

ALFRED POTOCKI'S ROLE IN HELPING THE ŁAŃCUT COMMUNITY 1939-1944

Jan-Roman Potocki

Count Alfred Potocki (1886-1958), son of Roman Potocki and Elizabeth born Princess Radziwiłł, the last master of Łańcut, played a significant role, from the first days of the German occupation until his departure in July 1944, providing help to all the inhabitants of Łańcut, including the sizeable Jewish community. Remaining at his post in September 1939, he assumed de facto responsibility for local townspeople as well as for the numerous Poles who sought refuge in Łańcut, providing material support as well as protection from the occupier's repressive policies.

I am aware that, as a member of the same branch of the family¹, the present text could be construed as lacking in objectivity. I should however also add that, I learnt the least about Alfred Potocki's activity from my own family, and the most, by pure chance, from witnesses to some of the events described below. The first account was relayed by the late Józef Wojnarski, who handed me a manuscript list of around 60 prisoners freed from the Pustków concentration camp, in late 1943 and early 1944, thanks to Alfred Potocki. I heard a second story in August 2008 during a pre-arranged telephone conversation with Henryk Mulhrad, living in Israel at the time. The latter described how, thanks to the personal intervention of Alfred Potocki in September or October 1939, he was released by the Gestapo and thus saved from execution. The late Mr. Mulhrad wanted, through me, to express his gratitude to Alfred Potocki. I shall never forget his words, warmly spoken in old fashioned Polish. They transported me, for a few minutes, to a bygone era. Henryk Mulhrad died a few years later.

I also realise that questions of life and death, of war and peace, remain highly politicised, even 70 years after the end of the second world war. A Polish aristocrat who helped his fellow Poles whilst playing host to senior German officers, who would, at the end of the war, help him take his family art collections abroad, was for many years a taboo subject. Maybe it explains why, despite readily available sources, no one took interest in researching this issue further. It is also ironic that those who received the least help from Alfred Potocki, that is the Jews of Łańcut, have most clearly expressed their gratitude. On the other hand, it is also unfortunately true, that not enough is known about the Poles who, risking their lives, hid and saved Jews during the war. Unlike the Ulma family from the neighbouring village of Markowa, Alfred Potocki never put his in life in danger. He was not a hero. Nonetheless, he would never refuse anyone help he could afford to give; making no distinction between Poles of Jewish descent and Gentiles, between the inhabitants of Łańcut and refugees from the West or from the East, between his own family and the rest of the community. In this, perhaps, lies his greatest virtue.

¹ Jan-Roman Potocki, born 1971, son of Marek and Charlotte Potocki. My father is currently head of the family following the death of Stanisław Potocki, only son of George Potocki, Alfred's brother.

Alfred Potocki's memoirs were published in London, posthumously, in 1959. A French translation was made available two years later². Unfortunately, the book was never published in his mother tongue, thus considerably reducing its distribution in Poland. These memoirs give a general picture of Alfred's role and motivation, but they are not sufficiently precise to be relied upon as a primary source for the events described below. I therefore based my research mostly on the accounts of Łańcut witnesses (J. Wojnarski³, J. Bieniasz⁴, Z. Pelc⁵), of people employed by Alfred's Estate⁶ (J. Wierciński⁷, former Castle staff⁸), and of surviving Jews who testified personally or whose recollections have been published in the Memorial Book of the Jews of Łańcut⁹. I also relied on family archives now kept at the Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych in Warsaw¹⁰.

² Alfred Potocki, *Master of Łańcut; The Memoirs of Count Alfred Potocki*, edited by Nicholson, W.H. Allen & Co, London 1959; *Châtelain en Pologne: Mémoires du Comte Potocki*, Julliard 1961

³ Józef Wojnarski, *The Year 1939 in Łańcut* (*"Rok 1939 w Łańcucie"*), Łańcut, July 1999, typescript. The defense of Łańcut is described after General Franciszek Skibiński's book "First Armoured Division" (*"Pierwsza pancerna"*, Warszawa, 1979) and the oral accounts of Captain Wincenty Pawłowski. The events in occupied Łańcut are presented in a diary format, from early September until October 31st 1939. It is not clear what role Wojnarski played. He most probably reproduced the diary of an unidentified member of the City Council.

⁴ Józef Bieniasz, "Hungry Kitchen" (*"Głodna Kuchnia"*), typescript, 1964, Łańcut Castle Archives, ref. 14/4.

⁵ Zbigniew Pelc, "My Łańcut" (*"Mój Łańcut"*), Łańcut, 1997. Son of Ignacy Pelc. His uncle, Teofil, was director of the vodka factory during the occupation. In the years 1940-41 he worked in the Castle gardens under Stanisław Augustynowicz.

⁶ Estate is an approximate equivalent of the Polish word "*ordynacja*" correctly translated as "fee tail" or "entail" (*"majorat"* in French or "*mayorazgo*" in Spanish). The latter is a legal status, which was granted in Poland from the XVIth century to a few large land estates, often historically significant, and meant to protect them from being sold, mortgaged or subdivided. The entail was usually bequeathed to the eldest son, who enjoyed a right of usufruct. He would pay an annual stipend to his siblings and widowed mother. This archaic legal status persisted in Scotland and Ireland until the turn of the XXIst century, and survives to this day in Sweden. Łańcut remained an entailed property until 1944. Alfred Potocki was referred to as the "Ordynat", legally meaning sole beneficiary of the entail, but in practice carrying significant prestige, akin to "Lord" or "Master" of Łańcut (hence the title of Alfred's memoirs).

⁷ Juliusz Wierciński, "Memoirs of an Estate Administrator" (*"Wspomnienia Oficjalisty"*) Kraków 1979, typescript, Łańcut Castle Archives. Published privately by his son in 2013. Juliusz was born in Kurowice, a farmstead belonging to the Estate. Both his father and his uncle were Estate managers under Roman Potocki, the penultimate Lord of Łańcut. After completing agronomy and law studies in Lvov, Juliusz found employment with the Estate in 1927 as a farmstead manager, and later as assistant to the General Manager. In the introduction he wrote: "Łańcut remained a place close to my heart". In elegant prose, he paints an interesting picture of life in the shadow of the Potockis, whom he did not like. He remained nonetheless loyal to the family and to Łańcut traditions until the end, saving the Castle from depredations by the Red Army.

⁸ In the 1960s the Łańcut Museum recorded the wartime recollections of Jan Szpunar, Stanisław Koch, Franciszek Jung, Józef and Jadwiga Bieniasz. In general, despite obvious political pressure, no serious criticisms of Alfred Potocki were made. These testimonies constitute a valuable point of view on certain events of that period.

⁹ Also known as the Yizkor Book, published jointly in 1963 by the Associations of Łańcut Jews in Israel and the USA, partly translated from Yiddish under the title "Łanzut, The Life and Destruction of a Jewish Community – Part Three English". The editors, Michael Walzer and Nathan Kudish, were both born in Łańcut. The Israel branch was established in 1943. Polish Jews from different towns published several Memorial Books as a record of prewar life as well as of the ensuing Holocaust. There are several inexactitudes in the Łańcut book relating to the date of events.

¹⁰ Archives of the Potockis from Łańcut. The Fund represents most of the documents taken by Alfred in 1944. Historically valuable, older records were sold after Alfred's death, ending up at Brigham Young University in Salt Lake City, UT. More recent documents were transferred to the Polish

I do hope that specialists of this subject will not only forgive me upfront for any mistakes or oversights, but that they will also feel inspired by my work to conduct further research, so as to bestow Count Alfred Potocki with the recognition and respect he deserves.

