

Aleksander Ładoś – one of the greatest “Holocaust rescuers” in history

We are talking to Jakub Kumoch, Polish ambassador in Switzerland, under the editorship of whom “Lista Ładosia” [“The Ładoś List. A list of names of 3,262 holders of Latin American passports issued to persons of Jewish origin during the Holocaust by the Legation of the Republic of Poland in Switzerland in cooperation with Jewish organizations”] has been published by the Pilecki Institute. We are talking about the precursor actions of the Bern group – called the Ładoś Group – which was a deep-cover state operation to save Jews, the price of human life, and the growing anti-Semitic attitudes around the world.

The development of the so-called Ładoś List was proclaimed the greatest Holocaust discovery of recent years. Do you agree with this statement?

It is difficult for me to assess my own research work or my team’s work. I am glad that I co-created the list in cooperation with the Institute of National Remembrance, the Jewish Historical Institute, the Pilecki Institute and the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oświęcim. I just made my contribution. This is just the beginning of work. We haven’t learned the whole truth yet. We are still missing names on the list. We know – this can be seen from the passport serial numbers – that the Ładoś Group produced more documents than the people we currently have on the list. There were probably eight, maybe 10,000, and the list contains 3,262 names, which is less than 40 percent. Only when Jewish families from all over the world start to speak to us – they have actually started doing this – will we be able to complete the numbers. This research will last for years – the Pilecki Institute will probably publish subsequent revisions of the Ładoś List as the work and the search process

progress.

What is the knowledge about the activities of the Bern Group, called the Ładoś Group among European and global Holocaust researchers?

There is a problem here. The knowledge that in Switzerland there were attempts to save people with the help of South American passports is on the outskirts of Holocaust research, but it exists. That is why many people get the impression that a lot has been written about it. This is not exactly the case. First and foremost, so far people have been dealing with how the passports were obtained, how they were delivered and how they were used, but not who produced them and under what circumstances. We dealt with the group of people who produced them. However, we did not deal with the co-workers of the Ładoś Group, and there were hundreds of them. We dealt with who receive them as a result and whether the action was effective. We are trying to balance our conclusions as much as possible.

The fact that it was a productive action is evidenced by how many people could be saved thanks to it...

Yes, but you should not forget that most of the holders of these passports perished. Our research shows that at least 25 – 35% of them survived. In Poland it is less – 15%, maybe 20%, but in the Netherlands the majority of the passports' holders survived.

The percentage of survivors is very large, considering the conditions and the number of people involved in the action. After all, it was very difficult to maintain its secrecy, necessary to save people...

None of the six members of the Ładoś Group said anything about it. I think that

these people, brought up in the traditions of independence, have sworn silence in this matter, following the pattern of former conspiracy. They wrote about it after the war in a very sparing way. Juliusz Kühl did not mention in his memories a word about the fact that he was one of the passports' "counterfeiters". Ładoś did not manage to write anything. Abraham Silberschein wrote the most, but he did speak very cautiously. Even the Abwehr failed to infiltrate the Group's core. Except for the Swiss police, which rightly noticed that the passports were a Polish fake, and in the Paraguay passports there was Konstanty Rokicki's handwriting. But the Swiss documents were kept secret for years. It was a very professionally run underground group that could be recreated only after rudimentary data.

Was there no weak link in such a large group of people involved in the action?

There were weak links, but luckily, they were not identified. To some extent, we use this weakness in our research. For example, too detailed documentation prepared by Silberschein at the time exposing many people or the fact that Rokicki did not make sure to forge some kind of different type of writing gave us research material. As for the group itself, it was not uniform and consisted of different levels of initiation. The political decision-making core was formed by the Legation of the Republic of Poland with the ambassador Aleksander Ładoś and his deputy Stefan Ryniewicz, consul – "counterfeiter" Konstanty Rokicki, and Juliusz Kühl – a Polish Jew who was the main contact point for Jewish organizations and thanks to whom they had confidence in the Legation of the Republic of Poland – and two organizations: one helping religious Jews, Agudat Israel, headed by Chaim Eiss, and the other secular, RELICO, represented by its founder, Abraham Silberschein. Reading the correspondence of the Group's members we can learn that everyone knew who was doing what – Silberschein knew that he could ask Ryniewicz for help in the case of the Consul of Peru, that forms could be taken from Rokicki, while Eiss knew about Rokicki, everyone knew about Kühl and about the fact that Ładoś supports this action and they

