

Paweł Kornacki

Institute of National Remembrance, Białystok

ORCID 0000-0002-3454-8256

THE HOLOCAUST WITHOUT THE GERMANS:  
*CENA. W POSZUKIWANIU ŻYDOWSKICH DZIECI PO WOJNIE*  
BY ANNA BIKONT

Anna Bikont's book *Cena. W poszukiwaniu żydowskich dzieci po wojnie* (The Price. In Search of Jewish Children After the War)<sup>1</sup> is by far the most interesting work in the hitherto output of the *Gazeta Wyborcza* journalist. This time, the reader is introduced to the stories of children saved from the Holocaust, where the axis of her work's narrative is the story of Lejb Majzels, from the Central Committee of Polish Jews, who, from May 1947 to August 1948, searched throughout Poland for Jewish children in the care of Polish families. Following or in the course of his visits, the children were picked up, ransomed or even kidnapped, after which they were transferred to Jewish orphanages or to Jewish families.<sup>2</sup> Majzels' records listed fifty-two children whom he intended to find. In the end, he failed to find traces of nine, six only mentioned and failed to reach one girl. Thus, Anna Bikont followed the trail of the thirty-six others for many years,

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<sup>1</sup> *Cena. W poszukiwaniu żydowskich dzieci po wojnie* (Warsaw: Czarne, 2022), 463 pp.

<sup>2</sup> See P. Kornacki, "Losy uratowanych dzieci żydowskich. Cztery bardzo smutne historie," [https://przystanekhistoria.pl/pa2/teksty/92353\\_Losy-uratowanych-dzieci-zydowskich-Cztery-bardzo-smutne-historie.html](https://przystanekhistoria.pl/pa2/teksty/92353_Losy-uratowanych-dzieci-zydowskich-Cztery-bardzo-smutne-historie.html).

reaching twelve and, in eighteen cases, managed to contact their families. In the final publication, she outlined the stories of thirty children<sup>3</sup> after having carried out hundreds of searches, where in order to meet her Holocaust survivors, she travelled thousands of kilometres, having done a mountain of work.

Anna Bikont's book is a form of reportage and not a research or strictly historical work. For this reason, scholars should approach it with some caution. Although in this convention the author is entitled to express her convictions, the question arises as to whether this is a work that brings us closer to, or further from, learning about the whole spectrum of issues related to Polish-Jewish relations under the German Occupation and the help that the rescued children eventually experienced from Poles. It is on these themes that this review will focus.

Although the publication in question deals with the fate of Jewish children during and after the German occupation, the reader is left with the impression that this only constitutes the narrative background. The key issue of Bikont's work is the various evils that befell Jews at the hands of Poles before, after and above all, during the Second World War. The Germans are almost absent from the war accounts presented, and the course of events becomes actually a showdown between Poles and Jews. The German occupier, if there is one, is located at a considerable distance, completely on the sidelines.<sup>4</sup> In one of the chapters, Anna Bikont supports this positioning of the Germans with, among other things, the findings of Dariusz Libionka, who counted how many Jews died in the area in the third phase of the Holocaust, when ghettos ceased to exist, and Jews had to try to survive in hiding: "Of the 584 Jewish refugees he inventoried, 550 died denounced or murdered by Poles."<sup>5</sup> In this context, Anna Bikont writes: "The vast majority of those who hid in Działoszyce and neighbouring villages did not live to see liberation. They died denounced, caught in manhunts, led by locals to gendarmerie stations and killed by members of underground organisations."<sup>6</sup> There are more references to Libionka:

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<sup>3</sup> Bikont, *Cena*, p. 393.

<sup>4</sup> The thesis of German absence during the German Occupation is one of the prime paradigms of the so-called The New Polish School of Holocaust Research (*Nowa Polska Szkoła Badania Holokaustu*).

