

AGNIESZKA WISŁA

Anitta Maksymowicz



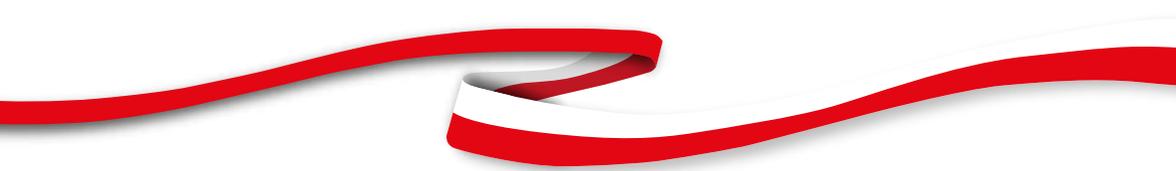
HEROES
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Agnieszka Wiśła (Archives of the Directorate of the Polish Army Veterans Association, hereinafter *AZG SWAP*)



AGNIESZKA WISŁA

1887–1980

“Distraught by inaction, when the whole world was fighting for freedom, [I] joined the special Women’s Unit organized by Helena Paderewska, and after a short training session I was sent to France as [the representative of] the Polish White Cross; after arriving in France, I was assigned to the French Red Cross to deal with Polish soldiers, volunteers from America fighting alongside the Allies,” wrote Agnieszka Wisła, a Polish social activist from America, in her biography. She devoted most of her life to the cause of Poland and the soldiers and veterans who fought for its independence. She herself also took part in the Polish-Bolshevik war as a nurse. As an extremely active person, she was active in many Polish diaspora organizations, but she was most closely associated with those that she co-founded: the Polish Army Veterans Association and the Auxiliary Corps which supported it.



Her Childhood and Activity in the Polish ‘Falcons’

Agnieszka Wiśła was born on January 10, 1887 in Szlachcin in the Średzki district in what was then the Prussian partition. Her parents were Mateusz Wiśła, a farm laborer, and Franciszka, née Michalak, who most likely worked in a local farm adjacent to the Sablewski family manor. Little is known about Wiśła’s childhood years. Agnieszka, like her several siblings, began her education at a local school. Years later, she recalled her upbringing at home in the spirit of patriotism and Polishness. However, as a young girl, she dreamed of going to America, where her sister Katarzyna had already settled in Chicago. In 1906 Wiśła decided to emigrate to the United States because – as she said – there was no freedom of speech in “Poland under occupation”. After arriving in the US, she lived with her older sister and brother-in-law, Katie and Andrew Smiglewski. On the passenger list of the ship *Bremen* her name is given as Agnes Wizła, but in the 1910 census of the inhabitants of Chicago, where she was already included, her name was written in the English version (Wisła), and that was the version she continued to use (while using the spelling Wiśła among the Polish diaspora).

At the beginning of the 20th century, Chicago hosted the largest concentration of Poles abroad. There were numerous Polish diaspora organizations, including the Association of Polish Falcons in America, which had been founded in 1887 by a Polish immigrant, Feliks Z. Pietrowicz. This association, which was the equivalent of the ‘Falcons’ Gymnastic Society (*Towarzystwa Gimnastycznego ‘Sokół’*) operating in Poland, instilled on American soil the idea of improving physical fitness in conjunction with strengthening patriotic attitudes. The organization brought together both male (*sokół*) and female (*sokolica*) youth.

After the outbreak of World War I, many Polish people, including those in America, hoped for a revival of the Polish state. In this spirit,



Agnieszka Wisła (center) with two Falcon nurses (*AZG SWAP*)

the Falcons also became more and more active. Wiśła joined their ranks in November 1914 and completed a sanitary course conducted by Polish doctors, which prepared Polish women for service at the front. Girls active in the Falcons dealt with cultural and educational matters, and organizational work in the fields of physical education and military training, as well as promoting the principles of hygiene. Their tasks also focused on preparations for medical service during a possible armed struggle for independence. Faith in its recovery was strengthened by French president Raymond Poincaré, who on June 4, 1917 issued a decree establishing a Polish Army in France. As a result of an agreement between the governments of France, the United States and Canada in September 1917, the Canadian authorities agreed to organize a training camp in Niagara-on-the-Lake for volunteers from America, who were to constitute the core of the Polish Army created in France. The Falcon women also started preparing to help them.

For a United and Independent Poland!

Work for the recruitment campaign conducted among the American Polonia became an important part of the activity of the female Falcons. The tasks of the women included organizing recruitment campaigns, reaching out to volunteers who were not required to serve in the US, and persuading them to join the ranks of the Polish army. The Falcons worked among the population of Polish origin in cities such as Chicago, Milwaukee, Cleveland, Detroit, Buffalo, Pittsburgh, New York, Boston and Bridgeport, and they started to attract volunteers, first counting in hundreds, and then in thousands, to Niagara-on-the-Lake.

