Polonia Inter Gentes, nr 5, (2024)
eISSN: 2956-3224

prof. Emmanuel Debruyne

Institute for the Analysis of Change in Contemporary and Historical Societies (IACS),
Université catholique de Louvain (Belgium)
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3121-9622

DOI: https://doi.org/10.56583/pig.2735

Poles in resistance under German uniform: A singular experience of underground warfare in occupied Belgium, 1914–1918

Abstract

During World War I, hundreds of thousands of Poles served in the German army, with some participating in the occupation of Belgium. This article focuses on the unique experience of a small group of them, often from the province of Posen, who became involved in the Belgian resistance against Germany. Several of them used their position within the occupying forces to pass on information to Belgian intelligence networks, such as Golenvaux and Wasseige. The best-documented case is that of Marian Szeszycki, a guard in the German section of the Liège prison. Szeszycki took advantage of his position to assist Allied agents imprisoned there and became involved in an actual resistance network operating within the prison itself, which worked closely with the *Dame Blanche*, the largest Allied intelligence network in occupied territory. In 1918, Szeszycki successfully helped two death-row prisoners escape and, in the process, deserted himself. As a former German soldier, Szeszycki could have been expelled from Belgium after the war, but he gained the support of former resistance members he had worked with, allowing him to settle in Belgium for a time. His actions, as well as those of his counterparts involved in other networks, did not go entirely unnoticed. Even though the authorities were reluctant to grant them official recognition, their activities were made public, especially within Belgian Catholic circles. In the years leading up to World War II, as rising international tensions raised fears of a new invasion of Belgium and Poland, Szeszycki's name even appeared in several books about the secret war of 1914–1918, contributing to a favorable image of Poland among Western countries.

Keywords: World War I, Military Occupation, Belgium, Resistance, German Army

Spis treści

Polonais en résistance sous l'uniforme allemand. Une expérience singulière de laguerre clandestine en Belgique occupée, 1914–1918

Durant la Première Guerre mondiale, des centaines de milliers de Polonais servent dans l'armée allemande, une partie participant notamment à l'occupation de la Belgique. Cet article se penche sur l'expérience singulière d'une poignée d'entre eux, souvent originaires de Posnanie, qui se retrouvent engagés dans la résistance belge contre l'Allemagne. Plusieurs d'entre eux profitent de leur position au sein de l'appareil d'occupation pour transmettre des informations aux réseaux de renseignements belges Golenvaux et Wasseige. Le cas mieux documenté est celui de Marian Szeszycki, gardien dans la section allemande de la prison de Liège. Szeszycki profite de sa position pour aider des agents alliés emprisonnés et se retrouve impliqué dans un véritable réseau de résistance créé au sein même de la prison, qui opère notamment en lien avec la Dame blanche, le plus grand réseau de renseignement allié en pays occupé. En 1918, Szeszycki parvient à faire évader deux condamnés à mort, et en profite pour lui-même déserter. En tant qu'ancien militaire allemand, Szeszycki aurait pu être expulsé de Belgique au sortir de la guerre, mais il bénéficie du soutien d'anciens résistants avec qui il a opéré, ce qui lui permet de s'établir un temps en Belgique. Son action et celle de ses homologues impliqués dans d'autres réseaux, ne passe pas totalement inaperçue. Alors même que les autorités sont réticentes à leur accorder des reconnaissances officielles, leurs activités sont rendues publiques, surtout dans les milieux catholiques belges. Dans les années qui précèdent la Seconde Guerre mondiale, alors que la montée des tensions internationales fait craindre une nouvelle invasion de la Belgique et de la Pologne, le nom de Szeszycki apparaît même dans plusieurs ouvrages relatifs à la guerre secrète en 1914–1918, alimentant à sa manière une image favorable de la Pologne parmi les pays occidentaux.

Mots-clés: Première Guerre mondiale, Occupation militaire, Belgique, Résistance, Armée allemand

Characterizing the First World War solely as a military clash between warring nations fuelled by intense nationalism oversimplifies the complex factors that shaped the conflict. There are several reasons for this, which have been extensively explored in historiography, but at least two can be highlighted: the involvement of multinational empires in the war, and the military occupation of vast portions of enemy territories by certain belligerents. In this context, while the primary wartime experience of the Belgian population was the occupation of almost the entire country throughout the

war, the Polish experience was shaped by a nation divided among three rival empires before the war. During the conflict, much of Poland's territory came under enemy occupation[1]. These experiences intersected because of the European and global dimensions of the war. The Belgian government's inability to regain control of its national territory led it to send a symbolic expeditionary force in support of the Russian army. As a result, Belgians fought against the Austro-Hungarian Empire in Galicia. Meanwhile, 850,000 Poles, citizens of the German Empire, were incorporated into the German army. This not only led them to fight on various fronts but also involved them in the military occupation of countries such as Belgium[2].

This situation was particularly unique for the Poles in the German army, which represented the armed wing of a state that, in the preceding decades, had often sought to undermine Polish identity[3]. Fighting against the Tsarist Empire could, in their view, have a national dimension, as it involved reclaiming Polish territories under Russian control, thereby opening the possibility for the resurgence of a Polish state. While the war on other fronts may not have carried the same significance, research has shown that, in general, Polish soldiers in the German army demonstrated loyalty from the moment of mobilization. However, the German authorities were understandably concerned about the lack of combativeness among regiments recruited from the province of Posen (Poznań), where the majority of soldiers were Polish. This region had, in fact, been a focal point — along with Western Prussia— of harsh repression during the *Kulturkampf*, a Germanization program that targeted the Catholic Church, promoted German colonization, and sidelined the Polish language. The religious, social, and linguistic tensions created by these policies turned the Posen region into a hotbed of Polish nationalism within the German Empire, directly affecting the reliability of soldiers recruited from this area.

This antagonism was, however, much less pronounced in regions such as Upper Silesia or Masuria, where the regiments demonstrated an ardour similar to that of other parts of the empire. The issue also tended to fade

[1] On the historiography of Poland during the Great War, see S. Lehnstaedt, *La Première Guerre mondiale en Pologne : simple prodrome à l'indépendance nationale ?*, in: *„Histoire@Politique. Politique, culture, société"* 22 (2014); P. Szlanta, *A Seminal 'Anti-Catastrophe'. Historiography on World War I in Poland, 1914–2019*, **in:** *Writing the Great War. The Historiography of World War I from 1918 to the Present*, eds. C. Cornelissen, A. Weinrich, New York – Oxford 2021, pp. 302–337.

[2] On Belgium in the war and its occupation by Germany, see: S. De Schaepdrijver, *La Belgique et la Première Guerre mondiale*, Brussels 2004.

[3] On the Poles in the German Army, see: A. Watson, *Fighting for Another Fatherland: The Polish minority in the German Army 1914–1918*, „English Historical Review" 552 (2011), pp. 1137–1166; R. Kaczmarek, *Poles in Kaiser's Army. On the Front of the First World War*, Berlin (et al.) 2020.

Spis treści

gradually on the front, as the composition of the regiments became more mixed, losing their initial homogeneity, and as Polish recruits were increasingly assimilated. Furthermore, the loyalty of these recruits was strengthened by the promises of the rebirth of a Polish state within the German imperial sphere. This prospect, which began to materialize in November 1916, was well-received, although it was not self-evident and was the subject of many debates among German decision-makers, where domestic political considerations, diplomatic tensions with the Austro-Hungarian ally, the evolution of the geostrategic situation, and relations with the occupied populations all intertwined[4].

However, the issue of troop reliability presented itself in differently for the occupying forces. Occupying a country like Belgium could be seen as participating in the domination of another people – predominantly Catholic in this case – by a Germany that the Poles themselves opposed due to its anti-Polish (and Anti-Catholic) policies. From this perspective, such a situation might have provoked a form of sympathy among the Polish soldiers mobilized under the German uniform toward the occupied Belgians. Traces of this sympathy can be found in personal journals kept by both sides, which testify to acts of solidarity from these reluctant occupiers towards the occupied population. For instance, a farmer from the French department of Aisne recalls the newspapers handed to him discreetly by "Officer Nötzel, a very tolerant Pole with the civilians"[5]; another, a priest in the Nord department, speaks of discussions with an occupant "who is Polish from Thorn (Toruń) and is not a patriot for a pfennig", and so on[6]. A systematic study of these interactions is still to be carried out, but this article aims to demonstrate that such sympathy did exist, highlighting one of its most radical forms: the participation of a few these Polish soldiers in the German army in Belgian resistance networks directed against the German army itself.

The word "resistance" had not yet assumed the meaning it would take during the Second World War[7]. Nevertheless, in Belgium and, to a lesser

[4] See particularly: J. Kaufmann, *Elusive Alliance: The German Occupation of Poland in World War I*, Cambridge, 2015; S. Lehnstaedt, *Imperiale Polenpolitik in den Weltkriegen: Eine vergleichende Studie zu den Mittelmächten und zu NS-Deutschland*, Osnabrück 2017.

