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THE ATTITUDE OF SIKORSKI'S GOVERNMENT TO THE TRAGEDY OF THE POLISH JEWS (1939—1944)

General Sikorski's Polish Government in France, sworn in on 1 October, 1939 in Paris, emphasized by its very existence the legal continuity of the authorities of the Polish Republic, as well as the principle of national unity based on democratic foundations and of unity in the struggle for the complete independence and security of Poland and other occupied states in Europe. The first declaration of the Government of National Unity, on 6 October, 1939, stated that its aim was the "rebuilding of a great and orderly Poland, which will be equally just in respect of all its citizens".¹

On 10 October, 1939 the government issued an amnesty decree for the former Brześć affair prisoners "with the aim of wiping out past indecision and of bringing about the complete unification of the nation".²

General Sikorski's orders to the army forbade any kind of political-party activity or discussion on topics relating to the causes and responsibility for the September defeat. However, the Polish press in France, whilst generally supporting the measures taken by General Sikorski's government, severely criticized the pre-war policy of both the National Unity Party and the National Party in relation to the Jewish population and also other religious and national groupings. This policy was criticized on plain humanistic grounds above all by the socialist "Robotnik" [Worker], the Democratic Party weekly "Czarno na białym" [In Black and White],

¹ M. Kukiel, *Generał Sikorski, żołnierz i mąż stanu Polski Walczącej* [General Sikorski, soldier and Statesman of Fighting Poland], Londyn 1970, p. 93.

² *Ibidem*.

and also the semi-official government organ, "Głos Polski" [Voice of Poland].

Through the mediation of couriers, neutral-stage centres and secret radio stations, General Sikorski received an enormous amount of information from Poland on the increasing extermination of Jews by the invaders there.

One of the first documents issued by Polish government centres was a pamphlet entitled *Tragedy of Polish Jewry*, published in Jerusalem at the beginning of 1940 by the Joint Committee for the Aid of the Jews of Poland. The contents of the pamphlet consisted of a report by A. Hartglas, President of the Zionist Organization in Poland and former Sejm deputy, and a report by M. Korner, member of the City Council of the capital city of Warsaw and former Senator.³

With the aim of launching nutritional aid for the Polish and Jewish population in Poland, on 15 January, 1940 the government passed a resolution calling for émigré and international funds to be released for food provisions for Poland. The food-supply campaign was sponsored by the former President of the United States, Herbert Hoover. Sikorski sent Dr Ludwik Rajchman to Washington in connection with this matter. Control of the nutritional-aid campaign, exercised alike by Polish and Jewish organizations, was taken over by the Commission for Polish Relief.⁴

Dr Ignacy Szwarcbard, a leading figure in the Jewish national movement, was appointed to the first National Council in Paris—the Polish parliament in exile—by the President of the Polish Republic, Władysław Raczkiewicz. Dr Szwarcbard, Szmul Zygielbojm, a Jewish socialist, and after the latter's death, Dr Emanuel Scherer, a distinguished figure within the Bund, sat on the second National Council. It is also appropriate to recall that from 3 September, 1941 the Minister of Justice in General Sikorski's government was Dr Herman Liebermann, one of the Polish Socialist Party's leaders of Jewish descent, whilst in the cabinet

³ See *Tragedy of Polish Jewry*, Jerusalem 1940.

⁴ K. Iranek-Osmecki, *Kto ratuje jedno życie. Polacy i Żydzi 1939 - 1943* [*He Who Saves One Life. Poles and Jews, 1939 - 1943*], Londyn 1968, p. 177.

appointed by Stanisław Mikołajczyk on 14 July, 1943, the Minister of Finance was Dr Ludwik Grosfeld, a socialist of Jewish descent.

During the first phase of the war aid for the Jews on the part of General Sikorski's government embraced : (i) a food-supply campaign, partly through the mediation of the Headquarters of the Union of Societies for the Care of Orphans and Abandoned Children (Centos), (ii) financial support chiefly for the Jewish intelligentsia, (iii) the establishing of contacts with families and organizations in the West, and informing world public opinion of the fate of the Jews. Sikorski's government informed the governments of friendly and neutral states of the fate of the Polish Jews through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Information. Through their own occasional bulletins and pamphlets these ministries informed the press agencies and radio stations of Nazi policy in respect of the Polish Jews. This purpose was served also by the so-called White Book of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, entitled *The German Occupation of Poland* (also in a French edition). The basis for the book was a note addressed by the Polish Republic government to the governments of the allied states on 3 May, 1941 when the Ministry of Information in London published a pamphlet entitled *Bestiality Unknown in Any Previous Record of History*.⁵ The Ministry of Information issued two volumes of the so-called Black Book. In volume II, entitled *The German New Order in Poland*, the introduction and six chapters are devoted to the plight of the Polish Jews. Among other matters these chapters deal with the orders of the occupying powers, murder and mass executions, confiscation of property, compulsory rehousing, social conditions prevailing in the ghettos, and the religious persecution of Jews.

On the whole the world did not accept the facts presented in the above-mentioned books. It treated them as a symptom of anti-German propaganda on the part of the Poles and Sikorski.

On the recommendation of the Prime Minister, the Polish ambassador to the See of Rome, Kazimierz Papée, several times interceded at the Vatican to induce a protest from the See of

⁵ S. Korboński, *Polskie państwo podziemne. Przewodnik po Podziemiu z lat 1939 - 1945* [*The Polish Underground State. A Guide to the Underground during the Years 1939 - 1945*], Paryż 1975, p. 127.

