

Martyna Grądzka-Rejak
Institute of National Remembrance
ORCID 0000-0001-8805-0616

WORKING FOR GERMANS AS A SURVIVAL STRATEGY:
JEWISH WOMEN IN OCCUPIED CRACOW – EVIDENCE FROM
TESTIMONIES AND MEMOIRS

Summary

The article examines the little-researched fate of Jewish women in German-occupied Cracow, focusing on their survival strategies on the so-called Aryan side. It analyses selected cases of women who hid under false identities and found employment with German officials and Volksdeutsche in Cracow and its surroundings. Particular attention is given to those women who, on Aryan papers – most often as Poles – left to perform forced labour in the Third Reich. This article examines strategies of survival in a German environment and how Jewish women adapted to extremely dangerous conditions. It also considers cases in which women were assisted, consciously or not, by Germans. The text draws on memoirs and is intended as a contributory study, outlining directions for further research, including the need to compare Jewish survivors' testimonies with other accounts.

Keywords

Cracow • German occupation • Jewish woman • Aryan side • Germans • Volksdeutsche • forced labour • Third Reich

The history of Jewish women in occupied Cracow has been approached from various angles, yet numerous dimensions still require deeper investigation.¹ These include forced labour for German entrepreneurs as one of the ways of surviving during the existence of the Cracow ghetto. Women were employed, among others, in the factory of Austrian entrepreneur Oskar Schindler or in Juliusz Madritsch's clothing factory, and after the liquidation of the ghetto, also in the ZAL/KL Plaszow camp. Due to this, among other things, they survived the war.² Another theme concerns Jewish women who found themselves on the so-called Aryan side and the survival strategies they adopted. Each survivor's story reveals distinct events, circumstances, actions and strategies that must be considered in any comprehensive analysis of Jewish life on the Aryan side and of Polish-Jewish, German-Jewish, Polish-German, and Jewish-Jewish relations during the war.

One particularly noteworthy strategy was the use of false identities by Jewish women employed as domestic workers in the households of German officials or Volksdeutsche in Cracow and its surroundings. Another, still unexplored, area concerns Jewish girls and women living on the Aryan side under assumed names – most often as Poles – who left Cracow to work as forced labourers in the Third Reich. In archival collections, I found several examples of such women³ of various ages and family statuses (some with children, some without). Although further research will most likely reveal additional examples, at this stage it is impossible to define the scale of this phenomenon.

In this text, I recount twelve stories of women who either worked for Germans or Volksdeutsche on the Aryan side in Cracow or left to work as forced labourers in the Third Reich. Some of them were native Krakovians, others found themselves in the city and stayed there during the German occupation but came from Lwów or other places.

¹ Cf. M. Grądzka-Rejak, *Kobieta żydowska w okupowanym Krakowie 1939–1945*, Cracow, 2016; L.J. Weitzman, "Living on the Aryan Side in Poland. Gender, Passing, and the Nature of Resistance," in *Women in the Holocaust*, eds. D. Ofer and L.J. Weitzman, New Haven, CT, 1998, pp. 187–222; M. Mariańska and M. Mariański, *Wśród przyjaciół i wrogów. Poza gettem w okupowanym Krakowie*, Cracow, 1988.

² See, among others, "Schindler Oskar & Emilie (Pelzl)," <https://collections.yadvashem.org/en/righteous/4017377> (accessed 16 April 2025); "Madritsch Julius," <https://collections.yadvashem.org/en/righteous/4016227> (accessed 16 April 2025); "Titsch Raimund," <https://collections.yadvashem.org/en/righteous/4017885> (accessed 16 April 2025).

³ These are primarily memoirs identified during research, mainly in the Archives of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, the Yad Vashem Archives, and in published memoir literature.

The article aims to examine the survival strategies of Jewish women in occupied Cracow, whether among Germans or as forced labourers in the Reich. The analysis focuses on their everyday choices, methods of adapting to extremely dangerous conditions, and – so far as the sources permit – the relationships they established with German employers, supervisors, and civilians in the hope of sustaining their false identities, preserving their lives, or improving their own and their families' situations. Particular attention is also given to cases in which Jewish women received help, consciously or unconsciously, from Germans living in Cracow. In this context, I give examples of Germans (or Austrians) who were awarded the title of Righteous Among the Nations after the war. I also draw attention to cases of women who chose the homes of, for example, German officials as their place of work and existence on the Aryan side. I examine these cases based on the women's memoirs. In the text, I discuss selected cases, draw attention to various issues related to them, and pose research questions – including those for which there are no clear answers yet, which is why the article serves as an introduction to the topic. The text is a contribution outlining the issue in question. There is no doubt that this issue is so complex that it requires further, in-depth research, including statistical research. It is also worth attempting to compare the descriptions left by Jewish women with what their German employers had to say about forced labourers, if this can be gleaned from the sources. I leave this issue as a research problem for further investigation.

In the context of Jewish women who attempted to hide among Germans and Volksdeutsche as a survival strategy in occupied Cracow, many important research questions arise that require further in-depth analysis. First and foremost, it is worth examining the most common forms of employment for Jewish women on the Aryan side and how their situation differed depending on social, geographical and class factors. It is also crucial to understand what adaptation strategies – including both identity camouflage and the social skills necessary to survive in a foreign environment and a state of constant threat – these women used to obtain and keep their jobs. Also noteworthy are the roles of appearance, accent, place of origin and other behavioural factors, which were so important in the process of blending into society and avoiding exposure. It should be noted that, largely because of the specific conditions that made survival possible and shaped the choice of strategies,

these testimonies contain virtually no information about the Orthodox Jewish community and therefore provide no insight into the experiences of religious women. Instead, they are dominated by the memories of assimilated individuals who spoke Polish rather than Yiddish and who had abandoned Jewish tradition and religious practice. Descriptions of ritual, symbolic, or metaphysical aspects are also absent. Nevertheless, survival on the so-called Aryan side depended above all on securing a place to live and a source of income. It also seems important to ask questions about the nature of the relationship between the women in hiding and their employers – the Germans and Volksdeutsche. As a rule, the details of these relationships are unknown, so it is necessary to reconstruct them based on scattered memories, archival sources and trial documents.

This raises the question of the moral tensions that may have accompanied these women – whether and how they coped with the feeling of losing their identity or benefiting from the support of the occupier, even if their motivation was solely the will to survive (their own and/or that of their immediate family). Another important aspect is the role of informal support networks – contacts among Poles, acquaintances in the administration, circles of the intelligentsia, or neighbours – which were often crucial for finding work or for finding shelter in critical situations. Following this line of thought, asking about this phenomenon allows us to consider the extent to which working for the occupier was something exceptional and dependent on individual circumstances. Equally important is the need to analyse why this topic appears so rarely in post-war testimonies and historiography. It may have been treated as a taboo, suppressed by shame, moral ambiguity, or the difficulty of clear evaluation. At the same time, it cannot be ruled out that the phenomenon was marginal and therefore not widely discussed. Further research is required on how this form of survival is represented in autobiographical narratives and related literature, to understand how the memory of these experiences has been reshaped in culture and how it influences collective perceptions of the Holocaust as an extreme experience in which every act of rescue involved complex and often dramatic existential choices. This article seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate by outlining current research on the survival strategies of Jewish women in occupied Cracow. It highlights statistical data and examines the situation of Jewish women in the city after the outbreak of the war, which shaped their

subsequent fate. The discussion then turns to examples of women whose survival strategies involved working for Germans in Cracow or leaving to perform forced labour in the Reich.

Current Research on the Survival Strategies of Jewish Women on the Aryan Side

When analysing the extensive historiography of the German occupation in Cracow, it is noticeable that there is still a lack of broader discussion of the survival strategies adopted by Jews, or more specifically Jewish women, in this city. No full-length study has yet been devoted to the Jews who hid on the Aryan side in the capital of the General Government.⁴ The topic reappears in academic and popular science works, but rather in the form of case studies than comprehensive analyses. An example is Monika Stępień's article about the fate of Hela Fisher (Wanda Raczyńska), Miriam Hochberg (alias Mariańska; Maria Górka being her name on the Aryan side), and Mordechaj Peleg (Józef Mieczysław Piotrowski, later Mariański), all living in Cracow under false identities.⁵ In it, the author shows how different the fates of those in hiding could be. Although Miriam Hochberg, under the pseudonym Mariańska, was seeking shelter for herself and her husband, she was also an activist in the Cracow underground and the Żegota organisation,⁶ helping other persons in hiding. Hela Fisher, by contrast, lived under so-called Aryan papers, passing as Polish. The article demonstrates

⁴ Emanuel Ringelblum described a division of Jews into two categories during the war: those living "above the surface," that is, among Poles, and those living "below the surface," in constant hiding. See, E. Ringelblum, *Stosunki polsko-żydowskie w czasie drugiej wojny światowej*, Warsaw, 2020. Joanna Nalewajko-Kulikow also uses the term "at the surface." M. Melchior, *Zagłada a tożsamość. Polscy Żydzi ocaleni „na aryjskich papierach”. Analiza doświadczenia biograficznego*, Warsaw, 2004, pp. 13–15; J. Nalewajko-Kulikow, *Strategie przetrwania. Żydzi po aryjskiej stronie Warszawy*, Warsaw, 2004, p. 8; G.S. Paulsson, *Utajone miasto. Żydzi po aryjskiej stronie Warszawy (1940–1945)*, Cracow, 2007, pp. 18–46; L.J. Weitzman, "Living on the Aryan Side," pp. 187–222. Cf. R. Gieroń, "Pomoc Polaków dla ludności żydowskiej na obszarze województwa krakowskiego w okresie II wojny światowej. Stan badań," in *Stan badań nad pomocą Żydom na ziemiach polskich pod okupacją niemiecką. Przegląd piśmiennictwa*, eds. T. Domański and A. Gontarek, Warsaw–Kielce, 2022, pp. 269–318.

