

10 *Judenjagd*

Reassessing the role of ordinary Poles as perpetrators in the Holocaust

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Introduction¹

The framework of categories introduced by Raul Hilberg – perpetrators, victims, and bystanders – once conventionally employed in understanding the destruction of European Jewry (Hilberg 1992), has started to fall out of fashion among historians of the Holocaust. In the case of East Central Europe, particularly Poland, the people situated at the edges of the volcanic eruption of genocide have invariably begun their slide from “bystanders” to “perpetrators” in the recent turn in scholarship since the publication of Jan T. Gross’s *Neighbors* (Gross 2001). Apart from the national debate unleashed in Poland in 2001, the major contribution of the book to the historiography was to banish a view of ethnic Poles solely as victims of Nazi Germany and to substantiate a long-standing claim found in Jewish survivor testimonies that Poles sometimes acted as perpetrators of the Judeocide (Polonsky and Michlic 2004: 30–43). The Jedwabne pogrom of 11 July 1941 has become the cornerstone of discussions about collaboration and perpetrators at the grassroots level in East Central Europe.

The seeds of a second, though much slower, paradigm shift can be found in the work of Polish historians focused on what they call the ‘third phase’ of the Holocaust, namely the attempt by the Germans to destroy the remaining Jews who survived Operation Reinhard – the code name given to the secret Nazi plan to murder all Polish Jews in the gas chambers of Bełżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka. These fugitives from Nazi German law fled ghettos and jumped off trains headed for death camps as they sought shelter among peasants in rural areas. The working assumption among these historians is that approximately 250,000 Jews – roughly 10 per cent of the 2.5 million Jews still alive in the summer of 1942 – made the escape to the so-called Aryan side. Of these, it is estimated that fewer than 50,000 survived (Grabowski 2013: 172–3). Unlike in the previous stages of ghettoization and deportation to death camps, where Polish society could do little to divert the Nazi steamroller of genocide, here, in the space of the ‘hunt for Jews’ (*Judenjagd*), allegedly out of reach of German authority, ethnic Poles had a larger say in the fate of the 200,000 fugitive Jews who did not survive. The issue of Polish behavior on this measurable “periphery of the Holocaust” thus represents the load-bearing question of Polish responsibility (Gross and Grudzińska-Gross

2012). Arguing against an older framework born under Poland's Communist regime (1944–89) that regards Polish participation in anti-Jewish acts as carried out by the criminal dregs found on the 'margins' of every society, these historians are careful to emphasize that the perpetrators often represented 'ordinary' Poles, not uncommonly well-respected members of local communities. The recent wave of scholarship – which makes reference to the murder of Tutsi in Rwanda and Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica (Gross and Grudzińska-Gross 2012: 84, 86) – is poised to interpret these events as part of a tradition of ethnic cleansing on the historiographical map. The vision of violence here is a kind of mobile *Jedwabne* in the Polish 'killing fields.'

In this chapter, I argue that something like the opposite of grassroots ethnic cleansing can be demonstrated. Peasant society participated in the capture and killing of Jews, but mostly within locally situated dynamics of communal fear and survival – not necessarily ethnic hatred or extreme nationalism – and this after the structures of village authority were reconfigured for the purpose by the occupation authorities. I offer a reappraisal of this phase of genocide using a different methodology to interrogate the meaning of 'perpetrators' and 'collaboration' within this framework. First, I contextualize the shelter and the hunt for fugitive Jews with parallel processes aimed at other fugitive groups, such as Soviet prisoners of war (POWs), Roma, deserters from the German army, and others. Second, I situate the actions of the perpetrators within a broad system of surveillance operations that conditioned local societies in obedience to German law. Third, I suggest the German occupation gave rise to two different trajectories of experience between Poles and Jews, which frequently culminated in an existential competition. This competition, in turn, helps us to understand the specific dynamics of grassroots violence. Fourth, I focus on the unique case of perpetrators who participated in both harming Jews and helping them.

Studying perpetrators in a different light

My approach is informed by a simple observation. While the Second Polish Republic witnessed official support for discriminatory anti-Jewish measures and growing outbursts of anti-Jewish violence, particularly in the period of accelerated democratic erosion following the death of Józef Piłsudski from 1936–39 (Zimmerman 2015: 14–20), the vast majority of Poles – as the majority of Germans at this time – had no experience with murder as a category of thought or action. Yet within a few years of the Second World War, in specific moments of the occupation, the denunciation and murder of Jews would be met with a significant level of social approval. It is in the 'hunt for Jews' that the German occupation authorities co-opted segments of Polish society into active complicity in genocide. How can a segment of society be shaped into an accessory of murder? This chapter is concerned with the social mechanisms that helped to transform ordinary people into perpetrators. A close study such as this is particularly suited to observing the gradual shift in attitudes and behavior that this transformation required. My overarching goal is to examine the actions of 'perpetrators' from a

variety of angles. In the broadest sense, perpetrators are defined here as those who participated in impeding the survival of members of a targeted group.

For both historical and moral clarity, the approach taken here aims to disaggregate the notion of the Holocaust into ‘smaller’ genocidal episodes or phases. Unlike other genocides, the Holocaust was unprecedented in that it compressed various forms of destruction within a short time period: mass executions, pogroms, ghettoization, death camps, hunts for Jews, and so-called death marches. Each of these stages introduced its own structure and dynamics of violence. The ‘Final Solution of the Jewish Question’ was a continent-wide undertaking applied in widely varying contexts. In the territories of the former Second Polish Republic under German occupation, now within the larger *Lebensraum*, it was superimposed on distinct policies targeted at other groups within the indigenous population. These policies rearranged the relations of its various victim groups. The focus here is on the *Judenjagd* from 1942–45, but unlike the approach taken by the recent wave of scholarship discussed earlier, the source base is significantly widened to observe peasant behavior within the broader dilemmas faced by rural societies. This is not to suggest that the *Judenjagd* was a mere byproduct of the occupation, but that it was part of a wider social space and cannot be understood solely by recourse to cases that involved Jews.