Rome against the Nazi crimes. Such intercession took place on 30 March, 1940 and 5 April, with Cardinal Maglione, Secretary of State, and with Monsignor Tardini and Monsignor Montini. Subsequently, on 17 May, 1940, Papée lodged with the Secretary of State a special memorial by General Sikorski for the Pope concerning the persecution of Poland's Jewish population.⁶ On 23 August, 1940 Papée lodged a verbal note at the Vatican on the persecution of Jews in Poland. He raised the matter anew in March, 1941 in a démarche lodged with the Secretary of State of the See of Rome and contained in a new memorial, the information included in which was later to be found in volume II of the Black Book.

The Polish government also attempted to launch aid for the Jews through the mediation of the influential Jesuit order, headed at the time by Father Włodzimierz Ledóchowski, General of the Order.

On General Sikorski's initiative members of the government and the National Council often appeared at public meetings, organized mostly in London, on the question of the plight of the Polish Jews. Amongst those who organized such meetings were the Inter-Associational Council of Polish Jewry in Great Britain, the Organizational Committee of the Representatives of Polish Jewry and the Anglo-Palestinian Club. Particular active in presenting the position of the Polish government on the Jewish question were the socialists Jan Stańczyk and Adam Ciołkosz and the Minister of Information, Professor Stanisław Stroński.

General Sikorski responded quite decisively to anti-Semitic pronouncements in London by former members of the National Radical Party and the National Party, whose mouthpiece was the magazine "Jestem Polakiem" [I am a Pole] suspended by the government on 15 May, 1941.

In April, 1941 General Sikorski was the guest of President Roosevelt in Washington. Part of the Jewish press in the United States gave Sikorski a very unfavourable reception in America. In "Congress Weekly", the organ of the American Jewish Congress, Jakob Leszczyński wrote, "Can we trust Sikorski, the proud, ar-

⁶ K. Iranek-Osmecki, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

rogant, aristocratic Polish general, more than we trusted Pilsudski, who lived with us for three decades on the barricades".⁷ Later in the same magazine Leszczyński emphasized, "The head of the Polish government in exile, at present in the United States, should appreciate that the delight of the anti-Semites is premature. He should take back to his government in exile the information that the Jews can be helpful, but they are also capable of being obstructive".⁸ Articles contained in "Der Tag" and other periodicals were written in similar vein.

On 17 April, 1941 Sikorski received in Washington a delegation consisting of representatives of the American Jewish Congress and the World Jewish Congress, the Committee for Polish-Jewish Affairs, the American Federation of Polish Jews and the Council of the American Jewish Congress. The delegation expressed admiration for the valour of the Polish Army and sympathy for the Polish nation. However, a memorial presented by the delegation to the general also recalled anti-Semitic manifestations (the articles of "Jestem Polakiem"). In a press survey of 19 April, 1941 the American Jewish Congress thus informed readers of the reaction of General Sikorski to the aforesaid memorial: "In reply General Sikorski stated that anti-Semitism is something alien to the Polish government. He is against it. Common suffering had created a spiritual bond between the Poles and the Jews [...]. Moreover, General Sikorski stated that the Polish government was guided by principles based on the five freedoms proclaimed by President Roosevelt. These are: freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom from fear of attack, freedom of information, freedom of the press and freedom from want. The slogan of the present government is: "Equal duties and equal rights".⁹

The memorial presented to General Sikorski, like the vast majority of articles from the American Jewish press during the years 1939 - 1941, concentrated more on manifestations of Polish anti-Semitism than on the German extermination of Jews in Poland. Thus Professor Olgierd Górka, head of the Department of

⁷ J. Leszczyński, *Our Wasted Opportunities*, "Congress Weekly", 28.03.1941.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ K. Iranek-Osmecki, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

National Minorities within the Ministry of Information and Documentation, and known for his humanistic attitude during the years of the Second Republic, held talks on 11 September, 1941 with Chaim Weizmann, president of the World Zionist Organization, in which he expressed concern that the world Jewish press, but especially in the United States, was doing little to actively inform world opinion of the Nazi crimes perpetrated against the Jews in Poland. President Weizmann agreed with Górk'a's viewpoint.¹⁰

Following the Third Reich's invasion of the Soviet Union, the Germans set about solving the "Jewish problem" in the eastern territories in the same way as they had done in the "Government General", encouraging the Poles to commit anti-Semitic acts. There was a strong aversion to the Jews amongst the Polish population in this zone. Apart from traditional pre-war prejudices, this was occasioned by the significant participation of Jewish intellectuals and workers in the Soviet apparatus of administration and repression. However, one should state that the Stalinist acts of repression also embraced members of the Jewish intelligentsia assimilated within Polish culture, and leaders of Jewish political parties, loyal to General Sikorski's government, and including the socialist "Bund", as well as a Polish Army officers and NCOs of Jewish descent. In instructions sent on 23 June, 1941 to Cyprian Ratajski, Government Delegate, General Sikorski, fearful of the consequences of anti-Semitic indoctrination by the Nazis, among other things wrote, "The Government places great emphasis on the necessity to warn society not to succumb to German incitement to active measures taken against Jews on the territory delivered from Soviet occupation. This is essential from the point of view of principles and tactics, since such measures would make it extremely difficult for the Government to reap any benefit from the situation in the international arena".¹¹ The Government Delegate informed General Sikorski of mass murders of Jews

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 183.

