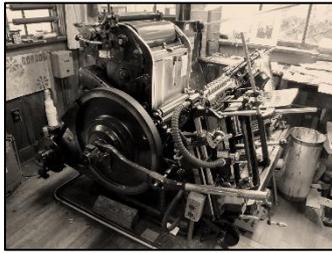


Stefan Zdobyszław Żółkowski

An Airman's Flight from Poland to Britain 1939-1940

At the beginning of the war I was thirty years old and had a printing business and lived in my own flat in Warsaw. My father, Alexander Żółkowski, and my step-mother, Helena, lived on Wiktorska Street, our family home. My brother, Jan and his wife Jadwiga and their four year-old daughter, Wanda, lived on Marszałkowska Street, one of the main thoroughfares in Warsaw, which he also used as his office; he was a lawyer.¹



Printing Business, Warsaw



Warsaw street, 1939



Marszałkowska Street, Warsaw

My brother and I were reserve officers, he in the Army and me in the Air Force. As he was five years my senior he had done his military service (obligatory) in Poland in 1925 while I did mine from 1930. Jan had been 'called-up' in the third week of August 1939 to his regiment near the Russian border in north-east Poland. I was mobilized as a Captain² to No.1 Regiment in the Air Force on 31st August 1939 and I joined-up the next day.

I reported to the gates of Okęcie Aerodrome³ but they were locked as all the planes had been flown away before the Germans had arrived. Groups of officers were standing about and the airfield had been bombed by the Germans that morning. We were told that the Air Force had been dispersed to various airfields around Poland and we were taken in trucks to the racetrack at Służewiec, south of Warsaw where two or three hundred Air Force personnel were assembled. There we were fed and slept for three or four days. We heard bombs falling nearby.

Went to Warsaw see my partner, Jerzy Sliwinski, in our printing works to make arrangements and to give written authority to deal on my behalf. When I returned to the racetrack I was told we would be leaving on 6th September. Warsaw was being bombed all the time with Polish planes trying to destroy German bombers.



Okęcie Aerodrome, Warsaw 1939



Warsaw Royal Palace bombed, 1939

¹ Jan Żółkowski was one among 22,000 Polish officers and nationals murdered by the Russian NKVD at Katyn in 1940.

² Captain or Kapitan in the Polish Air Force was equivalent to a Flight Lieutenant in the R.A.F.

³ Now Warsaw Chopin Airport

Tuesday 5th September, 1939

Went again into Warsaw to say goodbye to my parents at Wiktorska Street. Had my last meal at home and my step-mother made a parcel of food with some towels and other things to take with me. When I was leaving my father came with me to the tram stop in Pulawska Street.

While we waited there I gave my father written authority to act for me in any business matters needed. The tram came and we embraced and said goodbye and he stood and waved to me as the tram left. That was the last time I saw my father.⁴



Warsaw tram 1939

When returning to Sturziwice the tram was stopped by a large crowd outside the British Embassy - because Britain had declared War on Germany on 3rd September. They were cheering the British and celebrating.

That evening at the racecourse, a group of Air Force Reserve officers (about twenty-five of us) made preparations to leave next morning as we could not report to our own regiments. Amongst us was one pilot who had left hospital the day after an air accident, just before the war broke out.

Wednesday 6th September, 1939



Luftwaffe Stuka dive-bombers, 1939

Hearing bombs still falling on Warsaw, we left in vans for Warsaw East Railway station in Praga. The train was packed with civilians leaving Warsaw but we had reserved places. We were ordered to go to Brześć aerodrome on the East Polish-Russian border. We soon left, going East through Mińsk Mazowiecki. After leaving, German bombers attacked the train and we all had to scramble out and hide in ditches alongside the track and the train was damaged. The planes returned and we saw one girl minding geese out in a field. One of the planes swooped down and machine-gunned her and her geese. We were all shocked by pilot's inhumanity.

We walked back several kilometres to Mińsk as our train was out of action. There in a garage we found an open truck and we requisitioned this, filled it up with petrol, took several more cans of petrol and about twenty of us set off for Brześć.

In the afternoon we reached Siedlce - my birthplace - which was burning. We passed St Stanisław church where I was christened and turned off towards Brześć but found we could not reach the airfield as it had been bombed and personnel who had escaped were trying to hide in trenches. We hid the truck among the damaged buildings near the airfield and we also made for the trenches with the others. We found the commanding officer who was unsettled by our arrival and told us he was moving all his men south to Zaleszczyki, close to the Romanian frontier. He said we had better get petrol and, as soon as the bombing stopped we should get away by truck.

⁴ www.polandinexile

Saturday 9th – Sunday 10th September, 1939

We stayed at the airfield and I was appointed to arrange food with Pilot Officer Pajko as my assistant. We all pooled our money and bought a primus stove, pan and cups to make drinks. We left Brześć and spent the night near Włodzimierz.

