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MÉMORIAL DE LA RÉSISTANCE IN VERCORS, FRANCE

FRENCH RESISTANCE AT VERCORS AND ITS POLISH FIGHTERS 1940-1944

*Pour votre liberté et la nôtre
For your freedom and ours*

Lecture delivered on 26 March 2024
at the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk



**SPOTKANIA
Z HISTORIĄ**

26/3/2024
15.00

GOŚĆ SPECJALNY
Clare Mulley
Pisarka, autorka
bestsellerów
historycznych

WYKŁAD
**Kobieta-szpieg:
miłości, sekrety i życia
Krystyny Skarbek**

GOŚĆ SPECJALNY
Julien Guillon
Vercors Resistance
Memorial

WYKŁAD
**Francuski ruch oporu
w Vercors i udział obywateli
polskich w walkach**

Museum of the Second World War logo

Since the Liberation of France, historians have favored the study of the battles, and associations of French veterans have honored their memory constructing monuments and military cemeteries in agreement with the state. The issue of foreign fighters or fighters of foreign origin has never been addressed or it has been addressed very little. During the studies I carried out for my thesis, I tried to identify [those people's] paths from the 1930s to the 1950s and discovered that their life trajectories were complex. I saw that these traces went beyond the Vercors and France - to Belgium, Austria, then Poland,

and unfortunately I had little time to properly study these routes. Another doctorate would have been necessary to research this thread. This research is in its early stages and the invitation from the Gdańsk museum is for me a great opportunity to go further into the archives to present to you at least partial results of my research.

I have lived in the Vercors region for almost 20 years, and I regularly discover plaques and steles relating to Polish fighters. During my walks, I have gradually noted this data and the reports provided by the Vercors residents.

Twinnings between French towns and Polish towns are well marked when you enter the town. Poland punctuates my daily life, our daily lives. Villard-de-Lans is paired with Mikołajki. In 1984, students from a high school in Starogard Gdański stayed in Villard as part of school exchange. In 1990, Villard-de-Lans became the only French town to receive the Polish Commander's Cross. Collective and individual graves indicate that Polish fighters *Died for France and Poland*. Such inscriptions ask us to explore the relations between our soldiers and our two countries.

France and Vercors

In June 1940, France loses the war against German troops. Between June 1940 and November 1942, the Third Reich occupies the north of France. The Vercors is still in a free, unoccupied zone. From November 1942, all of France is occupied – except for a few small regions like the Vercors, which is difficult to access. The Vercors is a veritable fortified castle for the French resistance. Many fighters but also Jewish families meet there. I would like to point out that no Jewish family is deported because they are protected by the civilian population and by resistance networks. Because Germany needs workers for its war industry, the French government collaborates with Germany, and young French people are conscripted to work in Germany. Some refuse and go to mountain regions to hide with the involvement of the civilian population, more particularly in the Vercors. Little by little they are armed by the Allies (USA, UK, Canada).

After the Normandy landings of June 1944, there are around 4,000 fighters spread over a small territory. But the German troops cannot tolerate this concentration of fighters in their rear. Around 10,000 German soldiers attack the Vercors in July 1944. The German army [paratroopers] also attack from the air,

in gliders. It is the most important airborne operation in Western Europe carried out by the Luftwaffe in 1944.

When the German troops leave, the Vercors is devastated. Villages are destroyed, herds taken away, and civilians taken hostage. Some people are deported, others executed on the spot, or their bodies are found in mass graves. The youngest victim is 18 months old. The Vercors was really a rear base for the French resistance against Nazi Germany, and for many Polish fighters.

Poles in France

In September 1939, after the Nazi aggression on Poland, part of the Polish army which was able to leave Poland through Romania and Bulgaria arrives in France and forms the Polish Army. This army will fight alongside the French during the French campaign in 1940.

But there is also a large group of Polish refugees arriving in France, mainly in Paris. They are Polish state officials, cultural and economic elites. They arrive as families with the hope of returning to Poland quickly. They join the Poles who have come to France before the war, and sometimes settle in towns near the Vercors. In the fall of 1939, the Lycée Polonais Cyprian Norwid – Cyprian Norwid Polish High School – opens its doors in Paris. It has up to 400 students.

