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SOME REFLECTIONS ON *THE LAST JEW FROM WĘGRÓW*,  
THE MEMOIRS OF SHRAGA FEIVEL BIELAWSKI,  
AS A SOURCE FOR RESEARCHING THE HISTORY  
OF THE HOLOCAUST AND POLISH-JEWISH RELATIONS  
IN THE POVIAT OF WĘGRÓW

In December 2015, thanks to the efforts of the Polish Centre for Holocaust Research, a book by Szraga Fajwel Bielawski entitled *Ostatni Żyd z Węgrowa: Wspomnienia ocalałego z zagłady w Polsce* [The last Jew from Węgrów: Memoirs of a Holocaust survivor in Poland], was published in Poland. Initially, in 1991, the book was released in English in a small circulation in the United States, where it passed without much publicity.<sup>1</sup>

Professor Jan Grabowski, the research editor of the Polish edition, states in the introduction that “the description of Bielawski’s wartime experiences should be required reading for all who are interested in the history of the extermination of Jews in Poland, and for those who are ready to confront the most controversial and shocking aspects of Polish-Jewish relations under the occupation”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> S.F. Bielawski, *The Last Jew from Wegrow. The Memoirs of a Survivor of the Step-by-Step Genocide in Poland*, ed. L.W. Liebovich, Praeger, New York 1991.

<sup>2</sup> S.F. Bielawski, *Ostatni Żyd z Węgrowa*, Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, Warszawa 2015, p. 7.

After reading this memoir, it is difficult to disagree that it contains plenty of outrageous facts and controversies; however, it did not receive a review written by a professional historian for almost three years, nor was the work's content cited in historical publications or press articles. It seemed that after a mere two years, Bielawski's memoirs would disappear from bookshelves virtually unnoticed.

However, since 2018 this publication has had a kind of renaissance. Professor Jacek Leociak, in the recently published *Młyny boże: Zapiski o kościele i zagładzie* [God's mills: Records about the Church and the Holocaust], wrote a three-page summary of its content, considering it credible.<sup>3</sup>

Grabowski also returned to the active promotion of Bielawski's memoir on the pages of his latest collective publication *Dalej jest noc* [Night without End],<sup>4</sup> in which he undertook a description of the extermination of the Jews in Węgrów powiat (Polish: powiat, an administrative unit, county).<sup>5</sup> Grabowski uses the content of the oft-cited memoir to recreate the sequence of events and show the mass-scale involvement of the Polish population in the extermination process.

As a local historian, I decided to deal with Bielawski's history as part of my interest in the history of the region. I learned about this book for the first time shortly after its American premiere, but I did not get my hands on the original until 2009. As I read it, the work evoked more and more shock and disbelief, but also the first doubts about the authenticity of some of the scenes describing the participation of the inhabitants of my town and the surrounding area as active accomplices in the extermination of the inhabitants of the Węgrów ghetto. When the Polish edition of the book was published in 2015, I motivated myself to undertake an exhaustive verification of its content. In the course of numerous analyses, I had the opportunity to juxtapose many

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<sup>3</sup> J. Leociak, *Młyny boże. Zapiski o Kościele i Zagładzie*, Wołowiec 2018. pp. 90–93. See also H. Grynberg, *Pamiętnik*. 3, Wołowiec 2017, pp. 580–86.

<sup>4</sup> J. Grabowski, 'Powiat węgrowski', in *Dalej jest noc. Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski*, vol. 1, ed. B. Engelking, J. Grabowski, Warszawa 2018, pp. 383–539.

<sup>5</sup> In the opinion of journalists, the chapter on the district of Węgrów not only abounds in the most drastic descriptions of the Jewish ordeal, but is also the one in which the accusations against the local community are formulated most harshly. See J. Borkiewicz, 'Pogruchotana pamięć', *Rzeczpospolita*, 19 May 2018 ('Plus Minus' supplement), pp. 14–15; P. Zychowicz, 'Człowiek bywa świnia', *Do Rzeczy* 2018, no. 19, p. 58. See also K. Czarnecka, 'Ukryte w niepamięci. Wywiad z prof. Janem Grabowskim', *Polityka* 2018, no. 7, p. 23; M. Maciorowski, 'Profesor Jan Grabowski: Pomagaliśmy Niemcom zabijać Żydów', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 17 March 2018 ('Ale Historia' supplement); A. Pawlicka, 'Za kilo cukru, pół litra wódki, za buty...', *Newsweek* 2018, no. 16, p. 11.

sources with each other, and I realised that there were many inaccuracies, half-truths and even falsehoods in Bielawski's memoir which call the credibility of his story into question. In this review, I will cover the most important points that I was able to research.

I would like to add that in an enigmatic, but thought-provoking way, my doubts as to the credibility of Bielawski's memories were confirmed by another witness to the Holocaust from Węgrów, Sewek Fiszman. He knew the Bielawski family well because his wife's sister married one of Bielawski's brothers, Jerachmiel. In an interview, Fiszman said: "A man wrote that book *The Last Jew from Węgrów*. His name is Bielawski. I called him about the book. Even as the last Jew, he did not know the stories I remembered. I wanted to buy the book to see what he wrote about, but he wanted \$50. I knew more about him than he wrote in the book, so I didn't buy it"<sup>6</sup>

It seems, therefore, that although he did not read the memoirs, Fiszman was convinced that Bielawski did not write the full truth about the occupation, although it is impossible to determine what exactly he had in mind.

### The general context of the Holocaust and the Second World War: a series of mistakes

Even a cursory analysis of the beginning of both editions of Bielawski's memoirs should have led to reflection and the insertion of appropriate comments in the footnotes, which were often missing in the Polish edition. One does not need to make a detailed regional investigation to spot them, because one only needs to know the more important facts from the history of the Second World War. For example, according to Bielawski, in the spring of 1941, i.e. around a year before the construction of Treblinka II, transports full of Jews entered the camp (which was still non-existent) and they were liquidated on the spot. He also claims that the camp supposedly operated until the fall of 1944, while in fact the camp was liquidated a year earlier; from August 1944, the territories of the Sokołów-Węgrów powiat were already occupied by the Red Army.<sup>7</sup>

Bielawski's claim regarding the camp's location is also astonishing; he writes that the Jews of Węgrów were transported along the road to Siedlce, because allegedly that is

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<sup>6</sup> Sewek Fiszman's testimony, USC Shoah Foundation (hereinafter: USC, VHA) 18608, interview of 11 August 1996.

<sup>7</sup> A. Kołodziejczyk: 'Pierwszy okres "wolności"', in *Węgrów. Dzieje miasta i okolic w latach 1441-1944*, ed. A. Kołodziejczyk, T. Swat, Węgrów 1991, p. 15.

where the camp was located. After passing through the camp's gates, the prisoners were tattooed and pseudo-medical experiments were carried out on them; however, this never happened in the case of Treblinka. There were never crematorium ovens at that location either, yet the author mentions huge crematoria.<sup>8</sup>

Writing about the heartlessness of the Poles who did not care to save even a single Jewish life, he mentions Finland, which was never under German occupation, as a constructive example of a country whose citizens risked their lives to save Jews.<sup>9</sup> Before the war, around 4000 Jews lived there, many of whom took part in the defence of the country against Soviet aggression during the Winter War of 1939–40, and in subsequent clashes with the Red Army in 1941–44.

There is more false information. According to Bielawski, even before the German aggression against the USSR, the people of Węgrów were herded in front of loudspeakers to listen to a speech by Adolf Hitler, in which “he shouted in a loud voice that all Jews would be destroyed; if even one Jew remained alive after the war, I will salute him personally”.<sup>10</sup> This peculiar reading of the sentencing of the accused should also be noted in other reports, including from other ghettos; however, I have not found any information about this or any other speech by Hitler in which he used the words quoted by the memoir's author.<sup>11</sup>

Let us note, moreover, that an extract was removed from the Polish edition in which the information appeared that Adolf Eichmann, the SS-Obersturmbannführer<sup>12</sup> jointly responsible for the Final Solution, was Hitler's deputy. In reality, these two individuals never met in person. Nor did Eichmann run the extermination of the Jews in the General Government, which the memoir's author attributes to him. It is likewise untrue that the Germans filmed the extermination process in the camps and sent the records to Berlin, where in 1945 they fell into hands of the Allies when – as Bielawski writes – Berlin was ‘liberated.’<sup>13</sup> Clearly, it was the Allies, in the author's opinion, who liberated the Berliners, oppressed since 1933,

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<sup>8</sup> Bielawski, *Ostatni Żyd*, p. 125.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>11</sup> See K. Grzegorzewski, “Judenfrage”. Retoryczny obraz propagandy antysemitycznej w III Rzeszy na przykładzie publicznych wypowiedzi Adolfa Hitlera i innych polityków NSDAP w latach 1933–1945’, *Acta Universitatis Lodzianensis. Folia Litteraria Polonica* 2011, vol. 14, no. 1.

<sup>12</sup> The military equivalent of this rank in the Wehrmacht was lieutenant colonel.

<sup>13</sup> Bielawski, *The Last Jew*, pp. 80–81.

from the clutches of the Nazis. But if any such material really had fallen into Allied hands, it would have been made public, at least during the Nuremberg trials.

There are also errors in the chronology of events related to the history of the Second World War. These would seem to be an insignificant mistake; however, they are another example of the work's inaccuracies. According to the author, a few weeks after the invasion of the USSR, the Germans requisitioned winter clothes from the Jews,<sup>14</sup> as if, in August 1941, they prophetically assumed that the bitter Russian frost would overtake the Wehrmacht near Moscow. It is also puzzling that in May 1943, when the Bielawski family was hiding with Polish peasants, they heard the sounds of artillery fire and wondered whether it was German or Soviet;<sup>15</sup> the front, however, was at that time 1000 km from the vicinity of Węgrów.

The above examples prove that Bielawski was not well aware of the history of the Holocaust and the Second World War, and provided unreliable information. Let us mention here that the first edition of the book was verified by his sons and edited by Louis W. Liebovich, a professor of journalism at the University of Illinois. Many of these inaccuracies were not referred to in either the introduction or the footnotes by Jan Grabowski.<sup>16</sup>



### Who was Szraga Fajwel Bielawski?

According to the book, Bielawski was born on 3 March 1916 in Węgrów, a district town located 80 km north-east of Warsaw. In fact, according to the records of his marital status, the date of his birth is different: 11 March 1911.

A photo of Bielawski from an allegedly false identity card, apparently issued in 1942. In fact, it is a post-war passport photo, as evidenced by the Polish state emblem imprinted on it. Source: S.F. Bielawski, *The Last Jew from Wegrow*, ed. L.W. Liebovich, New York 1991.

<sup>14</sup> Bielawski, *Ostatni Żyd*, p. 107.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>16</sup> Sometimes Grabowski's footnotes are very puzzling. The information cited by Bielawski about the establishment of the camp in Treblinka was included in a footnote stating that it was probably a labour camp. Bielawski stated that the transports of Jews to be liquidated arrived at the camp, and the bodies of those murdered were burned. This clearly indicates the Treblinka II extermination camp, which was established a year later than stated in the description by the author.

Before the war, the town was a typical *shtetl*, mostly inhabited by a Jewish population engaged in trade and crafts. Bielawski finished his education at the elementary school level and took up the family business. His well-to-do family traded in timber and also ran a haberdashery shop on the Market Square, at number 16, in Węgrów. After the death of his father, Wolf Bielawski, Fajwel and his brothers bought timber, and his mother, along with Menucha, Szraga's sister, ran the haberdashery shop.<sup>17</sup> This information is meagre, but it suggests that the Bielawskis belonged to the middle-class economic class of the town. Their lives were similar to those of hundreds of thousands of Jewish merchants and traders in towns similar to Węgrów. Nothing is known about the political views of the author or whether he was actively involved in any of the Jewish political groups operating in the town.<sup>18</sup>

During the occupation, the entire Bielawski family remained in Węgrów and, fortunately, survived the liquidation of 22 September 1942, as well as the liquidation of the so-called remnant ghetto [*getto szczątkowe*, *Restghetto*] a few months later. Until the end of the war, they hid with Polish peasants near the villages of Jarnice and Zajac.

