

Greater Poland Uprising 1918-1919

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The memory of the Greater Poland Uprising during the inter- war years, the period of the People's Republic of Poland and the 3rd Republic of Poland

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[The Greater Poland Uprising \(...\)](#)

[World War II was a period of destruction
of the Polish patriotic tradition \(...\)](#)

The Greater Poland Uprising - one of the most important events in the history of the region - left a number of remarkable traces. Some of them, like the graves of the fallen, came into existence perforce. Others were created to commemorate this fragment of our history - the uprising per se and the individual events, distinguished people, etc. The greatest number of plaques and monuments related to the uprising can be found on battlefields, however, they were also erected in other towns - where patriotic traditions were vivid, where the Uprising was considered an important element of our history and where the participants of those events came from.

The tombs of the fallen were the first places to remind people of the insurgent battles. These victims gave their lives for freedom, and the living citizens perfectly understood the significance of the event, the purposefulness of its publicity and its use for building patriotism. Therefore the funerals of the fallen insurgents had, more often than not, the characteristics of a demonstration and many people took part in them. The first symbolic insurgent burial was the funeral of Antoni Andrzejewski and Franciszek Ratajczak in the Górczyn Cemetery on 1 January 1919 - the first victims of the fighting in Poznań - attended by officials, seven priests and a crowd of Poznań inhabitants, in an honorary place between the main gate and the mortuary. During the first anniversary of the outbreak of the uprising, at the place where nine bullets were fired at Ratajczak, a commemorative plaque appeared; at the very beginning it was made of wood (right above it, there was a plaque which resembled A.

Andrzejewski), but in 1928, it was replaced by a cast-iron plaque. In the year 1923, Rycerska Street which ran in this place was renamed Ratajczaka Street.

It is symptomatic that the bodies of victims, in the vast majority of cases, were transported to their town of residence and buried in local cemeteries. Even the ashes of the fallen behind the pre-war state border - before the Nazis came to power in Germany - were exhumed and transferred to their homeland: in 1928 eight fallen were moved from Kargowa to Wielichowo and in 1931, four fallen from Sulechów to Zbąszyń. This was not possible in the case of Międzyrzecz, where the grave of six insurgents is still located in an old cemetery, away from their homeland.

The tombs of the fallen were generally located in honourable locations in the central point of the cemetery (Krotoszyn, Opatów near Kępno), on the main avenue (Mogilno, Rozdrażew), sometimes along its axis (Ostrzeszów, Żnin), and even right next to the church (or chapel or mortuary, as in Rosk or Kruszwica). Two mausoleums for heroes were built: Feliks Pięta in Bukowiec near Nowy Tomyśl and Franciszek Sowiński in Krotoszyn. These tombs are well tended, renovated and upgraded; they contribute to keeping the memory of local heroes alive.

An exception among the insurgent tombs is the grave of three fallen near the Pławiska settlement in the Notecka Forest; they came from Grzebienisko and Oporowo near Ostroróg, and died in a skirmish in June 1919 and were buried at the place of the clash. A cemetery for 58

participants in the battles for the Odra River line was founded in the year 1924 in Nowa Wieś Zbąska (with a monument erected three years later). A very spacious quarter of fallen insurgents is also located on the slope of the Poznań Citadel - in total, 391 graves of victims of fighting in the years 1918-1920 are located there.

The uprising participants who died at a later time, were generally buried in family tombs. At present these burials are traced and marked in a uniform manner. On certain occasions, through the efforts made by veteran associations, special quarters are provided as the places of eternal rest for those who fought for the incorporation of Greater Poland into the territories of the reborn Polish state. Such places can be found in Bojanowo, Krotoszyn, Leszno, Ostrów Wlkp., Poniec, Środa Wlkp. and at the Junikowo Cemetery in Poznań. A small quarter for participants of the Greater Poland Uprising is located even in Gorzów Wlkp. - the city where insurgents started to develop the Regained Territories a quarter of a century later.

Also two specific tokens from the period of insurgent fights are preserved - spent German shell casings with accurate dates. They were found in the wall of a tenement house at 41 Dworcowa Street in Inowrocław (6 January) and in the tower of the church in Sulmierzyce (12 February 1919).

