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# “I will never forget what you did for me during the war”: Rescuer – Rescued Relationships in the Light of Postwar Correspondence in Poland, 1945–1949<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction: The Topic of Rescuers, Past and Present

In recent years in Europe academic and public interest in rescuers of Jews has been growing. This interest is manifested in history and popular writings, the establishment of centers and projects for documentation of rescuers’ stories, conferences, museum exhibitions, theatrical performances, and documentary and feature films among others. It takes on a universal and transnational form in which the rescuers serve as models for contemporary young Europeans, different national forms embedded in particular histories and historiographies, and specific public memories.

Contemporary Poland constitutes a good example of a state in which the recently intensified interest in rescuers is influenced by a number of varied developments. On one hand, the new European project on democratic citizenship education and the new investigation embedded in critical history writings, and on the other patterns of thinking about and manipulating rescuers for particular political, social, and moral aims.

In pre-1989 Poland, the subject of rescuers was fairly marginal in public memories and commemorations of wartime heroism and was skewed in historical writing. Pre-1989 Polish historiography on rescuers displayed three dominant tendencies: to underscore the large number of rescuers; to downplay or ignore the low societal approval of rescue activities; and not to differentiate among the various categories

<sup>1</sup> Part of this paper was originally presented at the International Conference, *Aftermath of the Holocaust: Poland 1944–2010*, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, October 3–6, 2010. I thank Professors Yehuda Bauer, Zvi Gitelman, Berel Lang, Shulamit Reinharz, and the anonymous reviewers for providing useful comments on this work.

of rescuers, protectors, and helpers and their motivations. In the climate of a potent fusion of communism with ethno-nationalism in the 1960s, these tendencies influenced the reception of the first collection of documents and testimonies pertaining to rescue efforts co-authored by Władysław Bartoszewski and Zofia Lewinówna. The work was published in 1966 and reissued in 1969.<sup>2</sup> In his interview with Marian Turcki in the third expanded edition of *Ten jest z Ojczyzny mojej: Polacy z pomocą Żydom, 1939–1945* that appeared in 2008, Bartoszewski admits that in the two previous editions he did not sufficiently emphasize the difficult aspects of rescue activities and the challenges that the Jewish fugitives and rescuers faced in Poland. The author also tentatively acknowledges how his work was “hijacked” by the communist ethno-nationalist regime as a tool of disseminating an idealistic vision of a noble Polish nation helping the Jews, though some content of the book revealed a much more complicated picture of the reactions of Polish society toward Jews under the German occupation.<sup>3</sup>

Even some Jewish historians residing in communist Poland who held important official positions tended under pressure to glorify the Polish nation as a healthy moral collective helping Jews purely out of altruistic reasons. For example, although the accomplished historian Szymon Datner was fully aware of the dark aspects of wartime Polish-Jewish relations,<sup>4</sup> his *Las sprawiedliwych – karta z dziejów ratownictwa Żydów w okupowanej Polsce* paints a one-sided, idealistic portrayal of Polish society, which is incongruent with the wartime realities. This work can best be categorized as an example of a tragic loss of professional and personal integrity in the face of the anti-Jewish propaganda of 1968 and official censorship.<sup>5</sup>

2 Władysław Bartoszewski and Zofia Lewinówna *Ten jest z Ojczyzny mojej: Polacy z pomocą Żydom, 1939–1945* (Kraków: Znak, 1966) (1st ed.; a 2nd expanded ed. appeared in 1969 and the 3rd expanded ed. in 2008). The original also appeared in English: *Righteous Among the Nations: How Poles Helped the Jews, 1939–1945* (London: Earls Court, 1969) and *The Samaritans: Heroes of the Holocaust* (New York: Twayne, 1970).

3 Władysław Bartoszewski in an interview with Marian Turcki, *Ten jest z Ojczyzny mojej: Polacy z pomocą Żydom, 1939–1945*, 3rd expanded ed. (Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie ŻIH Świat Książki, 2008), pp. xiii–xv.

4 See Szymon Datner, “Eksterminacja Żydów Okręgu Białostockiego,” *Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego*, vol. 60 (October–December 1966), pp. 1–29.

5 Idem, *Las sprawiedliwych – karta z dziejów ratownictwa Żydów w okupowanej Polsce* (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1968).

Throughout the entire communist period the subject of rescuers was broached usually not because of its intrinsic cognitive and moral merits, but predominantly to defend the good name of Poles and to silence any commentaries showing Poles in a bad light. In this, by the 1960s and 1970s both communist elites in the country and anti-communist elites abroad reached a peculiar agreement. This way of writing about rescuers has persisted in the post-communist period and is part of the so-called *polityka historyczna* (historical politics) enforced in the mid-2000s in the aftermath of the Jedwabne debate.

Historians and journalists practicing *polityka historyczna* employ the data of more than 6,000 Christian Polish rescuers of Jews honored to date by Yad Vashem as a tool to normalize the dark past, to claim that Polish antisemitism and nationalism did not have much of a damaging influence on Polish-Jewish relations, and to restore the image of Poles as heroes and martyrs.<sup>6</sup> They tend to focus on the stories of individual rescuers. What their writing lacks is a more nuanced historical context and a discussion of Polish society's hostility toward both the Jewish fugitives and their Christian rescuers.

By the mid-2000s, in spite of the continuous manipulation of the subject by champions of *polityka historyczna* and right-wing nationalist circles in the country and the Polish diaspora, young Poles began to show a genuine interest in new scholarship on rescuers. This interest is not motivated by the notion of saving the good name of Poland at the expense of historical truth, but by a desire to understand the complexities of national history, including its uncomfortable and painful aspects. A growing number of works challenge the pre-1989 hegemonic historical interpretation of rescuers as a monolithic, altruistic group, and typical representatives of Polish behavior toward Jews during World War II. These works as a rule shift the emphasis of historical

6 For the old pre-1989 tendencies present in contemporary debate and historical writing, for example, see the website [www.ZyciezaZycie.pl](http://www.ZyciezaZycie.pl) (accessed June 8, 2008) dedicated to the educational film project *Życie za Życie*, about ten cases of Christian Polish rescuers. See especially the preface to the film by Jan Żaryn, an IPN historian. (These materials are no longer on the website.) See also Anna Poray-Wybranowska, "Naród bohaterów," *Nasz Dziennik*, October 9, 2004; Dariusz Baliszewski, "Czy jesteśmy nacjonalistami?" *Wprost*, April 2, 2006, <http://www.wprost.pl/ar/88353/Czy-jestesmy-nacjonalistami/> (accessed December 18, 2009); and Marcin Urynowicz, "Liczenie z pamięcią," *Tygodnik Powszechny*, October 30, 2007, <http://tygodnik2003-2007.onet.pl/1547,1448231,0,547780,dzial.html> (accessed December 18, 2009).

inquiry onto the scope of varied crimes of ordinary Poles against Jews during and after the Holocaust.<sup>7</sup> For example, the fourth volume of *Zagłada Żydów: Studia i materiały*, an academic journal of the Polish Center for Holocaust Research based in Warsaw,<sup>8</sup> chiefly examines paid rescuers, some who later denounced those they rescued, and some who then murdered their Jewish charges. Other works also discuss the history of paid rescuers and the uneasy relationship between Jewish survivors and paid rescuers,<sup>9</sup> and the complexities of wartime life for rescuers and survivors in specific localities.<sup>10</sup> Some of these works, no doubt inspired by Jan T. Gross's work, underscore what I call the "grey zone" of rescue activities.

In the early 2000s, with the emergence of a new critical history writing school about Polish-Jewish relations, Poland developed new rituals of honoring Polish rescuers of Jews. One of the first such commemoration projects was initiated by the short-lived grassroots Polish-American Jewish Alliance for Youth Action (PAJA) established by two Americans, the late Dennis Mislner and Zofia Zager. PAJA presented each of the living Polish Righteous a special "Tree of Gratitude and Honor" award and aimed to establish them as heroes in Poland. Currently the Galicia Museum in Kraków continues the PAJA's work

7 For the latest examples of this history genre, see Jan Grabowski, *Judenjagd. Polowanie na Żydów 1942–1945. Studium dziejów pewnego powiatu* and Barbara Engelking, *Jest Taki Piękny Słoneczny Dzień ... Losy Żydów szukających ratunku na wsi polskiej 1942–1945*, both published in February 2011 by the Polish Center for Holocaust Research based in Warsaw.

8 *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i materiały*, vol. 4 (2008) includes major articles by Dariusz Libonka, Jan Grabowski, Grzegorz Berendt, Barbara Engelking, and Joanna Tokarska-Bakir.

9 See, for example, Jan Grabowski, *Rescue for Money: Paid Helpers in Poland, 1939–1945* in *Search and Research: Lectures and Papers*, no. 13 (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2008) and Witold Mędykowski, "Sprawiedliwi, niesprawiedliwi? O złożoności stosunków pomiędzy ratującymi a ocalonymi w okresie Zagłady," in Edyta Czop and Elżbieta Rączy, eds., *Z dziejów polsko-żydowskich w XX wieku* (Rzeszów: IPN and Uniwersytet Rzeszowski, 2009), 27–37.

10 See, for example, Andrzej Żbikowski, ed. *Polacy i Żydzi pod okupacją niemiecką 1939–1945: Studia i materiały* (Warsaw: IPN, 2006), chaps. 9 and 10 by Elżbieta Rączy and Anna Pyżewska, respectively; Elżbieta Rączy, *Pomoc Polaków dla ludności żydowskiej na Rzeszowczyźnie, 1939–1945* (Rzeszów: IPN, 2008); Jacek Leociak, *Ratowanie: Opowieści Polaków i Żydów* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2010); Małgorzata Melchior, *Zagłada i tożsamość: Polscy Żydzi ocaleni "na aryjskich papierach"* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN, 2004).

with rescuers and survivors.<sup>11</sup> Simultaneously, there were genuine calls to honor rescuers by naming local schools for them in order to firmly establish them as Polish wartime heroes in the eyes of Polish youth. At times, however, this idea has met with negative reactions and rejection from local political elites and communities.<sup>12</sup>

In the mid-2000s, new collections of oral histories of rescuers and survivors began to emerge. These projects contribute to the reinterpretation of the history of Polish-Jewish relations and Polish behavior towards Jews during the Holocaust. The Polish-English-German language publication, *Światła w ciemności: Sprawiedliwi wśród narodów świata* is one such oral history initiative.<sup>13</sup> Several young enthusiasts from the Lublin-based cultural center Brama Grodzka-Teatr NN are the authors of this collection of sixty-one interviews conducted in the 2000s with Polish rescuers, their children, and other eyewitnesses from the Lublin district and other southeast areas. The interviews reveal the interwoven wartime lives of rescuers and their Jewish charges in all their complexity, and opposing the soothing pre-1989 hegemonic representations of Polish society.

