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Building through the flames: Polish-Jewish architects and their networks, 1937–1945

Строить через огонь. Польско-еврейские архитекторы и их
профессиональные сети, 1937–1945 г.

Abstract. Before 1939, Jewish architects were active members of their profession, participating in domestic and international architectural networks and contributing to the built environment of Polish cities. From the mid-1930s, however, intensifying antisemitism and far-right political forces pressured architectural networks to exclude Jews from professional unions. The start of the Second World War and the German occupation in 1939 strained professional architectural networks but led to the formation of underground workshops, cooperatives, and other groups, whose connections extended from Warsaw through the camps and ghettos of occupied Poland. This article presents the history of Jewish-Polish architects from 1937 to 1945. Demonstrating how architectural networks reacted to changing conditions of war, occupation, and genocide, it emphasizes architectural networks as sites of political engagement, ranging from prewar antisemitic attacks on Jews and their removal from the Society of Polish Architects (SARP) to underground architectural networks that hid Jews and allowed them to work. Although the fate of Jewish architects depended largely on their relationships with their professional networks, they also actively decided how to utilize those networks to resist the Nazis and to ensure their survival. This research shows that interpersonal relationships and wartime networks were consequential in determining the wartime fates of Jewish architects and also shaped the profession's post-war structure.

Keywords: Holocaust, Warsaw, architecture, urban planning, genocide

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Introduction

On July 3, 1950, historian Anna Kubiak (née Chana Wajs) conducted the first in a series of interviews at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, Poland's capital city. The institute was then – as today – housed at 3/5 Tłomackie Street, the only building on that street to survive the complete destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto. By 1950, much of the vast sea of ruins had been removed, but traces

of the violent destruction of Warsaw's Jews and their neighbourhood remained visible in the burned floor of the institute's headquarters and in the absence of Jewish life in the surrounding areas, which had been the heart of the Jewish community in Warsaw before 1939. The lingering architectural evidence of genocide would likely not have escaped the notice of Kubiak's interlocutors, who were architects: From July to October 1950, Kubiak interviewed over 40 Polish architects and their family members. Kubiak's interlocutors recalled colleagues, students, teachers, friends, and family members who had been murdered. Their testimonies speak to the depth of the loss to Poland's architectural community that the Holocaust left in its wake.

Kubiak died in 1959, at the age of 51, without having written a full study based on the interviews that she conducted. Although these interviews represent only one step in a research process that was never completed, they are among the most important sources of information regarding not only the wartime fates of Jewish architects, but also the larger impact of the Holocaust on the Polish architectural profession. Recent studies (Chomańska; Tarnowska; Uchowicz; Kohlrausch; Skolimowski; Perlińska-Kobierzyńska) have made great progress in integrating the biographies of Warsaw's architects into the broader history of the Second World War, although the specificities of the experience of Jewish architects have yet to be explored in depth. In this article, I recount the history of Warsaw's Jewish architects from 1937 to 1945, drawing upon Kubiak's interviews, as well as a variety of first-person archival sources and scholarly works, to present a more complete picture of how Polish-Jewish architects experienced the years of WWII and the Holocaust. My goal in presenting this history is twofold: First, I seek to emphasize the contributions of Jewish architects to the Polish architectural tradition – contributions which did not cease either in the face of Polish nationalists' attempts to remove Jews from the profession or during the systematic murder of Jews during the German occupation – and to provide a basis for more research into the lives and works of this important group. My second aim is to emphasize the importance of professional networks in writing histories of genocide. As I demonstrate, the position of Jewish architects within professional architectural networks shaped both their prewar and their wartime experiences.

The Society of Polish Architects: 1937

During the interwar period, Jewish architects and students of architecture were integral members of their professional communities in Poland. Alongside their non-Jewish colleagues, they worked as educators in universities across the country, represented Poland in international architectural organizations, and con-

tributed significantly to the growth of Polish cities. Among the most prominent Polish-Jewish architects of the interwar period were Helena and Szymon Syrkus, who were well-known for their affiliation with avant-garde modernist groups in Poland and abroad¹. Other Jewish architects, such as Roman and Grzegorz Sigalin, Henryk Blum, Lucjan Korngold, and Jerzy Gelbard, were recognized for their varied contributions to the architecture of Warsaw. Jewish architects were also among the most active members in interwar architectural networks: Maksymilian Goldberg, who was internationally recognized for his modern designs, was one of the co-founders of the Society of Polish Architects, or SARP (Stowarzyszenie Architektów Polskich, known as SAP until 1934), while Szymon Syrkus was the organization's Vice President until 1937.

