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“That’s for harboring Jews!”

Post-Liberation Violence against Holocaust Rescuers in
Poland, 1944–1948

Abstract

This article explores post-war violence against ethnic Poles who had assisted Jews during the Holocaust. Officially praised as representative of the entire nation’s compassionate and generous attitude, they faced ostracism, robbery, and murder by their home communities. Their neighbours envied them the ‘Jewish gold’ they had allegedly received for their assistance, while the right-wing, anti-communist armed underground considered them traitors who had impaired the nationalist ideal of a Poland without Jews. Drawing on early Jewish testimonies, letters sent by helpers to the Jewish Committees, and their testimonies from the 1960s, this article examines the consequences of their wartime actions that rescuers faced in the first years after liberation.

In the final scene of Agnieszka Holland’s film *In Darkness* (2011), a group of Jews who survived the war concealed in the city sewers emerge from their hideout in the middle of a busy street, in broad daylight. Their Polish helper announces triumphantly to the astonished passers-by: “These are my Jews! I did it!” While testimonies confirm the veracity of Leopold Socha’s reaction, this iconic episode remains exceptional.¹ Typically, Poles who sheltered Jews urged them to leave under cover of night and swore them to secrecy. Some implored the survivors to never get in touch again. During the war, helpers hid their actions from their neighbours, friends, and sometimes even family members for fear of denunciation. After liberation, acutely aware of their communities’ lack of approval, they often continued to keep their actions a secret.

Those who, like Socha, decided to share their joy and satisfaction in having saved lives with their neighbours faced unexpected consequences. “After liberation, this proud woman told everyone what a good thing she had done, that for three years a human was hidden in her house and no one knew about it”, related a survivor about his helper. “But people poured cold water on her happiness, telling her that what she had done was wrong, that they would kill her. Even her own husband reproached her for having kept me without pay.”² The survivor asked the Central Committee of Polish Jews (CKŻP) to award his rescuer, “to make her happy, but also so people in her village, including her husband, know that what she did was good after all”.³

In this article, I analyse a phenomenon of post-war intercommunity violence against Poles who helped Jews to survive the Holocaust that occurred in the period

1 See: Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego (Jewish Historical Institute Archive, JHIA), Holocaust Survivor Testimonies, 301/2352, testimony of Krystyna Chiger, 1947. Krystyna, who was ten years old at the time, remembered compassionate reactions: “People pitied us; one lady bought us some gooseberries.”

2 JHIA, Centralny Komitet Żydów Polskich (Central Committee of Polish Jews, CKŻP), Social Welfare Department, 303/VIII/225, 137, letter from Abram Gruenbaum from Gąbina to the CKŻP regarding Helena Grabkowska.

3 JHIA, 303/VIII/225, 137-138.

between liberation (1944/1945) and the stabilisation of the Soviet-imposed communist regime (1948). Recently, historiography of social life in German-occupied Poland has shed light on the precarious position of rescuers, fearful of both Germans and their own communities, who did not approve of their actions.⁴ While the Nazis threatened to punish any assistance to Jews with death and indeed frequently meted out draconian punishment, including killing entire families with small children, very often those tragic consequences followed a denunciation by a fellow Pole.

My goal is to examine the situation of rescuers during a tumultuous time considered by scholars as a civil war with elements of ethnic cleansing.⁵ When Jews emerged from their hideouts, what happened to their helpers? I probe whether the condemnation and hostility against rescuers continued even though the risk of German collective reprisal was no longer a factor. What role did the new political situation play? Who were the perpetrators of attacks on helpers and what motivated them? I trace the connection between aggression toward rescuers and post-war violence against Jews in Poland. Whom did rescuers turn to for help and how did the situation shape their relationship with the survivors? Finally, I examine how the post-war fear of rescuers is narrated and explained in today's Polish collective memory which, for the last two decades, has been increasingly eulogising "the righteous" as national heroes and portraying them as representative of Polish responses to the Holocaust.

I here draw primarily on early post-war Jewish testimonies collected by the Jewish Historical Commissions, as well as materials (letters and affidavits) gathered by the CKŻP's special commissions tasked with the protection of the physical safety of survivor communities in Poland. These documents mention the instances of violence against Polish helpers but do not elaborate on their experiences. I supplement them with later testimonies of Polish rescuers recorded at Yad Vashem in the 1960s during reunions with their former charges in Israel. Recorded primarily for laudatory purposes and in celebratory circumstances, these accounts, understandably, present helpers' motivations as entirely altruistic and did not reveal any ambiguous or problematic aspects of relationships between Poles and the Jews they assisted. Self-aggrandisement and self-promotion, however, was in most cases prevented or limited by the presence of survivors. Moreover, in any case, local communities did not

