

The Attitudes of Poles towards Jews during the Holocaust

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On September 1, 1939, the Third Reich attacked Poland. Poland was defeated after a month, and a result of the defeat was five years of German occupation. The German occupier made universal terror the primary method of governing; imposed Nazi wartime criminal laws on Polish society; abolished or placed under total control the political, economic, and social life. Severe punishments - prison, concentration camp, death - were threatened for violating the obligatory regulations. There was also a death penalty for helping Jews. However, the fate of Poles and Jews during the Second World War was different. Although both groups were persecuted by the Germans, subjected to daily terror, from the very beginning of the war, there was no doubt that the Germans would treat Poles and Jews differently.

The German policy of exterminating 3 million of Polish Jews had several stages.

The first stage was a time of exclusion, discrimination, marking, and finally the creation of ghettos, and indirect extermination through starvation, disease, and exhausting labour. The second was murder - mass shootings and their improved version, the mass extermination camps. The final, third phase was to capture and liquidate the survivors. It is estimated that there were about 250,000 Jews who had managed to survive until then.

In the first two phases of the Holocaust, the role of Poles was marginal, and the possibilities of either helping or harming Jews were limited. In the third phase, the role of Poles and their ability to influence the fate of Jews completely changed, becoming crucial. Now incomparably more depended on their attitudes, Jewish life or death depended in many cases on Poles. Whereas before, Poles were simply witnesses, at this point their status changed. In this final phase of the Holocaust, Poles, who were also among the German victims, now sometimes became the helpers of executioners. The Germans remained the perpetrators and were responsible for the Holocaust, but some Poles in this situation became either the 'Righteous' or the persecutors of Jews. They could also become - on an equal footing with Jews - victims of their

neighbours who handed them over to the Germans.

In this short lecture, I want to outline a catalog of attitudes of Poles towards Polish Jews during World War II.

1. In this catalogue of attitudes, the first place should be given to the heroes, those who offered **help**. It is hard to determine the reasons for which people decided to risk their lives to help Jews. Ostensibly, they have nothing in common. The only thing they share - according to psychological studies - is the ability to feel compassion and the ability to feel empathy. The compassionate attitude manifested itself, among others, in ordinary acts of human solidarity, different forms of helping Jews - incidental help, singular, offered once. It consisted of feeding the needy, clothing them, or - possibly - helping to find false documents, a job, to rent a flat, offering temporary shelter.

The decision to offer permanent help to Jews must have been extremely difficult, considered very cautiously, as it constituted a threat to all those involved, all those who helped, as well as their families. Such a decision brought on further tension, fear, anxiety, and frequently called for a reorganisation of everyday life, necessary in a situation of many months of living under the same roof.

One type of assistance was **paid help**. One of the fundamental problems connected with help were financial issues - Jews had no food coupons, which were necessary to buy rationed food during the occupation, and their food had to be bought on the black market. It is quite understandable that they paid for their upkeep. Some worked (they sewed, gave private lessons, made toys at home, rolled cigarettes, baked, knitted, etc.), others lived off their resources: savings, or selling belongings.

The attitudes connected with paid help should not - in my opinion - be assessed in terms of the helpers' making profit on the hiding, but the broadly understood honesty in keeping the terms of a previously concluded contract. If the person kept in hiding, and the keeper, agreed on the fee (even if it was very steep) and the conditions of stay (even very modest),

and if the ‘host’ did not change the terms of the contract, then such a situation was considered not only normal but also praiseworthy.

In the context of helping Jews in Poland during the German occupation, it must be remembered that - even though Poland boasts over 7,000 ‘Righteous Among the Nations’ medals - the reality was not that it was active Poles who were saving passive Jews: one of three organisations providing aid, primarily in Warsaw, where some 20,000 Jews were in hiding, was the Council to Aid Jews called *Zegota*. It was co-created by the Polish Underground State in December 1942. The Council itself was of a federal character, it consisted of representatives from the Polish and Jewish underground organisations. According to the latest research, “*Zegota*” had about 3,000 Jews under their care, while two Jewish organisations - the Jewish National Committee (*Żydowski Komitet Narodowy*) cared for about 6,000 Jews in hiding, and the political party Bund helped about 3,500 Jews. Their help consisted of transferring money, which reached Poland through clandestine channels. The money came from the Polish government in London, and from the Jewish organisations from all over the world. The organised help - which involved Poles, but above all Jews who were in hiding themselves – included producing false documents, finding places to live or jobs, etc. In hiding “on the Aryan side,” Jews not only showed determination, courage, independence, and efficiency, but also helped each other by creating informal networks of family, friends, and people from the same town. Their Polish friends, acquaintances, and members of the anti-German conspiracy also took part in these networks.