The Germans took Rzeszów on September 8th 1939, following an intensive air campaign. The same day, Łańcut's city hall¹¹ and local district authorities fled their posts, exposing the town to potential chaos and panic before an approaching invading army, as well as an enormous number of refugees from Rzeszów.

Being in regular contact with the diplomatic corps – especially with his brother George, then Poland's ambassador in Washington – as well as with the Polish military high command, Alfred Potocki was not surprised by the German aggression. The Castle had in fact been prepared for possible bombardments and looting¹². One should also bear in mind that Alfred and Elizabeth Potocki had witnessed the devastation brought upon the whole region by the battles fought in the vicinity, in 1914 and 1916. They also vividly remembered the complete destruction, and eventual loss, of the Uładówka and Antoniny family estates in Volhynia following the Bolshevik revolution in Russia¹³.

Perhaps for this reason Alfred acted very quickly to counter the growing confusion: he advised his staff to stay put and convened, that very evening, a conference at the Castle with all the remaining local leaders, including colonel Stanisław Maczek¹⁴,

Institute of Arts and Sciences ("PIASA") in New York after the death of Alfred's widow, Izabela, born Jodko-Narkiewicz. The entire set is now at the Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych in Warsaw (AGAD).

¹¹ The mayor, Bogdan Tekielski, had been mobilized earlier. He came back to Łańcut after the September 1939 campaign. He was sent to the Pustków concentration camp following the Gestapo raid on Łańcut in August 1943, and freed on November 23rd 1943 thanks to the intervention of Alfred Potocki.

¹² A. Potocki, op. cit., p. 249. Jan Szpunar stated that the silver and china had already been packed and walled in the cellars in 1939.

¹³ The gubernias (provinces) of Volhynia, Podolia and Kiev represented parts of Ukraine, which had been conquered and colonised by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the XVIth century and finally annexed by Russia in the 1795 partition. The largest land estates remained nonetheless in Polish hands until the Bolshevik revolution of October 1917. Uładówka belonged to Roman Potocki, Alfred's father, and represented Łańcut's main source of income. The legendary Antoniny estate, belonged to Roman's younger brother, Józef Potocki, great-grand father of the author. Following the 1921 Riga Peace Treaty, sealing Poland's victorious war against Lenin's Soviet Union, its eastern border was drawn to include the historically Polish cities of Vilno and Lvov and part of what is today western Bielorrussia and Ukraine. Alas, the final border only included a small rump of Antoniny's original 55,000 ha. Uładówka was lost entirely.

¹⁴ General Stanisław Maczek (1892-1994) is one of Poland's most outstanding WWII military commanders. Maczek became a professional soldier by accident. A philosophy student in Lvov at the outbreak of WWI, he was drafted into the Austro-Hungarian army to fight on the Italian front. An early advocate of mechanized warfare and an excellent tactician, Maczek fought victorious battles in the 1919-1920 war against the Soviet Union. In the interwar period he graduated from officer school and commanded infantry troops. In 1938, in recognition for his experience in mobile warfare, he was given command of the 10th Motorized Cavalry Brigade, the first fully motorized formation in the Polish Army, which included 10th Cavalry Regiment stationed in Łańcut. During the 1939 campaign, his

commanding the 10th Mechanized Cavalry Brigade. The next day a temporary City Council, chaired by Alfred Potocki, was appointed. A citizen patrol force was also set up to protect inhabitants and their property¹⁵. In the meantime, Maczek's forces were making their last stand defending Łańcut. The Germans, uncharacteristically, did not use their airforce¹⁶. The first German patrols entered the city at dawn on September 10th. A first German staff was quickly stationed at the Castle, occupying the orangerie, the entire ground floor. It would later also take over the second floor. Alfred was left with one room, his study and the chapel, all contiguous on the ground floor.

During the following days of September 1939, the City Council, as well as the local population called to help, concentrated their efforts on distributing foodstuffs, water (a terrible drought was raging) and clothing to refugees and Polish prisoners of war. Elizabeth Potocka and Dr. Jan Jedliński had already set-up a 60-bed field hospital in the early days of September. This initiative proved farsighted as the Germans did not provide any medical assistance to wounded Polish soldiers. It wasn't the first time in fact, as Alfred's mother had already run a Red Cross hospital during the first World War, located at the time in the Orangerie. The Council also restored power and fixed the electrical and telephone grids. Alfred Potocki would participate in its daily meetings and provide all the material help his Estate could extend; lending equipment, providing foodstuff, fuel or cash¹⁷. Thanks to City's Council energetic response, order was restored within a week.

The Germans held an increasing number of Polish prisoners of war in the local military riding school, before final selection and evacuation to long term internment camps. As their numbers grew, and in the absence of any form of shelter or organised supplies, the PoW's plight became desperate and elicited spontaneous acts of solidarity from the local population. On September 24th, 25,000 captured soldiers from Army Kraków arrived in Łańcut. Due to their large numbers they were transferred to the so-called English Park, an open field which belonged to the Estate. Another 24,000 arrived between September 30th and October 2nd. The Germans simply transferred the entire responsibility for sustaining the PoWs to the local

brigade faced two German Panzer divisions and, for five days, effectively slowed their advance to a bloody crawl. After the Soviet invasion on September 17th, he was ordered to evacuate his troops to Hungary, diminished but undefeated. Maczek's 1st Polish Armoured Division, formed in Scotland in 1942, took part in the 1944 Normandy landings. Maczek and his men proved their worth with several spectacular operations: closing the Falaise gap, freeing the Dutch town of Breda without incurring civilian casualties, taking the Kriegsmarine base of Wilhelmshaven with 200 ships. Demobilised in 1947, he settled in Edinburgh but was incredibly denied combatant rights and a pension, forcing him to work as a hotel bartender. His plight exemplified the scandalous treatment of former Polish soldiers by Britain's postwar Labour Government. Instead, the grateful Dutch Government awarded him, secretly, a pension for life and paid for medical bills.

¹⁵ J. Wojnarski, pp. 7-9. Other members of the City Council included Francizek Spis, prelate A. Dożynski, Dr. Jan Jedliński and secretary Jan Wojnarowicz. The latter was appointed mayor of Łańcut in November 1939. Murdered by local bandits in 1944. See footnote 51.

¹⁶ Some commentators later assumed that Marshal Goering, commander of the Luftwaffe, wanted to preserve the art collections for later looting. Twenty-two paintings from Łańcut were indeed on the Gestapo's lists. Alfred Potocki writes that the intervention of General Metz most likely saved the works from being confiscated. (op. cit., p. 262). Close cousins, the Potockis from Cracow, did not have as much luck. Their summer residence in Krzeszowice was seized by Governor Hans Frank (who renamed it „Kressendorf”), and part of their valuable art collection looted by the Nazis. See also Lynn H. Nicholas „The Rape of Europa”, Vintage Books, 1995.

¹⁷ J. Wojnarski, op. cit., pp. 10,12

community. The latter soon exhausted its reserves in doing so. Wojnarski notes in his diary Alfred Potocki's crucial support during these days: „The kitchens set-up at the Borromeo Sisters's convent, and at the clothing factory, were working at full capacity thanks to supplies provided by the Estate”; „Ordynat Alfred and director Dwernicki strive every day to provide provisions in sufficient quantity”¹⁸.

As the weather broke early October, bringing cooler and wetter days, the living conditions in the English Park worsened „beyond description”. Some officers would commit suicide. For many days, the City's Council and Alfred Potocki's chief concern was ensuring sufficient supply of provisions, clothing and fuel: „Thanks to the efforts of Ordynat Alfred and of the Landrat, we received 5 railcars of coal”; „Secretary Wojnarowicz is off sick. Ordynat Alfred continues his daily visits to the Council”¹⁹. The temporary PoW camp and the field hospital were finally closed at the end of October.