Cyprian Norwid Polish High School

In June 1940, the Germans are at the gates of Paris. The students of the Cyprian Norwid Polish High School, with the exception of those in the final year, are evacuated to Great Britain. The oldest students take oral exams, obtain their diplomas and return to Angers, seat of the Polish government-in-exile, then to Great Britain. After the armistice of June 22, 1940 and the creation of the Free Zone

not occupied by Germany, part of this population moves to Lyon and Grenoble. There is quickly talk of founding a Polish school again in the free zone. Zygmunt Lubicz-Zaleski, as delegate in France from the Polish Ministry of Public Education, is carrying out the project. In Warsaw in 1939, he witnessed the fall of the city. He received the order to join the Polish government in France in 1940. With his son, he crossed the Carpathians on foot in winter to reach France via Hungary and Italy. Lubicz-Zaleski is now helped by Wacław Godlewski, a Polish language reader at the University of Lille and a long-time friend. The principle is acquired of a new high school, but which will keep the name of the old one. Now it is a matter of finding a place that does not attract attention but is rich in hotels suitable for boarding. Lubicz-Zaleski instructs Godlewski to choose an appropriate site. After an overview of the resorts which dominate Grenoble, which he knows well, the choice falls on the Vercors region and Villard-de-Lans, which is located at more than 1,000 meters above sea level. [...] In October 1940, the new Cyprian Norwid Polish High School is established at the foot of the Gerbier peak - Silver Mountains ("Srebrne Góry"), the name given by the Poles to the mountain which looms over the school. It is welcomed by Villard's inhabitants with kindness and understanding. The resistance fighters in the village very quickly form links with the Poles.

The Gerbier phase

The high school project is, from the start, a resistance project which revolves around the motto "For your freedom and ours". The school is intended for young demobilized Polish soldiers who have crossed the borders clandestinely, but also for prisoners from internment camps who have managed to escape. The high school welcomes the descendants of Polish immigrants to France from before the war.

Here I would like to mention Tadeusz Laski, born in 1914, in a village near Piotrków, who worked in the 1930s in Poland as a state civil servant in the Treasury Ministry. At the start of the war, he is taken prisoner by the Bolshevik army but escapes. He passes through Hungary and enters France in April 1940 to join the Polish army. Taken prisoner again, he finds himself convalescing at the English hospital in Hyères before entering the Villard high school in October 1941 and then leaving for England. He is killed during the Normandy landings in June 1944. But we can also mention Stefan Krzak, who comes to France as a soldier in February 1940, with the second division under the command of General Bronisław Prugar-Ketling, and who, after internment in Switzerland, finds himself in Villard-de-Lans in October 1941. His parents remain in Poland, his siblings find themselves dispersed by the war (one of his brothers is killed at Westerplatte, the other one is a prisoner of the Germans).

[...] The school's staff and students engage in the resistance. For many young people, the continuation of their intellectual training is very important as a moral resistance with a thought of the reconstruction of Poland after the war. For other students, the school is a temporary transit place before going to fight on other fronts.

In September 1941, supervision of the school is transferred to the Groupement d'Assistance aux Polais en France (GAPF), led by Lubicz-Zaleski, to counteract possible dependence on the Polish Red Cross by its center in Warsaw, under German control. At this date, resistance organizations do not yet exist in the Vercors. This part of France is not yet occupied by Nazi Germany. In Villard-de-Lans, the first small groups of resistance fighters fight the Vichy regime, which collaborates with Germany, by distributing leaflets and clandestine newspapers.

There are no guerrilla actions yet. The Poles who live at that time under German and Soviet occupations will be the first witnesses to tell the French about the horrors of both occupations. From 1942, the first French resistance movements coming from local towns establish themselves in the Vercors. A few kilometers away, in Grenoble, Zaleski meets René Gosse, mathematician, dean of the university, leader of the French resistance in Grenoble, a university town which has already welcomed a number of Polish students. Among them are demobilized soldiers who, after multiple adventures, find refuge here. Finally, as an additional advantage, Grenoble is close to the very neutral and benevolent Switzerland.

In May 1942, Lech Wróblewski makes contact with the Polish underground organization and becomes one of the organizers of the POWN-Monika network (the Polish Organization for the Struggle for Independence) in the region. Wróblewski was born in 1918 in Wieliczka (Poland), volunteered in the French army in September 1939 and attended the officers' school in France. Taken prisoner in combat in 1940, after months of captivity in Austria, he was repatriated in a medical convoy in August 1941, then demobilized in March 1942. He organizes the resistance cells among Polish students in Grenoble with dean Gosse and Zaleski, and they share the conspiracy work. Transit networks for Polish Jews are organized towards Switzerland. Poles from all over France are headed to Villard-de-Lans to reach London through Spain. In 1943, the organization has around 4,000 members in France.

Teachers

Let me introduce the characters of a few teachers from the Cyprian Norwid Polish High School:

- Kazimierz Gerhardt, from the Lviv Polytechnic, teaches physics and chemistry.
- Jan Harwas, from a Jewish family, head of the Cultural Service of the Consulate General of Poland in Lille before the war, shares with students his passion for ancient languages as a teacher of Greek and Latin.
- Zofia Łukasiewicz is a biology teacher and also heads the women's boarding school. She is amiably nicknamed "amoeba" by her students.
- Witold Budrewicz, an engineer by training, but also a boxing champion, takes care of the physical education of the students.
- Father Bronisław Bozowski, chaplain, responsible for ethics classes. He has a plaque in his memory in St. Mary's Church in Warsaw.

