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# Trzcianne – a Case Study

## The Polish-Polish war over Jews in witness accounts

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**Abstract:** Łukasz Konopa endeavors to reconstruct the process of the annihilation of Trzcianne, a town where the Jewish population was dominant before 1939. This case study is based on ethnographic interviews conducted presently with members of the Wasilewski family, the Righteous among the Nations, who both witnessed and participated in the events. The paper also refers to the accounts presented after the war by the surviving Jews and witness testimonies given during the trial conducted in 1950-51 against a few Poles accused of murdering Jews. In the course of his analysis, the author reveals the silence and secrecy surrounding the fact that some Poles were involved in the murder of Jews, whereas those who risked their lives to help Jews were punished by their Polish neighbors after the war. The shameful episodes in the past of a small town in the Podlasie region were deleted from the local historical discourse.

**Keywords:** ethnographic interview; the Holocaust; the Righteous; memory; denial; silence; oral history.

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Trzcianne (Yiddish: Trestiny) is located in the Podlasie region, in the vicinity of Białystok, near the Biebrza Basin. Its population is around 600 (“Witryna gminy Trzcianne,” n.d.). The Trzcianne Days festival, combining recreation, sports and an exhibition of local crafts (Maroszek & Studniarek, 2004, p. 347), has been held there since 1999. Since 2001, the municipality has also co-organized the Polish Championship in Mowing Marsh Meadows for Nature, colloquially named the “marsh haymaking.”

Before World War II, the population of Trzcianne exceeded 2,000, a decisive majority of which was constituted by Jews.<sup>1</sup> In September 1939, Trzcianne found itself in the territory conquered by the Red Army and incorporated into Western Belarus. From June 1941 to August 1944 Trzcianne was a part of the Białystok District (German: *Bialystoker Bezirk*) established by the Germans. It was during the German occupation when the town was practically annihilated. In June 1941 in the nearby village of Zubole, the Germans shot and killed 600 Jews (Datner, 1966, p. 20) and burned down the residential buildings. They also established an “open ghetto” in Trzcianne. There are no details of how the ghetto operated there. What is known, however, is that there were a number of open ghettos in the Białystok District. They were established on account of the destruction caused by the war, or “deliberate criminal acts of arson by the occupier” (Datner, 1966, p. 14). It was easier to enter and leave open ghettos than it was in the closed ghettos, but the traffic was often

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<sup>1</sup> I did not manage to find any official data on the exact size of the population of Trzcianne before the war. The sources I did find vary significantly (from 1,300 to 4,000 people). What is certain, however, is that the majority of the population of Trzcianne was Jewish. According to different sources, the number of Poles ranged from “several families” to “a few dozen people.” The numbers I consider most reliable and quote in this paper come from the paper by Szymon Datner on the extermination of the Jewish population in the Białystok District (Datner, 1966).

curbed by humiliating restrictions.<sup>2</sup> The residents of all open ghettos were forbidden to visit nearby villages (Datner, 1966, p. 14). On November 2, 1942, most of surviving Jews were moved to a transit camp in Bogusze and, later, to Treblinka. It can be estimated on the basis of the accounts and documents analyzed in further parts of this paper that several dozen Jews escaped deportation and hid in the surrounding woods and villages.

This paper attempts to reconstruct a picture of the annihilation of a Jewish town on the basis of witness accounts. Unfortunately, the available sources are extremely scarce. Firstly, the accounts could only be provided by those who managed to survive World War II. Gross writes that their memories are “skewed evidence, biased in one direction: these are all stories with a happy ending” (Gross, 2002, p. 93). Secondly, the majority of the residents of Trzcianne and the surrounding villages who remembered the time of the war are dead today. I could not listen to the accounts of the 16 Jews from Trzcianne who survived the war (Maroszek & Studniarek, 2004, pp. 163, 165) because, to my knowledge, none of them was still alive at the time of my research. There are, however, accounts of the Jews from Trzcianne made shortly after the end of the war. I quote them below. In order to get a better understanding of the destruction of the town, I will also refer to the testimonies given by the witnesses and defendants in the trial that commenced in 1950. The materials and accounts I collected are divided into subchapters, each devoted to a slightly different issue. This paper is not a historical study, but an ethnographic one, yet the accounts and documents I refer to may serve the purpose of setting the local history straight and contribute to studies into the fate of Poles and Jews in the Podlasie region. Statements made by my interlocutors constitute autonomous testimonies and as such are quoted without any changes.

The fundamental technique applied in this study to obtain information is the ethnographic interview (Konecki, 2000, p. 170). My primary interlocutors were members of the Wasilewski<sup>3</sup> family: Kazimierz, one of the Righteous among the Nations, his wife, Stefania and his brother, Stanisław. There are several reasons why the interviews with these three are of exceptional value. Firstly, they are among the very few eye witnesses to the events concerned who are still alive. Secondly, they are very well informed concerning the area of my research. During World War II they lived in the village of Zucielec, located in the immediate vicinity of Trzcianne, where some of the dramatic events involving Jews took place. The Wasilewskis hid three of them in their own home for three years. Thirdly, they are open people who told me about their ordeal. My attempts to find other witnesses who would agree to be interviewed failed, with the exception of one, short conversation quoted in the further part of this paper.

It needs to be noted that the account given by the Wasilewskis is subjective, highly emotional and painful. They talk about the extermination of a Jewish locality from the

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2 For instance, in Volkovysk, Jews were prohibited from sharing accommodation with “Aryans,” and their houses were marked by large yellow boards. In Siemiatycze, unemployed Jews were allowed to walk the streets only from 12 to 2 pm (Datner, 1966, p. 14).

3 My interviewees gave me permission to use their first and family names in this article.

perspective of their own experience and the fates of the people they encountered directly.

All the interviews were conducted from June to December 2009. They concerned only the topic of this paper and their duration ranged from one to three hours. I recorded them on video camera. The interviews are marked as follows:

- no. 1 and 2: interviews with Kazimierz and Stefania Wasilewski, conducted in their apartment in Białystok;
- no. 3: an interview with Stanisław and Kazimierz Wasilewski, conducted in the village of Zucielec;
- no. 4: an interview with an anonymous inhabitant of the village of Zubole located very close to Trzcianne, conducted in front of the interviewee's house;
- no. 5: an interview with Stanisław Wasilewski, conducted in his house in Zucielec.

### **Even the Germans didn't bother us<sup>4</sup>**

The German presence in the Trzcianne municipality did not leave a lasting mark on the memory of my interlocutors. This issue does not pop up in conversation on its own very often. The following is typical:

**Ł. K.:** Was Trzcianne almost all Jewish?

**Stanisław:** Yes.

**Ł. K.:** And Zucielec?

**Stanisław:** It was Polish. In Trzcianne, there must have been about three Polish families. In Trzcianne.

**Ł. K.:** Were there any houses left there or did everything burn down?

**Stanisław:** No, well... When the Germans were told that Polish families left these houses, they left them alone, the Germans did. In this street and there... [inaudible]. When the war broke out, the one that Hitler waged, the Soviets came in later on and the Germans left us alone. We were under the Soviets.

**Ł. K.:** And how did the Soviets treat the people?

**Stanisław:** Well, we... we weren't bothered by them, the Soviets. Even the Germans didn't bother us, let alone the Soviets.

