



Children prisoners, victims of the Auschwitz-Birkenau German Nazi concentration and extermination camp

out'); he ordered me to step out of the line of convicts, and my place was taken by Father Maximilian Kolbe. A moment later, they were escorted to the death row, and we were ordered to leave to the blocks. At that moment, it was difficult for me to realize the enormity of the

impression that had overwhelmed me; I, a convict, am to live on, and someone willingly and voluntarily sacrifices his life for me. Am I dreaming or is it really happening...?"

Gajowniczek, saved in that way, remained in Auschwitz-Birkenau until

October 25, 1944, and then was transported to the concentration camp in Sachsenhausen near Berlin. In May 1945, he and other prisoners were released by the Americans. He lived to see Kolbe declared a saint of the Catholic Church by the Polish Pope John Paul II in 1982. Gajowniczek died in Poland in 1995 at the age of 94.

### Jews

Between 1941 and 1944, a total of about 900,000 Jews were killed at Auschwitz-Birkenau, half of whom were Hungarian Jews who were exterminated in 1944 after Germany had seized the territory of their country. At the same time, 202,000 people of other nationalities, especially Poles, Russians, and Romani, died in Auschwitz. The total number of victims of the two camps is 1,100,000.

The second largest and most significant death camp in Poland was Treblinka in Podlasie. Between 1942 and 1943, the Germans murdered 974,000 people there, including 300,000 Jews who lived in the Warsaw Ghetto. On August 6, 1942, Janusz Korczak, a famous Polish educator and writer of Jewish descent, together with 192 children from the Orphanage, of which he was the director, were taken by the Germans to the Warsaw Umschlag-

platz, from where they were transported in a cattle wagon to Treblinka. In other death camps in central Poland, in Bełżec and Sobibór, the Germans murdered nearly 2,000,000 people.

### In Free Poland

The memory of the victims of German concentration and extermination camps is alive. There are museums and memorial sites, the largest of which are in Oświęcim [Auschwitz] and Majdanek in Lublin. The museum was established in November 1944, i.e. during the war, as the first museum commemorating the victims of the Second World War in Europe. To this day, Poland celebrates the anniversaries of the camp liberations. There are commemorative publications and occasional exhibitions. All this to keep on reminding not to ever again repeat the nightmare of the 20th-century concentration camps where – as Zofia Nałkowska, a prominent Polish writer, wrote about war and occupation time – “people doomed people to this fate.” ■

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# They Saved London

**It was one of the most daring operations of the Home Army. Polish intelligence captured an unexploded ordnance of the famous V2 rocket, one of the greatest military secrets of the Third Reich.**

A bit after midnight, July 25 to 26, 1944. The whirr of a heavy airborne machine pierces the silence of the night. A transport Dakota C47 belonging to the British 267th RAF squadron appears over the meadows of Tarnów. George Culliford, a New Zealander, steers the beast. After a while, the machine lands on a secret airfield code-named “Butterfly.” The door opens, and the second pilot, Lieutenant Kazimierz Szrajder of the No. 1586 (Polish Special Duties) Flight at RAF, appears at the door. Operation Wildhorn III begins.

“The aim of the flights to Poland from the airport near Brindisi in the Italian region of Puglia was to transport couriers, soldiers, weapons, mail, and secret documents between Great Britain and the occupied country,” explains Marek Jankowski, a Polish historian. In 1944, two Operations Wildhorn were organized: on the night of April 15–16, and on the night of May 29–30.

That time, four people arrived in Poland, including the Polish Government-in-Exile (which seated in London) emissary, Jan Nowak-Jeziorański. From Poland, the ma-

chine took five passengers, including Tomasz Arciszewski, a politician of the Polish Socialist Party, who would become Prime Minister of the Polish Government-in-Exile in November that year.

Most importantly, however, onboard that aircraft – in the care of the Home Army intelligence officer, Captain Jerzy “Rafał” Chmielewski – a mysterious cargo was to be transported. British orders gave the officer priority even over the future prime minister. Hidden in special containers and bags, the Captain carried data about Hitler’s secret weapon – the V2 bomb, as well as parts of that missile, intercepted by Polish intelligence.

### Secret Weapon

V2, Vergeltungswaffe-2 [Retaliation Weapon No. 2] was the first in history ballistic missile. It was tested by the Germans in 1942, and its mass production was launched a year later. A secret military plant in Peenemünde (Polish: Pianoujście) on the island of Uznam (German: Usedom) on the southern coast of the Baltic Sea, where V2 was being developed, was

targeted by the Home Army intelligence service in February 1943. After the Allies destroyed the facility, the Germans relocated the production to the inland Reich, to the Harz Mountains. The rocket, with a range of nearly 400 km, which was fired from the occupied Netherlands, was used by the Germans to attack English cities. In 1944, they also bombed in this way Paris, Brussels, and Antwerp liberated by the Allies. During the war, 5,500 of these missiles were fired, and caused the death of more than 7,000 people.

The Home Army Intelligence determined that the tests of new weapons were carried out by Germany on a training ground in the region of Sarnaki in the Polish region of Podlasie. On May 20, 1944, Polish partisans managed to seize a V2 unexploded ordnance. After dismantling the rocket, Janusz Groszkowski, a Polish radio technician and engineer, deciphered its control system, and Marcel Struszyński, a professor of chemistry at the Warsaw University of Technology, analysed the rocket’s propulsion. The V2 plans, microfilms, results of analyses by Polish scientists and key parts of the missile were transported to London as part of Operation Wildhorn III.

### Take-Off

“First, the flight was prevented by heavy rains, which drenched the airstrip. Then, two German reconnaissance aircraft landed on ‘our’ meadows; they tested take-offs and landings there. Fortunately, they flew away on July 24,” reported Lieutenant Colonel Kabat, the commander of the grouping covering the landing field. At the last moment, just before the operation, in a nearby village, there appeared a squad of about a hundred German aviators with anti-aircraft cannons. “We decided not to change the plan; we only got ready to respond to a possible attack,” recalled the deputy commander.

The unloading and loading of Dakota itself took the Home Army a good few



German V2 rocket

minutes. When everything was ready, the pilot started the engines, but the aircraft wouldn’t start. Two take-off attempts were unsuccessful. In despair, the soldiers thought of burning down the machine. Ultimately, it turned out that wet terrain caused the machine to burrow into muddy ground. After unloading the aircraft, trenches were dug under its wheels, planks were placed, and after the third attempt the Dakota set off. “In a few minutes, we were in the air, taking the direction of the Tatra Mountains and Brindisi. The whole operation took almost an hour and a half instead of six minutes,” recalls the second pilot.

Stealing away the secret of Wunderwaffe, a wonderful weapon, and giving it to the British was one of the most important operations of Polish intelligence during the war. Its participants were believed to have saved London. Such an inscription can be found on the monument commemorating them, erected in the area of the muddy airfield near Tarnów. ■

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