A related innovation here is to apply a model of ‘integrated history’ on the scale of a microhistory in keeping with an approach advocated by historian Saul Friedländer (Friedländer 2010: 21–9). It is not that the findings in the previously discussed works are false, but that it is precisely their isolation from the broader context that helps sustain a range of sharp theses. The approach taken here will help avoid the ‘bracketing’ of the Jewish experience in order to foreground a causal interplay between victim groups that had an impact on the course of the *Judenjagd* and gave rise to sub-categories of perpetrators on the local level. This methodological aim is akin to Clifford Geertz’s anthropological “thick description” (Geertz 1973: 3–30) employed by Gross in *Golden Harvest* (Gross and Grudzińska-Gross 2012: 19, 58–9), though it differs fundamentally in its application and conclusions. At the same time, the figure of the Righteous among Nations, so prevalent in the scholarship on Polish rescue, will be kept out of the historical reconstruction, as it is a moral and commemorative – not a historical – category that emerged in the postwar period (Dreifuss 2012: 77–81). Neither the figure of the Righteous Rescuer, nor a sacralized notion of martyrology and victimhood, belong on the historical landscape of an *Alltagsgeschichte*. This close study of genocide is committed to a notion of history as a “discipline of context and of process” (Bloxham 2009: 323–33).

The geographical focus is a region that corresponded to the eastern part of District Krakow of the General Government, or historic Western Galicia.² The primary archival sources used here are postwar investigation and trial records of individuals tried for collaboration on the basis of the so-called Decree of 31 August 1944 issued by the pro-Soviet puppet government, which today are housed at the archives of the regional branches of the Institute of National Remembrance (AIPN). These were generally off-limits to researchers during the time of the

Polish People's Republic (1944–89), but historians of the Holocaust have begun to draw on them in the last two decades. It is primarily this trial material that makes a reconstruction of the *Judenjagd* possible. Other sources include Jewish survivor testimonies deposited with the archives of the Jewish Historical Institute (AŻIH) in the immediate postwar period, as well as real-time underground reports by the major partisan formations of occupied Poland.

Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Soviet POWs?

A crucial change undergone by rural society during the war resulted from the restructuring of village authority and accountability. A new set of responsibilities was imposed on village society that profoundly altered its choice architecture and social relations. The occupation authorities were primarily interested in the Polish province as a source of food quotas to feed the German army and 'human quotas,' or forced laborers, for the Third Reich. The village head (*soltys*) bore the brunt of the responsibility for meeting these quotas. In order to help the village head carry out his duties, the Germans instituted a system of village guards (*Ortschutzwache* or *Ortschutz*), whose members were often drawn from the local fire brigades. The *Ortschutz* was de facto a kind of local militia headed by a commander. A secondary system of 'hostages' (*zakładnicy*) made these men personally responsible for maintaining 'security' over their areas of jurisdiction. If the village guards were not sufficient, a village head could always turn to the Polish "Blue" Police (*Polnische Polizei/PP*). The Blue Police – named informally after the color of their uniforms – was itself drawn from the prewar state Police, which was subordinated to the German Order Police (*Ordnungspolizei*; in rural areas, the gendarmerie).

After the invasion of the Soviet Union and the commencement of Operation Reinhard, the screws of this system were tightened and its scope broadened. It was the responsibility of each village head not only to apprehend Polish laborers, but to report and deliver any Jews, Soviet prisoners of war, partisans ('bandits'), strangers, or outsiders to the nearest gendarmerie or PP station. Thus, the same system that was already turned against ethnic Polish society in the forceful extraction of various quotas was expanded into a system of surveillance against all categories of people targeted by Nazi Germany. On 10 November 1941, Hans Frank, Governor of the GG, instituted the death penalty for people who offered any help to Jews outside of ghettos, a measure which could be – and often was – exercised in the form of collective punishment. But in the context of the village system, this punishment was extended to 'failure' to report and apprehend fugitives. In essence, villages were now weaponized against outsiders and the whole system was held in place by draconian threats at each level of authority. It is no accident that the overwhelming majority of individuals tried for collaboration after the war – the village heads, members of the village guard, messengers, foresters, and gamekeepers, who figure in these cases – were indeed 'ordinary' Poles. But in most cases, they did not represent a random sample of peasants, but those tried for collaboration precisely on the basis of their position in the 'security' gridlock that

they found themselves in, not a shared ideological profile. It was the institutional role that largely determined the range of behavior.

Thus, at its root, the village surveillance system was aimed at a variety of fugitives, and Soviet POWs represented the largest parallel group next to Jews. Although history has provided researchers with a control group, it is a wonder that no historian has taken advantage of this fact in the enormous scholarship on the rescue of Jews in Poland. What is striking here is that the hunt for Jews bears a remarkable similarity to the hunt for Soviet POWs. To take a few examples: in 1943, the village of Brzezówka (Rzeszów county) witnessed two cases of captured prisoners of war. In the first case, Rozalia Żurek took in a young man who was asking for food and shelter. She later learned that he was an escaped Soviet POW and let him stay, as he helped her with the fall harvest and entertained her children by writing in Cyrillic. However, word got out and members of the village guard appeared at her home to take the POW away. He turned to the guard commandant “with a plea to spare his life, as he’s a young man, he wants to live and return to his parents, he’s a prisoner of war, who explained clearly to the accused that he’s from Leningrad, that he took part in fighting the Germans and was wounded.”³ He then tried to escape, but one of the guards struck him down with an axe. The prisoner was taken to a Polish Police station, where he was likely shot.