After the crisis passed, Alfred Potocki organised a permanent „hungry kitchen” meant to feed the needy. It was run by his mother and other ladies, as well as to a large extent, by the Borromeo nuns who lent the premises. The estate would provide fresh supplies. Thus the kitchen was able to distribute 400 meals a day. This permanent form of support was invaluable for people with no means of sustaining themselves. As Zbigniew Pelc reminisces „many people relied on this help. It was a time when many Poles, evicted from parts of Poland annexed by the Reich, would seek refuge in Łańcut [...]. People would arrive with luggage, bundles, suitcases, penniless, without work and contacts. Until one could find a permanent solution, a free meal was a big help”²⁰. In later years, the kitchen fed refugees from Volhynia²¹. Józef Bieniasz, responsible for running the „hungry kitchen” stresses that Alfred's and Elizabeth's Potocki patronage proved invaluable to help surmount German administrative obstructions: „our supply was more or less illegal, thus the permanent help provided by both Potockis [...] was essential. The local Germans were aware of that, of the permanent [...] presence of military staff quartered at the Castle; this patronage helped a great deal to sort out various problems”. Despite growing complications with finding supplies and harsh quotas imposed by the Germans, especially following the German attack on the Soviet Union, the hungry kitchen functioned without interruption until the end of the war. J. Bieniasz reckons it served a total of 600,000 meals²².

¹⁸ J. Wojnarski, op. cit., pp.13-15

¹⁹ J. Wojnarski, op. cit., pp. 18,19

²⁰ Z. Pelc, op. cit., p. 250

²¹ At the outset of operation Barbarossa in 1941, Ukrainians living in the former Polish provinces of Eastern Galicia and Volhynia, were relieved to be rid of Soviet terror, and many expected the Germans to support their claim to independence. The Nazis did not play this card with any consistency but, from 1943, needing fresh recruits to fight on the eastern front, allowed Ukrainians to enlist in the SS Galizien division, which also included several police regiments. The latter were used in several retaliatory actions against Polish villages in 1943 and 1944, leading to the mass murder of around 2,000 civilians, including women and children. Others joined the Ukrainian Liberation Army (“UPA”), a partisan movement with a strong anti-Polish orientation, which took part in many atrocities against Polish civilians and Jews.

²² J. Bieniasz, op. cit., p.3. The author was arrested in 1943 and sent to Pustków, from where he returned on November 23rd 1943, thanks to Alfred Potocki's intervention. During his captivity, he was replaced by Mrs. Niedental.

Detailed accounting records of the Estate's Social Welfare Fund survived in the family archives²³. Between October 1939 and December 1942, the Estate spent slightly over 200,000 zł²⁴, of which 71% on the above mentioned „hungry kitchen”, 4% for the purchase of clothing, shoes, medicine, fuel as well as Christmas or Easter provisions for poor children. 21% of the budget was spent in various financial subsidies. For example Józef Majka received 1,000 złoty in the autumn 1939 for the Górny district; women teachers 500 złoty in the winter of 1940; the farms in Albigowa and Sonina 400 złoty during the same period. The balance was spent to support the Borromeo Convent, the Jewish kitchen (see more below) as well as the church in Łańcut.

Alfred personally authorised smaller sums, usually 20, 50 złoty each, for the needy petitioning the Castle. It is evidenced in the accounting records as well in Pelc's memoirs²⁵. In the spring of 1944, when refugees were pouring into Łańcut from the East, fleeing the Ukrainian SS Galizien echelons or the UPA gangs, the Estate was there to help. J. Wierciński recalls that „that significant sums in cash were distributed by the Estate to the refugees”²⁶. This form of financial support continued until the very end, as evidenced by cash receipts signed a few days before Alfred's final departure²⁷.

It is probable that part of these sums, under the disguise of social welfare, were meant to support the Polish Underground. Alfred Potocki recalls being aware of some of his closest staff's involvement with the Resistance; for example Roman Noga, Bronisław Trześniowski and Marcin Kochman, his two drivers and his butler. He tolerated or supported their activity but never overtly, having to maintain the appearance of neutrality with the Germans²⁸. An illegal printing press functioned in the Castle's attic in the early years of the German occupation²⁹. Alfred's chauffeurs fashioned grenade shrapnel in the garage at night, among the cars used by the staff officers quartered in the Castle³⁰. In Albigowa, where the Estate's stud farm was located, Józef Albigowski, owner of a dairy shop in Łańcut during the day and commander of the Home Army district of „Łańcut-Country” at night, „borrowed” Alfred's mounts so regularly for weapon gathering expeditions, that he used to jokingly call himself a „horse thief”. In difficult moments he could however also count on Alfred Potocki's support³¹.

²³ AGAD, Archives of the Potockis from Łańcut, ref. 1467

²⁴ For comparison purposes a bread bun cost 5 groszy before the war (interview with Dominik Szmuc, blog „Okupowana Młodość”, Łańcut 2012). The Polish Army requisition receipts of September 7th 1939, issued to the Łańcut estate, valued a riding horse at 250-400 złoty, and two Packards at 20,000 złoty each.

²⁵ Z. Pelc, op. cit., p. 253

²⁶ J. Wierciński, op. cit., p. 67

²⁷ Maria Nowicka of Łańcut received 20 zł on July 6th 1944, Józefowa Naróg of Łańcut 50 zł on July 7th, and Julia Cybulska from the Górny farmstead 20 zł on July 8th.

²⁸ A. Potocki, op. cit., pp. 263,264

²⁹ A. Potocki, op. cit., p. 264. The Home Army published “News” (“*Wieści*”), an underground information sheet. The printing press was transferred to the hunting lodge in Julin in November 1941 until the spring of 1942, when the Castle's staff started preparing the house for the summer season. (W. Bonusiak, “Łańcut: Studies and sketches of the city's history” (“*Łańcut: Studia i szkice z dziejów miasta*”), Wyd. Wyższej Szkoły Pedagogicznej, Rzeszów 1997, pp. 298-299)

³⁰ Z. Pelc, op. cit., p. 251

³¹ Interview with Elżbieta Klimza, Albigowski's daughter, blog “Okupowana Młodość”, 2011. Alfred Potocki reportedly vouched for Albigowski with the Germans.

The Castle and the Estate, in particular the vodka factory, raised headcount to maximally acceptable levels, in order to save townspeople and refugees from being shipped to Germany as forced labourers. Besides, they all received salaries which was of vital importance for Poles expelled from Greater Poland, for refugees from the east, fleeing Soviet repression or, after 1941, massacres by Ukrainian nationalists, and for people unable to find employment such as teachers or former Polish Army officers³². Alfred Potocki writes that, in 1942, employment in the Castle rose from 60 to 101³³. The Castle's Ballroom was filled with dozens of desks, arranged in rows, to accommodate newly created, fictitious, positions. A similar scenario applied to the Gardens Management Office³⁴. Stanisława Nowak, a former Home Army courier, remembers how her school girlfriends found bogus employment with Alfred Potocki: „The most important was that many of my older girlfriends, who had already graduated from high school, would rake the leaves in the Park and would dump them again before leaving, in order to preserve some work for the next day. Thanks to this ploy they all received *Arbeitskarten*³⁵ because, without these documents, so many people were sent to work in Germany, so many died there³⁶. Even oft-quoted Zbigniew Pelc, was lucky to find a cosy job in Łańcut's hothouses after resigning from backbreaking road building work³⁷.

