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The politics of the memorialization of the Holocaust in Poland: reflections on the current misuses of the history of rescue

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After the fall of communism, commencing in the region in 1989, the reconstruction and dissemination of histories of difficult pasts, in Poland and other post-communist countries, have proved to be a challenging process filled with silenced accounts, half-truths, denial, and pure lies in narrations.¹ In the case of the history of the Holocaust, the process of uncovering the dark and difficult aspects of the attitudes and behaviour of non-Jewish neighbours has been particularly unwelcome from the point of view of local right-wing ethno-nationalist political and cultural elites. They have consistently viewed it as primarily a foreign, Western-made assault on the good name and honour of their respective nations.²

In the introduction to *Bringing the Dark Past to Light: The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe* (2013), my colleague and co-editor John-Paul Himka and I emphasize that the multitude of approaches towards Jews and the Holocaust in post-communist countries suggests that troubling cultural heritage and historical traditions exert enduring power over national identity, memory, and professional history, and that therefore the past cannot be easily reshaped and rewritten to encompass

1 There is a huge and still growing literature on memory practices and memory politics in the post-communist region: see e.g. a comparative study of patterns of memory politics in 17 such countries in Jan Kubik and Michael Bernhard, eds., *Twenty Years after Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Ninna Mörner, ed., *Constructions and Instrumentalization of the Past: A Comparative Study on Memory Management in the Region*, CBEES State of the Region Report 2020 (Stockholm: Centre for Baltic and East European Studies/Elanders, 2021).

2 On the problem of whitewashing the Holocaust in post-communist Europe after 2015, see Jelena Subotić, *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019); Robert Rozett, “Distorting the Holocaust and whitewashing History: Toward a Typology”, *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 13, no. 1 (2019): 23–36; Joanna Beata Michlic, “The Return of the Image of the Jew as Poland’s Threatening Other: Polish National Identity and Antisemitism in the Third Decade after the End of Communism in 1989”, in *Research Handbook on Nationalism*, ed. Liah Greenfeld and Zeying Wu (Oxford: Elgar Edward of Oxford, 2020), 406–27.

the shameful and troubling memories.³ But our book also focuses on new developments in the memorialization of the Holocaust between 1989 and 2010, rooted in the then seemingly swift and steady arrival in the region of Western liberal democracy, with its concepts of addressing the unpleasant side of a nation's history and issuing public apologies for one's nation's historical wrongdoings.

From our vantage point today, that historical moment between 1989 and 2010 was innovative, vibrant, and encouraging in terms of the discovery of the history of the Holocaust, especially the histories of one's nation's dark aspects around local Jewish communities before, during, and after the Nazi German occupation. This was also a pivotal historical moment for the vital exploration of new directions in the writing of social histories of the Second World War. The crystallization and development of the critical field of Holocaust studies within the region was triggered by a broader intellectual conversation with, and endorsement of, Western scholarship about the history of the Holocaust and European Jews. Of great importance in this process was the discovery of Jewish survivors' testimonies and the acceptance of survivors' so-called ego documents in the reconstruction of crucial everyday human interactions and relations under genocidal conditions, which otherwise would be unknown to historians and lost to humanity.⁴

Weaponization of history after 2010

Today, in the post-2010 reality, with the advent of illiberal authoritarian democracies and the resurgence of exclusivist ethno-nationalistic traditions to varying degrees in the region, history, especially the history of the Second World War, has become "precious gold" over which intense and sinister political and ideological battles are being constantly fought in national and international arenas. Today, we see how hegemonic traditions about national martyrdom and heroism have been repackaged, reshaped, and re-applied by right-wing, conservative, and ethno-nationalistic political and cultural elites to defend the good name of their respective nations. This is particularly visible in contemporary Hungary

3 John-Paul Himka and Joanna Beata Michlic, eds., *Bringing the Dark Past to Light: The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 2013), "Introduction", 1–24.

4 On the latter point see Omer Bartov, "Wartime Lies and Other Testimonies: Jewish-Christian Relations in Buczacz, 1939–1944", *East European Politics and Societies: and Cultures* 25, no. 3 (2011): 486–511.

and Poland, wherein respective illiberal, conservative, and ethno-nationalist elites have established firm governmental rules that aim to create a solid long-standing future – a populist authoritarian democracy that would not permit any political or cultural changes, debate, or diversity of remembrance practices.⁵ Of course, a rejection of debate is in the nature of all ethnic collectivist nationalisms, not only in countries of the post-communist region: a case in point is the contemporary Turkish state behaving the same way towards its most difficult past, namely the history and memorialization of the Armenian genocide.

