

Holocaust Studies and Materials
Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały

2013

ISSN: 1895-247X
eISSN: 2657-3571
DOI: 10.32927
WWW: www.zagladazydow.pl

Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów IFiS PAN
Polish Center for Holocaust Research

Helping Those Doomed to Annihilation as a Source of Destruction – On the Basis of Brandla Siekierkowa's Personal Documents

Justyna Kowalska-Leder

redakcja@holocaustresearch.pl

DOI: https://doi.org/10.32927/zzsim.801
Strony/Pages: 159-171

CC BY

OPEN ACCESS

Justyna Kowalska-Leder

Helping Those Doomed to Annihilation as a Source of Destruction – On the Basis of Brandla Siekierkowa's Personal Documents

The wartime diary of Brandla Siekierka and her 1949 hand-written memoir call for an examination of the relationship between micro-histories/histories of individuals and the main currents of Polish historical narration. Both documents,[1] so far unpublished, were written in Polish. Their author was born in 1911 in the village of Żwirówka, near Mińsk Mazowiecki, where before the war she ran a dairy with her husband Mojżesz. After the closure of the local ghetto in August 1942 she, her husband and their two sons (aged four and eight) found shelter in their home village on the farm of their pre-war acquaintances – the Bylickis.

Neither the wartime nor the post-war account of the relations between the Siekierkas and the peasant couple, who for two years disinterestedly helped those Jews doomed to annihilation, can be defined within any of the types of historical narration of the Polish–Jewish occupation-period experience. The landlords' behavior differs greatly from the heroic and merciful stance of the Righteous among the Nations while the beneficiaries do not follow the model of gratitude for rescue. Such a model of Polish-Jewish relations is described in Władysław Bartoszewski and Zofia Lewin's monograph titled *Righteous among Nations: How Poles Helped the Jews 1939–1945*.[2] Brandla Siekierka's testimony shows the human and at the same time non-heroic dimension of continued and disinterested help, which results in growing antipathy between the two parties. The experience of hiding the Jews also negatively influences the relations between the Bylicki family members, which Brandla often mentions in her writing. The fact that Siekierka's testimonies do not follow the "positive" model of narration about the Polish Righteous and those they helped does not mean that they

[1] Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego [Archive of the Jewish Historical Institute] (later: AŻIH), 302/123, Dziennik i pamiętnik Brandli (Bronki) Siekierki z d. Fiszbajn [Diary and Memoir of Brandla (Bronka) Siekierka née Fiszbajn].

[2] *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej. Polacy z pomocą Żydom 1939–1945*, ed. Władysław Bartoszewski and Zofia Lewinówna (1st edition, Cracow: Znak, 1969).

follow the "periphery of the Holocaust" model, where the Poles denounce, rob and brutally murder their Jewish neighbors. We are familiar with that model due to publications such as *Jest taki piękny słoneczny dzień* by Barbara Engelking, *Judenjagd. Polowanie na Żydów 1942–1945* by Jan Grabowski or *Golden Harvest* by Jan Tomasz Gross and Irena Grudzińska-Gross.[3]

Brandla's writing gives us insight into the sphere between those two main ways of talking about active stances of Holocaust witnesses.[4] It is important that such a case is not an exception among those described in the diaries and memoirs that make up the 302 Fonds of the Archive of the Jewish Historical Institute (*Żydowski Instytut Historyczny*, ŻIH) where Siekierka's testimonies are kept.[5]

At first, we should analyze a note of a Łódź ŻIH branch employee, who wrote down her conversation with Siekierka, when she was submitting her diary in 1948. It helps to better understand the author's diary written in notebooks, which covered the period from 14 June to 5 July 1944. According to the recorder's note, Siekierka kept her diary in hiding in a few notebooks. Right after the war she did not think them particularly important and gave them to [her] children to play with. Consequently, only three of the notebooks survived. Upon their submission to the institute the author stressed that they described only a small part of the hiding period, which in fact lasted almost two years until the Red Army's arrival in July 1944. She and her family spent that period in the concealed attic of the Bylickis' barn in Żwirówka. Siekierka thought that Bronisław Bylicki had decided to hide the Jewish family because of the memory of his former neighbor – Brandla's father.

