

Jan Grabowski's research is facing a lawsuit in Poland. New book on the Polish Police during WWII

On the Watchpost. The complicity of the Polish and Polish Criminal Police in the Holocaust. Review of Na posterunku. Udział polskiej policji granatowej i kryminalnej w zagładzie Żydów

Jan Grabowski
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The new book by Professor Jan Grabowski is likely to stir even more irritation among those who prefer to forget the involvement of segments of Polish society in the Holocaust. Along with Professor Barbara Engelking, he is a defendant in a civil suit, accused of infringement of personal rights and defamation. The co-editors of an extensive double volume *Night without End* on fate of Polish Jews in the General Government (GG) lost in first instance in February 2021. In this review, I introduce Grabowski's latest book to a wider readership. Given the attention that the lawsuit and the current Polish government's history politics have gained worldwide, one may assume that *Na Posterunku* will reach a wider audience, once translated into English. Before that, it is my ambition to bring the book's content to the readership and locate Grabowski's contribution in the context of the current Polish government's campaign to defend Poland's name in the world, with Holocaust history at its epicenter.

THE POLISH POLICE in the GG (PP) was created in the autumn of 1939. Soon after the start of the occupation, it became obvious to the Nazi leadership that their own forces were overstretched. They were unable to uphold order in the growing chaos and violence that followed the war campaign in September 1939. This applied particularly to the rural areas, to which a 5,000-strong force of *Ordnungspolizei* (Orpo, the Order Police) was sent. Its prospects for fulfilling its mission were small, given its low numbers, lack of knowledge of Polish and the hostility of the population. In October 1939, all pre-war police officers of the Polish State Police remaining in the General Government were ordered to report for verification and service. They were joined by constables from the parts of Poland incorporated into the Reich. Participation was mandatory, and failure to show up punishable. Jan Grabowski has not found traces of any officers refusing duty, suggesting the hypothesis that very few if any did so. The Polish government in exile viewed the setting up of a new force as inevitable and encouraged the former officers to join, hoping they would be able to protect the population in one way or another. By late 1940, over 10,000 former interwar officers were manning police stations

all over the GG, with some stations in bigger towns almost reaching their pre-war crew numbers. The Polish Police, as the force was called, operated as a force under Polish commanders with German superiors within the police forces in the GG. The Polish Criminal Police (*Polska Policja Kryminalna*, PPK), comprising pre-war secret police and criminal police officers, served directly under German commanders under the auspices of the *Kriminalpolizei* (the Criminal Police, Kripo). The title of the book (ironically?) refers to the PP's and PPK's actions during WWII as "On the Watchpost. The complicity of the Polish and Polish Criminal Police in the Holocaust". As it happens, *On the Watchpost* was also the name of the main Polish police journal published in 1920–1939.

As the PP was poorly paid, the officers were tempted to look for opportunities to make ends meet. Their participation in the extraction of resources from the population (commissions ordered by the authorities, mainly of agricultural products) and related activities gave them some opportunities to earn extra income either by commissioning more than necessary or extracting bribes. A more lucrative business, and less likely to provoke negative reactions from the population, was to extract resources from Polish Jews. There were plenty of opportunities. PP officers took part in *all* phases of the persecution and mass murder of Jews in the GG, from enforcement of wearing special insignia, confinement in ghettos (open or closed, but always supervised), restrictions on bringing in food to ghettos, the possession of cash and gold, to Operation Rheinhardt – the liquidation of ghettos and either killing the Jews on the spot or sending them to death or work (concentration) camps. The final and longest phase was the *Judenjagd*, "the hunt for Jews". It lasted from 1942 to the very end of war (war operations in the GG ended in February 1945) with unremitting intensity, pursuing Jews who were hiding in ruins, woods, in private and farm homes, or using false ("Aryan") papers. Organized *Jagdkommandos* containing German police or gendarmerie, along with Polish police officers, combed through towns and the countryside in search of Jews. Officers of the Polish Police would also intervene after requests from locals, who were likely to hand over the Jews they found. Grabowski shows that the Polish Police engaged to high degree in actions not known to, or sanctioned by, the Nazi German structures, with space for appropriating more of the spoils of Jewish movables and money.

