

Zofia Wóycicka

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9461-2387>

German Historical Institute in Warsaw

**THE 'RIGHTEOUS' AS AN ELEMENT
OF TRANSNATIONAL MEMORY POLITICS:
THE STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL FORUM
ON THE HOLOCAUST AND THE MEMORY OF THE
RESCUE OF JEWS DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR**

Abstract

In the last two decades, the topic of help given to Jews during the Second World War has experienced an extraordinary boom in Europe and beyond. Transnational and intergovernmental organisations such as the Council of Europe, the European Parliament and the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) have played an essential role in promoting this subject. This paper shows that the first big event to introduce the category of the Righteous into transnational memory politics was the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust (2000). Researchers have described the conference as a significant step toward the 'institutionalisation of a European memory' and promoting a self-critical, victim-centred, future-oriented and highly personalised Holocaust remembrance. I argue that it was precisely the universalisation of the Holocaust and the notion of a wide-ranging implication of European societies in the genocide, which paved the way for the rescue narratives. However, as this paper demonstrates, the participants in the conference defined the Righteous differently and invoked them for divergent purposes.

Keywords: transnational memory, politics of remembrance, Righteous Among the Nations, Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust, Holocaust rescue

I
INTRODUCTION

The magnitude of the Holocaust, planned and carried out by the Nazis, must be forever seared in our collective memory. The selfless sacrifices of those who defied the Nazis, and sometimes gave their own lives to protect or rescue

the Holocaust's victims, must also be inscribed in our hearts. The depths of that horror, and the heights of their heroism, can be touchstones in our understanding of the human capacity for evil and for good.¹

So states the joint declaration signed by participants in the International Forum on the Holocaust held in Stockholm from 27 to 29 January 2000. The document's signatories also confirmed their commitment to "commemorate the victims of the Holocaust" and "to honour those who stood against it".²

This declaration is only one expression of the attention that the assistance given to Jews during the Second World War has gained internationally in the last two decades. This interest was triggered by the mass media and most prominently by Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List* (1993). Another factor that has brought this issue to public attention has been the politics of remembrance pursued by various state and civil society actors. Several European states have established holidays and organised official ceremonies honouring the 'Righteous' in recent years.³ Streets have been named after the rescuers, and museums and monuments dedicated to them have been raised all over Europe and beyond. An important role in propagating this theme is also to be attributed to transnational and intergovernmental organisations and networks, such as the Council of Europe, the European Parliament, the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research (ITF, since 2013 International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance – IHRA) and Gariwo – Gardens of the Righteous Worldwide.⁴ Most prominently,

¹ The Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust, 27–29 Jan. 2000, <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/about-us/stockholm-declaration> [Accessed: 17 Feb. 2022].

² *Ibid.*

³ Sarah Gensburger, 'La diffusion transnationale de la catégorie de "Juste Parmi les Nations"'. (Re)penser l'articulation entre diffusion des droits de l'homme et globalisation de la mémoire', *Revue internationale de politique comparée*, xxii, 4 (2015), 537–55; Sarah Gensburger, *National Policy, Global Memory. The Commemoration of the "Righteous" from Jerusalem to Paris, 1942–2007* (New York–Oxford, 2016); Zofia Wóycicka, 'A Global Label and its Local Appropriations. Representations of the Righteous Among the Nations in Contemporary European Museums', *Memory Studies*, xv, 1 (Feb. 2022), 20–6.

⁴ On this, see Gensburger, 'La diffusion transnationale'; Gensburger, *National Policy*, 105–14; Wóycicka, 'A Global Label', 20–2.

in 2007, member states of the Council of Europe signed a “Solemn Tribute to the ‘Righteous’ of Europe”, and in 2012, on the initiative of Gariwo, the European Parliament established the European Day of the Righteous.⁵

Since its establishment in 1962, Israel has used or at least tried to use the Righteous Among the Nations award to strengthen bilateral relations with other countries.⁶ Elsewhere, the topic of Jewish rescue became part of official memory politics already between the 1960s and the 1990s. Tides of political interest in the subject often coincided with moments when a given national community faced accusations of anti-Semitism and/or complicity in the Holocaust. For example, in Poland, the topic first came on the political agenda during the so-called anti-Zionist campaign in 1967–1968, when the Communist party instrumentalised the Righteous for anti-Semitic propaganda. The Zionists, i.e. the Jews, were criticised for slandering the Poles by accusing them of anti-Semitism and collaboration with the Germans.⁷ The enormity of their treason and ingratitude was intended to be exposed by highlighting the help given by Poles to Jews during the war. After decades of relative silence, the subject returned to the top of the public agenda at the turn of the millennium. This unexpected comeback can be interpreted as a ‘backlash’⁸ against the publication of *Neighbors* by Jan Tomasz Gross (2000) and the public debate on the Polish complicity in the Holocaust triggered by this book.⁹

⁵ Declaration of the European Parliament on support for the establishment of a European Day of Remembrance for the Righteous, 10 May 2012, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P7-TA-2012-0205+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN> [Accessed: 17 Nov. 2021]; Gariwo/European Day of the Righteous, <https://en.gariwo.net/european-day-of-the-righteous> [Accessed: 18 Feb. 2022].

⁶ Kobi Kabalek, ‘The Commemoration before the Commemoration: Yad Vashem and the Righteous Among the Nations 1945–1963’, *Yad Vashem Studies*, xxxix, 1 (2011), 200–10; Gensburger, *National Policy*, 14–23.

