

Silent Heroes

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An interview with Deputy Minister of Culture, National Heritage and Sport Magdalena Gawin.

Polish-Jewish relations cannot be described through the prism of the pathology of anti-semitism, physical violence or the mythology of oft-repeated lies which undermine the aid that was given.

"My Jewish family had been living in a small Polish town for eight generations, similarly to the family of Magdalena Gawin, Poland's Deputy Minister of Culture. The institute that she convened has raised a monument to her relative who was murdered by the Germans; there is no trace of my ancestors," wrote Professor Mikhal Dekel in "Gazeta Wyborcza".

That was the editor's leading paragraph; there were other more far-fetched statements. I very much enjoyed the reference to "sweet fantasies" – meaning my own, calling the stone and the plaque a "black granite monument", and casting doubt not only on Jadwiga's rescue of Jews but also on the fact that she let apartments to them before the war. Neither is there any trace left of the Tejtel brewery that was blown up by the Gestapo in June 1944, nor even of the gate with the cross that was referenced in the article. Professor Dekel does not read or speak Polish, she does not know the history of the occupation of Poland; furthermore, she is not aware of the situation that is no longer current, not to mention of budgetary matters of the academic institutions she mentions. The most varied configurations of leading paragraphs selected by editors for online articles are pushing the outlet's message in a well-known direction: towards Polish mythomania and the egoism of Poles disinterested in the fate of Jews.

For context: on 13 May, Poland commemorated the 120th anniversary of the birth of Captain Witold Pilecki, the only volunteer to be imprisoned in Auschwitz, the author of reports on the Holocaust, whose wife Maria was born in Ostrów Mazowiecka. Press outlets from both sides of the political spectrum joined in the promotional campaign, even those most staunchly opposed to the current government. Pilecki is for everyone – from the left, through the center, to the right. "Gazeta Wyborcza" stood apart from this, in that it began an anti-heroic campaign against Witold Pilecki and Stanisław Pyjas into which Jadwiga Długoborska, one of the "Called by Name", was also dragged.

I will remind you that Pilecki's biography by the writer and war correspondent Jack Fairweather has been a bestseller and twice awarded the prestigious Costa Books Award. The publication received positive reviews in many of the most important media around the world and has been translated into a dozen languages. It is a huge success. The biography is being received very well in every country. The European Parliament unanimously named Pilecki a patron of a united Europe, whose citizens had suffered at the hands of Nazism and Communism. People like Bronisław Wildstein, Bogusław Sonik, Roman Graczyk – people of varying views – protested the Communist authorities' narration of the Pyjas case. All this goes to show that attacking Pilecki or Pyjas to deheroize Polish history is passé in the present day.

Then what happened in the case of Jadwiga Długoborska?

The families of those "Called by Name" took Professor Dekel's article as an attack on their loved ones who also died in horrible ways, just like Jadwiga. In the opinion of "Gazeta Wyborcza", "sweet fantasies" include being denounced, having nails torn off from both hands, an eye gouged out, a back blackened with blood, hematomas and welts on both legs. It is also the story of the murderer, a sadistic Gestapo officer, one of the most infamous killers of Poles and Jews who lived just 20 km from Treblinka.

It is the story of a Pole of Jewish origin, whom Jadwiga sheltered in 1943 despite

the danger for her family and her tenants. This Jew went on to survive the Gestapo raid and joined the Ministry for Public Security after the war. Nearly twenty years after the war, he was murdered in 1964 by a shot from a handgun, mostly likely as a result of provocation by the Security Bureau. In the same year, Yad Vashem began to hand out the first medals on the basis of survivors' testimonies. Jadwiga will not receive one. It was for people like her that the "Called by Name" project was created. The majority of Poles who were murdered for helping Jews has no medals.

Why not?

There are no inflexible criteria; each story is different, but there are general rules. The first and most important of them include the rescued person's account, German documentation – which, more often than not, has not survived – and a testimony under oath before the Main Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes.

