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Marta Duch-Dyngosz

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The Meanings of Gratitude in the Narratives of Poles Saving Jews during the Holocaust

Marta Duch-Dyngosz

Institut für Europäische Ethnologie, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany

ABSTRACT

This article explores the ways in which oral testimonies of Jewish survivors allow a critical reflection on the understanding of gratitude as a social emotion in the context of hiding under German occupation in Poland. Examined alongside oral interviews with non-Jewish rescuers and helpers, these testimonies unveil the social hierarchy between the non-Jewish majority and the Jewish minority. Consequently, the article scrutinizes the topoi of 'an ungrateful Jew' within the context of the Polish public sphere which excludes Jewish narratives, experiences, and memories. Based on oral history interviews and in-depth individual interviews with Jewish survivors, rescuers, and helpers, their descendants, as well as residents of two Polish towns in the Lublin area, Biłgoraj and Izbica, the article presents two case studies of rescue and survival. The analysis investigates the narratives, cultural norms involved, and the underlying power dynamics between rescuers or helpers and Jewish individuals.

KEYWORDS

Gratitude; hiding; the Righteous Among the Nations; Biłgoraj; Izbica; Lublin area

Introduction

The narrative of 'Poles saving Jews in World War II,' has a long, complex history, and is considered one of the crucial themes in memory politics in Poland.[1] In the aftermath of the Jedwabne debate of 2000–2002, which confronted Polish society with the uncomfortable truth of its past complicity in the Holocaust, the narrative became a main tool for both reinforcing the positive image of the Polish nation and actively forgetting about the negative attitudes among ethnic Poles during the war.[2] The representations of Polish helpers and rescuers as heroic and altruistic individuals who risked their own lives

CONTACT Marta Duch-Dyngosz marta.duch-dyngosz@hu-berlin.de Institut für Europäische Ethnologie, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Anton-Wilhelm-Amo-Str. 41, 10117 Berlin, Germany

[1]Dariusz Libionka, "Polish Literature on Organized and Individual Help to the Jews (1945-2008)," *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 4 (2008): pp. 17–80.

[2]On the Jedwabne massacre of July 10, 1941, when the local Jewish community was murdered by a group of non-Jewish inhabitants, see Jan Tomasz Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). The debate caused a backlash, a strong counterreaction to the ongoing revision of the status quo regarding the memory of World War II and the Holocaust in Poland. For more, see: Piotr Forecki, *Po Jedwabnem. Anatomia pamięci funkcjonalnej* (Warsaw: Instytut Badań Literackich, 2018); Magdalena Nowicka-Franczak, *Niechciana debata. Spór o książki Jana Tomasza Grossa* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Akademickie Sedno, 2017).

and that of their families to help Jews have survived intact. These representations still serve as a symbol of the attitudes of all ethnic Poles during the Holocaust.

Particularly between 2015 and 2023, the ruling right-wing Law and Justice Party institutionalized 'the dominance of the righteous non-Jewish Poles'[3] as the hegemonic narrative about the Shoah. There are numerous examples that illustrate the ascendency of this theme in the politics of history and historiography.[4] In 2016, the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage established the Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valor (*Instytut Solidarności i Męstwa im. Witolda Pileckiego*). Three years later, the Institute initiated the 'Called by Name' educational program, which, according to its website, 'is recovering the stories of Poles who paid with their own lives and the lives of their loved ones for saving Jews during the Holocaust.'[5] In right-wing media, the Institute is often labeled as the 'Polish Yad Vashem,' suggesting that it either complements or competes with the Israeli Holocaust Remembrance Center known for honoring the Righteous Among Nations.[6] Holocaust scholars criticized this initiative mainly because it disregards Jewish victims, and is based on insufficiently documented cases of rescue. The most important institution that emphasizes and disseminates knowledge about ethnic Poles' positive attitudes towards Jews is the Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews in World War II in Markowa, which opened in March 2016. Between 1942 and 1944, Józef and Wiktoria Ulma hid eight Jews from the Goldman, Grünfeld, and Didner families. In the spring of 1944, all of them, including their children, were denounced by a local Blue Police (*Granatowa Policja*) officer.[7] The Germans killed the entire Ulma family as well as all the Jewish fugitives that were hidden on their property. In 1995, Yad Vashem awarded the Ulmas the title of Righteous Among the Nations. The Museum became an effective tool in a long history of political instrumentalization of the 'Righteous' figure, which, by then, had already been a subject of critical scholarly inquiry.[8]

Multiple commemorative initiatives launched in Poland since 2016 have led to public debates about the role of the Righteous and the helpers in the remembrance of the

[3]Agnieszka Haska, "The Righteous are Among Us," *Holocaust Studies and Materials* (2017): pp. 589–95; Justyna Kowalska-Leder, "The Omnipresence of the Righteous," *Holocaust Studies and Materials* (2017): pp. 596–606; Elisabeth Wassermann, "The Polish Discourse about the Righteous among the Nations: Between Commemoration, Education and Justification?" *Politeja* 1, no. 52 (2018): pp. 125–44.

[4]Jörg Hackmann, "Defending the 'Good Name' of the Polish Nation: Politics of History as a Battlefield in Poland, 2015-18," *Journal of Genocide Research* 20, no. 4 (2018): pp. 587–606; Joanna Beata Michlic, "The Politics of the Memorialization of the Holocaust in Poland: Reflections on the Current Misuses of the History of Rescue," *Jewish Historical Studies* 53, no. 11 (March, 2022): pp. 132–68; Sylwia Sadlik, "Reprezentacje postaw i działań Polaków wobec Żydów w czasie Zagłady w narracjach 'polityki historycznej' Prawa i Sprawiedliwości a opinie współczesnych Polaków," PhD diss., Jagiellonian University, Kracow, January 2024; Zofia Wóycicka, "'Serdecznie dziękujemy za przybliżenie nam historii Polaków ratujących Żydów,' Recepcja polskich muzeów 'Sprawiedliwych' w świetle wpisów w księgach gości – Apteka pod Orłem, Willa Żabińskich, Muzeum Ulmów," *Teksty Drugie* (2020): pp. 188–212; Zofia Wóycicka, "Global Patterns, Local Interpretations: New Polish Museums Dedicated to the Rescue of Jews During the Holocaust," *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History* 25 (2019): pp. 248–72.

[5]"Called by Name," Instytut Pileckiego, https://instytutpileckiego.pl/en/zawolani-po-imieniu?setlang=1 (last accessed on May 9, 2025).

[6]The Institute does not mention that some individuals were awarded the title of Righteous. See Justyna Kowalska-Leder, "'Zawołani po imieniu,' czyli Krzywda i Sprawiedliwość," *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 18 (2022): pp. 721–59.

[7]Alicja Podbielska, "Święta Rodzina z Markowej: kult Ulmów i polityka historyczna," *Zagłada Żydów: studia i materiały* 15 (2019): pp. 575–606.

[8]Jan Grabowski and Dariusz Libionka, "Distorting and Rewriting the History of the Holocaust in Poland: The Case of the Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews During World War II in Markowa," *Yad Yashem Studies* 45, no. 1 (2017): pp. 29–60; Piotr Forecki, "Muzeum zgody w Markowej," *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 12 (2016): pp. 243–52.

