

Polish-Jewish relations in Landkreis Bielitz during the Second World War: Some research problems

Jacek Proszyk

Abstract

Research into Polish-Jewish relations during the Second World War, particularly as regards the lands which had formed a part of prewar Poland and following 1939 were incorporated into the Reich, encounters a multitude of problems. First of all, it is necessary to analyze these associations in a broad socio-political context and introduce references to the interwar period. In the main, since Silesian Jews were connected with the German culture and language, and were also strongly assimilated, we cannot refer to them as “Polish Jews”, but rather as “German Jews”. Their interrelations with Poles during the war were frequently limited, if only because Poles constituted a minority in the region. Secondly, extant archival materials do not always depict the truth about the survival strategies employed by Jews. The author sets forward the difficulties which he experienced while working on a text concerning the fates of Jews from Bielsko and Biała Krakowska during the war, and concomitantly calls for the broadest possible verification and substantive critique of wartime and postwar sources.

The study of topics related to the Second World War and relations between pre-war neighbors is a particularly demanding task. I personally do not believe that it is possible to surgically excise a single ethnic or religious group from its context and selectively focus on one type of relations or history. Unless we make the disclaimer that such selectiveness is precisely our aim and that we shall be confining ourselves to certain types of data.

I have been researching the history of Jews in Cieszyn Silesia, western Lesser Poland, the Przemyśl Foothills and in the border region between Lower Silesia and Greater Poland for the past 25 years. Each of these regions differs in its history and ethnic composition. For 25 years I have also been in charge of the library and archive of the Bielsko-Biała Jewish Religious Community. I have had opportunity to meet with the pre-war inhabitants of these areas, to converse with them at length, to put up monuments and install memorial plaques at former synagogue sites, and to index thousands of gravestones from Wschowa in the west to Tyrawa Wołoska in the east.

We have recently seen a veritable explosion of debates on Polish-Jewish relations, especially during the Second World War. Two sides are defending their reasons, believing their opponents to be acting in bad faith or holding extreme political views. It is doubtful that a consensus will be reached and one should not count on it. This situation is having a very poisonous effect. Most importantly, it is adversely impacting scholarly research. Authors often discard argument-based discussion and refuse to hear the other side out, responding too emotionally to remarks or taking them personally. This tug of war does nothing but hurt the memory of the victims and prevent their proper commemoration.

I, too, am not free from mistakes and subjectivity when analyzing past events. But I have learned – from none other than those who survived the Holocaust themselves – the skill of pausing to say ‘check.’ I consider verification and a critical approach to sources (both wartime and post-war) within as broad a context as possible to be the foundation of scholarly research. And that is only the tip of the iceberg.

When I was collecting material on the history of the Jews in Bielitz in the 19th and early 20th centuries I mainly had access to the official correspondence of the local Israelite Community and documents reflecting the activities of progressive German Jews, who were gradually displaced by Zionists. In their periodicals and publications, including the memorial writings of the Bielitz Landsmanschaft in Israel today, all of these people showed disregard and disdain for the descendants of the orthodox Jews of Bielitz and Biała. As a matter of fact, they ignored their approach to life and to politics as well as their contribution to the city’s Jewish history and culture. Here I do not want to go into how both groups have perceived and treated each other because I have already done so in my book *Życie według*

wartości. *Żydowski liberałowie, ortodoksi i syjoniści w Bielsku-Białej* (Proszyk, 2012).^{*} However, out of sheer perseverance I sought out the descendants of those orthodox Jews living today in Bnei Brak, Mea She'arim, and Brooklyn. To my great surprise, they described the events and attitudes of both the orthodox and the Zionist community during the German occupation in a completely different light. Their accounts, especially those concerning the activities and decisions of the Ältestenrat (equivalent of the Judenrat),¹ were quite a shock to me. Many years ago, as I listened to different, wildly divergent, accounts of the same events I was astonished and sometimes even embarrassed to hear Jews themselves tell stories that did not fit the universally promulgated politically correct narrative. I was and continue to be close friends with Holocaust survivors, including both German liberals (i.e. Bielitz Jews), who continue to shun Zionist ideology, and Zionists and orthodox Jews. The orthodox narrative always elicited strong reactions among Zionists and encountered outright denial; the same was true in the other direction.

Why do I mention this? Because the Zionist perspective (which, by the way, has evolved significantly, especially since the Eichmann trial) is today recognized as the only valid framework for examining the events of the Second World War. I am not raising this as a charge, for it is natural that the historical policies of nations change according to needs. But scholars should be immune to political pressures and try as far as possible to consider the picture from all sides, taking into account both archival sources and their interpretations through the lens of different political and/or religious orientations. One would do well to verify the writings of liberals or Zionists against orthodox Jewish accounts. And vice versa.

The difficulties are further compounded by the emotions attendant on the conflict sparked by the recent amendment of the Law on the Institute of National Remembrance (Ustawa z dnia 27 czerwca 2018 r., 2018) and the reaction of Israeli ambassador Anna Azari in a speech she delivered on 27 January 2018 at KL Auschwitz-Birkenau (Azari, 2018). These developments make it even more crucial to verify the sources and to ensure a view from different perspectives (including the placement of historical events within the broader context).

* English edition: Proszyk, J. (2014). *Life according to Values. The Jewish Liberals, Orthodox and Zionists in Bielsko and Biala*. In: *The History of Jews in Bielsko (Bielitz) and Biala Between 17th Century and 1939. Liberals, Zionists and Orthodox Jews on the Border of Galicia and Austrian Silesia* (transl. by M. Jaszczurowska). Jaworze: Haskala.

