"Like Trees Marked for Cutting": The Jewish Struggle for Survival in Nazi-Occupied Provincial Poland

Jan Grabowski and Barbara Engelking, eds., *Dalej jest Noc: Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski*. 2 vols., Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2018, 1,700 pp.

Reviewed by
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The historiography of the Holocaust in Poland has been a fascinating barometer of how Poles have struggled to understand and remember one of the most difficult chapters in their complicated history: the murder by the Germans of more than three million Polish Jews during World War II, even as they simultaneously subjected the Poles to a brutal occupation. A key question was how Poles, themselves exposed to German terror, reacted to the mass killing of their Jewish neighbors as onlookers, as accomplices, as rescuers, as betrayers, or as looters of Jewish property. That rescuers could turn into killers and vice versa; that heroic Polish resistance fighters might at the same time murder Jews hiding in forests; that convinced anti-Semites like the devoutly Catholic author Zofia Kossak-Szczucka might create an organization, Żegota, to help Jews: all this challenges historians of wartime Polish-Jewish relations in Poland to be at the top of their game.

Hundreds of articles and books have appeared on this subject. However, few are as important, as methodologically innovative, or as emotionally compelling as this massive two-volume, 1,700-page study, *Dalej jest Noc: Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski*, edited by Jan Grabowski and Barbara Engelking and published by the Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów (The Polish Center

for Holocaust Research) in 2018. It stands as a stark challenge to a nation struggling to better understand its past.

The Polish Center for Holocaust Research was founded in 2005. Its journal, *Zagłada Żydów*, ranks as one of the world's most important organs of Holocaust scholarship.

The Center and its scholars have been favorite targets of the present government and the nationalist press. This book, as well as many others published by the Center, openly challenges key pillars of cherished historical narratives. It comes as no surprise, then, that *Zagłada Żydów* has lost its government subsidy and that the mandate of the Auschwitz Advisory Council, which had been headed by co-editor, Barbara Engelking, was not continued by the government. The Institute of National Memory (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej; IPN), which has become increasingly politicized in recent years, has also joined the campaign to discredit the work of the Center and this two-volume publication in particular.[1] Despite all this criticism, however, these hefty tomes have become unexpected best sellers on the Polish book market.

Few other nations take their history more seriously than Poles, as decades of trauma and upheaval encouraged the emergence of a certain historical narrative that became a linchpin of national identity. In this widely accepted reading of Poland's past, Poles appeared as victims and hardly ever as victimizers. They had endured the Russian suppression of the nineteenth-century uprisings; Prussian and Russian campaigns to undermine their culture; the Soviet murder of Polish officers at Katyn and the exile of hundreds of thousands of Poles to Siberia; the Nazi atrocities that claimed the lives of even more Poles; and the perceived betrayal of the Polish people at Yalta. In return they showed defiance and heroism: in the unending struggle to preserve national identity

1 See, for example, the 2019 IPN publication by Tomasz Domański, *Korekta Obrazu: Refleksje źródłoznawcze wokół książki Dalej jest noc. Losy Zydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski* (Warsaw: IPN, 2019). This seventy-two-page broadside has been effectively rebutted by Grabowski and Engelking chapter by chapter. One of Domański's major charges was that the authors of *Dalej jest Noc* attributed much more agency to the Polish blue police and to the volunteer firemen than they actually had, since, he argued, they were firmly under the thumb of the German occupiers. However, every chapter in *Dalej jest Noc* makes an overwhelming case that, notwithstanding German terror, these bodies had a great deal of power, especially during the "third phase" of the Holocaust, when there were fewer Germans on the ground, and that firemen and policemen showed a great deal of alacrity in the hunting down, denunciation, and the killing of Jews.

during the partitions; in the heroic battles of 1939; in the sterling record of Polish pilots in the battle of Britain; in the sheer courage of the Polish Second Corps at Monte Cassino; in the gallant and doomed Warsaw Uprising of 1944, in which more than 200,000 Poles perished; in the dogged defiance of four decades of Communist rule; in the clarion call to conscience of Pope John Paul II; and in the indisputable role of Solidarity in accelerating the collapse of the Soviet bloc.

And as for the Jews? The Holocaust? Here too, the accepted narrative offered comfort and reassurance. Poland ended up with millions of Jews because of its historic traditions of liberalism and tolerance. Jewish life flourished. Unfortunately Jews did not always show Poles proper gratitude, and all too often they opportunistically sided with Poland's enemies. During the Holocaust there was little that Poles, facing German terror, could have done to help them. Yet help they did, despite massive Jewish collaboration with the Soviets, despite Jewish passivity and resignation. Poles risked the death penalty to shelter Jews, and the Germans executed at least 750 Poles for doing so. It was only natural that Poland has more Righteous Among the Nations — almost 7000 — than any other nation. Indeed Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki recently argued that the entire Polish people, and not just these worthy individuals, deserves its own tree in Yad Vashem's Avenue of the Righteous.

Yes, to be sure, this narrative continued, there were Polish blackmailers and killers, but they were marginal elements; it was as unfair to judge the entire Polish people by their actions as it was to judge Jews by the actions of the Warsaw Jewish police. How unfortunate, then, how unfair, was the unending stream of Jewish aspersions and accusations that sullied Poland's good name. Why, to hear the Jews tell it, the Poles were worse than the Nazis! In other words, this view of Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust comports quite well with the wider historical narrative cited above.

Many Jews, and especially those who survived the Holocaust in Poland, did not agree with this narrative, to put it mildly. Furthermore, a significant minority of Poles, including the scholars linked to the Center for the Study of the Holocaust, have been calling for a far-reaching rethinking of their nation's behavior during the Holocaust.

