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CYPRIAN NORWID POLISH JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL AND HIGH SCHOOL IN VILLARD-DE-LANS (1940–1946)

On July 18, 2025, on Krakowskie Przedmieście Street, next to the Bristol Hotel, at 11:30 a.m. the grand opening of the exhibition *Ognisko wolności 1940–1946* (Eng. *The Cradle of Freedom 1940–1946*) took place, dedicated to the history of the Cyprian Norwid Polish Junior High School and High School, established in the city of Villard-de-Lans near Grenoble in France. The exhibition was organised by the Zygmunt Zaleski Foundation, which aims to support the development of Polish culture and science in Poland, France and in Europe. The ceremony was attended by, among others, Zygmunt Lubicz-Zaleski's younger son, French financier Romain Zaleski – founder of the Foundation, its president Hendrik Wirix, as well as members of the Management Board: Zygmunt's granddaughter Helene Zaleski (treasurer), Jadwiga Czartoryska, Rafael Lewandowski, creator of the film entitled *Z dala od orkiestry* (Eng. *Away from the Orchestra*), depicting the life and work of Zygmunt Lubicz-Zaleski, and Andrzej Biernat¹, president of the Society of Friends of the Polish Library in Paris. The purpose of the event was presented by Helene Zaleski, and the speech on the history of the Junior High School and High School in Villard-de-Lans was given by Stephane Malbos, son of Marcel Malbos, teacher at that school and treasurer of the Association for the Memory of the Cyprian Norwid Polish Junior High School and High School in Villard-de-Lans 1940–1946. It should be noted that an important role in the development of Polish culture in France is played by the former and currently honorary president of the Historical and Educational Society and long-time director of the Polish Library in Paris, Prof. Kazimierz Piotr Zaleski, the elder son of Zygmunt.

¹ He recently published an important book on the history of the Polish Library in Paris: Biernat (2024), *Biblioteka Polska w Paryżu – dzieje, zbiory, ludzie* (Eng. *The Polish Library in Paris – history, collections, people*).

In connection with the opening of the exhibition at the Museum of Warsaw in the Old Town Market Place, a feature-length film directed by Rafał Lewandowski entitled *Z dala od orkiestry* (Eng. *Away from the Orchestra*) was displayed.

Located in the city centre, the exhibition running until August 3, 2025, has attracted considerable interest among the capital's residents and tourists. The exhibition, with its rich iconography, presented the history of the co-educational Junior High School and High School in Villard-de-Lans in Polish and English. It informed visitors that between 1940 and 1946, the school community consisted of approximately eight hundred students, teachers and administrative and service staff (their surnames were listed on the exhibition boards). Located among the mountains, the educational institution was, in the difficult times of war, [...] *a place of refuge and, at the same time, a cradle of moral, cultural and military resistance*. One of the exhibition boards noted: *Demobilised soldiers, participating as volunteers in Polish, Norwegian or French campaigns (and often in several of them), reached the school by crossing the green borders [...]. The students-soldiers were joined by the children of war refugees: military personnel, civil servants, small landowners or city dwellers who arrived in France in 1939 and 1940. The school was mainly attended by children of pre-war emigrants living in the area near Grenoble and the mining basin in Lorraine, Pas-de-Calais, Gard, Corrèze...* (Exhibition: *The Cradle of Freedom 1940–1946*). For many students, especially those from working-class families, the school was a place where they learned to speak Polish correctly, strengthened their Polish identity and developed a sense of national pride.

The exhibition showed the glorious participation of students and teachers in the French resistance movement and the battles of the Polish Army on various war fronts. Six students from the school, who were members of the resistance movement, died fighting the Germans. The culmination of the activities of the High School in Villard-de-Lans, which educated young people in mathematics and the humanities, was the awarding of school-leaving certificates to 209 students, which gave them the right to apply for admission to French universities.

