liberation of Northern Europe.

Holder of the Military Cross for valour and many other war time decorations, Zbigniew Mieczkowski was also awarded various civilian honours:- President of Poland, Lech Walesa conferred on him the Insignia of the Commander of the Order of Polonia Restituta, The King of Belgium the Insignia of an Officer of the Order of Leopold and the President of France nominated him Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur.