



Helena and Jan Benisz with children, from left to right: Artur, Maria, above them Mieczysław and Lech. Photography from the 30's, 20th Century (Jacek Boczoń's collection)

ARTYKUŁ

“They took good care of me and they never stopped being friendly towards me”. The story of Sabina Honigwachs. From the annals of helping Jews.

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Sometimes to save only one person, trust, cooperation and eagerness of dozens of people were needed. The story of hiding of Sabina Honigwachs, a resident of the Gorlicki county in Poland, shows how difficult it was to save merely a single human life.

The Lesser Poland area witnessed many examples of Poles helping the Jewish community during the German occupation. Even though, many years have passed since the Second World War, historians keep discovering new stories about individual Poles or entire Polish families which stood against the Holocaust. One example of such bravery, is the story of the residents of the Gorlicki county, who saved a young, Jewish girl.

That girl was Sabina Honigwachs, born May 3rd, 1921 in Gorlice, where she lived with her family. Her father, Faivel Honigwachs had passed away before the war, so she and her only brother, Hirsch were raised by their mother, Bluma. Prior to the war, Sabina attended a local school. Her mother and brother ran a workshop making suitcases, which was later still functioning for a short time in a local ghetto.

From giving food stamps, to hiding at a cemetery

Fortunately, Jan Benisz, Helena's husband came to their rescue and delivered food stamps to Sabina, to the ghetto. Food stamps, that were given solely to Poles. The Jewish girl would then take off her armband with the David's star, illegally leave the ghetto and head to the local stores to get food.

Before the war even started, Sabina's mother made friends with Helena Benisz and her family, living in Gorlice. Since the first few days of the occupation, Benisz was helping Bluma Honigwachs and her family of four: her children, Sabina and Hirsch, and her late husband's sister and her little daughter, Hanna. Thanks to Helena's aid, Sabina got a job at the Gorlicki local government, where she was issuing food stamps. For some time, this job was the main source of income for the Jewish family; however, in the summer of 1941, when a local ghetto was established by the Germans, the girl was fired. Fortunately, Jan Benisz, Helena's husband came to their rescue and delivered food stamps to Sabina, to the ghetto. Food stamps, that were given solely to Poles. The Jewish girl would then take off her armband with the David's star, illegally leave the ghetto and head to the local stores to get food. Upon her return, she divided the food between the three related families: Gevish, Brinbaum and Halberstam. Jan Benisz, who was helping Sabina and her family, was a Supervisor in the City Victuals Office during the occupation. At the same time, he was a soldier of the Polish Home Army, codename "Hawk", serving as a quartermaster for the region. Even when Germans decided to eradicate the

Gorlice ghetto, Jan Benisz continued to help the Jewish family. Several days before the ghetto was to be abolished, he prepared a hideout for them in one of the empty graves at the local cemetery. An empty grave, close to the cemetery's entrance, was pointed to them by the parish's rector, Kazimierz Litwin. What's more, Benisz gave the Honigwachs family an address of a Polish family of Chwastowicze, where they could seek shelter if the hideout at the cemetery turned out to be too dangerous. In the end, the 5 Jews decided to hide with Chwastowicze, who took them in on the very same day. However; after just a couple of hours Sabina's family made a choice to go back to the ghetto, fearing that the Germans might search for them.



Helena and Jan Benisz with children, from left to right: Artur, Maria, above them Mieczysław and Lech. Photography from the 30's, 20th Century (Jacek Boczoń's collection)

Saving Sabina

One day, in the autumn of 1942, one of the local policemen, who was a friend of the Wrońskis, warned them on the telephone that the Jews working at the grange were to be taken away by the Germans.

After the ghetto was eradicated on August 14th, 1942 Sabina was the only one to make it out alive. Her

brother Hirsch died at the Auschwitz concentration camp, her mother murdered in the town of Bełżec. The Germans left Sabina and a few other Jews in Gorlice to work. Benisz kept helping her even then. She was put in the grange of the Wroński family, which was also working for the Gorlice division of the Home Army. Benisz asked for an easier job for the Jewish girl, so she became a maid at the grange. Apart from the orders of Benisz, the Wrońskis were friendly to Sabina because they were once friends with her grandfather, Wolf Brunner who ran a textile shop before the war. One day, in the autumn of 1942, one of the local policemen, who was a friend of the Wrońskis, warned them on the telephone that the Jews working at the grange were to be taken away by the Germans. Sabina, warned by the friendly family, managed to escape at the last second and was hidden by landlady Puchajda in the pea fields. When the danger was clear, Puchajda told Wroński that the girl survived. Wroński informed his son-in-law, also a soldier of the Home Army, Wincenty Horodyński about Sabina, and he, together with Jan Benisz and lady Puchajda took her in the middle of the night to yet another hideout, in the neighbouring village of Stróżówka. She was then hidden in the attic of the Tokarski family. During her stay there, Horodyński prepared fake papers for her, giving her the identity of Maria Wójcik.

