Rescue of Jews During the Holocaust in European Memory

Veranstalter: Barbara Schieb, Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand, Berlin; Raphael Utz, Imre Kertész Kolleg Jena; Zofia Wóycicka, Zentrum für historische Forschung Berlin der polnischen Akademie der Wissenschaften
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For many decades following the end of World War II, the public was not interested in learning about the rescue of Jews. In many Eastern European countries, people did not want to be seen as „Jew-friendly" and kept their actions secret. In Germany, talking about rescuers would have exposed that it actually was not impossible for ordinary people to help their neighbors. Over the last twenty or thirty years, we could observe a shift in interests. Today, talking about rescuers has become a prominent (and in some countries the only) vehicle to talk about the Holocaust.

The workshop brought together historians, sociologists and museological practitioners from Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, France, Denmark, Latvia, Greece, England and the United States to discuss how the rescue of Jews during the Holocaust is part of European memory. The participants continued along the path of a 2017-workshop by the same hosts, which focused on the portrayal of rescue in museums and memorials in Europe and Israel.

The sociologist DANIEL LEVY (New York) presented a conceptual framework for the workshop by talking about memory culture in his keynote lecture. „Rescue has two dimensions," he said. „The actual history of rescue in different countries. And the way it has been told since the end of World War II." Levy asked historians to not differentiate between history and memory, but instead to ascertain how history is influenced by memory. Especially given the „long shadow the Holocaust has been casting", and considering the ongoing heated political discussions in countries like Poland, it is important to (also) see history as the „politics of what we in the present want to remember", he argued.

As mentioned in the beginning, it is often stated that historians and the public became interested in talking about rescuers of Jews only in the 1990s. MANJA HERRMANN (Berlin) partially disputed this idea by talking about the history and the ramifications of the West-Berlin initiative „Unsung Heroes", which recognized German rescuers as early as 1958.

Throughout the whole three-day-workshop, the question of national memory versus the globalization / Europeanization of memory came up repeatedly. Commenting on the first panel „International Links & Cultural Diplomacy", ZOFIA WÓYCICKA (Berlin) brought forth the idea of instead talking about the „glocalization" of memory, meaning the interpretation of global (Holocaust) memory trends by local (national) actors.

Another common theme were discussions about the „*Righteous*", the honoring of Gentiles (non-Jews) who took great personal risks to save Jews by the Israeli Holocaust Centre Yad Vashem. To this date, Yad Vashem awarded 26.973 people the title of „*Righteous* Among the Nations" and planted trees as symbols for their actions.[1]

One of the most interesting takeaways of the workshop was that often it was not the actual history of events that led to people being recognized as *Righteous*. Instead, the panelists showed what a significant role international relations and politics played in who would receive the honor. Therefore, the number of *Righteous* from each country does not represent in any way the actual number of people who helped or rescued Jews during World War II.

ANNA MARIA DROUMPOUKI (Berlin), for example, talked about how it serves a diplomatic purpose for modern-day Greece to talk about the *Righteous*. A surprisingly personal reason lead to the Netherlands producing the second biggest group of *Righteous* (after Poland). Almost 5.700 Dutchmen and Dutchwomen have been honored as *Righteous*, although the percentage of Dutch Jews who could be saved was comparatively small.

[1] As of as of January 1, 2018. See: https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/statistics.html (07.01.2019).

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IDO DE HAAN (Utrecht) called this the „Dutch paradox," explaining that the Dutch-Jewish community in Israel was very close-knit and worked together in getting recognition for „their" *Righteous*.

A completely different example is Denmark, where „95% of the Danish Jews were rescued to safety in neighboring Sweden thanks to the altruistic help and assistance of their fellow Danes", as SOFIE LENE BAK (Copenhagen) explained in her talk – but only 22 people were honored as *Righteous*. This is due to the fact, that the national memory in Denmark sees the rescue operation as a collective act and that members of the Danish resistance asked Yad Vashem not to recognize individual members. In her talk, Bak also questioned the fixation on the fishermen as rescuers in international memory (represented by fishing boats exhibited in several Holocaust museums worldwide) and suggested to put a focus on other groups involved in the rescue (such as foster families taking in children) as well as researching how Jews were actively involved in their own rescue.