In the note attached to the diary the ŻIH employee also observed that "Mrs. Siekierka has innate intelligence. She wrote poetry in her youth." This remark is confirmed by both the diary and the memoir, which were written in quite good Polish, even though Brandla, as she declares herself, graduated only from an elementary school. In her diary, however, she does mention some additional education offered by friendly and wealthy Miss Brzeska – a Warsaw junior high school

[3] Barbara Engelking, *Jest taki piękny słoneczny dzień… Losy Żydów szukających ratunku na wsi polskiej 1942–1945* (Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2011); Jan Grabowski, *Judenjagd. Polowanie na Żydów 1942–1945. Studium dziejów pewnego powiatu* (Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2011 [*Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013)]); Jan Tomasz Gross, Irena Grudzińska-Gross, *Golden Harvest: Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

[4] I omit here the main theme of the historical narration of the Poles' indifference/helplessness in the face of the Holocaust, for Brandla Siekierka's personal documents call for a reflection on active stances.

[5] See for example: AŻIH, 302/48, Dziennik Karola Rotgebera [Karol Rotberger's Diary]; ibidem, 302/55, Dziennik Calka Perechodnika [Calek Perechodnik's Diary] (published version: Calek Perechodnik, *Spowiedź. Dzieje rodziny żydowskiej podczas okupacji hitlerowskiej w Polsce*, ed. David Engel [Warsaw: Ośrodek Karta, 2007]).

teacher. One summer Miss Brzeska, who was on vacation in the countryside, spent a lot of time talking with 12-year-old Brandla, lent her books and did not forget to bring sweets, which were a particular treat for the poor girl. "Before the end of the summer vacations she went with me to the town [Mińsk Mazowiecki – J.K.-L.] and enrolled me in a business school, paid a few months' tuition and asked Mrs. Tatarzanka to look after me."[6] Due to the generous teacher's help Brandla attends that school for an entire year. She also visits Miss Brzeska at Christmas and Easter and during summer vacations. According to the diary, during one of such visits Miss Brzeska made the girl an unusual proposal. "She told me to come to Warsaw to work and study. And that's what happened," recalls Siekierka. Unfortunately, this is all she writes about that. Surely those experiences, the additional education and her "Aryan" appearance played a significant role in her struggle for survival during the war.

Siekierka's wartime diary focuses mostly on the complicated relations with the Bylickis, the suffering she and her family experienced while in hiding in a small, dark attic and on her attempts to understand the reasons for the persecution of Jews. Brandla sees the Holocaust as God's punishment for sins. Simultaneously, she is aware that her behavior before the war contributed to that tragedy. In her entry of 29 June 1944 she confesses her guilt:

> My conscience is not clean today, I don't feel good about myself. I have recalled the past months: he, who loved me – a sinful love. I don't know if it was love or if it was madness? I was ugly, nobody really loved me, my husband was indifferent, and he did not caress me. Every woman wants to be loved and desires caresses, especially when she's doing well. It was ideal love, it was enough to look into each other's eyes, to sink into them, a squeeze of the hand, a touch of the leg were enough, and the happiness was great. Oh, how I loved him. He was beautiful to me, he was proud. The pogrom ended our idyll. He did not die at once, he was with my husband. I saw him twice again, once when I went for my husband, the other time when he came to Stanisławów and never again. I wanted him to come with us, but he was noble, he did not want to destroy our family: "you have a husband, children – go in peace. I love and respect you, but I won't come with you." He escorted us outside the gate, I'll never forget him standing there weeping: "we won't see each other again, for I will have died."[7]

Understandably, the theme of the pre-war love affair appears in the 1949 memoir. This time Siekierka is aware that the text will be a testimony not only to her individual experiences but also to the lot of the Jews domiciled near Mińsk Mazowiecki. So she describes the repressions intensifying since the beginning

[6] AŻIH, 302/123, Dziennik Brandli (Bronki) Siekierki z d. Fiszbajn [Diary of Brandla (Bronka) Siekierka née Fiszbajn].

