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CHRISTOPHER KASPAREK

## KRYSTYNA SKARBEK: RE-VIEWING BRITAIN'S LEGENDARY POLISH AGENT

Poland's Krystyna Skarbek (1915-52), also known as Christine Granville, was, according to author Marcus Binney, "the longest-serving and most capable of all SOE's women agents" in World War II. (She actually became a British agent months before the Special Operations Executive was founded in July 1940.) Binney credits Skarbek's resourcefulness and success with influencing the espionage-and-subversion organization's policy of recruiting increasing numbers of women.<sup>1</sup>

I first heard substantial accounts of Skarbek in the latter 1990s, from my father, Józef Kasperek (1915-2002). Half a century earlier, several years after World War II, he had met her at the now nonexistent *Klub Białego Orła* (the White Eagle Club), a favorite haunt of hers in London. Upon learning from her aunt that she and my father were related, Skarbek playfully called him "cousin," and whenever she was back in London from sailing with the British merchant marine, they would lunch at the White Eagle restaurant and talk about the war. Mostly, Skarbek spoke and Father listened. On one occasion, she surmised that he had had some experience in covert operations. He had indeed, in an amateur capacity, but for the next half-century felt bound not to reveal this by his 1938 oath of secrecy.<sup>2</sup>

Intrigued by my father's accounts of Skarbek's wartime exploits, I sought out books about her by Madeleine Masson<sup>3</sup> and Xan Fielding.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus Binney, *The Women Who Lived for Danger: the Women Agents of SOE in the Second World War*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 2002, pp. 49, 4. A fifth of Binney's book is devoted to Krystyna Skarbek.

<sup>2</sup> The most complete and accurate published account of these operations is Józef Kasperek's *Przepust karpacki* (The Carpathian Back Door), Warsaw, Sigma NOT, 1992. Interestingly, the Polish-Hungarian operations he describes, which led to Hungary's repossession of Carpathian Rus' ("Ruthenia") from dismembered Czechoslovakia, made possible Skarbek's first covert activities, in February 1940, involving travels across the Polish-Hungarian frontier thus recreated.

<sup>3</sup> Madeleine Masson, *Christine: a Search for Christine Granville, G.M., O.B.E., Croix de Guerre, with a Foreword by Francis Cammaerts, D.S.O., Légion d'Honneur, Croix de Guerre, U.S. Medal of Freedom*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1975. The book draws heavily on accounts by acquaintances of Krystyna Skarbek's, especially Andrzej Kowerski (1912-88). The foreword's

Reading them, I was astonished to find some of the very episodes already familiar to me: in some cases, depicted more precisely; in others, less so.

Here in Masson's book was Krystyna Skarbek's father, Count Jerzy, impoverished scion of one of Poland's oldest noble families, marrying the plain daughter of a wealthy Jewish banker; and with his fortune repaired, frittering it away with lavish entertaining.<sup>5</sup> Here is Krystyna as a teen, her father now dead, falteringly entering the worlds of work and matrimony. Here she is marrying her second husband, the choleric writer Jerzy Giżycki (1899-1970), and moving with him to Africa. At the outbreak of the war, she sails for England to volunteer in the struggle against the common enemy. British authorities show little interest in her, but are eventually convinced by her acquaintances, including journalist Frederick Voigt. She leaves for Hungary, where she persuades a skeptical Polish Olympic skier, Jan Marusarz, to escort her across the snow-covered Tatra Mountains into Poland. Arriving in Warsaw, she vainly pleads with her Jewish mother to leave a Poland occupied by the Germans, who will eventually murder her. An achievement of the Polish courier missions is the smuggling across the Tatras of a secret, unique Polish anti-tank rifle which is fated never to see wartime service.<sup>6</sup> While in Hungary, Skarbek takes up with a Polish officer, Andrzej Kowerski, aka "Andrew Kennedy," who lost part of a leg in a prewar hunting accident. In the latter part of the war, in France, she rescues a number of persons who are about to be executed by the Germans.

author, Francis Cammaerts, was one of three Allied agents rescued by Krystyna Skarbek in France in 1944.

<sup>4</sup> Xan Fielding, *Hide and Seek: the Story of a War-Time Agent*, London, Secker & Warburg, 1954. Fielding, another of the three agents rescued by Skarbek in France, dedicated his book "To the memory of Christine Granville."

