

The Conduct of the Sandomierz Diocese Priests. The Case Study of Bishop Jan Kanty Lorek and Rev. Ignacy Życiński

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Abstract

The issue of the Church's stance toward the Holocaust is yet to be fully researched. The article is a voice in the discussion about the conduct of the Catholic clergy during the German occupation, with particular attention to those actions which aimed at helping the Jews. The following is a case study focusing on two priests from the Sandomierz diocese: Bishop Jan Kanty Lorek and Rev. Ignacy Życiński.

Germany's occupation policy against Central and Eastern Europe revolved around the totalitarian domination and extermination of both the Jews and the Slavs, who were considered subhuman. According to the ideology promoted by Adolf Hitler, the German nation, classified under the "Aryan race," was superior to all other nations. The German "superhuman" was believed to be more intellectually, morally, and spiritually refined than representatives of other races and nations, who were frequently referred to as "subhumans." The destruction or partial enslavement of other peoples was to facilitate the creation of *Lebensraum*, defined as the living space to which the "master race" was entitled. The oppression and extermination constantly facing the social groups deemed valueless and inferior were effected in the name of their unconditional subjugation to the Third Reich (Cesarani, 2019).

One of the most acutely felt criminal activities inspired by Nazi ideology was an assault on the Catholic Church, an institution which spread Christian values and thus reinforced religious community and unified the local society even in the most testing times. The occupier's attempts at eliminating Christianity from the social fabric meant that the clergymen, who were part of Polish intelligentsia, very often suffered the tragic consequences of repressions (Fijałkowski, 1983, pp. 73–87). The belief was that people deprived of spiritual guidance would be more receptive to the occupier's ideology. The Catholic Church and its men thus became the Third Reich's strategic enemy, which was forced to stand up for faith and morality. Consequently, persecutions were more likely to affect those clergymen who were helping the Jews.

On 15 October 1941, Governor General Hans Frank issued an order under which the Poles who provided shelter to Jews would face the death penalty. Local governors in the districts of the General Government and ss commandants followed suit. As early as 10 November 1941, Ludwig Fischer decided that capital punishment would also apply in cases of any assistance given to Jews. Tactical moves of Nazi Germany meant that offering solid support to the persecuted individuals, let alone mounting efficient resistance to the occupier, was extremely challenging.

In the relevant literature, considerable attention is given Archbishop Adam Stefan Sapieha, the *de facto* head of the Church in the General Government. A member of the ducal family of Sapieha, he was son of Adam Stanisław Sapieha, an activist of the independence movement, who was friends with the then Pope Leo XIII. He organized and coordinated relief efforts for victims of military action, founded the Civic Relief Committee in 1939, and also supported the Central Welfare Council (Fijałkowski, 1983, pp. 180–183; Kumor, 1995, p. 461; Nitecki, 2000, pp. 392–393). The case of Bishop Jan Kanty Lorek is interesting and much less known in the context of the Polish clergy's conduct toward the German occupying authorities. This topic has been partly explored by Rev. Prof. Bogdan Stanaszek (Stanaszek 2004; 2009). In this article, the scope is expanded to include

the bishop's activities on behalf of the Jews, which is also a testimony to his defiance against the Nazis' policies. Also discussed is a like example of father Ignacy Życiński, who was eventually awarded the Righteous Among the Nations honorary title for his deeds.

