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STEFAN MICHAŁ MARCINKIEWICZ

University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9956-6351>

e-mail: stefan.marcinkiewicz@uwm.edu.pl

***The Spectre of Death* (October 31, 1943).
Myth-making in the war prose
of Aleksander Omiljanowicz
and the autobiography of Władysław Świacki¹**

***Widmo śmierci* (31 X 1943). Mitotwórstwo w prozie
wojennej Aleksandra Omiljanowicza i autobiografii
Władysława Świackiego**

Keywords: myth-making, local legend, combatants, Society of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy, Elk

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Abstract

Relying on archival material, the author verified the story of the alleged Home Army action near Elk (Germ. Lyck) on October 31, 1943, according to which a Home Army platoon under the command of Lt. Władysław Świacki was to carry out an attack on the SS detail who were executing Italian prisoners of war near the camp at Bogusze. It is recounted in *The Spectre of Death* by Aleksander Omiljanowicz (1965) and the autobiography of W. Świacki (2007). The study reconstructs the complex biographies of the protagonists of the engagement, i.e. Świacki and Czesław Nalborski. Also, attention is drawn to the plot elements in Omiljanowicz's narrative (including the date of the engagement and the name of the SS commander), which were then adopted in the accounts of the combatants themselves. The analysis of archival documents from various periods indicates that this story is a legend created in the 1960s. Despite this, the action has remained

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a fragment of the collective memory of the war in the Ełk district to this day. On October 28, 1989, a monument to the successful attack on the SS men was erected in Nowa Wieś Ełcka. It still stands there, demonstrating that local memory is influenced by the myth-making practices of the Society of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy.

The Spectre of Death

On 17 February 1974, the Polish Radio Theatre hosted the premiere of a radio play entitled *The Spectre of Death*, based on the prose of Aleksander Omiljanowicz. It recounts a wartime episode from 31 October 1943, when a 15-strong unit of Armia Krajowa (AK, Home Army) under the command of Władysław Świacki “Sęp” successfully eliminated an SS execution commando on the road between Ełk (Germ. Lyck) and Nowa Wieś Ełcka (Germ. Neuendorf) in East Prussia. The ambush was facilitated by the reconnaissance carried out by Czesław Nalborski “Dzik”. The leading role—that of “Dzik”—was played by Janusz Bukowski, Krzysztof Machowski played “Sęp”, Gustaw Lutkiewicz featured as “Żegota”, while Wiktor Zborowski was the narrator (*Encyklopedia Teatru Polskiego*, online).

This article compares Omiljanowicz’s story with the documents which former Home Army soldiers of the Grajewo area provided to Col. Władysław Liniarski “Mścisław”. Archival research and analysis of the content of the documents warrant the conclusion that, to this day, the collective memory of the war in the Ełk district remains influenced by Omiljanowicz’s story, whereas the action itself was a fictitious narrative dating to the verification carried out by Związek Bojowników of Wolność i Demokrację (ZBoWiD, Society of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy).

The writer of Białystok

During the war, Aleksander Omiljanowicz (1923–2005) was a member of the Związek Walki Zbrojnej (ZWZ, Union of Armed Struggle) and a prisoner of a Nazi labour camp from 1941 to 1945. He later served in the District Public Security Office in Suwałki, Iława (acting head; 1948–1949) and Nidzica (deputy head, 1949). He was sentenced to 8 years imprisonment for “mistakenly” torturing party activists, members of the Union of Polish Youth and labour efficiency leaders in Nidzica. The head of the security service, Stanisław Radkiewicz, demanded exemplary punishment of his subordinate. Omiljanowicz thus spent four

years in a Stalinist prison. From 1956, he worked as an editor in *Niwa* and *Gazeta Białostocka*, having also joined the Society of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy and the Polish United Workers' Party. His professional pursuits spanned writing, journalism and documentary filmmaking, though wartime prose was his specialty. In the 1960s, he became the leading author in the Białystok region, writing primarily about the partisans of north-eastern Poland. Books by Omiljanowicz continued to stir public imagination for almost four decades, shaping and consolidating the image of partisans and their fight against the German invader in the collective memory. An extremely prolific author, he was a "workhorse" of the Ministry of National Defence Publishing House, having released 20 volumes since 1960. Through his work, he created and censored the history of the partisans, all in line with the historical policy of the Polish People's Republic.

