

## **March to Kołobrzeg**

The march to Kołobrzeg was associated with immense fatigue, which “knocked soldiers off their feet.” Stach had it a little easier on one side, as his backpack was carried on a wagon transporting supplies. Additionally, he could sometimes hop onto the wagon to relieve his tired legs. In war, as in life, there is always something for something. While the march was easier for him, upon reaching a resting place, a frantic rush began. They had to light fires under the cauldrons and quickly prepare meals for the hungry and exhausted soldiers, who could not wait to get something to eat and rest for a few hours of sleep. Some were so tired that they fell asleep while marching, counting the regular soldier's step in their sleep. There were times when the entire column of soldiers marched half-conscious, zigzagging from one side of the road to the other behind the lead four-man team.

One day, Stach marched next to a soldier who was still wearing a helmet that others had already discarded as unnecessary ballast. Suddenly, there was the sound of a shot, and this soldier fell to the road. Stach bent down to lift him up, but there was no one to help. He only dragged the dead soldier to the side of the road so that others would not trample over him. A bullet, fired by a German soldier, pierced the helmet and created a hole in the soldier's head. Why did the shooter choose him among the dozens of soldiers marching in the column? Was he aiming at the helmet or did he pick a random target? We will never know. The company commander sent several soldiers to find and eliminate the shooter, but after several hours, they returned, reporting that they had not found anyone.

## **Battle of Kołobrzeg**

In Kołobrzeg, Stach was left alone from the entire company. Of course, it didn't happen right away. Everyone fought, including fusiliers and functionaries who were rarely at the front lines: staff officers, cooks, clerks, and others, replacing the fallen and wounded. In the early stages of the battle, when they were constantly close to death, something sad happened in their platoon:

For several hours, they moved under the wheels of freight wagons, which offered some cover from the rain of bullets flying their way from the German bunkers protecting the freight station and locomotive depot in Kołobrzeg. They attempted to take control of the station buildings. Finally, the Germans “ran out of ammo.” With no means of defense, they raised a white flag and began exiting the bunkers, standing in line.

Now, let's momentarily shift our focus from Stach and turn to his direct commander, Second Lieutenant Emilia Gierczak, as something happened that is worth noting. This event is often described in literature about her very heroic death in a way that is not truthful. The accounts are written by those who did not directly participate in the capture of the station, twisting the facts to fit communist propaganda, which was necessary for postwar books to be published.

A young woman, no older than twenty, wearing the uniform of a Polish Army second lieutenant, jumped from behind a wagon. She commanded the platoon in which Stach fought. It was clear she was not in control of herself. Grabbing her submachine gun by the barrel and cursing in the worst possible language, she began hitting the standing Germans on the head. This lasted only a short time. From the bunker, where the defenders of Kołobrzeg had not yet emerged, came a short burst from a machine gun, cutting the girl almost in half. There was no time for help. She died in the arms of her soldiers. She was buried in the military cemetery in

Kołobrzeg, alongside over a thousand other Polish soldiers who fell in the fight for the seaside city. A street in that city leading to the Polish Military Museum is named after her. She was Second Lieutenant Emilia Gierczak, and the event took place on March 16, 1945.

After this tragic event, Stach himself came close to death.

Standing alone near a German bunker, he suddenly heard a shout:

- "Du, du!" He looked behind him and froze with fear. At the entrance to the shelter stood a German soldier aiming a rifle at him. He was only a few meters away, so there was no chance of escape or defense. He was already saying his goodbyes when it turned out that the German – an older man, likely drafted into the army as part of the Volkssturm to turn the tide of the war – was just as frightened as he was.

- "Du, du nicht schießen!" (Don't shoot!) He repeated, trembling, his rifle shaking. He was clearly signaling his intention to surrender.

- "Nein, nein. Geh dorthin!" (No, no, go there!) Stach replied, gesturing with his hand to direct the German toward the staff area. There was no time or possibility to escort captured German soldiers.

The German threw his rifle aside and went toward the rear, happy that the war was over for him.

The next phase of the battle was exhausting. No, it was very bloody. At one point, Stach noticed that he was alone. After a while, a soldier joined him, unwilling to be alone. They lay down and observed the area in front of them.

Suddenly, a German soldier began to approach them from the German positions. He was likely no older than sixteen, almost a child. He walked with his hands raised above his head directly toward them. The soldier lying in a hole with Stach leaned out slightly and called the boy over. When he got close, the soldier shot him. That's when all hell broke loose. The entire German line opened fire on that one spot with all the weapons they had, including mortars and machine guns. They all wanted to kill Stach and his companion, avenging the death of the boy. His companion fell, almost certainly killed, but Stach managed to retreat beyond the line of fire, not even grazed. He crawled backward, using his hands to gather dirt and debris in front of him, feeling the hail of bullets all around him. Without the help of someone very strong who was looking out for him at that moment – or rather, someone who was protecting him – he would never have survived.

This time, the level of stress had been surpassed, just as it had been with Second Lieutenant Emilia, who paid for it with her life. He was fed up with everything. Before his eyes, for no reason at all, his companion shot the boy – so what if he was German, something Stach would never have been capable of. Besides, he wasn't even a good soldier. He couldn't aim at people. He shot because he had to, but never at a specific target, only ahead, following the rule that the soldier shoots, and God takes care of the bullets. That way, he never knew whether he had taken someone's life, and this allowed him to suppress his guilty conscience. This was the only moment when he doubted the protective power of his rosary. His mind was in complete chaos. His temples pulsed so hard that he could feel them under his cap, and his legs were as weak as cotton.

- "What am I doing here? When will this end? Why do all these Germans, who shot at me, insist on killing *me*? I haven't done anything to them." Slowly, the thought began to grow in him that he should end it all, right here, right now. He hid behind a thick wall, took out a grenade that he had kept for a "rainy day," and twisted the fuse. He would tear his right hand off with the fuse and escape this hell. He clenched his teeth and stuck his hand, holding the armed fuse, around the corner of the wall. One minute passed, then another, and nothing. The grenade should have exploded by now! The fuse hadn't worked. He felt ashamed of his weakness and threw it in front of him. As soon as it hit the ground, there was a loud bang. The fuse exploded.

He never again tried to hurt himself. He believed in the protective power of his talisman, his rosary, and in the fervent prayers of his mother, who had only him on the front line. She lived with him and left this world with him, but that was still far in the future.

For now, still reeling, he got up and, without hiding at all, walked forward. If they wanted to shoot him for leaving his post, let them shoot.



Stach's Wife, Leontyna. When he went to war, she was only 22.



A wartime photo taken somewhere near Warsaw. Stach with his team. He's the fourth from the left, not counting the three soldiers sitting behind them on horses.