

Michał Kowalski

Reply to Prof. Jan Grabowski's and Dr. Katarzyna Markusz's article

I am the author of the article “‘I think Jews will be taken to Treblinka. It's better for you to stay at home.’ Polish residents of towns around Treblinka as Holocaust witnesses. A Local Study”, which appeared in the latest publication of the Polish Center for Holocaust Research *Oto widać i oto słyszeć. Holocaust Witnesses in Occupied Poland*. In this volume, thirteen authors wrote about various groups of Holocaust witnesses from very different perspectives. I had the privilege of working with them as a grantee. As part of the project, I wrote an article about how Polish Holocaust witnesses remembered the so-called liquidation operations in Sokołów–Węgrów County.

I have been working on the history of the Holocaust since the spring of 2018. After the first search in the summer of that year at the State Archives in Siedlce, I knew that there was more than one story in the former Sokołów–Węgrów County. Based on documents found at the time, I wrote my first article on the mass digging at the Treblinka II death camp site, published in *Holocaust Studies and Materials* (no. 17 [2021], pp. 172–201). It was the multiplicity of sources found at that time that largely prompted me to take up the topic I am currently working on at the Doctoral School of the Institute of History at the University of Wrocław, entitled *Poisoned Earth—the Life of Local Polish and Jewish Communities in the Shadow of Treblinka I and Treblinka II Camps*. I plan to complete the dissertation in 2025.

Frankly, I must admit that after reading the article written by Prof. Jan Grabowski and Dr. Katarzyna Markusz, “‘Here You See. Here You Hear.’ But Poorly, because From Behind the Fence and From Behind the Curtain” deals with my text, I feel a certain cognitive dissonance, for we are dealing with total manipulation.

Such manipulation is extremely problematic and difficult to respond to. This is because the authors of the text are trying to impose on the readers the idea that my article discusses the same thing as the article by Professor Jan Grabowski on Węgrów County in *Night without End. The Fate of the Jews Occupied Poland* (Jan Grabowski, “Węgrów County”), eds Barbara Engelking, Jan Grabowski (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2022) .

These are two separate articles about two different issues.

In my text, I deal with a specific group of Polish Holocaust witnesses and their reactions to the ghetto liquidation operations that were carried out in a particular period (22–24 September

1942) in a specific area, namely Sokołów–Węgrów County. However, Prof. Grabowski analyzed the situation only Węgrów County (although formally during the war it did not exist) in the years 1939–1945. Therefore, my research does not concern Węgrów County. I deal with what Polish witnesses saw and how they remembered the liquidation operations on specific days in 1942.

My article does not analyze Jewish testimonies and does not consider what happened to the Jews who managed to escape into the forest from the transport en route to the death camp. I do not address the issue of Polish denunciations of Jews in hiding, and I do not analyze whether and why the court in Siedlce was dysfunctional after the war, neither do I write about issues related to the “August decree trials,” nor do I attempt to answer the question why testimonies of Jewish witnesses were dismissed in postwar trials. That is not because “Kowalski isn’t interested,” as I write about all these issues comprehensively in my dissertation. I also refer to some parts of the study by Prof. Grabowski.

On the other hand, my article in the volume published by the Polish Center for Holocaust Research in 2024, which I emphasize in the text and want to stress again here, deals with Polish witnesses and how they remember the liquidation operations in Sokołów–Węgrów County. I am quite clear about it: “How did Polish Holocaust witnesses perceive these events? By those living closer or further away in small or big towns?” (p. 337), based on the assumption that during the liquidation operations “the Holocaust was closest to the Polish witness – both at the level of physical contact, the proximity of the events and their massive character, as well as the different types of observations or the flurry of sounds associated with the actions” (p. 339).

Therefore, I describe how Poles remember the liquidation operations in this article. My research shows that in these particular places, they adopted an attitude I call “watching the Holocaust from behind the curtain.”

