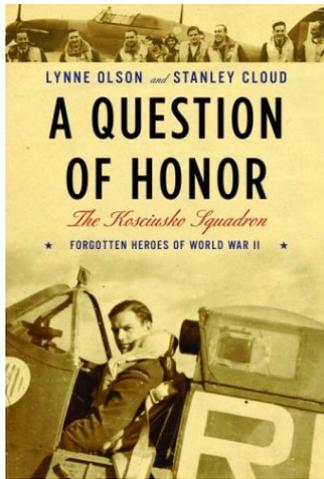


***A Question of Honor: The Kościuszko Squadron: Forgotten Heroes of World War II* by Lynne Olson and Stanley Cloud, 2003, Knopf, 495 pages.**



The book, written by veteran American journalists and authors Olson and Cloud, is the engrossing account of Polish fighter pilots who helped save England during the Battle of Britain in 1940. The story of the Kościuszko Squadron is also the centerpiece for a broader history of Poland in World War II.

The *Prologue* sets the theme of the book: Poland's betrayal by the United States and Britain. It describes the Victory Parade in London in 1946. Polish pilots and all other Poles who had fought under British command were excluded. They were barred from the celebration by the British government for fear of offending Stalin.

The Kościuszko Squadron of the Polish Air Force had a unique history-- it had its origins in 1919 when a group of American pilots came to Poland to help Poles in the Soviet-Polish War. In 1939 The Kościuszko Squadron (or Squadron 303) was formed from experienced Polish Air Force pilots who had fled Poland by way of Romania and France to England. It was the first all-Polish squadron in the British Royal Air Force.

The first part of the book centers on five pilots from the squadron: Mirosław Feric, Jan Zumbach, Witold Lokuciewski, Zdzisław Krasnodębski and Witold Urbanowicz. The authors had access to the squadron's unofficial diary and to letters, interviews, memoirs, histories and photographs. The personal experiences of these "hell raisers" illuminate the momentous events of the war. More than 30,000 Polish airmen, soldiers, and sailors had made their way to Britain, eager to fight. The Polish fliers--all skilled veteran pilots--resented RAF's initial condescension. The pilots attended language school and were trained in the technical peculiarities of British planes. When they were finally called into combat, it became clear that they were very good indeed. Their powers of concentration and their daring made them outstanding fighter pilots. The authors provide a lot of details about the Poles' vital role in the Battle of Britain. During the battle, 142 Polish fighter pilots took part, 76 of them in British squadrons, 66 in the two all-Polish squadrons.

The drama and excitement of the battle make for heady reading. The Kościuszko Squadron's diary entries, with personal comments by the pilots, give the reader a sense of immediacy. Squadron 303 was credited with downing more German aircraft than any other squadron attached to the RAF. The squadron's outstanding accomplishments turned the pilots into celebrities. George VI and Churchill visited the squadron. Five of the squadron's nine aces were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, RAF's top decoration. British and American journalists wrote glowing articles about the Polish fliers' courage. British civilians, especially the ladies, adored them. They were "the glamour boys of England." According to the various opinions presented in the book, it is evident that the Poles' contribution was crucial to winning the Battle of Britain. Nevertheless, their popularity and that of the Polish cause would plummet after the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, when Stalin became a courted ally.

The second part of the book, aptly titled *Betrayal* shifts its focus to the fate of Poles and Poland later in the war as Western Allies tried to appease Stalin's Soviet Union at Poland's expense. The authors discuss the Warsaw Uprising and the Allies' failure to rescue the city and the suppression of Soviet guilt in the Katyń Massacre. The interplay of personalities and power politics of The Big Three leading up to Yalta are clearly presented. The authors offer unsparing portrayals of Churchill and Roosevelt and their duplicity towards Poland as they acceded to all of Stalin's demands. On the personal level, there is a heart-wrenching scene as Polish fighter pilots listen to a BBC news bulletin on February 13, 1945. They find out that "... at Yalta Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt had formally ceded Eastern Poland to Stalin and had handed over control of the rest of the country to a provisional, Soviet-bred Communist government." (p.372)

When the war ended, Polish pilots and the rest of the Polish armed forces wrestled with the dilemma of whether to return to Poland. The Britons' attitude had changed drastically - Poles, including Polish pilots, were viewed as an unwelcome burden. A survey showed that most Britons wanted Poles to go back to Poland. Of the surviving original members of the Kościuszko Squadron in Britain, only two returned to Poland. The authors recount the difficult postwar adjustments of the four pilots (Feric was killed during the war).

At the end of the *Epilogue* the authors comment that there has been little official recognition for the Poles' vital contribution during the war. However, they note that lately there has been a resurgence of interest in Britain.

The book is a tribute to Poland and an eloquent indictment of its Allies. Zbigniew Brzeziński called the book "A gripping account of personal gallantry and of political treachery. On a par with the recent best-sellers about the fighting men of World War II."