Tuesday 12th September, 1939

We journeyed on towards Łuck and on the way we saw bombing in the distance. We stopped in a wood, leaving the van on the road and could hear the bombs and machine gunfire. We saw German planes approaching and spread out in the woods, lying on the ground and I watched a plane approaching me with bullets hitting the ground. Fortunately it stopped firing about one hundred yards from me and I escaped death and injury. We stayed the night there. I went with a driver to the town (without any problems) and managed to buy some food. We left the next morning.



Łuck synagogue – S.E. Kresy Region, Poland

Wednesday 13th September, 1939

We were getting low on petrol so we stopped in a small town called Krzemieniec. The inhabitants told us that Russians were crossing the frontier. We were nonplussed and didn't know what to do. We asked if there was any fuel and were told that there were no petrol stations around but they told us there was a bus there. We approached it and found it was a British Leyland coach with two men inside. They said they had come from Katowice where the Germans were bombing. They had filled the bus with spare parts and tyres. Then they said, "We just heard the Russians have crossed the frontier and we don't know what to do", so we decided to commandeer the bus. We deposited all the spares in a nearby school and the driver took us towards Zaleszczyki on the Romanian border.

Thursday 14th September, 1939

We slept overnight in the coach and next morning drove to Wisnowiec and spent the night there.



Zaleszczyki Polish border Spa Town, 1939

Friday 15th September, 1939

We arrived at mid-day in Zaleszczyki and reported to the Headquarters of the Polish Forces, housed in one of the larger buildings in this spa town. We were told that we would be crossing the Romanian frontier in two days and were given Polish money and told to buy civilian clothes and other necessities for a long journey. The Commanding Officer from Brzesz, who had also arrived in town, asked if he and his adjutant, a cook and a girl waitress from the Officers Mess could join us on our "luxury bus".

Saturday 16th September 1939

We spent the day buying goods and resting after our strenuous journey. I met up with one of my old friends, Ryszard Walcrak from Warsaw who had been at college with me.

Sunday, 17th September 1939

We reached the frontier at noon. There were many cars and trucks full of Poles and some were pilots who had been shot down and others from all over Poland who had abandoned their planes for lack of fuel. We were probably the last few Poles to escape to Romania. To mark the border between Poland and Romania there was a signpost reading 'No. 183. Poland Romania'. We were all addressed by a Polish general who said, "I am sorry that we have to leave our dear country. I understand that some of you who have families may wish to stay and fight." One of the twenty or so who went back was my friend Walcrak as he had a wife and new baby. There were no border guards, nor any Romanian authorities at the frontier and we drove through the countryside without making any contact with Romanians. We slept the night in the coach.

Monday 18th September 1939

We entered Suzawa and spoke to the police there. They did not know what to do with us. They phoned somewhere and told us to go on to Focsani.



Focsani, Romania



Susza, Romania

Tuesday 19th September 1939

Next morning the police gave us a guide and we entered Focsani in the evening. There again, it was a similar story and we were directed to go to Odabesti with another guide who had food for us provided by the police.

Wednesday 20th September 1939

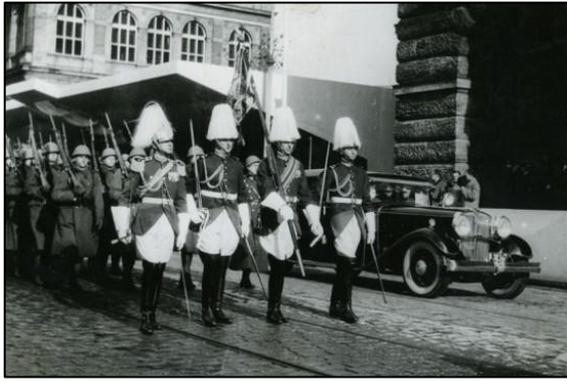
When we arrived there was repetition of what had happened over the last two days and the police said we had to return to Focsani.

Thursday 21st September 1939

We returned to Focsani but this time we were sent on to Gallati with a guide the next morning.

Friday September 22nd – Monday, 2nd October 1939

Following that we moved on to Tulcra. It is a small town at the start of the delta on the Danube as it flows into the Black Sea. Although the Danube is a beautiful river, the delta is ugly, a wide marshy swamp stretching for kilometres and with banks of rushes. It is infested with malaria-bearing mosquitoes and is impassable. About a mile from Tulcra was a complex of barracks where the Royal



Romanian Royal Guards, Tulcea Romania



King Carol II

Guards of King Carol II lived. Several hundred Poles arrived here and the officers were billeted in private houses with other ranks in tents in the Royal Garden near the barracks.

