

Institute of National Remembrance

<https://ipn.gov.pl/en/news/3981,An-interview-with-Deputy-President-of-the-IPN-Dr-Mateusz-Szpytma-on-research-connected-with-Poles-rescuing-Jews-under-German-occupation>

19.04.2024, 11:10

24.03.2020

An interview with Deputy President of the IPN, Dr Mateusz Szpytma on research connected with Poles rescuing Jews under German occupation

Unfortunately, we will not be able to determine the actual number of Poles saving Jews under German occupation, but through thorough research we can make these estimates much more precise. However, there is still a lack of basic research with regard to this issue - says Dr Mateusz Szpytma, historian, Deputy President of the Institute of National Remembrance.



Polish Press Agency (PAP): What type of knowledge is required of a researcher dealing with the topic of Poles helping Jews under German occupation? Is the knowledge of , for example, German law and German administration in occupied Poland a necessity?

Dr Mateusz Szpytma: In my opinion, any historian researching a given topic should above all have the ability to analyze source materials. Of course, you need to know the archives perfectly in order to be able to find these sources. They can be located in different countries, sometimes on several different continents. It is crucial to research not only the sources created by the German Reich - also those taken over by the countries which were victorious in World War II and occupied the territory of the German state - but also to accounts, testimonies, memories, and journals of the Jewish diaspora.

It is also necessary to analyze post-war documents, for example those related to a certain reckoning with the past of citizens of different countries and the free world, as well as those remaining behind the iron curtain as far as cooperation with the Third Reich was concerned. It is in those documents that one can often find evidence of resistance and heroism, including evidence of help offered to Jews. The difficulty in studying the history of the Holocaust, the policy of the German occupier who had created the plan of the annihilation of the Jewish nation, as well as the history of saving Jews in Poland is, in my opinion, first and foremost the knowledge of not only Polish and German, but also Hebrew, Yiddish and sometimes Russian.

A researcher of the subject needs to possess knowledge of the often extensive and multilingual (often English-language based) literature on the subject. Returning to your questions: without knowing the realities of the German occupation, including the so-called law imposed by the Third Reich, such research is practically impossible.

PAP: What methodology should be used during such research?

Should the research be interdisciplinary?

Dr Mateusz Szpytma: Although the Holocaust was one of the largest genocides in history, I do not think that a methodology different from that of research on other topics ought to be applied. Interdisciplinary studies should of course be conducted. There are also certain aspects of the subject which do not require interdisciplinary research.

PAP: How do researchers search and verify information on the scale of help provided to the Jewish population?

Dr. Mateusz Szpytma: The appropriate archives are selected, and within them collections relating to World War II, particularly German occupation. This is followed by archival queries.

There are naturally certain archives which contain the largest amounts of such information – they include the Yad Vashem Archives, the IPN Archive, the Jewish Historical Institute, the Central Archives of Modern Records and a whole network of state archives, the collections of the Holocaust Museum in Washington. One must also remember that there are huge collections in the field of oral history. They were collected by various institutions, such as the USC Shoah Foundation.

PAP: What research is currently being carried out by the Institute of National Remembrance with regard to Poles saving Jews?

Dr Mateusz Szpytma: In the past few months, the IPN has published the first volumes of two important publishing series. One of them is a

volume edited by Aleksandra Namysłó and Martyna Grądzka-Rejak "Repressions for helping Jews in the occupied Polish territories during World War II", and the other is "Accounts of assistance provided to Jews by Poles during 1939–1945, vol. 1: Warsaw District of the Generalgouvernement" edited by Sebastian Piątkowski.

We are continuing this research and this year the second volume of the "Accounts", focusing on the Krakow district, will be released. We would also like to establish what the help offered to Jews in particular regions looked like, and the broader aspects of Polish-Jewish relations of this period. This year we can expect a collection of articles summarizing the state of previous research to be published.

Of course, we are also exploring other aspects of Polish-Jewish relations during this period. Within a few months, a comprehensive book by Roman Gieroń on the subject of post-war judgment of denunciations and other such crimes is to be published.

PAP: Which areas of German-occupied Poland are difficult for historians to explore and verify?

Dr Mateusz Szpytma: For many reasons, it is most difficult to study the areas in the Eastern Borderlands of the former Second Polish Republic. Additional knowledge of such languages as Ukrainian, Belarusian or Lithuanian is needed here. However, this is a matter of having the right scientific approach. An even greater problem is the fact that the population of these areas was subject to the largest displacements, which is a huge difficulty also as far as contacting witnesses. The difficulties connected to poor access to archives in the East are also important factors.

PAP: What issues regarding the scale of Poles saving Jews remain unknown to researchers?

Dr Mateusz Szpytma: First of all, we still do not have basic research on this topic. Even for the Rzeszów region, the only region for which we have a monograph on this issue, its author, Prof. Elżbieta Rączy is constantly discovering new, previously unknown cases of Poles saving Jews.

PAP: Is it possible for us to one day get to know the real number of Poles saving Jews under German occupation?

Dr Mateusz Szpytma: Unfortunately, this is no longer possible, but through careful research we can, however, make these estimates much more precise.

It is, nonetheless, worth remembering that, contrary to popular belief, few historical phenomena or processes are fully investigated with absolute accuracy. History is a science that only gives us a picture of the past. Due to the incompleteness of sources, as well as the imperfections of the researchers themselves, historical sciences tend to reproduce the image of the past as closely as possible, because we will never be able to reproduce it in full.

An interview conducted by Anna Kruszyńska (Polish Press Agency) with the Deputy President of the Institute of National Remembrance, Dr Mateusz Szpytma on 24 March 2020.

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