Unlike the Brama Grodzka grassroots project, the online “Polacy Sprawiedliwi-Przywracanie pamięci” project, established in 2007 by the Museum of Polish Jews Project in Warsaw, is a state-sponsored initiative to memorialize rescuers as Polish heroes and to gather their oral histories. So far the project organizers have conducted 300 interviews with rescuers, most of whom have already been honored as Righteous Among the Nations,<sup>14</sup> and have also launched a Warsaw-based educational initiative for building a civic democratic society – Żolibórz-ogród Sprawiedliwych wśród Narodów Świata. This workshop introduces the participants to the history of rescuers in Żolibórz, a pre-1939 socialist (PPS) neighborhood of Warsaw, where many rescue operations took place.<sup>15</sup>

11 See the PAJA’s educational packet “Those Who Acted...” (Kraków: Polish-American Jewish Alliance for Youth Action, 2003).

12 See Paweł P. Reszka, “Szkola im. Sprawiedliwych wśród narodów świata,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, February 20, 2006; and voices on the forum of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, <http://forum.gazeta.pl/forum/w,62,37195375.html> (accessed December 18, 2009).

13 *Światła w ciemności. Sprawiedliwi wśród narodów świata* (Lublin: Brama Grodzka-Teatr NN, 2008). The book is available online: <http://teatrnn.pl/sprawiedliwi/node/9/Biblioteka>.

14 The interviews are available online at [www.sprawiedliwi.org.pl](http://www.sprawiedliwi.org.pl).

15 “Pospaceruj po Żoliborzu śladami tych, którzy ratowali Żydów,” <http://warsawa.gazeta.pl/warszawa/1,95190,8334348, Pospaceruj...> (accessed September 22, 2010).

The late Irena Sendlerowa (1910–2008) represents the best-known case of the current process of the “archeology” of rescuers. Sendlerowa (wartime codename “Jolanta”) has become the most famous Polish rescuer of Jews in both Poland and abroad.<sup>16</sup> Her name is evoked in almost every public discussion of the subject and she has been transformed into a major feature film “heroine.”<sup>17</sup> In 2007 the Polish Association of Child Holocaust Survivors (Stowarzyszenia Dzieci Holocaustu) and the American Foundation “Life in a Jar” established an award in her name, *Za naprawianie świata*, annually bestowed upon educators and public figures involved in building a civil and prejudice-free society in post-communist Poland.<sup>18</sup> Yet, until the mid-2000s, she was a little known figure in public life, and was in fact first “discovered” outside of Poland by American schoolgirls from Kansas who wrote a play about her and her wartime deeds.<sup>19</sup> But in 2007, one year before her death at the age of 98, representatives of the Polish state tried to nominate her for a Nobel Peace Prize, a diplomatic move addressed at audiences abroad to show that Poland today is free of ethnic prejudice and that it pays tribute to those who rescued Polish Jews. As part of this campaign the Polish Senate honored her actions and the actions of Żegota, the wartime Council to Assist the Jews, for which Sendlerowa clandestinely worked on March 14 that year.

Poland’s “discovery” of Sendlerowa is also a part of building new diplomatic relations with Israel.<sup>20</sup> The broad positive public outcome of such commemoration in the country lies in the reaffirmation of

16 Anna Mieszkowska, *Matka dzieci holokaustu: Historia Ireny Sendlerowej* (Warsaw: Wyd. Literackie Muza, 2004) (Hebrew ed. 2009 and English ed. 2011); and the documentary film by Mary Skinner, *Irena Sendler: In the Name of Their Mothers*, which was aired in the U.S. on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) on May 1, 2011.

17 *Dzieci Ireny Sendlerowej* by John Kent Harrison, 2009. The film is based on Mieszkowska, *Matka dzieci holokaustu*.

18 See report “Za naprawianie świata,” April 28, 2008, <http://www.forum-znak.org.pl/print.php?t=wydarzenia&id=7212&l=pl> (accessed September 5, 2010).

19 For an encounter of the elderly Sendlerowa with the American schoolgirls in Warsaw, see the documentary film, *Lista Sendlerowej* by Michał J. Dudziewicz. See the DVD, *Irena Sendlerowa* (Narodowe Centrum Kultury, Multimedialne Wydawnictwo Edukacyjne, 2009).

20 Adar Primor’s interview with Radosław Sikorski, Minister of Foreign Affairs, “Polish Foreign Minister to Haaretz: Nazi Germany Carried Out the Holocaust against Our Will,” *Haaretz*, February 27, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/misc/article-print-page/polish-fm-to-haaretz...> (accessed March 1, 2011).

rescuers' wartime deeds as an honorable and heroic aspect of Polish wartime history. However, in the right-wing and nationalist public debate and writing, rescuers are used instrumentally to counterbalance the narratives of the dark aspects of Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust. One case in point is the family of Józef and Wiktoria Ulm from the village of Markowa in the Rzeszów district. While Irena Senderowa, part of a left-wing Polish socialist milieu survived the war in spite of denunciations, the Germans brutally murdered Józef and Wiktoria Ulm, all their children, and the hidden Jewish fugitives on March 24, 1944.<sup>21</sup> The most recent articulation of counterbalancing the “dark history” by underscoring and manipulating the Ulm family's wartime biography — the shining positive history — is observable in the first reactions of politicians of the Law and Justice Party (PiS)<sup>22</sup> and journalists of the Catholic, right-wing *Nasz Dziennik* to the newly published and highly controversial book by Jan Tomasz Gross *Złote żniwa*.<sup>23</sup>

A strategy of using rescuers as a counterbalance to the anti-Jewish attitudes and behavior during the war can be traced to the early post-war period. Counterbalancing and drawing inaccurate symmetries between the good acts toward Jews and antisemitic activities became a fully established and widely endorsed strategy of saving face — Polish honor — at the expense of historical truth. This strategy has remained an intrinsic part of public memory and history writing. However, in the raw accounts of the wartime experiences, Holocaust survivors emerging from the war and their genuine rescuers voiced a much more complex image of Polish society. An in-depth textual analysis of these accounts illuminates the historical, social, psychological, and moral aspects of rescue activities. It shows that the history of rescuers and Polish society's attitudes and behavior toward Jews during the war and its

21 On the Ulm family, but without a nuanced historical context, see Mateusz Szpytma and Jarosław Szarek, *Sprawiedliwi wśród narodów świata: Przejmująca historia polskiej rodziny, która poświęciła swoje życie ratując Żydów*, 2nd expanded ed. (Kraków: Dom Wydawniczy Rafael, 2004) and Mateusz Szpytma, *The Risk of Survival: The Rescue of the Jews by the Poles and the Tragic Consequences for the Ulma Family from Markowa* (Warsaw, Kraków: IPN, 2009).

22 See the report “PiS chce oddać hołd Polakom ukrywającym Żydów,” *Wprost*, March 7, 2011, <http://www.wprost.pl/ar/234625/PiS-chce-oddac-hold-Polak...> (accessed March 7, 2011).

23 See Małgorzata Rutkowska, “Prymitywna antypolska propaganda Grossa” and accompanied testimonies of rescuers “Godni synowie naszej Ojczyzny,” *Nasz Dziennik*, January 5–6, 2011, 20–21.



aftermath cannot be written in purely black and white terms, but must include shades of gray.

## **Rescuers and Jewish Organizations in Early Postwar Poland:**

### *The Committee for the Assistance of Poles*

Members of the Central Committee of Polish Jews (CKŻP) and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (the Joint) were perhaps the first to learn of the complexities of the wartime and early postwar relationships between Jewish survivors and rescuers. William Bein, an American Jew and second director of the Warsaw branch of the Joint, following the tragic death of its first director Dawid [David] Guzik in March 1946, was exposed to this matter through letters — pleas of survivors asking for material assistance for their wartime benefactors. Gabriel Tenenbaum, a survivor from the town of Kobryń in Polesie province wrote one of these letters:

In my second letter dated May, [May 27, 1947, letter addressed to the Executive Committee of CKŻP],<sup>24</sup> I had enclosed the letter of this Christian gentleman, but I did not get an answer. Therefore, now I turn to you, I think that it is a question of honor for us as Jews to help a Christian who earned it when he is in extreme need... I believe that you, Mr. Bein, will, as the representative of the honor of American Jewry, understand me and [will respond] to my prayers to help him.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, Polish officials such as Prof. Alexander W. Rudziński of the Polish Consulate General in New York<sup>26</sup> were also bringing to Bein's attention cases of Christian Poles who had dedicated themselves to sav-

24 Letter of Gabriel Tenenbaum, May 27, 1947, Łódź to the Executive Committee of CKŻP, Żydowski Instytut Historyczny (ŻIH) Archives, File no. 303/VIII/226, 20–21.

25 Letter of Gabriel Tenenbaum, July 8, 1947, Łódź, to Warsaw branch of the Joint, ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/226, 24–25.

26 Alexander W. Rudziński, Professor at Jagiellonian University in Kraków until January 1950, when he asked for asylum in the United States, head of the legal department of the Polish Consulate General in New York and legal counselor to the Polish delegation to the United Nations.

ing the lives of Polish Jews during the war, and who now faced material hardships, unemployment, and illness in the war's aftermath.

Dear Sirs,

I take the liberty in recommending to you the following persons who are in dire need of your assistance and who for multiple reasons deserve it wholeheartedly. All these persons of Christian faith risked their lives for the Jews they had saved and were for this reason tracked down by the Germans during the occupation.<sup>27</sup>

William Bein's office was swamped mainly with requests for financial and material aid from traumatized, physically ill, and destitute Holocaust survivors who had begun to emerge from hiding places on the Aryan side and from concentration and death camps as early as the latter part of 1944.<sup>28</sup> However, he was not indifferent to letters recounting rescue activities and the postwar fate of selfless and heroic rescuers who went above and beyond the call of duty to save a Jewish life during the war. In fact, according to him, it was just such correspondence that prompted Bein to establish the *Komitet Pomocy Polakom* (Committee for Assistance to Poles), also referred to as *Komitet* or *Komisja Pomocy Aryjczykom* (Committee for Assistance to Aryans). The committee began its work on November 15, 1946 and ended its activities, like the Joint, its mother institution, in late 1949. The committee had four main goals: to distribute financial aid, food, and clothing among rescuers, and to provide Christian holiday greetings and gifts to those rescuers who were known to have served the Jewish cause. Moreover, it planned to bring the public's attention to the rescuers. Finally, it aimed to draw up a comprehensive chart of rescue activities by Poles. The latter two aims did not come to fruition.

Barely half a month after the official establishment of the committee, Bein was eager to report to his supervisors in New York about

27 Letter of Prof. Alexander Rudziński to the Joint Distribution Committee, New York, October 24, 1946. Rudziński strongly recommended seven rescuers Kazimiera Kijak, Helena Brzozowska, Stefania Skarżeńska, Prof. Tadeusz Kotarbiński, Stanisława Bobkowska, Kazimierz Pietras, and Irena Rudnicka, ŻIH Archives, 350/1265, 9.

