

JENNIFER MARLOW

LIFE IN HIDING AND BEYOND

Elizabeth Grotch, born in 1938, referred to her nanny, Janina Zillow, as the mother “she knew” before the war.¹ Zillow was present in the home providing the daily, hands-on child-rearing tasks, making sure she was dressed, bathed, and carefully looked after. After Janina Zillow removed Grotch, along with her cousin Lillian Trilling, from the Warsaw ghetto, the trio went to the former nanny’s sister’s home; but they could stay only a few days because Zillow’s sister, a laundress, was afraid to keep them any longer.² The nanny told people the girls were her nieces and that she was caring for them because her brother had been killed. The girls called her aunt in public, but sometimes mixed up details, adding to the serious danger. Zillow obtained papers for Grotch and Trilling, and the three of them traveled by train to Lviv (Lwów), where Zillow had been living.³ To avoid scrutiny, Zillow kept the girls inside the apartment all day while she worked, but the landlord denounced them. During her encounter with the Germans, Zillow was thrown against the wall and feared that she would be sent to work in Germany, so she and the two girls had to leave the area. The three of them parted ways; Trilling was provided with papers to work in Warsaw, and Grotch and Zillow went to stay with the nanny’s family in Lublin.

Life with Zillow’s family, whom she described as “pro-Nazi,” was difficult for both Grotch and her caregiver.⁴ While the rest of Zillow’s family treated her well, the mother was openly hostile toward her. Upon their arrival, the mother said to Zillow, “Well, when you were a child you used to bring stray cats, now you bring stray Jews.”⁵ Grotch lived in a formerly Jewish-owned apartment with Zillow and Zillow’s mother, brother, and sister. The family was also running a formerly Jewish-owned business, and hiding a Jewish child in this home led to a great deal of conflict. Grotch was generally kept concealed because the family was afraid that people would see her and recognize her typically Jewish features. Zillow’s family denounced people, looted their

belongings, and directly benefited from the persecution of the Jewish population by receiving both an apartment and a business. Grotch described the mother as fiercely antisemitic. Yet this family was willing to risk its members' lives to hide a Jewish child in their home, which seems contradictory in the face of their other behavior.

Grotch suggested that Zillow's mother was desperate to have Zillow there, and the former maid wanted a child of her own.⁶ Zillow had kept a Jewish baby in her Lwów apartment while she was hiding Trilling and Grotch; but when they were denounced, the baby had to be sent away. Grotch recalled Zillow frequently commenting that it was a shame about that other baby.⁷ While Zillow's mother may have had ambivalent or negative feelings about Grotch, Zillow was "her daughter, her youngest child, so it was better to have her even if she had to put up with that (a Jewish child in their home)."⁸ For Zillow, the desire to have a child and her feelings of attachment to her prewar charge were enough motivation to take an enormous risk and suffer her mother's displeasure.

Despite the animosity of the mother, Grotch was in many ways treated as part of this family. They celebrated the holidays together, and she was taken to church sometimes even though that was quite risky. Grotch believed she stayed with the family in Lublin at least one-and-a-half years, and she stayed with Zillow until she left Poland in 1946. This was a very uncomfortable and sometimes hostile environment for the child, and yet she was with the one person she felt safest with, Janina Zillow. Her maid was willing to deal with her mother's disapproval and risk not only her own life, but the lives of all of her immediate family to keep this child.

Zillow's age, the nanny's role as the child's primary caregiver before the war, and the time they spent together in hiding contributed to making their bond become even stronger during the Nazi occupation while staying briefly in Lwów and then in Lublin. When Grotch was approximately four or five years old, Zillow told her that her mother had been killed. Grotch replied, "Thank God it wasn't you," and her caregiver responded by yelling at her for saying such a thing and asking her if she was ashamed of herself.⁹ Zillow had been quite attached to Grotch's mother, acting very nurturing and protective toward her employer before the war, and was likely upset at the news of her death. Though it was jarring for Zillow to hear the child express her lack of attachment to her mother, perhaps her reaction should not have been unexpected. Grotch was very young at the outbreak of the war and said that by the end of the war she thought Zillow was her mother. The memory of her own mother was so vague by then that she did not even want to think about her or about being Jewish.¹⁰ Her age, the time spent with her caregiver, and the need to pretend and live as if she were Zillow's child certainly reinforced such forgetting.

