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The Righteous are among us

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Controversies

Agnieszka Haska

The Righteous are among us

For a long time, a discussion has been observed about the Righteous that has continued beyond the scientific framework and has become a public, if not a political, issue. Honoured with medals by Yad Vashem, they have been included in the battle for remembrance that is fought over the question concerning the attitudes of the Polish society under the German occupation; they serve as an obligatory argument on every possible occasion when there is the slightest shadow of suspicion that not every Pole helped the Jews and that not everyone has a spotless page on their lives. For the purpose of public discourse, scientific doubts and grey areas have been smoothed away since the battle for remembrance is black and white. This was proved by last year's debate on the location of the monument commemorating the Righteous, during which those who were against the plans to erect it in front of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews were said to attack the mere idea of honouring the Poles who saved Jews.

The popular science book *Sprawiedliwi. Jak Polacy ratowali Żydów przed Zagładą* [The Righteous. How Poles saved Jews from the Holocaust], by journalist and columnist Grzegorz Górny, who used to work with *Fronda* and now works with *W Sieci* magazines, fits very well into the framework of this black and white battle for remembrance. From a scientific point of view, the book does not represent any particular value, being a compilation of various facts and stories known from the literature, presented in an attractive layout that resembles a tour guide with photos, tables and highlighted stories of the Righteous. It should be emphasised, however, that this compilation is quite poor – the book has so many factual errors that it shall be necessary to devote half of the pages of the current issue of Holocaust Studies and Materials to mention them all. These are randomly chosen examples: the area of the Second Republic of Poland incorporated into the Third Reich was of 94,000 square kilometres, not 92 kilometres; the number of victims shot in Babi Yar is determined to be about 70,000 Jews, Poles, Romanies and Ukrainians, not "about 100,000 Jews" – similarly Górny overestimates the number of victims killed in Ponary. He also writes: "The mass murder in Ponary was carried out by the Lithuanian Ponary Riflemen Volunteer Squad, called Ypatingas Burys, subordinated to the German Gestapo."[1] The given name is incorrect both in Polish

[1] Grzegorz Górny, *Sprawiedliwi. Jak Polacy ratowali Żydów przed Zagładą* (Izabelin–Warsaw, 2013), p. 50.

and Lithuanian since the full name of the squad is *Vokiečių Saugumo policijos ir SD ypatingasis būrys* (*Specjalny Oddział SD i Niemieckiej Policji Bezpieczeństwa*) that is the Special SD and German Security Police Squad. In addition, it was not subordinated to the Gestapo and the term "Ponary riflemen" (*strzelcy ponarscy*) is a colloquial name. In the Chełmno concentration camp, not only the Jews from Łódź and the vicinity,[2] but Jews from the whole Reichsgau Wartheland were murdered and the victims were not killed in gas vans equipped with gas chambers only "in the beginning." Aktion Reinhardt (in the book "Reinhard") did not start in the summer of 1942.[3] It was the operation launched to murder the Jews in the General Government that was given this codename in June 1942. Next, Professor Franciszek Raszeja was not killed for operating on the Jew Abe Gutmajer.[4] Everything seems to indicate that he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time and the murder of people in Gutmajer's apartment might have been motivated by robbery.[5] Moreover, the Provisional Committee for Aid to Jews (*Tymczasowy Komitet Pomocy Żydom*, 'Żegota') was not established by Zofia Kossak-Szczucka alone,[6] but also by Wanda Krahelska, who was a Polish Socialist Party (*Polska Partia Socjalistyczna*, PPS) activist. Finally, the caption under the photo of Emanuel Ringelblum presented in the book reads: "his notes survived because he had hidden them in metal boxes and milk cans and then buried them,"[7] which provokes the reader to immediately call for a monument of Ringelblum with a spade in his hand.