Holocaust.[9] At the same time, the hegemonic right-wing narrative has taken deep roots in public consciousness.[10] As sociologist Agnieszka Haska notes, the accounts of rescue of Jews in World War II have become histories about Poles, not Jews: '[O]ne does not learn about the histories of those who were in hiding or about their tragedies and dilemmas; the Jews are given permission to speak only when they can testify to the nobility of Poles.'[11]

Nonetheless, rescue and help were crucial for Jewish survival, and are an integral part of the history of the Holocaust. Their significance has been demonstrated in the recent scholarly approaches, known as the 'rescue turn' and the 'resistance turn.'[12] These critical studies consider the traditional category of the Righteous Among the Nations, introduced in the 1960s by Yad Vashem, as too limited and failing to embrace various types of rescuers and helpers. They also examine and demonstrate the complexity of the rescuers' and helpers' actions.[13] For example, cultural historian Joanna Beata Michlic speaks about the concept of the 'grey zone of rescue'[14] that sheds light on a vast array of phenomena, 'ranging from 'altruistic/selfless rescuers,' 'decent rescuers for profit,' and '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.'[15] Importantly, critical studies have also brought to our attention a variety of 'Jewish self-help' instances – accounts of Jewish individuals who played a crucial role in their own survival, as well as that of other Jews.[16] The relationships between rescuers and rescuees, the agency of Jewish individuals, and the violence perpetrated by non-Jewish inhabitants against non-Jewish helpers in postwar Poland all became subjects of research in the 2010s.[17]

Less focus has been given to the ways in which ethnic Poles narrated their experiences of helping Jews in the context of intergroup relationships. Jacek Leociak, a literary

[9]One of the most contentious memorials is the Chapel of Memory of Rescuers at the Sanctuary in Toruń [*Kaplica Pamięci ku Czci Polaków Ratujących Żydów*]. It was initiated by Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, a figure known for his nationalistic and far-right views. See: Michlic, "The Politics of the Memorialization of the Holocaust in Poland," pp. 132–68; Alina Molisak, "Sprawiedliwi w kaplicy," in Katarzyna Chmielewska and Alina Molisak, (eds.), *Pomniki pamięci. Miejsca niepamięci* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2017), pp. 35–54.

[10]In 2020, 82% of respondents agreed with the statement that Poles did everything they could during the war to help Jews. 88% of respondents agreed with the statement that the Polish government should remind other countries about the efforts of Poles in saving Jews (see the representative survey conducted by the research agency Kantar on behalf of Marek Kucia between September 21 and November 25, 2020, using CAPI, CAWI, and CATI). The participants were all 15 years of age or older. See Sadlik, "Reprezentacje postaw i działań Polaków wobec Żydów w czasie Zagłady."

[11]Haska, "The Righteous are Among Us," p. 595.

[12]Michlic, "The Politics of the Memorialization of the Holocaust in Poland," pp. 156–8; Natalia Aleksiun, Zofia Wóycicka, and Raphael Utz (eds.), *The Rescue Turn and the Politics of Holocaust Memory* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2024).

[13]Michlic, "The Politics of the Memorialization of the Holocaust in Poland," pp. 156–8.

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

[15]Michlic, "The Politics of the Memorialization of the Holocaust in Poland," p. 157.

[16]Joanna Beata Michlic, "An Untold Story of Rescue. Jewish Children and Youth in Nazi-Occupied Poland," in Patrick Henry, (ed.), *Jewish Resistance to the Nazis* (Catholic University of America Press, 2014), pp. 300–18.

[17]Natalia Aleksiun, "Social Networks of Support: Trajectories of Escape, Rescue and Survival," in Simone Gigliotti and Hilary Earl, (eds.), *A Companion to the Holocaust* (Wiley Blackwell, 2020), pp. 279–93; Anna Bikont, *Cena* (Wolowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2023); Anna Bikont, *Nigdy nie byłaś Żydówką. Sześć opowieści o dziewczynkach w ukryciu* (Wolowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2023); Barbara Engelking, "Labyrinths and Tangled Paths. The Story of a Righteous One," *Holocaust Studies and Materials* (2017): pp. 84–111; Joanna Beata Michlic, "'I Will Never Forget What You Did For Me during the War': Rescuer – Rescuee Relationships in the Light of Postwar Correspondence in Poland, 1945-1949," *Yad Vashem Studies* 39, no. 2 (2011): pp. 1–39; Joanna Tokarska-Bakir and Avner Greenberg, "The Unrighteous Righteous and the Righteous Unrighteous," *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust* 24, no. 1 (August, 2013): pp. 11–63.

scholar, analyzed mainly written testimonies collected in the years 1945–1967 by the Jewish Historical Institute, through which Polish individuals sought support from Jewish organizations.[18] Leociak highlights three main lines of argumentation found in these requests: (1) a difficult financial situation of a helper; (2) poor health condition; and (3) 'help in exchange for help.'[19] He observes that the testimonies of non-Jewish rescuers and helpers reflect a stereotypical image of Jews.[20] He stresses, with no small dose of irony, that antisemitic views still hold significance: '[I]n many cases hiding Jews […] seems only to confirm pre-existing prejudices. The rescuees' behavior after the war makes these prejudices even stronger.'[21] He paraphrases a common non-Jewish viewpoint, which posits that 'Jews are (by nature) ungrateful, while we are selfless, virtuous, full of dignity and pride […] and yet (or maybe because of this) we are wronged, subjected to unfair treatment, left without help, forgotten, deceived.'[22] If we come to understand how little focus has been placed on the oral narratives of non-Jewish Poles about the Holocaust, where similar views, as reconstructed by Leociak and quoted above, are common, we may view this as part of the conspiracy of silence formed in the late 1940s and early '50s concerning Poles' anti-Jewish attitudes.[23] This article aims to fill this gap in existing research.

The motif of gratitude serves as a window into social hierarchy between the majority of ethnic Poles and the Jewish minority during the war, and the renegotiation of that hierarchy in the aftermath of the Holocaust. According to cultural studies scholar Konrad Matyjaszek, the rhetoric of gratitude/ingratitude is a Polish cultural code, closely associated with the narrative portraying Jews as guests in the country and ethnic Poles as their hosts – a relationship that has been reinforced throughout the long multicultural and multiethnic history of Poland.[24] Matyjaszek insists that this narrative dates back to the Middle Ages, a time when Jews migrated to the Kingdom of Poland to escape anti-Jewish violence in Western Europe. As a distinct religious community, they were positioned as guests within the social structure, a perception that made them a collective of outsiders in the eyes of the rest of medieval Polish society.[25]

Whenever the Jews have demanded equal rights, the gratitude/ingratitude argument has often been used to counter their claims. The asymmetrical relationship between the majority, which holds cultural and economic power, privileges, and controls the apparatus of violence, and the minority, which finds temporary and limited protection by engaging with the majority-controlled resources, can be analyzed through the lens of the 'subtenancy' category.[26] The concept of subtenancy means that a minority group reaffirms the hegemony of the majority by internalizing the image of a subjugated

[18]Additionally in his literary analysis, Leociak took into account testimonies from the USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive (VHA), Jacek Leociak, *Ratowanie. Opowieści Polaków i Żydów* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2010).
[19]Ibid., p. 40.
[20]Ibid., pp. 47–8.
[21]Ibid.
[22]Ibid.
[23]Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, "How to Exit the Conspiracy of Silence? Social Sciences Facing the Polish-Jewish Relations," *East European Politics & Societies* 25, no. 1 (2011): pp. 129–52.
[24]Konrad Matyjaszek, *Produkcja przestrzeni żydowskiej w dawnej i współczesnej Polsce* (Warsaw: Universitas, 2019).
[25]Ibid., p. 59.
[26]The category refers to Hanna Krall's book titled *Sublokatorka* first published in 1985, as well as to the conceptualization of "subtenancy" in the interview with Krall conducted by Joanna Tokarska-Bakir and Elżbieta Janicka. See "'Sublokatorka' po latach. Z Hanną Krall rozmawiają Elżbieta Janicka i Joanna Tokarska-Bakir," *Studia Litteraria Historica*, no. 2 (2013): pp. 3–26. The category was applied by Konrad Matyjaszek. See: *Produkcja przestrzeni żydowskiej*, pp. 91–136.

and stigmatized community of outsiders imposed upon it. Thus, subtenancy is one of key factors steering the relationships between Jews and non-Jewish Poles.[27] Matyjaszek puts forward an argument that the Holocaust unveiled this long-term asymmetrical and dependent relationship.[28] However, I contend that because of the visibility, closeness, and enormous scale of the Holocaust perpetrated by the Nazi Germans on Polish territory between 1939 and 1945, the hierarchy between the Jewish minority and the non-Jewish Polish majority – and consequently the post-Holocaust social order – have acquired new characteristics.

I seek to address the post-Holocaust hierarchy by exploring the meanings of gratitude and ingratitude in the rhetoric, as well as the lines of argumentation within oral testimonies and in-depth qualitative interviews with both rescuers/helpers and Jewish survivors from two Polish towns in the Lublin area: Biłgoraj and Izbica. By investigating different perceptions and understandings of gratitude, along with related social practices and the underlying social norms, values, and sense of belonging to a majority or minority group, I examine continuities and changes within the social hierarchy between ethnic Poles and Jews during and after the war.