⁵ Cf. M. Stępień, "Dzień powszedni „papierowych Żydów” na przykładzie losów H. Fisher i M.M. Mariańskich," <http://www.wkj.ihuw.pl/wkj/index.php?page=sekcja-dzien-powszedni-zagłady> (accessed 20 August 2018).

⁶ See also B. Heksel and K. Kocik, *Żegota. Ukryta pomoc*, Cracow, 2017; T. Prekerowa, *Konspiracyjna Rada Pomocy Żydom w Warszawie 1942–1945*, ed. A. Namysło, 2nd ed., Warsaw, 2020.

how complex and demanding this subject is, and how each case represents an individual struggle for survival.

I have previously analysed the coping strategies adopted by Jewish women on the Aryan side of the city and its surroundings in several publications.⁷ I also described one of these strategies, undertaken by both women and men: conversion and baptism in the Catholic rite.⁸ One research area that has not yet received broader and comprehensive treatment is the issue of Poles and representatives of other nationalities who offered assistance to Jews in Cracow and its surroundings, as well as those who received such help. This topic has been partially addressed in Krystyna Samsonowska's analyses.⁹ The question of survival strategies on the Aryan side, from the perspective of personal experience, is discussed in published memoirs, including those of Bronisław Szatyn, Julian Aleksandrowicz, Natan Gross, the Mariański couple, Roma Ligocka and Roman Polański.¹⁰ A great deal of

⁷ M. Grądzka-Rejak, *Kobieta żydowska*; M. Grądzka-Rejak, „Myśmy się nawzajem poznawały po oczach”... Z badań nad strategiami przetrwania kobiet żydowskich funkcjonujących „na powierzchni” po tzw. aryjskiej stronie w okupowanym Krakowie i okolicach,” *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość* 26 (2015), pp. 51–74; M. Grądzka-Rejak, „Usiłujemy żyć, jak gdyby nigdy nic. „Aryjskie” losy dwóch Żydówek krakowskich: Ireny Markiewicz i Marii Steczko, zapisane w pamiętnikach,” in *Kobieta i mężczyzna. Jedna przestrzeń – dwa światy*, eds. B. Popiołek, A. Chłosta-Sikorska, and M. Gadocha, Cracow–Warsaw, 2015, pp. 171–184.

⁸ M. Grądzka-Rejak, „Zapewniają, że szukają tylko Boga i swego zbawienia”. Konwersje wśród Żydów w okupowanym Krakowie w latach 1939–1942,” in *Kościół, Żydzi, jezuici. Wokół pomocy Żydom w czasie II wojny światowej*, ed. M. Wenklar, Cracow, 2021, pp. 103–124; M. Grądzka-Rejak, „Od dłuższego czasu straciłem wszelki kontakt z żydami i żydostwem”. Neofici w okupowanym Krakowie w świetle materiałów Archiwum Kurii Metropolitalnej w Krakowie,” *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 13 (2017), pp. 342–371. Cf. also A. Baciński, „Akcje organizacyjne arcybiskupa Adama Stefana Sapiehy na polu charytatywnym podczas okupacji niemieckiej (1939–1945),” in *Księga Sapieżyńska*, vol. 1: *Archidiecezja krakowska za pasterzowania Adama Stefana Sapiehy*, eds. J. Wolny and R. Zawadzki, Cracow, 1982, pp. 293–307; J. Czajowski, *Kardynał Adam Stefan Sapieha*, Wrocław, 1997; S. Dobrzański, „Archidiecezja krakowska podczas okupacji niemieckiej 1939–1945,” in *Księga Sapieżyńska*, vol. 1, pp. 437–460.

⁹ K. Samsonowska, „Pomoc dla Żydów krakowskich w okresie okupacji hitlerowskiej,” in *Polacy i Żydzi pod okupacją niemiecką 1939–1945. Studia i materiały*, ed. A. Żbikowski, Warsaw, 2006, pp. 827–856; K. Samsonowska, „Pomoc Żydom i ratowanie ich w Krakowie w okresie okupacji niemieckiej 1939–1945,” in *Krakowscy sprawiedliwi. Motywy, postawy, przestanie*, Cracow, 2013, pp. 21–33; Cf. also M. Grądzka-Rejak, „Krakowscy Sprawiedliwi. Stan badań i portret zbiorowy,” in *Co warto, co się oplaca. Sprawiedliwi a kolaboranci*, ed. A. Bartus, Oświęcim, 2022, pp. 143–166; *Księga Sprawiedliwych wśród Narodów Świata. Ratujący Żydów podczas Holokaustu (Polska)*, ed. I. Gutman, Cracow, 2009; T. Seweryn, „Wielostronna pomoc Żydom w czasie okupacji hitlerowskiej,” *Przegląd Lekarski – Oświęcim* 1 (1967), pp. 162–183.

¹⁰ A. Peleg and B. Łabno, „Maria Hochberg-Mariańska,” in *Wojna to męska rzecz? Losy kobiet w okupowanym Krakowie w dwunastu odślonach*, Cracow, 2011; B. Szatyn, *Na aryjskich papierach*, Cracow,

information on this subject can also be found in unpublished personal documents from the archives of the Jewish Historical Institute, the Yad Vashem Institute and the Shoah Foundation.¹¹ The role of work as a crucial element of survival strategies has not yet received a thorough analysis. Employment served as camouflage, providing apparent legitimacy for residence and existence on the Aryan side. It also mattered for economic, psychological and social reasons.

The material aspects of the adopted survival strategies – closely connected with work as a source of livelihood – undoubtedly require further analysis. Attention should be given to cases in which Jews hiding on the Aryan side relied on paid assistance, handing over part of their possessions, most often pre-war property, in return. It is also important to examine how such survival strategies were financed such as through money, valuables, or promises such as the transfer of a flat. Jews hiding on the Aryan side were often compelled to pay ransoms to informers, blackmailers and extortioners in exchange for silence. According to available accounts, these payments sometimes equalled several months' wages at that time.¹² It should be emphasised that the money earned during the war was neither sufficient nor proportionate to the sums demanded. Relations among Jews are also relevant here, especially instances of blackmail by collaborators and efforts to exploit those in hiding financially. The issue of Jewish collaboration with the Germans has been examined by Alicja Jarkowska, though she did not explore the financial dimension of informers' activities in detail.¹³

1983; M. Mariańska and M. Mariański, *Wśród przyjaciół i wrogów*; J. Aleksandrowicz, *Kartki z dziennika doktora Twardego*, Cracow–Wrocław, 1983; N. Gross, *Kim pan jest, panie Grymek?*, Cracow, 2005; “Hannah Bannett,” in *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters. Oral Histories of Women Who Survived the Holocaust*, ed. B. Gurewitsch, London–Tuscaloosa, 1998; R. Ligocka, *Dziewczynka w czerwonym płaszczku*, Cracow, 2002; “Miriam Rosenthal,” in *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters*; R. Polański, *Roman*, trans. K. Szymanowska and P. Szymanowski, Warsaw, 1989.

¹¹ For more, see *Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego* (Archives of the Jewish Historical Institute, hereinafter AŻIH), 301, Collection of testimonies of Jewish Holocaust Survivors; AŻIH, 302, Collection of diaries of Jewish Holocaust Survivors; Yad Vashem Archives (hereinafter AYV), O.3, Testimonies of Holocaust Survivors; USC Shoah Foundation, Visual History Archive, <https://vha.usc.edu/home>.

¹² Cf. e.g. AŻIH, 301/1218, Testimony of Barbara Pawlik; AYV, O.4/462, Testimony concerning Stefania Brandstätter.

