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Between Rocks and a Hard Place: Village Heads in Polish Villages during the German Occupation and the Holocaust

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Abstract

The vast majority of Polish citizens lived through World War II and the Holocaust in the countryside. Nevertheless, power relations in rural communities have been largely overlooked by contemporary historiography. This study examines a profoundly liminal position of Polish village heads (*sołtysi*) in village communities during WWII. These lowest level clerks present in every Polish village faced intractable dilemmas and were often torn between the Nazi regime and their own communities. The case of village heads serves as a prime example of how the German occupier outsourced daily management of the occupation, exploited pre-existing structures and traditions, and used indirect rule in the communities it controlled. The paper discusses the role of village heads in creating the reality of occupation in the Polish countryside and the extent to which these village officials facilitated and participated in the Holocaust. The study is based primarily on early postwar trial documentation, Holocaust survivors' testimonies, and village community records, most of which originate from the former Radom District of the General Government (today central Poland).

Keywords: Holocaust, World War II, German occupation, Poland, General Government, administration, indirect rule, countryside.

The German occupation of Poland not only brought unprecedented violence, destruction, and genocide to the country's once multicultural and diverse population but also profoundly changed the relations and power structure within the occupied society. The first issue of the official gazette, published on October 26, 1939 by the German occupation administration announced the establishment of the General Government (GG), a semi-colonial entity covering roughly one-fourth of prewar Poland and 35 per cent of its population.[1] The same issue also announced the re-establishment of administrative structures in the Polish territories.[2] While the Nazis replaced the Polish central administrative apparatus with the General Governor, Hans Frank, and the government structure under his leadership, as well as new district and county authorities, the lower levels of the former Polish administration were absorbed into the new framework. Former Polish low-ranking clerks became employees of the Nazi apparatus ruling the occupied territory, including numerous village heads

[1] *Verordnungsblatt des Generalgouverneurs für die besetzten polnischen Gebiete*, no. 1 (1939): 1–2.

[2] "Erste Verordnung über den Aufbau der Verwaltung der besetzten polnischen Gebiete vom 26. Oktober 1939," *Verordnungsblatt des Generalgouverneurs für die besetzten polnischen Gebiete*, no. 1 (1939): 3–4.

throughout the GG. In this essay I explore the position of these lowest level clerks present in every Polish village during the German occupation, the pressure they experienced, and how they navigated between conflicting interests of their communities and that of the German occupier in a reality marked by brutal military occupation and the unfolding Nazi genocide.

I focus here not on the relatively rare cases when village heads openly engaged in long-term collaboration with the Nazi regime (willingly supporting Nazi ideology and working to attain its goals). What specifically interests me is the liminal position of headmen as manifested in concessions made both to their communities or the occupying power, and the opportunities that working as a village head created as they became proxies of the German administration while retaining much of their agency. The work of village heads serves as a prime example of how individual members of the occupied society accommodated to extraordinary conditions inflicted upon them by the occupation. In fact, while adjusting to these conditions they also shaped them to some extent. This sheds light on how the German occupier outsourced management of the occupation to the local population of a conquered territory and used pre-existing administrative structures and traditions for its own interest.

After the war, some of the village heads were investigated and put on trial in accordance with the decree "On the Punishment of Fascist-Hitlerite Criminals Guilty of Killings and Mistreatment of Civilians and Prisoners of War as well as of Traitors to the Polish Nation," issued by the Polish Committee of National Liberation on August 31, 1944, known as the August Decree.[3] Most of the trials revealing the scope of local participation in Nazi atrocities served no purpose for state propaganda; therefore, they were not politicized. Since the early 2000s, historians have been utilizing postwar trial documentation as one of the primary sources for studying the Holocaust in Poland. However, the vast amount of information about life in the occupied country that these sources contain has not yet been explored. Although one needs to approach the early postwar trial materials with caution like any sources of this kind, the documentation of these legal proceedings provides insight into the reality that the village officials actively shaped. This article is based on early postwar investigation and trial documentation as well as wartime village community records originating primarily from central Poland, the area which during the German occupation constituted the GG's Radom District. This is not, however, an in-depth case study of one particular village official or area. Instead, I explore here a situation many village heads found themselves in during the German occupation of Poland and the various ways they responded to it. In the absence of sufficient historical sources originating from the Radom District, I utilize documentation from other regions. I also use memoirs and testimonies by Polish-Christian villagers as well as by Polish Jews to supplement court and communal sources.

Village Heads in Poland before WWII

Traditionally, one of the central figures in a Polish village was a village head (*sołtys*).[4] Before WWII the village head and his deputy (*podsołtys*) were elected for three-year terms by villagers themselves. The candidates came from among the most respected dwellers of the locality. Since 1936, Polish law had required that the candidate be a Polish citizen residing in the village, either a man or a woman, at least 30 years old and fluent in

[3] Andrew Kornbluth, *The August Trials: The Holocaust and Postwar Justice in Poland* (Cambridge, Mass., 2021), 90–91.

[4] For the sake of clarity I use "village head" or "headman" as an English translation of the Polish term "sołtys" throughout this article, except when quoting from published texts in which "sołtys" is rendered in English as "village elder" or "mayor." I use "village mayor" as English rendering of Polish "wójt."

spoken and written Polish.[5] The last requirement prevented members of Poland's multiple national and ethnic minorities from taking control over the administration of villages. The village head and his deputy (it seems there were very few women in these positions, if any at all) held the executive power in a village. They administered communal property and managed the community on a daily basis. They fulfilled many duties: registered new dwellers of and visitors to the locality; collected information necessary for taxation or military conscription; reported any illegal activity, including the presence of beggars or drifters in a village; controlled roads near a village and fixed minor damages; informed villagers about new regulations and ensured they were being obeyed. In addition, the village head also controlled his villagers' activities, including building with appropriate permits, hunting and fishing in accordance with regulations, and even ensuring that young men bathed before meeting a military conscription committee.[6] Village heads not only took care of the daily administration of a village but also often enjoyed a level of informal authority within the community, which allowed them to resolve minor conflicts. Village heads were important figures for the village internally but also externally as they represented the village before the higher administration officials and had to provide them with any necessary assistance. Chosen from among the villagers and by the villagers, village heads were part of the lowest level of self-governance present in the Polish administrative system before WWII. However, they were not employed by the government. The relatively small payments they received came from the funds of the community. These were compensation for expenses incurred in connection with the office rather than a proper salary. As an additional benefit, village officials could cultivate village land reserved for them.

