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## THE MEMORY OF RESCUE IN POLAND

Antonina Wyrzykowska saved seven Jews by harboring them in a small hamlet near the town of Jedwabne. Some of her charges found shelter in her home after surviving the 1941 massacre committed by their Polish neighbors. In 1976, without much public fanfare, she received the title of “Righteous Among the Nations,” an honor bestowed on Holocaust rescuers by Yad Vashem. Thirty years later, she confessed to Polish-Jewish journalist Anna Bikont, “You know the country you live in, so you tell me how many people would be happy to hear I hid Jews? One in ten, and that’s giving them the benefit of the doubt . . . When I got the distinction, that Righteous Among the Nations medal, my Helenka threw it right in the trash. And it’s better this way, because who would I show it to anyway?”<sup>1</sup> Although the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the pogrom finally brought public acknowledgment of her actions in Poland, including recognition by the country’s president, she was correct. The proposal to name an elementary school in Jedwabne after her met with strong opposition from the local community and was never realized.

My project explores when, how, and why Polish Holocaust rescuers – considered traitors by their home communities - became national heroes. I probe the dominant narrative of Polish aid as a mass-scale, community-supported, and altruistic effort, which portrays rescuers as representative of the entire nation’s virtue. Scrutinizing this widely accepted fabrication in public discourse and memorialization, I trace its development from the wartime to the present. I analyze how the spotlight on rescuers, which casts Poles as primary actors and victims, became a preferred, if not the only acceptable, mode of Holocaust remembrance in Poland. This, I argue, constitutes a return to a decades-old competition of suffering, a memory mode capable exclusively of mourning its own, ethnically defined victims.

Notwithstanding a plethora of works on Holocaust commemoration in Poland, there is no study on the memory of rescue. The prominence accorded this topic in present-day memory politics makes scholarly analysis all the more critically important.

### BACKGROUND

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All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>1</sup> Anna Bikont, *The Crime and the Silence: Confronting the Massacre of Jews in Wartime Jedwabne* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 380.

Rescuers' Fear

The Polish memory of rescue has been marked by paradox. A decade after the war, Michał Borwicz, one of the founders of the Jewish Historical Commission, revealed some unanticipated consequences of publishing documents in 1945 about the destruction of Cracow Jews, including information about Polish helpers.<sup>2</sup> The commission received visits from reproachful rescuers shortly thereafter. Making their names and “crimes” public, they complained, exposed them to revenge by their neighbors. Some Jewish survivors came to protest on behalf of their rescuers. Others forbade publishing their benefactors’ names in the future or even their testimonies altogether because their helpers’ identity could be deduced from details such as a town or village name. In a collection of testimonies of rescued Jewish children, published in 1947, many rescuers were identified by initials only. “I don’t know if anyone outside of Poland will comprehend,” commented the volume editor, Maria Hochberg-Dobrzańska, “that saving the life of a hunted, helpless child can bring shame and disgrace on someone and get him in trouble.”<sup>3</sup>

During the war, rescuers hid their actions from their neighbors, friends, even family members, and lived in constant fear of denunciation. After liberation, they faced ostracism and violence. “Two weeks ago, a band of native fascists broke into my house, smashed everything to pieces and beat and kicked me and cut my wife’s and daughters’ hair, shouting ‘that’s for the Jewish child,’”<sup>4</sup> reported Stanisław Chęc, a rescuer of a Jewish infant, in a letter to the Central Committee of Jews in Poland (CKŻP) in April 1947. Their neighbors’ hostility spurred many rescuers to leave their hometowns or even country. Antonina Wyrzykowska, robbed and brutally beaten, fled Poland illegally with the Jews she sheltered and found herself in a refugee camp in Austria. Later, she divided her time between Poland and the United States, but never returned to her home village.

The widespread myth of Jews’ fabulous wealth, particularly in conditions of postwar poverty, might have made rescuers the victims of their neighbors’ envy and greed. But the word “revenge,” used by fearful rescuers, illuminates how the act of help was perceived by their communities. Social norms valuing the safety of the collective over the individual encouraged denunciation over rescue. According to right-wing nationalistic propaganda as well as Catholic

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<sup>2</sup> Michał Borwicz, “List do redakcji,” [Letter to the Editor] *Kultura* 11 (1957): 47.

