

The Persistent Holocaust and the Kielce Pogrom of July 1946

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Well after the fall of the Third Reich, forty-two Jews in Kielce, Poland were murdered and another forty wounded, some mortally, in an outbreak of anti-Jewish violence on July 4, 1946.¹ The massacre of July 4 was not a singular event. It had been preceded by numerous other similar post-war pogroms, the most notable in Krakow and Rzeszow.² The savagery of the Kielce attack was unchecked by the authorities for hours and while the numbers may not seem staggering, especially in light of the millions killed during the war, the viciousness of Kielce was such that it served as a catalyst for post-war hopes of Polish Jews. The Second World War may have ended and with it the Nazi regime, but anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe endured and actually grew. In Poland in particular anti-Jewish fervor flourished, in many instances encouraged by the Church and local governments. The durability of anti-Jewish violence became manifest as a Persistent Holocaust and following the events in Kielce, would cause the Jews who had survived the concentration and death camps to flee their Polish homeland in order to survive. They had no future in Poland.³ The war was over but the genocide was not.

The impetus for the killing resulted from the Jewish community's alleged kidnapping and murder of Christian children purportedly to fulfill ritual requirements of so-called blood libel.⁴ Blood libel is a myth that dates to the Middle Ages which intimates a Jewish requirement for the blood of Christians to complete secret religious rituals. The blood of children was deemed especially valuable. In the post-Holocaust era, the blood libel charge underwent changes that included accusations of Jews kidnapping Christian children to steal their blood to offset war-caused malnutrition among Jews arising from their lengthy imprisonment in concentration and labor camps.⁵ In Kielce some days before the 4th of July, a young Polish boy, 9-year-old Henryk Blaszczyk slipped away from home for several days to be with his friends in an adjacent town. Fearing that his parents would punish him for running away, he told them upon his return that he had been kidnapped and held in the basement of Planty 7, a building owned by the Jewish Committee of Kielce and which served as temporary housing for many war-displaced Jews. Taken to the police station by his father, Henryk identified a resident of the building, Kalman Singer, "the man in the green hat" as the man who had lured him into the building.⁶ A mob soon formed and the massacre ensued. In addition to the maddened crowd, the Polish Army, the state-level police and security service as well as the local police all participated in varying degrees from actively committing murder to allowing the mob to run amok.⁷

Jewish Life in Kielce Before the War

Anti-Semitism in Poland is not a product of the Second World War. It has been a matter of centuries-long standing and a matter that was advocated by the socially and politically influential Catholic Church in Poland. Kielce is located in the Ecclesiastical province of Krakow, the Archdiocese, which exercised religious and administrative authority over the Kielce diocese. For many years, Jews had been prohibited from settling in Kielce because the Krakovian bishops would not allow Jews to set up permanent residence within the city.⁸ The prohibition was only lifted after the Tsar's imperial edict on the equality of rights in 1862 but the anti-Jewish animus did not disappear with the edict.⁹ Jews were constrained in many ways by legal, religious, and social discrimination, and sporadic outbreaks of anti-Jewish violence were not uncommon. Nevertheless, the Jewish population grew steadily and, albeit segregated, made inroads into the

community. By 1905 the number of Jews had reached 10,500 and was thriving in many areas of commerce and trade including as small plant workers, petty merchants and craftsmen. The census of 1931 indicated that Kielce had a population of 58,236, of which 18,073 were Jews. Despite the expansion of Jewish presence in Kielce and their rising influence in the commercial sector, anti-Semitism was more pronounced and overt in Poland than in Germany, at least before 1933, and the Jews of Kielce were relegated to second-class status as a function of their faith and were strictly confined to designated neighborhoods in the city.¹⁰

The Nazi Holocaust

Hitler's rise to power generated a directed campaign of increasing violence directed against the Jews in the areas that came under Nazi influence. Beginning in 1933 Nazi persecution of the Jews accelerated and spread concomitant with the spread of Nazi power. With the invasion of the Soviet Union in Operation Barbarossa In 1941, the period of Nazi persecution ended and the mass murder stage began, what we would come to know as the Holocaust or the Shoah. Many millions of soldiers and civilians perished in the war, but no population was so utterly victimized as were the Jews. Nowhere was that more true than in Kielce.