¹ Full name: Ältestenrat der jüdische Kultusgemeinde in Bielitz.

When writing of *Landkreis Bielitz*, I am referring to the area known as *Ost-Oberschlesien* (East Upper Silesia) during the Second World War. Its territory included today's cities of Bielsko-Biała, Oświęcim, Kęty, Andrychów and Wadowice as well as nearby villages. This area had been annexed to the Third Reich and was not part of the General Government (Kaczmarek, 2011, pp. 354–374).

After the First World War, Bielitz and Cieszyn Silesia became part of the Second Polish Republic. The Jews living in what was known as the Bielitz-Bialaer Sprachinsel (German language island) were more confident about Austria and Czechoslovakia than about the reborn Polish state, and identified with German culture. An interesting picture emerges from the Polish national census conducted on 30 November 1921, according to which Bielsko (Bielitz) had a population of 19,813, with the following breakdown into ethnic groups: 14,272 Germans (72.04% of the total population), 4,847 Poles (24.46%), 513 Jews (2.58%), and 181 persons belonging to other ethnic groups. Religious denominations: 10,768 Catholics (54.35% of the total population), 5,030 Protestants (25.39%), 3,955 followers of Judaism (of “Mosaic faith”) (19.96%), and 60 declaring themselves followers of other religions (0.80%). The local newspaper was quick to notice that as many as 3,442 Jews had identified themselves as Germans (most of them assimilated progressives), while Jewish nationality was principally claimed by orthodox Jews (*Z Bielska (Wynik spisu ludności)*, 1921, p. 4; *Korespondencye. Z Bielska*, 1921, p. 3). Not all followers of Judaism identified themselves as Jews. During this period, followers of Judaism and Poles made up similar-sized minorities compared to citizens of German stock. When analyzing Polish-Jewish relations in Bielitz/Bielsko one must therefore keep in mind that we are talking about relations between two minorities, and that Jews lived in relative harmony with the German majority which the Poles opposed. This had consequences both for the political changes after 1918 and for relations between Poles and Jews during the Second World War.

Additionally, we must ask ourselves whether we are not making the mistake of projecting our own contemporary understanding of Polish-Jewish relations onto what were entirely different relations in interwar Silesia and Greater Poland, where the majority of Jews were German Jews or, to be more precise, Germans of Mosaic faith, as they called themselves. I believe that the whole issue should be viewed from another angle. Since over 3,000 Jews in interwar Bielsko stated themselves to be Germans of Mosaic faith, then perhaps we should be talking about Polish-German relations in this case. The only distinction to be made here should concern religious affiliation, and so Germans should be divided into followers of Catholicism, Protestantism, and Judaism. I believe that scholars researching Silesia and Greater Poland should introduce this corrective and

analyze political and economic problems within a Polish vs German rather than a Polish vs Jewish frame of reference. Unless of course their research concerns denominational relations, e.g., between Protestants and Jews.

There is another problem with the category of “Polish-Jewish relations”. From the perspective of Jews themselves, was what they encountered in the Polish state during the interwar period the result of state policy (for instance the 1937 ban on ritual slaughter or the outlawing of B’nai B’rith lodges in 1938) or the consequence of actions by the local or regional community? If the latter, what kind of community are we talking about? Peasant, bourgeois, Polish, German, Ukrainian, or Silesian? Of course we commonly use the adjective “Jewish” to refer to the ethnicity of those who subscribed to Judaism or those whose ancestors had been followers of Judaism, even though “Jewry” was often so internally differentiated that members of different groupings had little tolerance for one another (Proszyk, 2012).

It was only the German occupation and the introduction of the Nuremberg Laws that made Germans of Mosaic faith Jewish nationals whether they liked it or not – a nationality they had repudiated. This was the case for several dozen families who had converted to Christianity long before the war. All of a sudden, liberals subscribing to Haskalah ideas found themselves being resettled to the Sosnowiec ghetto, where they became no less Jewish than Chassidim from the Lełów countryside. This change of identity happened overnight against their beliefs and against their will.² Even anti-Zionists were made to wear the yellow Star of David with the word “Jude” by the authorities of the Third Reich. Today few scholars take note of this, placing everyone without exception under the single heading of “Jews” in their writings.

Now, if today I was to put all of these wildly different individuals into a single basket labeled “Polish-Jewish relations” would I not be replicating Nazi-style segregation according to Nuremberg standards? I am aware that for the sake of clarity a single category, “Jewish nationals”, is used today to designate the ethnic background of assimilated Germans or Poles of Mosaic faith. But then we shall have to put in the same group Daniel Gross of Biała,³ a pro-Polish socialist and atheist, member of the Polish senate; Ignacy Perl, the anti-Zionist and pro-assimilation chairman of the Jewish Community of Biała (Braff, 1938, p. 3); and Siegmund Glücksmann, a pro-German attorney, chairman of the German Socialist Labor Party in Bielsko (Proszyk, 2012, pp. 146–148). All three perished during the Holocaust, and yet I cannot put them all into the same basket

² See the accounts of liberal Jews from Gliwice and Bielsko in the Sosnowiec ghetto and during deportations (Wiedermann, 1948).

