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www.berghahnbooks.com

Published in 2017 by
Berghahn Books
www.berghahnbooks.com

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This book has received the support of TransferS (laboratoire d'excellence,
program "Investissements d'avenir" ANR-10-IDEX-0001-02-PSL*
and ANR-10-LABX-0099).



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Zalc, Claire, editor. | Bruttmann, Tal, editor.

Title: Microhistories of the Holocaust / edited by Claire Zalc and Tal
Bruttmann.

Description: New York ; Oxford : Berghahn Books, [2017] | Series: War and
genocide ; volume 24 | "The international conference "Exploring the
microhistory of the Holocaust," which took place in Paris in December 2012
... was the origin of this work"—Introduction. | Includes bibliographical
references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016026106 | ISBN 9781785333668 (hardback : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Holocaust, Jewish (1939–1945)—Congresses. | Holocaust,
Jewish (1939–1945)—Historiography—Congresses.

Classification: LCC D804.18 .M53 2017 | DDC 940.53/18—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016026106>

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978–1-78533-366-8 hardback

ISBN 978–1-78533-367-5 ebook

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CHAPTER 9

THE DEVIL IN MICROHISTORY

THE “HUNT FOR JEWS” AS A SOCIAL PROCESS, 1942–1945

Tomasz Frydel



*Evil is unspectacular and always human,
And shares our bed and eats at our own table.*
—WH Auden, “Herman Melville”

An Integrated Microhistory

One of the most influential dictums of historians of the Holocaust has been Saul Friedländer’s call for an “integrated history” aimed at combining elements of the Hilbergian machinery of destruction—the perpetrator perspective—with the experience of its various victim groups and individuals.¹ Historians, including Friedländer himself, have in their own ways sought to follow this narrative and interpretive framework.² In the case of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, where thousands of ghettos and camps were established under Nazi German rule, microhistory has understandably emerged as the preferred method of historical reconstruction.³ This essay asks what it means to write an integrated *microhistory* of the Holocaust. Its goal is to reconstruct elements of a

local history as an integrated history that foregrounds German violence against one victim group (Poles) as a conditioning factor in its relations with the primary victim group (Jews) of the Holocaust.

In the case of genocide in occupied Poland, one important benefit of an integrated microhistory is that it can serve as an antidote to a polarized historiography. The Rzeszów (or Subcarpathian) region under consideration is perhaps most emblematic of this polarized landscape. On the one hand, it is the site of the most commemorated family of Polish rescuers of Jews – the Ulma family in the village of Markowa (Łańcut county). On 24 March 1944, Józef Ulma, his pregnant wife Wiktoria and six children were executed by German gendarmes along with the eight Jews of the Szall and Goldman families, whom they had sheltered since 1942.⁴ In 1995, the Ulma couple was posthumously given the titles of Righteous among Nations by Yad Vashem. Since then, they have occupied center stage in the Polish pantheon of national heroes as a kind of Holy Family of the Holocaust. On 17 March 2016, the site of their murder saw to the opening of a long-awaited museum, unambiguously named “The Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews in World War II,” which enjoyed the presence of Poland’s president, Andrzej Duda.⁵ On the other side of this well-maintained narrative wall, though garnering much less public attention, just thirty kilometers northeast of Markowa, lie the bodies of eighteen Jews in the village of Jagiełka-Niechciałka (Przeworsk county). These Jews were from the neighboring villages of Gniewczyna Tryniecka and Gniewczyna Łęczycka, who were robbed, tortured, and raped by members of the fire brigade prior to their being handed over to the German police for execution.⁶

Forms of help and harm by ethnic Poles toward Jews form a spectrum of behavior and both have their place in the history of occupied Poland. The danger for scholarship and public memory, however, lies in treating these respective narratives in isolation so that they come to represent separate academic “fields” and ways of remembering the past. Yet not only were the above phenomena part of the same social continuum, they were at times causally connected in important ways. Here, one cannot study the mechanisms of rescue without simultaneously linking these to the mechanisms of destruction. While historical inquiry must, understandably, often proceed according to a division of labor among historians, such a division runs the risk of being reified or essentialized into separate subfields, or genres, of scholarship. One analytical danger of such a dichotomy lies in falsely suggesting that entirely different social groups (such as the “criminal margins”) and individuals (or moral agents) were involved in ways of protecting Jews and ways of harming them.⁷

This chapter will sketch out important features of a microhistory of the Holocaust in rural Poland that complicate the above historiographical trends and ought to inform the basis of a social history of this period. Its primary geographical focus is southeastern Poland, with some examples drawn from other regions of the General Government (GG) – the name given to the main zone of German occupation formed from the Second Polish Republic. The thematic focus is the German “hunt for Jews” (*Judenjagd*), the final stage of Operation Reinhard, as it manifested itself in this region from 1942-45.⁸

Genocide from Above

On 13 March 1943, the head of the SS and German police in District Warsaw sent out a secret memo to the heads of the civil administration concerning the “arrest and liquidation of Jews who remain in hiding.” The head of the SS and police outlined the strategy along four axes:

I order immediate and most energetic action to apprehend the Jews, who have to be transferred to the gendarmerie for liquidation. More specifically, we are dealing here with Jews who roam the cities and countryside without an armband, who were able to flee the earlier deportation actions. In order to succeed, one has to involve the *Sonderdienst*, the *Polish Police*, and *informers* [V-Männer]. It is also necessary to involve broad masses of Polish society.... Persons who have helped to apprehend the Jews can receive up to one-third of the seized property [emphasis mine].⁹

