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## RESCUERS AND THE RESCUED: THE CASE OF AMALIA SANDBERG-MESNER OF ZALESZCZYKI IN THE EASTERN PROVINCES OF PREWAR POLAND<sup>1</sup>

The following text proposes a contextual approach in considering the contingencies and conditions which make it possible for a Holocaust survivor to initiate the process of formal recognition of a rescuer or rescuers and their admission to the list of *the Righteous among Nations*, a title awarded by the Yad Vashem Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem, since 1963. The two perspectives, that of survivor and rescuer, meet in the term "Righteous"<sup>2</sup>.

These reflections are based on a personal and deep friendship with Amalia (Mila) Sandberg-Mesner, born in Zaleszczyki, the town of my father, Eugeniusz Włodzimierz Fedorowicz. The Sandberg and Fedorowicz families knew each other and shared good relations in a relatively affluent and peaceful town in pre-war Poland, of which examples are told in both family traditions.

To understand the context of Mila Sandberg-Mesner's story, it is helpful to consider the nature and characteristics of the "Kresy" region in Poland up to 1939: "Kresy [...] in the Polish language, this is a word with symbolic importance, a keyword, untranslatable into other languages. Its essence is captured neither by the English term *borderland*, nor by the German word *Grenzland*, nor the French *confin*, nor the Russian *rubież*. For the *Kresy* are something more than a borderland, the coming together of many nationalities, or a periphery far

<sup>1</sup> The following article is written within a dialogic frame, taking into account differences in perspective between the rescued (understood as "survivors" within Jewish discourse) and the rescuers. Broadly speaking, from a Polish historical perspective, the time frame is referred to as "Occupation by the Third Reich" (see conference title) and as the "Holocaust" or "Shoah" from a Jewish perspective.

<sup>2</sup> The concept of *Righteous among Nations* is based on the Talmudic saying, "He who saves one life saves the entire world". The Yad Vashem criteria for recognition are as follows: only a Jewish party can put a nomination forward; helping a family member or Jewish convert to Christianity is not a criterion for recognition; assistance has to be repeated and/or substantial; and assistance has to be provided without any financial gain expected in return (although covering normal expenses such as rent or food is acceptable). [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Righteous\\_Among\\_the\\_Nations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Righteous_Among_the_Nations).



from the country's capital. It is a very copious and unusual idea, ambiguous, full of expressiveness, referring to a particular territory and at the same time to the entire historical legacy and cultural heritage of the Polish *Rzeczpospolita* in the East. [...] In the aftermath of the mass deportations, killings and expulsion of Poles, extermination of Jews, and the resettlement of many other national and ethnic groups, the multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious *Kresy* ceased to exist"<sup>3</sup>.

How does the specific nature of the *Kresy* region and its specific charisma, living on in people from this place and no longer found on any contemporary map, pertain to our topic?

Mila wrote to the author in March 2014: "I always think of your letters as a warm breeze of friendship and affection. For me it is a treasure and I am grateful that fate put us on a meeting course". When asked for her signature in the author's copy of her testimony, *Light from the Shadows*, Mila wrote: "Dla Hani, mojej pokrewnej duszy, z wielką przyjaźnią, Mila [To Hania, my kindred spirit, in great friendship, Mila]". Although we met through email correspondence in 2010, through the kind mediation of Vasiliy Olejnik, director of the Regional Museum in today's Zalischyky, I have also felt from the start that we are closely related. Is it a common heartiness and social engagement, a feeling shared by people connected to Zaleszczyki, whether Catholic or Jewish, whether Polish or Ukrainian, or is it due more to the "*Kresy* personality type" about which Zofia Kossak-Szczucka wrote: "bold, stubborn, able to strive and to act" (zuchwałych, upartych, umiejących chcieć i działać)?<sup>4</sup>.

