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SARA BENDER, *POGROM W GRAJEWIE LATEM 1941 R.*
AND JEFFREY KOPSTEIN, *POGROM W SZCZUCZYNIE*
27 CZERWCA 1941 R., OR, HOW NOT TO WRITE HISTORY

The articles mentioned in the title refer to different events, although they took place close to each other in time and place. These publications have two things in common. The first is their methodology, or rather the lack of it: both texts are based on selected extracts from a single source. The second is that in both cases the writers' intention was to justify a thesis that could be called at least questionable.

At the end of 2019 an article by Sara Bender was published, 'Pogrom w Grajewie latem 1941 r.' [The pogrom in Grajewo in the summer of 1941], in the fourth volume of the publication *Pogromy Żydów na ziemiach polskich w XIX i XX wieku* [Pogroms of Jews in the Polish lands in the 19th and 20th centuries].¹ One would expect such an article to examine what happened in Grajewo in summer 1941 after the German army entered there. A pogrom did indeed take place there, and Poles did take part in it. However, it was one of several events that took place in this town at that time; yet we will not learn this from Bender's article.

¹ S. Bender, 'Pogrom w Grajewie latem 1941 r.', in *Pogromy Żydów na ziemiach polskich w XIX i XX wieku*, t. 4: *Holokaust i powojnie (1939–1946)*, ed. A. Grabski, Warszawa 2019.

What, then, was her intent? “The subject of this article”, explains the author, “is the pogrom that took place in the summer of 1941 in Grajewo [...]. In this article, I will discuss the crimes committed primarily by Poles, especially the four-week pogrom in the Grajewo synagogue. During the pogrom, the victims were tortured and murdered by local Poles, with the minimal presence of the German army”²

Below I will demonstrate that all the statements above are false, and that the article is an example of the selective treatment of available sources. Here we have an affirmative attitude towards Jewish sources, as postulated by Jan Tomasz Gross, which in fact is the only one available in the Grajewo Memorial Book (*yizkor*). This source is the *History of the Grayeve Ghetto* written by Nachman Rapp.³ Rapp’s story is unique, even compared to the texts that can be found in other memorial books, biased and saturated as it is with anti-Polish stereotypes. However, Bender does not note this, and does not even do anything as elementary as conducting an internal criticism of the source. Meanwhile, even a cursory reading of the text shows us what we are dealing with. Rapp begins his story by describing what happened in the 1930s. In his telling, Poland, on the brink of war, is a fascist country where a “deplorable regime” ruled on the basis of terror, and whose number-one enemy was the Jews. Importantly, the author notes the existence of the National Party and such organisations as the National Radical Camp, but only in the context that the later murderers of Jews would come from among their members. He also notes the strong influence of Nazi ideology in Poland. In this situation, the author was surprised by the conflict between the good friends which, in his opinion, Poland and Germany were. Interestingly, in Rapp’s opinion, it was the pro-German *Sanacja* regime that started the aggression and ‘hate campaign’ in the press. He claims that the Poles demanded the creation of the ‘Gdańsk corridor’.⁴ Complaining about Poland and Polish anti-Semitism, Rapp ends with a description of an episode that supposedly happened on the day of mobilisation in Grajewo, when newly mobilised, drunken Poles allegedly lunged and shouted at the Jews, threatening to settle scores with them.

It was only the entry of the Red Army into Grajewo which made the Jews feel safe and happy. The situation settled down and “every Jew, without exception, received a job

² Ibid., p. 75.

³ N. Rapp, *History of the Grayeve Ghetto*, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Grajewo/gra174.html>, accessed 1 June 2021 (pages 174–196 are located at this address, but it is easy to switch to other pages).

⁴ Ibid., p. 178.

from the state, and did not receive a bad remuneration”⁵ The new authorities nationalised the factories and bakeries, and opened stores. A school teaching in Yiddish was established; a theatre was also based there, in which the report’s author was involved. “Jews were employed in all areas of economic and cultural life, as well as in town and district councils and in all institutions⁶ [...] For the first time, the Jewish youth in Grajewo noticed the great opportunities to develop that the Soviet government had given the young people”⁷ On the site of the Great Synagogue, which the Germans had burnt down in September 1939, the new authorities built a theatre with 1500 seats. Only the Polish fascist gangs, pursued by some Jews, disturbed their contentment. These “poisonous gangs”, as Rapp calls them, were made up of former native fascists or nationalists.

