

THE POLES IN THE GALLIPOLI CAMPAIGN¹

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Those who claim that there was no military conflict in the world without at least symbolical participation of Polish soldiers do not exaggerate. So it was even during WWI despite the fact that Poland, which lost its independence in 1772-95 and regained it in 1918, did not then exist on the map of Europe. The division of Polish territory between three great powers – Russia, Germany and Austro-Hungary – forced some Poles to fight against each other on different fronts of the Great War, including Gallipoli.

It seems that most of them fought for the Ottoman Empire. They were the descendants of Polish officers and soldiers who, after three lost insurrections (against Russia in 1831 and 1863 and against all three occupants in 1848), fled to Constantinople to continue their struggle against Russia – long a common enemy of the Poles and the Turks. In 1842 they built a Polish village near Istanbul and named it Adampol². From contemporary Polish residents of this village, we know of four of their ancestors who served in the Ottoman army on the Gallipoli Peninsula in 1915. Brothers Alfons and Józef Wrzostek were killed in action, and the location of their graves – as was the case of most Ottoman soldiers – is unknown. The other two, Marek Gazewicz and Józef Dohoda, returned safely to Adampol when the war was over. Unfortunately, the families of the above mentioned four soldiers did not retain any documents concerning their service on Gallipoli. Because of this, it is impossible to tell anything about the place and units in which they fought, or even the exact dates of death of the first two.

However, there was one Ottoman soldier of Polish origin about whom we possess a little bit more information. He was Ludomił Rayski (1892-1977), veteran of the Polish-Soviet war (1920), founder of the Polish aircraft industry, general of the Polish Air Force (in the late 1930's) and veteran of WWII. His father came to Turkey after the 1863 insurrection, became Muslim, then fought in the Crimean war and, when retired in 1889, came back to Krakow (Southern Poland, then Austria-Hungary). When WWI broke out, Ludomił, after a short period of combat service in Polish units of the Austro-Hungarian Army, came to Turkey in 1915 to serve for the Ottomans (because of his father, he had dual citizenship – Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian). He began service on March 1, 1915 as a car driver in the Dardanelles Fortified Zone's Transportation Unit. From Turkish sources we know that in this period the Turks had only two cars in the whole Dardanelles area. Thus we can assume that in the combat of March 1915 (including the main struggle between the forts and the Allied Navy on the 18th) young Rayski – who doubtlessly spoke fluent German and Turkish – served as the personal driver of the Turkish-German high command. In September 1915, he finished aviation

¹ This text is an expanded version of the article published with the same title in "The Gallipolitan", No. 105 - Autumn 2004, pp. 48-50.

² The place still exists under the Turkish name Polonezköy. Most of its present inhabitants are Turks, but around 90 Polish-speaking Catholics of Polish origin still live there.

school in Maltepe and came back to the Dardanelles as an air observer. At the late stage of the Gallipoli Campaign, Ludomił was twice wounded while flying over enemy positions. After hospitalization, he finished the pilot's course and until the end of WWI served with the rank of lieutenant in the Fifth Air Regiment in Izmir. Turkish historiography describes him as one of those who had the greatest record of combat missions among all Ottoman airmen. Although we know only a few details of Ludomił Rayski's service in Turkey³, there is no doubt that he was a brave soldier, as he has received several high decorations from the Sultan, including the War Medal (Harp Madalyası), Liyakat and Mecidiye⁴.

Another outstanding Pole who served in the Dardanelles was Włodzimierz Steyer (1892-1957) who took part in the last stage of the naval operations (ending with the main assault on the Narrows on March 18, 1915) then during the landings at Kumkale and finally in all other naval actions during the fights on Gallipoli. He was an officer on board of the Russian cruiser *Askold*. Some of his adventures in the Tsarist Navy were colorfully described in memories he has published in 1930's under a pen-name "Brunon Dzimicz". In 1919 he joined the Polish Navy and started a brilliant career. In 1937 Steyer became a commander of Hel Fortified Zone (Hel Peninsula, Baltic Sea). Two years later between September 1 and October 1, 1939 he bravely defended the Peninsula from the attacks of overwhelming German forces. After the fall of Hel Steyer spent the rest of the WWII in different POW camps until liberated by the British troops in 1945. When the war was over he continued his career in the Polish Navy, became its commander (in 1947) and died in Gdańsk with the rank of rear-admiral⁵.

So far the only known Pole in the ANZAC units was William Frederick Wrobleske [Wróblewski], 12/2161 also known as Wroblfski. He served in Auckland Infantry Regiment, 4th Reinforcements N.Z.E.F. and was killed in action on August 8, 1915 in age of 27. His name is commemorated on the New Zealand Memorial at Chunuk Bair (Conk Bayırı). Wrobleske was enlisted in Cremona House, Morrinsville, Piako, Hamilton as son of Joseph and Bertha Wrobleske of Kanieri, Westland. For the period of about twelve months prior to enlisting he was employed as a tailor at Morrinsville. His brother, *32977 Private Francis Wrobleske⁶ served in New Zealand Rifle Brigade, 10th Reinforcements 4th Battalion, H Company and was killed in action at Ypres, Belgium on December 28, 1917⁷.

The other Poles who died in the Dardanelles and whose graves are known were André Lubinsky [Andrzej Łubiński] and ? Glodkowsky [? Głodkowski – first name unknown] who fought in French units, and thus were buried in the French Cemetery at Cape Helles. Unfortunately, we have no data about their service records⁸. Many Polish

³ From the War Chronicle of the Fifth Air Regiment in Izmir (unfortunately, only the part concerning the year 1918 was preserved), we know that between January 23 and 28, 1918 he defended *Goeben* from British bombing raids after the ship was heavily damaged and grounded in the Dardanelles following her mission to Imroz.

⁴ A more detailed biography of Rayski was published at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ludomił_Rayski

⁵ A more detailed biography of Steyer was published at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Włodzimierz_Steyer

⁶ See: <http://muse.aucklandmuseum.com/databases/general/RecordDetail.aspx?dataset=Cenotaph&SearchID=1839763&Ordinal=1&OriginalID=81166>

⁷ The author expresses his gratitude to Professor John Crawford (NZ) and Dean Hunter (Fez Travel Office, Istanbul) for providing him with data about Wrobleske brothers.

⁸ During his diplomatic service in Ankara the author asked the French Embassy in Turkey for help in that matter but was refused with no sensible reasons given...

surnames among the German military advisors to Turkey and the crews of *Goeben* and *Breslau* also require further research.