

Rescue Inflation and Holocaust Distortion

In 2016 at a special session in the European Parliament in Brussels to mark International Holocaust Remembrance Day, I took part in a panel discussion. The speaker to my right was Jan Żaryn a professor of history, and, at the time, a senator in Poland. Speaking before me, Professor Żaryn asserted that the rescue of Jews in Poland was a central feature of the story of the Holocaust there, and in fact, given the many concentric circles of activity, one million Poles were involved in rescuing Jews. He pronounced that Poland was a “nation of rescuers”. Of course, to reach such a large number required not a little bit of arithmetic gymnastics, given the fact that at the time approximately 7,000 Poles had been recognized as Righteous Among the Nations, and out of about 3.3 million Jews in Poland, 3 million were murdered in the Holocaust. Moreover, it is estimated that at least 200,000 Jews died at the hands of their Polish neighbours.¹ It is possible that more than 7,000 Poles were involved in rescue, and their stories remain unknown. It is also plausible that there were wider circles that at least remained silent when they were aware of the rescue activities and did not turn over the Jews and their rescuers to the authorities. But to extrapolate from 7,000 recognised Righteous Among the Nations to a million rescuers requires quite a leap, a leap that is far from reasonable.

The inflation and misrepresentation of rescue are not only a phenomenon in Poland but also appear in quite a few countries in which the Holocaust took place. In Bulgaria, as in Poland, there is a strong tendency to overemphasise the very real actions that quashed plans to deport Jews from the country's heartland and downplay Bulgarian complicity in the murder of other Jews under Bulgarian control.² In the Netherlands, there remains an image of the Dutch as benevolent rescuers, even though scholarship and public discourse have shown this to be a highly idealised image. In Italy, the notion of benign Italians who opposed the murderous Germans is still widely held, but research has also shown this to be at best simplistic. In the United Kingdom, the commemoration and public discourse extolling the *Kindertransports*, which brought some 10,000 mostly Jewish children to the UK following the November pogrom in 1938, downplay the wrenching separation between children and parents that it entailed and the sometimes, callous treatment meted out in British foster families. In Hungary, too, issues of rescue are sometimes invoked to deflect responsibility for the role of Hungarians in the destruction of Hungarian Jewry.

None of this means that there was not significant rescue in these countries or that the phenomenon of rescue is not important to research, discuss and commemorate. But the overemphasis on rescue and its misrepresentation often accompanies efforts to create a usable past, an idealised and sometimes even totally fictitious past, about which the nation can be proud. Almost invariably, the overstated focus on rescue goes hand in hand with whitewashing complicity in the Holocaust, invoking the trope, “it was the Germans, not us”. It is our task as historians to ensure that rescue is addressed with all its complexities in a historically accurate and evidence-based context.

¹ Grabowski 2024: 5.

² The issue of Bulgaria will not be addressed here. There is much discourse regarding the fact that Jews from areas annexed to Bulgaria were deported and the deportation of the Jews from the Bulgarian heartland was pre-empted. Issues of responsibility for both parts of the story lie at the centre of the debates. There are advocates for giving credit for “rescue” to King Boris and responsibility for the deportations only to the Germans, as opposed to those who place the responsibility for the deportations on the shoulders of the Bulgarian authorities and credit for the cancellation of deportations to members of the Bulgarian Parliament, Church and the Jewish community. In recent years there has been an attempt to frame Jewish forced labour in Bulgaria not as an anti-Jewish measure by the Bulgarian regime, but as an attempt to safeguard Jews from worse measures advocated by the Germans. This is clearly a distortion of history. A good summary of the controversies is Cohen 2021.