Grotch survived the war with Zillow and was claimed by her extended family, whose members were living in the United States. Zillow traveled with the child to Sweden and Cuba for two years, until they were finally able to reach the family in the United States. This woman left her family and home in Poland rather than be separated from her charge. Many other female Polish Catholic domestic workers who protected Jewish children under Nazi occupation loved their charges even before the war, but the time spent together living in fear as part of a conspiracy formed a new and deeper bond. Some of these women risked everything to keep these children, not just discovery by the authorities that could result in death, but the loss of their families of origin, loved ones, acquaintances, and friends. The children themselves sometimes were old enough to be aware of the situation or sometimes were so young, as in the case of Grotch, that the identities they took while passing became their primary identities. They did not always realize how abnormal the situation was. The moving, the tension in the home, the adoption of an entirely new identity — for some children this was the only childhood they would remember. Thus, it was not until later that they would understand exactly what was happening. Even for older children, the lines were also not so clear. They may have had clear memories of their parents and missed them very much, but they also became increasingly attached to their caregivers and to their new identities. As we can see in the case of Elizabeth Grotch and her nanny, Janina Zillow, while caring for a prewar charge or being cared for by a prewar maid or nanny, were in fact extensions of prewar life and provided a degree of normalcy, the situation also distorted and complicated every aspect of life for those involved in these conspiracies.

This chapter argues that the Nazi occupation and Holocaust changed relationships between Polish Catholic domestic workers and their former Jewish charges that they later protected, their former employers, and often their own acquaintances, family, and friends.¹¹ The rescue dynamic led to a greater intimacy between the caregiver and charge as they became partners in conspiracy, even while their clandestine activity greatly narrowed their universe and altered the prewar pattern of authority between the former employers and employees.

AN EVER SHRINKING UNIVERSE

Nazi policy was intended to sever ties between Polish Jews and gentiles and in many cases this policy was overwhelmingly effective. However, in many cases where rescue by a former household servant occurred, Nazi policy had exactly the opposite effect. Rather than cutting ties and ignoring the fate of their Jewish employers, these women who engaged in clandestine rescue and aid activities bound their own fate to that of the Jews they were aiding.

In order to protect a Jewish child, it was necessary either to pass that child off as a gentile or to conceal his or her existence completely. As these women had ties to these children from before the war, even in urban areas they ran the risk that the child would be recognized as their prewar Jewish charge. As a result, when a former caregiver took a child from the ghetto, they either had to conceal the child completely from anyone who could recognize them, or to relocate to where the two of them would not be recognized.

In the case of Zillow and Grotch, Zillow could not stay in the city and needed to take the child someplace else, so she returned to her family of origin in Lublin. This created conflict in the family and also required a cover story for the appearance of this child. In a small town or village, people were familiar with one another, and the sudden appearance of someone who had been away with a child they had never heard about before and no husband roused suspicion and demanded a cover story. Some women passed their charges off as their own offspring. It was, of course, much easier to explain the presence of a child without a husband to strangers than to one's own family and friends. Former nanny Victoria Rodziewicz removed Sarah Wall from the Vilna ghetto and initially stayed in the city so the child could continue to have contact with her mother.¹² In June 1941, after a former neighbor recognized Wall and Rodziewicz, the Gestapo took Rodziewicz for questioning. They released her, but this incident made it apparent that she would have to leave the city. She fled alone, returning the child to her mother temporarily, and within weeks she removed the child from the ghetto permanently.¹³ In preparation, Rodziewicz went to her priest to ask for papers for her charge; but since she told the clergyman that the child was Jewish, he would not oblige her request and suggested she ask another priest she did not know. She took his advice, told another priest that Wall was her illegitimate child, and had her baptized as Irena to obtain legal documents. Rodziewicz then returned to her family of origin in the village of Grauzyszki (Graużyszki), located today in Belarus, with a baby and unmarried. Initially, Wall says her caretaker did not know whom she could trust, so she did not tell her family this secret. Wall says, "You can well imagine this devout Catholic woman" who had to bear this shame.¹⁴ Soon it was apparent that her family could be trusted; and even after the child's identity was revealed, the family continued to treat her well. Just to be safe, however, anytime people came around they would start admonishing the child, yelling at her, "You bastard!" for good measure.¹⁵ This was a common means of concealing the identity of a Jewish child, even though it was certainly not without its problems and there was a stigma attached to this mode of deception for the caretaker.¹⁶