However, Yad Vashem is most willing only to acknowledge evidence given before the 1960s. The fact that testimonies given at a later date are not accepted does not mean that people did not rescue Jews. That is why the Pilecki Institute's "Called by Name" project was so necessary – to provide support, the possibility to speak up, validation and appreciation of the actions of loved ones. A few of the families were awarded medals from Yad Vashem, but only very late in the process because the institute kept changing its criteria. Irena, the surviving daughter of the Lubkiewicz family of bakers from Sadowne, did not live to see this. Her family has given us a shocking letter from the 1960s in which they are quite literally being tossed from one institute to another and receive no help whatsoever in Poland. These are the most tragic stories and the experiences of the most profound isolation that a person can feel following the death of a loved one in unacknowledged suffering.

Do you want to nominate Jadwiga to Yad Vashem?

The survivor's son, whom I was able to reach, sent an application. I searched for the family of the survivor abroad, because that seemed most logical – the USA, Israel, Canada; in the end, I found him in Poland. The son had no idea where or how his father had survived the occupation. He was very young when his father died, and his mother never spoke about the war. Jadwiga had been dead for a very long time. I showed him documents from 1944, a biography written in his father's hand, archived letters and other papers.

What evidence is there that Jadwiga Długoborska helped Jews? Mikhal Dekel claims that there is only the boarding house's log from before the war with "Jewish sounding names" and the testimony of Cecylia Pachecka, Jadwiga's sister, who saw her washing two unknown boys in the boarding house's kitchen.

There is no testimony from Cecylia Pachecka. Professor Dekel has everything backwards. There are archived letters from Wanda Wujcik, another sister, who tried to have Jadwiga released from prison in 1944, written after testifying before the Main Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes. The story about washing the Jewish children was told to me by Janina Mika, another of Jadwiga's sisters. I learned the Jews' origin from a post-war report by a double agent who was sentenced for collaborating with the Germans; he mentioned the Warsaw Ghetto, which surprised me because I was rather expecting the Jews to have come from smaller communities or the more local ghettos. There were several names of Jews who survived the executions in 1939. The key evidence, however, is the prosecutor's documents – more than 270 pages – from 1964, which I found much later on, in which witnesses testify where and with whom they spent the occupation. The testimonies are all consistent. These have not yet been sent to Yad Vashem. Jadwiga was tortured – which Professor Dekel also failed to mention – in her own grandparents' home.

There are two accounts by Professor Dekel, one from her time in Poland and from her book "Teheran Children", and this second

published by "Gazeta Wyborcza". This latter, however, perfectly presents a certain trait characteristic of its milieu: Polish-Jewish relations as seen through the prism of the pathology of antisemitism, physical violence and the mythology of oft-repeated lies which undermine the aid that was given. There is no place for normalcy in this dichotomous image. My great-grandparents and grandparents let their apartments to Poles and Jews for decades not because of any kind of personal opinion, but simply for practical reasons. These are the facts.

Who was Jadwiga Długoborska for you?

My grandfather's parents died during the First World War. He and his sister were raised by their uncle, that is Jadwiga's parents. In the interbellum, the majority of their siblings moved to Warsaw, but my grandfather and Jadwiga lived in Ostrów Mazowiecka. Jadwiga is my father's god-mother.

My family may have even crossed paths with Professor Dekel's, whose own family sailed to Palestine in 1943. Jadwiga's brother-in-law, Major Edward Bohdanowicz – a prisoner in a Soviet camp – left the USSR with Anders' Army and became an RAF pilot in the "Ziemia Mazowiecka" and "Ziemia Wielkopolska" bomber squadrons. He survived the war. In 1944, he was awarded the Virtuti Militari medal for his participation in the drops over Warsaw during the uprising. If I absolutely wanted to raise a monument to one of my ancestors, I could choose from among pre-war officers who fought the Germans throughout the entire war or until their death.

Why was Jadwiga Długoborska such a special person?

Because she, like the other "Called by Name", was a civilian who voluntarily risked her life to protect others. She paid the highest possible price. The people who sheltered Jews, particularly in the provinces, did so of their own free will and usually without the knowledge of the underground state. Jadwiga had to put her own family and her

tenants in danger. On the night of 23 June 1944, when the Germans burst into the boarding house, her sister's children were present.

Some historians linked with the Polish Center for Holocaust Research say that describing such stories causes us to forget that some Poles informed on their own neighbors, that the informers – sometimes wrongly described as Volksdeutsch – are being removed from history.

