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Listy z Woldenbergu. Korespondencja jeńca wojennego Majora Feliksa Chmielewskiego z Oflagu IIC Woldenberg, ed. by M. Koziński, Białystok 2021, pp. 120

The Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War signed in Geneva on 27 July 1929 defines strictly how detained soldiers should be treated, and what they must be provided with during their stay in POW (prisoner of war) camps. Among the many guidelines therein, Section IV with articles 35–41 deserves special attention as it refers to POWs' relationships with the external world. According to its provisions, every party to a conflict defines the number of letters and cards that the POWs will have the right to send every month, and is obliged to inform the other side of the conflict about it without any undue delay. Moreover, the letters and cards should be in the prisoner's native tongue, and censorship should be conducted in the shortest possible time so as not to make any significant impact on the delivery of the letters to the addressee¹. With the legal grounds thus explained, the POW epistolography, next to the POW diaries and memoirs, as the only testimony to the actual events taking place behind the barbed wires of Oflags seems to be an extremely

1 Dz. U. 1932 No. 103 item 866.

significant contribution to understanding the everyday fate of the thousands of soldiers imprisoned in the stalags and oflags on the area covered by the military hostilities of the Second World War.

That is why, in this light, the publication by the Army Museum in Białystok (Muzeum Wojska w Białymstoku, henceforth MWB), entitled *Listy z Woldenbergu. Korespondencja jeńca wojennego Majora Feliksa Chmielewskiego z Oflagu IIC Woldenberg*, which can be translated into “Letters from Woldenberg. Letters and cards of Major Feliks Chmielewski, a prisoner of war from Oflag II-C Woldenberg”, edited by Marcin Koziński. It draws from the documents that can be found in the museum’s collection purchased from the major’s daughter, Danuta Chmielewska, in 2002. The collection consists of 66 letters and cards written by major Feliks Chmielewski accompanied by numerous souvenirs, notably the cups commemorating his service in the 96th Omsk Infantry Regiment, and the 85th Vilnius Rifles Regiment, the memorial ring of the Border Protection Corps (KOP), a passport from 1915, identity cards, documents proving his military career, and numerous photographs and albums from 1913–1940².

The publication contains two basic parts: the introduction, letters and cards. What strikes is the lack of table of contents, which would make navigating around the book easier, and the title page with information about the author of research and main editor. In return, we only receive brief information on the editor (Marcin Koziński), proofreader (Natalia Filipowicz), publisher, and printing house.

The introduction consists of two parts, formally assigned to two, yet actually written by three different authors. The first and the shortest comes from Robert Sadowski, director of the MWB. It informs the reader briefly who Feliks Chmielewski was, and in what circumstances he wrote and sent letters and cards to his loved ones. There is also information that

2 Koziński’s introduction speaks of a period from 1913 to 1939, however, the photographs from the MWB collection in the book span the time from 1913 to 1941, and there are only two photographs taken after 1939. The first, from 1940, shows Chmielewski in Oflag XVIII-A Lienz, and the other, from 1941, features Danuta Chmielewska in Życzyna and her house in the background. See: M. Koziński, *Wstęp*, in: *Listy z Woldenbergu. Korespondencja jeńca wojennego Majora Feliksa Chmielewskiego z Oflagu IIC Woldenberg*, ed. by M. Koziński, Białystok 2021, p. 8; for the full list of objects in the MWB collection, see: U. Kraśnicka, *Mjr Feliks Ksawery Chmielewski, oficer KOP, zastępca dowódcy 42 pułku piechoty*, “Zeszyty Muzeum Wojska” 17 (2004), pp. 213–219.

the publication is second in the series that is based on the documents of Polish soldiers that can be found in the MWB collection³. It is a pity that the persons responsible for the publication of both did not name the series, as that would help in the identification of the published volumes. Perhaps this could be amended in the following volumes, as I assume there will be a follow-up.

The second part of Koziński's introduction, by contains four subchapters. The first informs about the archival and museum collections related to Feliks Chmielewski that provided a starting point for the work on the publication. It is the pity that the author failed to inform why the collection is incomplete and where the reader can look for the remaining parts of the collection of Chmielewski's letters and cards.