Bishop Jan Kanty Lorek

Jan Kanty Lorek was born in 1886 in Błażejowice (Gliwice county) in Opolian Silesia. After graduating from the local school, he joined a German secondary school in Strzelce Wielkie, but since he was Polish, he was not allowed to continue his education there. According to the ideology promoted by the Germans, the schools which they ran were for German children only. Lorek left for Kraków and enrolled in the minor seminary of the Congregation of the Mission of Vincent de Paul¹ and was accepted into the order upon graduating. In 1907, after completing the novitiate, he took the monastic vows. He was ordained on 2 July 1911 in the Wawel Cathedral by Bishop Anatol Nowak. In October 1912, having studied for over a year, he was sent to Czerna, where he started work as an educator in the Rev. Kazimierz Siemaszko Institution for poor and orphaned boys. In 1916, he was drafted into the German army, being first assigned to office duty, and then appointed chaplain of Polish seasonal agricultural workers and POWs in Germany. After the First World War, he was given charge of parish missions, mostly in Podlasie, and then returned to Kraków, to the Siemaszko Institution, of which he was appointed director in 1921. He was heavily involved in educational efforts and contributed to the Institution's further development and expansion, for which he was awarded the Order of Polonia Restituta Fourth Class (Czajka et al, 1995, p. 99; Łoży, 1938, p. 431; Nitecki, 2000, p. 255; Rostworowski, 1972, p. 547).²

It was probably his exemplary record as director of the Institution that secured him appointment as the prior and provost of the Holy Cross parish in Warsaw, where he also excelled at performing monastic and organizational duties. Consequently, Pope Pius XI made him apostolic administrator of the Sandomierz diocese in 1936. He was ordained to bishop on 7 June 1936, in the church where he had served as provost thus far (Stanaszek, 2004, p. 16).

¹ The Congregation was founded in 1625 by St. Vincent de Paul. It is still active, and its mission is the evangelization of the poor and the formation of the clergy.

² The Order of Polonia Restituta is a civilian award. It has five classes and is awarded for outstanding achievements in education, science, culture, and social service, among others. The only award in Poland with a higher rank is the Order of the White Eagle.

On becoming the diocese bishop, Lorek tried to find out as much as he could about the clergymen and the faithful in his jurisdiction. He was well-versed in the problems of ordinary people and wanted to be directly involved in the life of the local community. To that end, he made frequent visits to the parishes in his bishopric. Being gifted with considerable organizational talents, he skillfully ran the diocese and paid much attention to charity and the expansion of Catholic Action. One of his achievements included seeing through the renovation of the Sandomierz cathedral (Stanaszek, 2009, p. 84).

In August 1939, in anticipation of the war, the bishop issued an order for the clergymen, instructing them to “make every effort to be shining examples of patriotism, discipline, and sacrifices in the name of defending the Homeland” (Akta czasu wojny, 1939–1940, f. 5). Sandomierz came under bombardment on the very first days of the war. In the process, the local hospital was damaged. Out of concern for the wellbeing and safety of the people, the bishop accommodated the sick on the premises of the seminary. He also actively participated in organizing the evacuation of the patients from the bombarded building. Israel Kaiser recalled how Lorek insisted that a group of Jews help him rescue the sick from the burning hospital:

We threw down what we were carrying and ran to the hospital to rescue the sick and the wounded. We carried heavy iron beds with the sick, and also the wounded Polish soldiers who were there, over the distance of 350 meters, to the seminary building [...]. In return, we were allowed to hide in the seminary building, even though we were Jews (Relacja Israela Kaisera, 1947).

In late September 1939, almost a month after the war began, Bishop Lorek intervened with the German authorities about better treatment of the Polish POWs brought to Sandomierz. Thanks to his efforts, the Germans gave permission for them to be supplied with food and water (Stanaszek, 2004, p. 19).

Until 26 October 1939, the German authorities had tolerated the presence of Polish hierarchs in dioceses, and even tried to take advantage of their standing by insisting that they issue pastoral letters to convince the faithful to act in line with what the Germans wanted. In Radom, the prohibition on preaching in Polish had been lifted, but it was demanded that the Church call for the people to behave in an orderly fashion and obey the new authorities (Wilk, 1995, p. 62). On that occasion, Bishop Lorek released an open letter to the faithful, in which he recommended that they follow orders peacefully to avoid possible repressions (Akta stosunku Kościoła do sytuacji politycznej, 1930–1953, f. 1).