Commemorating a school that played an important role in promoting Polish culture in France in the form of an exhibition is certainly noteworthy. Admittedly, the Junior High School and High School in Villard-de-Lans is one of the better-developed Polish educational institutions operating abroad, as evidenced by Tadeusz Łepkowski's book (Łepkowski, 1990) and Ewa Valentin-Stączek's biographical publications in Polish and French on the Villard community (Stączek, 2000; Valentin-Stączek, 2007²) – however, there can never be too many references to the glorious deeds in the field of education during the difficult times of World War II. Usually, sharp focus is put on armed combat,

² Signed copy: *To our friend of the Villard family, Prof. Henryk Samsonowicz, with best wishes for enjoyable reading. The author, August 2008.*

achievements on the battlefield, and the glory of Polish arms, and rightly so, but we must also appreciate and promote in our collective memory the constant concern for education, the preservation of the Polish language and the maintenance of the national identity of the young generation of Poles, even in the most unfavourable conditions. We must spread the conviction that this is by no means a secondary task in exile. Among the publications that at least partially address the circumstances and conditions of the secondary school in Villard-de-Lans, worth mentioning is the book written by Stanisław Zabiełło (Zabiełło, 1967) and the article written by Roman Dzwonkowski (Dzwonkowski, 1981, pp. 187–199). Extensive material on the history of the institution can also be found in digital form (<https://www.rafaellewandowski.com/materials>; <https://polskie-liceum.pl/>; <https://zygmuntzaleskistichting.pl/>).

The few but very important archival sources concerning the first several months of the secondary school's operation stored at the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London are also noteworthy. They testify to the interest and support of the educational authorities in exile for Polish education in France, especially the Junior High School and High School in Villard-de-Lans.

Łepkowski has analysed the issue of reactivating the school and thus maintaining its continuity between Paris and the Grenoble area, and concluded that *there were visible and important links* between Villard-de-Lans and the French capital city (Łepkowski, 1990, p. 51; see: Chmielewski, 2013, p. 20).

It should be added here that the second part of the Cyprian Norwid secondary school in Paris was evacuated to Great Britain and operated as the State Junior High School and High School for Boys. It was organised with the participation of the local Citizens' Committee in a building rented by the University of London in the Ealing district in September 1940. In December, the building was bombed by the German air force. The school was moved to Scotland in January 1941. It was housed in a rented palace with a park in Dunalastair House near Pitlochry. In June 1941, eighty-two students were promoted to the next grade. Among the 37 people taking the school-leaving examination were four graduates of the Polish secondary school in Paris, who were unable to take the examination due to the war (the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education, Ref. No. A. 19.I/9, *Report on the activities of the Office of Education and School Affairs for 1941*).

In addition to the well-known history of the establishment of the Junior High School and High School in Villard-de-Lans, a document preserved at the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London shows that in September 1940 [...] *the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Vichy, shortly before leaving [France – W.Ch.] began its organisational activities, primarily in the area of resuming teaching Polish in public schools and initiating the reopening of the Cyprian Norwid Junior High School and High School in Villard-de-Lans* on completely new terms (the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education, Ref. No. A. 19. I/14; S. Zabiełło,

Directeur General des Offices Polonais en France, No 859/V, *Copy. To the Minister of Foreign Affairs in London. Education report*, Vichy, March 20, 1941). The informal successor to the activities of the Polish Embassy in the area under the jurisdiction of the government in Vichy in the field of establishing a secondary school was the General Directorate of Polish Offices subordinate to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in London. *In mid-October 1940, the General Directorate of Polish Offices led to the opening in Villard-de-Lans (Isère department), 30 km south of Grenoble, school called the Cyprian Godebski Polish Junior High School and High School, which was completely organised and, apart from continuing the name in order to retain its rights, had nothing to do with the Paris institution. In view of the adoption of the principle of educating Polish youth in French secondary schools, the institution in Villard-de-Lans was intended primarily for young people who were not linguistically prepared to study in French schools* (the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education, Ref. No. A. 19. I/14; S. Zabięło, *Directeur General des Offices Polonais en France, No 859/V, Copy. To the Minister of Foreign Affairs in London. Education report*, Vichy, March 20, 1941)³. Efforts were made to base the organisation of the secondary school on the Act of March 11, 1932 on Education System (*the Act of March 11, 1932, on Education System*, *Dziennik Ustaw Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej* 1932, No. 38, item 389). The conditions prevailing abroad and the need to adapt the teaching process to French requirements led to some modernisation of the school's work, but its Polish character was fully preserved.