As we can see, the *Free Łomża* published by the Soviets would not have been ashamed to publish a similar narrative,⁸ and Sara Bender used sources such as these as the sole basis for describing the events of summer 1941 in Grajewo. What is even more bizarre, in the short section entitled ‘The Soviet occupation (1939-1941) as a trigger for the conflict’,⁹ Bender basically copies Rapp’s narrative. She also adds a few of her own thoughts. According to her take, the Red Army entered when the Polish Army was in a “state of disintegration” at the end of the “short-lived Second Polish Republic”. The author also stated that at the end of the Soviet occupation, despite the easing of the anti-Polish line and the decline in the number of Jews employed in the administration and the Soviet militia, “the hostility of Poles towards Jews did not abate”¹⁰ According to Bender, the Poles believed that the Jews had betrayed Poland, denounced them, and participated in the deportations of Poles to Siberia. “Such views further exacerbated the Poles’ hostile attitude towards the Jews”¹¹

The above description of the influence of the Soviet occupation on Polish-Jewish relations can be called absurd at best. It is strange that the author does not refer to a number of publications that explain this issue more broadly.¹² She does

⁵ Ibid., p. 176.

⁶ Ibid., p. 183.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ *Free Łomża* was a Soviet propaganda sheet which appeared on 5 October 1939.

⁹ Bender, ‘Pogrom w Grajewie’, p. 77.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 78.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Here I am referring, for example, to the remaining articles contained in the book *Wokół Jedwabnego*, vol. 1: *Studia*, and vol. 2: *Dokumenty*, ed. P. Machcewicz, K. Persak, Warszawa 2002.

admittedly draw¹³ upon a very good study by Marek Wierzbicki,¹³ but she only takes from it the information that the Russians relied on the Jews at the beginning of the occupation, but then gradually started to treat the Polish population better and better, resulting in a decrease in the number of Poles imprisoned.¹⁴

Two more sections of Bender's article, 'Operation "Barbarossa" and the Polish settling of scores in Grajewo' and 'The pogrom and slaughter in the synagogue,' are basically a continuation of the summary of Rapp's narrative. Admittedly, the author notes the existence of another Jewish testimony, that of Zelik Tetnbojm,¹⁵ but uses it to a very limited extent, relying only on what appears in the article by Andrzej Żbikowski.¹⁶ In addition, the very way in which she uses Rapp's account must raise a number of doubts. Despite his negative attitude towards the Poles, Rapp does not claim that they were entirely to blame for what happened to the Jews in Grajewo. Bender, on the other hand, wishes to show it very much. She expresses this clearly at the end of the subsection:

The crimes that took place in Grajewo in the summer of 1941 are unique in nature because the local Jews had experienced persecution from both Germans and Poles. This was the result of the Poles' deep hatred towards Jews – a hatred and hostility so great that it surprised even the Germans. The latter allowed the Poles to do whatever they wanted with the Jews for a month. The tortures which Poles subjected the Jewish men imprisoned in the Grajewo synagogue in July 1941 were characterised by particular cruelty. Even when comparing them with the murders of Jews in other towns in the region, it can be said that they had no equal.¹⁷

¹³ M. Wierzbicki, 'Stosunki polsko-żydowskie za Zachodniej Białorusi w latach 1939–1941', in *Wokół Jedwabnego*, vol. 1, pp. 129–58.

¹⁴ The author fails to note that in another paragraph, Wierzbicki writes that the Poles were the most repressed ethnic group in Western Belarus, and the loss of Jews in administrative posts resulted from the influx of *vostochniks* (persons born in the eastern part of the area which was part of the Soviet Union prior to 1939), *ibid.*, p. 157.

¹⁵ Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego (Archives of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw), Underground archives of the Białystok ghetto, 204/10, Zelik Tetnbojm, 'Der blutike Kapitel Grayve' (The bloody chapter of Grajewo).

¹⁶ A. Żbikowski, 'Pogromy i mordy ludności żydowskiej w Łomżyńskim i na Białostocczyźnie latem 1941 roku w świetle relacji ocalałych Żydów i dokumentów sądowych', in *Wokół Jedwabnego*, vol. 1, pp. 180–84.

