

POLES WHO SAVED JEWS DURING WORLD WAR II, 1939-1945

We do not know anything about many other people: those who provided Jewish families with shelter, even if it was for two or three days when the danger was the greatest; those whom Nazis murdered together with their Jewish guests thus destroying all the evidence of their heroism; those who did their duty during the war and then remained silent...

Norman Davis (2013)

The history of the 20th century treated Poland and Poles in a special manner and subjected them to an extraordinary ordeal, particularly during World War II of 1939-1945. Poles became the victims of the genocidal policy of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, and at the same time they were forced to be witnesses to the extermination of Polish citizens of Jewish origin. The Polish Government in Exile in London and the authorities of the Polish Underground State strongly opposed those crimes – they announced severe punishment for German tormentors while trying to punish Polish traitors and informers immediately if it had been possible. The first note of the genocide in Auschwitz was prepared for the Polish underground resistance by Witold Pilecki who volunteered to become a prisoner, collected intelligence on the operation of the camp and organised resistance inside of it. At the same time, the Polish Government in Exile undertook informational activities and protests addressed to western governments and societies and appealed to stop the holocaust of the Jewish population. The examples include the note of the Polish government in exile of 10th December 1942 signed by the foreign minister, Edward Raczynski, and sent to governments of the signatories of the Declaration by the United Nations.

In the Polish territories occupied during World War II, Poles and Jews were strictly separated, any prohibited contact was punished with death by the Germans. In spite of the terror, risk and ordinary poverty and scarcity, there were many Poles among those who were in touch with Jews that were willing to risk their and their families' lives to save their neighbours. The breakthrough was the so-called *Gross Aktion* in Warsaw that involved transporting nearly a quarter million people from the Warsaw Ghetto to the extermination camp in Treblinka between late July and mid-September 1942. At that time the Żegota Council to Aid Jews was established. It included a known writer, Zofia Kossak. It was not the only form of institutional aid – the Central Welfare Council was active in the occupied territories since 1940, and it cooperated with Jewish aid organisation and effectively provided Jews with help in spite of the German regulations. There are known cases of aid provided by the Church circles – particularly by nuns who hid Jewish children at orphanages, schools and hospitals that they ran. Nunneries, friaries and monasteries became shelters for many Jews during the occupation.

In most cases, aid was provided on an individual basis without organisational help but in the face of the risk of death penalty (there is evidence for over a thousand cases where Poles were murdered by Germans for helping Jews). Apart from names known both in Poland and around the world, like Irena Sendlerowa or Jan Karski there were thousands of anonymous Polish heroes who rescued Jews and then were forgotten. The number of those Righteous, and historians can only provide cautious estimates. Poles who paid the price of life for their heroic attitude indubitably take a particular position among them. We will never know their actual number, just like the exact number of all those who provided aid

– doubtlessly, the number was not a small one, which is shown by the names of many executed Polish families whose only crime was their willingness to save their Jewish Compatriots. They include Michał Kruk of Przemyśl, Katarzyna Kazimierczak of Radom, Franciszka Resich of Kraków, Ignacy Boryczko and Józef Krawczyk, his wife and nine year old son of Boiska, the Baranek family of Siedliska, the Ulmas family of eight of Markowa, Dec, Lewandowski and Kuszek of Pantalowice, 19 residents of Wola Przybysławska, the Kowalski family and 33 residents of Rekówka and Ciepielowo, and many, many more. Sometimes Poles died for helping Jews also far from country, like Henryk Sławik whose rescue action took place in Hungary. Polish diplomats who saved Jews from death also gave the reasons to be proud of them: (e.g. Ambassador Tadeusz Romer).

In 1963, the honorific title of the *Righteous among the Nations*, which is given by the Shoah Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority (Yad Vashem), was established. Among 22 thousand people from 44 countries who received the title by the end of 2014, Poles were the largest group, with 6,000 people. It should be remembered, as pointed out by Norman Davis, a British historian, that the Israeli government may only honour those whose names have been remembered and whose stories have undergone rigorous verification and we do not know anything about many other people.

The opening of the Ulma Family Museum of Poles Who Rescued Jews in Markowa will bring back the memory of heroes who saved their Jewish compatriots and have often been forgotten. The interest in the issue appeared too late, and those who helped and were repressed for providing the aid lived and died without speaking anything.

This information has been based e.g. on the information from specialist news services:

- *Poles rescuing Jews during World War II* project by the Institute of National Remembrance;
- *Polish Righteous – Recalling Forgotten History* project by the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews;
- *From Those You Saved* project by the Remembrance and Future Foundation;
- *Life for Life* project by the Institute of National Remembrance and the National Centre for Culture Poland.

DOCUMENTARY FILMS (films publicly available on the Internet as of 3rd March 2016):

- *Cena życia* (dir. A. Baczyński, 2004);
- *Historia Kowalskich* (dir. A. Gołębiewski, M. Pawlicki, 2007);
- *Lista Sendlerowej* (dir. M. Dudziewicz, 2002);
- *Łyżeczka życia* (dir. M. Nekanda-Trepka, 2004);
- *No. 4 Street of Our Lady* (dir. B. Bird, J. Maltz, R. Sherman, 2009);
- *From Those You Saved* (dir. G. von Seltmann, K. Szykier-Koszucka, 2015);

- *Sprawiedliwi* (dir. J. Kidawa, 1968);
- *Życie za życie* (dir. A. Gołębiowski, 2006).

EXHIBITIONS:

- The *Right Address* (POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Ministry of Culture and National Heritage)
- The *House under a Wacky Star. Jews in hiding at the Warsaw Zoo* (POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Ministry of Culture and National Heritage)
- *Polish Artists Rescuing Jews* (POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Ministry of Culture and National Heritage)
- *Samaritans from Markowa* (Institute of National Remembrance, Polish Embassy in Ottawa)
- *Righteous among the Nations. Polish help for Jewish population in the south-eastern part of Poland in 1939-1945*
- *They risked their lives. Poles who saved Jews during the Holocaust* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews)

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- M. Szpytma, J. Szarek, *Rodzina Ulmów*, Warszawa 2014