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**Bystanders, blackmailers, and perpetrators:
Polish complicity during the Holocaust**

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Chapter 1: Introduction

“For every noble Pole who risked all to rescue a fellow human being, there were ten scoundrels who hunted Jews for a livelihood.”¹ Why would a Holocaust survivor make this statement? In a scholarly field where a substantial fraction of the literature claims that Polish hostility was minimal, survivor statements like this one cast a negative light on certain Poles. Examining these negative connotations helps reveal the true nature of Polish-Jewish interactions during the Holocaust.

While it is clear that the Nazis carried out the Holocaust spurred on by Hitler’s racial antagonism, the question of Polish involvement is significantly less clear. What is known is that Poland was the site of many of the concentration camps, and all of the extermination or “death camps.” In the death camps of Belzec, Sobibor, Chelmno, and Treblinka, there was no work for the inmates. Instead, these were centers of extermination. In these four camps alone, some 2,000,000 Jews are estimated to have been murdered.² There were also 200,000 Jews killed in the Majdanek concentration camp and 1,100,000 killed in the camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau.³ All told, the figures from these six camps alone amount to 3.3 million, or over half of all Jews killed in the Holocaust. The fact that these deadly camps were on Polish soil almost certainly derives from the fact that the prewar Jewish population was higher in Poland than any other country. In fact, with a prewar population of 3.3 million Jews, Poland

¹ Miriam Kuperhand and Saul Kuperhand, *Shadows of Treblinka* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 51.

² Bella Gutterman and Avner Shalev, eds., *To Bear Witness: Holocaust Remembrance at Yad Vashem* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2008), 145; 147.

³ Tomasz Kranz, *Extermination of Jews at the Majdanek Concentration Camp* (Lublin: Panstwowe Muzeum na Majdanku, 2007), 71; Gutterman and Shalev, 198.

contained over half of the entire Jewish population in prewar Europe.⁴ Thus, it made sense that the Nazis chose to erect their extermination centers there.

However, in examining the mass destruction of such a large percentage of one country's population, the role played by the local population becomes important. Furthermore, the study of anti-Semitism in Poland both before and during the war raises key concerns over that country's involvement in the Holocaust. It would be wrong to blame Poles for their involvement in the genocide based merely on the high numbers of Jews exterminated there. Instead, this work aims to define the varying levels of Polish complicity during the Holocaust and the motivations behind their actions.

Through studying survivor testimonies and memoirs, a pattern emerges regarding Polish involvement in the Holocaust. While there were indeed those righteous Poles who commendably helped hide and ultimately saved Jews, there were also those who went the opposite way. As survivor evidence often clearly corroborates, there were three main levels of Polish complicity during the Holocaust. The first and most widely practiced level was the bystander phenomenon. Many Poles were silent witnesses to the murder of the Jews and some even had opportunities to intervene. The second level was taking advantage of the situation. Sometimes Poles rationalized their actions as essential for survival, and yet sometimes Poles utilized criminal means of blackmail and extortion to gain from the Jews' situation. The third and most morally troublesome level was the perpetration of the Holocaust. Although the number of perpetrators was comparatively small in relation to bystanders, their actions reflect underlying animosity and also speak to why the Holocaust was so efficiently carried out.

⁴ Gutterman and Shaley, 283.

For each of the differing levels of complicity listed above, there comes the inevitable question of motive. For each action by a Pole, a number of probable motives can be examined. Sometimes Poles acted out of fear, a changing moral righteousness, or sometimes they acted out of anti-Semitism. A second component of this essay is its look at pre-war anti-Semitism and how that played some role in every level of complicity.

This essay seeks to argue that anti-Semitism likely was a contributing factor in many situations of Polish complicity—especially those involving extortion, blackmail or murder. In essence, the higher, more morally disturbing levels of complicity were likely carried out by the smaller percentage of “super” anti-Semitic individuals within Polish society, whereas bystanders were probably not as anti-Semitic. Given the prewar European disposition towards anti-Semitism, the level of it prevalent in prewar Polish society, and the German augmentation of propaganda upon invasion, anti-Semitism played a considerable role in the relationship between Poles and Jews during the Holocaust.

While it is very important to acknowledge that anti-Semitism played a larger role than commonly accepted, it is just as important to understand that in each and every incident where Poles and Jews interacted, the actions of the Poles were almost certainly driven by a mixture of motives, ideas, and decisions. Thus, while it is relevant to say that anti-Semitism was evident in some actions, other times Poles may have been acting out of differing personal motivations. Furthermore, the level of anti-Semitism almost certainly varied in each incident. For instance, while some bystanders may have withheld help out of a deep-seated anti-Semitism, others may have not been anti-Semitic at all. Instead, what arises is a range of possible explanations for each and every interaction, devoid of all-encompassing generalizations. Thus, this work seeks to present the differing levels of complicity while also

presenting probable, but certainly not definite, explanations for individual behavior and situations.

The question of Polish-Jewish interaction has been well-researched. Several key phases of research into the subject have been carried out. As these phases progressed, the outlook of Polish involvement in the Holocaust has changed. When research into this topic emerged in the mid-1980s, there was initially much sympathy towards the Poles. One of the common arguments was that Poles were facing the same troubles as the Jews. Jan Blonski, writer of a 1987 article entitled “The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto,” detailing Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust argued that Poles could not be fully blamed because they were effectively “next in line for the gas chambers.”⁵ The article carefully weaved together two important arguments that appear now to be divergent in nature.

Firstly, Blonski assumed the apologetic line that Poles could not offer much help and probably did all they could.⁶ Scholars who wrote in response to Blonski used this trend as a way to exculpate Polish actions during the war. As Wladyslaw Sila-Nowicki replied to the Blonski article, “Simply, we [Poles] would have done relatively little more than we actually did.”⁷ Jerzy Turowicz wrote a similar response to Blonski in which he argued that Poles were “helpless witnesses, unable for the most part to do anything about it.”⁸ Thus, the belief was created that the Poles were helpless bystanders. Stanislaw Salmonowicz continued this argument with his defense of Polish inaction: “I do not see that any other parties have the

⁵ Jan Blonski, “The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto,” in *‘My Brother’s Keeper?: Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust*, ed. Antony Polonsky (London: Routledge, 1990), 42.

⁶ Blonski, 45.

⁷ Wladyslaw Sila-Nowicki, “A Reply to Jan Blonski,” in *‘My Brother’s Keeper?: Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust*, ed. Antony Polonsky (London: Rutledge, 1990), 62.

⁸ Jerzy Turowicz, “Polish Reasons and Jewish Reasons,” in *‘My Brother’s Keeper?: Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust*, ed. Antony Polonsky (London: Rutledge, 1990), 142.

right to make the charge that an individual or a community as a whole lacked heroic qualities.”⁹ These scholars immediately rushed to defense of the Poles arguing that Poles were victims or all-together incapable of rendering aid to Jews.

The second point Blonski’s article made ignited a series of harsher responses from the scholarly community. Alongside the debate over Polish involvement came the question regarding the role of anti-Semitism. Although apologetic in tone, Blonski represented some Polish hostility as stemming from anti-Semitism. In the same article that Blonski presented the Poles as victims, he also delineated two terms he believed were overused and misunderstood: “participation and shared responsibility are not the same thing. One can share the responsibility for the crime without taking part in it. Our [Poland’s] responsibility is for holding back, for insufficient effort to resist.”¹⁰ In essence, Blonski argued that Poles had been anti-Semitic in the past and it was this anti-Semitism that led them to act irresponsibly during the Holocaust. With much subtlety, Blonski pushed this line of thinking forward: “If only we had behaved more humanely in the past, had been wiser, more generous, then genocide would perhaps have been ‘less imaginable’, would probably have been considerably more difficult to carry out, and almost certainly would have met with much greater resistance than it did.”¹¹

This idea sparked a rebuttal from many Polish scholars of the time. While they generally accepted the Poles were indifferent during the Holocaust, they did not accept that anti-Semitism was the cause. Turowicz completely rejected the idea of anti-Semitism as a motive, responding that, “There is no *direct* connection between Polish anti-Semitism and the

⁹ Stanislaw Salmonowicz, “The Deep Roots and Long Life of Stereotypes,” in *My Brother’s Keeper?: Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust*, ed. Antony Polonsky (London: Rutledge, 1990), 55.

¹⁰ Blonski, 46.

¹¹ Blonski, 46.

Jewish Holocaust.”¹² Salmonowicz downplayed the importance of anti-Semitism to make it appear more of a nonfactor: “Anti-semitism...is a marginal issue...[existing] particularly [among] those of country or small-town origins.”¹³ The claim of anti-Semitism was passionately denied by Sila-Nowicki who preferred to call the pre-war problems between Poles and Jews “assimilation.” He referred to these incidents as a “natural” occurrence by which a society tries to defend its traditions. Sila-Nowicki further claimed that the Jewish population “lived largely alongside that of the Polish population.”¹⁴ In essence, his article was intended as a complete rebuttal of Blonski’s claims.

Other scholars continued this rebuttal and even down-played cases where Poles were implicated in the Holocaust. While they noted that blackmailers and opportunistic Poles sometimes preyed on Jewish vulnerability, this was seen as only a rare occurrence and largely not indicative of the Polish population on the whole; nor did these select antagonists have genocide in mind when taking advantage of the Jews.¹⁵ Teresa Prekerowa emphasized this line of thinking by arguing that: “The crimes mentioned here did not, as is sometimes suggested, stem from anti-semitism. Greed was the motive and anybody sufficiently defenceless could have fallen victim.”¹⁶

Yet despite its unpopular reaction initially, some scholars debated the degree to which anti-Semitism played a role in Poland. In other words, Blonski did receive some support when scholars further researched his arguments. In essence, he had left the scholarly community divided. Janina Walewska proclaimed “I am divided between the two attitudes,

¹² Turowicz, 140.

¹³ Salmonowicz, 54.

¹⁴ Sila-Nowicki, 65.

¹⁵ Sila-Nowicki, 68.

¹⁶ Teresa Prekerowa, “The ‘Just’ and the ‘Passive’,” in *My Brother’s Keeper?: Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust*, ed. Antony Polonsky (London: Rutledge, 1990), 75.

one close to the attitude of Sila-Nowicki and the other to that of Blonski.”¹⁷ Another scholar, Andrzej Bryk, also struggled to define the implications of Blonski’s arguments. While arguing that anti-Semitism was a feature of Polish society, Bryk believed the motivation behind Polish prewar hostility was more likely “not enough moral sensitivity to include Jews as part of the traumatic Polish experience.”¹⁸

In the debates over Polish-Jewish relations, the arguments ultimately fell short as no decisive conclusion was reached. The general idea was that the maximum level of Polish complicity was their indifference and that they were not to blame for murders or more active levels of the Holocaust.¹⁹ Secondly, the idea that anti-Semitism played a specific role in Polish actions during the Holocaust had generally been discounted or downplayed by scholars. Whether some scholars were reluctant to take a stand, the idea of anti-Semitism had become a “hot-button” from which later debate often refrained.

In 2001, Jan Gross broke away from the debate and published his groundbreaking book, *Neighbors*. The book focused on the massacre at Jedwabne, Poland in which a large proportion of the town’s population murdered 1500 Jews in July 1941, after the Germans had retaken parts of Russian-occupied Poland. This revelation shattered the myth that indifference represented the extent of Polish complicity during the Holocaust. In other words, “*Neighbors* challenges the widely accepted view that during the Holocaust the Poles were, at worst, mostly hostile bystanders, unwilling or unable to assist their Jewish neighbors and

¹⁷ Janina Walewska, “In a Sense I am an Anti-Semite,” in *My Brother’s Keeper?: Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust*, ed. Antony Polonsky (London: Rutledge, 1990), 123.

¹⁸ Bryk, 175.

¹⁹ Antony Polonsky, “Introduction,” in *My Brother’s Keeper?: Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust*, ed. Antony Polonsky (London: Rutledge, 1990), 11.

profiting materially from their destruction.”²⁰ The book largely reads as an investigative piece, but it does raise some key historical issues that question previously held conceptions. Aside from upending the idea of indifference, Gross also argued that the Polish massacre of Jews in Jedwabne was inspired by deep-seated anti-Semitism; another point of contention with former debates surrounding this issue.

As the case with Blonski, Gross’s work also created a stir in the scholarly field. In 2004, *The Neighbors Respond*, edited by Antony Polonsky and Joanna Michlic, was published. Its sole purpose was to present essays debating the implications that *Neighbors* had on the debate over Polish-Jewish relations. The editorial work of Polonsky and Michlic appears unbiased, as they call *Neighbors* an important “next step” in which apologetic literature will be “replaced by careful and detailed research and reliable and nuanced firsthand testimony.”²¹ Yet, some of the scholars’ essays in the book were still reluctant to accept Gross’s arguments. These responses represent a cross-section of what was said in response to Gross’s book, at least as presented by *The Neighbors Respond*. The general consensus was that scholars had trouble accepting a thesis pointing at Polish complicity beyond indifference. Despite Gross’s use of Polish testimony, Jerzy Jedlicki still ascribed to the idea that Germans were to blame for Jedwabne: “Regardless of how many of them were present at the scene of the crime, there is no doubt that the Germans played the role of instigators in the massacre.”²² Another scholar, Tomasz Strzembosz, argued that “Gross’s

²⁰ Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic, “Introduction,” in *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland*, ed. Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 31.

²¹ Polonsky and Michlic, 43.

²² Jerzy Jedlicki, “How to Grapple with the Perplexing Legacy,” in *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland*, ed. Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 243.

theses, in the light of certain sources, do not appear to be entirely true.”²³ Another scholar, Bogdan Musial, also rebuked Gross’s claims, arguing “Jan T. Gross’s *Neighbors* contains numerous contradictions, erroneous interpretations, unhistorical speculations, and false statements.”²⁴ Yet, Musial’s evidence involves selective interpretation and generalizations of the same kind as he is accusing Gross of committing. Furthermore, Musial’s biggest issue with Gross’s is the use of Jewish survivor testimonies.²⁵

Musial’s rebuttal of Gross’s methodology is based on his belief that Jewish sources do “not reflect accurately the actual contents of those archival materials,” is concerning.²⁶ Musial is not the only scholar to question the use of survivor testimonies. John Connelly also questioned Gross because he believed “to be infected by the biases of survivors is to be poisoned as a historian. This is equally true for those who stand too close to the recollections of Holocaust survivors, like Jan Gross.”²⁷ Connelly also argued that Gross’s thesis is wrong and that most Poles had no role in the massacre.²⁸

Yet, survivor testimonies can be a legitimate source when used correctly. Gershon Bacon, who wrote in response to *Neighbors*, believed that Gross made “a strong case” regarding Polish involvement in the massacre using the sources he had available.²⁹ Yisrael Gutman and Shmuel Krakowski also promoted the use of survivor sources by arguing,

²³ Tomasz Strzembosz, “Collaboration Passed over in Silence,” in *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland*, ed. Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 220.

²⁴ Bogdan Musial, “The Pogrom in Jedwabne: Critical Remarks about Jan T. Gross’s *Neighbors*,” in *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland*, ed. Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 340.

²⁵ Musial, 305

²⁶ Musial, 305.

²⁷ John Connelly, “Those Streets over There,” review of N. Davies, *Rising ’44: The Battle for Warsaw*, in *London Review of Books*, vol. 26, no. 12, June 24, 2004.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Gershon Bacon, Holocaust “Triangles,” Ambivalent Neighbors, and Historical Memory: Some Recent Notable Books on Polish Jewry,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 97, no. 2 (2007): 294.