Gratitude and righteous ingratitude

According to the German sociologist Georg Simmel, gratitude is a 'binder' (*Bindemittel*) of society.[29] It is an emotion that creates a special bond between people, as it 'places a receiver into a certain permanent position with respect to the giver.'[30] At the same time, it makes the relationship between the involved parties asymmetrical: 'Being grateful to others creates […] a feeling of pure dependence which cannot be exchanged or fully returned.'[31] Simmel regarded this dependence simply as a key characteristic of social relationships. He saw gratitude as a counterbalance to the reification (*Sachwerdung*) of human relationships in the modern era,[32] and identified gratitude as 'the moral memory of humanity.'[33] The emotion expands an interaction into the present and future 'through the repeated remembering of that initial deed, and thereby the repeated remembering of the experienced thankfulness, which in some way comes to life again whenever that moment, situation, and deed are recalled.'[34] Gratitude is associated with recognition, which may refer to an action rather than a person, by creating a sense of responsibility for others.[35]

Nonetheless, this moral discourse protects both the act of giving and the giver from critical reflection, making gratitude simply the opposite of the taboo of ingratitude.[36]

[27]Matyjaszek, *Produkcja przestrzeni żydowskiej*, p. 91.
[28]Ibid., p. 97.
[29]Davide Ruggieri, "Being Grateful for Georg Simmel. Emotions, Gratitude, and the Relational Concern of sociology in the Globalized Society," *Digithum*, no. 28 (November 2022): pp. 1–11.
[30]Georg Simmel, "Faithfulness and Gratitude," in Kurt H. Wolff, (ed.), *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (New York: The Free Press, 1950), pp. 379–95, esp. p. 392, citation after Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, *Philosophies of Gratitude* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 297.
[31]Ruggieri, "Being Grateful for Georg Simmel," p. 6.
[32]Mees van Hulzen, "Gratitude and That Which We Cannot Return: Critical Reflections on Gratitude," *ZEMO. Zeitschrift für Ethik und Moralphilosophie*, vol. 4 (March 2021): pp. 109–19.
[33]Ruggieri, "Being Grateful for Georg Simmel," p. 6.
[34]Natàlia Cantó-Milà, "Gratitude – Invisibly Webbing Society Together," *Journal of Classical Sociology*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2013): pp. 8-19, here p. 13.
[35]Van Hulzen, "Gratitude and That Which We Cannot Return."
[36]Ibid.

This logic of the discourse conceals the difference between the perspectives of the privileged and the oppressed groups regarding the act of giving.[37] When disadvantaged groups fail to show appreciation, a majority sees this as an act of opposing the social order within which the rules of the narrative have been set by the dominant group. The American philosopher Cheshire Calhoun points to 'the distinction between the obligatory and supererogatory – what we are obliged to do as our duty and what we are praised for doing because it is beyond our duty.'[38] Concerning help and assistance given to Jews during the Holocaust, the understanding is that Jews should be grateful for not being murdered by their non-Jewish benefactors, despite the nature of the arrangements for whatever help they received. Hence, it is important to note that gratitude is shaped by the social context, especially by the power dynamics between the giver and the receiver. In a case in which two parties are 'distinctly unequal in power' and do not have the same choices or agency, gratitude should be analyzed as part of systemic injustice, whereby some can and some cannot harm others.[39] In this context, another American philosopher Claudia Card talks about 'misplaced gratitude' or 'undeserved gratitude,'[40] which can be developed by members of groups whose ethnic, gender, racial, or sexual identities have been used to justify their inferior position, and are expected to be grateful for 'ordinary decencies' and even 'for less abusiveness than was possible.'[41] By doing so, they are also reaffirming the existing social hierarchy. In such situations, claims Card, 'righteous ingratitude' should be recognized as an effort against hegemony and rejection of the unfair social order.[42] Those who are righteously ungrateful 'are affirming a sense of self that they believe has been demeaned by the benefit.' They do not want to be grateful for something they considered unjust, wrong, or humiliating. 'Righteous ingratitude' can therefore be viewed as a feeling shared among individuals who have been disempowered and become dependent on others in superior social positions. In the context of helping Jews during the Holocaust, the theme of gratitude requires such critical reflection and could be a useful tool for the analysis of two case studies of rescue and help.

The inferior position of Jewish rescuees in rescuers' narratives

The first case study provides insights into a type of rescuer who falls between the two extremes in terms of attitudes towards Jewish rescuees, as described by Michlic, which range from 'rescuer-abuser'/'rescuer-perpetrator' to 'selfless rescuer.'[43] The case also enables a reflection on the dynamics of power and the social distance inherited from the prewar culture of antisemitism, even if, after the Holocaust, these problems manifest themselves in the representations of rescue in more subtle and less overt ways. However, these examples are crucial for understanding the social order during World War II, and,

[37]Cheshire Calhoun, *Moral Aims: Essays on the Importance of Getting it Right and Practicing Morality with Others* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 206.
[38]Ibid.
[39]Claudia Card, "Gratitude and Obligation," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 2 (April 1988): pp.115–27; Rushdy, *Philosophies of Gratitude*, pp. 254–86.
[40]Card, "Gratitude and Obligation," p. 115;
[41]Ibid.
[42]Ibid.
[43]Joanna Beata Michlic, "Mapping the History of Child Holocaust Survivors," in Anat Helman, (ed.), *No Small Matter: Features of Jewish Childhood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 79–102.

consequently, the context of gratitude viewed as a social emotion. The case involves Halina Babiarz who lived in Izbica during the war, and who, with her mother, hid Hanan Lifshits for several months.

Until the 1910s, Izbica, located some 70 kilometers from Lublin, had been inhabited exclusively by Jewish families.[44] In the interwar period, the town maintained its unique ethnically monolithic character, with no Catholic church within its borders. Its narrow, one-story buildings housed over 100 Jewish workshops, most of which manufactured and sold clothing. By the 1920s, Jews still constituted a prevailing majority (93 percent) of the town's population. The non-Jewish residents of neighboring villages referred to Izbica as the 'Jewish capital,'[45] since it represented a reversed social hierarchy between the nationwide non-Jewish Polish majority and the Jewish minority. In the early years of the German occupation, Izbica became a destination for Jewish deportees from cities incorporated into the Third Reich, as well as from various locations in the Lublin district. Izbica functioned as an 'open ghetto.' There were no physical barriers, yet Jews could not move freely within the town, which was enclosed by hills on three sides and the Wieprz River on the fourth.[46] During this period, non-Jewish residents lived alongside the Jewish population, running their businesses and workshops. The situation of Jews worsened in early 1942, when Izbica, located on the main railway line between Lublin and Bełżec, turned into one of the largest transit ghettos in the district. It became the initial destination for Jews deported from the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, Germany, Austria, and Slovakia. Starting in March 1942, Jews who had been brought to Izbica were deported in several *Aktionen* to the Bełżec and Sobibór extermination camps, as well as to the concentration camp in Majdanek. Supervised by the SS, German *Gendarmerie*, and Ukrainian *Trawnikimänner*, the deportations were carried out with the assistance of the Polish Blue Police and firefighters. Between 1940 and early 1943, more than 26,000 Polish and foreign Jews passed through the Izbica ghetto. At least 2,000 were murdered on site. Just over 100 prewar Jewish residents of Izbica survived the Holocaust.[47]

Hanan Lifshits (also spelled Chanan Lipszyc, Chanan Lipschitz, Hanan Lipszyc), a Jewish teenager born in Izbica in 1926, had escaped a roundup during the *Aktion* in November 1942 and sought shelter with Kazimiera Babiarz and her 14-year-old daughter, Halina Błaszczyk.[48] The Jewish teenager was nearly the same age as Halina. Before the war his father, Zeev Lipszyc, was a local baker and a client of Babiarz, who ran a mill. In

[44]Andrzej Cebulak, *Tarnogóra i Izbica (województwo zamojskie). Studium Historyczno-Urbanistyczne. Dokumentacja opracowana na zlecenie Wojewódzkiego Konserwatora Zabytków w Zamościu*, Lublin, 1988, Archive of Wojewódzki Urząd Ochrony Zabytków w Lublinie – Delegatura Zamość, p. 76.