We all felt very sad and confused. We had

left our homes and families and here we were, virtual prisoners and not knowing what would happen to us. We got some supplies from the houses but had to supplement it with basic food bought in the town. Some of us were reduced to tears when we thought of all we had left behind. We all felt betrayed by the Polish government and military leaders and noisy arguments broke out between the air force personnel and the army, each blaming the other for our plight and that brought about days of anger and strife. We had lost our country and our freedom, hard won following years of oppression by Russia and Germany and had now reached this desolate state.

After three or four days we heard that the Polish men in the tents had revolted, disarmed the guards surrounding their encampment and, advancing on the barracks, had taken over control from those guards. The Romanian police must have phoned Bucharest because a Romanian general from the War Ministry arrived shortly by plane.

The Poles demanded that their officers, who had been barred from the men's camp, should be allowed to take charge there, that the terrible food situation should be improved and that they should have toilet and sanitary arrangements made for them. The general agreed to this and the officers organized supervision of their men.

The days passed very slowly. We were so despondent and could not do anything to better our situation nor could we contact our families in Poland. Some personnel had started to disappear and we found that a number of the officers had left Tulcea and made their way to Bucharest, trying to get to France.

Pajko, my friend with whom I travelled from Warsaw and I decided to make for Bucharest to obtain passports. We had to do it secretly because we were not supposed to leave Tulcea. We hid in bushes on the side of the track opposite the railway station. When a train stopped we jumped into a carriage, gave some money to the ticket collector and after four hours we found ourselves in the capital. We found the Polish Embassy and were shocked to find queues of Polish soldiers in civilian clothes encircling the building five times.



Bucharest University

We managed to find some friends in the crowds. They had been in a queue for several days and nights. The Polish officers were controlled by Romanians and it was slow work as they were very unpleasant but nevertheless I obtained a passport.⁵ The Poles we met were living in an hotel near the Embassy and said we could stay there too. After three days we saw we had no hope of getting travel papers as we had to pay a lot for the hotel and food. So we had no option but to return to Tulcra.

I decided to grow a beard so that when I went for a visa I could pass as a non-military person, as they only issuing them to civilians. The authorities had decided there were too many Poles in Tulcra and so they moved some of us to a large village nearby called Hainolidia. I was billeted on a farm, a poor wooden building with just one room on each side of a corridor. It was a very poor place. The farmer and his family of four had a slightly bigger room while I had the smaller room with just a wooden bed and nothing else but a single candle to light me to bed.

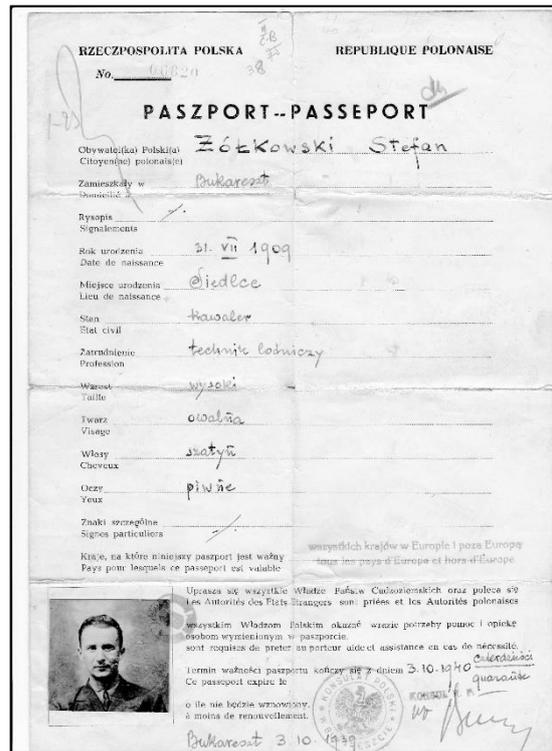
There was no mattress only a pile of maize stems cut to fit the length of the bed, no pillow and one linen sheet. I had a blanket with me and made a pillow out of my clothes. I tried to sleep on this but after an hour or so, I separated the maize stems and tried to sleep between them but not successfully. The "bathroom" was a tin basin on a wooden box in the passage with a jug of cold water and no soap or towel. There was a dry closet outside.

In the morning I ate some of the bread and meat I had brought with me. There was a small baby lying in a box outside the house. I found that every two or three days the baby had a malaria attack. Each time I passed it, there was a cloud of flies on its face which I tried to shoo away. They lived in abject poverty.

With nothing to do and getting hungry, I walked to the village and found an eating place (it could hardly be called a restaurant). There was Pajko and a group of Poles. He told me they had bread, eggs and tea or coffee. As the coffee was almost solid we stuck to tea with sugar but without milk of course. We stayed in that village a week with nothing to do but eat bread and eggs and drink tea. Then we were told to get on a train somewhere nearby. We all met up at the village 'café' and walked two or three miles to the railway stop which was not a station and we boarded the train. It stopped frequently. At some stops we could buy more eggs and bread. There were soldiers with us on the train.

