

**1943**  
**VOLHYNIAN**  
**MASSACRES**  
**TRUTH AND REMEMBRANCE**



**INSTITUTE  
OF NATIONAL  
REMEMBRANCE**



# REMEMBERING THE VOLHYNIAN MASSACRES 70 YEARS LATER – BASIC INFORMATION

**The Volhynian massacres** – were anti-Polish genocidal ethnic cleansings conducted by Ukrainian nationalists. The massacres took place within Poland's borders as of the outbreak of WWII, and not only in Volhynia, but also in other areas with a mixed Polish-Ukrainian population, especially the Lvov, Tarnopol, and Stanisławów voivodeships (that is, in Eastern Galicia), as well as in some voivodeships bordering on Volhynia (the western part of the Lublin Voivodeship and the northern part of the Polesie Voivodeship – see map). The time frame of these massacres was 1943–1945. The perpetrators were the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists–Bandera faction (OUN-B) and its military wing, called the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). Their documents show that the planned extermination of the Polish population was called an “anti-Polish operation.”

## Ukrainians in Interwar Poland, 1918-1939

Having been annexed by its neighbors in the late 18th century, the Polish state, as reconstituted directly after WWI, had approx. 5 million Ukrainian inhabitants. This was roughly 16% of the population. In some south-eastern regions (Volhynia, Eastern Galicia) Ukrainians constituted the majority. Most Ukrainians from Volhynia and to the west in the Lublin Voivodeship were Orthodox Christians. The majority of Ukrainians in Galicia, however, were Uniates, or Greek Catholics (i.e., Christians preserving the Eastern rite, but recognizing the authority of the Pope), whose ethnic identity was much stronger. Over 90 % of Ukrainians in the Second Republic of Poland lived in the countryside, 3–6% worked in industry, and ca. 1% were intellectuals. According to the 1931 census, the population of the Volhynia Voivodeship was slightly over 2 million. Ukrainians constituted a vast majority of the local population – approx. 64% (ca. 1.5 million), followed by Poles – 15.6 % (ca. 340,000), Jews – 10 % (ca. 210,000), Germans – 2.3 % (ca. 47,000), Czechs – 1.1 % (ca. 30,000), and other less numerous minorities.

Pre-war Poland was rife with Polish-Ukrainian disputes. Following the overthrow of the Tsar in Russia, both the White Movement and the Bolsheviks made it impossible for Ukrainians to establish their own state with a capital in Kiev. The creation of the Western Ukrainian People's Republic was hampered by the Ukrainian defeat in the Polish–Ukrainian War and the loss of Lvov (1918). Most Galician Ukrainians did not accept the political status quo. On the other hand, the Polish authorities did not deliver on their own promises. For instance, they failed to open Ukrainian university (as per the 1922 Act of Parliament) and they imposed restrictions on Ukrainian elementary and secondary education. Radical Ukrainian organizations began to use terrorism as a form of political pressure. The Polish politician Tadeusz Hołówko and the minister of the interior Bronisław Pieracki were assassinated in 1931 and 1934 respectively. These were the two most infamous assassinations conducted by the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), founded in 1929. The OUN also used terror against pragmatic Ukrainian activists.

In reaction to the act of sabotage conducted by the OUN in the fall of 1930, the Polish authorities ordered pacification of Eastern Galicia. This operation consisted of arrests, beatings, the compulsory quartering of Polish troops in Ukrainian villages, and in the so-called vicious searches (combined with destruction of property and crops). Even though the Ukrainian

National Democratic Alliance (UNDO) did reach an agreement with the Polish government in the summer of 1935 and won its own political representation in the Polish parliament, the Polish concessions (e.g., credits for Ukrainian entrepreneurs, partial amnesty, and the release of some OUN activists from the camp for political prisoners in Bereza Kartuska) were insufficient for the Ukrainians. Even the “Volhynian experiment” – that is, fairly liberal administration of the Volhynia Voivodeship under governor Henryk Józewski during 1930–1938 – did not change the situation. When taking office Józewski declared that “a way for the Polish and Ukrainian nations to coexist peacefully had to be found.” Nonetheless, his concessions, were also to prove insufficient. Moreover, in the late 1930s Polish authorities tightened policy towards Ukrainians, which led to Polonisation in Volhynia, especially in the Chełm region, combined with destruction of Orthodox churches.