*(interview no. 5)*

In the memories of my interlocutors, the Germans are not a source of fear:

**Kazimierz:** Partisans would come to the shop to do their shopping, and a German was standing there and he didn't touch them, neither this one nor the other (laughter).

**Stefania:** 'Cos they were a bit scared of those parti...

**Kazimierz:** And the partisans didn't touch them.

*(interview no. 2)*

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4 The headings are quotes from the interviews.

The exception was a story told by a man living in Zubole, at the exact spot where several hundred Jews were executed in June 1941. He had witnessed those events, but he did not want to talk about them:

**Man:** Sir, I would very much like to, but I don't want to get involved in these matters. I'm being interrogated by the IPN [Institute of National Remembrance, PL: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej] here. Trust me. It hasn't even been a month since an INR prosecutor came. To hell with that!  
(interview no. 4)

He did agree, however, to talk about a situation when his own life was in danger. In the background of his story, the tragedy of the Jews from Trzcianne can be seen. Let us consider an extensive excerpt:

**Man:** That I was saved is a miracle, plain and clear. There was a huge fire. And the smoke and flames were coming this way. The area was swarming with Germans. And what do you say? The Jews were fleeing, and I had a grandma, and grandma was 93. And my mom says to me and my brother: you take this grandma of yours, and get her out of here, this fire is coming towards us. And the smoke! It seemed to me that the fire was getting very close. The wind blew hard in the summer. It was... I think it was June 2. It must have been the devil that made me put on better clothes. What for? Farmers dressed the same way I am dressed today.  
**Ł. K.:** Was it Sunday?

**Man:** No, it wasn't Sunday, it was when the Germans came. My mom says: get your brother and walk your grandma a bit further away. So we took our grandma by the arm each, and I was wearing those clothes. And what next, sir? Mom gave me this bundle, all white. Those Jews carried bundles like that. You know, sir, whoever was fleeing, had one. But we lived side by side, sir, we lived with them like we would with Poles. I did seven years of elementary school by 1939. It was a universal school.

**Ł. K.:** Did the Jews attend the school with Poles?

**Man:** Together. And you know what, sir? I put this bundle on my shoulder. And you know what? Mom put the Madonna in it. Made of glass. Mom brought her from Częstochowa. And the Jasna Góra Monastery, a tiny picture. So the glass, and the postcard and the Madonna. Maybe you saw it? They have the same thing today. And on the threshold, my mom took this picture and "God be with you," you know, and put it in the bundle. And I was carrying this bundle on the shoulder. Maybe she didn't push it well inside? When we went out of the village, we left our grandma there. And those Jews here... they wanted to send us there, but we talked ourselves out of it. When one German started yanking me around, the Madonna fell out. And there was no way. "Jude." That's how people got shot here.

**Ł. K.:** Those who fled?

**Man:** Sir, when he saw a Jew, that was the end of it.

**Ł. K.:** How could they tell?

**Man:** You know, the Jews didn't dress the way I am dressed now. They wore slightly better clothes. They didn't run farms, they were in trade. So when he saw my clothes and this white bundle, he guessed I was Jewish. "Jude." Took me aside and he would have done me. Then the Madonna fell out on the ground and he saw it. So he grabbed it, picked it up and it all went away. And I made it alive. You see, there were all sorts of funny business.

(interview no. 4)

This is the only memory I recorded about direct danger coming from the Germans. Yet the author of this story came close to death only because he was mistaken for a Jew.

## They wouldn't have done it by themselves

What my interviewees say indicates that there were instances of collaboration between some Poles and Germans during the annihilation of the town.

**Ł. K.:** In Trzcianne, who did that?

**Kazimierz:** Germans. It was the Germans there, but three Poles volunteered.

**Stefania:** The Germans wouldn't have done it by themselves. There were so many of them, those Jews. The Poles needed to help.

**Kazimierz:** There were around, they said, there were around 4,000 people. But there weren't so many there.

**Stefania:** Germans were there, Poles were there.

**Kazimierz:** There is this place there, Zubole. This is their mass grave, they dug it out, the Jews did. And three Poles volunteered to shoot them. But one saw that, you know, and he backed away. R., his name was.

**Stefania:** Well, about using the names...

**Kazimierz:** But he's dead now. He's dead. And he backed away. The Germans never noticed in this crowd and those two who shot the Jews... eventually, a German held a pistol in his hand and he put it to the head of one of them, and then to the head of the other one, and both the Poles went to the same hole.

**Stefania:** And that was fair enough.

**Kazimierz:** To the same hole.

**Ł. K.:** And the other one escaped?

**Kazimierz:** That one escaped. And he was... Sir, and they honored him. After the war he was honored. I could show you today where he shot 16 Jews in the fields. That one, later on. And he chased them.

**Stefania:** But he's dead now.

**Kazimierz:** He's dead now.

*(interview no. 1)*

The accounts of the Jews who survived also confirm the collaboration of Poles:

"When the army was leaving, they left only a 19-year-old Nazi behind. Helped out by Polish thugs, he gathered the surviving Jews next to a natural hole in the ground and executed them, having been persuaded by the locals who had taken possession of Jewish property and inherited what had belonged to our parents. [...] Our murderous neighbors danced a devil's dance" (Machcewicz & Persak, 2002a, p. 342).

This account by Kuszner is dated May 2, 1945, so it was made before the war came to an official end. It is notable for its flowery language. Chaja Finkelsztejn from Radziłów spent a short time in Trzcianne during the war, and this is how she remembered the fate of the local Jews:

"[...] they did not escape the murderous hand, either. In late June 1941, Germans and Poles together destroyed the town and its inhabitants" (Machcewicz & Persak, 2002a, p. 264).

Some Poles who collaborated with the Germans during the war were prosecuted in 1950. The defendants – Józef Dzieszuta, Kazimierz Rafałko, Czesław Kozłowski, Stanisław Trykoszko and Konstanty Wasilewski<sup>5</sup> – were accused of taking part in two crimes as members of a spontaneously formed militia. One crime involved the murder of over a dozen Jews from Trzcianne seeking shelter in Zucielec on June 29, 1941. The other accusation involved Józef Dzieszuta murdering a woman and a child. The indictment read as follows:

“[...] obliging with the authorities of the German state, [the defendants – Ł. K.], alongside other, unapprehended perpetrators, participated in murdering over a dozen civilians. On that day [June 29, 1941 – Ł. K.] the campaign of killing civilians, so-called undesirable element, took on a wider, mass character; over a dozen individuals were gathered and then murdered in Zubole, in the Trzcianne municipality” (Żbikowski, 2002, p. 211).

What is interesting here, are the phrases “alongside other, unapprehended perpetrators” and “a wider, mass character.” They make it possible to assume that the number of people involved in murdering the Jewish population was considerably larger than those named in the indictment. The testimonies gathered in the course of the investigation reveal the acts committed by Polish policemen against Jews. An excerpt from the testimony of a defendant, Czesław Kozłowski, reads as follows:

“I saw these policemen herding the Jews from Trzcianne and its neighborhood to a hole in Zubole, in Trzcianne municipality, and murdering them together with a German [...] Ciecierko Piotr, Michniewicz<sup>6</sup> and Gąsowski shot them down” (Żbikowski, 2002, p. 212).

