

## A story like many others

On 7 June 2017 the Good Name Redoubt Foundation – Polish League Against Defamation issued a statement protesting against the activities of historian Jan Grabowski, whose stance on the Polish-Jewish relations under German occupation is similar to that of Jan Tomasz Gross and Barbara Engelking [1]. For my own part, I would like to add that he also represents the very same research methodology, involving not only a biased selection of sources but also their manipulation, which I personally pointed out to him in relation to the sources from the Gestapo in Ciechanów, which are known to me[2].

The accusations against Grabowski, formulated by the statement's signatories, include the claim that *“he fails to observe the fundamental principles of researcher’s integrity, using evocative and clearly exaggerated expressions that rather serve the purpose of furthering propaganda than presenting a reliable description of the facts. In this vein, he refers to the number of 1015 documented Jewish victims, murdered by individuals demoralised by the cruel and inhuman occupation, as a “sea of evil”, while failing to mention thousands of people saved from the Holocaust by mostly nameless heroes. It should be stressed that 6706 Poles have earned the title of Righteous Among the Nations. It should be borne in mind that helping Jews was made more difficult by the fact that 85% of the pre-war Jewish population did not speak Polish, which created a language barrier.”*

It is obvious that the 6706 Poles whom the Yad Vashem has singled out to date is no more than a fraction of those who actually saved Jews under German occupation. A lot of those heroes might never receive the honour due to the strict criteria used by Yad Vashem (a testimony by a saved Jew or confirmation in the German occupant’s documents). Furthermore – and I am going to prove it in this article – Yad Vashem tends to display the lack of awareness of the realities of the German occupation and of the fact that one person of Jewish nationality was usually saved by several, and even more than ten, Poles.

One location where Poles were particularly active in helping Jews was KL Auschwitz – from 1942 one of the most significant centres of deportation and extermination, and from 1943 the central site of the Nazi Holocaust of European Jews. Polish fellow prisoners helped Jewish prisoners at KL Auschwitz in a number of ways – both individually and as part of underground organisations. In actuality, helping Jewish prisoners was one of the priorities of Polish underground organisations. The great service done by those organisations involved the communication of information on the Holocaust, and other German crimes perpetrated inside the camp, to the relevant units of the Polish Underground State. Owing to this, the Polish Government-in-Exile could provide extensive information to Allies about the events taking place at KL Auschwitz. In addition, Jewish prisoners received help from Polish civilian workers at industrial plants using KL Auschwitz prisoners as labour force. Poles from Upper Silesia also went down in history by saving Jewish prisoners evacuated on foot from KL Auschwitz in January 1945.

Most Poles who helped the Jewish prisoners of KL Auschwitz were not recognised by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations. It is also clear that Yad Vashem is not aware of the fact that one Jewish prisoner was sometimes saved by a number of people. One example is the saving of **Robert Wolf (Dub)** – Jewish prisoner number 68735, who came from Ołomuniec in the pre-war Czechoslovakia region and was deported to KL Auschwitz on 19 October 1942 from KL Buchenwald. This prisoner escaped from KL Auschwitz III in Monowice on 15 July 1944[3]. In 1993 Yad Vashem gave the title of Righteous Among the Nations for his saving to **Wojciech Basik** – a Polish farmer from Korbielów, whom Robert Wolf encountered after his escape at the Jeleśnia station in the Żywiec District and who was hiding him until liberation[4]. It would follow from this that Wolf covered the distance of 50 kilometres from Monowice to Jeleśnia without any help, having no documents or money and dressed in the concentration camp stripes.

Obviously, this would not be possible. No prisoner ever escaped from the camp “*when marching to work*”, as it is described in “*The Encyclopedia of the Righteous...*” in its account of the story of Wojciech Basik and Robert Wolf. The distance between the KL Auschwitz III camp gate and the IG Farbenindustrie factory in Monowice, where the prisoners worked, was only 300 metres. Both sides of the road connecting the camp and the factory were strewn with posts occupied by armed SS soldiers. On top of that, if by some strange twist of fate, an escaping prisoner was not killed on the spot, then, in order to escape the camp area, he would have to evade the bullets fired by the SS soldiers stationed on guard towers lining the factory and camp enclosure, and to cross the second line of SS guards.

