

# Elzbieta Zawacka

alias

„Zelma”, „Sulica”, „Zo”



Katarzyna Minczykowska

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# Elzbieta Zawacka

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*„Zelma”, „Sulica”, „Zo”*



**Katarzyna Minczykowska**





**ELŻBIETA MAGDALENA ZAWACKA**, teacher of mathematics and physical education (1923–1939, 1955–1965); instructor of the paramilitary organization Female Military Training (from 1930), soldier of the Polish underground military organization of the Headquarters of the Polish Victory Service – Union of Armed Struggle – Home Army (1939–1945), emissary of the commander of the Home Army, General Stefan Grot-Rowecki to the General Staff of the Commander-in-Chief in London (1943), member of the Silent Unseen [Polish: „Cichociemni”] (1943), activist of the anti-communist Delegation of the Armed Forces and the Association "Freedom and Independence" (1945–1946); political prisoner (1951–1955); academic teacher (1965–1978), social worker – in 2002 honored with the title: Custodian of National Remembrance. Brigadier General of the Polish Army (2006).

## HOME, SCHOOL, STUDIES

Elżbieta Magdalena Zawacka was born on 19 March 1909 in Toruń under the Prussian occupation, as the seventh of eight children of Ladislaus (Władysław), court clerk and Marianna née Nowak (siblings of Zawacka: Maria, died aged 23 in 1920; Jan died at the age of 18 in 1918; Alfons died in 1935, he was 34 years old; Eryk did not survive a year; Egon died in Auschwitz at the age of 37; Adelajda lived to be 88 years old and Klara, a lawyer, died in 2012 in Toruń). At home, in the times of the partitions and strong Germanization,



▲ *Elżbieta Zawacka – a student, 1927  
(the collections of the Foundation)*

*In front of the post office where Elżbieta Zawacka worked to earn money to finance her university studies, Toruń, the end of the 1920s* ▲  
(the collections of the Foundation)



▲ *Elżbieta Zawacka, the first from the left, Poznań 1934  
(the collections of the Foundation)*

even though her parents spoke Polish to each other, little Elizabeth (Liz) and her siblings turned to German, thanks to which children had an opportunity to get education at a German school, since only such schools were available in Poland under the Prussian rule. Elżbieta began her school education during the First World War, at the age of six, at the German High School for Girls (Mädchen – Mittelschule zu Thorn). It is worth adding that it was not a high school in today's sense of the word.

The adjective Mittelschule referred to the financial status of the families which the students admitted to this institution came from.

This elementary school, today we would say „primary school”, was attended by daughters of government officials, railwaymen and teachers. On 28 June 1919 Germany signed a treaty at Versailles, under which Toruń was incorporated into Poland. Elżbieta was already a student of the Deutche Mittelschule in Thorn; having passed the exam from the Polish language – she went to the Junior High School for Girls in Toruń. She graduated in 1927. She dreamed about studying. She wanted to become a student at Gdańsk University of Technology, like her older brother, Ali – as he was called at home.

Unfortunately, none of them, for financial reasons, could afford to realize the dreams associated with education. Elżbieta’s brother went to the army and became a professional officer, while Elżbieta gave private classes in Mathematics, thanks to which she managed to save for the first year of studies. She became a student at the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences of the newly established Poznań University. During summer breaks she worked at the Toruń post office to earn money to finance her further study. She finished her dissertation in 1931, and in 1935 she obtained her master's degree. In 1936 she passed the state pedagogical examination entitling her to teach mathematics in public and private secondary schools where classes were given in Polish and German.

## TEACHER AND INSTRUCTOR

As early as September 1931, with the graduation certificate in her pocket, Elżbieta had to take a job as a teacher to finance her further study. Working as a teacher also gave her an excellent opportunity to communicate to young people the idea of the paramilitary Organization of the Preparation of Women for the Defense of the Country (and from 1938 the Female Military Training – PWK), which she joined in the fourth year of her studies. Her friend from college talked her into taking part in the first information meeting



▲ *Teaching Staff in the Middle School in Sempolno, the first half of the 1930s (the collections of the Foundation)*

on the newly founded academic regiment of the PWK. She went there out of curiosity. She gave herself completely to the work at the PWK, whose aim was to train Polish women in the event of the outbreak of another war. In July 1931, she went to the PWK training camp to Garczyn near Kościerzyna (near Gdańsk), where she passed the initial PWK instructor course. In September she took a job in the six-grade co-educational German Junior High School under the name of Emil Kaschube in Sompolno (Koło county, Łódź province). She taught mathematics, physics and physical education there. She founded a PWK regiment in nearby Koło. She also completed higher instructor courses. She continued to teach at the Sompolan school for three years until the school was closed down. Then she took up the position of a teacher at the Scientific and Educational Center of the Ursuline Sisters in Otorowo (Poznan province). She continued to engage in the work for the PWK. In nearby Szamotuły, she replaced the commander of the PWK regiment, who was delegated to a higher instructor course. At the

◀ *The camp of the PWK in Garczyn, the second from the right – Elżbieta Zawacka (the collections of the Foundation)*



same time, upon the consent of the founder of the Congregation of the Ursuline Sisters, Mother Ursula Ledóchowska (1865–1939), she organized a PWK regiment in Pniewy. After a year of working in Greater Poland [Polish: Wielkopolska], she returned to her hometown Toruń to take up the post of a teacher at the City Female Junior High School. It was there that she founded

a PWK regiment. In 1936,

being a fully qualified

teacher, she went to Silesia. She got a job as a teacher at the State Female Junior High School in Tarnowskie Góry. She also ran secret evening classes for female students of the so-called High School of Raciborzanki, daughters of Polish activists in Germany. People she met during those classes gave rise to numerous underground contacts during the war.

In 1937, upon the request of the

*The first from the right ▶ Elżbieta Zawacka, Otorowo, May 1935 (the collections of the Foundation)*





- ▲ *In the teaching Staff room, Elżbieta Zawacka in the PWK uniform, sitting as the first from the right, the 1930s (the collections of the Foundation)*

Commander-in-Chief of the PWK Maria Wittek, and upon the consent of the superintendent of education, she took an annual leave from her teaching work, obtained the highest PWK instructor's degree (October / November 1937) and became the commander of the Silesian Region. Silesia and Zagłębie Dąbrowskie, which in total amounted to 19 county headquarters. From March 1939, when the

PWK National Emergency Service was established at the Extraordinary General Assembly of the PWK in Warsaw, Elżbieta Zawacka was totally involved in the work



- ◀ *On the ship with her students from the Middle School for Girls in Toruń, Elżbieta Zawacka standing ad the second from the left, 1936 (the collections of the Foundation)*



of the Emergency Service. Her task was to prepare as many women as possible to act in the event of war. Thus, she trained Silesian youth – thousands of Polish women. In the event of war, sanitary training, anti-aircraft defense and fire protection defense trainings were conducted. Polish women were trained in such a way as to be capable of helping soldiers

and civilians the moment the war broke out. The PWK camps, where trainings were held, were organized among others in Garczyn, Kościerzyna, Istebna and Spała. An extensive propaganda campaign was also carried out with the support of the radio and press. There were organized training trips to almost every village with the intention to prepare as many Polish women as possible to do auxiliary service during the war. Thanks to those activities, only in a few months they managed to train about a million Polish women.

