

The attitude of the People's Party in exile toward the Jews during the Second World War

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Abstract

The article discusses the attitude of the People's Party in exile toward the Jews during the Second World War. The peasant activists who ended up in France and then in Great Britain as a result of military activities played a major role in the process of forming the Polish government in exile. They were in charge of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which was responsible for cases of nationality issues and communication with the occupied country. The Ministry received reports detailing German crimes perpetrated in occupied Poland, including against Jews. In light of the information sent from Poland concerning the situation of Jews, the peasant activists tried to alert the international community and demanded that the Allied powers take immediate action to save the Jews. However, these efforts did not elicit a proper response.

Particularly dramatic was the plight of the people who ended up in territories occupied by the USSR. The Polish authorities, most notably prof. Stanisław Kot from the People's Party, took steps to save their citizens, a significant portion of whom were Jews. They received help, thanks to which most of them survived, but it came too late for many, who died of starvation and disease in Soviet prison and labor camps.

The attitude of the peasant activists toward the Jews before the Second World War

Seventy years after the Second World War ended, a rather extensive body of literature is available concerning the history of the Polish peasants' movement. However, some of its aspects are still under-researched. One of them is the issue of the attitude of the peasants' political movement to national minorities. In recent years, a number of works devoted to the Polish-Jewish relations in the country have been published, but they have only focused on selected facets of mutual domestic-based relationships (such as providing help or lack thereof).¹ So far, there have been no publications concerning the stance which the People's Party took toward the Jews while in exile. Note that this is a very broad subject since peasant activists were heavily involved in the work of the Polish government-in-exile. Being part of the government, they were able to run far-reaching operations in England, USA, USSR, or the Middle East, among others. For that reason, this article is only going to touch upon selected aspects of this interesting subject matter which are yet to be explored.

From the late 19th century, the Polish peasants' movement was one of the major political blocs in the Polish territories, both before the restoration of independence and in the interwar period, while the Jewish issue was among the most important ones for domestic political and economic life.²

Between 1918 and 1926, the peasants' movement was part of the government and, although the peasants' parties were too weak to govern by themselves, they were present in almost every successive cabinet, while leading representatives of this movement held top state offices, Wincenty Witos serving as prime minister on three different occasions. The politicians of the peasants' movement took on heavy responsibility for the fortunes of the country, especially in 1923, when the Polish People's Party "Piast" formed a coalition with the Christian Union of National Unity. It was a watershed moment in the history of the peasants' movement: the biggest peasants' party could proceed to implement its political program on the most important points, including with respect to national

1 The issue of helping the Jews was discussed in the works of Kazimierz Przybysz (Przybysz, 2001) and Janusz Gmitruk and Dorota Pasiak-Wąsik (Gmitruk, Pasiak-Wąsik, 2005). Additionally, a number of works have been published which are devoted to the crimes perpetrated against the Jews by the Poles in the war period. Some of them concern the rural areas. The most recent publications by the Polish Center for Holocaust Research deserve a mention first and foremost (Engelking, Grabowski, 2018; Engelking, Grabowski, 2011; Engelking, 2011; Grabowski, 2011).

2 The issue of the relationships between the Polish People's movement and the Jewish population before the Second World War was thoroughly discussed in *Polski ruch ludowy wobec Żydów (1895-1939)*. This work contains references to sources and a bibliography concerning all the issues from that period which are covered in the article (Mańko, 2010).

minorities. However, what followed was the adoption of some anti-Jewish views espoused by the Popular National Union, which enjoyed the dominant position within the government. On the other end of the political stage, the opposition Polish People's Party "Wyzwolenie" [Liberation] was positively disposed toward the Jews and engaged in frequent cooperation in parliament with the Jewish Deputies' Group.

After the May Coup in 1926, the peasant activists moved to the opposition for good. A concerted political effort of the peasants' parties made for the integration of the entire movement. The formal conclusion of this process was the unification of the peasants' parties and the foundation of the People's Party in March 1931.

The violation of democratic principles on the part of the government (for example election rigging) saw protests of the peasants' movement. The difficult political situation contributed to the radicalization of the peasant activists. This process was visible both in the political program and in different forms of mass struggle. The peasant activists demanded the democratization of the state, restoration of civil liberties, and amnesty for the political emigrants - including Wincenty Witos - who had been convicted during the political Brest trials. These events culminated with the peasants' strikes in 1937, which at that time were the biggest such demonstrations in Europe. The strike was held in the territories inhabited by more than 8 million peasants, 3 million of whom took an active part in it. The Jewish politicians did not support the protests of the People's Party, a fact which impinged on their mutual relations.

It must be noted that these relations were very complicated for a number of reasons. Mutual distrust and frequent accusations from both sides were commonplace in the Polish-Jewish relationships. None of this was conducive to positive thinking, which would result in effective solutions to actual issues. However, the crux of the problem was something else, namely, the unique socio-economic structure of the Jewish population (and the resistance of some of its portions to any changes on that front).

Polish-Jewish relations were also affected by the general condition of the Polish state. The Jews unfortunately suffered various types of injustice from their Polish neighbors, but in the first place they were affected by the living conditions in a country which was not too affluent and was plagued by various maladies resulting from economic and civilizational backwardness. The situation decidedly worsened at the end of the 1920s. The slow recovery from the great economic crisis and increased competition in the craftsmanship and commerce sectors of the job market meant that, on the Polish end, comprehensive solutions were being sought, and also such that seemed the easiest. Falling into this category was the emigration of the Jews. The issue of emigration was also discussed among the Jewish politicians who supported the Zionist movement. The Zionists believed that it was necessary to found a separate Jewish state and set in motion a mass emigration of Jews from all the countries in which they lived.

The proposed state was to be established on the territory of Palestine. The leaders of the peasants' movement in turn claimed that the emigration of the Jews would result in the emergence of the third estate in Poland, which was supposed to help bring down unemployment in the countryside.³ Note that these proposals did not fully appreciate the broader international picture, especially the situation in Palestine. The growing popularity of the emigration idea was in turn the result of a lack of viable alternatives.

Shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War, the People's Party had around 150,000 members and an extensive organizational network spanning practically the whole country (with the exceptions of Polesie and Volhynia). Additionally, the authority of the Party was accepted by the 90,000-strong Union of Rural Youth "Wici". The People's Party had the most considerable clout in the Lesser Poland province and in the villages of the Kielce province. In the Lublin, Warsaw, and Łódź provinces, as well as in the Greater Poland province, holding sway in the rural areas were also the National Party and various organizations subordinate to the government (Przybysz, 2010, pp. 19–25).

Working for the Polish government in exile

The outbreak of the Second World War ushered in the most tragic period in the history of Poland. War damage, brutal terror, and the exterminatory policies of the occupiers resulted in the unspeakable suffering of the people. All spheres of life in the occupied country were subjugated to the monstrous schemes of the Third Reich and the USSR. Poles and Jews were forced to put up a fight not just to preserve the nation or culture, but also to survive biologically.

The outbreak of the war almost completely paralyzed the activities of the People's Party as leading activists dispersed or were arrested. Soon after the military offensive had concluded, the Germans arrested Wincenty Witos, the president of the People's Party, vice-president Władysław Kiernik, and, at a later point, vice-president Andrzej Czapski (he was murdered on 30 November 1939). Witos and Kiernik were released, but due to Gestapo surveillance they could not play any major role in the underground. In September, secretary general Kazimierz Bagiński found himself in the Volhynia province, from which he only returned in 1942. In March 1941, Bruno Gruszka, chairman of the Supreme Council, died

3 Some interesting views concerning the potential economic effects of Jewish emigration from Poland were expressed by Wiktor Alter, one of the Bund's leading activists. According to his estimation, a Jewish emigration would not only fail to reduce the unemployment rate but it would actually contribute to its increase (Alter, 1937, pp. 34–48).

in a prison in Przemyśl after having been arrested by the NKVD (Buczek, 1975, pp. 16–21).

The first attempts at rebuilding the party leadership were made near the beginning of the occupation at the initiative of Maciej Rataj. For various reasons, including Rataj's internment, this only happened in mid-February 1940, during a meeting of peasant activists in Lublin, where the Central Leadership of the Peasants' Movement (CKRL) was appointed, and the People's Party assumed the codename "Roch". The CKRL was composed of Maciej Rataj (released from prison in February 1940, arrested again in March, and executed in June 1940 in Palmiry near Warsaw), Stanisław Osiecki (who became chairman after Rataj's death), Józef Grudziński, and Józef Niećko. The make-up of the CKRL had a tendency for frequent change. The CKRL assumed control over the Union of Rural Youth "Wici", whose activists played an important part in "Roch". The CKRL's authority was also recognized by some of the activists of the pre-war Central Union of Rural Youth "Siew" (Buczek, 1975, pp. 16–21).

Before the formation of the CKRL, the so-called Foreign Group of the People's Party was established in fall 1939 in France. Towards the end of 1939, it was transformed into the Foreign Committee of the People's Party, which included former members of the supreme authorities of the People's Party and the "Wici" Union. Among the leading members of the Foreign Committee were Stanisław Mikołajczyk, Stanisław Kot, and Władysław Banaczyk. After France was defeated, the Foreign Committee relocated to London, where its members were instrumental in the formation of the Polish government in exile. Led by Stanisław Mikołajczyk, they were at first part of the coalition government of Gen. Władysław Sikorski, and after his tragic death in July 1943, took the helm themselves. Holding top offices in the Polish government enabled the peasant activists not only to implement the agenda of the People's Party, but also to shape the mainstream of Poland's wartime policies.

The standing of peasant activists in Gen. Sikorski's government became particularly strong after Stanisław Mikołajczyk was appointed deputy prime minister (on 5 September 1941). Earlier, Mikołajczyk assumed the office of the minister of internal affairs (3 August 1941).⁴ His predecessor was prof. Stanisław Kot (from 10 October 1940), and after Mikołajczyk became prime minister (on 14 July 1943), the job went to Władysław Banaczyk. Therefore, the ministry, which was crucial for national issues, was controlled by peasant activists up until the dismissal of Mikołajczyk's cabinet on 24 November 1944.

4 There is major disagreement in the Polish historiography with respect to the date of appointing Mikołajczyk minister and deputy prime minister (Buczek, 1996, p. 255).

Although the ministry of internal affairs in exile had, by definition, different responsibilities than it would in an independent country, it was still one of the most important ministries, in no small part because it was in communication with the homeland. The minister was in charge of communications with the leadership of the Polish Underground State. He received couriers and informational materials, which were then decoded and shared with the government, offices, and the press. Passing through the office of the minister of internal affairs were reports concerning German crimes perpetrated in occupied Poland, including against the Jewish population (Buczek, 1996, pp. 255–256).

The ministry passed the intel it received concerning the situation of the Jews directly to Ignacy Schwarzbart and Szmul Zygielbojm, the Jewish representatives in the National Council of Poland. Schwarzbart was typically apprised of new developments by phone or summoned to the ministry, where he met with Paweł Siudak, a peasant activist responsible for communications, or with another officer, and sometimes with Mikołajczyk (later with his successor, Banaczyk) (Stola, 1995, pp. 156–157).

In view of the information sent from Poland about the situation of the Jews in the ghettos, Mikołajczyk took steps to make the story public. In the Council of Ministers meeting on 27 September 1941, he called for initiating special publications targeted on American university centers which would chronicle “the full extent of the monstrosity of the new, Hitlerite order.”⁵

During Mikołajczak’s tenure, in November 1941, the Office for the German Crimes and Offences in Poland was formed at the Social (domestic) Department of the ministry. The materials received by this department were processed and then put on file (Buczek, 1996, p. 264).

