

## Article 16

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### **Janina Skrzynska, A Brief Outline of the History of Women POWs from the Polish Home Army (AK) Held in Stalag VIc at Oberlangen after the Warsaw Uprising**

The story of the soldiers of the Polish Home Army (AK) who fought in the Warsaw Uprising in August and September 1944 did not end with the capitulation of 2<sup>nd</sup> October of that year. Instead what ensued was a new episode in their lives in the POW camps dispersed throughout the territories of the Third Reich.

While the Warsaw Uprising lasted, the fate of insurgents captured by the enemy varied. In its very first weeks those captured were treated as plain 'bandits' and, if not immediately shot in Warsaw, they were either deported to concentration camps or to the German interior to do forced labour.

However, the London based Polish Government-in-Exile's determined interventions did affect the terms and conditions of the act of capitulation, which acknowledged combatant rights to the men and women who had fought in the Uprising. This meant that the insurgents had prisoner-of-war status and were therefore interned in German *Stalags* or *Oflag*s. Supervision of these prisoners lay exclusively in the competence of the German armed forces called the *Wehrmacht*. The capitulation document granted equal rights to both male and female prisoners. This was the first case in history where women found themselves behind the barbed wire of a POW camp.

At the start of the Uprising, on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1944, there were approximately 5,000 women in the Warsaw AK. They had the same rights and duties as the men. They took part in all of the AK's activities: in the administrative and logistic services, as nurses or couriers, in sabotage as well as in the spreading of information and propaganda. If caught by the Germans, they could expect the same fate as their brothers in arms: the firing squad, prison or the concentration camp.

The insurgents started leaving Warsaw on 5<sup>th</sup> October. They had to march approximately twenty kilometres to one of two transit camps, either in Pruszków or in Ożarów. The wounded and other patients of Polish resistance hospitals were taken to the Western Railway Station (Dworzec Zachodni) and loaded onto trains bound for a hospital and POW camp at Zeithem – this transport included 586 women. Another transport of wounded prisoners, including 445 women, departed from Pruszków to *Stalag* XI A at Altengrabow and Gross-Lübars.

The transports from Ożarów headed in various directions: northwest to *Stalag* X B in Sanbostal, *Stalag* XI B in Fallingbostel and a subsidiary camp of Bergen-Belsen, while another transport of 344 prisoners headed southwest to an enormous transit camp at Lamsdorf (Łambinowice). It was from this transit camp that the women POWs were sent on to *Stalag* IV B in Mühlberg and thence to its sub-camp in Altenburg, while 382 women officers and 38 privates were sent to *Oflag* IX C in Molsdorf.

In December 1944 the Germans started to send women prisoners from the Polish Home Army to Penal Camp (*Straflager*) VI C in Oberlangen.

A hardship shared by all the women POWs were the deplorable living conditions at the various camps. The German authorities were simply not prepared to take in a couple of thousand women with special prisoner-of-war status. The male prisoners were sent to camps that had been functioning since 1939 and were automatically put under the care of the International Red Cross. The women, on the other hand, were kept in overcrowded barracks separated from the main POW camps by barbed wire. In these cramped conditions, cold, frequently hungry, and lacking even the most basic sanitary facilities, these women had to endure the severe winter of 1944-1945. Yet they resisted persistent threats and coercion to renounce their prisoner-of-war status and become civilians, for according to the Geneva Convention of 1929, as captured combatants, they could not be forced to work in support of the Third Reich's war effort.

In the individual *Stalags* social life among the prisoners was quickly organised by women officers who had been specially selected before the deportations to conceal their ranks so that they could remain with the soldiers under their command. Their objective was to look after the youngest women prisoners, maintain discipline and help their subordinates adapt to the completely new conditions behind barbed wires.

Among those interned there were women with higher education, polyglots, artists as well as other activists in culture and education. Thus series of lectures, discussions and various other cultural events were organised in order to liven up the intellect and avoid psychological breakdowns.

In December 1944 the Germans started sending AK women prisoners to *Strafflager* (Penal Camp) VI C in Oberlangen. 5,000 women took part in the Warsaw Uprising, 3,000 of them were interned as POWs and 1,721 of these ended up in Oberlangen.

The camp had already had a dark history. Situated in the marshy Emsland area of northwest Germany, it had been one of the many concentration camps set up in the years 1933-1938 to hold opponents of the Nazi regime. After the outbreak of World War II the camp was taken over by the *Wehrmacht* and began to hold POWs from the occupied countries of Europe. The harsh climate, slave labour, hunger and disease turned the camp into a place of death.

In October 1944 Oberlangen *Strafflager* VI C was struck off the POW camp register on account of totally inadequate living conditions. Therefore the International Red Cross in Geneva was unaware of the fact that women POWs were later to be interned there.

The Germans continued to regard the Oberlangen facility as a penal camp and started to send women members of the AK there as a punishment for being obdurate rebels who had refused work as civilians in the German war industry.

The conditions in which we had to endure the winter of 1944-1945 were very difficult: two hundred prisoners in each rotten wooden barrack, draughty doors and windows (some lacking windowpanes), three-tier bunks, thin palliasses and only two cast-iron stoves burning damp peat that produced more smoke than heat. In one barrack there was a row of metal troughs with taps from which water, when there was any, barely trickled, and behind it two rudimentary latrines, all of which amounted to the camp's entire sanitary facilities. Eight barracks were designated for the healthy inmates, while at the front of the camp there was a hospital barrack, the camp kitchen, a sewing workshop, a bathhouse and a delousing station – of which I do not remember the last two ever functioning. One barrack was used as a chapel, while two more were left empty. These we exploited as an extra supply of fuel: we took out planks from the bunks, pulled up floorboards and even removed door and window frames until the camp authorities started imposing severe penalties for destroying government property.

