

*‘An eternal tradition that commands to live’:  
Polish-Jewish Reactions to the Outbreak of World War Two*

**Giacomo Lichtner, 27 August 2019**

Ambassador Gniatkowski has spoken eloquently about the impact experienced by Poland at the outbreak of WWII. Poland’s people, its culture and landscape paid an immense and long-lasting price. Poland became a point of reference, for its government’s decision to go into exile, which secured the country’s institutional legitimacy, and for the violence of the occupation inflicted upon it. Notably, when Maréchal Petain and his post-war apologists sought to justify their collaboration with Germany, they used the fate of Poland as a scarecrow: *‘Après nous, la polonisation’* (‘after us, polonisation’) was one of their slogans.

In my time today, I want to concentrate on the experience of Poland’s largest minority, the Jews, for whom the outbreak of the war was the start of the *Shoah*, ‘the catastrophe’, or what globally is more commonly known as The Holocaust.

I will focus on the Jewish experience of the invasion itself, and of the days and weeks that followed. These are voices we can only hear today thanks to the efforts of a distinguished Polish-Jewish historian, Emmanuel Ringelblum. As early as October 1939, he set about collecting everything they could about the conditions of Warsaw Jews; his team collected everything from Nazi decrees to jokes heard on the street, from resistance pamphlets to music sheets... ..and dozens and dozens of diaries. In his own Ghetto notes, he reflected: *‘The Jews began to write. Everyone wrote: journalists, writers, teachers, public figures, the young and even children.’*<sup>i</sup>

Ringelblum was extraordinary but he was not alone. Diaries and smaller archives were kept across Poland, and many survived as a testament to the first form of Resistance performed by Jews during the Holocaust. These are *taonga* – now recognised officially by Unesco as Memory of the World.<sup>ii</sup>

**1. Early reactions:**

At the start of the war, Jews experienced the same range of reactions as all Poles. Although many remembered Hitler’s repeated genocidal threats, few imagined what that rhetoric might

mean in practice. Anti-Semitism was – after all - something Jews were used to factoring into their lives.

On the first day of the war, Chaim Kaplan – Director of a Jewish School in Warsaw – wrote: *“We are witnessing the dawn of a new era in the history of the world. This war will indeed bring destruction upon human civilisation. But this is a civilisation that merits annihilation and destruction.”* [...] *“As for the Jews, their danger is seven times greater. Wherever Hitler treads there is no hope for the Jews.”*<sup>iii</sup>

In the fog of war, emotions swung wildly and two days later Poles, of whatever religion or ethnic background, were hailing the intervention of Great Britain and France. In his 1946 memoir *Śmierć Miasta* (*Death of a City* - much later popularised as *The Pianist* by Roman Polanski’s film), Władisław Szpilman would write about that 3 September 1939:

*“it is difficult to describe the emotion we felt as we listened to that radio announcement. Mother had tears in her eyes. Father was sobbing unashamedly...”*<sup>iv</sup>

However, the spontaneous demonstration in front of the British Embassy, that same afternoon, was hurriedly dispersed by an air raid alarm.<sup>v</sup>

On 8 September, Poland’s second city - Łódz - fell to the Germans. Dawid Sierakow, barely 15, wrote at that time: *“All conversation stops; the streets grow deserted; faces and hearts are covered with gloom, cold severity and hostility. Mr Grabinski comes back from downtown and tells how the local Germans greeted their countrymen ...”* bedecking the Grand Hotel with garlands of flowers and with cries of Heil Hitler.<sup>vi</sup>

The fall of Łódz was a point of no return in the brief battle of Poland that intensified a mass exodus. Except that no-one quite knew *where* to escape to.

Young Mary Berg – writing in her diary on 10 October (her 15<sup>th</sup> birthday) – remembers being on holiday in the “lovely health resort of Ciechonek” the day the war started. Her father insisted they return immediately to Łódz:

*“... We spent most of our time in the cellar of our house. When the word came that the Germans had broken through the Polish front lines, panic seized the whole population[...] Less than a week after our arrival from Ciechonek we packed our necessities and set out once more. Up to the very gates of the city we were uncertain which direction we should take: Warsaw or Brzeziny?”*<sup>vii</sup>

Berg's family went to Warsaw – alongside most Jewish refugees – witnessing the devastation and flotsam common to accounts of most mass exoduses: withered fields; corpses strafed by Luftwaffe or overwhelmed by exhaustion; orphans and people driven insane... but also abandoned possessions, such as cars and fur coats. And two memorable images: a “gigantic cloud of dust raised by the columns of refugees” and - at night - “patches of red against the black dome of the sky.”<sup>viii</sup> They were in Warsaw on 23 September – Yom Kippur of the year 5700 – when the Germans bombed the Jewish quarter with particular ferocity: “In spite of the danger”, she writes, “my father and a few other men who lived in our house went to the neighbouring synagogue. [...]” A bomb hit the synagogue killing scores of worshippers.<sup>ix</sup>

