
THE POLISH POLICE

Collaboration in the Holocaust

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Wrong Memory Codes? The Polish “Blue” Police and Collaboration in the Holocaust

In 2016, seventy-one years after the end of World War II, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs disseminated a long list of “wrong memory codes” (*błędne kody pamięci*), or expressions that “falsify the role of Poland during World War II” and that are to be reported to the nearest Polish diplomat for further action. Sadly—and not by chance—the list elaborated by the enterprising humanists at the Polish Foreign Ministry includes for the most part expressions linked to the Holocaust. On the long list of these “wrong memory codes,” which they aspire to expunge from historical narrative, one finds, among others: “Polish genocide,” “Polish war crimes,” “Polish mass murders,” “Polish internment camps,” “Polish work camps,” and—most important for the purposes of this text—“Polish participation in the Holocaust.” The issue of “wrong memory codes” will from time to time reappear in this study.

The Origins of the Polish “Blue” Police, or the *Polnische Polizei des Generalgouvernements*

In September 1939, after four weeks of valiant but hopeless struggle against the vastly superior German forces, the Polish state collapsed. The Germans immediately abolished or suspended most of the administrative powers of the Polish government. With time, however, and in light of the deteriorating security situation, the occupying authorities felt it necessary to revive certain institutions. One such institution was the police. German police forces deployed in occupied Poland in the fall of 1939 numbered about 5,000—members of the Order Police (ORPO)—and these were simply unable to maintain public order or enforce the new regulations. On October 30, 1939, Higher SS- and Police Leader (HSSPF) for the Generalgouvernement Friedrich-Wilhelm Krüger issued an order for all former Polish policemen to report, under threat of penalty, back to

work. The Polish Police (PP) was thus restored, but much transformed.¹ The police corps was purged of “politically and racially unreliable” elements; all higher officers were fired or demoted and were replaced by German policemen. During the first months of occupation the ranks of the PP grew quickly, reaching 10,000 officers and men in the beginning of 1940, and, at its peak in late 1943, more than 20,000. The Polish resistance, or the so-called Polish underground state, gave the Polish policemen its reluctant blessing to enter the new formation, urging them at the same time to do their best to protect the interests of the Polish nation. The “Blue” Police, as the PP came to be known for their dark-blue uniforms, thus were the only militarized and armed Polish formation the Germans allowed to continue operating in occupied Poland.

September 1939–December 1941

The German occupation of Poland brought with it a host of anti-Jewish measures, some of which were implemented even before the end of 1939. The Polish state had been abolished and in its place the Germans created a rump state known as the General Government (Generalgouvernement), with one of Hitler’s trusted associates, Hans Frank, at its head. One of the most “recognizable” German measures was the “branding” regulation, which required all Polish Jews above the age of 12 to wear, beginning on December 1, 1939, white armbands bearing a blue Star of David. The first ghetto was established in October 1939, although the majority of Polish Jews would find themselves enclosed in ghettos somewhat later, in 1940 and in 1941. Even before the establishment of the ghettos, the German authorities introduced a variety of measures that severely restricted the freedom of movement of the Jewish population. Jews were prohibited from using public transportation, and in some areas special tramways or wagons were designated “*nur für Juden*” (for Jews only). In many cases Jews were allowed to use only a designated part of the sidewalk, and in other areas they were pushed off the sidewalks altogether, forced quite literally to walk in the gutters. These were some of the many degrading and humiliating regulations. Another was the requirement that Jewish men take off their hats and bow deeply whenever encountering a German on the street.

While stigmatizing and incarcerating the Jews, the Germans at the same time moved to undermine the foundations of Jewish economic well-being: some professions were declared off-

limits for Jews; Jewish retirees lost their pensions; and Jewish-owned real estate was seized by the authorities. In January 1940, the anti-Jewish measures were further reinforced and the German authorities began to seize not only Jews' houses but also personal items and movable property such as furniture.

Historians have tended to focus on larger ghettos, paying special attention to Warsaw, Łódź, and Cracow. Much less has been written about smaller ghettos, although that is where the majority of Poland's Jews lived, suffered, and died. Also in these small ghettos, the German presence was much less conspicuous (often the Germans were altogether absent) and the role of the Blue Police grew accordingly. This was the case, for instance, in Opoczno, a small town situated forty miles east of Radom in central Poland. In 1939 the city had a population of 7,000 inhabitants, half of whom were Jewish. On October 8, 1939, in the nearby town of Piotrków Trybunalski (soon Germanized to Petrikau) after barely a few weeks of occupation, the Germans created the first ghetto in occupied Europe. Opoczno was soon to follow: a ghetto was established there in the winter of 1940. In practical terms, this meant that one section of the town had to be transformed into a "Jewish quarter," with Jews resettled into a small and desperately overcrowded area. The forcible relocation was carried out under the tight supervision of the Blue Police. This was an open ghetto, with a flimsy and incomplete fence serving as the only physical barrier separating the Jews from the so-called "Aryan side." Nevertheless, the boundaries of the ghetto—although invisible—were very real. A historian might wonder how, in the absence of German police forces, the "invisible wall" of the ghetto was maintained. How were ghetto rules enforced and reinforced by the occupier? What was it that prevented the Jews—at least those who were able—from fleeing their prison and blending in with the Poles outside its boundaries?² The police station register—a detailed record of the daily activities of the Opoczno Blue Police—offers partial answers to these questions. This register is one of the very few preserved records of the day-to-day work of Polish policemen. In it, the policemen on duty recorded basic information: staffing according to "type of service," duties performed, and "notes of the officer on duty."

By the end of 1940, the small section of Opoczno designated by the Germans as a ghetto had become a deadly trap and a prison for more than 4,200 Jews, including locals and those resettled

from the neighboring communities.³ The Blue Police, in addition to regulating traffic, maintaining order, and upholding public safety, was entrusted with the enforcement of the occupiers' "Jewish" regulations. On this "Jewish front"—as some Polish diarists referred to the Germans' ongoing anti-Jewish activity⁴—the Blue Policemen enforced the requirement that Jews wear identifying armbands. In the Opoczno police station register we find evidence of arrests and fines imposed on Jews found in violation of this regulation.⁵ Fines, at least in the beginning, were small. On April 25, 1940, for instance, the register recorded that Adam Wajnberg and Rywka Rosenblum were apprehended in Opoczno without their "Jewish armbands" and were therefore arrested and fined three zlotys each. This sum was not a fortune, but it served as a useful reminder of the existing restrictions and, combined with a brief incarceration, was a meaningful warning to Jews who dared to flout German regulations. Similar fines were recorded in the register in the following days, some issued to Jews for appearing without an armband inside the ghetto, and others for leaving the ghetto and crossing to the Aryan side. It also happened that Opoczno Jews were harassed by the Blue Police for wearing "dirty armbands"—whatever this meant. Policemen were also instrumental in starving the ghetto, as they restricted the movements of Jewish traders who tried to bring foodstuffs into the city from the villages nearby. One may assume that the Jewish peddlers and traders arrested and fined by Polish officers were the unlucky ones who could not afford the bribes extorted on a daily basis by the police. In addition, the Polish Blue Police from time to time conducted raids in search of contraband. Jews were not allowed to engage in trade, so successful searches led to arrests. Jews were barred from travel and from leaving their places of residence without authorization; Polish officers arrested and imprisoned Jews from other areas who were discovered in Opoczno.⁶

In fall 1941 the police register began to make frequent references to Polish officers' cooperation with, or rather their supervision of, the Jewish Order Police.⁷ Not much is known about the Jewish police in Opoczno, but it seems that Polish supervision involved, on the one hand, keeping the Jewish policemen in line, and on the other, conducting joint patrols in the "Jewish quarter."⁸ These patrols provided an opportunity to perform still more house searches and, inevitably, led to further extortions and seizures of goods deemed illegal by the Polish officers. Enforcement of the curfew, which in 1941 was set at 9:00 p.m., was also assigned to the Blue Police. Polish officers

were kept busy escorting work columns of Jews to sites of forced labor and ensuring that all designated slave laborers reported for work. In cases of truancy, it was up to them to find and to punish the offending Jews. Yet all of these activities of the Blue Police, however damaging they may have been to the Jews of Opoczno and, in a broader sense, to the Jews of Poland, were but an introduction to the much greater existential threats that were soon to follow.