Another defendant, Kazimierz Rafałko testified as follows:

“[...] I saw, in Niewiarowski’s backyard, Czesław Kozłowski bickering with a guard by the name of Ciecierko, who boasted about having killed a Jewish child whom a German did not want to kill” (Żbikowski, 2002, p. 212).

During the trial, all the defendants withdrew their previously submitted testimonies, claiming that they were forced by investigators. This claim, however, is made less likely by the fact that this trial was not used for political purposes. It is thus difficult to indicate a reason why the then authorities would fabricate the accusations. Secondly, the course of the trial and the lack of commitment on the part of the investigators to thoroughly clarify the matter goes against the claim that the testimonies were forced. Finally, one can hardly suspect uneducated investigators and court recorders of inventing all these cruel stories.<sup>7</sup> It is most probable that the defendants wanted to avoid responsibility, and simply lied to

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5 A distant relative of Stanisław and Kazimierz Wasilewski.

6 This Michniewicz is the same person who saved the life of one of my interviewees.

7 The course of a similar trial on the Jedwabne pogrom seems to lead to the same conclusions. Firstly, Anna Bikont and Jan Tomasz Gross demonstrated that the investigators were not politically inspired. Secondly, they did not seem determined to explain the whole case thoroughly. Witnesses withdrew their testimonies in both trials. The question is why some perpetrators were convicted in the Jedwabne case and not in the Trzcianne case? In order to answer this question a comparative analysis of the records from both trials would have to be made. Cf. Bikont, 2004, pp. 45–47; Gross, 2002, pp. 8–14.

the court. The witnesses also withdrew their testimonies under neighborly pressure. The fear and resistance to testifying against one's neighbors was there even as long as forty years after those events, as evidenced in the following part of Stanisław Wasilewski's account. It is noteworthy that it is his son who has the most negative attitude to testifying:

**Stanisław:** So an investigator, a prosecutor came to see us [...]. But my other son, the older one, scolded me. He says "shut up." That man introduced himself as an investigator. He came in a car that was not his own and with a driver. It should have been a secret and he came with a driver. And this driver could hear. And this son of mine scolded me.

**Ł. K.:** Not to talk?

**Stanisław:** Yeah, not to talk.

**Ł. K.:** And did the people tell the investigators who had helped to kill the Jews?

**Stanisław:** This nobody told. Not this... So they left and that was it.

*(interview no. 5)*

The court acquitted all the defendants in the verdict issued on May 3, 1951. Found guilty were the Germans along with several Polish policemen, who were already dead then: Piotr Cieciora, Franciszek Gąsowski and Alfred Piechowski. Thereby, the dead became "scapegoats," symbolically taking the guilt off the remaining people who took part in murdering Jews.

Taking into account the testimonies given during the trial, the verdict and the stories told by the Wasilewski family, it can be stated that Poles took an active part in the extermination in Trzcianne. It is nevertheless difficult to determine the scale of this involvement. On the basis of materials in my possession, over a dozen people can be named with high probability.

## **Poles didn't need to be taught**

The previous section features accounts that point to collaboration on the part of some inhabitants of Trzcianne and the neighboring villages with the Germans. The Wasilewski brothers talk also about the attacks on the Jews that were carried out independently, without any involvement by the Germans, by neighbors they know by name. Kazimierz Wasilewski tells the following story:

**Kazimierz:** Two weeks before the front line moved, he caught a Jewess nearby our field, at our neighbors'.

**Stefania:** That one whom you sheltered later on?

**Kazimierz:** No, this was another one.

**Stefania:** Okay, another one. Sorry

**Kazimierz:** And there is... you don't know what a stanchion was in a cart?

**Stefania:** He doesn't. A kind of a stick.

**Kazimierz:** And he took this stick, and a bayonet and he went and killed that Jewess in the field. Over there, in the rye. And he knocked her teeth out and buried her. And this neighbor



who owned that field where that Jewess was buried says: "The Wasils did that." And another neighbor says: "God forbid, don't run the Wasils down, you will learn one day, but who did that I will not tell you for now."

**Ł. K.:** And why did he kill her?

**Kazimierz:** 'Cos she was Jewish.

**Stefania:** The times were like that...

**Kazimierz:** 'Cos she was Jewish.

(interview no. 1)

Here is Stanisław Wasilewski's account of probably the same event:

**Stanisław:** And there was this thing, too: he killed a Jewess with an axe. And buried her right here, in the neighbors' field in the rye. And one neighbor, a young man, supposedly he ran to the police. He said we killed her and buried her there.

**Ł. K.:** And why did he kill her?

**Stanisław:** She had golden teeth. The one I'm speaking of, the one that killed, he was something! And his father... There was a husband, a daughter and his wife. So the old one, the wife, was killed by this one, and his father killed that husband of hers and her daughter.

**Ł. K.:** The Jewess's daughter??

**Stanisław:** Yes.

**Ł. K.:** The son's name was C.?

**Stanisław:** Yes, it was C.<sup>8</sup>

**Ł. K.:** And his father's name?

**Stanisław:** His father was... F. B. [...] He was buried here, at our neighbors', he was lying here [the murdered Jewish husband – Ł. K.]. These bodies are buried here. They are here and over there.

**Ł. K.:** Left there?

**Stanisław:** Yeah.

**Ł. K.:** So there was a Jewish woman with a husband and child?

**Stanisław:** Well, that's how it was. There were two kids. The Jew's son was taken to the camp. And these were hiding.

**Ł. K.:** The woman and her husband?

**Stanisław:** The woman and her husband and the daughter. Oh, what a nice girl she was, that daughter.

**Ł. K.:** How old was she?

**Stanisław:** Eighteen, maybe twenty.

(interview no. 5)

The stories told by the two brothers differ only in little details. Stanisław Wasilewski tells yet another story:

**Ł. K.:** When the Jews left their homes, was it the Poles or Germans who took their stuff? Who took it?

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<sup>8</sup> He is the only person who claimed after the war that the Trzcianne Jews welcomed the Red Army. Tomasz Strzembosz, the author of *Przemilczana kolaboracja*, refers to this very account in the subchapter *Trzcianne – charakterystyczny incydent* to evidence that Jews collaborated with the Russians. Is Borowski a reliable witness, though? It follows from my interviews with the Wasilewskis that he was extremely hostile towards Jews. My interviewees talk about the murders and robberies he committed. The people who testified during the 1950 trial mentioned him, alongside a dozen or so other people from Trzcianne and its neighborhood, as a member of the local police that collaborated with the Germans. Cf. Strzembosz, n.d.



**Stanisław:** Here in Trzcianne?

**Ł. K.:** Yes.

**Stanisław:** The municipal authorities took it all and sold it all and our Poles built their houses there. On these plots.

**Ł. K.:** What about other things: the clothes, valuables and gold?

**Stanisław:** Somebody might have got them.

**Ł. K.:** Have you seen these things in anybody's house?

**Stanisław:** I haven't seen anything like that. I've heard things but I haven't seen anything. They were said to have gold. Because, again, as I was saying, that the one who is the village leader now... his father... There was a Jew who walked by, they said [it happened – Ł. K.] at the time of the Germans, he carried gold in his shoe. He wore one slipper and one shoe. And people said that this Jew wanted to get to Chojnów, someplace across the river, so he killed him and took the gold with the shoe.