Górny's book, however, has a cognitive value for it may serve as a representative sample of characteristic features of this variant of discourse that I will tentatively call the "domination of the Righteous". I use the word 'domination' because facts, numbers and opinions are cited to demonstrate unambiguously that among Polish society, there were more righteous than unrighteous people and, in consequence, all those who state otherwise are indeed unrighteous.

The discourse of "domination of the Righteous" is founded on three theses. The first, extrapolation of righteousness, was formulated by Norman Davies in the introduction to Górny's book and reads as follows: "It is wrong to think that a name written at Yad Vashem is the ultimate account. The Israeli authorities can commemorate only those names that have been passed on to them and have undergone stringent verification. We know nothing about a multitude of other people […]. And so there is a significant distinction: 'Righteous Poles' as recognised by Yad Vashem and other Poles known only to God."[8] The list of the Righteous is indeed incomplete, yet in the discussed discourse this thesis is

[2] Ibidem, p. 68.

[3] Ibidem, p. 95.

[4] Ibidem, p. 156.

[5] See Włodzimierz Kalicki, "Świadek tylko czyta," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, supplement *Duży Format*, 21 April 2008.

[6] Górny, *Sprawiedliwi…*, p. 145.

[7] Ibidem, p. 237.

[8] Ibidem, p. 11.

transformed and complemented in a peculiar way. First of all, the number of 6,454 Poles who were awarded the honorary title (data as of January 2014) is "only the tip of the iceberg" since according to different calculations, there are from 100,000 to more than 1,000,000 Poles waiting to receive it.[9] Secondly, if Yad Vashem's criteria for awarding the title are too strict, other criteria, which comprise even the most incidental cases of helping Jews and thus extrapolate the Righteous title on the majority of the Polish society of the time, should be adopted. The justification for this is a general and omnipresent nobleness of the Polish nation towards the Jews during the occupation period that is attested to by the survivors themselves in testimonies or accounts of the war-time period such as Emanuel Ringelblum's *Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto*. Of course, the whole picture is not presented and it is not mentioned that in the same sources one can find examples where such nobleness is lacking. Moreover, in Górny's publication, there are statements taken out of context. For instance, two sentences from the beginning and end of Władysław Bartoszewski's interview to Zbigniew Nosowski,[10] when he says that he did not find anti-Semitic attitudes during the occupation because he moved in a special circle, therefore his perspective is, as he admits "a little bit distorted," were removed.

The issue of omnipresent nobleness of the Polish nation towards the Jews during the occupation is related to another foundation of the discourse, the emphasised incidental nature of these cases when the Poles did not act not very nobly. They are not denied, yet it is indicated that they were completely isolated situations. The explanations of Poles' motivation behind killing, robbing or reporting Jews are also interesting. We have the Germans who by creating fear or greed in the Poles involved them in the "depravity system," which was supported by "general demoralisation as a result of military actions." With reference to this matter, there is a quotation from Piotr Zychowicz, who states that the Jews were killed by the illiterate peasants and the nationality was of no importance: "If instead of them [Jews], outlawed French people, Americans or Polish officers had been wandering in the forests of the General Government, they would have suffered exactly the same fate."[11] In support of this thesis, the words of Bogdan Musiał are quoted: "Moreover, the Poles were also attacked, robbed and killed by these same individuals. After all, the occupation was the cause of crime and everyone, no matter what their origin, fell victim to it."[12] Thus, the whole blame for "unrighteous" behaviours is shifted either onto the undiscriminating illiterates or the criminals; if there had been an American not a Jew hiding in a barn, he would have also been killed. It need not be added

[9] Ibidem, p. 291.

[10] Władysław Bartoszewski, Zbigniew Nosowski, "Żyd i człowiek – rozmowa," *Więź* 7 (2011).

[11] Górny, *Sprawiedliwi…*, p. 105.

[12] Ibidem, p. 107.

that in Górny's book local collaborators and criminals were responsible for the Jedwabne pogrom.