Saturday 21st October 1939

After four days on the train we arrived at Babadag, a small town in western Romania on the banks of the wide Taita River. From there some of us were marched in columns to a village about two kilometres away called Rossari-de-vede. We were put up in very poor rooms over a café. Pajko and some others went to a small hotel in Babadag.



Passport from Polish Embassy Bucharest 31st Oct 1939

⁵ There is an inconsistency in the diary as Stefan Żółkowski's archive has a copy of a Passport issued by the Polish Embassy in Bucharest dated 13th October 1939 with an expiry on the same date!

Friday 27th October 1939

I moved back to Babadag from where some Poles had escaped to try to get to Bucharest although the town was surrounded by soldiers. One day Pajko said he would also try to get away by swimming across the river, in order to get to Bucharest. But I couldn't swim so had to stay, so I lost my travelling companion.

Sunday 29th October 1939

I plucked up the courage to try to get away. We knew that a heavily-guarded bus left early each morning to go to Bucharest.

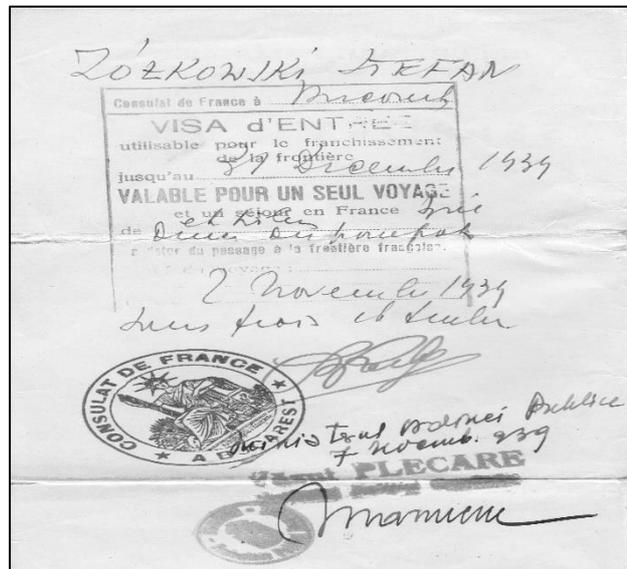
Monday 30th October 1939

I rose early and went to the garage where the bus was parked overnight. There were some women with baskets going by bus so I sat among them on the bus. It pulled up to a bus stop and quickly filled. I noticed that seats immediately behind the driver were vacant. The bus was waiting to leave. A car arrived out of which stepped the head of the town's police and his wife and they took the empty seats. A policeman got onto the bus, as was the usual procedure I had heard, to check if there were any Poles on board. He saw the police chief, saluted him and after a few words, got off again. That had been a stroke of luck!

I arrived in Bucharest at midday without any further trouble and went to the Polish Embassy. I was pleasantly surprised as there were no queues outside in the street. I wondered how many hundreds of Poles had passed through Bucharest on their way. My first thought was to find Pajko so I went to the hotel where we had stayed before but he had left and I booked in. The next day at 09.00 I reported to the Embassy and there were queues inside. I was advised to queue for residency papers and it took half the day to get them.

Wednesday, 1st – Wednesday 2nd November 1939

While all that was happening, I had the first news I had heard in Polish about what was going on in the world. Mussolini had joined the Germans and the news caused general depression. I was given twenty-five lei. The next day, I attended the Embassy again to obtain a visa for France. Talking to others in the queue, I found that no one had written home to Poland because they feared that the Gestapo would make trouble for their relatives and even possibly for themselves in Bucharest. At last I got to the passport desk and spent the rest of the day answering questions and writing my down my life-story. I was told to come back the next day when I finally received the visa.



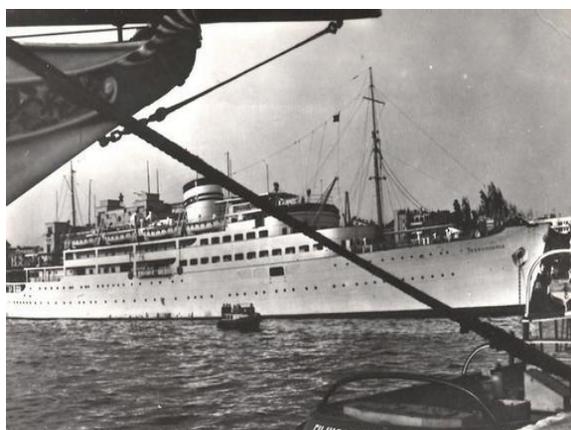
French visa issued Bucharest 02.11.1939

I was given a train ticket to the port of Constanta and that meant I would have to leave the next day. I was given the name of a hotel there where there would be a room for me. I was told that there would be ten Polish Air Force mechanics and that I was to look after them. We would have to stay quietly in our rooms and only send out one person at a time for necessities. We were all in civilian clothes. I was

told that a sergeant would come to my room and give me eleven tickets for a boat. When in Constanta we were to go one-by-one to the port and not speak Polish at all especially while we were going through customs as there would be German officials there. We were to be as invisible as possible. The ship would be called the 'Transylvania'.

