

INTERVIEW WITH POLISH SCOUTING LEADER KRYSZYNA CHCIUK

Christina Malkowska, granddaughter of the Founders of Polish Scouting Olga and Andrzej Malkowski, August 2010 – on the centenary of Polish Scouting

Polish Scouting World Jamboree, Zegrze, near Warsaw, Poland



As a participant in the World Polish Scouting Centenary Jamboree in Zegrze, where 1600 Polish youngsters from 5 continents have set up their camp to commemorate the centenary of Polish Scouting together, I was honoured to be able to catch up with Polish Guide Leader Krystyna Chciuk from San Francisco, USA. Krysia was a soldier in the Warsaw Uprising, 66 years ago. This is what she told me.

I was 17 when the Warsaw Uprising began. I lived in Warsaw at the time, at 57 Hoża Street, not far from a girls' school organised by nuns.

I entered the Polish Underground Army at the age of 15, because my friends one day came and told me that there was to be a swearing-in of new soldiers in nearby Żolibórz, and so I went along with them.

In principle the Underground Army didn't accept combatants of less than 16 years of age, but this swearing-in happened very secretly, in a dark cellar. When the priest conducting the oath caught sight of me, he said, "What are you doing here?" I told him it was too late – I had already pledged my word. Then a voice from the darkness said, "I'll take her."

That was how I joined the communications arm of the Polish Women's Army Corps in 1942 and obtained a place in one of the Underground's "groups of five" [to minimise]. We often used to be sent for drill to the nearby Kampinoska Forest.

Mother didn't know I was a member – I always used to tell her I was going for an outing to the forest with a girlfriend. Everything was kept in absolute secrecy – I didn't even know the real names of the other girls in my "group of five". My pseudonym was "Sonia".

In the forest the sergeant put us through various drills: how to use a telephone in the field, how to contact others in various ways, how to use Morse code in practice, and to work the "buzzer", the little button by which you sent the code. This was how we prepared for the Uprising.

On the morning of 1 August 1944, a messenger brought me a written order, which I read and then destroyed at once:

'Go to Czerniaków, bring a gun.'

I asked my brother to carry my rucksack to the bus stop and I ran in to say goodbye to Mother, without telling her what was going on. "Why are you so sad and thoughtful?" she asked, a little surprised. I would never go home again.

I went to the meeting place and there they told me that I was to deliver guns and ammunition to another division before midday. It was still all quiet in the city. They pushed 5 pistols into my belt, tied string tightly around the cuffs of my shirt at my wrists, and poured ammunition into my sleeves, filling them right up to my shoulders. I put a coat on over it all.

Thus equipped, I started walking along the road to Bielany. Suddenly I saw some Germans ahead. A whole unit was marching my way. And there I was with all that ammunition filling my sleeves and those pistols under my coat.

For a moment I froze in fear. I stood still, not knowing what to do.

But then I collected myself and carried on calmly walking, and I crossed the road right in front of them. They didn't take any notice of me and I walked on.

Eventually I reached my destination, where a hundred boys were waiting in a cellar. I gave them everything I had – the five pistols and the ammunition. Later in the afternoon they started shooting in the central district, and so the Uprising began.

We were kept busy running with orders, and on our journeys across the city we frequently had to stop and administer first aid to the wounded, or help pull someone still alive out of the rubble. I remember one young soldier, how he was howling in fear and pain – ‘I can’t see! I can’t see!’ He had been shot right in the face.

Many were killed. We had no way of burying them all. The Germans used huge mortars against us, so-called ‘cows’, which bellowed in a terrible way before exploding. The sound would freeze people to the spot – because you couldn’t tell which direction it was coming from. You had to drop down into the rubble right where you were standing until it was over, and I remember one time when I did that, my hand came to rest on the face of a dead man.

It was hell. Nobody can understand it who wasn’t there.

I don’t remember being afraid. You just had to go on. At the time our approach was that ‘things would get better’. That was our attitude. For 5 years of the Occupation we had endured street round-ups, our friends being tortured, and we felt anger, rage, we were eager to fight, and that pushed us on. But thousands of people died.

