

# Letters Found in Ruins of Monte Cassino Monastery in May 1944

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The letters presented in this article are of extraordinary historical interest. Before World War II, Eugeniusz Kaleniak lived in the Wilno region, northeast Poland, near the border with Soviet Russia. The Russian invasion and takeover of Poland's eastern borderlands on September 17, 1939, came just over two weeks after Germany invaded from the west. Unable to defend itself simultaneously on both fronts, the Polish state lost its independence to the two aggressors.

Kaleniak's father, a forester, was arrested and murdered by the Soviets. Eugeniusz, his mother, younger brother and sister were also arrested and deported to a gulag in Kazakhstan and the 17-year old Eugeniusz was sent to work in a gold mine.

Hitler invaded Russia in June 1941 and the Soviets were forced to release some of the Polish deportees to help with the war effort. Under the terms of the so-called "amnesty," Poles were allowed to join Polish army units being formed in the USSR under the command of General Władysław Anders, who was also released from prison.

Eugeniusz left the gulag in 1942, joined the Anders army and made the crossing to Persia (now Iran) where the British army was based. There he trained in an elite Polish unit which intercepted German radio communications. They were on duty 24 hours/day, intercepting and decoding highly classified information and reports, often more successfully than British intelligence experts. The unit was posted to Iraq, Palestine, Egypt, Cyprus



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

and Italy. In May 1944, they decoded German field messages which played a crucial role in the Polish army's victorious assault on the German stronghold in the monastery at Monte Cassino.

Eugeniusz's younger brother, Alfons, did not make it to the Anders army and to Persia because the Soviet authorities stopped further recruitment. Instead, they set up a Polish "Kościuszko Division" under their own command with General Zygmunt Berling at its head. Alfons was called up and enlisted in the communist Berling army in 1944. He trained as a pilot and took part in the bombardment of Berlin. After the war, he was expelled from this army because of his brother's service in the anti-communist Anders army.

It is rare to find letters written from the Berling army to the Anders army and vice versa. I am illustrating two.

The cover in Figure 1 was sent on Figure 5



April 10, 1944, from Alfons in the Rudnik-Retiwy gulag in Kazakhstan to Eugeniusz in Iraq. The letter was censored by Russian, British and Polish censors and bears received date stamps of Polish field posts no. 101 and 117, May 1944.

Figure 2 is a letter sent from Alfons when he was already serving as a pilot in the "Kościuszko Division." The letter was sent from Russian field post no. 22676, with the return address for field post no. 22657. The letter was censored and bears Russian, British and Polish censor' cachets dated February 10, 1945.

On May 18, 1944, the Anders army took the monastery from the Germans after very heavy combat. Five days later, on May 23, Eugeniusz Kaleniak entered the ruined monastery. Years later, he recounted to me in person the tragic and horrific sight that met his eyes. There were hun-

dreds of corpses, the stench of decomposing bodies, some documents, papers and letters that had not been destroyed lying scattered about. He picked up four letters in memory of the battle.

Figure 3 is a letter with some text sent through the internal post within the monastery in 1939.

Figure 4 (shown on the cover of this issue) is the picture side of a postcard with Christmas greetings sent to the monastery on December 22, 1940. The card features Our Lady with Baby Jesus and the greeting in Italian, "*Buon Natale*" (Merry Christmas).

The cover shown in Figure 5 contains a letter with text sent from Villetta Barrea in central Italy dated March 17, 1941.

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