³ Information about him is available in the database of inter-war Polish parliamentarians (Gross Daniel Bernard, n.d.).

labeled “Polish Jews”, let alone analyze their fate within the context of “Polish-Jewish” relations. But the fact that all three were victims of the Holocaust because of the word “Jude” pronounced at Nuremberg today qualifies them as members of the same nationality and weaves them into the Zionist narrative of the State of Israel which considers itself their successor. Is this legitimate? I leave this question for politicians to answer. Historians, meanwhile, should remember that we cannot view Jews in the 19th century from the perspective of 21st-century Israel. If I were to take that approach, what could I write of the four followers of Islam who were buried without any communal protest in the Jewish cemetery in Bielitz in 1915? Back then Jewish-Arab relations were satisfactory, while it was not uncommon for Bielitz factory owners to spend their holidays with their fabric buyers from Egypt or Persia in their homelands. Today, with a full-blown Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle East, this kind of burial is inconceivable. What this example demonstrates is the importance of perspective and context. We need to stop writing to fit a pre-determined narrative and really try to put ourselves in the shoes of those we are writing about.

Research problems related to statistics of Jews murdered during the Second World War in Landkreis Bielitz

The biggest problem the researcher faces has to do with providing hard statistical data: how many Jews survived the war and what percentage of the 1939 community did they represent? We then need to split those who survived into categories that would shed light on the nature of their survival strategies. The information I came upon while gathering relevant material left me baffled. Here is an example.

Preliminary information (Proszyk, 2011; Proszyk, 2012):

1. In 1939, the Jewish religious community in Bielsko numbered some 5,500 registered members, with around 4,000 Jews registered in the Biała Krakowska community. This gives us a total of around 9,500 Jews.
2. After the outbreak of the war and the annexation of Bielsko and Biała to the Third Reich the German authorities merged the two cities into a single entity – Bielitz.
3. The Wehrmacht entered the city on 3 September. Between 1 and 3 September most of the Jews and many Poles fled Bielsko and Biała for Kraków, Lwów, etc. (generally speaking, east), hoping that the war would be short and that they would be able to return to their homes after the fronts retreated.
4. Bielsko and Biała constituted what was known as the German language island, where the majority of inhabitants were German. In 1940, Bielitz (Bielsko and Biała) had 43,285 inhabitants, 63% of whom were German, 34.3% Polish, and 2.7% Jewish (1,168 people).

5. In February 1945, the Red Army drove the German troops out of Bielsko and Biała and a Jewish Committee was formed. Detailed lists of Jews returning to the city and registering with the Jewish Committee starting in February 1945 have been preserved in the archive of the Bielsko-Biała Jewish Religious Community.

In 1945–1951, a total of 3,294 people registered with the Bielsko Jewish Committee (for the towns of Bielsko and Biała), 1,316 of whom had lived in Bielsko or Biała before the war, which means that at least 13.8% of the towns' pre-war population (of 9,500 people) survived (*Księga zarejestrowanych osób, 1945–1951*, vols I–II). 13.8% are only those who returned to their hometown. I am unable to determine the number of people who survived the war but never returned to Bielsko and consequently never registered – and I know of many such individuals. Therefore I cannot with all certainty give the number of Jews from Bielsko-Biała who survived the Second World War because reaching all the Jewish Bielsko families scattered around the world is currently beyond my means (*Księga zarejestrowanych osób, 1945–1951*, vols I–II).

Getting back to the registered survivors: those registering with the Jewish Committee provided information on where they spent the war and how they survived. 1,316 people originally from Bielsko and Biała who returned to the city described the following circumstances:

- a. Hiding on the “Aryan side”: 163 people (including in Biała – 4 people; in Bielsko – 15 people; escaping from a camp and thereafter hiding on the “Aryan side” – 4 people) (12.38% of the total);
- b. Liberated in labor and extermination camps: 232 people (17.62%);
- c. Guerrilla warfare: 4 people (0.3%);
- d. Joining the Polish Armed Forces or the Red Army in the USSR: 57 people (4.33%);
- e. Staying abroad: 757 people (57.52%), including in Albania – 1; England – 1; Sweden – 1; Palestine – 7; Romania – 14; Switzerland – 1; Tunisia – 1; Hungary – 5; USSR – 726;
- f. No data: 103 people did not state how they survived the war (7.83%) – this group includes the first entries from February and March 1945, mainly people coming out of hiding.

It is difficult to draw any general conclusions based on these findings. Why? First of all, the statistics only cover a group of 1,316 people who returned to Bielsko-Biała after the war and registered with the Jewish Committee, and so a fraction of the pre-war population. We do not know how many Jews survived the war but did not return to the city.

Second of all, even if we were to analyze the strategies employed by those 1,316 people, I will still claim that the conclusions would be imprecise and not entirely credible. Why? To answer this question let me cite a story from the year 2000, when a plaque commemorating Jewish soldiers from Bielsko-Biała and the Bielsko-Biała area fallen in the Second World

War was unveiled at the pre-burial house in the Bielsko-Biała Jewish cemetery. Arie Jan Machauf, the by then elderly chairman of the Bielsko-Biała Landsmanschaft, whom I was friends with, was present at the ceremony. I had a number of long conversations with him (I cite him on numerous occasions in my latest book: Proszyk, 2012). I enlisted Mr. Machauf's help, among others, to check the bios I was writing for the book about the Jewish cemetery in Bielsko-Biała. We were in the archive of the Jewish Religious Community looking at the Jewish Committee's register of survivors for 1945–1951. Time and again Mr. Machauf would comment on the entries, saying: "he was not in a camp at all, he was in the Red Army and deserted..., this person was not in the USSR, he had false papers and spent the entire war in Brno pretending to be German", etc. Finally he said:

those who survived the war were those who did not reveal the truth about themselves, those who were best able to deflect attention, conceal themselves. You had to invent a new identity, be vigilant at all times, continually lie to everyone about your identity and professional skills. Do you think that in 1945 these thousands of people from the survivors book believed that everything would be okay from now on? That Bielsko would be Polish? Or perhaps Soviet? And what if a few months down the road it became Czech? Or if the Allies started an offensive from the west against the USSR and Bielsko ended up under American authority? After all, before the war we spoke German in Bielsko, we lived side by side with the Germans, so many people hid presenting themselves as Germans. The local Jews had a perfect accent, they had gone to university in Vienna, they survived on false papers. And now tell me: what would you do? The political situation is uncertain, the boundaries of Cieszyn Silesia are uncertain. You have survived pretending to be German or you were in the guerrilla units, and what will you ask them to put in the book to make it safe for you? Of course you will write down concentration camp or Kazakhstan, USSR. Whoever eventually comes to power, you will be out of harm's way. Better not to say things that can hurt you (Korespondencja i notatki, 2000–2004).