¹¹ *Armia Krajowa w dokumentach, 1939 - 1945 [The Home Army in Documents, 1939 - 1945]*, vol. II : Czerwiec 1941—kwiecień 1943 [June, 1941—April, 1943], Londyn 1975, p. 8.

committed by the Germans in the areas of Białystok, Brześć, Wilno, Lublin and Lwów.¹² In a report on the political situation dated 19 May, 1942, General Rowecki informed the government : "The transfer of the Lithuanian police to the Lublin region and Warsaw, following the extermination of the Wilno ghetto, together with news from the southern districts of the Government General and from the western annexed territories of the designation by the Berlin Gestapo of contingents of Jews doomed to execution, augur a general intensification of the campaign to annihilate the Jews. I report large-scale anti-Jewish excesses in the Ukraine, and the systematic murder and deportation of Jews in Lwów and the Jasło district and also in Łódź province".¹³

At a special session held on 6 June, 1942, the Council of Ministers discussed a draft note on this matter to the Allied states, prepared by General Sikorski and which partly read as follows : "The Polish Government communicates the above facts to the governments of the Allied states and maintains that they represent a new violation of international law and the Hague Conventions. The perpetrators of these crimes must be called to account, and this principle should become one of the principles of the Allies' war policy. All those in the Allied states who stand by the law and morality should give vocal support in the fight against the German terror. Public opinion in the free nations must be alerted anew to the German terror in Europe, and retortions on the part of the Allies should be recalled afresh and applied immediately wherever it is possible to apply them [...]. Awareness of retribution for crimes of terror must penetrate German public opinion and that of Germany's allies".¹⁴

General Sikorski gave a reminder of the tragedy of the Jews in his famous radio speech broadcast by the BBC on 9 June, 1942, in which he stressed : "In the ghettos people are being starved to death, mass executions are carried out, and even those suffering from typhoid are being shot [...]. The Polish Government is presenting the above facts for the information of the governments of

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 210.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 266.

¹⁴ Quoted after K. Iranek-Osmecki, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

the Allied states and world opinion [...]. The perpetrators of these crimes must be brought to account, and this principle should become the guiding rule in the war policy of the Allies [...]. Paying the profoundest tribute to the memory of those murdered and tortured, in the name of the Government of the Polish Republic I assure my country that the Polish Government is aware of all these crimes and shall not wipe one of them from the slate".¹⁵

On 27 September, 1942 during a meeting of the National Council, the Deputy Prime Minister Stanislaw Mikołajczyk recalled the tragic situation in the ghettos, expressing the fullest sympathy with an appeal from the Front for the Rebirth of Poland. In this we read : "The world gazes on this crime, more terrifying than anything history has seen, and is silent. The slaughter of millions of defenceless people goes on amidst a sinister universal silence. The butchers are silent, they do not boast of what they are doing. This silence can no longer be tolerated. Whatever its motives it is despicable. It is not permissible to remain indifferent in the presence of crime. He who is silent in the face of murder becomes the murderer's accomplice, he who does not condemn consents".¹⁶ In the name of the government Mikołajczyk joined this protest, along with the entire National Council.

"May the protest of the Government and the protest of the National Council, representing all sections of the Polish nation," Mikołajczyk stressed, "shake the conscience of the world, may it penetrate everywhere where decisions are made concerning the deployment of military operations, may it call forth more intensive efforts to save those still living, may it strengthen the desire on the part of the Allies for retribution in respect of crimes, serving as a warning to the thugs in question that they are being closely watched and recorded, that they shall not evade the punishment they deserve and will soon feel the heavy hand of justice on their shoulders."¹⁷

Accepting an invitation from the Jewish organizations of Great Britain, on 29 October, 1942 General Sikorski made a speech at the

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 186 - 187.

¹⁶ *Armia Krajowa...*, vol. II, p. 368.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 369.

Royal Albert Hall in London. Among other things he stressed that "Today's magnificent turn-out, in the cause not only of support for the Jews but also of support for the principles of morality and Christian integrity daily defiled by Hitler, is a clear proof for us that the Germans, who have committed a psychological error this time, have the entire civilized world against them [...]. As head of the government I can assure the Polish Jews that, in common with all Polish citizens, they shall reap all the benefit from the victory of the Allied Nations [...] as a soldier I give due warning to the German assassins that they they shall not escape just punishment for the mass crimes they have committed, above all in Poland, which has been and is the chief centre of resistance against Germanic barbarity".¹⁸

On 27 September, 1942 the Government Delegate in occupied Poland appointed the Konrad Żegota Provisional Committee, in which were represented the Catholic Front for the Rebirth of Poland, the Polish Democratic Organization and the Union of Polish Syndicalists ("Sprawa"), together with the socialist Liberty, Equality, Independence (WRN). On 4 December, 1942 the Provisional Committee was dissolved in favour of an expanded Council of Aid for Jewish People. Represented in the Council were all the main political currents of the underground Polish state (with the exception of the national radical camp and the communists) together with representatives of the Jewish community. The Council, financed by the Delegation, appealed directly to the government for increased subsidies. Apart from this there were demands for the government to appeal to the community for material and moral support for the Council's activity. The Council placed particularly strong emphasis on the need for a special pronouncement on the question of strict penal liability in respect of all those who committed acts of coercion in respect of Jews, or who cooperated in any way whatsoever in such acts. "It is essential to combat this phenomenon," we read in a letter of 29 December, 1942 from the Provisional Presidium of the Council to the Government Delegate, "in view of its wholesale nature and in view of the fact that opposition to it will contribute to greater efficiency in affording aid,

¹⁸ K. Iranek-Osmecki, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

and finally bearing in mind the need to put a stop to the moral confusion within the community".¹⁹

