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## THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF SURVIVAL OF THE JEWISH POPULATION IN HUTA PIENIACKA AND HUTA WERCHOBUSKA (KREIS ZŁOCZÓW): TESTIMONIES OF SURVIVORS

### Summary

The article explores the fate of Jews who went into hiding during World War II in the vicinity of Huta Pieniacka and Huta Werchobuska, located in the pre-war Tarnopol Voivodeship (Kreis Złoczów). The region's extensive forest complexes offered favourable conditions for evading German extermination efforts. In these forests, groups of Jews who had escaped from liquidated ghettos and transports to death camps struggled to survive.

The text draws on testimonies from Holocaust survivors, detailing their daily battles with hunger, disease, exhaustion, as well as constant fear. These accounts also shed light on the varied responses of the local population – both Poles and Ukrainians.

On 28 February 1944, Huta Pieniacka was attacked by the 4th Police Regiment of the 14th Waffen SS Grenadier Division “Galizien,” with support from troops of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (*Ukrainska Povstanska Armia*, UPA). Some residents, having been warned of the impending assault, managed to flee; the others were murdered, and the village was

destroyed. Although the pacification targeted the Polish population, it also had grave consequences for Jews in hiding, intensifying the danger and severing local support networks.

## Keywords

Huta Pieniacka • Huta Werchobuska • Holocaust • Kreis Złoczów • pacification • Jews in hiding

## Introduction

This article aims to analyse the circumstances surrounding the hiding of the Jewish population in two pacified localities – Huta Pieniacka and Huta Werchobuska (Kreis Złoczów) – and their immediate vicinity. The villages themselves and their surroundings, due to the nearby forest complexes, were a convenient place of refuge for numerous groups of Jews. The issue was presented based on sources of Jewish provenance – specifically, testimonies of Holocaust survivors, from which extensive quotations were drawn.

During the Second Polish Republic, the area in question was located within the borders of the Tarnopol Voivodeship, on the border between the counties of Brody (Huta Pieniacka, Pieniaki Municipality) and Złoczów (Huta Werchobuska, Podhorce Municipality).<sup>1</sup> From the outbreak of World War II until June 1941, the Tarnopol Voivodeship remained under Soviet occupation. After the Third Reich's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, these areas were incorporated into the newly created Galicia District, which became part of the General Governorate on 1 August 1941. Huta Pieniacka and Huta Werchobuska

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<sup>1</sup> “Rozporządzenie Ministra Spraw Wewnętrznych z dnia 21 lipca 1934 r. o podziale powiatu brodzkiego w województwie tarnopolskim na gminy wiejskie [Regulation of the Minister of Internal Affairs of 21 July 1934 on the division of the Brody County in the Tarnopol Voivodeship into rural municipalities],” *Dziennik Ustaw* [hereinafter Dz.U.] 1934, no. 68, item 630; “Rozporządzenie Ministra Spraw Wewnętrznych z dnia 14 lipca 1934 r. o podziale powiatu złoczowskiego w województwie tarnopolskim na gminy wiejskie [Regulation of the Minister of Internal Affairs of 14 July 1934 on the division of the Złoczów County in the Tarnopol Voivodeship into rural municipalities],” Dz.U. 1934, no. 64, item 572; *Skorowidz gmin Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej. Ludność i budynki na podstawie tymczasowych wyników drugiego powszechnego spisu ludności z dn. 9 XII 1931 r. oraz powierzchnia ogólna*, part 3a: *Województwa południowe*, Warsaw, 1935, p. 4.

(located about 2 km apart) were then within the boundaries of Złoczów County (Kreis Złoczów).<sup>2</sup>

At the turn of February and March 1944, the villages were subjected to a brutal pacification operation carried out by the 4th Police Regiment of the 14th Waffen-SS Grenadier Division, alongside a *kuren* [namely, a company-sized unit] of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) led by Maks Skorupski, who was collaborating with German forces at the time. These actions resulted in the deaths of over a thousand Polish civilians.<sup>3</sup> Let us briefly examine the circumstances surrounding this tragedy. It took place in Huta Pieniacka on 28 February 1944. Five days earlier, an armed skirmish occurred between members of the Polish self-defence forces and a reconnaissance unit of the 1st Battalion of the 4th Police Regiment, composed of Ukrainians who were volunteers for the SS Division “Galizien.”<sup>4</sup> As pointed out by prosecutor Waldemar Szwiec,<sup>5</sup> who led the investigation into the pacification of Huta Pieniacka,

members of the self-defence group took up arms, believing that the attackers were Ukrainian nationalists dressed in German uniforms. They came to this conclusion based on the fact that the attackers spoke Ukrainian. As a result of these actions, two members of the group were killed, and eight others were wounded.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Amtliches Gemeinde- und Dorfverzeichnis für das Generalgouvernement auf Grund der Summarischen Bevölkerungsbestandsaufnahme am 1. März 1943, Statistisches Amt des Generalgouvernements, Krakau, 1943, p. 29.*

<sup>3</sup> See W. Bąkowski, *Zagłada Huty Pieniackiej*, Cracow, 2001; H. Komański and S. Siekierka, *Ludobójstwo dokonane przez nacjonalistów ukraińskich na Polakach w województwie tarnopolskim w latach 1939–1946*, Wrocław, 2004, pp. 66–71; S.S. Żuk, *Skrawek piekła na Podolu: Huta Pieniacka – Hucisko Brodzkie*, Warsaw, 2009; S. Srokowski, *Zanim spłonęli żywcem: Ukraińska zbrodnia w Hucie Pieniackiej*, Warsaw, 2024; *Za to, że byli Polakami*, ed. M. Gośniowska-Kola, Wschowa, 2009; *Archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej w Warszawie* (Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance, hereinafter AIPN), 2904/308, An incomplete list of the persons murdered on 12 March 1944 in Huta Pieniacka, Brodzkie Hucisko, Czernica and Maleniska, compiled by Edward Gross, 5 May 2020, pp. 1–6.

<sup>4</sup> G. Motyka, “Dywizja SS „Galizien” („Hałyczyna”),” *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość* 1 (1) (2002), p. 114.

<sup>5</sup> The investigation into the pacification of Huta Pieniacka from 24 November 1992 was conducted by the District Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against the Polish Nation in Cracow under the reference number S/5/92/U. Suspended on 22 December 1997, it was reopened on 14 March 2001 (S 10.2001.ZI), transferred to Warsaw on 8 June 2001, and returned to Cracow on 15 July 2003 (S.50.2003.ZN). It was thereafter closed on 8 September 2017 and reopened on 29 June 2023 – the current reference number is S 38.2023.ZN.

<sup>6</sup> W. Szwiec, “Informacje o śledztwie w sprawie ludobójstwa dokonanego przez nacjonalistów ukraińskich w latach 1939–1945 na terenie Huty Pieniackiej,” in *Prawda historyczna a prawda politycz-*

The Ukrainians were to check whether a unit of Soviet partisans was stationed in the village (on 22 February 1944, a group of about sixty partisans under the command of Boris Krutikov left Huta Pieniacka so that their presence would not lead to the destruction of the village, which served as a base for their sabotage activities against the Germans).<sup>7</sup> On the night of 27–28 February 1944, a courier from the Home Army Inspectorate in Złoczów arrived in Huta Pieniacka to warn residents that the SS subunits from the “Galizien” division were approaching. He also delivered the Inspectorate’s order to halt defensive preparations and withdraw armed personnel to prevent a military confrontation. This decision was influenced by recent events in Majdan Pieniacki, where a sub-unit of the police regiment from the SS Division “Galizien” had entered the village, interrogated its inhabitants, and ultimately released the men detained on suspicion of partisan activity following an investigation.<sup>8</sup> However, the events in Huta Pieniacka unfolded differently. In the early hours of 28 February 1944, the village was surrounded, and without warning, buildings on its outskirts came under fire. A brief exchange of gunfire followed between the attackers and members of the local self-defence unit. The Ukrainian forces, having a significant numerical advantage, entered the village and subjected its population to brutal repression. Under the pretext of searching for Soviet partisans, many civilians were killed. Once the search concluded, residents were confined to their homes and barns, which were then deliberately set ablaze. Those who attempted to flee were shot at.<sup>9</sup> The information on the investigation concerning the crime in Huta Pieniacka stated:

Drawing on eyewitness testimonies, as well as the available historical sources and scholarly publications, it has been determined that the number of victims

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na w badaniach naukowych: *Ludobójstwo na kresach południowo-wschodniej Polski w latach 1939–1946*, ed. B. Paż, Cracow, 2015, p. 118.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 118–119.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>9</sup> *Oddziałowe Archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej w Krakowie* (Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance, Branch in Cracow, hereinafter AIPN Kr), 1/2250, W. Bąkowski, “Była taka wieś w województwie tarnopolskim...” Karlino, 1992, manuscript, pp. 160–173; G. Motyka, *Od rzezi wołyńskiej do akcji „Wisła”: Konflikt polsko-ukraiński 1943–1947*, Cracow, 2011, pp. 260–266; “No. 30 [No date], [no place]. Excerpt from the intelligence case of the NKGB of the Ukrainian SSR ‘Zvery’ related to developments in Huta Pieniacka,” in *Poland and Ukraine in the 1930s and 1940s: Documents from the Archives of the Secret Services*, eds. J. Bednarek et al., Łódź–Warsaw–Kiev, 2012, pp. 451–452.

of the actions described ranged between 700 and 1,300 individuals. At the time, Huta Pieniacka comprised 172 farms and approximately 1,000 residents – though this figure does not include people from nearby villages who were present during the attack. Investigative findings indicate that around 160 people survived the pogrom.<sup>10</sup>

As a result of the pacification, the village ceased to exist (only the church and the school building survived).

The destruction of Huta Werchobuska occurred on 22 March 1944. The assault was carried out by units of the SS Division “Galizien,” supported by members of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) and local Ukrainian collaborators. Having been warned of the impending attack and aware of the massacre in Huta Pieniacka just days earlier, most of the population fled into the surrounding forest. The attackers looted the village and then set its buildings ablaze. Those who remained behind to defend their property were mostly killed.<sup>11</sup>

### State of Research

The existing literature on the subject devotes little attention to the rescue of Jews in the regions under discussion, this lack of attention also applies to the experiences and survival strategies of local Jews during the Holocaust. The earliest known testimony concerning Jews hiding in the forests around Huta Pieniacka and Huta Werchobuska comes from the memoirs of Zvi Weigler, published in Hebrew in 1957 in the magazine *Yedioth Yad Vashem*.<sup>12</sup> They were titled “For helping Jews, two Polish villages were burned down,” which clearly suggested that the destruction was carried out as a punitive measure.

Reuben Ainsztein cited Weigler’s testimony in his 1974 publication *Jewish Resistance in Nazi-Occupied Eastern Europe*, which detailed life in the forests and

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<sup>10</sup> W. Szwiec, *Informacje o śledztwie*, p. 121.

<sup>11</sup> “No. 30 [No date], [no place]. Excerpt from the intelligence case of the NKGB,” p. 453; *Dokumenty zbrodni wołyńskiej*, vol. 2, eds. E. Gigilewicz, L. Popek, P. Sokołowski, and T. Zych, Warsaw, 2024, p. 160; H. Komański, “Eksterminacja polskiej ludności, powiat Złoczów. Huta Werchobuska,” *Na Rubieży* 10, no. 4 (1994), pp. 10–11.

<sup>12</sup> Z. Weigler, “Za udzielanie pomocy Żydom spalono dwie polskie wsie,” *Yedioth Yad Vashem* 12 (1957), pp. 15–16.

the activities of the Jewish resistance.<sup>13</sup> In Polish scholarship, the first references to both villages in this context date back to 1968, when both Hutas appeared on a list of localities destroyed for aiding Jews, compiled by Szymon Datner in his book *Las Sprawiedliwych* (The Forest of the Righteous).<sup>14</sup> This researcher wrote:

In early February 1944, in retaliation for providing shelter, food and care to about 100 Jews from Sasów (Złoczów County) who had escaped from a forced labour camp and were hiding in the surrounding forests, a German punitive expedition, together with a unit of Ukrainian fascists, surrounded the Polish village of Huta Pieniacka (near Sasów) and murdered its inhabitants, burning them alive. Along with the inhabitants, livestock and all buildings were burned. [...] three weeks after the massacre in Huta Pieniacka – for helping a group of Jews hiding in a nearby forest – a punitive expedition composed of German and Ukrainian fascists carried out a massacre in the village of Huta Werchobuska, near Sasów. Fortunately, mounted messengers warned the villagers in time of the approaching German column, enabling most of the village population to flee to the forest.<sup>15</sup>

In the scholarly literature published after 1989, Polish researchers have devoted some attention to the fate of Jews in the regions discussed, however, in the most well-known studies concerning, among other things, the pacification of Huta Pieniacka and Huta Werchobuska, the issues of the aid provided, the conditions in which Jews were hiding, and the circumstances of their deaths have not been the subject of in-depth research.<sup>16</sup> Aleksander Korman mentioned that Jews were

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<sup>13</sup> R. Ainsztein, *Jewish Resistance in Nazi-Occupied Eastern Europe*, London, 1974, pp. 450–453.

<sup>14</sup> S. Datner, *Las Sprawiedliwych: Karta z dziejów ratownictwa Żydów w okupowanej Polsce*, Warsaw, 1968.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 104–105.

<sup>16</sup> G. Motyka, *Ukraińska partyzantka 1942–1960: Działalność Organizacji Ukraińskich Nacjonalistów i Ukraińskiej Powstańczej Armii*, Warsaw, 2015, p. 383; G. Motyka, *Od rzezi wołyńskiej*, pp. 260–262; W. Poliszczuk, *Dowody zbrodni OUN i UPA: Integralny nacjonalizm ukraiński jako odmiana faszyzmu*, vol. 2, Toronto, 2000, pp. 556–560; W. Poliszczuk, *Gorzka prawda: Zbrodniczość OUN-UPA*, Toronto, 1995, pp. 314–317; W. Poliszczuk, *Gorzka prawda: Cień Bandery nad zbrodnią ludobójstwa*, Toronto, 2004, p. 132; W. Siemaszko and E. Siemaszko, *Ludobójstwo dokonane przez nacjonalistów ukraińskich na ludności polskiej Wołynia 1939–1945*, vol. 2, Warsaw, 2000, pp. 1003–1006; A. Korman, *Nieukarane zbrodnie SS-Galizien z lat 1943–1945, Chodaków Wielki, Huta Pieniacka, Podkamień, Wicyń i inne miejscowości*, London, 1990; W. Konarski, “Zagłada Huty Pieniackiej,” *Szkice Historyczne* 1 (1996), pp. 105–113.

hiding in Huta Pieniacka in his book published in 1990, citing the *Przegląd Tygodniowy AK* (10–17 March 1944).<sup>17</sup> Edward Prus also wrote about the deaths of Jews as a result of the pacification of this village.<sup>18</sup>

The most thorough examination of this topic can be found in Anna Zapalec's study, which explores the fate of Jews in the region between the German deportations and the arrival of the Red Army.<sup>19</sup> The author invoked, among other things, Samuel Wander's testimony about the help provided by Poles, which contributed to the survival of Jews hiding in the forests:

I went to a friend's house in Huta Werchobuska. He fed me, dressed my wounds, and I went back to the forest. I met an old man who said that for denouncing a Jew, they would give 5 kg of sugar, 1,000 marks, and a set of clothing. Two friends, Uszer Podhorcer and Symche Baumer, went into the forest to get food and were shot by Ukrainians. Over time, a group of 18 Jews gathered. We had a hiding place in the forest. Before each round-up, Poles would warn us.<sup>20</sup>

Citing Wander as a reference, the author stated that a group of several Jews were hiding around Huta Werchobuska and Huta Pieniacka, who were then murdered by Ukrainian nationalists. However, the details of this event were not disclosed.<sup>21</sup> In Fajwel Auerbach's testimony, we read:

There were 30 of us in the forest. We hid in Huta Werchobuska and [Huta] Pieniacka. The inhabitants of these villages – Poles, very poor peasants – helped us, sharing their last morsels even though they themselves were starving. We stayed there from July 1943 to March 1944. Thanks to them, we survived. We had weapons. When there were raids, the village leader would warn us.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> A. Korman, *Nieukarane zbrodnie SS-Galizien*, p. 41. The aforementioned *Przegląd Tygodniowy AK* (Home Army Weekly Review) held at the National Library is not available for viewing due to its condition.