Mila Sandberg-Mesner wrote the stories of her wartime experiences in occupied Poland as a young Jewish girl from a *Kresy* town in 2005<sup>5</sup>. They were published by the Polish-Jewish Heritage Foundation in Montreal in 2009. The context for finally publishing her memories was 52 years of repeating the riveting stories of her life to her husband Izidor (Izio) Mesner, who suggested that she write them down. But just as pertinent was the existence of a unique institution, of which Mila Sandberg-Mesner was a co-founder, whose aim made it easier to formalize personal and painful stories told again and again: "The aim of the Polish-Jewish Heritage Foundation is to seek out and publish the testimonies of survivors in order to distribute them into libraries... The personal history of every one of those individuals is woven into a series of momentous events: tragic or fortunate encounters, fateful life decisions, and miraculous deliverances. The people in question are not young anymore [and we] encourage those who are inclined to write... not to delay recording their experiences for the benefit of future generations... There is, however, no question that these testimonies are enormously important historical records. They tell us much about those perilous

<sup>3</sup> T. K. Kozłowski and D. Błahut-Biegańska, *Świat Kresów*, Warszawa 2012, Dom Spotkań z Historią i Ośrodek Karta, Wyd. II, p. 5, all translations by the author.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> M. Sandberg-Mesner, *Light from the Shadows*, Montreal 2009, Polish-Jewish Heritage Foundation of Canada. For the online version, see:

<sup>www</sup> [www.polish-jewish-heritage.org/eng/06-05\\_From-Alinka-Light\\_from\\_the\\_shadows.html](http://www.polish-jewish-heritage.org/eng/06-05_From-Alinka-Light_from_the_shadows.html).



times; about how people behaved in dramatic, dangerous, and often tragic circumstances. They tell us what we might expect from strangers, from those close to us, and from ourselves... We must not allow the facts to fade away into oblivion as the witnesses pass on. We must ensure, too, that those who did not survive are never forgotten”<sup>6</sup>.

So to begin, the importance of these personal stories needs to be recognized as an “important historical record”. Yet, the possibility of initiating the process of recognizing a rescuer is embedded in the doubly traumatic realization of remembering and retelling wartime experiences on the one hand, and of having been saved, while others were not, on the other hand. As Truda Osterman-Rosenberg, a survivor from prewar Lwów, relates: “So many people perished. I felt guilty, that I could be saved, while they were not... It took me a very long time to overcome the feelings of guilt, that I am alive, while others, including all my loved ones, died. I often wondered, what did I do to survive? Others, with more wisdom than I, more maturity, were not able to escape the Holocaust. In time, I came to understand that guilt is irrational”<sup>7</sup>.

A related factor was the difficulty of reception of wartime memories of survivors in the first decades after the Second World War. As a psychologist working after the war in Israel, Truda Osterman-Rosenberg recalls how Israelis did not want to hear about the Holocaust in the 1960s when she was living there: “For people there, it was shameful, that we went, in their eyes, like lambs to the slaughter. Can you imagine? We resisted, we fought for life. I carried weapons for the underground of the Polish Home Army. There was an uprising in the ghetto! There was the Warsaw Uprising! They had no idea about all this. It was terrible for us survivors, that our own nation did not want to know about what happened. Despite others, I began to talk about the Holocaust, I began to visit schools... It was the beginning of overcoming the shame”<sup>8</sup>.

Many authors have addressed the difficulty of being a survivor, as well as a rescuer, in the immediate postwar period in Poland. Representative of many different accounts, whether biographical or historical, I would like to borrow from Louis Begley, born in 1933 as Ludwig Beglejer in Stryj, who wrote in fictional form about the dilemma of being a survivor in Cracow after the war: “Yes, there are also other Jews in Cracow, not only those returning with the Russians: a few who, like Tania and Maciek, bought their lives with a lie and a few, who paid for their hiding place and were not betrayed and sold out. Some of them even use their former names, Rosenduft or Rosenstein, believing that it doesn’t bother anyone. But Tania and Maciek know better: Mr. Twardowski or Mrs. Babinska are very much bothered. These half-forgotten ghosts with their hated names, these people who don’t quite tick properly, they will soon find out: the day will

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> H. Fedorowicz, *Doznać cudu? Opowieść Trudy Rosenberg*, Smak Słowa, Sopot 2012, pp. 113, 121.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, p. 88, translation by author.



come that others will show them where they belong, even if some of them can't figure out why they are unwelcome"<sup>9</sup>.

In such an atmosphere, it is understandable that many rescuers chose to remain silent about their deeds. Sociologist and survivor Nechama Tec found in early research that the common motivating thread for rescuers was "their independence or self-reliance to act in accordance with personal convictions, regardless of how these are viewed by others" together with "a broad commitment to stand up for the needy"<sup>10</sup>. The characteristic of standing against the current in one's social context would predispose one to remain discreet rather than drawing attention to having helped Jews, wherever blaming the victim became the new norm.

