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German Grenade launcher captured by the "Parasol" Battalion in Warsaw's Wola neighborhood, a photograph prepared for publication in Aleksander Kamiński's book Zośka and Parasol

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"I'M HEALTHY, FOR NOW..."

A new look at archival records sheds light on the heartbreaking struggles endured by surviving WWII resistance fighters in postwar Poland.

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leksander Kamiński's book *Kamienie na* szaniec (translated as *Stones for the Ram*part), familiar to many people in Poland, tells the story of three young members of the Polish underground resistance – known by their *noms-de-guerre* "Rudy" (Jan Bytnar), "Zośka" (Tadeusz Zawadzki), and "Alek"



(Aleksy Dawidowski). These valiant young men, like many others serving in the Gray Ranks (*Szare Szeregi*) resistance movement, bravely fought against the Nazi occupation of Warsaw. The book traces their journey from students to resistance fighters, highlighting their acts of courage, sabotage, and sacrifice, making it a lasting symbol of Polish youth and patriotism in World War II.

In 1971, Kamiński published an intriguing research article on the post-war fate of other members of the Grey Ranks - some of those who managed to survive the war and Warsaw Uprising. The article was based on a survey Kamiński had conducted in 1959 among former soldiers of the "Zośka" Battalion (a sub-unit of the Grey Ranks, named after Zawadzki after his death). The survey asked the surviving "Zośka" Battalion soldiers how they had managed to rebuild their lives after the war. In his article reporting on the findings, Kamiński highlighted the challenges they encountered and sought to show that despite significant adversity, they had adapted well to the new post-war reality. The survey responses were initially intended to be disposed of after being analyzed, but original copies were found preserved in Aleksander Kamiński's personal archives, now held by the Polish Academy of Sciences Archives in Warsaw. These documents now represent an invaluable primary source for studying Poland's post-war history.

A total of 253 soldiers of the "Zośka" Battalion survived the war. Of those, 102 confirmed that they had received the survey Kamiński sent out on 31 January 1959, but only 58 returned completed forms. One survey was indeed destroyed after analysis, while another, written in letter form, did not directly address the survey questions, making for a total of 56 responses available for contemporary reanalysis.

The survey was divided into eight main sections, containing 55 questions covering topics such as fam-

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ily background, wartime experiences, health, education, occupation, family, and social relationships. Although the survey was anonymous, the limited pool of respondents and the specific, detailed questions make it relatively easy to deduce the identities of most participants.

In line with the methods used in sociological research, Kamiński next brought together a group of former "Zośka" soldiers as a "panel of experts" and invited them to a special meeting on 14 June 1959. They discussed eleven additional issues that had emerged while reviewing the survey responses. When asked to identify cases of disrupted or unsuccessful lives, the panel noted that only six individuals in the study could be considered completely socially maladapted. However, they offered a broader observation that "almost everyone is somewhat derailed," particularly those who had been imprisoned after the war. Ultimately, the experts deemed the survey's findings reliable.

Kamiński structured the sections and questions to reveal how the former soldiers had adapted to life

in the new political environment. When we read their responses today, however, we often interpret them quite differently than he did.

One section, along with a few additional questions, focused on the former soldiers' health, including injuries they had sustained and illnesses acquired in camps and prisons. Most respondents, generally under 40 at the time, rated their health as "good," with the more cautious sometimes adding, "good, for now." This assessment seems somewhat optimistic - they had endured the traumatic experiences of World War II, the Warsaw Uprising, and often years of arrest and imprisonment in post-war Poland. Living for years in harsh conditions and facing deprivation, stress, and fear must have had a profound impact on their health, including their mental well-being and overall life satisfaction.

The first health-related question in the survey asked about injuries sustained during the Warsaw Uprising itself. Of the 56 respondents, 41 reported having been wounded or injured at that time. However, only 22 received official disability recognition after the war. Others, often in worse condition, did not even apply, believing they would not be granted benefits. For example, one man who had suffered gun-

A group of soldiers from the Gray Ranks. Symbols on the stove represent the operations in which one of the posing soldiers (Baobab) had participated

shot wounds to the hand and arm and endured the infamous Pawiak prison, the Majdanek concentration camp, then a Polish prison for eight years, received only a 10% disability rating. He did not specify in the survey what his disability entailed, though it may have been linked to the tuberculosis he contracted in prison. Similarly, a woman injured in the leg during the Uprising and imprisoned for five years after the war listed chronic myocarditis as a health issue affecting her life, ironically summarizing its cause with a question mark.

Soldiers with injuries to their hands, legs, hips, and lower legs, burns, shrapnel in their eyes or knees, and torn Achilles tendons received disability ratings of 25-36%. Others, whose conditions were assessed at 43-58%, had chest or lung wounds requiring rib removal, shrapnel in their legs, head injuries, post-traumatic epilepsy, or were missing an eye. The highest disability ratings, of 73-78%, were given to those who had multiple wounds, including double hemorrhages in the eardrums and partial deafness, chronic osteomyelitis, or the loss of a hand. Even in this group, only a few acknowledged that their injuries caused difficulties in their current lives. Those few who did report illnesses affecting their daily lives usually listed tuberculosis, heart disease, chronic digestive issues, and rheumatism. One person suffered from schizophrenia. "Rudy's" final commander could not fill out the survey because he was in a mental institution. Even Aleksander Kamiński noted that the respondents' answers about their health were overly optimistic and did not always reflect their actual condition. For example, one man, imprisoned by the occupiers, repeatedly wounded in the Uprising, and held in a Polish prison for five years after the war, reported no specific illness, although he admitted to having weakened lungs and low physical stamina after the Uprising.

