

Institute of National Remembrance

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The Righteous – the Rays of Hope



When one night an unknown Jew knocked at the window of a peasant's cottage, with him knocked the Jewish problem of the time, with the attendant risk, and need to make a decision in the eye of a moral dilemma. A hunted man asks for help; for scraps of food; for few moments inside to get warm. When he receives a look with no more than a trace of sympathy and a kind word, he asks to be allowed to stay for few days: he will work and then be off. The peasant must decide how to react. He is aware that a moral dilemma knocked on his window, the problem of a human denied his humanity: a humanitarian

question knocked on his window. The eternal problem that afflicts generation after generation: the problem of the temporary predominance of evil; the problem of the hounded and the oppressed. At that moment a person confronts the challenge of a moral test, to put one's behaviour to the test of a moral imperative. The risks involved in choosing to follow the good, the side of the persecuted, have always been high. Between 1939 and 1945, however, the level of such a risk was beyond compare. Four potential courses of action seem to have been open to anyone in such a dilemma: the first, in line with the "laws of occupation" imposed by the German invader, was to deliver the Jew into the hands of his oppressors, which meant the death sentence; the second was neither to turn him in nor to help him; the third was to provide help for his immediate needs; the fourth was to take care of him and give him long-term shelter". (Szymon Datner, *Las Sprawiedliwych. Karta z dziejów ratownictwa Żydów w okupowanej Polsce*, Warszawa 1968, p. 27).

Szymon Datner was well aware of all this. As one of the few Holocaust survivors, he drew attention to the tragic situation of those who were persecuted and sought help, as well as to the grave dilemmas in which those asked for help were caught. It is almost half century since the publication of his book, and it remains uncertain how many people chose to take which course of action. The exact number of Jewish survivors also remains unknown. It is estimated that, thanks to the help provided by Poles, between 30,000 and 100,000 Polish Jews survived. The question of whether that is many is often addressed. There is no easy, precise answer to that. If we look at it through the

eyes of the Jews, persecuted and doomed to extermination at the hands of the Germans, then those rescued were few. If we remember the repression the Poles suffered, the conditions in which they lived, and, crucially, that for any help proffered Jews the Germans executed Poles, then the answer is entirely different. Estimates show that the occupying German forces murdered at least 1, 000 Poles for helping Jews. Often such executions were deliberately publicised, so there would be no doubt about the fate awaiting those who broke the inhumane occupation laws. This is the way, on 24 March 1944, in Markowa the Ulma family perished. One of the German murderers yelled to the witnesses: "Look how Polish pigs who harbour Jews perish!" Not only was the father of the family, Józef, killed, but also his pregnant wife Wiktoria. The perpetrators had no hesitation in eliminating the Ulmas' six young children. The family was killed along with the Goldmans, the Grünfelds and the Didners, the Jews they had been sheltering.

70 years on the Ulma family has become, both in Poland and in Israel, a symbol of the sacrifice made by the Poles who paid with their lives for saving Jews from German persecution during the Second World War. The Museum of Poles Saving Jews opened in Markowa on 17 March 2016 bears the family name. The Museum tells the story of the tragedy that befell not only the Ulmas, but also other Polish families, and not just the stories that ended in tragedy. Jewish visitors to the museum pay special attention to the behaviour of those who continued to shelter Jews when they witnessed their neighbours being executed for just that. When the Ulmas were shot, a deadly fear commanded the

Szylar family who lived not far from the Ulmas to force seven Jews whom they had been hiding in their home to leave, but they managed to overcome their fear, and continued to take care of the fugitives until the Germans were driven out. Another fourteen Jews who hid with another Markowa family survived until the Soviets entered Poland.

The Polish Righteous are more than individuals or families who had only themselves to think about. In any discussion of the issue of Poles helping citizens of Jewish descent in German-occupied Poland, it should be remembered that numerous Catholic convents provided help to Jews, and as such their achievements in saving Jewish children from death are remarkable.

Of particular importance is the fact that the Polish Underground State, supported by the Republic of Poland's Government in Exile, sided with the persecuted Jews. Thanks to the Polish underground's soldiers, such as Jan Karski, Witold Pilecki, Zofia and Stefan Korbońscy, information on the Holocaust was passed on to the allied leaders and thence to international public opinion.

From December 1942 the Polish Council to Aid Jews called Żegota operated under the Government in Exile's Delegation for Poland. The Council was set up by transforming a social committee established in September 1942. The Żegota was the sole specialist conspiracy government agency in German-occupied Europe that had its own structure, including field units, and that was funded by the Polish Government in London and from collections taken up among Jewish community, especially in the US. The scope of the Żegota's activities

was broad. They helped Jews to cross the border and escape occupied Poland and for those in hiding they provided forged documents (around 40,000 from August 1 1944). The nature and scope of the operation is well-reflected in Żegota's branches, which were set up from 1943 in the following order: accommodation, field operations, children, medical. Numerous documents show that despite its brave endeavours the Żegota was unable to provide help to all who requested it, although it did help thousands of Jews. Irena Sendler together with her collaborators saved around 2, 500 Jewish children from death.

Within Poland there were also those who were indifferent to the tragedy of the Jewish nation; even those who informed to the Germans on the Jews in hiding and Poles who had harboured them. These informants have many deaths on their conscience. Informants were deemed traitors by the authorities of the Polish Underground State. Some of them were tried for their deeds by the underground judiciary and were shot.

The Righteous, the rays of hope, of whom Szewach Weiss says that God lived in their hearts, are sorely needed today, to which the atrocities of the war in former Yugoslavia and the Rwandan genocide bear witness. We also know, however, that the rays of hope pass through the world, seemingly invisible, but they are there. During the terror attack at the Bardo Museum in Tunisia in 2015 one of its employees risked his life to hide two tourists in his office, thereby saving their lives.

The problem of the "temporary predominance of evil" remains

relevant. Any of us may unexpectedly have to make a morally unambiguous choice. The Polish Righteous followed the good, as their conscious dictated.

Mateusz Szpytma, Ph.D.

Poles who rescued Jews during the Holocaust
Recalling Forgotten History,
Warsaw, December 2016

Chancellery of the President of the Republic of Poland,
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