*Zofia Grzegorzewska (Dziunia) ►  
(1906–1939) – member of the PWK,  
Zawacka's friend; Dziunia died  
on 7 June 1939 in a railway accident  
caused by the German sabotage action  
(the collections of the Foundation)*





## **SOLDIER**

The mobilization order was sent to Elżbieta Zawacka at the end of August 1939 while she was at the instructor camp of the State Office of Physical Education and Military Training in Spała. She quickly

returned to Katowice. There, with her subordinates, she organized station outposts for soldiers and road sanitary facilities (with so-called drops of milk) for a moving civilian population. As early as 2 September 1939 she received the order to leave Katowice. She left the city in the bus of the PWK National Emergency Service in Katowice along with a dozen of the PWK female instructors and female scouts from the Scouts' Emergency.

On 3 September the scouts in the aforementioned bus went to Rabsztyn, from where they intended to get to Cracow, while the PWK members went on foot to the east. Through Sandomierz, Kraśnik in the PWK uniforms they arrived in Lublin by train, where in the Soldier's House Elżbieta reported to the commander Stefania Hajkowiczowa, who had come from the Main Headquarters in Warsaw. She received an order from Hajkowiczowa to get to Lviv, which at that time belonged to Poland, where she arrived by truck through Tarnów, probably around 9/10 September.

She checked in with the Commander Maria Wittek (the first Pole in the general rank, 1997) and received an assignment to air defense in the Citizens' Committee of the city of Lviv.



◀ *Maria Zawodzińska  
alias „Sabina”  
(1909–1943) – member  
of the PWK, soldier  
of SZP-ZWZ-AK,  
courier and cipher clerk  
(the collections  
of the Foundation)*

*Commander Maria Wittek ►  
alias „Mira”  
„Pani Maria” (1899–1997)  
– the head of the Military  
Women’s Service  
(the collections  
of the Foundation)*



When the Lviv Auxiliary Battalion of the Women's Military Service [PWSK] was established, (under the command of Halina Wasilewska) Elżbieta Zawacka was assigned to this battalion. „Instructors” traveling with her earlier

also reported in Lviv soon. All day and night the girls from the PWSK filled bottles with gasoline and distributed them in antitank points. Everyone suffered from the lack of food. When Lviv was already surrounded by Germans from three sides, Elżbieta Zawacka applied to the anti-tank teams, but she did not even manage to take her position. The Germans began to withdraw, and the Red Army entered the city. On September 22, Lviv capitulated. Elżbieta, for the sake of the family who stayed in Pomerania, got to Toruń. Luckily, her parents were alive and they even had not been thrown out of their apartment – it must have been too modest a flat for the Germans to bother. Yet, Elżbieta did not stay too long in Toruń, as she decided to go to Warsaw. After all, she was a soldier. She could not wait...

In the second half of October, Elżbieta Zawacka managed to reach Warsaw. First, she contacted her friend from the PWK Maria Zawodzińska, who was already active in the underground movement. It was she who attracted Elizabeth to underground work. On 2 November Elżbieta made a vow in front of Janina Karasiówna,

alias „Bronka”, the head of the Secret Communication Department of the Polish Victory Service. She adopted the pseudonym „Zelma” and returned to Upper Silesia to organize a network of underground military service for women there. She installed herself in Będzin. In a short time, she managed to acquire nearly 200 women working in the PWK before the war. They worked in subversion organizations, sabotage, intelligence and counterintelligence services. Elżbieta was the head of communication in the Staff of the Sub-division of Zagłębie Dąbrowskie SZP-ZWZ. She also organized secret education in Zagłębie. Many times, thanks to her perfect knowledge of German, blond hair and blue eyes, easily (though not without fear, often risking her life) she crossed the border of the territories incorporated into the Reich within the General Government. She also went to Warsaw. At the end of 1940, she was called to the Main Headquarters of the Union of Armed Struggle.

- ▼ *In the uniforms of the PWK. In the middle – Elżbieta Zawacka, 1939 (collections of the Foundation)*



*Emilia Malessa,  
alias Marcysia  
(1909–1949) – the head  
of the Department  
of Foreign Communication  
of the KG ZWZ-AK  
(the collections  
of the Foundation)*



After the meeting in the Main Headquarters, Elżbieta was ordered to wait for a message regarding the assignment. The password was: „The white dress is ready”. Elżbieta heard it from Maria Szczurowska (also a former PWK instructor), who telephoned her in December 1940. At that time, her first meeting with Emilia Malessa alias „Marcysia”, took place; Malessa was the head of the Foreign Communication Department of KG ZWZ, cryptonym „Załoga” [English: „Crew”], „Zagroda” [English: „Farmstead”]. Elżbieta adopted the pseudonym „Zo” for work in „Zagroda” – from the name of her late sister-in-law Zofia (the wife of the late brother Ali). With her experience, perfect German and beauty, she worked great in a courier's job. Under assumed names, but always with a real name (e.g. von Braunegg, Kubitzka, Nowak, Riviere, Watson, Grochowska), she crossed the borders of European countries several hundred times (with the 100th time, which took place in 1942, she ceased to count).

She transported the Main Headquarter's [KG's] mail (forwarded to the Commander-in-Chief 's Office in London), and brought money (transferred by the Polish government). At the same time, she organized western courier routes. In 1942, in Katowice, she organized the Foreign Communication Department of KG ZWZ-AK [The Main Headquarters of the Union of Armed Struggle – the Home Army] „Cyrk” [English: Circus], the couriers of which operated on the following routes: 1) Poland – Berlin – Stockholm, 2) Poland – Lorraine – Paris, 3) Poland – Bern in Switzerland. The institution dealt with the transfer of couriers and emissaries carrying mail to the Polish Staff of the Commande-in-Chief, working at that time in London.

