



COINS OF POLAND

For much of the late 1930's following the takeover of Germany by the Nazi Party and the continued strengthening of the Soviet Union, it seemed that war was inevitable. The Republic of Poland, then in its second incarnation, was sandwiched between the two nations. The German-Soviet Pact of August 23, 1939 ensured Poland would be partitioned between the two powers; enabling Germany to attack Poland without the fear of a Soviet reprisal.

Without warning, at 4:45 in the morning on the first of September 1939, the German battleship *Schleswig-Holstein*, opened fire on the Polish garrison at Westerplatte. Shortly thereafter the German Armed Forces (the Wehrmacht) swept across the border; the 20 years of relative peace enjoyed since November 11, 1918 were over. The Polish forces, though outnumbered, fought back fiercely against the more modernized and mobile Wehrmacht. Poland moved its military headquarters to the southeast, prolonging the German assault in the hopes that the British and the French would launch a counterattack and rescue them. The two nations had declared war on Germany two days after the invasion. These hopes were crushed when the Soviet Union invaded on September 17, 1939 with no declaration of war; just like its Nazi ally. After heavy shelling and bombing, Warsaw, the capitol, surrendered on September 27, 1939 and the battle was over by October 6 with 140,000 Polish troops taken prisoner. Despite this, Poland never officially surrendered. The Polish Government-in-exile in England encouraged the fight against Nazi Germany. Back home, the Polish Underground resistance continued to fight back on all fronts, slowly thwarting the efforts of the occupying forces.



War Posters of Poland in Polish and English

The Nazi occupiers looted Poland bringing their economic and agricultural wealth back to the Third Reich while the Soviets relocated Polish industries further eastward towards Moscow. The two occupying nations fostered violence among the Polish people through propaganda campaigns dividing them along ethnic, social, and religious lines. Anyone caught resisting Nazis or Soviets was executed. But this did not deter many Poles from forming and joining groups of armed Polish resistance. The greatest example was the Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*).

The brutal joint occupation would last until June 22, 1941 when Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union; once again turning Poland into one large battlefield.

In the 1600's, Poland established a monetary system under the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth with the Złoty as the official unit of currency divided into 100 Groszy. When Poland became part of the Russian Empire from 1815, its money was altered to resemble that of Russia. Values were written both in Polish Złoty and Groszy and Russian Roubles and Kopeks. Over time, any distinctly Polish imagery and slogans were removed by 1850. There would be no new distinctly Polish coins for nearly 70 years until the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1918.

After the establishment of the new Polish Republic, the mint in Warsaw was reopened in April of 1924. The new Złoty would be fixed to the gold standard with one Złoty equal to 9/31 grams of pure gold. Coins in values of 1, 2, and 5 Groszy were made of bronze. Coins in values of 10, 20, and 50 Groszy were made of nickel.

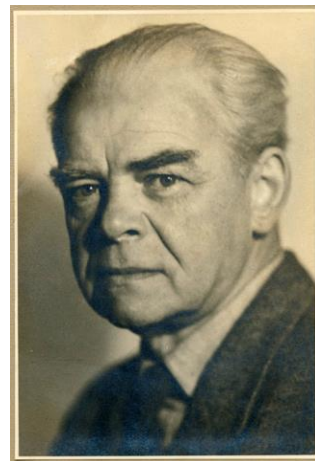
Coins of greater values were made of silver or gold. These early years of coin production saw Poland subcontract coin production to England, Austria, Holland, Switzerland, France, and even the United States. By 1926, the Warsaw Mint had become fully operational again; providing the Polish people with a steady supply of money during a relatively prosperous 1920's. Poland felt the effects of the Great Depression and coin production was scaled back to meet demand. By 1939, only four coin types were being produced: 1, 2, and 5 Groszy coins, and a silver 10 Złoty coin.

The Groszy unit coins were all designed by Polish artist Wojciech Jastrzębowski.



Obverse

Reverse



Wojciech Jastrzębowski

Each of his coins features the Polish Coat of Arms (1927-1939); a crowned eagle with its wings outspread facing left. The crown does not signify a kingdom (although many Poles had fond memories of certain Polish kings). The crown represents Poland's sovereignty. The date each coin was struck is placed at the top. The name of the coin's country of origin is written in Polish as, "RZECZPOSPOLITA POLSKA" or Republic of Poland. Wojciech Jastrzębowski's initials are located underneath each of the eagle's wings. The reverse of each coin features the value which is flanked by two flowers.





The 10 Złoty coin features a portrait of a fierce-looking man dressed in a military uniform. This is Józef Piłsudski; a Polish war hero, statesman, and one of the founding fathers of Poland as we know it today. The son of an impoverished Polish noble, Piłsudski dedicated his efforts to liberate Poland from Russian rule. He found backing from German and Austro-Hungarian military officials and was appointed head of the military department of a newly formed Polish council of state on the condition that Poland would be granted sovereignty after the war. Germany and Austria-Hungary never intended to keep their promise and after the Bolsheviks seized power and took Russia out of the war, Piłsudski was ordered to swear loyalty to Germany and its allies. He refused and was imprisoned for doing so. Released at the end of the war, Piłsudski arrived in Warsaw as a national hero and was unanimously accepted as head of state and commander in chief of the Polish army. Józef Piłsudski now focused on protecting the fledgling nation against Russia under a Bolshevik government eager to extend their ideology throughout the continent. The war seemed to be a quick Soviet victory as one by one, villages in Eastern Poland fell to the approaching Red Army. Fortunately their advance on Warsaw was halted in a very hard battle at where Piłsudski, leading a hastily grouped of armed volunteers, surprised and defeated the approaching army at the Vistula River. After the “Miracle at Vistula” on August 15, 1920, the Red Army began a slow and steady retreat culminating with a ceasefire in October. The Bolshevik leaders, utterly humiliated, signed the Treaty of Riga on March 18, 1921 leaving the border between the two nations similar to what it was before the Russian Empire consolidated Poland. The valor, courage, and sacrifices of the Poles

postponed the Communist domination of Eastern Europe until after World War Two.

Afterward, Piłsudski was offered the presidency but declined. Instead, he assumed command of the Ministry of Defense. He held this position until his death in 1935.

This coin was minted from 1934 through 1939. It was designed by Polish sculptor and medalist Stanisław Kazimierz Ostrowski. The obverse depicts a crowned Polish eagle with its wings outspread. Rays of light shine outward from the eagle. The name, “RZECZPOSPOLITA POLSKA” or Republic of Poland, encircle the eagle. The value, “10 ZŁOTYCH,” and date are located at the base of the coin. The reverse of the coin features Józef Piłsudski’s portrait facing left. The coin has a composition of 75% silver and 25% base metal. This would be the last silver coin minted for circulation in Poland.

After much of Poland was brought under Nazi rule, the Złoty was set at a fixed rate of 1 German Reichsmark to 2 Złoty before the Reichsmark became adopted as the de-facto currency. The reserves of bullion and precious metal coinage were confiscated and sent back to Germany along with historic Polish coins from the collection of the Numismatic Cabinet. For those firmly under Nazi rule, a series of occupational coinage was minted on equipment from the ruined Warsaw mint. These coins were issued in denominations of 1, 5, 10, 20, and 50 groszy.



The 1 groz coin minted under Nazi-occupation was minted to the same weight, thickness, and diameter as the one minted before the war. The difference is the coin is made of zinc rather than bronze. Zinc was cheap and was used in many of the coins struck in Nazi-occupied countries. This coin was minted between 1941 and 1944 but it bears the year 1939. Like a broken clock, the coin keeps the date of the last year that Poland was free.



The 5 groszy coin minted under Nazi-occupation between 1941 and 1944 is also composed of zinc and bears the year 1939. Another noticeable difference between this coin and the pre-war issue is the hole in its center. The arrangement of the lettering on the reverse was modified so the hole would fit within the lower loop of the number 5.



The 10 and 20 groszy coins were struck with surplus dies bearing the date 1923. These coins, made of dull grey zinc, quickly tarnished black in circulation.



The largest value occupational coin, the 50 groszy piece, was deemed suitable to be composed of nickel. This is surprising since nickel was vital in the production of many tools and machinery components vital during the war. These coins bear the year 1938, but were struck between 1939 and 1940.

Money was among the least of worries for the average Polish person during the years of Nazi rule. Large portions of the Jewish population in Poland were sent to live in cramped ghettos or were transported to concentration camps by the SS.



One of the largest ghettos was in the industrial city of Łódź, renamed Litzmannstadt during the occupation. Around 160,000 Jews, around 1/3 of the city's population, were forced into an enclosure measuring 4 square kilometers with more Jews and other undesirable ethnicities arriving from other countries which had fallen to the Nazi war machine. Life was horrendous; much of the ghetto had no water or sewage lines. The majority of the Jews worked as forced labor in German factories and received only meager food rations in exchange. This labor, combined with shortages of food, fuel, and poor sanitation resulted in nearly 1/5 of the population dying from hunger, cold, and sickness. A small series of coinage was struck for use within the ghetto. These coins were struck between 1942 and 1943. They were made of magnesium and aluminum. Most of the magnesium coins were used to light fires.

The obverse displays the Star of David, a six-pointed star, which came to be a symbol for identifying Jews. The word "GETTO" and the date 1943 are visible in the lower right area of the coin. Two circles adorned with small six-sided stars encircle the design. At a glance, it resembles the barbed wire fencing used to keep Jews within the confines of the concentration camps.

The reverse side displays the coin's denomination in the center. The legend around the coin is written in German. It reads, "DER AELTESTE DER JUDEN IN LITZMANNSTADT," or "For the Jewish Elders of Litzmannstadt." The banner

running across the denomination is a notice indicating that the coin is good for 10 German marks. These coins did not circulate much and many survive today, examples from a bleak era in human history.

Concentration camps for Jews and others deemed unfit for living in the Third Reich were set up across the nation: Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Auschwitz-Birkenau (part of the infamous Auschwitz complex), and Majdanek. Deportations to these camps had initially been carried out early in the war but ceased after the factories in the ghetto were brought into operation. In 1944, deportations resumed with the last residents sent to the Aushwitz-Birkenau camp in August, 1944.



Warsaw January, 1945

Poland suffered deeply from both Germany and the Soviet Union. An estimated 90% percent of its Jewish population perished in the Holocaust.

The Soviet invasion and occupation from 1939 to 1941 led to massive loss of life from starvation and internment in prison camps. The most horrific example is the murders of nearly 22,000 Polish citizens. This has become remembered as the Katyn Massacre, named for the forest near the Russian town of Smolensk. Among the dead were members of the Polish army, navy, air force, aristocracy, university professors, lawyers, clergy, engineers, teachers, writers, and refugees. A mere 395 prisoners were saved from the brutal execution at the hands of the Soviet NKVD.

An official estimate lists 5.2 million Polish citizens dead by the end of the war; 15% of the pre-war population. For Polish citizens, the Second World War finally came to an end in January 1945 when the Soviet Red Army crossed the Vistula again and marched into the ruins of Warsaw.

At the end of the war, Eastern Poland, the territory the Soviets claimed early in the war, was annexed. The Western Allies ceded eastern portions of Eastern Germany to Poland as compensation for the land given to the USSR. These border changes resulted in forced population relocations. As early as January of 1945, people began to return to Poland despite a ban on such acts by the new Soviet authorities. Reconstruction efforts began unofficially immediately but with the establishment of the Biuro Odbudowy Stolicy (Office for the Reconstruction of the Capital) on Valentine's Day 1945, work began rebuilding Warsaw which had been practically wiped from the face of the Earth by German fighting and aerial bombing. Work continued in the capital until the last bit of reconstruction on the Royal Castle, the former residence of Polish monarchs, had been completed in 1984.

A Moscow-backed puppet government was established in Warsaw in 1949 following 1949 elections rigged in the communist party's favor. That same year saw the Warsaw Mint resume operations. The new coinage was the first produced in 10 years. These coins bore the name, "RZECZPOSPOLITA POLSKA" or Republic of Poland encircling an heraldic Polish eagle, albeit without the crown. As the world settled into the unease of the Cold War, Poland remained independent in name only with its leaders not making any actions unless they met with approval from the Kremlin. This lasted until 1989 when free elections, the first in 60 years, voted out the communist party leaders.

No sooner had the ink dried on the documents than a special coin was produced. It is a silver commemorative 100,000 Złoty coin minted in 1990. It was the first to display the old crowned Polish eagle. Appropriately, it commemorates the 10th anniversary of the independent trade union Solidarność (Solidarity) established in 1980 as a nonviolent resistance movement to the Polish communist party.

The Soviet Union began withdrawing its military from Poland in 1991. Two years later the task was completed and Poland was once again a free nation.

Today, Poland's economy is strong amidst other European nations. A new Złoty was introduced in 1995 and to this day, the nation retains the Złoty as its unit of currency. According to a nationwide survey in 2014, close to 70% of Polish citizens surveyed didn't wish to give up the Złoty in favor of the Euro. A set of commemorative coins were struck in 2019 to mark 100 years of the Złoty in Poland. These coins, both old and new, are important hallmarks of Poland's legacy and endurance.