**Ł. K.:** Father of the village leader?

**Stanisław:** Yup.

*(interview no. 5)*

Robbery is a strong motivation in the stories above. Yet it can hardly be a motive in the next story:

**Stanisław:** There was R. K., he was another one who'd go wild and shoot Jews. He was quite something! Even our neighbor would say so. At the time of the Germans he was a policeman, when the Germans were here, he caught eight Jews in the rye in the summer, and these Jews asked, begged him to spare them. He shot all eight of them down. He shot them here... and he would also shoot there, "at the round place," as it is called. Then they herded them into a horse cart, they laid them down there and dumped them right here. My brother might not have told you...

**Ł. K.:** No, he didn't.

**Stanisław:** Right here, you'd have to go along our path, the same way you came, and on, and down there another path goes off to the left and it was there in that pit... there were eight Jews dumped there that he had shot.

**Ł. K.:** That R. shot?

**Stanisław:** Yes.

**Ł. K.:** Was he on his own or with someone?

**Stanisław:** On his own.

**Ł. K.:** Why did he do that?

**Stanisław:** How do I know why? And why did they shoot that one that was hiding with us, tell me, why?

*(interview no. 5)*

The alleged perpetrators of the murders referred to in these interviews were already mentioned in the context of the trial against the policemen in Trzcianne. This, however, is only circumstantial evidence. It puts them in a very bad light but does not make it possible to corroborate the above stories. Apart from that, all the people who allegedly murdered the Jews are dead. There are probably no records to be found because there were no prosecutions related to these events. Their evidence is only stored in the memory of Kazimierz and Stanisław Wasilewski. They are sure of what they remember and it is difficult to contradict them in any way:

**Kazimierz:** But the Germans were taught by Hitler and the Poles didn't need to be taught. The Poles did that on their own. No lessons needed.  
(interview no. 1)

The following doubt may arise with reference to the above: should accounts that cannot be properly verified be rejected as a whole? In order to answer this question, one has to realize that the victims of attacks such as those described above will never be able to confirm them.

"About the 'heart of darkness' that was also the very essence of their experience, about their last betrayal, about the Calvary of 90 percent of the prewar Polish Jewry – we will never know" (Gross, 2002, p. 94).

Joanna Tokarska-Bakir says that if we reject those accounts that cannot be thoroughly verified, we will expel huge chunks from the Polish and Jewish collective memories.

"How are we to live in a world that is deprived by historians of areas where they cannot establish certain or even approximate knowledge? In this dispute between historians and philosophers [...] the stake is the moral health of societies" (Tokarska-Bakir, 2008b, p. 173).

### **That took courage**

Were there any people in the municipality of Trzcianne who decided to help the Jews, putting their own lives at risk? We know of two such cases. In Nowa Wieś, Franciszek and Edward Kuklo are said to have sheltered some Jews. Additionally, the Wasilewski family hid the runaways from the Trzcianne ghetto for three years. The decision to help them was made by Anna and Jan, parents of Kazimierz and Stanisław. My interviewees were teenagers then and thanks to their stories I could learn how Dawid and Herszek Mroczkowski and Maśka Fiszko<sup>9</sup> were saved.

How did they go about hiding the Jews? Analysis of the numerous cases where Jews were helped makes it possible to identify a specific pattern (cf. Tokarska-Bakir, 2008b). First, the rescuers<sup>10</sup> had to make the decision to take in those in need. This decision was extremely difficult because it meant putting their own lives at risk. The Wasilewskis were aware of the danger:

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9 Herszko is a diminutive form of Hirsz. The full form of Maśka was Marja (Kośka, 2002). In this study, I will use the names as remembered by my interviewees. Additionally, the name "Mroczkowski" can be confirmed by the letters Kazimierz Wasilewski was sent from Israel. There are discrepancies between the Wasilewskis with respect to Maśka's last name. Kazimierz claims it was "Fiszko" or "Fiśko," whereas Stanisław says it was "Szpak."

10 Discussing the Wasilewskis' case, I will follow Joanna Tokarska-Bakir using the following terms: "rescuers" to indicate those who helped, and "survivors" – those who were able to survive thanks to the help received. Thereby, I refrain from applying the term "the saved." [...] [the term] objectifies one party while giving the other party the false omnipotence to save. Rescuing was fundamentally conditioned by the fact that the condemned chose the anguish of seeking help in the first place and then stuck to this choice" (Tokarska-Bakir, 2008b, p. 175).

**Ł. K.:** Did many people help the Jews around here?

**Stanisław:** Do you mean around here? Who do you think did? Nobody helped, only us. Our family was the only one. And what was the risk? A bullet. For the whole family, if a German had come in here.

*(interview no. 5)*

The interview with Kazimierz Wasilewski shows that they risked more than just a German “bullet”:

**Ł. K.:** It was very dangerous.

**Stefania:** Oh, don’t even ask how dangerous it was. This meant death. The whole family risked being killed both by the Germans and by the Poles.

**Kazimierz:** Death to the whole family.

**Stefania:** That took courage.

*(interview no. 1)*

People frequently sheltered Jews hoping to get rich (Tokarska-Bakir, 2008b, pp. 176–181). In the case of the Wasilewskis there was no material motivation whatsoever, because they never asked for remuneration:

**Kazimierz:** And mom... never denied anybody food or help, ‘cos she knew about being poor, ‘cos she was an orphan and she also was... she was still young, she was 48.

*(interview no. 2)*

When rescuers decided to take Jews in, they had to respect the principle of total secrecy. This was the fundamental element in hiding Jews (Tokarska-Bakir, 2008b, p. 182), and a prerequisite for success. The Wasilewskis were very particular about this principle:

**Kazimierz:** When they first came, they themselves helped out. They even made this dugout for themselves, they made it in the cowshed. And they’d hide in there when something suspicious was going on... they’d hide there and there was a ladder standing on the entrance to this dugout. They would slide something on it... there was straw there and a ladder was standing on top ... like on a... They would hide in this dugout and put the ladder on top of it. It wasn’t large, maybe... I don’t know how big... two meters by... two. It might have been a bit more than two meters long, but... it was deep, that was so that nothing could echo and they were in there... and in the summer they slept in the hay, in the hayrack.

**Ł. K.:** Did you bring them food?

**Kazimierz:** Yeah, I did. Mom brought them food and I did, too. You’d put it in a bucket, this food, so that nobody suspected that something was being carried there.

**Stefania:** Well, you carry a bucket around in the country, maybe you are going to milk the cows...

**Kazimierz:** That’s right... we pretended to be milking the cows...

**Stefania:** Or you are taking some feed in this bucket for... well, and nobody would guess what was going on... [...]

**Stefania:** You loaded up the bucket with those containers, they had those army mess tins, as they called them... so food was put in them and they would go into the bucket and you had to look around if there are any neighbors around to see. That’s how it was and at the front...

