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ANDRZEJ ŻBIKOWSKI
*O NADZIEI, CIERPIENIU, BÓLU. LUDNOŚĆ CYWILNA
W CZASIE POWSTANIA W GETCIE WARSZAWSKIM**
(HOPE, SUFFERING, AND PAIN: THE CIVILIAN POPULATION
DURING THE WARSAW GHETTO UPRISING)

The year 2023 marked the 80th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. This became the catalyst for numerous educational, artistic, journalistic, and academic initiatives prepared in honour and in memory of Jewish female and male combatants. Temporary exhibitions were created,¹ podcasts and radio programs were recorded, documentary programs, and press supplements were prepared to reach the widest possible audience with the message about the uprising. Academic

* Andrzej Żbikowski, *O nadziei, cierpieniu, bólu. Ludność cywilna w czasie powstania w getcie warszawskim* (Hope, Suffering, and Pain: The Civilian Population During the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising) (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2023) 216 pp.

¹ One of the initiatives was a temporary exhibition at the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, titled "Around Us a Sea of Fire." The exhibition was accompanied by a comprehensive catalogue, published in Polish and English: *Wokół nas morze ognia. Losy żydowskich cywilów podczas powstania w getcie warszawskim / Around Us a Sea of Fire: The Fate of Jewish Civilians During the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*, ed. Z. Schnepf-Kołacz, B. Engelking (Warsaw, 2023)

conferences² and educational sessions were organized, as well as themed seminars. It is worth noting that the Senate of the Republic of Poland voted 2023 as the Year of Remembrance of the Heroes and Heroines of the Warsaw Ghetto to honour their efforts in this symbolic way. In these various activities, the organisers focused on the civilian population who remained in the Warsaw Ghetto during the Uprising. The publication of Andrzej Żbikowski's book, *O nadziei, cierpieniu, bólu. Ludność cywilna w czasie powstania w getcie warszawskim*, by the Jewish Historical Institute in 2023, is part of an initiative to restore the memory of the 'ordinary' civilian inhabitants of the ghetto who were caught in the machinery of significant historical events.

It is no coincidence that this issue has been tackled by a historian affiliated with the Jewish Historical Institute and the University of Warsaw, who has researched the history of Polish Jews for years, including the events of the German occupation, the Jewish underground and the Warsaw Ghetto. In his introduction, Żbikowski clearly states what motivated him to prepare the book: "Reflecting on the tragic fate of Warsaw's Jews during World War II, at some point we inevitably ask ourselves: what significance does Monday, 19 April 1943, hold for us?"³ This question – about the meaning of the outbreak of the Uprising, about the entanglement of both the fighters and the civilian population in the events unfolding during the revolt – accompanies the author throughout the pages of the book and is the prime cause of the subsequent research questions posed.

Writing a comprehensive account of the fate and experiences of the civilian population during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising is a challenging task for many reasons. Already, the presentation of statistical data concerning this group poses problems. The author begins his study with this issue. Official sources indicate that from September 1942, after the end of the deportation of Jews from the ghetto to the death camp at Treblinka, approximately thirty-five thousand Jews resided in the truncated area of the quarter. Researchers estimate that another fifteen to twenty thousand lived there without permission.⁴

² One of them was a conference organised by the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) entitled "The Jewish Resistance against the Germans in Occupied Poland," which was held on 21 April 2023 at the Janusz Kurtyka History Point Centre in Warsaw.

³ A. Żbikowski, *O nadziei, cierpieniu, bólu*, p. 10.

⁴ More in T. Berenstein, A. Rutkowski, "Liczba ludności żydowskiej i obszar przez nią zamieszkiwany w Warszawie w latach okupacji hitlerowskiej," *Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego* 2 (26)

Another difficulty is encountered when trying to provide more information about the gender, age, or social status of all these persons. In January 1943, the Germans began deportations and transported around five thousand people from the ghetto to the Treblinka death camp. In the following months, some people from the ghetto were sent to slave labour camps still operating in the General Government. Some tried to get out of the ghetto to the so-called “Aryan” side, others returned to the ghetto. Due to this fluctuation of the population, it is basically impossible to be precise about its size. Fragmentary information, although it can be found in various sources, does not allow estimates to be made. In mid-April 1943, just before the then upcoming Pesach (Passover)⁵ holiday, an unspecified number of people previously hiding on the so-called “Aryan” side arrived in the ghetto. Just before the outbreak of the Uprising, there may have been as many as fifty–sixty thousand Jews in the ghetto. A similar estimate of their number is given by Andrzej Żbikowski in his publication.⁶ A few hundred of them, we don’t know exactly how many, engaged in underground activities to varying degrees, while the rest tried to survive.