The second subchapter is Chmielewski's bio covering his military service in the Russian armed forces and in the Polish Army. The reader can follow the development of his military career and, albeit briefly, trace his private life. The author primarily draws from the collection of the Central Military Archive⁴ and complements his findings with a vast collection of photographs of the major, his relatives, and his brothers in arms. These help to make the person of Feliks Chmielewski closer to the reader, and his biography fuller. After all, it is the latest and the most detailed biography of Feliks Chmielewski to have as yet been published⁵, an achievement that the author should be applauded for. I hope that he will not stop at that and that, in the coming years, we will be presented with a work describing the history of life of that outstanding soldier in detail.

Koziński devotes the third subchapter to the largest POW camp for Polish officers, Oflag II-C Woldenberg, its history, structure, everyday life

- 3 The first was J. Kowalczyk, *Wspomnienia żołnierza 3. Dywizji Strzelców Karpackich*, ed. by M. Koziński, Białystok 2020.
- 4 Centralne Archiwum Wojskowe Wojskowego Biura Historycznego [hereafter: CAW], Kolekcja Akt Personalnych i Odznaczeniowych [hereafter: AP], Chmielewski Feliks Ksawery, sygn. 1.481.C.1394; CAW, AP, Chmielewski Feliks Ksawery, sygn. odrzuciono 25.06.1938.
- 5 By now only three notes on Chmielewski have been published. One is part of the reviewed book, while the other two are U. Kraśnicka, *Mjr Feliks Ksawery Chmielewski*, pp. 213–219; *Major Feliks Ksawery Chmielewski*, in: *Aparat bezpieczeństwa wewnętrznego wobec żołnierzy Korpusu Obrony Pogranicza i funkcjonariuszy Służby Granicznej*, eds. A. Chrzanowska, S. Koller, W. Kujawa, K. Langowski, S. Pilarska, P. Skubisz, D. Wolska, Warszawa 2013, p. 341.

in the camp, and the formal issues concerning the exchange of letters and cards between the prisoners and the outside world. Here, the author only refers to three publications⁶. This is no flaw, yet an insightful historical analysis would help to edit the material that Koziński embraced, especially if one considers the large number of works on POW life in Woldenberg⁷. The fourth subchapter is a psychographic analysis performed by Karolina Gorzkowska, a lawyer, graphologist, psychographologist, forensic linguist, expert in handwriting and documents. Its content was supervised by the Polish General Writing Board (Naczelna Rada Pismoznawcza). Rather than the full text of the analysis, the publication includes its wide fragments intended to complement the image of Chmielewski gleaned from the bio and the content of his letters and cards. The author presents her assessment based on a sample of 20 letters and cards from 1939–1940, which she conducted in March and April 2021. Such dates are given in Koziński's short introduction to the psychographic analysis. However, the content of her analysis proves that Gorzkowska also worked on letters dating to later years. That is evident from the following passage: “[Chmielewski] uplifts the spirits of the addressees, writing that everything will be all right. That is especially visible in the letters from 1939–1942, while a gradual loss of physical strength and psyche is noticeable in the letters from the later years. The officer has concerns about the future, and becomes ever more locked within himself. Just like optimism and hope were visible in the letters from the first years of detention, the feelings predominantly present in the letters from 1944 are sadness, scepticism, detachment, seriousness, and the deteriorating emotional condition of the author”⁸. Unfortunately, lack of access to the full contents of the analysis makes it impossible to verify the correctness of the dates provided in the text. However, bearing in mind the earlier inaccuracies in the text, it must be assumed that

- 6 *Oflag II C Woldenberg. To brzmi jak tajemnica*, ed. by W. Dembek, Dobiegniew 2017; *Oflag II C Woldenberg. Wczoraj i dziś*. Muzeum Woldenberczyków w Dobiegniewie, ed. by A. Pazdan, Dobiegniew 2014; J. Olesik, *Oflag II C Woldenberg*, Warszawa 1988.
- 7 A detailed bibliography on Oflag II C Woldenberg can be found on the website of the Stowarzyszenie Woldenberczyków Association: http://woldenberczycy.pl/?-page_id=6, last accessed on 6.01.2023.
- 8 K. Gorzkowska, *Opinia psychograficzna – portret osobowościowy na podstawie analizy pisma ręcznego*. Badania przeprowadzone na zlecenie Muzeum Wojska w Białymstoku, Warszawa 2021, pp. 4–6, quoted from M. Koziński, *Wstęp*, p. 35.

the above is an editorial mistake and the sample of Chmielewski's letters and cards Gorzkowska studied goes beyond 1940.