The food was the same as in other camps: in the mornings and evenings a tepid herbal tea, frequently mouldy bread, the occasional piece of margarine or a spoonful of beetroot marmalade. At midday we would receive soup from bitter cabbage or grubby peas with two or three jacket potatoes.

The final stages of the war had a disastrous effect on supplies. Red Cross parcels from previous camps arrived in only very small quantities, if they were not stolen by the Germans or spitefully held at Lathen Railway Station some 12 km away. Meanwhile the Red Cross in Geneva remained oblivious to the fact that the camp had been reactivated.

Despite the difficult conditions, the Polish organization within the camp functioned effectively and efficiently. Having already experienced life in other POW camps, the women at Oberlangen continued to maintain their own command structure and army discipline.

The camp authorities refused to recognize Irena 'Jaga' Milewska as camp commandant, but on account of the fact that she had been appointed by the commander of the Women's Military Service, Major Maria Wittek, on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1944, she was assigned to the post of camp delegate and thus held some sway with the Germans.

The German command at the camp comprised four men: SS Colonel Miller, who was soon replaced by Captain Mehler; the quartermaster Lieutenant Treiber (a vulgar and spiteful man who was on very bad terms with the Polish women); Company Sergeant Majchrzak and Corporal Zwicklick (called by us Świetlik – the Polish word for glow worm). There were also three German women of undisclosed posts who would carry out surprise inspections and searches. There were 80 guards in all keeping watch on the camp.

The Polish organisation within the camp was managed with an iron hand by 'Jaga'. Maintaining discipline among 1,721 women aged from 14 to 60, of various social backgrounds and very different levels of education required not only determination but also a good understanding of human nature. 'Jaga' selected a competent staff to help her carry out this difficult task. The commanders of individual companies (one company equalled one barrack) concealed their officer rank so as to be able to look after all the internees. This was vital, particularly with regard to underage prisoners and to those who had nervous breakdowns – among us there were victims of the so-called barbed-wire syndrome.

The key to getting on with one another in Oberlangen was not only a matter of discipline but also of solidarity and camaraderie. In January 1945, when the first ten children were due to be born, for there were women who had become pregnant before leaving Warsaw, 'Commandant Jaga' announced at roll call: 'A baby is to be born, and it will be naked because its mother has nothing.' These words were enough: every woman who had anything to spare – a piece of bed linen, a handkerchief, a blouse or an undergarment – would undo the stitches, cut, sew and wash. So many bonnets, baby gowns and nappies were made for the first child that there was also enough for those who were born later. Cartons from Red Cross parcels were converted into cradles.

Every day work squads (*Kommandos*) would leave the camp to carry out compulsory chores: to the forest to gather firewood, to the peat bogs to collect peat and to the fields to deposit the contents of the camp latrines. Our free time was spent on cultural activities, general education and military instruction.

There were women of many talents among us, and as far as possible they tried to teach others some of their skills. As in previous camps we also organised lectures, group discussions and artistic activities. With the help of a penknife that had somehow remained concealed during the many searches or a nail pulled out of a bunk, simple objects such as, tin cans, a piece of cloth or some straw were transformed into refined cups, ornamental gorgets or pictures.

Religious practice in the camp was hampered by the lack of a priest. After persistent appeals, the Germans agreed to allow the chaplain of a nearby POW camp for Italians to occasionally say Mass at Oberlangen. However, the priest was unable to hear confessions or give spiritual advice. Therefore Lt 'Zbigniewa' and qualified nurse 'Maryla' requested the Italian cleric to permit them to take vows that would entitle them to hear confessions. On the initiative of these two women, a

'questions box' was set up so that prisoners could anonymously air their most serious personal problems without suffering the humiliation of being identified. The objective was to protect inmates from psychological trauma that could drive them to trying to commit suicide, for such cases had already occurred in Oberlangen. The idea proved to be popular with the prisoners.

**With** the coming of spring the Germans stepped up their efforts to win us over. One day a man arrived who the camp authorities introduced to us as Hitler's personal friend. For three days he tried to convince our Polish commander of Germany's good intentions towards Poland and to us in particular. He wanted us to form a women's legion that would fight against the Red Army. Our authorities advised this man to first gain permission from the Home Army Commander-in-Chief, General Bór-Komorowski, who was still being held in the Reich as a prisoner-of-war.

**Some** time after the ineffective visit of the Führer's friend a group of German officers arrived to try to persuade our command to testify that we had been treated in accordance with the Geneva Convention. The group was headed by the commanding officer of all the POW camps in the region, who tried to persuade our commanders to withdraw a report, due to be sent to Geneva, on the offensive way in which Lt Treiber had treated our Commandant 'Jaga'. On that occasion he told her 'I spit on the Geneva Convention' and then fired in her direction – fortunately he missed.

The increasing number of visitors was a sign that the end of the war and Germany's defeat were fast approaching.

**At** 18.00 hrs on 12<sup>th</sup> April 1945 the Oberlangen camp was liberated by soldiers of General Maczek's 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Division. The immense joy of being liberated by a Polish force was to last for weeks, but at the time the war was still on and we would have to wait another month before the women soldiers of the Polish Home Army and former POWs in the Third Reich could start the next chapter in their lives.

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