In many cases, Arie Machauf was right. The accounts provided in the letters and memoirs of Bielsko Jews written on trips back to their hometown or in Israel sometimes do not match up with the book of survivors. Those who survived pretending to be German did not admit it after the war for fear of being charged with collaboration by the new authorities. Their strategy of survival by denial which had worked under Nazi rule was extended after 1945 under the Soviet regime. The best known

example of rescue thanks to having been brought up in German culture and language in Bielsko was that of the engineer Wilhelm Bachner, a Jew (passing for a German) who stood at the helm of a large German construction company on the "Aryan side" of Warsaw (Lee, Oliner, 1996).

The data regarding Jews in hiding in the city itself are also imprecise. As I have already said, before the war most of Bielsko's Jews were German Jews who identified with German culture (this was Silesia, after all, with over 400 years under Habsburg rule). I know of cases of Jewish children hidden by German families in Bielsko who then fled along with these families from the Red Army advance. They are not in the survivors' index.

Add to this the documentation (preserved in the Jewish Religious Community archive) concerning postwar exhumations of Jews hiding "in wild places", e.g., gardens (the Bathelt farm in Stare Bielsko) or basements (probably in the castle of the Princes Sułkowski), who died of natural causes during the war. In the end, these people were interred at the Jewish cemetery (Poświadczenie dotyczące ekshumacji na cmentarz żydowski, 1945). In the 1990s, Aleksander Szrajber (chairman of the Bielsko-Biała Jewish Religious Community) showed me two places in the cemetery where the Jews from "wild places" had been buried. One was described in a document in the Jewish Religious Community archive, but there is no mention of the other anywhere. How many bones are there, and how many people? We simply do not know.

What other factors make the statistics regarding survival in hiding, in the USSR or using false papers unreliable? I asked some Bielsko Jews why they do not want to tell me how they survived and why their accounts have not been recorded by Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation which has registered the stories of as many living survivors as possible. And quite recently I found out that in Israel these people reported that they had been in hiding in the Third Reich during the war, even though they had actually survived in the USSR. Why did they make such statements? Well, it has to do with the pensions paid out by Germany. Those who spent the war in the USSR cannot claim the pension. That is why they lied.

Therefore, there is too much uncertain information even in such a well-preserved register of survivors and other archival records to work out the precise numbers and to statistically determine which survival strategy worked best. Especially since – after what I heard from Arie Jan Machauf – I have approached statements like "arrived from a camp" in the Jewish Committee books with considerable caution. Unless of course a verifiable camp name or prisoner number is also provided next to the annotation. So what is to be done?

I decided to tackle the subject from the other end. Namely, I began by trying to determine the number of those who perished, which I then intended to subtract from the Jewish population in 1939. That would lead me to the number of survivors, I thought. My main sources of information were:

- a. letters and information in the Jewish Religious Community archive, the Bielsko-Biała yizkor book, memoirs and commemorative inscriptions carved on gravestones after the war (this still proved too little – only about 200 names);

and:

- b. Pages of Testimony collected in the Yad Vashem archive and accounts in the holdings of a variety of academic and research institutions.

I started with the Yad Vashem pages, which are the best source on the subject (Pages of Testimony for Jews, n.d.). No other institution at present has a more comprehensive database of Jewish victims of the Second World War. On this basis, I began to put together a database of murdered Bielsko Jews. But problems appeared along the way. The Hebrew-speaking Israeli researchers who enter the PTs into the database and who are not that familiar with Polish geography sometimes confound Bielsko (in Cieszyn Silesia) and Bielsko (Podlaskie), or Biała (Krakowska) and Biała (Podlaska). Having sorted (to the extent possible) thousands of records, I ran into new difficulties. Sometimes there are two or three PTs regarding the same person. Multiple forms have been filled out by next of kin, extended family and friends of the deceased. This is completely natural and understandable because those who survived wanted to keep the memory of their friends and relatives alive. This is not an accusation, and yet it makes for a certain obstacle. One needs to verify the data carefully in order to eliminate doubles, triples, etc. Unfortunately, sometimes the same person figures on several PTs under different names. For example, an English-language form might pertain to a Maxymilian, while a Hebrew-language one might reference Mordechai (religious name), yet both are about the same person. I therefore had to carefully check nearly every form and verify the data against censuses and vital records.⁴

Example 1. Artur Huppert, a well-known local Zionist activist (four forms):

- PT no. 319779 – filled out by Huppert's brother, Hugo Huppert, who stated that Artur perished at Auschwitz without giving a date;
- PT no. 617547 – filled out by a friend, Chawa Orlan, who said that Huppert was killed in Bielsko;
- PT no. 503571 – filled out by colleagues from the Engineers Society; they provide the name Aron (whom we recognize as Artur thanks to the parents' names);
- PT no. 1616870 – filled out by Huppert's sister, Rachel Huppert-Schwarz.

