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Jews, Poles & Nazis: The Terrible History

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Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp

by Christopher R. Browning

Norton, 375 pp., \$27.95

Z'ydzi w powstan'czej Warszawie [Jews in Insurrectionary Warsaw, 1944]

by Barbara Engelking and Dariusz Libionka

Polish Center for Holocaust Research, 358 pp., zł44.0

The hangings took place on the last day of August 1941, on the town square of Wierzbnik, in what had once been central Poland. Two years had passed since the joint German-Soviet invasion that had destroyed the Polish state; ten weeks before, the Germans had betrayed their ally and invaded the Soviet Union. Wierzbnik, home to Poles and Jews, lay within the General Government, a colony that the Germans had made from parts of their Polish conquests. As Poles left church that Sunday morning, they saw before them a gallows. The German police had selected sixteen or seventeen Poles—men, women, and at least one child. Then they ordered a Jewish execution crew, brought from the ghetto that morning, to carry out the hangings. The Poles were forced to stand on stools; then the Jews placed nooses around their necks and kicked the stools away. The bodies were left to dangle.¹

Demonstrative killing of civilians was one of several German methods designed to stifle Polish resistance. The Germans had murdered educated Poles: tens of



US Holocaust Memorial Museum/Miles and Chris Laks Lerman

thousands in late 1939, thousands more in early 1940. Since June 1940, the Germans had been sending suspect Poles to Auschwitz and other camps. Polish society was to be reduced to an undifferentiated mass of passive workers. German policy toward Jews was different, though the nature of the difference was not yet clear. Jewish elites had been preserved; some of them as members of the *Judenrat* (Jewish council) or as policemen directing the local affairs of Jews in a way that suited Germans.

The sisters Renia, Rosalie, and Chanka Laks, from a prominent Jewish family in Wierzbnik, Poland. Rosalie Laks—whose testimony appears in Christopher Browning's Remembering Survival—said that when their father was pushed into a gutter and kicked repeatedly by a German during the early days of the Nazi occupation, 'This was the first time I understood what the war was all about.' All the sisters survived the war and are still alive.

Although fatality rates in some ghettos were high, Jews in summer 1941 had little idea that they had been gathered into ghettos in preparation for a “Final Solution.” The Germans had first planned to deport the Jews to a reservation in eastern Poland, or to the island of Madagascar, or to Siberian wastelands. As these schemes proved impracticable, the Jews remained in the ghettos. It was in that final week of August 1941 that the German “Final Solution” was taking on its final form: mass murder. Two days before the hangings at Wierzbnik, the Germans had completed their first truly large-scale murder of Jews, shooting some 23,600 people at Kamianets-Podil's'kyi in occupied Soviet Ukraine.

“I knew I hanged the right people,” one of the Jewish hangmen in Wierzbnik recalled more than fifty years later. He thought that those who were executed belonged to the Polish Home Army, and as such were guilty of murdering Jews. The people in question died, of course, not because Poles were killing Jews, but because Poles were resisting German rule. The hangings at Wierzbnik were a typical German reprisal, aiming to spread terror and deter further opposition. If it were not for the testimonies of the Jews from Wierzbnik, this particular event would have been lost. For most of them, it was a first stark demonstration of German mass murder, if only a small foretaste of what was to come.

In his magnificent and humane microhistory, Christopher Browning has drawn on the “written, transcribed, and/or taped accounts of 292” Jewish survivors, most of them from Wierzbnik, who shared a similar experience of the war. He treats these testimonies as historical sources, believing that according them “a privileged position not subject to the same critical analysis and rules of evidence as other sources will merely discredit and undermine the reputation of Holocaust scholarship itself.”

Here, in recounting how a Jew forced by Germans to kill Poles blamed the Poles for their fate, Browning reaches the problem of Polish–Jewish relations.² While he is quite aware that this particular testimony must be subjected to scrutiny, his analysis consists mainly in the comparison of multiple Jewish testimonial sources.

Addressing the evidence of the Jewish hangman, Browning characterizes the Home Army as a “conservative nationalist underground movement” that did indeed kill Jews, but perhaps not as early as 1941. This description may reflect a consensus among surviving Wierzbnik Jews; it does not fit the historical Home Army.