“Simply put, the dead can no longer produce information, and the perpetrators of crimes prefer to remain silent. In contrast, the survivors can speak.”³⁰ Gross has also written about the efficacy of using survivor testimonies saying, “Holocaust memoirists have done their task: they bore witness. Now in order to make sense of our century’s dark times, we must do ours: read their testimony as it has been conceived.”³¹ Historian John K. Roth accepted Gross’s arguments, saying “the sources are inseparable from the event, for if they were to disappear our best access to the Holocaust would vanish as well.”³² In the context of the debate over sources, this paper assumes full legitimacy of survivor testimonies and memoirs along the line of scholarship promoted by Gross: “When considering survivors' testimonies, we would be well advised to change the starting premise in appraisal of their evidentiary contribution from a priori critical to in principle affirmative.”³³

One final source worthy of mention in the historiography on this topic is the 1986 book by Gutman and Krakowski entitled *Unequal Victims*. In the work, these scholars delineated differing levels of Polish help and complicity. They utilized convincing evidence and made an important distinction between those who participated in raids, those who blackmailed, and those who murdered. The book also presented the idea that anti-Semitism did play a role in certain circumstances and was likely a fixture of a small “super” anti-Semitic, hostile group of Poles. The basic tenets of Gutman and Krakowski’s book were effectively overshadowed by the more vociferous arguments made by Polish scholars

³⁰ Yisrael Gutman and Shmuel Krakowski, *Unequal Victims: Poles and Jews During World War Two* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1986), 238.

³¹ Jan Gross, “One Line at a Time,” *Poetics Today* 27, no. 2 (2006): 429.

³² John K. Roth, “Rethinking the Holocaust, and: Sources of Holocaust Research: An Analysis,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 17, no. 1 (2003): 154.

³³ Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 139-149.

responding to Blonski in 1987. However, the arguments made by Gutman and Krakowski are largely supported by evidence in this paper, and their scope of argument merits more attention for setting the base arguments behind Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust.

This is where the current state of scholarship is; there exists a lack of literature explaining other avenues of direct Polish hostility towards the Jews.³⁴ Thus, it is the goal of this paper to help identify more clearly the other, sometimes more subtle Polish involvement in carrying out the Holocaust. While incidents such as Jedwabne—where large Polish groups massacred Jews—are relatively scarce, there is abundant evidence to suggest that everyday Polish-Jewish interactions were potentially deadly for the Jews. Building off the arguments made by Gutman and Krakowski, while also furthering the logical thought of Gross, this paper will reexamine the sometimes complex interactions between Poles and Jews during the Holocaust. In examining the daily interactions of these two groups, “One can inscribe an entire range of Polish-Jewish encounters that, in the midst of all their situational variety, had one feature in common: they all carried potentially deadly consequences for the Jews.”³⁵

³⁴ Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*, 140.

³⁵ Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*, 134.

Chapter 2: Pre-war Polish Anti-Semitism

The prewar climate of Poland, although different from Germany, had some similarities. Anti-Semitism had unquestionably increased over the course of the 1920s and 1930s as it had in Germany. Also as in Germany, “the image of the Jew that emerged was that of a monstrous creature with many ugly faces that he skillfully disguised.”¹ The anti-Semitic image held in Poland on the eve of World War II was a multi-faceted and dynamic concept. “It was marked by religious beliefs and medieval myths of the evil Jew as the Christ killer, the devil, who used Christian blood. Superimposed upon the traditional beliefs were the nationalistic stereotypes of the Jew as the antithesis of everything Polish: the enemy and corrupter of Polish values, the underminer of Polish nationhood, the Communist.”² Such a dynamic form of anti-Semitism was very potent in that it fed off of centuries-old religious ideology combined with modern economic concepts. This combustible mix created an in-group and an out-group which pitted the Poles as true Polish citizens and the Jews as different and foreign.³ This separation resulted in furthering the split between Poles and Jews when war came and the Germans invaded.

In order to understand the varying levels of complicity exhibited by Poles during the Holocaust, one must first examine the complex issue of pre-war Polish-Jewish relations. Many factors were at work in interwar Poland that made it a place where Jews occupied a precarious position within society. Of these factors, one of the most important was anti-

¹ Celia S. Heller, *On the Edge of Destruction: Jews of Poland Between the Two World Wars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 133.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

Semitism. The goal of this chapter is to examine pre-war anti-Semitism; and in doing so, to create a base from which to view Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust.

Prior to the cataclysm of World War I, Poland was not an independent nation. Instead it was split amongst a conglomeration of empires including those of Russia, Germany, and Austro-Hungary. Only after the war ended in November 1918, did Poland become its own nation again; marking the first time in nearly 130 years the country was free from foreign rule.⁴ As a new nation with the age-old problems applicable to a central European people, Poland experienced some difficulties in its transition into independence. With a Jewish population of well over three million in 1931, Poland accounted for over half of Jews that lived in Europe, as well as one-fifth of the world's Jewish population. Since over 90 percent of the Polish population was Christian, tensions between the two groups sometimes ran high.⁵ Anti-Semitism had been commonplace throughout European Christianity for thousands of years prior to the 20th century. The religious component to anti-Semitism stemmed from a deep-seated idea that the Jews had killed Jesus Christ. This myth had transcended the centuries to become an ever-present feature of European life.⁶

As time passed, economic and social discrimination also became part of European anti-Semitism. For example, since they were being locked out of jobs, especially those in the religious field, Jews took to the world of banking and finance. Their role in this aspect of the economic sector, however, soon also took on derisive connotations. Banking practices such as usury, or interest taking, allowed Christians to make more connections with Biblical

⁴ Joanna B. Michlic, *Poland's Threatening Other: The Image of the Jew from 1880 to the Present* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 69.

⁵ Joseph Marcus, *Social and Political History of the Jews in Poland, 1919-1939* (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1983), 15-16.

⁶ Marvin Perry and Frederick M. Schweitzer, *Anti-Semitism: Myth and Hate from Antiquity to the Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 18.

scripture regarding the Jews. When the Jews became wealthy from their economic roles, they felt the need to hide their riches in order to avoid more persecution from Christians. The Poles began to view these Jewish economic practices as filled with secrets, lies, and deception; and the gulf between the two began to grow.⁷

New developments in the 18th and 19th centuries altered the relationships between Christians and Jews throughout Europe. In the modern era, major societal changes, sparked by the Industrial Revolution and the Enlightenment, further removed much of the emphasis previously put on religious explanations and supernatural myths. The world had developed into an era characterized by rational thought and the advent of modern machinery.⁸ In the middle of the 19th century, the Jews across Europe were granted emancipation from legal discrimination. In Poland, this transition took place in 1862.⁹

Despite these gains, by the onset of the 20th century anti-Semitism was reborn largely as a backlash to world economic decline and new scientific thinking. The anti-Semitism of the 20th century was very potent because it capitalized on new ideologies propagated by emerging scholars of the time. Combining elements of newly discovered evolutionary processes and Galtonian eugenic thought with age-old stereotypes, 20th century anti-Semitism took on scientific connotations that enhanced its basic tenants. This new strand of anti-Semitism also had the power to become political. In 1897, Karl Lueger was elected mayor of Vienna after running on his anti-Semitic laurels. The growth of his party ushered in a renewed ferocity in anti-Semitism and the repercussions of his time in office influenced

⁷ Perry and Schweitzer, 120-127.

⁸ Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World-Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1967), 53.

⁹ Magdalena Opalski and Israel Bartal, *Poles and Jews: A Failed Brotherhood* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1992), 3.

Adolf Hitler himself.¹⁰ Furthermore, the rest of Europe took note of Lueger's popularity and many copied his anti-Semitic programs and policies.

As was the case elsewhere in Europe, the years leading up to World War II were marked by a change in the relationship between Jews and Poles in Poland. While Jews were somewhat accustomed to anti-Semitism, the new onslaught was different and noted by many survivors as being recognizably unique. In essence:

Although in contrast to Germany no uniform or highly structured racist ideology was ever constructed in Poland, nevertheless nineteenth-century European racial doctrines did influence the conception of the Jews. They were generally considered a distinct race in the following sense: a group different from Poles because of their innate, immutable characteristics—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. And in the 1930s, Nazi influences strengthened the racist elements in the Poles conception of Jews.¹¹

Although not as systematic as Nazi anti-Semitism, the Polish ideology had similar characteristics in both its creation and promulgation.

In the early 20th century, Poland was undergoing a radical nationalistic phase in which “ethno-nationalism became the dominant model in the formation of modern Polish national identity.”¹² With the recurring tide of anti-Semitism sweeping Europe at the start of the 20th century, the Jews came to be labeled as the “threatening other.” The Polish ethno-nationalism also helped promote the idea of the “other” as being represented by any rival,

¹⁰ George E. Berkley, *Vienna and Its Jews: The Tragedy of Success, 1880s-1980s* (Cambridge: Abt Books, 1988), 97-107.

¹¹ Heller, 64.

¹² Michlic, 3.

adversary, or enemy to Polish self-identity.¹³ In other words, “The use of the ‘other’ in political culture for the purpose of increasing national awareness and cohesion, a phenomenon...witnessed in daily life in interwar Poland,” was crucial to the furthering separation between Jews and Poles.¹⁴ What ultimately happened was that Poles were able to combine elements of an emerging Polish nationalism with preconceived, deep-seated anti-Semitism; which allowed Poles to represent themselves as separate and distinct from their Jewish neighbors.

One important political group in Poland that arose from the racist nationalism of the time was the National Democrats. Some members in the party were anti-Semites; and as they gained power, this group sought to expand anti-Jewish sentiments throughout Poland. Through utilizing their newfound power and also skillfully manipulating propaganda, the National Democrats helped create the desired effect. “The fact remains that National Democracy was the principal vehicle for its dissemination [of anti-Semitism]...the National Democrats used their image of the Jews to direct the doctrine of struggle toward domestic as well as foreign enemies...By defining the Jews broadly, [they] could place any ideological or political enemy within this imagined circle of subversive, antinational ‘elements.’”¹⁵ In other words, because the Jewish label was so vague and also because it had centuries-old connotations attached to it, the National Democrats could use the Jews as effective scapegoats for any perceived threat to their power. In time, the label became so second-nature that “while the anti-semitic slogans were accepted, the thinking behind them was

¹³ Michlic, 3-4.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Brian Porter, *When Nationalism Began to Hate: Imagining Modern Politics in Nineteenth-Century Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 227.

not.”¹⁶ The anti-Semitic label became a fast and easy stereotype to use in place of any source of trouble in the emerging Polish nation.

One of the earliest areas where anti-Semitism was promulgated was through expanding the ancient myth that Jews exploited the economic world. In the prewar period, Poles created a policy of economic discrimination that “was so deep-rooted that it was regarded as normal.”¹⁷ The policies that were implemented were largely a reaction to the positions that Jews were perceived to have held within society.

Jews headed areas of commerce including the railroads, highways, and shipping enterprises, but because of their visibility within society, Jewish bankers became specific targets of Polish anti-Semitism.¹⁸ Most of the bankers in Poland were Jews, and as such, they provided the capital for much of the early public works projects throughout Poland in the late 19th century.¹⁹ Likewise, many of the largest industrial projects carried out in the developing Polish nation of the 20th century were also funded in large part by Jewish banks. In fact by 1913, one Jewish-run bank, the Commercial Bank of Warsaw held more than 75 percent of all of Poland’s bank deposits.²⁰

The common belief that Jews thrived in the financial sector and ran some of the largest and most important banks in Poland furthered anti-Semitic hostility because Jewish success caused anxiety and resentment among Poles.²¹ Poles began to see the Jews as socially different and as a result, the blooming Polish middle-class of the 20th century

¹⁶ Frank Golczewski, “Rural Anti-Semitism in Galicia before World War I,” in *The Jews in Poland*, ed Chimen Abramsky, Maciej Jachimczyk, and Antony Polonsky (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1986), 104.

¹⁷ Marcus, 212.

¹⁸ Ibid, 83.

¹⁹ Ibid, 75, 82.

²⁰ Ibid, 83-84.

²¹ Ibid, 97.

“became the most hostile group towards Jews” because they regarded the Jews as “the main obstacle to their own advancement.”²²

A revival in anti-Semitism reinvigorated age-old biases of the greedy Jewish banker and interest collector. Thus, with the rise of the National Democrats, discriminatory practices became popular because they provided a check on rich Jews and sought to even the playing field for Poles. Jews were heavily taxed. In fact, taxes on Jewish assets accounted for 21.5 percent of the total tax revenue of Poland, more than twice the proportion of Jews in the entire Polish population and substantially larger than the Jewish proportion of the national income.²³ Other discriminatory economic practices included a differential welfare program and Polish co-operatives that excluded Jews and limited their ability to compete in the Polish marketplace.²⁴ Furthermore, Polish laws excluded Jewish access to some job fields with the passage of compulsory work laws that forced Jews in certain trades to take Sundays off, thereby forcing them to work on Saturdays—the Jewish religion’s specified day of rest. These laws were effective in driving Jews from government-owned industry and commerce.²⁵ Thus, the economic anti-Semitism emerging during the 1920s and 1930s opened a considerable gulf between Jews and Poles.

The renewed vigor with which anti-Semitism separated Poles and Jews allowed for a prejudice that many Jews had not experienced since before emancipation of the 1860s. Neighbors were turning unfriendly and the Jewish economic and social prospects in Poland dried up. Furthermore, job prospects for Polish Jews were quickly limited as Poles were

²² Ibid, 98.

²³ Ibid, 219.

²⁴ Ibid, 213; 221-227.

²⁵ Heller 101.

favored in the hiring process.²⁶ Jews “knew that after graduation we would not be able to follow certain professions, at any rate not in Poland. Jewish boys who wanted to study medicine or architecture were shipped off to France, Belgium or Italy.”²⁷ One Holocaust survivor recounted how hard it was for a Jewish child to excel in the Polish school system: “Though total exclusion had never been introduced in Polish universities, there was none the less a clear unofficial restriction on the number of Jews admitted for studies, particularly those leading to professional degrees, such as medicine.”²⁸

The Jewish skilled craftsmen of Poland were also discriminated against with the onset of new Polish economic measures. As early as 1932, new policies were implemented that specifically sought to oust Jews from skilled trades. Among the new requirements were a required three-year apprenticeship under contract, a three-year stint in a trade school, and passing a special examination. Yet, the biggest obstacle to Jewish artisans was their inability to attend a trade school because of Polish preference.²⁹ As a result of the new strict laws favoring Poles, thousands “of qualified Jewish craftsmen could not become licensed.”³⁰ In other words, the new requirements were effective at limiting Jewish participation.

Anti-Semitism was not solely evident in artisan shops and colleges; it ran throughout the public and private education systems of Poland. A Holocaust survivor recalled a math teacher who delivered a speech containing several elements of propaganda and anti-Semitism. The tutor’s rhetoric startled the Jew because it was “clear to us that we should not

²⁶ Heller, 100-101.

²⁷ Edward Stankiewicz, *My War: Memoir of Young Jewish Poet*, with forward by Barbara Handler (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 3.

²⁸ Janina Bauman, *Winter in the Morning: A Young Girl’s Life in the Warsaw Ghetto and Beyond* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 8.

²⁹ Boris Smolar, “What Polish Jews are Facing,” *The Nation* 134, no. 3473 (1932): 99.

³⁰ Heller, 104-105.

buy our stationery or anything else in Jewish shops. And that we should attend only Christian cinemas instead of pouring money into the pockets of Jewish owners...After that, I could never go to my tutor with any personal problems.”³¹ The survivor’s eyes were further opened to the anti-Semitism surrounding her when dealing with harassment from her classmates. Two of the Christian girls in the room “took great pleasure in making loud insulting remarks about Jews in my presence.”³² While she ignored their jibes and endured the verbal harassment, another classmate physically harassed her: “She would pull my plaits, pinch my arms, kick my ankles, tear up my exercise books, brazenly take my small possessions like pens, pencils and rubbers.”³³

Pre-war anti-Semitism was sometimes more forcibly expressed, as experienced by a Jewish student attending Polish art school before the war. This survivor noted two incidents he experienced involving direct Polish anti-Semitism. One day, while creating a sculpture, “a fellow student, Jan Jazab, sitting right behind me, hit me sharply in my back. ‘Parszywy Zydzie’ (Rotten Jew!) he said.”³⁴ After insulting his mother, Jazab hit the Jew again before being reprimanded by a teacher for the violence. Two years later, the Jew experienced more violence from his Polish neighbors: “A senior named Antoni Cetnarowski...cursed me furiously and hit me hard in the stomach. He said that, as a Jew, I did not belong in the school.”³⁵

Although individual acts of violence and prejudiced rhetoric were becoming more common, the most widely experienced anti-Semitism was the idea that Jews were

³¹ Bauman, 9.