Heroes and bandits

Omiljanowicz was prone to embellishment and exaggeration. As requested by the Department of Security, he wrote a CV that reads like an adventure novel (1945): once liberated from a labour camp, he captured German towns along with allies and killed Germans with a rifle: "When peace and order had been established and I, given the name of the Vanquisher of the Fascists, set forth for my homeland in order to contribute my young strength and hand to the edifice of the might of our homeland, which, slowly shaking off the ruins and ashes, is rising towards a new life" (Cieśla 2005).

The characters in his novels are either unequivocally good or unequivocally villainous. The Germans were generally represented as the embodiment of all evil (Omiljanowicz 1968: 24–27). The partisans of *Narodowe Siły Zbrojne* (NSZ, National Armed Forces) would be depicted as thugs, cutthroats, collaborators, bandits and alcoholics (Omiljanowicz 1968: 78–79, 136). Such a depiction was consistent with the historical policy in communist Poland, whose government adopted a definite anti-German and pro-Soviet line. The positive characters include Polish and Soviet soldiers, forced labourers, undercover operatives and selected partisan groups (People's Army, Home Army). The Polish-Soviet socialist brotherhood of arms is often highlighted; "anti-Sanation" elements are also in evidence (Omiljanowicz 1968: 66, 70). Pathos is tangible in Omiljanowicz's stories:

[...] The three of them charged him. He knocked them to the ground with a burst. He jumped a few steps again. He reached the pond and there he was hit by their fire.

He went down. But he continued to shoot until the gun went silent. He saw them approaching. He pulled out the pin of the grenade and pressed it to his chest. ‘Long live Poland...!’ (Omiljanowicz 1968: 48).

In Poland after 1989, an employee of the Institute of National Remembrance discovered evidence of Omiljanowicz’s past association with the Department of Security. In 2003, he was sentenced to four and a half years in prison for the maltreatment of members of *Wolność i Niezawisłość* (WiN, Freedom and Independence) while being a functionary at the District Public Security Office between 1946 and 1947. He died in the Barczewo penitentiary in 2005. Today, the credibility of the facts that his work cited as true is in question, whereas Omiljanowicz’s heroic prose presents a problem for historians studying partisan history (Marcinkiewicz 2020: 119–123). For many years, the stories of the Białystok author were reproduced and treated as historical sources, including by professional historians (e.g. Gnatowski 1974: 143; Kowalczyk, Monkiewicz 1974: 157).

Dzik’s operation?

The short story *Spectre of Death* was originally published in fragments in *Gazeta Białostocka* (4–5 September, 11–12 September 1965) and subsequently in *Olsztyński Głos* and *Kulisy* (the weekend supplement to *Ekspres Wieczorny*). In the book version, this story was published three times under different titles and with slightly revised form and content, as *Widmo śmierci* (Omiljanowicz 1968: 30–42), *Koniec komanda śmierci* (Omiljanowicz 1971: 68–80) and *Samochód „widmo śmierci”* (Omiljanowicz 1972: 124–136). The story was also translated into Russian and featured in the *Literaturnaya Rossiya* weekly, titled “Operatsya ‘Kabana’” (“‘Dzik’s’ Operation”) (6 May 1966) (Омилянoвич 1966).

In the story, the Nazi heads of *Bezirk Białystok* decided to execute Italian prisoners of war and designated a firing squad to carry out a “special operation”. Posing as a forced labourer, a clandestine intelligence operative of the Home Army—Czesław Nalborski “Dzik”—spotted a car with SS men regularly driving to the POW camp in Bogusze. It was an execution detail under *Hauptsturmführer* Stammer who were driving there to shoot Italian, Soviet and Polish prisoners of war in the nearby forest. “Dzik” notified “Sęp”, the commander of the local unit, and drew up a plan for an ambush. On 31 October 1943, 14 partisans, together with “Sęp” and “Dzik” carried out an attack on the squad in a forest near *Elk* killing 13 Gestapo men. Allegedly, “Dzik” shot up the Opel and set it on fire using

petrol. The partisan unit then retreated without any casualties. The Germans removed all traces of the action while the chief of the Białystok Gestapo discontinued executions of the captives.