INCREASED INTIMACY

The conspiracy that Wall and Rodziewicz participated in, just as in the previously mentioned case of Zillow and Grotch, firmly cemented the relationship between caregiver and charge as one of mother and child. Like Grotch, Wall was very young when she was placed in Rodziewicz's care, and eventually this woman would be the only mother she remembered. Wall slept with Rodziewicz every night. She remembers these wartime years as hard for everyone, but she recalls feeling fairly secure and being treated with love.¹⁷ She always felt that she was the most important person in Rodziewicz's life.¹⁸ The nanny would bleach Wall's hair blond to ensure she looked Polish; Wall did not realize until later that this was not a normal activity. They celebrated all the Catholic holidays, and she describes herself as just like all the other (gentile) children, meaning antisemitic.¹⁹ One night Rodziewicz and Wall had to leave in the middle of the night because people seemed to be suspicious; and her caregiver made it into a game, "like everyone just leaves in the middle of the night."²⁰ These abnormal activities that were necessary to conceal the true identity of a child often did not seem particularly abnormal to the children at the time. Depending on their age or the situation, they did not know the difference or they became accustomed to this. Wall, for example, did not have any idea at the end of the war that this woman who had raised her was not her biological mother. After she was reunited with her own mother, who survived the war, she continued to miss her caregiver; but she did not ever share this sadness with her mother because she knew it would be hurtful to her to hear.²¹

Rodziewicz and Wall developed this strong mother-daughter relationship that was strengthened by the absence of the child's mother and by the conspiracy in which they engaged. The family treated Wall as if she were a member and behaved as if Rodziewicz were the child's mother. Wall did not know any of this was abnormal. She did not realize that having her hair bleached regularly was to conceal her Jewish identity; it was just something she did. The family closed ranks and all became responsible for this secret and all bore the risks. They pretended that the child was a "bastard," and it stands to reason that this would have been the cause of gossip and shame for the family as a whole, but especially for Rodziewicz. So while Rodziewicz was able to maintain her connections with her family of origin, she did have to leave her home and acquaintances in Vilna and bear the shame of having a child out of wedlock, thus restricting her social life and relationships. Rather than just her own universe shrinking, this conspiracy restricted the universe of the entire family unit.

Most caregivers were not fortunate enough to have the support of their families in their rescue activities; and even when they did have some assistance

from their own family or friends, they still had to conceal their activities from everyone else. This included neighbors, landlords, coworkers, shopkeepers, and even priests. Nothing could appear out of the ordinary. Karolina Sapetowa was employed as a nanny for the Hochweiser children — Samus, Salusia, and Iziu — before the war; and after they were confined in the Kraków ghetto with their parents, she continued to have contact with the family, taking food and needed items to them. The youngest child came to stay with her at her home in Witanowice, and she would take the older children from the ghetto temporarily whenever the situation became especially unstable. She worried and missed the children when they were confined and thought of them as her own.²² In March 1943 when the ghetto was liquidated, Sapetowa and her aunt went to the ghetto and caught sight of the older children, Iziu and Salusia, with their mother; and as soon as their mother caught sight of Sapetowa, she urged the children to “Go to Karolcia.”²³ Salusia “slipped like a mouse between the heavy boots of the Ukrainians,” who did not notice the child.²⁴ The little girl ran to Sapetowa with her “hands stretched out imploringly.”²⁵ Iziu stayed with his mother, and they were both loaded aboard a transport and Sapetowa never saw them again.

