

Essays Commemorating Szmul Zygielbojm

Edited by

Michael Fleming



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The Polish University Abroad, London

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Notes on Contributors

Michael Fleming is a professor of history and vice-director of the Institute of European Culture at The Polish University Abroad, London. His recent publications include *Auschwitz, the Allies and Censorship of the Holocaust* (2014); *Communism, Nationalism and Ethnicity in Poland, 1944-1950* (2010).

Wojtek Rappak was born in Gdańsk and studied philosophy and history in Canada, Warsaw, Paris and London. He has a doctorate from the University of London for research into the foundations of logic and the early philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. He is a Reader in history in the Institute of European Culture at The Polish University Abroad in London and heads the Unit of Contemporary British Culture. He is currently completing a post-doctoral history research project at University College London on Jan Karski.

David Rosenberg was born in London in 1958. His grandparents came to the East End as Jewish immigrants from the Tsarist Russian Empire in the 1900s. David divides his working time between adult education teaching, training teachers, working on educational and cultural projects, writing, giving talks and guiding people on radical history walks. As a teacher and educationalist he has participated in projects in Uganda, South Africa and India. His writing on history and current affairs has featured on several Channel 4 websites and in many print publications including *The Guardian*, *New Statesman*, *Red Pepper*, *Morning Star* and *Time Out*. He is the author of *Battle for the East End: Jewish Responses to Fascism in the 1930s* (2011) and *Rebel Footprints: A Guide to Uncovering London's Radical History* (2015). He has a longstanding commitment to Yiddish – the mother tongue of many of the East End's Jewish immigrants. David blogs at <https://rebellion602.wordpress.com>

Halina Taborska is the director of the Institute of European Culture at The Polish University Abroad. She joined the university in 2002 as head of the Contemporary British Culture Unit before becoming the university's pro-rector (deputy chancellor) (2007-2011) and later rector (vice-chancellor) (2011 to 2017). Between 1966 and 1998 she was an academic teacher and researcher in London in the fields of aesthetics, the history of art, the history of ideas, and contemporary public art. She

has lectured as a guest speaker or visiting professor at universities in Great Britain, the United States and Poland. Her current research and writing is focused on public monuments commemorating civilian victims of the Second World War and on contemporary public art in European cities. The latter is examined in the wider context of urban planning, new or regenerated architecture, and its impact on city culture and civic open spaces. Her publications include (in English): *Monuments of Fighting Warsaw* (1995), *Current Issues in Public Art* (1998), *Contemporary Public Art and Architecture* (1999); (in Polish): *Współczesna sztuka publiczna. Dzieła i problemy* (1996), *Nowy Londyn – miasto i jego sztuka publiczna* (2004), *Miasto, które nie zginęło: Ludność Cywilna Warszawy 1939-1945 i pomniki jej poświęcone* (2014).

Mieczysława Wazacz trained as a filmmaker at the Polish Film School in Lodz. She is the author of critically acclaimed collections of short stories published in her native Poland and in London. Wazacz is also a playwright, scriptwriter and filmmaker. She has worked for Polish films and television before settling in the UK. Her television play *Russian Roulette* about the writer Fyodor Dostoevsky was produced by ITV and starred Freddie Jones. Her plays *Marathon* and *The Flower of the War* were performed in London (POSK). She is the author and director of documentary and art films for Polish Television, the most acclaimed of which are: *The Mask and the Crown* (1996), *Zygielbojm* (1997), *The Ultimate Sacrifice* (1998), *The Wall* (2001), *Tola Korian and Her Theatre* (2006), *No Ordinary Countess* (2011).

Introduction

Michael Fleming

Szmul Zygielbojm was a Jewish socialist and a leading figure of the General Jewish Workers' Union – the Bund. Between March 1942 and May 1943 he served as one of two Jewish representatives on the Polish National Council. The Polish National Council was the consultative body of the Polish Government in Exile that was based in London from 1940. Prior to the Second World War Zygielbojm had been a councillor in Warsaw and later in Łódź. Following the German invasion, Zygielbojm was sworn in as a councillor in Warsaw once more. He was among those Warsaw councillors taken hostage by the Germans to ensure that the city complied with German demands. In the first months of the German occupation Zygielbojm protested against German plans to establish a ghetto in Warsaw and was forced to escape Poland. He reached the United States in early 1940 where he stayed until he was asked, in February 1942, by the Polish Government in Exile to join the Polish National Council. Zygielbojm arrived in London in late March 1942.

Zygielbojm tirelessly sought to draw attention to the situation of Jews in German-occupied Poland. In May 1942 a report sent by his Bundist colleagues in Warsaw via Polish intelligence channels arrived in London. It reported that 700,000 Polish Jews had been murdered by the occupying Germans. Zygielbojm took to the airwaves, wrote to leading political figures, spoke at public meetings, published the information from Poland and liaised with other socialists in London in an attempt to elicit a response to aid the perishing. His task was not easy. In addition to facing antisemitic sentiment among some Poles in London and less than fulsome support from Polish ministers, including the Polish Minister of the Interior, Stanisław Mikołajczyk, Zygielbojm had to negotiate a British context in which Jews were marginalised and stereotyped in various ways.

News of atrocities was problematic in the British context. Such news was viewed by some through the lens of First World War propaganda and was doubted. Others, especially in the Foreign Office, sought to downplay the news of German atrocities against Jews due to concerns about the situation in the Middle East (focusing on Jews, it was feared, might alienate some communities) and a commitment to

refer to titular nationals (Poles, French, etc.).¹ There was also concern about how news of atrocities would impact on British morale and a worry that reports of German actions against Jews would accentuate domestic antisemitism and thereby undermine national unity during the crisis of war.² The Foreign Office adopted a position of strategic scepticism towards news of atrocities against Jews, especially during the summer of 1942. This practice undermined Zygielbojm's attempts to elicit an adequate response. In addition, ongoing conflicts within the European Left in Britain limited Zygielbojm's efficacy.

Although news of the mass killing of Polish Jews was highlighted at a British Ministry of Information conference on 9 July 1942 and information about Chełmno, Sobibór and Bełżec had been published in the organ of the Polish Government in Exile *The Polish Fortnight Review* that same month, it was not until December 1942, following the arrival of further information from Poland (some of which was carried by Jan Karski to Paris), that the Allies issued a declaration condemning Germany's 'bestial policy of cold-blooded extermination'.³ Over the subsequent months, further news about German atrocities against Jews, including the slaughter taking place at Auschwitz, arrived in London via Polish intelligence (i.e. from the Polish Underground State) and other sources. This information was occasionally published on the inside pages of British newspapers in addition to receiving coverage in *The Polish Jewish Observer* – a newspaper which published a great deal about the Holocaust as it was taking place.

In April 1943, the last remaining Jews in Warsaw fought the Germans in an uprising that was reported on in London. At the same time, Allied officials met in Bermuda to discuss the issue of (Jewish) refugees. The Bermuda Conference failed to provide solutions to save those facing death as a result of Nazi Germany's genocidal policies. After almost a year of seeking an adequate response from the Allies and the wider public through dialogue, petitions, representations, writings

¹ For instance, Frank Roberts of the Foreign Office saw efforts by Jewish representatives to gain special recognition of Jewish suffering as part of an attempt to gain recognition for a Jewish nationality. National Archives (Kew) (hereafter NA) FO 371/30917 Roberts to Lias (21/8/1942).

² Concern about domestic antisemitism was expressed in parliament. See Hansard, House of Lords Debates 10 September 1942 volume 124 cc344-65 (Debate on Jewish refugees). It was also noted in the Home Intelligence Reports that surveyed domestic opinion during the war. See, for example, NA. INF 292 Home Intelligence report 117, 31 December 1942.

³ Hansard, House of Commons Debates 17 December 1942 volume 385 cc2082-7.

and broadcasts, on the night of 11/12 May 1943 Zygielbojm took his own life in an act that protested against the indifference and lack of action to save Jews.

In letters to the Polish President and Prime Minister, to his brother in South Africa and to his Bundist colleagues, Zygielbojm made clear to everyone that his last act was a political protest. To his colleagues he wrote:

I am going away as protest against the democratic nations and governments not having taken any steps at all to stop the extermination of the Jewish people in Poland...⁴

Zygielbojm's efforts to draw attention to the mass-slaughter of Polish Jews during the Second World War, to elicit a response from the Allies to save those condemned to death by Nazi Germany simply because they were Jews, and his commitment to a world free of chauvinism, are of continuing significance. Zygielbojm's actions highlight that it was possible to understand German policy relating to Jews prior to December 1942, that attempts were made to elicit a response to the terrible news through the summer of 1942 and that the barriers to an adequate response were considerable. Zygielbojm's wider political vision also remains relevant. His commitment to social equality and fierce opposition to chauvinism can help orientate and inspire those who oppose intolerance, racism and antisemitism.

Overview

This book brings together papers that were presented at a workshop in May 2018 to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of Szmul Zygielbojm's protest suicide. The workshop was organised at The Polish University Abroad within the framework of an ongoing seminar series on twentieth century Polish history.⁵ The volume opens with a message from Zygielbojm's grandsons, Dr Arthur I. Zygielbaum and Paul S. Zygielbaum, to participants of the workshop (see p. 11), in which they highlight the continuing relevance of their grandfather's sacrifice.

⁴ The full text is available at http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Zygielbojm_Shmuel_Mordkhe

⁵ See <https://puno.edu.pl/xx-polish-history-seminar/>

David Rosenberg's article, charting the struggle to memorialise Zygielbojm in London, follows.⁶ Thanks to the efforts of David and his colleagues, a plaque commemorating Zygielbojm was unveiled in 1996 in Bayswater, London, close to where Zygielbojm lived between 1942 and 1943. Continuing the theme of memorialisation, Halina Taborska considers how memorials to Zygielbojm were created in Warsaw. The discussion is placed in the wider context of memorialisation in that city, with particular reference to *The Memorial Route to the Struggle and Martyrdom of the Jews 1940-1943*.⁷

Mieczysława Wazacz provides a brief summary of how her important film on Zygielbojm, *Mur* (The Wall), evolved through various versions, and notes the sources that she used. The film offers an account of Zygielbojm's life and struggle, and makes his story accessible to a range of different groups. The film is now available online.⁸

The final two articles seek to shed additional light on Zygielbojm's activities and interactions in London during 1942 and 1943. Wojtek Rappak focuses attention on Zygielbojm's meeting with the Polish emissary Jan Karski. Karski had met Jewish representatives in Warsaw in the summer of 1942 and delivered their message directly to Zygielbojm on 2 December 1942. Rappak analyses the impact of the 2 December meeting on both Zygielbojm and Karski. The subsequent article by Michael Fleming considers Zygielbojm's relationship with the British Labour Party, and the European Left in London more broadly, and highlights some of the difficulties that Zygielbojm faced in disseminating the news from Poland and eliciting an appropriate response.

⁶ David Rosenberg's article was first published online in May 2018 See <https://rebellion602.wordpress.com/2018/05/10/preserving-the-memory-of-a-martyr/>

⁷ This contribution is an abridged version of a Polish language article. The unabridged article (in Polish) can be found in *Zeszyty Naukowe PUNO* (2018), 6.

⁸ See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r0pla3sr2HA&feature=em-share_video_user

Message to the PUNO seminar

Dr Arthur I. Zygielbaum and Paul S. Zygielbaum

As the only surviving descendents of Szmul 'Artur' Zygielbojm, we applaud the Polish University Abroad on its presentation of this workshop about the life, death and significance of our grandfather, and we thank the organizers, speakers and participants. Especially in these days of resurgent anti-Semitism in many countries, it is incumbent on all of us to bear witness to the horrible events of the past. It is also incumbent on all of us to stand for the oppressed everywhere. That is the true legacy of our grandfather's sacrifice. We wish you an excellent meeting.

The Struggle to Memorialise Zygielbojm in London¹

David Rosenberg

In April 1991 I was chairing a meeting organised by the Jewish Socialists' Group in London, to commemorate the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Our speaker was one of our older members, Majer Bogdanski, born in Piotrkow, Poland in 1912. We had asked Majer to speak specifically about his comrade Szmul Zygielbojm. Majer recounted Zygielbojm's life up to his escape from Poland with a mission to tell the world what was happening under Nazi occupation. He then described Zygielbojm's crucial work in London between 1942 and 1943 when he served on the Polish National Council in Exile, how Zygielbojm bombarded political leaders, diplomats and the press with first-hand information from the ghettos collected through underground resistance networks, until his final courageous act of suicide as political protest, prompted by two simultaneous events: the failure of American and British politicians and diplomats to offer any plan for rescue and refuge of Jews being slaughtered in Poland, and the news that the incredible Warsaw Ghetto Uprising had finally been extinguished.

Majer came to Britain as a refugee in 1946 and lived in East London till he died in 2005. He and Zygielbojm had been active in the same left wing organisation – the General Jewish Workers' Union – known as the Bund – in Poland. In Lodz, in the late 1930s, Majer saw Zygielbojm almost every day.

In 1991, ours was the only Jewish group in Britain that identified itself closely with the Bund's political philosophy. Today, as both the left of the Jewish community and further right wing are both growing, there are other Jewish groups such as Jewish Voice for Labour and a younger group, Jewdas, who openly embrace some key Bundist ideas.

The Bund was secular, socialist, committed to Yiddish culture, and to full equality for minorities. It was thoroughly anti-nationalist – especially territorial nationalism – so it was a strong opponent of Zionism. The Bund believed that Jews should strive for equal rights in the lands where they lived. Its slogan in Yiddish was: '*Dortn vu mir leben, dort is undzer land*' – There, where we live, that is our country.

In the 1980s/90s, the JSG held annual meetings to commemorate the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, and Majer often spoke. We ourselves only

¹ This essay was first published online in May 2018.

See <https://rebellion602.wordpress.com/2018/05/10/preserving-the-memory-of-a-martyr/>

become familiar with the details of Zygielbojm's story in the early 1980s. We wrote about him in the second issue of our magazine, *Jewish Socialist*, in 1985, to inform a wider Jewish and non-Jewish public.



II. 1: Majer Bogdanski (Photo: David Rosenberg)

The audience at our meeting in 1991 was captivated not only by Zygeilbojm's dramatic story, but also by the authenticity of Majer's delivery as someone who had personal recollections of Zygielbojm. As the meeting formally closed and people stood chatting, Majer asked me: 'Should there not be some kind of memorial to Zygielbojm in London?' I said, 'Of course there should, and I will do what I can to make it happen.' Some time later, I was speaking with another Bundist, Esther Brunstein, who used to visit Zygielbojm's home in Lodz as a child – her best friend at school was one of Zygielbojm's children. Esther told me that a visiting Canadian professor of Yiddish had asked her recently whether there was any memorial for Zygielbojm here. (There is a prominent memorial for Zygielbojm in a park in Montreal.)

How odd it is that a person who had committed such a dramatic act of self-sacrifice in London, as a political protest during the Holocaust, had not already been commemorated here, and remained barely known even within Britain's Jewish community. But that reflects the dominant narratives within that community that were established by the early 1950s.

Zionism had been a small minority opinion within Jewish communities everywhere before the Second World War and found more traction among the middle class when many Jews were working class. By the mid-1950s the social class formation of Jews was definitely changing, making them more amenable to it, but the two biggest factors were the Holocaust, which wiped out so many of the people who believed in diaspora, and also the terrible situation after the war, where hundreds of thousands of Holocaust survivors languished in DP camps with no country wanting to take them. Zionists who organised within DP camps, persuading people of the possibilities of reaching Palestine, won sympathy for their position among Jews in Britain and elsewhere. In Zygielbojm's last letter to his brother Fayvl in April 1943, he excoriated Zionists for 'exploiting the Jewish tragedy for their political ends', paraphrasing their spokespersons: 'Another 100,000 Jews murdered. Give more money for Palestine.'



II. 2: DP Camp Germany 1947 (Photo: Author's archive)

Within Jewish youth and educational organisations here, the Zionist narrative about the precariousness of diaspora, of redemption and security through Israel, became hegemonic. Their telling of the Warsaw Ghetto resistance – in which Bundist and communist anti-Zionists and non-Zionists fought alongside left-wing Zionists in a united Jewish fighting organisation – elevated the role of Zionist fighters and conveniently airbrushed out the communists and Bundists, and Zygielbojm.

Very few Holocaust survivors were allowed to settle in Britain compared with other western European countries or the US and Canada, but there was a group of around 25 Bundists and children of Bundists in London shortly after the war. They lived mainly within its poorer quarter – the East End. Many joined the Labour Party, and were active in local Yiddish cultural groups.



Il. 3: Bundists in London around 1950: Front Row (from left) Perec Zylberberg, Majer Bogdanski, Esther Brunstein. Just behind Majer, Leon Kuczynski (Photo: Author's archive)

There was no Holocaust memorial in London at all until 1983. The Holocaust Education Trust was founded in 1988 and their focus was on education packs, exhibitions, work with schools rather than physical memorials. The Holocaust Galleries in the Imperial War Museum did not open until 2000. The statues at Liverpool Street station to mark the *kindertransport* were unveiled in 2006, so when we began contemplating a public memorial for Zygielbojm in 1991 this was quite novel.

How did we start? With a meeting of the Bundist survivors in London, their spouses, and a few people in the Jewish Socialists' Group especially interested in Bundist history.

In 1991, there were four surviving Bundists in London: Majer Bogdanski, Leon Kuczynski – a strong, thick set man – in Yiddish a *shtarker* – who had been very active in the Bund's self-defence group in 1930s Warsaw, Wlodka Blit-Robertson – whose father was Lucien Blit, a well known Bundist in Warsaw. Wlodka's mother was a left-wing Zionist. Wlodka and her twin sister were smuggled out of the Warsaw ghetto a few weeks before the uprising and hidden by a Catholic family. Wlodka's father had already escaped to Russia and later to London, her mother and other family members were killed by the Nazis. And, finally, Esther Brunstein, a survivor of Auschwitz and Belsen, who came from a Bundist family in Lodz. Her brother, Perec Zylberberg, who lived in Montreal and was active with Bundists there, would join us if we met when he was visiting. We usually met in Esther's house. Of those Bundists, only Wlodka is still alive today.

At our first meeting we named ourselves the 'Szmul Zygielbojm Memorial Committee', and agreed that the most appropriate and realisable form for a permanent memorial would be a plaque preferably on the building in which Zygielbojm lived. It ended up in a more prominent position. We wanted something less ephemeral than a conference, more public than an artefact locked in a museum, something that could raise awareness and encourage people to reflect on its relevance today.

I sought advice from Dan Jones, part of a group that successfully campaigned for a plaque commemorating the Battle of Cable Street – a seminal anti-fascist event of the 1930s. On his advice we sought endorsements for our project – from historians, academics, writers, rabbis, cultural figures and MPs. We wrote to around 80 people, and got replies from 40-50, mainly very enthusiastic. A tiny number were wary of commemorating a Bundist. Despite several attempts, we got no reply from Greville Janner, former president of the Board of Deputies, involved in several Holocaust-related initiatives, but also a staunch Zionist.

Where did Zygielbojm live? In Porchester Square, Paddington. In 1991 this was a Conservative flagship council, unsympathetic to socialists and trade unionists, and not keen on immigrants and refugees. It was this council we had to approach to ask: 'Would you please

commemorate a Polish, Jewish refugee who was a trade unionist, socialist and anti-fascist activist!

My initial letter to the relevant council officers, copied to the leaders of the major political parties on the council, described Zygielbojm's life and death, explained that a monument had recently been unveiled in Warsaw on the 50th anniversary of the Ghetto uprising, and added 'yet there is no memorial to Zygielbojm in London where he carried out his most important work.' We listed some supporters: the historians David Cesarani and Bill Fishman; the Polish Jewish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman; three rabbis; two MPs, Barbara Roche from Labour and Alex Carlile from the Liberal Democrats. Carlile had been born in 1948 to post-war Polish Jewish immigrants; Colin Shindler, editor of the Jewish Quarterly magazine (a respected cultural journal); and Esther Brunstein, a survivor of the Lodz Ghetto and Auschwitz.



Il. 4: Porchester Square (Photo: David Rosenberg)

We received encouraging letters back and the matter was passed to Westminster plaques scheme coordinator Gillian Dawson, who was extremely helpful. Within a relatively short time we had agreement in principle for the plaque and details of the likely costings. At this stage the exact wording wasn't required but there was a very interesting discussion on the committee, with some urging caution to ensure the council's planning committee would rubber stamp it, others wanting it

to be as politically explicit as possible within a limit of 28 words. The maximalists won. Our final wording:

Jewish Workers' Bund leader. Representative to the Polish Parliament in Exile... Took his life in protest at the World's indifference to Nazi extermination of the Jews

The council agreed it and we began fundraising to cover the costs of the plaque, approximately £375, and our ongoing administrative costs.

We updated the surviving organisation of the Bund on our progress. After 1945 the remnants of the Bund – many of whom were Holocaust survivors – were scattered in several countries but affiliated with a World Bund Coordinating Committee in New York, which produced a monthly Yiddish journal – *Undzer Tsayt* (Our Times). The Jewish Socialists' Group had contact with the Bund from the mid-1980s. They were overjoyed about our initiative and put us in touch with the remnant of Zygielbojm's family. When he committed suicide, Zygielbojm believed all his immediate family had been wiped out, apart from any who got out before the war. His brother Fayvl got to South Africa. But one of Zygielbojm's children, Joseph, survived.



II. 5: Joseph and Adele Zygielbojm (Photo: Author's archive)

A Red Army partisan during the war, he returned to Poland, married Adele, who had survived a Nazi concentration camp and several slave labour camps, and then they came to America. Joseph was excited about our plans and looked forward eagerly to coming to England for the unveiling. Then we hit problems.

The plaques officer informed us that the building Szmul Zygielbojm lived in was now occupied by five private renters. We required consent from all five households. We feared encountering one antisemite who would refuse. Ironically, the one refusal was from a Jew – a Holocaust survivor who feared that the plaque would attract fascist vandals. We detailed the historian David Cesarani to approach him but he couldn't persuade him. We had to look elsewhere.

Behind the flats there is a very nice garden, part of it a children's playground. The council investigated but told us that the garden could not be used for any 'racial, religious, political or memorial' purposes.