¹³ A. Jarkowska-Natkaniec, *Wymuszona współpraca czy zdrada? Wokół przypadków kolaboracji Żydów w okupowanym Krakowie*, Cracow, 2018; A. Jarkowska-Natkaniec, *Brunatna pajęczyna. Agenci Gestapo w okupowanym Krakowie i ich powojenne losy*, Cracow, 2024. Cf. also D. Swałtek-Niewińska, “Gospodarowanie żydowskimi meblami w Krakowie w latach 1939–1945. Działalność Möbelbeschaf-

Jewish Woman and the War

The roles assumed by women during the early stages of the German occupation were crucial in shaping the actions and strategies connected to later deportations and the liquidation of the Cracow ghetto. World War II profoundly affected Jewish women's lives, accelerating their entry into the broader public sphere, which was largely driven by the need to work and support their families. In Cracow, many men left in the autumn of 1939 to avoid repression or conscription into the army, leaving women to assume the role of primary breadwinners. This situation also affected Christian women whose husbands, fathers, or brothers were imprisoned in prisoner-of-war camps or remained outside the borders of the General Government. Some women had to endure the consequences of their husbands' involvement in underground activities, which often resulted in their deaths during pacification campaigns. The ability to work, and the opportunity to do so, proved invaluable after the outbreak of the war, during the move to the ghetto, and then throughout its existence until its liquidation. Employment was frequently the only chance for biological survival. Work also offered opportunities to meet others, establish contacts, and maintain mental health. During the liquidation of the ghettos, the ability to work could determine survival in the selection process, even if the outcome was deportation to a labour camp. Considering that many jobs in the Cracow ghetto were controlled by Germans – owners of workshops and factories producing for the Third Reich economy – employment also meant becoming accustomed to working for the occupier as a survival strategy.

The war and occupation became, to some extent, a catalyst for social processes. From the very first weeks, Jewish women, who were often deprived of support from their husbands, fathers, and brothers, had to manage the challenges of daily life and meet the needs of their loved ones alone. During the occupation, the Jewish population was systematically marginalised and impoverished, and women endured further blows: the loss of their homes, the collapse of social circles and families, and, ultimately, the physical loss of parents, husbands, partners, or children. Despite these traumatic experiences, guided by the memory of the dead and

ftungsamt,” in *Klucze i kasa. O mieniu żydowskim w Polsce pod okupacją niemiecką i we wczesnych latach powojennych 1939–1950*, eds. J. Grabowski and D. Libionka, Warsaw, 2014, pp. 255–298.

a sense of responsibility for the survivors, many women took action to support their families, trying to resist apathy and despair. In the face of the repression and restrictions imposed by the German occupiers, they took on more and more responsibilities. As a result, as shown by studies on the situation of women in occupied Cracow, they increasingly took centre stage in the family structure.¹⁴ In addition to traditional household tasks, many of them took up paid work, often becoming the main breadwinners for their families.¹⁵ These strategies were particularly important before Operation “Reinhardt.”

Beyond factors such as education, financial status, or physical characteristics, qualities like flexibility, openness, and adaptability to rapidly changing realities played a crucial role in increasing women’s chances of surviving until the end of the occupation. The living conditions imposed by the German authorities rendered existing norms and value systems obsolete, replacing them with new, often arbitrary “rules” that forced Jewish women to adjust and redefine their social roles continually. Despite harsh realities and daily challenges, Jewish women sought to use their limited free time for rest. Such practices remained possible until the German authorities began implementing Operation “Reinhardt.” From that moment, daily priorities shifted entirely – the struggle for biological survival became the overriding goal.¹⁶

From the perspective of this article, two elements are of particular importance: the persistent drive to survive – the will to resist and act even under severe trauma – and the point at which Jewish women began to develop strategies for existence on the Aryan side. The liquidation of the Cracow ghetto, much more so than its creation, was a turning point that prompted the decision to escape and seek refuge outside its walls. This process intensified particularly after December 1942, when, after two mass deportations to the death camp in Bełżec, the ghetto was divided

¹⁴ For more, see M. Grądzka-Rejak, *Kobieta żydowska*.

¹⁵ For comparison, see A. Czocher, *W okupowanym Krakowie. Codziennosc polskich mieszkańców miasta 1939–1945*, Gdańsk, 2011.

¹⁶ For more on this topic, see *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy*, vol. 5: *Getto warszawskie. Życie codzienne*, ed. K. Person, Warsaw, 2011; M. Grądzka-Rejak, “„Zdobyczynie życia”. Wybrane aspekty codzienności dziewcząt i kobiet żydowskich podczas okupacji niemieckiej (1939–1942),” in *Rodzina żydowska 1939–1945. Wybrane zagadnienia*, eds. M. Grądzka-Rejak and K. Zieliński, Warsaw, 2024, pp. 73–118. Cf. also M. Ferenc, “„Zaiste, nie mogło być gorszej rzeczy, niż być matką w getcie”. Trzy sceny z getta warszawskiego,” in *Rodzina żydowska 1939–1945*, pp. 47–72.

into two parts, and the Germans were already building the ZAL Plaszw forced labour camp. According to the existing memoirs, there was a growing conviction at the time that the ghetto would soon cease to exist. Attempts to escape and leave the ghetto were therefore not only made on the days of its final liquidation (13 and 14 March 1943) but also earlier.¹⁷ With the growing awareness of the impending threat, efforts to obtain false identity documents – the so-called Aryan papers – intensified. These documents enabled people to begin a new life on the other side of the wall, often without the need to remain in hiding.

Female Prisoners Working in Juliusz Madritsch's Clothing Factory and Oskar Schindler's Factory

In the Cracow ghetto, as in other ghettos in the General Government, many people, including women, were employed in factories and workshops. Part of the ghetto functioned as a labour camp that was integrated into the Third Reich economy, which explains the presence of numerous factories both within and near the ghetto, including Juliusz Madritsch's Clothing Factory (*Fabryka Wyrobów Konfekcyjnych Juliusza Madritscha*) at 2 and 3 Podgórski Market Square,¹⁸ the Bonarka brickyard, the Municipal Cleaning Works (*Zakłady Czyszczenia Miasta*) (no women worked there at first, but in January 1942 four were employed, rising to about thirty by April), and Oskar Schindler's Deutsche Emailwarenfabrik in Zabłocie.¹⁹ The Craft Workshops (*Gemeinschaften*) on Krakusa Street, commonly

¹⁷ Cf. AŻIH, 301, Testimonies of the Holocaust Survivors.

¹⁸ Previously, they were located on Węgierska Street. Cf. AŻIH, 302/25, Diary of Michał Weichert, pp. 286–287.

¹⁹ Before the outbreak of World War II, the First Małopolska Factory of Enamelled Tableware and Tin Products "Rekord" (*Pierwsza Małopolska Fabryka Naczyni Emaliowanych i Wyrobów Blaszanych „Rekord”*) operated here. It was established in March 1937 by three Jewish entrepreneurs: Michał Gutman from Będzin, Izrael Kohn from Kazimierz in Cracow, and Wolf Luzer Glajtman from Olkusz. On 15 January 1940, Oskar Schindler leased the factory buildings at 4 Lipowa Street and 9 Romanowicza Street. He also purchased finished and semi-finished products, later acquiring a plot of land on Lipowa Street. Schindler then renamed the factory Deutsche Emailwarenfabrik (DEF) and was listed as its legal owner from 1942 (Cf. A.B. Skotnicki, *Oskar Schindler w oczach uratowanych przez siebie Żydów krakowskich*, Cracow, 2007; M. Pemper, *Prawdziwa historia listy Schindlera*, Warsaw, 2006; S. Müller-Madej, *Dziewczynka z listy Schindlera. Oczami dziecka*, Cracow, 2001). The *Archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej* (Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance in Warsaw, hereinafter AIPN) hold testimonies and minutes from inspections of sites connected to these subcamps, *Główna Komisja* (Main Commission, hereinafter GK), 174/344, Materials concerning the subcamps of KL Plaszw; AIPN, GK, 174/345, Materials concerning the subcamps of KL Plaszw.

known as “Optima,” with facilities on Węgierska and Targowa Streets, also played an important role. Orders were also received from the Central Office for Craft Supplies (*Zentrale für Handwerkslieferungen*) at 26 Słowackiego Avenue. Renata Grünbaum,²⁰ who was employed there, mentioned the latter workplace in her testimony. The premises at 2 Lwowska Street housed Emmanuel Wachs’s factory, which produced lamps, bunker fans, and stoves.²¹ In addition, branches of various companies operated in the ghetto. Jewish women were mainly employed in tailoring and shoemaking workshops located, among others, on Węgierska Street (formerly the site of the Optima chocolate factory), as well as in places requiring precise manual work. Almost every one of these establishments employed at least a few women. Sometimes they were employed in administration, but mostly as manual workers in production halls.