[45]Rafał Hetman, *Izbica, Izbica* (Wolowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2021).

[46]See Robert Kuwałek and Martin Dean, trans. by Steven Seegel, "Izbica" in Martin Dean, (ed.), *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos 1933–1945. Volume II, Ghettos in German-Occupied Eastern Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press and USHMM, 2012), pp. 639–43. For a thorough and comprehensive history of the transit ghetto in Izbica, see Steffen Hänschen, *Das Transitghetto Izbica im System des Holocaust* (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2018).

[47]Together with Magdalena Waligórska, Alexander Friedman, Ina Sorkina, and Yechiel Weizman, I put together a list of 112 names of survivors from Izbica, most of whom survived on USSR territory. We based the list on records of postwar Jewish settlements in Lower Silesia, postwar trials of Nazi collaborators, collections of testimonies, collections of oral histories (VHA, Fortunoff Video Archive, Brama Grodzka – Teatr NN), and Steffen Hänschen's publication on the Izbica ghetto (*Das Transitghetto Izbica)*. See (forthcoming) Magdalena Waligórska et al., *The History of Shtetl after 1945* (Berlin: De Gruyter Brill).

[48]Testimony of Hanan Lifshits (born 1926 in Izbica), May 11, 1998, the Collection of the USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive (USCSFA VHA), interview code 47808.

the spring of 1943, following a tip-off from one of the neighbors, the Germans and the Polish Blue Police raided Błaszczyk's house. Hanan Lifshits hid in time and escaped to a nearby village. There he met Dawid Brandt and Bajla Adelsztajn, a young Jewish couple from Izbica. They took him in and brought him to Zofia and Bronisław Malinowscy, a Polish couple who had assisted them previously.[49] Together with Lifshits, Bajla and Dawid built hideouts in the forests and fields, where they survived until the end of the war, relying on regular help from the Malinowscy couple.

After the war, the Babiarz family remained in Izbica. In the available testimonies, neither Halina Błaszczyk nor other members of the local community mentioned that the Babiarz family had ever experienced any hostility or stigma. This was despite the fact that those who helped Jews often faced ostracism and violence from some local residents and partisan groups in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust.[50] (In other words, social acceptance of persecuting Jews also extended to persecuting their helpers and rescuers.[51])

In her testimony, Zofia Malinowska, who, together with her husband Bronisław, had assisted three Jewish survivors including Hanan Lifshits, stated: 'Neighbors laughed at what we were doing. Even Polish partisans who were looking for Jews beat my husband with rifle stocks.'[52] In this case, the Babiarz family upheld its favorable social position in the town. Following the migration of residents from nearby villages and towns during and after the war, Izbica, once a predominantly Jewish community, became entirely non-Jewish. In 1985, Kazimiera Babiarz and Halina Błaszczyk were honored by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations for assisting Lifshits.[53] In a series of oral history interviews conducted in 1999,[54] 2003,[55] 2010,[56] 2012,[57] and 2015,[58] Halina discussed her experience as a young non-Jewish girl living in Izbica, in a transit ghetto during the war.

The narratives show that Halina witnessed the normalization of violence against Jews. For example, when Błaszczyk was talking about the execution of the Jewish ghetto policemen, she said: '[…] and there they were, strewn on the ground. One here, one there. Word got around the town and we ran there to look at them […] Nobody seemed to

[49]In 1995, Zofia and Bronisław Malinowscy were recognized as Righteous Among the Nations. Betty Berendt Levy (nee Bajla Adelsztajn) gave testimony about their rescue efforts, Yad Vashem Archives (YVA), M.31. 2/6548. See: Yad Vashem's The Righteous Among the Nations Database, https://righteous.yadvashem.org/?searchType=righteous_only&language=en&itemId=4035056&ind=0 (last accessed March 24, 2025); "Protokół przesłuchania świadka Zofii Malinowskiej na temat pomocy udzielonej przez nią i jej męża Bronisława Malinowskiego Bajli i Dawidowi Berendom oraz Chananowi Lipszycowi, 10.07.1986, Lublin" in *Relacje o pomocy udzielanej Żydom przez Polaków w latach 1939-1945*, vol. 4, wybór i opracowanie Sebastian Piątkowski (Lublin: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej. Komisja Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu. Oddział w Lublinie, 2020), pp. 280–2. Their account of rescue is also described in Rafał Hetman, *Izbica, Izbica* (Wolowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2021).

[50]Anna Bikont, *The Crime and the Silence: Confronting the Massacre of Jews in Wartime Jedwabne*, trans. by Alissa Valles (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016).

[51]Joanna Beata Michlic, "Gender Perspectives on the Rescue of Jews in Poland Preliminary Observations," *Polin. Studies in Polish Jewry* 30, no. 1 (2019): pp. 407–27; Alicja Podbielska, "'That's for Harboring Jews!' Post-Liberation Violence against Holocaust Rescuers in Poland, 1944–1948," in *S:I.M.O.N.—Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation* 6, no. 2 (2019): pp. 110–20.

[52]Testimony of Zofia and Bronisław Malinowscy, YVA, M.31.2/6548.

[53]Yad Vashem honored Kazimiera and Halina Babiarz on March 13, 1985, https://righteous.yadvashem.org/?searchType=righteous_only&language=en&itemId=4039620&ind=0 (last accessed April 19, 2025).

[54]July 10, 1999, The Jeff and Toby Herr Oral History Archive, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM).

[55]February 25, 2003, interviewed by Robert Kuwałek, the State Museum at Majdanek Archives, XXIV-30/4/1.

[56]September 28, 2010, interviewed by Krzysztof Banach, Oral History Collection of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews.

[57]September 1, 2012, KARTA Oral History Collection interviewed by Anna Wylegała.

[58]April 30, 2015, Oral History Collection of Brama Grodzka in Lublin, interviewed by Daniel Krzaczkowski.

care about it any longer.'[59] In her interviews, Błaszczyk quickly revealed the cultural distance towards Jewish residents. Before the war, her family had lived in the center of the town, among Jewish inhabitants: 'The village of Izbica was located up the hill, and it was inhabited by Poles. Unfortunately, we were living down here, in the town center [among Jews].'[60] In 1939, all Jewish mills were sealed, and her family's mill was one of only two (the second mill belonged to the count of Tarnogóra, Smorczewski) that still operated during the war. She admitted that the profit from running the mill kept the family financially secure: 'During the occupation, the business was quite prosperous.'[61] In a 2012 interview, she implied that her family's business benefited from anti-Jewish policies: 'Later, when the Germans arrived, they obviously went after the Jews. All Jewish mills were sealed, so our mill and the count's mill had a ton of work, because many villages around [were] left without a mill. So, it was good […] under the Germans.'[62] Her stance here shows that her main focus was on her family's wartime experiences, rather than empathizing with the deteriorating situation of Jewish residents.