THE NUMBER OF PUNISHABLE offences in the GG grew over time due to new restrictions and the deteriorating economic situation. For a Jew, being outside the confines of the Nazi created system of oppression became a crime. For the police officers, there was a growing number of offences to handle, and to employ for their own gains. Grabowski has previously covered the hunt for Jews in a book published in Polish in 2011 and English in 2013, a local historical case study of the county of Dąbrowa Tarnowska east of Cracow.¹ In a way, "On the Watchpost" constitutes a much



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On the 75 years Remembrance Day of WWII the 27th of January, the Swedish public agency Living History Forum invited Jan Grabowski to talk on the Raoul Wallenberg Square in Stockholm.

PHOTO: LEVANDE HISTORIA

bigger version of his *Hunt for the Jews*, as it covers the whole territory of the GG (including the activity of the PPK in the District of Galicia where *Ukrainische Hilfspolizei* (Ukrainian auxiliary police) was doing the job of the PP), while the groups engaged in the chase of Jews in hiding remain the same. Before publishing *Na posterunku*, Grabowski was co-editor and a contributor to *Night without End*, the anthology of the fates of Jews in a number of GG counties mentioned at the beginning of the text.²

GRABOWSKI FINDS THAT the PP officers were very valuable to the Nazi administration during the Holocaust. Without them, and the efforts of the non-Jewish population in general, the task of identifying and bringing Jews to their death would have been much harder. The German gendarmes or police officers were unable to detect the slight differences in behavior and/or pronunciation, while the PP officers were likely to notice any deficiencies in cultural capital among the potential suspects. Several had known the Jews they were facing before the war, particularly in rural areas and small towns. Appearance was still the single most fundamental identification factor, but there were many others – such as adults renting a room or a flat alone (as many Jews had lost their spouses, families and relatives before going into hiding), or being recognized by former schoolmates or working colleagues. In bigger towns, the visual inspection was the first step in identifying a Jew

before checking documents and eventually bringing the person to the police station if the papers were in order. An entire ecosystem that worked against Jews in hiding developed – neighbors and fellow villagers, fellow passengers and conductors on tramways and trains, rickshaw and coach drivers, police and criminal police informers, police officers, officers of the criminal police. In fact, any person at any time could denounce a Jew, down to gangs of children or adolescents harassing their peers. In most of the GG, the closest available person of authority, the master of life and death, was an officer of the Polish Police of the General Government. In general, the Polish population considered that contacting the PP in order to get rid of Jews in hiding or on the run was a safer alternative than contacting the Nazi security apparatus. The latter were more likely to ask problematic questions and suspect people of hiding Jews or robbing Jewish property, with potentially severe consequences all the way to the death penalty. The PP offered a more appealing way of sharing the spoils, with less risk involved. By the autumn of 1942, Emmanuel Ringenblum, Jewish-Polish historian documenting the ongoing Holocaust, claimed the Polish population viewed the remaining Jews as “walking dead” (literally “dead on the leave”); people were so accustomed to the ongoing murders of Jews.³ Ringenblum was himself denounced along with 20 other Jews in March 1944, in a joint operation of German detachments, the PP and the Polish Criminal Police. All perished.

The participation of firefighters in the Holocaust is a new finding by Grabowski, and an area of potential future research. The Nazi administration called both professional firefighters employed by municipalities and their rural colleagues serving in the Voluntary Fire Brigades (*Ochotnicza Straż Pożarna*) to participate in cleansing the ghettos. The reason seems to have been practical – they were expected to control and contain fires. In some places, as in Warsaw, the firefighters would use their posi-

tion to help Jews escape. On other occasions, they would make sure Jews remained in the burning buildings, so their movables could be plundered later. Rooms and attics were searched for Jews with professional vigor and expertise by those originally trained to pull rooms and buildings apart in order to save lives and property. In rural areas, the firefighters were often likely to take a more active part than expected in cleansing ghettos. Just like their PP colleagues, they also took unsanctioned initiatives when it came to tracking, murdering, and robbing Jews. In areas where the presence of the PP and German attachments was weak, the locals could ask firefighters to assist them in “searches”.