The main protagonist of *The Spectre of Death* is Czesław Nalborski alias “Dzik” (1910–1992). He worked as a forced labourer in the Elk district, though it is unclear when, as various sources provide diverging dates (1940, September 1941, 10 July 1942) (Marcinkiewicz 2020: 94–95). It is possible that he was a member of the Home Army. Arrested in 1949 for belonging to the ZWZ-AK, he was incarcerated until 1950. So far, it has not been determined when his cooperation with the security service began (Marcinkiewicz 2020: 103–107). However, available reports from the Department of Public Security indicate that he was recruited in the Elk prison on 2 November 1949 as an informer and given the alias “Wierny”. In 1951, Nalborski was instructed to obtain information on Home Army veterans in the Grajewo district (including Władysław Świacki). “Wierny” was expected to gather intelligence on Świacki (“find compromising material”) and establish his contacts (IPN Bi 011/45: 149). In late 1951, he reported that Świacki communicated with “Bruzda” (IPN Bi 011/45: 153). Maj. Jan Taborowski alias “Bruzda” (1906–1954), a former Home Army inspector and member of WiN, was at the time one of the most wanted members of the anti-communist underground in the Białystok region (Poleszak 2012: 219–248). Thus, “Wierny” contributed to the arrest of Świacki (13 II 1952) and other members of the Demokratyczny Związek Walki o Niepodległość (DZWON; Democratic Union of Fight for Independence) (Szymanowicz, Strzyżewski 2011: 100–113). “Bruzda” was alleged to be the head of the entire organisation in the Białystok voivodeship (Poleszak 2012: 249–250).

Czesław Nalborski claimed to have been a scoutmaster before the war, but his scouting identity was not confirmed by the pre-war scout Leon Gajdowski (Gajdowski 2004). Nalborski was a member of the Riflemen’s Association, which ruled out scouting (“Przegląd Łomżyński” 1936). It is also possible that he was assigned to the scouts in Elk as a security service informant. In 1958, following the consecration of the scout banner, the Zawisza Czarny troop was disbanded, and Nalborski unsuccessfully tried to take it over (Merchelska 2016, online).

Having his merits attested to by Świacki’s (1964) and Omiljanowicz’s stories (1965), Nalborski became a hero of the Home Army in Elk. As a respected veteran, he would meet with scouts, schoolchildren and other veterans. However, it was the late Władysław Świacki who became the main hero in 1989. In 1991, attempts were made to expel Nalborski from the Association of Veterans and Former Political Prisoners (Kopia oświadczenia S. Wiśniewskiego). The story of the ambush

near Ełk was also challenged. Even as early as 1971, the former quartermaster of the 9th Regiment of Home Army Mounted Rifles, Lt. Józef Dąbrowski, alias “Ski-ba”, wrote in a letter to Col. Władysław Liniarski that Nalborski “did not distinguish himself in the ranks of the AK” (15 January 1971) (BOssRkps 16681/II: 233).

Autobiographies of “Sęp”

The liquidation of the SS detail was described in *Szkic historyczny* by Lt. Władysław Świacki “Sęp”, which the latter submitted to the former Commander of the Białystok District of the Home Army, Col. Władysław Liniarski (ca. 1960). In a perfunctory fashion, the brief account speaks of 15 partisans who, led by “Sęp”, carried out an attack on a field car, killing 11 SS men; importantly, it does not mention “Dzik”.

Władysław Świacki, alias “Sęp” (1900–1972), was the most important figure in that story. Before the war, he worked as a policeman in Grajewo, then took part in the defensive war of 1939. He served as commander of the auxiliary police (*Hilfspolizei*) in Grajewo (1941–1942?), being simultaneously a member of ZWZ and AK (1941–1945). After escaping from the police station, he briefly became the commander of the first partisan group in the Grajewo area (1943). As part of Operation “Burza”, he participated in the guerrilla battle at Czerwone Bagno (8 September 1944). In fact, Świacki’s entire family—three sons, wife and daughter—are said to have been involved in underground activity. Two of his sons were killed during the war: Witalis Świacki (born 1928), shot during the pacification of the village of Grzędy (16 August 1943), and Tadeusz Świacki (born 1926), killed during a partisan action (24 June 1944). After the war, Świacki claimed that he was the adjutant of the dismounted 9th Regiment of HA Mounted Rifles, but according to historian and AK soldier Jan Orzechowski, he was an orderly NCO of the staff (Orzechowski 1993: 162). Having returned from forced labour in 1945, he was employed in Prostki and Ełk. He was arrested on 13 February 1952 as a member of a subversive organisation modelled on the Home Army, i.e. DZWōN; his son Henryk had already been arrested a few days earlier (Szymonowicz, Strzyżewski 2011: 113). Probably intimidated and tortured, he named 15 former underground fighters as members of DZWōN. Sentenced afterwards to 15 years in prison, loss of public rights for five years and forfeiture of all property, Świacki was released only in 1957, thanks to his cooperation with Col. Liniarski and Fr. Kossakowski. As of 1964, he was the most important person responsible for the vetting of Home Army members in the Grajewo District. He compiled his

