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In a Ciechania presbytery The story of saving Zofia Trembska. A case study

Zuzanna Schnepf-Kołaczk

Museum of the History Polish Jews POLIN

redakcja@holocaustresearch.pl

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Zuzanna Schnepf-Kotacz

“In the Ciechania presbytery.” The Story of Saving Zofia Trembska. A Case Study

The basic difficulty in describing cases of village rectors helping Jews is the scarce database. The best known cases are those of the clergymen who received the title of Righteous among the Nations. However, even their stories are usually described by short accounts, schematic in form and content, of the honored themselves or the persons they helped. In this context the case of hiding Lila Flachs in the house of the Orthodox priest Jan Lewiarz is a fascinating and multidimensional story. It tells the story of a Jewish girl and an Orthodox priest of Polish nationality pretending to be Ukrainian siblings in a Lemko village and protected by the authority of a Ukrainian nationalist who was the priest's friend. Certainly, there are many other equally touching stories, yet only a few of them are documented so well.

The detailed accounts come from both sides. In the Yad Vashem Archives there is the account of Zofia Trembska¹ (that is, Lila Flachs, who did not return to her Jewish name and surname after the war) presented in 1961. Several years later, in 1964, the Jewish Historical Institute obtained the account of Father Jan Lewiarz.² Both accounts were written separately with no common aim to connect them, as it happens in the case of applying for the title of the Righteous. Each author describes war experiences from their own perspective, which makes it possible to learn about the events from both the rescued and the rescuer. Another extremely precious source, and one that offers a completely new perspective, is the interview conducted with Zofia Trembska in May 2009.³ Juxtaposed with the account presented to Yad Vashem almost fifty years earlier, it shows significant differences not so much in the factography but in the author's emotional attitude towards the priest. A comparison of both accounts of Zofia Trembska gives one a chance to follow the evolution of her memory from the period of hiding and her relationship with her main carer.

The issue of memory and reconstruction of events after years relates to all presented sources because they all come from the postwar period. The only material

¹ Yad Vashem Archive (later: YVA), O3/1823, Testimony of Zofia Trembska.

² Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego [Archive of the Jewish Historical Institute] (later: AŻIH), 301/6006, Testimony of Jan Lewiarz.

³ Interview with Zofia Trembska conducted in May 2009 by Kamila Dąbrowska for The Museum of the History of Polish Jews as part of the Polish Roots in Israel project.

from that period, that was established *hic et nunc* and gives researchers unique possibilities of interpretation, is the set of photographs taken during the period of hiding.⁴ Apart from documentary and illustrative qualities, these photographs also play the role of a “time machine” – they convey the atmosphere of those days and provide additional material not to be found in any written testimony.

I. The First Meeting

It was the early autumn of 1942. The Lvov ghetto had already gone through two Liquidation Actions, during which Germans deported approximately 60,000 people to the Bełżec extermination camp. An eighteen-year old Jewish girl, Lila Flachs, got on a tram going to the outskirts of Lvov. Having arrived at the terminus she sat down on a nearby bench. She waited for fifteen minutes. Then she got on the tram again and sneaked into the ghetto. Those fifteen minutes determined her future fate. An unseen observer reportedly watched the girl sitting on the bench and decided if he wished to hide her and save her from extermination. Fortunately, she was a blonde and had ‘good looks’. The verification proved favorable.

Who was this secret protector *in spe*? This Lila did not know, she was not even completely aware that she was being watched. The meeting at the tram terminus was arranged by her uncle, who promised he would get the girl out of the ghetto and place her on the Aryan side. Uncle Joachim Morgenstern was, apart from her father Jan Flachs, one of Lila’s last relatives who were still alive. Her mother had been deported to Bełżec during the August action of 1942. Thanks to his American wife, Joachim Morgenstern owned the passport of a Guatemala citizen. In occupied Lvov he was interned in a special camp for Jews who were citizens of foreign countries. He stayed in better conditions than his relatives in the ghetto and he had more freedom of action and in contacting the Aryan side. Among others, he traded with a Pole, Jan Lewiarz, who was the head of a male dormitory in Lvov. Jan came from the village of Fredropol near Przemyśl. Before the war he studied theology in Przemyśl;⁵ he wanted to become a priest. According to Zofia Trembska, he was to have become a Roman Catholic priest but for unknown reasons he could not. In 1940 he submitted a thesis titled “The Presence of the Israelites in Egypt in the Light of Archeology”⁶ to the council of Greek Catholic bishops in Lvov. Lewiarz explains in his testimony that he became put off the Greek Catholic Church by the Ukrainians’ participation in the pogrom of the Jews, which he witnessed in June 1941. It was then that he joined the Orthodox Church.⁷ Zofia claims that in that context it was crucial that during war the Vatican suspended ordination of Roman and Greek

⁴ Photographs are in possession of Zofia Trembska.

⁵ According to the official form filled in after the war by Jan Lewiarz, he graduated in theology in 1933: Prawosławne Archiwum Metropolitalne [Orthodox Metropolitan Archive] (later: PAM), Official Form: protopope Jan Lewiarz, XVII9 602A, p. 14.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ AŻIH, 301/6006, Jan Lewiarz’s Testimony, p. 1.

Catholic clergymen. It was most attainable for Jan Lewiarz to become ordained by the Orthodox Church, which ordained new clergymen during the occupation.⁸ The only obstacle was that Lewiarz did not have enough money for the fees related to the ordination.⁹

Having heard the story of the would-be priest, Joachim Morgenstern offered the Pole a deal: he would pay for his ordination as an Orthodox priest and in exchange Jan would take care of his niece and keep her on the Aryan side. After watching Lilka sitting on the bench and ascertaining that her looks did not raise suspicions, Lewiarz decided to agree to the girl's uncle's offer. According to Zofia Trembska's postwar account, apart from having his ordination financed he was also to receive by post 300 zlotys¹⁰ monthly, sent by her uncle's friend, a doctor from Lvov.¹¹ In addition, the uncle donated a one-time sum of money for the priest's clothes and everyday equipment for the presbytery. Unfortunately, information about the above-mentioned terms of the agreement comes only from Zofia Trembska, who did not directly participate in the transaction. Describing his help to Lilka, Jan Lewiarz does not mention any financial aspects of this venture at all.