In the second case, Franciszek Sowa, the village head, notified the Polish Police in Błazowa that Aniela Miłał was sheltering a Soviet POW of Russian background who had jumped off a transport. The denunciation was passed up the chain of command, and the following day the German gendarmerie and Polish Police were dispatched to Miłał’s home. When they failed to find the escaped prisoner, they shot Aniela Miłał, her nine-year-old daughter, and 10-year-old son. Her home was set on fire and the village guard was ordered to throw their bodies into the burning building.⁴ Likewise, in the village of Przyszów (Stalowa Wola county), Marcin Kotwica, the gamekeeper (*gajowy*) was accused of apprehending and handing over to the German police three escaped French POWs, one of whom attempted to trade his coat in exchange for a piece of bread.⁵ In yet another case, Jan Kostak, the village head of Turza (Kolbuszowa county), along with hostage Ludwik Matuła and village messenger (*goniec*) Tomasz Mika, apprehended three young Soviet POWs, who were looking for shelter for the night.⁶ They delivered the young men to the German police, where they were shot.

Still, manhunts went beyond Jews and Soviet POWs – peasants were also drawn into hunts against fellow villagers evading forced labor in Germany. For example, in the village of Przykop (Mielec county) in July 1942, Józef Raclawski, the commandant of the *Ortschutz*, received an order to apprehend Poles to be sent to Germany. One of the people he was forced to capture was his own sister.⁷ In a number of cases, the village guard and local peasants were mobilized in the hunt for partisans or ‘bandits,’ in the nomenclature of the occupation authorities. In the village of Las (Żywiec county), Emil Michałek was ordered by the commandant of a German police station to report for such a hunt. When Michałek failed to make it to the police station on time, as he had no shoes, the commandant

threatened him, saying he should have “wrapped his feet in rags and reported for the hunt.”⁸ Sometimes the very presence of a stranger was cause for alarm. When an unknown woman with a child appeared in the village of Wola Wielka (Dębica county) in January of 1943, the entire community was thrown into an existential dilemma as villagers debated how best to proceed. Some claimed she was a Jew, others that she was a Roma, she herself claimed that she was a wandering beggar. In the end, the locals decided not to take a risk and applied pressure on the village head to deliver mother and child to the police.⁹

It is here that Geertz’s “thick description” is most relevant in capturing the broader social world that conditioned the actions of would-be perpetrators. Hunts for Jews were entangled with hunts for other fugitives. People who sheltered Jews sometimes sheltered prisoners of war. A hunt for Polish laborers could bring into its orbit a hunt for Jews and vice versa. Village heads were forced to act against Jews as well as members of the ethnic Polish collective, though certainly not in the same genocidal capacity. Perpetrators on the local level could thus be viewed along several axes. Taken on their own and harnessed to a narrative, such incidents could be seen as the smoking gun of unique peasant hatred against a particular victim group; when combined, they force the historian to reconsider the motivation within the broader framework that informed such actions.

Informers: weeding out the Good Samaritans

Obedience to this system was reinforced by informers working for the German police. For our purpose, informers are significant for two reasons. First, knowledge of their presence and operations conditioned the behavior of locals to propel peasants along a path leading to inaction or perpetration. A particularly sinister role was played by agent provocateurs under various covers. These informers, or *V-Personen*,¹⁰ compiled lists of those who gave them shelter, inquired about who possessed weapons or maintained contact with partisans. The use of informers posing as escaped Soviet POWs appears to have been the most widespread practice. The village of Styków (Rzeszów county) was ‘tested’ three times by such informers.¹¹ In the village of Żurowa and Raławice (Tarnów county), “an incident took place where members of the Gestapo dressed up as Russians . . . [and] caused the burning down of two homes and the shooting of two families.”¹² The two men dressed in Soviet uniforms returned the following day in the uniforms of the SS and in the company of other policemen to execute those who had opened their doors to them.

The plot thickens when the Polish province emerges as a zone teeming with every variety of informer, Gestapo agent, and false-flag operation, fueling an atmosphere of distrust. In the town of Łańcut and vicinity, Maria Steinberg was seen by locals walking around “dressed as a chimney sweep,” only to be later seen (along with another informer) in the uniform of the German gendarmerie, assisting in the ‘pacification’ of the village of Żołynia, where 14 people were killed.¹³ Monthly underground reports carefully observed intricate false-flag operations. Still, locals unwittingly often stepped into these traps. In the spring of 1943, the

Kripo and gendarmerie of Dębica had set up base in the village of Łączki Kucharzkie (Ropczyce county), dressed up as armed partisans, and walked through neighboring villages. They passed through the village of Glinik on 10 April 1943 and returned there the following day now as German policemen to execute locals for failing to inform them about the presence of partisans in the region. They executed a few villagers, stopping only when some locals identified the German policemen as the very same group of ‘partisans’ that had passed through the village the previous day.¹⁴

Second, some categories of informers, recruited as they were from among victim groups, tell us something important about the dramatic transformation of victims into perpetrators that took place during the war. Within the above set of practices, the use of informers posing as fugitive Jews was hardly off limits. Various partisan formations of the underground movement were acutely aware of this. For example, a unit of the Peasant Battalions in the Krosno region “sold a machine gun for 3,000 zł to a member of the Jasło Gestapo, Becker [Oskar Bäcker], posing as a Jew,” and once contact was established, the entire unit was eventually penetrated and destroyed by the German police.¹⁵ Similarly, a Home Army report from the fall of 1942 warned: “Over 15 spies have been dispatched into each county, who are to roam the region as peddlers, Jews, nuns, and soldiers escaping from camps.”¹⁶