Sapetowa took Salusia back home to Witanowice, where she was already keeping her little brother, Samus. At first, the children were able to play outdoors and her neighbors did not harass her much, but this did not last long. When relations grew difficult with the other villagers, she began keeping the children indoors; but the threats from her neighbors increased rapidly. Her neighbors implored and threatened her to turn the children in to the Gestapo before they all were punished for harboring Jewish children. She responded to their demands by “telling them off” or bribing them, until one day in 1944, shortly before the Soviets liberated Witanowice, the local farmers came to her and told her that they must “get rid of the children.”²⁶ Their plan to do so involved taking the children to the barn and cutting their heads off while they slept.²⁷

Sapetowa lived with her elderly father, and he was of course alarmed at this turn of events, and the children themselves were aware of what was happening. She remembers, “The poor children knew everything, and before they went to bed they would say to us, ‘Karolcia, do not kill us just today!’”²⁸ These children knew that their caretaker, who loved them as her own, was being pressured not just to send them away but to take them into the barn and let the neighbors execute them. Sapetowa resolved that she would “not hand over the children at any price.”²⁹ Instead, she put the children on a cart and paraded them around the village, telling everyone she was taking them outside of the village to drown them. She then took them out into the surrounding countryside and hid them, until she could smuggle them back into town that

evening and hide them in a neighbor's attic. The children suffered there, concealed from the other neighbors in a hot, filthy attic, while Sapetowa worked to earn enough money to pay for food and to pay the neighbor for this hiding place. Eventually, she could not make the payments, and they were in turn evicted from this hiding place. Sapetowa, then, with no other choices available, brought the children back to her home and hid them in a shed with the cattle until the Red Army liberated them. The children remained with Sapetowa after the war; she became their sole guardian. She wrote, "I shall never part from them again, and even if they were to go to the ends of the earth, I would go with them. They are like my children; I love them more than anything in the world, and I would do anything for them."³⁰ Sapetowa never remarried (she was a widow), and she stayed with the children, leaving Poland with the children for Denmark. Later in life she cared for Salusia's children.³¹

While Sapetowa had the support of her father, she was surrounded by hostile neighbors, who believed she was putting all of them in danger. They threatened her regularly until she concealed the children completely to appease them. Neighbors she had likely known for years became openly hostile toward her, demanding that she murder or at least consent to the murder of the children she loved as her own. She also must have been cognizant of the danger into which she was placing her elderly father. In addition, the children's world shrank, as Sapetowa became the only one protecting them. "Normal" changed from confinement in the ghetto to staying for short periods with Sapetowa, with whom they "felt at home," to then staying full-time and being allowed to play outdoors. Soon, however, the children realized that every single person living in that town did not want them there, and some of those people wanted to harm them physically.³² They went from playing outside to total concealment. Their father had been shot, their mother and older brother had disappeared, and they became fearful that the one person they loved and who cared for them might take them into the barn and cut off their heads. For these children and others living in hiding, the outside world not only became smaller, it became unimaginably hostile.

ALTERED CAREGIVER-CHARGE RELATIONSHIPS

While rescue brought increased intimacy to the relationship between caregiver and charge, further cementing familial bonds and emotional attachment, the situation also brought new anxieties and pressures to the relationship. As mentioned previously, Salusia and Samuś Hochwieser started to fear that their beloved caregiver, Karolina Sapetowa, would succumb to the pressure of her neighbors and murder them. Elizabeth Grotch also acknowledged the love that she felt for her caregiver and felt very much loved by Zillow in return, but recalled that there were also tense moments which made her fearful. At one

point, Janina Zillow's mother threw her and the child out of her home. Zillow went to a convent seeking shelter for herself and the child, but they were refused. Zillow was upset and did not know where to turn, so she told Grotch they would go to the church and stand in front of the Holy Virgin and "if she nods her head that I should give you away I will have to. If she doesn't I'll stay with you."³³ Grotch remembers feeling terrified standing there, an unwilling player in a game of Christian roulette. Mary, of course, did not nod. It was not uncommon for caregivers, who were under extreme stress, to lash out at the children they cared for or exhibit abnormal behavior during these periods of extreme pressure.

