If we look at it from a certain perspective, the history of humankind can appear to be predominantly a history of evil. It can be seen as generally a struggle for power: to rule, to impose one’s religion or ideology on an enemy, or to conquer more territory. Such conflicts can understandably result in war, blood, tears, and humiliation. Indeed, it can be suggested that countries either inflicted suffering on their foes or endured the suffering inflicted on them. The history of Poland and of the nations living within its borders may not seem to be significantly different from this general pattern. Polish territories were the center of Nazi atrocities during World War II. Here the Germans killed three million Polish Jews and three million Polish gentiles. Yet Auschwitz, that factory of death, provided Father Maximilian Kolbe a living example of selfless love, a living example of one person sacrificing his or her life for another. Moreover, near the town of Tarnów is the grave of Otto Schimek, a German soldier who chose to die rather than to murder innocent people. How many other selfless people were there in Poland during World War II? Memoirs and records from those years document that there were many others, including Polish nuns, who aided Polish Jews and their children, who would otherwise have been doomed to die in the Holocaust.

To talk about the hiding of Jews in Polish convents during World War II is fraught with problems. One is the lack of records due to the fact that the rescue of Jews and their children in Poland was carried out clandestinely. Obviously, the nuns would not record
their activities. After the war, political conditions and the pressure of day-to-day work for the sisters, as well as their own attitudes, were not conducive to the task of completing the archives with notes or statements about wartime activities. The Jews themselves left the convents and scattered throughout Poland and to the four corners of the world. They were rarely able, and perhaps not willing, to visit the places where they had spent their wartime years. Therefore, I had to recover this lost history as best I could by traveling in Poland, Israel, and America to collect information.

To rescue Jews was a dangerous activity for Polish nuns. If caught they would have paid for it with their lives. Neither cassock, habit, nor bishop’s mitre provided protection from the penalty of death for such a transgression. For example, records show that at least two sisters of the Order of the Immaculate Conception and eight Sisters of Charity were executed by the Germans for their participation in helping Jews and their children.

Before the outbreak of World War II, there were eighty-five orders of nuns in Poland, consisting of seventy-four orders or congregations of active sisters, and eleven contemplative orders. Numerically, there were over twenty thousand nuns in Poland at the time. My research shows that about 62 percent of the eighty-five religious communities of women in Poland were engaged in helping Jews during the war. The opportunities for nuns to engage in rescue work were limited during the occupation by German policies towards the Roman Catholic Church. These policies differed significantly in various parts of Poland. Nuns who were situated in parts of the country incorporated into the Reich in October 1939 were not able to do anything. They were interned in prisons and labor camps, relocated, or went into hiding. Nuns who were in the areas occupied by the Soviet Union until June 1941 were forced to work and not allowed to wear their religious garb. In sum, almost the only nuns in a position to help Jews during the war lived in the convents in the General Government. For this reason, my information relates primarily to nuns’ activities in this geographical area.

The most active were the nuns located in Warsaw and its environs. In the capital city alone, twenty-three houses hid Jewish children and forty-one other houses did so on the outskirts of the city. These figures are not definitive, of course. They are, however, the product of information received from nuns themselves and from Jews who were rescued by nuns. There is today no way of
ascertaining the actual number of children rescued by orphanages and boarding schools. Nevertheless, it seems that the number of children saved was at least fifteen hundred. How many more there may have been will probably always remain a mystery.

My research focuses on the rescuing of Jewish children. However, the data I have collected indicates that more adult Jews were rescued than were Jewish children. This is because almost all of the convents hiding Jewish children also saved adult Jews. Surely, in comparison with the three million Polish Jews who were murdered, the number of those saved in the convents is ridiculously small. Did Polish nuns do all they could to save Polish Jews? Wladisław Bartoszewski, who was devoted to the cause of saving Jews, answered a similar question in the following way: "During the war in Poland to do all one could for the murdered Jews meant to die for them, and I am alive."