During the two following months Jan Lewiarz passed his exams in Warsaw and was ordained as an Orthodox priest. He asked to be given a parish in the smallest and most out-of-the-way village. In both her testimonies Zofia Trembska emphasizes that it was a sacrifice on his part in order to ensure her safety. The point was to find shelter in a place secluded and forgotten by all, where Lilka would not have to contact many local people. Besides, taking over some modest parish limited the risk of raising envy among other clergymen. Finally, it was decided that the recently ordained priest would be assigned to Ciechania, a mountain village in Krosno County. Meanwhile, Jan Lewiarz handed Lilka documents of his late sister, who had died of tuberculosis. From that moment on Lila Flachs became Zofia Lewiarz, the sister of an Orthodox priest. Never again did she return to her real name.

II. Ciechania

At the turn of October and November 1942 a small group of travelers appeared at the Lvov railway station: an Orthodox priest in a cassock, a girl with a black dachshund in her hands and a young man carrying suitcases. "There were very many Jews from the ghetto who caught Jews for the Gestapo," recalls Zofia Trembska.

⁸ 21 out of 153 Orthodox priests in post-war Poland were ordained from 1940 to 1944 – data based on the questionnaire carried out from 1953 to 1954, quoted in: K. Urban, *The Orthodox Church in Poland in 1945–1970* (Cracow, 1996), 189–190.

⁹ Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich [The Museum of the History of Polish Jews] (later: MHŻP), Polish Roots in Israel, Transcript of interview with Zofia Trembska, May 2009, pp. 3, 4.

¹⁰ 300 zlotys per month was a very small amount as a payment for hiding someone. Perhaps it was 3,000 zlotys.

¹¹ YVA, O3/1823, Testimony of Zofia Trembska, p. 21.

"I was frightfully afraid of this control, [afraid] that they would recognize me. It would be enough that they had seen me once in the ghetto."¹² But fortunately they got on the train with no obstacles. The dog, Aks, the priest's favorite pet, turned out to be good camouflage. "What kind of a Jew would drag a dog along?"¹³ asks Zofia Trembska rhetorically.

The man who traveled with them was priest Lewiarz's lover. The Ukrainian, Roman Hawrylak, settled in the presbytery with the priest and his sister as their cousin. Zofia quickly found out that the relationship between her carers went beyond just friendship. However, it was only after six months of living together at the presbytery that she found out from the 'Sexual Issues' encyclopedia about the existence of homosexual relations.¹⁴

Roman Hawrylak came from a well-known family of Ukrainian nationalists near Przemyśl. His presence was supposed to be a kind of safety screen for the Pole and the Jewess, Lilka, their authentication in the Lemko village of Ciechania. "When I said that Hawrylak was my family it was itself like a spell among the Ukrainian activists"¹⁵ – explains Zofia Trembska. It is worth emphasizing that not only Lilka/Zosia hid her true identity. A similar situation was that of Father Lewiarz, who posed as a Ukrainian from his arrival in Ciechania (and perhaps even earlier). They both managed to obtain a Ukrainian *Kennkarte* during their stay in the village, which, together with Romek's presence, was additional protection.

According to the census of 1921, Ciechania had a population of 305 people, 304 of whom were of Rusyn nationality. Only one respondent declared Polish nationality and Roman Catholic religion.¹⁶ Perhaps it was the teacher, J. Orłowski, who appears in pre-war sources as an informer of the state authorities on anti-Polish activities among the local Greek Catholic priests.¹⁷ It is not known, however, if the Polish teacher still lived in the village during the occupation. In the testimonies of Zofia Trembska and Jan Lewiarz, no Polish people living in Ciechania appear. Similarly absent were the Jews who, according to the census of 1921, inhabited the neighboring villages in limited numbers.¹⁸ The largest concentration of the Jewish population

¹² MHŻP, Transcript of interview with Zofia Trembska, May 2009, p. 9.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 7.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 5.

¹⁶ *Skorowidz miejscowości Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej opracowany na podstawie wyników pierwszego powszechnego spisu ludności z dnia 30 IX 1921 r. i innych źródeł urzędowych*, vol. XIII: *Województwo lwowskie* [Lvov Province] (Warsaw, 1924), 19.

¹⁷ Documents of the Ministry of Religious Denominations and Public Enlightenment (*Ministerstwo Wyznań Religijnych i Oświecenia Publicznego*, MWRiOP) [Archive of New Records], 929, 482, quoted in J. Moklak, *Łemkowszczyzna w Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej. Zagadnienia polityczne i wyznaniowe* (Cracow, 1997), 177.

¹⁸ In the Polany village 9 out of 910 residents declared the Mosaic religion; in the Olchowiec village 7 out of 402 of all residents declared the Mosaic religion. It is worth noting that in both villages none of the residents declared Jewish nationality (the declared nationalities:



Father Jan Lewiarz with the Lemko population of Ciechania, 1942 or 1943.

was in the small town of Żmigród Nowy, approx. 15 kilometers from Ciechania.¹⁹ On the other hand, Zofia Trembska recalls that the whole village hid a local Jew, who moved from one farmer to another. By the road into the village there was a former Jewish house, in whose yard a Jewish family had been murdered. The farmers who drove by this household took off their hats and crossed themselves.²⁰

Perhaps the Jews did not arouse negative emotions among Ciechania inhabitants. The reason for such an attitude was not only the insignificant presence of Jews in the everyday life of the village. It can be assumed that the major problem in the pre-war community of Ciechania was the internal antagonism among the Lemko between the followers of the Russophile tendency and the followers of the national-Ukrainian movement.²¹ Both warring concepts were strongly connected with religion. Those who promoted the idea of the Lemko as members of the Russian nation

Rusyn, Polish, German - 1 person, other - 3 persons), *Skorowidz miejscowości Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, vol. XIII: *Województwo lwowskie* [Lvov Province], 19.

¹⁹ Żmigród Nowy: 709 out of 1959 residents were of Jewish nationality, at the same time 940 declared the Mosaic religion, *Skorowidz miejscowości Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, vol. XII: *Województwo krakowskie i Śląsk Cieszyński* [Cracow Province and Cieszyn Silesia] (Warsaw, 1925).