From the start of the recruitment campaign, Agnieszka Wiśła worked in the Polish Army recruitment office, wrote the instructions for women assisting in recruiting volunteers, and took part in the official



Agnieszka Wiśła presenting the banner she made for the Polish Army in France
(AZG SWAP)

opening of the Niagara-on-the-Lake camp. For this occasion, Wisła made a banner for the Polish Army in France, which was presented to them on October 14, 1917 on behalf of Polish women in America.

As a result of the extensive recruitment campaign conducted in the years 1917-19, 22,000 volunteers were sent to the training camp in Niagara-on-the-Lake. From December 1917, over 21,000 volunteers of Polish origin left North America for Europe to fight in the ranks of the Polish Army, first in France, and then on the eastern border of reborn Poland, against the Ukrainians and Bolsheviks.

Agnieszka Wisła's volunteer training activity in Niagara-on-the-Lake went far beyond just participating in the recruitment campaign, as it also had a material dimension. The young *sokolica* organized collections of money for the Polish Army in Chicago and participated in them herself; she also provided the volunteers stationed in Canada with sweaters, socks and scarves made by herself and other members of the Falcons. Making warm garments for volunteers was a very popular activity among Polish women, who donated thousands of pieces of warm clothing. In addition to winter clothes, Agnieszka Wisła made badges and banners for Polish troops in her workshop; these were her main source of income.

The 'Insubordinate' Nurse of the Polish White Cross

Neither her participation in the recruitment for the Polish Army, her activity in the Falcons, nor her professional work seemed sufficient to Agnieszka Wisła in the face of the huge needs of the Polish soldiers. Her deep commitment and willingness to help them is evidenced by the fact that during World War I, after the United States joined the war, Wisła sought membership in the American Red Cross (ARC).



Agnieszka Wiśła during a fundraiser for the Polish Army organized in Chicago during World War I (AZG SWAP)

However, in the light of the regulations, without being a US citizen (she had already lived in the US for over ten years, but was still not naturalized), she could not be accepted. The fact that Poles could not act in an organization of this type was observed by Helena Paderewska who, alongside her husband, was developing a range of aid and charity activities. It was she who made efforts to create the Polish Red Cross (*Polski Czerwony Krzyż*, PCK), but as national Red Cross organizations could only arise in independent countries, there was no legal possibi-

lity for the establishment of a Polish branch of the Red Cross. In this situation, on February 2, 1918, Helena Paderewska created a civil organization operating in support of the Polish army – the Polish White Cross (*Polski Biały Krzyż*, PBK).

The first members of the Polish White Cross came from the Chicago branch of the Polish Women's Alliance in America, but over time most of the Polish women's organizations active in the United States became involved in its work. However, it soon turned out that the material and spiritual help they offered, despite being substantial and varied, was insufficient. Requests for Polish nurses, who were sorely needed in light of the ever-growing number of wounded, began to flow in from France. Paderewska organized training; this was attended by Wisła, among others, who thus found herself among the group of forty-two trained nurses sent to France in 1918.



Nurses of the Polish White Cross during a parade in the United States, probably 1918 (*AZG SWAP*)

After arriving in France, Wiśła and the other girls were assigned to work in the Le Perray, 'Blake' and 'Aux. No. 117' hospitals in Paris, as well as in the American hospital where many wounded Polish soldiers were being treated. However, they were not only being treated in the 'Polish' hospitals in Paris, but also in other infirmaries scattered throughout France. The task entrusted to Agnieszka Wiśła was related to this. The plan was for her to visit hospitals around France to find the Polish soldiers there and arrange for their transfer to facilities with Polish medical personnel. They would be sent to hospitals where they could communicate with Polish-speaking doctors and nurses, so that those who could not speak French would not feel alienated and lonely.

About three months after arriving in France, on the order of the Supreme Command of the Polish Army in Paris, Agnieszka Wiśła was sent to the south of the country to take care of the Polish soldiers in Nice for convalescence and rest. Her work was of great importance to the soldiers, not only regarding health, but also organizationally. Wiśła appreciated the importance of keeping them in a good state of mind, so she arranged for a Soldiers' Inn to be set up for them in Nice, so that they would have a place to meet, as well as obtaining permission for Polish soldiers to enter the American Inn. Those who were in better shape got to go on tours of the Cote d'Azur organized by Agnieszka Wiśła.

In April 1919, a few months after the end of the war and the start of demobilization, the soldiers of the 'Blue Army' [the Polish army formed in France] were transported from France to Poland. Along with the demobilization of the army, the disbandment of the PBK nurses' unit progressed. At the beginning of May 1919, Wiśła, together with Ignacy Jan Paderewski, his wife, and other dignitaries, left for Poland on a diplomatic train. Of the forty-two nurses sent to France, eighteen had already returned to the United States, and twenty-four continued their service in the reborn Poland: twelve of them were included in the



Nurses of the Polish White Cross with patients in the hospital on Dzielna street in Warsaw, 1919 (*AZG SWAP*)

American Red Cross Mission to Poland (they helped the so-called Gray Samaritans), and ten – still under the standard of the Polish White Cross – worked in hospitals around the country, taking care of soldiers wounded in the Polish-Bolshevik war.