Village heads played a dual role, representing their village before the village mayor (*wójt*—an official governing a *gmina*, a commune comprised of several villages) and the county authority (*starosta*), while at the same time serving as the lowest representative of executive power of the Polish state administration in every village throughout the country. Before the war and during the German occupation of Poland village heads remained members of the village elite. The Ringelblum Archive, the underground archive of the Warsaw Ghetto, preserved a letter sent in early 1942 by a young Jewish woman who worked as a farmhand on a farm owned by a headman in a village of the GG's Lublin District. She briefly described the position of the owners in her letter by referring to a headman and his family as the local "aristocracy."[7]

Under Foreign Rule

From the outset of the German occupation, the circumstances of village heads changed profoundly. The German authorities liquidated the self-governance of Polish village communes and villages in the GG, but left the old structures working to the occupier's benefit.[8] While the Nazi authorities had oftentimes replaced prewar village mayors with loyal ethnic Germans or Poles who proved themselves trustworthy, most ethnic Polish village heads

[5] Rozporządzenie Ministra Spraw Wewnętrznych z dnia 8 października 1936 r. w sprawie regulowania wyborów sołtysa i podsołtysa, *Dziennik Ustaw*, no. 81, pos. 558, par. 2, 3.

[6] *Kalendarz informator sołtysa na 1939 r.* (Warsaw, 1939), 167–200.

[7] "Dokument nr 33: 21.01.1942, Sosnowica k. Parczewa. Hanka [Wermus], List z 21.01.1942 r. do N.N. (Warszawa-getto)," in Aleksandra Bańkowska, ed., *Archiwum Ringelbluma: Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy, tom 6: Generalne Gubernatorstwo: Relacje i Dokumenty* (Warsaw, 2012), 100.

[8] Izabela Lewandowska-Malec, *Samorząd terytorialny w Polsce: Zarys wykładu, kazusy, wybór źródeł* (Kraków, 2007), 16–17.

were left at their posts, though now subordinated to Nazi authority.[9] According to occupation law, they became non-German employees of the administration. When we consider that in early 1943, in the four districts of the GG inhabited predominantly by ethnic Poles, virtually each one of the 14,343 villages had a village head, we get a sense of the scale of the phenomenon under examination.[10] Thousands of Polish village heads served as proxies for the occupation. It was through these people that the occupier communicated with the conquered society and implemented its policies in the villages.

The conduct of village heads during the German occupation tends to come up increasingly in recent research on the Holocaust in provincial Poland. Jan Grabowski points toward village heads as an important part of the "complicated, but deadly efficient, system" working to the detriment of the Jews struggling for survival in rural areas.[11] A village head and his conduct during the Holocaust was also in the center of a three-year-long court litigation recently launched in Poland by a niece of the village official (with significant facilitation by the state) against scholars Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski. Although in 2021 the court dismissed the case, arguing that courts should not intervene in academic freedom, the discussion of the role of the lowest village officials during the Nazi genocide went beyond academic forums.[12]

Hardly ever, though, have historians analyzed the village heads as anything other than accessories to murder during the Holocaust. The most comprehensive study of these village officials fulfilling their duties in the GG has been offered in an article by Tomasz Frydel. Using categories proposed by Evgeny Finkel and Scott Straus, Frydel places village heads at the meso-level of the Nazi genocide in Poland: on a level between the Nazi state and that of individual villagers; at the level of regions and the local communities populating them.[13] Frydel places the village officials at the center of the process that turned multiple Polish village communities into a social environment extremely hostile to Jews hunted by the Nazis. He argues that regardless of their limited agency, the village heads as the central figures in the meso-level had a fundamental role in what he calls a community-making process. Essentially, they were important for the process of creating social networks, forming allegiances, and negotiating identities in the communities they headed, which involved also the radical alienation of the Other: the Jews. Frydel suggests that such local dynamics "in effect transformed violence driven by existential fears and dilemmas into political violence."[14] Therefore, he places village heads at the core of Polish villagers' accommodation to the unfolding Nazi genocide of the Jews. This seems convincing for analysis of the Holocaust (especially its third phase) in western Galicia, the Kraków District of the GG in particular, which was examined by Frydel (and earlier also by Grabowski). There, the village heads managed a complicated system of night watches, hostages, and voluntary fire fighters.

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[9] Jan Grabowski, "Społeczność wiejska, policja granatowa i ukrywający się Żydzi: powiat Dąbrowa Tarnowska 1942–1945," in Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski, eds., *Zarys krajobrazu: wieś polska wobec zagłady Żydów 1942–1945* (Warsaw, 2011), 143–44.

[10] *Amtliches Gemeinde- Und Dorfverzeichnis für das Generalgouvernement auf Grund der Summarischen Bevölkerungsbestandsaufnahme am 1. März 1943* (Kraków, 1943). I excluded *Distrikt Galizien* (District of Galicia) from the count for a few reasons; the villages there were predominantly Ukrainian, and more importantly, between 1939 and 1941 the area was occupied by the Soviet Union, which dismantled old administrations and introduced new ones.

[11] Jan Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland* (Bloomington, 2011), 63.

[12] "Polish Appeals Court Overturns Ruling against Holocaust Historians," *The Guardian*, August 16, 2021, at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/16/polish-appeals-court-overturns-ruling-against-holocaust-historians (accessed February 20, 2025).

[13] Tomasz Frydel, "The Polish Countryside as a Gray Zone: Village Heads and the Meso Level of the General Government, 1939–1945," *East European Politics and Societies* 37, no. 1 (February 2023): 207–8.

[14] Tomasz Frydel, "The Polish Countryside as a Gray Zone," 222.