As a result, in Hungary and Poland, skewed historical narratives, often tinted with various antisemitic tropes and antisemitic interpretations, have become an official source of historical “knowledge” about the Holocaust and society during the Second World War. The official instrumentalization of the Holocaust also involves feeding on and manipulating Western-born Holocaust memorialization practices that arrived in the post-communist region in the late 1990s. They are being skilfully adapted to memorialize well-known and less-known wartime national and local heroes who committed atrocities against local Jews and other minorities during the war and immediately afterwards. New songs and new commemorations are created, and new monuments are erected for such “heroes”. In addition, troubling global developments such as the culture of post-truth and “alternative knowledge”, and the rise of global extremism on both the left and right, has influenced memory politics and the memorialization culture of the war and the Holocaust in the post-communist region.

At present, in Poland, one of the chief goals of the hardcore historical policy of the Law and Justice Party government is to eradicate both the school of critical history of Polish–Jewish relations during the Holocaust and the entire dark history in Polish–Jewish relations that that school has been interrogating and disseminating in various publications since

5 On ethnic collectivist nationalism and its nature, see Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: A Short History* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2019), 85–90. Some scholars also refer to the current rise of collective ethno-nationalism in Poland and Hungary as a populist, illiberal, authoritarian democracy, e.g. Weronika Grzebalska and Andrea Pető, “The Gendered Modus Operandi of the Illiberal Transformation in Hungary and Poland”, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 68 (2018): 164–72; also as “national populism”, e.g. Rogers Brubaker, “Between Nationalism and Civilizationism: The European Populist Moment in Comparative Perspective”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40, no. 8 (2017): 1191–226; Holly Case, “Now who’s living in truth?” *Eurozine* (13 June 2017), <https://www.eurozine.com/now-whos-living-in-truth/> (accessed 15 September 2019).

the early 2000s.⁶ The repressive erasure of the critical history field of Holocaust studies is conducted in manifold ways: firstly by applying legal measures; secondly by denying funding to academic institutions and individual scholars carrying out research into the dark national past; thirdly by orchestrating a wide “against-campaign” targeting academics interrogating a difficult past in the mass and social media in the country and abroad; and fourthly by creating a parallel world of experts, educators, and academic institutions of higher education both in the country and abroad. The last three measures seem to be the most successful strategies of historical policy.

Yet, I believe that all those intellectually and morally troubling developments that seem to triumph in Law and Justice-ruled Poland today might not prove to be as potent in the future because of the nature and weight of primary sources hosted in various historical archives in Poland and abroad. Archives of the Second World War and the Holocaust would have to be assaulted and their content arrested, heavily censored, falsified, and/or destroyed for the imposed ethno-national history vision to triumph permanently. After all, individual, local, national, and transnational historical accounts hosted by those archives are much more complex and nuanced than the authoritarian, ethno-nationalist biased, and narrow version of monumental national history that has been imposed in the official public sphere since 2015. Critical readers can easily identify many glaring inconsistencies and incongruent narratives tinted with covert and overt anti-Jewish and other anti-minority tropes in that version of history. However, the impact of the monumental ethno-national version of history, understood as the only “just” version of the national past, cannot be underestimated as it is dangerous for present and future historical education and public awareness, as well as for democracy and civil society. Both uneducated and educated members of society of all ages can be susceptible to the narratives of glory and martyrdom, and to antisemitic narratives portraying Jews as the chief culprit “aiming to harm Poland and Poles” once again, by allegedly being behind all the recent forces defined as anti-Polish, including the LGBT community.

I contend, however, that under the weight of individual, complex accounts of both Polish non-Jewish eyewitnesses and Polish Jewish survivors, the power of monumental, ethno-national history could

6 On the critical school of history writing on the Holocaust in Poland, see e.g. Joanna B. Michlic, “‘At the Cross-Roads’: Jedwabne and the Polish Historiography of the Holocaust”, *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust*, 31, no. 3 (2017): 296–301; special Hebrew ed. of *Dapim*, 2018.

in time weaken, as it contains too many biases and obviously naive and false narratives that can easily be questioned and exposed. In my various publications on Jewish child survivors, I argued that by critically examining children's early and late postwar testimonies, we historians can gain much new insight into the complex topics of rescue, survival, self-help, and everyday relations with adults, both Jewish and non-Jewish Poles, under the Nazi German occupation of the country.⁷

In this paper, I shall concentrate on one aspect, namely the ways in which children's voices complicate and oppose the official narratives of a highly emotional and timely subject – the rescue of Jews in German-occupied Poland. This historical field is subjected to extensive and sinister manipulations within Law and Justice's historical policy, and in fact stands at the centre of historical policy concerning the Holocaust of Polish Jews and the reactions of non-Jewish Poles to the extermination of Polish Jewish co-citizens. Before I engage with the children's voices, I want to discuss briefly new approaches towards the history of rescue of Jews in the historiography of the Holocaust.