Agnieszka Wisła however, was given a different task: together with Helena Gaczor, she was directed to the Eastern Front, where the battles with the Bolsheviks were taking place. She looked after the needs of the wounded herself, at first together with Gaczor, and then after the latter's death (of typhus); she brought and distributed first aid supplies, as well as cigarettes awaited by the soldiers, and other gifts sent by Polonia to PBK in Warsaw.

Wiśła recalled this time as follows:

“In April 1919, [I] left with this army to Poland, where I spent the entire time of the Bolshevik invasion on the fronts: on the Ukrainian front at Łuck, Równe, Sarny, Rokitno; then later the Russian front, Vilnius, Daugavpils, Minsk, Borysiv, where I provided medicaments, warm clothing, cigarettes and other things sent from America and other countries to the soldiers on the fronts fighting Bolshevism, because after recovering its freedom in 1918 Poland was drained to the point that soldiers fought in paper clothing; in many cases their feet were wrapped in rags instead of shoes, and their wounds were wrapped in paper. [...] During this twenty-two-month-long ordeal in Poland, and especially during my stay on the Volhynian and Lithuanian-Belarusian fronts, I had much to do with such poverty, neglect, diseases, and all kinds of events so extraordinary that in a normal way of life, one could not believe that human beings could live in such conditions.”

After returning from the front, for several weeks Wiśła organized material aid and transported it to the country manors where soldiers were convalescing, so that they could regain strength before returning to the front. This action was carried out among the population on a large scale; many people expressed their willingness to accept recovering soldiers into their homes. In addition, Wiśła continued to transport medicines, medical equipment, and other items sent from America as gifts and delivered by the national Red Cross.

At the start of 1920 – as she had already had experience in organizing soldiers’ lodgings, first in France and then in Warsaw – she was delegated to Pomerania, which had been recovered from the Germans, to conduct educational and cultural activities among soldiers under the



Agnieszka Wisła with aviators, Easter 1920 (*AZG SWAP*)

PBK. There, she established lodgings and day rooms at military schools established in former German barracks (for example, in schools educating Navy personnel, airmen, navigators and artillery NCOs).

Although in Toruń, Grudziądz and the surrounding towns, Agnieszka Wisła's main task was cultural and educational activities, the skills and experience she had acquired while recruiting soldiers to the Polish Army in France were very useful there. During the Polish-Bolshevik war, Wisła established cooperation with the Citizens' Committee and assisted in recruiting volunteers to defend Warsaw; in August 1920 she left for the capital herself, and from August 12–18, she assisted in treating the wounded. Her sacrifice and determination were demonstrated by the fact that, like several of her friends from PBK,

she left for the capital against the orders of the organization's president, Helena Paderewska, who relieved the ladies of their obligation to aid the wounded during the bloody battle for Warsaw, and ordered them to move to a safe place.

“During the siege of Warsaw, I was there for a whole week, and seven of us Polish women from America received an order from our supervisor, Mrs. H[elena] P[aderewska], to leave Warsaw immediately. We did not obey this ordinance, for which I later received a letter from her declaring that for the first time in her life she had been forced to bow before the insubordination of her subordinates.”

After August 18, Agnieszka Wisła returned to Pomerania and stayed there until January 28, 1921, when she set out from Gdansk with soldiers from the 'Blue Army' in a military transport (the ship *President Grant*) to New York, where she arrived on February 16, 1921.



Polish White Cross nurses Agnieszka Wisła (second from the right) and Anastazja Wichniarek on board the *President Grant*, 1921 (AZG SWAP)

Rescuing Polish Children from Siberia

At the end of January 1922, Agnieszka Wisła was entrusted with an extraordinary mission: in 1920, 312 children (some of whom were orphans) had been evacuated from Siberia during the Polish-Bolshevik war by Japan to the United States, and temporarily placed under the care of the American *Polonia*; her job was to bring them to Poland. The children were not formally adopted because it was planned that as soon as possible after the end of the war they would be sent back from the United States to Poland, where they would be able to reunite with their families.

