

Ernest Wilimowski – the forgotten Polish football star

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Summary

The objective of this paper is to report on Ernest Wilimowski's extraordinary sports career, with particular emphasis on the interwar period, when he was the biggest star of the Polish national football team. Analysis of the press corpus was applied as the basic study technique.

Ernest Wilimowski was born in 1916 in Katowice, in the territory of the German Reich. In 1922, Katowice and a part of Upper Silesia were incorporated into Poland. He won league games four times with the *Ruch Wielkie Hajduki* club. He made his debut on the Polish national team as a 17-year-old. He played on it until the end of August 1939. In 22 matches, he scored 21 goals. During the Nazi occupation, he acted as a native German. On June 1, 1941, he made his debut on the German national team. He played for the team of the Third Reich 8 times and scored 13 goals. He felt and acted like a sports star. His modern approach to football did not match the idea of amateurism that was mainstream in this period. For him, most important were the benefits that could be gained from the game of football.

Key words: Ernest Wilimowski, sport, football, sportpress, Second Polish Republic

Introduction

The end of World War I and Poland regaining independence were not synonymous with the end of the process of displacing borders in this part of Europe. Despite failure in the attempts made by Central Powers to decide on the state membership of Upper Silesia, pursuant to art. 88 of the Versailles Treaty, a plebiscite was applied to make a decision regarding this issue. For Poland, the negative result from this plebiscite led to the outbreak of the Third Silesian Uprising, which was attended by members of Polish sports clubs and associations that were established in the Upper Silesia region only two years earlier. Finally, on the basis of a decision made by the Council of Ambassadors, Poland received one third of the plebiscite area. It was not until June 1922 that the Polish army entered the eastern part of Upper Silesia, and the civil authorities took over administration of this area. Katowice became the capital of the autonomous Silesian province, the inhabitants of which chose Germany during the plebiscite.

Ernest Wilimowski was born in Katowice in 1916, which was then part of the German Empire, and throughout his career, he became an outstanding footballer and sports star. This text forms a follow-up of a series of articles relating to the activities of individuals associated with physical culture of the interwar period and initiatives promoting physical culture in the reviving Republic of Poland.

The interwar period brought Poland over a dozen Olympic medals. New sports authorities were established, and a modern press and radio were founded. There were also extraordinary personalities that formed the Polish tradition of physical culture. The biggest sports stars were then athletes (among others: Halina Konopacka, Janusz Kusociński, Stanisława Walasiewicz) and Jadwiga Jędrzejowska, a tennis player. Ernest Wilimowski's football career developed in an unusual way in the 1930s. Unfortunately, great politics and war dramatically interfered in the course of his career in September 1939.

The objective of the study reported in this article includes the presentation of Ernest Wilimowski's extraordinary sports career, with particular emphasis on the interwar period, when he was the biggest star of the Polish national football team. Analysis of the press corpus was applied as the basic research technique. The research concerned with this area includes, first of all, the studies by Joachim Waloszek, Paweł Czado, Andrzej Górzewski, (also the team comprising authors and collaborators of the GiA publishing house, where a commemorative book entitled *90 lat. Śląski Związek Piłki Nożnej Katowice* [Eng. 90 years. The Silesian Football Association in Katowice], was published), Thomas Urban (*Schwarze Adler, weiße Adler. Deutsche und polnische Fußballer im Räderwerk der Politik*) and Diethelm Blecking. In 1996, Wilimowski's biography was made public by his son-in-law – Karl Heinz Harke and

Georg Kachel – entitled *Fußball – Sport ohne Grenzen. Die Lebensgeschichte des Fußball-Altnationalspielers Ernst Willimowski*.

The Ruch Wielkie Hajduki club

Wilimowski was born on June 23, 1916 as Ernst Otto Pradella. He was raised by his mother in the German culture. German was his first language that he spoke at home, but at school and on the playground, he spoke Polish. At the age of 13, he was adopted and took his stepfather's surname (Snoch 2006, p. 126; Waloszek, Czado 2012, p. 23).