New approaches to the history of rescue in Holocaust historiography

Scholars recognize the recent “rescue turn” or “the resistance turn” and its importance for revisiting, reinterpreting, and questioning the older established approaches towards and definitions of rescuers of Jews as Righteous Gentiles and moral heroes without blemishes.⁸ Scholars such as Mark Roseman, one of the chief historians representing the “rescue turn”, show that the old schemas of thinking about rescuers provide a somewhat narrow historical picture of rescue, unable to apprehend different profiles of rescuers.⁹ In painting the history of rescue of Jews in Germany, Roseman convincingly demonstrates that some of the rescuers do not fit into traditional categories of Righteous Gentiles that Yad Vashem introduced in the 1960s, and that the realities and challenges of daily life for those who opposed the Nazi regime were full of compromises

7 See e.g. Joanna Beata Michlic, “Jewish Children in Nazi-Occupied Poland: Survival and Polish–Jewish Relations during the Holocaust as reflected in Early Postwar Recollections”, *Search and Research: Lectures and Papers 14* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2008), 1–92.

8 Jacques Semelin, Claire Andrieu, and Sarah Gensburger, eds., *Resisting Genocide: The Multiple Forms of Rescue*, trans. Emma Bentley and Cynthia Schoch (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

9 Mark Roseman, *Lives Reclaimed: A Story of Rescue and Resistance in Nazi Germany* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2019).

and often not easy decisions. In his important, controversial study (of 2019) on the rescue of Jews and resistance in France, the French political scientist Jacques Semelin stresses the importance of analysing the nature and dynamics of rescue in everyday settings – “the little gestures of help”, the political parameters, and everyday social interactions between rescuers and their Jewish charges.¹⁰ In a microhistory of Buczacz (of 2018), Omer Bartov deconstructs the old schemas of thinking about rescuers by introducing the concept of “ambivalence of goodness”.¹¹ In my own work on rescuers of Jews in Poland, I have discussed (in 2017) the “grey zone of rescue” and emphasize the importance of outlining the full spectrum of rescue, ranging from “altruistic/selfless rescuers”, “decent rescuers for profit”, “rescuers for profit only”, to the categories of rescuer-abusers who mentally, physically, or sexually tormented their Jewish charges, as well as rescuer-perpetrators who in time transformed into denunciators and killers of their Jewish charges.¹²

Another important historical development investigated in the current scholarship on rescue by all these scholars is the history of self-help among Jews and Jewish resistance, and the agency of Jewish fugitives during the Holocaust.¹³ This, in turn, leads to the re-evaluation of the concept of solely non-Jewish rescue of Jews by showing that, in cooperation with non-Jews, Jewish fugitives often played a key role in their own survival and that of other Jews.

Overall, the new historical scholarship on rescue complicates the old schemas of thinking about rescuers by shifting focus onto how different social, cultural, and geographical environments influenced rescue, and onto the pivotal role of the agency of Jewish fugitives. As a result, more complex narratives of rescue and rescuers have been interwoven into Holocaust history writing, and new important questions have been asked about how one remained a decent human being, without losing one’s

10 Jacques Semelin, *The Survival of the Jews in France*, trans. Cynthia Schoch and Natasha Lehrer (New York: Oxford University Press, and London: Hurst, 2018).

11 Omer Bartov, *Anatomy of a Genocide: The Life and Death of a Town called Buczacz* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2018), 374.

12 Joanna Beata Michlic, “What Does a Child Remember? Recollections of the War and the Early Postwar Period among Child Survivors from Poland”, in *Jewish Families in Europe, 1939–Present: History, Representation, and Memory*, ed. Joanna Beata Michlic (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press/University Press of New England, 2017), 153–72.

13 For the first major collection of essays on a variety of Jewish self-help during the Holocaust, see Patrick Henry, ed., *Jewish Resistance to the Nazis* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014).

humanity in Nazi-occupied Europe, when others in society succumbed to antisemitism, and happily accepted the outcomes of the extermination of Jews. Another more general question that springs from the history of rescue of Jews during the Holocaust is how individuals mobilize at the grassroots level to aid persecuted people.

Finally, another set of major topical questions that has sprung from recent rescue scholarship ponders the place of the subject within the general history of the Holocaust, since the rescue of Jews was historically a crucial and yet a marginal phenomenon. Various historical studies since 2010 confirm that only between five and ten per cent of Jews who survived in Germany, its occupied territories, and collaborationist states received active assistance from non-Jews and non-Jewish organizations during the Holocaust.¹⁴ This data prompted Alvin Rosenfeld, a doyen of Holocaust and antisemitism studies, to ask questions about how central or peripheral the “moral heroes” of the Holocaust were to the larger history of the Holocaust.¹⁵ Thus another immediate question that comes to mind is about how much space the rescue of Jews should be allocated in global and respective national historical education about the Holocaust: should it be central to Holocaust education, since protecting Jews from persecution and physical annihilation by the Germans and their local collaborators constituted the exception to the rule?