<sup>18</sup> “[...] in the school and barns, Polish and Jewish children were burned alive together” (E. Prus, *Holocaust po banderowsku*, Wrocław, 2001, p. 160).

<sup>19</sup> A. Zapalec, “Powiat zloczowski,” in *Dalej jest noc: Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski*, vol. 1, eds. B. Engelking and J. Grabowski, Warsaw, 2018, pp. 623–760.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 720.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 724.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 733.

It is also worth mentioning a relatively new publication by Ryszard Tyndorf and Zygmunt Zieliński entitled *Wartime Rescue of Jews by the Polish Catholic Clergy: The Testimony of Survivors and Rescuers*, which is devoted to the rescue efforts of the Catholic Church during the German occupation, also addresses the issue of the survival of Jews in the area around Huta Pieniacka and Huta Werchobuska.<sup>23</sup> Its authors wrote:

70–80 Jews who escaped [from Sasów] encountered a similar number of Jews from other camps and ghettos in the forests. They managed to survive thanks to Polish peasants from Huta Pieniacka and Huta Werchobuska. Both Polish villages were surrounded by hostile Ukrainian settlements, and to defend themselves against attacks by Ukrainian nationalists, the Poles organised a defence unit in each village, armed with several rifles.<sup>24</sup>

References to Jews also appear sporadically in Polish memoirs. Władysław Bąkowski wrote about twenty Jewish civilians and one wounded Soviet partisan who were murdered on 28 February 1944 during the pacification of Huta Pieniacka. However, his list includes only five Jewish victims: Golenberg, a doctor from Podkamień; his wife, son, and daughter (names unknown); and the aforementioned partisan – Sierżantow (name also unknown, original spelling preserved). The author did not specify the circumstances under which these persons found themselves in Huta Pieniacka, limiting himself to stating the fact and listing them among the murdered.<sup>25</sup>

Sulimir Stanisław Żuk, who served as a courier in the vicinity of Huta Pieniacka, wrote in his memoirs:

It happened that Jews fled and hid in the forests. Cases of Poles hiding Jews were punished with the immediate death of the hosts and the burning of their farms. Despite this, some Poles risked their lives to help Jews. Jews were also hidden

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<sup>23</sup> R. Tyndorf and Z. Zieliński, *Wartime Rescue of Jews by the Polish Catholic Clergy: The Testimony of Survivors and Rescuers*, vol. 2, Lublin, 2023, pp. 636–637, 1079–1080.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 636.

<sup>25</sup> W. Bąkowski, *Zagłada Huty Pieniackiej*, p. 95.

in our house several times. My father and I made a special hiding place in the attic, concealed under the stairs, where a person could hide and wait for some time until the danger passed. It should be added that there were usually several Jewish families living in Polish villages; in neighbouring Hucisko Brodzkie, there were four Jewish buildings. Children from Jewish families attended the same school as Polish children.<sup>26</sup>

The names Huta Pieniacka and Huta Werchobuska also appear in an undated document issued by the Main Commission for the Investigation of Hitlerite Crimes in Poland, titled *Egzekucje na ludności polskiej za pomoc udzieloną Żydom – wykaz miejscowości* (Executions of the Polish Population in Retaliation for the Aid Provided to Jews: A List of Affected Localities). In this document, both villages are identified as sites of mass executions of Poles who had helped Jews.<sup>27</sup> We read in it:

Huta Pieniacka, USSR [now Ukraine – M.S.] – in the first days of February 1944, for hiding about a hundred Jews who had escaped from the ghetto and were staying in the surrounding forests, a German punitive expedition murdered the population of the village of Huta Pieniacka. All livestock was burned, the village burned all day, and the perpetrators made sure that no one survived. [...]

Huta Werchobuska,<sup>28</sup> USSR [now Ukraine – M.S.] – the site of a massacre on 23 March 1944, when Nazi forces murdered all of its inhabitants in retaliation for aiding Jews who were hiding in the village and the surrounding forest. The victims were burned alive in their homes, along with the buildings and livestock.<sup>29</sup>

Considering the above information, it is worth noting that although brief descriptions and references to the situation of Jews in both villages – and to the aid they received from the Polish population – do appear, these topics have been only marginally addressed in scholarly discourse and have not undergone broader analysis.

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<sup>26</sup> S.S. Żuk, *Skrawek piekła*, pp. 45–46.

<sup>27</sup> AIPN, 392/2040, Executions of the Polish Population in Retaliation for the Aid Provided to Jews: A List of Affected Localities, no date, p. 88.

<sup>28</sup> The spelling in the document is Wierchobuska.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

## Characteristics of the Area

Huta Pieniacka (Pieniaki Municipality, Brody County, Pieniaki Parish, Tarnopol Voivodeship) was located, as already mentioned, in the southwestern part of Brody County, on the northeastern border of the Złoczów County. The nearest larger towns were Brody and Złoczów. To the south were Hucisko Pieniackie and Werchobuż; to the east were Hołubica, Litowisko, Hucisko Litowskie, Hucisko Brodzkie and (further away) Podkamień; to the west were Huta Werchobuska, Majdan Pieniacki and Hucisko Oleskie; and to the north was Żarków, inhabited by Ukrainians, and Huta Nowa.<sup>30</sup> These were small Polish settlements located close to each other. To reach the main road, one had to travel about 10 kilometres in each direction along a dirt road, which was impassable for carts in winter and during rainy seasons. Huta Pieniacka was practically self-sufficient, with its inhabitants engaged in carpentry, blacksmithing and cooperage. Potatoes, rye, barley, oats, buckwheat, millet, wheat, hemp and flax were grown in the fields. Cattle, pigs and poultry were raised. Agricultural raw materials were processed on site or in nearby villages.<sup>31</sup> The village was laid out in a circular plan, with a ravine and a small hill where a church was built in 1928, replacing an earlier chapel. Most of the houses were wooden. In the village was a four-grade elementary school and a community centre, which hosted occasional gatherings and celebrations. Relations among the inhabitants were warm; people felt close to one another and were characterised by deep piety. The Catholic worldview was reinforced by the proximity of Huta Pieniacka to Podkamień, home to a Dominican monastery with a miraculous painting of the Mother of God, which drew pilgrims from various regions during the church fair. Clergy and teachers were regarded as authorities. Matters important to the community were discussed by an informal council of elders. A Rifle Association was also present in the village.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> S. Srokowski, *Zanim splanęli*, pp. 55–56; R. Kobylański, *Huta Pieniacka: Kainowa zbrodnia*, Wrocław, 2024, pp. 13–45.

<sup>31</sup> AIPN Kr, 1/2250, W. Bąkowski, “Była taka wieś w województwie tarnopolskim...” Karlino, 1992, manuscript, p. 26; W. Bąkowski, *Zagłada Huty Pieniackiej*, p. 37.

<sup>32</sup> AIPN Kr, 1/2250, W. Bąkowski, “Była taka wieś w województwie tarnopolskim...” Karlino 1992, manuscript, pp. 27–29. In the Second Polish Republic, the Rifle Association (*Związek Strzelecki*) was a social and educational organisation for young people. It drew on the traditions of its predecessor from 1910–1914 and mainly brought together pre-conscription youth, including those from rural and artisan backgrounds. For more on this topic, see, for instance, A. Zakrzewska, *Związek Strzelecki 1919–1939: Wychowanie młodzieży obywatelskiej*, Cracow, 2007.

