



ROMAN ROZMIŁOWSKI

["Gazeta Ludowa", issue 66, p.6]

HOW IGO SYM DIED

An interview with the executor of the sentence

Warsaw in 1940 and in the first months of 1941 lived under the weight of German cruelty: arrests, tortures at aleja Szucha, deportations for forced labour, several mass round-ups of men who were then deported to the concentration camp in Auschwitz, isolation of the Jewish community within the closed Ghetto which was a sombre presage of future actions by the occupier.

Underground organisations were thriving from the first months of the occupation, and new ones were still emerging. Far-reaching activities of conspiracy propaganda were spreading the news abroad on the situation in Poland, and proliferating underground publishers were instructing, reassuring and cheering the people of the tormented city, dejected by France's defeat, suspicious, and almost believing in miracles.

In such a state of affairs, the 7 March 1941 was almost game-changing for the spirits of the Warsaw people, as it was the day when the first death sentence of the Special Military Court was carried out on the Gestapo informer and provocateur Igo Sym, who had been a famous Polish film actor before the war, and then a *Reichsdeutch* and director of the so-called *Theater der Stadt Warschau*, created by the German occupier in place of the closed Polish Theatre in Warsaw.

During the uprising, in the Śródmieście district, we encountered the last living member of the combat group which liquidated Igo Sym and at the same time the executor of the sentence, Home Army lieutenant "Zawada".

A young, fit, strapping blond man with cheerful yet stern blue eyes, he had several other weasels, provocateurs and Gestapo men "on his schedule" after Igo Sym, including

the infamous informer Opęchowski, who had escaped the execution sentence several times and had been in hiding for many months until he was finally shot in a nursing home in Otwock; a Gestapo agent, Mikula, who was executed along with his mistress, also an informer, at Służewska Street; and many others. Igo Sym, however, was an offender of higher rank, and his execution was the first affair of this sort and a still unforgotten one in our country.

"So how was it with Igo Sym, lieutenant?"

"We found out that on 7 March at 7.30 a.m. he was to leave for the Reich and stay there. We could not wait any longer. There were three of us: second lieutenant "Szary", captain "Mały", and myself (the former two died in later action). Sym was living on the fourth floor of a house at Mazowiecka 10. When we knocked on his door at 7.10 a.m., the door was opened by a woman who was – as it turned out later – the traitor's sister-in-law.

"Could we speak to the director, Igo Sym?" we asked.

"One moment," she answered and indeed in a moment Igo Sym appeared in the hallway, ready for the journey.

"Mister Igo Sym?"

"Yes, it's me. How can I help you?"

"At that moment I fired my Vis, aiming straight at his heart," continues lieutenant "Zawada".
"The shot was accurate. The weasel fell face down to the floor without so much as a groan."

"And then?" we ask.

"We rushed downstairs, and then we dispersed without haste."

The news of Igo Sym's death travelled fast across Warsaw, becoming the breaking news of the day even before the special announcement was issued through the street *szczekaczki* [loudspeakers] at 11.00 a.m. The announcement stated that Igo Sym was shot by "an unknown person" and appealed to the inhabitants to apprehend or surrender the perpetrators in three days, as otherwise 40 people arrested as hostages would be executed. Moreover, the curfew was moved to 8.00 p.m. and all theatres and playhouses were to be closed for a month.

On the night of 7–8 March and 8–9 March 1941, there was a wave of arrests by the Gestapo. In total, about 100 men and 18 women were brought to Pawiak. Many distinguished representatives of the theatre world were arrested then: Leon Schiller, the late Stefan Jaracz, Sawan, Dardziński, and among the women: Zofia Małynicz, Lidia Wysocka, Elżbieta Barszczewska. Apart from these, the Gestapo was arresting people in accordance with previously made lists of names of suspects who were not connected with the theatre environment and had nothing to do with the execution of Igo Sym.

The arrests stirred up the people, not only in Warsaw, but in all places the news had reached. Strenuous efforts were made to save the hostages from certain death. As the result of the intervention of the Cracow RGO Board [Rada Główna Opiekuńcza – Central Welfare Council], a promise was made that the execution would be suspended until a special committee, which was to come to Warsaw “from the capital of the General Government”, would examine the case in detail. In the meantime, however, the Warsaw governor, the infamous murderer Fischer, ordered a retaliatory execution on his own initiative, explaining later to those who had interceded for the victims that he executed “only those who had been previously sentenced to death”.

On the morning of 11 March 1941, 17 men were taken for execution from Pawiak. The Germans executed then:

Zakrzewski, Kazimierz, professor of the University of Warsaw, a distinguished historian;
Kopeć, Stefan, PhD. professor of the University of Warsaw, a brilliant biologist;
Kopeć, Stanisław, his son;
Bardodin, Józef;
Gawroński, Władysław;
Gołębiewski, Stanisław;
Hejnikowski, Edward;
Kałaciński, Ludwik;
Kołaczyński, Konstanty;
Mawko, Karol;
Mechalski, Czesław;
Piętka, Władysław;
Rudnicki, Wacław;
Skubaczewski, Henryk Ryszard;

Śliwka, Jan;
Szymborski, Ksawery;
Taborowski, Mirosław.

Several days after the execution of the hostages, in a Warsaw *szmatławiec* [rag] and throughout the entire city there were wanted notices for the actors Dobiesław Damięcki and Irena Górka, as they were "suspected of participation in the assassination of Igo Sym". Threatening severe penalties for offering the suspects any help or shelter, the notices also promised a reward of PLN 3000 "for providing information contributing to apprehension of the suspects".

Nobody feared the German punishment, nor was Judas's money tempting for anyone, but since then an untrue rumour has spread through Warsaw that Damięcki the actor really did take part in the execution of Igo Sym. The real executor of the sentence, lieutenant "Zawada", when asked about the hard days in the aftermath of the traitor's death, told us:

"When I was listening to those announcements, I felt as if everyone was looking at me. There was a moment when I wanted to give myself up to the police. Then I took a sleeping pill and the next day I felt better. But I was sorry that Damięcki, an actor charged with the assassination by the Gestapo, had to hide."

The Igo Sym affair found its epilogue only in April 1941, when almost a thousand prisoners were deported from Pawiak to Auschwitz (on the night of 4–5 April), among them Jaracz, Schiller, Sawan and many others from the group of men arrested on the night following Igo Sym's death.

Some of the arrested women were released, and some deported to the concentration camp in Ravensbrück; some left the camp only in 1945, after the end of the war, while some will never come back.

W. Bartoszewski