

PASSAGES

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EXTRAORDINARY LIFE

Maria Brodowicz 'was the epitome of Polishness'

BY ANNE M. HAMILTON

By the time Maria Brodowicz arrived in Hartford, she had outlived World War II — surviving two years in a Soviet gulag, then making her way first to Iran, then to East Africa and then London. Finally, as a displaced person, she was able to come to Connecticut. Along the way, she lost a brother, was separated from two siblings and her father for years, and became acquainted with scouting — a vocation that shaped the rest of her life.

Maria K. Brodowicz, a resident of Wethersfield, died October 13. She was 86.

During the war, Brodowicz and her family were pawns in the world of political maneuvers, treaties and deals made by the superpowers. She was born April 14, 1932, in Eastern Poland and lived a comfortable life in the country until she was 7. She had four siblings, and her father, Florian Krzysztosiak, owned a bakery — but he had also been an officer in the Polish army during World War I and bred horses for the cavalry.

After Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, Russia invaded from the East and quickly took control. "When the Soviets came to occupy, they had a list of people they wanted to deport," said Brodowicz's son Jacek. Maria's father — because of his prior military service — was one of them, but he happened not to be at home and spent the next two years in hiding.

Given only a few hours to prepare to leave, Maria's mother, Rozalia, left the two oldest children with an aunt and took Maria, 7, her sister, 5, and her baby brother onto the cattle car bound for Siberia. "They were work camps, not extermination camps, but it was a place where people were expected to work and die," said Jacek Brodowicz. "The cold was unrelenting, there was little food, and the adults were forced to work, cutting down forests and chopping wood for furnaces and fireplaces." Some worked in coal mines. Maria and her sister contracted typhus and malaria, "but my grandmother was able to take care of them. They were able to persevere and recover," said Jacek. The baby, however, died.

After Germany invaded Russia in 1941, the Soviets looked for allies, and an agreement with Great Britain resulted in the freeing of the Polish people held in

prisoner of war camps. Maria Brodowicz and her mother and sister were released in August 1941. In the agreement, Russia granted "amnesty" to the former prisoners and sent them to Iran, and Great Britain promised to house the Poles in colonies it controlled.

More than 100,000 Polish prisoners of war made their way to Tehran, which welcomed the refugees with food and shelter, but the trip was not easy. "My grandmother was fluent in Russian and bartered and traded and picked up stuff. They got rides. They walked, and people helped them," Jacek said.

During their time in Iran, Brodowicz joined the Polish scouting movement, which had similar activities and values to American scouting, but had a strong emphasis on Polish heritage and culture. In Tehran, the family was reunited with their father through the efforts of the Red Cross, but Iran was only a way-station. Some refugees stayed, others went to India. Rozalia and her two daughters were put on a ship to Kenya, a British colony, while their father joined the newly formed Polish army in exile in London. Around 12,500 to 15,000 Poles eventually ended up in about 20 East African refugee camps, according to histories of the exodus.

The Krzysztosiak family stayed in Kenya for a short time before being sent to Tanzania, another British colony then known as Tanganyika. The British settled the refugees in a town called Tenguru, about 50 miles from the base of Mount Kilimanjaro. According to several accounts, Tenguru had from 3,000 to 5,000 Polish refugees, who soon created a Polish enclave in the middle of the open grasslands of Africa. Most of the residents were women and children, along with a few disabled men. They built round clay huts with banana leaves for a roof, planted gardens and drew on individual skills to create a new community. Before there was a school building, or books or pencils, a former teacher taught children to draw letters in the dirt with sticks.

"At first, it was scary," like the jungle, said Krystyna Derecki, who spent four years in Tenguru. "Everything was normal after one or two years. We would now call it a little Poland." There was a Polish priest and a church, and eventually a school, and the streets were named after Polish artists



BRODOWICZ FAMILY PHOTO

Maria Brodowicz, who was displaced from Poland during World War II, spent most of her life in the Hartford area and was heavily involved in the Girl Scouts.

or historic figures. Maria's lifelong love of scouting flourished as she earned merit badges in the Polish scouting group. Her mother managed a commissary, and Maria learned to sew.

After the war, most of the Poles in Tenguru left, although survivors still hold reunions in the U.S. today. The Krzysztosiak family went to England, where they were reunited with their father, who had continued to serve in the Polish army and participated in the battle of Monte Cassino in Italy, which was a significant victory for the Allied forces.

"England didn't know what to do with these people," said Jacek. "Going back to Poland was not an option because the homes weren't theirs anymore. It was a different country and had also gone under Soviet domination," and their village had been incorporated into Ukraine.

Her father came to Hartford, followed a year later by the rest of his family, who

joined a vibrant Polish community, anchored by the Polish church, Saints Cyril & Methodius. After another year in England, the rest of the family received a visa for the United States. It was 1954 and Maria was 22 and a seamstress. She was one of the founders of the Polish Girl Scouts in Hartford and worked for decades as a troop leader and was the highest ranked leader of the eastern region. The scouts learned Polish language and history along with camping skills, and Maria served as president of the scout parent group for many years. She worked as a banquet waitress at the Hartford Hilton, loved singing and joined the Paderewski choir in New Britain. There she met Stanislaw Brodowicz, a fellow Polish refugee who had been captured near Taiwan while in the merchant marines. He was offered either political asylum in the U.S. or a return to Poland, which by then was controlled by the Communists. He chose the U.S., and they married in 1957. He was a foreman at Atlantic Machine Tool Works and died in 1988.

Maria Brodowicz was a member of the Polish Cultural Club whose goal was to sustain the traditions and customs of Poland. Many events involved religious holidays: special blessings for food on the day before Easter, miniature mangers at Christmas, or special doughnuts before Lent. Brodowicz "made sure everything was authentic and true to her Polish roots," said Frances Pudlo, a fellow member. "Polish people are survivors. The people and heritage have been through so much."

In recognition of her work with the Polish community, Brodowicz received several honors, including Cavalier Cross Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland awarded for service in improving relations between nations, as well as the Siberian Exiles Cross, which recognized the more than 300,000 Poles deported to Siberia during World War II. In 2017, the Secretary of the State of Connecticut designated her as Immigrant of the Year.

"She was the epitome of Polishness," said Anna-Mae Maglaty, a member of the Polish Cultural Club.

Maria Brodowicz is survived by her daughter, Ursula Brodowicz, her son Jacek Brodowicz and two grandchildren, Tomek and Milena.