

STEFAN'S SPEECH: UNVEILING OF PLAQUE
November 17, 2018
KRAKÓW AVIATION MUSEUM

Hello, my name is Stefan Gnyś, son of pilot Władysław Gnyś.

Welcome to this world-famous museum in beautiful Kraków for this historic event honouring Capt Mieczysław Medwecki and 2nd Lt. Władysław Gnyś who were participants in the first aerial combat of the Second World War.

It is a great privilege for Janet and me to be here from Canada with all of you today for the unveiling of this magnificent plaque on the Wall of Honour, dedicated to two pilots who fought against the German Air Force invasion.

I am very happy to say that the Gnyś family is well represented here today, but I would like to recognize one person in particular from the Medwecki family - his 95 year old cousin Prof. Anna Medwecka-Kornaś! Welcome dear lady.

To think that on September 1, 1939, Rakowice Aerodrome, not far from where we are standing, was destroyed by the Luftwaffe and raised to the ground.

It was brilliant planning on the part of the Commanding Officers who moved the squadrons of the 2nd Air Regiment, to a secret airfield in Balice, just west of this city - the day before the invasion.

I would like to read to you excerpts from my book called **FIRST KILLS**, and paraphrase the events that occurred at the hidden location in Balice, where the pilots were sleeping:

“In the early hours of September 1st, Władek was abruptly awakened by the sound of terrifying explosions and the roar of planes overhead. He sprang out of bed and rushed to the window ... the sky above Kraków in the distance was crimson red. The 29 year old pilot pulled on his flying overalls and aggressively opened his bedroom door to see his comrades scrambling about, stunned by what they had also just witnessed.

At that moment, his C.O. Cpt Medwecki came yelling down the corridor: “It is war! It is war! Get to your aircraft immediately!” He caught sight of Władek and shouted, “Władek, you will take off with me!”

2nd Lt Gnyś ran with Medwecki down to the nearby field. Władek dropped into the cockpit and took off to the right of his captain. At around 300 metres and still climbing, Gnyś noticed tracer bullets in front of him and three silhouettes overhead. Instinctively he threw his PZL to the left and down. He managed to pull up just above the tree tops and outmanoeuvre the attacking Stuka aircraft who were on his tail. Climbing again, he saw Capt Medwecki’s aircraft swaying from side to side, out of control. “He’s been hit!” Władek shouted!

After that, he encountered two returning German bombers and shot them down becoming the first victorious pilot for the Allies.

When Gnyś eventually returned to base, he saw on the outskirts of Balice a plane burning on the ground – it was Cpt Medwecki’s PZL. Half an hour earlier he had run across the field shouting, “Władek, you will take off with me!” Now, he was gone.”

But we are here today to honour, to respect and to remember
“THE FIRST DEATH, THE FIRST VICTORY”.

I am so proud to be the founder of this memorial plaque, but without the following people, it would not have been possible. So for their dedicated contribution to this project, I would like to publicly thank them and I will be eternally grateful:

- Waldemar Serocki for his initial contribution to the project.
- Director Krzysztof Radwan, his staff and volunteers.
- Dominik Kościelny for his outstanding co-ordination and communication skills and keeping me positively in the loop in the completion of this project.
- Professor Jerzy Nowakowski – the very talented and famous artist who made this amazing plaque for today’s gathering. After this ceremony, please look at it up-close – read the words (English & Polish) and look at the expressive images.
- Agnieszka Gnyś for her on-going skills in translation and for working with me today.

In conclusion, I believe that this plaque symbolizes the strength of the Polish people today who believe in the joy of freedom, expression, & democracy. Let us not forget, **“Poland was the first to fight!”**

Thank you very much.