One might expect that the fall of Communism has made it easier to confront the past with more detachment and honesty. This is arguably the best time in Polish history. Poland today is a prosperous country,

with one of the most dynamic economies in the European Union. There are no foreign occupiers, and, unlike the old days, Poland does not face the problem of large ethnic minorities. The country is at peace, and while Russia remains a problem, no one seriously expects any imminent invasion.

But in fact Polish politics today are quite contentious. One reason, among many, is an ongoing struggle over history and national identity. After 1989, various groups in Polish society could no longer rally around a shared hatred of Communism. Decades of Communist rule, economic mismanagement, and a culture of mendacity and hypocrisy that affected all sectors of society left deep wounds, just as Poles had to take a new look at who they were. In the 1990s the country stood at a crossroads. In an essay titled the "Two Faces of Europe," published in 1990, Adam Michnik, the editor of *Gazeta Wyborzca*, noted that Poles now had to confront the tension between two kinds of Polishness: one model of identity that was ethnocentric, Catholic, and exclusionist; and the other, a new model of Polishness, that was pluralistic, secular, and civic, rather than ethnic or religious, and open to Polish integration into a new and changing Europe.[2] One can say that thirty years later Michnik's insights are just as relevant now as they were then.

The appearance of *Dalej jest Noc* is but the latest chapter in a long story of how Holocaust memory has evolved in Poland. Right after World War II, as a civil war raged in the country, and up to 1,500 Jews were killed for various reasons by Polish anti-Communist fighters, plain bandits, and former neighbors afraid of losing their newly-acquired Jewish property, a few Polish intellectuals courageously challenged their compatriots to confront honestly the massive crime that had just unfolded. Although it was a crime committed by the Germans, and not the Poles, that was not the entire story, and the Polish people had to stop pretending that it was.

In 1945, the literary critic Kazimierz Wyka wrote that,[3]

> From under the sword of the German butcher perpetrating a crime unprecedented in history, the little Polish shopkeeper sneaked

2 Michael Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), p. 88. This is still one of the best studies of Polish-Jewish relations.

3 Kazimierz Wyka, *Życie na niby* (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1986), p. 157. I have used Michael Steinlauf's translation in Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*, p. 59.

> the keys to his Jewish competitor's cashbox, and believed he had acted morally. To the Germans went the guilt and the crime; to us the keys and the cashbox. The shopkeeper forgot that the "legal" annihilation of an entire people is part of an undertaking so unparalleled that it was doubtlessly not staged by history for the purpose of changing the sign on someone's shop. The methods by which the Germans liquidated the Jews rest on the German's conscience. *The reaction to these methods rests nevertheless on our conscience*.

Two years later, in 1947, the Polish writer Jerzy Andrzejewski wrote that,[4]

> For all honest Poles the fate of the perishing Jews must have been exceeding painful, for the dying were people whom our people could not look straight in the face, with a clear conscience.

Wyka and Andrzejewski assumed that their readers all understood why Poles could not look at the Jews with a clear conscience. But as Poland became more Stalinist, these voices all but disappeared from public discourse. Indeed, Polish Communists, desperate to gain popular support, also promoted a view of the Holocaust that conflated Polish and Jewish suffering, that praised Polish Righteous Among the Nations and condemned Jewish ingratitude, and that accused Zionists of working hand in glove with German revanchists to undermine Poland.

Over time the Communist regime lost what legitimacy it had, despite forlorn efforts to play the "Jewish card," such as during the anti-Zionist campaign of 1968–1970. And as years passed, discussion of the country's Jewish past reemerged. In June 1979, the newly elected Polish Pope John Paul II visited Auschwitz and mentioned the special suffering of the Jews. The new "flying universities" (illegal gatherings in homes for lectures and discussions), as well as liberal Catholic publications, such as *Tygodnik Powszechny* and *Wież*, encouraged a new interest in Jewish topics. Beginning in the 1980s, many new publications appeared in Poland on Jewish themes, such as a new edition of Emanuel Ringelblum's writing and the diary of Adam Czerniakow. Academic conferences — in 1984 at Oxford, 1986 at Brandeis, and 1988 in Jerusalem — opened a new dialogue between Polish and Jewish scholars.

4 Quoted in Joanna Michlic and Antony Polonsky, eds., *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 11.

In the late 1980s, as Polish Communism was in its death throes, a landmark essay appeared in *Tygodnik Powszechny*, Professor Jan Błoński's "The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto," published in 1987.[5] While it was the Germans who did the killing, Błoński argued, the Poles also bore a great deal of moral responsibility for their historic antisemitism.

> We should stop being defensive, pleading innocence, haggling… we should say: yes, we are guilty. We welcomed Jews to our home, but made them live in the basement. When they sought to enter the drawing room, we promised we would let them in on the condition they would stop being Jews, or "become civilized…"
>
> …When some Jews expressed willingness to follow this advice, we started talking about a Jewish invasion, the threat posed by their infiltration into our society!... Then we lost our home and the occupier began killing Jews on its premises. How many of us decided this was none of our business? There were also those (I leave criminals out of account) who secretly were glad that Hitler solved the Jewish "problem" for us.[6]

No other article that ever appeared in *Tygodnik Powszechny* elicited such a stormy response. Some readers agreed with Błoński, while many indignantly rejected any notion of Polish guilt.

In the end, though, Błoński did offer his Polish compatriots some important words of comfort.

> When one reads what was written about Jews before the war, when one discovers the amount of hatred rife in Poland, one cannot help wondering why words were not followed by deeds. In point of fact, they were not (or only in isolated cases).[7]

But this comforting assumption that, unlike Ukrainians or Lithuanians, Poles rarely murdered Jews themselves was totally upended by the publication of Jan Gross's *Neighbors* in 2000.[8] This was a searing account

5 Jan Błonski, "Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto," *Tygodnik Powszechny* 2, January 11, 1987. For the English version, see Jan Błonski, "Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto," *Yad Vashem Studies* 19 (1988). Błoński based his title on Czesław Miłosz's 1943 poem, "A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto."

