Diver in the uranium mine of Kowary, Poland

# *Diving the* Uranium Mine *of Kowary, Poland*

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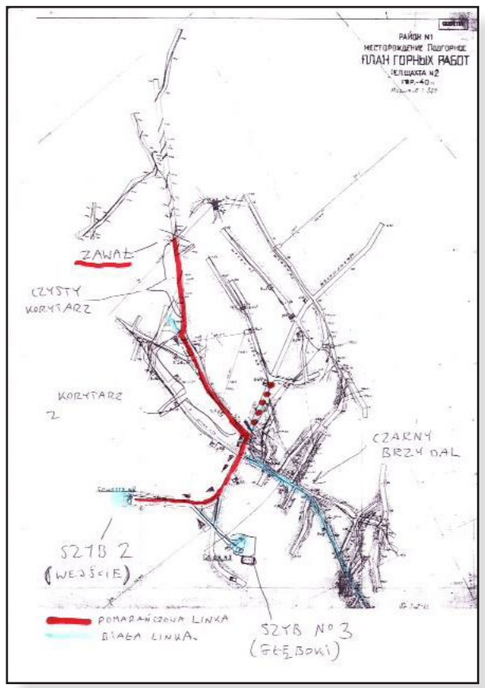
Photos by Kasia Cylwik

**Diving in old mines and tunnels is becoming more and more popular. More and more cave divers are discovering a love for the exploration of these unique time capsules.**




Map of uranium mine in Kowary, Poland

In recent years, I have had the chance to dive a series of mines. Mainly these were iron mines and slate mines, which have been opened for years to trained cave divers. However, as is the case everywhere, the law of supply and demand also applies to mining. The bigger the interest is, the more possibilities there are.

The uranium mine in Kowary, Poland, is a good example. It was September 2015, when I first saw pictures of divers in the uranium mine. I thought initially that it was a Halloween joke or a printing error. Diving in a uranium mine? Wasn't it too dangerous? What about the radiation? But the pictures were so impressive that I had to look for more information. This led to an invitation I received from a couple of Polish dive buddies, who said it would

Gear stands ready at the point of entry for the dive in the Kowary uranium mine. Note the macabre decoration in the background—the outer shell of an atomic bomb; Bats hang in the tunnel to the dive site (right)

be best if I came in person and took a look at the mine, and that it would be even better if I brought a few friends.

At the end of March 2016, I took my team to Poland. There we met Michal Czerminski and Michal Rachwalski, who had kindly agreed to accompany us during our dives in the uranium mine. They knew the mine very well and belonged to a team of Polish cave divers, who handled the exploration of the mine.

## Getting there

The mine is located in the middle of a forest, so it was a challenge for even off-road vehicles to get there. Once there, one must register in a small wooden hut, which is apparently occupied day and night.

After all the formalities were completed, we began to bring our equipment into the mine. The distance from the parking lot to the entrance of the mine is about one kilometer. Fortunately, we did not have to carry our extensive and heavy equipment. A quad with a trailer was available for transport.

While Czerminski transported the equipment, we divers started on foot. Then, to get from the mine entrance to the point of entry for diving, we had to go through a long dark tunnel. There was no light here. One had to have a



headlamp or something comparable to navigate. On closer inspection of the ceiling of the tunnel, I could see colonies of bats.

After about 700m, we left the main tunnel and entered an area that consisted of three consecutive chambers. In the first chamber, we could store our equipment and move around a bit. However, in this chamber, there also was no lighting, which made preparation of our equipment a challenge. In the adjoining, much smaller chamber, there was some lighting, and on the walls, there were maps showing the different levels of the mine. The passage to the next chamber was made difficult by some macabre decoration—the outer shell of a large atomic bomb—which was the last obstacle that separated us divers from the dive entry point.

## Diving the mine

The first dives in the uranium mine were guided dives, and those who did not have at least 10 dives in

THIS PAGE: Scenes from the dive to leve 3 in the uranium mine of Kowary; Divers lower gear into the water (left and above) in preparation to enter the shaft leading to level 3 (top right)

Divers shed light on support beams strewn on the floor of the mine corridor

Divers lug their gear down to the entry point

the mine could only look at the first level. Access to the deeper areas was not permitted. My dive partner was Czerminski, who knew the mine very well.