4 This phenomenon was first analysed by Jan Tomasz Gross, *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej ale go nie lubię* [He is My Fellow Countryman, But I Do Not Like Him], in: idem, *Upiorna dekada. Trzy eseje na temat wzajemnych relacji między Polakami, Żydami, Niemcami i komunistami w latach 1939–1948* [Ghastly Decade: Three Essays on the Theme of Relations among Jews, Poles, Germans, and Communists, 1939–1948], Krakow 2001, 25–60. On the conditions of rescue in German-occupied Poland, see also: Jan Tomasz Gross/Irena Grudzińska-Gross, *Golden Harvest. Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust*, New York 2012; Gunnard S. Paulsson, *Secret City. The Hidden Jews of Warsaw, 1940–1945*, New Haven/London 2002; Jan Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews. Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland*, Bloomington 2013; Jacek Leociak, *Ratowanie. Opowieści Polaków i Żydów* [Rescue. Stories of Poles and Jews], Krakow 2010; Anna Bikont, *Sendlerowa. W ukryciu* [Sendlerowa. In Secret], Wołowiec 2018; Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, *Okrzyki pogromowe. Szkice z antropologii historycznej Polski lat 1939–1946* [Pogrom Cries. Sketches in Polish Historical Anthropology 1939–1946], Wołowiec 2012; Wojciech Józef Burszta/Barbara Engelking/Jan Grabowski (ed.), *Zarys krajobrazu. Wieś polska wobec Zagłady Żydów 1942–1945* [Landscape Outline. A Polish Village in the Face of the Holocaust of the Jews 1942–1945], Warsaw 2011; Barbara Engelking/Jan Grabowski (ed.), *Dalej jest noc. Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski* [It is Still Night. The Fate of Jews in Selected Powiats of Occupied Poland], Vols. 1–2, Warsaw 2018; Barbara Engelking, *Jest taki piękny słoneczny ... Losy Żydów szukających ratunku na wsi polskiej 1942–1945* [There is Such a Beautiful Sunny ... The Fate of Jews Seeking Help in the Polish Countryside 1942–1945], Warsaw 2011; and Joshua D. Zimmerman, *The Polish Underground and the Jews, 1939–1945*, Cambridge 2017.

5 See: Jan Tomasz Gross, *Fear. Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz. An Essay in Historical Interpretation*, New York/Princeton 2006; Marcin Zaremba, *Wielka trwoga. Polska 1944–1947. Ludowa reakcja na kryzys* [Great Fear. Poland 1944–1947. People's Responses to the Crisis], Krakow 2012; and Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, *Pod klątwą. Społeczny portret pogromu kieleckiego* [Under the Curse. A Social Portrait of the Kielce Pogrom], Vols. 1–2, Warsaw 2018.

differentiate the treatment of the rescuers based on their motivations. On the other hand, in Israel rescuers were more likely to speak freely about the persecution they suffered at the hands of their fellow Poles. More problematic are letters sent after the war to the CKŻP and later to the Jewish Historical Institute by individuals who identified themselves as rescuers and sought material reward for their wartime solidarity. While some were trustworthy, others attempted to extort money or honours by exaggerating their assistance or through completely false claims.

“I do not want people to laugh at me for hiding Jews”, declared Zdzisław Krzyczkowski to a group he had harboured in his Warsaw flat for almost two years.⁶ Some rescuers had indeed faced mockery. In their neighbours’ eyes, helping Jews, especially without significant reward, amounted to gullibility at best. Adhering to deeply entrenched antisemitic clichés, villagers often perceived rescue as yet another instance of a cunning Jew tricking a credulous Polish peasant into doing something against his own interest. One rescuer, awaiting in vain a visit from a survivor who promised to remunerate her after the war, was jeered at by her friends and family for her naiveté. As the embittered woman insinuated in a letter to the Jewish committee, they were proved right, since the survivor left the country.⁷ “Today, people who know about what I did laugh at me, asking what good being a Jewish father brought me”, is how another rescuer substantiated his request for a reward. “It does not discourage me because I am proud of it”, he assured the CKŻP. Still, he considered himself aggrieved by the people he helped. “The Jewish nation caused me such harm that I will not forget it as long as I live, and I will be asking God for revenge”, he lamented.⁸

“People here cannot comprehend that we acted selflessly”, explained the Kobylec family in January 1947. During the war, they operated an underground bunker which served as a transit point for Jewish resistance members en route to Slovakia and Hungary. After someone denounced them, the German authorities shipped them to Auschwitz. “Their sneering does not bother us because we are proud of what we did”, declared the Kobylecs.⁹ A survivor who moved to Chicago comforted his rescuer: “As for Poles from Żelechów who laugh at you [for helping Jews], let them. We will see who has the last laugh”, he declared, promising to return and settle the scores with Poles who had assisted Germans in murdering Jews.¹⁰

