

Rural Society and the Jews in Hiding: Elders, Night Watches, Firefighters, Hostages and Manhunts¹

Jan Grabowski



In the summer and fall of 1942 the Germans started to liquidate the ghettos in occupied Poland and ship their inhabitants to the extermination sites. Faced with the horror of upcoming *Aktionen* (operations), a large number of Jews decided to flee to the “Aryan” side, seeking shelter among the Poles. The search for these refugees, known in German as *Judenjagd* (hunt for Jews), was to last until the end of the war.² More than forty years ago historian Szymon Datner observed:

Practically every hamlet, village, town, and city in the General-gouvernement was witness to the murders of Jews who fled the ghettos, or escaped death trains. These victims, who, unlike the hundreds of thousands and millions of those who perished in gas chambers and in mass executions, quite often can be individually identified, deserve our special attention. They were people, who tried, in their own way, to fight for their survival.³

The goal of this study is to try to find out why their fight for survival was so horribly difficult, and why their struggle was so often ultimately unsuccessful. Although we know a great deal about the dangers facing

- 1 I am grateful to my colleagues and friends from Yad Vashem and to the evaluators of *Yad Vashem Studies* for their judicious comments and suggestions. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Baron Friedrich Carl von Oppenheim Foundation for its generous support.
- 2 The expression *Judenjagd* was introduced into the historical literature by Christopher R. Browning in his seminal book, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998).
- 3 Szymon Datner, “Zbrodnie hitlerowskie na Żydach zbiegłych z gett. Groźby i zarządzenia ‘prawne’ w stosunku do Żydów oraz udzielających im pomocy Polaków,” *Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego*, vol. 75 (1970), pp. 28–29.

the Jews hiding on the Aryan side in the cities, our knowledge of the realities of hiding in the rural areas is much less complete. This article looks at the fate of Jews who tried, usually unsuccessfully, to survive in hiding in Dąbrowa Tarnowska County, a rural area in southeastern Poland, in the Kraków District of the Generalgouvernement. The county, situated some fifty miles (80 km.) east of Kraków and ten miles (16 km.) north of Tarnów, was — and still is — a typical farming area. In the north, the county borders on the Wisła River, while the Dunajec River marks its western frontier. Before the war there were 101 villages in Dąbrowa County and, according to the last prewar census of 1931 the county was home to 66,678 people, including 4,807 Jews. Most of the Jewish population was centered in two small towns — Dąbrowa Tarnowska itself and nearby Żabno — but a significant minority lived in the villages spread throughout the county.

Omer Bartov, writing about the extermination of Jews in the small Galician town of Buczacz, raised an important question:

Genocide would have been much harder to accomplish, and its success much less complete, had the Germans not found so many collaborators willing, even eager, to do the killing, the hunting down, the brutalizing, and the plundering. Conversely, hardly any of the handful of Jews who lived to tell the tale would have survived had it not been for those Ukrainians and Poles who gave them food or shelter, even if at times they charged them for the service and not infrequently drove them out or denounced them once the Jews' resources ran out.⁴

In order to understand the genocide, Bartov argued, we need to reconstruct the events from the bottom up, from the local level, the level of individual murders, all the way to the planners of the Final Solution. An analysis of the situation in one chosen area, such as a single county in occupied Poland can, hopefully, bring us closer to this goal.⁵

4 Omer Bartov, *From the Holocaust in Galicia to Contemporary Genocide: Common Ground — Historical Differences*, Joseph and Rebecca Meyerhoff Annual Lecture (Washington: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2003), p. 6.

5 For a recent example of such a “microhistorical” approach, see Nicolas Mariot and Claire Zalc, *Face à la persécution: 991 Juifs dans la guerre* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2010). Using a broad array of available sources, the authors were able to follow the destinies of the Jewish inhabitants of Lens, a city in northern France throughout the war years.

The Germans occupied Dąbrowa on September 8, 1939, and the Jewish population soon became the target of increasingly repressive measures. In January 1940 the Germans established two ghettos, in Dąbrowa and in Żabno, with their own Jewish councils and Jewish police (Ordnungsdienst). In 1940 the Jews lost not only the rights to their own businesses, but were also precluded from exercising their professions; furthermore, their mobility was severely restricted, their food rations cut, and the living conditions in the ghettos became appalling. In early 1942 a series of bloody *razzias* (police raids) claimed dozens of victims, terrorized the local Jews, and paved way for the upcoming “liquidation actions” of the summer. Facing certain death, hundreds of Jews started to prepare their escape to the Aryan side. Disturbing rumors about the fate of the “deported” Jews of Lublin added urgency to these plans. In order to succeed, the potential fugitives had, however, to secure some kind of cooperation or help from the local Christian population. This, unfortunately, proved to be one of the most difficult challenges.

In the rural areas the chances of survival on the “Aryan side” were generally not good. Christopher R. Browning, writing about Jews attempting to flee German forced labor camps, noted that “fear of denunciation by hostile Poles was one of the great deterrents to escape. Indeed, among those who escaped, many experienced not only denunciation but robbery and even murder.”⁶ Emanuel Ringelblum, the founder of the Oneg Shabbat Warsaw ghetto archive reflected during the war in a similar vein:

As regards Jews’ hiding in the countryside, this proves to be a difficult matter, as in small towns and particularly in villages everybody knows everybody else and a stranger arouses general curiosity. The Germans knew very well that after every “resettlement action” some Jews would be hiding at their Christian neighbors’ houses or in the vicinity, in the countryside. To clear the surrounding area of Jews, the Germans would employ two tactics: the method of rewards and the method of threats. Financial rewards and rewards in kind were put on the head of every Jew, in addition to which the clothes and belongings of those captured

6 Christopher R. Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), p. 255.

were also assigned to the captors. In western “Little Poland,”⁷ in Borek Fałęcki, Wieliczka, Bochnia, and Swoszowice, for instance, 500 zlotys and a kilogram of sugar were being offered for every captured Jew. These tactics resulted in success for the Germans. The local population in great numbers turned Jews over to the Germans, who shot these “criminals.” ... Besides rewards, the Germans also utilized a system of punishments for hiding the Jews. Posters threatening capital punishment for this “crime” appeared before every “liquidation action” against the Jews in any given locality.⁸

Night Watches

The desperate struggle for survival undertaken in 1942 by the Jews of Dąbrowa Tarnowska County collided with a complicated but deadly efficient system based in part on old, prewar traditions, and in part on mechanisms, structures, and institutions the Germans introduced. Without any doubt, the great majority of Jews in hiding perished as a consequence of betrayal. They were denounced, or simply seized, tied-up by the locals, and delivered to the nearest Polish police station, or to the German gendarmerie. In this context an important role was performed by the structures of local self-government and rural self-defense, which coordinated the collective activities of these rural communities. On the level of a rural regional council (*gmina*),⁹ the authority usually lay in the hands of a *wójt*, an official appointed by the district head (*starosta*).

