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HONOR AND MASCULINITY IN THE POLISH OFFICER CORPS DURING WORLD WAR II IN CAPTIVITY

ESCAPES AND COURTS OF HONOR: THE CASE OF OFLAG VII-A MURNAU*

The outbreak of World War II was not a surprise for the Polish Army. The tension between Poland and the Third Reich had been steadily rising, and an armed conflict was expected. The military forces were preparing to mobilize, and soldiers were trained in case of a real threat. They were prepared not only physically but also ideologically. The experience of 120 years of Partitions of Poland, national uprisings, and the struggle for independence during World War I meant that, in the Second Polish Republic, one of the fundamental characteristics of a patriot and a good citizen was readiness to fight for the motherland.

The Officer Corps felt itself to have a special role to fulfill. It was not only to be the guarantor of power and effectiveness of Polish defense, but also the core of the highest level of citizenship. Hence, a very strong emphasis was placed on the patriotic education of cadets. Each officer was obliged to ensure compliance with the principles of good manners, and especially honor within the Corps. Thanks to that, a single ethos of the officer was maintained.[1]

* This article would not have been written without the Lanckoroński Foundation's scholarship, for which I am extremely grateful. I would like to thank also Aleksandra Urbańska for the help with the translation.

[1] Officer ethos is the key category in my PhD project on the masculinity of Polish officers in the interwar period *Etos oficerski w Polsce międzywojennej. Ideał a realia życia codziennego* [*The Officer Ethos in Interwar Poland. The ideal and reality of the everyday life*], Adam Mickiewicz University Poznan (the estimated date of dissertation defense is 2012). Cases described in this article are for me a great example of the consequences of dominant ideals in the army.

In this chapter, I will analyze the situation of officers, who were kept in German Prisoner Of War (POW) camps (*Offizierslager für kriegsgefangene Offiziere*) for officers called *Oflag* during the war. By doing so, I will show the role of the principles of honor in the Polish military, and its shift during the war. Analyzing the captured officers' sense of honor is a perfect starting point for research in the history of masculinity.[2] An army is a natural field to begin that kind of analysis because this is where honor and so-called true masculinity were most strongly stressed.

Honor and masculinity

According to the philosopher Eugène Dupréel, honor is an idea that separates an aristocratic minority from the rest of society and legitimizes its possession of power. It is a value that one owns, but always has to take care of, because losing it is the greatest and most unforgettable disgrace.[3] For Polish interwar elites, and especially for the officer corps, honor was a value that had not changed since the Middle Ages and the high period of 16th and 17th century Poland. They wanted to see in it knightly and noble traditions. However, as all similar categories, the Polish sense of honor evolved through centuries. For example a Polish 17th century noble would never accept the cold French style of duels with all the rules and sober minds. It was perceived to be more like a murder attempt than an honor defense.[4] However, from the second half of 18th century on, the western way of dealing with cases of honor became more popular in Poland.

This was also the time when the modern officer corps started to form as a separate group among elites, burdened with the task of defending the country and with a great sense of honor. This model of an officer, a man of honor and gentleman consolidated during the Napoleon wars, the Polish national uprisings and the great war, but also during the partitions, when a military career was available to Polish men in the Austrian, Russian and (less so) Prussian armies.[5] By its history the Polish definition of honor was

[2] As an example of using honor as a main category for history of masculinity, see Ute Frevert, *Men of Honour. A Social and Cultural History of the Duel*, trans. Anthony Williams (Cambridge: Polity, 1995); Robert A. Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

[3] Eugène Dupréel, *Traktat o moralności* [*Discussions on Morality*], trans. Zygmunt Glinka (Warsaw: PWN, 1969), 279.

[4] Andrzej Garlicki, *Piękne lata trzydzieste* [*Beautiful 30's*] (Warsaw: Prószyński i S-ka, 2008), 181.

[5] Tadeusz Hołówko, *Oficer polski* [*Polish Officer*] (Warsaw, 1921), 32 and further.

a mixture of analogical patterns from France, Great Britain and Germany. Its military provenance explains also why women were called "impropre au duel".[6] Women owned honor only when their "natural defender" – husband, father or brother – was a man of honor. They could offend or become offended but it was men's role to defend or satisfy.

Despite the fact that there has been research conducted on honor[7], and even on officers' everyday lives[8], and that gender perspective is known to many Polish historians, there are no published works putting the male identity in the center of its concern. Even authors of publications about Polish officers in Nazi Oflags do not ask what influence imprisonment had on the sense of honor and masculinity of the captives.[9]

Honor symbolically divided elites from common people and as such was above the law in the officer's hierarchy of values. It required special treatment in the military environment. Due to the great importance of this value in interwar Poland, hundreds of cases of honor were fought in the Corps each year. In peacetime, any conflicts of honor between officers were solved in accordance with the *Code of Honor*[10] and the *Statute of the Courts of Honor for Officers*[11]. These cases were not only started based on the officer's own wishes, but most of all it was their soldier's duty to defend and always explain, with all vehemence, any issues that may call into doubt the reputation of the Corps.

Honor was the main factor influencing the attitudes of officers, and thus constituted the foundation of their identity. Even if they tried to bring to life different patterns of masculinity (such as a good father or a head of the family), the model of a man of honor – a gentleman – stood unmoved in the first place. Boundless devotion to military service was required from officers, who were to be the elite of society. They indeed formed the elite,

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[6] Władysław Boziewicz, *Polski kodeks honorowy* [*Polish Code of Honor*] (Warsaw and Kraków, 1939), 11. Thereafter Boziewicz, *Polski kodeks honorowy*.