4 The examples given here can be searched at: <https://yvng.yadvashem.org/nameDetails.html?language=en&itemId=NUMBER&ind=0> by replacing the word NUMBER with the form number provided above.

Immediately, we need to answer the question: how do we classify him? Did he die in Bielsko or at Auschwitz? (*Anonse gratulacyjne z okazji zawarcia ślubu*, 1939, p. 4)

Example 2. Jakub Glasner, well-known painter (four forms):

- PT no. 1443832 – filled out by Glasner’s niece Selma Pickman, who stated that he was killed in Lwów in 1942;
- PT no. 1916170 – filled out by Glasner’s niece Zelma Glasner-Zolman, who said that he was killed in Lwów in 1941;
- PT no. 347755 – filled out by Yaakov Alboni, according to whom Glasner perished in Lwów in 1943;
- PT no. 393647 – filled out by Glasner’s niece Regina Mastbaum, who says that he perished at Auschwitz in 1942.

So where and when did Glasner die? In Lwów in 1941, 1942 or 1943? Or at Auschwitz in 1942? If in Lwów, a precise date of death could tell us, roughly, whether it happened during the pogroms (June–July 1941), resettlement to the ghetto (winter 1941), deportations (starting in spring 1942) or during the liquidation of the Lwów ghetto (June 1943). Luckily, in Glasner’s case there is a monograph about his paintings which includes a bio verified by the author, which helps us determine which date is correct (Dudek-Bujarek, 1997).

Example 3. Artur Rabinowitz, born in 1890, industrialist, chairman of the Hakoah Bielsko Jewish Sports Club:

- PT no. 601913 – filled out by Rabinowitz’s son, Jan Ravid Rabinovitz, in 1971;
- PT no. 1772070 – filled out again by Jan Ravid Rabinovitz in 1995;
- PT no. 1056951 – filled out for the third time by Jan Ravid Rabinovitz in 1999;
- PT no. 1443496 – filled out by Artur’s brother, Jaakov Rabinovitz;
- PT no. 1435879 – filled out by an acquaintance, Benjamin Guter.

All of them list Warsaw as the place of death and 1942 or 1943 as the year of death.

Whenever there were multiple forms for the same individual, verification sometimes required reading the original Hebrew scans and not only the translated information in the table.

Another problem with the Yad Vashem database concerns people who did perish in the Holocaust but whose names are not in the database because nobody ever submitted them. For examples:

- Joachim Seifter – mohel and chazzan at the Tomche Association’s house of prayer in Bielsko, who celebrated his 80th birthday in July 1939, remembered by the Jewish community for the “beautiful and endearing way he prayed” (*Joachim Seifter jako 80-letni jubilat*, 1939);

- Maurycy Rotter – son of Josef Rotter, the head of the Bielsko Ältestenrat (Judenrat), killed at KL Auschwitz in March 1941;⁵
- Artur, Juliusz and Helena Weissmann – brother and parents of Gerda Weissmann-Klein, a world-famous author who won an Oscar in the best documentary feature category for the film adaptation of her book about her experiences during the Holocaust; neither she nor her family ever filled out a form for Yad Vashem (Klein, 1995);
- Leo Zitrin – a lawyer from Bielsko, shot on 9 November 1942 in the Ältestenrat building at Herman-Göring-Strasse 62 (Kopie metryk zgonów, n.d.);
- Markus Steiner – chief rabbi of Bielsko; I filled out a form for him myself a few years ago since he was not in the database.

I have also identified people who actually survived the war but whose names nevertheless do figure in the Yad Vashem database. Examples: Eryk Löwy – he returned under a different surname and did not go back to his previous name. In the 1990s, I visited him in Warsaw. He was an excellent translator of Polish poetry into German (Yad Vashem form no. 9859631).⁶

The Yad Vashem database also contains individuals who passed away before September 1939 but are listed there as victims of the Holocaust. For example:

- PT no. 308788, Maria Huppert – registered by Hugo Huppert in 1956 with the information that she perished at Auschwitz. In reality, she died on 13 May 1939 at the age of 63 (grave number 3399);
- PT no. 1163295, Mendel Schindel – form submitted in 1999 by his cousin Mordechai Frei with the annotation that Schindel was murdered in Bielsko during the war. In reality, he had died on 13 July 1939 (grave number 3414).⁷

My general conclusion after reading the Pages of Testimony is: in order to treat these materials as a reliable source one needs to spend a couple of weeks in Israel at Yad Vashem reading each document, then a few more weeks comparing them with the personal records in Bielsko-Biała. At this stage unverified Pages of Testimony cannot serve as a sufficient and reliable source making it possible to determine the number of Jewish victims from Bielsko.

5 There is a gravestone at the Jewish cemetery in Bielsko-Biała with the inscription: "Here rests the urn with the ashes of Maurycy Rotter b. 1 XII 1901 d. 23 III 1941 martyred at Auschwitz."

6 It must be said that each form has a "Submit Additions/Corrections" option, so such inconsistencies can be reported to Yad Vashem.

7 A list of graves in the Jewish cemetery in Bielsko-Biała can be viewed at the Bielsko-Biała Jewish Religious Community office.

Mischling (German: half-blood, person of mixed Jewish and Aryan stock). In the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 the word was used to designate Germans with Jewish ancestors. Two racial categories were introduced: “half-blood” Jews (Mischling of the first degree), i.e., somebody with two Jewish grandparents in their genealogical tree, and “quarter-blood” Jew (Mischling of the second degree), i.e., a person with a single Jewish grandparent.

