

# Medical service in the Vilnius Region of the Home Army

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## Summary:

Situation of Polish community in the prewar Vilnius province of the II Republic of Poland during World War II was particularly dramatic. Occupational authorities changed five times and inflicted brutal terror on Poles, particularly on Polish elite. Many of its representatives were murdered and doctors were also found among the victims.

In order to protect themselves as well as Polish character of this region, the Poles organized combat divisions of the Home Army (Armia Krajowa), which fought in all territories belonging to the Vilnius region. Injured soldiers were provided medical aid during combat, as there was a well-organized, adequately equipped and effective medical care system functioning within the Home Army. In this article, the process of formation of this system, its key forms and working methods were described. Selected profiles of doctors were also introduced.

**Key words:** World War II, Home Army, Vilnius region, underground health care.

Attack of the Red Army on Poland in 1939 resulted in breaking of the Vilnius Province into two parts. Its south-east regions were overtaken by the soviet authority and included in the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic. On the other hand, the north-west part, including Vilnius, was attached to Lithuania on the grounds of Lithuanian-Soviet agreement signed in October of the same year [1, 2].

The fact that the main part of Vilnius region fell under Lithuanian occupation, which was relatively non-invasive influenced the development of Polish underground in this territory during World War II. Vilnius became the center of independence operations on the north-east borders of the II Republic of Poland. A large-scale phenomenon appeared of bottom-up

formation of local organizations and conspirational groups, as well as legal societies for charity care. The latter were formed due to the necessity of providing aid to the thousands of refugees and casualties of September 1939 warfare, as well as to the military internees held by the Soviets in Lithuania. There were about 30 thousand war refugees in Vilnius at the end of 1939. For the majority of them, the only source of livelihood was aid of the Lithuanian Red Cross (LRC), which overtook the Polish Red Cross (PRC) points in this town. However, LRC activity was not sufficient.

There were eight prisoner of war (POW) camps in Lithuania containing 12 thousand soldiers and non-commissioned officers (NCO), as well as 2,5 thousand police officers. These camps

were provisional and prisoners suffered from the cold and hunger. Polish community in the Vilnius region tried to provide aid to the fellow countrymen in the POW camps and organize care for the refugees. There were several charity institutions appointed for this purpose. Every one of them established, among other things, outpatient clinics and points providing medical aid to the victims. Therefore, they also recruited doctors and nurses, gathered drugs and medical supplies. It should be emphasized that medical personnel served gladly in those facilities. Many doctors co-created these charity organizations. The largest were: Community Self Aid Society (Towarzystwo Samopomocy Obywatelskiej) led by a Jesuit, Kazimierz Kucharski (dr Stanisław Markiewicz was responsible for medical care), War Refugee Aid Committee (Komitet Pomocy Uchodźcom Wojennym) established by dr Maria Petrusiewicz and the War Victims Assistance Committee (Komitet Pomocy Ofiarom Wojny) managed by Prof. Kazimierz Pelczar, a world-famous oncologist and an admirable social activist. His international connections allowed for an influx of donations to Polish charity organizations in Vilnius from International Red Cross and American charities such as the Commission for Polish Relief and American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee [3, 4].

Another factor influencing the specific character of conspirational work in this region at the beginning of World War II was that the Ministerial Committee for the Home Affairs and the Main Headquarters of the Union for Armed Struggle in Paris (Komitet Ministrów do Spraw Kraju i Komenda Główna Związku Walki Zbrojnej w Paryżu) offered Vilnius region under Lithuanian occupation special treatment. They took steps to gain Lithuanian support for their cause. Therefore, they ordered their activists in Vilnius to hold back their efforts toward building an underground military organization and to focus on charity. This included formation of a system of medical care engaging more and more nurses, dentists, and pharmacists. This is how the future underground health care began forming up in there [5].

### **Creation of underground health care**

When the Soviet Union annexed Lithuania in June 1940, the Polish Government in Exile residing

in France allowed for development of organizational cells of the Union for Armed Struggle in Vilnius region. In February 1942, it assumed a name of Home Army (HA), which encompassed the entirety of military efforts undertaken by the Poles under occupation during World War II. This organization was the largest conspirational army in Europe at that time. It covered the entire area that had belonged to Poland before the war. HA operated in provinces of pre-war Commonwealth of Poland. Vilnius Region of HA was one of the most dynamically functioning among all districts at the eastern borders [6, 7].

In the second half of 1940 commanding officers developed all cells of command and auxiliary services into a complete headquarters of the Vilnius region. A priest, Kazimierz Kucharski aka. "Simon," became its member as a chief of the medical branch [8, 9].

Polish community in Vilnius responded to the return of Soviets with great anxiety. It came to a realization that a "rest" period when Vilnius was the only place in divided, occupied Poland where life took a normal course giving hope for enduring war under relatively peaceful and safe conditions despite the nuisance of Lithuanian rule had ended. The omnipotence of NKVD was particularly feared and its activity evoked awe and sense of insecurity among Poles with a threat of sudden arrest and deportation. One of the first decisions of the Soviet authorities was disbandment of Polish charity organizations. However, most of their workers continued their activities underground, in secret from the Soviets. Medical personnel was among them [10, 11].

The main goal of NKVD was destruction of Polish underground. An extensive network of confidants and spies, mainly non-Poles, was constructed in order to achieve it. Various forms of terror were inflicted upon Polish population. Until June 1941 there were three mass deportations, which decimated the most productive and valuable parts of society. Seeds of Polish conspiracy were annihilated in this manner. There were many regional commanding officers among the deportees. The chief of medical service of the Vilnius region, Kazimierz Kucharski, was arrested on 25<sup>th</sup> May 1941. After brutal interrogations involving many

acts of maltreatment he was sent deep into the Soviet Union [3, 9].

Restitution of HA branches in Vilnius region did not take place until autumn 1941, under German occupation. Lieutenant colonel Aleksander Krzyzanowski became the commandant of this district. Command of the medical services was also appointed within the regional headquarters. Major Adam Galinski, the former director of Social Insurance Company in Vilnius, took the authority over it and doctors: Stefan Borkowski, Wiktor Dunin-Horkawicz and Stanislaw Markiewicz became his deputies. The Regional Medical Headquarters continued to exist in this structure until reorganization in spring 1943. Then, dr W. Dunin-Horkawicz became the chief of the HA medical services of the Vilnius region [12, 13].

Vilnius Region Command Headquarters followed the instructions and orders of the Main Headquarters in Warsaw that dictated preparation of forces and resources for an uprising as well as conducting ongoing struggle. The district commandant had a wide range of autonomy in execution of these tasks. He organized the subordinate structures according to human resources and conditions arising from the politics of the occupational government as well as ethnic relations [14].

During years 194–1943 the HA soldiers were preparing for an uprising that was supposed to overtake the regions under General Government (GG). The HA of the Vilnius region was not to assume any insurgent fights due to its general weakness. It was expected to conduct diversion and sabotage on communication routes and hubs in order to stop the influx of German forces from the Eastern Front to GG. Therefore, several dozen of diversionary and partisan centers were formed in this area. While preparing for these actions, HA soldiers from Vilnius region conducted mainly diversionary-partisan operations. Few soldiers were injured in their course. They were treated by “doctors of trust,” who worked in hospitals and outpatient clinics in various locations around the Vilnius region and were in agreement with the commanders of combat groups as to the rules for providing medical assistance in necessity. It must be emphasized that they were working in

particularly dangerous conditions. They were constantly under control. They worked mainly in small towns where all members of the community knew each other and there was a great risk that they would identify strangers around doctors’ offices and report them to the authorities [15].

Vilnius community consisted of various nationalities, mainly Poles, but also Lithuanians, Byelorussians, Jews and Russians. German and Lithuanian police took advantage of this situation by antagonizing them against each other. The events that took place in Svetsiany were the proof of that. In May 1942 a group of Soviet partisans attacked a German car near a town of Svetsiany, killing three people. Poles were indicated as the attackers. Lithuanian police in cooperation with the Germans murdered 400 men, women and children who inhabited it. One hundred and fifty Poles kept in the Vilnius prison were executed [2, 12].

Doctors had to be very careful in their cooperation with HA under those circumstances. Members of the Regional Medical Service Headquarters were aware of that as they were slowly but systematically forming medical aid cells in their area. Above all, they were establishing a network of underground medical service in districts that previously belonged to Polish counties and recruited doctors from hospitals and ambulatory clinics. Recruitment of directors and heads of clinics in county hospitals was most desirable. At that time the majority of personnel in those hospitals began their cooperation with HA medical services [15].

Situation was somewhat different in Vilnius. The majority of its inhabitants were anonymous to each other and it was much easier to organize military resistance and medical aid for HA soldiers in this town. Therefore, this was the place where the first main organizational structures were formed. It resulted in an unfortunate division of the district areas into two parts: the city of Vilnius (under codename “Mansion”) and the rest of the province (under codename “Field”) composed of four Regional Inspectorates (several districts comprised an inspectorate) and a sub-district of Kaunas county. Negative consequences of this division, especially in the area of medical aid, revealed later. It was functioning

remarkably well in Vilnius itself, but situation in surrounding areas was not so good [8, 12].

## Conspiracy work in Vilnius hospitals

Vilnius hospitals constituted a center for medical aid for the whole region. During Nazi occupation they were directed by the Germans and Lithuanians, but patriotic Polish personnel dominated among their workers. There were teams in every hospital whose members belonged to the medical branch of the HA. Dr Stanisław Markiewicz was the chief of medical service in Vilnius. All Vilnius hospitals fell under his command and each had an appointed conspirational commandant [8].

Dr Feliks Oleński was appointed the conspirational commandant of St. Jacob's Hospital. Dr Józefa Dowgiałło-Muszyńska, dr Antoni Tołłoczko and dr Leon Achmatowicz worked on the surgical ward. There were covert patient beds in this hospital prepared for HA soldiers injured in combat. One of the surgeons was constantly on duty and traveled with a special surgical kit to distant places on every call of the organization in order to attend to the wounded.

