

Institute of National Remembrance

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The „Life for a life” project - remembrance of Poles who gave their lives to save Jews



The „Life for a life” project, is carried out by the Institute of National Remembrance and the National Center of Culture, and is aimed at propagating the knowledge of Poles who risked their lives, to salvage the lives of Jews during World War II. As part of the project we plan to publish an educational package for the teachers. Its supposed to serve as a historic aid for the presentation of this uneasy subject in schools.

Another part of the project includes documentaries and televised public announcements dedicated to people, who died providing help for the Jewish inhabitants. Furthermore, there are the book publications devoted to this topic. Already issued within the IPN's series - "Who saves a life", are the IPN's album - Righteous and their world, by Mateusz Szpytma, which depicts the story of Ulma family, and the publication by Elżbieta Rączy about the rescue of the Jews in Rzeszów voivodeship.

Worth reading

Jan Żaryn - Preface to the film

The Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem has honoured over 6,000 Poles with its "Righteous among Nations" medal. This number represents only the tip of the iceberg in terms of the actual scale of aid given to Jews by Poles under German occupation conditions. In Warsaw alone, some 25,000 persons of Jewish origin were able to escape from the ghetto to the "Aryan" side; according to historians, a total of at least 50 thousand, some even estimating this figure at 120 thousand Jews were rescued in areas occupied by the Germans during the war. They could not have survived the occupation without the help of the Poles¹. Taking into consideration the manifold difficulties connected with the conspiratorial nature of concealing persons whose "wrong appearance" clearly gave their origin away, it may be assumed that on average, several and as many as 20 Poles had to be engaged in the saving of one Jewish person (family). This gives us a minimum of from 500 thousand to over a million Poles, who - in one way or another - actively

tried to help those in need². It is difficult to count exactly how many Poles must have been engaged in various forms of rescue help – which does not necessarily mean the actual saving of one Jew. "Some helped us for a year – others for a couple of months, some just a few days, but I tremble to think what would have happened, but for their helping us those few days? May God bless even that person who gave me lodging for just one night". – remembers Róża Stenko from Tel Aviv³. And the other, often anonymous helpers: a parish-priest and his curate who forged a certificate of baptism; the organization that produced "Aryan papers"; the woman who helped to dye people's hair blond; the man from a nearby village, who brought food to the forest where a group of Jews were hiding in an underground bivouac; the owners of an estate and their whole family, who took on a Jewish couple as estate employees; and finally the whole monastery, at whose doors unknown parents left their young Jewish child; thanks to this the child found refuge within the walls of the monastery throughout the long years of the occupation. And the owners of the house on Ceglana Street and the occupants of this Warsaw tenement, beneath which there were cellars connected to the ghetto. Also the population of Oświęcim (alongside which town the Germans built the Auschwitz concentration camp), who aided those fugitives attempting to escape – if only on their first night of freedom, when they provided them their first civilian clothes. These examples, though anonymous, show how many people must have been involved in the saving of at least one Jew, and with no guarantee that this help would prove effective. It should also be emphasized that alongside the Jews, many Poles too had to hide – conspirators sought by the Gestapo.

"There were comparatively few Polish-Jewish mixed marriages in Poland before the war. These marriages, entered into by the Jewish intelligentsia, were characterized by their exceptional durability in contrast with Germany, where the majority of such mixed marriages eventually broke up" - wrote Emanuel Ringelblum - "It is possible to accept as an axiom, that if a Jew had relatives in a Polish family, he could count on their help, even if that family consisted of nothing but anti-Semites" 4. The saving of a Jew on the "Aryan side" was preceded by the dramatic decision to abandon the ghetto and one's closest family. Only some of the Jews made this heroic choice. Those persons knowing Polish families and the Polish language and culture had greater chances of survival. In turn, those Poles aiding people who did not differ too much from other members of the public had a greater chance of survival themselves. "Christmas Eve started with the exchange of best wishes and the breaking and sharing of rice paper wafers blessed by the Church. Everyone embraced and kissed Mrs. Karola's hand. I just followed their lead. - remembers Halina Zawadzka, a Jewess from Koński - Christmas Eve supper consisted of twelve meatless dishes symbolising - as Dziunia explained to me - the number of the apostles. [...]

Throughout the whole evening, I was very careful to behave like the others. I shared the wafers, exchanged wishes, took part in the conversations and sang the carols, remembered from school. [...]