Dressed as a nun of The Sisters congregation

After a month, the Jewish girl was once again moved to another safe house. This time, soldiers of the Home Army took her under the protection of the congregation of the Sisters, Servants of Mary Immaculate in Dominikowice, with whom they were in cooperation. Sabina was being taken care of by sister superior Serapiona and two other sisters, Czesława and Chrystiana. Apart from the nuns, the true identity of Sabina was also known to the priest confessor, Stanisław Łach and in time to his superior, rector Julian Filoda from neighbouring village, Kobylanka. Both priests supported and took care of her. In the beginning, the Jewish girl stayed in one of the rooms in the monastery, where she ate and slept in solitude. After a few days, sisters Czesława and Chrystiana dressed her as a nun and let her live among the other sisters. She pretended to be a Polish girl who joined the congregation in order to avoid being oppressed by the Germans for her political views. To not arise any suspicion, she ate and slept with the sisters. She also took part in the prayers in the nearby church in Kobylanka, went to confessions, received the Holy Communion and helped out with the works at the monastery. After sister Czesława passed away, her position was taken by sister Atanazja, and she too was let in on Sabina's secret by the sister superior. In the meantime, the Home Army managed to get her a second, fake Kennkarte. This time around she was given the name of Janina Blumska from the city of Przemyśl. Sabina was often visited by the Kosibowie family from Gorlice. Prior to the war, Mrs. Kosibowa used to buy textiles from Sabina's grandfather, so she knew her very well. What's more, Kosibowa's son was a member of the Gorlice Home Army, hence he knew where the Jewish girl was hiding. Additionally, in case of any unpredictable events she could get help from another Home Army soldier, Wilhelm Habela codename "Biały" or "Karlik" who visited her from time to time in Dominikowice. In July, 1943 the sister superior passed away, and not knowing who would replace her and what would the new superior's opinion on cooperation with the Home Army be, it was decided that Sabina should temporarily hide somewhere else. Habela came for her and drove her on his bike to the town of Szymbark. There, she stayed for a few weeks at an apartment of Stanisław Stankowski, a teacher and a Home Army soldier as well. Then, Habela once again drove her to another hideout due to a threat of being discovered. She ended up with the Tokarski family in Stróżówka for a

second time (summer 1943). Another few weeks later, she had to move again. This time Habela took her to the Lipinki village, where she stayed with a Polish soldier, Jurek. Sabina remained there for a month.



Sister Ambrozja, sister superior of the monastery of the Sisters, Servants of Mary Immaculate in Dominikowice. (Sisters, Servants of Immaculate Mary in Dębice collection)

After a few days, sisters Czesława and Chrystiana dressed her as a nun and let her live among the other sisters.

In the summer of 1944, she was frequently visited by Wilhelm Habela, which was ordered by Jan Benisz to take care of her and bring her food. By the end of summer, when the Home Army made sure, that the new

sister superior of the Dominikowice congregation, sister Ambrozja can be trusted, cooperation with the monastery was resumed. As a result, Sabina was once again moved to the place she knew very well and pretended to be a nun for a second time. The Benisz family still continued to help, the girl was often visited by Helena Benisz. However; in October, 1943 the Germans arrested 20 members of the Gorlice Home Army, among them Jan Benisz and his two sons, the 19 years old Lech, and 21 years old Mieczysław. They were all shot on October 19th, 1943 in Rozwadów, near Stalowa Wola. Despite the tragic loss in the family, Helena Benisz kept visiting Sabina. Due to the fact, that from time to time, the Germans received tips about the “suspicious” activity in the monastery, the Jewish girl often took off her nun’s habit and visited the Stankowski family in Szymbark in her regular clothes. Sometimes, she would also go to Jurek, in Lipinki. During such ventures, she used her fake papers with the name Maria Wójcik. When the danger was clear, Sabina would return to Dominikowice. Probably in autumn of 1944, the monastery became a place of hiding for Mieczysław Przybylski codename “Michał”, the commander of the Gorlice division of the Home Army, who was being hunted by the Gestapo. His soldiers were responsible for taking care of Sabina. Upon her request, Przybylski agreed to include her in the Home Army underground. Among her duties was e.g. the distribution of weapons. She would usually travel with sister Chrystiana, and apart from the guns, both women also delivered patriotic brochures and packages of unknown content. In the beginning of January, 1945, two weeks before the Soviets came, Sabina and sister Chrystiana took weapons for the last time, to Ciężkowice.

Righteous among the Nations

In 1946, Sabina met Jakub Bruk, who would later become her husband. They emigrated to Palestine in 1956. Thanks to the efforts of the author of this article, the Yad Vashem Institute gave Jan Benisz and both sisters superior, sister Ambrozja and Serapiona, post mortem medals and titles of Righteous among the Nations. On the 28th of June, 2018 during the official ceremony in the “Farys” cinema in the city of Biecz, the Israeli ambassador, Anna Azari gave medals and honorary diplomas to Benisz’s grandson, Jacek Boczoń, and a relative of sister Ambrozja, Agata Rybarczyk. During the very same ceremony, Ms. Rybarczyk gave the medal and diploma to sister Maksymilla Pliszka, the chief sister superior for dębickie servants. Since it was not possible to find a living relative of sister Serapiona, the Israeli ambassador gave sister Pliszka only a copy of an honorary diploma.



The ceremony of awarding medals and titles of Righteous among the Nations in Biecz. From left ot right: Jacek Boczoń, Agata Rybarczyk, sister Maksymilla Pliszka, Michał Kalisz - the author of the article and the applicant of awarding the medals, Urszula Karasińska (Jan Benisz's granddaughter) and Saturnin Rybarczyk (sister Ambrozja's relative). [Photography from Michał Kalisz's collection]

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