28 On the history of the re-emergence of the remnants of the Jewish community, child and adult survivors, see Lucjan Dobroszycki, "Re-emergence and Decline of a Community: The Numerical Size of the Jewish Population in Poland, 1944–47," *YIVO Annual*, 21 (1993), pp. 3–32.

these new initiatives, the delicate nature of the new project, and the inevitable challenges it was to face.

You are perfectly right in stating that we have our hands full in meeting the needs of the Jews.

Nevertheless, on my initiative, a special committee has been set up to give consideration and attention to Gentiles who helped Jews during the occupation. This whole matter is of rather a delicate and complex nature and if not properly handled could have some very unfavorable results.<sup>29</sup>

During the first two months of its activities, the Committee for Assistance to Poles was bombarded with letters regarding 350 cases of rescuers and as a result awarded varying amounts of financial assistance to ninety-five individuals, clothing parcels to seventy-nine individuals, and food parcels to twenty-seven individuals. The Committee also referred three Poles for medical treatment, and assisted three others in finding employment. In addition, the committee prepared and distributed sixty Christmas and New Year parcels to certain Poles who had not requested any assistance, but who were well known for their undisputed dedication in saving Jews during the Holocaust. Among the first to receive such holiday parcels was, for example, Professor Tadeusz Kotarbiński (1886–1981), the distinguished Polish philosopher, who had regularly assisted his former students, colleagues, and acquaintances to the extent of providing shelter to fugitives from the Warsaw ghetto in his wartime home in the capital.

For the first two months the committee had a budget of 850,000 zlotys: 500,000 zlotys from CKŻP and 350,000 from the Joint. However, the expenditure during this period exceeded its budget. By January 1947, the Committee had spent 926,500 zlotys, at which time members were preparing to review 300 new requests, and to make up holiday parcels for the forthcoming Easter holiday in the spring of 1947. Its members estimated the need for an additional 4,200,000 zlotys to fulfill genuine demand for the first half of 1947.

The Committee's objective was to extend help to three categories of rescuers, thus defined: first, those individuals who had played a vital role in underground activities on behalf of Jews; second, individu-

29 Letter of William Bein to Retz L. Stein, Joint, New York, December 2, 1946, ŻIH Archives, 350/1265, 6.

als whose rescue actions were rooted in altruism rather than personal gain; and third, individuals who had hidden Jews in their own homes.<sup>30</sup> The committee distinguished between assistance offered to the underground Jewish organizations and individual rescue activities. The criteria regarding rescuers put forward by the Committee for Assistance to Poles can be viewed as somewhat similar to the demanding standards applied by Yad Vashem’s examining committee to nomination for the title of Righteous Among the Nations.<sup>31</sup> According to Yad Vashem, the title of Righteous Among the Nations is reserved for individuals who aided Jews in danger of being killed or sent to a concentration camp; who were aware that they were risking their lives in providing aid to Jewish fugitives; who acted without requiring or expecting material reward; and whose aid was active not passive. To date Yad Vashem has honored approximately 24,000 such people, and the number is still increasing not only for Poland, but also for other countries of former Nazi-occupied Eastern and Western Europe.<sup>32</sup>

The first report of the Committee for Assistance to Poles, dated January 20, 1947, emphasized that Poles involved in underground activities on behalf of Jews were to be offered the highest payments — 10,000–25,000 zlotys — and some rescuers received such payments more than once.<sup>33</sup> Regarding individual assistance, the committee

30 Report of the Committee to Assist Poles, January 20, 1947, Warsaw. File no. 350/1266, 1, Archives of ŻIH.

31 On a brief history of the Yad Vashem Committee for the Righteous Among the Nations, including criticism of Yad Vashem for excluding Jewish rescuers, see Michael Berenbaum, “The Rescuers: When the Ordinary is Extraordinary,” in Jonathan C. Friedman, ed., *The Routledge History of the Holocaust* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2011), pp. 337–347; see also Kobi Kabalek, “The Commemoration before the Commemoration: Yad Vashem and the Righteous Among the Nations, 1945–1963,” *Yad Vashem Studies*, 39:1 (2011), pp. 169–211.

32 On various social and cultural factors behind the most recent wave of applications by Jewish survivors and their families on behalf of their wartime rescuers, see important observations by Jeannine (Levana) Frenk in Idem, *Righteous Among the Nations in France and Belgium: A Silent Resistance in Search and Research: Lectures and Papers*, no. 12 (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2008).

33 See the reports on financial aid to rescuers, *Pomoc udzielana Polakom* (Aid to Poles), November 21, 1946, and March 15, 1947, File no. 350/1266, 51–53; Report on the Activities of the Committee for the Assistance of Poles, April 1947, file no. 350/1266, 56. During this month, fourteen Poles received financial aid in the amount of 148,000 zlotys, the lowest payments were 5,000 and 8,000 zlotys, and the highest were 20,000 and 25,000 zlotys. Archives of ŻIH.

offered assistance primarily to rescuers of children and total strangers who had carried out such activities out of genuine concern for the safety and lives of Jewish fugitives, rather than for selfish reasons.<sup>34</sup> The committee's position on those Poles motivated by selfishness and profit was that it was the responsibility of the rescued individuals and their families to fulfill any *quid pro quos* they had made with their saviors during the war. Moreover, the committee's objective was to focus solely on those requests from Christian Poles that invoked positive attitudes towards Jews.<sup>35</sup> The way these objectives were formulated reveals the vexed problems of rescue activities — many twists and turns in this process — and the correspondence addressed to the committee further uncovers the multiple attitudes and expectations, complexities, and murky positions involved.

### **Epistolary Records: Exquisite Eloquence and Touching Simplicity**

Correspondence written by both individual rescuers and Jewish survivors constitutes a unique and voluminous collection of more than 500 letters. This correspondence also includes thank-you letters written by rescuers to the Committee for the Assistance of Poles, and private letters of rescuers, rescued, and members of survivors' families, accompanying the official petitions.

This correspondence constitutes a body of rare and salient data for the study of fresh, raw postwar memories of intricate wartime relations between Christian rescuers and rescued Jews. Moreover, these epistolary records provide an invaluable source for examining the wide range of interactions between Christian Poles and Polish Jews in the aftermath of World War II, and the social and economic situation of Polish society during that turbulent period. Finally, these testimonies

34 For the first detailed discussion of providing shelter for payments, see Nechama Tec, *When Light Pierced the Darkness* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 87–98. Tec reaches an important conclusion about money as a temporary and unstable incentive to help Jews. See also the latest study dedicated to the 'rescuers for profit,' Grabowski, *Rescue for Money: Paid Helpers in Poland, 1939–1945*; and Gunnar S. Paulsson, *Secret City: The Hidden Jews of Warsaw, 1940–1945* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 2002), pp. 131–135.

35 Report of the Committee for the Assistance of Poles, January 20, 1947, Warsaw. File no. 350/1266, 2, Archives of ŻIH.

can help us to understand the continuity and complexities of sensibilities and feelings about saving a human life, events that impact the lives of rescuers, both those who were recognized in the past and those who were recognized only in the 2000s, and Jewish survivors and their families up to the present.

The correspondence contains accounts of both exquisite eloquence and touching simplicity, and is written varyingly from haste to more carefully considered tones. It reveals every shade of human emotion, ranging from anger, jealousy and betrayal, to kindness, compassion, and love. It portrays a full gamut of human values and sensibilities, shedding light on self-interested fraudsters with their greed, broken promises, and cynical exploitation of one another, as on self-effacing altruistic actors acting out of patriotic, civilian, and religious duty, and pure humanitarian devotion. Thus, this correspondence offers a window onto the multiple motivations behind the rescue operations of Jews and multiple commitments and demands of real life during the war.

At the same time, these letters do not shed light on the history of rescuers who in the course of the war had transformed themselves into the perpetrators of crimes against their former Jewish charges,<sup>36</sup> nor do these letters deal with individuals who provided momentary forms of aid to Jews that also led to saving a life.<sup>37</sup>

The first impression one gets on reading these letters is of the commonalities of the early postwar experience of rescuers and Jewish survivors. Both groups faced enormous material hardships and struggles against illness, and both were driven by the similar powerful desire to rebuild their personal and professional lives and to heal the torments of the war. However, here the commonality ends. In the case of the majority of the Holocaust survivors, their lives in all aspects had changed forever. There was no possibility in any sense of going back, but only on embarking on new directions and a completely new

36 For a discussion of such cases based on written testimonies and oral histories, see Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, "The Unrighteous Righteous and the Righteous Unrighteous," *Dapim: Studies on the Shoah*, vol. 24 (2010), pp. 11–63. The article appeared first in Polish in *Zagłada Żydów: Studia i materiały*, vol. 4 (2008), pp. 170–217.

37 See Joanna Beata Michlic, *Jewish Children in Nazi-Occupied Poland: Survival and Polish-Jewish Relations during the Holocaust as Reflected in Early Postwar Recollections in Search and Research: Lectures and Papers*, no. 14 (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2008).

life. This frequently involved a change of family name<sup>38</sup> and geographical location that in turn meant exposure to and adjustment to a new culture, language, and social status. Finally, creating new families and social networks became a necessary strategy for survival, since most of the original families and local communities had perished.

The urge to leave the nightmarish past behind played a role in the relationship between rescuers and Jewish survivors in the immediate postwar period, but was not the only factor in determining the interactions between these two groups at that time. In reality, there were multiple objective and subjective emotional factors. They included the attitudes and behavior of rescuers toward Jewish fugitives/charges, the type of ties thus forged during the war, social and cultural backgrounds, individual understanding of moral responsibility, the desire to repay kindness with kindness, the possession or lack of material means, and the degree or lack of personal contact between rescuers and their Jewish charges at the end of the war.

The communist rise to power came with an official declaration of equality for all citizens and a commitment to fight antisemitism on the one hand and, on the other, an increasing wave of anti-Jewish attitudes and violence, and the persistence of low societal approval of rescue activities. Maria Hochberg-Mariańska, herself a Jewish survivor and a member of the Kraków branch of Żegota during the war, reported as early as 1946 the most striking accounts of wartime and early postwar low societal approval of rescue activities of even Jewish children.<sup>39</sup> Hostility toward rescuers had an impact on the lives of the rescuers and Jewish survivors, and on the interactions between these two groups. In the new-old climate some rescuers in the countryside

38 On the problem of retaining and using “Aryan” names among the survivors who remained in Poland, see the important study by Irena Hurwic-Nowakowska, *Żydzi Polscy (1947–1950): Analiza więzi społecznej ludności żydowskiej* (Warsaw: Pan, 1996). This book is based on the author’s impressive 1950 Ph.D. dissertation.