Our boys used to come to us through the sewers with orders for us. Stinking, filthy, wet, starving, exhausted, some of them wounded, they often went for many miles under the city, through the sewers, and they were constantly terrified, because the Germans would often throw gas or grenades into them. You had to walk very carefully and quietly down there.

But we had no time for despair. There was a huge comradeship in arms. We communications people were often sent to the partisans in the Kampinoska Forest to keep them in touch with the divisions in Żolibórz, especially after there had been an airdrop of ammunition.

I remember once when I was returning with a friend from the forest back to the city, I didn’t have any shoes on and my clothes were a bit torn, because we’d had to crawl along the ground for a distance, and the boys there had found me a quilt. So after accomplishing our mission we stopped to rest, and I shared the quilt with my friend, and we fell asleep. While we were asleep, a German bomb fell on us. My friend was killed, and I wasn’t. That was how it was then.

I don’t know myself how I survived. It must have been God’s will – it just wasn’t my time.

We battled on through 63 days of the Uprising. When they were taking us prisoner, I remember how one German, standing on a lorry to show respect as we marched by, looked at us and said quietly, “My God, they’re just children.”

The Germans declared that we had earned the status of prisoners of war.

We had to surrender our arms, and that was the moment when some of our boys wanted to kill themselves. We did our best to persuade them that this wasn't the end – that we still had our ideals.

After that the Germans took us girls into Germany, where they forced us, illegally, to do munitions work, in the Kirchmoser-Havel tank factory. They needed workers, and they kept trying to persuade us to sign civilian papers, because using prisoners of war in work was not allowed. But we insisted on retaining our status.

In 1945 we were sent to the penal women's prisoner of war camp at Oberlangen in Northern Germany. They didn't feed us very well, but we survived. It was bitterly cold, wet, crawling with insects and rats in that camp, but we arranged our lives there as best we could.

We had a wonderful Polish Guide leader with us, Guide Leader Jaga, who kept us up to scratch and dealt with the Germans superbly too. She organised a rota for us young ones to keep watch. So we kept an eye on the Germans, and they kept an eye on us.

It was April 1945 and the Dutch front was getting nearer. News reached General Maczek's soldiers of the First Polish Armoured Division [who were fighting in Holland with the Allies] that there was a Polish camp in Oberlangen. They decided to liberate it, without knowing who was in the camp. Imagine their surprise and astonishment when a huge crowd of women greeted them. The camp had been filled with the women soldiers of the Polish Underground Army from the Warsaw Uprising, 1,700 of us, together with a number of babies that had been born in the camp.

From that moment the First Polish Armoured Division took us into their care, and I was given various jobs to do with the Division until the moment they transferred us to England. By then I was 19 years old.

I never met with a single instance of unkindness from the Polish soldiers. They all treated me with the greatest respect.

After the war I married a Polish pilot, and we settled in the US, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and brought three daughters into the world. In 1962 I found out from my friends that Polish Scouting and Guiding was being organised. So I went to Guide Leader Lukomska and asked if my daughters could enrol. 'Please get them into uniform and bring them along,' she said. I did, and I also joined the parent volunteers' group to support the work.

A few years later we moved to San Francisco, California, where there was no Polish Scouting and Guiding, so I started organising it myself with Polish Scout Leader Tadeusz Butler. I made my Promise in 1973, and to this day I'm a Polish Guide leader. I'm 84 years old now, and I have five grandchildren.

What message would I like to give to the young people at this Centenary Polish Scouting and Guiding Jamboree here in Zegrze in Poland? I think probably, that they should remember who they are. That they shouldn't forget their heritage. Even if they don't speak Polish, they should learn the history, the literature of Poland. Because you can be proud of your Polish heritage even without knowing the language. And you can bear witness.

Polish Scouting and Guiding has a great role to play in all this. I'm so proud looking at our young people here at this Centenary Jamboree, how idealistic and disciplined they are. It's a wonderful legacy for our future.

Guide Leader Krystyna Chciuk from the Polish Scouting Association (International) US Region was talking to Guide Leader Christina Malkowska from the Polish Scouting Association (International) UK Region, in Zegrze, Poland, at the Centenary World Jamboree of Polish Scouting, on the 66th anniversary of the start of the Warsaw Uprising, 1 August 2010.