THEY RISKED THEIR LIVES

Poles who saved Jews during the Holocaust

"WHOEVER SAVES A SINGLE LIFE..."

Poles, eyewitnesses of German crimes against the Jews, had to contend with the Holocaust in a special way. They themselves were subjected to the brutal terror of war, and at the same time were confronted with the cruel extermination of their Jewish neighbours.

In occupied Poland, unlike in the countries of Western Europe, helping Jews was punishable by death. So those Poles who saved Jews acted under extreme conditions, in complete secrecy, and in fear for their lives. They risked not only their own lives but also those of their families. Thanks to their heroic stand, they managed to save thousands of Polish Jews.

In 1963, the Israeli parliament decided to honour those who had selflessly rescued Jews during the Holocaust with the title Righteous Among the Nations. In this way, the survivors wished to pay homage to their benefactors. Decisions to grant this award are taken by the Yad Vashem Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem. It has so far honoured more than 27,000 people from 51 countries. A quarter of them are Polish.

For more than twenty years, after the fall of communism in 1989, Poland has been gradually restoring the memory of Polish Jews. Historians are also looking into Polish-Jewish relations during World War II. Discussions continue about whether Poles could have helped the Jews more and whether they did all they could to tell the world about the extermination of Jews.

In the Talmud we read: **"Whoever saves a single life saves the entire world."** This sentence is stamped on the medal awarded to the Righteous. Polish citizens who saved Jews, though they were but a small section of society, are heroes, important figures in the memory of all Poles and the whole world. They were both willing and able to stand up to evil.

By saving Jews, they saved humanity.

Interwar Poland was a multi-ethnic country – besides Poles, the population included Ukrainians, Jews, Belarusians, Germans, Lithuanians, and Roms. The Jewish minority of 3.5 million represented 10% of the population. This, the largest Jewish diaspora in Europe, contributed significantly to the development of the Polish Republic.

World War II erupted in Europe on September 1st 1939, when Poland was attacked by Germany, and then, on September 17th, by the Soviet Union. The western part of the country was incorporated into the German Reich, while its eastern territories were incorporated into the USSR. The central part functioned as the so-called General Government with its capital in Kraków – territory occupied by the Third Reich.

A Polish Government in Exile was established as a continuation of the Polish state. It operated from London. It controlled the actions of a Government Delegation formed secretly in occupied Poland, and an underground military force – the Home Army. Together with underground political parties, they formed the Polish Underground State, in which hundreds of thousands of Poles became involved.

The Germans applied a policy of terror to the conquered population. They eliminated all manifestations of national life, murdered members of the Polish intelligentsia, destroyed or looted the country's cultural treasures, and confiscated the private property of its citizens. Hundreds of thousands of Poles were displaced from their homes, sent to prisons, concentration camps, or forced labour camps.

At the same time, in the East, the USSR authorities strove to eliminate all those they considered political enemies, filling prisons and sending hundreds of thousands of Poles to gulags and places of detention. In April 1940, in Katyń and other towns, the NKVD murdered over 21,000 Polish officers and policemen, people belonging to the Polish military and intellectual elite.

Between 1939 and 1945, a total of approximately six million Polish citizens, half of whom were Polish Jews, lost their lives.

For us Poles, it was war and occupation. For Jews, the end of the world. They were sentenced to death simply because they existed...

Jan Karski, Righteous Among the Nations



An air raid on Warsaw in September 1939. German planes bombing the city.



Bombing of the Royal Castle in Warsaw.



Public execution of Poles by German soldiers.

German anti-Jewish policy combined humiliation, exploitation and persecution. Gradually, it aimed at the total annihilation of the nation. Jews were deprived of civil rights and property, forced to wear the Star of David on their clothes, and then resettled to the ghettos.

In June 1941, Germany attacked the Soviet Union and occupied the eastern territories of pre-war Poland. Special execution squads (*Einsatzgruppen*) carried out the mass murders of Jews, killing men, women and children. They also encouraged local populations to take part in these pogroms. As a result, over a million Jews were killed.

In January 1942, at the Wannsee Conference, German officials met to develop a plan for the "final solution to the Jewish question" in Europe. This plan was implemented first in the General Government, under the code name "Operation Reinhardt." The choice of location for the death camps was based on practical considerations – firstly, most Jews lived in this part of Europe, and secondly, communication routes enabled the Germans to transport other Jewish populations to this area. The plan included the establishment of death camps equipped with gas chambers. Their first victims were Polish Jews, then Jews from all over Europe.

Under the pretext of relocating the Jews to forced labour in the East, the Germans deported them to the death camps. So-called transports headed to Kulmhof and Auschwitz-Birkenau in the Third Reich and the four death camps in the General Government, Bełżec, Sobibór, Treblinka, and Majdanek. Almost until their last moments, those deported failed to realize that they were going to their deaths. Immediately upon arrival, most of them perished in the gas chambers.

Altogether, as a result of the German extermination policy, six million European Jews perished during World War II.

MAP OF OCCUPIED POLAND



THE GHETTO AND THE "ARYAN SIDE"



Karmelicka Street in the Warsaw ghetto, 1941. A Jewish policeman directs traffic.

Maria Szulisławska-Palester, Righteous Among the Nations, to her Jewish friend, Maria Proner:

The ghetto is not going to be just a separate neighbourhood. No one is going to survive it.



Photographs from the Warsaw ghetto: the construction of the ghetto wall; the footbridge over Chłodna Street connecting two parts of the ghetto, the street below being on the "Aryan side;" a young Jewish boy begging on the street.

In the cities and towns of occupied Poland, the Germans established closed districts into which they drove the Jewish population. Towns became divided into a ghetto and a so-called "Aryan side," where non-Jews lived. This division was due to the Third Reich's policy of racial segregation.

The largest ghettos were established in Warsaw (holding over 500,000 people), Łódź-Litzmannstadt (200,000), and Kraków (17,000), and in the East, in Wilno and Lwów. Leaving the ghetto without permission was forbidden under penalty of death.

Despite their separation, the Jews tried to maintain a semblance of normalcy: they organized self-help groups, educational and cultural activities, and continued to practice their religion. However, in bigger ghettos, the problems of overcrowding, hunger, and disease were ubiquitous. Beginning in March 1942, the Germans began the liquidation of ghettos, in other words, mass deportations of Jews to the death camps. This continued until the summer of 1944.

Some Jews refused to obey the order to move to the ghetto. There were also those who, after the ghetto was closed off, risked escaping to the "Aryan side." In order to survive, they had to go into hiding and change their identities.

