

Not All Roads Led to Hotel Polski

On 18 May 1943, a transport of nearly seventy Jews to a transit camp in Vittel, France, set off. We would like to invite you to read the column by Dr Paweł Wieczorek about Hotel Polski (lit. Polish Hotel) – an internment centre for Jews on the “Aryan” side, which turned out to be the Gestapo trap.

Rumours of “foreign papers” had been disseminated among Warsaw Jews long before the final liquidation of the “closed quarter” in the first half of 1943: “It was known that the holders of such documents had been separated from the rest of Jews and taken to Pawiak for safety” before the announcement of the memorable »deportation« on 22 July 1942. At the turn of December 1942 and January 1943, they were transported to Vittel. Few ghetto Jews lived to see the arrival of the documents necessary for their survival. Most of them fell victim to the murders in Treblinka. Documents proving that they had existed remained – like “dead souls”. [19;763-764. Also: 23] “Because those people had been gone” commented the case Franciszka Grunberg, “others were taken in their place.” [15;269. Also: 5;8-9]

Since there were “papers”, it was appropriate to use them. It was all like a game. Perhaps initiated by Jewish collaborators, certainly with the knowledge and control of the Gestapo and probably with considerable support from Poles. Everyone had their share. They could earn considerable amount of money illegally, and the same time fully legally carry out the task imposed from the top down: to make Warsaw become Judenfrei. In the whole system, only the Jewish population was objectified...

The case of “papers” started in mid-April. Benjamin Horowitz recalled how, on the eve of the outbreak of the uprising, “Jews who obtained foreign passports were released to Hotel Polski.” [13;218. Also: 6; 23] Their transport (of nearly seventy Jews) to Vittel started on 18 May 1943. In circumstances where hundreds of people had been losing their lives in the burning ghetto day after day, such an event had to make the information about survival opportunities spread quickly throughout Warsaw. The Royal Hotel at 31, Chmielna Street was reported first. Those who could

afford “émigré documents” were staying there. However, it soon became apparent how many were willing to obtain such “papers”. The current place of “internment” was changed into a much larger “Hotel Polski” at 29, Długa Street.

The first decade of July was coming to an end, when in the early afternoon a young boy uttered the words: “I saw a thousand happy Jews!” He said that shortly after he met his peer at the front wall of Hotel Polski. For a brief moment, he probably felt like a witness to a miracle – the existence of a world different from the one he had known so far. You did not need to hide your identity there. There was no risk of death for not wearing a band with the Star of David. There was no need to cover your face or look away. Maybe that is why he emphasized in a voice typical of an overexcited child: “They are going abroad, maybe even to America? We can still leave, too!” [15;268-269]

This boy’s name was Ryszard. He left the ghetto in January 1943. In March, his father, Stefan, reached him. In April, just before the outbreak of the uprising, his mother, Franciszka, joined them. They found shelter with Poles. They were holding on in another world: with the memory of Grossaktion, the vestigial ghetto and the uprising. With the experience “acquired” as a result of the attack of Polish blackmailers and with the awareness of the harassment going on for weeks on all who found shelter on the “Aryan” side of Warsaw: “We were living in constant fear.” Was it awareness of the occurring threats, perhaps, that caused the words of the son returning to the hideout were treated first with disbelief? Soon afterwards, however, going to Hotel Polski was being seriously considered. After all, “a thousand happy Jews” were there...

The “case” started – a Pole came to “help”. He handled formalities (acquisition of documents necessary for “emigration”) and confirmed that they had made the right decision. A wife of a Jewish Gestapo collaborator was to be the guarantor of security. She was waiting to leave for Vittel. So the contact man explained: “If he [Adam Żurawin – author’s note] had a trace of suspicion that it is a dirty business, he wouldn’t send his wife.” [15; 271] All they needed was money. The Grunbergs gave away all their property, and in return they received documents with the name of a Jewish lawyer well-known in the interwar period: “We were glad to see that name. We knew that the person had been in America for a long time, so we were sure that a friend of

his had sent him these papers for the trip. This name gave us confidence that everything could still be true, the whole trip, a hundred percent sure, and our moods improved." [15;272]

The Grunbergs were on the right track, first to Hotel Polski and then to South America. Until the time of the departure came. A Polish contact man arrived and declared: "The departure time is tomorrow. You should take a cab and go to the Gestapo on Szucha Street. There is a list of those who are leaving." Such commands caused a shock. Franciszka described her first feelings: "We looked at one another as those doomed to death, who are already standing under the gallows and see the noose intended for them." You could have doubts as a result: "It's so strange to go to the Gestapo at your own request. What a picture. Three Jews with luggage arrive at the Gestapo and report: »Here we are, here we have come«. Isn't that grotesque?" [15;274]