In the courier and organizational work of Elżbieta Zawacka, the old contacts with her female school mates from the so-called High School of Raciborzanki in Tarnowskie Góry were invaluable. Also, Zawacka, who worked in the Silesian structures of the Military Women's Service [Polish: Wojskowa Służba Kobiet – WSK], was also involved in the work in



▲ *Elżbieta Zawacka in 1943*  
(the collections of the Foundation)

„Circus”. In 1942, under the pseudonym „Sulica”, she created the WSK Department of the District Command of the Silesian Home Army. She appointed her subordinate with the pseudonym „Saba” as the head of this department. In addition to her courier work, „Zo” continued to engage in secret teaching. She taught at the Warsaw Junior High School under the name of N. Żmichowska,



▲ Klara Zawacka, „Bianka”, Elżbieta’ sister, probably the interwar years of the 20th century (the collections of the Foundation)

at the same time training herself, studying social pedagogy at the Secret Free Polish University.

In May 1942, while „Zo” was on the courier route, there was a large amount of de-inspiration in Silesia („give-aways”). Many of her co-workers were arrested, including her sister Klara, whom „Zo” had engaged to work under the pseudonym „Bianka” Returning to Silesia, „Zo” miraculously avoided arrest. Many happy coincidences contributed to this. She was helped by caution and acumen as well as great courage. Unable to get to Klara’s apartment, she knocked at the door of the neighbour, in whose flat the Gestapo were waiting for her. Luckily, the Gestapo had just left for dinner. „Zo” escaped. With a suitcase full of money, she went first to friends, where she stayed for the night, then to the station, where she left her luggage in the storage room. She handed over the luggage receipt in Katowice, under the pretext of buying some drugs, to a pharmacist also involved in the underground work. Without thinking about herself but only about her co-workers, she circulated in the station, warning the couriers and co-workers arriving there. Once the Gestapo’s ear had tracked her, first she tried to mislead them by taking a tram through the city, then she jumped on the train to Cracow, where she



divert the attention of the Gestapo, she left her coat in the compartment, pretending to go to the toilet, and jumped out of the moving train. She was near Żyrardów. Wounded and exhausted, she ran ahead. For a gold ring with aquamarine (gift from her parents) she got a headscarf and bread from some woman. She managed to get to Jaktorów, from where she got to Warsaw thanks to the money she had received from an accidental passer-by. There she checked in at the house of „Marcysia”, who, after passing the report by „Zo”, had gone to Katowice to collect the suitcase with dollars. The Gestapo sent out a wanted notice on her (Fahndungsbuch No. 237); her entire family was arrested and Klara was taken to the Ravensbrück concentration camp. As a result of the Silesian give-away, over a hundred people lost their lives, including twenty from the cell created by „Zo”. Her fate was to survive so that she could continue working for Poland.

After reaching Warsaw, Elżbieta Zawacka received another task. Upon the request of Janina Karasiówna, General Stefan Grot-Rowecki, Commander-in-Chief of the ZWZ-AK, delegated Zawacka as an emissary to the Staff of the Commander-in-Chief in London. Preparations for the trip lasted several months, during which time she „polished” foreign languages, studied courier routes, and during meetings with the head of the WSK, Maria Wittek, she discussed the issue of women's military service. She had the task of safely reaching London and pass to Gen. Władysław Sikorski, Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Armed Forces, a report on the situation in the country, the communication on Warsaw – London routes and the need to regulate soldiers' rights for Polish women, without whom the conspiracy activity would be difficult to organize in the form in which it functioned.

„Zo” set off on 20 December 1942, as Elizabeth Kubica, a clerk of an oil company. In a small, working lighter she transported 500 pages of microfilms containing the monthly mail of the Main Headquarters [KG]. She reached Paris, where she took the name Elise Riviere. Unfortunately, it turned out that the route planned for „Zo” was not

secure enough, so she had to return to Poland. On 17 February 1943, she again set off to London, this time with the mail hidden in the shaft of a small key. Through Germany, France, Andorra (Pyrenees), miraculously avoiding arrest, she reached the British consulate in Barcelona, where she handed over the mail, which was sent by the British diplomatic route to London. However, as they procrastinated sending the message of „Zo” by plane to England, she decided to travel herself by train through Madrid to Gibraltar, and from there by ship to Bristol, from where on 4 May 1943 she reached the Staff of the Commander-in Chief in London, where she stayed until September 1943. Just after arriving, she checked in with Colonel Michał Protasewicz, in the Staff of the Commander-in Chief, giving a report from the tasks entrusted to her. During her stay in London

she was received by many important

people of Polish politics:

from the Polish President

Władysław Raczkiewicz,

through Gen. Władysław

Sikorski and Sta-

niśław Mikołajczyk

(the prime minister

of the Polish govern-

ment) to many other

members of the Polish

government. She was a

guest of the Minister of

National Defense, Ge-

neral Marian Kukiel,

General Kazimierz

Sosnkowski and



◀ *Captain. Elżbieta Zawacka, 1944*  
(the collections of the Foundation)

General Józef Haller, to who she reported on matters of Poland, the need to improve communication and to regulate the rights of Polish women soldiers. Unfortunately, despite the efforts and many conversations, the issues she talked about were not fully understood. For politicians who had lived in exile for several years, the situation in occupied Poland was so unimaginable that it became sometimes incomprehensible. „Zo”, however, did not give up. She spent many weeks analyzing postal transfers and learning the organizational system of the Auxiliary Women's Service, the Headquarters of which operated in the Polish Ministry of National Defense; she worked on the basis of British models. „Zo” convinced politicians that the issue of women fighting in the country should be regulated legally, so that fighting Polish females had the right to promotion and disciplinary rights in relation to their subordinates. At the same time, she was still thinking about returning to the country as soon as possible. For this reason, she underwent a parachute training, during which she sprained both ankles. Nevertheless, on 9 September 1943, with two stiffened ankles, as one of the 316 members of the „Silent Unseen” she flew to Poland. After returning (parachuting in the fields of the Osowiec estate in Masovia) on 10 September 1943, she reported to the Main Headquarters of the Home Army and told about the arrangements in London regarding the regulation of the legal situation of women soldiers. The confirmation of the words of „Zo” was the Decree of the President of the Republic of Poland on Volunteer Military Service of Women of 27 October 1943.

