

Article 21

Dr Andrzej Suchcitz, The Grey Ranks (1939-1945)

When in the autumn of 1939 Poland was subjected to German and Soviet occupation Poles resorted to clandestine work not only in the realms of politics and military affairs but also in all other matters concerning their nation and state. Every effort was made to keep the nation's spirit alive.

Among the first nationwide organisations to go underground was the Polish Scouting Union (*Związek Harcerstwa Polskiego – ZHP*), which in February 1940 assumed the cryptonym 'Grey Ranks' (*Szare Szeregi*). The ZHP headquarters was now called the 'Apiary' (*Pasieka*) and the whole country was divided into 20 'hives' (*ule*), i.e. the 20 pre-war standards, each of which was further subdivided into 'swarms' (*roje*), meaning pre-war scout troops. Finally there were the 'families' (*rodziny*) – scout squads.

During the occupation the Grey Ranks had two leaders: Fr. Lt. Col. Jan Mauersberger (1939-1942) and Piotr Kupczyński (1942-1945). The wartime leaders of the Scouts' Organisation (*Organizacja Harcerzy*) were Florian Marciniak (1939-1943), Stanisław Broniewski (1943-1944) and Leon Marszałek (1944-1945). Like all of the ZHP, the Scouts' Organisation's cryptonym was Grey Ranks.

'The mission of Grey Ranks was to educate young people through participation in the ongoing struggle. In carrying out this mission, the Grey Ranks became one of the elements of the Polish Underground State...'

The scouts' programme, entitled 'Today – Tomorrow – The Day After Tomorrow' stressed participating in the struggle on frontline. 'The fundamental idea was for every scout to take part in the clandestine struggle (Today), whilst simultaneously preparing for open struggle when the time came to rise (Tomorrow) and for work in an eventually free Poland (The Day After Tomorrow), living life to the full in all three stages.'

On 3rd October 1942 the Scouts' Organisation was divided into three age groups:

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| 'Zawisza' | – 12- to 14-year-old scouts, who prepared for auxiliary duties to be carried out during the future Rising, whilst continuing their secret school education. |
| 'Fighting Schools' | – 15- to 17-year-olds who carried out minor sabotage, Action 'N' (i.e. disseminating destructive propaganda among the Germans) and intelligence gathering. For the Rising, they were trained to become riflemen, to serve as commanders' runners, provide other postal services or to serve in reconnaissance detachments. For 'The Day After Tomorrow' they continued their school education in secret classes and took up professional training. |
| 'Storm Groups' | – Scouts over the age of 17, who for 'Today' conducted 'Major Diversions' and other partisan operations. For 'Tomorrow' they were trained as officer cadets, sappers and company commanders. And for 'The Day After Tomorrow' they completed their school or vocational educations, took up higher education by attending secret lectures and generally prepared themselves for work in the future 'recovered territories'. |

The Grey Ranks ran the Polish Home Army's Officer Cadets' School code-named 'Agricola' (*Agrykola*).

Examples of Grey Ranks activities:

Minor sabotage – included regularly painting resistance signs on walls: 'Anchors' (the symbol of Fighting Poland), 'tortoises' (the sign to work slowly) and 'Vs' (for victory) as well as the slogans 'Poland lives' and 'Pawiak shall be avenged'. German flags were pulled down and Polish ones raised. The windows of photographers' shops displaying pictures of Germans were smashed, the German plaques beneath the Warsaw statue of Copernicus were removed and fake magazine supplements were distributed. Similar actions were carried out in the whole country.

The Intelligence Service – known as WISS (Grey Ranks Intelligence and Information – *Wywiad, Informacja Szarych Szeregów*), gathered and reported information about the location and movement of German military units within occupied Poland. Among other things, it provided the first information about the research centre at Peenemünde as well as about various German air force and navy equipment. It also monitored traffic on the highways and railway junctions.

Action 'N' – involved the distribution of literature aimed at demoralising the German occupant and their families. The standards received ready prepared Action 'N' materials, which they then put into circulation in their particular zones. The magazines were slipped into coat pockets in places such as the cloakrooms of German cafes and tossed into train carriages or the German sections of trams.