<sup>3</sup> Maria Hochberg-Mariańska and Noe Grüss, ed. *Dzieci oskarżają* [The Children Accuse] (Kraków-Łódź-Warszawa, 1947), xxxii.

<sup>4</sup> The Archive of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw (AŻIH), the Central Committee of Jews in Poland (CKŻP), Social Welfare Department, 303/VIII/223. Letter of Stanisław Chęc. Chęc and his family were recognized by Yad Vashem in 1989.

Church teaching, Jews were enemies of Poland and Christianity, intruders to be extirpated from the country. Helping Jews endangered the community and hindered the project of the Polish nation-state. Rescuers were seen as betraying their communal, patriotic, and religious obligations. “Aren’t you, a Catholic, ashamed to have sheltered a Jew?”<sup>5</sup> anti-communist partisans rhetorically asked a rescuer in October 1945. As historian Jan Gross put it, “the future Righteous wartime behavior broke the socially approved norm.”<sup>6</sup> By being different, they posed a threat to the community. And as they did not share the co-conspirator bonds forged by crimes or passivity, they could bear witness and thus had to be terrorized into secrecy.

### Helping Poles

While many helpers instructed the survivors to keep silent, others contacted Jewish institutions to identify themselves as rescuers. In an ironic reversal of wartime roles, they asked for assistance. Jewish organizations tried to meet their needs, despite limited funds and the enormous task of caring for the surviving remnant of Polish Jewry. In December 1946, a local CKŻP chapter in Katowice requested foodstuffs and clothing from Warsaw to distribute to indigent rescuers for Christmas.<sup>7</sup> The number of requests led to the establishment of the Commission to Aid Poles (*Komisja Pomocy Polakom*). The Commission extended financial and material help (usually accompanied by a thank you letter), and provided legal assistance.

Most supplicants explained their dire circumstances, some with embarrassment. “If it were not for my material situation today, poverty really, I would never have sought reward for the help offered to Jews in the time of their tragedy,”<sup>8</sup> stressed Józefa Feluś. Some applicants, however, demanded “reimbursement” (*ekwiwalent*), “damages” (*odszkodowanie*), or “remuneration” (*wynagrodzenie*). They emphasized the incurred costs and referred to unfulfilled promises of payments made by the Jews they helped. “While staying with me, they wrote declarations . . . that they will finance my children’s education and pay me \$400 a head,”<sup>9</sup> complained Roman Dąbrowski, a rescuer of six. “We know very well that for similar actions other citizens received millions,”<sup>10</sup> stressed two farmers from the village of Świków. Because the father of the children

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<sup>5</sup> AŻIH, Holocaust Survivor Testimonies, 301/215. Testimony of Efraim Wajnsztajn.

<sup>6</sup> Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 238.

<sup>7</sup> AŻIH, CKŻP, Social Welfare Department, 303/VIII/219.

<sup>8</sup> AŻIH, CKŻP, Social Welfare Department, 303/VIII/225.

<sup>9</sup> AŻIH, CKŻP, Social Welfare Department, 303/VIII/224. Letter of Roman Dąbrowski.

<sup>10</sup> AŻIH, CKŻP, Social Welfare Department, 303/VIII/225. Letter of Jan Dojka and Tomasz Zych.

they saved was impoverished, they explained, they had agreed to be satisfied with a mere 150,000 zlotys for each child. In addition, they asked the Jewish Committee for a contribution to the reconstruction costs of a village school, which had burned down during the occupation (nothing in the letter indicated that it has been burned by the Germans).