⁷ Alicja Podbielska, *A Tree for Poland: the Memory of Holocaust Rescue, 1942–2018*, PhD dissertation, Clark University, Worcester (Mass.), August 2021, 115–35; Dariusz Libionka, ‘Polskie piśmiennictwo na temat zorganizowanej i indywidualnej pomocy Żydom (1945–2008)’, *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały*, 4 (2008), 34–7.

⁸ Magdalena Nowicka-Franczak, *Niechciana debata. Spór o książki Jana Tomasza Grossa* (Warszawa, 2017), 306–19.

⁹ Jan Tomasz Gross, *Sąsiedzi: historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka* (Sejny, 2000). On the debate that followed the publication, see i.a.: *Thou Shall not Kill. Poles on*

As described by Sarah Gensburger, the first initiatives in France to honour those who rescued Jews during the Holocaust arose in the 1980s and came from a group of French Holocaust survivors.¹⁰ However, it was not until the second half of the 1990s that the idea of commemorating the ‘Righteous’ was taken up by the state authorities and became an important element of French politics of remembrance. This process culminated in 2007 when the *Justes de France* were honoured with a plaque in the Panthéon. This growing interest coincided with the public debate on the collaboration of Vichy France in the Holocaust. Acknowledging the responsibility of the Vichy government for its participation in the deportation actions, President Jacques Chirac was at the same time seeking a narrative that would counterbalance his country’s negative image and help French society acknowledge the difficult truth.

In both the Polish and the French cases, the state authorities evoked the Holocaust rescue in anticipation of or reaction to external criticism. However, their policies were aimed primarily at the domestic audience. It was not until the beginning of the twenty-first century that the ‘Righteous’ fully entered the international stage. As this paper will demonstrate, the first major event that facilitated this process was the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust (SIF) from the year 2000. However, its participants defined the Righteous differently and invoked them for divergent purposes. My aim is thus to discuss the different interpretations and uses of the past during the conference and trace the interplay between the actors involved.

II THE ‘RIGHTEOUS’ AT STOCKHOLM

The organiser of the SIF was the Swedish government, led by Prime Minister Göran Persson.¹¹ Already in 1998, Persson had initiated the

Jedwabne (Warszawa, 2001); Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic (eds), *The Neighbors Respond. The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton–Oxford, 2004); Piotr Forecki, *Reconstructing Memory. The Holocaust in Polish Public Debates* (Frankfurt am Main, 2013); Nowicka-Franczak, *Niechciana debata*; Paweł Dobrosielski, *Spory o Grossa. Polskie problemy z pamięcią o Żydach* (Warszawa, 2017).

¹⁰ Gensburger, *National Policy*.

¹¹ On the organisation of the Stockholm conference see, amongst others, Jens Kroh, *Transnationale Erinnerung. Der Holocaust im Fokus geschichtspolitischer Initiativen*

creation of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research (ITF), with the primary objectives being to promote Holocaust research, education and remembrance, to counter Holocaust denial, to combat racism, anti-Semitism and intolerance, and to work towards genocide prevention.¹² As suggested by Jens Kroh, one of Persson's motives may have been to detract international attention from questions of profiteering from the Holocaust and the restitution claims raised by the World Jewish Congress and the US administration in the 1990s, which, among others, concerned Sweden.¹³ However, some Jewish organisations and public figures also supported Persson's initiative, not wanting money to become "the last memory of the Holocaust".¹⁴ Taking a proactive stance and shifting the focus from looming financial issues to Holocaust research and education, the prime minister established his country as a leader in this field. The political relevance of the forum also stemmed from the fact that the question of genocide had become acute due to the Rwandan Genocide (1994), as well as ethnic cleansing during both the Bosnian War (1992–5) and the Kosovo War (1998–9). Thus, preventing further crimes of this kind became a matter of urgency.¹⁵ Apart from Sweden, other founding countries of the ITF were Great Britain and the United States of America, joined soon after by Germany and Israel and followed in 1999 by France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Poland. The Stockholm Forum was the first major international event organised under the auspices of the ITF.

The interest in this event from the political sphere and the media exceeded all expectations. High-ranking representatives from 46 countries

(Frankfurt–New York, 2008); Larissa Allwork, *Holocaust Remembrance between the National and the Transnational: The Stockholm International Forum and the First Decade of the International Task Force* (London et al., 2015).

¹² On the ITF, see Jens Kroh, 'Erinnerungskultureller Akteur und geschichtspolitisches Netzwerk: Die Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance und Research', in Eckel Jan and Claudia Moisel (eds), *Universalisierung des Holocaust? Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik in internationaler Perspektive* (Göttingen, 2008), 156–73; Allwork, *Holocaust Remembrance*.

¹³ Kroh, *Transnationale Erinnerung*, 88–90; see also Allwork, *Holocaust Remembrance*, 20–9.

¹⁴ Stuart E. Eizenstat (Special Representative of the US-President and Secretary of State on Holocaust-Era Issues), cited after: Allwork, *Holocaust Remembrance*, 19.

¹⁵ Allwork, *Holocaust Remembrance*, 3–4.

attended the forum, including the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, the French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, the German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, Secretary-General of the Council of Europe Walter Schwimmer and the Secretary-General of the OSCE Jan Kubis. US President Bill Clinton delivered a video message during the conference. Holocaust survivors also participated in the SIF, as well as prominent researchers and experts in Holocaust education. Nevertheless, the conference primarily had a political character.¹⁶ The program allotted more time for plenary sessions, dominated by political speeches, than for panels and workshops with experts and Holocaust survivors. Furthermore, the conference offered few possibilities for exchange between politicians and academics, as most officials left right after their presentations.¹⁷ The extensive international media coverage focused chiefly on the political aspects of the event.¹⁸

Researchers regard the SIF as a 'key event' leading to the emergence of transnational memory politics.¹⁹ Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder also consider it the primary example of "the deterritorialisation and the institutionalisation of cosmopolitan memories".²⁰ As propagated by the forum, this 'cosmopolitan memory' was to be victim-centred, self-reflective, and highly universalised.²¹ It abandoned the old heroic narratives in favour of a more self-critical vision of one's own community, in which attitudes towards the persecuted minority groups, be they Jews or others, became the ultimate measure of good and evil. Cosmopolitan memory, as defined by the two sociologists, is also highly personalised. The victims are not commemorated as a national or ethnic entity but as individuals with whom everybody can empathise and identify. Finally, this mode of remembering is also future-oriented.