Antisemitic discrimination and violence, never absent from Polish public life, reached a new intensity in the 1930s, as support for nationalist parties such as the Camp of National Unity (Obóz Zjednoczenia Narodowego, OZN) and the National Radical Movement (Ruch Narodowo-Radykalny, ONR, also known as Falanga) increased among Polish voters². This shift was highly visible in academic workplaces, particularly after the presence of ghetto benches (*getta lawkowe*) for Jewish students and strict quota limitations on Jewish university enrolment became more widespread in the mid-1930s. In March 1937, the Main Board of SARP published an open letter condemning antisemitic repressions at the Department of Architecture at the Warsaw University of Technology³. That same month, the Board of the Warsaw branch of SARP published a statement of support for the Main Board in SARP's newsletter, condemning the "barbaric antisemitic incidents, which are being systematically provoked by organized factions", and arguing for swift action against the perpetrators (SARP Newsletter, No. 3, March 1937 8–9). The June/July 1937 newsletter reveals significant backlash to the Main Board's letter in support of Jewish students, and on May 29, a vote of no confidence was taken against the board members: 22 architects voted for removal, four

¹ In Poland, noteworthy modernist working groups included Blok and Praesens, which had their years of peak productivity in the 1920s. Praesens, a collective of modernist artists and architects, operated from 1926 to 1930. The most important international modernist network, however, was CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne, International Congresses of Modern Architecture), which existed from 1928 to 1959.

² Joanna Beata Michlic has argued that the ethno-nationalist platform of the National Democratic (ND) party was one of the main forces driving the increase in antisemitic attacks in the 1930s as the party's popular support increased throughout the decade. By the mid-1930s, she argues, the majority of political elites advocated for the complete removal of Jews from Poland through mass emigration (Michlic 105).

³ At that time, the Main Board members included Romuald Miller, Roman Piotrkowski, Anetolia Piotrkowska, Teodor Puławski, Jerzy Gomóliński, Gustaw Trzciniński, Adam Paprocki, and Szymon Syrkus.

voted in support of the Board, and one abstained (SARP Newsletter, No. 6/7, June/July 1937 6). Thus, the Main Board members were removed from their positions and replaced by a new cohort, who would not oppose further restriction of the organization's Jews.

In May 1937, the new board members introduced a so-called 'Aryan paragraph' (paragraf aryjski) to the society's regulations, a measure that would remove Jewish members from SARP and thus severely limit their ability to work in Poland as architects. SARP members voted overwhelmingly to introduce the Aryan paragraph, with 105 members voting in support, 52 against, and 13 choosing to abstain. SARP officially introduced the Aryan paragraph in June 1938, forcing Jewish members out of the organization and establishing a committee to review members of partial Jewish descent. On June 26, 1939, the SARP Board approved a measure that would deny membership of the organization to all architects of Jewish descent, with the exception of those who obtained special permission from the SARP Admissions Committee (SARP Newsletter, No. 6, June 1939 1). It is unclear whether any Jewish architects were granted this permission, but the newsletter indicates that 56 Jewish architects were stripped of their membership of SARP on July 1, 1939 (SARP Newsletter, No. 6, June 1939 1).

For many Jewish architects, this was the moment when they realized that their careers could not continue in their homeland. By 1939, Helena and Szymon Syrkus were already actively planning their emigration, as evidenced in letters written to fellow architects and colleagues. In a 1939 letter to Dutch architect Cornelis van Eesteren and his wife Frieda Fluck, Helena Syrkus noted that "under normal circumstances" her and her husband's work "would be supported by the state, but in our case, we are dealing with something very different", a clear allusion to the impact of antisemitic and nationalist political forces on their work (cited after: Kędziołek, Uchowicz, Wirkus 57). In another letter from early 1939, this time to Walter Gropius and Sigfried Giedion, Syrkus expressed the couple's plans for emigration more directly, noting that "external and internal circumstances as well as our personal situation force us to look for a country where we could continue our work" (cited after: Kędziołek, Uchowicz, Wirkus 77)⁴. As these letters demonstrate, the removal from SARP resulted in significant loss of work opportunities for Jewish architects, and the threat of further antisemitic repression stifled the possibility of advancement for many of the country's most prolific architects.

The removal of Jews from SARP was widely discussed in the Polish press, drawing significant attention even at a time when restrictions on Jews in profes-

⁴ Cornelis van Eesteren (1897–1988), a Dutch architect of the modern movement. Walter Gropius (1893–1969), a German architect best known for founding the Bauhaus school of design. Sigfried Giedion (1888–1968), a Swiss historian and architectural critic.

