

The state erects a monument to a relative of the deputy minister, but there is no trace of my ancestors

My Jewish Family Lived in a Small Town in Poland for Eight Generations. So Did the Family of Poland's Deputy Minister of Culture and National Heritage.

By Mikhal Dekel



From the left: Magdalena Gawin, Undersecretary of State at the Ministry of Culture, National Heritage and Sports, and Mikhal Dekel, professor of literature at the City University of New York Graduate Center and City College of New York, where she also heads Rifkind ... (Photo: Michał Lepecki / Mikhal Dekel private archive)

One summer evening in June 2014, I received an email from Warsaw. Its writer, Dr. Magdalena Gawin, now serves as Poland's Deputy Minister of Culture and National Heritage, General Conserver of National Monuments, and founder of the Pilecki Institute for the study of "Nazi and Soviet Totalitarianisms," but then she was just an academic, like me.

Gawin's Catholic father, and my Jewish father hail from the same Polish town, Ostrów Mazowiecka, located midway between Warsaw and Bialystok. But the subject of Gawin's email was not our fathers, or "our town," as she would later call Ostrów, but her great aunt Jadwiga Długoborska, whom, she wrote me, owned a small hotel in town where she had hidden Jews during during WW2. Near the end of the war, she wrote, Długoborska was informed on by a maid and was arrested, tortured, and murdered by the Gestapo. Now on the 75th anniversary of her death, Gawin was organizing a commemoration ceremony for her in Ostrów.

"I invite you on behalf of all family and city," she ended her email, "we will be honored."

As we ran away, they cheered

I visited Ostrów for the first and only time a year before Gawin wrote me, to research a memoir I was writing about my father. My father Hannan Dekel, nee Channania Tejtel, was twelve when he fled Ostrów Mazowiecka on September 6, 1939 and fifteen when he arrived in a kibbutz (collective settlement) in British-controlled Palestine. He lived in Israel for the remainder of his life, served in the Israeli Air Force, changed his name from Channania Tejtel to Hannan Dekel, married a native Israeli, had three Israeli children – I am the oldest - and spoke only Hebrew, never Yiddish or Polish. He mentioned Ostrów Mazowiecka only once, in the 1980s, when I interviewed his cousin Ze'ev Dekel (born Wolf Tejtel) for a "family roots" school project. When the cousin told me about the Tejtel Brothers Brewery in Ostrów, the surrounding residences in which they lived, their employees (Poles and Jews), the precise art of beer brewing (including the barley fermentation temperature, 67C), it sounded strangely ideal.

Browar Parowy Braci Teitel

rok założenia 1885, rok zamknięcia 1940



The brewery of the Tejtł brothers in Ostrów Mazowiecka operated for 55 years - from 1885 to 1940. Today, in its place is the Tadeusz Kościuszko Primary School No. 1 Photo. Mikhal Dekel's family archive

“But when we fled, the brewery’s Polish employees cheered. They shouted ‘**Now the browar will be ours!**’” my father said.

Nothing more horrific than “when we fled, the Polish employees cheered” was ever said to me in regards to Poland. Nothing more horrific needed to be said. That Poland was my father’s wound, and the wound of other Polish-born Israeli parents around me, I seemingly knew since I had cognition. In my school in Haifa, East European Jewish history was taught as a series of pogroms that culminated in the Holocaust and the rebirth of Israel. But it wasn’t just the Zionist interpretation of history that colored my knowledge. Most of our neighbors and family friends were born in Poland; I sensed that to them the Nazis were pure evil, but the pain of Poland, the fear of Poland, seemed to run deeper and more intimate as a silent inheritance.

In the summer of 1992, at his sister’s pleading, my father traveled to Ostrów. His relatives’ gravestones, and the entire Jewish cemetery, were gone. The Tejtł Brewery was gone as well and on its plot now stood a vast and freshly painted Tadeusz Kościuszko Elementary School no. 1. In a photo I have of him, my father

stands inside the school's front yard: a thin, tense, unwell man standing at the site of his childhood home. When he and his sister inquired about the deed to the former brewery at Ostrów's municipality, they were met with cold stares and elusive answers. But my father was able to retrieve his birth certificate, which showed that his age was not sixty-four, as his Israeli records showed, but sixty-five, the legal retirement age in Israel. He retired, and a year later he died.