²⁰ Supplementary interview, author's telephone conversation with Zofia Trembska, 8 June 2009.

²¹ For more: E. Michna, *Lemkowie - grupa czy naród* (Cracow, 1995).

usually found support among the representatives of the Orthodox Church. Greek Catholic clergymen favored Ukrainian activists. According to the census of 1921, all the inhabitants of Ciechania were of Greek Catholic religion. The situation was similar in all other places in Lemkivshchyna. Unfortunately, we do not have equally detailed statistics from the census of 1931. The picture that would emerge from the data collected ten years later would be certainly different from the one of year 1921. Meanwhile there was the so-called Tylawa Schism when, during the second half of the 1920s, many Lemkivshchyna villages, on a mass scale, converted to the Orthodox Church, following the example given by the local people from Tylawa. Ciechania was also among them.²² It did not mean that the Greek Catholic community ceased to exist there. To the contrary, in pre-war documents the Greek Catholic priest from Ciechania is mentioned as one strongly involved in the Ukrainian movement.²³ At the same time, Ciechania was one of the most active villages as far as Russophile initiatives were concerned, and in which Orthodox priests were involved.²⁴

It meant that there were two strong ideological and religious groups that opposed each other and at the same time were inimical towards the Polish State. It is difficult to determine what was the actual influence of those two tendencies on the awareness and everyday life of the inhabitants of Ciechania. Yet the conflict with the local Greek Catholic priest dating back to pre-war times was of great importance for the newly arrived Orthodox priest Lewiarz and his sister Zofia. It was because it could pose additional danger. In this context of anti-Polish actions that took place in pre-war Ciechania,²⁵ the role of Romek Hawrylak was invaluable as his name was enough to brush off any suspicions as to the Lewiarz siblings.

Together with religion, language was another significant determinant of the Lemko community. On the basis of these two elements, Galicia Rusyns built their east cultural community spirit and, at the same time, the feeling of separation from the neighboring Polish people.²⁶ For this reason the knowledge of the Ukrainian language turned out to be very important for the residents of the presbytery. Already during the cart ride from Jasło to Ciechania it became the only "official" language. "The peasant [who came for them to Jasło - Z.S.-K.] already spoke Ukrainian and

²² D. Nowak, "Przyczynek do historii greckokatolickiego dekanatu dukielskiego," *Plaj. Almanach karpacki* 30 (spring 2005).

²³ For instance, the Greek Catholic priest in Ciechania did not say the obligatory prayer for the well-being of the Republic of Poland and the President, quoted in J. Moklak, op. cit., 119, 171.

²⁴ In Ciechania a local meeting of the Russophile party RSO (Ruska Seljanska Organizacja - Ruska Organizacja Wiejska [Russian Rural Organization]) was held, and Kaczkowski's reading room was established. It promoted the Russophile movement among the Lemko. Orthodox priest T. Munczakewycz is also mentioned as an active worker of Kaczkowski's reading room, collaborating with the RSO activists, quoted in J. Moklak, op. cit., 54, 83, 98, 99.

²⁵ See footnote 22.

²⁶ E. Michna, op. cit., 34.

everyone switched to Ukrainian too. And I was not prepared at all that I would have to speak Ukrainian"²⁷ – recalls Zofia Trembska, who was the only one among those three not to know this language. Before she learned it she made her Polish sound like Ukrainian. "They [the local people – Z.S.-K.] laughed at me. . . . They said I spoke some dialect they didn't understand". Fortunately, Zosia did not speak Yiddish, so there was no risk that she would accidentally throw in a Yiddish word. Nevertheless, for the local people of the village the situation was unusual: the sister of the Orthodox rector, a Ukrainian girl, didn't speak Ukrainian! In order to satisfy their curiosity Zosia said that she had not grown up with the rest of the Lewiarz siblings but was taken into the care of a wealthy uncle in a big city, where she attended a Polish school and thus forgot her Ukrainian. People believed this story, or pretended to believe.²⁸

III. At the Presbytery

The division of duties between the residents at the presbytery was established the first morning after arriving in Ciechania. When Zosia got up her two carers were still sleeping. It was very cold in the kitchen where her bed was. But instead of making a fire the girl got dressed, sat down and started knitting to kill time. As she explains many years after, it did not even occur to her to work in the kitchen, prepare breakfast or make her own bed. Being spoiled as the only daughter she was not accustomed to working in the household. Both men were quite astonished at that when they woke up: "Romek woke up first, he went to the kitchen. There was no fire, it was very cold and I was sitting there and knitting. . . . He looked at me, went back, [and] they whispered something with Janek. Then Janek came to look at me. . . . He looked at me, said nothing and left. A moment later Romek got dressed, made some breakfast, laid the table and asked us to sit. . . . Later Janek wants to wash but there's no water: 'Romek, there's no water' – it did not even occur to me that it might concern me. Only when. . . Romek went to get some water. And it stayed like that"²⁹ – says Zofia Trembska.

Zosia's morning behavior must have seriously violated the vision of house order of the priest and his friend. Apparently the men hoped that a young woman would take care of the household. Meanwhile it turned out that their ward had no idea about housework and she was not aware of what they expected from her. Representatives of different social strata met under one roof: Zosia, brought up in the home of wealthy Lvov shopkeepers, followed a different cultural code; she had different habits and understanding of her own role. For Janek and Romek, who came from peasant families, it was difficult to imagine that an eighteen-year old girl could not light the stove. On the other hand, she could lay the table elegantly and com-

²⁷ MHŽP, Transcript of interview with Zofia Trembska, May 2009, p. 10.

²⁸ YVA, O3/1823, Testimony of Zofia Trembska, p. 22.

²⁹ MHŽP, Transcript of interview with Zofia Trembska, May 2009, p. 13.

pose a sophisticated menu for guests. Besides, she was not concerned with money, which in their understanding was proof of the fact that she never lacked any money and she did not have to be concerned about it. Zosia's carers accepted her different social status with respect and admiration: "Later I overheard this conversation: 'She is so much of a lady that she doesn't even understand that she should clean after herself.' They were impressed"³⁰ – says Zofia Trembska.