sional organizations were increasingly common. At least eight Polish-language newspapers published articles describing one event from the proceedings, namely the protest of Zygmunt Balicki, an architect who was thrown out of a meeting after loudly decrying the removal of Jews from the organization⁵. On this incident, the Jewish daily “Nasz Przegląd” (Our Review) observed that the “Jew haters” (*Żydożercy*) in SARP voted to have Balicki removed because “it is not pleasant to hear the voice of your conscience” (*Aryan paragraph in the Union of Polish Electricians and Architects* 12). The L’viv-based Zionist newspaper “Chwila” (Moment) praised Balicki’s rebuttal, shouted as he was removed from the meeting room, that the situation in SARP made him ashamed to be Polish (“rumieniec wstydu mnie oblewa, jako Polaka”) (*I blush with shame at being Polish* 1). Not only the Jewish press took an interest in the events: The far-right newspaper “ABC – Nowiny Codzienne” (ABC – Daily News) ran six articles dedicated to the SARP proceedings between April 16 and May 27, 1937. The events of 1937 served to embolden antisemitic attacks on Jewish architects and their work in the right-wing press. An article published in “ABC” in September 1937 – shockingly racist even for a newspaper whose content primarily featured antisemitic attacks – bemoaned the very presence of Jews in the profession. The author of the article described Jewish architects (“Lucjan Korngold, Gelbard and Sigalin, Helena and Szymon Syrkus, Seidenbeutel”) as “people whose main racial characteristic is the lack of artistic sense”, who “simply do not function well in three dimensions” (Stokowski 7). Such abuse demonstrates how the escalation of antisemitic attacks on Jews impacted Jewish architects in the late 1930s.

Antisemitic commentary pervaded professional discourse within SARP as well. A statement made by a Warsaw architect named Władysław Pieńkowski at a May 1937 SARP meeting demonstrates the racism that shaped discourse among Polish architects: “Although the culture of every nation is its own property, in Poland the harmful emphasis on a foreign culture has been increasingly prevalent [...]. We should hurry to limit Jewish influences, because the Jewish ethics and psyche are foreign to us [...]. It is the protection of the borders of the Polish soul in our culture” (*IV Annual General Meeting of SARP Delegates* 13). Pieńkowski’s claim that Jewish contributions to Polish culture were “foreign” (*obca*) and “harmful” (*szkodliwy*) reflects a line of thinking clearly rooted in extremist national and antisemitic political currents, which had been gaining support in Poland since

⁵ Zygmunt Balicki (1888–1959), a Polish architect who was involved in the cooperative movement, not to be confused with the nationalist theorist of the same name (1858–1916). Among the non-Jewish members who left the meeting in solidarity were Zaslav Malicki, Michał Kostanecki, Teodor Puławski, and Roman Piotrowski. Other non-Jewish architects, including Zygmunt Balicki and Bohdan Lachert, lost their jobs due to their opposition to the introduction of antisemitic and nationalist policies in SARP and at the Warsaw University of Technology.

the 19th century and reached a new intensity in the 1930s. Stanisław Jankowski, a student of architecture, wrote an article featuring false and provocative claims, clearly inspired by antisemitic political rhetoric, such as “the fact that a whole range of sectors in the building industry are concentrated in Jewish hands should be considered abnormal and highly dangerous from the perspective of a healthy economy” (Jankowski 12). Such language demonstrates how Polish architects employed the rhetoric of the antisemitic far-right in professional publications and discourse.

When Polish architects voted to remove Jews from SARP, they were participating in furthering the goals of the ethno-nationalist political factions who sought to remove Jews from Poland (Michlic 106–107). The legacy of these attacks did not disappear after Germany invaded Poland in September 1939. After the outbreak of the war, Jews had limited options: Some Jewish architects made it out of Poland, such as Lucjan Korngold, who reached Brazil in 1940, and Józef Sigalin and Edmund Goldzamt, who spent the war in the Soviet Union⁶. Others, including Helena and Szymon Syrkus, failed to secure visas and were unable to leave Poland before the outbreak of war. Against all odds, many architects who remained in Poland were able to continue their work and mobilize to fight for their survival and the survival of their friends and families. The next section of this article focuses on the experiences of Jewish architects who spent some or most of the war years in Warsaw, the city that writer Kazimierz Brandys referred to as “the capital of that war” (Gutman xiii). Like Jews of all professions, these architects faced impossible choices that impacted their chance of survival on a day-to-day basis.

Architects in the Warsaw underground

One of the major centers of wartime architectural activity was the Social Building Enterprise (Społeczne Przedsiębiorstwo Budowlane, SPB). The SPB, which had been founded in 1928, became “a magnet that drew architects, urban planners, economists, and sociologists [...]. [T]he strength of that magnet was proportionately inverse to one’s level of employment” (Syrkus 230). Helena Syrkus remembered the SPB as “one of the few places where hopes were raised not only for material safety – for obtaining a legal work identification card, called *Ausweis* at the time – but also for pursuing creative work” (Syrkus 230). Magda-

⁶ Lucjan Korngold (1897–1963), a Polish-Jewish architect most associated with the modern movement. Józef Sigalin (1909–1983), a Jewish-Polish architect who was the Chief Architect of Warsaw from 1951 to 1956 and an influential figure in the postwar reconstruction of Warsaw. Edmund Goldzamt (1921–1990), a Polish-Jewish architect and architectural theorist.