As SARAH GENSBURGER (Paris) remarked in her paper (that was read in absentia), it took until the 1990s for countries other than Israel to be interested in the *Righteous*. Other panelists expanded on how the idea of the *Righteous* was transplanted into different countries and different memory contexts. For example, in 2007, the *„Justes de France"* were formally introduced into the French Pantheon, but while *„Justes"* literally means *„Righteous"*, their actual meaning is completely contrary. In the original meaning as developed by Yad Vashem, the *Righteous* were unique individuals in the midst of the majority of uninterested or openly hostile Gentiles, whereas the „Justes" are seen as an „incarnation" of all of France.[2]

The symbolism of the tree planting in Yad Vashem has also been transplanted into many non-Holocaust contexts, examples for this are „gardens of the *Righteous*" established all over the world, for example in Yerevan to commemorate the *Righteous* for the Armenians or in Jordan to honor personalities fighting terrorism. Similarly, the European Parliament established the „European Day of the *Righteous*" in 2012, which takes many aspects of the Yad Vashem concept, but broadens the category of *Righteous* to include all kinds of genocides.

The role international politics can play on national memory can also be seen in Latvia, where private initiatives led to the opening of the Žanis Lipke Memorial, a museum using the story of rescuer Žanis Lipke to teach Latvians about the Holocaust. The museum was opened by Latvian president Andris Bērziņš in 2012, but Bērziņš only participated because Israeli president Shimon Peres was going to be there as well, as LOLITA TOMSONE (Riga), the museum's director, explained.

Due to the recent controversial Polish „Holocaust Law" (which asked for prison sentences for everyone accusing Poles of participating in Nazi crimes), Poland came up frequently in discussions during the three-day workshop. ALICJA PODBIELSKA (Worcester) provided some interesting background in her paper. She highlighted how Poland went from ignoring rescuers in its memory discourse to using the high number of Polish *Righteous* as „evidence of Polish heroism and innocence". More recently, Polish rescuers have been exploited „to suppress any discussion of Polish antisemitism and crimes against the Jews." In current politics, talking about rescuers is the „only acceptable mode of Holocaust memory in Poland," Podbielska argued.

Much of the workshop focused on specific country examples, but there were also panels on visual memory, individual memory and religious commemoration. Like earlier presentations, these panels followed similar ideas since they often talked about the same countries and the representation of rescuers in movies or other media was not that different from the overall national memory discourse.

ERIN BELL's (Lincoln) paper about the „British Schindler" Nicholas Winton, who was involved in saving hundreds of Jewish children on a *„Kindertransport"* (children's transport) lead to an interesting discussion about narratives and reference points – and to the realization that a successful movie portrayal like Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (USA

[2] The ceremony became an important diplomatic event, which was also streamed on the homepage of the French embassy in Israel.

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1993) can become an „alternative reality“ and a memory culture reference point more important than actual history.

KARINA JARZYŃSKA (Kraków) talked about the agency of the Catholic Church in commemorating Jewish rescue in contemporary Poland and thereby expanded on earlier papers about Poland. Like Alijca Podbielska she gave examples of Polish families who are involved in keeping the memory of their „*Righteous*“ ancestors alive, but who ignore the Jewish victims these people helped. Additionally, memorial services in Poland are often organized by the Catholic Church, are missing any Jewish religious symbols and are indeed only talking about Jews as „a passive object of the rescuers' heroic deed.“

The „Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews in World War II“ (a frequently used example in many of the presentations) uses the image of the „Good Samaritan“ to canonize the Ulmas. Similarly, the Reverend Gábor Sztehlo, who saved Jewish children in Hungary, was often described as a „Good Shephard“ protecting „his“ flock of Jews, TAMÁS KENDE (Budapest) explained in his paper.

The final presentations focused on individual memory and the ways individuals remember their own rescue or their own efforts helping others. An important factor here is the question of self-censorship – „To Say or Not to Say“ as NATALIA ALEKSIUN (New York) aptly called her paper. She analyzed testimonies about *Righteous* given to Yad Vashem and found significant differences between immediate post-war testimonies and testimonies given decades later: These testimonies often portray a beautified and more positive version of events. But as BARBARA SCHIEB (Berlin) pointed out in her commentary, this might also be due to the fact that people gained a deeper understanding of the importance of giving one's own survival meaning over the decades.

MARTA ANSILEWSKA-LEHNSTAEDT (Berlin) came to similar results in her analysis of over 50 oral history interviews she conducted with Child Survivors in Poland, summarizing that the majority spoke very fondly and positively about their rescuers.