6 Błonski, "Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto," p. 352.

7 Błonski, "Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto," pp. 354–355.

8 Jan Tomasz Gross, *Sąsiedzi: Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka* (Sejny: Fundacja Pogranicza, 2000). For the English edition, see Jan Tomasz Gross, *Neighbors: The*

of how Poles, and not Germans, murdered Jews in the small town of Jedwabne on July 10, 1941: they humiliated them, beat them to death with hammers, herded them into a barn, and burned them alive. One lone Polish woman who helped Jews suffered social ostracism and was forced to leave the town. After the war a memorial in Jedwabne promoted a convenient lie: it was the Germans, and not the local townspeople, who had killed the Jews. Just as the Soviets lied about the true perpetrators of the Katyn massacre, so, too, did these Poles, without, it seems, any sense of irony, lie about the crime that took place in their own town.

Neighbors had an enormous impact and undercut many widely-held stereotypes. Responding to the common charge that Jews had collaborated with the Soviets, and thus somehow had brought their fate upon themselves, Gross suggested that the same people who murdered Jews were also the most likely collaborators, be it with the Communists or with the Nazis. *Neighbors* shocked the country because it shattered yet another comfortable myth: that Poles who helped Jews enjoyed social support rather than ostracism.

Neighbors caused a firestorm of reaction. Gross's critics accused him of shoddy scholarship, of ignoring evidence of German guilt, of relying on Communist court records and flimsy Jewish survivor testimonies. When Gross had written about the suffering of Polish deportees to Siberia, he had been praised as a good Polish historian. Now he was vilified and became the object of thinly veiled antisemitic attacks (his father was Jewish). One of his leading attackers was the respected historian Tomasz Strzembosz, who had written extensively on the regional history of the Bialystok region. Gross hit back with a cutting reply. How was it, he asked, that Strzembosz, who had spent so many years writing about the Jedwabne region, had not once mentioned the Jews or what had happened to them in Jedwabne and nearby towns. Was it sheer ignorance? In that case how could one regard him as a serious historian? Or was Strzembosz deliberately trying to falsify history?[9]

Picking up on the same theme, the noted anthropologist Johanna Tokarska-Bakir asked in an important article, "Obsessed with Innocence," why Polish historians had ignored Jews in their research.

Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

9 "Gross contra Strzembosz," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, April 2, 2001.

The answer, she believed, was the Polish obsession with innocence, which kept them from taking an honest look at their own history. After all, it was more important to protect Poland's "good name."[10]

Neighbors was a watershed. There were televised discussions, two Polish presidents called for honest and serious reflection, and many important initiatives strove to take a proper look at Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust. The Polish government signed the Stockholm Declaration, promising to introduce the teaching of the Holocaust in Polish schools. Over time new Holocaust textbooks appeared, and sociological surveys showed that Polish high-school students were becoming more aware of the differences between how the Germans treated Jews and Poles during the war. Films such as *Cud Purymowy*, *Pokłosie*, and *Ida* touched on flashpoints of Holocaust memory.

The Jedwabne controversy and its aftermath highlighted the crystallization of two distinct historical schools in Poland. The first included historians such as Marek Jan Chodakiewicz, Piotr Gontarczyk, Bogdan Musiał, Jan Żaryn, and others. While it would be unfair to lump them all together, what they shared was a narrative that stressed Polish heroism, minimized Polish involvement in German crimes, and looked for explanatory factors in Polish antisemitism, such as Jewish collaboration with the Communists, general wartime brutalization and collapse of norms, or the actions of marginal and criminal elements. They also highlighted how Żegota, the Polish Home Army, and individual Poles helped Jews, risking German reprisals in the process.

These historians received critical support from nationalist politicians like Jaroslaw Kaczyński and, after Janusz Kurtyka replaced Leon Kieres as director, from the IPN as well. The PiS party spearheaded a campaign for a new "Historical Politics" (Historia Polityczna) to defend Poland's good name. Its de facto leader, Jaroslaw Kaczyński, complained, in 2008, that,

> We are faced with a situation where in the next few decades or less World War II will be understood as two great crimes: the Holocaust, in which Poles had allegedly taken part, and the expulsion of the

10 Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, "Obsessed with innocence," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, January 13–14, 2001.

> Germans [from Poland in 1945], in general, the outcome of Polish actions.[11]

This nationalist "Historical Politics" received a major boost when the PiS candidate Andrzej Duda unexpectedly defeated the incumbent president Bronisław Komorowski in 2015. During the televised debate between the two candidates, Duda shrewdly played the Holocaust card by asking Komorowski about his supposed failure to defend Poland's good name in the Jedwabne controversy. The new government lost little time in asserting its new line. By 2020, it had pushed out the directors of two of Poland's most important new historical museums, the World War II Museum in Gdansk and the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw. At the same time it supported new museums, such as the Ulma Museum in Markowa, which promoted the image of Poles as heroic saviors of Jews. The Ministry of Culture demanded that the Adam Mickiewicz Institute, tasked with promoting Polish culture abroad, focus less on sensitive episodes in Polish-Jewish relations and more on Poland's historic heroism as a defender of Christian values. "Historical Politics" encouraged a new, positive assessment of the "Cursed Soldiers," the postwar anti-Communist fighters, persecuted by the Communist government, whom many Jews and progressives regarded as antisemitic murderers. One of the most controversial actions taken by the new government was the 2018 amendment to the IPN Law (often referred to as the Holocaust Law), passed as a reaction to such perceived slanders of Poland as Jan Gross's assertion that Poles had murdered more Jews than Germans during World War II. The amendment, Article 55a, initially threatened imprisonment for anyone (with the exception of scholars and artists) who imputed Nazi crimes to the Republic of Poland or to the "Polish Nation." While the government walked that back, it is still true that such policies have had a chilling impact on the teaching and study of the Holocaust in Poland, especially for high-school teachers, graduate students, and younger faculty who do not enjoy job security.