Despite an opportunity to do so, Bishop Lorek did not leave his diocese. However, he realized he could be arrested by the Germans, and

consequently made arrangements to insure the continuity of the office. In early November 1939, he named four priests who could fill in for him in the event of his absence. At the same time, he asked the deacons to keep him updated on the situation in each parish (Stanaszek, 2009, p. 91). In February 1940, he wrote a reassuring letter to the priests, in which he thanked them for commendable conduct and perseverance at their posts (Akta czasu wojny, 1939–1940, f. 111; Gapys, 2012, pp. 28–29).

Bishop Lorek intervened with the occupying authorities relatively often, and his excellent command of German came in handy. Perhaps he believed that his actions could prevent further repressions, although he tried to avoid direct contacts with the Germans. In spring 1940, he failed to report to Radom District Governor Karl Lasch, citing damage to the railway tracks following a spring flood. However, forced by the circumstances, he appeared before him. On this occasion, he tried to negotiate the release of Rev. Adam Wąs, the provost of Odrowąż, and the cessation of persecutions aimed at the remaining hierarchs. His efforts proved partly successful, as Rev. Wąs was soon pardoned and returned to his parish, but this was not the case for the remaining priests (Stanaszek, 2004, pp. 21–25).

In time, it turned out that the release of Rev. Wąs was likely an attempt to win the bishop's trust. The Germans' strategy was to get him to cooperate on finding Polish workers for labor in the Reich. In late March 1940, the authorities of the General Government issued a missive to the bishops, in which they promised that the volunteers would be provided with decent living conditions, have an opportunity to aid their families in Poland, and receive pastoral care. In the "Sandomierz Diocese Chronicle," the bishop notified the faithful about the Germans' demands. He instructed the priests to give relevant information based on the adverts of employment offices and to stay in touch with those who would decide to leave (Lorek, 1940).

Bishop Lorek also intervened with the authorities in Radom about desisting from round-ups mounted in front of churches on Sundays and holidays. This was one way of acquiring forced laborers. He was told that the round-ups would cease as soon as a sufficient number of volunteers came forward. The bishop was assured that the laborers would be given decent wages, the right to move freely, and a promise that they would be allowed to rejoin their families in winter. He was also told that it would be possible to appoint a number of priests to provide pastoral care to the workers (Stanaszek, 2004, pp. 26–27). Rev. Lorek was eventually convinced and in mid-May 1940, he sent a circular to the provosts, in which he wrote the following:

I deem it necessary to notify all people in our diocese about this, and emphasize that the unemployed who are seeking work and could leave for Germany could thus unencumber

the individuals much needed here for economic, family, or personal reasons (Akta czasu wojny, 1939–1940, f. 251).

Issuing this call, Rev. Lorek clearly hoped that some sort of compromise could be reached with the German authorities. However, he was not fully aware of their tactics, or of the conditions of forced labor in the Third Reich. The Germans did not deliver on their promise, and the round-ups continued, while the bishop's actions did not go down well with the people, and he had lost the trust of some sections of the faithful.

Despite this failure, Bishop Lorek met with the German authorities again, this time accompanied by Teodor Kubina and Czesław Kaczmarek, the bishops of Częstochowa and Kielce respectively. They had an appointment with Governor General Hans Frank in Radom on 25 May 1940. However, they had no idea that Frank was celebrating his birthday on that day and wanted to exploit the meeting for propaganda purposes. The hierarchs put forward their requests toward the improved wellbeing of the Polish society. Bishop Lorek also tried to secure the release of Lublin bishops Marian Leon Fulman and Władysław Goral, but to no avail (Stanaszek, 2009, pp. 108–109; Umiński, 2016, p. 39).

Despite the fruitlessness of their contacts with the occupying authorities, the bishops still tried to exert pressure on them. Following the convention of the episcopacy on 14 October 1940, Lorek and Kubina were selected to present the hierarch's stance on the planned liquidation of seminaries. On this occasion, negotiations were partially successful: after a meeting with Secretary of State Ernst Kundt in Kraków, the decision was temporarily put on hold (Stanaszek, 2004, pp. 31–32).

