

Article 15

Ewa Bukowska, Secret Teaching in Poland in the Years 1939 to 1945

After the capitulation of Warsaw on 23.09.1939 and the cessation of fighting, despite the crushing defeat, the Polish community quickly set about clearing the damage and organising schools. Unfortunately the Germans were equally quick in imposing their own civilian administration. The occupied Polish territory was divided into a section that was incorporated into the Reich (the regions of Silesia, Poznan and Bydgoszcz) and the General-Gouvernement (up to the river Bug border), with its capital in Krakow, where Governor-General Frank set up residence.

The Germans made no secret of their plans regarding the Polish population. They were not only interested in the occupation of Polish land but also the destruction of Polish culture, whilst the Polish people were to be degraded to nothing more than a workforce. The Polish community was greatly shocked when all the professors of the Jagiellonian University were arrested after a lecture given by Müller, a Gestapo officer who had requested the university's rector for this gathering to be arranged.

In the territories that were incorporated into the Reich there were no Polish schools, not even primary schools, and Polish children were not allowed to attend German schools. And yet, despite the terror, clandestine classes were organised spontaneously. In great secrecy, teachers would gather several children from their neighbourhood and teach them. Parents would frequently ask teachers to take care of their children, so that they would not go astray due to a lack of education, and even pay the teacher as far as they were able to. Each teacher would instruct his small group of primary school pupils according to the pre-war syllabus, naturally modified, two or three times a week. As the number of classes increased teachers had to organise lessons for several classes at different locations. This was possible thanks to parents who allowed lessons to be held in their very small flats (the larger Polish homes were sequestered). If a German paid an unexpected call, he would be told that the children were being taught the German language and sums, officially required skills, for Poles had to be employed as menial labourers by the age of 12-14. The secret schools in this part of Poland were partly under the care and control of [Polish, underground,] military organisations.

In the General-Gouvernement all high and middle schools were closed, while the remaining primary and vocational schools had a reduced syllabus with the exclusion of Polish history, geography and literature. The German education system was imposed onto the existing Polish administrative structure, which the Germans now supervised and where they gradually reduced the number and competencies of Polish staff.

Towards the end of October 1939 the Secret Teaching Organisation (*Tajna Organizacja Nauczania* – TON) was founded to merge the Polish Teachers' Union with five smaller teaching organisations. Meantime the ZWZ (Union for Armed Struggle) set up the Commission for Public Education and there were also several regional initiatives. The existence of multiple organisations was only temporary. In 1940 the Polish Government Delegation's Department of Education and Culture was founded, chiefly to prepare teaching and examination syllabuses as well as future projects.

TON was subsidised by the London based Polish Government-in-Exile. The mission was to establish an underground education system involving the entire Polish community. This was one of the forms of combating the occupant. Initially TON concerned itself with primary education: the older years were taught the officially prohibited subjects and year seven was taught the programme of *gimnazjum* (middle school) year one. Soon middle school classes were also set up. Special rules were established: there were to be five to six pupils to each class, the number of hours for each pre-war subject was to be halved and lessons were to last two hours. Lessons were to be held at someone's home no more than twice a week. Classes were not to change locations during a single day, instead teachers were to go from class to class to give their lessons. In exceptional cases, when a school location seemed particularly safe, a secret teaching programme could be included in the vocational lessons timetable. For example, a woman could be secretly teaching history during what was officially a lesson in bookkeeping and she could be in the classroom officially as the form teacher. Maths or history teachers, for example, found employment in such schools after changing their qualifications to those of teachers of vocational subjects.

University professors in Warsaw and Krakow also gave lessons to secret classes. The gaining of permission from the German education authorities to set up new vocational schools helped in the organising of secret courses at university level. At least partly, such courses could be held at these vocational schools and benefit from some of the facilities they provided. For example, what was officially a school for auxiliary medical personnel run by *docent* [Assistant Professor] Jan Zaorski, was in fact the Medical Department of Józef Piłsudski University. The School of Draughtsmanship providing courses in technical drawing was in fact the Warsaw University of Technology, while a vocational farming school and private fishing school were in fact the former Main School of Farming (SGGW).

Professor Edward Lipieński of the Main School of Trade (SGH) acquired a licence to run one-year economics courses. After a year, students received a certificate for completing the 'general trade' class, the second year was the 'industry class' and in the third they did 'banking'.

In February 1940 some of the professors of the Jagiellonian University were released from the concentration camp. In December that year Prof. Mieczysław Małecki returned and, having reached an understanding with the underground authorities, found employment at the *Institut für Deutsche Ostarbeit* to officially gather material for a dictionary of Polish words of German origin. Thus he gained access to the Jagiellonian Library and was able to take the books he needed for preparing secret lectures. Małecki brought in more colleagues and in April 1942 they founded a secret Polish studies faculty. Later a law studies faculty was also founded. [This was achieved because] Professor Małecki had set up and registered a craftwork cooperative in which he employed fellow professors as master craftsmen, academic assistants as assistant craftsmen and students as ordinary workers from various firms.

Polish territories on the east side of the river Bug did not come under German control until 1941. To a certain extent, in the years 1939-1941 Polish primary and middle schools continued to function in these regions. It was the German occupant who closed them down and played on ethnic antagonisms between the Poles and Lithuanians, Byelorussians and Ukrainians.

Secret teaching was not just a matter of education but also of upbringing. The teachers treated their work as a civil obligation, while the young were eager to learn and studied well. Both teachers and pupils knew that if they were caught, all of them, including the owner of the home where the classes were held, faced prison or the concentration camp. Yet the occupant's brutal repressions failed to deter the running of secret lessons.

Ewa Bukowska

Further Reading

- *Stefan Korboński, *'Polskie Państwo Podziemne' in Promyk*, Philadelphia P.A.
- *Nadzieja Drucka, *Szkoła w podziemiu*, Wydawnictwo Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej, Warsaw
- *Janina Kazimierska, *Szkolnictwo warszawskie w latach 1939-45*, PWN, Warsaw 1980
- *Mikołaj Kozakiewicz and Stanisław Brzozowski, *Szkoła w konspiracji*, Instytut Wydawniczy Nasza Księgarnia, Warsaw 1960
- *Adam Kowalski, *Pamiętniki nauczyciela*, Wydawnictwo Łódzkie, Lodz J