



ARTYKUŁ

## **I was a sewer rat. Young Warsaw insurgents beneath the streets of the fighting capital.**

Author: **Bogusław Kamola** 01.12.2019

The account of Bogusław Kamola codename "Hipek" - a 14 years old Home Army soldier fighting in the 227th scout platoon (Sewer Rats) during the Warsaw Uprising - is a source of knowledge concerning the insurgent sewer communications and at the same time indirectly exposes the Communist disinformation conveyed in the film "Sewer".

**The outbreak of the Uprising - the account of a scout from the Żoliborz district**

Bogusław Kamola perfectly remembers August 1<sup>st</sup> 1944:

“At the Żoliborz district, first shots were fired at around 2 pm., even before hour <<W>>. It was connected with the operation of moving weapons near the Suzin Street. The Polish Home Army unit [...] stumbled upon a German patrol and a shootout broke out” [the unit was led by Zdzisław Sierpiński “Marek Świda”].

For that reason, the uprising at Żoliborz was pushed forward.

“I believe, this unfortunate incident was what caused all the confusion concerning the mobilisation of the Home Army. The Żoliborz operation was a signal to the Germans, that there indeed would be some kind of a fight or an armed resistance. Hence, all the German forces at the capital were put on maximum combat readiness”.

The Żoliborz events prevented the barely 14 years old Bogusław Kamola from receiving the order to mobilise. He hadn't learned about it until August 4<sup>th</sup>. He had to be clever in order to join his squad.

“I was reached by the platoon's runner. He told me the platoon was up and running, mobilising. And of course, that it would be best if the joining soldiers would come armed. [...] My dad was a weapons' supplier of the whole <<Żywiciel>>, then of the <<Żmija>> group. Due to that fact, we had lots of weapons buried in the basement. I decided to dig it out. [...] In the evening, I secretly went down to the basement and dug out the <<efenka>> handgun [Browning M1910/22], the one with an extended barrel and 53 bullets, so quite a lot, and another magazine. I prepared all that and left the apartment in the morning unnoticed. The German guards at the outposts didn't see me and I sneaked through an oil mill to the Rudzka Street and from that to the Vistula river. After that, I went through river canes to the Potocka Street. The first insurgent units were already stationed there. That's how I ended up at the Krasiński 20 Street”.

Troops of the 227<sup>th</sup> scout platoon, which after August 10<sup>th</sup> was included in the “Żyrafa” group, were stationed there.

“When I joined the platoon, I discovered that all of its soldiers were either my friends from junior high, or from secret schools, or from where I lived. We, the Żoliborz youth, were always involved in something. Since it was all conspiracy, absolutely no one told each other about it. We knew each other, but we didn't know who was in the other scout teams. They weren't people from nowhere, quickly organised into a unit. We knew each other very well, which gave us enormous strength and encouragement.”



› Uczestnicy tajnych kompletów w domu pp. Dzierżewiczów przy ul. Trószyńskiego; Bogusław Kamola stoi pierwszy z lewej; Warszawa, 3 maja 1944 roku

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**Participants of secret education in the house of Dzierżewiczowie by pr. Trószyński Street; Bogusław Kamola standing first from the left; Warsaw, May 3rd 1944**



› Pluton harcerski 227, zgrupowanie „Żyrafa” na dziedzińcu bloku przy ul. Krasińskiego 20

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**227th scout platoon, “Żyrafa” group at the Krasiński 20 Street bloc yard**



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**At the crossing of the Krasiński and Stoleczna Streets (today Popiełuszki Street) was the hatch, which Bogusław Kamola used to go down to the sewers**

## **Special communications - sewers**

The barricade at the Krasiński 20 Street was one of the most important strategic positions defending the access to the Wilson's Square, the centre of Żoliborz, from the West. However, this position was important for one more reason.

“The access to Krasiński was defended by the monastery of the sisters of the resurrection, then by us at Krasiński 20, and on the other side by the Krasiński 29 bloc. Our barricade held off until the end of the uprising [in fact, the insurgents retreated from these positions at the end of September 1944, after a massive German attack on Żoliborz]. Before the war, in front of the bloc were some lots and a few houses. On the left, was a chemical institute occupied by the Germans. On the right, about a kilometre away, was the German artillery. We were actually surrounded by the German forces all the time at that field. The barricade we built connected the Krasiński 20 bloc, crossing the street, with the Krasiński 29 bloc up to the sisters' monastery. The sewers hatch was reachable from the barricade. As it later turned out, we had a key element of the sewers communications.”

