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REV. TADEUSZ KRAHEL, *RATOWANIE ŻYDÓW PRZEZ
DUCHOWIEŃSTWO KATOLICKIE ARCHIDIECEZJI WILEŃSKIEJ
W CZASIE OKUPACJI NIEMIECKIEJ (1941–1944)* (THE RESCUE
OF JEWS BY THE CATHOLIC CLERGY OF THE ARCHDIOCESE
OF VILNIUS DURING THE GERMAN OCCUPATION, 1941–1944),
BIAŁYSTOK, 2024, 500 PP.

The involvement of the Catholic clergy in the rescue of Jews under German occupation in pre-war Polish lands is still an under-researched area. An attempt to shed light on this issue has been made in the latest publication, *Ratowanie Żydów przez duchowieństwo katolickie archidiecezji wileńskiej w czasie okupacji niemieckiej (1941–1944)* (The Rescue of Jews by the Catholic Clergy of the Archdiocese of Vilnius During the German Occupation, 1941–1944). The author, Rev. Tadeusz Krahel, Doctor of Theology and long-time lecturer at the Archdiocesan Higher Seminary in Białystok, has dedicated the majority of his scholarly career to researching the history of the Diocese, and later the Archdiocese, of Vilnius (at the time Wilno). His body of work includes several monographs, such as *Mar-*

tyrologia duchowieństwa archidiecezji wileńskiej 1939–1945 (The Martyrdom of the Clergy of the Archdiocese of Vilnius, 1939–1945),¹ *Przez więzienia i obozy do kapłaństwa. Wojenne losy alumnów Seminarium Duchownego w Wilnie* (Through Prisons and Camps to Priesthood: The Wartime Fate of Students of the Seminary in Vilnius),² and *Archidiecezja wileńska w latach II wojny światowej. Studia i szkice* (The Archdiocese of Vilnius During World War II: Studies and Sketches).³ He has also authored biographical studies on Blessed Revs. Henryk Hlebowicz,⁴ Stanisław Pyrtek,⁵ and Mieczysław Bohatkiewicz,⁶ as well as numerous articles on the history of the Catholic Church and the rescue of Jews – among them *Uwięzienia i zsyłki duchowieństwa archidiecezji wileńskiej w latach 1944–1952* (Imprisonment and Deportation of the Clergy of the Archdiocese of Vilnius, 1944–1952).⁷ Additionally, he compiled and edited anthologies of poetic prayers that incorporate themes associated with the veneration of Our Lady of the Gate of Dawn.⁸ His latest publication is therefore not thematically different from his other work and, as the author himself emphasises, is the result of several decades of research.

The book consists of three parts, preceded by a foreword by Prof. Jan Żaryn and an introduction. At the end, there is a short summary containing reflections on the research prospects in the field of the issue in question, a bibliography, as well as a list of abbreviations (only the most important ones), and an index of people and places. The publication has certain features of a biographical dictionary, although, as the author himself points out, the biographies are not dictionary-like but are more like descriptions of cases of providing aid to Jews. Each of them is topped off with a list of archival materials and studies used. Unfortunately, as Rev. Krahel himself admitted, he did not make direct use of the most important archives in the collections of the Jewish Historical Institute and Yad Vashem. The testimonies held

¹ T. Krahel, *Martyrologia duchowieństwa archidiecezji wileńskiej 1939–1945*, Białystok, 2017.

² T. Krahel, *Przez więzienia i obozy do kapłaństwa. Wojenne losy alumnów Seminarium Duchownego w Wilnie*, Białystok, 2015.

³ T. Krahel, *Archidiecezja wileńska w latach II wojny światowej. Studia i szkice*, Białystok, 2014.

⁴ T. Krahel, *Błogosławiony Henryk Hlebowicz: kapłan – męczennik*, Białystok, 1999.

⁵ T. Krahel, *Błogosławiony ksiądz Stanisław Pyrtek*, Włocławek, 2001.

⁶ T. Krahel, *Błogosławiony ksiądz Mieczysław Bohatkiewicz*, Włocławek, 2001.

⁷ T. Krahel, “Uwięzienia i zsyłki duchowieństwa archidiecezji wileńskiej w latach 1944–1952,” in *Z dziejów represji sowieckich wobec Polaków w latach 1937–1952. Białoruś, Litwa, ziemie północno-wschodniej Polski*, ed. J.J. Milewski, Białystok, 2017.

⁸ *Poezja ostrobramska: modlitwa poetycka*, ed. T. Krahel, Białystok, 2002.

in these two centres are cited through a reference to Ryszard Tyndorf's publication.⁹ While it is understandable that research in Israel may currently be difficult to carry out for many reasons, conducting research at the Jewish Historical Institute does not pose any problems and, as far as possible, should be carried out first.

