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Dead Rescuers:
The Commemoration of Poles Who Lost Their Lives Saving Jews During the Second World War

On September 5, 2021, Polish President Andrzej Duda tweeted in English about eight nuns from the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul convent who, according to him, "were doused with gasoline and burned alive" for sheltering Jews in August 1944. Unfortunately, none of the sources provided by presidential staff to the *oko.press* investigative website identified the circumstances of their deaths or confirmed the reason for their execution (Leszczyński). This bloodcurdling account is a conversation-stopper, negating the last two decades of critical historiography on Polish-Jewish relations during the war. The immolation of the nuns cancels out the difference between the fates of Jewish victims of the Holocaust (etymologically, "a burnt offering") and their Polish rescuers. President Duda's rhetorical strategy replaces rigorous historiography with an affective investment. This sacrifice should, it would seem, quash any doubts about the moral choices Poles took as witnesses to the Holocaust. And yet, such an intervention is a sign of a cultural counter-revolution, a populist rereading of Polish history through an ethnonationalist lens (Michlic 2022: 118). In memory studies, this shift has been called a "self-affirmatory memory" (Kobielska), promoting victim status for the Polish nation. Piotr Forecki highlights an agonistic dimension of memory wars, applying the term "backlash" to cultural practices that neutralize the damage caused by revelations about the Jedwabne pogrom (Forecki 2018: 255). An implicit goal of this reworking

of the past is "to put Poles and Jews upon an equal level of victimization" (Hackmann 604).

I wish to trace the consequences of this change, as evidenced in official forms of commemoration and a new regime of political memory after 2015. "Dead rescuers," i.e. Poles murdered for helping Jews, are commemorated by a host of institutions: a government-sponsored research institute, museums, and the Catholic Church. I visited the sites in question between 2017 and 2022, producing photographic documentation. An analysis of their rhetorical and visual strategies makes evident that they express a uniform attitude to the history of rescue. What follows is by no means intended to undermine the actions and sacrifices of rescuers but instead to highlight postwar political efforts to manipulate their decisions. Furthermore, both rescuers and their charges were Polish citizens. Construing the extent of the above-mentioned rhetorical campaign requires a historical detour. Popular culture in the Polish People's Republic introduced a motif of symbolic sacrifice, meaning that an ethnic Pole needed to die so that a Jew could survive (Łysak 549). In *Biały niedźwiedź* (dir. Jerzy Zarzycki, 1959), a Jewish academic, Henryk Fogiel, hides in plain sight, wearing a white bear costume in the mountain resort of Zakopane, donned previously by a Polish resistance fighter, killed by the Nazis. At the end, a Polish woman trying to save Fogiel gets hit by bullets intended for him. Thanks to her sacrifice, he escapes. Truth be told, focusing on the death of a Pole served to condemn "Jewish ingratitude" for having been rescued and featured in anti-semitic propaganda in the late 1960s (Wóycicka 2019: 263).

In the twenty-first century, two high-profile rescuers dominate public discourse about Polish help: Irena Sendlerowa and Jan Karski. The former coordinated a network of rescuers in a clandestine organization called Żegota as well as the smuggling of children (and adults) out of the Warsaw Ghetto. Sendlerowa proves an unlikely candidate for an ethnonationalist hero, as she was motivated by her leftwing political ideals rather than her religiosity (Bikont; Żarnecka). Critical scholarship on Sendlerowa may lack the performative power to reverse the mythologized biography of this helper (Żarnecka 162). Karski, meanwhile, as his myth goes, was trying to reverse the course of the Holocaust by appealing to British and American political leaders to end the extermination of Jews. The one-hundredth anniversary of his birth in 2014 provided an occasion to remind the world about Karski's failed mission. And yet, a critical reinterpretation of sources reveals that his primary goal was not to deliver news about the Holocaust to the Allies, who already knew about the mass murder (Puławski 318–343; Grabowski and Klein 10).

