

Jewish-gentile relations in Poland during the period of hiding, 1942-1945

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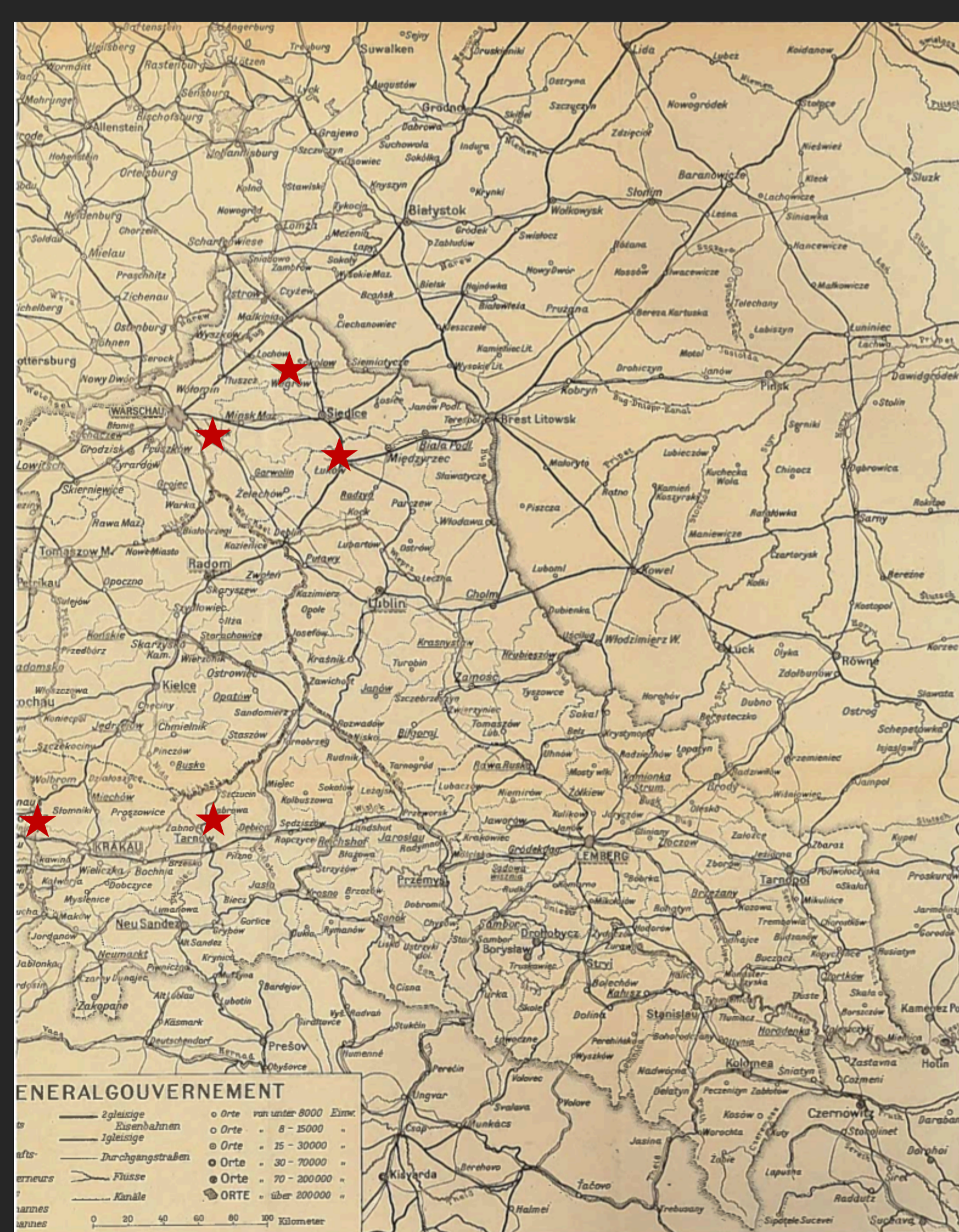
Introduction

In 1942, the Nazis implemented their 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question' and began to liquidate the ghettos of occupied Poland – known as the General Government. The Jews in the ghettos were aware that they would be sent to their deaths, and thus they began to look for shelter amongst the Poles in an attempt to save their lives. This project focuses specifically on those Jews looking for assistance in the rural areas of the General Government during the period of hiding, as this topic has received less attention than the issue of Jews hiding in the cities. Using the oral testimonies of 10 Holocaust survivors available through the Visual History Archive, this project explores who offered or denied the Jews shelter and their motivations for doing so, other threats the Jews faced whilst in hiding, as well as who became involved in hunting down the victims.