December 1941 through Summer 1942

The next stage of the Blue Police's involvement in the German policies of extermination opened on October 15, 1941 with the proclamation of the "3rd Regulation Concerning the Limitations of the Right of Residence in the Generalgouvernement."⁹ The most important part of this decree specified the death penalty on Jews caught outside the ghetto without authorization. To that point, Jews apprehended on the Aryan side typically had been arrested and sent to prison. Now, their lives were at stake. The same penalty was to be imposed on all those aiding Jews on the run—and an important role in the enforcement and execution of the new edict was assigned to the Polish Police. If anyone had any doubts about the Germans' true designs, these were put to rest in the first days of November 1941, when the ORPO in Warsaw began to transfer Jews apprehended outside the ghetto into the custody of the Polish Blue Police. The case files were sent to the German Special Court (Sondergericht), but the Jews were incarcerated in the Gęsia Street prison in the ghetto. "Gęsiówka," as it was known, was guarded by the Jewish Police. At the same time the Polish Police received instructions to shoot women and children caught trying to cross the ghetto boundary to the Aryan side (similar regulations regarding Jewish men had been issued several days earlier).¹⁰ Finally, on November 17, 1941 and December 15, 1941, the Blue Police conducted two mass executions in the yard of the Gęsia Street prison.¹¹

According to a report by a member of the Polish resistance, the execution took place at 8:35 a.m. in the presence of Col. Aleksander Reszczyński, commander of the Warsaw Blue Police, and several other officers. The firing squad was composed of thirty-two policemen. The German authorities were represented by Neumann (first name unknown), the prosecuting attorney. Incidentally, prosecutor Neumann, who in 1940–42 worked at the Warsaw Sondergericht, had

acquired notoriety as a “Jew-hater” and was particularly feared by the Jews caught outside the ghetto.¹²

The Polish underground informer reported that some members of the firing squad “had sorrow written on their faces,” but Colonel Reszczyński said to them: “Keep your chin up, boys! Be strong!” The firing squad stood six meters away from the posts to which the Jewish Police had secured the condemned persons. Pajkus, the glass-maker, cried: “That’s what people do, people are doing this!” (*Tak robią ludzie, to robią ludzie!*). The doomed cried in fear and despair and tore at their restraints in a vain attempt to set themselves free. An order was given and shots were fired. After a moment, four additional shots were heard. Commissioner Heinz Auerswald arrived in his car late for the execution. He jumped out of the car all smiles and, having heard from the prosecutor that all was over, said: “It’s a pity, but you did well!” (*Schade, [aber] Sie haben es gut gemacht*).¹³ News of the execution was reported widely both inside the ghetto and beyond it, not because of the uniqueness of the event (mass executions were, after all, commonplace in the fall of 1941) but because the Germans, as we may gather, were interested in making Polish Jews aware of the fact that the rules of occupation had just changed and that violation of German regulations henceforth would mean death.

Early in 1942, the Blue Police became instrumental in the implementation of the new policy of centralizing Jews in selected ghettos. At that point, the smaller Jewish communities (hitherto untouched by the ghettoization policy) were being moved to the larger ghettos in anticipation of the approaching “Final Solution.” In Opoczno that summer the situation took on its own horrible momentum: on July 28, 1942 the Blue Police assisted officials from the mayor’s office in escorting Polish families into the houses “vacated” by evicted Jews (*po wyeksmitowanych Żydach*).¹⁴ That same day, while some officers were escorting Poles to their new “ex-Jewish” homes, others escorted a column of 100 Jewish forced laborers from the shrinking ghetto to the Erystor factory located in the town. From time to time (once per month, on average) the Germans checked the Polish force’s readiness to confront the growing challenges. On August 6, 1942, according to the Opoczno “Station Register,” a lieutenant and a second lieutenant of the

gendarmarie conducted drills during the monthly inspection and inspected the weapons of the Polish policemen.

Shooting Jews—on German orders—became, in the late fall and early winter of 1941, one of the many additional responsibilities of the Polish Blue Police. In the period immediately preceding the liquidation of the ghettos, or the beginning of the implementation of the Final Solution, the policemen in blue carried out executions of Jews in Warsaw, Ostrów Mazowiecka, Wysokie Mazowieckie,¹⁵ Tarnów, Sokoły, Cracow, and many other localities too numerous to list here.¹⁶ It is one thing, however, to know about these executions in an abstract way; hearing about them from eyewitnesses is something quite different. In Sokoły, Janeczko, the chief of the local unit of the Blue Police, together with a few other officers, dragged Berl Kuszewski out of the local jail. Mosze Maik saw the execution:

Berl takes off his glasses, which he always had with him. He cleans the lenses and moves on. The policemen escort him on both sides. Only when he reaches the building of the Jewish Council does he see the gallows and the crowd of the assembled Jews. The Amtskommissar gives an order to tie Berl's hands behind his back and to hang him. The Polish policemen take Berl to the gallows and, having placed the noose around his neck, started to turn the crank, pulling him up to the very top. Berl's wife became hysterical and fainted, and his children were wailing.¹⁷

The murder of innocent people was a logical progression in the accelerating wave of terror directed at the Jews. The persecutions of 1940 and 1941 were a springboard, through a steep learning curve, to the murders of 1942. The robbery, the exploitation, the assaults, the beatings and the humiliation of the previous period paved the way to the next stage and made the Polish policemen an important—often indispensable—element in the German machine of extermination.

Einsatzbereit: The Liquidation Actions, 1942

In 1942 Constable Lucjan Matusiak was promoted to deputy chief of the Polish Blue Police station in Łochów, a quaint town fifty miles northeast of Warsaw. In the summer of that year Matusiak graduated from simple policeman to murderer. His education was linked to the liquidation of the Łochów-Baczkki ghetto, a relatively small ghetto with no more than one

thousand Jewish prisoners. During the liquidation, the Polish policemen—Matusiak among them—operated alongside their comrades and masters, the German gendarmes.¹⁸ We must recognize that Matusiak and his fellow officers did not become killers overnight. They observed the Germans at work and, with time, became skilled apprentices. According to Polish witnesses, the Polish policemen, together with the German gendarmes, moved from one Jewish house to the next, pulling the hidden Jews out of their hideouts in the walls and the attics. One witness stated after the war:

With my own eyes I saw Lucjan Matusiak and the gendarmes hunting down Jews. I saw him leading three Jews: Czerwony, Złotkowski and another one whose name escapes me, all of them were from our village.¹⁹ Matusiak, who led the Jews, knocked on the doors and ordered them to take shovels and to follow him. Later he told us [Poles] to go into the formerly-Jewish [*pożydowski*] houses and to throw the mattresses, bed covers, and furniture out into the street. In the meantime, the gendarmes stood over the Jews, who dug a grave for themselves. And then Fredek, the chief gendarme, shot those Jews.²⁰

A few days later, during the final liquidation of Baczki, Matusiak and other Polish policemen began to kill the Jews on their own. These were awkward initial steps, with the Poles firing randomly and inaccurately, and the Germans stepping in to finish off the wounded Jews themselves.²¹ Nevertheless, the evolution from murderers' apprentices to murderers in their own right was, in the case of the Polish policemen, rather swift. One can even venture to say that the policemen proved to be very diligent pupils who, in many cases, surpassed their German teachers even before the end of 1942.

While policeman Matusiak was honing his new skills in Łochów, his colleagues in Opoczno were loading the Jews into the railcars destined for Treblinka. After the train left the station, the Opoczno station register informs us, the policemen went to the empty ghetto to prevent the local “Aryan” population from looting the “abandoned Jewish property.”²² While the Jews of Opoczno were on their last road, the Jews of Węgrów (a town located 140 miles to the northeast of Opoczno) were preparing to observe Yom Kippur. They did not know that on the same day the local Blue Police had been placed on alert.

Early in the morning on September 22, 1942, a cordon of German and Polish policemen was formed around the town. Węgrów was now encircled, with the policemen taking part in the *Aktion* spread out at intervals of no more than 100 yards. The sky began to brighten at around 5:00 a.m., allowing the members of the Liquidierungskommando to see each other. The Blue Police were directly involved in the *Aktion* from the first moment, entering the town with the German forces, conducting house searches, and herding the Jews toward the central assembly point at the town square. By early afternoon, shortly after 2:00 p.m., the majority of Jewish inhabitants of the ghetto had been rounded up and delivered to the square. While the roving squads of Germans, Ukrainians, and Poles searched the houses for bunkers and hideouts, some of the members of the Liquidierungskommando began the mass executions with the shooting of elderly Jews.

