

# Memory...

**On the occasion of the Polish National Day of Remembrance of Poles Rescuing Jews under German Occupation, we invite you to read an article by Dr. Paweł Wiczorek.**

From the perspective of survivors – although they were members of a nation doomed to death – the assessment of reality was quite unequivocal: “We were being passed from hands to hands, defenceless, hounded, ragged and hungry, but hoping that we will always find friends, Poles who won't hesitate to help in this tragedy, the worst time of contempt, risking their own lives and the lives of their families”.

This is a fragment of a statement by one of the lucky ones. He survived... Little over two decades passed. He took part in a survey on helping the Jews during the occupation. He told his story and the story of those who survived.

The war was the hardest lesson for humanity. There was not a lot of room for fundamental norms: compassion for the victims, helping people in need, and respect for the dignity of others – regardless of their background, nationality or faith. All principles of social interaction deteriorated. The hierarchy of values was completely lost and the order of the “old world” was annihilated. The ever-present sense of fear that accompanied Jews and Poles determined all behaviours and attitudes. People had to face choices between tragic alternatives, each carrying a decision that exceeded the scope of feeling and imagination. Continuous disintegration and atomisation of the society led to a breakdown of pre-war bonds. All activities of the pauperised, poor and humiliated population focused on survival, which resulted in the numbing of sensitivity to the external. The tragedy was made worse was by this exact indifference to the others' suffering. In a situation of constant, everyday danger, the vast majority of people were unable to act for the sake of an individual, not to mention the collective which – according to the fascist ideology – was to be excluded and exterminated. The Holocaust revealed the true face of humanity.

If we were to assess the courage of some and the indifference of others with the same measure,

who would be the first in line? The minority that was ready to take the risk and help or the silent majority, the passive spectators? The stories about people who lent a helping hand, saving the Jews from the omnipresent death in a time of fear and terror emanate endless gratitude and human warmth. The same that they received at a time when life was devalued and death became commonplace. In these memories, the reader will find no heroism, pathos or ethos. Stripped of their literary garment, without any unnecessary embellishments, they still present live images of distant and yet not so distant past, which became permanently and deeply embedded in our memory. Thus perceived reality had a fixed, permanent and immutable value.

From the perspective of those who helped – although they came from various social groups and had different world views – the reality was assessed quite unequivocally. Even if they justified the meaning of their actions differently. Marcel Godlewski's parish was located within the borders of the Warsaw Ghetto. This prelate – a National Democrat in the interwar period – was described by Ludwik Hirszfeld in the following way: „When fate put utmost destitution in his path, he renounced his attitude and devoted all the fervour of his priestly heart to the Jews„. Many clergyman and nuns – in keeping with the Christian spirit – behaved in the same way. A Jewish woman, Romana Dalborowa, talked with the nationalist in 1942. Asked why he is helping the Jews, he answered: „I believe that following the occupant's orders is villainy. Our obligation is to oppose the Germans at each step. The Germans want to eradicate them [the Jews], so we must protect them!„. We do not know whether Zofia Dębicka acted out of love or compassion. One thing is for sure, her courage did not fail her when she pulled out a stranger girl from a transport to Treblinka. To the Germans, she said that the girl was her daughter. Friendship dictated Maria Siuda to help Krystyna Modrzejewska: „Maria told me that if there was magic in the world, she would wish to turn me into a May beetle, put me in a matchbox so that no one could see me. 'I cannot imagine that one day someone could come, take you and simply kill you,' she said and cried„.

Despite the differences – first, in their actions and later, in their justifications – all people who saved the Jews had one common denominator – their humanity. They were aware that in the time of the Holocaust everything could be considered relative. Except for one thing: the punishment for helping the Jews was irrevocable and the most severe – death. „To save one

man, you needed the cooperation of several, and sometimes several dozen people,” wrote Władysław Bartoszewski. „Only when you multiply the number of Jews saved in Poland by a dozen,” he explained, “will you realise that at least several hundred thousand Poles participated in the rescue action, to a greater or a lesser extent.” As in the case of Hanna Krall – one of the survivors. This is how she described it in *Polityka* weekly: „All those who rescued me put themselves and their families in mortal danger. In the game of saving my life – the stakes were the lives of 45 people,,

From the perspective of the victim nations – Jews and Poles – the past tense situates itself on different levels. The characteristic trait in the actions of the Survivors were attempts to find their lost identity. Although the search extended – in their minds – the time of the Holocaust, they were, at the same time, symbolic attempts to overcome trauma. Because for many, maybe for all, the most important historical reference that shaped consciousness – both individual and collective – was memory. It was memory that started to serve as a bridge connecting survivors to those who have wished to learn the truth about the distant, and yet not so distant past – their own, their relatives’ and strangers’, all people belonging to the Jewish nation.

There is also a different memory and narration about the Holocaust among non-Jewish people. The war strengthened Polish national identity along with social solidarity, however, in many cases, this was limited to one’s own harm, and not necessarily that of others. In this context, it is also worth noting the far-reaching, negative consequences which resulted from such a „national unity” were delusions and phobias about Jews. For many Poles in that period, they personified real danger and were treated as carriers of death...

The proximity of the Holocaust left deep marks in the consciousness of Jews and Poles. Have the paths of the two nations parted for good? Probably not. The more important it is to “shield the flame”, borrowing the title of Hanna Krall’s book, of those who survived and the Poles who helped them. To listen to their voices to better understand the past.

However, certain questions remain open, such as whether the Act on the Polish National Day of Remembrance of Poles Rescuing Jews under German Occupation adopted in March 2018 is a

next, important step in filling a recess of memory that – for the majority of the society – so far has had an „anniversary” character? Won't the Act become a convenient tool for manipulating history and collective emotions by some of the political and religious institutions, social organisations and foundations? Will it inspire academic circles to conduct further research? Will it spark the society's curiosity about its not so distant past, with both its dark and bright moments? Will it help to place people that have so far remained anonymous in the pantheon of national heroes? Certainly, considering that some – unknown Polish heroes – are finally coming out of the shadow and regaining their identity thanks to the research conducted in the recent years. A decade after the war, in an article entitled „Those who rescued” published in 1955 in Israel, a Jewish Zionist Adolf Berman, put it in the following way: „The froth and dirt on the surface of a raging river is easier to see than a deep, pure, underground current. But the current did exist”.

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