

ZYGMUNT JATCZAK
KRZYSZTOF SCHRAMM
I REGRET NOTHING



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KRZYSZTOF SCHRAMM

I REGRET NOTHING

TETRAGON



WARSZAWA

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Niczego nie żałuję

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Cover photo: Zygmunt Jatzak directs the fire of the Bren light machine gun, the German legionnaire Neumann shoots. Franchini plantation, 1950 (Zygmunt Jatzak's family archive)

Title-page photo: Zygmunt Jatzak with "Błyskawica" machine pistol. Warsaw, August 1944 (Aleksander Karcz, canvas, oil paint)

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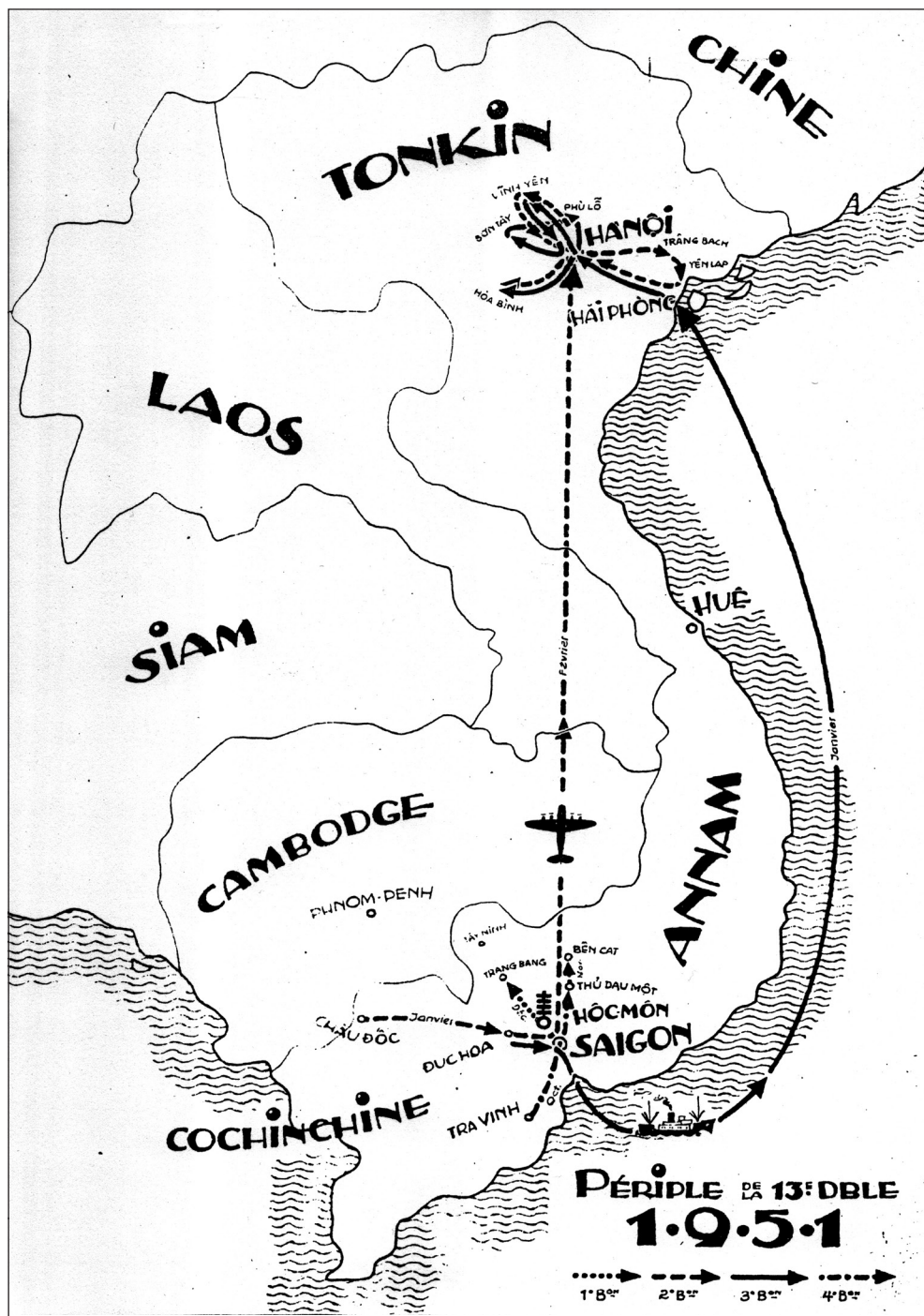
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Map 1. Operations of the Thirteenth Demi-Brigade of the Foreign Legion in 1951 (Krzysztof Schramm's archive)