The Holocaust, however, constituted only a small part of village heads' wartime activity. For most of German-occupied Poland, it seems that the community control system was less organized, more fluid, and as a consequence village heads were often rather solitary actors constantly navigating between the conflicting interests of their Nazi superiors and those of their own village communities, groups, and individuals. While many actions undertaken by village heads during the German occupation also involved other actors—gendarmes, policemen, firefighters, ordinary peasants, and sometimes even whole village communities—the authority of a village head was nested in rural traditions the German occupier adapted to its law and practice. When one examines the liminal position of a village head in Poland during the German occupation (not focusing exclusively on the Holocaust), a concept of indirect rule appears as a more accurate frame of analysis.[15] The Nazi apparatus in the occupied Polish countryside had limited resources at its disposal; therefore, it made use of local village officials who already possessed authority in their communities and who had knowledge of the people and the area.[16] The Nazis had incorporated structures and power relations originating from prewar Polish society into a new administrative framework designed to serve the needs of the occupation. In the GG, especially outside of the cities, in small localities with only low-level administration offices, the majority of clerical positions, apart from a few German managers, were staffed by ethnic Poles.[17] Such policies, together with the extraordinary conditions of life under occupation, resulted in a situation where numerous Polish citizens faced serious, often intractable dilemmas regarding working for or alongside the occupation authorities.

Village Heads Living through the Occupation: A Time of Extreme Liminality

While some Poles, making a conscious decision to collaborate, willingly entered the German apparatus and found some form of accommodation within it, others had to make choices on a daily basis in order to live their lives under the occupation. That was the situation faced by numerous village heads, who throughout the German occupation remained in the lowest positions of power in the countryside. They had been ordered to do so by the newly established Nazi administration. Stepping down from the post of village head without authorization could even have been treated as an act of sabotage.[18] This does not mean, however, that headmen did not attempt to leave their jobs, but they were required to offer a sufficient reason for vacating their post. Nazi authorities rarely accommodated such

[15] The concept of indirect rule has been commonly explored in colonial studies as a form of rule often utilized by a colonial power to control vast territories; when the colonizers are few they tend to depend on social and political structures pre-existent in the native communities. Through controlling local native leaders, a colonizing power obtained control over those whom these individuals ruled. A more systematic use of a framework provided by colonial studies for analyzing German-occupied Poland is yet to be conducted and requires a separate study. See: Michael Crowder and Obaro Ikime, "Introduction," in Michael Crowder and Obaro Ikime, eds., *West African Chiefs: Their Changing Status under Colonial Rule and Independence* (New York, 1970), xx; Ruth Ginio, *French Colonialism Unmasked: The Vichy Years in French West Africa* (Lincoln, NE, 2006), 117; Martin Klein, "African Participation in Colonial Rule: The Role of Clerks, Interpreters, and Other Intermediaries," in Benjamin N. Lawrance, Emily Lynn Osborn, and Richard L. Roberts, eds., *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa* (Madison, 2006), 273–75.

[16] Martin Klein, "African Participation in Colonial Rule," 273–74.

[17] This pertains primarily to four districts of the General Government existing from the fall of 1939: Kraków, Lublin, Radom, and Warsaw Districts. The fifth district, established in the summer of 1941, *Distrikt Galizien*, was different due to its large Ukrainian population and two years of Soviet occupation prior to German invasion.

[18] Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews*, 64.

requests and any decisions were arbitrary; even chronic illness limiting mobility did not merit retirement from the office.[19]

In many localities where the position of village head had become vacant, often the villagers themselves continued to elect the headmen as they had before the war. However, now their choice had to be approved not by a Polish village mayor but a Nazi-appointed head of the respective county (*Kreishauptmann*). (Before the war it was a Polish village mayor). The level of agency given by Nazi authorities to local communities and village mayors, however, varied in different counties (*Kreise*) and perhaps also at different times. It also depended on the particulars of a situation and the *Kreishauptmann's* individual style. For example, in *Kreis Miechow* (Kraków District) the head of the county issued a circular notification to all village mayors within his jurisdiction asking them to file appeals for the dismissal of those village heads who were not fluent enough in writing or calculating. At the same time, he asked village mayors to present two candidates from among whom the *Kreishauptmann* could choose a replacement for each dismissed village head. The *Kreishauptman* explained that those put forward as replacement candidates should be selected from among the younger, energetic, thoughtful, literate, and numerate villagers.[20] In some cases it may have been left to the village mayors to decide how they selected these candidates and whether they consulted the communities in the affected villages. Nonetheless, it was the head of the county who made the final decision about the appointment. Local Nazi authorities often had great leeway in shaping the occupation in the areas they managed, as was manifested also by the level of agency given to village mayors or local communities.

One could say that village heads filled the same place in the system (that is, between the village and the authority) as before the war. With the German occupation, however, their position became profoundly liminal. They belonged at the same time to both the village community and the Nazi administration, and yet they did not fully belong to either of the two. While there had been conflicting interests between that of the village and the state administration in the prewar period, it was during the German occupation that the two worlds in which headmen had to operate became almost completely separate and oftentimes utterly hostile to each other. Both worlds had serious expectations concerning the village heads' desired conduct. On the one hand, the German authorities expected village heads to strictly follow orders and act as instruments of occupation policy. On the other, local communities from among which the village heads had been elected counted on headmen securing their villages' existence and advocating for the interests of their compatriots.

Conflicting Interests: German Expectations toward Village Heads

German expectations regarding the role of village heads in the occupied countryside were clear. While remaining in their old positions, village heads had to ensure that the populations of the villages obeyed all laws and duties imposed on them by the occupier. The county authorities kept an open line of communication with all the village mayors residing in the county. Every village mayor convened regular briefings with the heads of villages located in the commune. The exact frequency of these meetings may have differed, most likely depending on local situations and times. In the commune of Duraczów (Radom District) in the first half of 1940 the briefings took place every other week. Village heads were obliged to attend meetings called by the authorities and could face punishment if they failed to

[19] Kielce State Archives (hereafter AP Kielce), Akta gminy Duraczów, 211, folio (f.) 2 (Letter by Stanisław Lengier, July 11, 1940), f. 9 (Letter by Józef Ślusarczyk, June 23, 1942), f. 10 (Handwritten annotation by village mayor on Ślusarczyk's letter, June 27, 1942).