The church was crowded and it was hard to get inside. I stood next to Dziunia, to be able to observe her and copy her actions"5.

According to the researchers, there existed at least three forms of aid to Jews; firstly, aid organized within the framework of the Underground

Polish State, provided by those operating since 1942 in the conspiratorial Council of Aid for Jews, codenamed "Żegota". The Catholic activist and writer Zofia Kossak was the founder of this organization. Those active in the Council were Christian Democrat, People's Party and socialist politicians, as well as Jewish politicians - from Zionists to Communists⁶. This organization in turn obtained funds for its activities (falsification of documents, finding flats and money for families, or else monasteries that would accommodate new "occupants" etc.) from the budget of the Underground Polish State funded by the Polish Republic's London-based government in exile: "In total, Żegota and Jewish organizations received over a million dollars, 200,000 Swiss francs and 37,400,000 zloties. There was no organization similar to Żegota in any other country occupied by the Germans, despite the fact that the terror faced by the Aryan population in these countries was nowhere as severe as in Poland" - wrote Stefan Korboński⁷. Secondly, aid was provided to Jews before and after the establishment of the RPŻ (Żegota Council of Aid for Jews), also in an organized fashion, except that this was provided by political organizations, including parties and armed squads, but above all by church institutions, mainly female monastic orders. According to existing research, nuns saved over 1,500 Jewish children in almost 200 monasteries⁸. In this context, it is worth mentioning the following individuals who co-operated with each other: Irena Sendlerowa, a leftist independence activist, working during the war years in the social welfare department of Warsaw's Municipal Council, and later directing the Children's Section of the Żegota Council of Aid for Jews, and Sister Maria Getter of the Franciscan Order of Marian Sisters. Aid was given to

Jews in all 40 orphanages maintained by this order. Both these women have today become symbolic figures, though being at the same time real people. And thirdly, help was given first and foremost by individuals, Polish families at whose door - most often at night - people came to knock. Individual help for the Jewish population was given by all kinds, from country folk, manor house owners and the working class and intelligentsia districts of towns. Jews were saved by people with socialist opinions, Piłsudzki ideologists and nationalists. The majority of Jews saved survived the war in the GG (the Nazi invader's so-called General Gouvernement section of Poland), mainly in Warsaw. Polish heroes were united by a common hatred for the German invader and a sensitivity that was the result of their Catholic upbringing. Saving Jews very often constituted only a small fragment of a given individual's or family's conspiratorial activities. There were also however cases where the motives for saving Jews were less lofty, but rather for financial gain. Nevertheless, people who took money from saved Jews (if only for their maintenance) were also risking their own lives and those of their nearest family.

Jews were helped in an atmosphere of intimidation and continual fear for one's own life and that of one's family. The more so that the danger threatening those giving assistance came from not only the invader but also from blackmailers, who earned a living from the occupation laws as betrayers of Jews, or from frightened neighbours who, by denouncing those aiding Jews to the Germans, aimed to save their own families, and finally from Jews themselves, who when caught and tortured by the Germans, betrayed their former guardian angels. Because Polish territory was the only place where the German

invader's harsh law was in force: the Germans kept repeating in their decrees that the penalty risked for giving any help whatsoever to Jews was death. (For example Governor Hans Frank issued a special order to this effect on October 15th 1941). The forms of assistance given varied. Death threatened not only Jews, but also Poles who harboured them, transported them from one place to another, gave them so much as a slice of bread, sold them any food or even for failing to report the fact that a neighbour was hiding a Jew. This drastic law provoked various attitudes, from the heroic to the dishonourable - but most often an attitude of indifference to another person's suffering when this could at any moment threaten one's own nearest family. In Markowa, the Ulms together with their children were executed; the wife was expecting another child at the time. A similar fate befell the Baranek family from Siedliska near Miechów, where a total of 5 people perished, including two children. In turn, in Boiski near Lipsk in the Lublin province, the Germans burnt the Krawczyks along with their son for succouring a wounded Jew. A mass crime was committed in Ciepielów, where a total of over 20 people perished at the hands of the Germans for aiding Jews. Manifestation of the least help, allowing a Jew to sleep in one's barn, or mediating in the arrangement of false documents, dyeing a Jewess's hair, etc. became in these conditions an heroic and exceptional act. According to data still being verified, in total 700 to 900 Poles perished for saving Jews. Other sources put this number at approximately 2,500 Poles murdered by the Germans for this crime⁹. We know the names of only a few of these victims. We know, for example that in the years 1942-1944 about 200 peasants were shot or burnt alive in the Kielce region¹⁰. The situation for both

Jews and Poles under German occupation was incomparable with the other regions of Europe¹¹.