On the one hand, there was Jürgen Stroop’s “official report”;⁷ on the other, testimonies, diaries and memoirs. Żbikowski raises the legitimate question of whether the report made by the destroyers of the ghetto uprising can be trusted:

Opinions among historians differ on this. Some argue that he could not have lied because he was controlled by his often conflicted subordinates. Did he understate his own losses and overlook failures? Perhaps, but if so, only to a small extent.⁸

(1958), pp. 73–114; B. Engelking, J. Leociak, *Getto warszawskie. Przewodnik po nieistniejącym mieście* (Warsaw, 2013); M. Ferenc, „Každy pyta, co z nami będzie”. *Mieszkańcy getta warszawskiego wobec wiadomości o wojnie i Zagładzie* (Warsaw, 2021); R. Sakowska, *Dwa etapy. Hitlerowska polityka eksterminacji Żydów w oczach ofiar. Szkic historyczny i dokumenty* (Wrocław, 1986); R. Sakowska, *Ludzie z dzielnic zamkniętej. Z dziejów Żydów w Warszawie w latach okupacji hitlerowskiej. Październik 1939 – marzec 1943* (Warsaw, 1993).

⁵ Pesach is the Jewish holiday that commemorates the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt.

⁶ A. Żbikowski, *O nadziei, cierpieniu, bólu*, p. 13.

⁷ Andrzej Żbikowski is the author of the 2009 edition of this report. He has also commented many times on the content of this source, its historical value and the pitfalls it carries, see J. Stroop, *Żydowska dzielnica mieszkaniowa w Warszawie już nie istnieje!*, ed. A. Żbikowski (Warsaw, 2009).

⁸ A. Żbikowski, *O nadziei, cierpieniu, bólu*, pp. 17–18.

The answer is not clear-cut, but the extent to which this source is used in the work indicates that the author considers it important. Żbikowski frequently references source issues throughout the book, discussing their origin, cognitive value, and potential pitfalls. This is a notable strength of the reviewed publication.

The fate of the civilian population, as the subsequent pages of the book show, is reconstructed primarily based on the second category of sources used by the author – the personal documents of those who stayed in the ghetto during the Uprising. If one takes into account the aforementioned probable number of the population that was there at the time, few sources have remained, from which one can learn more about their fate during the Ghetto Uprising. Żbikowski stresses:

Almost everything we know about the experiences of civilians hiding in the Warsaw Ghetto after 19 April 1943, comes from diaries written in hiding on the Aryan side or post-war memoirs (written or recorded). These testimonies were created at different times, under various circumstances, and belong to very different diaristic discourses.⁹

In total, there are about fifty texts, written in various circumstances: in the ghetto during the actual Uprising, just after the end of the Uprising, immediately after the war, or many years after the war. It is noteworthy that among those most frequently used in the context of the fate of civilians are women's testimonies. One such source is the partially preserved diary of a woman named Maryla¹⁰ – written “there and then” about the functioning of hideouts [called “bunkers”] from the perspective of one of the people locked in them. The fragmentary nature of the notes, as she herself pointed out, was due to extreme circumstances she had to confront. Additionally, the document itself has not remained in a good state, resulting in gaps in the text. Despite these limitations, Maryla's diary remains a unique testimony to civil resistance in the ghetto.¹¹ The temporal proximity of

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹⁰ Two editions of this source have come out: *Patrzyłam na usta... Dziennik z getta warszawskiego*, ed. P. Weiser (Cracow–Lublin, 2008); *Dziennik Maryli. Życie i śmierć w getcie warszawskim*, ed. D. Libionka (Warsaw, 2022).

¹¹ For more on this, see the article by Dariusz Libionka in the most recent edition of the diary *Dziennik Maryli*.

this glimpse of the unfolding events and the lack of an evaluative time perspective are advantages of this text. The second source is the diary of an unknown author kept in the archive of the Kibbutz of the Ghetto Fighters.¹²

The other testimonies used by the researchers come from the post-war period. Very important in this context is Stella Fidelseid's extensive diary, in which she outlined in quite some detail the daily life in the hideouts and the hiding after the fall of the Uprising.¹³ These and many other memories are quoted and analyzed by Żbikowski in the subsequent pages of the book.

In the testimonies used, there are many references not only to details related to the topography of the ghetto but also to the emotional states and everyday experiences of the women in hiding and others who stayed with them. It should be noted at this point that the aspect of the women's stories and their gender-related experiences could have been more emphasised in the book. Regarding the sources researched in the work – it is worth following the footnotes carefully, as well as the attached list of publications and archival records used. The above-mentioned offer insight into the personal sources analysed and provide an in-depth insight in the testimonies on which the author grounded his reflections. In this context there is a conspicuous lack of oral history sources such as for example, testimonies recorded for the archive of the USC Shoah Foundation – The Institute for Visual History and Education (previously known as the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation), the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies. The use of these materials, as well as a broader reference to contemporary literature in the field, taking into account the achievements of sociology, historical anthropology, or psychology, would undoubtedly have added to the book and thus broadened its readers' knowledge of the civilian population's experiences during the Ghetto Uprising. Adopting such a broader perspective would certainly have painted an even more complete picture than the one presented. Perhaps the author felt that no material among these testimonies would have contributed more than what the selected

¹² Cf. A. Żbikowski, *O nadziei, cierpieniu, bólu*, p. 108.