¹⁷ Bender, 'Pogrom w Grajewie', p. 77.

And later:

The Germans were well aware of the Poles' hatred towards the Jews. The awareness that the Germans had left the Jews to their fate and did not intend to intervene in their defence ignited the [Poles'] lust for blood [...] It can be taken for granted that no one forced the Poles to murder the Jews [...] They had literally been looking for such an opportunity, and when it finally arose, they took advantage of the chaos prevailing at the beginning of the German invasion, and attacked their Jewish neighbours in an organised and extremely cruel manner.¹⁸

Apart from the Jewish reports, there are quite a large number of Polish sources from which we can find out what really happened in Grajewo in the summer of 1941; however, Bender did not use them in her work. While it may be understandable that she could have found it troublesome to find the documents on the above-mentioned subject in the resources of the Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance (hereinafter: AIPN),¹⁹ she should nevertheless have been able to find at least two very relevant books. The first is *Grajewo w latach wojny i okupacji* [Grajewo during the war and occupation], in which we can find an article by Waldemar Monkiewicz entitled 'Zbrodnie Wehrmachtu na ziemi grajewskiej' [The crimes of the Wehrmacht in Grajewo district];²⁰ the second is the very interesting *Diary stored in a barrel* by Władysław Świacki.²¹ Świacki, codename 'Sęp' [Vulture] (1900–72), was one of the first organisers of the ZWZ-AK [*Związek Walki Zbrojnej-Armia Krajowa*: the Union of Armed Struggle, from February 1942 the Home Army] in Grajewo. On the orders of his superiors in the underground, he became the commander and organiser of the auxiliary police in Grajewo in summer 1941. In subsequent years he was an active member of the ZWZ-AK, took part in the battle in Grzędy

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 86.

¹⁹ Oddziałowe Archiwum IPN w Białymstoku (Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance Branch in Białystok; hereinafter: AIPN Bi) 646/11, Files in the criminal case against Maciejewski, Wincenty; AIPN Bi 405/45; Files in the criminal case against Jarząbek, Stanisław; AIPN Bi 410/18; Files of the investigation in the case of Gąszewski/Gąsiewski, Aleksander. The materials on the case of Maciejewski, who was one of those who guarded the theatre and tortured prisoners, are particularly interesting.

²⁰ *Grajewo w latach wojny i okupacji, Materiały z sesji popularno-naukowej odbytej w Grajewie dnia 19 stycznia 1985 roku*, Grajewo 1986.

²¹ W. Świacki, *Pamiętnik przechowany w beczce*, Grajewo 2007.

on 8–9 September 1944. After being arrested some time later, he was deported to Germany; the diary ends with his return to Poland. After a few years, the author started an underground conspiracy against the new government, as a result of which, after being arrested and tried by the Communist judiciary, he spent five years in a prison in Wronki. He wrote his diary in the 1960s, which was hidden and preserved by another well-known conspirator, Prof. Stanisław Skrodzka-Kumor. The story of Świacki – a direct witness to the events – is invaluable, especially since he did not conceal certain facts that show some of Grajewo's Polish inhabitants in a bad light. Also, he described them at a time when no one could have imagined how important these facts would later become in historiography. Let us then juxtapose the story told by Sara Bender and Nachman Rapp with the account of Władysław Świacki.

So, according to Sara Bender, what happened in the summer of 1941 in Grajewo, and how does she justify her description as quoted above?

The Germans supposedly entered the town on 24 June. The next day at 10 a.m., the Jews were assembled in the market square, where a German officer gave a speech in which he called them a nation of criminals whose blood was impure. Hence, the Jews could no longer live among other peoples, and in the future they would be liquidated. On penalty of death, they were to obey every German. A rumour spread among the frightened Jews that Poles from the criminal underworld were preparing for a pogrom, and that the Germans had told them that killing the Jews would be safe.