Before the appearance of the above-quoted letter, on 17 September, 1942 the Civil Defence Administration of the Government Delegation issued a special declaration concerning crimes committed by the Germans against Jews, and mentioning the total extermination of Polish Jews. "Not being in a position to actively combat this," the declaration reads, "in the name of the entire Polish community the Civil Defence Administration protests against the crimes committed against the Jews. All Polish political and social groupings are united in this protest. As in the case of Polish victims, personal responsibility for these crimes will fall on the executioners and their accomplices".²⁰ In a report entitled "The Jewish Question", sent to London by the Delegation on 21 November, the need was stressed to create substantial funds, partly through the help of Jewish people living in the Allied and neutral countries. The report criticized the appropriation of former Jewish property by some Poles.²¹ Through the energy of the Polish government and Jewish organizations, on 17 December, 1942 a joint declaration from the governments of the countries at war with the Axis states appeared simultaneously in London, Moscow and Washington, concerning responsibility for extermination of the Jews. Commenting on this declaration in a radio speech broadcast by the BBC, the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Edward Raczynski, pointed out, "It is tragic that the policy of extermination adopted by the German government in respect of the Jews has met with active assistance, or at least support amongst a significant proportion of the German people, whilst the remainder maintain silence".²²

In a regular report for the government for the period from 5 to 12 December, 1942, General Rowecki informed London, "In

¹⁹ T. Prekerowa, *Konspiracyjna Rada Pomocy Żydom w Warszawie 1941 - 1945* [The Underground Council of Aid for Jewish People in Warsaw, 1941 - 1945], Warszawa 1982, p. 365.

²⁰ *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej. Polacy z pomocą Żydom 1939 - 1945* [This Person is from my Homeland. Poles Helping Jews, 1939 - 1945], compiled by W. Bartoszewski, Z. Lewinówna, 2nd ed., Kraków 1969, pp. 919 - 920.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 921.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 1015.

the Warsaw Ghetto, street executions and the shooting of passers-by commenced again. Individual minor workshops employing Jews have also been liquidated. The so-called Toebbens sheds (sweat-shops for Jews working for German firms) have been totally cut off from the rest of the ghetto, and amongst the remainder of the Jewish population desperate plans for self-defence are in the making. News is coming from the provinces of the total liquidation of the ghettos in Kobryń, Łuniniec and Brześć, where all Jews were murdered on the spot, and of mass executions in Mołodeczno, Baranowicze and in all the towns of Little Poland and Volhynia".²³

Like many Home Army (AK) officers, General Rowecki was sceptical of the chances of an armed resistance movement in the ghettos, although he knew about the formation of the Jewish National Committee in October, 1942 and then in November of the same year of the so-called Co-ordinating Commission, which became the chief political body of the Jewish underground.

Contact with the Government Delegation was maintained on behalf of the Jewish National Committee by Dr Adolf Berman ("Borowski") and on behalf of the Bund by Dr Leon Feiner ("Berezowski"). On 2 December, 1942 the Jewish Combat Organization (ŻOB) came into being, headed by Mordechaj Anielewicz, Arie Wilner ("Jurek") became liaison officer between the ŻOB and the AK, maintaining permanent contact with the Jewish section at AK Chief Headquarters, run by Henryk Woliński ("Wacław"). In an order of 11 November, 1942 General Rowecki recognized the ŻOB as a paramilitary organization and ordered them to follow AK instructions concerning organization and methods of combat. The organization of assistance for the ŻOB was dealt with by Maj. Stanisław Weber ("Chirurg") and Capt. Zbigniew Lewandowski ("Szyrna"). According to Weber's information the ŻOB received from the AK : 1 light machine-gun with ammunition, 2 sub-machine-guns with ammunition, 10 rifles with ammunition, 50 hand pistols, 500 grenades, 400 grenade fuses, 175 kg of explosive materials of various kinds.²⁴ The Jewish Military Union (ŻZW) equip-

²³ *Armia Krajowa...*, vol. II, p. 394.

²⁴ K. Iranek-Osmecki, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

ped themselves with arms, food supplies and medical supplies through the aid of the Security Corps (an autonomous organization subordinate to AK Chief Headquarters). The aid operation was directed by a Security Corps officer, Maj. Henryk Iwański ("Bystry"). However, supplies for the ŻOB and ŻZW were very modest and did not satisfy the needs of the Jewish fighters. This circumstance arose chiefly from the AK's objective difficulties, but also from the disbelief of some of the AK officers as to the effective use of the arms they were supplying.

More effectual than assistance in supplying arms was financial aid. The government was allocating grants for aiding the Jews before the formation of the Council of Aid for Jewish People. These were modest, like the Delegation's entire budget, and in 1942 did not exceed one million zlotys. In 1943 the grants increased to 7,775,000 zlotys, and in 1944 to 34,250,000 zlotys. Apart from this the Polish government organized transfers to Poland from the West of funds raised by Jewish organizations and the allied governments. Today it is difficult to say how large these sums were. They exceeded several million dollars, a significant proportion of which represented aid for the Bund, the Jewish National Committee, the Rightist Poalej Syon, the Leftist Poalej Syon, the General Zionists, and the Central Committee of Zionists. Aid was also given to private individuals, as well as to inmates of concentration camps. One should also add that the Council of Aid for Jewish People, through the medium of the Government Delegation, received from the West 195,000 dollars from Jewish organizations, and 50,000 dollars from the Polish state budget. This represented but a small percentage of the sums set aside by the West for the Polish Jews.²⁵

The government and the Delegation as well as the underground political parties connected with the Council of Aid for Jewish People, began polemizing not only with the Nazi regime, but also with Polish chauvinism represented by, above all, the so-called national-radical movement.