The Polish Rescue Committee for Children in the Far East, which led the action from the beginning, received enormous help from the Japanese government and the Japanese Red Cross, thanks to which over 800 Polish children were sent to Japan from 1920 to 1922. The first transport, consisting of nearly four hundred children, was organized in July 1920. They were first taken to the port of Tsuruga, and then by train to Shibuya near Tokyo. They were weak and malnourished, and many of them were ill. In Japan, they received medical help, care and material support – not only from the government, but also from ordinary citizens, because help for them was arriving from all over the country. The first group was sent to Poland from Kobe. Thanks to the efforts of the American Red Cross, it was possible to send the second group of 370 children first to the United States; 150 of them arrived there on the *Suwa Maru*, 114 on the *Katori Maru* and 106 on the *Fushimi Maru*. The children were taken care of by the Polish community in America. Initially, it was planned that in the United States they would all live together on a farm designated for the purpose (Ignacy Jan Paderewski wanted to offer them hospitality on his property), but there were too many of them, and eventually they were placed in orphanages, boarding houses and in Polish expatriate families, including in the towns

of Polonia, Manitowoc and Milwaukee (in the state of Wisconsin), Niles (Illinois), Detroit and Orchard Lake (Michigan), New Britain (Connecticut), and Cambridge Springs (Pennsylvania).

“The Siberian Rescue Committee brought 370 Polish children from Siberia to America – it evacuated them at the most critical moment in 1920, when it would have been impossible to transport them to Poland, because the enemy was near Warsaw and threatening the whole country; to leave them in Siberia was impossible, because the war and anarchy would have condemned the children to certain doom. At this truly tragic moment, help came for our children from America – thanks to the decision by the State Department to admit the children to America for a few years, until they could be returned to Poland.”

The moment came in February 1922, when several Polish women acting on behalf of the Polish Emergency Committee for Children in the Far East, including Agnieszka Wisła, set off with the children under their care on the *Princess Matoika* sailing from New York to Bremen. From there, thanks to Wisła’s involvement, among others, they reached Poland after several years of wandering.

The Only Woman in the Polish Army Veterans Association

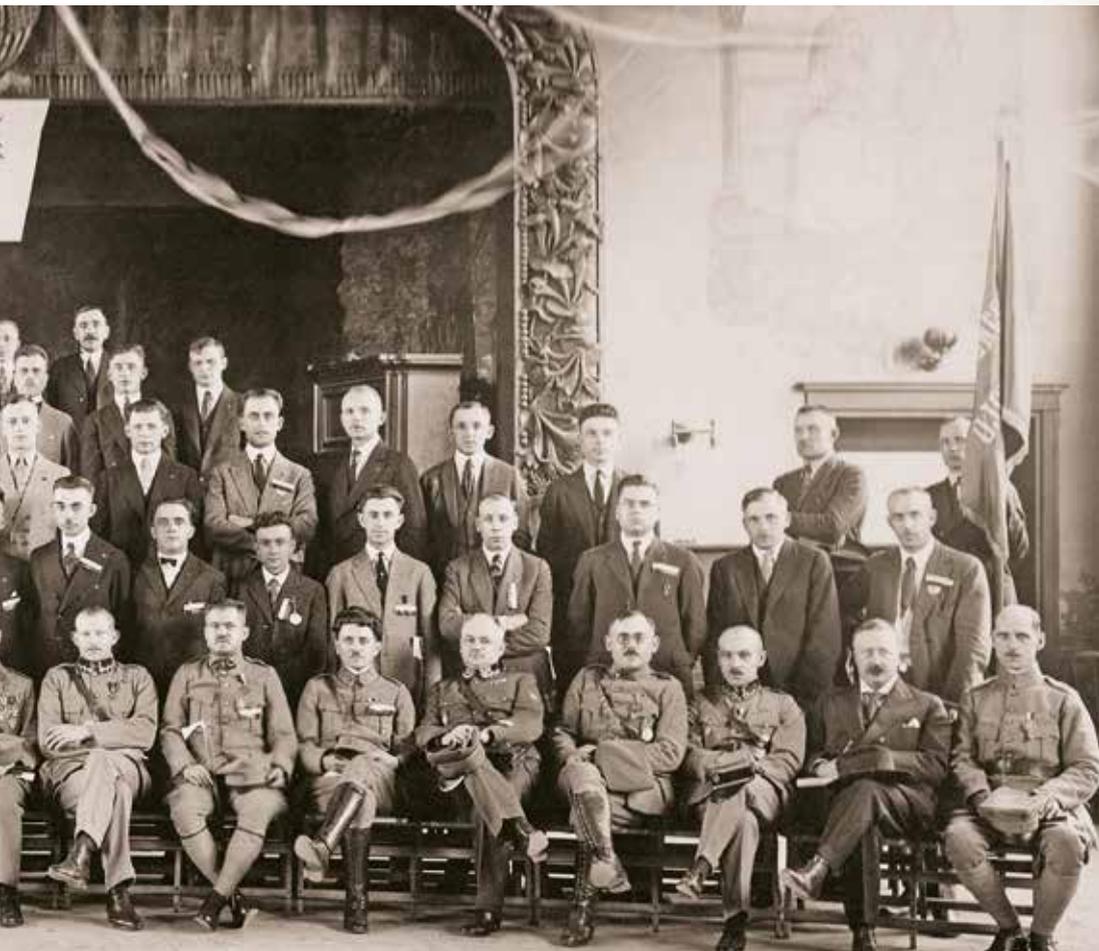
In 1921, shortly after arriving in the United States, Agnieszka Wisła started the work which she continued until almost the end of her life. At that time, she became involved in organizing aid for former soldiers of the ‘Blue Army’. She was active in various organizations and associations, initially in the United States and Canada, and then in France



The 2nd PAVA Congress, Chicago, May 28–30, 1922. The only woman present: Agnieszka Wisła (*AZG SWAP*)

and Poland. The most important of these, however, was the Polish Army Veterans Association (PAVA) [*Stowarzyszenie Weteranów Armii Polskiej w Ameryce (SWAP)*].