Julius Madritsch, a textile expert born in Vienna, became a *treuhänder* (a trustee) during the German occupation of Poland and managed companies designated by the German authorities. These were two textile factories located near the Cracow ghetto. In 1941, Madritsch opened a private factory in the ghetto. Together with the plant manager, Raimund Titsch, he employed Jewish women and men, including those without qualifications. Madritsch and Titsch ensured decent working conditions, larger food rations and the opportunity to interact with Poles. A kosher kitchen was even set up at the workshops.

The Madritsch Clothing Factory specialised in sewing military garments, such as uniforms and overalls, and also produced men’s underwear. The factory in the Cracow ghetto was managed by Karl Heinz Bigell. As one employee, Anna Först, recalled, silk coats for German women were initially sewn there as well. Schorowa (her full personal details are unknown, and several variants of her surname exist), the workshop manager, was responsible for their production.²²

At first, the workshops operated on Węgierska Street, in a privately-owned house with several rooms adapted for use. Initially, only those who owned sewing machines were employed. Work in the factory was regarded as a way to avoid resettlement from Cracow, and Jewish women received food rations for their

²⁰ AŻIH, 301/4215, Testimony of Renata Grünbaum, pp. 9 ff.

²¹ R. Kotarba, *Niemiecki obóz w Płaszowie 1942–1945*, Cracow, 2009, p. 17.

²² AŻIH, 301/1706, Testimony of Anna Först, pp. 5–7.

labour. A few months later, the company moved to Rynek Podgórski, occupying a two-storey building and expanding its production. As a result, more people found employment, including both Jewish and Polish women. The latter worked in separate rooms and, unlike Jewish women, received monetary remuneration, though the specific rates remain unknown. Many Polish women volunteered for work to avoid being sent to forced labour in Germany. Although they worked separately, they were not completely isolated, and there were still spaces where both groups could meet. Anna Först was assigned work even though she did not own a sewing machine; one was lent to her in the workshop. This decision was made under the patronage of the manager, Mrs Schorowa. The women were instructed to work efficiently so that it would remain profitable for the Germans to keep the facility open as long as possible.

The quota was a minimum of four fatigue shirts or five pairs of trousers per person per day, which were given out cut to size. Everyone tried to work above the quota, just to keep their jobs and avoid displacement, so sometimes twice as much was produced. After a few weeks, the quota was increased to seven pairs of trousers or six fatigue shirts. I was not a seamstress, but a bank clerk, yet I learned to sew on a machine and became so skilled that I sewed 6 or 7 pairs of trousers a day.²³

In post-war testimonies, former Jewish workers recalled that some Polish women who came to the factory brought small amounts of food with them. When they returned home, they took away valuable items at almost no cost – items that Jews had exchanged for food.²⁴ However, the scale of this phenomenon is unknown, as is the scale of selfless aid. It should be borne in mind that attempts by Polish women employed in the factory to contact Jewish women may have been hampered by fear of possible consequences, especially after 15 October 1941, when the Germans issued a regulation imposing penalties – including the death penalty – for assisting

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Cf. A. Czocher, *W okupowanym Krakowie*; G. Berendt, “Cena życia – ekonomiczne uwarunkowania egzystencji Żydów po „aryjskiej stronie”” *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 4 (2008), pp. 110–143.

Jews.²⁵ The exchange of goods for food was one aspect of Polish-Jewish relations during the German occupation. It was often regarded as a form of assistance and rarely viewed negatively, though at times it could involve coercion or violence. Polish workers exploited this advantage, although their motivations varied. According to Anna Först, work at Madritsch's workshops began at 7 a.m. and lasted until 6 p.m., with a half-hour break for a meal. However, the women employed at the factory did not receive any remuneration, which meant that only better-off Jewish women could do this job. To survive the nearly eleven-hour workday, they had to bring food from home. In the Cracow ghetto, there was a widespread belief that employment "at Madritsch's" provided protection – initially from resettlement from the city, and later also from deportation to the death camp in Belżec. Indeed, thanks to the efforts of the factory owner, the female employees and staff of Madritsch's workshops were not harmed during the deportation in June 1942. This reinforced the belief that work at the factory was stable and protected against deportation. Unfortunately, according to witness testimonies, in October 1942, almost the entire staff, including the manager, was transported to the death camp in Belżec. Only a few people survived – those who did not show up for work on the day of deportation or who realised what was happening en route and managed to hide. After this deportation, additional individuals from those remaining in the Cracow ghetto were sent to Madritsch's workshops.

Madritsch and Titsch supplied textiles to other workshops employing Jews. Another factory was also opened in Tarnów, in the local ghetto. A delivery van was used to smuggle food from the Aryan side to the ghetto, which the factory managers turned a blind eye to. Madritsch also helped female employees hide on the Aryan side, with the support of Oswald Bousko,²⁶ an Austrian officer of the German police operating inside the ghetto, and other Viennese police officers.

After the liquidation of the Cracow ghetto (13–14 March 1943), Madritsch sought to enable the female workers from his factory – who had been transferred to the Plaszow camp – to continue working. Initially, he obtained permission for them to go to the factory, which continued to operate on the site of the former

²⁵ The Third GG Residence Restriction Regulation of 15 October 1941, *Verordnungsblatt für das Generalgouvernement* 99 (1941), p. 595.

²⁶ "Bosko Oswald," <https://collections.yadvashem.org/en/righteous/4014067> (accessed 16 April 2025).

quarter. Many people were hidden in the factory. Some of them managed to escape to Tarnów and, from there, even to Slovakia and Hungary. No specific data on this issue is known. At the end of March 1943, Madritsch transferred 232 Jewish workers from Cracow to Tarnów without an SS escort. Many of them managed to escape and survive. Some Jews left the Tarnów ghetto by joining workers heading to work. Over time, Madritsch established a factory on the grounds of the ZAL Plaszow camp, where he provided his workers with slightly better conditions and additional food.

In September 1944, after the liquidation of the Plaszow camp, Madritsch and Titsch tried to transfer the workers to other factories, but without success. However, they managed to send about 100 people to Oskar Schindler's ammunition factory, thus saving them from certain deportation to camps in the Third Reich. After the war, Julius Madritsch published a brochure titled *Menschen in Not!* (People in Need!), in which he described his aid activities. In recognition of his and Raimund Titsch's efforts, the Yad Vashem Institute awarded them the title of Righteous Among the Nations relatively early, on 18 February 1964.²⁷

Another site of forced labour for Jewish female prisoners was a subcamp at Oskar Schindler's factory, located at 4 Lipowa Street. Established in the spring of 1943, the factory itself had already been in operation earlier. At first, Polish workers were employed there, but over time, Jewish prisoners were also sent in. Around 100 people worked there under compulsion and without pay, drawn initially from the Cracow ghetto at the end of 1942 and later from the Plaszow labour camp.²⁸ The prisoners were provided with food. From 8 May 1943, the subcamp formally came under the authority of the main Plaszow camp and was subject to its commandant. Since it was also a site of forced labour for women, I have chosen to include it in this article, while fully aware that it represents a very different survival strategy from taking up work with the Germans on the Aryan side.

The subcamp at Oskar Schindler's factory housed approximately 700 Jewish men and 300 Jewish women. The camp at Deutsche Emailwarenfabrik consisted

²⁷ "Madritsch Julius." Of the more than 360 people honoured with the title of Righteous Among the Nations for helping Jews in Cracow and the surrounding areas, at least nine were of German or Austrian origin.

²⁸ AIPN, GK, 174/344, Testimonies of Abraham Bankier, p. 60.

of four barracks for men, three for women, a kitchen, a barrack for Order Service (*Ordnungsdienst*, OD) functionaries, a small barrack for the so-called *Vorarbeiter* (foremen), a warehouse and an infirmary. After work, men and women were not separated and could spend time together.²⁹ There was also a dental room, a hairdresser's and a laundry. The camp was surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by armed sentries. The work of firing pots in huge kilns and in the section where sulphuric acid was used proved to be particularly exhausting.³⁰ The prisoners were supervised by factory foremen and the *Werkschutz* (German industrial guard), and from 1944 onwards also by SS officers.³¹

The liquidation of the subcamp at Oskar Schindler's factory began in August 1944. First, approximately 700 men and 160 women were transported to KL Plaszow, and then to camps located in the Third Reich. As a result of Oskar Schindler's long-term efforts, a camp for a selected group of prisoners was established in Brännlitz (in the Sudetes). It functioned as a branch of the Gross-Rosen concentration camp.³² In the following months, that is in October and November, a group of about 1,100 prisoners, both men and women, were brought there, some of whom worked in the aforementioned subcamp. Most of the workers at the subcamp at Oskar Schindler's factory survived until the end of the war.