The communication problems between the isolated units and districts of the fighting capital forced the uprising's command to look for an alternate way of communicating. In cooperation with the city's water supply workers, special communication routes were prepared, under the city, in the sewers.

“Żoliborz was especially cut off, since it was limited by the railway line of the Gdański station. It was a natural wall, controlled by the Germans, which prevented us from reaching the city centre and the old town. That’s why the command decided [...] to form special units, which would take on communications through the sewers. [...] Our platoon [...] was assigned to do that. [...] I suspect we were chosen, because we were an experienced squad. We were young boys, quite athletic, not tall, motivated, scouts. It was a perfect group. [...]

The assignment to the sewers I received as an honour, I thought it was a special task. However, I was scared at the same time. I remembered a storm drain flooded with water, which I had seen as a little boy. [...]

We chose the teams in which we walked through the sewers ourselves, there were no orders in that matter. Żoliborz’s command of course had its main group, we were the doers. But the brains behind the work in the sewers were lieutenant <<Gałązka>> [Lieut. Zygmunt Zbigniew Zamięcki, the commander of the platoon’s special-sewers communications at Żoliborz] [...] and a group of employees of the former Water Supply and Sewers Company. These employees provided us with pre-war plans of some parts of the sewers, so when we took part in operations, commander <<Gałązka>> knew where we were heading to, what routes we were using and which sections”.

## **The name “sewer rats” stayed with them for good**

“When it comes to the name <<sewer rats>>, we saw many rats in the sewers and someone came up with the name. [...] This name stuck to us until the very end, which I’m very proud of. Rats are very clever creatures, resilient, surviving in any conditions – that fit us.”

<<Sewer rats>> - this name stuck to us until the very end, which I’m very proud of. Rats are very clever creatures, resilient, surviving

in any conditions – that fit us.

His first descent into the sewers he remembered for life.

“We were going down with the order to check if the sewers leading to the old town were passable. There were five of us. We didn’t reach our target then, but we did a reconnaissance of the area – under the Gdański station, reaching the Stawki street and what used to be the ghetto. [...] The so-called <<our>> hatch was back then (and is to this day) the last entrance to the sewers before the <<storm drain>>, which is the meeting point of a few sewers leading north. Apart from the specific smell, the incredible hum and ripple in the cramped, dark space made us scared of something unknown. We had to zip line down, to the dark abyss. It was an unforgettable experience. When we did reach the bottom, it turned out, that the water level was high – at the end of August, the sewers were still operational in the central district, water was still reaching people’s homes. It was all accompanied by the feeling of uncertainty, where we were, and by fear. We were ordered to hang on to each other’s panther jackets and to touch the sewers’ walls with the other hand. It was shaped like a horseshoe and was quite high too, around 1,8 metres. Dragging our feet, we moved forward. Of course, we were forbidden to talk, scream and take our feet above the water, we were only allowed to drag them on the bottom of the sewer”.

The “sewer rats” quickly adapted to the harsh conditions underground.

“When we first descended, we got high wellingtons, with uppers to the knees. We would stick our pants in the shoes. Apart from that, we had helmets and weapons. We always had very good weapons – either Sten or Lightning submachine guns. But during our first time, when the sewage poured into the uppers, who didn’t have tightly fit shoes lost them in the sludge quickly. The sewage practically made it impossible to walk, we had to drag our feet on the bottom. All in all, it was also very slippery and you could fall any time. [...] We usually wore trainers with holes, on our bare feet, so the water would pour through and the shoes stayed on. Apart from that, we wore short pants – they didn’t take water and made it easier to walk through the sewers. It was an important invention; however, it made our legs more vulnerable to small wounds and in the sewers they could easily get infected. [...] Our only medicine for that, was a grey ointment, nothing more. [...] Then we stopped taking helmets. A helmet, when we fell or hit the wall, made a very loud sound and the echo carried it throughout the whole sewers. [...] Every bullet, every shot fired up on the surface, a vehicle, a tank, a bomb – we felt in the sewers with double force”.