She did not take care of the household. Among her few duties as the priest's sister was baking little balls of dough which Lewiarz later gave to his parishioners as the Holy Communion. The priest was laughing at the absurdity of this situation: a Jewish girl prepares communion for the Orthodox.³¹

Soon the priest and Romek started planning a journey to Lvov to bring the old maid Hania, who was to run the household. Zosia insisted that they bring her father to Ciechania together with Hania. She resorted to blackmail, saying that if they did not agree to bring her father she would go back to Lvov, because she could not bear it being there on her own. Finally, Janek and Romek gave in to her insistence. After a week they came back with the maid and Jan Flachs, who was waiting for Aryan documents. Officially, he was introduced to the local people as her mentally ill uncle. The priest's household now had five residents.

Members of this family-non-family were far from revealing their own secrets even to each other. "Relations there were strange, we didn't talk about many things, it was so good that we didn't have to know about many things"³² – says Zofia Trembska. All she knew about Hania was that she had been a maid before the war. During the Soviet occupation in Lvov she hid Jan Lewiarz, who was persecuted by the authorities for unexplained reasons. The priest told Zosia that, considering these deeds, she was to show respect to Hania. But the old servant did not know about the Jewish origin of the girl and her father. The official version stated that Zosia was a daughter of a Polish officer who had to be hiding. Hania was a kind-hearted and very hard working woman. She took over the house duties of Romek, who often had to travel to trade things. "I guess we would have rotted with dirt when Romek left... the priest and I, we weren't cut out for work."³³

As one ponders the joint functioning of the presbytery residents, it is necessary to keep in mind not only their different nationalities and social and cultural background but also the distinct and not easy-going personalities of the residents. Father Lewiarz was the key figure: a man of forty years,³⁴ handsome, according to Zofia's description, although there was "something weird in his face." Years later, his former ward considers him a very intelligent man, very knowledgeable, something that could impress people. At the same time, she repeatedly emphasizes his

³⁰ Ibidem; YVA, O3/1823, Testimony of Zofia Trembska, p. 22.

³¹ Author's conversation with Zofia Trembska, 24 January 2010, in Tel Aviv.

³² MHŽP, Transcript of interview with Zofia Trembska, May 2009, p. 25.

³³ Ibidem, p. 17.

³⁴ Date of birth 23 April 1903.: PAM, Official Form: protopope Lewiarz Jan, XVII9 602A, p. 14.

quick-tempered character, using epithets like "raving madman" and "hysteric." Jan was prone to start fights, which, we can assume, was often the case.

The pivotal line of conflict ran between the rector and Zofia, who quickly dropped her original shyness of a young girl. As she says herself, she was a spoiled teenager and talked back to the priest, imposing her own rules. She even went as far as to blackmail (especially when her father was not with them anymore): "If you scream at me, I'll bear it, . . . but keep in mind: the moment you hit me, I don't care, I can go and report to the Gestapo tomorrow. What can I lose? Only myself, and you will all go."³⁵ The priest would pay her back in kind, calling her the worst names. To be sure, these quarrels did not add to a friendly atmosphere, but by being tough and stubborn Zofia won a high standing in the household's hierarchy, [and] was a person to be reckoned with.

Her father's situation was different; by his humble and submissive demeanor and by doing all household chores he tried to win the householders' favor. The result of such actions was the opposite - the priest did not respect Jan Flachs, he pushed him around and harassed him.³⁶ In an interview of 2009 Zofia also talks about another problem: her father had a neat appearance, spoke Ukrainian, he was witty, joyful, [and] the people in the village respected him very much, but he could not learn to make the sign of the cross. "We organized lessons: 'Uncle, make the sign of the cross!' . . . and he wasn't able to learn that. It was a psychological thing" - Zofia recalls.

Certainly, her father could not adapt to the new conditions as well as his daughter. They tried to limit his contacts with the local people; they said the uncle was mentally ill, suffered from seizures and had to be closed in a room then. Later his involvement in village life was limited even further as a consequence of one word that he imprudently uttered. Jan Flachs continuously confused the name of a befriended farmer, calling him "Bobik" instead of "Bobek." At an evening meeting with the parishioners Bobek said to him laughingly: "Uncle, learn already that I'm not Bobik! All the Jews in Żmigród also called me Bobik."³⁷ After this incident the terrified priest told the uncle to speak as little as possible. During his entire stay in Ciechania Jan Flachs did not have Aryan documents, which increased the risk of exposure.

It is hard to say what the priest's general attitude towards Jews was like. It is known that when he quarreled with old Hania he called her a "Jewish maid," which was an insult. According to Zofia, the priest did not hate Jews but he was not very fond of them either. He had a knowledge of Jewish culture and history, spoke some Hebrew, probably because of the thesis he wrote during his theological studies "The Presence of the Israelites in Egypt in Light of Archeology."³⁸ The priest's mother,

³⁵ MHŻP, Transcript of interview with Zofia Trembska, May 2009, p. 26.

³⁶ YVA, O3/1823, Testimony of Zofia Trembska, p. 23.

³⁷ MHŻP, Transcript of interview with Zofia Trembska, May 2009, p. 16.

³⁸ Supplementary interview, author's phone conversation with Zofia Trembska, 8 June 2009.

who was the only person in the Lewiarz family to know that her son was hiding Jews, visited them several times in Ciechania. Zosia remembers her as a kind, good woman who felt sympathy for her fate.³⁹

Unlike Jan, it seems that Romek Hawrylak had a temperate disposition. But one should admit that his part was easier as he often traveled and did not need to deal with everyday tensions. Zosia talks about him very fondly, pointing out at the same time that he was a Ukrainian nationalist. During angry quarrels with the priest he threatened that he would denounce the priest for hiding Jews. Then Zosia's father beat him and choked him until Romek promised that he would not denounce them.⁴⁰ Apart from this incident, Zosia says that he was good to her, "like a brother," he felt for her although he did not show it. She says he was her support in life, even after the war.⁴¹

IV. Local People

It is striking how such a diverse group functioned, forming theoretically one family in a closed, small rural community without raising any suspicions on the part of the local people. "The People of Ciechania were simple and it was easy to hide because no one cared"⁴² – claims Father Lewiarz in his testimony. Zofia Trembska confirms these words: "It was generally accepted not to ask about anything. . . . I'm not sure if no one was interested. . . .?"⁴³. To be sure the lack of inquisitiveness and distrust on the part of village inhabitants was an advantageous factor in hiding. Probably, to some extent it also resulted from the character of the Lemko community – closed, without a broader orientation, remote, far from the center of events. The above-mentioned reluctance to ask questions could also be a result of the war-specific character of those areas. At that time, the mountain areas of Lemkivshchyna were a haven and shelter for outcasts and people outlawed for various reasons. Among the local elite that the priest and his 'family' met there were intellectuals from tsarist Russia who escaped Bolshevik repressions, priests dismissed from the Catholic Church for alcohol abuse and relationships with women, a Polish doctor from Lvov hiding with his wife, a Jew. . . .