The victims were delivered to the killing site at the Jewish cemetery on carts commandeered from residents of the town. They were shot over shallow pits dug out earlier by Polish workers who had been assembled by the mayor's office. The mayor, a Pole by the name of Okulus, was tasked with overseeing the removal of dead bodies from the streets. In his memoir, he made the following note: "The removal of the bodies had already started. There were carts and people were ready—they volunteered for the job without any pressure. Our hyenas were after Jewish clothes, footwear, and the cash that might be found on the dead."²³ While some were robbing the bodies left behind in the ghetto, others were busy in the cemetery at the site of the execution: "My friends who found themselves at the cemetery had tears in their eyes when they told me about the wounded being buried alive together with the dead, and about the gravediggers finishing off some of the Jews with shovels and stones."²⁴ Some of the Węgrów residents who had volunteered for the work of removing bodies from the streets took off with more than clothes and shoes: "They even pulled out gold teeth with pliers. That's why people in Węgrów called them 'dentists.' The 'dentists' sold their merchandise through fences and go-betweens. When I mentioned to one of them (he was a court clerk) that this gold was soaked in human blood, he told me: 'Impossible, I personally washed this stuff off.'"

The “hyenas” took their clues most of all from the Polish Blue Police and from the members of the firefighting brigades. The firefighters, led by Chief Wincenty Ajchel, showed up in the ghetto during the liquidation and, according to Mayor Okulus, “threw themselves [on the Jews] like hunting dogs on their prey. Henceforth, they ‘worked’ hand in hand with the Germans and—as locals and firefighters—did it much better than the Germans.” Chief Ajchel carried around a briefcase into which his men deposited precious objects taken from the Jews. The plan was to pool their resources and to split the loot in the evening, after “work.” Müller, the chief of the Węgrów Schutzpolizei, recognized the contribution made by the Polish police and firefighters, and met with some of them in the evening at a local restaurant: “He pulled a wad of money out of his case and gave it to them, saying: ‘Here, this is for your good work.’”²⁵

There were hundreds of ghettos in Poland (Nazi-occupied Poland, of course) and their liquidations followed a horrible pattern—one in which the Blue Police, the firefighters, the “bystanders,” and even children had a role to play and choices to make. Węgrów was no exception. The ghetto in Biłgoraj, fifty miles south of Lublin, was liquidated on November 2, 1942, ten days after the liquidation in Węgrów. Jan Mikulski, a Polish forester, described what he saw there as he was on his way to the bank to pick up some cash for his workers (life had to go on, after all): “Many bodies of women and children lying in the streets, in the gardens and on the squares. Wiesiołowski, the commander of the Polish police, surrounded by scores of kids aged 6 to 12, searched the attics, cellars, and sheds. For each Jewish child brought to him he gave the [Polish] kids sweets. He grabbed the small Jewish children by the neck and shot them through the head with his small-caliber revolver.”²⁶ The horrible and gory details of executions are not the most striking elements of these descriptions. Writing about the Holocaust touches, after all, upon the darkest aspects of human nature and upon the most evil human actions. What is striking here is the wide geographical distribution of the historical evidence discussed: segments of the local population seem to have taken an active part in the genocidal German project all across the occupied lands.

The Painful Issue of Bullets

On the day of the Aktion in Węgrów, the German-Ukrainian Liquidierungskommando, with the assistance of the Blue Police, local firefighters, and so-called “bystanders,” murdered more than 1,000 Jews in the streets of the city.²⁷ Another 8,000 Jews were marched to the Sokołów railway station, eight miles distant, and delivered to Treblinka. The Liquidierungskommando left Węgrów the following day. Their job, however, was far from complete: more than a thousand Jews remained hidden inside the ghetto. In the subsequent days and weeks the Polish Blue Police and the local firefighters conducted intense searches and found most of them. They either killed these Jews themselves, or delivered them to the German gendarmes for execution.

While Jewish Węgrów ceased to exist, the Jews of Wodzisław, a small town halfway between Kielce and Cracow, were still hoping against hope. Their ghetto, created in 1940, had a population of close to 4,000. As in so many other small ghettos, there were no walls or fences to separate the Jews from their “Aryan” neighbors. Nor were there any Germans to speak of in Wodzisław; the forces of order were represented by the local Blue Policemen. The Wodzisław unit reported to the county police headquarters located in nearby Jędrzejów. Some of the unit’s reports dealt with matters such as staffing, overtime, the policemen’s study of the German language, or minor matters of discipline. Other reports dealt with ammunition: the German ORPO members attached to the Blue Police were, as we learn from the preserved correspondence, notoriously stingy with ammunition. The Germans feared, for good reason, that the “Blues” would either sell the bullets on the black market or even use them against the occupation authorities. In 1942 there was little organized resistance against German rule, but by 1943 the loss or theft of bullets could result in a hearing before the SS and Police Court in Cracow (SS und Polizei Gericht Nr. 6 [Krakau]) and the consequences for the Polish policeman involved could be dire. It is not surprising, therefore, that before issuing further supplies, the Germans expected a thorough and very detailed accounting of all expended ammunition. Until mid-1942, requests to the German authorities for new ammunition most often listed the shooting of stray or rabid dogs as the reason for the use of previously issued bullets.

In the summer and fall of 1942, however, the realities of the Endlösung overtook and transformed police routine, relegating the shooting of stray dogs to a distant second place. Henceforth the Blue Policemen would most frequently target Jews. And so, in November 1942, in anticipation of the upcoming liquidation of the Wodzisław ghetto, the Germans provided the Polish officers with a fresh supply of ammunition. The bullets came in handy, as the local policemen seem to have fired often and fired well. The entry on Wodzisław in the encyclopedia of camps and ghettos published by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum devotes significant attention to the liquidation of the Jewish quarter:

The town had a small Polish (Blue) Police force, consisting at first of three and then two policemen, named Szczukocki and Machowski. The latter participated in the shooting of local Jews; after the war, he was sentenced to death by a Polish court in Kielce and executed.... The Germans liquidated the Wodzisław ghetto on or around September 20, 1942. Following the liquidation Aktion, the German authorities established a remnant ghetto in Wodzisław. At the beginning of November 1942, 90 Jews lived there, but the number reportedly grew to 300 before its liquidation that same month. On November 20, the remaining Jews were resettled to the Sandomierz ghetto.²⁸

By and large, the USHMM encyclopedia gets it right. The records of the Polish Blue Police allow us to make some important corrections to the existing narrative, however. In a report dated November 21, 1942, one day after the final liquidation, the commander of the Wodzisław police station listed the number of bullets expended by each officer. The Blue Policemen, if we are to trust their reports, fired 300 bullets on that fateful day. First of all, not just one officer—as we read in the encyclopedia—but all of them were involved in the mass murder of the Jews of Wodzisław. On average, each Polish policeman fired at Jews between fifteen to twenty bullets; platoon leader Józef Machowski—as the encyclopedia correctly notes—applied himself more energetically than did his fellow officers, expending thirty-six bullets during the Aktion.²⁹ The report reads: “I request a fresh supply of ammunition for the local detachment of the Polish Police. The bullets were fired against Jews by the officers of this police station during the most recent deportation of Jews from Wodzisław. Names follow.” The police reports—and three such reports have been preserved from the period during which the Wodzisław ghetto was liquidated—not only testify to the fact that all Polish officers took part in the Aktion but also reveal that

Sergeant Władysław Buczek, their commander and the author of the reports, requested for himself twenty additional bullets to replace those fired at Jews. According to the Jewish survivors of the Aktion in Wodzisław, close to 200 Jews were killed in the streets of the ghetto during that time.

The deadly efficiency of the Polish policemen is confirmed in another, unrelated series of archival documents. In 1949 constable Machowski and a fellow officer from the Wodzisław detachment were prosecuted for murdering Jews and Poles. According to witnesses, shortly after the liquidation of the ghetto was complete, Machowski boasted of having shot that day “at least thirty Jews.” He thus corroborated, in a way, the 1942 request for ammunition. We can now make corrections to the above-quoted encyclopedia entry. First, there were not three, but twenty Polish officers in Wodzisław on the day of the final liquidation. Second, it is highly unlikely that on November 20, 1942, three hundred Jews were marched to Sandomierz; instead they were killed by the Polish policemen in Wodzisław. If any Jews at all were resettled to Sandomierz, they must have somehow avoided the mass execution. The police documents quoted above force us—even at the risk of triggering “wrong memory codes”—to acknowledge the role of the previously unreported murderers—the Polish Blue Policemen.

On Duty in Łochów: The Case of Constable Lucjan Matusiak.

Keeping in mind the requests for bullets made by the policemen from Wodzisław, and the tight control over ammunition exercised by the ORPO, we can once again consider the above-mentioned platoon leader Lucjan Matusiak of the Łochów detachment of the Blue Police—the apprentice killer of local Jews. This time, however, our travel through the Holocaust will take us to June 1943, eight months after the liquidation of the last ghettos in the area and during the period of the so-called *Judenjagd*, or “hunt for the Jews.”

