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Labyrinths and Tangles. The story of a Righteous among Nations

Labirynty i plątaniny. Historia pewnego Sprawiedliwego

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Labyrinths and Tangled Paths. The Story of a Righteous One

A researcher's work at times resembles that of an archeologist or a detective or perhaps even more so, the quest of Theseus, who follows the thread slid into his hand by mysterious Ariadne. One cannot help but pull on the thread, all the more so since it usually looks tempting and arouses curiosity. From time to time curiosity pays off; it leads to unexpected discoveries and unforeseen stories, or it connects seemingly unrelated episodes, which suddenly, fortuitously, cohere into a harmonious whole. Once the thread is pulled and the ball begins to unravel, it leads down the corridors of a labyrinth where, after a while, one realises that the found pieces of the puzzle make up but a fragment of a bigger picture – as if resembling a net of smaller and bigger meshes made up of interlaced threads crossing at unexpected points. In the circumstance of Jews who were hiding on the Aryan side, as we shall later see, several overlapping nets exist. One of them – a net of threats – was cast *by szmalcowniks* [blackmailers], the other – a net of good deeds and human kindness – was tied by Jews and those Poles who were determined to help them.

The process of untangling these nets, of undoing their knots, of searching for significant points is a fascinating, captivating, and particularly inspiring aspect of a researcher's work.

A thread may begin in the testimony of a Jewish survivor, intriguing a researcher to try and discover more about the story or its characters. Literary and archival sources may yield unexpected discoveries, which help to solve the puzzle, but more frequently than not, sources also introduce ambiguities, beget new questions and open paths leading to further labyrinths. In comparison with Survivors' testimonies, the testimonies given by the Righteous are, one after another, much the same – they are stories of human kindness, heroism, and readiness to sacrifice. Usually these stories end happily: everyone survives and years later, rescuers are honored with the well-deserved medal. While the minutiae such as geographical locations, topographical details, differing numbers of the rescued, varying threats, or numbers of blackmailers may differ, at the heart of every story lie the same effort, dedication, secrets, and fear. The fear is rarely mentioned openly.

For that reason the testimony given by Henryk Ryszewski (stored in the ŻIH Archive[1]) seemed to me all the more interesting and escaping convention. Written in 1961, it takes the form of a memoir and private confession. Here is a prewar journalist, an anti-Semite, who during the war sees the light and rescues thirteen Jews, saving their lives…

Memoirs of Henryk Ryszewski

Two testimonies given by Henryk Ryszewski,[2] as well as several other sources, enable the reconstruction of the following course of events. Having completed six years of secondary schooling, Ryszewski (b. 1900) entered the seminary in Włocławek (where he studied alongside the future cardinal, Stefan Wyszyński). In 1920, during the Polish-Soviet War, he volunteered for the army and never returned to the seminary. In 1921 he became a journalist for *Gazeta Warszawska*, then from 1924 through 1939, he worked as a correspondent of *Dziennik Bydgoski* (the right-wing newspaper, an outlet for the Christian Democracy movement), and as a parliamentary commentator for many other newspapers. He was a member of the elite Parliamentary Correspondents Club, active at the Sejm [parliament] of the Republic of Poland and open to journalists of various political leanings. The club's ambiance was quite unique: "it was the club's indisputable achievement that the emotions permeating from the parliament were unable to disturb the atmosphere of mutual trust among colleagues, and respect for different opinion that prevailed at the club. At the same time, in their relationships among each other as well as with the outside world, the journalists were always guided by the sense of loyalty."[3] It seems likely that standards set by the club and this sense of professional loyalty were two of the guidelines of Ryszewski's behaviour during the occupation.

When war broke out, Ryszewski, a father of three, lost his job and needed to find another way to earn a living. Until June 1941 he worked in a journalist

[1] Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego [Archive of the Jewish Historical Institute, later: AŻIH], 302/212, Henryk Ryszewski, „Nikt nie chce dobrowolnie umierać" [No one wants to die willingly], p. 90. Typescript of the memoirs contains repeated paragraphs and alternative descriptions of the same events.

[2] AŻIH, 302/212, Wspomnienia Henryka Ryszewskiego [memoirs of Henryk Ryszewski]; ibidem, 301/5869, Relacja Henryka Ryszewskiego [Testimony of Henryk Ryszewski]. The second is an undated, concise 4-page note, devoted to a description of the heroism and bravery of his wife Irena Ryszewska.

[3] Agnieszka Dmowska, *Klub Sprawozdawców Parlamentarnych przy Sejmie RP 1919–1939. Warunki pracy, relacje między sprawozdawcami a władzą*, in *Echa przeszłości*, vol. 4 (Olsztyn: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warmińsko-Mazurskiego, 2003), p. 99. Only the members of the Club were allowed to report on the parliamentary proceedings. The club numbered fifty before the war. Reputable journalist, Władysław Bazylewski served as the club's chairman.

cooperative 'Prasa', and, as he had a good voice,[4] he also sang at weddings and funerals. In especially difficult times he was able to earn some extra money as a street musician, playing the mandolin and singing Polish and Italian tunes. Later, he found a job with the chorus of the musical theatre, at that same time beginning singing lessons. He became good friends with his teacher, Helena Moyseowiczowa-Fiszler,[5] to the point that when she moved in with her daughter, the Ryszewskis left the Warsaw suburb of Wołomin and moved in to her three room apartment on 7 Nowy Zjazd Street in the Mariensztat neighbourhood.

One day – when the ghetto was being organised, according to Ryszewski's testimony, although it probably must have happened later than that – he was approached by Leon Przybysz, a long-standing attendant in the Parliamentary Correspondents Club.[6] Przybysz, somewhat embarrassed (as Ryszewski was known for his anti-Semitic views), asked "on behalf of Władysław Bazylewski, honorary life chairman of the Parliamentary Correspondents Club," if he wouldn't hide "our colleague, a Jew, an editor of the Lvivian [newspaper] *Chwila*, a doctor of both laws and a journalist quite well-known and well-liked in Warsaw, Leon Fall."[7] Ryszewski was not only startled but also furious; he didn't want to agree, but his wife came forward as a 'fervent advocate' of the idea and due to her determination Fall came to stay with them. After several weeks, his friends took him out to Otwock to help him to recover from tuberculosis.

Other Jews came to the flat in Nowy Zjazd Street during the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto. As Ryszewski recalls, on 15 September 1942, he again met Leon Przybysz who told him about

> the need to provide immediate help to two young booksellers, Jews from Lvov. […] Out of other options they had reached the cellar of a collapsed building in the Old Town [*Stare Miasto*]. […] After consulting with my wife, I agreed to take them in […] for a few weeks. […] The only wealth they brought with them was a collector's edition of Prus's *Pharaoh* and a white tablecloth.[8]

The escapees from the ghetto were Aleksander Artymowicz, a bookseller from Lvov, and Izak Pinalis with his wife. Artymowicz, whose real name was

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[4] According to the questionnaire, he was a tenor, see Akta śledztwa w przeciwko Henrykowi Ryszewskiemu [The case file on the investigation against Henryk Ryszewski], By 0.70.736, p. 17.

[5] Polish soprano, known for stage roles and performance; years active, 1908–1920.

[6] See Dmowska, *Klub Sprawozdawców Parlamentarnych…*, p. 94; Agnieszka Dmowska writes that he was "an attendant, a messenger, and a highly-trusted office employee, all in-one" – the second most important figure among the administration personnel of the Club (after Irena Paczkowska, the front office manager and sister-in-law of Mrs Borsuk). After the war he worked as a doorman in the headquarters of the Journalist Association on Foksal Street.

[7] AŻIH, 302/212, Wspomnienia Henryka Ryszewskiego, p. 8.

[8] Ibidem, pp. 12–13. Dates in the memoirs appear to be imprecise. The group of Jews most likely arrived at the Ryszewskis' later, early in 1943. The next group – during the Uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto.

Moryc Gelber, was a Bund member. He had worked briefly in Arct's bookstore in Warsaw, but had been dismissed because of his distinctly Semitic appearance and had to go into hiding. Władysław Bartoszewski helped him later on behalf of 'Żegota', and Krzysztof Dunin Wąsowicz[9] came to the Ryszewskis' a few times to bring him money. The Pinalises' wartime documents were issued in the name of Pawłowski, but their real name was Kupferstein.

Two weeks after the first fugitives arrived, when life in the three room apartment in Nowy Zjazd Street was slowly returning back to normal,

> all of a sudden someone knocked on our door at dusk. […] At intervals of less than twenty minutes, eight Jews [appeared] in our hallway. […] The newcomers stated with one voice that they had come to the indicated address to visit their relatives, who lived with us. Overwhelmed by longing, they wished to spend one short night with them, to talk and cry to their hearts' content, as who knew whether they would see each other again in this life.[10]

Although it was clear that the real reason for their arrival was different, as the curfew was fast-approaching, they couldn't be turned out. Moreover their appearance gave them away, "they looked very tired, crushed, drained of all strength. They were so very weak that they could hardly move a leg. The women were shivering uncontrollably. […] With these eyes full of terror, souls defeated and hearts without a spark of hope for salvation, the hell of the Warsaw ghetto came closer to us, within our hands' reach,"[11] Their 'invasion' of the Ryszewskis' home can be seen as an act of utter despair and hopelessness – it might well have been the only address they had – or the last one left.