[7] Ibidem.

of the war, the living conditions in the ghetto, the liquidation operation and then her wandering, which ends at the Bylickis' farm.

In her occupation-period diary Siekierka never mentions the names and surnames of her helpers or the name of the village where she found shelter. She did so perhaps out of fear that the notes would fall into the wrong hands. She calls the landlord a "benefactor," his wife a "she-cat" (for, as she writes, "her face looked like a cat's") and one of their sons a "nightingale" because of his nice voice. The last inhabitant of the house mentioned in the diary was an elderly woman – the mother of the landlord or his wife. Her childhood friend Stanisława Roś, called simply Stacha in the diary, is a very important character in Brandla's writing. She lives near the Bylickis' farm and regularly – every two weeks or so – brings food for the Siekierka family and, if possible, also some money to buy coal from the landlords. The devoted friend appears to be a virtual angel in Brandla's writing: "I need to change my husband's dressing again and go to sleep thinking that maybe after all we will live to be free and to dream about You, my dear, that perhaps one day I will be able to see You and serve You, to be as faithful to You as a dog. I have loved You for a long time, since childhood. God bless You."[8] Stacha is described very warmly in almost all entries, also the ones written after the war. In her diary Brandla regularly blesses and thanks her friend and declares her love. Siekierka justifies Stacha even when she waits at night in vain for her arrival. Stanisława's descriptions in the post-war testimony of Brandla's sister Ita Gartenkranz, who joined the family in hiding in spring 1943, are equally cordial.[9] But on the basis of the available sources it is difficult to say precisely how long she stayed there.[10] It seems that her stay was temporary. Perhaps Ita often stayed for some time in the Bylickis' barn.

Contrary to the enthusiastic descriptions of Stacha's stance, the behavior of the Bylickis' is painted in dark colors, which does not mean that it was the subject of an ultimate or unambiguous judgment. Both the diary and the post-war memoir of Brandla are highly ambivalent with regard to that issue. The main accusation Brandla makes against the Bylickis is their reluctance to share food with the hiding Jews, who suffered from starvation.

[8] Ibidem.

[9] AŻIH, 301/4103, Relacja Ity Gartenkranz [Ita Gartenkranz's Testimony].

[10] Apart from Brandla's diary and memoir and the testimony of her sister Ita Gartenkranz the Archive of the Jewish Historical Institute contains also: testimony of Brandla's son Welwel (Władysław) Siekierka about the occupation period lot of his family (301/3681), testimony of Brandla herself, who talks briefly about the deportations from the towns near Mińsk Mazowiecki (301/4158), testimony of Brandla's husband Mojżesz Siekierka, which is in fact a list of over forty Jews from Mińsk Mazowiecki and its vicinity, who managed to survive the war (301/4072) and the testimony formally given by Brandla and her husband, which was in fact given only by Mojżesz, who outlined the phases of the extermination of the inhabitants of Mińsk Mazowiecki and the neighboring towns and villages (301/4098).

> And even though it hasn't been a day or two but an entire period of 22 months, we still cannot become accustomed to hunger. […] Today my older son became sick, he complained about collarbone and chest pain. I know, my child, what's ailing with you, I know that your poor heart and lungs are withering just like you legs are, but I cannot do anything about it even if I killed myself. I know that there is bread at my benefactor's because they baked bread on Monday, even though they lied about it so skillfully… but I cannot do anything about it, for his heart is as hard as stone and he won't give my child even ten grams even though he has children too.[11]

Descriptions of attacks of hunger and the illnesses it caused are a leitmotiv of Brandla's diary. There is for example an embarrassed confession of the mother, who uses the fact that her sons are asleep and eats a slice of bread for the whole family. The descriptions of the suffering of her husband are also moving: he developed a skin disease, which caused large, bursting and oozing sores. The description of the family's post-war convalescence in a hospital organized by Soviet soldiers – described in the other document, that is, in the memoir – makes one aware of the advancement of their hunger disease. "We lay there like corpses for days on end, and a reaction started. My husband's sores swelled, the children walked with the help of sticks. The soldiers brought us what they had. My husband sat in the sun and the puss oozed from the wounds. Gradually good nourishment and sun did their work."[12]