The Junior High School and High School in Villard-de-Lans was the only Polish secondary school in France at that time and one of only seven such institutions in Europe. The others were: the Junior High School and High School in Platers in Cyprus (approximately 200 children and teenagers), the High School in Oberburg in Switzerland (167 interned soldiers), the Juliusz Słowacki Junior High School and High School for Boys, first in London and later in Scotland (95 teenagers, including a matriculation course for soldiers), the Junior High School and High School for Girls in Scone-Palace near Perth in Scotland (50 girls in the process of recruitment), the Junior High School and High School in Tel Aviv in Palestine (about 70 children and young people), the Junior High School and High School in Stockholm (24 children and teenagers) (the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education, Ref. No. A. 19 I/7, *Report on the activities of Minister Lieutenant General Józef Haller for the period from August 15, 1940 to March 15, 1941*).

³ Zabięło was the General Director of the Polish Offices with its headquarter in Vichy, and thus the delegate of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in France from September 21, 1940 until his arrest by the Germans in December 1942. In a sense, he replaced Feliks Frankowski, the chargé d'affaires who was in charge of the evacuated Polish Embassy. The individual Polish Offices were institutions created to replace the existing Polish consulates.; compare: Zabięło (1967), p. 126, 137, 161; see: *The Polish Foreign Service after September 1, 1939* (1954), p. 50.

The Junior High School and High School in Villard-de-Lans, like Polish primary education in this area, was initially financed by the Grenoble branch of the Polish Red Cross in London, and after its forced liquidation, it was supported by the Society for the Care of Poles in France. The secondary school in Villard-de-Lans was also subsidised by the Polish government in London, more specifically by the Office of Minister Lieutenant General Józef Haller, often referred to by him as the Office of National Education, and then by the Office of Education and School Affairs under his leadership (the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education, Ref. No. A. 19.I/9, *Report on the activities of the Office of Education and School Affairs for 1941*). It cannot be ruled out that funds for the maintenance of the Junior High School and High School were transferred by the National Culture Fund in London, as it was done at the request of Prof. Adam Vetulani in relation to Polish schools and higher education in Switzerland.

The General Director of Polish Offices *appointed Prof. Zygmunt Zaleski* as the headmaster of the newly established school. *Thanks to his extensive life experience, profound culture and intelligence, he was able to give the school a truly high educational standard, and, in terms of academic achievement, ensured that it attained the maximum value possible in extremely difficult conditions – without textbooks, laboratories or teaching aids* (the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education Ref. No. A. 19. I/14, S. Zabiello, Directeur Général des Offices Polonais en France, No 859/V, *Copy. To the Minister of Foreign Affairs in London. Education report*, Vichy, March 20, 1941). Jadwiga Aleksandrowicz became the school inspector, and Waław Godlewski was appointed as secretary general. The teaching staff which consisted of 13 people was collected by the high school headmaster. The teachers looked after teenagers living in boys' and girls' boarding schools, located in two separate buildings (the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education, Ref. No. A. 19.I/9, *Report on the activities of the Office of Education and School Affairs for 1941*).

On December 20, 1940, the Junior High School and High School had 133 pupils, including 19 girls. Despite the difficult situation in France, which was occupied and subjugated by Germany, the student community continued to grow (the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education, Ref. No. A. 19. I/14, *Copy. Extract from the report by Mr. St. Zabiello of December 20, 1940, No. 301/IV*). At the end of 1941, it comprised 158 male students and 25 female students aged between 15 and 30. They attended the third and fourth grades of junior high school and the first and second grades of high school (the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education, Ref. No. A. 19.I/9, *Report on the activities of the Office of Education and School*

Affairs for 1941). In the following years, the Junior High School achieved its full organisational status, i.e. four classes.