Survival strategies

The approximate number of Jews who attempted to hide in occupied Cracow at various stages of the war is unknown. Estimates indicate that, when including converts, pre-war Cracow Jews, and those who sought refuge in the city for varying lengths of time, the population numbered several thousand. By way of comparison, at the beginning of the German occupation, the Jewish population of Cracow numbered roughly 70,000. Following forced resettlements in the second half of 1940 and early 1941, this number decreased by roughly 50,000. Initially, 11,000 Jews were sent to the Cracow ghetto, with slightly more women than men.

²⁹ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2007.474.1, Remembrances by Anna Grun, [no page numbers].

³⁰ AIPN, GK, 174/344, Testimonies of Edward Majcherkowicz, pp. 52 ff.; *ibid.*, Testimonies of Róża Nass, p. 58; AIPN, GK, 174/344, Testimonies of Abraham Bankier, p. 63.

³¹ AIPN, GK, 174/344, Testimonies of Róża Nass, p. 58.

³² AIPN, GK, 174/344, Testimonies of Abraham Bankier, p. 64.

It is estimated that by June 1942, the number of inhabitants of the ghetto had risen to approximately 20,000. Following two deportation operations to the death camp in Bełżec, and the transfer of Jews from nearby towns, about 11,000 remained in the Cracow ghetto by March 1943.³³ Some of them were looking for the last opportunities to leave the quarter and take refuge on the Aryan side. Emanuel Ringelblum wrote during the war:

There are many Jews hiding in Cracow, despite the significant number of informers and denouncers who mercilessly track them down. Polish-Jewish relations in the Małopolska (namely, Lesser Poland) region have been very good for a long time. Obviously, this has contributed to the rescue of Cracow's Jews. It is worth adding that many Jews from larger provincial cities (Lwów, Cracow, Grodno and others) have been hiding for a year, or perhaps longer, on the Aryan side of Warsaw.³⁴

Regardless of the author's views on the Austrian monarchy's policy towards minorities, this is an important voice concerning the scale of denunciations in the city. Researchers estimate that 1,000–1,500 Jews may have survived the war in Cracow.³⁵ Consequently, there is also no information on how many Jewish women and girls attempted to hide on the Aryan side in Cracow or the surrounding areas. An important factor is the dynamics and change of hiding places after the liquidation of the ghetto, as in some cases these were surrounding towns near Cracow (such as Wieliczka, Wawrzeńczyce, Skała), and even, as Ringelblum mentioned, cities in other districts (for example, Warsaw or Lwów). Considering these diverse factors, it is necessary to examine the subsequent fate of the individuals analysed in this study and to extend the scope beyond Cracow.

To function and survive outside the ghetto, Jews could stay there either quasi-legally or in hiding. The former option was available only to a few – those deemed

³³ Cf. M. Grądzka-Rejak, *Kobieta żydowska*, pp. 40–70; A. Chwalba, *Kraków w latach 1939–1945*, Cracow, 2002; A. Biberstein, *Zagłada Żydów w Krakowie*, Cracow, 2001; R. Kotarba, *Żydzi Krakowa w dobie zagłady (ZAL/KL Plasow)*, Cracow–Warsaw, 2022.

³⁴ E. Ringelblum, *Stosunki polsko-żydowskie w czasie drugiej wojny światowej*, p. 131.

³⁵ K. Samsonowska, "Pomoc Żydom i ratowanie," p. 22.

to have a “good appearance” who managed to obtain false documents. Properly forged papers created a new identity and offered potential protection in case of arrest. They also enabled access to documents such as a certificate of residence or a Kennkarte (identity card), which, subsequently, made it possible to find employment or housing. The production of the so-called Aryan documents engaged a wide spectrum of Poles, ranging from private individuals and members of various organisations to laypersons and clergy in parish offices.

Gender played a significant role in the survival strategy. Since circumcision did not apply to women, it was much easier for them to hide in non-Jewish surroundings. It was also important to be familiar with the environment in which they lived. In Cracow, both pre-war residents of the city and visitors from other towns stayed on the Aryan side. Natan Gross wrote about one such woman who tried to survive: “A small-town Jewish woman, even an intelligent one, does not know how to behave in such situations. She shows off too much and unnecessarily, which immediately draws attention.”³⁶ A Jew could be recognised for various reasons. It could be done by former colleagues, neighbours, or people whom she or he knew before the war. This made living in Cracow easier for Jewish women from outside the city. Teresa Prekerowa, who was involved in helping Jews during the war, drew attention to the dangers that awaited Jews on the Aryan side in her later scholarly work and monograph on the Council for Aid to Jews “Żegota”:

Much less noticeable to them [the Germans] was the uncertainty in behaviour on the street (Poles were also not at ease when dealing with the occupying authorities). There was no way that accents, specific linguistic expressions or certain cultural differences could give rise to any suspicions. Each of these traits immediately became sufficient clues for local informers and blackmailers – Volksdeutsche, Poles, Ukrainians, and Jewish informers – who could also take advantage of snippets of overheard conversations, information, and rumours. Jews felt besieged by them on all sides.³⁷

³⁶ AŻIH, 301/426, Testimony of Natan Gross.

³⁷ T. Prekerowa, *Konspiracyjna Rada Pomocy Żydom*, p. 265.

In the context of the occupier's difficulty in recognising the origin of women staying on the Aryan side, it is worth noting the words of Natan Gross. In his post-war testimony, he emphasised: "The Germans are worried. They ask Janka and others: 'Are you Jewish?' The Germans are sometimes disarming in their naivety."³⁸ When the Germans employed women as domestic helpers or office workers, and so on, they were usually unable to recognise their nationality. The greater a woman's confidence and her ability to adapt to the new situation and assume the role assigned to her, the lower the risk of her being recognised.

After the liquidation of the Cracow ghetto, other possibilities were sought. Some women tried to live in the city, while others organised places of refuge for themselves in nearby towns. Some chose the alternative of volunteering for forced labour and leaving for the Third Reich. The same was true of working for German officials' families. An analysis of personal documents and post-war accounts shows that this is a separate and important research topic. Almost every story told is an example of a different fate, which must be taken into account when presenting the full picture of the presence of Jewish women on the Aryan side. Some of these fates can be systematised and classified into subgroups, yet many elude the rigid categories imposed by the researcher. Addressing this issue also requires a careful examination of Jewish–German and Jewish–Polish relations.

Working for the Occupier

Once every other possibility was gone, Jewish women even dared to take extremely dangerous steps. One of them was working for the Germans or the *Volksdeutsche*. Of course, working for one or the other was not always a last resort; it could be the first or the second choice. In the case of the *Volksdeutsche*, it was particularly noteworthy that some of them had lived in Cracow before the war. There was therefore a risk of being recognised and having their true identity discovered, which is why it was easier to hide for women who came from outside the capital of the General Government.

One example is Anna Weissberg, a former resident of Lwów, who made her way to Cracow during the occupation: "After the August [1942] operation in Lwów,

³⁸ AŻIH, 301/426, Testimony of Natan Gross.

she left for Cracow only with her birth certificate. She found work in a nearby village as a cowgirl through a newspaper advertisement.”³⁹ The operation she wrote about in her testimony took place on 10 August 1942. At that time, the Germans deported about 50,000 Jews from Lwów to the death camp in Bełżec.⁴⁰ Anna did not mention whether her family members were deported at that time.

However, the job she took on after seeing an advertisement in the collaborationist (*gadzinowa*) press proved too physically demanding for her. Based on her testimony after the war, it is impossible to determine exactly what her duties were. Nevertheless, for someone who had previously lived in an urban environment, working in the countryside was so hard that she was unable to cope with it in the long term. Eventually, she returned to Cracow. The testimony is rather laconic, making it impossible to determine which version of her life story Anna Weissberg presented, or whether there was any suspicion that she was concealing something. Such uncertainty might have subsequently led to attempts to probe those suspicions, followed by confrontation, and ultimately denunciation. Nevertheless, in Cracow, the woman “worked as a maid for the Volksdeutsche, without a certificate of residence.” Since she came from Lwów, there was no risk of her true identity being recognised by old acquaintances. This risk could have arisen if she had met someone who also came from Lwów and knew her true origins. Since she decided to work for a family of Volksdeutsche, she must have been convinced that neither her accent nor her characteristic Yiddish expressions would betray her.