II. 6: Public Library on Porchester Road (Photo: David Rosenberg)

At the end of the terrace, Porchester Square meets Porchester Road; just opposite there was a beautiful library building with a white façade. A plaque would stand out prominently. The library were keen, and later we held further Zygielbojm memorial events there, but council officers informed us that a library plaque could only celebrate an author. Zygielbojm was a factory worker at 10 years old, making boxes, before being apprenticed as a glovemaker. In the 1930s he was a drama

critic for the Bund's newspaper, and wrote several articles, but he was not a recognised as an 'author'.

Meanwhile we developed further contacts. Zygielbojm's surviving family shared his strong identification with Poland, and put us in touch with Jan Karski. They encouraged us to approach Polish bodies here. We contacted the Polish Embassy, the Polish Cultural institute, and some elderly Polish socialists here in Britain, including Lidia Ciolkosz. We also had contact with one of the founders of the new Polish Socialist Party, post-1989, Piotr Ikonowicz, whom the Jewish Socialists' Group had already encountered when he visited London to meet socialists here in the early 1990s. He expressed warm support for our initiative.

In May 1994, a year from our first contact with the council, we received the welcome news that the side-wall at the end of the terrace opposite the library was in full council ownership. The planning committee was unlikely to object to the plaque being mounted there. So by chance we ended up with a much more prominent position. But there would be a delay. The terrace was due for refurbishment towards the end of the year. If we put the plaque up in the autumn it would soon be covered with scaffolding and sheeting for several months. We reluctantly accepted this delay. Our new target date was May 1995. However, it transpired that the refurbishment works were more extensive and would take much longer. So we had to push the date back a further year until May 1996.

During this delay we received the saddest news from Adele Zygielbojm that her husband Joseph had died. She assured us though that she and other family members would come for the unveiling. Indeed, in those three years it took from our initial approach to the unveiling itself, Zygielbojm's brother Fayvl died in Israel, as had two members of our committee who were husbands and wives of Bundists.

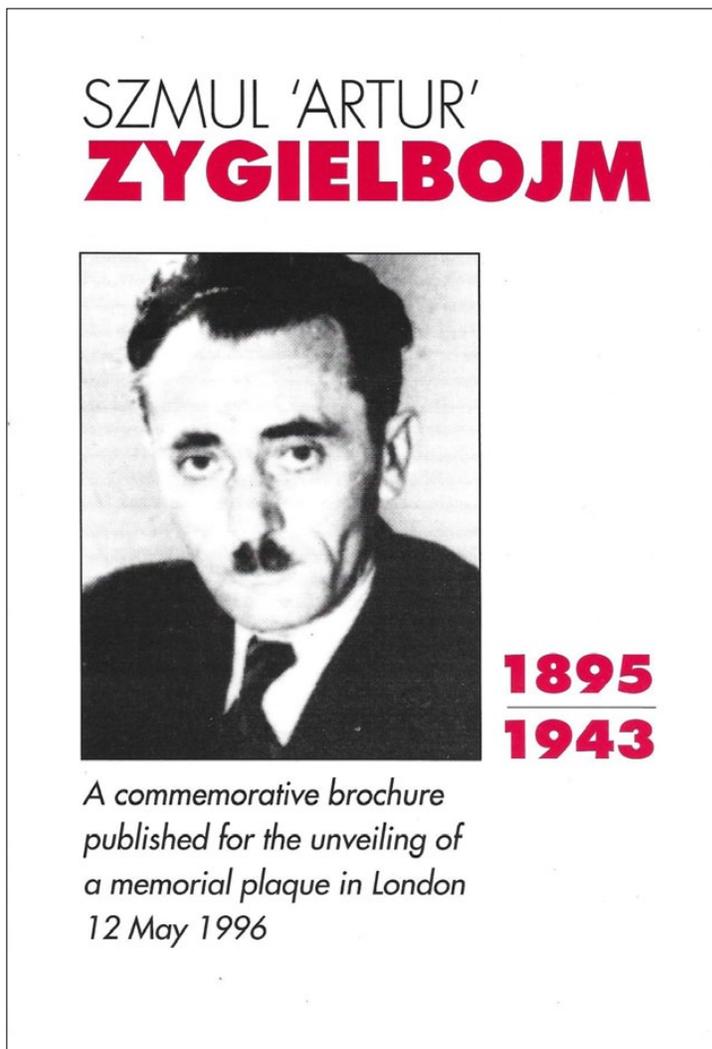
Fast forward to Sunday 12 May 1996, a beautiful sunny day, 53 years after Zygielbojm was pronounced dead, when the plaque was finally unveiled. We hoped that 100 people would attend. Nearly 200 were present. We gave out a 4-page memorial brochure we produced through donations from the Bund, the 45 Aid Society (a London-based society of Holocaust survivors), and several individuals. The brochure contained a brief biography of Zygielbojm, newspaper cuttings reporting his suicide from 1943, a quote from Jan Karski from an article he had sent us, and Zygielbojm's suicide letter address to President Raczkiewicz of the Polish Government in Exile.

We gathered, initially, on the opposite side of the road to the plaque, where the Lord Mayor of Westminster officially welcomed us. I spoke of Zygielbojm's life and death, his enduring messages urging practical international solidarity for the oppressed, and reflected on why no memorial for Zygielbojm in London existed. Zygielbojm, I suggested, cast 'an uncomfortable shadow over how Britain's military objectives were defined and prioritised. For the Allies it was a costly victory, for the Jews of Europe it was an irrecoverable loss.' What about Jewish leaders' lack of interest? I suggested that: 'Zygielbojm, and the philosophy of the movement he represented, did not fit with Anglo-Jewry's post war self-image and values. Too often in our community, material success, high academic achievement, support for Israel, are more prized than contributions to humanity as a whole.'

Esther Brunstein, one of the Bundists on the Zygielbojm committee, read Zygielbojm's suicide letter in Yiddish, and Julia Bard of the Jewish Socialists' Group read it in English. We crossed over and gathered under the plaque. Adele Zygielbojm and the Polish Ambassador, Ryszard Stemplowski, pulled the curtain rope to unveil the plaque. We invited people to join us at the Yaa Asantewaa African-Caribbean community centre, a mile away, for a reception and celebration of Zygielbojm's life.



Il. 7: Reception following the unveiling of the plaque (Photo: Author's archive)



II. 8: Cover of commemorative brochure (Author's archive)

An all-women klezmer band, Royte Klezmoyres (Red Musicians) greeted guests with Yiddish tunes. There were speeches. Perec Zylberberg, who had flown in from Canada, spoke on behalf of the Bund about Zygielbojm's importance to their movement; Polish Ambassador Ryszard Stempowski paid tribute to Zygielbojm's courage and recalled the Bund's significant role in Polish political life. Major Bogdanski offered personal memories of how Zygielbojm interacted

with Bundists in Lodz. David Cesarani described Zygielbojm's extraordinary efforts to spread first-hand information and demand action during the Holocaust. Adele Zygielbaum and her two sons Arthur and Paul spoke of the legacy of ideas and values that he left.

'By his death', Adele said, 'he wanted to express the importance of every human being's right to live, no matter who they are or what their beliefs.'

Arthur Zygielbaum said his grandfather's message was still current. 'People are still being exterminated today because of an accident of birth. Because they are identified with one ethnic group or another. His death is not resolved. His message is still unanswered. His cry is not silent.'

Arthur's brother Paul affirmed that 'Szmul Artur Zygielbojm's labour and sacrifice were not for the Jews alone... amid his anguished pleas for the salvation of a people, he wrote of his belief that a better world would come... a world of freedom, justice and peace.'

Messages of support were read from absentees, including Jan Karski who wrote: 'Much as I would like to come I cannot. I am over 82 years old and not strong anymore.' He sent an article he had published and invited us to quote from it. We chose a paragraph where Karski says: 'Taking one's own life violates the Judaic-Christian tradition but a distinction should be made,' between someone 'who takes his life because he cannot handle any longer his personal misfortune, or to escape from the responsibility of his acts', and on the other hand, Zygielbojm, who 'took his life out of compassion for the suffering of his people hoping that his death will help or save those he loved.'

After refreshments we ended with a cultural programme of poems and Yiddish songs including the partisan song, traditionally sung at commemorations of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, and *di Shvue* – the hymn of the Bund.

For several years afterwards we gathered by the plaque on the nearest Sunday to Zygielbojm's *yortstayt* (death anniversary) for a ceremony with speeches and songs, and there would always be a presence from the Polish Embassy or Polish Cultural Institute.

On the 70th anniversary of Zygielbojm's death in 2013 we held a big meeting and cultural event with music and poetry, in central London, at which Wlodka Blit Robertson spoke about her experiences in the Warsaw Ghetto and when she was hidden afterwards, Esther

Brunstein spoke of her childhood recollections in Zygielbojm's home and Mr Szaniawski spoke on behalf of the Polish Embassy.

We hope that our efforts to mount the plaque, and the consciousness we raised about it, have contributed to telling the story of an extraordinary person and the values both he and the Bund embodied.



Il. 9: Plaque commemorating Szmul Zygielbojm, Westminster (Photo: Author's archive)

Illustrations

- 1: Majer Bogdanski (Photo: David Rosenberg).
- 2: DP Camp Germany 1947 (Photo: Author's archive).
- 3: Bundists in London around 1950: Front Row (from left) Perec Zylberberg, Majer Bogdanski, Esther Brunstein. Just behind Majer, Leon Kuczynski. (Photo: Author's archive).
- 4: Porchester Square (Photo: David Rosenberg).
- 5: Joseph and Adele Zygielbojm (Photo: Author's archive).
- 6: Public Library on Porchester Road (Photo: David Rosenberg).

7: Reception following the unveiling of the plaque (Photo: Author's archive).

8: Cover of commemorative brochure (Author's archive).

9: Plaque commemorating Szmul Zygielbojm, Westminster (Photo: Author's archive).

‘I cannot be silent, and I cannot live’ – The Szmul Zygielbojm Warsaw Monument on the Memorial Route to the Struggle and Martyrdom of the Jews 1940-1943

Halina Taborska¹

The urban landscape of Warsaw stands out among the capitals of Europe by its large number and diversity of memorial works dedicated to the victims of World War II. Many of them honour the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, and its 63 days of bloody struggle with the occupying German forces – they commemorate the fighters and the ruthlessly slaughtered civilian population. There is also in the city another commemorative trail, which is indivisibly linked to Warsaw’s wartime history. Called The Memorial Route to the Struggle and Martyrdom of the Jews 1940-1943, it runs from the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes (unveiled on 18 April 1948, for the fifth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising) – along Zamenhof, Dubois and Stawki streets – and ends at the Umschlagplatz Wall Monument (unveiled on 19 April 1988, for the 45th anniversary of the Uprising).



II. 1: Monument to the Ghetto Heroes (Photo: Halina Taborska)

¹ For an extended version of this article in Polish see *Zeszyty Naukowe PUNO* 6 (2018) (forthcoming).

The Monument to the Ghetto Heroes was preceded by a less known work of homage to the ghetto fighters. The decision to build it was taken in the autumn of 1944 by the Provisional Central Committee of Polish Jews, active in Lublin (October 1944-February 1945).

On 19th April 1946, on a small patch of land cleared of rubble, the first monument to the Uprising was unveiled. Made of red sandstone, symbolizing blood, it was similar in form to the round openings leading to the underground bunkers and sewers of the Ghetto. Its top was slightly tilted towards the no longer existing gate of the Ghetto through which German tanks charged at the outbreak of the Uprising. It carried a text saying: ‘In memory of those who died in unparalleled struggle for the dignity and freedom of the Jewish nation, for a free Poland, for the liberation of Man’.²



II. 2: The first monument dedicated to the ghetto fighters (Photo: Halina Taborska)

² H. Taborska, *Monuments of Fighting Warsaw*, London 1955, p. 6.

Placed by it is a circular plaque with a bronze palm leaf symbolising martyrdom, and a single Hebrew letter Beit written onto a Torah scroll – a reference to the first letter of the Old Testament, which opens with the word *Bereishit* – ‘At the beginning...’. It is the earliest of the Jewish Warsaw monuments, erected amidst the ruins of the ghetto. In the new century it acquired a new neighbour – an impressive modern building, the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, which has as its sculptural counterpoint the Monument of the Ghetto Heroes. The Memorial Route running from here co-creates a physical and symbolic sphere of the lost Jewish Warsaw.



II. 3: The Umschlagplatz Wall Monument – The memorial route terminates here (Photo: Halina Taborska)



II. 4: Umschlagplatz, common first names in Hebrew, Yiddish and Polish of Umschlagplatz victims (Photo: Halina Taborska)



Il. 5: Umschlagplatz – a black slab with a bas-relief of a destroyed forest symbolising the mass destruction of the Jewish people (Photo: Halina Taborska)

The Memorial Route

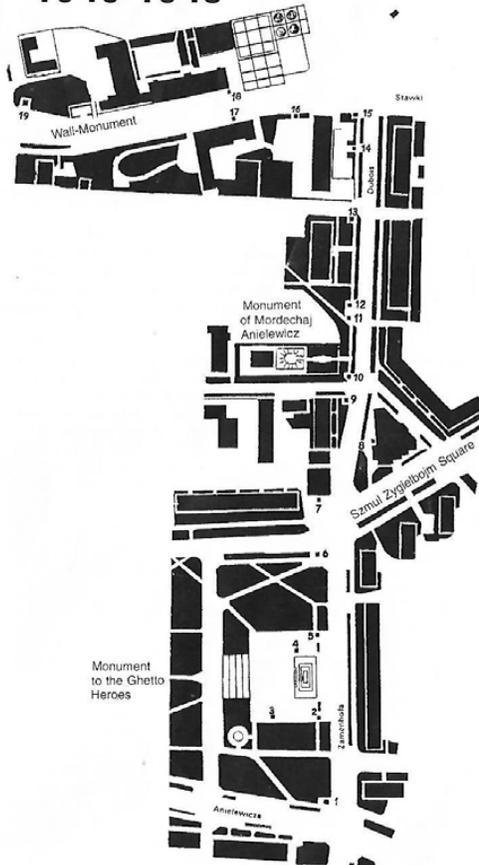
The Route designed by Zbigniew Gąsior, Stanisław Jankowski and Marek Moderau is punctuated by 19 commemorative stones, made from dark grey Polish syenite. The stones at the beginning and at the end of the Route carry concise information in Polish and Hebrew:

In 1940 the Germans formed in Warsaw the so-called Jewish Residential District – the Ghetto, enclosing within its walls four hundred and fifty thousand Jews whom they murdered between the years 1940 and 1943.

The name of the Route is noted on the side walls of all blocks, again in two languages: on the left side in Polish, and on the right – in Hebrew. On the front walls there are only dates: 1940-1943. On the top, smoothly polished black plaques in the shape of a *matzeva*, with the

simplified drawing of a menorah crowning it, carry brief, chilling descriptions in Hebrew and Polish of the activities and circumstances of death of the people to whom the stones are dedicated.

THE MEMORIAL ROUTE TO THE STRUGGLE AND MARTYRDOM OF THE JEWS 1940-1943



II. 6: The Memorial Route (Source: Memorial Route leaflet, Umschlagplatz Memorial Committee (1988))



Il. 7: A block on the Memorial Route (Photo: Halina Taborska)

Seven of the blocks are devoted to the ghetto fighters – among them are: Mordechai Anielewicz (1919-1943), young leader of the Uprising, who ‘Together with his staff committed suicide when their bunker was surrounded by the Germans on May 8, 1943.’; Arie Wilner, ‘Jurek’ (1917-1943), liaison-officer between the Jewish Fighting Organization and the Home Army (AK), who died with him in the bunker; Meir Majerowicz, ‘Marek’ (1911-1943), ‘group commander of the Jewish Fighting Organization, perished in the fighting.’ They were posthumously awarded: Mordechai Anielewicz – the Grunwald Cross, Third Class; Arie Wilner – the Virtuti Military Cross, Fifth Class; Meir Majerowicz – the Cross of Valour. Frumka Płotnicka (1914-1943), the only woman to be honoured on the Route, ‘Liaison – officer of the Jewish fighting Organization in Poland. Co-organizer of self-defence in the ghettos of Warsaw, Sosnowiec and Będzin. Killed fighting in self-defence in a bunker in Będzin’, received the Grunwald Cross third class.



Il. 8: Figures of the ghetto fighters (Photo: Halina Taborska)

Five stones are dedicated to civilian victims. Near the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes stands the stone for Emanuel Ringelblum (1900-1944), ‘social activist, founder of the underground Ghetto Archives. From the summer of 1943 he was hidden by Poles together with whom he was shot in the Pawiak Prison on 10 March 1944.’ The Archive materials gathered by Ringelblum and a group of his collaborators in the years 1940-1943 and hidden in three different locations were dug out of the ghetto ruins after the war, and constitute a unique source of knowledge about wartime life, and the fate of Jews in Poland.³ Priceless

³ The website of the Jewish Historical Archive in Warsaw records that the archive ‘was created in November of 1940 at the initiative of historian Dr. Emanuel Ringelblum and with the involvement of the Oneg Shabbat (Joy of the Sabbath – because of their Saturday meetings) organization created by him. The group numbered several people and undertook the task of gathering and developing documentation – broadly defined – on the fates of Jews under the German occupation. The activity of the Oneg Shabbat was completely secret. /.../ Emanuel Ringelblum and most of the Archive’s creators did not live to see the end of the war. Those who survived made the effort to find the archives. In September 1946, the first part of the Archive was unearthed, the second part was come upon by chance in December 1950. Until today, the third part of the Archive, which was to be hidden on 19 April 1943, the night before the outbreak of the uprising in the ghetto, in the brushmaking workshop near 34 Świętojerska St. (today, the Chinese embassy grounds), was not found. The majority of the documents, despite having rested in the

for the history of the Jews, and the memory of the Holocaust, the Archive was in 1992 placed on the UNESCO list, which registers the ‘most important documents preserved by mankind’.

The extermination of hundreds of thousands of Jewish families was most movingly mourned by Icchak Kacnelson (1886-1944), who is presented on The Route as:

Poet, author of ‘Songs about the murdered Jewish nation’. Wrote in Hebrew and in Yiddish. Perished in Auschwitz.

Kacnelson’s poem, composed of 15 songs, written between 3 October 1943 and 18 February 1944, was hidden by him in three glass bottles, and recovered in September 1944 from the grounds of the Vitell camp in France after its liberation by the allied forces.⁴ ‘The Songs’, translated into many languages, form a great lamentation, a poem of dramatic questions and despair:

Where are you my dead ones / I search for you in rubbish and clay,
/ and in every fistful of ashes. / Where did I lose you? / ... I want
a call for help, let the despair of man cry! Murdered Jewish nation,
let them hear you.

earth for a few years, were preserved in their entirety. The materials collected usually do not have counterparts in other archival units in the world. They are often the last testimonies of life, suffering and death of both individuals and entire communities of cities and towns scattered throughout the country. They constitute an invaluable source for Holocaust study.’ Available at www.jhi.pl/en/ringelblum-archive/the-underground-archive

⁴ The website of the Holocaust Education and Research Team (2012) states that ‘on 3 October 1943, two days after Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, Katzenelson started writing his most famous work *Dos Lid funem Oysgehartetn Yidishn Folk* (The Song of the Murdered Jewish People). On 18 January 1944 he completed his epic work and he then concentrated on making corrections and copies. /.../ In the spring of 1944 shortly after Katzenelson had completed his epic, Ruth Adler, a German Jew from Dresden who had a British Palestinian passport, received permission to leave the country in an exchange for German Prisoners of War. In the leather handle of her suitcase, she smuggled out one of the two copies out [sic] of the Vittel Camp and went to Israel ./.../ The other copy was buried by Katzenelson with the help of fellow internee, Miriam Novitch – in three sealed glass bottles under a tree in the Vittel Camp. After the camps [sic] liberation Miriam Novitch retrieved the manuscript as well as other writings by Katzenelson’.

Available at <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/survivor/katzenelson.html>

In London, close to the place where he died, Zygielbojm is remembered on a round green plaque with the words: ‘Jewish Workers’ Bund Leader. Representative to the Polish parliament-in-exile. Szmul ‘Artur’ Zygielbojm, 1895-1943, took his life in protest at the world’s indifference to Nazi extermination of the Jews. Lived nearby 1942-1943.’ City of Westminster Szmul Zygielbojm Memorial Committee.

Szmul ‘Artur’ Zygielbojm did not take part in any battles – the only weapon he fought with was the word – spoken and written. It served the Jewish people throughout his whole adult life, and at its end it was used in his desperate efforts to save the remnants of the Jewish nation from annihilation.

Life and Death

The tragic death of Szmul Zygielbojm was preceded by a difficult and busy life. Born 21 February 1895 in a place called Borowica, he was one of eleven children of Jozef and Hena Pinker. The family was poor; Szmul went to work at a factory at the age of ten, and at fourteen started training as a glove-maker. He was mostly self-educated, he studied diligently and learned fast. From his youth, Jewish people and political issues were of genuine concern to him. He was 17 when he joined the Bund (the Jewish socialist party), and remained its member to the end of his life.⁵ At the age of 29 he became a member of the Central Committee of the party.

⁵ Alina Cała and Gabriela Zalewska (2000) outline the history of the General Jewish Labour Bund of Lithuania, Poland and Russia. The Bund was ‘a political party established in 1897 in Vilnius. Initially, it operated as an underground organisation within the territory of the Russian partition. From 1906 onwards it formed an autonomous section of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, from which it then seceded during World War I. In 1919, its operations became legal in both Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. In 1930, it joined the Labour and Socialist International. The programme of the Bund constituted a Jewish form of social democracy. The Bund considered the Jewish population as a nation living in a diaspora, lacking territory, but with their own culture. The party opposed both the domination of Orthodox Jews, and the Zionist program of emigration and establishing a national state outside Europe. Bund demanded the introduction of cultural autonomy on territories inhabited by the Jewish minority, promoted secular education and regarded Yiddish as the national language. In Poland, the Bund enjoyed a mass following, especially in the former Russian partition (the number of members of the Bund in the 1930s was estimated at 50 thousand). Throughout the entire inter-war period, the party maintained a sizeable representation in the municipal local government, extending its sphere of influence to Jewish community

Due to his organisational skills and rhetorical talent, he was given important functions – he was, among others, the General Secretary of the Jewish Section of the Central Commission of Trade Unions. In 1927 he became a councillor of the Warsaw City Council, and after moving to Łódź in 1936 he also became a member of the City Council of this city.