Zygmunt Jatzak in Indochina, Franchini Plantation, 1951 (Zygmunt Jatzak's family archive)

Introduction to the First Edition

Zygmunt Jatzak is a living legend of the Polish Home Army and French Foreign Legion. He fought in the Warsaw Uprising in the “Miotła” Battalion¹ and was a soldier in the Thirteenth Demi-Brigade of the Foreign Legion in Indochina. Decorated several times, he received, among others, the Cross of Valor for the Warsaw Uprising, and the Military Medal (*Médaille militaire*) for his service in Indochina. Mr. Jatzak returned to Poland and lives in the north of the country. He is an honorary member of the Association of Former Soldiers and Friends of the Foreign Legion in Poland. His memoirs, presented in this book, were collected during our meetings between 2009 and 2014.

Our many encounters and days of conversations are for me, a historian, a trip into the past. In this journey, I am guided by the Hero of those times. A prisoner of Majdanek,² a soldier in the Warsaw Uprising, he showed me the real story of the days of the insurrection in Warsaw, sparing none of its gravity, heroism, or tragedy for the city and its inhabitants.

My Guide and Friend also took me on a voyage to the legendary Foreign Legion of the olden days. I heard a first-hand narrative about Sidi Bel Abbès, the Legion’s *maison-mère*, in Algeria. I also traveled with him to fight against the Communist Viet Minh. Together we traversed southern Indochina, I met my Friend’s old brothers-in-arms—and on his path, he met quite a few of those, whose stories would shape history. He knew General Salan and General Bieagard, the French paratrooper legend; Lieutenant Imbot, who later became a general; and General de Lattre. I followed my Friend on his patrols in the jungle and rice fields and I saw the Legion’s battles and operations through the eyes of their participants. There are only a few people left today who remember these events. There are fewer and fewer Warsaw Uprising insurgents left and scarce are those who remember the fight against Communism in Indochina.

Zygmunt Jatzak, my Friend, calls himself a lucky man to have survived all of these “adventures.” I am lucky that I have him as a Friend.

¹ “Miotła” Battalion was a unit of the Home Army—the primary Polish resistance movement in the Second World War. The battalion distinguished itself in numerous underground operations and took part in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. Before the Uprising it was directly subordinated to Home Army HQ with a main mission of assassinating Polish traitors. “Miotła” means broom which is a direct reference to the performed tasks.—Ed.

² Majdanek was a German concentration and extermination camp built and operated by the SS on the outskirts of the city of Lublin during the German occupation of Poland in the Second World War. It had seven gas chambers, two wooden gallows, and some 227 structures in all, placing it among the largest of Nazi-run concentration camps.—Ed.

Here I would like to express my greatest gratitude toward Zygmunt Jatzak for his friendship and the time he devoted to telling his story.

I would like to thank Zbigniew Truszczyński, the President of the Association of Former Soldiers and Friends of the Foreign Legion in Poland, thanks to whom I met Zygmunt Jatzak. I address a special thank you to Andrzej Wojtas, who not only enabled me to publish a series of articles about my Friend in the magazine *Komandos*, but also convinced me to write this book.