„Zo” returned to work in „Zagroda”; she interrupted her work there in March 1944 owing to the betrayal of „Jarach” (probable personal details are: Rudolf Zazdel vel Żazdel, vel Zazdek), who turned out to be an agent of the Gestapo. Fortunately, he did not know all the people of „Zagroda”. „Zo” and „Marcysia” escaped arrest, but about 100 soldiers of „Zagroda” were arrested. The give-away of „Jarach” was the largest in the Foreign Communication Department of the Home Army. „Zo” had to go to quarantine and for almost four months (from March to July 1944) she had to stay – as a

postulant – in the convent of the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Szymanów near Sochaczew. Knowing that the long-awaited moment of the uprising (the „W” hour) might come soon, in mid-July she „broke the order” about the quarantine and left the convent arbitrarily, walking to Warsaw on foot. She checked in with Janina Karasiówna and received the assignment to the head of the Military Women's Service. The mood of the upcoming Warsaw Uprising was almost sensed in the air. It was 1 August 1944. Zo, along with other female soldiers from the Home Army, waited for an order to be able to fight. However, she waited in vain as she was foreseen for commanding tasks. For many days of the uprising, „Zo” along with other women soldiers from the Main Headquarters of the Home Army [KG AK] worked in the WSK headquarters in Powiśle (Warsaw district). From time to time, they were sent to the Home Army Headquarters, to the department of the female sabotage unit of the so called „minerki” or as liaison officers with the post. In the second half of August, they had to leave their headquarters in Powiśle and move to the building where the insurgent hospital had been set up in Szczygła Street. They could help in the hospital. They dealt with the wounded, whom they brought from the street. Zawacka was also an inspection officer – she helped other soldiers who went from the sewers to go out of the Old Town. Soon she received the order to change the quarters. Together with others, she escaped to 6 Chmielna Street, where, performing various insurgent tasks (inspections of WSK teams at combat units, acquiring water and food for fighting soldiers), she stayed until the end of the uprising. At the end of the uprising she was promoted to the rank of captain (although already as a captain she had carried out her mission to London in 1943). Even before the capitulation of the uprising, she received the order to get out of the capital. In the lining of her coat she hid the order of General Tadeusz Bór Komorowki (commander-in-chief of the Home Army) typed on a piece of white silk, which ordered to help to its owner. Getting out of the crowd leaving Warsaw along with Wacława Zastocka, alias

„Baśka”, she went to the monastery in Szymanów. They reached the convent, where Sister Superior, Asumta, gave them shelter. Soon they arrived in Cracow to rebuild the broken foreign communication there. Having access to the radio, working with a cipher and a liaison, „Zo” contacted the Polish authorities in London. She managed to rebuild many courier routes, which she had passed by herself, and in December 1944 she organized – personally checking the routes – a transfer to Switzerland of an emissary Jan Nowak (real name: Zdzisław Jeziorański, known after the Second World War as Jan Nowak-Jeziorański, „courier from Warsaw”, a long-time director of the Polish section of Radio Free Europe in Munich). In February 1945, after the dissolution of the Home Army by General Leopold Okulicki (19 January 1945), in Cracow „Zo” was demobilized by her commander, Emilia Malessa, alias „Marcysia”.

## THE FIRST POSTWAR YEARS

Having been demobilized, Zawacka returned to Toruń. However, due to the political situation in the country, she did not stay long in Toruń and after a week she left for Warsaw. In the capital, she renewed her underground contacts and got involved in independence activities in the Delegation of the Armed Forces in the department of communication and distribution of the Western Area. She also worked in the distribution of the brochure of the



◀ *Garczyn 1946  
(the collections of the Foundation)*

Association „Freedom and Independence”, continuing at the same time in Łódź the second university studies in the field of social pedagogy, which she had started at Wolna Wszechnica Polska in Warsaw and interrupted owing to her underground activity. In June 1946, she took up a job in Maria Wittek’s Section of the Women’s Military Training at the State Office for Physical Education and Military Preparation, thus ending her underground work. However, due to the political situation in the country, she also had to finish her in the field of military training of women. She returned to the teaching profession, taking up a teacher’s job in Łódź in 1948, then in Toruń and Olsztyn (II State Coeducational Middle School and High School for Adults in Łódź, III State Primary and Secondary School of Tadeusz Kościuszko in Toruń, State High School for Working Students in Olsztyn). She also intensified the work on her PhD thesis in the field of social pedagogy. Her academic supervisor was Prof. Helena Radlińska from the University of Łódź. Thanks to the scholarship she received and the continuation of her professional work, Zawacka had a chance to defend her doctoral thesis quickly. Unfortunately, the time of „free Poland” turned out to be unfavorable for many former soldiers of the Home Army repressed by the

*Elżbieta Zawacka* ►  
*in 1951 – arrested*  
*by the Security Bureau*  
*(the collections*  
*of the Foundation)*



communist authorities. Elżbieta Zawacka also painfully felt „freedom”. On 5 September 1951, the officers of the Public Security Office (Polish political police) knocked on the door of Elżbieta Zawacka’s flat in Olsztyn. They searched the flat, destroying and requisitioning many research materials, and arrested her.



►  
*The gate to  
 the detention centre  
 Warszawa-Mokotów,  
 the modern view  
 (photo M. Gordner,  
 collections of  
 Areszt Śledczy  
 Warszawa-Mokotów)*

## POLITICAL PRISONER

On 5 September 1951, Elżbieta Zawacka was taken to the Olsztyn detention center, and on the next day to the most severe detention center for political prisoners in Warsaw-Mokotów, where she was



▲ *Prison in Fordon (photo: [www.sw.gov.pl](http://www.sw.gov.pl))*

kept in a cell with eight other prisoners. She went through a ruthless investigation. Accused of harmful activities for the Polish state, she was sentenced by the Military District Court in Warsaw first to 5 years in prison (sentence of 23 January 1952), and after the review of the verdict – at the request of the military prosecutor's office – upon the decision of the District Court – for 7 years (28 July 1952). After another review, she was sentenced to 10 years in prison (28 November 1952). On 12 December 1952, after a year and a half of



▲ *The gate to the prison in Grudziądz, modern view (photo: M. Nowicki, collection of ZK in Grudziądz)*

arrest, she was transported to the heaviest of female prisons, to Fordon (now a district of Bydgoszcz), where she worked in the kitchen. Then she was imprisoned in Grudziądz – there she worked in a lingerie factory – and in Bojanów, where she taught prisoners and, upon the consent of the prison governor, she created a consultation point for the Correspondence High School in Leszno. She was released from prison 24 on February 1955. In Poland, the „Stalinist period” ended, the „thaw” was coming.



