H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard C. Lukas, ed. *Forgotten Survivors: Polish Christians Remember the Holocaust.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004. viii + 232 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1350-2.

Reviewed by Mark Lindsay (Centre for the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations, Cambridge)
Published on H-Genocide (February, 2006)

It is by now well established that the relationship between Poles and Polish Jews before, during, and after the Holocaust was both ambiguous and contentious. Recent works, such as Jan T. Gross's *Neighbors* (2001) and Joshua Zimmerman's *Contested Memories* (2004) have underscored the problematic nature of the relationship as well as the stereotypical assumptions that have emerged to dominate the issue. Richard Lukas's new book *Forgotten Survivors: Polish Christians Remember the Nazi Occupation* seeks to explore not only this subject but also its close corollary, the question of "ownership" of Holocaust memory. While Lukas never phrases the question in precisely these terms, it is clear that he views the twenty-eight survivors whose testimonies he has collated here, and the wider Polish Christian population they represent, as victims of the same genocidal machinery by which the Nazis murdered Europe's Jews. Indeed, as the front-cover material says, "their stories provide a somber reminder that non-Jewish Poles were just as likely as Jews to suffer at the hands of the Nazis, who viewed them with nearly equal contempt." This is a big claim, and one that is reiterated throughout the book by both editorial commentary and the testimony of individuals. Barbara Makuch, for example, argues in her chapter that "the same fate [as that of the Jews] awaited Polish Christians" (p. 86). When, in the Lukas notes in the introduction that "Poles and Jews shared pain, agony, degradation, and death at the hands of the Nazis," the truth of his assertion is, to my mind, overshadowed by what seems to be an implicit demand that the book be read with a view to making qualitative comparisons between the suffering of Jews and non-Jewish Poles (p. 1).

Certainly, the survivor testimonies that Lukas presents are moving and, at times, harrowing. We read, for example, of Zbigniew Haszlakiewicz, who was suspended horizontally above the floor of his interrogation cell, his hands tied behind his back and pulled one way, while his legs were pulled in the opposite direction. "The pain was so overwhelming, so cruel ... [that even the whipping was] not as painful as the tearing apart of my shoulder joints" (p. 45). We also read of Dr. Stanley Garstka who, in 1941, was sent to the Tuberculosis Experimental Station in Dachau, where he witnessed Polish priests being infected with malaria and hepatitis as part of so-called "clinical trials" (p. 27). For his part, Paul Zenon Wos recalls that at Flossenburg, the SS soldiers checked whether inmates were alive or dead by poking red-hot iron rods into their bare stomachs (p. 217). Notwithstanding the horrific nature of the suffering to which these survivors bear witness, anyone who has read other collections of Holocaust survivor testimonies will find nothing here that is unfamiliar. By this I mean neither to demean the extent of trauma that is recorded in this book, nor to question the integrity of the memories that Lukas has brought before us. Conversely, it is surely a futile exercize to attempt to construct a ranking of suffering, and so the book's implicit–and, I suspect, unintended–demand to compare the experiences of Jews and Polish Christians under Nazism is fruitless.

On the other hand, Lukas does succeed in prizing open the question of ownership of Holocaust memory and historiography. Curiously, perhaps, Lukas never uses the word "Holocaust" in this book, preferring instead to speak of "the Nazi occupation" and "genocidal horrors." That he does, however, use "Holocaust" in two of his earlier books on the Polish experience of Nazism suggests that he does in fact regard non-Jewish Poles as victims of the Holocaust in as legitimate a sense as Jews.[1] Indeed, he cites approvingly Norman Davies, who has argued that "the murderers were not just Nazis, the victims were not just Jews" (p. 2). Lukas's unstated aim would appear, therefore, to be to engage with the hotly contested question, "who owns the Holocaust?"

The most significant contribution of this book, however, does not lie in its contribution to historiographical debates over memory ownership or the scope of victimhood. Far more important in my mind is that, through the media of personal recollections, we are given insights into the numerous Polish rescue and aid organizations. By highlighting the role of groups such as Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa (Jewish Fighting Organization), Armia Krajowa (Home Army), and Zegota, Lukas helps debunk the myth of Polish bystanding.[2] To cite Barbara Makuch again, for example, we are told that Zegota was "a huge conspiracy, helping Jews to survive the war by collecting and distributing money and forged documents, finding refuge for them, and transporting them from one place to another" (p. 87). Similarly, Andrzej Slawinski describes in some detail the structure of the Home Army. Far from being a rag-tag "Dad's Army," the Armia Krajowa was organized into city sectors, battalions, and platoons. There was even a cadet corps–the so-called Battle School unit of the Scouts–that acted as a training facility for the AK. Its ultimate failure notwithstanding, Slawinski reminds us that the AK, as well as the various other underground organizations, offered far more than token resistance. Such resistance may have been futile, but "the inhabitants of Warsaw were impressed with our efforts. We felt they really needed us" (p. 172).

There are, as is naturally the case in any collection of personal memories, some claims in the book that are utterly discordant with what most scholars would now routinely accept. It has already been noted that Lukas, like many of his interviewees, seeks to place the Polish experience of Nazism on the same plane as the Jewish genocide. Yehuda Bauer's famous distinction between genocide and Holocaust seems not to register at all. I admit to being sympathetic to Lukas's aim, insofar as he is determined to argue that the Holocaust was not purely a Jewish event. On the other hand, the point seems to me to be somewhat unnecessarily forced. Perhaps most strikingly, Jan Januszewski claims that "there was no anti-Semitism (sic) in my region of Poland." Indeed, "talk about Polish anti-Semitism before the war has been greatly exaggerated ... It [antisemitism] was not part of the general spirit of the Polish people" (p. 51). While it surely serves no great purpose to contradict survivor memories and experiences, it is just as surely incumbent upon someone in Lukas's position as editor to add a qualifying comment to those remembered circumstances that do not accord with the general historical record. That Lukas opts not to do so certainly validates the integrity of his subjects, but perhaps this comes at the expense of historical accuracy.

Overall, this collection of survivor accounts is a valuable addition to the historiography of Nazism and Polish-Jewish relations during the Second World War. It will be a particularly useful resource for those students and teachers who are reliant on English material. Quite naturally, the book benefits from the many strengths ingredient to a collection of personal memories, as well as suffering from the equally inevitable drawbacks that are inherent in such collections. So long as both these possibilities and limitations are taken into account, it will serve its readers admirably.

Notes

[1]. R. C. Lukas, *The Forgotten Holocaust: The Poles under German Occupation, 1939-1944* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1997); R. C. Lukas, ed., *Out of the Inferno: Poles Remember the Holocaust* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1989).

[2]. Zegota was the code name for Rada Pomocy Zydom, the Council for Aid to Jews.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Mark Lindsay. Review of Lukas, Richard C., ed., *Forgotten Survivors: Polish Christians Remember the Holocaust.* H-Genocide, H-Net Reviews. February, 2006.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11459

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.