

Tadeusz Stefan Krasnodębski, *Policjant konspiratorem. Szesnaście lat na muszce gestapo i bezpieki [Policeman-Conspirator. Sixteen Years in the Sight of the Gestapo and State Security]*, ed. (Kraków–Międzyzdroje: Arkadiusz Wingert – Przedsięwzięcie Galicja, 2008)

The book *Policjant konspiratorem* (a beautiful edition, in hardcover, with an art paper insert with photographs) is quite an unusual document, if only because it is the first autobiography of a blue policeman that I ever heard of. Let us begin with the author: Krasnodębski was born in Wolbórz near Piotrków Trybunalski in 1916. In the late 1930s he graduated from the police school in Mosty Wielkie and shortly before the war broke out he was on duty as a constable in Dąbrowa Tarnowska. In autumn 1939 he volunteered for the blue police and remained in the force until summer 1944. At the same time, as an underground soldier, under the pseudonym “Kostek”, he was active in the Armed Combat Union (*Związek Walki Zbrojnej*, ZWZ), and later in the Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*, AK); he infiltrated the police, forewarning his “forest” commanders about the enemies’ moves. In summer 1944, “Kostek” deserted from the police and joined the partisans. After the Red Army’s arrival, Krasnodębski was still in the underground, this time in the NIE organization and in Freedom and Independence (*Zrzeszenie Wolność i Niezawisłość*, WiN). He was in hiding until the early 1950s, when he was brought before a court and accused of collaboration and murdering Jews. He was, however, exonerated and returned to normal life; he devoted himself to professional work as well as patriotic and veteran’s activity. He wrote the autobiography in the mid-1980s. This is the author’s fate in a nutshell.

The thematic axis of the book is the time of the war, and the post-war underground activity is only a hastily attached supplement. Thus, what does an AK member, a secret agent in the police, have to say about the war period? From the beginning of the occupation until liberation, Krasnodębski worked and then fought in Dąbrowa Tarnowska county. To be more precise – at the station of the State Police (*Policja Państwowa*, PP) in Otfinów, a small town north-west of Tarnów. The area of Otfinów and Dąbrowa is mostly agricultural and thus the book offers “some” idea of the rural reality during the occupation. I wrote “some”, because its aim is most of all to stress the significant role of Krasnodębski in the underground and the fight against the occupier. The author successfully led his German superiors down the garden path, sabotaged their orders, forewarned people whose names appeared on proscription lists about the threat of being sent to forced labor in the Reich, helped farmers circumvent inhuman regulations, turned a blind eye to unrun piglets, and he generally gives examples of his civic engagement and selfless patriotism. The

crowning moment of his occupation-time career was the execution of Engelbert Guzdek, a German gendarme notorious for his cruelty, called in the Tarnów area “the butcher of Powiśle”. Although a local historian, Adam Kazimierz Musiał claims that Guzdek was certainly killed by somebody else¹; who can tell for sure now? It is not the only doubt concerning the facts: the author’s version does not always coincide with the accounts closer in time to the described events. What might serve as an example is a description of capturing and murdering Kalm Wilk, a Jewish policeman from Żabno, who was hiding in the area after the liquidation of the ghetto.

Krasnodębski writes:

Wilk was hiding for some time in Diament, until the fiancée of Niechciał [a policeman from Otfinów – J.G.] met him there and told us about this meeting. Niechciał with Lewandowicz went to Diament and arrested Wilk, who tried to buy himself out and showed them the site where the valuables were hidden, but it was of no use to him as the policemen took the valuables and shot the Jew. (116–117)

Albin B., one of the witnesses testifying in a Cracow court, described the same event slightly differently:

The Jew Wilk was on his way to my place and one of these five boys went to the police station to report it. After a while, I saw four policemen riding bikes, and these were Tadeusz Krasnodębski, Lewandowicz, Lesiński and Mądry. They came straight to my place for this Jew and they took him to the police station and this Jew begged them to let him go, saying that he would show them where he had gold and money hidden.

So the police fetched this Jew to Żabno, where he had the money and gold hidden, and they shot this Jew and all the four policemen shared the money and gold. It seems a small difference, but it becomes significant when one looks at it closer.