“May God fulfill all your and your nation’s wishes so you will be able to help others,”<sup>11</sup> wrote Maria Assanowicz, thanking the Central Committee for the help she had received. While some rescuers expressed their gratitude, others felt unsatisfied or even insulted. “The local committee offered me 2,000 zlotys as if I were a beggar while I am worth incomparably more,”<sup>12</sup> lamented Walenty Beck. In the internal correspondence, the Committee officials admitted that if indeed Beck had sheltered 18 persons he should receive more. A disgruntled rescuer followed up an apparently heated visit to a committee office with yet another letter. “My Jews (*Żydki*) said thank you, turned around, made *gescheft*, and went abroad, and I have to work hard,” he grumbled. Genowefa Czyżowa lodged a complaint regarding the quality of received assistance. A sewing machine turned out to be old, a coat destroyed by moths, the shoes full of holes, and the amount of money “ridiculous.”<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the committee employees treated her like “an annoyance” while taking very good care of her former wards.

Demanding help-seekers proved a frustration. Specious claimants were another. An instruction from the Warsaw headquarters to look into a case of an alleged rescuer (arrested for signing the *Volkliste*) irritated the employees of the Rzeszów committee. Not only, they complained in a passive-aggressive tone, had their regional office received the least quantity of *matzot* for the holidays, but they were “constantly being pestered by different individuals who claim they contributed to rescuing Jews during the occupation.”<sup>14</sup>

Still, many rescuers’ pleas were supported by survivors’ testimonies. Israel Dorembus wrote from Hannover, where he worked for UNRRA, to ask for assistance for Stanislaw Bandurski who had helped his family during the war. “I will thankfully repay whatever is necessary as soon as sending money from here becomes possible,”<sup>15</sup> he assured the Committee. A request for help

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<sup>11</sup> AŻIH, CKŻP, Social Welfare Department, 303/VIII/119. Letter of Maria Assanowicz. (Recognized by Yad Vashem in 1982).

<sup>12</sup> AŻIH, CKŻP, Social Welfare Department, 303/VIII/221. Letter of Walenty Beck. (Recognized by Yad Vashem in 1983).

<sup>13</sup> AŻIH, CKŻP, Social Welfare Department, 303/VIII/223. Letter of Genowefa Czyżyowa.

<sup>14</sup> AŻIH, CKŻP, Legal Department, 303/XVI/106.

<sup>15</sup> AŻIH, CKŻP, Social Welfare Department, 303/VII/221. Letter of Izrael Dorembus.

from Adela Adamska stated that she had selflessly sheltered Abram Rubel, and he corroborated her story. In his letter, Rubel expressed the utmost gratitude to his “heroic and noble savior” who “through the entire occupation protected me with absolute selflessness and surrounded me with truly motherly and sisterly care, which saved my life.”<sup>16</sup> For her actions, he added, she deserved “an exceptional reward.” An investigation by a local Jewish committee in Otwock, however, revealed that Adamska’s deeds were far from disinterested. For her assistance she had received 3,000 zlotys in cash and 7,000 zlotys in material goods each month. Moreover, her situation did not appear as grim as she claimed, since she still lived off her wartime profit. Pressed by the committee’s employees, Rubel disclosed that during the war Adamska “tried to bleed him dry” (*ciągła z niego co mogła*). He admitted that he gave in to Adamska’s demands for the letter of support only to get rid of her (*na odczepnego*) and recommended that the committee do the same.<sup>17</sup>

### Fêted in Israel

The early 1960s marked the beginning of rescuer visits to Israel, where - for the first time in their lives - they were hailed as heroes. Because they did not enjoy that status in Poland, the affectionate welcome and attention they received surprised, moved, and overwhelmed them. “I was extremely warmly received, to the extent that I did not have to go through customs.... The ladies waited with flowers and with their families – my grandchildren, as I call them. We all went to the Finkelsteins’ for a glass of wine and then it started,”<sup>18</sup> related Feliks Cywiński, a daring rescuer of 26 people. “A banquet in my honor was held in Tel Aviv by the Association of Polish Jews in Israel. There was a rabbi there and such speeches that people wept. I will never forget this,”<sup>19</sup> recounted Franciszek Winczewicz, a peasant who sheltered Jews in his barn and a bunker in the nearby forest. The survivors did not spare any effort to make the trips attractive for their guests. During her two-month stay, Anna Brazowska planted a tree in Yad Vashem and visited “the Weizmann Institute in Rehovot, an archeological excavation site in Ashkelon, chemical and food processing plants in Erez Kibbutz, a potash plant in Sdom, fruit and vegetable dehydration plant in Bror Hayil Kibbutz, agricultural research center in Gilat, Yad Mordechai and Ein Gedi Kibbutz, desert areas