Methodology

This project focuses on the testimonies of 10 Holocaust survivors, available through the Visual History Archive and written memoirs. Each survivor escaped death by hiding amongst the Poles in the rural areas of the General Government. This research focuses on which locals were willing to aid the Jewish refugees and which were not, as well as their motivations for doing so. Attention is also given to those who aided the Germans in locating and killing the refugees, and the other threats experienced while in hiding.

Holocaust survivors: Phillip Biel, Paula Lenchner, Molly Applebaum, Ruth Abarbanel, Clara Bronstein, Edward Applebaum, Nathan Aptekar, George Hoffman, Rachel Luchfeld & Feida Stieglitz



Map of the General Government, produced by German authorities, with 5 of the Jewish refugees plotted with a red star.

Results

Who provided shelter and why

The 10 survivor testimonies viewed for this project revealed a variety of reasons the Polish gentiles agreed to aid the refugees, the most common being compassion, pre-war acquaintances and financial gain.

Financial payments, compassion, pre-war acquaintances

Phillip Biel's search for shelter in Wegrow revealed a variety of reasons the locals were willing to aid him. One farmer agreed to hide him and his brother in exchange for gold, while another agreed because he had known his father from his business before the war. A third farmer provided shelter also because he had known his father and would receive a large financial sum. Furthermore, this farmer agreed to let him stay for an extended period of time after Biel was able to construct a hiding place in the barn that could not be seen.

Survivors Paula Lenchner, Ruth Abarbanel, Frieda Stieglitz and Edward Applebaum also stated financial gain, compassion and the existence of pre-war acquaintances as motivations the locals had for aiding the refugees.

Hatred for the occupying soldiers

Edward Applebaum and Clara Bronstein's testimonies revealed that locals were willing to aid them because they possessed a hatred for the occupying soldiers. While Clara Bronstein was hiding in Bialystok, a Ukrainian family provided her with shelter for a month because they had lost their father and sons to the occupying Soviet forces, and therefore were compassionate for her situation. They aided her further by providing her with her daughter's identification papers, which identified her as a gentile. Edward Applebaum, while hiding in the forests of Ponikla, repeatedly spoke of his Polish friend who continually aided them throughout their years in hiding because he hated the Germans.



This is a photograph of where Mr. Ratynski's house in Wegrow once stood. Mr. Ratynski attempted to save 18 Jews, all of whom were killed. Photograph taken by Jan Grabowski.

Who denied the Jews shelter and why

Fear

The most common motivation for the Poles to deny the Jews shelter was fear, as the penalty for assisting any Jew caught outside of the ghetto was death. Almost all 10 testimonies revealed fear of either the Germans or anti-Semitic neighbours as the primary reason the locals were not willing to aid the refugees.

Paula Lenchner, while disguising her identity and pretending to be a Polish girl looking for work in Wesolowka, Lukow, was refused employment by a woman because she was afraid her neighbours would discover her true identity and find out she was employing a Jewish girl. Similarly, a farmer refused to aid Biel as he was afraid of his brother finding out and reporting him to the Germans. Clara Bronstein also mentions the fear of Germans in her testimony, as she had to leave the house of the family she was staying with after the Germans approached the house.

Anti-Semitism

Anti-Semitism was another, more obvious reason the locals had for refusing to aid the Jewish refugees. Anti-Semitism was common amongst the Polish gentiles, who believed the Jews were the killers of Christ. Biel mentions religious anti-Semitism in regards to the farmer who was hiding his mother. This farmer said to him "I'm sorry, but God said the Jews must be destroyed," and that the Jews deserved to be exterminated for what they did to Jesus. Frieda Steiglitz also experienced the anti-Semitism of the locals when a farmer had caught her, her sister and her grandmother hiding in his fields. Not only did he refuse to let them go, but he reported them to the Germans - resulting in the death of her sister and grandmother.