The important publications by Błoński and Gross offered certain rays of comfort. Readers might readily have agreed with Błoński that at least Poles had not actually become mass murderers and that indifference, or even antisemitism, while regrettable, was not the same as killing. And after the appearance of *Neighbors*, it was still

11 Jaroslaw Kaczyński's statement, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, February 9 and 10, 2008.

possible to argue, as this reviewer himself wrote in a 2003 article in the *Forward*,[12] that Jedwabne had been the exception and not the rule. Since then, however, Polish scholars like Andrzej Żbikowski have shown that Jedwabne was far from being an isolated case, that the same region had seen many other pogroms in the summer of 1941, that Poles had massively participated in the denunciation and murder of their Jewish neighbors, and that the sheer number of Jewish victims who had died at the hands of Poles, either directly or through denunciation, was truly horrendous.[13]

In light of these recent developments, one must assess the significance of the publication of this massive two-volume collection. In some important respects the themes treated in *Dalej jest Noc* are a continuation of issues raised in previous studies published by the Center.[14] While most historical studies of the Holocaust in Poland focused on the major cities, these shifted attention to the provinces and to the countryside, where most Jews had actually lived.

Another important feature of the studies published by the Center was the interest in the "third phase" of the mass murder. This concerned the fate of Jews who had somehow escaped the mass deportations to the death camps by building hideouts, escaping into the forests, jumping from death trains, or finding shelter with Poles. These scholars estimated that of the 1,250,000 Jews in small ghettos and in the countryside in the

12 Samuel D. Kassow, "When Neighbors' Indifference Gave Way to Massacre," *Forward*, April 20, 2001.

13 Andrzej Żbikowski, "Pogromy i mordy ludności żydowskiej w Łomżyńskiem i na Białostocczyźnie latem 1941 roku w świetle relacji ocalałych Żydow i dokumentow sądowych," in Paweł Machcewicz and Krzysztof Persak, eds., *Wokoł Jedwabnego*, 2 vols. (Warsaw: IPN, 2002), pp. 159–271.

14 Just a partial listing includes Barbara Engelking, Jacek Leociak, and Dariusz Libionka, eds., *Prowincja noc: Życie i zagłada Żydów w dystrykcie warszawskim* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Filozofii i Socjologii Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2007); Jan Grabowski, *Judenjagd: Polowanie na Żydów 1942–1945: Studium dziejów pewnego powiatu* (Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2011); Barabara Engelking, *Jest taki piękny słoneczny dzień... Losy Żydów szukających ratunku na wsi polskiej 1942–1945* (Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2011); Alina Skibińska and Tadeusz Markiel, eds., "Jakie to ma znaczenie, czy zrobili to z chciwości?," in *Zagłada domu Trynczerów* (Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Zydów, 2011); Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski, eds., *Zarys krajobrazu. Wieś polska wobec Zagłady Żydów 1942–1945* (Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2011). See also Samuel Kassow, "It Was a Sunny and Pleasant Day," *Yad Vashem Studies* 41:1 (2013), pp. 205–227.

Generalgouvernement, more than 10 percent, or as many as 150,000 Polish Jews — perhaps even more — tried to evade the mass deportations of *Aktion Reinhardt* and other killing sprees. At the most, 50,000 Jews survived the Holocaust on Polish territory (including labor camps), and a major reason for this was that, far from being merely "indifferent," many Poles were involved in denunciations, manhunts, and outright murders. These killings and denunciations were the work of the Polish police, Polish firemen, village heads, units of the Home Army and the National Armed Forces, village night watches, and many individual Poles.

At the same time, the fact that so many Jews fought for their lives undercut a commonly accepted narrative of Jewish passivity. Both in previously published as well as in these two volumes, the accounts of the Jews' struggle to stay alive is both searing and depressing. One example is the amazing story of Szymon Hofman, a dressmaker who lost his wife and children and survived all alone in the forests near Jozefów in a dugout. He was helped by a Polish forester, Wladyslaw Czekirda, who from time to time left him food. After many months, isolated in his solitary hideout, Hofman could only crawl, his clothes had turned into rags, and he looked more like a wild animal than a human being. But thanks to the help of decent Poles, he survived and went to Israel. There he committed suicide (first volume, pp. 357–358).

Many Jews had to face an impossible decision: to stay with loved ones or escape on their own. When Kalmen Krawiec wanted to jump from a train bound for Treblinka, his seven-year-old sister Sorele embraced him and begged him not to leave her. He stayed on the train and was the only member of his family to survive Treblinka (first volume, p. 122). In Mielec a Polish high-school student, Czesław, offered to shelter his Jewish former teacher, Joel Czortkower. Czortkower was deeply depressed by the recent murder of his wife, and he told his daughter to go in his stead. Tosia responded, "Mother has perished, you will die soon and I will die with you. That's how things are meant to turn out" (second volume, p. 520). All too often the struggle for life left scars of guilt that never healed.

These studies also had another important virtue. Instead of seeing the Jews as an anonymous mass of faceless victims, they restored their humanity. The victims were people with names, parents, wives, husbands, and children. Often they had entrusted their Polish neighbors with their property and, in their hour of need, hoped that those Poles would extend

a helping hand. Most of the time those hopes were dashed and ended in tragedy. These scholars also have restored the memory and humanity of Polish rescuers, even while showing that relations between rescuers and the rescued were often not as noble as they might have seemed as, for example, when portrayed in the applications for Righteous Among the Nations status filed with Yad Vashem.