The plans were not fulfilled. A contact man met with the Grunberg family the day after the last group of several hundred registered "foreigners" and "no papers" Jews had been directed to Pawiak (13 July), and the day before the mass murder was committed on them (15 July). He took the documents from them but did not return the money. He explained that the current situation did not allow him to do that: there was a danger of giving the members of the network away – people like him, willing to help Jews; there was involvement of German services; and there were obligations towards other contact people. He promised that as soon as the situation improved, he would contact them. However, it turned out to be the last meeting. Is that, perhaps, why the Grunbergs survived? The events they participated in were happening over a period of less than 12 – 13 weeks. They reached the "Aryan" part of Warsaw when the uprising was going on in the ghetto. Simultaneously, a very different, parallel world was being created. Young Richard Grunberg came into contact with it. Many of those fighting and those who managed to escape from the burning ghetto knew that the world existed. It attracted everyone..

At the turn of June and July 1943, the last insurgents were leaving the ghetto ruins through the sewers. It was owing to the sacrifice of people like Hersz (?) Szladkowski, who not only managed to escape from the train to Majdanek, but also returned to Warsaw to help his brothers. He led them through the sewers to the "Aryan" side several times. One of these was in the first days of July. The Jews rescued then were to reach Hotel Polski. However, they abandoned that thought.

Whether they were driven by fears – justified by the experience of the ghetto and distrust of the occupier, or by the desire to continue fighting – is not known. They found shelter among Polish friends. [16; 140-141] The one who had saved them, Hersz (?) Szladkowski, died in Auschwitz in November. Some of those who had been freed fell victims to blackmailers. Others, a little later, died in the Warsaw Uprising. Everyone lost their lives. However, in a different way...

Yosef Klugerman appeared in Hotel Polski at the end of June. He had bought passports to one of the South American countries for himself and his loved ones. "See you in Vittel!", he said to a friend on the eve of his trip to the "transit camp" in occupied France. Whether he believed that everything would end happily – as the organisers of the "emigration" promised – is not known. That family disappeared without a trace, except that not in Vittel, but in Auschwitz. The friend he was saying goodbye to was David Goetz. He had been staying for several hours with his young daughter at 29, Długa Street. He was waiting for his wife, Sophia, who had been hiding in Milanówek for nearly a year. She had arrived two days before the transport. However, this time the road of "emigrants" led to Bergen – Belsen near Hanover. [18; 172-185. Also: 14; 69-71, 101-102] That family survived both the camp and the war. Was it, perhaps, because they were registered at Hotel Polski on the cheapest emigration list to Palestine? They eventually arrived there but only after the war.

A similar road had to be travelled by Helena Rufeisen – Schupper, a Jewish Combat Organisation liaison officer who had left the ghetto on the orders of Mordechaj Anielewicz. She also got to Hotel Polski. [17; 127-128] Partly thanks to the support of the Jewish underground, and perhaps also due to the activities of Jewish collaborators. For the latter, the help provided to several people from the Jewish Combat Organisation could have been a form of "insurance", in an indefinite, post-war future, against accusations of cooperation with the Gestapo. Symcha and Nadzia Motyl also got a certificate for Palestine. [24] They all were called fourth-class passengers, because Palestinian "emigration papers" were considered the least valuable.

Szepsel Rotholc, the Polish boxing champion in the interwar period, spent the occupation first in the ghetto as an officer of the Jewish Order Service, and during Grossaktion, he fled to the "Aryan" side. He also found shelter in Hotel Polski for a short period of time. He bought the

necessary documents, although he did not trust in ensuring of the “»going-abroad« impresario”, a collaborator Leon “Lolek” Skossowski. Doubtlessly this is why he hid in the hotel attic together with several people, when preparations for the last, third transport were underway: “We had been laying for about four hours. Various shouts could be heard below us, cries of people being loaded on cars. [Then] there was silence telling us that they must have already left.” [7; 14-15] Not only did he survive the Hotel Polski affair, but also the Warsaw Uprising and the war...

Jerzy Himmelblau was a pedlar, sometimes a petty thief. His non-Jewish appearance had been saving him. When, however, there was a shortage of livelihood on the “Aryan” side, led by rumours of a chance of survival, he and his family went to Hotel Polski: “We had no papers. We squatted there.” On 13 July, the Germans threw him and his brother out of the hotel, believing that they were Polish. A moment later, he withstood the view of the closest ones taken to Pawiak. His younger brother did not: “He cried and jumped in front of the car. The chauffeur stopped, his brother jumped up the stairs, the gendarme grabbed him and threw him on the car.” [3; 21-22] Himmelblau’s relatives died, he survived...

