

# Right and justice shine through the infernal prism of wartime Poland

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Special to The Japan Times

One of my most treasured possessions is an old photograph. Taken in 1910, in Kraków, Poland, it shows five generations of my ancestors on my mother's side, beginning with my great-great-grandfather, Joseph Pinkus Krengel, who was born in 1818.

Due to the unusual nature of the surname, Krengel, it isn't hard to trace the history of my family. In fact, we know that they left Spain for Poland at the end of the 15th century, just when the interrogators of the Inquisition were polishing their twisted metal with Jewish blood.

It was lore in my family that Poles were not well disposed toward their large Jewish population. In 1966, when I told my great-aunt Sylvia that I had learned Polish and was going to Poland to do postgraduate research, she said, "Poland? It's the biggest country of anti-Semites in the world."

Poland's notoriety as such is a common fallacy. In fact, for centuries Poland was the biggest country of philo-Semites. That's why there were so many Jews there. As far back as the reign of King Kazimierz III (1310-70), Jews were welcome in Poland as in no other European state. Kazimierz III is the only Polish king still considered "Great"; and the Jewish district in Krakow is called, to this day, Kazimierz.

The sullied reputation of the Poles in this regard derives primarily from events that took place under Nazi rule during World War II, and stories that were told later. Some people even go so far as to use the term "Polish concentration camps" to describe those on its territory. This is like calling the concentration camp at Guantanamo Bay "Cuban."

Now, an excellent book published in English in 2011 by Oficyna Wydawnicza RYTM, has addressed the relationship between Poles and Jews during the war in an objective and thorough manner. Titled "Inferno of Choices, Poles and the Holocaust," it is a must-read for anyone who wishes to learn the true story of this most tragic association.

The book is made up of historical documents, letters and testimony that throw light on the actual nature of living conditions in occupied Poland, the chief region of Europe chosen by the German Reich to confine and murder peoples they deemed inferior to themselves.

"The reader will find here examples of bestiality, indifference, ordinary human help," say the editors, Sebastian Rejak and Elzbieta Frister, "but also examples of Polish heroism for which some of them paid the price of life."

The armchair of hindsight is clearly no place from which to judge or condemn ordinary people caught up in cataclysmic choices. "Any Jew," say the editors, "asking for help, and any Pole asked to help, faced an inferno of choices: Whom to save, for whom to take risk, whom to turn to for help, at what price to survive the war?"

On Oct. 15, 1941, Governor-General of Poland Hans Frank issued a decree prohibiting Jews in Warsaw from leaving the ghetto. Any accomplice was to receive the same penalty — death. "An attempted act," states the regulation, "shall be punishable as if committed."

Non-Jewish Poles were treated with systematic cruelty. Peasants were forced to hand over the bulk of their crops to the occupying forces. According to reliable sources quoted in the book, "Peasants in arrears of deliveries were imprisoned in special camps or concentration camps." In all, 3 million non-Jewish Polish citizens were killed.

There were many incentives for Poles to turn in Jews who escaped the ghetto. Anyone who did so received 20 percent of the value of the escapee's property. Some people denounced Jews simply to settle an old score. *Szmalcownictwo* ("money milking") was common. This involved the lucrative blackmailing of Jews in hiding.

Directives from Adolf Hitler stated one aim of German policy as "the physical destruction of the Poles as an ethnic group." And yet, "Inferno of Choices" details many incidents of altruism and common decency under the most gruesome of circumstances. Scholars now put the number of Poles engaged in helping Jews at 300,000.

At Sambor, in the Lwow district now in Ukraine, 26 Jews were concealed for more than two years in a grain warehouse. A prosperous furrier in Jeziarzyny, in the province of Tarnopol, kept 70 Jews in hiding at his own expense.

"For every example of a negative attitude," states the book, "there is an example of a positive one, every generalization made on the basis of one source can be countered by another generalization drawing on another source."

It is this — complicated by the fact that, under the communists in the postwar era, the Polish government resisted full disclosure of wartime realities — that has prevented the revelation of the real record as it was: ambiguous and immensely complex. In addition, the deplorable tendency of some Jews to claim the Holocaust as an exclusive tragedy has worked against the bringing to light of the many charitable and heroic acts carried out by Poles during the Nazi occupation of that country.

The impact that Jews had on the economy, culture and lifestyle of Poland was colossal. More than 3 million Jews lived in Poland before the war, three out of four of them in big cities. At the outbreak of the war in September 1939, Warsaw, with 375,000 Jews (one-third of the city's population), was, after New York, the second-biggest Jewish city in the world.

Rabbi Abraham Ozjasz Thon (1870-1936), who was a deputy in the Sejm, the Polish parliament, said, in 1919, "I believe in Poland. ... I declare to you that we offer our affection, that we come to you in service and give you all our loyalty." Sadly, that loyalty was not always required.

Throughout the ages, however, Jews, like my mother's father's family, had found a home in Poland. They lived in Krakow for 400 years. Fortunately, almost all of the Kregels left long before the war — the only victim of whom I am aware being Maksymilian Kregel, my grandfather's cousin. Born on Oct. 24, 1887, Capt. Kregel served as a doctor in the Polish Army. He was murdered on Stalin's orders in 1940, along with an estimated 22,000 other Polish nationals, in the so-called Katyń Massacre, and is buried in Kharkov, Ukraine.

One of the most famous poems of modern Poland is "Modlitwa" ("Prayer"), which was written during the war by the Jewish-Polish poet Julian Tuwim (1894-1953). The last two lines are: *Let right mean right / And justice, justice.*

**"Inferno of Choices, Poles and the Holocaust"** presents history in its true light — now repulsive, now uplifting.

As is written in the book, "This is not about a 'competition of suffering,' or even about comparing the fate of the Jews and the Poles. The sole purpose is to examine the geographic backdrop of the Holocaust."

By doing that, this volume makes a unique contribution not only to the study of what was once one of the most vital and important relationships among the peoples of Europe, but also to what is right and, ultimately, just.