Another important issue was deciding on the government’s jurisdiction with regard to policies of nationality. Mikołajczyk presented this problem on 12 March 1942 in a Council of Ministers meeting. The proposal assumed that all relevant decisions should fall within the purview of the minister of internal affairs as the entity responsible for executing the government’s nationality policies. To that end, the activities of nationality units at other ministries were to be closely aligned with the nationality office at the ministry of internal affairs. Although the proposal was approved by the Council, even Mikołajczyk himself was rather skeptical about the success of the plan. The minutes read, “The minister of internal affairs does not expect the resolution to change much, unfortunately, but efforts need to be made nevertheless.”⁶

5 Minutes from the Council of Ministers meeting on 27 Nov 1941 (Rojek, Suchcitz, Zgórniak, 1994, p. 210).

6 Minutes from the Council of Ministers meeting on 10 Mar 1942 (Rojek, Suchcitz, Zgórniak, 1998, p. 168).

Prof. Stanisław Kot also gave a lot of attention to the issue of national minorities.⁷ Kot, acting at the government's behest, had been dealing with this subject ever since his arrival in France. On 9 January 1940, in a meeting of the Council of Ministers in Angers, a decision was made that he would be responsible for Jewish affairs on behalf of the government.⁸

Władysław Banaczyk, the minister of internal affairs in Stanisław Mikołajczyk's cabinet, similarly took active steps to help the Jews. Among others, he continued the work of his predecessors with respect to informing the international public opinion about the crimes perpetrated against the Jews (*Oświadczenie min. Banaczyka*, 1943). The minister also held talks with representatives of Jewish organizations in London. As a result, the Polish authorities undertook to revoke the legal limitations affecting the Jews in pre-war Poland, while the representatives of Jewish organizations pledged to support the Polish national interest on the international front.⁹

Representatives of the Foreign Committee of the People's Party actively participated in the works of the National Council, which served as an ersatz Polish parliament in exile, especially during the 1st National Council, which – in the absence of its chairman Ignacy Paderewski, whose health had deteriorated – was presided over by deputy chairman Stanisław Mikołajczyk. The powers of the Council were very limited because it had been appointed as an advisory body to the President of Poland and the Government. It was composed of representatives of the parties which formed the government as well as influential figures from different regions of Poland and various social circles (Duraczyński, Turkowski, 1997, pp. 21–23).

Posing much trouble was the process of appointing representatives of national minorities to the National Council. In the case of Jews, various political parties wanted to have their own representatives.¹⁰ Eventually, in January 1940, a seat in the council was given to Dr. Ignacy Schwarzbart, a Zionist, and in February 1942 also to Szmul "Artur" Zygielbojm, a representative of the Bund. After Zygielbojm committed suicide on 12 May 1943, his seat went the following month to Dr. Emanuel Scherer, another Bundist (Duraczyński, Turkowski, 1997, p. 87). Attempts were also made to appoint representatives of the Ukrainian and Belarusian minorities to the

7 Roman Buczek accurately points out that his attention was rather unidirectional. He wrote that Kot "focused his attention on the Jews, while there were also Ukrainians and Belarusians" (Buczek, 1996, p. 276).

8 Minutes from the Council of Ministers meeting on 9 Jan 1940 (Rojek, Suchcitz, Zgórnjak, 1994, p. 156).

9 Minutes from the Council of Ministers meeting on 24 Aug 1943 (Rojek, Suchcitz, Zgórnjak, 2003, p. 73).

10 Minutes from the Council of Ministers meeting on 23 Jan 1942 (Rojek, Suchcitz, Zgórnjak, 1998, pp. 127–128).

Council, but political considerations proved a stumbling block: no candidates could be shortlisted who would support the Polish national interest and would not, most importantly, dispute the eastern borders of Poland.¹¹

In official statements

The Jewish politicians appointed to the National Council repeatedly emphasized their affinity with Poland and Polish history. Ignacy Schwarzbart believed that the main goal of Poland's Jewish community and its representatives should be to reach an agreement with the Poles. In his conversation with Prime Minister Sikorski in spring 1941, he said that an agreement may be reached in exchange for the sacrifice made by the Jews fighting for the country's liberation and their cooperation in building a new Poland. A key to tightening the bond between the Poles and the Jews was supposed to be their intertwined fates (Stola, 1995, pp. 65–66).

These were not just empty words. Much was actually done toward strengthening the relationships. One telling example of this was the Ceremony of the Polish Jews, held on 3 November 1940 in London. It was organized by the Council of Polish Jews in the United Kingdom and the Organizational Committee of the Representatives of the Polish Jews in London. The ceremony, presided over by Ignacy Schwarzbart, was attended by representatives of the Polish authorities in exile. Appearing on behalf of the People's Party were Stanisław Mikołajczyk and Stanisław Kot. Schwarzbart delivered a speech, in which he stressed:

Poland's magnificent moral and political contribution to the present struggle, the heroic resistance of the Polish people, and the fact that Poland deserves an important seat at the table in the new Europe, while the Jews, in weal and woe, are forever tied to Poland's fate. This Ceremony is held in order to accentuate the support of the Polish Jews for Poland's heroic struggle and to express the hope for the prosperity of the Polish Jews in the new, free Poland (Akademia Żydostwa Polskiego, 1940).

Jan Stańczyk made a statement on behalf of the Polish government. He emphasized that Poland could only be built on democratic principles, ensuring equal civil, political, and social rights:

11 Minutes from the Council of Ministers meeting on 5 Mar 1943 (Rojek, Suchcitz, Zgórniak, 2001, p. 306).

As Polish citizens, the Jews will, in liberated Poland, have the same responsibilities and enjoy the same rights as the Polish community. They will be free to have their culture, religion, and customs. This will be underpinned not just by state legislation but also by the common sacrifice made while fighting to liberate Poland and the common suffering endured in this most tragic period of oppression (*Żydzi w wolnej Polsce*, 1940).

The People's Party took the same stance. The official declaration concerning this issue was made on 26 March 1941 in a meeting of the National Council. On behalf of the People's Party, Władysław Banaczyk stated that how the state treats the citizen shall not depend on their religion, race, or heritage. He emphasized that the state shall confer the same rights and impose the same obligations on every citizen. However, he said that this rule shall hold for all national minorities in Poland except for the Germans, "who, under the People's Party proposal, shall not enjoy any privileges as a minority in the Polish state" (*Obrady Rady Narodowej R.P.*, 1941).

In the following month, a similar statement was also issued by Gen. Władysław Sikorski, who paid an official visit to Canada and the United States, accompanied, among others, by Stanisław Mikołajczyk (*Buczek*, 1996, p. 221). In New York, the prime minister met with the World Jewish Congress delegation headed by rabbi Stephen Samuel Wise. The delegation handed Sikorski a memorandum, which demanded that all strictures placed on the Jews in Poland be revoked. During a conversation, Sikorski promised that Poland would be founded on democratic principles, while the delegation offered every help for struggling Poland, which included mounting an informative offensive in the United States.¹²

A formal discussion on the report from the visit was held in a meeting of the Council of Ministers on 11 June 1941. Gen. Sikorski made a number of suggestions, including one respecting the policies toward the Jews:

The Polish government aligns itself with the principles presented by the Prime Minister in the United States and concerning the Government's policies toward the Jews, and it is in particular sympathy with his statement on this issue made before the National Council on 4 June 1941, which is as follows: Under the genuinely democratic policies of the Government, the following principle shall be in force in the new

¹² General Sikorski's report from the visit to Canada and the United States (Rojek, Suchcitz, Zgórnjak, 1995, p. 365).

Poland, holding in equal measure for all Polish citizens, irrespective of their nationality, race, or religious affiliation: equal obligations – equal rights.¹³

In order to deliver on these assurances, Prof. Kot asked the government for permission to give an interview to the Jewish press on the issue of lifting the restrictions facing the Jews at Polish universities. A different stance was taken by the National Party's Marian Seyda, who argued with the postulates of the Jewish delegation. He also voiced numerous reservations about the democratic manifesto of minister Stańczyk, which the latter presented during the Ceremony of the Polish Jews.¹⁴

The debate was also joined by Mikołajczyk. He said that Gen. Sikorski's statement which he had made in the United States – that all citizens would be treated equally in Poland – “left a first-rate impression on the American public.” At the same time, Mikołajczyk emphasized that Poland had been badly hurt by the anti-Jewish views promoted by persons with ties to the National Party, especially those aired in the “Jestem Polakiem” periodical, which was issued in London (*Prasa żydowska o “Jestem Polakiem”*, n.d., p. 19).¹⁵

The subject of removing the restrictions which the Jewish population faced in pre-war Poland was also raised at a later point. Upon Schwarzbart's request, the National Council passed an official resolution, which stated that all limitations which violated the principle of citizens' equal rights and obligations shall be lifted. Additionally, it was noted that the Polish government shall actively counter antisemitism and “pull out all the stops to arrive at full cooperation founded on mutual respect between the Poles and the Polish Jews, both home and abroad.”¹⁶

In the meantime, significant shifts had occurred on the Polish political stage in London. The government crisis which ensued against the background of the Polish-Soviet pact of 30 July 1941 resulted in the reconstruction of Sikorski's cabinet. Consequently, the National Party, which was negatively disposed toward the Jews, was removed from the government. A few months later, a group of nationalists gathered around Seyda rejoined the government, which only confirmed the rift within the National Party (Stola, 1995, p. 99). Emerging stronger after the crisis were three

13 The Prime Minister's proposal submitted to the Council of Ministers respecting the policies toward the Jews (Rojek, Suchcitz, Zgórnian, 1995, p. 380).

14 Minutes from the Council of Ministers meeting on 11 Jun 1941 (Rojek, Suchcitz, Zgórnian, 1995, p. 375).

15 See: Stanisław Mikołajczyk's report from his visit to the United States (Rojek, Suchcitz, Zgórnian, 1996, pp. 61–62).

16 The Polish National Council's resolution respecting the fortunes of the Jewish people, adopted upon the request of Dr Ignacy Schwarzbart, 11 Apr 1942 (Duraczyński, Turkowski, 1997, pp. 334–335).

democratic parties (the People's Party, the Polish Socialist Party, and the Labor Party), which supported Sikorski. The People's Party gained a particular opportunity to shape the government's policy since Mikołajczyk – as mentioned earlier – became deputy prime minister.

The democratic parties mentioned agreed on a common program, which included a favorable provision concerning the rights of national minorities:

Poland shall be a democratic state, founded on the notion of the equality before the law and offices of all citizens irrespective of their race, religious affiliation, and nationality, the notion of respecting individual freedom and civil liberties, and finally the notion of respecting the rights of national minorities: Slavic nations, Lithuanians, and Jews.¹⁷

This program affected the declaration of Sikorski's government made on 24 February 1942, which included the following passage on national minorities:

The Polish state, while imposing on them equal obligations, shall confer equal rights on the national minorities fulfilling their civic duties, and it shall also enable them to grow politically, culturally, and socially.¹⁸

While the July 1941 program of the three parties (the People's Party, Polish Socialist Party, and Labor Party) included an unconditional declaration of the equality of all citizens, the government's declaration from 24 February 1942 provided that this right shall be contingent on fulfilling civic duties. This unfavorable amendment was a corollary of the reintegration into the government of Seyda's faction (Stola, 1995, p. 102).

Aside from working within the government and the National Council, the peasant activists were running a concurrent information campaign among the Polish diaspora. In January 1942, at the Polish Hearth Club in London, the Political-Propaganda Committee of the People's Party organized a meeting. It was the first in a series of meetings held with a view to getting in direct touch with the Polish diaspora. Stanisław Mikołajczyk gave a lecture on the situation in occupied Poland in which he emphasized Polish-Jewish relations.

Mikołajczyk remarked that, in order to facilitate the subjugation of the occupied country, the Germans made attempts to inflame racial and

17 Annex no. 5: The declaration of principles (Buczek, 1975, p. 482).

18 Minutes from the first meeting of the 2nd Polish National Council on 24 Feb 1942 at 11:50 in London (Duraczyński, Turkowski, 1997, p. 277).

class antagonisms. To illustrate his point, he quoted the German policies toward the Jews. Mikołajczyk believed that the deportation of Jews from the Reich to the General Government was informed by the intention to arouse antisemitism in the Polish population: "The German policies toward the Jews, which have culminated with the gruesome reality of the ghetto, must provoke entirely different reactions than the Germans expect." He also noted that Poland was the only occupied country that was not cooperating with the aggressor and emphasized that this merit was by no means impugned by isolated incidents of collaboration. Mikołajczyk stressed the significance of the test to which the Poles were put in summer 1941, when they refused to join the German army:

For Poland showed that outweighing the temptation to temporarily improve its fortunes, outweighing the wrongs suffered and the dislike for communism, is the unwavering resolution not to bolster Hitler's ranks (*Nie zniszczą i nie zatrą śladów*, 1942).