Disputing General Sikorski's position on the need of help for

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 242.

the Jews and on their democratic rights in the future Polish state, "Szaniec" (Earthwork), in issue No. 15 (20) of November, 1942, rendered the Jews responsible for Stalin's crimes perpetrated on the Polish population, and questioned the right of Sikorski and the Polish government in London to express their opinion on the question of the future of the Jews in a reborn Poland. In issue No. 3 (93) of January, 1943 "Szaniec" cited the Jewish minority alongside foreign minorities as unquestionably hostile one which, along with the German minority, must vanish from Poland. Propagating the idea of assimilation, the editorial board of "Szaniec" "magnanimously" agreed to accept Jews into the Polish nation on an individual basis. Even after the liquidation of the ghettos in the Polish lands, another mouthpiece of the national-radical movement, "Zaloga" (Crew), wrote in issue No. 15 of October, 1943, "When the time for fighting comes, remember, we must not allow treacherous minorities to decide on equal footing with us the fate of the country." The position presented above was contested by the pro-government press representing the socialists, Peasant Party followers, syndicalists, Pilsudskiites, Democratic Party members, and the centre-national liberal circles associated with the League of Work.

General Sikorski's government and then Stanislaw Mikolajczyk's government fought against blackmail being carried on by collaborators at the expense of the Jewish population. For ultimately both Poles and Jews were victims of blackmail. A special section was created within the Council of Aid for Jewish People to counteract blackmail. It issued thousands of leaflets in which it denounced these "szmalcownik", ready to reveal the hiding-places of Jews to the Nazis. Later the leadership of Underground Combat and the Special Courts punished traitors and blackmailers with death sentences. On 11 March, 1943, in the columns of "Rzeczpospolita Polska", a statement appeared from the Leadership of Civilian Combat, which partially read, "There exist individuals devoid of honour and conscience, recruited from the criminal world, who have set up a new source of income for themselves through blackmailing Poles sheltering Jews, and Jews themselves [...]. The Leadership of Civilian Combat gives warning that cases of blackmail of this sort are being recorded and will be

punished with the full severity of the law, as far as is possible forthwith, and in any event in the future.”²⁶

In a proclamation to the Polish nation on 5 July, 1943, the “Leadership of Underground Combat” gave a reminder that “The Special Courts will energetically prosecute financial blackmail and the defrauding of money under cover of ‘attempts to secure the release’ of imprisoned or interned Poles, as well as financial blackmail of Jews in hiding.”²⁷ Consistent with this announcement, on 7 July, 1943 the Special Court in Warsaw sentenced to death and loss of public and civil rights Jan Pilnik, *szmalcownik*.²⁸ In the view of Władysław Bartoszewski, the eminent historian of Polish-Jewish relations during the years of the Second World War, “The personal diversion section of the Leadership of Underground Combat for the city of Warsaw alone issued several dozen death sentences (in the course of seven months in 1944, for instance, these numbered over sixty) in respect of Nazis and their informers, engaged in various forms of oppressing and tracking Jews, and Poles co-operating with Jews. Similar operations were undertaken independently by the AK Diversional Command and also by the People’s Guard, later the People’s Army”.²⁹ The Special Courts issued death sentences in respect of blackmailers in Cracow, Nowy Sącz and other towns. Neither were they inactive in the countryside.

The war drove into the forest not only ideological partisans, but also the criminal world, which organized pillaging raids on estates, wealthy peasants and Jews in hiding. These looting parties often impersonated the AK. On 7 February, 1944 Polish society was informed by the Government Delegate that the Special Courts had been given authority to prosecute criminal offences as well, and to impose penalties up to and including the death penalty. Criminals caught red-handed in acts of banditry and blackmail were immediately disposed of on the spot and their names announced in the underground press.³⁰

²⁶ “Rzeczpospolita Polska”, No. 4/5, 11.03.1943.

²⁷ K. Iranek-Osmecki, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

²⁸ “Biuletyn Informacyjny”, No. 37(192), 16.09.1943, p. 1.

²⁹ *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej...*, p. 59.

³⁰ “Rzeczpospolita Polska”, No. 2, 7.02.1944.

Icchak Cukierman, ŻOB commander after the death of Mordechaj Anielewicz, informed the AK Command in November, 1943 of the slaughter by a gang of a ŻOB group in the village of Starzyn in the Koniecpol district. Cukierman emphasized that the local population was well-disposed towards the group and gave them help. The murders were carried out by the detachment of Second Lieut. Leon Szymczewski ("Orzeł"). After the facts had been established by the Kielce Region Court, AK Second Lieut. "Orzeł" was sentenced to death. The sentence was carried out in June, 1944. Several bandit raids on Jews in hiding were organized by detachments of the National Armed Forces, something which met with sharp criticism from AK Commanders and the government.

After the radio speech by Edward Raczyński condemning Nazi crimes on 19 December, 1942 Ambassador Papée, on General Sikorski's instructions, lodged another verbal note in the Vatican, together with a note from the Polish government, on the persecution of Jews. Apart from this, President Raczkiewicz, on hearing the news of mass exterminations of Jews, sent, on 3 January, 1943, a letter to Pope Pius XII, in which he requested intervention to put a stop to the Nazi crimes. The letter read partly as follows: "The extermination of the Jews—including many individuals Semitic by race, but Christian in faith—has proved to be the first attempt to put into practice the systematic and almost scientifically organized slaughter of a nation".¹¹

The main documents issued by the Polish government in defence of the Jews were published in March, 1943 in the brochure "The Mass Extermination of Jews in Germany Occupied Poland". Earlier, on 7 January, the National Council in London approved an appeal to the Allied States, agreed by General Sikorski's Cabinet and calling for the adoption of effective means to curtail the German crimes, including reprisal air raids. The initiator of the appeal was Zygielbojm.¹²

¹¹ K. Iranek-Osmecki, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 195.