The conspirational commandant of the Railway Hospital was dr Jan Janowicz. Surgeons who were working there: dr Józef Piotrowski and dr Michał Juszczyński took care of HA soldiers both in the hospital and in the field [9].

Neurological Hospital in Zwierzyniec was also involved in conspirational activities. Dr Janina Hurynowicz became the commandant of this hospital. Also dr Zofia Bojarczyk-Czyżewska and dr Zygmunt Kanigowski belonged to the HA structures. Numerous injured and compromised soldiers of the underground resistance found shelter there. Patients, instructed by the doctors, imitated signs of illness with such skill that even experienced German and Lithuanian board doctors were not able to expose the fraud. The hospital relocated men from Vilnius to Warsaw multiple times under the pretext of performing brain surgeries (brain tumors), as at that time only the neurosurgical center in Warsaw could perform such procedures. The legislative branch of HA supplied the "patient" as well as his escort with proper documents.

It was one of the most reliable paths of communication with the main HA Headquarters in Warsaw [16].

The conspirational commandant of the Hospital for Infectious Diseases in Zwierzyniec was dr Zofia Wasilewska-Świdowa, who worked with the following doctors: Michał Raubo, Romuald Orłowski, Aleksander Rutkowski, Michał Gojdz and Witold Umiastowski. Hospital consisted of several separate pavilions (or rather barracks) surrounded by a thick bush, which made it easier to transfer wounded and ill HA soldiers into its buildings. It was also well-furnished with medical equipment and other supplies by the regional HA logistic service, as the Germans did not inspect this hospital for the fear of infectious diseases [15].

In the Surgical Clinic in Antokol, under the command of Prof. Kornel Michejda, experienced surgeons: Władysław Żemojtel, Antoni Szczerbo and Helena Maciejewska taught future doctors of HA squads. Dr Tadeusz Winiszewski and the following medical students: Zbigniew Szacki, Janusz Michejda and Jan Szwykowski (who was later sent to the Novogrod district for support) gained battlefield surgery skills in this hospital. Polish doctors were also employed in some of the clinics belonging to the hospital in Antokol, which was later transformed into a German Military Hospital no. 901. Hospital's commandant, dr Reichelt from Vienna, set up a chapel on its grounds, which was open to general public. It made the work of HA doctors easier, as it enabled them to move HA soldiers into and out of the hospital and transport out the equipment, medicines and medical supplies essential for the partisans. Almost every day, a horse carriage carrying prof. Michejda to and from work would leave hospital premises loaded with supplies for HA. Wehrmacht soldiers encountered on the way would salute a German N.C.O, who was driving the carriage. Professor would raise his hat [9].

Dr Zdzisław Kieturakis was the conspirational commandant of the Red Cross Hospital on 3 Bogusławska St. His surgical aids were: Józef Tymiński and Antoni Naumik. Numerous times they were called to the wounded partisans brought from the battlefields around Vilnius region to medical aid points created

in private houses on the outskirts of Vilnius. They also often traveled to the resting places of partisan units scattered over the area of all inspectorates [8].

There were covert hospital beds maintained in an Ophthalmology Clinic on 16 Tyzenhauz St., which were meant for wounded resistance soldiers. The chief of regional medical service, dr Wiktor Dunin-Horkawicz, worked there with other doctors sworn into the HA: Stanisław Markiewicz and Józef Kucharski (the conspirational commandant of this hospital). Councils and briefings of doctors from the HA Headquarters of Medical Service in the Vilnius region were conducted there. Organizational schemes of the medical service and operational directives for diversionary actions, the general uprising as well as the 1944 campaign (codename “Tempest”) were established during those meetings [9].

Councils, meetings and medical training were also conducted in doctors’ homes and private offices such as the private laboratory of dr Helena Dunin-Horkawicz on 12 Portowa St., the office of dr Wiktor Kopeć on Kalwaryjska St., or the home of Assistant Prof. Janina Hurynowicz on 16 Tomasz Zan St. [15].

### **Conspirational medical points and partisan hospitals**

Not only in the hospitals the Vilnius doctors provided assistance to the HA soldiers. They also organized covert medical aid points on city premises where injured combatants were attended to and rehabilitated. It was so, because the wounded could not always be hospitalized in civilian facilities presented above. Original weekly medical reports as well as the records of HA soldiers treated in those conspirational medical service points organized in all seven precincts of Vilnius in 1944 may be found in the Central Archive of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Warsaw. They contain a lot of data that show the extent of medical aid offered in those places. It proves that the wounded were brought there from the entire Vilnius region. They also present the statistics associated with number of hospital beds prepared for them and the number of patients who stayed there. It appears that there were 50 beds in standby. It

should be emphasized that the number of beds always exceeded the number of patients, which means that the care of medical personnel surpassed the actual needs in that matter [17].