The obliterated world

Two decades later, I began researching my father's prewar and wartime life and once I did, a vast and utterly unknown world fell into my lap, like an accordion that had been pried open and kept expanding.

Eight generations of Tejtels had lived in Ostrów Mazowiecka. The first, my namesake Michel Tejtel, arrived in 1789. They were a huge clan, organized around several family businesses: the brewery, a sawmill, a carpentry outfit. They were public figures and philanthropists, employers of roughly a hundred workers in the brewery alone, half of them ethnic Poles. They survived WWI, during which my father's uncle served as deputy mayor of Ostrów. They survived the subsequent Polish-Russian war, which was fought in their backyard. In the interwar period they became affiliated with Zionism and sent their children to a Zionist Jewish *Tarbut* school, which was located inside the brewery's compound. They observed the Sabbath, but dressed like Christian Poles of their class. For high school, they sent their children to the Polish *gymnazjum*. Their life was neither the Shtetl world of Sholom Aleichem's *Fiddler on the Roof* or the assimilated life of Proust. It was something else completely, a Polish-Jewish mixture of pious and modern that has been erased so completely it seemed to have disappeared even from their own imagination.

Ahead of my first trip to Poland in 2013, I checked in with my aunt Ryfka Benyamini (born Regina Tejtel), who drew me a diagram of the brewery compound and told me about the "pogromchiks" she had lived through in Ostrów in the 1930s, marches of intimidation and destruction that usually took place around Easter. I also re-read Wolf Tejtel's memoirs of his strange, but not altogether terrible life as one of three Jewish boys in his class in Ostrów's *gymnazjum* (he excelled in school, but outside school had nearly no contact with Christian students); his account of the boycott of Ostrów's Jewish businesses in the late 1930s (the man who led the boycott continued to shop clandestinely in Jewish owned stores); and his description of the events that propelled him to leave Poland in 1936 (after a Jewish friend who had passed the entrance exam to the Warsaw Polytechnika was severely beaten, and he himself was flunked, he decided to travel to study at the newly opened Technikum in Haifa, Palestine, which saved his life).



The Tejtl family, from the left: Channania (the author's father) and Ryfka, behind them their parents Rachela and Zundel. Photo: Mikhal Dekel's family archive

I also read *Ostrów Mazowiecka z dystansu*, an unpublished memoir by a former Ostrów resident, which a guide I hired, Krzysztof Malczewski, sent me before my trip. Its author, Andrzej Pęziński, was born in 1927, the same year as my father. In a chapter titled "The Coexistence of Poles and Jews of Ostrów," Pęziński wrote that, "apart from the many negative aspects concerning this coexistence... there were also some positive ones. Some of the rich Jews – Tejtel and others, financially supported the construction of the gymnazjum building in Ostrów, where their children studied."

The new history of the town

A month later, when I met Pęziński in Warsaw, where he then lived, he received me warmly, repeated that my "grandfather" was "respectable" and "honorable," and lamented that not all Jews in Ostrów had been like him. "When the Germans entered town, they fawned to them," he said - and looked bewildered when I politely suggested that his standards of honor were inapplicable to people scrambling to avoid death.

Later my guide and I traveled to Ostrów, whose Jewish residents were nearly all murdered, and whose traces of Jewish life have been erased. The former synagogue was now an auto garage; a yeshiva was a nursery school. Ostrów's Jewish cemetery, which was razed after the war, was a domestic beast market. All Jewish owned residences and businesses - including my family's brewery and the five residences that were lodged around it - had either been demolished or repurposed.

At the entrance to the school that now occupied it was a memorial plaque that read: "This place was sanctified by the martyr blood of Poles fighting for freedom during the Hitlerite occupation of 1939-1944." The Tejtel brewery, my guide told me, served as Gestapo headquarters during the war.