During the war, Jews often visited Błaszczyk's home to trade. They exchanged personal belongings with Błaszczyk's family in return for food and other means of assistance they had badly needed. Securing food was fundamental to their physical survival during the Holocaust. However, selling food in exchange for valuables was a form of dispossession that often exploited the vulnerable position of the Jewish community. For Błaszczyk's family, it proved to be a highly profitable activity.[63] As a result of this arrangement, they gained access to goods that had been beyond their means in prewar Izbica. Halina Błaszczyk remembered how her grandfather bribed Ludwik Klemm, a deputy to Kurt Engels, head of the SD detachment stationed in *Kreis* Krasnystaw, to open their mill: 'I remember he gave [the bribe to the Nazis], it was from the Jews. A Jewish woman brought us two bales of cloth; a suit fabric made in Bielsko.'[64] Błaszczyk recalled a Jewish woman named Pelc who was selling such goods:

> [S]he constantly brought us cosmetics of different kinds that no one here had seen before. When someone [a Jewish deportee] came from Germany, they would bring jewelry or cloth. And she would take money from them in exchange for these goods. She took eggs. She took flour. My mother gave her milk.[65]

The Błaszczyk rescuer family perceived their social status as more favorable in comparison to other local inhabitants under German occupation. While talking about non-Jews who plundered and robbed Jewish property after the so-called 'liquidation' of the Izbica ghetto, Błaszczyk stated: 'I did not set foot there. There wasn't anything that we needed [laughter]. We had all we needed. We had just bought a house from a Jew. A Jewish man owned a one-story house, left unfinished, and my mother bought it from him [… H]e realized that he would not be able to finish the construction.'[66] Błaszczyk's comments

[59]Halina Błaszczyk, July 10, 1999, VHA.
[60]Ibid.
[61]Halina Błaszczyk, April 30, 2015, Oral History Collection of Brama Grodzka in Lublin.
[62]Halina Błaszczyk, September 1, 2012, KARTA Oral History Collection.
[63]Barbara Engelking, "Czarna godzina. Rzeczy żydowskie oddane na przechowanie Polakom," in Jan Grabowski and Dariusz Libionka, (eds.), *Klucze i kasa. O mieniu żydowskim w Polsce pod okupacją niemiecką i we wczesnych latach powojennych 1939–1950* (Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2014), pp. 387–437.
[64]Halina Błaszczyk, September 1, 2012, KARTA Oral History Collection.
[65]Ibid.
[66]Ibid.

do not reflect a perception of daily life under occupation typical among the local non-Jewish population. However, her narratives are surprisingly similar to oral history and in-depth interviews that capture the present-day non-Jewish vernacular memory of the Holocaust.

The vernacular memory of the Holocaust still needs a comprehensive analysis. However, there is one characteristic that features commonly in these testimonies – a great social distance towards anti-Jewish violence and towards the sufferings of the 'other group,' and consequently, an absence of any detailed accounts of Jewish experiences.

The rescuer-rescuee relationship as a reflection of social hierarchy between minority and majority populations

What is also striking from the interviews is the ways in which Błaszczyk spoke about Hanan Lifshits. She recollected him in a cold, impersonal way, and identified him by his ethnicity, saying 'that Jew,' 'the Jew,' or 'our Jew,' rather than by his personal name. In addition, Kazimiera referred to Lifshits as: 'the child' or 'that child' (in Polish, the pronoun she used – 'ono' – could sometimes refer to objects as well as to people). On rare occasions, she used his name or called him 'our Hanan.' Recollecting the night when the boy showed up at their doorstep asking for help, she stressed over and over his vulnerable circumstances: 'There was barbed wire in the windows [in the building where Jewish people were imprisoned]. Somehow, it [Hanan] got out. It [Hanan] was […] small, he was so short […] we heard someone knocking. As mother opened the door, it [Hanan] was standing there.'[67] This passage points to Hanan's miserable and subjugated position during the Holocaust. It also shows that long after the war, the social hierarchy between the Jewish minority population and the non-Jewish majority is still reflected in the language of the rescuer/helper.

In her research, Michlic indicates that Jewish individuals, especially children who sought shelter, were vulnerable to abuse or harm, living in constant fear of being hurt, denounced, or killed.[68] The relationship between Jewish fugitives and their helpers was often very fragile.[69] The situation involved power dynamics that depended on the social, cultural, and economic resources at the disposal of the hiding Jews. We do not have any information regarding whether Hanan Lifshits provided any payment for the shelter. In his case, it is important to recognize Hanan's perseverance and the phenomenon of 'Jewish self-help,'[70] often neglected in the official narratives presented in Polish public discourse. In the spring of 1943, after the Germans raided the Babiarz house, Liftshits escaped Izbica and found refuge in a nearby village, where he stayed in hiding with another Jewish couple until the end of the war.[71]

[67]Halina Błaszczyk, April 30, 2015, Oral History Collection of Brama Grodzka in Lublin.
[68]Michlic, "What Does a Child Remember?" pp. 153–72.
[69]Jennifer Marlow, "Life in Hiding and Beyond," in Joanna Beata Michlic, (ed.), *Jewish Families in Europe, 1939-Present: History, Representation, and Memory* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press/ University Press of New England, 2017), pp. 110–28.
[70]Joanna B. Michlic, "An Untold Story of Rescue. Jewish Children and Youth in Nazi-Occupied Poland," in Patrick Henry, (ed.), *Jewish Resistance to the Nazis* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), pp. 300–18.
[71]Tojwie Blatt's testimony reveals that Ostrzyce was the village where several Jews found shelter during the war. Testimony of Tojwie Blatt, The Archive of Jewish Historical Institute, 302/190.

When, in 2010, Halina Błaszczyk recollected the post-Holocaust impressions of the young Jewish survivor, her views of his inferior social position and powerlessness became even more explicit: 'The child [Hanan] was always small, he was always small. He never grew up tall.'[72] Liftshits took up trade after the war, which Błaszczyk ironically commented on: 'He was really big [laughter] […] when he was selling clothes at the market […] He earned a few zlotys. He found a wealthy uncle. The uncle sold a house in Izbica, got enough money to leave, and they set off for Israel together.'[73] Halina's daughter, who was present during the interview, expressed similar opinions about Hanan: 'The clothes he sent were not a good fit for anyone. We were all tall. It [Hanan] was little, and the trousers were too short. But he sent us some clothes his children had previously used. He did send them.'[74] On the flip side, this passage could reflect the feeling of shame concerning life in a rural area in a communist state, where everything was in short supply.[75]

Another way to approach this excerpt is through the examination of the relationship between rescuers and the individuals they had helped, and the anticipation of gratitude in material form. On one occasion, Halina Błaszczyk spoke about the expected help: 'Hanan came to Izbica before my mother passed away. She was already very sick. He gave her twenty dollars and at that moment, she required very expensive medication. Is a human life worth only twenty dollars?'[76] This passage evokes a common stereotype of Jews as financially better off than non-Jewish Poles, and yet mean and ungenerous. It goes hand in hand with the conclusion put forward by Jacek Leociak that in the non-Jewish perception, 'Jewish ingratitude often has a financial dimension.'[77] Such a perception should also be viewed as a part of the phenomenon of dispossession that refers to the idea 'Jews are by default wealth-givers,' as historian Magdalena Waligórska observes.[78] Interestingly, the meanings associated with ingratitude show a reversed social hierarchy decades after the war, at a time when rescuers and helpers find themselves in vulnerable circumstances: being poor, ill, or unemployed.[79] The Polish narrative evokes a cultural topoi of an 'ungrateful Jew.'[80] The disappointment over unmet expectations is a recurring motif in the vernacular narrative of non-Jewish former rescuers and their children.

During the 1980s, when diplomatic relations between Poland and Israel began to be rebuilt, Hanan Lifshits established contact with the Babiarz family. In 1991, he reluctantly agreed to visit Izbica, 'I came to Izbica thanks to my wife. I didn't

[72]Halina Błaszczyk, September 28, 2010, Oral History Collection of Museum of Polish Jews POLIN.
[73]Halina Błaszczyk, July 10, 1999, VHA.
[74]Halina Błaszczyk, September 28, 2010, Oral History Collection of Museum of Polish Jews POLIN.
[75]To a certain degree, a parallel situation occurred during and after the war in cases of receiving support from a family abroad, leading to feelings of shame, distress, and humiliation. See Agnieszka Pajączkowska, *Nieprzezroczyste. Historie chłopskiej fotografii* (Wolowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2023), pp. 294–5.
[76]Halina Błaszczyk, February 25, 2003, State Museum at Majdanek Archives.
[77]Leociak, *Ratowanie. Opowieści Polaków i Żydów*, p. 50.
[78]Magdalena Waligórska, "Topos of the Jewish Treasure in Postwar Polish, Belarusian and Ukrainian Shtetls," *Holocaust Studies* 31, no. 3 (2025): pp. 498–516.
[79]Ibid., p. 53.
[80]According to Dariusz Libionka, the motif of "the ungrateful Jew" played a central role in the antisemitic campaign orchestrated by the communist regime in March 1968. Key narratives within the propaganda of that time revolved around how the mass involvement of Poles in assisting Jewish individuals during World War II was disregarded and unappreciated, and how the Jewish community was passive in the face of the Holocaust. See Libionka, "Polish Literature on Organized and Individual Help," pp. 29–33.