After the September 1939 collapse of the Polish state, some *wójts* were removed by the Germans and replaced with people (often the local *Volksdeutsche*) seen as loyal to the new occupation authorities. From the German standpoint the *wójts*' main task was to mobilize Polish agriculture and Polish peasants for the Reich's wartime economic needs. First, each village had its fixed quota of products, grains, and

7 Małopolska, Little Poland, is a geographical description of an area of southeastern Poland that includes Tarnów and Dąbrowa Tarnowska with Kraków, its capital.

8 Emanuel Ringelblum, *Polish-Jewish Relations during the Second World War*, edited by Joseph Kermish and Shmuel Krakowski (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1992; first edition Yad Vashem, 1974), p. 137.

9 A typical Polish rural regional council usually included a dozen or more geographically contiguous villages.

livestock that had to be delivered to the state, or sold at regulated (i.e., ridiculously low) prices. Second, the *wójt*s were responsible for finding volunteers to go to work in Germany. After 1940 the volunteers became scarce, and people were taken to Germany by force.

The *wójt*s were also required to inform the population about all new German regulations, and regularly held meetings with *Kreishauptmänner* (chiefs of regional administration), who communicated directives coming from Kraków, the capital of the Generalgouvernement. There was even a bilingual Polish-German “Bulletin” which carried detailed instructions for the *wójt*s. The *wójt*s later conveyed these orders to the village elders (*sołtysi*), who headed the lower level of rural self-government. In prewar Poland the elders were chosen under public scrutiny and the elected individuals usually commanded the respect of their peers. In some cases elders were chosen in general village elections; elsewhere, the council representatives cast the ballots.¹⁰ During the war the Germans told the elders to continue their mandates; attempts to quit the job were considered acts of sabotage.

According to Jan Tomasz Gross, “except when they wanted to promote ambitious new *Volksdeutsche*, the Germans would usually leave the old *sołtys* in his post, and he was smart enough to become aware that many candidates were eager to take his place. Therefore, he made sure that his performance satisfied the Germans.”¹¹ At the same time the elders received new powers, which raised concerns among the peasants. A resident of the village Kozłów noted in his memoir:

Occupation. The worst plague is our degenerate Poles, if one can call them Poles at all.... Once the Germans introduced the death penalty for insulting or assaulting an elder, the latter lost contact with their constituents.... When this regulation was announced from church pulpits, the elders became virtual dictators.¹²

Whenever a position of an elder became vacant, the *wójt*s (with the ap-

10 Archiwum Państwowe w Krakowie (State Archive in Kraków; APK), Sąd Apelacyjny w Krakowie (Appellate Court in Kraków – SAKr), 1020/ IV K/ 147/50, p. 7. Polish court files used in this text are, for the most part, related to postwar investigations into collaboration with the Germans. These so-called “August Trials” (reference to the August 31, 1944 decree targeting the collaborators) included thousands of cases of Poles who denounced, robbed, or killed Jews.

11 Jan Tomasz Gross, *Polish Society under German Occupation: The Generalgouvernement, 1939–1944* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 141.

12 Krystyna Kersten and Tomasz Szarota, eds., *Więś polska 1939–1948. Materiały*

proval of the Germans) appointed a new candidate.¹³ While the *wójt*s met the Kreishauptmänner on a regular basis, the village elders were called in from time to time to listen to the local Landkommissars (German rural area chiefs). In some areas of the Kraków District the meetings were convened very frequently, sometimes as often as weekly. The local gendarmes also had a role to play. In Dąbrowa Tarnowska, *Wachtmeister* Richard Ketter, the captain of the guard and a well-known killer of Jews, often took part in these meetings.¹⁴

During the meetings the German officials discussed the quotas, numbers of laborers to be sent to the Reich, and in the summer of 1942, the transfer of local Jews to the secondary ghettos (in our case — to Tarnów and to Dąbrowa) or directly to Bełżec on death transports. The elders were told to prepare a sufficient number of wagons and carts, and to alert the village guards. Later, after the deportations, the elders were charged with disposing of Jewish movable and immovable property. Although this issue is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note the existence of this large (and practically unexplored) research area. With time, especially after the outbreak of war with the USSR, and with the simultaneous growth of underground organizations, the village elders were ordered to organize community-based self-defense structures. This self-defense force was primarily made up of night watches (guards), voluntary firefighters, with the assistance provided by village “couriers,” deputy elders, and elders themselves. In the Bolesław regional council (north of Dąbrowa, close to the Wiśla River), the night watch was thirty-men strong, drawing in peasants from twelve nearby villages. In order to secure the military depots that had been built in this village, the Germans amalgamated the villages in a so-called “integrated community” (*Sammelgemeinde*) and were thus able to secure a more significant force for the night watch.¹⁵

The watch started in a guardhouse (sometimes it was a guardhouse only in name, as any large room in a peasant’s house would do).

konkursowe (Warsaw: PWN, 1970), vol. II, p. 265. I am grateful to Dr. Dariusz Libionka for drawing my attention to this text.

13 Archiwum Instytut Pamięci Narodowej (AIPN; Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance), Warsaw, collection GK/255/319, Sąd Okręgowy w Krakowie (SOKr; District Court in Kraków), p. 26.

14 Deposition of Antoni Patoń (b. 1897), who was the elder in Oporyszów village during the war, Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg [BAL], collection B 162\8940, p. 20.

15 APK, SAKr 1044 IV K 266/50, explanation of the verdict.

There was also a “village prison,” normally a safely locked potato cellar, or other secure area, transformed whenever required into a holding pen. The members of the watch (designated beforehand by the elder, by gendarmes, or the Polish “blue” police) received their orders from the commander of the watch, and left the guardhouse to reach their positions in designated areas in and around the village.

In addition to regular watchmen, who were required to serve from time to time, following the local rotation, there were also the “section leaders” (*dziesiątnicy*). They were more frequently on duty, received modest compensation for their efforts, and had seniority over other members of the watch (excluding the commander).¹⁶ Although the watchmen were armed mostly with pitchforks, clubs, and other blunt instruments, the Germans made sure that at least one peasant per watch carried a firearm.