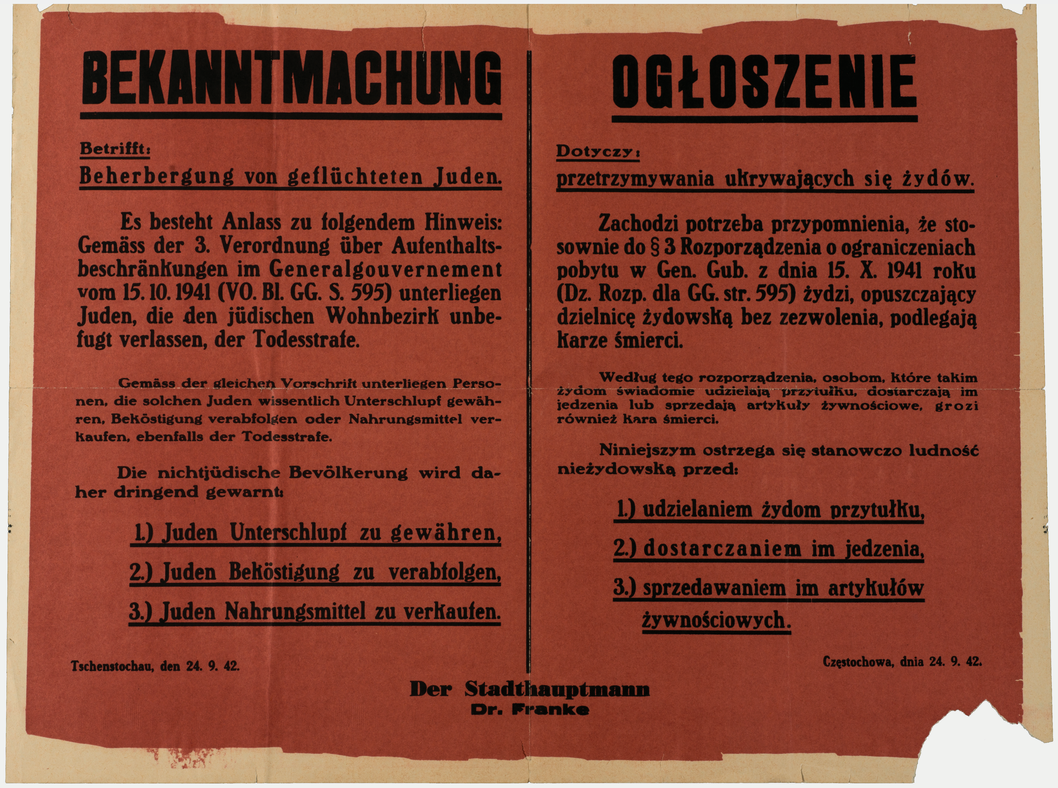
The main factors that increased one's chances of surviving on the "Aryan side" were cultural assimilation – fluency in Polish (before the war, the majority of Jews spoke Yiddish at home, and Polish with a distinct accent), the "right appearance" (blond hair and blue eyes), knowledge of the Christian religion and enough resources to pay for food and shelter. One essential condition for survival was to have a Christian birth certificate and a fake *Kennkarte*, the identification papers recognized in the General Government. Jews in hiding tried to change their physical appearances by dyeing their hair. There were even cases of men undergoing operations to eliminate the effects of circumcision.

The death penalty was imposed for:
1) providing shelter to Jews,
2) providing them with food,
3) selling them foodstuffs.



The Germans conducted show executions in the marketplace. They hung Poles and Jews next to each other, and in this way, warned the public what the penalty would be for hiding Jews.

Ryszard Ciszewski,
Righteous Among the Nations



BEKANNTMACHUNG

Betrifft:
Beherbergung von geflüchteten Juden.

Es besteht Anlass zu folgendem Hinweis: Gemäss der 3. Verordnung über Aufenthaltsbeschränkungen im Generalgouvernement vom 15. 10. 1941 (VO. Bl. GG. S. 595) unterliegen Juden, die den jüdischen Wohnbezirk unbefugt verlassen, der Todesstrafe.

Gemäss der gleichen Vorschrift unterliegen Personen, die solchen Juden wissentlich Unterschlupf gewähren, Beköstigung verabfolgen oder Nahrungsmittel verkaufen, ebenfalls der Todesstrafe.

Die nichtjüdische Bevölkerung wird daher dringend gewarnt:

1.) Juden Unterschlupf zu gewähren,
2.) Juden Beköstigung zu verabfolgen,
3.) Juden Nahrungsmittel zu verkaufen.

Tschenstochau, den 24. 9. 42.

Der Stadthauptmann
Dr. Franke

OGŁOSZENIE

Dotyczy:
przetrzymywania ukrywających się żydów.

Zachodzi potrzeba przypomnienia, że stosownie do § 3 Rozporządzenia o ograniczeniach pobytu w Gen. Gub. z dnia 15. X. 1941 roku (Dz. Rozp. dla GG. str. 595) żydzi, opuszczający dzielnicę żydowską bez zezwolenia, podlegają karze śmierci.

Według tego rozporządzenia, osobom, które takim żydom świadomie udzielają przytułku, dostarczają im jedzenia lub sprzedają artykuły żywnościowe, grozi również kara śmierci.

Niniejszym ostrzega się stanowczo ludność nieżydowską przed:

1.) udzielaniem żydom przytułku,
2.) dostarczaniem im jedzenia,
3.) sprzedawaniem im artykułów żywnościowych.

Częstochowa, dnia 24. 9. 42.

Public proclamation dated September 24th, 1942, posted in Częstochowa. The German authorities remind the Polish population of the prohibition against aiding Jews.

Ryszard Ciszewski lived with his mother and brother in Stanisławów (now Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine). In 1941, the Germans entered the town and established a ghetto for the Jews. Every few days, Ryszard's mother, Janina, brought home some new Jewish friends. Everyone came "just for a few nights," only to end up staying at the Ciszewskis for the next two years. 11 people hid in one room. They tried to maintain their kosher traditions. Ryszard rode around the town on his bike and bought food at various shops so as not to arouse suspicions when buying so much food.



The public executions of Michał Kruk, sentenced for helping Jews, and Aleksander Hirschberg, of unknown relation. Przemyśl, September 1943.

In the autumn of 1941, Hans Frank, the Governor-general of the German-occupied Polish territories, issued a public proclamation announcing the death penalty for hiding Jews, or even for giving them any form of assistance.

This law applied not only to those saving Jews, but also their families and neighbours. Posters were regularly put up in towns to inform the public about new and ever more repressive decrees. The danger lay mainly with the Germans, but also with some Poles. These included extortionists blackmailing Jews in hiding, criminals robbing those bereft of any protection from the law, traitors and anti-Semites, as well as informers acting for, among other reasons, fear of their own lives. German law aimed at reversing moral values: any person giving assistance to Jews was a criminal, while informers were treated as law-abiding citizens to be rewarded.

The inhuman rules imposed by the German occupiers also applied in other countries of Eastern Europe, e.g. in Ukraine and Serbia.

Poles came face to face with the problem of people who, according to German criteria, had no right to live and were doomed to annihilation.

A decision to offer Jews assistance was a dramatic one and, by taking it, the rescuers placed themselves in mortal danger. That moment made the fates of the person hiding someone and the one being hidden inseparable – from that time on, they were mutually dependent and thus had to endure, in order to ensure the rescue was a success. The rescuers became fully responsible for the people hidden. This involved psychological stress, but also a financial burden, because one's charges needed to be supplied with a hiding place, food, medicine, and clothing. At the same time, the rescuers had to carry on living as if nothing had changed. They bore the burden of secrecy and lived in constant fear of being discovered.

Not everyone who would willingly have helped was able to do so. Some were constrained by their own living conditions or too modest financial means, while others were paralyzed by their fear of the death penalty.

The rescuers came from various social backgrounds and were often motivated to act for different reasons. Some among them were simple folk and some were educated, they were religious and non-religious, and they came from towns as well as from villages. What they had in common was a similar moral sensitivity to human suffering.

