

# Polish partisan leader recalls liberating Holiszow

BY  
ANTONI BOHUN-DABROWSKI

After the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939, Polish Army Colonel Antoni Bohun-Dabrowski joined the pro-Western partisans as commander of the Holy Cross Brigade. The following portion from his memoirs has not previously been published in English. It is excerpted from "Byłem Dowódcą Brygady Światochryzyskiej," which was published in Polish by Veritas Foundation Publication Centre, London, 1984. The Colonel's son, Andre Skarbek, wrote the introduction and translated the excerpt. They were brought to the attention of The Jewish Voice by Deal resident Maria Segall, who is the Colonel's daughter.

**Introduction:** The war in Europe was on the verge of ending by spring of 1945. The advance of the Third Army under the command of General Patton was halted by the strong defenses of German Army near the village of Bischofsstein on the border between Germany and Czechoslovakia. In the mean time, a large contingent of Polish partisans was making its way between the Soviet and German fronts in Czechoslovakia. After four long and perilous months they stopped to rest in the small village of Vshokary. They hoped to escape the Soviet grasp and join with the American forces.

Polish commander Colonel Antoni Bohun-Dabrowski met with representatives of the Czech underground. They informed the commander of the Holy Cross Brigade that, about three miles from Vshokary, the Germans had established a women's concentration camp which held approximately one thousand prisoners. Some of them were engaged in

the manufacture of ammunition in a factory next to the camp. But there also were two heavily guarded barracks cordoned off with high voltage barbed wire and surrounded by strategically placed gasoline cannisters. Approximately 280 Jewish inmates were inside. The Colonel recollects: this information shook me very deeply. I immediately started planning the liberation of the camp. May 4, 1945: the whole day was dedicated to the penetration of the area near the camp, learning the extent of the German opposition, and scouting the placement of German heavy machine guns. May 5, 1945: the whole Brigade was placed on alert from 6 AM. I decide to initiate the attack at noon time when the majority of the German troops were having lunch. At 11:30, with the signal from a green flare, the Brigade commenced advancing toward the assault. The second battalion of 202 regiment was moving with difficulty through the bombed terrain littered with broken and uprooted trees. A short distance from the objective, the battalion encountered a deep canal over which only one narrow bridge existed. For a brief moment it stopped the battalion in its tracks. Suddenly came the command "Run across the bridge." In a matter of a few minutes the whole battalion made it across. From German bunkers, machine guns fire whistled above our heads.

With a fierce and violent onslaught, the battalion under the command of Major Rusin permeated the German defenses in the area around the administration buildings and the mess hall. As expected, most of the SS troops were having lunch

and were taken by surprise. After a short battle, they raised the white flag of surrender and slowly began abandoning the buildings. At the same time the battalion of the 202nd regiment under the command of Captain Step engaged the Germans at bunker N 1 and N 2. After some brief but fierce fighting they overran the bunkers and occupied the munitions factory.

Meanwhile, the first battalion of the 204th regiment under the command of Captain Wejski, after liquidating bunkers N 3 and N 4, secured the highway from Pilzno. The concentration camp at Holiszow was thus captured. Taken captive were approximately 200 storm troopers and 15 female prison guards. Their freedom restored, the jubilant inmates ran out of their barracks. Tears of joy filled their wretched faces with renewed radiance. The court yard was filled with slender bodies draped in striped prison garb.

This joyous atmosphere was interrupted when suddenly my adjutant, Lieutenant Zygmunt, approached with information about two barracks to the left from where we were standing. The barracks were cordoned off with double rows of high voltage barbed wire. The gate was chained and padlocked shut. Peering out through the tiny windows, one could see pale human faces with deeply sunken eyes; and one could hear faint pleas for assistance.

I ordered the camp commandant to have the voltage turned off the fence. In response to my inquiry regarding the reason for isolating those prisoners in such a manner, he answered, "It was by direct order from the Fuehrer, that prisoners of Jewish descent

be handled in this way. The barracks along with the inmates were to have gasoline poured over them and set afire in the event the American Army's approach to within 20 miles of Holiszow."

After the gate to the cordoned-off area was opened, I entered the premises. I asked the German commandant whether or not he intended to carry out Hitler's orders. He began to explain that he was an officer of the Wehrmacht and that he took over the function of commandant only a few days ago. He swore he had no intention of carrying out those orders and so on....

The doors to the barracks were opened by my men. I wanted to go in, but the macabre scene within which I was confronted made me hesitate at the door step. I smelled the stench of human waste and decomposing human remains. From this dark abyss of horror, into the light of day, crawled out, with tears of joy in their eyes, what was left of the living female inmates. Their frail bodies would not allow them to stand on their feet. I looked at them while contemplating the degradation and degeneration of man's nature.

At that moment, one of the female inmates embraced my feet. She then took out a small bundle, wrapped in newspaper, handed it to me saying, "I was lucky enough to hide a few dollars from the Nazis. I would like to offer them to you for saving my life." Returning the bundle of money I told her that I had been rewarded enough in the knowledge that so many human lives were rescued from almost certain death. She should save the money for herself because now it may become useful to her.

Along with all the freed

prisoners, we experienced immeasurable happiness and joy. I felt a great deal of pride and satisfaction from the well executed military endeavor by my brave officers and men. Again, they did not fail me.

In the square by the administration buildings the former inmates began to harass and beat their former guards. I ordered Captain Gustav to intervene and divert the German captives to Vshokary. There he organized a prisoners camp which, after the arrival of allied forces, was turned over to American authorities. The captured warehouses of German rations were turned over to the former inmates of the concentration camp. The total number of freed females from the Holiszow camp was approximately 1,000 individuals of varied nationalities such as Poles, French, Yugoslavs as well as 280 of Jewish origin.