In the Polish language, individuals extending help to Jews during the Second World War are referred to either as "Sprawiedliwi" (similar to "the Righteous Among the Nations"—a term introduced by Yad Vashem in 1963 to honor those whose identity as rescuers has been rigorously confirmed) or "Polacy ratujący Żydów" (this group outnumbers the former cohort, most individuals lack recognition, their motives and conduct may avoid historical scrutiny). The latter phrase is officially translated as "Poles Saving Jews." Herein, I use "rescuers" unless the individuals in question have been awarded the title coined by Yad Vashem. Joanna Michlic further complicates the picture, talking about "dedicated rescuers"—"individuals who went above and beyond the call of duty to save their Jewish charges" (2014: 216). She applies this term to a group of female rescuers who never betrayed those seeking shelter, as opposed to rescuers motivated by greed or who eventually killed their charges. In Poland, the number of rescuers tends to be blown out of proportion, with the highest unsubstantiated estimates close to one million (Podbielska 576). I argue that, after 2015, dead rescuers dominated the official commemoration of rescue,[1] the Holocaust, and Polish-Jewish relations. Such a rhetorical strategy ignores the social context of the Nazi occupation and belittles the fact that dead rescuers frequently perished upon denunciation by fellow Poles. There is a hidden assumption about the purity of their intentions, which is generalized as being the attitude of the Polish nation. This window dressing won governmental support and has three interrelated goals: to combat the "pedagogy of shame"[2] in Poland, to offer a renewed sense of national pride, and to counteract the damage to the image of the country abroad. In picking these goals, the right-wing government is castigating the pre-2015 pro-European establishment for its "politics of regret" (Olick).

1. Micro-history and reclaiming the countryside

A government-sponsored program entitled "Zawołani po imieniu" ("Called by Name") honors dead rescuers. It is run by the Pilecki Institute, a research-commemoration institution established in 2017 to implement historical policy. Initially, the Institute studied the impact of the Nazi and Communist

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1   There are earlier examples of this trend. A documentary film *Historia Kowalskich* (dir. Arkadiusz Gołębiewski, Maciej Pawlicki, TVP 2009) dramatizes the execution of Poles who had rescued Jews. The National Bank of Poland honored the Kowalskis, issuing two coins in 2012 emblazoned with "Poles Saving Jews."

2   An umbrella term for critical historiography and political rituals, undermining a heroic self-perception of Polish history.

totalitarianisms on Polish society but, with time, its focus has shifted to the commemoration of rescuers. On its website, the Institute estimates that approximately one thousand Poles were killed for helping Jews under the Nazi occupation, and their stories will be told with their relatives' help. In a promotional video, Magdalena Gawin—director of the Pilecki Institute as of 2021—calls them "unacknowledged heroes," explaining its four actions: "calling out their names in public at the site of their death," "inviting their families to join the ceremony," "soliciting the participation of the local community," and "identifying the names of helpers and their charges." A stone with a commemorative plaque, the first of many, was unveiled in 2019. The project flew under the radar until a railroad worker, Jan Maletka—shot dead for offering water to Jews crammed in a cattle car on the rail spur in Treblinka on August 20, 1942—had a stone unveiled next to a recent installation honoring Jewish victims who passed through the Treblinka train station on their way to the gas chambers of the nearby death camp. The ceremony caused international outrage and Jan Hartman called it an "antisemitic excess," as one can only cherish Maletka's heroism if one also forgets that other Poles lining the tracks to Treblinka hoped to exchange water for Jewish gold and jewelry. Coincidentally, Maletka's memorial stone is visible from the house of Czesław Borowy, who was a key witness in Claude Lanzmann's epochal documentary *Shoah* (1985). To its international audience, Borowy's account of Jewish deportees to Treblinka came to symbolize the callous indifference of Poles. Heretofore, memorialization was carried out in the countryside, mostly in the Podlasie and Lubelskie regions (electoral strongholds of Law and Justice), as evidenced by a map on the website. This choice reflects the trajectory of Holocaust studies in Poland, which shifted attention from big ghettos in cities to the process of extermination in the countryside (Engelking, Grabowski eds.). It also exonerates the countryfolk from accusations of indifference to, or complicity in, the Holocaust, both well-documented in historiography, court files, and oral history.