[5] *La guerre de 1914–1918 dans la région de Guise, témoignage de Charles Ghewy, fermier. Audigny*, in: „Mémoires de la Fédération des sociétés d'histoire et d'archéologie de l'Aisne", ed. P. Romagny, 1982, pp. 153–173 (here p. 154, entry of June 15, 1917).

[6] *Journal de Monsieur le Chanoine Joseph Peter, curé de Maroilles pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale*, retranscription made by Michel Coulon, 2005 (unpublished), entry of July 31, 1916.

[7] E. Debruyne, *Combattre l'occupant en Belgique et dans les départements français occupés. 1914–1918. Une 'résistance avant la lettre'?*, in: „Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire" 115 (2012), pp. 15–30.

extent in the French occupied departments, thousands of citizens were involved in secret organizations engaged in non-violent forms of resistance against the occupying forces. These activities included military intelligence for the Entente, the exfiltration of lost soldiers and volunteers from the occupied territories, and the writing and dissemination of underground newspapers with patriotic content, such as *La Libre Belgique*, the most famous among them[8]. Many of these former "resisters" produced reports of their activities after the war. A systematic analysis of these writings, by former members of intelligence networks reveals the involvement of Poles, integrated into the German occupation apparatus, in the activities of three such organizations. This article aims to identify these individuals and contextualize their unique experience within the framework of Belgian resistance networks. It will then explore how this involvement may have impacted their trajectories after the war, in a Europe undergoing profound political reconfiguration.

At Bertrix, for the Golenvaux Network

Military intelligence was likely the primary form of organized resistance in occupied Belgium during the First World War. With the exception of the southeastern front, which was stabilized near the Franco-German border, the entire rear area of the German armies engaged in the West was located in occupied territory, either in Belgium or France. In other words, all communication routes, rest areas, retreat lines, supply depots, and various infrastructure necessary for the proper functioning of an army in the field, as well as for maintaining its connections with its national territory, were situated in regions inhabited by subjects of countries at war with Germany. This situation stemmed from the partial success of the German offensive in the summer of 1914, but it also presented an opportunity for the intelligence services of the Western belligerents. They took advantage of the resentment from the occupied populations toward the invaders, using it to recruit agents in enemy territory[9].

However, this opportunity was not easy to exploit, as the occupied territories were isolated from the rest of the world by the front line on one side,

[8] S. De Schaepdrijver, E. Debruyne, *Sursum Corda: The Underground Press in Occupied Belgium, 1914–1918*, „First World War Studies" 1 (2013), pp. 23–38.

[9] L. van Ypersele, E. Debruyne, *De la guerre de l'ombre aux ombres de la guerre. L'espionnage en Belgique durant la guerre 1914–1918. Histoire et mémoire*, Bruxelles 2004.

and by the security measures implemented by the occupiers on the other. These measures culminated in the construction of an electrified fence along the border separating Belgium from the neutral Netherlands. Crossing this barrier to smuggle agents and intelligence would become one of the primary arenas of the "secret war" in the West throughout the conflict. Nevertheless, from the outset of the war, Belgian and French intelligence services succeeded in establishing networks within the occupied territories, soon followed by the British. These networks, typically composed of a few dozen agents each, often focused on railway intelligence to report on the strategic movements of German units. They also monitored military installations and German units stationed in the region under their surveillance.

The Golenvaux network was one of the earliest resistance networks of its kind. It was initiated by the Catholic politician Fernand Golenvaux, a member of parliament and alderman for public works in Namur, in southern Belgium. After the city's fall, the German authorities dismissed the sitting mayor and appointed Golenvaux in his place[10]. He accepted the position but soon began balancing his challenging administrative duties in an occupied city with clandestine resistance activities[11]. The network, aimed directly at undermining the occupying power, began its activities in early 1915. Golenvaux was tasked by the Belgian government, which had relocated to Le Havre in unoccupied France, with reporting on the state of the fortifications surrounding the city. This survey was carried out by trusted individuals recruited by Golenvaux, but as the network grew, its scope expanded to include observations on the entire German military apparatus and troop movements in the Namur region.

The network also expanded further south, reaching Bertrix. This small town in the Ardennes had notably been the site of a massacre of civilians by German troops on August 24, 1914, following intense clashes with the French army. Once the occupation was established, the German army took advantage of the local railway line, which passed through the town, until the end of the war. As a result, some employees of the German railway worked on the town's railway installations. Among them was Adalbert Helbig, originally from the province of Posen. According to the report he would write after the war about his clandestine activities, he arrived in the

[10] See: E. Bodart, *Une source méconnue de l'histoire de la Première Guerre mondiale: la collection d'imprimés réunie par Fernand Golenvaux*, in: *Namur à l'heure allemande. 1914–1918*, eds. E. Bodart, M. Ch. Claes, A. Tixhon, Namur 2010, p. 42–51.

[11] See: M. Ronvaux, *Fernand Golenvaux, bourgmestre, espion et prisonnier*, n.d. [no date]. Available at: https://www.marcronvaux.be/Files/golenvaux.pdf (last accessed on April 26, 2024).

town in October 1914[12]. His first acts of solidarity with the Allied cause involved discreet assistance to French prisoners passing through Bertrix station. Although the exact details of when and how are unclear, a bond of trust developed between Helbig and two local women. The first was Sister Marie-Antoinette de Beugny d'Hagerue, a French nun from the Convent of the Sisters of the Christian Doctrine. This convent was located near the center of the town. The second was Odile Cornerotte, the wife of a blacksmith who lived near the convent, on the street leading to the station where Helbig worked[13]. Helbig gathered at work information about the German army, which he then passed on to these two women. He did this either by listening to telephone conversations or through documents he came across at the station. He was assisted in this by his cousin Ignace Novicki, who, like him, worked at the station. Once the information had been gathered, it was regularly sent to the network's central office via Brother Marcel, the director of the Christian Schools in Bertrix. Moreover, the Golenvaux network sought to go further and establish a continuous observation post for railway traffic at Bertrix station. This system, which began to be implemented in 1915 among networks in occupied territories, aimed to provide complete coverage of the railway movements made by German units, thus reporting on the enemy's strategic redeployment. Helbig dedicated himself to this task for seven consecutive weeks, a particularly demanding responsibility (a line had to be monitored 24 hours a day, seven days a week, in order to obtain reliable intelligence), but was eventually forced to stop due to the lack of a trusted person to assist him. Two subsequent attempts were made to continue the task, but both failed. The very incomplete documentation on the network has not clarified the exact role played by his cousin Novicki in this matter. It is, however, established that Helbig found a new source of information in the person of a fellow countryman in uniform. The German identified under the name "Joseph Dobalia", about whom little information has been found, was one of those involved in the resistance activities[14].

These activities, however, were not without risk. The German General Government, responsible for the occupation of Belgium, established a secret

[12] State Archives of Belgium (hereafter AGR), Archives of the Commission for the Archives of Patriotic Services (hereafter CAP), nr 2487, Report by Mr. A. Helbig, Bertrix, December 12, 1918.

[13] AGR, CAP, nr 2487, Document submitted to the 2nd Bureau of the General Staff (EMG), SRA, n.d. [no date].

[14] He is said to have been captured at Thiepval in July 1916, but no individual by that name has been found in the prisoner-of-war records compiled by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), https://grandeguerre.icrc.org/fr (last accessed on April 11, 2024).

police force, the *Zentralpolizeistelle*, by the end of 1914. This force was further divided into local offices (*Polizeistellen*)[15]. The arrest of Golenvaux on June 13, 1916, by this police force brought an end to the network's activities. Golenvaux was put on trial in September during the *Grand Trial of Hasselt*, a major espionage case resulting from a series of arrests across multiple networks, which were interconnected. Although Golenvaux was sentenced to death, his notoriety allowed him to secure a pardon, sparing him from the fate of four of his fellow prisoners. More importantly, Golenvaux managed to avoid implicating his agents, which meant that those in Bertrix were not persecuted. While preserved, documentation suggests that they attempted to continue their work, it appears they were unable to establish lasting connections with another organization. Nonetheless, while the Polish operatives in Bertrix could no longer send their intelligence to the Allies, others quickly took over.

The Ciska Brothers

Like "Dobalia", who had provided intelligence to Helbig and Novicki, the brothers Ivan and Ladislas Ciska were Poles enlisted in the German army. Unfortunately, we have found little information about their backgrounds. For instance, we do not know what their specific roles in the army were, nor whether they served in the same unit. What is clearer, however, is that both operated for the Wasseige network. Max Wasseige, a Catholic lawyer from Namur, was tasked by Belgian military intelligence to establish a new network in the Namur region to replace that of Golenvaux. The primary goal was to restore continuous surveillance of the railway lines radiating out from Namur. However, Wasseige faced difficulties recruiting locals from Namur, as the repercussions of the *Grand Trial of Hasselt* cast a long shadow over the region. The death sentences handed down to several Namur residents, including the acting mayor Golenvaux, underscored the significant risks faced by anyone involved in espionage for the homeland[16].