In reality, the story of Robert Wolf's escape from KL Auschwitz III was a far cry from how it is represented in “*Encyklopedia Sprawiedliwych*”. Wolf's escape was made possible by two Polish civilian workers from the IG Farbenindustrie factory – **Franciszek Gnaciński** and **Henryk Wierzbicki**, whom the Jewish prisoner befriended during his time at the factory. It was them who secretly brought civilian clothes, a wig and a forged pass into the factory. Without these items, Wolf, dressed in prisoner's clothes and with his head shaved, would not stand a chance of even passing through the checkpoint.

On the day of the planned escape, Wolf first changed into civilian clothes in the factory. Then, he went to the factory gates accompanied by Gnaciński and Wierzbicki. When Gnaciński diverted the guards' attention, Wierzbicki and Wolf safely made it through the checkpoint. After walking several kilometres, they reached the nearby railway station in Dwory. Wierzbicki bought Wolf a ticket and, along with Gnaciński, accompanied him to Jeleśnia – with changes in Spytkowice, Wadowice and Sucha Beskidzka. The presence of Wierzbicki and Gnaciński during the journey was vital. Wolf did not speak Polish and could have been at any time recognised by a random German – an SS soldier, a policeman, a Luftwaffe soldier from the antiaircraft defence of the IG Farbenindustrie factory – one of the numerous local German colonists, or even a German ticket inspector in the train.

In Hucisko – the last stop before Jeleśnia – the train with the runaway Jewish prisoner from KL Auschwitz and his two guardians was boarded by **Rudolf Basik** – Wojciech's brother. He had been asked for help in Robert Wolf's planned escape and hiding. This message was passed to Rudolf Basik by Franciszek Gnaciński by hand of his fiancée's mother. After he consented, the two men met in the fiancée Jadwiga Miodońska's flat in Żywiec to discuss the details. Rudolf Basik lived in Korbielów and worked in the municipal hospital in Żywiec, where he was responsible for food supplies, heating and other technical tasks. He was recommended to Gnaciński by Jadwiga Miodońska's mother as a trustworthy person, which turned out to be true. After boarding the train, Rudolf Basik handed over to Wolf his identification documents, the so-called “*palcówka*” (a fingerprint document) [5], which was mandatory for Poles in the territories occupied by the Third Reich and constituted the only document acknowledged by the German police authorities in the Żywiec District. It was a genuine document issued for Józef Krzesak (a real person, though deceased), stolen by Rudolf Basik from a German office in 1939 during the momentary absence of a German officer.

After leaving the train at the station in Jeleśnia, the distrustful Wolf did not act on Rudolf Basik's words and instead of the fingerprint document showed the German policemen his Ausweis, which he received from Gnaciński but which was not recognised by the German police in the Żywiec District. As a result, he and Wierzbicki were arrested. The punishment involved hours-long work on clearing the embankment, after which they were supposed to return to the places of residence specified in their documents. During that time Rudolf Basik borrowed a horse wagon from a resident of Krzyżowa and, after Wolf and Wierzbicki had been freed, he secretly met with Wolf and the two men travelled to Korbielów. German police inspected them twice – in Krzyżowa and Korbielów. This time, however, Wolf presented the right document – the said “*palcówka*”.

In Korbielów Rudolf Basik first accompanied the runaway prisoner to his brother **Franciszek Basik's** home where they stayed until the evening. Then, they went to the house in which his brothers **Wojciech** and **Bronisław**, and sister **Wiktoria** lived. Wojciech Basik had not been informed about the matter, but he agreed to hide the Jewish runaway prisoner from Auschwitz without a moment of hesitation.