These parameters formed the outline of the “hunt for Jews” in what could be described as a top-down, Nazi policy-directed “genocide from above.” The system of German control over the countryside was based on two pillars of rural authority: village heads and local Polish police forces. The village head (*soltys*) functioned as a crucial link in the system of rules and regulations imposed by the occupation authorities. His main responsibilities consisted of the following: (1) to collect food quotas from each family for the German army, (2) to collect, in cooperation with the Labor Office (*Arbeitsamt*), “human quotas” of young Polish men and women to be sent as forced laborers (often by force) to the German Reich, and (3), following the launch of Operation Barbarossa on 22 June 1941, to ensure that the village under his jurisdiction was not harboring anyone without proper identification (*Kennkarte*), such as fugitive Jews, Soviet prisoners of war (POWs), partisans, and any outsiders. If a member of any of these groups was discovered, it was the responsibility of the village head to apprehend them and notify the Polish Police or gendarmerie or, barring that, take the initiative in delivering the suspect to

the police station. Village heads were equipped with the manpower necessary to carry out these tasks in the form of village guards (*Ortschutz* or *Ortschutzwache*), often directly adapted from existing fire brigades. Stepping down from the position of village head (most were elected prior to war) was regarded as a form of sabotage of the German war effort. When the *Judenjagd* was mobilized after the liquidation of ghettos in the summer and fall of 1942, these local structures – village heads, village guards, fire brigade units, messengers, foresters, and gamekeepers – formed the security net around villages. This system of surveillance represented the lowest reaches of German authority in village society.

Local Polish police forces represented the second pillar of German control over the countryside. On 17 December 1939, General Hans Frank formally declared the creation of the Polish Police, which was partly reconstituted as the *Polnische Polizei* (PP), and made subordinate to the German Order Police (*Ordnungspolizei*), which in rural regions meant the gendarmerie.¹⁰ The policemen continued to wear their prewar uniforms with the emblems of the Polish Second Republic removed (the eagle on the cap was replaced with the city or commune coat of arms). The PP was the only armed and uniformed Polish formation under German occupation in the GG. In December 1942, PP forces counted twelve thousand policemen.¹¹

However, the PP was modified in important ways. Many of the policemen did not return from hiding. Those who did return to service did so under the threat of incarceration in a concentration camp. Following Polish defeat after the dual German and Soviet attack, a large percentage of policemen found themselves in Soviet POW camps. The Ostaszków camp contained the largest number of policemen—sixty-five hundred police and security forces from all strata—who were then executed by the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) in the nearby village of Miednoje.¹² This local police vacuum required finding new recruits. Many were drawn from the Polish population deported to the GG following the annexation of the Warthegau into the German Reich (many new recruits came from Silesia and the Poznań area). A three-month course in a police academy in Nowy Sącz was created to train recruits without prior experience. In general, each commune (*Sammelgemeinde*) contained a PP station, which usually included six to eight policemen. Gendarme posts were mostly restricted to larger towns and cities, except in the case of large ethnic German (*Volksdeutsche*) villages. The PP therefore had a degree of limited autonomy that was kept in check by a system of rotating gendarmes (usually of ethnic German background) as commandants of the PP posts to provide oversight and to build group morale by fraternizing with its members.¹³

The main responsibilities of the PP included maintaining law and order, enforcing the system of exploitation imposed on village society, and combatting the growing rise of banditry in the countryside. This meant fining or arresting farmers for a variety of infractions, such as failing to tag pigs and cattle (in an attempt to avoid their seizure during quota collections), shirking forced labor in Germany, and participating in the black market. During the so-called liquidation stage of ghettos, the PP was drawn deeper into the process of guarding ghettos and participating in the capture and killing of fugitive Jews. At the same time, as the underground movement increased its anti-German struggle, the Polish Police was drawn into the anti-partisan struggle.

Genocide from Below

The *Judenjagd*, understood in terms of the axes outlined in the memo, was essentially a project to make segments of occupied society complicit in genocide. Involving “broad masses of Polish society” meant hammering segments of the local population into the desired shape, in order to radically transform social norms and behavior. It is impossible to write a history of this process without discussing the social anxieties unleashed by these new conditions. Naturally, it took on different forms depending on the region. For example, in the summer of 1942, German authorities organized a meeting in the village of Antoniów (Tarnobrzeg county). Stanisław Rydzewski, the village messenger, was told to call out all the inhabitants. The German army then surrounded the inhabitants as the following lesson was conducted:

A German spoke in Polish at this meeting and told us not to attempt to help the Jews, not to hide them. As an example, so that people would not try to maintain any contacts with Jews, they took a Jew and beat him with a stick. In the course of beating the Jew, one of the German officers turned to the people, saying that every good Pole should treat Jews in the same way.¹⁴

It is not clear how extensive these methods were, but such public spectacles undoubtedly had an impact on villagers like Rydzewski, who was accused after the war of directing the gendarmerie to the whereabouts of various Poles, a Soviet POW, and a twelve-year-old Jewish girl. Top-down directives often ricocheted in unpredictable and surprising ways on the local level. “Genocide from above” gave rise to existential dilemmas in village society that came to form the bottom-up push of denunciation and killing, or “genocide from below.” Local violence is thus seen here as a product of the dynamic that emerged between these two force

fields. This section will discuss in outline some of the manifestations of the system of pressures generated from below.

