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REPORT ON THE CONFERENCE 'POLISH-JEWISH
RELATIONS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY.
RESEARCH, CONTROVERSIES, PERSPECTIVES'.
THE THIRD COLLOQUIUM: 'POLES AND JEWS
IN THE SHADOW OF THE GERMAN OCCUPATION
OF POLAND', KIELCE 2019

Since 2016, the Delegation of the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) in Kielce, together with the Institute of History of the Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce (UJK), has over the past few years organised several scientific conferences focused on Polish-Jewish issues. At the invitation of both bodies, researchers representing Polish and foreign research centres have visited Kielce to present and discuss the latest research findings on the issue of the Jewish presence in various Polish military formations (2016), or the activities of the so-called 'blue police' targeting Jews in the General Government (2016). The Kielce Branch of the IPN and the Institute of History of the UJK have also held regular conferences on strictly Polish-Jewish relations under the title of 'Polish-Jewish relations in the 20th century. Research, controversies, perspectives'. Each year, this event raises various issues which sometimes would otherwise remain as blank spots on the scientific canvas. These have included the issue of sources for research on mutual relations between Poles and Jews, as well as the issue of saving Jews during

the Second World War, which have already been discussed during these sessions. In 2019, the 'Polish-Jewish relations in the twentieth century' conference was held for the third time (in Kielce on 3 July 2019), on the following topic: 'Poles and Jews in the shadow of the German occupation of Poland'. It seems that the organisers' choice of topic was quite deliberate. There is now a trend of research which visibly minimises or marginalises the role of the Germans in shaping Polish-Jewish and Jewish-Polish relations during the German occupation. Any consideration of the 'German presence' should naturally lead to questions about the influence it had on the scope of the contacts which were possible between the Poles and the Jews. Without the occupation's anti-Jewish and anti-Polish legislation, condemning Jews to extermination, punishing Poles with death for helping Jews or forcing them to participate in capturing Jews, in conjunction with the widespread and real terror it sowed, one cannot speak fully of a Polish 'witnessing' of the Holocaust, or of the anti-Jewish activities conducted by part of Polish society.

The guiding spirit of the conference was raised in the opening remarks given by the head of the Kielce Sub-Branch of the Institute of National Remembrance, Dr. Dorota Koczwańska-Kalita; the Mayor of Kielce Bogdan Wenta; the deputy director of the IPN, Dr. Mateusz Szpytma; and the director of the Institute of History of Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce, Prof. Beata Wojciechowska. Dr. Koczwańska-Kalita said: "We are portraying Polish-Jewish relations in the shadow of the German occupation. We will show them both from the legal, i.e. the political and administrative, point of view, and also how they developed in different poviats, because this matter was very complex, and looked different in different regions of Poland. We will show both the Polish and Jewish sides and their optics". The deputy director of the IPN mainly referred to the title of the third colloquium, 'Poles and Jews in the shadow of the German occupation'. According to Dr. Szpytma, when speaking of Polish-Jewish and Jewish-Polish relations, the context of the occupation in the public consciousness is fleeting. As the deputy director of the IPN said, it was this "'third actor' – the occupier – who was most important, because it was Germany who shaped what was happening under the occupation in a decisive way. Of course, this does not mean that one should evade responsibility for the wrongs that were committed on both sides". The mayor of Kielce emphasised the importance of scientific research in building and shaping

contemporary relations between the two nations, as in his opinion these could also contribute to toning down destructive emotions. Referring to the date of 4 July, the upcoming anniversary of the Kielce pogrom in 1946, he encouraged the joint commemoration of this event. An important thought was also expressed by Prof. Wojciechowska, who emphasised that the complicated matter of Polish-Jewish relations required great sensitivity from specialists. She also emphasised the fact that researchers from various research centres had participated in the conference.