Long time spent in the tunnels underneath Warsaw was dangerous not only because of the possibility of meeting the enemy.

“Every sewage and filth release various gases, e.g. methane, which is deadly for humans. It was the same there. When we went on the surface, we felt half-conscious, poisoned.”

In the Warsaw Rising museum, there are stories of adult insurgents, who broke mentally in the sewers. The 14 years old Bogusław Kamola never broke.

“I never panicked or lived a scene like in Andrzej Wajda’s film <<Sewer>>. [...] Probably, because we were professionals in moving people and equipment through the sewers. We knew, where we were going, what was our goal and how to approach it. We marked street names with white chalk. [...] The worst thing for me, the most stressful, was keeping guard in the sewers. At first, the movement in the tunnels wasn’t controlled, but since more and more people moved through them, passes were introduced. For control, the command ordered guard duty. Our point was near the Gdański station. It was always a tunnel with a branch, which we could use to safely evacuate in case of danger. Standing there, alone or with a friend, in complete darkness and silence, constantly listening if anything happens, left us in enormous tension. Every day, a new light signal was established. If someone didn’t respond to such a password, we were ordered to shoot. Shooting in the sewers was characteristic for one thing - every shot was accurate, there was no chance to avoid the bullet”.





**House by Krasiński 20 Street,  
plaque says: This house, during  
the Warsaw Uprising August-  
September 1944 was the place of  
battle and bastion of the 227th  
Home Army scout platoon,  
“Żyrafa” group**



**Bogusław Kamola in the  
Alengrabow XI prison camp, 1944**



**Bogusław Kamola in 1946**



The sewers opened up communication routes for the insurgents, which they were unable to get above ground. Due to that fact, the “sewer rats” got various tasks.

“We delivered weapons, e.g. to the Old Town. Weapons, which we got from the soldiers based in the Kampinos forest, who were very well armed. [...] Sometimes, these <<foresters>> came with us. They were more athletic, physical, but inexperienced in the sewers. [...] We moved entire squads to the Old Town, and from there to Żoliborz, to arm them. We had to come up with whole logistics for this. Obviously, the groups couldn't be too big, not bigger than 25-30 people. It was connected to the fact, that the sewer hatches were already open. When we reached a hatch, we had to jump underneath, waiting and listening if anything happened above ground. Those, who made it, had to wait for the others. Before the whole group of 20-30 people made it to the other side, a lot of time had passed. [...] Sometimes, people got lost in the tunnels. The sewers are a giant, multilevel, dangerous city. It was a kingdom ruled by fear. Who couldn't take it alone, in the dark, died”.

I never panicked or lived a scene like in  
Andrzej Wajda's film <<Sewer>>.

As the fight went on, the tasks got harder by the day.

“The Germans found out, that we were using the sewers. Hence, there were the open hatches and blocked tunnels. They lowered all kinds of metal rails, beds, barrels and so on, which blocked the water flow, raised its level and made it difficult to pass. Our job was, among other things, to unblock the tunnels and destroy the barricades [...]. One of them, was underneath the Gdański station. Despite countless efforts and trials, we couldn't get rid of it. We were also sent to destroy the barrage blocking the access to the city centre. On the other side, water was already high, so we needed to be very careful when taking down the blockage. In the end, it was blown up by another group of our friends, who got there”.

“Hipek” remembered very well another, similar task.

“We got the orders to destroy a brick wall – the Germans blocked a sewer that way, somewhere beneath the Obozowa Street at the Wola district. We had plans how to get there and information on how the wall was supposedly constructed. We got special food rations (cracker biscuits and twelve sugar cubes each) – it looked like we were to spend there longer than usual. Unfortunately, we got lost. We reached a big room, where several branches and sewer levels met. It was really noisy. As it turned out, our commander lost the way. When we were at the edge of our strength, we stopped to debate on what to do next. Despite some voices calling for a retreat, the commander decided to push on – and he was right. In the next sewer, we found our target. Right after the opened hatch, was a brick wall, illuminated ever so slightly by the light from above. My friend stood guard under the hatch, while I and my friend from school, Zenek started to work on the wall with hammers wrapped in rags. Suddenly, the hatch became dark. Alarm. We threw the hammers into the sewage and waited. Everything became silent. We grabbed our weapons. After a minute, we heard an engine go off and it all became bright once again. It was a German vehicle, which stopped above the hatch. Our commander called for a retreat, but we still reached the base with enormous difficulties”.

