



Poland and the Holocaust – facts and myths

Summary

- 1. Poland was the first and one of the biggest victims of World War II.*
- 2. The extermination camps, in which several million people were murdered, were not Polish. These were German camps in Poland occupied by Nazi Germany. The term “Polish death camps” is contradictory to historical facts and grossly unfair to Poland as a victim of Nazi Germany.*
- 3. The Poles were the first to alert European and American leaders to the Holocaust.*
- 4. Poland never collaborated with Nazi Germany. The largest resistance movement in occupied Europe was created in Poland. Moreover, in occupied Europe, Poland was one of the few countries where helping Jews was punishable by death.*
- 5. Hundreds of thousands of Poles helped Jews survive the war and the Holocaust at the risk of their own lives. Poles make up the largest group among the Righteous Among the Nations, i.e. citizens of various countries who saved Jews during the Holocaust.*
- 6. As was the case in other countries, during the war there were also cases of shameful behaviour towards Jews in occupied Poland, but this was a marginal phenomenon on the scale of Polish society as a whole. During the war, there were also instances of shameful behaviour by Jews in relation to other Jews and Poles.*
- 7. During the war, pogroms of the Jewish people were observed in various European cities, and were often inspired by Nazi Germans. Also, during the war, Polish people, notably the intelligentsia and the political, socio-economic and cultural elites, were executed on a massive scale.*
- 8. In the post-war period, some attempts were made to falsify the history of the Holocaust, including the attitude of the Poles towards the Jews during the war. In order to prevent this falsification and to protect Poland’s reputation worldwide, in January 2018, the Polish Parliament passed an Act to eliminate attributing responsibility for Nazi Germany’s crimes to the Polish state or Polish nation.*
- 9. There are opinions that accusing Poland and Poles of anti-Semitism and complicity in the Holocaust is a deliberate attempt to facilitate the achievement of specific political and financial goals in relation to Poland.*
- 10. In February 2018, prominent German politicians publicly admitted on several occasions that the full responsibility for the Holocaust lies with Germany.*

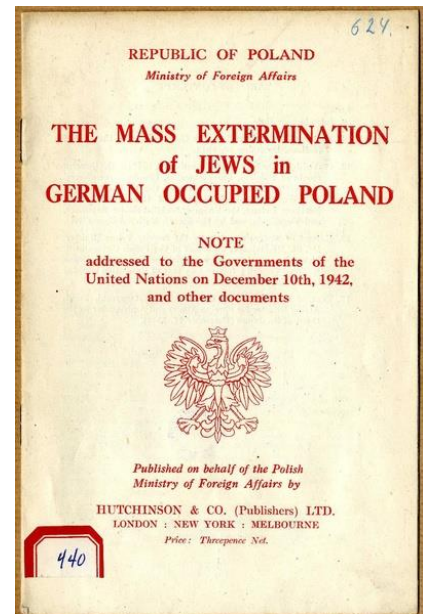
Poland and the Holocaust – the facts and the myths

1. **Poland was the first and one of the biggest victims of World War II.** Poland fell victim to two totalitarian regimes – Nazi Germany and Communist Soviet Union. In August 1939, both countries made a pact to attack Poland. Based on the pact, Germany invaded Poland on 1 September 1939 and the Soviet Union on 17 September 1939. Consequently, the entire territory of Poland was under occupation. As a result of the war (1939-1945), Poland lost around **6 million** people, including approximately **3 million** Polish citizens of Jewish origin. Those human losses are similar to those of the Jewish nation.
2. **The extermination camps, in which several million people were murdered, were not Polish.** They were German camps in Poland occupied by Nazi Germany. The death camps in Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka, Belzec, Sobibor, Kulmhof and Majdanek, as well as concentration camps in occupied Poland, were built and managed by the Germans. Therefore, in truth, one should use the term **“German Nazi concentration/extermination camps”** that is officially used by the UN (UNESCO). The term “Polish death camps” is contradictory to historical facts and grossly unfair to Poland as a victim of Nazi Germany. It should not be used since **the victim must not be regarded as the executioner.**

Major German occupation camps and German death camps within the so-called Greater Germany in 1941–1944



3. **The Poles were the first to alert European and American leaders to the Holocaust.** It included reports by **Jan Karski** (1940-1942) and **Witold Pilecki** (1943-1945) on the persecution of Jews in occupied Poland, life in ghettos, and genocide in the German extermination camps. In December 1942, based on Karski's reports, the Polish Government-in-exile prepared the diplomatic [note](#) **"The Mass Extermination of Jews in German Occupied Poland"** that was sent to the governments of the signatory States of the Declaration by the United Nations. The Polish Government urged them to condemn the German crimes, punish the criminals, and devise effective means of stopping the mass extermination. The document informed about the planned extermination of Jews (living in Poland and deported by the Germans to Poland from other countries in Central and Western Europe, *inter alia* from Germany), and the **extermination of the Polish nation**. Jews, Poles, Romani and people of other nationalities were murdered in the German extermination camps.