To prevent the crime

The Polish authorities in exile took multiple steps to stem the wave of terror in occupied Poland. To that end, both the Polish government and the National Council were running an extensive informative and diplomatic campaign. The Polish authorities hoped to receive the support of the allies on that front. The general sentiment was that only a concerted international effort can be effective. This initiative saw contribution from all political parties, including the People's Party, whose politicians held top state offices at that time.

The Polish government in London was first informed about the persecutions of the Jews as early as in 1940. The relevant information was then shared with the public opinion in the West. The London-based "Dziennik Polski" paper mentioned such events as the displacement of the Jewish population of Kraków or new restrictions imposed on the Jews in the General Government (*Wysiedlanie Żydów z Krakowa*, 1940; *Żydzi opuszczają Kraków*, 1940; *Nowe ograniczenia dla Żydów w Gen. Gub.*, 1940).

As the Nazi oppressive policies intensified, more and more alarming news could be heard from Poland, especially after the German attack on the USSR, when the physical extermination of the Jews commenced. On 11 November 1941, deputy prime minister Mikołajczyk delivered to Schwarzbart a document which included the first known mention of the mass execution of Jews near Czyżewo in the Łomża region (currently Podlaskie province) (Stola, 1995, p. 157). Further intel from Poland had an even more drastic content. In London, however, not much weight was given to this news, which was considered to be exaggerated anti-German

propaganda (Puławski, 2009, pp. 458–459). It was only in June 1942, when the Bund's report estimating the number of Jewish casualties at 700,000 reached London, that everybody started talking about these crimes. The news was broadcast on the BBC and made it to the Polish and British press (Stola, 1995, pp. 158–161).

This new wave of the German terror was the main subject discussed at the Council of Ministers meetings. On 6 June 1942, Mikołajczyk presented the outcomes of the works of the Political Committee. A number of decisions were made concerning the relevant steps to be taken, which included notifying the governments of the Allied powers, issuing a special address, encouraging mass protests, and suggesting the adoption of a common stance to the Allied governments. It was also decided to turn to the Poles living in America for help with organizing a protest. The Council of Ministers accepted the recommendations of the Political Committee and adopted a detailed roadmap. Mikołajczyk's role was to word the government's statement and liaise with the National Council on all matters relevant to this initiative.¹⁹

The diplomatic note sent to the governments of the Allied powers read as follows:

The firm stance of the Polish People, who denied any cooperation to the German occupiers, and have recently rejected attempts to be dragged into the so-called anti-Bolshevik crusade, resulted in a new wave of violent persecution [...]. Further mass forceful displacements of the Polish population from major towns and cities are supposed to ensure greater security for the immigrants from western Germany [...]. The action of taking representatives of the Polish intelligentsia hostage has intensified, and at the same time convicts are executed in concentration camps. The extermination of the Jewish population has reached staggering proportions. In Wilno, Lwów, Kołomyja, Stanisławów, Lublin, Rzeszów, or Miechów tens of thousands of Jews are being slaughtered. In the Warsaw and Kraków ghettos, the Gestapo carries out mass executions every day. The Jews suffering from typhus are executed by shooting. The Jews in Poland are facing the greatest predicament in their history [...]. The Polish government is hereby apprising the Allied Governments of these facts and is of the opinion that they constitute a violation of the international law and the Hague agreements. The perpetrators

19 Minutes from the National Council meeting on 6 Jun 1942 (Rojek, Suchcitz, Zgórniak, 1998, pp. 330–331).

of these crimes must be held responsible, and this principle shall be the central principle of the war policies of the Allies, while their governments shall, in accordance with the dictates of law and morality, express their vocal support to the fight against the German terror.²⁰

One month later, at a meeting of the National Council on 7 July 1942, Mikołajczyk presented a report on the steps the government had taken so far toward counteracting the German crimes in occupied Poland. Acting on this information, the National Council passed a resolution which expressed sympathy with the government on all initiatives which could contribute to stopping the terror. At the same time, the resolution called on the governments of Great Britain and the United States to take retaliatory measures.²¹ However, these countries did nothing to that end. One reason for such inaction was the reluctance of some portions of the British public opinion to see German cities bombarded. Mikołajczyk revealed that the British feared that retaliating against the Germans (launching airstrikes on open cities) may result in the intensification of the oppressive policies in the occupied countries (Puławski, 2009, p. 518).

The culmination of the Polish information campaign was a special conference held on 9 July 1942. Earlier, Mikołajczyk presented a report in the British ministry of information about the German crimes in Poland. This document included detailed data pertaining to the number of casualties and also quoted a special address received from occupied Poland, which had a telling title: "Our country demands that the eyes of the world open." It stated that the measures taken against the Germans so far were not sufficient and that "the mere threat of a tribunal for the Germans is not enough." Next, Mikołajczyk showed the data from the report to the journalists. The conference was attended by minister of information Brendan Bracken, who stated, on behalf of the British government, that all crimes named by Mikołajczyk would be punished. Mikołajczyk, in his turn, called for "opening a second front in order to expedite Germany's defeat and for taking prompt repressive measures against the German people, who only respond to the language of immediate punishment for crimes" (Minister Mikołajczyk: Kraj żąda drugiego frontu i represji, 1942; Sprawozdanie Ministra Mikołajczyka złożone w Brytyjskim Ministerstwie Informacji, 1942).

Adam Puławski observes that Mikołajczyk, while presenting the facts concerning the situation in the occupied country, mostly pointed to

20 A draft of a note concerning persecutions in Poland, 2 May 1942 (Rojek, Suchcitz, Zgórniak, 1998, pp. 333-334).

21 The resolution of the National Council of Poland, 7 Jul 1942 (Duraczyński, Turkowski, 1997, pp. 331-332).

the suffering of the Polish people. During the conference, he said that the events taking place at that time in the Polish territories were a prelude to removing every single trace of the Polish ways and Polish culture. In this view, the Poles were the prime victims of the war. Zygielbojm, in his turn, argued that it was the Jews who were chiefly targeted by the German terror. Schwarzbart took a somewhat different stance. He did not focus solely on the Jews but instead emphasized that non-Jews would face enslavement, while the Jews were looking at biological annihilation. This was at odds with the narrative presented during the conference by Polish politicians. "Nevertheless, the 9 July conference proved that the initiative, despite apparent differences of opinion, was a common undertaking of the Polish and Jewish politicians" (Puławski, 2009, pp. 521–525).

Two weeks later, on 22 July 1942, the Germans proceeded to liquidate the Warsaw ghetto. Every day, a transport of between 5,000 and 6,000 people departed Warsaw for the Treblinka II extermination camp. By 13 September 1942, i.e. in just two months, more than 300,000 Jews had been ferried off and murdered (Eisenbach, 1961, p. 317). London was alerted about these events by Stefan Korboński, head of the Directorate of Civil Resistance. In a message sent on 26 July 1942, he wrote:

The Germans have commenced the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto. Street announcements order the deportation of 6,000 people, each of whom may take 15 kg of personal baggage plus the valuables. The transport is to be loaded onto two cargo trains, and it is obviously supposed to be executed. People are desperate and we have been recording numerous suicides. The Polish police have been withdrawn and replaced by Lithuanians, Latvians, and Ukrainians. Many instances have been recorded of spontaneous executions in the streets and houses. Raszeja, a professor of the University of Poznań, was shot dead while consulting a Jewish doctor and a patient (Korboński, 2001, p. 55).

Initially, London misinterpreted Korboński's message, thinking that the number of 6,000 concerns a one-time event, not transports sent on a daily basis. The liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto, which was inhabited by more than 300,000 people, seemed improbable: the extent of this genocide simply defied imagination. It was only a few months later, when the British intelligence confirmed this intel, that the reports from the Directorate started to be given credence (Korboński, 2001, p. 55). Additionally, in November 1942, Jan Karski, a special emissary of the Polish Underground State and a first-hand witness to these crimes, arrived in London. He not only apprised the Polish government in exile of the genocide but also personally met with many public figures in London and the United States and gave numerous interviews (Żbikowski, 2011, pp. 301–310).

One of the results of Karski's mission was a resolution passed by the National Council respecting the mass murder of the Jewish population in occupied Poland. On 27 November 1942, a special Council meeting was held, in which a resolution was adopted that called on the other countries to take immediate steps against the Germans in order to save the Jews (Uchwała Rady Narodowej R.P., 1942). During the meeting, deputy prime minister Mikołajczyk made the following statement:

The Polish government, with a full sense of responsibility, and having kept the world posted about the German's mass murders and bestiality perpetrated in Poland, has at the same time done everything in its power to counteract this terror [...]. The Country is angrily protesting against the murders and the looting. This protest comes with a great deal of sympathy and a loud scream of one's own helplessness about what is happening. The Poles back there, in the Country, are also fully aware that - as can be read in various reports - the fast rate of this murder which today affects the Jews will tomorrow affect all the others [...]. May the protest of the Government and the protest of the National Council, a body representing every section of the Polish nation, appeal to the conscience of the world; may it be heard wherever decisions are made about expediting the war effort; may it demand more action toward saving those who are still alive; may it strengthen in the Allies the desire to see the crimes punished, and at the same time warn the thugs that they are being closely watched, will not escape deserved punishment, and will soon acutely feel its hard blow on their backs (Kraj, Rząd i Rada Narodowa wobec masowego mordowania, 1942).

Mikołajczyk referred to this speech during a Council of Ministers meeting on 4 December 1942. He also pointed to anti-Polish publications in some sections of the Jewish press, which accused Poles of complicity in these atrocities. Mikołajczyk warned those Jewish circles which "despite the common tragedy could not help themselves from strategically undermining the Poles" against such steps.²² In order to prevent similar accusations, Prof. Stanisław Kot sent to Gen. Sikorski an official request to appoint a Jew as the head of a Jewish department, which was supposed to be established at the ministry of internal affairs or at the Council of Ministers Presidium. He put forward the candidacy of Izaak Lewin, son

22 Minutes from the Council of Ministers meetings on 4 and 5 Dec 1942 (Rojek, Suchcitz, Zgórnjak, 2001, p. 97).

of Rabbi Aaron Lewin. At that time, he was in the Middle East (with the soldiers who had left Russia under the command of Gen. Anders). The Council of Ministers approved Kot's request and the department was established at the ministry of internal affairs.²³

The actions of the Polish government played a major role in the issuing, on 17 December 1942, of a famous declaration of the 12 Allied powers and the French National Committee respecting the responsibility for the extermination of Jews in occupied Poland (Stola, 1995, p. 174). The declaration expressed the unanimous condemnation of "the bestial policies of cold-blooded extermination."²⁴ However, no further steps were taken, even though the Poles demanded retaliatory airstrikes on German cities, in connection with which a statement would be issued explaining that this was a response to the extermination of the Jews.

The Polish government continued its wide information campaign. On 11 January 1943, "Dziennik Polski" printed Stanisław Mikołajczyk's address to the people in the country, in which he promised that the Germans would be punished for their crimes against the Poles and the Jews (*Karząca ręka sprawiedliwości dosięgnie Niemców*, 1943). Then, on 22 January, the paper printed "An appeal to the conscience of the Allied Nations concerning an immediate commencement of talks with a view to deciding on the measures to stop the German crimes." On the same day, minister of foreign affairs Edward Raczyński submitted a note to the governments of the Allied Nations concerning the new wave of terror in occupied Poland. The document included information about crimes perpetrated against the Jews (*Apel do sumień Narodów Sprzymierzonych*, 1943).