The Introduction to the Second Edition, Revised and Extended

Zygmunt Jatzak's memoir *Niczego nie żałuję [I regret nothing]*, originally published in 2014, showed for the first time the life of the incredibly lucky man that Zygmunt was. After all these years, his story has finally been told and is available to a wider audience. Articles, books, radio programs, and films have been made. Both the Warsaw Uprising Museum and the Pawiak Prison Museum in Warsaw have expressed an interest in him. The memory of Zygmunt Jatzak is alive in the Association of Former Soldiers and Friends of the French Foreign Legion in Poland, where he was an honorary member. Mr. Jatzak was present, though not personally, at exhibitions dedicated to the Legion and its heroes held by the Association in the Polish cities of Bydgoszcz, Poznań, and Warsaw.

The many public meetings that took place as a part of the promotion of the book were a great opportunity for further and longer conversations between the two authors. Especially noteworthy was the wonderful encounter with the Hero in Olsztynek in Poland (organized by the city's administration). Tens of hours spent between 2015 and 2020 at the Hero's home which helped unveil stories that Zygmunt had never shared before. They have now found a place in this book, which has been extended by both new written content and illustrations.

With the help of my friends at the Association of Former Soldiers and Friends of the French Foreign Legion in Poland, my various ideas could come to life and Zygmunt Jatzak was able to appear at many public events in person. The Legionnaires were also present at the encounter in Olsztynek, for which I am extremely grateful.

I thank Alain Barthelemy from France and Andrew Mitchell from Ireland for their kind help and for providing me with unique sources. The photographs from Indochina and the *Journal des marches et opérations de la 13 DBLE 1951* (Thirteenth DBLE War Diary 1951) allowed me to present many previously unknown details. Indeed, they may be the first-ever published sources about the First Indochina War. A documentation of Thirteenth DBLE as well as the *Bande noire's* (Black band) operations in 1951, which today could be referred to as special service units, can rarely be found in professional literature.

Most significant for my Friend must have been France's recognition of his service in Indochina. Zygmunt Jatzak was appointed to the rank of Knight (Chevalier) of the Legion of Honor by the President of the Republic of France on April 3, 2017. The honorary ceremony took place on July 7, 2017, at the Town Hall in Olsztynek. Colonel Roland Delawarde, the Embassy of the Republic of France's defense attaché, who had also served in the French Foreign Legion, decorated Mr. Jatzak on behalf of the president of France. My Friend was saluted by an Association of Former Soldiers and Friends of the



After the decoration with the Legion of Honour: Colonel Roland Delawarde, Zygmunt Jatzak, Zbigniew Truszczyński, Olsztynek, July 7, 2017 (Photography by Krzysztof Schramm)

French Foreign Legion in Poland delegacy, who came with the Association's banner, and by the Association's President, Zbigniew Truszczyński. The Hero was also congratulated by Olsztynek city officials and delegations from the Polish Army and veterans' organizations.

That *I Regret Nothing* caused such huge interest and that the first edition has been sold out convinced my Friend Zygmunt and me to work on the second edition. The revised, completed, and extended version of the memoir was published thanks to the kind interest of the Tetragon publishing house and its owners, Mr. Łukasz Przybyło and Tadeusz Zawadzki.

Thank you.

*Krzysztof Schramm
Poznań, June 2020*

Memories of Zygmunt Jatczak, Hero of the Home Army and the Foreign Legion

It was probably 2008 or maybe already 2009 when I heard about Zygmunt Jatczak for the first time. It was during one of the meetings of the Association of Former Soldiers and Friends of the Foreign Legion in Poland. The then president Zbigniew Truszczyński asked me, "You know Krzysztof, that in Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship, near Olsztyn, lives a Legion veteran of the Indochina War. I have been in touch with him, maybe it is worth your time to contact him? He will tell you his story, and you should write it down, it is worth it..."

This historian needed no further explanation, Zbyszek made an appointment for me, first by telephone. One, another, and then another telephone call and this is how our acquaintance began. I did not know then how lucky I was, that I had just met an extraordinary man. Not only the hero of the old days but most of all, a Great Man.

The publication of the memoir *I Regret Nothing* became a dream come true for my friend. The result is a book that tells the story of his life.

