

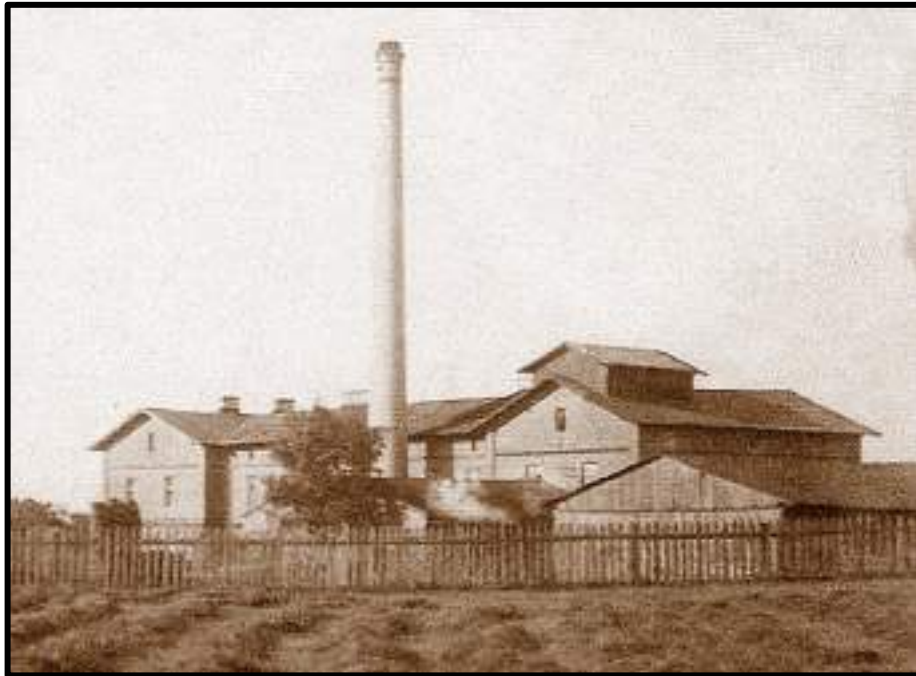
Tadek's Story

The life of a Polish naval veteran

Devon Development Education project "Telling Our Stories"
Digital talk on The Polish Navy in Okehampton
Presentation by Ryszard Sroka 23.11.2020

Origins

- Born in the village of Kaski in 1916 and named Tadeusz Zygmunt Sroka, he was known as Tadek to family and friends
- He was the sixth of eleven children
- In 1930, the family moved to Wieruszow, a small town nearby and on the German border
- 'Marianow', the family home, provided the base for a timber and sawmill business



- When Tadek was born, Poland was partitioned between Russia, Prussia and Austria
- Only in 1918 was Poland declared an independent country