The Castle and the Estate administration, being under the constant monitoring by the German authorities and especially by the Gestapo, had to be exemplarily run - and they were³⁸. Nonetheless the latter very quickly made Alfred Potocki understand that he was not above suspicion, nor beyond its reach. Just before Independence day, on November 11th 1939, Alfred Potocki was arrested together with Felix Dwernicki, the Estate's general manager, and a group of Government employees, teachers etc..., and imprisoned in Rzeszów. The Castle's staff, suddenly finding itself without protector, was seized with temporary fear. Alfred was released the next day after committing himself in writing to maintaining strict neutrality towards the Germans³⁹. Alfred was interrogated in Rzeszów once more in December 1939, and kept under arrest for four days at the Gestapo headquarters in Cracow in October 1940⁴⁰. The Gestapo searched the Castle several times during the occupation, without result.

Juliusz Wierciński, unscathed in November 1939 and even appointed to take up the general manager's tasks following Dwernicki's arrest, describes his interrogation in July 1941 at the Gestapo headquarters in nearby Jarosław: „The bloodied body of a

³² J. Szpunar, op. cit., p. 3. In response to official questioning in 1963, about „Alfred Potocki's attitude towards his compatriots”.

³³ A. Potocki, op. cit., p. 276

³⁴ Testimony in the 2000s by Kazimierz Bartoszyński, former employee of the Gardens Management Office, relayed by Mrs. Aldona Kruszyńska of the Łańcut Museum.

³⁵ Or “work card”. As early as December 1939, the German administration imposed an obligation to work on all Poles aged from 18 to 60. The minimum age was later lowered to 14 for Gentiles and 12 for Jews. People without employment were shipped to Germany as forced labourers.

³⁶ Interview with Stanisława Nowak, blog “Okupowana Młodość”, January 2012. Also corroborated in an written interview with Stanisław Stys in the 1960s, Archives of the Łańcut Museum, ref. 14/26, p. 2

³⁷ Z. Pelc, op. cit., pp. 245-250. Employed in 1940 and 1941.

³⁸ J. Wierciński, op. cit., p. 54

³⁹ A. Potocki, op. cit. p. 257; J. Wierciński, op. cit., p. 55

⁴⁰ A. Potocki, op. cit., pp. 264-265. He reportedly informed the Castle of his arrest by dropping a note during a walk under guard in the streets of Cracow. It reached his family the same evening.

man not showing any signs of life was thrown through the door. Just as innocent as you – barked the Gestapo agent⁴¹ – you will look like that in a moment [...]. I was close to fainting. At this moment a higher ranking officer entered the room from the corridor, because all the others suddenly stood to attention”. The officer quickly checked the documents on the desk and said: „*Sie sind frei*”. It took Wierciński a few long seconds to grasp the meaning of these words: „I stood motionless, drenched in sweat”⁴². The author does not explain in his memoirs the reason for his unexpected and sudden release, but one can assume he owed his freedom to Alfred Potocki’s intervention or simply to his being a senior administrator of the Łańcut Estate, which enjoyed a certain protection. J. Wierciński was arrested twice more by the Gestapo, once that very evening, but quickly released and without torture threats.

Being forced to accommodate at the Castle an endless succession of senior German officers, as well as their staffs, numbering up to 50 people, Alfred and Elizabeth Potocki lived with the enemy, under one roof, throughout the entire war. Alfred played his role remarkably well, maintaining until the end the appearance of strict neutrality. Fulfilling his duty as master of the house, he managed to maintain correct, but not friendly, relations with the Germans. Thanks to this posture, Alfred accumulated a certain capital of trust, which he often used to help, in various ways, many fellow Poles. In fact, Łańcut very quickly acquired a reputation for being a relatively safe place thanks to the presence of Counts Potocki. Above quoted J. Bieniasz stressed: „One should remember that, during the occupation, Łańcut was considered a relatively safe town, protected by the Potockis. It is beyond doubt that this was the case to some extent. In September 39, the fact that the family did not leave Łańcut, and that, on the contrary, he [Alfred Potocki] assumed responsibility for the town, had an important effect on the inhabitants morale”.

Apart from Alfred’s own diplomacy, many factors contributed to this absolutely unique situation, especially in the context of a country so brutally and ruthlessly occupied and exploited by the Germans. In the first place, Elizabeth’s, Alfred’s mother, ancestry impressed the Germans. She was born in the Radziwiłł palace in Berlin⁴³, and was related to the former Prussian reigning family. Alfred himself was Wilhelm I von Hohenzollern’s godson, the penultimate German Kaiser, whose portrait hung in Łańcut. J. Wierciński, a former Estate administrator, often critical of his employers’ attitude towards the occupier, relates an incident which is revealing of the relationship the Potockis maintained with the Germans: „In November 1939, when the Gestapo arrested Alfred and a few other people at the Castle, the Countess [...], was parting with her son with tears in her eyes [...]. Asked by a Gestapo agent to conclude as it was time to go, she stared at him in such a way that he stepped back without uttering a word”⁴⁴.

⁴¹ J. Wierciński, op. cit., p. 81. It was Franz Schmidt, vice-chief of the Jarosław Gestapo. Notorious for his cruelty and for hundreds of murders committed personally. In 1943, he took part in many “pacification” raids on neighbouring towns and villages, as well as in the murder of Jews in Pelkinie.

⁴² J. Wierciński, op. cit., pp. 69-70, 72

⁴³ Wilhelmstrasse 77, standing next to the Brandenburg Gate. Sold to the newly created Prussian government in 1869, it housed united Germany’s first chancellery under Bismarck. In the 1930s, the palace was redesigned to serve as Hitler’s private residence. The famous bunker was built underneath. The building was burnt during the war and finally torn down.

⁴⁴ J. Wierciński, op. cit., p. 100

Besides, the sight of an imposing, immaculately kept castle, could only arouse the respect of people for whom „*Ordnung*” was a holy word. Alfred Potocki repeatedly stresses in his memoirs that, maintaining the established way of life at the Castle and the Estate, was not only a question of principle, but also a means of preserving the old Polish culture in the face of foreign occupation, as well as necessary diplomacy. This was in fact misunderstood by most Polish witnesses at the time and often, too easily ill-interpreted by postwar historians. I prefer to simply quote here former Estate employees, who were officially asked in the 1960s to testify about their wartime experiences. Franciszek Jung recalled that Alfred Potocki accepted the invitation of a German General to hunt pheasant on his own estate: „He went [...] by car accompanied by his lackey. As he stepped out, General Metz gave the Count a weapon. The latter did not accept the gun and replied in German: „I am a Pole, I am not allowed to carry a weapon”, and proceeded to participate in the hunt as an observer. I heard this from the lackey who witnessed the exchange”⁴⁵. The Germans sat down to meals separately, in the Castle’s Turkish Rooms, turned into an officers’ mess. According to J. Szpunar, Alfred „did not organise any banquets for the Germans”⁴⁶.

One should also quote the rarely heard point of view of a Wehrmacht officer, Udo von Alvensleben, stationed in Łańcut in April 1944, when Alfred was busy packing his art collections. He gives a good account of the impression the Castle made on him and, most likely, on many other German officers before him: „The incomparable Łańcut of Count Potocki. Everything I could expect from a family seat, and even beyond, was assembled here in perfect harmony. People representative of their position, the lifestyle, great carriages, historically and artistically valuable art collections, first class administration. Thanks to favourable conditions and wise management, here, in this unique case, the full picture of the culture of bygone centuries, survived as a whole”⁴⁷. In fact, for safety reasons, the first-floor representation salons could be visited by German officers only with permission of the residing General. Throughout the entire occupation, the quartered German staff left the Castle completely untouched, even after Alfred’s departure in July 1944 and before the arrival of Soviet troops⁴⁸.

