

The history of rescue in Poland and gender perspective: new approaches and questions¹

Abstract

This essay does not claim to be a gender and quantitative analysis of rescue. Its modest aim is to discuss complexities and difficulties of studying the subject of rescue of Jews in wartime Poland from a gender perspective. The initial analysis put forward here is intended to investigate to what extent gender mattered in the treatment of the non-Jewish Polish rescuers by members of their local communities during and after the war. The essay demonstrates how the use of the category of gender in the study of rescue of Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland can facilitate an in-depth analysis of the nature of rescue of adult and young Jewish fugitives in everyday settings. Gender as a tool of analysis can also throw new light on dangers and betrayal of rescuers within the local social environment. This essay also argues that gender should be explored in relation not only to objective factors such as the age, socio-economic background and religiosity of rescuers, but also in relation to more subjective factors such as internal dynamics in marriages and individual family practices, the individual system of beliefs, and parental and sexual desires of married, widowed and single male and female rescuers.

Keywords: Dedicated/genuine non-Jewish Polish rescuers, female perpetrators, rescuers ‘for profit’, rescuer-abusers, stigmatization, social abuse and ridicule of genuine rescuers, rape and sexual assault, and anti-Jewish and anti-genuine rescuers’ violence.

Introduction

Historians of Eastern Europe in the Second World War have only recently begun to rectify their neglect of women’s experiences², and the historical study of the role of Eastern European women in rescue of Jews during the Holocaust is still under-researched.

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² On the problem of the lack of research on the history of Eastern European women in the twentieth century, see for example, the introduction by Nancy M. Wingfield and Maria Bucur in Nancy M. Wingfield and Maria Bucur, eds., *Gender and War in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2006), 1–20, and the Introduction by Katherine R. Jolluck in her, *Exile and Identity: Polish Women in the Soviet Union during World War II*, (Pittsburgh, PA.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002), 1–24.

At present, except for a few works³, we do not have analytical studies of the intricate relationship between female rescuers and their Jewish charges during and after the war. Neither do we have studies examining the history of Polish female perpetrators whose actions led to the denunciation and killings of Jewish fugitives, nor do we have studies looking specifically at those Polish females who rescued Jews for 'profit only', and, at the same time, exhibited hostile and abusive attitudes towards their Jewish charges, including Jewish children. In her essay, 'The Contribution of Gender to the Study of the Holocaust', Dalia Ofer, one of the pioneering and key scholars of the history of women and the Holocaust⁴ calls for gender analysis be applied in topics such as 'cooperation with or resistance to the Final Solution, responses to the plunder of Jewish assets, and rescue efforts'⁵. In historical studies, gender perspective typically complicates and nuances our understanding of a particular historical event⁶. Can gender perspective complicate and illuminate our understanding of rescue of Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland? Can gender be a useful category to facilitate a discussion of specific aspects of the rescue activities and their postwar memories? How should we treat gender in relations to other aspects such as the socio-economic background, religion, and the age of the rescuers?

This essay does not claim to be a gender and quantitative analysis of rescue. Its modest aim is to discuss complexities and difficulties of studying the subject of rescue of Jews in wartime Poland from a gender perspective. The initial analysis put forward here is intended to investigate to what extent gender mattered in the treatment of the non-Jewish Polish rescuers by members of their local communities during and after the war. I focus on the category of rescuers whom I call the dedicated/genuine individuals who went above and beyond the call of duty to save Jews in hiding without intention to profit from rescue and without taking advantage of their Jewish charges. For decades in communist (1945–1989) and post-communist Poland (1989–2023), these rescuers have been chiefly presented as figures and symbols rather than as real, complex human beings. For decades, their rescue efforts have been weaponized to serve ideological goals of portraying Polish society during the Holocaust in a purely good light: as an ideal, innocent country without any blemishes on the national past in relations to the Jewish minority. The weaponization of the history of rescuers has been particularly intensified during the rule of the former right-wing and conservative PiS government between 2015

³ See Jennifer Lynn Marlow, *Polish Catholics Maids and Nannies: Female Aid and the Domestic Realm in Nazi-Occupied Poland* (PhD Dissertation, Michigan State University, 2014). The historian Phillip Friedman was the first scholar to discuss loyalty, total dedication and altruism of some former Polish female housekeepers towards their Jewish employers. See Philip Friedman, *Their Brothers' Keepers* (New York: Crown Publisher, 1957).

⁴ Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998).

⁵ Dalia Ofer, "The Contribution of Gender to the Study of the Holocaust", in: Marion A. Kaplan, Deborah Dash Moore, *Gender and the Jewish History* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011), 120–135.

⁶ Marion Kaplan, "Revealing and Concealing: Memoirs in German-Jewish History", in: Eli Lederhendler and Jack Wertheimer, eds., *Text and Context: Essays in Modern Jewish History And Historiography in Honor of Ismar Schorsch*, (New York: JTS, 2005). I would like to thank Prof. Marion Kaplan for providing me with this important article.

and 2023 when historians advocating the government's historical policy have brutally hijacked the genuine rescuers' individual histories to reinforce a false narrative about "Polish society's solidarity" with their Polish Jewish community during the Holocaust. In this process, right-wing ethnonationalist historians and pundits also exploited the genuine rescuers in order to erase the dark past in Polish-Jewish relations from history and suppress critical school of history writing that has been uncovering this dark past⁷. This instrumentalization is nothing else than an abuse of memory of these rescuers and their families.

Can we see substantial differences in attitudes towards and treatment of dedicated/genuine female and dedicated/genuine male rescuers in Polish society during and in the aftermath of rescue? Or in this respect, could we rather speak about a mostly similar experience within this group, regardless of their gender? What does the wartime and early postwar experience of dedicated rescuers, both female and male, reveal about wider Polish social and cultural norms, especially towards Jews, as revealed by those who defied these norms and attitudes?

I aim to answer these questions by a careful exploration of the most basic and quotidian aspects of the rescuers' lives, including the personal and emotional levels, as articulated in the personal letters from the early postwar period when the memory of the war was still raw. This essay is a follow up to my previous work on rescuers in Poland⁸, and is chiefly based on the correspondence of rescuers and rescued Jews, addressed to the Central Committee of Polish Jews and its various local branches, and to the American Jewish organization, the Joint in the early postwar period. This hardly examined correspondence pertains to rescue activities during the war and to individual early postwar requests for material and medical assistance for these activities.

Male and female authors of the letters

Though I recognize that this correspondence as a historical source cannot offer us a comprehensive picture of rescue and needs to be juxtaposed with other historical documentation and be broadly contextualized, yet I am interested precisely in this particular source and what this source tells us about the past. From a methodological point

⁷ On this topic see, for example, Kornelia Kończal, "Politics of Innocence. Holocaust Memory in Poland", *Journal of the Genocide Research*, Vol. 24, No. 2, 250–263; Joanna Beata Michlic, "The Politics of the Memorialization of the Holocaust in Poland: Reflections on the Current Misuses of the History of Rescue", *Jewish Historical Studies* vol. 53, no. 11, (March, 2022), 132–168, Piotr Forecki, *Reconstructing Memory: The Holocaust in Polish Public Debates*. Translated by Marta Skowrońska (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Edition, 2013); Paweł Machcewicz, "When History Matters Too Much: Historians and the Politics of History in Poland", *Contemporary European History* 32 (2023), 15–20, and Jan Grabowski, *Whitewash. Poland and the Jews*, *The Jewish Quarterly*, August, 2024.

⁸ Joanna B. Michlic, «I will never forget what you did for me during the war:» Representations of Rescuers and Relationships Between Rescuers and Jewish Survivors In The Light of Correspondence to the Central Committee of Polish Jews and the Joint, 1945–1949, "Yad Vashem Studies 39 (2) (2011), and "Daily Life of Polish Women, Dedicated Rescuers of Jews During and After the Second World War", Caroline S. Gould, Simone Gigliotti and Jacob Golomb, eds. *Ethics, Art and Representations of the Holocaust*, (Festschrift in honor of Berel Lang), (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 215–234.

of view, I study how much nuance and texture the analysis of this neglected correspondence and the accompanying notes and testimonies of Jewish survivors and their families, can add to our understanding of rescue and the early post-war rescue representations and memories. I examine five hundred letters and notes penned by rescuers, Jewish survivors, members of the survivors' families, and representatives of Jewish organizations. Characteristically, individuals within the group of survivors and their families either corroborate the accounts of their rescuers or themselves write on behalf of their rescuers asking for material assistance or other forms of help for their wartime saviours and their families. For this reason, the correspondence constitutes an exceptionally interesting source of multi-voices, describing the same rescue activities from various perspectives. A small minority of this correspondence also pertains to a search of a former rescuer or a former Jewish charge including a special case of a Polish male rescuer writing to Jewish organizations for help locate his wife who was also his former Jewish charge. According to this heartbroken man, once the war was over, his wife left him suddenly without an explanation. She allegedly abandoned him, in spite of the couple having had happy and agreeable marital relations and raising a family together. The husband reports that his wife most likely acted under the influence of members of an unidentified Jewish organization, who had visited their home prior to his wife's departure. There is a need to study such cases, and the origins and the nature of such intimate relations formed under extreme genocidal conditions. These intimate relations would most likely have not been formed given the different ethnic, social, and cultural background of the two involved parties. We need to investigate not only how many such couples were formed under extreme circumstances of war and genocide and the nature of these relations, but also the extent to which the eruption of the early postwar antisemitism and ethnic pressures existing on (ethnic) Polish and Polish-Jewish sides at that time constituted the key causes of their abrupt ending. We also need to write a history of intimate relations between non-Jewish Polish rescuers and their Jewish charges that had survived the test of war and the Holocaust and the immense early postwar social and cultural pressures and violent antisemitism in the country. These couples constitute a tiny minority whose history has not been yet written.

Polish widows, whose Jewish husbands were murdered during the Holocaust, constitute another small group of the authors. In their letters, they ask Jewish organizations for assistance to raise their ethnically half-Jewish children born from their prewar marriages with Polish Jewish men. The widows seem to be uncertain of their status and the status of their half-Jewish children's within the Jewish community and for that reason, their letters take on a strong self-effacing tone.

In addition, I also analyze early postwar testimonies of Jewish survivors, and later postwar testimonies of rescuers. Earlier and later postwar letters and testimonies give us an insight into the rescuers' emotions and personal memories of their wartime experiences: what aspects of the rescue were important and clearly pronounced in their memories at the time of recollection, and how they were articulated. About the latter, one can

investigate how the collective/group experience and the specific historical context influenced the narrative, language and content of the testimonies.