Why do we today know so little about these Polish heroes? Why don't we put up monuments to these heroes, who were so numerous, taking into consideration the extreme conditions under which they acted, and commemorative plaques to their heroic stand? After World War II, Polish-Jewish relations were burdened not only by the experience of the Holocaust, but also Jewish co-operation with the Soviets, the pathologies characteristic of post-war periods, and finally the deterioration in the principle of respecting other people's property. Whereas in the period of Poland's annexations and in the time of the 2nd Polish Republic, assimilation by Jews was the result of a voluntary and conscious acceptance of national traditions, including often conversion to Catholicism, after 1945 loss of Jewish identity was linked first and foremost with the acceptance of communist ideology, and therefore a catalogue of anti-Polish values. The over-representation of Jews in the power apparatus forced on Poles, including the MBP (Ministry of Internal Affairs with its secret police), and also the official voice of the Jewish minority (the CKŻP - Central Committee of Jews in Poland) encouraged the stereotype of "Commie-Jew". Thus these were not conditions under which Polish society's antipathy towards Jews - also seen before the war - could suddenly relent. Despite the suffering of the Jewish nation. In addition, throughout the whole period of the communist PRL - the Polish People's Republic, appropriate party cells and the censors carefully ensured that "taboo" subjects were not raised publicly and simultaneously tried to arouse - in 1956 and again in 1968 - the merely dormant anti-Semitic attitudes¹². In turn, in the

collective experience of those saved from the Holocaust, there predominated an image of the Jew hiding during the war from both the invader and the anti-Semitic Polish "Jew betrayer". This image, strengthened after the war by the antipathy of Poles to "Soviet" Jews arriving from the East, overshadowed the positive experiences.

In view of their fervour for independence, Poles who saved Jews during the occupation, after 1945 very often became the object of repression by the communist security apparatus. Also after 1956, this milieu - apart from a few exceptions, such as Władysław Bartoszewski - was denied the right to vote on public issues¹³. This was not the political climate in which to demand a fair assessment of Poles' attitudes during World War II. Nor was it, apart from the Catholic Church, an honest and credible place in which Poles would want to announce their own relations in this respect¹⁴.

It was however a good climate and an opportunity to manipulate hidden emotions. Particularly in 1968, when some members of the party apparatus took up an anti-Semitic campaign. Its main aim was the takeover of lucrative positions in the PZPR - the Polish communist party - and public administration, and this was achieved by appealing to the resentments of the early post-war years¹⁵. In the West in turn, historical works and reminiscences arose that were mainly based on communist reports, which supported the stereotype of the anti-Semitic Pole, and Polish independence formations (WiN - the Freedom and Independence movement, NSZ - the National Armed Forces movement and others) were accused of fascist sympathies¹⁶. In Poland in turn the, by nature of the situation, silent majority maintained this image of the anti-Polish Jewish and communist conspiracy. Only in niche

conditions were any research achievements to develop that are still important and well-known today, such as Teresa Prekerowa's work *Conspiratorial Council of Aid for Jews in Warsaw 1942 - 1945* (1982), or the individual research conducted by Wacław Bielański, the prosecutor of the Main Commission for Research into Nazi War Crimes in Poland and by the émigré amateur explorer - Wacław Zajączkowski¹⁷. Neither was the general public aware of the endeavours by the Jewish Historical Institute (ŻIH), which were aimed at ensuring Yad Vashem honoured Polish "Righteous Among Nations" and were undertaken for example in connection with the celebration of the 35th (1978) and 40th (1983) anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. The Jewish Historical Institute has made an enormous contribution to the collecting of reports by Jews saved by Poles¹⁸.