When war broke out, he returned to Warsaw where he participated in organising the defence of the city, and the Jewish underground defence movement. Briefly imprisoned by the Germans (as a hostage), he escaped from Poland with the support of the Bund, and started a long, strenuous journey across war-torn Europe. He reached Holland, Belgium, then travelled through France, Spain, and Portugal – from Lisbon he departed to the United States, and on 12 September 1940 reached New York. He returned to Europe in 1942, arriving in March in London, where he received a nomination from the President of the Polish Republic Władysław Raczkiewicz to become a member of the National Council of the Polish Republic. The nomination was dated 13 February 1942. In the Council he was a representative of the Bund, and represented the Jewish population of Poland together with Zionist Ignacy Schwartzbart.

From the moment he left Poland up to the time of his death, his life was entirely devoted to informing the world about the fate of Polish Jews, and to ceaseless efforts to persuade allied governments to save the Jewish nation from annihilation. On 13 December 1942, in a dramatic radio broadcast, he appealed to the nations of the world, speaking from a BBC studio:

I am aware that perhaps right now I am a representative of a community of the dead. But even if a small number of my compatriots are still alive, I am calling you in their name to undertake exceptional steps in the face of this exceptional crime to force Hitler's henchmen to stop this massacre.⁶

councils in the 1930s; however, none of its representatives were ever elected to the Polish Sejm'. Available at <https://sztetl.org.pl/en/glossary/bund>

⁶ Quoted in Władysław Bartoszewski and Marek Edelman (2010) *I była dzielnica żydowska w Warszawie: Wybór tekstów*, Warsaw: PWN, pp. 113-14 (English translation Halina Taborska).

On 11 May 1943 Szmul Zygielbojm wrote his last open letter, hoping that his suicide, and final words of protest, would influence world opinion and allied leaders. This did not happen, but the letter became part of history as one of the most moving protestations against the indifference of the world to the extermination of the Jews of Europe.

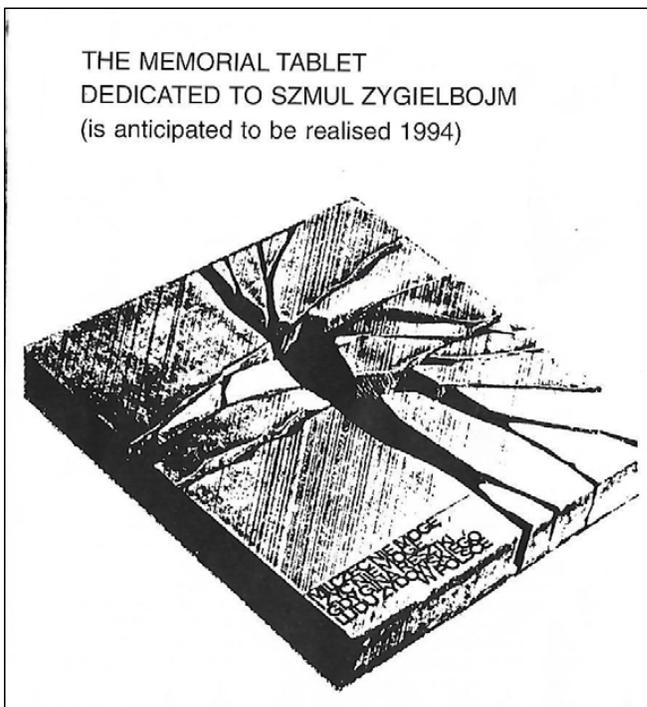
The Zygielbojm Memorial in Warsaw

Zygielbojm joined the heroic Polish Jews whose names are inscribed on Warsaw's commemorative blocks, at the time of the official opening of the Route, which took place on the 45th anniversary of the Ghetto Uprising. Ten years later, for the 55th anniversary of the commencement of the final ghetto liquidation, a two-part monument for Zygielbojm was unveiled on 22 July 1997. Together with the already described Zygielbojm stone, it formed a memorial place situated by a building at 6 Lewartowskiego Street, in the Muranów district, and entered the everyday life of the capital – with its passers-by, parked cars and shop window displays.



Il. 10: Zygielbojm Memorial (Photo: Anna Taborska)

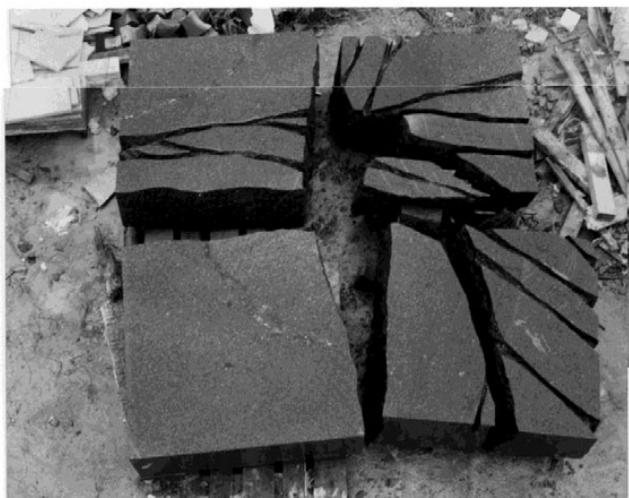
The monument consists of a square stone tablet, placed on the ground, measuring 2x2 metres, made of dark grey Polish Przedborowa syenite, and of a relief measuring 7x4 metres, executed in Swedish black granite, positioned on the wall of the building.⁷ The stone tablet was made first; its model presented in the already mentioned leaflet *The Memorial Route to the Struggle and Martyrdom of the Jews 1940-1943*, and described there as ‘The memorial tablet dedicated to Szmul Zygielbojm (is anticipated to be realised 1994)’, with the inscription in the bottom left-hand corner: ‘I cannot remain silent, nor can I live, while the remnants of the Jewish people perish in Poland’.



Il. 11. Model of the memorial tablet for Szmul Zygielbojm (Source: Memorial Route leaflet, Umschlagplatz Memorial Committee (1988))

⁷ Przedborowa is the commercial name for a dark grey and black rock of quartz monzodiorite, commonly called syenite in Poland. Its name comes from a place called Przedborowa, where the quarry is located.

It was executed later, around 1996, without the inscription, and has rested on the ground – shattered and mute. Sometimes dead leaves and rubbish carried by the wind get wedged in its deep cuts and cracks. On the model one could discern the outline of a human form, with outstretched arms and legs, and perhaps interpret its message as a symbolic reference to the nameless victims of the Holocaust. Now passers-by see it mostly as a sign of destruction, of violence and some final catastrophe.



II. 12. Work on the memorial slab in progress (Photograph courtesy of Marek Moderau)

The second part of the monument, measuring 7x4 meters, has been described as a low relief, sgraffito or simply ‘decorated wall made of black stone’. According to the artist, Marek Moderau, it is neither a low relief nor sgraffito, as he worked on the stone surface utilising its textural qualities, and there is only ‘an allusion to the layers’ being used in the sgraffito technique.

The idea itself – of a work of art positioned on the wall – emerged at the time when information was received that a huge new building was planned for the site, and that there was a possibility of working with its architects and of designing the artwork for a section of the elevation allocated for this purpose.

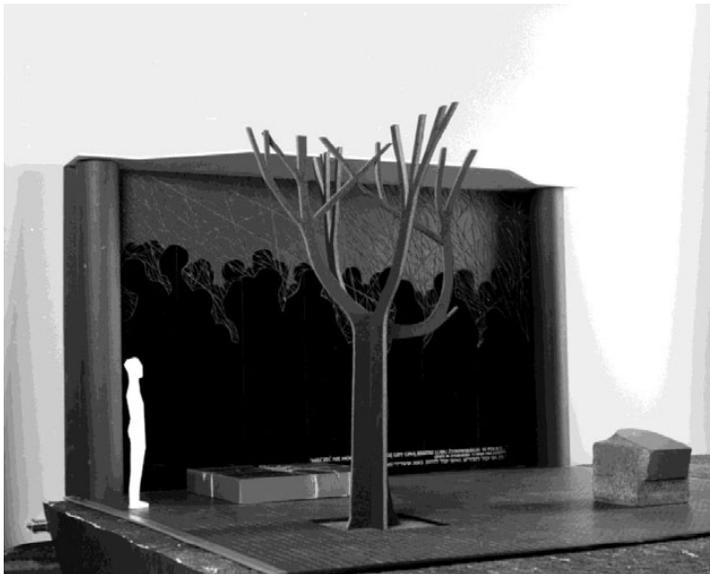


II. 13: Memorial slab (completed) in situ (Photo: Anna Taborska)

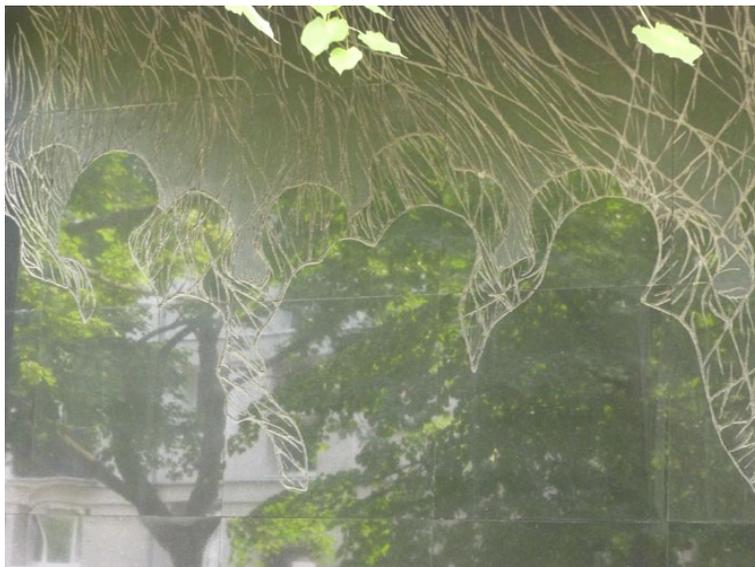
The artist's main problems were:

to refer to the Szmul Zygielbojm letter, which he left as his manifesto, and present those who were eliminated during the Holocaust without leaving a trace – they are the shadows, whom we still remember. It is difficult to identify them by name, there is the enormousness of numbers, hence the decision to show people through the lack of them. Remembering the inappropriateness (in a religious sense) of showing images of people, one can show them by their absence, through an external outline, a description of the space surrounding them...⁸

⁸ E-mail sent by Marek Moderau to the author, 10.6.2018.



Il. 14: One of the artist's models for the Zygielbojm monument
(Photograph courtesy of Marek Moderau)



Il 15: Outlines of the crowd and individual figures (Photo: Anna
Taborska)



Il 16: Individual figures in the crowd (Photo: Anna Taborska)

Describing his working process, Moderau wrote:

The space around them [the people] is filled with dynamic though soft lines, suggesting smoke and flames, executed in a relief form. The stone with figures (black polished Swedish granite) creates a mirror, and beyond their outlines there is a suggestion of a few planes, with deep relief lines. The lines are cut in a deep (a few centimetres) relief, first by incision into the stone with a thin, diamond blade, then by hand chopping at the edges of the stone, which allows the creation of a line with the required direction and shape, but with an innervated, quivering form.⁹

The completed artwork is positioned at ground level and framed on both sides by columns which are part of the architectonic design of the building.

⁹ Ibid.



Il. 17: Artwork on the wall framed by columns (Photo: Anna Taborska)

The Swedish granite from which it is made has a cryptocrystalline structure, ‘without division into single grains, and after a hundred years it will still retain its polish. It is more durable than marble’, says Moderau.¹⁰ The assembly of the work, carried out in the spring and summer of 1997 by the team of Grzegorz Wołoszczuk and two sons, was completed just in time for its unveiling.

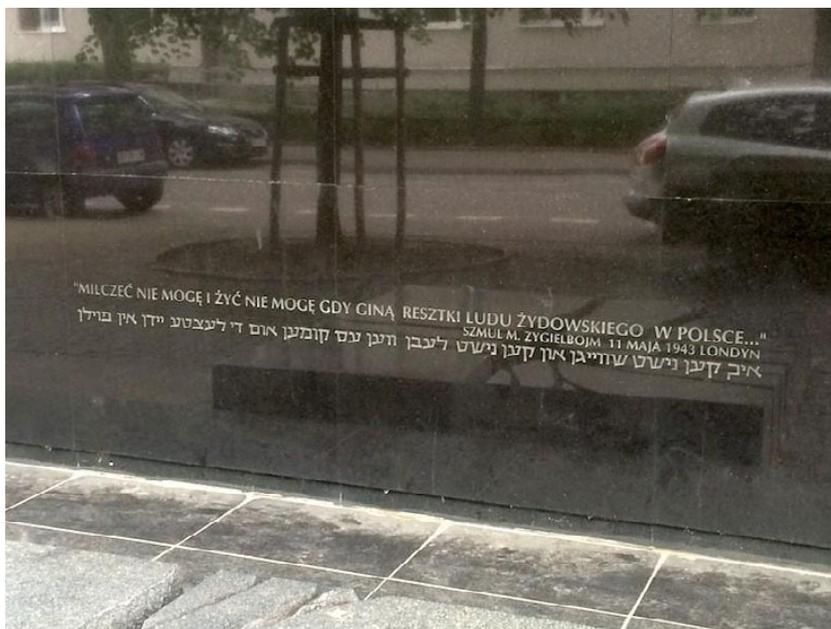
In the finished work dark shadows of the victims stand frozen in time; between and above them flow light, tangled lines – clouds of fire. The beautifully polished mirror surface takes onto itself the reflections of houses, trees, passing cars and pedestrians – here the frozen time past and fleeting moments of time present meet.

At the bottom of the wall, on the right-hand side, an inscription in two languages, Polish and Yiddish, carries a brief quotation from the last letter of Szmul Zygielbojm:

I CANNOT REMAIN SILENT NOR CAN I LIVE WHEN THE
REMNANTS OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE PERISH IN
POLAND...

SZMUL M. ZYGIELBOJM 11 MAY 1943 LONDON

¹⁰ In an interview with the author, 6/8/2017, Studio/Galeria Barbara i Marek Moderau, 4 Bieniewicka Street, Warsaw.



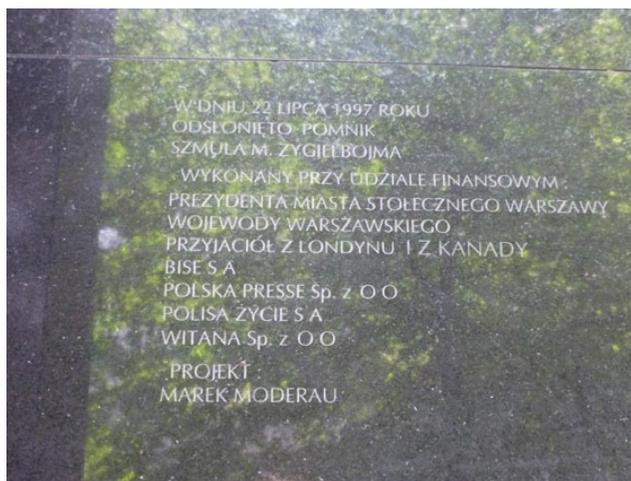
II. 18 and 19: Zygielbojm Memorial (Photos: Halina Taborska)





Il. 20 and 21: Assembly team at work. (Photographs courtesy of Marek Moderau)²⁰

On the left-hand side, running from the top of the wall, is the date of the monument's unveiling, followed by the names of people and institutions that made a financial contribution to its execution. Among the acknowledged are: the President of the capital city of Warsaw, the Voivod of Warsaw, friends from London and Canada, and four companies (financial contributors). The inscription, perhaps necessary, does not seem to serve the artistic values or the message contained in the work.



Il. 22: List of sponsors (Photo: Anna Taborska)

²⁰ Assembly team of Grzegorz Wołoszczuk and his two sons, and a workman. These are from Kodak prints made on 29/1/1997, and are kept in the artist's archive.

On 11 May 1943 in London, the last night of his life, Szmul Zygielbojm wrote to his brother Fajvel:

Why am I not there now, in their last struggle? Why am I not fighting by their side on the ruins of the wall in Warsaw? Why am I not lying crushed with them? What have I achieved? Have I saved even a single Jewish child from a terrifying death? I am standing, dejected, with a shattering sense of powerlessness... I cry into the dead of night: O, deaf world! Save them! Save them! In Poland they are murdering Jews, men, women, old people, children... The sky is cold and silent like the people down below... Indifferent to our tragedy each night they go to sleep in their warm beds. It slashes my heart and mind like a sword. Their life in agony, their death, is a disgrace for everyone in this world, and no one is ashamed? ... My life belongs to the Jewish people in Poland and that is why I am giving it.²¹

In his last open letter, with the same date, addressed to the President of the Republic of Poland Władysław Raczkiewicz and to Prime Minister Władysław Sikorski, Szmul Zygielbojm wrote:

Please allow me to address my last words to you, and through you to the Government and the people of Poland, to the Allied Governments and nations, and to the conscience of the world. [The latest news that has reached us from Poland makes it clear beyond any doubt that the Germans are now murdering the last remnants of the Jews in Poland with unbridled cruelty. Behind the walls of the ghetto the last act of this tragedy is now being played out.] I can neither be silent nor live when the last remnants of Jewish people [whose representative I am] are being killed. My comrades in the Warsaw ghetto have fallen with guns in their hands in their last heroic struggle. I wasn't given the chance to die like them, together with them. But I belong with them, in their mass graves.²²

²¹ Available at <http://www.jhi.pl/en/blog/2018-06-04-farewell-letters-from-shmuel-zygielbojm> – The quoted fragment was translated from Yiddish into Polish by Magdalena Siek, and into English by Olga Drenda, and published in an English-language handout provided for visitors to the exhibition 'Shmuel Zygielbojm. I can neither be silent nor live', held at the Jewish Historical Institute ŻIH in Warsaw (10.05-22.07.2018).

²² Available at <http://www.jhi.pl/en/blog/2018-06-04-farewell-letters-from-shmuel-zygielbojm> – Published many times in Polish and in English translations, this letter is



II. 23 Street sign – Zygielbojm Square (Photo: Anna Taborska)



II. 24. Memorial place for the ghetto fighters, 18 Miła Street (Photo: Halina Taborska)

Zygielbojm's most frequently quoted (in full or in part) piece of writing. This translation is taken from the handout given to visitors at the afore-mentioned ŻIH exhibition. The first two sentences put in square brackets were omitted in the quoted fragment, and have been taken from an English translation kept in the Yad Vashem Archives, O-55. Available at <http://www.yadvashem.org/docs/zygielbojm-letter-to-polish-national-council-in-exile.html>

In a poem entitled *For Polish Jews* (Żydom polskim), written in Jerusalem in 1943 and dedicated to the memory of Szmul Zygielbojm, Polish poet Władysław Broniewski addressed the fighting insurgents: ‘Sons of Maccabee! You too know how to die, / take up without a ray of hope the fight that started in September.’ He ended his verse with a vision of victory, and words of a utopian dream that sometime in the future ‘one race will rise, the highest: of noble people’.²³



Il. 25. Names of the insurgents who perished in battle, 18 Miła Street (Photo: Halina Taborska)

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²³ The poem (in Polish) is available at <https://literatura.wywrota.pl/wiersz-klasyka/40905-wladyslaw-broniewski-zydom-polskim.html>

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Reflections on *Mur (The Wall)* (2002)

Mieczysława Wazacz

My intention was to make a film about the personal tragedy of Szmul Zygielbojm who, as a member of the General Jewish Worker's Union – the Bund, was in 1942 invited by the Polish Government in Exile to represent the Jewish minority in the Polish National Council in London. By 1943, Zygielbojm had come to the view that his activity in London, including within the National Council, was not producing results that could help the Jews in Poland who were being murdered by the occupying Germans. In protest against the inactivity of the Allies, he committed suicide.



Il. 1: Screenshot from *Mur (The Wall)* (2002) – Zygielbojm with his family

The film surveys Zygielbojm's life and highlights his involvement with the Bund from an early age. He worked in Lublin, Łódź and Warsaw. Zygielbojm was in Warsaw following the German invasion of Poland in September 1939. Later that autumn the Germans took hostages from the city's councillors to ensure that the city complied with their demands. Zygielbojm was sworn in as councillor in Warsaw and was taken hostage (in place of Estera Iwinska). The Germans also sought to create a ghetto. Zygielbojm protested against this and was forced to escape Poland.



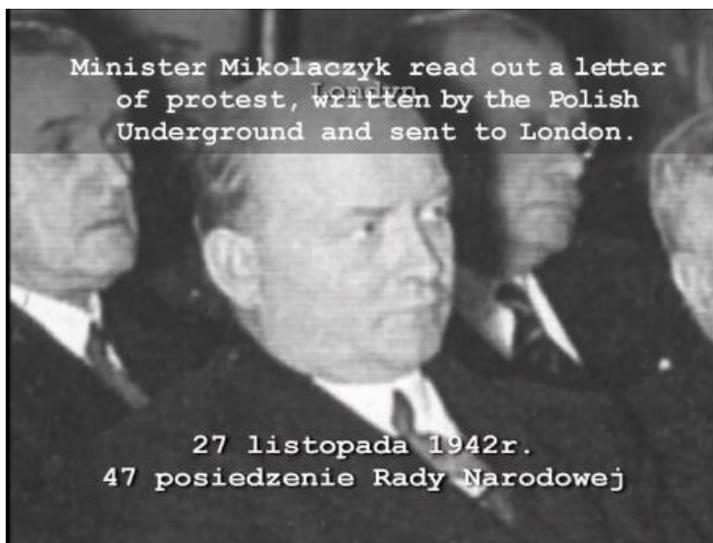
II. 2: Screenshot from *Mur (The Wall)* (2002) – Bund meeting



II. 3: Screenshot from *Mur (The Wall)* (2002) Majer Bogdanski

II. 4: Screenshot from *Mur (The Wall)* (2002) Warsaw councillors / hostages of the Gestapo, October 1939

While researching in the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London I was fascinated by the minutes of the wartime meetings of the National Council of the Polish Government in Exile. Seen from our contemporary perspective, those unending debates between people doomed never to agree seem even more ironic and tragic. The film considers a number of important sessions of the National Council, from 22 April 1942 to 15 August 1944.