Dalej jest Noc consists of nine chapters written by Jan Grabowski, Barbara Engelking, Tomasz Frydel, Dariusz Libionka, Dagmara Swałtek-Niewińska, Karolina Panz, Alina Skibińska, Jean-Charles Szurek, and Anna Zapalec. Each chapter studies a different district in German-occupied Poland. These districts were Miechów (Dariusz Libionka), Węgrów (Jan Grabowski), the western part of Bielsk Podlaski (Barbara Engelking), Złoczów (Anna Zapalec), Bochnia (Dagmara Swałtek-Niewińska), Nowy Targ (Karolina Panz), Łuków (Jean-Charles Szurek), Biłgoraj (Alina Skibińska), and Dębica (Tomasz Frydel). They represent a cross-section of occupied Poland. All in all 138,149 Jews lived in those districts in 1942. Of those, only 2,513, or 1.8 percent, survived the Holocaust. The percentage of survivors ranged from 6.1 percent in the Złoczów district, 3.5 percent in Bochnia, to 0.8 percent in Łuków and 0.6 percent in Miechów.

Many of those survivors were murdered right after the war. These killings, as Karolina Panz pointed out in her chapter on Nowy Targ, where thirty-three Jews were killed after the liberation, should be viewed as a continuation of what happened during the war, and especially after 1942, when Jews became fair game and Jewish life cheap.

Each district had its own specific character. In Bielsk there were many Belorussians, while in Złoczów there were many Ukrainians. Both were occupied by the Soviets until the summer of 1941, and later there were some limited possibilities of survival through the Soviet partisan movement. Nowy Targ and Bochnia were near the Slovakian and Hungarian borders and thus offered another possibility of escape for those with the means to hire smugglers. Biłgoraj was so underdeveloped and its railway network so sparse that many Jews were shot on the spot or murdered during long treks to the trains. The Germans sited Treblinka in the Węgrów district, and the Jews in the vicinity quickly learned about the death camp that was so close to them. Districts that contained many German work camps, like Miechów, offered Jews other hopes for a reprieve from death. Some of these districts, like Nowy Targ or Złoczów, had many "open ghettos" or no ghettos at all. A unique feature

of the Nowy Targ district was the German attempt, which enjoyed some success, to encourage Góral separatism. Indeed the Górals as a rule were singularly unwilling to help Jews, and the survival rate in this region was exceptionally low.

When Jan Grabowski completed *Judenjagd*, based on the district of Dąbrowa Tarnowska, and reached damning conclusions about Polish responsibility for the very low survival rate of Jews who had attempted to hide, critics noted that one could not generalize based on such a limited case study. *Dalej jest Noc* goes a long way toward meeting this criticism, and by and large these additional studies confirm Grabowski's earlier conclusions.

In a masterly introduction, the editors Jan Grabowski and Barbara Engelking emphasize a key feature of these volumes: the concentration on microhistory, which, as Giovanni Levi[15] has argued, utilizes focused case studies on a micro level in order to gain wider historical insights. Grabowski and Engelking correctly argue in the introduction that microhistory is a methodology exceptionally well suited to the study of the Holocaust. It restores the voice of the victims, reminds us of their humanity, and forces the reader to confront specific encounters between killers and victims in order to grasp yet a new dimension of the Holocaust. This is not a story of a distant *Schreibtischtäter* or of a remote, bureaucratic murder-machine effecting the orderly industrialized killing of millions of victims in remote, unseen places. The killing described here was up close and personal: thousands of Jews were murdered before they even boarded the trains, in the market squares, in the streets of small towns; onlookers chortled with delight as Jews were tortured and their corpses desecrated; and many Jews suffered death at the hands of trusted acquaintances.

Such methodology requires a wide range of sources, and in this respect the book does not disappoint. These volumes are based on a large array of archival sources, oral histories, individual testimonies, German court proceedings, records of wartime Polish criminal courts, German personnel records, Jewish memorial books, published memoirs, archives of the Polish underground, and more. Of particular importance are the thousands of testimonies deposited in Yad Vashem and in the Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, as well as the "*sierpniówki*," trial records of cases

15 Giovanni Levi, "On Microhistory," in Peter Burke, ed., *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

based on the August 1944 decree that designated criminal liability for actions such as collaboration with the Germans or involvement in the murder of Polish citizens.

Each study begins with a very brief historical account of the district and a short overview of Polish-Jewish relations before the war. One might note that, despite an overall deterioration in Polish-Jewish relations before the war, many of these districts saw relatively little anti-Jewish violence and a low level of support for right-wing nationalist parties. But in the end the political weakness of the "Endeks" did not necessarily mean that Poles were more prepared to help Jews.

With the beginning of the German occupation, the accounts shift gears and become much more detailed. There are painstakingly documented descriptions of the various branches of German civil administration, of the German police and security services, and how they liaised with various Polish bodies. A key theme running through the various chapters is the wide degree of latitude enjoyed by the local German authorities, the ingenuity and adaptability of the German administration in carrying through the "Final Solution." This was no mere top-down operation in which local Germans simply carried out orders that came from Berlin. They could be relied upon to show much initiative on their own.

Whenever possible the various authors offer detailed biographies of German officials and their postwar fate, which for most German perpetrators meant either return to civilian life or, at worst, judicial proceedings that usually ended in light sentences.[16]

For many of these German officials, occupation duty had been wonderfully attractive. Ernst Gramms, the *Kreishauptmann* of Sokołów-Węgrów boasted to his wife of his marvelous house, car, and swimming pool. "Here," he wrote her, "I am king" (first volume, p. 397).

Just as important for the book's overall argument is an equally detailed description of Polish administrative structures under the occupation, including the police, firemen, and Baudienst (compulsory labor service for Polish teenagers). During the mass roundups the

16 In her study of the Bilograj district, Alina Skibińska discusses the key role played by Orpo Batallion 67 in serial murders of Jews. Not one policeman was tried after the war, and at least forty former members of this battalion served in the postwar German police. One policeman, Kurt Dreyer, wrote letters home describing how he had removed some shoes from the body of a murdered Jewish woman: "Maybe Bube [his son] might wear them..." (p. 248).