The five hundred letters under analysis disclose the human depth and texture of the rescuers' experiences. They also demonstrate how their experiences, precisely as exceptions, challenge the key myths and memories of rescue that had fully developed during the communist period, 1945–1989⁹. These myths and memories have continued to a high degree in the post-communist debate on rescue¹⁰ in the 1990s and 2000s, despite the fact that recent critical¹¹ research conducted by scholars in Poland and abroad has contributed to the dismantling of the hegemonic narratives of the so-called 'Polish collective solidarity with Jews' during the war. This research has demonstrated the biases, pure lies, and incongruence of these themes with the wartime historical reality. The critical interrogation of the myth of Polish collective solidarity with the Jews during the Holocaust has been mostly achieved by uncovering the previously suppressed dark aspects of Polish-Jewish relations during the war¹². As a result the emphasis has radically shifted onto the studies of rescuers for profit¹³ and those rescuers who in the course of war turned into abusers of their Jewish charges or saved them only to later denounce

⁹ On the history of the communist memory of the Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust, see for example, Joanna Beata Michlic and Małgorzata Melchior, "The Memory of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Poland", in: John-Paul Himka and Joanna Beata Michlic, eds., *Bringing the Dark to Light: The Memory of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Nebraska University Press, 2013), 412–420.

¹⁰ For the old pre-1989 tendencies present in contemporary debate and historical writing see, for example, the website 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* (9 October 2004); Dariusz Baliszewski, „Czy jesteśmy nacjonalistami?”, *Wprost* (2 April 2006), <http://www.wprost.pl/ar/88353/Czy-jestesmy-nacjonalistami/> [accessed December 18, 2009]; and Marcin Urynowicz, "Liczenie z pamięcią", *Tygodnik Powszechny* (30 October 2007), <http://tygodnik2003-2007.onet.pl/1547,1448231,0,547780,dzial.html> [accessed December 18, 2009], that claims that in Poland there were four hundred thousand Christian Polish rescuers of Jews. He draws on Gunnar S. Paulsson's numerical estimates of Jews who survived in wartime Warsaw. See the critical response questioning Urynowicz's assumptions and methodology by Jacek Leociak and Dariusz Libionka, "Zonglerka liczbami", *Tygodnik Powszechny* (27 November 2007) [accessed June 8, 2008], <http://tygodnik2003-2007.onet.pl/1547,1454440,0,554745,dzial.html>.

¹¹ See, for example, Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski, eds. *Zarys krajobrazu: wieś polska wobec zagłady Żydów 1942–1945* (Warsaw: Centrum Badań nad Zagładą, 2011); Engelking and Grabowski, eds. *Dalej jest noc: losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski* (Warsaw: Centrum Badań nad Zagładą, 2018). On the broad topic of non-Jewish Poles profiting from the destruction of Polish Jews, see Jan Grabowski and Dariusz Libionka eds., *Klucze i kasa. O mieniu żydowskim w Polsce pod okupacją niemiecką i we wczesnych latach powojennych 1939–1950*, (Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2014).

¹² See, for example, Andrzej Żbikowski, ed., *Polacy i Żydzi pod okupacją niemiecką 1939–1945. Studia i materiały*, (Warsaw, IPN, 2006), chapters 9 and 10 by Elżbieta Rączy and Anna Piżewska, respectively; and Elżbieta Rączy, *Pomoc Polaków dla ludności żydowskiej na Rzeszowczyźnie, 1939–1945*, (Rzeszów, IPN, 2008); Jacek Leociak, *Ratownie. Opowieści Polaków i Żydów*, (Cracow, Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2010), and *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 4 (2008). Hereafter *Zagłada Żydów* 4 (2008).

¹³ See, for example, *Zagłada Żydów* 4 (2008), and Jan Grabowski, "Rescue for Money. Paid Helpers in Poland, 1939–1945", *Search and Research. Lectures and Papers* 13 (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2008); Jan Grabowski, *Judenjagd. Polowanie na Żydów 1942–1945. Studium dziejów pewnego powiatu*, (Warsaw, Polish Center for Holocaust Research, 2011), Hereafter Grabowski, *Judenjagd.*; and Agnieszka Wierzchołska, "Helping, Denouncing, and Profiteering: a Process-Oriented Approach to Jewish–Gentile Relations in Occupied Poland from a Micro-Historical Perspective", In: Kubátová, Hana and Lániček, Jan (eds): *Jews and Gentiles in Eastern Europe During the Holocaust in History and Memory* 23, (2017), p. 34–58.

or kill them¹⁴. These new vital studies are generally descriptive and microhistories with a focus on particular regions.

The correspondence under the analysis constitutes a rare documentation of the intricate map of the relations between the rescuers and the rescued Jews, and the rescuers and members of their local communities such as neighbours and extended families. Neither do male or female rescuers under the analysis belong to the same marital and generational category. The letters also suggest that male and female dedicated rescuers differed from each other in terms of the socio-economic background, and the educational level. They also differ from each other in terms of geographical location. There are four major regions in which these rescuers lived and in which they sheltered and assisted Jews during the war: Warsaw and the Warsaw province, Kielce region, Little Poland (*Małopolska*) and the Eastern Territories (*Kresy*).

In the case of some genuine rescuers from the countryside, the educational level emerges at its lowest, as their letters are written by someone else – typically the administrator of village – and only signed by the rescuer with three crosses or one cross indicating their complete illiteracy. Yet, some of their accounts, especially of women's, are filled with intense emotional expressions and reveal striking details about how they coped with daily challenges and their attitudes towards rescue. Except for a small group of letters written mostly by men of the working class, we hardly learn anything about politics and ideological affiliations of the female and male authors. The leftwing working-class men and women, who openly declare their affiliation with the Polish Socialist Party, PPS and other left-wing organizations, emphatically state that they rescued Jews for ideological reasons such as patriotism and civic duty. But from most of the letters, we could not detect if and to what extent politics influenced the male and female rescuers and what was their ideological affiliation and political sympathies prior and during the Second World War. The politics seems irrelevant as the majority, regardless of their gender, age, and socio-economic background, declare that they saw rescue of Jews as an ordinary human action: as an act of decency to help the most needed and endangered people.

Only a small group of authors, from both urban areas and villages, make brief and positive references to the political transformation, taking place in early postwar Poland. Their statements are rather uniform, careful and vague, and speak briefly about the endorsement of 'democracy and equal civic rights' for every citizen in the new, communist Poland. It is difficult to detect if the authors truly believed in those statements or uttered them pro forma.

¹⁴ See, for example, Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, "The Unrighteous Righteous and the Righteous Unrighteous", *Dapim: Studies on the Shoah* 24 (2010): 11–63. The article appeared first in Polish in: *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 4 (2008): 170–217, and Barbara Engelking, *Jest taki piękny słoneczny dzień ... Losy Żydów szukających ratunku na wsi polskiej 1942–1945* (Warsaw, Polish Center for Holocaust Research, 2011). Hereafter, Engelking, *Jest taki piękny słoneczny dzień ...*

In the cohort under analysis, except for the well-known Irena Sendlerowa (1910–2008)¹⁵, none of the authors seem to have written or publicly spoken about their war-time rescue efforts in a different and expanded form. Therefore, it is impossible to outline each rescuer's biography in greater detail. Most of them can be identified as ordinary men and women not belonging to cultural or political non-Jewish Polish elites. Their letters permit us to access glimpses of their early postwar emotions, ways of thinking, and intentions. In their requests for assistance, both female and male rescuers explain in an almost uniform fashion that their current dire situation had forced them to turn for help to Jewish organizations. Most of the male and female authors of different social and economic status stress, in less or more sophisticated manner depending on their educational level, that they do not seek repayment for rescue and that their assistance to Jews was of a purely humanitarian nature. Their uniform position suggests that they were aware that their fellow countrymen abused, harmed and took advantage of Jewish fugitives. Therefore, it is important to them to dissociate themselves explicitly, especially from the group of rescuers 'for profit,' who, also at the same time, wrote to Jewish organizations for material help.

Rescuers, belonging to the intelligentsia, both female and male, appear embarrassed and uncomfortable by making requests for assistance. Members of Jewish organizations note in their accompanying comments that some such rescuers refused to accept financial help. Instead, these rescuers only accepted necessities: clothes and shoes for their families, and food and some toiletries. Under the harsh economic conditions of the early postwar period, all these basic goods were considered luxuries, hard to find and afford¹⁶. The often repeated refusal to accept funds for rescuing a human life can be viewed as a demonstration of a particular attitude towards money and honour prevalent within Polish intelligentsia, regardless of gender. Former Jewish charges typically confirm the deteriorating material circumstances, severe medical problems, and poverty their wartime benefactors faced in the early post war period.

¹⁵ See, for example, the documentary film by Mary Skinner, *Irena Sendler. In the Name of Their Mothers*, which is going to be aired in the US on PBS on May 1, 2011; and *Dzieci Ireny Sendlerowej* by John Kent Harrison, 2009. The latter film is based on Anna Mieszkowska, *Matka dzieci holokaustu. Historia Ireny Sendlerowej*, (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Literackie Muza, 2004); See also report "Za naprawianie świata", April 28, 2008 [accessed September 5, 2010] <http://www.forum-znak.org.pl/print.php?t=wydarzenia&id=7212&l=>.

For an encounter of 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).

¹⁶ On the social, economic, and mental conditions of Polish society in the aftermath of the Second World War, see, for example, Marcin Zaremba, *Wielka Trwoga. Polska 1944–1947. Ludowa Reakcja Na Kryzys* (Cracow: Znak, 2012), and on the political transformation in the early postwar Poland, see Andrzej Paczkowski, *Pół wieku* (Warszawa: PWN, 1996).