Source: www.ms.gov.pl

4. **Poland never collaborated with Nazi Germany.** In contrast to other countries occupied by Germany, in occupied Poland there were no voluntary political or military structures collaborating with Hitler (Germans formed the so-called "blue police" but its members were drafted involuntarily; a refusal to join the police was punished with a death penalty or detention at a concentration camp). In occupied Poland, the **Polish Underground State** was established, i.e. **the largest resistance movement in Europe** with extensive secret political and military structures aimed at fighting the Nazi occupier. Those structures were subordinate to the Polish Government-in-exile (first in France, and later in England). Part of the Polish Underground State was the **Home Army** (*Armia Krajowa*), which had about 380,000 soldiers and was **the largest underground army in occupied Europe**. Polish partisans were often supported by civilians, for which the Germans punished them by applying collective responsibility and carried out **brutal pacifications of Polish villages**, which involved burning the buildings and murdering all the residents (including women, children and elderly people). In the years 1939-1945, hundreds of pacifications took place (*inter alia*, in the regions of Lublin, Zamosc, Kielce, etc), in which tens of thousands Poles lost their lives.
5. **In occupied Europe, Poland was one of the few countries where helping Jews was punishable by death** (the penalty was also applied in Serbia and the Ukrainian lands, but not in Western Europe). The Germans killed several thousand Poles who had helped Jews. A symbolic example here is the Polish [Ulma family](#) from Subcarpathia (southern Poland), which gave shelter to eight Jews in their home for more than a year. The entire family (father, mother seven months pregnant, and their six children aged 2 to 8) was executed by a German firing squad. The Germans killed many other Polish families for helping Jews – for example, Baranek, Janus and Madej, Kowalski, Kurpiel, Lodej, Olszewski, etc. **Poles who helped Jews were transported to extermination camps, put before the firing squad, hanged, tortured, and burned alive.** The Germans also carried out **pacifications of many Polish villages** (e.g. Stary Ciepiewow, Boiska, Paulinow, Pantalowice, etc), with thousands of Poles killed (often families with small children). Those executions and massacres were to intimidate the Polish society and discourage people from helping Jews.

6. **Hundreds of thousands of Poles helped Jews survive the war and the Holocaust at the risk of their own lives.** Individuals, entire families and villages, the Polish underground movement, and special organizations, all helped the Jews. One of these was [the Council to Aid Jews “Żegota”](#) – a Polish underground organization which helped Jews on a mass scale (fake identification documents (around 50-60 thousand), financial benefits, residential and medical aid, helping children, fighting against blackmailers, etc). This was the only such organization in occupied Europe. The Jews were also helped by the **Catholic Church**. They received shelter in more than 70 Polish cloisters and parsonages, Polish priests issued false baptism certificates to them, etc. **During the war, Poles saved thousands of Jews from extermination** (according to estimates, around 30-120 thousand Jews were saved in occupied Poland). Several to a few dozen people were involved in the saving of each Jew. It is estimated that **several hundred thousand Poles provided Jews with various forms of aid** (at least 200-300 thousand, and according to some historians, 1 million to 1.2 million).
7. **Poles make up the largest group among the Righteous Among the Nations, i.e. citizens of various countries who saved Jews during the Holocaust.** This honorific medal – given by the Israeli Yad Vashem Institute – was received by more than [6,700](#) Poles, i.e. 25% of all of the Righteous. According to some historians, at least 100,000 Poles deserve such distinction. One of the Righteous was **Irena Sendler**, a Polish social activist, who organised a network of co-workers, and together with them saved more than 2,500 Jewish children from the Warsaw Ghetto. Shortly before her death (in 2008), she was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. By virtue of a decision by the Polish Parliament, 2018 was announced the Year of Irena Sendler. Another Polish Righteous was **Henryk Slawik**, who issued fake documents to refugees fleeing from Poland to Hungary, which saved the lives of more than 5,000 Polish Jews. He also helped to establish an orphanage for Jewish children. He was tortured and murdered in the German Mauthausen-Gusen camp for aiding Jews. The Righteous also include **Antonina and Jan Żabinski**, a married couple, who helped several hundred Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto by giving them shelter in the Warsaw Zoo for several years. This story was recently told in the American movie *“The Zookeeper’s Wife”* (the movie was not approved for screening in some European countries, including France).



