Sebastian Piątkowski, PhD. "‘Aryan Papers’. On the Help Provided by Poles in Legalising False Identities for Jews in the Territory of the General Governorate for the Occupied Polish Regions"

Aryan acquaintances got me an Aryan certificate for free.”¹ With this sentence, Tadeusz Bluth from Jasło began the account that he wrote shortly after the end of the war. When discussing his tragic life during the occupation, he did not mention how he had acquired a document that ensured a new identity and allowed him to survive up to the
German retreat. We can no longer find out the names of the people who selflessly helped him and whether those were pre-war or occupation acquaintances. This very significant fact was obscured by a description of more important events that had a crucial impact on the fate of this man, who had been fighting for his life day by day for several years.

Bluth’s case is not unique. Although the motif of adopting a new identity on the basis of false documents appears in many accounts, diaries and memoirs related to the history of the Polish lands under German occupation, for many reasons the process of acquiring these forged documents has not yet been comprehensively studied. The size and internal diversity of the community – if it is possible to use such a term – of people using assumed names is one of the most important factors. This group included Jews attempting to save their own lives, Polish political and social activists persecuted for political reasons, and denounced Underground soldiers forced to escape their homeland. Many of them changed their identity several times, usually not knowing to whom they owed their next chance to hide from the Germans. Acquiring a new identity was in retrospect often judged as a significant event but certainly less important than more memorable situations such as changing places of residence, escaping from the Germans and their collaborators, or taking part in Underground operations.

Researchers interested in how such people lived with such forged papers will find only a few items on the library shelves related to
producing and distributing such documents to the persecuted. Here, the research of Stanisława Lewandowska comes indisputably to the foreground, as the book and two comprehensive articles she wrote are devoted to how the Underground organisations devised new identities. The memoirs of several people involved in the underground preparation and use of false identity have also been published. To research the fates of Jewish individuals, we have at our disposal sparse – mostly laconic – memoirs from Polish resistance members who took part in forging documents for ghetto escapees. However, there are many more memoirs about people of Jewish nationality who used forged papers. Joanna Nalewajko-Kulikov and Gunnar S. Paulsson made very interesting attempts to show the mechanisms by which people hiding in Warsaw acquired new identities. The book by Małgorzata Melchior should be noted in particular; the author very carefully analysed many aspects of how false identities were created and how the people living under assumed names functioned, based on conversations with Holocaust survivors and their accounts.

However, such publications are scarce. Most of them concern people connected with the Underground: the soldiers of secret organisations, as well as ghetto escapees supported by the Council for Aid to Jews with the Government Delegation for Poland (codenamed Żegota). To this end, the aim of this article is to recall some issues related to the help in legalising false identities given to Jews by Poles who were not connected with the military and civil Underground, including in the provincial areas of the General Governorate. Postwar accounts by both those who were helped and those who did the helping during the
Before I discuss the issues included in the title of this study, I will describe the legal regulations on identity cards that were in effect in interwar Poland and then from the autumn of 1939, including in the central Polish territories occupied by the Germans. It may seem surprising, but the Republic of Poland as recreated after 1918 did not develop a system in which each adult citizen possessed a document confirming their identity. The first national ID cards were issued in the 1920s; in reality, these were passports for people going abroad so they could check into hotels and boarding houses. Getting such a document was very expensive (in 1930, the fee amounted to more than 100 złoty), so these were purchased only by well-off people travelling the world either as tourists or on official business. Later, information about temporary registration of residence on the national territory began to be recorded in this document. Only a Decree of the President of the Republic of Poland published in March 1928 made it possible to obtain a national ID card which meets our contemporary understanding. This card was issued by a local office after submitting a written application and a nominal fee amounting to only 60 Polish grosz, plus the cost of taking a photograph at one’s own expense. However, it is necessary to stress that it was not compulsory to obtain this document.

Apart from a passport or a national ID card, a citizen of pre-war Poland could present other documents confirming their identity to the authorities: a copy of their birth or marriage certificate, a certified statement from the local authority of permanent residence on its occupation are the main sources on which this text is based.
territory, a military identity card, a clerical identity card, or a union ticket. There was, however, no requirement to carry them on one’s person. The reality of the period was such that no document was needed for contact with banks or credit unions (they preferred a system of bearer bills of exchange), or for concluding notarial deeds (it was sufficient to bring a witness with any kind of identity card along to the office, and this witness confirmed the identity of the applicant before a notary). In practice, hundreds of thousands of citizens of the Republic of Poland, of all sorts of nationalities and faiths, especially inhabitants of villages and small towns, successfully went about their social and economic lives without any documents confirming their personal identity.