The structure, unveiled on 14 May 1922, at the entrance to the parish church in Opalenica, is regarded as the first monument devoted to the Uprising - it is not placed on the tomb of the fallen but rather stands as an independent

monument. It has not been preserved to the present day, and a concrete element with a relevant inscription has been placed there instead. In the neighbourhood of this place, there is another monument which was unveiled in the year 2004.

In Poznań, the ashes of five insurgents were moved to the tomb of the first fallen insurgents in 1923, and in May of the following year, a monument designed by Stanisław Jagmin was erected - much bigger than the present one (after the previous monument had been destroyed by the Nazis, the current one was erected as late as in 1968).

The monuments and graves were usually created by amateur stone-cutters and sculptors. The works of good artists were a rarity, for instance, the monuments in Koźmin (by Władysław Marcinkowski from the year 1929, reproduced in 1985), the monument in the insurgent quarter in Środa Wielkopolska (from the year 1935, sculpted by Edward Haupt) and the monument in Buk (by Marcin Rożek, from the year 1927). A non-standard form of commemoration is the stained glass window, from the year 1924, in the parish church in Inowrocław, designed by painter Henryk Jackowski-Nostitz: at its bottom, there is a group composition with the following inscription: „Pamięci oswobodzicieli Inowrocławia w 1919” [To the Memory of the liberators of Inowrocław in 1919].

Also, trees in the most prestigious locations of cities were planted during the anniversaries of the Greater Poland Uprising with the aim of

preserving the memory of the heroes. For instance in Skalmierzyce near Kalisz, in front of a building which was a centre of Polish life during the Prussian partition, a commemorative oak was planted during the first anniversary of the regaining of independence. In Kłecko, in 1929, on the street leading to the cemetery, in which nine fallen insurgents are buried, nine lindens were planted (not all of them have been preserved till our times).

The “first victims” of the Uprising occupy a special place among the commemorated persons. Franciszek Ratajczak is a symbolic figure for the entire Uprising. In the southern part of Greater Poland, Jan Mertka was such a person. Other dead insurgents are symbols of the uprising for given areas, their memory is honoured, for instance, with plaques or names of streets. Here, it is possible to mention: Michał Rajewicz in Budzyń, Józef Raczkowski in Chodzież, Stanisław Kuczmanowicz in Czempień, Walerian Daniel in Janowiec Wlkp., Franciszek Masztalerz in Kościan, Franciszek Sowiński in Krotoszyn, Stefan Wittmann in Lwówek, Marian Suwalski in Margonin, Jan Kaus in Mogilno, Piotr Mocek in Mosina, Feliks Łabędzki in Mrocza, Franciszek Sójka in Odolanów, Antoni Kozak in Opalenica, Stanisław Kotkowiak in Pogorzela, Jan Drożdżyński in Poniec, Wincenty Ciastowicz in Skoki, Piotr Zieleziński in Sulmierzyce, Antoni Przybylski in Wolsztyn and Władysław Lewandowski in Żnin. In Rawicz, such a figure was Stanisław Mikołajewicz who stood in defence of the Polish population and died of his wounds in the camp for the interned in Żagań.

Owing to the efforts of local circles, even before World War II, about 40 monuments, 25 commemorative plaques and 60 cemetery graves were erected. The insurgent monuments erected in the vein of the inter-war years (reproduced after partial or total destruction during the Nazi occupation) can be seen in Bieździadowo, Jankowo Zalesne, Lisewo Kościelne, Margonin, Paterek and Wysoka. The tombs of the fallen, with magnificent graves, are preserved, for instance, in cemeteries in Buk, Ceradz Kościelny, Czerniejewo, Kwilcz, Lubasz, Magnuszewicw, Parzynów, Pleszew and Solec Kujawski.

A symbolic element of the erasure of the foreign rule was the erection of insurgent monuments at places of demolished monuments that glorified the Prussian army, as e.g. in Koźmin or Szamotuły. On the other hand, the sparing Greater Poland inhabitants did not intend to destroy everything which had previously existed - therefore the monument-column in Zduny is only a slightly reworked former German monument.