Rescue of Jews in wartime Poland and gender perspective: the outline of problems

The detailed study of the rescue of Jews in France and Belgium contends that French and Belgian men and women were equally involved in helping Jews¹⁷, though in absolute numbers, women's participation appears slightly higher than men's in both these cases. But this slightly higher absolute number of women over men in both cases is explained by the male deficit in France and Belgium before and during the war¹⁸. Can we talk about a similarity between the French and Belgian cases and the Polish case? At this stage, it would be rather difficult to draw definite conclusions and argue that male deficit is the sole reason for the visible over-representation of Polish women rescuers, though it is an important factor, as this essay argues. Various data and historical interpretations point us into opposing directions. In the Polish case, no doubt, there was a male deficit during the war as men were drafted to the Polish army and imprisoned by both occupiers, the Germans (1939–1945) and the Soviets (1939–1941), but we do not have yet a comprehensive statistical data to draw clear conclusions about the number of Polish men and women involved in rescue activities. Therefore, there is a need to conduct a detailed statistical study of the number Polish male and female rescuers. Microhistorical studies with focus on gender can illuminate the female-male division in rescue in different geographical areas. In this respect, what can also be helpful is research based on the interrelated method of prosopography that examines the collective experience of the rescuers and the environment and social structures in which they had functioned. At present, we do not have yet such a study in the Polish case.

Nachum Bogner, the pioneering scholar of rescue of Jewish children in wartime Poland, and himself a child Holocaust survivor from Galicia insists that in the Polish case, women constituted the majority of the genuine rescuers¹⁹. One can also reach the same conclusion from the study of the number of more than 7, 232 recognized Polish rescuers by Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem²⁰. The early postwar letters under the analysis also indicate that there were more individual, genuine Polish female rescuers than individual dedicated Polish male rescuers. How can this over-representation of female rescuer-authors be treated and explained? No doubt, these differences resulted from the wartime and the early postwar realities characterized by the lack of gender balance in Polish society. The male deficit caused by the war and the Nazi and Soviet occupations, led to what can be defined as a gender revolution in Polish society: the emergence

¹⁷ Jeannine (Levana) Frenk, *Righteous Among the Nations in France and Belgium: A Silent Resistance* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem Studies, 2008), 40–41.

¹⁸ Frenk, *Righteous Among the Nations in France and Belgium: A Silent Resistance*, 40–41.

¹⁹ See Nachum Bogner, *Be'hasidei zarim: hatsalat yeladim bezechut she'ulah bepolin* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2000), English translation *At the Mercy of Strangers: The Rescue of Hidden Jewish Children in Poland* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2009), and the author's interview with Nachum Bogner in his home, Kibbutz Netiv Ha-Lamed Hey, 9 May 2014.

²⁰ I would like to thank Mrs. Bożenna Rotman, from the Polish Desk at the Department of righteous Among Gentiles at Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, for helpful observations on the subject.

of matriarchy²¹, characterized by visible loneliness of women during and after the war on the one hand, and on the other, by economic and sexual independence of women²².

Polish women, of different age, were turned into wartime widows. Many young Polish women lost their to-be-husbands, boyfriends and husbands, as well as fathers and brothers in the war. Germans and the Soviets killed their male family members in military actions, and in labour camps. According to the available statistics, the gender im-balance between men and women in 1939 was as follows: there were 104,9 women for every 100 men; in 1946, there were 115,5 women for every 100 men; and in 1947, 113,1 for every 100 men. The highest deficit of men was visible in big cities such as Warsaw and Łódź: in 1931 there were 119, 4 for every 100 men in Warsaw; in 1946, there were 140, 8 women for every 100 men in the ruined capital. In Łódź in 1931, there were 117,2 women for every 100 men; but in 1946, when the city enjoyed the status of the temporary capital, there were 134, 2 women for every 100 men²³. In 1950, the percentage of single women between the age of twenty and forty-nine, who could not count on finding a male partner was 46 %, whereas in 1931 it was only 34%²⁴.

The wartime situation forced Polish women to take up roles at home and outside their homes that were out of their reach prior to 1939 as men had chiefly occupied them. The war changed this gender division. During the five-year Nazi occupation, women became household heads and managers, and chief breadwinners of their families. Did holding the function of household managers during the war prompt Polish women to rescue Jews? Did it also enable them to make swift practical decisions about saving Jews? Was the loss of a male family member or a fear of losing a male family member a contributing factor in making a swift decision about rescuing Jews? These are important gender-related questions that need to be thoroughly investigated.

A close examination of the correspondence of rescuers and survivors suggests that this was the case in most of the female authors of the letters. Later postwar testimonies of survivors also confirm the viability of this pattern. Interestingly, ethnic Polish women, whose wartime national and professional status can be considered murky, are also included in the category of genuine Polish female rescuers. For example, in the unpublished memoir of Shmuel Ron (Rozenwajg), born on 21 November 1922, the author recalls that one of his main rescuers, Sofia (Zofia) was a part-time prostitute as well

²¹ Małgorzata Fidelis, "Czy «nowy matriarchat»? Kobiety bez mężczyzn w Polsce po II wojnie światowej," in: Anna Żarnowska, Andrzej Szwarz, eds, *Kobieta i rewolucja obyczajowa. Społeczno-kulturowe aspekty seksualności. Wiek XIX i XX*, vol. IX (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo DiG, 2006), 421–436. Hereafter, Fidelis, "Czy «nowy matriarchat?»".

²² On the situation of women in postwar Polish society, see also, Hanna Jędruszczak, „Miasta i przemysł w okresie odbudowy”, in: Franciszek Ryszka ed. *Polska Ludowa 1944–50. Przemiany społeczne*, (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1974), 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 Szwarz, eds, *Kobieta i praca. Wiek XIX i XX.*, vol. VI, (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo DiG, 2000), 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).

²³ Michał Krasocki, „U źródeł siły żywej”, in: *Praca i opieka społeczna XXII* (1) (January–March 1948): 35; and also *Powszechny sumaryczny spis ludności 14 February 1946* (Warsaw: Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 1947).

²⁴ Fidelis, "Czy «nowy matriarchat?»", 426.

as the caretaker of a building in a prestigious neighbourhood in Katowice. She rescued him and his friends because her job as a caretaker allowed her to do so, in spite of having a tiny apartment. But primarily she rescued Ron because of her religious beliefs. Ron was a member of an underground Jewish youth movement in Zagłębie, who lived openly on the Aryan side and depended on Sophia: 'Sophia believed in the Creator and in Jesus. She would speak to Jesus as to some distinguished man sitting by her side and she told me she had also made a deal with him—if she saved me Jesus would save her son, who was about my age and serving with the German army on the Eastern Front. Sophia had a husband too, who was also posted in the East. Sophia would introduce me as her nephew when I went along to help her at her cleaning and maintenance job at the N.S.D.A.P. offices, and the people working there sometimes asked me to do odd jobs for them. At home, Sophia treated me like an adopted son, and even called me that'²⁵.

The detailed study of the percentage of Polish female and male rescuers needs to carefully consider the cohort of nuns and priests involved in rescue actions. In contrast to the spiritual guidance to help the Jews offered by many religious leaders in France or Belgium²⁶, the higher echelon of the Catholic Church in Poland which itself suffered substantial human losses under the Nazi occupation²⁷, did not issue any statements on behalf of Jews. It did not offer spiritual guidance urging Christians to protect fellow Polish Jews. In fact, it was deeply antisemitic because of the widespread prewar influence of the ideology of exclusivist ethnonationalism that saw in Jews the key enemy of Poland.

Therefore, it is clear that in wartime Poland, Roman Catholic priests and nuns actively involved in the rescue of Jews acted on their own accord. The attitudes towards Jews and the rescue actions of the Mother Superior, in each of the nunnery and missionary, was essential for assisting Jewish fugitives. At present, a comprehensive history of their

²⁵ Shmuel Ron, *And You Shall Tell Your Children*, (Memoir completed in Jerusalem in November 1995), 117–118. Ron continued to keep in touch with Sophia, his rescuers after the war even after he had moved to Israel. He called 'his mother'. In 1983, a short article about Sophia appeared in the Israeli newspaper *Herut* on 18 September, but the fact that she was a part-time prostitute was omitted from the piece. [accessed May 12, 2014] http://www.ranaz.co.il/articles/article1790_19630918.asp.

I would like to thank Amos Ron, the son of Shmuel Ron for sharing with me his father's important memoir.

²⁶ See, for example, Wilfred Douglas Halls, *Politics, Society and Christianity in Vichy France* (Oxford: Berg, 1995), 97–106; Francis R. Nicosia, ed. *Archives of the Holocaust. Vol. 4, Central Zionist Archives 1939–1945*, (New York: Garland, 1990), 161–166; Lieve Gevers and Jan Bank, eds., *Religion under Siege. The Roman Catholic Church in Occupied Europe (1939–1950)*, (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 222; and Mark van den Wijngaert, "Les Catholiques Belges et les Juifs durant l'occupation Allemande 1940–1944", in: Rudi van Doorslaer et al (eds.) *Les Juifs de Belgique. De l'Immigration au Génocide, 1925–1945*, (Brussels: Centre de Recherches et d'Études Historiques de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale, 1994), 121.

²⁷ On the history of the Catholic Church in Poland under the German occupation, see, for example, Franciszek Stopniak, ed., *Kościół katolicki na ziemiach Polski w czasie II wojny światowej: Materiały i studia*, (Warszawa: Akademia Teologii Katolickiej, 1981), vol. 10, no. 5; Zygmunt Zieliński, ed., *Życie religijne w Polsce pod okupacją hitlerowską 1939–1945* (Warszawa, Ośrodek Dokumentacji i Studiów Społecznych, 1982); Zygmunt Zieliński, *Życie religijne w Polsce pod okupacją 1939–1945: Metropolie wileńska i lwowska, zakony* (Katowice; Unia, 1992).

operations, motivations, achievements and limits has not yet been written²⁸, as scholars do not have a full access to church archives in Poland. Instead, we have a proliferation of hagiographical works filled with embellished information and skewed interpretations. The involvement of individual priests and nuns in rescue of Jewish children was, no doubt, significant and requires a comprehensive investigation, free of ideological agendas. According to the statement of the nun, Teresa Antonietta Frącek, her Franciscan Missionaries of Mary alone rescued approximately 500 Jewish children²⁹. Because of the strict and hierarchical nature of functioning of these religious organizations and their social isolation, it was relatively easier to hide Jewish children among non-Jewish children in nunneries and monasteries than with individual families. Were the Polish nuns chiefly motivated by the Christian belief in agape – helping the most needed and yet also mixed with the desire to save the individual by conversion to Catholicism? Were they more open to rescue because of their status as the handmaidens of the church, performing charity without heeding official edicts? Did the nuns' suppressed maternal and nurturing instincts play an important role in the daily rescue of Jewish children? Do we have cases of hostile nuns who acted in a cruel fashion towards young Jewish wards? And how could we explain such hostility? These are important gender-oriented questions begging for investigation.