But perhaps the most counterintuitive is the participation of Jews themselves with the Gestapo in the surveillance of the local population and the *Judenjagd*. After the war, Christoph Führer, who was part of the German civilian administration, reported the following scenario: “[In 1942] I met two Jews on a country road, who had previously lived in Dębica, equipped with identity cards issued by the Gestapo. They had an assignment to ferret out hidden Jews.”¹⁷ The Mielec Gestapo used several Jewish *V-Leute* in the region. One of these was a 20-year-old woman with the pseudonym of Sophie, who was transferred to the Mielec post in the spring of 1943 and was dispatched into the region to penetrate the underground movement (Krempa 2013: 20–2). A labor camp established by a German firm, Bäumer und Lösch, in the Czekaj forest near Mielec included a special barracks for Jewish informers and their families, who were drawn from the Jewish Councils (*Judenräte*) of the Mielec and Dębica ghettos and Pustków labor camp, as well as the Jewish ghetto police (*Ordnungsdienst*) of Dębica (Krempa 2013: 146–53). Izak Kapłan from Mielec, Herman Immerglück from Dębica, and Max Bitkower from Tarnów were its three main agents. They were exempt from work in the camp, were permitted to bring their families (Bitkower brought his wife and child from Tarnów), and were issued special papers by the Gestapo to allow them to walk around freely. “In the morning, they left on bicycles and returned at night. We knew that the Gestapo came to visit them – they drank, ate and had fun together. Later it turned out that they rode to the woods where Jews were hiding and denounced them,” stated Jakub Grynblum, who worked in the camp.¹⁸ When they succeeded in persuading fugitive Jews to come to the camp, they were usually taken out and shot by members of the Mielec Gestapo in the nearby forest of Berdechów. On 23 April 1943, members of the *Ortschutz* of nearby Chrzastów

apprehended one of these informers – perhaps Kapłan himself – and handed him over to the Polish Police in Mielec.¹⁹ The man was subsequently released and was seen walking around in the company of the German police. These informers operated in the region from the end of 1942 to the summer of 1943, when they were executed by the Gestapo.

Surprising as it may be, the participation of Jewish informers in the *Judenjagd* was in line with the Nazi policy of divide et impera of its colonial subjects. But the fact alone that victims of genocide could be so dramatically transformed into collaborators and perpetrators ought to take the wind out of sharp claims about the *Judenjagd* as an exclusively grassroots, peasant-driven ‘social movement’ to rid society of its Jews. The effect of these widespread surveillance practices was undoubtedly to condition an automatic response among villagers to immediately report and apprehend any strangers that made their appearance. It seems impossible to understand the irrational fears shared by rural society without taking these factors into account.

Beyond ethnic categories: the teleology of survival

In her study of peasant violence toward Jews, historian and psychologist Barbara Engelking quotes Roza Majerfeld, who experienced the paralyzing taste of death during a German patrol: “My heart and legs became numb, it’s as if my speech was taken away from me. It was a feeling of death – a faint, sweet taste for a fraction of a second” (Engelking 2011: 195–6). Such feelings undoubtedly accompanied many Jews in their desperate search for shelter, which deepened as the *Judenjagd* swept across the countryside and farmers increasingly refused to open their doors to strangers. Majerfeld herself tasted it many times over, but lived to see liberation. But was the fear experienced by those sheltering Jews any less profound? The German occupation introduced a unique dynamic in which the Poles who undertook the shelter of Jews arguably partook in a shared taste of death. But the taste could evoke different responses.

This tension is captured in the story of Perel Faust and her husband Chaim, who escaped the Dębica ghetto to hide with a Polish family for a period of 22 months in return for payment. When a member of the Gestapo moved into the room next door, the Polish woman asked their Jewish charges to leave, but a granddaughter exclaimed: “Grandmother, if they leave, they will shoot us, for they will certainly reveal that they were with us!” (Faust 2016: 289). Here began the toxic relationship between the rescuers and the rescued. The Gentile family believed that releasing the Faust couple would lead to their eventual capture – and the betrayal and death of those who gave them help. At the same time, with the German policeman and the Jewish family separated by a thin wall, they could not endure the daily experience of fear. Eventually the Polish couple began making threats that they would have to kill their Jewish charges. “They did not want to keep us anymore, but they could not let us go, for then they would be in danger. Indeed, they were in great danger,” wrote Faust. During those 22 long months, a series of murder attempts on the Jewish couple using poison, suffocation, and starvation followed.