*(interview no. 2)*

A year or so before they took in the Jews, a bomb had exploded, impairing Kazimierz Wasilewski's eyesight, which turned out to be helpful in keeping everything secret:

**Stefania:** Well, they took the food to them, and mainly it was...

**Kazimierz:** Well, it was me.

**Stefania:** 'Cos he was kind of disabled. They didn't even pay attention, the Germans or anybody.

*(interview no. 1)*

Secrecy often turned out to be very difficult to maintain in a Polish village, especially over a longer period of time.<sup>11</sup> Stanisław Wasilewski said:

**Ł. K.:** Those Jews stayed with you for close to three years, right?

**Stanisław:** Yeah, close to three years. In the winter they'd sit here, in that shelter that was dug out in the cowshed and covered with hay on top. And in the summer they'd go to the rye fields. They kept to the fields.

**Ł. K.:** Did you bring them food?

**Stanisław:** Yup.

**Ł. K.:** Did anybody know they were at your place?

**Stanisław:** They guessed they were here.

*(interview no. 5)*

One more fragment from the interview with Kazimierz Wasilewski:

**Ł. K.:** Did any of your neighbors know that you had them?

**Kazimierz:** No.

**Stefania:** Someone must have known. They knew for sure. You can't hide that.

*(interview no. 1)*

That "someone" might have known may be evidenced by C. K. (a defendant in the 1950 trial) who visited the Wasilewskis to warn them:

**Stanisław:** But it was C. K. who came here and warned us because he also worked with the Germans. "If you have any Jews, make them leave."

*(interview no. 5)*

In the case of the Wasilewskis, the attempts to keep things secret failed, putting them in danger on several occasions. The first such situation occurred because their neighbor, F. B., father of C., informed on the Wasilewskis at a German police station. M., a distant relative of the Wasilewskis, was the interpreter, and he translated Borowski's denunciation as a request for permission to kill a pig. M. told the family about this event himself:

**Kazimierz:** We had this cousin who worked as an interpreter with the gendarmes. This interpreter warned us that such and such was coming, his name was B., and that he, that he... "The Wasils" he says "are hiding Jews, they are staying there." Right. And the German asks

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<sup>11</sup> The example of Antonina Wyrzykowska illustrates how difficult it could be to maintain secrecy and what enormous efforts were needed. Cf. Bikont, 2004, pp. 249–256.

“What does he want?” And it was translated that “he wants a permission to kill a pig.” And the German says then “komm, komm, komm... come here, you’ll get the permission.” (laughter) He took a club, beat him up and they left. [...]

**Ł. K.:** And it was this interpreter himself that came to you on his own and told you about that?

**Kazimierz:** No, well... we met, ‘cos we’d go to Trzcianne to do shopping. The shops were there... When the Germans were here, there were shops...

**Stefania:** But it means that he told you, right? The one who translated told you that?

**Kazimierz:** Yes, the interpreter told us...

**Stefania:** All right...

[...]

**Ł. K.:** So he saved lives, didn’t he?

**Kazimierz:** He did, yes, he saved lives, ‘cos he said: “beware of such and such ‘cos he... he comes and then...”

*(interview no. 2)*

The records from the 1950 trial show, however, that the person who prevented the tragic outcome of B.’s denunciation was personally involved in murdering Jews in other circumstances (Żbikowski, 2002, pp. 211–212). Partisans posed another threat for the Wasilewskis:<sup>12</sup>

**Kazimierz:** Someone set a... they knew that those Jews were hiding here because the partisans came during the war. “We came here...” They wanted us to give the Jews away. And my mom said: “I’m sorry, I will not give them away. If you catch someone somewhere around here, I will do nothing... but I will not give away anyone I have at home.”

**Stefania:** It’s a good thing they did not right away...

**Kazimierz:** And they just happened to be at home, those Jews. Through one door... and I let them out through another door and they went to this dugout over there.

*(interview no. 1)*

Characteristically, the Wasilewskis were threatened exclusively by Poles: their neighbors, inhabitants of the same village and partisans. Germans were potentially dangerous but only responding to a denunciation by a Pole. Whenever the Wasilewskis experienced any solidarity from their neighbors, it was aimed against the Jews (the warning from C. K.) or resulted from family ties (the intervention of the interpreter M.). What took place on the Wasilewskis’ farm can be named the “Polish-Polish war over Jews” (Tokarska-Bakir, 2008b, p. 197). Their case fits the pattern Tokarska-Bakir reconstructed on the basis of numerous accounts: the rescuers of Jews were typically alone and had no social support. Additionally, “people around them saw them as defying loyalty to their families, villages and even [...] loyalty to their nation and faith” (Tokarska-Bakir, 2008b, p. 197), which would occasionally bring a punishment executed by their Polish neighbors.

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12 An identical event took place across the Biebrza Basin. Wyrzykowski describes how “at night the partisans came for a Jew to be given to them, so that they could kill him and not bother us anymore. My wife said that he had left. They started to beat her up so hard that there was no white skin left on her body, only black.” Cf. Bikont, 2004, p. 253.

## She stayed, so she died

All three managed to survive until the German retreat: the Mroczkowski brothers and Maśka Fiszko. It can be presumed that Dawid and Herszko quickly realized that it was not safe for Jews to stay around Trzcianne. According to what the Wasilewskis say, they headed to Knyszyn right away, where other survivors gathered. Kazimierz Wasilewski and his father visited them there:

**Kazimierz:** They had several houses there, but they were guarded. They had machine guns and everything.

**Stefania:** They were not scared...

**Kazimierz:** No, later on, well... They armed themselves 'cos they were attacked there. And then further on, to Israel. But how did they, I wrote them, how did they get there? It was all in 1945, and I got a letter from them right away, in the fall the same year.

*(interview no. 1)*

The Mroczkowski brothers made it safely to Israel. One of them went missing, most likely during the Six-Day War. The other one kept exchanging letters with Kazimierz Wasilewski until the mid-1990s. He never came to Poland. The only person of the Jewish faith who decided to stay in Trzcianne after the war was Maśka Fiszko.<sup>13</sup> Her house was one of the few that had not burned down. But it was taken by a Polish family in the meantime:

**Ł. K.:** When the Germans had left and she left your house to go back to her place, was there somebody living there already?

**Kazimierz:** A family lived in her house. A family did.

**Ł. K.:** And what did she do?

**Kazimierz:** She took a little room there, but...

**Stefania:** She kept quiet. Imagine that: people were afraid of one another. Neighbors would... She stayed there, she kept quiet and then she'd walk to them [to the Wasilewskis – Ł. K.] to pay a visit or something.

**Kazimierz:** She'd come practically every day. She'd come for lunch, for, well...

**Stefania:** And she had no say over there, although it was her house.

**Kazimierz:** No, she had no say at all.

*(interview no. 1)*

Maśka Fiszko came to visit the Wasilewskis every day. One day she stopped coming.

**Kazimierz:** That B. C., when she was walking to our place, he took her, or maybe she went out of her own will, that I do not know, because he's dead now, the man who told us he saw who took the girl.