POLAND

The distortion of the Holocaust to create a useable past has deep roots in Poland. Immediately after the war, the communist functionary Jakub Berman declared that just as there were 3 million Jewish victims of the Holocaust, there were 3 million Polish victims of the war, putting on par the suffering of Jews and gentiles in Poland. According to the historian Jan Grabowski, Berman invented the figure for Polish victims.³ Moreover, research by Jan Grabowski, Barbara Engelking and others has demonstrated that Poles were not only victims, but also that a very significant number of Poles were complicit in the murder of their Jewish neighbours, often handing them over to the Germans, but not infrequently handing them over to other Poles to be killed, or killing them themselves.⁴ Their research has been the subject of attacks in public discourse and in the courts.⁵

The idealisation of rescue is starkly evident in the Ulma Family Museum of Poles Who Saved Jews that opened in 2016 in Markowa. The museum tells the tragic story of Józef Ulma and his wife Wiktoria, who were later recognised as Righteous Among the Nations. The couple hid the Jewish Szall family and the two Goldberg sisters; however, they were betrayed, and the Germans executed them, their children and the Jews they were hiding. This museum's narrative implies that the Ulmas represent the Polish norm at that time, and the exhibit presents a romanticised picture of Polish-Jewish relations during the German occupation. Among other things, it ignores the immediate repercussions of the murder of the Ulmas and the Jews they were harbouring. A deposition given by Yehuda Erlich to Yad Vashem about the immediate repercussions of the Ulma tragedy makes clear that rescue was complex, and fear led some "rescuers" to betray their charges. Erlich was hiding in Sietesz, only a couple of miles from Markowa, and he describes the harrowing aftermath of the murder of the Ulma family and the Jews hiding with them:

*"These were hard times for them [Jan and Maria Wiglusz (Erlich's rescuers)] and for us. Searches were conducted both by the Germans and the Polish peasants themselves, who wanted to find the hiding Jews. In the spring of 1944, a Jewish family was discovered hiding with Polish peasants. The Polish family – eight souls, including the pregnant wife – was killed with the refugees. As a result, there was enormous panic among other Polish peasants who were hiding Jews. The morning after, 24 corpses of Jews were discovered in the fields. They had been murdered by the peasants themselves, who had given them refuge for 20 months."*⁶

THE NETHERLANDS

There is no question that rescue of Jews was a significant phenomenon in the Netherlands during the war. If Poland has some 7,000 Righteous Among the Nations recognised out of a population of some 30 million during the war years, the Netherlands has somewhat over 6,000 recognised as Righteous, but with a much smaller wartime population, just under 9 million. An outstanding example of rescuers is the Westerweel group, composed of Jews and Christians working together. The group managed to hide 55 Jewish children in the Netherlands and smuggle about 200 to France and 70 to Spain before most of the main rescue activists were caught. Out of the 55 child-

3 Grabowski-Klein 2023.

4 For more on this see the following: Grabowski 2013; Grabowski 2024; Grabowski-Engelking (eds.) 2022; Engelking 2016.

5 In 2021 a private citizen, apparently with significant backing, sued Grabowski and Engelking for libel after the publication in Polish of *Night Without End*. In a chapter of that volume, written by Engelking, two testimonies given by a Jewish survivor, named Estera Drogicka, regarding the actions of a village elder, named Edward Malinowski, were presented. At a postwar trial in which Malinowski was accused of complicity in the murder of Jews, Drogicka said that he had helped her survive. Her testimony was pivotal in his exoneration. Many years later, Drogicka gave testimony in which she said that although Malinowski had indeed helped her, he also had stolen all of her possessions. Engelking presented this as a story illustrating the complexities of the period and of human behavior. The first court proceedings found the editors guilty of libel. Upon appeal to a superior court, the ruling was overturned. Court of Appeal in Warsaw, I Civil Division Citation I Aca 300/21 (https://www.ijl.org/grabowski_engelking-full/; last access: 26 August 2026).