<sup>5</sup> Bikont, *Cena*, p. 115.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

As a rule, many people from the local population – firemen, members of the night watch and ordinary onlookers, including women and children [...] – took part in catching the Jews and bringing them to the stations. The most important roles were played by village heads and Blue Police, who were usually the last link in the chain – they took them over and usually “liquidated” them themselves. The participation of Germans was negligible.<sup>7</sup>

These few sentences prompt a deeper historical reflection. Firstly, the author makes a fundamental mistake in that under the German administrative system organised in the occupied Polish lands, Pińczów County no longer existed.<sup>8</sup> Under the German Occupation at this time, this area was governed by the Germans as the Miechów *Kreishauptmannschaft*<sup>9</sup> (Miechów Administration), headed by a *Kreishauptmann* (Administration Governor) – and it is these two local government terms that Bikont uses interchangeably. It is puzzling therefore that, citing the findings of Dariusz Libionka, Bikont confuses these two administrative structures, especially since this historian by no means did so. In this way, by omitting this distinction and its role in shaping Polish-Jewish relations during the occupation, did the author wish to accentuate Polish perpetration of the Holocaust from the very beginning of her work?

The historian’s attention is also drawn to the general assessment of the role of Poles in relation to the third phase of the Holocaust, i.e. between 1942 and 1945. During this period, the German occupation authorities, motivated by Nazi ideology, showed almost uncommon determination to murder the Jews located outside the so-called places of segregation (for example residual ghettos, labour camps). Meanwhile, in the book under review – by means of an appropriately chosen quotation – the denunciation of Jews, their “capture,” and murder is presented exclusively as one at the hands of Poles. The author did not even bother to write that the post she mentions in the quotation above is a German gendarmerie post, i.e. part of the German Order Police (Ordnungspolizei), one of whose most

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> The pre-war name and local government structure [translator’s note].

<sup>9</sup> The German Occupation administrative system in Polish territories created local territorial structures known as *Kreishauptmannschaft* – some being similar in size to counties, others larger, as in this case [translator’s note].

important tasks was the murder of Jews. When considering this issue, it must, of course, be emphasised that indeed civilians (mainly from the countryside) and the aforementioned formations made up of ethnic Poles, i.e. the *Polnische Polizei* (the so-called Blue Police), the fire brigade or the so-called functionaries – village heads – took part in the raids on Jews in hiding. However, it was the German occupation authorities, both civilian and police, who created and supervised the system aimed at capturing Jews, in which the above-mentioned Poles participated.

Further, we do not learn from the book about the omnipresent political terror in the General Government, directed against Poles. One can assume that for the author of *Cena* these are insignificant marginalia, not worth even hinting at. In addition, Anna Bikont is silent about the briefings organised by the German *gendarmier* in the field, to which village heads were summoned in order to explain to them that they were to detain every suspicious person, including Jews. Neither is there information about the order of 28 October 1942, introduced by Friedrich Wilhelm Krüger, under threat of severe punishment, on the obligation to report to the authorities Jews in hiding or other methods of implicating and coercing the Polish population in the implementation of German anti-Jewish policy.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the sentence in the book about the negligible participation of the Germans in these activities sounds curious – when juxtaposed with historical facts. Bikont's thesis is not surprising, since researchers ideologically close to her<sup>11</sup> have also written about the occupation system organised by the Germans, marginalising it at the same time. It seems, therefore that the author presents the most possibly radical interpretation and – most importantly – one not corresponding to the true reality of the German Occupation between 1942 and 1945. It is noticeable, therefore, that the above-mentioned issues of German wartime presence and its contextual impact on Polish-Jewish relations, not to mention the physical presence of the Germans themselves as occupants, have not so much been marginalised by Anna Bikont, as almost been completely eliminated.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. B. Musiał, *Kto dopomoże Żydowi* (Warsaw, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> The flag-bearing publication here is: *Dalej jest noc. Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski*, ed. by B. Engelking and J. Grabowski (Warsaw, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> A similar narration occurs in such publications as for example, *Dalej jest noc*; J. Tokarska-Bakir, *Bracia miesiące. Studia z antropologii historycznej Polski* (Warsaw, 2018).

