

*Who Do You Think You Are? Magazine, January 2022*

Dear Editor,

I'd like to share some information I discovered about my Polish ancestors that may be of interest to your other readers. As a result of both World Wars, many immigrants from Poland settled in Britain, and as many as two million Britons are of Polish descent.<sup>1</sup> In order to integrate and thrive in Britain, the children and grandchildren of migrants may grow up identifying themselves as British and can become completely estranged from the foreign culture of their relatives.

My father was a Polish WW2 veteran who served under British command during World War II and never said a word about the war to me. After his death, I was astonished to discover that he had received Poland's highest military decoration for heroism – the *Virtuti Militari* (equivalent to the Victoria Cross). This chance discovery came about when I ran a Google search on my last name – Rupniak – a query that took me to a website naming my father as a war hero. Why would he have neglected to mention this important fact to me? Perhaps there must be another *Marcin Rupniak*?

I contacted the curator of the website to enquire how I could verify that the entry in his database was my father or another person by the same name. He advised me to request my dad's military service records from the Ministry of Defense and to write to the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London to ask whether they had any records about his awards. A large package duly arrived from the MOD, and I knew at once from a photocopy of a war diary written in my dad's distinctive hand, and the words *Virtuti Militari*, that my dad was indeed the person I had found on the internet.

An English translation of his Polish records led me to understand that my dad earned his *Virtuti Militari* during the defense of Poland in September 1939. From historical accounts of the war I learned that it was not the invasion from the west by Hitler that caused the collapse of Poland, but the invasion from the east by his ally Stalin. My dad was one of the lucky ones who was able to evacuate to Hungary, from where he eventually made his way to England. There, the Polish army regrouped to serve under British command. Hundreds of thousands of Polish troops who were unable to escape were arrested by the Soviets. Most of these men were deported to hard labour camps in Siberia.

Why would my dad have kept his heroism a secret from me? The answer to that question was revealed on a journey to Poland to meet my Polish cousins. My cousins told me that when the Soviets took control of eastern Poland, they rounded up the families of Polish officers and deported them to Siberia. My grandmother and three uncles were among the 1.7 million Poles deported to the gulag; only one member of my family survived. What became of most of these prisoners is not known. In 2001, a documentary in English recording the horrific experiences of

---

<sup>1</sup> The Polish Diaspora <https://www.pilotguides.com/study-guides/the-polish-diaspora/>



**Captain Marcin Rupniak**

surviving deportees was made by Jagna Wright, called *A Forgotten Odyssey*; excerpts of this are available online.<sup>2</sup> There is also a virtual museum commemorating the people who are known to have been deported.<sup>3</sup> Almost nothing is known in the West about this tragedy that befell Poland.

This, I understood, was the reason for my dad's secrecy. After the war, Poland fell under a communist regime that made it unsafe for many veterans to return. My dad could not tell us about his role in the war because he needed to protect his remaining family in Poland, where deportations to Siberia continued until the late 1950s.

I am fortunate that my dad's military records survived the war and that my Polish family preserved important documents that helped me in my research. I would love to know how many others are researching their Polish ancestors and would like to share their stories.

Nadia Rupniak

[www.nadiarupniak.com](http://www.nadiarupniak.com)

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://polishatheart.com/the-wwii-polish-deportations-still-an-untold-story>

<sup>3</sup> Kresy-Siberia Virtual Museum commemorating Poles deported to Siberia <https://kresy-siberia.org>