Separating the Personal and the Political: Ukrainians who rescued Jews During the Holocaust and the Politics of Memory in Ukraine

The German and Soviet invasions of Poland in September 1939 marked the beginning of the bloodiest conflict in human history. After the German invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, and the rapid conquest of western Soviet territory, the Third Reich suddenly found itself in control of territory on which lived the vast majority of European Jewry. Germany, in trying to build a *judenrein* Europe, had, suddenly, a massive problem. And by the end of 1941, a solution to this problem was implemented. In December 1941, Hans Frank, head of the Generalgouvernment, told his lieutenants, "Gentlemen, I must ask you to rid yourselves of all feeling of pity. We must annihilate the Jews wherever we find them, in order to maintain the structure of the Reich as a whole."[1] So began the Holocaust. By the end of the War, the majority of the Jewish population of Europe had been destroyed. And the lands that saw the most killing were, of course, those with the largest populations of Jews – Poland, Belarus and Ukraine. Some 3 million Jews had lived in Ukraine[2] before the War;[3] by 1945, 1.5-1.6 million had been killed.[4]

The Holocaust in Ukraine has been the subject of intensive academic study and continued public discourse since the end of the War. In myriad ways, historians, sociologists, economists, psychologists, politicians and the public at large has attempted to interpret and explain the process of the destruction of Ukrainian Jewry. Complicating

[1] Quoted in Snyder, Timothy. *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* New York, 2010, 214
[2] including the territories of (pre-1939) Soviet Ukraine, Halychyna, Volyn, and Bukovyna
[3] Friedman, Philip. *Roads to Extinction: Essays on the Holocaust* New York, 1980, 193
[4] Lower, Wendy. *Historical Research on the Holocaust in Ukraine: Achievements and Agendas.* Paper presented on 11 September 2009 at the conference "The Holocaust by Bullets in Ukraine: A Conference for Researchers and Educators," Landgoed Huize Bergen, Vught, Netherlands, 1

greatly this attempt to comprehend what happened are the extraordinarily convoluted role played by the local, occupied gentile populations in the Holocaust; for it was not only the German occupiers who rounded up and murdered Jews – it is universally acknowledged that the Germans recruited local populations to assist in the destruction of their Jewish neighbors. The involvement of the local populations has received (much needed) attention from Holocaust survivors and scholars. "Jewish and Ukrainian memoir literature illustrates how a selective memory of the past may generate nationally aimed paradigms of collective guilt and responsibility. Whereas a common Jewish recollection often holds Ukrainians equally or sometimes guiltier than Germans, a Ukrainian memory rather avoids touching a Jewish component or refers to the Jewish plight as a tragic and inevitable historical reality."[5]

Yet during this time of mass crisis and pervasive violence many Christian Ukrainians risked their own and their families' lives to rescue or otherwise help their Jewish countrymen. Yad Vashem has documented more than 2000 cases of Ukrainian Righteous.[6] The role of Christian Ukrainians in rescuing or assisting Jewish Ukrainians has, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, been garnering increased scholarly attention.[7] If the circumstances around collaboration with the German occupiers are extraordinarily convoluted, the circumstances around aid and rescue are equally complex. Arguably the most effective way to get at this complexity is through the testimony of the survivors,

---

[5] Melamed, Vladimir. "Organized and Unsolicited Collaboration in the Holocaust." *East European Jewish Affairs*, 37:2, 2007, p. 218

[6] http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/righteous/pdf/virtial_wall/ukraine.pdf. Accessed 20 September 2010.

[7] For an overview of the recent historiography on this topic see
Abakunova, Hanna. *Vyvchennia problemy dopomohy yevreyam na okupovanykh natsystamy terytoriakh u dyskursi mizhetnichnykh vzayemyn – istoriohrafichnyi aspect.* Materialy miznarodnoi naukovo-praktychnoi konferentsii "Ukraina u Velykiy Vitchezniani Viyni – omyslennia mynuloho, pohliad u maybutne" Donetsk. Vydannia Donetskoho natsionalnoho universytety, 2009, #1 (41), 115-120
See also
Kovba, Zhanna. *Lyudiannist u bezodni pekla.* Kyevo-Mohylanska Akademiya, 2009

eyewitnesses and rescuers. They were there; we were not – and it is they who can inform us on the intricacy of human relations that can help us to better understand the contexts surrounding rescue and aid in Ukraine during the Holocaust.

This paper will be divided into two main sections. The first section, *The Personal*, will deal with the complexities surrounding rescue and aid in the context of the Holocaust in Ukraine. Evidence in this section will be drawn from interviews with survivors and aid givers. The second section, *The Political* will focus on the role of rescue in the history of memory of the Holocaust in Ukraine. The central point here is that neither the Holocaust nor, it follows, rescue and aid during the Holocaust seem to be integral parts of the discussion and remembrance of the German occupation of Ukraine among ordinary Ukrainians Why? And can an increased public knowledge of rescue be of any use in correcting this problem?