## ACADEMIC TEACHER

After her release, thanks to her efforts to restore the right to practice, she returned to her teaching career in Sierpc, and in 1956 she was employed at the Correspondence Secondary School in Toruń. She also returned to scientific research, wanting to prepare a doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Prof. Ryszard Wro-

czyński, head of the Department of Social Pedagogy at the University of Warsaw, whom she knew from her studies at the Secret Free Polish University. She did research in adult self-education. The basis of her research were surveys. Unfortunately, due to the still unfavorable political conditions, this method of research turned out to be unreliable, because answers to the questions provided in the questionnaires were not honest. Thus, Zawacka decided to withdraw from the research method she had adopted. However, without giving up issues related to self-education, she continued to teach in



▲ *Conference for headmasters of technical schools for working people, during which Dr Elżbieta Zawacka had a lecture on self-education, Szczecin 1966*

correspondence schools, published articles on this subject and cooperated with Prof. dr. hab. Ludwik Bandura, head of the Didactics Department at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, who agreed to become the supervisor of her PhD thesis. Finally, in 1965, she defended her doctoral thesis, entitled „Correspondence school and its students”. The reviewers were professors: Aleksander Kamiński and already mentioned Ryszard Wroczyński. Two years later, this work was also published (*Correspondence training*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warsaw 1967).

In 1965, after the position of the director of the Correspondence High School in Toruń became vacant, Zawacka was offered to take the job. However, she had to fulfill one condition: she had to become a member of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR, communist party in Poland). Elżbieta Zawacka refused to accept membership card of the „only right” party in Poland. Thus, the director's position and further research at the correspondence school she planned to conduct were gone. Zawacka left for Gdańsk, where she accepted the



proposal of Prof. Bandura, who was then the rector of the Higher Pedagogical School in Gdańsk (after merging with the University of Economics in Gdańsk, 1970), to take up the post of assistant professor at the Department of Didactics at this university. And as always, she devoted herself completely to scientific and didactic work. She cooperated with many scholars dealing with andragogics (adult education) at home and abroad. She also participated in the works of the Universal Knowledge Society [Polish: Towarzystwo Wiedzy Powszechnej]. She was the head of the Education Section of the Society of the Free Polish University in Gdańsk. Her work was noticed and appreciated also in foreign centers, the best proof of which was her being invited to accept the membership in the International Council on Correspondence Education (ICCE).

On 3 May 1972, the postdoctoral colloquium of Zawacka was held in Cracow at the Higher Pedagogical School. The habilitation dissertation concerned extramural education („Obstacles and failures in the teachers' study”), and its reviewers were: Prof. Ludwik Bandura (University of Gdańsk), Prof. Franciszek Urbańczyk (the Higher Pedagogical School in Cracow) and, as before, Prof. Ryszard Wroczyński (University of Warsaw).

In 1972 in Gdańsk Zawacka created a section of Adult Education at the Gdańsk branch of the Society of the Free Polish University. One and a half years later (15 November 1973) dr hab. Elżbieta Zawacka took the position of assistant professor at the University of Gdańsk, and in October 1975 she was employed at Nicolaus Copernicus University. She returned to her beloved Toruń again. Nothing announced the imminent end of her scientific career. Zawacka – as always full of enthusiasm – started to organize an independent Department of Adult Education, which she was to administer. For two years, working hard, Zawacka created a research unit – so needed at Nicolaus Copernicus University; she also organized the ICCE Scientific and Information Center. In 1976, for scientific



*The International Council  
of Correspondence  
Education, Leipzig 1975* ▲▶

purposes, she left for England, where she met with the Polish diaspora, and conducted historical research at the Polish Underground School in London, where archival materials on the Home Army have been kept to this day. Elżbieta's return to Poland, however, was not the most pleasant. At the Warsaw-Okęcie airport, the magazines (including „Kultura”) she brought with her, books (including *AK w dokumentach*, *Armia Podziemna*, *F.A.N.Y. Invicta* or even *Panorama Kaszubsko-Pomorska*), along with copies of archival materials were confiscated. Fortunately, after persistent efforts the confiscated materials were returned to the owner in the 1980s. Unfortunately, the university spell was broken – the communist authorities could not allow the „reactionary element” to influence the young intelligentsia. The research unit established by Zawacka was not included in the Institute of Pedagogy and Psychology, reorganized at the Faculty of

Humanities of Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń in 1977 (from 2007, Faculty of Pedagogical Sciences). Despite the ICCE's request to appoint Elżbieta Zawacka to be the head of the Polish Center for Documentation and Scientific Information and to allocate UNESCO resources for this purpose, the candidacy of Zawacka was not supported; as a result, the center was not established, and Zawacka herself as a result of these harassments was forced to retire in 1978. Exhausted by the huge organizational effort and disappointed by the decisions of the authorities of Nicolaus Copernicus University, she had to face the deterioration of her health, but did not give up. She undertook one more mission, another one – to spite the communist authorities and the fate that was prepared for her – she decided to commemorate those who had fought and those who had died.

## THE CUSTODIAN OF NATIONAL MEMORY

In the 1960s, having accepted a job at the College of Pedagogy in Gdańsk, Zawacka began collecting materials documenting the work of the so called *pewiaczki* (girls from the PWK Organization – the Female Military Training) and their war service. Her area of interest was also Pomerania. She wanted to immortalize the memory of the dedication and devoted fight of many Polish women. She collected accounts, photographs and documents. She first published only works on the PWK, and then also on the WSK [the Women's Military Service]. She collaborated with former PWK activists centered around Maria Wittek. The retirement made it easier for her to continue the activities initiated earlier. She contributed to the work of the Warsaw Committee on the History of Women (KHK) at the Society of History Enthusiasts – Branch of the Polish Historical Society (currently KHK is based in the Archives of New Files in Warsaw); and in Toruń, gathering female veterans, she began to prepare and compile the materials she had collected. Along with the



▲ *Elżbieta Zawacka among souvenirs from the PWK, the 1980s.*

entire Toruń team (her first Toruń cooperators were: Helena Augustowska, Adela Dejewska, Aniela Gliniak, Janina Mahrburg and Barbara Skrobacka) decided to expand the collection of materials concerning the activities of all Pomeranians who in difficult Pomeranian conditions had decided to fight the German occupant. This widening of interests caused that more and more people joined her team. At the same time, Elżbieta Zawacka was involved in the work of NSZZ „Solidarność” [Independent Self-governing Labour Union „Solidarity”], preparing a program for its educational circles. In 1981 she also became the head of the Historical Commission of the Veterans' Council operating at NSZZ „Solidarność” in Gdańsk (she was also the vice-president of this Council).