Early Years and the Navy

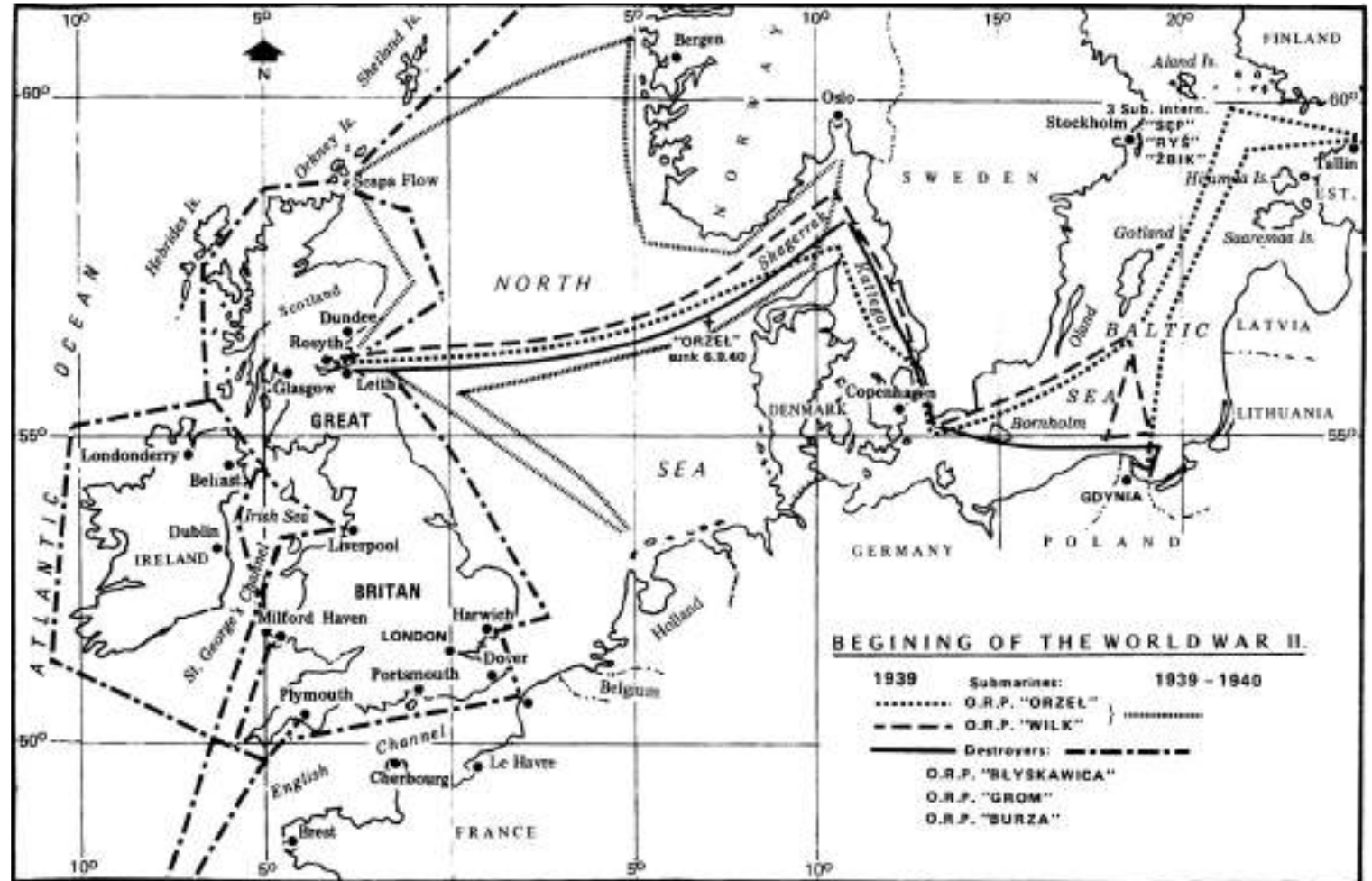
- Left school at 15 to start an apprenticeship in hairdressing
- Moved to Gdynia at 18 and conscripted into the Polish Navy for two years in 1937
- There followed a short stint as a civil servant
- Conscripted back again into the navy shortly before the outbreak of war



Tadek as a young man, c.1935

The beginning of World War II and the journey to Plymouth

- A few days before war was declared on 2 September 1939, three Polish Navy destroyers retreated from the port of Gdynia to Scotland
- The ships were ORP Grom, ORP Blyskawica and ORP Burza
- By October 1939, they had sailed around the west of Britain to Devonport and were joined soon after by the Polish submarine Orzel
- Tadek was on the Grom



Operation Peking – the escape from Gdynia to Britain

Polish destroyers on patrol in 1939/40

- During the winter of 1939/40, the Polish destroyers patrolled the waters of the North Sea out of Harwich



The Norwegian Campaign 1940

The Battle of Narvik and the sinking of ORP Grom, May 1940

- Neutral Norway had been invaded by the Germans in 1940
- Polish destroyers gave artillery support to Allied ground troops landed in the area
- During the campaign, ORP Grom was subject to a concerted aerial attack on 5 May 1940
- It was hit by two bombs and sank within four minutes
- 59 lives were lost but Tadek was a survivor
- For this battle and acts of heroism, he was awarded the Polish Cross of Valour



View of Narvik fjord from ORP Burza

The Cross of Valour



On the Field of Glory -To the Valiant



Recovery and recuperation in Plymouth



Tea and cakes with the vicar

With Nancy Astor and friends



Romance on Plymouth Hoe

- Tadek met his future wife Helen on Plymouth Hoe Pier in 1940
- Theirs was the first Anglo-Polish marriage in Plymouth in 1941



Next ship ORP Orkan

- Following service on the Grom, Ouragan and shore postings, Tadek was transferred in 1942 to a new Polish destroyer, ORP Orkan, for Mediterranean duties
- By then, he had risen to the rank of Petty Officer as the ship's paymaster

