

Limore Yagil

Paris-IV-Sorbonne, France

Bar-Ilan University, Israel

Scopus Author ID 38262018700

*WARTIME RESCUE OF JEWS BY THE POLISH CATHOLIC CLERGY:
THE TESTIMONY OF SURVIVORS AND RESCUERS, VOL. 1–2,
ED. RYSZARD TYNDORF WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF ZYGMUNT
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The case of Poland presents perhaps the most pointed of the many paradoxes of the Holocaust. On the one hand, of the more than three million Polish Jews who fell into the hands of the Nazis, only about three per cent survived, putting Poland at the very bottom of the league table amongst all the countries of occupied Europe. On the other hand, in the league table of people who are known to have risked their lives to rescue Jews, Poland stands at the very top, accounting for more than a quarter of all the “Righteous Gentiles” recognized by Yad Vashem, Israel’s official memorial to the victims of the Holocaust. By January 2022, 7,232 people in Poland have been recognized by the State of Israel as The Righteous Among the Nations. Naturally this paradox has given rise to intense polemics, characterized, unfortunately, by a great deal of jumping to conclusions. The correlation is obvious – Poland was a country of rampant anti-Semitism, and most of its Jews perished: cause and consequence. On the other hand, Poland is a country with strong Catholic traditions of hospitality, charity, and self-sacrifice;

hence the large number of Righteous Gentiles. Yet, the role of Polish Catholic and Protestant churches in rescuing Polish Jews still awaits a comprehensive study.

The first extensive work on the considerable role of Polish Catholic nuns in saving Jewish children was published by Ewa Kurek-Lesik¹ (1992); more recently Joanna B. Michlic² (2008) has updated and expanded the information available. In fact, the help given by religious Catholics (bishops, priests, nuns) is rarely considered by historians dealing with the situation of Jews in Poland. Ryszard Tyndorf, is not a historian in the sense that history is not his major occupation, but he succeeded in reassembling facts and testimonies concerning survivors and rescuers. For many years he has been collecting and verifying the nature of testimonies and information. The result is a huge book, with thousands of testimonies from all over Poland, from 1939 to 1945. Ryszard Tyndorf has produced a massive, free-to-download³ monograph that should make a considerable difference to both Holocaust Studies and current controversies within Poland, with “Wartime Rescue of Jews by the Polish Catholic Clergy: The Testimony of Survivors and Rescuers.”

The heart of this book is the author’s attempt to calculate the number of Jews hiding not only in Warsaw but also all over Poland. Ryszard Tyndorf counted more than 500 religious institutions in more than 580 localities all over occupied Poland that were involved in the hiding process of Jews that contributed to their rescue and in so doing, constructed a “giant mosaic.” His study shows how much effort was put into preparing such a work, and how information can be gathered from a variety of places, to build an extremely interesting and sometimes even exciting story on their basis.

The book is the first English monograph on the assistance of Catholic priests to Jews in Poland during the Holocaust and was published by the Publishing House

¹ E. Kurek-Lesik, *Gdy klasztor znaczył życie. Udział żeńskich zgromadzeń zakonnych w akcji ratowania dzieci żydowskich w Polsce w latach 1939–1945* (Cracow, 1992), pp. 49–54; *eadem*, “The Conditions of Admittance and the Social Background of Jewish Children Saved by Women’s Religious Orders in Poland from 1939–1945,” *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, vol. 3: *The Jews of Warsaw* (1988), pp. 244–275, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1rmj5z.17>. E. Kurek, *The Role of Polish Nuns in the Rescue of Jews, 1939–1945* (New York, 1992).

² J.B. Michlic, *Jewish Children in Nazi-occupied Poland: Survival and Polish-Jewish Relations During the Holocaust as Reflected in Early Postwar Recollections* (Jerusalem, 2008).

³ See <https://repozytorium.kul.pl/items/86f916e2-4bcd-4b40-ab19-32ddd8842fc>, accessed 6 May 2024.

of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin in collaboration with the Abraham J. Heschel Center for Catholic-Jewish Relations of the Catholic University of Lublin. Tyndorf has found many testimonies, even if it was difficult, though these stories are not told from generation to generation, and the related documents and testimonies. Many cases of Jews rescued by the Roman Catholic clergy may never be known or fully known. In many cases, however, such stories were not told. Tyndorf tried to discover them and to reveal them to the public and by means of this unique work, he has contributed to a better understanding of the period, and revealed the courageous attitude of many Poles, especially that of the clergy.

The data provide an all too-rare example of how a historian can combine qualitative and quantitative sources to develop a fuller picture of a particular moment in time. The quantitative sources in question consist primarily of surviving lists of Jews in hiding who received assistance from aid organizations, while the qualitative sources are largely memoirs. Such an approach is not used enough and particularly in Holocaust studies there is too often an aversion to quantifying the past. Tyndorf is not trying to quantify, but presents many testimonies from which any historian or sociologist can propose new research of a more precise and detailed nature. Tyndorf demonstrates that if many nuns and priests helped Jews, it was possible because they organized networks, composed of several members or more. Socialist students, members of Żegota, (Council for Aid to Jews – a Polish underground organization that provided for the aid for Jews) as well as doctors, engineers and teachers all gave assistance to Jews. Assistance was also provided to Jews by the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, which ran or were on the staff – often as nurses – of hospitals throughout German-occupied Poland.