The psychographic analysis referred to above enriches the publication and casts a new light of the person of Feliks Chmielewski. What every reader could decode studying the letters and cards penned by Chmielewski is provided here, before the presentation of the letters themselves. The researcher remarks on the change of the major's handwriting with the passage of years, and infers conclusions concerning his psychological state. However, she may be mistaken in assessing his personality and character on the grounds of the material she studied. That results from the fact that her research on the works of Feliks Chmielewski glosses over the social, and even more importantly, historical aspects. Obviously, the researcher knows that the author of the letters was a POW and was detained in a German camp but does not know precisely the period in which individual letters were written. Consequently, she cannot fully know what the joy or sadness evident from the successive texts resulted from. Similar conclusions can be drawn in respect of Chmielewski's stiffness and a slightly formal writing style. The researcher makes a reference to camp censorship, yet without a more in-depth knowledge of the spectrum in which the letters were written. Therefore, the appraisal provided in the analysis presented may be far from a proper assessment of the situation. For POWs primarily used the words, phrases, and even whole sentences that the censors could understand for letters with those were likely to be allowed to leave the walls of the camp. That is why one should be cautious while approaching the psychographic analysis and provide it with an appropriate historical background.

The major part of the publication in question are the letters that Chmielewski wrote to his closest relatives. His 66 letters and cards written in 1939–1944 in Stalag I-A Stablack⁹ (one letter), Oflag XVIII-A

9 Stalag I A Stablak, the largest POW camp in Eastern Prussia, was established in 1939 in the northern section of former German military training grounds Stablack spread over the premises of today's Stablawki and Kamięńsk in Górowo Iławeckie commune in Bartoszycki County in Warmińsko-Mazurski Region, with a section near the town of Dolgorukovo in Kaliningrad Region. Details on the camp, and its prisoners and history, see: Z. Lietz, *Obozy jenieckie w Prusach Wschodnich*, Warszawa 1982; B. Koziełło-Poklewski, *Obozy jenieckie w Prusach Wschodnich (na marginesie książki Zygmunta Lienza)*, "Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie" (1983) No. 4, pp. 517–536; J. Necio, *Stalag I A Stablack. Próby upamiętnienia*, "Łambinowicki Rocznik Muzealny" 2011, pp. 53–66; A. Kruglov, J. Lusek, *Mannschaftammlager (Stalag) I A*,

Lienz¹⁰ (one card), and Oflag II-C Woldenberg (34 letters, 30 cards) with eight of those also being included as scans. It is a pity that not all letters were showed in this form, as that would have allowed the reader to obtain some more details concerning the quoted content of the individual letters. What the reader is therefore given is just a dry text with brief information concerning the addressee and the sender in a footnote. Unfortunately, the editors of the book also omitted other detail, as the bio only informs that Chmielewski was a prisoner in successive camps, however fails to place those events on the time axis¹¹. Such a chronology can nevertheless be deduced from the published letters. Complementing that information with the knowledge on the aforementioned POW camps allows recreation of an approximate chronology of events that took place during the Second World War.

The emergency mobilisation of the 42nd Jan Henryk Dąbrowski Infantry Regiment started on 24 August 1939. The 1st Battalion completed it in the evening of the same day, the 2nd Battalion – by the morning of 25 August, and the 3rd Battalion commanded by Chmielewski – on 26 August. It took them several hours to reach Ostrołęka, from where they moved to Łodziska, where they awaited further orders. During the September campaign, they participated in the clashes along the Ostrołęka–Łodziska line, and around Dylewo and Kadzidło. On the night of 12/13 September, Chmielewski's battalion was caught in a trap in a forest near Czerwony Bór and all its soldiers became German POWs¹². Chmielewski was first taken to Stalag I-A Stalback (letter of 10 October 1939)¹³, and

transl. by K. Luft, in: *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945*, vol. 5: *Camps and Other Detention Facilities Under the German Armed Forces*, ed. by G. P. Megehee, Bloomington 2022, pp. 287–390.