## September 1939 and the Soviet Occupation

The course of events sped up after the outbreak of World War II in September 1939. 110,000 of the one million soldiers of the Polish Army were Ukrainian. They fought arm-in-arm with the other soldiers of the Polish Army. At the same time, however, a Ukrainian nationalist terror flared up in Volhynia, particularly after the Soviet invasion of Poland on September 17, 1939. Instances of rape, looting, and murder spread across Volhynia. Polish manors and farms were set ablaze. The number of Polish victims is estimated at 2,000–3,000. Many of those people were soldiers, policemen, clerks, and refugees who had evacuated from Central Poland as it was being overrun by Hitler’s invasion force. Moreover, the Germans began to play the Ukrainian card. The “Sushko” legion is a good example. Six hundred men strong, this OUN detachment was trained by the Abwehr and organized by the Germany-based Col. Roman Sushko. The Sushko legion took part in the German invasion of Poland from the south.

The Polish territories that found themselves under the Soviet occupation stretched eastward from the Pisa, Narew, Bug, and San rivers and constituted 52 % of Poland’s territory (ca. 200,000 km<sup>2</sup>). Inhabited by over 13.7 million people, they were incorporated into the USSR.

The period of the Soviet occupation of Poland’s eastern territories was one of numerous repressions, mostly (but not solely) against Poles. The persecutions continued with varying intensity and in various forms until the German invasion of the USSR on June 22, 1941. By then hundreds of thousands of Polish citizens had been arrested, imprisoned, or deported to Siberia during four deportation campaigns. Various repressions were levelled against Polish political and social activists, reserve officers, priests, landowners, policemen, foresters, industrialists, merchants, military and civilian settlers and their families, along with escapees from the territories occupied by Germany. But in mid-1940 the Soviets intensified the repressions against Ukrainian nationalists.

After the German invasion of the USSR, the NKVD massacred almost all the people detained in Volhynian and Galician prisons before its evacuation from those territories. The number of victims in Łuck alone is estimated at 2,000–4,500. Similarly, approx. 500 people were killed in Dubno. Moreover, before their retreat from Lvov the Soviets murdered over 3,000 Polish, Ukrainian, and Jewish prisoners.

## The German Occupation, and the Holocaust

Many Ukrainians hoped that the Third Reich would help create a Ukrainian state. In the summer of 1941 Ukrainian inhabitants of many localities enthusiastically welcomed the arriving

German detachments. Ukrainians erected arches to welcome the Germans and they put up Ukrainian flags. On 30 June OUN-B set up Jaroslaw Stećko government in Lvov. Germans, however, were not interested in this political offer and sent the OUN-B leaders (including Bandera) to concentration camps. In the summer of 1941 Germans initiated a series of pogroms of Jews in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia, which the Ukrainian militia formed by Banderites, took part in. For instance, during the Petlura Days (July 25-27) approx. 1,500 people were killed in Lvov. The former Volhynian Voivodeship and parts of the Lvov and Polesie voivodeships were incorporated as Generalbezirk Wolhynien und Podolien into Reichskommissariat Ukraine with its capital in Równe. Not only German, but also Ukrainian administrative bodies were established in those territories. The latter were to ensure delivery of provisions for Germans, recruit laborers to the Third Reich, and construct and repair roads. Lvov became part of the General Government as the capital of District Galicia (Distrikt Galizien).

The occupier waged terror throughout Volhynia, which some Ukrainians greeted with dismay. The Ukrainian nationalists from the OUN, however, chose to support the occupier. The Germans conscripted approx. 5,000 volunteers into the newly-created Ukrainian auxiliary police. At the very beginning of the occupation the Germans executed several hundred representatives of the Polish and Jewish intelligentsia on the basis of lists drafted by the OUN. These massacres took place in Krzemieniec, Kostopol, and Równe. Moreover, the Germans carried out arrests, executed inmates in prisons, and conducted public executions. After they had captured Lvov, the Germans inspired a pogrom against the local Jews and murdered 25 Polish professors at Wuleckie Hills in Lvov. Thousands of Poles were detained in concentration camps.