In order to put more pressure on the guards and to improve their performance, every village had to designate a number of “hostages,” or people whom the Germans would hold personally responsible for any actions which, in the parlance of the times, could “threaten the vital interests of the German nation.” The hostages were appointed by the police or by the elders for limited periods of time. They were kept on a tight leash and had to keep in touch with the local blue police and report about the “state of security in their village.” The hostages who refused to inform were threatened with terms of hard labor in the labor camp (*Arbeitserziehungslager*, AEL) at Szebnie, Mielec, or Pustków.¹⁷ That’s how the police secured the cooperation of many peasants and gained a steady flow of information about the situation in the villages. Incidentally, the hostage phenomenon was known not only in rural areas; in nearby Sanok German authorities also “appointed” chosen individuals to these positions of unwanted responsibility. The local businessman Antoni Wilk was selected as a hostage twice by the German mayor. In both cases the businessman’s “term of appointment” was limited to two weeks.¹⁸

The night watch was subject to periodic police controls. In

16 Testimony of Franciszek Noga, APK, SAKr 1033/IV K200/50; Testimony of Piotr Miłosz, September 27, 1948, APK, SAKr 1025 K IV 163/50. It seems that the function of “section leaders” was known only in the Kraków District.

17 Testimony of Tadeusz Pękała from Pleśna, APK, SAKr, 974, IV K 210/49.

18 Deposition of the witness Antoni Wilk, August 28, 1947, Yad Vashem Archive (YVA), JM/3499/v. 6, p. 125.

Lubaszowa, in the spring of 1943, the blue policemen from Tuchów descended on the village to inspect the guards' "state of preparedness." Finding no peasants on duty, they fined the slackers fifty złotys each.¹⁹ In *Książ Wielki* members of the local firefighting brigade carried out the inspections. One of the delinquent watchmen (instead of patrolling his area, he went to his sister's wedding) was delivered to the police station. After the war he testified, "I received such a horrible beating with rubber whips that I had open wounds and could not walk. All the policemen took part in the beating"

What exactly were the duties of the night watch? In the first place, the watchmen had to secure the villages from "bandits, partisans, and other unwanted elements." In late 1942 and in 1943 with the increased presence of partisan units, the security conditions in the rural areas (especially in the eastern parts of occupied Poland) deteriorated quickly. It became clear that the peasants were unable to stop the partisans, so the instructions sent from Kraków advised particular vigilance when dealing with fugitive Soviet POWs and with the Jews who fled the liquidated ghettos. The village guards had to stop all suspicious individuals, especially Jews, who wandered from one village to another. Once they had a Jew in their custody, and before the matter was referred to higher instances, the members of the village watch could conduct their own investigation. One of the Polish witnesses described the arrest of a wealthy Jew from Mędrzechów of whom he wrote,

as he sat in the locked cellar, I heard him crying and asking for mercy. [The members of the watch] took him from the cellar, and led him to his house, so he would show them where he had buried his stuff and his gold. When he refused, they beat him up and tortured him.²⁰

For the Jews who waited for death in a village prison, the time before the police arrived was filled with pleas for mercy. Occasionally the doomed tried to appeal to their captors' compassion, others begged to be released, and some wanted simply to say a few final words before dying. The drama of captured Jews was even greater when they knew their oppressors personally. Haskiel Rand, caught with his nine-year old son Izaak in the Wojnicz area in December 1943 was beaten so

19 APK, SAKr, 994/IVK/6/50, pp. 18–19.

20 APK, SAKr 1044, IVK 266/50.

badly “that his face was all bloody, so that initially I was unable to recognize him,” testified a blue policeman after the war. “Rand turned to me, and said, ‘Chief, see what they have done to me, look how they beat me up.’ Stanisław Kuk, one of the locals [who had brought Rand to the police station — JG], said, ‘We beat you up, because you kept struggling, you son of a bitch!’”²¹ In May 1944, in Sutków (a hamlet close to Radgoszcz), members of the local night watch arrested eighteen-year old Chaim Knie. One of the peasants called to the commander of the watch, “Francis, we’ve got ourselves a Jew!” Knie, locally known as “little Chaim,” begged for mercy, but to no avail. Later, the commander of the Sutków watch testified, “When Chaim saw me, he said, ‘What did I do to them? Why did they tie me up like this?’ Then Chaim sat on a bench and started to pray. I want to add that everybody knew Chaim well because he stayed in our area since the beginning of war.” Soon the victim, with hands tied with barbed wire behind his back, had been delivered to the Radgoszcz police station, where he was murdered the same day.²² The Jewish man Marian Haba had been beaten so badly by the peasants, that the blue policeman who arrived later “fired one shot, to put Haba out of his misery.” One of the witnesses recalled this policeman’s words: “I have worked for the police for fifteen years, but I have never seen anything like it. The Jew has literally been butchered by the peasants.”²³ Another witness added, “We found one horrible mass of meat. The Jew had been massacred, all bloodied, his face was covered with foam. He did not move; he was all black.”²⁴

As one can see, the arrested Jews were treated brutally by the peasants, sometimes very brutally, after which the guards summoned their village elder, who would then decide on further action. Only on rare occasions, and no later than mid-1942, as long as some ghettos still existed in the area, could an elder simply release the prisoner. In practically all cases, however, the arrested Jews were eventually transferred into the hands of the authorities. At this point the elder appointed one or more peasants to transport the apprehended fugitive to the nearest police station, or to hand him over to the gendarmerie. In the absence of an elder, the matter could be settled by his deputy, or by the com-

21 Testimony of Piotr Kopytko, APK, SAKr 1018 IV K 135/50, pp. 12–12v.

22 APK, SAKr, 1033/IV K200/50.

23 Testimony of Piotr Kruk, APK, SAKr, 994/IVK/6/50.

24 Testimony of Władysław Kempniński, APK, SAKr, 994/IVK/6/50.

mander of the watch. Sometimes, in the absence of the people above, the issue was simply decided by one of the section leaders.²⁵

There were times, however, when for one reason or another, it was impossible to deliver a Jew to the police. Because most of the villages had no telephone links, one would dispatch a communal courier to fetch the officers. The communal couriers had an official standing and, according to the law, had to assist the police in searching the houses of people suspected of aiding Jews.²⁶ Village couriers and cart drivers ordered by their elders to deliver Jewish captives to the police faced a difficult dilemma: a refusal could mean punitive quotas of grains, arrest, or even death. To set the transported Jews free on the way to the police station could mean severe penalties from the Germans. The reprisals could strike other people as well. The principle of collective responsibility was being applied universally, and the appointment of the above-mentioned hostages was an excellent way of enforcing obedience among the peasants. Unfortunately for village couriers and cart drivers, some of them had to face the courts (and several were sentenced to years in prison) after the war as accessories to murders of Jews whom they had helped to bring to the execution sites. The realities of the *Judenjagd* confronted the elders with an even more disturbing challenge, and they had to make choices for which they were ill-prepared. Facing the court after the war, they defended their good name and tried to explain themselves in naïve, unsophisticated, language.