The history of rescue of Jews in contemporary Poland

In Poland, over the last two decades, the subject of the rescue of Polish Jews by Polish society in the Second World War seems to have been almost entirely hijacked by the right-wing conservative political and cultural elites, who constantly use biased and outdated schemas of thinking about the rescue of Jews, chiefly as a strategy to build soothing and “all feel good” narratives about the national past. Thus, they constantly insist on maintaining the ahistorical narrative that “most Poles assisted Polish Jews during the Holocaust” and that Polish society that no doubt suffered greatly under the two totalitarian regimes during the Second World War has in its wartime past “nothing to be ashamed of”. However, one can also notice since the early 2000s the emergence of some more complex

14 Peter Hayes, ed., *How Was It Possible? A Holocaust Reader* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), “Introduction”, 25.

15 Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *The End of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2011), 81.

histories and memories of rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust, and new sophisticated educational programmes on rescue taught in the Brama Grodzka in Lublin, the Polin Museum in Warsaw, and Galicia Jewish Museum in Kraków. The Polish branch of the Association of Child Holocaust Survivors has also been instrumental in raising more nuanced public awareness about Polish rescuers of Jews and in assisting rescuers living in Poland.

Since 2015, the architects and faithful executors and disseminators of Law and Justice's historical policy have weaponized the history of rescuers of Polish Jews in their war for the supposedly "only right and just" historical version of Polish society during the Second World War. The opening by President Andrzej Duda on 17 March 2016 of a new museum, devoted to the memory of the no doubt remarkable Ulm family in Markowa, in southern Poland,¹⁶ and the creation of an annual institutionalized National Day of Remembrance of Polish Rescuers of Jews, established on 24 March 2018, on the initiative of President Duda, are two pivotal examples of the ways in which the history of Polish rescuers is currently being weaponized in memory politics and presented in a skewed form, devoid of nuance and without regard to wartime and postwar complexities and contexts.¹⁷ This is achieved by a skilful exploitation and manipulation of the accounts of individual rescuers and network rescue activities, as well as of Jewish survivors' accounts. The continuous highlighting of the fact that more Poles than any other nationality have been awarded the Medal of Righteous among the Nations by Yad Vashem also serves as one of the chief arguments used by those seeking to "defend the good name and honour of Poland" and to erase any public discussion about the dark past.

The historical studies and exhibitions produced by the current Institute of National Memory – which has, since 2015, become the guardian of solely monumental ethno-national history writing of heroism and bravery, and its offshoot younger organization, the Witold Pilecki Institute, opened in 2017, ignore histories of the ways in which home-made prewar

¹⁶ Andrzej Duda, "Wystąpienie na uroczystości otwarcia Muzeum Polaków Ratujących Żydów im. Rodziny Ulmów w Markowej", 17 March 2016, <http://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wypowiedzi-prezydenta-rp/wystapienia/art,33,wystapienie-na-uroczystosci-otwarcia-muzeum-polakow-ratujacych-zydow-im-rodziny-ulmow-w-markowej-.html> (accessed 7 June 2017).

¹⁷ See <https://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wydarzenia/art,931,narodowy-dzien-pamieci-polakow-ratujacych-zydow-pod-okupacja-niemiecka-pleng.html> (accessed 13 October 2020).

antisemitism, and fear of one's neighbours, colleagues, and even family members in Polish society influenced the scale and nature of the rescue of Polish Jews.

This current weaponization of the history of rescuers of Polish Jews constitutes an ideological abuse of that history, and could be harmful to both future commemorations and to the study of the history of rescue in particular, and the history of the Holocaust and the Second World War in general. It often also constitutes an insult to the deceased and living genuine Polish non-Jewish rescuers because the executors of the historical policy do not hesitate to manipulate individual ageing rescuers to fulfil current political goals in both Poland and abroad. For example, in the official annual delegations to Israel in 2018 and 2019, the representatives of Polish Righteous among the Gentiles were accompanied by Professor the Reverend Waldemar Chrostowski, known for antisemitic utterances for which he had earlier been expelled from the Christian Jewish Council in Poland. On 27 October 2016, in his keynote lecture at the International Congress dedicated to the Polish Righteous among the Nations and the grand pages of Polish history, Chrostowski had also claimed that "the Holocaust was organized in Poland in order to destroy the good name of Poland".¹⁸

As a result of the weaponization of the history of rescue, an immense variety of hagiographic representations of Polish rescuers proliferate today in the government-controlled and -supported mass media, official commemorations, and memorialization sites that have been mushrooming since 2015. Among the last, I will discuss only one here – the first major hagiographic memorialization site to the Polish rescuers of Jews, the Chapel of Memory of Rescuers at the Sanctuary NMP Gwiazdy Nowej Ewangelii i św. Jana Pawła II (Temple of Our Lady the Star of New Evangelization and St. John Paul II), set up in the bastion of the "Old Church" of Father Tadeusz Rydzyk in Toruń. Father Rydzyk is known as a chief advocate and forceful disseminator of the most extreme ethno-nationalist version of Polish Catholicism filled with anti-Jewish traditions of both the modern and premodern kind.