In this social landscape, one prominent pattern of peasant aggression toward Jews centered around instances of extreme violence toward Poles for sheltering Jews—particularly in connection with “pacification actions” (*Pazifizierungsaktionen*). The pattern of expelling, capturing, and killing Jews accelerated most dramatically in the immediate aftermath of these acts. State terrorism in the form of pacification actions could thus function to provide a climate conducive for searching out Jews, as the presence of fugitive Jews became increasingly associated with communal survival. For example, on 23 April 1943, two trucks filled with German soldiers and gendarmes with police dogs arrived in the village of Podborze (Mielec county). They had received information that the Dudek family was sheltering Jews and ordered Michał Pająk, the village head, to take them to their house. However, when they arrived on the scene, there was no sign of either the Polish or the Jewish family.¹⁵ The Germans then threatened locals with execution and proceeded to set fire to the village, beginning with the Dudek household. A total of twenty-three properties were burned to the ground. Although no one in the village was killed, a close reconstruction of events shows that the pacification action resulted in the capture and death—with the help of locals—of a total of approximately 25–30 Jews across three communes in the immediate weeks following the event. If viewed on a map, subsequent peasant violence toward Jews formed a ring around the site of repression.¹⁶ To ethnic Polish communities, it was likely that anything was preferable to inviting the unpredictable violence of the German police.

The outline of this structure of violence brings us back to the murder of the Ulma family in the village of Markowa on 23 March 1944, mentioned at the outset. According to Yehuda Erlich, who survived in hiding in the nearby village of Sietesz, the brutal murder of the Ulmas and the Jews they were sheltering had a galvanizing effect: “Polish peasants who were hiding Jews fell into a terrible state of panic. The next day, twenty-four Jewish bodies were found in nearby fields. They were Jews murdered by these peasants, who had been sheltering them for the previous twenty months.”¹⁷ This testimony suggests that the killing proceeded along a similar arc. Further, the region around Markowa was subjected to a series of German repressions from 1942 to 1945. From 6 to 8 March 1943, repressions (mostly targeted at the underground movement) swept across local villages: Łopuszka Wielka (19 people), Rączyna (18), Pantalowice (17), Rokietnica (45), Kaszyce (121), and Czelatyce (15).¹⁸ Approximately 235 people were killed in these actions. Of course not all pacification actions were a result of locals sheltering Jews, but

they were steeped in a climate of ongoing repressions. Sietesz itself was “pacified” twice in connection with locals sheltering Jews and Soviet POWs.¹⁹ Under similar allegations, Pantalowice was targeted previously in 1942. In the nearby village of Pawłosiów, the Czerwonek family was shot by the German police for the same “crime” in July of 1943. Added to this was the fact that the precise reasons for repressions in neighboring villages were not always clear, which probably caused fear of German terror to be very common in the minds of the local population.

The dynamic of fear appears to have been much more widespread. To take another example, in the Tarnów region, the very act of posting a notice by the *Kreishauptmann* (county chief) on 9 September 1942 was sufficient cause for a dramatic change in behavior:

The Poles were basically afraid of helping the Jews, because the *Kreishauptmann* had made it known to local Poles, through the use of posters, that every person who hides a Jew will be killed. ... As a result of such notices, even decent Poles drove Jews out of their homes, who subsequently fell into the hands of the Gestapo.²⁰

In another part of the General Government, the direct effect of German terror was to cut off the food supply to Jews in hiding, such as Józef Goldfinger: “After the pacification in Kaszów and Liszki, people who until the pacification had willingly given him shelter and food began to refuse, fearing the consequences of German regulations.”²¹ As a further consequence, the shortage of food, combined with an increasingly hostile population, compelled many Jews to turn themselves in. The pattern examined here may also be applicable beyond the General Government. For example, in the small Lithuanian town of Butrimonys, Lithuanian policemen hunted down Jews following an *Aktion* in 1942. After the head of the Golembowski family was arrested and shot for sheltering Jews, many other Jews were subsequently turned out by their protectors.²²

A second core component of this pattern was the belief that the preemptive capture or killing of fugitive Jews by local villagers and police forces would save a family or village in the event that a captured Jew denounced their former protectors. The death penalty against Poles for sheltering Jews introduced a new teleology of violence. The likelihood of denunciation certainly increased when sheltering Jews had developed into a small-scale economy of “rescue for money,” where desperate fugitives were left vulnerable to financial exploitation and robbery.²³ If we return to the case of Podborze, Polish policemen Jan Pielach and Michał Strzapka were called to the nearby village of Dąbie in the summer of 1943. They arrived to a scene where a crowd of villagers had

surrounded a Jewish man and woman. The policemen followed protocol, placed the Jews on a wagon to turn them over to the gendarmerie and began making their way toward Mielec, but the Jewish man allegedly “uttered some threats against the people of Dąbie, [stating] that he will teach them a lesson, and complained that they took twelve dollars from him.” Peasants ran alongside the wagon begging the policemen not to hand the Jews over, as the village could face repression as a consequence. Pielach, the commandant, then “came to the conviction that delivering these Jews to Mielec, with the possibility of their providing testimony, could end unpleasantly for the population of Dąbie.”²⁴ The policemen stopped the wagon and shot the siblings in a nearby field. In the village of Zimna Woda (Jasło county), a Jew by the name of Tolek was captured by the village guard when he caused panic by appearing in the village in broad daylight. According to Franciszek Wojnar, Tolek allegedly “made threats to the entire community, saying that ‘half the village will go down with me.’”²⁵ When the police arrived, Tolek was shot on the spot.