Thursday 8th November 1939

In the afternoon a civilian came to my room and I immediately realized that I knew him as he was a member of the same sports club as me, the "Skra" in Warsaw. We were very happy to see each other and he told me that he was the man I was to expect who would bring the tickets. He said he did not intend to go to France and soon he would be going back to Warsaw to his wife and children. He gave me eleven tickets. He told me that as long as we were in Romania it was very important that we keep a low profile until we sailed. As I said goodbye, I remembered that I had some zlotys that I had been given as we crossed the frontier so I gave them to him to help him on his way. I gave my men all the instructions I had. The ship was to sail the next day in the evening.



M.S Transylvania 1938



Romania exit visa and MS Transylvania boarding card

Saturday 9th – Tuesday 12th November 1939

We embarked and were very happy to be leaving Romania. We shared three cabins and felt that, at last, we could breathe. We felt free although conditions had not been too bad in Romania. The 'Transylvania' was a small boat going from port to port. We were the only Poles on board while the others were probably all Romanians. We left the Black Sea by the southwest corner. It was night but we could not sleep very well. We sailed through the Sea of Marmara, through the Dardanelles and we saw the dawn and beautiful sunshine.

About midday, we stopped in the port of Eirens in Greece. We were told we would be staying about three hours there. I decide to get off and found a tram going into Athens. In about fifteen minutes we were at the terminus. I got off the tram and there I found a wide boulevard stretching into the distance. There on a hill was the Acropolis. It was such a beautiful sight that I was quite overcome with the joy of seeing it.

Suddenly I remembered that I had left my men on the ship and perhaps the captain might decide to leave the port. So I returned as quickly as possible and when I arrived my men told me that a Polish freighter had arrived in the port, full of Polish personnel. It was so crammed and packed with men that the captain was afraid it would capsize. I tried to see if there was anyone I knew on board but there was not. Our captain set sail. He told me he was making for Beirut.

Monday 13th November 1939

We arrived in Beirut and were told to disembark. We didn't know what to do but soon a Pole in civilian clothing turned up and told us that a bus would soon arrive and that we would be billeted in the barracks of a French-African troop for two days. There were quite a lot of Poles already there and we were put in the officers' quarters. The food was good but a bit too spicy!

Next day I went with two other officers into Beirut and, walking around found ourselves in the Jewish Quarter. We heard someone shouting excitedly, "Polacy, Polacy!" with a typically Jewish accent. We turned around and saw a man in Krakow-Jewish clothes with black hat, beard and side-locks! He threw his arms around us, shaking our hands. He was so happy to see us. He had left Poland several years earlier and when heard us speaking Polish, he was delighted. My friends left and I stayed behind and spoke to him. Among other things, I asked him if he could tell me where I could change Polish money. He didn't want to do anything about it but then he changed the zlotys for fifty francs. I said goodbye to him and caught up with my friends.

Later we walked to a big park where we saw huge eucalyptus trees. One of us had a camera and a passer-by took a picture of the three of us. By this time we were exhausted and found transport back to the barracks.

Tuesday 14th – Monday 20th November 1939

The next morning buses were waiting for us to take us back to the port. Here we found a beautiful French cruise ship called SS Champollion. We didn't realise that it was for us until we were directed on board. We set sail and called into Jaffa. We were in the luxury quarters with plentiful food and lots of French wine.

We sailed on to Alexandria and stayed there for two days. Next morning an excursion was arranged to see the city but I then had my first terrible attack of malaria. My friends called the French doctor as I was half-conscious and praying to die. He gave me quinine tablets and slowly the symptoms lessened and I managed to sleep so that the



SS Champollion luxury liner at Beirut 1939



Marseille harbour 1939

following morning I felt better. We left Alexandria and were told that there was danger from German U-boats. We sailed directly across the Mediterranean, passing Sardinia and Italy en route.

Tuesday 21st November 1939

We reached the port of Marseille and disembarked. There was a special train for Polish personnel and we were taken to Lyons. The next day we were taken by bus to Bron airfield⁶ where we filled-in forms and were registered. Polish officials in charge.

⁶ In the autumn of 1939, the Lyon-Bron Airport was planned to be used as a training ground for Polish pilots who were able to get out of Poland during the September campaign, but eventually they were accommodated in Lyon without the prospect of starting French training.

