

**Bogdan Białek**

## **O earth, cover not thou my blood, and let my cry have no place**

*Book of Job, 16:18*

*(part of the book "Homo Homini". Publisher Jan Karcki Society in Kielce)*



In the article entitled "Nasza bardzo wielka wina" [Our Very Great Guilt], which I published in the local edition of "Gazeta Wyborcza" daily ("Gazeta lokalna", 27-28 May 1995), I wrote, "Let us be frank. For the people of Kielce the pogrom is a very, very difficult subject. There was no talk about it not only because this was the wish of the communist regime, which could be the reason for the many years of silence in schools and the media.

But there was not talk about it in churches and during religion lessons. There was no talk about it at home, in families, among friends. And when finally the talk began, it was that Jews themselves procured this fate, or that it was the Soviets who massacred 42 people in the very center of the city, who kept on killing the entire day through. As if Kielce became deserted for this one day and all the righteous citizens took a day off and left the city for a bit of rest in the Świętokrzyskie Mountains nearby. (...)

The subject is difficult – if only to recall the words of John Paul II in Kielce, who upon his visit here mentioned the pogrom and instantaneously evoked numerous outraged voices – why are WE told this, after all we now have nothing to do with all that. Many of us think that the pogrom of Jews is a dirty trick somebody played on us.

It is difficult – if only to see how the post-communist city authorities, when planning festivities in relation to the anniversary (50th anniversary of the pogrom – from the editor) next year, write in the program of the events that they are expecting «a large number of Jews coming to Kielce» hence they propose to install two plaques commemorating the murder of 26 thousand Jews killed by Germans and Ukrainians, and another plaque on the Jewish cemetery, commemorating the inhabitants of Kielce and the region who have received the title of Righteous Among Nations. Not a word about the pogrom".

The 50th anniversary of the pogrom did finally take place and the celebration was indeed grand, with many guests from Poland and abroad, with speeches by the then Polish Prime Minister, Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz, who expressed his grief and remorse, and by the Nobel Prize winner, Ellie Wiesel. But even years after the event, in January 2008 at a meeting in Kielce with Jan Gross, the author of "Fear" – a book describing anti-Semitism in Poland after World War II, one of the participants said, "How is it possible that having been born in Kielce years after the war, I did not learn about the pogrom until I was an adult?". In interviews after the Kielce. launch of the book, Gross himself said that, "the Kielce meeting was emotional also because of the fact that both the organizers and we, who were sitting behind the table, were expecting the worst: we were told what to do in case of a bomb attack.

Bogus Białek, who has been for years involved in Polish – Jewish issues in Kielce, has had such situations happen to him. But the meeting was fantastic. People were very moved and spoke about the book, showing that the issues discussed have been to a great effect already digested. Of course, there were mad voices too, but it was evident that there was no support for them in the room. The rest was a normal and open discussion.”

The several hundred people who came to the meeting with Gross, to talk and listen to the painful past and the difficult present, no doubt must have disappointed the media who had hoped for a turmoil. Nothing of the kind happened.

Before the state and local authorities announced the festive celebration of the 50th anniversary of the pogrom in 1996, together with a group of citizens of Kielce we addressed the Jewish community with the following letter: "...we, the people of Kielce, Christians associated in the Civil Association of "Memory – Dialogue – Reconciliation", express our pain and shame for the events of the past. Regardless of what was the actual mechanism of the crime, nor what was the actual participation of Polish and Soviet official institutions, we fail to understand why our older brothers, fathers, neighbors, having so much suffered during the Nazi and then the Bolshevik occupation, stained their hands and conscience with the blood of their brothers in suffering – the Jews.

We are not able to understand nor accept a justification of the situation based on twists of history and turns of politics. We observe that our society was not free – nor is it still, unfortunately – of ethnic and religious prejudices, of an aversion to «others», or even hostility which in 1946 took the form of crime.