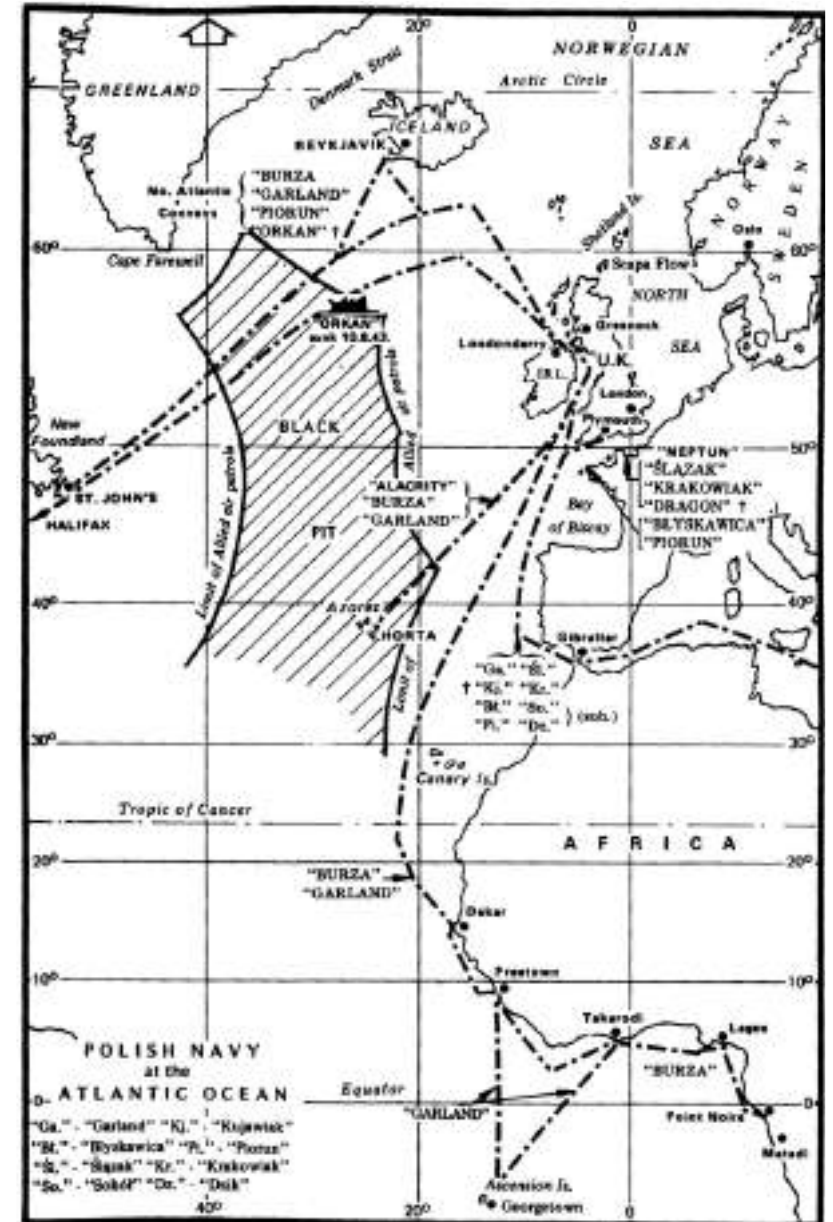


- One unhappy task for the Orkan was to bring the body of General Sikorski back from Gibraltar to Plymouth in July, 1943 following his death in a mysterious plane crash

Disaster strikes in the North Atlantic



- In October 1943, the Orkan was directed to convoy duties and anti-submarine patrols in the North Atlantic
- The ship was just outside the area of air cover known as the Black Pit (hatched area)
- Here the Orkan was torpedoed with the loss of 179 lives
- Tadek was one of 44 survivors



Conclusion of War and Polish Victory Parade, May 1946

- After hospitalisation, Tadek remained land-based and was later assigned to the Naval Training Camp at Okehampton until the conclusion of the War
- Royal Navy ships - loaned to Poland after 1939 - were handed back
- While the rest of Britain celebrated VE day without the Poles marching (because Churchill thought it would offend Stalin), Plymouth was the only city that emphatically wanted to recognise the Poles' military contribution
- 2021 marks the 75th anniversary of the Polish Victory Parade



Resettlement and family

- Following de-mobilisation of Polish Forces under British command, Poles were given the option of returning to Poland or settling in England
- The first step was the founding of the Polish Resettlement Corps (PRC) in May 1946 as almost a quarter of a million Polish servicemen supporting the Western Allies found that they could not return home
- Soldiers and airmen serving overseas were to be helped through the Corps to stay in the United Kingdom (UK) and settle into civilian life there
- The Polish Resettlement Corps (Navy) at Okehampton assisted in this process and Tadek, already with an English wife and two young boys, enlisted there until 1949
- After a refresher course in hairdressing, Tadek landed a job as a barber in Plymouth and later opened his own hairdressing shop