want to.'[81] He visited Kazimiera Babiarz. He also went to his prewar family home, but a man who lived there did not let him in, asserting his ownership of the property.[82] Six years later, in 1997, Lifshits traveled to Poland once more. This time, he had no wish to visit his hometown again. Pnina Lifshits, his daughter, described her impression of Izbica:

> Twenty years ago, I also visited Izbica. I came to visit Halina. I saw the place where my father was hidden, the town, the place where the Jews were gathered [during the *Aktionen* …] and I visited there again about four or five years ago. I did not enter his house. I didn't want to do it. We just looked at it. I don't know, I just didn't want to enter. The town was miserable and poor. But it was important for me to see where I came from. But I didn't want to talk to anyone there. As I was walking, I became angry […] Look what they did. My father was angry, and he passed it on to me, so I was angry, too.[83]

In the eyes of Jewish survivors and their descendants, the help offered by non-Jewish Poles to Jewish fugitives during the Holocaust was seen as individual endeavors that went against the social norms of the non-Jewish community, rather than a collective action: 'For my father, Izbica was home. For me, it is a symbol of evil, except for Halina […] Today, this town no longer holds my interest. When my father was alive, it held significance for me, but not anymore,'[84] Pnina reflected. After emigrating from Poland, many Jewish survivors broke away from their previous commitments of loyalty to the non-Jewish Polish majority. As a result, they discussed their experiences more openly, and more often expressed the 'righteous ingratitude,' which challenged the systemic inequality.

Hanan Lifshits' narrative is predominantly about one's own agency in physical survival during the Holocaust. However, the non-Jewish Polish rescuer/helper did not acknowledge any clear, evident efforts or actions on the part of Jewish fugitives such as Hanan. Halina's perspective does not shed any light on Jewish struggles and suffering experienced within the ghetto, nor on the life on the 'Aryan' side where Jews were forbidden to live, but had to enter to seek hiding places. In their recollections, Jewish survivors are more willing to address any ambiguous or troubling issues about the relationships between them and the Poles who had helped them.[85] To capture the whole range of complexity of postwar testimonies, historical narratives about the Holocaust in Poland should therefore integrate a Jewish perspective. This would challenge and verify the overtly positive self-image of the non-Jewish majority. Only then can we fully grasp and critically reflect on the emotions of gratitude and ingratitude. The next case of rescue and help puts Jewish narratives and trajectories as the starting point for approaching the subject.

The right to forget

To be honored by Yad Vashem as 'Righteous Among the Nations' (a translation from the Hebrew *Hasidei Ummot Ha-Olam*), one must meet stringent criteria. A Jewish survivor

[81]Testimony of Hanan Lifshits, May 11, 1998, USCSFA VHA, interview code 47808. Translation to English by Yechiel Weizman.
[82]Ibid.
[83]Pnina Lifshits, zoom interview with Yechiel Weizman, February 2, 2021. English summary created by Yechiel Weizman.
[84]Ibid.
[85]Engelking, "Labyrinths and Tangled Paths."

needs to submit his/her testimony that clearly states that a non-Jewish person 'risked her or his life, freedom, and safety, in order to rescue one or several Jews from the threat of death or deportation without exacting monetary compensation or other rewards.'[86] The title of the Righteous Among the Nations is awarded by a special commission, usually at the request of Jewish individuals who view themselves as having been 'rescued.'[87] The second generation of survivors or helpers may also submit a request. From a sociological perspective, recognition and gratitude are intertwined, and help preserve the bond between the two distinct parties involved in the process.[88] However, after the war, some survivors did not wish to continue the relationship with their rescuers. The circumstances and unbearable conditions faced by Jewish individuals in hiding, and a constant awareness of life-threatening surroundings, must be considered as the context for power relations between rescuers and Jewish rescuees both during and after the war. This helps us understand and acknowledge the right of survivors to 'righteous ingratitude.'

To illustrate this phenomenon, I wish to focus on one case of a Jewish child survivor who opted not to testify to the actions of an ethnic Polish family that had helped her and four other Jewish individuals. She refused to provide evidence to Yad Vashem and thus bestow honor upon her rescuers as Righteous Among the Nations. Sally Kochan (née Sara Zylberfajn) survived with her father, Hersz Zylberfajn, two uncles, Boruch Wermut and Beniamin Hochman, and a cousin, Nusen Hochman in a village adjacent to Biłgoraj, a small town in southeastern Poland.[89] Before the war, Hersz and Sally's uncle, Boruch Wermut, were partners in business.[90] Both families were relatively well situated financially. The Zylberfajn family possessed a water mill, a pond, and large farming plots, whereas Boruch was a grain merchant.[91] During the war, both families hid in several places within the town and the nearby forests.[92] In December 1942, a local inhabitant denounced Sally's mother, her aunt, and her cousins hiding in the mill.[93] They were all murdered instantly upon being discovered there.[94] Sally was five years old when her mother was killed. Miraculously, only the day before the tragic events, her father had taken her to a new hideout that he had arranged with a non-Jewish neighbor, Piotr

[86]"Righteous Among the Nations," Yad Vashem, https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/how-to-apply.html.

[87]On the diplomatic conception of the title "Righteous," see: Sarah Gensburger, "From the Memory of Rescue to the Institution of the Title of 'Righteous'," in Jacques Semelin, Claire Andrieu, and Sarah Gensburger, (eds.), *Resisting the Genocide: The Multiple Forms of Rescue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 19–32.

[88]Van Hulzen, "Gratitude and That Which We Cannot Return."

[89]Testimony of Sally Kochan (nee Sara Zylberfajn), born in 1937, given on May 23, 1995, USCSFA VHA, interview code 2711.

[90]Mourice Wermut, zoom interview with Magdalena Waligórska, March 9, 2021.

[91]Sally Kochan, May 23, 1995, USCSFA VHA.

[92]Ibid.; Boruch Wermut, "Przeżyłem, aby dokonać zemsty," in Abraham Kronenberg, (ed.), *Zagłada Biłgoraja. Księga Pamięci*, trans. from Yiddish and Hebrew to Polish by Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, Andrzej Trzciński and Marzena Zawanowska, (Gdansk: Wydawnictwo słowo/obraz terytoria, 2009), pp. 205–11.

[93]During the war, a *volksdeutsch* (a Nazi term, literally meaning 'German folk," used to describe a person of ethnic-German origins who did not hold German or Austrian citizenship and lived outside Nazi Germany, particularly in Eastern and Central Europe) resided in the mill and the house. In October 1942, when families sought shelter in the mill, he did not allow women to stay in the attic and made them leave with their children. Later on, they returned and hid in the mill, without the *volksdeutsch* being aware of their presence.

[94]In the immediate aftermath, the perpetrator – a local resident – was put on trial, found guilty, and sentenced to death. See: "Akta w sprawie: Kulesza Franciszek i inni oskarżeni o to, że w czasie okupacji niemieckiej w m. Biłgoraj działali na szkodę osób narodowości żydowskiej," Instytut Pamięci Narodowej (IPN), 1946-1945, IPN Lu 327/31; Wermut, "Przeżyłem, aby dokonać zemsty," pp. 205–11. For more on the trial, see Marta Duch-Dyngosz, Magdalena Waligórska, "Wąskie widzenie winy: Granice kolaboracji w świadomości świadków w procesach sierpniowych. Biłgoraj i Izbica jako studia przypadku," *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 19 (2023): pp. 325–54.

