

The fate of teachers in the Eastern Greater Poland during World War II based on school chronicle records. Introduction to the problem*

Abstract

School chronicles are one of important but sometimes underestimated sources of information for the history of education. The difficulties with their use result from their dispersion, lack of availability and subjective nature. However, despite their subjectivity, they can provide extremely interesting information, e.g. on biographies of individual educators. This article focuses on the war fate of school teachers in the Eastern Greater Poland. Almost all of them lost their jobs as a result of the closure of schools. Many were deported to the General Government or to forced labour in Germany. Those who stayed undertook off-an-on work or jobs that had nothing to do with the teaching profession. Despite the threat to their lives, some of them were also engaged in secret teaching. Unfortunately, there were also those who decided to collaborate with the German occupier. The research included in this article should be considered an introduction to research in this source area.

Keywords: school chronicle, World War II, teachers, fate, Eastern Greater Poland

School chronicles continue to be a source that is not fully appreciated by researchers working in the field of the history of education and in other disciplines. This is probably due to several reasons. One of them is certainly the dispersion of these documents across many schools and educational institutions while another is their subjective nature. In spite of this subjectivity, they are an extremely interesting source of information for the history of education and for the reproduction of biographies of individual teachers¹. Taking

¹ See e.g.: P. GOŁDYN, *School chronicle as un(der)appreciated source for the history of regional education*, [in:] *Historical studies in pedagogy. Source contexts (Kronika szkolna jako nie(d)ocenione źródło do dziejów oświaty regionalnej*, [in:] *Badania historyczne w pedagogice. Konteksty źródłowe*, ed. W. SZULAKIEWICZ, Toruń 2015, p. 111-131; idem: *Teachers' biography themes in school chronicles. The example of Eastern Greater Poland*, [in:] *Subject, sources and methods of research in biography (Wątki biograficzne nauczycieli w kronikach szkolnych*, [in:] *Przedmiot, źródła i metody badań w biografii*, ed. R. SKRZYNIARZ, L. DZIACZKOWSKA, D. OPOZDA, Lublin 2016, p. 309-322;

into account the region of Eastern Greater Poland², the fate of teachers during World War II was mostly reproduced, or more accurately recorded, in the chronicles after the end of the war. It was difficult to do so during the occupation, not least because of the fact that schools were closed down and teachers were removed from their positions. These deliberations constitute an attempt to introduce a problem whose main subject focuses on teachers and their fate during World War II. School chronicles continue to be the main source of information and the topics discussed here will concern the fate of teachers, who lost their jobs as a result of the war and were displaced to other parts of Poland. Many of them also died either in battle or in concentration camps.

Before the outbreak of the war, Franciszek Stanowski was the head of the school in Biała Panieńska. At the moment of the German assault on Poland, he got on a bicycle and went to Warsaw like most inhabitants of the western part of Poland. After the surrender of the capital and the occupier's calling, he returned to his workplace. He described his return and the first few days in the chronicle: *After two weeks of wandering, school master Fr. Stankowski returned from Warsaw to his former position but he could not stay at home for several weeks, as the constant complaints of the local Germans brought full-armed Feldgendarmarie officers to take him away on several occasions. On their last visit, they searched the whole brickyard (because this is where he had mostly stayed with his family) but not having found the headmaster, they came by the school, where an enamelled Polish eagle was hanging. They shot at it several times and destroyed it completely. Unfortunately, after a few searches, they returned to Grodziec with nothing and the Feldgendarmarie went away and everything passed³.*

The headmaster was able to return to work. His wife and Antoni Ratajski, a former Polish officer, worked with him. He replaced two other teachers, Zyta Chylińska and Antoni Kubiak, who had left Biała Panieńska and never came back. Like other teachers in Warthegau, all of them worked only until March 1940. Then all Polish schools were closed. A female teacher of Grzymiszew had to hide from Germans. Urszula Osmakówna was suspected and even accused of detrimental activity to the German state⁴.