You can hide a sack of grain somewhere, burying it in the ground, but how do you hide people? After all, they must breathe, use the toilet, and you have to bring them food.

Marianna Wachowiec, Righteous Among the Nations



We opened the door and there stood three Jews, cold, stripped of their clothes. They knelt before my father and begged for help. You would have taken pity on an animal, let alone another human being.

Maria Huzarska, Righteous Among the Nations

Basic humanity required one to help another person in distress. I never gave it a second thought that I risked getting the death penalty or being sent to a concentration camp.

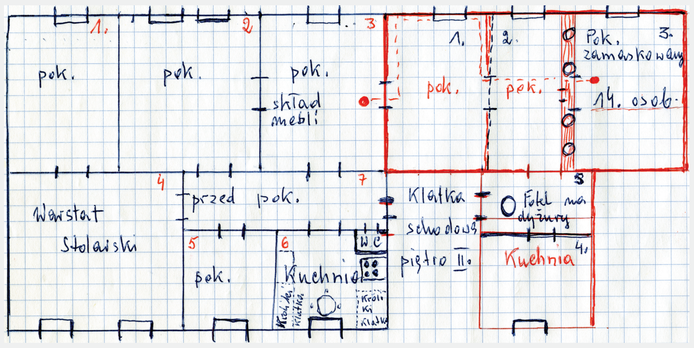
Jan Bartczak, Righteous Among the Nations

The assistance given to Jews took many forms. Only some Jews could occasionally "surface," that is, officially, as tenants in the rescuer's house. Those with a typically Semitic appearance or who were not really fluent in Polish had to remain in hiding.

Typical hiding places were barns, sheds, basements, attics, and dugouts, or, in apartments, in wardrobes, beds or concealed rooms. The hiding space was usually small and dark, stuffy and damp.

The people thus hidden had to live according to established rules and follow these strictly – especially in emergency situations, such as searches. They also needed to limit their basic needs to a minimum. They lived in constant, overwhelming fear. Any day a mistake could be made. They could be reported and their presence could be discovered, even accidentally. Those in hiding were aware of being totally dependent on their rescuers, waiting for them to provide food and water, to bring a fresh latrine bucket, or just to tell them what was happening "on the surface." Those visits often brought them their only support and encouragement.

The rescue of a whole family, or even of one person, often depended on the actions of many helpers who appeared in the lives of those seeking help, providing them temporary or long-term support.



14 people hid in the Żak family's apartment on Grzybowski Square in Warsaw. Day and night, those hiding had to maintain total silence. They moved around the apartment in soft slippers to suppress the sound of their footsteps. In the plan of the apartment, the room where they slept is highlighted in red.

It was a pit holding eight people. In the summer it was so hot we were infested with fleas. In winter it was so cold you could never get warm. No toilet, only a bucket. Sometimes the bucket got knocked over... And all the time the gnawing of hunger.

Genia Dombek, survivor





Survivor Celina Glücksberg's "attic calendar," on which she counted off weeks spent in hiding in Łuck (now in Ukraine). The entries end in March 1944, when the Red Army entered the town.

I have no idea how we managed in the bunker. How we got dressed, how we washed... We were in there for almost two years.

Sara Gliksman, survivor

Abraham Grinbaum, concealed in the years 1942-1945 by Helena and Władysław Grabarek in the village of Niedzielisko near Gąbin. Abraham Grinbaum survived the war and emigrated to Israel.

Interwar friendships and even emotional relationships were often the motivation behind the decision to help.

Poles rescued friends from work, schoolmates, and neighbours. Jews looking for help first turned to their Polish friends, if they had any. Contacts on the "Aryan side" were one of the most important conditions for surviving outside the ghetto. Very often, however, people asked total strangers for help, the rescuer's home being the first they encountered, whether on a street or in a forest.

I remember how, on our first date, when I was 14, I went to find Krystyna. We rode our bikes – she on hers, I on mine. Then, just two months later, Jews were forbidden to own bikes.

Bogdan Jastrzębski,
Righteous Among the Nations





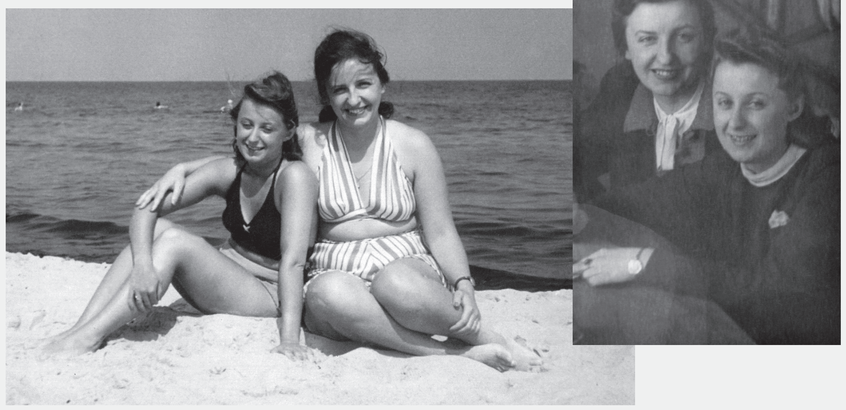
Bogdan Jastrzębski was in love with Krystyna Gleisler; he had met her before the war. They lived in Częstochowa. In 1940, the girl and her family had to move to the ghetto. Every day she went to work in a German armaments factory. One day, Bogdan grabbed Krystyna out of the column of workers. He hid her in the attic of a rented apartment. In 1951, Bogdan and Krystyna were married.



Before the war, **Lubomira Karwowska** and Krysia Friedwald attended the same high school. Krysia's father was shot and her mother perished in Auschwitz. The Karwowskis arranged a fake identity card for Krysia. The girls went together to secret university lectures and accompanied each other on the street. Krysia never went into hiding, even though there was a German sentry post in the house where the Karwowskis lived.

I was alone in our apartment. Krysia arrived in a terrible state, saying, "Save me, I have no one to turn to." We sat on the couch and cried our eyes out. But I couldn't decide something like that on my own. My mother came home and said, "I have one daughter, now I'll have two."

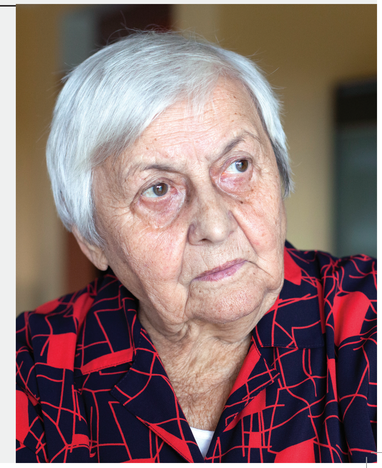
Lubomira Karwowska,
Righteous Among the Nations



It was Christmas Eve. They knocked on the door. They were emaciated and freezing. I remember the long icicles on their beards. Daddy let them in.

Stanisława Włodarz née Szlama,
Righteous Among the Nations

In the winter of 1942, the Szlama family took in two Jews, Mosze Lichter and his cousin Mordechai. The men had escaped a few months earlier from a transport to the Treblinka death camp and, since then, had wandered in the forests. The Szlamas agreed to hide the refugees even though they were total strangers. They also helped two young cousins of the Lichters, Róża and Czesława. The four of them hid together, in the basement in winter and the attic above the barn in summer. After the war, the Lichters wanted to donate their savings to the Szlamas in gratitude for helping them. The Szlamas, however, firmly refused.