Potential contradictions – such as the omnipresence of blackmailing (*szmalcownictwo*) in Jewish testimonies – are explained with a numerical argument. With reference to the blackmailers, there is a thesis presented that it is not known exactly how many such people there were, but certainly the number is lower than the number of Righteous and, moreover, the "secret bodies" of the Polish Secret State "from the beginning considered blackmailing to be an act of collaboration with the enemy."[13] By the way, it is regrettable that it is left unexplained if the phrase "from the beginning" should be interpreted that these "secret organs" were established in March 1943 or that the author states that it was only then that the blackmailers started their practice. It is obvious that the one and only blame for demoralisation (meaning: also the said illiteracy) is borne by the Germans, who intentionally made the victims and witnesses perpetrators of crime. Jewish collaborators are a conclusive argument for this. It is interesting to note that in Górny's book the main collaborator is not Abraham Gancwajch but Leon Skosowski. Thus, in the book about the Holocaust and saving the Jews, the author devotes more pages to the Hotel Polski affair than to Żegota, distorting almost all the facts that could be distorted. In this version, Skosowski was not eliminated for being a double agent (Gestapo and the Office of the Delegate of the Government in Exile) but for the "provocation in the Hotel Polski." Of course, the Home Army and underground Jewish organisations (in Górny's book, it is the Jewish Military Union [*Żydowski Związek Wojskowy*, ŻZW]) pursued with determination those who had been seduced by the profits to be drawn from collaborating with the Germans and sentenced them to death.

An important element here is the absolute uniqueness of the Poles' attitude in comparison with the normal stance of occupied Europe and their exceptional sacrifice for the Jews. The argument that in western Europe the act of hiding Jews was related to a far lower risk (meaning: no risk), not to mention constant danger of death and collective responsibility, is repeated as if a mantra. In Górny's book, one even finds a bold thesis that "in Belgium, Norway, the Netherlands, France and Italy not even one case of killing a person for saving Jews was noted,"[14] which contradicts the histories of Righteous Joop Westerweel from the Netherlands and Daniel Trocmé from Le Chambon-sur-Lignon in France. The Polish underground, which "from the beginning" opposed the "anti-Semitic policy of Nazi Germany"[15] informing the allies and condemning the occupiers' attitude toward the Jews in the underground press, is juxtaposed with Vichy France that participated in the Holocaust – conclusions may be drawn by a comparison. Large numbers of people helped the Polish Jews, starting from priests, through

[13] Ibidem, p. 137.
[14] Ibidem, p. 73.
[15] Ibidem, p. 129.

landowners, residents of villages and cities, organisations (with particular focus on pre-war members of the National-Radical Camp [*Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny*, ONR]), and ending with ordinary people. At the same time, Górny does not omit the question: "Could something more have been done?" He answers this in two ways. First of all, he quotes the survivors' comments, in which they underline the uniqueness and heroism of the Polish nation (meaning: the whole nation); secondly, he explains that the possibility of helping was limited. It is interesting that here he not only offers terror, death penalty or collective responsibility used by the Germans as an argument, although such phrases appear most often. Górny also focuses on material conditions. In the first place, problems were caused by a "difficult housing situation." As a result of the destruction of houses and deportations, "it was more difficult to hide fugitives."[16] This can be an argument but not a fundamental one. The second reason was "a radical impoverishment of the local population,"[17] because of which "many people did not possess even the most basic resources that could be used to bring help." This is related to the third problem, "a difficult provisioning situation."[18] At first glance, it is hard to combine it with a thesis about extrapolation of the notion of "righteous" on every, even the smallest act of help, yet the discourse does not notice this contradiction and it even makes use of it – the greater the difficulties with shelter, food or money, the more exceptional Poles as society were. They helped not only because of their innate kindness, but above all because of religious reasons – the quoted testimonies reveal that the order to save the Jews was given by God himself.[19] It is another example of when the area of national community is outlined in the book: a righteous Polish Catholic helps his Jewish neighbour. Here, priests occupy a special place: "Although the Catholic Church was itself a victim of persecutions, it strove to help its elder brothers in faith."[20] Górny refers to Father Paweł Rytel-Andrianik's research, which as Dariusz Libionka presented in the previous number of *Holocaust Studies and Materials*, is completely divorced from historical research methodology.