From its inception in October 2016, the Chapel aims to create an archive documenting the great deeds of Polish rescuers who had not necessarily been acknowledged by Yad Vashem. During the opening of the Chapel on

18 Waldemar Chrostowski, keynote speech, *Kongres w WSKSiM-pomoc Polaków w ratowaniu Żydów*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=76_w96hEW9g (accessed 3 March 2017).

27 October, 1,059 names of Righteous Gentiles were collected and listed on the Chapel's walls. In August 2020, Father Rydzyk and the foundation Lux Veritatis created an interconnected hagiographical memorialization site to Polish rescuers, the National Park of Memory, with the leading slogan "They did the right thing". The Park of Memory, which can be seen as a follow-up to the Chapel, has even more ambitious and more spectacular goals than the former because it views Poles at the centre of commemoration both as heroes helping others and as victims of others' persecution, including the infamous Volhyn massacre of 1943.

At the opening of the Park, on 8 August, a special commemorative site was unveiled to 2,345 Polish nuns and priests who were "helping Jewish brothers". But the central aspect of the Park constitutes a display of 300 striking-looking columns commemorating Poles helping Jews during the German-occupation of Poland. A hundred of the columns were ready for public viewing with the names of 18,457 Poles inscribed on them at the time of the opening, but the aim of the creators of the Park of Memory is to commemorate 40,000 Poles who rescued Jews. Not only do the creators of this site not verify their figure of 40,000 Polish rescuers of Jews against the data of approximately 7,000 non-Jewish Polish rescuers commemorated by Yad Vashem, the chief Israeli memorialization site of non-Jewish European rescuers, but they also ignore the more uncomfortable studies about rescue of Jews conducted within the Instytut Pamięci Narodowej (IPN; Institute of National Remembrance). The IPN research project, which began in 2006, about the Poles persecuted for helping Jews, *Represje za pomoc Żydom na okupowanych ziemiach polskich w czasie II wojny światowej* (Index of Poles Persecuted for helping Jews), was partially completed in 2019. Based on extensive and detailed research of 654 cases out of 6,000 in the database of this project, the historians Martyna Grądzka-Rejak and Aleksandra Namysło contended that 341 Poles lost their lives because of their actions rescuing Jews.¹⁹

The lack of verification of the number of rescues is only one major problem, however, within the hagiographical literature about Polish rescuers. What is also missing in this genre is crucial discussion of what might be called the "grey zone of rescue". The hagiography neglects and omits a historical analysis of rescuer-abusers and rescuer-perpetrators

19 Martyna Grądzka-Rejak and Aleksandra Namysło, eds., *Represje za pomoc Żydom na okupowanych ziemiach polskich w czasie II wojny światowej* (Warsaw: IPN, 2019), <https://ipn.gov.pl/pl/publikacje/ksiazki/84294,Represje-za-pomoc-Zydom-na-okupowanych-ziemiach-polskich-w-czasie-II-wojny-swiat.html> (accessed 20 October 2021).

on the one hand and, on the other, the investigation of the stigmatization and denunciation of selfless rescuers by their Polish compatriots and the postwar hostility to selfless Polish rescuers and their families by members of Polish society. What is also missing is the important theme of the long-term postwar silence in rescuers' families about the wartime deeds of their relatives, and the suppression of that knowledge in local communities or within the rescuers' families. This topic needs to be properly investigated in the broader context of prewar prejudices, individual jealousy, anti-semitism, and the stigmatization of rescuers as "traitors to the Polish nation".²⁰

Child survivors' testimonies: challenging false histories of rescue

At present, we do not yet have a detailed chart of rescue or a comprehensive typology of rescuers in Nazi German-occupied Poland.²¹ Nevertheless, an analysis of Jewish child survivors' early postwar testimonies throws new light onto the two opposing categories of rescuers – the rescuer-perpetrators and selfless rescuers. They illuminate the everyday dynamics of rescue, shifts between help and rescue, and the emotional landscape of rescue encompassing moments of frustration, hesitation, and difficult decisions. They provide clues about different grades of complicity on the part of local communities who disrupted and opposed the rescue acts of selfless rescuers. Not only do the testimonies enrich rescue history writing, but they also add depth to and complicate and challenge popular and skewed narratives of rescue. I would like to illustrate the power of child survivors' voices in opposing the skewed history of rescue by using four examples.

