

RESCUING PRISONERS

How was it even possible? These poor people living in and around Oświęcim were deported, persecuted, terrorized, yet they managed to do so much to help the prisoners.

It really was heroism. People helped without worrying about the penalties—they could be imprisoned in the camp or shot—or about their own poverty, and they took the food out of their own mouths to feed those who were worse off.

It began with making contact with the prisoners. The camp was strictly isolated, surrounded by electrified barbed wire and watched by guards. But the prisoners went outside to labor, under SS supervision, of course. They performed different kinds of labor there, for instance surveying, demolishing the houses whose Polish owners had been evicted, constructing roads and new buildings, working on drainage and flood control. They labored in factories. They also worked on farms—the villages from which the people had been expelled were seized, including the livestock, the animals. There were fields to work and cattle to look after. The fact that prisoners labored outside the barbed wire made it easy for the underground and the people of good will to have secret contact with them and help them in various ways.

There was another favorable factor. So-called civilian workers, who were Poles from Upper Silesia and also from the Oświęcim area, worked in the vicinity of the camp or even within the camp itself. Various German companies employed them—labor was compulsory during the occupation, by the way—and assigned them to various jobs in construction and installation. Therefore, they had contact with the prisoners, and sometimes labored alongside them—guarded by the SS, of course. Furthermore, the camp administration forced some Poles to deliver various sorts of construction material to the camp. The delivery men entered the camp (under tight control, of course), and made illegal contact with prisoners.

These sorts of contacts made it possible to hand over a piece of bread, drop a package of food, give them medicine, or act as intermediaries in correspondence between prisoners and their families. There was even help organizing escapes. As early as 1940, Polish laborers in one of the German companies gave food and medicine to prisoners from the first transport, from Tarnów, which arrived on June 14. They even organized the escape by one of them, Tadeusz Wiejowski. That was the first successful escape from the camp. The workers gave him clothes, a wig, and documents. Dressed as a civilian worker, he left the camp with them during the dinner break. They supplied him with money, too. He rode trains, mostly freight trains, back to his hometown near Jasło, and went into hiding there. Unfortunately, the Germans caught him a year later and shot him.

Were there a lot of escapes like that one?

There were over 800 attempts, but only 150 prisoners escaped successfully. The lucky ones survived because of help from civilians. Anyone who escaped alone would be caught sooner or later. But escapes organized by the underground had a chance. Many people had to cooperate in order to rescue a prisoner. First, secret messages had to be exchanged in order to establish the date and method of the escape, which depended on whether or not the prisoner could leave the camp grounds, for instance dressed as a civilian worker. Then couriers would supply him with civilian clothing, a wig, and documents. That's the way it worked in the case of Kazimierz Haloń of Brzeszcze, whose escape was organized by the PPS (Polish Socialist Party) organization. After successfully making his way out of the camp, he was met by couriers who took him to Jaworzno, and he was smuggled from there to Cracow. An escapee needed to be watched over, he needed a hiding place, and he had to be transferred to another locality. That's the way it was, for instance, with two Jews, Josef Meisels and Szymon Zajdów, who were taken to Cracow and placed in so-called hideouts, apartments where the dwellers took care of them. Families connected with the underground hid them—like the

Wiśniewski and Ulatowski families, or Józef Jedynak from Wieliczka—and the escapers stayed there until the end of the war. Escapers were also sent to the partisans. More than 20 Auschwitz fugitives fought in the AK (Home Army) unit, called Sosienki, which operated near the camp. They included Marian Szayer and Stanisław Zyguła, who were freed near Auschwitz by two Sosienki partisans in October 1944. The partisans were dressed in SS uniforms. They stopped the SS men who were escorting the prisoners and, pretending to be officials from the camp Gestapo, demanded that the prisoners be turned over to them so they could take them to be interrogated. The guards obeyed the fake Gestapo men and turned over the prisoners. It should be added that these partisans had themselves been in Auschwitz, and escaped two months earlier with the help of couriers from the Sosienki unit.

Perhaps the most amazing thing is that even children took part in the operations to aid the prisoners. Sometimes, small children.

Yes, sometimes small children. Like the Stupkas' 6-year-old son. Helena Stupka was one of the leaders in the aid operation and belonged to the Home Army. She put her little son Jacek to work. He would go up to prisoners and take secret messages from them.

A priest at the parish in Oświęcim told about how one of his female parishioners would send her little son to drop off food and cigarettes for the prisoners. One day an SS officer on horseback saw this and tried to run him down with his horse. But the horse balked, reared up, and the boy got away.

He was lucky. I would like to add that food was a very important part of this aid, but not the only part. Medicine was also very important, both the common medicines and valuable specifics that came from Professor Bujwid's factory in Cracow. Especially anti-typhus medicine, smuggled secretly out of the factory and distributed.

That was a highly coordinated operation. Within the Main Welfare Board (RGO) in Cracow, there was a Department for the Protection of Prisoners and Their Families, popularly known as "The Patronage," for Montelupich prison. This Patronage also worked semi-legally and illegally to supply food and medicine. The Patronage also had an Auschwitz section, headed by a remarkable woman named Teresa Lasocka, who married the famous Professor Kazimierz Estreicher after the war. She was the driving force. She raised money to buy medicine, acquired medicine, and helped in escapes. Lasocka was also active in Cracow in the secret committee called Aid for Concentration Camp Prisoners. Together with the agrarian activist Wojciech Jekielek, the socialist Edward Hałoń, and the physician Helena Szlapak, she organized help for the prisoners in Auschwitz.