Prof. Stanisław Kot's mission in the USSR and in the Middle East

The Nazis were not the only ones who exterminated the Polish population. Equally dramatic as under the German occupation were the fates of those people who, as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, ended up on the territory of the USSR. After invading Poland, the Soviet authorities deported around 400,000 Polish citizens to the northern regions of the USSR (Strzembosz, Wierzbicki, Jasiewicz, 1996, p. 24).²⁵ Thousands of weaker individuals and children perished during transports, traveling in terrible

23 Minutes from the Council of Ministers meeting on 11 Feb 1943 (Rojek, Suchcitz, Zgórnjak, 2001, pp. 271, 273).

24 Declaration of the 12 Allied countries respecting the responsibility for the extermination of Jews, 17 Dec 1942 (Korboński, 2001, p. 111; The common declaration condemning the German crimes, 1942).

25 According to Vasilij Chernyshov, deputy NKVD commissar, it was 321,220 individuals: 26,160 former POWs, 132,463 settlers and foresters, 46,597 convicts and persons under investigation, and 176,000 refugees and victimized families.

conditions, while the lethal climate at the destination, compounded by slave labor and hunger, decimated the deportees. The Polish authorities made attempts to get their citizens released from the Soviet camps, prisons, and other places of deportation. These steps could only be taken after Poland had reestablished diplomatic relations with the USSR. A relevant agreement was signed on 30 July 1941. One month later, Prof. Stanisław Kot, who had been appointed ambassador, arrived in Moscow (Rutkowski, 2000, p. 220).²⁶ Already within the first few days of his arrival, he began to organize help for Polish citizens.²⁷ He wrote, "On-the-spot assistance of the Polish embassy kept alive a huge portion of the Polish deportees and helped them survive the period of the highest mortality" (Kot, 1955, p. 25, 27, 235).²⁸ A large percentage of these people were Jews and Ukrainians. Kot estimated that every third or fourth deported citizen of the Second Polish Republic was a Polish Jew. By early 1942, the Polish embassy had recorded 106,000 persons of Jewish nationality, i.e. 39,3% of all individuals registered.

On 15 October 1941, as the German army advanced, the Polish embassy was evacuated from Moscow to Kuybyshev, where the Soviet government had relocated (Szubtarska, 2005, p. 25). Working out of there, Kot took active steps toward securing the release of political activists from prisons and concentration camps. The list which Kot submitted to Andrey Vyshinsky on 20 September of "83 persons to be located and released immediately" also included the names of Jews, such as Aaron Lewin and rabbi Mojżesz Schorr (together with his family), a University of Warsaw professor (Kot, 1955, pp. 101-102; Dokumentacja dot. interwencji w sprawie zwolnień polskich obywateli z ZSRS, 1941-1943).²⁹ Additionally, Kot made attempts to secure the release from Soviet prisons of two leaders of the Bund: Henryk Erlich and Wiktor Alter. The USSR at first released them as part of a plan to send them to Great Britain and the United States with the mission to found there the International Jewish Antifascist Committee. However, both "got out of prison in such poor condition that it was out

26 The request to appoint Prof. Kot ambassador was approved by the council of ministers on 14 August 1941, but the nomination was only signed by the president on 29 August 1941.

27 The issue of extending care to the Polish citizens in the USSR was most fully described in the work of Daniel Boćkowski (Boćkowski, 1999).

28 This help was possible thanks to the efforts of the Polish government and its posts in Great Britain, United States, Canada, and India, as well as the generosity of charity organizations. Between 1 September 1941 and 31 August 1942, the American Red Cross supplied 1.7 tons of flour, milk, clothes, blankets, and medications. During the first year, the Council of Poles delivered clothes and other items worth a total of 815,000 dollars. In December 1941, the first three transports with aid were sent by the Jewish Labor Committee. In spring 1943, the Soviet authorities requisitioned the warehouses where the Embassy kept the humanitarian aid.

29 More names were added to the list later on. In time, it turned out that many of these people had died.

of the question that the NKVD would let them leave the country any time soon" (Kot, 1955, p. 95). In reality, the "Committee" was an NKVD brain-child and was supposed to run a "Jewish propaganda to win assistance for Russia in the anti-Hitlerite form" (Kot, 1955, p. 128). After his release, Alter briefly served as a Polish embassy delegate in Sverdlovsk. There were also ongoing talks about appointing the leaders of the Bund to the National Council in London (Kot, 1955, p. 124), but before it could happen, Alter and Erlich were again arrested in December 1941, on the trumped-up charges of espionage. Kot commented on these events as follows:

The charges pressed against them are absurd, but they are likely motivated by the hatred toward the Jews, who are believed to be predisposing the Americas against the Soviets. Soviet Jews are now being arrested (Kot, 1955, p. 216).

The efforts toward securing their release were in vain and both men died in Soviet prisons (Rusiniak-Karwat, n.d.; Pikhan, 1997). Kot also made interventions concerning the release of Zionists Emil Sommerstein (Rusiniak-Karwat, 2017)³⁰, Michał Ringel, and Maurycy Maksymilian Lesser, as well as culture activists Zalman Reisen, Naran Schwalbe, and Saul Wagman (Kot, 1955, p. 273).

Some Jews were employed by the Polish embassy. Kot was particularly impressed by the work of Ludwik Seideman, an officer in charge of Jewish affairs. He also hired Bernard Singer, a well-known journalist, at the embassy's press office (Kot, 1955, pp. 27-28), while Marek Wajsblum, a student of his and an eminent historian of Polish reformation and an activist of the Esperanto movement, became his advisor for social and political matters (Wajsblum, 1996, p. 9).

At the very beginning of his mission in the USSR, Kot noticed that the NKVD was employing the expert tactics of dividing society and playing off different races and nationalities against each other. In his words:

Holding the greatest promise was the escalation of the Jewish problem. It was supposed to be a show for the entire world so it could see that solidarity among Polish citizens was unsustainable, that the conflicts – inflamed from the very beginning – would exacerbate, and that the only way out was to separate Jews from Poles and to encourage the former to take

30 Despite the numerous interventions by the embassy, Emil Sommerstein remained in a Soviet prison up until 1944, when, through Wanda Wasilewska's efforts, he was brought to Moscow and became one of the leaders of the Union of Polish Patriots. His wife, Ida Sommerstein, was more fortunate and had left the USSR earlier, with Anders' Army.

Soviet citizenship and to file complaints against the wrongs inflicted upon them by the Poles (Kot, 1955, p. 24).

In Kot's optimistic assessment, the НКВД's actions did not have the desired effect:

During my time in the USSR, nowhere in these vast areas in the purview of our offices, with such a variegated body of deportees, did the НКВД manage to play off one group of Polish citizens against another. The attempts to drop hints to the Jews that the embassy was anti-Semitic and was harming the Jews did not convince anybody, so they were eventually abandoned. I thought it was our great victory (Kot, 1955, p. 25).

Undoubtedly, one of the fathers of this "victory" was Bernard Singer, who was working toward increased awareness among the Jews, warning them against Soviet provocations. These actions later landed him in trouble because the НКВД planned to arrest him in retaliation and denied him permission to leave the USSR. Eventually, thanks to Kot's resoluteness, who said that he would not leave the country without Singer, the Soviet authorities gave in. Kot wrote:

It was only on the final night, after midnight, that the Narkomindel [foreign affairs commissariat] delivered the passports with the exit visas of the people who were leaving with me. One document was still missing: B. Singer's. I feared that he would be arrested in connection with his recent trip to Uzbekistan to explain the deceptive Soviet tactics to the Polish Jews. Thus, I gave instructions to inform the Narkomindel officer that if they did not approve this visa, I would not be leaving Kuybyshev the next day. At 3 a.m., the passport was delivered (Kot, 1955, p. 57).

While happy with what he saw in the civilian structures, Kot had a more pessimistic outlook on the situation in the army, where things were "more difficult, and the actions of the НКВД more deliberate" (Kot, 1955, p. 25). As it later turned out, he was mostly right. The НКВД's campaign in the military was hugely successful and led to numerous conflicts between the Poles and the Jews.³¹

³¹ Kot noticed that the first groups of Jews were actually sent to the army by the НКВД, and that "they included a lot of shady individuals arrested for smuggling and profiteering. Initially, the situation of the Jews in the Polish Army received publicity, was tracked by the НКВД, and was of particular interest to foreign Jewish

The Jews released under the so-called amnesty eagerly joined Gen. Władysław Anders' army, a move they believed would improve their fortunes.³² Playing a part were also the efforts of the ambassador, who was seeing to it that the Jews would feel comfortable in the Polish army (Kot, 1955, p. 294).³³ Kot was aware of how significant the Jews were for the Polish policies and for the issue of the eastern borders:

In the future, with respect to the eastern border, this influx of the Jews will be a huge political asset, especially in the context of the Ukrainians' systemic hatred of everything that is Polish (Kot, 1955, p. 136).

Unfortunately, constantly weighing on the mutual relationships were also the events from the past. The Poles could not forgive the Jews for how some of them had behaved during the Soviet occupation.³⁴ Some Jews still openly expressed their hostility toward Poland while in exile in the USSR. One of the embassy's reports characterized this attitude as follows:

A number of the Jews were indeed in the camps, where some of them displayed not just loyalty but also – at times – heroism, as they stressed their solidarity with the Polish nation and the Polish State. However, most of them considered it a disgrace to identify themselves with Poland and went to great lengths to unsettle the Poles in the camps by denouncing them and deriding everything that was Polish. They kept saying, “This is not Poland, Poland will be no more,” etc., and such behavior was supposed to improve their own fortunes

correspondents; a notion was promoted that due to Polish anti-Semitism the Jews would not have proper conditions to serve in the Polish army. On the other hand, the NKVD circulated the information that the Jews were the most cowardly and constantly dissatisfied individuals in the ranks” (Kot, 1955, p. 249). The information was also confirmed by Gen. Anders (Anders, 2007, pp. 117, 127–128).

32 Also “Russian” Jews tried to join the Polish Army. Their motivation is explained by Leopold Spir: “It was common knowledge to those of us in Russia that hanging around the centers of the re-evacuation of the Poles from the USSR to Iran were a lot of Russian Jews, who were looking for an opportunity to get out of Russia. We were universally envied because we were leaving. I believe this is instructive enough, and a testament to the Jews' true attitude to the political system of the USSR” (Jasiewicz, 2009, p. 352).

33 For instance, in March 1942, as the holidays were approaching, Kot took a lot of trouble to get the Jews flour to make matzah. The Army was also attentive to their spiritual needs, having hired a rabbi, a cantor, and additional personnel. A synagogue and an office were even set up for the rabbi (*Instrukcja dla rabinów dywizyjnych*, 12 XI 1941 r., 1941, p. 28).

34 Władysław Anders wrote in his memoirs that “some of the Jews cheered the Soviet troops entering Poland in 1939. Because of that, the indigenous Poles had harbored a grudge, which I had to overcome” (Anders, 2007, p. 110).

since the Soviet authorities generously rewarded those engaged in denunciation and derision (Raport na temat mniejszości żydowskiej w ZSRR, 17 VI 1942 r., 1942, p. 117).

As regards the situation in the military, it was emphasized that the Jews were vocal in their complaints about the hardships and lack of food, and that some of them had only volunteered on condition that they would be assigned to the auxiliary service. All this stirred up the animosity of the Polish soldiers toward the Jews. An idea was put forward to form separate Jewish units (Anders, 2007, p. 110). Additionally, some officers promoted anti-Semitic policies in the army (Kot, 1955, pp. 249, 436). This is evidenced by some of the letters sent to the ambassador, in which complaints were made about the discrimination of the Jewish soldiers, for example describing how during the latest evacuation a special "supervision" was carried out in the ranks, as a result of which a significant portion of the Jews had remained in the USSR.³⁵

Without a doubt, the Soviet authorities played a big part here, as they hindered the evacuation of the Jews from the USSR to Iran with Anders' army, seeing the national minorities living in the eastern territories of the Second Polish Republic as Soviet citizens. At the same time, the NKVD maintained that it was the Polish authorities who were blocking the evacuation.³⁶ Gen. Anders' take on this situation was as follows:

After a laborious effort on my part, I obtained the clearance from the USSR authorities for the Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Jews who were already in the ranks. The NKVD were extremely uncooperative, especially in the cases of the Jews who wanted to leave as the families of the soldiers. Soviet perfidiousness became fully apparent in how this issue was dealt with. The Jews were informed that the Polish authorities did not agree to their departure, and at the same time the military received clear orders to bar the Jews from the transports (Anders, 2007, p. 164).