THROUGHOUT THE BOOK, Jan Grabowski is critical of the contemporary Polish “myth of national innocence”. According to him, it has been growing in recent years, and is backed by publications, commemorations, medals, coins and other paraphernalia. “The theme of saving (Jews) has, regrettably, become a hostage of history politics”, operating beyond the context of the history of the Nazi occupation.⁴ Saving of Jews was the single most dangerous conspirative pursuit one could engage in, Grabowski finds. A police officer who decided to save Jews would find himself “at the epicenter of danger”, between Germans, the PP hierarchy, colleagues, and the PP *esprit de corps*. All this, in addition to the “traditional” dangers such as neighbors, fellow villagers, partisans, and robbers (do not forget the old anti-Semitic template of “Jewish gold”). Around 15 PP officers have been declared to be *Righteous Among the Nations*. Piotr Kruk, a captain and head of XVII police station in Warsaw, was executed for defending Jews against his subordinates. A police officer’s help, one soon learns, could take various forms. He could do a minimum and not take pro-active measures, let people through the police cordon during the cleansing of ghettos, or tolerate smuggling of food into ghettos (without which most Jews inside would have starved to death long before Operation Reinhardt). Finally, there was direct support. The last mentioned could take the form, as in the unique case of a ring of Austrian and Polish police officers in Cracow, of facilitating smuggling, fighting blackmailers of Jews, or issuing of false identity documents and smuggling Jews out of the GG altogether. From Warsaw, there is a handful of accounts of police officers helping Jews in several ways.

Grabowski is unable to answer the question haunting genocide research: That is, why and in what ways people turn into mass murderers. He claims there is no simple answer. The much-used explanation, that of the death penalty for helping Jews, does not work in this case, as many PP officers were executed by the Nazis in 1943–1944 for cooperating with the Polish Underground. This generally known fact, however, did not discourage others from continue to cooperate, or even make the first contact. Grabowski has not found a single case of a PP officer being executed for refusal to kill Jews. His hypothesis is that the PP and the PPK were organizations that constituted “one of important elements of strategy of the final solution of the Jewish question”. Their activities had “definitely criminal character”. He also refers to Emanuel Ringenblum, who in 1943 claimed that “Polish

fascism, allied with anti-Semitism, possessed the majority of Polish society”.⁵ Grabowski follows Ringenblum in claiming that anti-Semitic sentiments were probably more important than the potential material gains.

Thorough the book, Grabowski returns with distaste to the attempts of current Polish history policy to paint the Poles as helping Jews when possible, while also suffering almost as badly from the hands of the occupiers (something he calls *Holocaust equalizing*).⁶ Indeed, to anyone – like myself – with fundamental knowledge of the Holocaust in the GG, the fate of the two groups is incomparable.

Grabowski declares that attempts to influence research on the Holocaust on Polish soil by the current Polish government (the Law and Justice (PiS) party and its coalition partners in the United Right) is unlikely to succeed. This because the Holocaust perhaps constitutes the single aspect of Polish history that is of universal interest. Tinkering with this part of the past is not likely to pass unnoticed.

PROFESSOR JAN GRABOWSKI published his newest book just months before a lawsuit was filed against him and Professor Barbara Engelking. They edited the above-mentioned two-volume book on the fate of Jews in several counties of the General Government during WWII – *Night without End*, also writing chapters on the counties of Węgrów and Bielsk respectively.⁷ The author collective found that of the 300,000 Jews who survived ghettos, ran away and hid, approximately 200,000 were either denounced or killed by Poles. The claims of the editors of *Night without End* were just too much for the Law and Justice coalition and the NGOs close to it. *Gazeta Wyborcza* suggests that the multitude of detailed accounts of denunciation and death in the volumes could not be left without comment.⁸ The amendment to the so-called “Holocaust law” (actually changes to the law on the IPN, the Institute of National Memory) were voted into force by both the Sejm and the Senate and signed into force by President Andrzej Duda in January 2018. In a gesture of compromise towards Israel, potential criminal responsibility for claiming Polish compliance in the Holocaust was removed from the amendment. At the same time, the exemption of artistic or academic activity was removed, and those became open to (civil) lawsuits by the IPN or classified NGOs such as the League. Jörg Hackmann has found that in practice, the amendment



The Markowa Ulma-Family Museum of Poles Who Saved Jews in World War II, in Markowa, Poland, March 2019.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