own history of that area and handed over extensive accounts to Col. Liniarski. The complete memoirs were published many years later as *Pamiętnik przechowany w beczce* (2007), although the versions of his memoirs are not consistent (see Marcinkiewicz 2020: 234–245). An in-depth analysis demonstrates that Świacki sought to align his reminiscences with Omiljanowicz’s story. It was only after he had received a certificate of merit that he admitted to serving in the auxiliary police with the Germans. Simultaneously, Nalborski testified to his positive conduct during the occupation. The past service in the *Hilfspolizei* and Stalinist repression undoubtedly exerted an influence on the nature of his memoirs and interpersonal relationships. The 1964 relationship with Nalborski is suggestive of collusion (mutual corroboration) but may have also resulted from blackmail. Świacki’s contacts with many people from the occupation period were severed. Until the end of his life, Świacki was marginalised and remained a person of interest to the Security Service (Marcinkiewicz 2020: 78–89). Pushed into obscurity, “Sęp” was subsequently rediscovered after the collapse of the People’s Republic of Poland.

The fictional “facts”

In the short story *Spectre of Death* (1965 and later), the attack on the Gestapo men near Ełk allegedly took place on Sunday, 31 October 1943. However, that very date does not appear in any of the earlier documents. Świacki referred to “the third decade of October 1943” (1960, 1964), while Nalborski spoke of “October 1943”. Only in the 1967 documents did Świacki specify the date as 31 October 1943 (BOssRkps 16681/II, Vol. II: 432), which is also cited in the published version of his memoirs (2007). According to Omiljanowicz, the SS men were active on Sundays as well, aiming to dispose of the Italians as quickly as possible. This made the attack possible since Nalborski—a forced labourer—had time off only on Sundays.

Executions of the Italian prisoners of war in the Bogusze camp are a crucial element in the narrative involving the death commando. Omiljanowicz wrote about “special treatment” (*Sonderbehandlung*) or “special action” among the interned Italians. Allegedly, the Gestapo shot 300 people daily (chiefly Italians, Poles and Red Army soldiers) (Omiljanowicz 1965a). Both Nalborski and Świacki used generalities such as “finishing off”, “starving” or “destroying” so as to blur the facts. The Italian prisoners of war were held in Stalag IB/PR in Bogusze/Prostki in the autumn of 1943. Some died of starvation and disease (about 460 inmates) but were not executed (Marcinkiewicz 2020: 176–181). The absence of executions calls the existence of a “death commando” into question.

The sinister designation of “the spectre of death” is another element of the story. A dialogue line in Omiljanowicz’s narrative reads: “It was called ‘the spectre of death’, the major replied” (Omiljanowicz 1965a). In his questionnaire, Nalborski wrote as follows: “We called it ‘the spectre of death’” (15 August 1964, BOssRkps 16681/II, vol. II: 237–240.), while his account states: “I called the car the spectre of death” (September 1964, BOssRkps 16681/II, vol. I: 55). Świacki’s account formulates it thus: “he called it ‘the spectre of death’” (“he” refers to Nalborski) (September 1964, BOssRkps 16681/II, vol. I: 188). Invented by Nalborski, the “spectre of death” is to be found in Omiljanowicz and in the published memoirs of Świacki (Świacki 2007: 285). However, it follows from the derivative sources that those were the local people who supposedly called the car the “spectre of death”, as Omiljanowicz described it.

In Omiljanowicz’s story, 13 Germans (11 SS men, the driver and the commanding officer Stammer) are said to have been killed during the operation. Until 1964, a figure of 11 SS men had been stated by Świacki and Nalborski. However, in the verification documents submitted in 1967, Świacki was no longer certain of how many Germans had been killed, mentioning “11 or 13” (BOssRkps 16681/II, vol. II: 432). Also, Świacki would incorporate elements of the dominant story by Omiljanowicz into his documents and memoirs. The latter’s *Spectre of Death* became a hegemonic narrative, as not only did it shape the local community’s knowledge of the event, but it was also accepted as a valid source by the veterans themselves.

As early as 1965, an enduring conflict had arisen between the main participants of the alleged attack, which should be attributed to Nalborski’s actions that prompted Liniarski to temporarily withhold issuing veteran certificates (BOssRkps 16692/II: 114). In Ełk, Nalborski sought to make himself into the leading heroic figure of the underground, while Świacki remained on the sidelines as an enemy of the “people’s government”. In 1970, Świacki refused to sign the questionnaire concerning Nalborski’s wife, despite insistent persuasions from Col. Liniarski. The words “Mścisław” used in correspondence clearly indicate that a “paper deal” was involved:

[...] Also, please bear in mind that on one occasion Fellow Veteran signed a questionnaire of Nalborski’s and stated his outstanding merits in the fight against the invader. Based on that information, Mr Nalborski was awarded the Order of Virtuti Militari and the Cross of Valour. It is unfounded to reject the application that his wife had not been a member of the Resistance (BOssRkps 16694/II: 98).