Irena Sendler



Henryk Slawik



Antonina and Jan Żabinski

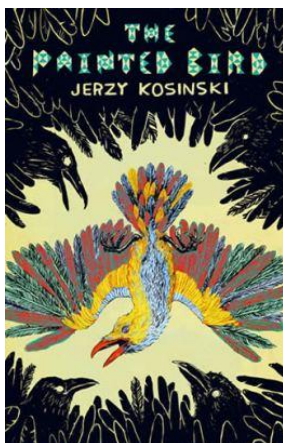
Source: sprawiedliwi.org.pl

8. **As was the case in other countries, during the war there were also cases of shameful behaviour towards Jews in occupied Poland, but this was a marginal phenomenon on the scale of Polish society as a whole.** This can be exemplified by the so-called *“shmaltsovniks”*, who blackmailed Jews in hiding and Poles who were helping them, or reported on them for money and other favours to the German occupying authorities. The blackmailing practice was present in all countries of occupied Europe. The

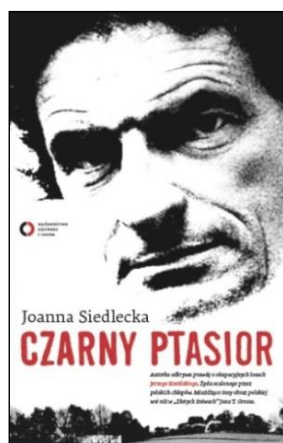
exact number of Polish *sh maltsovniks* is unknown (it is estimated that there were 3-4 thousand of them in Warsaw). **Being a *sh maltsovník* was punished by death by the Polish Underground State** (with judgements passed by underground courts, and executed by Home Army soldiers). The blackmailing usually took place in large cities. In rural areas, however, there were cases of killing the Jews who had run away from the ghetto or from transport to an extermination camp. Yet, the scale of the phenomenon is unknown, and the numbers appearing sometimes in public (considered to be highly overstated) are not reliable as they lack scientific basis.

9. **During the war, there were cases of shameful behaviour by Jews in relation to other Jews and Poles.** Some Jews were *sh maltsovniks* (one of the examples is the Hotel Polski (Polish Hotel) case, i.e. a trap set by the Nazis and their Jewish collaborators for affluent Jews hiding in Warsaw). In ghettos there were Jewish organizations collaborating with the Germans, e.g. infiltrating Jewish and Polish underground organizations (including those which aided Jews), organising the transportation of Jews to extermination camps, etc. These included **Judenräts, Jüdischer Ordnungsdienst (Jewish Ghetto Police), Żagiew, the so-called Thirteen**, etc. In Warsaw, Lodz and Lviv ghettos alone, there were more than 4 thousand Jewish police officers collaborating with the Germans. The best-known Jewish collaborators were, among others, Abraham Gancwajch, Chaim Rumkowski and Lolek Skosowski. There were also many Jews in the Polish lands occupied by the Soviet Union who collaborated with the Communists (for example, they denounced Poles, who, as a result of the denunciation, were murdered or sent to Soviet labour camps).
10. **During the war, pogroms of the Jewish people were observed in various European cities** occupied by Germany and its allies, e.g. in 1941 in Odessa (Ukraine), Iași (Romania), Kaunas (Lithuania), Jedwabne (Poland). Those pogroms were often **inspired by Nazi Germans**. It is estimated that in the biggest pogrom in occupied Poland (Jedwabne) more than 300 Jews were killed (the exhumation works carried out by Poland [Institute of National Remembrance] aimed at determining the number of victims were discontinued at the request of the Jewish side). In other pogroms, the number of Jewish victims was much greater, with around 4 thousand in Kaunas, 13 thousand in Iași, 25-34 thousand in Odessa. Also, the **Vel d'Hiv roundup**, which took place in France in 1942, was mass in its nature. It resulted in the arrest of 13 thousand people of Jewish origin, including 4 thousand children (who were later transported to the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp). There were also pogroms of Jews in which **the victims included Polish people**, e.g. the Lviv pogroms in 1941, as a result of which Polish scientists and their families were also murdered (the so-called murder of Lviv professors).
11. **During the war, Polish people, notably the intelligentsia and the political, socio-economic and cultural elites, were executed on a massive scale.** This includes the massacres in Palmiry (1700 victims), Szpegawski Forest (5-7 thousand victims), Mniszek (10 thousand victims) and Piasnica (12-14 thousand victims). Those **crimes of genocide against the Polish nation**, mainly **mass executions**, were carried out by Nazi Germans in the early years of the war (1939-1941), i.e. before the start of the Holocaust that began in 1942 (after the Wannsee Conference). Those German crimes are compared to the Communist **Katyn massacre** (1940), i.e. the execution of nearly 22 thousand Poles (including 10 thousand military and police officers) by the Soviets. As regards genocide, it is necessary to mention the **Volhynia massacres** (1942-1943), as a result of which Ukrainian nationalists murdered approximately 100 thousand Poles. There was also the **Wola massacre** at the beginning of the Warsaw Uprising (1944), in which, over the course of a few days, the Germans shot 40-60 thousand inhabitants of Warsaw (this was the largest massacre of civilians in Europe during World War II).