¹³ This document can be found in the Archives of the Jewish Historical Institute. It has also been published: S. Fidelseid, "Pozostałam w gruzach... (Moje przeżycia po likwidacji getta warszawskiego kwiecień–grudzień 1943)," *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów* 2 (2003), pp. 227–241.

source texts had already provided. If so, the introduction should have discussed and clarified this issue.

Andrzej Żbikowski's book consists of two parts preceded by an introduction, ending with a conclusion and a bibliography of sources and publications referred to. The introduction provides the reader with key information about the history of the Warsaw Ghetto and the months leading up to the Uprising in April 1943. The first part, entitled "Walki w getcie" (Fighting in the Ghetto), provides some military background to the Uprising. The author succinctly describes the activities of the members of the Jewish Combat Organisation (*Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa*, ŻOB) and the Jewish Military Union (*Żydowski Związek Wojskowy*, ŻZW). He presents the first armed actions in the ghetto and analyzes the subsequent strategies and options available to the members of the underground. He shows up to which point in the ghetto the heaviest battles were fought and when tactics were changed. Step by step, based on the sources, the author reconstructs the battles of the fighters and the attacks of the Germans until the last moments of the Uprising. This is an important context, without which it would be difficult to understand the fate of civilians trying to survive somehow in the constantly deteriorating conditions, especially after the end of the first phase of the fighting, when the Germans proceeded to systematically set fire to the ghetto. This part of the book is relatively short, consisting of four subsections, covering a total of about 30 pages. This is understandable; after all, armed struggle is not the work's central theme. Nevertheless, it embeds the titular theme in an important context, without which subsequent discussion would not be clear.

The second part, entitled "Ludność cywilna w getcie" (The Civilian Population in the Ghetto), already focuses on the core, titular topic. It has been divided into eleven problem sub-sections. Beginning with a concise discussion of the Holocaust texts that form the basis of the analysis, the author tries to show the reader the situation in the bunkers, hiding places and shelters, describes the course of the Passover holiday, discusses the subsequent topographical spaces of the ghetto, and finally shows the possible ways of leaving the ghetto – either through the sewers to the so-called "Aryan" side or through the Umschlagplatz, which was a more uncertain direction. The book makes clear that the civilian population created an "underground city" in the ghetto from the first hours of the fighting. Ghetto

residents hid in shelters and hiding places in cellars, attics, under stairs, and in living quarters, wherever this was possible and provided a substitute for safety. They also built well-equipped and stocked hideouts or bunkers (often with the help of specialists), placed mainly underground, which could accommodate many people.

Żbikowski illustrates throughout the text, using personal documents, how the atmosphere in the hideout (bunker) became increasingly oppressive. The limited space and the necessity to stay with former neighbours, family members as well as complete strangers caused tensions and led to conflicts. Civilians were hidden in dim, cramped rooms that offered no privacy, tranquility, or personal space. The hiding places were filled with smells – of cellar rooms, unwashed bodies, sweat, unwashed clothes, buckets of faeces, smoke from the burning ghetto, as well as with fear that grew almost hour by hour. Those in hiding – relying on one another – fell into various emotional states. Night-time brought moments of calm as the number of German patrols in the ghetto decreased. During these times, people left their shelters to search for food, prepare meals, or attend to their hygiene. Żbikowski highlighted these activities, but a deeper exploration of the emotional tensions and feelings of those in hiding could have added more depth. The author could have also depicted the realities more vividly. However, it is important and valuable that the author extensively quotes witnesses to the events, often discussing the issues with their own words.

There is also the impression that the publication would have been clearer for the reader had the author proposed a slightly different structure, one that would clearly outline the topics addressed. For example, Żbikowski discusses life in bunkers and hideouts. In this context, it would have been possible to distinguish subsections on provisions, supplies, the availability of particular hiding places, everyday life in hiding, violence, sexuality, formal and informal relationships, relations between people, the situation of women, children, families, and so on. It is important to note, as the author emphasises multiple times, that after the initial fighting, the Germans systematically destroyed the ghetto and burned more tenements in the following days of the Uprising. The exact number of people who were burned alive or suffocated due to smoke or fumes released into the hideouts will never be known. Some individuals chose another path – suicide. However, this issue, along with the previously mentioned gender aspects and those related

to violence, is not further explored in the book. This opens up opportunities for more in-depth research.

The publication, *O nadziei, cierpieniu, bólu* by Andrzej Żbikowski is undoubtedly an important title in the historiography of the Warsaw Ghetto. It is based on a broad source base and bibliography, skillfully written, and most importantly, tackles a topic that has not been thoroughly analysed to date. Although many works have been written about the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the picture of the Uprising remains incomplete without consideration of the role and dramatic situation of the civilians in the ghetto. Without the sacrifice and silent resistance of the civilians, the Uprising would not have lasted for such an extended period. The study, written in an accessible manner for both specialists and non-historians, offers a glimpse into how civilians functioned during the Uprising and, more broadly, the processes of their struggle for survival. It is also important to note that the work raises further research questions and motivates historians and other researchers to explore them.