However, I want to talk about the attitudes of Poles toward Jews, so let us return to that.

2. Another type of attitude towards Jews needing help is **refusal to help** – understandable in the context of the occupation-time reality. Poles did have reasons to be fearful, and we cannot demand heroism from everyone, or readiness to take risks. We should acknowledge that people have the right to be afraid. Germans punished helping Jews with death.

Refusal to help, in my opinion, cannot be assessed negatively in moral terms, we cannot say that everyone was obliged to help. Examples of refusal, understandable also to the hiding Jews, are noted in many testimonies, e.g. by Stefania Staszewska, who turned for help to the former female caretaker: “*I knock, and Mrs. Stefanowa opens the door. She recognizes me, and in her eyes [there is] such fear as if death was standing in the doorway. ‘Don’t enter, go away.’ The fear in her eyes turns to anger. She slams the door. I go downstairs, with no hard feelings. Everyone has the right to be afraid, and I am a walking death sentence. Do I have the right to try to save my life at the expense of another? Do I have the right to put people or entire families in danger?*”

In this context one should ask who was seeking rescue? After all, many Jews were perfectly aware that they were “deadly”, that their very presence endangered the lives of those who were helping them. Many believed that they could not expose another human being to such a risk and forewent rescue. Turning to someone with the request to risk their life must have been a great challenge, requiring courage and determination. I think it called for a strong motivation such as the will to survive, family emotions or the necessity to look after children. Others gave up trying to survive because they were tired or exhausted with the ghetto experience, resigned themselves to the idea of their own death, did not want to part with their closest, or did so on religious grounds.

3. It is impossible to estimate how the varied Polish attitudes towards Jews in need of help were distributed statistically. Probably they were distributed according to the Gauss curve, with a smaller margin of helping, more of harming, and the most common attitude being **indifference** (in feelings) and passivity (in action). It seems that we can distinguish different motivations behind this indifference.

Firstly, it resulted from the hardships of everyday life during the occupation. The fight for survival, personal problems, and worries were conducive to focusing on one’s own problems, and that of the immediate family, all that pushed away the problems of other people.

Secondly, a kind of indifference stemmed from anti-Semitic attitudes that created a distance to Jews, a feeling of estrangement, and a complete lack of interest in their fate. Therefore Jews – stigmatised, persecuted and closed in the ghettos by the Germans – could disappear, literally and metaphorically – from the Poles’ horizon.

Thirdly, indifference could have been the result of the demoralising influence of the war, a meanness of the spirit and its petrification.

Fourthly and finally – indifference stemmed from the acceptance of the Germans’ actions.

For Jews, Poles were the closest direct witnesses of their tragedy and humiliation. Sometimes they were sympathetic witnesses, other times they were mere onlookers, curious or indifferent, as in the account of Miriam Eisenberg, who recalled how in Warsaw, during the deportation to Treblinka, in the summer of 1942, Jews were led to the *Umschlagplatz*: “The weather then was very nice and favourable for Poles to observe this from their balconies. I remember their faces, curious or indifferent, when the terrible screams came from below. It went on for days”².

4. Let us move on to the other extreme of Polish attitudes to Jews during the Holocaust – from help through indifference to **harmful attitudes**. German actions against Jews during the occupation in Poland switched over moral signs: good was punished and evil was rewarded. One could pay with one’s life for helping Jews, and one could expect a reward for giving up someone who was hiding - sometimes a kilogram of sugar, sometimes a kilo of grain, sometimes the belongings of the murdered. The temptation proved too strong for many. Greed and lack of scruples led to preying on Jews. Cheating and exploiting them was practically unpunished. There was incomparably more danger involved in helping Jews than in robbing them.