However, each of the Polish nuns who saved Jewish life had to be prepared for the possibility that she would have to pay with her own life for disregarding the German ban on helping the Jews. When I asked one of the nuns if she had been afraid of death, she answered, "Of course I was afraid; everybody was. But it was the war and so many people were dying. One must die for something; it might as well be a Jew." This answer is simultaneously banal and profound. It must be remembered that Polish nuns were probably neither less nor more anti-Semitic than the whole of the Polish society. A great majority of nuns came from average Polish families. Some of them would bring into the convents stereotyped, often negative images of Jews.

When I asked Polish writer Jan Dobraczynski, who cooperated with convents in saving about three hundred children from the Warsaw ghetto, why he did so, he told me, "I come from nationalist circles, often charged with anti-Semitism. Why did I save Jewish children? Because they were children, because they were people. I would save any man in danger of death, and a child—every child—is particularly dear to me. This is what my Catholic religion orders me to do."

The above quotation typifies many others and proves that anti-Semitism did not matter as much when it came to saving Jews in convents. A persecuted Jew somehow stopped being a Jew and became simply a man, woman, or child in need of help. The Polish nuns were motivated by a Christian duty towards others and by their fidelity to the ideals that they were pledged to do so in a
special way by their vows. This is what a nun from one of the Warsaw houses, sister Maria Ena, said:

I won't forget the conference of sister Wanda Garczynska. It was 1942–1943. The school in Kazimierzowska Street had been closed. The SS was based in a huge block opposite our house, where the RGO kitchen for the needy was open and functioning almost without a break. The people, too, came in a constant stream—children, young people, adults with canisters for soup. Only for soup? For everything. Kazimierzowska pulsated with life—from the nursery to the university. Amongst this hive of activity there were also Jewesses, with red, curly hair, freckled, with prominent ears and unusual eyes. These obviously were Jews. There could be no mistake. It was well known that concealing a Jew meant the death sentence.

The sisters knew that other orders had already been warned and searched. So she hid nothing, withheld nothing, and she called us together. She began the conference by reading a fragment of the Gospel of St. John, verses 3–17. She explained that she did not wish to jeopardize the house, the sisters, the community. She knew what could be awaiting us. There was no thought of self. She knew: you should love one another as I have loved you. How? So that He gave His life.

I lowered my head. I did not dare look at the other sisters. We had to decide. If we said one word, openly, honestly admitted to fear for our skins, our own lives, the lives of so many sisters, the community…. Was it prudent to risk it for a few Jewish families? It was our decision whether or not Jews hiding with us would have to leave.

There was silence.

No one stirred. Not a single breath. We were ready. We would not give up the Jewish children. We would rather die, all of us. The silence was overwhelming—we did not look at each other. The sister was sitting with closed eyes, her hands folded over the Gospel. She was no doubt praying.

We got up. We did not even pray together as we normally did. We went to the chapel. We felt light and joyful, though very grave. We were ready.

A communal decision was not taken in every convent as in the case above. Mostly, it was a sole decision, taken by the Mother Superior of a given convent. But it always flowed from the most important Christian commandment, from the commandment of love.

The Polish nuns faced death for reasons other than hiding Jews. They also could be executed for hiding priests and underground activists wanted by the Gestapo, for active cooperation with guerrillas and underground organizations, as well as for a great many other “offenses” against the German law. They not only saved Jewish children, but also Polish, Ukrainian, Gypsy, and even German children, towards the end of the war. If they distributed soup, they distributed it among all the hungry people without asking
who they were. If they dressed a guerrilla's wounds, they did not ask him to which political side he belonged. This is why saving Jews and Jewish children should first of all be seen in the broader context of monastic service to humanity.

It is true that the call to save Jews was a completely new task for sisters in Poland. This task gave rise to numerous controversies and misunderstandings fueled further by the sharp clash of the Jewish and Christian religions over the centuries.