³² Ibid, 10.

³³ Ibid, 11.

³⁴ Morris Wyszogrod, *A Brush with Death: An Artist in the Death Camps* (New York: State of New York University Press, 1999), 21.

³⁵ Ibid.

unwelcome in Poland. One survivor defined what it meant to be a Jew in Europe during this time: “The European Jew, although technically a citizen of the country of his birth, was traditional and effectively isolated by religion and heritage from his fellow citizens. We might be natives of Poland and feel love for the country, but the years of discrimination and isolation had turned us inward to our own people.”³⁶

The separation between Jews and Poles was noted in many Holocaust survivors’ memoirs. One survivor recalled anti-Semitism on the playground at a young age. While Polish children got made fun of for being overweight or ugly, he was called “a dirty Jew.” Even though his father was a reserve officer in the Polish army, “to my Catholic friends, I was a Jew first and not a Pole.”³⁷ He endured other insults including being called “a dirty mongrel Jew” at recess just after a lecture where his teacher had informed the class that Jews came from nowhere and had no real roots or homeland. Further insults from the young man’s friends included rumors that the Jews killed and ate Christian children in order to get blood to make matzo, their unleavened bread.³⁸

This was not just felt in one remote area. Instead, Holocaust survivors from all over Poland recalled the feeling of being an outcast in their homeland. In one survivor’s words:

There was something paradoxical about our situation: on the one hand, we were expected to speak and behave as if we had imbibed Polish and Polish culture with our mother’s milk, and, on the other hand, we were constantly reminded that we did not quite belong to this country because we were Jews.

³⁶ Nathan Shapell, *Witness to the Truth* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1974), 19.

³⁷ George Lucius Salton, *The 23rd Psalm: A Holocaust Memoir* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 6.

³⁸ Salton, 6-7.

We were reminded of it in the streets, in the parks, on our trips, and by the very segregation of our schools.³⁹

The Poles of the 1930s were essentially combining elements of pre-emancipation forms of prejudice with new ideals. Put differently, Polish anti-Semitism of the 1930s “infused the old stigma of Jewishness with new life and new meaning. These differences reinforced prejudice and discrimination. To prejudiced Poles the fact that the Jews were different from them in religion, culture, or occupation often constituted proof of the correctness and reasonableness of their attitude toward Jews and the way they treated them.”⁴⁰

Yet, other survivors also experienced this ancient prejudice reemerging with the new anti-Semitic components. One survivor experienced it from her Christian maid. When asked if she liked Jews, the maid replied she did not because Jews had “murdered our lord Jesus.”⁴¹ The use of such an ancient idea as the citation for a modern context is essential in demonstrating the convergence of early and contemporary anti-Semitism in pre-war Poland. The experiences of Jewish survivors exemplified how the reemergence of anti-Semitism in pre-war Poland was historically rooted. This religious element was constantly tied back into contemporary anti-Semitism to make it more relevant and potent.⁴²

In Germany in 1933, early Nazi propaganda was aimed at creating a separation within society that left the Jews a race apart. A few months after the Nazi Party took over Germany in 1933, Jews in German society were cast out and stripped of basic civil rights. They had “become a nonentity, invisible and irrelevant.” Jewish survivors recalled that their fellow

³⁹ Stankiewicz, 3.

⁴⁰ Heller, 76.

⁴¹ Bauman, 4.

⁴² Marcus. 316-317; 362-363.

citizens turned cold to them very suddenly and that close non-Jewish friends literally stopped interacting with them overnight.⁴³

In the early stages of the Nazi regime in Germany, violence was carried out by the minority instead of the majority. Instead, it was as if a social chasm had been opened between the Germans and their Jewish neighbors. Many German people were passive and indifferent towards Jewish residents. At this early stage, Germans were reluctant to resort to measures meant to create undue violence or disturb the sacred peaceful order paramount to German society. Instead, anti-Jewish laws and policies were widely accepted and carried out by the German people because both the conservative elites and much of the general public felt that it would limit disorder while at the same time ending the role of Jews in German society. Because it was being carried out in a legally sanctioned way, the German people widely accepted Nazi anti-Semitic policy because it seemed capable of accomplishing two goals in one—the removal of Jewish influence (based on years of anti-Semitism) while maintaining peace and order in the remaining sectors of society. In essence, much of the German public favored removal of Jewish influence from society, but had not yet ascribed to exterminationist ideology like the Nazi leadership might have.⁴⁴ Although Poland lacked a structured leadership mostly aimed at excluding Jews, the Poles still worked to widen the gulf between Poles and Jews in pre-war Poland based on their own predetermined factors.

As anti-Semitism grew in subtlety and complexity in Poland, different forms of propaganda were distributed. Prior to the war, one survivor recalled experiencing this increased anti-Semitism firsthand. She saw posters in Warsaw which read “Don’t buy in

⁴³ Victoria J. Barnett, *Bystanders: Conscience and Complicity During the Holocaust* (London: Greenwood Press, 1999), 3.

⁴⁴ Christopher R. Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939-March 1942* (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 10.

Jewish shops,” and heard whispered slogans from Poles referring to Jewish people as “you filthy Jew.”⁴⁵ As war drew nearer, the anti-Semitism from Poles seemed to propagate even further. In spring of 1939, this survivor recalled an increase in Polish signs of anti-Semitism: “The swelling menace of war hung over the country and aroused strong nationalist feelings. These often degenerated into chauvinism. Anti-Semitic slogans, speeches, articles became a staple diet. The common unrest could easily result in anti-Jewish riots. Jews were expecting them, fearing them. The ominous word ‘pogrom’ entered my vocabulary.”⁴⁶

Other Jews in Poland in the pre-war years also noted this ratcheting up of hostility. One survivor noted Warsaw had become more hostile: “the local ragamuffins did not like Jewish-looking boys on their turf. They would throw stones at me or turn my easel over.”⁴⁷ One incident in particular stuck out to him that characterized the anti-Semitic extent of Poles: “One sunny morning a hooligan in a white student cap took a swing at me as I was crossing the gates to the temple of learning. He obviously did not like my face, a fact he corroborated with a colorful expletive. I realized that Jews were not welcomed in this place.”⁴⁸

As was true elsewhere in Europe, prewar Poland was a place familiar with anti-Semitism. Therefore, in the upcoming chapters’ look at Polish complicity in the Holocaust will focus on Polish anti-Semitic attitudes and how they affected interactions with Jews. For instance, why did one Pole merely stand by and look away from the death camps while others actively hunted and killed Jews? The answer to this is complex because each individual circumstance was different. However, regardless of how this question is answered,

⁴⁵ Bauman, 4.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 15.

⁴⁷ Stankiewicz, 9.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 4.

Polish people were subjected to some level of pre-war anti-Semitism, and that ultimately shaped their level of complicity during the Holocaust.

Chapter 3: The Silent Masses

In examining the different levels of Polish complicity during the Holocaust, the most widespread tendency was for Polish people to be bystanders. Numerically speaking, “bystanders make up the majority in our world,” just by the sheer scale of humanity.⁸⁴ While bystanders who showed indifference towards the Holocaust as it was occurring represented the least direct threat to Jewish survival, their inaction made it unlikely Jews would get help from the outside. Furthermore, because the size of the Nazi extermination program was so massive, it was impossible for them to keep it concealed. Therefore, many Poles are implicated based on their sheer proximity to the Holocaust. While some Poles simply could not have helped, there were many more who could have offered assistance based on their role in society. Research also suggests that bystanders who become helpers through public opposition to genocide are typically successful in helping victims because the adverse reactions by bystanders “can elevate values prohibiting violence, which over time perpetrators had come to ignore in their treatment of the victim group.”⁸⁵

Delineating who was a bystander is a complex issue. The dictionary definition of a bystander is someone who is not actively engaged in an activity but who literally stands by. In a court of law, the bystander has the legal role of witness, or “someone who happened to be present and could shed light on what actually occurred.”⁸⁶ However, bystanders

⁸⁴ Israel W. Charny, *How Can We Commit the Unthinkable? Genocide: The Human Cancer* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982), 202.

⁸⁵ Ervin Staub, “The Psychology of Bystanders, Perpetrators, and Heroic Helpers,” in *Understanding Genocide: The Social Psychology of the Holocaust*, ed. Leonard S. Newman and Ralph Erber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 28-29.

⁸⁶ Barnett, 9.

witnessing the Holocaust can be defined in the context of what each individual specifically experienced and witnessed:

But the implications of words like “witness” and “bystander” are altered by human experience. A witness does not merely see something; a bystander is not just physically present. People are changed by what they see and do, and they are often moved to act. A definitive part of human experience is the way in which we react to outside circumstances: either involuntarily (such as withdrawing one’s hand from a hot stove) or deliberately (such as deciding whether or not to respond to a cry for help). It is tempting, as theologian Miroslav Volf writes, to think of the bystanders’ world as “neutral territory, suspended above the agonistic world of noninnocence”; that is certainly how bystanders like to think of it! In reality, however, they are “immersed in that same large world inhabited by the parties in conflict. They themselves are perpetrators and victims, often both at the same time, and they project their own struggles, interests, and expectations onto the conflict they either observe or try to resolve.”⁸⁷

In other words, bystanders are affected by what they see and experience. Whether out of prejudice, fear, or the desire to not get involved, bystanders simply choose not to act or respond to events they witness. Often times, “to reduce their own feelings of empathic distress and guilt, passive bystanders will distance themselves from victims.”⁸⁸ This results in a conditional peripheral blindness where the bystander attempts to block out anything

⁸⁷ Ibid, 9-10.

⁸⁸ Staub, 24.

negative. In fact, “in many cases, the bystander pretends to himself that nothing remarkable is happening, certainly nothing that requires his response, and he may actually achieve a conscious state of unknowingness.”⁸⁹

Furthermore, recent scholarship has suggested that silent bystanders may benefit perpetrators of genocide. Whether on the individual level or as whole nations, “complicity by bystanders is likely to encourage perpetrators even more.”⁹⁰ The more subdued and uninvolved a population is, the less chance there is of protest, punitive action, or other repercussions for the occupier. Thus, perpetrators are less self-conscious about their actions and can act with relative anonymity. Likewise, perpetrators can also misinterpret a population’s silence as encouragement or support.⁹¹ In essence, the lack of a dissenting opinion can create a scenario where perpetrators are less inhibited.

In dealing with the Holocaust, being a bystander was the easiest way to comply with Nazi genocide. “The stance of local residents, in other words, was to accept the camp as an unpleasant but unchangeable reality. Accordingly, they arranged their lives and psyches—and their ethics—so they did not have to deal with what was going on there.”⁹² The common perception held amongst those who turned away and ignored the Holocaust was that they were incapable of helping. Both in Germany and in Poland, the same reason has been cited by bystanders for not offering assistance: “There is nothing we could do about it. We are just little people. It’s the government.”⁹³

⁸⁹ Charny, 202.

⁹⁰ Staub, 27.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Barnett, 7.

⁹³ Fred E. Katz, *Ordinary People and Extraordinary Evil: A Report on the Beguilings of Evil* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 40.

Despite this reasoning, there is evidence suggesting that Poles were in a position to offer some assistance. Poles lived close to the camps, ghettos, and other areas where the genocide took place. The Majdanek concentration camp, for example, where an estimated 350,000 people died, was just four kilometers from the city center of Lublin; a city of more than 100,000 residents at the time. Furthermore, the vastness of the camp made it an anomaly in the Lublin cityscape. Stretching for 676 acres, well over a square mile, the camp could hold 50,000 prisoners at a single time.⁹⁴ To gain some perspective as to the size of the camp, this capacity number was equal to roughly half of the contemporary Lublin population. One survivor described the scene in Lublin shortly after the largest single mass shooting of the war. In November 1943, 42,000 Jews were executed at Majdanek. Afterwards: “The smoke from the burning bodies of the Jews murdered in Majdanek hung like a pall over the city of Lublin for a week. The district of Lublin was then declared *Judenfrei*, or ‘free of Jews.’”⁹⁵ The large open fires used to dispose of all the bodies was more intrusive than the regular gas chamber smoke.

As was the case in Lublin, other Holocaust survivors noted the proximity from which Polish people witnessed some incidents. One survivor noted the closeness of his camp to civilian life: “I would stand and look out the barbed wire...just beyond the fence I watched Polish children playing in the woods.”⁹⁶ Another had similar observations: “From the windows of my room on the second floor of these houses, I could see Poles walking freely on

⁹⁴ Edward Balawejder, Thomasz Kranz, and Barbara Romme, *In the Middle of Europe* (Stadtmuseum Munster, 2001),.

⁹⁵ Thomas toivi Blatt, *From the Ashes of Sobibor: A Story of Survival* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), xix.

⁹⁶ Salton, 130.

the street.”⁹⁷ This example takes on context when one takes into consideration the details of being close to a concentration camp. In other words, camp life was not normal or subtle. The following description is the survivor’s experience of nearing a camp: “Great flames belched from the chimney, and the strange, sickening, sweetish odor which had greeted us upon our arrival, attacked us even more powerfully now.”⁹⁸ Yet, although the odor and smoke were signs something had previously occurred, several examples also indicate that many bystanders witnessed incidents as they happened. For example, a study of a small town near a concentration camp revealed that “there were bloodstains on the streets and crude graves dug beside the roads. Inmates were beaten or shot before peoples’ eyes.”⁹⁹ In this example, the “lines of demarcation” between town life and concentration camp life were obliterated.¹⁰⁰ Not all Poles lived near camps, but the ones who did were likely to smell, hear, or see something during the six years of Nazi occupation.

Poles did not have to live in the vicinity of a camp to experience the Holocaust. A survivor, who had not yet been captured by the Nazis, recalled a scenario he encountered while on a train full of Poles:

Suddenly a kind of subdued anxiety spread among the passengers. They closed the windows; some lit cigarettes. What had happened? Why did the talk turn to whispers? I caught scraps of sentences. “They gas...fat for soap.” Despite the closed windows, the odor of rotting flesh seeped through. BELZEC! Of course. I grew numb with shock. We were passing near one of the rumored death factories! My heart was pounding, I looked out the

⁹⁷ Wyszogrod, 184.

⁹⁸ Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys: The Story of Auschwitz* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1983), 22.

⁹⁹ Barnett, 8.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

window. There were scarce woods, then, in the distance, I saw flames—now fading, now shooting higher into the sky. This was the destiny I was trying to escape. The smell receded as the train raced on, but I could still see the reflection of fire in the sky.¹⁰¹

The image presented here is a reminder that even the more remote camps were incapable of being concealed. Furthermore, this example helps uncover the modernity of the Holocaust and how that affected the range of bystanders involved. Because the Holocaust occurred in the mid-20th century, the utilization of mass transportation made the world much smaller. Therefore, it was very hard for the Nazis to entirely hide death camps. In the above scenario, passenger trains passed near the Belzec camp. Furthermore, given the passengers reactions upon arriving in the vicinity of Belzec, such as rolling up the windows and lowering their voices, they had either experienced this situation before or been expecting it.

Upon arriving in Lwow from the same train, this survivor noted the proximity of a different concentration camp. After leaving the train: “We passed close to the infamous concentration camp Janow. The camp was right in the middle of town, and as we walked past I couldn’t help seeing emaciated Jews working under guard behind barbed-wire fences.”¹⁰² This description provides detail into the public nature of the camp of Janow and the Polish citizens’ relative proximity to it.

At Treblinka, one of the more remote camps, the high level of killing carried out was likely witnessed by local peasant villages. A Treblinka survivor expanded upon this idea: “I did not understand how the Polish villagers around the camp could remain passive. They

¹⁰¹ Blatt, 47.