This line of defense should be approached with a dose of skepticism, as it was undoubtedly exploited by the accused for exculpatory purposes and, in the case of policemen, to give their actions a veneer of “patriotism.” Such cases should be examined by the historian on a case-by-case basis. Yet it is impossible to entirely dismiss the claims, as this form of reasoning became anchored in an occupational logic of survival that is echoed throughout real-time sources. Along these lines, an underground report issued by the Home Army (AK) on 12 March 1943 stated:

There has not been a single incident in which a captured Jew did not denounce everyone who offered them help. In many cases, they maliciously give surnames [of those] who are completely uninvolved. All are shot on the spot. We have borne many losses because of this. Therefore, I forbid any contact with and help to fleeing Jews.²⁶

Similar fears are echoed in the chronicle kept by Franciszek Kotula in the city of Rzeszów during the war. On 16 December 1942, he wrote:

News is arriving from all directions that the Germans are murdering entire Polish families when they discover that they are sheltering Jews. Whoever is still sheltering someone expels him, and when the Germans catch that person, he most often reveals where he was and who fed him. After all, he knows that he’s going to die anyway. Panic has erupted among those who once sheltered Jews, and they are running off into the woods. Even if a Jew manages to escape the ghetto, he will no longer be able to find shelter in the countryside, not even a corner, not for a moment.²⁷

The practice of interrogating Jews about who gave them food and shelter was not systematic, but it was made sufficiently routine to cause panic among peasants. If we freeze the narrative frame in this moment, we see various reactions. In the village of Gamratka (Mińsk Mazowiecki county) in July 1943, the gendarmerie arrived at the home of Zofia Kur, who was sheltering Jews in a bunker. The policemen threw a grenade into their bunker and ordered locals to pull the Jews out. Three young men, covered in blood and with limbs blown off, were pulled out of the bunker. In the words of the village head:

We laid the three Jews on the ground, and the German gendarmes brought all of the men and women of Gamratka around the Jews and asked them [the Jews] whether they knew us. The Jews replied that they didn't know us. One of them knew me from having seen me before, but he told the gendarmes that he didn't know me.²⁸

Yet in a number of cases, the threat of death often bore fruit. Around the same time, in the vicinity of the village of Malinie (Mielec county), the German police had captured a Jewish woman, who was marched through local villages and beaten into admitting who had given her help, before being shot.²⁹ Her seventeen-year-old daughter was captured shortly after and allowed to be kept alive if she helped denounce local Poles who offered her help. She was executed in the village of Grochowe after leaving behind a trail of fourteen dead people whom she had denounced.³⁰ According to Jan Fereński, who was both a former Polish policeman and a member of the Home Army, the Czajka family of six in the village of Libusza (Gorlice county) was shot by the Germans for sheltering Jews: "Morgenstern hid with them. When they realized that they were being observed, they moved Morgenstern to Czeremno, where he was captured by the Germans and betrayed the names of those who had sheltered him."³¹

In other instances, promises made by German policemen appeared to have been effective. For example, in Wólka Ogryzkowa (Przeworsk county), Nathan Haske was shot by German police during a hunt for Jews in a nearby forest. One of the policemen "gave him water to drink and promised him that if he tells them everything that they ask, they will send him to a hospital and then to Germany, where he would live." Haske allegedly supplied the police with the names of members of the Peasant Battalions in nearby villages. Another German policeman noted everything down. When his information was exhausted, "Gestapoman Zajder told him to get up, as he would be taken to a hospital," and then shot Haske in the forehead.³² The archival record has preserved two

such interrogation reports given by Izek Zylberberg after his capture in November of 1942 near the town of Iłża (Radom county). Zylberberg had taken shelter with a group of partisans consisting mostly of fugitive Jews and was the only one taken alive after the Germans had attacked their forest bunkers. In the last report, the interrogating policeman noted that “this Jew had not yet been shot, so as to allow him to provide further testimony.”³³ However, it must be emphasized that the dynamic around the fear of denunciation was certainly not specific to Jews, but was inherent to hiding any fugitives, though they were the largest fugitive group. For example, an underground newspaper bemoaned a practice among Soviet POWs of betraying their former protectors in the hope of “extend[ing] their life by a few days” when faced with “the inevitable bullet.”³⁴ There is no doubt that the will to survive and the prospect of even a few more days of life was a powerful force for those fleeing certain death.

The use of torture in such cases was not uncommon. In January of 1943, the Augustyn family was denounced for sheltering three Jews in the village of Ołpiny (Jasło county). The Polish police arrived from the Szerzyny station and transported them to the gendarmerie in Jasło. The file suggests that the Augustyns may have denounced the Jews themselves, but in order to protect the Augustyns, policeman Mikołaj Leszega and his colleagues falsified their report to state that the Jews had just arrived on their farm. Nevertheless, three weeks later, a member of the Jasło Gestapo, Karl Hauch, arrived in the village and shot Józef Augustyn, because during interrogation the captured Jews had revealed that they were sheltered for three months.³⁵ Further, both those receiving and providing shelter faced the prospect of torture. In the village of Brzeziany (Dębica county), Andrzej Andreasik brought food to Jews hidden in a forest bunker. Several policemen from the PP station in Wielopole Skrzyńskie, headed by gendarme Wilhelm Jaki, arrived at his home.

Jaki took me out into the field and began to ask me where the Jews are. I told him that I don't know anything. He told me to lie on the ground and started to beat me with a stick. After hitting me several times, he told me to get up again and continued to ask me about the Jews. I continued to say that I don't know, and he hit me two more times in the face with the stick, but I did not reveal anything.