Interestingly, the “Polish underground” makes several appearances in Browning’s book, usually behaving in ways that are remembered positively: shooting Germans, attacking camps, helping Jews. The Home Army, meanwhile, appears in this negative light, as murderous and anti-Semitic. There is a problem here: the Home Army was the Polish underground. Aiming to restore Polish independence from German rule, it united hundreds of resistance groups. It represented a very wide spectrum of opinion, excluding only the communist left and the extreme nationalist right. And it was not just an underground movement: it was an integral part of the Polish armed forces, under the command of the exile government in London, allied with Great Britain and the United States in the war against Nazi Germany.³

Although the Home Army’s enemy was Nazi Germany, anti-Semitism was indeed a problem in its ranks. On Rosh Hashanah, three weeks after the hangings in Wierzbnik, Polish Prime Minister Władysław Sikorski sent his good wishes from London to the Jewish citizens of Poland via the BBC. Stefan Rowecki, the commander of the Home Army in Warsaw, was irritated; such gestures, he thought, made “the worst possible impression” among Poles. This revealed a basic tension, apparent throughout 1941, between the Polish exile government and its underground army. Anti-Semitism, Rowecki seemed to think, was so pervasive that the Jewish issue should be tabled until war’s end. Many Poles had been inclined to support anti-Semitic parties in the 1930s, and the experience of German and Soviet occupation had not helped.⁴

Some Poles claimed to resent the Jews who had taken up positions of authority in the Soviet occupation apparatus in eastern Poland between 1939 and 1941, after the Soviet invasion of that part of the country. Other Poles were corrupted by having taken over Jewish houses or apartments when Jews were forced into ghettos in 1940 and 1941. Throughout 1941, Poles were debating the political and civic status that Jews should have in Poland after the war. The exile government took the view that

postwar Poland would be a democracy without racial discrimination. Within the government, however, nationalists questioned this position.

Polish wartime debates about the “Jewish question” ceased only when Adolf Hitler’s answer became clear. The condition of Polish Jews became a pressing question for the exile government and the Home Army when the Germans began to gas Jews in the final weeks of 1941. In early 1942, Polish leaders believed that news of the shocking German campaign would prompt action from Great Britain and the United States. The Home Army thought that the revelation of the existence of gassing facilities would force the Germans to stop. It transmitted to London the documentation about the death factory at Chełmno that had been gathered by the ghetto historian Emanuel Ringelblum. This led to BBC broadcasts about the mass extermination of Polish Jews. The Polish government in London, though always presenting Jewish suffering as part of a larger story of Polish martyrdom, gave the mass murder of Jews as a reason for the British and the Americans to carry out retributions against German civilians. In vain: the Germans were not shamed by the publicity, and the Western allies took no meaningful action.⁵

In 1942, in Operation Reinhard, the Germans deported some 1.3 million Polish Jews from ghettos in the General Government to death factories at Treblinka, Bełżec, and Sobibór. The associated mass deportations of the Jews of Warsaw, which began on July 22, forced the local Home Army into action. It supplied false documentation to Jewish survivors, supported Żegota, the Polish government organization that aided Jewish survivors, and assisted Jews within the Warsaw Ghetto who were planning an uprising. Operation Reinhard reached the town of Wierzbnik on October 27. As Browning shows, an unusually high proportion of Wierzbnik Jews, some 1,200 men and four hundred women, were selected for labor. Browning provides a heartrending depiction of the selections that separated those who would work for the Germans from the nearly four thousand who would be gassed at Treblinka.

This scene was repeated thousands of times in occupied Poland, but rarely if ever has it been rendered in such detail from so many perspectives. Some families were forced apart. Others divided themselves, not knowing which group was the better one. Some people left their families behind. Others stayed with their families when they might have saved themselves. Others still contrived to take their families with them into labor duty. Browning gently evokes the kinds of morality that could function in such a situation of extremity. He does not expect his sources to provide an example of ethical behavior: “We must be grateful for the testimonies of those who survived and are willing to speak, but we have no right to expect from them

tales of edification and redemption.” But he does draw attention to the loyalties that did function: the bonds among families, lovers, and friends.