35 Letter to Prof. Stanisław Kot dated 27 Dec 1942 (author's signature illegible) (Juchnowski, Juchnowski, Paszkiewicz, 2013, p. 421). The issue of the Jewish desertion from Anders' Army has already been studied (Strzyżewski, 2012, pp. 220–238).

36 "The draft boards in the field were exclusively Soviet, operating in the presence of a Polish delegate, and it was usually at this stage that they already rejected the Jews, tracing the race all the way back to a grandmother or checking if a candidate was circumcised. A second examination was conducted with our military personnel, while the NKVD delegate would see to it that even those Jews would be turned down whom the previous commission had cleared. The same applied to Ukrainians and Belarusians. Quite a number of Jews sneaked through under false names, anyway. The Soviets, who prohibited the admission of the Jews, at the same time used their agents to circulate rumors among the Jews that they were doing the Polish authorities' bidding" (Kot, 1955, p. 321).

It is worth adding that when the Polish Army arrived in Palestine, as many as 3,000 Jewish soldiers deserted. Around 1,000 remained and took part in subsequent fights (Anders, 2007, p. 204). In this context, it is not surprising that, following the evacuation from the USSR, the Polish-Jewish relations were very tense. Certain steps toward alleviating the situation were taken by Prof. Stanisław Kot, who, after leaving the USSR, served as the minister for Middle Eastern issues.

While in the east, Kot held a series of meetings with representatives of Jewish organizations. The chief goal of these meetings, aside from easing the tensions, was to convince some Jewish circles to cooperate with the Polish government. Kot also supported protests against German war criminals. In November 1942, he held talks regarding this issue with the orthodox Agudath Israel party.³⁷ Then, in early December, he met with Yitzhak Ben Zwi, the chairman of the Jewish National Council, and David Ben Gurion, the president of the Jewish Agency. On 4 December, he called a press conference in Tel Aviv, during which he declared that the Polish government would do everything in its power to get the democratic states to save the Polish Jews (Min. Kot w Jerozolimie, 1942).

Kot's efforts undoubtedly contributed to diffusing the tensions in the Polish-Jewish relationships. Tadeusz Lubczewski, a delegate of the minister of labor and social welfare, wrote him the following note:

I would like to inform you, Sir, that after a few days of your stay in Tel Aviv, great détente can be clearly felt among the Jewish people, who are very appreciative of your comments. One of the reasons of this improvement is a publication in the local press concerning Gen. Anders' role in saving Jewish children in Russia. As you know, a few weeks ago the Jewish press would not release this story.³⁸

An improvement in the mutual relations was somewhat confirmed by the 19th January 1943 reception in Kot's honor, organized by the Representatives of the Polish Jews. Some of those in attendance were David Ben Gurion, Yitzhak Ben Zwi, chief rabbi Isaac Halevi Herzog, Tel Aviv mayor Israel Rokoach, and prof. Martin Buber from the Hebrew University (Rutkowski, 2000, p. 314). One issue Kot mentioned at the reception was the information campaign of the Polish government concerning

37 Letter from Henryk Rosmarin, Polish Consul General, to Prof. Stanisław Kot, a Polish government minister, dated 19 Nov 1942 (Juchnowski, Juchnowski, Paszkiewicz, 2013, pp. 401-402).

38 Letter from Tadeusz Lubaczewski, the Delegate of the Minister of Labor and Social Welfare, to Prof. Stanisław Kot, 11 Dec 1942 (Juchnowski, Juchnowski, Paszkiewicz, 2013, p. 442).

the extermination of the Jews. He also outlined plans of future reforms and initiatives to be undertaken in the postwar Poland, which was to be founded on the principle of equal rights and obligations for all citizens:

The civilized world finds it hard to believe that such bestiality should be possible. Consequently, the Polish government, using all of its resources and its entire propaganda apparatus, intends to appeal to the conscience of the world and prove the atrocities perpetrated against the Jews, as well as against the Poles [...]. The shared suffering lays foundations for camaraderie. We are aware of the assistance that the Poles, even those most disadvantaged, try to provide – despite their modest capabilities – to the persecuted and their families. The best proof of the commendable behavior of the Poles was provided by the occupiers themselves, who, in order to exterminate the Jews, had to bring in the units of their vassals from other countries.³⁹

On 22 March 1943, after returning to London, Prof. Kot presented a report detailing his mission in the East to the Council of Ministers. His actions in Palestine were praised by the Polish prime minister. Especially appreciated was his contribution to forging ties with particular Jewish organizations.⁴⁰

The final attempts to save the Jews

Two months later, London witnessed a tragic event. On 12 May, Szmul Zygielbojm, a member of the National Council, committed suicide in protest against the Allies' indifference to the suffering of the people of the Warsaw ghetto. During the funeral ceremony, Prof. Kot delivered a speech. This is what he said about Zygielbojm:

He departed the world of his own volition, fully aware of his actions, to protest against the mass extermination of his brothers by the German army; against the civilized world's reaction to this unprecedented slaughter, a reaction which was too slow, too soft, almost casual; finally, against his own

39 The address of Prof. Stanisław Kot, minister-delegate of the Polish government to the Middle East, delivered during the meeting with the Representatives of the Polish Jews (Korboński, 2001, pp. 118–120).

40 Minutes from the Council of Ministers meeting on 22 Mar 1943 (Rojek, Suchcitz, Zgórnjak, 2001, pp. 317–318).

helplessness in the face of this terrible tragedy befalling the community of his brothers, of which he felt not merely an inherent part, but also the chief representative [...]. The government of Poland, who takes care of all of her children, saw it as its duty to vigorously demand that measures be taken which it thought were necessary to save at least those Jews whom the German occupiers had not yet slaughtered in Poland. May this cry of despair and protest – whose noble victim we today bid farewell to – help these actions gain more impetus. Then, the sacrifice of Zygielbojm, a truly distinguished son of Poland, will not have been in vain (*Żegnając zwłoki Szmula Zygielbojma*, 1943).

On 22 July 1943, “Żegota”, the Polish Council to Aid Jews, asked Stanisław Mikołajczyk to save the remaining Jews. They believed that the only possibility to rescue them was a personnel exchange under an international treaty. The message read,

The Polish Council to Aid Jews is hereby emphatically requesting that the Polish government promptly ask the governments of the democratic states to initiate the exchange of the remaining Jews and the numerous citizens of the Reich who are still in the Allied-controlled territories.⁴¹

This request, similarly to all the previous ones, was ignored by the Allies.

On 20 April 1944, the Council of Ministers, upon the request of prime minister Stanisław Mikołajczyk, adopted a resolution respecting the formation of the Council to Save the Jews in Poland.⁴² This entity, operating in exile, was responsible for providing all kind of assistance to the Jewish people. The adoption of the resolution was explained as follows:

Unless extraordinary measures are taken, a danger exists that by the time the country is liberated, the Jewish population will have been exterminated. Competent to take these measures in the first place is the government of Poland. The government, through the Ministry of Internal Affairs, has been taking active steps in this department. In this case, the Polish government is the only allied government which

41 The Polish Council to Aid the Jews addressing the Polish government: the extermination of the Jews, 22 July 1943 (Adamczyk, Gmitruk, 2012, p. 53).

42 The Council of Ministers resolution dated 20 Jun 1944 on the formation of the Council to Save the Jews in Poland (Rojek, Suchcitz, Zgórnjak, 2003, pp. 577–578).

has actually provided assistance to the best of its ability (Rojek, Suchcitz, Zgórnjak, 2003, pp. 577–578).

Unfortunately, this resolution was merely symbolic because most of the Jewish population had been already murdered.

A week later, on 28 April 1944, the Polish government released a statement supporting the 22 January 1944 decree of the President of the United States on appointing the Council for War Refugees, which was to provide assistance to all victims of persecution or those facing death, irrespective of their nationality, race, or religious affiliation.⁴³ Then, on 2 November 1944, the Council of Ministers approved the request by Jan Stańczyk, minister of labor and social welfare, with respect to providing help to the Jewish citizens of Poland in Belgium. The Polish government borrowed the necessary money from the Belgian government.⁴⁴

These were the final steps taken by the Polish government in exile and by the People's Party, which was its part, to save the Jews. Still operating in Poland was the Council to Aid Jews, financed through the government's funds. However, after the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising and the annihilation of Warsaw, the council's capabilities were significantly diminished.

The People's Party in exile were favorably disposed toward the Jews and did much to save them. Being one of the parties responsible for shaping the government's policy, they tried diplomatic and informational campaigns to elicit proper reactions of the Allies. The People's Party suggested, among others, launching airstrikes on the centers of extermination, railways, and German cities. However, all these attempts to stop the aggressor were futile. The German terror could only have been halted by military operations, which were out of the question given the developments on the eastern front at that time.

Within the network of the Polish Underground State, the peasant activists took part in providing courier services and radio communications between the Jews and the West. Responsible for the issue of helping the Poles and Jews imprisoned in the USSR-occupied territories, whose plight was equally serious, was Prof. Stanisław Kot, a proponent of the Polish-Jewish alliance.

It is commendable that despite a difficult political situation and limited material resources, the peasant activists never abandoned the efforts to save the Polish Jews, which was worth pointing out again in this article.

43 The Government's statement (Rojek, Suchcitz, Zgórnjak, 2003, pp. 591–592).

44 Minutes from the Council of Ministers meeting on 2 Nov 1944 (Rojek, Suchcitz, Zgórnjak, 2006, p. 589).

ANNEX

Saving the Jewish people in the USSR as described in the documents of Polish Ambassador Stanisław Kot (1941–1942)

Saving Polish citizens in the USSR, as many as one third of whom were Jews, was only possible after Germany attacked the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 (Operation Barbarossa).¹ The resulting political developments enabled the signing of a Polish-Soviet agreement on 30 July 1941. Under the agreement, the Soviet government undertook to annul the 1939 treaties with Germany, but it did not recognize the Polish prewar borders. It agreed to forming the Polish Army in the USSR and releasing Polish citizens, but only under an amnesty.² Thanks to the agreement, the people deported from Poland to the USSR and incarcerated in prisons and labor camps were freed.

As it soon turned out that announcement of amnesty was just the beginning of the fight for the freedom of Polish citizens because the Soviet authorities had no intention of respecting the bilateral agreements. The biggest obstacles were encountered with respect to the Jews, Ukrainians, and Belarusians deported from Poland, whom the USSR did not recognize as Polish citizens. The Soviet authorities would invoke the 19 November 1939 decree passed by the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union on acquiring Soviet citizenship by the residents of the western provinces of Ukraine and Belarus, where on 22 October 1939, the Soviet occupation authorities organized the “elections” to the People’s Assemblies of Western Ukraine and Western Belarus (which were rigged and violated the international law). Soon after the elections, these assemblies made a formal request to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR for the incorporation of the eastern provinces of the Second Polish Republic into the Belarusian and Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republics. The Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union approved both requests at the meetings on 1 and 2 November. Pursuant to the 19 August 1938 Act on USSR Citizenship, citizenship was granted to everybody who was resident on Soviet-occupied territories between 1 and 2 November 1939, including the refugees who were in the eastern provinces of the Second Republic after 17 September 1939 (Boćkowski, 1999, pp. 21–22).

1 The issue of extending care to the Polish citizens in the USSR was most fully described in the work of Daniel Boćkowski (Boćkowski, 1999). This work also includes a list of references and sources pertaining to this matter.