lena Matysek-Imielińska argues that the work of the SPB and its biggest clients resulted in the “employment of the largest number of intellectuals and young people involved – during the war – in politics or the Polish underground resistance movement” (Matysek-Imielińska 263). Indeed, the SPB functioned simultaneously as an architectural workshop and as the hub of a rapidly forming underground network, where workers were guaranteed both safety from being rounded up for forced labor and the ability to produce architectural plans and designs that rooted them firmly in an aspirational postwar future. Before 1939, the SPB employed just four workers with engineering qualifications; by the beginning of 1942, that number had risen to 15 engineers who worked alongside the dozens of other employees (*Notes from the S.P.B. Supervisory Board Meeting III–185: 84, 4*)⁷. The growth of the SPB did not result in a significant increase in architectural output, but it did ensure the safety of more and more members of the architectural and urban planning communities.

Within the SPB, the Architectural-Urban Workshop (*Pracownia Architektoniczno-Urbanistyczna, PAU*) was a center of particular importance. The PAU was the most expansive architectural workshop operating in occupied Warsaw and the one that most directly supported the continuity of architectural networks from the prewar to the postwar periods, through its focus on the construction of social housing. This continuity can be observed through the networks of wartime support which often emerged from prewar support systems formed to resist the antisemitism and ethno-nationalism that threatened Jewish architects before 1939; the memories of the expulsion of Jews from SARP and the dehumanizing nature of the accompanying discourse would have still been fresh in the minds of Jewish architects, and in 1940 the stakes were much higher. Many of the architects who protested the loudest against SARP’s removal of Jews in 1937 were among the most active participants in PAU from 1940. This group included non-Jews such as Bohdan Lachert (whose villa in Saska Kępa also served as a hiding place for Jewish colleagues), Roman Piotrowski, and Zygmunt Balicki. Helena Syrkus later referred to Balicki – whose angry protest against SARP’s exclusion of Jews had been a topic of interest in the press – as Szymon Syrkus’s “closest co-worker from the SPB” (Syrkus 230).

Polish architects who denounced antisemitism before the war were far more likely to be active in underground rescue networks than their colleagues who attacked Jews in SARP and elsewhere. During the war, the latter group was more likely to participate in national Polish resistance movements or continue their

⁷ I thank Anita Chodkowska for sending scans of this file, as well as many other documents, from Stanisław Tołwiński’s archive.

work in private architectural studios⁸. Architects who harmed or betrayed their Jewish colleagues during the war did not often write about their deeds at great length, but there are traces of evidence that allude to the scale of this activity. Such an example can be found in the records of the SARP Verification Committee (*Komisja Werifikacyjna*), a group that was assembled in 1946 to pass judgement on architects accused of collaborating with the Germans during the occupation. Although the commission's goal was not to enact retribution against Holocaust perpetrators – indeed, the commission's omission of such crimes constitutes a significant oversight – the details of other cases reflect acts of wartime violence against Jews. In one case, a certain Jan Stefanowicz was found guilty of charges that included pilfering furniture from synagogues and the Warsaw Ghetto to refurbish and sell them for profit; Ludwik Fischer, the notorious wartime governor of Warsaw who oversaw the genocide of the region's Jews, was allegedly one of the accused's clients (*SARP Verification Committee*, Protocol 40, April 22, 1948). The committee ultimately found that Stefanowicz's wartime actions "had the character of inappropriate relations with the occupier", and Stefanowicz was deprived of membership privileges for one year as punishment (*SARP Verification Committee*, Statement from May 2, 1948). The leniency of Stefanowicz's sentence implies an attitude of permissiveness regarding wartime crimes against Polish Jews on the part of the postwar SARP authorities⁹.

⁸ Stanisław Jankowski, the 26-year-old student who published an antisemitic commentary in the SARP newsletter in 1937, is widely known in Poland today for his wartime career in the Polish Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*, AK) and his postwar career as an architect. Stanisław Pieńkowski, one of the most forceful advocates of the 'Aryan paragraph' in SARP, appears to have continued his architectural work in the Tarnów region during the war. Juliusz Żórawski, a modernist architect and another proponent of the removal of Jews from SARP, defended his doctoral thesis at the underground Department of Architecture at the Warsaw University of Technology in 1943 and spent the remainder of the war working in Zakopane. Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz, a renowned Polish architect who advocated for SARP's wholesale takeover by the antisemitic OZN party in 1937, spent the war working in a German architectural studio in Kraków. For this work, Szyszko-Bohusz was investigated by the postwar SARP committee but was ultimately not formally sanctioned for his wartime actions.