After returning to Węgrów, Bielawski ran a restaurant for a year, then moved to Łódź; in 1946 or 1947 he left Poland. For some time he stayed in Belgium and Germany, where he managed to obtain an American visa. In 1950, he arrived in the United States, where he obtained citizenship, changed his name to Philip Biel, and ran his own company in Minnesota. He wrote his memoirs in retirement in 1991, and died on 13 February 2004.

### The Bielawski family: their social position and survival strategies during the war

When the Germans entered Węgrów in 1939, a time of terror and exploitation began for the town's Jewish community, which numbered over five thousand.

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<sup>17</sup> Bielawski, *Ostatni Żyd*, pp. 40, 31–32.

<sup>18</sup> During the war, Bielawski mentioned his involvement in the underground group led by right-wing Zionists under Zanwel Szpilman. I only managed to establish that a resident of Węgrów with this name and surname was murdered in Treblinka. I have reasonable doubts as to whether this type of conspiracy was really organised in the Węgrów ghetto. According to the memoir, the conspirators Bielawski named unsuccessfully tried to obtain weapons from a combat organisation associated with the PPS, but no historian mentions this in any previous historical research. See T. Wangrat, *Polska i powiat węgrowski w przededniu i w czasie II wojny światowej*, Węgrów 2010; J. Stolarz, 'Powiat Węgrów w walce z okupantem', *Najnowsze Dzieje Polski 1939–1945* 1965, vol. 9, pp. 95–141; P. Matusak, 'Okupacja i ruch oporu w Węgrowie 1939–1944', *Szkice Podlaskie* 2005, no. 13, pp. 57–100.

The Bielawskis lost the opportunity to trade timber, and could only run the haberdashery shop.<sup>19</sup>

A key event for the local Jews was the creation of a ghetto in Węgrów. It remained open, and was not fenced off from the rest of the town by a wall or barbed wire entanglements. The fact that the Jewish district was an open ghetto made the lives of its inhabitants a little more liveable than in other ghettos, if only because it was easier to get food. Gradually, however, the Jews' situation became more and more difficult due to their exploitation as free labour, requisitions of their property, financial extortion, restrictions on their ability to earn a livelihood, starvation rations and German terror.<sup>20</sup>

The population density in the ghetto was high due to the necessity to locate there first the Jews expelled from Greater Poland, and then the Jewish population displaced from smaller towns. The implementation of German orders was supervised by two institutions established by the Germans, the *Judenrat* and the *Jüdischer Ordnungsdienst* (the Jewish police<sup>21</sup>), which did not have a good reputation. Working for them ensured greater food rations and increased the chance of protecting oneself and one's family from being recruited into labour gangs.<sup>22</sup>

Bielawski speaks positively about the *Judenrat* in Węgrów, while in the chapter describing the period before the liquidation of the ghetto, he vividly describes his conflict with the police chief, Noach Kochman.

This incident ended with the policeman being beaten up, when the *Judenrat* made an attempt to settle a Jewish family in Bielawski's house.<sup>23</sup> The question then arises of what the reason was for Bielawski's exceptional position, if he dared to get into a fight with the chief of police; and why, although no strangers lived in his residence, the Jewish police did not send him and his family members to perform forced labour, such as working in the town. Also, why was the family

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<sup>19</sup> Bielawski, *Ostatni Żyd*, p. 51.

<sup>20</sup> W. Gozdawa-Gołębiowski, 'Powiat węgrowski w latach okupacji hitlerowskiej', in *Węgrów. Dzieje miasta i okolic 1944–2005*, ed. A. Kołodziejczyk, T. Swat, M. Szczupak, Węgrów 2006, p. 330.

<sup>21</sup> The JO officers were commonly known as *odemans* (OD-men).

<sup>22</sup> Efraim Przepiórka, who collected reports from Jewish survivors from Węgrów after the war, notes the corruption: "Since the *Judenrat* and the Jewish police started operating in the town, corruption has also started to appear. Whoever paid a bribe was not sent to work. The *Judenrat* was ordered to send 1000 or 2000 people to work – but money could cancel the order. It was understood that everyone gave money" (E. Przepiórka, 'Tak został zniszczony Węgrów', in *Vengrov: Sefer Zikharon*, ed. M. Tamari, Tel Aviv 1961, p. 63).

<sup>23</sup> Bielawski, *Ostatni Żyd*, pp. 103–15.

property not a victim of the numerous requisitions which took place at that time? These questions are important because – as Bielawski claims – from the moment of the aforementioned fight, Kochman became his enemy, unsuccessfully trying to trap him and get him sent him to a labour gang as an act of revenge. The only repression that affected him was the forced labour ordered by the Germans, and only when he happened to find himself in the ghetto by mischance.<sup>24</sup> It had nothing to do with the conflict with the Jewish police commander which he described.

Bielawski explains his incredible luck in avoiding being included in the labour gangs by the fact that his fiancée, Rachel, had information about the special lists of Jews assigned by the *Judenrat* to tasks required by the occupiers, so when the name of Bielawski or his brother appeared, both of them could hide in advance, first in the ‘outhouse’, and later in a hiding place in the attic.<sup>25</sup>

How does Bielawski explain that, in the face of the high density of ten people per room, his family of four were able to live in a five-room apartment? Well, it was because he presented the *Volksdeutsche* from the accommodation office with two shirts, which apparently protected his family from being rehoused for almost two years. That is a suspiciously low price for such a big favour, and these explanations seem quite infantile. Considering these two facts (the fight with the chief of the Jewish police and comfortable living conditions during the occupation), we see that Bielawski had a unique position in the ghetto, and that he was probably being protected by someone who represented the ghetto elite, although he himself does not expand upon these circumstances.

Piotr Matusak, who researched the occupation in Węgrów, writes: “In 1940, the daily bread allowance in Węgrów for the Poles was 200 grams per person, and in 1941 it was 250 grams. This was below the level of biological necessity. The situation of the Jews was even more tragic, as they received only half what the Poles did”<sup>26</sup>

All the more puzzling is the description of the ration allocation Bielawski includes on the pages of his memoirs: “A week’s rations for one person consisted of one pound of meat, a half pound of sugar, a half pound of butter, and so on”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 73–74, 93–96.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 65–66.

<sup>26</sup> Matusak, ‘Okupacja i ruch oporu’, p. 65.

<sup>27</sup> Bielawski, *Ostatni Żyd*, p. 69.



Let us note that the amount of meat he describes is five times higher than what was available on the coupons for Poles, and ordinary Jews did not receive meat at all.

Only Jewish policemen or members of the *Judenrat* could have received such rations in the ghetto.<sup>28</sup> It is possible that the passage of time caused the author to become confused regarding the amount of food allocated, although that would be strange at the very least. In other memoirs, the lack of food is a circumstance that the victims of the German occupation remembered well and emphasised strongly in their accounts.<sup>29</sup>

The fact that Bielawski belonged to the ghetto's elite, most likely the Jewish police, may also be confirmed by the fact that, according to Sewek Fiszman, Bielawski's brother Mosze was an officer in that body.<sup>30</sup> It is hard to believe that he and his brother had to hide from being drafted into the labour gangs.

Indirectly, this is confirmed by the wartime memoirs of one Eddie Bielawski, Szraga Fajwel's nephew. On the cover of his memoirs, we can find a photograph of the four Bielawski brothers, an image which was also included in *The Last Jew from Wegrow*. Three of them are wearing boots or leggings, which was a custom of the Jewish policemen. Initially, I was inclined to identify the owners of this type of footwear more with the uniformed services, but in Waclaw Roguski's account I found a report that, at that time, shoes with uppers had become so fashionable that women also wore them.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, it cannot be assumed *a priori* that just because someone wore such shoes meant they served in the Jewish police.

Another detail is important. The figure on the right, Mosze, is wearing a functional armband. However, the cover reproduction of Eddie Bielawski's book differs from the original, as it has been retouched. The pile of branches in the background has been replaced by a brick wall, and Mosze's arm bearing the unfortunate band has disappeared.<sup>32</sup> It can be assumed that the memoir's author

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<sup>28</sup> B. Engelking, F. Tych, A. Żbikowski, J. Żyndul, *Pamięć. Historia Żydów Polskich przed, w czasie i po Zagładzie*, ed. G. Tencer, Warszawa 2008, p. 114.

<sup>29</sup> Bielawski also writes about this, but he is concerned with the period after the liquidation of the ghetto, when he was hiding in the hideout, and later in the Polish countryside. Before September 1942, he did not complain about hunger that much.

<sup>30</sup> Sewek Fiszman's report.

<sup>31</sup> W. Roguski, 'Wspomnienia z lat młodości w wsi Górki Borze (do 1944 roku) oraz okresu służby wojskowej (1944–1946)', *Zeszyty Korytnickie* 2010, vol. 2, p. 65.

<sup>32</sup> E. Bielawski, *Invisible Jews: Surviving the Holocaust in Poland*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2017. Picture from the book cover.



The Bielawski brothers (from left): Icchak, Fajwel, Jerachmiel, Mosze. The latter was wearing an armband with two bands, which indicates that he held a certain position. Source: Bielawski, *The Last Jew from Węgrow*.

considered his uncle's service in the Jewish police to be too troublesome, and so he decided to have the photo retouched appropriately.<sup>33</sup>

Regarding the discussion concerning the Jewish police, the extract from the memoir concerning how Bielawski and his brother dressed is unclear and puzzling.

After the largest liquidation action in September 1942, the Germans established the so-called remnant ghetto in November, where a selected group of Jews was allowed to stay. At that time, Fajwel Bielawski's sister found employment in Jachiel Kreda's laundry, while her two brothers only dined there. Fajwel and Mosze did not do any work throughout the existence of the ghetto, so they did not have the necessary passes allowing the few Jews from Węgrów to legally remain in the town.

At one point they made the decision to change their clothes from Jewish to Polish. Bielawski recalls: "We decided to hide our new 'gentile' clothing with Rachel's friend,

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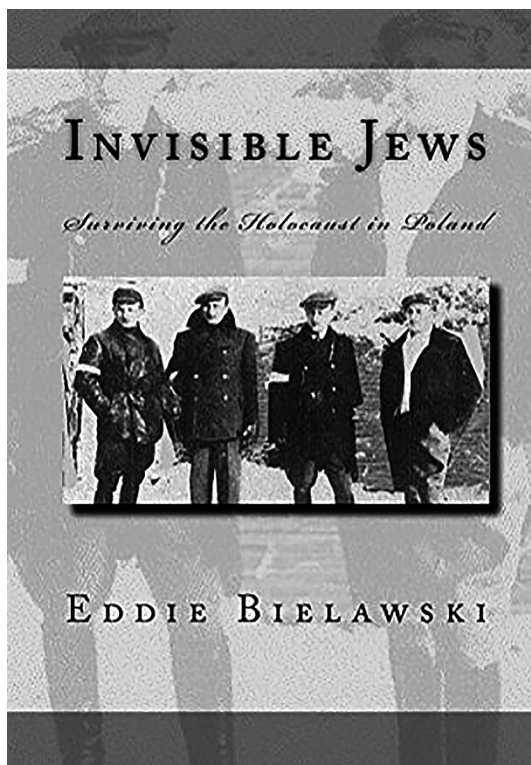
<sup>33</sup> In the collection of the Municipal Public Library in Węgrów, you can see the preserved armband of a Jewish police officer. There is a bilingual inscription, *Juden Polizei / Policja Żydowska*, on a white background. The two stripes which are seen on Mosze's armband are not visible on the MBP armband. In Bielawski's memoir, we read that Moshe was a member of the sanitary team; but if he was indeed wearing the armband of this service, there would have been no need to retouch the photos.