[7] Andrzej Tarczyński, *Kodeks i pistolet, o niektórych przejawach honoru w międzywojennej Polsce* [*The Code and the Pistol: About some of the Manifestations of Honor in Interwar Poland*] (Bydgoszcz: WSP, 1997).

[8] Franciszek Kusiak, *Życie codzienne oficerów Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej* [*Polish Army Officers' Everyday Life in 1918-1939*] (Warsaw: PIW, 1992).

[9] Even if Kisielewicz gives in her work much valuable information for the gender historian, she does not seem to be interested in the masculinity analysis. Danuta Kisielewicz, *Oficerowie polscy w niewoli niemieckiej w czasie II wojny światowej* [*The Polish Officers in the German Captivity During World War II*] (Opole: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego, 1998). Thereafter Kisielewicz, *Oficerowie polscy*.

[10] Boziewicz, *Polski kodeks honorowy*.

[11] *Statut Oficerskich Sądów Honorowych* [*Statute of the Courts of Honor for Officers*], (Lviv, 1927). Thereafter *Statut Oficerskich*.

who defended all citizens, but also had the right to govern them. It was expected from men of honor to demonstrate great courage, tenacity, and a willingness to sacrifice their own lives for a just cause. That cause was the freedom of their homeland, but also the good name of the regiment, or army. In this context, this ideal was inconsistent with the model of the head of a family and the father, which puts the good of his relatives in the first place. For this reason, officers had doubts whether, in the event of war, they would be able to fully devote themselves to the cause and not put the welfare of their children and wives above it, risking being accused of cowardice.[12]

One can venture to say that many officers had been waiting impatiently for the war as the event which would allow them to demonstrate unquestionably their courage, manliness, and honor.[13] The war was, after all, the military's element. But certainly the young soldiers did not have in their minds the full picture of its horrors. They were inspired rather by the "Myth of the War Experience" derived mostly from novels and stories of war, as were most of the boys at that time.[14]

As already mentioned, the officers were not surprised by the outbreak of war on the 1st September 1939. They were prepared to sacrifice their lives for their homeland, and many did so. During the September Campaign about 3.300 officers were killed. Even before the end of the invasion, a large part of the army fled abroad to Romania, Hungary and Lithuania to join the military forces of the Western allies and later attack the Third Reich. In this group there were about 10.000 officers. Most of them managed to escape and join the Polish Armed Forces in the West to continue to fight the Germans. After the capitulation of Poland, a large part of Polish troops were captured by the Nazis, including about 17.000 officers. They were placed in Oflags and spent the rest of the war there. The worst fate befell about 8.000 officers, who were taken prisoner by the Soviets. They were shot in the spring of 1940 in the so-called Katyn Massacre.[15]

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[12] J. L., '*Rodzina odciąga od wielu obowiązków*' ['Family Keeps Away from Many Duties'], *Polska Zbrojna*, 21 January 1926, 8.

[13] Jan Kamiński, *Od konia i armaty do spadochronu. Wspomnienia uczestnika II wojny światowej* [*From the Horse and the Cannon to Parachute. The Memories of A World War II Participant*] (Warsaw: PAX, 1980), 9.

[14] See George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[15] See Sławomir Kalbarczyk, 'Zbrodnia Katyńska po 70 latach: krótki przegląd ustaleń historiografii' ['Katyń Crime after 70 Years: Short Review of the Findings of Historiography'], in Sławomir Kalbarczyk, ed., *Zbrodnia Katyńska: w kręgu prawdy i kłamstwa* [*Katyń Crime: in the Circle of Truth and Lies*] (Warsaw: IPN, 2010), 3-20.

From among these groups, I will analyze the situation of the officers who were kept in German Oflags. This is a specific example, which will help me show the role of the principles of honor in the military, and its shift during the war. The situation, in which those soldiers found themselves went far beyond the scenarios assumed previously. A Polish officer was prepared to give his life for his country. He tried at all costs to find a way to continue the fight against the invaders, either in the Polish resistance movement or in the ranks of the Allied forces. He was also prepared for captivity, but past war experiences did not lead them to expect long-term imprisonment of such a large group of officers, while the war was fought on without their participation. This situation must have strongly shaken the officers' self-esteem and sense of honor. They had lost the defensive war, their homeland was invaded, their families lived in constant fear of the enemy. Their colleagues, who managed to escape captivity, fought on different fronts, and they themselves, healthy and strong, could not do anything to contribute to weakening the enemy. The officer's honor, the basis of their masculinity, seemed to be heavily compromised.

In this article I will examine the strategies that were undertaken by Polish officers captured by Germans to save their good name – their honor. As it turns out, defense of honor often required risking one's life, opposing military rules, and provoking conflicts among prisoners. However, no price was too high for honor. I intend to describe two strategies in detail – fighting against the enemy by means of escape from the camp and defending their good name in the Courts of Honor for Officers. For the analysis of each strategy one example will be used. I will examine the officers' attitude to the escape of Cpt. Edward Mamunow internal to the camp and a series of cases of honor against Gen. Roman Abraham. Both events took place in the same POW camp in Murnau. To support my arguments, I quote similar cases from other camps.