In fact, there were several ways to help Jews. The most important way was to convert Jews and to furnish them new falsified documents attesting to their Catholic origins. Secondly, to find a place to shelter them and hide – especially in convents, orphanages, and religious institutions. The Dominican monastery in Lwów manufactured documents for Jews on a large scale. The Sacré Coeur Sisters (Sisters of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus) sheltered a number of Jews at their convents in Lwów. Rev. Canon Adam Łańcucki, the pastor of Brzeżany, near Tarnopol, provided a number of false identity documents that helped Jews to survive the war. The book is rich in such examples.

In the second chapter Tyndorf gives a very detailed description of the situation of the clergy in Poland. The conditions suffered by the Catholic Church in occupied Poland were incomparably worse than those in other countries occupied by the Germans, especially in Western Europe and this situation did not facilitate any activities of rescue of Jews. Many priests were sent to concentration camps. The intensity of the persecution of the Catholic Church varied significantly throughout occupied Poland, where Polish Jews were the primary victims of the Nazi Germany-organized Holocaust in Poland. Throughout the German occupation of Poland, Jews were rescued from the Holocaust by Polish people, at a risk to their lives and the lives of their families. The Catholic clergy was equally repulsed by the violence directed at Jews, as were most Poles.

In the third chapter the author focuses on the response of the Polish Catholic clergy to the plight of the Jews during the German occupation from September 1939 to June 1941, before the Holocaust got underway. In the fifth chapter, Tyndorf describes how priests and nuns throughout Poland responded to the increasingly harsh conditions faced by Jews by giving various forms of assistance to those who fled from ghettos from 1942 to 1945. One of the survival strategies of Jews especially in cities was to be baptized and live as 'newly converted' Catholics. The most widespread way of extending help was the issuance by priests of birth and baptismal false certificates. Those identity documents were variously referred to in rescue accounts and literature simply as baptismal certificates. Conditions in Poland were not at all favorable for rescue. In villages, churches were usually small and without cellars; they were not suitable as refuges. Parish rectories were hectic places that were often visited by German authorities who viewed Polish priests as natural opponents of Nazi rule. Polish nuns lived in poverty and places in orphanages became more and more limited.

Considering the percentage of clergy in society during this period, the number of people helping in this environment is very significant. In comparison to other countries, in Poland every person that helped a Jew, could be punished with death. The number of Poles murdered by the Germans for helping Jews during the Holocaust has not yet been precisely determined. On 10 November 1941, Governor Ludwig Fischer expanded the activities for which Poles faced the death penalty (in the Warsaw District) to include providing even a night's lodging, food or transportation to any Jew. Even selling food to Jews was covered by this prohibition.

Yet many Poles continued to trade with and shelter Jews. While Polish Catholic bishops encouraged and approved of rescue activities by the clergy, they did not compel their clergy to perform such deeds of heroism. They understood perfectly well that they had no moral authority to issue such commands.

In fact, a good number of priests, monks and nuns were involved in saving Jews, especially children, putting themselves in a position of severe danger. Hiding Jews was threatened with sanctions, which increased in severity over time. Every Pole, who accepted to hide a Jew or to help him, could be shot. Any kind of help to Jews was punishable by death, for the rescuer and their family, and would-be rescuers acted in an environment hostile to Jews and their protection, exposed to the risk of blackmail and denunciation by neighbors. Yet, about two thirds of all nunneries in Poland took part in the rescue, in all likelihood with the support and encouragement of the church hierarchy. These efforts were supported by local Polish bishops and by the Vatican itself. For example, Archbishop Stanisław Gall, the Vicar Capitular and later Apostolic Administrator of the vacant Warsaw archdiocese, appealed in December 1940, after the creation of the ghetto, to help Jews. Cracow archbishop Adam Sapieha also endeavored to intervene on behalf of Jewish converts to Catholicism, and appealed to help everyone. Through the mediation of Rev. Ferdynand Machaj, the pastor of the Most Holy Redeemer Parish, Sapieha supplied false baptismal and birth certificates to Jews.⁴

No doubt, this book is an important contribution to the history of Jews in Poland during the Holocaust, making mention of the many ways help was brought to Jews by the local population in various towns and villages. Not all rescue efforts ended well. From now on, however, after the publication of this study we can no longer deny the importance of the help provided to Jews by the Polish clergy. This work will encourage other research in the field and the ensuing discussion in all its broadness. Above all, it will contribute to change our perception of the attitude of Poles towards their fellow citizens during the Holocaust in the period 1939–1944. Tyndorf's study no doubt in this regard will be a milestone in Polish historiography and Holocaust studies across the World in respect to the rescue of Jews and the related attitude of Poles.

⁴ *Wartime Rescue of Jews by the Polish Catholic Clergy: The Testimony of Survivors and Rescuers*, vol. 1, ed. R. Tyndorf with the assistance of Z. Zieliński (Lublin, 2023), pp. 112–116.