

Project InPosterum

PRESERVING THE PAST FOR THE FUTURE

Irene Tomaszewski and Tecia Werbowski. *Zegota*. Price-Patterson Ltd. Montreal, Canada.

Chapter 4. The Konrad Zegota Committee

The Underground movement in Poland arose spontaneously and regionally as soon as the German occupation began. Polish officers and soldiers who had not been put in prisoner-of-war camps buried their uniforms and their arms, then met secretly in their neighbourhoods to plan resistance.

Cells were composed of men and women from established political parties, from former army units, or – simply from their home districts. Eventually, all of these small units, – excluding the Communists on the extreme left and the fascists on the extreme right, united under one command. The military arm later became known as the Home Army – the *AK (Armia Krajowa)* – one facet of what became in reality an underground state.

Resistance was not new to Poles. From the late 1700s, to 1918, their country had been partitioned and occupied by the Germans, the Russians and the Austrians. But Poles had never accepted foreign rule, resisting, regardless of the cost. They resisted again, but no one at first expected the perversions and savagery that would be directed against the entire population.

Nor was it immediately apparent that this time Germany was determined to carry out the unprecedented biological destruction of entire nations, most notably the Jews. Even in the context of daily terror, it was not long before the special brutality directed against the Jews was noted. Reports appeared both in the Polish Underground press and in communiques to the West.

After the death sentence was decreed for anyone helping Jews, Poles were exhorted in clandestine publications to defy this "law," but initially, no general strategy to do so was developed.

By the summer of 1942, about a million of the Jews in Poland were dead. They had died of disease, starvation and random massacres, but after the German entry into the Soviet zone, they were systematically killed in mass executions.

For a long time, the leading members of the Jewish community and most of the Jewish population believed that their only hope lay in obeying German edicts until liberated by the Allies. It was hard to believe that the Germans planned the murder of an entire nation. The Germans kept their hopes alive with constant reassurances that those being deported were only being "resettled," and that once the required quota for resettlement was met, further deportations would stop.

Zegota. Chapter 4: The Konrad Zegota Committee

To reinforce their belief that they were only being resettled, Jews being transported were given extra rations of food and they were allowed to pack some belongings. The station at Treblinka was built complete with rest rooms and "Arrival" and "Departure" schedules. There were no departures. To further support this fiction, the Germans forced those who had been deported to write cards and letters describing their new and happy life in agrarian communities in the east.

But by 1942, there was little doubt among the leaders of the Polish Underground and the younger members of the Jewish Underground that the Germans planned nothing less than the extermination of the Jewish people.

That help to Jews had to be coordinated, organized and supported on a larger scale occurred seemingly at once and spontaneously to a number of Polish resisters. They realized that the support of personal friends, or unplanned and unsupported help of strangers, was far from enough. But more help would not be easy. By this time, the Polish population had been pauperized. Working for ridiculously low wages, limited to very small rations, and living in a police state, their ability to help was severely restricted.

Relentless terror and anti-Semitic propaganda were also taking their toll. With an ideology that turned every civilized concept of morality upside down, the Germans not only threatened with death all those who defied them but also rewarded those who cooperated with them. The Gestapo had paid informers from all ethnic groups, including *Volksdeutsche*, Poles, Ukrainians, Lithuanians and Jews, on its payroll. Some were motivated by racist ideology, some by greed and still others by threats to themselves or their families.

Organized crime, a kind of Mafia, also comprising elements from all ethnic groups, fed as it always does on the vulnerability of others. Then there were the marginal elements: the drunks, the punks and the moral and mental degenerates. All of them, collectively known as *szmalcowniki* – a derogatory term based on the Polish word *szmalec* – meaning lard – were responsible for the deaths of many Jews and of their Polish protectors. They also targeted members of the Underground.