Yet rescuers often faced consequences far graver than ridicule. A suspicion that they had been handsomely rewarded exposed them to envy and robberies. The Jasło Jewish committee and religious congregation reported to Warsaw in February 1947 about the fate of a local rescuer: “After the Red Army’s entry, Adolf Jachym was punished for his love of his fellow man with severe beating and robbery. In the middle of the night, he was assaulted by a band of unidentified thugs who [...] accused him of harbouring Jews and demanded he hand over the remuneration he had received. When they did not find any of the money they had expected, they robbed him and his family utterly, taking their clothes, shoes, and food supplies.”¹¹ Contrary to the *żydokomuna* conspiracy theory, which posited a sinister alliance between Jews and

6 Marian Berland, *Dni długie jak wieki* [Days Long as Centuries], Warsaw 1994, 454. See also: Jacek Leociak, “Nie chcę ludziom na śmiech się pokazać, że Żydów u siebie chowałem...” *Sprawa Zdzisława i Haliny Krzyczkowskich* [“I Do Not Want People to Laugh at Me Because I Hid Jews ... The Case of Zdzisław and Halina Krzyczkowski], in: *Zagłada Żydów 4* (2008), 324-366.

7 JHIA, 303/VIII/228, 84, letter from Maria Kit from Wrocław, 1947.

8 JHIA, 303/VIII/230, 82, letter from Jan Kulpa from Biała Krakowska, 1948.

9 A copy of the letter is displayed in the “Post-War Years” gallery in the core exhibition of the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw.

10 JHIA, 303/VIII/228, 31, letter from Leo Weiss to Teresa Kaliszek, 1948.

11 JHIA, 303/VIII/227, 36.

communists, the presence of the Soviets did not guarantee the safety of either the survivors or their helpers. The perpetrators' belief in the existence of 'Jewish gold' turned out to be equally fallacious.

Anti-Jewish harassment sometimes spilled over and affected rescuers.¹² A Jewish committee in Lublin complained to the authorities about a series of evictions targeting Jewish families. "To top it all off, citizen Sobolowska (a Pole), who was given a flat in a Jewish house [...] for her selfless help to Jews during the occupation, was ousted out of the apartment while being mocked: 'you were in prison because of Jews, now let the Jews find you a flat!'"¹³

Antisemitic sentiments on the street turned against the helpers as well. In June 1945, a rumour about a ritual murder of a Polish girl galvanised the residents of Rzeszów. People who gathered in the squares and markets "praised the actions of the Hitlerites, who exterminated Jews as well as Poles hiding Jews", reported a communist security agent.¹⁴ A trope of Jewish ingratitude also appeared: "We were feeding and hiding them, and in return they are murdering our children",¹⁵ stated a woman in the main square, claiming credit for the rescuers' actions for herself and the Poles as a whole.¹⁶

Often, violence against rescuers was intimately connected to murders of Jewish survivors. The Białystok committee reported in April 1947 about the recent murder of Chaim Finkelstein, who had been rescued by Zofia Puchalska only to be killed by "NSZ [National Armed Forces] bandits". Soon after, the perpetrators showed up on Puchalska's farm, took away her cart and horses, and warned her that if she went to the authorities she would meet the same fate as the Jews she had helped.¹⁷ She could not count on her neighbours' support or protection since the whole village disapproved of her assistance to Jews hiding in the local forest.¹⁸ After two of the survivors who had moved back to Janów Podlaski and operated a mill belonging to one of their families were murdered in March 1946, the Misiejuk family who had assisted them during the war fled the village and scattered throughout Poland.¹⁹

Violence that befell rescuers constituted both an extension of anti-Jewish violence and part of settling of accounts among Poles in what, according to scholars of the period, amounted to a civil war with elements of ethnic cleansing. This hostility against helpers sheds light on attitudes toward survivors and vice versa. Scholarship driven by current politics of history often downplays post-war anti-Jewish violence as common crime. The widespread myth of Jews' fabulous wealth, particularly in conditions of abject poverty, might have made rescuers the victims of their neighbours' envy and greed. Their association with Jews, who in the Poles' eyes had not shed their wartime pariah status, turned them into fair game for anyone, in a period

12 On anti-Jewish violence in post-war Poland, see: Gross, *Fear*; David Engel, *Patterns of Anti-Jewish Violence, 1944–1946*, in: *Yad Vashem Studies* 26 (1998), 43–85.

13 JHIA, CKŻP, Legal Department, 303/XVI/153, letter from the Lublin Jewish Committee to the Special Housing Commission of the Council of Ministers' Presidium, 1947.

14 Meldunek specjalny kierownika Sekcji VII Wojewódzkiego Urzędu Bezpieczeństwa Publicznego w Rzeszowie o eskalacji nastrojów antysemitycznych w tym mieście [Voivodship Public Security Office in Rzeszów Section VIII Head Special Report about the Escalation of the Antisemitic Atmosphere in the City], 12 April 1945, cited in: Dariusz Iwaneczko/Zbigniew Nawrocki (ed.), *Rok pierwszy. Powstanie i działalność aparatu Bezpieczeństwa Publicznego na Rzeszowszczyźnie (sierpień 1944 – lipiec 1945)* [The First Year. Founding and Activity of the Public Security Apparatus in Rzeszowszczyzna (August 1944–July 1945)], Rzeszów 2005, 600.