With a smile and a sense of great joy, he posed for photos with the book in his hands, he was proud of it. I felt the same.

He felt a fulfilled man, not only thanks to his family but also thanks to History, in which he is enrolled in golden letters. He enjoyed the second edition of the book and knew about the preparations for the English edition. The story of his life is already immortal, and he will soon go out into the world.

In August 2020 I learned about his stroke. My friend had a serious health condition, and there was possibility of him not recovering. But thanks to the care of his family, Zygmunt slowly regained his strength, and we were able to talk again. We planned another meeting, but unfortunately his health deteriorated in January. The commandos from Lubliniec were lucky enough to visit him... I was not so lucky. Zygmunt Jatczak passed away on February 9, 2021. We met at the funeral.

My friend loved life, he enjoyed it, although it was not always good for him, as he used to say, "I regret nothing" and at the end of our meetings he would always tell me, "Goodbye Krzysiu and come back soon..."

Friend! Goodbye, we will meet again in a while.

Krzysztof Schramm
Poznań–Olsztyn 2021



From the left are Halina, Zygmunt, Zofia, mother Marianna, Leokadia
Warsaw, 1930 (Zygmunt Jatzak's family archive)

Family and Childhood

I am part of the Generation of Columbuses,¹ and now I am one of those few whose maturity and the beautiful years of young adulthood coincided with the war. The war became my school of life, and my paths have had lots of twists and turns. I often brushed with death, yet I was lucky...

I am now ninety-six years old. I was born on January 1, 1924, in Warsaw. My adulthood began during the Second World War. The war shaped my later life. I was fifteen when the Germans invaded Poland. It was an emotional experience for me, and I remember always believing that Poland would come out of it victorious.

My family and I first lived on Kacza Street in Warsaw, and later, in 1934 or 1935, we moved to the corner of Żytnia and Młynarska Streets in the Wola District. The exact address was 45 Żytnia, apartment number 40.

The first school I ever went to was Public School No. 100 on Leszno Street. It was a very modern school, built in 1926. The building hosted two schools, mine, and Aleksandra Piłsudska Public School No. 194. That is why the building was called the Municipal Public-School Building. During the uprising in 1944, it was severely damaged, and later, after the war, it was torn down. Nothing is left of it today. Walking to school every day before eight o'clock in the morning and gathering, along with teachers and the principal, to sing *Kiedy ranne wstają zorze*² (*When the light of dawn arises*) was an incredible experience.

I started attending secondary school in 1937. It was the Roesler Trade School, also called 1H, consisting of four levels. Its continuation was a two-year administration high school known as 1A. It was located at 33 Chłodna Street and my aunt lived close to there. When the war broke out, I was still in secondary school.

The Roesler National Trade School was a prewar Warsaw legend. It was considered to be the best secondary, and later (since 1937) high trade school. Its origins went back as far as 1911, but it was officially opened only in 1919. That year Józef and Maria Roesler donated the building at 33 Chłodna to a foundation bearing their name. The family had owned the building since 1782. The Roesler merchant family was known to all Varsovians. The Roeslers originated from Czechia and arrived in Poland in 1765, where they

¹ The Generation of Columbuses is a term denoting the generation of Poles who were born soon after Poland regained its independence in 1918, and whose adolescence was marked by the tragic times of the Second World War. The term itself was coined by Roman Bratny in his well-received 1957 novel *Kolumbowie*. *Rocznik 20*.—Ed.

² Very popular hymn praising God and all of its creations, written by Polish poet Franciszek Karpiński in early XIX Century.—Ed.



Boernerowo, a Sunday's outing with friends in Warsaw in 1943. On the tree is Zygmunt Jatzak, the woman on the left is his sister Halina, and behind her is her husband Paweł Pieśko. (Zygmunt Jatzak's family archive)

quickly assimilated and became part of the Warsaw bourgeoisie. The construction of the two buildings on Chłodna Street began before 1914; one building was to become the school, and the other was to bring profits to cover the costs of running the facility. The architect responsible for the design was Władysław Marconi, who also drew the façade of the Bristol Hotel³ in Warsaw.