A Word on Methodology

Before beginning the discussion about rescue and aid in the context of the Holocaust in Ukraine, I will allow myself a brief digression on methodology. The primary evidence used in this study is almost exclusively based on interviews with Holocaust survivors from Ukraine. The problems of using eyewitness testimonies in scholarship are well-known and have been described in detail. However, I believe that the use of first-hand accounts gives us unique insights into the human experiences of people that cannot be garnered from official documents. As Omer Bartov convincingly argued, “by virtue of being personal, or subjective, such testimonies provide insights into the lives and minds of men, women and children who experienced the events and thus, tell us much more

than any official document about the mental landscape of the period, the psychology of the protagonists, and the views and perceptions of others."[8] The interviews with survivors or rescuers to which I will be referring in this section are drawn from two sources – the Shoah Visual History Foundation archives and the archives of the Ukrainian Canadian Research and Documentation Centre in Toronto; I have reviewed 126 interviews in total. The commonality among all of these interviews is that they were all conducted in Canada; that is, all of the people interviewed are now living in Canada. This is because the research conducted for this paper was done under the auspices of a joint project of the UCRDC in Toronto, the Center for the Study of History and Culture of East European Jewry in Kyiv and the Ukrainian Jewish Encounter Initiative. The project is entitled *I am my Brother's Keeper*, and was initiated by Leonid Finberg, director of the Center for the Study of History and Culture of East European Jewry in Kyiv.[9] As part of this project I am responsible for research in Canada. This approach presents several advantages, but also has several drawbacks. One of the most important drawbacks is that the vast majority of the survivors and rescuers who were interviewed are from Western Ukrainian lands (that is, lands that were occupied by the Soviet Union only in 1939); as such the experiences of survivors and rescuers in Soviet Ukraine are thus objectively underrepresented. This approach, however, offers the advantage that the variable of Canada has provided for a cross-section of survivors; that is, not only survivors who were rescued or had positive interactions during the Holocaust with the Ukrainian population were included in the review of evidence. Having said that,

[8] Bartov, Omer. "Wartime Lies and Other Testimonies: Jewish-Christian Relations in Buczacz, 1939-44." In *East European Politics and Society*. Vol. 25, #3. August, 2011, p. 487

[9] For a full explanation of the goals of this project, see the project website http://www.ucrdc.org/Project-Ukrainian-Jewish_Relations.html

however, this paper should be viewed as a preliminary starting point of what will be a much wider study. A caveat must also be mentioned. Because of the time (mid-1990s-present) in which the vast majority of the interviews under review here were conducted, most of the survivors and rescuers (or, sometimes, children of rescuers) were very young (childhood age to late teens, or at most, early twenties) during the war. There are, of course, good reasons to argue that testimonies given decades after the events under discussion must be viewed with some skepticism; a person's life experience, can, obviously, influence their views of the traumatic events through which they lived. For many Holocaust survivors, however, the desire to share their stories developed only later in their lives, when they had built their own families, and sought to leave a record of what they went through not only for posterity, but for their children and/or grandchildren.[10] Moreover,

> In some, though not all cases, testimonies given decades after the event have all the freshness and vividness of a first account that one may find in some early postwar testimonies. This can be explained not least by the very fact that the memory of the event was kept sealed inside the mind and never exposed to the light of day through telling and retelling, let alone contaminated by the "noise in the system" of external discourse and representation."[11]

It is, I believe, quite possible to get an accurate picture, especially of something as inherently personal as rescue, through the testimonies of those who were rescuing or those being rescued.

---

[10] Dan Michman, head of the International Institute for Holocaust Research at Yad Vashem, discussed these issues in his recent presentation, *Righteous Among the Nations: The Emergence of a Unique Commemorative Concept*. University of Toronto, Centre for Jewish Studies Lectures. 19 September, 2011, Toronto.

[11] Bartov, Omer. "Wartime Lies and Other Testimonies: Jewish-Christian Relations in Buczacz, 1939-44." In *East European Politics and Society*. Vol. 25, #3. August, 2011, p. 488

Part A – The Personal

The Testimonies – Before the War

Before turning to the time of the Holocaust, it is, I believe, important to comment briefly on what the testimonies tell us about Ukrainian-Jewish relations before the attack by Germany on the Soviet Union. Between the Wars, when most of the territories from which most of the witnesses came were part of the Polish state, in general relations between Jewish Ukrainians and Christian Ukrainians and Poles were, if somewhat distant, fairly amicable. Many of the Jewish survivors remember the interwar years fondly, as a time of relative harmony.[12] Fania Ingber from Lutsk, for example, said that she never experienced anti-Semitism personally before the War; that her family often visited with neighbors.[13] Samuel Levinson from Rokitno (Volyn), said, "Life altogether wasn't bad; we had a lot of friends, that later on we were very disappointed in."[14] There was a distance between the Jewish and the gentile populations. Peter Binder said, "A goy was different, but we got along; they were gentle people."[15] Nevertheless, several of the survivors pointed to periodic, isolated incidents of anti-Semitism. Fishel Goldig, from Melnytsia, remembers being called "dirty Jew" by schoolmates, and being beaten up in the schoolyard,[16] and Gertruda Rosenberg remembers a tangible rise in anti-Semitism around 1938, and periodic fights breaking out between Jewish Ukrainian and Christian

[12] For a discussion on these relations, see Redlich, Simon. *Together and Apart in Brzezany: Poles, Jews, and Ukrainians, 1919-1945*

[13] Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive. Interview with Fania Inberg (nee Paszt), 16 September 1996, Ville St. Laurent, QC, Segment 11.

[14] Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive. Interview with Samuel Levinson. 20 July, 1995, Richmond Hill, ON, Segment 6.

[15] Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive. Interview with Peter Binder, 30 January, 1997, Winnipeg, MB,. Segment 4.

[16] Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive. Interview with Fishel Goldig, 12 December, 1996, Montreal, QC, Segment 5.

