

Magdalena Kowalska

A Polish heart in a feldgrau uniform – complicated journeys from the Wehrmacht to the Polish Army in Exile

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Magdalena Kowalska
Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza
w Poznaniu
Polskie Towarzystwo Naukowe na Obczyźnie
w Londynie

A POLISH HEART IN A *FELDGRAU* UNIFORM – COMPLICATED JOURNEYS FROM THE WEHRMACHT TO THE POLISH ARMY IN EXILE¹

70 years after the Second World War ended there are still subjects which remain taboo, many of them absent from collective memory, often disappearing together with the last witnesses of the past. One of such subjects is the matter of Polish citizens who, joining up or being conscripted in the Wehrmacht, served in the occupier's army. For many years this topic was forgotten, banned from both the public and the private spheres. Many of those who after the war returned to their families did not talk about that period of their lives, fearing the consequences. The term „grandfather from the Wehrmacht“, coined as a slur in the midst of media storm during the Polish presidential campaign in 2005, paradoxically brought to light the complexity and multidimensionality of this problem. Slowly the same term ceases to be a slur but becomes a part of history which in various ways is being restored to collective memory.

This article focuses on two aspects of the presented problem. Firstly it portrays the circumstances surrounding the conscription of the Poles into the Wehrmacht. Secondly, it focuses on often complicated journeys undertaken by those men who wanted to join the Polish Armed Forces. Some of them deserted from the Wehrmacht, but the majority went through the allied POW [prisoner of war] camps, from where they were recruited, subjected to a long and complicated screening process, finally to be assigned to their new Polish units.

Some time ago, searching online the term 'Polish POW in Wehrmacht' I found this particular query on one of the forums dedicated to Polish history: 'My Father was con-

¹ The abbreviated version of this text was a part of my unpublished MA Dissertation *The morale and combat performance of the Polish 5th Kresowa Infantry Division during the Italian Campaign, 1944-1945*, University of Birmingham 2013. (Supervisor: Dr Halik Kochanski).

scripted to the German army from Silesia, he would never talk much about it. Does anyone have information on what happened to these young men throughout the war. He was 18 when he was taken away from his family and after the war was sent to England where he settled for the rest of his life. He wanted to return to Poland after the war but his Father wrote to him stating that those that did return were being murdered and so he never went back to Poland until 1962. I wish that I had asked more questions but My Father passed away in 92. [...] He also said that the Germans came to get him with a threat that they would send the rest of the family to a concentration camp if he refused to fight for Germany. [...] I know that he was also in Italy and eventually was in the Polish army but don't have information as to how all this came about. My Father was tough and hard working but suffered all his life with bouts of depression and insomnia. I would really like to know what happened to these young men after they were conscripted' [jochemczyk, November 2011; spelling original]².

During the last 200 years of Polish history, in almost every military conflict the Poles, especially those from Pomerania and Silesia, were forced to wear the uniforms of the armies of their occupants. The Second World War saw the third generation of these so-called Barteks³. Although most of the examples presented in this paper pertain to the Polish 2nd Corps, as this particular formation (especially the Kresowa Infantry Division) is the main focus of my research, similar stories belong to those who found their way to serve in other Polish formations, especially the 1st Armoured Division as well as the 1st Independent Parachute Brigade.

Following the treaty of friendship, signed on 28 September 1939, both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union established their zones of occupation in Poland. The German zone comprised 72,800 square miles of Polish territory with its 20,000,000 inhabitants. Danzig, and the provinces of Poznań, Pomerania and Łódź had been divided between two *Reichsgauer*, Danzig-West Prussia (Gauleiter Albert Forster) and Warthegau (Gauleiter Arthur Greiser). Along with Polish Upper Silesia they were incorporated into the Reich. The rest of the German-occupied zone became the General Government, under the rule of the Gauleiter Hans Frank⁴.

Poland was intended as a 'giant reservoir of labour'⁵ for Nazi Germany, which also applied to the army. However, potential recruits had to first acquire German citizenship before they could be called up to serve in the Wehrmacht. Four categories of *Volksdeutsche* were established. The first two *Deutsche Volksliste* (DVL) covered those 'who had proved themselves to be of German descent' or 'had satisfactorily demonstrated their German origins'. The third category covered 'persons of German descent who had developed connections with Polish nationality to whom German citizenship was granted conditionally'.

² PolishForums.com, <http://www.polishforums.com/history/conscripts-german-army-55499/>, accessed: 31.10.2015.