made denying the Holocaust equivalent to anti-Polonism, as denying Nazi crimes was placed on a level with claiming Polish co-responsibility for them.⁹ In the case of Grabowski and Engelking, a civil lawsuit was filed by the Polish Anti-Defamation League on behalf of Filomena Leszczyńska. The 80-year-old claimed the book slandered the memory of her uncle Edward Malinowski who was a village elder in Malinowo, in the region of Podlasie, during the war. According to *GW*, she claimed she was contacted by several people after hearing about the story on the radio. *GW* assumes that the League contacted her, and that this very organization actually was behind the lawsuit. The head of the League, Maciej Świrski, is also the head of the supervisory board of the PAP (The Polish State Press Agency). The lawsuit is based on information on page 150 (*GW* wrongly quotes p. 157) in the first volume of *Night without End*. The statement is based on testimonies of Estera Drogicka (née Siemiatycka), a Jewish survivor whom Malinowski helped by not denouncing her and by using his authority as a village elder to pick her to go and work in East Prussia (by then she had acquired false documents stating that she was Belarusian). Malinowski took most of Drogicka's belongings and half of her money. In the trial against him after the war, she testified in his defense. However, in a Shoah Foundation interview from 1990s, she revealed Malinowski's taking of a chunk of her belongings, but also that he, along with a forest ranger, denounced twenty-two Jews hiding in the forest to the German gendarmerie. Filomena Leszczyńska claimed that the history of her uncle was purposely manipulated so Poles would be depicted as murderers of Jews, requesting a formal written apology in newspapers and 100,000 PLZ (26,000 US dollars) compensation for the damage caused by the publication.¹⁰ According to Engelking, Drogicka testified in favor of the village elder to ex-

press her gratitude for saving her life, but also because she feared for it. When Malinowski was in custody while accused of cooperating with anti-government partisans in 1949, his wife and son enumerated the villagers who had communicated with the authorities. Those were soon beaten up by the partisans, while a paramedic who tended their wounds was killed on the following day. Engelking also underlined the fact that people behaved in many ways in the midst of the Holocaust. Some could be a combination of saviors, denouncers and killers. According to Engelking, Malinowski was something between a hero and a blackmailer.¹¹ In *Na posterunku*, Grabowski illuminates several such cases, for instance of staunch anti-Semites risking their lives to save Jews they found "decent" or for other reasons.

HOWEVER, ONE DOES NOT find the information about the post-war developments described above by *GW* in the text of the book chapter. Faced with the evidence presented there, the reader cannot come to the conclusion that Malinowski "is complicit in the deaths of several dozen Jews", nor that he "robbed" Drogicka, as the main text claims.¹² From the footnote 397 on page 150, one learns that Malinowski fed her and several Jews who gathered in his barn at nights. The information comes from Drogicka's testimony during Malinowski's post-war trial,

and there are no references to the Shoah Foundation Institute interview almost fifty years later, in which, according to Engelking's statement in *GW*, she could safely express her suspicions concerning Malinowski's activities. However, the footnote contains the information that the court acquitted Malinowski.¹³ Thus, there is no reference to the testimony used by Engelking to claim illicit activities on his behalf in *Night without End*. The Polish Anti-Defamation League used this fact, and contacted Leszczyńska for steps aiming at discrediting the scholars. In the ruling on February 9, 2021, the Warsaw district court sentenced Grabowski and Engelking to apologize for "the inaccuracies", while finding those not to be deliberate – a ground for refusing Leszczyńska any financial compensation. On the following day, both historians declared they would appeal the verdict.¹⁴

Grabowski has encountered the Polish state apparatus before, for example when the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs contacted the Swedish MFA with a request to cancel his invitation to give a lecture to the *riksdag* in 2020. His home university of Ottawa received a letter from the Polish Anti-Defamation League requesting the termination of his contract, as he was supposedly promoting a falsified account of the history of the Holocaust. Grabowski has drawn parallels with anti-Semitic campaign in 1968 against scientists and intellectuals in the People's Republic of Poland, the goal being to discredit and scare them.¹⁵

BOTH GRABOWSKI and Engelking have dedicated most of their careers to Holocaust-related issues. They have published dozens of works, written with great commitment and with the focus on illuminating the fate of the victims, as well as showing the perspectives of the perpetrators and bystanders. It is hardly surprising, then, that they would be the first researchers to experience the indignation of a state sponsored NGO armed with the amendment to the law on the IPN. At the same time, the latter institution's employees produced a number of negative reviews of the book, one of these reaching 70 pages. Grabowski described it as a collective work aiming at discrediting him and Engelking rather than pursuing a debate on the topic.¹⁶ The public expression of doubt as to their work is unlikely to upset their international reputation or careers. However, the effect could be a situation when less established scholars abstain from reporting their results black on white, or even from research on potentially "anti-Polish" subjects. The intent was to discredit the editors of *Night without End* in particular, and Holocaust research in general, in the public eye. Footnotes and ways of referring to source material should be matters for discussions within the academic community, and not a base for displaying feelings hurt in a lost case of Polish philo-Semitism during WWII. ❌

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