The life of a surrendered officer

Most officers who were captured by Germans had to face a situation very difficult for all commanders: the need to surrender. The part of Andrzej Bukowski's memoirs on officers defending Warsaw shows how hard the decision to surrender was. He writes that many of them chose to shoot themselves in the head rather than fall captive.[16] Józef Bohatkiewicz men-

[16] Andrzej Bukowski, *Za drutami oflagów. Dziennik oficera 1939-1945* [*Behind the Barbed Wires. The Diary of an Officer 1939-1945*] (Warsaw: PWN, 1993), 36. Thereafter Bukowski, *Za drutami oflagów*.

tions that many officers did what they were taught in the cadet school and left the last bullet for themselves.[17] The ideal of a man of honor stipulated that suicide was sometimes a better option than living with shame, and voluntary surrender to the Germans was certainly shameful. Most of them however hoped that they were losing their freedom only for a short time, and would still have the opportunity to fight for their motherland. Soldiers were persuaded that this surrender was 'honorable', which meant that commanders were allowed to keep their side-arms, and all prisoners would be released to their homes after a couple of days.[18] They did not oppose being transported to numerous camps as they were still hoping to stay captive only for a few weeks, maybe months.

During the Second World War in the Third Reich and areas occupied by it, there were about 130 Oflags, of which 38 were intended for Poles. In later years, this number dropped to seven. The number of Polish officers kept there was estimated at more than 17.000. In the biggest camps, such as Oflag II-C Woldenburg and VII-A Murnau, there were between five and a half and six and a half thousand prisoners at peak times.[19] In general, officers were kept captive from October 1939 to the spring of 1945.

With such a large concentration of people in the same area, unable to get out for over five years, and being always in the same company, Polish officers were exposed to various mental problems. Not only did they have to deal with numerous conflicts with co-prisoners, but also with their own egos. They were mostly young, strong and healthy officers who were ordered to surrender, deprived of the chance to struggle and to heroically die for their homeland, and in return received a miserable life behind the barbed wires.

One of the first problems with which officers had to deal was to acquire the belief that the loss of the Defensive War did not undermine the honor of the whole army. It could be done either by finding those responsible for the disaster, or by searching to identify heroic achievements. The latter was much easier after the surrender of France, considered a world power. The conquering of France, which took Germans two weeks, was perceived by the Polish officers as a complete absolution their army, which had held out

[17] Józef Bohatkiewicz, *Oflag II B Arnswalde* (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1985), 19.

[18] Wiktor Ziemiński, *Wrzesień..., Oflag..., Wyzwolenie...* [*September..., Oflag..., Liberation...*] (Warsaw: MON, 1963), 90; Stanisław Miśkiewicz, *Wojna 1939 roku i niewola. Fragmenty wspomnień i listy* [*War 1939 and Captivity. Fragments of Memories and Letters*] (Poznań: Drukarnia Swarzędzka, 2008), 39. Thereafter Miśkiewicz, *Wojna 1939 roku*.

[19] Kisielewicz, *Oficerowie polscy*, 53; Edmund Ginalski, ed., *Oflag II C Woldenberg: wspomnienia jeńców* [*Oflag II C Woldenberg: Prisoners Memories*], (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1984), 5.

for over a month.[20] In addition, during the five years of captivity, officers had to deal with a situation which was much more difficult to accept – the inability to participate in the war. As skilled soldiers, they felt a great need to continue the fight. There were several ways to satisfy this hunger. The most obvious was to escape from the camp. It was believed that a soldier attempting to flee from the Oflag was "a fighting soldier", because not only was he making a stir in the ranks of the enemy, but also trying to join the Polish Armed Forces in the West, or the Polish resistance.[21] Escape attempts were, however, a risky and difficult undertaking to bring off successfully. Captive officers could also conspire with the resistance, which worked well in POW camps,[22] or participate in the secret training courses preparing them for the future struggle. Being weakly-armed, the prisoners considered any fight against the camp guards as a meaningless suicide when there was no real threat to the prisoner's lives. Nevertheless, if such a threat was posed, this scenario was planned as the ultimate meaning of an honorable death.

The officer's honor was also tested for another reason. Its rules required not only dedication on the battlefield, but also proper maintenance and care of the uniformity of the Officer Corps. This gave the opportunity for a continuous revision of Corps members' values and maintaining as far as possible an ideologically and socially uniform environment. However, in war-time all the cases of honor were suspended by the rules until the end of struggle.[23] Only the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces could change this regulation. So when there were disputes between officers in the Oflags, they had no adequate means to defend their good names. Conflicts were often quite harsh, especially since prisoners were anxious, and not all of them still equally believed in the ethos of the officer. Sometimes they simply did not want to comply with the rules of coexistence. Despite prohibition by Polish and German laws, in two Oflags, Courts of Honor for Officers (in Woldenburg and Murnau) there were illegally created, and in other camps issues were resolved in less organized ways.[24] Some former prisoners claim that this helped maintain proper atmosphere in the camps,

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[20] Tadeusz K. Gruszka, *W Murnau* [*In Murnau*] (Hove: Caldra House Ltd., 1994), 62. Thereafter Gruszka, *Murnau*.

[21] Szymon Datner, *Ucieczki z niewoli niemieckiej 1939-1945* [*The Escapes from Nazi Captivity 1939-1945*] (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1966), 22. Thereafter Datner, *Ucieczki z niewoli*.

[22] Especially through contacts with Union of Armed Struggle in Poland, see Kisielewicz, *Oficerowie polscy*, 224-43.

[23] *Statut Oficerskich*, 54.

[24] Kisielewicz, *Oficerowie polscy*, 128.

however, as I shall show, it was also a cause for an escalation of some conflicts between officers.