Tadek and sons Jurek and Ryszard

Polish Resettlement Camp, Okehampton



The Polish Naval Veterans Association

- Many Polish war veterans stayed in Plymouth, married English girls and eventually thrived there
- Tadek was a co-founder of the Polish Naval Veterans Association (Plymouth Branch) and was its Chairman and Treasurer for over 28 years
- The Association held its meetings at the Polish Eagle Club in Plymouth where Anglo-Polish families gathered along with Polski-philes
- Here's a group of veterans meeting some 40 years after the war



At the Polish Eagle Club Plymouth 1980s

Remembrance Sunday at the Polish War Memorial

- Every year the Poles gather for a remembrance ceremony at the Polish War Memorial at The Belvedere on Plymouth Hoe
- It includes the singing of the Polish National Anthem
- This usually is an occasion for the Lord Mayor of Plymouth to attend along with Polish consular staff and the Royal Navy
- Tadek is shown here saluting those who gave their lives



- Over the years, other memorials have been added for other military campaigns in joint remembrance

- It was in the past an occasion for flag-carrying and march pasts
- Here are also the Royal Marines bandsmen and children of the Krakowia Cultural Society
- The memorial carries wreaths from different parts of the country
- The memorial in bronze and raised lettering and on a granite plinth carries the names of ships that carried the Polish flag



ORP DRAGON
ORP KONRAD
ORP GROM
ORP BLYSKAWICA
ORP BURZA
ORP GARLAND
ORP PIORUN
ORP ORKAN
ORP KRAKOWIAK
ORP KUJAWIAK
ORP ŚLAZAK



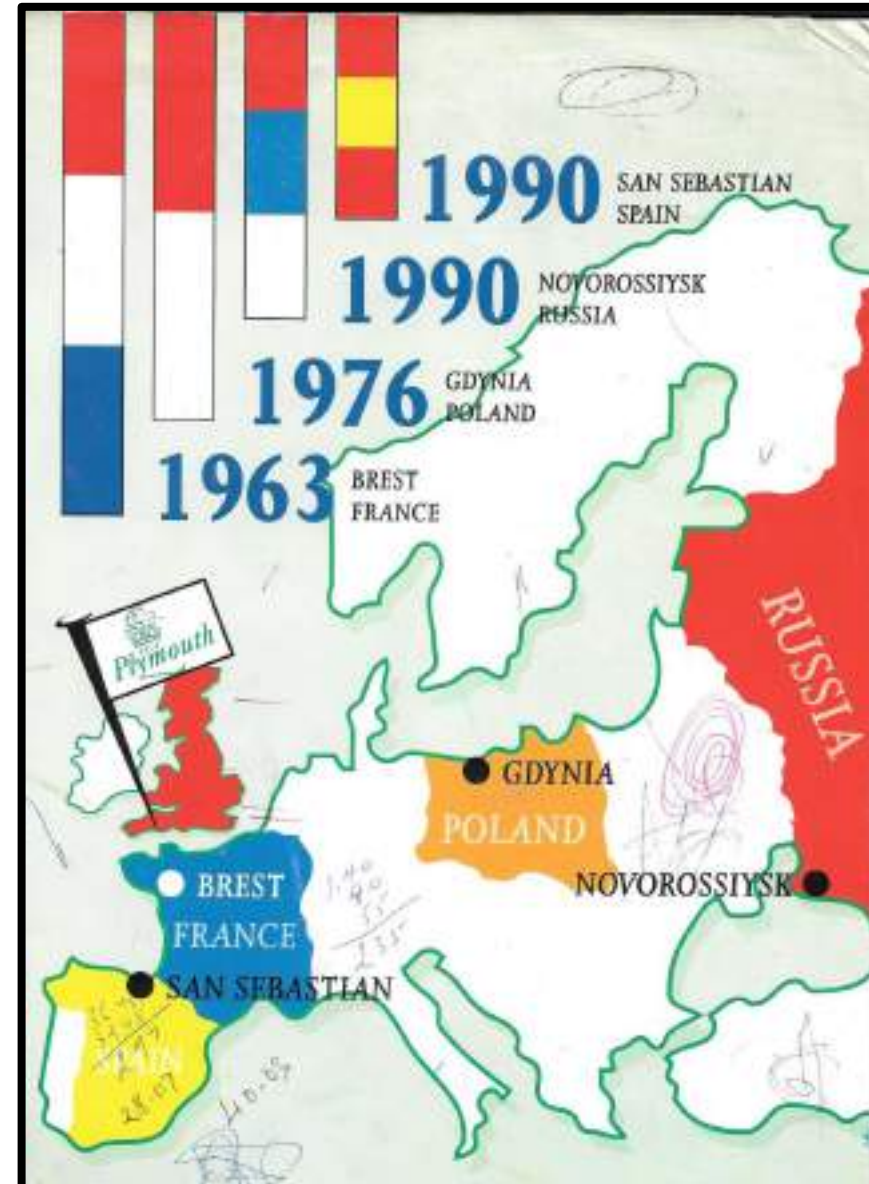
FS. OURAGAN
FS. MEDOC
FS. POMEROL
ORP. ORZEL
ORP. WILK
ORP. SOKOL
ORP. JASTRZAB
ORP. DZIK
MGB.s: S.1-10
P.1-12 CH.11
CH.15