After Świacki’s death in 1974, two prominent physicians were decorated for their participation in the ambush near Ełk: Henryk Antoni Misiewicz alias

“Pirat” (Virtuti Militari V Class) and Leszek Misiewicz alias “Granit” (Golden Cross of Merit with Swords) (BOssRkps 16681/II, vol. II: 218–220 and 221–223). Brothers Misiewicz had not been mentioned previously in Świacki’s account of the ambush, but ultimately their status was elevated to that of the leading executors of the attack. It would appear that the engagement served as a “back door”, enabling further people to be officially confirmed as veterans by ZBoWiD and have their merits recognised.

Conclusions

Is it conceivable that a Home Army unit of 15 men walked about 40 kilometres one way, crossed the East Prussian border unnoticed, carried out a successful attack on a vehicle near Lyck and returned to their base without being pursued? After the wave of Nazi terror in the Białystok region in the summer of 1943, would the Germans not have retaliated but merely covered up the evidence? Allegedly, all that happened in October 1943, when the front was still far away and the German civil and military administration exercised full control over the territory of East Prussia. Most likely, had it been possible to conduct historical research without any restrictions and politics had not defined the narrow scope of historical truth, few would have believed it. In the 1960s, the vetting of former partisans by ZBoWiD produced legends. Former conspirators (and fake Home Army members) let their imaginations run wild to gain as much as possible. This is well reflected in Władysław Liniarski’s appeal of December 1964:

Dear friends!

Money does not buy heroic deeds, dedication to ideological work for the good of the general Polish cause and the personal dignity of comrades, etc.

I have asked Fellow Veterans to write personal accounts to obtain an extensive picture of the work of the Home Army in particular areas, the work you did for 5 years.

I am returning 1,000 copies and ask to submit accounts according to the guidelines you have received concerning the work during the Nazi occupation.

History asks all commanders and soldiers of the Home Army for details because these are mostly hidden and fade into oblivion with time.

If others do so, what will we leave to history and the generations?

17 December 1964 Mścislaw.

Undoubtedly, the content of the war story was influenced by post-war persecution, Stalinist terror, ZBoWiD vetting, the manoeuvring between the veterans

and the authorities, and the memory policy of the Polish People's Republic. Nonetheless, the collective memory of the local communities still happens to be shaped by the erstwhile legends and myths in which literature played a paramount role. The tale of the partisans who allegedly destroyed a car carrying Gestapo men near Ełk is an eloquent example of such a local legend, whose primary vehicle was the short story *The Spectre of Death* (1965) by Aleksander Omiljanowicz.

The attack on the Gestapo men near Ełk does indeed appear in the accounts and questionnaires submitted by former Home Army members of the Grajewo District for the purpose of ZBoWiD membership application and merit verification. Even so, those sources demonstrate serious discrepancies when compared, revealing the mechanisms of manipulation: fabrication of memories to have one's contribution recognised. In 1964, Władysław Świacki as well as Czesław Nalborski were positively vetted by Col. Liniarski, and received the *Virtuti Militari* and Cross of Valour for the action. In 1965, Omiljanowicz published his story about the heroic underground operative "Dzik", thanks to whom the attack on the firing squad was carried out (*The Spectre of Death*). To dispel doubts as to who the hero had been, he published the same story in Russian as "*Dzik's*" *Operation*. The most recent findings suggest a link between Nalborski and the matter of Świacki's arrest in 1952. The former also passed on information to the security services about Świacki's contacts with Jan Tabortowski "Bruzda".

On 28 October 1989, the partisan action was commemorated with a monument: an obelisk with a plaque and cross, which was erected by the road from Ełk to Nowa Wieś Ełcka. The inscriptions on two plaques (1989, 2017) include content from Omiljanowicz's story. In 1989, a street was named after Świacki, while in 2007, a roundabout was dedicated to Nalborski. Following the publication of the book entitled „*Widmo śmierci*” (31 X 1943). *Partyzancka legenda, polityka i pamięć w powiecie ełckim* (2020), which exposed Nalborski's collaboration with the security services, the roundabout was renamed. The monument, however, continues to commemorate the fictitious action.

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