The Jews had to be helped to escape from the ghettos and the certain death that awaited them. But just being on the Aryan side was a crime punishable by death, and the *szmalcowniki* were poised to exploit this situation for quick profits. Fighting this plague was one of Zegota's greatest challenges.

The idea of unifying the diverse efforts to help Jews was primarily the result of the efforts of two women, Zofia Kossak and Wanda Krahelska-Filipowicz. Kossak was a well-known, conservative Catholic writer, a member of the Catholic lay organization, the Front for Reborn Poland, and intensely involved on a personal level in assisting Jews. Krahelska-Filipowicz, who also personally sheltered Jews, was a Catholic Socialist activist of long standing and well connected to important members of the AK.

Zegota. Chapter 4: The Konrad Zegota Committee

While Kossak and Krahelska are generally credited with galvanizing a united front in the struggle to help Jews, they and the people they drew together were already deeply involved in this work, either at party levels, in community associations, or as individuals. The aim now was to unite all these forces and link them with the considerable Underground resources of the *AK*, and, just as important, to get funds from the Government-in-Exile in London and other sources.

Of vital importance also was to coordinate efforts with the Jewish Underground and thus establish a liaison with the Jewish community. This already existed at a party level, and contacts had already been made with the *AK* by the Jewish Fighting Organization (*ZOB*), a resistance group formed by the younger members of the Jewish Underground. Some of the Jewish leaders were already living on the Aryan side and the two most prominent, Dr. Adolf Berman and Dr. Leon Feiner, were invited to join in the first discussions of the Konrad Zegota Committee in Warsaw.

Who was Konrad Zegota? There was no such person. In the conspiratorial life of the Polish Underground, virtually everything had a code name – a cryptonym – and the Council for Aid to Jews was no exception. Clearly, no conversations about anything to do with Jews could be risked, and "Zegota" was used not only in discussions, but on all documents, receipts, and memos. In time, "Zegota" came to signify all activities involving help to Jews.

The first slate of officers of Zegota included Adolf Berman of the Zionist Poale Zion party as secretary; Leon Feiner of the *Bund* as vice-president (and later president); Julian Grobelny of the Polish Socialist Party as president; Tadeusz Rek of the Peasant Party as his deputy; Ferdynand Arczynski of the Democratic Party as treasurer; and Wladyslaw Bartoszewski and Witold Bienkowski of the Catholic Front for Reborn Poland as liaison directors. Zegota immediately set out to identify the most serious problems in rescue activities, to set up an over-all plan of action, and to recruit the people to implement it. Since all of the members were already in the Underground and active in helping Jews, they brought to Zegota their conspiratorial experience as well as their many contacts and skills.

The Council was divided into sections dealing with clearly identifiable needs: Legalization, Housing, Financial, Child Welfare, Medical, Clothing, Propaganda, and anti-*szmalcownik* activities. From its Warsaw base, the Zegota network expanded to include relief organizations in Cracow, Lwow, Zamosc, Lublin and the countryside.

The main links with the Polish Underground were through Aleksander Kaminski and Henryk Wolinski, both of the *AK*. Kaminski was editor of the *Biuletyn Informacyjny (BI)*, the most widely read Underground newspaper. The *BI* had correspondents in practically every part of Poland, some "foreign correspondents" in other occupied countries including Germany and, most important, a permanent correspondent in the Warsaw Ghetto.

Zegota. Chapter 4: The Konrad Zegota Committee

Wolinski was head of the Jewish Section of the Underground Bureau of Information and Propaganda. He was the principal *AK* contact for Arie Wilner, the Jewish liaison of *ZOB*, and later for the Jewish leaders in Zegota as well. Also noteworthy was Witold Bienkowski, a representative of the *Delegatura* (the Home Delegation of the Government-in-Exile). Bienkowski had argued passionately and convincingly that the *AK* was already equipped with the essentials of conspiratorial activities and should put its resources at the disposal of Zegota.