Andreasik was then taken to the police station, where, kept without food or water, he continued to be beaten every one and a half hours for three days, in an unsuccessful attempt to have him reveal the whereabouts of the Jews. The lesson he drew from the experience was that Poles who

sheltered Jews simply broke down too easily under physical pressure: "I criticized the actions of the local population, who sheltered Jews but then betrayed them as a result of torture applied by the Germans. . . . If I was beaten by the Germans, I would not break down so easily."³⁶

A third layer of the hunt for Jews was informed by the presence of numerous informers, or *V-Männer* [*Vertrauensperson* or "trusted person"], dispatched by German authorities to entrap peasants and report on activities deemed illegal. This was a broad strategy usually coordinated by the local Gestapo to apprehend sheltered Jews, escaped Soviet POWs, and members of the underground. In a striking case, in 1948 Stanisław Bajorek stood accused of collaboration with the German occupation authorities for handing over a Soviet POW in Rzepiennik Strzyżewski (Tarnów county) and was sentenced to five and a half years in prison. In a dramatic overturn of the verdict by the District Court of Jasło, Bajorek was acquitted when additional evidence revealed that the alleged Soviet POW was in fact an informer, known for wandering through villages to compile lists of peasants who opened their doors and gave him shelter. The gendarmerie would then return to these homes and arrest and execute the peasants.³⁷

In a number of instances, Jews themselves were used to entrap peasants hiding Jews. In the spring of 1943, Edward Sypko and his father had given a certain "Rubin" shelter several times in the village of Brzoza (Brzuza, Węgrów county). On 3 March 1943, Rubin had returned with the Gestapo and arrested Edward Sypko and his father, along with six others, who had also given help to Rubin. The operation, coordinated by the Gestapo of Ostrów Mazowiecka, resulted in the arrest of twenty people from Brzoza. Among the arrested Poles were two Russian POWs and a teenage Jewish boy. The next day, seven of the prisoners were executed in the woods of Szynkarzyna, the younger Sypko's father among them. On 5 March 1943, Edward Sypko and the remaining prisoners were sent to Treblinka.³⁸ Word of this wave of "provocations" in Węgrów county and the area near Treblinka was reported by underground publications, such as the weekly *Wieś* (The Village), issued in Warsaw and circulated throughout the General Government. It decried the actions of this Jewish informer, allegedly a former "member of a Bolshevik band," who was behind the "enormous wave of German terror" targeted at "village families for helping Soviet POWs and Jews who had escaped from ghettos."³⁹

Similarly, in the spring of 1943, Bogdan Protter, a fugitive Jew hiding in the village of Chrzastów (Mielec county), met a well-dressed and clean-shaven stranger walking around the village:

I saw the individual and recognized him as a Jew, whom I didn't know. We immediately began to speak Yiddish and I learned from him that he was from the Tarnobrzeg region. This really surprised me, because it would have been more natural for him to hide in his own region. I didn't like this Jew based on his behavior. He began to ask how many Jews were hiding in the region, and where. He showed no sign of fear or anxiety. When I told him that a few more Jews were hiding in the nearby forest of Malinie, he suggested that we go there together. Here I would like to add that I had already heard that some Jew by the name of Kapłan was a German informer, and informed the Germans about Jews hiding in the region, employing several people in the process.⁴⁰

As a result of the encounter, another fellow Jew, Herschek, and his son, were persuaded by the stranger to enter a labor camp near Mielec, where Herschek and his son were later shot. The informer had also learned of the whereabouts of the barn in nearby Złotniki where Protter and his brother were hiding. On that very same day, the barn was surrounded by gendarmes and searched without success, as Porter and his brother avoided returning to it after this encounter. Kapłan himself and some of the other members of this network were themselves former members of the Mielec and Pustków camp Jewish Councils (Judenräte). Their gradual transformation into informers exemplifies the narrowing of the range of choices and the emergence of a new survival strategy that adapted itself to the needs of the *Judenjagd*. Yet knowledge of such operations likely became more widespread, and the perception came to form a reality. We see it recorded by Kotula some sixty kilometers away, who noted the following anecdote on 15 July 1942:

Some Jews are trying to escape the ghetto one way or another. The Gestapo is surely aware of this, and is trying to figure out how to capture and exterminate these people. And they have sophisticated ways of doing this. They tell the following tale:

A Jew comes to the home of a peasant, who lives close to the woods in Babice, and asks to hide him for three months. The peasant is indignant and doesn't want to hear of it. The Jew pulls out money, a lot of money, and thrusts it before the peasant. But the peasant threatens the Jew to leave right away. The alleged Jew then changes into a Gestapo man, praises the peasant, and gives him a few packs of tobacco and 200 zł in reward.

Such a story spreads at lightning speed. It is certain that the Gestapo put the story into circulation by means of its agents in order to evoke suspicion and fear.⁴¹

Rumors in a time of war, with limited access to reliable information, are known to have particular staying power, as their importance was often tied to survival. The toxic mix of real incidents and rumors, like

the one above, were likely in high circulation during the occupation and informed the popular imagination of peasants vis-à-vis fugitive Jews.