10 Oflag XVIII-A Lienz, was a POW camp in East Tirol established in the northern part of Lienz in Austria in 1939. For details on the camp, and its prisoners and history, see: D. Michelbacher, *Offizierlager (Oflag) XVIII A*, in: *The United States Holocaust Memorial*, vol. 5, pp. 609–611.

11 See: M. Koziński, *Wstęp*, pp. 28–29.

12 See: A. Dobroński, K. Filipow, *42 pułk piechoty im. gen. Jana Henryka Dąbrowskiego*, Białystok 1996, pp. 26–49; M. Koziński, *Wstęp*, pp. 28–29.

13 MWB, korespondencja obozowa F. Chmielewskiego ze Stalagu 1A Stalback, Oflagu XVIII A Lienz i Oflagu IIC Woldenberg, lata 1939–1944 [camp letters and cards by F. Chmielewski from Stalag I-A Stalback, Oflag XVIII-A Lienz, and Oflag II-C

later to Oflag XVIII-A Lienz (card of 11 December 1939)¹⁴, where he was given the camp number 5680/XVIII A, and finally to Oflag II-C Woldenberg (card of 7 February 1941 and successive ones)¹⁵. There he was billeted to Barrack 3B which belonged to the 1st Battalion of the Camp East and later to Barrack 23B, being part of the 5th Battalion of Camp West (letters of 9 December 1941 and ff)¹⁶. He remained in the camps for officers until 25 January 1945. Then, as part of the German evacuation of the POW camp II-C Woldenberg he moved westwards with other POWs. During the march, many prisoners died of exhaustion while others were murdered by the camp guards. The journey of the 5th Battalion lasted until 8 December 1945. That was when the last 300 POWs were transported by the British Armed Forces to Szczecin¹⁷.

The care for the the editorial and visual aspects deserves special attention. The book is highly aesthetic. The minimalist design of the cover stands out against similar publications. It does encourage a potential reader to grab the book and learn its content. When opened, the book presents a clear and legible layout of the pages, with photographs and scans of the letters carefully prepared for printing. The manner of presentation of the published letters and cards brings to mind the layout popular in volumes of poetry: one page – one poem, in this case – one letter. This makes it easier for the reader to browse through the successive records of life in the camp that the author sent to his loved ones. Additionally, the comments provided in the form of footnotes for every successive letter and card help in navigation while not dominating the text proper.

The publication by the MWB is an exceedingly valuable work that will certainly help many aficionados and researchers of the history of the Second World War in discovering new facts from the POW life of the Polish soldiers taken captives by Germans, and will help not only historians in learning the reasons and symptoms of what is known as “the barbed wires malady” also known as the KZ-Syndrome. Koziński

Woldenberg, 1939–1941], No. inw. MBW/D/3556, quoted from: *Listy z Woldenbergu*, p. 39.

14 MBW/D/3557, quoted from: *Listy z Woldenbergu*, p. 40.

15 MBW/D/3558/1, quoted from: *Listy z Woldenbergu*, p. 42.

16 MBW/D/3558/4, quoted from: *Listy z Woldenbergu*, p. 45; W. Dębek, *Organizacja obozu*, in: *Oflag II C Woldenberg. To brzmi jak tajemnica*, pp. 12–13.

17 Z. Izydorczyk, *Ewakuacja i wyzwolenie*, in: *Oflag II C Woldenberg. To brzmi jak tajemnica*, pp. 90–96.

deserves special recognition as the editor responsible for the book. Minor errors aside, he made a huge effort that produced a very good book. I hope that further publications in the series based on the documents of Polish soldiers in the collection of the WB will soon be released. They will allow a better insight into the individual and collective stories of Poles fighting on various fronts of the war not only to historians but also to all readers.