In September 1941, Oberleutnant Friedrich Genk of the German Wehrmacht arrived in Gomel. A wound badge on the front of his immaculate uniform proved his status as a frontline veteran as he toured various headquarters of rear-echelon military units. He seemed to be a most sociable officer, as he was often found in restaurants and bars in Gomel, suitcase in hand, talking to waitresses and fellow officers.

However, this was all an elaborate and daring ruse. Oberleutnant Genk was in actual fact Ivan Borisovich Shilov, one of the leaders of the Gomel Underground and a secret service agent of the Main Intelligence Service of the General Staff of the Red Army.

Born into a large family in the village of Bobovich in Gomel region in 1914, Shilov took part in the defence of Gomel in August 1941. He managed to avoid being captured and joined the Gomel underground. Through his exceptional courage in masquerading as a German officer, Shilov was able to collect large amounts of important intelligence for the resistance, as well as perform dangerous missions. On 4 November 1941, thanks to his disguise, Shilov planted a bomb in a restaurant frequented by German officers. The subsequent explosion demolished the building and killed dozens of the enemy.

In 1942, Shilov took up a job at the power station in Gomel and quickly established a resistance group there. However, as the group was preparing to blow up the station, Shilov was seized by German soldiers. After interrogation and torture, he was shot. For his extraordinary courage, Shilov was posthumously awarded with the Order of the Patriotic War (1st Degree). Today, a street in Gomel is named after Shilov and memorial boards are displayed on the walls of the houses where members of the Underground once met.