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The Warsaw women who took on Hitler

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On August 1, 1944, thousands of Poles, among them girls as young as 13, joined the Warsaw Uprising – an attempt to expel the Nazis that led to terrible reprisals. Bernadeta Tendyra meets three survivors, now living in Britain, who recall the horror and the heroism of those days

A young military nurse runs through burning Warsaw streets to reach an injured soldier. Suddenly, arms and legs fly through the air and blood spatters her clothes. A booby-trapped German tank has exploded, 700 metres away, killing more than 300 people. The stretcher bearers who accompanied the nurse have vanished - she will never see them again.



Survivors: Marzenna Schejbal and Anna Przylipiak in 1944, the year of the Warsaw Uprising

Marzenna Karczewska Schejbal, who lives in Chiswick, west London, was just 20 that memorable day, August 13, 1944, when the world seemed to stop momentarily. She and her sister, Ewa - the injured soldier - were among some 5,000 Polish female fighters of the Warsaw Uprising, a horrific yet largely forgotten fragment of Second World War history.

On August 1, 1944, responding to the boom of Red Army artillery in the east, the youthful, ill-equipped Home Army (Armia Krajowa or AK) had attacked German forces after five years of bloody occupation. It aimed to greet the Soviets in a free Warsaw.

But the Rising soon failed in its objectives, and Hitler exacted a biblical revenge. Special SS divisions proceeded methodically through the capital, detonating buildings and killing insurgents and civilians with appalling savagery. The partisans resisted for 63 days from sewers and cellars, deploying everything from captured German tanks to scythes and old socks stuffed with nails and explosives.

The Red Army, meanwhile, watched Warsaw burn from the other side of the River Vistula. Poland's Western allies expressed regret but gave limited assistance. On October 2, 1944, fearing annihilation, the AK capitulated amid the ruins of its once proud city. A quarter of a million people, mainly civilians, lay dead.

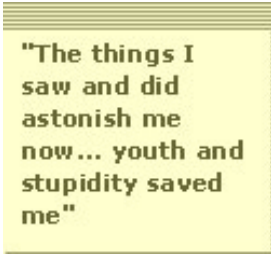
Marzenna Schejbal had been ill-prepared for the launch of the Rising. During the occupation, her father, who ran a painting firm, had forbidden his daughters to join the resistance. He was helping to smuggle Jews and partisans to safe houses in the country, and feared the girls might compromise these efforts. So they stumbled upon "W-hour" - the 5pm start of hostilities - almost by accident.

"August 1 was warm and sunny, and Ewa and I were wearing summer dresses. We headed for the city centre; we wanted some silver rings engraved with that day's date, as a present for our boyfriends. It was a coincidence - I knew nothing about the Rising.

"By the time we went home at 5pm, the shooting and shelling had started. Battles were raging, nothing was working. But we were intent on getting back to say we were safe. We spent four days covering just two miles."

Once home, Marzenna and Ewa reported to their nearest AK unit on Long Street in the Old Town. "The shooting, bombing and barricades had prevented soldiers reaching assembly points, hence there were manpower shortages. So they took us without question."

Marzenna joined 3 Company "Wkra", Pine Group, and soon acted as messenger, nurse, stretcher-bearer, forager for medical supplies and jack-of-all-trades. On August 6, 1944, sporting a white-and-red AK armband - ubiquitous symbol of the Rising - she recited the oath to Poland's Black Madonna and became a soldier.



"The things I saw and did astonish me now... youth and stupidity saved me"

She was not alone. Female soldiers during the Rising represented at least 10 per cent of AK personnel. In addition, many women volunteered their services spontaneously and never appeared in official records.

Girls as young as 13 begged to be taken on as helpers.

Almost immediately, the AK seized the central districts. "We were euphoric because the Old Town and its environs were free. That sense of liberation after years of German brutality was intoxicating. We sang, we danced, we drank wine seized from German stores. Such delight!"

But the partisans soon fought on shrinking islands in a German sea. "Our joy lasted less than a week. More and more friends perished in battle or sustained dreadful injuries. " In Pine Group, more than half of the female messengers - who had to crawl through bombed basements or over ruined buildings exposed to shells and snipers - died on duty.