After the official part, the conference speakers took the floor. The main thesis of the conference was clearly addressed in the first panel. In his paper 'The political and administrative system of the General Government in 1939–1945', Dr. Wojciech Wichert (of the IPN's Regional Historical Research Bureau [OBBH IPN] in Szczecin; his paper was read by Dr. Ryszard Śmietanka-Kruszelnicki) characterised the system of German rule in the General Government. He drew attention to the concept of leadership and the scope of the power wielded by administrative and police offices (especially the *starostas*), as well as their competences in the field of implementing the sentences imposed and the possibility of shaping their own nationality policy. As Wichert put it, the more energetic and independent heads of the counties "literally became 'little Hitlers'". In turn, the lecture by Dr. Ryszard Śmietanka-Kruszelnicki (of OBBH IPN Kraków, Kielce Delegation) entitled 'Under the threat of death. The choices and attitudes of Polish and Jewish residents of Garbatka during the German occupation (1939–45)' shifted the focus from the general level to the practical dimension of the German occupiers' activities. In his paper, based on the example of a single town, Kruszelnicki highlighted the circumstances that formed the basis of Polish-Jewish relations before the war, such as the recreational nature of the settlement, the influence of the Piłsudski camp and the activities of the Socialists. In the context of the occupation, he focused on the atmosphere of fear created by the Germans, the terror caused by the mass arrests of several hundred people on 12 July 1942 and the breakdown of the structures developed during independence. He also raised the issue of the demoralisation of the population, as expressed for example in the spread of robbery. Despite the large losses and the interactions of various situations, there were many people in the settlement who helped the Jews in the years 1942–45. The conference participants had the opportunity to hear one more speech on this

panel: Prof. Vasyl Hulai (Василь Гулай, Vasyl Gulay) (of the National University of Lviv Polytechnic, Lviv), in his paper 'Jews as the object of the creation of 'the image of the enemy' by legal publications in the district of Galicia of the General Government', focused on elements of anti-Jewish propaganda. One constant element in shaping this 'image of the enemy' was the emphasis on the presence of Jews in the Soviet police authorities, together with the image of the Jewish speculator. An important theme in Prof. Hulai's speech was the analysis of the press and its importance in the anti-Jewish campaign. At first, it had a nationalist tone, in the spirit of the OUN-UPA's propaganda. Prof. Hulai listed in detail individual titles such as *Злочовське слово*, *Тризуб* and many others, of which thousands of copies were published in almost every major city centre. Most of these titles, however, were only published until the end of 1941; after that time, the Germans limited the number of permitted titles to four.

The next panel was devoted to microstudies. The conference participants heard papers by the following: Dr. Jakub Parol (of the Museum of Independence Traditions in Łódź), on 'Methods of exterminating Poles and Jews at the prison in Radogoszcz (1939–45)'; Marlena Bodo (PhD student, Jagiellonian University) on 'Poles and Jews during the German occupation in Szydłowiec (1939–45)'; Mateusz Kofin (PhD student at the Ignatianum Academy in Cracow) on 'Jan Mosdorf – a 'converted anti-Semite' and a "righteous nationalist". Case study'; Dr. Joanna Potaczek (from the Centre for Dialogue Between Religions and Nations in Jarosław) and Grzegorz Oleniacz on 'Poles and Jews during the German occupation in the Sanok district (1939–45)'. The speech by Ms. Bodo, devoted to Poles and Jews in Szydłowiec, was of particular interest. Although the title showed a balance with regard to both nations, her presentation was dominated by her analysis of the situation of the Jewish population: first the Holocaust, and then Polish-Jewish relations. She referred to the Germans' general anti-Jewish activities that destroyed the foundations of that people's existence, taking into account local conditions determining mutual relations and mutual Polish-Jewish perceptions, such as the property status and the open character of the Szydłowiec ghetto, which made it possible for Jews to conduct trade and obtain food almost until its closure in September 1942. Ms. Bodo also referred to the 'Memorial Book' of Szydłowiec's Jews and the way in which Polish-Jewish relations were presented in this study.

The next panel was started by Leszek Dziedzic (of the Museum of the History of Kielce) with a lecture entitled ‘Two peoples – two paths. Presidents of the *Judenrat* in Kielce’. Attempts to assess the acts of *Judenrat* officials are nothing new; much has been written about Chaim Rumkowski or Adam Czerniaków, offering harsh and firm judgements on their actions. The paper’s title left no doubts as to the differences in the attitudes and actions of the Kielce *Judenrat*’s leaders, Mojżesz Pelc and Herman Lewi. In the view of the speaker, Pelc was clearly a positive figure, as a fighter who battled in inhumane conditions for the rights and dignity of the Jewish people; on the other side, we see Lewi, a pre-war industrialist, zealously implementing all the German orders, but who died shouting ‘Long live Poland’.