The subject became important to me due to information I came upon in German archival records. The Jews of Bielsko were very liberal and quickly adopted the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment) values that the wind of history blew in from Berlin and Vienna. They assimilated into German culture and abandoned their former orthodox ways. Living among Christians, no longer only among their own fold, starting in the mid-19th century many Jewish families began to convert to Christianity. As early as the 1860s, Jewish Christians were being buried in family tombs at the Jewish cemetery. In Bielsko and Biała there were both Christian families of Jewish extraction and mixed Christian-Jewish couples. The Brüll family of nearby Mikuszowice is an example of the latter type.

When writing about the Second World War in Bielsko I was also very keen to describe the survival strategies of Mischlings, particularly of Mischlings of the first degree. For theirs are captivating stories of saving themselves and their loved ones while also helping Jews in the open ghetto in Biała (in the area known as Lerchenfeld, Polish: Konfirunek). But here I stopped again. What was the reason? Well, a conversation that I had had with one of the Brüll brothers, Edwin (b. 1918), on one of his visits to Bystra Śląska. I took down many of his memories at the time, which I will be citing later. Edwin Brüll had two brothers: Ernest (b. 1915) and Jan Herbert (b. 1920). Their father, Walter Brüll (b. 1888), was a Jew (born to two Jewish parents), while their mother, Elfriede *née* Schreinzer (b. 1894), was a German Catholic. They were in Bielsko during the war. Of course they were stripped of their property, including a textile plant which was placed under German trusteeship (*Treuhandstelle*). Edwin mentioned that one day his father, Walter, came home seething at the head of the Bielitz Ältestenrat, Józef Rotter, who had made a detailed list of all the Christian families of Jewish extraction and mixed-marriage families for the Gestapo. He claimed that Rotter had blackmailed them, trying to get valuables, fur coats and money out of the families whose names were being added to the list – valuables which he then gave as bribes to Gestapo men or handed over to Moses Merin, the chairman of the Central Office of Jewish Councils of Elders in Eastern Upper Silesia (*Zentrale der Jüdischen Ältestenrate in Oberschlesien*). To this day, Rotter’s Mischling list can be found in the archive of the Bielsko-Biała Jewish Religious Community (Spis „Mischlingów” sporządzony przez Józefa Rottera, 1942). An interesting correspondence on the subject of appealing German directives can

also be found in the State Archives. This a great body of material for studying survival strategies.

I copied the surnames from the Mischling list and began to look for ways to get in touch with their descendants. I managed to contact some of them. The majority did not wish me to write about their grandparents. Many of these families still lived in Bielsko-Biała. Some even told me up front that their grandfather or grandmother did not change their religion and convert to Christianity before the war so that I could now drag their Jewish origins out of the closet. They considered the case closed. Some of these families survived in Bielsko-Biała until the end of 1944, whereupon they fled from the advancing Red Army along with the Germans. Nonetheless some people did give me permission to tell their stories. And yet I asked myself the question: since Walter Brüll was so enraged at the head of the Bielitz Ältestenrat for making a list of people whose ancestors had converted even before the First World War without these people's consent, then what moral right do I have to make their names public and describe how they survived the war? I have no moral right to do so. For statistical purposes, these individuals represent almost 100 people whose names have not been recorded in the Book of Survivors. But I will write about those who have authorized me to do so, e.g., the Brüll and Josephy families.

Here is an excerpt from the memoirs of Edwin Brüll, written down in July 2004:

We were on friendly terms with the family of a German factory owner, Wolfgang Josephy. His grandfather was a Jewish convert and his wife, Greta, who hailed from Ostrava (Moravia), was 100 percent Jewish. When the war started, Wolfgang found some German in Ostrava who signed a notarized declaration that he was Greta's real father. This allowed Greta to be a "Mischling" from then on. What a paradox in Bielsko – the Josephys, considered the unofficial leaders of the city's German community, have Jewish roots, and to top things off Wolfgang has to make underhand deals to save his wife from being resettled to the ghetto. But that is not all. His son-in-law, Willy Riedel (a German construction entrepreneur), won the tender for the construction of crematoria at Birkenau starting in 1942. So Riedel is building crematoria while at the same time taking part in protecting his Jewish mother-in-law from being killed. Riedel knew exactly what he was building and he had also seen the reality of Birkenau from inside. After he started construction works in Birkenau, Willy Riedel told many people in Bielsko that Birkenau was an extermination camp and that people with Jewish roots were not safe. He would warn especially "Mischling" (mixed) families like ours so that we would not passively wait but try