That has nothing to do with the "Called by Name" project. At every commemoration, we join the local community in condemning the denunciations and honoring the memory of the heroes. There is also another accusation that we are trying to propagate a claim that "aid was provided on a mass scale". Help was not – and could not have been – provided en masse in the provinces. Nevertheless, denunciations cannot be allowed to burden the victims; we cannot use collective responsibility and say that one person denounced so everyone is guilty – a whole village, a whole city, or even the nation. There were denunciations in the Communist era as well. Lesław Maleszka's denunciation burdens neither his victim Stanisław Pyjas nor Poles as a whole. The majority of Poles never denounced anyone. It is necessary to understand that the war was a period of totalitarian authority and secret political police; one of the methods used to control society included a network of agents, denunciations, forcing testimonies through torture, provocation.

Jadwiga Długoborska's torturer – her killer – was a Volksdeutsch Gestapo officer called "Cyk", nicknamed the Ostrów Executioner.

He went under a false name during the occupation: Birkenfeld. Neither was he a teacher of German, as he claimed. His real name was Anton Peter Psyk. Before the war, he worked as a miner in Tarnowskie Góry, and then as a caretaker at the municipal office in Brzeziny Śląskie (in German: Birkenhain). He was a member of the German

community in Silesia; he studied on both sides of the Polish-German border, which is why he knew both languages so well. The participation of Volksdeutsch in the terror apparatus was immense. The common factor was their bilingualism and relatively low social position prior to the war. Records from the 1930s show that more than 700,000 Germans were living in Poland at the time. Some researchers claim that this number was nearing a million at the outbreak of the Second World War. A large group was recruited into the German terror apparatus from this community.

Psyk was a category III Volksdeutsch and was given citizenship in the Third Reich in 1942. He began his career in Einsatzgruppe in Kielce, Końskie and Częstochowa, and then he made his way via Warsaw to Ostrów as a translator. He attended German police training in Berlin, and received a uniform without distinction and the right to carry out individual investigations. He was a terrible sadist and criminal who took great pleasure in brutally torturing people. He took part in both mass and individual executions. He died in 1976, as a citizen of West Germany, completely untouched by the German legal system. An arrest warrant was put out shortly after the war, but no one was able to establish his identity for decades. I did it myself. The residents of Ostrów also searched for him after the war; they feared that he would discard his uniform and blend into the crowd of Poles.

Did the Germans offer to let Jadwiga sign the list of Volksdeutsch?

Yes. The whole family was given the list because of their German roots – or more specifically their Franco-German roots. They came from Alsace – from Lorraine – a few dozen kilometers from Strasbourg. Like other families from Alsace, they kept separate from the “true” Germans and quickly assimilated. They wanted to be Poles.

In her description of pre-war attitudes in Ostrów, Professor Dekel makes reference to the escape of the Jewish owners of the

brewery. She cites one of the Tejtel brothers, who says that the workers cheered when they ran. She also writes about pogroms before the war, and the actions of combatants from the National Radical Camp.

Professor Dekel told me that one or two Poles accosted her grandfather or father and shouted “now the brewery is ours!” She turned that into cheering crowds in her article. There were some 9,000 Catholics in Ostrów before the war – did they all cheer? People fled the town in a hurry – it was being bombarded. There was absolute chaos. I realize that someone running away often only recalls the last image they see. More broadly speaking, entire barracks in Komorowo near Ostrów Mazowiecka – the homes of pre-war officers – were entirely plundered. Wives and children who had gone to the city came back to find empty apartments. State structures were entirely ruptured.

Were there any pogroms in Ostrów?

There were no pogroms before the war. There were incidents of antisemitism in the 1930s, ultimately unsuccessful attempts to boycott Jewish shops. There were indeed some acts of violence committed by the National Radical Camp, whose victims often included Poles, families letting their homes to Jews, but that does not fit into the logic of the official narrative. Just like the fact that people collaborating with the Germans denounced Poles during the occupation.

“There is no trace of my ancestors,” Professor Dekel claims. And probably rightly; in many places, Jewish cemeteries were built over after the war or left to be overgrown with weeds.

The Jewish cemetery in Ostrów Mazowiecka is a result of many years of disrepair resulting mainly from unestablished property rights. The matzevahs have been taken for renovation, the regional conservator has set aside the necessary funds, and we have accepted a plan for the reconstruction of the cemetery. Now the ball lies in the court

of the starost, because he needs to begin the proper legal proceedings. Thanks to a legal amendment I have introduced, local government authorities cannot sell land containing a cemetery without the approval of the regional Conservator of Monuments. What's more, all of them have been entered into an index or the register of monuments. The sale of land on which cemeteries are built was somehow previously acceptable. Two years ago, Professor Dekel sent me a photograph of her family for a permanent exhibition in a museum that was being established at the time. She did not mention that in her article; perhaps she forgot.