Medical service of HA in the Vilnius region had a numerous personnel. Almost all doctors and nurses working in the Vilnius district belonged there. Most of them conducted secret courses that trained paramedics for partisan units. Many members of medical personnel were taught by the faculty of Medicine from Stefan Batory University (SBU) in Vilnius. On 15<sup>th</sup> December 1939 Lithuanian authorities shut down this Europe- and world-famous Polish school depriving young people of the opportunity to study. All scientists and employees were deprived of work and means for making a living. Many of them were forced to undertake physical work in deforestation or digging drainage ditches. Secret teachings were organized in many departments despite difficult conditions. That included medicine. Dr Michal Reicher, the former prorector of the SBU, became the chief of secret medical department. After he fled from Vilnius he was replaced by dr Stanislaw Legeżyński [18,19].

Many young doctor and students of secret teachings were allocated to hospital surgical wards, where they underwent intensive training in battlefield surgery necessary for aiding the wounded in combat. They later assumed responsible positions in medical service of HA units. Overall, over 100 doctors, about 150 members of the middle-level medical personnel (nurses, laboratory workers, field surgeons) and over 300 trained paramedics belonged to the HA in the Vilnius region. About 30% of them were ordered to join the HA squads in the forests. Over a dozen of doctors and medical students were sent to the Novogrod region medical service, which was lacking personnel. Some historians, who were previously HA soldiers in the Vilnius region, emphasize that medical service of this region was the most numerous and best-organized among all other auxiliary services [20, 21, 22, 23].

Terror imposed by the Gestapo and oppression of Polish citizens in the Vilnius region resulted in many fatalities, including doctors. Among others, prof. Kazimierz Pelczar and

prof. Mieczysław Gutkowski were executed by the Germans. Prof. Bronisław Wróblewski died of a heart attack while Gestapo was searching through his home. Prof. Marian Hłasko, prof. Stefan Kempisty, prof. Walenty Romanowicz and dr Szczepan Ławcewicz died in prison [24].

A plague of bandits was a great nuisance to the inhabitants of rural areas. Combat groups were formed for defense. Another factor fostering the development of military resistance was the fact that in 1943 the occupational government intensified its efforts to capture men for slave labor in Germany. In order to avoid detainment men escaped to the forests. Therefore, there were spontaneous inclinations toward forming a resistance movement. The commandant of the regional HA took advantage of these inclinations and, as a result, many partisan combat groups were formed. They acquired weapons and military supplies in combat [13,25].

The most dynamic development of partisan groups in the Vilnius region took place in spring 1944. Over twenty field units were formed during six months. Units consisting of more than 100 people capable of carrying out independent tactical tasks were called partisan brigades. Thirteen units received that designation. There was a medical service unit in every brigade as an inherent organizational element. In eight brigades these units were commanded by doctors and in five cases they were led by medical students in their last years of studies. They all underwent training in battlefield surgery conducted by prof. Kornel Michejda. They were young people with no previous military training. They gained the experience of military doctors in partisan groups. Only in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Vilnius Brigade (under the command of "Szczerbiec") second lieutenant dr Lech Iwanowski, who completed four years of studies at the Medical Cadet School before the war and received professional military and medical training, served as doctor. Moreover, he also participated in the September campaign in 1939 as a deputy commandant of a sanitary train [26].

As they began their service, brigade doctors had nothing but enthusiasm. They had to achieve everything with their own efforts, especially at the beginning. For that purpose, they

established contacts with doctors and pharmacists from nearby villages and towns, who gladly helped by providing them with basic medical equipment, medicines and dressings. They were also taking care over the ill and the wounded that required treatment away from the unit [15].

There were partisan infirmaries functioning within the brigades attended to by doctors and auxiliary personnel such as nurses and paramedics. They were also included in the units. These infirmaries were organized in peasant homes. It should be emphasized that brigades were constantly moving. As a rule, they only stayed in one place for one or two nights, so it was not possible to create a stationary facility. Such lifestyle was very burdensome. Constant efforts to find a place for night's rest were very troublesome. People most often slept in overcrowded rooms of peasant homes. It was often the case that, on arrival, they could not find a place to sleep because of people ill with typhoid fever inhabiting the homes. In such cases plans for night's rest would complicate. Under such circumstances, hygiene was not the most important thing. They often washed in the morning with cold water from the wells. In exceptional cases they washed in "banyas" popular in the Vilnius region as there was usually no time for it. They did not change their undergarments very often. Therefore, it is not surprising that many partisans suffered from scabies and lice infestation was common [27,28].

From the accounts of many soldiers it ensues that after several months in the brigade they suffered from a severe health crisis. Abscesses and ulcers formed in various places, especially on the legs and buttocks. Gastrointestinal disturbances appeared. Some, for a long time, could not rid of cough and rhinitis following an upper respiratory tract infection. All these conditions were treated in the brigades with scarce resources of the medical personnel [23, 29].

Its members also participated in combat training. They taught first aid to the partisans with the use of personal dressing that belonged to every man's equipment. They explained the importance of mutual aid in case of injury on a battlefield. They were also training many ways of transporting the wounded to the medical aid

point. These skills were new to them as most soldiers were 18 – 20 years old and had not previously undergone any military training. Good preparation for this task was very important as in 1944 the number of battles carried out by the soldiers of the HA in the Vilnius region was rising from month to month. There were 65 battles in the first three months and 110 combat operations in the next quarter. Particular intensification of warfare fell in the period from March until May of that year. Many Vilnius HA soldiers call this time a “spring epic.” During this year large regions were freed from enemy occupation [30,31].