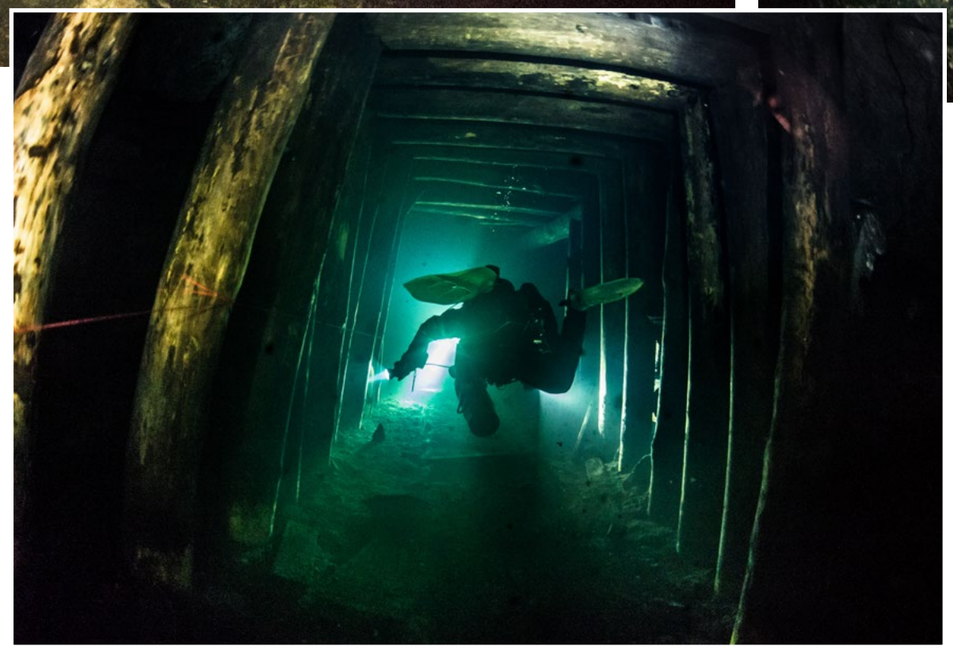
Divers had to enter a narrow shaft, which led down to the fourth level at a depth of 150m. From this shaft, one could also enter the overlying levels of the mine. One had to be extra careful not miss the entrance to the level one wanted to dive, as some entrances only opened to a wall of the mine.

Every dive in the mine was a decompression dive. Since the decompression stops had to be carried out in the shaft, each dive group could not exceed three divers. So, groups of divers, three at a time, began their dives in a timed manner. The distance between the groups had to be great enough so that there would be no difficulties in the last group's decompression stops.

Czerminski and I began our dive after the group ahead of us completed their dive. At the point of entry, I had to get used to a narrow passage. Two other divers helped me establish the stages. While diving, I hardly dared to move, as it seemed like everywhere I was bumping into walls or beams.

At about 24m depth was the entrance to the 30m level, our destination. Criss-crossed bars made access difficult. The visibility in the entrance area was not good, but that changed quickly. The path we followed was supported by beams. Other beams were strewn on the ground. We hovered through half-open doors. The walls were roughly hewn and the passages were narrow. On the ground as

Diver in main tunnel of Kowary mine (right)



well as on the surface of the water were carpets of bacteria, which whirled up with every careless movement and danced through the water.

This trip into the underwater labyrinth was exciting and spooky at the same time. All too soon, it was time to turn around. Back in the shaft, which would bring us back up to the water's surface, we started our ascent. After 90 minutes, we finished our dive.

We left our equipment in the mine for the next day, when we would be accompanied by our Polish friends yet again. Even though we were not allowed to leave the 30m level, the second day of diving was as interesting as the first. When we were done, the quad with the trailer was used again to easily transport our equipment back out of the cave area.

The visit to the uranium mine of Kowary was indeed special. It was exciting and creepy and intriguing, all at the same time. We will surely come back and hopefully also take a look at the next three levels at 70m, 110m and 160m.

If you are interested in diving the uranium mine of Kowary, please contact Michal Czerminski at: michal-czerminski@wp.pl, or Michal Rachwalski at: michal@emnet.com.pl. ■

*Sabine Kerkau is a German technical diver, dive writer and underwater photographer based in Switzerland. For more information, please visit:* ***Sabine-Kerkau.com****.*

THIS PAGE: Scenes from the dive on level 3 of the Kowary uranium mine