⁹ The leaders of SARP in 1946 were, of course, not the same architects who authored and instigated the 'Aryan paragraph' in 1937. The first official postwar congress of SARP took place in Lublin on November 5, 1944; the attendees included many prewar SARP members, including Bohdan Lachert, Lech Niemojewski, Michał Kaczorowski, Julian Sadłowski, and Władysław Czerny. The appointment of Bohdan Lachert as the organization's first provisional postwar vice president in November 1944 demonstrated a symbolic return to the leadership who had presided over the organization before the vote of no confidence that had paved way for the introduction of antisemitic restrictions in the spring of 1937, although the lack of major efforts to investigate and punish prewar or wartime crimes against Jews reflects the resistance towards punishing Polish Holocaust perpetrators that pervaded postwar Polish society.

For those involved in PAU, the threat of arrest and deportation to Nazi camps was ever present. On October 30, 1942, Szymon Syrkus was arrested by the Gestapo, along with Jakub Bajurski, a worker at the Warsaw Housing Cooperative (Warszawska Spółdzielnia Mieszkaniowa, WSM), and Jarosław Ładosz, a teen-aged WSM resident¹⁰. According to Bajurski, only he and Syrkus were on the list of people to be arrested, and Ładosz – who occasionally hid in the Syrkus’s apartment to avoid arrest – was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time (Bajurski 23). All three were taken to the Pawiak prison. In addition to describing the harrowing conditions at Pawiak – where prisoners slept crowded together on a damp concrete floor and were subject to frequent beatings and brutal interrogations – Bajurski wrote of the furtive moments of camaraderie among arrestees from the WSM or other underground circles, who met in corridors or in the communal bathroom to “express our wishes for the fall of Hitlerism, a free homeland and our own freedom” (Bajurski 27). This group included not only Ładosz and Syrkus, who were arrested together with Bajurski, but also Aleksander ‘Juliusz’ Rydygier, a communist activist whose WSM apartment became the site of secret meetings, and communist activists by the names of Jerzy Cesarski and Rotman. Dozens of activists and workers from the WSM passed through cells in Pawiak in 1941 and 1942, and Bajurski’s testimony provides one of the most complete accounts of those connections, transplanted into the brutal environment of the notorious prison. Around three weeks after their arrest, on November 21, 1942, Bajurski, Ładosz, and Syrkus were deported to Auschwitz in a transport of 84 prisoners. Syrkus, who received the prisoner number 77165, was registered in the camp as a Polish political prisoner (Schutzhäftling) and not as a Jewish prisoner, indicating that the Gestapo was unaware of his background (Lawin 16). This fact made a significant difference to Syrkus’s treatment in the camp and almost certainly saved his life¹¹.

Examining the postwar testimonies of Syrkus’s fellow inmates provides rare insight into his experience in the camps. While at Auschwitz, Syrkus was employed in the horticultural division (gärtnerische Anlagen) of the Construction Office, where he worked as a draftsman (Abzug den polnischen Häftlingen). At Auschwitz, Syrkus was able to forge connections with other architects, the most important of which was his friendship with Ludwik Lawin, a landscape architect who had been in the camp since 1940. In a post-war testimony, Lawin described

¹⁰ The Warsaw Housing Cooperative is located in Warsaw’s Żoliborz neighborhood. Helena and Szymon Syrkus were among the architects who were most active in designing the cooperative’s residential buildings and were members of its social community.

¹¹ It is unclear how the Gestapo officers who arrested Syrkus did not uncover his Jewish identity. Ludwik Lawin suggests that the Gestapo simply did not check because the charges against him were not very serious, adding that “Syrkus neither hid his identity nor drew attention to it. Maybe that’s why the Hitlerlites never investigated it” (Lawin 16).

Syrkus as “a progressive Pole of Jewish background” from “an old land-owning family of the Jewish intelligentsia” whom “life had not prepared at all for the conditions in the Auschwitz camp” (Lawin 16)¹². Lawin claimed that Syrkus “came under [Lawin’s] care” after Syrkus sought him out to ask about the fate of a mutual acquaintance, a technician who had been a prisoner in the camp but was shot before Syrkus’s arrival (Lawin 16). Noticing that Syrkus was “close to death because he worked so intensively, in the Kiesgrube [gravel pit] among other places”, Lawin requested that Syrkus be transferred to the Construction Office, where the two worked together for the remainder of their time in the camp (Lawin 17).