2 The wording of the Polish-Soviet agreement and of the annexed protocol was included in Stanisław Kot’s work (Kot, 1955, p. 447). On 12 August 1941, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union issued a decree on granting amnesty to the Polish citizens deprived of freedom in the territory of the USSR. It was granted to “all Polish citizens deprived of freedom on the Soviet territory as POWs or on other valid grounds.” Thanks to the decree, the Polish citizens could report to the draft boards (Materski, 1992, p. 6).

The job of ambassador Stanisław Kot was to see that the Soviet authorities would respect the provisions of the agreement, as well as to save the Polish deportees and provide assistance to the high command of the Polish Army, which was forming in the Volga region under a separate agreement from 14 August 1941 signed, on behalf of the Polish side, by Gen. Władysław Anders and Gen. Zygmunt Bohusz-Szyszko.

After arriving in Moscow on 4 September 1941, Stanisław Kot initiated talks with representatives of the Soviet government. He met with Foreign Affairs Commissar Vyacheslav Molotov on 8 September, President of the Council of People's Commissars Mikhail Kalinin on 9 September, and deputy commissar Andrey Vyshinsky on 10 September. After the evacuation of the diplomatic corps to Kuybyshev (in October 1941), Molotov worked with Stalin in Moscow, with the city facing the threat of a German attack. Assuming the de facto control of the Narkomindel (the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs) was Vyshinsky, and from that point onward Kot held official talks mostly with him, bar occasional visits to Moscow. Kot wrote,

Adopting cautious tactics, so as not to sever the relationships, I always achieved some results, especially the release of thousands Polish citizens from camps and prisons, some sort of legal protection for them, and the possibility to provide them with care, food, and accommodation. Hundreds of thousands survived and, despite the breaking off of the relations in 1943, lived to see the day of returning to their homeland, one way or another – that was a result of these moderate tactics (Kot, 1959, pp. 9–10).

A significant number of Polish citizens who received assistance in the USSR were Jews. At the beginning of 1942, the records of the embassy contained 106,000 individuals of Jewish origins, which amounted to 39,3% of all registered persons (Rutkowski, 2000, p. 220). They received assistance from the embassy (in the form of monetary aid, clothes, food, or the embassy's interventions), thanks to which most of them survived. The documents quoted below suggest that help came at the last minute, but it came too late for many, who had died of hunger and diseases in Soviet prisons. The Polish government borrowed the funds (100 million rubles) from the USSR (Kot, 1959, p. 25). Of huge significance were also handouts from charity organizations (food, clothes, medications), distributed through the Polish embassy's network of warehouses and dispatch points. In spring 1943, after the severance of the diplomatic ties with the USSR and the liquidation of the embassy's posts, the warehouses were requisitioned by the Soviet authorities.

Despite numerous requests of the ambassador, the USSR categorically denied permission to evacuate the Polish Jews, whom – as already

explained – they considered Soviet citizens. An exception was made only for those Jews who were in the Polish Army and for their families. Aside from the 4,000 soldiers (3,000 of whom deserted after leaving the USSR), at least 500 Jewish civilians were successfully evacuated (illegally, thanks to various tricks, mostly under false identities) with Anders' army (Anders, 2007, p. 204; Kot, 1955, p. 442). The 30 June 1942 message to the minister of foreign affairs (included in the appendix) also suggests that attempts were made to “smuggle” Jewish children out of the USSR, 11 of whom managed to leave already on the first transport (from a Polish orphanage in Ashgabat).

Facing even more difficulties were any attempts to evacuate from the USSR various eminent Jewish figures and a few former Belarusian and Ukrainian parliamentarians. Kot accurately diagnosed the reasons of this situation in the 16 February 1942 letter to the minister of foreign affairs (see appendix). Instructive of the character of the efforts to save representatives of national minorities are the fortunes of two great leaders of the Bund, Henryk Erlich and Wiktor Alter. Both were released from a Moscow prison after they had agreed to the Soviet plan of establishing the Jewish Antifascist Committee in Great Britain and the United States. Still, they emphatically stressed their Polish citizenship and their critical stance toward the communist rule. They were arrested again in Kuybyshev on 4 December 1941, that is on the same night when Sikorski and Stalin signed the declaration of mutual friendship at the Kremlin. The attempts to secure their release made by the Polish embassy were futile. Both died in a Soviet prison (Kot, 1959, pp. 269–270).

The appendix contains several documents pertaining to the attempts to save Jews in the USSR. They mostly come from the source materials compiled by Prof. Stanisław Kot. Seeing as the subject matter (or at least those aspects of it that concern the Jews) is relatively unknown, a determination was made that a selection of these materials should be included in this paper. In longer texts, less important fragments were left out. Footnotes were omitted as well. Additionally, the appendix includes a few documents from the Archive of the Institution of the History of the Polish Peasant Movement.

The materials included in the appendix not only document the actions of Prof. Stanisław Kot but also describe the difficult circumstances in which the Polish embassy in the USSR functioned. Despite the unfriendly disposition of the Soviet authorities, which sometimes hindered the operations of the embassy, its employees contrived to help a sizeable portion of Polish Jews in the USSR, though this number is, for the time being, difficult to estimate.³

3 The introduction to the annex was compiled on the basis of the information included in Stanisław Kot's work (Kot, 1959, pp. 5–30).

1.

**A letter to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kuybyshev,
8 November 1941
[Kot, 1955, pp. 152–165]**

Dear Sir,

After two months of work in the USSR, I would like to share with you some general impressions of mine.

(The agreement as a reprieve for the Poles in Russia)

1. The Polish-Russian agreement has proved to be a major game changer for the Poles in Russia. Thanks to it, a few hundred thousand Poles have been released from prisons, labor camps, or allowed to leave the areas in which they were de facto kept against their will, and which were so dangerous that the possibility to leave was what saved them. Regardless of how decent living conditions they will secure now, the very fact of having been released is decisive for their future. Many of them were at their mental and physical limits.

The release provided under the agreement gave an incredible boost to the Polish people, as it gave them some sort of mystic belief that the Polish State has the right to exist. They saw that, though operating outside the Country and with no resources, far away, there exists the representation of this Country, embodied by the government, which not only cares about the fortunes of its citizens, imprisoned at the opposite end of the world and sentenced to annihilation, but also has enough gravitas and power to restore these citizens to the lives of human beings, even if only led under the most modest of circumstances. Out of the various national groups kept in prisons, the Poles – who bore the brunt of the fiercest anger of their persecutors – were the only ones to be released, and this fact enhanced the stature of Poland in the eyes of the Russians and all the other nationalities imprisoned here. The “Poland is not yet lost” anthem, heard on the first barge on the Pechora river which carried the released prisoners from the direction of the North Sea, was a great shock to the teams working on the banks and drew a response from the Poles, who, not yet aware of the agreement, felt that the Polish government had just begun to rescue them. [...]

(The significance of any kind of help)

vi. In light of the extreme poverty of our people, every single penny donated matters a lot. 2,000 rubles sent by the embassy to any given village enables the departure of a few dozen families. Handing 4,000 rubles at a nodal point to a transport of one thousand makes their journey possible for another couple of weeks. For a person who earned 150 rubles per month for hard toil, such aid seems to be a blessing. It is true that not everything can be bought. Bread, for example, requires a permit. Items of clothing, which the ragged people released from labor camps need, are mostly unavailable, e.g. pants are nearly impossible to get anywhere, but you can always find something in a shop, and then buy something else from your acquaintances who are selling out. Vast sums of money are therefore necessary. [...]

(The morality of the Polish people)

vii. The Polish people whom the reports describe and whom we come across as they are passing through Kuybyshev heading east deserve the highest praise. They are mostly simple people, such as foresters' or settlers' families, or manual laborers. All of them are drained, beat, but at the same time extremely patient, calm, resilient, proud, uncomplaining. All of them trust that the future is bright and firmly believe that they will make it to Poland. Many of them have minuscule savings and refuse the allowance: they need guidance, a pat on the back, but they will do without monetary aid, which is requested by the families of the robbed, severely sick, mothers with children, or rather it is their companions that ask for it on their behalf. [...]

(The conduct of the Ukrainians)

Belarusian peasants are volunteering for military service, and so far they seem to conduct themselves well. The Ukrainians are worse. Scattered among the settlers, they were mostly hostile toward the Poles. Sometimes, this even happened in prisons and labor camps. The mistreatment of the Poles was related to playing up to the local authorities, who would fall for it as they did in the Polish territories.

On the other hand, since June, the Ukrainians have started to sympathize with the Germans, and they have been happy with Hitler's progress. They took advantage of the agreement to be released as Polish citizens. Some of them volunteered for the Polish Army, but some groups had to be expelled for German sympathies. The Ukrainian soldiers have been divided into groups across different units, and they are being closely watched.

Ever since the agreement was signed, the Polish settlers have faced open hostility from the Ukrainian *kulaki* [affluent peasants], who were the subject of a mass resettlement to Siberia a few years ago. Their aversion is reflected in threats and their refusal to sell food to the Poles; they are

strong in many different parts of Siberia, and the Polish people are afraid to stay there. [...]

(The number of the Jews)

VIII. A great share of the Polish citizens in the USSR are Jews, maybe even one third of all, because the Soviets deported a lot of Jews who had fled to the east, running from Hitler. Additionally, many Jews from the Eastern Borderlands moved to Russia of their own volition, looking for a job, while many others were drafted. Some labor battalions are exclusively Jewish. Among the people migrating at present, this share seems even higher because it is not evened out by the scores of Polish peasants deported from the country, who, having to take care of their families, are usually reluctant to leave the settlements where they have put down roots.

(The Army's disapproval of the behavior of the Jews from the Eastern Borderlands)

The Poles usually harbor grudges against the Jews for their behavior during the occupation, for cheering the Red Army, insulting the Polish officers and privates led at gunpoint, acting as Soviet patsies, denouncing Poles, etc. Even while in labor camps, many Jews attempted to get in the authorities' good books by insulting Poles, whom they tried to upset by making such threats as, "This Poland of yours will never return," and some added further insults. There were also many Jewish snitches, and some Jews are still suspected of having now volunteered for the Polish Army to carry on ratting. These accusations are almost exclusively leveled against the Jews from the Eastern Borderlands, who leaned toward Russia already before the war, in particular the Jewish plebs. The doggedness of these people was such that some have not changed even after the harrowing experience of the Soviet camps and prisons.

On the other hand, there are numerous positive reports about the conduct of the Jewish intelligentsia and the so-called bourgeoisie. Most of them openly identified as Poles and were in touch with Polish society. Some deserve recognition for the boldness of their actions. A small portion of Jews was also frowned upon because they constantly engaged in profiteering, wholesale purchases, and pushing up prices, completely disregarding the needs of others.

(The influx of Jews into the military)

The release of the Polish citizens under the agreement was greeted with enthusiasm by the Jews. The decent ones rejoiced in Poland's success, while those of dubious integrity loudly professed their affinity for Poland to erase their previous actions. It was precisely this lot that immediately pushed for places in the army; not knowing what to do with themselves, they decided they had to join the military, whereupon they were mostly deemed unfit for service and rejected, thus becoming a burden and vocally demanding further help. Also many of those who did get accepted for service

proved to be of little value: the hardships, lack of food, inconvenience of staying in tents, and rainy weather prompted them to express a most vigorous criticism, which adversely affected the units. Some of the Jews registered for service panicked and disappeared, while some said they would only join the ranks if they were assigned to the auxiliary service.

(The issue of forming separate Jewish units)

All those issues prompted the officers to express their criticism toward the idea of having Jews in the army. Consequently, attorney K. from Warsaw and engineer S. from Wilno, representatives of the revisionists associated with Jabotinsky, put forward a proposal to form separate Jewish units under the command of Polish officers, which would at some later point transfer to Palestine. This idea was opposed by the Bundists (once Bund leaders Erlich and Alter were freed, they successfully negotiated with the NKVD the release of some top figures of their faction, thanks to which this course appears the most popular among the local Jews; in the meantime, the Soviets will not release the Zionists, despite various attempts made to that end).