The origin of his sports career should be sought at the local pitch. Like most children in this area, he started by kicking a rag football on a children's team from Francuska, a street in Katowice. However, at the age of nine, he began his trainings at *1. FC Katowice*. It was one of the most successful football clubs in the Upper Silesia region. It was founded in 1905 as *FC Preussen Kattowitz* (later *1. FC Kattowitz*). In 1907, 1908, 1909 and 1913, it won the championship of Upper Silesia. This entitled its members to play in the competition for the championship of south-eastern Germany. When the Polish championship in football was initiated with a competition held in a league system, the team from Katowice was at the forefront. The team that was identified by members of the German minority in Poland lost the championship title in 1927 after a controversial match with *Wisła Kraków*, which ended in fights among the fans and stadium riots (Jasnorzewski 2006, p. 12; Urban 2012, pp. 22-29, 46).

In the line of attack comprising five players, Wilimowski played as the left wide midfielder, i.e. a player whose role was concerned with interaction between the middle striker and the left wing. He scored important goals and at the age of 17, he was voted as the best player of his team. In the autumn of 1933, activists of the *Wielkie Hajduki* club (later *Ruch Chorzów*), became interested in him. His transfer to *Ruch*, which was the Polish champion, was therefore associated with his personal promotion as a footballer. Political arguments also supported the transfer. The players of *1. FC Katowice* felt abused by the decisions of the referees and Polish sports authorities. Jerzy Herisz, who also played in Katowice and later moved to *Polonia Warszawa*, advised Wilimowski to carry on his career in a Polish club (Waloszek 1998a, p. 22).

Ruch was represented by a club of Polish patriots, Silesian insurgents. It was established in 1920 as part of the plebiscite campaign to establish Polish clubs in Upper Silesia. As many as 160 Polish clubs associating over 30,000 players were established as part of this process. The name *Ruch* was selected to symbolise the national liberation movement of the Polish citizens in Upper Silesia. The club won the Polish championship five times in the 1930s (Stecki 1982, pp. 212-212).

The authorities of *Ruch* paid *1. FC Katowice* the amount of 1,000 PLN for the transfer of the new player,

Ernest Wilimowski. At that time, this was the equivalent of 200 USD or ten salaries of a postman. *Ruch* was obliged to play two matches with the club based in Katowice (Czado 2003, p. 16). Wilimowski got a job as a courier at the heavy plate department of Batory steelworks in Chorzów. His unemployed stepfather was offered the job of a porter. At that time, despite the end of the era of the Great economic crisis, it was not easy to find a job (Waloszek 1998, p. 22). The circumstances marked by crisis and the socio-economic outcomes related with it also affected the sports movement, which also suffered from the effects of unemployment and a general lack of stability. As a result, professional competition also emerged in Upper Silesian sport (Steuer 2008, pp. 149-152).

Wilimowski made his debut in *Ruch* on January 2, 1934, and participated in the league matches in April of that year. He immediately became a revelation of the games. He scored his first goal on April 29 in a 4:1 win in the match versus *Wisła Kraków*. A crowd comprising 10,000 spectators attended this match. As noted by the reporter of *Przegląd Sportowy* [Eng. Sports Review], Wilimowski was closely covered during this match, which is why he carried out only a few individual attacks (PS 1934a, p. 2). In his third match, against the *Podgórze Kraków* team, he scored 5 goals. One of the goals was scored after he passed five opponent players. The *Ruch* team won this match 13:0, and already at the beginning of the season did he become the journalists' favourite for the championship title (PS 1934b, p. 2).

During the first season of his career in the *Ruch* club, Wilimowski scored 33 goals and became the top scorer in the league. Together with Gerard Wodarz and Teodor Peterek, he created the so-called "Three Kings Attack", which amused fans. Wilimowski's style made him a spectators' favourite, as he was admired for his technical skills and speed as well as the great delight derived from the football game (Krzoska 2006, p. 86).