The school's interior was spacious yet modestly adorned, with potted palm trees on the stairs. The construction was interrupted by the outbreak of the First World War, but was completed in 1919 and the school was officially founded in the same year. Its first principal was Szczepan Bońkowski. Apart from the high quality of teaching, the school was student-oriented as its focus lay, as people used to say back then, on *the social and civic factors through shaping will and character*. The school's candidates had to pass exams and psychological tests. In the 1930s, education cost eighty-five Polish zlotys for each semester, with the price of admission at ten Polish zlotys, and the exam and psychological test fee at seven Polish zlotys. The sons of state employees or merchants, and those who came from less fortunate backgrounds and had good grades could apply for up to a seventy-percent reduction of the fees. Most of the school's graduates immediately went into trades. I would probably have followed a similar path. However, fate paid a trick on me.

My father, Jan Jatzak, had worked as a police officer before the war. In 1937 he passed away suddenly at the age of fifty-four while he was on duty. I never learned what exactly happened to him, but it was said that he suffered from a stroke and died. I was thirteen years old when it happened.

For his whole life, dad was a military man. First, when Poland was still partitioned, he was a member of the Russian Army. He fought in Manchuria with the Japanese in 1905 and in 1912, he went to war with the Turks in the Caucasus. During the First World War he was captured by Austrians in 1914 in the Carpathian Mountains in Galicia. He was a POW until the end of the war in 1918. From his stories, I know he was encamped somewhere in Albania; it was Kosovo I believe. After returning to Poland, just as the country had gained its independence, he enrolled in the *Milicja* in 1919. *Milicja* was what the police forces were called during that time. That is how he began his career in the Polish State Police.

My mother, whose name was Marianna and whose maiden name was Rykaczewska, was a housewife. She took care of the house and children. Our father's work was enough for us to have financial stability. After his death, she received a pension. There were four children at home, Zofia and Leokadia (my two older half-sisters who were my father's daughters from his first marriage) and Halina and me, who shared the same mother. Our family was incredibly lucky to survive the war in its entirety, although many of us had found ourselves on the verge of death several times. Other families did not have so much luck.

And so, before the war but after my father's death, I lived in a house full of women. As far as I can remember I was always slight, and my mother would even call me a picky eater. In fact, I never needed to eat a lot throughout my life. Could that be the secret to longevity?

3 Until today Hotel Bristol is the most luxurious hotel in Warsaw.—Ed.

The War

When the war reached me and my mother, we were living in the Wola District in Warsaw. I remember 1939 as constant bombing. I remember houses collapsing around us. People waited in cellars, praying, and crying. On September 7, the Polish Radio announced that German armored units had arrived at the capital's gates. It was a shock, people cried, nobody believed that our army could be defeated so quickly. After all, we were supposed to be *Ready, steady, and strong!*¹ The city was burning, there was no water or food, and the end was just a matter of days. On September 28, on the day of Warsaw's capitulation, I saw olive drab airplanes flying low over my house. I thought them to be the Polish PZL planes², only when they had gotten closer could I see the black cross. For me, still a young boy, it was a tragedy. I cried like a baby because that was the end. We would now be under occupation.

The German occupier obliged all Poles to work. In 1940 I continued my education in the Roesler secondary school, which had been moved to a building on Grzybowska Street, earlier occupied by an orphanage for Jewish children and run by the famous pedagogue, Dr. Janusz Korczak. The orphanage was displaced to our old school building on Chłodna Street. That part of the street fell within the border of the Jewish Ghetto, at the time under construction. I got my first job in 1941 when I was seventeen years old. My older sister arranged for me to get the post. Halina worked in a china and crystal shop on Bielańska Street, whose owners were a man from Poznań, a Mr. Łabędzki, and a Varsovian, a Mr. Palmowski. It was incredible that even during the war goods were being shipped from Japan to Poland and we would unpack these goods! It sounds unbelievable, but these luxury items were being sold as usual. The goods were available not only to Germans but also to Poles. Life under the German occupation went at a normal pace despite the reprisals. Cinemas, theaters, cabarets, and restaurants remained open and had guests. But they were, of course, socially boycotted by many; people would disperse stinking substances or patch *Only swines go to the movies*³ in these institutions. Vocational schools were also open, although the subjects on offer were limited, and his-

¹ *Ready, steady, and strong!* was a government propaganda slogan in Poland before the Second World War depicting the Polish Army and State as steady, steady and (very) strong, hence the shock of their quick collapse in September 1939.—Ed.