Sure enough, the next day, "they began beseeching and requesting to let them stay. They could not stay in a cellar any longer, they explained. […] Our explanations – that it can't be, that it was impossible to shelter this many Jews, that it would be the surest way to an abrupt exposure and eventual tragedy – were of no avail. When finally, by word and action, I managed to throw them out the door, they sat down on the steps and began to cry…"[12] Mrs Irena, 'mater Judaeorum' – as her husband named her later in his writing – convinced him, or maybe even forced him to agree and take those eight Jews in. They were all of them from Łódź: three sisters Lewin, Anna and Róża, who were unmarried, and Leja Lewin with her husband Leon Funt and their small daughter Linka, and also Lipa Szymkiewicz, as well as Markus Kasman with his wife.

The last ones to arrive at the Ryszewskis' were a couple who had jumped from a train transporting Jews to Lublin during the uprising in the Warsaw

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[9] http://lewica.pl/?id=27510&tytul=Krzysztof-Dunin-W%B1sowicz:-Ocali%E6-%AFyd%F3w, access 12 March 2015.

[10] AŻIH, 302/212, Wspomnienia Henryka Ryszewskiego, p. 14.

[11] Ibidem, p. 26.

[12] Ibidem, p. 15.

Ghetto in April 1943. Ludwik Opal and his wife were prewar acquaintances of the Ryszewskis. She had broken her arm while jumping from the train, and he had been badly bruised. They had come there – as Opal used to tell – because of a dream he had had while they had slept out in the forest. He dreamt he met Ryszewski on Krakowskie Przedmieście Street, and that the man cordially invited him to his home. The dream might have been just a mere figure of speech; nonetheless, Opal and his wife joined the other residents of the flat in Nowy Zjazd Street.

"Blackmailers popped up like mushrooms after warm rain showers"[13] in occupied Warsaw, and therefore the hiding of Jews required the application of rules of conspiracy as well as the development of certain security measures. Luckily, there were two stairways leading up to the flat in Nowy Zjazd Street, which made running errands much easier. Provisions could be brought home in smaller quantities by varying routes, to avoid prying eyes. During the occupation, staircases were as if "made of crystal glass", wrote Ryszewski, "and omni-present eyes lurked everywhere, all-seeing, most piercing, never weary, watching all the time, always there."[14] Certain house-rules were set in the flat – no coming near windows, walking only in socks, no flushing of the toilet in the daytime. Should a situation arise, the Jews were to take cover in the hideout built in the bathroom behind the double wall. In spite of such precautions, one *szmalcownik* found his way to Nowy Zjazd Street at the end of 1943 and demanded money threatening to turn the Jews in. After some bargaining, he settled on a payment of 400 zlotys payable on the first of every month. Ryszewski remembered that he had come three times and then disappeared.

The Ryszewskis' financial situation was difficult. Together the Jews contributed three thousand zlotys per month to the household's expenses, which was still hardly enough to keep seventeen people fed; yet, "thanks to the wise and careful management of our Boss [Irena Ryszewska], we survived without knowing hunger."[15] Although it was free from hunger, the modest life in the hideout was still dangerous and, moreover, monotonous. Like most of those who were in hiding, the Jews read newspapers, books, and "before long, Funt began to tutor my daughters, especially in Maths, Opal started an English course. […] Mr Markus gave German lessons."[16]

The Ryszewskis' daughter Zofia, who was sixteen at the time, recalled that they played cards almost every day, especially Hearts.[17]

Those who sheltered Jews seldom mentioned conflicts or emotional tensions in their – mostly clichéd – testimonies. What makes Ryszkiewicz's record all the

[13] Ibidem, p. 23.

[14] Ibidem, p. 28.

[15] AŻIH, 301/5869, Relacja Henryka Ryszewskiego, p. 3.

[16] AŻIH, 302/212, p. 60.

[17] Testimony of Zofia Brusikiewicz (née Ryszewska, b. 1927), USC Shoah Foundation, interview No. 31708; recorded 25 April 1997.

more valuable is that he does not conceal difficult moments or negative emotions. He recounts a situation when he dressed down one of his charges and called him 'gudłaj[18]' and 'a Jew', creating – under the circumstances – unintentional comic effect. The origin of the quarrel was Ryszewski's discovery that a Jew had been sheltered in the apartment without his knowledge – which in and of itself must have been rather difficult to accomplish. Ryszewski, who was incredibly superstitious, raged not so much because one more Jew was hiding, but because all together they were now thirteen. The squabble erupted as soon as the matter came out into the open, after which, as he recounts, "I came to my senses and felt ashamed of my anger."[19] In another instance, faced with growing tensions and an increasing number of conflicts among the enervated Jews, their host felt forced to tongue-lash, even slap, a particularly belligerent guest to defuse the situation.

Apart from these episodic accounts, not much is known about what went on between the Jews, or between them and the Ryszewskis. In all likelihood emotions ran high. Some were positive – after the war, two of those in hiding married. Others were painful – one of the Jewesses, Anna Lewin had breast cancer. She must have been suffering a great deal, and was taking morphine. Nonetheless, Zofia Brusikiewicz recalled her as "the heart and soul of the group, […] a wonderful person, so very optimistic, most enjoyable and trying not to show how she was suffering."[20] Anna was "the moral authority of the group […] a person of great gentleness and few words, quiet and humble in heart. Her whole being radiated an aura of inner strength, commanding respect and arousing trust, and irrepressible sympathy. […] Through the most trying times, she was a source of inspiration for others [enabling them to believe] in good fortune and ultimate survival, […] she was the moral component capable of raising their spirits."[21] The second person who had a profound impact on the dynamics of interactions between the residents of the apartment on Nowy Zjazd Street, was their hostess Irena Ryszewska. Her husband described her in his memoirs as an indomitable and heroic figure. Not only was she able to overcome his anti-Semitic prejudices, but "her only thought was to save those hapless Jews at any costs. Disasters and murderous demons of war were stopped halfway by the strength of that woman's spirit. She knew perfectly well that the entire power of the Gestapo was against her, supported by the anger, stupidity and decline of some of her fellow countrymen. […] For them [the Jews], Mrs. Irena had become the sole and deciding factor. They called her 'Mrs Boss' and loved her very much."[22] One may presume these two women had a crucial role in

[18] A derogatory term for Jew – *transl*.

[19] AŻIH, 302/212, Wspomnienia Henryka Ryszewskiego, p. 18.

[20] Zofia Brusikiewicz, testimony recorded in 2008; http://www.sprawiedliwi.org.pl/pl/media/142/, access 23 March 2015.

[21] AŻIH, 302/212, Wspomnienia Henryka Ryszewskiego, p. 85.

[22] AŻIH, 301/5869, Relacja Henryka Ryszewskiego, p. 3.

the survival of members of the group; Anna enabled them to live a relatively harmonious life, while Irena ensured their physical existence. Unfortunately there is nothing more to be known about these two remarkable women, as some narratives break off as suddenly as they spring up.

As Ryszewski writes in his memoirs, his wife was free from any anxieties, she did not show any fear, she did not experience an inner crisis, because "she had had a dream, which she considered prophetic; [in the dream,] she, together with all our charges, were sailing a stormy sea on a raft, and finally as the storm abated, they all reached the safety of the shore in the golden blaze of the first light. The dream gave her such a spiritual strength that even if the Gestapo were banging on our door, she would still believe in some kind of lucky escape."[23]

He himself admits openly to living in a state of constant anxiety, and this openness, in my opinion, is the most valuable aspect of his memoirs: "An evil spirit was whispering ceaselessly in my ear: the Jews will die and you will die with them. Why then take on this great and dangerous task? Sacrifice for the sake of others has its limits… Thousands of people wash their hands of the Jews, and you are going to place your proverbial head under the Gospel? *Cui bono*? You shall live to regret it but by then it will be too late!"[24] Finally, as he writes, came a day when he was seized by "a primal, raw, animal, and cold fear of being discovered and held responsible, of paying with [my] life for sheltering Jews, as it was the sole price for it. Out of this fear, the only thing, which remained to me, was my naked, terrified 'self'. Although my house was full of people, at the same time it seemed to me [to be] a cemetery chapel, all covered with a pall. That nervous weakness changed my soul; I felt it had become evil. I couldn't shield myself from the blows of blind fear; I was defeated straightaway. […] My nerves failed me, I lost control over my thoughts and my actions. […] One obsessive thought never left me, day or night: to rid myself of those doomed people, free myself from them. Out of fear for my life, I wanted the Jews to leave our home immediately."[25] His wife would not hear of it, so – unable to withstand the tension and the fear any longer – Ryszewski moved out from the flat for some time, "I left my wife and children, and all the Jews to their own fate."[26] In his memoirs, he describes this as a betrayal, but his experience and surrender to fear was rather real and human. He does not paint himself a hero; by admitting weakness, he becomes more relatable, closer, and less monumental and remote.

[23] AŻIH, 302/212, Wspomnienia Henryka Ryszewskiego, p. 82.

[24] Ibidem, p. 29.

[25] Ibidem, p. 38.