Only after one season in the first league, was he elected the fourth athlete in Poland in the plebiscite held by *Przegląd Sportowy*. Only the following athletes were better: Stanisława Walasiewiczówna, Jadwiga Wajsówna and Janusz Kusociński. The newspaper noted that "Wilimowski's name was repeated on almost all elector's cards, which best demonstrates that this *Ruch's* talented and young striker has long become the anticipated personification of those football values that encourage the masses" (PS 1935, p. 6).

In 1936, he was again at the top of the league, this time with a colleague from the team, Teodor Peterek. He also scored the most goals in the unfinished 1939 season. In *Ruch*, Wilimowski played 86 league matches, in which he scored 112 goals. Throughout his career in *Ruch*, this club won the Polish championship title four times. In one of the matches, he entered the list of scorers ten times. On May 21, 1939, in a match won by *Ruch* against *Union Touring Łódź* 12:1, he set a record of goals in the competition. During this match, Wilimowski skillfully exploited the mistakes of the opponent's defense line, performing spectacular

rallies with the ball from the middle of the pitch (PS 1939, p. 2).

Ruch Wielkie Hajduki, which turned out to be the top team on domestic fields, also competed with international clubs. At a time when European cups did not exist, Polish clubs contracted matches with teams from Czechoslovakia, Germany and even England. In 1934, *Ruch* competed with *09 Beuthen* twice, which was the champion of Southeastern Germany. In spring, the match ended in a 7:0 win for the Polish champion. The October rematch held in Bytom also ended with the success of the Polish team. The team was supported by numerous compatriots who came to this match from the Opolskie Province and won 5:3 (RDT 1934a, p. 10). On December 30, 1934, *Ruch* recorded a historic success by defeating FC Bayern. At the Munich stadium on Grünwalder Straße, the score was 0:1, and the hero of the match was the goalkeeper Eryk Tatuś, who saved a penalty kick (Gliner 1935a, p. 5). Three days later, on a muddy clay pitch, after three goals by Wilimowski and two by Wodarz, *Ruch* defeated *VFB Stuttgart* 5:4 (Gliner 1935b, p. 2). After the return to their home town, crowds of supporters waited at the train station. *Ruch*, along with *Cracovia*, became the most popular clubs in Poland (Czado 2004, p. 20).

The Polish national team

The head of the association, i.e. the Polish national team's coach – Józef Kaluża, appointed Wilimowski to the national team after only five league matches. The young player from *Ruch* had already scored 7 goals and enjoyed an enthusiastic attitude of the press. Wilimowski's debut on the Polish national team took place on May 21, 1934 in Copenhagen, in a match that finished in a 4:2 loss to Denmark. At the time, Wilimowski was 17 years, 10 months and 28 days old. Thus, he became the youngest international debutant on the Polish national team. Interestingly, the youngest player was on the team for the next four years. The consent to let the underage player go to Scandinavia had to be signed by an official of the Batory steelworks in Chorzów (Gowarzewski 1991, pp. 103-104).

After the match against Denmark, the editor-in-chief of *Przegląd Sportowy*, Marian Strzelecki, included a positive review of Wilimowski's performance in his magazine. He considered the young footballer, alongside Gerard Wodarz, as one of the major figures of the match. According to the editor, these two offensive players won in faceoffs and worked out the vast majority of attacks and shots on the opponent's goal (Strzelecki 1934a, p. 2). On the other hand, it was noticed in the weekly *Raz, Dwa, Trzy* [Eng. One, Two, Three] that Wilimowski was able to integrate well with the team's game, and performed too slowly close to the opponent's goal; therefore, he did not manage to score in many of the accessible situations (RDT 1934b, p. 3).

He scored his first goal for Poland two days later in Stockholm. After spectacular dribbling, his goal gave

Poland's team a 2:2 draw, but Józef Kaluża's players lost again 4:2 (Strzelecki 1934b, p. 1).