Toward the end of 1940, Bishop Lorek was told to report to Radom to meet with an official from the press department. The German clerk admonished him for his open pastoral letters calling for help for the people displaced from the territories incorporated into the Reich. He informed the bishop that the deportees were a "criminal element" and no assistance should be extended to them. He also claimed that the "Sandomierz Diocese Chronicle" was issued without permission and had not been registered, and said that similar newsletters should not be published. However, the bishop continued to call for help for the needy, including the deportees (Stanaszek, 2004, p. 33).

The bishop and the Jews

The bishop intervened with the occupying authorities not just about the clergy or POWs, but also about the Jews, whom he was helping despite the wartime difficulties thanks to the office he held. It is worth adding that his activity to that end started in the early days of the occupation. On 9 September 1939, when the Germans entered Sandomierz, numerous

members of the local intelligentsia were detained, as well as over 600 Jews aged between 14 and 60. All of them were driven to the market, and on the next day, escorted by the Germans, departed for the village of Zochcin, 35 km from Sandomierz (Paul, 2018, pp. 25–26). On their way there, the Jews were despoiled and abused: older men had their beards cut off with bayonets. They were also ordered to throw prayer books, *tallits*, and *tefillin* in a fire (Relacja Izraela Kaisera, 1947). Bishop Lorek appointed Rev. Adam Szymański, rector of the seminary, and Rev. Jan Stępień to negotiate the release of the hostages with the Germans. However, the occupiers demanded a substantial ransom, which the families of the detainees could not pay. Consequently, Bishop Lorek used the church resources and withdrew the 6,000 zlotys needed to meet the demands from the diocese fund. All the residents of Sandomierz were allowed to return home, and in the following week, Jews prayed for the bishop in the local synagogue (Relacja Izraela Kaisera, 1947; Stanaszek, 2009, p. 92).

In late April 1940, a delegation of Jews from Tarnobrzeg asked Bishop Lorek to intervene with the town authorities about two issues: facilitating their return to the town and halting the dismantling of their wooden houses. However, the bishop could not help them directly, because the matter concerned the area outside his diocese. Consequently, he asked father Fabian Madura, the prior of the Tarnobrzeg Dominicans, to assist them (Akta czasu wojny, 1939–1940, f. 206). Bishop Lorek also intervened with the occupying authorities in 1942, when the Sandomierz ghetto was being sealed. The Germans carried out on-the-spot executions of the Jews who disobeyed orders and tried to get hold of food outside the ghetto walls. Following Lorek's intervention, such persons were escorted back to the ghetto without additional repercussions (Lis 2019; Stanaszek, 2004).

One of the persons whom the bishop helped flee Sandomierz was Czapnikówna [Ms. Czapnik], a hygienist from the hospital. He secured her shelter in the nunnery of the Servants of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Czyżów Szlachecki. The woman survived the occupation and visited the nuns after the war to thank them for saving her. Bishop Lorek also helped other people of Jewish origin by letting them hide in the basement of the seminary and in the attic of the Sandomierz cathedral. There are accounts according to which Jews were also hiding in the nearby bell tower (Zapart, 1982, p. 444; Kumor, 1995, p. 465; Stanaszek, 2004, p. 38). The Jews asked the bishop to hide Rabbi Ezechiel ha-Lewi Halsztok from Ostrowiec. He was son of Meir Jechiel Halsztok, a well-known rabbi. When the war broke out, he was living in Warsaw and then returned to Ostrowiec. The bishop agreed to give him shelter. However, when the rabbi was notified, he refused to accept help, as he believed that he could not think of saving his own life when his entire nation was perishing. He was murdered outside the Sandomierz synagogue in January 1943 (Feldenkreis-Grinbal, 1993, p. 553; Rabinowicz, 1996, pp. 182–183; Paul, 2018, p. 25).

After the war ended, on 22 December 1945, the bishop received an official letter of thanks from the Jewish Committee in Sandomierz for intervening with the occupying authorities to secure the release of thousands of Poles and Jews from the Zochcin camp near Opatów; for help and reassurance provided in times of our greatest plight; for exerting constant pressure on the competent bodies in order to delay our confinement to the Sandomierz ghetto (*Korespondencja z władzami okupacyjnymi, 1939–1945*, f. 369; see also Lis, 2019).

