

One million Polish rescuers of hunted Jews?

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Think of one of the many ordinary Poles who during the Nazi terror risked their lives by extending a helping hand to hunted Jews. They keep hearing the complaining refrain: *Why were there so few?* (Wiesel, 1986). How must these persons feel? What does “few” mean in this context? At what point would this description no longer hold? At 50,000? At 100,000? At 1,000,000? At two or more million? In their insistence on the small number of rescuers can those who hold this view justify that relative estimate? Or is there perhaps no connection at all between the estimated number of rescuers and the phrase *so few*?

In this context the following study presents eight objective reasons why the number of recorded Polish rescuers is likely to be a serious underestimation. Each of the eight points by itself would make it reasonable to multiply the recorded number of Jewish survivors by some number larger than one. Unfortunately, there is no entirely objective way to arrive at firm numbers.

This state of affairs is unsatisfactory largely because of two psychological factors alluded to at the beginning. There is a strong predisposition, on the one hand, to underestimate the number of rescuers and, on the other hand—and this is perhaps the most serious consequence of that bias—to present the Holocaust story in a perspective of otherness, unreality and, ultimately, incomprehension.

Eight points for estimating the number of rescuers

I recognize that, by definition, any estimation includes a certain degree of “guestioning,” especially in this particular context. Nevertheless, even here we should be able to find a reasonable basis for estimating the number of rescuers of Jews in Poland. However, for that purpose, it behooves one to articulate and justify these bases to the best of the available knowledge. Mainly relying on Tec (1986), I list now the eight points which in my view are a reasonable basis for estimating the number of Polish rescuers. I do not believe that points (2) to (7) are in themselves controversial. However, in opposition to point (1), a counter-argument is proposed by those who insist on the paucity of Polish rescuers, I propose a counter-argument.

- (1) In the vast majority of long-term rescue situations the number of helpers exceeded the number of Jews rescued.

Counter-argument to point (1): frequently, a small number of one and the same rescuers helped a great number of Jewish people and did this at different, successive times. As a consequence, none of the further points (2) to (8) would amount to any significant increase in the number of rescuers. In presenting this counter-argument, Tec (1986, p 83) even goes so far as to suggest that on this basis it would be reasonable to argue the opposite of point (1), namely, that there were fewer Polish rescuers than the number of Polish Jews rescued.

However, I hold that perusal of Tec's own book as well of other reports of Jewish rescue strongly show two things. First, most rescues were of one or a small handful of people at a time and these are less likely to be reported. Moreover, even if hypothetically the facts of the argument itself were true, it is unreasonable to make the claim that the estimated increase in the number of Polish rescuers on the grounds of points (2) to (8) is insignificant. In other words, I believe that in addition to point (1), each of the points (2) to (8) can become the occasion for a serious underestimation of the number of Polish rescuers.

- (2) Thousands of Poles were executed for helping Jews, often by being murdered on the spot or by the burning down of the building in which both Polish helpers and Jewish victims perished. We have only fragmentary records of these executions.
- (3) Similarly, thousands of Jews who were helped at one time during the war did not survive to tell the story.
- (4) Thousands of Jews who during the war "passed" as Poles and were helped by Polish rescuers, for various reasons continued after the war to deny their Jewish origin. Tec (1986, p 235) gives the number at 20,000.
- (5) A majority of Poles had to keep their rescue of Jews secret, not merely for fear of denouncement and official German threat of death, but on account of their environment. A strongly anti-Jewish attitude on the part of many Poles was prevalent before, during and after the war. It was especially virulent immediately after the war, continued in its peculiar fashion during the communist years and still is relatively strong today.
- (6) Unless the rescued surviving Jews took the initiative, there was no ready opportunity for Poles to register their acts of rescue. It is probable that only a minority of Jewish survivors, partly for reasons of discretion, personal anti-Jewish experience, or for reasons of psychological repression, came forward with the names and details of their Polish helpers.
- (7) The rescuers did not consider their actions as something special or heroic. It was just natural and ordinary, not something to brag or talk about openly.
- (8) Thousands of helping acts were done on impulse, on the spur of the moment, lasting no longer than a few seconds to a few hours: such as a quick warning from mortal danger, giving some food or water, showing the way, sheltering from cold or exhaustion for a few hours. None of these acts can be recorded in full detail, with persons and names counted; yet without them the survival of thousands of Jews would not have been possible.

An estimate of the number of Polish rescuers

On the basis of these eight points, an estimate of the number of Polish rescuers can be worked out. Iranek-Osmecki (1971) suggests at least one million. Is this reasonable?

