

Carving Out a History Niche: Aquila Polonica's Passion Fuels Publishing

by Linda Carlson

If you didn't speak Polish, had no military experience, and didn't know a thing about the Warsaw ghetto or World War II, would you try to write fiction about Polish WW II flying aces?



Probably not—but Terry Tagnazian wasn't fazed. Not that she ever finished her novel. Instead, she established a company to publish eyewitness accounts of life in Poland during the Second World War, and started out by acquiring the rights to dozens of 60- and 70-year-old titles.

Sounds gutsy, doesn't it? But then the co-founder of the Los Angeles-based Aquila Polonica (Latin for Polish eagle) isn't exactly a shrinking violet. Tagnazian began her career as a film finance attorney, structuring deals for moviemakers in need of cash and investors in need of tax advantages. After a dozen years, she says, she couldn't tolerate the idea of yet another movie prospectus or contract. What she was interested in by then was making her own movies, and she did one, a thriller set in Israel.

"But I didn't love it enough to pursue another one," she recalls. "I couldn't deal with the talent—the actors, director, and other crew. There was too much drama!"

What she did love was the concept of drama in print, which is what led her to want to do a novel with a World War II plot. Tagnazian is a baby boomer, so this historical fiction project required research about an era she did not live through, and for her, that research started with a vague recollection about Polish fighter pilots.

"Somewhere, somehow I'd heard that there were ace pilots

who helped save English people during the Battle of Britain. Not knowing anything else, I headed to the UCLA library's section on Poland in World War II."

That was the first step toward publishing.

"In research, I concentrated on the memoirs of key Polish Underground leaders. It didn't take me long to realize that I had had no idea what went on in Poland during the war," Tagnazian says. "The story is probably the most heroic and most tragic of that of any of the Allies."

Most of Aquila Polonica's titles are selections of the History Book Club, the Book-of-the-Month Club, and the Military Book Club.

Tagnazian's interest in publishing was reinforced by a trip to Poland for additional research, with a stopover in London to meet a man she knew at that point only from an online chat group.

LINKING UP

She and Stefan Mucha had corresponded via email for 18 months after introducing themselves through the group, which Mucha was using to gather information about his late father's war-time service and about the family members he lost in Poland during World



War II. The senior Mucha—who served in the Second Polish Corps in Italy after being liberated from a German forced-labor camp in 1945 and then emigrating to Great Britain—never spoke of Poland or the war, and did not teach his son Polish, but Stefan became interested when he found a 1930s Mucha family photo after his father’s death.

Following her conversation with Mucha, Tagnazian met a woman in Warsaw who made it clear that the Soviets had hidden the truth about Poland as an Ally. When Tagnazian hired her to serve as guide and translator, she arrived for the first meeting with a couple of library books about the Polish Underground’s army, the Armia Krajowa, or Home Army.

“Almost her first words to me were, ‘I want to thank you for this assignment. When I was growing up, we were taught it was the Communist resistance that saved Poland from the Nazis, and that these Armia Krajowa guys were clowns.’”

That gave Tagnazian goose bumps, she recalls. “I thought, ‘Here is a woman who doesn’t know her own history because of propaganda.’ If even some Poles don’t know the truth, is it any wonder that Americans don’t?”

The rhetoric favored by candidates in the United States this fall pales by comparison with Tagnazian’s passionate description of how Poland was the only Ally invaded by both Germany and the Soviet Union, occupied by both enemies for almost two years, and then controlled by the Soviets for decades.

This drive to tell Poland’s wartime stories is part of what led Tagnazian and her British partner to publish material that has won Aquila Polonica acclaim among those who read in English and interest from the international publishing community.

TITLES’ TRIUMPHS

The company’s most recent title, *The Auschwitz Volunteer: Beyond Bravery*, was the subject of an overwhelmingly positive and lengthy review (1,600 words) in the *New York Times* Book Review in June. A week later, it was selected by the *Times* as an Editors’ Choice.

Like most of Aquila Polonica’s other titles, it is a selection of the History Book Club, the Book-of-the-Month Club, and the Military Book Club. Besides reviews in the *Times*, *Publishers Weekly*, and other trade and consumer publications, it’s won raves from Polish-American publications and bloggers, with comments such as, “A dramatic and often harrowing eyewitness account of life, death and resistance inside ▶

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the infamous Nazi German concentration camp,” and “An astounding memoir, even if you feel you have read too many WWII stories already. . . . The story is breathtaking.”

In advance of October’s Frankfurt Book Fair, it had attracted attention from foreign publishers, so someday soon there may be editions in Japanese, Polish, French, German, Italian, Hebrew, Portuguese, and Slovenian.

Another title, *303 Squadron: The Legendary Battle of Britain Fighter Squadron*, has been a gold medalist in IBPA’s 2011 Benjamin Franklin Awards program as well as a selection of book clubs, and its publication has been especially meaningful to Tagnazian.

“This is coming full circle from my first step on the path toward forming the company,” she says, because this 1942 title—now enlarged with a “Historical Horizon” section that provides a synopsis of the circumstances and adventures that led to the establishment in England of the 303 Squadron and other Polish squadrons—documents the valor of pilots who flew for France and then Britain after Poland was occupied, the same pilots Tagnazian had focused on as characters when she was working on her novel.

Unlike many publishing entrepreneurs, Tagnazian and Mucha spent the first few years at their startup acquiring titles rather than issuing books. “To give ourselves a starting base for a catalog, we made several trips to Warsaw to acquire the rights to 30 books,” Tagnazian explains. Since 2009, they have published five books and a DVD, all of which are still in print.