Thirdly, one should also point out that Alfred was lucky in the random draw of his unwanted guests. Two personalities in particular, who also stayed the longest at the Castle, contributed to Alfred’s ability to rely on the German military high command’s help. This support was invaluable to disarm the Gestapo’s repeated assaults on the Castle, which remained under constant observation and suspected - correctly in fact - of harbouring underground activity.

⁴⁵ Franciszek Jung, manuscript, Archives of the Łańcut Museum, ref. 14/13, p. 2. F. Jung was employed in the Castle’s gardens.

⁴⁶ J. Szpunar, typescript, Archives of the Łańcut Museum, ref. 14/29, p. 2. J. Szpunar attended to the Castle’s guest rooms.

⁴⁷ Udo August von Alvensleben-Wittenmoor (1897-1962), „*Tagebuch im Kriege*”, Herausgegeben von Harald von Koenigswalk. Propyläen Verlag, Berlin 1971, p. 385. The author came from an aristocratic Prussian family. He mentions his forebear, Friedrich Johann von Alvensleben, Germany’s ambassador to St-Petersburg during the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-05, who was known to Alfred’s parents.

⁴⁸ J. Szpunar, op. cit., p. 2.

General Hermann Metz arrived in Łańcut with his staff in October 1939 and stayed, with some intervals, until June 1941. Born in 1878, he had been called back from retirement and belonged to the older, Prussian, officer corps. He did not have much in common with the National-Socialist movement. Shortly after his departure, Field Marshall Gerd von Rundstedt, stationed in Łańcut for a few days before taking command of Army Group „South”. He sent an aide in the middle of the night to inform Alfred that operation „Barbarossa” had commenced half an hour earlier⁴⁹. Until the arrival of the next long term resident in October 1942, Alfred sorely felt the loss of more permanent higher military patronage.

Before arriving in Łańcut, General Friedrich Altrichter had commanded the 58th infantry division, laying siege to Leningrad. These tough military operations had probably exhausted his health⁵⁰. During the interwar period he had been a highly rated instructor at the military academy in Dresden. In his memoirs, Alfred mentions his culture, well bred manners and willingness to help. He thus could be relied upon to provide much needed support with many difficult issues facing the Castle and the town, especially at a time of increasingly harsh restrictions imposed by the German administration. Alfred Potocki also recalls his clear-eyed assessment of the military situation in the East, often spiced with sarcasm about the fate of Poland should Stalin win the war. He must have belonged to those officers for whom Hitler’s war was gradually losing its purpose.

Alfred Potocki was opposed to armed interventions against German personnel because of ensuing repressions against the Polish civilian population. Criminal acts were in fact sometimes disguised under the banner of Home Army sabotage⁵¹. In the course of 1943, the Polish Underground intensified its armed activity against the occupier. The Gestapo responded with brutal retaliatory measures, for which the local communities paid a disproportionate price.

Łańcut lived through terrible moments during one of these „pacification” raids on July 5th 1943. The previous evening, army and police detachments encircled the town and started arresting all men according to previously established lists; 600 people in total. The arrested were quickly interviewed by the Gestapo and divided into groups. Some were badly beaten and two, Tadeusz Filipiński and Józef Martyński, shot on the spot. Most were freed soon after, except for two groups who were sent, respectively, to concentration camps in Pustków and Oświęcim⁵². Jadwiga Bieniasz, whose brother Józef had been badly beaten before being sent to Pustków, remembers the terrible moment when townspeople accompanied their kin, perhaps for the last time: „The prisoners were quickly loaded [on guarded trucks]; with their families standing in the

⁴⁹ A. Potocki, op. cit, p. 270. The Germans expected the support of Polish society following the start of the war against the hated Soviet enemy.

⁵⁰ According to Alfred Potocki, he had a condition of the lungs and did not stand cold weather well. He died in Soviet captivity in 1949. Op. cit., p. 277

⁵¹ On February 29th 1944, Jan Wojnarowicz, the last mayor of Łańcut during the German occupation, was shot by local bandits who broke into his house. Ten hostages held in the Tarnów prison, paid with their lives for this murder. As an “example” they were shot in a Łańcut street on March 5th 1944.

⁵² Tadeusz Kowalski, “Extermination of the civilian population in the Rzeszów area during WWII (1939-1945)” (*Eksterminacja ludności na Rzeszowszczyźnie w okresie II wojny światowej (1939-1945)*), Wyd. Towarzystwa Naukowego, Rzeszów 1987, p. 107. The arrested were divided into four groups with different destinies: freedom, death by shooting, forced labour in Pustków or in K.L. Auschwitz.

streets, or watching from the windows of the [H. Sienkiewicz] high school building located across the street from the courthouse [used also as a local jail], bidding them farewell in silence – heading towards an uncertain fate. Only the children, who could not at this moment muster the strength to remain silent, let out a cry...”⁵³. „There all the prisoners were given „uniforms” and shoes belonging to murdered Jews or Soviet prisoners. As political prisoners, they had a letter „P” marked on their sleeve and, from that moment on, given only a number by the camp’s authorities”⁵⁴.

Pustków was one of several concentration camps built by the Germans in the Subcarpathian region, initially to exploit and exhaust the labour potential of Soviet PoWs. Later, Poles and Jews were interned there. The Pustków camp was part of the Waffen-SS training facility in Dębica. After the installations built to manufacture V2 rockets in Peneemünde, on the Baltic coast, were bombarded by the Allies; the Germans transferred the works in August 1943 to Blizna, located near Pustków. The living conditions in the camp were horrendous. In addition to starvation level rations and exhausting work, the guards regularly beat, tortured and murdered prisoners. The death rate among Poles was thought to be around 40%⁵⁵.

Alfred Potocki was horrified by the pacification, and immediately started using his influence to free the prisoners. He managed to obtain the immediate release of Felix Dwernicki, the Estate’s general manager, and of Piotr Rutkowski, minutes before their planned execution. The former was freed and the latter condemned to forced labour⁵⁶. To this day it is not clear how Alfred Potocki managed, in the end, to obtain the release of all the prisoners sent to Pustków. Unfortunately Alfred does not mention this episode in his memoirs. Most were released in small groups on November 23rd, December 5th 1943 and January 5th 1944. A few were released individually during the same period⁵⁷. Many theories abound, but it is likely that Alfred Potocki not only relied on the influence of General Altrichter, then quartered at the Castle, but that he also had to pay a ransom for the prisoners’ release⁵⁸. Taking into account that, in the summer of 1943, the Gestapo shot over 100 civilians during retaliatory raids on the neighbouring town and villages of Leżajsk, Żołyńia, Wola Zarzycka, and knowing the nature of relations between the German occupier and Polish society, saving the lives of 62 people (including Dwernicki’s), most of them sentenced to a slow death in inhuman conditions, is an incredible feat worthy of great acclaim.

⁵³ Jadwiga Bieniasz, typescript, 1963, p. 2, Archives of the Łańcut Museum, ref. 11/6

⁵⁴ T. Kowalski, op. cit., p. 107.

⁵⁵ Documents of the court case “US versus Bronisław Hajda”, a former Polish member of the SS and a guard in Pustków, US District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, 1997. Most of the information on the living conditions in the camp are quoted from the work of Stanisław Zabierowski: “Pustków: Hitlerite extermination camps servicing the SS Polygon” (*“Pustków: Hitlerowskie obozy wyniszczenia w służbie Poligonu SS”*), Rzeszów, Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1981. The prisoners from Łańcut were reportedly better treated.

⁵⁶ T. Kowalski, op. cit., p. 107. The author does not mention Alfred Potocki, probably on purpose. He relies on written testimonies in his possession, by Piotr Rutkowski and Roman Argański. Z. Pelc (op. cit., p. 224) refers to the reminiscences of B. Trzeźniowski, Alfred’s driver, according to whom Alfred Potocki immediately intervened to try to save the people who had been arrested.