[26] Ibidem. Aleksander Artman writes that Mrs Ryszewski took care of the Jews with her two daughters, whilst [Mr] Ryszewski rented a flat nearby where "he lived alone, and came for breakfast to Nowy Zjazd almost daily." Artman also writes that he started living at the Ryszewskis' in January 1944 (Yad Vashem Archive [later: YVA], M.31.2/2243, Letter of Aleksander Artman to Vera Prausnitz in Yad Vashem, 15 August 1980).

The Ryszewskis' and their charges held out until the Warsaw Uprising. In the first days of August 1944, when the Warsaw Uprising broke out, their house caught fire and they all had to escape. They lost sight of one another. Henryk Ryszewski and his eldest daughter, Zofia, were deported to camps in Germany after the downfall of the uprising. Happily, the other members of the family were in Praga (the east bank district of Warsaw) in August 1944, where the fighting did not spread. Almost all of the Jews survived as well. Only Leon Funt, who was sick with tuberculosis, was recognised as a Jew and shot dead inside a transit camp in Pruszków. After the war, Aleksander Artymowicz married Róża Lewin. Anna Lewin, sick with cancer, committed suicide in Łódź on 28 January 1945. The other Jews scattered across the world: to Palestine, France, the United States, Canada, Belgium and the United Kingdom.

Concealments: the Ryszewski's trial

Although unusual due to the high number of the Jews rescued, the story of the Ryszewski family seems quite similar to many others of its kind. It may have an additional human dimension owing to sincere descriptions of doubts and fear, but it otherwise follows a familiar pattern: all ends well and, years later, the kindhearted helpers are recognised as "Righteous" due to the testimony of grateful Jews. Nevertheless, this story likewise contains an unrevealed passage, obscured by curious omissions in the official testimonies, which takes unexpected turns, and leads [us] deeper into the labyrinth. Apparently, after the war, Henryk Ryszewski was accused and convicted of… blackmailing of Jews during the occupation.[27] How would this be possible?

For about a month [during the war], a Jewish boy, Marian Wrześniewski (b. 1934), lived at the Ryszewskis'. The name 'Wrześniewski', however, has been removed altogether from the official testimony of aid to the Jews; it is not mentioned either in any of Ryszewski's testimonies, or in the interviews given by his daughter to the USC Shoah Foundation and to the portal The Polish Righteous – Recalling Forgotten History (project of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews). Nonetheless, the attempt at wiping out all traces of the Wrześniewskis proves entirely successful; Ryszewski's trial files preserved in the IPN Archive enable one to reconstruct the course of events.

On 7 September 1947, Izak Koenigstein, who had assumed surnames Leśniewski and Wrześniewski during the occupation, submitted to the prosecutor's office a report signed 'Ignacy Wrześniewski', in which he stated that his son and his son's governess had lived on the Aryan side, at Ryszewski's

[27] The District Court [*Sąd Okręgowy*] of Warsaw sentenced him to two years of imprisonment on 14 December 1948. On 18 October 1949, the Supreme Court not only dismissed the petition to revoke the sentence, but also sentenced him to three years' imprisonment, stressing that a three-year sentence was the lowest outlined by the law.

from August 1942. Ryszewski had been recommended to them by Mrs Fiszler, a voice teacher. The Wrześniewskis, who left the ghetto later on 3 October 1942, stayed in the Żoliborz district at [Mrs] Wacława Kowalska's. Her daughter Ewa was likewise taking voice lessons from Mrs Fiszler, and had first met Ryszewski there. When the Wrześniewskis went to Nowy Zjazd Street to visit their son, the host extended to them "a cordial welcome ingratiating himself into their confidence". Two weeks later, Ryszewski unexpectedly came to Żoliborz to visit the Wrześniewskis, and told them "that someone from the German police had come to his place and demanded ransom for sheltering a Jewish child". He stated that he had paid him three thousand zlotys, and he pressed the Wrześniewskis to compensate him. The following day, "an individual dressed in the uniform of a sergeant of the German police, together with some civvy,"[28] arrived at their apartment, demanding more money. The Wrześniewskis suspected Ryszewski of being behind this, all the more so because the blackmailers knew certain details that Wrześniewski had told Ryszewski; among other things they knew about the memoirs that Wrześniewski had begun to write on Ryszewski's advice. The Wrześniewskis paid their way out with a diamond ring and, of course, relocated. After several weeks of moving around from place to place, with no other place to turn to, they came back to Mrs Kowalska's. On 20 December 1942, Ryszewski and his wife, supposedly both came by, demanding an additional five thousand zlotys to the blackmailer. Mrs Fiszler had also known of the Wrześniewskis return to Kowalska's place, as she reportedly probed Mrs Kowalska's daughter on the matter.

Ryszewski was detained on 16 September 1948.[29] During the first questioning at the WUBP station (*Wojewódzki Urząd Bezpieczeństwa Publicznego*, Provincial Public Security Office), Ryszewski asked by Officer [*referent*] Czubak, "what names of the Jews hiding at his place does the suspect recall?" – answered,

[28] Archiwum Państwowe w Warszawie [State Archive in Warsaw, later: APW], 654/3694, Akta w sprawie karnej Henryka Ryszewskiego, Doniesienie adwokata Ignacego Wrześniewskiego do WUBP w Bydgoszczy, 7 września 1947 r. [The file of the criminal case against Henryk Ryszewski, the report submitted by Counsel Ignacy Wrześniewski to the WUBP in Bydgoszcz on 7 September 1947], pp. 438–441. After having been blackmailed, the Wrześniewskis found shelter on Feliński Street in the Żoliborz district with the Zubrzycki family, where they stayed until the Warsaw Uprising. Karol, Eugenia, Piotr, and Marianna Zubrzycki were awarded the Righteous Among the Nations medal in 2002.

[29] Before Ryszewski's detention, Maj. Górski of the Ministry of Public Security [*Ministerstwo Bezpieczeństwa Publicznego*, MBP] had sent from Warsaw to the WUBP in Bydgoszcz a copy a record from 'the files of pro-independent organisation', which stated: "Henryk Ryszewski, an actor of the c[ity] of Warsaw theatre, is to be in service of the GO [Gestapo] (according to one of the GO clerks)", Akta śledztwa w przeciwko Henrykowi Ryszewskiemu [The case file on the investigation against Henryk Ryszewski], By 0.70.736, p. 17. The lead of Ryszewski's alleged collaboration with the Gestapo was not raised during the investigation.

> of those names, I recall just one, of a small boy, Leśniewski, son of a merchant of Marszałkowska Street. His father came to me only once while his son was living at my home, and brought along one more Jewess with him. Due to her carelessness, the whole thing came out. Some character showed up [soon after], accompanied by another, announced himself as working for the Gestapo, said that a Jewish boy was staying with me and demanded money. I collected from Leśniewski [father] eight thousand, in three installments, to pay off the man who was blackmailing me.

To the next question about the reasons why he forced the Wrześniewskis to pay him, Ryszewski answered, "he paid me three thousand, but refused to pay the remaining five. Then my wife and I went together to Cit[izen] Kowalska's, where the aforementioned was living, demanding that five thousand."[30] Ryszewski was questioned twice more and arrested a few days later (on 16 September). He stayed in gaol for a long time, his hearing repeatedly adjourned while Wrześniewski was unableable to turn up. Since the start, the accused pleaded not guilty. During the questionings and the proceeding, and even when confronted with Wrześniewski, he presented his own version of the events: he had accepted the Jewish boy and his governess at the request of Ewa Kowalska; after some time, the Wrześniewskis came "in broad daylight, around 11 a.m. […]; they were dressed in work clothes and were filthy." The Ryszewskis invited them in, offered them a dinner, they talked about mutual Jewish acquaintances. After they departed, the Ryszewskis continued to shelter the child until the day, "when some young type came and announced that he worked for the Gestapo, and was in possession of a letter informing that a Jewish child was hidden in my apartment. He also intimated that the letter would go no further if I gave him three thousand zlotys." Ryszewski had no money, but promised to pay the next day. Having no other choice, he took the child to his parents (they were staying with Wacława Kowalska in Żoliborz district), and received from them the money, which he then handed over to the blackmailer. He had nothing to do with the blackmailers who showed up at the Wrześniewskis the following day. It is true that he came to them on 20 December 1942, asking for five thousand zlotys, but only because he had to pay off [the blackmailer] again.

As for who stood behind the blackmail, Ryszewski pointed to Mrs Fiszler or to his former tenant whom Ryszewski had asked to vacate her bedroom he needed for Wrześniewski's son and his governess. The tenant's fiancé – and Ryszewski's colleague from the theatre – named Wydra, had confronted him about it, making a scene. Ryszewski also argued, quite reasonably: "if I wanted to blackmail Wrześniewski, I – knowing his family name – could have demanded ransom from him; but I didn't, and I was sheltering thirteen Jews.[31]

[30] Ibidem, p. 448–449.

[31] Ibidem, Zeznanie H. Ryszewskiego na rozprawie głównej [Testimony of H. Ryszewski at trial], 14 December 1948, p. 333–337.

Irena Ryszewska testified much the same, explaining that they took in the Wrześniewskis' son in autumn 1942, at Mrs Fiszler's request.