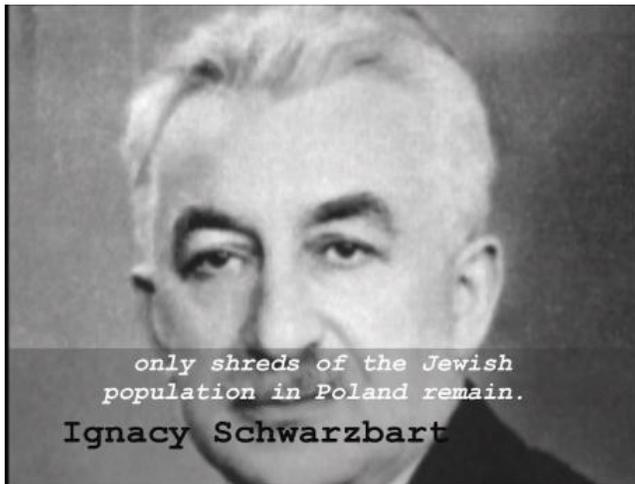
II. 5: Screenshot from *Mur* (The Wall) (2002) Stanisław Mikołajczyk

The final part of the film focuses on the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943 and includes an interview with Irena Klepfisz, the daughter of Michał Klepfisz – one of the leaders of uprising.



II. 6: Screenshot from *Mur* (The Wall) (2002) Michał Klepfisz

The film also features the second Jewish representative on the Polish National Council, moderate Zionist Ignacy Schwarzbart.



II. 7: Screenshot from *Mur* (The Wall) (2002) Ignacy Schwarzbart

In addition, the film includes an interview with the famous Polish emissary Jan Karski.



II. 8: Screenshot from *Mur* (The Wall) (2002) Jan Karski

The first version of the film was entitled *Zygielbojm*. This film was shortened to 30 minutes, and was shown on the Polish television channel Canal+ in 1998, to mark the 55th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. This film was a dry, factual documentary.

The second and longer version of the film was entitled *The Ultimate Sacrifice*. I edited this film in 1999. It was shown in Warsaw and in London.

The third version, entitled *The Wall*, focuses on the personal tragedy of Zygielbojm and on that of Poles and Jews – people divided by an invisible wall. It is now available online at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r0pla3sr2HA&feature=em-share_video_user

Illustrations

Screenshots from *Mur* (The Wall) (2002)

- 1: Zygielbojm with his family
- 2: Bund meeting
- 3: Majer Bogdanski
- 4: Warsaw councillors / hostages of the Gestapo, October 1939
- 5: Stanisław Mikołajczyk
- 6: Michał Klepfisz
- 7: Ignacy Schwarzbart
- 8: Jan Karski

Szmul Zygielbojm, Jan Karski and the news from Poland

Wojtek Rappak

The Jan Karski story is now a quite familiar account of a Polish resistance courier who left Warsaw on a clandestine mission to London carrying news of the Holocaust to the West. It was late 1942, by then Nazi Germany had already murdered millions of Jews and it had become clear that unless the Allies act, the Nazis will carry out their plan to murder all remaining Jews in Poland and other occupied countries. According to the story, Karski was deeply concerned about the Jewish tragedy, he risked his life travelling across occupied Europe to bring news of the Holocaust to the West. He talked to many people, he met President Roosevelt and other Western leaders, he tried to persuade them to act. This was the central purpose of his mission: it is why Karski is sometimes described as ‘a man who tried to stop the Holocaust’. But his mission was a failure, the powerful Western allies did nothing to save the Jews. They were focused on winning the war against Germany, not on rescuing Jews. As Karski put it many years later: ‘the Jews were left alone to perish’.

In his 1944 American bestseller on the Polish wartime state and on Polish resistance, *Story of a Secret State*, and also in the testimonies he gave many years after the war, Karski talked about a meeting which he described as perhaps one of the most significant.¹ It was a meeting with Szmul Zygielbojm,² a Bundist leader and one of the two Jewish members of the Polish National Council; we can be fairly certain that the meeting took place in London on 2 December 1942, about a week after Karski’s arrival in Great Britain.³ In the late testimonies, Karski talked about the intensely stressed Zygielbojm he met at this meeting and also about the significance of Zygielbojm’s suicide six months later, with its courteous but heartfelt suicide note saying good-bye to ‘all the people and things he loved’. To Karski, he personified the helplessness of a Jewish leader who could do nothing to persuade the Allies to stop Nazi Germany from exterminating the people he

¹ Jan Karski (1944) *Story of a Secret State*, New York: Houghton Mifflin.

² ‘Zygielbojm’ will be the spelling used in this article except in quotations from Karski’s *Story of a Secret State* where it is spelled ‘Zygelbojm’.

³ Karski refers to 2 December 1942 in the 2011 edition of *Story of a Secret State*. This is also the date given in *The Ghetto Speaks*. It is also mentioned in the minutes of the Joint Foreign Committee of the Board of Deputies of British Jews meeting on 3 December 1942. See London Metropolitan Archives ACC 3121 1 C11 7 1 1.

represented, the Jews of Poland; his suicide on 12 May 1943 was the final and desperate act of a Jewish leader who wanted to join his comrades who died fighting the Germans during the Warsaw ghetto uprising.

In *Story of a Secret State* Karski says that he ‘often thought about Szmul Zygielbojm, one of the most tragic victims of this war and its horrors’. His death and suicide was ‘utterly hopeless’:

Of all the deaths that have taken place in this war, surely Zygielbojm’s is one of the most frightening, the sharpest revelation of the extent to which the world has become cold and unfriendly, nations and individuals separated by immense gulfs of indifference, selfishness and convenience. All too plainly, it marks the fact that the domination of mutual suspicion, estrangement, and lack of sympathy has progressed so far that even those who wish and strive for a remedy by every possible means are powerless and able to accomplish pitifully little.⁴

There is something rather puzzling about this view. Zygielbojm committed suicide, his death was self-inflicted, why then would it be ‘one of the most frightening’ deaths that occurred in the war? Surely, the tragedy of the millions of innocents who were murdered by Nazi Germany in a campaign of extermination and genocide is far more frightening than the desperate suicide of someone who lived at a safe distance away from it. And how could Zygielbojm’s death provide us with a revelation of the world’s evils that is sharper and, by implication, more significant than the death of those innocents? Karski was a practising Catholic throughout his life and Catholicism is very clear on suicide: it is a mortal sin, ‘we are stewards, not owners, of the life God has entrusted to us. It is not ours to dispose of.’⁵ But it seems obvious that for Karski Zygielbojm was not a sinner, he apparently viewed Zygielbojm’s suicide as an act of the most desperate heroism, an act whose significance was connected not so much with the millions of innocent victims but with the ‘cold and unfriendly’ world which remained indifferent to them, with the powerlessness of people like Zygielbojm who tried to help those victims ‘by every possible means’ but could only ‘accomplish pitifully little’.

⁴ Karski (1944) *Story of a Secret State*, p. 338.

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2280. Available at http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a5.htm

Thirty-two years after writing *Story of a Secret State*, Karski made similar remarks about Zygielbojm's suicide in the interview with Claude Lanzmann in 1976. These remarks seem to elaborate the earlier ones, there is more emphasis on 'Jewishness', Zygielbojm's suicide is described as a symbol of the Jewish tragedy and of the indifference of the world:

The Jewish problem during the Second World War – in my mind – is the death of Zygielbojm. Death of Zygielbojm! This is what shows this total helplessness and the indifference of the world. Indifference of the world! And the Jews perished! The Jews perished and you have a Jewish leader, his name is Zygielbojm. And he says, 'I am a leader, a Jewish leader, and there are no more Jews. I go with them! They don't need leaders.' The death of Zygielbojm for me shows more than anything else the Jewish tragedy in the Second World War.⁶

Later on in the interview Karski says it was the helplessness of a Jewish leader which explains Zygielbojm's suicide, he was 'lost in helplessness'. Once again, Karski seems to be saying that the extermination of the Jews by Nazi Germany was, of course, a crime of historic proportions, but it was the world's indifference to it that was the real tragedy and it was Zygielbojm's helplessness, as a Jewish leader, to do anything to help his people that was the reason for his suicide. His own death, by his own hand, was the only action left to him. In his suicide note – which Karski knew well – Zygielbojm makes this very clear:

I cannot continue to live and to be silent while the remnants of Polish Jewry, whose representative I am, are being murdered. My comrades in the Warsaw ghetto fell with arms in their hands in the last heroic battle. I was not permitted to fall like them, together with them, but I belong with them, to their mass grave.

By my death, I wish to give expression to my most profound protest against the inaction in which the world watches and permits the destruction of the Jewish people.

I know that there is no great value to the life of a man, especially today. But since I did not succeed in achieving it in my

⁶ Postec and Lanzmann, *Transcript*. pp. 50-51.

lifetime, perhaps I shall be able by my death to contribute to the arousing from lethargy of those who could and must act in order that even now, perhaps at the last moment, the handful of Polish Jews who are still alive can be saved from certain destruction.⁷

The desperate helplessness of a Jewish leader and the indifference of the world towards the continuing destruction of the Jewish people seems to be the reason why Karski, writing in 1944, regarded Zygielbojm as ‘one of the most tragic victims of this war and its horrors’.⁸

But Zygielbojm’s sense of helplessness may have been aggravated by the demands from the Jewish leaders in Warsaw which Karski reported during the 2 December meeting. There is a puzzling element in Karski’s accounts which suggests that he felt in some way guilty of complicity in Zygielbojm’s suicide, that in some small way he contributed to it. Let us see if we can unravel this.

Karski’s *Story of a Secret State* was published in America in late 1944. He wrote it in New York in the summer of that year and so the comments in the book about Zygielbojm cannot be regarded as ‘late’ testimony, they referred to very recent events: Zygielbojm committed suicide just over a year earlier, on 12 May 1943, the meeting with Karski took place about six months before that, on December 2, 1942. This is significant because it suggests that even when we allow for wartime constraints, political and publisher pressure as well as for the propaganda objectives of the Polish government in 1944, what we read in the 1944 edition of *Story of a Secret State* seems to express Karski’s genuine – and deeply felt – views on Zygielbojm at the time. It is also significant that he held these views throughout his life; we can see this when we examine the testimonies he made decades later.

In *Story of a Secret State* Karski tells us that the 2 December 1942 meeting with Zygielbojm was just one of the ‘literally hundreds of conferences, conversations, contacts, and reports’ which he was ‘swamped with’ since his arrival in London about a week earlier. In other words, it was not in any way meant to be a special meeting, it was one of many. As with all the other meetings, so too with Zygielbojm, Karski writes that he proceeded by ‘emptying my memory of

⁷ ‘The Last Letter From Szmul Zygielbojm’ (11 May 1943). Available at <http://www.yadvashem.org/docs/zygielbojm-letter-to-polish-national-council-in-exile.html>

⁸ Karski (1944) *Story of a Secret State*, p. 338.

everything that it had stored up for just such an occasion'⁹. As he put it many years later, he was a 'recording machine, a tape recorder', he played back what he was told – and 'recorded' – in Warsaw and delivered a verbal report in London. In Zygielbojm's case, Karski was delivering a report from the Bundist leader of the Jewish resistance in Warsaw, Leon Feiner. Note that Feiner – using the pseudonym 'Berezowski' – sent two reports to London at that time. The first was a nine-page typewritten report dated 31 August 1942, the second was a verbal report which Feiner presented to Karski at about the same time. Karski's mission was to carry the 'physical' reports and memorise the verbal reports which he would then 'play back' to their designated recipients in London as close to the original as memory allowed. Feiner's typewritten report – the 'Berezowski letter' – was probably among the materials which Karski took with him when he left Warsaw sometime in the middle of September. They were placed on a separate route when he reached Paris in early October and we believe that they arrived in London in mid-November, about a week before Karski. Zygielbojm received this report a day or so before Karski's arrival in London and he refers to it in a passionate speech he made to the Polish National Council on 27 November 1942. The verbal report was carried, so to speak, in Karski's head and Karski delivered it to Zygielbojm during the 2 December meeting. It is this verbal report which interests us here.

There is an account of this meeting in the 1 March 1943 edition of a periodical issued by the American branch of the Bund, *The Ghetto Speaks*. The article refers to a meeting with a 'special messenger from Poland' who reached London 'in the last days of November, 1942'; it took place 'On the 2nd of December 1942' when 'the Polish Minister of Interior, in London, summoned S. Zygielbojm, (...), as well as Dr. I. Schwartzbart (...) to a conference with that messenger from Poland. (...) stenographic notes were taken of the message from Poland'.¹⁰ The 'special messenger from Poland' is clearly Karski and, based on later accounts, we may assume that Zygielbojm and Schwartzbart saw Karski separately. We do not know if the 'stenographic notes' were taken by Zygielbojm's Bund or by the Polish Ministry of Interior staff but we would expect such notes to be a verbatim transcript of what the messenger – Karski – said.

⁹ *ibid.* p. 337.

¹⁰ *The Ghetto Speaks*, 1 March 1943 p. 1.

Unfortunately, if these notes have survived they have not yet been found. However, the preface to the article states that it presents ‘the most important part of that message’ and so suggests that it is an excerpt from the stenographic notes. There are reasons to believe that, at least in its essentials, it is such an excerpt because it is consistent with other documents produced at the time and it fits in with some of the key parts of Karski’s account of the Zygielbojm meeting in *Story of a Secret State*. The article also includes three-dotted ellipses which may be taken as an indication that some parts have been omitted but everything shown is taken directly from the ‘stenographic notes’. We will assume therefore that the article is a report of what the ‘messenger from Poland’ said and that the messenger was Karski.

To understand the part of the article that interests us we need to note its use of two layers of direct speech, the first quotes Karski, the second quotes Karski quoting ‘Mr “X”’. We can assume that this is Leon Feiner, the leader of the Bundist resistance in Warsaw whom Karski met about three months earlier and whose identity had to be concealed in the article ‘for obvious reasons’. The article is thus a record of what Karski said to Zygielbojm as he was delivering the verbal report to Zygielbojm from Feiner (quotation marks have been kept):

“Mr. “X” requested me to inform you, Mr. Zygielbojm, and all other Jews the following: “Tell them ‘there’ (outside the Nazi-invaded countries) that there are moments when we hate them all; we hate them because they are safe ‘there’ and do not rescue us ... Because they don’t do enough. We are only too well aware that in the free and civilized world outside, it is not possible to believe **all** that is happening to us. Let the Jewish people, then, do **something** that will force the other world to believe us...”

‘We’ are the Jews of Warsaw, condemned to death, ‘here’ in Warsaw; ‘they’ are the Jews who are safe in England and other unoccupied countries. ‘They’ must do something to make – force – the ‘other’ – the free – world to believe the reports about the tragic fate of the Jews. There now comes the demand on what ‘they’ – Zygielbojm and all the other Jews – must do:

“We are all dying here; let them die too. ... Let them crowd the offices of Churchill and others, let them proclaim a fast before the

doors of the mightiest and not retreat until they [here the antecedent is ‘Churchill and the others’] will undertake some action to rescue those of our people who are still alive.¹¹

Karski then closes the quotation and ends this part of the (verbal) report he brought from the Warsaw Bundists: ‘That is the opinion of Mr. “X” and of all others with whom I came in contact there’. The article does not record Zygielbojm’s reaction to this, but Karski described it later as something bordering on a nervous breakdown. In *Story of a Secret State*, written in mid-1944, about 18 months after the meeting, Karski suggests that the Warsaw Bundists’ instruction seems to have made Zygielbojm furious:

Zygielbojm started as though he had been bitten and began to pace around the room agitatedly, almost breaking into a run (...). ‘It is impossible,’ he finally said, ‘utterly impossible. You know what would happen. They would simply bring in two policemen and have me dragged away to an institution. Do you think they will let me die a slow, lingering death? Never...’¹²

In the 1978 interview with Lanzmann, Karski refers to his book but elaborates on what he wrote thirty-four years earlier,

As if with hatred, frustration, after I had given him all the material, he says: ‘So what can I do! What can I do that I am not doing? I do everything! I do everything possible. So what do they want me to do? What can I do?’¹³

As described by Karski, Zygielbojm rejected the Warsaw Bundists’ demand that he and other Jews begin a hunger strike which ‘might shake the conscience of the world’. The article in *The Ghetto Speaks* confirms the accuracy of this account, Zygielbojm’s comrades in Warsaw called on him and ‘all other Jews’ to ‘proclaim a fast before the doors of the mightiest and not retreat (...) until they will undertake some action to rescue those of our people who are still alive’. According to Karski’s account, for Zygielbojm a hunger strike was pointless. But when Zygielbojm, in desperation, asks, ‘So what do they

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Karski (1944) *Story of a Secret State*, p. 336.

¹³ Postec and Lanzmann, *Transcript*. pp. 47-48.

want me to do? What can I do?’ he seems to be responding to something far more wounding in the Bundists’ report. As reported in the article in *The Ghetto Speaks* (and cited above) the Warsaw Bundists instructed Karski to tell Zygielbojm and the other Jewish leaders in the West that ‘we hate them because they are safe ‘there’ and do not rescue us ... Because they don’t do enough’. Karski makes a comment in *Story of a Secret State* which suggests that this was the most hurtful part of the report. It was the end of their long and gruelling 2 December meeting, both men were exhausted.

We shook hands, Zygielbojm gazing directly into my eyes, intent and questioning.

‘Mr. Karski, I’ll do everything I can to help them. Everything! I’ll do everything they demand – if only I am given a chance. You believe me, don’t you?’¹⁴

This seems like a desperate response to the Warsaw Bundists’ accusation that Zygielbojm and other Jewish leaders like him ‘don’t do enough’. Karski’s reply, as he describes it in his book, was banal and cynical, ‘Of course I believe you’; he had just delivered one report, there were many others and he was concerned about being late for the next meeting.

In *Story of a Secret State* Karski describes how, six months after the 2 December meeting, he received the news of Zygielbojm’s suicide. He had regrets about the meeting and about the way he thought about Zygielbojm, ‘it occurred to me that he might have found my answer to his last question cold and unsympathetic’. But what is most puzzling is his belief that in some way he was complicit. ‘I felt as though I had personally handed Zygielbojm his death warrant, even though I had been only the instrument’.¹⁵ What sense can we make of this puzzling remark?

What Karski ‘handed’ to Zygielbojm was a verbal report from the Warsaw Bundist resistance leader Leon Feiner. Karski’s role was to memorise what he was told in Warsaw and repeat it verbatim, if possible, to Zygielbojm in London. He was ‘only the instrument’ in the sense that he listened and memorised what he was told by Leon Feiner and then recalled it, ‘played it back’, in London. By analogy, he was like a postman who delivers a letter whose content is known to him

¹⁴ Karski (1944) *Story of a Secret State*, p. 337.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 338.

because he memorised it, it is ‘personally handed’ to the designated recipient when the postman delivers the letter by recalling its content in a meeting with the recipient. How then can we make sense of Karski’s feeling that the verbal report he delivered to Zygielbojm was a ‘death warrant’? It is difficult to find a convincing answer to this question but it clearly has something to do with what is in the message which Karski brought to Zygielbojm, and probably with the statement, printed in the article in *The Ghetto Speaks*, in which Zygielbojm’s Bundist comrades in Warsaw, speaking to Karski at a time – we assume it was at the end of August/beginning of September 1942 – when the Warsaw ghetto deportations were transporting between 10 to 15 thousand Jews to the Treblinka death camp each day, refer to their comrades in London with what seems like contempt: ‘there are moments when we hate them all; we hate them because they are safe ‘there’ and do not rescue us ... Because they don’t do enough.’ This must be what Karski meant by ‘the death warrant’. He knew the content of the message but, as his role required, he ignored the fact that Zygielbojm, a Jewish leader who did all he could to rescue his people, might be deeply wounded by the content of the message, by his Warsaw comrades’ accusation that he was not doing enough. As we saw, he told Karski, ‘I’ll do everything I can to help them’. Everything was not enough, it made no difference, it only revealed Zygielbojm’s helplessness.

In the 1978 interview with Karski, Lanzmann – who must have read *Story of a Secret State* very carefully before the interview – raises the ‘death warrant’ question:

C. L.: Do you think that the requests you made to him from the Jews in Poland had a direct influence on his suicide, which he committed exactly six months later?

K. I don’t know. I prefer to think not. What can I tell you? It is not a very comfortable idea to live with. As you mentioned, and I mention in my book, I think about it. But I defend myself as much as I can.¹⁶

It is probably right to think that Karski was too hard on himself, or that he was perhaps too absorbed in his role as an emissary and thought that he should have censored the contents of some reports, this one in particular. But, as he frequently reminds us, he was a courier who had

¹⁶ Postec and Lanzmann, *Transcript*. Op. cit. p. 50.

to deliver many verbal reports to a large number of Polish political, military and government figures in London. Zygielbojm was just one of them. Nevertheless, his *Story of a Secret State* account of the meeting with Zygielbojm on 2 December 1942, written only a year and a half later, clearly suggests that the meeting with Zygielbojm was different to all the others, it concerned a tragedy which was unprecedented, one whose scale could be grasped by a reflection on the meaning of Zygielbojm's suicide on May 12 1943, just over six months after the meeting.

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Zygielbojm in London: Labour, the Holocaust and the Politics of Memory

Michael Fleming

Seventy-five years ago, Bundist Szmul Zygielbojm committed suicide in London in protest at the Allies' lack of action to save Jews who were being systematically murdered by Nazi Germany. In this article I outline Zygielbojm's activities from his arrival in London in March 1942 until his suicide in May 1943. I show that Zygielbojm, in seeking to elicit a response to the terrible news from occupied Poland, engaged repeatedly with the British Labour Party. In doing so, Zygielbojm had to find ways to communicate information about mass murder committed by Germans to a constituency in which socialist 'Vansittartists' vied with others on the socialist Left to explain Nazism and to influence Labour policy in relation to Germany. The conflict within Labour, and within the European Left more broadly, impacted on how various factions responded to the news from Poland. I suggest that consideration of Zygielbojm's struggles and experiences in London can contribute to reflections on the politics of memory in relation to responses to the Holocaust in both Britain and Poland.