[20] AP Kielce, Akta gminy Topola, 879, f. 26 (Am sämtliche Bürgermeister im Kreise, February 21, 1941).

show up.[21] It was usually the village mayor who briefed the village heads he supervised, but occasionally the police authority or the *Kreishauptmann* himself called for such meetings. The main goal of these briefings was to inform village heads about new regulations, requirements, and expectations that were to be met by them or by dwellers of their villages. It was a headman's responsibility to pass along to his villagers the knowledge he acquired at these meetings. The briefings covered a wide range of topics concerning the daily operation of villages, including management of livestock, crops, health, disease control, and taxes. In this way village heads were not only messengers but very efficient instruments for ruling the conquered areas. Most likely new demands and duties imposed on the occupied population faced less resistance if they were announced to the villagers by one of their own. The regular and frequent meetings of village heads at the village mayor's office also served for controlling the lowest officials and gathering information. It was through village heads that the Nazi authorities obtained registers of people designated for forced labor in Germany.[22] In rural areas it was also village heads who announced to the local Jews that they were obliged to wear white armbands with a Star of David. By using village heads as their proxies, German authorities were certain their messages would be delivered—if not, there was a person who could be held accountable.

There were, however, ways other than briefings through which the authorities communicated with village heads. Traces of correspondence between village mayors and village heads exist in the archives. The authorities issued circulars containing information to be distributed among the villagers (about mandatory blackout of windows, removal of dead fruit trees and planting new ones, care for sanitary conditions in villages, rules on purchasing building materials, taxes for dog and bicycle owners, inventorying horses and carts).[23] The village heads were not only responsible for passing along the information but also for their villagers' adherence to the rules. The occupying power held village heads accountable for any breach of regulations that occurred in the villages they headed. Although how these measures were administered most likely depended on decisions by local Nazi authorities, in many places a collective responsibility principle was eventually introduced in one way or another. For example, village heads were ordered to designate several affluent farmers who would vouch for the proper protection of communal property, reporting strangers and suspicious behavior to the police. The selected villagers had to put their life and property on the line, becoming hostages; headmen were among them.[24] In this way the occupier imposed a tight self-control system on the villages.

One of the most important duties of village heads was ensuring that farmers were delivering the food quotas.[25] The higher authorities outlined the quotas for a whole village but the village head was responsible for assigning individual farmers their share. The quotas applied not only to crops and livestock, but also fodder or other animal feed. A complicated system of economic control and exploitation developed with the settling in of Nazi authorities. The village heads were crucial workers in this apparatus, as they knew the villages in

[21] AP Kielce, Akta Gminy Topola, 879, f. 32 (Letter by the village mayor of Topola commune to the headmen, March 11, 1941).

[22] AP Kielce, Akta Gminy Duraczów, 214, f. 5–6 (Minutes of village heads' gathering, January 13, 1940).

[23] AP Kielce, Akta Gminy Busko, 1066, f. 108 (Letter by the village commune authority to all the headmen in Busko commune, November 15, 1941); AP Kielce, Akta Gminy Topola, 879, f. 20 (Letter by the village mayor to all headmen in Topola commune, April 4, 1941).

[24] AP Kielce, Akta gminy Zagość, 19, f. 43 (Information about Busko *Kreishauptmann's* order, November 18, 1942). Alina Skibińska, "'Dostał 10 lat, ale za co?' Analiza motywacji sprawców zbrodni na Żydach na wsi kieleckiej w latach 1942–1944," in *Zarys krajobrazu*, 352–53; See also Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, "Bełk and Other Places: The Story of Decurions-as-Hostages," trans. Jerzy Juruś, in Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, *Jewish Fugitives in the Polish Countryside, 1939–1945: Beyond the German Holocaust Project* (Berlin, 2022), 35–66.

[25] Grabowski, "Społeczność wiejska," 144.

which they worked. When certain farmers did not deliver their quotas on time, the village heads had to report them to the authorities.[26] In addition, the locally-based officials also collected taxes.

The headmen also had to fulfill the village commune authorities' requests for labor. This included providing men who would perform agricultural work on estates located in the area as well as carters with horses and wagons to provide transportation for the Polish Blue Police (*Polnische Polizei im Generalgouvernement*; force subordinated to the German *Ordnungspolizei* and created by the Nazis on the basis of the Polish prewar law enforcement officers) or the German gendarmerie. In case the village heads failed to adhere to these demands, they could face arrest under the deadly suspicion of sabotage.[27] In addition to providing labor for locally performed works, village heads also played an important part in recruiting forced laborers for work in Germany. Depending on place and time, the headmen acted as messengers distributing correspondence from the *Arbeitsamt* (Labor Office) but also took on a more active role by designating people for forced labor. For some village officials this created an opportunity to take revenge on villagers with whom they had conflicts, and also to profit by accepting bribes to not notice infractions or to cross someone's name off the list.[28]

Conflicting Interests: Villagers' Expectations toward Village Heads

Even though village officials carried out orders issued by their Nazi superiors, the communities they headed continued to perceive them as representatives of their village. In most cases, prior to September 1, 1939, these very same individuals had represented their villages before the Polish state authorities. Furthermore, the relatively small remuneration received by headmen from the German authorities did not act as a buffer between the village officials and their own communities.[29] The allowances the headmen received did not cover basic living expenses and must have been thought of as a bonus rather than a main source of income. Hence, just as before the war, they had to remain active farmers. Working the land in addition to fulfilling their duties as officials made village heads even more connected with the people whom they administered and controlled on behalf of the German occupiers. Remaining closely connected with their communities and at the same time being the only representative of the occupying power in the village placed a heavy burden on the headmen. The villagers expected that the local official would advocate for his community, turn a blind eye on their illegal activities, and protect them from the Germans.