¹⁶ Kroh, *Transnationale Erinnerung*, 136–41.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 139–41.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 190–200; Allwork, *Holocaust Remembrance*, 67–73.

¹⁹ Kroh, *Transnationale Erinnerung*, 111; cf. also: Aline Sierp, 'Integrating Europe, Integrating Memories: The EU's Politics of Memory since 1945', in Lucy Bond and Jessica Rapson (eds), *The Transcultural Turn: Interrogating Memory Between and Beyond Borders* (Berlin, 2014), 111.

²⁰ Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder, 'Memory Unbound. The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory', *European Journal of Social Theory*, v, 1 (2000), 100; cf. Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder, *Erinnerung im Globalen Zeitalter. Der Holocaust* (Frankfurt am Main, 2001), 210–11.

²¹ Levy and Sznajder, 'Memory Unbound'; *eid.*, *Erinnerung im Globalen Zeitalter*.

History is not being dealt with for its own sake or to better understand the contemporary world but is treated instead as a tool to shape the attitudes of future generations.

In his analysis of the SIF, Jens Kroh shows, however, that while the political speeches seem quite homogeneous at first glance, on closer inspection their message proves to be divergent. As the political scientist notes, the event served primarily:

to reaffirm the significance of the genocide through the presence of the politicians and their statements before the world public. Nevertheless, the intentionality and intensity of their reflections on the Holocaust differ. Indeed, the politicians tried to meet the expectations of the assembled community of states, which partly explains the uniformity of the speeches. ... However, national narratives equally found their way into the contributions of the government officials who spoke in Stockholm.²²

This tension between universal aspirations and particular interests is also visible when analysing the evocations of Holocaust rescuers during the conference.

The most visible cleavage in how the rescue stories were treated occurred not between representatives of different countries but between experts and politicians. While the historians and educators often referred to the rescuers, they simultaneously stressed that it was equally important to talk about Holocaust victims, perpetrators and bystanders, including passive onlookers and collaborators. For example, during one of the workshops, the Dutch educator Ido Abram stated that attention to “positive issues such as solidarity, resistance, and the preservation of human dignity in situations of extreme danger and hardship” was needed but should not be the main point of Holocaust education.²³ For historical understanding, he said, it was equally important, he said, to speak about the perpetrators and their collaborators. Some of the speakers also underlined that helpers invariably represented a tiny minority. Their deeds prove that help was possible, thereby forming an even stronger accusation against those who remained indifferent.

²² Kroh, *Transnationale Erinnerung*, 141 [this and other translations by the author].

²³ Presentation by Dr. Ido Abram, Workshop 1 on Education: ‘Pedagogy: Theories, Tools and Results’, <http://d.dccam.org/Projects/Affinity/SIF/DATA/2000/page1039.html> [Accessed: 8 March 2022].

Other speakers referred to the helpers as role models. The Israeli historian Yehuda Bauer, one of the leading advisors to the ITF and the conference, saw in the rescue attempts an important topic of Holocaust and civic education. “On the thin margins of the horror, there were the rescuers: too few of them, too isolated, but their very existence gives us the justification to teach about the Holocaust. They showed that people had choices that they could act differently from the multitude. Within the context of despair, they form the context of hope”.²⁴ Bauer was also the main person responsible for drafting the text of the Stockholm Declaration.²⁵ The historian had already stressed the universal lessons of the Holocaust on previous occasions, foremost the ‘commandment’ not to remain passive in the face of genocide.²⁶ Although a close collaborator with Yad Vashem, he nevertheless deviated in his speech at the SIF from the definition of the ‘Righteous’ as formulated by the Israeli Holocaust Remembrance Authority by stressing that both non-Jews and Jews could be considered as ‘Righteous’.²⁷ He cited as an example Yoshko Indig, a Zionist from Zagreb, who took care of Jewish children and youths from Germany and Yugoslavia stranded in Nonantola in northern Italy and then accompanied them on their flight to Switzerland in autumn 1943.²⁸ Other researchers and educators also underlined the exemplary role of rescuers. The US-American nun and professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies Carol Rittner stressed that just as it was “important to help students ask why ‘ordinary people’ became such ‘willing executioners’ for Hitler and the Nazis”, so it was also important “to help them ask why ‘ordinary people’ aided their fellow human beings at risk of their own lives. ... If we could find the answer to those questions, the world would be very

²⁴ Speech by Professor Yehuda Bauer at the Ceremonial Opening of the Forum, <http://d.dccam.org/Projects/Affinity/SIF/DATA/2000/page898.html> [Accessed: 6 Jan. 2022].

²⁵ Kroh, *Transnationale Erinnerung*, 161–3; Allwork, *Holocaust Remembrance*, 5.

²⁶ Allwork, *Holocaust Remembrance*, 48–52; Kroh, *Transnationale Erinnerung*, 162.

²⁷ Speech by Professor Yehuda Bauer at the Ceremonial Opening of the Forum, <http://d.dccam.org/Projects/Affinity/SIF/DATA/2000/page898.html> [Accessed: 6 Jan. 2022].