¹⁰² Ibid, 49.

certainly could smell the rotting bodies being exhumed and incinerated; they couldn't fail to see the smoke as it spread many kilometres around the camp."¹⁰³ Despite the rural location, several local citizens silently witnessed some incidents at Treblinka. Since more than 800,000 people were killed and incinerated there in 15 months, it is logical to reason that camp functions were large enough to be visible for miles around.¹⁰⁴

Despite its remote location, the death camp at Sobibor also had several small neighboring villages surrounding it. As one Sobibor survivor recalled: "I stopped daydreaming and observed the countryside. It was spring. The trees were chirping. A dog barked. Smoke curled from the chimneys of a few cottages nestled among the trees. The farmers were going about their business."¹⁰⁵ The pace and scope of death at Sobibor was not as great as at Treblinka, but it was significant (a total of 250,000 people were killed at Sobibor in roughly 18 months of camp operations).¹⁰⁶

While it is hard to determine the extent to which local peasants could have intervened, a Sobibor survivor recalled seeing a possible form of help: "Across the barbed wire I could see the Sobibor village train station. The stationmaster is probably ticking away dots and dashes on his telegraph, I mused...I fantasized sending a message now: 'Help! Help! Save us!' But there was no one to send it to, no one who cared, no one who would

¹⁰³ Samuel Willenberg, *Surviving Treblinka*, ed. by Wladyslaw T. Bartoszewski (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1989), 108. Originally, mass graves were dug to bury the Jewish dead. However, after the creation of gas chambers and large furnaces, it was untenable to continue burying the dead and the graves were dug up so the bodies could be disposed. Sometimes This was done with the help of Polish workers. See Doris Bergen, *A Concise History of the Holocaust (2nd ed.)*.

¹⁰⁴ Edward Kopowka and Piotr Tolwinski, *Treblinka: The Stones are Silent—I Remember* (Muzeum Regionalne w Siedlcach, 2007), 6.

¹⁰⁵ Blatt, 93.

¹⁰⁶ Yitzhak Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka: The Operation Reinhard Death Camps* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 177.

help.”¹⁰⁷ While this is a dramatic example, the survivor does reiterate a component of the bystander phenomenon that was important to the Holocaust. While many who witnessed the Holocaust, such as citizen in the peasant villagers surrounding rural camps, probably could not have done much to change anything, the idea of a train stationmaster within sight of the camp does raise questions of complicity. Given his proximity to the camp, one questions whether the Nazis had control of the stationmaster’s communications or if a local Pole was in charge. In either regard, this example gives evidence of a situation in which help could have possibly been rendered given the right circumstances.

Although some of the deadliest camps were located in rural areas, such as at Treblinka and Sobibor, Poles did not have to live near a camp to experience the Holocaust. In the later stages of the Holocaust, the Nazis were less worried about concealment and “the killing was broad and open and mobile.”¹⁰⁸ As the Nazis lessened their secretive measures, the likelihood of Poles experiencing the Holocaust increased.

In several memoirs, often times written by survivors from different parts of Poland, there exists a common theme of the “silent Pole” who watched or turned away as the Jews were rounded up and deported. Most of these recollections occur during the ghetto stage of the Holocaust from 1939-1942. As one survivor noted, “The Tyczyn Jews, carrying bundles and bedrolls, lined up along the street. Polish police carrying rifles supervised the departure. One police officer stood at the doorway of a Jewish neighbor and called the people out into the street. Polish neighbors stood on the sidewalk, watching the expulsion of the Jews.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Blatt, 93.

¹⁰⁸ Gordon Horwitz, *In the Shadow of Death: Living Outside the Gates of Mauthausen* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 162-163.

¹⁰⁹ Salton, 53.

This is a subtle incident, but the Poles are implicated here in that they are noticeably present during the roundup. A different scenario lends a different image of Polish bystanders:

Our Polish neighbors watched from the sidewalks, darkened doorways, and windows...I searched their faces for sympathy and pity, but met only curious glances and hateful glares. I knew that the Poles had not organized our expulsion and it was beyond their power to stop it, even if they wanted to. They could have shown support, voiced objections, or waved goodbye. They did and said nothing.¹¹⁰

Another survivor recalled a similar situation where a group of Jews was rounded up and loaded onto trains for Auschwitz: “We raced through the city under the escort of helmeted guards armed with machine guns. People on their way to work glanced fearfully at the crowded trucks.”¹¹¹ Thus, it was common for roundups and expulsions to be public occurrences which almost always took place at some considerable distance from the camps.

Another survivor recalled an encounter with Poles while passing between the Polish and Jewish sides of the ghetto, “I moved in a haze through the city, through the Aryan neighborhood full of promenading Ukrainians and Poles who looked at me wide-eyed, as though they were seeing an apparition...they behaved like they had seen a ghost, because none of them could utter a word.”¹¹² He described further that “Respectable Polish or Ukrainian citizens passed us in silence; sometimes they gave us dirty looks, as if we were at fault for still being alive.”¹¹³ Although some bias is noted towards the end of this example, one can better understand the sentiments of Polish-Jewish interaction in determining how

¹¹⁰ Salton, 54.

¹¹¹ Krystyna Zywulska, *I Survived Auschwitz* (Warsaw: tCHu pUblishing house, 2009), 12-13.

¹¹² Stankiewicz, 32.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 64.

close the Aryan and Jewish sectors of larger cities were. For example, in larger cities like Warsaw and Krakow, the ghetto was in the center of the city.¹¹⁴ In this example, the Polish and Jewish sides are separated by a wall not higher than surrounding buildings. Thus, there was often little separating the two sides and some interactions on one side were likely to have been witnessed on the other.

Another survivor, speaking of the liquidation of the Krakow ghetto, also recalled the presence of Polish people at the roundup. This time, by 1943, the Nazis performing the roundup were conspicuously armed and more forceful. This survivor described a dialogue with a family member:

The first line was formed by SS men pointing the guns, and the whole column was surrounded by many guards with machine guns...there were less than a hundred SS men surrounding us. Then I said, "Look, look, Pola. See all those people watching us from their windows?" "Sure, why not, a circus has come to town," Pola grumbled. "Can you imagine, if they all got together, they could take us away from the SS men easily," Anna echoed my thoughts. "My, are you a dreamer!...The Poles will never help a Jew. Just look at them hiding behind the curtains, pretending not to see or hear."¹¹⁵

Although the Jewish representations of the Poles in this scenario are generalized and biased, the important component here is that again, the Polish presence was noted during the Jewish deportation.

¹¹⁴ See Bauman, illustration page 84.2.

¹¹⁵ Erna F. Rubinstein, *The Survivor in Us All: A Memoir of the Holocaust* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1983), 79.

While several rather well-contained settings have been evidenced, there are other moments of Polish indifference where Jews who had escaped camp life are seen by Poles. This often occurred much later in the war, and usually took place either on transportation from one camp to the other, during some kind of work carried on outside the camp, or along the death marches at the end of the war.

On a ride in an SS ambulance, one survivor recounted a trip from Auschwitz out into the neighboring town of Oswiecim where she encountered an experience she described as “surreal.” In her words, “Free men were walking about in the streets, standing in queues, coming out of church, entering stores. Housewives, with baskets were shopping. Children were playing. No kapos, no clubs, no triangles on the clothing.”¹¹⁶ This scene is an example of everyday Polish existence. The idea raised by this example then is that the normal existence of Poles was being carried out within five miles of Auschwitz. While there is nothing complicit about this example, it does help create the setting for the following examples.

Another survivor recalled ventures into the Polish towns surrounding Sobibor. Upon arriving in town, he noted “a group of Poles walking towards us on the narrow sidewalk.”¹¹⁷ He also noted, “As we marched to and from work we were forced to sing. Poles stopped on the streets in confusion and looked at us. When had they last seen Jews, let alone young and healthy-looking Jews, singing happy songs? They didn’t know what to make of it. When they found out we were from Sobibor, the whole street emptied in fear.”¹¹⁸ Further survivor evidence corroborates this reaction by some Poles. After spending time in Auschwitz, one

¹¹⁶ Lengyel, 191-192.

¹¹⁷ Blatt, 109.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 109-110.

survivor was part of a group of inmates which worked out in the villages surrounding the camp. She noted “after walking three miles we turned into a village. A normal village with cows, chickens and a well. People ran away at the sight of us.”¹¹⁹

The reaction of Poles running away at the sight of Jews can be explained by looking at how things had changed during the war. As the war progressed, the landscape changed drastically. Of the millions of Jews that the Poles had witnessed being deported to concentration camps, only a few remained, and those who did were in bad physical shape. Thus, when the Poles interacted with remaining Jews, the physical composition of the prisoners was likely to be disturbing. One survivor described the conditions that camp life in Auschwitz had on the regular person’s physique:

From the bodies in the morgue we could determine what physical deformations the camp life caused in the internees. After even a short stay, many of the prisoners looked like skeletons. They had lost from 50 to 60 per cent of their original weight and had shrunken in height. It was unbelievable, but they actually weighed about sixty or seventy pounds. The same cause, malnutrition, caused other bodies to become abnormally swollen.¹²⁰

Because conditions in concentration camps were often brutal, Jews still alive later in the war were emaciated and malnourished. Thus, any time Jewish inmates were taken into the surrounding cities, their appearance was unusual to Polish civilians—especially if those civilians did not live near a camp.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Zyulska, 38.

¹²⁰ Lengyel, 83.

¹²¹ As the war continued, the Nazis utilized slave labor more often and thus, Jewish interaction with Poles was much more prevalent later in the war as the Nazis needed the manpower.

One survivor described other inmates who “were stricken with pneumonia painfully walking the eight miles from the camp to the place of work and digging all day to avoid being sent to the hospital.”¹²² In this example, the work group travelled 16 miles roundtrip; a distance within the range of several surrounding villages of the camp.¹²³ Thus, given their physical conditions, these women likely were abnormal sights in the midst of Polish passersby. Furthermore, this example also gives evidence that camp life was sometimes brought to the Polish people who did not live directly near camps.

Likewise, when the Germans retreated in late 1944 through the end of the war, they forced the remaining Jewish inmates on death marches away from the advancing front lines, the chain of marchers was likely to have been evident to anyone living in the vicinity. Survivors recalled seeing the Poles, often within close proximity, on these marches. One survivor described a group of 6,000 emaciated women marching through the countryside late in the war. She wrote that during the death march: “we passed several Polish villages. I can never express the feelings which the sight of normal civilian life created in me. Homes with curtained windows behind which free people lived. The name-plate of a doctor noting regular office hours.”¹²⁴ Furthermore, these large groups of marching prisoners were in no way silently retreating. The same survivor noted that the conditions of the march were harsh and anything but stealthy. The SS guards commanding the group often yelled and shouted commands. Furthermore, if someone straggled or fell behind they were shot. As a result, there were “bodies that lay in the ditches on both sides” of the road the marchers travelled.¹²⁵

¹²² Ibid, 118.

¹²³ “Map: Auschwitz environs, summer 1944,” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media_nm.php?MediaId=306, accessed March 14, 2011.

¹²⁴ Lengyel, 201.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 200-201.

Another survivor noted a similar scenario. Thousands of marchers from Auschwitz were forced to march through the countryside. This survivor also recalled passing Polish villages and the minimal effect that the marchers had on the citizens there. She observed, “We were passing a village. A couple was walking through the square. Civilians, he and she. He held her arm. She was smiling up at him. I wished I could go after them.”¹²⁶ Again, this forced march did not occur in a vacuum. The German guards were yelling, shouting, and shooting amidst the shuffle of thousands of marching feet. Yet, in this example, the Poles stood by.¹²⁷

To determine why many Poles remained indifferent throughout the course of the Holocaust is a difficult issue. Individual reasons certainly vary, but there are a few plausible theories as to why so many Poles complied with indifference and silence when more could have theoretically intervened.

One major reason why Poles did not help was because of fear. The Poles were often motivated to remain silent “simply by fear of reprisals” from the Germans.¹²⁸ One of the strictest measures passed by the Germans upon invading Poland was to issue the death penalty for any Poles caught hiding or otherwise assisting Jews. Furthermore, the Germans’ new laws regarding Polish citizens “established the death penalty in almost every paragraph...for all offenses, including the most trivial.”¹²⁹ Thus, there was a distinct difference between lawfully sanctioned coercion and coercion as a violation of the law, of

¹²⁶ Zywulska, 231.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Arad, 378.

¹²⁹ Jan Gross, *Polish Society under German Occupation: The Generalgouvernement, 1939-1944* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 200.

which Nazi occupied Poland fell in the former.¹³⁰ Poland was the only country during the war where such forceful laws were in place, and the fear they generated was palpable amongst Polish citizens.¹³¹ The threat of death did not merely extend to would-be conspirators, but also to those around them. Therefore, “to hide one Jew meant risking the life of one’s whole family, children included.”¹³² Thus, the actions of one Pole wishing to help Jews threatened many other people, often times without their realization. The promised retribution by the Nazis was complete and guaranteed. Because of the real threat of death, and the low-ranking status of Poles in the Nazi racial hierarchy, “not everyone felt morally entitled to risk the lives of those nearest to them, for whose safety they felt responsible first of all; not everyone was able to overcome their own fear.”¹³³

While fear was likely a prominent factor in why many Poles refrained from assisting the Jews, another plausible reason was the diffusion of responsibility. A diffusion of responsibility is defined under the following terms: “individuals, when constituted as a group experience a diffusion of responsibility as a product of the knowledge that one is deciding upon an action jointly with others rather than deciding by oneself.”¹³⁴ Essentially, a diffusion of responsibility pertains to larger groups: “whenever a person is part of a large group of onlookers, the odds are greater that he will allow himself to not get involved with the victim on the grounds that others will undoubtedly become involved instead.”¹³⁵ In essence, the more people who witness an event, the less likely it is that the victim will get assistance. In

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Richard C. Lukas, *The Forgotten Holocaust: The Poles Under German Occupation, 1939-1944* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1997), 127.

¹³² Blonski, 38.

¹³³ Prekerowa, 76.

¹³⁴ Michael Wallach, Nathan Kogan, and Daryl Bem, “Diffusion of Responsibility and Level of Risk Taking in Groups,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 68, no. 3 (1964): 263.

¹³⁵ Charny, 202.

the Holocaust, a large number of Poles had interactions with Jews, and a diffusion of responsibility may have taken place. While there were some who indeed helped Jews, the majority did not help; and of this majority, some may have assumed help was being offered by others.

Yet, a third possible explanation for the lack of Polish assistance is anti-Semitism. As the last chapter established, anti-Semitism was present before the war; and by remaining silent while the Holocaust occurred, some Poles may have exhibited their anti-Semitism. Emmanuel Ringelblum, a respected historian on Polish-Jewish relations who lived, wrote, and died during the Holocaust, stated that “after the German invasion, there was a revival of anti-Semitism in the full sense of the term.”¹³⁶ This anti-Semitism can account for the indifference shown by some Poles: “For some of the right-wing Poles, who had always wanted the Jews to depart, the deportations came virtually as wish fulfillment.”¹³⁷ The idea that the Jews had been guilty of “many sins against the Polish people” was an important concept of Polish anti-Semitism, and this element drove some indifferent Poles to rationalize that “even if Jews shouldn’t be killed, they weren’t worth saving.”¹³⁸

A Pole who was a child during the Holocaust described the indifference she felt towards the Jews during the Holocaust: “I was completely indifferent to the human beings who were perishing in the ghetto. They were ‘them’ and not ‘us.’ I saw the smoke from the burning ghetto, I listened to what was happening there, but—it concerned ‘them.’”¹³⁹ This separation of “us” and “them” harked back to the pre-war image of the Jew as a race apart.

¹³⁶ Emmanuel Ringelblum, *Polish-Jewish Relations During the Second World War*, ed. Joseph Kermish and Shmuel Krakowski (New York: Howard Fertig, 1976), 37.

¹³⁷ Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe, 1933-1945* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 204.

