

Institute of National Remembrance

<https://ipn.gov.pl/en/news/9023,For-those-who-disseminate-knowledge-about-Poland-abroad-The-seventh-edition-of-t.html>

17.04.2024, 04:26

26.10.2021

For those who disseminate knowledge about Poland abroad. The seventh edition of the IPN's "Witness of History" Prize.

The President of the Institute of National Remembrance Karol Nawrocki Ph.D., presented the laureates of 2021 edition of the "Witness of History " Prize with the IPN's honorary distinction on 27 October. The event took place at the Palace on the Isle, at the Royal Łazienki Park in Warsaw.









Five individuals and one institution received the prize in recognition of their outstanding contribution to commemorating the history of the Polish Nation. The laureates came from Belgium, Italy, Canada and the United States.

The participants of last year's edition of the prize also took part in the official ceremony.

The „Witness of History” Award is an honorary distinction established in March 2009 by the President of the Institute of National Remembrance. It is granted to individuals and organizations in recognition of their outstanding contribution to commemorating the history of the Polish Nation and supporting the IPN in its statutory activities in the field of education and research.

At the ceremony, the IPN President Karol Nawrocki addressed the winners, saying,

All of you, regardless of the part of the world you live in, managed to find the core of the Polish soul. And since Poland's middle name is history, to me and other Poles you are much more than witnesses testifying about history: you testify about Poland,

The winners:



HALINA BABIŃSKA (Canada), born in 1929 (in the former Volhynian Voivodeship), is a former Siberian exile; she got out of Russia via Iran and Lebanon and has been living in Canada since 1948.

For decades, she had direct contact with the leaders of the Polish emigration in Canada; she collaborated with Dr J. Kirszak on many occasions, providing him with materials from her home archive, and, throughout her life, has been involved in the activities and development of Polish diaspora organisations in Montreal.

Ms. Babińska has become a true guardian of the memory of General Sosnkowski.

She was a founding member of a team which for many years prepared lists of Polish graves and biographies of persons resting in the Saint-Sauveur cemetery near Montreal. It was first published in a book in 2002, but since 2020 has also been available online.

She volunteered at the Polish Library in Montreal for years. Since 1950s, she has been a volunteer at the Polish Children's Aid Committee in Montreal, helping organise many patriotic ceremonies and events commemorating representatives of the Polish community.

Being a Siberian exile, she regularly met with students from Canadian and Polish schools to talk about her life in the USSR and the years she spent in Iran and Lebanon. She was interviewed several times in the Canadian media Her video memories from the time of her exile are available on the www.kresy-syberia.org website, and her account of the Middle East was included in 'Pod cedrami Libanu: wspomnienia

polских studentów z Bejrutu 1942-52' [*Under the Cedars of Lebanon: Memories of Polish Students from Beirut 1942-52*].



GILLES LAPERS (Belgium), born in 1950, is a distinguished promoter of Polish history in the EU and documenting the memory of the soldiers of the 1st Armoured Division in our country and worldwide. He is enthusiast of Polish history, an experienced collector, publicist, and a tireless organiser who has supported several exhibitions, as well as publishing and documentation initiatives of the IPN. He lends his collection free of charge to exhibitions commemorating Polish 'soldiers of General Maczek'.

Mr. Lapers assists IPN employees in their search for archival sources and unique iconographic materials, as well as independently documents and tries to save from oblivion the traces of the activity of the 1st Armoured Division soldiers in France, Belgium and Germany.

In 2001, he started working on a biography of Zygmunt Sawicki (his wife's grandfather). It is now available at CEGES, the Konijk Museum and ULB. In 2006, it won the "Rose de reconnaissance" award in Fribourg, Switzerland; since 2006, he has maintained a blog dedicated to Zygmunt Sawicki in English, French and Polish.

He is a member of international groups, associations and organisations promoting the memory of the 1st Armoured Division.

Mr. Lapers' collection includes over 5,000 original photographs documenting events from September 1939 to the repatriation of Polish soldiers in 1946, as well as artefacts, official documents, and recordings of testimonies of the events participants. He is constantly updating his collection and documenting the testimonies of the last living soldiers.

