

Marian Turski

(Porzecze, June 26, 1926 – Warsaw, February 18, 2025)

Marian Turski, survivor of Auschwitz and Buchenwald concentration camps, long-established social activist and prominent figure in Polish-Jewish life, died in Warsaw on February 18, 2025. Born Moshe Turbowicz in Porzecze (today Paretse in the Grodno district of Belarus), or, according to other sources in Druskienniki (today Druskininkai in Lithuania), he was the descendant of a well-known rabbinic family from Klyetsk in the Minsk region of Belarus. His father, Elias, had intended to emigrate to Palestine but was prevented from doing so by the injuries he sustained as an infantryman during the First World War. Accordingly, he settled in Łódź with his family where he worked in his wife's parents' cotton goods store.

Marian described his parents as follows:

My father was an educated man, very educated even – especially in matters relating to Jews, Jewish culture, Jewish heritage, Jewish history, and Jewish teachings. That is how he was brought up, and what he tried to pass on to me... My mother was fluent in French, Russian, and also Polish. And she was progressive. We didn't speak Yiddish at all at home. Although my parents spoke Yiddish between themselves, they also spoke Polish. But this Yiddish was Lithuanian Yiddish.¹

Marian spent his childhood and adolescence in Łódź, graduating from the Tarbut primary school at 11 Piotrkowska Street, which employed Hebrew as the language of instruction and subsequently enrolled in the Polish-Hebrew Gymnasium for Boys run by the Society for Jewish Secondary Education. Because of his father's illness he supplemented the family income by tutoring his classmates. He completed the second grade of high school before the outbreak of World War II and continued his education in the Łódź ghetto in which his

¹ POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, Digital Collections, Oral History Collection, interview with Marian Turski, interviewed by Józef Markiewicz, October 7, 2019, accessed April 16, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zn0a-C1vGiyw>.

family was confined from 1940, attending secret classes and passing the “small leaving exam” in 1941. In the ghetto, Marian learned Yiddish and adopted a left-wing standpoint, becoming politically active in the *Lewicowa Organizacja Antyfaszystowska* (Left-Wing Anti-Fascist Organization), founded by former supporters of the Communist Party of Poland (KPP), which had been dissolved by the Comintern in 1938.

In 1944 Marian’s parents and brother were deported to Auschwitz. Two weeks later, Marian joined one of the last transports to the camp before the liquidation of the ghetto. He did so voluntarily, along with other members of the Left-Wing Anti-Fascist Organization, in the belief that this would give them a better chance of survival. His father and brother perished in the gas chambers and his mother was sent to work in Bergen Belsen. Marian worked in a labor commando in Auschwitz and survived a death march to the Buchenwald concentration camp in January 1945. He movingly acknowledged the kindness of fellow prisoners who had saved his life in Auschwitz after he was knocked to the ground by a kapo, shattering his glasses. They had given up their meager bread rations to buy him a new pair of spectacles on the black market in the camp. Without them he could not have survived. After the liquidation of Auschwitz, he was one of 60,000 prisoners sent on a death march west to avoid the advancing Soviet forces. The small number of survivors were sent to Buchenwald in cattle trucks. He was then sent on a second death march from Buchenwald to Terezin where he was liberated, on the brink of death from typhus and exhaustion. He lost a total of thirty-nine relatives in the Holocaust.

In September 1945, he returned to Poland, was reunited with his mother and married Halina Paszkowska, a fellow Holocaust survivor. He was now a self-proclaimed communist, having previously refused the opportunity to emigrate to the West and urging his associates “to recognize the new Poland, People’s Poland, the socialist, proletarian Poland...”² He settled in Lower Silesia where at the end of 1945 he joined the Polish Workers’ Party (*Polska Partia Robotnicza*) and, on the advice of the Personnel Department of the party’s Central Committee, changed his name to the less Jewish-sounding Marian Turski. He was an electoral commissioner in the referendum held in June 1946 and subsequently openly admitted his complicity in rigging the results.