15 *Ibid.*, 591.

16 Beatings and robbing ensued. The quick reaction by the authorities and the evacuation of Jews from the city stopped the pogrom in its tracks and prevented casualties.

17 JHIA, 303/VIII/236, 36. See also: JHIA, 301/2952.

18 JHIA, 303/VIII/236, 37.

19 JHIA, 301/1871, testimony of Grzegorz Misiejuk, 1946.

marked by an increase in interpersonal violence and violent crime.²⁰ Social acceptance for assaulting Jews extended to their helpers.

Robbery served as a punishment for those who were deemed turncoats. Violence against rescuers was narrated by all actors – perpetrators, victims, and Jewish survivors who reported about it – as retribution. It was enacted as soon as Poles regained control. After the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising in August 1944, it was revealed that Helena Korzeniewska had sheltered Jews in her flat. Her neighbours reacted with indignation. “The janitor spat at me: ‘Such a decent young lady, I thought, and she was hiding Jews’”, she recounted. The building residents swiftly informed a military unit passing through the neighbourhood “what a ‘disloyal Pole’ I was.”²¹ The insurgents ransacked Korzeniewska’s apartment and threatened to come back and kill her.

In some cases, the perpetrators framed their crimes as a form of serving justice. An underground anti-communist organisation in Rzeszów took it upon itself to punish Tadeusz Wiatr for the help he had offered to the Langsam siblings. “It turned out that I had received a death sentence [...] for aiding and cooperating with the Jews”, Wiatr related in his 1966 Yad Vashem testimony.²² The intervention of an acquaintance who was influential in the organisation kept him safe. “Nevertheless, I stopped going to Rzeszów and until today I do not visit”, he confessed. Following the Langsams’ lead, he moved to Wrocław and made a point of avoiding his hometown. Another rescuer related: “After [...] Samuel Celnikier emerged from the hideout, people’s fury turned against me [...]. Partisans, there were many of them in the forest here, passed a death sentence on those who sheltered Jews. I was counted among them and they would have executed me if not for one acquaintance who warned me. Since then, I had to hide, could not sleep at home, and my wife and children had to tremble with fear and buy [the partisans] off with foodstuffs.”²³

Violence against rescuers not only continued but even increased after liberation, when wartime secrets were revealed and scores settled. When the Red Army reached the Lublin area in July 1944, three Jews emerged from a hideout in the Misiejuk family barn. “Only then did the neighbours learn about it; they were astonished that we had taken such a risk.” Repercussions followed at once. “Immediately [...] they started persecuting us: In December 1944, a gang of some twenty men robbed us utterly. It was revenge for hiding Jews. Later, they often stopped by and threatened us.”²⁴ In one case, partisans suspected a local family of providing food to three Jewish brothers in hiding and threatened them with death. Yet the men remained undiscovered and survived until liberation. “But the band did not forget me”, related a rescuer. “One night they assaulted us and robbed us completely. They even took the shoes off our feet. My husband died a couple weeks later out of shock and fear.”²⁵

Both Poles and Jews interpreted such assaults as punishment. One rescuer, who voiced his dissatisfaction at the lack of gratitude and reward from the survivors, related: “What is worse, when they left [...] a forest band raided our house [...] they left us practically naked. On their way out, they said: That is for keeping Jews. A year later they robbed us again. [...] In 1946, they robbed us for the third time [...] and they

20 The post-war atmosphere was generally hostile towards Jews, who were the most common target of assaults, not only by partisans but also by groups of disabled veterans or youth gangs.

21 Yad Vashem Archive (YVA), O.3/2518, testimony of Helena Korzeniewska, 1963.

22 YVA, O.3/2981, testimony of Tadeusz Wiatr, 1963.

23 JHIA, 303/VIII/227, 113.

24 JHIA, 301/1871, testimony of Grzegorz Misiejuk, 1946.

25 JHIA, 303/VIII/223, 8.

said the same thing, that is for helping Jews.” “For sheltering Jews during the occupation my house and all my belongings were burned down”, related Józef Znój from the Krasnystaw area, in a statement supported by two survivors he had assisted, in February 1947. “Because I sheltered Jews, forest bands destroyed my farm, took away two horses, a cart, and pigs. They visited me nine times”, wrote Helena Sadowska from the village of Miastkowo near Łomża in May 1947, asking the Jewish congregation in Warsaw for assistance.²⁶ The Lublin committee reported about an incident when “after liberation, a group of bandits showed up in a village [...] accusing the Kalbarczyks of helping Jews; they murdered Maria Kalbarczyk’s husband.”²⁷