Another example of the difficulty of calling up painful memories is exemplified by the questionnaire distributed to survivors or their family by the Memorial Museum at the former death camp in Bełżec, asking them to provide names of relatives who were taken there to their death. The questionnaire aims "to give the victims a name", as the death camp at Bełżec left no list of the close to 500,000 people murdered there. Of three persons to whom I provided this questionnaire, none were able and/or willing to fill out this document alone. In one case, further personal assistance and supportive guidance led to answers.

In Canada, where I was born, contacts between Canadians of Polish Christian and Polish Jewish descent were rare and private, official relations being more characteristic of two solitudes, each community remembering its own trauma and its own stories of suffering. For many years, some Polish Jews would even avoid non-Jewish Poles, refusing to speak Polish if in the presence of a stranger speaking Polish, in case the latter were once among wartime persecutors or blackmailers (*szmalcownicy*). I experienced this posture, entirely understandable in the postwar context of solitudes, on more than one occasion in the Montreal of the 1970s. Even today, one can meet a defensive discourse among some Polish Canadians who wish to throw off the epithet of anti-Semitism or betrayal, a generalized accusation made by some Jews both of the war generation, as well as postwar generations, against Polish Christians. An editorial in a mainstream Canadian newspaper in 2005 testified to this lingering resentment, calling Poland "home to Auschwitz" as well as highlighting only ongoing incidents of anti-Semitism in Poland<sup>11</sup>. The efforts of Polish media watch groups to advise newspapers of the inappropriate nomenclature still used with regard to Nazi death camps on occupied Polish territory, sometimes meets with a lack of understanding.

The defensive discourse sometimes attempts to document that Poles suffered as much as Jews, usurping the name "Holocaust" by thematizing the "other"

<sup>9</sup> L. Begley, *Wartime Lies*, Alfred A. Knopf: New York 1991, English translated by the author from the German edition, *Lügen in Zeiten des Krieges*, Frankfurt am Main 1994, Suhrkamp, pp. 218–219.

<sup>10</sup> N. Tec, *When Light Pierced the Darkness: Christian Rescue of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland*, NY 1986, Oxford University Press, p. 188.

<sup>11</sup> E. Greenspon, "How does it feel to know you just told that to a Jew?", *The Globe & Mail*, 29 January 2005.



Holocaust<sup>12</sup>. One can read, for example, of the efforts to “defend Poland’s good name” by “encouraging Poles to write about their experiences during the Second World War and the communist era, especially about the ‘Polish Holocaust’, in order to preserve a historical record for future generations”<sup>13</sup>.

Within this defensive discourse, efforts made by Poles to gather information about Righteous Poles are often silent about the anti-Semitic legislation, daily brutality and prejudice that many Polish Jews faced prior to the German occupation, making it especially difficult to find helping hands when the Nazi hunt for Jews became acute. The singular targeting of all Jews for extermination simply for having been born a Jew is easily overlooked by one-sided efforts to remember, as if the great calamity of the Nazi occupation of Poland was only “our” tragedy, but not “theirs”, a mutually exclusive and sadly symmetrical argument used by both perspectives. Regrettably, some Jewish writers and historians generalize from specific cases to a universal and undifferentiated condemnation of Poland or of all Poles as anti-Semitic. An example of attempts to untangle a difficult narrative of accusation is provided in the historical text that can be found on the Canadian Polish Congress website<sup>14</sup>. The “defence” of Poland’s good name, based in an arbitrary distinction between “Pole” and “Jew”, deteriorates into an inadvertent and unreflective tightening of the tangled web.

I would like to place such historical contests of recrimination and defensiveness within the general human context of “trauma and recovery”, as Judith Herman writes: “The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma. People who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility and thereby serves the twin imperative of truth-telling and secrecy. When the truth is finally recognized, survivors can begin their recovery. But far too often secrecy prevails, and the story of the traumatic event surfaces not as a verbal narrative but as a symptom”<sup>15</sup>.