Thus Poles' reluctance to publicise their war experiences could only be overcome after 1989, under conditions of a free and independent Poland. The first such works have begun to be published, including reminiscences describing the accomplishments of Poland's "Righteous Among Nations"¹⁹

. The end of the nineteen-nineties saw the establishment of the Committee for Remembrance of Poles who saved Jews, which has collected over 800 written statements (reports, documents, pictures, etc.) from people who until now had kept quiet about their accomplishments during the war. This committee's aim is to put up plaques honouring Poles who saved Jews. A suitable monument is to be erected next to Warsaw's All Saints Church. During the war, this religious building found itself within the walls of the ghetto, and the local priests (Fathers Marceł Godlewski and Antoni Czarnecki) were

required by the Archbishop of Warsaw to provide religious services for its Catholic Jews. In practice, support was provided to all who asked for it, including the saving of young Jewish children by getting them over to the "Aryan" side through the church's premises (sightseers may still visit these hiding places today). The church in the Warsaw ghetto thus became one of the centres of the Polish resistance and conspiracy on behalf of the Jews. The "hiding places" discovered in its walls may be visited to this day²⁰. In turn, since 2006 an "Index" project has been underway at the initiative of the Institute of Strategic Studies (ISS) in Krakow, with the support of the historians of the Institute of National Memory and the archivists of the Directorate of State Archives. The aim of this undertaking is to establish a list of names of those Poles persecuted by the Germans for giving aid to Jews during the occupation. It will be several years before the above-mentioned initiatives have any concrete effects. However already today one should realise that it is up to Poles themselves to talk loudly about their heroic ancestors from World War II. Nobody else will do it for them. Efforts aimed at consolidating in the collective memory the real attitudes of Poles during World War II should also embrace the foreign community, including Jewish communities. This will permit us to demolish the walls of antipathy and negative emotions, formed through mutual ignorance and the durability of certain fixed and false stereotypes.

¹In turn, a total of approx. 5.5 million European Jews perished at the hands of the German invader, including at least 2,8 million citizens of Polish Jewish nationality – M. Urynowicz, Organized and individual Polish aid for the Jewish population exterminated by the German

invader during the Second World War, in: Polacy Żydzi pod okupacją niemiecką 1939-1945 Studia i materiały (Polish Jews under German occupation 1939-1945. Studies and materials) edited by A. Żbikowski, Warsaw 2006, page 209-279 (ibidem literature); A. Żbikowski, Introduction, [in:] Ibidem, page 11.

2M. Urynowicz, Organized and individual Polish aid for the Jewish population exterminated by the German invader during the Second World War, page 278; the author estimates that at least 300 thousand Poles saved Jews, assuming the lowest adopted number of those saved - 30 thousand; in turn, in the opinion of Professor T. Strzembosz, the number of Poles saving Jews reached 1 million. See also: Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej. Polacy z pomocą Żydom w Polsce 1939-1945 (He is my compatriot). Poles aiding Jews in Poland 1939-1945). Władysław Bartoszewski, Z. Lewinówna, Krakow 1969, pages 74-75 (compared with the 2007 edition). The authors estimate that "at least several hundred thousand Poles of various ages and both sexes played greater or lesser roles in the rescue action", Ibidem, page 75.

3A. Klugman, Encyklopedia Polskich Sprawiedliwych (Encyclopaedia of Polish righteous among nations), published by "Więź", April 2005, No. 4 (558), page 52.

4Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej (This is about my fatherland), page 97.

5H. Zawadzka, Ucieczka z getta (Escape from the ghetto), Warsaw 2001, page 87.

6See more, Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej. (He is my compatriot), page 7 and subsequent pages. Compare articles included in the collective work entitled Polacy i Żydzi pod okupacją niemiecką 1939 - 1945 (Poles and Jews under German occupation 1939 - 1945), edited by A.

Żbikowski, Warsaw 2006. Polacy i Żydzi (Poles and Jews)

7S. Korboński, Polacy, Żydzi i holokaust. (Poles, Jews and the holocaust). Stefan Korboński, Warsaw 1999, page 58.

8See further, E. Kurek, Gdy klasztor znaczył życie. Udział żeńskich zgromadzeń zakonnych w akcji ratowania dzieci żydowskich w Polsce w latach 1939 - 1945 (When the monastery meant life. The part played by the female monastic orders in the rescue action for Jewish children in Poland in the years 1939 - 1945), Krakow 1992, page 124. (Compare E. Kurek, Dzieci żydowskie w klasztorach, Udział żeńskich zgromadzeń zakonnych w akcji ratowania dzieci żydowskich w Polsce w latach 1939-1945 [Jewish children in monasteries, The part played by the female monastic orders in the rescue action for Jewish children in Poland in the years 1939 - 1945], Lublin 2001).