A permanent exhibition in Warsaw, produced by the Pilecki Institute, divulges a similar intention, applying micro-history to the phenomenon of unsuccessful rescue. On the one hand, it feeds off a post-traumatic sensibility of Holocaust commemoration. On the other, an eye-catching video projection on display there relies on an AI animation of colorized still photographs of rescuers, bringing the dead back to life. This eerie display of digital technology highlights the contradictions of commemorating dead rescuers: they died so that the image of an innocent Poland could live. The "Called by Name" project commemorates rescuers in order to counteract recent historical findings regarding the ubiquity of anti-Jewish violence and to accuse

Fig. 1. A commemorative stone dedicated to Jan Maletka in Treblinka (photo: Tomasz Łysak)

Fig. 2. A window display in the permanent exhibition of "Called by Name," produced by the Pilecki Institute (photo: Tomasz Łysak)

the postwar communist authorities of abandoning the unsung heroes and surviving relatives. In fact, it was local communities who stigmatized these survivors. And yet, official commemoration in the Polish People's Republic highlighted rescuers, frequently as part of its anti-semitic agenda, e.g. in *Naganiacz* (dir. Ewa and Czesław Petelscy, 1963) based on Roman Bratny's short story (Żukowski).

2. The Ulma family and the transnational memory of the Holocaust

The fate of one family from Markowa, near Rzeszów, came to define historical policy relating to rescuers. The Ulmas were killed in 1944, after denunciation by Włodzimierz Leś, an ethnic Pole and a Blue Policeman[3] from Łańcut, together with their Jewish charges. He had previously sheltered the same Jews and knew about their new hiding place. Despite this information being presented front and center at the exhibition, its moral significance is defused (Kobielska 367). Recently, the Ulmas' willingness to risk their life has been extolled as a Catholic virtue, based on which their beatification process was officially initiated in 2003 as part of a larger cohort of "war saints." As a side effect, the Ulmas attracted the attention of pro-life activists as Wiktoria Ulma was eight months pregnant at the time of her execution and started giving birth to her youngest child, who

Fig. 3. The Ulma Museum in Markowa in 2017 (photo: Tomasz Łysak)

3   A member of the Polish Police of the General Government, established in 1939 under German command.

subsequently has been counted as the final victim and become a candidate for beatification (Podbielska 583). The Ulma Museum of Poles Saving Jews in World War II opened its doors in 2016, while the idea of erecting it was first raised in 2007. Although Markowa is a remote village, the Museum represents a global phenomenon (Wóycicka 267). It has also been taken as a reflection of Europeanization, by stressing "human rights, the rule of law, tolerance, democracy and pluralism" (Wassermann 11).

Mirosław Nizio—a Polish architect whose fame skyrocketed after preparing the architectural blueprint for the Warsaw Rising Museum (2004)—designed the Ulma Museum. Its architecture combines a weathering steel structure—modeled on a traditional gable-roof rural house—with a concrete pavilion. Its blocks cut into a small hill with the roof of the pavilion covered with grass. Inside, a glass installation hosts a replica of the Ulmas' house, originally situated a few hundred meters away. This visually stunning building takes its cues from international developments in commemorative architecture to underscore Poland's attempts to manage its reputation abroad. To this end, the Museum has prohibited English-language tours from being led by guides other than members of its staff.[4] The exhibition features a map of villages in the area where Poles rescued Jews, but rescuers from other ethnic minorities get no mention. In this sense, a map of rescue is a politically charged representation at odds with the GIS-inspired mapping projects of Holocaust rescue in Hungary (Cole, Giordano 64). Rescuers from the Podkarpacie region are also listed on the Museum's website, which provides narratives about the identity of charges, the fate of rescuers and those helped, and recognition of rescuers by Yad Vashem. Piotr Forecki argues that the true goal of this museum is not to pay homage to those executed but "to serve the well-being of the national community and Polish international branding" (Forecki 2016: 643). The Ulmas have thus become paradigmatic rescuers in the new memory regime, useful in upholding a pivotal narrative about Polish innocence (Florczak 166). Shockingly, their family photograph has been used to "correct" a previous critical bias in the permanent exhibition at the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk after its hijacking by Law and Justice,[5] while their official commemoration by Parliament and the beatification process by the Catholic Church combine key right-wing discourses.

