

Institute of National Remembrance

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Karol Nawrocki: Shoah never again

“We rightly demand that the world shows greater empathy towards the Polish victims of World War II. We will remain credible in this endeavour as long as we maintain empathy towards the victims of the Holocaust,” writes Karol Nawrocki, Ph.D., President of the Institute of National Remembrance, in an article published by the Polska Press group on 26 January 2024.



Had he grown up in the United States, he would have conquered Hollywood. However, even in pre-war Poland, Henryk Szaro was recognised as one of the leading filmmakers of that time. He was equally successful in silent and sound cinema. In total, he had directed over a dozen films, including acclaimed patriotic productions such as *To Siberia* and *The Year 1914*. His films featured some of the most outstanding actors of that time, including Eugeniusz Bodo, Adolf Dymśa, Nora Ney, and Jadwiga Smosarska. This brilliantly developing career was interrupted by the war. Like thousands of Polish Jews, Szaro found himself in the Warsaw Ghetto. In 1942, Germans dragged him

out of his apartment and shot him on the spot.

41-year-old Szaro was among the six million European Jews murdered by functionaries of the German state during World War II. Every 27 January on International Holocaust Remembrance Day, commemorated on the anniversary of the liberation of the last surviving Auschwitz prisoners, we honour all those affected by this terrible crime.

From *Mein Kampf* to the smoking chimneys of Birkenau

From the beginning of his political career, Adolf Hitler was possessed by anti-Semitism. “This plague that was introduced to our nation is worse than the Black Death,” he wrote about Jews in the book *Mein Kampf*, published in 1925. Thousands and, over time, millions of his supporters in Germany, shared his views.

When the National Socialists took power in the Reich in 1933, they quickly moved from anti-Semitic rhetoric to actions. The Nuremberg Laws of September 1935 deprived Jews of basic civil rights. Three years later, a wave of anti-Jewish rioting swept through Germany, culminating in what is known today as Kristallnacht. More and more Jews were forced to emigrate and were robbed of their property. But the worst was yet to come. On 30 January 1939, Hitler announced in the Reichstag that, if a world war had broken out, it would have resulted in “the destruction of the Jewish race in Europe.”

After Hitler and Stalin divided the Second Polish Republic between them, the German and Soviet occupiers created pandemonium for the inhabitants of the conquered lands. As part of Operation Tannenberg,

Operation AB, and other genocidal actions, the Germans ruthlessly murdered representatives of the Polish elite – especially teachers, priests, officials, former Silesian and Greater Poland insurgents, and even members of the Polish Western Union (formerly Union for the Defence of the Western Borderlands). From the beginning, German terror affected the Jewish population. On 12 September 1939, in Końskie, Wehrmacht soldiers shot down 22 Jews. In Przemyśl and the surrounding area, officers of the notorious Einsatzgruppen murdered several hundred Jews. Similar massacres, on a much larger scale, took place in the summer of 1941 after Germany's attack on the Soviet Union in the eastern territories of the Republic of Poland.

In the General Government and in the lands directly incorporated into the Reich, the Germans had already crowded the Jewish population into ghettos. The largest one – in Warsaw – at its peak was populated by approximately 450,000 people, walled off from the outside world. “New refugees are constantly arriving. These are Jews from the countryside, who were robbed of everything they owned. They are ragged, barefoot, and have the tragic eyes that can be seen in starving people – mostly women and children,” wrote the young Miriam Wattenberg, later known as Mary Berg, in her *Diary from the Warsaw Ghetto*. Hunger and disease took a tragic toll in the ghettos. In search of food and a better chance of survival, some attempted to escape to the “Aryan” side. However, any unauthorised instance of leaving the ghetto was punishable by death. “In the Aryan district, a German policeman intercepted a Jewish mother with a baby in her arms who had managed to escape from the ghetto. He shot the mother, threw

the baby on the pavement, trampled on it, opened a sewer hatch, and threw the still whimpering baby into the hole,” states one of the eye-witness accounts.

The Germans also killed those who aided Jewish escapees who were in hiding. Such a fate befell the Baranek family from Siedliska in Małopolska and the Ulma family from Markowa in Podkarpacie. In total, about a thousand Poles died at the hands of the German occupiers for helping Jews. Fortunately, there were also stories with positive endings. The famous doctor Ludwik Hirsztfeld, the pianist Władysław Szpilman, the future director Roman Polański – all of them, along with many others, survived on the “Aryan” side thanks to the help of Polish friends and often complete strangers and their goodwill.

They managed to survive despite the fate that the Germans had intended for them. In the second half of 1941, within the leadership circles of the Reich, a decision was made regarding the “Final Solution to the Jewish Question,” i.e. the extermination of all European Jews. The plans prepared for the Wannsee Conference of 20 January 1942 mentioned as many as 11 million people! Virtually the entire German state apparatus, including the occupied territories, was involved in the colossal Holocaust operation. Only during the “Aktion Reinhardt” from 1942 to 1943, nearly 2 million Jews had been murdered, primarily in the General Government.

By 1942, the industrial killing of Jews had begun in the gas chambers of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Bełżec, Treblinka, Sobibór, and other extermination sites. “This is how it happened: people were transported

to the barracks in trucks. Those of us assigned to help assisted the sick in getting off and undressing inside the barracks. [...] The undressed individuals then walked naked to the chamber. SS men stationed at the entrance used batons to drive them inside. Once the chamber was full, the SS men locked the door,” testified Szlama Dragon, a Polish Jew ordered by the Germans to work in the Sonderkommando camp at Auschwitz. This genocide was ended with the defeat of the Reich.

Commandment to remember

As the end of the war neared and the front approached from both the West and the East, the Germans made great efforts to erase the traces of their shameful crimes. They burned the bodies of the murdered, as in the Białystok forest where, in 2022, the Institute of National Remembrance found 17 tons of human ashes. These were the remains of victims from the Soldau camp. In the extermination camps, gas chambers and crematoria were blown up, and all documentation was destroyed. However, these efforts were only partially successful. Testimonies and accounts of survivors, along with preserved camp documents and other sources, enable us to reconstruct the course and mechanisms of terrible crimes – including the one known today as the Holocaust or the Shoah. The remembrance of this crime is now observed throughout the entire civilised world.

On International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the Institute of National Remembrance pays tribute to the murdered, including almost 3 million Polish Jews who were citizens of the Second Polish Republic. We reflect on their fate not only on this occasion, as evidenced by the extensive

and constantly updated catalogue of IPN publications titled *Terror, Holocaust, Repression. Jewish community under German and Soviet totalitarianism in Polish lands 1939-1945*. As Poles, we are special custodians of the memory of the Shoah, particularly because it was on Polish lands that the Germans built extermination camps. Today, where the crematoria once emitted smoke, there are museums and memorial sites that serve as living history lessons for future generations.

Auschwitz, the most recognisable symbol of the extermination of Jews worldwide, is also one of the most significant places of Polish martyrdom. Both nations, as victims of the same German totalitarianism, fully deserve a place in our memory.

Karol Nawrocki, Ph.D., President of the Institute of National Remembrance

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