39 Maria Hochberg-Mariańska, “Introduction” to Maria Hochberg-Mariańska and Noe Grüss, eds. *Dzieci żydowskie oskarżają* (Kraków: Żydowska Komisja Historyczna w Krakowie, 1946); English ed., *The Children Accuse* (London and Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell, 1996), p. 24. For the first analysis of the local Polish hostile environment toward rescuers, see Jan T. Gross, *Upiorna dekada: Trzy eseje na temat wzajemnych relacji między Żydami, Polakami, Niemcami i komunistami w latach 1939–1948*, 2nd expanded ed. (Kraków: Austeria, 2007; 1st ed. 1998). For a discussion of *Upiorna dekada* (Ghastly Decade), see “Polacy i Żydzi w upiornej dekadzie: Dyskusja,” *Więź*, no. 7 (1999), pp. 4–22.

and small towns struggled to recover from physical abuse and psychological harassment or from the destruction of their property by those who did not approve of their rescue activities. And so these rescuers turned in despair to Jewish organizations to assist them to make a fresh start, as this simple letter of Helena Sadowska from Miastkowo, near Łomża reveals:

Because I sheltered Jews, forest bands destroyed my farm and took away my two horses, a cart, and pigs. They “visited” me nine times. [Therefore,] I ask you [the Jewish community in Warsaw] for a positive attitude toward my request and to offer me financial aid, so that I will be able to buy a horse. Without a horse, I cannot run my farm.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, the fact that the Joint and other Western Jewish organizations were donating massive financial aid and other material goods to the remnants of Polish Jewry,<sup>41</sup> also played a role in shaping relations between the rescuers and Jewish survivors. It was as though in the realm of material assistance and moral support, rescuers had become dependent on those who were previously so dependent on them during the war thus reversing the core of the relationship.

## **“I will never forget what you did for me during the war.” Remembering and Forgetting**

One of the central themes that is presented in early postwar Jewish discussions about rescuers who undertook rescue activities purely out of civil duty or humanitarian and Christian conviction, is remembrance of their noble acts and of the enormous sacrifices they had to make in order to save their Jewish charges. In this discourse, these rescuers

40 Letter of Helena Sadowska to the Jewish *Kehillah* in Warsaw, May 29, 1947, Miastkowo, district Łomża file ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/238, 848. Sadowska’s letter was accompanied by the statements of two Jewish witnesses, Leon Kofler and Pinkas Gruszniewski, who confirmed the truthfulness of her testimony. Pinkas Gruszniewski, who she took to the Jewish Children’s Home in Bytom at Smoleńska no. 16, was in fact the youngest of the six Jewish charges under her care. See ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/238, 848.

41 Yosef Litvak, “The Joint’s Attitude toward Rehabilitating She’erit HaPletah in Poland, 1944–1949,” (Hebrew) in Benjamin Pinkus, ed., *The Jews of Eastern Europe between the Shoah and Rebirth, 1944–1948* (Hebrew) (Sde Boker: The Ben Gurion Heritage Center, 1987), pp. 334–388.



are, as a rule, presented as individuals who went well beyond the call of duty to save a Jewish person and thus as individuals showed themselves capable of extraordinary humanitarian efforts.

In their private letters, written both within Poland and abroad, adult and young survivors clearly articulate the intention never to forget those Christian Poles who had saved their lives so unselfishly. This is understood not only as a personal moral duty, but also as an expression of loyalty and a strong emotional lifelong bond, including the desire to repay kindness with kindness. The authors of these letters express deep, positive family-like attachments toward their rescuers, and thereby provide information pertaining to their own current existential situation and state of mind.

These survivors tend to communicate with their wartime benefactors not only around Christmas and Easter holidays, traditionally a time for exchanging greetings among family members and friends, but also to write to them without a special occasion. They are keen on sharing with their rescuers the many vignettes of their new lives and fresh experiences, as they travel through various European countries to expected or unexpected new homelands. Moreover, they always request information and express concerns about the current situation and well-being of their rescuers:

Our beloved friends,

We have not received even one reply from you to any of our letters. Perhaps you have not received them. I beg you to respond to this letter immediately upon its arrival. We would be very glad to hear from you.

We will never forget about you and always hold the image of our dear Mr. [*Pan gospodarz*] before our eyes. We will always hold all of you as dearest in our hearts. Wherever we go and whom-ever we speak to, we always mention you. We have been traveling for several weeks and rest sometimes in in places we pass through. We visited Austria and now we are in the Winterberg area in Germany. We have a big apartment similar to that which we had in Wrocław. We found Malwinka and Bronek, and [now] live together.... Here where we now live there is countryside, but much bigger and more beautiful than Rohatyń, or the town of Brzeżany.

We are fine but we do not know the schedule or destina-

tion where we will be next traveling. I am finishing now because everybody else wants to drop a line and they are shouting at me that I have not left them enough space. Please write us, first of all, about whatever our beloved Lincia reports to you, about how she feels, and if she has found a good husband. Write us about what all your children are doing.

I kiss you all and wish you lots of happiness and all good things. Anka<sup>42</sup>

Despite a strong desire to repay kindness with kindness, many survivors wrote of feeling that they are not able to offer much for now, which is hardly surprising given their unsettled economic and social situation. Physical and mental injuries and lack of the tools necessary for engaging in one's profession plagued many survivors remaining in Poland. The older ones, due to their age, mental scars, and medical problems could not earn a good living, while the younger adults were preoccupied with the upbringing of newborn children, and putting all their energies into satisfying the needs of their newly recreated families. Those who had already left Poland were not necessarily sure of their future destination, and were concentrating on acquiring new skills, and seeking out remaining family members, and getting by on limited funds for the duration of their journey. Some survivors openly acknowledge the overwhelming unknowns and insecurities of their early postwar lives, as exemplified in the following letter of Hanka Hamersztajn written in Milan, Italy, on May 8, 1946, to her rescuer Jan Syta of Warsaw.

Dear Andzia and Janek,

Today we celebrate the anniversary of the end of the war, and on this really warm day I remember your dear faces. During both difficult and happy moments of my life, I often think about you. Visiting the beauty of Italy, Rome, and Venice, and enjoying the miracles of nature, I also think about people I rarely come across now. I often reflect on your human kindness, and the sacrifices you made for us.... My beloved ones, life is beautiful, but tough. I am struggling with reaching my goals. Sometime in the future,

42 Letter of Anka (no family name given), Wittenberg, January 7, 1947, ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/243, 23–25.

once I settle down somewhere permanently, I will try to repay you somehow. I remember everything, everything!<sup>43</sup>

Other letters reveal survivors without financial means who nevertheless felt a strong personal obligation to reward their selfless rescuers without delay, and who therefore looked chiefly toward the Jewish organizations to quickly alleviate hardships incurred by their wartime benefactors. Many wrote petitions to the CKŻP or the Joint in Warsaw, asking for assistance on behalf of their rescuers. In separate private letters, they informed their saviors about the requests they had made to Jewish institutions, and urged them to follow up on them, as in this letter by the husband of Mrs. Anka, following his wife's above-cited letter:

Our loved one,  
My wife has already written briefly to you about everything. I want to add that we will never forget about you all. Here I work as director of a vocational school and have no reason to complain. My Anka also works and we are fine. Dear Mr. Michaś [diminutive of Michał], please let me know if my request on your behalf to the Jewish committee has had a successful outcome. If you are traveling to Wrocław, you must visit Mr. Kamerling — he lives where we used to — and remind him to assist you, if, in the meantime, you have not received a positive answer [from the Jewish Committee] at my request.<sup>44</sup>

Some survivors, who had already moved abroad and were enjoying financial security, were determined to help their saviors of their own accord. Their actions sprang from an impelled gratitude and the commandment not to forget. However, they sometimes found it impossible to reach their rescuers for the lack of communications infrastructure. For example, Abraham Seidel from Łuck managed for a while to send modest parcels to Adam Polak of Bursztynowo village, near Grudziądz, via the Polish Consulate in Rome. Adam Polak had sheltered Seidel for eighteen months in his home and supplied him with food, clothing, and precious Aryan identity documents. When the ability to post par-

43 Letter of Hanka [Hammersztajn, Hamerstein], Milan, to Jan Syta, ul Ząbkowa 7, Warsaw, May 8, 1946, ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/239, 71–73.

44 Letter of Anka's husband, signed only as "engineer," ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/243, 26.

cels to Poland ended due to the discontinuation of the postal service at the Polish Consulate, Seidel, who resided in the Kibbutz Villa Cicerone, in Grottaferrata, twenty kilometers southeast of Rome, did not give up. In April 1947, he turned to the Joint office in Rome for help and urged them to arrange assistance for his rescuer through the Joint office in Warsaw. Thanks to Seidel's insistence and perseverance, Adam Polak's case was finally presented to the Committee for the Assistance of Poles in Warsaw in October 1947. The Committee granted him a Christmas parcel in December the same year.

### **“I did not at all expect such proof of your remembering me.” Rescuers' Reactions toward Gifts Bestowed upon Them by Jewish Organizations**

In the letters of the rescuers, the theme of remembrance takes on two distinct forms. Selfless rescuers who had not requested any material or financial aid, but who had received Christmas and New Year greetings and gifts from the Committee for the Assistance of Poles and CKŻP, wholeheartedly thanked the Jewish organizations for remembering their wartime deeds. One such rescuer was Irena Solska (1875–1958), a great Polish tragic actress. During the war she lived in Warsaw and was engaged in underground activities. In her apartment at Puławska Street no. 114, Solska provided temporary shelter to many Jews and was known for rescuing individuals at the last moment, when all other options had fallen through.

“This is such a nice surprise, I would like to thank you so much for the parcel. I did not at all expect such proof of your remembering me. I would like to say thanks a lot to the initiators of this action, for sending me so many good things. God bless you. Irena Solska.”<sup>45</sup>

For many, the arrival of unexpected parcels becomes an occasion of reflecting on what they did during the war and the motivation behind their actions.

As a reply to your letter of December 12, 1946, I would like to

<sup>45</sup> Thank-you letter of Irena Solska to CKŻP, Warsaw, [no date], ŻIH Archives, 350/1166, 101. See Irena Solska's biography Lidia Kuchtówna, *Irena Solska* (Warsaw: PIW, 1980), pp. 212–214.

thank you warmly for the Christmas greetings and the present you sent me.

I must say that I was very nicely surprised and touched by this proof of remembering me by CKŻP. As to the help that I offered to the Jews in those critical times, I regard it solely as a well-accomplished civil duty and as an action motivated by feelings of sympathy for a nation so oppressed during the Nazi occupation.

Yours, Piotrowski<sup>46</sup>

In his thank-you note of January 11, 1947, Aleksy Pietrysz, a train driver from Skarżysko-Kamienna, reveals how his admiration for Jews and their cultural contribution to Christian Europe influenced, if not triggered, his rescue actions.

In response to the letter of CKŻP dated December 20, 1946, I would like to thank you warmly for the holiday greetings and Christmas gift (weight eight kilograms).

