

BOOK REVIEW

***Zbrodnia niemiecka w Warszawie 1944 r. Zeznania – Zdjęcia* [German Crimes in Warsaw in 1944. Testimonies and Photographs], compiled by Edward Serwański and Irena Trawińska, Poznań 1946, reprinted Poznań 2016.**

It may seem that everything that can be said about the Warsaw Uprising has already been written. However, this is not the case, as for a long time, in particular before 1989, scholarship concerning this event was subject to a single, biased interpretation. The situation changed only after the political transformation, although it may seem that during that period people relied on certain simplifications instead of on source studies. Today it is difficult to add anything new to our knowledge about those events. Hence, it is necessary to return to historical sources. A step in that direction is provided by this reprint by the Instytut Zachodni (Institute for Western Affairs) of a study originally published in 1946. The book is extraordinary, but we also need to remember that it was written in extraordinary circumstances. The authors' intention was to collect evidence which could be used in the future to hold Germans to account for their crimes in occupied Poland. However, the conditions in which oral evidence was collected did not meet all of the formal requirements necessary for its use in future court trials. As Edward Serwański wrote in the book's introduction, the oral accounts of the German atrocities in Warsaw had been written down when the fighting was still continuing. The stories were collected "at the peripheries of a terrible battle – on the spot, from people, victims, and witnesses in whose eyes you could still see the trauma of recent tragedies."

The idea of gathering oral evidence from the people of Warsaw originated among the members of an underground organisation called *Ojczyzna* ("Homeland"), which had been established in Poznań in September/October 1939 and was ideologically linked to the National Democracy political movement. When the Warsaw Uprising began, many members of the organisation were in the territory of the General Government, where they had fled in fear of being arrested. Edward Serwański, the originator of the idea to collect oral accounts of what was happening was an active member of *Ojczyzna*. He participated in the fighting in Warsaw, and afterwards fled the city along with the civilian population. As a true scholar, he felt an instinct for documenting the events. In mid-August he wrote down his own account, which described not only the fighting but also the fate of the city's inhabitants. His passion inspired others. He was supported in his endeavour by Irena Trawińska, and scholarly supervision was provided by Professor Zygmunt Wojciechowski. They all understood the need to

undertake this work, in view of its immense significance, and as a result the circle of people involved in the task grew quickly (they eventually numbered about 100). The undertaking was assigned the cryptonym “Iskra-Dog”. At the end of the war, those associated with the *Ojczyzna* organisation began efforts to establish Instytut Zachodni in Poznań, to focus on the study of Polish–German relations. At that time this objective was not questioned, and the effort to establish the institution was successful. The studies carried on there concerned current affairs, in particular Polish policy with regard to the defeated Germany. As a result, a number of papers were published on the issue of the proposed border, which constituted a theoretical basis for Polish demands. From the beginning, the Institute also endeavoured to document German crimes committed in Poland during World War II. Thanks to the work of the Institute’s employees, it was as early as 1945 that the first volume of *Documenta Occupationis Theutonicae* was published. A second volume in the series appeared in 1946, containing oral accounts collected during the Warsaw Uprising. These materials were used against German war criminals during the Nuremberg trials.

Even today it is hard to overestimate the significance of the documents compiled by Edward Serwański and Irena Trawińska. Indeed, they realised the importance of their work even while they were collecting the materials. In the introduction to the book, Serwański wrote that “the collected materials have value not only purely as documents but also psychologically, since they were collected on the spot and reflect Warsaw citizens’ state of mind.” It is impressive that the underground activists managed to set up groups that would gather reports from a number of localities around Warsaw. The major part of the work was carried out from August to October 1944, while the area was still under German occupation. The work was interrupted by the offensive on the Eastern front and the dispersion of people in the liberated territory. In the conditions of the underground movement it was difficult to put together and train a team to perform such a complex task. Framework guidelines were developed for the interviewers, and their main objective was defined as “collecting and describing as accurately as possible the whole of the German destructive campaign, murders, executions and plundering on the one hand, and on the other the activity of the AK [Home Army] and the attitude of the Polish community. The purpose of the documentation is for it to be made available to the Polish authorities and to Polish propaganda for use in an international forum.” Specific questions to be asked by the interviewers were listed under a number of points.¹ However, most of the collected material did not fit the template. Usually, the interviewers would write down oral accounts given by witnesses to specific events. Sometimes reports were written by the witnesses themselves. Today it is difficult to imagine the conditions in which the group members had to work. We need to remember that they were asking people to recount tragedies, the memories of which were still vivid. Of course, these circumstances were also hard

¹ Edward Serwański’s memorandum of 20 August 1944 for persons collecting information, in: *Zbrodnia niemiecka w Warszawie, 1944 r. Zeznania – Zdjęcia* [German Crimes in Warsaw in 1944. Testimonies and Photographs] compiled by E. Serwański and I. Trawińska, Poznań 1946, p. XVII.