Photo of the cover of Eddie Bielawski's book. The background in the form of a pile of the branches has disappeared, and has been replaced by a brick wall. Mosze's arm bearing the armband has also disappeared. Source: E. Bielawski, *Invisible Jews: Surviving the Holocaust in Poland*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2017.

the Zelinska woman, who was a dentist. She agreed and said she would allow us to change there, if the need arose".<sup>34</sup>

This does not seem to make any sense. Bielawski goes around (even though he does not have to) in some clothes that could mark him out as a Jew, and, if danger arises, he has to get to a Polish dentist in order to change into a non-Jewish outfit that allows him to look like a Pole. On the way, he risks exposure and wastes time that he could have used to find a hideout or leave the town in a hurry. He runs the risk of not finding the owner of the house, which would further worsen his situation. All these problems would disappear if Bielawski simply wore the clothes he purchased, or bought a spare set and put it somewhere for safekeeping, just in case. He could afford to do so. He and his brother, if we believe Bielawski's account, did not have any documents proving that they were registered employees, which put both of them at risk of being shot if they came across any gendarmes. So, walking around in clothes that indicated their Jewish origin, and moreover not carrying any documents, was an invitation to the Germans to inspect them, which would have led to a tragic end.

One also wonders what, in the reality of 1943, was the garment which indicated that its owner could be Jewish? The Germans forbade Jews to wear items of clothing related to religious life, such as *tallit* or skullcaps, so it seems that at that time only the uniform of a Jewish policeman could have clearly indicated the owner's



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<sup>34</sup> Bielawski, *Ostatni Żyd*, p. 183.

origin. Bielawski himself mentions that the policemen from Węgrów wore dark blue uniforms, as an indication of the standardisation of their dress.<sup>35</sup> No other description of the uniform of this formation has survived. Jan Stolarz mentioned, however, that they had special armbands and 'English-style' caps with a green brim.<sup>36</sup>

As I mentioned earlier, from Sewek Fizman's account, we learn that Moshe Bielawski served in the Jewish police, so in his case the decision to replace his uniform with a civilian outfit would be understandable. Since Fajwel took a similar decision, it may mean that he was also a member of the *Ordnungsdienst*. It is true that Fizman only described Mosze as a policeman, but it is also possible that Fajwel joined the police in the last period of its existence, or had simply come to own the uniform of a Jewish policeman.<sup>37</sup> When the largest liquidation action took place in September 1942, the Germans deliberately spared the members of the *Judenrat* and Jewish policemen. Stanisław Wojciechowski writes: "The Jews who were in the Jewish police and the *Arbeitskommando* survived the longest".<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, Stolarz describes the Jewish police in Węgrów as follows:

In order to ensure that none of the Jews would leave their [ghetto] area, the Germans established the Jewish police. There were many candidates. The policemen – with special armbands, in English-style caps with a green brim – eagerly fulfilled their duties of persecution and assistance in the murder of their brothers, imposed on them by the Nazi occupants. They were equipped with rubber truncheons, which – as I have seen – they did not hesitate to use, beating those who violated the Nazis' regulations and orders.<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps, thanks to this camouflage, Bielawski and his brother managed to survive liquidation in the ghetto, but he was not willing to write about it.<sup>40</sup> He does write

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>36</sup> Stolarz, 'Powiat Węgrów', p. 112.

<sup>37</sup> Sewek Fizman recalled that, as an outsider from Warsaw, he was particularly vulnerable to being detained for forced labour, and that he hid at home from the Jewish police. This limited his freedom to walk around the ghetto and observe what was happening there.

<sup>38</sup> S. Wojciechowski, *Osiem epizodów z mojego życia*, Warszawa 1992, 2nd edn, p. 34.

<sup>39</sup> Stolarz, 'Powiat Węgrów', p. 112.

<sup>40</sup> Bielawski describes the way in which he handed over clothes to Mrs. Zielińska as an example of his caution, just like burying money in a specially marked place near the Kreda dye shop. But in the description

that during the operation in September 1942, all the Bielawskis hid in the attic above the shop, and that he also survived the subsequent liquidation of the so-called remnant ghetto in April 1943. From that moment on, the whole family was hidden in the countryside by Polish peasants and were fortunate enough to live to see the end of the German occupation in August 1944. During the liquidation action, the Germans spared the Jewish policemen, who were used to bury the dead and empty the contents of Jewish shops. The Germans also used Jewish policemen to guard and lead to the execution sites those Jews who had survived the liquidation action and were hiding in the ghetto.<sup>41</sup>

Today it is difficult to determine whether only one or both of the brothers were included in the ranks of the police, but the Jewish *Ordnungsdienst's* actions during the war were sufficient reason not to reveal in their memoirs any connections that the Bielawski family might have had with this formation.

### Who were the beneficiaries of the German occupation – the Poles rather than the Germans?

For Holocaust researchers, the most important material is information written from the perspective of the eyewitnesses to the crime. According to Bielawski, however, the history of the Holocaust looks as if the Germans only actively signified their presence during the two liquidation actions in the Węgrów ghetto; and in the other situations, the negative role during the occupation was primarily played by his Polish neighbours. So there is no mention of the terror and ruthless exploitation inflicted on the Poles.<sup>42</sup> Nor does the author clearly specify any

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of his escape from Węgrów, we do not find the slightest mention of he and his brother digging up the hidden money before leaving the town and taking the deposit from Mrs. Zielińska. Thus, according to the memoir, both brothers – wearing 'Jewish' (i.e. very distinctive) clothing and lacking any money – leave the town, only to return to it after the Red Army entered in August 1944. It is hard to believe in such amnesia.

<sup>41</sup> See Archiwum Państwowe w Siedlcach (State Archives in Siedlce; hereinafter: APS), SO 653, Testimony of Klementyna Bobruk of 25 May 1948, p. 35; *ibid.*, Testimony of Janina Krysiak of 25 May 1948, p. 35; Sewek Fiszman's report.

<sup>42</sup> The only Polish victim of the Germans noted in the book is "the father of Maniek Karbowski", the persecutor of the Bielawski family. I managed to establish that his name was Bolesław Karbowski; he was not murdered by the Germans, but by the Soviets. He was a policeman and in September 1939, together with other policemen from Węgrów, he was evacuated to the East, where after 17 September he was taken prisoner by the Soviets. In 1940, he was murdered along with other policemen from Węgrów in Mednoe. The fate of 'Maniek Karbowski's father' is another example of Bielawski's factual errors and lapses.

information concerning the death penalties imposed for Poles who hid and gave aid to the Jewish population.<sup>43</sup> Instead, there are descriptions of the fraternisation of Poles with the Germans and the tangible, material benefits that this collaboration brought them, including the takeover of Jewish houses and shops. The Poles also allegedly did not want to share their food with those starving in the ghetto.<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, it is astonishing why there is no information about the Jewish district in Węgrów being literally wiped out from the face of the earth by the occupying authorities, but when a related thread appears, it turns out that, following the decision of the local priest, the bricks from the demolished synagogue were used to build a wall around the cemetery. The reader is therefore convinced that all the post-Jewish houses fell into Polish hands. In fact, only those in the Aryan quarter survived. During the war, they came under German administration and the Poles could only lease them; after 1944, they became municipal property.<sup>45</sup>

In connection with the process, vividly described by Bielawski, of the Poles rapidly taking over the Jewish houses, the following question arises: how did it happen that his well-situated brick house was not handed over to Polish owners during the occupation? Bielawski explained that the Germans established an officers' club in his house and shop. However, it appears that during the occupation the so-called *Soldatenheim*, thoroughly expanded by the Germans and adapted to their needs, was located in a completely different place – on the opposite side of the market square, in the building of the current Tax Office. Stanisław Wojciechowski gives the exact location of this club: “During the occupation,

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<sup>43</sup> When the Bielawski family was hiding with the Polish Korczak family, the Polish farmer warned his children that if they told someone else about it, their parents would face death. Bielawski himself does not confirm the truthfulness of Korczak's words in his book, and other Poles, such as Waclaw Bujalski (with whom the Bielawskis were hiding for over a year), justified their fears by the fact that they were in danger from an unspecified threat. In describing the Polish peasants, Bielawski stated that, considering the realities of the occupation, they were fortunate and not afraid of anyone. The danger appeared only when the front was approaching, because until July 1944, according to the author of the memoir, “death was only a concern of the Jews” (Bielawski, *Ostatni Żyd*, p. 265).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 88–89, 99.

<sup>45</sup> This was the case with the house of Mosze Mendelbaum, the head of the *Paolei Sijon* party, who is mentioned in Bielawski's book. In December 1942, it was leased by the Germans to my grandfather Antoni Piątkowski, and from August 1945, the profits from the lease were taken over by the Communist authorities. It was similar with other post-Jewish properties whose legal owners did not return after the war.

in the building next to the church, in addition to the pre-war offices of the *starosta*, magistrate and tax office, the Germans organised an officer's casino on the ground floor<sup>46</sup>.

I am signalling this inaccuracy because – as I will show later – there are a large number of errors in Bielawski's memoirs. The plunder of Jewish property by the Poles and the friendship between the residents of Węgrów and the Germans which he cites are only a prelude to much more serious accusations.

### The participation of Poles in the liquidation of Jews

The most dramatic chapter of the book is devoted to the liquidation of the ghetto in Węgrów on 22 September 1942. Bielawski describes that before its commencement, he, his sister, his brother and his mother had concealed themselves in the attic above their shop and stayed there for 49 days, until the Germans announced an amnesty for the Jews on 10 November. The Bielawskis' shop and house were situated on the market square in Węgrów, where the Jewish population was herded on the day of its liquidation, before they were transported to Treblinka. In the following days, trucks stood in the market square and were used to transport to the camp those who were taken by a liquidation team specially brought from Sokołów Podlaski to remove the victims from their hiding places in the ghetto.<sup>47</sup>

As he described, for the first three days he only heard what was happening outside, but on the fourth day he made a narrow hole in the mortar, and from that moment he could observe the events taking place on the market square.<sup>48</sup>

According to the author, on the first day the inhabitants of Węgrów enthusiastically joined in with the liquidation action. His Polish neighbour, Maniek Karbowski, together with the SS men, searched the Bielawskis' house, while other Poles helped to load the Jews onto trucks throughout the day. The tragedy was accompanied by the laughter of the Poles, who in the evening, after the action was over, in the Karbowski's pub, right next to the Bielawskis' hideout, loudly

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<sup>46</sup> Wojciechowski, *Osiem epizodów*, p. 22. This account seems to indicate that the town's inhabitants did not distinguish between a soldier's house and an officer's salon; perhaps the Germans themselves did not make strict distinctions in places such as Węgrów.

<sup>47</sup> J. Tchórzewski, *Świadectwo dojrzałości. Wspomnienia z lat 1928–1945*, Katowice 2007, p. 106.