³ Bartek Słowik is a main character in one of the short stories written by Henryk Sienkiewicz. Bartek also was forced to serve in the occupier's army.

⁴ H. Kochanski, *Eagle Unbowed. Poland and the Poles in the Second World War*, London 2012, pp. 96–97.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 98.

The final category consisted of those who, despite their German descent, insisted that they were Poles and therefore were treated by the Germans as renegades⁶.

Men from DVL 1 and 2 were immediately eligible for service in the Wehrmacht, but from 1941 those with DVL 3 were also conscripted, often forcefully. Between 1939 and 1941, before the formalization of the *Deutsche Volksliste*, a small number had been conscripted, although thanks to the successes of the German army the need for recruits from occupied Poland was practically negligible. The years 1941–1943 brought the legal regulations pertaining to DVL 3, but more importantly the war with the Soviet Union, which facilitated an increasing need for reinforcements to be sent to the Eastern front. However, the years 1943–1945, thanks to the catastrophic casualties on the Eastern front, and then the opening of the fronts in Italy and Normandy, brought the need for mass recruitment, including the highest number of Polish recruits. This resulted in the liberalization of the rules and a rapid increase of Poles forced to serve in the Wehrmacht⁷.

It is important to have knowledge and understanding about the long and complicated journeys those soldiers had to undertake to find a place for themselves in the Polish Army. There are significantly more documents showing the process and procedures involved in recruiting, screening and redeploying ex-Wehrmacht Poles than those showing the actual number of soldiers who were incorporated into particular units.

The Wehrmacht High Command did not trust the Poles. There was a tendency to split them up between platoons, so only one or two would serve together. This practice had a dual purpose: to speed up the Germanisation process, but also to prevent mutiny and desertion. Punishments were also more severe for the Poles, even if the offence was exactly the same. In the case of desertion, the whole family back in Poland was supposed to be punished. For example, there were a number of prisoners in the Stutthof concentration camp whose only crime was that their son or brother had deserted from the German Army⁸.

On the Western Front the first Polish prisoners of war were from the Afrika Korps. After discovering the high number of Polish nationals among German POWs, the Polish military, in cooperation with the British military authorities, created a special section whose members were tasked with finding Poles among the German soldiers and helping their transition into the Polish Army. The members of that first section, Major Stanisław Gauza (15th Poznański Lancers), Second Lieutenant Tadeusz Dehnel (3rd Carpathian Rifle Division) and Corporal Witold Jeszke (3rd Carpathian Rifle Division) were the ones who discovered not only the conditions in which Polish ex-Wehrmacht soldiers were held in the camps, but also started putting together the first instructions in order to help avoid

⁶ Ibidem, pp. 103–104. See also: R. Kaczmarek, *Polacy w Wehrmachcie*, Kraków 2010, pp. 29–77. Kaczmarek writes extensively about German racial policies in the incorporated territories, including who and in what circumstances could belong to each category of *Deutsche Volksliste*.

⁷ R. Kaczmarek, *Polacy w Wehrmachcie*, op. cit., p. 125.

⁸ K. Ciechanowski, *Pobór Polaków z Pomorza Gdańskiego do armii niemieckiej i zmilitaryzowanych oddziałów roboczych w latach II wojny światowej*, [w:] „Stutthof. Zeszyty Muzeum”, Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków-Gdańsk-Łódź 1985, p. 52.

some of the mistakes made in that initial period. For example some of the American and British officers in the POW camps, eager to help, often asked about the volunteers to the Polish army in front of the whole camp, including German officers. Fear of retribution usually prevented the Poles from making themselves known to the liaison officers. Also German POWs employed in the camp offices often sabotaged the records to hide the number and names of the Poles⁹. The summer of 1943 seemed to be the starting point for intensified action to find replacements for the Polish units¹⁰. Some of those ex-Wehrmacht Poles from Africa later joined the 2nd Corps at Sangro.

Major Gauza in his report, written in June 1943, presented the situation in POW camps in Africa, and possibilities for the Polish Forces. Polish liaison officers were also trying to find a better solution when it came to the initial selection, one that would give them not only more names to check out, but also provided a measure of safety for the Wehrmacht Poles. Many of them did not volunteer easily to talk to the Polish officers, nor did they express their desire to join the Polish Army because of the fear of their German officers and fellow prisoners. Three factors were dominant: fear that the Germans would terrorize them even more than usual, fear that their families would suffer, but also a reluctance to break the oath sworn when they were conscripted in the Wehrmacht¹¹.