- ▲ *The first archival works in Toruń's flat of Elżbieta Zawacka. From the left: Helena Augustowska, Janina Mahrburg and Elżbieta Zawacka*



- ▲ *The first meeting of the members of the Historical Club. Hanna Mrówka speaking, on her right side Janina Mahrburg, on the left: Elżbieta Zawacka, Janusz Łopuszański and Kazimierz Przybyszewski, Toruń, the end of 1986*

In the years of martial law, which was announced in Poland on 13 December 1981, and which lasted until 1983, acting in NSZZ „Solidarność”, Zawacka lectured at secret meetings held in private apartments of underground activist. From the end of 1986, activists, veterans and people interested in the history of the Polish underground during the Second World War, gathered around Zawacka, began to meet systematically as part of the Historical Club, which in February 1987 was officially established at the Kashubian-Pomeranian Association, Branch in Toruń. The publication of *Biuletyn Klubu Historycznego* [Bulletin of the Historical Club – since 1988 the Club under the name of Antoni Antczak] was launched; it was distributed among many friends and acquaintances of Zawacka. It was she, along with Prof. Jan Łopuski, Prof. Stanisław Salmonowicz and Prof. Andrzej Tomczak, who set up the largest Polish veteran organization – the Association of Home Army Soldiers (Zawacka was the vice president of the Association for a year) – and from 1990 the World Union of Soldiers of the Home Army.



▲ *The first plaque commemorating soldiers of the Home Army, uncovered upon the initiative of Elżbieta Zawacka (the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary)*



▲ *The establishment of the Association of Soldiers of the Home Army, the building of the court, Warsaw 1989*

Elżbieta Zawacka with Prof. Łopuski, Prof. Salmonowicz and Prof. Tomczak sought to establish a foundation in the Polish capital, whose task would be to collect archival materials related to SZP-ZWZ-AK. The plans were almost successful, as the Foundation „Archive and Museum under the name of Stefan Grot-Rowecki” [„Archiwum i Muzeum im. gen. Stefana Grota-Roweckiego”] was established. Unfortunately, it failed to develop a wider activity. As a result, in 1989, along with Prof. Stanisław Salmonowicz and his student Grzegorz Górski (today a professor at the Catholic University of Lublin), Elżbieta Zawacka made efforts to create the Foundation „Pomeranian Archives of the Home Army” [Archiwum Pomorskie AK] in Toruń. This time it worked. On 16 February 1990, the foundation was set up. Its registration took place two months later, and its council consisted of veterans and scientists, mainly historians of the 20th century.





▲ *Honorary Citizenship of Toruń, Prof. Wilhelmina Iwanowska and Prof. Elżbieta Zawacka (photo: Cz. Jarmusz)*

Elżbieta Zawacka, donated to the Foundation all of her collections, those relating to the PWK, WSK, the underground work in Pomerania and the history of the Foreign Communication Department of the Home Army „Zagroda”. They are made available to scientists, university students, secondary school students, veterans and their families. It is also worth adding that as part of the



▲ *Elżbieta Zawacka decorated with the Order of the White Eagle, with her friends and co-workers, Toruń, 15 Dec 1995 (photo: Cz. Jarmusz, the collections of the Foundations)*

compensation for „encouraging” Zawacka to retire, the authorities of Nicolaus Copernicus University in the 1980s created for her a full-time job position which was occupied by her secretary. For her scientific work (Zawacka published several books, about a hundred articles, a dozen books were edited) on 15 January 1996 she was appointed Professor of Humanities by President of the Republic of Poland Aleksander Kwaśniewski. A month earlier – on 15 December 1995 – the President of the Republic of Poland Lech Wałęsa awarded her with the highest Polish state decoration of the Order of the White Eagle, and invited her to become a member of the Chapter of the Military Order Virtuti Militari, which she had received twice (10 September 1943, and 2 October 1944). The Military Order Virtuti Militari is the highest military Polish decoration awarded for heroic deeds done in combat conditions. She was honored with the honorary citizenship of the City of Toruń (1993) and Piastów (2008), decorated four times with the Cross of Valor (11 November 1941,

11 November 1942, 4 April 1943, 4 May 1943), the Cross of Merit (2 October 1942) and the Cross of the Home Army. In 2002, the President of the Institute of National Remembrance Prof. Janusz Kurtyka honoured her with the title of the Custodian of National Remembrance, and in 2006 she was promoted by President Lech Kaczyński to the rank of brigadier general (captain in 1942, for the second time she was promoted to captain in 1944, lieutenant colonel in 1996, and colonel in 1999).

It is worth noting that the life of General Zawacka is a perfect example of how communist Poland treated the heroes of the Second World War. Elżbieta Zawacka, just like many other soldiers of the Polish Underground State, appreciated in the war years, repressed during communism, was not honored until after the Polish political transformation of 1989. The fruit of the work of Elżbieta Zawacka – the Foundation „Pomeranian Archive and Museum of the Home Army and the Women’s Military Service” runs in Torun a wide



▲ Elżbieta Zawacka greeting a guest at the 6th session of the Foundation („The Service of Polish Females in the Fronts of WWII”) – President Ryszard Kaczorowski, Torun 1996 (photo: K. Wojtowicz, the collections of the Foundations)



▲ *The 1st Assembly of Women Soldiers (photo: M. Ojczyk, the collections of the Foundations)*



◀ *The 2nd Assembly of Women Soldiers (photo: M. Ojczyk, the collections of the Foundations)*



▲ *With President of the City of Toruń Michał Zaleski handing in the general's nomination, Toruń, 13 June 2006 (photo: R. Stasiak, the collections of the Foundations)*

publishing, teaching and popularizing activity. The Foundation supported by the Memorial of General Maria Wittek, set up in 1996 by Elżbieta Zawacka, gathering several hundred members from Poland and abroad, collects, stores, develops and makes available materials commemorating the history of the Polish Underground State (also available on-line: <http://kpbc.umk.pl/dlibra/collectiondescription?dirids=130>). From the beginning of its activity, the Foundation commemorates soldiers of the Home Army by initiating the creation of monuments, obelisks and plaques. The first plaque dedicated to the memory of the Home Army soldiers was unveiled upon the initiative of Elżbieta Zawacka in 1986 in Toruń (the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary); later, under the Foundation's banner, Zawacka organized the creation of many other plaques and obelisks (e.g. in 1990 a plaque commemorating the District Headquarters of the ZWZ-AK District of Pomerania – Toruń, at 8 Warszawska; the obelisk dedicated to General Maria Wittek – Garczyn 1998; in 2007 Zawacka founded the monument to General



