



Philippe Sands

***Szlak szczurów. Historia uciezki
nazistowskiego oprawcy***

**[The Ratline. Love, Lies and Justice on
the Trail of a Nazi Fugitive]**

**Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2022
(transl. by A. Czwojdrak)**

The settlement of crimes committed by the Third Reich during the Second World War is a subject of research for representatives of various scholarly disciplines, first and foremost among them historians, political scientists and lawyers. The very process of uncovering the truth is often laborious for the historian, among others because of the state of preservation of sources produced by the German dictatorship. While a large number of these documents did not survive hostilities, numerous others – such as camp records – were purposefully destroyed to erase all traces of the crimes. Thanks to the testimonies of witnesses who directly experienced the German occupation and survived incarceration at prisons and labor or concentration camps, the researcher can largely reconstruct the crimes committed during the Second World War, however bringing those accountable for them to justice is far more complicated.

The reluctance of various circles in West Germany to try the perpetrators, as well as the Cold War division of the world, affected the work of Germans courts and prosecutors. Today, we are additionally faced with the issue of the time that has passed since the tragic world conflict: many unpunished perpetrators of war crimes and genocide are by now deceased, and thus justice cannot be served. But the question of the reckoning has also another aspect – the psychological dimension pertaining to the perspective on wartime crimes adopted by the families of those who committed them. The book about the German criminal Otto Wächter is partly devoted to the problem. The subtitle of this interesting publication, which appeared in print in 2022, is *Historia uciezki nazistowskiego oprawcy* [A history of the escape of a Nazi murderer]. It has to be noted, however, that the book does not focus on Wächter's escape. The story touches upon numerous themes, some concerning the closest family of the criminal, i.e. his wife and children. The book can be seen as an attempt at answering the question how his family dealt with the criminal life of both husband and father, and whether they were capable of a critical assessment of his past.

The book has four parts composed of chapters. They are prefaced with “Prolog: Rzym, 13 lipca 1949 roku” [Prologue: Rome, 13 July 1949], and end with “Epilog: Rzym, 13 lipca 2019 roku” [Epilogue: Rome, 13 July 2019]. Philippe Sands’ monograph is a multi-faceted reconstruction of the life of the German criminal Otto Wächter. Significantly, it was elaborated on the basis of sources originating not only from public archives, but also from family collections and documents, as Sands established personal contacts with the relatives of his protagonist. As a result, the book does not so much portray Wächter’s wartime criminal activities as focus on his postwar fates, and especially on his attempt to blend in with the new bipolar world and evade responsibility for his doings.

Otto Gustav Wächter was born on 8 July 1901 in Vienna. His father, an anti-Semite and nationalist by conviction, served as an officer in the Austro-Hungarian Army, while his mother came from an affluent Viennese family. Otto spent his childhood (the first seven years, to be exact) in the Habsburgs’ Austrian capital. He was enrolled in a local elementary school (*Volksschule*), and later continued his education in Trieste, on the Adriatic Sea, to where the Wächters moved. At the beginning of the First World War, due to his father’s military service, Otto and his family transferred to Budweis (České Budějovice). After graduating from high school, Otto commenced legal studies at the University of Vienna, which he completed in 1924.

This was the time when his anti-Marxist and anti-Semitic views were crystallizing. While still at university, and barely 22 years old, Wächter joined the German National Socialist Workers’ Party of Austria (Deutsche Nationalsozialistische Arbeiterpartei (Österreich), *DNŠAP*) and the Vienna *Sturmabteilung*. In 1930, he joined the *NSDAP*, receiving number 301,093, while from 1932 he was active in the *SS*. When the National Socialists seized power in Germany in 1933, Wächter started climbing the political career ladder. He was undoubtedly aided in his efforts by his wife, Charlotte, who had contacts in various circles associated with the *NSDAP* and herself was a Party member (having joined on 28 May 1931 with number 510,379). Otto Wächter commenced work at the Main Office of the Security Service of the Reichsführer *SS* (*Hauptamt Sicherheitsdienst des Reichsführers SS*). In the *SS*, he was promoted to the rank of *Obersturmbahnführer*. We learn about this period of his life – his childhood, youth, studies, fascination with National Socialism, and adult life as a husband – from the first part, entitled *Miłość* [Love].

