

Article 11

Zbigniew Bokiewicz, The Scout's Postal Service during the Warsaw Uprising in 1944

The Polish Scout's Postal Service played a key role in maintaining contact between the inhabitants of Warsaw during the 1944 Uprising.

By 30th July most of the German occupant's administration had left the city and only fortified police and army outposts remained. On 31st July the Commander-in-Chief of the Home Army ordered the start of operations for 17.00 hrs the following afternoon. Most of the capital's civilian population were unaware of this, so life in the city ran its course that day as usual. Consequently the sudden outbreak of fighting unexpectedly caught a great many ordinary people in the centre of town, cut off from their homes and families.

The strategic plan was to capture the bridges over the Vistula in order to prevent German units from retreating to the east bank and thus aid the Red Army, which had already reached the outskirts of Praga (Warsaw's eastern district). Politically, the plan was to take over the capital and install the legal Polish authorities there before the arrival of the Red Army. These plans were only partially successful. Although the Home Army failed to capture any of the bridges, it did liberate large parts of the city from the Germans and establish a Polish military and civilian administration there. Unfortunately the insurgents were unable to eliminate strong pockets of German resistance, which in effect divided the city into several isolated Polish controlled districts surrounded by enemy forces. Communication between these districts was maintained by messengers or couriers: 10- to 15-year-old boy scouts and girl guides of the 'Grey Ranks'. The 'Grey Ranks' was the wartime name of the Polish Scouting Movement, which was very active during the occupation, carrying out both major and minor sabotage operations, and by the time of the Uprising had developed an excellent organisational network. From the outset Polish scouts were conscious of the problems facing civilians and their need to communicate with separated family members. That was how the idea of creating a scouts' postal service came about.

The very first postal service was organised by Scoutmaster Kazimierz Grenda in the Śródmieście-Południe (Central-Southern) district on August 2nd. This service was limited only to that district, but on 4th August the scouts' GHQ decided to set up a postal service for all the liberated parts of the city. The Main Post Office was at No.28 Świętokrzyska Street. Apart from that, there were eight other post offices in the various districts: No.2 was in Szpitalna Street, No.3 in Napoleon Square, No.4 in Okulnik Street, No.5 in Czerniakowska Street, No.6 in Krasicki Street (Mokotów District – in the south of Warsaw), No.7 in Wilcza Street and No.8 in Żelazna Street. There were post boxes distributed in forty places throughout the city.

All correspondence had to be limited to no more than 25 words and was from the start subject to censorship, so as to avoid military and strategic information getting into enemy hands. Its delivery was basically free of charge, though voluntary contributions in the form of books, dressings or food for the wounded in hospitals were willingly accepted. The daily number of letters going through this postal service was usually somewhere between 3,000 and 6,000; it peaked at 10,000 on 13th August. For the first few days there were no postmarks. They appeared on 6th August in the form of a circle, featuring in small letters 'Scout's Post' and the Scouting Movement's lily.

Various materials were used to print them. One of the first was a potato cut in half, with the writing and logo carved out with a penknife. Such stamps were hardly durable and are today items of great rarity. Other materials used included linoleum, rubber and various soft metals. In the second month of the Uprising the Scout's Postal Service (including personnel) was incorporated into the AK and henceforth was called the 'Army Postal Service'. That same month official Army Postal Service stamps appeared in five colours, representing the five districts of liberated Warsaw. The postal service continued to operate until the insurgents' capitulation on 3rd October 1944.

I formed my basic collection in the years 1957-1964 and it has been constantly expanding since then. The first batch of Scout's Postal Service letters came into my hands in a fairly unusual way. In 1956, while removing rubble from the ruins of the Main Post Office on the Warecka Street side, workers found the skeleton of a boy scout with a postbag full of undelivered mail from the time of the Uprising. They took the letters to a stamp collector and dealer called K. de Julien, hoping to make some money on them. It so happened that Mr de Julien had lost his son in the Uprising and so he bought the letters. He then listed all the names of both the senders and the addressees and had them published in a popular Warsaw newspaper, giving a three-month deadline for any of these people to collect their correspondence. Most of the mail was eventually collected and the several dozen letters that remained came into my possession as the start of my collection.

Apart from its philatelic value, this collection that has expanded over the years can also be said to have considerable historical value on account of the contents of the actual letters. They reveal to us the Uprising through the eyes of its participants: not only the AK soldiers, but also members of the civilian population and even a German soldier fighting against us. One letter, dated 7th August, contains a dramatic description of how civilians were driven before German tanks attacking Polish positions. I also have an extant letter of mine written to my mother which she gave back to me in 1957. More recently I was shown a photocopy of a letter written to me by my cousin – a letter that was never delivered. Unfortunately, its current owner would not sell it, although he must have realised the immense sentimental value this fragment of correspondence has for me.

My collection comprises two parts:

1. The Scouts' Postal Service, which cooperated with but was not under the direct control of the AK – this is the period when postmarks and identical censorship marks were used with the Scouting Movement's Lily
2. The Army Postal Service, which was run by scouts under the direct command of the AK – the period when the insurgents' postage stamps were issued.

Among the most interesting items of the first part are: a letter with a postmark from a potato (one of the few known to have survived); a letter stating that in return for delivered correspondence the Scouts' Postal Service will accept remuneration in the form of books and dressings for the hospitalised wounded; a letter requesting the editorial of *Robotnik* (*The Worker*) to advertise the search for a missing family; letters written on scraps of 'Egipskie' cigarette boxes; 'UNDER FIRE' written on the back of a business card with a green pencil, meaning that the boy scout was unable to deliver it, or a letter with the annotation 'the addressee is dead', and many, many more.

The other part concerning the postage stamp period includes a series of General Government stamps with 'INSURGENTS' POSTAL SERVICE AUGUST 1944' overprinted on them. Then there are letters with the ultimate version of insurgents' postage stamps in five colours (representing the five districts held by the AK) all on their original letters; one of only two known complete blocks of four of this type of stamp; a trial stamp in brown that was never issued, depicting insurgents destroying a Tiger tank and a stamp issued by the London-based Government-in-Exile for the Insurgent Aid Fund together with an original drawing by Artur Horowicz. Moreover, there

are post-war fakes of insurgents' mail and stamps as well as Artur Horowicz's design work depicting a Polish soldier being greeted by his family and the rebuilding of Warsaw. The latter was commissioned by the Government-in-Exile for its planned return to Poland, but when the political situation changed all the stamps were destroyed.

Finally I would like to cite a fragment from Col. Kazimierz Iranek-Osmecki's account of how German intelligence made extraordinary use of Polish insurgents' stamps (*Droga cichociemnych*, p. 282):

'Bach [the German commander] was generally well and fully informed of what was happening on the battleground; he also admitted to being aware of conditions on the other, Polish, side of the barricades. To our amazement, he claimed this was due to his apparently efficient intelligence service. He confessed to copying the Polish idea of exploiting the sewers and sending agents, usually Volksdeutsch people or Ukrainians, into the Polish-occupied parts of town. They were able to return to the German zone by mingling with the refugee population. However, he had great difficulties in finding volunteers, for people were generally unwilling to go into the city. Many who went never returned – they were eliminated by the AK – while others never actually reached their destination and instead made up reports based on what they already knew of conditions on the other side. Therefore, to prove that they had actually infiltrated enemy territory, he ordered that they should return with an insurgents' postage stamp. However, when this measure also proved to be ineffective because such stamps could be acquired on the outskirts from civilians leaving the city, he decreed that the stamps must be postmarked with the current date. Henceforth the number of volunteers was really very limited.'

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