The Wierzbnik Jews selected for labor were in an exceptional position. By late October 1942, more than two million Polish Jews were already dead, shot in what had been eastern Poland or gassed at Treblinka, Bełżec, Sobibór, or Chełmno. In 1943 and 1944, as hundreds of thousands more Polish Jews were gassed at Auschwitz or shot in the East, Wierzbnik Jews continued to live and work. They owed their survival to an accident of geography: their homes were very near the Polish arms factory at Starachowice, now taken over by the Germans. Jewish labor at Starachowice was important to the German war effort. The Starachowice camps were not under the direct authority of the SS, but rather run by a private business, operating within a larger holding company. As in the Wierzbnik ghetto, daily authority over Jews in the Starachowice camps was in the hands of a Jewish council and Jewish police force. These institutions, which drew heavily from families that had been prosperous before the war, distributed labor assignments on the basis of connections and bribes. German personnel were few, and the guards were stationed outside the camps.

There was little need to guard the camps: in 1943 in occupied Poland, Starachowice was a place Jews escaped to, not a place they escaped from. When Jews from Majdanek were transferred to Starachowice, they could hardly believe their eyes. The place was filthy and the work was dangerous, but Jews remained alive in large numbers, sometimes even with their children. Some were able to supplement their minimal food rations by selling belongings that they had left for safekeeping with Wierzbnik Poles. Jews at Starachowice bribed camp guards to accompany them to Wierzbnik, where they would carry out these transactions. Then they returned to the camps with the food. To escape from Starachowice would be to court death. Jews found by Germans would be shot. Although thousands of Poles aided Jews despite the death sentence they faced for doing so, it would be an extraordinary gamble to trust any given Pole. In this part of occupied Poland there was no underground army that Jews knew would accept them, and no Jewish armed force that could protect them.

The major Jewish armed rebellion against German rule in the General Government, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of April–May 1943, had aimed not at survival but rather at the choice of the manner of death. It had involved a certain alliance between Poles and Jews, but one that did not endure. The Warsaw branch of the Home Army had given Jews a substantial part of its modest weapons cache. Seven of the first

eight armed actions taken by the Home Army in Warsaw were in support of the ghetto. This was symbolic: as everyone knew, the Home Army in Warsaw could not have saved the Jews of the ghetto in April 1943, even had it devoted all of its troops and weapons to this purpose. After the Ghetto Uprising was crushed, Home Army commanders failed to enlist surviving Jewish fighters. Thus even Jews with combat experience found themselves hunted in occupied Poland in 1943. Jews had to fear not only the Germans, but also local units of the Home Army who (on several documented occasions) shot them as bandits or (on a few documented occasions) shot them to steal their belongings.

From the perspective of the Home Army, 1943 was the year of an irresolvable dilemma: the Germans were losing the war, but the Soviets were winning it. In February the Red Army had dealt the Wehrmacht its first major defeat, at Stalingrad. Henceforth, the Home Army had to resist the Germans while preparing for the arrival of the Soviets. German propaganda drove the point home that April, revealing that the Soviets had shot thousands of Polish officers at Katyn. Stalin used the revelation of his own mass murder as a pretext to break diplomatic relations with Poland.⁶ This was an unmistakable sign of imperial ambition. If Stalin would not recognize the legitimate Polish government during a common war against Nazi Germany, why would he endorse Polish independence after a Soviet victory?

Some Home Army commanders feared that arming Polish Jews would ease the spread of Soviet power. Though this sometimes took the form of an anti-Semitic stereotype of the Jew as Communist, the concern was not entirely unjustified. The Polish Communist party was part of the Jewish Combat Organization, which the Home Army had supplied with arms. The man who negotiated those arms transfers, Aryeh Wilner, was also negotiating with Communists. The Jewish representative within the Polish government department charged with rescuing Jews, Adolf Berman, was also in touch with the Communists. (His brother Jakub would later preside over the Communist security apparatus that would persecute Home Army veterans—including those who had aided Jews.)⁷ For the Home Army, the Soviet advance meant the arrival of a dubious ally against the Germans as well as an impending threat to Polish independence. For Jews it meant life. This basic difference in perspectives, a result of the Holocaust, was difficult to overcome.