On more than one occasion, the author also refers directly to the deportation operation of 1942, *Aktion Reinhardt* (Operation Reinhardt) – the German genocide of the Jews. Of significance is the following quotation – referring to the Kielce-Cracow border region – where again we are confronted with the case of the “disappearing” Germans and the emphasis on the main role of the Poles in the Holocaust: “The deportations were managed by Germans. It didn’t take many of them, because they had the Junkers, the firemen, the Blue Police and the locals to help. Then – from late autumn 1942 until the end of the war – they appeared only occasionally.”<sup>13</sup>

This quotation requires further comment. Firstly, “locals” did not take part in the “deportations,” i.e. deportations to the extermination camps, unless the author is referring here to the Polish peasants who had to provide carts on German orders and sometimes transport the Jews to the places indicated by them. Before each *Aktion*, posters were displayed in the various ghettos stating that it was absolutely forbidden – under penalty of death – to enter the Jewish quarter. This order, out of fear for their own lives, was obeyed. Secondly, the youngsters, i.e. male youths from the Baudienst labour camps, as well as the volunteer firemen<sup>14</sup> and Blue Police, did not participate in the deportation operations of their own free will, but were forced to do so by the relevant German orders. The particular attitude of individual officers is, of course, a different matter.

Another overlooked participant in the Holocaust by Bikont, apart from the Germans, are the functionaries of the Jewish Order Service (*Ordnungsdienst*) and members of the Judenrat (Councils of Elders), forced by the Germans to participate in the Holocaust. Each of the aforementioned formations and structures – both Polish and Jewish – performed roles prescribed by the German police forces. However, reading the book under review, one has the impression that the author selectively presents only those formations involved in the Holocaust that are associated with the Polish population and perfectly fit the – it seems – predetermined thesis of this publication.

Also worthy of comment is the author’s thesis on the occasional appearance of Germans in villages between 1942 and 1945. The scholarly literature in this area points to a completely different phenomenon. This was the peak of the German

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<sup>13</sup> Bikont, *Cena*, p. 112.

<sup>14</sup> The Fire Brigade or the combat youth from Baudienst were militarised units carrying out the orders of the Germans.

presence in the provinces, or rather of the mass crimes committed against the rural population. At that time, the German police regrouped its forces, strengthened its units in the field, setting up temporary gendarmerie stations. Subsequently, the Germans sent mobile, ruthless battalions and police regiments into the field. These were the same units that were engaged in murdering Jews.<sup>15</sup>

In a narrative devoid of context, contradicting the results of historical research, which we observe in *Cena*, the line between attitudes forced by the Germans and those genuinely motivated by individual or sometimes even group conditions, such as anti-Semitism, becomes blurred. Bikont mixes these seemingly quite important orders, and according to her, all Poles become complicit in the Holocaust.

What is also surprising is the means of discussing the aid given to the Jews by the Poles. At the same time, while occasionally introducing themes of aid, the author constantly bombards the reader with occasional sentences or lengthy passages about anti-Semitic Poles without any need, completely suppressing and blanketing the heroism of the former with the wickedness of the latter. In doing so, Anna Bikont makes extensive recourse to emotional language saturated with mostly negative connotations: "After the war in small towns, the rules of the game were set by murderers, not by the Righteous."<sup>16</sup> The writer here uses formulations and descriptions that echo negative, drastic metaphors, such as "the noose was tightening." Furthermore, Bikont gives suppositions as if facts: "There were more and more people who were ready to give up the Jews [...]. Was this caused by fear, greed or anti-Semitism fuelled by German propaganda? Or perhaps the pleasure derived from killing?"<sup>17</sup> This last almost shocking accusation, presented admittedly in the form of a question, comes, according to Anna Bikont, from Marek Edelman. If this is indeed what he said, this passage should be given an appropriate explanatory footnote.