[15] See: E. Rezsöhazy, *De la protection du secret militaire à l'occupation des populations civiles. Les polices secrètes allemandes derrière le Front Ouest (1914–1918)*, PhD dissertation in History, Art, and Archaeology, UCLouvain, 2020.

[16] For example, this is echoed in the diary of the Namur canon Schmitz, who also knew Golenvaux and Wasseige personally. In his diary, the canon explains that the announcement of Golenvaux's death sentence caused "great emotion" in the city and that the occupation regime created an "anguishing" atmosphere, see: J. François Pacco (et al.), *Les carnets du chanoine Schmitz. La Grande Guerre au jour le jour en province de Namur et de Luxembourg. 1914–1919*, vol. 1, 1914–1916, Namur 2020 (entries for September 19, 1916, and August 31, 1916).

Despite these challenges, Wasseige managed to establish a small network. Paul Matholet, the deputy station master of Namur, whom he likely knew through their mutual involvement in the organization of food supply for the province, recruited a series of agents for him. Among them were the Ciska brothers, who, as German soldiers, were "tasked with monitoring the wagons near the cadet school",[17] as Matholet specified in a note he wrote about them after the war[18]. Matholet, who combined his professional duties with humanitarian work by managing the arrival of food supplies in Namur from the Commission for Relief in Belgium, came to know them during this time, although the exact circumstances remain unclear. How did the Ciska brothers realize that Matholet was involved in clandestine activities? This remains uncertain. In any case, on several occasions, the two Poles offered him their services. Cautious, Matholet refused, until the day the two Poles informed him that the German emperor was supposed to arrive at Namur station twenty minutes later. To test their reliability, Matholet challenged them to write and sign the document, which, if discovered, would have exposed them to a punishment that could be assumed to be ruthless. The brothers immediately accepted, which earned them Matholet's trust, and from that day onward, he recruited them into the network.

Matholet employed the two Poles to monitor the railway lines to Charleroi and Brussels[19]. After the war, he highlighted in his report their "loyalty" and the "crucial importance" of the report on the emperor's passage that they had agreed to sign. However, the motivation of the Ciska brothers appears to have been partly based on a misunderstanding. Matholet reported that they "devoted themselves mainly out of hatred for Germany, which considered them as dogs", but he also mentioned that the Ciska brothers were very Francophile and believed they were working for an organization dedicated to French intelligence, something Matholet himself seems not to have denied at the time[20]. Did he refrain from informing them that this was not the case and that the Wasseige network was actually working for Belgian intelligence? Or was he unaware of this himself? Once again, this remains unclear, but it highlights the ambiguity surrounding the affiliations of many resistance organizations for those active within them, as well as the importance of imagination in maintaining the motivation to continue a dangerous and often thankless clandestine task.

[17] The cadet school of Namur is indeed located in immediate proximity to the railway tracks.
[18] AGR, CAP, nr 2509, Appendix to the report by Paul Matholet, Namur, March 16, 1920.
[19] AGR, CAP, nr 2509, Report by Paul Matholet, Namur, March 16, 1920.
[20] AGR, CAP, nr 2508, Report on Wasseige-Matholet-Houart Intelligence Service, n.d. [no date].

Nevertheless, the activity of the Ciska brothers was not to last long. The network was dismantled as early as February 1917. Wasseige and Matholet were arrested on the 25th by the Namur Polizeistelle, following the capture of a liaison agent carrying the network's mail. Fortunately for the Ciska brothers, Matholet did not reveal anything about them. The two brothers, under circumstances that remain unclear, even managed to send him a note during his captivity in the Charleroi prison, probably to inform him that they had not been compromised, which may have been important in organizing his defence. Judged in Charleroi, Wasseige, Matholet, and several others were sentenced to death on June 28, 1917. They were pardoned following the intervention of the Bishop of Namur[21], and both were deported to Germany. As for the Ciska brothers, we do not know their fate after these events. While there is mention of desertion, we are uncertain whether it occurred during their involvement in the network or afterward.

This temptation of desertion, of course, was not unique to the Poles in the German army. As the war neared its end, German soldiers began to spontaneously abandon their ranks[22]. While the phenomenon did not become truly widespread until the final weeks of the war, by 1917, several thousand soldiers had sought refuge in the Netherlands. Once interned in neutral territory, these soldiers were interrogated by Allied intelligence services, who, with the cooperation of their Dutch counterparts, gathered valuable intelligence in this way[23]. The delivery of intelligence to the Allies was particulary significant for ethnic minorities, who no longer felt (or had never felt) any loyalty to the German Empire, which they did not recognize (or no longer recognized), or, worse, which they viewed as an adversary to their own national aspirations.

In this regard, it should be noted that we did not find any ethnically German soldiers among the agents of the Belgian clandestine organizations. However, we did trace two deserters from Alsace. The German military authorities were often suspicious of the Alsatians and Lorrainers, subjecting them to a discriminatory regime[24]. The research did not show that they deserted more frequently than other categories of German soldiers, but it is

[21] J. F. Pacco (et al.), *Les carnets du chanoine Schmitz. La Grande Guerre au jour le jour en province de Namur et de Luxembourg. 1914–1919*, t.2, *1917–1919*, vol. 2, 1917–1919, Namur, Les Editions namuroises, 2020 (entries for June 29 and 30, July 4, 14, 19, and 28, and August 18, 1917).

[22] On the subject of deserters from the German army, see: C. Jahr, *Gewöhnliche Soldaten: Desertion und Deserteure im deutschen und britischen Heer 1914–1918*, Göttingen 1998.

[23] G. Piégais, *Les Déserteurs de Hollande: Les interrogatoires des déserteurs allemands par le réseau Hunter, 1916–1918*, Master's thesis in History, UCLouvain, 2015.

[24] C. Jahr, *Gewöhnliche Soldaten…*, 252–284.

possible that those who did desert harbored stronger resentment toward the imperial army. What is striking, however, that the two Alsatian deserters we traced, rather than playing a subordinate role like their Polish counterparts, both used their knowledge of French and the German military to lead small network. The first, Max Christiaens, organized an escape route to Maastricht, while the second, Joseph Zilliox, was involved in both escape and intelligence work[25]. Zilliox was arrested and imprisoned in Liège, where one of his guards was a Polish soldier named Marian Szeszycki.

"Maryan"

While the story of the Ciska brothers remains shrouded in many uncertainties, that of the soldier Marian Szeszycki is much better known. Szeszycki was 30 years old when the war broke out. Born in Powidz, on October 8, 1883, and a Catholic by faith, he worked as a farmer for some time in his home town before migrating to Duisburg in the Ruhr, where around 1906 he became a steel mill worker ("*Blockwalzwerk*"), and possibly even a foreman. He married there three years later a woman from the province of Posen (Poznań), like him[26]. It is under the German uniform that Szeszycki arrived in Belgium in December 1914, likely as a soldier in a battalion of the Landsturm from Duisburg. According to his statements, he was assigned in March 1915 to the surveillance detachment of the Saint-Léonard prison section in Liège, requisitioned to house those resisting German rule[27]. During the early months of 1914, individuals arrested by the German authorities remained in Saint-Léonard under the responsibility of Belgian jailers, but the situation changed at the beginning of 1915. The Belgian staff continued to work in the German section, but they were now under the surveillance of a half-dozen Landsturm soldiers (including Szeszycki), and were prohibited from communicating with the detainees held by the Germans[28]. However, the Belgian guards, who knew the prison and its operations well, still managed to occasionally pass messages between political prisoners and the outside world.

[25] AGR, CAP, Nos. 1699–1702 and 2725–2749.

[26] AGR, CAP, nr 1051, File for Mr. Muraille [Walthère Dewé] concerning 'Marijan [sic] Szeszycki', undated; and Letter from Joseph Blintz, Special Police Inspector, to Walthère Dewé, Mulhouse, December 21, 1920.

[27] On Saint-Léonard during the war, see: V. Mazy, *Entre occupation et libération: La prison secondaire de Liège (Saint-Léonard) entre 1914 et 1919*, Master's thesis in History, UCLouvain, 2021.

[28] See, in particular: AGR, CAP, nr 666, Report by Mr. Lousberg, undated.