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<sup>16</sup> AŻIH, CKŻP, Social Welfare Department, 303/VIII/220. Letter of Abram Rubel.

<sup>17</sup> A brochure, “The Righteous from Otwock,” published in 2012 by the Otwock municipality, described the rescue story referring exclusively to the positive image painted by Rubin in his first testimony.

<http://www.otwock.pl/gazeta/2012/sprawiedliwi.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> YVA, O.3/3004. Testimony of Feliks Cywiński. (Recognized by Yad Vashem in 1966).

<sup>19</sup> YVA, O.3/2536. Testimony of Franciszek Winczewicz. (Recognized by Yad Vashem in 1975).

inhabited by Bedouins, and the city of Be'er Sheva.”<sup>20</sup> While Brazowska enjoyed the grand tour of the socialist *Eretz*, other rescuers, devout Catholics, cherished the opportunity to see the Holy Land. The visitors were clearly impressed with the young state. “It’s almost hard to believe that Jews did all of this by themselves. I would not have believed it, if someone had told me,” commented Edward Chacia. “They write us from home and ask why we don’t write about our impressions of Israel. So I tell them that for my impressions of Israel I would need 100 foolscaps of paper with 200 sheets each,”<sup>21</sup> reported Dimitri Kurowec.

Some rescuers considered contact with people they had saved the best reward. Edward Chacia aided fugitives from the Baranowicze ghetto. In the post-liberation chaos, displacement, and exodus of Jews from Poland, they lost sight of each other. But contacts resumed some years later with a number of the people he helped. They offered Chacia – an impoverished mineworker – a significant sum of money as a token of their gratitude. He turned it down. “After some time I wrote, as if joking – but I was serious – that my life dream is to see them again,” related Chacia. The joyful reunion took place in Israel in 1962.

### Where you go, I will go

Most rescuers continued to live in their villages and towns after the war, even if their life-saving actions had rendered them outsiders. But some tied their fate to Jews permanently and postwar antisemitism became a reason for them to leave. Gertruda Babilińska was among the passengers on the “Exodus,” the ship that became a symbol of illegal Jewish immigration to Palestine. She would not part from Mikki, a boy she rescued. Committed to raising him as a Jew, she could not envision their future in Poland. “Where Mikki will be, I’ll be there too,”<sup>22</sup> she declared. Apolonia Oldak moved to Israel to protect her adopted daughter from the antisemitism of her own husband. After the war, Oldak married a man who did not know the girl’s Jewish identity. “Once, a letter from Israel fell into my husband’s hands. He did not understand which of us is Jewish, me or Baška. He started to brawl and yell ‘You dirty Jew!’ (*Ty Żydówo!*) at me. I did not say anything and did not correct him,”<sup>23</sup> she related. She divorced her husband, gave up her Polish citizenship, and together with “Baška” moved to Israel. Maria Kielbasa also followed her daughter who, after a

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<sup>20</sup> YVA, O.3/2540. Testimony of Anna Brazowska. (Recognized by Yad Vashem in 1976).

<sup>21</sup> YVA, O.3/2537. Testimony of Dimitri Kurowec. (Recognized by Yad Vashem in 1964).

<sup>22</sup> YVA, O.3/2714. Testimony of Gertruda Babilińska. (Recognized by Yad Vashem in 1963).

