

CZUMA BROTHERS RETURN



gen. bryg. WALERIAN
CZUMA

1890-1962



On Thursday the 28th September 1939, following more than two weeks of German air assault and siege, General Walerian Czuma, Garrison Commander of the Polish forces in Warsaw, accepted defeat.

Even though German radio had announced the fall of Warsaw as early as the 8th September, Czuma had withstood the assault, despite complete German air & ground superiority, for 20 days, but now final destruction was all but certain.

The following day Czuma led 180,000 of his most courageous, but hopelessly outgunned, comrades from Warsaw's shattered garrison and into German captivity. Czuma himself would remain a prisoner of the Nazis for nearly six years until, in early 1945, the Americans liberated Oflag VIIA, Murnau.

Now, presumably, Czuma would be anxious to return home to Poland. But Europe in 1945 was a continent of displacement, not just people but whole nations uprooted and unsure if there was any home to which to return. And, more troublesome for some, Czuma was a national hero.

The Soviets, now replaced Germany in occupation of Poland, and they wanted nothing of Polish patriots, who may become figureheads for nationalist sentiment and future uprisings. Czuma & his Colonel Brother, Władysław, saw their Polish nationally revoked and joined the millions of others displaced, free, but with no home to go to.

It is a great credit to the UK that, having stood alone against Hitler's aggression, bankrupted and exhausted

to help free the peoples of occupied nations, we provided a home for so many who no longer had a 'home'. For Walerian & Władysław Czuma, home was to be the town of Penley, near Wrexham, North Wales.

In July 2004 I left London early, wishing to be in Wrexham in time for the cremation service. Months earlier I had the honour of being tasked, by Warsaw City Council, with bringing the hero brothers home. The exhumation had taken place early that morning and in chapel with me now were three members of the Polish Community of North Wales and their resident chaplain, who took a short service. A simple wreath was placed on the lid of each coffin, in Red & White, the colours of a newly free Poland.

After the service I had time, before the cremated remains would be ready to take back to London, for a visit to the quiet moorland roads above Wrexham. I hadn't planned to do this as, for some reason; I had Wrexham marked as an Industrial town without interest or any other reason to me to stay awhile. But I pulled my car off the open road, and walked a few yards over sheep cropped grass that would look good on a golfing green, to a flat topped rock perfect for sitting and looking. I sat & looked. I wondered what had brought the hero of Warsaw to this place? The view was supreme, the Lower Dee Valley in perfect, summer green and a vivid Blue sky with almost artificially fluffy white clouds. The whole of Wrexham could be seen from here and the stone on which I sat, placed so strategically, I wondered if it had been placed here just for this purpose.

In fact I was so sure it was too good to be true I checked the base of the rock to see any signs of it having been brought to this spot. What I noticed was a grey/white grit poured onto the ground marking a thin raised line around the circumference of the rock. As a Funeral Director I recognised this 'grit' as the final resting place of someone else who must have sat & looked. They picked a good spot.

Despite the beauty of the surroundings I still pondered life's ability to provide the unexpected course. From the Prussian front, to the outskirts of Wrexham via Warsaw in Europe's darkest hour. A week later my colleague (Boss) & I sat on a LOT Polish Airlines flight from London to Warsaw. We each carried an Oak Casket containing the remains of a Polish hero. Christopher carried the casket containing the remains of the General; I carried the casket of his Colonel Brother.

I had not been requested to make this visit in person but felt it was the right thing to do. I felt honoured to be the one to bring the General home to the city he tried, in vain, to save 65 years before. It also felt right that the country that gave him a home in 1945 should do this now and complete the circle.

As the aircraft taxied towards the terminal the Captain made an announcement – would Michael Gill & Christopher Henley please remain on board whilst the remaining passengers disembark. Something had been arranged.

Boy, had it been arranged!

The aircraft arrived at the centre of the apron and swung through 180 degrees and stopped. As it made this turn a full military reception committee came into view, with military band, Regimental banners, VIP guests, photographers and the local TV News crew.

The man sat next to me (Window seat) took in this impressive display and gasped, 'My God, who have they come to meet?' I couldn't have planned it if I tried. 'I rather think it may be me' I replied, conscious that it was not really me at all. It remains a vivid memory, sitting looking out over the crowded apron with my fellow passenger sizing me up and trying to work who or what I was?

When the other passengers had left the aircraft and boarded their coaches for the terminal we were requested to bring our caskets to the aircraft door. There we were met by surviving relatives of each of



Arriving at the airport



Auschwitz exhibition wall



Final resting place

the brothers, we handed over our charges and, at the foot of the aircraft stairs, General & Colonel Czuma arrived once more on Polish soil.

Now, with the news crew focussed elsewhere, we were whisked off, through the back gate and on to Warsaw.

We didn't attend the reburial at Powązki Military Cemetery, partly because I felt it should be a purely Polish affair, but mainly because we had decided to make a visit to Auschwitz, a couple of hours away by train.

I can safely say that Auschwitz is the most effecting place I have ever been. Everyone should go there and see for real what we all have seen in print and on TV. When we arrived we found two school parties just arrived. Teenagers on a boisterous day trip of the sort I once had to London Zoo. I wasn't sure this was a suitable place for such a visit.

Most people know about Auschwitz, what happened there, what you will see when you visit. The 'Arbeitsfrei' sign over the entrance (later stolen), the guard towers & electric fences and,

above all, the piles and piles of artefacts stored behind Perspex partitions in the former dormitories. Suitcases with Jewish sounding names written upon them hair, spectacles and, for some reason the most haunting of all, shoes. A mound six feet high, from one side of the room to the other, of shoes taken from those about to enter the gas chambers. At the top of the pile, a tiny pair of child's sandals, unbuckled...

My reservations about the school parties were swept aside. My abiding memory is of the moment when, having kept a measured control of myself, a schoolgirl, sobbing openly and uncontrollably, was led past the door of the room I was in by a school friend, himself, only just keeping from public breakdown. That, and the sandals broke me and I will never forget the moment. I found the school friends later, sitting on the kerb outside the building, holding each other and crying unashamedly.

Every school should make this visit.

I thought about the rock above Wrexham and the impossibly fluffy clouds in the perfect blue summer sky and I thought, whatever it was that brought General Valerian Czuma to that place, I'm sure he must have been grateful. ■

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