The Founders

Wanda Kraheńska-Filipowicz (1886-1968) was not new to Underground resistance activities. In 1906, when Poland was still partitioned among Russia, Germany and Austria, she took part in a bombing attack on the Russian governor-general of Warsaw, Georgii Skalon. The wife of a former ambassador to the United States, an editor of the art magazine *Arkady*, and a Socialist activist of long standing, she knew many people in the Underground, including members of the *Delegatura* (the office of the Delegate of the Government-in-Exile) and its military counterpart, the *AK*.

She used her influence to persuade both of them of the importance of setting up a central organization to help Jews, and to back it up with significant funding. Using the code name "Alicja," she had been in the Underground from the start and had begun hiding Jews in her own home early during the occupation. Among them was the widow of the Jewish historian Szymon Aszkenazy.

Zofia Kossak was, by comparison, a conservative nationalist. A well-known writer, she was a political opponent of most Jewish groups before the war and consequently was considered quite "anti-Semitic." An ardent patriot, Kossak joined the resistance at the very beginning of the occupation and was soon on the Gestapo's most-wanted list.

She changed her name almost as often as she changed addresses. In the Underground, she used the code-name "Weronika." Despite already being a target of an intensive Gestapo manhunt, she exposed herself to the added danger of helping Jews – influencing her children to do the same. Her motivation was moral, humanitarian and patriotic. She regarded the German crimes as an offence against man and God, and their policies an affront to the ideals she espoused for an independent Poland.

In the summer of 1942, when the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto began, Kossak published a leaflet entitled "Protest," which was printed in 5,000 copies. In it, she exhorted Poles, specifically those who might have felt antipathy towards Jews before the war, to come to their assistance. After the war, she stated, Poles and Jews could resume their political and ideological battles. Now, the only issue that mattered was moral. "Whoever remains silent in the face of murder becomes an accomplice of the murder," she wrote. "He who does not condemn, condones."

She despised hypocrisy and demanded of others no more than what she herself was doing. Her scathing attacks on the indifference of the West were also directed against the

Zegota. Chapter 4: The Konrad Zegota Committee

silence of western Jewry. She stressed that coming to the aid of the most persecuted people in history is an intrinsic part of Polish resistance to Germany, and condemned Catholics who professed their love of God but hated their neighbours.

The first chairman of Zegota was Julian Grobelny, a member of the Polish Socialist Party. Born in 1893, Grobelny had fought for Polish independence and social justice, participating in the Silesian Uprisings, and leading strikes and street demonstrations. After Poland regained independence in 1918, he served on the Lodz city council and continued his social welfare activism. In the 1930s, he contracted tuberculosis and retired to the country, where he and his wife operated a small farm. During his convalescence, he tirelessly organized help for agricultural workers who were unemployed in the winter. When war broke out, Grobelny immediately joined the resistance, resuming his old code name from the days of the Silesian insurrections – "Trojan."

Zegota's deputy chairman was Tadeusz Rek, born in 1906 into a peasant family. He became involved at an early age in politics as a member of the Peasant Party. He earned a law degree at the University of Warsaw and backed his social activism with his work as a writer and editor on many progressive journals. He was arrested in June 1940, sent to Pawiak Prison and then to Auschwitz. Released in November 1941, Rek, code named "Rozycki," returned immediately to his work in the Underground press. He was soon recruited by Zegota.

The treasurer of Zegota was Ferdynand Arczynski, cryptonym "Marek," a member of the Democratic Party and former editor of the Polish Daily in Cracow. Born in 1900, Arczynski was also a veteran of the Silesian Uprisings. He was tireless in his activities for Zegota, serving as treasurer, head of the Legalization Section, liaison with branches of Zegota in Cracow, Lwow and Lublin, and an unofficial, but successful, recruiting officer.