Isolation from relatives and continuous contact with the same people from the block, contributed to the disclosure of mental illnesses among prisoners. Collectively all the psychological problems associated with difficult conditions in the camps were called "disease of barbed wires". It consisted of, inter alia, cases of hysteria, anxiety and neuroses. It was a kind of psychoneurosis that appeared due to an unspecified time of imprisonment with no prospect of freedom, and living in crowds only escalated the sensation of restlessness.[25] "Disease of barbed wires" led to numerous conflicts, loss of faith in the previous ideals and attempts to isolate oneself from co-prisoners. In extreme cases, some of ill officers tried to commit suicide.

Captivity compromised their honor as officers because it emphasized the defeat of September 1939. It hurt them not only as soldiers but also as men, fathers, and husbands. They no longer had any influence over their families, and could not directly provide them with safety and economical stability. Many worried about whether after their release they would be able to have sexual relations with women, as malnutrition reduced their sex drive and vitality. Nevertheless the biggest problem for them was not lack of sex, but lack of any contact with women in general.[26]

In this situation, officers had to find opportunities to prove to each other their soldierly values, courage and honor. As in other camps, in Oflag VII-A Murnau it was not easy. This camp, however, differed somewhat from the rest. It was located in the picturesque foothills of the Alps in Bavaria. After the experience of war, many prisoners who came to this place associated it more with a spa, rather than a prison. Since 1942, 29 out of 33 Polish generals, held in German captivity, stayed in this very camp.[27] Although officers of the camp in Murnau made several courageous attempts to escape, it was also probably the only camp with Polish officers from which no escape had succeeded. One of the officers in his attempt even reached Hungary, where, however, he was captured and sent back to the camp.[28] Murnau was also one of the two Oflags in which the Courts of Honor for Officers operated and the only camp where the Court of Honor for Generals was active. The existence of these institutions was incompatible with the "Statute of the Courts of Honor for Officers", but had been

[25] Kisielewicz, *Oficerowie polscy*, 166.

[26] Kisielewicz, *Oficerowie polscy*, 165.

[27] The list of POWs in "Oflag VII-A Murnau" (The Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum London, hereafter abbreviated PISML, Kol.176/25).

[28] Datner, *Ucieczki z niewoli*, 189.

approved by the highest ranking officer in the Oflag – the unofficial commander of all the allied prisoners held there. In 1945 a group of prisoners from the camp in Woldenburg was transported to Murnau. One of the new dwellers described the atmosphere they found in the camp as follows: "It has something that worries and annoys. The atmosphere here is somewhat dense, stifling."[29]

This atmosphere was illustrated in the 1957 movie directed by Andrzej Munk titled "Eroica", one of who's two parts titled "The Escape" is devoted to the everyday life of Murnau oflag. The author of the screenplay, Jerzy Stefan Stawiński (1921-2010), a prominent Polish writer, was a former prisoner of this very camp. Knowing the reality of the life in the Oflags, and facts connected with the stay of Polish officers in Murnau, it is easy to realize that both the screenplay[30] and the movie are very honest, even if some facts and names are mixed up or changed. There are several movies based on Stawiński's wartime experiences, but as he himself said, only this picture was realized exactly as he wished.[31]

Both the scenario and the production itself are so very important because they pay special attention, unlike other sources, to matters of honor, sometimes so complex that at first sight they could be considered fiction or propaganda. Although the facts presented in the movie are confirmed by various memoirs and diaries, I will devote my attention only to the atmosphere that prevailed in the camp, to show the prisoners' attitude to the Polish officer' honor.

Of all means available to Polish officers to defend their manhood and honor in captivity, I have chosen two of the most striking: courts of honor and escapes. As an example of breaking out from an Oflag, I will use the story of Cpt. Edward Mamunow, who was accused by the Gestapo of murdering German civilian population. He fled inwards the camp to avoid torture and death. This escape ended tragically, but because no news of his capture came during the next few days after his escape everybody was convinced that Mamunow had gained his freedom. The fact of the failure is not of significance here, as in this example I am going to show only the attitude of officers towards escape attempts. To explain the role of the

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[29] Bukowski, *Za drutami oflagów*, 323.

[30] Jerzy Stefan Stawiński, *Opowieści powstańcze: Godzina "W", Węgrzy, Kanał, Ucieczka* [*Uprising Stores: "W" Hour, Hungarians, Canal, Escape*] (Warsaw: Trio, 2004). Thereafter Stawiński, *Opowieści powstańcze*.

[31] Bogumiła Prządka, ed., *Jerzego Stawińskiego scenariusz życia* [*Jerzy Stawiński's Screenplay of the life*], Polskie Radio, 8 February 2010, available at http://www.polskieradio.pl/24/286/Artykul/253893,Jerzego-Stawinskiego-scenariusz-zycia (last visited 21 September 2011).

Court of Honor for Officer I will use the case which is also not typical, nevertheless it more clearly reveals the importance of these courts in the Oflags. I will discuss the case of Gen. Roman Abraham, who was accused by other generals of behavior shameful to the dignity and honor of his uniform. Because of the Abraham's boycott of the Court of Honor, he was eventually excluded from the Officer Corps. Even in peacetime, bringing accusations like this against a general officer was unusual, and excluding one from the Corps was unprecedented. In this case it is particularly important that the court in fact acted illegally, though it had the support of the majority of generals in the camp. Moreover, Gen. Abraham was an educated lawyer and was well aware of his rights.