The preceding case is a microcosm of the larger dynamic that emerged between Poles and Jews during the *Judenjagd*. On an existential level, one family's will to survive was pitted against another's. It was the fundamental 'Faustian' bargain that ordinary people found themselves in during the course of shelter, and it gave rise to a new teleology of murder. In the preceding case, a denunciation by formerly sheltered Jews only appears as a possibility, but a close study of the Subcarpathian region reveals a number of reported incidents. In the same area combed by Kaplan's group of informers, an older Jewish woman from the village of Grochowe (Mielec county) was captured in the spring of 1943 by the German police. She was marched through the neighboring village of Malinie and beaten into revealing which families had offered her food or shelter. One of the several homes that she indicated was the Witek household. When the German police arrived, they beat the 65-year-old woman living there and, as punishment, ordered her to dig a grave for the Jewish woman underneath her door entrance.²⁰

In other cases, it appears that German policemen were able to exploit the vulnerabilities of young people who were captured. For example, Małka Schönfeld, an 18-year-old Jew from the village of Pantalowice (Przeworsk county), was hiding with her family in a forest bunker. On 4 December 1942, she was captured by German gendarmes and denounced the Poles who had provided the family with food. The German policemen took Schönfeld on a horse-drawn cart, as she indicated who in the village had given them help. As a result, the gendarmes executed three young Polish brothers in Pantalowice and six Poles in the village of Hadle Szklarskie.²¹ In another case, Nathan Haske was wounded during a hunt for Jews and turned himself over in the village of Wólka Ogryzkowa (Przeworsk county). The German policemen "gave him water to drink and promised him that if he tells them everything that they ask, they will send him to a hospital and then to Germany, where he would live."²² According to the village head, Haske supplied the policemen with the names of members of the Peasant Battalions in nearby Gniewczyna Tryniecka and Jagiełła. When the information was exhausted, "Gestapoman Zajder told him [Haske] to get up so that he could be taken to a hospital" and shot the young man in the forehead.

Such incidents in the Subcarpathian region could be multiplied (Rączy 2008: 113–15). They came to inform 'Polish' anxieties about the dangers of sheltering or even maintaining contact with fugitives and left a strong mark on real-time documents produced during the war. They can be found in the diary of Franciszek Kotula, who kept a chronicle of the "voice of the street" in the city of Rzeszów. The motif of Jews denouncing Poles who gave them shelter appears several times throughout the chronicle. Among others, his entry on 16 December 1942 reads:

Rumors are coming in from all sides that the Germans are murdering entire Polish families if any hidden Jews are found. Whoever is still hiding someone, that person is pushed out and, when captured by the Germans, he most often reveals where he stayed and who gave him food – even though he knows that he will face death anyway.

(Kotula 1999: 147)

His entry on 11 January 1943 captures the case of Małka Schönfeld, among others:

In the region around Hyżne, twenty Jews were killed and 10 Poles, who had given them food and shelter. Three sons of the forester in Hadle Szklarskie were killed for sheltering Jews and five peasants in Grzegorzówka. The Jews can't hold out during torture. Even though they know they will die, they betray their hosts.

(Kotula 1999: 151)

Every major partisan formation in the region registered this danger. On 12 March 1943, the following order was issued by the Home Army in the Rzeszów region:

There has not been a single incident in which a captured Jew did not denounce everyone who offered them help. In many cases, they maliciously give surnames [of individuals] who are completely uninvolved. All are shot on the spot. We have borne many losses because of this. Therefore, I forbid any contact with and help to fleeing Jews.²³

A report by the Communist People's Guard (GL), which was the most sympathetic to Jews, stated the following: "Recently two partisans were killed, who were given away by a Jewish woman hiding among our people."²⁴ The Peasant Battalions reported: "Certainly more of them [Jews] could have remained in hiding if it wasn't for their poor tactics during interrogation when captured by the gendarmerie. In such situations, they reveal everything they know – whom they hid with, who gave them food. The accused face unfortunate consequences, including the loss of life, and so fall victim sooner."²⁵ Yet it is important to bear in mind that the accusation was not aimed solely at Jews, but was inherent to the danger of hiding any fugitives. For example, an underground newspaper complained of Soviet POWs denouncing their former shelterers:

Facing imminent danger, the unavoidable bullet, he [the POW] gives away the names of those who had previously given him food and protected him. [. . .] There are only a few exceptions among Russian prisoners of war, who responded to the Germans with silence and contempt during interrogation and the barrage of questions, without betraying those who helped them in difficult times. The rest, although they knew without a doubt that their fate was sealed, extended their life by a few days.²⁶

On one level, Polish-Jewish tensions could be viewed through the prism of ethnicity. Yet the preceding cases suggest that they were also profoundly informed by a competing teleology of survival. The 'faint, sweet taste' of death was undoubtedly experienced by everyone caught in the dynamics of sheltering, even if money was involved. While each case was specific, the fundamental tension was located on a spectrum of existential competition. It is hard to understand the strained

conflict between Poles and Jews in this context without appreciating the ever-present fear of death, which, as we have seen, was based on real incidents, but also likely magnified by fear and the power of rumors in a time of war. The struggle for survival had the potential of becoming a zero-sum game, which sometimes left a trail of bodies in its wake.

The rise of a unique cohort of perpetrators: the people of two faces

At the institutional level, the occupational authorities had tilted the entire legal, economic, and social landscape toward facilitating genocide, causing a gradual landslide into a moral abyss and social breakdown, especially when Polish government structures above the village level were hijacked and political elites decapitated. At the local level, the lifting of all forms of state protection from Polish society encouraged a kind of ‘tribalization’ of social relations in rural areas, with lines of mutual distrust and hatred deepening along ethnic lines. Within the vacuum of legitimate state authority, underground structures aside, it was the Polish Police that often played a role of ‘stabilizing’ the volatile situation, especially in preempting the unpredictability of German terror. These conditions produced a unique type of ‘perpetrator’ – individuals who participated in ways of both harming and helping Jews. Take the case of Karol Stachak, who was both commandant of the PP in Czudec (Strzyżów county) and the commander of the local underground Home Army unit (AK Czudec). Among other accusations, he was tried after the war for killing a Jewish man who was brought to the PP station of Lubenia in the spring of 1942 while Stachak was its commandant. During questioning, the man allegedly “gave the names of eight families who sheltered him. The accused and his colleagues were afraid that if they handed him over to Czudec [gendarmerie], the Jew would also denounce these eight families, who would be shot.”²⁷ Stachak and two other policemen thus shot the man behind the police station.