The label of the beer produced by the Teitel Brothers Brewery. Photo: Mikhal Dekel's family archive

There wasn't any mention of the brewery's original owners on the premises, or of Jewish victims who died at the hands of the Gestapo. A small stone memorial, paid for by North American relatives, was erected for Ostrów's murdered Jews in the outskirts of town, near the Warsaw-Bialystok highway. I stopped by to light a candle, and continued to other towns. It was a bit of a letdown, to not find anything in Ostrów. But my apprehension of Poland, the uneasiness I had inherited and carried within me for seemingly a lifetime, dissipated almost immediately. Ostrów felt lazily harmless; Warsaw and Krakow were magnificent; my guide Krzysztof was warm and funny; even Peziński's mindless anti-Semitism seemed more ridiculous than malignant. I told myself that my father may have fled Poland in 1939 and his father's Polish workers may have cheered when he did, but in 2013, that did not much matter. I was an *Amerykańska Pani Profesorka* now in a thriving post-Communist country eager to showcase itself to its paying tourists. And if Ostrów had invented a new history for itself, a history from which my father's family and the rest of its Jewish residents were erased, I could simply turn my gaze away. Ostrów was not *my* wound - I belonged elsewhere - but it wasn't a place I thought I'd return to either.

Until I received Magda Gawin's email.

Magdalena Gawin: I will tell you about "our city"

I declined the invitation to her great aunt's ceremony, not quite sure what to think of it. In my research I had never come across the name Jadwiga Długoborska, or any other Christian resident of Ostrów Mazowiecka who had hidden or helped their Jewish neighbors. But Magda continued to write me. She offered to travel with me to Ostrów and arranged for me to give a talk at the Historical Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences, where she worked; I agreed, and few months later, in October 2014, we shook hands and then hugged at Chopin Airport. Tall, casual, open-faced, she was not what I expected. She was better, warmer, and we hit it off immediately.

A year and a half had passed since my first visit to Ostrów, which was cleaner now and more visibly gentrified. A fresh layer of paint covered the graffiti on the decrepit Soviet-era apartment complexes that were surrounded by newly planted gardens. The small shopping strip on 3 Maja Street now had more stores, a (German-owned) supermarket, a T-Mobile shop, and an Italian restaurant. And now that I was under Magda's wing, everyone was nice to me: at the Italian restaurant where we dined, at the T-Mobile store where I got my Polish SIM card, at the local deli, where Magda asked the owner to prepare Kugel for me for Rosh Hashanah, which was a few days away.

She had a fantasy, she said: that we should drink wine, eat Kugel and say a Rosh Hashanah prayer on the grounds of the Tejtel Brewery, like the 150 Jewish New Years my family had celebrated on those very grounds before the war. We circled the grounds of the brewery-turned-school a few times, then stood in front of the black granite monument for "the martyr blood of Poles fighting for freedom during the Hitlerite occupation."

"My great aunt Jadwiga was tortured here before she was shot in Zambrowski Forest," Magda said. "When I was growing up, I thought 'browar' meant 'Gestapo.'"



Jadwiga Długoborska from Ostrów Mazowiecka (1920) (Unknown, in Collection of Pilecki Institute, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons)

At nights, seated in front of the fireplace at her dacha, we downed bottles of French wine and the Jefferson Port I had brought from New York, and talked. Magda did most of the talking. She educated me about “our town” and my “Polish family,” as she called the Tejtels. She told me that in files she had found at *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej (IPN)* she found eyewitness testimonies about what went on inside the Tejtel brewery during the war. In one, by a food delivery man named Stanisław Szymański, the witness reported that the “interior of the brewery’s cellar - walls, ceiling, floor, tables - was always stained with blood”; that “dead bodies were lying naked outside the brewery”; that “corpses were piled up against the wall behind the building”; and that some bodies had been “poked with sticks and iron rods.”

She cried when she talked about Anton Psyk, a Gestapo agent whom she said had tortured and killed her great aunt. “Psyk was a sadist,” she said. “He was known as ‘the butcher of Ostrów.’ He was vulgar, very often drunk, he usually addressed Poles as ‘Polish pigs.’ It is lack of words what he did with Jews. The death of Jews at the browar was not normal. Torture involved the dogs. The act of killing was connected with play.”