Of course any kind of help for the Jews was punishable by death. Górny is scrupulous about presenting these cases when Polish families were killed by the Germans for giving shelter for the Jews. The fact that the Nazis did not have the gift of second sight and in the majority of cases it was the "kind" neighbour who gave away their hiding places does not match the thesis about the uniqueness of Poles. Such phrases as "on 7 March 1944, the Germans discovered" the Krysia bunker at Grójecka Street 81 are typical of the discourse about the domination

[16] Ibidem, p. 171.
[17] Ibidem.
[18] Ibidem, p. 175.
[19] Ibidem, p. 185.
[20] Ibidem, p. 277.

of the Righteous.[21] Whereas when the hiding place was given away by a Jewish escapee, for example in the case of the Dec family from Pantalowice and the Hadle Szklarskie family in the Subcarpathian region, it is always underlined who brought the Germans. The fear of Polish neighbours does not appear in the discourse at all; one does not learn from the biography of Righteous Julia Pępiak from Bełżec, who saved Salomea Helman and her daughter, that she was keeping this fact secret from her husband.

Finally, foundation number three: after the war, the Righteous suffered injustice. Their stories are unknown, there is far too little said about them, their heroism is not sufficiently underlined, there are no monuments erected to them and the criteria of Yad Vashem, as has already been said, are too restrictive. On the one hand, such a situation was caused by the conditions of the former political system that were unfavourable for seeking medals – when finally in the last years they were awarded, there were mainly posthumous decorations (there is no mention that Irena Sendlerowa received the Yad Vashem medal in 1965). On the other hand, as one may read between the lines and in the quoted interview with Anna Poray-Wybranowska, published originally in *Nasz Dziennik*,[22] it is because the Jews themselves who did not attend to honouring their caregivers from the occupation period. The Jan Karski bench and the Irena Sendler Alley are still not enough if there are almost one million heroes waiting to be remembered and honoured.

On these three foundations of discourse, a new monument of the Righteous is being erected, which is composed of random quotations from scientific works, interviews and press articles as well as from testimonies and fiction. The main researchers are: Marek Jan Chodakiewicz, Gunnar S. Paulsson and Bogdan Musiał other publications in the bibliography are missing on principle. It is no wonder. The monument of the Righteous should be seen from afar and should not raise doubts that the Polish population helped the Jews everywhere and in a wholesale manner during the occupation. There is no space for dilemmas, discussions and nuances, the domination of the Righteous should be clear to all who state that the Poles also performed less noble deeds. That is the reason why numbers are extremely important in this discourse; it is significant that there were more of those who helped than all the rest. However, the question about indifference of witnesses is not asked at all. As has been underlined before, in the black and white picture, there is no space for a grey scale, even if the "Warsaw of Mr and Mrs Kowalski", as the city was described in the study conducted by the Office of the Delegate of the Government in Exile in the middle of 1942, encompassed 90% of society.

And also there is no space for Jews who are somehow vanishing from this picture. In the majority of cases, the names of hidden Jews are not given – it is only

[21] Ibidem, p. 238.

[22] 9 October 2004.

the names of the Righteous that matter. One does not learn about the histories of those who were hiding or about their tragedies and dilemmas; the Jews are given permission to speak only when they can testify to the nobility of Poles. Thus, the discourse about the domination of the Righteous not only uses the heroic acts of help instrumentally, but also, and above all, again removes the subjectivity of those who needed this help. In other words, it becomes a story only about Poles, not Jews; the memory of Polish heroism and tragedy is cherished. Once more Jews prove to be strangers deprived of names and identities, who do not belong to the community. The main thing is that when they were hiding in wardrobes, cellars, barns and dugouts, one could help them despite all problems.

Translated by *Katarzyna Kaszorek*