In the first part, consisting of 15 pages and entitled "Archidiecezja wileńska w czasie II wojny światowej" (The Archdiocese of Vilnius during World War II), the author briefly presents the fate of the archdiocese before 1939, when it covered the entire Wilno Voivodeship, the western and northern parts of the Nowogródek Voivodeship, the counties of Grodno, Wołkowysk, Sokółka, and the central and eastern parts of the Białystok County of the Białystok Voivodeship (a map of the archdiocese is included in the publication to facilitate locating places). It also presents statistical data based on population censuses conducted by parish priests during pastoral visits in 1938. According to these data, 1,496,212 Catholics lived in the archdiocese during the administration of Archbishop Romuald Jałbrzykowski. There were 1,030,000 other residents of different faiths, of whom approximately 285,000 were Jews. This chapter also provides basic information on the division of the archdiocese following the outbreak of World War II, the establishment of new administrative authorities, and the situation of priests during the Soviet occupation, under Lithuanian rule, and during the German occupation.

The 37-page second part, entitled "Ratowanie Żydów przez księży archidiecezji wileńskiej" (The Rescue of Jews by Priests of the Archdiocese of Vilnius), offers a brief overview of the pre-war history of Jews and their wartime experiences, in addition to accounts of aid provided. The author describes the participation of Jews in anti-Polish demonstrations, the creation of welcome gates for the Red Army, and their participation in Soviet authorities in 1939–1941. Rev. Krahel also discusses Jewish efforts to assist the Polish clergy, referencing, among other cases, an example of this attitude in Mołodeczno. Mordechaj Pozner,¹⁰ who worked in a slaughterhouse during the Soviet occupation, intervened on behalf of Rev.

⁹ R. Tyndorf, *Wartime Rescue of Jews by the Polish Catholic Clergy. The Testimony of Survivors and Rescuers*, Lublin, 2023.

¹⁰ The author does not disclose the personal details of the Jew who rescued the priest. Cf. Ch. Shafran, *At the Onset of the War in Molodeczno*, http://www.eilatgordinlevitan.com/maladzyechna/mal_pages/m_stories_onset.html (accessed 27 May 2025).

Bolesław Łozowski, the local parish priest who had been arrested by local communists for anti-Soviet propaganda, which ultimately led to the priest's release.¹¹ The author then focuses on the situation of Jews living in the archdiocese at the time of the German Reich's attack on the USSR and at the beginning of the German occupation.

The inclusion of a subchapter on examples of Jews being rescued in this part of the book raises doubts, as some of the content is almost identical to that found in part three, which presents figures of clergymen. This applies, for example, to the case of Rev. Stanisław Janczaruk.¹² However, this is not the only comment that comes to mind when reading this chapter. It is important to critically examine the unthinking repetition of claims that, following the Soviet capture of Grodno in 1939, prisoners in the local jail were fed human flesh, and that soap was produced from the bodies of those killed. Similar myths circulated about the Germans, yet there is no credible evidence indicating that the Soviet repressive apparatus ever engaged in such acts.¹³

The author also examines whether any priests acted against Jews and cites a particularly disturbing account from Supraśl, where a local priest allegedly incited the Polish population against the Jewish community, leading to their expulsion and drowning in a nearby river. The account, reportedly recorded by the Germans for propaganda purposes, was given by Mendel Mielnicki, the son of an NKVD officer. The author deems this testimony unreliable due to Mielnicki's background. However, this unequivocal dismissal appears premature, and the matter clearly warrants further research.¹⁴

The third and most extensive part, comprising 324 pages, consists of 144 descriptions of cases of priests and monks who rescued Jews in the Archdiocese of Wilno. Some of them are accompanied by photographs and other iconographic material. Among those described, there are several persons whose presence may raise questions, as discussed below.

¹¹ There are more similar examples, see T. Krahel, *Ratowanie Żydów przez duchowieństwo katolickie archidiecezji wileńskiej w czasie okupacji niemieckiej (1941–1944)*, Białystok, 2024, pp. 48–50.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 55, 181.

¹³ M. Bonek, *Ludzie na mydło. Mit, w który uwierzyliśmy*, Cracow, 2023.

¹⁴ T. Krahel, *Ratowanie Żydów*, pp. 68ff.

In presenting Rev. Stanisław Janczaruk, the author recounts an incident in Nowy Dwór (Białystok Voivodeship), in which German forces arrested four individuals, allegedly affiliated with Soviet authorities. The author prematurely assumes that some of them were Jewish. According to the available testimony, the priest intervened and successfully persuaded the officer to abandon the execution. While this act was undeniably courageous and carried the risk of death, there is no evidence confirming that any of the detainees were Jewish. Furthermore, the assumption that they were Soviet officials is also premature, as the sources do not explicitly support it. The ethnic makeup of the Soviet repressive apparatus was diverse and included Poles as well. The case of Rev. Stanisław Kuderewski also remains questionable. While he is acknowledged for commending the Milkiewicz family from Wierkowszczyzna (Wilno Voivodeship) for sheltering a Jew, there is no evidence of him providing any additional aid or engaging in efforts to rescue other members of the Jewish faith. Similar doubts arise regarding the classification of certain individuals as opponents of the extermination of Jews – specifically, Rev. Alfonsas Lipnickas Lipniūnas and Rev. Bolesław Moczulski. It is important to clarify that Rev. Lipniūnas was detained not for resisting the extermination itself, but for urging Lithuanians not to enlist in the German army, as noted by the author. As for Rev. Moczulski, Rev. Krahel suggests he may have denounced the killing of Jews and the plundering of their property, though the exact context of this alleged condemnation remains unclear. Given these ambiguities, categorising these clergymen as rescuers of Jews appears to lack sufficient justification.