Out of 21,000 American volunteers who had joined the Polish Army in France during World War I, about 14,000 returned to the US. Most of them were not US citizens and did not fight in the US Army, and therefore had no right to receive assistance, or even any care as war invalids. For a large number of the former volunteers who had



previously travelled to Europe to fight for Poland, their return to the United States was a bitter disappointment. Many of them had lost their jobs due to being absent for several years; some had also lost their families, and some soldiers had been rendered disabled or homeless as a result of their injuries on the battlefield. There was thus a great need to help these Polish Army veterans.

In the initial period after their return to the US, in 1920–21, there was no organization that would concern itself with the fate of the injured veterans. After returning home, the former soldiers of the Polish Army

in France had to look for funds to secure their existence and to support those poorer than themselves; they could only rely on their own efforts. They thus began to gather in various independent organizations scattered throughout the United States. As early as May 1921, at a convention in Cleveland (Ohio), these dispersed groups managed to form a strong, unified organization called the Polish Army Veterans Association. Its first president was Falcons activist, Dr. Teofil Starzyński.

The aim of the association was primarily to help former Polish soldiers – veterans of the ‘Blue Army’, in particular the invalids, the homeless, and the unemployed. Various activities were carried out to collect funds or donations in kind. PAVA’s activity won them a great ally – Ignacy Jan Paderewski, who in 1926 donated 10,000 dollars to help the veterans, which gave rise to the Invalids’ Fund (*Fundusz Inwalidzki*), which still operates under his name today.

Agnieszka Wisła immediately joined the work of the Polish Army Veterans Association in America, and joined PAVA Local no. 5 in Chicago, with which, as it turned out, she would be associated for many years. She was the first (and for a long time, the only) woman admitted to the Association.

The Auxiliary Corps: A Cornflower to Help the Veterans

Although Wisła greatly appreciated her membership in PAVA, after her first few years of activity in its ranks, she came to the conclusion that the Association’s activity would be more effective if more women worked for it. Indeed that was the case: many women were involved in helping former soldiers, even if they were not affiliated with any organizations. One early form of such activity was the Veterans Aid Committee, which Agnieszka Wisła organized as early as 1922, soon after the creation of PAVA. This

committee included quite a large group of women who supported single veterans and the less well-off families of former Polish Army soldiers. However, despite the efforts and dedication of the Committee's members, their work did not bring satisfactory results, mainly because of their organizational dispersion and the irregular nature of their activity. A way was therefore sought for them to work more productively.

In the fall of 1923, the PAVA management board presented a project to establish an Auxiliary Corps (AC) within the Association, and Local no. 3 in Milwaukee was the first to implement it. It set up a unit of the Auxiliary Corps (initially thirty-nine men and women), whose purpose was specifically to give aid to veterans. This unit became the prototype of the nationwide Auxiliary Corps, whose task was to include mutual material and spiritual help, to spread Polish culture in America, and promote the name of Poland.

At PAVA's 3rd General Congress in Detroit (Michigan) in May 1925, a resolution was adopted to merge the various small circles and societies, including the Veterans Aid Committee founded by Agnieszka Wiśła, into a new organization. The Auxiliary Corps of the Polish Army Veterans Association was thus established – a nationwide organization with its own board and charter, as well as branches to be set up at PAVA facilities. The founding meeting of the AC was held under the auspices of PAVA on August 11, 1925 at the headquarters of the Polish Women's Alliance (*Związek Polek*) in Chicago.

The Corps was established as a humanitarian organization of PAVA, primarily to care for former Polish soldiers. The Corps quickly became a women-only group, although the name of the Ladies' Auxiliary Corps was only adopted in 1992. Its intention was to integrate the Polish women's units which had been working individually in various cities. The



The Auxiliary Corps logo

new organization was first joined by women who had previously acted on behalf of veterans, e.g. members of the Polish White Cross, the Gray Samaritans (*Szare Samarytanki*), and employees of recruitment offices or various committees. Agnieszka Wisła, who had been the only woman among PAVA's members, was not only the founder of the Auxiliary Corps, but also its first president until 1931, and later its long-time honorary president. She was also appointed to organize branches of the Corps at individual PAVA locals.