Ukrainian university students.[17] Somewhat different were relationships in the part of Ukraine under Soviet rule since the Revolution. Grigorii Galperin from Odessa, for example, pointed out that in their apartment building Jewish and gentile Ukrainians invited each other over for their religious holidays; the children, he said, therefore were able to celebrate both Christian and Jewish holidays. He also mentioned, however, an undercurrent of "quiet anti-Semitism."[18]

With the Soviet occupation of Western Ukraine, a new political and socioeconomic order was established. Part and parcel of the new order were political repressions; thousands of people were arrested, expropriated and deported by the Soviet authorities; Jewish Ukrainians in the newly annexed territories, were, of course, not immune from these repressions. While some witnesses remembered the first Soviet occupation as a time of the greater equality for Jews – Morris Perlmutter of Malynkska, for example, said, "Under the Russians, the Jew became a mensch,"[19] the vast majority remembered 1939-1941 as years of upheaval and turmoil. David Cuperfain's father, Aaron, owned a factory in Kowel, which was confiscated in April 1940; the father was declared an "enemy of the people." There was a perceptible shift in moods – "Kids could beat me up, call me a capitalist, bourgeois. I was considered an outcast."[20] Flora Blitzer spoke of her father's factory being nationalized; her family was thrown out of their apartment. They were, she said, now second-class citizens because they were "former

[17] Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive. Interview with Gertruda Rosenberg, 22 January, 1996, Ottawa, ON, Segment 24.
[18] Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive. Interview with Grigorii Galperin, 23 May, 1996, Toronto, ON, Segments 20-21
[19] Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive. Interview with Morris Permutter. 4 January, 1995, Toronto, ON, Segement 19
[20] Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive. Interview with David Cuperfain. 9 August, 1996, North York, ON, Segments 21-22

capitalists."[21] According to some witnesses, Jews who had been active Communists during the years of Polish rule many of whom had spent time in Polish prisons for their politics, were quickly disillusioned by the realities of Soviet rule. Fela Leader from Lviv, for example, noted that "those real Communists who spent years in prison converted away from Communism when they saw the truth."[22] Many Jewish Ukrainians were deported by the Soviet authorities; as one noted

> Already under the [Soviet] regime, before the Nazi tragedy, fathers of families had become like loosely hanging limbs. The framework of their lives was torn away, their families became unsteady, their desire for society disappeared, and the authority of Jewish conscience crumbled.[23]

Although rare, there were examples in the interviews where Jews in Western Ukraine believed that the German occupation would not be worse than the Soviet. Sabina Hirsch's father, Otto Badian, whose store was confiscated by the Soviets, recalled his experiences in the First World War as an officer in the Austrian army, and did not try to flee east with his family; "he thought it would be better under the Germans." [24]

The Shoah – Christian Ukrainian aid to their Jewish Ukrainian Neighbors

Perhaps the most striking feeling one gets when researching instances of rescue and aid offered by gentile Ukrainians to Jewish Ukrainians is the extraordinary breadth and convolution of aid giving and rescue; if as Wendy Lower correctly pointed out, "collective violence is a form of social history,"[25] then so too is aid and rescue. Probably

---

[21] Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive. Interview with Flora Blitzer (nee Rinde) 2 December, 1994, Willowdale, ON. Segments 16-17

[22] Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive. Interview with Fela Leader (nee Zwilling). 19 January, 1995, Willowdale, ON. Segments 34-35.

[23] Quoted in Snyder, Timothy. "The Life and Death of Western Volhynian Jewry, 1921-1945." In Lower, Wendy, and Brandon, Ray. *The Shoah in Ukraine: History, Testimony, Memorialization*. Indianapolis, 2008, 89. See also for discussion of the Soviet deportations, 1939-41

[24] Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive. Interview with Sabina Hirsch (nee Badian). 16 March, 1997, Winnipeg, MB. Segment 16.

[25] Lower, Wendy. *Historical Research on the Holocaust in Ukraine: Achievements and Agendas*, 11

the most obvious distinction that one comes across is aid or rescue offered for motives of profit or enrichment and that offered for the sake of offering aid. In the interviews studied both instances are present often. David Cuperfain, from Kovel, who along with three family members, was hidden by a Ukrainian peasant woman Ksenia, recalls that she hid them in her barn. Ksenia would return from church and tell them that the priest had said that it was a sin to hide Jews, and that she was throwing them out. In response to this David and his family would offer her more money, which she would accept, and they would stay another week. It was, Cuperfain, said, "her way of milking."[26]

There are numerous instances mentioned in the testimony about aid offered in return for financial incentives. Hermina Eidelberg, for example, hid for over a year with a family in a village near Lviv, over the course of which she paid them with all of her own family's precious jewelry.[27] Susan Lieberman, from Przemyslany, was hidden by a peasant couple, Dimitri and Stefania. Dimitri had owed money to Susan's father and agreed to take her in, not telling his wife that Susan was Jewish. When Stefania found out, Susan had to pay her to keep hiding her, and was taken advantage of, forced to do difficult farm work, while sleeping only a couple hours a day.[28]

Sometimes aid-giving relations that had been based on payment changed. Carmela Finkel, from Radziechow (near Ternopil) recalled that her father had made arrangements with a man, Ochudsky who had previously worked for him when he (Finkel's father) was a manager of a mill, The father was in the ghetto and would send

---

[26] Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive. Interview with David Cuperfain, 9 August, 1996, North York. Sections 24-27.

[27] Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive. Interview with Hermina Eidelberg (nee Raubvogel), 28 April, 1996, Toronto. Segments 19-20.