<sup>5</sup> Krystyna Skarbek described to Józef Kasperek a reception hosted by the Count, at which a guest boasted of his descent from the last Polish king, Stanisław August Poniatowski. Count Jerzy responded sarcastically that *he* was descended from a cobbler—the mythical Kraków cobbler who had done in the fabled Wawel dragon by enticing it to devour a sheepskin stuffed with sulfur. Krystyna Skarbek's account of Count Jerzy's reception seems the likely provenance for Masson's allegation (p. 5) of the Skarbeks' descent from the cobbler.

<sup>6</sup> Józef Kasperek—who knew Marusarz, then a factotum at the White Eagle Club—explains that the rifle had been held in such secrecy that, when war broke out, no one knew how to operate it. In September 1939, the drawings for it had deliberately been destroyed so they would not fall into German hands, therefore the weapon would have had to be reverse-engineered for use by the Allies. To reduce the weapon's weight for transport across the mountains, the stock and barrel were sawed off. Subsequently it turned out that its reverse-engineering would have taken too long, so the remarkable Polish weapon was never produced abroad. (More on this episode in Masson, pp. 58-60.)

a number of persons who are about to be executed by the Germans. Approaching a German officer, she introduces herself as a niece of British General Bernard Montgomery and threatens the officer with terrible retribution if harm comes to his prisoners.<sup>7</sup> At war's end, Skarbek is left without further recompense or support from her British employers.<sup>8</sup> She is stabbed to death by a male fellow merchant-marine steward.

Nearly all these episodes, and many others recounted by Masson, are faithfully synopsized by Binney. Notable exceptions occur when he doubts that Marusarz did accompany Skarbek across the snowed-in Tatras, and omits the anti-tank-gun episode. Binney also cites some contemporaneous documents that do not appear in earlier publications and do not much alter the previous picture of Skarbek and her achievements. Nevertheless, these documents, if authentic, may provide the earliest written corroboration for some previous accounts.

Thus, it was a source of consternation to Skarbek and Kowerski to learn, after their perilous escape from Hungary and the Gestapo in January 1941 (Kowerski had been exfiltrating Polish and other Allied military personnel, and collecting intelligence) and after their subsequent arrival at SOE offices in Cairo, Egypt, that they were under suspicion due to Skarbek's contacts with a Polish intelligence organization called the "Musketeers." This group had been formed in October 1939 by engineer and inventor Stefan Witkowski, who would be killed in 1942—it remains unclear by whom or for what reason. In this connection, Binney cites (p. 71) a memorandum of 10 October 1941 by SOE's Peter Wilkinson:

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<sup>7</sup> The incident occurred at Digne, in southeastern France, where three Allied agents had been arrested on 13 August 1944, two days before the Allied "Operation Anvil" landings in southern France. The three men were the Belgian-British former pacifist Francis Cammaerts, whom Skarbek was assisting by linking Italian partisans and French Maquis for joint operations against the Germans in the Alps, and by inducing non-German, especially Polish, troops serving in the German occupation forces to defect to the Allies; Xan Fielding, another SOE agent, who had previously operated in Crete; and a French officer, Christian Sorensen. The incident is described by Fielding (pp. 226-49) and Masson (pp. 200-09) and recapitulated by Binney (pp. 90-98). Several years later, Skarbek told Kasperek that during her negotiations with the Gestapo she had been unaware of danger and that only after she and her comrades had made good their escape, did it hit home that she could have been shot as well! She would describe to Aidan Crawley, in similar terms, her characteristic response to danger (Masson, p. 230).

<sup>8</sup> During one conversation, she said to Kasperek: "You think I'm set up for life [*urządzona*]? I'm not." The substance of her lament on another occasion—"How the English treat us Poles!"—is expanded on by Fielding and Masson and echoed by Binney.

[W]e had been asked by [Polish Premier and Commander-in-Chief, General Władysław] Sikorski to break all contact with the Witkowski organization as soon as possible... We had information that [it] had [...] been penetrated by the Gestapo largely because it was mainly composed of amateurs.<sup>9</sup> [...] I warned I.b. M.E. [Middle East] to keep an eye on Kennedy [Kowerski] and Gizycka [Skarbek] while they were in Cairo. This came to the ears of Colonel Ross who, I understand, informed Kennedy of whom he was a personal friend. [...] Actually there was no doubt about their loyalty [...]