“We voluntarily accepted the obligation to visit the sick in hospitals whom we knew about, bringing them cigarettes, oranges or other seasonal fruits, and shaving kits; above all, we provided this moral support, the awareness that someone remembered them, that they were not orphans or forgotten, that they had someone to take care of them when they left the hospital. We started looking for our men in hospitals and we found many, many of them [veterans] who had been lying there almost since they had returned, and no one knew about them. Then, together with the veterans, we started to think about shelters and further help for them. We began to search for the graves of our deceased soldiers and mark them, initiating the ceremony of laying wreaths on the graves, decorating them with flags, and keeping them respectable. We helped in finding jobs for the unemployed. Things were so tight that the pips squeaked sometimes, but no one asked for anything; it was necessary to offer our help very carefully, so as not to offend anyone. Our honored doctors and dentists were very sympathetic to the sick, giving their advice, testing and care for free, but the medicine had to be paid for. For these purposes, we organized various games, picnics, whatever we could, to get a penny or two for the necessary expenses, and to this day our ladies run this work and look after the shelters.”



The Auxiliary Corps at PAVA Local no. 5 in Utica, New York during a break before the ceremony commissioning the local Veterans Home, November 13, 1949
(AZG SWAP)

In addition to collecting money, the Auxiliary Corps' most important tasks were to search for people, organizations and various institutions, such as hospitals and restaurants, who would be willing to help. Due to the difficult economic conditions, especially from the second half of the 1920s – a time of recession, the impending Great Depression and the related high unemployment rate – even the healthy had difficulties finding employment.

In order to counteract such negative phenomena, or at least reduce the number of homeless veterans, in late 1928 Agnieszka Wisła and the activists of the Auxiliary Corps in District no. 1 in Chicago made efforts to establish a shelter for veterans. The ladies were given an abandoned

house on Emma Street in Chicago which had belonged to the Polish National Association, and set up a shelter for veterans in it, where they lived from the money collected from fundraising.

Following this shelter, new ones were built. Thanks to the dedication of the Polish diaspora, the Corps sometimes managed to transform shelters for sick, infirm veterans into real homes for former soldiers. The Corps performed their work with great dedication, which was even more difficult as with the passage of time, it required even greater commitment to reach the Polish community, which was becoming less and less sensitive to the veterans' growing needs. This fact filled the veterans with bitterness, because when they had joined the Polish Army they were supported by their compatriots, showered with promises and given great respect and love, but after returning to the US, they could count on Polish émigrés to only a limited extent.

“Our society at large, which enthusiastically cheered for our youth departing to France, has adopted a much cooler stance towards Polish veterans. Enthusiasm has been replaced by indifference.” The reason why the Polish diaspora's passionate feelings for the veterans died down may have been a certain weakening of motivation after the goal of regaining Poland's independence was achieved. It must be remembered that before the outbreak of the war, and especially during it, the Polish community made a great effort to help not only the Polish military volunteers, but also civilians in Poland. Meanwhile, after the second half of the 1920s, the economic situation of Polish emigrants themselves became increasingly difficult. This fact could also have caused some of the Polish community to distance themselves from the needs of their former soldiers.

Agnieszka Wiśła held little to do with such attitudes; she felt a great responsibility for the fate of the veterans, and remained very loyal to them:

“I consider my work for the former soldiers of [the Polish Army], who had sacrificed their health on behalf of the entire Polish diaspora, and for whose deeds many of their leaders received many awards and decorations, to be a great obligation; because I do not want to be ungrateful, like the others, who promised a lot when they recruited them and then forgot about them completely.”

That is why the annual Cornflower Day (*Dzień Bławatka*, from the color of the Blue Army’s uniforms) has become a form of help. This collection is usually held in May or June, during which symbolic cornflowers are sold, and the money thus obtained is transferred to the Paderewski Invalids’ Fund. This annual event is still one of the Auxiliary Corps’ flagship actions.



Cornflower Day in Worcester; Corps members are pinning a cornflower on William A. Bennett, city mayor (*AZG SWAP*)



The Ladies' Auxiliary Corps at PAVA Local no. 81 in Trenton, New York during the erection and decoration of veterans' tombstones, May 30, 1957 (*AZG SWAP*)



In addition to providing aid in the form of these fundraisers – organized for years and, if only for that reason, still of great importance, but nevertheless *ad hoc* in nature – the founder of the AC tried to introduce certain systemic changes which could permanently improve the situation of the veterans. At the Polish consulate in Chicago, she canvassed for Poland to sign a similar agreement providing veterans with access to treatment, as France and Great Britain had concluded with the United States. She was very anxious to ensure that Polish veterans be treated in well-equipped American military hospitals with the same rights as other Allied soldiers in the US.

Another important, non-material contribution by the AC members was commemorating the memory of deceased veterans. One of their most fundamental forms of activity involves searching for forgotten graves of veterans in cemeteries, tidying and cleaning them, and ceremonially decorating the graves of former soldiers with crosses.