It also bears emphasizing that the underground groups operating near the camp—the Home Army, the PPS, and the Peasant Battalions—concentrated on aiding the prisoners. They thought that helping the prisoners was their main responsibility.

It's also worth noting that communion wafers and altar wine were smuggled into the camp so that priests could secretly say mass for the prisoners. For instance, there is an extant secret message from Father Szweda where he writes to his family that the happiest day in his life was when he was able to say mass with the wine and communion wafers secretly delivered to him from outside.

Let's go back to the escapes. They were also important because escapees frequently carried documents attesting to the SS atrocities. These were later published in the underground press and forwarded to London.

In terms of documenting the Nazi crimes, I would like to stress that the local resistance movement, maintaining secret contact with the underground inside Auschwitz, received proof

of SS crimes from prisoners. At present, the Archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum contains several thousand documents, including reports, lists of victims, and secret messages referring to these crimes. We also have photographs of extermination operations, taken secretly in the camp and smuggled through the barbed wire. The Polish resistance movement received these documents, safeguarded them, and published them in the underground press and clandestine books. It also published brochures, in German, for German civilians. One of these brochures, *Teeth from Auschwitz*, informed the Germans about the extermination of Jews from all over Europe and the use of gold from teeth plundered from the victims for the economic needs of the Third Reich.

This information and the documents that came out of the camp illegally were forwarded by the Polish resistance movement to London by courier and secret radio transmitters (mostly belonging to the Home Army), where they were received by the Polish government-in-exile, which then informed the world about what was happening and issued periodic reports about these crimes. It also carried on a diplomatic campaign to inform the Allies about the true nature of Auschwitz. The world knew what was happening in Auschwitz, thanks to the civilians in Oświęcim and the local underground, who were the intermediaries in delivering evidence of the Nazi atrocities.

It is worth mentioning here a very important operation by the resistance movement, aimed at blocking the so-called Moll Plan. This was an SS plan to remove all evidence of the crimes once the front lines were approaching. It foresaw the shelling of the camp, razing everything to the ground, using tanks, and then plowing it over to make the site look “innocent.” The plan also foresaw, above all, murdering the prisoners as witnesses to the crime. It was called the Moll Plan because it was supposed to be carried out by an SS man named Moll, who was the boss at the crematoria. When the prisoners learned about it—they had their own intelligence service—they immediately passed word through the barbed wire, by means of couriers from the Brzeszcze PPS group. A report reached Teresa Lasocka in Cracow that same day. A secret Home Army radio transmitter passed information about the Moll Plan to London and asked that something be done to save the prisoners. The Polish government communicated the information to the Americans and the British, pleading with them to prevent this crime. In response, the Allies informed the world (on October 10, 1944, through the BBC and Washington radio), and threatened reprisals against those who ordered it and carried it out. That was late 1944 and the authorities of the Third Reich were already afraid of the consequences they would face, so they did not dare to carry out this criminal act. Earlier, a list of the “henchmen of Oświęcim” had been publicized. Prisoners made a list of SS men guilty of specific crimes. Their names were sent out by way of the couriers, reached Polish resistance movement centers, and were sent on to London where BBC radio broadcast them to the world. The SS men were mortified—some of them listened to the BBC. There were cases in which they volunteered for the Eastern front in an effort to save themselves. Some changed their names.

What were the costs? How many of these people perished?

Our records contain over 1,200 names of people who helped. We realize that this is an incomplete figure. Many acted anonymously. Of this figure, about a thousand were residents of the Land of Oświęcim or areas adjacent to it. One fifth of them, despite the fact that their efforts to aid the prisoners were clandestine, were arrested. Many of them underwent horrible torture during interrogation. Many of them died.

I'd also like to add one more thing. All these efforts had great significance for the prisoners in terms of morale. They knew someone was thinking about them, remembering them, and that they could count on help. That was a stimulus in the struggle to survive.

The prisoners were also active in the resistance. They collected those documents to send to the outside world, as a wake-up call, to shock the world into making the Allies intervene. Thanks to them, the truth about the camp survived. And also the truth about the extermination of the Jews, since no records were kept of the people who were gassed. The camp resistance movement issued information that a Jewish transport from, for instance, Italy, Holland, France, or some other country arrived on such and such a day, and how many of the deportees were sent to the gas chamber. Sometimes the resistance even delivered lists of the murdered, as in the case of the Jews from the Theresienstadt ghetto near Prague, or a list of about 6,800 Polish women who were killed or perished in Birkenau. There were lists of those who were shot, killed by lethal injection of phenol, etc. The list of Polish women who were killed or perished in Birkenau, which I mentioned, was smuggled through the barbed wire—along with other documents stolen or drawn up by the camp resistance, such as anthropometrical measurements of the Jewish women and twins who were Dr. Mengele’s victims, and photographs of his “guinea pigs,” along with photocopies of the crematorium blueprints—and hidden in Brzeszcze with the parents of a woman who was a courier in the local resistance movement. That courier, Zofia Gawron, was imprisoned in Auschwitz herself for helping prisoners, and she joined the resistance movement inside. She brought those documents out because she labored outside the perimeter fence and had contact with civilian workers, who in turn had contact with her parents in Brzeszcze. She survived Auschwitz and the war and married another former prisoner.

How many are still alive from among those who helped?

Several dozen.

**Thank you for the interview.
Stefan Wilkanowicz**