One day in March 1944, Franciszek Olbrycht, an elder from Bieniaszowice found in his house “two people of mosaic faith — a woman called Pearl Kapelner and a man, ‘Black,’ a nickname,” who hailed from Opatowiec, on the other side of the Wisła River. Also some other people were there guarding the Jews. “Pearl sat on the bench, and cried softly. The man sat next to her,” added Olbrycht.²⁷ Pearl Kapelner lived in nearby Siedliszowice before the war and was well known to the people of Bieniaszowice. But the peasants who caught and delivered the Jews to the elder’s house were not yet done. The hunters requested that Olbrycht call the police from the nearest station, in Gręboszewo.

25 Deposition of Władysław Bednarz, APK, SAKr, 1024 IV K 156/50. The authority of the section leaders was strictly territorial and the peasants from other villages were under no obligation to follow orders of “alien” leaders.

26 Deposition of Józef Boryczko, “*Mo trzy hektary*” (Got Three Hectares), APK, SAKr, 1034/IVK 204/50.

27 Interrogation of the Elder Olbrycht APK, SAKr, 1001/IV K/44/50.

At first the elder hesitated, but when one of the peasants threatened him — “What, do you pity the Jews?” — he ordered someone to prepare a cart. Later that day Pearl Kapelner and “Black” from Opatowiec were handed over to the police, and shot.

An Elder from Kłyż, sentenced to six years in prison for having called in the blue policemen who executed the local Jewish woman, tried to justify his actions. “My only fault was that one Julian Zelazny showed up in my office and requested that I summon the blue police. The Jewess was said to have also asked for the police, or so I was told, and I had to assent to this request.”²⁸ Władysław Nagórzański, a village elder from Siedliszowice, who had organized a manhunt which netted a local Jewish merchant, also referred to orders coming from above. “The [‘blue’] policeman told me to send out, as an elder, a few peasants and to catch the Jew-boy.”²⁹

Indeed, the elders were caught in a potentially deadly trap. On the one hand, in the event of inaction, the authorities could take a very dim view of the elder’s role and overall performance. On the other hand, the elders had to contend with the mood of their own people — some of whom were actively persecuting, denouncing, and robbing the Jews. Very often these neighbors were the ones who insisted that apprehended “citizens of Jewish nationality”³⁰ be immediately executed, or at least surrendered to the authorities. Non-compliant elders were often threatened with denunciation. One of the peasant hunters told the reluctant elder, “If the elder does not know what to do with the Jew, perhaps the Germans will know what to do with the elder.”³¹

The letters sent to the police, although usually written in very poor, halting Polish, could easily doom the village official and his family. One of these letters said, “I sketch these few words to the German

28 Plea for pardon sent by Elder Stanisław Łat to Bolesław Bierut, the President of the Polish Republic, APK, SAKr 965/ K 122/49, k. 185.

29 Interrogation of Władysław Nagórzański, APK, SAKr 1023/ IV K/ 155/50, p. 11–11v.

30 This awkward term, *Obywatel narodowości żydowskiej*, was often used in postwar court officialese.

31 Testimony of Jan Słoma, AIPN, GK, 217/281, pp. 31–32, as quoted in Alina Skibińska, “Dostał 10 lat, ale za co? Analiza motywacji sprawców zbrodni na Żydach na wsi kieleckiej w latach 1942–1944” [“He got ten years, and for what?” Analysis of Motivations of Murderers of the Jews in the Kielce area, 1942–1944], in Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski, eds., *Zarys Krajobrazu: Wieś polska wobec zagłady Żydów 1942–1945* (Warsaw: IFiS PAN, 2011), p. 318.

Power and straight to the Commander of Gendarmerie himself, because here, in our village [of] Gutkowo horrible things are happening and all because of our Elder who plays politics, and [who] should have been removed already a long time ago.”³² The Germans translated these letters, investigated the accusations, and the subsequent fate of denounced elders depended only on the mood of the local chief of the gendarmerie.

The transfer of Jews into police custody did not, however, end the involvement of the night watch. Once the police had arrived, the village guards had to support and reinforce the officers and take them to the local prison, or to the farm where the Jews had been found. There, the peasants were expected to surround the premises, and make sure that no one would escape during the search. One of the peasants from Łęki Dolne later testified:

One of the men was told to push the straw chopper out of the way, and once we had seen the concealed door leading to the hideout, the Gestapo agent [a gendarme, obviously – JG] called on the Jews to come out. When no one emerged, the Gestapo agent threw two hand grenades inside and then sprayed the hideout with his machine gun. As I was small, the Gestapo man gave me a chain, and told me to climb into the tunnel and pull out the bodies of the Jews. So I went into the tunnel, placed the chain on the wrists of [the] dead Jews, and other peasants pulled them out to the surface. Once all [bodies] were outside, it became clear that one Jewess was still alive. When the Gestapo agent threw water in her face, she opened her eyes. She said nothing, so the Gestapo man shot her dead.³³

As we can see from the description above, even after the arrival of the police, the night watch continued to play an important role reinforcing the officers. Another example of such cooperation comes from Grochowiska, a hamlet in Radgoszcz commune. In the fall of 1942 Władysław O., commander of the local night watch, went to Radgoszcz, to deliver to the local police station one kilogram of butter and two chickens – a usual levy paid by the village to the officers. On his

32 Denunciation of Władysław Koniecki and others, June 1941, AIPN, collection of Gestapo-Zichenau, 148/1841.

33 Deposition of Jan Panek, p. 29, APK, SAKr, 1045, IVK, 271/50.

way to the village O. encountered Frass, a Jewish butcher from Radgoszcz, who was well known in the area. In 1950, interrogated about these events, O. said:

Commander Andrzej Szypulski asked me where he could find this Jew, and I told him that I had no idea. So then Szypulski warned me that if I refused to help in catching this Jew, he would deliver me to the German gendarmes. Fearing for my life, I told Commander Szypulski that the aforementioned Jew and another one whose name I didn't know quite often took the road next to my house. I told him that if he wanted to catch them, he would have to prepare an ambush somewhere close [to my house]. I pledged my help in catching the Jews and I told him that I would be on the lookout to see whether they took this route or a different one. Four or five days later the German gendarme Guzdek, Commander Andrzej Szypulski, several other blue policemen, and one Pawlina, a *Volksdeutsche* and a commander of the night watch (who carried a pistol) showed up at my place. It happened during the night, somewhere around ten o'clock. They set the ambush in the bushes, close to my house. Once I saw the approaching Jews, I was to alert Pawlina, who would wait hidden in the cornfield, next to the road. I waited thirty minutes and then I saw the Jew Frass and the other Jew coming my way. Once I was certain, I shouted, "Pawlina, the Jews are coming!" Pawlina jumped out of the cornfield with a pistol in his hand and cried out, "Hands up!" Then he blew his whistle and the policemen hidden in the bushes came running. The captured Jews were later brought to my house. I saw that Commander Szypulski caught one of the Jews by the throat and, shaking him, said, "I've got you, you Jewish son of a whore!" I heard that the Jews were taken to the Radgoszcz police station, and then shot.³⁴

In the case described above one of the members of the night watch promised the Jews some food, and thus drew them into the trap, while the other one, commander of the watch, quite literally blew the whistle on them and summoned the police.