Her strategy was interrupted by an event in December 1942. While walking down the street, Weissberg encountered “Obersturmführer Derley, an Austrian who headed the Durchgangslager for Ukrainians at the Sobieski School in Lwów. He also worked there in March 1942, during the first deportation of Jews. At that time, he released many young women.”⁴¹ They knew each other because Anna Weissberg worked at the Sobieski School at the time and was involved in a campaign to feed displaced persons, organised by the Jewish community. According to a post-war testimony, the man approached her and said: “Kleine, du bist klug, ich wunsche

³⁹ J. Honigsman, *Zagłada Żydów lwowskich (1941–1944)*, Warsaw, 2007, pp. 62–63.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ AŻIH, 301/432, Anna Weissberg, p. 3.

dir viel Gluck.”⁴² Despite its rather positive outcome and tone, this event undermined her belief that she remained anonymous in the city. It made her fear that she might be reported to her employers. After several months of uncertainty, in April 1943, Anna Weisberg again encountered an acquaintance, this time a Polish friend from Lwów who came to Cracow. They eventually got married, which allowed her to change her surname, place of work and residence, and enabled her to obtain documents. As she recalled after the war: “Their wedding was officiated by this gentleman’s cousin, whereby he subsequently provided a backdated marriage certificate.”⁴³ Armed with solid “Aryan” papers and a Catholic husband, she was able to live more peacefully in the city. She no longer exercised the opportunity to work for the occupiers.

Another woman, Stefania Cang-Schutzman, who also came to Cracow from Lwów, left a very emotional testimony. Initially, she was there alone, but over time her child and her closest family – her mother, sisters and father-in-law – joined her in the city. The woman described in detail the process of finding a place for herself on the Aryan side:

[...] my hopes were dashed, no one wanted to take me or mine in, I was in an alien place without any friends, knowing that I must not reveal my origins in the slightest, because danger threatened me from all sides. I spent almost every night in a different flat. I made friends with the lowest of society, with prostitutes who, for a hefty fee, knowing who we were, agreed to put us up for one day.⁴⁴

The situation became even more complex when her mother arrived in the city with her child – a son who, to make matters worse, was circumcised. As she herself emphasised, from that moment onwards, it became even more difficult to find a place to hide. Perhaps Stefania and her child did not have what was considered a “good appearance,” which made it harder for them to find shelter and rendered

⁴² *Ibid.* Translation: “Little one, you are clever, I wish you lots of luck.”

⁴³ AŻIH, 301/432, Anna Weissberg, born 10 June 1919, Czortków, p. 3. [The witness’s language reflects archaic Polish usage, including a third-person construction and a form such as “przyczem” (whereby), which I have attempted to render in English – K.D.].

⁴⁴ AŻIH, 301/1794, Stefania Cang-Schutzman.

their identity easier to decipher. The woman recalled: “Out of pity, people let me into their flats for a few hours. Eventually, I made contact with an Aryan family who, for a large fee, took the child in for a while.”⁴⁵ A few days later, Stefania, along with a friend of non-Jewish origin who had come to Cracow from Lwów, and other people, was arrested by the Gestapo on charges of belonging to a secret organisation. “What I feared most happened: the Gestapo arrested me, and my baby was left with complete strangers. My despair was boundless, but I knew that I had to play my part to the end.”⁴⁶

She spent six weeks in prison. Upon her release, she was only able to see her child briefly: “I went to see my child immediately, but unfortunately, they did not allow me to enjoy my little one for long. The people who were looking after him gently held on to him and forced me out.”⁴⁷ Perhaps they feared that after leaving prison, she would be followed, which could bring misfortune to the family where her son was staying. After all these experiences, and because her child was still staying with a Polish family outside the city, she returned to Cracow. There she began working as a seamstress in the military barracks. Four months later, she started working in the home of one of the German military officers. As she herself emphasised in her testimony: “The poor general did not know who he had as a maid.”⁴⁸ The woman survived the war.

Other Jewish women living in Cracow on the Aryan side also took up work with German families in the city. We do not know, and will probably never know, the exact scale of this phenomenon, though it does not seem significant. There are isolated references in the existing testimonies that can be treated as research leads. Luba Schonbaum, who became Wanda Mączka after the war, recalled: “After moving to the Susmans, I stopped doing cottage industry work and worked in a German office as a clerk.”⁴⁹ To provide another example, in the transcript of Reni Warszawska’s testimony, who escaped from the ghetto to the so-called Aryan side in March 1943, it was highlighted that she found accommodation for a few days. The

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ AŻIH, 301/1953, Luba Schonbaum (Wanda Mączka).

woman was looking for work. When she managed to find a job – she took care of the house and the children – her “employers turned a blind eye, even though they suspected.”⁵⁰ To dispel suspicion, she obtained the necessary papers. Over time, she changed jobs and secured a position at the post office. Her situation grew more complicated in July 1943, when her brother was arrested and she and her daughter lost their home. Taking a risky step, she found accommodation with a German family, though she did not reveal her name. “A German housewife. She took her in. After three days, she returned to work. She stayed with the German woman for a week and ate there. They didn’t know what to do. She lost her job. She went to the countryside to Wesołowo near Tarnów.”⁵¹ This short excerpt suggests that she was treated rather well by her German hostess. The woman survived the war.

Anna Landesman’s testimony is emotional, though still largely laconic. She possessed Aryan papers, which gave her confidence in her actions. She bribed an official from the Wohnungsamt (German Housing Authority) to be granted her former flat again. At the same time, she obtained a work permit from the Arbeitsamt (German Employment Office) and secured a position there. Reality, however, proved markedly different from her expectations. As she recalled: “The conditions here are terrible for Poles, civil servants are not allowed to speak Polish. I worked for four months. I got on the wrong side of a German woman and was fired from my job. I thanked God, because I lived in constant fear that someone from the members of the public would recognise me.”⁵² Despite the secure position that her forged documents gave her, the woman still feared exposure. The conditions that prevailed among German officials were not favourable and caused excessive psychological stress. After some time, Anna Landesman resigned from the job there.

It is also worth mentioning P.P. Witkowski, who served as managing director of the Todt Organisation factory in Lwów during the German occupation of Poland. In 1941, Helena Hauser (née Koch) and her husband Wilhelm found employment at the plant, both using forged identity documents that confirmed their Aryan origin. Witkowski, aware of their Jewish origins, warned Wilhelm Hauser, who was not fluent in Polish, that his situation was particularly dangerous. He suggested moving

⁵⁰ AŻIH, 301/438, Renia Warszawska, born in 1920 in Łuck.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² AŻIH, 301/622, Anna Landesman on Zakrzówek.

to other, more provincial areas, where he would have a better chance of remaining anonymous. Shortly afterwards, Witkowski learned that Hauser and several other Jews had been arrested by the Gestapo and murdered. After this tragedy, Witkowski took care of the surviving members of the family – Wilhelm’s wife, their daughter, and mother-in-law – and sent all three to his sister Hedwig Kretchmar, who lived in Cracow. Kretchmar provided them with temporary shelter and enabled Helena to take up employment under a false Aryan identity. However, considering the risk of exposure by former acquaintances, after some time, she decided to send the Hauser family, posing as Polish labourers, to her sister-in-law and mother-in-law in Bautzen, Germany. They stayed and worked there until the end of the war, without revealing their identity. After the war, Helena Hauser remarried and settled in Great Britain. In recognition of their efforts to save lives, Hedwig Kretchmar and P.P. Witkowski were awarded, on 13 September 1979, by Yad Vashem in Jerusalem with the honorary title of Righteous Among the Nations.⁵³

It is worth mentioning here two Germans who stayed in Cracow during the occupation and helped Jewish women and their families. This assistance, in addition to helping them find accommodation or shelter for a certain period of time, included providing Aryan papers and helping them find employment. One of them was Max Nagler, an employee of the German postal service. Following the outbreak of World War II, he was assigned to the Postschutz, a unit tasked with securing postal infrastructure and services. He was sent to Cracow, where he took over a flat formerly belonging to the Jewish Arzewski family. Unlike many other representatives of the German administration, Nagler established contact with the former tenants and gradually became involved in supporting their entire family. His help extended to Stanisław and Bronisława Arzewski, their son Mieczysław (later Michael), Bronisława’s mother Stella Stabryła, and her sister and brother-in-law, Lola and Jakub Feuer. After the forced displacement of the Jewish population from Cracow began in May 1940 – as part of measures aimed at “cleansing” the capital of the General Government of Jews – Nagler continued to keep in touch with the family, who had settled outside the city. He visited them regularly, providing them with food and basic necessities.

⁵³ “Kretchmar Hedwig,” <https://collections.yadvashem.org/en/righteous/4015845> (accessed 16 April 2025).

In the summer of 1942, after the liquidation of the ghettos in the General Government had begun within Operation “Reinhardt,” the Arzewski family decided to return to Cracow. Nagler, who had since moved to a new place of residence, took in the six-member family. He sheltered them for more than two years, from September 1942 until January 1945, when Red Army troops entered the city.