In our meeting with Bogusław Kamola, took part an employee of the Warsaw water supply. He filled in the details of this story. As it turned out, the scouts really got lost, and even though they reached the Wola district, they encountered the end of one of the sewer branches. The reinforced concrete wall, built by the employees of the Warsaw sewers, would never fall under the hammers of Bogusław Kamola and his friends.

The main route of the “sewer rats” led from Żoliborz to the Old Town, rarely did the teams move to the city centre.

“The distance between our hatch and the Old Town hatch was around 4.5 km. To walk through that section, took us, depending on the amount of people in the unit, around 4 to 10 hours. Usually, without food or water. Our commander, Lieut. <<Gałązka>> was advised by the sewers’ employees. He would then provide us with the most basic rules on what to do down there, but first and foremost not to be afraid; that there weren’t any special threats. We always tried to walk as safely as possible, as to not slip and fall. [...]

During the uprising, the Old Town was the first district to be exterminated. We were going there, so we saw, what was happening. Going from the green Żoliborz to the burning Old Town was a truly traumatising

experience, the contrast was very visible”.

As it turned out, the sewers were also the place of shelter for the civilians, hiding from the war and the German repressions.

“By the end of August, we stumbled upon some Jews hiding in the sewers. We got the orders, to clear out a passage, somewhere beneath the old ghetto. These tunnels were filled with corpses. In one of the connecting rooms, we found a small platform, and on it a bunch of things – blankets, rags, water buckets, even canned food. We realised, someone must have been hiding there. We started calling for them, and after some time human figures, or more like human wrecks, started appearing out of one of the branches. It was a sore sight. We managed to lead these six people out, to Żoliborz. [...] We once met another several civilians, lost in the sewers, and we managed to get them out as well”.

We delivered weapons, e.g. to the Old Town. Weapons, which we got from the soldiers based in the Kampinos forest, who were very well armed. [...] We moved entire squads to the Old Town, and from there to Żoliborz, to arm them. We had to come up with whole logistics for this.

The difficult service in the sewers communications did not mean, the scouts were relieved of other insurgent duties. However, it came with some privileges too.

“At Krasiński 29 Street we always had water buckets, which we could use to clean up. It wasn't much – a jar each. It was difficult to do, but we tried our best. When it comes to special treatment, that was it. What's more – going down the sewers didn't relieve us of guard duty. I once had an unpleasant situation regarding this. After one of the expeditions – already changed and, let's say, cleaned up – I joined the platoon. When the commander saw me, he told me I was to stand guard since 2 am. My request to put me on guard later fell on deaf ears. Completely exhausted, I went to the barricade. There, I met my friend Tytus who also

stood guard. He took mercy on me and told me to sleep it off in a stairway of a nearby bloc. If anything were to happen, he would call me. And that's what we did. It would all be good, if not for the fact, that due to my fatigue I mistook the stairway. The time to change guards came and I wasn't there. Going off the barricade during the war meant the highest possible penalty - court martial. They started looking for me and of course found me dead asleep. There was a lot of fuss over it... Luckily for me, I only got the scout's punishment - at the morning roll-call I had to do circles around the bloc yard, carrying water buckets before the entire platoon. Given the situation we were in, it was an incredibly light punishment".

Any free time the scouts spent on resting, although they sometimes sang songs together. There were also rare leaves allowed.

"On my birthday I got a leave to meet with my family. I broke through to my home and luckily, on the very same day, on August 25<sup>th</sup> I met my mom and brother there. She welcomed me with tears, but she was very happy that I was still alive. She thought I was going to stay, but I couldn't, I had to get back to my platoon. A week after my visit home, there was an attack on the primary school no. 133, where Germans were stationed. The school was taken and burned. Our home [it was in a neighbouring building] was also destroyed. Fortunately, my family survived. We met again three years later, after I returned from imprisonment".

After the Warsaw Uprising fell, Bogusław Kamola was sent to the German stalag prison camp with very harsh condition, Altengrabow XI. Then, he was forced to work in e.g. Magdeburg. He returned to Poland in 1947. He now lives at the Warsaw Żoliborz district, which he so bravely defended 71 years ago.

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