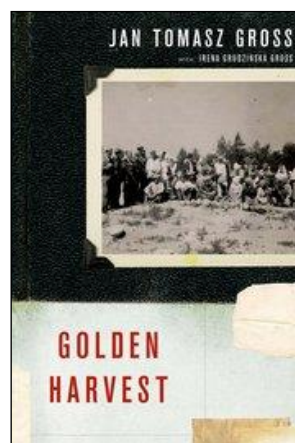
12. **In the post-war period, some attempts were made to falsify the history of the Holocaust, including the attitude of the Poles towards the Jews during the war.** One example of this is the famous book *“The Painted Bird”* by Jerzy Kosinski, a Polish-American writer of Jewish origin. The book, published in 1965 in the USA, was the first literary accusation of Poles of anti-Semitism, cruelty towards Jews, participation in the Holocaust, etc. The publication was perceived as being autobiographical: during the war, Kosinski was allegedly separated from his parents and wandered from village to village in southern Poland. During his vagrancy, the boy – considered a Jew or a Gypsy – was supposedly persecuted by Polish villagers, humiliated, exposed to violence and cruelty, and lost the ability to speak for several years. As it turned out, **Kosinski’s book was a hoax, and the accusations against Poles were made up.** In 1993, Joanna Siedlecka, a Polish writer, based on conversations with people from the villages depicted by Kosinski, determined and described in her book entitled *“Czarny ptasior”* (*The Black Bird*) that the Lewinkopf/Kosinski family survived the occupation and the Holocaust thanks to Poles from the village of Dabrowa Rzeszycka. These were Poles who provided them with shelter and assistance, and Kosinski remained the whole time with his parents, did not lose his speech, and the cruelties described by him did not happen. Despite the proven lies, *“The Painted Bird”* still serves as an inspiration for artists. Performances inspired by the book are still being staged in theatres, and a Czech-Slovak-Ukrainian film is being produced.



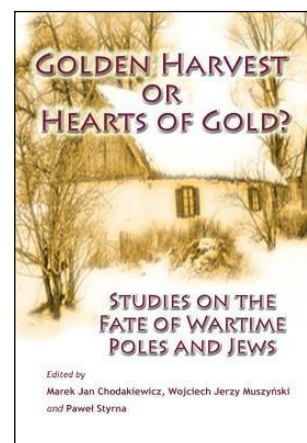
Kosinski, *The Painted Bird*
(USA 1965 / Poland 1989)



Siedlecka, *The Black Bird*
(Polska 1993)



Gross, *Golden Harvest*
(Poland 2011 / USA 2012)



Chodakiewicz et al., *Golden Harvest or Hearts of Gold?*
(Poland 2011 / USA 2012)

13. **After the collapse of the Communist rule in 1989, one could observe the appearance of a peculiar approach to Polish history, including the Holocaust, referred to as “the pedagogy of shame”.** This was a way of interpreting Polish history which focused on underlining and exaggerating the negative events in the past, while downgrading or omitting the positive ones. This resulted in the warping of the actual proportions and scale of historical events, and therefore, presenting a falsified historical picture. This can be exemplified by controversial and radical publications and statements by prof. **Jan Tomasz Gross** on Polish-Jewish relations during and after the war, attributing Poles with anti-Semitism, complicity in the Holocaust, etc. This is relating to his books *“Neighbours”*, *“Fear”* and *“Golden Harvest”*, published in Poland and the USA between 2000 and 2012. The books written by Gross, who is a sociologist rather than a historian, are accused of being **partial, prejudiced, unreliable**, of their **technical shortcomings**, etc. These include erroneously interpreting source materials, omitting inconvenient facts, manipulating numbers, basing conclusions on conjectures instead of facts, generalising on the grounds of individual cases, etc. Similar accusations have been formulated in reference to the publications by prof. **Jan Grabowski**, who researches the history of Jews in Polish rural areas during the German occupation.

