

Arie Galles

Postcard

Thursday, January 14, 2001

Last Sunday, while at a local antique-junk place, I noticed a vendor selling postcards and other Nazi paraphernalia. He was new to this venue, and I never saw such merchandise being sold there in the many years Sara and I stopped by on our regular Sunday morning peregrinations.

One card, a light tan piece of paper with a red Wehrmacht eagle on top of a swastika, caught my eye. It was different from the other cards. On the upper right-hand corner was a purplish stamp of 30 (mark?) with Hitler's right-facing profile with the words "Deutsches Reich/General Gouvernement." The cancellation stamp read "Warschau 29-6-42-18 which I assumed meant June 29, 1944. The pre-printed recipient's address/name was Comité "RELICO" 52 rue des Paquis, GENEVE (SUISSE). I then noticed the name of the sender, written in a fine script similar to my own handwriting, "Wiera Grynszpan, Warschau, Elektoralna 26/10. The sight of the name sent a chill through me. It was only then that I noticed the small rectangular cartouche with the words, "JUDENRAT WARSCHAU," on the upper left-hand part of the card.

I felt as if this card was meant to be found by me. On the other side of the card, at the top-left corner was printed "Zeichnen :/Référence: and a "backward printed stamp of "GENEVE 81163" and other words I couldn't make out. On the right top-side was written "Datum des Postempels/Date du timbre postal" with a purple stamp, barely visible, "6 JUIL,1942" Below the reference number was printed, in bold type, "Au Comité "RELICO" GENÉVE, and below that, in a much smaller typeface, was written in German, "Ich bestätige, hiermit, dass ich von Ihnen (there followed a dotted space onto which Wiera has hand written the number 4) Lebensmittelpaket(e) erhalten habe." She certifies that she received 4 foodstuff packages. To the right was written, in French, "J'accuse réception de.....colis de produits alimentaires que vous m'avez fait parvenir." The "J'accuse" of this ordinary pre-printed statement pierced me again with its mnemonic power of recalling Zolla's outcry. Below, there was printed "Unterschrift :/Signature: And again, in a fine handwriting was her signature, "Wiera Grynszpan." Below that line, under Adresse:" she wrote "Warschau, Elektoralna 26/10" in a less steady hand, and below that, in a hurried hand was written "Generalgouvernement."

I was holding in my hand a piece, a spark, of someone's life. What was her fate? Did she survive the war? Is she alive now? Where is her grave, if she perished? Are there any of her relatives now alive? What was the committee "RELICO?" (Religious Company?) Who funded it and how did it function? Did Wiera really receive these 4 packages? Is the Judenrat's certification stamp a confirmation of the truth, or a were all parties told to sign and send this letter out to make things look good for international consumption, the Red Cross, etc? This 59 year old document speaks silently to me. I guess my whole project is my trying to connect with voices like this one.

I paid the requested \$10 for the card, just to keep it from being lost again. The seller, who happened to be from Greece, held firm to the price. I spoke to him about the meaning of this card, how different it was from the others. He showed no reaction of any kind, and I guess it was a reaction of sorts.

Once I returned home I wrote this episode down as a letter to my colleagues at the Goldner Holocaust Symposium. The letter ended with this plea: "Does anyone here know anything about the "RELICO" committee? How could I go about finding out about that and about the fate of Wiera Grynszpan? Help! In Friendship, Arie"

Within a few days I received an answer from my good friend, Dr. Stephen Paulsson, a historian living in England at that time. His father was a Swede. His mother was a Polish Jew, although he didn't learn of her ethnicity until after her death. (The story of his journey of discovery is a book in itself). He is a fluent in Polish, among other languages. His University of Oxford PhD Thesis, "Hiding in Warsaw: The Jews on the 'Aryan Side' in the Polish Capital, 1940-1945" is an incredible book. He wrote:

"RELICO (RELief COmmittee) was the relief organization of the WJC, HQ in Geneva, and headed by Dr Albert Silberschein. It is unfortunately best known for its part in the infamous Hotel Polski scam, in which it played the role of unwitting accomplice to the Nazis. One of the rescue efforts which RELICO initiated was to try to get documents to Polish Jews which would allow them to emigrate. In particular, there were Latin American countries which were prepared to extend citizenship to people who owned land in those countries.

The scheme therefore was to buy land on behalf of Polish Jews, and on that basis to obtain 'promesas', letters promising that passports would be issued on receipt of appropriate documentation. Large numbers of these promesas arrived in Warsaw at about the time the ghetto was being liquidated, when most of the people for whom they were intended were already dead. The Nazis didn't miss a trick: they let it be known informally that they would be prepared to turn a blind eye if people other than the named individuals turned up to claim these documents. Who was to say, after all, who was who?

To make it believable, they demanded large payments from people who wanted to participate in the scheme, and put out the story that the people who came forward would be exchanged for German prisoners abroad. To receive such people they allocated a small hotel, the Hotel Royal, and when it filled up another, larger hotel called the Hotel Polski on Długa Street. In the summer of 1943 (after the destruction of the ghetto) about 3500-4000 people went to the Hotel Polski, the only place in Warsaw where it was legal for a Jew to be alive. Then in September the hotel was cleared out. The inmates were sent via the Pawiak Prison either directly to Auschwitz or to holding camps in Vittel, Bergen-Belsen and Tittmoning. From there all but about 70 people who had papers for Palestine were eventually deported to Auschwitz and killed.

This is a cautionary tale about the feasibility of rescue efforts and the consequences of dealing with (and therefore trusting) the Nazis. It is not the only one of its kind."

So there was an answer. Wiera's fate is enveloped in the smoke screen of Nazi directives and subterfuges. We can only ask questions. Most probably the flame of her life was extinguished together with the Ghetto. One fact, however, remains, on June 29, 1942, at 26/10 Elektoralna Street in Warsaw a Jewish woman, Wiera Grynszpan was alive.

JUDENST
WARNSCHAUF

1471

241

CARTE POSTALE



Miera Gymspan
Harschau
Elektoralna 26/10

Comité "RELICO"

52, rue des Pâquis
GENÈVE (Suisse)

164321

Zeichen :
Référence :

Datum des Poststempels
Date du timbre postal

Au Comité "RELICO",
GENÈVE

16. JUL 1941

Ich bestätige, hiermit, dass ich von
Ihnen 4 Lebensmittelpaket(e)
erhalten habe.

J'accuse réception de
colis de produits alimentaires que vous
m'avez fait parvenir.

Unterschrift: Miera Gymspan
Signature:

Adresse: Harschau, Elektoralna str. 26/10
Generalgouvernement