According to Bender, the pogrom took place after Sunday mass on 29 June 1941. Poles armed with axes and sticks began to attack Jews in their homes and in the streets. Ten Jews were killed and about thirty were wounded. Rapp's account states that the Poles launched the attack immediately after leaving church. At the same time, however, we have reports that Father Aleksander Peża and the Communist Henryk Sobolewski strongly opposed it. Here we have a curiosity, because Rapp said that the priest who called on the community not to be drawn into German provocations was denounced by the Poles and then killed by the Germans. However, this story about the death of Father Peża turned out to be untrue, as already pointed out by Żbikowski.²² The pogrom supposedly ended upon the intervention of the German gendarmes, who

²² Żbikowski, 'Pogromy i mordy', p. 184. However, contrary to his report, Fr. Peża was in fact later murdered by the Germans for his underground activity, on 15 July 1943. <https://grajewiak.pl/index.php/biogramy/631-peza-aleksander>, accessed 2 July 2020.

shot three of the 'pogromists' near the church. The Germans allegedly intervened at the request of a Jewish delegation. Here Bender ends her story of the pogrom on 29 June.²³ This is the first example of how the author selectively treats her sole source, as Rapp explains the background to the events:

It was just a clever trick on the part of the German executioners who, on the one hand, organised the pogrom, and when it happened, they pretended not to know about it. On the other hand, they incited the Christian population against the defenceless Jews. [...] This cunning game was organised in such a way that later, when the Germans imprisoned the Jews in the ghetto, the Jews took it as a favour to them that they would live far away from the Poles, who had threatened them with a similar pogrom every day.²⁴

Rapp also told the rest of the story. The Germans supposedly took several of the wounded Jews to the hospital. There, they brought a Pole, Lutek Remiszewski, to one of them, whom the wounded man mistakenly thought was one of his torturers. As a result, Remiszewski and other Poles ended up in the synagogue building, which was turned into a prison. Rapp explains that the Germans' goal was to force the Poles and the Jews into confrontation. Bender did not acknowledge these elements: first, that the pogrom had been organised by the Germans; second, that Poles were also imprisoned in the synagogue. As we will see later, the latter fact is completely incompatible with the further course of the author's narrative.

The next day, an SS and Gestapo unit arrived in Grajewo. About five hundred Jewish men were gathered in the market square.²⁵ Then the Poles were called upon to point out the Communists. The ones indicated were forced to leave the ranks, and then the Poles started beating them mercilessly. These beatings took place without any involvement on the part of the Germans.²⁶ A few days later (on 3 July), the situation was repeated. This time around three hundred Jews were gathered in the cattle market. There was

²³ Bender, 'Pogrom w Grajewie', p. 80.

²⁴ Rapp, *History of the Grayeve Ghetto*, p. 192.

²⁵ In the interwar period, Grajewo was a *poviat* town in the north-western part of the Białystok province. In 1921 it was inhabited by 7346 people, including 2834 people who declared the Jewish faith, and of whom 2484 proclaimed Jewish nationality. In 1937, 9500 people lived in Grajewo, 3000 of whom were Jews.

²⁶ This information is not available in Rapp, but in Tetnbojm's note 15.

the selection, the beating and photographing by the Germans, and then the victims were brought to the synagogue and imprisoned there. Then the Germans left, and the Jews were watched by the Poles. Next began what Bender calls “the pogrom in the synagogue”, in which the hundreds of Jews guarded by the Poles had been imprisoned for four weeks. The prisoners were forced to work, then beaten, tortured and murdered in various, quite sophisticated ways. The commanders of the Polish torturers were named as Dawidowski and Staniszewski, who in addition extorted “remnants of property” from the families of the victims. In August, the ordeal ended with the execution of the prisoners by the Germans. A little earlier, on 10 August, a ghetto had been established.²⁷

Rapp does indeed describe all this in his account. He talks about what the Poles did, but clearly points out that the perpetrators of many of the tortures, such as throwing people into a basement full of dead bodies, were “German gangsters”.²⁸ It was the Germans who organised physical exercises involving jumping over benches and jumping through the window from the second floor. Those who broke their legs when jumping were finished off with truncheons. It was the Germans who forced two Jewish men to kiss, and then beat them as they did so, and also when they stopped. It was finally on 26 August that the Germans set up a mock court which sentenced about 120 Jews to death. The list of crimes described by Rapp is much longer. True, a few Polish criminals played an auxiliary role in the abuse of the victims. But Rapp clearly identifies the Gestapo as the main perpetrators. He writes: “Everything was carried out by the Gestapo and a few Poles”.²⁹

Bender does not make any note of these descriptions – an unusual way of treating the source. For her, the perpetrators of what happened in Grajewo were the Poles alone, because – as she explains in the section ‘Why here?’ – they were anti-Semites and nationalists incited by the Church.³⁰ Of course, one may write something like that, but does it have anything to do with academic research?