20 See e.g. Joanna Beata Michlic, "The Stigmatization of Dedicated Polish Women Rescuers during the Second World War and its Aftermath", *East European Memory Studies*, 13 (2013): 1–6; Michlic, "Gender Perspectives on the Rescue of Jews in Poland: Preliminary Observations" *Polin*, 30 (2018): 407–27.

21 See e.g. Jan Grabowski, *Judenjagd: Polowanie na Żydów 1942–1945. Studium dziejów pewnego powiatu* (Warsaw: Polish Center for Holocaust Research, 2011), trans. Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013); Barbara Engelking, *Jest Taki Piękny Słoneczny Dzień . . . Losy Żydów szukających ratunku na wsi polskiej 1942–1945* (Warsaw: Polish Center for Holocaust Research, 2011). Specifically on the mistreatment of children, see Olga Orzeł, ed., *Dzieci żydowskie w czasach Zagłady. Wczesne świadectwa 1944–1948: Relacje dziecięce ze zbiorów Centralnej Żydowskiej Komisji Historycznej* (Warsaw: ŻIH, 2014), "Introduction", 7–46; many of the 55 early postwar Jewish children's testimonies in this important publication speak directly about mistreatment and abuse.

Accounts of rescuer-abusers and rescuer-perpetrators

A history of the brutal mistreatment of Jewish child fugitives by those who were supposed to rescue and care for them has not yet been written. The picture that emerges from the children's early postwar testimonies reveals a disturbing, strange intimacy and cruelty in the realm of the home of what I call a rescuer-abuser. What should have been a safe shelter was often, for the hidden children, a space of daily suffering, isolation, and loneliness. The reasons behind abuse could be multiple, ranging from pure individual cruelty mixed with anti-Jewish prejudice, the knowledge of Nazi persecution of Jews and the calculating understanding that Jews were simply disposable in the eyes of the German occupier, and that one could benefit from the helpless young fugitives by inheriting the properties of the children's dead parents.

In their early postwar testimonies, children were capable of expressing what they felt and what they thought in the face of everyday doses of emotional and physical cruelty. Recollections of threats of denunciation by cruel and simple-minded rescuer-abusers, children's crying and begging them to spare their lives for one more day provide a brutal and disturbing picture of rescue that looks much more like a grey zone in which human greed, lack of compassion and respect for a young life, and pure exploitation of the young are central to the dynamic of the relationships between Jewish children and their rescuer-abusers.

On 3 September 1947, in a Jewish children's home in Bytom located at 23 B. Prusa Street, Gizela Szulberg recollects matter of factly the ways her rescuers mistreated her on a daily basis. She was born on 23 September 1934 into a well-to-do middle-class Jewish family, and her father was an engineer and co-owner of a glass factory in Dubeczno, near Włodawa, in Lublin voivodeship:

My host had two sons-in-law, terrible anti-Semites, and they constantly said, "We have to kill this Jew or give her back to the ghetto." This is how they talked about me. The wife of the rescuer ordered me to pray to my Jewish God for help. I sat in the room next door and heard everything. The farmer used to say: "I will not kill her; I do not want to have blood on my hands." His wife used to say in response: "You wish to kill me, you do not have mercy over your own children." Our gardener [the brother of Mr. Wajdzik, the host] took lots of money from my parents but did not share the sum with his brother. He would advise him to kill me, and that would be the end of the story . . . Later, I learnt what happened with my parents.

They were in hiding, but at some point, they did not have any funds because a woman [not clear who] did not want to return their belongings to them. They wanted to visit me but were caught by the Germans and were killed and buried in a ditch. After we received this news, the farmer decided to keep me after all, but demanded that I bequeath my parents' estate to him. Every day they would talk only about the estate, nothing else. I wanted to be treated well, so I had promised them that I would bequeath them the estate. In spite of my promise, once they threw me out of the house. I sat near the barn because I had nowhere to go. They found me there later and allowed me to return inside the house.

I was so drained that I did not care any longer what they would do with me. When the spring came, I was looking after the cows in the fields and was happier, because I did not need to be in the wardrobe in a bent position. Until today, my posture is still a little bit bent [as a result of living in the wardrobe]. . . . They caused me so much pain. They hated me because I was a Jewess. They treated me as if I was a Cinderella, and nothing else. I would wake up with the sunrise and would go to fields with the cattle. I had eighteen cattle including the sheep under my care. My legs were so full of cuts and blisters, they looked horrible.²²

A similar case of survival in the house of a rescuer-abuser is poignantly articulated by Chana Grynberg (or Grinberg). Chana was born in Głowaczew, a small village in the Radom district. She was born on 15 January 1932. In 1942, the entire Jewish population of Głowaczew was transferred to the nearby town of Koziernice (Kozhnitz in Yiddish), which was a thriving centre of Hasidism in central Poland during the nineteenth century.²³ Chana's parents and her youngest sibling soon died of hunger in the ghetto and Chana had to fend for herself.²⁴ After the liquidation of the Koziernice ghetto on 27 September 1942 Chana roamed from village to village and begged for food and a place to stay. One Polish woman,

22 Testimony of Gizela Szulberg, 1947, signed by the interviewer, Ida Gliksztejn, CKŻP (Central Committee of Polish Jews), file no. 301/2731, pp. 1–2, Archives of ŻIH (Jewish Historical Institute), Warsaw.

