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GERMAN CRIMES IN WIERZBICA AND WOLICA.  
EXHUMATION AND FIRST FUNERAL OF A FAMILY MURDERED  
FOR HELPING JEWS IN 1943

In May 2022, the funeral of the Książek family from Wierzbica, murdered by German officers for helping Jews, took place at the parish church in Kozłów near Miechów.

Despite German prohibitions and the death penalty imposed for any assistance given to the Jewish population, the family of Piotr and Julianna Książek sheltered two Jewish refugees from nearby Żarnowiec on their farm in Wierzbica. Other Jews were also taken in by local farmers in the neighbouring villages of Wierzbica and Wolica. Unfortunately, one of them was found by a German patrol in January 1943. When interrogated, the Jewish man agreed – probably hoping to save his own life – to take the Germans to all the houses where he had been offered help and all the places where he knew Jews had been hidden or had been helped by the local Polish population. It was clear to all at the time that such activities were illegal under German law, and the individuals, along with their family members, would be subject to brutal repression by the occupier if ever found out.

On 29 January 1943, the occupation authorities sent a punitive expedition to Wierzbica and Wolica, including German officers (including blue police-

men<sup>1</sup>) and one Kazimierz Nowak, a *Volksdeutsch* notorious for murdering Jews, Poles, and Romani living in the area. The members of this expedition brought along the captured Jew who led them one by one to the houses of families who had given aid to Jews.

In Wolica, the officers carried out the first murders. When they came to the house of Jan Gądek, they shot him on the spot and then murdered his wife, Władysława, and his mother-in-law Balbina Bielawska for helping Jews. Then the German officers and the rest of the expedition drove to Wierzbica. The arrested Jew led them to the Książek family. In the house of this Polish family, the Germans found two hiding Jews from Żarnowiec (since they were not from this village, their names could not be ascertained). They shot the Jews on the spot and then murdered, one by one, all four members of the Książek family, who were in the house at the time:<sup>2</sup> Piotr Książek (he was 67 years old and is sometimes mistakenly referred to as Franciszek<sup>3</sup>), his sons: Jan Książek (21 years old) and Zygmunt Książek (18 years old), and Piotr Książek's wife, Julia Książek (40 years old).

The arrested Jew then led the officers to the home of the Polish Nowak family from Wierzbica. There, they murdered Nowak (an invalid) and his daughter, just a few years old, for helping Jews.

They later headed for the Kucharskis' farm, where they shot eight family members, one by one, who were in the house at that time, killing Izydor Kucharski's wife, Anna, and four of their children: Mieczysław (15 years old), Bolesław (9 years old), twins Józef and Stefan (5 years old). Their grandmother, Julianna Ostrowska (86 years old), was also shot dead. Two of these eight people were miraculously saved,

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<sup>1</sup> The Polnische Polizei, known as the blue police, was a German service created by the authorities of the General Governorate in December 1939. It included some former police officers of Polish nationality. This police force, as a German service, was – consistent with reality – regarded by Polish society as one of the tools of the occupier's repressive policy. On more about this, see M. Korcuć, “*Niemiecka Polnische Polizei. Historyczny i państwowo-prawny kontekst funkcjonowania granatowej policji w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie 1939–1945*,” in *Policja granatowa w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie w latach 1939–1945*, ed. T. Domański and E. Majcher-Ociesa (Kielce–Warsaw, 2019), pp. 14–88.

<sup>2</sup> Archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej (Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance in Warsaw, hereinafter AIPN), GK, 392/1364, Minutes of Piotr Karcz's questioning, 7 April 1978, pp. 10–14.

<sup>3</sup> This is explained by Piotr Książek's grandson, Wojciech W. Książek, *Mord mej rodziny i sąsiadów-Żydów w Wierzbicy. Starajmy się robić swoje*, <https://wojciechksiazek.wordpress.com/mord-mej-rodziny-i-sasiadow-zydow-w-wierzbicy-starajmy-sie-robic-swoje/> (accessed 15 October 2020).

although German officers were convinced they had killed them. The father of the family, Izydor Kucharski, was shot in the back of the head. The perpetrators thought he was dead. It was only later apparent that the bullet had passed through the head and exited through his eye socket. After the massacre, Izydor Kucharski regained consciousness, despite his severe wounds. However, he was maimed for life and lost one eye. His son, Bronisław Kucharski, also survived, despite being shot in the head at close range.<sup>4</sup> He, too, became an invalid for life, losing his sight completely.