In October 1946, he began studying history at the University of Wrocław and became a journalist, writing for several party papers, including *Gazeta Robotnicza*, the organ of the Provincial Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party in Wrocław. In July 1948, he joined the District Board of *Związek Akademicki Młodzieży Polskiej* (ZAMP; Academic Union of Polish Youth) and was appointed secretary of the Coordinating Committee of Polish Student Organizations in Wrocław. He was also a member of the thirty-person Polish delegation to the World Congress in Defence of Peace, in Prague in April 1949.

² Marian Turski, as cited in the documentary film *Mój najszczęśliwszy dzień* [My happiest day], directed by Michał Bukojemski (Digit-Film, 2013).

In 1949 he moved to Warsaw where he continued his studies at the Party School of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party (KC PZPR) and the College of Social Sciences, also operating under the auspices of the KC PZPR. He then became a functionary in the Office for the Press and Publishing of the KC PZPR as an instructor. In 1954, he became a senior instructor in the Department of Propaganda and Agitation (Publishing Section) and in the years 1956–1957 was a member of the Press Commission of the Central Committee.

During the events of the Polish October of 1956, he was deputy editor-in-chief of the *Sztandar Młodych* magazine but was dismissed from this position in December 1957 because of his support for revisionism. He now, at the invitation of Mieczysław Rakowski, moved to the newly founded weekly, *Polityka*, and, in 1958, became head of its history section. He solicited articles from leading historians, such as Juliusz Bardach, Janusz Tazbir, Stefan Kieniewicz, and Tadeusz Manteuffel, and established the journal's annual awards for the best academic and popular books on the contemporary history of Poland. In 1964, he was awarded an eight-month State Department scholarship to the United States and in the following year took part in the anti-segregation march from Selma to Montgomery organized by Martin Luther King.

Inevitably, the antisemitic campaign of March 1968 created a crisis for Turski. As he described it, this constituted:

the end of my loyalty toward the official line [of the communist party], as well as a change in thinking about my Polish-Jewish identity [...]. The year 1968 accelerated my transition from being a Pole with Jewish origins to an awareness of being a Pole and a Jew simultaneously.³

He did, however, decide to remain in Poland. He explained this decision by the support he had received from his colleagues at *Polityka*:

[If] in 1968 twenty people from the *Polityka* team, with one exception, were able to stand firm with the nine of "bad origin," then I had no right [...] to leave such friends who, if the hour came, would not be able to leave.⁴

Certainly, unlike most of the Polish press, *Polityka* did not publish any articles with antisemitic content during the "anti-Zionist" campaign. In 1975, Turski was able to publish *Byli wówczas dziećmi* (They were children then), a collection of survivor accounts submitted for a competition announced by *Polityka* and the Council for the Protection of Monuments to Struggle and Martyrdom.⁵ He remained at the journal throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, despite the growing polarization which was being caused within its editorial team by

³ Turski, cited in *Mój najszczęśliwszy dzień*.

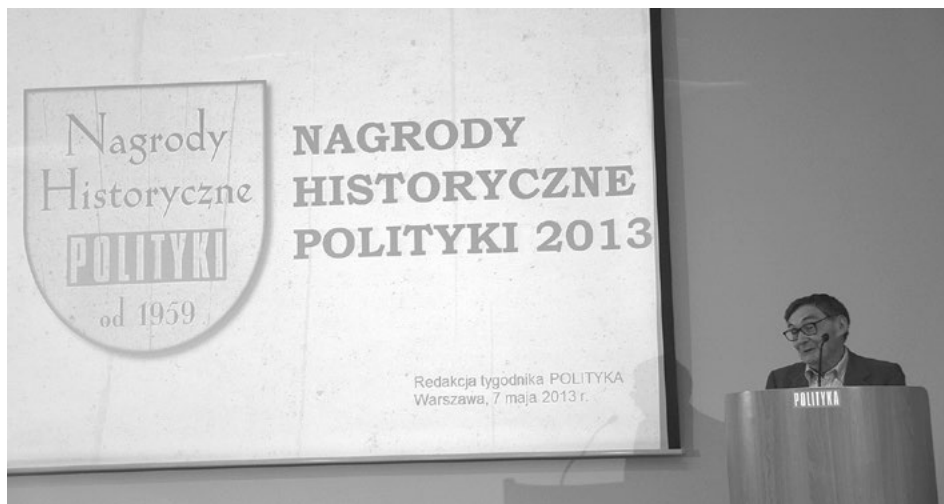
⁴ "Trzech na jednego z Marianem Turskim," *Zdanie*, no. 3/4 (2014): 11, accessed April 16, 2025, <http://mbc.malopolska.pl/Content/89819/zdanie-2014-3-4-162-163.pdf>.