However, in the course of the investigation, it was also revealed that Stachak had sheltered a Jewish boy in his home – who survived the war – as everyone in the village was afraid to take him in. Stachak also knew that a Jewish girl was being hidden in a mill by a farmer in Hyżne, yet, according to one witness, “he protected her and did not turn her over to the German authorities.”²⁸ Further, as a member of the Home Army, he procured “Aryan papers” for Jews and had a good reputation in the Jewish community.²⁹ The court did not know what to make of this man. On the one hand, as a “member of the AK, he sympathized with people of communist convictions, Jews, did a lot of good for people, helped them in various situations, often at the risk of his own life [. . .] helped people avoid being sent to Germany, helped to hide Jews – moreover, he hid a Jewish child in his own home.” On the other hand, he was a member of the PP “under the control of German authority,” whom the Germans could always trust. He was “a man of a vacillating character, of indecisive and unsettled political convictions – a man of two faces,” concluded the court, as it sentenced him to death.³⁰ The case of the Polish Police is all the more relevant, because in the Second Polish Republic their

duties included preventing the outbreak of violence against its Jewish minority, but during the *Judenjagd* they appear on the horizon as key perpetrators.

In many ways, the story of Karol Stachak is emblematic of the wider dilemmas of Polish society under occupation, which eluded the established legal and political categories of collaboration (Connelly 2005: 771–81). The “people of two faces” had to straddle two universes – satisfying state-level German regulations from above and communal survival pressures from below. The case of the Polish policemen foregrounds these ‘contradictions’ most dramatically, as they had to navigate this fraught relationship. This ‘triangular’ relationship faced by local police forces differed fundamentally from the situation of the ‘ordinary men’ of Police Battalion 101 in Christopher Browning’s classic study (Browning 1992). After the liquidation of ghettos throughout the GG in the summer of 1942, members of the PP were to apprehend Jews, take down their testimony, and deliver them to the German police, resorting to shooting only in the case of escape. From February 1943, however, they were under German orders to shoot Jews on the spot, though this could differ from region to region. But oftentimes, as in the case of policeman Stachak, they acted as a kind of killing squad or ‘willing executioners’ of Jews in the name of protecting the local population from the onslaught of German state terror and collective punishment.

It is in the context of acts of repression that the role of the Blue Policemen emerges most visibly in the capacity of ‘willing executioners.’ Manhunts initiated by ordinary peasants without ties to the village security system, or the “active involvement of large masses of peasants in the *Judenjagd*” in each village (Grabowski 2013: 75–8), were the exception rather than the rule and took place in specific circumstances. A close study of the Subcarpathian region suggests that it was rather in the immediate aftermath of a major act of repression for the shelter of Jews – precisely the moments that represented the greatest existential threat to the community – that we see a popular upsurge of expelling, capturing, or killing of Jews. The ‘pacification’ action of the village of Podborze (Mielec county) is a case in point: it resulted in the capture and death of over 30 Jews across three communes in a matter of two weeks (Frydel 2016: 147–66). When local policemen arrived on the scene, they encountered peasants pleading with them not to hand over the Jews for fear that they might denounce their shelterers, but to shoot them on the spot.

These perpetrators, the ‘people of two faces,’ recur regularly throughout the archival record. What do they tell us? It was precisely the people who were part of the institutional framework tied to genocide, whether the Polish Police or the village security apparatus, who faced this dilemma most sharply. The village head of Nagoszyn (Dębica county), Stanisław Biduś, was tried for handing over Jews and Soviet POWs to the police. He was indeed found guilty, but what angered locals during the house searches was his alleged hypocrisy. A witness echoed a refrain heard during the searches: “He’s sheltering Jews himself, but goes to others’ homes looking for them.”³¹ In all these cases, the perpetrators had to conform to an outward facade. The messenger of the village of Zwiernik (Dębica county), Mieczysław Fiołek, was ordered to report to the home of the village head at dawn, where the PP was organizing a hunt for Jews in a nearby forest. Some 80 villagers

were called out from their homes and were divided into search parties. Although Ryba himself sheltered a Jewish woman, Sala Teifelbaum, who survived the war, he had to participate in the search.³²

A discernible dividing line in these cases lies at the level of kinship, which was a determining factor in who to help and who to hand over or kill, if it came to that. Marian Lenartowicz, a Polish policeman from Żyrardów in central Poland with ties to the Home Army, who was transferred to Jasło during the war, participated in delivering Jews to the Gestapo. At the same time, the goods that he confiscated from peasants for illegal slaughter or black marketeering were sent to help Jews in the Warsaw ghetto. He “sent packages for Jews in the Warsaw ghetto, who came from Żyrardów. These packages were repackaged by me and my father and sent by post with the help of Stachecki,” testified his sister.³³ Another policeman, Michał Strzępka, mentioned above, killed over a dozen Jews during his time at the Radomyśl Wielki PP station. Surprisingly, one of the people who came to his defense in the trial was Wiktoria Wolińska (née Berl), whose family (Wiktoria, Salomon, and Adela Berl) had received help from the entire Strzępka family since 1940. Strzępka, his wife, and daughter helped coordinate the relocation of the Berl family from village to village, provided them with food, information, and false papers, without receiving any payment in exchange. Remarkably, the duality of the policeman was unknown to Berl: “During my stay in the Radomyśl Wielki region and nearby villages, I never heard or saw Strzępka persecuting Jews. [. . .] I never heard that Strzępka ever participated in the capture or shooting of Jews.”³⁴

