



Priest Michał Kubacki, first from the left (photo: sprawiedliwi.org)

ARTYKUŁ

The Church saving Jews

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07.04.2020

Many seem not to remember today that all Polish citizens were subjected to the terrors of occupation during the Second World War. Maybe that is the reason behind questions being asked whether the help of the Catholic Church for Jews was enough during that time. It is, then, worth reminding the scale of repressions against the Church and the scale of help it nonetheless provided to Jews.

After the year 1989, there were many precious publications analysing e.g. the role of the Catholic nuns in

saving Jewish children. Not long before, at the Catholic University of Lublin, research on this subject was conducted mainly by Pr. Prof. Zygmunt Zieliński and, similarly, by Pr. Prof. Franciszek Stopniak at the Warsaw Theological Academy. The next themes in this subject were researched along the process of beatifications of 108 martyrs of the Second World War. Finally, in recent years research projects like *Priests for Jews* led by Pr. Paweł Rytel-Andrianik, the lecturer of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome and currently the media spokesman of the Episcopal Conference of Poland. As part of this project, a wide query was conducted in archives in Poland, USA, Israel, Great Britain, Germany and countries of central-eastern Europe. The result of the research brought not only a confirmation of the previous findings regarding priests bringing aid to oppressed Jews, but also documented many new cases previously unknown to historians.

Important statistics

In the face of theses claiming that too little priests engaged in helping Jews during the occupation, the appropriate statistics are unfortunately often omitted or simply not taken into account at all by those supporting such theories. It is worth noting, that in 1939 there were just over 10 thousand diocese priests working in the Second Republic of Poland. Around 20% of this number died, so every fifth priest. In some dioceses, which were directly joined to the Third Reich, almost every other priest was murdered and the pastoral activity of the Church was almost entirely eradicated. It was similar with chapter priests. In 1939, male chapters in Poland counted more than 7.5 thousand members (priests, clergymen, chapter brothers). 370 of them were killed. Moreover, during the Second World War around 4 thousand priests and monks and 11 thousand chapter nuns were imprisoned in German camps, while those who remained free were repressed. Additionally, the number of victims should also include the priests and clergymen killed by the Soviets and sent to gulags. As a result of all these forms of repression, according to the research by Salesian priests Jan Woś and Wiktor Jacewicz, nearly 50% of priests were eliminated from the pastoral work. Thus, it was impossible for them to fulfil their duties, but also to bring aid to those repressed.

Only after presenting these facts can one assess the scale of the engagement of the priesthood in helping Jews. If we take the aforementioned statistics into account and add to them the results of the research mentioned in the opening of the article, it turns out the scale of the engagement of the Polish priesthood in the operation of helping Jews was impressive and far from the theses proposed e.g. by Jan Gross who, in his publications, tries to systematically falsify the picture of the approach of the Catholic Church towards the Jewish population during the war.

What are the numbers for Polish priests helping Jews? During his many years of research on the subject, Pr. Franciszek Stopniak established that 769 priests (including 17 bishops), nuns and friars took part in aid actions in 389 towns in Poland. Additionally, Dr Ewa Kurek found that Polish nuns saved around 1.5 thousand Jewish children with over 200 chapter homes taking part in the process. The research conducted as part of the project "Priests saving Jews" describe more than a thousand priests engaged in various forms of help to Polish citizens of Jewish origin during the German occupation. From this number, 150 priests were murdered by the Nazis. In 30 cases, it was clearly proved that the deaths were the result of saving Jews. In many other cases,

the helping actions could have been one of the reasons for why they were killed as they took part in conspiracy operations of the Polish Underground State, were included on the execution lists for being representatives of intelligentsia, were arrested as a result of street round-ups or shot in public executions.