A teacher from the school in Kuchary Kościelne wrote in the chronicle about his escape from his place of residence in fear of the Germans: *Having received a release from work at school, the author of this chronicle escaped from his place of residence to the Turek district and thus avoided being sent to a camp. However, he did not avoid being sent to work but only to Poznań, where he worked as a ground worker, precisely a concrete placer⁵.*

Lech Wojtkowski, a teacher from Tuliszków, also fled from Germans further into Poland. He was killed by an aeroplane bullet. It probably happened during an evacuation

² The term Eastern Greater Poland is an artificial term created for the purposes of these deliberations. In this particular case, it includes the historical districts of Koło, Konin and Turek in the period of 1931-1950.

³ Biała Panieńska Primary School Chronicle. part 2, bp.

⁴ Grzymiszewo school chronicle for 1945-1951, bp.

⁵ Kuchary Kościelne school chronicle for 1949-1992, bp.

towards Warsaw, as he was a disabled 1920 war veteran and probably did not take part in military activities⁶.

On 26 September 1939, after a short war turmoil, German occupation authorities ordered the registration of teachers in the school inspectorate. For the sake of appearances, they allowed for teaching to be resumed by employing Polish teachers in schools. In Biskupice, for example, classes were conducted by a married couple, the Reders, and Katarzyna Tyma⁷. Despite the permission for the return of children and teachers to the school, the work was not easy. Typically, Polish subjects were gradually removed from the curriculum and orders were given to start teaching the German language. *Besides, it was impossible to conduct normal classes – the teachers were exposed to constant harassment and lived in constant fear of being deported, expropriated or imprisoned. The teachers were more exposed to persecution than the rest of the population*⁸.

After the schools were restarted in October and November 1939, the German language was introduced as a compulsory subject. There were not enough German teachers to teach it, so attempts were made to use Poles. Therefore, in Zagórow, for example, a thirty-hour-long training was organised for them. It was held three times a week for three hours. It was a pretty intense course. The Zagórow teachers were taught by local Germans, Dr Hugo Breade and pastor Alexander Gross, in this course⁹.

The schools were open for only a few months, after which the teaching of Polish children was banned. The closure of schools in March 1940 deprived teachers of jobs and means to make a living. They took up different occupations. Besides, there was a sense of despair, fear for their and their families' lives. This is how the situation was described by teachers in Kłodawa after the schools had been closed down: *After being freed from the arrest, the teachers strived for months, selling out whatever they could. Some taught secretly but that was a very dangerous undertaking, as the gendarmerie and the auxiliary police followed watched closely. When the Abreitsamt took all the Poles into its records, the teachers, forced by financial necessity and fear of repression, enrolled to work in German offices and companies*¹⁰.

H. Sobczakowa, a teacher from Kuchary Kościelne, worked in quarries in nearby Świącia¹¹. The headmaster of the school in Modła Królewska, too, described in the school chronicle how he made a living during the occupation. He wrote: *For my part, I started working as an assistant in agricultural work for Roz. Kwiecińska in Modła Król. This kind of work made it possible for me to keep in contact with the local population, who I slowly prepared and hardened to endure the heavy yoke of slavery. I instructed how to behave so as not to thoughtlessly and often pointlessly expose oneself and one's family and friends to*

⁶ Tuliszkowo school chronicle for 1945-1959, bp.

⁷ Biskupice school chronicle for 1926-1973, bp.

⁸ Budziszław Kościelny school chronicle for 1945-1994, bp.

⁹ Zagórow school chronicle for 1945-1983, p. 14.

¹⁰ Kłodawa school chronicle for 1931-1951, bp.

¹¹ Kuchary Kościelne school chronicle for 1949-1992, bp.

*being sent to penal concentration camps but at the same time keep one's dignity and sense of national identity. I fulfilled this task at every opportunity*¹². Early in December 1940, he went to Kramsk, where he worked as a miller's helper until the end of the war. This protected him from being displaced or deported to Germany for work.

This short period of operation of Polish schools until the beginning of spring of 1940 was often called a parody of education. However, as noted by the head of the school in Kotunia, there were some upsides, as well. The three-month pay check that teachers had received allowed them to survive in difficult financial conditions¹³. However, it should be noted that the salaries, despite being low, were given at the rate of 1 Polish Zloty = 1 Deutsche Mark while in other circumstances the Polish currency was exchanged for the German one at a rate of 2:1¹⁴.