As a German guard, Szeszycki was not supposed to maintain friendly relations with the enemies of the empire. However, it appears that he discreetly showed kindness to certain Belgian political prisoners. Among them, the most unfortunate were likely those sentenced to death, typically for being active in a networks providing intelligence to the Allied armies. One such man was André Garot, a native of Liège, who spent the final days of his life in prison -days that had not spared him much suffering. Aged 53, Garot had already lost his wife and two of his six children, and he had not heard from his son Edmond, a volunteer in the Belgian army[29]. Was it out of solidarity with this son that Garot had used his profession as a travelling salesman to join one of the first resistance networks in occupied Belgium?[30] The day before his execution, on October 17, 1915, Garot wrote in his last letter to his daughter: "I am visited at all times by the soldier Maryan, who comes to talk to me, but he distracts me from what I want to say. He is a good boy, so sad, and much sadder than I am."[31] The image of Szeszycki that emerges from these few lines is that of a man burdened by the war, who seems eager to show compassion to its victims.

By this point, Szeszycki was likely already facilitating contact between certain political prisoners and individuals outside the prison, helping to prevent further arrests and secure sentence reductions[32]. His actions, however, went beyond this. Szeszycki was playing a double game, gaining the trust of the German NCO Weissbarth, the head of the German detachment at Saint-Léonard. After the war, Weissbarth was described in highly negative terms by former Belgian detainees, who referred to him, for example, as a "real brute"[33]. Szeszycki himself admitted to having "pushed around" several political prisoners, explaining that "it was to mislead the director and German soldiers at the prison. I had to avoid appearing suspicious, and I had to maintain their trust". Nevertheless, taking advantage of Weissbarth's trust, Szeszycki secretly smuggled correspondence and even provisions to the detainees.

---

[29] AGR, CAP, nos. 1794–1796, His son was sent to occupied Belgium by British intelligence to establish a network. Captured by the *Zentralpolizeistelle* in March 1917, he was sentenced to death but will receive a pardon, sparing his life.

[30] See: AGR, CAP, 2832.

[31] AGR, CAP, nr 2830, Letter from André Garot to Raymonde Garot, Liège, October 17, 1915.

[32] AGR, CAP, nr 1051, This is, in any case, what emerges from the letter of a former French detainee working after the war in Alsace for the French Special Police. Letter from Joseph Blintz, Special Police Inspector, to Walthère Dewé, Mulhouse, December 21, 1920; a similar testimony from a detainee of 1916 can be found in: **Un hommage qui est dû**, "*Gazette de Liège*", July 3, 1919.

[33] AGR, CAP, nr 666, The Historical Notice on Saint-Léonard Prison in Liège during the German Occupation (1914–1918) by Lavaux, undated.

When did Szeszycki begin his clandestine activities? We do not know. Perhaps, for a long time, he simply offered small gestures of sympathy to lift the spirits of the detainees, as he did with Garot in October 1915. For those sentenced to death and awaiting execution, such gestures were not necessarily prohibited by the German authorities, as the condemned prisoners enjoyed a more relaxed regime during their final days. This likely explains why Garot mentioned him in his last letter, seemingly without fear of compromising Szeszycki[34]. However, it is also possible that, by this time, Szeszycki was already involved in more extensive efforts to comfort other political prisoners, including those awaiting trial.

It may have been as a result of such gestures that Franz Creusen, a Belgian detainee who spoke German, persuaded Szeszycki to go further and give his actions a more organized form. Szeszycki thus became involved in a small underground network within the German section of the prison[35]. While he was not its mastermind, he played an essential part of it. He worked under Creusen's direction, but the two albo teamed up with another detainee, Emile Fauquenot, who was involved in the same operation.

The experiences of Creusen and Fauquenot together deserve an entire book in themselves[36]. It is enough to note that the two accomplices, Belgian and French respectively, worked in 1916 for the Allied services in the Netherlands, specifically in Maastricht. Fauquenot led a French military intelligence office there, while Creusen, who had also worked for Belgian military intelligence, served as a liaison officer with the smugglers in the Liège region, which was not far from Maastricht. During an ambush at the border, both were captured by the Liège *Polizeistelle* on July 1, 1916, and were sent to Saint-Léonard while their cases were being investigated. Creusen and Fauquenot, along with about twenty of their agents, were tried starting on August 14, 1916. This trial resulted in severe sentences, including three executions, but the judgment for Creusen and Fauquenot was postponed for further investigation. On October 12, 1916, Creusen was informed that he, too, had been sentenced to death. Following the rejection of his appeal for clemency, he was transferred to the Fort of Chartreuse on the evening of October 16, where others, such as André

[34] Regarding this letter and its context of writing, see: E. Debruyne, L. van Ypersele, *Je serai fusillé demain. Les dernières lettres des patriotes belges et français fusillés par l'occupant. 1914–1918*, Bruxelles 2011.

[35] AGR, CAP, nr 514, Notice on the service of Saint-Léonard prison associated with our corps, undated.

[36] Two books have been dedicated to this topic: P. Durand, *Agents secrets. L'affaire Fauquenot-Birkel*, Paris 1937 and L. Lombard, *Le Fusillé vivant*, Stavelot 1939.

Garot, had been executed by firing squad, or would be later, like the Alsatian deserter Joseph Zilliox. Typically, condemned prisoners were executed the day after their arrival, at dawn. However, in a twist, nothing of the sort happened. Creusen remained in limbo between life and death until October 23, 1916, when he was returned to Saint-Léonard. He later learned that his execution had been postponed thanks to the small clandestine organization in the prison, which used its connections to the outside to secure an urgent intervention from the Dutch diplomatic mission in Brussels. The postponement lasted for a significant time. It is likely a few weeks after this episode that Creusen succeeded in recruiting Marian Szeszycki, who had shown him much sympathy upon his return from the Chartreuse. Through his role as a guard, Szeszycki allowed Creusen and Fauquenot to stay in contact with the outside of the prison. His role became particularly crucial starting in May 1917, when the *Polizeistelle*, after confiscating suspicious papers from certain prisoners, ordered the construction of a wall to physically isolate the German section of the prison from the parts still used by the Belgian authorities for the detention of common law prisoners. This separation made it impossible for Belgian guards to have access to the German section, preventing any contact between political prisoners and the Belgian wardens. To overcome this obstacle, Szeszycki made contact with Maurice Delhaize, a clerk in the Belgian wing of the prison. After Delhaize's arrest on September 17, 1917, and his subsequent deportation to Germany, Szeszycki was introduced to three sisters, the Weimerskirch sisters. Emma, the youngest, aged 38 at the time, was familiar with the prison, having spent several months in the women's wing in 1916 after being condemned for distributing *La Libre Belgique*[37]. Most importantly, the three sisters were members of the *Dame Blanche* (White Lady), a highly effective intelligence network deeply rooted in Catholic faith[38]. Szeszycki also facilitated the delivery of notes intended for Joseph Delville, an engineer at the Cockerill industries and a member of the *Dame Blanche*, as well as Paul Greiner, the managing director of Cockerill.

In fact, a whole system was established in which Marian Szeszycki not only acted as a liaison with the outside world but also communicated to Creusen and Fauquenot the information he gathered from his fellow German soldiers or from the prisoners themselves about new arrests and sentences[39].

[37] P. Durand, *Agents secrets…*, p.109.

[38] For information about the *Dame Blanche*, see: P. Decock, *La Dame Blanche. A World War I Intelligence Network*, Brussels 2010.

[39] AGR, CAP, nr 666, The report of Maurice Joseph Delhaize, clerk at the Liège prison, Liège, June 6, 1919.

Several networks were alerted about the fate of their agents incarcerated at Saint-Léonard, allowing them to prevent further arrests or coordinate the defence of the accused during trials. The work of this internal resistance organization in the prison proved particularly useful, as Liège was one of the key centers for Belgian intelligence and escape networks. A direct contact with the women's wing, separated from the men's wing, was also established by the conspirators at Saint-Léonard. However, this contact was not linked to Szeszycki, who had no access to the women's section. Creusen and Fauquenot made contact with a French detainee, Marie Birkel, involved in the same case as them, through whom the link with Emma Weimerskirch, who had been her cellmate, was established. They used Delhaize for this purpose, as well as the Belgian chaplain of the prison, Father Coenen, and several others.

The women's section was very active, managing to smuggle oral messages, letters, packages, and even sometimes a copies of *La Libre Belgique* into Saint-Léonard. Moreover, Szeszycki was not the only German soldier involved in passing messages. At least one other Landsturm soldier is said to have participated, though he did so in exchange for money and later than Szeszycki[40]. His ties with Creusen and Fauquenot were of a completely different nature. The Polish soldier appeared to believe that Creusen and Fauquenot were high-ranking officers, but this was not the case[41]. However, the two men did not seem to correct him, likely to maintain a moral advantage over him. This did not prevent a certain familiarity, though. Szeszycki was clearly addressed by his first name by all the prisoners with whom he had some form of solidarity. In fact, all postwar accounts by former prisoners refer to him by his first name (spelled "Marijan", "Maryan", or even "Marianne") and almost never by his last name[42]. This practice likely indicates a certain closeness with the Polish soldier, but it may also reflect the difficulty French speakers had in pronouncing, remembering, or writing "Szeszycki". The last and most spectacular action of the trio in the men's wing took place on March 28, 1918,

[40] AGR, CAP, nr 666, Report by Maurice Joseph Delhaize, Clerk at the Liège Prison, Liège, June 6, 1919.