Skakuj, who lived with his family just outside the village, close to the local woods. Sadly, Hersz did not manage to convince the peasant to give shelter to the entire family in time. Sally remembered that, initially, Skakuj was against the idea of taking in a child, and even went so far as to urge Hersz to either kill Sally or send her away to the partisans staying in the woods – both of which Sally's father rejected.[95] The hideout was built in a barn, among farm animals. Its outside surface was covered with bales of hay that protected it from being discovered by dogs (the German gendarmerie and Polish Blue Police often brought trained dogs to hunt Jewish fugitives.[96]) In a house next to the barn, the non-Jewish farmer lived with his mother, wife, and their three daughters. For more than two years, Sally stayed in the narrow, dark hiding place next door to their home. She recalled lying on the floor most of the time. She found it difficult to talk about her wartime experiences:

> When I came out, I could only whisper. My voice was not there. After a while it came back. I do remember men playing cards, but I really don't remember what I did. It is just a blank. Sometimes I try to think, when I see my grandchildren, that they cannot sit still for a minute. How could I have sat there and done absolutely nothing? I cannot imagine it![97]

At night, Hersz, Boruch and Beniamin, Nusen, Mosze Bojm, and Fiszel Kandel[98] would climb out of the hideout to get some fresh air and bring food. At some point, the farmer became reluctant to provide the food they needed. Sally remembered that it was the farmer's mother who took care of Jewish fugitives by giving them cooked potatoes or warm milk. She also recalled the moment after liberation, when they were finally allowed to leave their hideout: 'I remember the old lady, who was so good to me, that she was crying.'[99] In their interviews, the farmer's daughters underlined that their grandmother was the one who had played a crucial role in providing everyday assistance to the Jewish runaways. She was the one who had convinced Piotr Skakuj to take in Jewish families in the first place. All the Jewish survivors agreed that the grandmother should somehow be commemorated for saving them.

From Sally's perspective, it was Piotr Skakuj who held responsibility for the conditions of their hideout during the war. Hersz Zylberfajn, Boruch Wermut, Beniamin Hochman, Mosze Bajm, and Fiszel Kandel had paid the farmer and promised to transfer their property to him after the war: 'My father and my uncle gave him a fortune […] the mill was put in his name together with whatever we had possessed [in order] to hide us.'[100] But, as time went on, his attitude towards Jewish individuals changed. 'He thought it would only be a few weeks […] and then we would leave, and he would be rich. But as it goes on and on, he's got no food for us. He insisted that we leave the hideout and go elsewhere.' This is how Sally described the complex relationships between the Jewish fugitives and Piotr

[95]Sally Kochan, May 23, 1995, USCSFA VHA.
[96]The oldest daughter of the rescuer described the hideout similarly. Krystyna Skakuj, born in 1931, zoom interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, April 12, 2024; Barbara Skakuj, born in 1939, phone interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, May 15, 2024.
[97]Sally Kochan, May 23, 1995, USCSFA VHA.
[98]Mosze Bojm and Fiszel Kandel escaped from the Zamość labor camp. While they were in hiding, Bojm contracted tuberculosis and died. His body lay in the hideout for several days before he was buried in the woods. The farmer's growing reluctance to keep them led Kandel and another man to leave the hideout. The two men were later killed by non-Jews who had promised to hide them. See Wermut, "Przeżyłem, aby dokonać zemsty," pp. 207–09.
[99]Ibid.
[100]Sally Kochan, May 23, 1995, USCSFA VHA.

Skakuj. The experiences shared by the survivors and their descendants illustrate their efforts to challenge the dynamics of their relations with their helper, and thus guarantee their survival. The promise of property-transfer usually convinced the rescuer or helper to keep their side of the agreement. In this particular case, rescuees pushed back against the power structure also by warning the farmer about the presence of Jewish partisans in the local forest, who would seek revenge against him and his family if Jewish fugitives were harmed.[101] One could posit that the social positions of both the rescuer and the rescuees were similar in these dire situations, as they all risked being killed if the hideout was discovered. Therefore, cooperation between them was necessary for the survival of both involved parties. This, however, is not true, since 'these were the non-symmetrical histories'[102] – whenever a hideout was exposed, Jewish rescuees were invariably murdered, while their helpers were often spared, as was demonstrated in the first discussed case of the Babiarz family. Finally, a rescuer could always kill hidden Jewish fugitives to free him/herself from the burden. Sally admitted that the Jewish survivors understood the asymmetry of that situation: 'He probably wouldn't have killed anybody himself. He might have taken us out and told someone else to do it, but he wouldn't have done it by himself.'[103] Clearly, the hidden Jews did not have the same options, choices, or agency as their rescuers.

After liberation, when the Zylberfajns left their hideout, Sally and her father returned to their old house in Bojary.[104] 'We went to our house […] and there was a Polish family living there […] they took us in. She was very good, because she tried to look after me and to put me into school […] but I wasn't very long in Biłgoraj. After I came out of [the hideout], I went to school, but I wasn't too happy [there].'[105]

While staying in the town in the first year after liberation, Sally visited the Skakuj family, spending time with Piotr's daughters, and even dined with his family. Sally believed that the grandmother 'felt guilty, and so did Skakuj's wife […] They tried to make me welcome.'[106] In 1945, she moved to Kracow and stayed with her uncle, Boruch Wermut, for a while, and then went to a Jewish orphanage in Zabrze. Hersz Zylberfajn returned to Biłgoraj to operate the mill. In the property register compiled by the local authorities in 1944, he was the only remaining Jewish owner in the town. Skakuj's daughter remembered Zylberfajn's empty house with a spacious room and a window through which she watched him pray every day.[107] Sally recalled: 'People from all around were coming to get their flour milled. And my father was a very good man. He helped everyone, no matter whether they could pay or not. He did their flour.'[108] This was most likely his way to express his gratitude to the non-Jewish

[101]On strategies of Jewish fugitives to manage their properties while in hiding, see Engelking, "Czarna godzina. Rzeczy żydowskie oddane na przechowanie Polakom," p. 408.
[102]Elżbieta Janicka, "The Triumphant Gate of the Polish Narrative: The Symbolic Reconstruction of the Bridge over Chłodna Street in Warsaw vis-à-vis the Crisis of the Dominant Polish Holocaust Narrative, " *Studia Litteraria et Historica* (transl. K. Stoll), vol 8 (2019), p. 112.
[103]Sally Kochan, May 23, 1995, USCSFA VHA.
[104]The 1944 property listing in Biłgoraj indicated that Hersz Zylberfajn was an owner of a water mill and two-single story houses in Biłgoraj. See "Wykaz osób posiadających nieruchomości na terenie miasta Biłgoraja za 1944," Archiwum Państwowe w Lublinie. Oddział w Kraśniku, Akta Miasta Biłgoraja, Zarząd Miejski w Biłgoraju, 37/13/0/176, f. 3.
[105]Sally Kochan spoke about the *volksdeutsch* family who took over the mill during the war and helped her family hide for a while. Sally Kochan, phone interview with Magdalena Waligórska, April 17, 2021.
[106]Ibid.
[107]Barbara Skakuj, phone interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, April 12, 2024.
[108]Sally Kochan, phone interview with Magdalena Waligórska, April 17, 2021.

population, as well as to ensure his safety in a small town after the war; at the time, the Lublin area was the most dangerous region for Jewish survivors and repatriates.[109] Sally recalled that Hersz had intended to repay the family who helped them by buying back the mill and selling it.[110] In addition, he played the role of intermediary for reclaiming and selling Jewish properties. He assisted other survivors by testifying in their restitution cases or representing them in the municipal court.[111] In the 1950s, Sally immigrated to Australia with her uncle Boruch Wermut and his new wife. Hersz joined them there a few years later.

In the 2010s, Piotr Skakuj's daughter contacted Sally to ask her to testify in support of their application for the recognition of her father as the Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem. Sally denied the request, stressing that 'she wanted me to sign that her father was a righteous person. And I said no, because I don't remember him being a righteous person. The way he treated us and the two people who were killed […] was […] only because of him. Because they had to leave.'[112] Her family believed that the decision to hide them was based on unethical reasons that were mainly financial – to gain material profit.[113]

Both of Skakuj's daughters expressed their disappointment with Sally's refusal to submit a positive statement about their father. They disagreed with the survivor's portrayal of their father, and insisted that 'the good deed' of their family should be somehow memorialized, as they all had taken enormous risk during the war. But, interestingly, they both also underlined that it was their grandmother, rather than their father, who had arranged the hiding and taken care of the Jewish fugitives.[114] The youngest daughter, Barbara, born at the beginning of the World War II, claims to remember that in the immediate aftermath of the war, her family stayed in touch with the Zylberfajns and the Hochmans, since they all lived nearby in the village for several months after liberation. Barbara also recalled her often visiting the Zylberfajn and Hochman homes, when her mother had some things to attend to in the town. Meanwhile, Krystyna, the oldest sister, would get into fights with non-Jewish pupils at school who harassed Sally and called her names because of her Jewish identity. Thus, from the perspective of the rescuer family, the postwar relationships with the former Jewish charges seemed close and warm. The stereotypical representation of Jews was absent in their interviews, and the cultural distance was not so evident as in the language used by Halina Błaszczyk. Nonetheless, the women did not offer any reflections about the nature of Jewish

[109]Julian Kwiek, *Nie chcemy Żydów u siebie. Przejawy wrogości wobec Żydów w latach 1944*–1947 (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Nieoczywiste, 2021).