for the interviewers as many people – for obvious reasons – did not want to return to their past traumas. Additionally, people still feared for their safety. The occupying forces were very sensitive to information about people’s participation in the Uprising, and the disclosure of such information could have serious consequences. Thus, it was natural that people wanted to keep those experiences to themselves. If they decided to share their experience, it was because they placed a great deal of trust in the interviewer. The collected materials were copied out, registered and suitably marked, personal names were enciphered, and the documents themselves were hidden, usually buried. The result surpassed everyone’s expectations. It is rare to have access to such well-captured memories. This is because memoirs written years after the events are subject to various influences, and as time passes the details become blurred and facts get twisted. There is no such problem in this publication. The reader is faced with immediate, still fresh and painful reactions to the recent traumas. The originators of this endeavour did not have the time or opportunity to make full professional preparations for their documentary work, to think over the concept, to draw up a catalogue of questions, and so on. In the circumstances of the time, but also from today’s point of view, this turned out to be an advantage, since the narrative is claimed by those telling the story. It is the interviewees who recount in detail what they have gone through and witnessed. Even if these oral accounts are largely subjective, which is understandable, they still have great value as they were recorded on the spot. They are also reliable. The initiator of the project emphasised that the accounts had not been verified, but since “the stories were completely consistent with one another they asserted their own authenticity.” This tremendous task, carried out by what was still an underground organisation, brought astonishing results. The idea itself was surprising enough that no-one, particularly the Germans, could suspect that such documentary work might be taking place right under their noses. The work was an extraordinary example of heroism, and the authors of the study realised that. “It would not be an exaggeration to say that one wrong step, an unguarded moment, a lack of caution would mean nothing short of death,” Serwański wrote. It was not easy to recruit a team for such work, and it was hard to expect that people recounting their experiences would wish to disclose their names. The disclosure of such material would, after all, put them in grave danger. Luckily, the operation was not exposed.

Immediately after the war the collected accounts were published in print. The book presented here is a reprint of the 1946 original. The editors of this publication, Maria Rutowska and Stanisław Żerko, decided not to make any changes to the book. The materials collected during the operation are kept in the World War II Archive of the Instytut Zachodni, which also contains photographs of the Warsaw Uprising. In the extensive introduction to the current edition not only are the circumstances of the project described, but the *Ojczyzna* underground organisation is also presented, along with the stories of the main figures involved in the project and the beginnings of the Instytut Zachodni. The book contains 145 reports, divided according to the districts of Warsaw to which they relate (the Wola Massacre, Ochota–Zieleniak, Mokotów–Czerlniaków–Żoliborz, Śródmieście, Pruszków). Numerous photographs of Warsaw during

the fighting are a valuable addition to this publication. The collection includes reports of various kinds. Sometimes they are chronicles of events or short notes with basic information. In the great majority of instances, however, they contain extensive and shocking descriptions of the tragedies. Almost all of the reports concern crimes committed against civilians. In most cases the texts are not descriptions of military action, but are an illustration of everyday life during the Uprising. These accounts not only report the barbarity of German and Ukrainian soldiers, although the detail of such descriptions is unprecedented as they come from eyewitnesses. The reader gets to experience the fear felt by Warsaw citizens of being executed by firing squad, of being burnt alive in their homes, of rapes and robbery. We see through their eyes the endless piles of bodies that built up as there was no-one to bury them. We see the hopelessness of the situation, but also the “everyday life” of the struggling city, and the behaviour of the civilians condemned to an uncertain fate and persecuted by the German and Ukrainian soldiers trying to crush the Uprising. Usually, the descriptions concern the first stage of the Uprising, when the soldiers were given orders to murder all Poles. However, the reader of these accounts can follow the mood from the beginning of the Uprising and see how it changes with time. We get to see the events through the eyes of ordinary people and relive the remembered tragedies with them. In those parts of the city that fell into German hands no-one could be certain about their fate. There are appalling descriptions of methodically carried out executions when victims had to dig their own graves, descriptions of how people were subject to selection, how hopes were raised and crushed. These are truly distressing testimonies. But these documents also include examples of unprecedented heroism in particularly tragic circumstances, descriptions of heroic attitudes of women and children driven away into the unknown. Edward Serwański recalled: “I was deeply touched by the attitude adopted by women. Deeply focused, they relentlessly marched forward like soldiers, paying heed to nothing but their children and bundles [...] during their walk [...] and there was not a single instance when I heard them lamenting, crying bitterly or asking for help.” He went on: “I was impressed by the men’s attitude. They formed a mass of people, like one huge body, like lava flowing through the streets, hardened by its silence, solid in its relentlessness, with no cries, no manifestation of fear or anxiety.”² But there are also other recollections, reflecting the tragedy of the situation and people’s different reactions. Sometimes they concern spontaneous acts of help, in other cases a ruthless fight over the last piece of meat.

The reprint published 70 years later still speaks volumes. It is a reminder of times that we cannot even begin to imagine. The book is a shocking document, a testimony that cannot be erased from memory. But it is also a document which shows that even in such tragic circumstances it was possible to retain faith in fundamental values, as evidenced by selfless sacrifice and true patriotism. This material also bears witness to the lives of those who had the courage to undertake this extraordinary work. The members of *Ojczyzna* soon came to be viewed as enemies of the “new Poland”. In

² *Zbrodnia niemiecka...* [German Crimes...], p. 54.

March 1948 Edward Serwański was arrested by the security services of the communist state. As he did not give in to his persecutors and refused to collaborate with the secret police, together with other *Ojczyzna* members he was subjected to a brutal investigation, and finally he was sentenced to seven years in prison. Long after his release he remained under the surveillance of the UB/SB security services and classified as a “definite enemy of the system”. Out of fear that the collected materials might be confiscated, the employees of the Instytut Zachodni decided to remove those reports which presented the Red Army in an unfavourable light. Trouble also loomed over the Institute: it was threatened with closure since the people involved in its activity were perceived by the authorities as reactionary and Catholic, and the Polish United Workers’ Party did not have any influence there³.

Stanisław Jankowiak

³ S. Jankowiak, *Instytut Zachodni w pierwszej połowie lat pięćdziesiątych – walka o przetrwanie* [The Instytut Zachodni in the first half of the 1950s – the struggle to survive], *Kronika Wielkopolski*, 1993 No. 2, pp. 22-27.