[41] Note concerning Maryan Szeszicki [sic], Walthère Dewé, Liège, November 6, 1920, in AGR, CAP, n°1051.

[42] AGR, F1649, Archives of the Aliens Police (hereinafter APE), nr 1113347, A document in the file compiled on him by the Belgian Aliens Police even specifies regarding "Maryan": "he is only known by this name". Letter from Charles, Chief Inspector of Military Security, to Remy, Director of Public Security, Liège, March 15, 1919.

when Creusen and Fauquenot escaped with the complicity of Szeszycki inside the prison walls and the assistance of the Dame Blanche network on the outside. The event that triggered the operation, which the trio had been considering for some time, was the announcement of Szeszycki's upcoming transfer to the front. This occurred amid the German army's mobilization of as many men as possible to launch their spring 1918 offensives, which were supposed to end the war before the American army could mobilize on a large scale. For Creusen and Fauquenot, Szeszycki's departure meant not only the impossibility of completing their escape but also the collapse of their entire operation due to the loss of their indispensable Polish ally. According to Creusen, Szeszycki was initially "a little scared" but was eventually persuaded[43].

At the end of the day on March 28, 1918, Szeszycki, after placing a long rope on a ledge accessible through a small window, left the doors of Creusen and Fauquenot's cells open. The Polish soldier then left the prison as he normally would at the end of his shift. Meanwhile, the two prisoners rushed toward the window, where they climbed onto the roof, to a spot where it overlooked a street running alongside the prison wall. At first, the darkness initially prevented them from finding the rope, so they used sheets tied together to prepare their descent, which they completed with the rope once they located it. The Dame Blanche leaders involved in the operation received the two escapees and took them to a safe house. There, Creusen and Fauquenot were reunited with Szeszycki, whose desertion and subsequent care by the network had also been planned. Before reaching the safe house, Szeszycki had taken care to throw his "*Mütze*" (police cap) into the Meuse River. This gesture was intended to make his disappearance appear as a drowning, but it can also be seen as having a highly symbolic meaning: without his German uniform, the Polish man shed both the domination he had been subjected to and the double game he had imposed on himself. He could finally be himself, even if it meant hiding until the German troops evacuate Belgian territory. Meanwhile, Creusen and Fauquenot attempted to cross the Dutch border clandestinely on July 5, 1918. Creusen managed to succeed, albeit with difficulties, but did not return to his homeland until after the Armistice, while Fauquenot was forced to turn back. As for Szeszycki, he was transferred to another refuge in Liège, where he met two young Frenchmen, burned because of their activities for the Dame Blanche network, who were also being shel-

[43] AGR, CAP, nr 666, Report of Franz Creusen No. 1, January 4, 1919.

tered there[44]. It is here that Fauquenot joined them after his failed attempt to cross the border[45]. They staid there until November 1918.

What homeland to turn to after the war?

After the war, several figures from the Belgian resistance sought to bring their efforts out of the shadows, aiming to publicize what they considered a patriotic epic and encourage authorities to recognize the merits and sacrifices of its members. Starting in 1919, these individuals, particularly those who had been executed by the enemy, became the focus of numerous official and private initiatives: solemn funerals, medal distributions, erection of monuments, publication of memoirs, and more[46]. In general, these resistance members were seen as the civil equivalent of the soldiers who had fought for four years in the trenches. They were celebrated as "heroes", whose struggle, and more importantly – their sacrifice, allowed the painful episode of the occupation to be integrated into the national narrative, giving it a patriotic dimension.

Nevertheless, in some cases, this patriotic glorification was not so straightforward. What should be made of this small group of men who participated in the underground struggle while also being part of the enemy occupation apparatus? Indeed, foreign nationals received Belgian decorations, and Belgians were awarded foreign honours, but the countries involved were those of the Entente or, possibly, neutral powers. In this case, however, the individuals in question were enemies because of their nationality during the conflict. So, how could these men, who arrived in Belgium as German occupiers but had since become Polish citizens, be recognized as having participated in the Belgian resistance? It is first necessary to review their trajectories after the war. The case of the Ciska brothers is the simplest: we have no idea what became of them. The case of Adalbert Helbig is a bit less straightforward. It appears that he remained in Bertrix for at least some time, where he wrote an activity report in December 1918, indicating that he had escaped the internment measures imposed on German nationals in lib-

[44] AGR, CAP, nr 1051, Note concerning Maryan Szeszicki [sic], Walthère Dewé, Liège, November 6, 1920; and Letter from the SOA [*Dame Blanche*] to the SA [War Office], Liège, April 24, 1919.

[45] P. Durand, *Agents secrets…*, p.173.

[46] See : Van Ypersele L., E. Debruyne, *De la guerre de l'ombre aux ombres de la guerre. L'espionnage en Belgique durant la guerre 1914–1918. Histoire et mémoire*, Bruxelles 2004..

erated Belgium[47]. He is said to have been granted a sum of 1000 francs[48] after the war, but after this point, we lose track of him, just as we do of his cousin, Ignace Novicki[49]. Was their post-war trajectory affected in any way by the battles that took place for several months between German soldiers and Polish insurgents in their native province of Posen? We do not know. While their individual paths after the war remain unclear, their involvement in the resistance did not remain entirely unknown. In fact, it was mentioned in a speech given in Brussels by their network leader during a plenary session of the House of Representatives on April 9, 1919. Fernand Golenvaux, a Catholic MP and former resistance member who had survived a death sentence and returned from deportation in Germany, spoke about his experience in the clandestine struggle under occupation. In his speech, Golenvaux briefly paid tribute to "these good Poles from Posen (Poznań), reluctantly conscripted into the enemy ranks, who served us so well and so faithfully"[50]. Although this was the first public mention of the Poles in the Belgian resistance of the Great War, it would also be the last. The only exception would be the particular treatment Marian Szeszycki, also born in the province of Posen (Poznań). His path has been somewhat identified and reveals several issues related to both symbolic and material recognition. After deserting the German army, he was forced to hide in a safehouse of the *Dame blanche* network. He reappeared in public once the German army had finished leaving Belgian territory at the end of November 1918. By December, Szeszycki left his refuge and moved to 36 Rue François in Seraing, in the Liège metropolitan area. As a German national, his situation was theoretically precarious, given that the Belgian authorities were implementing out a form of "ethnic cleansing" policy aimed at removing Germans living on Belgian soil. However, the creation of the Polish state placed people like Szeszycki, originally from contested regions of the former German Empire, in an ambiguous position. All German nationals who had served in the army or occupation apparatus were supposed to be interned for expulsion, but a distinction was made for minorities now detached from Germany, particularly

[47] F. Caestecker, T. Roobrouck, *De jacht op de Duitsers in het bevrijd België, 1918-1925. De beschuldiging van collectief verraad door de Belgische Duitsers en Duitse Belgen getoest*, in: *Quand les canons se taisent. En toen zwegen de kanonnen. When the Guns Fall Silent*, eds. P. A. Tallier and P. Nefors (eds.), Brussels 2010, pp. 225–253.

[48] AGR, CAP, nr 2487, Document sent to the 2nd Bureau of the General Staff, SRA, undated; AGR, CAP, nr 2487, Report by Mr. A. Helbig, Bertrix, December 12, 1918.

[49] We have not found any individual files in their name in the archives of the *Police des Etrangers* held at the State Archives of Belgium.

[50] Annales parlementaires. Chamber, Sessions of Wednesday, April 9, 1919, p. 744.

the Poles and Alsatians. This distinction, however, only took effect several weeks after the Armistice[51]. Fortunately for Szeszycki, the services he had rendered during the war earned him considerable support, and there is no indication in his file with the *Police des Etrangers* (Aliens Police) that he was ever threatened with internment or expulsion. Thus, a former political prisoner from Saint-Léonard, Engineer Tonneau of the Cockerill Industries, to whom he had provided assistance during his imprisonment, offered him a job at the factory, with the approval of General Director Greiner, at a salary of 6 francs per day[52]. Moreover, Szeszycki likely did not remain in the position for long, as he later complained that his salary represented only half of what he earned in Germany before the war, while the cost of living had tripled in the meantime[53].