Courses for Nurses and Letters to Polish Soldiers

The years of World War II were another heroic chapter in the history of the Polish Army Veterans Association and the Auxiliary Corps which cooperated with it. As they had done more than twenty years earlier, the Auxiliary Corps sold war bonds, the profits from which also boosted the resources of the Invalids' Fund. Agnieszka Wisła was also extremely active during World War II. In an appeal to the Auxiliary Corps district bodies, she called for the organization of courses for nurses. She recalled her experiences from over twenty years earlier when she was training to be a nurse. She encouraged women, and not only AC members, to organize courses and training in which women would participate, and instructed them on how to go about it in practice.

The activist, drawing upon her extensive experience, was able to show her younger colleagues how to organize sanitary courses. At the same time, she drew attention to the need to cooperate with the Association of Polish Doctors and the American Red Cross, and stressed how important it was that the specialists conducting the courses should come from these professional and trusted organizations. As in the inter-war period, so during World War II, Wisła initiated close cooperation between the AC and PAVA itself, as well as doctors and hospitals. This would allow 'Blue Army' veterans and future invalids to receive medical assistance on the most favorable terms. That is how these organizations came into contact with American clinics, including the St. Mary of Nazareth Hospital in Chicago and the Polish Doctors Association.

In addition to caring for soldiers and their families, the activities of Agnieszka Wisła and the Auxiliary Corps during World War II included cooperation with Red Cross organizations (the American and Polish Red Cross groups) and collecting gifts for parcels for prisoners and civilians in Poland. Apart from material help, the need for moral and spiritual support was also appreciated, and so during World War II Wisła also organized teams of girls to correspond Polish soldiers at the front.

Agnieszka Wisła – just as she had done almost a quarter of a century earlier – was involved in recruitment campaigns for the Polish army. One such action was announced in May 1941, during a visit to the United States by General Władysław Sikorski, who met with the Falcons and Hallerczyks (soldiers from Haller's army formed in France) in Chicago. On this occasion, Agnieszka Wisła, both as a representative of the AC and as a member of PAVA, was able to meet the general. However, this mission did not bring the expected results, because most young people from Polish emigrant families did not feel such a strong tie to Poland as their parents or grandparents had; besides, it was still remembered how

the volunteers had been treated during World War. The action ended in April 1942. During a similar drive in Windsor, Ontario, only just over a thousand volunteers were recruited.

Don't Forget the Veterans!

After the end of World War II, the Polish veterans found themselves in a completely new political reality. Contacts between Polonia in America and communist Poland were significantly impeded or even completely cut off.

Nonetheless Agnieszka continued to work for the veterans. Above all, she gave her support to the Auxiliary Corps and wrote memoirs aimed at upholding the ethos of the Polish Army's volunteer soldiers and the memory not only of them, but also of the Polish women who had worked for them with such dedication. It should be remembered that her activities for the Auxiliary Corps also had a practical side. Wisła's permanent contribution to the AC, which was connected to her professional work, lies in the costumes for the Corps' members, which were made in her workshop. At official ceremonies AC members, like the nurses of the Polish White Cross, wore these uniforms, whose design had been approved during the PAVA General Congress in Rochester, New York in 1937. They include a white dress, a blue cape with an amaranth lining, and a cap. For many years, Agnieszka Wisła sewed custom-made uniforms for AC members. To this day, the official costumes of the Corps arouse admiration during various ceremonies.

After the war, one popular way of raising money for veterans were the annual Exhibitions of Women's Works (which are sometimes referred to as the National Women's Exhibition). The members of the Auxiliary Corps Board were warmly encouraged to participate in them. Reports from AC activities tell a lot about the forms of assistance they



Representation of the Ladies' Auxiliary Corps in full uniform during the World Congress of War Veterans, Warsaw, 1992 (AZG SWAP)

offered, and above all their scale. The data contained in the report for the years 1952–55, which was presented during the AC General Congress in 1955, show that during this period the members collected over \$86,000! At that time, the Corps allocated over \$8,300 to the PAVA Invalids' Fund; almost \$25,000 for benefits for sick veterans; over \$28,000 for shelters and veterans' homes; over \$9,500 dollars for expenses related to the funerals of veterans; and a similar amount for humanitarian purposes to other organizations (including the Polish-American Council and the Polish-American Congress). In addition, a little under \$600 was spent on subscriptions to the *Veteran*, and over \$800 on printing a collection of testimonies entitled *The Military Deeds of Polish Émigrés in America: A Collection of Historical Documents and Materials* (*Czyn zbrojny wychodźstwa polskiego w Ameryce: zbiór dokumentów i materiałów Historycznych*). The report shows that AC members, like PAVA itself,



Decoration of Agnieszka Wisła, President of the Auxiliary Corps of the Polish Army Veterans Association in America, with the Silver Cross of Merit by the Consul General of the Republic of Poland in Chicago (National Digital Archives)

had not forgotten about the veterans from outside the United States; almost \$5000 was allocated to the disabled in Poland (and this was not a one-time gesture; the Auxiliary Corps subsidized veterans in Poland for many years).