Mr. Lapers authored some 20 articles in museum exhibition catalogues on the 1st Armoured Division. He took part in preparing a permanent exhibition for a private museum commemorating Polish soldiers, the Canada-Poland War Museum in Adegem (Belgium), and provided archive materials for the Museum in Wałbrzych for the photo exhibition 'For Our Freedom and Yours - Polish Places of National Remembrance in France' (2012).

He participated in making a film by the NDR television about the town of Haren/Maczków, commemorating a "Polish town" in Germany; he also made available part of his collection for a documentary by RTL Nord television, also about Maczków. What is more, Mr. Lapers helped make a documentary entitled 'Invincible. The Story of General Stanisław Maczek', produced by the Polish History Museum.

He is also the organiser and originator of many educational initiatives that promote history. An example is the 2015 reunion of the heroines of the famous photograph from the liberation of Breda in 1944.

Free of charge, he provided materials for many publications related to the history of the 1st Armoured Division, e.g. the book *Vergeten helden (Forgotten Heroes)* by Dirk Verbeke, *The House of Broken Wings* by M. Kolarikowva and C. Lock, and *Phoenix Odyssey* by J. Wiack.

Similarly, Mr. Lapers makes his collection available to the IPN, including the right to use and reproduce the images.



MARCO PATRICELLI (Italy), born in 1963, is a journalist, historian and university lecturer. His research, focusing on Polish and Italian history, has won him international recognition and has been translated into Polish, French and Czech. He is an outstanding expert on Polish history and its unrivalled promoter in Italy.

This outstanding expert on contemporary Polish history cooperates with TV RAI and private-owned TV Mediaset in making historical films and programmes, often dedicated to Poland. He is the author of numerous publications on Poland's WWII history, released by the most famous Italian publishing houses. His book 'Ochotnik' [*Volunteer*], the first biography of Witold Pilecki, was published in 2010. It received the most important Italian award in its category, Acqui Storia, and was translated into French. Currently, a Hollywood film based on it is being finalised.

In 2013, Mr. Patricelli published 'Umierać za Gdańsk' [*To die for Gdańsk*], revealing unknown facts and events that took place before and after the beginning of WWII.

He penned the preface to the Italian edition of 'Wspomnienia gen. Andersa' [*General Anders's Memoirs*], and was a co-author of the Italian biography of one of the soldiers of the 2nd Corps, Wojciech Narębski, published in 2020 together with Diego Bottero Audero and Norman Davies. In March, his book on the Maiella Brigade, which contains a lot of information on the 2nd Corps, was published in Italy; in July, Rusconi will release the history of General Anders's 2nd Corps and an article on the contribution of Poles to cracking the Enigma code.

He also creates musical compositions dedicated to historical events and people: among others, he composed 'Pilecki's Suite' and 'After the Uprising (Warsaw 1944)'.

He is an authority in Italian scientific and journalistic circles, credited with inspiring a circle of young historians to tain Polish history.

As an important partner for the Polish Embassy, Mr. Patricelli willingly participates in all events organised by the Embassy.

For his work, he has received various Polish and Italian awards.



HELENA SOŁTYS (the USA), born in 1963 (Poland). Since 1999, she has been involved in education in the Polish community. Currently, she is teaching the Polish language, history and geography at the Mikołaj Kopernik School near Chicago.

She is a member of the Polish Teachers Association in America. During her long activity in the Association, she served as Vice President for 12 years. In the Polish Teachers Association, she was responsible, among other things, for organising ceremonies, the scripts of which she wrote herself.

She is the author of scripts on Polish history, including the recent period, for school and community celebrations. She is the initiator of school events, e.g. students' trip to the reconstruction site of the Battle of Mokra, or meetings with witnesses of memory and IPN educators.

She encourages students to participate in competitions organised by various institutions, among them by the IPN's History Stop in Chicago. She is the guardian of the school colour guard, with which she participates in patriotic and religious ceremonies; in the year of the 40th anniversary of the school, she was on the jubilee committee.

Ms. Sołtys teaches her students to remember the Polish national heritage, and gets involved in appeals and charity actions, such as collecting funds for the Polish Museum in America. She is a tireless promoter of Polish community life, active in the Polish Teachers Association, which looks after Polish schools, as well as in Parents' Committees. During the Association's 12th Congress, she helped the Rzeszów Branch of the Institute of National Remembrance display its exhibit on Polish Righteous. She also helped in presenting it at the Polish Museum in Chicago.