<sup>48</sup> Bielawski, *Ostatni Żyd*, p. 88.

manifested their joy at getting rid of their neighbours from the ghetto. The joy was allegedly even greater as the Jewish shops and their contents passed into Polish hands.<sup>49</sup>

In the following days – according to the author – the Polish involvement remained considerable. The Poles discovered the hideout of the Bielawskis' neighbours, and handed Tojbe Chudzik and her three daughters into the hands of the cruel gendarme, Giller, who shot all four of them. They also showed the Germans where the three Złotowski sisters, also neighbours of the Bielawskis, lived.<sup>50</sup> In another description, no Germans were present, but firefighters from Węgrów and 'blue' policemen loaded the family of the dentist Nisman, a well-known person in the town, onto a truck. When one of his daughters tried to escape, she was shot down in cold blood by 'blue' policemen.<sup>51</sup>

On the seventh day of the operation, Polish firefighters and policemen, assisted by a single German, led the remaining captured Jews out of the prison located in the so-called Żywica house, including the family of Bielawski's maternal uncle, Schlessinger. Nearly fifty people were led to the Jewish cemetery, where they died at the hands of Polish policemen. Bielawski writes: "The Germans could not have had it any easier. One German soldier would supervise, the Polish firemen would keep order, and the Polish police would execute the Jews. The Poles finally could fulfill their fantasy of killing Jews. The Nazis only needed to send one SS officer".<sup>52</sup>

Even the Polish children played a part: "The policemen, carrying rifles, paraded alongside to make sure no one escaped. Polish children stuck out their tongues and mocked the Jews".<sup>53</sup> Earlier Bielawski recalls: "The families I had seen supporting each other in the street were now dead, murdered by these bandits. The gentile Poles were not satisfied with rounding up their neighbors for the gas chambers. Now, the Germans let the Poles, themselves, exterminate whoever had been missed by the trucks to Treblinka".<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., pp. 131–32.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., pp. 137–38.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 135.



Bielawski's comment on the scene he saw after the Poles executed the Jews in the Jewish cemetery is very telling: "The next morning there were no more Jews to catch, and nothing more to watch. The Germans walked arm in arm with Polish girls. The Poles and Germans were partners, and they had been successful".<sup>55</sup>

It would be difficult to accuse the Poles of participating in the Holocaust more eloquently. By asking the rhetorical question, "Why would a village of people collaborate with a vicious group of invaders to send their neighbors to gas chambers?"<sup>56</sup> Bielawski unambiguously sent all the Poles of Węgrów to the dock.

Are these descriptions true, and was Bielawski a witness of the described events? It is worth asking ourselves these questions in greater detail.

### Was Bielawski really hiding in the attic?

Serious doubts as to whether Bielawski saw what he described in his memoir arose after my inspection of the place that was both his hideout and observation point. The house and shop have survived to the present time, and can now be found at Rynek Mariacki 26 (formerly Rynek 16), although the attic has been closed for many years and unused by anyone. The only entrance, through the hatch, was blocked long ago when the ceiling was plastered over during the store's renovation. The only way to get to the attic was from the roof. If the Bielawski family did indeed hide out there, there should be some remnants of it on the walls – a scratch on the wall indicating that someone had cut through the bricks with a sharp tool, which would leave a mark in the form of new mortar. It thus seemed worth trying to do a reconnaissance.

I admit that I doubted whether I could discover the remains of the hideout, but after I entered it turned out that it really did exist, and that it had survived in surprisingly good condition. Walls, doors, and even a few objects belonging to the Jewish owners survived: a kerosene lamp, bottles, cans of German-canned fish, fragments of cardboard boxes with Hebrew inscriptions. On one of the beams, someone cut marks that were probably used to record the number of days in hiding. Was there one person or more? Did the author of *The Last Jew from Wegrow* really spend time there?

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

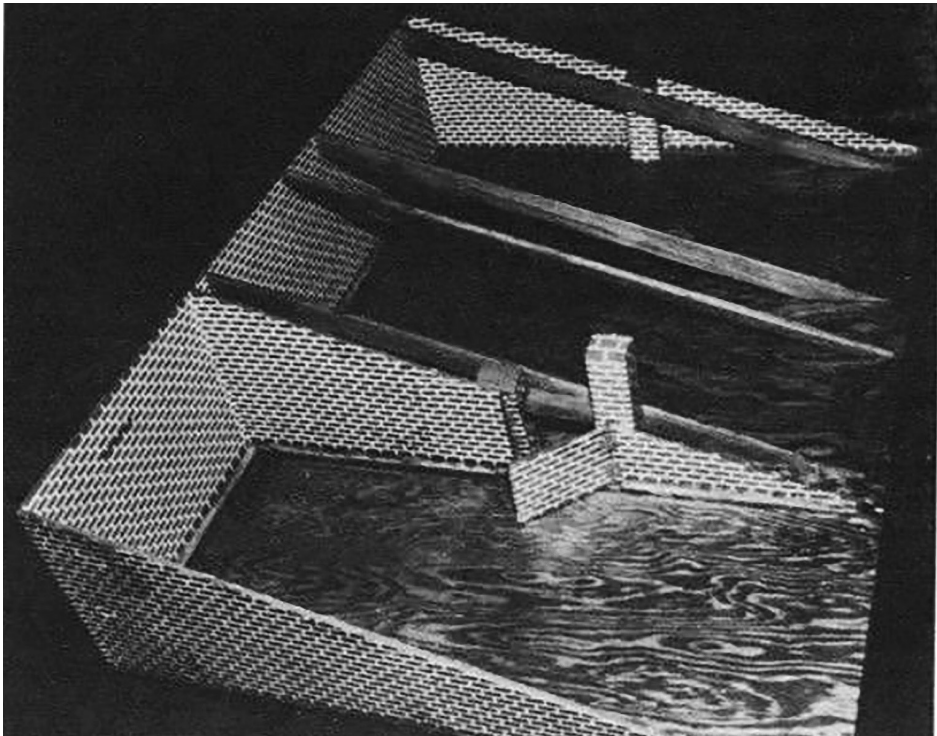
<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

Bielawski claims that he built the hideout himself. For the purposes of the book, he prepared both a detailed description of its structure and an appropriate drawing. However, a closer inspection showed that there is a serious discrepancy between his description and drawing and the actual state of the building. The hiding place allegedly had the shape of a narrow rectangle, and Bielawski says he built one wall along the attic. In fact, the room is L-shaped, and the person who constructed it built two brick walls which meet at a 90-degree angle, separating the entrance hatch leading from the kitchen from the rest of the attic intended as the hiding place.

Bielawski was also supposed to have very cleverly disguised a brick door with a metal rim. He recalls that his Polish neighbour, Maniek Karbowski, zealously searched the attic and rapped on the walls to hand over the Jewish family



A contemporary photo of the shop and house of the Bielawski family. The shop was located where there is now the entrance to the 'Szmizjerka' shop. Around a dozen years ago, the roof structure was changed to a triangular form, which revealed the hideout. The original looked like the nearer part of the building, which now contains an exchange office, among others. The Bielawski family's yellow and grey house stands sideways at 90 degrees to the store. Photo by Roman Postek.



The drawing of the hideout included in the book, which – as it turned out – bears little resemblance to what I discovered in the attic of this building. Source: Bielawski, *The Last Jew from Wegrow*.

to the Germans, so the masked door turned out to be a brilliant solution, and their Polish persecutor left this place in the conviction that there were no Jews hiding in the attic.<sup>57</sup>

If, however, the description of Maniek's meticulous searches was accurate, the hideout would have been detected within a few minutes. Someone who visited the store regularly would have had no trouble noticing that the attic was smaller than the size of the ceiling in the store would suggest, and by knocking on the door, it would have been easy to discover the unmasked iron frame on the right side of the door. In the description of the construction and in the drawing, the right edge is cleverly masked with a false chimney. In fact, this was never built, so someone checking the wall in more detail would have discovered a narrow gap between the wall and the iron-rimmed bricks that make up the door. To make

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<sup>57</sup> Bielawski, *Ostatni Żyd*, p. 127.



The hideout. Standing outside it, I shone a flashlight into the interior. We can clearly see that there is no false chimney on the left side, and the right end of the door is not directly adjacent to the chimney. Photo by Mariusz Szczupak.

matters worse, the hideout's builder failed to fit the door so that the brick rows in the wall were aligned with the door bricks to form a single line. This is a small but clearly visible fault. The Bielawski family probably owed their rescue to the fact that when the shop was being searched, one of the Germans looked into the attic with a flashlight, inspected the walls for a moment, and then went downstairs. And later – contrary to what the author of the memoir writes – no one else came looking for them.<sup>58</sup>

When writing about the equipment in the hideout, Bielawski also mentions that he prepared flashlights and candles to illuminate it. It is hard to believe that, after being in the hideout for 49 days, he did not remember that he could have

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<sup>58</sup> In a 1997 interview, Bielawski said that the Germans, accompanied by Maniek Karbowski, searched his house and shop only once. Contrary to what he had written in his book, he did not mention any subsequent attempts to find their hiding place in the attic. After its discovery, I spoke with the post-war owners of the property, in whose hands it had been for over 30 years; they had been unaware of its existence for the whole time.



Items found in the hideout, including a kerosene lamp, cardboard boxes with Hebrew inscriptions, and a tin of German-canned fish. Photo by Mariusz Szczupak.

used a kerosene lamp to illuminate it, which would have been better suited for this purpose than candles. Anyway, I found such a lamp inside the hideout.

Moreover, Bielawski writes: On the morning of the fourth day, I decided I had to see what was happening outside. I took a knife and began to scrape out the mortar between two bricks on the wall facing the square. It took a whole day and night of scraping, but I finally gouged a small peephole<sup>59</sup>.

Anyone familiar with the topography of the town would seriously doubt whether this was the case after reading this passage. The very idea of gouging a peephole to see something is questionable. A scratch on the white plastered outer wall of the store would have exposed the hideout to the public, which can be verified by carefully examining the façade in the contemporary photo. If such an opening were made today, it would also be perfectly visible.

And finally – as Bielawski knew very well – the view of the greater part of the market square, where the most dramatic events took place, was obscured

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<sup>59</sup> Bielawski, *Ostatni Żyd*, p. 127.



The shopping hall, now demolished, which effectively made it impossible to see what was happening in the market square. A photo from the 1960s, taken shortly before its demolition. Photo by Eugeniusz Rajs.

by a large shopping hall (which no longer exists), the roof of which was higher than the Bielawski's loft.

In the drawing in the book, one row of bricks was marked, so it was possible to pierce the mortar with an ordinary knife. However, on the spot, I measured the thickness of the bricks in the wall, because – as I mentioned – the building has survived in the same shape to this day.<sup>60</sup> The bricks were up to 38 cm thick, so it would have been absolutely impossible for anyone to pierce through this wall with an ordinary knife. There is not even an indication on the wall of anyone trying to do so, because then the mortar on the length of two bricks would have had to be fresher than that on the rest of the wall. In an interview in 1997, Bielawski recalled that he had a small, folding knife. Anyway, even if he had miraculously made a crack in it, he could not have seen through the opening any of the incidents which he described. With such a large distance between the eyes and the opening of the slit, it would have been impossible to see any dynamic action such as Bielawski describes.

This is not the only case of false report about the construction of a hideout. Later, when the entire family was hiding in the countryside with Waclaw Bujalski,

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<sup>60</sup> The only visible change is the location of the gable roof on a part of the building in place of the former one-slope roof, and that the walls are now insulated with polystyrene.



The wall separating the hideout from the market square. It would not have been possible to pierce it with the pocket knife that Bielawski had at his disposal. Currently, this part of the building has a different, gable roof, rising above the wall, as can be seen in the photo. When the store was owned by the Bielawski family, the single-pitched roof dropped to the opposite end of the building. The concrete poured over the bricks is a remnant of the previous roof structure. Photo by Mariusz Szczupak.

Bielawski claimed he came up with the idea of building a shelter in the Polish farmer's field. As it turned out, the hideout had already been built for two people by another escapee from the ghetto, Sewek Fizman, and the Bielawskis only adapted it to accommodate a larger number of people.<sup>61</sup>

Bielawski's reports on his observations from the hideout differ from those he gave in Łódź after the war.