The escape

Officers in captivity kept licit contact with the outside world mainly through letters from relatives, and the German press, both censored. They also managed to smuggle in conspiracy newspapers and radio receivers. They had therefore fairly up-to-date information on the ongoing struggles in the world. There were instances of letters coming from old friends, who managed to escape, and who went in the direction of the allied troops to join them.[32] The knowledge that somewhere out there an important game went on in which officers could not take part led many to one thought only: to escape.

Historians interpret the will to escape and join the troops as the "duty of an officer". Attempts to break out of the camp made them "fighting soldiers"; they became a "part of their army's continuing armed struggle".[33] This fact is confirmed by memoirs of some prisoners who wrote about the "natural impulse" and "obligation of a prisoner".[34] But the memoirs of a very keen observer, Marek Sadzewicz, show rather that the fleeing officer was guided mainly by "a feeling of jealousy towards his colleagues who remained in the game". Sadzewicz thought it was a state similar to that felt by a boy closed in a room who could not play with the others making noise in the backyard. His colleagues in fact still "made noise" on the front.[35]

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[32] Datner, *Ucieczki z niewoli*, 23; Marek Sadzewicz, *Oflag II D Gross-Born* (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1977), 61. Thereafter Sadzewicz, *Oflag II D*.

[33] Datner, *Ucieczki z niewoli*, 26; See also Kisielewicz, *Oficerowie polscy*, 242.

[34] Stefan Majchrowski, *Za drutami Murnau* [*Behind the Barbed Wires of Murnau*] (Warsaw: MON, 1970), 147. Thereafter Majchrowski, *Za drutami*.

[35] Marek Sadzewicz, *Oflag* (Warsaw: PIW, 2005), 36; see also Majchrowski, *Za drutami*, 15.

One may of course deny that all attempts to escape were motivated merely by jealousy. Even captain's Mamunow escape, which I am going to describe, was not. But I am convinced that this feeling largely shaped the officers' attitude to such attempts. Escapes were similarly treated by Germans. They respected the honorable right of officers to make efforts to exit the oflag, and sometimes even congratulated captured prisoners on their attempts. It was treated as a knightly act undertaken to defend the officer's honor.[36]

When in June 1940 Cpt. Edward Mamunow vanished from custody while he waited for trial, accused of shooting German civilians during the September Campaign, no one knew exactly what happened. The officer disappeared from his cell and left one of the windows looking out to the outside of the camp open. That was the direction in which the first brigade started the pursuit. The information about the escape of Mamunow began circulating among the prisoners. The next few days did not bring news of his capture. With time, all became convinced that the attempt was successful.[37]

Cpt. Mamunow's story is known mainly from the testimony of Maj. Marian Siarkiewicz[38] (then Lieutenant), who was the first to give him assistance and who helped him till the end. All the extensive information on this subject available to me is based on his testimony. It is most likely because not many officers were familiar with this issue at all. A total of five prisoners supported Mamunow, and his place of hiding was known only by 21 people. The single source known to me, which is not based on Siarkiewicz but which can bring something to this case is Munk's movie, "Eroica". In this picture, despite the fact that the hero has a different name, and the action takes place about four years later than in reality, the scale of similarities to the Mamunow's case is striking. The officers' feelings to this escape are presented quite fairly. However it is important to stress that Stawiński had been a prisoner of Oflag VII-A just since 1944, so he could only get acquainted with this matter secondhand.

The protagonist, Lt. Zawistowski, just as Mamunow, fled from the Gestapo after being accused of killing German civilians in Bydgoszcz, and like him was hiding in the attic over the washroom where he eventually committed suicide. But what is most important, this movie shows us clearly the attitude of officers to this escape, which is hard to find in other testimo-

[36] Datner, *Ucieczki z niewoli*, 33, 86.

[37] Majchrowski, *Za drutami*, 148.

[38] Marian Siarkiewicz's letter (Kalisz, June 06, 1964), available at http://www.info.kalisz.pl/siarkiewicz/strona7.htm (last visited 21 September 2011). Thereafter Marian Siarkiewicz's letter.

nies on this issue. Most of the prisoners defined this achievement as heroic, saying that Zawistowski "saved the honor of the camp" from which no one else managed to escape.[39] Indeed Mamunow, who successfully hid in the washroom attic for ten months, was for the longest time proof for the others that it was possible to leave this Oflag. This very strong impulse awoke hope in officers. Lack of news from the escapee did not mean that something had gone wrong. There have been instances when co-prisoners knew nothing about the effects of a break out until the end of the war.[40] It is no wonder that the self-esteem of prisoners sank when absolutely no one had managed to gain freedom, and it was the reason why they did count so much on the next daredevils.[41] Stawiński, in "Eroica's" screenplay, suggested that officers fully believed in the success of Mamunow's project and no other sources deny this. The Siarkiewicz's testimony even implies that when he was organizing food for the hidden officer, some did not believe his story, and accused him of trying to extort supplies for himself.[42]

Therefore, based on available sources, we can say that escapes from the camps were valued by the prisoners because it was an officer's duty in captivity and necessary to preserve the army's honor. In the above mentioned movie, one of the protagonists speaks about "saving the honor of the camp". We may even wonder if it was not the result of some competition with other camps in which escapes succeeded more often. This high regard for escapes was also due to the belief that the escapee would try to participate in the war.[43] Moreover any attempt to regain freedom, even unsuccessful, was perceived as a mockery of the enemy, unsettling his ranks. This situation reminds one of a game in which prisoners try to escape, and guards to prevent this from happening, but all fully respect their assigned roles and deal honorably with each other until the end. Commanding officers, though rarely taking part in such actions, encouraged the prisoners. In the Oflag II-C Woldenburg in 1940, Col. Misiąg said that: "the escape from captivity is a measure of the Polish soldier's value, is a classic example of personal courage and sacrifice in the fight against the enemy."[44] "Eroica's" screenplay, based on Stawiński's memories, also suggest a special role of the escape – it was a cause for pride for the officers.