Nagler remained in Cracow and did not withdraw with the German forces. Shortly after the Red Army entered, the surviving Jews reported to the Soviet military authorities together with Nagler, confirming that they owed their lives to him. This did little good, as Nagler was arrested and detained by the Soviet authorities. Despite numerous interventions, he was not released until 1949, when he returned to Germany. Many years later, on 29 June 2015, the Yad Vashem Institute awarded Max Nagler the title of Righteous Among the Nations.⁵⁴

Another person awarded the honorary title was Herbert Vogt, born in 1909 in Oppeln, Silesia (now Opole). During World War II, he worked in the Reich railway administration in Cracow. A deeply religious man who strongly opposed Nazi racial ideology, he aided persecuted Jews by supplying false identity documents that enabled them to live on the Aryan side and by helping them secure employment. In the second half of 1942, Vogt sheltered Stefania Kornfeld, a Jewish woman, and her six-year-old daughter in his flat – the mother for three days and the child for another six weeks. He also assisted Anna Shein, whom he regularly warned of impending roundups. He obtained two sets of documents for her: one under the identity of a Volksdeutsche and another under the identity of a Polish woman. These documents enabled her to survive on the Aryan side, secure employment – with Vogt’s help – and live under a false identity.

In 1943, when Anna Shein was in immediate danger, Vogt took her to the countryside, where she lived under a false identity as a German woman for three months. When she returned to Cracow, Vogt arranged papers for her to travel to Vienna. He also wrote letters of recommendation to trusted individuals who assisted her, enabling her to survive in the Austrian capital until nearly the end of

⁵⁴ “Nagler Max,” <https://collections.yadvashem.org/en/righteous/5419489> (accessed 16 April 2025).

the war. For his actions, Herbert Vogt was honoured by Yad Vashem on 25 March 1979 with the title of Righteous Among the Nations.⁵⁵

The Fate of Amalia Mames

Born in 1900 in Cracow, Amalia Mames remained in her hometown for some part of the German occupation. In December 1940, like many other Jews, she was forced to leave the city. During the resettlements in 1940 and 1941, approximately 50,000 Jews were transported to various locations in the Cracow District, as well as to other parts of the General Government. These events irrevocably interrupted the continuity of Jewish settlement, family histories and the long presence of Jews in this city. Amalia Mames, together with her husband and teenage children – a son and a daughter – settled in Niepołomice. It is unclear whether they had any relatives there. Nevertheless, the available testimonies indicate that the family lived in relative peace until 21 August 1942. The summer of that year marked the end of the Jewish community in Niepołomice, when, during Operation “Reinhardt,” the Germans deported Jews from many towns in the Cracow District to the death camp at Bełżec. One of the survivors, Julian Fleiszer, recalled:

The Judenrat in Niepołomice near Cracow received an order from Major Kundt in Cracow that all Jews, regardless of age and gender, were to report to Wieliczka by 22 August 1942 at the latest. For this purpose, several hundred carts were made available to the Judenrat in Niepołomice, financed from a fund known as the contribution [paid by Jews].⁵⁶

Attempts were made to calm the Jewish population and assure them that they faced no danger. Survivor Amalia Mames emphasised:

It was forbidden to leave individually, only as part of a transport after gathering in the market square. We had no illusions about our fate, even though many other wise and intelligent people succumbed to delusions, unable to imagine

⁵⁵ “Vogt Herbert,” <https://collections.yadvashem.org/en/righteous/4018099> (accessed 16 April 2025).

⁵⁶ AŻIH, 301/159, Julian Fleiszer.

that such a mass murder, a crime committed against thousands of people, was possible. However, many people sought to escape from Niepołomice.⁵⁷

Among those who managed to escape the city at that time was Amalia's family. The woman recalled that many people tried to flee, aware that staying put was extremely risky. She also recounted the emotions that she and her loved ones experienced at that time: "We did not have the strength to fight, we could not imagine living on false documents and the struggles that would entail, so – by force of inertia – we went to Wieliczka."⁵⁸ The situation in Wieliczka was similar. To avoid further problems with registration, Amalia's husband obtained the so-called Aryan papers for his family. Thanks to this, they were able to leave the town and move to Cracow. They managed to do so before the deportation to the death camp in Bełżec.

Living in her hometown was not the easiest of experiences. The family began a period of wandering between Cracow and the surrounding towns. Amalia Mames emphasised:

We were isolated, living like on an island, separated from the rest of the population in the ghetto. Danger lurked at every turn; every child could betray us. We moved from place to place for four months, through villages and towns, but everywhere we aroused suspicion that we were Jews.⁵⁹

Fears of denunciation, the instability, the absence of permanent housing, and the lack of a steady source of income prompted the family members to separate. The son managed to leave for Tarnobrzeg, while the daughter found shelter with a Polish woman, Bronisława Leśniakowa, in Jasło. The reasons for choosing these particular destinations and the circumstances under which the daughter was placed in contact with Leśniakowa remain unclear. Unfortunately, the girl was soon robbed of her belongings there. Fearing for her future, she fled Jasło and returned to her parents in Cracow. Another chapter of wandering and moving from place to place

⁵⁷ AŻIH, 301/1377, Amalia Mames. The original spelling has been retained.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

began for the family. Because of blackmail and suspicions surrounding them, they separated again. Amalia and her husband headed towards Częstochowa, while her daughter was detained at the Arbeitsamt and taken to the Reich for forced labour. She left as a Polish woman. Amalia recalled:

At my husband's persistent urging, I left for Germany on 18 May 1943. I travelled to Berchtesgaden, where there was a demand for maids at the beginning of the season. My daughter was living in Kassel at the time, and I maintained correspondence with her.⁶⁰

It remains unclear whether her husband sought to protect her from further blackmail and the constant need to change lodgings, or whether he wished her to be closer to their daughter. Both women left the General Government using false (Aryan) papers. It should also be noted that Jewish women from other districts likewise managed to save themselves by leaving to work in the Reich or by taking positions in German offices. This subject requires further investigation in relation to other regions within the General Government.

In the remainder of her testimony, Amalia made no mention of any contact with her son. Regarding her husband, she added that she received letters from him for almost two consecutive months, after which she had no further news from him. As I mentioned, the woman ended up in Berchtesgaden, which was not without significance. Near Obersalzberg was the Berghof – Adolf Hitler's home and official residence from 1936 to 1945. This residence was the centre of Hitler's private and political life, and its location in the mountains provided both impressive views and relative isolation from the outside world. Amalia recalled:

At that time, traffic in Berchtesgaden was still normal, excursions were taking place, and only Germans were allowed to visit. Hitler's residence, the Berghof Obersalzberg palace, towered over the entire town, located over 1,000 metres above sea level, [reachable by] an hour and a half climb on foot. It was a huge housing complex, surrounded by SS barracks and equipped with a shelter. I was

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

informed about this by my employers, the four Rottenhorer sisters, owners of the Wiessbach Hotel. Hitler himself lived in the palace, while his entourage and party members lived in the complex.⁶¹

A bus service reserved for Germans connected the town with the housing estate, while entry was strictly prohibited to people of other nationalities. Amalia's account of how fellow hotel employees perceived the Führer offers particularly interesting insights:

In the environment where I worked, both the owners and tenants harboured an outright hostile attitude toward Hitler and the entire system. My employers trusted me completely and confided their feelings. The atmosphere of terror was so pervasive that they feared even their thoughts might be detected.⁶²

Such was her perspective and her memories of that period. Even if the references to hostility towards the ruling system or trust were exaggerated, certain concerns of the Reich's inhabitants had to be discussed in her presence. Such references are rare in Jewish accounts. The rest of Amalia's statement shows a lack of awareness or interest on the part of these same people in what was happening in the eastern territories occupied by the Reich:

I told them that the Jewish population had been murdered, that the Polish population was being deported en masse and shot. They were astonished and said that it was unbelievable that Germans were capable of such crimes, that there were such hyenas among them.⁶³

The language used in this passage is also important, as it suggests that only certain individuals with criminal tendencies would be capable of such actions. Amalia's life was spent working and concealing her identity. The fact that her stories about the tragedy of the Jewish population in the General Government were not

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

understood certainly affected her mental state, her sense of loneliness and alienation. The testimony does not describe the circumstances, but Amalia's daughter died during the war, and the woman also lost contact with her husband, who most likely also died.

Amalia lived to witness the liberation by the Allied forces. In early May 1945, they entered Berchtesgaden. Her survival strategy proved effective, and she returned to Cracow, where she gave testimony and sought information about her loved ones.