Nevertheless, Szeszycki did not lose contact with the "*Corps d'Observation anglais au front Ouest*" (English Observation Corps on the Western Front), the "official" name for the *Dame Blanche*, which had opened an office in Liège to handle the administrative liquidation of the organization. It was in this context that he was asked, as a former member of the "Saint- Léonard prison service in Liège" and a former guard, to testify about the fate of the detainees and the events that occurred during the war at the prison. On November 30, 1918, he provided a four-page statement in German – due to his insufficient command of French – which was later translated into French. In his deposition, he described the conditions of detention at Saint-Léonard, particularly condemning the Weissbarth and his deputy, *Unteroffizier* Holltmann, who, like Szeszycki, were mobilized in Duisburg[54]. He accused them of having embezzled large quantities of supplies (coffee, bread, sugar, etc.) delivered for political prisoners at the prison, either by the city of Liège or by the families. He denounced the inadequacy of the food, both in quantity and quality, explaining that prisoners "fainted from hunger". He also described the threats and violence committed by the two German NCOs, who he accused of pointing "their revolvers at the chest and face" of some detainees, beating them, and sending them on their own initiative to an unsanitary solitary confinement for weeks. Furthermore, they were accused of throwing away

[51] F. Caestecker, *Wie was nu de vijand? De constructie van de 'Duitser' bij het aflijnen van ongewenste vreemdelingen (1918–1919)*, in: *Une guerre totale? La Belgique dans la Première Guerre mondiale. Nouvelles tendances de la recherche historique*, eds. Serge Jaumain (et al.), Brussels, pp. 519–531.

[52] AGR, CAP, nr 1051, Letter from the SOA [*Dame blanche*] to the SA [War Office], Liège, April 24, 1919.

[53] AGR, CAP, nr 1051, Letter from Joseph Blintz, Inspector of Special Police, to Walthère Dewé, Mulhouse, December 21, 1920.

[54] AGR, CAP, nr 1051, Translation of Szeszycki's report, Liège, November 30, 1918.

the prisoners' correspondence, including letters intended for the officer in charge of the prison (who, moreover, never visited).

Szeszycki was equally accusatory toward the personnel of the Liège *Polizeistelle*, whom he accused of frequently torturing prisoners to force confessions. He described how they, stripped prisoners naked, then beat them "with canes, even with chairs"[55]. When Szeszycki returned the prisoners to their cells, "they were all bruised and could no longer walk or stand; they were covered in blood"[56]. He named eight detainees – including the Alsatian Joseph Zilliox – who had endured such torture between November 1917 and March 1918, as well as the names of the seven police officers involved in these abuses. Szeszycki, who had experienced the system from the inside, proved to be a valuable witness, so much so that he was summoned by the Belgian military justice system, which had to investigate the cases of those who had worked for the *Polizeistelle*. Thus, he appeared as a witness in early 1919 regarding the "sheep" cases at the Liège prison[57].

Through the *Dame Blanche*, Szeszycki also reconnected with Franz Creusen, who was then working with former members of the network. Szeszycki found in him a powerful ally to help fulfill a cherished wish: for his wife to join him in Belgium. Michalina Bartkowiak, Szeszycki's wife, also from the province of Posen, still lived in the Ruhr, which was in close proximity to the part of the Rhineland now occupied by the Belgian army. Creusen, assisted by the senior members of the *Dame Blanche*, worked diligently to go to Duisburg and organize the Michalin's relocation to Liège[58], handling the necessary formalities. In doing so, he earned the approval of the *Sûreté militaire* (Military Security) of the Occupation Army, which did not oppose the operation[59]. The couple was finally reunited in Belgium in the spring of 1919[60].

This happy reunion, however, should not obscure the distress Szeszycki felt during this period. Exiled—unable to return to Germany due to his

[55] Regarding German prison and police violence, see: E. Debruyne, E. Rezsöhazy, and L. van Ypersele, *Dans les mains de la police allemande. Les violences carcérales et policières comme expérience d'occupation en Belgique, 1914–1918*, "Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains" 272 (2018), nr 4, pp. 65–90.

[56] AGR, CAP, nr 1051, Translation of Szeszycki's report, Liège, November 30, 1918.

[57] AGR, F1649, APE, nr 1113347, Letter from Charles, Chief Inspector of Military Security, to Remy, Director of Public Security, Liège, March 15, 1919. For post-war trials, see: *La Patrie crie vengeance! La Répression des «inciviques» belges au sortir de la guerre 1914–1918*, eds. X. Rousseaux, L. van Ypersele, Brussels 2008.

[58] AGR, CAP, nr 1051, Letter from SOA [*Dame Blanche*] to SA [War Office], Liège, 24 April 1919.

[59] AGR, CAP, nr 1051, Letter from Creusen to Dewé, undated [spring 1919].

[60] *Un hommage qui est dû*, "Gazette de Liège", 3 July, 1919.

desertion, and with the situation in the Posen region being very unstable at the time—he was cut off from his pre-war social network. Haunted by a sense of social demotion, Szeszycki, despite the support from the relationships he had forged through his clandestine involvement in Belgium, felt abandoned. Not by Creusen, who, according to a report, continued to have "considerable moral influence"[61] over him, but by the former members of the Dame Blanche network, with whom he, bitter, eventually severed ties in early 1919. Apparently quite disoriented, Szeszycki even went so far as to complain about the Dame Blanche to another of his contacts, Commissioner of Police Crepin, asking him to intervene[62]. He also made attempts to reach out to King Albert and the British Embassy in Brussels[63].

This psychological state was likely linked to the fact that Szeszycki, as he confided to Creusen, had lent the little financial resources he had at the end of the war to another Polish exile, who had not yet returned the money—or at least not by that time. The leaders of the *Dame Blanche* decided to overlook Szeszycki's resentment and come to his aid through Creusen's good offices. It was agreed that, given his "acts of unparalleled heroism and generosity", and despite his "difficult and primitive character", the network would take responsibility for his situation and find him housing and a small capital of 500 francs to help him support his wife[64]. The network also attempted to find him a job, considering reaching out to a director of a piling company in the Campine region.

The leaders of the *Dame Blanche* also considered Szeszycki's "heroism" as grounds to propose him, alongside Franz Creusen, for the British Empire Medal (BEM). Meanwhile, Fauquenot and Birkel, who had since married, were nominated for a higher decoration: the Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE)[65]. The British government responded favorably to the proposals and awarded these decorations in February 1920, except for Szeszycki, who was refused on the grounds of his "status as

[61] AGR, CAP, nr 1051, Note Regarding Maryan Szeszicki [sic], Walthère Dewé, Liège, 6 November 1920.

[62] AGR, CAP, nr 1051, Letter from SOA [*Dame Blanche*] to SA [War Office], Liège, 24 April 1919.

[63] AGR, F1649, APE, nr 1113347, Letter from MS to the Minister of England, 20 February 1919.

[64] AGR, CAP, nr 1051, Note Regarding Maryan Szeszicki [sic], Walthère Dewé, Liège, 6 November 1920.

[65] Regarding the official recognition of members of intelligence networks, see: E. Debruyne, *Sortir de l'ombre – Des combattants clandestins en quête de reconnaissance*, in: *Quand les canons se taisent. En toen zwegen de kanonnen. When the Guns Fall Silent*, eds. P. A. Tallier & P. Nefors (eds.), Brussels 2010, p. 449–479.

a German soldier"[66]. The same would have applied to the French authorities, though it remains unclear to which order he had been proposed. Fauquenot, who was working in the liquidation office for networks that had operated for the French services, advocated for Szeszycki with his superiors and British counterparts. He succeeded in securing a sum of 2,000 francs, with an additional 3,000 francs provided by the British at the request of Henry Landau, the former officer in charge of the *Dame Blanche* network[67]. Despite several testimonies attesting to the assistance Szeszycki had provided to prisoners, whether from members of the *Dame Blanche* or others, these sums were not awarded for his services but rather as financial aid following his desertion. A report written at the end of 1920 by Walthère Dewé, the head of *Dame Blanche*, revealed that Szeszycki was disappointed by the amount, and likely expected more[68]. The multiple complaints he filed in 1919 with various Belgian and Allied authorities reportedly "spoiled his case and discouraged many people who were fully devoted to him". Moreover, Dewé added that it would be useful for the government to grant him some form of official recognition. Moreover, Dewé's report reveals another difficulty Szeszycki faced after the war: he had conflicts with former prisoners, who, seeing him only as a German guard, accused him of having mistreated them and even physically assaulted and threatened to drag him to court.

By the summer of 1919, there was probably some improvement in Szeszycki's situation. Not only was his wife now by his side, but he also received some form of public recognition through an article dedicated to him in the Catholic regional daily La Gazette de Liège on 3 July 1919. Titled "A Tribute that is Due," the article celebrated his "devotion," "without selfishness," "out of simple hatred for the Boche, and sympathy for the Belgians, whom he considered the oppressed brothers of his fellow countrymen."[69]

---

[66] AGR, CAP, nr 1051, Note Regarding Maryan Szeszicki [sic], Walthère Dewé, Liège, 6 November 1920.