Historians who **challenge Gross's and Grabowski's hypotheses in a scientific and balanced way** (e.g. prof. Marek Chodakiewicz from the Institute of World Politics in Washington and former member of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council) are being attacked and ostracised.

14. **The term "Polish death camps" has been used in public for years, which falsifies history and the memory of the Holocaust.** The term is used by the media, politicians, and even scientists. In 2012, President Obama mentioned "Polish death camps" in his speech, for which he later apologised. This is a misleading term (see point 2) and might suggest Poland's participation in the Holocaust as being equal to that of Nazi Germany, which is obviously false. **The fight against the term "Polish death camps" is continued by the Polish government at diplomatic levels, and by non-governmental organizations,** which are issuing requests for correction. However, those activities, similarly to civil actions being brought by the last living prisoners of German death camps, are not resulting in any significant curbing of this phenomenon. Furthermore, ZDF, a German public television broadcaster, is refusing to apologise to Karol Tendera, who was a prisoner in the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp, for the use of the term "Polish extermination camps", despite final and binding judgements by Polish and German courts. In addition, **informational activities** on extermination camps are being conducted (the [Truth About Camps](#) and [German Death Camps Not Polish](#) websites have been launched in several language versions).
15. In order to prevent the falsification of Polish history and to protect Poland's reputation worldwide, in late January 2018, the Polish Parliament passed an **amendment to the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance**. The Act introduces fines or up to 3 years' imprisonment as a punishment for ascribing responsibility for the crimes of Nazi Germany, publicly and against the facts, to the Polish nation or Polish state. Similar regulations are present also in other countries, e.g. in Israel and Germany, where denying Holocaust is punishable by 5 years' imprisonment. The Polish Act **does not restrict the freedom of expression, artistic activity or scientific research** concerning the Holocaust. The Act was signed by the President of the Republic of Poland in early February (and simultaneously submitted to the Constitutional Tribunal for approval), and entered into force on 1 March 2018.
16. **There are opinions that accusing Poland and Poles of anti-Semitism and complicity in the Holocaust** (e.g. by using such expressions as "Polish death camps", etc) does not result from ignorance of history but it **is a deliberate attempt to facilitate the achievement of specific political and financial goals in relation to Poland**. Currently, the Polish Parliament is working on the Reprivatisation Act that is going to regulate the issue of returning property nationalised after the war by Poland's Communist authorities. Jewish communities are voicing their objections to the draft Act. At the same time, the US Congress is working on the JUST Act (*Justice for Uncompensated Survivors Today*, S. 447), which creates tools for supporting international organizations associating Holocaust survivors in recovering Jewish heirless property. Passing the Act would enable Jewish communities **to exert pressure on Poland in order to obtain certain financial benefits** (real property, reparations, etc). In this context, the words of Israel Singer, former General Secretary of the World Jewish Congress, are recalled. In 1996 he said: *"If Poland does not satisfy Jewish claims, it will be publicly attacked and humiliated in the international forum."*
17. In early February 2018, **prominent German politicians publicly admitted on several occasions that the full responsibility for the Holocaust lies with Germany**. German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel said: *"Poland could be assured that every form of historical falsification such as the term 'Polish concentration camps' is met by a clear rejection on our part and will be sharply condemned. There is not the slightest doubt as to who was responsible for the extermination camps. This organised mass murder was carried out by our country and no one else. Individual collaborators change nothing about that."*

This was also confirmed by the German Ambassador to Poland: *“The intention of Nazi Germany was to murder Jews and Poles, and to destroy their culture. We must bear the full responsibility for this. The crimes of individuals who were not German do not change that.”* Furthermore, **German Chancellor Angela Merkel** said: *“As Germans, we are responsible for the things which happened during the Holocaust. The responsibility for concentration camps lies with Germany. This responsibility is maintained, and each new government of Germany will continue to carry that responsibility.”* Chancellor Merkel added that a good and common future with Poland, Europe, and the world, can only be created on this basis.

18. In early March 2018, the Polish Parliament passed an Act establishing a new public holiday – the **National Day of Remembrance of Poles Rescuing Jews Under German Occupation**. It will be celebrated on 24 March, on the anniversary of the murder by the Germans of the Polish Ulma family, who gave shelter to Jews during the Holocaust (see point 5). Also, in March, the Polish Government decided to create the **Warsaw Ghetto Museum**, which is to open in 2023, i.e. on the 80th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The Museum will be located in Warsaw, where the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews has existed for 5 years, presenting the 1000-year history of Jews on Polish soil.

Warsaw, March 2018