6 Jozef and Wiktoria Ulma, Poland (<https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/stories/ulma.html>; last access: 26 August 2026).

ren hidden on Dutch soil, 33 survived, but the others were betrayed.⁷ The story of Anne Frank and her diary has also done much to bolster the perception of Dutch rescuers, although she and her family were also betrayed and deported. Her mother died in Auschwitz, and Anne Frank and her sister, Margot, died in Bergen Belsen. Perhaps just as important contributing to the image of rescue is the fact that the only general strike anywhere in Europe on behalf of the Jews took place in Amsterdam in February 1941. Nonetheless, out of about 140,000 Jews living in the Netherlands when the war broke out, only some 30,000 survived. Some 9,000 survivors were married to non-Jews. About 16,000 of the 25,000 Jews who had gone into hiding in the country survived discovery and betrayals, and 5,000 Jews returned from Nazi German camps. Ultimately, the story of the Jews of the Netherlands during the Holocaust is much more about destruction than rescue and survival.

In particular, research shows that the Dutch authorities were deeply complicit in the deportations. The researcher Frank Boevenkerk writes:

“There is no doubt that the heights of efficiency attained by the German mass murder machine would have been impossible without large-scale assistance from Dutch institutions, officials and the public at large. Under the Dutch civil administration appointed by the German Reichs Commissioner for the Occupied Dutch Territories, Seyss-Inquart, the highest civil servants (the permanent ministerial secretaries) were now in charge of the various government departments. The Nazis were able to reach their goals with minimal effort on the part of their own personnel. Throughout the Netherlands, for example, no more than 444 German police officers were needed; they were assigned to combating the resistance movement.”⁸

Upon their return from German camps, the relatively few Dutch Jewish survivors were often greeted with callousness. To a significant extent this was because the Dutch themselves had gone through the very difficult “hunger winter” of 1944–1945 and fierce fighting on their soil, rendering most with little room for sympathy for others. On 4 October 1945, the Holocaust survivor Avraham Sarlouis wrote:

“Life here is still quite disordered. The Netherlands has been seriously hit and is facing enormous difficulties. It is not easy for the Jews. The reception is not, save for a few exceptions, so very cordial. Many people who had been entrusted with things [by Jews] for safekeeping, often proved untrustworthy, though it must be said that there were also decent people.”⁹

Although today we might find it difficult to fathom, surviving Jews returning to Amsterdam had to pay outstanding municipal taxes, unpaid rent on city-owned properties and late fee penalties.¹⁰ This is hardly indicative of sympathy, empathy and benevolence.

ITALY

The common perception regarding the Italians during the Holocaust is that they were good to the Jews as opposed to the “bad Germans”. There certainly were pockets of Italian non-cooperation with the German pressure to persecute Jews and even outright rescue in Italian-occupied areas in Southern France, Croatia, Slovenia and Italy itself. The late Professor Daniel Carpi wrote many years ago about a confluence of diplomatic and political issues and humanitarian impulses that contributed to Italian measures to block the handing over of Jews to the Germans and Croats.¹¹ After Mussolini was ousted and then reinstated in what was known as the Salò Government, deportations hit Italy proper. Significant aid was given to Jews, especially by hiding them in convents.¹²

7 Johan Gerard and Wilhelmina Dora Westerweel, Netherlands (<https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/stories/westerweel.html>; last access: 26 August 2026).

8 Boevenkerk 2000.

9 Rozett–Orvieto (eds.) 2016: 221.

10 JTA 2016.

11 Carpi 1977.

12 Zuccotti 1987.

Out of some 48,000 Jews in Italy, roughly 7,000 were murdered, meaning the large majority survived.¹³

Yet research since the 1970s and most recently the work of Simon Levis Sullam shows that the persecution of the Jews in Italy was a central feature during the run-up to the Second World War and during the war itself.¹⁴ Mussolini's regime became increasingly anti-Jewish, enacting antisemitic decrees and actively persecuting Jews. Eventually Italy established its own camps for Jews, and during the period of the deportations, Italian police and other officials often hunted down Jews in hiding and turned them over to the authorities to be imprisoned and deported. In an article published in 2017, Sullam writes:

*"The German occupier could thus count upon a dense network of collaborators, whose role was vital for the accomplishment of the 'Final Solution' in Italy."*¹⁵

Yet the image of overriding Italian benevolence remains strong. Sullam attributes this to a large degree to a general amnesty that was passed in 1946 in the name of reconciliation, that

*"erased all military and political crimes with a sentence of less than five-years' imprisonment, including crimes of massacre, plunder, destruction and collaborationism... In the following decades, the dichotomy between the 'bad German' and the 'good Italian' gradually crystallized thanks to memoirs, fictional representations, movies and documentaries."*¹⁶

In his 2020 PhD dissertation John Barruzza offers an additional explanation for this narrative.

*"Italy's Jewish survivors, for many decades after World War II and the Shoah, continued to invoke the national myths of the 'good Italian' and the 'bad German' in their recollections, despite their frequent persecution at Italian hands. This tendency, I argue, stems from their past experiences of acceptance and integration in Italy after national unification and emancipation, experiences which extended to foreign Jews residing in Italy, as well. Only recently, since the turn of the twenty-first century, has a collective counter-memory emerged from within the survivor community to challenge the predominant myths of fascism, the war, and the Shoah that prevailed in postwar Italy."*¹⁷

THE UNITED KINGDOM

Although the United Kingdom was not a scene of the persecution and murder of Jews during the Holocaust, like many other countries, it played a role in events, especially in combatting the Axis and as a possible country of refuge regarding Jewish immigration to Mandatory Palestine. From the early twentieth century onwards, beginning with the 1905 Aliens Act, restrictions on immigration to the United Kingdom came into place, largely targeting Jewish immigrants. The rampant Germanophobia that accompanied the First World War, along with the economic collapse of the 1930s, further restricted immigration to the United Kingdom. Between 1933, from the Nazi rise to power, through 1937, only about 33,000 German Jews were allowed into the United Kingdom. Between 1938 and 1941 another 141,000 arrived, but they were not meant to stay but to continue their journey to other destinations. Ultimately, about 40,000 remained from this contingent. Until 1939, when it became untenable, Jewish refugees were supported primarily by the British Jewish community. During this same period, restrictions regarding Jewish immigration to Mandatory Palestine were put in place, with the low point reached at the publication of the White Paper in February 1939 that limited Jewish immigration to Palestine over the next five years to 75,000.

In the wake of the November Pogrom, leaders of the Jewish community in Palestine called for the British to allow 10,000 children into Palestine, beyond the quotas about to be made public in the White Paper. The government refused this request but instead agreed to allow 10,000 children

¹³ <https://portal.ehri-project.eu/countries/it> (last access: 26 August 2026).

¹⁴ Sullam 2020.

¹⁵ Sullam 2017.

¹⁶ Sullam 2020.

¹⁷ Barruzza 2020.

to enter the United Kingdom in what came to be known as the *Kindertransports*. This was reported by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency on 14 December 1938.¹⁸ The children would be allowed to come to the United Kingdom, but without their parents.

The researcher Jennifer Craig-Norton has written, “...the prevailing narrative of the *Kindertransport* [is] as a noble act of rescue that saved ten thousand lives”.¹⁹ She goes on to explain that

*“...carers, especially voluntary foster parents, have been portrayed as altruistic strangers whose well-meaning motives made up for occasionally inadequate or substandard care... Although it is an uncomfortable conclusion to reach, many carers were more self-serving than selfless, and the instance of truly warm and reciprocally fulfilling placements were much rarer than the mythologies of the *Kindertransport* have purported.”*²⁰

The dominant celebratory narrative is that eventually the children did well in Britain, but that evades the testimonies of the former children about trauma and especially about loss of parents and family.²¹ It is not that the *Kindertransports* did not save the lives of 10,000 children, but given that it came with a British refusal to let the children into Mandatory Palestine, demanded separation from parents and often siblings, and that many children had quite a rough time with inappropriate foster parents and ongoing trauma, it is far from the idealised altruistic self-congratulatory rescue it is often held to have been.