Representing the Catholic Front for Reborn Poland and heading the large and difficult Liaison Section were Ignacy Barski (code-named "Jozef"), a lawyer, and the very young Wladyslaw Bartoszewski ("Ludwik"). Barski personally undertook dangerous delivery missions to outlying areas such as Lwow and Lublin while Bartoszewski, who at 21 had already endured eight months in Auschwitz, directed the network of couriers. Most of the couriers were very young women, many of whom were caught, tortured, sent to concentration camps or killed in the course of their missions. None ever betrayed the organization.

The Jewish Representatives

The Jewish Underground had also organized relief and rescue efforts. Contact between Poles and Jews was maintained from the start of the occupation between people who had professional, political or social contacts before the war. The raising of the ghetto walls and then the sealing of the ghetto made the contacts more difficult. But they were never broken.

Zegota. Chapter 4: The Konrad Zegota Committee

A Jewish socialist party, called the *Bund*, and Polish socialist parties had maintained their links; the Jewish Communists kept contact with their counterparts on the Polish side; the other parties, ranging from the Zionist right and left and assorted centre and right, established contact through their various professional prewar associations. Youth groups, notably the Scouts, were another very important link.

In 1942, Dr. Adolf Berman, code-named "Borowski," was a member of a left-wing Zionist party and a director of CENTOS, a Jewish charitable organization dedicated to the care of children in the ghetto. After the formation of the Jewish National Committee that united six Zionist parties, it was decided that Berman should get out of the ghetto and concentrate on establishing Polish contacts to help Jews escape from the ghetto, and then survive on the Aryan side.

At the same time, Leon Feiner – code named "Mikolaj" – a lawyer and a leading member of the largest Jewish political party, the *Bund*, left the ghetto with the same objectives as those of Berman. Through his long association with Polish socialists, Feiner made contact not only with the AK, but with members of the Underground in the *Delegatura*, representing in Poland the Government-in-Exile. Feiner, who looked very much like a typical "Polish country squire" and armed with excellent forgeries bearing a Polish Catholic identity, was able to move around Warsaw with relative ease.

Zegota and the two Jewish groups formed a natural alliance. Both played an extremely active and important role in Zegota and brought to the organization workers from the Jewish Underground.

Zegota created "an organic bond between the Jewish and Polish action of relief for Jews" wrote Adolf Berman. In the most heavily policed, yet totally lawless, country in occupied Europe, Polish men and women risked torture and death to shield others; while Jewish men and women, themselves rescued, gave up their small measure of safety to go out again for those still trapped.

The Network

In October 1942 the *Delegatura's* official newspaper, *Rzeczpospolita Polska*, published the following announcement:

We have been asked to make it publicly known that the initiatives of a number of social organizations from Catholic and Democratic quarters have led to the organization of the Civic Assistance Committee, which will provide relief to Jewish people suffering from the results of bestial German persecution. As far as means and opportunities allow, and taking into account the living conditions in an occupied country, the Committee will try to bring relief to the victims of Nazi outrages.³³

This was the only public notice of the birth of Zegota. This announcement, revealing nothing except the existence of such a committee, was published at considerable risk. Had this information fallen into German hands, the Gestapo would have arrested and

Zegota. Chapter 4: The Konrad Zegota Committee

tortured as many people as required to uncover and break the organization. The idea of Zegota came into being because of individual humanitarian impulses, but its realization would not have been possible without an extensive network. Personalities, and they were without exception very strong personalities, were surrendered to principles. Individuals submitted to the collective, reaching out to expand the network horizontally. What little hierarchy there was, existed only to demand obedience to the discipline of the conspiracy. Most of all, the people in Zegota were not just idealists but activists, and activists are, by nature, people who know people.