In December, 1942 Jan Kozielowski (pseudonym Jan Karski), an emissary from Professor Jan Piekalkiewicz, Government Delegate, arrived in London. Before leaving Poland he had talks with Jewish leaders, with Leon Fajner (Berezowski) of the Bund and Dr Adolf Berman, activist within the Leftist Poalej Syon. "Our entire people," Fajner told Karski, "will be destroyed. A few may be sawed, perhaps, but three million Polish Jews are doomed. This cannot be prevented by any force in Poland, neither the Polish nor the Jewish Underground. Place this responsibility on the shoulders of the Allies. Let not a single leader of the United Nations be able to say that they did not know that we were being murdered in Poland and could not be helped except from the outside."³³

Adolf Berman added to this declaration : "Germany can be impressed only by power and violence. The cities of Germany ought to be bombed mercilessly and with every bombing, leaflets should be dropped informing the Germans fully of the fate do the Polish Jews, and we ought to threaten the entire German nation with a similar fate both during and after the war. We do not believe and do not aim at a slaughter of the German people but such a threat in the only possible way to check the German atrocities. Such a warning backed up by force might frighten the German people into putting enough pressure on their leaders to make them change their practices. Nothing else will."³⁴ Kozielowski-Karski's interlocutors called for public executions of Germans taken prisoner and redemption of some of the Jews from the Germans. They insisted that the Jewish leaders in Great Britain and the United States proceed to all the more important English and American Government offices and by hunger-strike force some action out of the democratic countries in defence of the Jews.³⁵

Kozielowski-Karski—who had observed life in the ghetto at first hand—presented his own remarks, the Government Delegate's appraisal and the demands of the Jewish leaders to the Deputy

³³ J. Karski [J. Kozielowski], *Story of a Secret State*, Boston 1944, p. 323.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 325 - 326.

³⁵ K. Iranek-Osmecki, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

Prime Minister Stanisław Mikołajczyk, Edward Raczyński, the leaders of Great Britain's political parties, editors of leading British periodicals, and to Prime Minister Sikorski after his return from the United States.

On 2 December, 1942 days of Polish mourning were organized in both the Americas, as well as a 15-minute protest strike. Nine allied states jointed the appeal for mourning from the Jewish Agency in Palestine. In Sweden all the bishops signed a protest against persecution of the Jews.⁸⁶

During a third visit to the United States, which took place between 19 December, 1942 and 10 January, 1943, General Sikorski once more represented the tragedy of the Polish Jews to the American administration.⁸⁷ He also raised the issue in talks with the president of the Council of the American Polish Community, Franciszek Świetlik. The minutes of these talks, held on 6 December, 1942, read, "General Sikorski approves of the unanimity over the resolution protesting against German atrocities towards Polish Jews, not only from the point of view of Christian ethics, but also as a political move. General Sikorski recommends the official announcement by Censor Świetlik of this resolution to the leading Jewish organizations, which is to say to the American Jewish Congress, by World Jewish Congress, the American Jewish Committee, and also the Federation of Polish Jews".⁸⁸

Whilst the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto was in progress, on 1 May, 1943 the Jewish National Committee, via a Government Delegate, sent a tragic telegram to the western Jewish leaders : "We cannot understand your silence. We have sent five telegrams without a reply, despite appeals and alarms no funds whatsoever are coming in. Why is Joint not sending any money ? We can still save thousands of Jews, women and children from annihilation and certain death. We must have substantial funds. Raise the alarm at once to Joint and all other Jewish organizations. We must have

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 200 - 201.

⁸⁷ See J. Lipski, E. Raczyński, S. Stroński, *Trzy podróże gen. Sikorskiego do Ameryki* [*General Sikorski's Three Trips to America*], Londyn 1948.

⁸⁸ Instytut Historyczny im. gen. Sikorskiego w Londynie. Prezydium Rady Ministrów, 7/18.

a hundred-thousand dollars to save the remnants of the Jews. We wait for your help".³⁹

General Rowecki informed London on 4 May, 1943 of the rising in the Ghetto in the following words : "On 19 April Waffen-SS divisions together with auxiliary formations of Lithuanians, Latvians and Ukrainians entered the Warsaw Ghetto with the aim of final liquidation. They were attacked by the Jewish Combat Organization, which held its ground at previously prepared positions until 23 April. The Germans used tanks and planes simultaneously. One tank was burnt out. During 23 - 28 April the resistance continued in the form of guerrilla street fighting, mainly at night. From 28 April the fighters put up several days' resistance in different fortified buildings, but this has now been broken. The main weapon of the Germans is systematic burning of the Ghetto, which is still burning today. Since 3 April, 14,000 Jews have been taken away for disposal, 3,000 have been burnt to death, and about 2,000 have been murdered on the spot. The figures grow with the liquidation of particular hiding-places. Our armed assistance to the Jews will be described in a special report for the exclusive attention of N. W. Headquarters".⁴⁰

At the same time, the Jewish organizations in Poland sent the following appeal to London : "There is great excitement throughout the city. The population of Warsaw watches in admiration and with distinct goodwill towards the fighting Ghetto. We demand immediate retaliation. You must insist that the International Red Cross visits both the ghetto and the death camps at Oświęcim, Treblinka, Bełżec, Sobibór and Majdanek, and other concentration camps in Poland".⁴¹

Through the radio station "Świt", the chief of the Leadership of Civilian Combat, Stefan Korboński, had informed the Polish government in London of the rising in the Ghetto before General Rowecki. These are some of his telegrams :

"20 April, 1943. Yesterday the Germans commenced extermination of 35,000 Jews in ghetto here. The Jews are defending themselves, shots and grenade explosions heard. The Germans

³⁹ *Armia Krajowa...*, vol. II, pp. 2 - 3.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 3 - 4.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 4

used tanks and armoured cars. They have suffered losses. Fire in several places. Speak to ghetto today.