Agnieszka Budny-Wiederschall believed that the death of her daughter was an act of vengeance. She had sheltered six people in her small apartment in Siedlce, including her future husband. To conceal their presence, she took up raising rabbits, which helped to explain any sounds coming from the flat. Still, the prying eyes of her neighbours cost her several close calls. Thanks to her resourcefulness and nerves of steel, her beneficiaries survived. After the war, she moved to Legnica in Lower Silesia, a major area of Jewish post-war settlement. Thanks to the local Jewish committee, her actions became known. “I had a daughter, Belunia [...]. She went to school with Polish children and they took her [to play] near the railway tracks. One girl, an anti-semitite, pushed her in front of the train [...] out of revenge, for sure.”²⁸ Whether it was indeed an antisemitic act, or merely a tragic accident, it is clear that Wiederschall fully expected retribution from her fellow Poles. Soon after, in 1958, she left Poland and settled in Israel.

The notion of revenge evoked by rescuers when reporting about the attacks illuminates how the act of help was perceived in their communities. According to right-wing nationalistic propaganda as well as Catholic Church teachings, Jews were enemies of Poland and Christianity, and intruders to be extirpated from the country. Most of the armed underground, adhering to an ethnocentric ideal of the Polish nation, influenced also by racial theories, favoured a Poland without Jews. In areas with a Ukrainian majority, rescuers were punished by Ukrainian nationalists who rebelled against Polish nationalism but shared its idea of Jews as detrimental to their own nation’s greatness and prosperity.²⁹ With time, as the lines between anti-communist resistance and common criminality blurred, ideological and criminal motivations probably overlapped.

However, even if helping Jews served as a pretext for robbery, it fit soundly within the ideology of a mono-ethnic nation state and a firm belief in *żydokomuna*. Assisting Jews hurt the national cause of a Poland free of Jews, a long-held ideal of the nationalist right, which had conveniently been carried out almost to completion by the Germans. Consequently, rescuers were blamed for the communist takeover of the Polish state. The fact that Jews could only seek protection from the authorities turned this myth into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Branded ‘Jewish lackeys’, rescuers became an ideological target.

In village communities, social norms valuing the safety of the collective over the individual encouraged denunciation over rescue.³⁰ Helpers were identified as ‘Jewish

26 JHIA, 303/VIII/238, 2.

27 JHIA, 303/VIII/228, 25, letter from the Lublin Jewish Committee to the CKŻP, April 1946.

28 YVA, O.3/2555, testimony of Agnieszka Budny-Wiederschall, 1964.

29 JHIA, 303/VIII/119, 91. See also: YVA, O.3/3049, testimony of Ignacy Ustianowski, 1968, 6.

30 Sometimes it happened that rescuers, rather than being denounced to the Germans, were warned and pressured by the community to get rid of Jews. See for example: JHIA, 301/579, testimony of Karolina Sapetowa, 1945.

uncles' and 'aunts'. After liberation, as Janina Ciszewska related, "[the Jews] stayed with me for another week and a half. In town, people learned that I rescued them and I was nicknamed 'a Jewish mother'".³¹ These monikers, signalling the rescuers' affinity with Jews, branded them as outsiders, if not pariahs of the community. "We are persecuted by people, we have become outcasts of the society", is how the daughter of rescuers summed up their post-war situation in June 1947.³²

Rescuers, noted anthropologist Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, were seen as betraying their families as well as communal, patriotic, and religious obligations.³³ "Are you, a Catholic, not ashamed to have sheltered a Jew?" is what partisans rhetorically asked a rescuer in October 1945.³⁴ "Two weeks ago, a band of native fascists broke into my house and smashed everything to pieces. They beat and kicked me and cut my wife's and daughters' hair, shouting: 'that is for the Jewish child'", reported Stanisław Chęć, the rescuer of a Jewish infant, in a letter to the CKŻP in April 1947.³⁵ Forced shaving, a gendered punishment for fraternising with the enemy, testifies to the optics of help as treason.

Their neighbours' hostility spurred many rescuers to flee their hometowns. Following the pattern of Jewish migration, rescuers moved to the former German territories in the west or left Poland. "We refer to you citizen Franciszek Kwaśny", a Jewish committee in Dzierżoniów wrote to their Wrocław branch in June 1947, "who during the occupation sheltered Jews and is now being persecuted by reactionary elements. Because of this he had to move. We hope you will take an interest in his situation, find him an apartment, and help him settle in the Lower Silesia."³⁶ Antonina Wyrzykowska, a rescuer from Jedwabne, who was robbed and brutally beaten by her neighbours, escaped Poland with the Jews she had sheltered, and found herself in a displaced persons camp in Linz, Austria.³⁷ Later, she divided her time between Poland and the United States, but never returned to her home village.