She seemed genuinely sad and sympathetic to the terrible fate of the Jews, but her focus remained on her great aunt Jadwiga.

“I want to give Jadwiga to *Yad Vashem*,” she kept saying. “But I don’t think they will take her.”

Doubt and love

Yad Vashem, the international Holocaust museum located in Israel, grants the honorific of Righteous Among the Nations to non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. An application for such recognition requires “survivor testimony” or “other documentation” that substantiates it. Magda believed that her great aunt harbored long-term Jewish residents who were living in her inn before the war and that she may have also lodged Jews who were trying to escape from Nazi occupied Poland into the Soviet Union, whose wartime border was a mile to the east of Ostrów. The problem was, as I understood it, that she had only two pieces of evidence: the inn’s prewar guest log, which contained “Jewish sounding names”; and the testimony of Jadwiga’s sister, Cecylia Pachecka, who had seen her sister washing two unknown boys at the inn’s kitchen. She asked if I could help her locate a person Jadwiga might have saved.

Jadwiga’s remains are buried at Ostrów’s Catholic cemetery. At the entrance to the cemetery is a black granite plaque etched with 138 names etched on it: 28 killed by *N.K.W.D.*, the Soviet secret police; 23 by the *U.B.*, Communist Poland secret police; and 88 killed by *Hitlerowców* (Hitlerites), including Jadwiga. Magda asked that I say a Hebrew prayer for her.

I scrambled, then the words of the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai just came to me:

From the place where we are right
flowers will never grow
in the spring.
The place where we are right
is hard and trampled
like a yard.

But doubts and loves
dig up the world
like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
where the ruined
house once stood.

Doubts and love. In a way, it was liberating: the demand that I loosen up the exclusivity on Jewish suffering and learn what had happened to the Polish residents of Ostrów under Nazi occupation; liberating to forfeit the grim image of Poland I had subconsciously inherited; liberating to understand the details of my father’s childhood in Poland, which explained many things that were mysterious about him.

That night, Magda and I had dinner with her friends in a nearby town. Among them was a famous media personality who had been a dissident under Communism; a prominent Catholic journalist and his wife, a Christian pop singer; and the widow of the former president of Poland's National Bank. They were political conservatives, phobic of Russia, and abhorrent of the specter of the Communist regime. They were warm and charming and friendly. They seemed by far the happiest people I had met in Poland.

How to correct a historical inaccuracy?

When we drove back in pitch darkness, the windows open and the cool air on our faces, I thought about Israeli artist Yael Bartana's 2011 video installation *And Europe will be Stunned*. The video imagines the return of millions of dead Jews to their ancestral homeland. Return was impossible, but for a moment I began to feel that a narrow crack had now opened through which I could perhaps begin to reinsert my Jewish family's history into the history of Poland.

Which immediately raised many problems and questions.

"If this is *our* town, as you say," I asked Magda carefully, where are the Jewish names on Ostrów cemetery plaque?"

"Many murdered Poles aren't commemorated in the cemetery either," she shrugged.

"And what about the Jews who died in the brewery, why are they not mentioned on the plaque at the former Tejtel brewery?"

On November 10th, 1939, hundreds of Ostrów's Jewish residents were locked up inside the Tejtel brewery and on the next day, roughly five hundred of them were marched to a nearby field and executed by machine gun in one of the first mass massacres of Jews in Poland.

In other testimonies, even those Magda herself had shown me, the incidents of those arrested and killed inside the Tejtel brewery involved Jews, some of them children. In Pęziński's *Ostrów at a Distance*, he too reported that a "German soldiers ordered one Jew to climb up a tall chimney of the brewery. They were shooting at him just for fun, and after each gunshot he oscillated around the chimney hoping that this way he would avoid death."