I am grateful for and touched by the gift. I am proud that I was able to fulfill a human responsibility, though the conditions were tough. I helped anybody who needed me, but most readily the Jews, because the Jews were the most oppressed, even by the Christian nations. Taking into account that the Jewish nation has bestowed the highest spiritual, cultural, and moral values upon others, in my opinion, it therefore deserves help and care from other nations, particularly Christians ones.<sup>47</sup>

For others, it is also an occasion for reflecting on the ways others in Christian Polish society perceived their wartime rescue actions, both during and after the war. These thank-you notes speak volumes about the social isolation of their authors, the lack of understanding and support for their rescue actions, and even about the contempt and hostility visited upon them by members of their local communities. The Kobylec mining family, Karolina and Piotr and their three sons Mieczysław, Alojzy, and Wiktor, penned such a letter. They lived in the part of Silesia incorporated into the Reich, and were officially stateless people during the war because they refused to accept German nationality. Their

46 Thank-you letter of [no first name] Piotrowski to CKŻP, Warsaw, January 15, 1947, ŻIH Archives, 350/1266, 99.

47 Thank-you letter of Aleksy Pietrysz to CKŻP, January 11, 1947, ŻIH Archives, 350/1266, 90.

precarious situation did not stop the family from assisting Jews in the Będzin ghetto and the surrounding area in a variety of ways.

My family and I wish to thank you for remembering us and for the Christmas gift. We are very happy to know that there are still people who understand us and fully appreciate our actions. We fought the German occupier from the beginning of the occupation until we were taken behind the barbed wire of Auschwitz. We returned from there looking as though we were skeletons, physically damaged and materially destroyed. Not only did they steal our clothes, shoes, and bed linen, but even the better quality furniture. The local people are not capable of grasping that we acted selflessly. The fact that they are laughing at us does not bother us, because we are proud of what we did. The history of the locality must be playing a role in the reactions of these people toward us; my parents come from the district of Miechów. Once again we thank you very much for remembering us, and we wish to say goodbye to the entire Committee in a brotherly manner, just as in the bunker during the occupation when your colleagues were saying farewell to us on their way to Czechoslovakia and Hungary.<sup>48</sup>

Some rescuers express bewilderment and frustration with the scornful ways members of their local communities look upon them. The perplexing question that preoccupies them is why “brotherhood, solidarity, mutual assistance, and love of one’s neighbor...[became] hollow words.”<sup>49</sup> Social isolation, contempt, and misinterpretation of rescuers’ motivations and actions by their neighbors and members of local communities rather than mutual support and solidarity, even in the form of consciously keeping silent about the whereabouts of the rescuers and fugitives, in other words, maintaining “the positive silence” regarding their rescue efforts, is a recurring theme in the accounts of selfless rescuers. Therefore, one can argue that in the history of aid to

48 The thank-you letter of Kobylec family to CKŻP, Michałkowice, January, 20, 1947, ŻIH Archives, 350/1266, [89?]. The journalist Józef Goldkorn interviewed Karolina and Mieczysław Kobylec in the 1960s. This interview confirms the account presented in the above-mentioned thank-you letter to CKŻP, and was republished in Bartoszewski and Lewinówna, *Ten jest z Ojczyzny mojej*, pp. 318–321.

49 The thank-you note of Józef Jaroszyński, Kraków, [no date], ŻIH Archives, 350/1266, 91.

Jews in Poland, we (so far) hardly find an account similar to that of the successful collective rescue efforts in the village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon in France.<sup>50</sup> Instead, one finds chilling accounts of solidarity in chasing away and murdering Jewish fugitives,<sup>51</sup> and solidarity in condemning and undermining rescue operations and hurting and betraying the selfless rescuers of Jews.<sup>52</sup>

### **“Do not forget the poor who served well the Jewish cause.” Letters of Complaint to Jewish Organizations**

In some of the letters rescuers speak about being forgotten by their Jewish charges. In their correspondence to the Jewish institutions such as CKŻP, these Christian Poles complain that their Jewish charges left them without a goodbye and failed to fulfill wartime promises and obligations. Their letters give full vent to their deep disappointment and hurt. Moreover, they insist on seeking justice in Jewish institutions. Indeed, members of local Jewish committees carefully investigated such cases by interviewing both Jewish and non-Jewish witnesses.

The feeling of having been forgotten and being unjustly treated is a theme that features prominently in correspondence pertaining to the wartime care of Jewish children.<sup>53</sup> Such correspondence is filled with

50 A number of works discuss the rescue operations on behalf of 5,000 French Jews in the Huguenot town of Le Chambon. See, for example, Philip Hallie's ground-breaking study, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979). Frenk provides a bibliography of the subject in her study *Righteous Among the Nations in France and Belgium*, p. 11.

51 On villages in central Poland, which became accomplices to crimes committed against Jewish fugitives/survivors, see Alina Skibińska and Jakub Petelewicz, “The Participation of Poles in Crimes against Jews in the Świętokrzyskie Region,” *Yad Vashem Studies*, 35:1 (2007), pp. 5–48.

52 On social isolation of rescuers and blackmail and contempt visited upon them see, for example, various cases analyzed in Tokarska-Bakir, “The Unrighteous Righteous and the Righteous Unrighteous,” and Michlic, “Jewish Children in Nazi-Occupied Poland.”

53 On the wartime experiences of Jewish children in Nazi occupied Poland, and the early postwar recovery of these children by Jewish organizations, see the pioneering study by Nachum Bogner, *At the Mercy of Strangers: The Rescue of Hidden Jewish Children in Poland* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2009), (original published in Hebrew in 2000); and also Emunah Nachmany-Gafny, *Dividing Hearts: The Removal of Jewish Children from Gentile Families in Poland in the Immediate Post-Holocaust Years* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2009) (original published in Hebrew in 2005).

varying shades of bitterness and anger, self-pity, bewilderment, confusion, and sadness.

People of mean character have disappeared abroad and forgotten about their obligations toward me. I have no idea where they are based at present and therefore cannot seek justice directly from them. I spent several thousand zlotys on feeding them, and they were supposed to stay just a few weeks, but they stayed with us for two years. The four month-old boy Moses Frizner, known as Ryszard Wójcik, was not able to stay in his hiding place in the apartment because someone denounced him to the criminal police. Therefore, my wife had to run away with him, and they lived in Bieliniac near Nisko....

We served the Jewish cause well and diligently fulfilled our duty. Therefore, we now have the right to request the remuneration that was promised to us. We do not wish to suffer any loss. We hope that you will show your conscience and fulfill our request, similarly to the way in which I protected the baby's life [Moses Frizner's], so diligently, and in so many ways. Presently we are both sick, we cannot make ends meet, and suffer material hardships. I ask you to repay me, at least for now, these several thousand zlotys that I had spent on living costs for these individuals. I also ask for curing my wife of paralysis..."<sup>54</sup>

Some Christian Polish women are the authors of the most emotionally charged letters, expressing feelings of being forgotten and unjustly treated by the relatives of Jewish children who had been in their care during the war. The devastating conditions of their families, no doubt, reinforced these women's feeling of being neglected, unappreciated, tricked, even betrayed. Their cry for recognition of their rescue efforts is interwoven with the cry for financial aid, as illustrated in the following evocative letter of Maria Traczyk:

In 1948, I presented [for the first time] evidence of my helping a Jewish child, in the form of a letter from England written by Leon Figowy. I assisted not only Mr. Figowy's child at risk of my own life, but several other Jewish children too. I sheltered them in the attic, in the toilet, wherever I could, to protect them from disaster.

54 Letter of Michał Wójcik of Nowa Sól, district Koźuchów, Wrocław voivodship, to CKŻP, Warsaw, July 8, 1947, ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/421, 74–75.



I did not count on any payment, but did everything out of a sense of humanity. Today I am alone and seriously ill; after losing my only son who was shot by a German while helping Jews in the [Warsaw] ghetto in 1943; after I was kicked by a German soldier for standing in defense of a Jewish child whom he had tortured. I have witnesses who can confirm all these things, yet today you [the Jewish organizations] forget about me. If I were healthy, I would have asked you for employment, but because my health is fragile I am forced to humbly ask you for help. Do not forget the poor who remembered the Jewish children.

Yours, Maria Traczyk<sup>55</sup>

**“He told me he did not save my life out of desire to make profit.”**

**Accounts of Pure Devotion**

By the end of the war, adult, adolescent, and even some younger child survivors, knew well the difference between rescuers for profit, who treated sheltering Jews as a dangerous but lucrative business, and those rescuers who carried out their rescue activities selflessly, out of loyalty and the pure desire to save human life. Some survivors reported chilling accounts of betrayal of their relatives, friends, and neighbors by individuals who had previously sheltered them in their homes. Meanwhile, others were deeply moved by and spoke about the incredible joy emanating from the selfless rescuers at the end of the war when these Poles realized that they had managed to save a human life against all the odds.<sup>56</sup> Letters recording the actions of the latter are memorable not only for the accounts of wartime dedication, but also for their disconcerting accounts of these individuals’ subsequent experiences in the early postwar period. These letters are the first raw recorded testimony, showing how rescuers were still suffering a heavy toll for their altruistic humanitarian actions in wartime because of their neighbors’

55 Letter of Maria Traczyk of Wronia no. 57, Warsaw to CKŻP, May 31, 1949, ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/240, 19–20.

56 Survivors also recall the difference between the various types of rescuers they and their families encountered during the war in their memoirs written many decades after the war. See, for example, Clara Kramer with Stephen Glantz, *Clara’s War: A Young Girl’s True Story of Miraculous Survival under the Nazis* (Edinburgh: Ebury Press, 2009).

antisemitism, jealousy, and greed, and the unpredictable circumstances of early postwar life and their personal lives.