It would seem, therefore, that the author, in referring to the alleged participation of Poles in the Holocaust, is also trying to defame the image of the Righteous, although the source basis of her reflections is questionable: "The boundaries were

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<sup>15</sup> On the scale of German crimes in the countryside in this area and the German presence see T. Domański and A. Jankowski, *Represje niemieckie na wsi kieleckiej 1939–1945* (Kielce, 2011); J. Fajkowski and J. Religa, *Zbrodnie hitlerowskie na wsi polskiej 1939–1945* (Warsaw, 1981).

<sup>16</sup> Bikont, *Cena*, p. 115.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

fluid, someone who seemed sympathetic only a moment ago suddenly began to threaten. Sensing when this change would occur, when yesterday's rescuer would turn out to be today's murderer, was a matter of life and death."<sup>18</sup> Undoubtedly, such situations where rescuers committed crimes against Jews did occur, which was either a direct result of the enormous tensions created by the conditions of the German Occupation, or out of greed, or indeed anti-Semitism per se. These should be condemned unreservedly, but Bikont does not research how many such cases have been established and does not attempt to estimate the scale of the phenomenon of murdering and reporting Jews. Was this the Occupation norm, one may ask, or a certain margin of Polish-Jewish relations?

A key theme explored extensively in *Cena*, from which the title of the entire book is taken, concerns the post-war ransoming of Jewish children who were taken care of by Polish families. Bikont refers to financial issues, writing that Poles who hid Jews often did so "in order to rob them." Once again, the stratagem of depreciating those who rescued Jews is employed: "Many Jews gave up all their possessions in exchange for shelter with Polish friends, who took everything and after a few days threw them out like a squeezed lemon."<sup>19</sup> In her interpretation, the Polish population tried to deceive the Jews in every situation, taking advantage of their superior position as Poles in the reality of the Occupation. In doing so, Bikont authoritatively accused many Poles of lying, who spoke after the war of giving selfless aid: "I, on the other hand, from observing documents and testimonies, can say that when someone who hid Jews starts by declaring that he did not receive any remuneration from the Jews, they most probably did receive it, and a lot."<sup>20</sup> As to the nature of documents on this subject that Bikont had analysed and the percentage of such cases as the above, alas we will not learn from her publication.

The themes of payment, bargaining and the price of rescue as well as aid appear in almost every chapter.<sup>21</sup> The shocking stories highlighted by Bikont distort the overall picture of the aid situation. Moreover, the book lacks a reflection on how

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>21</sup> Barbara Engelking wrote in a similar vein on her Polish-Jewish relations: "*Jest taki piękny słoneczny dzień.*" *Losy Żydów szukających ratunku na wsi polskiej 1942-1945* (Warsaw, 2011).

much people risked by taking in Jewish children and we do not learn what the motivations of the rescuers were. The theme of payment, which is emphasised in the foreground, reduces the rescue of children to a financial issue only, obviously in a negative context.

The reader may have the impression that in the whole process of helping, we are dealing only with the desire for profit, the burning thirst for Jewish gold and that Jewish children are only a good deal that will pay off after the war. In the pages of the book in question, Poles are generally depraved individuals, greedy, demanding horrendous amounts of money from Jews for the safekeeping of children, people to whom it did not occur that children should be given away for free after the war. An editorial by Magdalena Budzińska<sup>22</sup> appeared as a comment on similar situations: “I am thinking out loud [...], shouldn't it be commented on somehow directly that it didn't occur to people that someone else's child could, or even should, simply be given back to the family and not exchanged for a square in Zawichost?” Was indeed such an attitude widespread, and did such an experience also accompany the nearly thirty Jewish children rescued by the nuns at the orphanage in Turkowice in the Lublin region?<sup>23</sup>

From reading *Cena* we learn that some rescuers dared to baptise their children, to bring them up in a Christian manner and thus generally arouse in them, as Bikont suggests, an atavistic hatred of Jews. These last two themes are inseparable. Children rescued from Christian families, as depicted by the author, hated Jews and bringing them back to the bosom of Judaism required a lot of effort and, once the family's charges were taken away, caused Jewish educators a lot of trouble. In a world so “directed” by the author, the foster Christian parents essentially stripped the children of their identities, and it was only by uprooting them from these environments that the latter had a chance to return to the normal world.