Brandla's writings present two models of help provided to persecuted Jews. Stacha embodies the first one – she is hearty, cordial and caring. At the same time, however, it should be remembered that she contacts the Siekierkas twice a month or so. The Bylickis represent the other model – they do not show empathy or protectiveness toward the Jewish family. But one cannot forget that they hide them on their own farm for two years. They not only put their lives at risk but they also carry a permanent psychic burden.

To understand the complicated relations between the Bylickis and the Siekierkas one should focus on the post-war memoir, which presents the events in a more ordered and coherent way than the diary entries written during the war. But it should be said immediately that the two texts do not differ substantially in terms of facts or the author's opinions.

According to the memoir, Brandla decided to escape to the "Aryan" side during the liquidation of the Mińsk Mazowiecki ghetto on 21 August 1942. She took her two sons with her (her husband was in a neighboring village "on a work detail"). She wandered in the area for a few days. The countrywomen willingly gave her some food but none wanted to take the risk of sheltering them. The

[11] AŻIH, 302/123, Dziennik Brandli (Bronki) Siekierki z d. Fiszbajn [Diary of Brandla (Bronka) Siekierka née Fiszbajn].

[12] Ibidem, Pamiętnik Brandli (Bronki) Siekierki z d. Fiszbajn [Diary of Brandla (Bronka) Siekierka née Fiszbajn].

Siekierkas' older son Welwel returns to those dramatic moments in his 1948 testimony: "Nobody wanted to so much as let us sleep in a barn. We were very cold, but we were not afraid because mother was with us."[13] Finally, Brandla ended up in the house of "Mrs. Zaleska from the mansion."[14] Unable to help her, the woman decided to talk about it with the Siekierkas' old acquaintances, the Bylickis.

"Mother took us to a peasant acquaintance. […] He was a good man, he took pity on us and took us in,"[15] reads Welwel's testimony. According to Brandla's memoir, the first days in hiding at the Bylickis' fill her with optimism. The landlord is cordial, he does not want to accept any money out of the modest sum of 2,000 zlotys Brandla Siekierka has. But the woman worries about her husband and confesses to the landlord, who fortunately "says, that if there's three of us, then there can be a fourth one."[16] So Brandla leaves her sons in the Bylickis' care and goes for her husband who performed forced labor in nearby Ruda. After their return to the Bylickis the husband insists they move to the ghetto in Stanisławów, which the Germans promised to leave intact. Despite Brandla's reservations, the Siekierkas depart to Stanisławów. "When we were leaving the landlord shouted after us, 'remember, don't you let them get you, my door's always open.' We kissed him for what he said and we parted,"[17] recalls Brandla Siekierka. The move turned out a mistake because the horribly overcrowded ghetto is plagued by famine. Consequently, after two weeks Brandla decides to check if the Bylickis are still willing to help them. The landlord firmly answers: "I know that in just a few days they'll finish you off, so come to me." Mojżesz Siekierka finishes his testimony devoted to the occupation-period lot of the Mińsk Mazowiecki Jews with the following personal memory: "We came back to Bolesław Bielicki [*sic*]. He told us: The door is always open for you."[18] This is how the Siekierkas' older son recalls the moment of their return from Stanisławów: "He took us in again risking the life and property of the whole family."[19] We should remember that despite the awareness of the risk the Bylickis invite the Jewish family under their roof time and again.

Before Brandla finally escorted all her family from Stanisławów to Żwirówka

---

[13] AŻIH, 301/3681, Relacja Welwela (Władysława) Siekierki [Welwel (Władysław) Siekierka's Testimony].

[14] AŻIH, 302/123, Pamiętnik Brandli (Bronki) Siekierki z d. Fiszbajn [Diary of Brandla (Bronka) Siekierka née Fiszbajn].