A feature central to the work of a village head in German-occupied Poland was serving multiple masters, perhaps a rather unusual situation for low-level clerks of the state, and definitely not a comfortable one for the individuals in question. Many village heads were aware that their office placed them in a difficult position. A headman's professional but also physical survival largely depended on his ability to negotiate and navigate between

[26] AP Kielce, Akta gminy Topola, 879, f. 7 (Letter by the village mayor of Topola commune to headmen of Topola, Kobylniki, Krępice, and Kamyszów villages, June 28, 1941).

[27] Radom State Archive (hereafter, AP Radom), Akta Gminy Zalesice, 42, f. 1 (Letter by the village mayor of Zalesice commune to the headmen of Polany, Pomorzany, Zalesice, and Łączany villages, December 11, 1941), f. 25 (Letter by the village mayor of Zalesice commune to the headman of Pomorzany village, October 12, 1943).

[28] Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance in Kielce (hereafter, IPN Ki) 129/27, f. 1 (Request letter to the Security Service in Busko Zdrój, September 25, 1945).

[29] For example, in May 1940 in *Kreis Pulawy*, Lublin District of the GG, village heads received an annual allowance of 50 to 290 zlotys, depending on the size of the village, and an additional 60 zlotys as annual reimbursement for their expenses. Lublin State Archive, Gouverneur des Distrikts Lublin, 80, f. 2. I thank Tom Frydel for sharing this document with me.

the environment of his own village, the German occupier, and oftentimes a third player—partisans who were active in the vicinity. One of the principles of successful negotiation is that no party ever gets everything they want; that same principle prevailed in the strategies pursued by many village heads.

"Don't go to the village meeting because if you go, they might elect you a village head and you will regret that. You know what kind of people we have here," warned the wife of Józef Chustecki in the summer of 1941. However, the meeting was vital for the village. In his memoir, Chustecki remarked that later on he cursed that day and his own stubbornness.[30] He became the village head of Prudno in *Bezirk Bialystok*. The wife of Jan Chmielewski, who served as a deputy village head in Szyszczyce near Chmielnik in GG's Radom District described a similar concern. During the postwar trial of her husband, the woman explained the situation to the Prosecutor of the Kielce District Court: "In 1944 my husband was elected a deputy village head. Nobody else wanted to accept the vote, so my husband made a sacrifice and accepted this responsible duty."[31] While this might have been a convenient line of defense, it is also possible that the explanation was genuine. Becoming a village head imposed duties and obligations that potentially placed an official in conflict with his own community, although it also created opportunities which many headmen eagerly took advantage of. Some collected more food quotas than required and kept the surplus for themselves; others abused their power over villagers or asked for various favors, including sexual ones.[32]

Many of the village heads, however, were aware that they were walking a tight rope and might face serious consequences if they became overzealous. In drastic cases, they could have become targets of violent attacks by partisans or the villagers themselves.[33] Even though an attack against a headman could have resulted in a death penalty for an assailant, most likely that possibility provided only illusory security.[34] Usually, Germans were not stationed in the villages and could not provide village officials with round-the-clock protection. In the end, they were on their own. Villagers dissatisfied (justly or not) with their village head could have accused the official in front of the German authorities. In some cases such allegations of criminal activity or supporting the underground could have been completely false but still triggered the arrest of the headman. In one of the analyzed cases such a false accusation led to a village head's imprisonment in Auschwitz concentration camp and his eventual death. Two men responsible for plotting against that village head admitted after the war their intent had been to replace the official and thereby avoid delivering their assigned food quotas.[35] This case illustrates how villagers could sometimes use the German occupier to solve internal village conflicts and get rid of an unwanted headman. It seems that in many more cases, however, village heads and their deputies faced informal sanctions. These could also be painful when inflicted by their own community with whom they were closely connected by longstanding ties as neighbors, friends, or even family. Headmen realized that they were being perceived as the prime culprits by their communities. As Chustecki noted in his postwar memoir:

[30] Józef Chustecki, *Byłem sołtysem w latach okupacji* (Warsaw, 1960), 75.

[31] IPN Ki 127/120, f. 90 (Letter by Józefa Chmielewska to the Prosecutor of the District Court in Kielce, December 23, 1946).

[32] IPN Ki 127/266, f. 27–28 (Transcript of witness interview: Franciszka Mirek, April 2, 1948).

[33] Kornbluth, *The August Trials*, 21.

[34] Grabowski, "Społeczność wiejska," 144–45.

[35] IPN Ki 013/1130, f. 5 (Transcript of witness interview: Łukasz Mastalarek, March 10, 1945), f. 9 (Transcript of suspect interview: Stanisław Juszeński, March 19, 1945), f. 16 (Testimony by a suspect: Stanisław Juszeński, March 11, 1945).

"People thought that anything bad that happened in the village was the village head's fault."[36]

The Partisans and Consequences of Navigation Errors

In some areas of Poland, such as in the southern part of Radom District, especially toward the end of the war, village heads were not only caught between the Nazi administration and their own communities. There was also a third actor that put village heads under pressure and requested services which made their situation even more complex: the partisans. If they required room or board from the villages, they expected the headmen to comply. The underground also monitored the behavior of village officials and did not refrain from punishing them when they harmed the Polish Christian population by overzealously fulfilling German orders.[37] Ethnographic research conducted by Dionizjusz Czubala in the 1970s in the southern part of the former Radom District shows that some villagers perceived disciplining those headmen whose cooperation with the occupation authority went too far to be a primary goal of the local partisans. Czubala's informers mentioned several instances of village officials being lashed by partisans. At least in one of these cases pressure applied by the underground was effective and the village head changed his behavior.[38] There is, however, evidence that the disciplining of headmen by the partisans was more systematic and exceeded the few cases uncovered by Czubala's research. A bulletin published by the underground peasant movement announced in May 1944: "The action of the underground organizations has largely changed the situation in the countryside. A village head has ceased to be a Hitlerite ruler of his village. Feeling justice on his own skin, the communal official has begun to take into account even the 'dull peasant.'"[39] The tone of this information might be too optimistic, but it testifies to the fact that disciplining village officials by partisans was not a phenomenon limited to one region: the bulletin, published in Warsaw, covered the entirety of German-occupied Poland.