Gaining control over the territory enabled organization of medical aid in the field. There was a possibility of forming partisan field hospitals in specific Regional Inspectorates of the Vilnius region of HA. Moreover, the Headquarters of Field Units were established in April 1944. At that time, inspectorates were reorganized into partisan groups in preparation for the “Tempest” campaign. The most severe combat took place in the region of Inspectorate “A” encompassing the Vilnius-Trakai district. German and Lithuanian garrisons withdrew from this area in spring. Partisan hospitals were organized in liberated towns and villages. The largest such hospital was created in the village of Onzadowo. It was established by the mentioned second lieutenant Lech Iwanowski, a doctor serving in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade under command of “Szczerebiec.” This hospital consisted of three chambers, an operating room, a surgical dressing room, kitchen and storage rooms. It was relatively well-outfitted with equipment and medicines. A lot of this medical equipment was captured from destroyed Lithuanian units and German police posts. Some of this equipment was supplied by the logistics unit of Inspectorate “A” [32].

The second partisan hospital was organized and operated by a doctor from the 7<sup>th</sup> Vilnius Brigade, Dr Wiktor Korzeniowski. Brigades belonging to this Inspectorate formed the 1. Partisan Unit. Dr Stefan Cierpiński assumed the duties of the medical unit commander [33].

The second Partisan Unit was formed from the Inspectorate “North,” which was created by joining Inspectorates “B” and “C”. It encompassed

the following districts: brasławski, święciański, głębocki and postawski. Dr Tadeusz Ginko became the chief of its medical service. He established cooperation with “doctors of trust” of partisan units. Doctors most devoted to the resistance movement in this area were: dr Marian Hajel of Woroniany, dr Stefan Opalski of Łyntupy, dr Marian Sylwanowicz of Kiemliszki, dr Jerzy Rogowski from a hospital in Święciny and dr Jerzy Gołowski from a hospital in Świr [33].

Conspirational medical service points were organized in the field – in colonies, mansions, settlements – in order to tend to the wounded and the ill. For safety reasons there was a rule not to place more than two ill or injured soldiers in the same house. “Doctors of trust” would visit and care for them. Together with dr Ginko they would collect medical equipment, bandages and medicines. Formations of the 2. Unit carried out a successful combat operation in Daugiliszki Nowe where they acquired a large supply of medicines and dressings greatly needed before the “Tempest” operation from a local pharmacy and Lithuanian magazines [34].

In Punżany, the medical chief of the 2. Unit organized the first field partisan hospital in this area. Hospital was supplied by the local doctors and pharmacists. Some of the necessary equipment was acquired from the Headquarters of the Medical Service of HA in the Vilnius region. The second partisan hospital in the operational area of the 2. Unit was established by a local estate co-owner – member of HA – Czesław Popławski. Regional Headquarters of the Medical Services appointed dr Wiesław Rasiewicz as the hospital commandant.

Four districts of the south-east Vilnius region: mołodeczański, wilejski, wołożyński and oszmiański comprised Inspectorate “F”. The last of the mentioned districts played a leading role. Brigades from this region were called “oszmiański.” Doctors from a district hospital in Oszmiana were chiefs of the medical services in this Inspectorate. All doctors as well as the middle-level auxiliary personnel who worked there belonged to the HA. The doctors were: Jan Brzozowski, Michał Holak, Piotr Wysocki, Bohdan Tallat-Kiełpisz. The first one of them served as a doctor in the 3. Partisan

Unit. Two partisan hospitals were formed there. One of them was established in a forest lodge near Wojnaryszki Wielkie by corporal Andrzej Sochański, who underwent medical training before the war as a scout. As injured soldiers started arriving to the hospital, dr Stanisław Żebrowski overtook the command. The second hospital was located in the village of Antoniszki. It was located in the wooded area and occupied two spacious houses on the village borders. It included a well-equipped operating room, a library and a radio. Dr Jan Brzozowski was the commandant of this hospital. Partisan field hospitals not only gave the opportunity to treat wounded and sick soldiers. They also served as training bases for the medical services of the Vilnius HA region [35].

### Medical care during operation “Gate of Dawn” („Ostra Brama”)

As it was mentioned above, HA soldiers were preparing for the fundamental task of general, armed uprising at the end of World War II. The tactical and operational foundations for this struggle were worked out in autumn 1943 and were given a codename “the Tempest”. These operations were to assume the form of harassing rear guards of the German forces withdrawing from the Eastern front as well as diversionary operations conducted throughout the whole area. They were initiated in 1944 in Volhynia. This concept was modified with regard to the Vilnius region (it was decided to take over Vilnius instead of large areas). On June 12, 1944 Vilnius region commandant, lt. col. Aleksander Krzyżanowski aka. “Wolf”, during a briefing in Warsaw received orders for combat – operation received a codename “Gate of Dawn” . He was supposed to carry it out using his own units concentrated in the Vilnius neighborhood together with subordinate Home Army units from Novogrod district and capture the city few days before arrival of Soviet army. He was assigned the command over joint forces of both districts. His headquarter was established in the town of Dziewieniszki freed from German occupation by the partisans [13, 36].