Do you believe that Professor Dekel has been used instrumentally to tell the story of Jadwiga Długoborska?

Of course. On 15 May, just after her article was printed in "Gazeta Wyborcza" with a large photograph of me, I received an email from her which she ended by saying that she was agonizing over the fact that she might have hurt me, but that she had decided it was important for political reasons. She was not told that her article would be published on the 120th anniversary of the birth of Pilecki.

I feel a certain distaste after reading her article.

Piotr Gursztyn called her article a "denunciation" of me. Unfortunately, it might have been seen as such.

Why, in your opinion, is the Pilecki Institute's "Called by Name" project so important?

The "Called by Name" project is more than just plaques with names on a stone. First and foremost, it is work with the families; that is what makes it so unique. We talk to the victims' loved ones, seek out surviving witnesses, record video accounts. We do not research the scale of the aid, but the examples of the most brutal repressions and the subsequent consequences for the families after the murder of their loved ones. In essence, it is the creation of a space for those

people and empowering them. I don't want them to be alone. I established the name of the person who denounced, of the survivor, and also of the executioner – having only his pseudonym and the false name he used – in order to reclaim control over the past and the present and to help others.

History reimagined

Source: "Rzeczpospolita" p. 28

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On 13 May, "Gazeta Wyborcza" published an article by Professor Mikhal Dekel, a lecturer of English literature at City University and City College in New York. Her book "Teheran Children: A Holocaust Refugee Odyssey" was published in 2019. Her article describes a meeting with Magdalena Gawin, Deputy Minister of Culture and National Heritage, and the story of the minister's first cousin twice removed cousin, Jadwiga Długoborska, who was killed during the war as punishment for sheltering Jews. Professor Dekel claimed, among others, that "[the minister's] relative, murdered by the Germans, was presented with a monument from the institute which she convened. There is no trace of my ancestors."

Professor Dekel admitted that she "has only been in Ostrów Mazowiecka once, one year before receiving an email from Minister Gawin, when I was gathering material for my father's memoirs. My father's cousin spoke about the brewery in Ostrów that belonged to the Tejtel brothers, about the homes where they lived, about the Polish and Jewish workers at the brewery [...] It sounded like a strange bucolic tale. 'But when we ran away, the Polish workers cheered,' my father cut in. 'Now the brewery will be ours!'" Professor Dekel explained that her school in Haifa had taught her that the history of Jews in Eastern Europe was the history of a series of pogroms culminating in the Holocaust and the rebirth of Israel. "But it was not only this Zionist interpretation which stamped its mark on my historical knowledge. The majority of my neighbors and family friends was born in Poland. I had the impression that the Nazis

were evil incarnate for them; but the pain inflicted by Poland – the fear it instilled – seemed to reach more deeply, to be a more intimate, silent heritage.”

Describing her time in Ostrów, she wrote: “There is currently a car mechanic on the site where the local synagogue once stood, and a pre-school where a yeshiva was located. There is an animal market at the Jewish cemetery that was razed to the ground during the war.” She added that, “Ostrów has reimagined its own history, from which my father’s family and the rest of its Jewish residents have been erased.” In the professor’s opinion, the newly established museums, monuments and research institutes “serve to disseminate, both locally and internationally, a vision of Polish suffering, of Polish heroism, of Polish-Jewish amity, and the rescue of Jews by Polish Christians. [...] A black granite monument dedicated to Jadwiga Długoborska stands outside the entrance to the Tadeusz Kościuszko Primary School, where the Tejtel brewery once stood. It was put up by the Pilecki Institute, which in turn was convened by Minister Gawin. [...] In time, I came to understand that most of what Minister Gawin was so energetically defending concerned identity – a desire to disqualify informers and culprits from Polish history; carving out an image of a good and noble Poland, a crucified nation; and proclaiming Poles to be courageous and gallant defenders, as in the case of Jadwiga,” wrote Professor Dekel in “Gazeta Wyborcza”.