Syrkus’s employment in the camp Construction Office granted him a special status that permitted him to send and receive mail; between January 17, 1943, and July 30, 1944, he sent 34 letters from Auschwitz to Warsaw. As Martin Kohlrausch has observed, the letters – which were subjected to rigorous censorship and review by the German camp authorities – primarily discussed concepts of architectural and urban planning, alongside expressions of gratitude for letters and packages from Warsaw (Kohlrausch 254). In the second letter Syrkus wrote after arriving at Auschwitz, he expressed to his wife a wish that she could keep “continuing our professional work in the building cooperative [...]. Time is fleeting. You are an energetic woman, and you will focus on the work and not our fate” (Szymon Syrkus to Helena Syrkus, January 24, 1943). Syrkus’s letters echo the wartime ethos of his architectural milieu, which prioritized construction work in spite of great personal risk. In addition to a focus on architectural work – kept vague with the censors, who reviewed all incoming and outgoing mail, in mind – Syrkus’s letters also reveal the profound connections that remained between the architect interred in Auschwitz and his colleagues, still working underground in Warsaw. “How are the young architects, my students Jacek [Nowicki] and Michał [Przerwa-Tetmajer]?” Syrkus asked in a letter several months after his arrest (Szymon Syrkus to Helena Syrkus, May 30, 1943). Unsurprisingly, the letters also reveal the close relationship between Syrkus and his wife, Helena. In one letter, Syrkus describes his internal life (inneres Gedankenleben) as “an intimate form of constantly being with you”, invoking the garden at their home in Serock and writing that he “would be adding a white honeysuckle bloom to the pink and red ones on the lawn in front of the barn because, like you with your white hair, it is always young and beautiful and blooms ceaselessly” (Szymon Syrkus to Helena Syrkus, July 9, 1944). Although Syrkus emphasizes the central importance of the architectural work, his letters also demonstrate the importance of personal relationships to the successful completion of that work.

¹² I thank Dr. Wojciech Płosa for sending me scans of this document.

Correspondence from after the war also reflects a belief in the transformative power of architecture and architectural networks, particularly – or even especially – in times of war and genocide. Janusz Zarzycki expressed such convictions in a letter written to Helena Syrkus on her eightieth birthday in May 1980:

At that time, you [Helena and Szymon Syrkus] managed to do something really unlikely in PAU. In the middle of a city terrorized by the occupier, among people going through inhuman suffering, constantly under threat, you gathered a group of architects, sociologists, economists, and natural scientists, who – under your direction – began a task that seemed absurd. Then, in 1941, '42, '43, when everything was collapsing into ruins, when the probability of survival was vanishingly small, they participated in the creation of a program of Polish urban planning for the postwar period and worked on projects for the reconstruction and new construction of Warsaw [...]. Your work, your consequential line of development through Praesens, CIAM, through PAU, to the active design work in the construction of the new Warsaw [...] is a beautiful page in the history of the development of Polish cooperative thought and, indeed, socialist Polish urban studies (Zarzycki 1980).

The importance of the wartime work of PAU is twofold, based not only on the architectural work that took place in the grounds of the workshop during the occupation, but also on its ability to preserve (and even strengthen) the relationships that were crucial to the successful functioning of the architectural underground. These two documents additionally demonstrate how the goals of urban planning and architecture were inextricable from the cultivation of these personal relationships, which in many cases far outlasted the brutal years of the occupation.

The Warsaw Ghetto

Not far from the drawing boards of PAU was the brick-wall border of the Warsaw Ghetto: The ghetto was close to the workshop in a physical sense, as its northern boundary was only about 2.5 km (1.5 miles) away from the PAU workshop. For many members of the workshop, the ghetto was also close in a personal sense, as many had family members and all had friends and colleagues who were incarcerated within the ghetto's walls: Among the family members were Helena Syrkus's sisters, Anna and Marta, their families, and her mother, Stella; Szymon Syrkus's parents, Moszek and Idesa, and his sister, Stefania; and Wolf Folman's father, his mother, Rozalia, and siblings, Marek and Ewa¹³. Folman himself was

¹³ This information has been gathered from a variety of sources, including post-war surveys completed by the Syrkuses regarding the wartime fate of their immediate relatives. See Archiwum Akt Nowych (AAN): 2/2521/0/1/5894, AAN: 842/0/10.10/4/649. Information about the family of Wolf Folman comes from the post-war testimony of his mother Rozalia: ŻIH: 301/1085.

incarcerated in the ghetto until he managed to escape in 1941; Szymon Syrkus arranged identification papers and work for him at SPB upon his return to Żoliborz.

Architectural solutions were part of the resistance to the Nazis that Polish architects and their colleagues developed during the occupation. Among the most surprising of these plans was the idea to purchase and maintain a house for Jewish residents of the Warsaw Housing Cooperative in the Warsaw Ghetto, developed after Jewish residents were informed of the mandate to relocate to the ghetto in 1940. Documents from the archive of Stanisław Tołwiński reveal that the WSM board had hoped to purchase a house at 61 Dzielna Street, towards the ghetto's northern boundary (Siwiński). The building was to house between 50 and 55 Jewish families and provide them not only with shelter, but also with a cooperative community; as one Jewish diarist recalled, the house was to be "a model of social, sanitary, and self-help management" and "a beacon of light [...] in the Jewish district" (*Anonymous diary* 499). To rent the building, 8,000 zlotys were to be paid quarterly to a certain Mr. Sobański, while around 6,000 zlotys were required quarterly for other costs, including water, electricity, coal, taxes, and a cleaning service.