Wilkinson would later tell Masson (p. 126) a somewhat different story: when, after the fall of France, the Polish government had established itself in London, it had been agreed that all communications with occupied Poland should be channeled exclusively through Polish authorities in London. Thus, the Polish authorities had been within their rights to request withdrawal of support from Skarbek's and Kowerski's associates in Poland. Kowerski himself told Masson (p. 126):

I've no doubt [Witkowski] was an old Intelligence man, and he ran his group very efficiently. Then when the Home Army [*Armia Krajowa*] began to be organized from London, they made haste to get rid of independent groups. I believe that all the Musketeers accepted the orders from London and were integrated into the Home Army; but Witkowski continued to act on his own. He disappeared mysteriously, and nobody knows what happened to him.

Masson adds (p. 251):

Against [...] orders of the Home Army [the Musketeers] sought direct contact with British Intelligence and to engage in certain political activities. This incurred the suspicion of both the Polish [military] Staff in London and [its *Oddział II*—Section II, i.e. Intelligence]. Witkowski is believed to have been shot dead in 1942 by German police.

According to Binney (pp. 71-72), the suspicions against Kowerski were addressed in London by General Colin Gubbins (to be, from 1943, head of SOE) in a 17 June 1941 letter to Sikorski:

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<sup>9</sup> See also Binney, pp. 324-25.

According to Binney (pp. 71-72), the suspicions against Kowerski were addressed in London by General Colin Gubbins (to be, from 1943, head of SOE) in a 17 June 1941 letter to Sikorski:

Last year [...] a Polish citizen named Kowerski was working with our officials in Budapest on Polish affairs. He is now in Palestine [...]. I understand from Major Wilkinson [...] that General [Stanisław] Kopański [Kowerski's former commander in Poland] is doubtful about Kowerski's loyalty to the Polish cause, owing to the fact that Kowerski has not reported to General Kopański for duty with the [Polish Independent Carpathian] Brigade. Major Wilkinson informs me that Kowerski had had instructions from our officials not to report to General Kopański, as he was engaged [...] on work of a secret nature which necessitated his remaining apart. It seems therefore that Kowerski's loyalty has only been called into question because of these instructions.

Another source of suspicion against Skarbek and Kowerski was the ease with which she had managed in Istanbul, after fleeing Hungary, to charm transit visas through Syria from the pro-Vichy French consul. Only German spies, some Polish intelligence officers thought, could have gotten such visas. (Masson, p. 116; Binney, p. 69.)

Jerzy Giżycki,<sup>10</sup> when informed that Wilkinson had told Skarbek and Kowerski that their services were being dispensed with, took umbrage at their shabby treatment and abruptly bowed out of his own remarkable career as a British intelligence agent. (Binney, p.70; Masson, p.127.) And when Skarbek told Giżycki that she loved Kowerski and would not return to her husband, he left for London and later went to Canada. (Masson, p. 127.)

By the time Krystyna Skarbek was holding a commission as a British WAAF (Women's Auxiliary Air Force) flight officer (from 21 November 1944 to 14 May 1945), granted to her "for cover purposes" (Binney, pp. 101, 107)—as Józef Kasperek would recall, when she visited Polish military headquarters in uniform, she was treated by Poland's military chiefs with the highest respect. No doubt, it did not hurt that in the meantime the Germans had invaded the Soviet Union (on 22 June 1941) as her intelligence obtained from the Musketeers had predicted. (Masson, pp. 66, 131.)

Binney quotes (pp. 75-76) a 16 December 1942 SOE memorandum as saying that Skarbek and Kowerski

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<sup>10</sup> Skarbek would divorce him at the Polish consulate in Berlin on 1 August 1946. (Masson, p.xxx.)

their identity in a perfectly innocent way as a result of a chance meeting.