[28] Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive. Interview with Susan Lieberman (nee Eisenstein), 9 June, 1998, Hampstead, QC, Segments 14-16.

money to Ochudsky. Eventually the money ran out. Ochudsky, however, refused to let Carmela go, telling her, "You're just going to stay with us and we'll manage."[29] Despite the fact that Gestapo agents were billeted in the house, she stayed with Ochudsky and his wife for twenty months.

Much of the aid mentioned by survivors came in the form of small tokens of one-time assistance; farmers bringing food to the forests, letting Jewish Ukrainians stay over night, and so forth.[30] Indeed, this kind of aid is mentioned in almost all of the testimonies.

A particularly problematic question when dealing with aid and rescue is aid given by people who harbored prejudices towards Jews but nonetheless helped individuals. Wanda Lerek, of Lviv, and her husband, Mike, for example, were hidden by a woman who told them she liked them because "they weren't ordinary Jews. She liked [Mike], but not the ordinary Jew."[31] There is also the problem of people who genuinely wanted to offer aid, but for several considerations, could not do so, or did so for only short periods. Joseph Dichek from Kalucz recalled that Joseph Dubenko, a farmer near Stanislawow (now Ivano-Frankivsk), would not let him hide at his farm, saying, "I don't care about my life, but they'll kill the whole family."[32] However, Dubenko did agree to let Dichek come and get food while he was hiding in the forest, and allowed him to stay for a couple days at a time. Regina Dichek, Joseph's wife, was fed several times by a Ukrainian peasant who felt she could not take the risk to hide her.[33]

---

[29] Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive. Interview with Carmela Finkel (nee Shragge), 25 February, 1996, Winnipeg. Segments 30-44.

[30] UCRDC Archives. Interview with Daria Derbysh. 5 July 2010, Toronto, ON
Interview with Zenon Tatarsky. 29 June, 2010, Toronto, ON.

[31] Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive. Interview with Wanda Lerek (nee Kleinwichs). 20 October, 1995, Toronto. Segment 91.

[32] Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive. Interview with Joseph Dichek. 17 September, 1996, Toronto, ON, Segments 10-18

[33] Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive. Interview with Regina Dichek (nee Likwornik). 17

Hannah Abakumova has discussed several possible reactions of the local population to the German occupation:

> With regard to the policies implemented by the occupation forces…psychologists define three basic reactions of the local population. The first reaction is the most common – changing one's attitude towards reality practically without a change in consciousness. This allows for a certainty in what will happen tomorrow. It is, in essence, a protective reaction. The second reaction is a position of coexistence. A person understands what is happening, but does nothing to oppose the regime, understanding that they are unable to change anything, but does not spiritually accept what is happening. The third reaction is rebellion – spiritual and physical. This reaction is the rarest, in that on the one hand the regime is strong and powerful and fighting it is difficult, almost impossible, and on the other – fear for one's own life and an understanding of the high risks involved. For these reasons this behavior is not for many. [34]

In the testimonies reviewed, there were several instances identified of precisely the third type of reaction to German occupation mentioned above. Given that sheltering, hiding or aiding Jews carried with it the death penalty (often for not only the rescuer/s but also for his or her family), the act of sheltering or assisting Jewish Ukrainians, particularly if done over a long period of time, must be construed as active opposition to the policies of the occupation.[35] Sometimes the aid offered was done so because the Jewish Ukrainian being helped was a close friend of the family. In the case of Sabina Hirsch, a gentile Ukrainian, Serafin, a judge in the town of Husiatyn (Ternopil region) was the father of Sabina's best friend, Lida. Sabina, after escaping from a Ukrainian policeman, came to their house. Mrs. Serafin opened the door. Sabina describes her reaction:

> Sabinka, you're alive! And she grabbed me and hugged me and kissed me. I want you to know that Mrs. Serafin loved me almost like her own daughter. Lida used

---

September, 1996, Toronto. Segment 53-54

[34] Abakunova, Hanna. *Vyvchennia problemy dopomohy yevreyam na okupovanykh natsystamy terytoriakh u dyskursi mizhetnichnykh vzayemyn – istoriohrafichnyi aspect.* [my translation from Ukrainian]

[35] Abakunova, Hanna. *Vyvchennia problemy dopomohy yevreyam na okupovanykh natsystamy terytoriakh u dyskursi mizhetnichnykh vzayemyn – istoriohrafichnyi aspect.* [my translation from Ukrainian]

> to be jealous… [The Serafins] were the Ukrainian elite in [Husiatyn]. "We know everyone. Even if someone finds out, you'll survive. My husband is a judge."[36]

After a time, however, it became too dangerous for the Serafins to keep Sabina, so Rachenko, the town priest, taught her Ukrainian prayers and she was provided with a fake identity, Stefka Bohdan. In 1995 she reunited with the Serafims.[37]

Krystyna Korpan, the daughter of Kateryna Sikorska, who was recognized as Righteous Among the Nations in 1995, described how her mother hid two sons of their Jewish Ukrainian neighbor, Anatoliy and Leonid Kresel, and Klyar, a photographer in Pidhaytsi, near Ternopil. Korpan said that her doctor neighbor had been very good to them, "That doctor was very good to us. My mother was a widow…and she would come and treat us and never took any payment. She was always so good to us."[38] Kateryna Sikorska was tried and executed by the Germans in 1943 for her assistance of Jewish Ukrainians.

As already touched upon, Jewish Ukrainians tended to live somewhat segregated from their gentile Ukrainian neighbors, especially in territories that were not part of the Soviet Union until 1939. One of the most important aspects of aid and rescue during the Holocaust in Ukraine is the fact that many of the rescuers either did not know those they rescued or knew them only in passing. Mordecai Paldiel described this dilemma.