We do not find such great disproportions in evaluating the protagonists of the speech given by Krzysztof Jakubowski (of the *Tygodnik Ciechanowski* local newspaper), entitled ‘Women and the Holocaust. Maria Tyk (a Jewish woman) and Marianna Cybulska (a Polish woman)’. Jakubowski devoted his lecture to two stories, the first of which concerned the Jewish community from the small town of Strzegowo in the north of Mazovia (incorporated into the Reich after 1939) and the friendship between the Tyk sisters (Jewish women) and their Polish neighbours. The second story concerned the relationship between the Polish woman Marianna Cybulska (*née* Zalewska) and her Jewish employers, the Eisenbergs from Warsaw. After the Jews were expelled from the Warsaw ghetto, Cybulska took care of Eisenberg’s daughter, Teresa. With great difficulty and at the risk of her own life, she saved the child; when she learned in 1945 that none of the Eisenberg family was still alive, she placed her in a Jewish orphanage in Warsaw.

Maciej Korcuć (from the Kraków Branch of the IPN) devoted a great deal of space to references to the colloquium’s title in concluding this part of the conference with his paper entitled ‘The struggle of the Jewish youth in Pilica. Facts and context of events’. Korcuć stated that his paper was “a story about people subjected to the terror of the German Reich. The invasion by this state into the lives of millions of citizens of the Republic of Poland of various nationalities changed almost all points of reference. It turned the lives of millions of people upside down”. As Korcuć continued, if one tells the story of those times without taking the presence of the Reich into account, this distances us from the truth about the reality of the occupation. From the lecture, the audience

learned about the resistance of the Jewish youth in Pilica (for example, scattering anti-German leaflets) and about its contacts with an ethnic-Polish Communist organisation called the Union of Working People of Towns and Villages. Of especial importance was the recollection of the testimony of Estera Rusinek, who described the activities of a Jewish group that, among others, forced the Polish population to ransom the money it had put aside for organisational purposes. Korcuć's analysis supplemented the information about the events in the village of Wierbka which had already been published.¹

The organisers devoted the last two papers to issues of historical sources. Prof. Jerzy Gapys (of the Institute of History of Kochanowski University in Kielce) discussed several elements of Jewish daily life in a paper entitled 'The diary of Stanisław Turnau as a source of Jewish history in 1939–44'. First of all, he highlighted the journal's value as a historical source for the the Second World War period. In the notes by Turnau which he quoted, the speaker argued that we can find testimonies of German anti-Jewish activities: gradual restrictions of mobility, income and trade, and then the ghetto uprising, hunger, mass executions and finally 'Operation Reinhard'. The diary also shows the aid activities undertaken by Polish landowners, which (if the author of the diary is to be believed) at times took place on a mass scale. The source quoted by Gapys also makes clear the polarisation of the behaviour and attitudes displayed by Polish society towards the Jews. The conference ended with a speech by Dr. Tomasz Domański (OBBH IPN Kraków, Kielce Delegation) entitled 'A new paradigm? Polish-Jewish relations under German occupation as presented in the book *Dalej jest noc* [Night without End]'. The core of Dr. Domański's speech was the extensive review of this work which he prepared,² which provoked a lively discussion and polemic within the scientific community dealing with Jewish studies. In his lecture, Dr. Domański drew attention to the way in which German-run organisations composed of Poles were presented in this study, including the 'blue police' and the volunteer fire brigades. He also referred

¹ K. Samsonowska, 'Dramat we wsi Wierbka i jego dalszy ciąg na zamku w Pilicy', in *"Kto w takich czasach Żydów przechowuje?...". Polacy niosący pomoc ludności żydowskiej w okresie okupacji niemieckiej*, ed. A. Namysło, Warszawa 2009, pp. 125–32.

² T. Domański, *Korekta obrazu? Refleksje źródłoznawcze wokół książki "Dalej jest noc. Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski"*, vol. 1–2, ed. B. Engelking, J. Grabowski, Warszawa 2018–2019.

to the alleged existence of a German-Polish administration during the occupation. The basic problem identified in Domański's paper is the omission or insufficient consideration by some researchers of the role of the German presence and its influence on the mutual relations between Poles and Jews during the war. Domański also emphasised the importance of the analysis of source materials, pointing to specific examples of the unreliable approach displayed by the authors of *Dalej jest noc* to the historical sources they used.

Lively discussions took place both after the individual panels and at the end of the conference, which (although this may sound a little trivial) were interesting and important. Speakers and listeners asked about the topics of specific papers. This led to questions about the sources for some of the research, and the need to precisely define which police forces took part in, for example, displacement actions. Opinions and demands were also offered concerning the need to increase the number of English-language publications of Polish research on the Holocaust and Polish-Jewish relations. The Kielce conference, like much of the other research in the broadly understood field of Jewish studies, showed how popular the above subject is, as well as how great are the emotions it arouses in Poland and around the world. According to the conference participants, including the author of these words, research into the context of the occupation needs to be continued and expanded upon.