### The extermination of Jews in Bielawski's post-war testimony

These testimonies were submitted to the Central Jewish Historical Commission in April 1945, and the minutes were recorded by hand by one Epstein, whose first name is not known.<sup>62</sup> Bielawski testified in Yiddish and his words were translated into Polish. At the very beginning, he gave a false date of birth (1914) and stated that

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<sup>61</sup> Sewek Fizman's report.

<sup>62</sup> I have not been able to establish who he was or what his name was.

he had been in Węgrów only at the beginning of the war. Both pieces of information contradict what he stated in the pages of his memoir.<sup>63</sup>

In the first two-page testimony, we find a description of the death of Rabbi Morgenstern, who was murdered in September 1939. In the second, Bielawski focuses on the events that took place in Węgrów until the end of the war. He begins by repeating the story of Morgenstern's death, then discusses the help that the people of Węgrów gave in 1939 to the prisoners driven to the sports ground by the Germans, and then talks about the slave labour performed by the Jews of Węgrów. The above events, divided into two pages, can be treated as a prologue to the tragedy of the Jewish community after 22 September 1942. However, his testimonies do not contain any details of the liquidation of the ghetto in Węgrów. On this subject, Bielawski testifies: "This was the situation until 1942. Then the Operation began in Węgrów. 10,000 Jews were sent to Treblinka. About 5000 were shot by the German and Polish police at the Jewish cemetery in Węgrów. The Polish population took all the property that was left by the Jews".<sup>64</sup>

In the case of the events of 22 September 1942, the account basically boils down to three facts that are obvious to everyone who survived the occupation in Węgrów or its vicinity. Most of the Jews were taken to Treblinka; some were shot by the Germans. I have not come across any source that confirms the participation of 'blue' policemen as a firing squad at the cemetery. There are also reports that the Nazis tried to secure valuables in order to transport them to Germany.<sup>65</sup> Of course, there were also cases of Poles plundering Jewish property, but the thesis that all the Jewish property ended up in Polish hands is not supported by the facts either.

In Bielawski's account, we do not find any information that would confirm that he was an eyewitness to the liquidation of the Węgrów ghetto, or that he knew something more than anyone else. A witness who twice reports to the clerk about

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<sup>63</sup> Testimony of Fajwel Bielawski, Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego (Archives of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw; hereinafter: AŻIH) 301/38.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Bielawski did not mention that the Jewish stores were thoroughly stripped by the Jewish policemen who, under the supervision of the Ukrainians, loaded the goods onto trucks that were to go to Germany. See A.P., 'Gromadzenie świadectwa', in *Vengrov: Sefer Zikharon*, p. 72.



the tragic death of Rabbi Morgenstern – which he only knew about from a report by his mother – should have provided a more extensive account of the dramatic events which he saw with his own eyes. However, this did not happen.

### Philip Biel, as an eyewitness to the Holocaust in the sources of the Yad Vashem Institute and the USC Shoah Foundation

One of the tasks of the Yad Vashem Institute is to consistently implement a programme to collect information about the murdered Jews. Those who were eyewitnesses to the deaths of their relatives, friends or other people known to them personally filled in the appropriate fields on special forms by providing the personal data of those who had been murdered or who died of natural causes. It was permitted to file reports about people whose death the witness had second-hand information, as long as he was convinced of the truth of the report. And even if the witness had only seen a deportation to a death camp, this was considered a death certificate.

In 1979, Bielawski – under his new American name of Philip Biel – filled out 34 such forms for Yad Vashem, containing information about the circumstances of the death of the Jewish inhabitants of Węgrów which were known to him. Since the files have now been digitised and made available online, we may now view all the cards he filled in.<sup>66</sup>

The list includes the victims of the execution, described by Bielawski, which the ‘blue’ policemen carried out in the Jewish cemetery. On the basis of his book, it should be possible to identify 43 relatives and close friends, 30 of whom were taken to the cemetery and allegedly shot there by the Polish police.<sup>67</sup>

Meanwhile, the Yad Vashem institute gives only eight names of members of the Schlessinger family. Together with them, the executioners allegedly killed the Marcusfeld family, consisting of Mendel Marcusfeld, his wife, Frajdla, and their son, Mosze, with his wife and son, Dawid. In the book version, all the above-mentioned persons were shot at the Jewish cemetery on the eighth day after the liquidation action began, which makes it possible to precisely determine the date of their death as 30

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<sup>66</sup> ‘Phillip Biel Yad Vashem: Pages of Testimony Names Memorial Collection’, [https://yvng.yadvashem.org/index.html?language=en&advancedSearch=true&sln\\_value=Biel&sln\\_type=synonyms&sfn\\_value=Phillip&sfn\\_type=synonyms](https://yvng.yadvashem.org/index.html?language=en&advancedSearch=true&sln_value=Biel&sln_type=synonyms&sfn_value=Phillip&sfn_type=synonyms), accessed 10 September 2019. We note parenthetically that two of them were double-entered by mistake, reducing the number of registered victims to 32.

<sup>67</sup> Bielawski, *Ostatni Żyd*, p. 127.

September 1942. Meanwhile, Bielawski gave November 1942, at least a month later, as the date of the eight members of the Schlessinger family's death on the forms.

The author also saw others going to the execution site: Szlom Zylbernagel and his wife, and Izrael Zylbernagel with his wife and son. However, we do not find these names among the forms Bielawski filled out in 1979. We do see those of the Rozebaum, Szydłowski and Tik families, although there is not the slightest mention of their fates in the pages of *The Last Jew from Wegrow*.

On the other hand, the list from Yad Vashem also does not include the names of the three Złotowski sisters, nor the wife and three daughters of Chudzik, who were shot by the gendarme Giller. Meanwhile, in the case of the Chudziks, Bielawski could not only have described the circumstances of their death, but also have given the murderer's personal details, as he might still have been alive in 1979. The witness's recorded account may have resulted in some attempt to find him after the war and bring him to trial for the crimes committed.

Bielawski's most drastic description of an alleged crime was the shooting by Polish policemen of a young girl, Maria Nisman, and the deportation of her parents and sister to Treblinka. The author of the memoirs declared: "I will never forget Dr. Niseman [sic],<sup>68</sup> never..." but like his testimony before the Łódź commission, the memory proved to be unreliable, and the Nisman family was not included on the list either.

Reporting the case of Maria Nisman could even be called his moral duty, due to the fact that Bielawski presented himself as an eyewitness to her death, and making such information public could be important for her living relatives. There were a few cases when someone ended up in Treblinka but survived, which gave the families some faint hope that maybe some of their relatives were lucky. Such an account would have resolved all doubts.

Bielawski is also not helped by the account in Yad Vashem given by Leon Ptak, who wrote that Dr. Nisman was shot in Kosów Lacki. It is possible that he survived the liquidation of the ghetto in Węgrów, and that when the Germans announced the amnesty on 10 November, he and other Jews were sent to the remnant ghetto in Kosów and murdered there during its liquidation in December 1942. However, I managed to establish the fate of Maria's older

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<sup>68</sup> Feivel Bielawski uses the surname Niseman, but in official documents the dentist from Węgrów is listed as Benjamin Nisman.

sister, Rebecca Nisman, who also avoided capture by the Poles in the town and being transported to the camp by truck; she hid in nearby Węgrów Klimowizna, although German soldiers found and shot her there.<sup>69</sup>

More evidence of the incoherence of Bielawski's testimony is the nearly four-hour interview carried out with him for the USC Shoah Foundation by Sarah Akerlundi, which was videotaped on 10 August 1997, six years after his book was published.

In that testimony, Bielawski describes *inter alia* the construction of the hideout and the moment when the family took refuge there during the liquidation action. He describes in an emotional way the screams, pleas and prayers of the Jews who had been herded onto the market square, but when he is asked a specific question about friends and acquaintances, no specific names are mentioned. There is no word about the Nismans, the Chudziks or the Złotowski sisters. The witness only mentions how the Jews were driven to the town clock<sup>70</sup> with the help of the 'blue' police, firefighters and ordinary onlookers. The building with the clock is located in the south-eastern part of the market square – exactly diagonal to the store. And that is why, even if the wall was of the thickness described in his memoir and Bielawski could have seen what was happening in the market square through the peephole he cut out, he could not have seen the images he described anyway. The view would have been effectively blocked by the aforementioned shopping hall, which was only demolished in the 1960s.<sup>71</sup>

### A true image of the Holocaust, gaps in the memory, confusing truth with fiction, or pure fantasies?

Describing the deportation of Jews from the market square, Bielawski quoted words spoken by one of the deportees to the people of Węgrów who were loading their Jewish neighbours onto the trucks: "A man next to the little girl screamed at the Poles, 'You are pushing us into the ovens. God will take revenge on you'".<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> J. Mielniczek, *Szkola. 75-lecie Liceum Ogólnokształcącego w Węgrowie*, Węgrów 1993, p. 21.

<sup>70</sup> A reference to the town hall's clock.

<sup>71</sup> The author of this article witnessed its demolition, and has photographic documentation of the project.

<sup>72</sup> Bielawski, *Ostatni Żyd*, p. 130.

So, the Jews of Węgrów knew that they were going to be exterminated in the 'death factory'. When we think about extermination camps, we involuntarily recall images from movies and books: the selection, the gas chambers, and the tall, smoking chimneys of the crematoria – things which never existed in Treblinka. Nor were they in Sobibór or Bełżec, and these camps, along with Treblinka, were the ones that received transports from the ghettos during Aktion Reinhardt. In September 1942, the bodies of the murdered were thrown into huge pits. Only in the spring of 1943, after the liquidation of the ghetto in Węgrów, were special ovens built in the camp. A team of prisoners was ordered to dig up the bodies and burn them in order to remove the traces of the mass genocide. No stoves or smoking chimneys were built in Treblinka.<sup>73</sup> Bielawski, however, claims to be familiar with Treblinka and other facts: "Then the bodies were removed, the gold fillings were taken from the teeth, and the corpses burned in huge crematoria."<sup>74</sup>

In the reality of September 1942, no inhabitant of the Węgrów ghetto, even though he knew that Treblinka was a place of mass extermination, could have known about any crematoria, let alone shout about them loudly while being pushed onto a truck. This is pure invention based on knowledge widely disseminated only after the war and related to the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp, in which large gas chambers and crematoria were actually built, but used until 1943, after the liquidation of the Węgrów ghetto.

After 'liberation', Bielawski lived in Węgrów for another year; so, he had enough time to hear Polish accounts of the Jewish population being taken on foot to the station in Sokołów Podlaski. However, we learn something else from the book: "Ultimately, almost all the Jews from Węgrów died at Treblinka, having been transported by open trucks over the unpaved road to Siedlce. The road to Warsaw had been a route of commerce and salvation for the Jews of Węgrów. Now, it would become the road to the gas chambers."<sup>75</sup> As the map shows, the road to Siedlce, near which the camp was allegedly built, leads in a different direction than the one along which the Jews were driven to the railway station in Sokołów

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<sup>73</sup> S. Różycki, E. Kopówka, N. Zalewska, *Obóz zagłady Treblinka II*, Warszawa–Treblinka 2019, p. 27.

<sup>74</sup> Bielawski, *Ostatni Żyd*, p. 125.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55. It is worth noting that the road from Węgrów to Warsaw runs in a completely different direction than the one to Siedlce. Bielawski travelled to the capital on business many times, so he knew this route well. This makes it more difficult to understand such a mistake in his book.