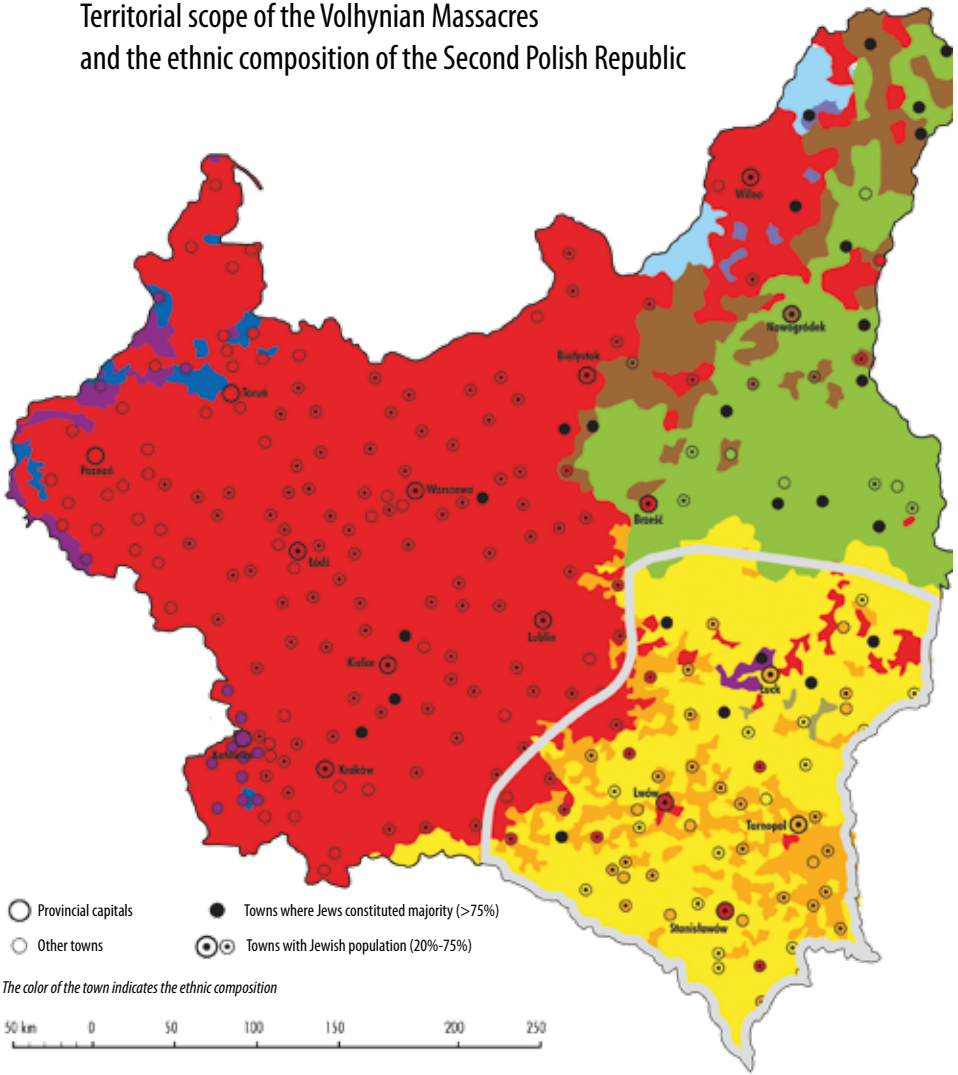
Soon, the Ukrainian police in German service and Einsatzkommandos began to organize mass executions of Volhynian Jews. The Jews from the ghettos were not transported to death camps, but killed on the spot, that is, in ditches outside cities or at the edge of forests. By October 1942 the Germans had killed approx. 247,000 Volhynian Jews (97 % of all local Jews).

The executions of Jews in Eastern Galicia began in the fall of 1941. Most victims were intellectuals or “unproductive elements” (that is, people incapable of work). Deportations to death camps (mostly Bełżec and Sobibór) began in the spring of 1942. The Ukrainian police also participated in the Holocaust in Galicia. The brutal extermination of Jews proved that people could be killed on an unprecedented scale, with impunity, and in keeping with binding German law.