She took part in 'Polonia's Encounters with Recent History', which resulted in cooperation with the National Education Office, and participation in annual conferences. Thanks to her cooperation with the Institute of National Remembrance, the Polish school community received teaching resources for modern history lessons.

In 2014, Helena Sołtys co-organised a concert dedicated to the Cursed Soldiers, and in autumn 2015, coordinated the project 'Educational Week of the IPN in Chicago', combined with the opening of the 'Republic Lost' exhibit, workshops for teachers, classes for students of Polish schools and open seminars. The meetings were attended by the representatives of the Warsaw Branch of the IPN.

On the 70th anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising, she designed the exhibition 'Barricade of Memory', featuring photographs by Sylwester 'Kris' Braun.

Additionally, it must be pointed out that the celebrations of the 1050th anniversary of the Baptism of Poland were coordinated by schools in the Chicago metropolis, which Ms Sołtys presided over. In the same year, she was the originator and coordinator of the project 'Gniezno - where Poland was born - The Road to the Baptism of Poland'. The project involved educational projects on the origins of Polish statehood, and promoted Dobra Polska Szkoła social networking site.

On her initiative, in January 2018, the IPN's History Stop in Chicago was established, which operates under the auspices of the IPN at the Polish Teachers Association in America.

She managed to save from destruction over a hundred-year-old archive of "Dziennik Związkowy". Thanks to her efforts, an agreement was signed between the newspaper and the IPN, under which the archives were preserved and digitised by the IPN Archive.

In 2018, as part of the 15th Convention of Teachers of Polish Diaspora, she conducted historical workshops.

She is the author of the 'Oak Alley of Independence' project under the patronage of the KG in Chicago and the Polish Teachers Association. It consisted in planting 100 oak trees for the 100th anniversary of regaining independence. The project was addressed to schools, organisations, associations, foundations and individual people. In that

year, she also implemented activities in her school related to the anniversary of regaining independence

Ms. Sołtys was the coordinator of the meeting of young people from Polish schools with the President of the Republic of Poland in 2018.

In cooperation with LOT Polish Airlines, she organised an art competition in honour of the pioneers and aces of Polish aviation, and as her own project, 'In the Footsteps of the past - into Chicago's Polish Past' trip, for teachers.

On the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of the WWII, she organised a trip for students and teachers, entitled 'Following the Polish Army Veterans' Routes', which included visiting veterans.

Helena Sołtys constantly improves her qualifications by participating, among others, in workshops conducted by the IPN educators; in 2017, she co-lead methodology workshops for teachers on contemporary history.

In 2020, she organised two international photo contests: a photography competition titled 'Polskość białą i czerwienią się mieni się' [Polishness Shimmers in White and Red] and a tribute to the veterans of the Battle of Warsaw called 'Victoria Warszawska' [Victory of Warsaw].

Ms. Sołtys is a member of the Polish American Congress, and the initiator of the roll call of the Fallen on Memorial Day, which commemorates deceased teachers and educators.

She maintains contact with the veteran community. She helps organise ceremonies by the Polish Army Veterans Association and the Siberian Exiles Association. She collaborates with the Polish Scouting and Guiding Association, the Polish Museum of America, historical re-enactment groups, and cemetery managements, promoting educational projects of Polish institutions in the U.S., *such as Archiwum pełne pamięci* [Archive Full of Memory] by the IPN.

Helena Sołtys collaborates with the Council of Polonia Educators and the Polish Studies Department at the Loyola University. She cares for the doyens of Polish-American education, advocating the education of ambassadors of Polishness, and works with the Education Committee of the Polish American Congress.

As a member of the Polish Journalists Association in America, she has been cooperating with the Polish media for many years, promoting the achievements of Polish schools and the 'History Stop'. She participates in radio and television programmes, inviting the public to historical events, exhibitions and lectures, and encouraging the young generation to learn about Polish history.

H. Sołtys moderates the Polish Teachers Association social media, as well as the 'History Stop' and 'Oak Avenue' accounts.

She has received numerous diplomas of recognition, congratulatory letters and awards.