We are aware of the fact that NO WORDS CAN ERASE THE SUFFERING AND HUMILIATION OF VICTIMS. Speaking upon the need of conscience we ask, however, the families of the murdered, their kin and all the Jewish community for forgiveness. We ask on our own behalf and on behalf of all those who join us in this act of repentance.” The letter was published by the biggest Polish daily – “Gazeta Wyborcza”.

The process of recovering and taming the memory of the pogrom has been long and complicated and is still pending. The first public act of memory took place in 1981 upon the initiative of local Solidarity – it was a holy mass dedicated to the victims of the pogrom celebrated at the Kielce Cathedral by the then parish priest and later bishop, father Mieczysław Jaworski. This was unfortunately a one-time event, never repeated. In the following years individual people tried to annually, on 4 July, commemorate the pogrom – either in front of the house on Planty street, or at the Jewish cemetery. The secret security police always tried to prevent these events from happening. A larger manifestation of several dozen took place in 1986 – also stifled by secret security services. The following year was pivotal – a large group of Jews, former inhabitants of Kielce, came to town after a renovation and a rededication of the Jewish Na Pakoszu cemetery (the Communist authorities refused to grant them entry the previous year, in 1986, on the 40th anniversary).

In his address at the cemetery, David Blumenfeld, a rabbi from Kielce, appealed for reconciliation. Many local scientists, such as Krzysztof Urbański, Zenon Guldon, Regina Renz, Stanisław Markowski or Marta and Stanisław Meducki began systematic studies on the Jewish history in Kielce and the region. Unfortunately, apart from a voluminous work by Stanisław Meducki and Zenon Wrona, the difficult Polish-Jewish topics, including the pogrom of 1918, the times of occupation, namely the problem of “szmalcownictwo” [a pejorative Polish slang word used during World War II that denoted a person blackmailing hiding Jews or blackmailing Poles who protected Jews during the Nazi occupation – from the translator, following Wikipedia], or the pogrom of 1946, were omitted. The

mentioned work by Stanisław Meducki and Zenon Wrona (*Antyżydowskie wydarzenia kieleckie 4 lipca 1946* [Anti-Jewish Events in Kielce of 4 July 1946]) was a magnificent exception.

Prof. father Jan Śledzianowski offered an original take on pogrom in his publication *Pytania nad pogromem kieleckim* [Questions on the Kielce Pogrom] with echoing journalistic publications by Jerzy Daniel (*Żyd w zielonym kapeluszu* [A Jew in a Green Hat]) and Tadeusz Wiącek (*Zabić Żyda* [Kill a Jew]), in which the authors also try to grapple with the difficult and painful history. Increasingly more texts began to appear in the press: reportages, interviews, some perhaps a tad sentimental but recalling the Jewish history of the city, the Jewish presence and coexistence with Poles.

In 1990 two commemorative plaques were placed on the wall of the building on Planty street – the scene of the crime. The first one was founded upon the initiative of Lech Wałęsa, who was then the chairman of Solidarity. From that year on the local and regional authorities have been coming to the place on 4 July with flowers and candles. Upon the initiative of Methodist pastor Janusz Daszuta and myself, Memory Marches are organized each year, beginning 2000. The trail leads from Planty street to the Jewish cemetery, to the mass grave of those murdered in 1946.

100 people participated in the march in 2008 – a clear sign of memory which is increasingly accepted by the inhabitants of the city. Even if it is not the number of participants that counts, the annually increasing group of pilgrims is reason for joy.

The Jan Karski Association was established in 2005 as a continuation of the “Memory – Dialogue – Reconciliation”. This was preceded by naming one of the schools in Kielce after Jan Karski, an event which took place with the participation of a special guest, Dr Marek Edelman – the legendary commander of the insurgence in the Warsaw Ghetto. He addressed the youth of Kielce with the following words: “I was in Kielce the day after the pogrom. I saw dead people, blood on the pavements. I never came back here again. 50 years have passed. Time has eradicated evil from this town. Kielce now is a different, better city.”