Podlaski. This description therefore does not conform with real events. In addition, even the night before the liquidation of the ghetto, the author heard some sounds: “We heard the sound of trucks, many trucks, in the street”.<sup>76</sup> At least 125 large trucks would have had to come to the town<sup>77</sup> to carry away 10,000 inhabitants of the ghetto, which seems impossible.

Jews who resisted were killed on the spot, and smoke grenades were thrown into their houses; yet we should emphasise that the sounds of shots and explosions are not to be found in Bielawski’s account of the first day of the liquidation of the ghetto. Despite allegedly spending many days observing the market, the author did not note that the *Hiwis*, special units formed by the Germans composed of Ukrainians, Lithuanians and Latvians, took part in the operation.<sup>78</sup> As noted in many reports, Ukrainians constituted the majority of the liquidation teams that came every day to search for hidden Jews, herding them onto trucks and then sending them to Treblinka, or liquidating them on the spot.<sup>79</sup>

Judging by Jewish reports, the Ukrainians supervised the robbery of goods from Jewish shops by the Jewish police, who had been deliberately spared.<sup>80</sup> Anyone observing the market square would have seen the *Hiwis*, but in Bielawski’s version, it was the Poles (without any objection from the Germans) who took over the stores, while – and let us emphasise this – his family’s store did not gain a new Polish owner. The Karbowski family, instead of making themselves comfortable behind the shop counter, took the goods out of the shop stealthily and under cover of night.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>77</sup> I found a reference to the largest number of Jews to be loaded into a single vehicle in reports about the Saurer trucks used by the Germans in Chełmno nad Nerem. These were large vehicles, suitably modified to kill the people inside with exhaust gases while driving. 80 people could be loaded into them. See C. Lanzman, *Shoah*, Koszalin 1993, p. 112.

<sup>78</sup> The participation of Latvians and Lithuanians was mentioned by the then parish priest of Węgrów, see *Ksiądz kanonik Kazimierz Czarkowski. Wspomnienia i dokumenty*, ed. E. Kozłowska, Warszawa 2007, p. 23. The presence of Lithuanians was also noted by Sewek Fiszman (see Fiszman’s report).

<sup>79</sup> Tchórzewski, *Świadectwo dojrzałości*, pp. 106–12.

<sup>80</sup> ‘Spisane świadectwa’, in *Vengrov: Sefer Zikharon*, p. 73. Despite the German restrictions, Jews owned most of the shops on the market square. In the collection of the Municipal Library in Węgrów an incomplete list of commercial premises and service establishments in Węgrów from 29 January 1942 has been preserved. Of the 141 listed, Jews were the owners of 97, and Poles of 44. There were 24 on the market square. (‘Węgrówskie listy 2’, in *Żydzi w Węgrowie*, ed. W.W. Ronge, W. Theiss, Węgrów 1990, pp. 62–64).

<sup>81</sup> Bielawski, *Ostatni Żyd*, p. 129.

Also, the accusation that it was the 'blue' police that shot Jews under the supervision of a single German is not confirmed by any sources known to me, either Polish or Jewish. The most important accounts include the testimonies of Polish and Jewish witnesses at the firefighters' trial: the recollections of Sewek Fiszman,<sup>82</sup> one Rotstein, whose first name is unknown,<sup>83</sup> Jerzy Tchórzewski,<sup>84</sup> Władysław Okulus, Władysław Wójcik,<sup>85</sup> Zygmunt Klem,<sup>86</sup> Henryka Grabowska,<sup>87</sup> and Kazimierz Okrasa.<sup>88</sup>

Bielawski wrote that the son of Chaim Naczelnik was an eyewitness to this murder, but a few sentences later, he twice names the father as the witness, and not the son.<sup>89</sup>

There are also other inaccuracies. According to the available knowledge, on 10 November 1942, the Germans announced an amnesty for the hidden Jews, who, after revealing themselves, were obliged to go to Kosów Lacki, where a remnant ghetto was established. However, the German commissioner in Węgrów, Willi Neuman, obtained permission to create a small ghetto in the town itself. The reason for this decision was that, after the liquidation of the ghetto in September, there was a shortage of craftsmen in the town. A few selected professionals thus received special certificates allowing them to remain in Węgrów legally. In the testimony given in April 1945, Bielawski truthfully stated that some of the Jews had these certificates, while others remained there illegally. The fact that the remnants of the Jewish community were divided into those who worked there legally and those who remained in hiding is confirmed in other sources.<sup>90</sup>

However, we have a completely different version in the book, which does not include the order for the survivors to go to the ghetto in Kosów Lacki or the limit

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<sup>82</sup> Sewek Fiszman's report.

<sup>83</sup> Rotstein, 'Masowy grób', in *Vengrov: Sefer Zikharon*, p. 61.

<sup>84</sup> Tchórzewski, *Świadectwo dojrzałości*, pp. 106–12.

<sup>85</sup> Testimony of Władysław Wójcik, AŻIH 301/4998.

<sup>86</sup> Z. Klem, 'I wtedy przyszło najgorsze', in 'Węgrowskie listy 2'.

<sup>87</sup> H. Grabowska, 'Wojna zabrała nam dzieciństwo i młodość', in 'Węgrowskie listy 2'.

<sup>88</sup> Kazimierz Okrasa's testimony, in the author's private collection.

<sup>89</sup> Bielawski, *Ostatni Żyd*, p. 138.

<sup>90</sup> See W. Okulus, 'Największa tragedia w dziejach Węgrowa', AŻIH 301/6043 p. 7; Klem, 'I wtedy przyszło najgorsze', p. 45.

on legal permits. According to Bielawski, all Jews who survived the liquidation action were permitted stay in the town, where they were to rebuild the houses destroyed during the liquidation.<sup>91</sup> In fact, the opposite happened, because in the end the Germans decided to demolish the Jewish quarter.

Bielawski's sister, Menucha, was included in the list of employees at the workplace run by their cousin, Kreda, who, with the permission of the Germans, ran a laundry and dye-house. His mother had to go into hiding and Fajwel and Mosze moved to the 'Aryan' district on Kilińskiego Street, where Rachel Mendelbaum, the author's fiancée, lived. They had no documents and, unlike the remaining Jews, they did not do any work.<sup>92</sup>

When the Germans began the liquidation of the remnant ghetto on 30 April 1943, the family members on Kilińskiego Street managed to hide in the attic of the neighbouring house, which belonged to the police chief's widow.

Bielawski relates: "We peered through the cracks of the wooden gable and saw four of them. They were helmeted and carrying machine guns. The Polish police, carrying guns, followed, and then came twenty or thirty Polish youths".<sup>93</sup> Although the entire street was searched, the search for Jews in the widow's house was abandoned for unknown reasons.

Polish criminals appear once again in Bielawski's narrative, supporting the Germans *en masse* in their extermination of the Jews. But did this story really take place? I managed to find the witness Kazimierz Okrasa, who as a young boy lived at that time on Kilińskiego Street. In his opinion, after the liquidation action in September 1942, no Jews lived there anymore, and the Majchra family lived in the Mendelbaum house.<sup>94</sup> The street was small, everyone knew each other well, so the return and residence – for five months – of a family well known to their Polish neighbours could not have gone unnoticed.

Bielawski recalled that on the day the remnant ghetto was liquidated, he found shelter with a widow who was living in the house of the oldest of the Bielawski brothers, Icchak, which stood opposite the Mendelbaums' house. The author ran

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<sup>91</sup> Bielawski, *Ostatni Żyd*, pp. 157, 176.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 161–63.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>94</sup> Kazimierz Okrasa's testimony, in the author's private collection.

quickly to the other side of the street at the last moment before the Germans entered the Mendelbaums' house. In fact, the house of Icchak Bielawski was on a different street, a hundred metres away in a straight line.

Further proof that the account of the events at Kilińskiego Street is not true is provided by Bielawski himself in the aforementioned account to the commission in Łódź in April 1945. The testimonies therein show that "On 1 May 1943, the last action took place in Węgrów, in which one hundred were killed, supposedly the privileged ones, and many of whom were in hiding. I managed to hide in some basement, and in this way I saved myself".<sup>95</sup>

This is easy to imagine. Bielawski is lucky that when the liquidation began, he was outside the ghetto and, by chance, close enough to a house with a basement that is not later searched by the Germans. However, this testimony does not mention any attic from which he could have watched the German-Polish punitive expedition. The term "some cellar" suggests a random choice of hiding place. So while writing his memoirs, Bielawski forgot about the content of his testimony from several dozen years ago, and let his imagination run wild, hoping that no one would verify the content of his book – especially as his own testimony would speak against him.

Let us just add that in the previously quoted interview from 1997, Bielawski omitted the period of his stay in Węgrów during the existence of the remnant ghetto between November 1942 and April 1943, and stated that after leaving that hideout, he went straight to the countryside.

### On Polish attitudes towards the Jews – from the hidden man's perspective

In May 1943, Bielawski left the town and managed to join his relatives. The entire Bielawski family of ten hid with a group of Polish farmers in the area around Jarnice, Pieniek Jarnicki and Zajac, and fortunately lived to see the end of the occupation.

With the liquidation of the remnant ghetto in Węgrów and the relocation of the Bielawski family to the countryside, the Germans disappear from the pages of his book until the end of the occupation. After saying goodbye to the Mendelbaum family, other Jews also disappear. Bielawski's only contacts are with

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<sup>95</sup> Fajwel Bielawski's testimony.



Poles, and more specifically with the inhabitants of the five Polish farms who they turned to and obtained help from.<sup>96</sup>

Hiding in the wilderness in dugouts or in barns, Bielawski ceases to witness any more dramatic events, although this does not mean that his memories of that time are free from descriptions of crimes against Jews committed by Poles. Let us list these threads:

1) Cooperation between Poles and the German occupiers:

a) "I hear it said that Polish youths are out searching for Jews in the fields and forests, killing them when they find any. They brag about how many Jews they have killed in the past several days".<sup>97</sup>

b) Although this should not have come as any surprise to us, we still sat and wondered how the same people with whom we had lived, worked, and played could undertake to murder their fellow citizens, imitating their bitter enemies who had instigated this extermination. It was incredible that they would cooperate with their conquerors in this genocide. But such were the facts".<sup>98</sup>

2) The murder of Jews by the Polish Underground:

a) "On Sunday he heard that several Jews had appeared in Jarnic on Saturday asking for bread. They had been discovered and shot by members of the Polish underground".<sup>99</sup>

b) "The Polish underground urged that the Jews be hunted, though the underground was supposed to be the Germans' enemies and the flame of Polish nationalism. The neighbors eagerly pursued the few Jews who were left in hiding".<sup>100</sup>

c) "A friend told me there are still Jews hiding in the forest and that they should be killed, so that there will be no witnesses after the war. Be very careful".<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Bielawski, *Ostatni Żyd*, p. 90.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 224.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 257.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 235. This fact has not been mentioned in any of the post-war studies on the Polish underground in the Węgrów powiat. See Wangrat, *Polska i powiat węgrowski*; Stolarz, 'Powiat Węgrów'; Matusak, 'Okupacja i ruch oporu'.

<sup>100</sup> Bielawski, *Ostatni Żyd*, p. 249.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., pp. 251–52. This incident, Bielawski writes, was triggered by an underground newspaper, which urged the liquidation of the Jews.