Many of the names were of German origin, reflecting earlier settlement from the Silesia region.<sup>33</sup> Wojciech Kierepka, one of the former residents of Huta Pieniacka, described it as follows:

The area surrounding Huta Pieniacka was dominated by extensive forest complexes, which served as the primary source of livelihood for the local population. The village itself was arranged in an almost perfect circle, with two roads intersecting at its centre. Beyond the cluster of buildings lay a belt of meadows, pastures, and farmland with a width [...] ranging from 500 to 900 meters. This was followed by another strip of forest. The terrain throughout the region was nearly flat. Huta Pieniacka was comprised of approximately 130 farms, workshops, and labourers' homes, with an estimated population of around 1,000. The two wealthiest farmers owned about 12 to 13 morgas of land. All village buildings were constructed of wood and had thatched roofs, except for two farmers who owned brick houses with tiled roofs.<sup>34</sup>

Due to its modest size and population of approximately 400, detailed accounts of life in Huta Werchobuska – a small village with a manor house located in Podhorce Municipality, Złoczów County, Tarnopol Voivodeship – are not available.<sup>35</sup>

## Two Occupations and the Holocaust in the Territory of Pre-war Tarnopol Voivodeship

Approximately 13 million people lived in the Eastern Borderlands of the Second Polish Republic, with Poles constituting the dominant ethnic group. Jews, who made up slightly over 8% of the region's population, were concentrated primarily in cities and smaller urban centres, generally avoiding rural areas due to the nature of their occupations, which were not connected to agriculture. Within this community, professions related to trade, crafts, and small business predominated.

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<sup>33</sup> W. Bąkowski, *Zagłada Huty Pieniackiej*, pp. 32–33.

<sup>34</sup> *Oddziałowe Archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej we Wrocławiu* (Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance, Branch in Wrocław), 477/32, vol. 1, Minutes of the interrogation of the witness Wojciech Kierepka, 23 September 1969, pp. 28–34.

<sup>35</sup> H. Komański and S. Siekierka, *Ludobójstwo dokonane przez nacjonalistów ukraińskich*, pp. 499–500.

A significant number were owners of small shops and workshops, while others worked in the liberal professions. Although some Jews were wealthy, the majority did not belong to the financial elite. Assimilation into Polish culture was limited; much of the Jewish community maintained its own language, traditions, and religious customs, which set it apart from the Polish population.<sup>36</sup>

According to the 1931 census, Poles made up approximately 50% of the population in the Tarnopol Voivodeship, while Ukrainians accounted for around 45%. The second-largest national minority were Jews, whose share in the region's demographic structure did not exceed 5%. Less than 1% of the population belonged to other groups, including Germans, Russians, Czechs, and Belarusians.<sup>37</sup>

After the Third Reich and the Soviet Union invaded Poland in September 1939, the Polish state was divided between the two occupying powers. In the south-eastern borderlands, control was taken over by the Soviet authorities, who quickly introduced wide-ranging mechanisms of repression and surveillance. The communist administrative apparatus, exploiting national minorities, often antagonised the local population and turned it against the pre-war state structures. In 1939–1940, a wave of arrests and deportations was initiated, affecting representatives of various social and national groups. Political activity was banned, and religious and social organisations were outlawed. The economy was also subordinated to the Soviet system through the nationalisation of private property and workplaces and the replacement of the Polish currency with the rouble.<sup>38</sup> While Poles were the primary group affected by displacement, the Jewish community also experienced the consequences of political upheaval, with many of its members deported deep into the Soviet Union. The reprisals were

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<sup>36</sup> P. Eberhardt, "Liczebność i rozmieszczenie ludności żydowskiej na Kresach Wschodnich I i II Rzeczypospolitej w pierwszej połowie XX w.," in *Świat nie pożegnany: Żydzi na dawnych ziemiach wschodnich Rzeczypospolitej w XVIII–XX w.*, ed. K. Jasiewicz, Warsaw, 2004, pp. 64–76.

<sup>37</sup> M. Siekierka, "Stan badań nad pomocą Żydom świadczoną przez ludność polską w okresie II wojny światowej na okupowanych terenach województwa tarnopolskiego," in *Stan badań nad pomocą Żydom na ziemiach polskich pod okupacją niemiecką – przegląd piśmiennictwa*, eds. T. Domański and A. Gontarek, Kielce, 2022, p. 669.

<sup>38</sup> K. Jasiewicz, *Zagłada polskich Kresów: Ziemiaństwo polskie na Kresach Północno-Wschodnich Rzeczypospolitej pod okupacją sowiecką 1939–1941: Studium z dziejów zagłady dawnego narodu politycznego*, Warsaw, 1998, pp. 105–121.

driven more by class than ethnicity, leading many Jews to perceive the USSR as less threatening than Nazi Germany.<sup>39</sup>

The situation of the Jewish population worsened dramatically after 22 June 1941, when the Third Reich launched its offensive against the Soviet Union. Within a short period, German forces expelled the communist administration from the territories occupied since 1939. As they retreated, Soviet troops carried out numerous mass executions of political prisoners, notably in Lwów, Złoczów, and Tarnopol. These atrocities were later exploited by German propaganda as a pretext for orchestrating anti-Jewish pogroms, in which both the occupying forces and segments of the local population – including members of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) – took part.<sup>40</sup>

At the turn of 1941 and 1942, Jews were confined to ghettos, where they lived in extremely poor conditions. In mid-1942, in accordance with the extermination plan that went down in history as Operation “Reinhardt,” the liquidation of the Jewish community began. The inhabitants of the ghettos were shot or deported to extermination camps, mainly to Treblinka, Sobibór and Bełżec.<sup>41</sup> Collective responsibility was often applied, affecting entire families and local communities. Occupied Poland was one of the few countries in Europe where, on 15 October 1941, the Germans introduced the death penalty for providing aid to Jews (the so-called Third General Governorate Residence Restriction Regulation). Collective responsibility was often applied, affecting entire families and local communities.<sup>42</sup>

German troops entered Złoczów on 2 July 1941. In the initial phase of the new regime, the town was administered by the German military command (Ortskommandantur), which oversaw both administrative and law enforcement functions. In August 1942, control shifted to the German civil administration, and Złoczów became the administrative centre of the Kreis Złoczów within the Distrikt Galizien.

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<sup>39</sup> M. Hańderek, “Stosunek ZSRS do obywateli polskich narodowości żydowskiej,” [https://przystanekhistoria.pl/pa2/teksty/78341%2CStosunek-ZSRS-do-obywateli-polskich-narodowosci-zydowskiej.html?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://przystanekhistoria.pl/pa2/teksty/78341%2CStosunek-ZSRS-do-obywateli-polskich-narodowosci-zydowskiej.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com) (accessed 4 June 2025).

<sup>40</sup> D. Bechtel, “Od Jedwabnego do Złoczowa. Lokalne pogromy w Galicji, czerwiec–lipiec 1941,” in *OUN, UPA i zagłada Żydów*, ed. A.A. Zięba, Cracow, 2015, pp. 247–262.

<sup>41</sup> See e.g. *Akcja Reinhardt. Zagłada Żydów w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie*, ed. D. Libionka, Warsaw, 2004.

<sup>42</sup> *Represje za pomoc Żydom na okupowanych ziemiach polskich w czasie II wojny światowej*, vol. 1, eds. A. Namysło and M. Grądzka-Rejak, Warsaw, 2019, p. 25.

The position of the Kreishauptmann – head of the district and representative of the Nazi civil authority – was held by Regierungsassessor Hans Mann until January 1943, when he was replaced by Otto Wendt. The Kreishauptmann wielded significant power over local governance, including oversight of security, economic policy, and the implementation of anti-Jewish measures. With the withdrawal of the Soviets, anti-Semitic sentiments intensified among the local population, incited in part by the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN).

The turning point came with the discovery of mutilated bodies of NKVD prisoners in the cells of the Sobieski Castle. On 3 July 1941, local groups of Ukrainian nationalists initiated mass violence against the Jewish population in Złoczów. Hundreds of Jews were captured and imprisoned in the local fortress, where they were forced to exhume the bodies from mass graves before being murdered. The pogroms lasted four days and resulted in the deaths of approximately 1,400 Jews.