Introduction

Szmul Zygielbojm's activities during the thirteen and a half months he spent in London are of continuing significance. Zygielbojm was among the few individuals who tirelessly sought to draw attention to the slaughter of Polish Jews by Nazi Germany and to persuade the Allies to act to save the perishing. Examining Zygielbojm's struggles from March 1942 until his death in May 1943 can not only shed light on how news of the Holocaust was responded to by different constituencies, but can also inform debates on how we narrate the history of responses to the Holocaust. In Poland, the new law on the Holocaust is exciting a great deal of discussion.¹ The law's promoters

¹ See Ustawa z dnia 26 stycznia 2018 r. o zmianie ustawy o Instytucie Pamięci Narodowej – Komisji Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu, ustawy o grobach i cmentarzach wojennych, ustawy o muzeach oraz ustawy o odpowiedzialności podmiotów zbiorowych za czyny zabronione pod groźbą kary in *Dziennik Ustaw Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, Warszawa, dnia 14 lutego 2018 r. Poz. 369. Available at <https://ipn.gov.pl/pl/o-ipn/ustawa/24216,Ustawa.html> An English translation of the relevant text can be found at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-of-polands-controversial-holocaust-legislation/>

insist that it aims to defend the Polish nation from defamation. Originally the law criminalised assertions of Polish complicity in Nazi Germany's genocidal project. Few would disagree that the phrase 'Polish death camps' is erroneous and that many Poles today would be offended by such a formulation.² On 27 June 2018, under pressure from civil society and the wider international community, the law was amended to decriminalise offences.³ Those who 'publicly and against the facts' claim that the Polish state or nation was 'responsible or complicit in' the crimes of Nazi Germany will now be guilty of a civil rather than a criminal offence. Steep fines rather than three years in prison are envisaged for those found guilty. The law's critics have suggested that it will have a chilling impact on Holocaust scholarship, despite the exemptions that scholars should benefit from, and on public discussion of the Holocaust. The Polish Centre for Holocaust Research in Warsaw made its position clear in late January 2018.

We consider the adopted law a tool intended to facilitate the ideological manipulation and imposition of the history policy of the Polish state. The new legislation would constitute an unprecedented (and unknown in a democratic system) intrusion into the debate about the Polish history.⁴

More generally, the law risks codifying a narrative of Polish-Jewish relations that depicts non-Jewish Poles as nobly helping their Polish-Jewish neighbours in a time of crisis. Stories of sacrifice, the terrible conditions endured in occupied Poland and the number of Poles recognised as Righteous Among the Nations are repeatedly highlighted.

² This was not always the case. In October 1944, *Colliers Weekly* published an article by Jan Karski entitled 'Polish Death Camps'. The article was from Karski's book *Story of a Secret State* which was about to be published. That book played an important role in the Polish Government-in-Exile's information/propaganda campaign in the West during the final phase of the war. See Jan Karski, 'Polish Death Camps' in *Colliers Weekly* 14 October 1944, pp. 18-19. Available at <https://www.unz.com/print/Colliers-1944oct14-00018/>. Also see 'Sprawozdanie z książki Jana Karskiego 'Story of a Secret State'', Hoover Institute Archives, Stanisław Mikołajczyk Collection, Box 12 Folder 23.

³ See Flieger, E. (2018) 'Premierzy Izraela i Polski podpisali wspólną deklarację. Morawiecki: Zmiana ustawy o IPN osłabia atak na Polskę' in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, available at <http://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,23604237,mateusz-morawiecki.html>

⁴ Statement of the Polish Centre for Holocaust Research regarding the changes in the law about the Institute of National Remembrance voted in by the Polish Parliament on January 26, 2018.

Available at <http://www.holocaustresearch.pl/index.php?mod=news&show=349>

But other important issues are marginalised and the new law will likely make it more difficult to discuss events which fall outside the dominant state-backed narrative. Work by the Polish Centre for Holocaust Research has been at the forefront of reshaping our understanding of the Holocaust in Poland. Through various rigorously researched local studies, we now have a better comprehension of the dynamics of Nazi persecution and killing. We also have a clearer idea of how some Polish citizens sometimes aligned themselves with Germany's genocidal project by finding, handing over and indeed killing Jews who sought refuge outside the ghettos.⁵ What is at stake is not simply a deeper understanding of a painful past, but a vision of the future in which openness to others and intellectual honesty is valued. The concern expressed outside Poland in relation to the new law reflects, inter alia, the worry that it will encourage a jaundiced public history that insulates Poles from their troubling past and that it may weaken inter-cultural communication and understanding.

In Britain, government has not resorted to legislation in an attempt to control historical debate and public memory. Nevertheless, the idea that the Holocaust happened elsewhere has meant that discussion of Britain's response to Nazi Germany's destruction of Europe's Jews remains fairly marginal within public discourse. Like in Poland, in Britain much attention has been given to those exceptional individuals who aided Jews during the Nazi years, such as Nicholas Winton and Frank Foley.⁶ But without proper contextualisation the promotion of stories of this sort can foster misunderstandings of Britain's often problematic responses to Nazi Germany's persecution and later mass murder of Jews, and be too easily co-opted into established narratives of wartime Britain. Recent scholarship may change this as the extent of contemporary knowledge in Britain of what was happening in occupied Poland, including at Auschwitz, becomes clearer. For promoters of the new law on the Holocaust in Poland, this is double-edged. On the one hand, the scale of the Polish Underground State, its systems of communication (couriers, radio) and the important information about the Holocaust that was sent west, becomes better

⁵ See, for example, Barbara Engelking, Jan Grabowski (eds.) (2018) *Dalej Jest Noc: Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski*, Warszawa: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów.

⁶ Prior to the war, Winton played a key role in organising the *Kindertransport* from Czechoslovakia. Foley, a Secret Intelligence Service officer who worked as a passport control officer at the British embassy in Berlin, provided passports to Jews in Germany.

known to a Western audience. Polish heroism, sacrifice and important contribution to the war effort in this enterprise cannot be ignored. On the other hand, the ways in which information was sent, the promptness in sending information and the way this information was handled and distributed by Polish intelligence in London and the Polish Government in Exile, raise, on occasion, some uncomfortable questions.

In this article I argue that an analysis of Zygielbojm's struggles in London can fruitfully contribute to narratives about responses to the Holocaust in both Poland and Britain, and can bring into focus the ways in which political beliefs and expediency often influenced how individuals and organisations responded to the terrible news from Poland. The history of Zygielbojm's engagement with the British Labour Party is important. In 1942, some Labour Party members arguably viewed news of the mass-killing of Jews primarily through the prism of debates within the party rather than in terms of the slaughter itself. Cleavages within the (socialist) Left which existed prior to Zygielbojm's arrival in London played a significant role in how Zygielbojm and the terrible news which he sought to convey through 1942 were received by members of the Labour Party and the wider European Left.

During the Second World War there was an ongoing discussion within the Labour Party and the European Left in Britain about the nature of Nazism. On one side of the argument were those who saw the rise of Nazism as a result of class contradiction. The actions of the Nazi regime were therefore the responsibility of the Nazi leadership. Germans and Austrians on the Left could picture themselves as the Nazis' first victims, and some chose to do so. On the other side of the argument were those who saw Nazism as the consequence of the specificity of German culture and tradition.⁷ Given this, and the fact

⁷ In 1943 Labour intellectual and later party chairman, Harold Laski, criticised the tendency to essentialise Germans and pointed out that 'those who are now foremost in the denunciation of German savagery' did not utter a word of protest between 1933 and 1939 against the actions of Nazi Germany. Though he directed his readers away from the Labour Movement – towards the Anglo-German Fellowship which had a membership, according to Laski, worthy of Debrett's Peerage and the Directory of Directors, the implied criticism against 'socialist Vansittartism' would have been clear to senior Labour Party members. See Harold Laski (1947) *Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, New York: Viking Press, p. 253. Also see Harold Laski (1940) *The Rights of Man*, London: Macmillan and Co. In this earlier work, Laski suggested that the persecution of Jews was due to Hitler's pathological psychology, the tendency of terrorising dictatorship to need an enemy and the need to provide opportunities for followers (by removing Jews from the professions and business). He argued that the German leadership was responsible – 'To

that Hitler had been elected, ordinary Germans were co-responsible for Nazism and could not be trusted either now or in the future. This hardline view was advanced by various members of the Huysmans Committee, which had been set up within the Labour Party as a consultative organ in autumn 1941. It was chaired by the Belgian socialist Camille Huysmans. William Gillies, secretary of the International Department of the Labour Party, acted as secretary to the committee.⁸ Those who endorsed this ‘socialist Vansittartist’ position tended to be far more open to the terrible news that arrived from occupied Poland in May and June of 1942.⁹ The news was readily accepted because recipients had established views on the nature of Germans and the news supported these views. Reports of German mass-killing of Jews could also be mobilised within the intra-Left debate about the nature of Nazism.

For those socialists relying on a class argument, and who saw German antisemitism as a form of false consciousness, news of the mass killing of Jews was difficult to understand. It challenged their assessment of Nazism and, significantly, it had the potential to negatively impact on their influence within the Labour Party. In the context of their own ideological commitments, the reports from Poland were harder to process than for those on the Left without these particular commitments. Mass-murder, even in the context of war, could not be readily accommodated to the established class analysis of

put a whole people in chains, as the Nazis have put the German people in chains, has struck with horror all those who still cherish the traditions of our essential inheritance...The Nazi leaders represent that ultimate corruption of the human spirit which pervades and infects every government which denies its responsibility to ordinary men’. There was much distance between Laski and socialist Vansittartists.

⁸ See Isabelle Tombs (2000) ‘‘Morituri vos salutant’’: Szmul Zygielbojm’s Suicide in May 1943 and the International Socialist Community in London’ in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* Volume 14, Issue 2, pp. 243-265, p. 245. Tombs, in a series of important articles, has shed a great deal of light on Zygielbojm’s relationship with the Labour Party and the broader dynamics of Leftist politics in relation to news of the Holocaust. Also see Isabelle Tombs (1996) ‘The Victory of Socialist Vansittartism: Labour and the German Question 1941-1945’ in *Twentieth Century British History* Volume 7, Issue 3, pp. 287-309; Isabelle Tombs (2000) ‘Szmul Zygielbojm, the British Labour Party and the Holocaust’ in Christine Collette and Stephen Bird (eds.) *Jews, Labour and the Left, 1918-1948*, London: Routledge, pp. 122-144.

⁹ Robert Vansittart served as Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office from 1930 to 1938, opposed appeasement and, during the war, argued that Germany was inherently aggressive and that Germans required re-educating under the tutelage of the United Nations. See Robert Vansittart (1941) *Black Record: Germans Past and Present*, London: Hamish Hamilton.

Nazism. The news posed a challenge to how responsibility for the killing was to be understood, with significant implications for how the Left should think about the post-war order. In addition, the thesis advanced by socialist Vansittartists, in a vulgar form, could be, and often was, seen as being essentialist and discriminatory (against ordinary Germans). This seems to have alienated some within the Labour movement from causes which socialist Vansittartists spoke up for.

Zygielbojm and the Bund Report

Zygielbojm escaped occupied Warsaw in December 1939. The Germans had learnt that he had spoken against the concentration of Jews in ghettos and were seeking him.¹⁰ Passing through Europe, he eventually joined fellow Bundists in the United States. In 1942, he took up the post of the Bund's representative on the Polish National Council.¹¹ Zygielbojm arrived in London in March 1942. Among the first activities he undertook was to advise a range of figures on the left, including Arthur Greenwood, Harold Laski, Henry Noel Brailsford and others, about the incarceration of his Bundist colleagues Victor Alter and Henryk Erlich in the Soviet Union.¹² He had hoped to build support among the Left in London to pressure the British government to make representations to the Soviet government in order to secure the release of Alter and Erlich. British trade unionist Walter Citrine made clear to Zygielbojm the difficulties with such a course of action. The British government was of the view that the issue was an internal Soviet matter and nothing was done.¹³

¹⁰ See Yisrael Gutman (1989) *The Jews of Warsaw, 1939-1943: Ghetto, Underground, Revolt*, Bloomington: Indiana Press, p. 49.

¹¹ Daniel Blatman notes that the 'American Bund Representation did not regard Zygielbojm as a suitable candidate' for the Polish National Council. Some Bundists in the United States felt that Zygielbojm lacked the necessary skills. See Daniel Blatman (2004) 'On a Mission Against All Odds: Samuel Zygielbojm, April 1942-May 1943.' In David Cesarani (ed.) *Critical Concepts in Holocaust Historical Studies*, Vol. IV, London: Routledge, pp. 293-320, p. 297.

¹² The Labour politician Arthur Greenwood held a ministerial post without portfolio. Henry Noel Brailsford was a (liberal) socialist journalist who wrote for *The Manchester Guardian* and *Reynolds News*. In 1944 he published *Our Settlement With Germany*, a book that advocated a post-war settlement that differed from the Vansittartist vision.

¹³ Blatman, 'On a Mission...', p. 299.

By the time Zygielbojm arrived in London, it was clear to numerous British officials that the Germans were systematically murdering Jews. In August 1941 Prime Minister Winston Churchill was informed of the mass-killing of Jews by Germans as the German Army advanced east.¹⁴ In January 1942 a British Postal and Telegraph Censorship report stated that ‘Germans clearly pursue a policy of extermination against the Jews’.¹⁵ And in March 1942 Wilfrid Israel, then working for the Foreign Research and Press Service, contended that ‘Nazi rule is aiming at the extermination of the Jews’.¹⁶ Two months later, at the end of May 1942, a report sent by the Bund in Warsaw via Polish Underground channels reached London.¹⁷ It revealed the gassing of Jews at Chelmno and indicated that the Germans had murdered 700,000 Polish Jews.

According to a range of scholars, the BBC broadcast the ‘gist’ of the Bund Report on 2 June 1942. Tombs suggests that Zygielbojm delivered the broadcast.¹⁸ On 9 June the Polish Prime Minister,

¹⁴ On 12 September 1941 Nigel De Grey at Bletchley Park reported to Churchill: ‘The fact that the police are killing all Jews that fall into their hands should now be sufficiently well appreciated. It is therefore not proposed to continue reporting these butcheries specially unless so requested [by the Prime Minister]’. See Michael Smith (2004), ‘Bletchley Park and the Holocaust’ in Len Scott and Peter Jackson (eds.) (2004) *Understanding Intelligence in the Twentieth Century: Journeys in Shadows*, London: Routledge, pp. 111-121, p. 116.

¹⁵ National Archives, Kew, NA.HO 213/953, 3. ‘Report on Jewry, No.3 Part I’ (22 January 1942). The report was based on intercepted correspondence from the period May-October 1941. Also see Richard Breitman (1999) *Official Secrets: What the Nazis planned, what the British and Americans knew*, London: Allen Lane, p. 101.

¹⁶ See Naomi Shepherd (1984) *Wilfrid Israel: German Jewry’s Secret Ambassador*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, p. 216.

¹⁷ Material was carried by the Swede Sven Norrman to Stockholm. Norrman also carried regular Polish intelligence reports which, following a different distribution protocol, reached London on 23 June 1942. That package of reports also included information about Chelmno. The Bund Report of May 1942 can be found at the Polish Underground (1939-1945) Study Trust (PUMST) MSW 16/26. An English translation of most of the report was circulated by Zygielbojm on 30 June 1942. See People’s History Museum, LP ID 21. Also see Józef Lewandowski (2001) ‘A fish breaks through the net: Sven Norrman and the Holocaust’ in Antony Polonsky (ed.) *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 14, pp. 295-305. For an outline of the important role of Swedes in smuggling intelligence reports out of Poland see Józef Lewandowski (1979) ‘Swedish Contribution to the Polish Resistance Movement during World War Two (1939-1942)’ *Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis* 20, Uppsala.

¹⁸ Isabelle Tombs (2000) ‘Szmul Zygielbojm, the British Labour Party and the Holocaust’ in Christine Collette and Stephen Bird (eds.) *Jews, Labour and the Left, 1918-1948*, London: Routledge, pp. 122-144, p.124. Also see Walter Laqueur (1989) ‘Hitler’s Holocaust: Who knew what, when and how’ in Michael Marrus, *The Nazi Holocaust*:

Władysław Sikorski, made a brief reference to the German policy of extermination in a broadcast to Poland.¹⁹ However, it was only on 25 June, almost a month after the Bund Report arrived, that the British mainstream press published the news. It seems as though Zygielbojm, through the Polish journalist Stefan Litauer, was able to make contact with *The Daily Telegraph*.²⁰ On 25 June 1942 *The Daily Telegraph*

Part 8, Bystanders to the Holocaust Volume 1, London: Meckler Ltd, pp. 60-79, p. 64. Although scholars routinely refer to a 2 June broadcast, the primary source for this claim is not referenced. There seem to be two main secondary sources for the claim about a 2 June broadcast that drew on the Bund Report to which subsequent scholars (and others) explicitly or implicitly refer. First, Yehuda Bauer, in a short 1968 article, indicates that a broadcast was made on 2 June 1942, but does not provide a source for this claim. That article provides an English translation of the May 1942 Bund Report. See Yehuda Bauer (1968) 'When did they know?' *Midstream* 14 (4) (April), pp. 51-58, p. 52. In a later work in which Bauer does provide references to how news from the Bund Report was distributed, he refers to an article published by Ernest Hearst. See Yehuda Bauer (1978) *The Holocaust in Historical Perspective*, Canberra: ANU, p. 20. Hearst relies on newspaper reports and refers to the 3 July 1942 edition of *The Jewish Chronicle* which reported on a broadcast from the previous Friday (i.e. 26 June). See Ernest Hearst (1966) 'The British and the Slaughter of the Jews' *Weiner Library Bulletin*, Volume 21, Number 1 (Winter 1966/67) pp. 32-38. The second main secondary source is the entry for Zygielbojm written by Israel Gutman in the *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*. See Israel Gutman (1990) *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, Volume 4, New York: Macmillan, pp. 1748-1749. In the absence of a clear primary source for the claim of a BBC broadcast on 2 June 1942 referring to the 'gist' of the Bund Report, and the apparent absence of a subsequent reference to the news from Warsaw in the press, it is prudent to treat the claim with caution. The records for the BBC European Service held at the BBC Written Archives Centre at Caversham are incomplete, including those for the Polish Service, but a letter from the editor of the Polish Service, Gregory Macdonald, to Jan Baliński-Jundziłł (the Polish official responsible for liaising with the BBC) on 3 July 1942 casts some doubt on a 2 June broadcast. Macdonald stated that the news of the massacre of Jews was first given to a newspaper and the BBC European Service was asked to delay publicity for a day. This is a reference to the 25 June article in the *Daily Telegraph* and the broadcast of 26 June. See the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum (PISM) Kol 434 /52. German atrocities against Jews were raised in the National Council meeting of 10 June. At the Polish Cabinet meeting of 6 June, the situation of Jews in Poland had been considered. See Adam Puławski (2009) *W Obliczu Zagłady*, Lublin: IPN, p. 477.

¹⁹ A translation of Sikorski's 9 June 1942 broadcast is available at the People's Museum, Manchester, LP ID POL 2, and at the National Archives – NA 371/31097 (66). Sikorski's broadcast of 9 June 1942 is well documented and was reported on at the time. Also see 'Sikorski Assails Nazi Atrocities Against Jews in Broadcast to Poland', *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, 10 June 1942. Available at <https://www.jta.org/1942/06/10/archive/sikorski-assails-nazi-atrocities-against-jews-in-broadcast-to-poland>.

²⁰ Ignacy Schwarzbart, member of the Polish National Council, Zionist, and frequent adversary of Zygielbojm, was of this opinion. Yad Vashem Archives (YVA), M2/767 Schwarzbart Diary (English) 27 June 1942, 180.

revealed to the British public that the Germans had killed 700,000 Jews in Poland, and drew attention to the use of gas.²¹ The following day Noel Newsome in a BBC broadcast spoke of the massacre of the Jews in Poland and referred to ‘mobile lethal chambers’²². The BBC also broadcast news from the Bund Report in Polish and Zygielbojm spoke over the airwaves.²³ This broadcast was heard in Warsaw and noted by Emanuel Ringelblum and his colleagues.²⁴

Over the next few days the news from Poland featured deep within a number of national newspapers and in the regional press. On 29 June the British Section of the World Jewish Congress held a conference which highlighted information about German atrocities against Jews, including data derived from the Bund Report.²⁵ According to Ignacy Schwarzbart, Joel Cang, the journalist and editor of *The Polish Jewish Observer* (and former *Manchester Guardian* correspondent in Warsaw), asked ‘questions which were clearly aimed to put Zygielbojm [sic] in the forefront’.²⁶ The following day Zygielbojm issued an English language circular reporting the news

²¹ See *The Daily Telegraph* ‘Germans murder 700,000 Jews in Poland’ 25 June 1942, p. 5. The article is available at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/history/world-war-two/11370972/Holocaust-Memorial-Day-Telegraph-revealed-Nazi-gas-chambers-three-years-before-liberation-of-Auschwitz.html>. Schwarzbart was critical of Zygielbojm. In his diary entry for 25 June 1942, Schwarzbart wrote: ‘God knows how many thousand of Jews will pay with their lives for this press news. It should have been given without disclosing the source. But Mr Zygielbojm was anxious to cook for the Bund a little glory. How saddening’. YVA, M2/767 Schwarzbart Diary (English) 25 June 1942, p. 175.

²² Noel Newsome ‘The massacre of the Jews in Poland’ *The ‘Man in the Street’ (of the BBC) Talks to Europe*, Westminster: P.S. King and Staples, pp. 62-63.

²³ Prior to his broadcast, Zygielbojm met Mikołajczyk. Mikołajczyk is almost certain to have discussed the forthcoming broadcast. See Hoover Institute Archive (hereafter HIA), Stanisław Mikołajczyk Papers, Box 1 Folder 3. Available at https://szukajwarchiwach.pl/800/22/0/-/1/str/1/17/15/hr2d6yD0_ZLPsTSudIVGAg/#tabSkany

²⁴ The transcription of the 26 June 1942 BBC broadcast, including Zygielbojm’s speech, as heard by Ringelblum in the Warsaw ghetto is found in the Ringelblum archive at the Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw. It is available at <http://www.jhi.pl/en/blog/2015-06-26-the-anniversary-of-the-bbc-radio-report-on-the-fate-of-polish-jews>. Also see Polish Underground (1939-1945) Study Trust, Adam and Lidia Ciołkosz Archive, Kol 133/258 [Summary of information received by Zygielbojm] 26 June 1942.