Magdalena Gawin Photo: MICHAŁ ŁEPECKI

Someone, presumably me, would have to protest the historical inaccuracy of commemorating only Christian Poles, I thought. But what would I be fighting for exactly? A plaque at the entrance to the former Tejtel brewery that would state: "Here stood the Tejtel Brothers Brewery"? An amendment to the Brewery's monument for "the martyr blood of Poles fighting for freedom," which would turn it into "the martyr blood of Jews murdered by the Nazis *and* Poles fighting for freedom?"

Morally speaking, could these two groups even co-exist in the same fantasized plaque? That was the *big* question I was gnawing at.

My father was a Polish citizen.

The brewery's employees who cheered when he fled were Polish citizens.

Anton Psyk, "the Butcher of Ostrów," was a Polish citizen.

"But Psyk was a Volksdeutsch," Magda said, an ethnic German living outside the Reich. That was never proven.

"What about the 'pogromchiks' in Ostrów that my aunt Ryfka had told me about and my father's cousin mentions, the boycotts and the violence?" I asked Magda.

"When I asked my father about the prewar period," she said, "he told me that the instigators were not from our town, but members of ONR (Obóz Narodowo

Radykalny, the anti-Semitic National Radical Camp) who came by bus with their badges on their arm.”

“If these were outsiders, why didn’t the local police chase them off?”

“When I asked my father he said, ‘My God, in our town there were five policemen. When they saw so many young men coming by bus they hide in the police station and they feared,’” she said. “There was just not enough state support to fight the violence in the 1930s, and so Jews and some Poles in our town found themselves completely alone.”

“But I know from Wolf Teitel’s memoir that ONR had its own party in town, headed by a man named Radwański. (“Radwański continued to shop in Jewish shops on Sundays, entering through the back door,” the cousin wrote).

“Even the Radwański family,” Magda said, “who were unequivocal supporters of Roman Dmowski did not support violence against town Jews. Our townspeople were traditional, religious, but not radical, not violent. They were like *me*. They were like *your* family. People who are attached to the national idea and to traditional values.”

Questions about the Home Army

Back in Warsaw, we visited the Warsaw Uprising Museum, which Magda’s husband Darek Gawin co-created and still serves as deputy director. Swarms of school children, assignments in hand, walked between the displays of weapons, uniforms, recordings, songs, photos, oral testimonies, life size posters of *Armia Krajowa* soldiers, re-enactments of wartime scenes, and the 3D display of Warsaw before and after the uprising. The exhibitions were jubilant, interactive and technology heavy, telling in extremely effectively and visually appealing ways the story of Polish heroism. Outside, a brick wall etched with names of Home Army soldiers foregrounded a manicured open courtyard used for commemorations.

“Home Army soldiers like my great aunt Jadwiga were forgotten during Communism,” Magda said repeatedly. “Now we can honor their bravery.”

“But the Home Army has a big blemish,” I said, a little sheepishly. “It did nothing to support the Warsaw Ghetto uprising.”

“The purpose of the Home Army was to fight the Germans and the Soviets. Its purpose was military. It did not protect and sometimes even hurt Polish civilians, let alone Jews, who were the weakest link,” Magda said.

“The Ghetto uprising *was* a military action,” a historian friend wrote me that night when I asked her to send me more details. “But when Mordechai Anielewicz [leader

of the Warsaw ghetto uprising] begged the Home Army for weapons they ignored him. The Home Army contained nationalists and the Polish underground in general also contained factions like the *Narodowe Siły Zbrojne* - the National Armed Forces – that were openly anti-Semitic and killed Jews.”

But I decided not bring this up with Magda further. I remained uneasy, but I was also grateful for her hospitality and generosity and for the help she had given me with my research. I did not know whether Jadwiga had in fact hidden Jews, or had done something else that caused the wrath of the Gestapo, but I understood Magda’s need to give meaning to her great aunt’s death. And if her picture of Jewish-Christian relations was rosier than it in fact was, in 2014 it seemed to me like the sweet, harmless fantasy of one private citizen.

But it wasn’t.