<sup>23</sup> YVA, O.3/2227. Testimony of Apolonia Oldak. (Recognized by Yad Vashem in 1966).

series of antisemitic incidents, decided to emigrate. “I understood that I can’t make her sacrifice and stay here. If she marries a Catholic, no matter what kind of person he is, when there will be trouble, he will call her ‘You Jew!’” she explained. But soon after her daughter’s departure, she recounted, “I had very bad dreams.... I dreamt about rabbis... that they are chopping off her head and other terrible dreams. So, what am I doing? I’m selling my business and going to the kibbutz!”<sup>24</sup> Although they were recognized as Righteous early on, these Polish rescuers were not fully embraced by the Israeli society and had a difficult time integrating. Many never learned Hebrew, and felt lonely and isolated. Their wartime actions positioned them between the two communities and rendered them homeless.

In communist Poland, the Holocaust was typically absent from the public discourse. The dominant, ideologically-driven narrative of the war backgrounded the particular suffering Jews endured. With Jews written out of national memory, there should have been no place for their helpers either. Yet, the topic of aid has been part and parcel of Polish reckoning with antisemitism past and present.

Most recently, a surge of interest in help followed the publication of Jan Gross’s *Neighbors* (2000) and coalesced into a defensive reaction to revelations about Polish complicity in the Holocaust. In rescue, state officials found an ideologically appropriate, nationally celebratory, and globally exportable story. Still, in the early 2000’s the preoccupation with help coexisted with self-critical revisions in historical consciousness. With the onslaught of right-wing populism, however, the spotlight on rescue turned into a backlash that increasingly amounts to historical negationism. The current government’s historical policy (*polityka historyczna*) invokes “the Righteous” to foster nationalist pride and suppress discussion of Polish crimes. The key aspect of the rescuers’ legacy - a universal message of solidarity with all “others” - remains unacknowledged in the present xenophobic climate.

### PROJECT NARRATIVE

The two initial chapters explore pivotal moments that shaped the popular narrative about help. I trace the discursive strategies that color it today back to **the wartime**. As the Holocaust unfolded, the Polish clandestine press for the most part refrained from direct appeals for help to the Jews. Instead, it soothed its readers with claims about all of society’s compassionate and generous

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<sup>24</sup> YVA, O.3/2978. Testimony of Maria Dyrdał-Kielbasa. (Recognized by Yad Vashem in 1966).

attitude. I juxtapose these accounts with the diaries of helpers, who emphasize the majority's indifference, if not hostility, toward Jewish fugitives. The condition of the ethnically defined Polish national community – its honor, moral purity, and image on the international scene - emerged as a primary concern in relation to the Jewish tragedy. Already during the war, rescuers came to serve as proof of all Poles' heroism and innocence, while any discussion of Polish antisemitism was treated as evidence of "Jewish ingratitude."

The redemptive function assigned to rescuers proved indispensable **after the war**. I examine the references to help in reactions to postwar violence against Jews, and in the official narrative of wartime victimhood and bravery, which served to provide nationalist legitimization of the communist rule. I pay special attention to March 1968 when, ironically, the state-initiated antisemitic campaign brought the subject of rescue to the fore. Finally, I explore the attention given to rescuers in the nation-wide debate prompted by Jan Tomasz Gross's *Neighbors* (2000).

As I trace the topic of rescue in Polish public discourse, I probe the social history of **relationships forged through aid**. Some rescuers tied their fate to Jews permanently by marrying people they helped or adopting children they fostered. To shelter their families from antisemitism, many of them emigrated from Poland and settled in Israel or other countries. Some people separated by postwar circumstances tried to stay in touch, exchanging letters, photographs, and parcels. The early 1960s marked the first reunions, with rescuers' visits to Israel where they were recognized by Yad Vashem. There - for the first time in their lives - they were hailed as heroes, a status they did not enjoy in Poland. Postwar antisemitism in Poland frequently brought back memories of the war and prompted some rescuers to offer their assistance to their Jewish friends once again. In the late 1980s, memories elicited by testimony recording and the onset of heritage trips to Poland brought about a new wave of reconnecting, with participation of the second and third generation.