Gen. Anders, remaining true to his stance, rejected the plan to form separate Jewish units within the ranks and banned the anti-Semitic propaganda. Each Jew who in September 1939 served in the army or had completed military training is a member of the military, and only promising candidates are now accepted, while useless ones have been dismissed. By the way, the officers, who are thought to be anti-Semites, allegedly support the idea of forming separate Jewish units.

The Jewish masses are moving fastest to the south, and there is already a high number of Jews in Uzbekistan, but many of them manage to find something on their own and avoid the hard work. Given the great privation among the Jews, it is recommended that pressure be put on the rich echelons in America to get them some help, which, however, needs to pass through the embassy. I happily appoint Jews of various persuasions as my delegates and confidants.

Kot

2.

The instruction for division rabbis. Attachment to report no. 1 submitted to the Chief of Staff on 12 November 1941 [AZHPRL, ASK, file no. 353, p. 28]

The duties of a military rabbi are as follows:

1. Holding a service on Saturdays, between 10 and 12 o'clock (prayers and sermons) and on holidays,
2. holding a prayer service for Poland and the Polish army, as well as services for the souls of the fallen Polish soldiers,

3. taking oaths from soldiers,
4. daily prayers with the sick in the hospital,
5. visiting the sick in the hospital on the everyday basis and establishing their religious affiliation, which is of significance to the family (wife, children) in the event of the patient's death,
6. preparing the severely sick to make their will (a testament),
7. giving the last rites to the sick,
8. holding funeral services together with the honor guard platoon,
9. performing the ablution of the body according to the Jewish rites (assisted by two people) and performing the related religious acts,
10. keeping the vital records of the deceased who practiced the Jewish faith,
11. designating space at a military cemetery (separate quarter for the Jews),
12. ensuring that the tombs will be properly described (name, surname, etc.),
13. following the orders of the Command of the Jewish chaplaincy in the USSR.

In order to fulfill the aforementioned duties, a rabbi needs:

1. an office, 2. a room for holding prayers (synagogue), and the following persons to assist with the service: a) a cantor, b) 2 persons to perform the ablution of the dead.

3.

The conversation of Polish ambassador Prof. Stanisław Kot with A. Y. Vyshinsky, deputy People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs at the Narkomindel in Kuybyshev, 6 December 1941 [Kot, 1959, pp. 175–177]

(Attended by director K. N. Novikov and W. Arlet, 1st Secretary, acting as an interpreter) [...]

(The improbable accusations against Erlich and Alter)

Kot: A few days ago, two Polish citizens were arrested who had closely cooperated with the Embassy: Mr. Alter and Mr. Erlich. I would like to hear some explanation, please. First of all, they are very well-known internationally, being leaders of the Jewish socialist organization Bund. It is most unfortunate that you have had them arrested, especially at a time when General Sikorski is paying a visit. Alter is one of the leaders of the Socialist International. As for Erlich, we wanted to send him to London as the Bund's delegate to the National Council. The response to the Embassy's enquiry was that the arrests were made in connection with new incriminating evidence, so this is clearly related to pre-amnesty issues. Releasing them now is very important. Plus, when they were released in September,

they did not get temporary certificates, like all Polish citizens. Think of how the American Jewish organizations will react to these arrests.

Vyshinsky: Our actions cannot be informed by the uproar from the Jewish organizations. The arrests were made in connection with a most non-trivial issue. It is a very nasty scandal, discovered by sheer accident. It has been established beyond all reasonable doubt that they have been working for Germany. Of course, I do not know how the investigation will conclude. But the crime they committed is very serious.

Kot: It is most unbelievable that Jews in such high offices should be German agents!

Vyshinsky: Yet Trotsky was a German agent after all.

Kot: After they were released, they held talks with the НКВД concerning the formation of the antifascist Jewish Committee, which would be headquartered in Moscow. Why would they do something like this if they were German agents?

Vyshinsky: The antifascist committee may be some sort of a ruse. I cannot give you a detailed explanation but I will order a thorough investigation of the issue.

Kot: But we know both of them very well. These accusations are completely improbable. In my opinion, the arrests were made based on faulty evidence or false accusations. Sometimes all it takes is the suspicions of unskilled investigating officers. I personally know a man – whom I spoke to the other day – who on 2 August was given a prison sentence for his activities in the Russian territory against the German Reich. Just like that, an investigation was instituted, the case followed the official course, and 5 weeks after the war against you began, you sentenced a man for anti-German activities from before the war.

Vyshinsky: Such mistakes happen, but I can assure you, Sir, that the arrests of Alter and Erlich were not ordered by a low-level official, but by a central authority.

Kot: I am urging you in the strongest possible terms to sort out this issue.

Vyshinsky: And what if our common cause requires that such German agents be neutralized?

Kot: Sir, if I had the slightest doubts as to Alter's and Erlich's innocence, I would not intervene on their behalf.

Vyshinsky: The arrests were only made two days ago. The case is serious and the investigation is going to take time.

Kot: I am certain that they have been arrested by mistake.

Vyshinsky: If they have been wrongfully accused, the Embassy may rest assured that they will be released.

Kot: I am once again kindly asking you, Sir, to have this issue sorted out. (goodbyes)

4.

**Message to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, 10 December 1941
[Kot, 1955, p. 209]**

(The arrest of Erlich and Alter)

Alter and Erlich, two eminent members of the Bund, were arrested on the night of 4 December in Kuybyshev. The embassy took immediate steps and I personally spoke to Vyshinsky. I warned him about the negative reactions in America and England. I demand that they be released and allowed to speak to the Embassy's delegate, and that food and clothes packages be delivered to them.

Vyshinsky's answer - that the two worked on behalf of Germany - is, in my opinion, a half-baked excuse.

Today, we have been allowed to deliver the packages.

For the eyes of London, Washington.

Kot

5.

**Message to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, 25 January 1942
[Kot, 1955, p. 201]**

To Montreal, at the discretion of the Consul, so as not to divulge the source.

(Concerning Erlich and Alter)

Please discretely notify Mrs. Erlich, 5579 Park Avenue, Montreal, that I have made three emphatic interventions concerning both detainees. So far, I have only managed to have underwear delivered to them. The authorities know that both men are at the center of the Embassy's interest, so I do not believe they will be facing very serious hardships. They are kept in a local prison. When I wanted to deliver food to them, I was assured that they were being fed well.

The charges pressed against them are absurd, but they are likely motivated by the hatred toward the Jews, who are believed to be predisposing the Americas against the Soviets. Soviet Jews are now being arrested. The Polish Jews are firmly denied permission to leave USSR, under the pretext that they are considered Soviet citizens because in fall 1939 the then residents of the so called Western Ukraine and Belarus were incorporated to the USSR.

Kot

6.

**Message to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kuybyshev, 16 February 1942
[Kot, 1955, pp. 272–273]**

[...]

(Imprisonment of national minorities activists as a blow dealt to Poland)

The special Soviet policies toward the Polish citizens of non-Polish origins have other objectives as well. If the Jews, Ukrainians and Belarusians with pro-Polish or independence sympathies were to be released from prisons and camps and allowed to join the Polish Army or go abroad, then, when the inevitable happens while deciding on the order of the postwar Europe, that is when the clash occurs between our democratic-federative notion of international cooperation and the red notion of Russian imperialism coming in the guises of “democracy”, the Polish side would have natural allies in those national minorities who would be grateful to us for avoiding annihilation.

The departure of Jewish or Ukrainian activists would enable Polish policies to take advantage of those centers of Jewish and Ukrainian political thought abroad which, being disillusioned with Russia and Germany, would be willing to cooperate with us. This is the reason for arresting the Bund’s Alter and Erlich and the Narkomindel’s notification of the embassy that the latter is a Soviet citizen; this is also the reason for keeping in prisons and labor camps Zionists Sommerstein, Ringel, and Leser, or cultural activists Reisin, Schwalbe, and Wagman. The Ukrainian victims of these policies are Celewicz, Łucki, Węłykanowicz, Kuźmowicz, Starosolski, or Malicki. All of them made some sort of contact with the Embassy, and the Embassy intervened on behalf of all of them, but these attempts have been and – given how the issue of citizenship is interpreted at present – will be futile. Among the Belarusians, facing the same plight is Łuckiewicz.

That way, the Polish international policies are deprived of a considerable asset, in an attempt to restrict their influence, and that way, non-Polish nationalities are denied the right to self-determination in the future.

Kot

7.

**Message to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, 22 March 1942
[Kot, 1955, p. 290]***(Pessimism about Erlich and Alter)*

All attempts to secure the release of Alter and Erlich have been futile. Lately, the Narkomindel issued a response which makes any further discussions problematic, namely, that both are USSR citizens under the Soviet interpretation of the citizenship of national minorities. Of course, the

Embassy will continue its efforts, as a matter of principle, but the current situation gives little hope for a positive resolution without a firm outside intervention.

Kot

8.

To Ambassador Ciechanowski in Washington, Kuybyshev, 10 April 1942 (Kot, 1955, p. 303)

(Obstacles facing the Federation of the Polish Jews)

None of the foreign welfare-charity organizations – either Polish or Jewish – received permission to run their operations in the USSR. The Joint were denied the entrance visas.

The local political circumstances rule out any scenarios whereby anybody acts on behalf of any foreign organization before obtaining clearance from the Soviet authorities. Seeing as the aforesaid federation received no such permission, appointing Wołkowicz may only get him into trouble with the authorities, and he will not be able to act anyway. There are reasons to believe that the arrests of Erlich and Alter were motivated precisely by their contacts with international Jewish organizations and the anticipation of the role they could play locally as their representatives.

The local technical circumstances make it impossible more than anywhere else to take care of people without an extensive network in place. The Embassy does everything it can to overcome huge obstacles, which are inconceivable to other circles. Any actions by a single person are out of the question.

The only remaining option is to appoint the Federation's representative at the Embassy and keep it secret from the Soviet authorities. The Federation would have to explain why it requests such representation and what its scope would be. [...]

Kot

9.

The conversation of Polish ambassador Prof. Stanisław Kot with A. Y. Vyshinsky, deputy People's Commissar at the Narkomindel, with the participation of Mr. Valery Zorin and the Embassy's secretary W. Arlet, acting as an interpreter (Kot, 1959, pp. 269–271)

[...]

(Please give me Erlich and Alter back)

Kot: And finally, Sir, there is one more issue, which has been raised by the Embassy on many occasions. I am thinking of Erlich and Alter, Polish

citizens and members of the Warsaw board of supervisors, who are in your custody.

Vyshinsky: I am not in a position to discuss this.

Kot: Sir, why don't you just do it for me and give me these men as I am leaving. I will take them with me and see to it that they will not engage in any kind of anti-Soviet propaganda abroad. I am only speaking out of concern for the common cause that is the war we are fighting together. Nobody is going to believe that these people had anything to do with supporting Hitlerism. (The ambassador produces leaflets and copies of correspondence with leading us figures, which describe the protests of Jewish labor organizations in the States). Whoever needs that? Will it be of any help to the common fight against the Germans?

Vyshinsky: (not looking at the materials): I understand completely your intentions and feelings, Mr. Ambassador, but I cannot debate the issue of Alter and Erlich with you, Sir. You know our stance, according to which they are citizens of the Soviet Union.

Kot: (jokingly): Then you must be planning to seize Warsaw after the war. For how are they supposed to be your citizens! They are members of the Warsaw board of supervisors, and when you incorporated eastern Poland to the USSR they were in your prison.

Vyshinsky: Your comment about Warsaw is surely a joke, Mr. Ambassador. We have no intention of taking it! But Warsaw will do just fine without Erlich and Alter.

Kot: I am very sorry that this is the stance of the Soviet authorities since releasing these people would only be in your interest.

Vyshinsky: I am not in a position to discuss this issue, nor to influence the outcome. I am being honest with you, Mr. Ambassador, although I could easily resort to tricks or promises. This matter is closed for the time being. [...]

10.