In 1934, he starred in three matches played by the national team, i.e. in a lost match against Yugoslavia and Germany and a draw against Romania. He scored a total of two goals in them.

Since Wilimowski was excessively exploited and fouled permanently, he dropped out of the team in autumn 1934 as a result of injuries. For various reasons, he did not play on it for two years. In 1935, supporters followed news reports about his health, renewing injuries, hospital stays and operations.

The Berlin Olympic Games were held in 1936. As a result of his suspension, Wilimowski did not participate in the football tournament. *Ruch* players were suspended several days before the inauguration of the summer Games. The extremely harsh decision of the football authorities was the consequence of a scandal that broke out after *Ruch's* friendly match against *Cracovia*, which was then listed in the A class at the time, who unexpectedly beat the Polish champion 9:0. The day before this match, *Ruch* won a league match against *Wisła*, and the lucky players decided to celebrate their victory at the Silesia restaurant in Katowice. The loud conversations in the restaurant included topics such as the money that the club paid to players for wins in two matches. The players were to receive 50 PLN each. The topic was picked up by the media, and the union set up a special League commission, which questioned the players, examining whether the principles of amateurism were not broken (PS 1936a, p. 5). Ultimately, the Polish Football Association decided that the Wilimowski's behaviour violated the Olympic principles because he provided false testimony to the commission. PZPN decided to remove Wilimowski's name from the list of the Polish representation in the Olympics and to inform the Polish Olympic Committee. In connection with this event, the player was forced to leave the training (PS 1936b, p. 4).

During the Olympic tournament, the Polish players defeated the amateur national teams of Hungary, Great Britain and Austria, and lost 2:3 in the match for the bronze medal against Norway. Inter-war Polish football did not have a strong position in Europe. In the World Cup qualifications for championships in Italy in 1934, the Poles were beaten by Czechoslovakia, who later became the world vice-champions. Yugoslavia was the Pole's opponent in the qualifications for the World Cup in France in 1938. On October 10, 1937, Poles won 4:0 in Warsaw (in the match one of the goals was scored by Wilimowski), which with a minimal defeat in the rematch, ensured the promotion of the Polish representation to the tournament taking place in the knock-out system.

On June 5, 1938, at the Strasbourg stadium, Poles faced Brazil in a match that went down in football history and made Wilimowski a world-class star.

Before this match, the Polish press, citing the opinions of French experts, gave the players of the Kaluża team better chances of winning. On the one hand, the

advantage of Brazilians was emphasized, as it was demonstrated by their better physical conditions and better performance in ball handling, and on the other, voices appearing on the pages of the largest French sports newspaper *L'Auto* (currently *L'Equipe*), indicated that Poland should have been the actual likely winner in this match (IKC 1938a, p. 11). Similar opinions were found in the Italian and Swiss press, which Polish sports journalists considered an objective and deserved recognition of the work undertaken by Kaluża's staff (PS 1938, p. 1).

The Brazilians were led by Leonidas da Silva, the then top scorer of the tournament, and controlled the beginning of the match. As a result, they scored three goals in the first half against one goal gained by the Poles. The latter seemed intimidated by the opponents' skills and played chaotically. After the break, the Polish team played much better in defense and attack, which made them the fans' favourite. The Poles clearly liked the change in weather conditions. In the falling rain, which turned into a downpour, Wilimowski scored three goals. This led to the 3:3 draw followed by the result 4:4 in the course of the match. The fourth goal by Wilimowski, which was already scored in the extra time, decreased the defeat of the Poles in the match to 5:6 (IKS 1938, p. 2). Poland dropped out of the tournament, but Wilimowski's unprecedented performance at this level formed one of the leading topics on the sports pages of Polish newspapers for several days. The papers proudly cited the reviews in the French daily *L'Auto*, which described Wilimowski as the leading figure in the match and the soul of all attacks by the Polish national team. He was delighted with his dribbling and ability to handle the ball. His successful fight with Brazilian defender Domingos was highlighted (IKC 1938b, p. 13).