CHRISTIAN DUTY

Some Poles decided to grant aid to Jews for religious reasons. They felt it their Christian duty to help one's neighbours in need. This motivation was behind the acts of both religious and secular rescuers.

The Polish Catholic Church took no official position on the need to provide assistance to Jews, nor did it centrally organize such aid, since this would have caused severe repression by the occupying forces. Nevertheless, the grassroots activities of the clergy were very important in saving Jews.

Some priests issued them fake Christian birth certificates and gave them shelter in their parishes. Nuns, acting alone or in concert with the Polish underground, accepted Jewish children into their orphanages and hid them by giving them Polish names. Dozens of convents were involved in helping Jews.



The pictures show girls in orphanages: a meal in the convent of the Congregation of Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception in Lwów; the day of their celebration of Holy Communion in the convent of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Chotomów. Among them are Jewish girls in hiding.





Sister Matylda Getter
The Mother Superior of the Warsaw Province's Congregation of Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, running more than 20 institutions for the care and education of children and youth. During the occupation, Sister Matylda, along with the other nuns, organized birth certificates for Jewish children rescued from the Warsaw ghetto and hid them in the Congregation's educational institutions.



Father Marceli Godlewski
The pastor of the parish of All Saints in Warsaw, known before the war for his anti-Semitic views. During the occupation, his church ended up being enclosed by the ghetto. Seeing the tragic plight of the imprisoned residents, Father Godlewski decided to save them. His parish of All Saints issued dozens of false identification papers, and more than a hundred Jews were hidden on the grounds of the church. Father Godlewski became involved in smuggling food and medicine to the ghetto and in the organization of escapes to the "Aryan side." He also hid Jewish children in his home outside Warsaw.



Teresa Grabowska (pictured on the left, standing in front of the barn in which Jews were hidden) During the occupation, she was a teenage girl who lived in a village called Mąkolice near Piotrków Trybunalski. She spent a lot of time in the house next door, that of her relatives, the Bartczak family. One night in the autumn of 1944, three young Jews knocked on their door seeking refuge. The men were hidden in a hole under the barn. Teresa became friends with those in hiding, brought them food, and laundered their clothes. On Christmas Eve, the Bartczaks invited the three to dinner in their home.

What do we do now? Just leave them? After all, these are human beings. It would be a sin not to help. They are people, our brothers. May God's will be done. And so we let them in.

Teresa Grabowska, Righteous Among the Nations

RESCUE AS A FORM OF COMBATING THE OCCUPYING FORCES

For some members of the Polish underground, helping Jews was a form of struggle against the invader, an element of their underground activity.

During the war, many Poles joined secret military organizations. The largest of these was the Home Army (AK), the military force of the Polish Underground State. Other military organizations operating included the People's Army, the National Armed Forces and a number of other smaller organizations. Their activities consisted mainly of sabotage, propaganda, and partisan attacks aimed at the German occupying forces.

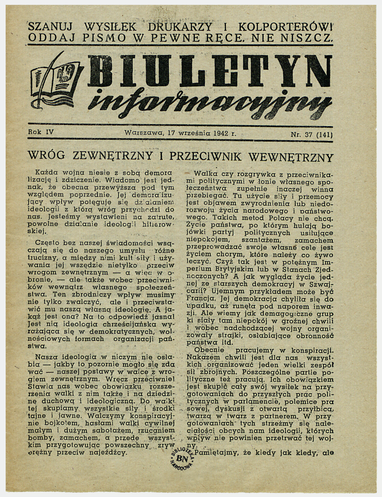
The Home Army organized military training of recruits, accumulated weapons, and ran an underground press. One of the most important periodicals issued by the Home Army was the *Information Bulletin*, which published real information – unavailable in the official German-controlled press – about the situation in the occupied country, including the tragic situation of the Jews.

In September 1942, the *Information Bulletin* printed a proclamation protesting the crimes committed against Jews. The Home Army also condemned informers and in September 1943, in the name of the Republic of Poland, its underground court issued its first death sentence against an extortionist "for blackmailing Polish citizens of Jewish nationality in hiding and reporting them to the German authorities." However, such sentences were rarely handed down and the activities of informers continued.

Despite the appeals of the Polish authorities, requesting Jews be helped where possible, among members of the Home Army (and other underground military organizations) there were also those hostile to the Jews, refusing to accept them into their ranks or even provide them assistance.



Commemorative photograph of a squad of Polish partisans fighting in the forests during World War II. Partisan warfare was one of the most common methods of resistance used in occupied Poland.



SZANUJ WYSIŁEK DRUKARZY I KOLPORTERÓW!
ODDAJ PISMO W PEWNE RĘCE, NIE NISZCZ.

BIULETYN informacyjny

Rok IV — Warszawa, 17 września 1942 r. — Nr. 37 (141)

WRÓG ZEWNĘTRZNY I PRZECIWNIK WEWNĘTRZNY

Każda wojna niesie z sobą demoralizację i zdziczenie. Wiadomo jest jednak, że obecna przewyższa pod tym względem poprzednie. Jej demoralizujący wpływ potęguje się do działalności z którą wróg przychodzi do nas. Jesteśmy wystawieni na zalanie, powolne dziczanie ideologii hitlerowskiej.

Często bez naszej świadomości wpadamy się do naszego umysłu różne trucizny, a miedzy nimi kult siły i użycia jej wszędzie nietylko przeciw wrogom zewnętrznym — a więc w obronie, — ale także wobec przeciwników wewnątrz własnego społeczeństwa. Ten zbrodniczy wpływ musimy nie tylko zwalczyć, ale i przeciwstawić mu naszą własną ideologię. A jaka jest ona? Na to odpowiedź jasna! Jest nią ideologia chrześcijańska, wyrażająca się w demokratycznych, wolnościowych formach organizacji państwa.

Nasza ideologia w niczym nie ośabia — jakby to pozornie mogło się zdawać — naszej postawy w walce z wrogiem zewnętrznym. Wręcz przeciwnie! Stawia nas wobec obowiązku, rozszerzenia walki z nim także i na dziedzinę duchową i ideologiczną. Do walki tej skupiamy wszystkie siły i środki tajne i jawne. Walczymy konspiracyjnie bojkotem, hasłami walki cywilnej małym i dużym sabotażem, zniszczeniem bomby, zamachem, a przede wszystkim przygotowując powszechny, zryw wyzwoleńczy przeciw najeźdźcy.

— Walka czy rozgrywka z przeciwnikami politycznymi w łonie własnego społeczeństwa zupełnie inaczej winna przebiegać. Tu użycie siły i przemocy jest objawem zwyrodnienia lub niedorozwoju życia narodowego i państwowego. Takich metod Polacy nie chcą. Życie państwowe, po którym bujają bojówki partyj politycznych usiłujące niepokojem, szantażem, zamachem przeprowadzać swoje własne cele jest życiem chorym, które zalety co żywo leczyć. Czyż tak jest w potężnym Imperium Brytyjskim lub w Stanach Zjednoczonych? A jak wygląda życie jednej ze starszych demokracyj w Szwajcarii? Ujemnym przykładem może być Francja. Jej demokracja chyliła się do upadku, aż runęła pod naporem inwazji. Ale wiemy jak demagogiczne grupki stały tam niepokój w groźnej chwili i wobec nadchodzącej wojny organizowały strajki, osłabiające obronność państwa itd.