**“The Jewish Issue”, a report dated 15 June 1942
(AZHPRL, ASK, file no. 352, pp. 115–116)**

In the South Kazakh and Kzyl-Ordinskaya oblasts, the percentage of the Jewish population is around 60–65%, that is 13,500 people, and is between 32% and 95% in larger cities and settlements, being the highest in Kzyl-Orda (around 95%) and Turkistan (around 90%), or close to big cities, for example near Tashkent in the Bostandyk region (98%), amounting to a total number of 4,000 across these couple of settlements. A large percentage of Jews settled in regional centers and settlements located along railways or major roads. Around 5,000 people are concentrated in these settlements, while the other 4,500 are dispersed across kolkhozes in the entire area.

The Jewish people, regardless of the background and education, succumb to complete demoralization, and only few individuals have so far managed to protect themselves against this general downfall.

Another common feature, which intensifies this demoralization, is aversion to work, and no arguments or appeals will rectify this harmful attitude.

For example, when I was in Kzyl-Orda in March, the authorities promised to hire 700 people for stockpiling firewood. The conditions were very decent, an 8-hour shift, 800 grams of bread, warm meal twice a day, and the wage of 5–7 rubles at a minimum. I immediately ordered the hiring of workers, but only thirty-some people volunteered over these two weeks. They went for labor, took payments for 10 days in advance, in money and in kind, but failed to report for work on the next day. The company's board said that it would not be hiring Jews.

In Turkistan, when scores of young people and women complained to me that they had no means for survival and no jobs, I suggested that I would talk to the Raispolkom to find them jobs at local companies, or alternatively get them sent to kolkhozes, but they replied, "we are young, we want to live, we won't be doing manual labor."

In larger Jewish settlements, illegal commerce is rife, from groceries, to currency, gold, and brilliants. The Soviet authorities, who at first were rather lenient toward these things, are now becoming more stringent, and the number of Polish citizens in prisons is constantly increasing. However, the sentences of up to 8 years are not deterrents. It needs to be noted that in the majority of cases the profiteers are "ratted on" by their compatriots.

Additionally, a relatively high percentage have turned to crime, being guilty of thefts and robberies, as well as murders for profit.

In recent weeks, I gave the order to relieve a number of Jews of their duties of seniors in kolkhozes – they were mostly attorneys and members of the intelligentsia – for the way of apportioning the American handouts, which was unfair to the members of a given settlement.

The Jews in the kolkhozes have gained notoriety not only with the common folk but also with the administration: I keep hearing complaints that our Jewish citizens are demoralizing the locals by their attitude to working, i.e. they do not come to work at all, or if they do, they go home after 2 or 3 hours. These cases were brought to my attention by Sagentyayev, the chairman of the Oblispolkom, after he had inspected a number of regions.

Today, the Soviet authorities make no secret of their dislike for the Polish Jews.

The deputy head of the Shymkent НКВД, in a spontaneous conversation we had in a street, told me, "the worst ones we had were the Bukharian Jews, but they are angels compared to your Jews – we have never met anybody like that."

Things have gone so far that the kolkhozes which suffer from major staff shortages have stopped hiring even those whom the Obliskompol officially sends to the district through the Delegation.

There are some Jews who respond to these issues in a very serious, matter-of-fact manner and are very worried about the current situation, which will have severe consequences. When we talk, they tell me openly, "the locals despise us so much that in the event of some catastrophe we are not getting out of it alive." However, their prudent stance and attempts they are making to reason with their own folk fall on deaf ears – the vile people will not listen.

I estimate the number of useful individuals at 15–20%, and these people should be saved – and this is where assistance should be provided by the Jewish organizations from abroad, which are so influential that they could secure a certain quota of entry visas and, through official British and American channels, get the Soviet authorities to grant exit visas to Polish citizens of Jewish nationality. I consider this a very urgent matter since the Jews' continued exposition to bribery and corruption, which are extremely virulent among the common Soviets and the Soviet administration, may shortly derail also these few individuals who have so far refused to compromise and have not given up the universal ethical principles.

[signature illegible]

11.

A report concerning the Jewish minority in the USSR, 17 June 1942 (AZHPRL, ASK, file no. 352, pp. 117–118)

The Jewish minority often makes unfounded complaints about receiving worse treatment than the Catholics, being reportedly ignored in the process of apportioning aid and not accepted for the military and for office posts.

The Delegation explains that the lists of people registering with the Delegation on the daily basis show that the percentage of Jews stands exactly at 99, and it seems as though there was nobody else.

The Delegation's attitude toward the Jews is very tolerant and calm, despite their behavior, which is very intrusive and at times extremely inapt.

The process of apportioning aid is based on the principle that receiving it first are children, then people unfit for work, people taking care of large families, and finally the working people, regardless of their nationality or religious affiliation.

With respect to rejection by the military, the situation is highly complicated, as the contingent is restricted by the Soviet authorities, and consequently, the military first and foremost recruits soldiers who have already served.

With respect to hiring, no real discrimination has been made here, either.

The Jewish people are currently very vocal about their patriotic feelings. What is the reality?

A number of the Jews were indeed in the camps, where some of them displayed not just loyalty but also – at times – heroism, as they stressed their solidarity with the Polish nation and the Polish State. However, most of them considered it a disgrace to identify themselves with Poland and went to great lengths to unsettle the Poles in the camps by denouncing them and deriding everything that was Polish. They kept saying, “This is not Poland, Poland will be no more,” etc., and such behavior was supposed to improve their own fortunes since the Soviet authorities generously rewarded those engaged in denunciation and derision. It needs to be noted that most of the Polish Jews ended up in the USSR not through forceful deportation – as was the case of all Poles – but by choice, having come voluntarily and having accepted Soviet passports. And outside prisons and camps, when the beautiful and firm stance of the Polish nation – be it in the occupied country or in exile – earned them respect and adoration, the Jews in the USSR, despite their alleged patriotic feelings, are doing everything in their power to tarnish Poland’s reputation and undermine its value. They shirk labor, engage in the commercial activities illegal in the USSR, steal, extort help in kind for the purposes of profiteering, and rat on their brothers to the Soviet authorities.

Those working at the posts immediately commit malversation, for example Mr Rosenblatt and Mr. Kocman, working for an official representative in Tulkubash, were guilty of serious malfeasance, selling for profit the American handouts and the food which were supposed to go to the most needy.

Testifying to the veracity of the description of the behavior of the Jews is the fact that these people approach the Embassy anonymously, lacking the courage and dignity to state their names.

It is highly unlikely that the very same people who so fervently profess their patriotism and affinity for Poland, and at the same time lack the moral courage to reveal their names, should have been capable of stressing their patriotism as emphatically at a time when identifying as a Pole entailed persecution, imprisonment, and time in a labor camp.

[signature illegible]

12.

**Message to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kuybyshev, 27 June 1942
(Kot, 1955, p. 339)***(Establishing the whereabouts of deputy Sommerstein)*

After 10 months of searching and intervening, deputy Emil Sommerstein has been found. He is in the municipal hospital in Balashov, in Saratov oblast. His condition is serious. Despite being formally released on 19 November 1941, he was de facto released from the prison hospital in the same town only on 9 April. I sent monetary aid immediately. I have made a formal request to the Narkomindel for arranging his transfer to Kuybyshev.

For the eyes of the Washington embassy, with the following note: Please notify the president of the World Jewish Congress, Mr. Wise, in New York.

Kot

13.

**Message to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kuybyshev, 27 June 1942
(Kot, 1955, p. 339)***(Lies about the mistreatment of the Jews)*

The message of the Jewish Telegraph Agency concerning the reported disfavoring of the Jewish people in the process of apportioning aid has caused universal bewilderment here. Since I arrived in the USSR, in September of the previous year, I have not received a single complaint about this issue from the parties concerned. Apparently, the source of this information is elsewhere. It may originate with those groups which now, at a time when the Soviet authorities deny the Jews Polish citizenship, will stop at nothing to cause frictions.

Kot

14.

**Message to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kuybyshev, 30 June 1942
(Kot, 1955, p. 341)***(Smuggling Jewish children)*

In the course of organizing the first transport of children, I instructed that a dozen or so Jewish children be included, but with extreme caution, so as not to attract the attention of the local authorities. Even in telegrams, which are our only means of contact with the delegate responsible for sending children from Ashgabat, we have to avoid the word "Jewish". The first transport, of 162 children, was supposed to include 14 Jewish children and a doctor; this number dropped to 11, probably because of diseases.

Kot

15.

**The conversation between Stanisław Kot and Wendell Willkie,
Tehran, 15 September 1942
[Kot, 1955, pp. 380–382]**

The meeting with the participation of Mr. Dreyfus, the United States Minister to Iran, Mr. Willkie's two secretaries, Mr. Barends and Mr. Gowles, and US Army Maj. Henryk Szymański, acting as an interpreter. [...]

(Concern for the living)

Ambassador Kot: At this point, we are concerned about the living, who are scattered across the Soviet Union, from Archangelsk to the Bering Strait; they are great multitudes, who in the local circumstances do not lend themselves to precise statistical calculations, and who are facing death from starvation. A great number of our citizens have already died in the Soviet Union. They do grueling work, plus the Soviets do not give them tasks according to their skills but send almost everybody for the hardest labor, such as cutting wood, digging, etc. What is the point of forcing chemistry professors to cut wood? We have kept some of these people alive thanks to the extraordinary help of the American and British societies. I would like to take this opportunity and thank you for the help provided by the noble Americans.

But at this point, it is uncertain if any help is going to reach the Polish people. For the Soviets, having at first agreed to setting up the network of the Embassy's delegacies responsible for recording Polish citizens, looking after them, and providing them with clothing, food, and medications, have now, after my departure, suddenly dismantled this entire structure. On 8 July, I asked Vyshinsky if the Soviet government was going to charge our delegates, and he assured me that it was not the case. It was logical, since these delegates were following the orders from the Embassy and General Sikorski's Government in the spirit of the Polish-Russian agreement. However, shortly afterward, all delegates and their staff were arrested, so the entire relief effort on behalf of the Polish citizens ceased to exist.

(Equal treatment of the Jews)

Wendell Willkie: Was this relief effort also targeted on the Polish Jews? I need to emphasize that neither myself nor the American people, despite being very fond of the Polish Nation, could side with anybody – be it the Poles or any other nation – who would espouse anti-Semitism.

Ambassador Kot: If you can find in Russia a Polish Jew who would accuse my Embassy of anti-Semitism, please do not give any credence to any of my statements. We took care of all Polish citizens, in equal measure, and they were Jews as well as indigenous Poles. It would be ideal if you could summon representatives of the Polish Jews in Russia. But let me warn you that whoever it is that the Soviets allow to speak to you is going to be

their agent, and if a Polish Jew reached you and told you the truth about their situation in the Soviet Union, he would be signing his own death warrant. The Soviets have declared the Jews and other national minorities from Poland Soviet citizens, in an attempt to substantiate their territorial claims to Poland's Eastern Borderlands. The Polish Jews, even those who were critical of the conditions in Poland and had high hopes concerning the life and freedoms in the Soviet Union, do not want to be Soviet citizens at any price, given the treatment they have received from the Soviets. Each of them wants to remain a Polish citizen and return to their Polish homes.

(The imprisonment of Erlich and Alter)

Instructive of the Soviet government's indisposition toward the Jews is the second arrest of eminent leaders of the socialist Jewish movement, Erlich and Alter, who were ready to cooperate with the Soviets propaganda-wise against the Germans, but they were suspected of excessive commitment to the principles of democracy and freedom. Both were members of the Warsaw board of supervisors. Before I left, I asked the Narkomindel to release them so I could take them with me, and I made personal assurances that they would not make a single critical remark concerning the situation in the USSR. My request was denied, on grounds that they were now Soviet citizens.

Wendell Willkie: I am very glad to hear about your efforts to help the Jews in Russia. The fact that the Polish Government has so emphatically stood up against anti-Semitism means that I see myself as a very dear friend of Poland and the Poles, and a personal friend of Gen. Sikorski. [...]

(transl. by Maciej Grabski)

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