²⁸ On the historical background see Klaus Voigt, *Solidarität und Hilfe für Juden während der NZ-Zeit*, vi: *Villa Emma. Jüdische Kinder auf der Flucht 1940–1945* (Berlin, 2002); Sara Berger, “Ich gebe zu, dass mir manchmal die Hände zittern”. *Hilfe für verfolgte Juden in Italien 1943 bis 1945* (Berlin, 2021).

different from what it is today".²⁹ Likewise, the Holocaust scholar Elisabeth Maxwell mentioned "the need for role models".³⁰ "The powerful example of the Righteous, who as we know can be found in any country, any religion and any race", she argued, "will provoke a desire to emulate them. This would seem to be a way of attaining a universal, uncontroversial basis of absolute good which could counterbalance the absolute evil which has plagued the last century".

However, the evocations of Holocaust rescue were very different in the statements of governmental representatives. Jens Kroh divides the political speeches held during the conference into two main categories: those striving for historical clarification and a "factual examination of historical events" and those "mythologising the past".³¹ The former he ascribes mainly to representatives of Western countries, the latter to officials from Eastern and Central Europe. The analysis of how the topic of rescuers features in the political speeches basically confirms this East-West divide, albeit with some caveats.

Almost all the representatives of former Eastern Bloc countries and EU-candidate states mentioned, in one way or another, the help delivered by their countrymen to Jews during the Second World War. One can distinguish two ways in which the helpers were referenced. There were those speakers who strove to establish the story of Holocaust rescue as their country's grand narrative and those who, recognising that the societies they represent were in various ways implicated in the genocide, tried to mitigate this negative image by evoking the stories of survival.

The most prominent example of the first approach can be found in the speech given by the President of Bulgaria, Petar Stoyanov. Stoyanov presented his country as one that saved its entire Jewish population in the face of immense Nazi pressure. This, as he stated, was Bulgaria's greatest contribution to European civilisation. The Bulgarian president referred to the so-called Kyustendil action. In March 1943,

²⁹ Presentation by Dr. Carol Rittner, Workshop 2 on Education: 'Teaching in the contemporary context', <http://d.dccam.org/Projects/Affinity/SIF/DATA/2000/page1064.html> [Accessed: 8 March 2022].

³⁰ Presentation by Dr. Elisabeth Maxwell, Workshop 5 on Education: 'Religious and Ethical Teachings and the Holocaust', <http://d.dccam.org/Projects/Affinity/SIF/DATA/2000/page1092.html> [Accessed: 14 Jan. 2022].

³¹ Kroh, *Transnationale Erinnerung*, 143.

King Boris III halted the deportations of Jews from Bulgaria proper. Although historians still argue about the real cause of this decision, it was undoubtedly influenced by the protests of Dimitar Peshev and other deputies to the National Assembly.³² However, as claimed by Stoyanov, “most of the credit goes to the Bulgarian people who have always been strangers to xenophobia, [and] ethnic or religious intolerance”.³³

The Bulgarian representative did not conceal that his country had been an ally of Nazi Germany and that it had introduced anti-Jewish legislation on the eve of entering the war. Nevertheless, he claimed that “the Bulgarian people today have every reason to feel proud of their courage to care [!] and save from deportation and death nearly 50,000 Bulgarian Jews”. The responsibility for the deportation of the over 11,000 Jews from annexed Greek and Yugoslav territories, carried out by the Bulgarian authorities only a few days earlier, was attributed by the president to the Germans alone, and he expressed regret that “no protests by the Bulgarian public could save them”.³⁴

Such a reading of the past was in line with the predominant historical narrative in Bulgarian public discourse at that time.³⁵ The year

³² On the historical context and the historiographical controversies see amongst others Gabriele Nissim, *Der Mann, der Hitler stoppte: Dimităr Pešev und die Rettung der bulgarischen Juden* (Berlin, 2000); Jan Rychlík, ‘Zweierlei Politik gegenüber der Minderheit: Verfolgung und Rettung bulgarischer Juden 1940–1944’, in Wolfgang Benz and Julia Wetzel (eds), ‘Solidarität und Hilfe für Juden während der NS-Zeit’, *Regionalstudien*, vii, 4 (Berlin, 2004), 61–98; Iva Arakchiyska, *Kann ein Mensch dabei untätig bleiben? Hilfe für verfolgte Juden in Bulgarien 1940–1944* (Berlin, 2016); Nadége Ragaru, ‘Contrasting Destinies: The Plight of Bulgarian Jews and the Jews in Bulgarian-occupied Greek and Yugoslav Territories during World War Two’, *SciencesPo*, 15 (March 2017), <https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/en/document/contrasting-destinies- plight-bulgarian-jews-and-jews-bulgarian-occupied-greek-and-yugoslav-.html> [Accessed: 27 Nov. 2018].

³³ Message by the President of Bulgaria, Peter Stoyanov, <http://d.dccam.org/Projects/Affinity/SIF/DATA/2000/page923.html> [Accessed: 10 Jan. 2022].