## **The Genocide on Poles Conducted by the OUN-B and UPA**

Following the mass deportations and arrests carried out by the NKVD and after the subsequent German repressions (e.g., deportation to the Reich for forced labor, arrests, detention in camps, and mass executions), by 1943 Poles constituted only 10–12 % of the entire population of Volhynia. Poles became an ethnic group deprived of most of its social activists, intellectuals, and military men. Thus, the Poles did not seek to create conflict situations. On the contrary, they did everything to avoid them. This fact should be stressed because some Ukrainian historians try to dispute it. Contrary to the truth, they suggest that the Volhynian massacres were not the first, but the second stage of a bloody Polish-Ukrainian conflict. According to their version, which has no basis in reality, the first stage began in the spring of 1943 as a “peasant war” (a “Jacquerie”) – spontaneously, and not inspired or controlled by Bandera’s OUN. The war was purportedly declared by the “masses of Ukrainian refugees” from the Chelm region who had fled across the Bug River eastward as early as 1942/1943. In Volhynia they inflamed the anti-Polish sentiments among Ukrainian peasants by telling them about the atrocities Poles had purportedly committed against Ukrainians in the Chelm region. All this is in line with the pro-Bandera

# Territorial scope of the Volhynian Massacres and the ethnic composition of the Second Polish Republic



- Provincial capitals
- Towns where Jews constituted majority (>75%)
- Other towns
- ⊙ Towns with Jewish population (20%-75%)

The color of the town indicates the ethnic composition

Congested settlement (>75% of the indicated nationalities)

- Red: Poles
- Yellow: Ukrainians
- Green: Belarusians
- Blue: Germans
- Light Blue: Lithuanians

Mixed settlement (25%-75% of the indicated nationalities)

- Orange: Polish and Ukrainian
- Brown: Polish and Belarusian
- Purple: Polish and German
- Dark Blue: Polish and Lithuanian
- Olive: Polish and Czech

Gray line – the territorial scope of the Volhynian Massacres

propaganda put forward during the last stages of World War II and successfully promoted after the war by émigré Ukrainian nationalist historians associated with OUN-B.

The first particularly cruel massacre of Poles took place on February 9, 1943 in the colony of Parośla located 1 km from Sarny. The number of Polish victims exceeded 155.

In early 1943 the Ukrainian auxiliary police in Volhynia and Podole had nearly 12 thousand members. In March and April approx. 5 thousand of them deserted from the German service taking weapons and ammunition. Many of them had previously participated in murdering Jews of Volhynia. Majority of the deserters joined UPA, and many of them became commanders. From that moment on the number of initially sporadic massacres of Poles increased.

The OUN-UPA terror assumed a mass scale in the summer and fall of 1943. The massacres of Poles initiated in the Sarny, Kostopol, Równe, and Zdołbun counties spread across to Dubno and Łuck counties in June 1943. In July of that year they affected the Kowel, Włodzimierz Wołyński, and Horochów counties, before spreading further still to Luboml county in August. The month of July 1943 proved particularly tragic, with the Sunday of July 11, 1943 being especially bloody. At the crack of dawn that day UPA detachments (often actively supported by local Ukrainians) simultaneously surrounded and attacked 99 Polish villages in the Kowel, Włodzimierz Wołyński, and Horochów counties, as well as in a part of Łuck county. Ukrainians ruthlessly slaughtered Polish civilians and destroyed their homes. Villages were burned to the ground and property was looted. Researchers estimate that on that day alone the number of Polish victims may have amounted to some 8,000 people — mostly women, children, and the elderly. The perpetrators used bullets, axes, pitchforks, knives, and other weapons. Many Poles were killed in churches.

Attacks on churches were indeed common, as the Bandera followers wanted to murder as many Poles as possible. On “Bloody Sunday” of July 11, the Ukrainians killed approx. 200 parishioners in the church in Poryck. The local parish priest, Father Bolesław Szabłowski, a Pole, was killed a bit later. Similarly, the Polish priest Father Jan Kotwicki died along with some 150 parishioners in the church in Chrynow. Father Józef Aleksandrowicz, aged 74, was killed in similar circumstances in the Zabłoćce parish. Furthermore, Polish parishioners died in the churches in Krymno and Kisielin (approx. 40 and 80 victims respectively).