21 April, 1943. Resistance in ghetto continues. Shots, explosions heard all night, fire in places.

28 April, 1943. Fighting in ghetto continues. The Germans burning building after building".⁴²

On the fifth day of fighting in the Warsaw Ghetto, on the "Aryan" side of Warsaw a proclamation was distributed written by Ignacy Samsonowicz, activist of the Bund, and representing an appeal by the Jewish Combat Organization to the Polish population : "A fight is going on for our liberty and yours. For yours and our—human, social, national—honour and dignity. We shall avenge the crimes of Oświęcim, Treblinka, Bełżec, Majdanek ! Long live the brotherhood in arms and blood of fighting Poland ! Long live liberty ! Death to the executioners and butchers ! Long live the fight to the death with the invader !" ⁴³

"Biuletyn Informacyjny", the AK organ, reacted to the ghetto uprising with respect and admiration. "The spirit of the coming times," wrote the unknown author of an introductory article, "demands that mankind be delivered permanently from the system of collective mass murder, whoever wishes to resort to it, otherwise the Second World War shall be lost and the world shall not escape a vicious and bloody circle. Until the time when a reborn Republic restores complete security to this part of Europe, along with true liberty and the ascendancy of our old European culture, it is our solemn Christian duty to help the fugitive Jews from the burning Ghetto".⁴⁴

In accordance with the suggestion of his Cabinet, General Sikorski decided to inform the world, by means of BBC radio, of this new German crime : "On 19 April at four in the morning, the Nazi executioners, using methods already known to us, set about the 'liquidation' of the remnants of the Warsaw Ghetto, where tens of thousands of Jews were still vegetating. Having shut off all the exits, they invaded the Ghetto in armoured cars and light tanks, so as to finish off the remnants of men, women and children

⁴² S. Korboński, *op. cit.*, p. 138 - 139.

⁴³ *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej...*, pp. 925 - 926.

⁴⁴ "Biuletyn Informacyjny", No. 17, 29.04.1943.

with the aid of machine-guns. Driven to despair, the Jewish population put up heroic armed resistance. The fight has continued since then. I ask my fellow countrymen to give all the help and protection they can to those being slaughtered, and at the same time, before all mankind, which has maintained silence for too long, I condemn all of these atrocities".⁴⁵

The socialists—the leading force within the Council of Aid for Jewish People—thus reacted to the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto : "To the Jewish workers and employees, who in the face of inescapable death determined to perish with a weapon in their hands rather than to submit passively to brute force, we send brotherly salutations and the assurance that their action will not die away without echo. It will become part of the legend of fighting Poland, a common achievement of the Polish people, an achievement upon which the edifice of a reborn Republic will be raised [...] Calling for the speediest external attack on the German might, let us strengthen our efforts in preparing a general Polish uprising, which, together with the Allied offensive, will deal the mortal blow to totalitarianism in all its shades".⁴⁶

In an article *Gloria victis* printed in the daily underground paper "Nowy Dzień" [New Day], Aurelia Wyleżyńska remarked, "The defence of the Nalewki district will pass into history alongside the defence of Saragossa, Alcázar, Westerplatte, Stalingrad, and every other place held with blood [...] The burnt offerings, both literally and figuratively, take their leave, but the civilized [world] holds them in glorious remembrance".⁴⁷ Articles in similar vein were written in "Głos Demokracji" (The Voice of Democracy), the underground paper of the Polish Democratic Party, and in the papers of the Polish Workers' Party. Amongst émigré journals, the tragedy of the Jewish population in Poland was most penetratingly presented in "Nowa Polska", edited by Antoni Słonimski in London, and in the bulletin "Poland Fights", edited by Aleksander Hertz.

The most important form of assistance for the fighting ghetto did not consist of declarations, of financial grants or of the di-

⁴⁵ K. Iranek - Osmecki, *op. cit.*, pp. 212 - 213.

⁴⁶ *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej...*, p. 928.

⁴⁷ "Nowy Dzień", No. 504, 14.05.1943.

verse activity of the Council of Aid for Jewish People, but of armed assistance for the Jewish fighters. In accordance with an order from General Rowecki, a plan was worked out for a relief attack beneath the ghetto walls two months before the commencement of military operations. The plan, worked out by an officer of the Diversion Command of the Warsaw District of the AK and accepted by the District's Commanding Officer, was jointly agreed with representatives from the ŻOB. It is also worth recalling that at the end of 1942 the ghetto detachments of the People's Guard, directed by the Polish Workers' Party, were absorbed into the ŻOB.

The plan for the operation was to use chiefly a forty-man detachment of engineers under Capt. "Chwacki" and reserve detachments. The task of the engineers' detachment was to breach the ghetto wall from Bonifraterska Street, by which means detachments of the ŻOB and the Jewish Military Union were to break through from the Braner factories and a brush-making shop. The operation did not produce the desired results.⁴⁸ The breach in the wall from Bonifraterska was made, and a few Germans and three Polish policemen were killed. The Germans concentrated considerable forces in the area where the fighting was taking place and separated those fighting on either side of the wall. Later, German detachments in the vicinity of the Ghetto were several times attacked by small combat diversion units from the Warsaw District of the AK and the Command Detachments of the AK Chief Headquarters Diversion Command. Amongst the later, the boy-scout Storm Group OS "Jerzy" received the assignment of destroying a German gun position bombarding the Ghetto through the gates in Bonifraterska Street. This operation was called off after the fighting in the Ghetto had turned into the defence of isolated pockets of resistance.