After the 2nd Corps landed in Italy, the recruitment campaign among the ex-Wehrmacht Poles in Allied prison camps became even more intense. One of the reasons for that was the length of time between the initial contact and the actual arrival to their new Polish units, which usually took at least three months. The procedures that were put in place were as follows: after the initial contact and an expressed desire to join the Polish Forces, the prisoners were immediately separated from the Germans. They were transferred to British Transit Camps, where they undertook a screening process, being closely questioned by Polish Intelligence officers, and then prepared for transport to the United Kingdom. Once there, they went through additional questioning, physical examinations, and if they received approval from the intelligence officers, preparation for the transfer to their new units at the frontline¹². During 1944 it was decided that ex-Wehrmacht prisoners of Polish nationality captured in Italy, and selected by the Corps commanders, were going to be sent to the Middle East (Egypt), to be trained in Polish bases and depots, and from there assigned to their new units¹³. British High Command insisted on keeping the fact that ex-Wehrmacht Poles were being singled out in the prison camps and recruited into the Polish forces as top secret. In his letter to General Sosnkowski, dated 17 February 1944, General Anders wrote: 'As to the prisoners of Polish nationality, General Alexander decided that all of them from Italy are being sent to the 7th Division in Egypt, and will arrive here [after completing the screening and training process]. General Alexander does not want the Germans to learn about the existence of the special transit camps for the prison-

⁹ Archive of the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum (from now on: PISM), A.XI.11/1.

¹⁰ K. Ciechanowski, *Pobór Polaków...*, op. cit., pp. 60–62.

¹¹ PISM, A.XI.10/1.

¹² PISM, A.XI.11/1

¹³ PISM, A.XI.11/1.3.

ers of the Polish nationality'¹⁴. Among the reasons were the safety of prisoners' families left behind in the occupied country, but more importantly the safety of the British and American POWs who were held in German prison camps¹⁵.

The screening process aimed to exclude those prisoners who were entirely unsuitable for the Polish army and could prove to cause problems. Ultimately only those who willingly declared their desire to join the Polish forces, and were either Polish citizens (no matter what their nationality or religion) or although not Polish citizens had Polish nationality and spoke Polish, could be recruited. Excluded were those who did not want to join the Polish army because they openly declared themselves to be of German nationality and loyal to the Führer and the cause, or those who, although they were Polish nationals, had Soviet citizenship before 1939¹⁶. Intelligence officers prepared a special 'Form of particulars' for POWs wishing to enlist in the Allied Forces. Amongst the questions the prospective recruit had to answer were: their nationality at birth and at present, their religion, details of education, occupation prior to enlistment, details about the family members, membership of political parties, the circumstances connected to being called up, the place and date of capture, the unit from which they were captured, and most importantly their personal reasons for enlistment in the Allied Forces¹⁷.

What motivated the Poles who served in the Wehrmacht to switch sides? As a reason for enlistment in the Allied Forces most of them cited: 'To fight for a free Poland', and 'I am a Polish native by birth'. Another soldier wrote: 'As a native Pole I want to fight for the freedom of my country, I also want to wash off the shame of wearing the German uniform I was forced to wear'¹⁸. Some of the censored letters could be attributed to the ex-Wehrmacht soldiers. One of them wrote: 'I am grateful to be allowed to serve in this army, which for everyone, on every front is an example of how to conduct yourself; I am among people who not only know how to carry and use a rifle but most of all people who have a heart where it's supposed to be'¹⁹. Another wrote: 'All in all this army is really to my liking. Comparing both armies – Polish and German, I can tell you that here in our army discipline comes from the feeling of responsibility and the bond between officers and men. The officers I got to know so far are really cool, you can talk to them about everything...'²⁰.

Not everyone wanted to join the Polish Forces. There were always a number of POWs who, while not renouncing Polish nationality, did not want to volunteer. The main reasons were usually fear of German reprisals towards their families, and simply battle exhaustion²¹. To provide a measure of safety for the soldiers, but more importantly their families, every POW who wanted to join the Polish forces could request to be given an alias. Only the recruiting officer and the Intelligence officer knew their real names.

¹⁴ PISM, General Anders Collection, 31.

¹⁵ PISM, A.XI.11/1.13.

¹⁶ PISM, A.XI.11/1.61.

¹⁷ PISM, A.XI.63/5.