The second part of the publication, titled *Władza* [Power], contains a description of Wächter’s further fate. Appointed Governor of the Kraków District in October 1939 (Mączyński, 2012, p. 170), he was a trusted collaborator of the Governor-General of the General Government of Occupied Poland, Hans Frank. For example, it was Wächter’s idea to take hostage 120 professors, doctors and lecturers, who were arrested as part of a brutal operation against the Polish intelligentsia, *Sonderaktion Krakau*, on

6 November 1939. Moreover, soon after assuming office, he issued a decree on the marking of Jews, and took part in public executions in Kraków and the outlying areas, among others in Bochnia. Alongside Frank, he was one of the leading enforcers of the Third Reich's criminal ethnic and national policies targeting the Polish residents of Kraków. In the General Government, Wächter implemented the planned persecution and extermination of Jews and Poles. In Kraków, he established a ghetto where thousands of local Jews were imprisoned and later murdered; he personally took part in these executions.

Otto Wächter and Hans Frank not only cooperated closely, but were also friends. They eagerly took advantage of their position as high-ranking occupation officials to satisfy their craving for luxury, looting private apartments and stealing valuables – including works of art. Wächter's name appears in the memoirs of Edward Kubalski concerning the Nazi occupation of Kraków, with the author wryly noting that while introducing National-Socialist order in the former Polish capital, the German officer regularly seized Polish property to ensure that he and his wife lived in suitable comfort. Kubalski wrote the following entry for 22 December 1939:

German dignitaries went back to their Vaterland for the holidays. The market square is full of trees and bustle – but there is no joy and no “dough”. Many households will not celebrate a traditional Christmas Eve. Prof. Szyszko-Bohusz, Geppert and other members of the Visual Arts Faculty from Łobzowska Street were arrested a few days ago for holding meetings without permission. This was obviously just a pretext. Mr. [Kajetan] Mühlmann, head of the Governor's art department, is indefatigable. The Czartoryski Gallery was partly looted, even though it belongs to the foundation, not to the state. Sculptures, so-called guild paintings, medieval paintings, and other paintings of great value ([G i e r y m s k i], M a t e j k o) were likewise stolen from the National Museum to adorn Mr. Wächter's chambers in the Pod Baranami Palace. Mrs. Wächter herself was picking and choosing furniture and Gdańsk wardrobes [emphasis by the author] (Kubalski, 2010, p. 44).

At the beginning of 1942, Otto Wächter was assigned a new task.¹ In January, he replaced Dr. Karl Lasch as Governor of the District of

¹ The subsequent governors of the Kraków District were Dr. Ferdinand Wolsegger (until 31 January 1942), ss-Brigadeführer Dr. Richard Wendler (until 25 May 1943),

Galicia, taking up office in Lwów (Kubalski, 2010, p. 193).² According to the memoirs of his wife Charlotte, he was personally selected for the post by the leader of the Third Reich, Adolf Hitler, since it could be said that he was the right man to implement the genocidal policies adopted at the Wannsee Conference. In the Simon Wiesenthal collection, Philippe Sands discovered a typescript deposited by Rose Stephenson, who had been Wächter's secretary already in Kraków. Accompanying him to Lwów, she described a city in chaos, devoid of order and hygiene. She attributed the blame to Wächter's predecessor, Dr. Lasch, who despite clear orders had failed to establish a Jewish ghetto. After Wächter arrived in Lwów, "a ghetto was built, persecution commenced, and stricter regulations came into effect" (p. 356). The secretary herself witnessed the crimes committed there.³ The extermination of the city's Jews was one of Otto Wächter's "achievements" (Honigsman, 2007).