The existence of this idea demonstrates the thinking of the WSM board, which sought to maintain a community among Jewish WSM members even when they would not be able to be physically present in their Żoliborz apartments. Such a plan reveals the transcendence of the modernist idea, which was rooted in the cooperative architecture of the houses at Żoliborz and Rakowiec but could apparently be transposed elsewhere in an emergency. The spirit of the architecture was embodied in the community as much as the social lives of the community were to be transformed by the architecture of their homes. The plan to create a Jewish WSM colony in the Warsaw Ghetto never materialized, likely due to the prohibitive costs of maintaining the house and the impossibility of establishing cooperative conditions inside the ghetto. The existence of this plan demonstrates how even well-meaning Poles underestimated the genocidal intent of the Nazi regime's policies towards Jews and, subsequently, the danger faced by their Jewish neighbours and colleagues. The example of the proposed WSM settlement in the Warsaw Ghetto should therefore be understood as evidence of the widespread wartime mobilization of cooperative and architectural networks as channels of mutual aid for family, friends, colleagues, and neighbours, even when that mobilization was not able to prevent genocide.

On November 15, 1940, over 400,000 Jews were forced into the Warsaw Ghetto, including many Jewish architects. This group included Wolf Folman, who would escape the ghetto in 1941 and begin work at PAU shortly after. Maksymilian Goldberg, a prominent modernist who, we recall, was among the founders of SARP, also went into the ghetto in 1940, supposedly to reduce the risk to his

non-Jewish wife Alicja and their son Piotr¹⁴. The last entry in Goldberg’s notebook epitomizes the sudden fracture that the forced relocation into the ghetto created in the lives of Warsaw’s Jews: “I took no notes on further conclusions for reasons out of my control. 1940” (Goldberg MA: IIIb.539). Glimpses of the wartime stories of these architects can be found in the testimonies or diaries of other inhabitants of the Warsaw Ghetto who crossed their paths. One such source is the memoir of teenage diarist Mary Berg, who took lessons in architectural planning and drawing with Goldberg. On February 15, 1941, Berg wrote that “geometry and history of architecture are taught by Engineer Goldberg, who built the most modern government buildings in Warsaw” and was “particularly popular with the students” (Berg 42). Berg described a particularly memorable incident in Goldberg’s classroom:

They [German soldiers] march in insolently with a firm tread. A deathlike silence prevails in the room. Engineer Goldberg, our teacher, who has an excellent knowledge of German, greets the visitors. He answers all their questions and shows them the best drawings. The Germans are not interested in the illustrations, nor in the architectural blueprints; they devote most of their attention to the technical drawings, upon which they dwell at length and which they criticize in detail (Berg 50).

In her interview with Anna Kubiak, Goldberg’s wife Alicja Godlewska similarly affirmed that Goldberg “in the ghetto, in a remarkably difficult atmosphere, [...] taught young Jews architectural principles and how to speak and write well in Polish [...]. Maksymilian preserved within himself an artist and a human being” (Alicja Godlewska, interview with Anna Kubiak). Bohdan Lachert described Goldberg as “one of the most remarkable architects” with “a phenomenal memory” and “a subtle [...] intelligence” (Bohdan Lachert, interview with Anna Kubiak). These sources speak to Goldberg’s popularity as a teacher, his role in the education of young architects, and his attempts to preserve a sense of community and dignity for his students.

The wartime experiences of other architects can similarly be reconstructed by examining testimonies from the Warsaw Ghetto. Jerzy Berliner was an architect whose diverse body of prewar work included not only modernist housing, but also extensive sketches of the Great Synagogue of Vilnius, co-authored with Roman Sigalin (Seligman 2–3). While in the ghetto, Berliner worked as a teacher in the Building School at the Society for the Promotion of Craft. According to Ludwik Hirszfeld, a microbiologist who was involved in vaccination campaigns and health outreach in the ghetto, Berliner was the “soul” of the school and his work

¹⁴ This sentiment is expressed in Alicja Godlewska’s interview with Anna Kubiak (Jewish Historical Institute: S/350/1).

demonstrated that, in the ghetto, there were Jews “who, even faced with death, were able not only to dream about beauty, but also to design it” (Hirszfeld 251). Information about Jerzy Gelbard, another Warsaw architect, was shared by his wife, Izabela ‘Czajka’ Stachowicz, a socialite and actress who survived the war. After fleeing from the ghetto in 1940, Gelbard and Stachowicz found shelter at a blacksmith’s home in the village of Glinianki. In January 1943, Gelbard decided to return to Warsaw to help a friend and her daughter find a safe hiding place. Stachowicz recounted how Gelbard was arrested by the Gestapo after the woman and her daughter were arrested and confessed to being Jewish; although Gelbard was not identified as Jewish, he was accused of carrying false papers and hiding Jews (Stachowicz 129)¹⁵. After around nine months in the notorious Pawiak prison, Gelbard was sent to Majdanek, where he was murdered before the end of the war. In her interview with Anna Kubiak, Helena Syrkus described Gelbard as a “tragic figure” who was “baptized as a student” and ultimately “died in Majdanek: Denounced” (Helena Syrkus, interview with Anna Kubiak). Stachowicz described Gelbard as a “sensitive” person for whom “there existed only beauty, and nothing else” (Stachowicz 128).