Diverging perspectives of scapegoating and finger-pointing are embedded, as I suggest, in a discourse of trauma, out of which no joint or even overlapping history is possible. Such approaches are countered decisively by Jan Karski, Polish wartime courier and diplomat, whose courageous efforts in bringing news of the barbaric treatment of Jews to western political leaders make him a “hero of humanity” honored in 2014 by a travelling exhibition prepared by the Museum of Polish History: “God entrusted me with the duty to speak and to write in wartime, at a moment when – it seemed – this could help. It did not help. When the war was over, I discovered that governments, leaders, academics, writers did not know what happened to the Jews. They were startled. The murder of six millions

<sup>12</sup> R.C. Lukas, *Forgotten Holocaust. The Poles under German Occupation 1939–1944*, NY 1998, Hippocrene Books.

<sup>13</sup> Official website of the Canadian Polish Congress: <http://www.kpk.org/defense-of-polands-good-name>.

<sup>14</sup> M. Paul, *A Tangled Web: Polish-Jewish Relations in Wartime Northeastern Poland and the Aftermath*, Toronto 2008, Pefina Press.

<sup>15</sup> J. Herman, *Trauma and recovery*, NY 1992, Basic Books, p. 1.



innocent people was a secret, a 'horrible secret'. That is when I became a Jew. But I am a Christian Jew. I am a practicing Catholic... My faith tells me that humanity committed the second cardinal sin – through the very fact of the crime, but also through negligence, voluntary ignorance or lack of sensitivity, personal interests, hypocrisy or heartless rationalization. This sin will persecute humanity till the end of its days. It persecutes me. And I wish this to be so"<sup>16</sup>.

As a Christian Pole and as a recipient of the Righteous among Nations Medal, Karski underlines that the Holocaust cannot be relativized or diminished by the suffering of other nations and groups. Instead, I believe that efforts are needed to dispel the hold of war's trauma on the imagination and on memory by creating a new discourse of multi-perspective historical truth-telling, acknowledging the truth and the pain of the Other<sup>17</sup>, to use Kapuściński's term, so as to lay the groundwork for mutuality and reconciliation.

That the recovery of memory and an inclusive view of the Shoah is a continuous challenge without easy answers is described by Father Wojciech Lemański of the Polish Council of Christians and Jews in his blog reflection on Treblinka and other memorial places of the extermination of Jews in Poland: "There is not only one path to these places and there is not only one way of reacting to the fact of the crimes committed there. But in order to find your own, appropriate way of being present, you must first find your way there and face the immensity of evil which took place. Many people know nothing about these facts. There are some who deliberately close their ears and divert their gaze. I know some who for decades postpone the journey to the cemeteries of their loved ones. And there are some who cannot imagine not coming here time and again. A conversation with certain people about these matters is not so much difficult, as it is impossible. So who has the right to specify the canon of correct behaviour for those who finally arrive at such a place?"<sup>18</sup>.

Both Karski and Lemański use a discourse that points to the integrative power of an inclusive multiple perspective which is shared with the Other, rather than nurturing separate narratives for one's own group alone.

Similarly, Mila Sandberg-Mesner stands above all divisions to bring a message of humanism and courage to Jews and non-Jews alike. Her generosity, despite great personal suffering and loss, is exemplary and a model to all. Not only did she commit her memories to paper, Mila Sandberg-Mesner then proceeded to send a copy of her book addressed simply to the "Mayor of Zalischyky, Ukraine" in the hopes of sharing her reminiscences with anyone who might be interested. She struck a positive chord with Zalischyky's present-day mayor,

<sup>16</sup> J. Karski, *Bohater Ludzkości*, Wystawa Muzeum Historii Polski. Digital version: [http://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/exhibit/jan-karski-bohater-ludzko%C5%9Bci/QR\\_UaCtP?projectId=cultural-figures&hl=pl&position=84%2C0](http://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/exhibit/jan-karski-bohater-ludzko%C5%9Bci/QR_UaCtP?projectId=cultural-figures&hl=pl&position=84%2C0). Quote is found on the seventh to last slide.

<sup>17</sup> R. Kapuściński, *Encountering the Other: The Challenge for the Twenty-First Century*. *Spotkanie z Innym Jako Wyzwanie XXI Wieku*, Kraków 2007, TAIWPN Universitas.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.ksiadzlemanski.waw.pl/index.php/blog-ksiedza-wojciecha/762-co-wypada>, translation by author.