In addition to real actions undertaken against overzealous headmen by different underground units, some of their propaganda efforts focused on creating an atmosphere of pressure around Poles working in the occupier's administration, making them believe that the underground was closely monitoring their behavior. One of the organizations distributed a leaflet that informed Polish city mayors, village mayors, and village heads that their conduct was under constant surveillance. It also announced that those who harm their fellow Poles by working for the Germans would face serious consequences: "Any acts against Polish raison d'état will not go unpunished—the punishment will reach you soon enough. Those who will manage to escape punishment today will be dealt with immediately after the liberation. Your deeds and crimes are being meticulously recorded."[40] The signature on the leaflet did not point toward any particular underground organization. Instead, it read: "social executive," suggesting that society itself was scrutinizing the conduct of village officials, thereby blurring the boundary between the underground and society. Hence, with the rapid development of underground organizations toward the end of the war, village heads who harmed their own communities had to take into account not only informal social sanctions but also serious punishment that could be inflicted upon them by the partisans during the occupation or by the justice system after it.

[36] Chustecki, *Byłem sołtysem*, 136.

[37] IPN Ki 127/266, f. 71 (Transcript of suspect interview: Antoni Maciejski, July 4, 1948).

[38] Dionizjusz Czubala, *Ustne opowieści wspomnieniowe z "Republiki Pińczowskiej" lub "Republika Pińczowska" w ustnych opowieściach wspomnieniowych (Z zapisów terenowych Dionizjusza Czubali)* (unpublished manuscript). Many thanks to the author for sharing this text with me.

[39] *Wieś: Agencja Informacyjna*, May 25, 1944, 6.

[40] Biblioteka Jagiellońska, 399884 III (Do burmistrzów—wójtów—sołtysów w kraju!, ca 1944).

Village Heads, the Nazi terror, and the Holocaust

In addition to managing the village on a daily basis, village officials occasionally assisted the German gendarmerie during arrests or searches carried out in the village. Some were more willing than others, but all had to comply at least to some extent. The consequences of disobeying German gendarmes could be deadly for the village head and/or his family. Headmen served as the village contact persons for gendarmes. The officials were expected to provide any necessary help and fulfil orders conveyed to them. They were charged with the task of burying victims killed in their villages by the Blue Police or the gendarmerie, especially when there were no relatives of the victim who could take care of a proper interment. Most often, this was the case for Jewish victims. A former village head of Damiany in Radom District testified after the war: "After some time the car parked near my house. A gendarme got out and came to my house ordering me to designate men to bury two Jews, a man and a woman who had been killed in the Moskorzew forest."[41] Not only did the village head fulfill the order, he also accompanied the two men whom he designated and stayed to witness the burial. One of the men who buried the bodies later stated that the headman also allowed him to take the shoes one of the victims was wearing.[42]

Village heads fulfilled a particular role in the persecution and extermination of Jews in the Polish countryside. In multiple villages Jews were not moved to the ghettoes at all or were moved just weeks or even days before the deportation to a death camp or an execution site. These people did experience different stages of Nazi persecution, such as restrictions on movement, payments to the Germans, or forced labor while still living in their own homes. Oftentimes, the village head was virtually the only representative of the occupying power whose decisions directly impacted the lives of the local Jews. It was the village head who, following German orders, dispossessed the local Jews, organized and supervised their forced labor in service for the village (such as clearing the snow). Sometimes, however, the village official received only general instructions and the way he implemented them depended on his own invention, thus giving him agency in shaping the fate of the Jewish population in the village he headed.[43]

During *Aktion Reinhardt* in the localities with no ghettos it was the village heads who first received German police instructions ordering the concentration of Jews destined for deportation. The village heads communicated to the Jews the order to leave their homes and move to the nearest ghetto that at this stage, unbeknown to them, served as a concentration point before deportation to a death camp. Later, headmen delivered the order to prepare for deportation.[44] In some places where local ghettos were far away from railway lines, village heads were tasked by the Nazi authorities with supplying horse wagons and carters to assist in the deportations from the ghettos to trains destined to death camps.[45] Horse wagons and carters designated by village heads on occasion also transported Jews to mass execution sites in the vicinity of the ghettoes.[46] Their privileged position in the

[41] Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance in Katowice (hereafter, IPN Ka) 230/5206, f. 11 (Transcript of witness interview: Wojciech Przybyła, February 23, 1953).

[42] IPN Ka 230/5206, f. 22 (Transcript of witness interview: Władysław Trela, April 2, 1953).

[43] Dawid Rubinowicz, *The Diary of Dawid Rubinowicz*, trans. Derek Bowman (Edmonds, WA, 1982), 6, 38–39, 76, 87.

[44] Jan Grabowski, *On Duty: The Role of the Polish Blue Police and Criminal Police in the Holocaust*, trans. Jan Grabowski and Katarzyna Gucio (Jerusalem, 2024), 93; Barbara Engelking, *Such a Beautiful Sunny Day—: Jews Seeking Refuge in the Polish Countryside, 1942–1945*, trans. Jerzy Michalowicz (Jerusalem, 2016), 27.

[45] Grabowski, *Społeczność wiejska*, 17, 145; Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews*, 65.

[46] Grabowski, *On Duty*, 128; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (hereafter, USHMM) RG-50.488.0229 (Oral history interview with Marian Miller).

information chain provided headmen also with an opportunity to warn Jews about danger and some officials indeed made use of it.[47]

Jan Grabowski argues that "the orders to initiate manhunts usually originated with the German police and reached village elders [i.e. village heads] through the office of the local *voit* [i.e. village mayor]."[48] There seems to be little doubt, however, that some village officials initiated searches on their own authority. Such manhunts claimed many victims especially in the aftermath of deportations from nearby ghettos. Occasionally, headmen rallied as many as three hundred of their villagers to participate.[49] Headmen played an instrumental role in managing these hunts and in detaining people that had been captured.[50] Some village officials, as the local individuals in power, even instigated and organized collective violence perpetrated against the Jews by firemen and other villagers.