The aptness of this comment is borne out by an incident, probably dating from Skarbek's first visit to Poland nearly three years earlier, in February 1940, that she described to Kasperek: At a Warsaw café she was hailed by a woman acquaintance exclaiming, "Krystyna! Krystyna Skarbek! What are you doing here? We heard that you had gone abroad!" When she denied that her name was Krystyna Skarbek, the acquaintance responded that she would have sworn she *was* Krystyna Skarbek—the resemblance was positively uncanny! After the woman left, Skarbek, to minimize suspicion, tarried a while longer before departing the café.<sup>11</sup>

Another SOE evaluation, apparently from the spring of 1944, cited by Binney (p. 78) reports that Skarbek "speaks perfect Polish, almost perfect French, good<sup>12</sup> English and some Russian and a little Italian. She knows only a few words of Hungarian and knows *no German* [my emphasis—C.K.] at all." How to square this statement with Masson's following account (pp. 199-200) of an incident from her activities in southeastern France?

A frontier patrol caught up with her when she was guiding an Italian partisan to the nearest Maquis. Christine was told to put her hands above her head. Unhesitatingly, she obeyed. She had a live grenade in either hand. *In idiomatic German* [my emphasis—C.K.] she informed her captors that, unless they let her and her companion go free, she would blow them all up.

Binney (p. 99), on unknown authority, alters the story: "she was held up at gunpoint by two young *Italian conscripts*" (my emphasis—C.K.) and threatened to drop her hand grenades. The language she employed (Italian?) is not identified.

When asked about Skarbek's appearance, Józef Kasperek said it was unremarkable, befitting an intelligence agent who should be inconspicuous. Binney aptly notes (p. 51) that in various photographs (a

<sup>11</sup> This episode, and several others recounted from Kasperek's conversations with Skarbek, appear in print for the first time here.

<sup>12</sup> Certainly not perfect. For example, Masson quotes Skarbek (p. 182) as speaking of "lying *on* the sun," and astutely surmises that this is "possibly a direct translation from the Polish." The Polish idiom *leżeć na słońcu* is, if anything, less absurd than its English equivalent, "lying *in* the sun." Another metaphrased Polonism scattered through Masson's book is Skarbek's pet name "Cat" for Kowerski, and his use of "Kitten" for her. Both doubtless translate from the single expression *kotek* ("kitty"), a Polish term of endearment applicable to either sex.



threatened to drop her hand grenades. The language she employed (Italian?) is not identified.

When asked about Skarbek's appearance, Józef Kasparek said it was unremarkable, befitting an intelligence agent who should be inconspicuous. Binney aptly notes (p. 51) that in various photographs (a generous sampling is found in Masson's book) "she appears a completely different person, sometimes with film-star assurance and glamour, sometimes simply full of charm and fun. She could look alternately carefree and vivacious, wistful and retiring, gentle or playfully arch." Numerous contemporary descriptions suggest that, while not a classic beauty, she could exert a powerful allure compounded of youth (she was just twenty-four when she embarked on her first intelligence mission), fitness (she was a fine horsewoman and skier), a sense of humor, and a social intelligence that enabled her to engage seemingly anyone she wanted to.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, according to Masson (p. xxviii),

she appeared to have a chameleon-like quality of blending so perfectly [...] that she was able to preserve intact the core and private motivations of her being.

She revealed facets of her character only as and when she wished, and in so doing made up [...] the Christine persona she wanted to put over. Vera Atkins [assistant to the head of SOE's French Section] said she was a loner; others said she was a gregarious creature [...]. One of her friends [said] that if she were bored, and she became quickly bored at purely social functions, she became silent and colourless [...].

Skarbek turned her protean personality—a by-product, one wonders, of her dual ethnic heritage—into a weapon of war:

Part of Christine's success as an agent was due to the way [...] she could get into the skin of the part she was playing. [I]n the Italian Alps [in 1944] she [...] decided that her role would be that of a naïve and trusting young peasant girl. Twice she was caught by the Germans, but so convincing was her act that they let her go. [Masson, p. 199.]

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<sup>13</sup> A capacity not limited to interactions with humans: on at least two occasions, she instantly won over fierce police dogs. (Masson, pp. 109-10, 199.) Curiously, she sometimes referred to admirers she attracted as her "lame dogs" (Masson, pp. xxviii, 236)—probably from the Polish idiom, *pies kulawy*, that makes the expression less deprecatory than self-deprecatory.



Gestapo had not been anxious to incur the wrath of Skarbek's aunt and of her relation, the Hungarian Regent Miklós Horthy. (Masson, pp. 90-94.)