As mentioned earlier, Wanda Krahelska-Filipowicz was well connected to both military and political leaders of the Underground. Aleksander Kaminski had contacts in the ghetto because of his pre-war activities as leader of the Section of Minority Groups in the Polish Scouts' Association. Henryk Wolinski, a lawyer, headed the Jewish Section of the Delegatura and had scores of Jewish friends and colleagues from pre-war days and in the Polish Bar Association. And Zofia Kossak was to prove invaluable in locating homes for women and children because of her close ties to the Catholic clergy as well as to the upper classes, especially the landed gentry. Irena Sendlerowa, one of their first recruits, was an administrator in the Warsaw Welfare Department, who already had an established wide network among medical and social workers.

The *Bund*, represented by Leon Feiner had long-standing contacts with Polish socialists, and Adolf Berman had extensive professional contacts – he was a noted psychologist – with Poles and with ghetto welfare workers in CENTOS. According to Berman, "The Jewish National Committee (a coalition of Zionist parties) had more than 100 cells involved in the relief and rescue of Jews, the majority of which were made up of Poles. Moreover... (in) the *Bund* ...the active workers were members of the *Bund* and Poles ...first and foremost Polish Socialists.³⁴

As we look at the membership of Zegota we see the same pattern throughout – social and political activists with a wide circle of friends and colleagues. Even the youngest members, Bartoszewski, 21, and couriers Maria Tomaszewska and Wanda Muszynska, 18 and 17, respectively, had a network either as students or as members of the Scout Association. Add to these, the Writers' Union, the Underground Journalists Association, the Democratic Doctors' Committee, and many others such as the railway, tramway and sanitation department workers' organizations that established contacts with Jewish friends either in the ghetto or in hiding, and Zegota had a good base for building an extensive network. Every one of these organizations was already actively involved in aid to Jews.

Zegota could not stop the murder campaign of the Nazi government. They could not intercept and help every Jew who escaped from the ghetto. They could not even guarantee the security of those Jews who did come under their wing. Nevertheless, they were able to rescue and succour thousands of people otherwise destined for death.

Miriam Peleg, a Jewish courier from Cracow, now living in Israel, said in a filmed interview that Zegota not only helped materially, but also gave people hope. For the first time in years, those who came in contact with Zegota felt that at last they were not alone

Zegota. Chapter 4: The Konrad Zegota Committee

³⁵ This sentiment was perhaps expressed more dramatically by two escapees, Pawel Rogalski and his wife, who recalled that soon after they came out of the ghetto, they chanced upon a copy of Zofia Kossak's "Protest." They can still recite from memory the words that gave them hope, and it was Zegota that provided them with the means to get them started with life on the Aryan side.³⁶

Zegota's headquarters at 24 Zurawia Street was the home of a Polish Socialist, Eugenia Wasowska, who worked closely with the *Bund*. It also doubled as a temporary shelter. One of the refugees hidden at 24 Zurawia Street was Ignacy Samsonowicz, who later married Wasowska, one of many marriages between rescuer and rescued, and between colleagues in the resistance.

24 Zurawia had "office hours" twice a week, when couriers could drop in to pick up or ask for documents or money, arrange for housing or medical help, get clothing, or arrange for food deliveries to Jews in hiding. They would also find out the date and time of meetings and transmit this information to the members. The office was administered by Janina Raabe, a friend of Zofia Kossak's who had studied book binding in Paris and was co-founder of the Democratic Party's underground press, and by Zofia Rudnicka, a lawyer.

Raabe and Rudnicka looked after funds, meetings, and contacts for Jews with Poles. They prepared reports to be sent to London, and wrote a newsletter to Jews and those hiding them. There were frequent personnel changes as people were arrested, killed, or, warned of danger, forced to lie low for a while. An incredibly large number of people from the AK, the Jewish Fighting Organization, and Zegota knew about Zurawia Street. Miraculously it was never raided, but there were some close calls.

Tadeusz Rek once approached the house when he realized that he was being followed. Without missing a beat, he walked past number 24 and knocked on another door pretending that he was looking for a room to rent. When he emerged, the shadow was still with him. He turned down another street and met Leon Feiner on his way to the same meeting. Rek greeted him loudly and effusively, like a friend he hadn't seen for several years. Then, arm on his friend's shoulder, he guided him to a nearby cafe for a stiff drink.

