

Many second circulation authors called for some difficult topics to be tackled

About taking up the subject of the Holocaust in the underground publications during the years of the Polish People's Republic, how the topic of shmaltsowniks was dealt with in the second circulation, about the contemporary narrative concerning Holocaust, we are talking to Dr Martyna Grądzka-Rejak – Scientific Department Head of the Warsaw Ghetto Museum, and Dr Jan Olszak from the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Their book entitled “Holokaust, pamięć, powielacz. Zagłada Żydów i okupacyjne stosunki polsko-żydowskie w publikacjach drugiego obiegu w PRL” (“The Holocaust, the memory, the repeater. Jewish destruction and Polish-Jewish relation during military occupation as presented in the second circulation publications in the Polish People's Republic”) was published by WIEŹ

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Why did the underground authors during the years of the Polish People's Republic decide to deal with the issue of the Holocaust and the attitude of Polish people towards it?

Martyna Grądzka-Rejak: *In the second circulation, which included letters and printed materials issued by the circles connected with the opposition and the structures of the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union “Solidarity” without censorship, primarily the texts referring to contemporary times were published. Many publications addressed various historical issues. The effort was made to speak about the topics that were not discussed in the official, censored publications. They were either described thoroughly or presented in the chosen aspects only. Therefore, the issues of the Holocaust and Polish-Jewish relation during the military occupation were among the very many different topics discussed in the underground publications. Our*

book is focused on the publications and articles about those issues, therefore, it may lead the reader to the wrong conclusion that it was one of the predominant topics discussed in the second circulation. Regarding underground press as a whole, the Jewish themes were much rarer than the issue of the Katyn massacre or latter repression of the Soviet Union towards Poles.

Jan Olszek: *One of the aspects of the opposition activity was to fill the “white spots” in contemporary history. In some publications, there was a strong trend of recalling not only the glorious motifs in the Polish history but also Polish guilt towards the representatives of other nations, not only Jews but also Ukrainians. The latter aspect was particularly strongly addressed by the Lublin magazine “Spotkania” [“The Meetings”].*

How did the underground publications describe the Shoah? How did the authors’ attitudes to that subject differ from those of the authors of official, censored texts?

Martyna Grądzka-Rejak: *The second circulation discussed many aspects of that subject. The course of the Shoah, the perpetrators, the victims – all those issues were discussed. Polish-Jewish relations were also addressed, including their difficult moments. The latter, in particular, were not dealt with in the censored publications. They focused, among other things, on helping Jews, marginalising, for example, the problem of shmaltsovníks or confiscation of Jewish property. Historiography as well as education in the Polish People’s Republic presented selected topics, often depending on the current political context.*

Jan Olszek: *Many authors of uncensored publications did not run away from those difficult topics; on the contrary, they even called for them to be tackled, to take some responsibility for those attitudes and behaviours. Until the time when the article by Jan Błoński “Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto” [“Poor Polish people are looking at the ghetto”] was “officially” published in “Tygodnik Powszechny” in 1987, such perspective in the official publications was almost completely absent. Certainly, not all of the authors shared this point of view. However, it is worth pointing out that also in the second circulation, like in the official publications, the negative attitudes of Poles towards Jews were often identified with people from the margins of society.*

Did all the authors of the opposition publications speak with one voice about the Holocaust? Were there different attitudes in those circles?

Martyna Grądzka-Rejak: *Not all the second circulation authors spoke, as you call it, “with one voice”. We should bear in mind that although all writers had roots in the political opposition community, they still represented varied groups and viewpoints. Some of them addressed that subject by referring the positive aspects of Polish-Jewish relations, writing very little about the phenomenon of shmaltsowniks. Others wrote about the robbery of the property of deported Jews and the denunciation of those who were hiding on the Aryan side. There were still others who did not refer to those accounts at all; they wrote about the Shoah in general, showing the behaviour of the perpetrators as well as the attitudes of Jews sentenced to death. The memoirs of the Survivors, often critical of the Jewish ‘elite’ – members of the Judenrat or Jewish police, were also published in the second circulation. In the memoirs there were also numerous descriptions of the blackmails of Poles against the Jews in hiding. Therefore, the discussed subjects were very diverse, and the attitudes of individual authors also varied.*