[15] AŻIH, 301/3681, Relacja Welwela (Władysława) Siekierki [Welwel (Władysław) Siekierka's Testimony].

[16] AŻIH, 302/123, Pamiętnik Brandli (Bronki) Siekierki z d. Fiszbajn [Diary of Brandla (Bronka) Siekierka née Fiszbajn].

[17] Ibidem.

[18] AŻIH, 301/4098, Relacja Brandli i Mojżesza Siekierków [Brandla and Mojżesz Siekierka's Testimony].

[19] AŻIH, 301/3681, Relacja Welwela (Władysława) Siekierki [Welwel (Władysław) Siekierka's Testimony].

she used every opportunity to obtain food. "I walked from one cottage to another, and when I couldn't carry any more for everybody gave something, this one a few potatoes, that one a liter of rye, nobody refused."[20] The peasants are equally generous when a few days later she walks the same route with her family. Also later, when Brandla walks ten kilometers to Stojadły to beg for food after a starvation period at the Bylickis', she returns to the barn barely carrying a 15 kilo sack of food from the peasants. Welwel recalls his mother's quests for food: "Mother dressed as an Aryan and went to town to beg our acquaintances for food. […] She always returned carrying a sack on her back, we were very hungry. […] The people were usually good to us, they gave what they could." They behaved in the same way toward the Siekierkas already after the war when the family was going back to Mińsk Mazowiecki after it had left the hideout in Żwirówka: "And again the people on the way gave us what they could because we were naked and ragged."[21] Such a warm attitude of the local peasants to the Siekierkas, and especially to Brandla, seems curious in the context of other testimonies devoted to the experiences of the Jews from Mińsk Mazowiecki and its vicinity. Already the short testimony of Ita Gartenkranz talks at length about hostility of the local inhabitants toward the escapees from the ghettos. For instance, it features such a passage:

> About a kilometer from us in the village of Krzewina 5 Jews from Stara Miłosna near Warsaw hid in a bunker. Some Christians knew about it and denounced them. […] After some time we heard shots. […] Two Jewish children – brother and sister – from Falenica near Otwock were wandering in Cisie. A Christian from Aleksandrówka, Waleszek, denounced them to the Polish police in Dębe Wielkie in the winter of 1943. The Polish policemen came to Cisie, captured the children, took them to Dębe Wielkie and shot them. There were many instances like that.[22]

Both Leon Guz in his diary[23] and Leib Rochman in his occupation-period memoir mention the hostility toward the Jews hiding or wandering near Mińsk Mazowiecki.[24] Apparently Brandla's experience is totally different in that respect. Perhaps because of the good relations Siekierka established with the local population before the war. She purchased milk from local peasants, so must have had many contacts, which could have occasioned that friendly attitude during the war. It should be stressed that unlike the Bylickis the local population was

[20] AŻIH, 302/123, Pamiętnik Brandli (Bronki) Siekierki z d. Fiszbajn [Diary of Brandla (Bronka) Siekierka née Fiszbajn].

[21] Ibidem; AŻIH, 301/3681, Relacja Welwela (Władysława) Siekierki [Welwel (Władysław) Siekierka's Testimony].

[22] AŻIH, 301/4103, Relacja Ity Gartenkranz [Ita Gartenkranz's Testimony].

[23] See Leon Guz, *Targowa 64. Dziennik 27 I 1943–11 IX 1944* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1990).

[24] See Leib Rochman, *The Pit and the Trap. A Chronicle of Survival* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1983).

willing to give food to Brandla. At the same time, however, unlike the "benefactor" and the "she-cat" they did not want to hear about hiding them.

Brandla's testimonies relate that the "benefactor" is not really afraid that her quests for food will result in a denunciation. He gets scared when he hears rumors about gendarmes moving in the area or about the Germans' discovery of a Jewish hideout.