Work under pressure was not easy. The teachers were concerned primarily about arrests, which occurred very frequently. One such case was described in the chronicle of the Public School in Brdów: *On 2 November [1939] the head of the school was ordered by the German militia to hold a teacher meeting. At this meeting, we were arrested and taken to Izbica, and in the evening to Koło. Female teachers were kept in a monastery while male teachers stayed in the Koło prison. After a few weeks in detention, the teachers returned home*¹⁵. These arrests included not only the teachers from the school in Brdów but probably from all the schools in the district of Koło. They were mentioned also by the head teacher of the school in Dzierawy, Ignacy Ziębowicz¹⁶. The chronicle of the public school in Kłodawa provides information on additional facts of this arrest. It confirmed the fact the women had been held in the monastery but there was an additional piece of information that as many as 60 women had been kept in one room under terrible sanitary conditions. They were held only for a week, though. Men were released after three weeks. Upon the release from the arrest, they were told it was absolutely forbidden to teach children and young people under the pain of death¹⁷.

It was the Germans that primarily decided who would be employed in a school in the period from October 1939. However, the chronicle of the school in Kotunia included a rather enigmatic record: *The German district authorities are going to register teachers and notify them who will be employed in education only at the end of October. Of course, not all of them – those whom the Ukrainians resent, like Pohorecki and others, cannot count on employment*¹⁸. Why Ukrainians? There are two possible causes. One is

¹² Modła Królewska school chronicle for 1912-1948, bp.

¹³ Kotunia school chronicle for 1945-1978, bp.

¹⁴ Zagórow school chronicle for 1945-1983, p. 15.

¹⁵ Brdów school chronicle for 1945-1996, bp.

¹⁶ Dzierawy school chronicle for 1931-1976, p. 38.

¹⁷ Kłodawa school chronicle for 1931-1951, bp.

¹⁸ Kotunia school chronicle for 1945-1978, bp.

that many Ukrainians settled in these areas after they had been released from the camp in Strzałków following the Polish-Bolshevik war. Another possibility is that Ukrainians sometimes were teachers and even heads of schools in the public education of the Eastern Greater Poland, as was the case in Sławsk¹⁹.

Many teachers were sent to forced labour. According to the records of the chronicle in Biskupice, such a fate befell the teachers there²⁰. The same was true of the teachers of Budzisław Kościelny, who were taken to the General Government, deprived of their property and left with little luggage²¹. The same fate befell teachers in Ciężęń. As early as on 11 February 1940, the Komineks family (two teachers) were displaced to the GG, while another family (the Gesslers – also two teachers) went to the General Government to their relatives by themselves. Subsequent displacements took place in May 1940. At that time, 45 families, including the family of the school headmaster, were expropriated *from everything they owned, even underwear, clothes and bedding* with the intention to deport them to Germany for forced labour. First, they were sent to Koło, where they underwent medical examinations. However, not all of them were fit for hard work on the field and were rejected. The headmaster of the school in Ciężęń was among those rejected and was sent back with his wife to the municipality of Rzgów, where he spent the whole war²².

Teachers from the school in Golina, or at least some of them (Jan and Jadwiga Misiak and Leokadia Kwiatkowska), were deported, as well. They were moved together with other residents to the General Government. The school chronicle describes this in a very colourful way, creating a certain dramatic tension for this event (after all, it really was a dramatic experience). *They have to leave everything and take only a small bundle. They are herded to the rail road station with children on their hands in severe frost*²³. The Komineks, a family of teachers, were displaced from Kotunia in winter 1940. Unfortunately, the chronicle does not specify the place they were sent to²⁴.

On 13 February, some inhabitants were displaced from Kramsk. As stated in a chronicle record, these were primarily teachers. The situation was, more or less, as follows: *They do not let you take anything with you, only 100 Polish Zlotys per person, you must give away the rest of the cash, give away gold and silver, take 1 small pillow and 1 blanket per person and food for 10 days, the rest – everything – stays and the flats are sealed. In the afternoon, they take you away on the sleigh to Konin*²⁵.