These cases might normally be treated as odd ‘exceptions’ within the conventional legal and political understanding of perpetrators and collaboration, but there are grounds to treat them as a cohort, which shows that the participation in persecution and killing was not specific to any social group or ideology. These good acts represented neither brief sparks of humanity nor an insurance policy taken out in the event of a change in political winds, but were structural to the situation of society under occupation. Further, there is reason to believe that such paradoxical behaviors were more salient in the General Government due to the lack of political collaboration with Nazi Germany, compared to other Eastern European states, such as Lithuania, Ukraine, or Slovakia, where the social energy of collaboration was harnessed to an organizing political principle. The brutalized occupational conditions of the General Government had given rise to an arithmetic of survival, in which the killing of fugitive Jews was at times re-imagined as a way of protecting the larger community. If the Holocaust was a “legitimate resident in the house of modernity,” in the words of Zygmunt Bauman (1989: 17), the paradox of perpetrator-helpers was one way that local societies learned to coexist with it under occupation.

Conclusion

This analysis has harnessed the data to an explanatory framework that makes acts of perpetrators of violence toward Jews comprehensible primarily within an institutional framework in which a system of draconian control was imposed on village life. The violence thus flowed from the top in what could be called ‘genocide

from above' – as well as from 'abroad,' as it was largely imported by an occupying power and imposed on a defeated and dismantled state. This chapter argues that the majority of peasant acts of violence against Jews constituted a form of genocide from above. However, at the same time, the specific conditions of the German occupation in the General Government gave rise to 'killing from below,' rooted in the restructured social reality that set its fragmented victim populations on a collision course. Genocidal policies issued by the occupation authorities from the top ricocheted in surprising ways on the local level. In this analysis, Nazi German racial reasons for the killing of Jews from 'above' can begin to be distinguished from the causes of Polish killing of Jews from 'below.'

What does this tell us about perpetrators and motivation? The complex reality examined here cannot be poured into the mold of antisemitism alone. This is not to suggest that antisemitism, like greed, did not co-exist with this system or to say that Gentiles were otherwise waiting to jump forward to save the Jews. But it can be overworked as an explanatory concept when confronted with the complex reality of local violence, particularly in the paradoxical case of the perpetrator-rescuer. The system of pressures examined here formed the baseline of causes that informed the actions of the perpetrators. No doubt the system benefitted from antisemitism, but it was a sufficient, not a necessary, condition for participation. It only gets us so far in explaining why killing on the local level proceeded the way that it did. A genocide that took the form of the *Judenjagd*, it seems, was an enterprise that harnessed multi-ethnic participation, driven by German policy from the top. In the broad hunts examined here, there was little ideological consistency to peasant behavior or to the profiles of the policemen.

At stake in a study of perpetrators is the question of why people kill – here, quite ordinary people. A microhistory, with its proximity to the intimacy of violence, can perhaps bring us closer to an answer. The primary forces that held the system in place and propelled the *Judenjagd* along its tracks were fear and the will to survive. In the shadow of mass killing, social relations were rearranged along an axis of kinship networks. A related observation is that times of catastrophe and communal crisis appear to give rise to utilitarian thinking, constraining altruism to family and acquaintances. Further, short-lived episodes of violence that eventually petered out, such as the Jedwabne massacre and the pogroms in the summer of 1941 more broadly, are not the best lens for examining a long-term process that was drawn out for a period of three years. The German occupation was a period of radical social transformation and the "perpetrator" was a fluid category in this landscape. Without a broader contextualization, a study of perpetrators can become unmoored, which is evident in ongoing treatments of the subject. If we ignore the parallel hunts against other groups, the dilemmas that compromised village society, and remove the teleology that often informed decisions to denounce or kill, then indeed the *Judenjagd* emerges as killing done for its own sake, which fits in more readily with a model of ethnic cleansing. Yet, as this chapter shows, killing took place within a different set of coordinates.

In setting out his approach to writing the history of the English working class from below, the historian E.P. Thompson (1980: 12) famously wrote that he sought to

rescue the ‘backwardness’ of his subjects from “the enormous condescension of posterity.” It seems that a similar intervention is needed from another “condescension of posterity” when writing about peasant society and the Shoah.