Of course, the over-representation of genuine Polish female rescuers over male rescuers in the letters under analysis, does not mean that Polish women in general can be treated as just forgotten heroines of the war. In the interactions with Jewish fugitives, non-Jewish Polish women, like non-Jewish Polish men, behaved in a variety of ways. Many acted in ways that reflected the sheer impact of exclusionary ethno-nationalism, antisemitism, greed, dangerous curiosity and suspicion, negative indifference, narrow and personal interests. Whereas some showed a deeply felt sympathy for Jewish victims, humanitarian attitudes and a belief that Jewish fugitives were members of the same collective, deserving assistance and care. Therefore, we also need to investigate another set of gender-oriented questions: Were women more capable of endangering rescue of Jews than men in terms of 'spotting' the genuine rescuers in daily activities such as purchase

²⁸ The works published on the subject are descriptive rather than analytical. See, for example, Jerzy Kłoczowski, "The Religious Orders and the Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland", *Polin: A Journal of Polish-Jewish Studies* 3 (1988), 238–43; Ewa Kurek-Lesik, *Gdy Klasztor znaczył życie* (Cracow: Zak, 1992); Ewa Kurek-Lesik, *Your Life Is Worth Mine: How Polish Nuns Saved Hundreds of Jewish Children in German Occupied Poland, 1939–1945*, (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1997); and Franciszek Stopniak, "Katolickie duchowieństwo w Polsce i Żydzi w okresie niemieckiej okupacji", in: Krzysztof Dunin-Wąsowicz, ed. *Spółczesność polskie wobec martyrologii i walki Żydów w latach II wojny światowej: Materiały z sesji w Instytucie Historii PAN w dniu 11.III.1993 r.* (Warszawa: Instytut Historii PAN, 1996), 19–55.

²⁹ Statement, of 23 October 2013, of the Director of the Central Archives of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, the nun, Teresa Antonietta Frącek. Frącek cites the figure of 500 Jewish children saved by the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary from the questionnaire conducted in Poland in 1962. The statement is included in the documentation about the rescue actions of Czesława Strąg. I would like to thank Dr. Nachum Bogner for sharing with me the document. In her book, Ewa Kurek, *Dzieci żydowskie w klasztorach: Udział żeńskich zgromadzeń zakonnych w akcji ratowania dzieci żydowskich w Polsce w latach 1939–1945* (Lublin: Clio, 2001), she identifies 53 orders of nuns who rescued no fewer than 1,200 Jewish children in almost 200 convents and institutions, 139–204. However, some of her interpretations of data are skewed and false.

of larger amounts of food for the hidden Jews? Were they more dangerous than men in terms of paying attention to suspicious sounds, gestures and movements in neighbouring apartments and houses? Were women the chief 'collectors' of dangerous rumours about their neighbours' 'suspicious' social activities? Were they more disposed to betray their neighbours hiding Jews than their male counterparts? Did they disapprove of rescue activities for different reasons than the men? Were they the chief facilitators of an atmosphere of social exclusion of genuine rescuers, which often led to and enabled physical violence against them and their Jewish charges during and after the war? And could the same or different strategies be used to pacify women and men – the blackmailers (szmalcownicy)³⁰, who had threatened the genuine rescuers to denounce their actions?

In his 2013 important study of rescue in France *Persécutions et entraides dans la France occupée: comment 75% des Juifs en France ont échappé à la mort*³¹, Jacques Semelin discusses in depth the small gestures of protection by ordinary French people during the mass deportations of Jews 1942–1944. Semelin portrays them in four self-explanatory categories: the host, the guardian angel, the falsifier, and the smuggler. These categories are helpful in terms of understanding the mechanism of rescue on daily settings and the scope of rescue. They can be applied in charting a comprehensive map of various sub-groups of rescuers in Polish society. In my work on the rescue of Polish Jewish children in wartime Poland, next to the category of long-term and short-term genuine rescuers, I introduced the category of a sudden helper saving the young Jewish fugitives from dangerous encounters with the Germans and Polish blackmailers³². Both male and female genuine rescuers play the role of sudden rescuer on the streets, in the railway stations, offices and shops. A few members of the Polish blue police (*granatowa policja*)³³ acted as sudden helpers by rejecting their colleagues' voiced accusations that the captured person was a Jew in hiding. As sudden helpers they also managed to convince their colleagues to free the arrested individuals. These individuals acted in contrast to many colleagues in the Polish blue police forces who actively participated in hunting Jewish fugitives³⁴.

³⁰ For detailed analysis of blackmailers in wartime Warsaw, see Jan Grabowski, *„Ja tego Żyda znam. Szantażowanie Żydów w Warszawie, 1939–1943* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN, 2004). For cases of collectively organized searches of Jews by groups of peasants recollected in Christian Polish diaries, see, for example, Stanisław Zemiński, „Kartki dziennika nauczyciela w Łukowie z okresu okupacji hitlerowskiej”, *Biuletyn ŻIH* 8 (August 1958): 105–112;

³¹ Jacques Semelin, *Persécutions et entraides dans la France occupée: comment 75% des Juifs en France ont échappé à la mort* (*Persecution and Mutual Help in Occupied France. How 75% of the Jews Escaped Death*) (Paris: Seuil-Les Arènes, 2013).

³² Joanna Beata Michlic, „Jewish Children in Nazi-Occupied Poland: Survival and Polish-Jewish Relations during the Holocaust as Reflected in Early Postwar Recollections”, *Search and Research. Lectures and Papers* 14, (2008); hereafter Michlic, „Jewish Children in Nazi-Occupied Poland”.

³³ On the *granatowa policja*, see, for example, Adam Hempel, *Pogrobowcy kłęski: Rzecz o policji 'granatowej' w Generalnym gubernatorstwie, 1939–1945* (Warsaw: PWN, 1990). In his rather disappointing TV film, *Wyrok na Franciszka Kłosa, The Condemnation of Franciszek Kłos* (2000), the renowned Polish filmmaker Andrzej Wajda addresses the problem of members of *granatowa policja* collaborating with the Germans in the annihilation of Polish Jews.

³⁴ On the topic of the involvement of the blue police in hunting Polish Jews, see Jan Grabowski, *Na posterunku. Udział polskiej policji granatowej i kryminalnej w zagładzie Żydów* (Wołowiec: Czarne, 2020).

In the letters under the analysis, the genuine female and male rescuers often play the multiple roles of host, guardian angel, and the smuggler. The case of the late Czesława Strąg (nee Kisielewicz), born in 1923, who as a 19-year-old Polish woman, decided to save a 7-year-old Jewish girl, Róża Kateganer (Maria Damaszek) is a good example of a non-Jewish Polish female who played all these three roles, in spite of her young age³⁵. Strąg was a young woman with mature sense of nurturing and caring for children. She met Róża Kateganer in the summer of 1942 in her hometown Berezany (Brzeżany)³⁶, Galicia, and shortly after, upon request of Róża Kateganer, decided to save her, in spite of her parents' deep fears that she might endanger the whole family. With the agreement of Róża Kateganer's father, she brought home the young Jewish fugitive and took care of organizing for her, a 'good' birth certificate in the name of Maria Szkolnicka, a name of one of Strąg's cousin, who was sent to Siberia by the Soviets in 1940. She also approached a familiar and trusted priest to obtain the baptism certificate for Maria. For safety reasons, Strąg decided to leave her hometown with Róża Kateganer, and moved to Sambor and next to Lviv in order to protect the girl and herself from potential local denunciations who could recognize them easily. Once it was clear to her that her Jewish charge had a better chance of survival with the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary in Podhajce, near Berezany, than with her on the Aryan side, Strąg placed Maria there. Nevertheless, she kept in touch with the trusted nun to make sure that Maria was well-looked after, and from time to time, on a regular basis, she also phoned and visited Maria in Podhajce. This lasted till the spring of 1944 when the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary had to relocate to a safer location first in Lviv and next near Cracow, because of the danger of the missionary being destroyed by the military Ukrainian units (OUN) that were killing Poles and Jews en masse in the area. Thus, Strąg lost contact with her Jewish charge. Nonetheless, Strąg and her young Jewish charge were reunited after the war in western Poland and led a close familial like relations in Wrocław where they both settled. They have continued to keep in close relations even after Maria Szkolnicka (Damaszek) left for the United States in 1963 to be reunited with her biological father's family.

When it comes to the category of the falsifier, who produced the necessary, lifesaving documents for Jewish fugitives, Polish women could hardly be found serving this task. Specific gender-based professional background allows for the explanation why men appear to dominate in this category. The application of gender categories also allows us to explain why some Polish men in the position of heads and managers in welfare, legal, and medical institutions and in the blue police, performed rescue tasks that were out of reach in the case of Polish women-rescuers.

³⁵ Czesława Strąg, *Wspomnienia Czesławy Strąg z Holocaustu i o uratowaniu Marii Szkolnickiej, Róża Rozalia Kateganer* (transcript of oral history conducted on 27 September 1993) The document is hosted in the Central Archives of the Franciscan Missionary of Mary in Warsaw. This testimony is accompanied by the statement of 21 December 2013, by Maria Damaszek (the former Jewish charge Róża Rozalia Kateganer). I would like to thank dr. Nachum Bogner for sharing with me these documents.

³⁶ On the history of wartime Brzeżany, see Shimon Redlich, *Together and Apart in Brzeżany: Poles, Jews and Ukrainians, 1919–1945*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002). hereafter, Redlich, *Together and Apart in Brzeżany*.

A small body of the early postwar letters authored by non-Jewish Polish women – wartime widows – speak about their husbands as the driving force of rescue, who paid the heaviest price for sheltering and assisting Jews. The Germans brutally murdered them. Characteristically, these women depict themselves as rather emotionally and physically detached from the rescue activities. They seem to be overwhelmed by the loss of their husbands and destroyed family life, and worried about the future of their families.

Among letters written by local representatives of the Polish community such as the sołtys – the head³⁷ of a village, and representatives of Jewish organizations, we also find requests to assist orphaned non-Jewish Polish children whose both parents were murdered by the Germans because of them undertaking rescue activities. As a rule, these letters do not provide information about the daily rescue routine and which of the two spouses was the driving force behind it. But the testimonies of Jewish survivors throw light on this aspect. They assert that in general both spouses cooperated together and that their rescue activities were complementary, though one of them: the husband or the wife was the key initiator of rescue. In many cases, survivors speak about the dominant role of the woman in taking the daily, mundane care of the Jewish fugitives, and in protecting them. This evidence suggests the gender division in the families of rescuers shaped the daily routine of rescue. In the countryside, it was not unusual that the mature peasant women, guided by religious values, had to protect the Jewish wards from sexual, violent harassment by the drunken, male members in their families, ordinary fathers and husbands.