An additional factor averting suspicions was the high standing of the rector in the local hierarchy of authority: the esteem and favor he was endowed with by the faithful, to some extent because of his post. The contacts of Father Lewiarz and his 'family' with the parishioners were close and frequent. Almost every evening the Lemko visited the presbytery 'like a café' – according to Zosia, they sat with no light on and chatted away. Equally intensive were the meetings with the intellectu-

³⁹ MHŽP, Transcript of interview with Zofia Trembska, May 2009, p. 15.

⁴⁰ Author's conversation with Zofia Trembska, 24 January 2010, in Tel Aviv.

⁴¹ MHŽP, Transcript of interview with Zofia Trembska, May 2009, pp. 15, 31.

⁴² AŽIH, 301/6006, Testimony of Jan Lewiarz, p. 5

⁴³ MHŽP, Transcript of interview with Zofia Trembska, May 2009, p. 23.



Lila Flachs (wartime name: Zofia Lewiarz) with her Ukrainian fiancé Włodzimierz Bajko, Ciechania or Bartne, 1943.

als from the neighboring villages: teachers, clergymen, a doctor, a pharmacist... "They were all part of our company, we were supposed to invite and get to know them... we visited them on various occasions,"⁴⁴ says Zofia. They themselves also organized receptions for their guests. "We had an eventful social life there," she sums up.

During one of the meetings Zosia met Włodzimierz Bajko, five years her senior, a Ukrainian and a principal of the school in the nearby village of Polany. She fell in love with him, [and] the feeling was reciprocated. As his fiancée she visited his family, who were delighted at such a good match: the priest's sister, a well-mannered young lady. Undoubtedly, Father Lewiarz was not too keen on Zosia's relationship, which posed potential danger to their secret. But he did not say anything about him. "He pretended he didn't see anything. It was probably the smartest thing to do,"⁴⁵ states Zofia. She decided to reveal to Włodek the truth about her origin when the front line was moving closer. Her beloved reacted with terror, quickly leaving the

⁴⁴ Ibidem, p. 13.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 23.

presbytery, probably never to come back there again. “Until this day I still don’t know if he was so wonderful as I saw him when I was in love or whether he was a nobody, as I see it today. . . . it was downright escape and cowardice”⁴⁶ – comments Zofia years later.

V. Germans

In the immediate neighborhood of the presbytery, on the other side of the road, there were the headquarters of the German border guard (Ciechania was on the Polish and Slovakian border). Approximately twenty soldiers were stationed in the barracks. Some of them were regular participants of the social life at the presbytery. In the postwar testimonies of Zofia and Jan there are three contradictory versions of how social contacts with the Germans were initiated. In the testimony of 1961, Zofia Trembska claims that meeting soldiers was the idea of the priest, who sent her with a courtesy visit to the barracks.⁴⁷ Lewiarz remembers this event differently: “Every evening the Germans came for Zosia to go dance with them. When I once forbade her to go, because I was afraid they would violate her there, a German named Luman came and almost pierced me with his bayonet, and I got a beating from him. From then on Zosia started going there and it was easier for me with food because Zosia brought back meat and other provisions from them.”⁴⁸ But in the interview of 2009 Zofia admits that the first visit to the Germans was her idea. She wanted to get some bread, which was unavailable in the village.⁴⁹ This last version seems to be most likely.

After striking up an acquaintance, the soldiers became frequent guests at the presbytery; they brought along German newspapers, bread and paraffin. One of the guards, Georg Splawski, grew fond of Zosia, he talked to her openly about his communist views and hatred towards Nazism. Another soldier befriended Jan Flachs to such an extent that when he left for Warsaw the German sent him packages with various goods. Together they had a good time at the presbytery: “they danced with me and the priest played the accordion,”⁵⁰ recalls Zosia.

The photographs taken in Ciechania in the summer of 1943 are a reminder of the friendship with German soldiers. Most of the ten photographs were taken with the camera of the befriended Georg Splawski and given to Zosia. They portray Father Lewiarz surrounded by the villagers, Splawski with a Lemko child in his hand, Zosia walking with German soldiers or dressed up in a traditional Lemko outfit (supposedly the Lemko people were delighted when she came dressed like that to the Orthodox church) . . . The moments preserved on the film are full of tranquility

⁴⁶ Ibidem, pp. 21, 22.

⁴⁷ YVA, O3/1823, Testimony of Zofia Trembska, p. 23.

⁴⁸ AŽIH, 301/6006, Testimony of Jan Lewiarz, p. 5.

⁴⁹ MHŽP, Transcript of interview with Zofia Trembska, May 2009, p. 17.

⁵⁰ Ibidem, p. 18.



Lila Flachs (wartime name: Zofia Lewiarz) with Roman Hawrylak (right) and a German soldier Georg Splawski (left), Ciechania, summer 1943.

and an idyllic atmosphere. Zosia is sitting on the meadow between Romek Hawrylak and Georg Splawski. They are all in their bathing suits, they are smiling with their eyes slightly squinting in the bright sunlight. A Jewish girl, a Ukrainian and a German soldier during a friendly walk, thrown together by unexpected wartime circumstances.

The familiarity of the Orthodox priest with German soldiers was in line with the political pattern generally accepted by the superiors of the Orthodox Church on the Polish territories. Metropolitan Dionizy officially declared loyalty to the authorities of the General Government and supported the Ukrainization of the Orthodox⁵¹ with their consent. Although among the Lemko those actions were not supported, it seems that Father Lewiarz's close contacts with the Germans did not arouse any particular controversy in the village.