Operation „Gate of Dawn” was to be carried out by the forces of garrison “Vilnius” fighting within the city as well as partisan units attacking firmly fortified German positions from the outside. To differentiate them from the units

and conspirational groups in Vilnius they were called “units in the field”. The medical chief of these units was dr Michał Reicher. It was anticipated that during this warfare the number of casualties requiring medical aid will raise significantly. Steps were taken to make sure that it would be the best possible [35].

One of the most important decisions during that time was organization, apart from the medical units already existing in the brigades, so called forward medical teams designated to provide professional medical help to soldiers in the first line of fire. Field partisan hospitals constituted support for those teams. They consisted of one or a few doctors, nurses and paramedics. They were prepared to establish a field surgical hospital under any conditions. Before the “Gate of Dawn” operation, each partisan unit was assigned one forward medical team carrying a corresponding number. A forward medical team of the District Command, a so called “K” Team, was also established. [35]

According to the regulations developed by the Chief Medical Service of the District Command, many steps were taken in order to ensure adequate supply of medical equipment to partisan units. There were attempts to create field repositories for them. It must be added that medical equipment, medication and dressing materials were gathered for several years. In addition, a lot was seized from the enemy. The majority constituted gifts of patriotic people: doctors, pharmacists and other citizens. In many civilian hospitals, covert cells of medical service would produce personal bandages. Vilnius craftsmen manufactured in their workshops sterilization cans, syringes and other tools without asking for payment [8,9].

Matters of hygiene propagation among soldiers and prevention of infectious diseases were also considered in the course of preparations for the battle of Vilnius. Doctors from medical service headquarters developed popular, concise guidelines on those subjects. These guidelines were copied and distributed among unit commanders in a form of small brochures with a recommendation to dispense it among soldiers together with appropriate instructions. Even earlier the Offices of Information and Propaganda in those districts, both directed by doctors – mjr dr Jerzy Dobrzański in Vilnius district

and dr Stanisław Wawrzyńczyk in Novogrod district, – periodically published popular information on hygiene and prophylaxis of infectious diseases. This kind of activity was very useful, as partisan units were often forced to stay in areas of epidemiological and sanitary hardships [12].

Infectious diseases most commonly occurring among civilians inhabiting these regions were: typhoid, typhus and dysentery. As the population of partisan units constantly rotated, there was a significant danger of spreading the disease among them. As medical services did not have a sufficient amount of serum at their disposal to vaccinate all soldiers, precautions were taken in the form of quarantines for the newcomers. Moreover, in order to prevent spreading of infectious diseases among soldiers, the quartermasters ordered all community leaders to immediately report all cases of infectious diseases in a civilian population to the commandants of partisan units stationed in their areas [15].

It is also worth mentioning that, due to the anticipated necessity of blood transfusions, there were plans to conduct blood group testing among soldiers. A qualified “K” Team initiated such testing, but could not be continued due to the movements of units in the course of the planned campaign [35].

Despite careful preparations for the operation “Gate of Dawn,” several unfavorable assumptions were taken and many of its details were not considered, which in the end had a negative influence on its course. Among other things, it stipulated a frontal attack of the HA units on the city in a manner similar to a regular army, which it was not. Enemy forces and their location were not properly identified. The Regional Commandant and his headquarters were not aware that German generalship designated a special task for its units in Vilnius. As it considered this city as one of the most important connection hubs for defense position covers, its forces were strengthened and soldiers ordered to remain in their positions at all costs. German forces occupying Vilnius at the beginning of July 1944, under the command of gen. Rainer Stahel, consisted of 17 500 soldiers. They had a significant advantage in terms of military equipment as they possessed 270 cannons and 60 tanks at their disposal. Several

combat aircraft squads were stationed in Porubanek. On the other hand, HA used about 4 of 18 thousand soldiers it had under arms in both districts. It constituted only 21% of their own forces. An order given on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July speeding up the operation by a whole day contributed to this to a large extent. As a result, battalions from Novogrod did not manage to arrive on time. It is hard to explain why a number of units stationing near the city did not receive orders on time and were not used in combat [37, 38].

Attack of the Home Army units on Vilnius began during the night of 6th on 7th of July. Despite fierce German defense, Polish offense was initially successful. However, in the morning it was stopped at the bunkers under fire from artillery, mortars and aircraft gunfire. The intent to seize the city by surprise turned out to be impossible. Prospects of repeated offense during daytime were unfavorable and only exposed the attackers to the risk of further losses. This is why Lt. col. “Wolf” decided to withdraw all units away from the city Vilnius. Only the 3. Brigade continued fighting during the day together with a Soviet unit. Units of the Vilnius garrison got involved in the combat at that time and participated in fierce battle for the next seven days together with the Red Army. They captured many important public and economic objects. HA efforts were crowned by hanging a white-and-red flag on the Castle Hill on July 13, when the Germans withdrew from the city. However, it was quickly taken down by Soviet soldiers [39, 40].