The biography of Wolf Folman – the architecture student who escaped the ghetto in 1941 and found work at PAU – can also be illuminated more clearly through these sources. Folman was frequently mentioned in Kubiak’s interviews, including by Helena Syrkus, who described him as a “luminous figure”, and architect Jehuda Szlafszejn, who remembered his former classmate as “a modest, quiet worker” (Helena Syrkus, interview with Anna Kubiak; Jehuda Szlafszejn [Ostrzewski], interview with Anna Kubiak). In a postwar testimony given to the Jewish Historical Institute, Folman’s mother, Rozalia Folman, recounted how Wolf, the eldest of her three children, managed to secure Aryan papers for herself and her eighteen-year-old daughter Ewa (Chawa) in August 1942, thereby enabling them to leave the ghetto and go into hiding. Ewa, the only one of the three Folman children to survive the war, became involved in the Jewish resistance through the Halutz youth group and was arrested and sent to Auschwitz in December 1942. Marek Folman, the middle son, joined a Jewish partisan group in January 1943 and was killed after being betrayed by a Polish collaborator in Częstochowa in August 1943¹⁶. Like his brother, architect Wolf Folman was also

¹⁵ Stachowicz added that the Gestapo likely identified that Gelbard’s papers were false because they were the papers of an executed prison worker whom the Gestapo recognized. She also explained that Gelbard was not recognized as Jewish because he was not circumcised.

¹⁶ Yitzhak Zuckerman, a commander of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising who worked with Marek Folman from early 1943, recounted that he had originally heard that Folman had been arrested and shot by the Germans at the Częstochowa train station while on a mission. Zuckerman only later

killed while fighting in a partisan unit, which he joined in the spring of 1943 after leaving his position at PAU.

Conclusions

In this article, I have shown that architects and their professional networks were active in both enacting and mitigating state policy in interwar and wartime Warsaw. In 1937, a faction of architects within the Society of Polish Architects, or SARP, organized to remove the association's Jewish members, dramatically restricting Jewish architects' ability to work in Poland. Among the Jewish architects affected by this incident were Maksymilian Goldberg, one of the founders of SARP and a former member of the advisory board of the organization's Warsaw branch; Szymon Syrkus, who was at the time the Vice President of SARP; and Helena Syrkus, whose involvement with international architectural circles established Poland on the modernist map. After 1945, architect Władysław Czerny connected the injustice of the removal of Jews from SARP to the later persecution of Jews during the Holocaust, describing Goldberg as "an outstanding intellectual with beautiful, humane convictions", whose murder in Treblinka was rendered "even sadder and more infuriating by the fact that even before the war, he was being harassed by our own national falangists" (Czerny 36)¹⁷. As Czerny correctly observed, prewar Polish antisemitism shaped the fate of Polish Jews before, during, and after the Holocaust. Examining the history of architectural networks and societies illuminates meaningful continuities in the biographies of Jewish architects, even during a period characterized by the ruptures of war and genocide.

This article also demonstrates that biographical studies that focus on professional identity have the potential to reveal new dimensions of social and cultural histories of genocide. In 1950, when dozens of Warsaw's eminent architects and their families travelled to the Jewish Historical Society on the ruins of Tłomackie Street to share their memories of their murdered Jewish colleagues, their shared remembrances shed light on the lives and achievements of a group that contributed much to the development of Polish architecture, even as policies of Polish ethno-nationalism and Nazi genocide threatened their careers and lives. In spite of the great risks involved, architects continued to work on ambitious plans for their cities in underground workshops during the occupation. The largest of these

learned that Folman had been arrested and killed by German agents after his group was betrayed by a Polish double agent posing as a communist (Zuckerman 406).

¹⁷ The term "falangists" refers to members of the Falanga group, a subset of the ONR party that advocated for totalitarian Catholic rule and the forced removal of Poland's Jews.

workshops, and the only one dedicated primarily to residential construction, was the Architectural-Urban Planning Workshop (Pracownia Architektoniczno-Urbanistyczna, PAU). At PAU, Jewish architects such as Wolf Folman and Helena and Szymon Syrkus were able to continue work that would become foundational to the reconstruction of Warsaw after 1945. The workshop's proximity to the Warsaw Ghetto further emphasized the high stakes of the work taking place at PAU, and particularly for the workshop's Jewish workers, who faced near certain death if they were discovered.

In these ways, the history of Polish-Jewish architects from 1937 to 1945 outlined in this article demonstrates the potential of using professional societies and networks as a basis for studying biographical continuity during times of genocide and war. In shedding light on understudied elements of that history, this article may provide a basis for further research into the important lives and works of Poland's Jewish builders.

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