[67] For example, let's cite the letter from the Belgian guard Herman Leenders addressed in May 1919 to the Military Security regarding the torture inflicted on a detainee (who was later sentenced to death and executed): "I am sure of these facts since I was the one who fed him for 35 days during his detention, with the complicity of the Polish soldier Marganne [sic]." – AGR, CAP, nr 668, Letter from Herman Leenders to the Military Security, Liège, 25 May 1919.

[68] AGR, CAP, nr 1051, Note Regarding Maryan Szeszicki [sic], Walthère Dewé, Liège, 6 November 1920.

69 *Un hommage qui est dû*, "Gazette de Liège" July 3, 1919. It should be noted that the article appears as a newspaper clipping in the file compiled by the Aliens Police of the Public Security in the name of Szeszycki and his wife (see: AGR, F1649, APE, nr 1113347).

The article's author also made it known that a subscription had been opened to raise money to help Szeszycki. Shortly after, he left Seraing but remained in the Liège area. He moved with his wife to 4 rue des Coteaux, in a small house in a greener neighborhood, just a stone's throw from his new job. Szeszycki was now working for a weekly salary of 120 francs at the Société de l'Air Liquide in Ougrée[70].

In 1921, Szeszycki was again asked to provide testimony about the last moments of several prisoners executed during the war[71]. However, his personal situation still seems to have failed to stabilize. Information about him becomes less frequent, but it appears that he moved again in 1922. By July 1925, he had left his new home, likely after separating from his wife. This is when he left Belgian territory, and his trail goes cold. The *Police des Etrangers* notes that his country of residence at that time had no reason to reproach him ("His conduct and morality had not attracted any unfavorable remarks, and he was not known to have any particular relationships or associations"[72]), but Szeszycki seems to have wanted to start a new life elsewhere. After considering moving to France, he is said to have settled in Esch-sur-Alzette, in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. This departure is particularly striking, as it came at a time when numerous people with a similar profile to his were arriving in Belgium. Between 1923 and 1925, thousands of miners from the Ruhr region (like Szeszycki before the war), who had chosen Polish nationality, left Germany to settle in Belgium, which was experiencing a labor shortage in its coal mining sector[73]. Is there a connection between this migration trend and Szeszycki's departure, or was it simply a coincidence? The sources do not allow for a definitive answer to this question.

The Memory of a "Brave Pole"

Although Szeszycki's personal trajectory remains obscure afterward, it is still possible to trace his memory as a "character" associated with the memory

[70] AGR, F1649, APE, nr 1113347, Pro Justitia from the Police Commissariat of the 8th Division, City of Liège, concerning Maryan Szeszycki, 3 November 1925.

[71] These reports – or part of them – are dated August 16, 1921, and are compiled in: AGR, CAP, nr 1369.

[72] AGR, F1649, APE, nr 1113347, Pro Justitia from the Police Commissariat of the 8th Division, City of Liège, concerning Maryan Szeszycki, 3 November 1925.

[73] F. Caestecker, *Alien Policy in Belgium, 1840–1940. The Creation of Guest Workers, Refugees and Illegal Aliens*, New York – Oxford 2000, p. 65–69.

Spis treści

of the occupation in Belgium, generally under the name "Maryan." Fifteen years after the article dedicated to him in the *Gazette de Liège*, "Maryan" made his first literary appearance in 1934 in the book *L'Intelligence Service en Belgique* by the French publicist Jean Bardanne, which was dedicated to the *Dame Blanche*[74]. Bardanne's mention of the "brave Pole […] Maryan Szeszycki" was very brief and only reproduced an excerpt from the general report written after the war on clandestine activities at Saint-Léonard, which the author had managed to obtain[75]. The name "Maryan" appeared again twice on the following pages, referring to the escape of Creusen and Fauquenot, but there was no further elaboration.

However, the character of Szeszycki reappeared the following year in *The Secrets of the White Lady*[76], a book published in 1935 by Putnam's Sons in the United States. Its author, Henry Landau, recounted – often in great detail – his experience as a former British intelligence officer. This book was the second he wrote on the subject, following *All's Fair*, published the previous year by the same publisher. In this second book, Landau focused primarily on the *Dame Blanche* network, the flagship of the espionage organization he led. Among many other episodes, he recounted in detail the escape of Creusen and Fauquenot, and the decisive role played by "Maryan" in this affair. Landau portrayed the courage and decisive action of a Pole filled with resentment against Germany, which, like many of his compatriots, had forced him to serve and sacrifice for a cause that was not his own: "though on the surface he was servile, he resented his forced conscription in the German Army."[77]

This apparent "servility" was the first description given of Szeszycki by a Belgian author, when in 1937, the Catholic writer from Liège, Laurent Lombard, described his own experience as a resistance member and a political prisoner during the Great War. The portrait he painted of Szeszycki in *Face au Peloton* was as follows: "average height, a forbidding face, thick black mustache. [...] Maryan indeed rendered invaluable services to many prisoners, but for disguising his actions, he was rude and brutal toward

[74] J. Bardanne, *L'Intelligence Service en Belgique*, Paris 1935. It should be noted that Szeszycki is briefly mentioned as a "Polish soldier" in 1926, without his name being cited, in the writing of a former political prisoner of Saint-Léonard, the Spaniard Jaime Mir, who was also involved in Belgian networks and sentenced to death for his actions – J. Mir, *Mémoires d'un condamné à mort 1914–1918*, Paris 1926, p. 167.

[75] Notice on the Saint-Léonard prison service associated with our unit, undated, in: AGR, CAP, nr 514, reproduced in: J. Bardanne, *L'Intelligence Service…*, pp. 116–117.

[76] H. Landau, *Secrets of the White Lady*, New York 1935, p. 107–109, 154–164.

[77] *Idem*, *All's Fair*, New York 1934, p. 107.

others"[78] Arriving at Saint-Léonard in June 1917, at a time when Szeszycki was already deeply involved in the activities orchestrated by Creusen and Fauquenot, Laurent Lombard was unfortunate enough to find himself among these "others".

The same year, a French author, reserve commander Paul Durand, published Agents secrets. L'affaire Fauquenot-Birkel. Durand wrote extensively about the Saint-Léonard prison and the schemes being plotted there, but he mentioned "Maryan" almost exclusively for his role in the escape of Creusen and Fauquenot. He was, however, very vague about the reasons behind this role, merely presenting the character as "the Polish Maryan, a friend, lost among the German troops"[79]. While Durand's narrative was told from Fauquenot's perspective, two years later, in *Le Fusillé vivant*, the same Laurent Lombard, who had briefly mentioned "Maryan" in *Face au Peloton*, adopted the viewpoint of Franz Creusen. The somewhat ambiguous description Lombard gave of Szeszycki in 1937 gave way to a much more detailed and positive portrait. In the meantime, Poland had been invaded by Germany, and at the time *Le Fusillé vivant* was published, the Belgian population lived in fear of suffering the same fate. Lombard noted that "the Polish Maryan Szeszycki" may have initially appeared rough with Creusen, but after his return from the Chartreuse, he showed him all his "sympathy"[80]. This work is by far the one that most extensively describes Szeszycki's particular position, highlighting his double-dealing towards his superior Weissbarth and, at the same time, the contrast between the compassion of the former and the contemptible character of the latter. Lombard devoted several pages to describing the secret exchanges between Creusen and Fauquenot, and how Szeszycki served their causes. He also portrayed the anxious character of the Pole and his difficulty in expressing himself in French, as well as the trusting relationship he had with Creusen, which was nurtured by their ability to speak German together. A few months before the publication of *Le Fusillé vivant*, Lombard had already reintroduced the figure of Marian Szeszycki, who briefly appeared by name in *Le Drame de la Villa des Hirondelles*, portrayed as a guard filled with compassion for the *Dame Blanche* agents who were captured and beaten by their interrogators[81].

[78] L. Lombard, *Face au Peloton*, Stavelot 1937, p. 128–129.
[79] P. Durand, *Agents secrets…*, p.141.
[80] L. Lombard, *Le Fusillé vivant*, Stavelot 1939, p. 118–141.
[81] *Idem*, *Le Drame de la Villa des Hirondelles*, Stavelot, 1939, p. 116–117.