Bielawski's informants are the hosts who are hiding him, but – let us note – none of the situations he described has been noted in other sources. In Pieńki, where the Bielawski family was hiding, the Germans killed twenty Jews and the farmer who hid them. This matter was very well known, but in the book of 'the last Jew from Węgrów' we will not find any mention of it.<sup>102</sup>

When the Bielawski family was hiding with Waclaw Bujalski for a year, the real threat was allegedly his anti-Semitic brother, who was in conflict with their host. As he lived nearby, the Bielawskis waited for him to go to the town with his wife, because only then could they build their hiding place in the attic. Bielawski also described a conversation between the Bujalski brothers, observed from the attic, which took place just before the Russians entered. They both wondered what might happen if their farms found themselves in the war zone. The incident could not have happened, however, because the accounts of Waclaw Bujalski's sons show that their only uncle, Józef, emigrated to the United States before World War I, which means that the alleged threat from him was invented by the author of the book.<sup>103</sup>

### Post-war reality: between fiction and truth

After the Red Army captured Węgrów, Bielawski was allegedly the first survivor to return to the town, where he quickly became the leader of the reviving Jewish community. In his nephew's book, however, the Bielawskis do not return until the end of August, at least two weeks after the Soviets entered. The man who did reorganise the Jewish community in the town was Rubin Bird-Przepiórka, and when the Jewish Committee was established in Węgrów, it was headed by Szmul Rajzman, who led it until May 1945. Bielawski took over the leadership after Rajzman's departure to Łódź; even though he had not been a member of the committee's governing body before that time, he managed to take credit for other people's work.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> M. Piórkowska, *Sprawiedliwi i ocaleni. Mieszkańcy Węgrowa i okolic, pomagający Żydom w latach okupacji hitlerowskiej*, Węgrów 2012, p. 151.

<sup>103</sup> Interview with Stanisław Bujalski, in the author's private collection.

<sup>104</sup> Financial reports of the Jewish committee in Węgrów from the commencement of its operation until 23 May, 1945, dated 6 June 1945, AŻIH, Central Committee of Jews in Poland. Department of Records and Statistics 303 / V / 377.

The author of the memoir did not forget to emphasise his services to his needy Jewish brothers, and in one case, to save a Jewish woman, he did not hesitate to undertake a risky action that could have cost him his life from a Soviet soldier's bullet. How does this boastful self-representation relate to the extant testimonies?

During Bielawski's post-war stay in Węgrów, poor Polish families cared for three Jewish orphans. One of these children, Lusia Farbiarz, was saved during the occupation and, as a Polish child named Zuzia, was hidden by one Pelagia Vogelgesang, risking her life to do so. She received material support from the Committee's first chairman, Szmul Rajzman. After his departure Bielawski, who at that time was running a thriving restaurant, took over his duties. However, according to Vogelgesang, he did not provide any help to the girl: "He told [Rajzman] that he was leaving now, but Mr. Bielawski became the chairman of the Jewish committee, but Mr. Bielawski remembered very little about Lusia, and I did not draw any attention to myself; and somehow God helped, that the child did not go hungry".<sup>105</sup>

In an interview in 1997, however, Bielawski did not spare his criticism of the Poles around him: "Not one of the neighbours in the country where I lived and next to whom I lived came or shook hands, or expressed happiness that I was alive, or asked whether I needed anything".<sup>106</sup> So let us reverse the situation, and say: when Bielawski became chairman of the Committee, he never came to Ms Vogelgesang, did not shake her hand, and was not glad that a little Jewish girl had survived thanks to her courage and dedication. And what is particularly important, considering the difficult financial situation of her Polish guardian, no-one from the Bielawski family asked whether little Lusia needed anything.<sup>107</sup>

The arrival of the Soviets and the end of the German occupation did not mean the end of the ordeal for Bielawski, because "many Poles were killing Jews even after the Russians arrived. They were afraid that the Jews would testify against them, and tell

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<sup>105</sup> Testimony of Pelagia Vogelgesang, AŻIH, 301/4975, p. 9.

<sup>106</sup> Testimony of Philip Biel, USC, VHA, 34246, interview of 19 August 1997 (Philip Biel was the new name Bielawski used after he settled in the United States).

<sup>107</sup> Bielawski recalled: "Weeks passed and the restaurant prospered. With our profits I purchased proper dinnerware and kitchenware. We bought clothing and bedding, and our food was sufficient for our needs" (Bielawski, *Ostatni Żyd*, p. 286). However, nothing could be siphoned off this abundance of food, not even one plate of soup a day for a small, orphaned Jewish child.

the Russians that the Poles had collaborated with the Germans in murdering the Jews”<sup>108</sup> In fact, there was only one such case in Węgrów mentioned in the ‘last’ Jew’s book. According to the author of the memoir, the surviving son of the laundry owner, Icchak Kreda, was shot by a Pole while trying to recover his plant, which the Pole had taken over during the occupation. There was indeed a murder, but Bielawski’s description is incorrect. After returning to Węgrów, Icchak Kreda joined the UB<sup>109</sup> additionally engaged in illicit trading; he was not shot at the family factory, but in the Miednicki forest, 16 km away from the town. In April 1945, the investigation was discontinued due to the failure to identify the perpetrators. They were resumed only four years later, when none of the Bielawskis were in Poland.<sup>110</sup> Contrary to what the author of the memoir writes, no one benefited from the death of Icchak Kreda or took over his business, because both the house and the laundry became communal property thereafter.

The end of the Bielawski family’s stay in Węgrów, as presented in the last chapter of the book, allegedly took a very dramatic turn. In October 1945, the author of the memoir fell victim to the lawlessness of the local UB. He was beaten and threatened with death; fearing for his life, he fled with his brother, his sister and her husband, carrying one suitcase in his hand, leaving the house and restaurant to their fate. He stated in the book that he did not know what had happened to the family’s property and land. Unfortunately, the author did not write the truth, because the entries in the land and mortgage register show that on 15 October 1945, the Bielawski family sold the house and store to the Jaworski family for 250,000 zloty<sup>111</sup> – a large sum of money for the time. I managed to find a payroll from the Security Office in Jawor, from October 1945 to be precise. And I calculated how many years a person working there would have had to put aside his entire salary in order to buy the Bielawski’s property in Węgrów. The head of the UB in Jawor, Jan Kurczyzna (whose salary was 2448 zloty net) would have had to save up for 8½ years; his deputy, Leon Fajgelbaum (salary 2148 zloty) for 9 years

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<sup>108</sup> Bielawski, *Ostatni Żyd*, pp. 297–98.

<sup>109</sup> Polish political police at the service of the Soviets. It was responsible for the murder, torture and deportation to camps of those who did not recognise the new Soviet occupation and enslavement.

<sup>110</sup> See Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance 473/72, Ludwik Kalata and other convicts, on 24 September 1951 under Art. 221§1 of the Penal Code, art. 257§1 KKWP for the fatal shooting of Icek Kred in the Miednicki forest, and the theft of his money.

<sup>111</sup> Węgrów: real estate located on the market square at policy no. 1, consisting of a square with an area of 44 rods and the house standing on it, mortgage no. 113 (APS, 62/1218/0/2.1/648, Mortgage in Węgrów).

jest od wszelkich długów i zastrzeżeń.

§ 2. Mocą niniejszego aktu, Icek vel Icko-Chil Bielawski, Rachmil Bielawski i Fajwel Bielawski, ten ostatni w imieniu własnym oraz Srula-Moszek vel Mojżesza Bielawskiego i Menichy vel Mnichy Bielawskiej tudzież Sury-Frejdy Bielawskiej, wszystkie swoje prawa odziedziczone w spadku po Majerze-Wulfie vel Wolfie Bielawskim do powyższej pozostałej po nim części nieruchomości, położonej w Węgrowie, oznaczonej Nr. hipotecznym 113, czyli całą swoją i mocodawców swoich współwłasność tej nieruchomości, ze wszystkim tym, co na miejscu się znajduje i z prawa, natury lub przeznaczenia nieruchomości i jej przynależność stanowi, bez żadnych wyłączeń, w stanie wolnym od wszelkich długów i zastrzeżeń, sprzedają, współstawiającym Edwardowi i Zofii małżonkom Jaworskim, w równych między nimi częściach niepodzielnie, za cenę ogólną złotych 250.000 dwieście pięćdziesiąt tysięcy i podstawiając kupujących od chwili obecnej we wszystkie swoje i mocodawców swoich prawa do przedmiotu sprzedaży, zezwalają na przepisanie tych praw a po zamknięciu postępowania spadkowego i tytułu własności przedmiotu niniejszej sprzedaży wszędzie gdzie należy, a w szczególności w wykazie hipotecznym powyższej nieruchomości na imię kupujących Edwarda i Zofii małżonków Jaworskich.

Sprzedający Icek vel Icko-Chil Bielawski, Rachmil Bielawski i Fajwel Bielawski, ten ostatni w imieniu mocodawców swoich Srula-Moszek vel Mojżesza Bielawskiego, Menichy vel Mnichy Bielawskiej i Sury-Frejdy Bielawskiej przyznają, że całą powyższą cenę sprzedażną otrzymali dla siebie, przy czym Fajwel Bielawski i dla wyżej wymienionych mocodawców swoich w całości, gotowizną, jeszcze przed sporządzeniem tego aktu, z odbioru kwitują, z tego tytułu tak obecnie jak i na przyszłość zrzekają się do kupujących małżonków Jaworskich jakichkolwiek pretensji, przy czym gwarantują kupującym z całego swego obecnego i przyszłego majątku ruchomego i nieruchomego, że oprócz ujawnionych w tym akcie spadkobierców, innych spadkobierców po Majerze-Wulfie vel Wolfie Bielawskim nie pozostało i że powyższy spadek pozostały po tymże Majerze-Wulfie vel Wolfie Bielawskim wolny jest

Deed of sale of the Bielawski family's real estate. Source: State Archives in Siedlce, Land and Mortgage Register no. 113.

and 7 months; an investigative officer (1587 złoty) – 13 years and 1 month; a doctor (1040 złoty) 20 years and 10 months; and a cook (854 złoty) 24 years and 4 months.<sup>112</sup>

The Bielawskis had intended to sell their property for a long time because the collection of the relevant documents had already begun in May 1945. The contract included a special item, giving the Bielawskis time until the beginning of November to remove or sell their belongings. There was no question of any panicked escape, or even of selling for a song under the pressure of the moment.

In his book, Bielawski mentions that after leaving Węgrów, he moved to Łódź, where his dying mother, Sara Frida Bielawska, was staying. When she died in January 1946, Fajwel Bielawski organised her funeral and after eight days of mourning, he and Mosze left for Belgium. Is the above description correct? A completely different version of the events is contained in Eddie Bielawski's memoirs, which show that Fajwel and Mosze left while Sara Bielawska was still alive, with the intention of bringing her there after they had settled on a location. However, the mother's health deteriorated: the people who took care of her were Menucha and her husband, Moryc.<sup>113</sup> Icchak's wife, Paula, also came with little Eddie for a few days to help (according to *The Last Jew from Węgrow*, Icchak's entire family was in Germany; according to Eddie, however, they left Poland for Austria, and only passed through Germany to embark on a ship to Canada). Later, Paula was with her son at her mother-in-law's funeral.<sup>114</sup> However, according to Fajwel's memoir, only he and Mosze, as the last family members staying in Poland, participated in the funeral ceremonies.

Both of these versions recorded by two representatives of the Bielawski family are mutually exclusive. They are, however, linked by the date of Mrs Bielawska's death (January 1946), and also by the fact that in neither memoir does this date correspond to the truth. From the information I found on the Bielawski family's genealogical website, it appears that Mrs. Bielawska died a year later, on 19 January 1947. The same date appears on her tombstone.

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<sup>112</sup> Calculations made on the basis of T. Balbus, 'Powiatowy Urząd Bezpieczeństwa Publicznego w Jaworze – struktura, kadry, działalność (maj–grudzień 1945)', in *Aparat Represji w Polsce Ludowej 1944–1989* 2008, vol. 6, no. 1, p. 22.