¹⁹ GOŁDYN, P., *One hundred years of education in Sławsk (Sto lat oświaty w Sławsku 1915-2015)*, Kalisz 2015.

²⁰ Biskupice school chronicle for 1926-1973, bp.

²¹ Budzisław Kościelny school chronicle for 1945-1994, bp.

²² Ciężęń school chronicle for 1945-1966, bp.

²³ Golina school chronicle for 1945-1972, bp.

²⁴ Kotunia school chronicle for 1945-1978, bp.

²⁵ Kramsk school chronicle for 1945-1977, bp.

The teachers from a school in Lubstów were also displaced. Maria Skrzypecka and Zygmunt Baranowski were deported to Krakow and Marta Tomczak ended up in the village of Błonawy²⁶.

Teachers from a school in Cielce went in various directions on their own, protecting themselves from repression and arrests. The chronicle mentions that Gronert, Kołodziejczak and Pawlak left the school. They left for Lodz, thus avoiding the arrests that took place in the municipality on 1 May 1940. The arrestees were sent to concentration camps in Dachau and Mauthausen. The school headmaster escaped the arrests. He took shelter in the nearby Warta. As he wrote in the chronicle: *In June, I secretly came to the school, took the files, the main (grade) books and seals. I hid it all in Warta, where I stayed hiding from the security services until 20 October. Then I received a job at the post office as a rural postman*²⁷. He worked as a postal worker until the end of the war.

Ignacy Ziębowicz, a head teacher of a school in Dzierawy near Koło, was also saved from being arrested thanks to the people he knew. He was arrested along with several other villagers as an unemployed person and was to be deported to Germany. However, he returned to the village and described the following event he had seen in his garden: *When he returned, he found several children pulling out vegetables in the schoolyard. Beans were being pulled out with roots. 2 bushes of peony and rhubarb had been dug out. How sad it was to see those children, who were not able to respect the work of a teacher, who were glad to rob with such impunity. Of course, parents who allowed them to commit the robbery are more to blame*²⁸. Ziębowicz worked for a construction company outside the village until the end of the war and also had to leave his flat in a school building and live in a small hut in Dzierawy.

When it comes to the problem of unemployment in villages, the unemployed were mainly teachers. Schools were closed so they lost their jobs. They were also deemed unemployed by the Kotunia village head, who prepared the list of the unemployed for the municipality office in Ciężęń. His list included only teachers.²⁹

Józef Jakubowski, the head of a school in Górki, spent the war in a penal camp. Unfortunately, the circumstances of his arrest and imprisonment are unknown. It is not known whether it was a penal or concentration camp³⁰.

A great number of teachers were also mobilised at the end of August 1939 to take part in armed activities during the defensive war. For example, two teachers from Borysławice, Sobański and Władysław Ławniczka, defended the homeland in September 1939. The first one died near Łęczycza and the other one was captured³¹. The headmaster of the school in Brdów, M. Janowski, was also mobilised but he returned to Brdów and resumed work

²⁶ Lubstów school chronicle for 1945-1996, bp.

²⁷ Cielce school chronicle for 1916-1955, bp.

²⁸ Dzierawy school chronicle for 1931-1976, p. 38.

²⁹ Kotunia school chronicle for 1945-1978, bp.

³⁰ Górki school chronicle for 1945-1954, bp.

³¹ Borysławice Kościelne school chronicle for 1945-1984, bp.

on his previous position on 15 October 1939³². The headmaster of a school in Janów, Wacław Lasota, was mobilised, too³³. The headmaster and several teachers from a school in Kotunia were called up³⁴.

Several teachers from a school in Zagórow were also mobilised, including Alfred Pabel and Jan Piątkowski. As officers of the Polish Army, they received only part of the salary for September, or, more strictly, only one quarter. More – half of it – was given to Chorążys and Junior-chorążys. In this case, these were teachers Wojciech Maśliński and Stanisław Jakubowski³⁵.