Contemporaneous accounts describe the attackers in the ideologically coloured language of the time. "On March 17, two Home Army bandits attacked the apartment of a Jew named Sztejman in Briąnsk, Białystok County. They killed two Jewish women and a housekeeper, a Pole, who tried to save them", reported the Jewish Press Agency Bulletin in a note entitled *Murder by Fifth Column Agents*.³⁸ Particularly survivors, unaware of local political divisions, often referred to all partisans as Home Army members (*akowcy*).³⁹

Antisemitism and hostility towards rescuers were not limited to anti-government forces. Just like during the war, partisans of different political affiliations committed anti-Jewish crimes, including – though much more rarely – the peasant movement Bataliony Chłopskie or even pro-communist Armia Ludowa and Gwardia Ludowa. Members of the communist state apparatus, in the popular imagination controlled

31 JHIA, 301/2514, testimony of Janina Ciszewska, undated.

32 JHIA, 303/VIII/241, 12, letter from Zofia Węclawska (Skorzyce, Kraśnik County), June 1947.

33 Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, *The Unrighteous Righteous and the Righteous Unrighteous*, in: Dapim. Studies on the Holocaust 24 (2010) 1, 11-63.

34 JHIA, 301/3535, testimony of Szmul Garber, 1945.

35 JHIA, 303/VIII/223, 100, letter from Stanisław Chęć, 1947.

36 JHIA, 303/VIII/230, 106.

37 Anna Bikont, *The Crime and the Silence. A Quest for the Truth of a Wartime Massacre*, London 2016, 375. See also: JHIA, 301/5825, testimony of Aleksander Wyrzykowski, 1962.

38 *Mordy agentów piątej kolumny* [The "Fifth Column" Agents' Murders], in: *Biuletyn Żydowskiej Agencji Prasowej*, 17 April 1945.

39 "After some time, already after the war, news about Kowalczyk's assistance to us reached an AK unit prowling the area. They burst into Mr. Kowalczyk's house, dragged him out of bed, and beat him unconscious [...] He soon died following great suffering", wrote a group of survivors in a letter from Israel in 1966. JHIA, 301/6242.

by Jews, were not free of antisemitism, either. In fact, many individuals implicated in anti-Jewish crimes during the war joined the communist police and security forces. Andrysiewicz, who hid Jews in the village of Trofimówka, suffered harassment after the war by a local people's militia unit.⁴⁰ Its chief, who had been involved in killing Jews during the occupation, assisted locals in getting rid of returning survivors who could have claimed their right to properties that had been taken over by Poles.⁴¹

Regardless of their political orientation, perpetrators usually belonged to the same communities, not anonymous but familiar faces. "In May 1945, my mother-in-law's neighbour, Jan Czerech, informed a forest gang that the Dębowski [his in-laws] were hiding Jews. One night, they were attacked: My father-in-law, Krzysztof Dębowski, was killed in his own bed, while the rest of the family managed to escape. All of the livestock was taken. My mother-in-law is sick until this day, she simply shakes with fear. After the murder of my father-in-law, the neighbour, Czerech Jan, [...] did not stop harassing us. He keeps saying that I am a Jewish lackey and will die the way Jews died", lamented Alojzy Konopka.⁴²

Stanisław Wasilewski's parents sheltered three Jews in the village of Trzciannie near Białystok. After liberation, one of them, 21-year old Maska Fiszko, moved into a room in her family home, now occupied by a Polish family. She visited the Wasilewskis daily and had her meals with them. One day in April, on her way to the Wasilewskis, a local unit of Bataliony Chłopskie murdered her, most likely in connection with her property. Soon afterwards, the Wasilewskis were assaulted, beaten, and robbed. "They shouted: 'This is for feeding the Jews'", recounted a son, Kazmierz Wasilewski.⁴³ They returned several times. Men in the family took to spending nights outside the house. In August, when they slept in a barn, partisans returned, raping and killing their mother, Anna Wasilewska. It happened shortly after she revealed to a local priest that she had recognised one of the attackers. The priest refused to accompany her coffin. Instead he admonished the family: "It was not smart to recognise them."⁴⁴

Like survivors, rescuers made inconvenient witnesses. As historian Jan Gross stated: "The future Righteous' wartime behaviour broke the socially approved norm, demonstrating that they were different from everybody else, and therefore, a danger to the community. They were a threat to others because, potentially, they could bear witness. They could tell what had happened to local Jews because they were not – whether by their deeds or by their reluctance to act – bonded into a community of silence over this matter."⁴⁵ Thus, the community had to terrorise them into secrecy.

This strategy proved successful: Most rescuers insisted on remaining anonymous. "The witness asks for his name not to be published, because he is afraid of armed gangs roaming the area where he lives", noted the Jewish Historical Commission clerk. "Even now, I do not have peace. Because I kept a Jewish child, I was robbed by a band three times already", is how Zygmunt Ulman explained his request.⁴⁶ Józef Kida, who sheltered the eight-person Gerstner family, felt compelled to destroy a thank you letter he received in 1945 from the Lublin Jewish committee lest his as-

40 JHIA, 301/1260, testimony of Abram Lipcer, 1946.

41 People involved in anti-Jewish crimes often joined the communist apparatus of repression. See: Tokarska-Bakir, *Pod klątwą*.