Intermediaries of the Genocide

The village heads acted as intermediaries in killing Jews also on a more regular, one might say, daily or ordinary basis. After the majority of the ghettos had been liquidated and the following few weeks of organized manhunts ended in the GG in 1942, it was often village heads who played a pivotal role in the eventual death of the captured Jewish fugitives. Early postwar court documentation provides more than enough evidence to support this statement. Władysław Zięcik was a headman in the community of Pijanów (*Kreis Konskie*, Radom District). According to his testimony given during the postwar investigation, a man from Radwanów, the neighboring village, came to him on November 25, 1942 claiming there was an armed Jewish man in his house. He urged the village head to turn the Jew in to the gendarmes. The village official took two other villagers with him and went to Radwanów. Upon their arrival, they established that the Jewish man was not in the house of the person that brought forth the information but was staying with another villager. After confirming that the Jewish man had neither a weapon nor an ID on him, the village head took him to the headman's house and later delivered to the nearest gendarmerie post in Radoszyce.[51] Although Zięcik testified he did not know what happened to the Jewish man, it is almost certain that he was shot by gendarmes soon after his arrival. All the Jews of Radoszyce had been deported and subsequently murdered in the Treblinka death camp three weeks earlier.[52]

This tragic story of a Jewish fugitive is rather typical for the GG. After the summer or autumn of 1942, when the majority of the ghettos had been liquidated and their inhabitants murdered in the death camps during *Aktion Reinhardt*, countless Jews who sought refuge in the Polish countryside were handed over to the Polish Blue Police or German gendarmerie after they had been brought to the village head. Like Zięcik, other village heads delivered fugitives to the police posts themselves, designated individual villagers to do that, or simply called for the blue policemen or gendarmes, who came to the village and executed Jews on site. While researching the involvement of the Polish Blue Police in the Holocaust, Jan Grabowski encountered a document written by an officer from the village of Stanin, at that time in the Lublin District. The policeman listed heads of the villages in the vicinity of his

[47] Archive of the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw (hereafter, AŻIH) 301/3158 (Testimony of Abram Chaskiel Zacharewicz, December 29, 1947).

[48] Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jew*, 76.

[49] Engelking, *Such a Beautiful Sunny Day*, 174.

[50] AŻIH 301/2111 (Testimony of Arie-Lejb Prybut, January 5, 1947); AŻIH 301/2101 (Testimony of Alter Trus, December 24, 1946).

[51] IPN Ki 128/122, f. 80–81 (Transcript of suspect interview: Władysław Zięcik, November 29, 1952).

[52] Martin Dean and Mel Hecker, eds., *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos: Vol. 2 Ghettos in German-occupied Eastern Europe* (Bloomington, 2012), part A, 296.

station and the number of Jews these village officials delivered to the local jail.[53] It is likely that not all of the listed headmen themselves delivered Jews but designated villagers to do that on foot or in horse carts. Nevertheless, these village officials orchestrated the handing over of captives to the police. In fact, the role of headmen in delivering Jews or informing the executioners about captured Jews placed these village officials in the center of a number of postwar investigations examining Polish peasants' involvement in the Holocaust. Furthermore, in some of the cases in which postwar investigations established beyond reasonable doubt the involvement of other villagers in the capture and denunciation of Jews, only the village heads were held accountable for collaborating with the Nazi regime.[54]

In German-occupied Poland, a house of a village head often served as a liminal space in which the case of a captured Jew changed its character. From a private matter between the villagers and a captive (whom they may have known) it turned into a public matter. This was precisely the case in aforementioned Radwanów where the captured Jewish man had owned a shop in a nearby town and many villagers had been his clients. With the intervention of the village head, the capture of a Jewish fugitive became an official matter that involved the occupation authorities. In numerous similar cases leading to the ultimate death of Jews attempting to survive in the Polish countryside, the headman acted as an intermediary between the Polish villagers who captured Jews and the gendarmes or blue policemen who killed them. Why did the villagers bother to inform a village head instead of turning directly to the gendarmes or policemen? Presumably, the village head was a more familiar figure, his behavior more predictable, and contact with him was burdened with less risk. The village head, after all, had been elected from among the villagers. He was a neighbor, an acquaintance, or even a relative.

Occasionally, a village head could use his authority to the advantage of the Jews who were caught by the villagers. This was the case for Brandla Fajn, a young Jewish woman who survived the Holocaust near her home village in Lublin District. At some point in late 1942 or early 1943, she and her husband were caught by peasants patrolling the area and searching for Jews. "After an intervention of a village head who knew me since I was a child, I was released," testified Fajn after the war.[55] One of the interviews recorded by Dionizjusz Czubala also reveals a story of rescue by a village head. The man was called to the barn where the villagers kept a Jew they had caught. The village head was asked to check whether the prisoner was circumcised. The official lied and thus saved the Jewish man's life.[56]

Sometimes village heads could themselves become hostage to their own villagers, who threatened to denounce them to the Nazis if they failed to act in accordance with German expectations.[57] Testimonies collected in the course of postwar investigations of Piotr Grzywnowicz, the former village head of Chlewice in Radom District support this argument all too well. In two separate events, Grzywnowicz, together with other villagers was involved in the capture and subsequent murder by gendarmes of five Jews attempting to survive in the village. In both cases it was not the village head who captured the Jewish fugitives, but he played a key role in handing over the victims to the police authority. Defending himself in court, Grzywnowicz explained that he was, or felt, threatened by the villagers

[53] Grabowski, *On Duty*, 11.

[54] There seems to be no clear explanation why in some cases it was the village head (the individual who called for the gendarmerie or the police) who was held accountable, yet in some other similar cases, the prosecution aimed at the first person who initially captured the Jew (or Jews). In fact, some of the court case documents contain debates within the courts and by defendants over the issue of who should be held accountable. These debates had, however, no definite conclusion.