At the aerodrome we found hundreds of Polish officers and men walking about or standing in groups aimlessly, talking about the chances of some kind of employment. After having travelled across Europe in all sorts of ways, they were hoping here to be able to start fighting the enemy for the freedom of Poland. Our pilots expected to be able to fly again but there were no available planes at all. It was surprising and shocking that the French didn't know what to do with us. They were saying "the Poles had caused the war; they had lost their country and now they wanted to occupy France"!



Bron Aerodrome 1940

Outside the Polish Headquarters there were large posters hanging with lists of different jobs on which we were to write our name, rank and qualifications. I put my name down to train as a pilot. We were given French money and told that we officers had to find somewhere to live in town, as there was accommodation only for mechanics at the aerodrome. After a long search among the hundreds of men at Bron, I found my friend Pajko who told me he had a room in a low quality hotel in the town called the d'Albion. It had a large double bed so we could both sleep there. The room had a wash-basin with running cold water but there was no heating in the room.

Each day we had to meet in the town park in the unheated summer theatre. Our breakfast was a small cup of coffee and a croissant at a stall on our way to the park. Our presence was recorded and we were given operational information and any news of the war. We spent the rest of November doing this and at the beginning of December we were told we could send parcels to our families in Poland. These would be sent from Portugal (a neutral country) and consisted only of tins of sardines! After the war my step-mother, Babcia, told me that my father was so happy because he knew I was still alive and the sardines were hidden in the cellar and only used when times were bad and food scarce.



Base Aérienne Polonaise Bron Identity Card 28.11.1939

The days were very tedious with no work. We walked about Lyons, killing time, eating lunch at a little café near our hotel and then for the rest of the day we bought food and wine and ate in our room. We were even able to get out of the town and once we went by train to Grenoble.

The winter was very severe and, unusually, there was heavy snow in central France. Our room was freezing with no heating so we piled everything on the top of the bedcovers; old blankets we had bought with us, our coats and our jackets. I was even pleased that Pajko smoked as it did seem give a bit of warmth!

December 1939

Christmas was approaching and we wanted to celebrate our Polish 'Wigilia' with two other Poles in the hotel. It was a Saturday and, on the way back from our daily meeting at the park we broke off a small branch of a fir tree. We bought two long French loaves, two bottles of wine, four or five tins of sardines and we all sat on the bed in the hotel to eat them. All the time we were thinking of our families in Poland, probably starving under the German occupation. We sung our carols and that was the extent of our Christmas Eve. Next day, we went to a mass in the church.

January 1940

The New Year came and went without any celebration. It became warmer and the snow thawed. We often went by bus to the aerodrome to see if there was any work for us. I asked, "What about my application for flying training?" They replied, "You are an engineer - we have hundreds of pilots but we need engineers".

Wednesday 28th February 1940

On 28th February a list was issued on which I found my name at last. We had been given French Air Force uniforms in January and were told that we would be going to a factory which rebuilt aero-engines after they had completed a tour of duty. The engines were made by "Gnome-Rhône"⁷ and the name of the factory was A.R.A.A. in Limoges. A group of two hundred Poles was formed and the Commanding Officer was Kapitan Lojasiewicz and his deputy Kapitan Kwikiewicz. The other officers were: Kapitan Sendorek, Puzylucki and myself, Kapitan Żółkowski. I was put in charge of the mechanics' workshops and Kapitan Wacek Markowski was the official interpreter. It was the first time I had heard of him since I left Poland. The rest of the team was made-up of non-commissioned officers and airmen mechanics.



Gnome-Rhône 14N Engine



Polish aircraft technicians 1940

⁷ The **Gnome-Rhône 14N** was a 14-cylinder two-row air-cooled [radial engine](#) designed and manufactured by [Gnome-Rhône](#). A development of the pre-war [Gnome-Rhône 14K](#), the 14N was used on several French and German aircraft of [World War II](#).

Tuesday 5th March 1940

We set off from Lyons and two hours on the train we reached Limoges in central France. We were taken on coaches to the A.A.R.A. factory on the outskirts of Limoges. It was a huge complex with the gates heavily guarded by military police. Behind the main office block was a large marquee with beds for our airmen. When we had seen the men settled-in, we officers were taken to the town and were billeted in the 'De la Paix' - a first class hotel. It was nice to have a comfortable, warm room and bed. The next day that we discovered that we had to pay for each meal as we ate it and, when we saw the room tariff, it was so expensive that we could not afford the hotel and thought we must move.



Saint Martial Bridge - Avignon

Wednesday, 6th March 1940

Next morning we went to the factory where there was an official welcome party with bands which played the French and Polish National anthems with speeches by the managers of the factory. We were then told that the factory worked 12 hours a day from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. with a two-hour lunch-break and a day-off on Sunday.