²⁵ Following the 29 June British Section of the World Jewish Congress conference, Ignacy Schwarzbart sent a summary of British reporting to the Board of Deputies of British Jews. Many British newspapers noted that 1 million Jews had been killed since the war began. However, Schwarzbart failed to highlight that these stories tended to be buried deep within the newspapers. See London Metropolitan Archive, ACC 3121 C11 012 087.

²⁶ YVA, M2/767 Schwarzbart Diary (English) 29 June 1942, p. 180.

from Poland and on 2 July he delivered a broadcast in Yiddish on the BBC's Polish Service.²⁷

However, the loss of control over the news agenda disturbed officials in the Foreign Office. In the authoritative Weekly Political Intelligence Summary (WPIS), which was distributed to around 500 members of the British governing class (ministers, leading civil servants, diplomats etc.), the news from Poland was treated with circumspection.²⁸ WPIS 143 of 1 July 1942 advised readers that the 700,000 Jews murdered by Germans in Poland as reported in a newspaper 'should for the present be treated with caution', but it noted that 'the Germans desire to see as many Jews as possible perish'. The Summary suggested that 200,000 Jews had been killed and indicated that it was possible that another 400,000 or 500,000 Jews had died in the ghettos 'as a result of overcrowding, undernourishment and lack of proper medical treatment'.²⁹ On the same day, the Polish government's *The Polish Fortnightly Review* reported on Jews being murdered at Sobibór.

Despite the Foreign Office's strategic circumspection in relation to the information revealed in the Bund Report (some of which was reiterated in a Polish intelligence report which arrived in London on 23 June), Brendan Bracken, the Minister of Information, chose to host a conference which highlighted that '700,000 Jews alone have been murdered in Poland'.³⁰ Zygielbojm spoke at the conference and emphasized that 'in Poland a monstrous plan of extermination of all the

²⁷ See 'The atrocities in Poland – BBC broadcast to the world', *The Jewish Chronicle*, 10 July 1942, p. 1.

²⁸ The Weekly Political Intelligence Summaries have been published, see Clifton Child (ed.) (1983) *Great Britain. Foreign Office. Weekly Political Intelligence Summaries*, London: Kraus International Publications.

²⁹ The writer and Foreign Office reviewer / editor of the WPIS (possibly Frank Savery and Frank Roberts) distinguished between 'active' killing (for example, executions) and death caused by the system imposed on Jews that resulted in excess deaths i.e. (social murder). They could imagine that 700,000 Polish Jews had died during the German occupation, but considered that most had perished due to the German-imposed conditions in the ghettos rather than by being 'actively' killed. This differentiation between 'social murder' and active killing hindered the recipients of WPIS from comprehending the scale and pace of Germany's programme of annihilation in occupied Poland. For an early discussion of 'social murder' see Friedrich Engels (1993) *The condition of the working class in England*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 107.

³⁰ Brendan Bracken (1942) *Bestiality...unknown in any previous record of history...*, London: Polish Ministry of Information, p. 38.

Jews is being ruthlessly executed' by the Germans.³¹ The BBC's Home Service reported on the conference in its 9pm news bulletin and made the Service's first of very few references to the Germans' use of gas.

Although Bracken himself referred to the 700,000 murdered Jews reported in the Bund Report, the Polish Minister of the Interior, Stanisław Mikołajczyk, cited a lower figure – in excess of 200,000 – and suggested that 200,000 non-Jewish Poles had also perished. Mikołajczyk had met Frank Savery of the British Embassy to Poland on 29 June and had passed on some Polish intelligence reports.³² It is possible that Savery had advised Mikołajczyk of the Foreign Office position in relation to the news from the Bund Report.³³ Nevertheless, Mikołajczyk reported that the 'wholesale extermination of the Jews' had begun and referred to the killing of Jews at Bełżec.³⁴

The terrible news from Poland was made public in Britain in late June and early July, but it was not a lead news story and was reported deep inside the national and regional press. For some in the Labour Party this was unacceptable and moves were made to highlight German atrocities against Jews. On 6 July 1942, the Labour Party's *International Supplement* reported on the gassing of Jews at Chelmno on its front page. *The International Supplement* was sent to Labour Party members and branches throughout Britain. The same day, William Gillies, International Secretary of the Labour Party (and editor of the *International Supplement*), distributed invitations to a meeting of the Labour Party and parties of the European Left exiled in London, at which Zygielbojm was to speak.

Zygielbojm had joined the Huysmans Committee in contravention of the wishes of the Bund in the United States.³⁵ It is

³¹ Zygielbojm 'Statement by Mr S. Zygielbojm' in Bracken, B. (1942) *Bestiality...unknown in any previous record of history...*, London: Polish Ministry of Information, p. 50.

³² NA.FO 371/31097 (124-7). In 1944 the British Embassy to the Polish Government in Exile was bombed. Files were destroyed, including any Polish documents.

³³ Speculatively, if this was the case, it is not impossible that part of that conversation was lost in translation – The writer of WPIS 143 settled on a figure of 200,000 killed and pointed to 400,000-500,000 additional deaths. Mikołajczyk may have simply heard the 200,000 figure and repeated that at the 9 July conference. It is unlikely that Mikołajczyk saw the Weekly Political Intelligence Summary.

³⁴ Stanisław Mikołajczyk, 'The German Terror in Poland' in Bracken, B. (1942) *Bestiality...unknown in any previous record of history...*, London: Polish Ministry of Information, pp. 39-46; p. 39.

³⁵ See Tombs, 'Morituri vos salutant' p. 245. Also see Blatman, 'On a Mission...' p. 298. Zygielbojm was supposed to obtain authorisation from the Bund in the United States in

possible that the failure of Labour figures on the ‘liberal wing’ (i.e. non socialist Vansittartists) to assist him in his efforts to highlight the Soviet imprisonment of Erlich and Alter, their (Labour figures’) relative passivity in relation to the news from Poland and Zygielbojm’s need for outside support to help him with his work (including publicising news from Poland) all encouraged him to liaise with the Huysmans Committee.³⁶

For Zygielbojm, the Huysmans Committee cemented Labour’s links with international socialists in London and provided important support for the distribution of information from Poland. By aligning with this group and members of the Labour Party who endorsed socialist Vansittartist views, Zygielbojm is likely to have alienated other wings of the Labour Party. But he had little choice – no other group was particularly interested in the news that Zygielbojm sought to disseminate. Eleven days later, on 17 July, Zygielbojm spoke to fellow Leftists about the news from Poland.³⁷

The 17 July meeting had a number of consequences. First, it provided further encouragement for the Labour Party’s National Executive Committee and later the Trades Union Congress to issue a public resolution. This resolution, issued on 22 July, condemned ‘the organised and bestial atrocities committed by Germany in Poland and Czechoslovakia’ which were ‘without precedent in their naked and savage cruelty’.³⁸ It also called for those responsible to be ‘brought to stern justice at the close of the war’.³⁹ The resolution was silent on the main issue on which Zygielbojm spoke – the mass killing of Polish Jews. Second, it committed the Labour Party to organise a conference

order to participate in any political discussions. Invitation to join the committee was made on a personal rather than party basis. Camille Huysmans was secretary of the Second International. In August 1942, the Bund leadership in New York continued to forbid Zygielbojm from joining the Huysmans Committee. In practice, co-operation continued. See Daniel Blatman (2003) *For Our Freedom and Yours: The Jewish Labor Bund – Poland 1939-1949*, trans. Naftali Greenwood, London: Valentine Mitchell, p. 140.

³⁶ Blatman notes the scale and scope of work that Zygielbojm had to undertake in his role as the Bund’s representative on the Polish National Council. See Blatman, ‘On a Mission...’.

³⁷ That same day, Zygielbojm also met Mikołajczyk. Over the subsequent weeks he spoke with the Polish Minister of the Interior on a semi-regular basis. At the end of July he was advised of the situation in the Warsaw ghetto. Meetings with Mikołajczyk took place on 22, 27, 29 July (and perhaps 20 July). HIA Stanisław Mikołajczyk Papers, Box 1 Folder 3.

³⁸ News of the Lidice massacre of June 1942 was widely distributed.

³⁹ People’s History Museum (PHM) LP/ID/21. Also at: Labour Party, International Sub-Committee minutes, 17 July 1942 (Hassocks, 1976).

on German atrocities in Poland and Czechoslovakia. Third, it provided support for, and a commitment to ensure the widest circulation of, a text being prepared by ‘Polish comrades, with a preface by A.J. Dobbs’ entitled *The extermination of a nation*. By 22 July Zygielbojm had prepared an initial outline of the issues that the booklet should include.⁴⁰ This was to undergo revision during August 1942.

For Gillies, the 17 July meeting was a success – the Labour Party had focused on German atrocities and had undertaken a series of commitments to highlight them to the wider Labour movement and to the British public. Following the 22 July resolution, the 11 August 1942 edition of the Labour Party’s *International Supplement* published extensive details of the situation in Poland and drew attention to the murder of Jews through the use of gas at Chełmno. Jim Middleton, the Labour Party General Secretary, noted that the details in this section had been submitted by ‘trustworthy’ Polish comrades – Szmul Zygielbojm, Adam Ciołkosz, Jan Stańczyk and Jan Kwapiński.⁴¹

The same information was incorporated in the text mentioned at the 17 July meeting of the European Left that was being prepared through August 1942 by Zygielbojm in conjunction with the Polish Social Information Bureau, headed by the well-known journalist Jerzy Szapiro. *The extermination of a nation* was re-titled *Stop Them Now: German Mass-murder of Jews in Poland* and was published on 2 September with an initial print run of 25,000 copies.⁴² The booklet on its back cover highlighted that ‘it is evident that the policy of the Germans is to wipe out entirely, not only the Jews in Poland, but the Jewish population of the whole of Europe’.

Over the course of July and August Zygielbojm spoke at numerous events to highlight what was happening in occupied Poland. He also spoke to the press. At the end of July 1942, for instance, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency reported that Zygielbojm believed that the German policy of murdering Polish Jews, which had cost 700,000 lives, ‘was a prelude to a systematic campaign to wipe out the entire population of the Warsaw ghetto’.⁴³ And through the second half of 1942, he played an important role in gathering names and addresses of

⁴⁰ See Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum, London A10 4/10 Memorandum – by Zygielbojm.

⁴¹ Ciołkosz, Stańczyk and Kwapiński were leading figures of the Polish Socialist Party.

⁴² Ultimately 60,000 copies were published.

⁴³ ‘Thousands of Jews seized in Warsaw ghetto for forced labor executed in woods’, Daily News Bulletin, Jewish Telegraphic Agency, 29 July 1942.

Jews in Poland for the food parcel scheme which had been sanctioned by the Ministry of Economic Warfare in July 1942.⁴⁴ This scheme sought to send food parcels from Lisbon to the ghettos in Poland, but no parcels were sent in 1942.⁴⁵

Zygielbojm liaised with a range of socialists who were associated with the Fight for Freedom Editorial and Publishing group. This organisation was set up at the end of 1941 by British and exiled socialists while debate about the nature of and responsibility for Nazism continued within the (non-communist) Left.⁴⁶ Its leading figure was the German-Jewish socialist Walter Loeb. People affiliated with this organisation held (or recognised the utility of) Vansittartist-type views on the nature of Germans, and they proved to be most open to the news from Poland and were willing to publicise it. It is no accident that many of the participants at the 2 September 1942 protest meeting at Caxton Hall organised by the Labour Party were from that particular faction of the Left.⁴⁷ Situating the Labour Party's and the broader European Left's response to the news from the Bund Report and other news of the Germans' actions against Jews within the context of the ongoing

⁴⁴ See London Metropolitan Archive (LMA) ACC/3121/C/11/012/091 (2) (90) Zygielbojm to Brotman (12 October 1942). Zygielbojm was of the view that no publicity should be given to the scheme.

⁴⁵ Benzion Margulies, Chairman of the Council of Polish Jews, held the Board of Deputies of British Jews responsible for failing to send parcels to the ghettos. See LMA ACC/3121/C/11/012/92 (3) (76a, 76b, 77).

⁴⁶ See Isabelle Tombs (1996) 'The Victory of Socialist Vansittartism: Labour and the German Question 1941-1945' in *Twentieth Century British History* 7 3 pp. 287-309. Also see Jörg Thunecke (2016) 'Fight for Freedom: A Vansittartist Network of Rightwing German Socialists in Great Britain' in Helga Schreckenberger (ed.) *Networks of Refugees from Nazi Germany: Continuities, Reorientations, and Collaborations in Exile*, Leiden: Brill. Thunecke labels Fight For Freedom a 'right-wing Vansittartist network' and seems to endorse speculative and unsubstantiated claims that Walter Loeb was a Nazi agent, first mooted by Philip Noel Baker in 1997. He queries where FFF's funding came from, writing that Loeb's 'financial shenanigans were one of the reasons for the suggestion that he was a Nazi agent'. Thunecke fails to mention the role members of Fight For Freedom played in highlighting news of the Holocaust. Tombs also tackles the issue of funding for the FFF and indicates that organisational profits together with undisclosed subsidies from Jewish donors and the Dutch Government-in Exile supported the group.

⁴⁷ The protest meeting was publicised in August 1942. In a diary entry dated 21 August 1942, Ignacy Schwarzbart wrote 'Zygielbojm is arranging September 2nd a great meeting with Morrison, Kwapinsky devoted to the Jewish situation in Poland. He has to be congratulated. The labor party is helping him more than the Zionist party is helping me' [sic]. YVA, M2/167 Schwarzbart Diary (English) 21 August 1942, p. 258. Schwarzbart's office in Bayswater was subsidised by the Board of Deputies of British Jews and by the Jewish Colonisation Association. See LMA ACC/3121/E/03/516.

internal debate within the Left on the nature of Nazism is important and allows a more nuanced understanding of the difficulties that Zygielbojm faced in London.

In late August 1942, for instance, Zygielbojm liaised with Adam Ciołkosz of the Polish Socialist Party. Ciołkosz, like his Polish socialist colleague Adam Pragier, worked with the Fight for Freedom group. On 22 August Zygielbojm and Ciołkosz developed a resolution which they wished to see adopted at the Labour Party's protest meeting on 2 September. They highlighted the 'premeditated slaughter of hundreds of thousands of men, women and children among the Jewish population', and called on 'the Allied Governments not only to precipitate the day of victory and liberation from this outrageous slavery, but also to apply immediately special measures which will put an end to this orgy of murder'.⁴⁸ The protest meeting ultimately did not discuss or approve the resolution and this, in part, may have contributed to Zygielbojm's alleged over-wrought state at the meeting.⁴⁹

In his speech at the 2 September 1942 protest meeting, Zygielbojm highlighted the latest news from Warsaw as well as information from the Bund Report of May 1942: 'Seven thousand people daily are taken from the ghetto, apparently to be deported, but everyone in the ghetto knows that they are led to their execution'.⁵⁰ The reporting of the conference in the national press was minimal. The *Daily Herald*, on whose board sat leading figures of the Labour Movement, including Walter Citrine, did not report on the protest meeting. This may, in part, be a reflection of the cleavages within the Labour Party in relation to socialist Vansittartism. *The Times* and *The Manchester Guardian* noted Home Secretary Herbert Morrison's speech at the meeting on page eight and page six respectively. In contrast, and atypically in the British media landscape, *The Daily Telegraph* – the paper which had first published the news from the Bund Report, referred to the gas chambers at Chełmno in a page 3 article entitled 'Gas Chamber Massacres – Nazi Slaughter of Polish Jews'.

⁴⁸ PUMST AALC Kol133/386 (Działalność 1942) Resolution 22.8.1942. Also see PHM LP/ID/21 (undated).

⁴⁹ Walter Laqueur notes that 'Zygielbojm seemed over-excited and over-wrought by many of those present'. See Walter Laqueur, (1989) 'Hitler's Holocaust: Who Knew what, when and how' in Michael Marrus, *The Nazi Holocaust: Part 8, Bystanders to the Holocaust* (Volume 1. London), pp. 60-79, p. 66.

⁵⁰ Zygielbojm's speech was published in A. Dobbs (1942) *German Atrocities in Poland and Czechoslovakia: Labour's Protest*, London: Liberty Press.

The view from the Foreign Office

In the summer of 1942, the Foreign Office marginalised and cast doubt on the news about German atrocities against Jews. In August 1942, Foreign Office officials sought to dissuade Sydney Silverman from distributing the news from the Riegner Telegram which highlighted Germany's intent to annihilate Jews.⁵¹ The Foreign Office also received news about the Warsaw ghetto which, together with news published in *The Times* on 17 August (and on the back cover of *Stop Them Now*), indicated that the ghetto was being liquidated.⁵² The Foreign Office managed to persuade the Liberal Member of Parliament Geoffrey Mander to withdraw a parliamentary question about Chelmno in early September using arguments, as Walter Laqueur has noted, that 'were so illogical that it must be asked whether they were not misquoted in transmission' and, through the Weekly Political Intelligence Summary, promoted its strategic scepticism among the British governing class.⁵³

The Foreign Office worked hard to regain control over the news agenda in relation to the presentation of atrocities for a number of reasons, including concerns regarding the situation in the Middle East and provoking antisemitism (including among the elite) in Britain, and worked to counter arguments publicised by Robert Vansittart.⁵⁴ Vansittart, on 1 September 1942, delivered a powerful talk on the BBC's Home Service on German actions in Poland which was later published in *The Listener* on 10 September. Vansittart highlighted that:

⁵¹ See NA FO 371/30917 (101) and Laqueur *The Terrible Secret...*, p. 80.

⁵² Dariusz Stola has noted that this news – framed as though it came from Reuters in Zurich, was actually derived from a cable sent by Stefan Korboński (head of the Civilian Struggle Directorate (Kierownictwo Walki Cywilnej)) in Warsaw. See Dariusz Stola (1997) 'Early News of the Holocaust from Poland' *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 11, pp. 1-27, p. 24, fn. 49.

⁵³ See Walter Laqueur (1998) *The Terrible Secret: Suppression of the Truth about Hitler's 'Final Solution'*, New York: Henry Holt, p. 221. This included concerns about undue publicity exposing those in Poland to German sanctions. Also see Michael Fleming (2015) 'Intelligence from Poland on Chelmno: British Responses', *Holocaust Studies*, 21:3, pp. 172-190.

⁵⁴ Real, as opposed to strategic, scepticism about news of atrocities existed in Britain, in part, as a result of Arthur Ponsonby's (and others') revisionist account of British propaganda during the First World War. See Arthur Ponsonby (1928) *Falsehood in War-Time: Containing an Assortment of Lies Circulated Throughout the Nations During the Great War*, London: George Allen and Unwin. Recent scholarship has challenged Ponsonby's argument. See Adrian Gregory (2009) *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War*, New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 44.

The fate of Polish Jews is unspeakably tragic. They are murdered by the thousands daily, even children – and poison gas is used to do the dreadful work. Hundreds of thousands of Polish Jews have already perished. Hitler has no use for the Jews: he does not even consider them as potential slaves like the Poles. Never in history were terror and oppression so well organised or on such a scale of cruelty.⁵⁵

Countering Vansittart's contentions allowed the Foreign Office to maintain policy flexibility in relation to the future of Germany, and neutered arguments calling for actions to help those being killed. Officials chose to question the evidence that Vansittart marshalled, which undermined the potency of the distributed information about German atrocities among key constituencies.

Conflict within the Labour Movement

Similar processes were at work within the Labour Party and within the broader European Left exiled in London. Although socialist Vansittartists such as William Gillies and leftists affiliated with the Fight For Freedom organisation played a key role in focusing attention on German atrocities and providing support to Żygielbojm through July and August 1942, they were not able to sustain that support in later months. Following the protest meeting on 2 September, Austrian socialists, under the leadership of Oscar Pollak, launched a scathing attack on the meeting. Pollak asserted that excluding socialists from 'a Fascist country is a narrowly nationalist attitude'. More pointedly, Pollak contended that the 'Vansittartist obsession to punish all Germans...prevents Labour from fully realising the vast international implications of this war...'.⁵⁶ The Labour Party chairman (and chair of the Protest Meeting) refuted Pollak's claims in a letter on 24 September, but Pollak continued his criticism, noting that it was 'utterly

⁵⁵ Robert Vansittart (1942) 'Never in History...' in *The Listener* 10 September 1942, pp. 325-326. The Polish Foreign Minister, Edward Raczyński, thanked Vansittart for highlighting the situation in Poland in his broadcast. Edward Raczyński (1962) *In Allied London* London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, p. 121.

⁵⁶ London Information of the Austrian Socialists in Great Britain 15 September 1942, p. 4. Available at PHM/LP/ID/21

wrong to treat Socialists of any country differently from those of other countries because they happened to be the first crushed by the Nazis or other Fascists'.⁵⁷

Pollak's criticism which, *on its own terms*, was not without merit, failed to recognise the gravity of the German mass-murder of Jews which Zygielbojm and others were calling attention to. Pollak, fellow Austrian Karl Czernetz and German Hans Vogel had sent their apologies for not attending the 17 July meeting of Labour figures and international socialists. This failure to participate in the earlier meeting meant socialists from Axis countries missed an important opportunity to discuss the news from Poland and to express their views on it in a constructive manner prior to the 2 September public protest meeting. Pollak's intervention had a significant impact on how Labour managed news of atrocities over the subsequent months and years. Socialist Vansittartists found it more difficult to speak out, as unity (both within the Labour Party and across the European Left) and discipline were increasingly valued. Labour never organised another protest meeting to highlight German atrocities during the course of the war, despite a great deal more information arriving in London.

Within the internal politics of Labour, the issue of German atrocities against Jews had the potential to lay bare, once again, the significant cleavages in how different factions viewed the war and the way in which German atrocities should be understood. It is in this context that Zygielbojm tirelessly sought to find allies in order to persuade his government and the British government to respond to the German slaughter of Jews in Poland. Those who worked closely with him during the summer of 1942 – William Gillies, Adam Ciołkosz, Jerzy Szapiro and the editor of *The Polish Jewish Observer*, Joel Cang – continued to provide support but, with the exception of Cang, they were constrained to various degrees both by the internal situation of the Left in London following the anti-Vansittartist backlash, and by the broader socio-political context which marginalised news of atrocities.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ PHM/LP/ID/21 Pollak to Dobbs, 8 October 1942.