Let us also consider how Władysław Świacki saw the course of the events described above. The chronology he gives is slightly different, but it does not significantly affect the overall picture of the events. In his telling, on the morning of 29 June 1941, several

²⁷ Bender, ‘Pogrom w Grajewie’, pp. 81–82.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

³⁰ Bender, ‘Pogrom w Grajewie’, pp. 83–85.

dozen Gestapo men, commanded by an officer whom Świacki describes as a colonel named 'Kolasa' came to Grajewo.³¹ The Gestapo men were joined by soldiers, gendarmes and some civilians from the vicinity of Ełk and Prostki. Some of the Germans then began to rob Jewish houses. Świacki, along with others, stood behind the church wall and watched what was happening. They all saw how the Gestapo officer spoke to the Jews, insulted them and issued orders similar to those described by Rapp. Then the Jews were led through a line of torturers who beat them with clubs. Some of them were killed at that time. The Germans beat the Poles and forced them to help in the massacre of the Jews. The Germans allegedly stuck sticks in their hands and photographed them. After a few hours it turned out that about eighty people had been killed. However, Świacki noted that some Poles said that Hitler would free Poland from the Jews. Then the Gestapo left. In the subsequent actions their place was taken by local bandits, commanded by two individuals named as Szamina and Staniszewski. Interestingly, Świacki stated that he had not seen them before. Over a hundred people were killed or injured during the pogrom. Note that Świacki gives a much higher number of victims than Rapp. This was all accompanied by large-scale looting. Then Świacki, together with Fr. Peża and Mgr. Kulesza, went to the town commander, *Hauptmann* Schmidt, to ask for an intervention. It ended with the above-mentioned shooting of three Poles in front of the church.

In the following days, the group led by Szamina and Staniszewski, under authorisation from the Gestapo, began arresting Jews, Russians and Poles, as real or imaginary collaborators with the Soviet authorities. Those arrested were gathered in the former synagogue, which the Soviets had converted into a theatre. At that time, at the initiative of the German authorities, the Polish auxiliary police were established, and, after certain vicissitudes, Stanisław Świacki was appointed its commander. The reason for creating this police force was the fact that the gendarmes travelled around the powiat, and the Gestapo travelled from Ełk. Meanwhile, the gang led by Szamina and Staniszewski became more and more audacious. Schmidt handed over Soviet rifles to fifteen men who had joined the police. This body was supposed to keep order in the town; however, when asked if they could deal with the torturers from the theatre, Schmidt replied that they were under the Gestapo's control and could not be touched. Świacki knew

³¹ From the reports obtained by Monkiewicz, it appears that officer was called Kuleschka (*Grajewo w latach wojny i okupacji*, p. 88).

that terrible crimes were taking place in the theatre, that the dead were piling up in the cellars. Despite the commandant's repeated requests to intervene in what was happening in the theatre, Schmidt consistently refused. Not only that: he ordered the policemen to set up a station near the theatre. However, Świacki did not give up and began to collect evidence that the bandits were extorting money from the families of those imprisoned. A series of efforts and clever intrigues eventually led to the arrest of the perpetrators. The policemen took over the supervision of the prisoners and collected further information about the actions of Szamina, Staniszewski and their henchmen. Unfortunately, at some point the Gestapo came to supervise the prisoners and made them jump through the window, after which they were beaten. They also released Szamina and Staniszewski. Then the mock trial was conducted, which Świacki witnessed; this almost cost him his life, as he refused to participate in shooting the prisoners. The other policemen also refused to do so. However, they were forced to escort the victims to the Jewish cemetery.³²

Świacki wrote his story twenty years after the period in question, and he had perhaps confused the sequence of events. In describing these incidents, he probably also whitewashed the members of his auxiliary police: reading the files mentioned in footnote 19 indicates that things could have been a bit different, and that events were not as crystal-clear as the author wants to portray them. However, this does not change the fact that this was a clear reportage of the activities of the occupiers in Grajewo. The Germans found around a dozen men in the town who eagerly participated in their undertakings. Świacki strongly condemns the actions of these people, and claims they were later held in contempt.

