

In Memory of Stanisław Żurakowski

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Colonel Stanisław Żurakowski died on the July 27, 2023. He was an important figure of the post Second World War Polish political exiled community. He left his mark on the lives of many organizations and individuals.

Żurakowski was born in Wołomin near Warsaw at the end of the Polish-Bolshevik War of 1919–1920, on July 24, 1920. He was the seventh of nine children. His mother, who was pregnant with him at the time, and five elder siblings (one of his younger sisters having died in childhood) escaped before the advancing Bolsheviks during the Polish retreat from Kiev from the family estate of Żytniki in the Ukraine.

His father, Stanisław Ludwik Żurakowski, was a civil servant and a local government official between the wars. Until the September 17, 1939 he was the Mayor of the border town of Ostróg on the Horyń. Arrested by the NKVD, he was murdered in the Katyń Forest Massacre in the spring of 1940.

His mother, Maria Żurakowska maiden name Jastrzębska, survived the Second World War as a deportee in Kazakhstan. After being released, she was evacuated with the Polish Army to Iran and then the Lebanon. She reached the United Kingdom, where she made her home and lived until her death in London in 1970.

Along with his three sisters and four brothers, Stanisław was brought up and educated in an independent Poland. All of them took part in the Second World War. His brother Edmund, serving in the 19th Infantry Regiment of the Polish Forces in the USSR, died of typhus on April 17, 1942 in Karshi. His brother Józef, who served in the 1st Battalion of the 3rd Carpathian Rifle Division, was killed on May 12, 1944 during the battle for Monte Cassino. He is buried in the Monte Cassino Polish War Cemetery. The youngest of the brothers, Antoni, served in the 3rd Battalion of the 3rd Carpathian Rifle Division. He was killed on the Chienti River on June 22, 1944 and is buried in the Polish War Cemetery in

Loretto. His first cousin and a close friend was Squadron Leader Janusz Żurkowski from Lublin, a Battle of Britain pilot and a distinguished test pilot in Boscombe Down. After the war he settled in Canada becoming a well know test pilot throughout the world.

Stanisław Żurkowski left the family home on October 14, 1939 with the aim of reaching and joining the Polish Army in France. A fortnight later he was stopped and arrested by the Soviet border guards. He was subsequently imprisoned in Worochta, Nadwórna, Stanisławów and Chernihov. In June 1940 he was sentenced to five years in a labor camp. He was taken there via Vitebsk, Leningrad, Vologda to Archangel and from there to Najran-Mar. Taken into forced labor, Żurkowski was made to fell trees and build the railway line to Uchta and further in the direction of Kozva and Abiz.

Following the signing of the Polish-Soviet Pact on July 30, 1941, he was released in September 1941 and taken by railway transport to Tockoye. There, on September 28, 1941, he joined the Polish Army under the command of General Władysław Anders. On October 1, he enlisted in the 16th Infantry Regiment, later reorganized into the 16th Lwów Rifle Battalion. He took part in the Italian Campaign of 1944–1945. He was involved in horrific fighting in the of taking Monte Cassino during the Battle of Monte Cassino. He completed the Reserve Infantry Officer's School in Madera on January 18, 1945 and became an Officer-Cadet. Promoted to 2nd Lieutenant with seniority as of January 1, 1946. He came to Great Britain in October 1947 and was demobilized on January 12, 1948.

In civilian life, Żurkowski found several employments: in a coal mine in Midsomer Norton, in the Avon rubber factory in Melksham, in a television production factory in London. Whilst taking a draughtsman's course (1958) he worked for Joseph Parks and Son Limited after which he worked for British Rail until his retirement in 1978.

Żurkowski regarded his marriage to Doreen Frances Stilman on December 5, 1949 as the most important event in his life. She died on November 11, 2001.

He had a high regard for work, calling it a blessing, while he treated charitable work as an ordinary duty. He was generous in regularly donating to numerous charitable causes, supporting various Polish organizations and institutions in Great Britain, Ukraine, Poland and Africa especially those dealing with veterans and welfare. However, he gave his time, knowledge and heart to one organization. This was the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum, where, with his wife's support, he worked as a volunteer from 1965. It was here where his duty to Poland and his respect for history met. However, Żurkowski believed that all periods of time, every life and all events are important and should be treated with attention, not just concentrating on past epochs. He saw history in the events of today.