Jan Olaszek: *There were some writers, like Jan Józef Lipski, who strongly emphasised that the Polish society was guilty of indifference to the fate of the Jews during the war. Much was written about the fact that the Holocaust did not mark the end of Polish anti-Semitism. Particularly worth mentioning is the text published as a separate booklet. It was an essay by Roman Zimand “Piołun i popiół (Czy Polacy i Żydzi wzajem się nienawidzą?)” [“Piołun i popiół (Do Poles and Jews hate each other?)”], which was an attempt to provide a comprehensive view of Polish-Jewish relations as seen by a Polish Jew.*

Which were the most important underground publications about the Holocaust, in your opinion?

Martyna Grądzka-Rejak: *We can list several such items. In our book, we specified several categories of works that were issued in the Polish People Republic without censorship. Therefore, on the one hand, we deal with reprints of important works, starting from classical ones – like, for instance, the publication by Hanna Arendt about the roots of totalitarianism,*

going through many memories by the Survivors (Marek Edelman, Noemi Szac-Wajnkranc, Adina Blady-Szwajger), and ending with some incredibly interesting articles. With regard to the little-studied issue of religion in the years after the Holocaust, there was an interesting work by Barbara Engelking dedicated to this aspect.

Jan Olszek: *The whole series of articles referring to the discussion around the film “Shoah” by Claude Lanzmann was important. The discussion around the film was conducted in the official, Catholic, and the underground press. The reactions of the underground press authors to the film “Shoah” were mixed, although predominately there were voices against the negative campaign of the officials towards the director of the film and his work. It did not mean that there were no critical opinions about some elements shown in the film, of course. The discussion conducted in the underground press after the publication of the exile reprint of “Aneks” magazine, dedicated to Jewish themes, was also interesting.*

How did the underground publications on Holocaust influence the public opinion?

Jan Olszek: *The independent publication movement not only reached intellectual elites from the largest cities, but it also functioned in smaller locations, among varied social groups. However, there were mainly the larger towns which set the tone of the underground press; the second circulation did not reach the smaller ones and villages, or it did very little. From the perspective of the knowledge we have today, we are not in a position to clearly state how the articles or concise works published there influenced public opinion. For sure, the content of those publications differed from that of the official ones. However, it is difficult to assume how large was their impact on changing the perception of the issue among the readers of the underground press.*

In 1987, the underground “Fighting Solidarity” published “Brief History of the Bersohn and Bauman Hospital (1939-1953)” by Adina Blady-Szwajger. It was very interesting not only on the account of her priceless historical testimony but also because it is the future seat of the Warsaw Ghetto Museum. What was the response like?

Martyna Grądzka-Rejak: *That publication was published in a small number of copies. We also did not find any reviews or references to this work in other articles. Therefore, it is difficult to assume how it was received. This does not apply to the reception of the publication only; on more than one occasion, we were not able to determine the reception of books or articles published in the second circulation.*

What was the attitude towards the problem of shmaltsowniks and blackmailers in the second circulation publications?

Martyna Grądzka-Rejak: *First of all, the second circulation publications discussed that issue. As opposed to the official publications, the authors of the articles and books did not run from dealing with that problem. The scale of the phenomenon was not studied – most often it was classified as marginal, although some publishers viewed it differently. There is especially one work etched on my memory – “The Umschlagplatz” by Jarosław M. Rynkiewicz . In addition to searching for the square from the title, discovering its dark history and fighting for its commemoration, the author appealed for taking responsibility for denunciations, blackmails and robbing of the Jewish property. There are many plots, conversations, and description appearing on the pages of his book. He also reflected upon the fact of such situations taking place and analysed whether the acts described resulted from the general atmosphere of social consent or whether they were influenced by other factors.*

