Marian Hemar (1901-1972), Polish poet, writer, composer, satirist, playwright, broadcaster and theatre director.

The final resting place of Marian Hemar and his wife, Caja Eric, Broadway actress, singer and dancer, can be found at Christ Church in the idyllic Surrey village of Coldharbour. The grave, which is close to the front entrance of the church, has recently been restored and is in a beautiful location in the Surrey Hills. Surrey History Centre in Woking has been researching the life of this Polish literary giant.

**Life in Poland and the war**

Born Jan Marian Hescheles in Lwów, Poland, Hemar was a prolific poet, journalist, playwright, theatre director, and songwriter, of Jewish descent. After studying at university and briefly fighting for the pro-Polish forces against the Russians in 1918-1919, Hemar moved to Warsaw and became a key figure in the Polish cabaret scene. He was director of the Warsaw National Theatre and wrote hundreds of radio sketches. In 1935, Hemar married actress Maria Modzelewska, for whom he converted to Protestantism but their relationship broke down and they later divorced.

When war broke out, Hemar’s anti-fascist views rendered him a target for the Gestapo. He had previously written a sarcastic song mocking Hitler’s moustache, which prompted the German ambassador to complain to the Polish government! The Gestapo pursued him after the invasion of Poland but Hemar fled to Romania and eventually joined the Polish Independent Carpathian Rifle Brigade in the Middle East. It was here that Hemar wrote the anthem for the Brigade; he also performed for Polish troops and even organised a theatre in the besieged city of Tobruk.

Hemar’s religious identity is complex and he never entirely severed ties with Jewish culture. He declared that he was born into the Jewish faith but a was ‘Voluntary Pole’. Research into the Hemar family reveals Jewish birth, marriage, and death records from the part of the former province of Galicia which is now in Ukraine. Hemar’s cousin, on his mother’s side, was the famous science fiction author, Stanislav Lem (1921-2006). Hemar’s interwar poetry and political satire focuses on his identity as a Polish Jewish writer confronted with anti-semitism and fascism. Trips to Israel in the 1960s made him reflect on the Diaspora and he wrote on this topic in *Świstki z podróży* (*Scraps from a Journey*, 1964). Patriotic Polish, historical themes, and nostalgic memories of Lwów dominate his post-war poetry.

**Hemar’s work in Britain**

Considered a political activist by the Polish authorities, Hemar was unable to return to his homeland and he emigrated to England c.1941-2, possibly at the request of General Sikorski, the Commander in Chief of the Polish armed forces. He was put to work producing counter propaganda to Goebbels’ broadcasts and worked with the BBC during the later years of the war. Hemar became one of the best-known figures of the twentieth century Polish diaspora and was twice awarded the Order Polonia Restituta.

One of Hemar’s most notable plays performed in the UK was *Poor Man’s Miracle*. Written in 1939 and translated into English, it was first performed in Dublin in 1943, starring Cyril Cusack. One report from *The Times* states that, during his escape from Poland, Hemar lost the case containing all his manuscripts. He discovered that all known copies of his work had been destroyed with the burning of the National Theatre Library in Warsaw but that one remaining copy of this play had been in the possession of an actor cast to play a part. The copy had been
‘smuggled out of Poland by a young refugee, who delivered it into the author’s hands’. It was also serialised for radio by the BBC in the 1940s but no recording survives. From 1953 to 1969, Hemar prepared and presented weekly programmes for Radio Free Europe, in which he commented on news from post-war Poland. Towards the end of his life he translated all of Shakespeare Sonnets into Polish, as well as Horace’s Odes.

In July 1946, Hemar married Caja (Carrol Ann) Eric in London. Caja (b.1910) was a Hollywood and Broadway starlet of Danish parentage. Caja had appeared in various famous productions including Show Girl (1929), Show Boat (1932), Murder at the Vanities (1933) and in the Broadway run of Ziegfeld Follies in 1931. She was also one of the interchangeable torch bearer models for Columbia Pictures in the 1930s, a role which continued to earn her royalties. Shortly before the war, Caja and her mother relocated to the UK where she continued her stage career. Research has revealed little for Caja other than ship’s passenger lists from New York and her 1939 UK National Identity registration.

The Hemars in Surrey

Little is known about the Hemars’ time in Surrey. In London, they first lived in Caja’s flat in Knightsbridge, until they bought 12 Palace Gardens Terrace, in Kensington. They appear in the electoral registers here from 1949, accompanied by Caja’s mother; Hemar appears in the London telephone directories from 1946, listed as ‘J. Marjan Hemar’. Around 1959, the Hemars purchased Fig Tree Cottage, Leith Hill, Dorking and set about dividing their London house into flats. The Hemars are listed at Fig Tree Cottage in the Dorking telephone directory from 1959. Neither appears in the certificates of British Citizenship or Naturalisation papers held at The National Archives.

Hemar died on 11 February 1972 and is buried at Christ Church, Coldharbour; Caja, died on 14 July 1982 and is buried with him. Tom Bolonski, who appeared in one of Hemar’s performances in 1967, recalls that they were a devoted couple and adored each other, “Caja didn't speak a word of Polish, but knew she was married to an extraordinarily talented and important artist”.

Our full story of Marian and Caja Hemar, along with the sources we have used, can be found on the Exploring Surrey’s Past website at http://www.exploringsurreyspast.org.uk/themes/subjects/diversity/polish/marian-hemar/.

We are most grateful to Mr Tom Bolonski for the information and material he has provided, and to Mrs Irena Delmar-Czarnecka for her memories and images of the Hemars. If you know more about Marian Hemar’s life in Surrey we would be delighted to hear from you. Please email us on shs@surreycc.gov.uk.

Find out more

Surrey History Centre in Woking collects and preserves the records of Surrey’s past and present. From medieval manuscripts to modern newspapers, from watercolours to digital photographs, our holdings document the story of the county and its people from the 12th to the 21st centuries. Visiting the centre to use our collections is free, our staff are always happy to offer advice, and we have a busy programme of exhibitions, talks and events. Whether you are researching your family history, house history or want to donate material to us why not explore our website and discover how we can help you learn more about Surrey’s rich and remarkable history www.surreycc.gov.uk/surreyhistorycentre

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