Żurkowski published two books and participated in several joint publications. In cooperation with Tadeusz Kryski-Karski and Henryk Barański, he helped prepare *Piechota Polska* (Eng. *Polish Infantry*), which was published in instalments from 1970

to 1976. He co-authored *Generalowie Polski Niepodległej* (Eng. *Generals of Independent Poland*), published in London in 1976. This was the first publication of its kind and became a much sought-after book. A second, expanded edition was published in Warsaw in 1991. He edited *Listy z Kozielska Burmistrza miasta Ostroga* (Eng. *Letters from Kozielsk of the Mayor of Ostrog*), published by the Artists and Poets Publishing house in London in 1989. In 1995 he published a collection of his own memories entitled *Ot, bajki... nie-bajki* (Eng. *Just Stories... or Not Stories*).

After the war, Żurkowski was promoted several times by the legal Polish Government-in-Exile. In 1964 he was promoted to Lieutenant and in 1990 to Captain. Following Poland's regaining of independence that year, he was promoted to Major and Lieutenant-Colonel, then on his 100th birthday to the rank of Colonel in 2020.

Żurkowski was a highly decorated soldier. During the war, he was awarded the Cross of Valour for Monte Cassino and a bar following his part in the capture of an intact bridge on the Sillaro River. He was also awarded the (Polish) Army Medal with two bars, the Monte Cassino Commemorative Cross and the British 1939–1945 Star, the Italy Star, the Defence Medal and the War Medal. After the war, he received – the Silver Cross of Merit (1968) for his charitable work from the Polish Government plus the Gold Cross of Merit (1973), Chevaliers Cross of the Order of the Rebirth of Poland for his long-term contribution to the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum (1985). After Poland regained its independence in 1990, he was honored by the Polish Government in Warsaw with the Commander's Cross with Star of the Order of the Rebirth of Poland (2020), as well as ministerial awards: Pro Memoria Medal, Pro Patria Medal, Medal of Carer of National Remembrance Monuments, Medal of Merit for Defence of the Country, Medal of the Polish Army.

Colonel Stanisław Żurkowski lived for 103 years. He died peacefully in the early hours of Thursday July 27, 2023 at home, where he had lived since 1956. During his 55 years of voluntary work at the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum, he left his mark on several generations of staff and volunteers, as well as on researchers and visiting members of the public. His funeral took place on Tuesday August 15, 2023 at noon from the chapel in Mortlake Cemetery (Clifford Avenue). Following the service his coffin was taken to North Sheen Cemetery (Lower Richmond Road) where he was buried in the family grave alongside his wife and mother.

His wonderful and venerable age did not lessen the sadness that followed his death. *Pan Stanisław* created unique bonds with each and every person. He was very frank: at moments perhaps painfully so and a truly sincere person. He built his relations with people without unnecessary or false words. He was without pretence. He managed to bring out the best in people, giving them the benefit of trust, which put an obligation upon them. He inspired people and fired them with enthusiasm to value simple things. In

a natural way, he reminded one of the world's universal truths, and gave ordinary words literal meaning. He always saw the best in others. Many, many people feel a sense of gratitude for his having been in their lives.

His one and only visit to his family regions in Poland and Ukraine was with his wife Doreen in the summer of 1993. For him, it was a very important and moving personal journey. He brought back symbolically a panoramic picture of long lost family fields swaying with ripening rye, an image which stayed with him to the end of his days.

*They were dying, they die, they will continue to die,
As they live and have lived.
Graves of those who toiled with work,
Grow long and spread with straw.
And mighty is the path, full of strength,
A field soaked with abundant blood.
On these graves, on these fertile tombs,
Let us sow rye, let us sow rye, let us sow rye.*

[Leopold Staff, *The Road* (Pol. *Droga*), trans. Katarzyna Danilewicz]

May He Rest in Peace