While it can still be said that a pogrom was held on 29 June in which a group of residents participated, calling what took place in the synagogue (theatre) a pogrom and saying that it was carried out by Poles alone is bizarre, and does not even follow from Rapp's account on which Bender relied.

The second article I would like to discuss is the publication by Jeffrey Kopstein, 'Pogrom w Szczuczynie 27 czerwca 1941 r.' [The pogrom in Szczuczyn on 27 June 1941].³³ This is another example of how biased a difficult historical source such

³² Świacki, *Pamiętnik przechowany w beczce*, pp. 171–91.

³³ J. Kopstein, 'Pogrom w Szczuczynie 27 czerwca 1941 r.', in *Pogromy Żydów*, vol. 4, pp. 59–71.

as the memorial books can be, and also how theses of great recklessness can be drawn up after making a selective reading of the text.

In the introduction, Kopstein puts forward the thesis that the pogrom in Szczuczyn was typical of a whole wave of pogroms in Białystok and Łomża. The author does not justify this thesis in any particular way, although it is at least counterfactual.

At the beginning, Kopstein discusses the source he uses – because, as in Bender's article, only one is used – the letters of Chaja Sójka Golding contained in the memorial book of Szczuczyn.³⁴ At the same time, the author accuses Żbikowski³⁵ of not using the most valuable reports, but of only referring to the testimony of Basia Kacper.³⁶ It is obvious that Kacper's report, although enigmatic, is consistent and specific. Chaja Sójka's letters are chaotic and emotional, and in terms of factography, we cannot learn much from them. Nevertheless, in Kopstein's opinion, these are the most valuable source. Going further, one might ask why the author does not inform the reader how Chaja was able to write these letters and how many there were. Nor does he note that the same memorial book also contains the account of Mojżesz Farberowicz, which contributes a lot to the description of events. Moreover, Chaja Golding Keyman's account in Grajewo's memorial book is readily available from other sources.³⁷ One can also point to the accounts of the aforementioned Golding and her sister Sara, contained in the New York newspaper *Forward* on 5 May 1946.³⁸ Let us assume, however, that these sources and the files of the 'August' trials as collected in the Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance in Białystok were hard for the author to access. However, he could at least have compared the content of Golding's account with what Żbikowski stated about these trials. Unfortunately, Kopstein's sole source is Golding's letters, or in fact three extracts from them, which the author supplements with his own commentary. It is true that he mentions the accounts he found in Mirosław Tryczyk's book *Miasta śmierci* [Cities

³⁴ Chaja Sójka Golding's letters are in the Szczuczyn Memorial Book, pp. 44–62 <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/szczuczyn/szc044.html>, accessed 1 June 2021. Golding escaped with her family from the Szczuczyn ghetto to the Białystok ghetto from where they came to Oświęcim. After the war, she left for the Netherlands and wrote her letters from there.

³⁵ Żbikowski, 'Pogromy i mordy', pp. 172–80.

³⁶ Basia Kacper (actually named Batia, i.e. the daughter of God) was a seamstress from Szczuczyn, who survived by hiding in the vicinity of Grajewo, including in the town of Grabowo. After the war, she gave a testimony to the Jewish Historical Commission in Białystok; she also testified twice at the court trials of the perpetrators of the pogrom. Her account can also be found in the Memorial Book of Grajewo.

³⁷ <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Grajewo/gra215.html>, accessed 1 June 2021, pp. 218–25.

³⁸ AIPN Bi 015/350, Files without title and pagination.

of death],³⁹ maintaining that they corroborate the Golding sisters' stories in the Memorial Book.