The Jewish guide, whom the Germans had arrested, did not save his life as the officers from the punitive expedition did not intend to honour any commitments they had made to him. Having used his deposition, they also murdered him near the village of Żabiniec. The perpetrators of the murder also shot a Pole, Stanisław Tochowicz,<sup>5</sup> who was just passing by.

The occupation authorities did not allow funerals to be arranged. Four members of the Książek family were buried directly at the entrance to their house (their mill). After the war, the site was marked with a wooden cross and a small fence. The abandoned house fell into neglect and was taken apart. Years later, a stone slab with the names of the murdered people and information about the circumstances of their death was placed on the spot where the bodies had been buried.

Piotr Książek, a grandson of the murdered Piotr Książek, asked the Institute of National Remembrance for help in arranging the first honourable funeral of the murdered Książek family members. In 1943, the grandson Książek's father was in a German POW camp, where he had been taken prisoner after the September campaign of 1939, and thus survived the war. On 24 May 2022, the Cracow Branch of the Office for Commemorating the Struggle and Martyrdom of the Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation carried out an exhumation at the site. The archaeological and exhumation work was carried out by a group of specialists led by Dr Krzysztof Tuni from the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of

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<sup>4</sup> AIPN, GK, 392/1364, Record of Piotr Karcz's interrogation, 7 April 1978, pp. 10–14.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Record of questioning Bronisław Kucharski as a witness, Wrocław, 7 October 1977, pp. 1–5; *ibid.*, Record of Piotr Karcz's questioning, 7 April 1978, pp. 10–14; *Represje za pomoc Żydom na okupowanych ziemiach polskich w czasie II wojny światowej*, ed. by M. Grądzka-Rejak and A. Namysło (Warsaw, 2019), pp. 202–204; AIPN, GK, 392/1364, Record of Piotr Karcz's questioning, 7 April 1978, pp. 10–14.

Sciences.<sup>6</sup> The remains of four members of the Książek family, Piotr, Julia, Jan and Zygmunt, were retrieved from the burial pit. Small objects of personal use were found next to all the skeletons. The remains were identified based on a detailed anthropological analysis using historical documentation. Justyna Marchewka and Veronica Bogdanovich from the Institute of Human Biology of the Faculty of Biology and Environmental Sciences at Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw carried out the anthropological analysis. According to the reports concerning the excavated remains of a woman, “the preserved skeletal material made it possible to conclude that the examined remains belonged to a woman who died between the ages of 35 and 45, which allows the deceased to be identified as Julia Książek.” In the case of the remains of an older man, “the preserved skeletal material made it possible to conclude that the examined remains belonged to a male who died being over 60 years old, which allows the deceased to be identified as Piotr Książek.” According to the expert report, the preserved skeletal material also supports the conclusion that “the remains examined belonged to a male who died being over 20 years old, which allows the deceased to be identified as Jan Książek.” With regard to the last remains, the preserved skeletal material confirms that “the examined remains belonged to a male who died being between 16 and 20 years old, which allows the deceased to be identified as Zygmunt Książek.”<sup>7</sup>

All the remains were finally laid to rest, one by one, in ornamental wooden coffins provided by the IPN.

On 27 May 2022, the first Christian funeral of the Książek family took place at the parish church in Kozłów. In addition to local residents and official delegations, the ceremony was attended by the families of the murdered, including Piotr Książek’s grandchildren: Piotr Książek and Stanisława Miernik née Książek.

All the remains were interred in a common grave in the Kozłów parish cemetery. The family has agreed to the Institute of National Remembrance funding a stone grave monument on the tomb in 2023.

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<sup>6</sup> Oddziałowe Archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej w Krakowie (Branch Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance in Cracow), K. Tunia, “Sprawozdanie z prac archeologiczno-ekshumacyjnych w miejsc. Wierzbica, pow. Miechów w roku 2022”, Cracow 2022, handwritten account.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, J. Marchewka, V. Bogdanovich, “Analiza antropologiczna szczątków kostnych z prac archeologiczno-ekshumacyjnych przeprowadzonych w roku 2022 w Wierzbicy, pow. Miechów”, Cracow 2022, handwritten account.