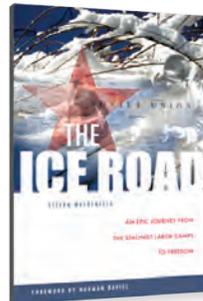
The first title, issued in September 2009 to coincide with the 70th anniversary of the beginning of World War II, was *The Mermaid and the Messerschmitt: War Through a Woman’s Eyes, 1939–1940* by Rulka Langer. About the same time, Aquila Polonica also released *Siege: World War II Begins*, a DVD that includes the 1940 Academy Award–nominated

newsreel of original film footage of the Nazi German siege of Warsaw in September 1939. “The two complement each other, and we started with them because they powerfully convey the opening days of the war,” Tagnazian says.

Langer, a Pole who returned to Warsaw after earning a degree at Vassar College in 1928, had been an account executive at the American advertising agency J. Walter Thompson, where

she met her husband, another Pole educated in the United States (Harvard Business School, 1929). By the late 1930s she was working at the Bank of Poland and rearing two small children while waiting to join her husband in the United States, where he was by then serving as a Polish diplomat. When war broke out, she chronicled her daily life, and when she arrived in New York in 1940, she turned her observations into a 1942 book and speeches (as noted by the 1943 publication, *Who’s Who in Polish America*).

AUTHOR PROMO STAND-IN SCENARIOS



Tagnazian worked with Langer’s son, George, now in Colorado, on an extensive enhancement of the book, as she has with the children of other authors whose books are being revised or translated for the American market. Some—such as Virginia resident Alice Faintich, whose father, Stefan Waydenfeld, wrote *The Ice Road: An*

Epic Journey from the Stalinist Labor Camps to Freedom—do “author” appearances.

“It’s both a challenge and a blessing to have dead authors,” Tagnazian says with a chuckle. (Some of the company’s authors are alive, but with one exception, they are all elderly or do not speak English.) Although she has to depend on authors’ family members, herself, or her translator for media and personal appearances, Tagnazian doesn’t have to deal with the drama and ego characteristic of some writers—the kind of drama she disliked about moviemaking.

Translator Jarek Garlinski, an effective voice for Aquila Polonica’s publications, became involved with the company because his parents had worked in the Polish Underground in Warsaw and the publishers wanted to license his late father’s memoirs for an English-language edition. Reared in Great Britain, Garlinski is now located near Houston.

TACTICS FOR TACKLING CHALLENGES

Houston, England, Los Angeles—what makes it possible for three such far-flung professionals to run a publishing company?

“We couldn’t do it without Skype, FTP, and email,” Tagnazian declares. She and Garlinski, who freelances for the company, are in time zones only a couple of hours apart, but the two publishers must deal with an eight-hour difference, and Mucha also has a full-time job heading a graphic design and marketing business.

This professional expertise, in addition to his passion about the Polish experience, is what has made Mucha a full partner; he's done all the book cover and text design. Now, as his business commitments have increased, a freelance designer in Los Angeles is providing help, and Tagnazian has also hired a full-time administrative assistant for her office.

Besides lacking live authors to promote all the books and coping with the distance between the publishers, Aquila Polonica's challenges include one familiar to other IBPA members: history is not a hot genre.

These publishing entrepreneurs spent the first few years acquiring titles rather than issuing books.

"History books are not your usual bestsellers," Tagnazian points out. "Add to that the fact that we are publishing in a narrow niche—Poland in World War II—that really didn't exist before. And this history is not of innate interest to most Americans, even a lot of Polish-Americans. So beyond selling each book, a large part of our job is to create demand for our niche by building interest in the overall story."

Besides using popular promotional tools—Twitter, Facebook, events, media publicity, YouTube—Tagnazian and Mucha emphasize strong visuals in book design, including extensive use of photos, maps, and illustrations, and the use of introductory material to set the books in their historical context.

What really propels the publishing company, however, is the passion of the founders. "I was hooked by the heroism of the Poles; heroism is a part of the human spirit that resonates strongly with virtually everyone," says Tagnazian. And both she and Mucha believe the Polish struggle, which continued for decades under Soviet oppression, is an important and almost unknown piece of Allied history. "World War II was one of the most transformative events of our modern time, and this part of it deserves to be known," she declares.

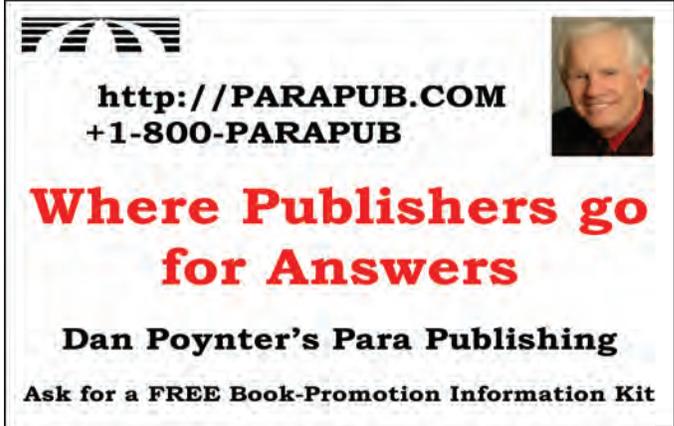
Reflecting on lessons learned in her few short years as a publisher—lessons important for every publisher—she adds, "A book is not an ordinary product you just package and sell. Books have the power to change the world." ■

Linda Carlson researched the routines of daily life in the United States during World War II for her history, *Company Towns of the Pacific Northwest*.



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