During the operation “Gate of Dawn” medical aid was provided to the wounded by medical patrols, surgical sanitary points, forward medical teams as well as the city and field hospitals. Medical patrols were present in all squadrons. They were given with a task of providing first aid and evacuating the injured to surgical sanitary points. A patrol consisted of a medical NCO and two paramedics. Every patrol was equipped with a stretcher, a sanitary bag and compression bandages. The bag contained over a dozen of bandages and splints for limb immobilization [29].

Surgical sanitary points were served by: a doctor, a medical NOC, paramedics. They were equipped with surgical tools, anesthetics, analgesics and dressing materials. The extent of aid

provided to the wounded was usually limited to bandaging the wound, application of anti-tetanus serum, analgesics and cardiac medicines. Less complex surgical procedures were also performed from time to time. Lightly wounded soldiers were then transferred to prepared conspirational quarters and severely wounded patients were evacuated to the field hospitals in Onżadowo, Sz wajcary, and Elżbietowo or to civilian hospitals in Vilnius [15].

Surgical sanitary points were organized not only by the units attacking the city of Vilnius from the outside, but also by the combat units formed within the city. For example, one of such points was organized in the downtown precinct by a doctor belonging to the Vilnius “Kedyw” (Diversion Command of the Home Army Headquarters), Igor Klatzo. This point was located on the combat positions on 4 Żeligowski St. Similar points existed on Jagiellońska St., Wielka Pohulanka and in the basement of a convent next to St. Catherine’s church, where dr Józef Lenartowicz performed treated the wounded.

The entire first-line medical service performed its duties selflessly. Doctors were working constantly. Paramedics and porters carried away the wounded from the battlefield under gunfire. It is estimated that during the battle of Vilnius, in all lines of combat, medical patrols and surgical sanitary points provided emergency medical help to about 300 injured HA soldiers saving their health and sometimes also their lives [9].

Forward medical teams played the greatest role in providing medical aid to the injured in the course of Vilnius battle. It should be emphasized that they adapted very well to the dynamic situation on the battlefield. They were organized in partisan hospital bases, established field hospitals during successive rest stops, where the wounded brought from the battlefield were operated on and treated. Moreover, forward medical teams were created by all command posts of individual units, where the injured were attended to before sending them to the respective field hospitals [35].

The forward medical team of the 1. Unit moved together with its squad since the beginning of July. Three days before a battle, it established a field hospital in the village of Czarne, where

the casualties were brought from the battlefield. Doctors from the forward medical team performed necessary surgeries under German aircraft fire. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of June, the forward team moved together with its patients to the Kuny estate, and after the following four days, to the village of Elżbietowo. It provided assistance to about 100 wounded HA soldiers [35].

At the beginning of July forward medical team of the 2. Partisan Unit provided medical aid to the soldiers in numerous encounter combats that took place during their march toward Vilnius. Because of that, this unit did not participate in the night battle on July 6/7. Arriving late, this unit had to fight many battles with Wehrmacht forces withdrawing from Vilnius. The most deadly battle occurred in the region of Nowosiółki-Krawczuny on July 13<sup>th</sup>. It encountered a German combat unit of 3 thousand men under the command of gen. Stahel. German losses in the course of this battle amounted to 1000 people (dead, wounded, detained or missing). Polish losses, on the other hand, consisted of 79 deaths. Immediately after it began, the medical chief of the unit (and a forward team) and doctors from individual brigades organized surgical sanitary points. Medical patrols collected the wounded from the battlefield and carried them to those points. Not only injured Poles were tended to, but also German soldiers. Polish medical service showed great humanitarianism under those circumstances. About 150 wounded soldiers were sent away to local hospitals after their wounds had been attended to.

This forward team was relatively well-supplied with medical equipment, medicines and dressings. Several columns with sanitary equipment were seized during victorious battles with the enemy. Substantial stores of vaccination sera greatly needed by all medical teams were also acquired.

Forward medical team of the 3. Unit was created at the beginning of June 1944 on the grounds of a partisan hospital in Antoniszki by dr Tadeusz Wiszniewski. When partisan units were ordered to regroup to the Vilnius region on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July, dr Wiszniewski left Antoniszki, together with the nurses and the paramedics belonging to his team. On July 6<sup>th</sup>, the team arrived in Sz wajcary, in the Kulesza estate,

over a dozen kilometers away from Vilnius. Soldiers injured in the battles of Vilnius started arriving shortly. The total number of wounded and casualties who passed through this point was about 180 persons.

The forward medical team of the Regional Command, the so-called „K” team organized and commanded by dr Władysław Żemojtel, fulfilled the medical needs of the units protecting the Command. It was also supposed to dispatch medical teams to the units requiring sudden or augmented medical interventions. Therefore, it was more numerous than a regular team. It was relatively well-equipped. Supplies were replenished along the way by purchasing medicines and dressings in pharmacies. Dr Antoni Karwowski donated a folding metal surgical table, an autoclave, medicines, bandages and linen to the team. During the battle of Vilnius this team changed their position several times. It provided help to tens of injured HA soldiers [9, 35].