34 Interrogation of Władysław O., February 9, 1950, APK, SAKr, 1014/IVK/118/50, pp. 6-7. Shortly after the war Władysław O. threw in his lot with the victorious communists and joined the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR).

Firefighters

In larger villages, such as the previously mentioned Bolesław, the night watch was reinforced by voluntary firefighters. The better discipline and organization of the firefighting brigades was the main difference between them and the watchmen. Firefighters drilled together, were more disciplined than average peasants, and were used to well-coordinated group pursuits. In addition, the chief of the local voluntary firefighters was, not unlike an elder, publicly elected by all inhabitants of the village and thus he enjoyed a certain respect from his peers. His decisions were, therefore, binding for many, and not only in matters of putting out fires.

During the occupation, the chiefs of the firefighters, like the elders, were also told by the Germans to continue in their functions. The curfew, for obvious reasons, did not apply to firefighters, who had more freedom of movement than the other villagers. Firefighters' drills could therefore be used as an excuse to conduct various exercises, such as exercises in searching for Jews. The actions of firefighters from Raclawice (a village between Miechów and Olkusz) can be an example of such an exercise. In June 1944 the local firemen were called in and told to search the farm of one Wawrzyniec Pomierny who, according to many, had sheltered Jews.³⁵ Indeed, while searching through the barn of the suspect, the firemen came across six Jews, "the Lewkowicz couple, and four Krotzer children." The woman tried to flee but was quickly caught by other firemen, who guarded the farmstead's perimeter. "The Lewkowicz woman tried to hide in the wheat, and [fireman] Koziół cut her off, running through the potato field, right next to the wheat. When Lewkowicz tried to resist, he hit her."³⁶ The whole operation was conducted with discipline, the firemen splitting into two groups of six men each. One of them later said, that they "looked in the houses and in the barns, but left the attics and the cellars pretty much alone."³⁷ Later, the village elder provided horse-drawn carts, and "firefighter Pączek tied the Lewkowicz couple with a rope." The elder heard that "the Jews cried and begged the peasants not to send them to the police," but later he "felt dizzy, and went home."³⁸ Before he felt dizzy, however, he was able

35 APK, SAKr 1021/IVK/150/50, vol. III, pp. 512ff.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 518f.

37 Interrogation of Piotr Sułek, *ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 31–32.

38 Deposition of Melchior Pomierny, *ibid.*, vol. III, p. 515.

to select a few peasants as cart drivers, and order them to deliver the Jews to the nearest Polish blue police station, in Sułoszowa. Lewkowicz and the children were later delivered to the gendarmes in Wolbrom, where they were executed.³⁹

The actions of the Raławice firefighting brigade were by no means an exception. The firemen and other witnesses recalled numerous searches and hunts for the Jews conducted by local voluntary firefighters. In the spring of 1944 several such actions took place, but the results were disappointing because no Jews were found. However, another time (the witnesses were unable to agree on a date) the hunters were more successful and caught several Jews. The victims were later shot in the fields by a Polish policeman who had been called into the village specifically for this purpose.⁴⁰

There is little doubt that by and large the firemen from Raławice were not antisemites, but a few “who were known for their hostile attitude towards the Jews” were enough to ensure that the others obediently participated in these “actions.” True, they were afraid of the Germans, but to a larger extent they were afraid of their own colleagues. The conformism and the hostility toward the Jews were motivated and fuelled by greed and by the tales of “Jewish gold.” This universal conviction about Jewish riches just waiting for new owners is a phenomenon reported by many. “Associating the Jews with money, with gold, was the most common antisemitic cliché, alongside the image of the Jew as Christ-killer,” wrote Jan T. Gross, specifically referring to rural Poland.⁴¹

Finally, hunts similar to those conducted by the Raławice firefighters were conducted in other administrative districts of the Generalgouvernement. On October 22, 1942, an underground newspaper published by the central command of the Home Army reported the liquidation of Warsaw-area ghettos. “The Jews are being murdered and deported from Wołomin, Stoczek, Węgrów, Radzymin, Jadów, Siedlce. From many sources we hear about mass killings of the Jews, but nothing as awful as the news coming from Wołomin and Stoczek. Firefighters from Wołomin and the riff-raff from Stoczek, who actively took

39 Ibid., p. 512f.

40 Testimony of Jan Mitka, APK, SAKr 1021/IVK/150/50, vol. III, p. 514.

41 Jan Tomasz Gross, *Złote żniwa*. Rzecz o tym, co się działo na obrzeżach Zagłady Żydów (Kraków: Znak, 2011), p. 29.

part in the extermination of the Jews, and who searched and robbed those in hiding, covered themselves with shame.”⁴²

Another underground publication wrote about the events in Stoczek. “On October 24, [1942], [Polish] firemen participated in the liquidation of the ghetto. They pulled the people out of their homes, and robbed them. The [German] butchers’ lackeys even received expressions of gratitude from the local Stadthauptmann [German mayor].”⁴³ Of course, while the firemen in Stoczek took part in an officially sanctioned “liquidation action,” their colleagues from Raławice set their own agenda, without any German involvement. Even the blue policemen were summoned only after the fact, once the manhunt had been completed. Obviously, as far as the *Judenjagd* was concerned, Polish firefighters were not only able to support the police, they were even willing to replace them.

In 1943 the Polish blue police agents in Mszana Dolna learned about two Jews, the brothers Jurek and Jusek Grybel, who were hiding in Skrzydlina, a nearby village.⁴⁴ However, the police were on alert and the officers were forbidden to leave the station. Given the circumstances of this emergency, the order to arrest the fugitive Jews was relayed to the firemen in Skrzydlina. Voluntary firefighters left their guardhouse, surrounded the farm indicated by the police, and took the Jews into custody. Firefighters were also used by the Germans in other capacities. Sometimes they surrounded the execution sites and in Szczurowa, after a massacre of local Gypsies, they were ordered to bury the victims of the shooting. According to one of the witnesses, “[Gendarme Engelbert] Guzdek ordered the elder to immediately call the firefighters. Trumpets sounded and in five minutes twenty-one firemen reported. This, for the time being, was enough. Guzdek took them to the cemetery and soon we heard the sound of spades.”⁴⁵

Despite their discipline (combined with a good knowledge of local conditions), the firefighters were also known to make mistakes.