At other times, fear of informers overlapped with fear of pacification actions. After the war, the deputy village head of Straszecin (Dębica county), Jan Skowroń, along with members of the village night guard, were accused of capturing two Dutch POWs, who had allegedly escaped from the nearby Pustków camp, and of handing them over to the Polish Police in the summer of 1943. The two men had previously been sheltered by Stanisław Wojko. The pacification of the nearby village of Bobrowa on 9 July 1943, where more than twenty inhabitants were killed and their property burned down, played a crucial role in the future course of events. One of the accused night guards stated the following:

Sometime in the summer of 1943, already after the pacification of Bobrowa, Skowroń came to my house and told me to come with him to capture people, who were dangerous to the village—some sort of spies, who some said were Dutchmen. I said that maybe we could get by without doing this, but he replied that they were dangerous, that things could end tragically the way they did in Bobrowa. In Bobrowa, a stranger had spent the night in the home of Mordyńska, and then the Germans shot several people in her home and those of others and burned down two homes.⁴²

Another of the accused night guards, Ludwik Adamowicz, testified:

I was called by Skowroń and Kolbusz, who were standing in front of the home of Wojko, and told me that there were German spies in his home. Skowroń gave me a chain and told me to go and tie them up. I told him that perhaps they were Poles, Jews, or Russians, who were hiding from the Germans. Skowroń replied: here I am refusing to tie them up, while they could be spies, who could very well be spying on me, and that half the village could be shot because of me, just as in Bobrowa. So I took the chain and went to the home of Wojko.⁴³

Taken together, the congruence of fears surrounding pacification actions, the potential of betrayal by those who were given help, the temptation to rob and denounce Jews, and the existence of undercover agents gave the *Judenjagd* deadly momentum, especially as it was connected to a larger hunt for Soviet POWs, partisans, German deserters, and other fugitives.⁴⁴ These elements formed the matrix of pressures from below that shaped the behavior of all victim groups on the local level. What is striking here in terms of those who found themselves on both sides of the help and harm spectrum is that rescuing and killing were not infrequently carried out by the same people. Many village guards who had to participate in hunts for Jews or Soviet POWs often sheltered such fugitives themselves. Some policemen killed one group of Jews while

sheltering others. For example, policeman Michał Strzapka, who participated in the killing of over a dozen Jews following the Podborze *Pazifizierungsaktion*, had since 1940 been active, along with his wife and daughter, in coordinating the rescue of the Berl family from Kraków, without any material reward in exchange.⁴⁵

The Devil in the Details

“Unweaving” the Holocaust into discrete parts to be studied in “cross-sections” can be analytically useful in bridging certain of its aspects (as well as connecting the Holocaust to other genocides). For example, historian Daniel Blatman’s findings on the “death marches” bear some similarity to the “hunt for Jews.”⁴⁶ Blatman found that anti-Semitism was not central: all marching victim groups received the same brutal treatment. In the death marches, killing was not immediate, as in a death camp or a mass execution over a death pit; deportations created a drawn-out process of gradual killing. A large number of the perpetrators were ordinary Germans who had no prior experience in killing. Many of them crossed the boundary from passive observers to participants. There was no centralized bureaucracy or authority controlling this process.

A fundamental goal of history is to seek explanations of past events by recourse to patterns and processes that are not always evident to its subjects. It is also to make the world of its subjects—and the actions emanating from it—more comprehensible. I have tried to cull from the sources a matrix of local pressures that gave shape to the unfolding of genocide following the major “liquidation actions” of ghettos in the General Government. The call “to involve broad masses of Polish society” contained within it a whole social world that unfolded for approximately three years. Today it represents a rich but as yet unwritten social history, with its own social dynamics and mechanisms of local violence, which a microhistory is ideally suited to reconstruct. A macrohistorical view of local murder as a form of ethnic cleansing motivated primarily by anti-Semitism or extreme nationalism disintegrates under the microscope of a local history. The *Judenjagd* occurred in the midst of a radical transformation of social relations conditioned by a brutal occupation and itself functioned as a powerful driver of this process. Within the parameters set out here, this period likely witnessed a transformation in the nature of anti-Semitism, no doubt facilitated by the deepening of ethnic thinking and categories, which affected everyone under occupation.

The danger inherent to a historical reconstruction based on trial material is to assume the narrative of the accused, who were no doubt

trying to present their actions in the best possible light before investigators and judges. In the subject examined here, it can also run the risk of blaming the victim. The challenge for the historian is to retain the grain of truth in the claims of those who were complicit, in order to uncover the social mechanisms of violence that shaped local relations and perceptions. Yet the strength of a microhistorical approach is to shed light on the slow unfolding of violence accompanied by an entangled victimhood of Poles and Jews. By restoring a sense of individual agency and ordinary human motivation, it can serve as a lens for examining the “intimacy of violence” in the colonial space that was the General Government. A microhistory thus allows us to view genocide stripped down to its homicidal proportions, while an integrated history shows how local attitudes and violence against Jews was connected with—and conditioned by—violence against Poles for sheltering Jews.

Franciszek Kotula noted that “Jews know very well that to ask for help from someone and expose him to death is inhuman.”⁴⁷ In the morally inverted universe created by the occupation authorities, the decision of its most condemned to seek survival meant bringing into orbit the lives of others. The relationship between the helper and the helped could transform over time into a two-way street between the denouncer and the denounced, the perpetrator and the victim. These are findings that will not satisfy those who expect a black-and-white story of perpetrators and victims, heroes and villains. The Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski often spoke of the presence of “the devil in history” in the twentieth century,⁴⁸ while the American scholar Lawrence Langer coined the term “choiceless choices” to describe the situations of conflict and the moral circumstances that Jews found themselves in during the Holocaust. The devil in a microhistory of the Holocaust shows the uncomfortable truth that even in the most hopeless of situations every human being has a choice and that the narrower the margin of choices tied to survival, the greater the potential for evil.