> For having brokered the arrangement, Cit[izen] Fiszler demanded one thousand zlotys, as well as antique Jewish earrings, over which she and Cit[izen] Wrześniewski quarreled. […] She was a voice teacher and she had great influence over her students, and everything she wished to know, she extracted piece by piece from my husband, as well as from Cit[izen] Kowalska. Besides being clever, she was also greedy. Even though she had diamonds, which she claimed had been left to her by her sister – Cit[izen] Kowalska knew about them, too – she still inveigled us into giving her dinners. I was obliged to cook them daily, and my husband delivered them to her and her husband. And as I'd heard, she had talked Cit[izen] Kowalska into giving her coal.[32]

The witnesses all concurred, that Ryszewski was a decent man.[33] Only Janina Wrześniewska testified against him at the trial. She reiterated the version of events given in her husband's statement (he was absent from the trial) and concluded, "In my opinion, Helena Moysewicz-Fiszler was the real driving force behind all of this. She supposedly lives in Katowice now. Without question, she orchestrated everything. She demanded the earrings from us, and also to sign over to her our house or plot."[34] No one, however, initiated a search for Helena Moysewicz-Fiszler, or at least, there is no trace of such search in the case files. She was not questioned, so her version of the story remains unknown.

The affidavits of the Jews who, in the meantime, had already left Poland were also presented during the trial. Their testimonies enable us to verify some details from Ryszewski's memoirs (in addition to being the only accounts by the Jews he had rescued as none of them left behind any other testimonies or memoirs.)

Ludwik Opal (b. 1889) testified that they returned to Warsaw after their escape from a train to Majdanek, where they remained, in the Grochów district, until October 1943. "Having been discovered, I needed to leave that lodging. It was then I went to Ryszewski's, where already more than ten persons of Jewish origin were staying. Nevertheless, Ryszewski answered my plea and took also us in, my wife and I. […] Throughout our entire stay at Ryszewski's, that is until

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[32] Ibidem, „Wyjaśnienie" Ireny Ryszewskiej dla Wiceprokuratora 21. Rejonu Sądu Okręgowego w Warszawie ["Explanatory statement" of Irena Ryszewska to the Assistant District Attorney, 21st Circuit, District Court, Warsaw], pp. 522–523.

[33] Testifying on his behalf were, among others, Leon Przybysz, an attendant for the Parliamentary Correspondents Club who stressed Ryszewski's help in hiding the journalist from Lvov and L. Fall as well as Władysław Dunin-Wąsowicz, who, being a member of a journalist self-help group that had been helping fellow Jewish journalists in hiding, had sent Aleksander Artymowicz to Ryszewski.

[34] APW, 654/3694, Akta w sprawie karnej Henryka Ryszewskiego, Zeznanie Janiny Wrześniewskiej na rozprawie głównej 14 grudnia 1948 [Testimony of Janina Wrzesniewska at trial, 14 December 1948], p. 343.

the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising, he treated us very kindly. I am deeply indebted to him for his help, and am deeply surprised that someone could accuse Ryszewski of acting to the detriment of the Jewish people. That these thirteen people of the Jewish origin stayed at his place, and were not betrayed but rather provided with good care, rules out the possibility that he could have acted to the detriment of the Jewish people. I emphasize once again that I am so grateful to Ryszewski and his wife, who was of a dauntless courage, that I cannot reconcile myself to the fact that such good people, who were of help to us, in those dire circumstances, risking their own lives, are now harmed by someone's unreasoned actions."[35]

Leja Funt (b. 1903) offered similar evidence: "I don't know anything about Ryszewski extorting payments from the persons who lived with him […] under threat of bringing upon them the German authorities' persecution. To the contrary, I can say that Henryk Ryszewski comforted [us] all, and that he supported Izak Pinalis and his wife at his own expense, expecting nothing in return."[36]

Maria Kupferstein [Pinalis] sent in her statement from the DP camp in Wasseralfingen, in which she wrote, on behalf of herself and her hospitalised husband, that since May 1943, they had been hiding at [the apartment of] Ryszewski, who "fed and supported [us], and did it in an utterly selfless way, risking his life and the lives of his family […]. I avow that for this we are forever in debt to Cit[izen] Henryk Ryszewski and that we will remember for the rest of our lives that there was a man of so generous a heart and kind in character, [who] saved not only us, but also ten others from certain death, by hiding them together with us."[37]

The case files also contain a letter by Aleksander Artymowicz written from Paris to Irena Ryszewska on 30 September 1947. It reads, "Dear Mrs. Irena! We were very troubled by the news in your letter. As for Henryk, we have great respect for him; he is among the few whom we have trusted and we are astonished that such injustice has been done to him; it's beyond belief, and hard to imagine that, of all people, this has befallen an innocent man, while there are others who have deserved it. […] We hope this incomprehensible affair will be resolved, and that you will see your husband soon. Perhaps an error was made – probably, this is about somebody else and – as always – the innocent man will suffer.[38]

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[35] Ibidem, Protokół przesłuchania świadka L. Opala [Typescript of interrogation of witness L. Opal], 3 October 1947, Warsaw, pp. 494–495.

[36] Ibidem, Protokół przesłuchania świadka L. Funt z d. Lewin [Typescript of interrogation of witness Funt, née Lewin], 14 October 1947, Łódź, pp. 498–499.

[37] YVA, File from the Collection of the Righteous Among the Nations Department, no. 2664. Ryszewski was awarded the Righteous Among the Nations medal in 1983 due to the statements made on his behalf during the investigation by the Jews. The statements are not preserved in the court file.

[38] APW, 654/3694, Akta w sprawie karnej Henryka Ryszewskiego, List Aleksandra Artymowicza [Letter of Aleksander Artymowicz], pp. 522–523.

In spite of these indisputable evidences and testimonies attesting to Ryszewski's innocence, he was sentenced to two years' of imprisonment on 14 December 1948.[39] The appeal filed to the Supreme Court resulted in a rehearing of the case, and a sentencing to three years of imprisonment on 18 October 1949. The time he had spent in gaol since his arrest was credited against his sentence, and he was released precisely after three years, on 11 September 1950. His conviction was expunged in 1963.

After careful consideration I have come to the conclusion that the defence's case is more convincing, and it seems to me to be closer to the truth than that of the prosecution. A chain of unfortunate coincidences may have led Wrześniewski to suspect Ryszewski of being behind the blackmail. However, taking into account Ryszewski's [sound] actions during the occupation, this is highly improbable. The failure to find and question Mrs Fiszler was the most serious negligence of the investigation. This oversight on the part of the investigators' seemingly led to the conviction of an innocent man.

However, the case is still not quite clear, leaving a researcher with a myriad of questions and doubts. First, did Ryszewski fabricate that he was blackmailed? Did he just want to swindle Wrześniewski? And if so, why didn't he do so more effectively and cunningly? Second, assuming that the blackmail was not contrived, why did the Ryszewskis continue taking in more Jews, rather than decide to cease hiding them althogether? Could they have been certain that the blackmail would not be repeated? Would this mean that the source of the blackmail was known to them, and they did not feel under further threat? Could it have been Mr Wydra's fiancée, or Mrs Fiszler. Irena Ryszewska's testimony may point to this; during the trial she said,

> Cit[izen] Leon Przybysz, an attendant in the Sejm, came to us at the beginning of 1943 and asked us again to take in three Jews; we agreed [to do it] believing that the incident [the quarrel between Ryszewski and Wydra] had already been forgotten [by the people] at the theatre, and indeed it had been. But I made my husband swear to me that he would not breathe a word about it to Mrs Fiszler, as I was strangely frightened of that woman, who would boast of her connections with the Gestapo, and who had been bragging that these contacts enabled her to do a lot of 'good'. Later I heard that she had had a Jew staying with her who had made her some bequest. Within a short time, the Gestapo had taken the man after doing a search. […] She herself had told us this.[40]

[39] Ibidem, Wyrok [Sentence], pp. 357–359; one judge dissented, not finding any mitigating circumstances and proposing a 4-year prison sentence.

[40] APW, 654/3694, Akta w sprawie karnej Henryka Ryszewskiego, „Wyjaśnienie" Ireny Ryszewskiej dla Wiceprokuratora 21. Rejonu Sądu Okręgowego w Warszawie ["Explanatory statement of Irena Ryszewska to the Assistant District Attorney, 21st Circuit, District Court, Warsaw], not sworn testimony, p. 522.

This narrative is consistent with their conviction that Wydra's fiancée and Mrs Fiszler were behind the denunciations of the Jews. If it is true that Mrs Fiszler did not know of the thirteen Jews they were sheltering – and no serious blackmail took place during that time – it might be evidence that she was linked to the prior incidents. However, as Ryszewska was testifying in defence of her husband, it should be considered that she may not necessarily have told the truth.