Felicja Raszkin-Nowakowa, a young Jewish woman from Białystok, found caring rescuers in the Zalewski family who lived in the village of Ponikla, sixteen kilometers from her birthplace. Mr. Zalewski hid her in a barn on the family's farm after smuggling her out of the first temporary shelter Felicja had found on the Aryan side in Białystok. The Zalewski family was acquainted with Felicja's mother prior to the outbreak of the war, and out of loyalty brought food to Felicja's family in the Białystok ghetto set up by the Germans on August 1, 1941. This is how Felicja recalls the Zalewskis' attitude toward her during the long eleven months she spent on their farm until July 1944:

I was hidden in the attic in the straw. I could not make any movements there, nor go down to their home because other farmers [in Ponikla] knew me. We lived in constant stress and fear because of the frequent Nazi searches and the uncovering of hidden Jews in nearby villages. They sheltered me in a great secret and brought me food three times a day, risking their lives. They were all very kind and caring toward me.<sup>57</sup>

Mr. Zalewski did not expect any remuneration for sheltering Felicja and refused to accept the only family treasure she possessed, the diamond ring she had offered him after the Red Army entered the region on July 27, 1944. In Zalewski's eyes, Felicja was an orphan, who still needed material assistance herself. The Zalewskis continued to send her food parcels and refused to accept any money from her after she returned to Białystok to look for surviving family and friends. At about that time, news of the Zalewskis' sheltering of a Jewish girl got out in their village, and thus the troubles began. Unspecified underground military units who were fighting the Russians in that region began to frequently rob the Zalewskis of their possessions and livestock. In addition, one of their neighbors, misinterpreting the nightly underground military visits to the Zalewski farm, denounced them to the new local communist authorities as collaborating with anti-communist forces. As a result, Zalewski and his son were arrested and kept in a communist prison for

57 Letter of Felicja Raszkin-Nowakowa to CKŻP, Warsaw, March 6, 1947, Modlin, ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/242, 6. Zalewski's first name is not cited in the letter.

three months, until at her behest Felicja's only surviving relative, her father's brother, who was serving in the Red Army, intervened.<sup>58</sup>

In March 1947, Felicja wrote to the CKŻP in Warsaw, asking for financial aid and clothing parcels for the Zalewskis' large family. She was then a married woman, residing with her husband, a military man, in Modlin. However, she maintained that presently she herself was still unable to assist her saviors. Nevertheless, she was concerned about the Zalewskis' well-being and disturbed by the knowledge of the losses they had incurred in the aftermath of the war as a result of hiding her. She was fully aware the Zalewskis' precarious social standing in the village, and that the family, though in need, would avoid direct contact with Jewish organizations for fear of further repercussions. Therefore, Felicja requested the CKŻP to respond by mail to her address, rather than directly to the Zalewskis.<sup>59</sup>

This plan well illustrates how, in the immediate postwar period, helping selfless rescuers of Jews had become a delicate and challenging logistical matter. Direct and publicly known assistance, especially in hamlets, villages, and small towns where it was impossible to remain anonymous and to maintain strict privacy, could bring unpleasant repercussions in the form of robberies, verbal and physical abuse, and further misfortunes, including loss of home and, in the most extreme cases, murder of the rescuer. It is difficult if not impossible to establish how many selfless rescuers their Polish compatriots murdered during the war and in the immediate aftermath. Most likely we will never know the exact number because of the long-lasting social taboo on the subject and the current natural increase of deaths among family members who could remember and testify about the murders of their relatives-rescuers who were killed for their wartime deeds.<sup>60</sup> However,

58 In an opening interview to the third edition, *Ten jest z Ojczyzny mojej: Polacy z pomocą Żydom, 1939–1945*, p. xvii, Władysław Bartoszewski recalls cases of denunciations of rescuers to the communist authorities by envious and fearful neighbors in the country. Bartoszewski also states that Jewish survivors, who knew about the arrests of their rescuers, were eager to help obtain their former benefactors' release from a communist prison, if they themselves were not afraid of the new communist regime.

59 Letter of Felicja Raszkin-Nowakowa to CKŻP, Warsaw, March 6, 1947, Modlin, ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/242, 5–8.

60 For a chilling oral history account of the two brothers Kazimierz and Stanisław Wasilewscy of the village Zucielec, near Trzcianne, the sons of the rescuer Anna Wasilewska, who was raped and subsequently killed by an unnamed military

what it is possible to ascertain is that in the early postwar period to extend help to rescuers became by necessity, a careful and guarded project, to be kept in secret not dissimilar to the secrecy maintained by selfless rescuers themselves during the war. Such secrecy has persisted in some localities even up to the present, along with the surviving state of disapproval for wartime rescue activities.<sup>61</sup> One such disturbing example of surviving animosity toward wartime aid to Jews, is that of verbal abuse directed at ageing and ailing rescuers by members of their peer group in old people’s retirement homes.<sup>62</sup>

**“I helped the needy according to my abilities during the war, so please do not deny me help now.”  
Pleading for Help to Escape Desperate Conditions**

In rescuers’ letters, the common explanation and central rationale of requests to Jewish organizations for material and financial aid was expressed along the lines: “The pathetic state I am in compels me to ask

group (*chłopcy z lasu*) on April 18, 1945, see the short documentary film by Łukasz Konopa *Ukryci*, 2010. The film was made by the Ethnographic Archives of Warsaw University as part of Konopa’s M.A. degree work under the supervision of Prof. Joanna Tokarska-Bakir. In 1988, Yad Vashem honored Jan and Anna Wasilewscy (posthumously) and their three sons, Kazimierz, Stanisław, and Jerzy, as Righteous Among the Nations. According to Kazimierz and Stanisław Wasilewscy, one of three Jewish survivors, a young (unnamed) woman was also killed by Poles after she left the wartime shelter in their family home and moved back to Białystok. I would like to thank Prof. Joanna Tokarska-Bakir for making the film accessible to me.

- 61 On the problem of continuing low societal approval of rescuers, see Cezary Łazarewicz, “Sprawiedliwi wśród narodu: Ukrywali Żydów, dziś sami się ukrywają,” *Polityka*, March 14, 2010, <http://www.polityka.pl/spoleczenstwo/reportaze/1503822,1,ukrywali...> (accessed June, 2010); see also Bikont, *My z Jedwabnego* (Warsaw: Prószyński i S-ka, SA, 2004), pp. 249–256 and 260–264; Paweł P. Reszka, “Lęk Sprawiedliwych,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Section “Duży Format,” February 12, 2006; and the documentary films by Agnieszka Arnold, *Sąsiedzi* (2001, TVP, Poland) and Sławomir Grünberg, *The Legacy of Jedwabne* (2005, LOGTV, USA). These oral history projects reveal that even in the early 2000s, the aging Polish rescuers of Jews were held in low esteem.
- 62 Author’s interview with Irena Talmon, M.D. about the fate of one of her family’s rescuers in the 1980s in an old people’s home in Częstochowa. The woman was subjected to daily verbal abuse as a punishment for what she did during the war. Another Jewish survivor who visited the rescuer requested the intervention of a local priest and this apparently put an end to the verbal abuse, but it is impossible to verify this information since the rescuer is deceased (October 2, 2010).

you for help.” Of those pleading in this way, women rescuers constitute a majority. These women were taking care of children of various ages and of husbands and elderly sick parents. Other women in this category were single mothers, widows, and even abandoned wives. In the early postwar period, though Polish women faced high unemployment, they were at the same time often the chief breadwinners, forced to look for employment to financially support themselves and their families.<sup>63</sup>

For the fifty-four year old peasant woman Emilia Stepaniak, the tragic death of Dr. Aleksander Rajgrodzki in the Białystok ghetto meant, in her own distressing words, “the end of my own life.”<sup>64</sup> Stepaniak worked as a housekeeper for Dr. Rajgrodzki and his family for thirty-three years prior to the German re-occupation of Białystok in the summer of 1941. She continued to be employed by Dr. Rajgrodzki following the establishment of the Białystok ghetto. And thanks to a special permit she obtained from the Germans, she was allowed to remain with Dr. Rajgrodzki’s family within the ghetto itself. Emilia, like the housekeeper of Eugenia Szyk, the mother of the famous artist Artur Szyk of Łódź, was unconditionally dedicated and loyal to her employers.<sup>65</sup> According to her, she planned to organize a shelter for Dr. Rajgrodzki and his wife on the Aryan side, but unfortunately, the doctor badly advised, refused to leave the ghetto in time. After the war, Stepaniak found her financial and existential situation unbearable. Robbed of her remaining belongings, including clothes and shoes, she was living at the mercy of her cousins in the village of Dawidowce in the Bielsko-Podlaski district, near Białystok, and regarded herself as a sick, old woman. In her letters to Dr. I. Chain of the Jewish health organization TOZ (Towarzystwo Ochrony Zdrowia, Association for

63 On the situation of women in postwar Polish society, see for example, Hanna Jędruszczak, “Miasta i przemysł w okresie odbudowy,” in Franciszek Ryszka ed., *Polska Ludowa 1944–50: Przemiany społeczne* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1974), pp. 339–340; Dariusz Jarosz, “Kobiety a praca zawodowa w Polsce w latach 1944–1956 (główne problemy w świetle nowych badań źródłowych),” in Anna Żarnowska and Andrzej Szwarc, eds., *Kobieta i praca. Wiek XIX I XX*, vol. VI (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo DiG, 2000), pp. 217–244. On the standards of living, see also Bohdan Brodziński *Stopa życiowa w Polsce w latach 1945–1963* (London: Szkoła nauk politycznych i społecznych, 1965).

64 Letter of Emilia Stepaniak to the Joint in Warsaw, [no date], ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/239, 40.

65 Philip Friedman, *Their Brothers’ Keepers* (New York: Crown, 1957), pp. 82–94 and 150–154.

the Protection of Health) in Łódź and the Joint in Warsaw, she appealed for help in the name of her deceased employer Dr. Rajgrodzki,<sup>66</sup> seeking funds to buy a horse to trade produce in the city and thus to become financially independent.

For Eugenia Orzechowicz, wartime rescue activities in Buczacz<sup>67</sup> (her husband Jerzy Orzechowicz's home town) culminated in a tragic personal twist. Not only was this brave woman arrested and tortured by the Germans, but she was also betrayed by her husband when he abandoned her for one of the adult Jewish women that she had sheltered in her own home in Buczacz during the Nazi occupation. Repatriated from the Eastern territories to Poland, Eugenia Orzechowicz, like many other Poles from the Kresy, was settled in Szczecin (Stettin) with her orphan niece Teresa Lassota.<sup>68</sup> In her letter to the CKŻP, she speaks movingly of her existence as a newly single woman, facing challenging new beginnings and forced to rely on her family for financial help. In spite of the personal betrayal, she still speaks warmly about those whom she had rescued, including a baby boy, Herman Rotfeld from Stanisławów.<sup>69</sup> Her appeal for financial aid to the CKŻP is gracious. In it, she stresses that her current financial situation exacerbated

66 See three other undated letters of Emilia Stepaniak addressed to I. Chain, ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/239, 41–42 and 303/VIII/239, 36–37 (in Polish), and 303/VIII/239, 34–35 (in Russian). According to I. Chain's letter, T. Ostrowska of the Joint's Warsaw branch, TOZ warmly accepted Stepaniak's requests and allocated 10,000 zlotys for her needs, January 29, 1947, ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/239, 33.

67 On the history of the destruction of the Jews of Buczacz, see Omer Bartov, "Inter-ethnic Relations in the Holocaust as Seen through Postwar Testimonies: Buczacz, East Galicia, 1941–44," in Doris Bergen, ed., *Lessons and Legacies VIII* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006) and Yehuda Bauer, "Buczacz and Krzemieniec: The Story of Two Towns during the Holocaust," *Yad Vashem Studies*, vol. 33 (2005), pp. 245–306.

68 Both Christian Poles and Jews were repatriated from the Kresy to Szczecin. In June 1946 there were 30,951 repatriated Jews registered in Szczecin. By December 1946 half of them had already left the city for the West, and in the late spring of 1947 fewer than 7,000 Jews remained in the city. See Tadeusz Bialecki, ed., *Encyclopedia Szczecina* (Szczecin: Szczecin University, 1999), pp. 441–442 and 739–740.