23 See Baruch Kaplinski, ed., *Sefer Zikharon le-Kehilat Kozhnitz* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv and New York: Koziernice Organization, 1969; English ed. 1983); on the Koziernice ghetto, see also Anna Skibińska, "Życie codzienne Żydów w Koziernicach", *Zagłada: Studia i materiały*, 3 (2007): 64–86. For the number of deportees and dates of deportation from Koziernice and other locations in that vicinity, see Yitzhak Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka: The Operation Reinhard Death Camps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 392–5; Hebrew ed. *Mitsva Reinhard: Belzets, Sobibor, Treblinkah* (Tel Aviv: Am'Oved, 1988).

24 In the close and cramped Koziernice ghetto, people began to die *en masse* from hunger in the summer of 1942; Skibińska, "Życie codzienne Żydów w Koziernicach", 76–82.

with whom she could stay only a few days, was a crucial helper, advising her in which direction to go and how to present herself convincingly as a Polish girl whose parents had been killed by the Germans. In the village of Trzebień, Chana came across Mrs. Józia B., a farmer and head of the family, who accepted her without requiring a birth certificate. Chana stayed with her family for a few months and was well looked after and well treated as a help on the farm, so she considered it a safe refuge. However, at one point in the winter, from fear of being thrown out of the house and having to roam once again without stable shelter, Chana was forced to disclose to her new employer-benefactor that she was Jewish. The neighbours of the farmer had suspected the girl was Jewish and had insisted that Mrs. Józia check her identity. After the disclosure, the woman did not throw Chana out – she needed her on the farm – but became a rough mental abuser driven by anti-Jewish prejudices:

I felt so good at this place. However, one day she called me and told me that people were saying that I was Jewish. In order to check if I was Jewish she ordered me to bring my birth certificate. This was a very hard decision to make, but I decided to admit to her that I was Jewish because I could not face wandering around again. The woman did not throw me out, because no one else could cope with her, but after the disclosure of my Jewishness, she was awful to me. She did not give me much to eat. In the winter she would not give me much bread to eat, arguing that I had not earned it. She often shouted at me and beat me up. I had enough of this treatment and wanted to leave, but she did not let me, threatening that she would denounce me to the Germans. I was so bullied that I almost gave up on living: when terrible bombing began, I did not go to the air-raid shelters, but stayed with the cows in the fields.²⁵

Selfless rescuers and their predicaments in their communities

Of course, Jewish child survivors' testimonies also illuminate everyday acts of kindness and goodness bestowed on them by daring, selfless non-Jewish rescuers under life-threatening conditions in Nazi-occupied Poland.

“Szlamo” (Szlama, Szlomo) Kutnowski, born in 1929 in Warsaw, worked for a farmer who underwent a transformation from being a caring

25 Chana Grynberg (Grinberg), “Wspomnienia Chany Grynberg” (Memoirs of Chana Grynberg), in Franciszka Oliwa, ed., “Księga Wspomnień”, file no. 302/289, pp. 87–8, Archives of ŻIH.

employer to knowingly being the caring, long-term rescuer of a Jewish boy. In his undated early postwar memoirs written in the Jewish Children's Home in Lublin, Szlama recounts his rescuer-farmer's transformation. After his escape from the Warsaw ghetto in 1942, Szlama found work at the farm of Aleksander Ciemerych in the small village of Zambski Kościelne (Zambski Stare), in the Pułtusk district:

I had to work hard at his place, but I had enough to eat. He was very good to me when he did not yet know that I was Jewish, and was still sending me to take Holy Communion in church. Yet, when he realized that I was Jewish he was still good to me. . . . People tried to persuade Ciemerych to get rid of me, but he told them that his conscience did not permit him to get rid of me in such a cold winter and to leave me without a roof above my head.²⁶