The Fate of Rena Knoll

One of the more widely described examples of survival strategies involving forced labour in the Reich is the story of Rena Knoll, who stayed in the Cracow ghetto and then on the Aryan side. After hiding in the city for some time, she left to perform forced labour in the Reich. Rena was a young girl at the time, born on 12 February 1927 to Ozjasz Knoll (born 23 March 1887) and Lea, née Poss (born 1893). Rena also had a younger sister, Sabina (born in 1930). Most of this information comes from a diary she kept during the war.⁶⁴ Rena's notes concerning her and her family's situation in occupied Cracow and in the ghetto have survived. They provide a detailed and emotional record of a growing girl experiencing her youth during German occupation. Their author left the ghetto on 10 March 1943, a few days before its liquidation. Rena described what happened later in the Aryan side in a post-war testimony given on 4 December 1945 in Cracow.⁶⁵ It is entitled "Papiery Aryjskie" (Aryan Papers) and begins with a brief explanation of why, in the narrator's opinion, the whole family was able to remain in the ghetto until March 1943. The decisive factor was her father's job, as well as her own, in the tailoring department of the Optima company. Rena recalled that there were rumours circulating in the ghetto that Optima was to be moved to the nearby ZAL Plaszow camp at the end of March. The girl's mother suggested that I should "run away to my Polish friends if I wanted to rescue myself, assuring me that she would come for me the very next day. I listened to my mother and went to my friends, the Sagans, who were Polish."⁶⁶ Rena's loved ones were separated. Ozjasz ended up in a camp, while Lea and Sabina made it to

⁶⁴ See R. Knoll, *Dziennik*, with introduction and editing by J. Kowalska-Leder, Warsaw, 2012, pp. 8–9.

⁶⁵ AŻIH, 301/1223, Rena Knoll.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

the Aryan side. Initially, they hid in one of the towns near Cracow, and after a few days they made their way to the city. According to the accounts, Rena never met with them again. She received financial support from her aunt, her mother's sister. After some time, her sister and mother were sent to an OD prison,⁶⁷ and then to the Plaszow camp. Rena wanted to follow in their footsteps, but her aunt stopped her, explaining that she should remain on the Aryan side, live there, settle down and try to get her mother and sister out of the camp. The women even paid a bribe to do so, but the person who was supposed to act as an intermediary was allegedly detained by the Gestapo and lost the money. Rena underlined:

At that time, my aunt Regina Pos risked her life to maintain constant contact between us and the barracks [in Plaszów] to the extent that the Germans put a price on her head because they already knew her description and had circulated it. She advised us to go to Germany for forced labour because the situation was becoming increasingly dangerous, and constant house searches made it impossible to be sheltered by strangers, especially since we had no documents.⁶⁸

This excerpt also shows the tension that existed within the occupied society in Cracow.

Rena described how she managed to find the contact details of a person who acted as an intermediary in transporting people to the Reich for forced labour:

We learned from our host's fiancée about a young man who worked at the Arbeitsamt, deporting Poles to forced labour in Germany. He sent Jews as well but for money. He usually turned those Jews in afterwards.⁶⁹

It is worth adding that the German authorities exerted enormous administrative pressure to deport people for forced labour. Questions remain about the extent of on-site verification of "undesirable" persons, including Jews. It also remains unclear how many other Jewish women took advantage of this intermediary. Later in the

⁶⁷ Prison of the Jewish Ghetto Police (JOD) in the Cracow ghetto.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

testimony, she points out that at that moment she found herself in a situation where she had little to lose. The alternative was to try to continue hiding in occupied Cracow, risking that the person who had mediated in the unsuccessful attempt to get her mother out of ZAL Plaszow might denounce her. She could also, as she had originally planned, try to get into the camp and lose that little bit of freedom. She therefore chose to leave with her aunt for the Reich:

we approached a man named Aleksander Rybik, reportedly an academic. My aunt sold her wedding rings, and each of us gave him two thousand for obtaining *Transportscheins* for the journey. On 10 October 1943, we departed with these documents, accompanied by a certain Polish man, bound for Tirol. During the journey, our papers were inspected six times.⁷⁰

Despite various inconveniences they encountered along the way and fears that they would be recognised at some stage, especially since their documents lacked photographs, which was a serious procedural violation, they reached the town of Igls near Innsbruck. There, Zofia Chrzanowska, a friend of the intermediary Aleksander Rybik, was waiting for them.

According to Rena's testimony, Chrzanowska was of Jewish descent. However, the question of her true identity was not discussed between them. The woman referred them to Józef Bania,⁷¹ a doctor of Polish descent living in Solbad Halle⁷² near Innsbruck. They were to stay there and find employment. Józef Bania appears in Rena's story as an extremely kind and good man:

He was a man with an incredibly kind heart. [...] He showed us an unexpected amount of kindness. He left his work when we approached him and accompanied

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Renia left an interesting description of his story in her post-war testimony: "He was an interesting character. A peasant, the son of a peasant from Tarnów, he was sent to work in Sudetengau, from where he escaped and ended up in a hospital in Innsbruck as a patient. There, he said that he was the son of a doctor who had been killed in Katyń, and so the doctors took care of him. He was quite intelligent and began to study medicine and Latin with enthusiasm. By assisting in autopsies, he learned to perform them so well that he was later paid for it" (*ibid.*).

⁷² Today this town is called Hall.

us to the Arbeitsamt, even though our legs were shaking with fear because we had no documents, except for a fake *Transportschein* without a photograph. We breathed a sigh of relief when we were given jobs as maids in a hotel.⁷³

Rena began working at a hotel where she was to serve alongside a German woman. As she herself recounted, the conditions there were far from standard:

There was a lot of work to do. The worst part was dealing with the German woman who harassed me at every turn. I had a month of peace because she fell ill and I arranged for her to be hospitalised at Bania's. However, when she returned after a month, she got even worse, so I turned to the hotel owner, no longer with a request but with a threat that if she did not relieve me of this German woman, I would do something she would remember. I was in such a mood that I kept thinking about suicide, and I felt guilty for leaving my mother. I kept dreaming about her, crying, and I wanted to go to the camp and share my mother's fate rather than live apart from her in this foreign country, exposed to constant harassment from that old German woman.⁷⁴

The girl managed to obtain permission to be transferred to another hotel where her cousin worked. However, she ended up in an even worse place. The experiences that her cousin had avoided became Rena's lot. In her testimony, she recalled:

I endured three hellish months there. The hotel owner, Rosa Steinmeyer from Halle in Tirol, made our lives miserable, deprived us of food, and used us for the hardest work in terrible conditions.⁷⁵

As in the previous case, Rena managed to have herself dismissed from this job. Until the end of the war, she and her cousin worked in a textile factory and lodged in private accommodation with a German woman. "We stayed there for two whole years, and we were treated very well." They lived to see the end of the war and the

⁷³ AŽIH, 301/1223, Rena Knoll.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

liberation. For some time, they prepared in the *Hachshara* for their departure to Palestine. Ultimately, however, Rena returned for a while to her hometown of Cracow.⁷⁶ Her survival strategy, although in circumstances different from those described in Amalia Mames's testimony, also proved effective.

Conclusion

In the reality of German-occupied Cracow, for some of the Jewish women in hiding, finding employment with the Germans and the Volksdeutsche was a survival strategy. Although extremely risky, it often proved to be their last chance of rescue. However, undertaking this kind of strategy required meeting many conditions, such as having an "Aryan" appearance, usually also appropriate false documents, knowledge of Polish (or German), as well as the ability to blend in socially with the surroundings. Women whose appearance indicated their origin, who spoke with a characteristic accent or who came from Cracow, where the risk of recognition was much greater than in the case of people who had arrived from other cities, found themselves in a particularly difficult situation.

The most common form of work was domestic service as a helper or cleaner. While these jobs provided the bare essentials of subsistence – food and a roof over their head – they carried a constant risk of exposure, whether from employers themselves or from the surrounding community, including neighbours and informers. An even greater danger came with employment in German administrative institutions, which, though they offered higher social status and access to information, required extreme caution, self-control, and resilience.

Informal networks of support – among Poles and others living on the "Aryan side" – were crucial. Neighbourly help, contacts in the administration, or acquaintances within the intelligentsia often determined whether one could secure work or shelter in moments of immediate danger. Even in times of relative stability, women in hiding lived under constant tension: every conversation, a careless gesture, a slip of the tongue, or unwelcome attention from those around them could expose them, leading to arrest and ultimately death.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

The details of the relationships between Jewish women in hiding and their German or Volksdeutsche employers remain unknown. This absence of evidence likely reflects both the scarcity of sources and the difficulty of speaking about such experiences after the war – particularly when they involved violence, coercion, sexual dependence, or morally ambiguous strategies of survival. It should also be recalled that mixed marriages between Jews and nonJews, as well as sexual relations with the so-called Aryans, were explicitly prohibited.

Ultimately, employment with the Germans and Volksdeutsche represented a drastic yet frequently sole avenue of survival for Jewish women in German-occupied Cracow. This path demanded not only compliance with specific conditions but also extraordinary resilience, adaptability, and the ability to sustain an imposed, fabricated identity. While it offered a means to survive, it came at profound emotional and moral expense. Such choices formed part of the wider spectrum of harrowing existential dilemmas confronting Jewish women during the Holocaust.

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