Notes

- 1 I am grateful to Irene Eber, David Engel, Jeffrey Kopstein, Antony Polonsky, and Piotr Wróbel for their comments on drafts of this chapter. Responsibility for content rests with the author.
- 2 The General Government (GG) was a part of occupied Poland not annexed to the Third Reich, but was not a collaborating puppet state. It was subdivided into five districts governed by German civil and police administrations: Warsaw, Lublin, Radom, Krakow, and Galicia (added in August 1941). District Krakow was subdivided into 12 counties (*Kreise*). The counties that fall under the purview of this chapter are Tarnów, Dębica, Rzeszów, Jarosław, Jasło, Krosno, Przemyśl, and Sanok.
- 3 AIPN Rz, 358/38, trial of village guard commandant Piotr Zembroń and others, indictment of the accused, p. 140. On 8 May 1951, the Voivodship Court of Rzeszów sentenced Zembroń to five years and six months in prison.
- 4 AIPN Rz, 357/10, trial of village head Franciszek Sowa, testimony of gendarme Wiktor Waszek, pp. 4–6. Sowa was found not guilty by the District Court of Rzeszów on 14 May 1947.
- 5 AIPN Rz, 357/31, trial of gamekeeper Marcin Kotwica, testimony of Józef Wojtak, pp. 39–41. According to Wojtak, a crowd of about 30 people had witnessed the incident and Kotwica therefore believed he had no choice but to hand the fugitives over. Kotwica was found not guilty by the District Court of Rzeszów on 31 October 1947.
- 6 AIPN Rz, 358/32, trial of village head Jan Kostak, Ludwik Matuła, and Tomasz Mika, court sentence by the Voivodship Court of Rzeszów on 18 April 1951, pp. 313–8. Kostak and Matuła were sentenced to six years in prison.
- 7 AIPN Rz, 363/4, trial of village guard commandant Józef Raclawski, statement by the defense drawing on the testimony of Józef Leszkowicz, pp. 64–6. Raclawski was found not guilty by the District Court of Tarnów on 16 April 1951.
- 8 ANK, SAKr, 1002, K 54/50, trial of Emil Michałek, deposition of the accused, pp. 32–3.
- 9 AIPN Rz, 358/119, trial of village guards Władysław Chorąży, Stanisław Dural, and others, court sentence by the Voivodship Court of Rzeszów on 25 June 1953, pp. 369–71. All of the accused were found innocent.
- 10 *V-Personen* or *V-Männer*, from *Vertrauensperson* in German for “trusted person.”
- 11 AIPN Rz, 352/153, trial of village head Franciszek Pruchnik, sentence by the Special Penal Court of Rzeszów, 9 August 1946, pp. 198–200. The village head was found innocent.
- 12 AIPN Rz, 354/52, trial of deputy village head Andrzej Kawa and village guard commandant Franciszek Mika, court sentence by the District Court of Jasło, 10 December 1947, p. 99.
- 13 AIPN Rz, 352/149, trial of Maria Steinberg (Pelc), pp. 92, 154–5. Steinberg was sentenced to death by the Special Penal Court of Rzeszów on 4 November 1946.
- 14 AIPN Rz, OKSZpNP, S 20/09/Zn, Vol. II, testimony of Jan Dziedzic, 1946, pp. 366–7.
- 15 CAW, II.33.44, Peasant Battalions, Rzeszów District IV-Bez, “Oracz” to “Zawojny,” 28 October 1943, pp. 1–11.
- 16 AAN, 1673/XI/50, “Pług” to “Rzemiosło” (Rzeszów), “Political Intelligence” report, 4 November 1942, “German intelligence” section, pp. 35–7.
- 17 BAL, B 162/7460, testimony of Christoph Führer, deputy *Kreishauptmann* of Dębica county, pp. 65–74.
- 18 AŻIH, 301/3503, testimony of Jakub Grynblum, 1947, pp. 1–2.
- 19 AIPN Rz, 353/61, pp. 258–61, trial of Jan Miłoś and other night guards, testimony of Bogdan Protter, a Jewish fugitive who came into contact with one of these informers.

- 20 AIPN Rz, 358/48, trial of Jan Malczyński, testimony of Władysław Witek, pp. 20–1.
- 21 AIPN Rz, OKŚZpNP, S 133/12/Zn, testimony of Julia Bura, pp. 11–13; testimony of Aleksandra Dec, pp. 16–18.
- 22 AIPN Rz, 359/21, trial of village head Jan Janas, deposition of the accused, pp. 16–17.
- 23 AIPN Rz, 105/7, Order No. 3, Point 21 of instructions issued by the commander of district AK Rzeszów-South, Col. Józef Maciołek, alias “Żuraw,” p. 120. The order itself was issued earlier by the central command in Krakow.
- 24 AAN, 191/XXIV/2, People’s Guard, Krakow District IV, Report No. 2, “Krakow,” 1 December 1942, p. 3.
- 25 AZHRL, VI/32, Subregion (Podokręg) Rzeszów – District Przeworsk, “To the Inspectorate of the People’s Security Guard (LSB),” Section IV, 1 July 1944, p. 3.
- 26 *Wieści*, no. 6, 6 February 1944, “Ivans and Vasyls,” 3–4.
- 27 AIPN Rz, 046/991, trial of PP Karol Stachak, sentence by the District Court of Rzeszów on 12 March 1949, p. 4.
- 28 AIPN Rz, 353/18, trial of PP Karol Stachak, testimony of Edward Brydek, pp. 116–17.
- 29 *Ibid.*, testimony of witness Chaskel Wiesenfeld, pp. 240–1. Wiesenfeld’s Jewish friends instructed him to seek the help of Stachak, who was generally regarded by them as a ‘good man.’
- 30 AIPN Rz, 046/991, court sentence, p. 1–12. The sentence was commuted to 10 years in prison by the Appellate Court of Rzeszów on 24 October 1949.
- 31 AIPN Rz, 353/81, Vol. II, trial of village head Stanisław Biduś and others, testimony of Karolina Cieśla, pp. 75–7.
- 32 AIPN Rz, 353/285, trial of Mieczysław Fiołek and Władysław Ryba, court sentence, p. 149; Teifelbaum’s letter, pp. 43–43v.
- 33 AIPN Rz, 107/1783, Vol. IV, Part I, trial of PP Władysław Malawski and others, testimony of Aniela Iżycka, sister of Lenartowicz, pp. 378–9; testimony of Marian Leczysłowski, a mailman in Brzostek, 379–80. Both witnesses testified that Lenartowicz sent food packages to prisoners in Auschwitz and Łódź, as well as Żyrardów Jews resettled to the Warsaw ghetto.
- 34 AIPN Rz, 34/61, Vol. I, trial of PP Michał Strzępka, testimony of Wiktoria Wolińska, 25 May 1965, pp. 183–8.

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- Archive of Modern Records [Archiwum Akt Narodowych w Warszawie (AAN)] 191/XXIV/2, People’s Guard [Gwardia Ludowa], Krakow District IV.
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