The first fragment of the Memorial Book cited by Kopstein discusses how, after the outbreak of the German-Soviet war, the Poles just released from Soviet prisons, burning with hatred for Jews and Bolsheviks, took power in the town for two weeks. The result was a pogrom on the night of 27–28 June 1941, as a result of which several hundred people were killed. The author took pains to cite the extract with the most drastic descriptions of the murders. The next section reports on how a group of Jewish women went to seek help from Polish intellectuals and a priest, and finally got it by bribing some German soldiers who had accidentally ended up in the town. The theme of the Polish intelligentsia's indifference returns in the third extract from Chaja's letter, regarding a certain secretary of the notary Tyszka, who appropriated the rabbi's coat. Kopstein claims that:

the pogrom broke out and spread not only because of hatred, hostility and rage, but also because of the undisguised indifference of the key figures of the Polish community to the fate of the local Jews [...]. Meanwhile, neither the priests nor intellectuals were moved by the frightened Jewish women's dramatic pleas for intercession, as is emphasised by numerous testimonies of this and other pogroms. Neither the clergy nor the lay leaders of the community lifted a finger; they did not show the slightest sign of solidarity with their fellow citizens.⁴⁰

If Kopstein had read other accounts from Szczuczyn and the surrounding area, he would have easily seen that many of them contradicted his thesis. A classic example is the attitude of the inhabitants of Knyszyn and Rutki, and of certain clergymen from Knyszyn, Grajewo and Jasionówka. There is also an interesting account from Szczuczyn itself that those who opposed the bandits were beaten by the 'pogromists'.⁴¹ The author completely ignores the fact that the townspeople had already lived for

³⁹ M. Tryczyk, *Miasta śmierci. Sąsiedzkie pogromy Żydów*, Warszawa 2015.

⁴⁰ Kopstein, 'Pogrom w Szczuczynie', p. 63.

⁴¹ Branch Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation, Institute of National Remembrance in Białystok, Files of investigation 19/06/Zn into the participation in the murders of Polish citizens of Jewish nationality on 5 July 1941 in Wąsosz, Grajewo powiat, Report of the interrogation of the witness Stanisława Kumor of 5 November 2009 by prosecutor Piotr Dąbrowski, pp. 965–67.

almost two years under Soviet terror, as a result of which many of them had died, and even more had been deported deep into the USSR. A few days before the events discussed, the direct fighting, during which a significant part of the town's buildings had been destroyed, came to an end. He does not notice – because it is not mentioned in Chaja's account – that the Germans had already started their cleanup of the town, and it was on their orders that the pogrom he described was carried out. Moreover, how could the intelligentsia have opposed an armed, drunken gang running around the streets, robbing and murdering Jews, in addition doing so at the Gestapo's orders? The author contradicts himself, describing how Chaja and other women went to work for the Germans. So in the end, who was in charge in the town?

“Two weeks after the June pogrom”, the author continues, “on 13 July 1941, the local authorities [referring to bodies made up of Poles, created by the Germans] organised another massacre, or at least participated in it”.⁴² This time he is referring to the murder at the cemetery in Skaje, during which about a hundred Jews were killed. When describing this event, Kopstein refers to the account of one Barbara K., which he took from Tryczyk. He does not notice that this is in fact Basia Kacper, whom he himself referred to at the beginning of his article. The error stems from the fact that while writing his book, Tryczyk did not notice that ‘Basia’ was a Polonisation of the Jewish name ‘Basha’ (itself derived from ‘Batia’), and decided to change it to ‘Barbara’ [of which ‘Basia’ is a common hypocoristic – translator's note], which Kopstein simply copied. We later read: “Polish peasants from the village of Skaje took part in burying the bodies, which indicates the material motives of the pogrom's perpetrators”.⁴³ This is one of the most bizarre sentences in the article. Of course, it is true that robbery was a key motive for the murderers. One has to ask, however: what was the viewpoint of the peasants, who were being forced under German orders to bury the dead?

The author further claims that “preserved sources [which ones? – P.K.] testify to the negligible presence, or even the absence, of the Germans during the above-mentioned events”.⁴⁴ This is not true. All the criminals' actions were carried out on German orders.

⁴² Kopstein, ‘Pogrom w Szczuczynie’, p. 64.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

German control was complete, as evidenced by the fact that the insubordination of three of the pogrom's leaders ended in their death at the hands of the Germans.⁴⁵

Kopstein's fundamental error, however, is different. One can indeed draw conclusions similar to those he has presented, on the basis of the one source he used. But his description covers only a small spectrum of what happened in Szczuczyn and its vicinity. It is a little as if the description of the defensive war of 1939 was limited to the defence of Westerplatte. And the events in the town are important, if not crucial, for understanding what happened in the Łomża region in the summer of 1941.

