

A Surprising Visit to London's Polish Institute & Museum

by S. Joseph Arroyo (May 2015)

My wife and I had to schedule this long-anticipated visit in quite a precise way, since the Institute is only open from 2 to 4 PM on specific days—staffed as it is by all volunteers. The complete official name for this 4-story museum and archive is *The Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum*. I had been reading a great deal about the amazing contributions of Polish fighters in WW2 who had escaped from Poland after the sudden and brutal Nazi invasion, in order to join together with Allied forces to attack the Nazis from other lands. I could understand their passionate need to strike back at the Nazis after the mass slaughter and aerial bombardment of Polish cities, and I was particularly impressed by the record-breaking achievements of the Polish flyers who fought with the RAF. They had earned the often-reluctant respect and, eventually, the admiration of the British pilots. I therefore wanted to visit this museum and had assumed I could just wander through it, like so many other museums.

Upon ringing the bell in the Knightsbridge area, where neighbors include the Embassies of Afghanistan (looking rather down-at-the-heels and badly in need of paint and weeding) and Ethiopia, we were greeted by an elderly gentleman wearing a tie with small Polish and UK flags enjoined, whose first question was: “Do you speak Polish?” When assured that, although ignorant of the Polish language, we were well read on the history of the Poles in England and knew why so many Poles had stayed in England after the war (since they had no desire to enter a newly-created Soviet slave-camp), he proceeded to describe the Institute and Museum’s purpose and then started to show us the exhibits, complete with an explanation of each exhibit as thorough as we desired.

Our tour-guide obviously knew his stuff, explaining in detail the answer to any question we asked. And we learned a great deal—e.g., we did not know that Poland had not only a naval fleet that played a part in the war, including the sinking of the Bismarck, but even a few submarines! Nor did we realize how many Polish soldiers fought in the infantry, laboriously ascending the boot of Italy while suffering many casualties.

The big surprise occurred when we were viewing the exhibits, paintings, and photos regarding

the horrific siege on the German stronghold at Monte Casino. I was familiar with the story of Monte Casino from a number of sources, including having found an old newspaper when I was a teenager that made a memorable impact on me. That yellowing newspaper headlined how the allies had— after much deliberation— been forced to bomb the ancient monastery into rubble in trying to force out the entrenched German machine gunners. But I had not realized that Polish forces were involved in this battle, and that in fact ultimately they raised the Polish flag over the ruins of Monte Casino on May 18th, after losing 30 men a day. [The Monte Casino siege was extremely prolonged and costly, with the 4-month battle resulting in 21,000 Allied casualties, with 4100 killed.]

Our guide's engagement became even more dynamic, in spite of his age, when discussing a couple scenes depicted in the exhibits. He subtly stated at one point, "I was there." I caught that at first, but because he had let the words slip out with no trace of ego, it was easy to miss. After discussing the details of the Monte Casino campaign a bit more, he vividly described the complexities of some of the strategies and difficulties the allies faced, and again said softly, "I was there." Once both of us realized what he was saying, we started to quiz him rather directly. He quickly admitted that, yes, he had been a young soldier in Italy fighting with the Polish forces, having volunteered at age 17, after lying about his age.

He showed us the multiple wound scars and permanent disfiguring on his arm and leg, and he told us how close he had come to being left to die there at Monte Casino. I wondered, but did not ask him, whether the obvious fact that he had only one functioning eye was also a result of the Monte Casino battle. He stated how his group had fought continually up the Italian peninsula and fluently named many of the battlefields and cities involved, as if he were just stationed there yesterday. The most impressive thing to me was that he said everything with complete objectivity, with no trace of ego, resentment, or revenge; and yet he obviously still valued those experiences so much that he devoted some of his little remaining lifetime to serving this unique institution, a memorial to the courage and determination of the Polish forces and to the indomitable Polish spirit.

We had a lively exchange when I mentioned that I had grown up in Chicago with many Polish classmates and Polish co-workers at my father's warehouse, and he exclaimed that Chicago was the most populous Polish city after Warsaw. He told us of groups from Chicago that visited the museum, especially in summer, and a few other details. Since the number of such veterans is dwindling by the week, as any perusal of a major newspaper's obituaries will prove, we considered ourselves fortunate to encounter such a man and to have the opportunity to absorb— at least a little— some of his depth of experience.

Just as we were about to leave, I asked him about his age, and he acknowledged that he would turn 90 in January of 2015. And then, after he gave us a card with a painting of a Polish war heroine on it, he smilingly recommended a Polish restaurant and bar ("with good vodka!") that was only a couple blocks away in case we'd like a late lunch.

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