Germans relied heavily on all these groups. The teenagers of the Baudienst were plied with liberal quantities of alcohol; the firemen eagerly brandished their axes to uncover hideouts. During the third phase of the Holocaust in Poland, the Germans direct role was reduced as that of the Polish police increased. To be sure a great number of Polish police and village heads turned over many Jews to the German gendarmerie, but as time went on, more peasants preferred to keep matters "in house." They would either kill the Jews themselves or turn them over to the Polish police — after all, why share the loot with the Germans when it could remain in Polish hands. In this regard *Dalej jest Noc* uncovers evidence that at times Poles who were caught hiding Jews escaped the death penalty, possibly because of a previous agreement between the Polish police and the German gendarmes.

Dalej jest Noc presents a compelling picture of the large-scale involvement of the Polish police and of various Polish underground groups in the third phase of the Holocaust. There are also instances of police and the underground helping Jews. The same policeman could have killed Jews and rescued others, and there are bizarre but telling examples of Polish policemen who earned praise both from the Germans and from the Polish underground. As readers of previous volumes published by the Center are all too aware, since Jews fell outside the sphere of moral responsibility, and since active measures to help Jews were considered socially unacceptable — and even a betrayal of the Polish cause — Poles who were active killers of Jews could rest assured that their actions would not harm their future reputations as upstanding citizens and upstanding Poles.

In his study of the Miechow district, Dariusz Libionka concluded that at least seventy-two Jews were killed by various underground groups. Matters reached the point that the Krakow branch of Żegota complained that the Polish underground was sabotaging its efforts to help Jews. Not one member of the underground was punished solely for the reason that he murdered Jews.

Another vital issue discussed by these authors is how the Germans ruled and manipulated Polish rural society. As Havi Dreifuss has shown, before the beginning of the mass murder, Jewish perceptions of Poles were often (hopefully) positive.[17] Emanuel Ringelblum noted many

17 Havi Dreifuss (Ben-Sasson), *Relations Between Jews and Poles During the Holocaust: The Jewish Perspective* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2017), pp. 205–215.

instances of peasant readiness to help Jews. But all this changed when the mass killings began. Many peasants who had acted humanely in time turned into eager killers.

In a report on the Polish countryside written in 1942, the Polish writer Zofia Kossak-Szczucka noted:[18]

> At first the behavior of the peasantry in the face of German atrocities against the Jews was humane, logical, reasonable. It was expressed in a Christian willingness to help hungry Jews who were leaving the ghettos. That was still the case in 1941. However by the second half of 1942 (after the beginning of the mass murder) these attitudes have changed radically. Today German bestiality has dulled the moral sensibilities of the peasantry, has undermined the moral instincts. Thunder does not strike from the sky to slay the killers of children, blood does not cry for vengeance. Perhaps the peasants think it is true that the Jew is damned, that someone can kill them without fear of punishment. Therefore there are more and more cases of active collaboration (on the part of the peasantry) in the German murder of the Jews. This is a very dangerous precedent.

As in previous studies sponsored by the Institute, there is a lot of information on power relations and governance in the countryside and how the Germans used the Polish police, communal chiefs (*wójts*), village heads (*soltys*), firemen, and others to extract food and resources and to exact cooperation in the tracking down of Jews. Here *Dalej jest Noc* continues in the tradition of earlier studies published by the Center for Holocaust Research. The Germans used a diabolical combination of carrots and sticks, as well as designated hostages in order to ensure cooperation in the villages. Constantly threatened with collective reprisals for violations of German directives, including the hiding of Jews, the villages often established "night watches" that nabbed wandering Jews who were seeking shelter.

The village heads were responsible for meeting German food quotas and demands for labor. They also had to vouch for the fact that the village was not hiding Jews. Usually the *soltys* had no option but to remain in their posts. When a peasant brought a Jew before the *soltys*, bound and beaten, he often found himself in a difficult position. If he

18 Cited in Feliks Tych, *Długi cień zagłady: szkice historyczne* (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 1999), p. 43.

released the Jew, he had every reason to expect that his fellow villagers might well denounce him. In the various chapters of the book it is made evident that there was a real fear of German reprisals ("I don't want them to burn the village down just because of this Jew") (see for example, second volume, pp. 447, 465–467), but it is also clear that this fear of the Germans turned into a convenient alibi.

In his excellent study of the Dębica district, Tomasz Frydel describes the terrible dilemma of the village head Wiktor Czekaja, who found himself caught between German pressure from above and the pressure of his fellow villagers from below. He had been helping two sisters, Chana and Malka Keil from Mielec, who had been hiding since 1942. But when some children came upon the two sisters in a barn, they alerted the whole village. Soon a crowd gathered and surrounded them. What could Czekaja do? He wanted to save the two girls, but the villagers would not allow it. He played for time. On the one hand he sent someone to inform the gendarmes, thus lessening the fear that the Germans would burn down the village in reprisal. On the other hand he tried to give the girls a chance to escape before the gendarmes arrived. But one sister was sick, and the other would not leave her alone. The Germans finally came and made loud threats, but in the end they simply left with the two sisters and promptly murdered them (second volume, pp. 447–449).

It would be wrong to conclude that the sole reason for the denunciation and murder of Jews was simply fear of the Germans or of neighbors. One of the consistent threads in each chapter is the overwhelming impact of sheer greed in the readiness of Poles to denounce and murder Jews. The legend of Jewish wealth doomed many Jews who were trying to find shelter and survive. Motivated by hopes of loot, Home Army units in the forest raided the homes of Poles suspected of sheltering Jews. More often than not Jews were murdered. If the Poles were lucky, they would be let off with a bad beating or a heavy levy, but frequently they were also killed. The line between underground resistance and sheer banditry became very thin indeed.