We encounter similar discrepancies as we read the description of Mendel Kapelner’s death. Krasnodębski writes: “Once, a Jew, Mendel Kapelner, appeared at the station. He looked like a human wreck. He had been hiding since last summer and one could see that he was totally exhausted, both physically and mentally. He appeared in the doorway and begged, ‘shoot me, I cannot take it any more.’” The author mentions that he shirked from the execution and his colleague obliged Kapelner’s request and shot him outside the station. Meanwhile, Franciszek S., who testified a few years after the war, remembered the death of Kapelner somewhat differently:

The village council chair, Władysław N., announced that we were going to catch a kike, Mendel Kapelner, who was hiding in Władysław Migąła’s barn. I replied that ‘I will not cum [sic] to catch him, as I did not give him his life,’ but

¹ see: A.K. Musiał, *Krwawe upiory. Dzieje Powiatu Dąbrowa Tarnowska w okresie okupacji hitlerowskiej* (Tarnów, 1993).

we approached the barn and there, the village chair told us that Władysław M. reported to Poster, the German police in Otfinów, that a Jew was hiding in his barn and the police ordered him to catch the Jew. And the chair told us to go into the barn and catch the kike and all three of us entered the barn.

Another witness, Józef M., put it in a few words: “In 1943, in May, people caught him and handed him in to the Polish police, who shot the above mentioned kike, Mendel Kapelner.” There were, obviously, cases of Jews reporting to the blue policemen or to German gendarmes asking for a quick death. Terrible but true. It seems, however, that Mendel Kapelner from Siedliszowice was not among them.

Similar doubts are raised by his description of the death of a young Jewess from Dąbrowa. Krasnodębski writes: “Boruschak [a German gendarme – J.G.] brought himself a very pretty Jewess, Süß, from Dąbrowa, whom he quartered at Augustyński’s place, and later in Gorzyce, at Piątkowa’s. This relationship did not last long, as when the girl was clearly pregnant, he led her behind the barn and shot.” The author is probably writing about the death of one the Süß sisters, the eighteen-year-old Salomea or her two years older sister, Hela. From a number of testimonies given by other blue policemen during 1946–1949, however, it emerges that it was not Boruschak who committed the murder, but Krasnodębski’s “blue” colleagues: Szewczyk, Stachowicz and the station commandant, Lewandowicz. Even the detailed description of the execution of both sisters was preserved:

then a young policeman, Stachowicz, fired one rifle shot at the Jewesses. One of them fell on the ground, while the other started screaming and ran to the fallen Jewess, and then I fired the gun once at her; she started screaming even more and fell down on the one who had been shot.

There is no point in enumerating all the discrepancies, but it should be emphasized that Krasnodębski has a problem with Jews in general. At the end of the book, there is a special, extensive essay, “Polscy Żydzi w oczach przeciętnego Polaka” [Polish Jews in the Eyes of an Average Pole] (p. 389–417). It is worth quoting only a few fragments which render the tone of the author’s argument quite well: “The Jews literally occupied the roads, pavements, gates and shops. The whole quarter made an impression of one huge marketplace.” “In view of the omnipresent vitality and mobility of Polish Jews, many a Pole was convinced that he had become a [member of] a minority in his own country. The Jews, when they were in the majority, or for various reasons were socially dominant, felt more confident, often demonstrating their superiority to the representatives of other nations. But when they were in the minority their arrogance disappeared instantly, they even became cowardly, meek to the point of obsequiousness.” “Due to their consumption of large quantities of onion and garlic, the Jews exuded a distinct smell, which could be easily noted. At the same time, they did not overdo their personal hygiene. Even clothes sewn in Jewish tailor’s shops gave off a specific ‘Jewish’ smell that betrayed its origin. It disappeared only after a long airing.” “Poor Jewish families herded together, usually

in cramped flats with no comforts. The flats were most often filthy. The Jews did not show any particular passion for cleanness.” “The more wealthy Jewish families employed Polish housemaids. It often happened that the employers seduced them during their service, and once they were exploited they were thrown away and replaced with a new one.” “Not without reason were Jewish districts thought to be oases of filth and hotbeds of various infectious diseases.” I will refrain from listing similar quotes, which are numerous in this part of the book.

Krasnodębski is not alone in his views. Similar anti-Semitic nonsense could be read in any Nazi publication and in the collaborationist press, or seen in the film *Żydzi, wszy, tyfus* [Jews, Lice, Typhus], widely distributed during the war. The only interesting thing is that absurdities of such a kind appear in print in Poland in 2008. Thus, a question arises: Is it worthwhile, with such reservations, to either mention or read this book at all? I think that it is, but only for one reason. Reading Krasnodębski “between the lines”, we can better understand the mechanisms of increasing terror in occupied Poland: the terror, whose important instruments were not so much German gendarmes, rarely seen in the villages, but the blue policemen, who fetched and carried for their German principals as well as “worked” on their own, robbed and mistreated the local population, and contributed immensely to murdering Jews.

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