However, not all the teachers survived the war. A large group of them were shot dead or killed in concentration camps and the largest group was the educators from the Turek district. On 10 November 1939, a teacher from Grodziec, Józef Pęcherski, was executed by firing squad in Konin. According to the chronicler's description, he was denounced by a local Evangelical pastor, Ulbrych and a teacher from a German school in Stary Borowiec – E. Hermann. The latter took over the management of the school. He immediately dismissed two Polish teachers, Helena Pęcherska and Irena Podczaska. In turn, S. Walicki, A. Legowska and J. Lipkówna were given jobs³⁶.

Said Walicki had worked at a school in Lipice before the war. He had to leave but when he came back, he wasn't able to find employment at his original institution. He was employed in Grodziec but he was consequently displaced to Tarnów. In part, this resulted from the actions taken by the German school commissioner for the municipality of Grodziec, who was the "new" headmaster of the Grodziec school, Edmund Hermann. When it comes to the attitude of his towards Polish teachers, his former colleagues, quite extreme opinions remained. As mentioned, he was said to have contributed to the death of the Polish teacher earlier but the pages of the school chronicle in Lipice include the following information: *The "Schulkommissar" for the local municipality was a former Polish teacher from Borowiec, a Nazi, Hermann Edmund, whose behaviour towards his former teacher colleagues was quite decent. Mr Walicki's displacement was his work but he reportedly did so to save him from a death, which the local Germans demanded for his ostentatious anti-German speech*³⁷.

The Germans started the extermination of teachers in the territory of the Turek district very quickly (from an administrative point of view, this district was a part of the Lodz Region, while the Koło and Konin districts were parts of the Inowrocław district). Arrests, displacements and deportations to concentration camps began in early November 1939. Czesław Kozłowski and Józef Turek from the Public School No. 1 in Turek were sent to

³² Brdów school chronicle for 1945-1996, bp.

³³ Janów school chronicle for 1945-1983, bp.

³⁴ Kotunia school chronicle for 1945-1978, bp.

³⁵ Zagórow school chronicle for 1945-1983, p. 10.

³⁶ Grodziec school chronicle for 1945-1976, bp.

³⁷ Lipice school chronicle for 1945-1984, bp.

the camp in Mauthausen. The Janowicz, Stach, Robakiewicz, Kozłowski and Kukulski teacher families were displaced to the General Government³⁸.

On the other hand, the chronicle of the school in Grzymiszewo includes information that the headmaster of the local school, Lucjan Zieliński, fell victim to arrests conducted by the Germans³⁹. He was later sent to the concentration camp in Dachau, where he lost his life⁴⁰. The chronicle of the school in Kotunia provides information about the first victim of the Nazi authorities among teachers from the Słupca region. ⁴¹This was a teacher from Smarzewo, Aleksander Hofman.

The headmaster of a school in Wyszyna, Tadeusz Posada, died at the concentration camp in Gusen. This happened in 1941⁴². The chronicler wrote the following note on the arrest and death of the headmaster of a school in Władysławowo: *In 1939, the war interrupted the work that Kusiak and the teachers did, and the arrested Kusiak was taken to a concentration camp in Dachau and then to Gusen, where he died in severe torment, leaving his wife and three children behind*⁴³.

Personal losses in the teaching staff in the Turek district were extremely high. The chronicle of the Public School No. 1 in Turek reads: *The eternal enemy of our nation has murdered around 80 teachers from our district in concentration camps. Out of those sent to death camps, only three colleagues returned – the eyewitnesses of this terrible tragedy. The vast majority of schools have lost from 1 to 6 teachers*⁴⁴.

The headmaster of the school in Kazimierz Biskupi, Eugeniusz Gajewski, was also arrested and held hostage. A local parish priest and village head were detained together with him. According to the reports, they were guarded by a special squad of soldiers and were told through an interpreter they could be shot when a need arose. For example, in retaliation for a death of a German soldier. *From time to time, there was a shooting. Then, an interpreter came to the arrestees and announced that gangs were eliminated in Kazimierz and in its neighbourhood. When leaving, he reassured them that the arrestees could still sleep peacefully because no harm was done to a German soldier. In the morning, there was usually news that someone had been killed in the forest. After a month, the arrestees were released*⁴⁵.

³⁸ Chronicle of the Public School No. 1 in Turek for 1945-1987, bp.