In other cases, it was the male members of the rescuer family who were more caring and compassionate than their wives who were chiefly preoccupied with the wellbeing of their own children. Therefore, they were reluctant to offer help to the Jewish fugitives and found it difficult to fully accept rescue activities taking place under their homes' roof³⁸. Some child survivors' testimonies speak about the compassionate and nurturing male rescuer whom the children regarded as trusted family like member and called him 'uncle' or 'father'³⁹.

One of the most poignant testimonies showing the extent of genuine help of a religious, illiterate, poor male peasant offered to an adult Jewish charge is that of Dawid (David) Nassan. Nassan wrote the testimony on June 25, 1947 in Cracow, his prewar hometown⁴⁰. Nassan enclosed this testimony to his request, of July 7, 1947, to assist his wartime benefactor, Józef Biesiada, of Smardzowice, the district of Olkusz, near Cracow⁴¹.

³⁷ For the overview of the social relations in Polish countryside under the German occupation and the role of village heads, see Tomasz Frydel, "The Polish Countryside as a Gray Zone: Village Heads and the Meso Level of the General Government, 1939–1945", *East European Politics and Societies, Special Issue*, eds. Natalia Aleksiu and Hana Kubátová 37, no. 4 (2023), 202–228.

³⁸ See, for example, the memoir of the Jewish survivor, Ewa Turzyńska, *Sądzonym mi było żyć...* (Warsaw: ŻIH, 2009), 168–173.

³⁹ For the records of such familial like relationships between young Jewish fugitives and male rescuers, see, Michlic, "Jewish Children in Nazi-Occupied Poland", 5–7.

⁴⁰ Nine-page testimony of Dawid Nassan, Cracow, 25 June 1947, ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/222, 20–28, hereafter Nassan, *Testimony*.

⁴¹ Letter, of 7 July 1947, of Dawid Nassan to the Committee to Aid Poles Assisting Jews During the War, Warsaw, sent via the channel of the Jewish Committee in Cracow, ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/222, 18–19.

In the killing action of the last Jewish fugitives from Skąta in the Cracow region, taking place in the middle of November 1942 at the local cemetery, Nassan lost his twenty-two-year-old wife, six-month-old daughter, and his parents-in-law. He managed to escape death by pure chance, running and hiding between the graves. Half-naked and traumatized by witnessing the death of his dearest, Nassan wished to acquire basic clothes and a pair of shoes to go to the Cracow ghetto. However, he was too afraid to visit the familiar peasant Cieślik from the village of Smardzowice, who was already in the possession of all Nassan's family belongings. He, in fact, suspected that Cieślik might kill him if he showed up at the peasant's house and asked for his belongings. Therefore, he decided to approach an unknown peasant family. In the dark, through the window, Nassan saw Józef Biesiada—the head of the family, praying and his wife with four children already lying in bed. Nassan knocked on the doors and asked them for a pair of shoes and clothes, but they did not have any spare trousers or shoes to share with him. They were shocked by the pitiful look of Nassan and by his account of escaping alive from the cemetery where the shooting of Jews took place. When it came to the issue of sheltering the Jewish fugitive, Biesiada's wife was, at first, afraid of providing a shelter, as she feared that the entire family would be killed if the Germans discovered the Jew on their premises. But, according to Nassan, Biesiada knelt in front of his wife and begged her to allow him to shelter the man. He argued that since Nassan had miraculously survived the killing in the cemetery this must have been God's will, so he was obliged to help him and thus fulfil God's wish⁴². Biesiada built a special hiding place in the barn where Nassan was hidden for twenty-seven months. Despite dire poverty, Biesiada not only brought him food and water to wash on a regular daily basis, but also shared with him home-made cigarettes. Nassan remained with the Biesiada family for three weeks after the Soviet army took over the region in February 1945. Finally, Biesiada drove Nassan, hidden in his cart, to Cracow where he received medical care. Before they separated, Biesiada had begged Nassan to not disclose his name publicly, as he feared that his neighbours might take violent action against him and his family because he had rescued a Jew.

To what extent was Józef Biesiada's caring and nurturing behaviour towards a Jewish stranger a norm among male rescuers? Were the designated traditional gender roles within family a major factor in the ways the couples shared the daily responsibilities over their Jewish charges? Or rather do we need to consider a combination of factors, such as gender, personality, individual system of values and beliefs, internal dynamics in the marriage and individual family practices, and personal relations with the Jewish fugitive to understand fully the dynamics and motivation for rescue?

In the case of adult rescuers, both male and female, we also need to examine to what extent the romantic and sexual desires played a major role in assisting adult Jewish fugitives. The social history of Polish women in general during the war suggest that many women, whose husbands were away, were engaged in informal sexual and intimate

⁴² Nassan, *Testimony*, 7 (26 in the entire file).

relations with new, short-term partners, including Jewish fugitives⁴³. From testimonies of Jewish survivors, we also learn that not only men but also women rescuers, whose husbands were absent from home, were engaged in romantic and sexual relations with hidden Jews. Some of these female rescuer-lovers hoped and in fact expected that their intimate relations with the Jewish fugitive-lover continue after the end of the war. Was this a norm or an exception?

We also know of some male Jewish fugitive-lovers, who were in hiding at the rescuer-lover's property with their Jewish wife and other members of the families, and who gave the rescuer-lover impression that they would indeed leave the spouse when the war is over. Was this a pure survival strategy to keep their Jewish family in hiding safe and alive? Or did some of these male Jewish fugitive-lovers fall in love with their non-Jewish rescuer-lover? ⁴⁴ What were the consequences of such secret intimate relations? This gender-oriented questions need to be fully investigated.

Symbolic stigmatization of dedicated rescuers within their environment and gender perspective

The letters reveal that, both during and in the aftermath of the war, genuine rescuers were exposed to stigmatization from members of their local environment who disapproved of their rescue actions mainly on ideological grounds. However, the stigmatization of rescuers within the local non-Jewish Polish community was not a new phenomenon born during the war. Its origins can be traced to the pre-1939 era when ethno-nationalists of varied degree, headed by the *Endecja*⁴⁵, the chief ethno-nationalist party, and the ethno-nationalist Catholic Church, launched a brutal propaganda war against non-Jewish Poles who, according to them, were Jewish helpers or sympathizers. In this war, they distinguished between 'good Poles' serving the ethnic Polish cause and 'bad, impure, corrupt and corruptible Poles' serving the interests of Jews and other national Ukrainian and German minorities. At the centre of this stigmatisation that can also be viewed as the symbolic boundary-making⁴⁶ was the myth of the Jew as the chief internal enemy of Poland and Poles. In the years between 1918 and 1939, this myth reached the apogee of its development and pernicious impact on political culture and society in the country. Ethno-nationalists of varied shades, labelled ethnic Polish liberal politicians, academicians, public intellectuals, artists and ordinary people who defended the rights of the Jewish minority against the waves of anti-Jewish violence at the uni-

⁴³ Fidelis, "Czy «nowy matriarchat?»", 430–433.

⁴⁴ See, for example, the account of Shimon Redlich about the love affair between Vovo, the handsome husband of his mother's younger sister Malcia, with Tanka Kontsevych, a Ukrainian rescuer of the Redlich family. Redlich, *Together and Apart in Brzezany*, 96–98.

⁴⁵ See for example, Joanna Beata Michlic, *Poland's Threatening Other. The Image of the Jew from 1880 to the Present* (Lincoln and London: NUP, 2006). Hereafter, Michlic, *Poland's Threatening Other*. For the more recent, seminal work on Roman Dmowski, the founder and intellectual leader of *Endecja*, see Grzegorz Krzywiac, *Szowinizm po polsku. Przypadek Romana Dmowskiego (1886–1905)* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Neriton, 2010).

⁴⁶ On national boundary making and national mythologies, see Pal Kolstø, ed. *Myths and Boundaries in South-Eastern Europe* (London: Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2005).

versities, professional unions and shops, and on the streets, as 'Jews', 'szabesgoje', 'Jewish uncles and aunts', and 'Jewish protectors and Jewish saviours'⁴⁷. This labelling was supposed to undermine these individuals' national belonging symbolically excluding them from the pure ethnic Christian Polish collective, from 'the true Poles'. Ethno-nationalists perceived and treated these individuals as traitors to the 'true' Polish collective. In their eyes, non-Jewish Poles supporting members of the Jewish minority broke social norms, failed to respect and violated the cultural code and transgressed socially and culturally accepted boundaries. Therefore, they needed to be punished. The ethnonationalists used social abuse, ridicule and exclusion to symbolically police the ethnic Polish community's own members, to prevent them from committing the 'betrayal' of moral support and empathy for, and cooperation with, members of the Jewish minority. The idea of stigmatization and its importance for the protection of the 'true' Polish collective was disseminated in the ethno-nationalist press, slogans, books, pamphlets, posters, public events, and Sunday sermons in catholic churches in cities, towns and villages all over the country. Thus, ordinary Poles had been exposed to the labelling of helpers and sympathizers of Jews as traitors of the true Polish collective prior to the outbreak of the Second World War.

The letters and testimonies of rescuers and survivors reveal that genuine non-Jewish Polish rescuers were indeed perceived as defectors from the cause of building the Poland of the ethno-nationalists' vision, an ethnically homogeneous nation-state. Therefore, as in the prewar period, they had to be punished for their actions of saving Jews during the war. Their neighbours and acquaintances subjected both male and female genuine rescuers to condemnation, threats, robberies and denunciation to the German occupier. In the post-1939 period, social abuse and ridicule continue to be applied as a form of disciplining the 'saviours of Jews' aiming to shame and undermine their social status within their community. But it turned into the mildest strategy used against the Poles perceived as supporters of Jews.

In his angry letter of January 15, 1948, to the Central Committee of Polish Jews in Warsaw, complaining about the lack of assistance from his former Jewish charges, Jan Kulpa of Biła Krakowska alludes to this labelling and ridicule: 'Today those who know about my actions laugh at me that I have gained nothing [from rescuing Jews]. They laugh at me that I was a 'Jewish father', but I do not take this to heart. In fact, I am proud of it'⁴⁸.