Obecnie pracujemy w konspiracji. Nakazem chwili jest dla nas wszystkich, organizować jeden wielki zespół sił zbrojnych. Poszczególne partie polityczne też pragną, jak obowiązkiem jest skupić cały swój wysiłek na przygotowaniach do przyszłych prac politycznych w parlamencie, polemice prasowej, dyskusji z otwartą przyłbicą, twarzą w twarz z partnerem. W przygotowaniach tych stremy się należycie obecnych nam ideologii, których wpływ nie powinien przetrwać tej wojny.

Pamiętajmy, że kiedy jak kiedy, ale

Front cover of the September 17th, 1942 issue of the *Information Bulletin*, which released a statement by the Chiefs of the Underground Civil Resistance protesting German crimes against the Jewish population.

I had a copy of the "Information Bulletin," an underground newspaper. And in it there was an order to do no harm and where possible, to help Jews; so if anyone was able and willing, they should help – but were absolutely forbidden to do them any harm.

Stanisław Galas, Righteous Among the Nations



Maria Sawicka
A socialist, who before the war trained in athletics with her Jewish friends. When, during the occupation, many of them joined the ranks of the Jewish Combat Organization, Maria (pictured on the right) and her older sister Anna Wąchalska (seated centre), as non-members, acted as couriers between the Jewish and Polish resistance in Warsaw. They carried reports, weapons and underground newspapers and searched for hiding places on the "Aryan side." During the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943, their apartment became a meeting place for the last combatants, members of the Jewish Combat Organization and the Bund.



Irena Adamowicz
Coming from an aristocratic family, before the war she was active in scouting, one of the few to establish contacts with the Jewish scouting organisation, and quickly gained the trust of its members. She worked with Warsaw's Social Welfare as an inspector of orphanages, continuing this work after the outbreak of war. She had a pass allowing her to visit the Warsaw ghetto. She joined the Home Army. Through her contacts she became a messenger between the ghettos in Wilno, Kaunas, and Białystok. Disguised as a nun, she conveyed secret information and reported on the situation in other ghettos. Thanks to her efforts, emissaries from the ghettos were able to contact the Home Army.



Krzysztof Dunin-Wąsowicz
A historian, a member of the Socialist Group "Płomienie" ("Flames"), editor of an underground magazine, a Home Army soldier, an activist in the *Żegota* Council for Aid to Jews, and in the Jewish political party, Bund. The entire Dunin-Wąsowicz family, well-known among Warsaw's social activist elite, was involved in underground operations, including helping Jews. They gave them shelter in their house, as well as in the dining hall of the Central Welfare Council (an officially functioning charity) run by Krzysztof's mother, Janina. The canteen also served as a contact point for Warsaw's underground resistance. Krzysztof himself helped Moryc Gelber, a bookseller from Lwów, repeatedly arranging shelters for him and an allowance from the Bund.



It was in the evening. The Gestapo surrounded us.
They had skull emblems on their caps.
Frania, Abram, Teresa, and her husband immediately fled. Teresa went back to get her jacket. They shot her in the head. She was pregnant.
My mother cried out, "Run to the neighbours!"
I looked back.
The house was already in flames.

Jadwiga Gawrych,
Righteous Among the Nations

The Germans often conducted searches of homes and farms.

They were looking for people suspected of involvement in the Polish resistance movement or the underground press, for firearms, and for Jews in hiding. They were often aided by Polish informers who were urged by Germans to report each other with the promise of rewards. Such denunciations led to brutal house searches. The household was held at gunpoint, beaten and cursed, and their property was destroyed. An unsuccessful house search generally did not lead to serious consequences. However, if they did find anything, or someone, the residents of the house were arrested or shot.



The Gawrych family and the Jews they hid pose for a photo in front of the Gawrychs' home, which was torched during a search. At the bottom of the picture is Abram Słomka, who taught the Gawrych children the violin. After his escaping a search of the house, Abram committed suicide.



I shouted, "Five men coming!"
Józek pulled back the couch. Everyone jumped into the hiding place.
The Germans entered. They held pistols to our heads.
"You're hiding Jews!" – they screamed at my mother.
All this time I prayed they wouldn't move the couch.
I guess God heard my prayers. They didn't move it aside...

Wanda Turczyńska-Kołomijska, Righteous Among the Nations

AT THE COST OF ONE'S LIFE

The death penalty for rescuing Jews in occupied Poland was no idle threat. Historians have so far documented the fate of over 700 rescuers, who were either shot or died in concentration camps. The Germans sometimes murdered whole Polish families, along with the Jews they had been hiding. The number of victims is still difficult to estimate.



The Postek family from Stoczek Węgrowski
The family was murdered as a result of a denunciation. Their house was surrounded by German soldiers. The Jews and some of the Polish family were shot dead in the yard. An eyewitness reports that one of the daughters was "clubbed to death for baking bread for the Jews." The rest of the children were arrested. They were never seen again.



The Kowalski family from Ciepielów
They hid two people in their house. On December 6th, 1942, the German police raided their farm and the homes of other Ciepielów residents suspected of hiding Jews. 34 people were burned alive, including the Kowalskis and their five children.





Apolonia Machczyńska-Świątek from Kock
She hid several Jews in her basement. Someone reported her. German policemen shot Apolonia in front of her two sons and father. She was in an advanced state of pregnancy.

The Germans gathered peasants from the village with pitchforks to spread out the straw. They suspected that someone was hiding there. They fired their weapons into it, and those hiding began to moan. My father was shot right in front of us. We escaped. It was a terrible blow. The end of the war was just two months away. We would have managed to save so many people...

Aleksandra Sawa, witness



Eleonora Goleń from Jasło
She hid a 10-year-old Jewish girl. At the end of 1942, when the Germans ransacked her house, the little girl was shot and Eleonora was imprisoned for a month. On January 5th, 1943, Eleonora was put up against the prison wall in Jasło and shot. It was a show execution, warning others against such actions.





The Ulma family from Markowa
The family hid eight Jews in their attic – the Goldman family. On the 24th of March 1944, the Germans searched their house. They shot the entire Ulma family of eight and all the Jews hidden there. Wiktoria Ulma was in an advanced state of pregnancy. The search was carried out as a result of a denunciation.





The Baranek family from the village of Siedlisko
This family hid four Jews in their home. The Germans raided their house. They shot all those in hiding, as well as the Baraneks and their two sons, 11-year-old Henryk and 9-year-old Tadeusz.

The "Żegota" was a unique phenomenon. It was the first organization in which Zionists, Bund members, Catholics, Polish democrats, Polish socialists, and members of the Polish Peasant's Party – both Jews and Poles – sat together at one table and conspired against the Germans.

Władysław Bartoszewski,
Righteous Among the Nations

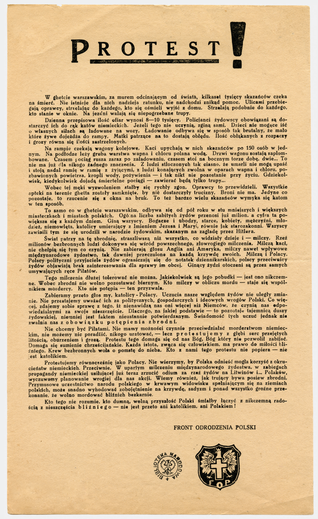


Władysław Bartoszewski plants a tree for the *Żegota* Council for Aid to Jews at the Yad Vashem Institute, Jerusalem, 1963.