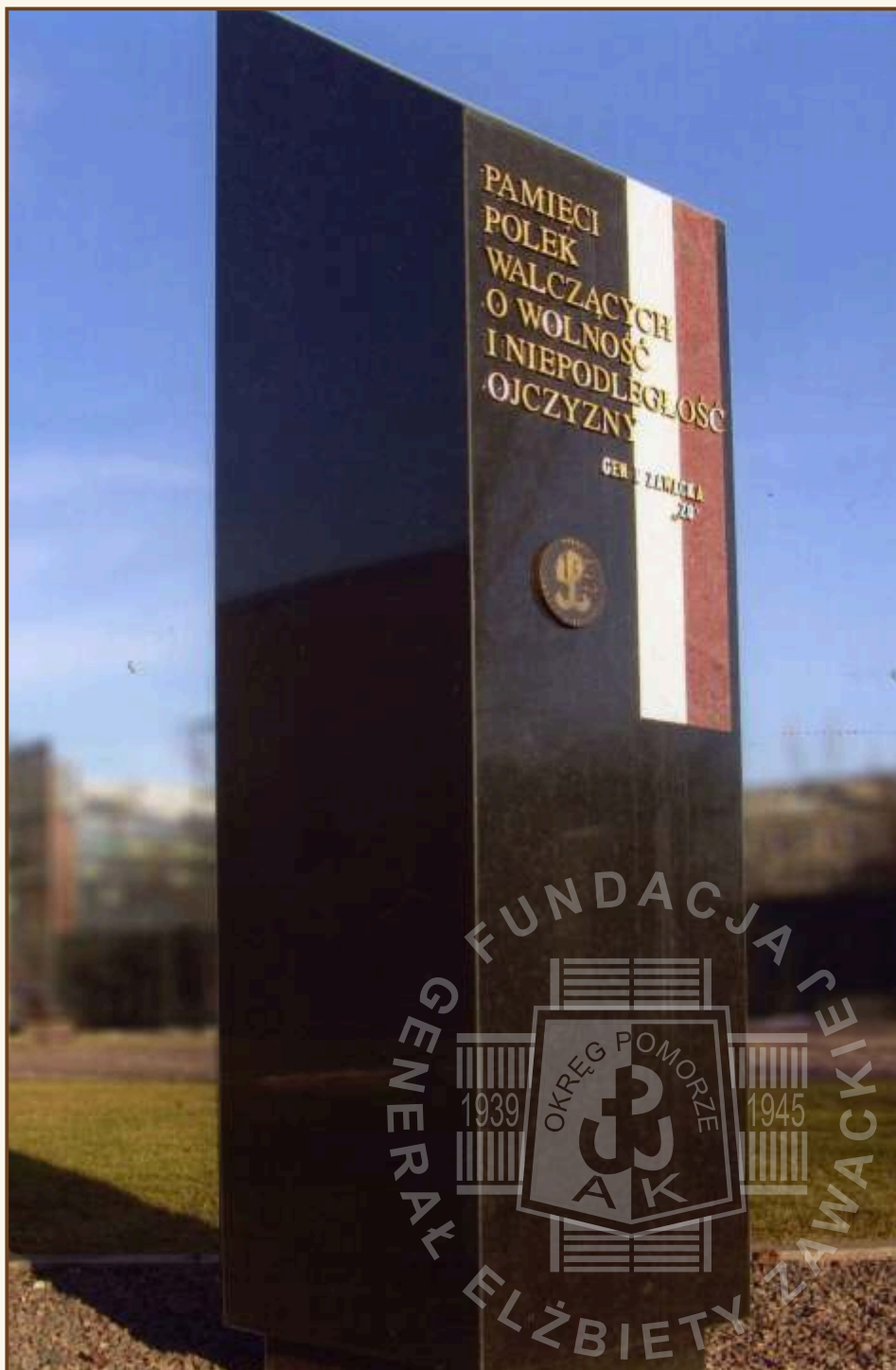
▲ *Elżbieta Zawacka during the ceremony of the nomination to the rank of brigadier general, Toruń 2006 (photo: R. Stasiak, the collections of the Foundations)*

Maria Wittek – Warsaw, in the courtyard of the Polish Army Museum, and the obelisk „To Commemorate Polish women fighting for freedom and independence of the Motherland”, Park Wolności Muzeum Powstania Warszawskiego). The Foundation also organizes scientific and popular science conferences (the first took place on 27-28 September 1989) on the history of the Polish Underground State and the participation of Poles in the Second World War, patriotic celebrations, exhibitions, lectures and contests for youth, historical reconstructions. Thanks to the Memorial of General Maria Wittek the Foundation motivates the young and the elderly to undertake joint activities, organizes meetings of veterans with youth and unites generations.

General Prof. dr hab. Elżbieta Zawacka, born in 1909, was the *spiritus movens* of all the foundation initiatives. Reminding how much was still to be done and how important patriotism was, she



▲ Monument of Gen. Maria Wittek founded by Elżbieta Zawacka and uncovered on 19 April 2007 in the courtyard of the Museum of the Polish Army in Warsaw (photo: H. Sikorska, the collections of the Foundations)



- ▲ *Obelisk commemorating all female Poles fighting in the fronts of WWII, founded by Gen. Elżbieta Zawacka and uncovered in November 2007 in Park Wolności near the Museum of the Warsaw Uprising, the management of which do their best to preserve the obelisk. (photo: J. Sikorska, the collections of the Foundations)*



- ▲ *Elżbieta Zawacka during the ceremony of the 60th Anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising. From the left: Elżbieta Zawacka née Maron – the wife of the cousin of Elżbieta Zawacka alias „Zo”, the second – Elżbieta Zawacka, alias „Zo”, Toruń 2004 (photo: K. B. Wakarecy, the collections of the Foundation)*



- ▲ *Prof. E. Zawacka on one of the benches she founded in Bielany Forest near the university, Toruń 2006 (photo: W. Streich, collections of the university library of UMK)*

engaged a large number of people to realize her ideas. With her charisma and faith she was able to motivate both young people and veterans to work. Anyone who was lucky enough to meet her at least once will always remember her and her faith in the sense of her actions for the good of her homeland. She passed away a few weeks before her hundredth birthday, on Saturday morning on 10 January 2009 in Toruń. She was buried with honors due to the General of the Polish Army in the cemetery of Saint George in Toruń (Gałczyńskiego Street), where over three thousand people came to bid farewell to her. Her legacy is the Foundation, which from 9 March 2009 is called the *Foundation General Elżbieta Zawacka. The Archives and Museum of the Pomeranian Home Army and the Women's Military Service*. The foundation accomplishes the goals which Gen. Elżbieta Zawacka set to her employees and volunteers years ago.