Szmalcowniks and blackmailers were, unfortunately, part of everyday life for Jews in hiding. They were the most common threat on the Aryan side. Emanuel Ringelblum,

Jewish historian in hiding in Warsaw, wrote: “Blackmailers and *szmalcowniks* are the eternal bane of Jews on the Aryan side. There is literally not a Jew ‘on the surface’ or ‘below the surface’ who does not have to deal with them”³.

Blackmailers had their own areas of specialisation, their techniques, and operational areas. Many operated on the streets, near the ghetto borders, lurked waiting on those leaving illegally, following them, attacking, and robbing them. Ita Dimant, who left the Warsaw ghetto in the summer of 1942, describes her way from the ghetto gate on Żelazna near Leszno to the Main Railway Station in Jeruzolimskie Avenue (about a kilometer): “As soon as we took the first three steps from the other side of the ghetto, when a horde of teenagers, blackmailers, surrounded us. They started running after us and [...] screaming to give them money. We were without armbands, of course. At first, I thought: we’ll give this one something, that one something and they’ll leave, but it was like a horde. One would leave - he would send another, another would leave - he would send a third. [...] We got into a cab. It’s hard to describe how much money we spent on each thing. We were riding in the carriage, and suddenly - next to the carriage - one on a bike, and another one, and a third one on a bike. Everyone stretches out his hand and we must give to everyone. They don’t let go. [...] There’s not much to tell. When we [got on the train] - we had neither rings, nor watches, nor shoes. We had nothing”⁴.

Other blackmailers specialised in home blackmails, harassing their victims, and robbing them. Among the blackmailers, there were professionals for whom the blackmailing of Jews became a way of earning a living, there were also “amateurs” – accidental, occasional blackmailers. One of the Jewish women in hiding recalls that a blackmailer tried to blackmail several passers-by on the street. The sixth time he blackmailed a Jew, from whom he took the money, and then explained to him, slightly ashamed, that he “*just needed the money very badly*”⁵.

The *szmalcowniks* and blackmailers, although as a rule they did not kill their victims themselves, by robbing them and depriving them of means, they indirectly brought on

their doom. Conspiratorial Civilian Courts, which were part of the Polish Underground State, passed death sentences on blackmailers. But these were few, generally applied to blackmailers who were also involved in harming the Polish underground and were not actually passed until 1943 - too late to eradicate the scourge of blackmailers.

6 5. The attitudes to Jews include more than robbing and blackmail – the direct threat was the **denunciation** of those in hiding. Denunciation is a particularly important element of the system of power in totalitarian regimes: it is one of the ingredients that fills the space between the inaccessible power and the ordinary citizen. The citizen uses the violence of the state to exploit it for his or her own goals. In this way the informer became part of the system of terror, a link in the chain of universal surveillance and the work of the secret police. Similarly, during the occupation of Poland, denunciations were an important element of the occupier's system of power and repression. Germans did not have the practical ability to check every apartment or farm to see if and where Jews were hiding (or breaking other ordinances). By spreading terror, they received invaluable favors from voluntary collaborators - informers. Informers could write anonymous letters to the German authorities (which was more common in the cities), inform them of the place where Jews were hiding, or even personally catch Jews and lead them to the police station (which was more common in the countryside).

The fear of denunciation was one of the reasons why helping Jews had to be hidden from the neighbours. Their denunciation could pose a serious threat. Germans applied the principle of "collective responsibility", so people were afraid that if they found a Jew in hiding, they could - for example - burn down the whole village. In postwar trials, defendants often justified their actions - denunciation - precisely because of fear. After the war, in Poland as in other European countries, those who collaborated with the German occupier were put on trial by special Decree of 31 August 1944⁶. These laws were also used in political trials by the new, communist

authorities. But among around twenty thousands of cases under the decree, files of which have been preserved, there are around seven thousand cases against people suspected of or charged with acting – sometimes among other crimes - to the detriment of Jews during the war. For example, in one of the trials, Antoni Śpiewak, a chimney sweeper from the town of Łuków, was indicted. During manhunts for Jews, he would search for shelters where people were hiding. As written in the indictment: "*Śpiewak would spontaneously take an axe and search for shelters with it*". He detected at least two: in one there were five people, in the other - 30. All of them died. In addition - two months before the end of the war - he handed over to the Nazis his former neighbour, a Jew who was hiding in the town. In 1945, Śpiewak was sentenced to death⁷.