In December 1942, the *Żegota* Council for Aid to Jews was established by the Government Delegation. This Council continued the work of the Provisional Committee for Aid to Jews. It consisted of members of several Polish and Jewish parties.

The Council's activities were financed by the Polish Government in Exile and Jewish organizations in the USA. *Żegota* was the only state institution in occupied Europe established to save Jews.

The aid provided mainly consisted in financial support, arranging hiding places, and providing false documents. Several thousand people received such assistance, including many children, who were hidden with Polish families or in orphanages. *Żegota* reported to the government on the situation of the Jews in occupied Poland, proposing among other things, revenge on the Germans, increasing the scale of assistance and combating the actions of informers. It operated mainly in Warsaw, but later also in Kraków, Lwów, and the Lublin region.



PROTEST!

W ghetcie warszawskim, za murem odcinającym od świata, kilkaset tysięcy skazańców czeka na śmierć. Nie istnieje dla nich nadzieja ratunku, nie nadchodzi zaiład pomoc. Ulicami przebiega cień widma głodowej śmierci. Wyludniają się kolejne domy. Stosami padają do dołów, ich ofiary w okiem. Na jawnej walce ma zbrojnego wroga.

Dziesięć przepisowe ilość ofiar wynosi 6–10 tysięcy. Policjanci żydowscy obowiązani są dostarczyć ich do zajęcia kamienicach. Jeżeli tego nie uczynią, zginą sami. Dzieci nie mogące iść o własnych siłach są ładowane na wozy. Ludzkie ofiary się w sposób tak brutalny, że mało które przeżyło ten transport. Nikt potrzeby na to dostają obłąkań. Ilość chłopczyków z rozpuszczonymi i grozi rychłemu zniknięciu z powierzchni ziemi.

Na zamęt zawiała wojenny kolejowy. Kazi sprzedaje w nich skazańców po 150 ciuli w jednym. Na godzinie leży gruba warstwa wapna i chlorek polana wodą. Dzień wagonu zostaje zapieczętowane. Czasem cyclog zasta zaraz po załadowaniu; czasem stoi na boczycie tory dobę, dwie... To nie ma znaczenia. Ludzie zadusili się, zamarzli, zagłodzili się, zanim wyruszył ich ostatni, ich ostatnie. Ich ostatnie podróż nie kończy się na cmentarzu. Żydzi kremowych zwłoki w ogniu wapna i chlorku

The Polish Government in Exile sought to save Jews through official diplomatic channels.

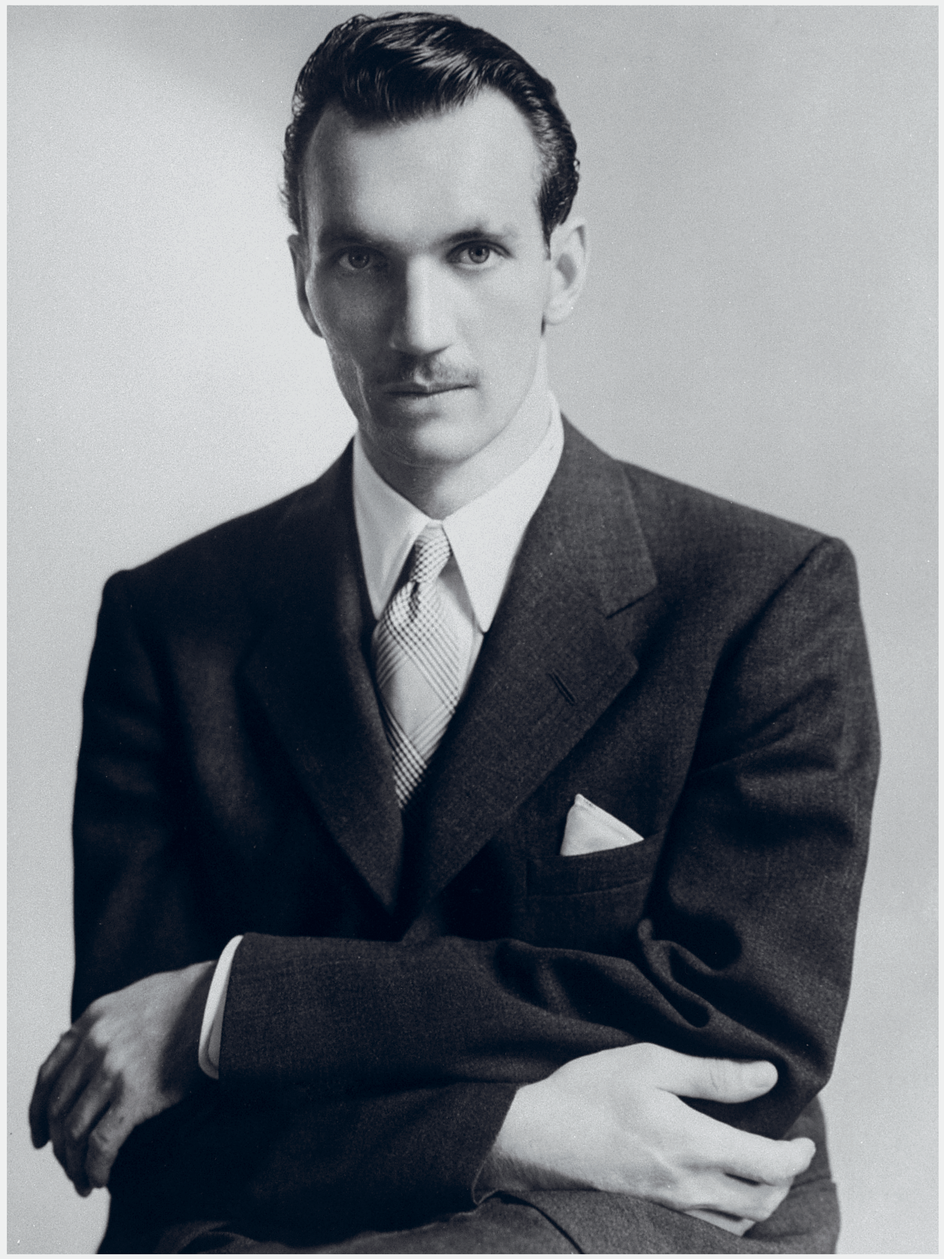
Home Army emissaries had submitted reports concerning the extermination of the Jews in occupied Poland. Likewise, there were Polish diplomats who, like Raoul Wallenberg, a Swede operating in Budapest, used their diplomatic status to issue false documents and foreign visas for Jews.



Representatives of the Allied Powers Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Joseph Stalin at the Yalta conference in February 1945. By then, the extermination of the Jews was already a fait accompli.



Henryk Sławik
(pictured with his daughter, before the war) Plenipotentiary of the Polish Government in Exile, he formed the Citizens' Committee for the Protection of Polish Refugees in Hungary. He provided assistance to about five thousand Polish Jews who found themselves in Hungary during World War II. He prepared for them identity cards with names that sounded Slavonic. He was assisted by József Antall, a representative of the Hungarian government, as well as Polish colleagues. Together with Antall, and aided by the Hungarian clergy, Sławik founded an orphanage in the town of Vác near Budapest. Jewish children were hidden there. The Germans arrested Sławik for helping Jews and shot him in the Mauthausen concentration camp in 1944.