The Old Town, with its medieval battlements and labyrinth of narrow streets, vaults and cellars, was ideally suited to guerrilla warfare. But the Germans attacked with overwhelming force, unleashing unmanned Goliath demolition mines, Tiger tanks, Big Bertha ordnance that pulverised houses, anti-tank artillery and Stukas that skimmed the rooftops before dropping their murderous loads.

Flame-throwers flushed out insurgents in the dying days of Old Town resistance. Bricks and bare hands became the AK's weapons of last resort.

But there was no defence against the Nebelwerfer, or "bellowing cow", a mobile, multiple rocket launcher that emitted a blood-curdling moan before firing incendiary and demolition bombs.

Marzena Schejbal witnessed its destructive force. "In the Old Town, we cared for the injured in cellars to avoid bombardment at street level. But a 'bellowing cow' hit a building and buried them alive. We couldn't rescue them because we'd been ordered into battle. It was monstrous - it's something that stays with you for ever."

Nineteen-year-old Wanda Gutowska was living in Zoliborz, north-west Warsaw, when the city rose. She greeted "W-hour" with relief. " I wasn't afraid because, frankly, one had little to lose. The occupation was awful. Anyway, we expected the Bolsheviks to help and the British to drop supplies, and we thought the Rising would end quickly."

Wanda, who now lives with her architect husband Tadeusz Lesisz in Cheadle, Cheshire, had been an AK messenger before the Rising. She, her mother and sister (her father was among 15,000 Polish officers and intelligentsia murdered on Stalin's orders at Katyn and other sites in the USSR in 1940) had stashed arms in their coke cellar and harboured various fugitives.

These included a courier parachuted in from Britain and a seven-year-old Jewish orphan - Henryk Teicher - who hid in the attic for three years. Wanda delivered clandestine leaflets and weapons.

Her new posting as a nurse in 202 Platoon, 21st Infantry Regiment, brought fresh dangers. She survived several military actions, including an assault on Gdansk Railway Station, between Zoliborz and the Old Town, where German units had gathered.



Schejbal, Przylipek and Lesisz will attend the Uprising's 60th anniversary in Warsaw

The insurgents aimed to break through to the old quarter but met fierce resistance, and scores died. Wanda loaded guns, heaved ammunition and held mortally wounded boys. "The things I saw and did astonish me now. Was that really me? Youth and stupidity saved me from madness. Nowadays, I jump at the sound of a car alarm."

Yet fighting was better than awaiting slaughter. In early August, SS units had massacred more than 40,000 civilians, including women, children, hospital staff, patients and priests, in the Wola and Ochota districts of west and south-west Warsaw.

"What went on was monstrous. The SS seized the director of a printing firm and his pregnant wife. They raped her in front of her husband, ripped out the unborn child with a bayonet, held it up for the father to see and finally killed him." The stench of thousands of burning bodies lingered for days.

In the southern district of Mokotów, a 23-year-old landowner's daughter dealt with daily horrors in her own inimitable way. "I walked around with a flower in my lapel," says Anna Olszewska Przylipek, who now lives in Stretford, Manchester.

"I wanted to show I wasn't afraid and frankly, I wasn't. I was always first into action, and I put the boys to shame. I was young, but not naïve; I was seasoned by the occupation, by the constant struggle for survival."

Anna, a soldier of Baszta Regiment, worked as a liaison officer for the AK's Security Department. During the Rising, she twice went behind enemy lines as a spy. Once, she smuggled a message in a false-

bottomed cigarette box to an AK member captured by the Germans. Soon after, his colleagues freed him from prison - just before the Gestapo arrived.

Anna, codename "Maria", rarely lost her humour. A missile from a "bellowing cow" once landed close by, and she and her friend Marysia fled. But laughing hysterically, Anna suddenly stopped.

"What on earth's the matter?" asked Marysia, crossly. Anna shrieked: "You've nothing on but your pinny. Your bottom's bare." Marysia retorted: "That makes two of us!" The air pressure from the missile had ripped off their clothes.