Efforts were made to conduct classes at school in accordance with the curricula which were in force in Poland. However, it was not easy, as they were not available abroad and teachers were often forced to recreate from memory the scope of knowledge from particular subjects taught to students. There was also a need to introduce far-reaching changes in teaching, as there was a justified need to adapt to the current curriculum requirements in French schools (the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education, Ref. No. A. 19. I/14, S. Zabiełło, Directeur General des Offices Polonais en France, No 859/V, *Copy. To the Minister of Foreign Affairs in London. Education report*, Vichy, March 20, 1941). The students enjoyed skiing, singing in the school choir, which added splendour to local celebrations, and even regular masses at a nearby church. Regardless of their systematic education, the student community successfully fostered a spirit of camaraderie, which allowed them to go beyond school discipline. The songbook of one of the high school students from 'Fleur des Alpes' contained lyrics sung to the melody of *Pierwsza Brygada* (Eng. The First Brigade):

*Nie wolno nam na randki chodzić
 Nie wolno nam malować się
 Nie wolno nam chłopców uwodzić
 Nie wolno nam całować się.
 My Fleur des Alpistki
 Flirtu Specjalistki
 Na stos
 Rzuciłyśmy miłości los
 Na stos! Na stos!
 Nie chcemy od belfrów uznania
 Nie chcemy mieć wspaniałych not
 Wolimy mocne całowania
 Wśród lasów, pól i ciemnych grot.
 My się nie boimy
 Na randki chodzimy
 Bo nasz profesor sam
 Na randki chodzi tu i tam* (Łepkowski, 1990 pp. 208, 209).

In the Report on the activities of the Office of Education and School Affairs for 1941 presented to the highest authorities of the Republic of Poland, the following was noted: *The school has a high standard of education and is also well-regarded in academic terms. This has been achieved thanks to the remarkable qualities of the headmaster, who has selected an appropriate team of co-workers. These results were achieved despite the extremely difficult conditions which*

the school operates in: great diversity in the age, background, past and level of the students, no textbooks, laboratories and teaching aids (the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education, Ref. No. A. 19.I/9, *Report on the activities of the Office of Education and School Affairs for 1941*).

To assist in improving the organisation of the school's work and establishing the course of teaching, the Office of Minister Lieutenant General Józef Haller sent the statutes of Polish secondary schools established in England and Scotland directly to headmaster Zaleski. He also announced that he would send the curricula in the future (the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education, Ref. No. A19.I/14, Copy. Directeur General des Offices Polonais en France No 859/V. Stanisław Zabiełło, *To the Minister of Foreign Affairs in London. Education report*, Vichy, March 20, 1941)⁴.

The well-run school was highly regarded by the General Director of Polish Offices in France: [...] *I consider the institution in Villard de Lans to be the most successful Polish project created in France after the catastrophe* [of the war in 1940 – W.Ch.]. *When assessing the school's constantly improving standards, I am paying close attention to it from both the educational and academic point of view. In order to help the school staff fulfil their difficult duties, during my visit I provided Prof. Zaleski with financial assistance from the Polish Red Cross to purchase sports equipment and scientific materials necessary to organise a physics and chemistry laboratory. I also granted subsidies for the salaries of professors developing the necessary [scripts – W.Ch.] for particular subjects due to the complete lack of Polish textbooks at the secondary school level* (the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education, Ref. No. A19.I/14, Copy. Directeur General des Offices Polonais en France No 859/V. Stanisław Zabiełło, *To the Minister of Foreign Affairs in London. Education report*, Vichy, March 20, 1941). The report on the school's activities prepared by the headmaster was forwarded to the Polish authorities in London.

It is worth noting that Zaleski's activities were not limited to running a secondary school but also expressed concern for the state of Polish education in France as a whole. When, in December 1940, under pressure from the Germans or the overzealous French school authorities, primary education centres in northern France were closed down, Zaleski intervened with the Minister of Education to have them reopened. The initiative was successful. In February 1941, teaching in educational centres in this area was reactivated, with the exception of two towns in the Pas de Calais department, where the management of the coal mine outright opposed this initiative (the Polish Institute and Sikorski

⁴ It should be noted that the *Curriculum for state secondary schools with Polish as the language of instruction* was published much later, see: Kurdybacha, 1946, p.13.

Museum in London, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education, Ref. No. A19.I/14, S. Zabiello, Directeur General des Oficces Polonais en France, *Copy. To the Minister of Foreign Affairs in London. Education report*, Vichy, March 20, 1941, No 859/V; *ibid, Copy. Extract from the report by Mr. St. Zabiello of December 20, 1940*, No. 301/IV).