Adina Blady-Szwajger did not succumb to assurances that the centre at 29, Długa Street in Warsaw in 1943 was the only safe place to survive. But she escorted her husband Stefan there. The view was amazing: “Women had put on their best clothes, there was a café there, you could drink coffee. Everyone was drinking it.” Years later, she recalled: “It was a foretaste of freedom.” It will remain a mystery whether that day she succumbed to his will or rather he succumbed to hopes. Maybe he could not stand his existence in hiding and constant fear of becoming a victim of blackmailers? Perhaps he did everything consciously: maybe he wanted to end his life not like a haggard animal, but like a man who tastes it, even if for a moment? Maybe he acted instinctively? They spent their last moments in the hotel together. When the moment of the departure came, he said: “I will not say goodbye to you, so as not to bring bad luck to our meeting after the war.” [22;220-222] Adina Blady-Szwajger survived. Her husband died... Did he have to? Marek Edelman spoke of such people: “They went, although probably only few believed in a miracle at Hotel Polski.” And he used another, a very similar example: “One of our boys also went, though we begged him: don’t go for they will kill you. He had been hiding in a factory that accidentally burnt. Then he broke down and couldn’t cope mentally.” [21; 196-197] The boy died...

Was it a conscious decision?

Years after the Holocaust, those who witnessed the events related to Hotel Polski provided very strict assessments of those who had got there. Jarosław Litwinowicz (during the war he had helped many Jewish friends) emphasized in his testimony: "The whole story of release of the Jews with a foreign citizenship from the ghetto was invented by Germans to obtain their hidden dollars and jewellery as a form of a release fee." [9; 6] Dwojra Szczucińska had the same critical approach to the Hotel Polski affair: "Germans, settling with the survivors, sold citizenships and in this way picked the naive." [1; 4] Are such assessments justified if they relate to people's feelings and behaviour at the time when they were objectified, and their lives treated as a coincidence and accident?

In mid-July 1943 Hotel Polski ceased to be a place of internment for Jews. Henryk Rudnicki wrote about it in his diary in the following way: "The end of that business went unnoticed. Human minds were occupied with propaganda about Katyń, the Allied landings in Sicily, or Soviet-German battles near Kharkov. If they talked about the Hotel, they only regretted the stupidity and naivety of the Jews. Nobody considered the reasons of this »naivety«." [11; 49] He spared no words – he was harsh in assessing Jews. Perhaps by accident he did not mention that on 13 July 1943 he had been in the Hotel. Poles saved him...

Why, over a period of a dozen weeks or so, so many people who "had all the means to survive: appearance, material status and the so-called standing i.e. work at various institutions /railway, post, fire service/ and had the opportunity to survive the period of German barbarism", were tempted and went to Hotel Polski? [1; 4] Did they have to? Since they quickly began to receive tragic information, when they had already been there, indicating that "the emigration" was a fiction: "A card from one lady in Hanover came to her friends, written in an encoded way, exposing the whole scale of the scandal. Namely, it had an agreed phrase »we are doing very well«, meaning the destruction of the group." [1; 4] And yet they continued to stay there... Did they have more confidence in Germans, who had murdered hundreds of thousands of Jews in the previous twelve months, and treat Poles, of whom many had helped them, with greater fear?

It is estimated that in mid-1943 in the “Aryan” part of Warsaw, there were about 25 – 30 thousand of Jews. Within a few weeks – from April to July of that year – approx. 10 percent of them decided to reveal their presence in the “secret city”. They registered with Hotel Polski. It quickly turned out, contrary to official assurances and unofficial guarantees (supported by large sums of money) that all of the first two groups of “emigrants” first went to the so-called transition camps (Vittel, Bergen – Belsen), and then to their final destination, the Auschwitz – Birkenau concentration camp, which would become their last stage of life. At the turn of 1943 – 1944, over two thousand prisoners were killed there.

The tragedy of the last, third group of “emigrants” occurred as the first, in mid-July. Let the last Polish witnesses tell about it: “Well-dressed men and women, with elegant luggage. Everything prepared for a luxurious trip to distant countries – Rudolf Sawicki wrote – Indeed, it was a far away country to which the Germans deported »Americans«. It was Pawiak”. [4;3-4. Also: 8; 22-23] Almost all were shot. Roman Kuciński saw the victims just before the execution. He was shocked: “Everyone was calm and dignified. I did not hear any screams of despair, cries for mercy or rescue.” [10; 2-4] Groups of several people were led near Pawiak, to 27, Dzielna Street. First they were ordered to undress, and then they were shot. “After the execution, on the same day, the victims were burnt on the spot. – Stanisław Wróblewski reported – Layers of people and boards were being alternately arranged, petrol was poured and set on fire.” [2;2]

Less than three hundred people survived the Hotel Polski affair. The answer to the question: was that many or few, will probably remain open forever...

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Also: <http://getto.pl/>

Publication date: 2020-05-26

Print date: 2021-09-13 08:23

Source: <http://1943.pl/en/artykul/not-all-roads-led-to-hotel-polski/>