The situation changed radically at the beginning of the German occupation. The escalation of repressive actions (especially the verification of identity papers), as well as the random searches on the streets and in residences, meant that a lack of an identity card could have far-reaching and negative consequences. The Germans allowed pre-war passports and national ID cards, and those who did not have them had to carry birth certificates. In November 1939, the General Governorate’s authorities introduced a requirement for Polish people to permanently carry an official certificate, colloquially called the palcówka (‘fingerprint’), that could be presented to police officers. This document contained basic personal data and information such as nationality, education, occupation, military rank and place of employment. It did not have a photograph; it was authenticated by a thumbprint (hence its common name) and the signature of the owner.10
The events unfolding in the Kresy Wschodnie (Eastern Borderlands) of the Republic of Poland, namely the 1939–1941 Soviet occupation, are also of vital importance for this study. After the official incorporation of this area into the Soviet Union, a census conducted there formed the basis for the ‘passportisation’ action during which Polish citizens received Soviet ID cards. Many of these people, representing different nationalities and faiths, became targets for extermination. Some were murdered on the spot, and very large numbers of people were deported to gulags or exiled. Shortly after the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, a part of the Kresy was incorporated into the General Governorate, and its residents fell under the equally criminal rule of the German occupiers.

A turning point in the intensification of German control over the residents of the General Governorate – not only Poles but also representatives of other nationalities – came in 1941. The introduction of a law obliging each Pole aged 18–60 to work required a certificate from employers confirming the employment; this Personalausweis (colloquially, auswajs) became a document that could be used to avoid trouble during contact with the police. After a short time, an employment card (Arbeitskarte) – a special sheet issued in two copies, one kept by the employer and the second by the employment office (Arbeitsamt) – was created to complete the Personalausweis. However, the introduction by Hans Frank of executory provisions in June 1941 for a long since dead-letter decree, ordering each non-German resident of the General Governorate over 15 years of age to have an identity card (Kennkarte; colloquially written in Polish as kenkarta), turned out to be
most important. A number of documents had to be submitted to the local office that issued the Kennkarte: an application form, two photographs, a birth certificate (or in the case of Christians, a baptismal certificate), a certified attestation of permanent residence and, if possible, a pre-war national ID card. This Kennkarte included basic personal data, a photograph, forefinger prints, information on the bearer’s religious denomination and occupation, as well as the officially confirmed place of residence.12

Although the Germans had intended to finish the operation of issuing the Kennkarten in 1942, the process lasted until April 1943. These dates are of the utmost importance for this study: the operation of issuing those documents coincided with the gruesome process of liquidating the ghettos in the General Governorate, and ended with the outbreak of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. In Warsaw and elsewhere, each escapee from the closed districts who was searching for a chance of survival had to consider acquiring a Kennkarte and, therefore, assuming a false identity. This was often a long and complicated process. It is worth recalling that few people had any real hope of hiding from the Germans, Polish blackmailers (szmalcownicy) or Poles sympathising with the German anti-Jewish policy. The most important matter was a ‘good appearance’, that is a lack of the physiognomic features commonly associated - also because of the extremely aggressive propaganda endorsed by the Nazis – with the Jewish nationality, such as dark eyes, a prominent nose or raven-black hair. Almost all men and boys practising Judaism were circumcised, which explicitly indicated their Jewish origin.13 Besides ‘good appearance’, a
perfect command of the Polish language (without inserting dialectal terms or phrases derived from Yiddish) as well as knowledge of Polish customs and Catholic practices were extremely important. Such ‘role-playing’ could be exposed at any moment for all sorts of reasons, such as refraining from Holy Mass and other religious practices, as well as an exaggerated emphasis of one’s Christian religiousness. Numerous post-war accounts by Poles speak in terms not of suspicion, but rather absolute certainty that some of their neighbours or co-workers, as well as more distant acquaintances, were in reality concealed Jews pretending to be people of Polish nationality. The Poles in question either did not put that knowledge to use, or (as will be discussed in a further part of this study) made efforts to help the persecuted. However, others decided to blackmail or even denounce such people.  

The existing sources, especially accounts and memoirs related to the period of the German occupation, emphasise the distinct importance of baptismal certificates as the most important documents for persons forced to adopt a new identity. A baptismal certificate made it easier to obtain other documents that authenticated their new personal identity. A Jewish child (who would not be old enough to be formally obliged to work and thus carry a Kennkarte), trying to survive in the countryside of the General Governorate without informing others about her or his Jewish origin, had to have a Christian baptismal certificate for the registration of residence.


13 The aid rendered by doctors, especially those from Warsaw, to Jews in hiding, also falls within the scope of this study. These doctors performed procedures of foreskin restoration and rhinoplasty, among others (conf. M. Ciesielska, ‘Zabiegi likwidujące skutki obrzezania wykonywane w Warszawie w czasie drugiej wojny światowej. Wstępna próba opisu zjawiska’, Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały 2017, vol. 13, pp. 437–446). See e.g. G.S. Paulsson, Utajone miasto..., p. 60ff.; M. Melchior, Zagłada..., p. 180.

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