In addition to organizing and providing material help, Agnieszka Wisła constantly tried to make the American Polish diaspora aware of

the role of the American volunteers, emphasizing that they had devoted a large part of their lives to working for the rebirth and maintenance of Polish statehood in 1917–1921. She participated in the work of preparing the printing of the aforementioned volume on the military activities of the Polish émigrés in America, which was eventually published by PAVA in 1957, on the fortieth anniversary of the initial recruitment to the Polish Army. Wisła was the secretary of the committee responsible for its publication.

This work was the crowning achievement of many years of efforts by the Polish community to properly commemorate the acts of the Polish volunteers in the US. Agnieszka's determination to maintain the memory of these volunteers among the Polish diaspora in America was fully justified, because shortly after World War II the activities of the veterans of the Great War and their sacrifices were overshadowed by the atrocities of World War II, and gradually forgotten over time. In addition, in communist Poland, the 'Blue Army' was perceived in the common mind as an auxiliary unit on a par with the scouting movement, and the actions of its soldiers were either downplayed or neglected. Wisła tried hard to persuade PAVA's leadership to pass on the truth about volunteers and veterans to the younger generations, who do not realize how much patriotism was displayed by this group of over twenty thousand Poles in America.

The Continuers of Agnieszka Wisła's Work

Over the years, deteriorating health obliged Agnieszka Wisła to gradually withdraw from her work in the AC, but she was interested in it for the rest of her life. She received numerous awards for her many years of fruitful activity; the Polish government awarded her with the Silver Cross of Merit of the Republic of Poland and the Cross of Polish

Soldiers from America. She was the only female veteran to be honored with these awards. She also received the *Polonia Restituta* Order. The Polish Army Veterans Association in America awarded her several times with their highest honorary distinction: the Haller Swords. She also received the Cross of Merit of the Polish Army in America and several other organizational awards. The Falcons gave her the Falcon Service Cross inducting her into the Honorary Legion of Polish Falcons; she was also decorated with the Star of Upper Silesia. In 1968 the mayor of Chicago arranged for her induction into the prestigious Senior Citizens Hall of Fame.

Agnieszka died on December 18, 1980 in Chicago at the age of ninety-three. The funeral mass was held on December 22 at Our Lady



Agnieszka Wisła's tombstone at St. Adalbert, Chicago, January 2012
(photo: Zygmunt Goliński)

of Victory church in the city. She was buried in the cemetery of St. Wojciech (St. Adalbert) in the Chicago district of Niles.

The Auxiliary Corps which she founded in 1925 exists to this day – since 1992, under the official name of the Ladies’ Auxiliary Corps of the Polish Army Veterans Association. For this long period, thousands of Polish women who have devoted their time and funds to it have continuously participated in its work. During the more than ninety years of the organization’s operation, its goals and functions have changed, depending on the conditions and needs of the times. In the interwar years and World War II, its basic tasks were related to the care of veterans, especially the homeless, unemployed, isolated, and disabled. After the Second World War, other veterans came to the US, and these currently make up the PAVA community. They are accompanied and continue to be supported by new generations of members of the Ladies Auxiliary Corps. Nowadays their role is slightly different, but some activities – such as fundraising, visiting sick veterans and Corps members, caring for them, and caring for the graves of veterans – are still their responsibility. Equally important in maintaining the memory of the commitment of several generations of Poles from America to the independent Polish state is the participation of the Corps in patriotic celebrations in the US and Poland, such as Veterans Day, the Pulaski Day Parade, Soldier’s Day, and the World Veterans Day celebrated in Warsaw.

Thanks to the work of today’s Auxiliary Corps members, Agnieszka Wisła’s work is being carried on.



PAVA and AC representatives in Doylestown, the 'American Czestochowa', 2004 (*AZG SWAP*)





PAVA banner made by Agnieszka Wiśła (left and right panels) (Polish Military Heritage Museum in New York / Muzeum Tradycji Oręża Polskiego w Nowym Jorku)

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The series *Heroes of Independence* introduces characters who participated in the struggle for the independence of the Republic of Poland in various periods of her modern history: from 1914–1918, during the battles for the borders of a reborn Poland in 1918–1921; during World War II and finally – in the era of Solidarity. The purpose of the series is to commemorate the heroism of persons, as well as exploits associated with the heroic events of those times. No less important is the presentation of an exemplary attitude: sacrifice for the cause of Poland's independence and freedom. In the books can be found the profiles of people widely known and also of those heroes of independence whose names, though oft forgotten, are worth remembering. Here are soldiers of the Polish Legions and the Blue Army, members of the Polish Military Organization (POW), participants in the Polish-Bolshevik struggle, insurgents of the uprising in Greater Poland and Upper Silesia, soldiers of the underground independence movement from the years of World War II and the post-war underground and lastly, the people of Solidarity.