During the inter-war years, the Greater Poland insurgents were not treated separately among the victims, that is, all those who died fighting for the borders of the Republic of Poland in the years 1918-1922 were remembered. In this way, the great value, which in itself was the integration of all parts of the country which were under the influence of the partitioning superpowers for many years, was recognised; on the other hand, many Poles took part in several stages of the formation of independent Poland (the disarmament of the Germans in the Kingdom of Poland, the Greater Poland Uprising, the Silesian

Uprisings, the Polish-Bolshevik war and the occupation of Vilnius). Therefore, the monuments unveiled in 1925 in Szamocin and five years later in Chodzież are monuments to Freedom. On the other hand, the Poznań monument on Ludgarda Street, dated 1927, honours the soldiers of the 15th Poznań Uhlan Regiment, which was the first insurgent cavalry unit, which at a later time fought in the Polish-Bolshevik war.

World War II was a period of destruction of the Polish patriotic tradition, and tokens from the Greater Poland Uprising were the most fiercely eradicated traces of our history. Many of them have survived till the present day only because they were hidden from the Germans. Two plaques from the monument of insurgents were kept by the Regional Museum in Międzychód, another original plaque (from the year 1924) was hung in 1997 on the building of a school in Urbanów near Opalenica. Medallions, from a monument erected in the year 1926, containing the names of the fallen insurgents from the area of the powiat were saved and hidden by the inhabitants of Wągrowiec in 1939; they were brought back from oblivion as late as in 1970. Some elements of a grave from the cemetery in Rozdrażewo were also hidden from the Nazis. Inside the new building of the railway station in Krotoszyn, there is an original plaque from the year 1932, which was stored by railwayman Robakowski; the monument in this city, erected in 1959, is ornamented with the original eagle from a pre-war monument. The plaque on the insurgent monument in the cemetery in Poznań-Starołęka survived World War II because it was covered with a layer of

mortar.

The commemorated places were not always completely and thoroughly destroyed by the Germans on purpose. The watching of monuments stripped of plaques and inscriptions, and deprived of their patriotic decorative motifs (like e.g. the eagles on the mass tomb in Rosk), must have been just one more depressing element of the enslavement of the native population. The devastated monument on the cemetery in Szubin was left as a "symbol of Nazi barbarism".

The period of occupation also left testament places of executions and the graves of people murdered by Nazis only because they had fought for the freedom of their native land before. In the park at the "Sokół" shooting range in Buk, a monument was erected at the place where two Greater Poland insurgents were shot in 1939. Two participants of the Uprising fallen in 1920 and two others murdered during the occupation period were honoured with a monument in Mochy. A plaque, including the names of 28 insurgents - victims of the Nazis - can be found in the cemetery at Kąkolewska Street in Leszno.

After World War II had come to an end, it became necessary to reconstruct all the spheres of life in the country. Among the structures which required reconstruction were also the insurgent monuments, but given more urgent needs, their reconstruction went slowly. From the year 1948 onwards, a negative assessment of the Greater Poland Uprising was commonly adopted, therefore no new monuments or plaques appeared during that period. The end of the year

1956 marked the beginning of the restoration of the fight of the Greater Poland inhabitants to its rightful place in the history of the nation. From that date, consecutive commemorations could appear again and in many cases they appeared in places where structures destroyed by the Nazis had been present. This is actually the year from which, for instance, the current plaque at the place of death of F. Ratajczak comes.

From the late 1950s and early 1960s, the memories of the events which had taken place several decades ago and the care of those places which reminded people of them were fostered by Committees for the Protection of Monuments to the Struggle and Martyrdom and the Association of Soldiers Fighting for Freedom and Democracy. As part of the Association of Soldiers Fighting for Freedom and Democracy, the National Commission of Veterans of the Greater Poland Uprising, based in Poznań, was established. The commemoration of the events of the Greater Poland Uprising was one of the officially decreed activities of these organisations, however there were even problems with taking stock of the existing monuments and plaques. Work in this direction was conducted by the Western Institute, universities in Poznań and Toruń as well as the Historical Commission of the Poznań district of the Association of Soldiers Fighting for Freedom and Democracy, but their effects were not particularly impressive. According to the stock-take of the year 1965, we had 102 reconstructed monuments and plaques referring to the Uprising and 41 new commemorations. The erection of a central monument devoted to the Uprising in