¹⁸ PISM, A.XI.63/5

¹⁹ 9 VII 1944; PISM, A.XI.9/3

²⁰ 21 VII 1944; PISM, A.XI.9/3.

²¹ PISM, A.XI.11/1.

Of course, the British and Americans transferred the ex-Wehrmacht Poles under their real names, but after that all the records held only the assumed names²².

How were the recruits received in their new Polish units? At first the policy was very similar to the one the Wehrmacht used, which meant that not too many soldiers from the same former units were placed together. The commanders felt that it would help the new soldiers assimilate and blend in much quicker, and the bond between old and new members of the unit would have a chance to develop earlier²³. Most of the officers understood that the process would be slow, required patience and understanding, considering everything those soldiers went through before they found their way into the Polish army.

Kresowa Division received first replacements probably in the late spring / early summer of 1944. For example, on June 7th the 15th Poznański Lancers Regiment received eleven new recruits²⁴. Most of them served previously in Africa, deserted or had been captured; but there were also those who had served in Greece or Sicily. Generally they were valued as well trained, disciplined soldiers. Piotr Medyna wrote: 'They knew organisation and the fighting techniques of the Wehrmacht, and their expertise was very much valued'²⁵. The ex-Wehrmacht Poles were often nicknamed *Kesselrings*²⁶. Bohdan Tymieniecki served in one of the armoured units, and in his memoirs portrayed a scene where his commanding officer was 'giving away' the new recruits, who previously served with the Hermann Goering Panzerdivision. Not everyone wanted them in their crew, but Tymieniecki replied that he did not care about their past, just that he had some of the best trained soldiers and he knew that they would obey, and they would fight the exact way he wanted them to²⁷.

Although the highest number of the ex-Wehrmacht Poles arrived from the Allied prison camps, there were also those who chose different routes. Some of the Poles forced to serve in the Wehrmacht decided to desert at the first news about Allied or Polish forces arriving at the frontline, others tried to do that during the fighting, waiting for the opportunity to change sides²⁸. Many of those instances happened during the battle for Monte Cassino. Waclaw Pietrzak from the 13th Battalion, 5th Brigade, in his memoirs remembered his commanding officer Major Kowalczyński, who had just come back from patrol with an armed German soldier, walking freely beside him. Seeing surprised and wary faces, the German soldier answered in Polish: 'I snuffed Nazi feldfebel, you schmuck, and I came to you to fight for Poland'²⁹.

However, not everyone who decided to cross the lines into Polish outposts managed to get there alive. Often it was simply impossible to distinguish between the enemy and

²² PISM, A.XI.11/1. See also: S. Dobrski, *Byłem żołnierzem Wehrmachtu. Trzecie pokolenie Bartków*, Londyn 2002, p. 353; K. Ciechanowski, *Pobór Polaków...*, op. cit., p. 65.

²³ A. Majewski, *Ludzie, wojna i medycyna*, Lublin 1969, p. 474.

²⁴ PISM, C.75, *War Diary of the 15th Poznański Lancers*.

²⁵ P. Medyna, *Do Polski przez cały świat. Wspomnienia z 2 Korpusu*, Warszawa 1973, p. 180.

²⁶ After the Field-Marshal Albert Kesselring, the Commander-in-Chief South-West and Army Group C.

²⁷ B. Tymieniecki, *Na imię jej było Lily*, Warszawa 1984, pp. 159–160.

²⁸ K. Ciechanowski, *Pobór Polaków...*, op. cit., pp. 59–65.

²⁹ W. Pietrzak, *Przez wzgórze Italii*, Warszawa 1971, p. 141.

a potential countryman. Sometimes only the letters home, found with the dead, helped to identify them as Poles forced to serve in the German army. One example is a letter found with a young soldier, killed by one of the Polish patrols. The letter was for his mother, written in Polish: 'Dear Mum, opposite us are the Poles. I am going to try to get to them tomorrow'. He died a very short distance from the Polish line³⁰.

Zygmunt Odrowąż-Zawadzki in his memoirs described another accident: 'One of our sentries killed the man who was approaching the Polish camp, in the night, wearing German uniform. Unfortunately, from the documents we found on him we learned that he was Polish. But because he was alone we assumed that he was a German deserter who somehow avoided both his and ours minefields. After this accident the sentries received strict orders not to shoot before asking: »Stop! Who is it?« We did not have more accidents like this one, although from time to time we got German deserters³¹.