On the pages of *Przegląd Sportowy*, Brazil's victory was considered as totally deserved. However, the report contained a note that if the Polish team played less nervously in the first half and demonstrated more tactical skills, this match could take on a different course (N.S. 1938, p. 2).

Wilimowski appeared on the Polish national team 22 times, and scored 21 goals. He closed this impressive balance in one of the best matches in his career. In the match against Hungary, which was then the world vice-champion on August 27, 1938, Wilimowski scored three goals in the last match of the Second Polish Republic, and the Poles won in Warsaw 4:2. This match was symbolic, because in the first confrontation after regaining independence in 1921, the Polish footballers also played with Hungary, and lost 0:1 in Budapest.

On a hot, Sunday afternoon, Warsaw was crowded with vacationers who had just returned from holidays. In the seating section of the Polish Army Stadium, reservists with hanging gas mask bags, gathered in the stadium next to numerous fans. The audience greeted them with a vigorous applause. Hungarians also enjoyed a friendly reception of the crowds. Before the match, their uncompromising and solidarity attitude was emphasised, which forced them, in these uncertain times, to come to Warsaw and play a football match.

The press considered Wilimowski as the main motor of the offensive actions of the Polish national team. Once again, the reports stressed the face-offs that he won, his work for the team and accurate passes. His last two goals were particularly effective, as they were preceded by impressive dribbles. After the match, the enthusiastic audience burst onto the pitch. Some supporters lifted the players onto their shoulders, both the Polish and Hungarians, and took them off the pitch (A. Sz. 1939, pp. 2-3). When the crowd left the stadium and flooded the streets of Warsaw, the applause was endless. This time, however, spectators cheered the soldiers passing on car platforms (K.G. 1939, p. 2). Five days later, German troops invaded Poland, leading to the largest armed conflict in world history.

The wartime period

World War II changed the lives of millions of people, and this also applied to athletes and footballers. Some players fought at the warfront, others played on underground teams, some of them were killed. From among the players playing for *Ruch*, the majority were conscripted into Wehrmacht. In 1939, Gerard Wodarz was in the Polish army and participated in the September campaign. In the years 1942-44, he served in Wehrmacht. He was captured by the Allied forces, from which he then joined the ranks of the Polish Army in Great Britain. Teodor Peterek, who was incorporated into Wehrmacht in 1942, during his stay in France, also surrendered to the Allied forces, and then joined the Polish Armed Forces (Jatkowska 2017, p. 300).

Alike most Silesian players, Wilimowski signed the *volkslist* and continued to play football, but this time, in German clubs. Until February 1940, he performed in the 1st FC *Kattowitz* reactivated by the Germans. Then, in order not to serve in the Wehrmacht, he moved to the police club *Polizei SV 1920 Chemnitz*, which competed in the League of Saxony. In 1942, he had already played in *TSV 1860 Munich*. He won the German Cup with this club and became the best scorer of these games (Czado 2013, pp. 12-13). In Germany, he was in life form. He scored goals and made history as the top scorer of Saxony in 1941 and Bavaria in 1942 (Rostropowicz 2006, p. 101).

The Germany national team's coach – Sepp Herberger, who admired Wilimowski's style during the match against Brazil at the 1938 World Cup, invited him to the training camp with his team. Wilimowski's debut in German colours was extremely successful. On June 1, 1941 in Bucharest, Germany defeated Romania 4:1, and Wilimowski scored two goals and permanently entered the team managed by Herberger, taking the place of Helmut Schön (Urban 2012, pp. 43-44, 59-60).

He appeared on the Third Reich team eight times and scored 13 goals. He performed best in a match against Switzerland. On October 18, 1942, at the Bern stadium, Wilimowski defeated one of the best defensive

lines in the world. He scored 4 goals and the Germans defeated the hosts 5:3 (Blecking, Huhn 2016). After the defeat in the battle of Stalingrad, the Third Reich suspended playing matches for the national team.