⁵⁷ The copy of the manuscript list handed to me by the author includes the details of 59 people. Z. Pelc quotes all 61, but without dates of release (op. cit., p. 222).

⁵⁸ J. Szpunar mentions the visit of Hans Frank’s deputy to Łańcut in August 1943, op. cit., p. 2

In March 1944, Alfred Potocki started packing most of his art collections and organising their eventual shipment to Vienna⁵⁹. He left Łańcut forever on July 23rd 1944, travelling by car to Cracow. From there he appointed Juliusz Wierciński as his plenipotentiary, sending back his chauffeur Roman Noga bearing an official power of attorney. It proved to be an excellent choice. Despite difficult past relations with Alfred, Juliusz Wierciński considered it his duty to look after a place of pluricentenary historical and cultural significance, which he also loved. Thanks to his clever initiative, the Soviet armies entering Łańcut on August 1st 1944 did not touch the Castle. He previously had little noticeboards hung on entrances with the following words spelt in Russian: „Музей Польсково Народа” meaning „Museum of the Polish Nation”⁶⁰.

The fate of Jews in German-occupied Poland was quickly decided and eventually sealed with the execution of the Final Solution. In rural settings, where Łańcut lay, Jews could only be saved with the active help of a few courageous Poles hiding them. Count Alfred Potocki was not one of those. He nonetheless did a lot to extend his help to the Jewish community until its final evacuation to the Pełkinie forests in August 1943, where most of them were murdered, and from where the last survivors were sent to death camps.

Overall, the Potocki family enjoyed good relations with the Jewish community, underpinned by strong economic ties. In 1910, Łańcut merchants presented Roman and Elizabeth Potocki with a bronze menorah for their silver wedding anniversary. The menorah stands to this day in the Castle’s entrance hall. During the interwar period, the next master of Łańcut, Alfred Potocki, maintained the same cordial relations with the Jewish community. It is worth mentioning Alfred’s gift of the roof for the new *Bet Haam* Jewish cultural center. The building was inaugurated in 1930 in the presence of Alfred Potocki, representatives of local authorities and of the leaders of various Jewish organisations (see picture below)⁶¹. Nearly 2,600 Jews lived in Łańcut before the Second World War, representing approximately 30% of the population⁶².

⁵⁹ According to J. Szpunar, (op. cit., p. 3), Alfred reportedly accepted the proposal of the German staff which was quartered in Łańcut in March 1944.

⁶⁰ J. Wierciński, op. cit, pp. 68-69, 71

⁶¹ in Łańcut Yizkor, Michael Walzer, “On the Lancut Community”, p. XXVII.

⁶² In “Jewish Congregation in Lanzut during Nazi Occupation”, Yad Vashem Archives, 127/II, p. 1. Translated from Hebrew.



Menorah in the Castle's Entrance Hall - Current Inauguration of the Jewish cultural center - 1930

After the war broke out, Alfred Potocki's first intervention in defense of the Jewish population was saving the town's synagogue, an 18th century landmark located on the market square, not far from the Castle. It had been set on fire by the Germans a few days after the invasion. Alfred sent his fire brigade put out the flames before they could do too much damage. Later the German authorities used the building to store grain⁶³. As a comparison, during the same days of September 1939, the synagogue in neighbouring Przeworsk was similarly set on fire and burnt to the ground⁶⁴.

Łańcut's first Judenrat was appointed on September 16th 1939 under the leadership of Dr. Marcus Pohorille, so was the Jewish police. Jews started returning to town along with many Jewish refugees from former Polish provinces incorporated into the German Reich⁶⁵. In the following months, the Judenrat's main task would be to provide the Germans with free labourers for street sweeping or house cleaning. Wojnarski notes that, during the harsh winter of 1939-1940, 100 to 200 Jews were daily at work clearing the streets from snow.

On September 26th the German military authorities ordered the Jews to leave town „and cross the San river under the penalty of death. They were allowed to take 100 zloty and a small bundle. People set out on foot or on rented carts in the direction of Jarosław [...] The better dressed Jews, mostly from the intelligentsia, were beaten by the Gestapo [...] Poles identified Jews in the streets and pointed to Jewish dwellings”⁶⁶. Wojnarski wrote in his diary „The town was seized by indescribable

⁶³ Diana Grinbaum, typescript, Archives of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, ref. 301/1501, p. 2. The Grinbaum family returned to Łańcut from hiding, in November 1939. Diana's father, Shlomo, was a member of the first Judenrat. He refused designating hostages at the Gestapo's request and was shot in the Jarosław prison in July 1942. His wife was hiding in Łańcut until she was denounced and shot in September 1942. See also Michael Walzer, op cit., p. XIX.

⁶⁴ Today the Łańcut synagogue is one of the few surviving examples of 18th century Jewish religious architecture. Its beautiful frescoes were restored by the Łańcut Museum between 1983 and 1990. The latter also hung a plaque near the door commemorating Alfred Potocki's intervention, before returning the building to the Jewish community in 2008.

⁶⁵ J. Wojnarski, op. cit., p.12

⁶⁶ Regina Landau's testimony, born in 1920, Kraków 1945. Jewish Historical Institute, ref. 301/840

chaos and dejection”⁶⁷. Alfred Potocki, engineer Sadowy, secretary Wojnarowicz protested. Unable to oppose the order, they nonetheless obtained from the German authorities that a few Jewish families be allowed to stay, probably the most needed professionals. According to Wojnarski this intervention „brought minimal results”, but it is repeatedly confirmed in Jewish sources⁶⁸, including by the precise and harrowing testimony of Eda Fenik⁶⁹: „a few Jewish families were allowed to stay thanks to the protection of Count Potocki, among which my own. My father was a cobbler. He was allowed to stay along with my mother, and the six of us children”. The above mentioned Castle accounting records contain an expense entry, dating from the autumn of 1939, for children shoes worth 2,000 zloty, showing „Kornblau” in brackets. It is possible that the order was placed with Eda’s father and that it helped this family survive the following months, and perhaps even prove its „usefulness” to the Germans.

The official „Vistula-San” demarcation line was announced on September 28th. It separated Nazi and Soviet-occupied Poland, running 35 km to the east of Łańcut and splitting the city of Przemyśl in half. Civilian German authorities took control of Łańcut on October 10th.

Protests voiced by Alfred Potocki and part of the City Council against the forced evacuation, allowed Łańcut to retain a core of its former Jewish community, which in turn later attracted Jews who emerged from hiding, returned illegally from the Soviet-occupied zone or simply refugees from western provinces annexed by the Reich. „Some Jews went into hiding and returned later, joining those who had been allowed to stay. After a while, Jews from Łódź and Kalisz arrived [...] A few hundred of them”⁷⁰.

Wojnarski writes in his diary on October 12th: „Some Jews are returning illegally from the other side of the San river”. The same day Gestapo policemen arrived in Łańcut, arresting and beating Jews, ransacking their homes. The following day „the Gestapo helped by the Jewish police looted the synagogue, loading all the valuable sacred objects on a truck, driving it later to Rzeszów”⁷¹.

⁶⁷ J. Wojnarski, op. cit., p. 14. Jewish chronicles quote September 22nd as the date of the forced evacuation of Jews from Łańcut. Wojnarski’s diary seems a more accurate source.

⁶⁸ Naftali Reich, “The Destruction of Lancut”, Yizkor Book, translated from Yiddish by Pamela Russ, p. 362. There remained only about 300 Jews. Their number rose to 900 after a few weeks.