Wolodymyr Benevyat, who was instrumental in having her book with its tribute to Zaleszczyki translated into the Ukrainian language.

Out of this initial cooperation with local authorities and out of an imperative to do justice, Mila Sandberg-Mesner funded a memorial for over 800 Jews of her hometown Zaleszczyki murdered by Nazi occupiers in 1941 and buried in three mass graves<sup>19</sup>. Speaking at the unveiling of the commemorative monument on 27 April 2011, she chose an inclusive perspective: "First of all, everybody loved the land we lived on. We loved the river Dniester, the high cliffs towering over the river, the blooming orchards, the chestnut trees, the black fertile soil, the wonderful summers full of music and life and the summer tourists bringing relative prosperity to our town. This was the land of our ancestors, Ukrainians, Poles and Jews, who for centuries lived here, worked here, produced goods, and died here... All the people regardless of their culture or religion shared the same fear of the unknown and the feeling of helplessness in the face of calamities. Everybody got up in the morning hoping for a good day without unexpected tragedies and unpleasant occurrences. Most people started the day with a prayer: the Ukrainians with *Otcze Nasz*, the Poles with *Ojcie Nasz*, and the Jews with *Moidi Any*. Some crossed themselves three times, some only once, and some turned to the Eastern wall facing Jerusalem, praying to the higher power we all called God... Unfortunately, life was and continues to be full of misfortunes and catastrophes. The situation in Germany after the First World War was catastrophic. Inflation, unemployment played havoc with the lives of people there. This became a fertile ground for the most evil and destructive form of government – Nazism. In times of difficulties, the common practice is to look for scapegoats. The most frequent targets were the Jews. The victims were innocent people who could not defend themselves, such as the Jews who are buried right here. The Nazi doctrine promoted a culture of hatred that resulted in brutality, sadism and hideous crimes against humanity. Some people profited materially by robbing and stealing from those who were helpless. They benefited from other people's misfortunes. Those who were humane and who cared for the people who were persecuted, were punished by death. Here in this earth, under our feet, are some of the victims of this monstrous regime"<sup>20</sup>.

The efforts of Mila Sandberg-Mesner to commemorate the murdered Jews of Zaleszczyki were actively supported by the present mayor of Zalischyky. Together with the director of the Regional Museum, Vasiliy Olejnik, they coordinated the preparation of drawings and the execution of the work. Furthermore, the mayor's active support and defence of religious pluralism in today's Zalischyky was given expression at Holy Mass in St. Stanislaw Church on 8 May 2013, in celebration of the 250th anniversary of the church's founding, a support of

<sup>19</sup> Official counts of two graves are contradicted by the stories of elderly witnesses.

<sup>20</sup> M. Sandberg-Mesner, *By the Ways of My Youth*, Misto 2012, Chernovtsi, p. 38. The unveiling ceremony is divided into five postings:

<sup>htp://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28nGGsrIle8&list=ULVgepEcM7sb0.</sup>



pluralism not readily found among local authorities in other towns of present western Ukraine<sup>21</sup>.

In the same spirit, the Ukrainian language edition of Mila Sandberg's memoirs of the Second World War was launched in Zalischyky on 27 April 2011, at a moving ceremony organized by local political and school authorities in tribute to a returning citizen. Teachers, journalists, artists, pupils and many other townspeople participated in the welcome. The local newspaper reported: "The active spread of the idea of tolerance and understanding, of remembering, as witnessed by Amalia Sandberg-Mesner's book, is a beam of light across time, demonstrating how to bring about the kind of world to which we aspire"<sup>22</sup>.

Soon after this pivotal event in her hometown, Mila Sandberg-Mesner travelled to Israel, including a visit to the Yad Vashem Memorial in Jerusalem. The testimony provided by Mila Sandberg-Mesner in her book about those persons who helped to rescue Mila and two of her relatives, her sister Lola and her cousin Jasia Elberger, provided the foundation for the application to Yad Vashem. However, as will become apparent, not all rescuers could be recognized. To begin with, Mila Sandberg-Mesner sought recognition for Albin Tyll.