Lack of finances

Poverty was another reason the locals refused to aid the Jews, experienced by both George Hoffman and Edward Applebaum. Although initially provided shelter by locals, they were both denied further aid once they had run out of money to provide in return.

What testimonies are lacking

It is important to note that many of the refugees stated they were too afraid to approach locals that they did not know, and often they deliberately avoided those known to be anti-Semitic. Because of fear the locals would report them to the Germans or kill them themselves, the refugees often approached only those they knew would be likely to assist them. Therefore, these testimonies are lacking the opinions of the most anti-Semitic Poles.

Other threats the Jews faced while in hiding

Hunger and thirst

The most prevalent threats amongst the Jewish refugees were hunger and thirst. Even when provided assistance by the locals, the Jews could go days without food or water. For example, while hiding in Dabrowa Tarnowska, Molly Applebaum wrote in her diary that the peasant hiding her often failed to bring food or water. Lack of food and clean water was also an issue for the refugees hiding in fields or forests, such as Ruth Abarbanel, who recalled drinking dirty water she had taken from the ground. Many refugees went out at night to look for food, with Edward Applebaum explaining how he used to dig potatoes out from the farmers' fields during the night.

Climate

Climate was another threat faced by the Jewish refugees, especially the cold temperatures of the Polish winters. Because many of the Jews were on the run, hiding in barns, fields, and forests, harsh winter temperatures were a major threat to their survival. This was often exacerbated by the lack of clothing they owned, with Hoffman stating he survived the winter with only a shirt, shorts and no shoes.

Psychological issues

Psychological issues were another threat the refugees faced while in hiding. Molly Applebaum hid buried in a box under the ground, and she often wrote in her diary of the boredom she experienced sitting in this box for hours at a time. Frieda Stieglitz also placed heavy emphasis on the psychological difficulties associated with her time in hiding, especially after the death of her sister and grandmother, which left her alone. Throughout her testimony, she repeatedly mentioned how difficult it was to persevere and try to survive when faced with loneliness, despair, constant fear and uncertainty of where to go next.

Sexual abuse

Molly Applebaum's diary of her time in hiding reveals another threat that is often missing from the Holocaust literature – the abuse of the Jews whilst in hiding. At 13 years old, Molly and her cousin were sexually abused by the peasant who was hiding them. Fearing the peasant would decide not to aid them any longer, often the girls encouraged the abuse, in order to survive another day.



House of Rabbi Morgenstern (killed by the Germans in September 1939) in Wegrow.

Photograph taken by Jan Grabowski.

Results

Who joined in hunting down the victims

During the period of hiding, some locals aided the Germans in locating and killing the Jewish refugees. Biel mentions this in his testimony, describing how young Christian boys would go out looking for the Jews and shoot them. Molly Applebaum also mentions this, writing in her diary that in 1943 the peasants would take part in man hunts for the hidden Jews. As Nathan Aptekar describes, the locals were motivated to track down the Jews because the Germans would provide them with 5 kilograms of sugar as a reward. However, Aptekar also describes that sometimes the locals killed not because of the reward, but because of anti-Semitism.

Conclusion

The testimonies of 10 Jewish refugees searching for shelter amongst the Polish gentiles of the General Government reveal the varied and complex reasons the locals had for aiding the Jews. This project demonstrates the diverse experiences of each refugee in searching for shelter in similar circumstances, as well as the common threats faced in surviving the war. These testimonies reveal the lengths the Jews went to in order to survive just a little bit longer. Finally, this project highlights the extreme difficulty of surviving the Holocaust in Poland.

The problem with testimonies

The testimonies available through the Visual History Archive are an excellent source for first hand accounts of Jewish refugees during the Holocaust. However, testimonies as a source have some shortcomings. First of all, testimonies are recorded many years after the events take place, and time alters memory. For example, traumatic memories can be repressed, and some survivors may leave out particularly traumatic experiences. Furthermore, these testimonies are missing the voices of those who did not survive the war.

References

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All testimonies available through the *Visual History Archive*.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program and the University of Ottawa for providing me with the opportunity and funding to undertake this research. I would also like to thank Professor Grabowski for allowing me to participate in his research on Jewish-Gentile relations in Poland, and for his expertise and guidance along the way.
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