

Zofia Korbonski, 1915-2010

Radio Coder Provided Information from German-Occupied Poland

During World War II, the British government made available to the various governments-in-exile from countries occupied by Nazi Germany, voice radio transmission facilities to broadcast to those countries, under the pretense that the transmissions originated in the occupied countries. To pull this off, the radio stations needed daily news feeds from observers on the ground. From Poland, the news was provided by Zofia Korbonski, wife of Stefan, who was the Polish Government-in-Exile's delegate and director of the Directorate of Civil Resistance, which coordinated non-military resistance efforts by the Polish populace against the German occupying forces. Zofia and Stefan gathered information from the extensive network of the Polish Underground Resistance, and Zofia was the cipher clerk who encoded the messages for transmission to Great Britain. Among the news first reaching the West by this route were: information about medical experiments on women prisoners in the Nazi German concentration camp at Auschwitz; the location of Hitler's command bunker in East Prussia; the outbreak of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943; daily reports on the fighting during the three weeks of that Uprising; the final deportation of ghetto residents and destruction of the ghetto; tests of V-1 and V-2 weapons on Polish territory; daily reports on the fighting during the 63 days of the Warsaw Rising which began on August 1, 1944; the "liberation" by the Soviets which marked the beginning of the next occupation of Poland.

Zofia Korbonski died in Washington DC on August 16 from pulmonary failure, after a long illness.

Born in Warsaw on May 10, 1915 as Zofia Ristau, daughter of a chemical engineer, she graduated secondary school and the School of Political Science in Warsaw. In July of 1938 she married Stefan Korbonski (1901-1989), prominent Warsaw attorney and high-level activist in the Polish Populist Party, which was a major force on the Polish interwar political scene, being the party in power on several occasions in the period 1920-1926.

When WW II broke out in September of 1939, Zofia went to live with her grandmother in eastern Poland, and Stefan was called up into the army. He was captured by the Soviets, who divided Poland with Hitler according to the secret codicil of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact. Stefan managed to escape and rejoined Zofia. They declined an opportunity to escape the country via Romania, and returned to Warsaw to assist their native land in whatever way they could.

In a situation unique in German-occupied Europe, the Polish political establishment, under the authority of the Government-in-Exile in London, set up a secret underground state complete with all of the structures of a functioning society: courts, schools, press, armed forces – all under deep cover from the occupying Germans. Being highly placed in one of the major political parties that formed these structures, Stefan played a major role, being named as the head of the Directorate of Civil Resistance. Zofia was his loyal

assistant in all his undertakings – she considered her activities secondary to his and would not talk about hers except as how they related to his.

Clandestine radio transmissions by the Polish Underground were begun immediately after the cessation of hostilities, and Zofia was involved from the start. She selected locations for the transmitters, smuggled equipment between locations, secured hiding places for the equipment in the event a location was threatened, served as lookout, and was the sole coder/decoder. Initially, transmitters were home-made, but eventually they were replaced by American-made professional ones supplied by air drops.

The work was incredibly dangerous. Of the 40 to 50 persons involved over the course of this activity, about half perished. The Germans had excellent radio-detection technology, deployed on vehicles and aircraft, which allowed them to determine the location of transmitters. German agents disguised as Polish priests, railroad workers or mailmen were sent to reconnoiter the area, followed by armed units to eliminate the transmitter and its crew. Survival required frequent changes of location, limiting the duration of transmissions, and continual observation of the environs, typically done by women. Among Zofia's duties was the training of observers to recognize German surveillance.

The radio station was particularly significant during the Warsaw Rising of August – October 1944, when transmission conditions were especially difficult. At times, the Korbonski's equipment was the only functioning transmitter in the city, able to transmit news of the fighting. Every day, it would transmit news of the atrocities committed by the Germans on the civilian population, which resulted in the loss of over 200,000 lives. In the words of Oxford historian Norman Davies, it was the equivalent of a 9/11 attack every day for 63 days.

The radio station continued to transmit information from Poland until November 1945, when Poland was already occupied by the Red Army.

The Korbonskis were both arrested by the NKVD in 1945, but were released as part of an amnesty when the nascent Communist government made a sham semblance of cooperation with the non-Communist opposition, which included Korbonski's Populist Party. But when that façade ended and opposition politicians were once again being arrested, in 1947 the Korbonskis fled to Sweden and within two weeks came to the United States.

Stefan immediately became active in émigré organizations, while Zofia began working in the Polish section of Voice of America, preparing texts for transmission to Poland – coming full circle from her wartime activities. She retired from VoA in 1980. Thereafter she became active in various Polish-American organizations, including the Polish American Congress, Polish Veterans Association and Friends of John Paul II Foundation.

Stefan died in the spring of 1989, just months before the first free elections that established the start of a democratic government in Poland. That year, Zofia made her first post-war visit to Poland, and then visited regularly, becoming engaged in the

construction of the Museum of the Warsaw Rising and the Monument to the Polish Underground State.

After the death of her husband, Zofia founded the Stefan Korbonski Foundation in Washington, with a chapter in Warsaw; its “goals and aims are to clarify and preserve the memory of the true facts of the recent history of Poland, and most specifically of the Polish Underground State in the years 1939-45, of the contribution of Poland to the Allied victory in World War II and of the role in that fight of the Directorate for Civil Resistance, headed by Stefan Korboński.”

In failing health, she became house-bound for the last several years of her life. Her significance to the recent history of Poland was recognized by Polish President Lech Kaczynski, who bestowed on her the high decoration of Grand Cross of *Polonia Restituta* – what is more, during his visit to the United States in February 2006, since she was unable to leave her house, the President came to her humble apartment in Washington to personally present this high honor.

A mass of Christian burial was held at Our Lady Queen of Poland Parish in Silver Spring, Maryland, on September 10 at 6:00 PM. The eulogy was pronounced by Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, National Security Advisor to President Jimmy Carter. Interment was at the Cemetery of the Shrine of Our Lady of Czestochowa in Doylestown, Pennsylvania on September 11 alongside her husband. The Ambassador of the Republic of Poland and representatives of the Embassy were present at both functions, and letters of remembrance from the President of the Republic of Poland and other high government officials were read.

-Ted Mirecki