**Stefania:** Took her from the road, that is.

**Kazimierz:** From the road.

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13 An excerpt from the interview with Stanisław Wasilewski:

**Ł. K.:** When Maśka came back to Trzcianne after the war, were there any Jews there or was she on her own?

**Stanisław:** She came on her own.

**Ł. K.:** She was the only one left?

**Stanisław:** Yes.

*(interview no. 5)*

**Stefania:** Probably by force.

**Kazimierz:** By force... and, well.

**Stefania:** Right.

**Kazimierz:** And took her over there and... they murdered her.

*(interview no. 2)*

During another conversation the Wasilewskis wondered about the motive for this murder:

**Ł. K.:** And why did they kill her?

**Kazimierz:** It was about the house.

**Stefania:** It must have been the house.

**Kazimierz:** It was about the house. It was a large house. She went straight there, to her house. And people lived there. But apparently...

**Stefania:** These are only guesses.

**Kazimierz:** Guesses! But he saw it. That B. C.

**Stefania:** Don't accuse anybody.

**Kazimierz:** What do you mean, don't accuse. That one who killed that Jewess, in the rye, in the field. That one took this girl somewhere and there... He was in Mońki.

**Stefania:** He's dead now.

**Ł. K.:** Was he prosecuted for that?

**Stefania:** Nobody was.

*(interview no. 1)*

Stanisław Wasilewski corroborates his brother's story about the murder of Maśka Fiszko.

**Kazimierz:** And the girl was hiding in the house.

**Stanisław:** The girl was in the house. In the attic. Still, when she came out, she had a hard time and they shot her later on.

**Kazimierz:** Poles did.

**Ł. K.:** Where was she walking? This way?

**Kazimierz:** The way that we just came.

**Stanisław:** She was walking along the road. Our neighbor caught her and... seventy people died at our neighbor's. They were shot behind that hill.

*(interview no. 3)*

According to both brothers, she was 21 when she died.

## **This is for feeding the Jews**

Shortly before World War II officially ended, the Wasilewskis suffered from the hands of Poles for the help they gave to the Jews:

**Ł. K.:** What happened on April 18?

**Kazimierz:** A gang came at night on April 18. They woke us up, and beat us up. We were so beaten up that we couldn't move, so they pulled us by the legs and threw us into the cellar. And we saw, mom saw who they were [...]

**Ł. K.:** How many were there...



**Kazimierz:** Among the partisans...?

**Ł. K.:** In the gang?

**Kazimierz:** I don't know that, it was dark. They beat us up so badly that no, I do not know how many there were.

**Ł. K.:** Were they partisans?

**Kazimierz:** They... they were partisans... it was a gang. They were partisans. A gang it was.

**Stefania:** And they took everything from the house. They robbed them.

**Kazimierz:** They took everything. Everything we had. Every feather blanket, everything...

**Stefania:** Bed sheets...

**Kazimierz:** Even some stupid glass stuff, 'cos in the past we did not have light in there... so they took the kerosene lamps...

**Stefania:** You know, kerosene lamps. You might have seen something like that in a museum or somewhere?

**Kazimierz:** And they took it all on...

**Stefania:** They took it... And the horses and the cart.

**Kazimierz:** And they took the horses and the cart.

**Stefania:** They put it all in there and left.

**Ł. K.:** Why did they attack you?

**Kazimierz:** Well, they did it because we saved the Jews.

**Stefania:** They came... Maybe I...

**Kazimierz:** They thought we were rich.

**Stefania:** Maybe I shouldn't say that. They must have... People used to say that Jews all had a lot, a sack of dollars.

**Kazimierz:** Yup, yup...

**Stefania:** And that they gave it all to them, they did. They wanted... well... and they had nothing and that is why he...

**Kazimierz:** And what we got...

**Stefania:** And that is why they persecuted them later on.

**Kazimierz:** There was so much that we did not have enough to eat in the village because the partisans had to get something and... well.

**Ł. K.:** Did they tell you anything when they attacked you?

**Stefania (to Kazimierz):** Those people who came, those partisans? They did, they did, and did they scold you or say nothing?

**Kazimierz:** They scolded us: "This is for feeding the Jews!"

**Stefania:** That's right.

**Kazimierz:** "You were feeding the Jews, so you'll get it now."

**Stefania:** And then, when was that?

**Kazimierz:** What?

**Ł. K.:** What month was it?

**Kazimierz:** April 18.

**Stefania:** And later, when they killed mom, then...

**Kazimierz:** Then we started hiding... it was August 16... We were hiding because they kept coming to our place and to mom... and we got caught in August. It was August 16 or something, I don't remember now and that was when they killed mom. I was with mom and the youngest brother, the one from Zielona Góra...

**Stefania:** But you need to tell it step by, as it happened.

**Ł. K.:** Right, what happened, where were you then? Were you at home or...?

**Kazimierz:** We were hiding in the mounds, potato storage mounds and wherever... Every night somewhere else but I guess they watched us. That night we came to the stable to sleep on hay.

**Ł. K.:** To your stable?

**Kazimierz:** Yes.

**Stefania:** Yes, yes.

**Kazimierz:** And they came, they brought a crowbar, broke the door at the, at the...

**Stefania:** At the lock...

**Kazimierz:** They broke the lock with the crowbar and... They came, they took mom... and well... And also...

**Stefania:** Oh, don't say no more...

**Kazimierz:** They committed a rape.

**Stefania:** Oh dear, oh dear, don't...

**Kazimierz:** It's a crime and... they committed a rape.

**Stefania:** They were not people, they were some... I don't know...

**Ł. K.:** They were the same people who came in April?

**Kazimierz:** The same ones 'cos we never... We never reported to the UB [Security Office] or anywhere else.

**Ł. K.:** And when they came to the stable this time, did they tell you something or did they say nothing?

**Kazimierz:** When they came?

**Ł. K.:** Yes, when they came.

**Kazimierz:** They came and said to mom to come down from the hayrack, one of them came up the hayrack and asked her to come... well. And they left me and my brother there. And he says: "Now, now, mom's coming back right away." And fifteen minutes later, maybe more than that, up to half an hour later... two series from a machine gun, from the backyard... so they killed...

**Stefania:** And what about you? Did you get out in the morning or right away, at night?

**Kazimierz:** We got out at night.

**Stefania:** You got out at night?

**Kazimierz:** We went out at night searching with my brother.

**Stefania:** I thought it was maybe in the morning.

**Kazimierz:** We looked for her at night. We looked for her and called her and, well... Then we kept hiding until the frosts came.

**Stefania:** All summer long.

**Kazimierz:** We hid all summer long. We slept...

**Ł. K.:** You and your two brothers?

**Kazimierz:** Yes, and...

**Stefania:** And your father, too, right?

**Kazimierz:** My father did, too.

**Stefania:** That's what I'm saying. The whole family.

*(interview no. 2)*

These events are confirmed by Stanisław Wasilewski. The story of the murder of Anna Wasilewska is known in the town as well. It is worth mentioning a conversation Kazimierz Wasilewski had with a randomly met person from Zubole:

**Man:** How did it happen that they killed your mom? I don't know about it. Did they take her at night? What happened there?