Any summary of the enormous amount of material contained in the two volumes can only scratch the surface, but certain chapters merit special mention for highlighting key themes of the book. From Jan Grabowski's chapter on Węgrów, the reader realizes to what extent mass murder took place in plain sight of the Polish population, the degree of active Polish participation, and the depressing postwar aftermath. The

Germans lost no time in terrorizing Węgrów's Jews. A short time after they seized the city in 1939, on *Yom Kippur* of that year, they bayoneted Rabbi Yakov Mendel Morgenstern. In the early years of the occupation, extensive trade contacts continued between Poles and Jews, as Grabowski demonstrates on the basis of hitherto underutilized Polish court records. While the Jews were not confined to a closed ghetto, as time went on they suffered growing isolation from their Polish neighbors. In a telling phrase, they resembled "trees in a forest marked for cutting."[19]

On September 22, 1942, which happened to be *Yom Kippur*, *Aktion Reinhardt* came to Węgrów and other towns in the district. The Jews in the town had already heard about Treblinka, and they knew their days were numbered. Just a few days before the wives of local German officials had asked local Jewish craftsmen to hand over the shoes or dresses that they had ordered. Polish village heads from the surrounding countryside were ordered to prepare wagons and carts to carry the Jews to the train line, which was 15 miles to the east. That *Yom Kippur* the Jews started their prayers early, just in case. One of their last prayers was "*U'Nesane Tokef*," a supplication that enumerates various kinds of possible deaths that could occur in the coming year, even as it offers hope that penitence, charity, and good deeds might avert the evil decree. When the cantor intoned death by strangulation, the entire congregation burst into tears.

As the Jews recited their *Yom Kippur* prayers, the Germans tightened the cordon that surrounded the town. When they finally pounced, most Jews tried to hide where they could, but they stood little chance. While the usual German units — SS from Warsaw and Treblinka, Sichersheitpolizei (SiPo), Kriminalpolizei (KriPo), Ordnungspolizei, (OrPo), Schutzpolizei (SchuPo), German gendarmes, and Ukrainian auxiliaries — carried out the action, they also called on the services of the Polish police, volunteer firemen, and teenagers of the Baudienst. Many local Poles also joined in the manhunt. The Germans promised 500 grams of sugar for each Jew, but just as tempting was the chance to get rich quick: after all, everybody "knew" that Jews had plenty of money.

In the course of the day, the number of Jews assembled in the market place grew, as did the increasing number of Jews who were

19 Grabowski (first volume, p. 407) quotes Robert van Voren, *Undigested Past: The Holocaust in Lithuania* (Amsterdam: New Rodopi, 2011), which quotes Ruta Vanagaite and Efraim Zuroff, *Nasi: Podrożując z wrogiem* (Warsaw: czarna Owca, 2017), p. 74.

murdered on the spot. A Polish witness, Henryka Grabowska, saw German gendarmes and Ukrainians bayonet a small child and then shoot his mother. Grabowska saw another dead woman nearby. Two children were lying beside her. One was still crying "Mama." Meanwhile another witness remembered a Jewish child yelling to her mother on the way to the market square: "I don't want to die! I don't want to die!" A mother replied that "you can't live because there is no place for you on this earth." Spectators laughed as some Poles tried to cut off a Jewish woman's ears in order to grab her earrings. As Malka, the wife of a tailor, was being led to a shooting site in the cemetery, nearby Poles yelled at her to hand over her shoes. "Can't you wait until I'm dead," she cried out. When a German ordered her to take off her shoes, she slapped him in the face. The German killed her and told the Poles to take her shoes. Another Jewish woman, even as her child held her in a tight embrace, removed a shoe and, with all her might, used it to hit a Polish policeman in the face. The eyewitness to this scene, Szraga Fejwel Bielawski, whose memoirs carry the apt title *The Last Jew of Węgrów,* wrote that, "that woman... showed real heroism. Even the largest bombs on earth didn't make the impression [that this gesture] did. She resisted, using the only means she could" (first volume, p. 450).[20] There are many other similar stories.

That day about 2,000 Jews were shot in Węgrów, and the rest were deported to Treblinka. As the day wore on the Germans asked the Polish mayor, Władysław Okolus, to round up Poles to clear the bodies. The mayor had thought that it would be hard to find people for this unenviable job, but he was mistaken. Plenty of people, eager for Jewish loot, were happy to volunteer. Many of the Jews were wounded; some were buried alive; others were finished off with shovels. That night gendarme Muller gave the volunteer firemen a large sum of money for a hearty celebration in a tavern. He complimented them on their good work. After the war the mayor commented that while the Jews had suffered a physical tragedy, the Poles had experienced a moral tragedy (first volume, pp. 445–446).

As was the case elsewhere, the Germans lured many Jews out of

20 Shraga Feivel Bielawski, *The Last Jew from Wegrow: The Memoirs of a Survivor of the Step-by-Step Genocide in Poland*, edited and rewritten by Louis W. Liebovich (New York: Praeger, 1991), p. 130.

hiding by establishing a new, small ghetto, which was liquidated on April 30, 1943.

Few Jews lived to see the end of the war. One survivor was Bielawski; when he walked through the market place after the liberation, he saw many Poles who knew him, but their glances were decidedly unfriendly. No one went up to ask him how he was. And then Bielawski saw Pierkowski, a Pole who had helped Jews. Deeply moved, he ran to Pierkowski and tried to embrace him. But Pierkowski rudely pushed him away, afraid that Polish onlookers would brand him as a Jew-lover.