42 *Biuletyn Informacyjny*, October 22, 1942, quoted from Dariusz Libionka, “Polska konspiracja wobec eksterminacji Żydów w dystrykcie warszawskim,” in Barbara Engelking, Jacek Leociak, and Dariusz Libionka, eds., *Prowincja noc. Życie i Zagłada Żydów w Dystrykcie Warszawskim* (Warsaw: IFiS PAN, 2007), p. 453.

43 *Informacja Bieżąca*, nr. 39, October 23, 1942. Quoted from Dariusz Libionka, “Polska konspiracja,” *Prowincja noc*, p. 454.

44 APK, SAKr 1020/IV K/ 147/50, p. 8.

45 Adam Kazimierz Musiał, *Krwawe Upiory* (Tarnow: Karat, 1993), p. 205.

Paweł Nogieć, the chief of firefighters in Zagorzyce once caught a fellow “who looked very Jewish and who spoke with an accent” and delivered him straight to the German policemen, who just happened to pass through the village. The same day the locals learned that the man was, in fact, not a Jew, but rather Jan Byczek, a Polish itinerant peddler of thread and cloth. The Germans, unmoved by these extenuating circumstances, took Byczek to the nearest police station and shot him the next day.⁴⁶

Manhunts

Night watches, firefighting brigades, and hostile local officials personified only some of the dangers facing Jewish refugees looking for safety in rural areas of occupied Poland. From the victims’ perspective, the most insidious and the most deadly threat was the active involvement of large masses of peasants in the *Judenjagd*. Manhunts were one of the most feared and most successful strategies used by the hunters. The manhunts were usually organized on the basis of the above-mentioned self-defense structures and they were potentially more deadly than the searches conducted in peasants’ huts. The bunkers and hideouts built in the forests required a collective effort, and usually (with exceptions) were built by a number of Jewish refugees, sometimes by several families. Consequently, detection meant the death of a large number of people. Not surprisingly, reports from Dąbrowa County describe several manhunts that ended in killings of up to fourteen Jews surrounded in one bunker.

From the point of view of their efficiency and sheer scope, the manhunts can be divided into the early ones, directly related to the liquidation of the local ghettos, and those organized later, which did not exclusively target Jews.⁴⁷ The hunts for Jews fleeing the liquidated ghettos were well-organized and involved significant forces of German

46 Deposition of the elder Józef Wójcik, APK, SAKr 1041/ IV K/ 244/50 k. 5–6, p.129–136. According to Wójcik, Byczek was denounced by Franciszka Krawczyk, a lady who owed him money. “She said, ‘Take him, he is a Jew, he keeps wandering around and talks in Yiddish.’”

47 Aleksandra Bańkowska, *Las jako miejsce przetrwania Zagłady. Zjawisko ukrywania się Żydów w lasach w okresie okupacji niemieckiej w latach 1941–1945 na terenie II Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, M.A. thesis, History, University of Warsaw, Warsaw, 2006, pp. 65–66.

and Polish police. The peasants also took part in these expeditions. Some were driven by fear of the Germans, while others were looking forward to the promised spoils, usually clothing, to be taken from the victims. The effects of these early manhunts were particularly bloody; during the first hours and days of the *Judenjagd*, the Jews still moved in large groups and often lacked knowledge of the area. Those who managed to survive these first days perfected their strategies of survival, investing time and energy in more permanent and more sophisticated hideouts, which gave some degree of security and protection against the elements.

The orders to initiate manhunts usually originated with the German police and reached the village elders through the offices of the local *wójt*. One such order has been preserved in the dossiers of the Kraków Appellate Court. On August 28, 1942, Franciszek Rusina, the *wójt* in Kośmice Wielkie, sent a letter to the elder in Janowice (a village east of Miechów, and north-west of Dąbrowa Tarnowska) saying:

[R]egarding the Regulation issued by the County Authorities on August 14, 1942, and concerning the deportation of the Jews from our area, I hasten to inform you that the matter is very serious. You are to make absolutely sure that not even one single Jew, Jewess, or Jewish child is left on the territory of your community. You must immediately dispatch the hostages to search the entire area, back alleys, bushes, and so on, in order to make certain that no [Jews] are left. Whenever caught, Jews are to be delivered to the nearest station of the Polish police. I repeat that the penalty for hiding the Jews is death. Village elders are also responsible for Jews hidden in the territory of their community and, in case of negligence, can face death. I remind you to make certain that these orders are followed; you are responsible under the penalty of death. Kośmice Wielkie, August 28, 1942.⁴⁸

The liquidation of the ghettos began in the summer of 1942, but the German authorities continued to pressure the elders for results during the later period as well. In June 1943 Andrzej Wojtowicz, the elder of Markuszowa, was summoned to the Stadthauptmann of Jasło.⁴⁹ The meeting, with several elders in attendance, revolved around the issue

48 AIPN, GK 255\319, p. 4.

49 Deposition of Andrzej Wojtowicz, Municipal Court [Sąd Grodzki] in Strzyżowo,

of *Judenbegünstigung*, or aiding and abetting Jews. The deputy mayor was very displeased with the situation in the villages, and berated the Poles. According to reports filed by informers, some Jews were still in hiding and the situation called for punitive measures. The elders were told to communicate this last warning to their people to surrender the Jews, or otherwise face retaliatory executions of five peasants in each village. It is difficult to say whether the same letters and warnings were given to all the elders, but it is quite obvious that local leaders were sufficiently motivated.

Looking for fugitives began as soon as the elder received information about Jews in hiding. Not infrequently this information came from the very people who had until then sheltered Jews and who decided they no longer wanted their problematic guests. At this point the elder had to mobilize the village guards, and at the same time, alert the police. One of the village elders from Dąbrowa Tarnowska County recalled a situation when “one Ludwik Kosoń reported to me that there was a Jew hidden in his barn. I went to the estate (they had a telephone) and called the police in Otfinów. The police told me to secure the barn. I ordered the village courier to mobilize the people for the manhunt, and in no time, I saw a mass of peasants leading a captive.”⁵⁰

The members of the previously discussed night watches became one of the essential elements of the manhunts. From the point of view of the desperate Jews, their risk increased in two areas. First, the introduction of a quasi-military organization into village life meant an increased risk of searches and gave the hunters an official blessing and legitimacy. Second, it allowed for much more efficient and deadly manhunts in the nearby forests, where many Jews sought refuge. The members of night watches were prone to organize independent manhunts, without direct police orders and without police knowledge. In the Brnik community the peasants organized a manhunt to preempt any official action. One of the participants summed up the situation

January 16, 1948, YVA, JM/3499, vol. 6, pp. 135–137. The dossier comes from the files of the Polish Main Commission for Investigation of Nazi Crimes.