Poles had to abandon their homes and seek shelter in the cities and towns which had posts of Hungarian and German troops. It was an irony that in order to escape from the UPA Poles had to seek protection from their oppressors: firstly from the Germans, and during 1944–1945 from the Soviets. The Germans deported Polish escapees to the Reich to forced labor. To escape the massacres some escapees tried to get to the General Government, particularly to the Lublin District. Finally, a small number of Poles created self-defence centers to protect themselves, with the most well-known ones located in Przebraże (where 10,000 Poles defended themselves), Huta Stepańska (600 Poles dead), Zasmyki, Dederkały, and Ostróg. Due to the lack of arms, ammunition, and a cadre of commanders most of the approx. 100 Polish self-defence centers were defeated.



■ Victims of the train raid near Zatyle (near Lubycza Królewska) executed on 16 June 1944 by UPA. Source: KARTA

The tragic events of 1943 in Volhynia had a significant influence on the development of the Polish underground, including the formation of the largest partisan unit of the occupation period, that is, the 27th Volhynian Infantry Division of the Home Army. Formed within the framework of Operation Tempest (January–February 1944), the division had up to 7,000 soldiers. Initially (that is, until mid-March 1944) the division fought against the UPA to protect the surviving Polish population as well as against the German Army. Thereafter, it joined the Red Army in frontline combat against German and Hungarian troops. Moreover, several thousand Poles (mostly in Polesie Wołyńskie) fought in the ranks of Soviet partisan units, where Poles sought help and protection from the UPA for their families. For these same reasons, in the summer of 1944 at least several thousand Poles joined the “destruction battalions” — Soviet auxiliary military police subordinate to the NKVD. It remains uncertain as to what extent those destruction battalions formed in early 1945 protected Poles against the UPA and to what extent they provoked the UPA to carry on with its campaigns.

## The Massacres in Volhynia as Genocide

Genocide is a legal category. The Volhynian massacres have all the traits of genocide listed in the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, which defines genocide as an act “committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such.” In Polish academia the Volhynian massacres are referred to as genocidal ethnic cleansings, the Volhynian (or Volhynian-Galician) slaughter, or, in legal terminology, the crime of genocide. Regardless of which qualification of the Volhynian massacres is the most suitable, there is



■ Burial of the victims of the train raid near Zatyłe

no doubt that the crimes committed by the OUN-B and the UPA were anti-Polish ethnic cleansings of a genocidal character. The public prosecutors of the investigation division of the Institute of National Remembrance (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN) are conducting 32 investigations regarding the Ukrainian nationalists’ crimes against Polish citizens. These crimes have been recognized as a crime against humanity in its special form, that is, genocide. Article 118 § 1 of the Polish Penal Code of 1997, which introduced the notion of genocide into Polish domestic law, serves as the legal basis for these investigations.

## Testimonies of Polish Survivors

There are many Polish testimonies regarding the Volhynian massacres. Born in 1941 in Lipniki, Volhynia, Mirosław Hermaszewski (pilot, general of the People’s Army of Poland, and the first Polish cosmonaut, who went into space in 1978) lost 19 members of his family (including his father) during the Volhynian massacres. The parents of the composer Krzesimir Dębski (born in 1953) met during the defence of the church in Kisielin against the UPA. Luckily, they survived and hid at their Ukrainian acquaintances’. Thereafter, they both joined the 27th Volhynian Infantry Division of the Home Army. The composer was born in Wałbrzych in Lower Śląsk (Silesia). The family of Father Jacek Salij (Dominican religious writer) comes from Volhynia. Born in 1942 in Budy in Volhynia, Salij recalls his family’s experienc-



es: "We did not fall victim to the genocide sweeping across Volhynia thanks to one Ukrainian neighbor lady whom my parents knew only by sight. She came running to warn us that the Banderites were close and that they were murdering Poles. She took great trouble to walk all the way from the village to our home. Moreover, she took great risk because [the warning] could have cost her dearly. We managed to escape. On our way we passed a widow we knew who was escaping on a wagon with her children. But the Banderites caught and murdered them. This was on April 15, 1943. In her testimony given to the IPN, Jadwiga Majewska, born in 1933 in Huta



■ Victims of the train raid near Zatyłe (near Lubyca Królewska) executed on 16 June 1944 by UPA. Source: KARTA

Stępańska, recounts the details of the evacuation and the self-defence of that village to Sarny on July 18, 1943: "I was the only one who stayed behind because I decided to return home to get the picture I got for my first Communion. I tried to catch up with the wagon but there were too many people. I saw a lot while I was chasing the vehicle. Mom was shouting and stretching out her arms to help me onto the wagon but I slipped behind because of that crowd. I saw many corpses. I remember that we were attacked during our escape. [...] I saw the Banderites shooting and shouting: 'Hoorah, hoorah, slaughter the Laks!'

