

FORTIES POST

A Salute to the '40s

SCOTLAND'S FRIENDLY INVASION

Nadia Rupniak recounts her Polish father's wartime experiences in Scotland and the kindness shown to him by the locals during World War Two and beyond

In 1940, Scotland received an unexpected influx of 17,000 Polish servicemen. Among them was my dad, Captain Marcin Rupniak.

He had fought with the Polish army to defend Poland in 1939, and had been forced to evacuate and regroup in France. The Poles intended to join forces with the French army to liberate Poland, but were unable to execute the plan before France was invaded by Germany. In June 1940, they were hastily evacuated to Plymouth, Devon as Britain braced itself to be next in line for invasion.

With the build-up of enemy ships in Norway, a priority was to defend the eastern Scottish coastline from an anticipated sea invasion. Polish soldiers were put to work constructing lines of anti-tank barriers – thousands of concrete blocks interspersed with pillboxes – along the coast and inland, which can still be seen in Lossie Forest, Moray. A photograph shows my dad by a row of concrete blocks which must have been taken in Scotland in 1940-41.

Within weeks of the arrival of the Polish troops, Germany launched a fierce aerial attack on England in the Battle of Britain. Two squadrons of Polish fighter pilots joined the Royal Air Force and the *Kościuszko* Squadron destroyed the highest number of enemy aircraft of any squadron. Polish pilots earned celebrity status and were pursued by female admirers.

The Poles stationed in Scotland also received a warm welcome from their new hosts. They did not know whether their loved ones were safe in occupied Poland, or the conditions in which they were living, and were anxious to return home.

The Scots showed them sympathy and kindness, although British food and

traditions such as afternoon tea were quite alien to the Poles. One of Dad's photos shows him with his friends seemingly entertained by a sign reading "morning coffee".

Naturally, the customs of the Poles were equally unfamiliar to the Scots and the men made quite an impression when they greeted the women by kissing the backs of their



Anti-tank defences built by the Polish army in Scotland during 1940-1941. Nadia's father Captain Marcin Rupniak is pictured on the right.



Above: Among the group of Poles finding entertainment from a sign reading "morning coffee" is Nadia's father Captain Marcin Rupniak standing with his hand on the wall. Above right: While out on manoeuvres, Captain Rupniak (holding a rolled map) and his men are amused by an advert for Hall's Wine, promoted as a "tonic restorative" capable of revitalising health during the cold and flu season. Inset: Romcia's grandson holding an Ovaltine tin in 2011. Romcia kept an empty tin of Ovaltine – sent in an emergency parcel by by Captain Rupniak – as a memento of the postwar times.

hands. Barely able to communicate, they somehow managed. I recall my dad telling me about a Polish friend whose pick-up line before he learned English was: "You go, I go, bus go Glasgow."

With the threat of an invasion averted, the Poles prepared for a counter-offensive to liberate Europe. Their commander, General Maczek, established his headquarters at Black Barony Castle near Eddleston, Peebles, one of several buildings requisitioned for the Polish army. There was also a Polish school of engineering, a parachute training school, and a military hospital.

Black Barony also has an interesting postwar story. In 1968, it was purchased by Jan Tomasik, a sergeant who settled in the area after marrying his Scottish bride. In the 1970s, he undertook an ambitious project in the grounds of the hotel known as the the "great Polish map of Scotland".

Made of concrete, it is the largest three-dimensional map of any country in the world and was granted Category B listed status by Historic Scotland. The project was partly inspired by an outdoor map of Poland made by Polish soldiers at an army camp in Douglas where Tomasik was based in 1940. He wanted the giant map of Scotland to serve as a lasting tribute to the Scots for their hospitality during the war. By February 1942, the Polish 1st Armoured Division was fully operational. Equipped with new Churchill

and Sherman tanks, they began practice exercises and became a familiar sight out on manoeuvres. I found some photos of my dad studying maps with his men taken at that time. One picture includes an advert that seems to be the source of some amusement.

The product is Hall's Wine, promoted as a "tonic restorative" capable of revitalising health during the cold and flu season. The caption says: "Take Hall's Wine and feel the joy of springtime all the year round."

Despite its name, many teetotalers drank it thinking it was a harmless medicinal remedy. In fact, the tonic contained not only alcohol, but also cocaine.

The 1st Armoured Division joined the Allies in the D-day landings in 1944. Their most famous battle was fought in Normandy at Falaise, where they sealed off the only remaining escape route for the German army that had been encircled by Allied forces. In an epic fight to the death, my dad was almost killed when his tank was struck by a German shell and exploded into flames.

Despite their heroism and victories that played a decisive part in the defeat of Hitler, at the end of the war their country was not free. Eastern Poland was annexed by the Soviet Union and, after a rigged election, west Poland also fell under a communist government.

Considered enemies of the state by the Soviet regime, many Polish servicemen

like my dad were unable to return home and settled abroad in Britain, America, Canada, Argentina and South Africa.

To learn about conditions in Poland during and after the war, I travelled to Poland in 2011 to meet my cousins. Romcia, the youngest child of my uncle Tomasz, had kept

a collection of letters written by my dad during the 1940s.

In autumn 1945, her family was ordered to relocate from east Poland to live within the new territorial borders to the west.

The expulsion meant the family lost almost everything they owned. Having survived for six years on starvation rations, the family of six, including a newborn baby (Romcia), were living in desperate conditions. My dad restored contact with Tomasz in 1946 and immediately began sending emergency aid packages from Scotland.

He wrote: "I'm assuming that so far you've received the parcels with cigarettes and seeds. So far, I've sent you five big parcels with clothes, so there should be enough for everyone. They were sent by my friends, the Scottish woman who I used to stay with, and the one I'm staying with now. They also helped me to get the things I need."

I was glad to read of the kindness shown to my dad by his landlords during such a distressing time. In another letter, he wrote: "This is the seventh parcel I'm sending you. It contains clothes, a bar of soap, a box of Ovaltine – it's similar to cocoa but better for children – and a bar of chocolate. Put two teaspoons of Ovaltine into a glass of hot milk or water and stir until it's dissolved. You can dissolve it in a cold drink as well."

Romcia had kept an empty tin of Ovaltine as a memento of those hard times. As an infant, she was so malnourished that Ovaltine may have saved her life. My dad continued sending aid packages to Tomasz until the late 1970s. 🇵🇱

If you would like to read more about Nadia's family's experiences during World War Two, please visit nadiarupniak.com