⁵⁸ Cang continued to report news from Poland, including news about the mass killing of Jews at Auschwitz, through the rest of the war in *The Polish Jewish Observer*.

The Polish Ministry of the Interior (Stanisław Mikołajczyk)

In a letter dated 16 October 1942, the Polish Minister of the Interior, Stanisław Mikołajczyk, advised Polish Prime Minister Władysław Sikorski of the situation of Jews in Poland.⁵⁹ Mikołajczyk stated that 200,000 Polish Jews had been murdered. At the 9 July 1942 conference at the British Ministry of Information he had referred to *in excess* of 200,000 and noted that the extermination of Jews had begun. News of mass murder through the use of gas at Sobibór, Chełmno and Bełżec (which had been published in *The Polish Fortnightly Review* in July 1942) had reached London in the early summer, and reports about the deportations from the Warsaw ghetto were circulated from late July 1942.

Both in July and in his October letter to Sikorski, Mikołajczyk provided much lower figures for the number of Polish Jews killed than indicated in the Bund Report. In fact, in his letter to Sikorski in October, Mikołajczyk used the *same* figures that had been passed to the British in July.⁶⁰ By using the same data from three months earlier, Mikołajczyk both ignored intelligence reports that had arrived over the summer and chose not to recalculate the figures based on already circulated information.⁶¹ In addition, Mikołajczyk chose to ignore, in

⁵⁹ HIA, Stanisław Mikołajczyk Papers, Box 51, Folder 23. Available at <https://szukajwarchiwach.pl/800/22/0/-/51/str/1/67/15/PpM2cDddxdFmzdfjRznzGw/#tabSkany>

Mikołajczyk had sent a message to Warsaw the previous day, asking for information. New Documents Archive, Warsaw (AAN) 1325 202/1-2 Message 91, 15 October 1942. (Microfilm 2201/1).

⁶⁰ These statistics were included (on p. 5) in a report translated into English entitled 'The German Terror in Poland', dated 9 July 1942, which was distributed by the Polish Ministry of Information and Documentation. See HIA, Stanisław Mikołajczyk Papers, Box 63, Folder 16 – available at <https://szukajwarchiwach.pl/800/22/0/-/63/str/1/51/15#tabSkany>. These statistics were then republished in the Weekly Political Summary (145) of 15 July 1942.

⁶¹ Messages received by Polish officials in London from the Polish Underground in Warsaw over the summer and early autumn that relate to the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto include the following: messages from the delegate, Stefan Korboński, 26 July 1942 and 11 August 1942; a message from Stefan Rowecki 19 August 1942; a message from Polish officials in Bern, 29 September; a message from the Polish Consulate in Istanbul, 15 October. The message from Polish officials in Bern highlighted the ongoing slaughter of Jews. It reported that thousands of Jews were being murdered daily. See the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum, London (PISM) A9 III 4 t5, Message 51. Sent 29 September 1942, processed 1 October 1942. Also see Dariusz Stola (1997) 'Early News of the Holocaust from Poland' *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 11, pp. 1-27, fn. 69. Mikołajczyk, as the Minister of the Interior, had access to this data. (Scholars continue to

the figures he cited, those Jews who died due to overcrowding, malnourishment and lack of medical care in the ghettos. This policy of ‘social murder’ was well known, and the Foreign Office’s 1 July 1942 Weekly Political Intelligence Summary, as noted, had published an estimate of the number of Jews who had perished. That summary was based on information handed, almost certainly, to Frank Savery by Mikołajczyk himself.⁶²

The same day that Mikołajczyk wrote to Sikorski, the Weekly Political Intelligence Summary (158) advised the British governing class that:

Jews are being steadily deported from Warsaw – sometimes as many as 6,000 in a day – to unknown destinations. Although there is no certain information as to what happens to these unfortunates, the Polish Government fear that very many are put to death.⁶³

This data was most probably derived from information passed to Savery by Mikołajczyk. Mikołajczyk met Savery on 8 and 12 October.⁶⁴ The Foreign Office’s policy of strategic scepticism was expressed in the tone of the WPIS report, but its substance indicated that the Polish

debate whether Mikołajczyk saw the 19 August message from Rowecki. This message was de-encrypted on 26 August, and on 1 September Mikołajczyk had a long meeting with Michał Protasewicz, head of the VI Bureau. The VI Bureau handled incoming messages – see Stanisław Mikołajczyk Papers, Box 1 Folder 3). It should also be noted that even British officials without access to Polish intelligence reports recognised the German process of extermination (i.e. the number of victims at a later date would be greater than at an earlier date). Ernest Cooper of the Aliens Department of the Home Office circulated a ‘Memorandum on Post-War Problems’ (on 29 August 1942). He understood that the German authorities were sending Jews to Poland where they were ‘starved and subject to mass murder, no doubt with the deliberate intention of exterminating that section of the Jewish race over whom the German Government exercises any control’. NA.HO 213/1347, paragraph 13.

⁶² Mikołajczyk met Savery on 29 June and handed over documents. See NA.FO 371/31907 (124-7) and HIA, Stanisław Mikołajczyk Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, appointment book entry 29 June 1942. Available at https://szukajwarchiwach.pl/800/22/0/-/1/str/1/17/15/hr2d6yD0_ZLPsTSudIVGAg/#tabSkany. Savery may have written the Polish section of the summary in 1942. Frank Roberts was one of the Foreign Office officials who regularly reviewed and edited the summary.

⁶³ Dated 14 October, the WPIS was actually released on 16 October.

⁶⁴ HIA, Stanisław Mikołajczyk Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, appointment book entries for 8 October 1942 and 12 October 1942. Available at <https://szukajwarchiwach.pl/800/22/0/-/1/skan/full/PXOVrL53O-vUQ0IFiyPGsQ>

Government in Exile (Mikołajczyk) had an understanding of what was happening in Warsaw and had shared this with British officials.

The discrepancy between what was being reported to the British and what Mikołajczyk reported to Sikorski may be due to several factors. In general terms, Mikołajczyk had a range of reasons to downplay German actions against Jews. First, the Polish Right was sensitive to Jewish suffering overshadowing Polish suffering. Mikołajczyk was critical of Zygielbojm in publicising news from the Bund Report, and of what he described as 'Jewish demagogy'. In choosing to adopt this perspective (and this language), Mikołajczyk echoed the views of those on the Right and signalled his impatience with the activities of Jewish representatives.

Second, Mikołajczyk rightly recognised that divergent accounts of Polish source material risked undermining the credibility of Polish intelligence. But even if Mikołajczyk did not wish to endorse the data in the May 1942 Bund Report, he had a duty to make it clear to Sikorski that the data he was citing had already been published three months earlier. It was not data that any reasonable person with access to Polish intelligence reports which arrived over the summer could suggest provided an up to date view of the situation of Jews in Poland. Mikołajczyk's solution to the divergent responses to news from Poland was to seek to strengthen the Ministry of the Interior's (i.e. his) control over the dissemination of intelligence from Poland. He proposed to Sikorski that the Ministry of the Interior should become a more robust gatekeeper of intelligence from Poland. News of atrocities against Jews (and the way Jewish representatives on the Polish National Council were distributing it) became an opportunity to strengthen the Ministry of the Interior vis à vis other ministries (i.e. the Ministry of Information and Documentation) and political representatives.

Third, it seems as though Mikołajczyk was particularly responsive to the British Foreign Office on the issue of news of German atrocities against Jews. The strategic scepticism of the Foreign Office in relation to atrocities committed by Germans certainly provided encouragement to Mikołajczyk to advance lower numbers in public and to Sikorski. It may well have been that Mikołajczyk was aware of the Foreign Office's concern about Sikorski's 'pro-Jewish' inclinations, and may have sought to mislead him while at the same time enhancing his own credibility with the British by providing more

accurate updates to the Foreign Office.⁶⁵ Sikorski was scheduled to speak at the end of the month at a conference on German atrocities convened by the Board of Deputies at the Royal Albert Hall. By forwarding him old data and complaining about the activities of Jewish members of the National Council, Mikołajczyk may have been trying to influence the content and tone of Sikorski's speech.⁶⁶

A fourth possible reason can be advanced. In the summer of 1942, some Polish cipher codes had been broken by the Swedes and by the Germans. Mikołajczyk was lucky not to be sacked.⁶⁷ During August, news from Stefan Rowecki provided further details of the deportations of Jews from Warsaw – a population of 400,000 had been reduced to 150,000.⁶⁸ Given that Mikołajczyk seems not to have passed this information on in August or September (assuming that he saw it), making reference to it in October would have raised questions as to why it had not been distributed earlier. This, in turn, could have led to further doubts about Mikołajczyk's position as Minister of the Interior. In October, when pressed by Sikorski on the situation of Jews in Poland, Mikołajczyk simply reiterated his earlier opinion. To do otherwise would have meant revealing the intelligence that Michał Protasewicz (Polish VI Bureau) had circulated, and retreating from the sceptical position that he had chosen to adopt.

The Minister of the Interior's response to the news from Poland was not helpful to Zygielbojm's (and the Zionist Ignacy Schwarzbart's) efforts to foster knowledge in Britain of what was happening to Jews in Poland during the period of June to November 1942. As a key gatekeeper of information from Poland, Mikołajczyk had access to Polish intelligence and was kept abreast of information from other

⁶⁵ Frank Roberts of the Foreign Office wrote to Godfrey Lias at the Ministry of Information on 21 August 1942 and noted that Sikorski was 'not averse from embarrassing His Majesty's Government if at the same time he could appease influential Zionists'. NA.FO 371/30917 (90).

⁶⁶ Sikorski considered 'the figure of 200,000 as a conservative estimate of the number of Jews massacred by the Nazis in Poland'. See PISM PRM 88/2 (23) 12 November 1942.

⁶⁷ See NA.HS 4/135. Letter from Lieutenant Colonel Peter Allix Wilkinson of Special Operations Executive to E. Coote at the Foreign Office, 20 August 1942.

⁶⁸ PUMST 3.1.1.2 (28) Message nr 638. 25 August 1942. The message is also available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wielka_akeja_likwidacyjna_getta_warszawskie_go_Radiogram_Stefana_Grota-Roweckiego_z_25_sierpnia_1942.jpg. Also see Adam Puławski (2007) 'Nie ujawniać czynnikiem nieoficjalnym: Depesze AK o Zagładzie' in *Więź*, Warsaw, pp. 69-80.

sources.⁶⁹ By questioning the Bund Report (probably with some encouragement from the British Foreign Office) and being less than candid about the information that arrived in the summer of 1942, including the Rowecki message of 19 August about the Warsaw ghetto, he missed an opportunity to assist those Polish citizens most persecuted by Germany. And without the support of a key ministry of the Polish government, Zygielbojm's mission was made unnecessarily difficult.

Further news from Poland: November 1942

Following the major revelations of the Bund Report of May 1942 and the Polish intelligence report which arrived in London on 23 June 1942, further information about German actions against Jews continued to arrive in London from different sources. In late July, the first indications of German deportations from Warsaw were reported. Even the Weekly Political Intelligence Summary of 5 August 1942 reported that 'within the last few weeks some thousands of Polish Jews have been removed from the Warsaw and Lublin ghettos'. At the beginning of September the British Foreign Office received, via the Polish Ambassador in the United States, information that had been sent from Switzerland to Jacob Rosenheim, President of the World Orthodox Organisation 'Agudas Israel'. It reported on the evacuation of the Warsaw ghetto and that 100,000 Jews had already been murdered.⁷⁰ In early October an intercepted message from Richard Lichtheim (the Geneva Representative of the Jewish Agency) to Joseph Linton in London, which reported that the Warsaw ghetto had nearly been emptied of people, reached the Foreign Office.⁷¹

On 29 October the Board of Deputies of British Jews convened a conference at the Royal Albert Hall highlighting German actions against Jews. The meeting was chaired by the archbishop of Canterbury and included representatives from the Allied nations. Prime Minister Sikorski highlighted the 'ruthless mass persecution and extermination of Jews in Poland' and stated that Jews were being killed 'in tens of

⁶⁹ The Riegner Telegram was circulated in various political and diplomatic circles in London.

⁷⁰ NA.FO 31097 (177). The data was sent to Switzerland by the Polish Underground State. See, for example, David Kranzler (2002) 'Orthodoxy's Finest Hour: Rescue During the Holocaust' in *Jewish Action* (Fall). Available at <https://jewishaction.com/books/reviews/orthodoxys-finest-hour/>

⁷¹ NA.FO 371/30885 (24).

thousands'.⁷² The chief Rabbi, Joseph Hertz, drew attention to the fact that these actions were being marginalised in the press and not being readily presented to the British public. The conference concluded with the issuance of a resolution which recorded 'horror at the deliberate policy of extermination which the Nazis have declared against Jews wherever they are to be found'.⁷³

Although the news of the German policy of extermination reached leading politicians, officials and representatives, it was not being highlighted in the national or regional press. All too often any news about German atrocities was restricted to the inside pages of newspapers, where it was overlooked, ignored and often treated with varying degrees of scepticism by the general public. But in mid-November overdue reports from the Polish Underground State, which had a dramatic impact on how news of German atrocities were to be responded to in Britain, reached London.

These reports were shared with the Jewish representatives on the Polish National Council and were translated. From 24 November 1942 British newspapers increasingly reported on German actions against Jews. *The Daily Telegraph*, for instance, published an article on page three entitled 'European Jewry is being exterminated: Mass butchery by Gestapo'. In addition to information from Poland, news about the situation in Poland was being disseminated in Palestine by Jewish returnees. In the United States, Under-Secretary of State Sumner Welles confirmed the veracity of the August 1942 Riegner Telegram which reported the Germans' intent to exterminate Jews. This confluence of datastreams which all reiterated the same point – that Germany was killing Jews at a mass scale – problematised the public stance of strategic scepticism that the Foreign Office had adopted towards information of this sort.

Zygielbojm was very active in circulating the information he received, and spoke forcefully at the 27 November 1942 Polish National Council meeting to ensure that an appropriate response was forthcoming.⁷⁴ *The Polish Fortnightly Review* of 1 December 1942 was focused on the situation of Jews in Poland, including an extensive

⁷² For Sikorski's speech see PISM PRM 88/2 (23). Available at https://sikorskimuseum-my.sharepoint.com/personal/admin_sikorskimuseum_onmicrosoft_com/Documents/web_files/PRM/PRM_50_99/prm88b.pdf?slid=4d1b839e-00ed-6000-3201-4ef2d8ea9413

⁷³ See *The Polish Jewish Observer* 6 November 1942. Available at the People's History Museum, Manchester, LP ID POL 2.

⁷⁴ Meeting of the Polish National Council, 27 November 1942, PISM A5/2/47a pp. 33-36.

analysis of the Warsaw ghetto. On 10 December, the Polish government issued a note to the Allied governments entitled ‘The mass extermination of Jews in German Occupied Poland’. A week later, the United Nations issued a declaration, read by Anthony Eden in the House of Commons, condemning the Germans’ ‘bestial policy of cold-blooded extermination’.⁷⁵

Zygielbojm met the Polish emissary Jan Karski on 2 December.⁷⁶ Karski had entered the Warsaw ghetto and the Izbica transit camp during 1942, and had delivered reports to Polish intelligence in Paris in October. These reports arrived in London before he did and were already being circulated prior to his debriefing and release from British custody. Karski records Zygielbojm’s agitated state when he passed on messages from Zygielbojm’s Bundist colleagues in Warsaw.

On 3 December, Zygielbojm participated in an emergency meeting of the Joint Foreign Committee (Board of Deputies of British Jews) and reported on what Karski had told him and Ignacy Schwarzbart.⁷⁷ The meeting sought to coordinate a response to the recently arrived news, including organising approaches to the Allied governments. That same day Zygielbojm held meetings with journalists

⁷⁵ Hansard, House of Commons Debates 17 December 1942 volume 385 cc2082-7.

⁷⁶ There has been some scholarly discussion as to when Zygielbojm met Karski. A report published in *The Ghetto Speaks* in March 1943 by the Bund in New York indicated that the meeting took place on 2 December (though Karski is not named). See *The Ghetto Speaks*, 1 March 1943, p. 2. In the 2011 revised edition of *Story of a Secret State* the date of the meeting is provided – 2 December 1942. Given that Zygielbojm and Schwarzbart attended a meeting of the Board of Deputies of British Jews’ Joint Foreign Committee on 3 December at which they reported on information given to them by ‘a gentleman of high standing’ recently arrived from Warsaw, and that Karski was not released from British custody until 28 November, this date seems to be correct. See London Metropolitan Archive ACC 3121 1 C11 7 1 1 (Note of Emergency Meeting Convened by the Joint Foreign Committee, 3/12/1942, p.3) and Jan Karski (2011) *Story of a Secret State*, London: Penguin, p. 363. The earlier 1944 edition does not date the meeting. See Jan Karski (1944) *Story of a Secret State*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, p. 335. For a discussion of the various editions and translations of *Secret State*, see Joanna Rzepa (2018) ‘Translation, conflict and the politics of memory: Jan Karski’s *Story of a Secret State*’ *Translation Studies*. Karski discussed his meeting with Zygielbojm with Claude Lanzmann for the film *Shoah*. The transcript is at https://collections.ushmm.org/film_findingaids/RG-60.5006_01_trs_en.pdf (from p. 45)

⁷⁷ London Metropolitan Archive ACC 3121 1 C11 7 1 1. Zygielbojm met Schwarzbart before the meeting. Schwarzbart was a regular participant in the meetings of the Joint Foreign Committee and he submitted regular reports to the Board of Deputies about the situation in Poland, as well as receiving financial support. See Zygielbojm’s calendar entries for 3 December 1942, reprinted in Aleksander Rowiński (2000) *Zygielbojma śmierć i życie*, Warsaw: Oficyna Literatów ‘Rój’, p. 235.

from a range of newspapers including *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The New York Times*, and met William Gillies and George Dallas of the Labour Party at Transport House.⁷⁸ These men were part of a Labour delegation that met Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden the following day (4 December). The delegation referred to the German persecution of Jews.⁷⁹

Zygielbojm knew that much needed to be done to aid Jews in Poland, but was keenly aware of the limitations of his influence in Britain. These limitations also extended to the Labour Party, which did not lead public opinion or public debate on the issue of German atrocities against Jews. This can be explained by a relative weakening of socialist Vansittartists within Labour, a broader desire to avoid exacerbating tensions between different factions within the Left and a recognition that the British Government was about to make a formal response to the latest news (the UN Declaration of 17 December 1942).

Nevertheless, on 15 December the National Executive Committee (of the Labour Party – NEC) issued an important resolution which stated that:

The British Labour Party appeals to the conscience of civilised mankind to arise in passionate protest against the bloodiest crime in history now being enacted on the European stage by and under the orders of the German government, with the complicity of their Allies.

The homes of men and women of the Jewish faith are being broken up, their families scattered, deported, taken in enslavement, driven to death by cold and hunger, tortured and murdered with calculated, scientific, and pitiless savagery...

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ The delegation to Anthony Eden was comprised of George Dallas, Harold Clay, James Walker, Tom Williamson, William Gillies and Jim Middleton. Dallas, Williamson and Gillies were part of the NEC and General Council of the TUC delegation which had met Eden on 24 August 1942 to formally present the NEC's 22 July 1942 resolution (on 'the organised and bestial atrocities committed by Germany in Poland and Czechoslovakia'). See Labour Party (1943) *Report of the National Executive Committee to the 42nd Annual Conference*, London: Labour Party, p. 37. The Labour Party delegation also discussed the food situation in Belgium.

The resolution highlighted that ‘within a short time the Jewish people...will have been exterminated’.⁸⁰

Despite good relations with a range of socialists in London, and having a willing collaborator in publicising and distributing the terrible news from Poland – the editor of *The Polish Jewish Observer*, Joel Cang, Zygielbojm was confronted by a series of barriers which undermined his mission to elicit a response which could aid the perishing. On 7 December 1942 Zygielbojm distributed material which outlined his demands. He argued for retaliation, for details on German atrocities to be dropped into Germany and for stern warnings to be issued to Germany.⁸¹ On 13 December 1942 Zygielbojm spoke on the BBC. This broadcast was facilitated through a recommendation from the Labour Party and meetings with the Foreign Office’s Polish expert (Frank Savery) – who also liaised with the BBC.⁸²

On 15 December, Zygielbojm sent messages to President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill in which he conveyed the ‘last appeal for help’ from Jews in Poland.⁸³ A reply which mentioned the 17 December UN Declaration and that the British government was looking at ways to bring relief to the victims of German terror was suggested by Foreign Office officials in January 1943.⁸⁴ The 17 December 1942 UN Declaration had included a stern warning to Germany and stated that ‘those responsible for these crimes shall not escape retribution...’ Leaflets which referred to the unnatural death of 600,000 Jews in Poland were dropped over Germany. The drastically reduced number (in December 1942, various national newspapers in Britain reported a

⁸⁰ For the full resolution, see Labour Party (1943) *Report of the National Executive Committee to the 42nd Annual Conference*, London: Labour Party, p. 38.

⁸¹ People’s History Museum, Manchester, LP ID 21. Zygielbojm also spoke with Mikołajczyk the same day. Also see Zygielbojm’s note to the Polish Foreign Minister, Edward Raczyński, dated 15 January 1943. HIA, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Box 612, Folder Box 14. Available at <https://szukajwarchiwach.pl/800/42/0/-/612/str/1/21/15#tabSkany>

⁸² See Tombs ‘*Morituri vos salutant*’ p. 250. A (sanitised) translation of Zygielbojm’s speech was published in the 1 February 1943 edition of *The Ghetto Speaks*, pp. 7-8. Also see Władysław Bartoszewski and Marek Edelman (2010) *I była dzielnica żydowska w Warszawie: Wybór tekstów*, Warsaw: PWN, pp. 113-14.

⁸³ PISM A10 9 7. Zygielbojm telegram to Churchill and Roosevelt, 15 December 1942. The Polish Telegraphic Agency published the contents of the telegram on 16 December 1942.