## The Ukrainian Righteous

According to a range of testimonies, many Ukrainians helped their Polish neighbors whose lives were in danger. That help assumed the following forms: warnings about attacks; showing an escape route during an attack; sheltering Poles before an expected attack; misleading the attackers; the provision of first aid to wounded Poles; the provision of food or clothing to survivors; taking care of orphans and children lost after attacks; helping to bury the victims; refusal to carry out an order to kill a Polish member of one's own family; refusal to participate in an attack; public protest; sparing the lives of Poles; and the release of arrested Poles. Even though it is difficult to estimate the scale of this help, it was real. In 500 localities of the Eastern Borderlands examined in this regard (massacres occurred in over 4,000 localities) the OUN-UPA killed ca. 20,000 Poles. Ukrainian acts of solidarity and mercy saved both individuals and populations of entire villages (several thousand people in total). Over 1,300 Ukrainians are documented as having helped Poles to a lesser or greater extent. Ukrainian nationalists killed several hundred of the righteous as punishment, for all manifestations of friendliness toward Poles were regarded as acts of collaboration with the enemy and betrayal of national ideals, and that called for merciless revenge.

## The Effects of the Volhynia Massacres

In 1944 the anti-Polish terror of the OUN-UPA shifted to Eastern Galicia (the Lvov, Stanisławów, and Tarnopol voivodeships) as well as to the Lublin region. Polish researchers cautiously estimate the number of Polish victims of the Volhynian massacres, which started during the winter of 1942/43 and ended in mid-1945, at approx. 100,000 (40,000–60,000 victims in Volhynia, 30,000–40,000 in Eastern Galicia, and at least 4,000 in today's Polish territory, including up to 2,000 in the Chełm region— as was called the south-eastern part of the Lublin Voivodeship was called). Moreover, the Ukrainian partisan units forced at least 485,000 Poles (125,000 from Volhynia, 300,000 from the Eastern Galicia, and 60,000 from the Chełm region) to flee to

central Poland to avoid death. It should also be said that in the spring of 1944 nearly 20,000 Ukrainians from the Chełm region abandoned their homes for fear of the Polish underground.

The number of Ukrainian victims of Polish retaliatory attacks until the spring of 1945 is estimated at 10,000–12,000 (approx. 2,000–3,000 in Volhynia, 1,000–2,000 in Eastern Galicia, and, until 1947, 7,000–8,000 on present-day Polish territory, including 2,500 in the Chełm region). Some Polish retaliatory attacks were war crimes. According to Polish historians, however, those attacks cannot be equated with the organized anti-Polish operation of the OUN-UPA.

The Roman Catholic Church lost approx. 200 members of the clergy (priests, monks, and nuns) on the Eastern Borderlands during 1939–1947. It is also estimated that Ukrainian nationalists killed 28 Greek Catholic clergymen and approx. 20 Orthodox clergymen in Volhynia.

The Łuck diocese in the Volhynian Voivodeship lost 50 Catholic churches (i.e., 31 % of all temples). Another 25 chapels (15 %) were burned down, vandalized, or destroyed. As a result of the UPA raids ca. 70% of all 166 parishes ceased to exist. All rural parishes (churches, chapels, and rectories) were destroyed.

It is estimated that 1,500 of the 2,500 Volhynian localities inhabited by Poles in 1939 ceased to exist due to the operations of the OUN-UPA (they were burned down or otherwise destroyed). Today in only 150 localities are there crosses commemorating the tragic death of the more than 10-thousand Polish victims of the massacres (monuments are less frequent still, and some are not even on the burial site). Thus, in ca. 1,350 Volhynian localities there are still no crosses on the graves of Polish victims of the OUN-UPA.



■ Pradun family of Ostrówek. From the right (seated): Maria (died near Sokal), Aleksander; Maria's sister, died near Sokół; standing: Jan (Maria's husband), Stanisław, died near Sokół; Maria's sister husband. Source: Leon Popek's archives.



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