In theoretical assumptions made while planning the “Gate of Dawn” operation, Vilnius civilian hospitals were to be the basis of medical care for HA units. It was anticipated that some of the city precincts would be seized on the first strike. As we have already mentioned above, they were well-prepared for that task as their personnel already got involved in underground activities and provided aid to the partisans from the beginning of the occupation. These hospitals could not be utilized in full due to the failure of combat operations. However, there was an urgent need for a provisional hospital that would provide care for severely wounded soldiers. [37]

On the first day of the battle, Polish forces took control over Pavilnys – a settlement located on the eastern peripheries of the city. A large field hospital was organized there in the local school and preschool. It was equipped due to the efforts of local resident council. Residents of this settlement, led by the parson Lucjan Pereświat-Sołtan and dr Halina Łobzowa, spared no efforts to provide the wounded soldiers with excellent care and nutrition. It mainly served soldiers from the 1. Unit (“Szczerbiec” and “Tur’s” brigades). Doctoral staff came from the “K” Team and Vilnius hospitals. The hospital

functioned for a relatively long time – until August 1944. Over 200 soldiers were hospitalized and attended to in this facility [41].

It must be said that establishing an exact number of fatalities as well as wounded and sick soldiers who passed through the surgical sanitary points, forward medical teams and partisan hospitals during the battle of Vilnius, the greatest battle fought by the Home Army with the Nazi occupants on the lands of the II Republic of Poland aside from the Warsaw Uprising, is an incredibly difficult task. Patient records were not always strictly kept and even if it were, most of these records are missing [42].

According to the reports of the medical chief of the Field Units, prof. Michał Reicher, losses of the Vilnius region HA during a week-long struggle amounted to over 500 deaths. This number includes fatalities both within the city and in all operational sections. There were 650 wounded soldiers. A large proportion of fatalities to the number of wounded could be explained by exceptionally difficult conditions for providing effective medical aid in the city fiercely defended by the enemy as well as the fact that Germans often killed the wounded. It must be considered that a number of soldiers, scattered and devoid of medical care, died on the battlefield or in the vicinity. Moreover, a number of the wounded took care of them, especially within of the city, and escaped identification. Most injuries sustained by the HA soldiers were gunshot wounds inflicted by handguns or machine weapons, 50% of which comprised wounds to the extremities, mainly soft tissues [35].

One should also indicate that establishing the exact losses sustained by the partisan units of the Vilnius HA region before the operation “Gate of Dawn” is incredibly difficult. Due to the conspirational conditions there was no evidence of wounded and sick partisans. Many injured HA soldiers were treated in civilian hospitals as “accident victims”, etc.

Polish losses sustained during over a dozen of larger battles and tens of encounters were relatively small. Partisan groups employed tactics of surprise attacks. Enemy advantage in terms of weaponry and firepower were balanced by good

training, selflessness and good knowledge of the terrain. Unit commanders conducted combat operations in such a manner that would minimize their losses. According to the estimated calculations, about 200 soldiers were killed and 400 were wounded on the part of Poland during the period of augmented attacks on enemy posts and garrisons, that is from autumn 1943 until July 1944. Most of the injured returned to their units after treatment. It was a great merit of medical services in the Vilnius region. It was one of the best-developed auxiliary services in this area. Almost all Polish doctors, field surgeons, nurses and paramedics participated in it. The majority of them made a soldier's oath to the Home Army. Their selfless work, courage and sacrifice constitute one of the brightest chapters in the history of Polish struggle for independence during World War II. In those incredibly hard times medical personnel of the Vilnius region fulfilled their humane, civil and professional duty. Tens of distinctions granted to doctors and medical personnel of the HA are some of the proofs of their virtues.

However, political situation that had developed in the Vilnius region at that time resulted in dramatic persecution and repressions toward HA soldiers instead of the expected satisfaction

from their achievements, awards from the government and society's gratitude. Following a joint liberation of Vilnius by the soldiers of the HA and the Red Army, the Commandant of the Vilnius HA region came to an agreement with the commanding officers of the 3. Byelorussian Front that his brigades would be transformed into regular army corps and continue combat on the front. The Soviets, however, after tolerating the HA units for several days, decided to abolish them. On the 17<sup>th</sup> of July Lt. col. "Wolf" in the company of his deputies went to the headquarters of the 3. Front in order to talk over matters regarding creation of the corps. They were arrested there. Tens of HA officers were arrested in Bogusze on the same day. The next day, Soviet tanks and units encircled HA brigades in Vilnius region. After disarming, 8 thousand Polish soldiers were deported to Kaługa. There were many members of Vilnius HA medical service personnel among them. [43]

Since August 1944 NKVD units increased their actions against the remaining HA groups. Although Vilnius HA region became disbanded on the 18<sup>th</sup> of February 1945, its soldiers were persecuted and suffered repressions from the Soviets for many more years [44].

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