1942-1943

The Germans invade the Southern Zone and occupy it. From this moment on, the departure of high school alumni to Great Britain intensifies. Zaleski is personally involved in the actions of the resistance since he supervises the clandestine transfer of funds from London via Lisbon to France to help Polish refugees. Funds channelled via Switzerland by the Polish government-in-exile in London initially ensure the survival of the high school. But the Vichy government begins to provide financial aid, takes the Polish high school under its supervision and establishes control. This is a very paradoxical situation - it is the French state which nevertheless wishes Germany to win, which finances the high school and which closely monitors its activity. It is a very complex balancing act for Zaleski. In January 1943, he is explicitly required to regularly inform Vichy about its functioning, its internal organization, discipline and studies. Luckily it is Bernard Hamel, a former French reader

in Krakow, married to a Polish woman, who supervises the school on site, and the control is not very strict. In February 1943, thousands of young French people are conscripted to go to work in Germany – this is the Compulsory Labor Service. Many of them refuse. They then reach the mountains and the refuge areas, including the Vercors.

Vercors guerrillas

In the first months of 1943, two types of resistance coexist in the Vercors. On the one hand, the resistance fighters, those who refuse to go to work in Germany who will gradually become fighters; on the other, the Polish high school whose objective is to preserve its culture and collaborate with London to spread the fight on an international scale. On both sides, avoiding contacts is advised to avoid amalgamations and chain arrests. This does not prevent junctions: the Poles help the farmers of the Vercors, just like the French resistance fighters, in the fields. Of course it is prohibited, but relations between young people are very cordial.

Zaleski is arrested on March 19, 1943 in Grenoble. He is deported to Buchenwald in January 1944. He survives until the liberation by American troops in April 1945. His wife is arrested in Warsaw. She is deported to Germany. Lech Wróblewski is also arrested on March 19, 1943 at his home in Grenoble following a denunciation. Deported to Buchenwald, transferred to Dora, in April 1945 he is sent to Bergen-Belsen where he is liberated by the Allies. He is repatriated to Lille on April 30, 1945.

Wacław Godlewski takes over and runs the establishment

Born in 1906 in Niewieżniki (Nevėžninkai) in Lithuania, district of Kowno, into a family of modest Polish farmers, Godlewski decides

in 1926 to leave for France. He then enrolls at the University of Grenoble before moving to Paris where he obtains a diploma in Polish language and literature. Reader in Polish at the University of Lille, he is a professor of medieval history and aesthetics. It is at this time that he crosses paths with Zygmunt Lubicz-Zaleski. But Godlewski is also arrested in March 1944 and then deported. During his interrogation, a German officer shows him a diagram of the entire [resistance] network set up.

Professor Ernest Berger, mathematician, will be the third director in the history of the high school; he also deserves credit for introducing students to music and creating a choir that later will become famous.

But surveillance of the Polish high school is increasing. The Germans who have not yet attacked the Vercors now know [the school collaborates with the resistance]. 70–80 young people take the escape route to England and the high school gradually empties. Seven young people from the Polish High School, of Polish origin, are wanted because they have to report for work in Germany. They then join the French resistance fighters in the mountains, near Villard-de-Lans. Others, who remain in high school, take part in the fighting in the Vercors.

In June 1944, the Normandy landings take place. On June 13, the Germans attack the Vercors from Grenoble without being able to completely break through the defence lines. In the south of the Vercors, Allied troops (USA and UK) are expected to help the French fighters. To do this, an airstrip is set up and a few dozen Polish high school students take part in setting it up.

But on July 21, 1944, the final assault comes. Around 10,000 German soldiers attack the Vercors. German paratroopers massacre the resistance fighters and, among them,

students from the Polish high school who are defending the airfield. Among the victims are:

- Jerzy Delingier (19 years old);
- Zdzisław Hernik (Jimmy, 23 years old);
- Witold Nowak (16 years old);
- Leon Pawłowski (20 years old);
- Józef Zglinicki (18 years old);
- Henryk Czarnecki (18 years old);
- Eugeniusz Łukomski (17 years old).

Note that we have never found any trace of Tadeusz Welfe, the establishment's doctor. Among others, Jan Harwas is buried in Villard-de-Lans; he was a resistance fighter, taken prisoner in the Vercors, interned, and assassinated at the end of 1944.

Today, the Vercors remains a symbol of the common defence of our two countries.

BIO

Julien Guillon

Historian and head of research at the Mémorial de la Résistance in Vercors, southern France. He specialises in the French Resistance. Author of books and articles on the Vercors region during the Second World War.