Poznań encountered certain problems. The concept of its erection had already appeared in 1921, the insurgent circles, authorities and ordinary citizens strived for it. During the inter-war period, the implementation of this initiative was hindered by political disputes and a certain reciprocal animosity between the Greater Poland inhabitants and the central authorities. It is perhaps worth adding that the insurgents themselves funded the plaques spontaneously to honour the memory of their colleagues fallen in the battles for independent Poland. These plaques were hung in church cloisters, where a holy mass was celebrated every year in memoriam, e.g. in the collegiate in Środa Wlkp. and in the Poznań Parish Church.

After the war, it was more important to commemorate the fight against the Nazis and 15 years had to pass before this issue could again be discussed at the level of the provincial instance of the Polish United Workers' Party (PUWP). A great deal of work was put into the finalisation of the design - selected as a result of a contest, as the decision-makers did not like some of the details. The work took longer than planned which resulted in a situation where only the foundation act was laid during the 45th anniversary of the Uprising, the 17-metre core element of the monument was built in the year 1964 and the stone cladding and brown bas-reliefs were ready the following year.

The monument was unveiled on 19 September 1965. Its architect was Alfred Wiśniewski (1916-2011) - a professor at the Higher Arts School in Gdańsk, a Greater Poland citizen by

origin (born in Rogoźno) and the son of an insurgent. He managed to combine modern form, functional properties and the requirements of the prevailing propaganda and also to skilfully balance abstract and realistic elements. It was also very good that the monument received sufficient space - about 0.6 ha. The solution for the monument was accepted by general society. Traditionally, official ceremonies organised every year in December take place in front of it. Fortunately there are no suggestions to change the appearance or "modernise" the monument - although "Drzymała's caravan" and the "activity of Marcin Kasprzak among the workers" were regarded as parts of the insurgent tradition. Also, the symbolic figures of an officer with a sword and a private with a rifle, which are deprived of any "class" undertones, met with a good reception.

A characteristic feature of the Communist era, especially the period after 1968, was the commemoration of the Greater Poland insurgents together with officers from the times of World War II (according to the nomenclature of that period, these were the "freedom and democracy fighters"). Examples of such solutions include the monuments in Zbąszyń (1969), Szkaradowo near Jutrosin (1969), Pępowo (1971), Opalenica (1977) and Kobylin (1979).

At the end of 1989 and the beginning of 1990, the issue of the national remembrance sites stopped being an element of the state propaganda and, in turn, gained a new status as the sites were now to serve the purpose of the preservation of local tradition. The task of taking care of the existing

commemorations was delegated to the lowest level, that is, the local government which is the true host of the given area. The conditions for the rebuilding of the monuments, which had not yet been reconstructed after their destruction during the Nazi occupation, were created. And so in the year 1990, an obelisk in Pogorzela was erected, and one year previously, an insurgent monument in Międzychód was unveiled (in 2002, it was provided with additional plaques containing the names of the fallen insurgents). In the year 1992, the monument in Gębice near Mogilno was rebuilt, and in the year 1999, the same happened with the monuments in Terespotockie near Opalenica and Zaniemyśl. Freedom Monuments were reconstructed in 1993 in Szamocin and in the year 2018 in Chodzież. A new monument, in the area of the place where the previous one had been destroyed, was unveiled in 2004 in Opalenica. In 2016, a reconstructed pre-war monument was located in Brzoza near Bydgoszcz in place of the previous one.

The existing monuments, plaques and tombs have been renovated and subjected to modernisation. In general, the original form of the monument is meticulously preserved while the elements which were destroyed are reconstructed. Sometimes they are complemented with new elements (such as the replica of the pre-war figure of an insurgent placed in 2014 on the tomb in Buk). Sometimes, however, the monuments receive new forms, which are in no way similar to their original shapes; this was the case, for instance, with the graves of Łukasz Kulik in Łowyń near Międzychód (1996) and Andrzej Kaczmarek in

Borek near Jutrosin (2003), which look like other contemporary creations of local stone-cutters.