IN MEMORY OF THE OFFICERS AND MEN OF THE
POLISH NAVY WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES FIGHTING
ALONGSIDE THEIR BRITISH COMRADES 1939-45

THIS MONUMENT HAS BEEN ERECTED BY VOLUNTARY SUBSCRIPTION OPPOSITE
THE BARRACKS OCCUPIED BY POLISH NAVAL BARRACKS DURING THE WAR

Fostering Anglo-Polish relations

- Tadek fostered links with many other organisations both English and Polish and maintained close links with the Polish Consulate in London:
 - Polish Naval Veterans Association
 - Federation of Plymouth and District Ex-Services Association
 - 10th Destroyer Flotilla Association
 - Plymouth-Gdynia Twinning Panel
 - Krakowia Cultural Society
 - Polish Consulate
 - Polish Navy Association (London)
 - Royal Navy and Mayoral events in Plymouth and Devonport
 - Commemorative events and reunions in in the UK, France and Poland



Meeting world leaders - London 1989



With the Polish Miss World

With Lech Walesa



Taking the salute in Gdynia at Swieto Morza 1993

(Festival "Days of the Sea" and World Convention of Marine Combatants)
celebrating the 75th anniversary of Polish independence in 1918



Tadeusz
Sroka

Army General Siwicki
Minister of National Defence

Vice Admiral Kolodziejczyk
Naval Commander

Interview with Tadek by Gdansk TV at Swieto Morza 1993



- Click on the image to hear interview extract

“I served on ORP Grom. We were patrolling routes and chasing submarines. After the invasion of Norway we sailed to Norwegian waters. Unfortunately the Grom was bombed and sunk there. I was one of the lucky ones who survived the sinking.

After the Grom I was in the Naval base for some time. Later on I came on board ORP Ouragan. Well it was not ORP as it was a French ship. When the French disobeyed orders the Poles took over that ship. That vessel was not great, not suitable for any major action, and did not last long.

After Ouragan I started serving on ORP Orkan. I was paymaster on Orkan. That was another unlucky vessel. But I can mention that we took on board the body of General Sikorski from Gibraltar to Plymouth.”

- The sinking of ORP Orkan and aftermath are described in <https://kresy-siberia.org/polish-naval-memories-ww2/year-1943/tadeusz-sroka-2/?lang=en>

Finale

- Before 1939, there were no Poles in Plymouth
- The first Polish presence began as a result of WW2 with the invasion of Poland and the establishment of Polish Naval Headquarters at Devonport
- Polish ships sailed out of Plymouth during the war alongside their British allies
- After the war, many Poles stayed, brought up families and embraced their new country
- Tadek was one who stayed and played a prominent role in Anglo-Polish circles for over 50 years
- This was his story



Tadeusz Zygmunt Sroka
1916 - 1998

Main source material and references

Photographs

- Richard (Ryszard) Sroka private collection
- Martin Hazell Collection
- Stefan Nahorski Collection
- Other non-attributed sources not known

Books

- Poles Apart (Polish Naval Memories of World War Two) by Martin Hazell – Southwest Maritime History Society Maritime Monograph 6 – First and Second Editions (2007)
- The Polish Navy in the Second World War (A Historical Sketch) by Michael Alfred Peszke – Polish Naval Association (1989)

Digital

- Kresy-Siberia Foundation website
- Wikipedia website
- Various dedicated Facebook groups

Other

- Family history records, personal data collection and direct knowledge