The German authorities confiscated Jewish property, focusing primarily on valuables and items of significant material worth. The Jewish population was compelled to register and, shortly thereafter, subjected to forced labour. A ban on leaving the city limits was imposed, restricting movement and making escape considerably more difficult. In addition, Jews were burdened with heavy financial levies, enforced by the Złoczów Judenrat under the strict oversight of the German administration. These measures formed part of a broader policy of discrimination, exploitation, and extermination.<sup>43</sup> From 1941, labour camps operated in Biały Kamień, Jachtarów, Kozaki, Lackie, Płuhów, Sasów, Zarwanica and Zborów.<sup>44</sup>

In the spring of 1942, an open ghetto was established in Złoczów, concentrating the town's Jewish population. In August, the Judenrat was forced to prepare a list

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<sup>43</sup> See P. Dieter, *Nationalsozialistische Judenverfolgung in Ostgalizien 1941–1944. Organisation und Durchführung eines staatlichen Massenverbrechens*, München, 1997, p. 63; W. Mędykowski, *W cieniu gigantów: Pogromy 1941 r. w byłej sowieckiej strefie okupacyjnej*, Warsaw, 2012, pp. 262–268; D. Bechtel, “Od Jedwabnego do Złoczowa,” pp. 252–256; J.P. Himka, *Ukrainian Nationalists and the Holocaust: OUN and UPA's Participation in the Destruction of Ukrainian Jewry, 1941–1944*, Stuttgart, 2021 (“Ukrainian Voices,” vol. 12), pp. 207–208; K. Kiebusinski and A. Motyl, *The Great West Ukrainian Prison Massacre of 1941: A Sourcebook*, Amsterdam, 2017, pp. 383–392; *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945*, vol. 2: *Ghettos in German-Occupied Eastern Europe*, part A, eds. G.P. Megargee and M. Dean, Bloomington–Indianapolis, 2012, pp. 744, 758; A. Zapalec, *Ziemia tarnopolska w okresie pierwszej okupacji sowieckiej (1939–1941)*, Cracow, 2006, pp. 266–269.

<sup>44</sup> *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps*, vol. 2, pp. 758–759.

of 2,500 individuals considered unfit for labour. On 28–29 August 1942, during the first mass deportation, approximately 2,000 Jews were sent to the extermination camp in Bełżec. In December, the ghetto was converted into a sealed area, further worsening living conditions and severely restricting movement. On 1 December 1942, the occupiers established a second sealed ghetto in Złoczów, where surviving Jews from the town and nearby communities – including Gołogóry and Sasów – were resettled. The ghetto, situated around Mickiewicza and Targowa Streets, was enclosed by barbed wire and walls, with access controlled by Ukrainian police collaborating with the Germans. Conditions inside were tragic – marked by overcrowding, hunger, and disease – as part of a deliberate policy of extermination. The liquidation of the Złoczów ghetto occurred on 3–4 April 1943, during which approximately 3,500 Jews were murdered in mass executions. Following the ghetto's liquidation, a labour camp operated in the city under the supervision of SS Hauptscharführer Josef Grzimek.<sup>45</sup>

The situation was similarly dire in the ghetto established in Brody in January 1942, which received Jews transported from surrounding towns and villages, including Koniuszków, Leszniów, Łopatyn, Olesko, Podkamień, Ponikowica, Ponikwa, Sokołówka, Stanisławczyk, Suchowola, and Toporów. The first deportation from Brody occurred on 19 September 1942, when between 2,200 and 2,500 Jews were sent to the extermination camp in Bełżec. Around 250 individuals – primarily the elderly and infirm – were murdered on the spot. On 2 December 1942, the ghetto was converted from an open to a sealed one, further worsening conditions. It was liquidated between late May and early June 1943.<sup>46</sup>

In 1943, escapes by Jews from the aforementioned labour camps and liquidated ghettos took various forms, shaped by local conditions and the degree of security. Weaknesses in surveillance were exploited: guards were bribed, individuals hid in transports, and tunnels were used to facilitate escape. Support from the local population also played a crucial role. Those who managed to flee often sought refuge in the forests of the Werchobuż and Pieniaki regions, where, far from urban centres, they hoped to find safety.

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 758–759.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*; M. Kuttan, *Ner Tamid: Yizkor leBrody*. Ramat-Gan, 1994; English version: *An Eternal Light: Brody, in Memoriam*, New York, 2018, pp. 43–51.

At the beginning of 1944, the threat posed by Ukrainian nationalists to the Polish population in the Kreis Złoczów intensified. By autumn 1943, the armed operations of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) targeting civilians had gradually expanded into the Galicia District. German administrative responses to these acts of violence were sporadic, largely due to the Wehrmacht's prioritisation of the Eastern Front, limited law enforcement capacity in peripheral regions – where Ukrainian auxiliary police often carried out policing duties – and the fact that interethnic conflict between Polish and Ukrainian communities served German interests within the framework of the German occupation policy.<sup>47</sup>

Since most of the source material consists of Jewish testimonies, it is important to consider what Jews who witnessed the pacification of Polish villages knew about Polish-Ukrainian relations during the war before analysing these testimonies in the context of aid. Let us begin by recalling two significant perspectives on the subject.

Harry Brill (known before the war as Herschel Brill), who had been staying in Huta Pieniacka with his sister Clara Dreier (formerly Klara Brill) since June 1943, stated in his testimony that Ukrainian actions were a form of retaliation for the Second Polish Republic's policy toward the Ukrainian population in the Eastern Borderlands, which he referred to as “segregation.” He suggested thereby that the methods used by both sides were adequate:

You have to understand that in this part of Poland, in Galicia, there were many Ukrainians and many Poles living there. The Ukrainians hated the Poles because the Ukrainians – or at least some of them – were subjected to segregation under Polish rule. The Ukrainians collaborated with the Germans, and the Germans had an SS division, a Ukrainian SS division, which collaborated with the Germans in killing Jews, mainly as guards in the camps. The Ukrainians wanted to take revenge on the Poles for the events of the previous war. It started with killing and burning villages. We were right in the centre of these events.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> E. Gross, *Kresowe dzieje podolskich wsi: Włochy, Ponikwa i Hucisko Brodzkie (1938–1944)*, Wrocław, 2004, p. 305; L. Kulińska and C. Partacz, *Zbrodnie nacjonalistów ukraińskich na Polakach w latach 1939–1945*, Warsaw, 2015, pp. 95–99.

<sup>48</sup> Archive at the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews (hereinafter POLIN), Harry Brill, tape no. 2, 5th–6th min.

Bernard [Beryl] Scharf, born in 1914 in Majdan Pieniacki to a large family engaged in horse trading and shopkeeping, offered a differing view: he claimed that the pacification was the result of an ongoing “guerrilla war”:

The few Polish villagers in the villages also organised themselves into a partisan group called “AK” [written by Marek Scharf as “AKaf” – M.S.]. Almost every night, these two groups of partisans attacked each other, and we all heard the shooting. A Ukrainian priest used to travel from his village to a neighbouring village on Sundays to attend mass. One day, several young Poles dragged him out of his cart into the forest and killed him. The Ukrainians took revenge. In response, one night, the Poles dragged a Ukrainian professor, who was the leader of the Banderites, out of bed, took him to the forest and hanged him. Every night, when I walked to the village, I heard new stories about the fighting. This went on for months.<sup>49</sup>

The testimonies cited reveal the limited understanding of local realities among Jewish witnesses. Both viewed events through the prism of their own experiences and general perceptions, rather than through a deeper understanding of relations between Poles and Ukrainians. This is an interesting topic, worthy of separate analysis.

### Testimonies on the Aid Provided by Poles to Jews and on the Pacification of Huta Pieniacka and Huta Werchobuska

As the German liquidation operations intensified in the Kreis Złoczów, more and more Jews, with Polish help, attempted to escape from the liquidated ghettos and forced labour camps and take refuge in more remote, safer areas. In addition to the friendly (non-hostile) attitude of the Poles, the natural conditions mentioned in the accounts of Jews also helped them to survive: “The forests were large, so the survivors formed various groups, and for a long time one group might not have known about the existence of another.”<sup>50</sup> “The forests in this region spanned

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<sup>49</sup> B. Scharf and M. Scharf, *Courage*, n.p., 2011, pp. 11–25, 45. Bernard Scharf’s taped recollections were transcribed by his son.