These religious controversies arose mainly over the cases of saving Jewish children, and the intensity of the conflicts depended directly on the degree of religious fervor on both sides. Many Jewish communities, imperiled by the Holocaust, accepted that life-and-death stakes justified the subordination of religious norms to save lives. They adopted the position that a little baptismal water would not harm Jewish children in the long run if it helped them survive the war. On the other hand, more orthodox Jewish communities believed that in the name of Kiddush Hashem the Jewish children should rather die than break the most sacred of the Jewish commandments. This attitude had a special significance both for the course of saving Jewish children in convents and for its scale. The famous Jewish historian, Ringelblum, recorded that it was Jewish orthodox opposition that turned down the offer made by church circles to save children from the Warsaw ghetto in 1942. It also became a future source of the accusation that the convents wanted to convert the Jewish children they rescued (Ringelblum 1983).

I have a feeling that this charge cannot be proven. It is true that often, in order to save the life, a Jewish child was christened at a certain moment. Baptism, in such cases, was an indispensable prerequisite for successfully hiding the children, but it was never an aim in itself.

For example, in Szymanów

when a group of [Jewish] children made their First Confession, one of the girls, when she was led into the sacristy where the confessional was, suddenly burst out crying. She told the priest, who tried to comfort her most warmly, that when her father was leaving her and her younger brother on the "Aryan" side, counting on their rescue, he forbid her, under oath, to reveal to anybody that they had not been already christened. Realizing that she was going to Holy Communion, and she would commit sacrilege, proved to be too heavy a burden to be carried by a nine-year-old girl. The nuns, informed by the priest about this situation, christened the girl,
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keeping it secret from other children with whom she went to Communion. (Bartoszewski and Lewin 1969)

The baptism of the girl was necessary so that she could, for the reason of her own safety, go to Holy Communion and not raise anybody's suspicions. The nuns had a choice: in full consciousness to allow a sacrilege, or to christen the child, against the Judaic faith. The dilemma was not for human beings to solve and so they acted according to the rules of their own religion.

The circumstances of christening the Jewish girl described above illustrate one of numerous dilemmas faced by Polish nuns hiding Jewish children during the last war. Throughout Poland, the nuns' attitude towards baptism varied greatly and ranged from the conviction that all the children living in the convent should be christened, to the opinion that was expressed by a nun when she said to a child asking to be christened "pray to the Jewish God and we shall pray to Lord Jesus—when we pray together, perhaps we'll survive the war" (related by rescued person).

The motivation for saving children in convents is most fully defined by those who were rescued. Saved by the Order of the Resurrection nuns a young Jewish boy said after the war, "It is just hard to believe what subterfuges the sisters used to make my stay with them possible, especially in the winter and autumn, and even to make it more pleasant. This is what charity flowing from God’s love can do." The mother of a saved Jewish child wrote from the United States to a nun whom she had found after a long search:

I have a strange feeling. It seems to me that I have found one of my own sisters again. You are as close to my heart as if you were my own sister; for who else gave us so many proofs of devotion, of understanding our misery, and of human feelings? I always vividly remember the moment when soon after the war I came to the convent to express my gratitude for saving my child and to leave the money which we still had after the war. Dear Sister Ludwika, our guardian Angel, told me then: "Keep this money for the Germans have taken everything from you. But whenever somebody will need help in his life, please help him." I have kept these words in memory and they have been a holy commandment for me. I have tried to help whenever I could, and when people thanked me, I told them the story of sister Ludwika's deed and of her request.

Maria Klein, who was saved in Przemyśl, recently has written from Israel: "My leaving the nuns was only physical. Spiritually I
always try to live in such a way that I could look into their eyes with a clear conscience.”

“To know what is just and to be just is the same thing,” proclaimed Socrates. In this statement there is a deep, everlasting truth. Humanity has always needed examples of the proper way of behavior. It needs it today too. It needs people who are just in the Socratic sense—contemporary altruists. This is why history about forgotten instances of altruism is of great importance. It can serve the world by illustrating models of behavior that are worth emulating. It points the way to the highest ideals of humanity: to good and love. Undoubtedly, the Polish nuns who risked their own lives to save the lives of other people during the last war are role models of altruism for both Jews and gentiles alike.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