⁶⁹ Eda Fenik, testimony in Polish, Kiriat Chaim, May 1959, Yad Vashem Archives, ref. 03/1272, p.2. Eda Fenik, born Kornblau in 1916, in Łańcut. Her family managed to hide in town for a few weeks after the forced evacuation to Pełkinie. Eda’s father was shot in the streets of Łańcut in September 1942. Her two sisters survived. Dr. Raba, who heard Mrs. Fenik’s account added the following words which require no further commentary: “Based on the witness’ relation, one cannot judge the attitude of the Polish population towards hunted Jews from a single view point. There were indeed Poles who helped the witness through her ordeals, but there were also hunters of Jewish scalps, who handed Jews in cold blood to Hitlerites. [...] She speaks about her slave labour experience in the explosives factory with reluctance and difficulty [...]. She interrupts her account at times with nervous laughter – a consequence of the nervous shocks she endured and of her inability to control herself”.

⁷⁰ E. Fenik, op. cit., pp. 2-3. Naftali Reich mentions 600 Jewish refugees from western Poland. The Germans probably shipped Jews from provinces annexed by the Reich to take the place of those who had been recently expelled to the Soviet zone.

⁷¹ J. Wojnarski, op. cit, pp. 16-17

Henryk Mulhrad, then 29 years old, scion of a family that had settled in Łańcut several centuries before, witnessed the Gestapo's first brutal raid on the town, probably during these days of October 1939. Together with a group of over hundred Jews, he had been seized on the streets of Łańcut, beaten, and held prisoner to be eventually shot in the town's cemetery. Informed of this grave situation by a delegation of Jews who knew him, Alfred Potocki obtained from the Wehrmacht officers stationed at the Castle that the prisoners be released. The Gestapo arrested some Jews again after a few hours, but this time Henryk Mulhrad, and certainly many others like him, managed to avoid the hunters and thus save their lives.

I quote below Mr. Mulhrad's narration, recorded by his relative, in his Haifa apartment, in the spring of 2008. His words were transcribed *verbatim* and sent to me a few weeks before my telephone conversation with their author:

“It was 1939 in September. The Germans entered Łańcut. There was lot of soldiers everywhere in Łańcut. [...]. But a few Gestapo officers arrived – he had a skull on his cap. I went out in the street. He accosted me. He asks where the rich Jews live. I told him that the rich Jews have left. There are not here. I spoke to him casually. I didn't think I did not know that he is from the Gestapo, that he is so dangerous. He killed whom he wanted on the street. He had a revolver. He would shoot. He would kill. He said: „Kom mit mir” – Come with me. I could not refuse. I followed him. He took me to the townhall. There was an Austrian officer – he was the Mayor. In place of the Mayor ⁷². After a while they brought my friend. He had a masters' law degree. A bit fat. He gave me a cloth to wipe the dust, to clean the room. [...] He came, so fat... You are so big – wash the floor. He knelt on the floor. We stayed a few hours. At four o'clock he said – You can go home. Tomorrow you must bring me this and this, shoe polish ... some other things. There was nothing to buy. All the shops were closed. What I had in my houseI went. He asked to come at eight in the morning. My friend didn't go. He was smart. I shouldn't have gone. He did not know where we live [...]. That Mayor told me „Go with him!”. He led me out. There was a garden. Fenced. It was not possible to flee. There were already many Jews. A few hundred Jews were already there. Old, young. Every five minutes they brought people in.

There was one man with a gun. He had a cane studded with nails. He came with a bucket. Everything one had in one's pockets, watches, rings, money. Everything into that bucket. And he asked: „Muhlrad Wieviel kommt?”. I answered „Vielleicht”- perhaps. He came towards me and started beating me. To this day I still have marks. My trousers were all bloodied. Completely. After that he noticed a Jew who had a bandage and a red cross. He ripped it off him. He saw that he does not have a big wound. He started beating him. The man was lying on the floor. I do not know if he killed him or not.

⁷² The German authorities took over from the temporary City Council on October 10th 1939, thus it seems to me that Henryk Mulhrad describes events, which took place in October and not in September 1939. Perhaps he refers to Emil Malarczuk, formerly a member of the Austro-Hungarian police. Before the war and until 1940, he was the local police inspector. At the time, Henryk, born on May 1st 1910, could have not known him. The first Gestapo raid on Łańcut is also contemporary with these events. Rainy weather points to a later period (following a long period of drought, which had been so difficult to bear for the POWs). If that were the case, the Mulhrad family must have been allowed to stay during the first forced evacuation from Łańcut to the Soviet zone.

On the other side of the garden the army stood with guns. They were supposed to take us to the cemetery and kill, shoot us. A delegation went to the Castle and asked Alfred Potocki. They said (he did not know) that there in the townhall there are a lot of Jews and something like this is happening. He said „Wait”. Generals lived at his place. He went to the generals. He asked them: „I please ask that nothing bad happens in Łańcut. As long as I am here, I do not want that something of this kind took place”. They agreed. They sent a soldier [...]. He knocked on the gate. This one opened. He let him in. He told him (I was close. I overheard): „Machta schnell!” – let them go quickly. It had rained. It was muddy. He told me to walk on my hands and legs. I was bloodied, after he beat me here. On the street the Gestapo caught people again. But I did not follow the main road home. I used back streets. Through back streets I fled home. I arrived home. I said: „We cannot stay here. We must flee!”.

Quite quickly after this shocking event, Henryk, with his brother Leon, sister Bronia, his parents as well as cousins who had arrived from Moravska Ostrava after Hitler's annexation of Czechoslovakia in 1938, fled to the Soviet side⁷³.

With the increasing restrictions Jews were facing, the possibility of living in one's own home without being physically separated from the rest of the town – as was the case in hundreds of gettoes being set up all over Poland in 1939-1940 – was an exception often quoted in Jewish sources. It also helped in the struggle for survival⁷⁴. Eda Fenik stresses that „in 1940, all the Jews still lived in their homes. But they tended to concentrate in one place, because they were afraid to live in outlying parts of town. It was better that they did not go out in the streets [...] There was in fact no need to leave one's home, because the Jews were, at that time, not allowed to do business anymore”. Regina Landau remembers that „Jews in Łańcut lived in their homes throughout the entire occupation. There was no „neighbourhood” as such”⁷⁵. Only from January 1st 1942, the Germans forbid the Jews to leave their place of residence under the punishment of death.

In the first weeks of occupation, the Town Council extended its help also to the Jews. Polish PoWs of Jewish descent were fed by the local authorities and community, or were being treated in the field hospital supervised by Dr. Jedliński. Jewish sources mention that Alfred Potocki, either directly or through the „hungry kitchen”, helped hundreds of refugees from Kalisz and Łódź, distributing potatoes and heating fuel. The Germans soon forbid further assistance.⁷⁶

⁷³ After a short stay around Lvov, the family was sent to a labour camp in Siberia and then in Kazakhstan. Henryk was one of the first Jews to return to Łańcut after the war. The Mulhrads were an ancient and large Łańcut family. The name appears several times in the history of Łańcut's occupation: Israel was a member of the second Judenrat, Milek a member of the Jewish police, (Yad Vashem, 127/II, microfilm 001254, Chaim Safler). Moshe Mulhrad emigrated to Palestine before the war and became a member of the first Association of Łańcut Jews in Israel, founded in 1943 with Michael Walzer and Nathan, later authors of the Lanzut Yizkor Book.