In late June 1943, Constable Lucjan Matusiak apprehended four Jews: two men, one woman and a child.³⁰ In fact, he did not catch the Jews himself; they were delivered to him, hands tied behind their backs with wire, by local peasants. The event was rather unremarkable—after all, by mid-1943, Matusiak and his fellow officers had been hunting down, robbing, and murdering Jews on a

regular basis for nearly a year. It can even be said that, in 1942 and the first half of 1943, the officers in blue had acquired extraordinary expertise in this particular area of police work. Their victims were either local Jews who went into hiding—Łochów, until 1942, had had a sizeable Jewish population—or Jews who had escaped from “death trains.” Between July 23, 1942 and late summer 1943, the railway line Warsaw-Łuszcz-Małkinia, which passes through Łochów, was the main transportation route delivering victims to the gas chambers in the not-so-distant Treblinka extermination camp. As we know well from the testimonies of the few survivors—testimonies corroborated by the hundreds of graves lining the railway tracks—many Jews tried to escape the deportation trains.³¹ They pried open the wooden planks of the wagons or tore away the barbed wire covering the small openings in the cattle-cars, and fled. Many were wounded or killed during the dangerous jump, and many were shot by the soldiers guarding the transports. Some, however, managed to make it into the heavily forested areas close to the railway tracks and, later, looking for help, reached the nearby hamlets and villages. That is where some of them encountered Lucjan Matusiak and his fellow officers in the dark-blue uniforms of the Polish Police.

We do not know whether the four Jews who found themselves at the mercy of the Polish constable in June 1943 were local Jews hiding in the area, or people who had escaped from the death trains. Whether they were local or from Warsaw is, however, of little importance. What was important was their number—a number that forced Constable Matusiak to make some hard choices. He had to kill four Jews, and he had only one or two bullets left. Waclaw Chomontowski, an eyewitness, described the incident:

I saw with my own eyes how officer Matusiak executed four Jews using one bullet in the village of Łopianka. He stood these four Jewboys [*żydek*] in a row, one behind another, and shot the last one in the back. There was also a young Jewboy [*żydziak*], so he killed him with a separate bullet. Once he had shot the Jews, he told me and the others to dig a grave, but he told us to make it shallow, not to dig too deep. When we laid them into this ditch, one Jew, who had only been wounded, started begging: “Mr. Officer please, have mercy, finish me off!” to which Constable Matusiak responded: “You are not worth a bullet, you will croak anyhow!”³²

Another gravedigging “bystander”—a term which the historians of the Holocaust in the East are more and more reluctant to use—described the same event in a slightly different manner, in more detail:

[Matusiak] lined up the Jews one next to the other and at the end of the row he placed this boy, who was perhaps thirteen, and then he shot them with one bullet. The boy was killed right away, but the older Jews were badly wounded, and one Jewboy begged: “Officer, please, finish me off!” But officer Matusiak said that he had no more bullets left. Then he told us to bury them and then he stomped on the dirt with his feet, not listening to the pleas of the wounded Jew.... So we buried them, but when I came back a while later I could see the earth moving and I could hear the wounded Jew still moaning beneath.³³

Chomontowski did not elaborate on why he had not thought—at that late stage—of saving the wounded Jew buried alive under his feet. This might be the first of the many troubling questions that come to mind in reading the archival records from the period immediately after the war: Did Chomontowski fear the return of Blue Policeman Matusiak? Or did he, like so many others across the occupied land, simply assume that for the Jews, death—one way or another—was inevitable? That digging the wounded man out of his grave would be pointless? The historian Emanuel Ringelblum noted while in hiding in Warsaw in 1944, shortly before he was betrayed and killed: “A Jew today is seen as ‘the deceased on leave,’ about to die sooner or later.”³⁴

There are several other troubling questions related to the execution in Łopianka. Some of them will, no doubt, trigger the “wrong memory codes” that today, more than seventy years after the fact, preoccupy authorities in Poland. First, the killings of Jews in Łopianka occurred in the absence of any Germans and without any German knowledge or direct involvement. Indeed, constable Matusiak acted on his own initiative; he solved the “Jewish question” in the town as well as he was able. There must have been no doubt in his mind that, one way or another, it had to be solved. Furthermore, the Blue Policeman was not acting alone; he could rely on at least some of the local inhabitants to assist him in his work. Third, constable Matusiak was not, from what we know, a vicious killer whom the Germans had hired for his murderous skills. In fact, he was just an ordinary small-town cop with eleven years of prewar experience in the Polish police. As far as we can tell from the documents in his file, he was an ordinary man whom

circumstances, antisemitism, greed, fear, and opportunity transformed into a killer. And finally, we have the question of the bullets. No doubt, by mid-1943 officer Matusiak had become a vicious and heartless killer. But he had a “rational” explanation for his indifference: the German reluctance to share ammunition with their Polish underlings.

Patriotic Policeman Królik

Grębków is a small village fifty miles east of Warsaw, just north of the Warsaw-Siedlce highway, a few miles past Mińsk Mazowiecki. The scenery is beautiful, even idyllic, with rolling hills, fields, lush meadows, and charming woods. Before the war Jews made up more than a half of the population in the towns in this area, but they were also fairly numerous in smaller villages. In spring 1942 the 142 Jews of Grębków were seized by the local Blue Policemen, placed in carts, and delivered to the nearby ghetto in Węgrów. On September 22, 1942 they were deported—together with most of Węgrów’s Jews—to the extermination camp in Treblinka. Those who remained in Grębków went into hiding. Unfortunately for them, the village was home to a detachment of the Polish Blue Police under the command of Sergeant Bielecki and his deputy, Królik.³⁵ Sometime in November 1943 (it is difficult to pinpoint the exact date, as witnesses give conflicting evidence), Sergeant Bielecki received information from one of his many trusted sources. The “confidential source” reported that Jews were hiding in the area. Indeed, a search of the house of Aleksandra Janusz in the village of Gałki, a few miles away, revealed the presence of nine Jews hidden in a primitive hideout—a crypt of sorts, dug out under the dirt floor of one of the rooms. Mrs. Janusz, the badly frightened rescuer, recalled that, as soon as they showed up at her door, officers Iwanek and Królik began shouting: “Hey, where are the poodles!?” Mrs. Janusz pretended not to know who these “poodles” were, but the policemen kept saying one to another, visibly amused: “Oh yes, yes, she has the poodles!”

The levity of both policemen is lost in translation—*królik* is Polish for *rabbit*. The notion of a rabbit chasing poodles might have seemed hilarious to the arresting officers. Once the jokes were over, however, Królik took a pitchfork and—apparently well-informed about the location of the hideout—went looking for the trapdoor leading to the cellar. The door had been covered with manure and dirt. And under the manure-covered trapdoor were the Jews, or—as Królik jokingly

referred to them—the poodles. Grochal descended into the hole and, not without trouble, hauled all of the offending “citizens of Jewish nationality”—to quote the language of the documents—to the surface.³⁶ The Jews and the policemen, as immediately became obvious, were no strangers. The Rubins, their children, and Mrs. Gurszyn and Mrs. Kajzer all hailed from nearby Kałuszyn. Królik, when he saw the Jews emerging from the pit, started to laugh and said: “Ho, ho, Mr. Rubin, I know you! You are from Kałuszyn and you made shoes for me! Don’t worry, we won’t hurt you. We will just lead you toward the forest, we will shoot a few times in the air and you will run for cover! I won’t shoot you!”³⁷ After a while, four more policemen entered the Janusz home and, according to the rescuer’s daughter, the still-smiling officer Królik grabbed from Rubin the shoemaker a wad of banknotes. Once Królik took the money from his victims, he and three other policemen marched the Jews towards the woods. Soon after, the peasants of Gałki heard numerous shots coming from the distance. After a while, the Blue Policemen returned to the village and Królik asked Mrs. Janusz to bring hot water because they needed to wash blood off their hands. Once the officers had washed their hands, constable Iwanek made an attempt to extort from Mrs. Janusz 3,000 zlotys as a fine “for having sheltered Jews.”³⁸

Emanuel Ringelblum, the well-known chronicler of the Warsaw ghetto, spent the last months of his life hiding in a bunker in Warsaw. In the winter of 1943–1944 he wrote his last book: a somber analysis of Polish-Jewish relations during the war. It was a bitter text, written by a Polish Jew who saw his entire nation being murdered in plain sight. Ringelblum also had a word to say about the murderers in dark-blue uniforms. Referring to the Blue Policemen, he wrote: “The blood of hundreds of thousands of Polish Jews, caught and driven to the ‘death vans,’ will be on their hands.”³⁹ Referring to the blood on the hands of the Polish policemen, Ringelblum was using a figure of speech, a metaphor. He had not met Constable Królik, the Grębków policeman.