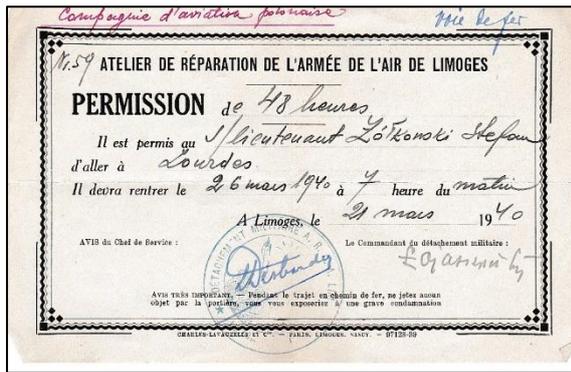
After the welcome and speeches we were taken back to the hotel where we spent two

hours eating lunch! We returned to the factory and found the office where all the officers had desks allotted to them. After work in the evening I went with my friend Wacek to look round the town to try to find a cheaper hotel. We found the 'Marcean' hotel - very nice with comfy single rooms. I booked in and next day moved in. Wacek was afraid of moving - but next day I went to the C.O. and told him what I intended to do. He was angry and said I should not have done that. Wacek then decided that he would move too. After two or three days, I was disciplined by being called to the C.O.'s desk and told I had to lecture the men in the marquee about the necessity of staying friendly with the French workers.

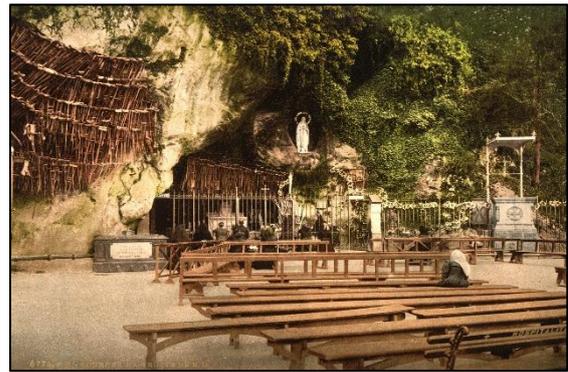
Sunday, 10th March 1940

Today I gave my lecture and talked for about half an hour on French-Polish co-operation in the factory. There was not much camaraderie between the two nationalities. Apparently the Poles worked too enthusiastically and too quickly for the French. The Poles were anxious to do their bit and make some sort of fight against the Germans and further the war effort but the French took it easy and did not get too worried about that. The French kept saying "Slow down" to the Poles. They also spent a lot of time in the toilets, chatting and smoking. Sometimes rows broke out in the toilets and the French tried to rough-up the Poles but they gave as much as they got. The French even kept bottles in their overcoats that hung on racks from which they frequently took swigs of wine and brandy!

One incident I remember took place with a reconditioned engine. It had been re-built by the Polish squad and then sent to the test chamber for testing. As the engine began to run the whole thing blew up. The factory police were called-in and there was a big hoo-ha, with the French blaming the Polish workers. The pieces of engine were taken for investigation and it was found that sand had been put into the engine. The incident was never fully resolved, however.



48-hour pass to visit Lourdes 24.11.1940



Lourdes

Sunday 24th March 1940

We managed to take time and make some local excursions. Wacek and I left Limoges at 3 a.m. in the morning and went by train to Lourdes where we arrived that afternoon. We found it crowded with pilgrims so we joined the people who were walking to the Shrine and attended the open-air mass in that holy place. We prayed there for our families and for Poland. We stayed overnight in a hotel run by monks and returned next day to Limoges. We also went to the Limoges porcelain factory.

We had a Polish football team of which I was the manager and we played several matches against local teams on Sundays.

Monday 22nd April 1940

With money I had saved up, I bought a jacket for 525 Francs and a pair of slacks for 150 Francs.

Sunday 28th April 1940

Today I received a card from my father to say he was alive and well. He also told me that my brother Jan had been taken prisoner by the Russians and was in a camp in Starobielsk but I did not know then that he would be murdered at Katyn. I was having attacks of malaria every three days and had to stay in bed. The factory nurse supplied me with malaria tablets.

Monday 17th – Monday 24th June 1940

The war continued and we had news that the Germans had broken a treaty and were moving south through France. Shortly after we heard artillery for the first time and it drew nearer the next day. Our Polish Commanding Officer met with all the Polish officers and asked us what we wanted to do. It was decided that we would all leave Limoges and make for the south of France.

Wacek, as interpreter, went to the factory boss and informed him about our decision. The manager said he was sorry we were going but understood the situation very well. Wacek also asked him to help to reserve seats on southbound trains for us all. He tried to do that but about half-an-hour later he told us that the last trains would be leaving Limoges the next morning and that it was impossible to book seats.