⁵ Marian Turski, *Byli wówczas dziećmi* (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1975).

the intensifying political crisis. He described his decision as an expression of his “Conradian loyalty” towards his long-time collaborators with whom he had gone through various difficult times.⁶

However, his position was changing. In 1985, at the invitation of Shmuel Krakowski (future director of the archives of the Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem), he visited Israel to participate in a conference of Holocaust survivors among the former members of the Left-Wing Anti-Fascist Organization, to which he had belonged during the occupation. A few years later, in 1989, Turski joined Arnold Mostowicz (also a survivor of the Łódź ghetto) and Tomasz Miedziński on the Founding Committee of the reactivated Association of Jewish Veterans and Victims of the Second World War. He was also active in the History Commission established in 1994 with the aim of collecting accounts from living members of the Association and publishing them in book form.

For many years, Turski did not speak of his experiences in Nazi camps and visited Auschwitz for the first time since the war in the 1970s. He has described the suppression of his camp memories as an amnesia which lasted twenty years. As this desire to suppress a painful past eased, he engaged in a major effort to collect accounts from other Holocaust survivors, many of which were published in *Losy żydowskie. Świadectwo żywych* (Jewish fates: The testimony of the living), which he edited and for which he wrote an introduction.⁷ The work



Marian Turski delivering a formal tribute to the editors of Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały (Holocaust Studies and Materials) during presentation of Polityka Special Historical Award in 2013 (photo courtesy of Jakub Petelewicz)

⁶ “Trzech na jednego,” 9.

⁷ Marian Turski, ed., *Losy żydowskie. Świadectwo żywych*, vol. 1 (Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Żydów Kombatantów i Poszkodowanych w II Wojnie Światowej, 1996).



Marian Turski during an "Open Academic Seminar" hosted by the Polish Center for Holocaust Research in Warsaw (photo courtesy of Jakub Petelewicz)

was published by the Association of Jewish Combatants of whose General Board Turski became head.

During the 1990s, he became involved in numerous initiatives fostering research and education on the history of Polish Jews and commemorating the Holocaust, among them the project of establishing the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. From 2009 until his death, he was the chairman of the Museum Council. A central figure among the Museum's founders, he understood that it needed to be a museum that expresses solidarity with the oppressed and marginalized, a key lesson he drew from Polish Jewish history and his experiences during the Holocaust. He also worked with the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute in Poland, which was the co-founder of the Museum and also responsible for the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute. In the years 2000–2011, he was the chairman of the Association and until 2023 served as its deputy chairman.

Marian Turski also held a number of important social offices, including deputy chairman of the International Auschwitz Committee (chairman from

June 14, 2021) and deputy chairman of the International Auschwitz Council (three terms over 2000–2018). He was a member of the Presidential Council for Polish-Jewish Relations under President Lech Wałęsa and a member of the Wannsee Conference Memorial Council (*Beirat Wannsee-Konferenz-Gedenkstaette*) in Berlin. He was also a longtime member of the Claims Conference delegation negotiating with the German government.