But it does not stop there. Paradoxically, most of the article is devoted not to a description of the events in the town (3½ pages), but an analysis of the causes of why they happened (5½ pages).

Unfortunately, there is nothing innovative and new in this part of the article apart from the currently fashionable topics of Polish nationalism and anti-Semitism. The author then discusses the significance of the Soviet occupation. Before the Soviets appeared in the town, the Germans ruled there for several days. At that time, they allegedly deported about three hundred Jews from Szczuczyn to Germany. This was in accordance with the order from the German Supreme Command of the Land Forces (OKH) of 24 July 1939, according to which men capable of military service aged 17 to 45 were sent as prisoners to camps in East Prussia.⁴⁶ Both Jews and Poles were deported; most of them did not return to Szczuczyn. Kopstein claims, although there is no proof, that the Germans did this "probably with the participation of the Poles".⁴⁷

Like other authors, Kopstein then tries to demonstrate that the thesis that the Jews supported Soviet power is false. His proof is a list of members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolshevik) in Szczuczyn, of which Jews supposedly made up about 15 per cent. He also claims that a significant part of the Jewish elite was deported to Siberia, although it is impossible to guess where he gets this information.⁴⁸

Then we try to define the significance of Germany and its policy for the events that took place in summer 1941. Of course, he cites the directive by Reinhard Heydrich, quoted everywhere, according to which the Germans controlled the pogrom policy,

⁴⁵ AIPN Bi 403/135/3, District Court in Elk, Minutes of the main hearing of 17 March 1949, p. 15.

⁴⁶ J. Kowalczyk, 'Zbrodnie Wehrmachtu w regionie białostockim w latach 1939–1945', *Biuletyn GKBZH* 1982, vol. 31, p. 93.

⁴⁷ Kopstein, 'Pogrom w Szczuczynie', p. 64.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

but it was in Szczuczyn that “the Poles developed their own detailed plan of violence”.⁴⁹ It remains a mystery to me on what basis the author comes to such a conclusion. It cannot in any way be derived from the letters of Chaja Sójka Golding. I assume it is a copy of the thoughts of Tryczyk, who makes such assumptions in his book.⁵⁰

The last paragraphs of this subsection are also intriguing. Kopstein writes here about the theory of “social distance”. In Szczuczyn, due to the Jews’ numerical advantage over the Poles and their dominance in the economy, as well as the political elections (before the war the Zionists won the majority of Jewish votes), “there was not even minimal solidarity between Poles and Jews. In such a situation, a pogrom could have taken place under favourable conditions, that is, for example, if the nationalists’ supporters wanted to take advantage of the deterioration of relations between the residents which took place during Soviet rule, as well as the Germans’ consent to attack the Jews”.⁵¹

We are dealing here with a strange theory that the anti-Jewish riots in 1941 took place only in those places where the election results had gone one way or another several years earlier. It is interesting, however, what conclusions Kopstein would have reached if he had examined more towns in Poland, and not just the ‘pogrom’ ones. It seems that this is another artificial, and so to speak, forcibly created theory, which has little or no significance in explaining the events which took place in the Łomża region in the summer of 1941. The author’s sole intention was to prove ‘Polish guilt’.

Sarah Bender and Jeffrey Kopstein’s articles are similar. Both are based on excerpts from memorial books. In both, instead of the thorough work of a historian involving criticism and analysis of the source material, we are given theoretical considerations of a kind stubbornly repeated by researchers of Polish-Jewish relations in the manner of Jan Tomasz Gross. Both texts cultivate the thesis that has been repeated for years about bloodthirsty and anti-Semitic Poles murdering Jews. In both cases, the main topic of the article – be it the events in Grajewo or Szczuczyn – somehow recedes into the background, and a specific thesis is put at the forefront of the issues discussed. But should history be written this way?

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 68.

⁵⁰ Tryczyk, *Miasta śmierci*, p. 299.

⁵¹ Kopstein, ‘Pogrom w Szczuczynie’, p. 70.