> It is not the rescuers who seek out the people who need to be rescued…Rescuers are suddenly confronted with a direct appeal for aid and they comply….they are chosen by the victim…In this highly charged atmosphere the would-be rescuer may consciously or subconsciously ask himself: "Without regard to my personal feelings and prejudices on this person's ethnicity (assuming that these are not

[36] Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive. Interview with Sabina Hirsch (nee Badian). 16 March, 1997, Winnipeg. Sections 75-91.
[37] Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive. Interview with Sabina Hirsch (nee Badian). 16 March, 1997, Winnipeg. Sections 91-96, 132.
[38] UCRDC Archives. Interview with Krystyna Korpan. 12 May, 2010. Toronto, ON. [my translation from the Ukrainian – OZ]

> always positive) – does this living person standing in front of me have the basic and minimum right to continue to live – a privilege heretofore enjoyed by all living creatures, and now, for the first time, contested by a malevolent human agency?"[39]

Sometimes the decision to help would come as a result of a small, kindness that had previously been offered the rescuer. Israel Friedman hid in a hole dug by a farmer, Bolko, from the village of Lovisko (Lviv) in his straw shed for more than 15 months. Friedman asked Bolko why he was helping him. Bolko told him, "What your father did for me, I can't forget." He then related the kindness that Friedman's father had shown Bolko. Bolko had hired five or six men to help him collect hay for his field; Friedman's father was driving his cart and offered the men a ride into the village. They stopped at the tavern and, instead of Bolko buying Friedman a beer, Friedman bought a round for all six men. This kindness, years later, was remembered by Bolko, and even after seeing the execution of another aid giver, kept Friedman at his home, making him promise not to say anything to his, Bolko's, family, about the execution. Friedman said, "You know what kind of mitzvah it is to help?…He's a very bright, courageous man. We're still in touch with them, send them packages every month. And they deserve it."[40]

There are several instances in the interviews when victims were rescued by people who did not know them at all. Olya, the daughter of Timosh Geramsymiuk, invited Chana Gitalis to stay in their home in Lubovyi. Chana and her brother in law stayed for

---

[39] Paldiel, Mordecai. *The Face of the Other: Reflections on the Motivations of Gentile Rescuers of Jews.* The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority. http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/righteous/pdf/resources/paldiel.pdf, 1-2

[40] Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive. Interview with Israel Friedman. 23 June 1997, Winnipeg, MN. Segments 17-30.

two years. “We gave them nothing. They were good people, angels. It is a miracle. We did not know him before. It’s a miracle what he did for us.”[41]

Rescuing was further complicated by the fact that in some instances family members of rescuers were opposed to the help being offered. Czarna Stermer recalled how she, her brother, sister and mother hid throughout the War in various homes in Bilche Zolote. Fedor Kosziuk, leader of the Ukrainian nationalists in Bilche, was hiding her brother. She and her sister were going from place to place. The “best and bravest” of their aid givers was Todaska Paron, who would bring her books, and feed them very well. Todaska did not trust her son, Josef, who wanted to go rob Jewish homes; in response Todaska beat him with a wet towel until he promised not to do it anymore. In 1990 and 1991, Stermer returned to Bilche to visit the people who had helped her during the War. Upon seeing Stermer, Todaska said that “Now she can die peacefully because she saw me. Those were her words.”[42]

The complexity of aid giving and rescue in the context of the Holocaust in Ukraine is profound; in many ways, the behaviors of people cannot be explained rationally; perhaps, as several of the interviewees have put it, in the end the only thing one can conclude is that there are many instances where there are “good and bad people, like in every nation.”[43]

---

[41] Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive.. Interview with Chana Gitalis. 26 May, 1995, Willowdale, ON. Segments 28-31.

[42] Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive. Interview with Czarna Stermer (nee Kimelman). 27 May, 1998, Hampstead, QC, Segments 13-32.

[43] Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive.
Interview with Anna Blufarb (nee Zuckerman). 22 May, 199, North Sydney, NS. Segment. 20.
Interview with Sofia Krayz. 16 June, 1998, Thornhill, ON. Segments 40-41
Interview with Herman Teicher, 7 May, 1998, Thornhill, ON. Segment 4.

General Observations on Rescue

Of 111 Shoah Foundation interviews studied,[44] sixteen interviewees made no specific mention of aid from the gentile population. In the main, these were survivors who either escaped to the forests (often to partisan units) by themselves, served in the army, or survived the ghettos and the Nazi death camps. Of 126 interviews, 95 made specific references to being hidden for at least a short period of time by somebody. Of these 95, 60 hid in rural settings (in farms, barns, peasant dwellings, or forests), while 24 hid in urban locations (in the main, attics, apartments, cellars). 11 interviewees mentioned hiding in both rural and urban locations. Several observations can be drawn from these facts.

What is striking about the fact that a large part of survivors successfully hid in rural settings is the fact that most of the prewar Jewish population in both Western and Soviet Ukraine lived in cities; many escaped to the countryside, where, it is obvious, there was a greater chance of survival. So, while in the main Jews tended to live in cities, those who survived the Holocaust tended to survive in the countryside. The most obvious reason for this is that there are more places to hide in the country – forests, farms, etc. It is also worth noting that control exercised by the authorities, or the capacity of the authorities to find Jews in the countryside was less than in the cities. However, it is also worth noting that in villages and small communities, the local population knew each other; it was therefore in some ways easier to identify Jews in the countryside. Moreover, it was also easier for neighbors to identify, to find out, who among them was hiding Jews. Nevertheless, at least from the small sample studied, it appears that the countryside was a

[44] I do not include interviews that were conducted by the UCRDC (15) in this number, as these were conducted specifically on the topic of rescue.

more effective place to hide than urban settings. While this may be somewhat obvious, it is nevertheless worth noting as an important reality in the social history of rescue.