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4 As seen in Markowa in February 2017.

5 A photograph of Wiktoria Ulma with her six children is placed between a display of artifacts from Jedwabne and a large reproduction of a post-liberation photo of the gate to Birkenau camp.

3. Dead rescuers in the service of ethnonationalistic catholicism

Father Tadeusz Rydzyk created, and still runs, three Catholic media outlets: Radio Maryja, a daily *Nasz Dziennik*, and the television station Trwam, all propagating traditional religiosity and ethnonationalism. Over the last decade, he has built a lavish church on the outskirts of Toruń, a memorial park, and a Saint John Paul II Museum. The church bears the long-winded name—the "Shrine of Our Lady Star of the New Evangelization and Saint John Paul II" and is replete with its ground-level Chapel of Remembrance, meant to "pay tribute to these Poles who risked their lives and the lives of their family members to save Jews during World War II" (Molisak).

Fig. 4. The Chapel of Remembrance in Toruń (photo: Tomasz Łysak)

This chapel commemorates Poles (initially, 1,182 of them) executed for sheltering Jews, carved into a black granite wall behind a white figure of the Virgin Mary. Atop four columns stand figures of gold-plated winged angels, blowing trumpets. The dedication on the wall reads: "Polish martyrs, pray for us." There is a looped audio recording, calling out the names of Polish dead rescuers (and their relations to others if kith and kin perished). A website provides information on the circumstances of their death, gleaned from official archives or gathered by an archive of oral testimonies created for this purpose in the early 2000s. Thus, Father Rydzyk's shift to commemorating "the Holocaust" is hardly a recent change of heart. It is an ethnonationalist politics of memory, diverting attention from critical historiography of the Holocaust in Poland to both retain an image of Poland and Poles as victims of the war as well as deny any complicity in the mass murder of Jews. This goal was stated as early

as 2002.[6] The chapel's website contains a similar manifesto and names the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a co-sponsor of the project. Another state institution, the Institute of National Remembrance, is credited as a forerunner of this project, starting its own "Poles Saving Jews" documentation endeavor in 2006. The list is by no means comprehensive, as new names were added in 2020. There is still ample space to extend it. On two separate visits to the Shrine, I found the chapel devoid of visitors while video materials on the website show that it hosts the official celebration of the National Day of Memory of Poles Saving Jews Under the German Occupation (March 24).[7] The facade of the church is decorated with bas-reliefs representing important events in Polish history (mainly, famous battles). The artwork flanking the entrance to the chapel is devoted to the Second World War, with the dates 1939–1945 prominent on top and three types of oppression of Poles listed: the German occupation (5,770,000 dead), the Volhynia massacre (100,000), and the Soviet occupation (570,000). A rendering of an iconic photograph of a Jewish man in Vinnytsia, Ukraine in 1942—with a pistol pointed at his head by a member of the Einsatzgruppe D killing squad—stands for the German occupation. It puzzles me why this image was chosen, as the site of the massacre was beyond Poland's borders in 1939, and given the absence of any explanation, visitors are bound to assume that the photograph represents the shooting of a Pole. In the same panel, the Soviet occupation is represented by Katyń, the murder of Polish officers by the NKVD, also at point-blank range.