could count on his intervention. Everyone outside the group thought their contact was the “rescuer”. Hence, Silberschein’s network was of the opinion that the passports pointed to Silberschein, the Eiss’ network that the passports meant Eiss, and people who knew Kühl thought that they were produced by Kühl. On the other hand, the Swiss authorities knew that the operation in which Jews were the most active had the support of an Allied state, which could make a scandal and although devoid of territory, it counted in international politics. It gave the Jewish organizations, doing a significant part of office work, protection. They refer to it many times in their writings, both Eiss, who called Ładoś Righteous Among the Nations many years before the creation of Yad Vashem, and Silberschein, who wrote that the action had the full support of the Polish legation. Were it not for Ładoś, Silberschein would not have been released from custody in September 1943. Anyway, his behind-the-scenes role can be seen in the unusual dispatch when he asked the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland for... condolences to the widow after the death of an MP from Haiti. I would like to emphasize: an MP of a distant country accredited far away from Poland and having nothing to do with it.

So, a kind of action outside the etiquette...

Yes, Ładoś probably arranged for the MP from Haiti to turn a blind eye when his consuls traded in passports. Otherwise, why should he call him “our true friend”?... Besides, the forged passports were recognised because the Polish state intervened in Latin American capitals. There are traces of this – dispatches, an act of recognition of Paraguay’s passports by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was not an individual, but a state operation.

The Ładoś Group’s e history is unusual and worth making a historical thriller. So far, only Robert Kaczmarek’s “Paszporty Paragwaju” [“Passports to Paraguay”] documentary was made in 2018...

I have said this many times that if anyone would like to make such a film, then – as long as I am an ambassador in Switzerland – I will share the original interiors of the ambassador's residence from the time when it all happened. This is clearly a topic for a movie. This story deserves a decent feature film, all the more since Ładoś is one of the greatest "Holocaust rescuers" in history. You can compare him with the greatest ones – Raoul Wallenberg, Chiune Sugihara, or Carl Lutz. I don't compare numbers here because there were different conditions. Ładoś was the first one to use the scheme to save people by giving them false citizenship en masse. It was later used by Lutz, using Salvadoran papers in Budapest, where the Ładoś scheme, duplicated by others, proved even more effective.

In that case, it would be good to make a feature film about Ładoś before someone makes such a production about Lutz...

Lutz was a great hero, and there is no doubt about it. He used, among others Salvadoran documents created by George Mandel-Mantello. When all consuls trading with Ładoś were deprived of their exequaturs and Chaim Eiss died, he was replaced by Isaac Sternbuch. He was the one who revived the lifeless operation by asking for help from a great hero, a Jewish diplomat from El Salvador. Mantello continued the work of Ładoś. It was 1944 and Polish support was no longer needed, because this time the neutral countries "woke up". These papers proved even more effective in Hungary, where the Holocaust lasted shorter and where foreign representations existed.

The Ładoś List included well-known names of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising fighters – Zivia Lubetkin, Icchak Cukierman, Tosia Altman, Frumka Płotnicka...

...and many other well-known Jewish names from other states. We can find Gisi Fleischmann from Slovakia who tried to save her Jewish countrymen, especially

children, as well as Lelio Valobra and Enrico Luzzato – leaders of the resistance in Italy. There are also three names of the daughters of the founder of the Wiener Holocaust Library, Alfred Wiener – Eva, Mirjam, and Ruth – who survived thanks to Paraguayan passports.

And the people I have mentioned – did Lubetkin and Cukierman survive thanks to the passports?

No. They, as well as many others who survived, did so thanks to a chain of various events. Adam Rotfeld survived as a child in hiding and learned about the passport from me. We do not claim that Ładoś rescued two to three thousand people. He tried to save 10,000, but he had no influence on what happened after the people got the passports. He wanted to cause the production of the documents and their recognition by Latin American countries. Whether the SS officer on the ramp would recognize the passport of its beneficiary and exclude them from the Holocaust, was up to the SS-man. Some people did not know at all that they had been trying to save them, and their passports never reached them. But there are also documented cases of the direct action of the passports, for example exclusion from transport already on the ramp at the Theresienstadt camp.

How did it happen that such a large group of passport beneficiaries came from the Zagłębie region?