But one subject brings a rare sobriety to Anna's eyes - the 16 hours she wandered Warsaw's labyrinthine sewers when Mokotów fell in late September, 1944. Anna was among the first evacuees to the still-fighting city centre, having sustained serious injury when shrapnel lodged in her head. Resistance doctors removed two fragments - without X-rays or anaesthetic - but one remains today. The wounded took to the sewers before the Germans could finish them off.

"We got completely lost - we should have gone north, but ended up east. I was half-blind and my wounds kept weeping. People began losing their nerve. The first sewer was small and round, some 80 cm by 70 cm, so the able-bodied crawled on hands and knees in the filth, with the person in front pulling the stretcher and the one behind pushing it.



Schejbal's Polish Army identity card, actual armband from 1944, Red Cross shoulder patches and ID card from the prisoner of war camp in Germany

"The worst thing was the panic. We were terrified the SS would put gas or grenades or electricity into the sewers. The manhole covers were open and we could hear German voices outside. "

Anna entered captivity on a stretcher in early October 1944, in a nightie and knee-boots; Wanda wore a flimsy summer dress. Marzenna half-dragged, half-carried her injured sister 20 kilometres to Ozarów, west of Warsaw, where the victors were herding the vanquished.

In late August 1944, London and Washington had granted the AK combatant rights, which the Germans now half-heartedly honoured. The three thus joined 3,000 women POWs in Wehrmacht custody.

"Throwing down our arms was so sad," recalls Wanda. "I'll never forget the clash of metal piercing the strange silence of the city."

Marzenna, Wanda and Anna's war ended on the windswept peat bogs of Stalag VIC at Oberlangen near Lathen, 10 kilometres from the Dutch border. The harsh climate and grim conditions made the camp wholly unsuitable for POWs. But 1,721 Polish women endured four months of freezing temperatures, dilapidated barracks, brutal guards, gut-churning hunger, rats, lice and haunting memories of home and the Rising.

Then, on April 12, 1945, the sound of gunfire heralded the arrival of Allied troops sporting white-and-red "Poland" insignia. Men of the 1st (Polish) Armoured Division, who had fought in France, Belgium and Holland under British supreme command, ran to embrace the valiant women soldiers of the Warsaw Uprising.

And so Marzenna and Wanda came to Britain with the Free Polish Forces, the injured Anna with the Red Cross. The women married, raised families and lived relatively normal lives in a democratic country. Yet the independence they had fought for during the Rising would elude their communist homeland for 45 years.

Hitler, true to his word, razed what remained of Warsaw to the ground. The Germans also expelled some 570,000 survivors, whose appalling plight in concentration and labour camps, or camped in open fields in sub-zero temperatures, added another chapter to Warsaw's woeful history.

In January, 1945, Soviet troops walked unchallenged into a ghost city that resembled a moonscape. They proceeded to impose a Stalinist system upon Poland.

The three women had their own tragedies. Marzenna's father disappeared from a slave labour quarry near Leipzig; his grave was never found. Wanda's sweetheart, Andrzej, bled to death on the last day of the Rising after German soldiers declined to help him. All three mourned countless friends and colleagues.

But at least one tale had a moderately happy ending. Little Henryk Teicher, the Jewish boy harboured by Wanda's family, survived and eventually joined relatives in Israel.

Wanda's mother, forcibly marched out of Warsaw after the Rising, had swathed her "son" in bandages to hide his Semitic features. Her remaining jewellery

bought food and silence. Forty-four years later, Henryk traced Wanda to Cheshire, and the two embraced joyfully on Israeli soil. Wanda's family received Israel's highest honour for helping Jews.

The three women, like many AK soldiers, will be in Warsaw on August 1 for the 60th anniversary of the Rising. How do they answer charges, made by some, that August 1944 was an irresponsible, tragic folly? "We had to fight for our independence," they answer, firmly.

What of the Soviets, Poland's so-called allies, who watched Warsaw die and failed to help? "Best not to say," is the short response.

And what of the Germans, who tried to wipe the city and its people off the face of the earth? Anna Przyłipiak is unequivocal: "I have forgiven them, but I cannot forget what they did. It's unthinkable that such acts should ever be forgotten."

- Bernadeta Tendyra is a historian and writer on Poland and Eastern Europe

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