Szlamo Kutnowski's plain and bold testimony not only throws light on his relations with Ciemerych but also provides important clues about the relations between Ciemerych and other villagers – the social pressure and instances of blackmail and threats he had to oppose and withstand to save the Jewish boy. Kutnowski was well aware of the daily battles Ciemerych had to fight with his neighbours. Therefore, he worried about the safety and wellbeing of his rescuer after the end of the war, when he had already made his way to a Displaced Persons camp in Germany. In February 1948, from Mainz in Germany, Kutnowski wrote in desperation to the Central Committee of Polish Jews (CKŻP) in Warsaw for news of Ciemerych. No doubt, he was by then greatly concerned about Ciemerych's wellbeing since he had not received any response from him to his earlier correspondence:

This man did so much good for me. Now after the war I wrote to him, but I did not get a reply. Germans arrested him and I do not know if he has already returned home or not. They know me as Jan Hodkowski there. I ask the Committee to find out what is now happening with Ciemerych, if he still lives at his [old address] and if not so perhaps his wife Helena Ciemerych [might know something]. As soon as you get any news please do write to me promptly.²⁷

26 The memoir of Szlama Kutnowski, file no. M-49/273-279, p. 7, Yad Vashem Archives, Jerusalem.

27 *Ibid.*, 38.

The strength and longevity of the bond between the child survivors and selfless rescuers are expressed frequently in postwar children's testimonies. In the six-page testimony written on the eve of her departure to Israel in the summer of 1955, Irena Grundland, née Morgensztern, born on 30 September 1933 in Warsaw, calls her compassionate and trustworthy rescuer "aunt": this was Mrs. Wisia from the small village of Boryczówka, in the Tremblowa district near Tarnopol. The letter also reveals that Irena and Aunt Wisia performed like two "actresses" before their Polish audience: Irena played a Christian Polish girl and Aunt Wisia supported her in a variety of ways in her special performance to escape death:

The cousin of Mr. Pietruszka I want to call Aunt Wisia. She is a wonderful human being and I lived with her until 1946. I grazed cows and geese during my stay at her place. She knew that I was Jewish, but never touched upon that topic with me. She was as good to me as if she had been my mother. Aunt Wisia was a teacher. She lived on her own. Her parents were deported to Siberia [by the Soviets] and her brother was captured and imprisoned by the Germans. We were a good team, and we still write letters to each other.²⁸

Child survivors' testimonies are often corroborated by the early postwar testimonies of genuinely selfless Polish rescuers. Attempts to persuade the rescuers to get rid of and thus abandon the young Jewish fugitives are recounted by many of these rescuers. In her undated early postwar testimony, Klementyna Darczuk, born on 17 February 1883, recalls that her neighbour in Otwock complained many times about her sheltering two Jewish children, Michał and Basia Cytryn. The neighbour also threatened Mrs. Darczuk with denunciation to the police. Darczuk's assertive, sharp, and cunning response pre-empted the neighbour's desire to betray her and the two young fugitives:

The girl did not look like a Jewess, only the boy, when he took off his hat in the church, began to look like a Jew, but he eagerly prayed. A few times he experienced some problems. My neighbour Włodarczykowa also constantly complained to me that I was sheltering Jews (but of course, I do not wish to cause her any harm now. God should be her judge. She had a rotten character in the past and today she is mean too). Once, when she saw the children, she abused me and threatened me for two hours that she would denounce me to the Germans. But I replied, yes, go

28 The testimony of Irena Grundland (Morgensztern), 1955, CKŻP, file No. 301/5543, p. 5, Archives of ŻIH.

ahead, you rogue! If you denounce me, I then too will denounce you to the Germans. I will tell them that you sell butter on the black market and make commercial deals with Jews.²⁹

Conclusions

The accounts of rescue in the postwar testimonies of Polish Jewish child survivors, Polish selfless rescuers, and other non-Jewish eyewitnesses enable historians to paint a complex and nuanced history of rescue that challenges the old, false schemas of historical thinking about rescuers, and to question the ahistorical representation of a “good saviour nation” of Polish Jews. Those testimonies are a potent weapon against the post-2015 ideologization and politicization of the history of rescue. The testimonies expose the false narratives and both naive and sinister lies in hagiographical writings, representations, and commemorations about the wartime rescue of Polish Jews. They are the evidence that the weaponization of the history of the Holocaust and rescue has its limits, despite its current triumphs.

29 Two-page testimony of Mrs. Klementyna Darczuk to Henryk Wasser, interviewer, n.d., Record Group 104/File 204, Seria I, 1, YIVO (Institute for Jewish Research), New York; under the testimony Wasser wrote a poignant note: “My observation: a good face, trustworthy eyes, she knows how to read and write. She is 64-years-old. In spite of her eye problems, she has to continue work as a dressmaker. She does not portray her rescue activities as heroic. She speaks with no touch of false pathos.” Henryk (Hersh) Wasser was the secretary and one of the few remaining key members of the underground archive in the Warsaw ghetto, Oneg Shabbat. On the wartime activities of Wasser in the Warsaw ghetto, see Samuel Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History?* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), 292–9.