The following is his post-war account of the event. *"For you to understand my actions, I need to go back to the autumn of 1939. During the September Campaign, me, my brother Rudolf Basik and friends from our village, Józef Mocek, Wincenty Juraszek and Wincenty Jankowski, used to help Polish soldiers in the forests of Pilsk. We brought them food and helped them change into civilian clothes, hide their weapons and leave the region".* At that time Wojciech Basik was arrested by German policemen and tortured for helping Polish soldiers, but he did not disclose any names. Wolf did not want to be escorted to Slovakia and, after a few days, asked the Basik family to continue to hide him. His wish was granted. He was hidden in a long tunnel in straw in a barn.

Not long after Rudolf Basik hid Wolf at his brother's farm, he was taken to forced labour to Sudetenland, near Karlovy Vary. Before Christmas 1944, Basik managed to escape and illegally returned to Korbielów. He learned that Wolf, in his carelessness, disclosed his place of hiding to the wife of Franciszek Niewdan, a resident of Korbielów, and was then being blackmailed by him. *"Knowing this, I approached Niewdan and even told him that if he were to fulfil his threats, we would hang him like a dog in his own stable,"* recounted Rudolf Basik. The risk of hiding Wolf was further increased by the fact that German troops had been stationed in Korbielów since the autumn of 1944, with the German military police conducting frequent searches in the local houses, looking for hiding runaways and partisan soldiers.

This prompted Rudolf Basik to relocate Wolf to Krzyżowa and hide him in the home of **Władysław Cudzich**. After the Soviet forces' January offensive, in February 1945 the front stopped in the Żywiec Land, and Krzyżowa and Korbielów remained under German occupation. At his own request, Wolf travelled to the Soviet side of the front, escorted by **Maria Jędrzejak**. Unfortunately, he was captured by Soviet soldiers in Przyborów and handed over to SMERSH, the Soviet military counter-intelligence organisation, which accused him of spying for the Germans. Once again the Basik family came to the rescue. After the liberation of Korbielów, three SMERSH officers arrived with the arrested Wolf. As the Basiks confirmed his identity, and because of the fact that he had been a prisoner of Auschwitz, he was released and most likely saved from execution or deportation to Siberia. Wolf once again lived at Wojciech Basik's house in Korbielów, and the Basik family once again saved him from trouble by confirming his identity when he was arrested by the civic militia.

Once the war had come to an end, Robert Wolf left for Prague. A few months later he returned to Krzyżowa for **Stanisława Cudzich** – Władysław Cudzich's sister – whom he married.

Saving Robert Wolf was the work of at least twelve Poles, and the Basik family rescued him at least four times – after he was arrested by the German police in Jeleśnia, after he refused to move to Slovakia, after a genuine threat of denunciation in late 1944, and after his arrest by SMERSH.

According to Wojciech Basik's account, his brother Rudolf was the most instrumental in hiding and saving Robert Wolf. Unfortunately, neither Franciszek Gnaciński nor Henryk Wierzbicki, who orchestrated and conducted Robert Wolf's escape from Auschwitz, nor Rudolf Basik, who contributed the most to his saving, nor other people, with the exception of Wojciech Basik, who were involved in hiding and helping Wolf, i.e. Franciszek, Bronisław and Wiktoria Basik, the Cudzich family, Maria Jędrzejak, Jadwiga Miodońska and her mother, were honoured by Yad Vashem [6].

This story was not an isolated incident. It is but one of the many true stories of heroic Poles who saved Jews condemned by Nazi Germany. Jan Grabowski is doggedly pushing his thesis about the so-called "Judenjagd" – "the hunt for the Jews", which after the liquidation of ghettos and deportation of most Jews to death camps was to be orchestrated by Poles against the hiding

Jews. Grabowski described that "Judenjagd" on the basis of an isolated example of the Polish Blue Police and the village night guard from the Dąbrowa Tarnowska District ("*Judenjagd. Polowanie na Żydów. Studium dziejów pewnego powiatu*", Warsaw 2011), but he believes that this phenomenon was widespread. Hence also the scandalous suggestion of the like-minded Jan T. Gross, according to whom Poles killed more Jews than Germans during the German occupation. Grabowski's book "*Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland*" received an award from Yad Vashem in 2014.