² The PZL P.11 (and its earlier version, the PZL P.7) was a fighter aircraft, designed and constructed during the early 1930s.—Ed.

³ Going to the movies was considered unpatriotic during the German occupation of Poland. Nevertheless this “act of collaboration” was still quite popular among the Polish population.—Ed.

tory or geography were not taught there. Public transport worked smoothly. Yet despite this seeming normality, the roundups, searches, arrests, and reprisals turned the citizens' life into a nightmare. Nobody could know when something bad was going to happen. The bloody terror was in most cases payback for combat and diversion, or sabotage operations conducted against the German Military by the different political branches of the Polish Underground. The ration stamps introduced for Poles to obtain the scarcely available food, wood, and other goods caused the proliferation of illegal trade, smuggling, or corruption. The flourishing black market left people demoralized. The situation in the newly constructed Jewish Ghetto seemed similar at first—rich Jews lived quite well. It all changed in 1941 when the food rations began to be gradually limited. That led to the catastrophic deaths of the less fortunate right on the streets of the walled Jewish district.

When my employers had a business dispute, and Mr. Łabędzki left the partnership, I quit my job. For a while, I just sort of dawdled, tried this and that. I managed to get by. My bucolic idleness was interrupted by an arrest and being transferred to the Majdanek Concentration Camp.

At first, during the occupation, I was not involved in the underground movement, because I was too young. It all changed once I was arrested and taken to the Majdanek Concentration Camp. There, I met someone who introduced me to the resistance. The arrest went as follows: around the mid of January 1943, the sixteenth I believe, I was stopped by the Germans in a roundup on Marszałkowska Street. I had myself to blame for it. I stood in front of a movie theater staring at a poster. Suddenly, I was pushed inside by a throng, and I heard someone shout “The Germans are rounding people up!” And then the Germans pulled me out. First, I was taken to Pawiak, the Security Police and Security Service’s prison in the Warsaw District. At that time, it was the largest political prison in occupied Poland. I immediately understood what it was like to be strong-armed by the occupier. As soon as the police vehicle stopped on the driveway, we were told to leave and hurry to the first floor. So, I got off the truck and ran to the stairwell where a Gestapo officer hit me right in the head! He pointed to the portrait of Hitler that was hanging on the wall and to the hat on my head. I had been punished for not honoring the Führer by removing my hat! I did not grasp the gravity of the situation then. In fact, I was quite amused. As we were standing in the room, one of the Germans, seeing my silly grin, said (to my surprise in Polish), “We shall see who will be laughing in this stupid manner later.” I was then taken to a higher floor where there were prison cells with bars. Two sentries stood there. From the way they spoke, I figured they were Ukrainians. We were searched and they took all our belongings. Among the things I had with me was a beautiful silver cigarette case with a rose inlay. One of the sentries wanted to take it away from me and said, “You will not be needing it anyway.” I refused to give it to him, and I was right in doing so, because I got to keep it. The cell had one bucket with water and one bucket for satisfying our physiological needs. This was all we had for the thirty to fifty cellmates. We were incredibly crowded and by morning the two buckets had been filled with urine. When tea was brought to us in the morning, they ordered us to empty one of the buckets and filled it with the tea. Not a sign of any leniency was present. After the registration, a convoy of police vehicles took us to the Warsaw East Train Station, where a special train



One of the last photos of Zygmunt Jatzak taken during the visit of soldiers from the Commando Unit from Lubliniec, Olsztynek, January 14, 2021, Photography by Joanna Zenc