³⁹ Grzymiszewo school chronicle for 1945-1951, bp.

⁴⁰ WALCZAK, M., *Greater Poland teachers during the war and occupation of 1939-1945 (Nauczyciele wielkopolscy w latach wojny i okupacji 1939-1945)*, Poznań 1974, p. 170-172.

⁴¹ Kotunia school chronicle for 1945-1978, bp.

⁴² Wyszyna school chronicle for 1945-1999, bp.

⁴³ Władysławowo school chronicle for 1945-1971, bp.

⁴⁴ Chronicle of the Public School No. 1 in Turek for 1945-1987, bp.

⁴⁵ Kazimierz Biskupi school chronicle for 1945-1984, bp.

Information about teachers teaching secretly appeared very rarely. The chronicle of a school in Kawnice informs that such activity was conducted by Bronisława Zborowska, who did not leave and was not arrested. She was supported by Maria Rogowska⁴⁶.

The Zagórow teachers who had stayed undertook secret teaching to a greater or lesser degree. However, they were all called for a hearing in the summer break of 1940. They were questioned individually but they all denied that they were conducting any educational activity. The group of teachers included: Irena Orchowska, Janina Ulatowska, Maria Wróblewska, Józefa Wysowska, Stanisław Jakubowski and Jan Piątkowski⁴⁷.

Even less information is provided on the teachers who cooperated with the occupier. Such information could be found on the pages of the school chronicle from Kazimierz Biskupi. When Eugeniusz Gajewski was deprived of his managerial capacity, the Germans handed over this responsibility to Pelagia Ambroziak, who was described after the war as follows: *Citizen Ambroziak worked in various German institutions throughout the German occupation and recently in the municipal office. Citizen Pelagia Ambroziak did not bring honour to the school, the teaching profession and the Polish people with her behaviour and attitude towards Germans during the occupation*⁴⁸. It is difficult to assess the teacher's attitude from the current perspective. It would be necessary to undertake separate research to confirm or invalidate the above-mentioned allegations in the school chronicle.

Teachers in Kramsk were submissive to the occupier, too. The school chronicler described this situation in the following way: (...) *the weak characters surrender to the German influence and so Roszko [teacher] declares himself as a German and gets a job in the municipal administration, where there is already a teacher; Piotr Andrejko, a Ukrainian from Patrzyków. Roszko's wife Wiktoria brings up their children Jerzy and Zygryd in a German spirit by sending them to a German school*⁴⁹.

When recreating the fate of Kramsk teachers, the Kramsk chronicler also mentions the teachers who came to the Kramsk municipality. He mentions a teacher, Walczkova, who came with her family and occasionally worked on Lewandowski's farm to make a living. The chronicler also mentions a catechist from Milin, Irena Podczaska, who worked in the municipality but signed the "Leistungsliste" (sic!). It is reported in the chronicle that a female teacher from Kublinowa wanted to be included on the Volksliste and asked Roszko's wife how to do it. Teacher Lupa worked as a warehouse worker at a bulwark for a long time but after using the state of her health as an excuse, she received another job and started managing a shop in Wysokie and then in Święte⁵⁰.

Many of these teachers survived the war and took on the challenge of the restoration of the educational system already in January 1945 after the war turmoil subsided. *They*

⁴⁶ Kawnice school chronicle for 1945-1972, bp.

⁴⁷ Zagórow school chronicle for 1945-1983, p. 18.

⁴⁸ Kazimierz Biskupi school chronicle for 1945-1984, bp.

⁴⁹ Kramsk school chronicle for 1945-1977, bp.

⁵⁰ Kramsk school chronicle for 1945-1977, bp.

*survived, often under very difficult conditions, under the German terror but with a never-ending hope for a better tomorrow until the liberation of Poland*⁵¹.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the deliberations above are a part of the introduction to the subject. Certainly, these studies should be continued with the use of more chronicles. It would be extremely interesting to use chronicles to compare the work of teachers from various corners of the occupied Poland. This would give an interesting picture of the war reality. The above-mentioned deliberations can be treated as an introduction and a research postulate.

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⁵¹ Kłodawa school chronicle for 1931-1951, bp.

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