What initial insights can one gather from the fate of the Rubin family of Kałuszyn? First, we learn of the frequency of betrayal of hidden Jews by Poles through the sharing of “confidential” information with the Blue Police. This betrayal, due to widespread antisemitism and hatred of the Jews, was combined with the seemingly universal conviction among Poles that “Jewish gold” was just waiting to be transferred to new owners.⁴⁰ The myth of “Jewish gold” was so popular

and so deeply-rooted among Christian Poles that it sealed the fate of Rubin, the poor shoemaker from Kałuszyn, and the others hiding with him. Once again, at the risk of repeating “wrong memory codes,” we must stress that the prevailing atmosphere was one of fear and antisemitism. This was an atmosphere that proved devastating to Poles who dared to engage in rescue efforts, and all the more deadly for their Jewish charges.

Our third observation concerns the surprisingly large margin for independent action, or agency, on the part of the Blue Policemen in cases involving the Jews. Very often constables arrested, robbed, and murdered their victims without any German orders and without German knowledge. Last but not least, these Polish policemen were killing people who were not strangers, but neighbors they had known—as in the case of the Rubin family—since before the war. After the war, responding to charges of murder, the Blue Policemen often argued that, in fact, the killing of Jews was a patriotic act—one that saved the Polish villagers from the wrath of the Germans, who would have learned sooner or later about the Jews in hiding and who then would have burned down the entire village and perhaps shot a number of Polish hostages.

There was, however, more to Constable Królik than met the eye. In his personnel file, which by chance survived in what remains of the collection of the SS and Police Court of Cracow, we find several laudatory evaluations written by his German superiors. In one of them one can read: “Krolik is an efficient, energetic and brave police officer.”⁴¹ Not only Germans looked favorably upon policeman Królik’s actions: his wartime contributions were equally praised by his superiors in the Polish resistance. Królik, as we learn, was a patriot and a soldier of the II Department (codename “Smola” [Tar]) of the Home Army (Armia Krajowa, AK), which was responsible for gathering intelligence in the Węgrów area.⁴² And the appreciation of Królik’s wartime achievements survived the war and lasts until today. Both Królik and Grochal have been recently described by a historian of the Węgrów area resistance as men “belonging to the most valuable human element among all the social strata.”⁴³ It is not surprising, therefore, that Królik was widely respected by his peers and by his community. After the war, when facing trial for the less praiseworthy episodes of his wartime activity, his neighbors stood by him and sent letters in his defense to the Warsaw Court of Appeals.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, in Warsaw: Brave Associates in Murder

The “exploits” of policemen serving in rural areas differed from the tactics employed by their colleagues serving in large cities, but at the end of the day, the Jews died either way. If one were to assume on the basis of the evidence presented earlier that the Polish Blue Policemen in rural areas were particularly deadly, one would be wrong. One of the duties of the Blue Police in Warsaw was to guard the ghetto from the outside as well as from within (two precincts were maintained inside the ghetto until the summer of 1942). After the Grossaktion Warschau—the partial liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto carried out between July 22 and September 21, 1942—the Polish Police remained on duty to control the 50,000 Jews still alive in the remnant ghetto. The rules of engagement had changed, however. On December 10, 1942, Ferdinand von Sammern-Frankenegg, the chief of police and SS for the Warsaw District, issued the following order to the Polish Police: “Jews encountered outside the Jewish quarter without a permit must be shot on the spot, no investigation of any kind initiated. On the 30th of every month a report must be filed with me listing all the Jews who were shot pursuant to the present regulation.”⁴⁵ Indeed, the Polish Police began to file the required reports. Soon, however, the realities of the destruction overtook and overwhelmed the bureaucratic framework of murder.

The uprising in the Warsaw ghetto began on April 19, 1943, as did its brutal suppression. Eighty-five German soldiers and policemen were either killed or wounded in this “battle against the Jews.” In his report “The Jewish Quarter in Warsaw Exists No More,” SS-Brigadeführer Jürgen Stroop wrote of the casualties on his side: “They gave to the Führer and to the Fatherland the most precious thing they had—their lives. We shall never forget them!” Constable Julian Zieliński of the 14th precinct of the Warsaw Blue Police, who—as we read—“was killed by the Jewish bandits in the fulfilment of his duties,” was also among the dead. Several other officers from the 1st, 7th, and 8th precincts found themselves among the wounded.⁴⁶ Let me once again quote from Gen. Stroop’s report: “The Polish Police received permission to seize one-third of all goods seized upon the persons of Jews apprehended and arrested on the Aryan side of the city. This measure was very successful.”⁴⁷

The Blue Police not only guarded the burning ghetto from the outside; many Polish officers found themselves in the very “heat of the action,” to use a military expression. Leon Najberg, a survivor of the Warsaw ghetto uprising wrote in his diary:

Wednesday, 26 May 1943. When Fugman saw the pistols in the hands of the Polish policemen, he made his last statement: “You German lackeys! I will be avenged!” The police scum opened fire.... Next to the wall of the house at Świętojerska 38, in front of the dump, we saw the bodies of women, girls, and children. They looked like a heap of rags; useless discarded items. But their twisted arms and legs showed that just a moment ago they had been alive. In the light of flashlights we recognized familiar faces.... We talked quietly in Yiddish about this new link in the powerful chain of crimes committed by the Polish-German block.

Thursday, 27 May 1943. Our co-citizens [the Polish policemen], the brave associates in murder, were not yet done. After yesterday’s killing they returned today—to plunder. Policemen from the 17th and the 18th precincts in Warsaw showed up today, before dawn, around 4:00 a.m., at the courtyard of Wałowa 4 and tore clothes from the bodies of not-quite-cold Jewish victims from the “Druker’s” bunker. They took the clothes, underwear, and shoes, leaving the “carcasses” naked. They did the same thing with the bodies of women who had been shot at Wałowa 2. The robbers put the clothes into bags and, around 5:00 a.m., they took all of it to the Polish quarter. While they tore the clothes off the bodies, they threw the dead as if handling animal carcasses. Twenty-five Polish hyenas, armed to the teeth with various firearms and grenades, were involved in this blasphemy.⁴⁸

Mietek Pachter, a member of the Jewish Fighting Organization (ŻOB) was caught in the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto in a bunker after the uprising. Escorted by the Germans, he was on his way, together with many other Jews, to the death trains waiting on the Umschlagplatz, nearby. Pachter later wrote:

We see the Polish “Blue” policemen. They stand by, watching this parade of death. A few of them stand farther away from the Germans and quietly say: “Throw us your diamonds and money, you won’t need them anymore.” Who could possibly be more vulgar than these leeches? I cannot contain myself and I shout: “Don’t think you are safe! Your moment shall also come—be damned!” I can only damn them from the bottom of my soul. A real fire was burning in my heart. I could only hear them speaking: “Throw your diamonds and money.... You won’t need them anymore....” A few others started swearing at the police; the marching crowd was riled up by the policemen, while the policemen’s impudence and greed reached its peak. But, after all, what could one expect? Why should the collaborators be any better than their

masters? They work together so well.... How much sadism and hate was in these few words!⁴⁹

Victory in the battle against the Jews of Warsaw did not mean, however, that the Polish officers (whom Najberg aptly dubbed “brave associates in murder”) could rest on their laurels. In their ongoing hunt for hidden Jews they received significant help from colleagues who had served in the prewar investigative units now known as the Polish Criminal Police, or the *Polnische Kriminalpolizei* (Polish Kripo or *Polska Policja Kryminalna*, PPK).

The Polish Kripo at Work

Historians know next to nothing about the wartime activities of the Polish Kripo. The handful of studies of German police rarely mention the PPK, and then usually only briefly. The role of the criminal police in the extermination of Polish Jewry remains unknown. In contrast to the more familiar Blue Police, which the Germans subordinated to their *Ordnungspolizei* (Order Police, ORPO) or regular police, the Polish Kripo was subordinate to the German Kripo, a section of the *Sicherheitspolizei* (Security Police, SIPO). Polish members of the Kripo came mostly from the Investigative Office, the elite of the prewar Polish police. In theory, the Polish Kripo was to focus on investigating common crimes. In reality, it became one of the essential components of the Nazi terror apparatus. As the occupation went on, Jewish survivors fighting to stay alive among “Aryan” society became a focus of the Polish Kripo’s work.