Our Yad Vashem

Exactly a year after I left Poland, Magda was appointed Deputy Minister of Culture of Poland’s newly elected *Law and Justice* government, and much of what she had personally schooled me in is now official government doctrine. Ideas about Polish suffering, Polish heroism, Polish-Jewish friendship, and especially Christian Poles’ rescue of Jews are disseminated on the national and international stage through newly erected museums, monuments and research institutes, some of them initiated by Magda.

There is now a “Warsaw Ghetto Museum,” which is planned to open on the 80th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising in 2023, and which per Magda’s boss, Culture Minister Piotr Gliński, will commemorate “the mutual love between the two nations [Jews and Poles] that spent eight hundred years here, on Polish land. Of the solidarity, fraternity, and historical truth in all its aspects.”

There is a new official holiday: “the National Remembrance Day for Poles Who Saved Jews During WWII,” which is observed on the day and month Nazi forces murdered a Polish family who hid Jews in Markowa.

There is now the Ulma Family Markowa Museum, which commemorates “all Poles who risked their lives to help their fellow Jewish citizens facing the Holocaust.”

And there is now a black granite memorial honoring Jadwiga Długoborska, located at the entrance to the Tadeusz Kościuszko Elementary School no. 1, formerly known as the Teitel Brewery.

The memorial was built by the Pilecki Institute, a research and commemoration center that Magda has created and which opened in 2017. Aside from generously funding research on “the Nazi and Soviet totalitarian regimes,” the Pilecki unearths

and bestows honors on “Poles murdered for providing aid and assistance to Poles and Jews during World War II.” This commemoration project, titled “Call by Name,” was created, Magda explains in a June 19, 2019 interview she gave *Poland: Current Events*, in order to recognize Christian Poles who have not been acknowledged by Yad Vashem.

“They are not recognized as righteous or as the victims of the Holocaust... They have no name. They are nobody,” Magda says, lamenting that “Israel does not recognize Polish documentation produced by the Main Commission for the Investigation of Hitlerite Crimes” and that it requires that “a Jewish witness... be present” as proof of a Pole’s “righteousness.” That isn’t true; Yad Vashem allows for “other documentation” that isn’t survivor testimony, and “Call By Name” is de facto a mechanism for circumventing Yad Vashem’s criteria for Righteous Among Nations.



Information materials of the Pilecki Institute about Jadwiga Długoborska (on the right) Photo: The Pilecki Institute

The emphasis of Pilecki Institute commemoration is on rural communities in Poland. “Today we give special emphasis to the significance of the deeds of quiet local heroes whose heroic stance towards the Holocaust testifies to the heroism of local communities,” Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said in a message that was read at the unveiling ceremony of Jadwiga Długoborska’s memorial on June 29, 2019. “[For Długoborska and another woman, Lucyna Radziejowska, who was

commemorated with her] “death was the price they paid for [their] act of human solidarity.”

Image correction

In the years since I visited Ostrów with Magda, I continued researching my father’s prewar and wartime past, and the evidence I amassed painted a picture that was largely the opposite of what might be called “human solidarity.” After fleeing Ostrów into the USSR, my father, like hundreds of thousands of Jewish and Christian Poles, was exiled to the remotest reaches of the USSR where he (and over 200,000 Polish Jews) survived because the Wehrmacht did not advance far enough to kill him. He was later released with other Polish citizens and continued to Uzbekistan, where he and his sister – their parents, like most Polish Jewish exiles, were left back - were evacuated to Iran, India, and eventually Palestine, alongside the Anders Army and Christian Polish exiles.

With some exceptions that shone brilliantly, the archival materials and eyewitness testimonies I had found did not reveal a friendly relationship between Polish Jews and Christians along these shared routes. They revealed discrimination, neglect, even violence directed at Jewish refugees, and elaborate attempts to explain and excuse them. They could not be reconciled with a worldview such as Magda’s. Once, when I wrote to ask her why she thought my father’s name was listed as “Janek” instead of “Chanania” in a list of Polish citizens in Iran, she answered that it must have been “what his Polish friends used to call him.” She continued to be generous and friendly and to occasionally help me with my research, but the gap between these words and the image of my cold, hungry father in Iran was painful.