Third, the role that money played in the story remains unclear. Financial difficulties might have been a factor in why the Ryszewskis took in the Jews. They might have sheltered the refugees from the ghetto in order to make ends meet. I do not mean to say, that the Ryszewskis wished to "cash in" on the Jews; it earned them money, but they didn't do it for the money. The moderate income was just enough to support the family and to survive the occupation. I would stress that taking payment from sheltering Jews – if mutually agreed-upon and made without abuse or exploitation – was, in my opinion, certainly respectable. Taking into account that hosts risked their lives, it was even an act of courage. Jan Grabowski, who has studied the subject, indicates: "a criterion for judging the conduct of takers [those aiding for payment] was not the profit made on those in hiding, but rather their broadly defined honesty in fulfilling conditions of a contract into which they had entered."[41] I agree with Cukierman – and Grabowski who has cited him – that the people, who for one reason or another risked their lives without asking for anything in return deserve our utmost respect. But deserving of respect are likewise those who received money from Jews they were rescuing, coincidently believing that the rescue constituted their humanitarian duty, and who did not withdraw their help even when those in hiding ran out of money.[42]

It is exceedingly difficult for a researcher to establish the motives that may have caused someone to bring aid, all the more so because "the boundaries between selfless help, and help motivated by financial calculations, were fluid"[43], and the available sources offer conflicting information. Jewish memoirs often testified to enormous costs of hiding, to deception, wrongdoing, abuse and betrayal of trust. At the same time, the testimonies (Jewish and Polish alike) gathered for the purpose of awarding the Righteous Among the Nations medal recount selflessness, friendship, and harmonious coexistence.[44] Of course, it has also happened that genuine interpersonal bonds and friendships developed between Poles and Jews, unified by their shared struggle for survival in the face

[41] Jan Grabowski, "Ratowanie Żydów za pieniądze – przemysł pomocy," *Zagłada Żydów, Studia i materiały* 4 (2008): 83.

[42] Ibidem.

[43] Ibidem.

[44] Resolving these contradictions could develop into yet another narrative inspired by the story of Ryszewski, which I will not expound on here.

of danger. The impulses on which those who were helping acted could have been a factor[45]. It was presumably easier for them to develop closer bonds with those from the same social class and similar background, as was the case in this story. In the realities of life under the occupation, a few people had the means to hide someone entirely at the own expense (to buy food without food stamps i.e. on the black market, to pay for essential medications or doctors' fees, and so on). It is evident that the Ryszewski family – having financial difficulties to contend with – was in need of additional income, and that the Jews they sheltered contributed toward the household expenses. But, as a rule, financial matters are not to be discussed openly.

There are three elements that suggest financial difficulties were behind the decision to shelter the Jews. First, Ryszewski wrote in his testimony that the Jews "could pay in 3,000 zlotys ~~each~~"[46]. The crossed word "each" opens a wide field for speculation. Secondly, he said during one of his interrogations: "for housing the 8 year old son of Leśniewski [Wrześniewski] and his governess, sent to live with him, I had taken 800 zlotys, not 1,500 złotys as Wrześniewski stated"[47]. Thirdly and most importantly, Aleksander Artymowicz (Artman) wrote a letter in 1989 to Yad Vashem in connection with the process of awarding the Ryszewski family the Righteous Among the Nations medal. In it, he stated that the Ryszewskis had experienced financial hardship during the occupation, so they had sheltered Jews for "the average amount" from April 1943[48]. That "average amount" seems to me rather fair, all the more so because in order to hide the Jews, the Ryszewskis stopped renting out a room (they had sublet it before to Wydra's fiancée) that was one of the sources of the family's income.

Fourthly, there is still another question that remains unanswered: what were the motives behind Wrześniewski's decision to report Ryszewski [to the authorities]. Was it the need for justice to be done?[49] Did he want to settle a score with Ryszewski? To use his social position? Was it maybe a psychological need to compensate for the time he had been helpless and at the mercy of others? Was it

[45] Emanuel Ringelblum noted, that "People who hid Jews for money only and had no strong moral motivation got rid of their dangerous ballast sooner or later and turned the Jews out of their", see Emmanuel Ringelblum, *Polish-Jewish Relations during the Second World War* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), pp. 245.

[46] AŻIH, 301/5869, Relacja Henryka Ryszewskiego, p. 4.

[47] APW, 654/3694, Akta w sprawie karnej Henryka Ryszewskiego, Protokół przesłuchania Henryka Ryszewskiego 16 września 1947, Bydgoszcz [Typescript of interrogation of Henryk Ryszewski, 16 September 1947, Bydgoszcz], p. 475.

[48] YVA, M.31.2/2243, List Alexandra Artmana do Very Prausnitz z Yad Vashem.

[49] In his report, Ignacy Wrzesniewski explained the whole story I, concluding that he asks that "Henryk Ryszewski, his wife Irene, and Helena Mojzesowicz-Fiszler be held accountable under Article 3 of the Decree of 3 August 1944, as amended by the decree of 10 December 1946." APW, 654/3694, Akta w sprawie karnej Henryka Ryszewskiego, p. 443.

his way of restoring equilibrium, regaining control over his own life? Or, maybe, there were some hidden personal motives. As I do not know enough, I will not venture to answer these questions. However, in his letter to the prosecutor's office dated 27 April 1949, Ryszewski indicated passion on the part of his accuser, writing that Wrześniewski was driven by a desire for revenge:

> He, being a Jew, used to hide during the occupation at the place of a certain Kowalska, a singing student, with whom I had a love affair of some sort. Wrześniewski, as a man characterized by a particularly vindictive spirit and suspecting everyone of being biased against him etc., when he achieved a senior position after the liberation, in order to satisfy his lustful vindictiveness, he could, as a skillful lawyer, present in a certain light some false facts [*sic*] against me and fabricate the denunciation substantiated by false circumstances, which [circumstances] he confirmed in court. […] Wrześniewski did not recognise those conditions, namely that by sheltering a Jewish child I put myself at risk with the occupation authorities, and instead of showing me eternal gratitude for all I had done – which, by the way, I did not expect then and do not expect now – he yielded to erotic passions or unreasonable jealousy and, for all that [I have done for him], he ensured that I was thrown into prison[50].

Frankly speaking, the motif of jealousy over a woman seems to me rather dubious also because it cropped up quite late in the story, when Wrześniewski had already lost his 'senior position', so it seems possible that Ryszewski just wanted to take advantage of the notoriety of his adversary's fall and trial. This line of reasoning should, however, be postponed and any further questions and speculation abandoned, as we are driven to move along the next corridor of the labyrinth, where the Ryszewski's story becomes even murkier.

'The paper industry affair': the Wrześniewski's trial

This path unexpectedly leads away from the micro-history and takes one towards the large-scale history, towards the socio-political life in Poland at the time the state was being transformed into a People's Republic. One is leaving a small theatre where wartime scores and grudges are enacted and entering a large stage where the leading roles are played by the mechanisms of the emerging socialist reality. For a while one enters the XX century Poland at the end of the forties, where the fate of individuals and pursuit of justice were caught in a tangled web of politics and propaganda.

Ignacy Wrześniewski had fallen victim to 'the paper industry affair', one of the show trials organised to terrorise those who were resisting nationalisation. A historian, Marcin Zaremba, rates nationalisation as one of two scourges

[50] APW, 654/3694, Akta w sprawie karnej Henryka Ryszewskiego, pp. 40–41.

(together with collectivisation) of the post-war era,[51] responsible for generating dread and a constant threat throughout the nation. On 3 January 1946, the National Home Council [*Krajowa Rada Narodowa*] passed the Industry Nationalisation Act promised by the *Polish* Committee of National Liberation (PKWN) in its manifesto of 22 July 1944. Under the act the State Treasury appropriated thirty five thousand companies, among them former German enterprises, which were taken over without compensation. The nationalisation affected primarily "the key industries" (mining industry, steel industry, power plants etc.) and all companies with 50 or more employees working on a single shift. Understandably, owners of small companies sought every way to avoid nationalisation (or, as it was called then: "the bolshevisation of the economy"); for example, they would try to divide their companies into smaller ones or limit the number of workers on a single shift.

The situation was much the same in the paper industry. On the one hand, the owners tried not to lose their factories, on the other, the Central Administration of the Paper Industry [*Centralny Zarząd Przemysłu Papierniczego*, CZPP], charged with the task of nationalising as many companies as possible, routinely overstated the number of workers, so the decree would apply to the company in question. Both sides would call in their own experts, who would issue contradictory opinions, then "the disputes would be brought before nationalisation committees of various levels, which, as a rule, would always decide in favour of nationalization."[52] A huge scandal in the paper industry following the decision connected with "the exclusion of a number of small cardboard and paper making factories in the Małopolska region from nationalisation – among them 'Klepaczka', 'Herbewo', 'Natalin'– had put an end to any further attempts to spare paper making companies from nationalisation. The case was handled by the Special Commission to Combat Economic Abuses and Wrongdoings [*Komisja Specjalna do Walki z Nadużyciami i Szkodnictwem Gospodarczym*], which proved the significance attached to it."[53] The 'affair' was staged according to the

[51] See Marcin Zaremba, *Wielka trwoga. Polska 1944–1977. Ludowa reakcja na kryzys* (Cracow: Znak, 2012), p. 464; regarding nationalisation, see pp. 471–477.

[52] Maciej Szymczyk, "Wielka afera o malwersacje w przemyśle papierniczym w świetle dokumentów w archiwum państwowym w Łodzi," *Rocznik Muzeum Papiernictwa* (Duszniki-Zdrój) 2 (2008): 92.