"Soldiers of the Warsaw detachments of the AK," stresses Tomasz Strzembosz, eminent historian of the history of the resistance

⁴⁸ T. Strzembosz, *Akcje zbrojne podziemnej Warszawy 1939 - 1944* [Armed Action in Underground Warsaw, 1939 - 1944], 2nd ed., revised and enlarged, Warszawa 1983, p. 286.

movement, "made their way inside the Ghetto by way of the sewers, supplying arms and explosive materials to the insurgents and helping dozens of inhabitants out of the besieged quarter".⁴⁹ Also taking part in the armed operation in the ghetto wall area in April was the Special Group of the Chief Headquarters of the People's Guard, led by "Jacek", Franciszek Bartoszek. In another operation, details of which are not known, but which took place on 22 April in the vicinity of Bonifraterska Street, the participants were taken prisoner and 35 Poles were shot on the spot by the Germans. The Socialist Combat Organization and the RPPS People's Militia took part in several operations. A SOB group (Leszek Raabe, commander, Jan Pohoski, Szymon Joffe, Maciej Weber, Stanisław Zielenkiewicz, and Jan Roszewski) twice in April, 1943 attacked German sentry-posts, once in the Muranowski Square district, and again in the Powązkowska Street district. On 22 April the German sentry-posts at the corner of Bonifraterska and Franciszkańska Streets came under fire from a combat group of the RPPS People's Militia led by Władysław Andrzejczak ("Antek").⁵⁰

The above-mentioned operations were difficult and risky for the Polish underground soldiers, in view of the shortage of arms and the lack of experience in the sphere of diversion. They were an act of moral solidarity with the fighting Ghetto. As General Jürgen Stroop's reports indicate, the operations represented a real threat to the German forces liquidating the Ghetto.

Bringing Jews out of the quarter—in flames—via the sewers had vital practical significance. One successful operation of this kind was carried out on 28/29 April, at the corner of Ogrodowa and Żelazna Streets, at the inspiration of the Provincial Committee of the Polish Workers' Party and the Chief Headquarters of the People's Guard. Also taking part in operations of this kind were soldiers of the SOB, members of the People's Provincial Council, and above all, soldiers of the AK, who twice brought Jews out from the Ghetto through the manholes in Sienna and Krochmalna Streets. The operation in Sienna Street was led by Chief of Staff of the Warsaw District of the AK, Maj. Stanisław

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 286.

⁵⁰ See *Armia Krajowa...*, vol. III, Londyn 1976, insert

Weber ("Chirurg"). The assistance of the Security Corps—an organization co-operating with the AK for the Jewish Military Union—was of the greatest significance. On 27 April, a Special Detachment of the Security Corps broke through into the Ghetto in the Muranów district, and after fighting the so-called "battle of Muranów" together with the ZZW and ŻOB, during which Maj. "Bystry" (Henryk Iwański) was seriously wounded and several of his soldiers killed, retreated from the Ghetto by means of a tunnel under Muranowska Street, together with Jewish fighters and a small group of civilians.

On 11 May, 1943 President Władysław Raczkiewicz and General Władysław Sikorski received a letter from Szmul Zygielbojm, after sending which this worthy member of the National Council of the Polish Republic committed suicide. The letter reads : "Responsibility for the crime of slaughtering the entire Jewish population in Poland rests above all with the assassins, but indirectly it also falls on mankind as a whole. The Nations and Governments of the Allied States, who to this day have not managed any concrete action to put an end to this crime, have, through their idle contemplation of this slaughter of millions of defenceless and maltreated children, women and men, become its accomplices. I should also state that although the Polish Government contributed in very large measure to moving world opinion. However, not sufficiently. However, it did not manage anything uncommon enough to match the scale of the tragedy taking place within Poland [...] I cannot remain silent and I cannot live, whilst the remnants of the Jewish people in Poland, whose representative I am, perish. My companions in the Warsaw Ghetto died with a weapon in their hands in a last heroic outburst. It was not given to me to die like them, with them. But I belong with them, in their mass graves".¹

In connection with an appeal by Zygielbojm that the Polish government at once commence appropriate diplomatic and propaganda activity to save the Jews who were still alive, on 20 December, 1943, and therefore after General Sikorski's tragic death, the National Council accepted a 12-point programme passed on

¹ K. Iranek-Osmecki, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

the initiative of its members, Dr Emanuel Scherer, Jan Szczyrek, Arkadiusz Bożek, Adam Ciolkosz, Bogusław Kożusznik, Mieczysław Szerer, Józef Beloński and Adam Pragier. Alongside a number of practical measures aimed at helping the Polish Jews, at point 12 we read : "The National Council expresses the deepest esteem for the heroic armed battle fought in the Warsaw Ghetto by the Jewish population, and pays tribute to the memory of the combatants who died in that battle. The National Council also expresses its deepest esteem for all the Poles who came to the aid of the armed battle in the Warsaw Ghetto, and who, at the risk of their lives, gave and give shelter to the remaining Jews. The National Council appeals to the Polish population in Poland not to spare themselves in continuing to save and keep alive the brother people of our state".⁵²

As Marek Edelman, member of the ŻOB Chief Headquarters, emphasizes, the Ghetto uprising was an uprising for dignity and freedom in life. All adherents of this principle must respect any human impulse towards liberty and truth. One such impulse was the blazing Warsaw Ghetto forty odd years ago.

(Translated by Phillip G. Smith)

⁵² *Ibidem.*