¹³⁸ Barnett, 112-113.

¹³⁹ Walewska, 131.

Therefore, “to speak of ‘indifference,’ or analyze the genocide of the Jews in the context of the larger brutality of the time, does not denigrate the enormity of that genocide, or deny the role played by anti-Semitism.”¹⁴⁰

However, one cannot look at anti-Semitism as the sole reason many Poles were bystanders.¹⁴¹ In all likelihood; for each individual Pole, the reason behind indifference was a personal choice and likely cannot be attached to a single motive. Instead, it was probably a varying mix of some elements of each of the three probable causes. Perhaps one of the better examples came from a survivor who was being rounded up in a deportation. He recalled: “People passing by recognizing us as Jews, reacted in various ways. Some stared with wide-open eyes and some laughed at us. Now and then taunts and curses were directed toward us. A few passed quickly by with downcast eyes as if in sorry. No one would give us bread or a kind word, for the penalty was death.”¹⁴² This scenario covers the general actions and reasoning of bystanders. Some were passive, others were anti-Semitic through words or actions; and yet, the threat of death was promised to any would-be helper.

Whatever the reason behind the passivity displayed by the Poles and recorded by Jewish survivors, the idleness of millions of local Polish inhabitants helped the Germans carry out the Holocaust. In other words, “the Germans were the beneficiaries of the ‘non-interventionist’ attitude of the local people, which kept them neutral and silent while their Jewish neighbors were dispatched to their death. This attitude, even if it was often motivated

¹⁴⁰ Barnett, 113.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Blatt, 52-53.

simply by fear of the reprisals in case of extending help to Jews, contributed to the success of the Nazi extermination machine.”¹⁴³

¹⁴³ Arad, 378.

Chapter 4: Scavengers, Blackmailers, & Extortionists

While most Poles were bystanders, there were those who took advantage of the Holocaust for personal gain. Taking advantage of the Holocaust represents the second level of Polish complicity. Some Poles sought to gain advantage in order to supplement their survival in a wartime environment where morality had changed, and society had become less organized. Other Poles took advantage in more criminal ways such as through extortion or blackmail. The actions of those in the latter group sometimes bordered on perpetration of the Holocaust because through their actions they enabled killing to continue.

Poles who sought to gain from the situation were reacting to a chaotic war environment. When Jews died or were forced out on deportations, looters often searched homes and dead bodies for survival goods or valuables to be used as currency. Furthermore, anytime a Jewish enterprise was liquidated, the wealth that was not assumed by the Germans was spread out amongst the Polish population.¹⁴⁴ Other times, the war economy turned some Poles into common criminals: “In black market trading in occupied Poland, the Polish suppliers were in a position to siphon off cash and valuables from the victims. Some individuals turned in escaping Jews for monetary rewards, and some extorted money or possessions from victims trying to live in hiding or disguise.”¹⁴⁵ In essence, sometimes Polish behavior was “motivated by self-interest only. At other times, for their own benefit—

¹⁴⁴ Hilberg, 214.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

but often to the detriment of their fellow citizens—they took advantage of the norms imposed by the Germans.”¹⁴⁶

There are a number of different ways Poles benefited from the removal of Jews from society. Before the deportations, the Jews needed money and goods to survive after being legally subjugated by Nazi policies. The Poles became the source of Jewish trade and one Jewish survivor noted the implications: “My mother left the house each morning to sell and trade our few remaining valuable. She had made good contacts with the Poles who wanted to take advantage of our desperate situation. One day I noticed that she was no longer wearing her watch, and soon after her wedding ring disappeared.”¹⁴⁷ This description presents insight into how a war economy changes trading between groups. In war, valuables lose their value in favor of survival essentials such as food or clothing.

During the creation and subsequent liquidation of the ghettos, some Poles continued to take advantage of the disappearing Jewish population. One survivor recalled a scenario where the Tyczyn Jews were being rounded up for deportation: “When I got back, Polish men were carrying our furniture outside and loading it into a wagon. They had dumped the contents of our drawers, cabinets, and wardrobes onto the floor.”¹⁴⁸ In Siemiatycze, similar occurrences were described. As Jews were confined to ghettos or deported to the death camps, a Jewish survivor noted this reaction from some Poles:

Like hungry vultures our Polish neighbors waited impatiently for the non-ghetto houses to empty of their owners. The Poles would be moving into larger homes, with extra room for all. With us it was just the opposite: we had

¹⁴⁶ Jan Gross, *Polish Society under German Occupation: The Generalgouvernement, 1939-1944*, 163.

¹⁴⁷ Salton, 25-26.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 53.

been allotted just one square meter of living space per person. The Poles also must have imagined that with any luck they would find that rumored hoard of Jewish gold under a loose floorboard or deep in a hidden basement passageway. They smiled as though they had won the lottery rather than inherited largely empty husks as guilty accomplices to their neighbors' misery...the forcibly evacuated homes were available for the taking by any German or Pole. The phrase "Jewish property" had no meaning. While my family squeezed into one room in our own home in the ghetto, most Jews had to witness the occupation of their homes by cruel strangers or by neighbors who had become worse than strangers.¹⁴⁹

While this passage contains some anti-Polish sentiments, it describes Poles taking Jewish property within sight of Jews who had been relegated to the ghetto or awaiting deportation. Other times, Poles taking property were less subtle: "In the Radom District they rummaged in emptied ghettos tearing out everything they could."¹⁵⁰

After deportations, looters commonly took to the streets to search for money and other valuables. One survivor who survived a roundup noted that after the deportation, "feathers were...floating in the air" as Poles ripped open pillows and comforters of Poles hideouts searching for valuables.¹⁵¹ The same survivor recalled the scene after subsequent roundups in which he managed to avoid: "I was shocked that the town had changed so much in six months! Most Jewish homes had been ransacked by gentiles seeking gold and other treasures. Only the houses on the main street remained intact, and they were now occupied

¹⁴⁹ Kuperhand and Kuperhand, 28.

¹⁵⁰ Hilberg, 214.

¹⁵¹ Blatt, 43.

by Poles.”¹⁵² This example demonstrates the adjustment to life without the Jews made by Poles. Poles had moved quickly to take advantage of not only any riches left behind, but also to secure the richest Jewish property. This statement can be backed up by the reaction of a local Pole to seeing the above survivor in the streets: “‘Oh,’ he said, smiling sarcastically, ‘you’re alive? You could live yet another couple of days.’”¹⁵³ While the Jewish survivor may have intended this statement for prejudicial reasons, the interaction it portrays highlights the use of sarcasm; a speech technique frequently used to express “ridicule, moral criticism, and other expressions of contempt.”¹⁵⁴

Aside from those who sought advantage out of a desire to survive, some Poles resorted to extorting Jews. When the Germans passed decrees limiting the items Jews could possess, Jews often left banned goods, such as furs and other valuables, in the possession of their Polish neighbors. In the words of Emmanuel Ringelblum, this “safe keeping” effort “usually turned out very badly for the Jew[s].”¹⁵⁵ As Ringelblum described the transaction, upon arranging for protection of possessions, the Jews and Poles would enter a partnership. However, these partnerships were easily broken:

The Jews were treated as “the deceased on leave” about to die sooner or later.

Thus there was no need to take them into account. I know of cases where

Aryans withheld payment of debts during the “resettlement actions”, hoping

that their Jewish creditors would sooner or later fall into the German net. In an

¹⁵² Ibid, 81.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ E.M. Dadlez, “Truly Funny: Humor, Irony, and Satire as Moral Criticism,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 45, no. 1 (2011): 2.

¹⁵⁵ Ringelblum, 77.

overwhelming majority of cases, perhaps 95 per cent, neither goods nor personal belongings were returned.¹⁵⁶

Thus, Poles did not always hold up their end of the partnership, and some Jews who survived the war returned to find that the Poles would not return their possessions to them.

For Jews who were not selected in the initial deportations, Poles could command a high price for providing shelter from Germans. A survivor described a night raid by neighboring Poles acting as authorities. When they discovered the hiding Jews, they blackmailed them by threatening to turn in the hideaways unless the Jews paid 100,000 zlotys, a large sum of money in the 1940s. Negotiations managed to lower the Polish blackmailers demands down to 40,000, but the loss of safety caused the Jews in this incident to flee town.¹⁵⁷

Furthermore, some Poles made a great deal of money by either hiding Jews or betraying them. The situation of those who had escaped initial deportation was profitable for Poles whether or not they sheltered the Jews. Poles “received a small reward for revealing the location of hidden Jews and a greater one for bringing in fugitives.”¹⁵⁸ If a Polish person decided to hide a Jewish person, the Polish person had control of setting the price for shelter. Sometimes, those who hid Jews overstepped the bounds between assistance and extortion. Put differently, “payment which exceeded the cost of keeping the person concerned—a condition of rendering help—lowers the moral status of such help.”¹⁵⁹ Some Poles practiced a double game that allowed them to double their money and rewards: “We were told about Poles who offered to shelter Jews for a price, only to tie them up and trade them to the

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Bauman, 111-112.

¹⁵⁸ Kuperhand and Kuperhand, 46.

¹⁵⁹ Prekerowa, 74.

Germans for a kilo of sugar.”¹⁶⁰ Thus, Poles who performed this betrayal not only received money from the Jews for their “safe keeping,” but they also received praise and goods from the Germans upon handing over any hiding Jews. Those who committed these double games bordered on the line between taking advantage and actively participating in the Holocaust. By turning over Jews to the Germans, these Poles were increasing the likelihood that the Jews would either be deported or murdered.

From this trend, blackmailers emerged as some of the biggest obstacles to Jewish survival. Called “smalcownicy,” these Poles practiced extortion often by approaching hidden Jews with their demands and threatening to turn them over to the Nazis unless they received payment.¹⁶¹ Those Poles who utilized the situation to enrich themselves “caused untold damage because they often operated within highly organized networks with much initiative and mobility. One cunning informer could discover and denounce dozens of people.”¹⁶² This problem was also noted in an underground Catholic newspaper called the *Prawda*. The paper chastised its Polish members for “an alarming increase in the number of denouncers, an unbelievable extension of well-integrated groups of blackmailers, threaten the peace of increasingly more persons, making life unbearable for those who, persecuted by the Nazis, feel like hunted mad dogs.”¹⁶³ Emmanuel Ringelblum called Polish blackmailers “an endless nightmare to Jews on the Aryan side.”¹⁶⁴ In Ringelblum’s text, he stated “there is literally not a Jew ‘on the surface’ or ‘under the surface’ who has not had something to do with them

¹⁶⁰ Kuperhand and Kuperhand, 46.

¹⁶¹ Antony Polonsky, “Introduction,” in *‘My Brother’s Keeper?’: Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust*, ed. Antony Polonsky (London: Rutledge, 1990), 21; Ringelblum, 42.

¹⁶² Willenberg, 26.

¹⁶³ Wladyslaw Bartoszewski and Zofia Lewin (eds.), *Righteous Among Nations: How Poles Helped the Jews, 1939-1945* (London: Earls Court Publications Ltd, 1969), 672.

¹⁶⁴ Ringelblum, 123.

[blackmailers] at least once or more than once, who has not had to buy himself off for a sum of money.”¹⁶⁵

Perhaps the most disturbing examples which showed Polish eagerness to find something of value from the Holocaust were two incidents towards the end of the war. Firstly, Poles at the Belzec death camp searched in the ashes of dead Jews for any remnants of gold.¹⁶⁶ Secondly, while Poles had looted corpses of murdered Jews on other occasions, a specific example was after the murder of the last Jews living in the Poniatowa concentration camp. Here, some peasants came in large numbers and also bring wagons to loot belongings and dead bodies in search of gold or other valuables.¹⁶⁷

The idea that likely motivated these Poles was the belief that Jews were synonymous with gold and valuables. This idea extended to lines of anti-Semitic economic thought predating the war. The gold myth grew anytime Poles found gold on Jewish property. For instance, one survivor noted his boss’s behavior the day after the man participated in several roundups with the Nazis: “Solecki opened the shop with a grin on his face. He had had a lucky night: Stolen gold rings gleamed on his fingers.”¹⁶⁸ Incidents like these may have exacerbated the myth and also served to inspire other Poles to search for gold amongst Jewish possessions.

Blackmail was also prevalent in the countryside among Polish peasants. One farmer promised to hide three Jews, but demanded that they first give him all their good clothes: “One night Bojarski [the farmer] asked Fredek to lend him his boots to wear to church. Fredek gladly consented. This was the beginning. After that we had to ‘lend’ him other items,

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Hilberg, 214.

¹⁶⁷ Gutman and Krakowski, 225.

¹⁶⁸ Blatt, 30.

one by one, until one day we were left with only our underpants, one pair of overalls, and one sweater to share among the three of us.”¹⁶⁹ After taking their clothes, the farmer also sought monetary gain. The first time the farmer demanded money, the Jews gave him approximately 1500 US dollars. Following this payment, the Polish farmer increased his demands after each minor incident that threatened to expose the hidden Jews. As new incidents occurred, he took more gold and valuables from the Jews.¹⁷⁰

Sometimes Poles were more forceful in their extortion. With a lessening in the lawful protection of the Jews under Nazi policy, some Poles robbed neighboring Jews. Some of these incidents were more violent than others. One Jewish man, who posed as a Pole to survive during the war, described a scene where he met a Polish street peddler. The Pole, unaware he was talking to a Jewish man, did not hide his motivation and gave a candid explanation of his process of extortion:

He offered me a few jackets, and hats, one of which fitted me. They had apparently belonged to uniforms which had been dyed black. “You’re like a shop,” I smiled. “You’ve got everything.” “What do you think? When the Germans murder the Jewboys, there’s pretty good money to be made.”

“How?” I asked, trying to force the terror out of my voice.¹⁷¹

After revealing the source for his marketable items, the Pole continued his description of what he did to secure Jewish money and property:

“I walk around Warsaw and look to every side. Suddenly I see this sad sack, and I cant help but notice that he’s scared and insecure. I sneak up to him and

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 174.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 174-177.

¹⁷¹ Willenberg, 153.

whisper, “Hey, Mr. Jew, are we walking around just for nothing this fine day?” Now he’s scared all over—his eyes, his face. He begins to stammer, roll his eyes around and say, “Sir, I’m Polish.” Then I tell him, “If so, let’s find a cop.” Then he’s really scared and he says, “Mister, leave me alone.” I say “Alright, but let’s go into this doorway together.” He goes in. He doesn’t believe me, but he’s scared stiff, so of course he goes in. There I give him a little search and take everything. Jewboys usually have lots of goodies on them. If he’s wearing a jacket, that’s good for me. They almost always have green hats. They’re good, too.”¹⁷²

This evidence shows the use of personal threats that some Poles used to rob Jews of their possessions. The Poles then resold these objects to make money. Such actions likely inhibited Jews from seeking out those Poles willing to help because Jews were unsure of which Poles to trust.

Other Jewish survivors recalled similar incidents where Poles more forcibly robbed Jewish property. One survivor described an encounter with a group of Poles who came to his home:

Besides Nazis we also had to contend with gentile townspeople who would rob Jews and plunder Jewish homes. One evening around nine o’ clock, as my mother and I sat on the sofa, the door opened and several men in civilian suits, brandishing guns, rushed in. “Hands up! Face the wall!” We complied, and within seconds, threatening to shoot, they had rounded up everyone in the house. Our neighbor, Chaim Kornfeld, was sick. He stood naked except for a

¹⁷²

ibid.

shirt and begged for pity. We were sure they would kill us. They searched us one after another, took our valuables and better clothes, and packed them into knapsacks.¹⁷³

This example showed the level of hostility some Poles took to gain from the situation. Incidents such as this one bring to light a gray area that existed between blackmailers and perpetrators of the Holocaust. Sometimes the two were one and the same.