Meetings were held frequently. Over the course of the years, Grobelny, Arczynski, Berman and Feiner never missed one, except when they were in jail. Rek attended all but a couple, and Bartoszewski and Bienkowski, who alternated attendance between them, never missed. This sense of responsibility and discipline is noted frequently in war memoirs. Even children in clandestine schools rarely missed classes, and complained whenever teaching was temporarily suspended for reasons of security.

Since 24 Zurawia was on occasion under surveillance, other premises were available, including the homes of two seamstresses, an electrician, and various other members. Janina Bucholtz-Bukolska, for example, worked as a translator in a notary public's office during the war. In the midst of constant traffic, she allowed Basia Berman, Adolf

Zegota. Chapter 4: The Konrad Zegota Committee

Berman's wife, to keep her forged documents and money there, and to dispense them to her "clients." Berman had what was, in effect, an office within an office.

Perhaps the most unusual branch office was a fruit and vegetable kiosk operated by Ewa Brzuska, an old woman known to everybody as "Babcia" (Granny). Babcia hid Leon Feiner's papers and money under the sauerkraut and pickle barrels, and secreted underground books and pamphlets in various nooks and crannies. She always had sacks of potatoes or something ready to cover Jewish children who found themselves running from the police. Two of those little smugglers now live in Canada.

Julian Grobelny, Zegota's first chairman, was actively helping Jews before he joined Zegota. He headed an Underground cell composed mainly of Socialist friends of the *Bund*. His wife, Halina, worked with him accepting all the risks and responsibilities of their dangerous work. The Grobelny cell eventually had some 40 members, including Włodzimierz Garlinski, director of a quarantine department on the Public Health Board. Nothing could be safer for Jews than to be under quarantine, and although this could only serve as a temporary respite, it gave Grobelny time to look for other quarters. The mother-daughter team of Drs. Hanna and Zofia Kolodziejska, and some of their colleagues, freely donated their medical skills, while Sister Makryna of the Mariavite convent arranged housing.

Grobelny's long involvement in labour unions also gave him an edge. He prevailed upon his contacts with railway workers to transport some of his charges out of the city. Since virtually every train was checked, this means of travel was particularly dangerous, requiring special precautions.

When the Socialist Party entered the discussions for the formation of Zegota, Grobelny was an invaluable asset, not only for his great organizational skills, but for his ability to enlist help. One of his recruits described him as a great humanist, but he was not a person who asked for help; rather, he delegated assignments. To help a Jew could cost you your life, he used to say, so for the same life, you might as well help several Jews.

Zegota's policy was not to solicit help without revealing for whom it was intended and what the risks were. They agreed that it would be immoral to endanger another's life without consent. However, there were a few instances when this was done – in the case of children and out of desperation.

As chairman of Zegota, Grobelny brought the same qualities to the organization that he had used in his own cell. He expanded the network, organized the operations, and also played a personal role in many activities, especially those involving children.

Footnotes

³³ Władysław Bartoszewski and Zofia Lewin, eds. (*Righteous Among Nations: How Poles Helped the Jews, 1939-1945*. London: Earls Court Publications Limited, 1969) p. 690.

Zegota. Chapter 4: The Konrad Zegota Committee

³⁴ Waclaw Zajaczkowski. *Martyrs of Charity, Part I* (Washington DC: St. Maximilian Kolbe Foundation, 1988) pp. 70-71.

³⁵ *Zegota: Council for Aid to Jews in Occupied Poland 1942-1945*. Documentaries International Film & Video Foundation. Washington DC, 1998.

³⁶ Teresa Prekerowa. *Konspiracyjna Rada Pomocy Zydom w Warszawie, 1942-1945* (Panstwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warsaw, 1982) p. 52.