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[39] Stawiński, *Opowieści powstańcze*, 167.

[40] Sadzewicz, *Oflag II D*, 57.

[41] It was similarly to other oflags, see Oflag II C Woldenberg, 6.

[42] Marian Siarkiewicz's letter.

[43] Kisielewicz, *Oficerowie polscy*, 243.

[44] Andrzej Toczewski, *Oflag II C Woldenberg w Dobiegniewie* [*Oflag II C Woldenberg in Dobiegniew*] (Zielona Góra: MZL, 2009), 54.

After ten months of hiding in the attic, in narrowness and loneliness, Cpt. Mamunow accidentally started a fire. In order to avoid torture when caught, he hung himself in a prostrate position because of the lack of space. Gen. Emil Krukowicz-Przedrzymirski, a former prisoner of Murnau, stated in his report that the failure of all escapes contributed to the decline in the number of new attempts made by the officers.[45] Therefore, prisoners of the Oflag VII-A developed a different way of defending their sense of manliness – the Courts of Honor for Officers.

The Courts of Honor for Officers

The courts were fully organized in only two camps, in Woldenburg and Murnau, but their simplified versions - courts of arbitration - operated in other Oflags too.[46] Some of the memoirs give negative feedback on them, suggesting that the courts and the trusted representatives ("seconds") were not treated seriously,[47] but most opinions were quite the opposite. Courts of honor had to take care of the moral behavior and camaraderie among the officers. They were considered an important tool for maintaining discipline.[48] The main matters discussed there could seem very trivial for an outsider, but the conditions in which prisoners lived meant that conflicts arose, even in the distribution of food. According to Tadeusz Gruszka, the courts allowed them to "starve with dignity".[49]

In his extensive report on life in the camp, Przedrzymirski posted that the courts of honor were very important institutions for the preservation of unity among the captives. Prisoners formed various political and social parties which led to conflicts and the breaking down of solidarity. The quarrels that had grown on this background contributed to a reduction in the social culture among the officers, who began to accuse each other of shameful behavior, staining the honor of their uniform.[50] Even in peacetime, that kind of imputation was seen as a threat to the reputation of the entire Corps. In such situations the Courts of Honor for Officers were a means to discipline the accused soldiers. In extreme cases, soldiers were ultimately excluded from the army. The POW's situation was more diffi-

[45] Gen. Emil Przedrzymirski's report of residence in POW camps (PISML, Kol. 176/23), 10.

[46] E.g. in the oflag II D Gross-Born: Sadzewicz, *Oflag II D*, 134.

[47] Majchrowski, *Za drutami*, 73.

[48] Sadzewicz, *Oflag II D*, 133.

[49] Gruszka, *Murnau*, 28.

[50] Gen. Emil Przedrzymirski's report, 9-10.

cult because of two main reasons. The first one was the gap in the regulations for officers living in captivity. It had not predicted a situations like this and had prohibited Courts of Honor for Officers, which were a very important institution dealing with the ill atmosphere.[51] The second one was the attitude of many officers to the discipline. With time, they cared less and less about the maintenance of it which contributed to a rise in the number of cases of honor. It is possible that in Murnau the situation became more tense, since there lived almost thirty generals in the camp. Among them, Gen. Przedrzymirski was one of the most active proponents of military order. He was also the principal opponent of Gen. Roman Abraham, against whom he initiated many cases of honor.

The Courts of Honor for Officers in the Oflags were formed based on those functioning in time of peace. They fallowed the *Statute of the Courts of Honor for Officers* from 1927 and the *Polish Code of Honor*, written by Władysław Boziewicz. Despite the prohibition, the highest ranking officer in Murnau accepted them, as he believed that the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces favored such actions and that this court was necessary for the moral good of the Officer Corps.[52] Like the Polish provisions, German ones also did not permit their functioning, but the number of files produced by the courts were impossible to hide. However, in accordance with the memoirs of Stefan Majchrowski, the guards deliberately did not check the contents of these documents. For lack of a suitable place, the court meetings were often held in block washrooms, where debates took hours, angering the officers who could not use them.[53] In the Murnau camp, since 1942, every block had its own Court of Honor for the younger and older officers. This was because of the great number of conflicts. Even though the conflicts could be resolved out of court by the seconds, who could explain their causes and lead to their elimination, the vast majority of cases ended up in the Court of Honor. There simply was no will to settle cases amicably.[54] Apologies and compensations, but also exclusion from the Corps were the most common judgments imposed by the courts. Although the exclusion was enforced only after the war, it was so offensive to the officer that there were cases of suicide because of it.[55] This verdict was in fact associated with total social ostracism, the breaking of a career and

[51] Gen. Emil Przedrzymirski's report, 10.

[52] Court of Honor for Generals Archives: Gen. Rómmel's letter to Gen. Abraham from 10 XI 1942 (PISML, A.XII.87/10 A.N.IV).

[53] Court of Honor (PISML, A.XII.87/10 N.1); see also Majchrowski, *Za drutami*, 73.

[54] General characteristics of Polish POW camp "Oflag VII-A" (PISML, Kol.176/23), 15-16.