Among his many decorations, one could mention the Commander's Cross with Star of the Order of Polonia Restituta (1997), the Cross of Merit First Class of the Federal Republic of Germany for contributions towards Polish-German relations (2007), the Officer's Cross of the Order of the Legion of Honor (2012), and the 2020 Father Stanisław Musiał Award "for contributions towards Christian-Jewish and Polish-Jewish dialogue." In November 2023, he was granted honorary citizenship of the city of Łódź.

Turski was very concerned to pass on what he had seen as the lessons of his complex life. In January 2020, on the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, he gave an emotional and stirring speech:

Auschwitz did not fall from the sky. It began with small forms of persecution of Jews. It happened, which means it can happen anywhere. That is why human rights and democratic constitutions must be defended. The eleventh commandment is important: Don't be indifferent. Do not be indifferent when you see historical lies, do not be indifferent when any minority is discriminated against, do not be indifferent when power violates a social contract.⁸

This "eleventh commandment" has evoked a strong response. In the words of the Polish Prime Minister, Donald Tusk, "Mr. Turski's words have become a watchword for us."⁹ This and other speeches by him were included in a collection titled *XI. Thou Shalt Not Be Indifferent* published in 2021 to mark his ninety-fifth birthday.¹⁰ He constantly called on countries to foster harmony through conflict resolution and saw it as his duty to confront neo-Nazis wherever he found them. Earlier this year he wrote an open letter to Facebook chief Mark Zuckerberg, urging him to ban Holocaust denial from his social media platform.

In January 2025, Marian was again one of the principal speakers at the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. A frail figure, erect despite his advancing years and speaking without wavering, he lamented how few of

⁸ Memorial tribute to Marian Turski by Gideon Taylor and Greg Schneider, Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, accessed April 16, 2025, <https://www.claimscon.org/in-memory-of-marian-turski-zl/>.

⁹ Gloria Tessler, "Polish-Born Journalist and Historian Marian Turski Dies Aged 98," *Jewish Chronicle*, March 5, 2025, accessed April 25, 2025, <https://www.thejc.com/news/obituaries/polish-born-journalist-and-historian-marian-turski-dies-aged-98-e57cdnbs>.

¹⁰ Marian Turski, *XI. Nie bądź obojętny / XI. Thou Shalt Not Be Indifferent* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne; Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Żydowski Instytut Historyczny w Polsce, 2021).

his fellow prisoners had lived to see freedom and “now, there is only a handful [left].” He went on to warn his audience: “We see in the contemporary world, today and now, a huge rise in antisemitism and it is precisely antisemitism that led to the Holocaust.”¹¹ He gave his final interview three weeks before his death in Simon Schama’s recent television film *The Road to Auschwitz* (2025), in which he repeated his injunction, “You shouldn’t be indifferent. Let’s start with reducing hatred” and then quoted the poet Bolesław Taborski, “The most important thing is compassion... It makes life bearable and its absence dehumanizes.”

While he may have regretted his youthful blind faith in communism, though still remaining a leftist until his death, he refused to erase aspects of his biography that became inconvenient over time – instead, like any self-respecting historian, he sought to highlight the whole picture, not just parts of it. His life – from his early childhood, through his miraculous survival, his engagement and disillusion with communism, his work for and on behalf of the Jewish community in Poland, in helping to achieve understanding with Poles, and in striving for reconciliation with Germans – was always marked by his quest for a higher purpose.

Turski was devoted to his wife Halina Paszkowska, who died in March 2017, a Holocaust survivor, a liaison messenger in the Warsaw Uprising and a well-respected sound operator in films. She worked on sound production for the Polish Film Chronicle (*Polska Kronika Filmowa*) and on over 200 documentaries and twenty feature films. Among these was Roman Polanski’s Oscar-nominated 1962 film debut *Knife in the Water*. Thanks to her contacts as a member of Solidarity, in 1990 Turski was able to conduct two interviews with Lech Wałęsa. He is survived by his daughter, Joanna Turska, a renowned flautist, two grandchildren, and two great grandchildren. He was a uniquely charming man who will be sorely missed.

Antony Polonsky

¹¹ Tessler, “Polish-Born Journalist.”