<sup>50</sup> R. Mosheh, “Mayn shtetl Sasov,” in *Sasiv Memorial Book*, New York, 2003, p. 127.

kilometres, allowing a person to enter and remain hidden indefinitely.”<sup>51</sup> According to Samuel Wander, approximately 800 Jews were hiding in the forests surrounding Polish villages.<sup>52</sup> One of them was Zwi Weigler, who recalled years later:

We learned that in Złoczów, it had been decided to send a company of 20 Ukrainian policemen to guard our camp. There were also rumours about a change in the camp overseer. So, we realised that we should not wait any longer, and we escaped. It was the night of 24 June 1943. We were a group of eight men and two women (several women were employed in the camp kitchen). We left one by one, met in a nearby grove, and from there went to a Polish peasant in the village of Dzwoniec, with whom we had previously made arrangements. [...] There were three Polish villages: Huta Pieniacka, Huta Werchobuska, and Majdan. Each was perhaps three or four kilometres from the other. So, we wandered between these villages.<sup>53</sup>

Offering a different perspective, Clara Dreier wrote to Yad Vashem in 1996:

I worked at the palace inside the Brody fortress. The Germans were rounding up Jews in the territory of Brody until the end of June 1943. We knew that our time was slowly coming to an end. At night, a Polish man took us in a horse-drawn cart to Huta Pieniacka, a village located about 20 kilometres from Brody. I was placed with the Wesołowski family, and my brother with the neighbouring Kotowski family.<sup>54</sup>

Another escapee from the camp, Joseph Schepps, also confirmed that aid was provided to Jews: “We fled to villages that I knew [...], where Poles lived, very nice people.”<sup>55</sup>

Jewish testimonies paint a picture of coexistence between Jews and the Poles who rescued them. Two cases mention aid provided to armed groups. Let us hear

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<sup>51</sup> POLIN, Jacop Gang, tape no. 1, 24th min.

<sup>52</sup> *Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego* (Archives of the Jewish Historical Institute, hereinafter AŻIH), 301/1403, Testimony of Samuel Wander, p. 7.

<sup>53</sup> Z. Weigler, “Za udzielanie pomocy Żydom,” p. 15.

<sup>54</sup> Yad Vashem Archives (hereinafter AYV), ID 13793312, Letter from Clara Dreier, p. 1.

<sup>55</sup> POLIN, Joseph Schepps, tape no. 2, 8th min.

from Fajwel Auerbach, who described the mutual relations between one of the armed groups and the Polish civilian population as follows:

We hid in Huta Werchobuska and Huta Pieniacka. The inhabitants of these villages – Poles, very poor peasants – helped us, sharing their last bits of food even though they themselves were starving. [...] When there were raids, the village leader would warn us. Once, 500 Germans surrounded the forest, and because they were afraid to go deeper into it, they set dogs on us. We saved ourselves because my Polish friends warned us of the danger. As a result of denunciations, all the peasants from Huta Pieniacka and [Huta] Werchobuska were killed [“burned” has been crossed out – M.S.]. Some were burned alive in a barn. The village was destroyed, and of the 190 huts, only the church and the school remained. I saw the charred corpses of women and children.<sup>56</sup>

Refael Mosheh’s testimony adds further detail to this account:

According to partisan accounts, there was one village in the forest, Huta Pieniacka, which was very friendly towards Jewish partisans, who spent time with the villagers, ate with them, and sometimes even slept there. The Banderites surrounded the Polish village, set it on fire from all sides, and burned it down along with its inhabitants. There were frequent clashes between Jewish partisans and Ukrainians, as the Germans did not dare to enter the forests. This lasted from the beginning of July 1943, when the camp in Sasów was liquidated, until March 1944,<sup>57</sup> when the surviving Jews were liberated by the Red Army.<sup>58</sup>

Jewish witnesses (Zvi Weigler and others<sup>59</sup>) also pointed to the local Ukrainian population as being responsible for denouncing Poles who were hiding Jews to the German authorities, which led to attacks on Polish villages. Weigler reported:

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<sup>56</sup> AŻIH, 301/1200, Testimony of Fajwel Auerbach, p. 3.

<sup>57</sup> The original text contains an incorrect date: “until March 1945.”

<sup>58</sup> R. Mosheh, “Mayn shtetl Sasov,” in *Sasiv Memorial Book*, p. 128.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

The population of the surrounding Ukrainian villages informed the German authorities that Jews and partisans had gathered in Polish villages. That winter, Soviet partisans were seen for the first time. Among our friends, there were also those who possessed weapons. Several members of our group joined the partisans. However, they only accepted young and healthy people – and most importantly, those who had weapons. [...] One day, two partisans whose group had been broken up and scattered joined our group. They brought German uniforms and weapons with them. [...] One day, the mayor of Złoczów invited the village leaders of the two Hutas to his office and warned them that if these peasants continued to help Jews and partisans, it would be the end of them. Despite this, the peasants did not change their attitude. Perhaps they did not believe the German official's threats. They only asked the Jews not to walk around the village during the day – and the Jews promised to keep their word.<sup>60</sup>

Themes related to aid provided by Poles are also evident in descriptions of events that were crucial to both Poles and Jews in hiding – namely, the pacification of Huta Pieniacka and Huta Werchobuska. We are talking about Jews who were direct witnesses to the crime or learned about it from people staying in the forest. What is more, the accounts of survivors reflect the conviction that the destruction of Polish villages was a direct consequence of the help provided by their inhabitants and the rescue operations they carried out. The key words in this matter are found in the recollections of Zwi Weigler:

The Poles, who were a minority in this region, had an underground organisation with its own agents. We learned from them that the Germans were preparing a punitive expedition against the village of Huta Pieniacka for helping the partisans, and especially for helping Jews who were openly walking around the village. Upon hearing this news, all the Jews fled to the forest. The threats were not empty words. The retaliatory operation came in February 1944. At 6 a.m., the Germans and the Ukrainian SS arrived. They were seen approaching, but the peasants did not move, probably believing that they would not be killed.

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<sup>60</sup> Z. Weigler, "Za udzielanie pomocy Żydom," p. 16.

The Germans and Ukrainians surrounded the village and began firing at it with machine guns and throwing hand grenades. Only a few peasants managed to escape; the rest of the population remained in the village. The Jews stood a kilometre away, at the edge of the forest, and watched everything. After opening fire on the village, the killers entered and gathered the farmers and their families in barns, together with their cattle. They set fire to the entire village. We heard screams, howls and the bellowing of cows. The Germans made sure that no people or animals escaped from the buildings. The village burned all day, and the killers did not leave until nightfall. At 1–2 a.m., we Jews entered the village. Many buildings were still burning. We gathered those wounded by gunshots and burns. Later, people from another Polish village arrived and began a rescue operation, transporting the wounded to the hospital in carts. Among them was a Jewish woman who had been hiding in the chimney of one of the houses. At that time, the front was already advancing, and people were convinced that the end of the Germans was near.<sup>61</sup>

Harry Brill recalled the pacification of Huta Pieniacka as follows, also addressing the German motives behind its destruction:

One day, they told us that the SS – the Ukrainian unit – would come to explore the village. Two rumours were going around. One was that they had found out that there were Jews there, that they were rescuing Jews. And the second rumour was that a few weeks earlier... you must know that the Poles who lived in the village had a few rifles for defence, because there was a war going on between the Ukrainians and the Poles... so the second rumour was that two SS policemen wanted to enter the village and killed the Poles [those who had the rifles – K.D.].

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* A shorter description of the destruction of Huta Pieniacka was provided by Bernard Scharf from Majdan Pieniacki: “There were three villages in the area, inhabited mainly by Poles. One day, two Ukrainians came to look around one of the villages called ‘Bukoniewska’ [incorrect spelling used by Marek Scharf when transcribing from the tape – it should have been ‘Pieniacka’ – M.S.]. The Poles killed them both. Two days later, about five hundred Ukrainians on horseback surrounded the village. They allowed almost no one to escape. They gathered the villagers and pushed them into a barn along with cattle, doused the place with petrol and burned the entire village down, including the people and the cattle. The smoke and the stench of burning flesh spread for many miles. We didn’t know what had happened until I went to our village, Majdan, and someone told me” (B. Scharf and M. Scharf, *Courage*, pp. 49–50).