[55] Kisielewicz, *Oficerowie polscy*, 161.

years of training, and the ultimate undermining of the honor of the convicted person, which could be regained almost exclusively through suicide. The cases of this ultimate act after exclusion from the Corps show perfectly how important honor was to those officers.

Exclusion from the Officer Corps was the last and rarest resort even in peacetime, and the exclusion of a general was totally unprecedented in the Polish Army. Such a judgment, however, was applied to Gen. Abraham while in captivity. Abraham was a hero of the Polish-Soviet War (1919-1921) and the Defensive War (1939). He was the only general who lost no battle in September 1939. During captivity he tried twice to escape from the POW camp VIII-E Johannisbrunn.[56] He was also a doctor of law, so he knew the military regulations very well.[57] This is why he boycotted courts in the Oflag.

General Przedrzymirski associated discipline in the Oflag with the unity and power of the Officer Corps. Therefore, quickly he got involved with the Court of Honor for the Generals (CoHfG). He had a strained relationship with Gen. Abraham from about 1940, when he began to boycott the activities of CoHfG. That period, however, is poorly documented in the archives. We have good knowledge about this conflict from 1942 on, when it grew to a large scale. It lasted until the liberation of the camp.[58] After Abraham ignored the court's demand to testify, Przedrzymirski strongly spoke out against such undisciplined behavior of the general. He accused him of "abuse of dignity and honor of the officers", of "sabotaging the Courts of Honor for the entire period of captivity", "the disregard of the obligation of regular military salute to the senior-ranking", "intentionally pushing others when entering the room, slamming the door in other's faces, etc.", and of "insulting a group of generals [through] ostentatious isolation from this very group", which gave bad example to younger officers. He also sabotaged the CoHfG elections by not giving a valid vote. The accusations also had a personal background as the pushing or unkind remarks concerned Przedrzymirski himself among others.[59] As he pointed out, he had no earlier conflicts with Abraham prior to the captivity.[60]

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[56] See Datner, *Ucieczki z niewoli*, 326.

[57] Leszek Laskowski, *Roman Abraham: losy dowódcy* [*Roman Abraham: The Life of the Commander*] (Warsaw, Poznań: PWN, 1998); Gen. Roman Abraham (Centralne Archiwum Wojskowe w Warszawie, hereafter abbreviated CAW, Generals Collection).

[58] Court of Honor (PISML, A.XII.87/10).

[59] Court of Honor (PISML, A.XII.87/10 A.N.I a, A.N.I b).

[60] Personnel files do not contain any traces of cases of honor of this officer (which however does not necessarily mean that there were none at all): Gen. Emil Krukowicz-Przedrzymirski (CAW, Generals Collection).

By his behavior, Gen. Abraham could significantly break the solidarity of prisoners, but he was not simply a "brawler", as he was called. Knowing the rules very well, he was aware that CoHfG operated illegally and he did not hide this knowledge. In his letter to the highest ranking officer, Gen. Juliusz Rómmel, from 5th Nov 1942, he explained that the camp court, "in accordance with the act and the regulations of the *Statute of Courts of Honor for Officers*, is not a legal Court of Honor for Generals." He expressed his distrust of that institution and its members, and asked for a postponement and transfer of the case to the appropriate CoHfG in the country after the war.[61] Abraham, when he appeared in the court as the offended back in August 1940, tried to solve the quarrel through the arbitrator, thus avoiding the illegal court. His opponent, however, did not accept the arbitrator's verdict, and sent the case to CoHfG, which canceled the sentence and gave an opposite one. These and other situations convinced Abraham that he could not count on fair judgments in this court and he started to boycott it.[62] The problem was that other generals acknowledged that institution and took to heart any rebellious behavior.

As a result of the continued insubordination of Gen. Abraham, on 23rd May 1943 the Court of Honor adjudicated that he was "guilty of the infringement of an officer honor", for which he was sentenced to "the penalty of exclusion from the Officer Corps".[63] It was stated that the foundations of officer ethos had been undermined by his behavior, which threatened the solidarity and the strength of the Corps, and, above all, it stained the honor of the officer's uniform. Salvation could only be achieved by cutting off Abraham, who even to that point had not manifested the will to improve. The General confirmed that by not appealing the verdict.

But this sentence had to be approved by the Polish president, which was possible only after the war. Abraham therefore still lived among other generals, who had a big dilemma. The year after that judgment no change was reported in the convict's behavior. In fact in his opinion, he had no reason to do that, because he did not regard this verdict as a legal one. The problem was bigger this time because he could not be judged by the CoHfG any more, since he was considered neither an officer, nor a man of honor. Despite the orders of the highest ranking officer, generals continued to feel provoked by his looks, offended by his words, and slighted by his not saluting. There were fears about the morale of younger officers who witnessed this situation. Moreover, other generals, who could no longer count on the efficacy of CoHfG in this case, would try to seek justice on their

[61] Court of Honor (PISML, A.XII.87/10 A.N.III a).

[62] Court of Honor (PISML, A.XII.87/10 A.N.III b).

[63] Court of Honor (PISML, A.XII.87/10 A.N.XXXVIII c).

own.[64] The inability to maintain discipline and defend an officer's dignity and honor eventually led to a conflict with the highest ranking officer.[65]

Preserving dignity, however, was understood differently by different officers. Many of them preferred to voluntarily conform to the regulations, statutes and codes, be subject to coercion and accept sanctions in order to avoid conflict with others. Life in conflict was for them a lower category of existence, which hurt their sense of honor.[66] Others, such as Gen. Roman Abraham, regarded subjecting themselves to illegal and self-styled institutions as disgraceful and shameful. They preferred to trust their conscience in the matters of honor. No matter on which side they were standing, each party firmly and constantly defended their position, sometimes leading to absurdities. Still the most important thing was to preserve honor in one's eyes. Without this, the prewar officer could not sleep peacefully.

