



Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe

Białystok in the interwar period

ARTYKUŁ

How Antony Blinken's grandfather died

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US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is the adopted son of a Polish-American man from Białystok, Samuel Pisar — a lawyer, author, politician and adviser to American presidents. Samuel's father was Dawid Pisar, whose family was one of the wealthiest in pre-war Białystok.

In August, 1941, the Pisar family was forced to live in the Białystok ghetto. Dawid worked as a mechanic and chauffeur for German businesses. As a result, the Pisars' fared better than many other families. This meant, for example, that Dawid Pisar was able to bring home some food scraps from his employers, which was crucial given the typical scarcity of the ghetto diet.



US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken. Washington, 2021
(Photo: Ronny Przysucha/US State Department)

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He also recalled that one day his father was arrested, tortured and executed by a firing squad.

Many years later, when he visited Białystok, Samuel Pisar searched for the location of his father's execution. Someone pointed him towards a large cross. The politician; however, did not know when and how his parent

was killed or who was responsible. It is time to unravel this mystery.



Street in the Jewish Chanajka district (destroyed during WWII). Białystok, 1932. Photo: National Digital Archives

A false lead?

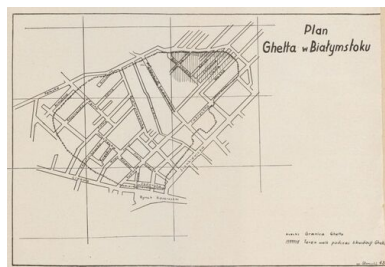
On November 12, 1944, officers of the Białystok Communist Security Office arrested 46-year-old Jakub Wajsfeld. He was accused of being a German spy in the Białystok ghetto and giving away several Jews who, under the German law, committed various crimes. Dawid Pisar was allegedly one of these victims.

Brener and Wajsfeld spent many months hiding in the shelter ran by Jadwiga and Michał Skalski in Białystok, at Rzemieślnicza 33 Street. During that time, both of them and other Jewish residents often argued. One reason behind such arguments could have been Wajsfeld's lover, Helena Rowińska.

A number of people were questioned over the course of the investigation. Out of those, only Abel Brener mentioned Pisar. He testified that Dawid Pisar's wife told him about it, but it was when the ghetto was still there. Other witnesses did not corroborate this fact and Wajsfeld himself claimed to not have known Pisar.

It turned out that Brener and Wajsfeld spent many months hiding in the shelter ran by Jadwiga and Michał Skalski in Białystok, at Rzemieślnicza 33 Street. During that time, both of them and other Jewish residents often argued. One reason behind such arguments could have been Wajsfeld's lover, Helena Rowińska. Jadwiga Skalska, who lived in the house, described Wajsfeld and Rowińska as the "criminal type." She was also surprised by Rowińska's attachment to Wajsfeld, who would hit her and be rough with her. Rowińska; nevertheless, consistently defended Wajsfeld in her testimonies, and accused Brener instead.

In the face of contradictory statements, the case was dismissed and the prosecutor decided it was based on slander. From the entirety of evidence gathered during the investigation, it is reasonable to assume that Wajsfeld, even though he wasn't without sin, did not give Pisar to the Germans.



Białystok ghetto plan drawn by the Germans in 1941 (Photo: Jewish Historical Institute/www.jhi.pl)

Kurt Ringenmuth's role

In the case documents; however, there was a testimony of one Szymon Amiel, who described the circumstances of Dawid Pisar's death. This testimony, along with Helena Najmark's recollection, allows us to establish what happened. According to Helena Najmark, the Jewish spy who brought Dawid Pisar's death was a certain Judkowski. It was the same man who gave away Icchok Malmed. During the liquidation of the Białystok ghetto in February, 1943, Malmed poured acid on a German and because of that to this day he remains a symbol of Jewish resistance in Białystok. The old Kupiecka Street was named after him in his honour.



Samuel Pissar

From the testimonies, it seems that Dawid Pissar, along with several dozen other Jews worked at a company installing water pipes, which belonged to Kurt Ringenmuth and was based in Białystok at modern-day Lipowa Street. The company was located right on the ghetto's border and several dozen Jews worked for its German owner. He also owned several cars, and Pissar, one of the few residents of Białystok to own a car before the war, knew a lot about repairing them.

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Contrary to his compatriots, Ringenmuth treated Jews favourably, and some of them even had the opportunity to dine with him. He took care of his workers and protected them during dangerous situations. When in November, 1942, the Germans began eradicating smaller ghettos, Ringenmuth, at the request of his employees, became involved with transporting Jews from various places to the Białystok ghetto, which seemed like a relatively safe place at the time. Of course, he did collect payments for this at the amount of 3-4 thousand marks per person.

Three of his expeditions took the German man to Wołkowysko, to one of the collective camps, operating between 1942 and 1943, from which Jews were consistently taken to the Treblinka extermination camp. To get some of the people out, the Jewish doctors first gave them a shot which caused them to lose consciousness. Then, they were transported to the cemetery as “dead men.” There, they regained their consciousness, dressed as peasants and got in the car.



Ghetto Heroes Monument. Jewish cemetery in Białystok (Photo: <http://www.info.bialystok.pl>)

Busted by the Gestapo

On January 11, 1943, Ringenmuth had to go to Królewiec, and some Pole replaced him as a driver during the trip to Wołkowysko. Judkowski, whom Ringenmuth had earlier refused to bring his sister out of Wołkowysko, took advantage of the situation and made a report to the Gestapo. Naturally, he didn't accuse the German himself, but rather a citizen of the ghetto named Okstrowski, who was the driver's brother-in-law. In the report, it was Okstrowski along with the driver who allegedly planned the expedition to Wołkowysko, most likely without Ringenmuth's knowledge and involvement. Not long after the car reached Białystok coming back from Wołkowysko, police officers entered the premises of the German's house. The driver and the Jews were no longer there, but the first man they met was Dawid Pisar. He was beaten and arrested along with other Jewish employees. Okstrowski's family was also detained. When he learned of this, he gave himself in on his own.

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Then, the Germans released everyone apart from Pisar. He was reportedly playing a crucial role in the entire operation. In the meantime, the driver was also arrested and killed. In April, 1943, the Germans murdered Okstrowski and Pisar as well. It is said that during the investigation the Jews, despite the torture, never gave up Ringenmuth's role in the operation. He stood party trial (he was a member of the NSDAP) nonetheless, and even though they couldn't prove anything, he had to close down his company and leave Białystok because of the accusation alone of helping Jews. Dawid Pisar, murdered in April, 1943, is most likely buried at one of Białystok's execution sites. Were the aforementioned details gathered ten years ago, then alive Samuel Pisar would have certainly been greatly moved. Today, it is but a small detail in the history of Białystok's Jews.



46th US President Joe Biden and Antony Blinken. Washington, 2020 (Photo: Mike Coppola/Getty Images for National Committee on American Foreign Policy)



Deputy US Secretary of State (in

Barack Obama's administration)

Antony Blinken during the meeting with minister of the Polish president's chancellery, Krzysztof Szczerski, in Warsaw's Belvedere Palace, 2016. (Photo: Marek Dusza/KPRP)

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