HUNGARY

The main thrust of the Holocaust in Hungary began with the German entry on 19 March 1944 to prevent Hungary from leaving the Axis alliance and make a separate peace with the Allies. The seeds of a major rescue operation were already in place before 15 October 1944, when the Arrow Cross came to power. Ultimately during the Arrow Cross period, what can be seen as an atmosphere of rescue emerged in Budapest, where the largest and last remaining Jewish community of Hungary had been mostly spared the first wave of massive deportations in spring 1944. This led to the largest rescue operation during the Holocaust. Still, out of 825,000 people classified as Jews living in Greater Hungary in the census of 1941, some 570,000 were killed in the Holocaust.

From the historical record, it is abundantly clear that the persecution and deportation of Hungarian Jewry was carried out primarily by Hungarians, and the rescue was almost exclusively the province of foreign diplomats and Jews, particularly young Jews in the Zionist youth underground. In public discourse, the role of Hungarians in the destruction of their neighbours, is generally attributed to a small minority, especially members of the Arrow Cross, although the main deportations in spring 1944 predated the Arrow Cross rise to power. Direct and widespread Hungarian responsibility for the Holocaust in Hungary is often obscured, even today, when research has made it very clear.

During a visit to Budapest by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in 2017, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán made a statement which is a good example of how rescue is invoked to veil responsibility:

“Naturally we also spoke about history – which in a meeting such as this is not only inevitable, but also desirable. I told the Honorable Prime Minister that we are aware of the painful nature of our history. I sought to clearly articulate that in an earlier period in history, when it failed to protect Hungary’s citizens of Jewish origin, Hungary’s government not only committed an error, but a crime. I would like to make it clear that, as we see it, it is the duty of every Hungarian government to protect every one of its citizens – regardless of their origins. In the Second World War Hungary failed to fulfil this duty – this moral and political duty. This was a crime. Then, instead of protecting the Jewish

18 <https://www.lbi.org/1938projekt/detail/at-least-the-children/> (last access: 26 August 2026).

19 Craig-Norton 2019: 317.

20 Ibid. 319.

21 Ibid. 322–323.

community, we decided to collaborate with the Nazis. I also made it clear to the Honorable Prime Minister that this can never happen again: in the future the Hungarian government shall protect all of its citizens."²²

In Orban's words, Hungary failed to protect its Jewish citizens because it collaborated with Nazi Germany. But failure to protect does not include active participation in persecution: rounding up Jews, despoiling them of their property, and putting them on trains to Auschwitz-Birkenau; taking Jews to hard and often lethal forced labour on the Austrian border; or shooting thousands of Jews on the banks of the Danube. These acts were not merely a failure to protect but acts that led to murder or were themselves acts of murder.

CONCLUSION

The study of rescue attempts during the Holocaust by Jews and non-Jews, whether large-scale or small-scale, is an important part of the history of the Holocaust. When examined in detail, research in rescue reveals many of the complexities of the period. Differences in situations and possibilities, in how situations were understood at the time as opposed to how we understand them today, the choices Jews and non-Jews made and the limitations in their agency, are all central features of these complexities. But as important as rescue is, when it is intentionally inflated, misused to mask issues of responsibility for persecution and murder, or intentionally taken out of context for whatever reason, it becomes a significant component of Holocaust distortion. Like all aspects of the history that we explore and teach, discussion of rescue during the Holocaust should be based on firm historical evidence and objective, thoughtful analysis.

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²² <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/statement-to-the-press-by-viktor-orban-following-his-meeting-with-prime-minister-of-israel-benjamin-netanyahu> (last access: 26 August 2026).

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