42 JHIA, 301/2966, testimony of Alojzy Konopka, 1947.

43 Łukasz Konopa, *Trzciannie. Studium przypadku [Trzciannie. A Case Study]*, in: *Studia Litteraria and Historica* 5 (2016), 16.

44 *Ibid.*, 19.

45 Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors. The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne*, Princeton 2001, 238.

46 JHIA, 301/2983, testimony of Zygmunt Ulman, 1947.

sistance be discovered by partisans.⁴⁷ Before the Gerstners left Poland, Kida asked them not to send him any letters. Survivors seeking welfare for their helpers often alerted the Jewish committees not to expose them. “Because of the harassment the Kisiel family would face if assistance is sent directly to their address, we ask you to inform us first. We will let them know and come together with them to Warsaw”, is how a survivor residing in Łódź instructed the CKŻP, mindful of his rescuers’ safety.⁴⁸ “In case you grant my heartfelt plea, please notify me first, since the Zalewskis, because of the turbulent atmosphere in the Białystok area, wish to remain incognito”, requested the survivor Felicja Raszkin-Nowak in March 1947.⁴⁹

Once the communists had tightened their grip on power and pacified the areas with strong partisan activity around 1948, the direct violence subsided. Rescuers, however, remained in a precarious position, subjected to their communities’ pressure not to break the conspiracy of silence. Rachela Finkelstein, the sole survivor of the 1941 pogrom in Radziłów, married her rescuer, Stanisław Ramotowski, and, now known as Marianna Ramotowska, lived among the murderers of her family. When the couple tried to buy back a dresser, her family heirloom, from one of the neighbours, a local NSZ unit threatened them with death. “Somebody did not like it. We found a piece of paper stuck to our house door saying that we were sentenced to death. At that time the NSZ gave out a lot of such sentences in our area”,⁵⁰ related Ramotowski. Through his contacts in the Home Army, he was able to keep them both safe, but the couple had learned their lesson. In a 1949 trial against the pogrom perpetrators, Marianna testified on their behalf – a price that allowed Stanisław to remain an accepted community member. She remained fearful of talking about the past until she passed away in 2001.⁵¹ The Wasilewski family kept silent both about the murder of the Jewish survivors and their mother. When they were visited by a prosecutor, they refused to testify, uneasy about the presence of the driver and pressured to remain silent by a younger generation.⁵²

While rescuers kept silent, their neighbours continued to talk. “In 1945, a band descended on Sobczak’s farm and robbed him of everything, including a horse, a cart, and pigs, saying that it was for hiding Jews”, testified Szmul Majer, whom Sobczak had sheltered together with eleven other Jews for two years on his farm in Frampol.⁵³ Sobczak’s neighbours killed six of them on the eve of liberation. “Until today, the neighbours reproach him for it”, added another survivor, Ela Aszenberg. In 1986, Sobczak’s daughter wrote to the Jewish Historical Institute: “Even today, I feel threatened because some of these people live in Frampol and they remind me that if I talk about it, they will retaliate.”⁵⁴ Rescuer Jan Adamczuk related in 1994: “After the war, we were often reproached for keeping Jews and until today, everyone in the area knows about it. Bad people often say that I am getting money for it.”⁵⁵

Post-war contacts with survivors came under neighbourly scrutiny. In small localities, letters and packages from abroad amounted to nothing less than a sensation. When a survivor living in Israel sent the Kozanecki family a box of oranges, their

47 JHIA, 303/VIII/228, 54.

48 JHIA, 303/VIII/228, 81.

49 JHIA, 303/VIII/242, 9.

50 Nieporzadnych bylo wiecej [There Were More Bad Ones] Interview with Stanisław Ramotowski, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 1 April 2001 <http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,205401.html> [Access: 30 October 2019].

51 See: Anna Bikont, *The Crime and the Silence*.

52 Konopa, *Trzciannie*, 7.

53 JHIA, 301/6310, testimony of Szmul Maler, 1949.

54 JHIA, 301/6310, letter from Kazimiera Korczak to the Jewish Historical Institute, 1986.

55 YVA, *The Righteous Among the Nations Department*, M.31/8705, letter from Jan Adamczuk, 1994.

village erupted in gossip. “They started saying: ‘Look, they have a house, they get oranges, they must have kept Jews.’”⁵⁶ Indeed, some Poles were given property by the survivors, either as payment or as a token of gratitude. Yet, for envious neighbours, who believed that helping Jews necessarily meant enriching oneself, the poverty in which many rescuers lived proved nothing.