**Kazimierz:** Man...

**Man:** I heard about that.

**Kazimierz:** What did you hear?

**Man:** I heard that she got killed. There was something there.

**Kazimierz:** It was in 1945.

**Man:** In 1945?

**Kazimierz:** Yes. April 18, the war was not over yet. They came, robbed us, beat us up and threw us in the cellar.

**Man:** In 1945? You mean 1944?

**Kazimierz:** In 1945. April 18.

**Man:** Was it after the liberation? There was so much confusion still then.

**Kazimierz:** It was a gang.

**Man:** It was that AK [Home Army] roaming around.

(interview no. 4)

Is the story of this family a disgraceful exception among many other cases of helping the Jews? The studies of Tokarska-Bakir (Tokarska-Bakir, 2008b, pp. 209–212) show that persecutions of the rescuers were far from rare, especially in the Białystok region. A number of similar cases have also been described by Anna Bikont (cf. Bikont, 2004, pp. 240, 243, 249, 253, 291). A recurrent element is the belief of the attackers that those who sheltered the Jews must have become rich on this account.

“The ‘Righteous’ have to this day been described as operating either in a social vacuum, or in a friendly, patriotic environment. The situation was and continues to be much more complicated than that”

says Dariusz Libionka, a historian from the Lublin branch of the IPN (Institute of National Remembrance) (Reszka, 2006).

Robert Kuwałek, Director of the Bełżec museum, who has been gathering stories from the times of the occupation told by the people of the Lublin region for over 15 years, observes that

“the ‘Righteous’ in Poland have been made into an anonymous crowd. [...] They have been transformed into a screen to conceal antisemitism and passivity. It has been stressed that Poles were awarded the biggest number of Yad Vashem medals among all other nations, but there was hardly any mention about the fear of the ‘Righteous,’ and what they had to suffer, not so much from the Germans but from their own neighbors” (Reszka, 2006).

This fear turns out to be still present even today. Nearly 60 years after the war ended, a cultural center from Lublin, Brama Grodzka – Teatr NN, developed a project titled *The Righteous among the Nations – the Lublin region*. Its authors endeavored to build an on-line database with the accounts of the holders of the medal. Out of the 21 persons the authors of the project managed to contact, not even one agreed to publish his or her story using their own name (Reszka, 2006). There have also been cases where those who are to receive the medal, or their families, request that the Embassy of Israel does not admit journalists to the event. In spring 2006 in Białystok, the medals and diplomas

were sent by mail. "The families that were to be distinguished came to the conclusion that it would be impossible to keep the matter secret" (Reszka, 2006).

### **There was no need to recognize**

Another negative protagonist of the Wasilewskis' story is the parish priest from Trzcianne, Stanisław Mikulski<sup>14</sup> (a high school teacher before the war, reported to be a member of the Home Army). After the attack on April 18, he was approached by the mother of Kazimierz and Stanisław, who asked for help in retrieving the horses that had been stolen. During this conversation, Anna Wasilewska probably told the priest that she had recognized one of the attackers. According to Stanisław Wasilewski "the priest sentenced her to death" right then:

**Ł. K.:** And why did he sentence her to death?

**Stanisław:** 'Cos he was in command of all that, of the boys from the woods. (...) He was quite a chief. 'Cos all these, here... all our neighbors here listened to him, that M. guy. He gave orders...

(interview no. 5)

In August 1945, during Anna Wasilewska's funeral, Stanisław Mikulski did not walk the casket to the cemetery. For the Wasilewskis, what he said then proves his involvement in the murder of their mother:

**Kazimierz:** He blessed it. They carried the casket to be blessed, but he did not walk to the cemetery. I can still see him, as if it were today, turning to me: "there was no need to recognize." Well, this means that...

**Stefania:** No... this means that there was no need to recognize that it...

**Kazimierz:** But it was... and everybody who was standing around could hear that.

**Stefania:** Well, yes, but it was him...

**Kazimierz:** 'Cos I was standing next to the casket. And I leaned against the casket and he came out, blessed the casket and said: "there was no need to recognize." And that was it...

(interview no. 2)

There is one mention of Rev. Mikulski in the book *Dzieje Trzciannego*. The following story is told by Mieczysław Gajdziński, quoted by the authors of this book:

"Several Germans entered the vicarage. They demanded to be given the keys to the church. They climbed up the tower. They started drilling into the wall to set up explosives. The officers came downstairs. Rev. Mikulski (the parish priest at that time) invited them in and offered them everything he had (moonshine and pork fat). He made no request. The guests called the sappers off the tower and left. The tower stayed intact. There remained quite a deep hole (I asked Rev. Mikulski about it and he replied that 'the Mother of God did it') (Maroszek & Studniarek, 2004, p. 157).

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14 Stanisław Mikulski was a parish priest in Trzcianne from 1933-1946. Cf. Maroszek & Studniarek, 2004, p. 114.

Apart from the accounts of my interviewees, I did not find any additional materials that would make it possible to identify what role Rev. Mikulski played in the events related to the extermination of the Jewish town. And what was it like in other places? Best described is the situation in the Łomża subregion of Podlasie, located across the Biebrza Basin from Trzcianne. The predominant attitude among the clergy there during the war was passivity, and sometimes even acquiescence (Bikont, 2004, p. 351). There are, however, cases where the priests appealed to the faithful “not to collaborate with Germans and not to succumb to their antisemitic provocations” (Rev. Aleksander Pęza from Grajewo) (Bikont, 2004, p. 351), when they clubbed their parishioners and threatened them with hell when they looted Jewish apartments (Rev. Cyprian Łozowski from Jasionówka) (Bikont, 2004, p. 351), and together with the local elite they even spoke in favor of the Jews to the occupying authorities (Dr. Nowakowski, apothecary Rzeźnicki and a local priest from Knyszyn, which [like Trzcianne – Ed.] lies in the Białystok subregion of Podlasie) (Bikont, 2004, p. 351). In Knyszyn, the local intelligentsia took a similar stance in the face of the pogrom.

“In July 1941, the criminal element from among the Polish population gathered [...]. One of their leaders was a policeman, Stach Bibiński. They marked Jewish houses with the Star of David, and Polish ones with the cross. The Jews felt great anxiety on this evening. It all quietened down on the next day, thanks to the local intelligentsia that stopped this wild crowd. The priest himself chased away a boy who wanted to break the windows. The same priest gave a sermon every Sunday, telling the faithful not to persecute the Jews and help them instead, because nobody knows what the future holds” (Bikont, 2004, p. 351).

The latter example is particularly significant as it shows that the priests (as well as the representatives of the local elite) could actually do much to prevent the murders and pogroms of Jews. Could their attitude have encouraged the faithful? Many accounts stress that the attacks often followed holy mass (Bikont, 2004, p. 351). The murder of the Trzcianne Jews whose perpetrators were prosecuted after the war took place on June 29, 1941, on a Sunday. One of those testifying, Paweł Rafałko, explained the presence of the town’s inhabitants in the place where over a dozen Jews were killed in the following manner: “I would like to add that the people were coming back from church at that time, so there were many of them there” (Żbikowski, 2002, p. 213). The question can be asked then, what did the faithful hear from Rev. Mikulski during the sermon that day?