Post-war arrests from 1945 to 1951 affected three of the eight women surveyed and 25 of the 49 men. Those completely spared from repression included four who had emigrated and one who managed to remain in hiding. The least fortunate was a man exiled to Russia from 1944 to 1947, who, upon returning in 1951, was sentenced to 15 years in prison, eventually being released in 1956 with severe neurosis.

Former "Zośka" soldiers often left Polish prisons with tuberculosis, ulcers, heart conditions, vegetative neurosis, psoriasis, nerve-related lichen, and rheumatism. These illnesses had a significant impact on their daily lives. Beyond the physical symptoms, these conditions led to general physical weakness and hindered their ability to engage with others in everyday situations, whether at work, on public transportation, or in shops.

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One could expect that a stable family life and career success might have softened the otherwise grim picture of the former "Zośka" soldiers' health. The survey included questions about their family backgrounds

Sample survey card from Aleksander Kamiński's 1959 questionnaire directed to former soldiers of the "Zośka" battalion

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- both the families they came from and those they later started. Nearly 30 respondents had come from well-to-do families. Their fathers had been doctors, lawyers, senior officials, officers, or landowners, while their mothers typically did not work. Twenty-four respondents' families had been middle-class, with fathers working as technicians, drivers, or in tram and railway services. Only four had come from poor families, often single-parent households with mothers who did manual labor. Higher family incomes generally meant better living conditions. One respondent, the son of a landowner, noted that his family home had had 16 rooms (adding "countryside" in parenthesis, as a kind of explanation for the size). Similarly, another wrote that his father had "managed a small estate" before the war, and his mother had "helped run the household." This family home had had 14 rooms - a stark contrast to the respondent's current situation, where he was living with six people in a tworoom apartment, conditions that hardly allowed for proper rest and recuperation. This is just one example among many respondents who managed to live what could nevertheless be considered "healthy and successful" lives in communist-era Poland.

The housing situation for most respondents was challenging, as it was for many in a war-torn country. After the war, over 30 families of the former soldiers surveyed had their own apartments, usually just one or two rooms. Others lived in shared apartments, where they had to share kitchens and bathrooms with other, often unfamiliar, residents. These conditions were especially difficult for those recently released from prison, who likely longed for more stability.

Not all respondents were satisfied with their level of education, jobs, or income, which further fueled frustration and discontent with their lives. Only about 19 were content with their professions. The others felt underqualified, misdirected in their careers, working in fields they disliked, or underpaid.

Two other factors examined in the survey – family life and leisure activities – also impacted overall life satisfaction, which in turn affected health. Of the respondents, 53 had families, though 12 of these relationships had proven unstable. Some breakups were linked to health issues, challenging living conditions, and difficulties in adjusting to post-war life. Arrests and years in prison also destabilized relationships. Even among those with families, some were dissatisfied with their situation, suggesting that the number of divorces could have increased over time. Overall, however, family life was the aspect rated most positively by all respondents.

What about relaxation and free time, which might have offered some relief? This, too, often became a source of frustration. Injuries from the Warsaw Uprising prevented veterans from participating in their favorite sports, such as skiing, tennis, or sailing.



Hiking was one of the few activities still accessible. However, outdoor recreation was also limited by high costs and a lack of free time. Many respondents noted that they could not pursue hobbies because the challenges of daily life – poor public transportation, healthcare, and food distribution – took up too much of their time.

In summary, reexamination of the survey conducted among 56 former soldiers of the "Zośka" battalion reveals a group repeatedly wounded, injured, and inadequately treated, who often denied their own health impairments and strove to live as fully as possible within the narrow margins allowed by the political system. These were individuals who had been imprisoned and punished for actions they had long viewed as their civic duty during the war, with limited access to education aligned with their interests and living on the edge of poverty. In response to a question about their health, 24 respondents considered themselves "healthy," five "essentially healthy," while 28 reported illnesses that could no longer be ignored, including tuberculosis, heart disease, schizophrenia, limb paralysis, and neurosis.

Not only illness but also frustration – an emotional response to the clash between expectations and reality, limitations, or social exclusion – contributed to stress, fatigue, and physical decline. Reading these surveys from the soldiers of the "Zośka" battalion now, more than 60 years later, makes this very clear.

Aleksander Kamiński did not publish his article until 12 years after conducting the survey. We can only speculate on the reasons for this delay. In any event, the survey remains a valuable source for understanding the history and tragic experiences of young soldiers in occupied Warsaw, offering insights into the toll on both their physical and mental health. Photographs from the filming of "Akcja pod Arsenałem" [Operation Arsenal] directed by Jan Łomnicki.

Further reading:

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