Thanks to the metropolitan bishop of Cracow, Adam Stefan Sapieha, pope Pius XII in his homily from 1942 condemned those “who decided to murder people only because of their race, nationality or religion” (photo from the NAC collection)

Many diocese priests engaged in aiding Jews with the knowledge and approval of their superiors. During the research, it was found that for 20 Roman Catholic bishops who stayed in their dioceses after September 1939, 16 of them were directly or indirectly engaged in bringing such help – among them were e.g. the bishop of Cracow, Lviv (Latin and Greek Catholic ones), Lublin, Sandomierz and Przemyśl. They gave their approvals to procure fake Church papers, including baptism certificates, appealed to help those in need and actively participated in helping. Archbishop Bolesław Twardowski hid a Jewish family in his headquarters in Lviv. It was thanks to the Cracow archbishop Adam Sapieha that pope Pius XII, in his Christmas homily in 1942, called those who decided to murder people only because of their race, nationality or religion - the oppressors. With these words, the pope clearly condemned the Holocaust and the German executioners.

When a monastery meant life

The aforementioned Dr Ewa Kurek published a book *When a monastery meant life* in 1992 in which she presented the results of the many years of her research on the subject of help given to Jewish children by Catholic nuns. Many of the stories of the nuns engagement in these actions are very moving, They also brought results. Only the congregation of the Franciscan Sisters of the Family of Mary, led by mother Matylda Getter, took in at least 500 Jewish children. The nuns decided to help the Jews completely voluntarily and with great passion, despite the looming threat of death. The Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth in Warsaw also made a decision to help save Jews. During one of their conferences, the mother superior read aloud the excerpt from St. John 15, 13-17, in which we can find the words:

“[...] Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”.

Then the nun asked her sisters if they were willing to risk their lives by saving Jewish children. The response was unanimous. This is how one of the sisters recalled this moment:

“Silence. No one dares move. No sigh is let out. We are ready. We will not give away the Jewish children. We would rather die. All of us. There is a poignant silence – we are not looking at each other. A sister is sitting with her eyes closed. Her hands are laid on the Gospel, she is surely praying. We get up. We are not even praying together like we usually do. We walk to the chapel. We are feeling light, joyful, although very serious. We are ready”.¹



¹

Priest Salesian Stanisław Janik

(photo: opoka.org)

It was similar in the male monasteries. We will take a look at the Salesians in this case who, during the occupation, committed to do their work among children and youth. Priests Salesians Jan Cybulski and Stanisław Janik, as the sworn in soldiers of the Home Army and lecturers at secret schools, helped hide Jewish boys at the Salesian facility at Lipowa Street in Warsaw. In this regard, according to priest Janik, the Salesians cooperated with, among others, Janusz Korczak. Additionally, priest Janik himself helped with procuring fake documents for Jews. After a short stay at the Salesian facility, the boys were sent further, usually outside of Warsaw, due to security reasons. Jewish children were also hidden in other Salesian orphanages. We know the names of three boys that were hidden in Częstochowa (A. Filipowski and two Krakowian brothers). In Głusków-Zielony, priest Adam Skatbania hid Jewish boys who survived the war under changed names.

Meanwhile, by the basilica at Warsaw's Praga district, priest Michał Kubacki was engaged in the help too. Two testimonies of people saved by him were found among archival documents. For several days, he hid an eight-year-old girl Zosia at his parish, for whom he found a family. The second case was Halina Aszkenazy-Engelhard who ran from a transport to the concentration camp in Majdanek. Priest Kubacki gave her shelter and a fake baptism certificate and then employed at the parish's Caritas. Priest Kubacki had help from priest Jan Stanek and the secular parish workers. Jews were also hidden at the Salesian basilica in April and May of 1943, during the eradication of the Warsaw ghetto.

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Beautiful acts of mercy like this also took place in the Podlasie region. Salesians Wacław Dorabiąa and Julian Zawadzki, along with sisters of charity, hid Jewish children at their facilities in Supraśl. According to the latest findings of the Institute of National Remembrance, sisters and priests gave a long-term help there to eight

people, and a temporary aid – to around twenty. Most Jewish children were hidden at the Salesian orphanage in the first years of the occupation, even when the Białostok ghetto was created and the Germans ordered all the children from pre-schools for the poor to be sent there. When the children were taken there by force, these who managed to escape regularly came to the orphanage for meals. Famous became the case of a boy named Josek Nadelhaft who, a year after the relocation of children from Supraśl, would come to the windows of the Salesian facility in the evenings where food was laid for him. He was very scared but also, because of that, very careful. Even though he was often invited inside, he never entered the facility. He came for his fish for the last time on Christmas Eve in 1942.²



Dominican sister Julia Rodzińska

(photo:

malgorzatakossakowska.pl)

Not only children were saved in Supraśl but also adults. A family of doctor Brenmuller and Dioniza Lewińska with her son found shelter at the Salesian house during the eradication of the Białostok ghetto. Before the war, Lewińska was a teacher of Polish in a Jewish junior high school in Warsaw. She was hired at an educational facility as a laundress and happily survived the war. After the war, she moved to Israel. Her son died in an accident in Bydgoszcz, hit by a car.