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Notes

1. Saul Friedländer, “An Integrated History of the Holocaust: Possibilities and Challenges,” in *Years of Persecution, Years of Extermination: Saul Friedländer and the Future of Holocaust Studies*, ed. Christian Wiese and Paul Betts (London: Continuum, 2010), 21–29.

2. Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, vols 1–2 (New York: HarperCollins, 1998–2008). For a discussion of the possibilities of different “axes of integration,” see Donald Bloxham, “Europe, the Final Solution and the Dynamics of Intent,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 44, no. 4 (2010): 317–35.
3. Both the intentionalist and functionalist trends in Holocaust historiography were not sensitive to local complexities. See Thomas Kühne and Tom Lawson, eds, *The Holocaust and Local History: Proceedings of the First International Graduate Students’ Conference on Holocaust and Genocide Studies* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2011), introduction, 1–12. For a theoretical overview of microhistory, see Sigurður G. Magnússon and István Szijártó, *What Is Microhistory? Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2013).
4. Józef Ulma, also helped another Jewish family construct a bunker in a nearby forest and supplied them with food, although they, too, were later killed. See Mateusz Szpytma, *The Risk of Survival: The Rescue of the Jews by the Poles and the Tragic Consequences for the Ulma Family from Markowa* (Warsaw: IPN, 2009).
5. The official museum website: <http://muzeumulmow.pl/en/> (accessed 20 July 2016).
6. See Tadeusz Markiel and Alina Skibińska, “*Jakie to ma znaczenie, czy zrobili to z chciwości?*” *zagłada domu Trynczerów* (Warsaw: Association of the Polish Center for Holocaust Research, 2011). A counterpoint to these events is offered by Piotr Chmielowiec, “Sprawa Józefa Laska. Z dziejów ludności żydowskiej w Gniewczynie Łańcuckiej,” *Glaukopis* 23–24 (2011–12): 10–45.
7. The most insightful road map for further research that breaks this dichotomy can be found in Havi Dreifuss (Ben-Sasson), *Changing Perspectives on Polish-Jewish Relations during the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2012).
8. For a discussion of the *Judenjagd*, see Christopher R. Browning, “‘Judenjagd’. Die Schlußphase der ‘Endlösung’ in Polen,” in *Deutsche, Juden, Völkermord: der Holocaust als Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. Jürgen Matthäus and Klaus-Michael Mallmann (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006), 177–189. For a full monograph on the subject, see Jan Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2013).
9. Bundesarchiv in Ludwigsburg (BAL), collection B 162, file 19161, 45–46, investigation into the representatives of Kreishauptmannschaft Bilgoraj.
10. Marek Getter, “Policja Polska w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie 1939–1945,” *Przegląd Policyjny*, Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Policji w Szczytnie 1–2 (1996): 1–2. For the only monograph on the Polish Police, see Adam Hempel, *Pogrobowcy kłeski: rzecz o policji “granatowej” w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie, 1939–1945* (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawn. Nauk., 1990).
11. Getter, “Policja Polska w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie 1939–1945,” 9. According to Getter, it is difficult to determine a definite number of policemen beyond this date, as the German authorities began to count Polish and Ukrainian police forces together as the “German Police” from 1943 to 1944 (under this rubric, the PP counted 13,437 in January 1943 and approximately 17,000 in May 1944).
12. Mielec county lost twenty-five prewar state policemen held in the Ostaszów camp. See “Lista oficerów Wojska Polskiego i funkcjonariuszy Policji Państwowej zamordowanych przez NKWD—Synów Ziemi Mieleskiej pomordowanych przez NKWD wiosną 1940 roku,” *Rocznik mielecki* 2 (1999): 186–188.
13. BAL B 162/7478, 73–74, prosecutor’s case against the German administration of Kreis Debica.
14. Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance in Rzeszów (AIPN Rz), file 353/277, testimony of Stanisław Rydzewski, 1950, 7–8.
15. Jan Ziobroń, *Dzieje Gminy Żydowskiej w Radomyślu Wielkim* (Radomyśl Wielki,