Albin Tyll, a polonized German from the German colony at Felizienthal near Stryj, worked at the city administration in Kolomiya. Albin's family spoke German, but he considered himself a Pole, according to Mila Sandberg-Mesner. He met Mila's sister Lola, who obtained a job at the municipal office when the family moved to Kolomiya soon after the take-over of Eastern Poland by the Soviet Union. Estranged from his wife and child, Albin soon became a part of the Sandberg family. Once all Jews were ordered into the Kolomiya ghetto after February 1942, Albin found quarters for them near the perimeter and devised a way of entering the ghetto to bring food and other necessities. He invented practical solutions to insurmountable problems, for instance, trading goods for funds to buy food to stave off persistent and extreme hunger. He sought out Father Ludwig Peciak, a Polish parish priest in Kolomiya and activist in the Polish underground who also helped many Jews. Albin organized Aryan papers based on the documents provided by Father Peciak. Despite making plans to escape to Hungary, the Sandbergs were rounded up before this became possible and were loaded into the train for Bełżec death camp in October of 1942. Miraculously, Mila, Jasia and Lola jumped from the train unharmed and made their way to the ghetto in Chodorów. In short time, Albin took the three women to Lwów, providing them with false papers under which they were able to pass as Aryans. He soon organized employment as an administrator at the German estate near Bóbrka and took his Polish "family", wife (Lola), cousin (Mila) and maid (Jasia). They were able to keep up pretenses for almost two years to spring of 1944. Albin felt very sure of himself and was willing to take many risks, repeating often: "I will not

<sup>21</sup> V. Olejnik, *Kostel Sviatovo Stanislava v Zalischykach*, Misto 2013, Chernivtsi. Mila Sandberg-Mesner supported the publication of this book financially. For Mayor Benevyat's presentation <http://youtu.be/kBRF-Wy4nxM> at 45 seconds.

<sup>22</sup> V. Dyakiv, "Svitlo kriz chas", *Kolos*, 13.04.2011, no. 40–41 (7923).



let anything happen to the three of you". As the Russian front drew nearer, Albin again took the women to Lwów until the situation became too unstable. With ingenuity he organized transport, horses and a wagon, to return to Zaleszczyki. In 1945, Albin helped to organize the evacuation of all three women to Romania, where their ways parted.

The example of Albin Tyll is not unique, other people, for instance in Zaleszczyki, a town where Jews, Poles and Ukrainians enjoyed relatively good relations, helped to hide their Jewish friends or neighbors. What is clearly unusual is the length of time and the daring with which he helped his protégées. His German origins were of advantage, Poles without this trump would not be able to resist both Nazis and their *askaris* for so many years. In documenting the scope and forms of helping Jews in this region, Albin Tyll's actions stand out in endurance, resourcefulness and risk-taking.

The possibility of commemorating rescuers takes on particular meaning in the context of a sometimes adversarial climate of victimization and recrimination, when recalling the Holocaust many years later. I would like to emphasize, that Mila Sandberg-Mesner did not succumb to negative views, distinguishing the moral imperative displayed by Albin Tyll of rescuing three Jewish women from certain destruction, from any regret which might have momentarily been felt, when he left her sister Lola in the end.

A further factor making the entire action possible was the integration of the Sandberg family in Polish life. Mila and her sister Lola attended the Polish high school (gymnasium) in Zaleszczyki, despite restrictions arbitrarily put on attendance for Jews, and had many Catholic friends. This made it easier to pass later as Catholics, being taught prayers and Christmas carols by Albin, so as to participate openly in social life. Mila's father, Zygmunt Sandberg, was well known as a successful business man and owner of a mill and respected in both Jewish and non-Jewish circles. Together with his wife Fanny, Zygmunt Sandberg believed that helping others was important. Whether the receiver of help was Jewish or non-Jewish was not important. People in need could always ask for help at the Sandberg household. Zygmunt Sandberg once scolded Catholic sisters conducting a charitable collection for not having come to his house to ask for a donation. They had wrongly assumed that a Jew would not want to contribute to a Catholic fundraising action. Upon returning to Zaleszczyki in 1944, Mila Sandberg was moved to receive heartfelt acceptance and material help from former neighbors and employees. This treatment contrasted with other places where returning Jews were not always welcomed back to their own homes. Whether this circumstance was specific to the town of Zaleszczyki or due to the special quality of personal contacts and relations, or a combination of both factors is an open question.