POLISH COMBATANTS' ASSOCIATION [SPK] IN CANADA, founded in 1946, is an organisation composed mainly of Polish veterans of the 2nd Polish Corps, who fought under the operational command of the 8th British Army.

Every year, SPK organises ceremonies on the occasion of national holidays, and its representatives take care of graves and pay tribute to deceased veterans, including an annual pilgrimage to the Blue Army cemetery in Niagara-on-the-Lake; they have laid wreaths or flowers on graves in Warsaw, Italy, and the UK.

SPK takes pride in building Polish churches, schools, its own headquarters, credit unions, creating youth and senior groups, providing financial aid during martial law, and help for disabled

veterans in the East.

It organises numerous occasional banquets, meetings of veterans and broadly understood Polish community, exhibitions, lectures, as well as interviews with veterans. The organization representatives remember sick and disabled veterans, and take part in Veterans Conventions.

Since 1962, a veterans' magazine 'SPK in Canada' has appeared. The Association has its own website with biographies of the recipients of the Order of War Virtuti Militari who settled in Canada after the war

It is the largest veterans' organisation in the world.



DIRK VERBEKE (Belgium), born in 1954, is the Honorary Secretary of the Belgian city of Tielt, which the 1st Armoured Division liberated during the Second World War.

He served as Secretary of the City of Tielt from 1991 to 2015. During that time and until now, he has worked to preserve and disseminate the memory of Polish soldiers. Among other things, he organised three exhibitions on the liberation of Tielt, and he was one of the initiators of unveiling a monument to the city liberators in the form of a Sherman tank.

He initiated the establishment of partnerships between Tielt and Szamotuły and with the neighbouring town to Tielt - Ruiselede and Kraśnik - where the 24th Lancer Regiment was stationed.

For many years, he befriended and met with living Polish veterans and their families, documenting their memories and collecting memorabilia; he's acquired many books and documentation about the 1st Armoured Division.

In retirement, he continued his activities in the Association of the 1st Armoured Division Belgium. In 2017, he became the Association president. He is still an active member. He created and runs its Facebook page, where celebrations of Polish national holidays in Belgium are documented, and profiles of Polish liberators and recent Polish history appear. He is also the Association's magazine 'Communication' editor and initiates many meetings and activities to keep alive Polish historical memory. The Association which he runs

actively participates in the celebrations of Polish national holidays, promoting the memory of Poland among the Belgian Polish community. Moreover, he takes care of cemeteries and war graves of Polish liberators in Flanders.

Mr. Verbeke has brought together people connected to Polish history and Polish liberators for 30 years. In 2018/19, he initiated and curated the exhibition 'Armoured Wings', which tells the story of the liberation of Flanders by the 1st Polish Armoured Division. He had worked on creating this exhibition for 1.5 years, conducting archival research, contacting associations and veterans. He cooperated with, among others, the Military Research Institute in Katowice, the Museum of the Second World War, the Museum of the Polish Army, and the National Institute of Polish Cultural Heritage POLONIKA. The exhibition 'travelled' from Warsaw, through Gdańsk, to the Flemish towns liberated by the Poles. The Belgian government donated it to the Armoured Weapons Museum in Poznań.

Together with the Polish Embassy in Belgium and the Polish Tourist Office, he co-organised the so-called 'Ride in the Footsteps of Liberation', namely, a bicycle rally following the Belgian trail of General Maczek's soldiers, in 2019 in Tielt. For this occasion, he created historical panels containing text and photos of the liberated towns.

He is the co-author of the book 'Forgotten Heroes' (2020 edition), telling the story of veterans of the 1st Polish Armoured Division. The authors focus on soldiers who stayed in Belgium because the communist regime took over Poland.

D.Verbeke is working on an exhibition about the life of General Maczek. As a member of a historical association, together with the Museum of Polish History, he is involved in the renovation and adaptation of a former German communication bunker in the Flanders town of Roeselare for a place of commemoration of Gen. Maczek.

He is a recipient of numerous Polish decorations.

2020 winners

Please submit nominations for media accreditation for the event to:
media@ipn.gov.pl until 27 October

Opcje strony

- [Print this page](#)
- [Generate PDF of this page](#)
- [Notify about this page](#)

• Share this article

[Share on Facebook](#)

[Share on Twitter](#)