Most suspicions and speculations were caused by the luxurious life of the presbytery residents, which was in contrast to the modest income of the provincial rector. "An Orthodox priest didn't have a salary big enough to live the way we lived," explains Zofia. "We were all beautifully dressed – everyone, including me. . . . There

⁵¹ For more: A. Mironowicz, *Kościół prawosławny na ziemiach polskich w XIX i XX wieku* (Białystok, 2005), 201–206; K. Urban, op. cit., 57–63.

were big, pompous receptions.”⁵² The priest’s ‘family’ did not suffer poverty and hunger. Zosia looked so good that her father, who came to Ciechania after a two-month period of separation with his daughter, thought that she was pregnant.⁵³ The monthly money orders sent by uncle Joachim ensured a luxurious life for all the residents.

Father Lewiarz’s initial assumptions that had guided him in his choice of the parish were not realized. The attempt to separate Zosia from the local people failed. To the contrary, she actually had a very intense social life, including the company of German soldiers. The second resolution, not to provoke the envy of others, was shattered by luxury and affluence, not appropriate for a country priest. A local Greek Catholic priest accused the Orthodox priest of having an illegal source of income. Fortunately, his conjectures were totally misdirected: he informed the Ukrainian police that the residents of the Orthodox presbytery were engaged in espionage (certainly for the Soviets).⁵⁴ The police carried out a search. The only suspicious things that they found were maps of the moving front line. In her free time Zosia copied them from German newspapers through the glass. Together with Romek she was put under arrest in the nearby Krempna village. Despite the fact that the befriended German soldiers testified that copying maps was only an innocuous spare-time activity, only a substantial bribe delivered by Janek enabled those arrested to be released. It seems that the means for bribing the police came from Jan Flachs. In her account for Yad Vashem, Zosia even states that the priest had to extract a huge ring from her father.⁵⁵ In a contemporary interview she mentions the ring but does not define precisely where it came from. In the priest’s testimony one can only find a vague statement: “I had collected some money and the Ukrainian police released her.”⁵⁶

Fortunately, the Ukrainian police did not check the identity of Jan Flachs, who still did not have Aryan papers. Only later did Jan Lewiarz arrange the required papers from the Greek Catholic priest Orski – a Pole who had earlier been a Roman Catholic priest but was expelled from the church for drinking and contacts with women. Most likely he knew the real story of Zofia and her father. After obtaining the papers, Jan Flachs decided to go to Warsaw in order to hide there on the Aryan side. The circumstances and motives of the decision are differently presented in Zofia’s testimonies. What is indicated as the direct reason [for Flachs’ decision] was the formation of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (*Ukraińska Powstańcza Armia*, UPA) in the vicinity, which announced recruitment among the civil population to its ranks. There was a concern that her father, passing for a Ukrainian, would be re-

⁵² MHŻP, Transcript of interview with Zofia Trembska, May 2009, p. 19.

⁵³ Ibidem, p. 16.

⁵⁴ Such accusations on the part of Greek Catholic clergy addressed to the representatives of Russophile orientation also happened in other places in Lemkivshchyna; For more: E. Michna, op. cit., 43.

⁵⁵ YVA, O3/1823, Testimony of Zofia Trembska, p. 24.

⁵⁶ AŻIH, 301/6006, Testimony of Jan Lewiarz, 2.

cruited by the UPA and exposed.⁵⁷ In her Yad Vashem testimony Zofia claims that an equally important factor was the intensifying persecution of her father by the priest, who thus wanted to force him to leave the presbytery. However, in a later interview bad treatment is not mentioned. The priest himself speaks about Jan's departure in a disdainful way: "He had been hiding for more than a year until he felt like going to Warsaw."⁵⁸

Her father stayed in Warsaw from April 1943 until August 1944. He exchanged letters with Zosia throughout that period. Jan Flachs became friends with the priest Orski, who was transferred to the Warsaw [district of] Praga at that time. Zofia's father visited him every few days. The letters arriving at Ciechania were more and more dramatic; her father gave it to understand in a coded way that "it was getting too hot for him."⁵⁹ Meanwhile the recruitment action for the UPA relaxed. It was possible to bring the father back to the presbytery again. For this purpose Zosia and Romek went to Warsaw. Unfortunately, they came too late. His lodging - a den he was hiding in together with some other people - was empty. They found out from the neighbors that a few days before all the residents were arrested for listening to the radio. It was the last message about her father's fate. The devastated Zosia together with Romek immediately got on a return train. They knew that "something was coming" and that those were the last moments to get out of Warsaw. "Among my Ukrainians the feeling of downright panic reigned since they were more afraid of the Poles than of the Germans"⁶⁰ - reports Zofia. The following day the uprising broke out in Warsaw.

After losing her father Zosia fell into despair; she slept for several days, [and] did not eat anything. She could not grieve openly because it might seem suspicious to the local people. Her carers approached the situation with understanding: "Hania brought me warm milk to the orchard and I slept. And they let me sleep, so I would calm down, so I would not cry."⁶¹

VI. Bartne

Meanwhile, when Zosia's father was in Warsaw, Father Lewiarz obtained reassignment to a bigger and richer parish. In the autumn of 1943 the rector's whole "family" moved to Bartne in Gorlice County. According to the German census of March 1943, there were 912 people living in the village.⁶² There are no data on the

⁵⁷ MHŻP, Transcript of interview with Zofia Trembska, May 2009, p. 21; YVA, O3/1823, Testimony of Zofia Trembska, p. 25.

⁵⁸ AZIH, 301/6006, Testimony of Jan Lewiarz, p. 2.

⁵⁹ MHŻP, Transcript of interview with Zofia Trembska, May 2009, p. 24.

⁶⁰ YVA, O3/1823, Testimony of Zofia Trembska, p. 6.

⁶¹ MHŻP, Transcript of interview with Zofia Trembska, May 2009, p. 25.

⁶² *Amtliches Gemeinde- und Dorfverzeichnis für das Generalgouvernement auf Grund der Summarischen Bevölkerungsbstandsaufnahme am 1. März 1943* (Cracow, 1943), 22. An official list of communes and villages in the entire General Government related to (or on the basis of?) a summary census of 1 March 1943.

composition of nationalities in the village during the war. One can only assume that, similarly to Ciechania, everyone was a Lemko⁶³.

