

Agent Zo

The Untold Story of Fearless WW2 Resistance Fighter Elżbieta Zawacka

By Clare Mulley

Dangerous, passionate, powerful and secretive, the life of Polish resistance fighter Elżbieta Zawacka – aka Agent Zo or Zelma – has been revealed by a gold star historian with a talent for sparkling reportage. Incredibly, this story of this British-trained agent was suppressed for years following World War Two by the Soviet-backed regime in Zawacka's homeland.

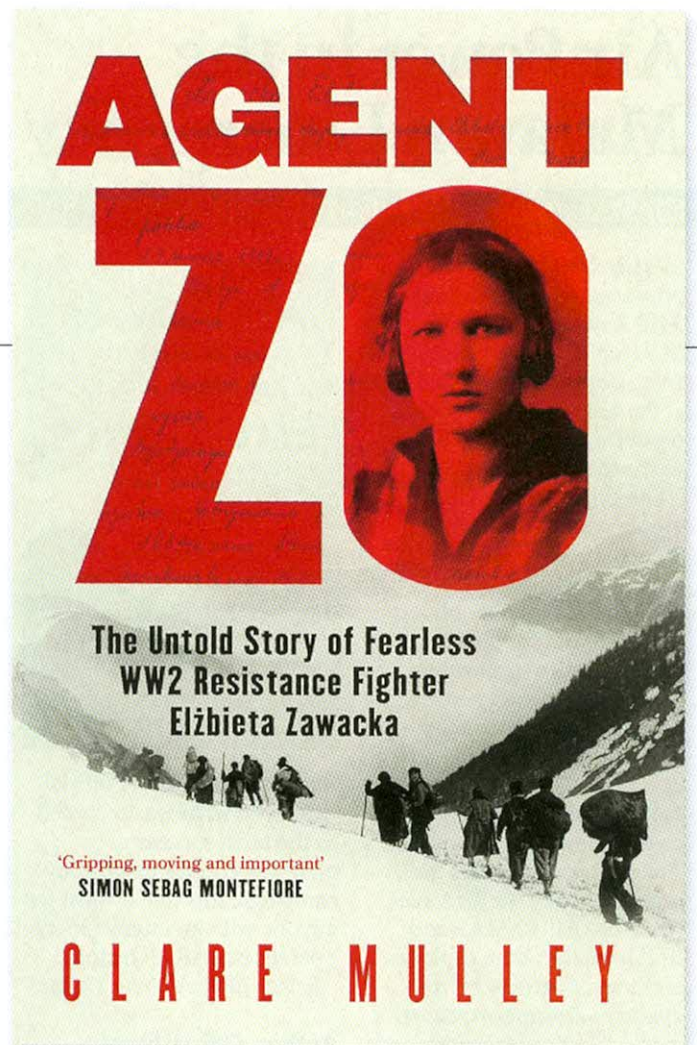
Award-winning author and biographer Clare Mulley reveals how Zawacka, a mathematics graduate, teacher and future professor, was the sole woman to join the SOE-affiliated, Polish Army-in-exile, special forces unit known as the Cichociemni or 'Silent Unseen'.

Within the 20 chapters of this gripping story we discover that Zawacka, born in the Prussian Partition of Poland in 1909, risked her life as a courier by joining the covert branch of the Armia Krajowa (Home Army). Her work involved carrying letters and documents from Poland to the Polish government-in-exile in London. This saw the spirited Zawacka travel across Germany, France and Spain to reach Gibraltar before being flown to London. Once in Britain she was based in the countryside at Audley End in Essex, and later became only woman to be parachuted into Nazi-occupied Poland. By 1943, the Gestapo had imprisoned her family, but Zawacka proved unstoppable in her revenge and she was hellbent on freeing her country from Nazi tyranny.

The pacy narrative describing her perilous journeys from Warsaw to London make for compelling reading, and we learn that part of Zawacka's role was to organise the clandestine trips of other couriers. Mulley writes: "The 'Briefing Course' at Audley End aimed to transform Silent Unseen trainees into apparently ordinary citizens of German-occupied Poland. 'It was like a finishing school,' one said, 'where we received a final polish,' Zo's briefings covered how the enemy were organised in occupied territory, this included information about their uniforms, equipment and expectations.

"She advised them on preparing cover stories that were both credible and hard to check, and how to suppress the nerves that might otherwise betray them in their eyes or tone of voice. She lectured her 'quietly ignorant students' on the basics of daily life, the limited availability in shops, the requisitioned buildings and most simply, the papers, the dress, the behaviour on the street. Pre-war memories of cafes, shops and the faces of smiling women had to be substituted by the images of German soldiers marching on Marszałkowska Street."

Years later, Zawacka admitted: "The men literally imagined that behind every bush or house in Poland there was a Gestapo officer and that you had to be on your guard against him with a



gun in your trousers. The automatic action of reaching for a gun was probably enough to get them killed but they were heroes going straight into the lion's mouth."

Storming descriptions of her actions during the 1944 Warsaw Uprising leave readers with the jaw-dropping impression this resistance fighter was a genuine force of nature. Her stoicism and tough characteristics were confirmed by relatives, friends and the people who fought alongside her. In fact, these interviews, accompanied by new archival research, underpin Zawacka's multi-layered and complex tale. As Mulley states: "All of the research transforms how we see the history of women's agency in the Second World War."

After the war, Zawacka was released from her duties. She briefly joined the anti-Communist Freedom and Independence organisation until deciding to return to her pre-war job as a teacher. However, in 1951, she was arrested and subjected to torture by the Soviet security services and sentenced to ten years for espionage and treason, eventually shortened to four years. In the 1980s, she co-operated with the Polish workers' movement Solidarity. Elżbieta Zawacka died in 2009 aged 99 as one of the most highly decorated women in Polish history.

Reviewed by Melody Foreman

Publisher: Weidenfeld & Nicolson
Web: weidenfeldandnicolson.co.uk
ISBN: 978-1-39960-106-1
Hardback & eBook: 370 pages

RRP: £22 (£12.99 eBook)
Illustrations: Y
References/notes: Y
Appendices: N