For Jews at Starachowice, only labor counted. As Browning masterfully reconstructs daily life within the factory camps, he reveals what Jews knew about their fate and the limits of their local perspective. When typhus broke out, for example, the Germans at first simply shot the Jews who were infected. So long as Jewish labor

was available for rent from the SS, shooting sick Jews was the economically rational thing to do. As the war continued and the number of living Jews plunged, the Germans treated sick Jews rather than killing them. Jews remembered this as a change in the camp regime; Browning recalls the larger causes.

In late 1943, Heinrich Himmler liquidated most of the camps in the General Government where Jews were used as labor, and had tens of thousands of Jewish workers shot. The directors of Starachowice sacrificed some of the women and children to Himmler, but preserved the men. Because their business was making arms, they could evade the policy of murdering all Jews. Only the Red Army's successful offensive in June 1944 forced the closure of the factory camps at Starachowice. In July the Jewish laborers at Starachowice were sent to Auschwitz. Mortality rates in one of the railcars was high, but not only because of the transport conditions: some of the stronger prisoners took the opportunity to beat the members of the camp council to death.

The Red Army was disarming Home Army units as it entered eastern Poland. The Home Army's only hope seemed to be an uprising against the Germans in Warsaw, timed to exploit the Soviet advance but precede the actual arrival of Soviet troops. The aim was to liberate Warsaw from German occupation by Polish efforts, and to install a Polish government before the Red Army arrived. In late July 1944, as the Wierzbnik Jews were sent to Auschwitz, the Red Army approached Warsaw. On August 1, 1944, the Warsaw Uprising began. The Home Army fought the Germans there for eight weeks: a longer battle than either the Polish campaign of 1939 or the French campaign of 1940, and with casualties comparable to both. As Dariusz Libionka and Barbara Engelking demonstrate in their pioneering study, Jews took part in the battle, most of them in the Home Army.⁸ Some of these were people of Jewish origin who regarded or presented themselves as Poles and had been in the Home Army all along. Others were veterans of the Ghetto Uprising. More were survivors who left their places of shelter in Warsaw in order to fight, seeing it as self-evident that they would help Poles fight Germans. As Michał Żylberberg put it, "The Poles had risen to fight against the mortal enemy, and it was our obligation, as victims and as fellow citizens, to help them." The Warsaw Uprising was a major example of armed Jewish resistance to the Germans during World War II. Indeed, it is quite possible that more people of Jewish origin took part in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 than in the Ghetto Uprising of 1943.

The Warsaw Uprising, like the Ghetto Uprising before it, was defeated. The Home Army, like the Jews the previous year, fought essentially alone. Stalin forbade Allied

air drops when they might have helped. The Germans held the line at the Vistula River, and the Red Army halted. Some of the most brutal German SS and police formations defeated the Polish resistance in Warsaw, killing at least 120,000 Polish civilians.

These people perished not only because German forces were ordered to kill them, but also because Joseph Stalin allowed them to die. The Red Army was indeed halted by the stubborn German defense at the Vistula, but its encampment there for five months must be understood as a political act. It doomed the Poles (and the Jews) who were fighting the Germans in Warsaw. The Germans killed people who, as Stalin knew, would also have resisted the imposition of Communist rule.

The Germans were able to empty not only Starachowice, but also the last ghetto in occupied Poland, in Łódź'. In July 1944, Łódź' Jews knew that the Red Army was nearby, and thought they could be liberated in a matter of days. Some 67,000 Jews were transported from Łódź' to Auschwitz while the Warsaw Uprising was taking place. Whereas the Wierzbnik Jews were not subjected to a selection at the ramp at Birkenau, most of the Łódź' Jews were gassed upon arrival.²

By the time the Red Army finally reached Warsaw in January 1945, the Wierzbnik Jews, Łódź' Jews, and other Jews were being marched from Auschwitz to labor camps in Germany, where they would remain until the end of the war. This ordeal was deadlier for the Wierzbnik Jews than Starachowice and Auschwitz; hundreds died in a matter of a few months. After the Red Army took Berlin in May, Polish-Jewish survivors found their way to displaced-persons camps in Germany. A few dozen Wierzbnik Jews were able to return to Poland and their hometown, where they were greeted with ugly threats from the Poles who had stolen their houses. In June a few returning Wierzbnik Jews were murdered by Poles. One Jew was beheaded. In Poland as a whole, hundreds of Jews were murdered by Poles in the months after the war was over.