Zofia recalls that when they arrived at Bartne there was a deserted Jewish household near the presbytery. It was a trace of the pre-war presence of Jews in the village. Actually, no one wanted to take over this household, which, in Zofia's opinion, proved their decency and a positive attitude towards the Jews.⁶⁴

Jan took over a nice big presbytery with an orchard. Its residents' lives went on as usual. They still kept in touch with the local "elite". Zosia's Ukrainian fiancé, Włodzimierz Bajkow, was a frequent guest there. The priest's house was also visited by befriended German soldiers from Ciechania. They would come to Bartne, 30 kilometers away, on bicycles, motorcycles or in cars which they lent to the presbytery's residents for their rides in the vicinity. "Personally, I had a special pass and permit to use German cars,"⁶⁵ recalls Zosia. Among her new duties was grazing geese. When, after several trials, she objected to it, saying that geese were mean and stupid, they gave her two rams to take care of. Her additional work was to take care of ten cats that the priest kept.

The atmosphere in Bartne was full of tension and uncertainty. In late 1943 and in 1944 the partisans were more and more active; at night they would often come out of the forest and appear in the village. According to Zofia, Father Lewiarz cooperated with one of the partisan groups – it is not known whether it was a Polish or Russian one. In turn, another unit hunted him down. For that reason all the residents left the presbytery at night and hid at different households in the neighborhood. As the front was moving closer and the eastern territories were being taken by the Red Army, postal services were disrupted and monthly money orders ceased to come. In her account for Yad Vashem Zofia claims that in light of the lack of money for hiding her, the priest tried to force her to leave by tormenting her mentally and starting quarrels for no reason.⁶⁶ In an interview of 2009 she admits that Jan hassled her and called her a "sponger," but he did not throw her away and treated her on equal terms as he did before.⁶⁷ One can only wonder if the blockage of the money flow caused the priest to feel that he gained an advantage over his ward and thus he became more malicious in their frequent quarrels.

In the above-mentioned circumstances it came to a fight which determined Zosia's further hiding and fate. In the summer of 1944 Jan Lewiarz accused her of not feeding

⁶³ According to the census of 1921, Bartne had a population of 760, 748 of whom were Rusyns (Greek Catholic religion declared) and 12 Jews (Mosaic religion declared), quoted in *Skorowidz miejscowości Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, vol. XII: *Województwo krakowskie i Śląsk Cieszyński* [Cracow District and Cieszyn Silesia].

⁶⁴ Eventually Zofia and the priest made agricultural use of this farming area (Supplementary interview, author's telephone conversation with Zofia Trembska, 8 June 2009).

⁶⁵ YVA, O3/1823, Testimony of Zofia Trembska, p. 27.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁷ Supplementary interview, author's telephone conversation with Zofia Trembska, 8 June 2009.



Lila Flachs (wartime name: Zofia Lewiarz) in traditional Lemko attire she put on to be photographed in to the joy of the local population, Ciechania, 1942 or 1943.

his cats, which was part of her duties. The girl insisted that she had fulfilled her duty. This trivial issue led to a bitter exchange of opinions. The enraged priest attacked Zosia and wanted to hit her. Romek didn't let it happen, he “jumped from the other side and hit him like that [he hit the priest – Z.S.-K.] and he broke his tooth”⁶⁸ – according to Zofia Trembska. Without giving it another thought she threw a toothbrush and a night gown into her bag. She ran away from the presbytery to Włodzimierz Bajko.

Her fiancé took care of her although he knew about her true origin and was terrified by the information. They temporarily lived in the Polany village school, where he was the principal. When the whole village was evacuated in the light of the approaching front, they went to the house of Włodek's mother, in Jabłonica Polska, near Krosno. Bajko told his mother that his fiancée was a Jewess. Zofia recalls her stay with the Ukrainian family badly: “when his mother passed by she made the sign of the cross and spat. . . . When he [Włodek – Z.S.-K.] wasn't there I didn't get anything to eat and when he was there they all ate at the table and I ate my food in

⁶⁸ MHŻP, Transcript of interview with Zofia Trembska, May 2009, p. 27.

another room.”⁶⁹ Włodek was good to her, he bought her perfumes and jewelry. He did not know that when he was at work his fiancée did not get any food. Meanwhile, the front rolled through and the Red Army came to Lemkivshchyna. Zosia was fed up with her several-months’ stay at Włodek’s mother’s place. She read the PKWN [Polish Committee of National Liberation] manifesto. Wanda Wasilewska, whom her [Zosia’s] parents knew before the war, signed it. She decided to go to Lublin and look for her former acquaintances or family members who would be able to help her. Bajko walked her to Krosno, where Polish soldiers transported people on trucks. Never again did Zofia see her Ukrainian fiancé. Her parting with him closed the war chapter in her life.

VII. After the War

After leaving for Lublin Zofia came back to Lemkivshchyna only once. It was still in the 1940s. She came from Warsaw to Bartne, to Father Lewiarz, in order to take her belongings which she had left when she ran away in a hurry after the fight over feeding the cats. “Bed linen was most important for me because I was not able to get that, I did not have any money.”⁷⁰ The priest welcomed her very kindly. “I was deeply touched, I felt truly attached to him”⁷¹ – she recalls years later. After this meeting they stayed in touch so closely that Jan advised his former ward against marrying a Jewish lawyer, Aleksander Trembski. He reportedly claimed that Zosia was too far from the Jewish community to fit in it again.⁷²

He himself was deported from Bartne, together with all the Lemko people, as part of the “Wisła” action. In the Western Territories Father Lewiarz actively participated in the reconstruction of Orthodox parishes. There are letters preserved, written by the hierarchs of the Orthodox Church, which at the beginning of the 1950s delegated Jan Lewiarz, the rector of the presbytery in Zimna Woda, to organize religious life in different locations.⁷³ From that period there is a positive opinion of the priest written by the dean, who was Lewiarz’s superior: “An exceptionally kind, conscientious and educated priest. . . . He commands authority . . . in the whole deanery and, most of all, among the Lemko people. Deeply attached to the Orthodox religion and very useful in the Western Territories for the authority of the Orthodox religion.”⁷⁴

According to the documents of the Office for Matters of Religious Denominations, in the second half of the 1950s Lewiarz persuaded the deported Lemko to return to Bartne and regain their presbytery; he organized fund-raising in order to renovate the Orthodox Church there and organized a visit of people deported to Bartne and

⁶⁹ Ibidem, p. 28.