Mapping **the present-day landscape of memory of rescue** in Poland, I consider several case studies. Through the figure of **Irena Sendler**, I address the de-politicized and gendered representations of rescue. A gifted organizer who masterminded daring rescue schemes and managed a well-developed network of people, Sendler is portrayed as a caretaker and a surrogate mother. The collaborative character of her work – the majority of liaison officers were women, some of them Jewish – is ignored. In the collective imagination, Sendler single-handedly led children out of the ghetto. Her political affiliation with socialism, life-long commitment to social justice, and close personal relationships with Jews, are elided in favor of the sweet-old-lady-with-

a-heart-of-gold image. The case of Sendler who, as the tagline goes, “saved twice as many people as Schindler,” illustrates the fixation on numbers and competition with other nations in Polish discourse on rescue, apparent in commentary surrounding her candidacy for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007.

I also examine **Jan Karski**, an envoy from occupied Poland to the Western allies, as a projected symbol of Polish reactions to the Holocaust. Scrutinizing representations of Karski as “a man who tried to stop the Holocaust,” I show how the tragic figure of a powerless witness in Lanzmann’s *Shoah* evolved into a Bond-like superhero. Embodied by its emissary, the Polish nation proves to be morally superior to the indifferent world, including American Jews, yet today stands unfairly accused of antisemitism, even participation in the Holocaust. This narrative glosses over Polish anti-Jewish attitudes, insightfully described by Karski as a “narrow bridge” on which Poles and German occupants met, and his denunciations of post-war antisemitism in Poland.

The cases of Sendler and Karski exemplify failed bottom-up attempts to commemorate rescuers as role models of civic engagement and human rights champion. Both were eventually coopted into a nationalist narrative of heroic victimhood, most fully realized in state-sponsored memorialization of **the Ulma Family**. The example of this peasant couple, murdered by Germans, together with their small children and the Jews they harbored, showcases the politicization of rescue and institutionalization of its memory. I show how the narrative of rescue, framed as Christian martyrdom, imbues the death of Poles with symbolic significance denied to Jews, and establishes Poles as victims of the highest order. It perpetuates the common stereotype of Poles actively defying the Nazis and dying for a cause. The Jews, on the other hand, are seen as passive victims, devoid of agency, merely a prop in a story of Polish heroism. This narrative mold reinforces national identity boundaries, clearly separating Polish “landlords” from their Jewish “guests,” who remain the ultimate other.

Finally, the ongoing **dispute over the planned two memorials to “the Righteous” in Warsaw** illustrates the current impasse between dueling self-critical and self-congratulatory narratives of the past. Unpacking both arguments, I examine the dilemma between denying rescuers proper recognition and the risk that their commemoration will encroach on the memory of victims or serve to justify the unrighteous behavior of the majority.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The role of the rescuer figure in discussions of Polish-Jewish relations is central to *The Memory of Rescue in Poland*. Thus, my project addresses issues of memory politics, national belonging, ethics, and language.

I seek to uncover the emergence of the popular myth of universal and altruistic assistance to Jews in Poland. Who were the primary contributors to this story, if, as my research suggests, it was neither rescuers nor survivors? What political and social needs did it serve? I will lay bare how, in order to meet those needs, complex and messy stories were sanitized. Focusing on generalizations and concealment within memory discourse, I scrutinize which aspects of help are foregrounded. How are ambiguous stories (such as paid help and lack of community solidarity with rescuers) represented? Which stories are barely told at all? (Cases of physical and emotional abuse of rescued by rescuers are but one example.) The visibility of particular rescuers raises the question of what made them so attractive that they became flagship models of Polish help. What role does gender play? Are rescuers represented as nurturing, motherly, “female” figures or “male” war heroes? And how does rescue fit into the narrative of Polish resistance, focused as that is primarily on armed struggle?

A core question is whether narratives about help challenge the traditional Polish discourse of innocent victimhood and universal resistance or, on the contrary, strengthen it. My research indicates that highlighting rescue contributed to a dichotomous vision of history, “murderers *or* rescuers,” and thus prevented a more complex understanding of the Polish-Jewish past. This simplified story lent itself to instrumentalization, both in memory politics and foreign policy. My project will elucidate how the rescuer myth was used to impress the Western world and facilitate Polish-Jewish reconciliation.