50 APK, SAKr 1023/ IV K/ 155/50, k. 11–11v; 124–124v. According to witnesses the hunt for the sixty-year old victim involved some 100 people. The Jew was able to free himself, but the crowd caught him again. Finally, he was handed over to the blue police and shot. After the war the elder and several other hunters stood accused as accomplices to murder. All were acquitted.

succinctly, “Because the Germans knew that many Jews are hiding in Brnik and that a catastrophe could strike the community.”⁵¹

A similar, preventive and large-scale manhunt was organized in March 1943 in the Mędrzechów area.⁵² Mieczysław Soja, on his way from Radwan to Wólka Mędrzechowska “observed five citizens of Jewish nationality hiding in the bushes, in the fields. They were a mother with three sons and a citizen of Jewish nationality, named Fałek.” Soja promptly brought his discovery to the attention of the elder of Wólka, who ordered the immediate arrest of the Jews. At the same time Soja rushed to Mędrzechów, to the nearest gendarmerie station. The manhunt started before the gendarmes had a chance to reach the scene. According to witnesses about 300 people, practically all the adult inhabitants of the village, took part in the expedition. “Some went because Trzepakczek [the village elder – JG] went from house to house and told them to go; others went out of curiosity.”⁵³ In the case of manhunts organized by the peasants, the elders rallied people to action. In other cases the members of the village community were mobilized by the local hostages appointed earlier by the police or by the elder, that is, those who were held personally responsible for the massive participation and for the success of the hunt.⁵⁴ In the case of the events described above, the manhunt was indeed successful and all five badly beaten Jews were delivered to the Mędrzechów gendarmes to be executed.

Another testimony describes a manhunt in the Tonia community. Here, too, the hostages mobilized the peasants:

In the spring of 1943, on Good Saturday, around ten in the morning, Piotr Czupryna, the village hostage, showed up at my door and told me that the Germans and the elder ordered me to take part in hunting down the Jews. I said “no,” so Czupryna went to other houses, but he soon came back and told me that I had to go, or the Germans would take me away. In this situation, I went to the bushes along the shore of the Wisła River, where I knew that the Jews were hiding. I found no one, so I hid in these bushes, and

51 Testimony of Adam Kmieć, APK, SAKr 967/K 153/49.

52 The description of the manhunt is based on the file taken from: APK, SAKr 964, IV K 115/49 (K 24/50).

53 Interrogation of Adam Koziół, November 18, 1948, APK, SAKr 964, IV K 115/49 (K 24/50).

54 APK, SAKr 965, K 136/49.

soon two other [peasants], Roman Wawrzynek and Jan Wójcik, joined me, and we hunkered down, all three of us. I heard some voices from nearby clusters of trees, and I saw people moving around, but all was blurred because the bushes were dense and taller than a man. I did not see the gendarmes or the Polish police. I stayed in the bushes for two hours, and then slowly made my way back home. Only later did I hear that six people of Jewish nationality were caught during this manhunt and that they were later executed. I took no part in this hunt.⁵⁵

One of the blue policemen described the same manhunt, in his words:

In 1943, around Easter, two Jewish families sought shelter in the community of Tonia, on the shores of the Wisła, in the so-called “wicker.” There, they built a hideout, a bunker. The German gendarmes, and more precisely [Engelbert – JG] Guzdek, their commander, scheduled a hunt for these Jews on Good Saturday. In order to ensure success, Guzdek appointed ten hostages, and personally warned them, that they had to make sure that all men from Tonia took part in the hunt. The hostages then started to knock on all doors and inform people about Guzdek’s order, and threatened all those who refused with possible consequences.⁵⁶

The manhunt, seen through the eyes of the victim (in this case ten-year old Dawid Wasserstrum who was hiding close to Dąbrowa), looked altogether different:

Later, when my aunt had to go to the village to buy food, the peasants found out where we were hidden and brought the police. It happened on February 10, [1944 – JG]. It was freezing cold outside, but in our bunker it was so hot that we all were half-naked, my sister was barefoot. Suddenly the policemen broke inside. We fled without anything; everyone in our bunker managed to get away, and we fled to another forest. In the bunker next to ours, however, eight people were killed, among them a mother

55 Interrogation of Stanislaw Baran, January 20, 1949, APK, SAKr 965 136/49 SAKr 965. The file concerns the hunt for Jewish families hidden in the hideouts in 1943.

56 Tadeusz Krasnodębski, *Policjant konspiratorem, Szesnaście lat na muszce Gestapo i bezpieki* (Kraków: Wingert, 2008), pp. 174–175.

who did not want to leave her limping daughter behind, and her husband.⁵⁷

The security of the new location was short-lived and the location of the new bunker was also discovered during another manhunt. This time it was a local forest ranger who alerted the Polish police and the Germans. “They kept shooting at us, and that’s when my two sisters and some other people were killed,” said Wasserstrum in his deposition. Some manhunts were organized by the peasants, some were organized directly by the Germans, others were ordered by the gendarmes, and in some cases the Polish blue police took the initiative. One of these blue police-inspired hunts conducted in Dąbrowa County started when

the guard from Kars reported that the Jews are hiding on the shores of the Wisła, between Karsy and Borusowa. Madry [the commander of the blue police detachment from Otfinów – JG] ordered an immediate deployment to this area. Lewandowicz led the expedition.... Once we reached the Wisła, he told us to surround the hideout, and then, together with Niechciał [another policeman from Otfinów – JG], he entered the bunker. He probably wanted to find cash and jewelry and did not want to share the loot with the rest of us. Our role was to stop the Jews in case of an escape attempt. After a moment I heard shots, and then I saw some people running through the bushes; they quickly disappeared from sight.... Niechciał and Lewandowicz killed two Jews in this hideout. When we joined them, the bodies and the bunker had already been searched. Niechciał was unhappy; he shook his head and said only, “They had nothing.” ... [J]ust as we left the bushes, an informer arrived with news that in Karsy, at the ferry; someone saw a Jewess, probably one of those who had managed to escape the ambush. Lewandowicz and Niechciał ran off and a moment later I heard a woman shouting, then some shots, and everything went quiet. According to Niechciał, Lewandowicz shot the Jewish woman, and the elder from Kars was ordered to bury the bodies of the dead.⁵⁸

Sometime later in 1943, the local Polish police learned about another

57 Testimony of Dawid Wasserstrum from Dąbrowa Tarnowska, AŻIH, 301/3866.

58 Tadeusz Stefan Krasnodębski, *Policjant konspiratorem*, p. 175; and APK, SAKr, K 83/49 SAKr 961.

Jewish hideout. This time the number of victims was much larger. “The next day,” wrote Helena Aussenberg, one of the few survivors of this manhunt, “the blue policemen surrounded our bunker. Inside was a family of thirteen and some other people who normally stayed elsewhere. That’s when my father was killed. The policemen called people one by one and shot them [as they came out]. Blue police arrived together with peasants. Other Jews escaped.”⁵⁹ Another police-led hunting party swept through the woods around the village of Skrzynka. This time the police searched many houses close to the edge of the forest. It is quite clear that the phenomenon of “houses close to the edge of the forest” had a fundamental importance from the point of view of Jews who were looking for shelter.