### **The boys from the woods**

The above-quoted accounts by Kazimierz and Stanisław Wasilewski stress one more aspect of wartime life in Trzcianne: the activities of the partisans towards the Jews and the local Polish population. The subject of the partisans is a frequent one, and it keeps recurring in my interviews. My interviewees emphasized that the partisans lived at the expense of the local population:

**Kazimierz:** They would take swine, and cows they took...

**Stefania:** So they had to live...

**Kazimierz:** They had to live... (laughter)

**Stefania:** They took, killed and ate them... Sure...

**Kazimierz:** And they wanted to live well...

**Stefania:** Well, yes...

**Ł. K.:** And what kind of partisans were they?

**Kazimierz:** I didn't know then. The name AK [the Home Army] wasn't around at that time... I don't know how they were named, it was 1940. Then the AK emerged...

*(interview no. 2)*

Supplying the partisans was not voluntary:

**Stanisław:** These were our boys, our brothers and sisters they were that did that. They would take the last pig or cow. Our boys from the woods.

**Ł. K.:** And did you have nationalist partisans here, too?

**Stanisław:** Yes, they were around but they didn't come to us. There were nationalist troops, sure. These would not come to us. The Home Army, Home Army soldiers, only them.

*(interview no. 5)*

The memories of the end of the war and the period that followed become increasingly brutal:

**Kazimierz:** What kind of partisans are we talking about? When they saw that a girl had a sheepskin they would come at night to take it away. (laughter)

**Stefania:** Yeah, that's how it was, that's what happened.

**Kazimierz:** When they saw a ring on the finger they would...

**Stefania:** A girl could not have a ring, or... I had to... I was much younger, I can only remember. A girl could not wear anything. He would come, rip it off and that was it.

**Kazimierz:** He would come, take stuff, at night he might also rape...

**Stefania:** It didn't have to be at night, but during the day, too...

**Kazimierz:** He would come during the day.

**Stefania:** It was horrible after the war, horrible.

**Ł. K.:** And did the same things happen in Trzcianne, too?

**Kazimierz:** Well, that happened in Trzcianne.

**Stefania:** It did... it happened around Trzcianne, around Jedwabne. Everywhere around was the same. Whether anything more happened somewhere, that I don't know. I don't remember much, but I do know that.

**Kazimierz:** Then the army arrived in Trzcianne and they swept these woods, those along the Biebrza, then it was...

*(interview no. 2)*

My interviewees' mentions of the partisans are frequent, strong and unequivocally negative, allowing me to assume that they, and not the Germans, were the most burdensome element of the everyday existence of the local population. The first reason might be their number. Trzcianne, located in the Białystok region, was exceptionally convenient for underground activities: there were the Biebrza swamps on one side and the Knyszyn Forest on the other. Armed underground operations reached an exceptional scale in

these surroundings, as confirmed by historical sources (Milewski, 2002, p. 80). On the other hand, the same conditions were conducive to the emergence of all sorts of ‘gangs,’ as my interviewees call them, engaged exclusively in looting and crime. The borders between the two types of activities are blurred in people’s memories and the names “gangs” and “partisans” are used interchangeably.

**Ł. K.:** Were they partisans?

**Kazimierz:** They... they were partisans... it was a gang. They were partisans. A gang it was.  
(interview no. 2)

Marta Kurkowska-Budzan comes across a similar phenomenon when studying how the operations of the armed underground are currently perceived in the Białystok region, among other things (Kurkowska-Budzan, 2009). One of the groups she examined included people who were not directly engaged in partisan operations but lived in the areas where such operations were very intensive. My interviewees could also be counted among this group. It is worth quoting the conclusions Kurkowska-Budzan reaches on the basis of her ethnographic interviews because they shed a new light on the issues discussed in this study.

The picture of relations between the partisans and the civil population that emerges at present from the words of Kurkowska-Budzan’s interviewees is full of resentment, complaints and conflicts. What are the reasons for this picture being so negative and one-sided? It seems that the main reason is the obligation to sustain the partisans imposed on the villagers in this area, often against their will. This is what Kurkowska-Budzan’s interviewees remember most, and the same aspect is also strong in what the Wasilewski brothers said above.

“For the country people who remember the post-war period it is of utmost importance whether the partisans directly robbed the farmers. This motif recurs in many private stories and is the most serious accusation against partisans and the reason to devalue their activities in general” (Kurkowska-Budzan, 2009).

Additionally, the organizational divisions of partisan groups hiding in the woods (Kurkowska-Budzan, 2009, p. 114) and their political objectives were not clear (Kurkowska-Budzan, 2009, p. 74) to the people in the Białystok region who were not engaged in the struggle themselves. In other words, people going through highly dramatic times and committed to the most basic everyday issues did not understand who was fighting in the surrounding forests and what they were fighting for. The picture was further complicated by purely criminal groups and smugglers that frequently terrorized the civilian population using the same methods the partisans did (Kurkowska-Budzan, 2009, p. 74).<sup>15</sup> Kurkowska-Budzan stresses that

“an ordinary farmer, housewife and shop owner did not care for ideology from the times when elections took place. What mattered was that they found themselves surrounded by

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15 “There’s a fine line between a partisan and a bandit,” says a veteran of the armed underground (Kurkowska-Budzan, 2009, p. 121).



people carrying guns and having at their disposal other means of repression and the decision about joining one of the parties had serious consequences” (Kurkowska-Budzan, 2009, p. 104).

## Conclusions

The above reconstruction of the shameful episodes excised from the memory of a small town in Podlasie is based on the accounts of eye witnesses. Their accounts make it possible to state that some Poles took part in the murders of people of the Jewish faith. Those who risked their lives and helped Jews were punished by their Polish neighbors after the war. The events presented in these accounts are extremely brutal and dramatic. It should be noted that this part of the history of Trzcianne is not included in the local historical discourse in any way (Maroszek & Studniarek, 2004). “[The] so-called question of Polish-Jewish relations during the war is like a loose thread in the historiography of this period. If we grasp and pull it, the entire intricately woven tapestry comes undone” (Gross, 2002, p. 113), Jan Tomasz Gross observes. Polish complicity in the Holocaust of the Trzcianne Jews and the parallel Polish-Polish war are one such thread.

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**Trzcianne – studium przypadku.  
Wojna polsko-polska o Żydów w relacjach świadków**

**Abstrakt:** Autor podejmuje próbę rekonstrukcji obrazu zagłady Trzciannego, miejscowości, której ogromną większość populacji przed 1939 rokiem stanowili Żydzi. Studium przypadku oparte jest na wywiadach etnograficznych, przeprowadzonych współcześnie z członkami rodziny państwa Wasilewskich – świadkami oraz uczestnikami wydarzeń, Sprawiedliwymi wśród Narodów Świata. Przywołane zostają również relacje złożone po wojnie przez ocalałych Żydów oraz zeznania świadków z procesu sądowego kilku Polaków oskarżonych o mordowanie Żydów, prowadzonego w latach 1950–1951. W toku analiz autor odsłania przemilczaną i ukrywaną społecznie prawdę, iż niektórzy Polacy brali udział w mordowaniu osób wyznania mojżeszowego. Natomiast ci, którzy z narażeniem życia pomagali Żydom, ponieśli po wojnie karę ze strony swoich polskich sąsiadów. Wstydlive epizody z przeszłości małego podlaskiego miasteczka zostały wyparte z lokalnego dyskursu historycznego.

**Wyrażenia kluczowe:** wywiad etnograficzny; Zagłada; Sprawiedliwi; pamięć; wyparcie; milczenie; historia mówiona.

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