The history and memory of the Holocaust, and the part that rescue and aid played in that history and memory, are not integral parts of the memory of the German occupation of Ukraine; nor are they an integral part of the narrative of national history - it is this problem to which I will now turn.

Part B – The Political – Competing Myths – The Soviet and the Ukrainian

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, two divergent broadly defined trends of discourse on the memory of WWII in Ukraine can be seen, which can be defined as the 'Soviet' and what I would call the 'particularist Ukrainian' interpretations. The old, unreformed Soviet interpretation – the myth of the Great Patriotic War, during Brezhnev's rule, replaced the October Revolution as the dominant foundational myth of the USSR: "In its idealized form, the war had everything: violence, drama, martyrdom, success, and a chic global status."[45] The myth of the War "carried with it an identifying and disciplining influence on the heterogeneous and, in the main, apolitical Soviet society."[46] This interpretation of the war still has great salience in Ukraine, if not in academic circles, then certainly among the general population. It is instructive, for example, that a Razumkov Centre poll in April 2011 found that 70 % of Ukrainians considered Victory

[45] Turmakin, Nina. "The Great Patriotic War as myth and memory." In *European Review.* Vol. 11, #4. 2003, p. 600

[46] Hrynevych, Vladyslav. "Mit viyny ta viyna mitiv." In *Krytyka*. #5, May, 2005. [My translation from Ukrainian – OZ]

Day, May 9th, a 'Great Holiday – *velyke sviato*'[47] while 66.2% thought that the most accurate name for the war against fascism is "Great Patriotic War – *Velyka Vitcheznyana Viyna*" while only 28.6% believed that it should be called the "Second World War – *Druha Svitova Vyina*"[48]

The 'Great Patriotic War' myth defines the War as, in the first place, the triumph of Communism over Fascism; the triumph of the Soviet people over the 'fascist occupiers – *fashystski zaharbnyky.'* In the second place, this "Great Patriotic War" interpretation defines the victims of Nazism as Soviet citizens; the victims were Soviets, not Ukrainians or Russians or Poles or Belarusians, or Jews. In the specific case of Soviet Jewry, the Great Patriotic War myth in large part obfuscated their role in Soviet victory. Amir Weiner quotes a letter to the Ukrainian Central Committee in April 1947, in which Jewish Communists complain about the attitude of Vinnytsia obkom secretary Stakhurskii:

> For some reason, [he] is "deeply convinced" that, to a man, all Jews were in Tashkent and not one of them has fought! It would do him no harm to know that every [Jew] of draft age was at the front and fought fairly well for the motherland, no worse than other nationalities in our motherland. It is a fact that the performance by the Jews was distinguished and [their] heroism at the front was not at the bottom among the peoples of the USSR.[49]

There is, moreover, little if any room in this interpretation for the particularity and exceptionalism of the Holocaust or for the destruction of Soviet Jewry as a unique process in the context of the War. "On the terrains of the Soviet Union, Jews were twice destroyed – physically, by the Nazis, and spiritually – by the Communists, who destroyed memory through a cynical claim of the murder, not of Jews, but of 'peaceful Soviet

---

[47] www.uceps.org/ukr/news.php?news_id=371. "Great" in this sense means important or central.
[48] www.uceps.org/ukr/news.php?news_id=371.
[49] Quoted in Weiner, Amir. "The Making of a Dominant Myth: The Second World War and the Construction of Political Identities within the Soviet polity." In *Russian Review*. Vol.. 55, #4. October, 1996, p. 647

citizens.'"[50] 20 years after the collapse of Communism, this interpretation still holds sway, if not in academia, then amongst a significant part of the population of Ukraine.

The other trend, broadly defined, I would call a 'particularist Ukrainian' interpretation, which focuses on the struggle of the Ukrainian people against both Fascism and Communism, against both Hitler and Stalin. Here the focus is on the Ukrainian people, their fight, their desire to build, on the ruins of both totalitarianisms, an independent Ukraine. In this trend, the sole "Ukrainian" actors in the struggle was the Ukrainian liberation movement (*ukrainskyi vyzvolnyi rukh*) were, in the political sphere, the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, and in the military theatre, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, who led a struggle against Soviet occupation and the 'Muscovite yoke.'[51] All other actors on the territory of Ukraine – be they Polish, Soviet (Red Army or partisan) or German, were enemies of the struggle for liberation.[52] Moreover, the 'particularist Ukrainian' interpretation of the war shares an important shortcoming with the Soviet interpretation; an insistence on a black-and-white picture of the war. "The heroes are…depicted as morally impeccable figures with deep ties to their native land and associated with a history of persecution that dates back several centuries."[53] In this interpretation, as in the Soviet one, there is also little or no room for the Holocaust.