The uniqueness of Mila Sandberg's experiences becomes clearer, when one reads other testimonies, for instance those published by the Polish-Jewish Heritage Foundation. A particularly tragic account is documented by Tosia



Szechter-Schneider<sup>23</sup>, also born in Zaleszczyki, but whose family moved to Horodenka when Tosia was six. Although she did survive the Holocaust, her book is full of tremendous sadness, not only due to the horror of persecution, the helplessness and loss of loved ones, but also because of the vehemence of some non-Jewish neighbors and acquaintances in turning their backs and even betraying their Jewish compatriots. A clear admission of a broad range of attitudes among Gentiles in the towns of the Kresy region, from willingness to risk one's life, fear and indifference all the way to active discrimination, extortion and exposure of Jews in hiding, is a fact which Polish historians must come to terms with, if an inclusive perspective of remembering is to be created.

The process of applying to Yad Vashem for recognition of a rescuer is also worth analyzing. Here some challenges needed to be overcome. In the case of Albin Tyll, Mila Sandberg-Mesner was long convinced that Albin had been recognized with a tree planted in the garden of the Righteous at Yad Vashem. To her surprise, when she visited Israel in 2011, she discovered that Albin was not in the records there. She began the procedure of recognition which took some time, as she wrote, because the committee which considers the applications does not meet very often. In this case, a successful decision of award was made on July 11, 2012. A further delay was experienced, as Yad Vashem looked for Albin's daughter, who was thought to be living in Poland. According to Mila Sandberg-Mesner, where a descendant can be traced, the posthumous award is presented to them. The presentation of the Yad Vashem medal and diploma in an official public ceremony with political representation is an important ritual, creating a shared public space for multiple perspectives and a unified historical account.

It was with great emotion that Amalia (Mila) Sandberg-Mesner received the notice of the official ceremony addressed to her in Montreal by Nadav Eschar, Deputy Ambassador of Israel to Poland on March 21, 2013: "It will be a great honor and privilege for me to present the decoration together with you into the hands of the Hero's daughter, Grażyna Madejska"<sup>24</sup>.

The award ceremony was held on April 25, 2013 in Katowice, in the Goldstein Villa, presided over by the Mayor of Katowice, Piotr Uszok, in the presence of the Deputy Ambassador of Israel. The moment itself was the pinnacle of sixty years of search for Albin's daughter and restitution for a selfless gift of rescue given at risk of one's own life. At the ceremony Mila Sandberg-Mesner said: "This is my story of Albin Tyll, of a great Hero. And this is a prize for the Righteous. He was both a Hero and Righteous. For three long years, he risked his life every day, without any self-interest. He loved my parents, he was a close friend, he was our 'guardian angel'. Today is an exceptional day where

<sup>23</sup> T. Szechter-Schneider, *Someone Must Survive To Tell The World*, Montreal 2007, Polish-Jewish Heritage Foundation of Canada.

<sup>24</sup> Digital copy of invitation letter to the official ceremony of presenting the medal and certificate of honour posthumously to Mr. Albin Tyll in possession of the author.



all these threads join into one knot. He is finally receiving an honour which he well deserved. I have waited for this day for sixty years”<sup>25</sup>.

Jerzy Forajter, chairman of the municipal Council of the city of Katowice summarized the historical significance of the event: “Today’s ceremony is unique: it is a ceremony which again restores to us our faith in the meaning of humanity”<sup>26</sup>.

Still one query remains unanswered, that is, how to honour Father Ludwig Peciak? He was the parish priest in Kolomiya who issued false documents of birth for Mila and Jasia, allowing Albin to obtain Catholic identity papers for them. Mila Sandberg-Mesner is no longer in possession of the document signed by Father Peciak clandestinely issued for her in the name of Stanisława Schmiedel. Without such evidence, Yad Vashem criteria for recognition cannot be met. In an email to the author dated March 9, 2014 Mila wrote: “The difference between Albin and Father Peciak is that I have never met Ks. Peciak. I know of him only from Albin’s verbal testimonies and seeing Father Peciak’s signature on our documents, but I have never seen him personally... According to Albin’s words, Father Ludwik Peciak was a courageous human being. My late brother-in-law, Dr. Dawid Wasserman, knew Father Peciak personally and also spoke highly of his humanity. This, however, seems not to be enough to accord him the status of Righteous”.