The resolving of the issue of commemorations in Międzychód also deserves particular recognition. The monument in front of the Town and Municipality Office was originally dedicated to the Greater Poland insurgents and victims of World War II. After reconstruction of the pre-war monument at Dworcowa Street, the existing monument now refers only to the victims from the years 1939-1945.

Monuments and plaques are still being unveiled, and more often than not in the most prestigious locations of the given towns. Among these, there is the monument in Grabowo at the Prosna River (1999), boulders in Kcynia (2004) and Złotniki Kujawskie (2009), plaques on the market squares in Kępno (1995), Czarnków (2004) and Swarzędz (2005), in the church in Łowyń (2002), on the cemetery gate in Skoki (2003), in the school in Łomnica near Zbąszyń (2004), on the defensive wall in Sulechów (2002), on boulders next to the school in Miedzichowo (1998), on the main street crossings in Powidz (1991), Piła (1999) and Walkowice near Czarnków (2001), in the cemetery in Zielona Góra (1999) and at the railway station in Chodzież (2004). Also monuments in the form of sculptures of insurgents have appeared in Boguszyn near Śmigiel (2008), Grodzisk Wielkopolski (2013) and Wolsztyn (2014).

Local episodes from the Uprisings are also commemorated, e.g. the fact of the hanging of a flag over the city for the first time is remembered

by a stone next to the water tower in Śrem (2007). Also individual participants of the Uprisings such as: Józef Raczkowski in Chodzież (2002), Gerard Pająkowski in Gniewkowo (2003), Jan Mertka in Przygodzice (2004), Jan Rzepa in Wronki (2006) and Andrzej Kopa in Trzcielina (2006) are commemorated. The memory of General Józef Dowbor-Muśnicki found a special place in Lusowo, where a memorial hall was created in a new school which was put into service in 1996. 12 years later, the memorial hall was transferred to the Museum of Greater Poland Insurgents which was established by the local government of the Tarnowo Górze Commune.

The developing interest in the history of that period resulted in the appearance of memorial sites of a new type: plaques which list the names of participants of the Uprising from a given town or parish. The first of these was a huge slab, in the cemetery in Środa Wielkopolska, established in the year 2005. Others were then erected in Buk (2008), Dopiewo (2008), Margonin (2014), Miedzichowo (2014), Opalenica (2006) and Wilkowyja (2009); there is also a stone with a plaque in Otusz (2014). The difficulties with the listing of all insurgents manifested themselves most prominently in Wiry: next to a plaque with 30 names dated 2006, it was necessary to unveil another one two years later, including another 13 insurgents. Soon after that, information appeared that some more insurgents, which would need to be commemorated, were found.

Recent years have brought one other way of commemoration of the Uprising. The developing art of large-surface murals also covers the subject

of historic events, including the Greater Poland Uprising. These are usually made on social initiatives, supported with the organisational and financial aid of local communities and local governments. A particular role in these activities was played by fans of a football team - "Lech" Poznań. Insurgent murals can be seen in Chodzież (Podgórna Street; 2017), Czerwonak (at the fire station of the Voluntary Fire Brigade; 2015), Gniezno (at two locations; 2013), Jarocin (Rzeczypospolita district; 2016), Lusowo (at the entrance to the village; 2013), Nowy Tomyśl (on Komunalna Street; 2014), Opalenica (at 5 Stycznia Street; 2015), Ostrów Wielkopolski (on Kościuszki Street; 2012), Piła (on Sikorskiego Street; 2015), Rogalinek (on a bus shelter; 2018), Rządkowo near Piła (on the main road; 2015), Śrem (on Wojska Polskiego Street; 2016), Świebodzin (on the Municipal Office; 2013) and Zdziechowa (at a bus stop; 2016). A huge painting presenting three people associated with insurgent operations in the Krotoszyn area was made in the year 2015 on the wall of a house on Zdunowska Street in that town. In the year 2017, the wall of the sports hall in Buk was ornamented with an eight-part painting related to the Uprising. The first of the murals, painted in the year 2012 in Poznań next to Teatr Polski (Polish Theatre) does not exist anymore, but it was replaced in the year 2018 by a huge composition on a tenement building at 33 Dąbrowskiego Street .

There is no doubt that the Greater Poland Uprising has currently become an important element of the regional tradition, so other forms of its commemoration should also be expected.

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