³⁴ On the deportations from the Bulgaria annexed territories see, amongst others, Rychlík, ‘Zweierlei Politik gegenüber der Minderheit’; Bartłomiej Rusin, ‘Deportacja Żydów z Macedonii Wardarskiej, Bełomoria i Pirotu w historiografii bułgarskiej’, *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały*, 11 (2015), 255–68; Arakchiyska, *Kann ein Mensch dabei untätig bleiben?*

³⁵ On Bulgarian memory politics in relation to the Second World War and the Holocaust see amongst others Nadia Danova, ‘Culture de la mémoire en Bulgarie d’aujourd’hui à propos de la déportation des Juifs des territoires sous administration

before, in 1999, the National Assembly had published the Bulgarian edition of Gabriel Nissim's book *L'uomo che fermò Hitler* [The Man Who Stopped Hitler], which, as argued by Steven Sage, largely contributed to the development of the cult of Dimitar Peshev.³⁶ The same year, a commemorative plaque was unveiled in front of the parliament building in Sofia, bearing the following inscription:

On 14 March 1943, a protest movement supported by parliamentarians forced the Bulgarian government to halt the deportation of 8,500 Jews to the fascist extermination camps. Together with the turning point of the war, this act of protest saved 49,000 Bulgarian Jews from death. Unfortunately, 11,363 Jews from Aegean Thrace and Vardar Macedonia were sent to Nazi concentration camps. ... The Bulgarian people bow their heads in memory of these innocent victims.³⁷

Thus, one can say that Stoyanov used the SIF as an arena to promote and legitimise the official Bulgarian interpretation of the country's wartime past internationally.³⁸

Nonetheless, following the sanctioned Bulgarian historical master narrative, Stoyanov simultaneously tried to align with the other speakers by rendering his speech universal. In his closing words, he reaffirmed his country's commitment to studying the Holocaust but also emphasised that "focusing on the dark pages of history, we should not overlook its brighter spots which could be viewed as a source of courage and a positive example".

Likewise, the speeches and written statements delivered by Polish representatives did not mention the issue of collaboration in the Holocaust. The President of Poland, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, who gave a speech during the conference's opening session, referred to the upcoming anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. He stressed that Auschwitz-Birkenau was not an "incidental episode in the history of Europe and the world" but rather a part of the heritage of European

bulgare en 1943', *Bulgarian Historical Review*, xliii, 1/2 (2015), 76–92; Steven F. Sage, 'The Holocaust in Bulgaria: Rescuing history from "Rescue"', *DAPIM: Studies on the Holocaust*, xxxi, 2 (2017), 139–45; Nadège Ragaru, 'Nationalization through Internationalization. Writing, Remembering, and Commemorating the Holocaust in Macedonia and Bulgaria after 1989', *Südosteuropa*, lxxv, 2 (2017), 284–315.

³⁶ Sage, 'The Holocaust in Bulgaria', 143.

³⁷ Quoted after: Danova, 'Culture de la mémoire en Bulgarie', 87.

³⁸ Ragaru, 'Nationalization through Internationalization', 287.

civilisation, albeit “a shameful one”.³⁹ The president also confirmed Poland’s commitment to preserving the site. While the speech delivered by Kwaśniewski had a universal appeal, the written address sent in by the Polish Minister of Culture, Andrzej Zakrzewski, focused on inter-Polish disputes. Zakrzewski did not tackle the issue of complicity in the Holocaust, attributing full responsibility for the genocide to the German Nazis.⁴⁰ While he vaguely mentioned that many Poles remained silent in the face of the Holocaust and “fearing for their lives, did not get involved in helping Jews”, he also stressed that according to historians’ estimates, there must have been around a million Poles who sheltered them and provided other kinds of help. This calculation was based on the dubious assumption that it took at least 15–20 people to save the life of each of the estimated 60–80 thousand Polish Holocaust survivors. Zakrzewski, himself a historian, also stressed that Poland was “the only Nazi-occupied country, where helping Jews was punishable by death to the entire family of the helper”.⁴¹

From today’s perspective, the minister’s address sounds like an attempt to silence complex issues. However, it is worth noting that the SIF was held just a few days before the publication of the Polish edition of Jan Tomasz Gross’ *Neighbors* and thus preceded the long-lasting and still continuing debates on Polish complicity in the Holocaust. Even before the so-called Jedwabne debate, historians were aware that there was widespread anti-Semitism

³⁹ Message by the President of the Republic of Poland, Aleksander Kwaśniewski at the ceremonial opening, <http://d.dccam.org/Projects/Affinity/SIF/DATA/2000/page904.html> [Accessed: 9 March 2022].

⁴⁰ Written Message of the Minister of Culture and the National Heritage of Poland, Andrzej Zakrzewski, <http://d.dccam.org/Projects/Affinity/SIF/DATA/2000/page985.html> [Accessed: 28 Jan. 2022].

⁴¹ This notion, very popular in Poland, is not accurate. It is true that in German-occupied Poland, helping Jews was punishable by death, and in many cases this penalty was actually meted out. There are also cases where a whole family, including the children of the aid providers, was killed in retribution. However, collective responsibility for aiding Jews was not the rule. Furthermore, in other German-occupied territories, including Byelorussia, Ukraine or Serbia, helping Jews also bore the risk of the death penalty. On this, see Aleksandra Namysło and Grzegorz Berendt (eds), *Rejestr faktów represji na obywatelach polskich za pomoc ludności żydowskiej w okresie II wojny światowej* (Warszawa, 2014); also Klara Jackl and Mateusz Szczepaniak, ‘The Death Penalty for Helping Jews’, <https://sprawiedliwi.org.pl/en/o-sprawiedliwych/kim-sa-sprawiedliwi/kara-smierci-za-udzielanie-pomocy-zydom> [Accessed: 28 March 2022].

in Poland in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as during the Second World War. Thus it is clear that Zakrzewski's speech embellished history. However, it did not deviate much from the then-current state of debate on Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust, which in the 1990s focused mainly on the question of Polish indifference to the fate of their Jewish fellow citizens and not so much on the issue of Polish participation in and profiteering from the genocide.⁴² It was not until July 2001, on the 60th anniversary of the Jedwabne massacre, that President Kwaśniewski publicly apologised for the crime.⁴³