After 2014, I did not further research the history of wartime Ostrów, or of Jadwiga Długoborska. Jadwiga now has a Wikipedia page in which she is described as “a Polish teacher, social and charity worker, and member of the underground... persecuted and murdered for lending aid to Jews.” The page states that she had hidden Jews on November 10th, 1939, the night before the mass massacre in Ostrów and that those she had hidden managed to cross the Soviet border and “even sent a postcard from Białystok that they were still alive.”



Magdalena Gawin (to the right of the monument) on June 29, 2019 in Ostrów Mazowiecka during the commemoration of Jadwiga Długoborska, her relative murdered by the Germans. During the same ceremony, Lucyna Radziejowska, who died in Auschwitz, was also commemorated. Photo: The Pilecki Institute

This could be new evidence; I had not heard about Jews hidden at the inn on November 10th, 1939, nor seen such a postcard on my visit to Ostrów, nor did I meet with any Jew who survived in hiding in Nazi-occupied Ostrów. During these years I did occasionally meet witnesses who had survived in hiding in other towns. One, a man by the name of Michael Pratt (born Rapaport) who aided by his father's Christian Polish lover hid for several years in a hole in the ground remained so fearful of his Christian neighbors in Łódź that up until his death in 2012 refused to travel from the United States to Poland.

Magda is striving for victory

“The problem,” historian Natalia Aleksion, who specializes in modern Polish Jewish history says, “is that the monuments and museums and commemorations paint a very selective picture of history. It’s true that there were ethnic Poles who were murdered for hiding Jews, but it’s also true that those who informed on them were mostly ethnic Poles as well. Invariably in these museums, good, noble, brave, and often fair, blond, and blue-eyed ethnic Poles are positioned as “saviors,” while “informers” are cast as others: ethnic Germans, Ukrainian and even Jewish themselves.”

So much of what Magda had been adamant and defensive about was about identity: the need to separate off the informers and the perpetrators from the Polish story, to reinforce the image of Poland as a good and noble crucified nation, and of Poles as brave and active saviors like Jadwiga. It was an obsession that long predated the PiS's 2015 electoral victory ("Compared to the firepower [of the Polish lobby], the Jewish lobby was barely capable of a skirmish," Claude Lanzmann wrote in *The Patagonian Hare* about Polish nationalists' incessant and aggressive campaign to block his film *Shoah*). But still it is a different story when the government itself is the one pushing such efforts. The Institute of National Remembrance now receives an annual budget of 420 million PLN; the Pilecki Institute, with 20 plus million, continually cultivates international collaborations. It now has a Berlin office; meanwhile, a branch of the "Museum of Poles who risked their lives to help their fellow Jewish citizens facing the Holocaust" is set to open in New York.



Mikhal Dekel Fot. archiwum prywatne

Against this atmosphere, it's no wonder that anything that challenges the image of such "heroes" is fought against vigorously, as we saw in the recent trial and guilty verdict against historians Jan Grabowski and Barbara Engelking. What in 2014 was a friendly, at times uneasy exchange between two academics is now a state war against uncomfortable evidence, fought in the public sphere with all the artillery of soft power. Magda appears to be fighting to win. No matter what evidence might be unearthed, she implies, she will not let the story of Polish heroism be wrestled away from the communities whose identity is dependent on it.

Or in her own words (and my emphasis), "On the Day of Poles Saving Jews, they" [residents of these communities] will go to the "place of their commemoration; fire station orchestras, Societies of Countryside Hostesses, teachers, neighbors, local

administration, mayor, school children. The priest will say a mass. ***Because this is their own story. And no one ever will be able to take it away from them.***

Mikhal Dekel is Professor of Middle East Studies and English at the CUNY Graduate Center and the City College of New York, where she also directs the Rifkind Center for Humanities and the Arts. Her book TEHRAN CHILDREN: A HOLOCAUST REFUGEE ODYSSEY was published by W.W. Norton in 2019. Its German edition, DIE KINDER VON TEHERAN, was published by WBG-Wissenverbindet in April 2021.