to get out of the Reich. After the deportation of Jews in the spring of 1942, there were still quite a few German Jews from mixed marriages and so-called Mischlings left in Bielsko. It was Willy, among others, who had an acquaintance in Austria named Schenker/Schonker (?), who was in touch with the Polish Mission in Bern, Switzerland. He found out that you could get South American passports from them and leave the Reich on them because those countries were neutral and the Germans allowed holders of such passports to leave Reich territory. I also had an acquaintance in Switzerland by the name of Seiler. And through these two contacts, paying off my (Seiler) and Riedel's (Schenker) couriers, we would send photographs and the personal data of Bielitzers of Jewish stock (including our own) to the Consulate of the Polish Mission in Bern. We would then get the passports via the same channels. The courier pretended to be a sales representative for our textile plant, Plutzar & Brüll, and, carrying fabric samples (into which the passports were sewn), he would go by train to Switzerland and back. They were Costa Rican passports. Thanks to them some people left Bielsko. Everything was running smoothly. I found out after the war that, devastated by the whole situation that he was witnessing as a building contractor at Birkenau, Willi Riedel smuggled (supposedly in person) most of the money he made into the Kraków ghetto for the family of Grete Josephy, his father-in-law's second wife, who had Jewish origins. We arranged passports for around a dozen families in Silesia and on the Czech side. We also had passports ourselves. But the good spell came to an end on 24 August 1943, when we were arrested by the Bielitz Gestapo and sent to Auschwitz. I had the number A135308, Ernest A135309, Jan Herbert A135307, our father Walter A135306. We were arrested not because we had passports from Costa Rica, but on the charge that we had to have money from an illegal source to have paid for those passports. And because we were of Jewish extraction, after 1939 we could draw no profit from our textile mill. Meanwhile, the German trustee of our plant had secretly given us money for living expenses and other needs (including the passports). After we found ourselves at Auschwitz we of course received immediate help from the already mentioned Willi Riedel, who already had connections at the camp. As people who knew several foreign languages, we were placed in the guardhouse at the Auschwitz I gate, where we filled out the camp registers. On 22 January 1945 we set out on the Death March to KL Buchenwald, where we were liberated on 11 April 1945 (Wspomnienia Edwina Brülls, 2004).

And so not even for Mischlings am I able to determine with precision how many people survived in Bielsko until February 1945, how many escaped with the Germans retreating in the face of the Red Army, and how many remained in the city. Nor can I estimate how many South American passports were delivered to Bielsko Jews thanks to the coordinated efforts of the Josephy, Riedel and Brüll families, or how many people managed to leave the city and survive thanks to those passports.

An additional difficulty is posed by the fact that at times different accounts provide conflicting information. Sometimes the testimonies collected after the war by the Central Jewish Historical Commission, the experiences described in private correspondence in the holdings of the Bielsko Jewish Religious Community archive, and the accounts that I have taken down over the last 20 years talk about different causes of death or circumstances of survival. Let me cite three examples:

1. The death of Rabbi Markus Steiner of Bielsko – I have three versions: shot in the street in Lwów, died on a train on the way to Siberia, died in the Janowska Street ghetto (*Relacja o śmierci rabina Markusa Steinera z Bielska*, 2010; *Relacja o śmierci rabina Markusa Steinera z Bielska*, 1942);
2. The death of Rabbi Samuel Hirschfeld of Biała – I have three versions: murdered at Treblinka; died of a heart attack in the Tarnów ghetto; killed during the liquidation of the Tarnów ghetto (*Relacja o śmierci rabina Samuela Hirschfelda z Białej napisana przez jego syna Eliasza Hirschfelda*, 1964; *Relacja o śmierci rabina Samuela Hirschfelda z Białej*, 1999);
3. The death of the chairman of the Bielsko Jewish Religious Community, Zygmunt Arzt – I have two versions: killed by Polish robbers near Tarnów in September 1939 (as related by his daughter who was five years old and in Bielsko at the time), killed near Tarnów when German airplanes bombed a column of refugees moving east (version transmitted by a Jewish survivor from Bielsko, of age during the war) (*Relacja o śmierci prezesa gminy bielskiej Zygmunta Arzta złożona korespondencyjnie przez jego córkę Hedvigę Rivalową*, 1991, 2007; *Relacja o śmierci prezesa gminy bielskiej Zygmunta Arzta*, 2010).

Where is the truth buried, then? The witnesses are dead and most of these accounts are currently unverifiable.

At some point I reached the conclusion that even if I were to spend many more years doing intensive research I would not be able to collect data exhaustive and credible enough to perform a thorough statistical analysis and determine the exact number of victims and survivors. What I can do, nevertheless, is describe confirmed individual cases. Perhaps this will bring me a little bit closer to a statistical overview. The situation is not helped by the incompleteness of the archival records. And even

when we have the complete records, the information in them is not necessarily true.

In my opinion, the main survival strategy in Bielsko and Biała, whether we are talking about Jews, Poles or, for that matter Germans (e.g., supporters of the Christian Democrat Eduard Pant – a convinced anti-fascist), was to escape, renounce one's true identity and go into hiding, pretending to be something one was not. These untruths have left their marks in the documents and accounts, which is why I have become so cautious to double-check every entry and bit of information.

It is hard for a researcher to examine and verify the source materials for Bielsko and Biała alone, let alone for the whole Landkreis! The same work awaits the historian who would undertake the same kind of study with respect to Wadowice, Andrychów, Kęty or Oświęcim. Indeed, each of these towns alone is a vast enough topic for a doctoral thesis. But the fact that the task is difficult does not make it impossible. I believe that it is necessary to dig up, verify and publish as much source material still available as possible.

(transl. by Dominika Gajewska)

Bibliography

Publications:

- Anonse gratulacyjne z okazji zawarcia ślubu Artura Hupperta z Hertą Offner podpisane przez Chewrusa-Habone (1939). *Tygodnik Żydowski*, no. 28, 4 August 1939, p. 4.
- Azari, A. (2018). *Ambasador Izraela o nowelizacji ustawy o IPN*. Source: <http://embassies.gov.il/warsaw/newsAndEvents/Pages/2018/2018-Ambasador-Izraela-nowelizacja-IPN.aspx> [accessed: 03.09.2019].
- Braff, P. (1938). Prezesowi Ignacowi Perlowi – w siedemdziesięciolecie urodzin. *Tygodnik Żydowski*, no. 30, 9 September 1938, p. 3.
- Dudek-Bujarek, T. (1997). *Jakub Glasner 1879–1942*. Bielsko-Biała: Muzeum Okręgowe w Bielsku-Białej.
- Joachim Seifter jako 80-letni jubilat (1939). *Tygodnik Żydowski*, no. 27, 21 July 1939, p. 6.
- Kaczmarek, R. (2011). Niemieckie władze okupacyjne. In: I. Panic, R. Kaczmarek (eds.), *Bielsko-Biała. Monografia miasta*, vol. iv. *Bielsko-Biała w latach 1918–2009* (pp. 354–374). Bielsko-Biała: Wydział Kultury i Sztuki Urzędu Miejskiego w Bielsku-Białej.
- Korespondencye. Z Bielska (1921). *Gwiazdka Cieszyńska*, no. 89, 29 November 1921, p. 3.
- Lee, K., Oliner, S. (1996). *Who Shall Live? The Wilhelm Bachner Story*. Chicago: Academy Chicago Pub Ltd.
- Proszyk, J. (2011). Polityka narodowościowa i rasowa. In: I. Panic, R. Kaczmarek (eds.), *Bielsko-Biała. Monografia miasta*, vol. iv. *Bielsko-Biała w latach 1918–2009* (pp. 375–385). Bielsko-Biała: Wydział Kultury i Sztuki Urzędu Miejskiego w Bielsku-Białej.
- Proszyk, J. (2012). Życie według wartości. Żydowscy liberałowie, ortodoksi i syjoniści w Bielsku-Białej. Jaworze: Haskala.
- Weissmann Klein, G. (1995). *All But My Life: A Memoir*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Wiedermann, P. (1948). *Płowa Bestia*. Monachium: EUCOM Civil Affairs Division.
- Z Bielska (Wynik spisu ludności) (1921). *Gwiazdka Cieszyńska*, no. 82, 4 November 1921, p. 4.

Archives, databases, acts of law:

Archive of the Jewish Religious Community in Bielsko-Biała (Archiwum Gminy Wyznaniowej Żydowskiej w Bielsku-Białej – AGWŻ)

Kopie metryk zgonów z okresu okupacji [Copies of death certificates from the occupation period]. (n.d.). AGWŻ, file no. 1003.

Korespondencja i notatki z rozmów z Janem Arie Machaufem [Correspondence and notes from conversations with Jan Arie Machauf]. (2000–2004). AGWŻ, file no. 264.

Księga zarejestrowanych osób w Komitecie Żydowskim w Bielsku [Book of people registered with the Jewish Committee in Bielsko]. vol. I. Numbers. 1–2303, from March 1945 to 3 June 1946; vol. II. Numbers 2304–3366 from 3 June 1946 to 13 March 1951. AGWŻ, file no. 74–75.

Poświadczenie dotyczące ekshumacji na cmentarz żydowski [Attestation regarding exhumations to the Jewish cemetery]. (1945). AGWŻ, file no. 964.

Relacja o śmierci prezesa gminy bielskiej Zygmunta Arzta [Account concerning the death of the chairman of the Bielsko community Zygmunt Arzt]. (2010). AGWŻ, file no. 621.

Relacja o śmierci prezesa gminy bielskiej Zygmunta Arzta złożona korespondencyjnie przez jego córkę Hedvigę Rivalową [Account concerning the death of the chairman of the Bielsko community Zygmunt Arzt submitted by correspondence by his daughter Hedviga Rivalowa]. (1991, 2007). AGWŻ, file no. 358.

Relacja o śmierci rabina Markusa Steinera z Bielska [Account concerning the death of Rabbi Markus Steiner of Bielsko]. (2010). AGWŻ, file no. 164.

Relacja o śmierci rabina Markusa Steinera z Bielska, kopie korespondencji z rodziną Steiner przebywającą we Lwowie w 1942 [Account concerning the death of Rabbi Markus Steiner of Bielsko, copies of correspondence with the Steiner family in Lwów in 1942]. (1942). AGWŻ, file no. 844.

Relacja o śmierci rabina Samuela Hirschfelda z Białej [Account concerning the death of Rabbi Samuel Hirschfeld of Biała]. (1999). AGWŻ, file no. 880.

Relacja o śmierci rabina Samuela Hirschfelda z Białej napisana przez jego syna Eliasza Hirschfelda [Account concerning the death of Rabbi Samuel Hirschfeld from Biała written by his son Eliaasz Hirschfeld]. (1964). AGWŻ, file no. 338.

Spis „Mischlingów” sporządzony przez Józefa Rottera [List of “Mischlings” made by Józef Rotter]. (1942). AGWŻ, file no. 87.

Wspomnienia Edwina Brülla [Memoirs of Edwin Brüll]. (2004). AGWŻ, file no. 449.

Gross Daniel Bernard (n.d.). In: Baza danych parlamentarzystów RP z okresu międzywojennego [Database of inter-war Polish parliamentarians]. Source: https://bs.sejm.gov.pl/F?func=find-b&request=000000499&find_code=SYS&local_base=ARS10 [accessed: 03.09.2019].

Pages of Testimony for Jews murdered in the Shoah (n.d.). The Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names. Source: <https://yvng.yadvashem.org> [accessed: 01.07.2018].

Ustawa z dnia 27 czerwca 2018 r. o zmianie ustawy o Instytucie Pamięci Narodowej – Komisji Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu oraz ustawy o odpowiedzialności podmiotów zbiorowych za czyny zabronione pod groźbą kary [Law of 27 June 2018 changing the Law on the Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation and the Law on the liability of collective entities for acts prohibited by law] (2018). Journal of Laws 2018 pos. 1277. Source: <http://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=wdu20180001277> [accessed: 03.09.2019].