Regrettably, the reviewed publication contains additional cases that raise concerns. The account of Rev. Karol Lubiańczyk's aid is based on a testimony that itself references other testimonies, in which "the thread of hiding local Jews recurs."¹⁵ Because this evidence is indirect, its reliability remains doubtful, which makes it difficult to justify the inclusion of this particular priest among those recognised as rescuers of Jews. Another example involves Rev. Adam Sawicki. Although no source verifies his participation in aid-related efforts, the author claims that "it can be assumed that Rev. Sawicki, as a close associate of Archbishop Jałbrzykowski,

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

took part in his patriotic activity and in the rescue of Jews.”¹⁶ In another instance, Rev. Józef Sawicki baptised a Jewish man in a prison cell, although it is unclear what purpose this was supposed to serve. We can assume it may have been a form of spiritual assistance, although there is no connection between this fact and the case of survival.

In the descriptions of cases of aid provided by priests and monks, there are also certain themes concerning the fate of the clergy themselves, which seem implausible or are discussed imprecisely. For example, Rev. Czesław Matusiewicz – in addition to helping Jews – was also very active as a pastor in parishes in the north-eastern part of the Archdiocese of Wilno. According to the author, “during the German occupation, Rev. Matusiewicz travelled for pastoral purposes to the Soviet Union, just beyond the pre-war border of Poland.”¹⁷ Unfortunately, he does not explain how this was possible, since although the Germans did issue passes to cross the border with the USSR to members of separated families until 1941, it is improbable that the Soviets would allow the same for a Polish priest. It therefore appears, though the author does not clarify this, that it concerned the care of other parishes following the outbreak of the German-Soviet war and the eastward shift of the front line. In his biography of Father Michał Dionizy Klimczak, Rev. Krahel, in turn, describes the execution of the Franciscan along with several dozen others, noting that “policemen¹⁸ and German military police witnessed the event and later recounted it to the local population with tears in their eyes.”¹⁹ The murder itself is indisputable, but questions arise about the perpetrators’ reaction. Why would they discuss it with the local population and emphasise their regret for the crime they had committed? These issues have not been clarified.

It should also be noted that the author erroneously identifies the German repressions of 1942 – targeting, among others, priests and aimed at the physical annihilation of the Polish intelligentsia – as the *Polenaktion*. While such an operation did occur, it took place in 1938 and concerned Polish Jews residing in the

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

¹⁸ When quoting the witness’s statement, the author does not specify which police force is being referred to.

¹⁹ As cited in *ibid.*, p. 194.

German Reich.²⁰ *Intelligenzaktion*, on the other hand, essentially ended in 1940. Another significant mistake is that one of the biographies mentions *Sonderaktion* from July 1943, but this term is not used as a proper name and simply means “a special operation.”

In addition to the foregoing comments, some observations on the editing are in order. The first thing that catches the eye is the incorrect page numbering in the table of contents, which does not correspond to that in the publication (there is a shift of two pages forward). Minor issues include: the names of the characters have been swapped (p. 47); the Soviet deportation took place in February 1940, not in February 1941 (p. 121); in the biography of Rev. Stanisław Żuk, the date of death in the header is 1987, while in the biography itself it is 1983; the biographical note on Rev. Jerzy Żamejć states that he issued a false baptism certificate to Ewa Szaldrowska, while the caption under the photograph of this document states that it was “probably” issued by Rev. Żamejć (pp. 386ff.). There are also certain stylistic lapses, such as: “because of a silly indiscretion” (p. 127), “killed by a bomb during the war front on 5 August 1944” (p. 148), and “he described the testimony beautifully” (p. 77). Another drawback is the repetition of testimony fragments and event descriptions, due to the fact that the same clergymen were sometimes involved in multiple rescue cases (for example, in the biographical notes on Rev. Adolf ŚnieżkaBłocki and Władysław Potocki). Such situations should be addressed through cross-references.

Despite certain doubts, shortcomings, and errors, it is important to recognise the significant effort Rev. Krahel devoted to preparing this study. Its value is heightened by its focus on the Eastern Borderlands – a region still underrepresented in research on aid efforts. The book sheds light on the stories of clergy members, not only prominent figures like Rev. Henryk Hlebowicz and Archbishop Romuald Jałbrzykowski, but especially those whose roles in aiding Jews have been rarely acknowledged or entirely overlooked. This publication is the result of decades of research on the Archdiocese of Wilno, which Rev. Krahel has pursued since the 1970s. His long-term commitment allowed him to reach direct witnesses of events from 1939 to 1945, lending the work exceptional historical value. As such, it serves as a meaningful resource for broader studies on aid.

²⁰ J. Tomaszewski, *Preludium Zagłady. Wygnanie Żydów polskich z Niemiec w 1938 r.*, Warsaw, 1998.