The fact that it is precisely the theme of financial aid that is important and perhaps the main in Bikont's new work for its overall expression, is evident from the title given to it – *Cena*. It is a pity that readers only get the chance to see one

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<sup>22</sup> Magdalena Budzińska – editor of literature and documentaries, tied to the publishing house Wydawnictwo Czarne.

<sup>23</sup> See R. Łukiewicz and P. Skrok, “*Dom ocalenia*” w *Turkowicach – opieka siostr służebniczek nad dziećmi trzech narodowości na tle historii regionu* (Lublin, 2022).



kind of price – the one paid by the Jews. The Polish price is irrelevant here and does not exist at all, even though there was a death penalty for saving Jews.

It is apt now to examine in more detail the two stories described by Bikont – that of Rachela Drażek and Zisla Jadowska. This scholar became familiar with the fate of the former, Rachela Drażek, before the publication of the book under review. Her life became even more interesting when, during a search in the Yad Vashem Archive, a diary written by her was found.<sup>24</sup> Her experiences are described by Anna Bikont in the fourteenth chapter of *Cena*: Rachela Drażek was born on 15 October 1929 in Ostrołęka, an only child. Her father was successfully involved in running a business before the war. In the 1930s, the family moved to Łomża, and when her mother died, her father remarried. Before the war itself, Rachela's brother Idzio was born. When Łomża came under Soviet occupation in 1939, Rachela absorbed communist propaganda at school, and after the outbreak of the German-Soviet war, her father served in the Red Army and died at the front in circumstances unknown to the family. Rachela, together with her stepmother and brother, was forced to live in the Łomża ghetto in August 1941. When the liquidation of the ghettos in the Białystok District began on 2 November 1942, Rachela's family and friends decided to flee. This is when the girl's epic journey began. She quickly lost her stepmother and brother, and in the course of her wanderings, she met various people. Those that were kind, however, were far more numerous, and it was thanks to them that she survived. They gave her shelter, food and life-saving warnings, which she went on to outline this time in her diary.

After leaving the ghetto in Łomża, she hid with her stepmother, brother and several other fugitives in Czerwony Bór. A forester found them there, warning the group of Jews and recommended they escape, as he knew that a manhunt organised by the Germans was heading for this area. One of the local peasants, who had been forced to participate, found Rachela. She recalls this moment as follows:

I was sitting crouched under a bush, and my frightened gaze was fixed on my enemy. And he, clearly amused, asked what I was doing here. He sort of threatened me and told me to hop it. Good, dear friends! So much depends on the person!

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<sup>24</sup> Yad Vashem Archives [hereinafter YVA], O.33, 10488, Pamiętnik Racheli Drażek.

They could have caught us all and handed us over to the Germans, they would have done their duty, and yet... For every Jew, 3 kg of sugar was provided, a luxury for the time, and there were those who took advantage of this privilege. However, this passed us by at that moment and for my part, I gained more confidence in Poles.<sup>25</sup>

In her case, her trust paid off, and Rachela Drążek survived the war.

During her escape, Rachela experienced a religious mystical inspiration and became a Christian. After the end of the war, she was baptised and joined the Order of the Benedictine Nuns in Łomża. It was there that Majzels found her in July 1947 and tried, with the help of various organisations and relatives, to make her leave the convent. Her story was chronicled by the sisters.<sup>26</sup> The efforts to persuade Rachel to leave the convent lasted about two years but were unsuccessful. She remained a nun, and her sense of mission was genuine and deep-seated.