There are several hypotheses about why the Jews from Zagłębie had been the main recipients of the passports, and not Warsaw, as historians previously thought. The mass production of Ładoś's passports fell for 1943, not 1942. Up to a certain point in time, it was thought that this form of rescue could only be elitist. It was thought that if there were too many recipients then the Germany would realise it and not only stop the operation, but also murder those who

already had the passports. I suppose that by the end of 1941 the passports that had been issued could be counted in their dozens. Maybe there were hundreds of them. In 1942, there were more passports, but real mass production began in 1943. It seems to me that in Poland the action accelerated after the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto and after information that if anyone wanted to get out of the Będzin ghetto on time, they had to obtain anything, any kind of rescue document. In addition, Silberschein had a very good network in the Będzin-Sosnowiec ghetto. Będzin and Sosnowiec were also territories incorporated into the Reich, in which the post office operated and it was possible to send correspondence in a normal way.

Did people earn money on the passports?

Yes, many people made a fortune on it. This has recently been documented by the Jewish Museum of Switzerland. However, they were not Polish diplomats or their Jewish partners. They were former honorary consuls, members of the legal elite of Bern, Zurich, and Geneva, who multiplied their fortunes. One of Zurich's law firms made this business out of it on an unimaginable scale. Admittedly, it only arranged for a dozen or so documents, but instead targeted rich families of bankers from Germany and the Netherlands, who were ready to pay a fortune, even 100,000, or even one million francs of that time.

How much money would it be today?

These amounts should be converted by multiplying them about ten times. So today it would be one million to ten million euros. I know a family who paid over a million francs for a Ładoś passport to a Swiss middleman. They survived. This does not mean that any of the Polish diplomats was aware that this was happening. Quite the opposite – even the Swiss police wrote that Rokicki did not take money and in 1946 they judged that he was too poor to live in Switzerland.

The lawyer referred to in the Museum, Arthur Wiederkehr, asked friendly Jewish communities to arrange a passport, and they, knowing that they were saving human lives and being totally unaware that they were feathering his nest, handed a thousand or two thousand francs to Juliusz Kühl, who bought the passport with this money. There are Survivors who say that in addition to the fact that the Legation of the Republic of Poland saved their lives, they were robbed by some middleman. Such things also happened in the Netherlands. That is why some families that were saved remember the passport as something paid for and not received. It is not surprising that this happened. In the Będzin ghetto, some people also considered the passports a source of profit. This can be found in the memories, and some of them are terrible. Just as drugs from development assistance or other items received for free are traded on the black market, so it was done with the Ładoś passports.

The more that people were desperate, and they wanted to save themselves at all costs...

Of course. All of us in this situation would do the same thing. Let us also remember that the Ładoś passports were also used by Germans and collaborators, both inside and outside the ghettos, to pull Jews out of hiding. The Polish Hotel case is well known, where the Ładoś passports were probably fewer than it had been previously assumed by historians – some of them did not come from Bern – but a provocation was organized in the Będzin ghetto. It was said that people with passports could leave, and transportation would be organised. People showed up and after this transport the trail went cold. Probably its destination was Auschwitz. Many passports arrived too late. It happened, however, that the nominal passport holder, whose family had already been murdered, tried to save strangers of similar age with the use of the same document. When I hear comments about the alleged “selfishness” of the Jews, it makes my blood boil. These stories contradict it. Jews saved others as any man would have done.

Trying to save strangers is always a very glorious act...

Yes. This was the case with Rabbi Israel Spira, who claimed to be a widower, and we saw in the 1946 papers that his wife had survived. We tried to sort it out. One of our Jewish friends and co-workers tracked down his memories, someone who was listening to the rabbi talk about it. In the book about the Holocaust, in the memory of rabbis there is information that Spira's wife and grandson were dead, so the rabbi chose a woman of an age similar to his wife's who had probably never returned to her previous identity and her trace is lost. We know she is a Survivor, but we don't know who she really was. In 1946, she was probably registered in Belgium and she was still using her new identity.

Where are the surviving passports currently kept?

We saw copies of 216 Paraguayan passports. Some of them are in the Yad Vashem. There is a beautiful collection of a dozen or so passports at the Archiv für Zeitgeschichte in Zurich. There is also Eiss' collection, which we managed to recover for the Auschwitz Museum and, as I understand it, also so that it could be displayed in the Warsaw Ghetto Museum and other Polish museums.

What is the chance for it?

Please talk to Piotr Cywiński, Director of the Auschwitz Museum, who obtained these passports – it his great merit that he made the decision right away. We got them after very long and difficult talks from an Orthodox family that does not talk to every museum. But when its members heard what museum it was about, they instantly agreed.