While it is easy to dismiss the National Memory Park in Toruń as a money grab of public funds,[8] it can be seen as a reflection of official commemoration in the mirror of conservative Catholicism. The park comprises four major areas: a central monument in the shape of Poland's borders, made up of double-file glass pillars (illuminated after dark in the colors of the Polish flag), a smaller monument devoted to Ukrainian rescuers of Poles during the Volhynia genocide

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6   In a call-in to Radio Maryja, a listener implored others to record testimony about rescues, addressing her plea to "honest people of Jewish descent" and young Poles (Maszkowski 673).

7   This day was established by the Polish Parliament in 2018 on the anniversary of the death of the Ulma Family.

8   Father Rydzyk's Lux Veritatis Foundation received ample funds from the Polish government after 2015. These funds were spent mostly without public scrutiny and the Foundation was sued by Watchdog Polska Citizen Network for failing to reveal how the money had been disbursed (Klauziński).

Fig. 5. The Radio Maryja complex in Toruń: the National Memory Park, the Shrine, and the John Paul II Museum (photo: Tomasz Łysak)

Fig. 6 A graduation tower in the contemplation zone (photo: Tomasz Łysak)

in 1943,[9] an information center on German atrocities in occupied Poland, and last but not least a rest/contemplation zone, complete with two "graduation towers".[10]

Paradoxically, these towers betray the purpose of this endeavor: to increase the well-being of the visitors, both in their understanding of the past and in their respiratory health. Pillars with the names of rescuers engraved on them (in total, 18,457) "protect" the Polish border. These people should not be confused with the Righteous Among the Nations and their names are clearly impossible to count for visitors, creating the impression that rescue was a mass phenomenon during the war. The spatial layout of the monument makes it clear that this commemoration serves to protect Poland against foreign accusations of complicity in the Holocaust and the "deleterious" scholarship of some Polish historians who have undermined national myths about Polish victimhood during the war. Father Rydzyk's media operation is a mouthpiece for this type of historical policy. As a follow-up to the migrant crisis in 2015, when Poland refused to admit any refugees fleeing, predominantly, the war in Syria, Catholic activists from the Solo Dios Basta Foundation called for a Rosary to the Borders prayer. Ostensibly, it was meant to beg the Virgin Mary to save Poland and the world, but some participants avowed that islamophobia informed their prayers, despite public protestations from the organizers. Some participants saw these prayers as a weapon in the struggle against evil, and the rosary (and by extension Poland's borders) as a shield protecting the Polish nation (Zynek-Mahometa 391). "The border was meant to become a symbol, building national pride" (Zynek-Mahometa 399). The goals of this prayer aligned with right-wing populism (Kotwas, Kubik), expressing the official discourse while being publicly funded.

4. Conclusions

Commemorating dead rescuers relies on several strategies. Some of them are borrowed from post-traumatic memorial practices: lists of names, "negative" architectural spaces (influenced by Daniel Libeskind's deconstructive architecture),

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9 The Polish Sejm adopted a resolution, reinforcing this interpretation of the violent conflict between Ukrainian nationalists and ethnic Poles in the Kresy region, simultaneously expressing gratitude to Ukrainians who sheltered Poles while refusing to join in the murders (Kobielska 368–369).

10 Such towers ooze a mist saturated with salt and are a staple element in Polish spas. Recently, Polish cities and towns have erected a raft of them as part of municipal beautification.