⁷⁰ Ibidem, p. 32.

⁷¹ Ibidem.

⁷² Supplementary interview, author’s phone conversation with Zofia Trembska, 8 June 2009.

⁷³ Documents of the Orthodox Metropolitan Archives, quoted in: K. Urban, op. cit.

⁷⁴ PAM, Official Form: protopope Lewiarz Jan, XVII9 602A, p. 15.

conducted a service there.⁷⁵ These actions were not in line with the policy of the authorities of that time, which, it seems, called him to order. From that time Lewiarz became "a man of trust" of the Office for Matters of Religious Denominations; he declared willingness to cooperate with the authorities and informed on undesirable actions to activate the Greek Catholic community in his area.⁷⁶ His reports could have influenced the authorities' negative consideration of the Greek Catholics' requests to restore their pastoral posts and [they could also have influenced] the decision to award exclusiveness on this matter to the Orthodox Church.⁷⁷

Father Lewiarz's contacts with the authorities were even more evident in the 1960s, when he was transferred to Sanok. As the dean of Rzeszów deanery he produced assessments in line with the authorities' campaign, accusing civilians as well as both Greek Catholic and Orthodox clergymen of Ukrainian nationalism. According to researchers who study these issues, many of his actions contributed to an exacerbation of Polish-Ukrainian antagonism at the following levels: state authorities-clergy, clergy-the faithful, as well as among the clergymen themselves.⁷⁸ Father Lewiarz was supported by national authorities who nominated him as a candidate for a bishop of the newly established Sanok-Przemyśl Diocese. Ultimately however, the decision to establish this diocese was dropped, probably out of fear of sparking national conflicts.⁷⁹

In 1956 Zofia, together with her husband and two daughters, went to Israel, where she still lives. Her correspondence with the priest continued, although it seems that it was not very regular. "She rarely writes. I asked her for some coffee and incense. She promised but didn't send [them]. . . . I'm lonely and I don't need much,"⁸⁰ complains the priest in his letter of 1964 to the ŻIH [Jewish Historical Institute]. "When it comes to writing letters I'm very chaotic in these matters,"⁸¹ confesses Zofia. At some point she received information that the priest needed financial help. She could not, however, help him because her husband had just died and she was in a difficult financial situation herself. "She told me to go to Warsaw, to the 'Joint' and go to Palestine. But that is beyond the power of an Orthodox priest,"⁸² writes Lewiarz. Zofia Trembska claims that Jan's visit to Israel had already been arranged, but the outbreak of the Six-Day War and the subsequent severance of diplomatic relations

⁷⁵ Archiwum Akt Nowych [Archive of New Records] (later: AAN), Urząd do spraw Wyznań, 21, 1, 4, 5, 7.

⁷⁶ Compare the letter of Jan Lewiarz of 20 November 1956, AAN, Urząd do spraw Wyznań, 21, 2, 3.

⁷⁷ K. Urban, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 316.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 157.

⁸⁰ AŻIH, 301/6006, Testimony of Jan Lewiarz, p. 3.

⁸¹ Supplementary interview, author's phone conversation with Zofia Trembska, 8 June 2009.

⁸² AŻIH, 301/6006, Testimony of Jan Lewiarz, p. 3.

between the two countries thwarted those plans. From that moment they lost contact. Some time later Zofia received information about the priest's death.

* * *

The story of Lila Flachs' salvation and her later relations with Father Lewiarz resists clear classification in terms of good and evil. It shows a rich variety of attitudes and behaviors in extreme situations, often reaching beyond the standards in which cases of Jews being rescued by the clergy are phrased. Yet this story is so very human and authentic exactly because it is so difficult to categorize it unambiguously. To a large extent its strength lies in the narration of the heroine herself – of Lila Flachs, a.k.a. Zofia Trembska – who sincerely and with some distance talks about her war-time fate years later. She verifies her own testimony given to Yad Vashem fifty years earlier. She explains that the extremely negative judgment of the priest presented at that time resulted from the attitude towards him that she remembered from the time of hiding. “It was a relationship like the one between a rebellious teenager and her parents. I was very rebellious, I wasn't used to the village, I hated the hypocrisy of a priest who hid his own identity or, for instance, ate furtively when we had to fast. . . . He was a raving madman, it wasn't easy to live with him under one roof.”⁸³ Such a content of the testimony for Yad Vashem was also rooted in the general atmosphere in Israel in the 1960s, especially among Polish Jews who often came from Poland as a consequence of anti-Semitic persecutions that they experienced there.

Eventually Zofia's attitude towards Jan became more and more gentle and understanding. She began to perceive the war situation more objectively, to distinguish its overall dimension, without focusing on the details ripped from the context. In remote Israel the priest began to become increasingly close to her, as she wrote in one of her letters to him: “as the years go by I feel strangely attached to you and your house and there are moments when I feel as if I had left my close family there.”⁸⁴ Even Zofia Trembska herself cannot determine which image of Jan Lewiarz is more accurate: the one given by her when she was rebellious and resentful, or the one she gives years later when she can see things from a distance. But she knows one thing for sure: “You know, madam, what torments me in my life? That I never said ‘thank you’⁸⁵ to my priest. Immediately after that she adds a sentence that constitutes the quintessence of the relations between the hidden and their carers: “And I would really like to talk to him, about how he saw me back then, not only how I saw him. And these are the things you cannot recapture in life.”⁸⁶

Translated by *Jerzy Giebułtowski* and *Katarzyna Skrobowska*

⁸³ Supplementary interview, author's phone conversation with Zofia Trembska, 8 June 2009.

⁸⁴ Fragment of Zofia Trembska's letter to Jan Lewiarz of 16 April 1963, AŻIH, 301/6006, Testimony of Jan Lewiarz, p. 4.

⁸⁵ MHŻP, Transcript of interview with Zofia Trembska, May 2009, p. 32.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 34.