The case of Gen. Abraham had significantly spoiled the atmosphere among generals, but his stubbornness was not in vain. After the liberation of Murnau camp, all documentation went to the Polish Ministry of National Defense in London to consider. There was no doubt that the verdict and the court itself were illegal. Therefore, the immigration authorities did not consider whether to validate the sentence, but were looking for the best way out of this delicate matter. The whole process was to be started again from the beginning, but Abraham left the army and returned to Poland, which made it impossible to continue.[67] The case was closed, and the general himself, at relatively high cost, proved that he was right.

The relicts of the old era

By the end of the war, even the officers had come to a realization that everyday life in Oflags was perceived as a relic of the old era. Officers, who fiercely defended their pride, constantly referring to the dignity and honor of the uniform, really lived according to values that in the meanwhile had become outdated. They were an extremely uniform social group collected in one place and in such a large number. Even in peacetime they were distinguished from the rest of society by their own traditions, but now those officers created a veritable museum. Prisoners could not experience the reality of war and did not understand how it had changed people. As

[64] Court of Honor (PISML, A.XII.87/10 A.N. XXXIX b, A.N. XXXIX c, A.N. XXXX).

[65] Gen. Emil Przedrzymirski's report, 7.

[66] Majchrowski, *Za drutami*, 73.

[67] Court of Honor (PISML, A.XII.87/10, l.dz. 37/45).

noted by Stefan Majchrowski, after some outsiders arrived at the camp, prisoners realized that they themselves had created a "strange human species, which is preserved and protected under a bell jar", people who had fallen asleep for a few years playing cards and still considering their heroics of 1939.[68]

The first outsiders they met were officers of the *Armia Krajowa* captured after the surrender of the Warsaw Uprising. They came in large groups to Oflags in October 1944. There was great excitement because of their arrival in all the camps. Prisoners were hoping to meet familiar faces, but above all, to learn something about the world firsthand. But it turned out that these were two completely different elements. *Armia Krajowa* officers, brought up by the war, young boys, who were often not even in the army before 1939, did not socially go together with those trained during peacetime. In addition there were among them a number of small crooks, who attached officers stars to themselves just before the end of the uprising in order to get to an Oflag instead of work camp.[69] It turned out that the concept of officer honor and dignity was for them something quite trivial in comparison with the need to save their lives or satisfy hunger. From superb sources of information, the new residents quickly became unwanted intruders and the cause of many conflicts.[70] Bronisław Konieczny, who actually fought alongside the officers of the *Armia Krajowa* after leaving the Oflag, noted their brutality, which would have been unacceptable before, a brutality borne of the cruelty of war.[71]

Defending the honor and dignity of the uniform to prove their bravery and courage was the most important matter for an officer. It was crucial in captivity too, because it prevented losing respect and helped him to stay, until the end, a true soldier. But it required a lot of effort to overcome the difficulties standing on this path. Officers put their lives in danger trying to escape the Oflags, or risked being ridiculed defending their own good names in the courts of honor. Some chose the path of taking lessons and practicing in the event of a sudden return to battle even though this was hardly expected. None of the paths was ultimately wrong. Most of the

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[68] Majchrowski, *Za drutami*, 168.

[69] Barbara Giza, *Do filmu trafiłem przypadkiem. Z Jerzym Stefanem Stawińskim rozmawia Barbara Giza* [*I Came to the Movie by Accident. Jerzy Stefan Stawiński Interviewed by Barbara Giza*] (Warsaw: Trio, 2007), 37.

[70] Bukowski, *Za drutami oflagów*, 333; Gruszka, *Murnau*, 65-7; Sadzewicz, *Oflag II D*, 162.

[71] Bronisław Konieczny, *Moje życie w mundurze. Czasy narodzin i upadku II Rzeczypospolitej* [*My Life in the Uniform. The Times of the Birth and Fall of the II Polish Republic*] (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2005), 334.

officers staying in captivity had failed to contribute to ending the war. Even though old-fashioned, preserving honor and manliness was just a means to survive another day of isolation from the world. If the chosen path would facilitate the survival and maintain a healthy mind, it was worthy. The most tragic fate befell those who, shortly before the liberation, broke down mentally and committed suicide, throwing themselves on the fence of the camp. In such cases, the guards fired without warning.[72]

Stanisław Miśkiewicz wrote in his memoirs that "the beautiful dream about the war turned into a black abyss of anguish and suffering". During their entire military career officers had been preparing to sacrifice their lives honorably for their motherland, or to fight until victory. Heroism was to be their destiny regardless of the result of their war struggles. "Contrary to the wishes it ended otherwise, it ended in the worst way, because each of us was prepared for death, but none for captivity."[73] While the officers were imprisoned, the reality outside had changed so much that they were no longer able to come to terms with it. After release from prison they had to re-learn social life, abandoning the ethos of the officer, or to find an enclave where they could live in the old way. That is why most freed soldiers emigrated to Great Britain and to further countries, such as the United States, Canada, Argentina or even Australia. Only a few of them joined up with Polish Armed Forces in the East who were themselves dependent on the USSR, and even fewer got permission to stay in the army after the war.

[72] Majchrowski, *Za drutami*, 150.

[73] Miśkiewicz, *Wojna 1939 roku*, 52, 98.