The school's educational and pedagogical successes were possible mainly thanks to the commitment of the teaching staff under the leadership of its headmaster, Zygmunt Lubicz-Zaleski. This outstanding educator was arrested in 1943 for his underground activities and imprisoned by the Germans in the Buchenwald concentration camp. He was succeeded by Waclaw Godlewski, who was sent to the Mauthausen concentration camp in 1944. After the war, both headmasters left the places of their torment. The last school headmaster was Ernest Berger.

After the war's end, the school was moved to Paris. Located in the Batignolles district of the French capital city, it was stripped of Cyprian Norwid's name and subjected to the overwhelming influence of two successive ambassadors in France – Stefan Jędrychowski and Stanisław Skrzyszewski, representing the pro-Soviet government installed in Warsaw by the USSR. A deputy headmaster described as 'the eye of Moscow' appeared at the school. In 1946, the institution ceased its activities.

Graduates and former pupils fondly recall unforgettable moments spent at the Junior High School and High School in Villard-de-Lans. It proves that the school had a significant impact on the teenagers who studied there. One of the boards at the exhibition mentioned that a meeting of former pupils was held in Kraków in 1958 with the aim of establishing a club for former Villard students⁵. In 1974, at the meeting in Villard-de-Lans, the Association of Former Students of the Polish High School was established. Over time, numerous initiatives were launched to commemorate the work of this distinguished school. The most important ones includes: the unveiling of a plaque on the wall of the Hôtel Parc et du Château in Villard-de-Lans in 1976, the installation of a commemorative plaque in the crypt of the Holy Cross Church in Warsaw in 1986 dedicated to the school's employees, professors and students who died in partisan fighting in Vercors in the years 1944–1945, and the inclusion of the name Villard-de -Lans on a joint commemorative plaque in St. John's Cathedral in Warsaw dedicated to the memory of Polish school teachers and students who died during World War II, also in Balaton Zamárdi and Balaton Boglár in Hungary and in Ploesti Craiova in Romania, and naming one of the streets in the Ursynów district of Warsaw after the Villard family

⁵ Lepkowski has provided more details about the meeting. It was held on the initiative of the Skinder married couple and Ludwik Panek in Nowa Huta in July, with the participation of 47 teachers and students residing exclusively in Poland. Those who gathered sent a letter to Zygmunt Lubicz-Zaleski. After the meeting, security service agents summoned the organisers for questioning.

[teaching staff and graduates of the school in Villard; in Polish: Villardczycy]. There were also other events related to commemorating the school, its students and teachers. Despite the passage of time, various forms of commemorating the Polish school near Grenoble as an unwavering cradle of freedom continue to be held.

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Photo: Rafał Lewandowski

Romain Zaleski – third from the right, at the grand opening of the exhibition



Photo: Rafał Lewandowski

The opening ceremony of the exhibition, Helene Zaleski in the foreground, Hendrik Wirix standing behind

Cyprian Norwid Polish Junior High School and High School in Villard-de-Lans (1940–1946)

Summary

Aim: To popularize the exhibition dedicated to the activities of the Junior High and High School in Villard-de-Lans from 1940 to 1946. To present the first several months of the school's operation in light of archival materials from the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London. To emphasize the role of Zygmunt Lubicz-Zaleski in the school's creation and functioning.

Methods: The use of methods appropriate for the history of education. A reference to archival sources and the exhibition organized next to the Bristol Hotel in Warsaw.

Results: A discussion of the most important achievements of the Junior High and High School in Villard-de-Lans during the difficult times of World War II in light of exhibition materials and archival documents, with a particular focus on previously unpublished facts. Drawing attention to the educational, pedagogical, and moral outcomes of the teachers working at this Polish secondary school in the French Alps. Emphasizing its role in preserving Polish identity and protecting Polish youth from denationalization abroad.

Conclusions: To disseminate knowledge and memory of the Junior High and High School in Villard-de-Lans, to showcase the school's educational legacy, and its importance for Polish culture and national heritage.

Keywords: school's work, teachers, students, education, role of the headmaster.