Philippe Sands has been equally meticulous in his analysis of Otto Wächter's postwar fate, which occupies the third part of the book. Here, his research is based on the Wächters' impressive family archives, to which he was granted access. After the end of the war, Otto Wächter spent some time in Austria, from where he proceeded to Rome. In Italy, he commenced efforts to leave for South America – as many other German criminals did at the time. Before he managed to escape the country, however, he fell ill and died.

Otto Wächter had several funerals. The chapter *Pięć pogrzebów O.W.* [O.W.'s five funerals] opens the fourth part of the book. The first inhumation took place on 16 July 1949. Following a service officiated by Bishop Alois Hudal, Wächter was buried in the Roman cemetery of Campo Verano. But although his wife requested that his remains be moved to a mausoleum in Palermo, Sicily, and the Italian authorities granted permission, he was not reinterred. Thus, acting in secret and in violation of the law, and ostensibly in order to fulfill her husband's wish to be buried in Austrian soil, Charlotte transported his body to Austria. In consequence, Wächter was buried for a second time, on a plot of land near Haus Wartenberg in Salzburg. This occurred around 1960. A few years later, he was moved yet again, to the garden of a property purchased by his wife near the town

Dr. Ludwig Losacker (until 10 October 1943), and Dr. Kurt Ludwig Ehrenreich von Burgsdorff (until the end of the German occupation) (Mączyński, 2012, p. 170).

² Dr. Karl Lasch was the brother-in-law of Governor-General Hans Frank, and had previously occupied the post of Governor of the Radom District. He was sentenced to death for trading in carpets and paintings (Mączyński, 2012, p. 187).

³ In Lwów, Jews were incarcerated at camps, one of which was situated on Janowska Street. This facility was a major site of the extermination of Jews in Lwów, with survivors describing it as a location of torture and regular shootings. Those who worked outside the camp, like Simon Wiesenthal, who was employed at the Eastern Railway Repair Works found themselves in a better position (Stankowski, 2009, p. 44).

of Fieberbrunn, 70 kilometers from Salzburg. The fourth funeral, participated in by Wächter's children, extended family members, and a priest, took place in 1974; the last was held in 1985, when his exhumed remains were placed on the lid of his wife's coffin (p. 239).

Otto Wächter's stay in Rome is shrouded in ambiguity. First of all, Philippe Sands asks the important question why a wanted German criminal was not arrested. An answer of sorts may be gleaned from the correspondence between Otto and Charlotte, which shows that their survival in the Italian capital was aided by numerous friends, not only from Italy, but also from Austria and Ukraine. Among them were Puccio Pucci, a lawyer, sportsman, Fascist and close collaborator of Alessandro Pavolini, the secretary of Partito Fascista Repubblicano who was shot together with Benito Mussolini on 28 April 1945, and Bishop Jan (Iwan) Buczko (Bucko), a Ukrainian nationalist who during the war, when Wächter was Governor of the District of Galicia, served as an auxiliary bishop of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. The group also included Albert Schnez, a Wehrmacht colonel who in 1949 wanted to establish a secret army of former soldiers and officers of the Third Reich to defend West Germany against Communism. Schnez was later an officer in the Bundeswehr.

A Catholic clergyman, the previously mentioned Bishop Alois Hudal, who was influential in Vatican circles, came to play an important role in Wächter's life. He took care of the gravely ill Otto, was present at his death, and – as he himself noted in 1949 – certified it with his signature: “I hereby confirm that Dr. Otto Gustav, Freiherr von Wächter, passed away in my arms and at peace with the Lord on 13 July at 11.00 p.m. at the Hospital of the Holy Spirit” (p. 235). Other of Bishop Hudal's less glorious deeds included providing assistance to Franz Stangl, who was third on the global list of criminals from the period of the Second World War. The former commandant of Sobibór and Treblinka camps, he did not answer for his actions before a court, but instead found shelter in Italy. He received a passport from the German Red Cross and took up residence in a seminary. From there he went to Syria, and next to Damascus and Brazil (Stankowski, 2009, pp. 114–115).