Other conference speakers gave a more nuanced account of their countries' individual histories. Most of them did not wholly reject accusations of complicity in the Holocaust but tried to counterbalance them with stories of rescue. An excellent example of such an approach is the address given by Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga. The president of Latvia admitted that there were Latvian collaborators who, instigated by Nazi propaganda, participated in the murder of Jews. However, she also underlined that as Latvia had ceased to exist as a sovereign state during the war, it was Nazi Germany which bore the ultimate responsibility for these crimes.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the Latvian politician assured that her country was committed to developing Holocaust research, education and remembrance and mentioned in this context the establishment of the Commission of the Historians of Latvia. The commission was founded in 1998 in response to growing international accusations concerning Latvia's involvement in the genocide.⁴⁵ Its members were

⁴² The state of research and debate at the time is well reflected by: Michael C. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust* (Syracuse NY, 1997).

⁴³ 'Address by President of Poland Aleksander Kwaśniewski at the Ceremonies in Jedwabne Marking the sixtieth Anniversary of the Jedwabne Tragedy on 10 July 2001', in Polonsky and Michlic (eds), *The Neighbors Respond*, 130–2.

⁴⁴ On the historical context see among others Katrin Reichelt, *Lettland unter deutscher Besatzung 1941–1944. Der lettische Anteil am Holocaust* (Berlin, 2011); Margers Vestermanis. 'Retter im Lande der Handlanger. Zur Geschichte der Hilfe für Juden in Lettland während der "Endlösung"', in Wolfgang Benz and Juliane Wetzel (eds), *Solidarität und Hilfe für Juden während der NS-Zeit* (Berlin, 1998), 231–72; Katrin Reichelt, *Rettung kennt keine Konventionen. Hilfe für verfolgte Juden im deutsch besetztem Lettland 1941–1945* (Berlin, 2016).

⁴⁵ Eva-Clarita Onken, *Demokratisierung der Geschichte in Lettland. Staatsbürgerliches Bewußtsein und Geschichtspolitik im ersten Jahrzehnt der Unabhängigkeit* (Hamburg, 2003), 179–99.

among the delegates to the SIF, and the commission's first progress report, which was published in November the following year, is marked by careful wording similar to that used in the speech.⁴⁶ While testifying to her country's readiness to come to terms with its past, the president of Latvia also reminded her audience that "despite the grave risk to their personal safety and that of their relatives, scores of Latvian families managed to save the lives of more than 300 Jews during the German occupation".⁴⁷

The politicians speaking at the conference often referred to Yad Vashem and quoted the number of people from their respective countries who had been honoured with the title Righteous Among the Nations. For example, the President of Slovakia, Rudolf Schuster, stressed that "Slovakia ranks as the first country among those whose citizens helped the Jewish people in those difficult times. ... More than three hundred of them have been the recipients of the Khasidey Umot Haolam award, bestowed upon them, as a sign of recognition, by the State of Israel".⁴⁸ The Lithuanian Prime Minister, Andrius Kubilius, expressed his pride in the "many Lithuanian families mentioned as the Righteous Among the Nations in the Yad Vashem memorial".⁴⁹ The then Prime Minister of Ukraine Victor Yushchenko likewise said he was proud "because of the fact that on the Righteous Alley in Jerusalem there are so many trees for the Ukrainians".⁵⁰ By the popular understanding, these statements suggested that the number or percentage of citizens of a given country distinguished by the Israeli Righteous Commission reflected the stance of a given society towards the Holocaust. As the Yad Vashem historians point out, this is wrong, as the number of people awarded depended on various factors, many

⁴⁶ The Progress Report of Latvia's History Commission: Crimes against Humanity Committed in the Territory of Latvia from 1940 to 1956 during the Occupations of the Soviet Union and National Socialist Germany, <https://www2.mfa.gov.lv/images/archive/data/file/e/HC-Progress-Report2001.pdf> [Accessed: 28 Feb. 2022].

⁴⁷ Message by the President of Latvia, Vaira Vike-Freiberga at the Plenary Session, <http://d.dccam.org/Projects/Affinity/SIF/DATA/2000/page919.html> [Accessed: 10 Jan. 2022].

⁴⁸ Message by the President of Slovakia, Rudolf Schuster, <http://d.dccam.org/Projects/Affinity/SIF/DATA/2000/page924.html> [Accessed: 10 Jan. 2022].

⁴⁹ Message by the Prime Minister of Lithuania, Andrius Kubilius, <http://d.dccam.org/Projects/Affinity/SIF/DATA/2000/page926.html> [Accessed: 10 Jan. 2022].

⁵⁰ Message by the Prime Minister of Ukraine, Victor Yushchenko, <http://d.dccam.org/Projects/Affinity/SIF/DATA/2000/page925.html> [Accessed: 10 Jan. 2022].

of which lay in postwar developments, e.g. the diplomatic relations between Israel and the respective country or the existence of memory agents encouraging applications for the award.⁵¹

Meanwhile, we find representatives of Western European countries on the opposite side of the spectrum. Many of them, most prominently the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Robin Cook, stressed the challenges faced by modern multicultural societies and promoted Holocaust education and remembrance as a means of countering neo-Nazism and combating ethnic and religious hostility and racial hatred. Others, such as the representatives of the Netherlands and Switzerland, focused more on historical issues, often displaying a critical approach to their own national past and the stance of their societies towards the Jews during the Holocaust and in the immediate postwar period. This left little space for mentioning the rescuers. Very significant in this respect was the address by the Italian Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema. He referred to the opening speech of Yehuda Bauer and his mentioning of the rescue action of Jewish children and youths in Nonantola. However, as D'Alema stressed, one should not forget that Italy was not only "a country of Villa Emma di Nonantola" but also "the country of Mussolini, the country whose entrails spawned fascism in Europe".⁵² To remember this and draw lessons from these less honourable aspects of one's national history was crucial for maintaining democracy and combating racism, intolerance, religious fundamentalism and nationalism. The Shoah, he argued, was "a European tragedy"; it neither belonged "to a single place" nor "a single period of time", as it could always "surface anew in new forms".⁵³