Such attitudes are well-known among historians. For example, Zbigniew Jakubik wrote about the operation in Józefów Biłgorajski: “Further transports paraded along a hidden line of spectators, mostly women and children, looking from behind fences, clinging to door frames, leaning cautiously out of half-open windows or standing in front of wickets. [...] From inside the room, I watched the perspective of the street passively and recklessly. I was not a local parish priest; I was not a Józefów police officer. I was a modest, dozing bureaucrat who is afraid in private and who knows that probably after a sleepless night, he will nevertheless have breakfast tomorrow, have lunch, and even have dinner, and to whom this passivity, this

forethought, and fear will probably not take away the appetite and will not cause remorse” (Zbigniew Jakubik, *Czapki na bakier*, Warsaw: Pod Wiatr, 1997, p. 22).

Marcin Zaremba, Warsaw University Professor, who wrote about the phenomenon: “I find this opinion accurate: ‘One may wonder whether the attitude of the Polish neighbors might have been to experience the liquidation of a Jewish ghetto precisely from behind the curtain, surreptitiously.’ Let me add that the issue of so-called voyeurs is one of the most recognizable research themes in Holocaust historiography.

Furthermore, I admit that I also do not know how the authors of the article came to this conclusion: “To sum up, Michał Kowalski’s study is an attempt to defend the claim that Poles did not take part in the liquidations of the ghettos of the consolidated Sokołów–Węgrów County.”

However, my article demonstrates that the opposite is true. I write explicitly about Poles from uniformed formations involved in liquidation operations. I point out, among other things, the zone of silence in Polish testimonies related to the lack of descriptions of Polish formations taking part in liquidation operations. To highlight this issue, I cite the testimony of Josek Kopyto from Sokołów, Władysław Okulus from Węgrów, and Stefania Wasylek from Stoczek. I also discuss the involvement of Polish firefighters from Węgrów and Stoczek Węgrowski in the liquidation operations.

I have no idea how the authors came to a different conclusion: “One of the phenomena shown by the authors of *Night without End* was, contrary to what Kowalski claims, the fairly widespread participation of the local population in the liquidations and immediately after them.”

I want to point out that the phrase “fairly common” is so vague and fluid that it is difficult to refer to this term in a discussion (again). In doing so, I would add that the instrumental treatment of the publication *Night without End* to support one’s claims is also hardly adequate. There is no general claim in this set that the participation of the Polish population in liquidation operations was “quite widespread.”

I stand by what I have written and what is evident in archival sources. In the liquidation operations in the ghettos of Sokołów-Węgrów County, Poles participated as members of uniformed formations – blue police and firefighters – and as individual collaborators. In the total forces assembled for these actions, however, they were not the leading group but an

auxiliary one (yet another issue is the question of the Polish population supplying carts for the operations, which I also discuss in my article). The Polish population participated en masse in the seizure of Jewish property, whether legally, according to German law at the time (auctions), or illegally (theft). Based on the sources at our disposal, I argue that the claim of “fairly widespread participation of the local population in liquidations” has no basis. The looting of Jewish property immediately after or during the actions, the Polish voices remembered by Jewish witnesses during the operations, groups of youths and onlookers, random people, or informers do not imply “fairly widespread participation” of the Polish population in the liquidation operations. Nor does it disprove the later mass seizure of Jewish property or the role of Poles during the so-called hunt for Jews in 1943. These are entirely different stages of the process. I will also address this problem in my dissertation. In contrast, what happened to the Jews after the liquidation operations is not at all the subject of the article under discussion. So I am grateful for the numerous suggestions of quotes mentioned in the “review,” but they are hardly suitable for this article.