The idea of Poles taking advantage of the Holocaust presents a level of complicity that falls between bystander and direct perpetrator. Those who sought to gain from the Holocaust deserve more blame than the silent bystanders, but not as much blame as those classified as direct perpetrators. Instead, they are left to be judged between the two on a personal basis depending on the extent their actions harmed Jews. Those seeking gain to find goods or to seek out means of survival were far less guilty than those who openly extorted and sometimes robbed Jews. Furthermore, the motivation for each scenario was different and unique and as such is worth discussing in some detail.

One of the factors that likely inspired some Poles to take advantage of the Holocaust for their benefit was greed. Whether this greed was motivated by a desire to survive or whether that greed was simply a function of the situation, it still drove many Poles to take advantage of the situation. In this sense, “anybody sufficiently defenceless could have fallen victim.”¹⁷⁴ Yet, the argument could also be made that many Poles were so entrenched in the daily struggle for survival themselves that they resorted to a primitive level of action when

¹⁷³

Blatt, 84.

¹⁷⁴

Prekerowa, 75.

dealing with Jewish property.¹⁷⁵ Thus, their taking advantage of the Jews can be seen as a logical conclusion derived from a survival struggle.

Furthermore, in a state of war, the typical morality people follow can and does change. In essence, “in supreme emergencies our judgments are doubled, reflecting the dualist character of the theory of war and the deeper complexity of our moral realism; we say yes *and* no, right *and* wrong. That makes us uneasy; the world of war is not a fully comprehensible, let alone a morally satisfactory place...one might better call this situation one of moral ambiguity, recognizing that existence involves an irreducible indeterminacy, and multiple, inseparable significations and aspects.”¹⁷⁶ In other words, when chaos dissolves among a large number of people, they typically become less focused on traditional morality. Instead, war often creates a situation where people abandon previously held moral beliefs. In this way, society often becomes degraded and situations can become unpredictable. Often referred to as social disorganization, the dichotomy of morality arises out of behavior aimed at “the deliberate exploitation for private gain of the existing conflicting system of norms.”¹⁷⁷

As the philosopher Emmanuel Kant suggested, war is “the scourge of humankind”; “the greatest evil oppressing man”; “the source of evils and moral corruption”; and “the destroyer of everything good.”¹⁷⁸ In this context, actions such as blackmailing or extortion may gain a newfound merit that would not otherwise make sense. Ringelblum’s description of what happened helps give a more concise understanding of the moral forces at work, “The war had demoralized people who had been honest and decent all their lives; now they

¹⁷⁵ Wladyslaw Bartoszewski, “Polish-Jewish Relations in Occupied Poland, 1939-1945,” in *The Jews in Poland*, ed Chimen Abramsky, Maciej Jachimczyk, and Antony Polonsky (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1986), 153.

¹⁷⁶ Robin May Schott, “Just War and the Problem of Evil,” *Hypatia* 23, no.2 (2008): 129.

¹⁷⁷ Gross, *Polish Society under German Occupation: The Generalgouvernement, 1939-1944*, 163.

¹⁷⁸ Brian Orend, “Kant’s Just War Theory,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 37, no.2 (1999): 325.

appropriated the Jews' possessions unscrupulously, in most cases not wanting to share even part of them."¹⁷⁹ Ringelblum's description of Poles in this instance showed that they had changed through the course of the war. Therefore, the ideas of war as an anathema to common morality carries some substantial weight in the argument of why Poles sometimes used certain situations during the Holocaust to their benefit.

Aside from dealing with a changing morality, anti-Semitism is another logical explanation for the extortion, blackmailing, and other personal gain Poles sought at the expense of Jews during the Holocaust. Pre-war anti-Semitism likely crept into Polish-Jewish interactions during the war. Antony Polonsky believed that if there would not have been so much anti-Semitism before the war, then "our attitude to their [Jews] extermination, which was taking place before our eyes, would have been different. We would not have had that sometimes very evident, indifference, or those inhuman and unchristian responses of the type: 'Hitler has solved the Jewish question for us!'"¹⁸⁰ Furthermore, fewer Poles would have blackmailed, extorted, and otherwise taken advantage of the disappearance of the Jews had it not been for the level of anti-Semitism existing in Poland before and during the war.

The basic tenants of anti-Semitism were encouraged during the Holocaust and served to reinforce some of the negative behavior displayed by Poles. For example, Ringelblum noted, "The united anti-Jewish fronts of agents, uniformed police, blackmailers and scmalzowniks gets considerable help from the anti-Semitic propaganda which has built up the ideological basis for the disgraceful deeds of these unified scoundrels. Anti-Semitic propaganda... provides this gang with material which, in the eyes of the Polish population,

¹⁷⁹ Ringelblum, 77.

¹⁸⁰ Polonsky, "Introduction," 18.

mitigates the criminal nature of handing Jews to the Germans.”¹⁸¹ Thus, the Germans utilized previous and present anti-Semitism to encourage Poles to continue taking advantage of the situation.

One way this was propagated was through local news media including the radio, public address system, and special anti-Semitic exhibitions. These vehicles “all permeated with anti-Semitic poison.”¹⁸² One Polish newspaper, *Nowy Kurier Waszawski*, “continuously incited the Poles against the Jews. Posters were put on the walls of buildings, in railway stations, in trams and other public places in towns, with illustrations depicting the Jews as loathsome.”¹⁸³

Evidence from the Delegate’s Office Interior Department, an underground Polish political organization during the war, seemed to confirm the idea that the Germans utilized propaganda in Poland. However, the same source also suggested that the Nazis were able to utilize a largely pre-established anti-Semitism among the Polish people to better implement further anti-Semitic policies. According to the Delegate’s Office:

...the potential anti-Semitism which still lingers in Polish society, is being exploited by German propaganda and by the underground press of various right-wing persuasions. The issue is exceptionally sensitive; possibly, it may even split the society into two parts, each with different political attitudes. The prevailing viewpoint is that the Jewish problem can be solved only through a massive, internationally coordinated emigration of Jews from Poland.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹ Ringelblum, 129.

¹⁸² Ringelblum, n.129.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Gutman and Krakowski, 51.

Thus, this source indicates that the Nazis effectively utilized pre-war anti-Semitism in certain situations to manipulate anti-Semitic propaganda and gain support amongst some Poles.

While the Germans encouraged the Poles to continue anti-Semitic policies, the Polish anti-Semites also helped the Germans. “The Germans were not especially proficient in recognizing Jews by their facial features and characteristic accent when speaking Polish. Hence the danger of betrayal came often from Polish extortionists and extreme anti-Semites and those involved in pursuing Jews.”¹⁸⁵ Thus, anti-Semitism can also be linked with instances of Poles betraying and uncovering Jews.

Since not all Poles were blatant anti-Semites, the evidence contained above does merit a little further analysis. While anti-Semitism existed throughout Polish society, the essential idea is that it was likely a small percentage of “super” anti-Semitic Poles who utilized blackmail and extortion to gain advantage from the situation. Thus, although all Poles are implicated due to the prevalence of anti-Semitism, the level of personal ascription on the individual level is crucial in determining personal action.

This chapter was written to look at the percentage of the population, however large or small, who took advantage of the Holocaust for their own personal gain. Whether through extortion, greed, or blackmail, some Poles utilized the plight of the Jews to get ahead. While anti-Semitism probably played some role in these situations, coincidental factors make each individual case unique. Speculation can include the changing morality of war combined with the desire to ingratiate oneself with the Nazi occupier as alternative motivating factors in Polish decision-making. Despite the cause, Poles who took advantage of the situation and extorted Jews made Jewish survival more difficult. In cases where a Jewish person was

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ibid, 254.

betrayed and/or turned over by Poles to the Nazis, the chance for Jewish survival was almost certainly decreased.

Chapter 5: Carrying out the Holocaust

This chapter deals with the highest level of Polish complicity during the Holocaust: perpetration of genocide. This chapter will not deal with large-scale atrocities such as the massacre at Jedwabne. Nor will it examine the postwar pogrom at Kielce, Poland. Although these are important in the historical context, these massacres were more systematic than incidents contained here. The only large-scale violence explained in this chapter is a look at anti-Semitic tendencies of the Home Army, or the AK. Instead, this chapter is more focused on individual acts of hostility committed by either individual Poles or small groups. The scope of this chapter is on the daily level and how singular acts of violence strained Polish-Jewish relations. Furthermore, because some of the behavior exhibited by Poles in this chapter was similar, if not identical, to that displayed by the Nazis, it is correct to assert that some Poles were perpetrators of the Holocaust.

Daniel Goldhagen provides one of the better definitions of who was a perpetrator in the Holocaust. According to Goldhagen:

A perpetrator is anyone who knowingly contributed in some intimate way to the mass slaughter of Jews, generally anyone who worked in an institution of genocidal killing. This includes people who themselves took the lives of Jews, and all those who set the scene for the final lethal act, whose help was instrumental in bringing about the deaths of Jews. So anyone who shot Jews as part of a killing squad was a perpetrator. Those who rounded up these same Jews, deported them (with knowledge of their fate) to a killing location, or

cordoned off the area where their compatriots shot them were also perpetrators, even if they themselves did not do the actual killing.¹⁸⁶

This definition is strong because it clarifies that perpetrators are not of one racial group or national unit; and thus, Poles and Nazis who performed the same actions can be classified in the same category. However, this definition is not all-inclusive. There can be no complete definition delineating everything constituting perpetration because each individual situation deserves to be judged in its own unique context.

Random acts of localized violence carried out by small groups of local Poles constituted the majority of Polish acts of perpetration. Evidence has shown “instances of participation by Poles in raids on Jewish fugitives have been authenticated as having occurred in 172 localities.”¹⁸⁷ Thus, the incidents were spread throughout Poland. Furthermore, evidence also suggests that “the overall balance between the acts of crime and acts of help, as described in available sources, is disproportionately negative. The acts of crime outnumbered the acts of help.”¹⁸⁸ The acts of Polish hostility were often recorded and corroborated in survivor testimonies from throughout Poland.¹⁸⁹

One survivor recalled an experience early in the war where a group of Polish “hoodlums” were inspired, “to run through the streets of the Jewish district, looting and hitting every man and women in their path.”¹⁹⁰ After this, they cornered a Jewish man and

¹⁸⁶ Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1996), 164.

¹⁸⁷ Gutman & Krakowski, 237.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid 246.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 238. Gutman and Krakowski also utilize survivor testimonies and the corroborating evidence therein as the main source from which to make many of their basic arguments dealing with complicity and perpetration.

¹⁹⁰ George Topas, *The Iron Furnace: A Holocaust Survivor's Story* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 35.

attacked him for reasons the survivor only described as “for sport.”¹⁹¹ Other survivors recalled similar instances of random Polish violence: “Alfred and I had become friends after Polish louts had attacked us on my street.”¹⁹² Not specific enough to generalize, this example helps create the image of Polish hostility that sometimes faced Jews on the streets of Polish cities.

Another survivor gives an example of the effect these attacks had on Jews: “One day a Warsaw lout stopped me on the street, dragged me through a doorway and took everything I had, not even leaving me a miserable kerchief...Helpless me, with no one to turn to in Poland. All this sent me into a terrible depression, and at times I contemplated suicide.”¹⁹³ The actions of other Poles were sometimes seemingly unprovoked: “On the way to the forest I was noted by local shepherds and grooms...They yelled “Jude,” and they pelted me with stones.”¹⁹⁴

While some violence occurred at a distance, other Poles were more active in their perpetration. One survivor recalled being hunted by Poles: “After a while we heard a loud voice coming from the road nearby: ‘Hey! You Jews, come out. If you come out voluntarily, nothing will happen to you!’ We were hidden in the bushes near the forest edge and could see the road. There stood a single civilian with a rifle, yelling the order to come out.”¹⁹⁵ The interesting component here is the enthusiasm exhibited by a Polish person who was hunting Jews by himself. There is no evidence that any Nazi was directly coercing him; and instead this appeared an action of his own motivations.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 35-36.

¹⁹² Willenberg, 42.

¹⁹³ Ibid, 160.

¹⁹⁴ Kuperhand & Kuperhand, 140.

¹⁹⁵ Blatt, 164.

Another similar situation also displayed Polish enthusiasm for hunting hidden Jews. In the words of one survivor: “We stood outside, cold and beaten for hours, until the Polish police brought the escapees back. The two young Jews were unrecognizable. Their clothing was torn, and they were nearly naked. Their hands were tied behind them with ropes. Their bodies and their faces were swollen and bloody.”¹⁹⁶ Despite pursuing Jews and turning them in for reward, the Poles here had also severely beaten the Jews before returning them to the Germans. In this example, the Jews had previously escaped detainment by the Nazis when “some Polish farmers spotted them. The Poles chased them through the fields and the woods. The farmers caught them, tied them up, and beat them. The Polish police came and took them back to camp.”¹⁹⁷ What was disturbing about this violence was that it was carried out by Polish peasants who were under no direct supervision from the Nazis. Thus, they acted on questionable motives. Not only were the Jews beaten by the Poles, but their capture and subsequent return to the Gestapo resulted in their deaths by execution the next day.¹⁹⁸

Another survivor noted that there was a pattern to Poles who hunted Jews. If a Jew took off their armband, the Nazis often could not distinguish them amongst the Poles. Thus, “the greater problem was the local citizenry. They were particularly good at recognizing Jews; they had lived with us for hundreds of years. Not only adults, but also teenagers and even children, would wait for an occasion when Jews tried to escape; first they would mock, beat, and rob a Jew, then hand him over for a reward of vodka or sugar.”¹⁹⁹ In this instance, the Poles abused Jews, while also seeking gain through the collection of a small reward. A similar example is corroborated in another survivor’s testimony: “No sooner had the [Jewish]

¹⁹⁶ Salton, 106.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Blatt, 42.

butcher moved into the farmer's toolshed then the farmer grabbed him and tied him up. After taking all the Jew's money, he chained him to the back of the wagon and dragged him several kilometers into town as one would a steer to market."²⁰⁰ For this action, the Polish farmer was rewarded with a kilo of sugar. Therefore, active collaboration rarely existed as an end unto itself, and often times, extortion and blackmail coincided with anti-Jewish violence by Poles.²⁰¹

Some Poles were less subtle about their loyalties and openly sided with the Nazis. As noted by one survivor: "Solecki, formerly an illiterate baker's helper in a Jewish bakery and now a turncoat collaborator, put on a red armband with a black swastika, grabbed a gun, and also ran after the Jews as the Akcja began."²⁰² This collaboration represented a distinct change in the personality of one man. Furthermore, he was not coerced into this collaboration, but instead chose his actions based on whatever personal motivations he possessed. Polish people like "Solecki" were called Volksdeutsche, and "they were Poles of German descent and had been given the option of becoming German citizens. On their arm they wore red bands with a black swastika and acted as though the world belonged to them."²⁰³

Often, even Poles with borderline claims of German descent could become Volksdeutsche, especially as the war continued and the Germans needed manpower. In December 1941, the Germans created a specific set of characteristics that defined who could call themselves a Volksdeutsche. This list included but was not limited to: aggressive, fond of sports, sagacious, tolerant, long-headed, blond haired, bright eyes, tall, young, slender, and

²⁰⁰ Kuperhand & Kuperhand, 50.

²⁰¹ Gutman & Krakowski, 208-211.

²⁰² Blatt, 29.

²⁰³ Liliana Zuker-Bujanowska, *Liliana's Journal: Warsaw 1939-1945* (New York: The Dial Press, 1980), 18.

healthy.²⁰⁴ Thus, any person in an occupied country who could demonstrate these vague characteristics could theoretically become Germanized. In essence, “intoxicated by the opportunity to brutalize, plunder, drive off, or murder their Polish and Jewish neighbors with impunity, the *Volksdeutsche* became another ‘grassroots’ source of radicalization behind Nazi racial policy in Poland.”²⁰⁵ Therefore, the ease of inclusion into the German system based on specific physical features or characteristics allowed for a situation where “people could be co-opted into the system and drawn into active cooperation.”²⁰⁶

Another example showed an instance where a civilian collaborated with the Nazis as part of the roundups of the Action: “I caught a glimpse of one girl, about eight years old, running behind a building. She had run out of the escorted column of Jews. She didn’t run far; a Catholic teenager caught her and brought her back.”²⁰⁷ This Pole was not acting as a silent bystander, and she also did not receive any notable gain for her actions. Thus, in actively pursuing and catching the Jewish girl, she became an active collaborator and had taken actions that Nazi officers may have taken themselves.