Szmul Wasser, chairman of the Committee, never forgot what the bishop had done for the Jewish community, as evidenced by an Easter postcard he sent from Toronto in 1961 (Bp Jan Kanty Lorek, 1936–1967).

The case of Rev. Ignacy Życiński

Aside from being involved directly, Bishop Jan Kanty Lorek also encouraged other clergymen to help the Jews. In the Sandomierz diocese, one such priest was Ignacy Życiński.³ During the German occupation, he was the provost of the Holy Trinity parish near Zawichost. Bishop Lorek was aware of his activity, because the curia had received a letter, dated 28 July 1942, from Lucjan R., who claimed that Rev. Życiński had broken the seal of confession and was additionally helping the Jews. The sender of the letter wrote that the priest stored various Jewish belongings not just in the church's attic, but also in the vicarage. The main reason behind the complaint was that Rev. Życiński had allegedly failed to keep a secret and revealed that he had learned during the sender's confession that his wife was paid visits by the sexton, who was spreading rumors that the priest was helping the Jews. Lucjan R. also wrote that unless the bishop handled this matter within a week, he would "notify the ss authorities about the priest's actions, and they [...] will resolve the issue like they usually do" (*Ks. Ignacy Życiński, 1910–1949*).

After receiving this letter, Bishop Lorek immediately wired Rev. Życiński and summoned him to the diocese. The details of their conversation are not known, but as early as on 30 July, the provost submitted a written explanation. He stated that a committee appointed by the authorities of Zawichost had determined that he had not stored Jewish belongings either in the vicarage or the church. As regards the alleged breaking of the seal of confession, he wrote that he had not learned about the sexton's rumors

3 Ignacy Życiński (1883–1949), son of Józef and Urszula (née Wiczorkiewicz), was born in Radomsko. He was ordained in 1910 in Warsaw by Bishop Kazimierz Ruskiewicz. In 1930, at his own request, he was incardinated to the Sandomierz diocese, where he became provost of the Holy Trinity parish in the village of Trójca (presently Zawichost).

concerning R.'s actions on behalf of the Jews while celebrating the sacrament, but as early as at the end of March, and there were witnesses who could bear him out on this. He further explained that he had relieved the sexton of her duties and banned her from the vicarage. Finally, he wrote that after two weeks, the sexton had admitted to having recklessly told others about the storage of Jewish property (Ks. Ignacy Życiński, 1910–1949).

The subsequent developments in this case are not known, but Rev. Życiński was not turned in to the Germans, perhaps thanks to Bishop Lorek's intervention. Over two months later, the diocese received another letter of explanation pertaining to the case of Lucjan R. The document was titled, "An appendix to my explanation of 30 July 1942" (Ks. Ignacy Życiński, 1910–1949). At the very beginning, the provost wrote that on 1 August he bumped into Lucjan R., who had allegedly demanded 3,000 zlotys in return for contacting Bishop Lorek and explaining that he had been distressed, and then retracting his previous accusations. Rev. Życiński further recalled, "I gave him no answer and we parted ways" (Ks. Ignacy Życiński, 1910–1949). What followed was a three-page long detailed account of the previous events, the relations between Lucjan R. and the former sexton, and possible motivations behind the man's actions.

Rev. Życiński did actually help the Jews, a fact that was later corroborated by persons to whom he had given shelter. The problem was that it was very difficult to keep it under wraps. The parish was frequently visited by various people, aside from the housekeeper, the sexton, and other individuals working in the church. Documents in Rev. Życiński's personal file suggest that he knew that the Lucjan R.'s denunciation and blackmail were a result of the indiscretion of the woman who had worked as the sexton. Since various third parties suspected that the provost was involved in helping the Jews, the premises were searched and raided by the Germans a few dozen times (Tokarska-Bakir, 2012, p. 45). However, neither the persons in hiding nor the Jewish belongings in storage were ever discovered.