Unfortunately it was one of my days when malaria struck and Wacek asked the nurse to come to my room with quinine and other medicine. I was semi-conscious and the nurse felt sorry for me. I was so weak and had tears in my eyes because I thought I would not be able to leave. I was sick all night and it seemed as if I would not be able to get up and leave with the rest. At first light I felt a little better and forced myself to get up and pack my things. Wacek came to my room and helped me to get to the waiting coaches. We found that of our airmen, five had deserted and were staying behind. At the

station the train was already waiting and was full of people. They all looked like civilians with some army deserters. The French taunted us and said, "The Poles are escaping again". They tried to stop us getting in but some were hanging on to the carriage doors and even on the couplings between the carriages. However, all our men managed to get aboard. The train progressed very slowly and after two days travelling we arrived in Toulouse.

In Toulouse we found another group of about two hundred men who had worked in an aircraft factory in the town and we all boarded another train going south. We had to change trains once more but, in the afternoon of June 24th, we arrived at the fishing village of Port Vendres on the Mediterranean, next to the Spanish border. We had to walk with our luggage about two miles to the port. There was a large barracks complex that had been used as a camp for escapees from the civil war in Spain. There were beds and heaps of straw and we told to use those but as we tried to sleep we



Port Vendres French/Spanish border

were bitten by swarms of insects - lice and bugs. We took our blankets, shook them well and went to sleep on the sand dunes on the beach.

We were ordered to go to the port where we found a Polish Group Captain who had arranged two large trawlers to take us to Oran in Algeria. We embarked and arrived the next evening. There was an empty train waiting for us, arranged by the French.



Polish Airmen aboard trawler 25.06.1940



Through the Atlas Mountains 27.06.1940

Thursday 27th June 1940

We travelled for a night and a day through the Atlas Mountains and reached Marrakesh in the early morning. When we got out of the train, we crossed over from the station and found a huge open space set-up with tables and there were bands and a reception committee of French generals and officers. We lined-up in columns and the officials made speeches to welcome us, saying how the Poles and French had been fighting together against the common enemy. The National anthems of both countries were played and the Poles all shouted "Nie

zye Francje - Long Live France"! We were invited to sit down at the tables and were fed a delicious French meal with wine, of course.

Friday 28th June 1940

We slept on the train all night and left Marrakesh the next day on the same train. We travelled through Morocco and finally arrived at Casablanca airport. It was very hot and the sun was blazing down. We left the train and lay about on the grass, then we were told anyone who wanted could

stay on the grass or else be taken by truck to the town where there were barracks. I was one of the silly ones who stayed. When the sun set it was a lovely evening but as darkness fell it became extremely cold and we felt like we were in Iceland! I had my overcoat and two blankets but was still frozen. In the morning we were taken to the barracks. These were in a very poor district and all my dreams of romantic Casablanca vanished. It was filthy and stank. We stayed two days in Casablanca.

Thursday 2nd July 1940⁸

We were taken in lorries to the old port and found an English collier tied-up there. It had discharged its cargo of coal and the crew were trying to clean it up. Our dreams of a luxury liner were dashed! When we boarded we found no comfortable beds, just floors of steel sheets where we all slept with our two blankets, clothes and our bags or suitcases to use as pillows. We were the only cargo and set sail that night. It was horrid with so many bodies packed onto the boat. However, we were happy to be in British hands at last.



Coal ship similar to one used in journey from Casablanca to Glasgow

Friday 3rd July 1940

About midday, we reached the Straits of Gibraltar where we had to wait in the Mediterranean for a convoy with which we would travel. We stayed on board for three days as several additional small groups of Poles were brought to the ship.



Naval convoy in Bay of Biscay 1940

⁸ In the original manuscript this date was given as Tuesday 2nd August 1940 but it appears to have been incorrect

Tuesday 7th July 1940

In a convoy of over twenty ships including a British Navy destroyer and other craft, we left the Mediterranean and began our voyage to Great Britain. On board there was one Polish-English guide-book which we all had to share. A group of us would have it for half-an-hour while we copied out words. Then it was passed to another group and we learned the words until it was our turn to get learn new ones. We tried to speak to the ship's officers and found out that we would be sailing out into the Atlantic in a wide arc and then on to England. We did this to avoid German planes and U-boats which patrolled the coastal waters. In spite of this, two of our convoy were sunk en route.



The River Clyde at Glasgow: start of a new life

Wednesday 15th July 1940

We had arrived in Britain but found it to be Scotland and not England! We sailed up the River Clyde and landed in Glasgow. As we came up the river, I remember seeing red vehicles in the distance like toys. They turned out to be double-decker buses, something we had never seen in our lives. We disembarked and were taken by coaches to a large park on the outskirts of the city where we were housed in tents.

It was to be the start of a new life.



Stefan Żółkowski - 1940

*Edited by Adrian Żółkowski-O'dell from the diary of Stefan Żółkowski,
translated by Winifred Żółkowska-O'dell circa 1990*