The same year, together with a group of people, we have founded (founders included Marek Jach, Sławomir Burnsztejn, Leszek Walczyk, and myself) a monument of Jan Karski, located in the center of the city. A year later Kielce hosted the Ninth National Day of Judaism which is celebrated in only two other local churches: Italian and Austrian. The Jan Karski Association was the initiator and organizer of the event. Members of the Polish Council of Christians and Jews came to Kielce, where they met with school youth, participated in joint prayer sessions, scientific meetings, and concerts. Michael Schudrich, the Chief Rabbi of Poland, addressed the people of Kielce and the media, “We can get to know each other and be open. Because history is not only all that is good, but also what is atrocious. We say how it was. We do not forget but we also say: not everything was bad. This is a chance. It is important that we are saying this in Kielce. After all the history of Kielce is not only this terrible hour from 60 years ago.”

The Jan Karski Association also came up with the initiative to place a plaque on the building on Planty street with the expiation prayer written by John Paul II which the Holy Father put in the crack of the Western Wall in Jerusalem. The celebration was attended by Bishop of Kielce, Prof. father Kazimierz Ryczan. When unveiling the plaque, Prof. Władysław Bartoszewski, an honorary citizen of Israel and a Righteous Among Nations, said, “It must be clearly said: those who live in Kielce today bear no responsibility for what happened here in July 1946. This city is absolutely different from the one 60 years ago. Kielce, which has become a sad symbol, is today an example for others. This is the first Polish city which began to speak about truth after the war, a city which has found a way out of lies and falsehood. It was here, in 1996, that truth about the pogrom was told. The words of the prayer of John Paul II, engraved in the plaque on the wall of the building at Planty, is a sign that the seed of

the Pope's thought has fallen on fertile soil – here in Kielce. The citizens of Kielce can walk with their heads up high as they have shown how to cope with the difficult problems of history.”

The same year, an official celebration of the 60th anniversary of the pogrom was held. A (somewhat controversial) monument by the American artist, Jack Sal, “White Wash II”, was unveiled. Apart from the many distinguished guests from Poland and abroad, the event was also attended by many citizens of Kielce. The festivities, organized by the Jan Karski Association with a huge support and engagement of the Mayor of Kielce, Wojciech Lubawski, included a fantastic concert of the greatest Jewish cantors at the local amphitheatre.

In 2007, in the year of the 65th anniversary of the liquidation of the Kielce Ghetto and genocide of over 20,000 people of its inhabitants, the Association founded a “Menora” monument by Marek Cecała, a world renowned ceramist, a native of Kielce and survivor of the Holocaust and pogrom. The celebration reminded

the people of the town that there was a ghetto in Kielce and that the Holocaust of the Jewish nation took place also on these territories.

Kielce has become a town which is free and open, free from hatred and open to others. For a very long time there have been no chauvinistic incidents, no anti-Semitic graffiti on city walls. There are many people and institutions who are involved in different pro-reconciliation and pro-dialogue activities on a daily basis – meetings, discussions, performances, books – all without pomp and circumstance. And even if we do not always think along the same lines, and for many the subject of the past is difficult, there is more that unites us than divides us.

And there is always the common love for the place. In 2006 minister Ewa Juńczyk-Ziomecka, representing the Chancellery of the President of the Republic of Poland, wrote in a letter to Mayor Wojciech Lubawski and me, chairman of the Association: “I deeply appreciate the involvement, work, and respect shown to both victims and the present citizens of Kielce. (...) the efforts undertaken by the city and the association can serve as an example for all those who want to face the past in the spirit of reconciliation, striving for historical truth. (...) positive effects are already visible. The celebration was met with gratefulness of different communities in Poland, Israel, and the United States. I have received many such signals.”

We have not forgotten. And we shall remember.