The German invasion of western Poland began in September 1939, and the Nazis immediately initiated reprisals against Poles with a special emphasis on Polish Jews.¹¹ Nazi actions against Christian Poles were primarily directed against the intelligentsia, but the energy applied to the Jews was not specifically focused on any sub-group, it targeted the whole of the Jewish community. With impunity, German soldiers robbed Jewish homes, organized raids, and imposed forced labor. The Jews were forced to wear the six-pointed star on their clothing. The best Jewish homes were wrested away, and other Jewish wealth was seized including quarries, mills, brickworks, lumber mills, and myriad small enterprises. The owners of the larger appropriated properties were immediately shipped off to concentration camps. Every Jewish store in the city center was compelled to close. Jews from the surrounding countryside were concentrated in Kielce and the population swelled to ~30,000. On March 31, 1941, an order was issued to create a "Jewish quarter in the city of Kielce."¹² The ghetto was located in the poorest part of the city and bound by walls and wire. Most of the houses had no running water or sewage capability. Thirty-thousand Jewish civilians were penned in an area with capacity for 10,000. Forced to live in indescribable filth, Otto Dietrich, Hitler's press chief, described the living conditions as "inconceivable dirt" when he accompanied the Führer on a visit to the ghetto on September 10, 1941.¹³

It became clear in the summer of 1942 that the Germans were planning to physically eradicate the Jewish population and, to that end, began to liquidate the ghetto. The first transport of Jews to death camps took place on August 20, at 4 a.m. Approximately 6,000 Jews were shipped to Treblinka. On August 22, another 6,000 were taken on that second transport and 7,000 were taken away on August 24. Approximately 1,500 to 2,000 people remained alive – those who were young and able to work. They were confined in a very compact ghetto area between Stolarska and Jasna streets. The ghetto operated until the summer of 1944, after which the workers who had managed to survive were sent off to Auschwitz. Of the city's twenty-some-odd thousand Jewish inhabitants, only some 500 survived the war and occupation.

Conclusion of the War and Post-War Poland

The Second World War in Europe was formally concluded on May 8, 1945, and although some fighting continued in isolated locations, for the most part, the German combat threat was eliminated. As the Anglo-American led Allies had closed in from the west and the Soviet-led forces had converged from the east, the death camps, the labor camps, and concentration camps were liberated as they came under Allied control. There were many sites of concentrated persecution but perhaps the most notable were Auschwitz and Majdanek in the east and Buchenwald, Dachau, and Bergen-Belsen further west. Not liberated because they had been destroyed by the Nazis were the special status camps committed exclusively to mass murder, the less famous but perhaps more notorious Operation Reinhard camps, Treblinka, Sobibor, Belzec.¹⁴ From

these camps there were essentially no survivors, having accounted for nearly two million of the deaths before the end of 1943, and the Nazis razed them in an attempt to hide their crimes.

With the war ended, and with it the Nazi capability to exterminate Jews, the Holocaust was over. Or was it? The situation in Poland is more complex. Poland had suffered terribly in World War II, enduring sequential Nazi and Soviet invasions, a set of conditions that Timothy Snyder has described as a catastrophic “double occupation.”¹⁵ Some 5 million Poles were killed during the war, 3 million of those were Polish Jews. Of Poland’s approximately 27 million pre-war citizens, about 2 million non-Jewish Poles, 7.5%, perished—a horrific number. In perspective, two million dead of Poland’s 3.2 million Jews, 3 million were killed, over 90%.¹⁶ Poland’s uniquely catastrophic World War II experience had made them both victims and victimizers as we shall see.

As the war had progressed the Jews had been dispossessed and removed first to ghettos and later to camps. Yet there were survivors among the Jews at the end of the war and as the camps were liberated most found themselves in Displaced Person Camps established by the controlling Allied powers as they wrestled with the complexities of reintegrating the populations. This became increasingly problematic because there was little enthusiasm for the returning Jews in Kielce and elsewhere throughout Poland. Many opted to leave and begin anew in other countries and of Kielce’s 500 or so survivors, some 300 opted to not return. For the remainder, some landed in Spartan yet adequate displaced person facilities. Others were less fortunate. Despite their mean status, however, many began to prepare to return to the normalcy of their pre-war hometowns. Schools were established within the camps, as were occupational facilities. Synagogues and the communities that formed there held religious and social ceremonies, too as they prepared to return home. Most of those returning from captivity held little hope that they would recover their lost personal funds and possessions, but many fully expected to have their confiscated real property restored and it was here that the seeds of the Kielce Pogrom were sewn.

Many Poles had benefited materially from the dispossession of the Jews as they were uprooted into ghettos and transported to camps. The relative material advantage gained was in peril with the return of the Jews, posing a threat to many of the beneficiaries of the re-allocated assets. Additionally, the displaced Jews who survived returned home to Poland were greeted with the deeply rooted and very powerful anti-Semitism that had been extant well before Hitler’s rise and that had weakened not at all during the war. As mentioned above, the blood libel myth had taken on new life in the post-war era. Thus, anti-Semitism was exacerbated by both avarice and fear, a formula that was not favorable to amicable reintegration of the returning Jews.