Also cases of manhunts organized *ad hoc* took place, without earlier mobilization of night watches and guards. If not enough men were available, women were told to join in as well. One of these impromptu hunts took place close to Szczucin (north of Dąbrowa) in April 1943. One of the women who took part in the operation, later recalled,

The policemen wanted to send Andrzej Łabuz, who stood with them, to get some men, but he told them that there was a market in the town nearby and that all the men went to the market. He also said that some boys were working in the forest, and perhaps they could go [and hunt for the Jews]. So, on the way, they took three boys who were planting trees. Germans went first, Polish policemen followed behind, and we, civilians, closed up the rear. In this place where the Szczucin and Słupsk forests come together they split us into two groups, and told us to meet on the other side [of the forest]. In my group, there was one German gendarme and one blue policeman. We marched in a line, but we village people went behind the Germans and behind the [Polish] police. I didn’t go through the woods; I chose to go along the path. When our groups came together, I heard shots fired.⁶⁰

Still in another case, a Jewish witness described a hunt for the Jews organized by two members of the local Sonderdienst (auxiliary police created in occupied Poland and made up of ethnic Germans), who asked some village youngsters from the Dulcza area for help. The boys

59 Testimony of Helena Aussenberg, Kraków, October 5, 1945, AŻIH, 301/1145.

60 APK, SAKr 1019 IV p. 141/50.

“jumped onto their horses and rushed into the woods to hunt for the Jews.”⁶¹ The woods in question were on the eastern border of Dąbrowa County.

Finally, some of the manhunts organized by the village community under the auspices of an elder did not necessarily or always target the Jews. In the Dąbrówka Szczepanowska community (a few miles southwest of Tarnów), Andrzej Gawron, the local elder, decided to fill the quota of people requested for work in Germany with the local Gypsies (Roma). “The community meeting therefore decided to capture these Gypsies. The members of the watch were sent to Kępa, where they seized twelve Gypsies (only elderly people) and locked them up in our school.” Sometime later policemen from Pleśna arrived, who informed us, “One of the Gypsies had been killed by the ‘blue’ policemen while resisting arrest and the rest were delivered to the Germans.”⁶²

The Germans, in the meantime, also organized their own hunts — looking for Poles who failed to report for work in Germany or those who had fled from Germany back home. Jan Szewczyk, a blue policeman from the Otfinów detachment testified:

In 1942 I took part in a hunt for Poles who were scheduled for work in Germany. The action took place in the village Kłyż (Dąbrowa County) and was organized by the German gendarmerie, with the assistance of the Polish police from Otfinów. Several Polish policemen were involved. Having caught the wanted individuals, we took them to the German Labor Office [Arbeitsamt] in Dąbrowa Tarnowska, from where these people were later sent to Germany.⁶³

And starting in the winter of 1943, the train from Szczucin to Tarnów was often stopped in the station at Dąbrowa. During this so-called “train hunt,” the gendarmes looked for smugglers and for people avoiding work in Germany.

61 Testimony of Helena Aussenberg, Kraków, June 1, 1947, AŻIH, 301/3215.

62 Testimony of Andrzej Gawron, APK, SAKr 1046/IVK 276/50, p. 14.

63 Interrogation of Jan Szewczyk, APK, SAKr 1055/IVK/344/50, pp. 36–37.

Conclusions

A review of the extant testimonies and trial dossiers indicates that all it took to start a manhunt was someone with initiative and with at least some authority. The hunts were led by the elders, forest rangers, firefighters, wealthy peasants, or simply by anyone who could inspire, threaten, or otherwise mobilize the village collective. The hunts for the Jews did not provoke negative emotions, or moral dilemmas, although some peasants were, quite understandably, upset about wasting a day of work for a basically unfruitful pursuit.

Is it really necessary to draw on this long list of indifferent descriptions and tragic testimonies in order to prove a degree of complicity of certain segments of Polish society in the implementation of the Final Solution? Unfortunately, yes. Even today there are historians willing to defend the activities of people involved in the manhunts, seeking justification for their actions, and trying to lay responsibility entirely on the shoulders and on the conscience of the German occupier.⁶⁴ Indeed, the peasants, the firefighters, the elders, and the Polish rural youth were made parts of the German system and they were subject to brutal German reprisals. But the deadly efficiency of this system depended on the zeal and the willingness of its participants, which cannot be explained by fear of reprisals alone. In any case, the success of the *Judenjagd* was much more impressive than any other “hunting” activity during the war. Here, the historical evidence is convincing, unequivocal, and horrifying: some elements of Polish society, various organizations, and social structures were actively and consciously involved in the liquidation of the ghettos and in hunting down the desperate Jewish refugees who sought shelter on the Aryan side. The few Jews who managed to escape the slaughter described the barbarism of the Poles’ actions in gruesome detail.

Can human fear and greed be considered a sufficient explanation for the deadly efficiency of these manhunts? Are these two strong but also universal and common feelings sufficient to explain why the chances of survival for Jews hiding in the rural areas of occupied Poland were so slim? Jewish and Polish postwar testimonies suggest something else. Jewish life, which steadily lost its value from the be-

64 Bogdan Musiał, “Zbrodnicza perfidia czy umiejętne działanie,” *Rzeczpospolita*, Plus/Minus supplement, March 19, 2011.

ginning of the occupation, became virtually worthless after the ghetto liquidations. In the eyes of many Poles, the Jewish refugees wandering from one village to another, hiding in primitive bunkers in the forests, or wasting away in underground shelters under barns were simply no longer human. Rather, they became a problem or a threat, which needed to be dealt with.

Somewhere in 1942, and it is impossible to determine exactly when, it became acceptable in the eyes of many to take Jewish lives. It was no longer considered a crime or a sin. Some took an active part in hunting down the Jews and delivered their victims to the Polish blue police or to German gendarmes. Others, forced by hostages or by their elder, marched in the third line of the hunt. Still others watched from the roadside, or from behind window curtains, as the peasants herded the bound Jews to the police station for slaughter. But no one, in these circumstances, could remain a neutral, emotionally detached witness, often described by historians as a “bystander to the Holocaust.” The complicated, multi-layered system invented for the needs of the *Judenjagd* assured that each rural inhabitant — man, woman, and child — had a role to play in this horrible theater of death.