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LANDED NOBILITY FACING THE SHOAH

“We do not need to hold a special gratitude to Jews in our heart, yet we could not look unperturbed at what the Germans were doing to them”, wrote Tadeusz Zwierkowski, the Manager of the Plechów Estate



The landed nobility noticed the first signals of change in the life of the Jews, when, next to the intensifying legal restrictions on religious and traditional rules and the definition of the status of the Jewish population, Jews were forbidden to conduct any trade with “Aryan”

people. The majority tried to ignore those decisions, clandestinely helping Jews to buy goods. However, any infringements of that law entailed drastic consequences for both parties. Stanisław Turnau, from Wlonice, recalled a case in which he was trading in grain with a Jew he trusted. In the wake of a denunciation, German police sentenced them to high penalties and forfeit of the grain.

Solidarity with the intelligentsia

As soon as the German policy towards the Jewish people began to turn oppressive, an increasing number of Jews sought assistance from acquaintances in the country, members of the Jewish intelligentsia included. Most could count on the assistance of friends in manor houses. The ties connecting them to the landed nobility were usually of a social kind, which were exactly the sort of key reasons that would encourage the landed nobility to help someone.

That was exactly the situation with the Glücksman family. The Jews of Cracow, numbering approximately 50,000, were forced to leave their city by an ordinance of Governor Hans Frank. The exodus of the Jewish residents continued until the establishment of the Cracow Ghetto in March 1941. The Glücksmans were among those banished: Wanda with her brother Leopold and mother. Initially, Zofia Kernowa, owner of the Goszyce estate, accommodated them for a long period of time in the houses of Stefan Kozubski and Franciszek Kułaga. Later, in 1942, they moved to the Kerns' manor house.

These people were taken in as a result of the fact that the Glücksmans'

father, Aleksander, was a friend of the master of the house. After the war, Wanda Glücksman reminisced with gratitude: “Who were we? Strangers, and moreover, people whom the occupant treated more and more brutally and ruthlessly. (...) And yet we were taken care of in Goszyce with infinite kindness.”

The experience of Ludwik Hirszfeld from Warsaw was similar. He and his family were hiding with the Grabkowskis of Kamienna. So was that of Adolf Szyfman, who went into hiding in the Pławowice estates of the Morstins. During the occupation, the manor house was a safe harbour for any member of the intelligentsia, irrespective of their origin.

Aid to the helpless

Could everyone count on the aid of the landed nobility? “It happened that a Jew approached my father asking to be hidden away. I don’t know if father hid him”, said Karol Benedykt Tarnowski expressing his doubts. However, thanks to the account of Jacek Woźniakowski, it is known that a Jewish family went into temporary hiding in Chorzelów. They were housed “in the orangery, shielded by palms and rubber trees”. Due to the death penalty introduced by the laws of the General Government, residents of manor houses would not shelter people they didn’t know. If they broke the rules, then it was mostly for people they knew well, and for mothers with children.

That was the case with the Tarnowskis, who were temporarily sheltering a girl they presented as their daughter Gabriela, deceased in 1941, and so it was with the Kleszczyńskis living in Jakubowice. The

Kleszczyńskis helped a Jewish family in a hopeless situation: when the wind carried sounds of shots being fired in Proszowice, they guessed the reasons for the commotion. A while later Józef Kleszczyński was notified that “a family of five had escaped the roundup (...) My parents found a permanent shelter in Gruszów (...). Once a month, a daughter of that Dubiel went (...)to the manor house and received money for the maintenance of those Jews.” Years later, the son of the estate owner emphasised that his family was in no way linked to these people. The only reason behind the aid was mercy.

Transports of hope

However, that was not the only form of support for those persecuted. With the establishment of the ghettos, the campaign of passing parcels behind their walls began. Secretly, sometimes with the permission of the German police authorities, parcels of food or pharmaceuticals were delivered. That phenomenon was not widespread. A symbol of such an attitude is Helena Jabłonowska from Przyborowie. Years later she reminisced: “Having brought a few quintals (100 kilo – editor’s note) of grain to a mill near Dębica, I agreed that the miller (...) would place 5–10 kilo of flour under the seat of the milkman’s cart every day (...), and he, passing through (...) would throw it over the fence”. She masterminded the feeding of the inmates in the labour camp in Pustków, however this time with the consent of the Germans.

Another form of aid was the official employment of men from the ghettos for work in the fields. The landed nobility treated their daily stay on their land not as a windfall of free labour, but as an opportunity

to support them. They fed them on the spot and in secret provided them with supplies for their families imprisoned in the ghetto.

The employers did not have a very high opinion of those workers, claiming that they were not accustomed to physical labour in the field. In turn, Jews complained about the character of the work, considering it a form of humiliation. Yet, as Lejb Senderowicz recollected after the war, he heard that “they shoot Jews who do not work”. To avoid that, he volunteered for drainage works on a manor. “Living conditions hard. Remuneration low. Treatment usually good” he recalled.

It would be hard to expect that the obligation to work described above could be exploited by the landed nobility or used to humiliate Jews. Zwierkowski noted: “it didn’t break through to our mind that you (could - editor’s note) treat people like rabid dogs”. The most responsible ones, following Catholic ethics, opposed their exploitation, which is why it turned out that, even though employment was possible, it was refused.

After the liquidation of the ghettos, individual Jewish refugees continued to hide. They hardly ever sought assistance in the manor houses as that entailed too great a risk. Most often support was given to them through foresters. There were cases of food and medicines being transported by horse-drawn carts to an agreed place in the woods. This form of aid limited the risk of repressions to a minimum. In the area of Opatów, some landed nobles who had run up debts to Jewish merchants paid them back voluntarily, thus helping the Jews to survive.

The penalty for aiding and hiding Jews was death however it is not recorded that there were any executions of the residents of manor houses for that reason during the war. The aid they offered to Jews still remains an insufficiently researched question that arouses controversies: from criticism for the small contribution of the landed nobility to their rescue to the opinion that no more could have been done. However, the landed nobility undoubtedly showed no indifference towards the tragedy of the Jewish people.

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