Saviours of Jews raised to the altars

Some of those who saved Jews were raised to the altars. Father Maximilian Kolbe, to this day accused by the leftist communities of anti-Semitism, took in around 1.5 thousand Jews to the monastery in Niepokalanów, which was a direct cause of his arrest and then a martyr's death in KL Auschwitz. Priest Michał Sopoćko, known as the advocate of God's mercy and confessor of St. Faustyna Kowalska, was also raised to the altars. During the war, he helped save more than a hundred Jews from a ghetto in Vilnius by delivering them personally procured baptism certificates. In 2001, a Greek Catholic rector of a parish in Przemyśl, near Lviv, was beatified – father Emilian Kowcz. He called for the peaceful co-existence of Poles, Ukrainians and Jews.

During the German occupation, in various ways he tried to save his Jewish neighbours from imminent death. He did not hesitate to baptise those who asked him for it, even though he was risking his life. In December 1942, he was arrested and sent to the death camp in Majdanek. He was remembered by other inmates for his heroic attitude, also among those of Jewish nationality. He shared his food rations and always had good word for everyone. He was called "Majdanek's pastor". He died at the camp's hospital in February 1944.

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Among the 108 martyrs, there are several beatified who saved Jews during the occupation. Sister of Resurrection Alicja Kotowska, not being able to help Jewish children taken by the Nazi Germans to be shot, she took them in her arms and was first to go into a car with them. She accompanied them on their last journey. She could not save them nor herself, but she gave them this one last gesture of love. She was murdered with them in Piaśnica, near Wejherowo in November 1939.³ Sister Ewa Noiszewska was a director of a school led by Sisters of the Immaculate in Słonim and a doctor at the same time. During the occupation, she served at a hospital where she saved Jews, for which she was arrested and shot by the Germans on December 19th 1942. Sister Marta Wołowska, a sister superior of the Słonim monastery also engaged in the help, was killed with her. Dominican sister Julia Rodzińska was arrested by the Gestapo in July 1943 and was sent to the Stutthof camp. During a typhus epidemic, she volunteered to care for the dying Jewish prisoners. She died on February 20th 1945 as a result of catching the disease. Klemensa Staszewska, sister superior of a chapter house in Rokiciny Podhalańskie, was arrested for sheltering Jewish girls and runaways at the monastery and ended up at KL Auschwitz where she died on July 27th 1943.



Sister of resurrection Alicja Kotowska (photo: wikipedia/zmartwychwstankirumi.a.pl)



Priest Michał Sopoćko (photo: faustyna.eu)

Among these martyrs we also see two diocese priests. Rector of the seminar in Kielce, priest Józef Pawłowski was arrested on February 10th 1941 for his pastoral activities, namely for organising help for Jews. He was sent from KL Auschwitz to KL Dachau where he was executed by hanging on January 9th 1942. Another beatified priest, Michał Piaszczyński was a professor at a seminar in Łomża. Even before the war, he was promoting religious dialogue with Judaism. He was one of the first to address the Jews as “older brothers in faith”. He was arrested on April 7th 1940 and kept in a prison in Suwałki. Then, he was kept at concentration

camps in Działdowo and KL Sachsenhausen where he died on December 18th 1940. During the hardship of camp life, he relieved weaker inmates, also Jewish ones, in hard works. When he shared his bread portion with a Jewish attorney from Warsaw named Kott, he heard from him:

“You Catholics believe in your churches that Christ lives in bread; I believe that there is living Christ in this bread who told you to share it with me.”⁴

The family of Józef and Wiktoria Ulm, from the Markowa village, left behind a heroic testimony of love towards others. They had been hiding eight Jews in their house since 1942. The Germans entered their home on March 24th 1944, shot the Jews, including a little girl, and then the entire Ulm family – both parents and six, or actually seven children, since Wiktoria was nine months pregnant. The entire family is now in the process of beatification. If they are raised to the altars it can be an unprecedented situation in the history of canonisation processes – an unborn child would become a holy martyr.