⁷⁴ N. Reich, op. cit., pp.362-364

⁷⁵ R. Landau, op. cit., p. 2

⁷⁶ There were about 600 refugees in total (see footnote 70). Giselle Samon, born Jassem in Łańcut in 1921, known as „Nusia” to her relatives, recalled in a private letter in 1999, that „when the Nazis brought the transport from the West to Łańcut, his mother and he [*i.e. Alfred and Betka Potocki*] opened a soup kitchen for them. It did not last. The Nazis closed it”. The Jassems were a large and well-off Łańcut family. Some of them, kosher butchers, supplied meat to the Castle. Nusia's parents and her two younger sisters were murdered in the Niechciałka forest or in the Bełżec camp. Giselle survived by hiding in Cracow during the occupation. I am indebted to Peter Jassem from Canada for

Z. Pelc writes that, following the establishment by Alfred Potocki of a permanent public kitchen, "Nobody was turned down, Jewish families, however, did not want to take advantage, among others because of dietary laws"⁷⁷. In all likelihood, Jews were mostly afraid of venturing outside their houses. The Judenrat set up its own bakery as well as a kitchen for the poor in the small Hassidic synagogue, run by orthodox Jews originating from Dzików, known as „Dzikower” in yiddish⁷⁸. According to Jewish chroniclers, Alfred Potocki provided food supplies⁷⁹. This fact is corroborated by the Castle's accounting records. The Estate's Social Welfare Fund regularly gave small sums in cash or in foodstuffs between the fall of 1939 until the spring of 1941, for a total amount of 2,750 złoty. It was however only a drop in the ocean of the Jewish community's needs, who was deprived of any means of subsistence by the total embargo on economic activity. For comparison's sake, during the same period, Łańcut's „hungry kitchen” received subsidies worth over 81,000 złoty.

At the end of 1940, around 1,300 Jews lived in Łańcut, of which 400 were refugees. Because of relatively better living conditions, Łańcut counted the largest community in the whole region as well as over half the amount of refugees. By way of comparison, in Jarosław, there were only 105 Jews left, out of 4,000 before the war⁸⁰. For the same reason the regional committee of the Jewish Social Welfare organisation was based in Łańcut under the responsibility Dr. Pohorille. It looked after 5,700 people.

After the start of the war against the Soviet Union in June 1941, many Jews returned to Łańcut from the former Soviet side, seeking safer shelter. The following year would see the final elimination of the Jews from Łańcut and neighbouring areas. In the winter, the Jarosław Gestapo arrested 24 people and shot them in the cemetery. By miracle, a man and a woman survived. The latter, wounded by a bullet, was attended to by Dr. Jedliński, but unfortunately caught again and murdered in Rzeszów. In March 1942, the Gestapo ordered a meeting of the Judenrat to designate 10 hostages. Some members did not show up. The rest refused executing the order, were arrested and murdered in the Jarosław prison in July 1942.

On August 1st 1942, the recently appointed second Judenrat⁸¹ was informed of the forced evacuation to Pełkinie of the last Jews from Łańcut and surrounding areas. Men, women and children left on August 3rd, most of them on foot, some on rented carts. On August 5th, in the nearby forest of Niechciałka, the old, the sick and children were shot above freshly dug pits, which would later be covered in lime and soil.

this informaton. Above mentioned N. Reich (op. cit., p.362-364), writes that „from the Polish people [...] only Count Potocki participated in the aid campaign [organised by the Judenrat to help the 600 refugees from Łódź and Kalisz] that distributed potatoes and wood”.

⁷⁷ Z. Pelc, op. cit., p. 250

⁷⁸ N. Reich, op cit, p. 362. Aside from the main synagogue, there were three houses of prayer before the war, located in private houses. The house belonging to the Hassidic Jews of Dzików stood on May 3rd street. I owe this information to Mr. Mirosław Kędzior, current caretaker of the Łańcut synagogue.

⁷⁹ N. Reich, op. cit., p. 362. See also T. Brustin-Bernstein, “Łanzut Under the Nazis”, Yizkor Book, p. XXXV

⁸⁰ “Jewish Congregation in Łanzut during Nazi Occupation”, Yad Vashem Archive, 127/II, p. 4

⁸¹ Reuben Nadel was its head, Naftali Reich its secretary, author of the above-mentioned article.

These mass graves lay next to those of thousands of Soviet PoWs shot earlier. Women were shipped to the death camp in Bełżec⁸².

To the surprise of Jews still hiding in Łańcut, the Gestapo allowed 50 healthy men as well as part of the second Judenrat, to return. It was probably a ploy to encourage the last families to leave their hiding places. It did not last long. The hated policeman Józef Kokot would shoot people in the streets, thus murdering several dozen people⁸³. The remaining Łańcut Jews were evacuated on September 17th to the Sieniawa ghetto and from there finally shipped to Bełżec in May 1943.

In 1951, surviving Łańcut Jews planted 1,050 trees in the Martyrs' Forest at Yad Vashem, in memory of their kin. They set the 21st day of Ab of 5702 in the Hebrew calendar, corresponding to August 3rd 1942, when the Jews of Łańcut were marched to their death in Pełkinie, as a memorial day marking the end of a centuries old Jewish presence in Łańcut.

Łańcut in the 20th century - especially after the upheaval of the political and social order which ensued after the first world war - remained an aristocratic residence from a bygone era; open to the world but reminiscent of the glory of pre-partition Poland, of the Duchy of Warsaw, of the great imperial capitals of Europe. Alfred Potocki devoted his entire life and fortune to maintaining a lifestyle polished by previous generations, to stopping the ebb of time. The levee broke on July 23rd 1944. Without a conductor, the orchestra stopped playing overnight. Literally a week later, Łańcut's Castle became a „Museum of the Polish Nation”; this time preceding events. The great clock of the Castle's tower had made up for its 30-year delay in the blink of an eye.

In retrospect, this period allowed Łańcut to enter the imagination of independent Poland. For 20 years, Łańcut served as a, de facto, almost „regal” residence, often, and at no cost, put at the disposal of the Polish state to serve its *raison d'Etat*. On September 1st 1939, both these words had lost their meaning. A dark night fell over Poland. Alfred Potocki decided to maintain, within the limitations imposed by the occupier, an unchanged lifestyle in Łańcut. Such a residence proved useful to the German military authorities, which were apparently willing to help Alfred maintain the Estate as a going concern, despite insisting pressure from the Gestapo. Nonetheless, on the other hand, judging by the hundreds of people who have been saved from imprisonment or death, by the hundreds of thousands of meals served to the needy during nearly five long years, one can say that Alfred Potocki was mostly driven by a sincere and unrelenting concern for his fellow Poles.

Describing the life and role of Alfred Potocki during the war, not through the prism of family recollections or social accounts, but rather through the pragmatic point of view of the Estate's employees, of the inhabitants of Łańcut, including those of Jewish origin, or even of the German occupier, made me understand how a history as

⁸² “Jewish Congregation in Lanzut during Nazi Occupation”, pp. 8,9

⁸³ Ch. Safier, op. cit.

complicated as the history of Poland – and especially the history of this period - requires the understanding of different worlds.

Unfortunately, within a very short period, from 1939 to 1947, two totalitarian regimes fighting each other, managed to physically annihilate most of Poland's minorities as well as its prewar creative forces and institutions. Thus the historical interpretation of this period took place without a common debate. To this day, 70 years after the war and quarter of a century after the fall of Communism, reading Polish, émigré or Jewish accounts of this period – on which I tried not to rely, seeking where I could primary sources – I am struck how easily History can be written partially, keeping important facts under silence, thus creating new myths.

I do hope that in Łańcut, where the symbols of ancient Poland were saved thanks to courageous people of goodwill, among whom Alfred Potocki must be included, the next chapter of this extraordinary town's history will be written with the participation of all the communities who share a common history and heritage.

Jan-Roman Potocki
Warsaw, March 18th 2016