Under the conditions of Nazi occupation, punishment for empathising with Jews took on new much more aggressive forms and attained a level of violence unknown in the pre-1939 Polish state that in spite of its weaknesses strived to contain civil discord, though not always successfully. The Germans' brutal punitive measures against the non-Jewish Polish rescuers of Jews transformed the home-made hate language

⁴⁷ The topic of stigmatization of Poles as Jewish saviours in pre-1939 Poland deserves a monograph on its own.

⁴⁸ The letter of Jan Kulpa of January 15, 1948, to CKŻP, ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/230, 80.

of the 1920s and 1930s into vicious deeds during the war⁴⁹. In the early postwar period of ideological civil war, poverty and a high level of uncertainty and volatility in Polish society, genuine rescuers continued to be subjected to condemnation, threats, robberies, and murder⁵⁰. As during the war, underground military units, who saw themselves as 'the moral police' acting on behalf of the 'true' Polish collective, continued to play the role of chief executors of punishment meted out against the genuine rescuers and their Jewish charges. In their testimonies, memoirs and oral histories, non-Jewish Polish rescuers and Polish Jewish survivors often referred to these military units as the chief threat. They chiefly describe them as bandits, night-time military bands and forest men. Historical research conducted in the last decade and a half confirms that the Polish right-wing nationalistic military units, especially National Armed forces (NSZ) that became part of the umbrella military organization Armia Krajowa towards the end of the war, were involved in killings on massive scale of rescuers and Jewish fugitives.

No doubt, these 'forest bands' had familial and other social roots in the local communities. Thanks to such contacts they easily learned who had sheltered Jews and for what reasons. The rescuers' letters and accompanying testimonies do not provide any precise information about the helpers of these military men who oversaw 'disciplining' the rescuers. They do not refer to ethnic Polish women as members of these bands. But this is not to say that ethnic Polish women who were against rescue did not and could not play a role in contributing to creating an atmosphere of isolation or masterminding the physical punishment and robbery. Their assistance in stigmatization of genuine rescuers needs a further thorough investigation.

As a rule, non-Jewish rescuers in the countryside and urban areas alike stressed that they saw in their neighbours, whom they defined in generic way, without necessarily referring to names and gender, a major threat to their Jewish charges and themselves. Maria Jakubowska, who sheltered eight Jews in her modest apartment in Warsaw recalls: 'Honestly, I am not capable of describing what we really went through. It was important to manipulate neighbours in such a way, so they would be totally clueless about the presence of Jews nearby. Neighbours always were the worst to deal with'⁵¹.

After the war, some female and male rescuers alike had to abandon their homes, villages and small towns where they grew up, because they received death threats. Antoni Misiejski, a young man of Bubel-Granna village, in Biała Podlaska County, had to flee the Lublin voivodeship to an unknown part of Poland to save his life from bandits who desired to discipline him for rescuing of Jews⁵². He endured physical violence many

⁴⁹ On the brutal violence against Jewish fugitives during the Holocaust, see, for example, Grabowski, *Judenjagd*; and Engelking, *Jest taki piękny słoneczny dzień ...*

⁵⁰ On robberies of Jewish properties, Jewish fugitives and survivors during and in the aftermath of the Holocaust, see, Jan Tomasz Gross with Irena Grudzińska-Gross, *Golden Harvest. Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). The latter appeared first in Polish in March 2011. Gross, *Golden Harvest*,

⁵¹ Undated letter of Maria Jakubowska to CKŻP, ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/227, 45.

⁵² See the letter of Antoni Misiejuk of October 8, 1947, addressed to the Social Welfare Department at CKŻP, and the confirming statement of the Jewish Committee of Biała Podlaska of March 14, 1946, ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/232, 82, 85.

times as a punishment for rescue. During the war Misiejski, born in 1928, rescued three Jewish men.

Antonina Wyrzykowska, from the hamlet of Janczewka near Jedwabne, is the best-known case of a female rescuer who endured physical violence as a punishment for saving Jews⁵³. Selective memory, repression and visceral fear were an intrinsic part of Wyrzykowska's recounting of the wartime events, because of her incurred suffering in the wartime and the early postwar period. Wyrzykowska and her first husband Aleksander provided a refuge for seven Jewish men and women – survivors of the anti-Jewish violence of the summer of 1941. The Wyrzykowski couple harboured them in two shelters on their farm for twenty-six months between November 1942 and January 1945. In the aftermath of the German defeat in January 1945, they were harassed and physically abused by neighbours who suspected that they were hiding Jews: Wyrzykowska was severely beaten by local men and was forced to move from her home three times. Even after the state authorities officially recognized Wyrzykowska's deeds during the commemorative ceremonies of July 2001, and her relatively quiet life between Łomża region and the USA, she remained silent about her local co-citizens who in the early postwar period assaulted and threatened her with death.

Some rescuers, both men and women remained silent, even in their letters to Jewish organizations, about the stigmatization they had incurred because of fear of the reoccurrence of violence against them. In such cases, we learn about the occurrences of abuse from the reports and statements provided by the Jewish organizations, and not from the rescuers themselves. For example, the statement of the Jewish Committee of Jasło, of February 12, 1947, speaks volumes about how the peasant Adolf Jachym of Sowina village, was given the status of an 'offender' who needs to be punished in his village because he had saved Jews⁵⁴. Jachym saved eleven members of two Jewish families, Korzenik and Kriger. The peasant not only provided his Jewish charges with long-term shelter over two years, but also played the roles of a guarding angel and smuggler to Jewish fugitives. He enabled two of the female Jewish fugitives hidden on his small farm to obtain false non-Jewish Polish identity cards that, in turn, allowed them to depart as volunteers-Christian Polish women for forced labour in Germany. And thanks to that these two Jewish women survived the war. During the two years of sheltering the Jewish fugitives, he risked the lives of his six-member family. His letter states that just after the entry of the Red Army into the region, unknown bandits beat him up and robbed him and his family of belongings, including even basic clothes. The economic element featured

⁵³ On Antonina Wyrzykowska, see, Anna Bikont, *My z Jedwabnego* (Warsaw: Prószyński i S-ka SA, 2004), and also two documentary films Agnieszka Arnold's *Sąsiedzi* (*Neighbors*, 20001) and Sławomir Grünberg's *Legacies of Jedwabne* (2005).

⁵⁴ Two-page letter, of 12 February 1947, of the Jewish Committee in Jasło and the Jewish Religious Congregation in Jasło, to the Central Committee of Polish Jews (CKŻP) in Warsaw, ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/227, asking for assistance for the 'brave man,' Adolf Jachym and his family: the wife, four children and the elderly mother. The authors of the letter stress Jachym's total dedication to the Jewish cause, and states that unfortunately the local Committee of Jews of Jasło lacks funds to help Jachym. The letter recommends providing Jachym with the most necessary goods: clothes and shoes for him and the family, and also some cash.

in this crime, but the robbery and beating were conducted as a punishment for rescuing Jews – this was the key motivation and rationale for the crime.

Other rescuers saw in Jewish organizations a forum where they could disclose their most secret and traumatic wartime experiences which they could not share with their compatriots out of fear of being symbolically stigmatized. In her statement of March 28, 1947, a 70-year-old widow, Katarzyna Dzieżyńska, a lonely repatriate to Przemyśl from a Mościski estate in Radochońce village near Lviv, writes about losing her beloved husband and all her possessions as a result of being punished for sheltering three brothers, Jankiel, Chaim and Majorko Echstein. In the statement Dzieżyńska presents herself as a person who did not stop assisting the brothers in spite of warnings and threats she had received. She was the driving force behind rescue, no matter the risk and dangers.

'All three brothers had to hide in the forest because in the village their lives were constantly threatened. They used to visit me in my home during night-time, and I provided them with everything I could: bread, milk, eggs and cheese. And then they would put everything into a sack and run back to the forest. I helped them in this manner for two years and they managed to survive. When the bandits began to suspect I was helping the poor brothers, I received death threats. But, I did not pay attention to those threats and continued to help.

In 1945, when the Soviet army entered our village, all three brothers survived and were free. Unfortunately, the bandits did not forget about me. One night they paid us a visit and robbed us of everything, including boots that we wore on our feet. A few weeks after this incident, my husband passed away out of fear. I am a seventy-years-old woman left without anything⁵⁵.

In the letters of members of the intelligentsia, the authors implicitly recollect the instances of stigmatization and its daily practices by referring to others who were subjected to harassment and threats within their local social environment. These authors seem to be embarrassed by the fact that such stigmatization against rescuers of Polish Jews existed within wartime Polish society. In spite of their bitter personal experiences, patriotism, and the desire to see one's own collective in good rather than bad light, could be seen as a plausible explanation for the embarrassment and anger. In her letter of 8 August 1947, Cecylia Piotrowska, an upper-middle class woman alludes to the symbolic stigmatization of her sister who like she was a genuine rescuer of Jews. In the letter, the brief paragraph about symbolic stigmatization of her sister stands out as a powerful but covert expression of Piotrowska's anger and frustration with those who opposed rescue of Jews within non-Jewish Polish community.

'I never expected any rewards. Many of my acquaintances, particularly those observant Catholics did the same and because of the same reasons. During the Nazi terror, someone painted a Star of David on the doors leading to my sister's apartment. This was a warning directed at her so that she would cease hiding Jews. I could say many things

⁵⁵ Letter of Katarzyna Dzieżyńska, addressed to the Jewish community in Przemyśl, March 24, 1947, ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/224, 110–111.

about those who saved Jews because of their convictions. They put their lives in danger and paid for their actions with their lives, freedom and wealth. They neither expected payment nor glory. But I have no right to write about them. Nevertheless, after a long hesitation I finally decided to write about my and my dearest lives, so the truth will be known: Only great Love, love of God and people can save humanity from bestiality and hatred'⁵⁶.

In May 1947, Iwo Trunk, one of Piotrowska's charges, corroborated her statement and spoke about her as an ideal and rare rescuer.

'During the time of the greatest adversity during the war, I myself experienced a lot of good in her home; I received not only moral but also material support. This was not an unusual action on her part. Many Jews passed through her home, and they owed their lives to her. If there were more Poles like her, certainly more Jews would have been saved. I emphasize that she did it all for purely selfless reasons'⁵⁷.