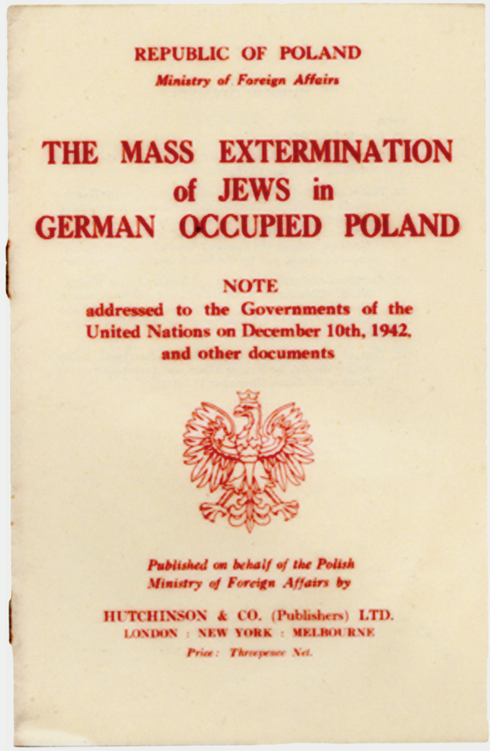


Jewish activists to Jan Karski prior to his secret visit to the Warsaw ghetto:

We urge you never to rest in your efforts! To do everything possible to convince the Allies. We do not have that chance. You are our only chance.

Jan Karski
Diplomat, historian, lawyer, professor at Georgetown University in Washington, and an emissary of the Polish Underground State during the occupation. In October 1942, at the behest of the Polish Government in Exile's Delegation, he met with activists of the Jewish underground, who asked him to report to the Allies concerning the extermination of the Jews and to call on them to attempt to save the remainder of the Jewish people in Europe. Karski was secretly escorted by Jewish conspirators to see for himself the Warsaw ghetto and the transit camp in Izbica, in the Lublin region. There he witnessed Jews undergoing selection by the SS and the macabre crowding of people into cattle cars to be sent to death camps. He later described what he had seen in reports addressed to Shmul Zygielbojm (a member of the London-based National Council of the Republic of Poland), Anthony Eden (the British Foreign Minister), Cecil Hurst (a Judge of the Permanent Court of International Justice at The Hague and a member of the war crimes commission), U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and the writers Herbert G. Wells and Arthur Koestler.

The politicians in the West did not believe his testimony. Felix Frankfurter, a judge of the U.S. Supreme Court, said of Jan Karski: **"I did not say that this young man was lying. I said I am unable to believe what he tells me. There is a difference."**


REPUBLIC OF POLAND
Ministry of Foreign Affairs

THE MASS EXTERMINATION of JEWS in GERMAN OCCUPIED POLAND

NOTE
addressed to the Governments of the United Nations on December 10th, 1942, and other documents

Published on behalf of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs by

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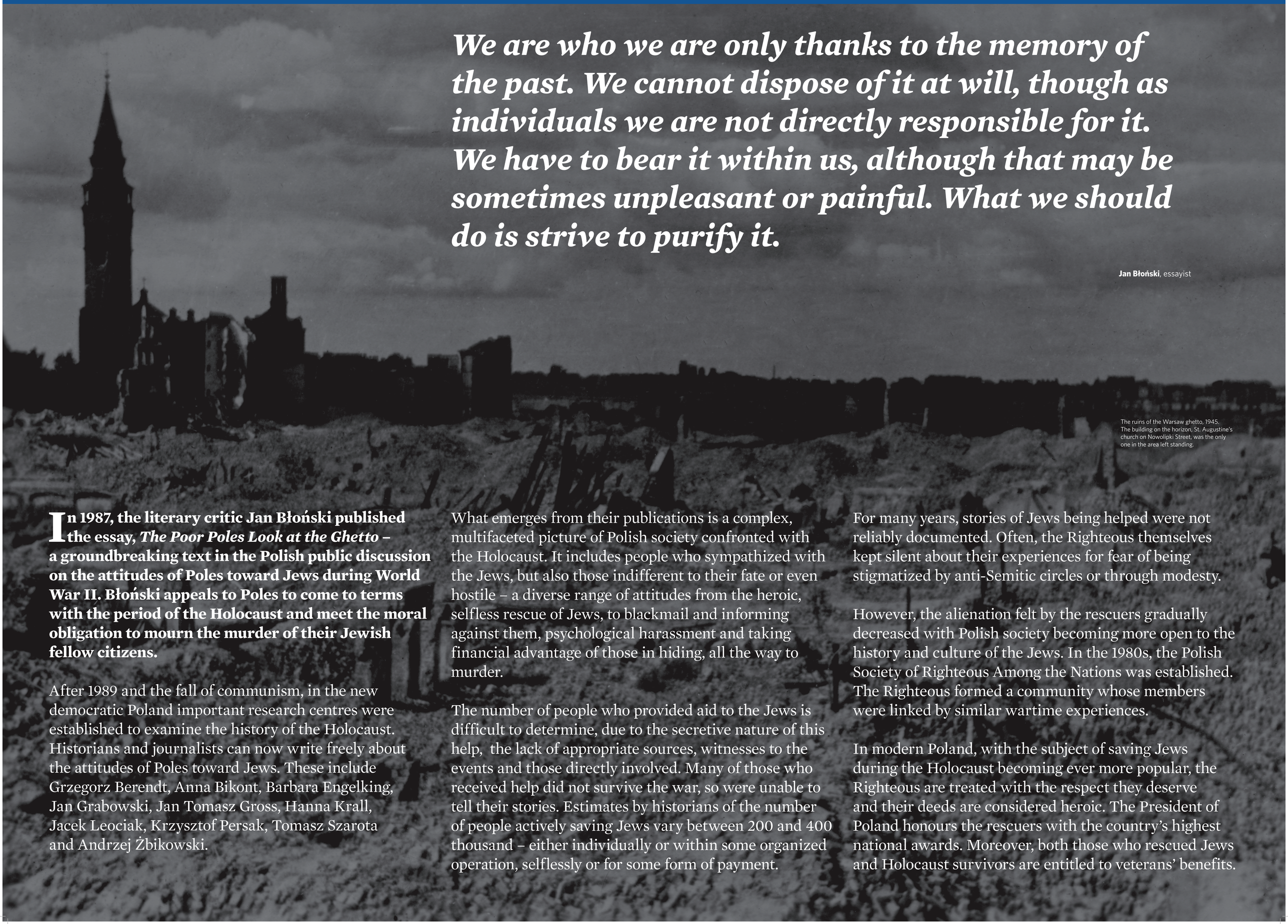
First page of the official diplomatic note sent by the Polish Government in Exile on December 10, 1942. Signed by Edward Raczyński, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, it was based on a report submitted by Jan Karski. This was the first official diplomatic report informing the West of the crimes committed against the Jews.

The Polish government urged the Allies to "not only condemn the crimes committed by the Germans and punish the criminals, but also [to] find means of offering the hope that Germany might be effectively restrained from continuing to apply methods of mass extermination."