Frequently, the force that moved feelings of fear and avarice into violence was anti-Semitism. Rumor of the modified Blood Libel arose in which the older idea of Jews taking the blood of Christian children for religious rituals morphed into Jews taking blood from children to help ameliorate their years-long malnutrition. The blood libel rumors were very durable and ignited a number of violent responses to returning Jews of which two, as noted above, are worthy of consideration.

The first event occurred in Rzeszow on June 12, 1945, after the first wave of returning Jews arrived in Poland from the displaced person camps. Riots broke out following rumors of ritual murder. None were killed but a number were beaten and the violence served as a portent for the Jews and marking the beginning of the exodus of the surviving Jews from Poland, a direct result of the Persistent Holocaust.

The second event was the Krakow pogrom of August 11, 1945. Again, rumors of ritual murder generated riots that left five killed and dozens wounded, many grievously. Hospital staff refused to treat the wounded because they were Jewish. On victim related that “nurses... threatened us, saying they were only waiting for the surgery to be over in order to rip us apart.”¹⁷ After observing the violence for several hours, the local and state security services asserted control after several hours of violence.

As anti-Jewish violence became more frequent, Jewish leaders asked the Polish primate, Cardinal August Hlond, to intervene with his coreligionists and he flatly refused declaring that since Jews were communists they had only themselves to blame for the righteous reaction of the Catholic Poles who abhorred the Soviet state.¹⁸ Thus, the returning Jews could expect no protection from the Church.¹⁹

The Kielce Pogrom

Following the initial post-war violence experienced by the returning Jews, many Jewish communities established local organizations for security and support as the returnees attempted to re-settle in their former towns. In Kielce, the Jewish Committee established a residence on Planty 7 that provided secure temporary housing for as many as 180 returning Jews in 1946.²⁰ It was to this location that the police came at approximately 8:00 a.m. on July 4, 1946, accompanied by Henryk and his father, to begin the investigation into the charges of child kidnapping. Once the police presence was sensed by the community, a crowd began to gather and became increasingly restive. At about 9:00 a.m. the local police entered the building and immediately determined that it had no basement which was a problem because young Henryk had described his basement incarceration in detail. A Sergeant Szelag accused the boy of lying while the crowd accused the police of trying to cover up the Jewish crime.²¹ A military unit arrived to secure the scene at about 10:00 a.m., and the Jews inside the building “sighed with relief,” but then the shooting began.²² The soldiers, far from being saviors, focused their attention and their weapons on the Jews, not the increasingly restless crowd. At this time the assault on Planty 7 began in earnest and continued until a lull at about noon. The various authorities present, local and state police and military units who were answerable to different headquarters, all competed for supremacy, some contributing the violence while others ignored it. Shortly after noon, the crowd was bolstered by a contingent of civilians from the Ludwikow Foundry on their lunch break who came armed with clubs and iron bars. The workers charged the building and the inner courtyard and “the whole area was turned into a vast killing field.”²³ The courtyard was left “littered with blood-stained iron pipes, stones and clubs which had been used to crush the skulls of Jewish men and women.”²⁴ The pogrom spread throughout the city and there was an especially grisly series of events at the railroad station in which Jews transiting through the city’s station were taken from the trains in which they were traveling and clubbed and stoned, sometimes to death.

In the immediate aftermath of the slaughter the official response was muted because the state and city leadership thought it prudent to avoid “any action that might indicate that authorities were siding with the Jews against ‘the people.’”²⁵ The intervention of local, regional, and state Communist agents altered that course and within days of the massacre the Polish secret police identified and arrested twelve individuals upon whom they placed the blame for the pogrom. The twelve were subjected to the summary justice of a military tribunal the next week, and nine were executed by firing squad and the remaining three were sentenced to prison terms. Significantly, the security officials who had been on scene and, in some cases precipitated the violence, largely escaped unscathed. The final tally was 42 dead and 40 more injured, many of whom did not survive.