Armed Struggle – was conducted by Storm Groups acting 'under the direct command of assigned AK commanders or participating in other AK detachments.' Their operations included: attacks on trains and the rescuing of prisoners, for example, in Biała Podlaska, Pruszków and Warsaw; the production of firearms and explosive materials; 'Bridge' protection III; assassinations of 'particularly burdensome functionaries of the occupying forces', including the Warsaw Gestapo chief Gen. Kutschera as well as participation in the liberation of 'Republic of Pinczów' territories. Their contributions during the Warsaw Rising form a separate chapter.

The Action outside the Arsenal – became legendary as the Grey Ranks' first major operation. It took place on 23rd March 1943 in Warsaw on the junction of Bielańska and Długa Street. The objective was to free troop leader Jan Bytnar alias '*Rudy*' (Ginger). Taking part were 28 scouts led by Warsaw Standard Commander Stanisław Broniewski. The successfully conducted operation led to the release of Ginger and 24 other prisoners, including another Storm Group troop leader, Henryk Ostrowski. It was an attack on the prison van that was taking the inmates from Pawiak Prison to Szucha Avenue (where the Gestapo were based). The initiator and one of the participants of the operation was Tadeusz Zawadzki alias '*Zośka*' (Sophie). Ginger unfortunately died four days later on account of injuries sustained due to German maltreatment.

Operation Ostrabrama (the liberation of Wilno) – from 6th to 13th July 1944 a platoon of Lt. 'Turbacz's' Storm Group took part in the fighting to liberate Wilno.

Warsaw Rising – Participating in the fighting were two scouts' battalions, '*Zośka*' (Sophie) and '*Parasol*' (Umbrella), as well as several Storm Groups and Fighting Schools. The Grey Ranks teaching staff fought in the '*Wigry*' Battalion, while the youngsters of Zawisza served as runners, go-betweens and as the renowned post boys of the '*Scouts*' Field Postal Service'. Polish girl guides contributed as field nurses, messengers and in social auxiliary services that were a part of every insurrectionary detachment. The losses were great. Three hundred scouts, including 48 instructors, of the *Zośka* Battalion perished.

The Polish Girl Guide organisation first used the cryptonym 'Clover Union' (1940-1943) and then 'Be Prepared'. Throughout the occupation the Polish Girl Guide Leader was Maria Krynicka. The work of the girl guides involved 'either training for or actually carrying out; Samaritan services,

liaising services, domestic duties such as the running of army canteens, secret classes... for children, care of POWs and other prisoners, help for Jews and generally prepared themselves work in the future Recovered Lands.' At 18, girl guides entered the AK Women's Military Service (*Wojskowa Służba Kobiet* – WSK). Service for the children concerned their upbringing in order to save the nation from biological extinction. During the occupation the girl guides provided lodgings for homeless children, organised rescue operations to save the children of *Zamojszczna* (the Zamość region) and also ran nurseries and summer camps. During the Rising they set up a shelter for abandoned children, ran nurseries and took up various spontaneous humanitarian actions. The older guides who were already in WSK served as messengers, nurses or general helpers. The deputy WSK commander, Girl Guide Instructress Jadwiga Falkowska, died in the Rising on 7th August 1944.

As was noted by the Polish President's, Władysław Raczkiewicz's adjutants, when Emissary 'Jur' (Jerzy Lerski) submitted his report on the situation in occupied Poland, he mention 'the youth movement...' and 'spoke enthusiastically about so-called Grey troops fulfilling their duties with exceptional courage and dedication.'

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Footnotes:

All quotes apart from the last are from: Stanisław Broniewski, *Szare Szeregi*, London, 1988. The last quote is from J. Piotrowski's *Dziennik Czynności Prezydent RP Władysława Raczkiewicza*, which is due to be printed.

This article on the Grey Ranks is based on Stanisław Broniewski's above-mentioned book and was written for AK website on the initiative of W. Szablewski.

Recommended Literature:

1. Stanisław Broniewski, *Szare Szeregi*, London, 1988.
2. Aleksander Kamieński: *Kamienie na Szaniec*, (many editions).
3. Aleksander Kamieński: *Wielka Gra*, (many editions).