The French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin also stressed that, albeit with some delay, the French government had acknowledged the responsibility of the French State for the persecution of Jews in France.⁵⁴ Jospin referred to the President of the French Republic, Jacques Chirac,

⁵¹ Yad Vashem/Names of Righteous by Country, <https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/statistics.html> [Accessed: 14 March 2022].

⁵² Message by the Prime Minister of Italy Massimo D'Alema at the Ceremonial Opening, <http://d.dccam.org/Projects/Affinity/SIF/DATA/2000/page902.html> [Accessed: 10 Jan. 2022].

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Message by the Prime Minister of the French Republic, Lionel Jospin at the Ceremonial Opening, <http://d.dccam.org/Projects/Affinity/SIF/DATA/2000/page903.html> [Accessed: 10 Jan. 2022].

who in 1995 officially acknowledged the responsibility of the Vichy government for the persecution of Jews during the Second World War.

However, as noted by Aline Sierp, the speeches given by Prime Minister D'Alema during the Stockholm Conference and the day after in the Teatro Valle in Rome were "unusual in their open admission of Italy's guilt in collaborating in the Holocaust".⁵⁵ They differed from other statements made by Italian politicians addressed to the domestic audience. In her analysis of other speeches delivered by Italian officials on the occasion of the *Giorno della Memoria* [Day of Remembrance], held yearly on the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz (27 January), Sierp observes that regardless of the political orientation of the speakers "the public admission of guilt is ... always accompanied by references to the so-called *giusti* – those who had helped the Jews".⁵⁶ As she argues, the focus put on the 'Righteous' and the positioning of these references suggest that the noble acts "were able to cancel out the previously mentioned horrors and therefore had a stronger right to be remembered".⁵⁷ Likewise, the speech by Lionel Jospin deviated from the official French historical narrative of that time. As already mentioned, the *Justes de France* play a prominent role in French politics of remembrance and are often cited as a counterargument to accusations that the country was complicit in the Holocaust. Even in the speech referred to by Jospin, in which Jacques Chirac publicly acknowledged for the first time the co-responsibility of Vichy France for the deportation of over 75,000 Jews, the president simultaneously claimed that the remaining three-quarters of the French Jewish community were saved by the Righteous Among the Nations. It was them who – as Chirac put it – incarnated "a certain idea of France, honest, generous, faithful to its traditions, to its genius".⁵⁸ Remarkably, in the address given at the SIF, the prime minister did not once refer to this aspect of the presidential speech.

In his discussion of the SIF, Jens Kroh puts forward the thesis that the statements delivered by governmental representatives were

⁵⁵ Aline Sierp, *History, Memory and Trans-European Identity. Unifying Divisions* (New York–London, 2014), 92.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁵⁸ 'Allocution de M. Jacques Chirac, Président de la République à l'occasion des cérémonies commémorant la grande rafle des 16 et 17 juillet 1942 (Paris, le 16 juillet 1995)', in Jacques Chirac, *Mon combat pour la France. Textes et interventions* (Paris, 2007), 32–3. English translation cited after: Gensburger, *National Policy*, 62.

addressed not only to the international audience but to a no lesser extent to domestic audiences and thus did not transcend the borders set by the national memory cultures.⁵⁹ However, the speeches given by the French and Italian prime ministers suggest the opposite. The difference between the tenor of these statements and the dominant historical discourse in both countries implies that Jospin's and D'Alema's intended audience was primarily the international community.⁶⁰ While in the French case, the slightly different approach to the history between the centre-right president and the Socialist prime minister may also partly be explained by political differences, in Italy, the *giusti*-narrative was equally promoted by representatives of all sides of the political spectrum.

Furthermore, I would argue that the leaders of the former Eastern Bloc countries and EU-candidate states also addressed their speeches foremost to the international public. The difference lies in how they defined their respective countries' interests and the aims of cultural diplomacy. While the French and Italian heads of state thought to gain more credit by presenting themselves as self-reflective and self-critical towards their national history, most Eastern European leaders, confronted with allegations of complicity in the Holocaust, thought they would do better to counter them by exposing other, more positive aspects of their countries' histories.

An interesting example of the invocation of the 'Righteous' can be found in the speech delivered by the Austrian chancellor and chairman of the Social Democratic Party, Viktor Klima. In October 1999, the socialists lost the Austrian parliamentary elections. Klima's successor in the post of chancellor, Wolfgang Schüssel, was to enter into a coalition with Jörg Haider's right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ). At the beginning of his speech, Klima mentioned that there were two concurring 'historic truths' on Austrian history: one truth was that what started with the *Anschluss* "ended for hundreds of thousands of Austrians in concentration camps, on the battlefields of the Second World War or in the bombed-out cities where their homes had been".⁶¹ However, he said there was also another historic truth, "a truth which

⁵⁹ Kroh, *Transnationale Erinnerung*, 141–2.

⁶⁰ Cf. Sierp, *History, Memory and Trans-European Identity*, 106.

⁶¹ Message by the Prime Minister of Austria, Viktor Klima, <http://d.dccam.org/Projects/Affinity/SIF/DATA/2000/page955.html> [Accessed: 11 Jan. 2022].

we long – far too long – refused to see: Many citizens of my country supported the Nazi regime and helped keep its annihilation machinery going to the very last day”.

