

Institute of National Remembrance

<https://ipn.gov.pl/en/news/7876,Maria-Barr.html>

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Maria Barr



The girl in this famous wartime photograph is Maria Barr.

The beginning of her life was probably blissful and secure: she spent her first sixteen years in Poland's Grodno, in a well-off family of an army officer. Given such privileged background, this must have been happy, if uneventful, childhood and adolescence time – with play, holidays, interests, school, friends, and perhaps first love on top of that.

It all came to an end in September 1939, with first German and then Soviet invasion on Poland; the family were fortunate enough to find refuge in France, where plenty of servicemen headed to join the recreated Polish Army. Behind, they left the half-destroyed country which would soon see exploitation, deportations, concentration camps and mass murder.

The French exile lasted only a few months: when La République fell under the German fist, Maria's family had to flee again, this time to Britain. Aboard MS "Sobieski" she met Philip Rex Barr, a British pilot injured in battle. He had good looks, more than a few drops of Polish blood, and several Boche notched on his gun; no wonder that before long he had her heart as well.

In Britain, Philip Rex recovered from wounds and Maria graduated from school; they met between his bombing missions, and in December 1941, got married in Glasgow. The Bomber Command losses were the highest in all British military, and young Mrs. Barr must have realized the dangers, having met the widows of 107 Squadron airmen. Eleven

months into her marriage she became one of them.

At 19, she was way below the average WWII widow age of 23, and didn't feel as one. In June 1943, when the famous photograph was taken, she accepted Squadron Leader Barr's DFC from the King, but still refused to believe he was dead. By then, she was already contributing to the war effort herself, working for the Polish Red Cross in Edinburgh.

Philip Rex never returned and till this day has been resting in a Belgian town of Wevelgem, not far from where his Douglas Boston light bomber crashed on 7 November 1942, killing the 4-man crew. Maria mourned him for years, but after the war, having finally come to terms with her loss, was married again, this time to a born and bred Pole.

Most of the quarter of a million Polish servicemen and their families in Britain had nowhere to return to: the Iron Curtain was already falling over the Soviet-dominated country, while the Eastern Borderlands, which Maria and many others called home, had been annexed into the USSR. The Poles took the benefits of 1947 Resettlement Act and stayed.

Maria Barr was no stranger to loss: for a few years she lived a carefree life in free Poland, and then, the war turned her into a refugee; for a brief while she was the wife of a RAF pilot, and then, for much longer, his widow; until the end of the war she served her country, but until the end of her life, over seven decades later, had to reside in another.

Still, one thing Mary probably never lost: womb-to-tomb, she remained

Marysia.

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