How long – according to your predictions – will the research on supplementing the Ładoś List last?

There is no time limit because we can never recover all of these names. However, I believe that some of the 5-7 thousand names will be recovered. We count most on the environment of Orthodox Jews. It seems to us that the part about Chaim Eiss is the least documented. Silberschein left a lot of notes, sometimes threatening with exposition. When it comes to Eiss everything is enigmatic...

Anti-Semitic moods are intensifying not only in Europe itself, but all around the world. What does it look like in Switzerland?

Anti-Semitic sentiment is on the rise all across Europe. This always happens in times of uncertainty and a crisis of values. Switzerland is a country with less uncertainty, but I notice allowing making some comments in the press, which the Israeli ambassador has also protested against. It may seem shocking to us that the chairman of Jewish communities explained that Swiss Jews are not more loyal to Israel than to their country. It is like asking a Catholic if he or she is more loyal to the Vatican. Holocaust revisionism is worrying. In the large daily Neue Zürcher Zeitung, an article was published in 2019 that not only Germans are responsible for the Holocaust. It is clear that not every Jew died at the hands of a German, but in Germany the statement that „the Holocaust is not only Germans” would be considered a scandal. The German state initiated and carried out the process of murdering Jews. It also created favourable conditions for collaboration. The Germans took responsibility for that and it would be extremely risky to question it today. Such an article would not have appeared there. It appeared in Switzerland and it was signed by a man who is still holding the post of an active diplomat.

Do I remember well that you wrote a reply to the Neue Zürcher Zeitung on this matter?

Yes, I did because this article stated that without the active help of local people, the ghettoization and construction of extermination camps would not have gone so easily, and that the local population participated in the creation of ghettos and extermination camps. A similar statement by Israeli politician Yair Lapid met with the violent reaction of the Auschwitz Museum in 2019, which stated that it was evoking association with Holocaust revisionism. In my reply, I protested against such statements that had nothing to do with historical facts. I described in it the story of my great grandfather who was evicted from his own house. He had to pack and leave because a ghetto was created in Radom. He had, of course, nothing to say about whether he wanted the ghetto to be there or not. Nobody asked him that.

Do children learn about the Holocaust in Swiss schools?

My fifteen-year-old daughter goes to a Swiss school. I haven't noticed that the Holocaust was given much attention. We talk a lot about it at home, but that's understandable.

But German schools don't talk much about the Holocaust either...

People learn about the Holocaust from movies. This is very bad because they learn about individual cases and get to know their Hollywood versions. In Switzerland, a debate took place in the 1990s about the extent of the Swiss state's responsibility for not letting in people seeking refuge there. It was very heated and ended in trauma. It seems to me that Switzerland is not particularly willing to talk about the Holocaust again. However, we have the support of Swiss Jews and the Israeli Embassy. A brilliant exhibition "Passports, Profiteers, Police. A Swiss War Secret" is open in Basel, at the Jewish Museum until spring. It shows the entire complexity of the situation at the time, the ambiguous role of Switzerland towards the Ładoś Group, both negative, such as the attempt to

stop the action, taking over passports, ambiguous, consisting of observing and not taking action, as well as positive, when hundreds of people supported the Group's actions, undertaking great risk.

What else remains to be examined regarding the Ładoś Group, except for the names of the beneficiaries?

Method of financing, smuggling, the attitudes of individual governments. In the Netherlands in the 1940s, a parliamentary investigation was ongoing into Latin American passports, seen as collaboration with the Third Reich by giving bribes. In Poland, in 1945, the Polish government decided to restore Polish citizenship to all of the passport holders. There remains the issue of using Ładoś passports after the war, Silberschein's mysterious visit to Warsaw in May 1946, who said that he met many people who had been rescued thanks to the passports. I have never come across a Paraguayan passport in Poland. I am also unable to recreate the survival model thanks to the Ładoś passport in occupied Poland. We know more about how it worked in the Netherlands, we know much more about the camps in Westerbork, Tittmoning, Bergen-Belsen, and Vittel – we know what happened there. However, why a woman with three kids staying in hiding at the end of 1943 was still trying to obtain a Honduras passport to Milanówek? I don't understand it. Could she have believed that a paper issued in the name of Jadwiga de Milanowski would save her? Why did the man who got to Auschwitz and got a camp number smuggled a Ładoś passport through the Sauna? What did he want to do with it? Maybe show it if they wanted to execute him? We will not know the answers to these questions. These people are deceased and the living Survivors were small children at the time.

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