CHAPTER 20

Stories of Rescue Activities in the Letters of Jewish Survivors about Christian Polish Rescuers, 1944–1949

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Introduction

This chapter considers the early postwar memories of Jewish survivors and their rescuers in Warsaw and Warsaw province, and the relationships between rescuers and their Jewish charges in the immediate postwar period. With the exception of studies of anti-Jewish violence, an early postwar social history of Polish Jewry has largely eluded close treatment by historians, as has a similar treatment of early postwar Polish society.¹ In general, the period 1945–1949 is under-researched in comparison with the post-1950 and post-1956 periods. While the history of Polish rescuers has been raised in several publications in Poland in the past, they have mostly been of a popular nature, and with the subject heavily politicized and emotionally charged. In his essay Polish-Jewish Relations since 1984: Reflections of a Participant, Antony Polonsky predicts a bright future for the study of Polish-Jewish relations.² One can only hope, given the recent more sophisticated and analytical research on rescue activities and the concerted efforts of scholars in Israel, Poland and the West, that a nuanced, comprehensive and synthetic portrait of this important aspect of wartime and postwar Polish-Jewish relations will emerge, for the subject at this stage is in its infancy.

¹ There is a vast literature in Polish, English and Hebrew on the Kielce pogrom and the historiography of this best-known single act of anti-Semitic violence of that period. For the most recent, albeit problematic, work in Polish pertaining to the subject, see Łukasz Kamiński and Jan Żaryn (eds.), Wokół pogromu kieleckiego (Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2006). On anti-Jewish pogroms in the early post-war period and the prevailing atmosphere, see Jan T. Gross, Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz. An Essay in Historical Interpretation (New York: Random House, 2006).

² Antony Polonsky, Polish-Jewish Relations since 1984: Reflections of a Participant (Cracow, Budapest: Wydawnictwo Austeria, 2009), see especially the conclusions, 41–52.
In this chapter, I analyze the early postwar correspondence addressed to the Central Committee of Polish Jews (CKŻP) located at Sienna St. no. 60 in Warsaw, to the American JOINT Distribution Committee (AJDC, the JOINT) with its headquarters at Chocimska 18 in Warsaw, and to the little known Warsaw based Komitet Pomocy Polakom (Committee to Aid the Poles), also referred to as Komisja Pomocy Polakom or Komisja Pomocy Aryjczykom. This Committee was established on the initiative of William Bein, second Director of the Warsaw branch of the JOINT, with the assistance of CKŻP. It began its work on November 15, 1946, and ended its activities, like the JOINT, in late 1949. The Komitet Pomocy Polakom had four main goals: to distribute financial aid, food and clothing among rescuers, to provide Christian holiday greetings and gifts to those rescuers who were known to have provided great service to the Jewish cause, to bring rescuers to the public eye, and to draw up a comprehensive chart of rescue activities by Poles. The latter two aims never came to fruition.

The large and unique collection of letters, petitions and accompanying notes, written between late 1944 and 1949, is scattered among different sections of the archives of the CKŻP, at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. Its authors were Christian Polish rescuers, rescued Jewish survivors, both adults and older children, and relatives of Jewish survivors living in and outside of Poland. A large number of the rescuers, both the authors of their own letters and those individuals referred to in the letters of Jewish survivors, constitute a group of “dedicated” individuals, committed to saving Jewish fugitives.

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5 On the subject of Komitet Pomocy Polakom see Joanna B. Michlic, “I will never forget what you did for me during the war”: Representations of Rescuers and Relationships Between Rescuers and Jewish Survivors in the Light of Correspondence to the Central Committee of Polish Jews and the JOINT, 1945–1949,” Yad Vashem Studies 39.2 (Fall 2011): 169–208.