Emanuel Ringelblum—who was not only a historian, but also a social activist and founder of *Oyneg Shabbes*, the archive of the Warsaw ghetto—was just one among the many Jews who had the terrible misfortune to come to the attention of the Polish Kripo. In the fall of 1943, Emanuel Ringelblum, together with his wife Yehudis and their son Uri, went into hiding in an underground bunker. They survived in the hideout until March 1944. The bunker—dubbed “Kryisia” by its occupants—was an extraordinary feat of engineering. Located in the southern outskirts of Warsaw, under the greenhouses of Mieczysław Wolski, a courageous Pole, “Kryisia” housed at various times almost forty Jews. In Warsaw in 1944, no other hiding place for Jews came close to the size of “Kryisia.” By then, after two years of being relentlessly hunted, the remaining Jews of Warsaw preferred to hide individually, or—more rarely—in small family groups. The existence

of a bunker housing dozens of people, still undetected in Warsaw in 1944, was simply astonishing. In the darkness of the bunker, Ringelblum worked on his last manuscript: a history of wartime Polish-Jewish relations. The manuscript, smuggled out of the bunker, survived the war. Ringelblum necessarily reflected on the role of the “Blue” Police: “The Polish Police ... has played a most lamentable role in the extermination of the Jews of Poland. The uniformed police has been an enthusiastic executor of all the German directives regarding the Jews.⁵⁰ Although Ringelblum knew well the threats awaiting the Jews in hiding on the Aryan side and the extent of the murderous actions of the Blue Policemen, he could not have known about the new strategies being developed at the time by the Polish Kripo. These strategies were to prove deadly to hundreds of Jews hiding in the city, including the occupants of “Kryisia.”

In the autumn of 1943, around the time when Ringelblum and his family took refuge in Wolski’s bunker, the Polish Kripo created a specialized unit to track and arrest Jews in hiding. Similar specialized units existed in other occupied countries: the Parisian police had a unit known as *mangeurs des Juifs* (Jew-eaters); the Dutch had their own, equally deadly “Hennicke columns”; and Belorussians and Ukrainians sent into the field thousands of uniformed and non-uniformed killers. While the French and the Dutch policemen and—to a lesser extent—their Ukrainian and Belorussian counterparts have been treated extensively in the literature, a deathly silence surrounds the exploits of their Polish colleagues.⁵¹ The new section of the PPK was named the *Kriegsfahndungskommando*—the Kommando for Wartime Manhunts. According to one testimony, the door to the Commando’s office bore a plaque with the telling sign *Oberstreifkommando* (Main Office for Manhunts). The Polish employees of the Warsaw Kripo called this unit simply “the Jewish office.”⁵² The Kommando for Wartime Manhunts was headed by SS-Untersturmführer and Kriminalkommissar Werner Balhause. Little is known about Balhause (a.k.a. Ballhaus, Balhausen). Before he was transferred to Warsaw, he had worked for the Kripo in Ostrowiec, where he was said to have been co-responsible for liquidating the ghetto. Balhause’s deputy on the *Judenreferat* (Jewish desk) was Kriminalsekretär Schuhardt, but the majority of its employees were Polish detectives, the *crème de la crème* of the Polish investigative units from before the war. When its first head, Waław Stroka, was killed in early 1944 in a random shoot-out, Zygmunt Głowacki, previously a detective with the 2nd Directorate

of the Kripo, took over. Balhause recruited for his new unit people with significant experience in tracking Jews, including two intelligence agents from the 2nd Directorate—prewar undercover detectives with extensive networks of informers across the city. The day-to-day work of this office relied on networks of informers. Every agent in effect ran his own spy ring. Thus, Sergeant Głowacki ran ten informers and collaborated with an agent for special missions: one Jan Łakiński, who would soon be executed by the Polish underground. The numerous anonymous reports sent to the police also played an important role in the work of the unit. The *Kriegsfahndungskommando* began to score some successes in the late autumn of 1943. According to one of the undercover agents, “arrests of Jews were conducted frequently, on average once or twice a week.”⁵³ Most often the arrests were made in apartments where Jews were hiding. An important motivating factor for the policemen attached to the manhunt unit was financial gain: “The whole section was engaged in searching for the Jews and robbing them,” recalled an employee of the Main Criminal Directorate.⁵⁴

Late February and early March 1944 were a time of increased work for the *Judenreferat*. Information about the intense activity of the Polish Kripo can be found in the secret reports of Blue Policemen who provided intelligence to the AK. On February 29, 1944 Ludwik Landau, who worked for the Office of Information and Propaganda of the AK was caught in unknown circumstances. His family was arrested a day later. On March 1, Julian Grobelny, the chairman of *Żegota* (the underground Council for Aid to Jews), was arrested in the town of Mińsk Mazowiecki. On March 2, Jan Jaworski, “a member of [*Żegota*],” was arrested in a Warsaw coffee shop where he was to meet with Kripo agents to pay a ransom for the release of detained Jews. On March 3, agents arrested a large group of Jews in hiding in Koźła Street.⁵⁵ And four days later, the “Kryisia” bunker was found. It is impossible to say whether the information the Polish Kripo had about the bunker came from the people arrested in previous sweeps, from Wolski’s scorned girlfriend (as some claimed), or from other sources.

Uncovering “Kryisia” was one of the greatest successes of the *Kriegsfahndungskommando* of the Polish Kripo. The operation can be reconstructed with reasonable accuracy thanks to the testimony of two men who took part in it. According to the testimony of Z. Głowacki, on

Tuesday, March 7, 1944, as soon as the officers arrived at work early in the morning, Untersturmführer Balhause raised the alarm. After a short briefing, the officers got into cars. Głowacki continues:

Balhause ordered us all to follow him. We drove to Grójecka Street, I don't remember the number—it was between Narutowicz Square and the last tram stop in the direction of Okęcie airport. When we arrived, we saw a dozen or so Germans from the Gestapo. We entered the property through a gate. There were greenhouses there. We and the Gestapo surrounded them. I learned that the gardener who owned the greenhouses and his teenaged [nephew] had been arrested. One of the Germans ordered the gardener's son to go down into the bunker under the greenhouses and explain to the Jews inside that all resistance would be pointless and that they should all come out. The Jews came out of that bunker one by one; there were more than twenty of them, and they were arrested by the Gestapo. These Jews were of different genders and ages—there were even children [among them]. After the arrests, the Jews and the gardener and his son were transported to the Gestapo command, while we returned to the headquarters.⁵⁶

The Blue policemen cooperating with the underground described the exposure of the bunker in similar terms. The underground bulletin *Kronika wydarzeń* (Chronicle of Events) noted on March 7:

Thirty-eight Jews hiding in gardener Wolski's buildings at 81 Grójecka Street were arrested. One of them was an infant just a few days old. These Jews had been hiding in a comfortably furnished greenhouse cellar. They had running water, a bathroom and electricity. Gardener Wolski delivered their food. The Jews had been hiding there since March 5, 1943. The Jews were taken away with their belongings (furs, jewelry, 4 kg of gold, etc.). The greenhouse and all the furnishings were destroyed with hand grenades and burned down. Wolski and his sister and sister's son were arrested, and his apartment was sealed.

It follows from these accounts that the Kripo mobilized significant manpower, including units of the Blue Police from several police stations: "From what I can remember, nearly everyone from our section and many agents from the Command and other police stations took part in liquidating the bunker filled with Jews in Ochota."⁵⁷ Another testimony reads: "We were made to stand in pairs with Gestapo men. There was a hiding place under the greenhouses on the property. The Germans brought out some people from this hiding place. There were about a dozen of these people."⁵⁸ Wolski's movables and his charges' possessions "were taken away by the 23rd

Precinct, and the local population stole the worthless rags left behind by the police.”⁵⁹ According to a report produced shortly after the war, “All the inhabitants of Wolski’s house fled during the liquidation of the hideaway, taking the most valuable things with them, and the uniformed police of the 23rd Precinct posted along Grójecka Street, which was crowded with locals, did not impede their escape.”⁶⁰

A week later Emanuel Ringelblum, Yehudis, Uri, and the rest of the Jews from the bunker were murdered in the ruins of the ghetto, probably in the same spot where the Museum of the History of Polish Jews (called with unintended irony the “Museum of Life”⁶¹—stands today. It can be assumed that the courageous rescuer Wolski and his nephew died at about the same time. The men of the manhunt unit of the Polish Kripo disappeared without a trace, except for the few scattered documents that are a mere signal of the degree of terror and pain they inflicted on the dying Polish Jews.

