

Article 10

Dr Andrzej Slawinski, Those who helped Polish Jews during WWII

One of the great tragedies to befall Poland during the Second World War was the systematic persecution and eventual extermination of Polish Jews by the German Occupant. Terms such as 'crime against humanity', 'genocide' and 'holocaust' only partly convey the horror of these events.

Even now, more than half a century after the end of the war, questions are still being asked: What was the Polish Nation's response to the unfolding Jewish Tragedy? Did the Poles try to help the Jews? How much help could have been actually offered in view of the rigours imposed by German Occupation? Such questions call for a considered response based on historical facts.

Poland was the only country in occupied Europe where throughout the duration of the war a secret organisation existed whose express purpose was to help the Jews and find, for at least some of them, a place of safety. Initially coordinated by several committees, this action culminated in the creation in December 1942 of the Relief Council for Jews in Poland, code name 'Zegota'.

'Zegota' **(1)** organised financial aid and medical care for the Jews in hiding on the 'Aryan side', and procured for them forged identity documents. 'Zegota' was successful in providing accommodation for many. This presented an extremely difficult problem as discovery of a person of Jewish origin on the premises resulted in an immediate execution of all the occupants. E. Ringelblum **(2)** describes hundreds of such cases.

Some 2500 Jewish children from Warsaw were saved by 'Zegota' by placing them either with catholic Polish foster-families or in orphanages run by convents or local councils. Help in the form of money, food and medicines was organised by 'Zegota' for the Jews in several forced labour camps in Poland.

As soon as the Jewish Tragedy became apparent, the Polish Government-in-Exile, the Underground State and Polish diplomacy embarked on a massive campaign, informing the free world of the plight of the Jews. Efforts were made to obtain help for them from the Allied Governments, the Vatican and from various organisations in the Allied countries. There were countless broadcasts, articles in the press, organised meetings, approaches to Allied leaders and governments in which the Free Polish leaders, ministers, politicians and diplomats over and over again insisted a crime of genocide was being committed by the Germans against the Jews. **(3)**. The full story of the Jewish Tragedy was brought to the Allied countries by special couriers from the Polish Resistance, one of them gaining access to the inside of the Warsaw Ghetto and of a death camp. The couriers tried to persuade the Allies and the Jewish organisations that there was a real danger and urgency to help the Jews. Unfortunately the efforts of the Poles were in vain. The Allies were too busy with the prosecution of the war to consider the plight of the Jews. The Jewish organisations in the free world could not bring themselves to believe the Polish reports - they thought it was all an exaggeration.

The military wing of the Polish Underground State, the Home Army, tried to involve the Jewish organisations in Poland in resistance activities. At first there was reluctance on their part to participate. However, in 1942 the Jewish resistance movement began. The Home Army helped by providing military intelligence, communication with the Allies and eventually by providing some weapons, explosives and military expertise for the fighters in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising **(4)**.

It is worth noting that Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes Remembrance Authority, has recently expressed both thanks and appreciation to the special unit of the 'Zoska' Battalion of the Polish Home Army, which in August 1944 captured the Warsaw Concentration Camp, the so called 'Gesiówka', liberating 348 prisoners, Polish and European Jews.

What of the ordinary Polish people - were they prepared to offer help to the Jews? At an early stage of Poland's occupation the Jews were selected for special treatment by the Occupier. This meant a gradual isolation, degradation, starvation and eventual denial of the right to life for all Polish Jews.

The harsh reality of life for the rest of Poland's population was that everybody was preoccupied with the constant struggle for survival. To find work, to obtain enough food and other necessities of life, all these were of utmost importance to very many. Furthermore there was the constant fear of being arrested and sent to a concentration camp, to forced labour in Germany, or to be taken as a hostage for public execution by a firing squad or hanging.

Three million Poles and three million Polish Jews perished as a result of the German occupation. Poland was the only country in occupied Europe where giving any kind of help to the Jews resulted in summary execution of the helper and his or her family. Under such circumstances it would require a person of a special kind of courage and love of humanity to offer help to a Jew. How many saints would one find in any community? And yet there were some Polish people who did help. It has always been difficult to establish the exact number of helpers. Some idea of the number can be gleaned from the Yad Vashem list of the 'Righteous among the Nations' (I). The list, as of 1st January 1997, gives the names of 14,706 persons from 34 nationalities who helped the Jews. 4,954 of them are Polish helpers. Among them are listed 11 catholic clergymen and 18 nuns. Only three organisations are honoured by Yad Vashem, one being, the Polish organisation 'Żegota'. It is likely that as research into the role of the Polish people in the Holocaust continues, the list of Polish names will grow.

Those listed are the helpers who survived and their heroism verified by those whom they helped. There were many who paid the ultimate price. In most cases those they were trying to help perished with them. The publication 'Those who helped' **(1)** lists 704 Poles who were killed because they helped the Jews. Places and dates are also given of mass executions by the Germans (the so-called pacifications of villages) of a further 143 Poles who rendered help to the Jews. To obtain and verify the names of those helpers who perished presents an even more difficult problem. Inevitably there will remain a large number of unknown heroes.

One can finally ask: - Was the help given to the Jews of some significance? Stewart Steven, who in his book 'The Poles' **(5)**, gives an extensive account of Polish-Jewish relations, offers the following conclusion: 'Maybe Poland could have done more for its Jewish population, but then so could every country of occupied Europe. The record shows that the Poles did more than most'.

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References:

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2. *Emanuel Ringelblum, Polish-Jewish Relations during the Second World War, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 1974*
3. *Kazimierz Iranek-Osmecki, He who saves one life, Crown Publishers Inc. New York, 1971. (See also: Walter Laqueur, 'The Terrible Secret', Little, Brown & Co. Boston, 1980).*
4. *Marek Edelman, The Ghetto Fights, Bookmark, London, 1990*
5. *Stewart Steven, The Poles, Collins/Harvill, London, 1982*