⁸⁴ NA.FO 371/31097 (C12895).

figure of 2 million – in line with the intelligence arriving from Europe) was a standard part of British propaganda strategy.⁸⁵

However, there was no retaliation and the Bermuda Conference of April 1943 failed to offer any practical strategy to provide escape or relief for Jews trapped and being systematically killed by Nazi Germany. In form, some of Zygielbojm's demands were met, but in substance the main advance was the firming up of the commitment to ensure those guilty would be brought to justice – at the end of the war. This was of little help to Zygielbojm's family, friends and colleagues in Poland.⁸⁶

After the 17 December 1942 UN Declaration

Zygielbojm sustained his relationship with the Fight For Freedom group and the Huysmans Committee. On 18 December 1942 he attended a conference entitled 'Germany's Thirty Years War' at the Savoy Hotel in London. He was sat at the top table and was introduced by the leading figure of Fight For Freedom, Walter Loeb, as 'a guest who represents the people with the saddest lot in Europe, the Jews of Poland'. Zygielbojm was not scheduled to speak – the conference was mainly concerned about the future of Germany, but he made an important intervention.

Whatever we do or say about retribution or punishment after the war cannot stop this mass slaughter which is going on, nor rescue a single soul of those millions who are sentenced to death today in Poland and all over Europe.⁸⁷

Zygielbojm also questioned the effectiveness of international law:

An International Committee would look for the men who gave the orders. They would go for the men who gave the orders. They would go to the top and they would reduce the whole thing to a

⁸⁵ NA FO 371/34550 C2431.

⁸⁶ Zygielbojm's wife Manya and son Artek lost their lives during the Ghetto rising in spring 1943.

⁸⁷ Zygielbojm in Fight for Freedom (1943) *Round Table Conference 'Germany's Thirty Years' War' 18th December, 1942 in London*, London: Fight for Freedom Editorial and Publishing Services, p. 48.

single man or to a few men at the top. Well, what about those many thousands of people who have carried out orders – orders which have nothing to do with war?⁸⁸

Zygielbojm was right to be concerned about this. That same day, the Political Warfare Executive in its general directive to the BBC instructed that ‘we should treat the extermination of the Jews simply as a policy personally dictated by Hitler’.⁸⁹ This anti-Vansittartist approach cut across British politics and was aligned with the views of those on the Left who spoke about the ‘other Germany’.

In his speech, Zygielbojm also stated that while he was in Warsaw and witnessed German crimes, he was looking for a sign of protest from Germans and he found none. He continued that, ‘About the Jews I do not want to talk now – I am afraid that that problem, unfortunately, in Poland, is already solved’, and noted that post-war justice had to be ‘connected with the problem of security after the war’. Tellingly, he drew attention to the fact that, ‘there are groups in various countries who would not mind having a Hitlerite order in their own country but without Germans and without Hitler’.⁹⁰ Adam Ciołkosz reiterated some of the points that Zygielbojm made, and expressed the view that warnings would do nothing to stop the German massacres – only winning the war would achieve that.

Zygielbojm fully recognised the limits of his influence in London – and that of the Leftists with whom he co-operated. On 3 January 1943 he cabled his Bundist colleagues in New York with the request that he be replaced on the National Council. The problem of securing visas for Bund representatives remained and no replacement was forthcoming. Nevertheless, Zygielbojm was pragmatic. As noted, in the summer of 1942, Zygielbojm aligned himself with socialist Vansittartists as they were prepared to respond to and promulgate the news of German atrocities against Jews. In June 1942, following the arrival of the Bund Report, he had even suggested to the moderate Zionist Ignacy

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ BBC WAC E2 131 8 News Directives December 1942.

⁹⁰ At the National Council meeting of 23 December 1942 Zygielbojm criticised the attitude of the Polish population and the Polish Government in Exile in relation to German actions against Jews, noting that ‘the tragedy will be associated with the attitude of some of the Polish population towards the situation’. He invited the government ‘to find the correct response’. See Daniel Blatman (2003) *For Our Freedom and Yours: The Jewish Labor Bund – Poland 1939-1949*, trans. Naftali Greenwood, London: Valentine Mitchell, p. 144.

Schwarzbart ‘joint action in behalf of the Jews in Poland’ [sic].⁹¹ And in March 1943 Zygielbojm sought permission from his Bundist colleagues in New York to *formally* coordinate protests against German atrocities with Schwarzbart in order to generate a greater impact on world opinion.⁹² It is moot whether formal coordination would have had such an impact given the way in which Jews, and German atrocities against Jews, were perceived among various constituencies in the West. Zygielbojm’s proposals (in June 1942 and March 1943) indicated that he was prepared to try any and all options to elicit a meaningful response from the Allies to save the perishing – even if that meant dealing with organisations and individuals that were unsympathetic towards the Bund.⁹³

In practice, both Zygielbojm and Schwarzbart had distributed the news received from Poland through 1942 and early 1943, and both had collected names for the food parcel scheme which the Board of Deputies of British Jews sought to coordinate. The division of labour in which each of the Jewish representatives on the National Council reached out to his particular social, political and ideological milieu ensured that different groups and organisations were made aware of the situation in Poland. Though there had been no formal cooperation between Schwarzbart and Zygielbojm in protesting against German atrocities against Jews, there were productive synergies in their efforts to focus attention on what was happening to Jews in Poland.

At the same time that Zygielbojm was reflecting on his strategy in relation to eliciting an allied response, news about Zygielbojm’s Bundist colleagues – Victor Alter and Henryk Erlich – reached London. According to the contemporary report, they had been executed by the

⁹¹ YVA, M2/767 Schwarzbart Diary, 21 June 1942, p. 173 Schwarzbart saw Zygielbojm as an ‘enemy’. The two men met for two hours. Zygielbojm enquired about the possibility of getting visas for Bundist colleagues (i.e. Alter and Erlich) in the Soviet Union to stay temporarily in Palestine. (Zygielbojm was proactive in seeking solutions in relation to Alter and Erlich). Schwarzbart saw Zygielbojm’s suggestion of joint action in relation to Jews in Poland as a ‘smokescreen’. Even if Zygielbojm made the suggestion fully expecting Schwarzbart to refuse, the offer was made without approval from colleagues in New York. The March 1943 request to formally coordinate protests with Schwarzbart can therefore be seen, in part, as an attempt by Zygielbojm to communicate, once more, the gravity of the situation in Poland to colleagues in New York.

⁹² Blatman *For Our Freedom and Yours*, p. 147.

⁹³ The response from his colleagues in New York was that he should maintain the Bund’s traditional outlook and independence from other Jewish organisations. See Daniel Blatman *For Our Freedom and Yours*, p. 147. Blatman refers to a cable from Nowogrodzki to Zygielbojm dated 4 May 1943, YIVO, Bund Archive M-16 /151.

Soviet Union.⁹⁴ In March and April 1943 Zygielbojm worked with Liberty Press (Jerzy Szapiro) on a booklet entitled *The case of Henryk Erlich and Victor Alter*, with an introduction by the Belgian Camille Huysmans (who was also a director of the Fight For Freedom Editorial and Publishing Services).

In Poland, the situation of the surviving Polish Jews was desperate. By January 1943, the Warsaw Ghetto had largely been liquidated. Those Jews who remained had seen their family members and friends deported to death camps. Armed resistance broke out on 18 January in response to what was believed to be the final liquidation of the ghetto. Around 5,000 Jews were deported at that point. Three months later the Germans did commit to completely ending the presence of Jews in Warsaw. On 19 April, the Jews of Warsaw refused to comply with German orders and began a revolt. For the next four weeks, Jews fought the Germans, principally within two organisations: the left-leaning Jewish Fighting Organisation and the right-leaning Jewish Military Union. Some weapons were smuggled into the ghetto from the ill-equipped Polish Home Army.

News of the revolt reached London as the fighting continued. Zygielbojm worked hard to distribute the news. News of fighting Jews was more acceptable to British propagandists and editors than news of death camps, and was published in the press and broadcast on the BBC. On 30 April 1943 Zygielbojm once more took to the airwaves and addressed those fighting in the ghetto.⁹⁵ Zygielbojm also updated Arthur Goldberg, director of the Labour Division of the Office of Strategic Services in London. In 1979 Goldberg wrote that he thought that Zygielbojm had advised him of ‘the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto and requested either a bombing of Auschwitz and / or the Warsaw ghetto’.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Erlich, after enduring harsh Soviet interrogations and his health failing, actually committed suicide on 15 May 1942. See Gertrud Pickhan (1997) ‘That Incredible History of the Polish Bund Written in a Soviet Prison’: the NKVD files on Henryk Erlich and Wiktor Alter’, in G.H. Hundert (ed.), *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, 10: 247–72. Also see the Soviet Ambassador’s (Ivan Maisky) letter to the Labour Party Secretary (Jim Middleton) dated 30 March 1943, reprinted in the Labour Party (1943) *Report of the National Executive Committee to the 42nd Annual Conference*, London: Labour Party, p. 40.

⁹⁵ Zygielbojm’s broadcast is quoted in Mieczysława Wazacz’s film ‘Mur’. Wazacz obtained information from a former BBC Polish Section employee.

⁹⁶ Letter from Arthur Goldberg to Walter Laqueur, 15 November 1979, cited in Walter Laqueur (1998) *The Terrible Secret: Suppression of the Truth about Hitler’s ‘Final Solution’*, New York: Henry Holt, p. 96.

It was certainly possible that Zygielbojm requested the bombing of Auschwitz. At the end of March 1943 Polish intelligence decrypted a message sent jointly by the head of the Home Army, General Stefan Rowecki, and the leading figure of the Underground State (the Delegate), Stanisław Jankowski. The message reported that 520,000 Jews had been killed at Auschwitz.⁹⁷ Further messages about the mass killing of Jews at Auschwitz arrived in London from the Polish Underground during March, and on 11 April 1943 the BBC broadcast information about Jews being sent to Oświęcim (Auschwitz) ‘which as it is known, has special installations for mass murder, that is gas chambers...’.⁹⁸ No concrete action to aid the fighters in Warsaw was forthcoming and Auschwitz was not bombed.⁹⁹

In May 1943 the Warsaw Ghetto Rising was entering its final stages. Zygielbojm’s wife and a son had been murdered. There was no doubt that any survivors who failed to escape to the ‘Aryan side’ would be sent to their deaths by the Germans. It is in this context that Zygielbojm decided to commit suicide in protest against the Allies’ inaction. In his final message to colleagues in the United States, Zygielbojm wrote:

I am going away as protest against the democratic nations and government not having taken any steps at all to stop the extermination of the Jewish people in Poland. Perhaps my death will cause what I didn’t succeed while alive that concrete action would be taken to save the less than 300 thousand Jews who remained by now in Poland out of 3 millions and a half. It’s the very last moment to do it.¹⁰⁰

On the night of 11/12 May 1943, Zygielbojm died after taking sodium amytal in his flat in Bayswater. He left a letter to the Polish President

⁹⁷ The Office of Strategic Services officially received this information in May 1943. The Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington D.C. received a copy of the data in June 1943. See Richard Breitman (1999) *Official Secrets: What the Nazis Planned, what the British and Americans Knew*, London: Allen Lane, p. 118.

This information was published in *The Jewish Chronicle* on 10 September 1943.

⁹⁸ BBC Written Archives Centre, European News Bulletins – Polish 1943.

⁹⁹ At this stage in the war, given the strength of German air defences, bombing raids on Warsaw or Auschwitz from southern England were not feasible.

¹⁰⁰ http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Zygielbojm_Shmuel_Mordkhe

and Prime Minister in which he condemned the inaction of the Allies to act to save Polish Jews.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

From his arrival in London to his death thirteen and a half months later, Zygielbojm worked tirelessly to publicise the terrible news from Poland and to persuade his own government and the British government to take appropriate steps to stop the Germans killing Jews, and to save the perishing.¹⁰² He gave broadcasts, spoke passionately in a range of fora, edited booklets, engaged with British politicians, trade unionists and civil society, as well as making the Bund's voice heard in the deliberations of the Polish National Council. He also co-operated with the Board of Deputies of British Jews in relation to the food parcel scheme.

Zygielbojm found that the most receptive group to the news from Poland were socialists connected to the Huysmans Committee and those who co-operated with Fight For Freedom Editorial and Publishing Services. These 'socialist Vansittartists' were engaged in an on-going debate about the nature of Nazism and the future of Germany with other factions within the broad labour movement, and were largely unencumbered by a belief in the 'other Germany' (i.e. anti-Hitler Germany). The news from Poland was readily incorporated into their narrative about Germany and Germans.

Zygielbojm's engagement with Labour indicated that on-going political and ideological commitments of individuals and groups impacted on how the news of mass-murder was received. News aligned with those commitments was readily absorbed, comprehended, believed, and elicited subsequent action. For others, the news from Poland posed a challenge to established commitments. For example,

¹⁰¹ Zygielbojm's letter is available in Yitzhak Arad, Yisrael Gutman, Abraham Margalio (eds.) (1981) *Documents on the Holocaust, Selected Sources on the Destruction of the Jews of Germany and Austria, Poland and the Soviet Union*, Jerusalem: Yad Vashem (Document no. 154, pp. 324-327).

¹⁰² Information about Zygielbojm's death was widely published. The Weekly Political Intelligence Summary of 19 May 1943 reported that Zygielbojm was 'tireless in his efforts to find a means of putting an end to the German annihilation – persecution is too mild a word – of the Jewish race in Poland'. However, his death was framed for the British political class as being the responsibility of Germany, rather than as a protest against the Allies' inaction to save the perishing. See WPIS 189, 19 May 1943, p. 4.

murder on the scale that was reported spread responsibility for inhuman crimes much wider than a narrow Nazi elite. It was somewhat more difficult for those hostile to the Huysmans Committee to respond to. Often additional evidence and /or explanation were demanded. The ‘news’ had the potential to bolster or substantiate the views of a particular faction within the Labour Party, and this fact influenced how it was comprehended and responded to.

The conflict within the Left, as illustrated by Oskar Pollak’s letters to Alfred Dobbs, had an impact on how Labour responded to news of the Holocaust. The choice of the ‘liberal wing’ (i.e. those who did not echo the Vansittartist view of Germany) not to recognise the full significance of the news from Poland during the summer of 1942, and the attention given to socialist Vansittartists’ reductive and essentialising view of Germans, played a role in Labour as a whole becoming less receptive to the news that Zygielbojm and others sought to publicise than it could have been. Bluntly, dealing with alleged discrimination (against left-wing Germans and Austrians) within the European Left in Britain was more soluble than responding to the news of Germans systematically murdering Jews. The failure of Labour to constructively resolve this tension – after all, dealing with allegations of discrimination in Britain and responding to the news from Poland were not necessarily connected – suggests that the Labour leadership chose not to do so. Even Clement Attlee, the Labour leader who espoused a hard-line policy towards Germany, only raised his voice in relation to German atrocities against Jews in the House of Commons in January 1943. Senior Labour politicians, aligned with the rest of the coalition British government and the Foreign Office, often considered news of German atrocities against Jews as problematic. Home Secretary Herbert Morrison, for instance, feared the news could provoke antisemitism in Britain, with implications for national unity and the war effort.

The failure of the ‘liberal wing’ of the Labour Party – both politicians and officials – to reach out to Zygielbojm and to respond adequately to the news he distributed, largely restricted his influence to those sympathetic to socialist Vansittartist arguments. On the one hand this allowed him to publicise the news and provided an important platform among the European Left in Britain. On the other hand, it entrapped him in an often testy political conflict – a conflict tangential to his mission. Association with socialist Vansittartists is likely to have alienated him from some figures both within and without Labour, and made his task to elicit an adequate response from the Allies more

complicated. All too often the messenger, it seems, was mistaken for the message: the news of German mass killing was, in part and for a time, mistaken as simply bolstering Vansittartist arguments. In a context where news of atrocities against Jews was frequently downplayed, restricted to the inside pages of newspapers and only sporadically reported on the BBC Home Service, the interpretation of the news from Poland within the framework on on-going debates within Labour proved to be a significant barrier to an adequate response. Socialist Vansittartists may have seized on the Bund Report, in part, for instrumentalist reasons (i.e. to bolster their argument about the nature of Germany and Germans), but they did respond and widely distributed the news.

Other sections of the Left in Britain eventually responded to news from Poland during and after December 1942. It is true that more news became available. But perhaps more importantly, the news had been officially and publically confirmed in the House of Commons through the reading of the UN Declaration of 17 December 1942. This helped the 'liberal wing' temper their view that atrocity news was being instrumentalised by socialist Vansittartists of the Huysmans Committee and the Fight For Freedom group. Victor Gollancz's pamphlet 'Let My People Go', written on Christmas Day 1942, signals to some extent the maturing of cross factional recognition of German atrocities against Jews. But over six months had passed since the Bund Report of May arrived in London and no coalition of the concerned was built within the broader Left.¹⁰³ Fundamental cleavages within the Left in general, and between different Leftist currents and the Bund, remained. For

¹⁰³ In March 1943 independent parliamentarian Eleanor Rathbone founded The National Committee for Rescue from Nazi Terror. Victor Gollancz was vice-president. For the first six months of 1943 Gollancz spoke at various fora about the need for rescue. Like Zygielbojm six months earlier, he distributed news about German atrocities and demanded a response. Like Zygielbojm he was unable to persuade the Allies to act – the argument that winning the war was the way to save Jews was entrenched. He had a nervous breakdown in June 1943. In 1942 Gollancz criticised Vansittart in a much discussed publication. See Victor Gollancz (1942) *Shall Our Children Live or Die? A Reply to Lord Vansittart on the German Problem*, London: Gollancz. The executive of the committee did not include Labour figures who had assisted in the dissemination of news from occupied Poland in the summer of 1942. No synergies between the committee and those who had been active in demanding a response to German atrocities against Jews in 1942 developed. See Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library & Museum, Records of the War Refugee Board, 1944-1945, Series 1 Box 20 'National Committee for Rescue from Nazi Terror'.

Available at http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/_resources/images/wrb/wrb0434.pdf

Zygielbojm, as his speech at the Savoy hotel on 18 December indicated, there was little common ground with those espousing the theory of the ‘other Germany’. The Soviet killing of Bundist colleagues confirmed to Zygielbojm there could be no rapprochement with communists or those seeking a socialist and communist alliance.

More generally, a consideration of Zygielbojm’s struggles and experiences in London offers productive ways to think about Allied responses to the Holocaust. First, Zygielbojm received information sent via Polish Underground channels very soon after it reached Polish intelligence in London (with a notable exception – Rowecki’s 19 August message about the Warsaw ghetto).¹⁰⁴ Second, although Sikorski was the first Allied leader to publicly state that the Germans were seeking to exterminate Jews, there was a great deal of scope for the Polish Government in Exile to have been more forceful in its dealing with its British ally. Minister of the Interior Stanisław Mikołajczyk seems to have downplayed news of atrocities against Jews, in particularly prior to November 1942. An argument can be made that a more effective intervention with the Allies was possible and indeed necessary earlier than the 10 December 1942 Note to Allied Governments. Third, it was difficult to circulate news in Britain of German atrocities against Jews. Memorialising Zygielbojm also means remembering the obstacles he faced and the failure of the Allies to listen to his repeated calls for action. If the Holocaust memorial which is to be built next to parliament is to play a didactic as well as remembrance function for Britons, the exceptional stories of people like Nicholas Winton and Frank Foley need to be contextualised by the less noble and more common responses of the sort that Zygielbojm and later Gollancz encountered.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Blatman indicates that some material sent from Warsaw, including underground newspapers and reports on antisemitism in Poland, were not passed to Zygielbojm. See Blatman, ‘On a Mission...’, p. 307. Zygielbojm discovered that an antisemitic passage in the Front for the Rebirth of Poland’s (Front Odrodzenia Polski) 1942 ‘Protest’ had been removed. The ‘Protest’ arrived in London in November 1942. See <https://sprawiedliwi.org.pl/pl/aktualnosci/protest-75-lat-temu-zofia-kossak-wezwala-dopotepienia-zaglady>

¹⁰⁵ See UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation and Cabinet Office Press Release (24 October 2017) ‘Adjaye Associates and Ron Arad Architects win UK Holocaust Memorial International Design Competition’, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/adjaye-associates-and-ron-arad-architexts-win-uk-holocaust-memorial-international-design-competition>. Also see David Tollerton (2017) ‘The problem with London’s new Holocaust Memorial’ Available at <http://theconversation.com/the-problem-with-londons-new-holocaust-memorial-86411>

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Appendix – Workshop Programme

Workshop: The Life, Death and Significance of Szmul Zygielbojm
9 May 2018 (beginning at 5pm) The Polish University Abroad, London.

The struggle to memorialise Szmul Zygielbojm in London
David Rosenberg (Chair, Zygielbojm Memorial Committee)

Zygielbojm meets Jan Karski
Dr Wojtek Rappak (PUNO)

Zygielbojm, the Labour Party and the Holocaust
Professor Michael Fleming (PUNO)

Tea/Coffee

Zygielbojm's significance: Introduction to the film *Mur* (with
English subtitles)
Mieczysława Wazacz (filmmaker)

Screening of ***Mur (The Wall)*** (2002) dir: Mieczysława Wazacz

I cannot continue to live and to be silent while the remnants of Polish Jewry, whose representative I am, are being murdered.

Szmul Zygielbojm, 11 May 1943, London

Especially in these days of resurgent anti-Semitism in many countries, it is incumbent on all of us to bear witness to the horrible events of the past. It is also incumbent on all of us to stand for the oppressed everywhere. That is the true legacy of our grandfather's sacrifice.

Dr Arthur I. Zygielbaum and Paul S. Zygielbaum
Message to the PUNO workshop
9 May 2018

Szmul Zygielbojm undoubtedly belongs to the most tragic figures of Jewish history during World War II. The number of publications devoted to him and the fact that alongside Hirsz Lekert he is the only Bundist with a street in Israel named after him attests to this. For many years, Zygielbojm's biography has become a source of inspiration for a range of authors interested in his life or the circumstances in which he sought to act. The volume *Essays Commemorating Szmul Zygielbojm* is an important contribution to the ongoing debate about the role of the Bundist in informing the free world about the mass extermination of Jews, but also about Zygielbojm's place in contemporary memory.

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