- 2009), 87–92. The Dudeks were sheltering members of the Siegfried family from the same village.
16. For a close study of the effects of German repression on anti-Jewish violence in the Mielec region, see Tomasz Frydel, “The *Pazifizierungsaktion* as a Catalyst of Anti-Jewish Violence: A Study in the Social Dynamics of Fear,” in *The Holocaust and European Societies: Social Processes and Dynamics*, ed. Andrea Löw and Frank Bajohr (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017) (forthcoming).
 17. Yad Vashem Archive (YVA), Department of the Righteous, file no. 2340.
 18. AIPN Rz 353/113, 114–17, statement by the legal defense. Trial of Teofil Ryzner and others accused of helping to capture Jews in the woods near the village of Sietesz (1949–50).
 19. AIPN Rz 353/114, 211–16, testimony of witnesses. Trial of Augustyn Wiglusz and others accused of handing over several Jews to the Germans in the village of Sietesz in August 1942. According to witnesses, one of the so-called pacifications of Sietesz consisted of German policemen rounding up one thousand of its inhabitants in the nearby school. The policemen demanded that locals hand over any Jews and Soviet POWs being hidden in the village.
 20. BAL B 162/2166, testimony of Izaak I., 6631. I am grateful to Dr. Melanie Hembera for sharing this document.
 21. National Archives of Krakow (ANK), collection 1042, file IV K, 252/50, testimony of witness Franciszek Golecki, 33.
 22. Martin Dean and Geoffrey P. Megargee, eds., *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945*, vol. 2, pt B (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 1045–47. I am grateful to Martin Dean for bringing this case to my attention.
 23. See Jan Grabowski, *Rescue for Money: Paid Helpers in Poland, 1939–1945* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2008).
 24. AIPN Rz 34/61, vol. 2, testimony of witness Jan Pielach, trial of Michał Strzępka, 1965–75, 24–31. Pielach offered the same reasons in his own trial in 1949–50 (AIPN Rz 32/1, 95), in which he was sentenced to fifteen years in prison.
 25. AIPN Rz 353/98, testimony of the accused Franciszek Wojnar, 29–30.
 26. AIPN Rz 105/7, Order No. 3, Point 21 of instructions issued by the commander of District AK Rzeszów-South, Col. Józef Maciołek (“Żuraw”), 120.
 27. Franciszek Kotula, *Losy Żydów rzeszowskich 1939–1944. Kronika tamtych dni* (Rzeszów: Społeczny Komitet Wydania Dziel Franciszka Kotuli, 1999), 147.
 28. BAL B 162/6842, testimony of Zbigniew Grędziński, 1972, 54–58. The eighteen-year-old son of Zofia Kur, Aleksander Kur, was shot and buried along with the three Jewish men. Grędziński, as village head, was threatened with execution for failing to report that Zofia Kur sheltered Jews, 44–48.
 29. AIPN Rz 358/48, testimony of Stefan Hejnas, 25–25v; testimony of Władysław Witek, 4–4v, 96–97.
 30. AIPN Rz, OKŚZpNP, II Ds. 28/70, testimony of Michał Ochalik, 23; AIPN Rz, OKŚZpNP, S 91/09/Zn vol. 1, testimony of Władysław Pieróg, 163; AIPN Rz 373/9, testimony of Władysław Witek, 83–85v.
 31. Archiwum Diecezjalne w Tarnowie (ADT), collection ARz 221/1, file 39, testimony of Jan Fereński (“Sęp”), 3.
 32. AIPN Rz 359/21, testimony of the accused village head, Jan Janas, 16–17.
 33. Bundesarchiv in Berlin-Lichterfelde (BAB), R 19/462, Ordnungspolizei Hauptamt, interrogation of Izek Zylberberg on 30 November 1942, 119, and 2 December 1942, 123–25, by Maj. Schwiager, commander of the First Motorized Gendarmerie Battalion stationed in Hża.
 34. “Ivans and Vasyls,” *Więści* (News), no. 6, 6 July 1944, 3–4.

35. AIPN Rz 354/73, testimony of the accused Mikołaj Leszeaga, 35–37.
36. AIPN Rz 275/4, testimony of Andrzej Andreasik, 4–7.
37. AIPN Rz 354/26, verdict by the District Court of Jasło on 13 May 1948, 119–23. Evidence about the informer was provided by Franciszek Pękala, the chief of the PP in Rzepiennik Strzyżewski. Pękala stated that this informer was later dispatched to Silesia after his cover was blown following numerous arrests of locals who gave him shelter.
38. BAL B 162/3835, testimony of Edward Sypko, 4733–34.
39. “Kronika cierpienia wsi” [A chronicle of the suffering of villages], *Wieś*, no. 8, 13 March 1943, 3–4. This issue speaks of “approximately a hundred peasants” murdered as a result of the provocations. Reporting on developments in District Radom, the same issue railed against peasant “gullibility” in opening their doors to gendarmes, Polish policemen and informers posing as partisans, who then arrest those same peasants; “Prowokacja, Łatwowierność i Nieszczęścia” [Provocations, gullibility, and tragedy], 2–3.
40. AIPN Rz 353/61, testimony of Bogdan Protter, 256–61.
41. Kotula, *Losy Żydów rzeszowskich*, 119.
42. AIPN Rz 358/59, testimony of Stanisław Kolbusz during the main proceedings, 280–310.
43. *Ibid.*, testimony of Ludwik Adamowicz. According to the testimony of Stanisław Golomo, Wojko’s wife had “complained to Skowroń with tears in her eyes that she was afraid that the Germans would kill them [the Wojkos] or burn them down, because they were in her house, and she begged him to take them away from her.”
44. For a discussion of peasant hunts for Soviet POWs and other targeted groups, see Tomasz Frydel, “Judenjagd: Reassessing the Role of Ordinary Poles as Perpetrators in the Holocaust,” in *Perpetrators: Dynamics, Motivations and Concepts for Participating in Mass Violence*, ed. Timothy Williams and Susanne Buckley-Zistel (University of Pennsylvania Press) (forthcoming).
45. AIPN Rz 34/61, vol. I, trial of PP Michał Strzapka, testimony of witness Wiktoria Wolińska (Berl), 183–88. The rescued family members included Wiktoria Wolińska, Salomon Berl, and Adela Berl.
46. Daniel Blatman, *The Death Marches the Final Phase of Nazi Genocide* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).
47. Kotula, *Losy Żydów rzeszowskich*, entry on 2 October 1942, 139.
48. Leszek Kołakowski and George Urban, “The Devil in History: A Conversation with Leszek Kołakowski,” *Encounter* (January 1981): 9–26; see also Vladimir Tismaneanu, *The Devil in History: Communism, Fascism, and Some Lessons of the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

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