They wanted to enter, and then they gave the order for the Polish population to surrender – to lay down their arms, and they said that they would enter with the German police and inspect the village. When we were living in the village, one day, Russian partisans came. And they told us that that was it, that it was over... Apparently, the Russians sent Russian partisans ahead to destroy [whatever they could], e.g. by derailing trains. And when the partisans came, they took men aged 18 and over with them – to join the partisan movement. But again, women and children were not taken. So, after three days, we had the thrill of anticipation. But then they left the village. And we stayed in the village again... And then the story with the Ukrainians began – we didn't sleep that night. We were all dressed and ready. And then the Germans came and surrounded the village, because it was heavily forested all around. As they were surrounding the village at about 2:00–2:30 in the morning, they suddenly opened fire from all directions. My sister, that girl and I – there was also another man – ran straight through the snow into the forest. But they were all around us, shooting from all sides. I saw many Poles falling in front of us and dying. I fell on top of dead people. We just kept running until we reached the forest. When we entered the forest, I lost my sister. I didn't know where she was. So, I ran away – I was alone, and I ran.<sup>62</sup>

Let us also refer to the third Jewish testimony, given by Irving Guttman:

We went to the village... it had a funny name: Huta Pieniacka. The Ukrainians were following the same route as the Germans. I slept at the house of a woman who let me stay there, Helena Monika Herszacka [Werszacka? – the recording is not clear – M.S.]. The village was surrounded by a huge forest, and between the forest and the village, there was a pasture. So, I ran into the house, grabbed my coat and told the woman that I was running away. She said, "Don't run away, I'll hide you." I said, "Listen, you gave me a bed, I spent the night here, but these are Germans, if the Germans catch me, they will shoot both you and me. You don't deserve that." How did I get to the forest? It's unbelievable, because bullets were flying around me. None of them hit me. I sat in the forest for two days. On

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<sup>62</sup> POLIN, Harry Brill, tape no. 2, 12th–15th min.

the third day, I went to the village. They razed the village to the ground. They killed women and children and burned all the houses. Who killed them? The Ukrainians. Yesterday they were still getting married, going to church together, and because of Hitler, the Ukrainians followed the Germans. And then they burned them.<sup>63</sup>

The aforementioned Zwi Weigler also described the pacification of Huta Werchobuska, emphasising the importance of Polish villages as places whose inhabitants rescued Jews:

Three weeks later, the second village, Huta Werchobuska, was destroyed. It was on 23 March 1944. Early in the morning, a Polish horseman galloped in from one of the nearby villages, inhabited by Poles and Ukrainians, with the news that a Ukrainian group had been organised to carry out a punitive expedition against the Poles from Huta. The news spread among the Jews, who went deep into the forest. Soon, the killers appeared. Some managed to escape into the forest, others were burned and killed as in the first village. Initially, some residents tried to resist, but the killers were armed with numerous weapons and easily defeated them. This village was also burned down. At night, we entered the burned village (which was still burning in parts). Polish farmers from the surrounding area also arrived and tried to extinguish the fire and save what they could. The farmers who had fled did not return to their burned village but went to Złoczów. After both villages were burned down, we Jews were left without a base.<sup>64</sup>

Let us compare this with the attack on Huta Werchobuska, as remembered by Jacob Gang, who was at the centre of events unfolding in this town:

Once, when I was in a village called Huta Werchobuska, it was late afternoon, and I was at home with the people who lived there. Three people who looked like partisans, three gentiles, entered the house. They were dressed like ordinary

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<sup>63</sup> POLIN, Irving Guttman, tape no. 2, 16th–19th min.

<sup>64</sup> Z. Weigler, “Za udzielanie pomocy Żydom,” p. 16.

people. They asked the owner and his friend, who were sitting over a drink, if they could join the partisans. When they started talking, I realised that they had a German accent. They didn't know that [their speech betrayed them – K.D.]. They didn't even know that I was Jewish. Anyway, they got food and drink and left, all three of them. And then I told them, "Don't believe what they say, because they are neither Russians nor Ukrainians nor partisans. They are Germans." They asked, "How do you know?" I replied that they had an accent, a German accent; they didn't catch it. In any case, they left. I was asleep there, and at about 6 or 7 in the morning, in winter, I looked out the window and saw the whole village... it was a long village consisting of a single street. [...] On each side of the street stood the German army, all dressed in white, with skis and machine guns. The entire village was surrounded – the entire village. They pulled all the physically fit people out of their homes. These three were dressed like German officers; they were in uniforms, with snow masks and coats, all in white. They took them all away. I never saw these people again.<sup>65</sup>

A similar belief about the reasons for the pacification of Huta Pieniacka and Huta Werchobuska, as expressed by Zwig Weigler, was held by siblings Clara Dreier (Klara Brill) and Harry Brill (Herschel Brill), who were in Huta Pieniacka on the day of the attack. During an interview for the USC Shoah Foundation, Clara recalled:

They took me to a place where my brother, my friend and another man were. We moved from place to place until finally one family took us in for a while. And one day they said that the Germans knew that Jews were hiding in the local forests and among us. They would come and kill us all. And we thought that they were like, you know... The next morning, they came. They burned down the whole little village, the people, their little houses... everyone was murdered. We started running into the forest. We returned to the forest. I ran in one direction and my brother in a very different direction, so I completely lost him. Being in the forest at that time, when there is nowhere to hide, there is snow, the trees are

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<sup>65</sup> POLIN, Jacob Gang, tape no. 3, 0–2nd min.

bare, there is nothing... if someone suddenly walked by, they could see you. So, I stood aside and looked around. I saw two Gestapo [officers], in white capes, with machine guns, walking through the forest and looking around. I said to my friend... in the meantime, another boy came, I don't even know where he came from... I said, "Let's hide in this place." She asked, "Where can we hide here? There are no trees, no bushes, everything is so empty..." Somehow, we managed to get under a bush. They came and looked around, started searching right next to us, then on the other side, and passed us by. [...] It was a miracle, somehow they missed our tracks in the snow. So, we waited all day in the forest, and in the evening we came out. Everything... literally everything had been burned. There was nowhere left for us to go. No place where we could do anything or get food. So, we went back to the forest.<sup>66</sup>

Polish testimonies also indirectly confirm that aid provided to Jews was the reason for the pacification of the village. Let us refer to the testimony of Wojciech Orłowski, who was hiding in a pile of brushwood at the time of the attack on Huta Pieniacka. The man reported:

At the last minute, nearly 40 people found refuge in my cellar, which had become a shelter. After nightfall, I led the surviving group – among them a Polish Jewish couple – out from hiding. Together, we made our way to the Polish village of Huta Werchobuska, where we received shelter and support.<sup>67</sup>

Bernard Scharf confirmed the number of Jews hiding in this village: "This time, however, many people fled as soon as they realised what was about to happen. About thirty Jews who had escaped from labour camps were hiding in this

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<sup>66</sup> POLIN, Clara Dreier, tape no. 2, 9th–12th min.