Sister Paula – that was her religious name – struggled with many dilemmas, but she persevered in the order until her passing. Towards the end of her life, she went to the Holy Land with the intention of converting Jews to Christianity and spent her last years in the monastery on the Mount of Olives where Anna Bikont met her. There, Rachela Drążek spoke about her wartime adventures, her escape from the ghetto during the *Aktion* and the time of hiding, as well as her choice of life, living to tell her tale thanks to the help of many good people. She did not nominate anyone to be honoured with the Righteous Among the Nations medal, because she believed that she owed the saving of her life only to Christ.

The transcript of Anna Bikont's conversation with Sister Paula would be one of the most interesting in her book if it were not for the writer's obsessive desire to highlight the injustices inflicted on Jews by Poles. Instead of focusing on a reliable account of Rachel's wartime fate, who survived the Holocaust precisely thanks to Poles, the author did not present her experiences, but told an "ersatz account" that did not directly concern her interlocutrix.<sup>27</sup> One might have the impression therefore that Anna Bikont wanted to use a negative account about Poles, who were

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<sup>25</sup> Bikont, *Cena*, p. 105.

<sup>26</sup> A. Piesiewiczówna, *Kronika Panien Benedyktynek* (Łomża, 1995).

<sup>27</sup> This story, however, concerned friends of Rachela with whom she was in hiding for a period of time.

not connected to Rachela's fate, so as to cover up the fact that along the Jewish girl's journey there were kind people who contributed to saving her.

Furthermore, Anna Bikont, described a murder that took place near the village of Podosie,<sup>28</sup> where a group of about 25 Jews were hiding. Twelve were murdered on the night of 1 to 2 June 1944, most probably by an AK unit under the command of Bolesław Kurpiewski "Orlik." However, analysis of the available documentation raises numerous doubts about the scenario of events outlined by Anna Bikont.<sup>29</sup> Even if it was as the author of *Cena* claims, at that time Rachela Drażek was in a completely different place. Naturally, in the chapter under discussion here, again the Germans are the great absentees. In a word, the whole story disregards the real story of Rachela, who was helped to survive in fact by the Poles.

The fate of Zisla Jadowska, is described in chapter sixteen – a Jewish girl born in 1942 in a forest hiding place near Węgrów, who was rescued by the poor and childless Ruskowski couple.<sup>30</sup> Bikont introduced the reader to various versions of how the child managed to survive. First, she quoted the story of the survivor herself. According to Zisla, her mother left her on Piwna Street, where she lay for three days and three nights, and was looked after by a German gendarme who gave her milk. He is said to have become annoyed and reproached the Poles, saying: "After the Jews you rob, you take everything, and you cannot take a child? Take this child

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<sup>28</sup> Podosie is located in the Miastkowo Commune, on the border of today's Mazowieckie and Podlaskie Voivodships. Anna Bikont also devoted a separate article to the crime that was committed there: "Marzeniem pana Poteraja, jak i moim, jest, aby te niechlubne wydarzenia zostały opisane." O zbrodni oddziału AK na Żydach ukrywających się na bagnach koło wsi Podosie w Łomżyńskim," *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 18 (2022), pp. 170–199.

<sup>29</sup> See among others, Archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej [Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance, hereinafter AIPN], Główna Komisja Badania Zbrodni Hitlerowskich w Polsce [Chief Commission for the Investigation of Hitlerite Crimes in Poland, hereinafter GK], 318/594, Files in the Criminal Case of Edward Ficowski and others; Oddziałowe Archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej w Białymstoku [Branch Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance in Białystok], 484/233, File on the murder of twelve Polish citizens of Jewish nationality committed in May 1944 by the Home Army unit of Bolesław Kurpiewski nom de guerre "Orlik" near the village of Podosie, Łomża Voivodship. Other sources are also mentioned in the aforementioned article. Doubts mainly concern the motives for the crimes. If the aim was indeed to exterminate the Jews, why did the partisans allow most of them to escape? Why was the crime committed by an AK unit from a neighbouring district? Anna Bikont gives other reasons for the crime: the arbitrariness of the squad leadership, the desire to rob, the intention to liquidate a robbery group or Soviet agents, and so on., but ultimately rejects them.