9S. Korboński, Polacy, Żydzi i Holocaust (Poles, Jews and the Holocaust), Warsaw 1999, page 78; compare W. Zajączkowski, Martyrs of Charity, Washington 1988; W. Bielawski, Zbrodnie na Polakach dokonane przez hitlerowców za pomoc udzielaną Żydom (War crimes committed against Poles by the Nazis for aiding Jews), Warsaw 1987 (Those who helped, Warsaw 1996).

10S. Korboński, Polacy, Żydzi i Holocaust (Poles, Jews and the Holocaust), Warsaw 1999, page 76.

11For example, in Denmark - as far as I am aware - during the whole war, one Dane perished for helping a certain Jew get on the ferry to Sweden. Ibidem, page 78.

12An example of oversight by the censors was the 1986 case of Bohdan Urbankowski, who in his essay - very delicately - merely mentioned the positive attitude of Jews to the "internationalist" slogan;

this "mistake" was quickly repaired; the author of these "improper" suggestions was dismissed from his post as chief editor of the publication "Poezja" (Poetry). M. Chodkiewicz, *Żydzi i Polacy 1918 - 1955. Współistnienie. Zagłada. Komunizm* (Jews and Poles 1918 - 1955. Coexistence. Extermination. Communism, Warsaw 2000, pages 8-9.

13W. Bartoszewski wrote about his pioneering visit to the Yad Vashem Institute in October 1963: "... there were dozens of saplings, perhaps about 30, and in a few cases those plaques had engraved quite well known names, others with rather less well-known, but nonetheless real. [...] There were also saplings commemorating Danes, one commemorating Norwegians, but there was no collective sapling commemorating Poles. And that really riled me the first day I saw that, and I decided I would do something about it. Only I did not expect to achieve anything on my first visit, but I did". My Jerusalem. My Israel. Władysław Bartoszewski in conversation with Joanna Szwedowska, Warsaw, b.d., pages 54-55.

14In the Archives of the Polish Primate in Gnieźno (for the years 1945 - 1948) and in Warsaw (for the years 1948 - 1989/1990) there is considerable correspondence addressed to the Primate, whose authors - describing their sorrow and points of dissatisfaction with regard to representatives of the Jewish nation as well as their positive experiences - treated those in the hierarchy as the only people reliable. An exception is the above mentioned work entitled *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej* (This is about my fatherland).

15Władysław Bartoszewski's and Zofia Lewinówna's book became an involuntary victim of anti-Zionist propaganda. It attempted to put a stop to the mutual insults, and was published on the basis of reports

collected for many years by the Catholic weekly "Tygodnik Powszechny", and also the work of the émigré activist Col. Kazimierz Iranek-Osmecki and had to wait a long time for an English language publisher. See "Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej. Polacy z pomocą Żydom w Polsce 1939-1945" (He is my compatriot). Poles aiding Jews in Poland 1939-1945) (also 1969, the English edition); K. Iranek-Osmecki, He who saves one life, New York 1971.

16Probably the first of this series was Joseph Tenenbaum's book, In search of a lost people. The old and the New Poland, New York 1948. Compare Wokół pogromu kieleckiego (Concerning the Kielce pogrom), edited by Ł. Kamiński, I J. Żaryn, Warsaw 2006.

17W. Zajączkowski, Martyrs of Charity, Washington 1988; W. Bielawski Zbrodnie na Polakach dokonane przez hitlerowców za pomoc udzielaną Żydom (War crimes committed against Poles by the Nazis for aiding Jews), Warsaw 1987.

18See Relacje z czasów zagłady. Inwentarz (Reports from the times of extermination. Inventory), Warsaw 2005 (the last, 4th volume).

19See M. Grynberg, Księga Sprawiedliwych (Book of the righteous among nations), Warsaw 1993; the Institute of National Memory occupied itself in a special way with the question of Poles saving Jews, by publishing an extensive study on the subject of Polish - Jewish relations. Polacy i Żydzi pod okupacją niemiecką 1939 - 1945 (Poles and Jews under German occupation 1939 - 1945), edited by A. Żbikowski, Warsaw 2006.

20Ludwik Hirszfild among others writes about this in his memoirs entitled Historia jednego życia (The history of one life), Warsaw 1967.

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