[53] Ibidem. Special Commission to Combat Economic Abuses and Wrongdoings – an official body called up by a decree of the Council of Ministers on 16 November 1945. Ostensibly created to prevent and investigate economic crimes, the commission actually functioned as a tool of repression focused on private property owners, in particular, owners of private craft and trade establishments that operated outside the MBP's structure. The Commision, headed by Roman Zambrowski, had the authority to impose fines, confiscate property, and send suspects to labour camps. It was dissolved 23 December 1954. Regarding the Commission's activities, see Piotr Fiedorczyk, *Komisja Specjalna do Walki z Nadużyciami i Szkodnictwem Gospodarczym 1945–1954: studium historycznoprawne* (Białystok: Temida 2, 2002); Ludwik Stanisław

propaganda requirements at that time. The summary trial lasted for several days and every day newspapers reported on the proceedings.[54] On 20 January 1949, the daily *Dziennik Polski* wrote that an embezzlement trial had begun in a case of a multimillion zlotys fraud in the paper industry. Seven persons were accused that taking advantage of their positions in the CZPP, they have deliberately hindered nationalisation of privately owned paper factories. For that they have collected multimillion zlotys bribes from businessmen.[55] Three industrialists, who "at all costs tried to prevent the nationalisation of factories in their possession", as well as four corrupted officials who held responsible managerial positions in the Central Administration of the Paper Industry and were also members of the CZPP's nationalisation committee in Łódź" were charged – as the newspaper described it – in "one of biggest economic sabotage trials"[56]. One of the officials was Ignacy Wrześniewski, a legal advisor and a member of the CZPP Committee on Nationalisation, charged with "helping factory owners in their attempts to keep the factories in private hands, for which he has obtained more than 100,000 złotys, and also with acting as a go-between in giving bribes."[57]

The case was political in nature, so the fate of the accused in 'the paper industry affair' was a foregone conclusion. The distinctive language of class struggle used by Prosecutor Kulesza in his speech reveals the frightening and oppressive significance of the 'paper industry affair':

> this trial is held at the time of the triumph of the working class, at the time when we are laying the foundation of our nation's future socialist economy. That is why the acts perpetrated by the accused have to be judged from the perspective of the interests of the working class. After the defeat of fascism, the popular masses have taken full power into their hands and immediately have undertaken the reconstruction of the national economy. […] But along with them, those people who have sold themselves to capitalists have managed to obtain positions in governmental and economic bodies, weakening the front of the working-class struggle against capitalism. […] This case is not about abuses of power, negligence or taking bribes. This case is part of the class struggle. Factory owners […] have tried to prevent the nationalisation of their factories harming thereby the interest of the masses. They have been united by a common goal – not

Szuba, *Komisja Specjalna do Walki z Nadużyciami i Szkodnictwem Gospodarczym i jej delegatura bydgoska (1945–1954)* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2009); Bogdan Sekściński, *Komisja Specjalna do Walki z Nadużyciami i Szkodnictwem Gospodarczym (1945–1955)* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2012).

[54] See Archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej Oddział w Łodzi [Archive of the Łódź Branch of the Institute of the National Remembrance, later: AIPN Łd], 5/27, vol. 1–4, Trial before the District Court in Łódź, 20–29 January 1949.

[55] *Dziennik Polski*, 21 January 1949.

[56] *Dziennik Łódzki*, 21 January 1949.

[57] *Dziennik Łódzki*, 23 January 1949.

> to surrender their industrial plants to the People's [Republic of] Poland. […] Preventing nationalisation and circumventing the nationalisation act – this is what this group of the accused intended to do […] Therefore the actions of the accused were to harm the reconstruction of the economic sovereignty of the People's [Republic of] Poland. […] Instead of carrying out the plan of economic reconstruction they have sold themselves to capitalists.[58]

One must admit that the now forgotten socialist 'newspeak' reflects the climate of the era and the style of the politics of that time well.

The verdicts reached after nine days of trial were severe. On 30 January 1949, *Dziennik* Łódzki reported on the first page: "Yesterday, at 7 p.m., the District Court in Łódź passed the sentence in the 'paper industry' trial. The court sentenced Emil Kraul [former managing director of the Central Administration of the Paper Industry] and Zdzisław Hasfeld [owner of the 'Natalin' and 'Klepaczka' factories] to death […], Ignacy Wrześniewski [legal advisor and a member of the CZPP's Nationalisation Committee] and Bronisław Słotwiński [head of the general department of the CZPP] to life imprisonment […], Stanisław Zięba-Barański [former co-owner and manager of the 'Herbewo' factory] to fifteen years of imprisonment […], Józef Seroga [owner of the 'Rori' factory and the legal speaker of the CZPP] to ten years of imprisonment, Grzegorz Axentowicz [head of the processing department and a member of the CZPP Nationalization Committee] to eight years of imprisonment."[59] Fortunately, the death sentences were not executed, the convicts were pardoned, and released from prison many years later[60].

In the aftermath of the "major scandal", the earlier decision to return the small factories to the previous owners was changed and all the factories were nationalised. In its political dimension, the trial, as many others, was intended at spreading fear and terrorising the population in order to pave the path towards the change of the socio-economic system.

The political context of the trial is presumably the reason why one cannot learn of Wrześniewski's wartime experience from his testimony. When asked by the MBP's officer Gabczyński during the first questioning, that took place immediately after his arrest in Łódź, on 15 April 1948, "what did the susp[ect] do until 1939 and during the occupation?", he only briefly answered:

> I worked as a common law lawyer and a legal advisor for several industrial and trading companies in Warsaw until 1939. From January 1940 to 1942, I worked as a clerk in the Wasilewski Co. in Warsaw. From 1942 to the

[58] *Dziennik Łódzki*, 29 January 1949.

[59] *Dziennik Łódzki*, 30 January 1949.

[60] "Death penalties were not carried out, and after many years, Kraul, Hasfeld, and the others sentenced were eventually released." writes Maciej Szymczyk, *Wielka afera o malwersacje w przemyśle papierniczym…*, p. 93.

> liquidation of the Warsaw Uprising, I was hiding in the Żoliborz district; being persecuted, I often had to move from place to place; and that's how I established a clandestine contact with a medical student, Ms Siemieńska, who was providing me with bulletins and news from London tinged with sympathy for the AK. I, in turn, was passing [them] to my friends. After the liquidation of the uprising, I was taken by the occupational authorities to Jędrzejowski County [*powiat*], later [I was] in Radom, where I lived by buying and selling goods. I arrived in Łódź in March 1945, and soon I found a job as a legal advisor at the Central Administration of the Paper Industry, where I worked until April 1947.[61]

None of the trial records mentions the earlier name of Wrześniewski, also the fact of his Jewish descent is mentioned discreetly just in two documents: in his wife's petition for pardon[62] and in the confidential opinion of the District Court in Łódź in regard to her petition. This opinion recommends pardon "taking into consideration that the convict, as a Jew, went through a lot during the occupation, and that the persecution by the occupational authorities must have affected his mental faculties, weakening his will and moral resistance; that he has no criminal record, has pleaded guilty and has shown some remorse, therefore one should presume that the individual is not dangerous to society."[63] Wrześniewski's sentence of life imprisonment was commuted to 7 years of imprisonment, that later was commuted to 4 years and 8 months under the Amnesty Act of 22 November 1952. Furthermore, his confession turned out to be dubious, since Wrześniewski had written in his petition to the Attorney General, while trying to have his conviction expunged:

> the sentence was pronounced after the summary trial, on the basis of the explanations that had been extorted from me during the investigation by use of unlawful means. These explanations, I had been coerced into giving them while being subjected to the physical constraint and violence, do not correspond to any actual state of affairs and have not been confirmed by any factual evidence, especially by the witnesses' testimonies[64].

Beating during the interrogation that led to a political trial was not uncommon in the fifties. After all, the show trial was at stake, its public dimension, and terrorising effect. Apparently, Henryk Ryszewski, who was then serving time, read reports of the trial published in the press in January 1949. It is possible that they provoked him to write the above letter to the prosecutor, and also

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[61] AIPN Łd, 5/27, vol. 3, Sąd Wojewódzki w Łodzi, p. 147.

[62] Janina Wrzesniewska, in letter to the President of the Republic of Poland dated 24March 1949, wrote with regards to her husband, that "due to the racial persecution, he endured a terrible martyrdom during Hitler's occupation, [...] in that time, he lost nearly all of his loved ones who were murdered by the occupant." Ibidem, vol. 1, part 2, p. 360.

[63] Ibidem, p. 394.