The early postwar letters and testimonies throw light on the emotional state of the rescuers. The feelings can be captured in the vocabulary they use to articulate their emotions, and in the values they attribute to them and to their actions. The key emotions expressed by both male and female rescuers, are the sense of social isolation, frustration, and despair, mixed with anger and accompanying matter-of-fact recollections of war-time dangers. Some female genuine rescuers appear much more emotionally expressive in delineating the threats caused by hostile attitudes towards them than male genuine rescuers. In such cases, not only gender, but also education, cognitive skills and personality can be seen as the key factors shaping their emotional expressions.

The early postwar accounts show that both male and female rescuers were aware that their local communities did not perceive their rescue actions as heroic and patriotic, as something that the local collective should be proud of. They had to accept this situation and cope with it. Therefore, they kept their accounts of rescuing Jews secret within their local social environment. They did not share their 'wartime secrets' with neighbours, colleagues or even members of their own family. They consciously saw themselves as acting against 'the majority' of Polish society on a local and national levels.

Many chose to be silent about the horrors they experienced during the war out of fear of being suddenly identified as a rescuer of Jews and therefore also as someone who had acquired Jewish wealth. That fear seems to be a daily companion of their wartime and postwar lives. Overall, the rescuers were aware that they could easily become victims of symbolic stigmatization and were afraid of the direct consequence of it – a potential physical violence and robbery. In her letter of March 1, 1948, to the Jewish Community in Warsaw, J. Ciecocińska, a rescuer of a young man exclaims, 'God only help me if this reaches the ears of the antisemites and their tongues start wagging'⁵⁸. In some cases, there seemed to be no end to the physical violence, as the letter of one of the punished rescuers, Helena Sadowska from Miastkowo, near Łomża reveals:

⁵⁶ Letter of Cecylia Piotrowska to CKŻP, 8 August 1947, ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/235, (5–6), 74–75.

⁵⁷ Statement of Iwo Trunk, 8 May 1947, Łódź, 77, ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/235, (7), 76.

⁵⁸ Letter of March 1, 1948 by J. Ciecocińska. See ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII.223, 4.

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 farm⁵⁹.

Sadowska's letter is a typical example of a letter written by a middle-age peasant woman – a household head and chief breadwinner who fights for physical survival and economic independence. In the early postwar period, Polish women, of different age and socioeconomic background, had to continue to play the role of household managers, as there were hardly any healthy Polish men between the age of 18 and 40 around, who could easily take over these functions in families. The early postwar newspapers and magazines directed at female audience in Poland also suggest that some of them did not wish to give up the economic independence they had achieved during the war and be dependent on men again. Furthermore, some women writers and journalists of this women's press expressed, what could be viewed as a feminist critical stance against the opposite sex, viewing the man as 'an expensive piece of furniture' without which a woman could easily manage⁶⁰. We do not learn from the letters under the analysis if any of the genuine female rescuers had such attitudes towards the opposite sex, but many of their requests for assistance to Jewish organizations demonstrate that they fought for economic independence and survival. They were strong women fighting to make ends meet within their local communities.

The early postwar correspondence gives us important clues about the stigmatization of rescuers, its nature, practice and immediate impact, but it cannot provide us with a full statistical data of the scope of stigmatization of genuine non-Jewish female rescuers. The subject of stigmatization and its daily practices, during and after the war, is difficult to research because for decades the topic has been taboo among both its victims and their families. For obvious reasons, perpetrators and their families have also not been willing to talk about it. But what we learn from the early postwar letters is that both genuine female and male rescuers and their families faced punishment for rescue of Jews, and that during and in the aftermath of the war, they found themselves in a vulnerable position within their own collective, regardless of gender.

However, the letters also demonstrate that the punishment that the ethnonationalist 'moral' police meted out against women for rescuing Jews had a specific gendered component. This is perhaps the most challenging aspect of stigmatization to research. Were these cases an exception? Or were these cases a norm that is extremely hard to detect because of the highest level of taboo on the subject and the murder of these rescuers?

⁵⁹ Letter of Helena Sadowska to the Jewish Kehillah in Warsaw, May 29, 1947, Miastkowo, district Łomża, ŻIH Archives, File. 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.

⁶⁰ Fidelis, "Czy «nowy matriarchat»?" 429–433.

The letters that speak about the specific gendered-nature of violence against women-rescuers, refer to cases in which the Polish men- bandits assaulted females by cutting off their hair. In such cases, the cutting off the women's hair constitutes one of the aspects of the punishment for rescuing Jews. This is well illustrated in the undated early postwar letter of Stanisław Chęcia, the head of a peasant family in Betzycze in Lublin county in Eastern Poland. Chęcia briefly describes how he, his wife and two daughters were 'disciplined' for saving a Jewish baby. The baby came to them at the age of six days some time in 1942. After the war, Chęcia family returned the child to his biological uncle without hesitation, and the newly reunited but deeply traumatised and fragmentary Jewish family left, grateful, for Paris. When the news, unfortunately, spread among Chęcia's neighbours that his family had saved a Jewish baby 'home-made fascists bands invaded our home, demolished all our furniture, beat up everybody and cut off my wife's and my daughters' hair, shouting that this is a punishment for [sheltering] a Jewish child'⁶¹.

During the war, the Polish women, who had sexual and intimate relations with the Germans and who were viewed as Nazi collaborators, were subjected to this kind of punishment by the underground military army, Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*). The practice of cutting off women's hair for collaboration with the Nazis was not only implemented by the Polish underground forces fighting the Germans, but it was also carried out against females of various nationalities in other parts of Nazi-occupied Europe during and in the immediate aftermath of the war⁶². Therefore, what we can infer in this case is that the perpetrators of the cutting off non-Jewish Polish rescuers' hair treated these women as traitors to their nation, who deserve to be humiliated as females. This can be seen as unique practice among the underground military forces fighting the Germans in Nazi-occupied Europe. This punishment meted out against female rescuers of Jewish charges confirms the destructive impact of homemade prewar antisemitism on the Polish underground movement. In the early postwar Polish press, Polish women, especially the single ones, were portrayed not as victims of the war, but as heroines of the war⁶³. However, genuine non-Jewish Polish women rescuers were denied the status of war heroines for many decades after the war.

An attempt of a rape, of a women rescuer and her female Jewish charges, is mentioned in only one letter of those examined. Here, the perpetrators did not necessarily consider rape as punishment for rescue, but rather as an easy opportunity to have coercive sex with women, who because of their vulnerable legal status cannot refuse them. The letter of Mrs. Jastrzębska demonstrates that for certain type of non-Jewish Polish males of lower social background, the female non-Jewish rescuer and the female Jewish

⁶¹ See the undated letter of Stanisław Chęcia from Betzycze addressed to the Central Committee of Polish Jews in Warsaw. See also the confirming statement of Chęcia's rescue by the Jewish Committee in Lublin, 29 March 1947. ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/223, 13, 14.

⁶² See for example, Benjamin Frommer, "Denouncers and Fraternalizers: Gender, Collaboration, and Retribution in Bohemia and Moravia during World War II and After", in: Nancy M. Wingfield and Maria Bucur (eds.), *Gender and War in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 111–132; and Fabici Virgili, *Shorn Women. Gender and Punishment in Liberation France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2002).

⁶³ Fidelis, "Czy «nowy matriarchat»?", 435.

fugitives were an easy sexual target. Mrs. Jastrzębska was a mature, lower middle-class woman, who ran a kiosk with cigarettes and drinks near the Poniatowski bridge in Warsaw. She provided a shelter to two young Jewish women, Regina and Ewa Greiss who came from Drohobycz near Lviv. Hieronim Duda, a nephew of Jastrzębska's husband brought the two Jewish fugitives into her apartment in April 1943. The young women, age 15 and 24, were robbed of everything by their previous non-Jewish Polish rescuers, A. and M. Szczepańskie, a mother and daughter, so when they arrived at Jastrzębska's home, they had to be given basic clothing. Jastrzębska hid them in various family apartments and her place of work. She came to love the two young Jewish females as if they were her own daughters. She arranged false identification cards and new Catholic Polish identities for them: Maria and Krystyna Kaweckie. They remained with her until the end of the Warsaw Uprising of August 1944 and were reunited again with their rescuer in July 1945 in Warsaw. Then, they spent five weeks with Jastrzębska, and began to contemplate a departure for the United States. In an undated, early postwar testimony – curriculum vitae, written with a purpose of locating the young female survivors, Jastrzębska recalls episodes of how she struggled with the blackmailers and potential rapists of Marysia, her twenty-four-old charge.

'We were afraid of our own shadows, of each neighbour, of each acquaintance, and of each stranger. Thanks to my cold blood, I saved [Marysia] by creating a safe exit for her from a tram from which she had to jump off. I stopped the [blackmailer] with my body, shouting at him that due to his aggressive behaviour, people were crowded in the tram... We experienced continuous blackmail on the part of the construction workers on the Poniatowski bridge. They recognized [Marysia's] semitic features and attempted to take an advantage of the situation in every way they could. They blackmailed her and they blackmailed me in a disgusting way. Once they paid us a visit in my kiosk and began to shout at us. Not only did they want to blackmail us again, but also attempted to rape us. We were in an oppressive situation then, women on their own facing beast-like men. I defended her [Marysia's] honour as if she was my daughter. My bravery was my best weapon. Knowing what is about to happen, I took out Marysia's coat and hat without the men noticing my action, and next whispered to her: 'Marysia, run away to the apartment and hide where you can.' Then I was left alone with the men. I did not give up and defended myself to the end. They called me horrible names'⁶⁴.

How many such cases of rape and attempted rape as sexual blackmail and coercive sex for pleasure were conducted by civilian non-Jewish Polish men of various socio-economic backgrounds? How many of these cases turned into the murder or death of the sexually assaulted females? Further research is needed to establish the scope of this phenomenon.

However, what we learn from recent research is that the rape and murder of female Jewish fugitives was practiced during the war, by sections of military and civilian

⁶⁴ The nine-page statement of Mrs. Jastrzębska, ŻIH Archives, 303/VIII/243, 7–8. According to Jastrzębska, Hieronim Duda was murdered on the request of the previous rescuers-for-profit of her Jewish charges. 'He was killed because of his assistance and sympathy towards Jewish fugitives', 6.

non-Jewish Polish male population, especially in the countryside. Here rape emerges as a brutal weapon to humiliate the vulnerable Jewish women who are considered members of a hated national group and individuals living with a death sentence imposed by the Germans. Typically, in such cases the rape of Jewish females precedes their murder in cold blood⁶⁵. The nature and goals of the rape and murder of Jewish female fugitives by the non-Jewish Polish males do not appear to differ from rape practiced in other parts of Nazi-occupied Europe. Typically, during the Second World War, rape against women was used as a weapon to humiliate the national and ethnic groups regarded as the enemies and lower races by the perpetrators, and also as weapon to take vengeance on the enemy⁶⁶. The rape of German women as a revenge for what the Nazis did to the Soviet population, Soviet women and children during the war also constitutes a special case⁶⁷.