Regarding the sources. Jan Grabowski writes about Chaim Kwiatek that he was introduced into the academic circulation in *Night Without End*. I am trying to figure out how I'm supposed to interpret this claim since I spoke about Chaim Kwiatek even before the publication of the book at a conference in Lublin, where I had the opportunity to debate with the Professor for the first time. That was in June 2022, before the publication of *Night Without End* (September 2022). Instead, I might wonder why the first text on Węgrów County by Jan Grabowski in *Night Without End* (2018) fails to refer to this vital witness, just as there are no other important precisely Polish testimonies that my article brings into academic circulation. These include, for example, the files of the Main Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland concerning Sokołów and Węgrów counties dispatched to the National Socialist Crimes Research Center in the 1970s and 1980s, which I found in the Federal Archives (Bundesarchiv).

As for Ernst Gramss. I first discussed this Nazi and his letters to his family with Markus Roth via email in September 2018. Gramss's fate remains unknown – in a context such that we do not know the date and circumstances of his death. This claim seems rather obvious. Ladies and gentlemen, these are not allegations of substance – they are malice.

I want to point out that the obligation to inform the readers that a given quote is taken from someone else's publication arises when this is the case. Instead, what I notice in the accusations of my alleged failure to cite specific sources is a desire to remind people that, according to Prof. Grabowski, he wrote the most important text related to Węgrów County. I understand and

respect the author's opinion about his text. On the other hand, I read his demand that I refer to research on half of Sokołów-Węgrów County as an attempt to impose a narrative that my article deals with the same thing. It does not. Wherever the article on Węgrów County is helpful in my analysis, I include a relevant footnote in the text. And all my work is in strict accordance with academic standards.

Such standards would be something that I ought to appeal to the authors of the “review” at the end of my reply since it has nothing to do with any of the criteria required for the evaluation of a scholarly text. What we have is a situation where the authors come up with a set of certain characteristics that they arbitrarily ascribe to my text and move on to condescendingly scold me for it and try to label me as a “negationist”. What Prof. Grabowski and Dr. Markusz are engaged in does not bear any characteristics of an exchange of views but has all the symptoms of bullying and is unworthy of members of the Academy. It is regrettable that you, in your “review,” are urging the hard work of several authors to be thrown away. *It* reminds me of the situation when the Institute of National Remembrance staff, searching for some apparent errors, typos, or inaccuracies virtually impossible to avoid in such a large publication, tried to convince the public that it was not worth anyone's attention...

At the same time, I would like to thank the scientific editors of the Polish Center for Holocaust Research: Prof. Barbara Engelking, Prof. Jacek Leociak, Prof. Dariusz Libionka, Alina Skibińska, as well as the invaluable editor Beata Binko and all those with whom I worked on this publication. It was an important time for me at that stage of my academic career.

I am happy that this important book has been published. Now, everyone can judge its content after reading *sine ira et studio*.

Finally, I will again quote Marcin Zaremba, who noted in the introduction of his review of my article: “Michał Kowalski's article ‘I think Jews will be taken to Treblinka. It's better for you to stay at home.’ Polish residents of towns around Treblinka as Holocaust witnesses” is poignant and vital, and his description of the cacophony of the Holocaust – outstanding. The author took on a topic that is already well-known but found many exciting accounts. The text is very well written.”

I encourage you to read my article and the volume.

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Polish and Jewish Communities in the Shadow of Treblinka I and Treblinka II Camps.
Supervisor: Bożena Szaynok, Professor of Wrocław University Two-time recipient of The Claims Conference Saul Kagan Fellowship in Advanced Shoah Studies (years 2023/2024, 2024/2025), the Global Education Outreach Scholarship Program at the Museum of the History of Polish Jews Polin (years 2021/2022, 2022/2024), and the EHRI Conny Kristel Fellowship Programme 2022. Participated in seminars and national and international conferences. He has written, among other things, about pre-war Polish anti-Semitism in the Sokołów-Węgrów region and Polish violence against rural Jews, the Jewish history of the Treblinka I labor camp, and the fate of Jewish women activists in the Second Polish Republic. Member of the Jewish Historical Institute Association; he cooperates with Holocaust remembrance organizations.