

Institute of National Remembrance

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Distinctions for Humanity



Distinctions for Humanity

The outbreak of World War 2 in 1939 irreversibly changed the world. The period through which the people of the nations occupied by Germany lived was one of chaos, hunger, carnage, and criminals. It was a time of injustice and sorrow. Poland found itself between two totalitarian systems, that of German Nazism and Soviet communism. Hitler's goal was to transform Eastern Europe into a racist empire, where the "Untermensch of the Slavic race" would work for the Germanic Herrenvolk, and where the "Jewish poison" would be completely eradicated. Stalin, on the other hand, resorted to giant deception while using violence to strengthen his totalitarian power. He

made himself into a warrior acting for the “good ” of all the nations of the world. He killed the “enemies of the people” in the name of this ideology.

Despite the enormous scale of the repression, Poles resisted the invaders throughout the war. It is estimated that approximately 6 million Polish citizens perished under Nazi German occupation, of which 2.7 to 2.9 million were Polish Jews. In occupied Poland as opposed to the majority of European countries, any help provided to Jews was punishable by death. Even in the face of such strict regulation, many Poles decided to engage in acts of humanity. Szymon Datner in his "Las sprawiedliwych. Karta z dziejów ratownictwa Żydów w okupowanej Polsce" with uncanny accuracy describes the situation of people seeking help and those who were asked for help. "When an unknown Jew knocks at a cottage window at night, the Jewish problem of that time knocks along with him, together with a tangle of consequences, risks, hazards, as well as the necessity to make a decision and the related dilemmas. The fugitive is asking for help, for a little food to eat, to be able to warm himself at the fireplace for a brief moment. When he sees warmth in the host's eyes or hears kind words, he asks to be allowed to stay for a few days, to work there for a while and then leave. The peasant is then faced with a question of how he should react. He realises that a moral dilemma has knocked at his window, a human who has been denied his humanity, a great question of humanity.

It is the eternal dilemma which has been faced by thousands of

generations: what to do when evil temporarily has the advantage, the dilemma of the chased and the persecuted. Times like these force you to test yourself, to compare your behaviour with the dictates of morality. The risks involved in siding with the persecuted and the force resulting from good has always been great. But between 1939 and 1945, the extent of these risks was incomparable.

It appears that, in general terms, the dilemma could be solved in four ways: the first would be to turn the Jew in to his pursuers in accordance with the 'law' imposed by the invader, which equalled a death sentence; the second would be to refuse help but not turn him in; the third would be to help in the short-term; and the fourth would be to take him in and shelter him for an extended period. The Ulma family from Markowa, who paid for aiding Jews with their lives, became the Polish symbol of the last of these standpoints. In addition to individual aid-oriented actions, Poles also engaged in organised forms of helping Jews. The Polish underground authorities were the only ones in Europe that established and co-financed a governmental institution – the Council to Aid Jews, which operated in the occupied territory.

The war affected whole nations and individuals alike. The good and bad experiences now form an extricable part of their remembrance.

Professor Aleksander Skotnicki says “Leon Berenson, a remarkable judge and defence attorney, appearing in many political trials, died in the Warsaw Ghetto on 22 April 1943. He ordered in his will that Jews should raise a monument of gratitude to the Polish people who smuggled food into the ghetto. The monument was to be shaped like a

loaf of bread on a marble pedestal". In turn, Emanuel Ringelblum, a historian of the ghetto, appealed for recognising such actions with an "order for humanitarianism" in future Poland. Julian Aleksandrowicz, a great scholar from Kraków, requested the Israeli government to create a Chapter of the Commander's Cross for Humanity, which would be given to True People for their heroic decisions to save those at risk, despite the danger posed by the occupier".

Perhaps it is worth paying more attention to this deeply humanitarian aspect of their recollections. In 1961, Julian Aleksandrowicz wrote to the Head of the Government of Israel, on the day preceding the date of Eichmann's trial, "... Stigmatising evil will gain gravity if it is made against the background of rewarding people's humanitarian values, i.e. nobleness, good and a willingness to sacrifice oneself for the noblest of human principles ..." (as cited in "Nasza Gmina" 09/2013).

In 1963, the Government of Israel decided to establish the "Righteous Among the Nations" medal. So far 25,000 people have received this distinction. Aleksandrowicz could have contributed to the creation of this medal, we do not know it for sure. What we do know, however, is that his deep humanistic drive stemmed from the memory of man's attitude towards another, expressed in kindness and even heroic help, offered by the stronger to the weaker.

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