The Bergs found shelter with Warsaw relatives, but many others simply had nowhere to go, and the story of evacuations followed by return is a common one. On 7 September, rumours spread that the Polish government had moved to Lublin and that all able-bodied men were to leave Warsaw to form a defensive line on the far side of the Vistula. Szpilman remembers his mother encouraging him and his father to go, but then silently smiling when they refused.<sup>x</sup> As survivor Jacob Litman remembers it: *‘There was nowhere to evacuate to’*.<sup>xi</sup> And Adam Czerniakow on the same day enters a single line: “Burdened with backpacks, all kinds of people set out for the unknown.”<sup>xii</sup>

Nevertheless, approximately 300,000 Jews found at least temporary refuge in the Soviet-occupied part of Poland. Although the Russians were anti-Semitic and deported many Jews to the far East, there was no comparison in Jewish minds between German and Russian occupation. Kaplan summed it up beautifully in his October 13 diary entry:

*“They [Jews] looked upon the Bolsheviks as redeeming Messiahs. Even the wealthy, who will become poor under Bolshevism, preferred the Russians to the Germans. There is plunder on the one hand and plunder on the other, but the Russians plunder one as a citizen and a man, while the Nazis plunder one as a Jew.”*<sup>xiii</sup>

For those who stayed in besieged Warsaw, there was some solace in being home, in being together. Many Jews remember contributing to the city's defence and relief effort.

On 13 September, the Jewish Citizens Committee received legal recognition by Mayor Starzynski, who named Adam Czerniakow its new Chairman. Working side-by-side with the City authorities filled Czerniakow with pride: “A historic role in a besieged city. I will try to live up to it.”, he inscribed in his diary.<sup>xiv</sup>

Little did Czerniakow know that that role – which he took after refusing the chance to escape Poland – would turn into the Chairmanship of the Warsaw Ghetto’s Judenrat: overseeing the administration of a city of 500,000 people, under impossible conditions and German authorities as volatile as they were oppressive.

On 23 July 1942, the day the Germans started deporting Jews to Treblinka from Warsaw, Czerniakow took his own life. The night before he had written:

*“Sturmbannführer Höfle called me into the office and informed me that my wife was free at the moment, but if the deportation failed she would be the first to be shot at a hostage.”<sup>xv</sup>*

And the final words of his diary are:

*“Worthoff exempted the students from the vocational school from deportation. The husbands of working women as well. He told me to take up the matter of orphans with Höfle. [...] It is 3 o’clock. So far 4000 are ready to go. The orders are that there must be 9,000 by 4 o’clock.”<sup>xvi</sup>*

However, between September and November 1939 Czerniakow’s diary is overwhelmingly concerned with the defence of the city first, and the day-to-day running of the Jewish community later. During sleepless nights he read Don Quixote, explicitly longing for a *caballero errante* (“an errant knight”),<sup>xvii</sup> but also implicitly – I would argue – reflecting on the meaning of madness. For instance, on 11 September the radio appealed to the population to start making lint bandages; Czerniakow quoted Cervantes: *“They will place a tasselled doctor’s cap made of lint upon his head, to dress some wound from a bullet passing through his temples, or leaving him maimed in arm and leg...”<sup>xviii</sup>*

Kafka may have been as useful as Cervantes to understand the pointlessness of trying to understand Nazi logic. The occupiers had thought went to the Jews before Warsaw had even surrendered:

*‘I refer to the conference held in Berlin today, and again point out that the planned total measures (i.e., the final aim – Endziel) are to be kept strictly secret.*

*Distinction must be made between:*

- 1. The final aim (which will require extended periods of time) and*
- 2. the stages leading to the fulfillment of this final aim (which will be carried out in short periods).<sup>xix</sup>*

These are months of randomness by design – of sudden arrests for no reason (e.g. all the 16 alternates of the Jewish Council); of requests for ransom while simultaneously blocking access to funds; of forbidding Jews to own tools yet requiring them for forced labour; of announcing and then delaying the formation of a closed ghetto... and so on. The German authorities themselves were waiting to work out exactly how to transition from *endziel* to *endlösung* (Final Solution).

There are two points I want to conclude with, following this brief and partial overview.

**2. Jews – especially in urban areas where integration was greater - experienced the invasion doubly, as Poles *and* as Jews.**

There is a perhaps understandable tendency to read the history of Judaism in Poland from the lens of the Holocaust, with the benefit of hindsight. In fact, 1000 years of Jewish civilisation in Poland cannot be defined only by the catastrophe that befell Polish Jews between 1939-45.

This millenary history complicates the story of Polish-Jewish relationships – which contains both triumph and tragedy, widespread anti-Semitism and yet remarkable tolerance: enough to afford Jews the cultural and religious independence necessary to make the Polish Commonwealth in the 18<sup>th</sup> C. the cradle of Early Modern European Judaic thought.

In 1939, 25% of Krakow and 33% of Warsaw were Jewish: how could they not share in the angst of their cities', their nation's defeat?