Discussion

In connection with the fact that Wilimowski played for the German team representation during World War II, the authorities in Poland made attempts to erase his name from football history. Post-war communist propaganda considered him a traitor who passed over to the occupier. His name was not included in publications concerned with national football history.

During the political transformation period following 1989, Wilimowski's name and his amazing sports accomplishments were recalled by sports journalists: Andrzej Gowarzewski and Joachim Waloszek from Katowice. In the works which described the complexity of his career in cruel times, it was stressed that this player was only interested in playing football. Subsequent attempts to rehabilitate the player presented him as an innocent victim of politics. The press materials disseminated in the Upper Silesia region clarified that Wilimowski was not interested in national issues, because he was neither a politician nor a soldier, but a footballer from whom a heroic attitude could not be expected.

Unexpectedly, the dispute over Wilimowski's career was again revived in 2012. On the occasion of the European Football Championship, an exhibition titled *White eagles, black eagles. Polish and German footballers in the shadow of politics* was organised at the German embassy in Warsaw. At that time, questions were asked about the player's choices and their moral consequences in the face of a totalitarian system. The discussion also included issues whether these historians should consider these events a trivial fact, as some researchers do, or whether they should be viewed as proof of disloyalty to Poland. Not accusing Wilimowski of involvement in the apparatus of violence of the Third Reich, it was reminded that his image was used by the Nazi propaganda. It was also suggested that the representatives of the Polish national team were not nameless citizens, and their attitude could be perceived by fans as an act of betrayal (Semka 2012, pp. 6-7).

We can note here, that not all great footballers from the countries occupied by the Third Reich agreed to play in the representation of this state. Oscar Heisserer, a representative of France and the best player of Alsace, refused this option to play for Herberger, and helped Jews escape from the occupied country during the war. He told the German coach – "I cannot be a French representative and a German representative. It's impossible, right?" (Kuper 2013, pp. 176-177).

The analysis of the press corpus has offered the author the possibility to make another point regarding the career of Ernest Wilimowski. The famous football player was an opportunity-seeker who pursued his sports career

with calculation. He changed clubs and national teams guided solely by personal, immediate benefits. We can also emphasise that he quickly adapted to the changing circumstances of the restless and cruel times of the inter-war period and the Second World War.

Concluding remarks

After the war, Wilimowski played in German clubs until 1959. He died on August 30, 1997 in Karlsruhe.

According to *Sport-Brockhaus*, a German encyclopaedia, his long career involved a total of 1,175 scored goals. In contrast, according to the Soccer Statistics Foundation, he scored 554 goals in official matches, and held the record of 10 goals on two occasions (Waloszek 1998b, p. 5).

His sports skills and lifestyle predisposed him to be a star. Wilimowski, who loved women and banquets, quickly started to live the life of a king. When discussing his sports career, it can also be noted that he was a type of modern footballer. The scandal, which blocked his way to the Berlin Games, clearly demonstrated that Wilimowski did not fit into the idea of amateurism. For him, most important were the benefits that he derived from playing football. He did not want to go to work nor did he want to join the army.

The decisions taken resulted in Wilimowski's opportunistic attitude. In 1934 he was transferred from a German minority club that was experiencing temporary problems to a team of Polish patriots. His career after this decision definitely accelerated. In 1939, he conducted negotiations with Junak Drohobycz. The debutant team in the national league of the 1940 season was planning a massive transfer in the offensive line due to the financial support of the local oil industry (Czado 2004, p. 20). These bold ideas were interrupted by World War II. In the first days after its outbreak, Wilimowski hid carefully. He did not want to wear a Polish uniform and go to the front (Urban 2012, p. 56). He also avoided the German army, leaving Katowice for the second time and moving to a police team from Saxony. Despite the fact that he was a Polish representative, he responded positively to the call of coach Herberger, putting the shirt of the Third Reich national team on during the war.

After the war, Herberger forgot about Wilimowski. He did not call him to his new team, which unexpectedly reached the world championship in 1954.

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