

Difficulties in Rescue Attempts in Occupied Poland

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Much has been written on rescue activities in Poland during the German occupation in WWII. The articles on this topic comprise, for the most part, testimonies and chapters of memoirs produced by survivors, and sometimes rescuers. Despite this, only a few research studies dealing with this topic have been published, and it has yet to be researched in a systematic and extensive manner.

The exact numbers of Jewish survivors in Poland by the time of liberation in May 1945 are unclear. Additionally, those who spent the terror of the war years in Poland and miraculously survived fall into different categories. The largest such group is Jews who managed to flee the occupied areas at the beginning of the war, during September to November 1939, and spent the years of occupation on Soviet soil. The size of this group is estimated at between 200,000-250,000 Jews. Their fate was not always improved; many of them were sent to labor camps in distant areas, where they perished. But at least their escape from Poland created the primary condition for their rescue. Some were even drafted to the Red Army or the Polish Army formed in the Soviet Union.

The second largest group of survivors are those who survived Nazi concentration camps. These were Jews who lived distressing lives in the ghettos, suffered forced labor, and endured camps and death marches, but somehow managed to survive until the fall of the Third Reich. Their number is estimated at around 50,000.

The third group is those who survived in occupied Poland. Different estimates put their number at between 20,000 to 30,000 souls.

Who were these Jews who managed to survive the occupation in Poland? They were those who managed to escape from the ghettos before their liquidation, or from deportations to the death camps. They were also those who managed to flee the different forced labor camps. Archival material collected in the 1990s by Yad Vashem's archives and others around the world tell us that escape from the ghettos and concentration camps was more of a widespread phenomenon than had been previously thought. A cautious estimate – which, as said, is still ungrounded in research – is that some quarter of a million Jews, among them thousands of children, fled from the ghettos and various camps, and then tried to find hiding places or escape routes.

The Jews who escaped may be broken down into different groups:

- Those who managed to obtain Aryan papers, which they used to hide on the Aryan side. These Jews mostly belonged to the narrow stratum of those of economic means and connections to Poles from before the war. To these may be added those Jews who were associated with the Polish intelligentsia. In general, they had a good command of the Polish language as well as strong links with Polish society. Sometimes their luck was enhanced by an outward appearance that did not reveal their Jewish identity.
- Jews that requested the help and protection of Polish acquaintances and neighbors with whom they had lived side by side for hundreds of years before the

war. This phenomenon was widespread, occurring in the big cities, the towns and the villages.

- Jews who fled to the forests, either alone or with family members or friends. In many cases, they endeavored to organize armed units in their hiding places, a necessary condition to survival in the forests where many different partisan units reigned.

Escape from the ghettos and camps were sometimes organized, on occasion spontaneous or accidental. Escapees acted alone, with their families or as part of a mass break out. The following is a description by Marcin Zowczak, resident of the Polish town of Laskarzew in the Lublin district, of the mass but unsuccessful escape attempt of the Jews in his town:

In Laskarzew there was a Jewish ghetto next to where I lived. When the liquidation of the ghetto began, the town of Laskarzew was besieged by Germans from the Selbstschutz and the SS. I saw Germans shooting the Jews who were trying to escape via the fields to the neighboring forest. I also saw how [the Jews] fell, one after the other. After a while, the Germans surrounded the forest where some had managed to flee. The Germans began to bring out the Jews from their hiding places. With my own eyes, I saw the Germans lead a convoy of dozens of Jews to a nearby shooting range. Among them I noticed a little girl holding an old man's hand. Suddenly the girl stumbled, bringing the old man down with her. One of the German escorts immediately began to hit the girl and the old man mercilessly, kicking them and abusing them without end. I saw how he carried this out with great enthusiasm. The Jews who were taken to the shooting range were shot dead [...] the Germans forced the surrounding villagers to bring wagons, load them up with the bodies of the murdered and bring them to a remote place, where they buried them in a mass grave.

(From the Archives of the Regional Commission into Nazi Criminals in Lublin, File D54/79, Vol. 2, p. 43)

From different eyewitness accounts collected after the war we know that only a few individual Jews survived the mass break out in Laskarzew.

Franciszek Kotula, a Polish teacher, described in detail the events that took place in Rzeszow, in Western Galicia. Although Kotula was not without prejudice against the Jews, he noted down facts and described events that were otherwise unknown. His description includes the story of the escape of the local Jewish underground, as well as their organization in the forests into equipped fighting units. The entire group fell during an encounter with the Germans and a group of hostile villagers from the area. These kind of events occurred in dozens of other places.