Hence the double injury of being victimised as Poles, and discriminated as Jews. Feeling foreign in their own homeland felt for many Jews like a betrayal, that time has not quite healed I think.

The Germans understood well the ethno-nationalist weaknesses of Eastern European statehood, and exploited. In a note dated 25 May 1940, for instance, Himmler himself laid out his plans:

*'In the treatment of the alien populations of the East we shall have to endeavor to recognize and nurture as many individual peoples as possible; that is, in addition to the Poles and Jews also the Ukrainians, the Byelorussians, the Gorals (Goralen), Lemcos (Lemken), and the Cashubes (Kaschuben). And if there are any other splinter peoples to be found anywhere, then these too.'*<sup>xx</sup>

At the core of this is a larger problem about the evolution of concepts of citizenship in Europe, and a lingering sense of a relationship between ‘blood’ and nationality: many countries still define nationality through the *ius sanguinis* – effectively a racial law – and others are discussing abandoning the traditional *ius soli* to enforce a vision of racial and cultural homogeneity.

### **3. Despair and Resilience coexist, and to understand Jewish experiences of the Holocaust we must acknowledge them not as counterparts, but as constant companions.**

Little did the Jews of Poland know that discrimination and concentration into ghettos would be only the horrible beginning of a much deadlier persecution. Hopelessness coexisted with attempts to carry on as normal, to draw strength from faith, from politics, or even from distant memories of atavistic persecutions.

I doubt they stopped to ponder about it then, but those efforts to just live were countless acts of resistance: not only the clandestine meetings, the efforts to keep religious observance going, to provide welfare for the most vulnerable; but also the weddings, the births, the music and, of course, the gathering of evidence. Had the Nazis’ genocidal hubris been successful, their efforts to dehumanise their chosen victims would still have failed because of those everyday actions.

I will leave the final word to Mary Berg’s diary, 23 November 1939:

“Today Uncle Percy celebrated his wedding in secret. The Gestapo has officially forbidden Jews to marry, but in defiance of that order the number of marriages is actually increasing. It goes without saying that all the marriage certificates are antedated. [...] To attend the wedding we slunk one by one like shadows down the few blocks that separate us from the ceremony.”<sup>xxi</sup>

And to Chaim Kaplan’s diary, March 10 1940:

“It is our good fortune that the conquerors failed to understand the nature and strength of Polish Jewry. Logically, we are obliged to die. According to the laws of nature, our end is destruction and total annihilation. [...] But even in this time we do not comply with the laws of nature. [...] The Jews of Poland – oppressed and broken, shamed and debased [still hold to] an eternal tradition that commands us to live.”<sup>xxii</sup>

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- <sup>i</sup> Sarah Wildman, Our Lost Warsaw Ghetto Diary <http://www.sarahwildman.com/our-lost-warsaw-ghetto-diary>
- <sup>ii</sup> Warsaw Ghetto Archives, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/memory-of-the-world/register/full-list-of-registered-heritage/registered-heritage-page-9/warsaw-ghetto-archives-emanuel-ringelblum-archives/>
- <sup>iii</sup> Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews 1939-1945: the Years of Extermination* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007) p.3
- <sup>iv</sup> Władisław Szpilman, *The Pianist* (London: Phoenix, 2002) p. 28; first published as *Śmierć Miasta* (Warsaw: Jerzy Waldorff, 1946)
- <sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*, 29
- <sup>vi</sup> Friedlander, p.4
- <sup>vii</sup> Laurel Holliday, *Children in the Holocaust and World War II: their Secret Diaries* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1995) p.210
- <sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*, p.212
- <sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*, p.216.
- <sup>x</sup> Szpilman, p. 30
- <sup>xi</sup> Jacob Litman, Testimony n. 3179, Visual History Archive of the Shoah Foundation, University of Southern California.
- <sup>xii</sup> Adam Czerniakow, *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow* (New York: Stein and Day, 1979) p. 73
- <sup>xiii</sup> Friedlander, p. 45
- <sup>xiv</sup> Czerniakow, p.73
- <sup>xv</sup> *Ibid.*, p.384
- <sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid.*, p.385
- <sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid.* p.90
- <sup>xviii</sup> *Ibid.*, p.73
- <sup>xix</sup> 'Instructions by Heydrich on Policy and Operations Concerning Jews in the Occupied Territories, September 21, 1939', [https://www.yadvashem.org/odot\\_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%201984.pdf](https://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%201984.pdf)
- <sup>xx</sup> Himmler on the Treatment of Ethnic Groups and Jews, 25 May 1940, document 1880, Yad Vashem; <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/himmler-on-the-treatment-of-ethnic-groups-and-jews>
- <sup>xxi</sup> Holliday, pp.220-221
- <sup>xxii</sup> Chaim Kaplan, Warsaw Ghetto Diary, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/warsaw-ghetto-diary-of-chaim-a-kaplan>