Tadeusz Romer
Polish ambassador to Japan in the years 1936 to 1941. In 1943-1944, Foreign Minister of the Polish Government in Exile. He collaborated with Chiune Sugihara, the Japanese consul in Kaunas, who in 1940 issued visas to Polish and Lithuanian Jews. By the end of 1941, thanks to documents issued by Sugihara, thousands of Jewish refugees had fled the occupied territories and arrived in the Far East. Tadeusz Romer constantly intervened with the Japanese authorities for the renewal of their visas, and also sought to arrange visas for Jews to neutral countries and issued them new passports.



We are who we are only thanks to the memory of the past. We cannot dispose of it at will, though as individuals we are not directly responsible for it. We have to bear it within us, although that may be sometimes unpleasant or painful. What we should do is strive to purify it.

Jan Błoński, essayist

The ruins of the Warsaw ghetto, 1945. The building on the horizon, St. Augustine's church on Nowolipki Street, was the only one in the area left standing.

In 1987, the literary critic Jan Błoński published the essay, *The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto* – a groundbreaking text in the Polish public discussion on the attitudes of Poles toward Jews during World War II. Błoński appeals to Poles to come to terms with the period of the Holocaust and meet the moral obligation to mourn the murder of their Jewish fellow citizens.

After 1989 and the fall of communism, in the new democratic Poland important research centres were established to examine the history of the Holocaust. Historians and journalists can now write freely about the attitudes of Poles toward Jews. These include Grzegorz Berendt, Anna Bikont, Barbara Engelking, Jan Grabowski, Jan Tomasz Gross, Hanna Krall, Jacek Leociak, Krzysztof Persak, Tomasz Szarota and Andrzej Żbikowski.

What emerges from their publications is a complex, multifaceted picture of Polish society confronted with the Holocaust. It includes people who sympathized with the Jews, but also those indifferent to their fate or even hostile – a diverse range of attitudes from the heroic, selfless rescue of Jews, to blackmail and informing against them, psychological harassment and taking financial advantage of those in hiding, all the way to murder.

The number of people who provided aid to the Jews is difficult to determine, due to the secretive nature of this help, the lack of appropriate sources, witnesses to the events and those directly involved. Many of those who received help did not survive the war, so were unable to tell their stories. Estimates by historians of the number of people actively saving Jews vary between 200 and 400 thousand – either individually or within some organized operation, selflessly or for some form of payment.

For many years, stories of Jews being helped were not reliably documented. Often, the Righteous themselves kept silent about their experiences for fear of being stigmatized by anti-Semitic circles or through modesty.

However, the alienation felt by the rescuers gradually decreased with Polish society becoming more open to the history and culture of the Jews. In the 1980s, the Polish Society of Righteous Among the Nations was established. The Righteous formed a community whose members were linked by similar wartime experiences.

In modern Poland, with the subject of saving Jews during the Holocaust becoming ever more popular, the Righteous are treated with the respect they deserve and their deeds are considered heroic. The President of Poland honours the rescuers with the country's highest national awards. Moreover, both those who rescued Jews and Holocaust survivors are entitled to veterans' benefits.

Danusia called me. "I want to see you. I've been looking for you so many years." I told her, "I don't want to come, I'm afraid that in Poland they want to kill us Jews." Then she said, "No, dear. Good and bad people are everywhere – here and there, also where you live. You must come. You're my little sister."

Giza Alterwajn, survivor

The Fryderyk Chopin Airport in Warsaw, 2009. Giza Alterwajn, survivor of the Warsaw ghetto, in the arms of Danuta Gałkowa at their first meeting in 60 years.

Danuta took care of tiny Giza in 1942 and Giza lived with her until the end of the war. Giza's relatives reclaimed her and took her abroad.

It is estimated that 250–300 thousand Polish Jews survived World War II. One-third of them survived in occupied Poland, the rest in the Soviet Union, to where they had fled or were forcibly evicted early in the war.

After 1945, they returned to their country. Poland was destroyed by the war and it was still not a safe place for them. Many survivors registered with the Central Committee of Polish Jews, looking for missing family members. A large number of them, however, quickly emigrated – especially after the tragic events of the Kielce pogrom in July 1946.

With the end of the war, fate had it that the rescuers and the rescued mostly went their separate ways for many years, and in many cases, forever. The survivors began new lives in new countries – mostly in America and Israel. They had no wish to return to their tragic experiences of the war. People lost contact with each other. Many rescuers felt a sense of regret that survivors had left without a word of gratitude.

The renewal of relations between the rescued and rescuers is usually connected with Poland's political transformation of 1989. People were again free to correspond and to travel to Poland. The long time that has passed since the war helps survivors recall those days with less of the trauma of the Holocaust. Cases of returning to the subject are often due to their children and grandchildren wishing to discover family roots. Survivors want to reunite with their rescuers and make sure they are honoured with the title Righteous Among the Nations.

Reunions are moments full of emotion, but also difficult confrontations. Sometimes they come about just before the ceremony of awarding the title of Righteous, in which the families of both rescuers and survivors participate. Despite the language barrier often occurring between these families, there is no doubt that they share a strong bond. This shows the inextricable interweaving of fates that not only applies to the rescuers and the rescued, but also to their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.



Every war brings forth great heroism or bestiality in people. And people in every nation are just the same.

Marianna Krasnodębska, Righteous Among the Nations

Of the more than 6,700 Polish Righteous Among the Nations, only a small group are still alive today. These are usually elderly people. But some of them are still strong enough to meet with schoolchildren and tell their stories and those of the people they rescued.

The number of Poles awarded the title of Righteous Among the Nations continues to grow. For several years, the title has also been awarded posthumously. Successive Israeli ambassadors stress that the Yad Vashem Institute will never stop searching, to bring out of the shadows those who rescued Jews during the Holocaust, even if they did not live to be recognised.

The term Righteous Among the Nations (in Hebrew *Chasidei Umot ha-Olam*) originally meant non-Jews who were good, God-fearing people. According to the Talmud, every generation produces 36 anonymous righteous people around the world (*tzadikim nistarim*), who through their deeds protect mankind from the wrath of God. It is therefore hoped that wherever evil occurs in the world, there will be someone to effectively oppose it.

Over the past 20 years, oral history has developed intensively, involving the recording of testimonies of direct witnesses to important historical events. People's personal experiences told within the context of the larger history are testimonies of unique scientific value. Thanks to the efforts of many research centres around the world, it has been possible to record the stories of the rescuers and save them from oblivion.

Their voices and portraits will remain with us.

The Avenue of the Righteous at the Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem. The olive trees were planted by people honoured with the title Righteous Among the Nations.

This exhibition makes use of the resources of the project "Polish Righteous – Recalling Forgotten History" undertaken by POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews for the Polish Republic's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews

Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland

The exhibition features historical artefacts from the collection of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, as well as archival materials from the collections of the Yad Vashem Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem, the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute, the Polish Institute of National Remembrance, Poland's National Digital Archives, Poland's National Library, The State Archive of Warsaw, Congregation of Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception's Archive, the Bundesarchiv, the National Archive and Records Administration, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Zofia Kossak Foundation, the Polish Press Agency, the BE&W Photographic Agency, the East News agency, and the private collections of Władysław Bartoszewski, Grzegorz Łubczyk, Mateusz Szpytma and Teresa Romer.

www.righteous.pl
www.polin.pl
www.msz.gov.pl

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