Consider this: at least 50,000 Jews lived and survived the Nazi occupation in Poland (Tec, 1986, p 11). We can conservatively estimate that an equal number of Jews attempted to hide but perished in the attempt (points (2) and (3)). Now add to this 20,000 (Tec, 1986, p 235) who, after the war, continued to deny their religious origin (point (4)). We have, from the Jewish side, 120,000 rescue situations. With this as a base, how many Poles would this involve?

An estimate of three Poles for one rescue situation would seem reasonable (point (1)). We multiply this by a factor of 2 in order to take account that Jews in hiding frequently had to move from one to another place (Tec, 1986, p 80). Now we have 720,000 Poles involved in the long-term rescue of 120,000 Jews. Add to it an estimate of four short-term rescue encounters for each of the 120,000 Jews (point (8)) and we arrive at an estimate of 1,200,000 Polish rescuers.

Note that in this computation we did not even explicitly calculate points (5) to (7), that is, surviving Jews or Poles who, for understandable reasons, did not come forward, or had no opportunity to come forward. There is simply no basis for any numerical estimate. Whatever that number would be, clearly not using it means to underestimate the true number of rescuers.

J. Friedman (1974, p 648), referring to Poland, remarked at an international historical conference: "If we knew the names of all the noble people who risked their lives to save Jews, the entire area round Yad Vashem would be full of trees and would turn into a forest. While wandering through Poland and along her borders during the war and immediately afterwards, I met Polish families who endangered their lives daily and sought no recompense. They were simple people who were motivated by deep personal feelings, but who remained anonymous."

Unfortunately, words such as these fell on deaf ears. And even when they were heard, the speaker's reply at the conference (p 654) dismissed the number as unsupported by the official standards of the "righteous among the nations." That would be exactly like limiting an estimate of the number of Catholics to the exceedingly small number of officially canonized saints.

In this connection Tec (1986, p 84) explicitly states that of the 189 Polish rescuers of her study—and she started her inquiry with names from Yad Vashem—less than a quarter had this official title: "There is no disputing that those who have been recognized by Yad Vashem represent but a fraction of those who deserve to be." In other words, just as we would not use the list of canonized saints as a reasonable basis for estimating the number of Catholics, we cannot refer to Yad Vashem as a reasonable basis for estimating the number of Polish rescuers.

One scientific study of 406 rescuers ("officially" recognized by Yad Vashem in Jerusalem) and 126 non-rescuers (as a control group) permits a different

approach to estimate the number of people willing to help the Jews under Nazi terror. In their search for personality characteristics of rescuers, the authors (Oliner and Oliner, 1988, p 138) found that 32 (25 percent) of the control group were asked for help and in response 25 (20 percent) provided some short-term help of up to three months' shelter.

The implications of this "scientific" statistic are startling. Remember, this is a control group of non-rescuers, that is, people who presumably did not give (long-term) help to Jews. If these people are anywhere typical of non-Jews under the Nazis, the percentage of 20 percent represents a huge number of many millions. I was truly astonished when I read these numbers and wonder whether the authors fully realized that this number flatly contradicts their emphasis throughout the book on the presumed small number of rescuers.

Psychological factors underlying the underestimation

As I have pointed out, the underestimation of non-Jewish rescuers is but one facet of what I cannot help but call the traditional myth of "why-so-few." This seems to me nothing short of a tragedy. For without some resolution on this issue the story of the Holocaust remains unreal and alien, as something that "others" have done. As such it cannot be assimilated and become a fully integrated part of history.

"How many righteous Christian were there?" asks Tec (1986, p 83). "Exact figures are elusive. What we have instead are estimates that vary with the particular assumptions on which they are based ... I believe that knowing the exact number of the righteous is not as important as understanding who they were and what motivated them toward this life-threatening behavior."

Why then make the attempt of estimating the number of Polish rescuers? First, this attempt has never been made with any methodological precision. Yad Vashem may appear to be such an attempt. But as mentioned earlier, it is nothing of the sort. Second, for the sake of historical objectivity the bias for underestimation must be recognized for what it is. Third, I would argue that the search for specific psychological characteristics of rescuers, the search for the "altruistic personality" is even more futile than what Tec calls "the search for the elusive number." And yet this search for a particular psychology seems to dominate the research of those who study the rescue attempts during the Holocaust.

The reason, then, why I refer to *specific* numbers has to do with what Tec called the assumptions behind the estimates. And to examine these assumptions is absolutely vital to a genuine reception of the whole story of the Holocaust. As one researcher says: "For the survivors who felt so radically abandoned and for Poles who feel that their national character has been impugned, the question of proportions becomes important. Were there more Poles who helped, or more who harmed?" (Hoffmann, 1997, p 243). However one should not frame the comparative question: which group is bigger? Rather, one should feel confident to say that in Poland during the Nazi terror there were many who harmed the Jews as there were many, though fewer, who helped the Jews.