Under the prevailing conditions, only very few of the escapees in Poland managed to survive. The German forces in charge of the deportations from the ghettos did their utmost to prevent escapes and imprisoned those who tried to flee. Every attempt at

revolt or resistance was cruelly crushed. Where escape occurred, the forests were immediately combed in order to locate the escapees. The Germans usually ordered one of the units of the *Ordnungspolizei* (German Order Police) to stay on permanent alert, and to catch the escaped or hidden Jews the moment their whereabouts were revealed. In every place a network of informers – secret members of the German police – was established, whose job was to inform on any Jewish hiding place or even their suspicion of one. Searches for hidden Jews continued in Poland ceaselessly and meticulously until the last day of the occupation. More than once, the “hunt” for hidden Jews in the forests was joined by racketeers and informers from the local population, as well as members of nationalist Polish and Ukrainian organizations.

Heavy punishment – sometimes even death – was imposed on every Pole, Ukrainian or Byelorussian caught hiding Jews or aiding them in any way. In contrast, foodstuffs and bottles of Vodka – valuable products in those troubled years – were handed out to anyone revealing a Jew or passing on information that would lead to the exposure of Jewish hiding places.

It is therefore understandable why only a few managed to survive. Most of the efforts to grab at straws of rescue failed sooner or later. We will examine one example. From research carried out in Poland over the past decade, it emerged that in the Rzeszow district (in southwestern Poland) in 1945 some 757 Jews had survived. This was, of course, before Polish Jews had begun to return from the Soviet Union or the German concentration camps. This was the number only of Jews who had survived in the area. Using the figures collected by the research, it is possible to estimate the number of those murdered in the Rzeszow district during escape attempts or after fleeing the ghettos – about 50,000 people. Comparing this number to the number of survivors – 757 – proves above all the extremely slim chance of survival after escaping a ghetto or a camp. It is important, however, to point out that there were areas where the option to hide and the chance of survival were better than in the Rzeszow district.

Despite the impossible conditions, thousands of Jews in Poland survived. They may be divided into different groups:

- The few who spent the period of Nazi occupation living under false identities
- A few thousand survivors from partisan units and family camps in the forests
- Jews that managed to receive help from Poles, Ukrainians or Byelorussians

Assistance by Poles to Jews was both organized and individual. Organized help came, in the main, from the “Council to Aid the Jews,” known by its underground name as *Zegota*. The Council was established in Warsaw at the end of 1942. Its operatives were representatives of democratic, socialist and Catholic parties, as well as organizations connected by their underground activities to national representatives of the Polish government-in-exile in London. The Council was also in contact with representatives of the Jewish underground operating on the Aryan side, mostly in Warsaw. *Zegota* also had branches in Krakow and Lvov.

The Council to Aid the Jews provided thousands of forged certificates (Aryan papers), helped many Jews find hiding places, gave financial support to some 4,000 Jews in hiding and found refuges in monasteries for hundreds of Jewish children. Attempts were also made to bring aid to Jewish prisoners in some of the forced labor camps on Polish soil. In the harsh reality reigning in occupied Europe, in particular in Eastern

Europe, this was an outstanding organization in terms of its dedication to the rescue and relief efforts. Yad Vashem awarded some operatives of the Council to Aid the Jews the honor of Righteous Among the Nations.

Thousands of Jews, a large section in the country villages, were fortunate to have been assisted by Poles not associated with any organization. There were Poles who agreed to put their lives and those of their families in danger to give refuge to Jews in flight. They generally hid them in cellars or under cowsheds, sometimes in bunkers near the house or in the neighboring forest. Some agreed to hide Jews in return for payment, and did not throw them out when the money ran out they, but continued to extend assistance. Others agreed to help for nothing in return. Some hid Jews they knew from before the war, often a neighbor or friend from years past. Others hid Jews who happened to pass by and knock on their doors. Rescuers were both educated and simple, members of the intelligentsia and workers, farmers, priests and nuns. All these put their lives at risk in order to save a Jewish soul. In large part, they were “idealists” (as the historian Emmanuel Ringelblum called them in his writings on the relationship between Jews and Poles during the war), who acted out of pure humane motivations. They comprised devout Christians, but also unmistakable liberalists, socialists and communists.

We do not know the number of Jews saved by this virtuous group of people. We must remember that there were times that a Polish family hid an entire Jewish family, or even many families, in its home. And there were many cases too where the survival of a single Jew was made possible by the cooperative efforts of many Polish families.

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