As the vast majority of Polish rescuers helped Polish Jews, representations of rescue raise the question of the place assigned to Jews in the Polish national community. Are they depicted as fellow citizens in danger, or as ultimate others marked by their distinct fate? Consequently, is aid to Jews understood as an intrinsic strand of Polish resistance or as a separate endeavor? I seek to examine whether memory of rescue promotes civic understanding of national belonging or reinforces divisions along ethnic and religious lines. Indeed, how does the narrative of Polish “hosts” who opened their homes to Jewish “fugitives” position Polish Jews? Do the stories of rescue reproduce (voluntarily or involuntarily) antisemitic stereotypes of Jews as essential strangers, to whom Poles choose to extend hospitality?

This power dynamic leads to the question of agency. I will explore whether narratives of rescue recognize Jews' initiative and perseverance in the struggle for survival or represent them as passive recipients of help. Is Jewish self-help part of the story? For example, is the Council for Aid to Jews "Żegota" represented as a case of Polish-Jewish cooperation or as a Polish effort on behalf of the Jews? Moreover, how does the narration of rescue as an act of Christian martyrdom position Jews? Are Jews subjects or merely objects in the Polish narrative of rescue? Does the prolific commemoration of rescuers complement or overshadow remembrance of the victims?

By examining which motivations for rescue (religion, empathy, patriotic duty, personal relations) are highlighted by whom, I will lay bare how the act of rescue is understood. Does rescue constitute a case of unprecedented heroism that no one has the right to demand from others, or simple decency that can and should be expected from anyone? Where is rescue situated between the traditionally dominant Christian moral code and the discourse of civic, secular virtues?

Language structures memory and permeates all the themes I explore. Some designations emerge from the past while others are imposed post factum. The unscripted memory of survivors, rescuers, and bystanders, as it emerges in postwar testimonies, trial documents, and oral history interviews, preserves a trace of wartime vernacular and contrasts sharply with the highly ritualized heroic discourse today. The specific words chosen to describe rescue activities indicate meaning and judgement, assign motivations and identity, distribute power and agency, and address gender relations. For example, although "rescue," "help," "aid," and "assistance" might be used interchangeably – as I have done throughout this proposal – there are significant semantic differences between them. And there are even greater differences between the implied omnipotence of "rescuer," relatively unassuming "helper," romanticized "righteous," and somehow objectifying "rescued."

#### **METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES**

In my interdisciplinary approach, I utilize tools of social and cultural history, anthropology, and literary studies. Pertinent primary sources abound, as demonstrated in my archival research and fieldwork, primarily in Poland, Israel, and the United States. To reconstruct the first-hand narrative of rescue, I utilize testimonies, diaries, and memoirs of Jews and their Polish helpers, juxtaposed with accounts of witnesses and defendants in postwar trials. I trace the postwar relationships between helpers and survivors through private correspondence, photographs, keepsakes, charity organizations records, documents pertaining to official recognition, and

communist security service files. In my analysis of public discourse, commemoration, and cultural representations, I draw on a broad range of media coverage, publications, exhibitions, officials' speeches, parliamentary session transcripts, educational projects, memorial sites ceremonies, film, theatre, and literature.

### CONCLUSION

My project explores the ways discussions of rescue feature in reassessments of national identity at certain pivotal moments, and how these narratives characterize Poland's coming to terms with the Holocaust. It addresses core questions of myth making and the politics of memory, and probes the social history of rescue. I examine "countermemories" that oppose the dominant discourse on help. These include survivors' recollections of lack of assistance, indifference, and betrayal, rescuers' memories of threat from their fellow Poles, and opposition to recognizing the rescuers as heroes which emerges from contemporary accounts from the Polish countryside. Uncovering the layers of complexity in the postwar story of Polish assistance to the Jews, I search for an answer to a poignant question posed by literary scholar Jacek Leociak: "How to do justice to the Just?"