<sup>67</sup> H. Komański and S. Siekierka, *Ludobójstwo dokonane przez nacjonalistów ukraińskich*, p. 592. Another Pole, Mieczysław Mendelski, a witness to the pacification, included the following recollections in his description of his search for his father: "We only found traces of a camp left behind by the Banderites. Nearby, we saw destroyed dugouts. They had been a shelter for a large group of Jewish families who had stayed there after escaping from the ghetto in Brody. We knew about them because the residents of Huta Pieniacka had helped them. There is no doubt that the Jews who were there were murdered by the Banderites" (*ibid.*, p. 586).

village, including several small children aged eight and nine. During the raid, they all fled into the forest.”<sup>68</sup>

The final issue concerns the significance that both villages and their surroundings held for Jews after the pacification. As previously mentioned, the Brill siblings recall that, following the destruction of the villages, Jews continued to hide in the nearby forests and even returned to the site of the tragedy in search of food or information. These locations served as a kind of “base,” as one of the survivors described it. Although destroyed, they still played a central role in the struggle for survival. However, there were also testimonies from Jews who treated the burned towns as areas to which they could no longer return due to the threat to their lives.<sup>69</sup> Those who returned to the destroyed villages searched for cabbage and potatoes, cut meat from dead and frozen farm animals, and sometimes stripped clothing and shoes from corpses. Clara Dreier recalled:

Every day we moved from place to place. We found dead cows and horses, cut out steaks and fried them on a fire. We found shoes and clothes. We took them from dead people. You could come across them. They could have been Poles or Jews, we don't know. [...] There were more than three of us, we were in a group. We found other people in the forest. Everyone was wandering around.<sup>70</sup>

Harry Brill, on the other hand, stated:

We returned to the village at night – to those Polish villages and those pigs and cows that the Germans had killed. It was winter, so there was frozen meat. There was plenty of it. There was no bread, no salt, but there was meat. Then we went on to the dugouts, where we found potatoes and some cabbage. At least we had something to eat. Every night we looked for anything we could get hold of.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> B. Scharf and M. Scharf, *Courage*, pp. 49–50.

<sup>69</sup> N.B. Meir (Pasternak), “Kolekcja wspomnień z Holokaustu,” in *Sasiv Memorial Book*, p. 228.

<sup>70</sup> POLIN, Clara Dreier, tape no. 2, 10th–12th min.

<sup>71</sup> POLIN, Harry Brill, tape no. 2, 17th–18th min.

A similar method of survival was described by Irving Guttman and Sheldon Reiss, who made use of property left behind by the murdered inhabitants of Huta Werchobuska: “This village was completely burned down, with people and animals. We used to go there afterwards through the forest. We found meat from cows and that is how we fed ourselves.”<sup>72</sup>

After the pacifications, the forest became a place where Jews encountered more and more groups that they had to be cautious of – they had to avoid Ukrainians patrolling the area, which made it impossible to stay in one place for long. Jews often responded with fire and killed their attackers.<sup>73</sup> They also encountered distressed Poles who blamed them for the German massacres in the countryside.<sup>74</sup> However, they also met those who continued to help them.

Harry Brill, who had to find his sister who had gone missing during their escape, recalled his encounter with the residents of Huta Werchobuska:

I went there and decided to go [further – K.D.] and look for my sister. In the afternoon, I stopped in the second village that still existed, a Polish village. I saw the first house and asked how to get to Majdan, which was the third village. They advised me to just follow the dirt road in the forest. So, I entered the village. And I asked the first man I met how to get to Majdan. Which direction in the forest? And he kicked me and said that because of you Jews, they would burn this village too. “It’s all your fault. Because of you, they burned Huta, because you were a Jew. And they found out that they were hiding Jews. So, I don’t even want to see you.” And he kicked me, so I decided to leave. However, he told me, “Go this way.” And he kicked me, and I left.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> POLIN, Irving Guttman, tape no. 2, 16th–19th min; POLIN, Sheldon Reiss, tape no. 3, 16th min.

<sup>73</sup> N.B. Meir (Pasternak), “Kolekcja wspomnień z Holocaustu,” p. 228.

<sup>74</sup> The analysed accounts also mention an isolated attack by a group of Poles on Jews. Samuel Wander recalls: “In Huta Pieniacka, SS men murdered all Poles for helping Jews and partisans. They burned down the village. We lived off the products we found in the burned village. Once, we were attacked by Poles who demanded a ransom of two thousand. We were penniless, and they took our shoes and coats. It was winter, it was freezing, and I was left barefoot and without a coat. Our tormentors promised that they would not kill us if we denounced the rich Jews. These Poles were killed by the Banderites” (AŻIH, 301/1403, Testimony of Samuel Wander, p. 7).

<sup>75</sup> POLIN, Harry Brill, tape no. 2, 18th–19th min.

He finally found his sister in a damp, cold underground bunker, in a very poor condition. He took her to Józefa Schnitzer's house in Majdan Pieniacki. When she recovered, they lived and ate at the Schnitzer family's house and sometimes stayed in the forest for safety reasons. This fact was established thanks to correspondence between Maria Bernadka Huzarska, Józefa Schnitzer's daughter, and Clara Dreier:

We also remember that one evening, these boys came back from the forest with a girl named Klara. She was extremely exhausted, cold and hungry. She had a fever. Julek gave up his place on the stove and we put Klara there, because it was the warmest and best place at that time. [...] Early in the morning, a friend of our Hrycio [a Jew hiding with them, details unknown – M.S.] came running, shouting that there were three German cars in the village. They hurriedly took Klara and fled into the forest.<sup>76</sup>

## Conclusion

The extermination of Jews throughout the pre-war Tarnopol Voivodeship was planned by the Germans and organised and directed by the German occupation apparatus. However, they could not have carried out their criminal plans without the support of local auxiliary formations, whose members were much more familiar with the terrain and social realities. Such auxiliary units included, among others, police regiments composed of Ukrainian recruits and formed part of the SS Division "Galizien."

Around the turn of 1943 and 1944, Ukrainian nationalists sought to take advantage of the conditions created by the occupying forces to advance their own agenda. Guided by the ideological tenets of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), their efforts focused on the depolonisation of the eastern territories of the pre-war Second Polish Republic. These actions endangered not only Polish civilians but also Jewish communities, whom the OUN-UPA regarded as adversaries. For Ukrainian nationalists cooperating with the Germans, the mere presence of Jews in a region often served as justification for violent attacks. Such operations were intended to lend legitimacy to their cause, curry favour with the German

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<sup>76</sup> AYV, ID 13793312, Letter from Maria Bernadka Huzarska to Clara Dreier, 3 November 1995, p. 4.

authorities, and secure access to German resources – arms, uniforms, and other supplies essential to furthering their political objectives.

The destruction of Huta Pieniacka and Huta Werchobuska – Polish settlements that functioned as self-defence hubs and bases for Soviet partisans – undoubtedly aligned with the interests of Ukrainian nationalists. This topic has been addressed in existing historical studies, which are cited throughout this paper. However, the issue of aid extended to Jews in these villages and their surrounding areas has received only fragmented and superficial attention. The current body of literature has not permitted a thorough analysis of such aid efforts, which have often been overlooked, and the presence of Jews among the Polish residents of both villages has been entirely neglected.

This study is the first to systematically address a significant gap in existing research, drawing in particular on the testimonies of Jewish survivors. The collected testimonies reveal that, around the turn of 1943 and 1944, Jews fleeing from the ghettos in Brody and Złoczów, as well as from labour camps in the Kreis Złoczów region, found refuge in Huta Pieniacka, Huta Werchobuska, and the surrounding forests. Their interactions with the local Polish population can be credibly characterised as sustained and organised aid efforts. Residents of both villages offered shelter in their homes, helped establish hiding places, provided food and essential supplies to those concealed in the woods, warned them of approaching German and Ukrainian patrols, arranged transport, and even supplied weapons. The testimonies suggest that this aid was a widespread endeavour – encompassing entire communities where Jews could move about with relative freedom.

Determining the exact number of Poles – specifically residents of Huta Pieniacka, Huta Werchobuska, and nearby areas – who assisted Jews is impossible. Identifying individuals who offered help is even more challenging, as Jewish sources largely overlook this subject, and Polish testimonies address it only marginally. The Kotowski and Wesołowski families, Wojciech Orłowski, and Józefa Schnitzer are among the few mentioned. Only one source analysed provides information about hostile attitudes of Poles toward Jews in hiding.

The question of whether assistance to Jews was the sole or direct cause of the destruction of Huta Pieniacka and Huta Werchobuska by the SS “Galizien” police

regiments remains unresolved and requires further investigation. Existing sources do not offer sufficient evidence to support this hypothesis. Nevertheless, Jewish survivors of the pacification, who witnessed the events firsthand, expressed no such uncertainty. In their testimonies, they attributed the tragedy of both villages to the act of helping Jews. To this day, the exact number of Poles killed in these villages, as well as the number of Jewish victims, remains unknown.

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