> At that time people talked about Jews being caught here and there. A Jewish boy was captured near us, on a wealthy farmer's farm. So they killed both of them. Having heard such news, our landlord would come upstairs all green in the face with fear twisting his innards. Our landlady resented the fact that after my arrival from Stanisławów I asked him instead of her for permission. So after they had picked on him at home, he would come to argue with me, why didn't you ask my wife then? My wife says that you have no money to live on. I told him all the arguments that his wife would have never taken us in, and since it is as it is, we could survive. We often sympathized with him, perhaps he wasn't so cunning after all, but if he gave us anything, they would pick on him twice as much.[25]

Following Brandla's line of reasoning one could conclude that the harsh way in which Bylicki treated the Siekierkas and his reluctance to share food with them stemmed mostly from his need to retain some self-respect. The landlord feels that it has been weakened by his provision of help without any gratification whatsoever. Both his wife and the grandmother do not let him forget that. Since the balance between the giver and the receiver of the gift [of help] is visibly upset, any additional assistance (in the form of food, for example) would further increase that imbalance and would mean in Bylicki's opinion that he lets others completely exploit him. In this context one should take notice that in her diary Brandla writes that Bylicka complains about the grandmother calling her "a Jewish aunt." In fact, the old lady scoffs at the landlords for taking on the risk of hiding the Jews without any gratification. That situation becomes a subject of incessant arguments in the Bylicki family. "Our landlady would shout quite loudly at the landlord when they had an argument. 'You have a fortune in the attic, they're using you,' her screaming was so loud that we were terrified that somebody would hear it," reads Brandla's memoir.

It should be said that the Bylickis could not count on a post-war material gratification for their hiding of the Jewish family. They were aware of the financial situation of the Siekierkas. The subject matter of the post-war compensation appears in the diary in a form of a sad remark that it would surely be impossible. On 5 July 1944 Brandla records the course of her conversation with the landlord:

[25] AŻIH, 302/123, Pamiętnik Brandli (Bronki) Siekierki z d. Fiszbajn [Diary of Brandla (Bronka) Siekierka née Fiszbajn].

> He reproaches me for not having saved some possessions, now I'd have money for food. 'Before that you didn't know I existed, but when you got in trouble, you ran to me. The Germans fed on your property." "Mister," I say, "we just want to survive, then everything will be fine." "Pick it up for a song [*sic*], they've already sold anything good there."[26]

Brandla's testimonies show that with each month the situation becomes more and more difficult to bear for Bylicki. After about a year and a half a crisis comes; the landlord goes to the Siekierkas for a decisive conversation:

> Finally, our landlord has grown tired of the constant arguments at home, fear, lack of income and of helping us for free. So he came up one day and he says, "Listen, folks. You've been here long enough; look for a new place to stay. What do you want from me? Go to Sarniak now." Sarniak was a wealthy landowner, a kulak, also our former neighbor. […] The landlord said what was on his mind, got it off his chest. We tell him: "Mr. Bronisław, you know damn well that nobody will take us in. Either at your place or in the ground." He did not have an answer to that argument and went back home.[27]

The situation apparently overwhelmed the helpers. Brandla's testimonies suggest that the landlord thought that the Jews would stay on his farm for some weeks or perhaps months. Even though their stay dragged out, the Bylickis did not decide on one of the solutions practiced in similar situations such as: throwing the unwanted guests out, arranging a false denunciation or even murdering them.

More importantly, according to Brandla's post-war memoir, Stacha – glorified in the diary – also experiences moments of crisis on the account of her assistance to her Jewish friend.

> Stacha kept helping us; she gave us anything she could from a piece of soap and some vinegar, from some saccharine to a notebook and a pencil. A little of everything. And then Stacha's situation improved, she became director of the cooperative in Cisie, she traded and started becoming rich. The change in the financial situation had some influence on our relations. Perhaps the war had lasted for too long already. Despite best intentions one's patience runs out. Perhaps because I often went there and her husband often saw me and would smack her later, all in all, she did not go out as often as before, but she regularly sent 200 zlotys by the agency of her sister for coal for the landlord and for all other things. But she could not satisfy our hunger. Maybe she did not believe that we would survive but had a guilty conscience and had to aid us. When I see her now she admits

[26] AŻIH, 302/123, Dziennik Brandli (Bronki) Siekierki z d. Fiszbajn [Diary of Brandla (Bronka) Siekierka née Fiszbajn].