Conclusion

The title of this article implies that the Polish police collaborated with the Germans. Were they, however, in fact collaborators, or did they pursue their own agenda—one that was not necessarily in line with the wishes of their German masters? From the point of view of the Jewish victims, these distinctions mattered little. Actually, they did not matter at all. For a Jew, falling into the hands of the Polish police meant, in practically all known cases, certain death. And death followed the Blue Policemen everywhere; Wodzisław, Opoczno, Warsaw, Biłgoraj, Węgrów, and Łochów were by no means unique. Neither were the methods used by the Polish police. The historical evidence—hard, irrefutable evidence coming from the Polish, German, and Israeli archives—points to a pattern of murderous involvement throughout occupied Poland. Emanuel Ringelblum, himself a victim of Polish detectives, suggested that the Polish policemen were responsible for the deaths of “hundreds of thousands of Polish Jews.”⁶² We will never know the precise numbers, of course. Some policemen killed, others tracked Jews down, and still others shut the doors of cattle wagons headed for Treblinka or Bełżec. But Ringelblum offered us an order of magnitude that should serve as a challenge to historians. The Jewish victims of the Holocaust, in many cases people who might have had a fighting chance to survive, deserve nothing less.

Today, in Poland, attempts are being made to portray the Blue Police as true Polish patriots deeply engaged in the resistance—as unsung heroes of the struggle against the Germans. In very many cases this is true. Unfortunately, as we know, patriotic engagement sometimes went hand-in-hand with involvement in German policies of extermination. This particular insight appears to have been missed by the creators of the new monument dedicated to the memory of Cracow Blue Policemen who were executed by the Germans. The monument, erected in 2012, could have been placed in several different locations: in front of the Cracow police headquarters, for instance. This was not to be: lacking subtlety, the creators placed the monument right in the middle of the site of the former Płaszów concentration camp, the murder site of 20,000 Cracow Jews. Many of those Jews were arrested and delivered to Płaszów—for near-certain death—by officers of the Polish Blue Police. Wrong memory code? Not this time, I fear.

Had policemen Królik and Matusiak and thousands of their fellow officers demonstrated less enthusiasm for tracking down and killing Jews; had the firefighters from Markowa, from Stoczek, from Węgrów, and from hundreds of other locations shown more interest in fighting fires and less in killing Jews; had the “bystanders” chosen to stand by rather than to engage in the search for the desperate victims, many more Polish Jews would have survived the war. If we leave out those Jews who fled to the Soviet Union and therefore never found themselves under German rule, the percentage of Polish Jews who survived stands at about one percent. This does not mean that all of them survived the subsequent pogroms and murders of the postwar period—but that is a different story.



Monument to Polish Blue Policemen executed by the Germans, located on the grounds of the former Płaszów concentration camp. Photo reprinted with the permission of Dagmara Swaltek

Where does all of this leave us? Far from engaging in new interpretations, we are faced with new historical evidence that can actually reshape our understanding of certain aspects of the Holocaust. Far from shifting the blame away from the Germans, the evidence points to widespread acceptance of the German genocidal project. However efficient, the German system of extermination was, at least in part, based on improvisation. Orders coming from the top were intentionally lacking precision, to allow lower ranks to improvise. In many countries local institutions and individuals—simple people—became in a variety of ways complicit with the Germans. Most were animated by antisemitism, although various other justifications were offered later to explain the heinous acts. It was their participation that, in a number of ways, made the German system of murder as efficient as it was.

In his last book, *Final Solution: The Fate of the Jews, 1933–45*, David Cesarani quoted a “bystander” who claimed that for the Germans the execution of three hundred Jews at Ponary meant the removal of three hundred enemies of humanity; for the Lithuanian auxiliaries involved in the massacre, the same three hundred Jews represented—the Lithuanian argued—three hundred pairs of trousers and shoes.⁶³ In light of the murderous actions of the Polish “Blue” Police, one might want to put Cesarani’s witness’s claim to the test. Does simple greed provide the necessary justification and help to explain the zeal with which local enablers of the Nazis committed murders? Does it explain the frequency of the killing sprees they committed? One rather doubts it. After all, and despite the widespread violence, not all shoes and not all trousers became fair game. Christopher Browning, one of the most insightful historians of *die Täter* (the perpetrators), argues that for the Germans the killing of Jews was a matter of duty; of following orders and responding to peer-group pressure. In the case of the Polish Blue Policemen and the Polish firefighters (and the Lithuanian auxiliaries, I would argue), the murder of Jews drew upon deeper layers of hatred. This hatred sprang like weeds from the toxic soil of antisemitism, which had grown deep over time, enriched and cultivated by centuries of the teachings of the Church and decades of secular, nationalistic indoctrination. Greed, opportunism, and fear were therefore powerful but secondary motivations for the Gentile killers of their own Jewish neighbors.

NOTES

¹ Of the little that has been written about the Polish “Blue” Police, most is in Polish. The only monograph of which I’m aware, Adam Hempel’s *Pogrobowcy kłęski: Rzecz o policji “granatowej” w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie, 1939–1945* (1990), was written before closed archival collections were made accessible to historians, and is therefore of limited value to researchers. Some information about the anti-Jewish activities of the Blue Police can be found in Jan Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 101–20.

² Elżbieta Janicka discussed the role of “bystanders” in Poland during the Holocaust in “Participating Observers? The German Project and the Local Contexts in Occupied Poland,” a paper delivered November 6, 2016 at the Lessons and Legacies conference at Claremont-McKenna College. See also Elżbieta Janicka, “Pamięć przyswojona: Koncepcja polskiego doświadczenia zagłady Żydów jako traumy zbiorowej w świetle rewizji kategorii świadka,” (Acquired Memory: The Conception of the Polish Experience of the Holocaust as Collective Trauma in Light of the Revision of the Concept of *Bystander*), *Studia litteraria historica* 3/4 (2014–2015): 148–226.

³ The ghetto was liquidated in two stages, during the fall of 1942 and January 1943. Jewish prisoners were rounded up and sent to Treblinka extermination camp.

⁴ See for example Franciszek Wyszzyński, *Dzienniki, 1941–1944* (Warsaw: Mówią Wieki, 2007).

⁵ See for example the cases of Faja Furman, Arie Perec, and Chaim Mendelson—each fined three zlotys for lacking the required armband. Station Register, Opoczno, entry dated April 26, 1940, Archiwum Państwowe w Kielcach (State Archive, Kielce, APK), collection Policja Państwowa (hereafter Station Register, Opoczno).

⁶ In the summer of 1941 the police register recorded “searches of Jewish houses” in nearby Przysucha and, in the fall, arrests of Jews from other areas who had arrived in Opoczno without authorization. See for example the entry dated November 22, 1941 concerning control of prices charged in the town market. An entry of the same day at 3:00 p.m. notes that constable Matysiak placed the Jew Jusek Zelkier from Końskie under arrest because he did not have a permit to be in Opoczno. Station Register, Opoczno.

⁷ Station Register, Opoczno, entry dated October 31, 1941, 8:00 p.m., constable Franciszek Bieńko: patrols in Opoczno and inspection of the Jewish Order Service; *Ibid.*, January 28, 1942, constables Franciszek Bieńko and Franciszek Matusiak: patrol in Opoczno and inspection of the Jewish Order Service, Łaja Gingold fined 5 zlotys for wearing a dirty armband.

⁸ *Ibid.*, entry of January 29, 1942, constables Franciszek Bieńko and Franciszek Matusiak: inspection of the Jewish Order Service, fines (health and sanitation); patrol in the Jewish quarter.

⁹ Full text of the 3rd Regulation, and other German regulations for the General Government, can be found in *Verordnungsblatt für das Generalgouvernement*.

¹⁰ “Jarko, Oberstleutenant d.Sch. (für. Hauptmann) an der Kommandeur der Ordnungspolizei für den Distrikt Warschau, 10.11.1941,” copy at Yad Vashem Archives (YVA), Record Group TR 10\2861-1, original held at Zentrale Stelle (Z.St) Ludwigsburg, 211 AR-Z 77\66 BI\ a.f. 31.

¹¹ Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak, *Getto warszawskie: Przewodnik po nieistniejącym mieście* (Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2013), 205. Twenty-four people were shot during the first execution.

¹² Izrael Cymlich, “Moje przeżycia wojenne.” Archive of the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw [AŻIH], collection 302, dossier 324, p. 19.

¹³ AŻIH, Ringelblum Archive, Ring. I/224. Jewish Council, Warsaw, Central Prison, Gesia. Note about the execution, after December 15, 1941. Another description of this execution can be found in a report filed by the Polish underground, see: Archiwum Akt Nowych (Archive of Contemporary Documentation, AAN), Warsaw, collection Delegatura Rządu na Kraj, 202/II/28, p. 67.

¹⁴ Station Register, Opoczno, entry dated July 28, 1942, Sergeant Józef Smogała, special duty in Opoczno: assisting a municipal official in escorting the Polish families into the apartments vacated by evicted Jews.

¹⁵ Testimony of Miriam Wicer Thau, YVA, O3/2716, p. 11.