Given the actual political developments, the outgoing chancellor appealed to the future Austrian government to continue the critical confrontation with the country’s past and apologised to the Jewish people and other victims of Nazism. However, as if wanting to mitigate his statement, he also mentioned a third role, apart from being victims and perpetrators, that his countrymen assumed during the Second World War – that of rescuers: “Yes, there were those actively involved in the crimes and there were the fellow-travellers. And there were also ‘the Just’: some of them are remembered in Yad Vashem, the unique memorial and research centre. They risked their lives to resist and help the victims of persecution and thereby left us an inheritance of hope that one can remain a human being even in the most inhuman times”.

In his speech, Federal Chancellor of Germany Gerhard Schröder also referred to help delivered to Jews by his countrymen. While not denying German culpability for the crimes committed during the Second World War, Schröder seemed to subscribe to the tendency to universalise the Holocaust by turning it from a German to a European phenomenon. “Auschwitz was not a natural disaster”, he said.⁶² “Human beings, mainly Germans, had transformed this place step by step into a slaughterhouse – into a place where civilisation was simply reversed, a place of nameless, lasting terror”. He went on to say how important it was to teach youths about the terror of the Nazi regime for history not to repeat itself. However, according to him, it was equally important to tell about those who helped and rescued the persecuted. As examples, he named the police officer Wilhelm Krützfeld, who during the November Pogroms of 1938 prevented the destruction of the New Synagogue on Oranienburger Street in Berlin and the Protestant priest Harald Poelchau, who hid and supported several Jewish families in the German capital. Their stories show “that elementary humane, civil behaviour was, at least within limits, possible even under the dictatorship when hate was so stirred up”. In line with Yehuda Bauer’s speech, Schröder saw the ‘Righteous’ as role models for future generations.

⁶² Message by the Federal Chancellor of Germany, Gerhardt Schröder at the Ceremonial Opening, <http://d.cccam.org/Projects/Affinity/SIF/DATA/2000/page905.html> [Accessed: 6 Jan. 2022].

However, the German chancellor assigned them yet another function: boosting German self-esteem. While stressing that “nobody can, and nobody wants to hold the German youth of today liable for the deeds for which they bear no responsibility”, he also claimed that the ‘Righteous’ and other members of the German resistance could be a source of pride for future generations. Thus, both Klima and Schröder, while admitting their countries’ responsibility for the Holocaust and other crimes committed during the Second World War, simultaneously referred to the rescuers to show that both the Austrian and German societies had yet another face, a face to be proud of.

III CONCLUSIONS

As this paper demonstrates, the topic of the rescue of Jews figured prominently in the speeches held during the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust. However, participants in the conference defined the Righteous differently and referred to them for different purposes. A significant divide between politicians from Western Europe and those from former Eastern Bloc countries can be seen. While the speeches of the western leaders made much less mention of the ‘Righteous’ and mainly referred to their universal meaning as role models for contemporaries, many of the Eastern European heads of the state saw the rescuers as representative of the entire nation or at least of a significant part of it. The statements made by Viktor Klima and Gerhard Schröder are placed somewhere in between these two poles. Stressing the German and Austrian responsibility for the Holocaust, they simultaneously evoked the ‘Righteous’ as exemplary figures and as a source of pride for their countrymen. These disparities are partly due to the different cultures of memory in which the speakers were rooted. An additional factor may be the political affiliations of the speakers. As noted by Jens Kroh, most of the governmental representatives from Western Europe were social democrats. As such, they were accustomed to being more self-critical of their respective national histories than their predominantly liberal-conservative colleagues from Central-Eastern Europe.⁶³ Yet no less important seem

⁶³ Kroh, *Transnationale Erinnerung*, 158.

to be differences in understanding the national interest and the role assigned to cultural diplomacy between East and West.

However, when assessing the speeches, national and regional differences are less significant than those between politicians and academics. While many of the experts referenced the 'Righteous', they never presented them as a synecdoche for an entire society. On the contrary, they stressed that the rescuers constituted a tiny minority and cited their stories as evidence that even under such extreme circumstances, help was possible. Thus, the helpers were to serve as exemplars for contemporaries. Going beyond Yad Vashem's definition of the 'Righteous' as non-Jews rescuing Jews, Yehuda Bauer and other experts also stressed the active role of Jewish aid providers and receivers. Despite these discrepancies, it was precisely the text of the Stockholm Declaration and the speeches by Yehuda Bauer and other experts that gave legitimacy to the political statements and their mentioning of the 'Righteous'.

While Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder may be right that, notwithstanding internal tensions, the SIF promoted an overall self-critical, victim-centred, future-oriented and highly personalised Holocaust remembrance, these traits also paved the way for the rescue narratives to enter the international discourse. On the one hand, the changes in the perception of the Holocaust as not only a German but a European phenomenon, accompanied by debates on the complicity and profiteering from the genocide, provoked a defensive reaction in many Eastern and Western European societies. The rescue stories were to rebuke or at least mitigate these allegations. On the other hand, it was the shift from historical to civic education and the treatment of history as a reservoir of role models that lent the rescuers a universal appeal. I would argue that this feedback loop between national and transnational policies of remembrance gave the topic growing legitimacy on both the local and international levels and helped it gain its current popularity.

proofreading Nicholas Hodge

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Zofia Wóycicka – memory and museum studies, recent history of Poland and Germany, especially the Second World War and Stalinist periods; researcher at the German Historical Institute in Warsaw; e-mail: woycicka@dhi.waw.pl