Was rape a common part of stigmatization of genuine, non-Jewish Polish women rescuers? Was rape a typical punishment for rescue? The early postwar correspondence provides scarce accounts of it. But this can be partially explained by the extremely shameful nature of this humiliating, gendered violation, and the lack of social protest against such brutal acts during the war and in the aftermath. What we learn from the growing literature about the war, genocide and rape as a weapon in the twentieth century is that speaking about rape is a brave decision among the female victims (and also male victims of rape), and that in cases such as Rwanda⁶⁸ and former wars in Yugoslavia of the early

⁶⁵ The brutal rape and murder, in the summer of 1941, of 20 young Jewish women from the Szczytno ghetto who were killed by local Polish men in Bzury where they were supposed to work as a free labour in the fields of a local Polish owner, is one of such cases that has been publicized in the recent Polish press. [accessed May 12, 2014] http://wyborcza.pl/1,75248,11289917,Mord_Zydowek_w_Bzurach_IPN_po_71_latach_wszczyna.html?utm_source=rozne#ixzz1oM7Acv70. For other accounts of rape and murder of Jewish women by Polish men, see, Gross, *Golden Harvest*, and also a list on: <http://zolnierzeprzekleci.wordpress.com/zbrodnie/> [accessed May 9, 2014].

⁶⁶ Norman M. Naimark, *Fires of Hatred. Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth Century Europe* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2001). Jeffrey Burds, "Sexual Violence in Europe in World War II, 1939–1945", *Politics & Society* 37 (2009): 35–74, and Dagmar Herzog, ed., *Brutality and Desire. War and Sexuality in Europe's Twentieth Century*, (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). hereafter Herzog, ed., *Brutality and Desire*. For comparison, on rape during Armenian genocide, 1915–1917, see Lorne Shirinian, *Survivor memoirs of the Armenian Genocide* (Reading: Taderon Press, 1999); and Donald E. Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller, *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide* (Berkeley–Los Angeles–London: University of California Press, 1999).

⁶⁷ See Norman M. Naimark, *The Russians In Germany: The History Of The Soviet Zone Of Occupation, 1945–1949* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1995). On gendered violence directed against Polish women in Soviet exile during World War II, see Katherine R. Jolluck, "The Nation's Pain and Women's Shame: Polish Women and Wartime Violence", in: Nancy M. Wingfield and Maria Bucur, eds., *Gender and War in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe*, 193–219.

⁶⁸ See, for example, "Rwanda: broken bodies, torn spirits: living with genocide, rape and HIV/AIDS", (Kigali: Rwanda African Rights, 2004).

1990s, many female victims have kept the memory of these painful, dishonouring and humiliating events to themselves for various social and cultural reasons⁶⁹.

Humiliation and dishonour could be viewed as a plausible reason for lack of a lot of evidence about rape of female Polish rescuers. But, oral history with the children-eye-witnesses of the non-Jewish female rescuers can be seen as helpful evidence, to throw light onto the occurrences of rape as a component of stigmatization of female rescuers in Poland. For example, in a chilling oral history account recorded only in 2010, the two brothers Kazimierz and Stanisław Wasilewscy of the village Zucielec, near Trzcianna, the sons of the rescuer, Anna Wasilewska, speak about how they became orphans because their mother was punished by ethnic Polish men for rescuing Jews. Before the official end of the war, on April 18, 1945, an unnamed military unit (*chłopczy z lasu*) invaded their home and first raped and then killed Wasilewska. That was the heaviest price that she paid for sheltering Jews. The sons witnessed this horrific sexual assault followed by the murder on their mother⁷⁰. Was this case an exception? Did it belong to the minority of cases, rather than a non-reported norm? This subject deserves to be investigated further and fully with the assistance of forensic lawyers, ethnologists, and oral history specialists.

Conclusions

This essay is not a gender analysis, but it demonstrates how the use of the category of gender in the study of rescue of Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland can facilitate an in-depth analysis of the nature of rescue of adult and young Jewish fugitives in everyday settings. Gender as a tool of analysis can contribute to a deeper and richer in texture and detail historical reconstruction. It can also throw new light on dangers and betrayal of rescuers within the local social environment. This essay also argues that gender should be explored in relation not only to objective factors such as the age, socio-economic background and religiosity of rescuers, but also in relation to more subjective factors

⁶⁹ See Rabia Ali and Lawrence Lifschitz eds. *Why Bosnia: writing on the Bosnian war* (Stony Creek, Conn.: Pamphleteer's Press, 1993). M. Cherif Bassiouni & Marcia McCormick, *Sexual Violence: An Invisible Weapon of War in Former Yugoslavia* (Chicago: International Human Rights Law Institute, DePaul University 1996); selections from Alexandra Stiglsmayr (ed.), *Mass Rape. The War Against Women in Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994); Matthias Bjornlund, "A Fate Worse Than Dying": Sexual Violence during the Armenian Genocide", and Teresa Iacobelli, "The «Sum of Such Actions»: Investigating Mass Rape in Bosnia-Herzegovina through a Case Study of Foca", in Herzog (ed.), *Brutality and Desire*, 16–58 and 261–283; Pascale R. Bos, "Feminists Interpreting the Politics of Wartime Rape: Berlin, 1945; Yugoslavia, 1992–1993", *Signs* 31 (4) (Summer 2006), 995–1025; Patricia A. Weitsman, "The Politics of Identity and Sexual Violence: A Review of Bosnia and Rwanda", *Human Rights Quarterly* 30 (2008): 561–578; Lisa Sharlach, "Rape as Genocide: Bangladesh, the Former Yugoslavia, and Rwanda", *New Political Science* 22 (1) (2010), 89–102; and the documentary film *The Heart of Bosnia* (KTVU-TV, 1996)

⁷⁰ 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 war-time 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.

such as internal dynamics in marriages and individual family practices, the individual system of beliefs, and parental and sexual desires of married, widowed and single male and female rescuers.

At present, we do not have a definite answer to the question of the total number of men and women involved in rescue activities in Nazi-occupied Poland. Some scholars insist that non-Jewish Polish women were the majority of genuine rescuers precisely because of their gender, whereas others wonder if the visible over-representation of Polish women rescuers can be explained by male deficit during and after the war that also plagued other societies of Nazi-occupied Europe. Do we deal here with a Polish variant of European-wide trends? This important problem can be illuminated by further micro-historical and prosopographic studies of rescue with a gender focus.

The analysis of the early postwar letters of rescuers and accompanying notes and testimonies of survivors, their families, and members of Jewish organizations demonstrates that the subject of genuine rescuers is not a closed history about which we cannot learn new salient aspects and new rich detail. Gender-related aspects of rescue of Jews in Poland, deserve a historians' attention.

When it comes to the study of the relations between gender the stigmatization of genuine rescuers within their local social environment, the picture that emerges is complex and disturbing and one that also needs to be further examined by using less conventional historical sources such as oral history, and ethnography. In the early postwar period, Jewish survivors and members of the Jewish Historical Commission in Poland who interviewed both female and male rescuers reported that the rescuers did not wish their names to be publically known. In her introduction to the collection of testimonies, *Dzieci żydowskie oskarżają*, published in 1946, Maria (Miriam) Hochberg-Mariańska, a Jewish survivor and a former member of the Jewish underground, pondered about the reasons for the urgent need among rescuers, even those who had saved penniless orphaned Jewish children, to remain incognito and to keep their rescue activities a deep secret⁷¹. Fear of being insulted and robbed was no doubt the chief reason behind that request, but this fear cannot be understood without the cultural underpinning. People who robbed and ransacked rescuers' properties did not do so solely for economic reasons, though they may have stolen in the belief that rescuers had acquired a huge Jewish wealth. Economic reasons and benefits were important, but the rationale and motivation were to stigmatize, ridicule, and punish non-Jewish rescuers for saving Jews.

The pre-1939 ethno-nationalistic intention in labelling an individual a 'Jewish saviour' was to make him or her stand out from the collective for betraying the 'true' Polish social and cultural norms. Prewar symbolic stigmatization of Poles who spoke out against antisemitism, in the form of verbal abuse and ridicule, took on much more violent and aggressive forms under German occupation with its genocidal policies against Jews

⁷¹ See her introduction to Maria Hochberg-Mariańska and Noe Grüss, eds. *Dzieci żydowskie oskarżają*, (Kraków: Żydowska Komisja Historyczna w Krakowie, 1946). English edition Maria Hochberg-Mariańska and Noe Grüss, eds. *The Children Accuse*, (London, Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell, 1996), 24.

and punitive measures against rescuers of Jewish fugitives. Verbal violence and ridicule easily turned into brutal deeds against genuine rescuers. And this situation continued in the early postwar period, when Jewish survivors began to come out of their shelters and leave their rescuers.

By looking closely at the accounts of genuine rescuers, we learn a great deal about the mechanism of stigmatization and its devastating impact. Ridicule and punishment in the form of beatings and robberies were the typical practices of stigmatization practiced against genuine rescuers, both male and female, during and in the aftermath of the Holocaust. However, the social punishment of female rescuers took in some cases the form of specific gendered violence such as injury to and humiliation of women's bodies: cutting off their hair and rape that in some cases was followed by murder. Given the extremely shameful nature of such brutal treatment and the fear of continuing repercussions, the women – victims of these crimes were reluctant to speak out about the subject even in the letters to the Jewish organizations. Were cases of gender violence against female dedicated rescuers an exception in wartime and early postwar Poland? Or are they a hidden secret about a phenomenon on a larger scale? Can such cases be regarded as a part of wartime gender violence against Jewish female fugitives by some Polish civilian and military men who saw in Jewish women members of a hated ethnic group and vulnerable individuals whose murder would not be followed by legal consequences? Can they be treated as a special case of gender violence in the history of rape during the Second World War? Are there any cases of gender violence in wartime and genocide in the post-1945 period that might be like the instances of gender violence against non-Jewish Polish women rescuers of Jews in WWII? These urgent questions deserve a full historical investigation.

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