Skilled as she was in dissimulation, Skarbek could also be uncompromisingly frank. She described to Kasperek an incident when, during a—postwar,<sup>14</sup> her interlocutor thought—journey, she was ignored by a Polish female acquaintance, only to discover at the destination that both were being met by the same persons. Skarbek's fellow passenger, unable to continue snubbing her, turned to her with a query about a relative, a Countess G. who had been executed by the Home Army as a collaborator of the Germans: "Krystyna, say she wasn't a traitor!" Skarbek coolly replied that she could not.

As with another legendary British intelligence agent of an earlier world war, T.E. Lawrence ("Lawrence of Arabia"), she likewise turned thirty at war's end, was betrayed by the politicians, and declined a bequest that might have provided some material security.<sup>15</sup> And as with Lawrence, the very traits and abilities that had enabled Krystyna Skarbek to achieve what she did achieve in war, unfitted her for peace. Each had survived a world war, only to fall victim to hazards of peacetime.

What, one wonders, were the springs of action for Skarbek, or for T.E. Lawrence, or Józef Kasperek? Certainly there was an enemy to be defeated, a people to be defended or to be set free. But one suspects that there was something deeper: a need to seize an opportunity to exploit a creative capacity—a creativity through destruction, if need be—and a profound curiosity about one's own responses to extreme events. That is why Skarbek spoke of her experiences to Kowerski and Kasperek; that is why Lawrence and Kasperek, against internal resistance, wrote of their experiences.

Perhaps the final word on Britain's most remarkable female SOE operative should be left to one of the three Allied agents whom she had rescued at Digne in 1944—Xan Fielding (epilogue, pp. 254-55):

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<sup>14</sup> There is a report that Skarbek visited Poland, with the aim of establishing contact between Poland's Home Army and British Intelligence, during her Cairo-based period (1941-44). (Mieczysław Paszkiewicz, "Skarbek-Giżycka, Krystyna," *Polski słownik biograficzny* [Polish Biographical Dictionary], vol. 38, Warsaw, Polska Akademia Nauk [Polish Academy of Sciences], 1997, p.26.) On the other hand, Kasperek specifically remembered Skarbek as *avoiding* contacts with the Home Army.

<sup>15</sup> Masson, p. 227. Jeremy Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia: the Authorized Biography of T.E. Lawrence*, New York, Atheneum, 1990, pp. 637-38, 944. There is a concrete link between Skarbek and Lawrence: Sir Robert Vansittart of Britain's Foreign Office, a second cousin to T.E. Lawrence, influenced the careers of both. (Masson, p. 40; Wilson, pp. 617, 858.) Both Skarbek and Lawrence were children of aristocrats; Skarbek actually was entitled to style herself "Countess."

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Perhaps the final word on Britain's most remarkable female SOE operative should be left to one of the three Allied agents whom she had rescued at Digne in 1944—Xan Fielding (epilogue, pp. 254-55):

After the physical hardship and mental strain she had suffered for six years in our service, she needed, probably more than any other agent we had employed, security for life. [...] Yet a few weeks after the armistice she was dismissed with a month's salary and left in Cairo to fend for herself.

[T]hough she was too proud to ask for any other assistance, she did apply for [...] a British passport; for ever since the Anglo-American betrayal of her country at Yalta she had been virtually stateless. But the naturalization papers [...] were delayed in the normal bureaucratic manner.

Meanwhile, abandoning all hope of security, she deliberately embarked on a life of uncertain travel, as though anxious to reproduce in peace time the hazards she had known during the war; until, finally, in June 1952, in the lobby of a cheap London hotel, the menial existence to which she had been reduced by penury was ended by an assassin's knife.

[W]e should all feel as guilty of Christine's murder as the man who was hanged for it. For it would never have occurred if we had protected her [...] from what she often [...] refer[red] to [...] as "the horrors of peace".

To those in the know, Skarbek had become a legend in her lifetime. Soon after her death, she entered the realm of popular culture. It has been asserted that Ian Fleming, in his first James Bond novel, *Casino Royale* (1953), to some extent modeled Vesper Lynd on her. Nearly half a century later, in 1999, writer Maria Nurowska published a novel, *Miłośnica* (neologism: Lovegirl?), an account of a fictional female journalist's attempt to plumb Skarbek's story.