---

[50] Kovba, Zhanna. "Holokost ochyma frantsuskoho sviashchennyka" In *Istorychna Pravda*. 9 September, 2011. http://www.istpravda.com.ua/articles/2011/09/9/54245/view_print/ [my translation from Ukrainian]

[51] Jilge, Wilfried, and Troebst, Stefan. "Divided Historical Cultures? World War II and Historical Memory in Soviet and Post-Soviet Ukraine: Introduction." In *Jahrbucher fur Geschichte Osteuropas.* Vol. 54, #1. 2006, p. 1

[52] For a discussion see Zaitsev, Oleksandr. "Viyna mifiv pro viynu v suchasniy Ukraini." Paper presented at the international conference *Druha Svitova Viyna ta (vid)tvorennia pamyati v suchasni Ukraini.* 23-26 September, 2009, Kyiv. Papers available online at http://ww2-historicalmemory.org.ua/docs/ukr/Zaitsev.doc

[53] Marples, David. "Anti-Soviet Partisans and Ukrainian Memory." In *East European Politics and Societies.* Vol. 24, #1, p. 40

It is important to point out that neither of the two broad trends that I have identified exist in a vacuum; there is a large degree of interaction, I believe, an effort by some historians, but mostly politicians, to combine the two opposing viewpoints into a consolidation myth.[54] However, the central point, in my view, is that *neither* myth treats adequately the particularity of the Holocaust in the context of the war; interaction between these myths, it follows, also does little if anything to illuminate the Holocaust as part of the history of the War in Ukraine. The discourse about the history of the War has played, and continues to play, an important role in Ukrainian politics since independence, and to some extent, since the beginning of perestroika. While this is not the place for an in-depth discussion of the interaction between the memory of the War and Ukrainian politics, it is nonetheless important to point out that through four presidential administrations, dialogue and dispute over this memory has remained a part of both election campaigns and general political discourse. The use of historical memory for political ends in Ukraine reached its apogee in the 2004 presidential campaign, with the sustained campaign to brand Viktor Yushchenko a "fascist," "Nazi sympathizer," and so forth.[55] Troublingly, because Ukrainian politicians can use the divided memory of the war for political ends[56], and thus rally their bases around questions of memory, there is

---

[54] Jilge, Wilfried. "The Politics of History and the Second World War in post-Communist Ukraine (1986/1991-2004/2005)." In *Jahrbucher fur Geschichte Osteuropas.* Vol. 54, #1. 2006, pp. 50-81.

[55] Hrynevych, Vladyslav. "Mit viyny ta viyna mitiv." In *Krytyka*. #5, May, 2005. See also Harasymiw, Bohdan. "Memories of the Second World War in Recent Ukrainian Election Campaigns." In *Journal of Ukrainian Studies.* Vol. 32, #1. Summer, 2007, pp. 97-108

[56] Example of this are too numerous to list here. One particularly cynical case, however, was the publication, according to a decree from President Kuchma, of the Book of Memory of Ukraine, (*Knyha Pamyati Ukrainy*), which was focused on the Ukrainian contribution to the War. The book was printed in two versions, with different introductions, in one of which the OUN and UPA were presented as Germany's henchmen. In the other version, there was no mention of this. The book was then distributed in East and West Ukraine accordingly.
For a discussion of this and other examples see Jilge, Wilfried. "The Politics of History and the Second World War in post-Communist Ukraine (1986/1991-2004/2005)." In *Jahrbucher fur Geschichte Osteuropas.* Vol. 54, #1. 2006, pp. 50-81. Suffice to say that unfortunately manipulation of historical

little reason for them to encourage, through state institutions, a more objective picture of the history of the war. Because of this, then, the question of the Holocaust, is left on the margins of discourse about the war, to say nothing of its integration into the Ukrainian national historical narrative. Thus, state support for the research institutions that focus on the Holocaust is

> virtually absent or minimal…Ukraine supports the creation of memorial complexes at the sites of mass executions of Jews, but these projects are primarily carried out using the donations of the foreigners whose relatives died in the Holocaust in Ukraine. Another example is the setting up of the Holocaust Museum in Dnipropetrovsk. This large-scale project is being realized, understandably, with Ukraine's support but is financed by the Jewish community and private individuals.[57]

The central problem with both the Soviet and the 'particularist Ukrainian' interpretations is that neither focuses on the victims. Struggle is the central building block of both myths. Largely because of this the problem of the Holocaust is left out of popular discourse on the War. If it is mentioned, it is mentioned as a separate, Jewish tragedy, and thus segregated from national Ukrainian history. "It is probably easier and simpler to speak *about us* and *about them,* for example, about our Holodomor, and their Holocaust. As a result of such an approach, a model of historical memory is gradually formed, in which the Holocaust has no connection to national history, and the Ukrainian context of

---

memory has been omnipresent in Ukrainian politics, and will probably continue to be so for the foreseeable future.

[57] Hon, Maksym. "Memory of the Holocaust: Who Shapes it and How it Functions in Ukraine." Paper presented at the international conference *Druha Svitova Viyna ta (vid)tvorennia pamyati v suchasni Ukraini.* 23-26 September, 2009, Kyiv. Papers available online at http://ww2-historicalmemory.org.ua/docs/eng/Gon.doc

the Holocaust is unfamiliar to society. What is particularly dangerous, the Holocaust is unfamiliar and not understood by Ukrainian youth."[58]

A very important positive development is that in the last few years Ukrainian historians and sociologists have identified this problem and within academia there is an effort to address it. Myroslav Shkandrij, of the University of Manitoba, in a discussion about Omer Bartov's controversial book *Erased,* wrote:

> My own study of Jews in Ukrainian literature has led me to many examples in which the Ukrainian and Jewish suffering has been combined. This is not to suggest that one should eclipse or diminish the other, but that both should be acknowledged. By allowing the story of Ukrainian suffering to be told, one in fact makes the narration of Jewish suffering easier, including the story of the complicity of some Ukrainians in the Holocaust. By acknowledging both, one disarms opposition when the question "Well, what about us?" is raised. In fact the answer in most cases, of course, is "They *were* us!"[59]

If in academia, this problem of integrating the Jewish experience into the narrative of Ukrainian national history is being addressed, in the wider public discourse the problem largely remains. The last few months have highlighted this problem –leading up to "Victory Day" celebrations, a plethora of discussions about the meaning and memory of the War, red flags, Hitlerism vs. Stalinism, and so forth, took place across the country. In very few of these discussions was the plight of Ukrainian Jewry during the War even mentioned; in almost none did the Holocaust play a central role. While it is clear that the Ukrainian government's decision to mandate that the red flag be flown during Victory Day celebrations was a provocation,[60] the central point is that the provocation, if not

---

[58] Podolsky, Anatoliy. "Ukrainske suspilstvo i pamyat pro Holokost – sproba analizu deyakykh aspektiv. *Holokost i suchasnist*. Vol. 1, #5, 2009, p. 51[my translation from Ukrainian]

[59] Shkandrij, Myroslav. "Book Symposium – Erased: vanishing traces of Jewish Galicia in present-day Ukraine." In *Nationalities Papers*. Vol. 38, No. 2, p.301.

[60] It is instructive that while the law was introduced by the ruling coalition, which is led by the President's party, the president never actually signed the law into effect. It seems that the whole exercise was little more than an attempt to divert attention from the socioeconomic situation in the country. See my article

totally successful, gained some traction. This highlights the obvious fact that the discourse over WWII in Ukraine remains highly politicized; this discourse, therefore, has little or no room for the victim. What is needed, in a word, is the *depoliticization* of the historical memory; or put another way, the *personalization* of historical memory.

Despite the fact that the state has shown little interest in promoting a more nuanced dialogue about the war, and has done little, if anything, to encourage a wider understanding of the Holocaust, in academia these processes are already prominent. There are many institutions in Ukraine, including *Tkuma* (All-Ukrainian Center for Holocaust Studies)[61] in Dnipropetrovsk, the Ukrainian Center for Holocaust Studies in Kyiv,[62] among others, carrying out scholarly, educational and general public knowledge work on the Holocaust. In public discourse there are signs that a new discussion is beginning. On 12 May, the program *Vechir z Mykoloyu Knayzhytskym* on TVi ran a very interesting series of interviews on precisely this topic;[63] the interview with Holocaust survivor Yevhenia Petriv Ruda was particularly enlightening. That this approach, with the victim at the center of the narrative is gaining salience can only be to the good of the development of Ukrainian national history and social discourse in the country. A few weeks ago, the exhibit *Holokost vid kul (Holocaust by Bullets)*[64], based on the well-known work of Father Patrick Desbois, opened at the *Ukrainskyi Dim*, one of the largest and best-known exhibit halls in Kyiv, and will run from 9 September to 3 October. One hopes that this exhibit will be widely attended, and widely discussed. Anatoliy Podolsky

---

post on *Ukraine Watch* – "Victory Day, Red Flags, and the Beginning of the End for Yanukovych" 18 May 2011.
http://ukrainewatch.wordpress.com/2011/05/18/victory-day-red-flags-and-the-beginning-of-the-end-for-yanukovych/

[61] http://tkuma.dp.ua/

[62] http://www.holocaust.kiev.ua/

[63] http://www.tvi.ua/ua/watch/author/?prog=831

[64] See extensive coverage of the exhibit at http://www.istpravda.com.ua/themes/holocaust-history/

pointed out that "a lack of information about the Ukrainian context of the Holocaust, which exists in contemporary Ukrainian society, has a paradoxical effect – not only are the dark pages removed from the national narrative, but so too are the numerous examples of how selfless Ukrainians rescued Jews."[65] I am reminded here of the story of Tryan Popovych, wartime mayor of Chernivtsi, who "refused to execute an order to deport Chernivtsi's Jews to camps in Transdnistria. More than this, he convinced the authorities that he was right and succeeded in getting the order changed – 20,000 Jews were allowed to stay in the city."[66] Popovych was recognized by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations; memory of his heroism in Ukraine, however, is virtually nonexistent.

If there is to be a development of something approaching a reasonable understanding in Ukrainian society of the tragedy of the War, the role of rescue and aid during the Holocaust must find its place in the narrative. Writing about new memorials to the victims of the Holocaust in Poland, Slawomir Kapralski pointed out that "the Jewish memorials may make Poles aware of the fact that Jewish memory has been a legitimate part of the symbolic landscape of Poland and that with the disappearance of Jewish memory, Poland has lost a great deal of its own identity."[67] The same, of course, is true for Ukraine.

Orest Zakydalsky
Ukrainian Canadian Research and Documentation Centre
28 September 2011

---

[65] Podolsky, Anatoliy. "Ukrainske suspilstvo i pamyat pro Holokost – sproba analizu deyakykh aspektiv. *Holokost i suchasnist*. Vol. 1, #5, 2009, p. 58 [my translation from Ukrainian
[66] Vorontsov, Serhiy. "Bukovynskyi Schindler." In *Dzerkalo Tyzhnia* #3 (731), 31 January, 2009]
[67] Kapralski, Slawomir. "Battlefields of Memory: Landscape and Identity in Polish-Jewish Relations." In *History and Memory*. Vol. 13, #2 Fall 2001, p. 56