Consequences: The Persistent Holocaust

The firing squads signaled the end of the pogrom but not the end of the Persistent Holocaust for the Jews of Poland. The anti-Semitism that had been well entrenched in Polish society for generations was fully in force in the post-war period. The anti-Jewish violence in Rzeszow and Krakow had been harbingers of the unabated hatred that awaited returning survivors of the Nazi camps. Despite those signals, many Polish Jews continued to return to their homes. Kielce was transformative in that it served as the final dismissal of hope for Polish Jews to remake their lives in Poland. Of the more than 3 million Jews of pre-war Poland, fewer than 240,000 survived the war to attempt to return home. In the aftermath of Kielce, by early 1947, the number of Jews in Poland had dropped from 240,000 to fewer than 90,000, and the number continued

to spiral downward in the face of unrelenting anti-Jewish hostility.²⁶ Polish authorities were only too happy to facilitate the speedy emigration by emplacing authorizations that allowed Jews to leave without administrative obstacles—exit visas were not required of Jews wishing to leave Poland. By the end of 1947, the population of Jews in Poland had fallen to 12,000, and through two more spasms of anti-Semitic violence that engulfed Poland, 1956-1957 and 1968-1969, all that remained of the largest Jewish population in the pre-World War II world had dwindled to a mere 3,500.²⁷

The Persistent Holocaust represents one of the most maleficent manifestations of what Emil Fackenheim termed “Hitler’s posthumous victories,”²⁸ a Persistent Holocaust. The largest portion of Poland’s more than three million Jews were destroyed by the Nazi regime. Hitler’s work was finished by Poland’s anti-Semites, who drove the vestige of the Jewish population that had managed to survive. Jan Karski, a Polish diplomat, wrote that Nazi policies toward the Jews of Poland “formed a sort of narrow bridge where the German and the larger part of Polish society meet in harmony.”²⁹ Despite the absence of the Nazis, the anti-Semitic foundation of that narrow bridge remained operational in the post-war period in Poland, the period of the Persistent Holocaust.

End Notes

- 1 Carol Rittner and John K. Roth, eds., *Pope Pius XII and the Holocaust* (London and New York: Leicester University Press, 2002), 32.
- 2 Tadeusz Piotrowski, *Poland's Holocaust* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 1998), 136.
- 3 Michael Marrus, *The Unwanted European Refugees from the First World War Through the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 336.
- 4 David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: A History of a Way of Thinking*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013), 203-205. The 'blood libel' or 'blood accusation' dates to the 13th Century and posits that Jews must secure Christian blood for ritual requirements especially during the Passover period.
- 5 Peter Hayes and John K. Roth, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2010), 519.
- 6 Jan T. Gross, *Fear: Antisemitism in Poland After Auschwitz* (New York: Random House, 2006), 84.
- 7 Ibid., 91ff.
- 8 William W. Hagen, "Before the "Final Solution": Toward a Comparative Analysis of Political Antisemitism in Interwar Germany and Poland, *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol 68, No.2 (June, 1966), 351-381.
- 9 Daryl Worthington, "Alexander II Emancipates the Serfs retrieved from <https://www.newhistorian.com/2015/03/02alexander-ii-emancipates-the-serfs>.
- 10 Timothy Snyder, *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2015), 32.
- 11 Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 48ff.
- 12 Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1973), 148.
- 13 Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945: The Years of Extermination* (New York and London: Harper Perennial, 2007) 17.
- 14 Yad Vashem: Shoah Resource Center, *Aktion Reinhard*, retrieved from https://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/microsoft%20word%20-%205724.pdf.
- 15 Snyder, 118-120. Casualties among Polish Jews is a difficult number to determine with certainty because of the imposed statelessness created by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Treaty that divided conquered Poland between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. Many Jews in the Soviet region were accounted for on casualty as 'Soviet Jews' despite their Polish origins. See Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 410.
- 16 Halik Kochanski, *The Eagle Unbowed: Poland and the Poles in the Second World War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 299-301.
- 17 Witness account in Zydowski Instytut Historyczny, cited in Gross, *Fear*, 82.
- 18 Suzanne Brown-Fleming, *The Holocaust and the Catholic Conscience: Cardinal Aloisius Muench and the Guilt Question in Germany* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2006), 113.
- 19 Phayer, Michael, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana

University press, 2000), 180-81.

20 Gross, *Fear*, 83.

21 GKBZpNP-IPN (Russian State Archives), p 12., cited in Gross, *Fear*, 85.

22 Gross, 87.

23 Ibid., 91.

24 Ibid.

25 Gross, 99.

26 Piotr Eberhardt, *Political Migrations in Poland, 1939-1945* (ISBN 9781536110357).

27 Population statistics vary widely in part because following the Soviet assumption of control following the war, persons were assigned state identity based on their location. The many Jews who had been displaced were often re-assigned national identity.

28 Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend the World: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Thought* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1992), 299.

29 Gross, 177.