It is known that the provost hid two Jewish women (Lis, 2019). Zofia Zysman was born and raised in Zawichost. She was married to Majer Zysman and sewed dresses for a living. In 1942, to avoid persecution, she left for Skarżysko and was staying at the home of one of her customers, Zofia Brzezińska. Since a longer stay was not possible, she went to Ożarów, where she was received by the family of Maria Ziemniak, another client of hers, who was a long-serving housekeeper in Rev. Życiński's parish of the Holy Trinity. She could not stay there long either, so Maria sent her to a family friend who owned a mill near Sandomierz, but she was not aware of Zofia's Jewish descent (Teczka ks. Ignacego Życińskiego, n.d.).

Some time later, Zofia Zysman met a school friend, Józef Przysiecki, in Sandomierz. He invited her to his house, where his mother, Maria Przysiecka, told her to stay. During dinner, it turned out that the family were

also hiding Zofia's friend Itka. Every night, the house was also visited by the Jews who were seeking refuge in the nearby forests. They received help from Maria, who was a wet-nurse by trade. She treated them, dressed their wounds, gave them food, and sometimes even money (Teczka ks. Ignacego Życińskiego, n.d.). In October 1943, the Przysielski house was searched, and the Germans were looking for "Fiszlówna" ["the Fiszel girl"] and "Berkówna" ["the Berek girl"] (Zofia and Itka's fathers were Fiszel and Berek, respectively). The women were well hidden in the basement and avoided discovery. Still, the location was no longer safe. Maria Przysiecka went to Rev. Życiński, who knew about the Jewish women she was sheltering and provided them with material support. At dusk, Zofia and Itka moved to the parish and stayed in its attic for the next few days, while Józef was preparing a hideout near the parish building, in a shed used for storing wood and coal. When danger was imminent, they would move to the attic or a bunker in the garden. They remained in hiding until the Red Army arrived, that is, until late September 1944.

When it seemed as if the gravest danger had passed, the women went to Strzyżów, and then to Ożarów (to Maria Ziemniak's family), and finally to Zawichost. Itka was to be sheltered by one family, but unfortunately she was turned in to the Germans, who tortured her so that she would reveal Zofia's location. However, she did not betray her friend and was soon executed. Meanwhile, Zofia was staying with the Kwieciński family. Shortly before the New Year, they were visited by an acquaintance, Ms. Kowalska, who took Zofia to her home, where she looked after her two-year-old son. When the war ended, Zofia moved to Sandomierz (Teczka ks. Ignacego Życińskiego, n.d.).

Rev. Życiński served as the provost of the Holy Trinity parish until 1948. He died one year later in Sandomierz and was buried at the parish cemetery. For sheltering Zofia Zysman and Itka "Berkówna," he was named a Righteous Among the Nations. Canon priest Włodzimierz Mazur accepted the medal on his behalf from the Ambassador to Israel David Peleg on 23 May 2005 in the Warsaw city hall.

The efforts of the Polish clergy toward helping those who fought a losing battle against the oppressor, including persons of Jewish origin, were a high-risk enterprise and often had tragic consequences.

Bishop Lorek's conduct toward the occupying authorities followed from his heavy involvement in actions aimed at preventing repression against both Polish society and the Jewish community. He took risks in the name of a Christian duty to help others. When lives were at stake – and there is nothing more valuable than life under this doctrine – he saved Jews and called for others to follow suit. His actions paint him as a devoted and zealous hierarch, who, however, was somewhat lacking in prudence and knowledge. Consequently, he made mistakes, such as encouraging people to volunteer for labor in the Reich. A cautious course of action in dealings with the authorities was adopted by Archbishop Sapieha: when

he tried to secure a meeting with the governor general, he did not agree for it to take place on Hitler's birthday. He also emphasized the voluntary character of leaving for labor in the Reich and believed that German orders should not be announced in churches.

Studies on the clergy's conduct toward the German aggressor and on its stance on the Holocaust ought to be continued, since this issue is still under-researched.

(transl. by Maciej Grabski)

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