To some extent, Philippe Sands' book references the work of Niklas Frank, which was his coming to terms with the legacy of his father, Hans Frank. Niklas publicly admitted to being the son of a criminal – both in press and television statements, and in his book (Frank, 1991).⁴ He carried out a unique analysis of his life: recalling his childhood, during which his father had been Governor-General in Kraków, he assessed the human cost of his parent's political advancement. He also described

⁴ This is the Polish translation of the book that originally appeared in German (Frank, 1987). Niklas Frank also published a book about his mother (Frank, 1995; 2005).

various events from his father's life, presenting the actions which resulted in the persecution and death of so many people during the war. It was not easy for him, especially since his closest family did not share his critical opinion of his father. It may seem that in its final message, Sands' book about Wächter would lead to a similar conclusion on the part of the criminal's son. However, Horst Wächter – one of Otto's six children (the others were Sieglinde, Heidegund, Waltraut, Lieselotte and Otto Richard) and Sands' chief interlocutor – could not bring himself to judge his own parent like Niklas Frank had his. Only one of the criminal's grandchildren, Horst's daughter, had the courage to declare “my grandfather was a mass murderer”, and her telling words end the book under review.⁵ Sands had many conversations with Otto's son. The attitude adopted by Horst and his mother Charlotte when confronted with evidence of the crimes committed by their father and husband, respectively, provides food for thought.

Finally, a few words should also be said about the author of the book. Philippe Sands is a Professor of Law at University College London and a practicing barrister at 11 King's Bench Walk. He has appeared before international tribunals in cases resulting from the events in Chile (the legacy of Augusto Pinochet), Yugoslavia and Rwanda, among others. The book about Otto Wächter is not his first publication, he has also written, among others, *Powrót do Lwowa. O genezie „ludobójstwa” i „zbrodni przeciwko ludzkości”* (Warszawa 2018) [East West Street. On the Origins of “Genocide” and “Crimes Against Humanity”], for which he was awarded the Baillie Gifford Prize and the British Book Award for Non-Fiction Narrative Book of the Year.

Witold Stankowski

ORCID ID: 0000-0001-9242-5644

(transl. by Aleksandra Arumińska)

Bibliography

- Frank, N. (1987). *Der Vater. Eine Abrechnung*. München: C. Bertelsmann.
- Frank, N. (1991). *Mój ojciec Hans Frank* (transl. by E. Kacprzycka, J. Kwiatkowski). Warszawa: Wydawnictwo „Rok” 1991.
- Frank, N. (1995). *Moja niemiecka matka* (transl. by J. Wolska-Stefanowicz). Warszawa: Wydawnictwo „Bellona”.
- Frank, N. (2005). *Meine deutsche Mutter*. München: C. Bertelsmann.

⁵ Also worthy of mention is the book by Jennifer Teege, the granddaughter of Amon Göth, a German criminal and commandant of the concentration camp in Kraków-*Płaszów* (Teege, Sellmair, 2013).

- Honigsman, J. (2007). *Zagłada Żydów lwowskich (1941-1944)* (transl. and comp. by A. Redzik). Warszawa: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny.
- Kubalski, E. (2010). *Niemcy w Krakowie. Dziennik 1 IX 1939-18 I 1945* (comp. J. Grochalski, Z.R. Grabowski). Kraków-Budapeszt: Wydawnictwo Austeria.
- Mączyński, M. (2012). *Organizacyjno-prawne aspekty funkcjonowania administracji bezpieczeństwa i porządku publicznego dla zajętych obszarów polskich w latach 1939-1945. Ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem Krakowa jako stolicy Generalnego Gubernatorstwa*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo PROMO.
- Stankowski, W. (2009). *Szymon Wiesenthal. Biografia*. Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza.
- Teege, J., Sellmair, N. (2014). *Amon. Mój dziadek by mnie zastrzelił* (transl. by E. Twardoch). Warszawa: Prószyński i S-ka.