Jan Olaszek: *The voice of Wiktor Kulerski is probably most critical towards the attitudes of Poles. He was very clear about the anti-Semitism among Poles, which Adam Michnik argued with by emphasising that responsibility for the anti-Semitism lies with those presenting anti-Semitic attitudes, and not with the whole nation. Also, Jan Tomasz Gross in the article titled “Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej..., ale go nie lubię” [“This one comes from the motherland of mine... but I don’t like him”] wrote that, in general, Poles did not help the Jews during the war, but it was not due to their fear of German repressions but because of their anti-Semitism. Some of the underground publishers did not agree with Gross, however, the aforementioned Wiktor Kulerski, for example, agreed with that statement.*

How were the Polish-Jewish relations during occupation used by the authorities of the People's Republic of Poland for current political needs, and how were the same Polish-Jewish relations described over the last five years? What is the contemporary narrative towards Shoah like?

Martyna Grądzka-Rejak: *Polish-Jewish relations during the occupation are among the most important themes of contemporary debate concerning the Second World War and the Holocaust. They have also been widely discussed in the second circulation publications, which we discuss in detail in subsequent chapters of our book. Many aspects of that problem, e.g. the scale of the shmaltsownik phenomenon, or the participation of military forces, like the so-called Blue Police, in pursuing the Jews in hiding, are still not thoroughly studied and described. After World War II, the issues of the Shoah and the Polish-Jewish relations during military occupation became the topics used by the authorities of the Polish People's Republic depending on the needs of current politics and the ideological direction set by successive party leaders.*

Jan Olaszek: *As it was mentioned before, in the years of the Polish People's Republic, chosen themes of the issue of Holocaust and Polish-Jewish relations during the military occupation were discussed. For example, there were some reports of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and other forms of resistance, of the aid given to Jews by Poles, and also of Auschwitz, then known as Oświęcim. In the period of particular interest to us, I mean the late 1970s and the 1980s, the need emerged to examine various "white spots" in the contemporary Polish history, including the history of the Jewish community, as well as the difficult issue of Polish-Jewish relations. When referring to those two decades, researcher Michael C. Steinlauf uses the adequate term "reconstructed memory". In the 1980s, the previous studies on the phenomenon of organised aid were deepened, with the main focus on the the "Żegota" Council for Aid to Jews, the activities of the Polish Underground State, the cooperation between the Jewish Combat Organisation and the Polish underground, as well as the attitudes of priests towards Jews during the war. In the 1980s, many diaries and memoirs from the occupation times were published as well, with the diary by Adam Czerniakow among them. A special place among the works published at that time is occupied by the books by Emanuel Ringelblum. One of them is devoted to the events in the Warsaw Ghetto, and the other to Polish-Jewish relations.*

Martyna Grądzka-Rejak: *In recent years, primarily after the year 2000, the scientific studies on the Holocaust and Polish-Jewish relations during the military occupation have developed a lot. However, sharp judgements, opinions or the most controversial, questionable fragments of those studies are most often received by the general public. In recent years, political discussions and differences have been added to that. There is a certain dualism in approach: some are pursuing the memory of the Righteous, others focus primarily on the negative attitudes of Poles towards Jews during the war. There is also a problem with the assessment of witnesses: whether they behaved passively, like onlookers, or whether they were more or less involved on either side. What makes the discussion even more complicated is the fact that often too broadly formulated conclusions are drawn from the fragmentary analysis. The duality of the attitudes makes it more difficult to conduct a constructive debate.*

Jan Olszek: *When we move away from strictly scientific texts and look at the current historical policy, it is clear that it is characterised by the exposure of the Righteous and marginalisation of the negative attitudes of Poles towards Jews, which is similar to the policy of the Polish People's Republic authorities.*

Interview conducted by: Anna Kilian

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