United in the service of saving Jews

In the apostolic letter *Tertio millennio adveniente*, John Paul II stressed that in the 20th century “the witness to Christ borne even to the shedding of blood has become a common inheritance of Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans and Protestants”. He then added:

“perhaps the most convincing form of ecumenism is *the ecumenism of the saints* and of the martyrs. The *communio sanctorum* speaks louder than the things which divide us”.

In the context of our reflection, it is worth noticing that the time of martyrdom also united Christians in their heroic testimony of love for others, also for those of Jewish nationality. A good example of such attitude is the case of Orthodox archimandrite Grzegorz Peradze. He was of Georgian origin. Before the war, he taught Orthodox theology and history of Georgian Orthodox Church at the University of Warsaw. Following the outbreak of the war he stayed in Poland and engaged in the help for the repressed, including Jews. He was arrested by the Gestapo on May 5th 1942 and imprisoned in Pawiak. In November, he was transported to KL Auschwitz. He died there on December 6th 1942. Archimandrite Grzegorz was canonised by the Georgian

Orthodox Church on September 19th 1995 and is also worshipped by the Polish Orthodox Church.

Among the priesthoods of other faiths, priest Feliks Teodor Gloeh from the Lutheran church was one of those who was helping Jews. He served as the main Protestant chaplain of the Polish Army. He was also a religion teacher at the Mikołaj Rej Junior-high School. During the German occupation, he operated within the structures of the Polish Underground State. As part of his engagement, he delivered more than 160 stamped baptism certificates in the Evangelic-Augsburg Church which were used to save Jews from the Mazowsze and Podlasie ghettos.⁵ In turn, sister Natalia Makryna Siuta from the Old Catholic Mariavite Church during the occupation took care of the chapel in Jędrzejów Nowy near Mińsk Mazowiecki. She was hiding Jews there. During a German round-up at the Rososz village she managed to hide a Jewish child underneath her robe and save its life. These are, of course, only some of the examples of the heroism of Christians of other faiths.

Ending

Poles, in the face of repressions, terror and constant threat of death, fought to save Jews as much as they could. In many cases, it was the result of their deep faith. Such were the testimonies of many priests and secular faithful who not only risked their own lives but also of their relatives and fellow parishioners. The Christian attitude of love towards others expressed by Poles was not only appreciated by the Church which raised them to the altars. Today, Poles are the nation having the most representatives among those awarded with the medal of Righteous Among the Nations of the World given to those who saved Jews during the Holocaust. Among them, there are 21 priests and 40 chapter nuns. It is worth not only remembering the testimony of the Church from these difficult times but also telling the truth about it.

Article from "Biuletyn IPN" issue 3/2019

¹ E. Kurek-Lesik, "Gdy klasztor znaczył życie. Udział żeńskich zgromadzeń zakonnych w akcji ratowania dzieci żydowskich w Polsce w latach 1939-1945", Kraków 1992, p. 55.

² J. Pietrzykowski, "Towarzystwo Salezjańskie w Polsce w warunkach okupacji 1939-1945, Warszawa 2015", p. 148-155.

³ T.M. Florczak, "Jak kropla wody w oceanie. Życie i męczeństwo Sługi Bożej s. Alicji Kotowskiej zmartwychwstanki", Poznań 1999, p. 118-119.

⁴ I. Borawski, "Sługa Boży ks. Michał Piaszczyński (1885-1940)", [in:] "Męczennicy za wiarę", editor W. Moroz, A. Datko, Warszawa 1996, p. 145.

⁵ J. Szturc, "Ewangelicy w Polsce. Słownik biograficzny XVI-XX wieku", Bielsko-Biała 1998, p. 94-95; K.J. Rej, "Ewangelicka służba duszpasterska w Wojsku Polskim 1919-1950", Warszawa 2000.

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