69 On the destruction of Jews of Stanisławów, see Dieter Pohl, *Die nationalsozialistische Judenverfolgung in Ostgalizien 1941–1944: Organisation und Durchführung eines staatlichen Massenverbrechens* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1996) and Thomas Sandkühler, *Endlösung in Galizien. Der Judenmord in Ostpolen und die Rettungsinitiativen von Berthold Beitz 1941–1944* (Bonn: Dietz, 1996). See also Dieter Pohl's article, focused mainly on the Nazi crimes in Stanisławów, "Hans Krüger and the Murder of the Jews in the Stanisławów Region (Galicia)," *Yad Vashem Studies*, vol. 26 (1997), pp. 239–264.

by a robbery in her new home in Szczecin has forced her to turn to Jewish organizations for aid.

What I did was not out of any desire to profit and be repaid, but out of human principle. However, I have now reached a point in my life when I cannot continue to be a burden to my family. In addition, I was robbed, and that's why I am forced to ask for assistance in my present difficult situation. I do not wish to become a beggar, but just to have a chance to make ends meet. I plan to open a shop and have already found a suitable property, but I need capital, which I can raise only by turning to the Jewish committee and asking either for aid or for a loan. Therefore, I am asking you to consider my difficult situation under exceptional conditions, and help me, just as I helped the needy according to my abilities. Thanking you in advance.

God bless you, Eugenia Orzechowicz<sup>70</sup>

However, for some widows who had lost their husbands due to their involvement in rescuing Jews, the concept of repayment of kindness with kindness takes on a rather sorrowful tone, as the letter of Irena Wolniarska illustrates. The widow would have preferred to have an ordinary husband alive, rather than a dead hero and savior of other lives.<sup>71</sup>

### **Repaying Kindness with Kindness and Levels of Expectations (Modest to Ambitious)**

Rescuers writing on their own behalf and Jewish survivors writing on behalf of their saviors both invoke the concept of repaying kindness with kindness as a central concept in their appeals. However, a precise understanding of this concept, and expectations of levels of repayment vary significantly from case to case. Moreover, the concept seems to be defined by not only the material and existential situation of rescuers and their wartime actions, but also by individual sensibilities toward wealth, and by attitudes toward Jews. Some claimant–rescuers left it

70 Letter of Eugenia Orzechowicz, to CKŻP, October 2, 1947, Warsaw, ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/223, 72.

71 Letter of Irena Wolniarska, Włochy near Warsaw, to the Central Committee of Polish Jews, September 28, 1947, File no. 303/VIII/421, 45–46, ŻIH Archives.

to the Jewish organizations to decide on the form, amount, frequency, and duration of material aid. As a rule, they belong to the selfless category of rescuers such as Leonard Wołowski who assisted several Jewish fugitives from the Warsaw ghetto with food, false identity cards, and shelters on the Aryan side. He opens his letter with a touching simple declaration: "I politely ask the respectful [Warsaw] *Kehillah* to assist me in any form [you decide]."<sup>72</sup>

Likewise, Stanisław Waclawski, a farmer from Hoczew village, asks for financial aid in a deferential style. He requests some funds for basic survival. The Germans had confiscated and destroyed his property as punishment for his sheltering five members of the family of Józef Herzig. They also beat him, and executed two of his brothers. As a result, he emerged from the war a broken man.<sup>73</sup>

Other rescuers make similar modest requests that do not differ from the requests for help penned by Holocaust survivors. The latter were in dire need not only of clothes, food, and money, but also of basic furnishings for their homes such as chairs and beds. A careful reading of the rescuers' petitions shows that aside from money they most needed winter clothing, underwear, shoes, and blankets. These needs give a clear insight into the economic state of Polish society as it emerged from the war and shed light on the early postwar standards of living. A widowed mother from Lignica who had lost her Jewish husband in 1946, and who had alone sheltered six Jews in her tiny two-room apartment during the war, writes in distress to the CKŻP:

I had a husband of the Mosaic faith who died of lung disease in 1946. I am left alone with a small child, and we live under harsh conditions. I have no income and am unable to find employment right now because the baby is only one year old and needs constant care. Therefore, I am politely asking you to consider my situation so my appeal will not be written in vain. I am asking you for financial aid and clothes for the baby and for myself. Do post these items to me because I am unable to travel [to Warsaw]. For the child I would like to receive two sweaters, two vests and two

72 Letter of Leonard Wołowski, Gdańsk Wrzeszcz, [undated]. ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/421, 52–55.

73 Petition of Stanisław Waclawski, to the CKŻP in Warsaw, Hoczew, June 15, 1949, ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/241, 6.



dresses, and nappies. For myself, I request a coat, two dresses, a sweater, two pairs of good quality underwear, and shoes.<sup>74</sup>

A clothing parcel for a baby usually consisted of six items, including a sweater, pants, and nappies. Holocaust survivors received similar clothing parcels for their younger and older children.<sup>75</sup> A typical food parcel for a family contained two cans of fish (one sardines and one tuna); a half kilogram of margarine; one can of marmalade; one carton of cocoa; two kilograms of flour; and two cans of condensed milk. In addition, some food parcels also included hard cheese; 250 grams of coffee; nine blocks of chocolate, and a can of peaches.<sup>76</sup> Some rescuers received food and clothing parcels two or more times as a token of gratitude for their wartime actions. In some cases, parcels were returned to the sender because the addressee could not be found.

Rescuers from Warsaw, which was largely destroyed by the Germans in the Warsaw uprising of August–September 1944, and rescuers repatriated from the former Polish Eastern territories constituted the neediest groups. Most had suffered total or almost near total losses of their property and possessions. Therefore, it was not uncommon for individuals from the Kresy to ask for larger sums of money — 20,000 and 30,000<sup>77</sup> zlotys — in order to re-establish themselves in the new and unfamiliar Western territories in which they had been resettled. Farmers from the Kresy also typically appealed for subsidies to buy horses and cows to restore their farming capacity. Urban people, both skilled blue-collar workers and professionals, requested assistance in obtaining employment in Jewish organizations or in their professions. Like the farmers, they appealed for concrete materials and tools such as typing and sewing machines, to facilitate the restoration of their professional life. One Warsaw musician complained about the loss of

74 Letter of Jadzia [Jadwiga] [no family name given] to CKŻP in Warsaw, Lignica February 4, 1947, ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/243, 3.

75 See, for example, Petition of Anna Oppenheim Górska to the Social Welfare Department at the CKŻP in Warsaw requesting clothes for her ten-year old son, ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/190, 42.

76 See information about the content of a food parcel posted to M. Ochudowski in the village of Bronisławów, Biała-Rawska. This parcel was returned to the Joint, May 21, 1947, ŻIH Archives, 350/1266, 45.

77 Letter of Michał Boczar from the village of Porchowa, Buczacz district, Tarnopol Voivodship, to the CKŻP in Warsaw, August 1, 1947, Minkinie Oławskie, ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/222, 49–50.

her piano and sheet music in the Warsaw uprising.<sup>78</sup> Jewish survivors made similar requests on behalf of their rescuers so that their postwar professional aspirations and dreams might be fulfilled.

I eagerly desire to repay my noble protectors who saved me from the Nazi occupation, and to assist them in their current hardship. As I described above, my own material situation does not permit me to help them, therefore I dare to request you [the committee] wholeheartedly, to assist Mr. and Mrs. Szewczykowski in a meaningful manner. At least do help her to purchase a sewing machine, so that she may open her own tailoring business. I believe this would be a tiny token of appreciation in the face of what the entire Jewish nation owes to just a few individuals of such a high caliber.<sup>79</sup>

Some other survivors, like Renia Selcerowa, probe morally vexatious issues of responsibility and gratitude for saving human life. They sense that they will never be able to come up with satisfactory expressions of gratitude or fitting repayment for their wartime protectors and their families. At the same time, dedicated selfless rescuers spoke casually about their rescue activities and portrayed these operations as ordinary human gestures and duties for which one should not expect any gratitude or repayment. This is not a unique feature of the self-description of rescuers in Poland; selfless rescuers from other countries similarly portray their rescue activities as an ordinary action in their interviews, letters, and memoirs.

However, other letters from the rescuers tell another story, one of greed and exaggerated demands for remuneration for having provided shelter, or of greed interwoven with anti-Jewish attitudes. For Aleksandra N., a declared member of the Polish Workers Party, sheltering the three-year old boy Jakub Curtelzon, the son of Estera Rozenfarb from Warsaw, brought the promise of making a good profit and good living. However, neither the surviving mother nor the CKŻP accept-

78 Letter of Leokadia Tafensiak to the CKŻP in Warsaw, ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/240, 1–4. Tafensiak, a fifty-two year old musician supporting her seventy-five year old mother, asked the CKŻP for help in obtaining a piano and music scores. For her, the loss of her piano was a greater tragedy than the loss of her home.

79 Letter of Renia Salcerowa to the CKŻP, Warsaw, regarding the rescuers Anna Szewczykowa and her husband from Rudki near Lviv, [Cracow, no date], [Received by CKŻP, June 26, 1947], ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/239, 94–95.

ed Aleksandra's excessive demands in payment for sheltering the boy over twenty-nine months. In her correspondence to the CKŻP and the Joint, Aleksandra N. asserts that in late April 1945, the biological mother took the boy away from her by force, but still guaranteed her a substantial payment that was subsequently not delivered. Therefore, she presents a bill to the CKŻP in Warsaw for 261,000 zlotys (the early postwar equivalent value of 87,000 wartime zlotys).<sup>80</sup> This figure includes monthly payments of 3,000 zlotys, claims for medical bills, and additional sums spent on clothes.<sup>81</sup> The CKŻP and the Joint awarded her 20,000 zlotys,<sup>82</sup> two clothes parcels, and one food parcel. However, Aleksandra N. was not satisfied. According to an official letter by Helena Merenholc and Józef Sack, two members of the Committee for Assistance of Poles, the woman was not only arrogant, but also implied that the Jews always cheat.<sup>83</sup> The committee denied her further assistance, on the grounds that its principles allow it to help only those Poles who saved Jews selflessly rather than for profit.

## Conclusions

The early postwar correspondence of rescuers and Jewish survivors constitutes a rare source for understanding the intricate web of wartime and early postwar relationships between individuals from these

80 Two letters of Aleksandra N. to the CKŻP, Warsaw February 27, 1947, and April 28, 1947, ŻIH Archives, 350/1266, 64, and 350/1266, 62–63.

81 Mrs. N. submitted two brief notes, issued by Dr. Halfter, a physician, and Father M. Kliszko, the priest of her local parish respectively, confirming that she had charge of the boy during the war. These documents accompanied her letters to the CKŻP. See ŻIH Archives, 350/1266, 65 and 350/1266, 66.

82 The official note of July 24, 1947, stating that Aleksandra N. received a total of 20,000 zlotys in five installments between June 25, 1945, and March 24, 1947, ŻIH Archives, 350/1266, 40.