One of the leading Polish perpetrators was Wincenty Ajchel, the head of the volunteer firemen. At his postwar trial the local priest, Kazimierz Czarkowski, who had not left his house the entire day of the roundup, vouched for Wincenty Ajchel: "He was a good Pole... He did not serve the Germans." Ajchel garnered similar accolades from a local bank director, a lawyer, and a pharmacist (first volume, p. 446).

In 1947, investigations began into the extensive role of local Poles in the murder of Węgrów's Jews. The community circled the wagons. Potential witnesses changed their stories. Of the few Jews who had survived, none lived in Węgrów at the time. But three Jewish survivors, at great personal risk, eventually came to Siedlce to give testimony. They received a harsh reception. The judge cast doubts on their reliability, and the prosecutor pointedly noted that all the "honest" Jews had been killed, broadly hinting that these survivors were shady characters. Only one of the accused, Ajchel, was convicted and received a five-year sentence.

Barbara Engelking's chapter on the western part of the Bielsk district is titled "Strategies of Survival." To what degree can one in fact speak of strategies in the sense that Jews formulated careful plans, made sober calculations, effected necessary preparations in order to make those plans viable, and then chose the best course of action that guaranteed survival? This is not an easy question. In one case after another, Jewish survival depended on chance and luck, on a fortuitous succession of miracles. Often what was "good" in the short run turned out to be disastrous in the long term. For example, up to 1942, conditions around Zakopane were relatively benign and that dissuaded Jews from trying to cross the border into Slovakia while there was still a chance to do so. That said, *Dalej jest Noc* does provide valuable insights into how Jews viewed their situation and then tried to make the best decision for survival given the circumstances — which varied from district to district.

On the whole, in the fight for life, less than one in three Jews who

tried to escape the major wave of mass killings survived. How exactly those lucky few survived is traced by an impressive array of statistical tables in each chapter. The major strategies for survival were hiding with Poles for a long period of time; hiding among several Poles for shorter periods of time; hiding in forests; joining the partisans; staying in a German labor camp; crossing the border into Slovakia or Hungary; or surviving on Aryan papers, which usually meant going far away where no one knew them. In many cases Jews would go back and forth between forests and a labor camp. Joining the partisans was only a real option where there was a Soviet partisan movement, and here, too, Jews could not count on a warm reception. Crossing the border demanded a lot of money, while Aryan papers required the right looks, linguistic skills, nerves of steel, and a move to a distant city where the risks were fewer. Of the 138 Jews who tried to survive on Aryan papers in the Nowy Targ District, not one succeeded.

Some Jews concluded that labor camps offered better chances of survival than trying to hide. Here, too, it was all a matter of luck, and there was no way of telling which camp might be "better" than others. In some cases, such as in the Dębica district, the Gestapo, by exploiting a network of Jewish informers, actually used labor camps in order to lure Jews in hiding to give themselves up.

One of the most effective ways to survive was to find a Pole willing to extend shelter for a long time. These helpers, not all of whom were recognized after the war, took major risks. Their relationship with the Jews they sheltered was complex and understandably often fraught. In Frampol the Righteous Among the Nations Stanisław Sobczak helped ten Jews, but this was exceptional. Despite assertions by nationalist historians and publicists that there were hundreds of thousands of Polish heroes, the real proportion seems to have been that one rescuer rescued between one to two Jews.

There is no consensus in *Dalej jest Noc* about the kinds of Pole who were willing to assume the risk of helping and sheltering Jews. Barbara Engelking suggests that in the Bransk district peasants descended from the petty gentry, the so-called *szlachta zaściankowa*, were more likely to offer help than the rest of the peasantry (a view strongly questioned by the anthropologist Joanna Tokarska-Bakir).[21] On the other hand

21 Joanna Tokarska Bakir, "Błąd pomiaru: O artykule Barbary Engelking Powiat bielski," *Teksty Drugie* (January 1918), pp. 166–194.

Jan Grabowski suggests that it was poorer peasants, or more marginal elements in the village, who turned out to be more helpful. In the Złoczów district, the Polish intelligentsia and Polish peasants had a better record than in central Poland, perhaps reflecting the fact that the peasants in eastern Galicia were exposed not only to German repressions but also to Ukrainian terror.

If there is a case in which the term "strategy of survival" is entirely applicable, it is that of the Amsterdam family in the Dębica district. The Amsterdams were rural Jews. They worked the land themselves, and this fact made them more acceptable to the local Polish peasantry. They had "social capital": they knew the countryside like the back of their hands; they had an extensive network of acquaintances in the villages; and they could converse with the peasants in their own dialect. The patriarch of the family, Yohanon (Janek) Amsterdam, took some decisions that were to have far-reaching consequences. Instead of obediently moving into a ghetto, they set up a camp in the nearby Dulecki forests, where the local AK warned them of planned German incursions. Amsterdam imposed strict military discipline and held all the Jews in the camp to a rigid set of rules, which included never stealing food from the peasants, never walking around by day, building emergency escape bunkers, avoiding well-used paths, staying clean, and walking around in specially-made snow shoes to avoid leaving tracks in winter. The group had a fraught and complex relationship with a group of bandits also living in the same forest. In the end 36 percent of the Jews in the Amsterdam group survived, as opposed to 10 percent of Jews hiding out in forests on their own. The story of this group certainly has the makings of an excellent novel (second volume, pp. 477–491).

The two volumes of *Dalej jest Noc* are well produced and well edited. There are voluminous and helpful footnotes, statistical tables, rare photographs, and a very impressive bibliography. On the front and back book covers there are reproductions of very rare photographs, taken by a Polish forester, Jan Mikulski, of two Jewish girls whom he was hiding — in addition to four other Jews. After the war Mikulski was recognized as a Righteous Among the Nations.

It is the hope of this reviewer that *Dalej jest Noc* will be translated into other languages as soon as possible.