Of course, there was always a possibility that some of the POWs recruited in prison camps would use it as an opportunity to leave the camp, and in order to do that they would lie about their Polish nationality and about their eagerness to join the Polish Army. Usually after arriving at the 7th Division training camp they tried to get to the enemy lines. On one occasion the Provost reported that three soldiers of the 27th Rifle Battalion, 7th Division had been apprehended by British soldiers near the frontline at Faenza. Those soldiers stated that they were German citizens and did not want to serve in the Polish Army. One of them spoke only German³². There were not many incidents like this one, but always they left a bitter disappointment.

When in January 1944 General Wilson expressed his concerns about potential reinforcements for the Polish Corps, General Anders assured him that those reinforcements would arrive from the frontline, from among the Poles serving in the German army. He was right. According to Konrad Ciechanowski, until 15 June 1944 there were circa 2,500 ex-POWs and deserters from the German army incorporated into the Polish 2nd Corps. In the second half of 1944 those numbers rose to 14,000, and in the first half of 1945 to 18,500 men. During the Second World War in the Polish Army in Exile served almost 90,000 men who previously were either prisoners of war or deserters from the German Army. This means that by May 1945 almost every third man who wore a battle-dress with 'Poland' on his shoulder titles at some point in the past wore a *feldgrau* uniform³³.

For many years the subject of Poles who served in the Wehrmacht but later found a way to join the Polish Army in Exile was absent in both the public as well as the private sphere. Recent years brought interesting projects such as the exhibition 'Grandfather from the Wehrmacht. Experience stored in memory', which aim to come to terms with the past as well as to save people's individual stories from falling into oblivion. However there are

³⁰ A. Majewski, *Ludzie, wojna...*, op. cit., p. 470.

³¹ Z. Odrowąż-Zawadzki, *Bóg-Honor-Ojczyzna*, Gdańsk 2007, p. 319.

³² PISM, C.437/II.

³³ K. Ciechanowski, *Pobór Polaków...*, op. cit., p. 64.

still many aspects of the story of the ex-Wehrmacht Poles which would benefit from further study. It would be interesting to compare and contrast not only the particulars of everyday lives in their new Polish units but also discover what happened to them after the war ended. Many of those men decided to stay in exile, but there were also those who returned to Poland. What their lives were like in the post-war Polish reality, both in the private as well as the public sphere, would make an interesting study, enriching not only the social history but also our understanding of the mechanisms governing both individual and collective memory of the past.

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Magdalena Kowalska

A Polish heart in a *feldgrau* uniform – complicated journeys from the Wehrmacht to the Polish Army in Exile

During the Second World War almost 90,000 men – Polish citizens who previously were soldiers in the German army, served in the Polish Army in Exile. This means that by May 1945 almost every third man who wore a battledress with ‘Poland’ on his shoulder titles at some point in the past wore a *feldgrau* uniform. Those who returned home after war ended, most of whom were from Silesia, Pomerania, Warmia and Mazury, for many years disappeared from collective memory, their stories absent both from the public as well as the private sphere. This article focuses on the often complicated journeys those soldiers had to undertake to find a place for themselves in the Polish Army.

Keywords: Polish Army in Exile, ex-Wehrmacht Poles, prisoners of war, collective memory.

Polskie serce w mundurze *feldgrau* – skomplikowane podróże z Wehrmachtu do Polskich Sił Zbrojnych na Zachodzie

Do zakończenia II wojny światowej w szeregach Polskich Sił Zbrojnych na Zachodzie znalazło się prawie 90 tysięcy żołnierzy – obywateli polskich, którzy wcześniej służyli w armii niemieckiej. Tak więc niemalże co trzeci żołnierz, który miał napis „Poland” na swoim wojskowym uniformie, w jakimś momencie życia nosił mundur Wehrmachtu. Żołnierze pochodzący głównie ze Śląska, Pomorza, Warmii i Mazur, zwłaszcza ci, którzy po wojnie wrócili do kraju, na wiele lat zniknęli z pamięci zbiorowej, a ich historie są nieobecne zarówno w przestrzeni publicznej, jak i prywatnej. Poniższy artykuł przybliży skomplikowane drogi, jakie nierzadko musieli oni przejść, aby znaleźć się w Polskich Siłach Zbrojnych.

Słowa kluczowe: Polskie Siły Zbrojne na Zachodzie, Polacy – byli żołnierze Wehrmachtu, jeńcy wojenni, pamięć zbiorowa.

Tłumaczenie Magdalena Kowalska