6. Unfortunately, denunciation was not the worst thing the Poles did to Jews during the war. There were also **instances of murder**. The remaining trial files indicate the variety of murder cases. We can read about true horrors – people murdered with spades, axes, hit to death, stoned, drowned, hanged, buried alive, or a Jewish family walled in alive in a cave in the closed quarry near Kielce.

Such information is also provided in the testimonies of those Jews who heard of such cases, or – more rarely – witnessed them. Let me give you one unusual example – a story of a Jew who not only witnessed but was the intended victim of a murderer. Icchak Lerner from a small village Komarówka (Radzyń Podlaski County), the owner of a soda water factory, veteran of the Polish-German war of 1939. Following his escape from a POW camp in 1939, he returned home. He started a relationship with Estera Rybak, widow with a 2-year-old daughter. In the summer of 1942, when mass deportations to death camps began, Icchak and Estera began to seek chances of rescue. An offer of help came from a neighbour Pole, Piotr Kapczuk. He offered to take care of the child, and told them they should go to Warsaw, where Kapczuk's friend, Młynarczyk, would be able to help them. Icchak and Estera left the child in Kapczuk's care, they paid 10,000 zlotys for

three months in advance; they also gave him all their movable property for safekeeping and went to Warsaw. Several months later they decided to bring the child to town, and because Kapczuk was not responding to their letters, Młynarczyk went to him, and brought back the news that the child was dead. In Lerner's testimony we read: "*Kapczuk confessed that he had murdered the child and proposed a compensation to Młynarczyk for killing me and Estera Rybak, and thus, declared Kapczuk, that we would have no more problems with the Jews and split their belongings between each other.*"⁸

Ichhak and Estera in fear of Kapczuk, changed their hiding place - they found themselves in a suburb of Warsaw in an empty house. Just there, on 19 July 1943, a tragedy played out. At night Młynarczyk came, shot Estera and wounded Lerner with a gunshot. Severely injured Ichhak asked Młynarczyk why he was killing them, and he confessed that Kapczuk had proposed 10,000 zlotys, and when Młynarczyk refused, he said that in this situation he would send somebody else to kill them. Młynarczyk began to regret the lost money and agreed to kill the Jews. As he explained to Lerner: "*Blame only Kapczuk not me, because if not I, then somebody else would have killed you.*" Despite the wounds, Ichhak recovered and survived the war.⁹

I would like to turn your attention to this explanation: "*blame only Kapczuk...*", as it contains many interpretations and explanations of the Polish – and generally humans' – attitudes to the Holocaust. Obedience to commands, following other people's orders is a universal excuse for doing evil. One way of interpreting this, is that Jews were perceived as completely outside of the borders of humanity; they were doomed anyway by a "higher power", an authority, the course of history that cannot be questioned. In this sentence one can find the quintessence of certain motivations such as greed, irresistible temptation, and a feeling of total impunity.

When examining the attitudes of Poles towards the Holocaust, I draw the pessimistic conclusion that the proclivity to evil is more fundamental and stronger than the inclination to good. The temptation of greed and the feeling of impunity, as well as common meanness, are a powerful mix that cannot

be balanced off by something so volatile as conscience, empathy, and courage.

Notes

1. Stefania Staszewska (Szochur), *Dni grozy* [Days of horror], Montreal, 2006, p. 64–65.
2. Yad Vashem Archive, O3/2196, Testimony by Miriam Eisenberg
3. Emanuel Ringelblum, *Stosunki polsko-żydowskie w czasie drugiej wojny światowej. Uwagi i spostrzeżenia*, [Polish-Jewish relations during World War II. Notes and observations], Warszawa 1988, s. 95.
4. Ita Dimant, *Moja część życia* [My life's part], Warszawa 2001, s. 73–76.
5. Yad Vashem Archive, E/285, Diary by Aleksandra Sołowiejczyk-Guter.
6. *Dziennik Ustaw* [Journal of Laws] 1944 no. 4, of 31 August 1944.
7. Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance, Voivodeship Court for the Warsaw Voivodeship 318/7. Court records in the case against Antoni Śpiewak.
8. Jewish Historical Institute Archive, 301/2802, Testimony by Icchak Lerner.
9. *Ibidem*.