[110]Sally Kochan, phone interview with Magdalena Waligórska, April 17, 2021. Zylberfajn obtained inheritance rights to the mill from his parents, Nusym and Hinka Zylberfajn. See "Akta z wniosku Hersza Zylberfajna o stwierdzenie praw do spadku po Nusymie i Hincie Zylberfajnach, 37/59/0/5720, May 20.1947-May 21.1947, Sąd Grodzki w Kraśniku," Archiwum Państwowe w Lublinie, Oddział w Kraśniku.

[111]Hersz Zylberfajn testified in numerous postwar restitution proceedings, and survivors indicated his house in Bojary as a place they either had stayed in or used for correspondence. See Akta w sprawie cywilnej z powództwa Beniamina Hochmana o zabezpieczenie dowodów, Oct. 21, 1946, Sąd Grodzki w Kraśniku," Archiwum Państwowe w Lublinie. Oddział w Kraśniku, 37/59/0/3740, f. 3; "Akta w sprawie cywilnej Arona Kopfa p.ko Michałowi Sawie o eksmisję, Jan. 16, 1948, Sąd Grodzki w Kraśniku," Archiwum Państwowe w Lublinie, Oddział w Kraśniku, 37/59/0/1596, f. 8; "Akta z wniosku Borucha Wermuta o stwierdzenie praw do spadku po Urysie Lejzorze Wermucie, Nov. 27.1948, Sąd Grodzki w Kraśniku," Archiwum Państwowe w Lublinie, Oddział w Kraśniku, 37/59/0/6009, f. 2-3.

[112]Sally Kochan, phone interview with Magdalena Waligórska, April 17, 2021.

[113]Mourice Wermut, zoom interview with Magdalena Waligórska, March 9, 2021.

[114]At the time of the publication of this paper, the granddaughters and daughters of Skakuj are still seeking to commemorate their family. His granddaughter noted that in Poland, the perception of the dominant role of men as heads of the family often leads women's perspectives being overlooked. Zoom interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, April 12, 2024.

trajectories during the war, and did not acknowledge Jewish survivors' right to not remember and commemorate those who in their eyes did not deserve it. The discrepancy between the perspectives of the rescuers and rescuees regarding wartime experience stems from the social hierarchy between minority and majority groups. Rescuers and helpers who assisted Jewish fugitives went against major social norms within Polish society, yet they were socialized in the dominant culture that perceived Jews as outsiders.

The Skakuj family helped five local Jews survive: Hersz Zylberfajn, Sara Zylberfajn, Boruch Wermut, Beniamin Hochman, and his teenage son, Nusym.[115] The only non-Jewish respondents who recalled the Skakuj family's assistance to Jews were those whose families were close neighbors. In their recollections, a recurring theme is that Piotr Skakuj 'came into a fortune hiding Jews,'[116] as he went on to own several mills and became a wealthy farmer. Other interviewees noted that all three daughters left the town and attained good education,[117] implying that the Skakuj family moved up the social ladder thanks to the material rewards they had received for their assistance to Jewish inhabitants during the war.

Sally shared the account of the hideout as part of her narrative of the survival, exploring the complexities of the relationships between the rescuer and the individuals who were in hiding, including the financial aspect of the assistance. The official narrative of the rescue of Jews in Poland fails to include such Jewish perspectives. One of the reasons behind this fact is the realization that Jewish viewpoints, if acknowledged and voiced, would likely prompt a more critical reflection of the moral conduct of ethnic Poles, as well as Polish culture and history. The inclusion of Jewish narratives would also challenge the systemic inequality in the status between non-Jewish Poles and Polish Jews. Lastly, retelling the history of rescue without acknowledging the agency of Jews in their own survival upholds a social hierarchy in which the former Jewish rescuee is still kept in an inferior position. This, in turn, justifies the continuous expectations of gratitude towards the rescuee and the entire community.

Conclusion: the discourse of gratitude/ ingratitude

In her book about child survivors, Polish journalist Anna Bikont touched on the theme of gratitude towards the rescuers, drawing on the experiences of survivor Irena Kisielewska, who admitted: 'I don't feel indebted to anyone for my survival, and I categorically reject the idea […] that Jews who received assistance from so-called Aryans should feel compelled to repay the supposed debt, or even express gratitude. […] I'm not grateful because, like all others, I was born to live, not to perish like that.'[118] Jewish fugitives had to rely on non-Jews for shelter, exposing themselves to the risk of being blackmailed, abused, humiliated, or even killed. A person who had received help may simply not have wanted to remember it, as one of Anna Bikont's interviewees confessed: 'I often realize that I am ashamed because I'd been treated worse than an animal. I wish I could forget it.

[115]Mordechaj Rapaport, "Wizyta w moim miasteczku," *Zagłada Biłgoraja. Księga Pamięci: materiały zebrane przez Abrahama Kronenberga* (Gdansk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2009), pp. 106–8.
[116]Woman born in 1938, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, October 6, 2021; woman and man born in 1940s, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz and Magdalena Waligórska, July 11, 2022; woman born in 1939, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, June 6, 2022.
[117]Woman born in 1939, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, June 6, 2022.
[118]Anna Bikont, *Cena. W poszukiwaniu żydowskich dzieci po wojnie* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2022), p. 129.

That is the reason why some of us did not contact those who sheltered us because they want to forget it.'[119] In cases such as Sally Kochan's, a more accurate category to describe her position is 'righteous ingratitude,' which could be seen as an act of questioning the ethnic Polish majority's conviction that they have exclusive right to present and owe the narrative about rescuing Jews.

In sum, the memory politics and cultural representations of rescuers in Poland do not resonate with the local vernacular memory of the Holocaust, particularly with regards to the subject of assistance provided to Jewish fugitives, which is often neither commemorated nor remembered. Through the accounts of Jewish survivors, Polish rescuers, and other non-Jewish eyewitnesses, a more comprehensive and nuanced history emerges about the acts of rescue, survival, and self-help during the German occupation. Thus, bringing Jewish voices into the public sphere sheds light on the conflicts and tensions between the rescuers and Jewish individuals they had helped. Jewish accounts challenge the stereotype of Jewish passivity, and foster a critical examination of the rescuer-rescuee dynamics. The recognition of the complexity and ambiguity of the rescue process and its motifs could result in different outcomes for future relationships among the two groups: 'What begins a debt, then, can either remain a debt, with those burdensome constraints, or it may transform into something else – a relationship premised on quite different grounds with more amicable and equal expectations,'[120] notices Claudia Card.[121] Given how the figure of rescuer has been weaponized in Polish memory politics, embracing the notion of 'righteous ingratitude' represents a novel political and moral stance that challenges the hegemony of the biased history of rescue of Jews instrumentalized in Polish politics.

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Notes on contributor

Marta Duch-Dyngosz is a sociologist, currently based at the European Ethnology Department of the Humboldt University in Berlin, Germany. She is a postdoctoral researcher in the ERC project: 'Intimate Dispossession: The Afterlives of Plundered Jewish Personal Possessions in the Aftermath of the Holocaust.' Her fields of interest include Jewish/non-Jewish relations, Jewish heritage, Jewish property, memory of the Holocaust, the far-right movement in Poland, and social theory.

ORCID

Marta Duch-Dyngosz http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9469-5901

[119]Ibid., p. 230.
[120]Paraphrased in Rushdy, *Philosophies of Gratitude*, p. 290.
[121]Claudia Card, *The Unnatural Lottery: Character and Moral Luck* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), pp. 130, 131, 139.