[55] AŻIH 301/1300 (Testimony of Brandla Fajn, January 20, 1946).

[56] Piotr Grochowski, ed., *O tym nie wolno mówić...: Zagłada Żydów w opowieściach wspomnieniowych ze zbiorów Dionizjusza Czubali* (Toruń, Poland, 2019), 109.

[57] Engelking, *Such a Beautiful Sunny Day*, 8.

who came to him and reported about the presence of Jews in the village.[58] He explained: "As head of Chlewice village, having seen that many people knew of the Jewish presence and as I was afraid that Jaworski or somebody else would inform the Germans that I did not want to intervene in this matter, I went to Jaworski's barn [the place where Jews had been caught and detained] ..."[59] Some of the witnesses at Grzywnowicz's trial testified about open threats addressed to the village head. These threats were allegedly shouted out loud by someone who was in the crowd of villagers gathered around the captured Jewish family as they were escorted by Grzywnowicz: "If he just lets the Jews go, we will immediately report him to the Germans!"[60] Even if we acknowledge that describing his role in the investigated events as beyond his choice played to the benefit of the former village head accused of collaboration and therefore may have been exaggerated in court, it is impossible to ignore the existence of pressure, perhaps linked with strong social control and sometimes threats, that influenced the conduct of this headman.

It is reasonable to consider that in many cases, it may well have been the pressure (real or assumed) of individuals, groups, or the entire community that made a village head act and deliver people to the German gendarmes or the Polish Blue Police. In this way, villagers dealt with the matter without spilling blood with their own hands, so to speak; after all, it was the headman who contacted the Nazi terror apparatus, not them. One can argue that the village head, as an intermediary figure, facilitated maintaining the integrity of the community. With a headman designated by popular vote as the "officially recognized" collaborator among them, the village as a whole did not have to cooperate with the Nazis. Examining the role of village heads in the deaths of countless Polish Jews hunted down by villagers throughout the GG proves one more thing: capturing Jews and handing them over to the killers was a social act involving numerous actors following certain scripts. That social dynamic and the involvement of village heads in their dual role as community members and workers in the Nazi administration is an important factor that has only recently come to researchers' attention.[61]

The documents of the postwar investigations, like any material of this kind, contain many often contradictory claims and explanations of actions undertaken by village heads. They shed light not only on the wartime events but also on how villagers perceived the role of the headmen and defined the limits of what they considered acceptable conduct during the occupation. After 1945, some of the villagers clearly sought someone to blame for their wartime suffering. The village head was most often the only person at hand from whom they could demand justice. The Germans had either fled or had been killed, and the Polish legal apparatus was preoccupied with prosecuting "more serious" war criminals whose trials could be used for solidifying communist legitimation. Hence, the village's rage sometimes focused on the village head or his deputy. It is clear that for some individuals the simple act of carrying out German orders by village officials was sufficient grounds to demand their punishment after the war, while other villagers made more nuanced judgements of the wartime reality and conduct of the village officials. It was "zealous" and proactive behavior and not just simple obedience to orders that, according to them, warranted punishment. In this way, the courtrooms in the early postwar period became spaces in which the role and conduct of Polish workers in the Nazi administration were discussed and their meanings negotiated within village communities.

The case of the village heads illustrates a complex situation in which thousands of Polish citizens found themselves in Nazi-controlled territory, their work ruthlessly exploited by

[58] IPN Ki 126/175, f. 298, 300 (Transcript of court proceedings, February 23, 1949).
[59] IPN Ki 126/175, f. 298 (Transcript of court proceedings, February 23, 1949).
[60] IPN Ki 126/175, f. 307, 310 (Transcript of court proceedings, February 23, 1949).
[61] Tomasz Frydel, "The Polish Countryside," 202–28.

the occupier, and vital for maintaining the occupation. The headmen had functioned as the lowest-level representatives of the administration in prewar Poland, and during the German occupation that role did not change. The position of intermediary was embedded in the office of a village head long before September 1, 1939. But it was during the German occupation that it became profoundly liminal, situating the headmen in a difficult place, torn by multiple powers that pulled them in different directions. The German occupier expected them simply to implement Nazi policies in the communities they served. The communities expected their headmen would manage somehow to protect fellow villagers from the Nazis by acting as a buffer in contacts with the occupier. The partisans expected the village heads to comply with requests, facilitate clandestine activities, and remain loyal to their fellow Polish citizens. Each of the parties attempted to closely monitor the village heads' behavior and placed them under strong pressure.

Judging from the evidence I have seen, it seems that most of the village heads responded to this situation by navigating and negotiating between these conflicting expectations. The same individuals could take different positions on different occasions. Sometimes they protected their villagers or assisted the underground, jeopardizing the occupier's efforts to exploit and crush Polish villagers. At other times, they served as merciless tools of German policy and even manifested their own agency in shaping that policy against their own men and women. The village officials also played a crucial role in the deaths of countless Polish Jews who sought refuge in the countryside during the Holocaust. Villagers who caught these Jews often delivered them to the village head who then called in the executioners—the Polish Blue Police or the German gendarmerie. Such headmen contributed to the death of captives who, to be sure, were caught by others; by "ordinary" village people. Thus, by doing the job they were appointed to do, village heads acted as intermediaries of the genocide and at the same time played a useful role for both the German occupier and the non-Jewish Polish villagers. Traces of such activity are preserved in multiple files of investigations and trials conducted after the war in Poland.

Studying village heads in German-occupied rural Poland sheds light on the extremely hostile environment in which headmen functioned and the difficult choices they were forced to make. Furthermore, it allows us to question the extent to which collaboration (especially in its narrow legal meaning) proves to be useful as an analytical category for studying occupied local communities. Perhaps "accommodation" is a more accurate and, as the case of village heads manifests, an equally deadly category. Examining Polish headmen sheds light on a broader phenomenon: the everyday reality that occupied communities and their individual members not only lived in but also navigated, made choices about, and eventually shaped. Thus, it opens up for further analysis the question of agency in an occupied society and that of the individual historical actors within it.

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