[27] Ibidem, Pamiętnik Brandli (Bronki) Siekierki z d. Fiszbajn [Diary of Brandla (Bronka) Siekierka née Fiszbajn].

> that she could have given us much more. But what she gave us was tremendously precious to us for it kept us alive.[28]

The antipathy the Bylickis feel toward the Siekierkas and the distance growing between Brandla and her old friend were connected with the helpers' growing tired of the prolonged hiding. For once only or short-term help provided in a situation of grave danger, which often saved the persecuted persons' life, is different than long-term support, whose finale remains unknown. This is why the duration of help is one of the key criteria taken into consideration by the commission that awards the Righteous among the Nations title.[29] Let us focus on an issue, which seems banal but which was of basic importance during the occupation: contrary to us, readers, the participants of those events had no idea how long the war would continue. It had a fundamental influence on their perception of their own situation. Brandla takes up the issue many times both in the diary and the memoir when she compares hiding in the barn with imprisonment. "For when one is in prison, one knows that each passing day brings one closer to freedom. By contrast, we sit here with a death sentence and our lives hang by a thread all the time," reads the entry of 15 June 1944. The inability to predict the end of the war turns out to be a source of suffering greater than the devastating hunger, illnesses, lice, fleas and rats, which literally attack the inhabitants of the hideout. The diagnosis of the existential situation of the Jews can be extrapolated onto the Poles who helped them and who were also trapped. When the "benefactor" offered the hideout, he did not suspect that the help would drag on for two years. Not knowing the length of the "sentence," he too was in "prison" for on the one hand he did not want to hide the Jews any longer and on the other hand was not ready to get rid of them. This is how Brandla's sister described his situation: "Our landlord was afraid to continue hiding us but he could not do anything with us. He could not hand us over to the Germans because he was a good old-time friend of ours."[30] Consequently, despite the initial warm feelings he had for the Siekierkas, Bylicki grows unfriendly and irritated. On Friday 30 June 1944 Brandla writes the following in the diary:

> We are a plague and the innocent people suffer because of us too, people who do not owe us anything, to whom we did not give anything to hide, who are neither our family nor our relatives. They suffer but they hate us deep in their hearts. They know we are like a plague to them, and everybody avoids a plague. Yes, my dear friend, you're helping me as much as

[28] Ibidem.

[29] See Ewa Koźmińska-Frejlak, "Wdzięczność i zapomnienie. Polacy i Żydzi wobec Sprawiedliwych 1944/1945–2007," in *Następstwa zagłady Żydów. Polska 1944–2010*, ed. Feliks Tych and Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS and ŻIH, 2011).

[30] AŻIH, 301/4103, Relacja Ity Gartenkranz [Ita Gartenkranz's Testimony].

> you can, but you don't want to have any contact with the plague. I have poured some of the anger onto the paper, I'll feel some relief.[31]

Not being able to or not wanting to continue provision of direct help, the idealized Stacha simply withdraws. The Bylickis have to deal with the consequences of their merciful gesture – of the invitation of the persecuted Jews under their roof – until the end. This story has nothing to do with the morally exemplary model, in which Poles' mercy occasions Jews' gratitude. Neither does it follow the model of Jews' suffering at the hands of their neighbors, who benefit from the persecution of the hiding Jews, steal from them or even commit cruel murders. Brandla Siekierka's testimonies place us between these two extremes in a sphere of phenomena, which are difficult to evaluate or to even fully understand. It is problematic even for the diary author herself. On 19 June 1944 she writes:

> I don't know what I should think of them, I know that I have empoisoned their life, that it hangs by a thread just like mine and I sometimes think, in return for what? Did I give them gold, did I give them thousands, in return for what? For promises? I know that he suffers a lot because of us, that they pick on him all the time, but perhaps they are good; perhaps others would throw him and us out headfirst. I don't know, I cannot control myself today, the misery has stupefied me. It seems to me that I should be given change from a penny. To my mind if he risks his life he should risk giving me some bread too instead of torturing us like this, for it is torture. And it's not about me but about the little children. Every day he cuts bread for his children, shouldn't he cut two thin slices of bread more and give them to my children every day, or at least give us some water so that I did not have to ask for it, why, water is free. Why, he decided to do it, he didn't tell us to go with everybody but told us 10 times: "remember, the door's always open for you, come whether you have money or not. And I'll give you a quart of potatoes in secret before my wife and children. If I eat twice a day, you'll eat twice a day, if I eat once, you'll eat once. I won't let you die."[32]

Formally, the Bylickis fulfill the criteria specified by the Yad Vashem for the candidates for the Righteous among the Nations title. It is awarded to non-Jews who provided repeated assistance to Jews during World War II without any financial gain expected in return. The procedure requires that their engagement be confirmed by the survivor, which proves that the assistance was successful. The most important issues taken into consideration by the special commission headed by a justice of the Supreme Court of Israel are: the scope of assistance, helpers' motivation and level of risk occasioned by provision of help. The com-

[31] AŻIH, 302/123, Dziennik Brandli (Bronki) Siekierki z d. Fiszbajn [Diary of Brandla (Bronka) Siekierka née Fiszbajn].

[32] Ibidem.

mission awards the title when it is convinced that the helpers risked their own life and health to save people of Jewish origin from death or deportation out of purely humanitarian motives. We usually learn about such decisions from a short newspaper article, which mentions mostly the place, length of assistance and the number of rescued persons. The Righteous become an embodiment of heroism in our eyes, which, I think, obscures the human, hence, complex and ambiguous dimension of the assistance provided.

Attempting (not without difficulty, as she herself admits) to describe the experience of suffering Barbara Skarga focuses on its destructive dimension:

> This experience overwhelms. But at the same time it inspires growing opposition and objection, which nevertheless, do not have the power of an act, they are stifled, hence, silent. For the truth that becomes apparent is cruel. In its light I notice my own worthlessness, my own meanness, and simultaneously everything around that has seemed close and friendly reveals its ominous face. Suffering destroys the tissue of life, crushes it and not everybody is strong enough to rebuild their own world from those shreds. Suffering does not elevate, on the contrary, it disgraces, destroys, disillusions. […] It inspires neither qualms nor willingness to atone. It does not give birth to any positive emotions. On the contrary, it inspired hatred.[33]

It seems that this difficult, morally devastating aspect of provision of help is rarely present in Polish Holocaust memory. It is obscured by something close to "bookkeeping" – by counting the trees in the Garden of the Righteous and by creation of indices of surnames of Poles murdered for their aid to Jews.[34] Such an approach does little to help one to understand the Polish-Jewish occupation-period experience.

Translated by *Anna Brzostowska*

Abstract
Brandla Siekierkowa's occupation-time diary and her 1949 memoir describe experiences, which do not fit the main currents of Polish historical narration. After the liquidation of the Mińsk Mazowiecki ghetto in August 1942 the author, her husband and two sons found shelter in the Żwirówka village on the Bylickis' farm. Brandla's testimonies reveal a non-heroic dimension of the long-lasting and disinterested help, which occasioned mutual aversion. They fit neither the "positive" model of narration about the Righteous and the helpees nor the

[33] Barbara Skarga, *Kwintet metafizyczny* (Cracow: Universitas, 2005), 148–149.

[34] INDEX Programme for the Remembrance of the Poles Murdered and Repressed by the Nazis for Aiding the Jews is carried out by the Cracow Institute for Strategic Studies and the Head Office of the State Archives. See www.archiwa.gov.pl.

"fringe of the Holocaust" model where the Poles hurt the Jews. Brandla's notes give us insight into the sphere situated between these two types of narration about the Polish-Jewish past.

Key words
diary, memoir, Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust, help provided to Jews, Mińsk Mazowiecki