▲ *Honour guard at the coffin of Gen. Elżbieta Zawacka, Toruń, 17 Jan 2009 (photo: R. Stasiak, the collections of the Foundation)*



▲ *The funeral mass service of Gen. Elżbieta Zawacka. Władysław Bartoszewski speaking, Toruń 17 Jan 2009 (photo: R. Stasiak, the collections of the Foundation)*



▲ *Funeral procession of Gen. Elżbieta Zawacka, Toruń 17 Jan 2009 (photo: R. Stasiak, the collections of the Foundations)*



- ▲ *Funeral ceremonies of Gen. Elżbieta Zawacka at the cemetery of St. George in Toruń, 17 Jan 2009 (photo: R. Stasiak the collections of the Foundations)*



- ▲ *The tomb of Gen. Elżbieta Zawacka. Made by the sculptor Zbigniew Mikielwicz (photo: M. Debczyńska-Wróblewska, the collections of the Municipal Office, Torun)*



# Elżbieta Zawacka

„Zelma”, „Sulica”, „Zo”

## Summary

There have been many great names and great heroes in the history of Poland. Almost all Poles and many foreigners have heard of Kościuszko, Pułaski, Sikorski, Anders or Emilia Plater, but there are only few knowing two other women who deserve to be listed among these memorable persons – Maria Wittek and Elżbieta Zawacka, Polish Army generals.

Elżbieta Zawacka, profesor and general, was born in Toruń at the turn of the 20th century from Marianna and Władysław, a judiciary clerk. For her first eleven years she had spoken only German, what later made her able to act and live through the years of the World War II, when she became one of the best couriers of the Foreign Communication Department of the Home Army High Command and the Home Army Commander's in Chief emissary from Poland to the Bureau of the Polish Commander in Chief in London. In the World War II Zawacka, under false names, crossed boundaries of European countries nearly hundred times transporting underground messages, money and men. She was the one who arranged Jan Nowak-Jeziorański's (later the head of the Polish section of the Radio Free Europe) transfer to Switzerland. She organized resistance networks in Silesia and took a part in the Warsaw Uprising.

Although educated mathematician and pedagogue, she was passionate about history. In the times of the People's Republic of Poland she got arrested, sentenced and imprisoned. Oppressed by Polish authorities, Zawacka retired from the Nicolaus Copernicus University earlier to deal with commemorating the service of her male and female friends – Home Army soldiers. She is a cofounder of the World Association of Home Army Ex-Servicemen, Gen. Grot-Rowecki Archive and Museum Foundation in Warsaw and Foundation „Pomerelian Archive of the Home Army” in

Toruń. In 1995 she was decorated with the Order of the White Eagle and 11 years later she was promoted to general rank. Her life is as uncommon as she is herself – strong and intransigent, because „the matter”, the matter of Poland, is the most important.

*Translation: Michał Targowski*

## **Zusammenfassung**

In der Geschichte Polens mangelt es nicht an großen Namen und großen Helden. Selten hat jemand von Kościuszko, Puławski, Sikorski, Anders oder Emilia Plater nicht gehört.

Nur wenige wissen aber, dass neben diesen großen Namen sehr wohl die Namen von zwei Polinnen genannt werden können: Maria Wittek und Elżbieta Zawacka, zwei Generäle des Polnischen Heeres.

General Prof. Dr. Habil. Elżbieta Zawacka wurde Anfang des 20. Jhs. in Toruń geboren, in der Familie von Marianna und Władysław, der Gerichtsbeamte war. Bis zum elften Lebensjahr hat sie nur Deutsch gesprochen, was ihr geholfen hat, in der Zeit des 2. Weltkrieges zu wirken und zu überleben. Damals war sie eine von den besten Kurierinnen der Abteilung für Auslandskontakte der Hauptkommandantur der Heimatarmee und Abgesandte des Oberbefehlshaber der HA (in Polen) an den Stab des Oberbefehlshabers in London, wohin der die polnische Regierung nach der verlorenen Verteidigungscampagne 1939 umgezogen war. Während des 2. Weltkrieges hat E. Zawacka die Grenzen der europäischen Staaten mehr als hundertmal überschritten, indem sie unter verschiedenen Namen geheime Post, Menschen und Geld hinüber geschafft hat. Sie hat u.a. den Geheimtransport des „Kuriers aus Warschau“, (Jan Nowak-Jeziorański) organisiert. Sie hat konspiratives Netz in Schlesien organisiert und an dem Warschauer Aufstand teilgenommen.

Sie war gelernte Mathematikerin und Pädagogin, und passionierte Historikerin. In der Volksrepublik Polen war sie

verhaftet, verurteilt und im Gefängnis gehalten. Verfolgt von den VRP-Behörden hat sie sich vorzeitig von der Arbeit an der Nicolaus-Kopernikus-Universität pensionieren lassen, um mit voller Hingabe den Dienst der Kollegen und Kolleginnen, Soldaten der HA, der Vergessenheit zu entreißen. Sie war Mitbegründerin des Weltbundes der Soldaten der Heimatarmee, der Stiftung „Archiv und Museum des Generals Grot-Rowecki“ in Warschau, so wie auch der Stiftung „Pommersches Archiv und Museum der HA und des Heeresdienstes der Polinnen“ in Toruń. 1995 wurde sie mit dem „Orden des Weißen Adlers“ ausgezeichnet und 2006 zum Brigadegeneral ernannt. Ihr Leben ist so ungewöhnlich, wie sie selbst. Stark und kompromisslos, denn die Angelegenheit Polens ist am wichtigsten.

*Übersetzt von: Wojciech Szreniawski*

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PUBLICATIONS FOR THE FOUNDATION  
OF GENERAL ELŻBIETA ZAWACKA ARE REVIEWED BY:

prof. dr hab. Grzegorz Berendt, prof. dr hab. Józef Borzyszkowski,  
prof. dr hab. Bogdan Chrzanowski, prof. dr hab. Andrzej Gąsiorowski,  
prof. dr hab. Mirosław Golon, dr hab. Sylwia Grochowina,  
prof. dr hab. Jarosław Kłaczek, prof. dr hab. Waldemar Rezmer,  
prof. dr hab. Stanisław Salmonowicz and prof. dr hab. Jan Sziling

CONSULTATION

Andrzej Tomczak, Dorota Zawacka-Wakarecy

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Zuzanna Filarska

MARKUP AND TEXT REVISION

Aneta Dąbrowska-Korzus

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