[64] Ibidem, p. 357.

a personal letter to Ignacy Wrześniewski. This letter has been preserved in his file, because the prisoner's request to send it to the addressee was not approved. The letter says:

> Mr Ignacy! When your shameful allegations landed me in [the hands of] the UB [*Urząd Bezpieczeństwa*, Security Office] and later in prison, I could not imagine, that you yourself – Ignaś [diminutive of Ignacy] – would have such a 'dazzling career', that the entire national press would cover your story, that your 'photogenic' pictures would be featured in these newspapers[65]. A summary court sentenced you to life imprisonment and stripped you of your civil rights forever. I congratulate you on avoiding the hangman's noose, as, apparently, you haven't deserved sudden death; instead you may brood over your crime against the People's [Republic of] Poland and against me for many years to come. I was the first one who extended a helping hand to you when you left the ghetto, and what did you [undecipherable] do to me? I had hid your only son for several months risking my own life, and you [in return] threw me into prison. […] Your talk is as vile as your vindictive character is black, and disgraceful is the end of your lifetime 'career'. You renounced the faith of your fathers, you changed your name, Konigstein, to the 'noble' name Ignacy Wrześniewski, you gave up your nationality. But all that was to no avail. The long arm of the law has caught up with you at last. I'll leave the prison before long. In September [undecipherable] I shall visit you in Rawicz or Wronki to show you personally my disdain for your shameful deed. I want to 'thank you' personally for my suffering, my wife's tears and the privation suffered by my children. Your son is not responsible for his Father's crimes. I'm ready to come to his aid, as I have already helped him once in need. As far as you are concerned, I wish you a long, very long life…[66]

The letter clearly shows that Wrześniewski was not the only one filled with passion. The author of the epistle was not just full of bitterness and a feeling of having been a victim of harm and injustice. Reading these lines one can also detect a hypocritical magnanimity tinged with satisfaction about Wrześniewski's punishment.

'The paper industry affair' may inspire many further quests and bring to light further tangles of problems and questions. I wish to focus on just one topic, which seems intriguing, and relates to the currently prevailing opinion that those who had helped Jews during the war used to conceal it in fear of the reaction of their surroundings. It seems to be true for certain social groups (rural rather than urban). One of the defendants in the "paper industry trial", Grzegorz Axentowicz, stated that he had sheltered Jews during the occupation giving it as proof of his decency and civic conduct. That fact had nothing to do with his indictment; the

[65] Trial reports contain drawings depicting the accused, see *Dziennik Lódzki*, 23 January 1949, drawing of Wrześniewski.

[66] APW, 654/3694, Akta w sprawie karnej Henryka Ryszewskiego, pp. 98–99.

suspect decided, however, that this bit of information could be helpful and he submitted to the jury a testimony of a barrister, Karol Peczenik, who stated that:

> Mr Grzegorz Axentowicz, a then resident of Warsaw, was of help to me, my wife and son over many years during the occupation, doing it with the greatest commitment and generosity, providing us with the necessary documents and supporting us the entire time. I want to stress that to obtain the documents for us, he sold his watch because he did not have enough money at that time. He did not limit his help to material support for us. He was giving us moral support and showing us so much warmth and affection that, due to his conduct, we regained faith in humanity. I owe Mr Axentowicz my and my family's life. I also know that many other persons used Mr Axentowicz's help, as he supported the needy and persecuted with all his kindness.[67]

In another statement enclosed by Axentowicz's defence attorney, a renowned composer, pianist, and music teacher, Bolesław Woytowicz, declared:

> I regard Cit[izen] Axentowicz as an honest, generous, and giving man. The above opinion is confirmed by a considerable number of facts I have learned from accounts by reliable people, as well as by the one [fact] I have witnessed myself: Ryszard Werner, a Polish pianist and my friend, escaped from the Warsaw Ghetto during the occupation. According to Werner's own account, Cit[izen] Alexandrowicz did all he could to keep Cit[izen] Werner in hiding in Warsaw, to find him subsequent places to live and provide him with means of livelihood. He did it being fully aware of the risk involved in helping persons of Jewish descent and hiding them from the German authorities[68].

It would be interesting to follow the wartime stories of the Peczenik family[69] and Werner, but as for now the gate to this path of the labyrinth remains closed.

Even more labyrinths and tangled paths

The thread that began to unwind when I started reading Ryszewski's memoir goes on and on. From the story of the 13 hiding Jews, it took me to one of the "August" trials, and then to the scandal of political significance linked to forced nationalisation of private property and the show trial designed to terrorise and scare off the public. Then the thread branches off and leads to a story of other hiding Jews, who crossed the path of the heroes of the above account, forming

[67] AIPN Łd, 5/27/2, Sąd Wojewódzki w Łodzi, p. 239.

[68] Ibidem, p. 114.

[69] Karol Peczenik (b. 1897), lawyer and legionnaire. Before the war he had worked in courthouses in Jarosławiec, Krakow, and Kielce, and – from 1938 – he was an attorney in Warsaw. During the occupation, he was an official of the Jewish Order Service in the ghetto, then went into hiding. After the war became a military court justice. He emigrated from Poland in 1968.

further meshes of the huge net covering the entire occupied Warsaw. Thus, one piece of information takes us to another enabling us to reconstruct a chain, or rather many interconnected chains of human destiny.

There is one more lead I wish to mention here. Janina Wrześniewski (Koenigstein), nee Kaftal, is the same "Aunt Nina", who tried with great determination to save her family members during the war. Her sister, Helen Meszorer had two children: Ludwika (Wisia) and Lutek (Józef). In his memoirs, Lutek frequently mentioned Aunt Nina and her son Maryś (Marian Wrześniewski) with whom he had grown up since early childhood. As one may read in his memoirs, the Koenigsteins lived on Marszałkowska Street before the war, and later – on Śliska Street in the ghetto. After the small ghetto was liquidated, he moved to the Meszorers on Leszno Street. Aunt Nina played a certain role in the rescue of her sister's children (Lutek and Wisia) from the Umschlagplatz: when they were caught during the selection in the Schultz's 'shop', she took them out of the ghetto the following day. Meszorer remembers that

> in the morning of August 14 we walked together with Aunt Nina along Leszno Street towards Żelazna Street. It was sunny, the street was almost empty. […] A few Jewish policemen, who had been paid off, were hanging around the gate. Some time passed, a blue policeman turned away and I, together with my sister, holding hands, passed with measured pace through the gate to the other side of Leszno Street. Walking further along Leszno Street we joined Miss Bronia, who was waiting for us there. Almost at the same time, two men approached us and began to talk about something with Miss Bronia. Then we entered a passage of a nearby house and the hall with a staircase on the right. […] Later, already after the war, we learned that those *szmalcownicks* haggled with her, because in their opinion the entire amount of 1,500 zlotys she had on her was not enough so they wanted to take us to the Gestapo. Finally she gave them also a ring and they let us go[70].

Wisia and Lutek were taken to a flat in the Saska Kępa district, where "aside from Witek and Jurek, our cousin Maryś had already lived (for a few weeks), so there were five of us in one bedroom and we had quite a good time."[71] So, here we meet Marian Wrześniewski. He had probably been taken from the flat in Saska Kępa to the Ryszewskis, as his parents paid him a visit there as soon as they had left the ghetto in October 1942. The story of Witold and Jerzy Jedlicki (Grosman), Meszorer's cousins mentioned above, who had not gone to the ghetto but had spent the entire occupation in Warsaw on the Aryan Side, could become a new thread of this tangled quest.

Another path appeared in front of us when we spotted Miss Bronia waiting for the children at the exit of the ghetto. It is an important path as it

[70] Józef Meszorer, the typescript in my possession.

[71] Ibidem.

leads a researcher to a new topic (and a new maze) of a role played by Polish housekeepers and nannies, who worked for Jewish families and later, during the occupation, bravely attempted to rescue their employers and wards. I shall ignore this path, however, because right now I am only interested in the threads interwoven with the story of the Meszorers and the Koenigsteins. Miss Bronia, i.e. Bronisława Bielatowicz, who was Marian Wrześniewski's nanny before the war, played a major role in the rescue of her employers. When they were in the ghetto, she used to bring them food and "run all possible errands. She demonstrated the most sincere devotion and affection." In August 1942, she first led out Marian of the ghetto, then the two children of the Meszorers. As Janina Wrześniewska emphatically said: "it was due to her devotion and courage that the children's lives were saved" and she did it in spite of being repeatedly "blackmailed and hunted, and her life being threatened."[72] Helena Meszorer writes about Bronisława Bielatowicz in a similar way, pointing out her sacrifice and unselfish attitude, as well as enormous role in the rescue of the children[73]. More could be said about the wartime experiences of the Meszorer family, about the help extended to them by the Szaniawski family, where Lutek had found a shelter. Here lies another question that is waiting to be asked, namely, what happened to a certain unknown Jewish girl who also found shelter at the Szaniawskis in Przybyszew near Góra Kalwaria.

Bronisława Bielatowicz was recognised as Righteous Among the Nations in 1980. Henryk Ryszewski, died in 1972 and after his death, in 1978, his daughter Zofia Brusikiewicz, applied to Yad Vashem on behalf of her parents. In 1983, Yad Vashem awarded the Righteous Among the Nations medal to Mr and Mrs Ryszewski, and their daughter, Zofia Brusikiewicz.

Conclusion

The case of Henryk Ryszewski, an anti-Semite helping Jews, is not an exceptional one. It happened, and while the animosity towards Jews did not disappear, it grew weaker as it was pushed away by the Christian compassion at the sight of the Jews' anguish,[74] as it was with Zofia Kossak-Szczucka. Romana Dalbor remembers a similar attitude displayed by her acquaintances,

[72] AŻIH, Sekcja dla Spraw Odznaczeń Yad Vashem, file no. 73, Letter of Janina Wrześniewska, 20 April 1980.

[73] Ibidem, Letter of Helena Meszorer, 24 April 1980. It is possible that the testimonies of the two Kaftal sisters, which they made in ZIH, contain more details regarding their and their families' fate during the occupation, but unfortunately both these testimonies have since gone missing: AŻIH, 301/6931, Testimony of Janina Wrzesniewska, and 301/6932, Testimony of Helena Meszorer. In the archives, both cases contain annotations "testimony missing".