Another survivor recalled a similar example: “The [Jewish] men were taken to the Siemiatycze railroad station and placed against a long brick wall. Forced to stand with their arms against the wall all day and night, they were cut with razor blades if they moved even slightly. The Gestapo and their Polish friends took turns torturing the Jews with sharp pieces of steel and the toes of their boots.”²⁰⁸ Likely a small group of *Volksdeutsche*, the Poles

²⁰⁴ Jan Gross, *Polish Society under German Occupation: The Generalgouvernement, 1939-1944*, 196-197.

²⁰⁵ Browning, 13-14.

²⁰⁶ Gross, *Polish Society under German Occupation: The Generalgouvernement, 1939-1944*, 197.

²⁰⁷ Blatt, 36.

²⁰⁸ Kuperhand & Kuperhand, 22.

helping the Gestapo assault the Jewish prisoners were on the same level of perpetration as the Germans in this scenario. The same survivor noted further incidents of perpetration:

Enthusiastic crowds of Poles joined in the sadism; to them it was a joyous family outing. Forced to sing Hebrew as they walked, the Jewish men sang about G-d [God] avenging their enemies. The laughing Christian crowd, swigging from omnipresent bottles of wine, beer, and spirits, turned ugly when the macabre procession approached the narrow bridge spanning the river. This was a dangerous place and therefore an opportunity to revel in killing Jews. The Gestapo and their friends grabbed some Jews and threw them over the bridge to the water below. At least one of the victims drowned, but the merry procession did not miss a beat. Once at the cemetery the Jews were ordered to dig a large ditch as a grave for the “Jewish” Communist god. The beatings continued with each new task, and the cries of the bloodied men tore through the hearts of terrified Jewish witnesses like me.²⁰⁹

This scene helps highlight the idea that Polish violence was not constricted to large scale massacres like Jedwabne, and yet a pogrom atmosphere could still be created with a minimal loss of life.

Aside from beatings, abuse, and theft; some Poles murdered Jews. In the previous chapter, there was the story of a farmer who hid Jews while extorting money and goods from them. Later on in the account, the farmer committed further crimes against the Jews. After a failed attempt to barricade the door of the Jews’ underground shelter in an attempt to suffocate them, the Polish farmer took further action: “Suddenly a flash of light and the crack

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ibid, 26.

of a gunshot disturbed the stillness.” This shooting killed one of the Jews, and in short order, a second Jew begging for his life was shot and wounded. The author of the story survived by faking death to which the Polish men’s reply of: “Let’s not waste a bullet; he’s already stiff,” exhibited their intention to kill the Jews.²¹⁰ The farmer, perhaps tired of hiding the Jews and no longer wanting to risk his family’s lives, had forgone a number of options at his disposal such as no longer harboring the Jews, or turning them in. Instead, the farmer sought to murder Jews.

Another Polish farmer who had hidden Jews on his property succeeded in suffocating his hideaways. Along with receiving money for the hideout, he eventually sealed the hideout bunker which resulted in the deaths of ten of the twelve Jews in his care. An even more disturbing example was a Polish farmer near Sarnaki, who had nine Jews on his property. While simultaneously receiving money for their safe keeping, he also plotted to kill them. His technique differed from previous examples: “His method was to pour boiling water into the burrow, and to wait near its opening with a pickaxe, to make sure that anyone who tried to get out would be chopped down.”²¹¹ In this way, the farmer killed eight of the Jews. The one who escaped was so badly burned that he turned himself over to the Nazis soon thereafter.

One survivor told a story of a mother and daughter who were killed by local Poles. Not having consent from the farmer to live on his land, these two Jews were attempting to survive discreetly. “This particular mother would crawl out of her hole at night to forage for food. Sadly, she was caught and killed by Polish bandits. Without her mother to feed her, the

²¹⁰ Blatt, 184-187.

²¹¹ Gutman & Krakowski, 213.

child perished soon afterward.”²¹² Yet, later in the war, this apparently was not an unusual occurrence. As the same survivor also stated, “These Poles would hunt down the Jewish refugees who emerged at night to look for food. While some of them were bounty hunters rewarded by the Gestapo, others killed Jews for the sport.”²¹³

Other single-handed murders occurred at varying locations throughout the Polish countryside. One Pole near Wilno organized the killing of a physician, the physician’s wife, and their son. In a similar act, another Polish farmer in the Kielce district murdered two Jewish sisters with the help of several accomplices. Yet, another example was a Pole from Przegaliny. After providing shelter at a high cost to eight different Jews at eight different times, the farmer from Przegaliny subsequently murdered each one.²¹⁴ The systematic manner in which this Pole killed his Jews raises concerns over the amount of planning needed to carry out these acts. Other times, the murders by Poles were more random. For example, one Pole killed a Jew after spotting him in a village marketplace. Yet, another murdered a Jew he found hiding in a forest. A third incident saw a Pole hunt down a Jew and kill him in the same cemetery the Jew had used as a hideout.²¹⁵

Other evidence suggests that some Jews were more fortunate and escaped attempted murder plots by Poles. In Lukow, a peasant hiding six Jews for large sums of money killed and looted one of the Jewish hideaways. With the aid of his brother-in-law, the Polish peasant was planning to do the same for the remaining five Jews, but they all learned of the plot and escaped. Likewise, in Kurow, a Polish farmer sheltering two men was inspired by

²¹² Kuperhand & Kuperhand, 156.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Gutman & Krakowski, 210-211.

²¹⁵ Ibid, 214.

his wife to plot to kill his two charges. However, the Jews were made aware of the plot in time and escaped.²¹⁶

The Polish police force also represented an occasionally hostile group for the Jews. Under the strain of Nazi leadership and with the Polish government in exile, the Polish police sometimes sided with Nazi demands. Their duties included “participating in tracking down Jews who were in hiding after the ‘resettlement actions’ ... [and] shooting Jews sentenced to death by Germans.”²¹⁷ Thus, evidence suggests that some of the perpetration of the Holocaust was carried out by the Polish police force. “The Polish Police conducted the extermination ‘action’ against the Jews in October 1942...they uniformed police [usually] maltreated captured Jews terribly.”²¹⁸ One example, noted in a diary of the Warsaw ghetto, described a murder committed by a Polish police officer: “Yesterday at about nine o’clock in the evening a Jewish boy aged 13 to 14 was shot dead in front of my window. The murder was committed by a Polish policeman. He shot through the gap in the wall and hit the boy in the heart. The boy ran on another ten steps and then fell dead.”²¹⁹

Some of the most prevalent group violence was carried out by the Home Army, or the AK; which was a grassroots anti-Nazi group in Poland.²²⁰ A group that claimed to be fighting for Polish independence also became known amongst survivors for its hostility against Jews. One survivor recounted a massacre carried out by the AK:

My escorts then led me to a cellar filled with bodies of women and children...“Yesterday I noticed some men in battle fatigues and AK armbands

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ringelblum, 134.

²¹⁸ Ibid, 135.

²¹⁹ Abraham Lewin, *A Cup of Tears: A Diary of the Warsaw Ghetto*, ed. by Antony Polonsky (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1988), 102.

²²⁰ Gutman & Krakowski, 242.

entering the shelter. When we saw them we hid, my friends and I, behind a burned-out wall. A little later we saw the rebels leading the Jews out and dividing them into two groups—men on one side, women and children on the other. On the pretext of looking for weapons, they made a body search and confiscated their watches, valuables and money. Then they took the men out to the street and ordered them to take off their shoes and line up against a wall. A lieutenant gave the orders to fire. The rebels then returned to the yard and put two soldiers in charge of the women and children. They dragged the women and children into the cellar. A few moments later we heard the women screaming. The rebels were raping them. And a little later—a burst of gunfire. The rebels emerged and left the scene.”²²¹

This example raises concerns over the extent of involvement regarding the A-K. It also indicates that although claiming to fight for Poland, some factions of the A-K participated in carrying out the Holocaust.

Other survivors also recalled actions taken by the A-K against Jews: “‘A true member of the National Army,’ he answered, ‘will not kill a Jew, except when he is caught with a weapon. But it’s possible that some Poles posing as members of the A.K. are killing Jews while they rob them.’ A chill went down my spine...I knew of cases in which the A.K. had killed innocent Jews.”²²² Furthermore, another survivor recalled the negative actions of the AK: “Duke Krakuwka’s son ‘helped the Polish nationalist partisans, the Armia Krajow[.],...telling these killers where they could find helpless Jews to plunder and murder.

²²¹ Willenberg, 186.

²²² Blatt, 200.

Instead of coordinating activities with Jewish partisans in the woods, they would attack Jewish groups at every opportunity.”²²³ The survivor continued: “When they operated clandestinely in the forests, they had never failed to kill Jewish fugitives or even Jewish partisans who could have been their allies.”²²⁴ Thus, despite Jewish attempts to join the resistance, this evidence suggests that Jews were shunned or even killed by the A-K.

Although it occurred, it was difficult for Jews to join the A-K, and sometimes attempting to join the resistance was fatal. For example, a Jewish partisan who was supposed to be armed by the AK in order to form a resistance group was ambushed by Polish resistance fighters: “After completing their work on the bunkers, the Polish underground fighters had hidden out in the woods to await the arrival of our men. When our men had filed into the bunker, the Poles, who were supposed to be their allies against the Nazis, rushed out from their hiding places, threw hand grenades into the bunker they themselves had built, and opened fire on those inside.”²²⁵ Of the forty Jews in the party, two survived.

Other mass killings by the AK were frequent throughout Poland. In Lezajsk, the AK infiltrated two houses in which a number of Jews were living after the liberation of some recent camps in 1944. Sixteen Jews, men, women, and children, were killed in the raid and several were wounded. In a third house within proximity, the AK threw a hand grenade which killed nine more recently freed Jews.²²⁶ Another group hiding near Polaniec in a bunker was ambushed by the AK and seven of eight Jews there were killed. Furthermore, another example saw 13 Jews murdered by the AK in a forest outside Jozefow.²²⁷ One

²²³ Kuperhand & Kuperhand, xiii.

²²⁴ Ibid, 76.

²²⁵ Samuel Gruber, *I Chose Life* (New York: Shengold Publishers, Inc., 1978), 41.

²²⁶ Gutman & Krakowski, 220.

²²⁷ Ibid, 217-218.

survivor's group of Jewish partisans experienced further hardships by the Poles of the A-K: "Our comrades suddenly found themselves surrounded by Poles and a pack of vicious, snarling dogs. Before they could regain their wits, Morel and Shmuel had their machine gun taken from them and found themselves forced against a wall. The Poles opened fire on them. The others in the group escaped, but Morel and Shmuel were killed."²²⁸

The AK committed murders of Jews at a rather high frequency.²²⁹ While some Jews were killed collaterally during other operations, many others were killed upon sight. A good deal of these murders took place after the liberation of some camps. Recently freed Jews emerged from hiding to be murdered by partisan groups like the AK. Including the AK, a study done found evidence suggesting that partisan group murders of Jews were carried out in 120 localities or forest ranges throughout Poland.²³⁰

In determining what drove Poles to actively participate in the Holocaust, there are two likely motivations. Often times, Poles who committed murder or other violent acts against the Jews did so in conjunction with blackmailing or extortion. Thus, these were crimes of opportunity. These crimes of opportunity were most often played out in small groups searching for Jews. Sometimes the Polish groups were rewarded directly from the Nazis and sometimes they were rewarded by looting the corpses for any valuables.²³¹

However, anti-Semitism played some role in most scenarios of a Polish act of violence against Jews during the Holocaust. Representing a small section of the population, perhaps 10-15 percent, these "super" anti-Semitic Poles were responsible for the overwhelming majority of violent crimes perpetrated against Jews during the Holocaust.

²²⁸ Gruber, 55-56.

²²⁹ Gutman & Krakowski, 216.

²³⁰ Ibid, 216-7.

²³¹ Ibid, 208.

Thus, it is important to understand that anti-Semitism was inherent in Polish society both before and during the war. While some were complacent with small levels of rather docile anti-Semitism, others exploited the ideology and became active perpetrators of the Holocaust.

Survivor testimonies give substantial and corroborating evidence to support the existence of anti-Semitism as a motivating factor in Polish acts of perpetration. In examining several more situations, the anti-Semitic behavior of some Polish people becomes apparent. Thus, one can utilize the following examples as a cross-section of Polish anti-Semitism and how it manifested itself during the war. In being able to see anti-Semitic behavior in certain examples, it is easier to understand its role for those Poles who helped carry out the Holocaust. In other words, the following examples are not purporting to show outright perpetration, but instead help give a better idea of the hostile nature in which perpetration occurred.

During one roundup, a survivor noted the behavior of the Polish onlookers: "The Polish and Ukrainian teenagers mocked us and spat on us."²³² Another survivor noted a similar experience. Upon witnessing the Germans assaulting Jews and cutting off their beards soon after the invasion, this was the response: "Then I heard laughter from a group of Poles watching the spectacle... The Germans shouted with joy, and the Poles, the people of my town, my neighbors and friends, two of them my classmates, did a little dance and cheered."²³³ During life in the ghetto, the same survivor noted similar reactions from Poles as they walked to and from work: "A German kicked me, and I struggled to keep up with the

²³² Blatt, 54.

²³³ Salton, 16.

others. The Poles on the sidewalks stood and laughed at the sight of straggly Jews being taught by the Germans how to march like soldiers.”²³⁴

This hostility was not a product of the liquidation of the ghettos later in the war. Instead, it was something that survivors noted much earlier, beginning sometimes at the start of the war in 1939. One survivor commented on the Polish reaction to the German invasion: “we could hardly believe the behavior of many of our Polish neighbors. They hugged and kissed the German soldiers as though they were liberators instead of murderous invaders. Polish girls presented the Nazis with bouquets of flowers and marched arm in arm with them.”²³⁵ Another source specifically mentioned the invading German army receiving “friendly greetings” from the ethnically Polish population of villages and hamlets.²³⁶

While these examples were not indicative of all initial interactions between Germans and Poles, many Jewish survivors did recall a noticeable increase in anti-Semitic propaganda upon the German invasion. One survivor stated that this change was almost automatic and that “as soon as the Germans arrived, anti-Semitism resurfaced.”²³⁷ A different survivor noted this change as well, and he referred to it in this way: “A curtain of ice and hatred came down between us and the Poles.”²³⁸ A third survivor echoed these claims: “Polish anti-Semites became more aggressive and shrill by the day. Jews were attacked in the press and in

²³⁴ Ibid, 76.

²³⁵ Kuperhand & Kuperhand, 21.

²³⁶ Noted in 3 Polish-language sources in Jan Gross, *Polish Society under German Occupation: The Generalgouvernement, 1939-1944*, 139-140.

²³⁷ Wyszogrod, 32.

²³⁸ Shapell, 17.

the streets.”²³⁹ German propaganda issued soon after the invasion served to exploit “domestic” Polish anti-Semitism that already existed in the region.²⁴⁰

Polish newspapers and magazines represented the most prolific way in which anti-Semitism was spread. Ringelblum questioned the press: “Why has the Polish anti-Semitic press not stopped its incitement against the Jews even for a moment, and why does the Government press so rarely break its silence on the Jewish question, why does it take so weak a stand in defence of the Jews?”²⁴¹ A different survivor noted the increased virility of the new anti-Semitic propaganda:

Large colored posters were everywhere—on the streets, in the depot, and in the mayor’s office. Jews were depicted as dishonest. One picture showed dead rats being added to ground meat for sale; another showed a big louse climbing from the collar of a Jew onto a Christian Pole, spreading typhus. Others depicted Jews as murderers, sucking blood from innocent Christian children, supposedly for making Passover matzo. The Germans’ anti-Semitic propaganda spread like a virus.²⁴²

Essentially, the Germans sought to exploit any existing anti-Semitism and create new propaganda aimed at encouraging Polish hostility. While many Poles ignored this propaganda, there were some who utilized it as a motivating force for their actions.