and prioritizing personal narratives. The Pilecki Institute is more conservative in its choice of commemorative object (a stone with a plaque). The above strategies are complemented by digital commemoration, as websites present the rationale for embarking on these projects, provide access to supplementary modes of remembering (snippets of information about dead rescuers and their charges, audiovisual interviews with surviving witnesses, maps, photographs), and facilitate planning visits to the sites in question. Ernst van Alphen dubs the practice of enumerating names "list mania," underlining its ambiguity. Lists of names return individuality to victims of the Holocaust, but the Nazis' proficiency in listing facilitated this genocide (van Alphen 12). A similar point is raised in a groundbreaking study of lists as a cultural phenomenon (Young 85–108). Therefore, lists are not a morally foolproof mode of commemoration (van Alphen 14). And yet, they should not be perceived as intrinsically evil or put to mischievous use by evil people, hence it is of the utmost importance to unpack the "assumptions and categorizations" they create (Young 107). Yad Vashem pioneered the use of listing names of Holocaust victims, a practice that was vastly accelerated by the adoption of digital databases (van Alphen 11). In Poland, a printed Yad Vashem list is on public display at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, part of the Israeli exhibition in Block 27 (2013). Paradoxically, defending the good name of Poland requires the compiling of lists of dead rescuers, executed for breaking the Nazi prohibition against helping Jews. In this vein, Nazi crimes provide moral validation for Polish historical policy. They also offer ostensible proof of the oft-repeated (and only partially true) claim that Poland was the only country in Nazi-occupied Europe in which rescuers of Jews faced death. These helpers were executed together with their charges, symbolically negating the chasm between the fates of Jewish victims of genocide and the deaths of ethnic Poles. Compiling lists of rescuers implies they are comprehensive, but simultaneously, their referentiality is not limited to the individuals listed. On the contrary, the rhetorics of this commemoration create an impression that those enumerated represent the moral core of the nation. Redirecting focus to the executed helpers has an additional advantage, as it stresses the perils of rescue and explains why so few Jews survived. Conversely, it rules out Jewish agency in surviving the Holocaust and makes Jews seem dependent on the genocidal zeal of the Nazis, their collaborators, and the good nature of the rescuers.

Singling out dead rescuers to represent rescue is advantageous from the point of view of ethnonationalist historical policy. First, it avoids the problem of postwar hostility toward rescuers whenever news of their actions leaked to their neighbors. Some rescuers could hardly escape the fallout, as their attempts

to conceal their kindness were mostly futile. Second, dead rescuers could not compromise their good deeds by choices they would go on to make in the Polish People's Republic. Given the declarative anti-communist agenda of Law and Justice, this choice rules out potential muckraking and prevents the undermining of the moral integrity of rescuers. Third, sacrificing one's life to help others can be found in two discourses: Catholicism and romanticism. As a result, "the moral triumph of the Righteous is undeniable" and future generations of Poles can bask in their glory just as they feel pride in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 (Kowalska-Leder 1077). To paraphrase Maria Janion—an eminent Polish literary scholar—"to Europe but only with our dead [rescuers]" (Janion). Interestingly, Janion made a plea to count Polish Jews among "our dead," a gesture subverted by right-wing historical populism. Commemorating dead rescuers is a commendable endeavor, but in its current form, it manipulates the past to boost national pride and may cause suffering to surviving relatives.

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| Abstract

Tomasz Łysak

Dead Rescuers: the Commemoration of Poles Who Lost Their Lives Saving Jews During the Second World War

After their electoral victory in 2015, the Law and Justice party started a counter-revolution in historical policy, intended to undermine critical historiography on the Holocaust. As a result, "dead rescuers," Poles who lost their lives saving Jews during the Second World War, are commemorated by a host of institutions: a government-sponsored research institute, museums, and the Catholic Church. This commemoration borrows its aesthetics from earlier practices established in Holocaust memory: post-traumatic architecture, lists of victims, and micro-history to boost national pride and defend the good name of Poland abroad. Memory actors receive financial support from the government, becoming a mouthpiece for its reclaiming of the past for ethnonationalist ends.

| Bio

Tomasz Łysak, associate prof. at the University of Warsaw. His work focuses on representations of the Holocaust in relation to trauma studies and psychoanalysis, photography, and visual media. He has edited *Antologia studiów nad traumą* (2015) and is the author of *Od kroniki do filmu posttraumatycznego – filmy dokumentalne o Zagładzie* (2016) which was awarded as the best debut book in cinema and media studies by the Polish Association for Studies of Film and the Media. Recently he has been working on Polish popular culture and the Holocaust as well as digital Holocaust memory. He published in *Holocaust Studies*, *Teksty Drugie*, and *Kultura Współczesna*.

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