Hoffmann reminds her readers how

the Nazi occupation created a world of monstrously inverted morality. It was a world in which the ordinary qualities of decency, responsibility toward others, concern, and compassion were criminalized, and in which rank brutality and sadism were normalized ... In this atmosphere there were some who took the new rules as permission to behave swinishly, and yet others who felt liberated by them into bestiality and violence ... But there were others who found it in themselves to behave with common decency, at a time when such behavior required uncommon courage and selflessness. Even the motives of the rescuers cannot always be understood in ordinary moral terms. (Hoffmann, 1997, pp. 241 ff.)

There is a strong bias or predisposition on the part of Jewish scholars to emphasize “the abandonment of the Jews” and to react to reports of rescue with a complaining and objectively unrealistic “Why were there so few?” This phrase, enshrined over the years in literature and folklore is subjectively comprehensible as a psychological defense structure. In view of the difficulty of articulating the enormity of the evil and of the loss suffered on the Jewish side, it may appear justifiable as an emotion-laden expression.

There is no question that from the victims’ viewpoint, the feeling of total abandonment and the cry of: *Why were there so few helpers?* was absolutely real. This cry mirrors and expresses an experience that cannot be adequately put into words. To realize the desperate pleas for help from the Warsaw Ghetto to the outside world just before the final uprising is a heart rending exercise that defies description. In this sense, the phrase “so few” has nothing to do with numbers. No amount of numbers could “demonstrate” that this phrase is misplaced.

Nonetheless, this genuine attitude of desperation amounts to a bias that cannot but seriously underestimate the number of rescuers. And since rescue and rescue attempts are an integral part of the Holocaust story, a fair estimate of the approximate number of people involved is appropriate. The aim of that estimate is then not to change the attitude—which, as pointed out earlier—has really nothing to do with the actual numbers and, as shown in the following, is impervious to rational arguments.

Rabbi Schulweis, in the preface to Oliner and Oliner (1988) refers to “scattered sparks of sanctity in the midst of impenetrable darkness” and to the “scandalously few acts of altruism.” Yet without noticing the contradiction, he continues: “Many of the millions of Jews who survived the slaughter could not have done so without the care and protection of non-Jews in every country the Nazis occupied.” Even to mention this bias as a possibility means to encounter protests of taking an anti-Jewish stance. Oliner and Oliner (1988, p XIX) report the shouting accusation of some survivors amid those who were acknowledged rescuers and the fear that highlighting rescue activities could “lull people into believing that the horrors never occurred ... The memories of those years are too surfeited with tragedy to allow for much goodness.”

As long as this bias toward underestimation remains a given in Jewish

Holocaust literature it is not easy for any scholars, particularly for Poles, to assert what they consider objectively grounded historical facts. From a psychological perspective it is comprehensible that Poles would resent the constant insistence on Jewish losses and Polish abandonment. The extent of Polish losses, if not equal, is massive and the help given to Jews by Poles—under risk of death—is also massive. In the end, objectivity is suspect and has no voice in a field dominated by psychological bias.

In conclusion, one must point to the connection between the bias of underestimating the number of rescuers and of overestimating the number of perpetrators of Nazi evil (as, for instance, in the case of referring to Germans in general as Hitler's willing executioners). This reflects our psychological tendency to see things in black and white and, even more basically, to identify ourselves with the good, the US, and differentiate ourselves from the bad, the Other. One Polish contemporary of the Nazi destruction of a Jewish shtetl is proud of those nine Polish families that have been honored as Righteous Gentiles. He believes "that they represent the Polish norm ... In his view, the murderers and informers were the aberration, the inevitable marginal fringe of people all too easily prodded into crime in the climate of Nazi lawlessness. The survivors believe just the opposite. They think the anti-Semitic hatred was the Polish norm, and that during the war, the anti-Semitism lurking in every Pole came out and showed its true virulence" (Hoffmann, 1996, p 246).

Far from facilitating a true grasp of the enormity of the Nazi evil and the continuous potential danger of the destructive racist ideology, both the respective underestimation of helpers and the overestimation of perpetrators contribute to a picture of irreality, a story of something that concerns the Other, not Us. A halfway reasonable (i.e. objective) differentiation (such as quality of participation or of helping) and estimation of the number of "Hitler's willing executioners," as well as of those who both had the opportunity and actively helped hunted Jews, would be a sound first step in making the story of the Holocaust real and fruitful as human history.

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