83 Letter of Helena Merenholc and Józef Sack to the Director of the Joint in Warsaw, July 21, 1947, ŻIH Archives, 350/1266, 42. Helena Merenholc (wartime name Stanisława Królikowska), born in 1911 in Warsaw, was a child psychologist interested in music and theater therapy. During the war, she was a manager of the Department of Care for Children at the Centos office in the Warsaw ghetto. After the war, she briefly worked for the Department of Statistics at the CKŻP, and later became editor-in-chief of radio programs for children at Polish Radio. See her personal files at CKŻP, ŻIH Archives, 303/V/425, 5773 and 5733a, and 303/III/16, 32. Józef Sack, born in 1899, was a leading member of Poale-Zion Right. He survived the war in Warsaw on the Aryan side and became a leading member of CKŻP. ŻIH Archives, 303/V/425, bn16.

two groups, each characterized by a distinct ethnic, cultural, and social heritage. Only by grasping the meanings of the depictions, arguments, and pleas conveyed in this correspondence can we fully understand the later postwar discourses about rescue activities in Poland and Polish rescuers. As with the case of other dominant narratives pertaining to the memory of the Holocaust, some of the chief narratives about rescuers and Jewish survivors were formed in the early postwar period such as the myth of the "ignoble ungrateful Jew." By the late 1960s, this myth was fully developed and utilized by the "partisan" faction within the Communist Party, led by General Mieczysław Moczar. Writers, journalists, and historians continued to disseminate the myth of "the ungrateful Jew" in publications in the 1970s and 1980s,<sup>84</sup> and the myth has persisted in popular historical consciousness in the post-communist era.<sup>85</sup>

The early postwar letters from Jewish survivors to Jewish organizations on behalf of their rescuers and directly to the rescuers demonstrate that the myth of "the ungrateful Jew" was rooted in prejudice rather than reality. The letters show that in some cases, ironically the most appropriate expression of gratitude for wartime deeds was for the Jewish survivors to pretend to cut off contact with the rescuers in the early postwar period, so that these Poles would not be exposed to their neighbors' disapproval of their wartime rescue activities, sometimes expressed in violence and robbery. In fact, some rescuers themselves asked their Jewish charges not to correspond with them out of fear of repercussions for being publicly known as "Jew saviors," a request some survivors recall in detail in their memoirs and interviews of the late postwar period. For example, Izhak Shumowitz, a survivor born

84 Władysław Bielawski and Czesław Pilichowski, *Zbrodnie na Polakach dokonane przez hitlerowców za pomoc udzielaną Żydom* (Warsaw: Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1981); Tadeusz Bednarczyk, *Walka i pomoc; OW-KB a organizacja ruchu oporu w getcie warszawskim* (Warsaw: Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1968). These two works are characterized by historical misconceptions and are seasoned with various anti-Jewish prejudices.

85 For recent mild and strong expressions of this myth see, for example, Mark Paul, ed., *Wartime Rescuers of Jews by the Polish Catholic Clergy: The Testimony of Survivors* (Toronto: Polish Educational Foundation in North America, 2007); interview with Anna Poray-Wybranowska, "Nation of Heroes," *Nasz Dziennik*, October 9, 2004, and the internet site of the Institute for National Memory dedicated to rescuers: [www.zyciezazycie.pl](http://www.zyciezazycie.pl)

in Czerwony Bór in Zambrów County in the Podlaskie Voivodship, passionately recalls:

When we arrived in Israel, I lost no time in writing to these two brave and honorable men that we had at long last reached the safety of our land. Tishke [Tadeusz] replied hinting that it would be dangerous to correspond with me, since this might serve as an excuse for the fanatics and bloodthirsty among his people to take revenge on him for his crime of helping a Jewish family stay alive. We recalled that not only his closest family, but also his more distant relatives were angry at his acts of kindness during the war, which we presumed was the reason for his unwillingness to carry on a correspondence. With great sorrow, we had no alternative but to cease communication with him.<sup>86</sup>

This is not to say that all Jewish survivors wished to stay in contact with their selfless rescuers and offer them assistance in the aftermath of the war. Poland had become the biggest graveyard of European Jewry, and many survivors left in haste for new homelands, not wishing to look back on their past and have contact with those who could remind them of the dreadfully painful wartime years. Early postwar correspondence reveals that in cases where the selfless rescuers saved more than one individual, some survivors took upon themselves to represent all the Jews who were rescued. In the later postwar period, some survivors also criticized those survivors who had not shown much interest in the mutual rescuers.

The early postwar letters reveal that many survivors had the urgent need to promise their selfless rescuers that once they had settled and established themselves in new homelands they would repay kindness with kindness. Many later postwar survivors' memoirs give accounts of embarking on challenging journeys to the Eastern European lands ruled by communist regimes, and their overwhelming joy at finding and being reunited with their wartime saviors and their families.<sup>87</sup> Such

86 Rivka and Israel Teyer, *The Red Forest, as narrated by Izhak Shumowitz* (Raanana: Docostory, n.d.), p. 254. The original edition of this memoir was published in Hebrew in 1982.

87 For accounts of compelling searches of and happy reunions with rescuers, see for example, Hersch Altman, *On the Fields of Loneliness* (Jerusalem and New York: Yad Vashem and the Holocaust Survivors' Memoirs Project, 2006), p. 177; Clara Kramer with Stephen Glantz, *Clara's War: A Young Girl's True Story of Miracu-*

reunion trips were possible in Poland only after the infamous anti-Jewish campaign of the late 1960s, orchestrated by the communist regime, completely subsided. Later postwar memoirs and various genres of oral history, including low budget documentary films demonstrate that survivors' children and grandchildren at some point in their lives feel compelled, out of myriad emotions, to meet the individuals thanks to whom their three-generational families exist.<sup>88</sup> However, the survivors themselves may not be so keen on such visits, and are in fact angry at their children's and grandchildren's enthusiastic desire to encounter their complicated wartime past. Curiosity, a need to express gratitude, and feelings of doing the right thing are the main factors that motivate the children and grandchildren of survivors.<sup>89</sup>

What the early postwar correspondence does not reveal are the histories of those survivors who tried to move heaven and earth to get help and failed, those whose rescuers mistreated them badly, and those who realized that their rescuers were hostile toward their dearest family members and in fact murdered them. We find such chilling and disturbing accounts in early postwar testimonies, late postwar memoirs, and oral histories. For example, according to Fanya Gottesfeld Heller, born in the small town of Skala in the Kresy, one of her rescuers, a young Ukrainian man named Jan who was also her first lover, most likely was responsible for the death of her beloved father. Heller bravely admits that this knowledge, though never confirmed, left an imprint on her entire life.

*lous Survival under the Nazis* (New York: Ecco, 2009), pp. 333–336; and Shimon Redlich, *Together and Apart in Brzezany: Poles, Jews, and Ukrainians, 1919–1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), esp. pp. 1–20 and 153–162.

88 See, for example, the ninety-minute documentary film by Julia Maltz, Barbara Bird, and Richie Sherman, *No. 4 Street of Our Lady* (2008) about the reunion of survivors and their families with the family of a remarkable selfless rescuer, the late Francisca Halamajowa.

89 An emotional split about visiting former rescuers in the three-generational family of a Holocaust survivor is portrayed in the acclaimed documentary film by Menachem Daum and Oren Rudavsky, *Hiding and Seeking: Faith and Tolerance after the Holocaust* (2005). While Menachem Daum, the main hero of the film and son of the Jewish survivor from Poland is enthusiastic about visiting his father's rescuers, the father opposes his son's idea of a trip to Poland and does not share his son's enthusiasm for meeting his former rescuers. Menachem Daum's two adult sons go along with their father's idea, though they are less keen on the trip than their father.

My relationship with Jan and the accusations that he had killed my father had colored my whole life — as a Jewish woman, a wife, and a mother. At first I refused to think about it. Then I was consumed with ambivalence and guilt and uncertainty: how could anyone possibly make sense of this, resolve the apparent contradictions?<sup>90</sup>

Some survivors, especially young girls who were sexually and physically abused by those who were supposed to be responsible for their safety, have preferred to remain silent about the past until now.<sup>91</sup> The histories of other women who lost their lives because of complications in pregnancy after being raped by their rescuers will mainly remain lost.

In the early postwar correspondence we see selfless and heroic rescuers whose local environments were hostile, beginning to keep their wartime rescue activities a deep secret out of fear of losing their possessions, their homes, their community, and even their lives. For such rescuers, the Jewish organizations were the only institutions to which they could turn to for help, moral support, and a sympathetic ear for the hearing of their wartime rescue stories. Early postwar hostility toward selfless rescuers of Jews resulted in their prolonged silence. Their wartime and early postwar accounts had to be confined to the domain of private families' memories and were buried deeply there. Not until the early 2000s was there a sympathetic audience for rescuers' accounts in their own country, Poland.

The Holocaust is often interpreted as a history of abandonment of European Jews. In Poland, the wartime situation can be viewed not only as a chilling history of abandonment of Polish Jews, but also of their selfless and heroic Polish rescuers, their neighbors, and other members of local communities. These rescuers in extending aid to Jews acted in social isolation and faced low societal approval for their rescue activities during the war. This social isolation and contempt for their efforts continued in the immediate aftermath of the war and into the late postwar period, a clear sign that antisemitism and disapproval

90 Fanya Gottesfeld Heller, *Love in a World of Sorrow: A Teenage Girl's Holocaust Memoirs* (Jerusalem and New York: Devora Publishing, 2005), p. 261.

91 The author of this article conversed with two women, child survivors who fall into such a category, but cannot reveal their identities because these women are unable to speak about their wartime experiences in detail.

of rescuers' actions have outlived the wartime events in which they first took place.

Several scholars have analyzed the accounts of rescuers to seek common personality characteristics that motivated the rescuers' acts of human kindness. In their classic study, Samuel P. and Pearl M. Oliner suggested the altruistic personality as a major explanation of the rescuers' motivation,<sup>92</sup> while the psychologist Eva Fogelman looked into the rescuers' childhoods for traits that fostered their involvement, commitment, care, and responsibility toward Jewish fugitives.<sup>93</sup> The early postwar correspondence analyzed in this paper confirms that selfless rescuers were generally modest, low-key, and self-effacing individuals who went well beyond the call of duty, but regarded their actions as something ordinary.

Finally, from a broader historical perspective, this correspondence offers two convincing tales about social interaction in ethnically divided societies, in which one group is the target of genocide, and about the post-event interactions, and memories. Here, on the one hand, is a tale of unsung modest heroic rescuers and grateful survivors, and of emotional bonds, loyalties, and responsibilities between individuals forced into a close, intimate encounter by war and extermination, a tale of transcending ethnic barriers and ethnic prejudices, and a tale of altruism and humanitarian action of the highest standard. Here on the other hand, is a tale of uncomfortable truths about meanness, greed, prejudices, conflicts of expectations, and painful betrayals. Making sense of these complicated individual accounts and creating a nuanced picture that must inevitably be equally uncomfortable and soothing is the task for the social historians of today.

92 Samuel P. and Pearl M. Oliner, *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe* (New York: The Free Press, 1988).

93 Eva Fogelman, *Conscience and Courage: Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust* (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1994).