Conclusion

The difficulties Marian Szeszycki faced in the post-war period illustrate the gap between a war conceived in a narrow national framework and the broader dynamics that emerged during the conflict. These dynamics led to a reconfiguration not only of spatial but also of the mental frameworks of collective identities. As a citizen of the German state, where he had found opportunities for mobility and career before 1914—having migrated from province of Posen to the Ruhr—Szeszycki found himself caught in a war that revived tensions between his Polish identity and his German citizenship. While the latter led him to wear—probably against his will—the German uniform, the former fuelled his hatred of what that uniform represented, to the point where he chose to serve those who, in the name of an identity completely foreign to his own, aimed to fight it. By doing so, he exposed his own life just as they did theirs. After the war, Szeszycki was no longer a citizen of a Germany, a state that might have considered him a coward or a traitor. However, he did not become a hero for the newly independent Poland, which he did not join, nor for Belgium, where he had fought in the shadows and where he eventually settled, soon joined by his wife. He was also not recognized as a hero by France or England, whose agents and networks had nonetheless benefited from his services. In the end, and as far as we know, Szeszycki did not find a new place to settle in Belgium. After the Posen region and the Ruhr, he left the Liège region in 1925 for an uncertain future.

In terms of official recognition, Szeszycki found himself in a sort of no-man's land after the war. But perhaps this is not the most important point. It is, in fact, the relationships he formed, the interpersonal recognition that he could rely on, albeit with some tensions, that opened up a few gaps that earned him, if not recognition, at least the goodwill of the Allied authorities. These relationships were formed in the complicity of underground struggle. Szeszycki was not alone in this, even though we do not know what became of others like him, originating—at least for Helbig and Novicki—from the province of Posen, a fertile ground for Polish national identity. Although not always clearly visible in the sources, it is striking to note that the incorporation of Poles from the province of Posen, probably Catholic (or who identified as such in Szeszycki's case), seems to have been facilitated by a religious proximity. Golenvaux, Wasseige, or members of the *Dame Blanche* network all operated within the Belgian Catholic socio-confessional pillar. From this secret complicity during the war emerged the memory of "brave Poles", a memory that did not only belong to those who had known

them but, once again, primarily carried by Catholics. This memory found expression after the war in confidential reports and, on a broader scale, in Parliament and the press. Much later, this memory spread among Belgian, French, and Anglo-Saxon readers who reflected on the previous war experience as the danger grew again for both Poland and Belgium. By taking advantage of the position of occupiers imposed on them to secretly support the occupied, whom they had originally seen as strangers, these Poles not only struck a blow against a Germany in which they did not identify but also unknowingly contributed to spreading a favourable image of Poland in Western countries at a time when it was trying to rebuild and assert itself as a state and nation.

Bibliography:

References:

Archives

State Archives of Belgium (AGR),

Archives de la Commission des Archives des Services patriotiques (Archives of the Commission for the Archives of Patriotic Services)
Numbers: 514, 666, 668, 1051, 1369, 2487, 2508, 2509, 2832, 1699–1702, 1794–1796, 2725–2749.

Archives de la Police des Etrangers (Archives of the Aliens Police),
F1649, nr 1113347

References

Annales parlementaires. Chamber, Sessions of Wednesday, April 9, 1919.
Bardanne J., *L'Intelligence Service en Belgique*, Paris 1935.
Bodart E., *Une source méconnue de l'histoire de la Première Guerre mondiale: la collection d'imprimés réunie par Fernand Golenvaux*, in: *Namur à l'heure allemande. 1914–1918*, eds. E. Bodart, M. Ch. Claes, A. Tixhon, Namur 2010, p. 42–51.
Caestecker F., *Alien Policy in Belgium, 1840–1940. The Creation of Guest Workers, Refugees and Illegal Aliens*, New York – Oxford 2000, p. 65–69.
Caestecker F., Roobrouck T., *De jacht op de Duitsers in het bevrijd België, 1918-1925. De beschuldiging van collectief verraad door de Belgische Duitsers en Duitse Belgen getoest*, in: *Quand les canons se taisent. En toen zwegen de kanonnen. When the Guns Fall Silent*, eds. P. A. Tallier and P. Nefors (eds.), Brussels 2010, p. 225–253.
Caestecker F., *Wie was nu de vijand? De constructie van de 'Duitser' bij het aflijnen van*

ongewenste vreemdelingen (1918–1919), in: *Une guerre totale? La Belgique dans la Première Guerre mondiale. Nouvelles tendances de la recherche historique*, eds. Serge Jaumain (et al.), Brussels, p. 519–531.

De Schaepdrijver S., E. Debruyne, *Sursum Corda: The Underground Press in Occupied Belgium, 1914–1918*, „First World War Studies" 1 (2013), p. 23–38.

De Schaepdrijver S., *La Belgique et la Première Guerre mondiale*, Brussels 2004.

Debruyne E., *Combattre l'occupant en Belgique et dans les départements français occupés. 1914–1918. Une 'résistance avant la lettre'?*, in: „Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire" 115 (2012), p. 15–30.

Debruyne E., *Sortir de l'ombre – Des combattants clandestins en quête de reconnaissance*, in: *Quand les canons se taisent. En toen zwegen de kanonnen. When the Guns Fall Silent*, eds. P. A. Tallier & P. Nefors (eds.), Brussels 2010, p. 449–479.

Debruyne E., Rezsöhazy E., and van Ypersele L., *Dans les mains de la police allemande. Les violences carcérales et policières comme expérience d'occupation en Belgique, 1914–1918*, "Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains" 272 (2018), nr 4, p. 65–90.

Debruyne E., van Ypersele L., *Je serai fusillé demain. Les dernières lettres des patriotes belges et français fusillés par l'occupant. 1914–1918*, Bruxelles 2011.

Decock P., *La Dame Blanche. A World War I Intelligence Network*, Brussels 2010.

Durand P., *Agents secrets. L'affaire Fauquenot-Birkel*, Paris 1937 and L. Lombard, *Le Fusillé vivant*, Stavelot 1939.

Jahr C., *Gewöhnliche Soldaten: Desertion und Deserteure im deutschen und britischen Heer 1914–1918*, Göttingen 1998.

Kaczmarek R., *Poles in Kaiser's Army. On the Front of the First World War*, Berlin (et al.) 2020.

Kaufmann J., *Elusive Alliance: The German Occupation of Poland in World War I*, Cambridge, 2015.

La guerre de 1914–1918 dans la région de Guise, témoignage de Charles Ghewy, fermier. Audigny, in: „Mémoires de la Fédération des sociétés d'histoire et d'archéologie de l'Aisne", ed. P. Romagny, 1982, p. 153–173

Landau H. *All's Fair*, New York 1934.

Landau H., *Secrets of the White Lady*, New York 1935.

Lehnstaedt S., *Imperiale Polenpolitik in den Weltkriegen: Eine vergleichende Studie zu den Mittelmächten und zu NS-Deutschland*, Osnabrück 2017.

Lehnstaedt S., *La Première Guerre mondiale en Pologne : simple prodrome à l'indépendance nationale ?*, in: „Histoire@Politique. Politique, culture, société" 22 (2014).

Lombard L., *Face au Peloton*, Stavelot 1937.

Lombard L., *Le Drame de la Villa des Hirondelles*, Stavelot, 1939.

Lombard L., *Le Fusillé vivant*, Stavelot 1939.

Mir J., *Mémoires d'un condamné à mort 1914–1918*, Paris 1926.

Pacco J. F. (et al.), *Les carnets du chanoine Schmitz. La Grande Guerre au jour le jour en province de Namur et de Luxembourg. 1914–1919*, t.2, *1917–1919*, vol. 2, 1917–1919, Namur 2020.

Spis treści

Szlanta P., *A Seminal 'Anti-Catastrophe'. Historiography on World War I in Poland, 1914–2019*, in: Writing the Great War. The Historiography of World War I from 1918 to the Present, eds. C. Cornelissen, A. Weinrich, New York – Oxford 2021, p. 302–337.

Van Ypersele L., E. Debruyne, *De la guerre de l'ombre aux ombres de la guerre. L'espionnage en Belgique durant la guerre 1914–1918. Histoire et mémoire*, Bruxelles 2004.

Watson A., *Fighting for Another Fatherland: The Polish minority in the German Army 1914–1918*, „English Historical Review" 552 (2011), p. 1137–1166.

Internet sources, unpublished works and the press

Mazy V., *Entre occupation et libération: La prison secondaire de Liège (Saint-Léonard) entre 1914 et 1919*, Master's thesis in History, UCLouvain, 2021.

Piégais G., *Les Déserteurs de Hollande: Les interrogatoires des déserteurs allemands par le réseau Hunter, 1916–1918*, Master's thesis in History, UCLouvain, 2015.

Rezsöhazy E., *De la protection du secret militaire à l'occupation des populations civiles. Les polices secrètes allemandes derrière le Front Ouest (1914–1918)*, PhD dissertation in History, Art, and Archaeology, UCLouvain, 2020.

Ronvau M., *Fernand Golenvaux, bourgmestre, espion et prisonnier*, n.d. [no date]. Available at: https://www.marcronvaux.be/Files/golenvaux.pdf (last accessed on April 26, 2024).

Un hommage qui est dû, "Gazette de Liège", July 3, 1919.

https://grandeguerre.icrc.org/fr (last accessed on April 11, 2024).