[74] See Carla Tonini, *Czas nienawiści i czas troski. Zofia Kossak-Szczucka – antysemitka, która ratowała Żydów* (trans. Teresa and Wojciech Jekiel, Warsaw: ŻIH, 2007; Sławomir Buryła, "Katoliczka, patriotka, antysemitka," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 25 December 2008.

landowners whom she approached for help when she was trying to find a place to stay for her Jewish girl-friend. She writes:

> a small manor house, truly Polish. A grandfather's medal from Napoleon was there, and the other one [earned during] the Kościuszko uprising; each great grandmother's portrait was venerated and the pride was there that no drop of foreign blood was running through their veins, everything Polish, and everything noble. […] They rather didn't like Jews who "had seized our trade and industry, and who pushed and shoved and soon will grab our land, too". The daughters were staunch anti-Semites. […] It was a respectable and very Christian household.

During the occupation, when some Jews from a neighbouring town knocked at the manor's door, the owners hid them and helped them. Mrs. Dalbor recollects, that when she asked the reason for the change of their attitude towards Jews, she received the answer: "we do our duty. […] to feed the one who is hungry, to clothe the one who is naked and so on, so it seems, all the more [important] to provide a roof over the head and shelter to a fugitive and homeless person! Above all, it is a Christian duty."[75]

Nechama Tec[76] dedicated a chapter of her book to the anti-Semites who rescued Jews bringing up usual examples: Jan Mosdorf and Father Marceli Godlewski as well as Leon Nowodworski, a dean of the [Warsaw] Bar Council. The latter was in favour of the expulsion of Jews from the legal profession before the war, then openly stood up to Germans in defence of Jews at the beginning of the occupation and for that was sent to prison[77]. Tec rightly noticed that cases of anti-Semitic helpers were extremely rare. "In both the literature and archival materials, the same few names appear and reappear."[78] Her own research has confirmed that anti-Semite rescuers were a rare exception among the Righteous. Of more than thirty rescuers she interviewed two openly affirm the anti-Semitic

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[75] Romana Dalborowa [Recollection], in *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej. Polacy z pomocą Żydom 1939–1945*, eds. Władysław Bartoszewski, Zofia Lewinówna, (Cracow: Znak, 1969), pp. 568–569.

[76] Nechama Tec, *When Light Pierced the Darkness Christian Rescue of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), chapter "The Rare Case of the Anti-Semitic helper", pp. 99–109. Also writing about anti-Semites saving Jews, Jan Żaryn, „Elity Obozu Narodowego wobec zagłady Żydów," in *Poles and Jews under the German occupation, 1939–1945. Studies and materials*, ed. Andrzej Zbikowski (Warsaw: IPN, 2006, pp. 365–428). It is nevertheless such an absurd piece of writing, that it does not warrant being taken seriously. Jan Grabowski criticised "case of Żaryn", see "Polacy wobec Zagłady," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 10 November 2006.

[77] Ibidem, p. 100, there is no information regarding Nowodworski's imprisonment in other sources; allegedly he was expelled from the practice of law for his disobedience toward the Germans; see http://slawniprawnicy.pl/i-polowa-xx-wieku/94-leon-nowodworski, access 11 April 2015.

[78] Tec, *When Light Pierced the Darkness…*, p. 101.

sentiments. The negative attitude to Jews acknowledged by her responders was partially aroused by the ingratitude, which was shown by those rescued to the Poles, who had helped them. Apparently, they regarded showing no gratitude, as being the same as showing ingratitude.

Ryszewski seemed to think likewise in 1961 when he wrote:

> The war is over, everyone has survived. We have no power over the abyss of human oblivion. Forgetfulness and human ingratitude never run out and never die out. […] Our Jews have withdrawn into dogged silence sealed with seven seals. They cannot even bring themselves to write even an unspecific message, such as "here we are, alive". That utter forgetfulness is still afflicting us like a thorn in the raw flesh, [and it will] until this tender nerve inside us dries up, the one that requires an affectionate memory, and if it cannot find it, causes pain and arouses bitterness. It is the one that has already eaten away a considerable chunk of our disappointed heart.[79]

Ryszewski complained about the ingratitude of the Jews, and that they were not in touch, which might well be regarded as true at the time he was writing his memoirs. But they had been in touch earlier. The survivors testified during the trial, although they did it to vouch for the truth rather than to show their gratitude. Mr. Kupferstein [Pinalis, Pawłowski] visited the Ryszewskis in Bydgoszcz for a few days just after the war[80], and furthermore, as Ryszewski wrote in his petition for expungement: "the Jews regard him as their hero and pay him 500 zlotys per month for life."[81] So, the survivors' ingratitude has to be ruled out, but still, Ryszewski feels resentment and bitterness. He misses the warmth and attention, which, he believes, the saved Jews should show their protectors.

Gratitude is a complicated, complex and tangled feeling. What makes it even more complicated is that it involves not only an emotion, but also an attitude and even a moral obligation. As David Walker notices, [the concept of] gratitude involves a symbolic aspect (a display of feeling) as well as a material aspect (an appropriate repayment for a good received).[82] Gratitude is hard to express. As early as in 1908, William McDougall, a psychologist, pointed out a lack of clarity of the feeling, when he described it as a complex

> binary compound of tender emotion and negative self-feeling […]. The act that is to inspire gratitude must make us aware, not only of the kindly feeling, the tender emotion, of the other towards us; it must also make us

[79] AŻIH, 302/212, Wspomnienia Henryka Ryszewskiego, p. 40.

[80] Zofia Brusikiewicz mentions this in her testimony for the website http://www.sprawiedliwi.org.pl/pl/media/142/, access 23 March 2015.

[81] APW, 654/3694, Akta w sprawie karnej Henryka Ryszewskiego, p. 134.

[82] Angela D.M. Walker, "Political Obligation and the Argument from Gratitude," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* vol. 17, 3 (1988): p. 200, cited after Filip Niemczyk, "Wdzięczność jako źródło obowiązków moralnych," *Etyka* 40 (2007): 100.

> aware of his power, we must see that he is able to do for us something that we cannot do for ourselves. This element of negative self-feeling, then, is blended with tenderness in true gratitude, and its impulse, the impulse to withdraw from the attention of, or to humble oneself in the presence of, its object, more or less neutralises the impulse of the tender emotion to approach its object.[83]

It seems possible that the delicate matter of self-esteem constitutes the underlying cause behind a receiver's difficulty in showing gratitude: a grateful person is of inferior status in comparison to a 'benefactor'. When human life is saved, inevitably, the roles of hero and rescued person are assumed. Sometimes, it may resemble the roles of rescuer (saviour) and victim in the classic drama triangle[84]. Victims are passive, weak, disheartened, and helpless – unable to manage either the inner or outer reality of their lives. Rescuers solve all of the victims' problems but, at the same time, they make victims dependent upon them.

Feeling grateful for a good received includes not just affection, but also the urge to answer, to react appropriately, to behave properly.

Where there is an obligation (for a gift or a favour), there is also a debt that should be settled. The principle of reciprocity requires a return for a good received; it is seen as an act of gross moral negligence, when someone evades returning the obligation. What is returned should not be too small but must be commensurate with the benefit received. Sometimes, it is enough just to say "thank you" or to respond in some other customary manner. Another time, a proper response requires greater effort.

There are, however, no rules regulating how one should be repaid for saving someone's life. How can you repay such debt? What needs to be done? How would you know whether the return is fair? How should you meet such obligation? This kind of debt, which is impossible to repay, places a heavy burden on one's shoulders. It causes unbearable strain. Those whose life has been saved are under a moral duty to reciprocate. If they fail to satisfy the obligation they may feel remorse, and, under the burden of the impossible obligation, may be haunted by guilt.

As gratitude is a complex emotion and the saved ones are indebted for life – it is possible that, when the war was over, it was too difficult for some of them to stay in touch with those who had saved them. Because of the symbolic dimension of gratitude, once they regained their subjectivity and ability to run their own lives,

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[83] William McDougall, *An Introduction to Social Psychology (Revised Edition)*, chapter 5 "The Nature of the Sentiments and the Constitution of Some of the Complex Emotions" (Boston: Luce and Co, 1926), pp. 136–137.

[84] The Drama Triangle with its roles of Victim, Persecutor and Rescuer was described originally by Stephen Karpman (1968) as one of the models of human relations in Transactional Analysis. The model is successfully applied to this day in psychotherapy.

they wanted to free themselves from any experience of being a victim, dispel their old image. Because of its material dimension, they might prefer to 'forget' their protectors as the interaction with them would be a constant reminder of an impossible obligation.

Translated by *Karolina Dmowska*, *Elżbieta Olender-Dmowska*

Abstract
The article tells the story of Henryk Ryszewski, who provided hiding to about a dozen Jews in his flat in the Warsaw district of Mariensztat. Accused after the war of blackmailing Jews (as I think, wrongly), he was convicted and spent several years in prison. His prosecutor fell victim of the 'paper industry affair' show trial and also spent a few years in prison.

Key words
the Righteous, help to Jews, provision of hiding, Warsaw, 'Aryan' side, 'paper industry affair'