On June 6, 2013, Bozenna Rotman from the Polish Desk at Yad Vashem wrote an email to Mila Sandberg-Mesner, regretting that although the archive in the State Museum at Majdanek found documentation of Father Peciak’s death there on April 16, 1943, no documented reason for the arrest could be found. Without a clearer proof of action by Father Peciak on behalf of the rescued, “nothing can be done in this case”. Recent attempts to retrieve the document issued in the name of Stanisława Schmiedel from the city archives in Kolomiya by the local Catholic priest or other authorities, has thus far met with disappointment. Father Peciak was arrested on November 11, 1942, only a few days after Sandberg-Mesner’s friends Tonka and Iser Reiseman were killed in Lwów with false papers signed by Father Peciak in their possession. This convergence of dates is a strong indicator for Mila Sandberg-Mesner that the Germans had discovered his actions on behalf of Jews. She writes in an email dated 1 December 2013: “I am deeply convinced that Father Ludwik Peciak deserves a medal and the distinction of hero and martyr. My greatest wish is that this might still happen in my lifetime”.

The example of Father Ludwik Peciak illustrates some of the hurdles associated with rescuers, when survivors and their testimony alone is an insufficient condition for recognition. On the other hand, when rescuers tell their story without corroboration of the rescued, an equally one-sided picture arises. Plans to unveil a monument to rescuers in Warsaw, where considerably more than the

<sup>25</sup> Ceremony for Albin Tyll with Righteous among Nations Medal + Diploma in five parts: <http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLkkoUYW19M3RpD119-VCj878tczeNrl07>.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, part one, at 3:44.



almost 6,500 names stringently documented by Yad Vashem will be listed, points to the discrepancy in criteria applied by different groups<sup>27</sup>.

In addition to clarifying the criteria of recognition, the question of whether rescuers named only by the Polish side would have the same impact of healing and restorative justice which the Yad Vashem award carries, remains open.

Remembering rescuers without remembering the rescued is of questionable historical value, while remembering the rescued without remembering those who were not rescued borders on the immoral.

Groups instrumentalizing memory work pertaining to rescuers for contemporary political advantage do a disservice to themselves by excluding the integrative potential gained by including multiple perspectives. Conversely, condemning all bystanders as indifferent, antagonistic or anti-Semitic does a disservice to the possibility of overcoming personal and collective trauma, as well as constitutes an injustice to the memory of rescuers. Without a common ground for exchanging truths and sharing pain in order to restore "faith in the meaning of humanity", regions like the prewar Kresy, now in western Ukraine, will continue to be "contaminated landscapes", as Martin Pollack writes, waiting for the hastily covered graves, the thousands of unnamed victims on all sides and the lingering taboos to be uncovered, remembered and mourned together<sup>28</sup>. To the Jewish, Polish, Ukrainian, German perspectives, the Austrian, Lithuanian, Hungarian, Slovak and many others must follow<sup>29</sup>.

The dialogic value of bringing rescuers and rescued together, even if only through the mediation of their respective representatives, remains the key to overcoming the trauma of the Holocaust for all.

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[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Righteous\\_Among\\_the\\_Nations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Righteous_Among_the_Nations).

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.sprawiedliwi.org.pl/pl/cms/archiwum-aktualnosci/994,pomnik-polakow-ratujacych-zydow-stanic-na-placu-grzybowskiem-w-warszawie/>. A second monument has been suggested in the vicinity of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews. The lack of an inclusive perspective at the time of writing appears to indicate an instrumentalization of the problematic by some groups: <http://www.jewish.org.pl/index.php/opinie-komentarze-mainmenu-62/5731-wojna-pomnikow.html>.

<sup>28</sup> M. Pollack, *Kontaminierte Landschaften*, Salzburg 2014, Residenz Verlag. Polish translation in preparation.

<sup>29</sup> For an Austrian treatment of taboos with the intention of understanding how the horror of the Holocaust could be carried out by ordinary soldiers, see Stefan Ruzowitzky's film, *Radical Evil*.



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<sup>1</sup> *Encountering the Other. The Challenge for the Twenty-First Century. Spotkanie z Innym Jako Wyzwanie XXI Wieku*, Kraków 2007, TAIWPN Universitas.