<sup>113</sup> According to Bielawski's memoir, Menuch and Moryc were already in Germany at the time of the death of their mother (Bielawski, *Ostatni Żyd*, p. 293).

<sup>114</sup> Bielawski, *Invisible Jews*, pp. 15–16.

During an interview in 1997, a specific question was put to Fajwel Bielawski: “In which year did you go to Belgium?” And he replied, “1945, 1947, and I was there until 1947”.<sup>115</sup> We may guess that Bielawski initially gave the wrong date, and then corrected it immediately. It is therefore very likely that he stayed in Poland for a year longer than he described in his memoir. However, he said nothing about what he was doing during that time.

Even the title of Bielawski’s memoirs does not correspond to the truth. The last Jew from Węgrów was in fact one Alter Szpilman, mentioned in the book, who lived there and ran a photography salon; it was only after a few years, when his daughter had graduated from university, that he decided to go to Israel.

### Summary

The purpose of this article is to draw attention to the large number of mistakes made by Bielawski, as well as – in my opinion – his conscious confabulations. The list of objections to the content of the memoir is much longer: suffice it to say that the results of the investigation I have collected would compose a book almost three times larger than the memoir of ‘the last Jew from Węgrów’.

In the light of my findings, Bielawski’s memoir cannot form a reliable basis for the author’s wartime biography, nor for any reflection upon Polish-Jewish relations from that period. His reminiscences are full of gaps, simplifications, and content which is unconfirmed or simply untrue.

The case of Bielawski shows that it is not good practice to place uncritical trust in post-war recollections, especially those which – such as Bielawski’s – were created many years after the events described.

In preparing the account of his wartime fate, Bielawski ‘stocked up’ his book with confabulations and fantasies about the scale of Polish participation in the Holocaust. For unknown reasons, the author’s attention was focused primarily on Poles as accomplices of the Holocaust, although it cannot be

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<sup>115</sup> Testimony of Philip Biel, USC, VHA 34246, interview from 19 August 1997.

denied that there were abuses and even crimes committed against Jews by Poles.<sup>116</sup>

However, Bielawski's memoirs give the impression of what might even be called the collective responsibility of the Polish people. In his opinion, the entire town took part in the September liquidation, and almost all the peasants in the countryside were enthusiastic participants in the hunt for the few Jews who were looking for shelter outside the town. But the author's dramatic stories, when juxtaposed with other accounts, documents, and testimonies of surviving witnesses, are most often proved to be untrue.

The publication in Polish of Bielawski's memoir, which was not preceded by a thorough analysis and which lacks appropriate footnotes, is for me argument for more critical verification of sources, especially if, as in this case, there are more or less sensational threads in them with an obvious detriment to historical truth.

Bielawski's book was published in 1991, and went virtually unnoticed. It only reached Polish readers in a truncated version. Removed from the first chapter were *inter alia* the author's critical remarks about the Catholic Church, and from the fifth chapter, the start of his story. The latter is justified in a footnote that states that the missing sections contain basic information about the stages of the extermination of the Jews in Poland. However, it seems that the actual reason may have been slightly different. The author of the memoir simply did not provide a reliable description of the course of the Holocaust, and his text was full of all sorts of errors. It is surprising that, in the first chapter, there was not even a footnote informing the reader that part of the chapter had been removed, with a brief justification as to why it was decided not to include it in the Polish edition.

When *Dalej jest noc* was published in 2018, it turned out that one chapter, authored by Jan Grabowski, was devoted to the powiat of Węgrów.<sup>117</sup> The accumulation of confabulations,

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<sup>116</sup> Fajwel Bielawski claimed that he was afraid of Polish bandits while hiding in the countryside; this is not an anti-Polish invention with no factual basis. While collecting information, I conducted several interviews with inhabitants of villages near Węgrów who told me about crimes of this nature committed for criminal reasons. Bielawski names the firefighter Deszczyński and one of the Ajchl brothers among those who led the Jews to their execution. These people were brought before a court after the war for their participation in the liquidation of the ghetto. However, the author of the memoir could have learned about their activities after the war, because he remained in Węgrów for another year.

<sup>117</sup> During the occupation, the Węgrów powiat was not an independent administrative unit. The Germans linked it to the neighbouring Sokółów powiat. The seat of the occupation authorities was Sokółów Podlaski, where the German *starosta* Ernst Gramss resided.



falsifications and silences that I discovered while reading this book is a topic for a separate, multi-page publication. It often quotes Bielawski as a credible witness to Polish crimes against Jews. However, an attentive reader of both publications will easily notice the fact that the content of the Węgrów chapter contradicts the content of Bielawski's memoirs in many places. For example, Bielawski writes about executions carried out by the 'blue' police in the Jewish cemetery. Jan Grabowski, as editor of Bielawski's memoir, did not append any commentary to that report. However, as author of the Węgrów chapter, he wrote that the executions were carried out by the Germans. Elsewhere, Grabowski stated: "The inhabitants of the remnant ghetto were divided into the legals, with permits issued by the Germans, and the illegals".<sup>118</sup> Meanwhile Bielawski, writing about the 'amnesty' for the Jews in November 1942, stated that it covered all the surviving Jews, who were then to rebuild the Jewish district. This information was not been corrected in any way.

Jan Grabowski is not surprised by what I have already described: neither of the Bielawski brothers work or hide, but walk around the market square in Węgrów freely wearing 'Jewish clothes' and without any German-issued documents. The author of the memoir even describes how easily he can enter and leave the guarded ghetto.<sup>119</sup>

There are also many examples of Grabowski's 'arbitrary' use of Bielawski's account, changing its meaning. For example, in the memoir we find a description of how the Chudzik family were discovered by the Poles. The mother and her three daughters were handed over to the gendarme Giller, who shot all four of them. This took place on the fourth day of the liquidation action. Quoting Bielawski's account, Grabowski removed the sentence mentioning the date of the event described, and moved it to the first day of the liquidation of the ghetto. In this way, he authenticated the alleged mass involvement of Polish residents in exterminating their Jewish neighbours from the very first moments of the liquidation action (i.e. 22 September 1942). In turn, when writing about the period when the ghetto was still functioning, he stated: "From time to time the Germans and the 'blue' police conducted searches in the Jewish houses for illegal residents, and they shot those they found in the Jewish cemetery".<sup>120</sup> In the relevant footnote, we find the additional information: "Among those who died at this time were Rachel Mendelbaum, Fajwel Bielawski's fiancée, who had been hiding with seven

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<sup>118</sup> Grabowski, 'Powiat węgrowski', p. 461.

<sup>119</sup> Bielawski, *Ostatni Żyd*, p. 166.

<sup>120</sup> Grabowski, 'Powiat węgrowski', p. 461.

other people in a hideout under Kreda's house".<sup>121</sup> In fact, Rachel Mendelbaum died on 6 June 1943. The fact that she died after the liquidation of the remnant ghetto is confirmed in other sources.

Grabowski also drew a description, based on Bielawski's memoir, of the liquidation of the remnant ghetto, in which a group of several dozen Poles allegedly participated actively. Yet this description does not correspond to the truth. Grabowski was aware of Bielawski's account of April 1945, in which the latter stated that he was hiding in a random basement, and not in an attic as he later maintained in his memoir, but he also ignored this discrepancy. The alleged action described in the memoir took place outside the remnant ghetto on Kozia Street (now Kilińskiego Street), while Grabowski moves it several hundred metres away, to the ghetto.<sup>122</sup>

The examples given illustrate to just a small extent the wider phenomenon of how Grabowski analyses his sources. As a result of these actions, we are offered a publication which – as I have demonstrated – contains many errors and distortions. Can it therefore constitute the basis for an honest discussion of Polish-Jewish relations during the German occupation?

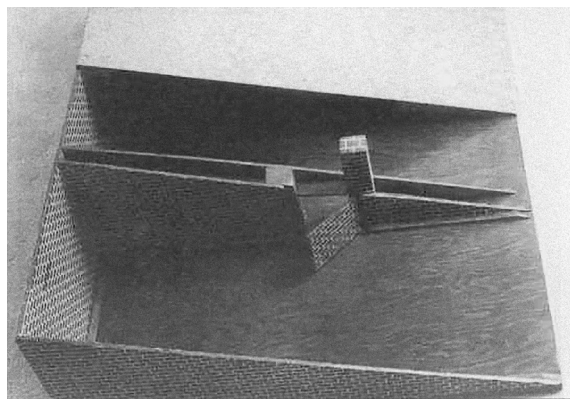
Finally, one more note. When we found Bielawski's hideout in June 2018 and revealed this in the press, Grabowski publicly commented on our discoveries. The article in which he presented his thoughts confirmed the paradigm that has been noticeable in research conducted by the "new Polish school of research on the Holocaust". This is the belief that Holocaust survivors always tells the truth, and the very fact of questioning their account is worth stigmatising. According to Grabowski, we located the hideout where Bielawski allegedly was hiding.<sup>123</sup> While there are some indications that the memoir's author may have been elsewhere during the liquidation action, it is also possible that he was hiding in the place he had mentioned. The thesis that Bielawski was not in the hideout has never been considered a certainty.

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> A specific paradox is that since, according to Grabowski, Rachel Mendelbaum was hiding on Gdańska Street and she was shot before the liquidation of the ghetto, Bielawski could not stay in her house on the day of the ghetto's liquidation. That is why Grabowski not only deliberately changed Bielawski's whereabouts from Kiliński Street to the ghetto, but he also changed the three-person Mendelbaum family who are mentioned in the memoirs into brothers, although only one, Moshe, accompanied him.

<sup>123</sup> J. Grabowski, 'Zaczyna się negacja świadectw zagłady. "Nie wierzę w ani jedno słowo tego Żyda"', <https://oko.press/prof-grabowski-zaczyna-sie-negacja-swiadectw-zaglady-nie-wierze-w-ani-jedno-slowo-tym-zyda/>, accessed 15 August 2018.



A drawing from the Polish edition of Bielawski's book, which is easy to compare with the earlier drawing from the US edition. It is clearly visible that part of the roof and one of the chimneys were intentionally covered, so that more inquisitive readers would not raise reasonable doubts.

The drawings (see the reproductions) of the hideout also raise significant doubts. There are as many as three chimneys (two real and one false). There were too many of them for such a small room, which could raise the suspicion of a more inquisitive researcher. In the Polish edition of Bielawski's memoir, a roof was added to cover part of the room, thus making the drawing seem more credible. Also, there were actually two ovens: one heating the store, the other a cooking stove.

The most important discovery was the measurement of the wall and publicising the fact that it was 38 cm thick. According to those who explored the attic and the hiding place, it would have been impossible to pierce an observation hole in it with an ordinary knife. And this provided a basis to deny the credibility of Bielawski as an eyewitness to all the stories that allegedly took place in the market square in Węgrów. Grabowski did not refer to this important information. Instead of a substantive polemic, we faced only an *ad hominem* attack.<sup>124</sup>

It is no exaggeration to say that the discovery of an intact Jewish hideout from the occupation period after more than seventy years is a discovery of great importance for Holocaust researchers. It should be examined and described in detail as soon as possible, items lost in the rubble should be searched for, and the results of the research should be made public. Meanwhile, for over two years, no-one from the Association of the Centre for Holocaust Research has bothered to travel the 80 km from Warsaw to Węgrów to do so. If the research of such an unusual discovery is not within the scope of the Centre's interest, what is the priority in this institution's research work?

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<sup>124</sup> For this reason among others, we have been called 'amateurs'. However, as such, we found 22 sources directly related to the Bielawski family; in Grabowski's publications, we find only three. We did not use state grants; we covered the costs of the research out of our own pockets. For the publication of *Ostatni Żyd z Węgrowa*, the Centre for Holocaust Research received a subsidy of 25,400 zloty from the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage.