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Polish precursor to Turing’s code cracking gets Surrey plaque

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Henryk Zygalski (1908–1978), a Polish mathematician who helped break the Enigma cipher before the Second World War, laying the foundations for Alan Turing’s work at Bletchley Park, has been honoured with a commemorative plaque at the University of Surrey. After the war, he taught mathematics at Battersea Polytechnic and the University of Surrey for 17 years without his colleagues learning what he had done.

Zygalski was a mathematician at the Polish Cipher Bureau, with Marian Rejewski and Jerzy Różycki, who worked out how to read messages sent on Germany’s Enigma machine in the 1930s. In 1938, he devised the Zygalski sheets – large, perforated cards that, when stacked on a light table, showed codebreakers how the machine had been set up.

In 1939, weeks before Germany invaded Poland to start the Second World War, the Polish team shared everything they knew about Enigma with British and French intelligence. Their work laid the foundations for Alan Turing and his colleagues at Bletchley Park.

The plaque was revealed today (Wednesday 11 November), Poland’s National Independence Day, by Professor Stephen Jarvis, President and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Surrey, and Rafał Wiśniewski, Chargé d’Affaires ad interim at the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in London.

Members of Zygalski’s family, representatives of the Polish community and historians, including from Bletchley Park, attended.

Professor Stephen Jarvis, President and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Surrey, said:

“There is something rather wonderful about knowing that one of the people who helped change the course of the Second World War subsequently spent his days teaching mathematics to students at Surrey, with little indication of the extraordinary life he had led.

“I am delighted that his contribution is now being recognised, and that future generations of students and colleagues walking past the plaque might pause for a moment and wonder about the remarkable life of Henryk Zygalski, mathematics lecturer at the University of Surrey.”

When Poland fell in September 1939, Zygalski escaped through Romania to France, where the Polish codebreakers kept working on Enigma. After Germany occupied the south of France in 1942, he crossed into Spain, where he was arrested, then reached Portugal. A British naval vessel took him to Britain in 1943, where he joined the Polish Signals Battalion.

Unwilling to return to a Poland under Soviet control, he stayed in Britain. He taught mathematics at the Polish University College in London from its founding in 1947. When Battersea Polytechnic took over the college in 1951, he was one of only eight staff offered posts. The polytechnic was the forerunner of the University of Surrey, established in 1966.

Those who worked with him at Battersea and Surrey never knew about his part in the war, according to a biography by J J O’Connor and E F Robertson of the University of St Andrews. His nephew, Dr Jeremy Russell, has said Zygalski “never talked about it spontaneously”.

Surrey University

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