<sup>30</sup> YVA, M.31/5581 – 3 August 1995. Yad Vashem recognised Marianna Ruskowska (1901–1970) and her husband Antoni Ruskowski (1902–1962) as Righteous Among the Nations.

and save her.”<sup>31</sup> However, according to this version, the Poles were afraid, because it was for helping the Jews that the Polish woman was killed. It is significant that it was only at the end of the chapter that the journalist herself stated that this variant was improbable. Interestingly, Anna Bikont considered as the most plausible interpretation the claim that Zisla was given into care (for money, of course) in the countryside and that the guardians abandoned her on the street in Węgrów.<sup>32</sup> This is also a presumption, except that it shows another variant of the “Polish evil.”

According to Zisla’s account, she survived the war with the Ruszkowski family who adopted her and after the war did not give her back to her uncle Szmul Szenberg. After the war, she lived in Węgrów and because her origins were known, she was subjected to harassment, which led her to suicidal thoughts. Her foster parents, however, loved and supported her. In 1964 she went to Israel to visit her uncle, who tried to discourage her from returning to the Poles. He explained to her that they had collaborated with the Germans and wanted to kill him. Zisla, however, remained in Poland under the name Zofia Żochowska.

The chapter describing Zisla’s fate could not be one without digressions. Referring to the post-war harassment that the protagonist faced in Węgrów because of her origin, Anna Bikont explained to readers that the Poles’ complicity in the Holocaust exacerbated post-war anti-Semitism, resulting in more than a thousand murders of Jews committed at the time. The journalist referred to the findings of Julian Kwiek, who additionally counted that 19% of the victims were women and children. A major shortcoming of Kwiek’s research is that it lumps everything together. Unfortunately, the author did not bother to count how many Jews were killed when robbed and how many out of anti-Semitism.<sup>33</sup>

There is another unjustified and shocking digression in the chapter under discussion. In the author’s interpretation of *Cena*, the death penalty for rescuing Jews is also presented as a myth. “Death awaited the hiding Jews almost without exception. As far as hiding Poles were concerned, it was rather an exception, although it did

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<sup>31</sup> Bikont, *Cena*, p. 172. The question is why, in this particular version, the main female protagonist kept to her story.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>33</sup> J. Kwiek, *Nie chcemy Żydów u siebie. Przejawy wrogości wobec Żydów w latach 1944–1947* (Warsaw, 2021).

happen,<sup>34</sup> writes Anna Bikont. The author tries to convince the reader that as a rule the consequences for rescuing Jews were at most, burning down a farm, being beaten, arrested, fined, imprisoned or sent to a concentration camp. Bikont even goes so far as to claim that the Poles' belief that entire families were punished by death was the result of rumours spread by the Germans. "During the Occupation, rumours spread by the Germans and compounded by fear spoke of dozens of people killed in the area, of families being shot, of villages going up in smoke. To this day, stories of Jews being caught hiding end in the death penalty for an entire Polish family."<sup>35</sup> It follows that it was as a result of rumours disseminated by the Germans that a "legend" was created about Poles being punished by death for any help given to Jews. Meanwhile, death for helping Jews was suffered, according to older research, by no less than 700 Poles.<sup>36</sup> In doing so, Bikont makes a completely erroneous reference to the findings of historians from the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) in their work *Represje za pomoc Żydom* (Repressions for Helping Jews), which mentions more than 340 people murdered. The editors of the aforementioned work, Martyna Grądzka-Rejak and Aleksandra Namysło, have clearly stated that the publication contains partial results of research and that the research project is still continuing. It is, therefore, difficult to speak of definitive data at this stage.<sup>37</sup>