¹⁶ “The public execution of Berl Kuszewski,” AŻIH, collection 301, file 390. Testimony of Mosze (Michał) Maik from Sokoły. On the other executions, see the testimony of Szymon Datner, 28 November 28, 1946, AŻIH, collection 301 (Jewish testimonies), file 1998.

¹⁷ “The public execution of Berl Kuszewski,” p. 3.

¹⁸ Depositions of witnesses, Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN), Warsaw, collection GK (Główna Komisja, Main Commission), 317/28 v. 3, pp. 27–27v.

¹⁹ Names of the murdered Jews can also be found in: *Rejestr miejsca i faktów zbrodni popełnionych przez okupanta hitlerowskiego na ziemiach polskich w latach 1939–1945: Województwo siedleckie* (Warsaw: Główna Komisja Badania Zbrodni Hitlerowskich w Polsce, 1985., pp. 148–49.

²⁰ Most probably Friedrich Hartmann, a local ethnic German (Volksdeutsche). See deposition of Jozef Fedorczyk, dated October 3, 1948, IPN), Warsaw, GK 317/28 v. 3, pp. 29–29v.

²¹ Statement of accusation against W. Kolodziejczyk, Blue Policeman from Łochów, 24 April 1945 IPN GK 209/57, p. 2. See also the deposition of Bolesław Abczyński, 30 March 1945, IPN GK 209/57, pp. 25–25v.

²² Station Register, Opoczno, entry dated September 18, 1942: “In Opoczno, in the Błonie area, following the orders of the gendarmerie, guarding the property of the deported Jews”; entry dated September 19, 1942: “Manhunt for the bandits”; entry dated October 28, 1942: “Special duties in the former Jewish quarter to maintain order, to prevent civilians from entering.”

²³ Testimony of Władysław Okulus, AŻIH, 301/6043.

²⁴ Testimony of W. Wójcik, YVA O.33/1066, p. 32.

²⁵ Deposition of Aleksander Ajchel, April 2, 1947, Archiwum Państwowe w Siedlcach (State Archive in Siedlce), SOS, dossier 652, pp. 5–6.

²⁶ Jan Mikulski, “Myśli, wspomnienia, uwagi, refleksje...,” typed manuscript dated 1970, in the holdings of the Biłgoraj Public Library. I am grateful to Alina Skibińska for having brought Mikulski’s memoir to my attention.

²⁷ The witnesses put the number of Jews murdered on that day at one thousand to two thousand..

²⁸ Geoffrey P. Megargee and Martin Dean, eds., with an introduction by Christopher R. Browning, *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945*, volume 2, *Ghettos in German-Occupied Eastern Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press in association with

the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2012), 344–45.

²⁹ In 1950 Machowski was sentenced to death by hanging. He appealed unsuccessfully to the Supreme Court, and the President of the Republic denied his request for pardon. His sentence was carried out in the Kielce prison on May 21, 1951. To my knowledge, this is the only death sentence to have been carried out on a member of the Blue Police. Sąd Apelacyjny w Kielcach (Appellate Court in Kielce), USHMM, RG 15.180M, reel 20; original held at IPN, GK 217, dossier 208/208a., p. 141.

³⁰ For the details of this case, see numerous depositions of witnesses in IPN, GK 317/28, v. 3.

³¹ Shortly after the war the courts required local authorities to produce itemized lists of mass and individual graves of victims of German terror. These lists provide us with a fragmentary and incomplete, but fairly accurate evidence of wartime burials.

³² Deposition of Waław Chomontowski, November 4, 1948, IPN. GK, 317/28 v. 3, pp. 27–28.

³³ Deposition of Stanisław Grodkowski, *ibid.*, 19–21v.

³⁴ Ringelblum, *Polish-Jewish Relations*, 77.

³⁵ Indictment (Akt oskarżenia), 18 November 1949, IPN, GK 317/133, pp. 4–4v, 36–38. Officer Iwanek, who had served in the police since 1920, and who before the war was stationed in the Węgrów area, was deposed at length on the role of Królik.

³⁶ Protokół rozprawy głównej (minutes of trial proceedings), 17 April 1952, IPN, GK 318/460 v. 1, pp. 147–60. Piotr Grochal had served in the police since 1934.

³⁷ Deposition of Aleksandra Janusz, 22 May 1949, IPN, GK 317/134, pp. 5–6.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Emanuel Ringelblum, *Polish-Jewish Relations during the Second World War* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1992), 135.

⁴⁰ Jan T. Gross with Irena Grudzińska-Gross, *Golden Harvest: Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁴¹ Personnel file of Władysław Królik of Grębków, Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde, collection of SS- u. Polizei Gericht VI, Krakau, NS/7/v. 1185—, p. 8.

⁴² Tadeusz Wangrat, *Polska i Powiat Węgrowski w Przededniu i w czasie II Wojny Światowej* (Węgrów: Światowy Związek Żołnierzy AK, Obwód “Smola,” 2010), 56–57. Królik was also praised for his contributions to the fight against common banditry.

⁴³ Wojciech Gozdawa-Gołębiowski, Chapter 2 in *Węgrów: Dzieje miasta i okolic w latach 1441–1944*, ed. Arkadiusz Kołodziejczyk and Tadeusz Swat (Węgrów: Tow. Miłośników Ziemi Węgrowskiej, 1992), 347.

⁴⁴ Władysław Królik was tried for crimes committed against Poles, Soviet POWs, and Jews. He was sentenced to death, but the sentence was later commuted to life in prison. Królik was released from prison seven years later, in 1959. Wyrok (Sentence), 24–27 October 1952, IPN, GK 318/126, pp. 850–70.

⁴⁵ Archiwum Państwowe m.st. Warszawy (State Archive of the City of Warsaw), collection of the 2nd Precinct of the Polish Police.

⁴⁶ Jürgen Stroop, “Żydowska dzielnica mieszkaniowa w Warszawie już nie istnieje!” (*Dokumenty* 38), ed. Andrzej Żbikowski (Warsaw: IPN, 2009), 23–28.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁴⁸ From the diary of Leon Najberg, AŻIH, collection 302/113, entries for Wednesday, May 26 and Thursday, May 27, 1943, no page number. See also Najberg, *Ostatni powstańcy getta* (The Last Fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising) (Warsaw: ŻIH, 1993), 89–90.

⁴⁹ Mieczysław Pachter, *Umierać też trzeba umieć*, ed. Barbara Engelking (Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2015), 81.

⁵⁰ Emanuel Ringelblum, *Polish-Jewish Relations during the War*, 133–34.

⁵¹ Jean-Marc Berlière, *Les policiers français sous l’occupation* (Paris: Perrin, 2001); Laurent Joly, *L’antisémitisme de bureau: Enquête au coeur de la préfecture de Police de Paris et du commissariat général aux Questions juives, 1940–1944* (Paris: Grasset, 2011); Ad van Liempt, *Hitler’s Bounty Hunters: The Betrayal of the Jews* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Tal Bruttman, *La logique des bourreaux, 1943–1944* (Paris: Hachette, 2003); Martin Dean, *Collaboration in the Holocaust: Crimes of the Local Police in Belorussia and Ukraine, 1941–1944* (New York: St. Martin’s Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2000); John-Paul Himka, “The Lviv Pogrom of 1941: The Germans, Ukrainian Nationalists, and the Carnival Crowd,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 53, nos. 2–4 (Jun–Dec. 2011): 209–24; Alexander Prusin, “Collaboration in Eastern Galicia: The Ukrainian Police and the Holocaust,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 34, no. 2 (2004): 95–118.

⁵² Deposition of Bronisław Chudzikowski, January 13, 1950, IPN, GK 317/248, pp. 57–57v.

⁵³ Interrogation of Zygmunt Głowacki, February 9, 1950, *ibid.*, 31–32.

⁵⁴ Deposition of Maria Dziegielewska, January 3, 1950, *ibid.*, 52v.

⁵⁵ Delegatura Rządu na Kraj, *Kronika wypadków*, March 2, 1944. AAN, 202—II—44. “Jaworski” is probably an alias.

⁵⁶ Interrogation of Z. Głowacki, February 10, 1950, IPN, GK 317/248, pp. 33–34

⁵⁷ Interrogation of Z. Głowacki, January 10, 1950, *ibid.*, 20–21.

⁵⁸ Interrogation of Władysław Nowiński, January 9, 1950, *ibid.*, pp. 45–45v.

⁵⁹ Report of an anonymous militia officer, January 26, 1950, *ibid.*, 67–67v.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ See <http://www.polin.pl/pl/budynek> (accessed April 13, 2017)

⁶² Gross, *Golden Harvest*, 47.

⁶³ (London: Macmillan, 2016), 394.

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