Browning concludes from this horrible finale that the goal of the Polish underground was the end of Jewish life in Poland. He adds that the Polish nation was defined in opposition to an enemy image of the Jew. As Browning acknowledges, it is not at all clear that members of the Home Army committed the murders and robberies in Wierzbnik; the Jews upon whose testimony Browning relies could not have known this. However that may be, it is misleading to discuss Polish political aims only in the light of these events. If Polish patriotism was simply a matter of hating Jews, why did the Home Army fight the Nazis with such determination?

Officially, the Home Army was fighting for constitutional liberal democracy and equal rights for all citizens; what its victory or indeed what democratic elections would have brought to Poland we will never know. After intimidation campaigns and faked elections, Poland became a Soviet satellite governed by a Communist regime. We owe the description of the Home Army as a reactionary nationalist clique to Soviet and Polish Communists, whose forces defeated its stubborn remnants, tortured its best officers, and hanged its last commander after a show trial.

In Stalinist Poland, only Communist resistance to the Germans was recognized as such; everything else was fascism. Communists had no difficulty whatsoever in conflating the people who had fought the Nazis with the Nazis themselves. The Ghetto Uprising was celebrated as Communist (though it was not); the Warsaw Uprising was denounced as fascist (though it was not). Yet we owe the stark separation of the two events to national as well as to Communist politics. The Ghetto Uprising is a founding myth of the State of Israel, and the Warsaw Uprising is a founding myth of today's post-Communist Poland: this, too, keeps the two events further apart in memory than they were in history.

Though the record of the Home Army toward Jews is ambivalent, the dark legend must be abandoned. Important as Jewish testimonial material is to the history of the Holocaust, the recollections of Jews who spent years in camps cannot serve as the basis for historical reckonings with the Home Army. If its history were to be written from Jewish perspectives, these would have to include those of people such as Chaja and Eстера Borenstein, who volunteered as nurses at the beginning of the Warsaw Uprising, or Marian Mendenholz, who died trying to rescue Polish comrades right at its very end. It would have to allow for the experiences of Jews such as Stanisław Aronson. Fighting in the most celebrated unit of the Home Army in the Warsaw Uprising, Aronson stormed Umschlagplatz, from which he himself had been deported to Treblinka two years before. Then he and his Polish comrades liberated a concentration camp on the ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto, and freed several hundred Jews.

That said, the pristine legend of an unblemished Home Army, cultivated by Polish veterans and patriots, is also unsustainable. There was distance between soldiers in the field and declarations from London, variation among regions and units, reluctance to see Jews as part of the Polish nation, insensitivity to the particular dangers faced by Jews, and occasional outright murder. Getting the balance right is not just a matter for Jews and Poles. The Home Army was the most significant non-

Communist resistance movement in Nazi-occupied Europe. Those who regard opposition to Hitler as a measure of morality will have to take its history seriously.

1. 1
On Christopher Browning's evidence, the hanging might have taken place one week earlier or later. ↵
2. 2
A similar issue arises in Snyder, "Nazis, Soviets, Poles, Jews," *The New York Review*, December 3, 2009. ↵
3. 3
It was known as the Union of Armed Struggle through 1941. The Polish government left Paris for London in 1940. ↵
4. 4
Arrested by the Gestapo in 1943, Rowecki was executed in Sachsenhausen in 1944. ↵
5. 5
See Adam Puławski, *W obliczu Zagłady: Rząd RP na Uchodz'ństwie, Delegatura Rządu RP na Kraj, ZWZ-AK wobec deportacji Żydów do obozów zagłady (1941–1942)* (Lublin: IPN, 2009). ↵
6. 6
See *Katyn: A Crime Without Punishment*, edited by Anna Cienciała, Natalia Lebedeva, and Wojciech Materski (Yale University Press, 2007). ↵
7. 7
One of these was Władysław Bartoszewski (1922–), a fascinating figure who awaits a scholarly biography. ↵
8. 8
The (nationalist) National Armed Forces and the (Communist) People's Army also fought in the Warsaw Uprising. ↵
9. 9
Andrea Löw, *Juden im Getto Litzmannstadt: Lebensbedingungen, Selbstwahrnehmung, Verhalten* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2006), pp. 466–476. ↵

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