If this were true, why was there no such "Judenjagd" in Korbielów, in the Żywiec Land? Why, then, did anyone bother to save a Jew who also came from a foreign country? Why did they organise a complete stranger's escape from KL Auschwitz and hid him, putting so many lives at risk? Definitely, not for money, as Auschwitz prisoners had no possessions. He could not promise his saviours any other material profits, as all his property had been confiscated by Germans before his deportation to KL Buchewald. Was Korbielów an exception? It was inhabited by the same peasants as other Polish villages and regions, with the same education, material status, and religion. Korbielów was not an exception. It was the rule.

Unfortunately, the western readers of Jan Grabowski and other authors promoting the thesis of the Polish complicity in the Holocaust perpetrated by the German Third Reich do not have this information. The message that goes out to the western public is that German-occupied Poland saw a significant rise in anti-Semitism, which had been already high before the War and that the majority of Poles were glad of the misfortune that befell the Jews, and took financial benefits by claiming Jewish property.

It is self-evident that attempting to attribute a shared responsibility to Poles for the German crimes committed during World War 2, including in particular the Holocaust, acts to the detriment of Poland. This time, however, it is more than just being detrimental to our country, and goes far beyond the ordinary defamation or deformation of history. It is simply political aggression – a well-prepared, efficiently executed and wide-ranging one. Unfortunately, all attempts made so far by the Polish side to oppose this aggression must be seen as ineffective. Today, the world's knowledge about the Polish-Jewish relations during the time of World War 2 is based on the image depicted by such authors as Jan T. Gross and Jan Grabowski.

[1] „*Stanowczo sprzeciwiamy się działalności i wypowiedziom Jana Grabowskiego*” (*We are firmly opposed to Jan Grabowski's actions and statements*). Statement, <http://www.wpolityce.pl>, 7.06.2017.

[2] B. Piętka, a review of: A. Namysło (ed.), "*Zagłada Żydów na polskich terenach wcielonych do Rzeszy*" (Warsaw 2008), "*Zeszyty Oświęcimskie*" No. 26, Oświęcim 2010, pp. 320, 322-326.

[3] D. Czech, "*Kalendarz wydarzeń w KL Auschwitz*", Oświęcim 1992, p. 711.

[4] S. Bender, I. Gutman (red.), "*The Encyclopedia of the Righteous Among the Nations. Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust*", S. Bender, S. Krakowski, "*Poland*", Jerusalem 2004, vol. I, pp. 80-81.

[5] Anmeldung zur polizeilichen Einwohnererfassung (Registration of the population by the police) – a two-sided document with a fingerprint (Fingerabdruck), hence the name "*palcówka*".

[6] The Archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. Memories Collection, vol. 141, book 71-89, Memories of Henryk Wierzbicki; Statements Collection, vol. 88a, book 87, an account by former prisoner Arnošt Tauber; vol. 88a, book 131-137, an account by former prisoner Robert Dub (camp name: Wolf); vol. 88a, book 164, an account by former prisoner Karel Minc; vol. 100, book 2-23, an account by Henryk Wierzbicki; vol. 124, book 14-23, an account by Rudolf Basik; vol. 124, book 24-28, an account by Wojciech Basik; Correspondence Collection. Correspondence No. 5941/86 regarding Robert Wolf (Dub); Häftlings-Personal-Karte. Catalogue number D-Au I-3a/1685-1950, inv. No. 174174, vol. 8, book 348-349, the personal card of prisoner Robert Wolf; IZ-8/Gestapo Łódź/4a, inv. No. 155917, vol. 6, microfilm 90/200-201, a telegram about the escape of prisoner Robert Wolf.

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