Although the Germans sought to exploit anti-Semitism in Poland, the nature of anti-Semitic propaganda was derivative of pre-war Polish anti-Semitism. Government documents from the Interior Department of the Delegates Office provide some clues as to how anti-

²³⁹ Stankiewicz, 13.

²⁴⁰ Michlic, 133.

²⁴¹ Ringelblum, 9.

²⁴² Blatt, 13.

Semitism increased: “The latent anti-semitism that lingers on in Polish society is being exploited by German propaganda and by the underground press of various right-wing persuasions.”²⁴³ In other words, it was easier for the Germans to inspire anti-Semitism when such a culture already existed within Polish society. Furthermore, the Delegate’s Office’s reference to “right-wing persuasions” helps to underscore why anti-Semitism might have existed within the AK, which was after all, a right-wing organization.

Another survivor recalled the local response to a group of Jews being driven onto a cattle car: “People were standing there, waiting for a train. We overheard their greeting: ‘Jews, they’re going to make you into soap!’”²⁴⁴ The same survivor noted similar hostility later in his ordeal: “As we marched along the railway a passenger train passed, a crowd of faces at its windows. They observed us with curiosity, looked at the forest and at the pillar of smoke rising from the burning corpses, and pointing at us they gestured to one another. Some of the faces looked fearful, others pitying. A few smiled with satisfaction. The sight of languid, smiling Poles aboard that train reminded us that we could not hope for much help from the outside.”²⁴⁵

Another survivor noted similar hostility among the Polish population. While Jews were being rounded up, the Nazis committed two separate murders of the infirm. The survivor recalled the reaction of bystanders: “I saw, through disbelieving eyes, Poles—men,

²⁴³ Yisrael Gutman, “Polish and Jewish Historiography on the Question of Polish-Jewish Relations During World War II, in *The Jews in Poland*, ed Chimen Abramsky, Maciej Jachimczyk, and Antony Polonsky (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1986), 181.

²⁴⁴ Willenberg, 39.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 96.

women, and children—lined up along the road and search their faces for—for what? Horror? Sympathy? Would I never learn? I saw instead smiles and even laughter.”²⁴⁶

Other times, Poles offered vocal support for Nazi activities. As a group of SS officers was forcing camp survivors on a march, the nearby Poles encouraged the beating of an inmate as it occurred. As described by a survivor: “As we marched at their frantic pace, they continued to hit us. Along the road Polish civilians came out of their houses to watch the spectacle of Jews being beaten and abused. Some laughed and mocked us and urged the SS on.”²⁴⁷ Although not physically aiding in the abuse, the Polish encouragement to the SS served to reinforce their brutality. As a result, the beatings continued until “the streets were washed in our tears and blood.”²⁴⁸ A similar situation of Polish encouragement was noted by Ringelblum: “The first smile to be seen on the face of a Polish anti-Semite nodding to a German was in response to a blow dealt to a Jewish passer-by.”²⁴⁹

Other survivors recalled Poles who had opened up to them regarding their feelings about anti-Semitism. Not realizing she was talking to a Jewish man who had survived Treblinka, a landlady expressed feelings that were probably meant to be candid to a survivor in this testimony: “Then this mature, cultured woman went on to say, ‘We ought to put up a golden monument to Hitler for having wiped out and murdered all the Jews.’”²⁵⁰ Another survivor had a similar incident where a Pole revealed further feelings regarding the Holocaust:

²⁴⁶ Shapell, 111.
²⁴⁷ Salton, 143.
²⁴⁸ Ibid.
²⁴⁹ Ringelblum, 40.
²⁵⁰ Willenberg, 171.

They said, “Those poor Jews.” But then someone else got up and said, “Well yes, but one cannot get rid of the Jews in any other way. They must be shot. Either they must be given complete freedom, or they must be shot.” “And I,” said the young squire, “am of the opinion that it is better that the entire people be exterminated. It will save us the trouble. His sister...said, “The Jews are not worth our sympathy. They are an ungrateful element. Should we help them now, then after the war they will all turn against us.”²⁵¹

Caught in moments of candid admission, these examples give an idea of anti-Semitism that lingered in some Poles. While not applicable to all Polish people, the expressions of anti-Semitic feelings given here could be representative of the rationale used by more complicit Poles.

A disturbing trend among survivor testimonies was the common reference to anti-Semitism among children. Many survivors noted the activity of children who had already had some level of indoctrination in anti-Semitic ideology. One example where this is defined is in the creation of “Jew-games.” One survivor described a “Jew-game,” in which he found himself a participant. The game that this survivor witnessed was called “Catch a Jew” and it is described here:

In this game, a few boys would pick on one particular fellow and yell, “Jude! Jude Kaput!” The accused, knowing what came next, would try to escape but was usually caught. Here the ritual began. “Jude?” he was asked in a stern voice, simulating German authority. When the prisoner confessed to being a

²⁵¹ Donald L. Niewyk, ed., *Fresh Wounds: Early Narratives of Holocaust Survival* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 153.

Jew, he was made to sit on the ground while his friends ran around him, aimed their cow sticks as if they were rifles, yelling “Jude! Christ killer! Bang! Bang! Jude! Christ killer! Bang! Bang! Bang! The “Jew” fell “dead,” and the game was over. Sometimes, however, if the “Jew” did not admit to being Jewish, then there was the ultimate proof—the proof of circumcision. First he had to be wrestled to the ground. It ended with the bruised prisoner lying on his back with his pants pulled down, his indisputable proof of “pure Aryan blood” plainly visible. Then he was set free.²⁵²

Some of the game’s fundamental qualities are consistent with Polish anti-Semitism. The use of ancient stereotypes of the Jew as “Christ-killers” is crucial because since it was incorporated in children’s games, this must mean that age-old Polish anti-Semitism was introduced to some Poles early in life. In other words, children, who often have no filter, can sometimes be the best representative of what is taught and learned amongst a population.

Secondly, the act of imitation in this game showed the wide-ranging impact of what Poles had witnessed during the war. If games are representative of a common culture, this game portrayed elements of the Holocaust that were witnessed first-hand somewhere before. Essentially, elements of the game in which the German is superior to the Jewish person and has the ability to take the Jewish person’s life are elements that could not possibly have existed in a children’s game prior to the war.

Other survivors noted general anti-Semitic hostility from Polish children. One survivor noted a recurrent incident that happened in the ghetto. “Some stood on the sidewalk and shouted insults at us. The Polish children shouted, “Filthy Jews! Go to the devil! Dirty

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Blatt, 208-209.

Jews to Palestine!”²⁵³ This happened every Sunday while a group of Jews marched to the showers. Another survivor, who was hiding in the Polish countryside, had an incident where Polish children threatened to uncover a larger group of hidden Jews: “Just then we heard children shouting. A group of school boys came running out from among the trees. When they saw us, they began to yell, “Zhyd! Zhyd! (‘Jew-boys! Jew-boys!’).” The survivor recalled that he felt almost as if the children were hunting the Jews.²⁵⁴

While indoctrination in anti-Semitism at the juvenile level is disturbing, the effects it had on some Poles later in life is more clear. One survivor, after witnessing the murder of a Jewish man in the streets of Izbica, noted the response of local teenage Polish girls: “A couple of Polish girls I knew peered through the window. They laughed and joked about the grotesque position of the murdered Jew, Lipsz. A few minutes later they left, still giggling.”²⁵⁵ The idea of murder being comical is a disturbing observation made by this survivor. Furthermore, this example serves to reinforce the idea that anti-Semitism did play a part in the Polish people’s response to the Holocaust.

In summation, Poles who helped perpetrate the Holocaust did so for two reasons. Firstly, some perpetrators assaulted and murdered Jews for monetary or material rewards. Secondly, many of the first group along with several other Poles murdered Jews and participated in the Holocaust because of a deep-seated anti-Semitism. The Nazis spread anti-Semitic propaganda throughout Poland soon after the invasion in September 1939. However, because anti-Semitism already existed in Poland, the Germans had an easier time expanding their anti-Semitic ideas amongst the Polish population.

²⁵³ Salton, 105.

²⁵⁴ Gruber, 70.

²⁵⁵ Blatt, 84.

Even though not all Poles acted on it, almost all Poles had been exposed to anti-Semitism in their pre-war lives. Anti-Semitism had become internalized in Polish culture over the course of hundreds of years before World War II. This anti-Semitism “had a particularly harmful effect on the population of Poland,” and as a result an inseparable cultural divide was formed between Jews and Poles.²⁵⁶ In the end, this cultural separation “creates an unbridgeable distance from those who still belong.”²⁵⁷ This gap between Poles and Jews made it easier for some Poles to exercise their anti-Semitism during the war. Thus, while the majority of the Polish population did not act solely on anti-Semitism, there was a small percentage that used the ideology as a major motivating factor behind their actions during the Holocaust. It is very likely that this small percentage of “super” anti-Semitic Poles constituted the majority of those Poles who actively perpetrated the Holocaust.

²⁵⁶ Bartoszewski, “Polish-Jewish Relations in Occupied Poland, 1939-1945,” 148.

²⁵⁷ Barnett, 112.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

From a historical perspective, the Holocaust is anything but black and white. There are so many differing levels to the genocide that it is often difficult to make any definitive statements generalizing what happened. Given the difficulty, the logical question arises of why does study on the Holocaust persist? The reason lies in the very fact that makes it difficult—“The proportions of its eventfulness have shattered all locality in the restricted sense of a particular place and time.”²⁵⁸ In essence, in studying the Holocaust, one gets closer to understanding human nature and the sometimes dark recesses associated with it. Given its complexity and scale, the Holocaust is still at its core “a man-made event—the result of human beliefs and behavior.”²⁵⁹ Because it is solely a man-made phenomenon, its lessons can undoubtedly teach us more about ourselves.

Through studying the interactions between Poles and Jews during the war, one becomes more familiar with the subtle nuances of a relationship that was anything but static. While there were the “righteous among the nations” who aided the Jews; and should be commended and remembered for doing so, many more were complicit in the Holocaust. By far the most widely practiced form of complicity was the bystander phenomenon. The reason most Poles were bystanders was because the Holocaust happened on such a large scale. Thus, Poles were witnesses whether they wanted to be or not. The second level of complicity was taking advantage of the situation. This level was defined by Poles taking Jewish property or

²⁵⁸ Michael D. Ryan, editor, *Human Responses to the Holocaust: Perpetrators and Victims Bystanders and Resisters: Papers of the 1979 Bernhard E. Olson Scholars' Conference on the Church Struggle and the Holocaust* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1981), 1.

²⁵⁹ Christopher R. Browning, “Introduction,” in *Understanding Genocide: The Social Psychology of the Holocaust*, ed. Leonard S. Newman and Ralph Erber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 6.

seeking rewards from the Nazis for their own personal gain. Sometimes this was done for survival purposes, while other times it was out of the intent to blackmail or extort Jewish people. The third level was active perpetration of the Holocaust. This was where Poles threatened, abused, or actually took the life of a Jew. If not done during an act of blackmail or extortion, perpetration of the Holocaust was almost always a function of anti-Semitism.

In examining these three levels of complicity, it is most important to realize that each individual Poles' decision to harm, help, or remain neutral was likely a combination of a number of motivating factors. While it likely varied widely for each individual situation, the motivations behind Polish complicity fell into several categories including: greed, fear of Nazi retribution, a diffusion of responsibility, or a changing morality associated with war. In interpersonal situations carried out on a daily basis, the interactions and personal motivations are too intricate to be completely understood. Thus, each situation involving Polish-Jewish interaction deserves to be examined on a case-by-case basis. However, there was one common motivating factor given for each level of complicity; anti-Semitism.

The debate regarding the role anti-Semitism played in Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust escalated in the mid-1980s. Scholars of this period, such as Teresa Prekerowa, Wladyslaw Sila-Nowicki, and Jerzy Turowicz argued that anti-Semitism played little or no role in Polish participation or lack thereof. Yet, the publication of *Neighbors*, Jan Gross's landmark work in 2001, unearthed a forgotten massacre carried out on Polish soil where Polish citizens murdered their Jewish neighbors. To further complicate the historiography, Gross also argued anti-Semitism was a crucial component of this massacre. This argument essentially divided the scholarly world and stirred up debate with a renewed fervor regarding Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust.

Through the analysis of survivor testimonies, this essay sought expand upon some of Gross's arguments regarding Polish motivation. Gross's argument of anti-Semitism as a possible motivating factor is backed up by evidence gathered from survivor testimonies, which indicates and continually confirms that anti-Semitism did play a role in Polish involvement in the Holocaust. The real question that arises is to what extent did anti-Semitic ideology affect the everyday decision-making of Poles to partake in the Holocaust or to remain bystanders?

To further understand the complexities of Polish anti-Semitism, one needs to look to pre-war Poland. Polish anti-Semitism did not arise solely from the wartime environment. Anti-Semitism had existed in Poland for hundreds of years prior to the outbreak of World War II. Containing similar nuances of other European societies, early Polish anti-Semitism was a mix of religious and economic elements. With the dawn of the 20th century, new ideologies and a changing political scene ushered in a renewed vigor in the anti-Semitism in Poland and throughout Europe. When the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939, they spread propaganda across the nation to build upon the preexisting animosity in Polish culture. The resulting promulgation of anti-Semitism in Poland had an impact on Polish citizens. Some ascribed to the ideology and others were able to minimize its effects. In connecting pre-war Polish anti-Semitism with wartime anti-Semitism, this paper offers a suggestion as to how an ideology may have affected certain members of a larger group.

It is impossible to determine the exact level in which anti-Semitism factored in each case or situation, but it is likely that it played a considerable role in certain incidents. While those Poles who stood by and those who sought advantageous gain for survival were likely acting out of personal choices, those who blackmailed, extorted, threatened, abused, or

committed murder were likely to be acting out a more complex set of motivations including a higher level of anti-Semitism. There have been many cases argued in this paper where anti-Semitic behavior was shown in reference to a situation where Poles were complicit in the genocide. In the Holocaust, those who murdered or aided in murder likely harbored some anti-Semitism as a direct motivating factor for their actions. However, the Poles who acted in large part on anti-Semitism likely represented a small percentage of Poles who actively participated in the genocide. Thus, while anti-Semitism was widespread in Poland before and during the war, only a select number acted on it. On the other hand, the majority seemed to minimize its effect on their actions. Regardless of the level anti-Semitism played in each circumstance, it certainly constituted some role in Polish complicity during the Holocaust.

In best defining the role of bystanders and perpetrators, there is really only one logical way to summarize, and it lies within our human nature: “Whether or not we are driven by deterministic forces, each of us must bear full responsibility for the choices we make whether or not to be destroyers.”²⁶⁰ It was the personal choices of those involved that make studying the Holocaust so complex; but it is those same singular decisions that set the righteous apart from the bystanders and perpetrators.

Moving forward, research should continue to be done on this important subject. It should not be the goal of that research to seek to place blame on the Polish people; instead, research should be based on the desire to better understand the dynamics of complicity and the effects local populations had on the victims of the Holocaust. In better understanding the roles played by bystanders, blackmailers, and perpetrators, one can more fully realize the foundations of human interaction. In

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Charny, 34.

delineating the intricate details of interpersonal relationships, we get closer to grasping how a group of people who had been a part of European society for thousands of years were utterly destroyed over the course of six years.

Understanding the factors at work in the Holocaust will hopefully lead to a better understanding of hate, ideology, and the powerful forces of propaganda. In coming to terms with these issues, humanity may one day be able to prevent mass genocide from occurring because either the warning signs will be recognized or a local population will rise from the role of bystander to intervene on behalf of the victims. While the past cannot be changed, the lessons pulled from the carnage of the Holocaust will certainly never cease to teach us more about ourselves and our interactions with our neighbors.

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