In the early 2000, the Lublin based non-profit organisation Brama Grodzka created an online database of testimonies of the Righteous from the region. Out of 21 individuals they contacted, not a single one agreed to appear under their real name.⁵⁷ Awardees honoured by the Israeli Embassy in 2005 in Biała Podlaska requested that the event be closed to journalists. They admitted that they feared people’s reactions. It took a lot of convincing to persuade one distant relative of rescuers who lived in another city to be named in the newspaper.⁵⁸ In Białystok in 2006, the ceremony did not take place at all. The families decided that they could not ensure it would remain a secret and requested that the medals be sent by mail.⁵⁹ Several people declined a prestigious state award from President Lech Kaczyński in 2008, not wanting their families to find out.⁶⁰

Today, however, most rescuers, or rather their families readily agree to make their names public. Both local and national press informs extensively about new Righteous medals being awarded to Poles, listing their personal details and the circumstances of the help they provided. Increasingly, rescuers are being commemorated with monuments or memorial plaques in the places in which they had lived, including small localities, with local officials and clergy participating. Yet the recognition granted to rescuers, in most cases posthumously, comes at the price of becoming a symbolic representation of a community that used to threaten and persecute them. This hostility is neither acknowledged nor reckoned with. On the contrary, the dominant narrative of rescue claims the existence of a communist-imposed silence. While the communist regime treated rescuers instrumentally, no ban on commemorating rescue ever existed. However, the dominant narrative today conventionally claims that rescuers kept silent out of fear out the communist security organs rather than their own neighbours. This makes possible the concomitant commemoration of rescuers and their persecutors.

While communist propaganda lumped together its political opponents with criminals and branded them ‘fascist bands’, today’s centrally-powered ‘politics of history’ glorifies all of them as ‘accursed soldiers’ (*żołnierze wyklęci*), heroic fighters for Poland’s freedom. In March 1945, in Sokoły in Wysokie Mazowieckie County, a unit led by Kazimierz “Huzar” Kamiński, formerly of the Home Army, together with NSZ unit “Zemsta” murdered twelve Jews and four Poles who were helping them.⁶¹ In 2007, President Lech Kaczyński posthumously awarded Kamiński one of the highest Polish state medals for “extraordinary merits for Polish independence”.

56 Paweł Reszka, *Lęk Sprawiedliwych* [The Fear of the Righteous], in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*. Duży Format, 13 February 2006, 3.

57 Reszka, *Lęk Sprawiedliwych*, 3.

58 Marek Pietrzala, *Zyda uratować nie grzech, ale wstyd* [It Is Not a Sin to Save a Jew, But It Is a Disgrace], in: *Dziennik Wschodni*, 28 September 2005. <https://www.dziennikwschodni.pl/biala-podlaska/zyda-uratowanie-grzech-ale-wstyd,n.1000040808.html> [Access: 30 October 2019].

59 Reszka, *Lęk Sprawiedliwych*, 2.

60 Ewa Ziomecka, statement during a public discussion “O Sprawiedliwych – nie pomnikowo” (About the Righteous, Unmonumentally), Polin Museum, Warsaw, 7 March 2015.

61 Alina Cała, *Ochrona bezpieczeństwa fizycznego Żydów w Polsce*. Komisje Specjalne przy Centralnym Komitecie Żydów w Polsce [The Protection of the Physical Security of Jews in Poland. Special Commissions at the Central Committee of Polish Jews], Warsaw 2014, 17. See also: Zaremba, *Wielka Trwoga*, 346.

In a letter to the editor published in the *Gazeta Lubelska* in November 1944, an anonymous reader called for an honest reckoning with Poles' behaviour towards Jews during the war. He drew attention to the circumstances of individuals who helped them, often with the most selfless generosity. "Sadly, today in many cases these people are afraid to admit to their sacrifices", he concluded. "Instead of admiration and respect, they often face hatred and contempt. According to a part of society, people who hid Jews – those who bring honour to the Polish nation – are traitors."⁶²

The anonymous reader's voice remained an exception. As claims of selfless and mass-scale assistance, enjoying the support of the entire population, became an inherent part of the dominant Polish narrative of the war, the treatment of rescuers by their neighbours was left out. Indeed, nothing challenges the idealised image of Polish attitudes toward Jews more deeply than post-war revenge on their helpers. Today, the whitewashed story of the past, turned by the right-wing nationalist government into officially binding state policy, points to the fear of collective punishment by Germans as the only possible reason for Polish lack of support for rescue activities. The absence of that danger after the end of the occupation reveals the much more complex motivations of Polish treatment of Jewish fugitives and their helpers: demoralisation and brutalisation brought about by the war, but also homegrown anti-Jewish nationalism.

62 R.K., *Drażliwa sprawa* [A Sensitive Issue], in: *Gazeta Lubelska*, 1 November 1944, 3. Cited in: Feliks Tych, *Zapomniane świadectwo*, in: idem, *Długi cień Zagłady. Szkice historyczne* [The Long Shadow of the Holocaust. Historical Essays], Warsaw 1999.

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