A counterpoint to Zisla's story is also the description of the liquidation of the Węgrów Ghetto. Here, the journalist drew, among others, on the work of Jan Grabowski<sup>38</sup> and the memoirs of Szraga Fajwel Bielawski.<sup>39</sup> So the story of the *Aktion* is recounted, one carried out by Germans, Ukrainians and Polish Blue Police, who together surrounded the ghetto. Members of the volunteer fire brigade threw children out of the windows, and the gendarmes – surprisingly, the Germans – slaughtered them. The author quotes Fajwel Bielawski, who is said to have heard the screams of Jews mingle with the shouting of Germans and the laughter

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<sup>34</sup> Bikont, *Cena*, p. 172.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> W. Bielawski, *Zbrodnie na Polakach dokonane przez hitlerowców za pomoc udzielaną Żydom* (Warsaw, 1987).

<sup>37</sup> See Bikont, *Cena*, p. 172; *Represje za pomoc Żydom na okupowanych ziemiach polskich w czasie II wojny światowej*, vol. 1, ed. by M. Grądzka-Rejak and A. Namysło (Warsaw, 2019), p. 75.

<sup>38</sup> J. Grabowski, "Powiat węgrowski," in *Dalej jest noc*, vol. 1, pp. 383–544.

<sup>39</sup> F. Bielawski, *Ostatni Żyd z Węgrowsa. Wspomnienia ocalałego z Zagłady w Polsce* (Warsaw, 2015).

of the Poles. He describes how Poles voluntarily removed the corpses of Jews from the town, hoping for loot in the form of leftover clothes. In the next paragraph, in turn, there is a description of the execution. Unfortunately, the reader does not learn who carried it out. Instead, there is a quote: “I watch from home [...] as they killed.”<sup>40</sup> The question arises as to who did the killing. The next paragraph again presents a description of the looting of the corpse.

Unfortunately, the picture presented by Jan Grabowski of the liquidation of the ghetto and the one emerging from Bielawski’s diary (according to among others, the research of regional historian Radosław Józwiak) consist of many distortions and confabulations.<sup>41</sup> The ghetto in Węgrów was liquidated by the Germans and auxiliary troops composed of Ukrainians. The Blue Police, members of the Judenrat and Jewish Ghetto Police, also took part in rounding up the Jews to the market square. Each of these formations carried out the order of Germans commanding the *Aktion*. In the case of the Jewish Ghetto Police and Judenrat members, they paid a terrible price for saving – if only for now – their own lives. Leaving aside these details, however, there is no doubt that the reader of *Cena* received a biased picture of the events in the town, one far from the truth.

Undoubtedly Anna Bikont’s reportage books are interesting and colourful, certainly demonstrating a great talent and commitment. However, what draws one’s attention in *Cena* is the complete lack of reference to the realities of the Occupation created by the Germans, who are almost absent, making it impossible to understand the nature of Polish-Jewish relations during the Second World War. Her work *Cena* thus becomes a phenomenon that is set, as it were, in a historical vacuum. It is an investigative oxymoron, in which the rescuers are presented as little better than murderers. For the Polish reader, reading this work is a bitter experience, as even the Righteous turn out to be those who sold their sacrifice for money. If this is what Anna Bikont wanted to convey to us, then she has succeeded.

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<sup>40</sup> Bikont, *Cena*, p. 176.

<sup>41</sup> R. Józwiak, “*Garść refleksji na temat wspomnień Szraga Fajwla Bielawskiego, ‘Ostatni Żyd z Węgrowa’ jako źródła do badań historii Zagłady i stosunków polsko-żydowskich w powiecie węgrowskim*,” *Polish Jewish Studies* 2 (2021), pp. 336–378. This was published after *Cena*, so Anna Bikont could not have had access to it. She could, however, without any problem have found the review by Tomasz Roguski, “Dalej jest noc. Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski,” red. Barbara Engelking i Jan Grabowski,” *Glaukopis* 36 (2019), pp. 335–356. Here, the author refers to the research by Józwiak and other scholars.