At the end of an extensive workshop that benefited greatly from its small number of participants by engaging in vivid discussions, Daniel Levy came full circle by giving the final remarks. Once again referencing *Schindler's List*, Levy pointed out that often it is not historians who have the „*Deutungshoheit*“ (prerogative of interpretation) over memory culture. An important point Levy made, and which should be kept in mind for future research about rescuers, is the „co-extensive emergence of scholarship of rescue and the commemoration of rescue“ during the last decades. Because we still don't know enough about the rescues, it might seem easier to instead study commemoration and critique certain nationalistic, political or religious trends in commemorative events, but it is important not to ignore the actual historic events.

The workshop faced the same problem as many other similar conferences or research projects: it primarily focused on rescuers and *Righteous* although its title put the emphasis on the „*Rescue* of Jews“. Participants did talk about Jewish agency – about highlighting the role Jews played in their own rescue – as well as about Jews helping or rescuing other Jews in their papers, but with a few exceptions they struggled to create a „rescue“-narrative that didn't center around the rescuers.

During the final discussion, participants reflected questions about what a future portrayal of rescue and rescuers could look like. Suggestions included shifting the focus away from the long tradition of ignoring the „victims“ and instead looking at Jewish involvement in their own rescue operations, researching short-term rescue (historians tend to look at long-term rescue, but sometimes the two hours hiding someone from a mass shooting were more critical than a six-month hiding period) and lastly researching the pre-war period (rescue didn't happen in a vacuum).

Conference Overview:

Zofia Wóycicka (Zentrum für historische Forschung Berlin der polnischen Akademie der Wissenschaften): Welcome Address

Keynote Lecture
Daniel Levy (Stony Brook University): Memories of Rescue: Between Cosmopolitanization and Neo-Nationalism

Panel I: International Links & Cultural Diplo-

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Chair: Zofia Wóycicka (Zentrum für historische Forschung Berlin der polnischen Akademie der Wissenschaften)

Manja Herrmann (Technische Universität Berlin): European Holocaust Memory and the Case of Rescue: Kurt R. Grossmann and the Early Berlin Initiative Unsung Heroes (1958-1966)

Sarah Gensburger (Centre national de la recherche scientifique Paris): From the *Righteous* Among the Nations to the *Righteous* of France. State commemorations and social memory – (*in absentia, paper read by Raphael Utz*)

Naum Trajanovski (Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw): Struggles for an Interpretative Exclusivity: The Holocaust Memorial Centre in Skopje and the Competing „Salvation" Narratives over the Macedonian Jewry

Panel II: Country Reports
Chair: Joanna Michlic (University College London)

Ido de Haan (Utrecht University): Guilt, Pride and International Reputation. The Memory of Rescue of Jews in the Netherlands, 1945 to the Present

Sofie Lene Bak (University of Copenhagen): Danish Heroism Revisited: Cracks in the Collective Memory of the Rescue of the Danish Jews

Anna Maria Droumpouki (Freie Universität Berlin): Commemorating and Remembering Jewish Rescue in Greece

Lolita Tomsone (Žanis Lipke Memorial): Evolution of the Memorial Culture and Emergence of the Public Discourse about the Jewish Rescuers in Latvia

Alicja Podbielska (Clark University, Worcester, MA): Memory of Holocaust Rescue in Poland

Panel III: Visual Memory
Chair: Raphael Utz (Imre Kertész Kolleg Jena)

Viktoria Sukovata (Karazin Kharkiv National University): Representations of Rescuers in Soviet and Russian Cinema about Holocaust: Constructions of Public Memory

Tomasz Żukowski (Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw): The Discourse on the *Righteous* in Poland

Erin Bell (University of Lincoln): Remembering Nicholas Winton – the 'British Schindler' 2015-2018

Panel IV: Religious Commemoration
Chair: Natalia Aleksiun (Touro College, New York)

Karina Jarzyńska (Jagiellonian University Kraków): „Let their shedded blood earn us the concord we need". Agency of the Catholic Church in Commemorating Jewish Rescue in Contemporary Poland

Tamás Kende (Gerda Henkel Stiftung, Düsseldorf): The Human Figure behind the Cult – The Memory and the Memoirs of the *Righteous* Reverend Gábor Sztehlo

Panel V: Individual Memory
Chair: Barbara Schieb (Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand, Berlin)

Natalia Aleksiun (Touro College NY): To Say or Not to Say? Self-Censorship in the Testimonies about *Righteous* Among the Nations

Jonna Rock (Humboldt-Universität Berlin): Rescue during the Holocaust in Memory of the Sephardic Jewish Community in Sarajevo

Marta Ansilewska-Lehnstaedt (Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand, Berlin): Memories of Jewish Child Survivors in Poland Eegarding their Rescuers 70 Years after World War II

Daniel Levy (Stony Brook University, NY): Final Remarks

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