Bernhard Kempler and his sister, Anita, spent the war passing as the daughters of their former caregiver, Franciszka Ziemiańska.³⁴ Bernhard had to act, convincingly, in order to pass as a little girl, Bernadette, since it was especially dangerous for male Jews because their circumcision could easily confirm their Jewish identities. Kempler was very young during the war, born in May 1936; but he recalls he had to make his voice sound like that of a girl, he remembers having his hair braided, and he recalls wearing a dress. He passed as a little girl for at least four years. He also became Catholic: learning all the prayers, attending Mass, and performing the rituals very naturally with his caregiver. His whole identity, gender as well as religion and ethnicity, had to be transformed to pass as his nanny's child.

Separated from his parents and living with a new identity as a Catholic girl was an extreme hardship for the young boy; and the relationship between Kempler, his sister, and his caregiver, whom he relied on for stability and protection, was also fraught with tension. Yet Kempler recalls kindness, and he felt that Ziemiańska loved the children. Kempler explained:

Of course we had been with her before the war as well so it wasn't that big a change, but there were times when she was frightened, she had terrible headaches and sometimes if we didn't do something exactly the way she wanted she would be very upset. She would threaten to leave us, asking "What did she need this for?" It was dangerous for her to be taking care of us and hiding us like that. And I remember that it was frightening to me that she would leave us.³⁵

In order to please his caregiver, who was a devout Catholic, Kempler acted "very religious as a Catholic" and would get her water and headache powders when she was not feeling well.³⁶ He explains that he felt close to her, but was also aware that she did not have to keep him and his sister; so he behaved in a manner as good, obedient, and helpful as possible.³⁷ Before the war, his nanny had looked after him, but this relationship became distorted under Nazi occupation policy. Now, under this new circumstance, he faced insecurity and

fear that the woman who loved him might leave him at any moment. This compelled him to constantly attempt to please her as he concealed his true identity.

The relationship between Ziemiańska and Kempler's sister was also newly complicated by this precarious situation. His sister was "more of a problem" for their caregiver, so Kempler felt a need to compensate for her behavior by being especially obedient and doing everything precisely the way he thought Ziemiańska wanted him to.³⁸ According to Kempler, this created conflict between the three of them, placing them in a situation in which he always wanted his sister to behave better, but she would not. So he would behave better, as he was afraid they would be abandoned. This created what he describes as a sort of psychological triangle between and among them.³⁹ In her biography, Kempler's older sister, Anita Lobel, writes that when the nanny's mother became ill, Ziemiańska resented that she was unable to leave the children to go and be with her before she died, and sometimes she also had to miss Mass because of the children.⁴⁰ The constant threat of discovery altered the dynamic between caregiver and charges and between the siblings.

Unimaginable stress and resentment are often left out of the narrative of rescue because it does not fit the image of a heroic rescuer, who is usually portrayed as selfless and brave. This understanding of rescuers as more human and less heroic is in conversation with the current scholarship on Holocaust rescuers.⁴¹ In reality, we know that caregivers were humans, with human emotions. They sometimes snapped at their charges, threatened to leave them, and at times resented the burden of their commitment to them.

Even with the continuity of a prewar caretaker, life for these children was forever altered, often more than the children even understood while it was happening. Relationships between caregivers and children were distorted and complicated under the pressure and circumstances of the Nazi occupation. Sarah Wall recalls that after the war, when she realized what had really happened, "nothing was the same."⁴² Her whole life was, in her words, "fractured." Elizabeth Grotch became a part of her caretaker's family and was socialized in antisemitic attitudes, and she became accustomed to living with a woman who openly disliked her presence and believed that the Jews were "getting what they deserved."⁴³ Bernhard Kempler went from just being a little boy living in a middle-class home being cared for by his nanny to the keeper of the peace between his sister and their nanny as he also took on the identity of Catholic girl. For children who were not completely concealed and had to assume a new identity, this meant that one's life depended on convincingly taking on the role of Catholic, working-class child; and often this meant losing parts of their own prewar self in the process. Kempler hid with his nanny disguised as a little girl, but also went through the camp system as a girl to stay

with his sister.⁴⁴ While a prewar caregiver provided a measure of comfort and continuity, there was only so much protection from the damage inflicted upon these children that she could give. The stress from the situation, changed relationships, and the acts of masking one's identity was extremely taxing even on the most resilient of children.

NEW PATTERNS OF AUTHORITY

In many of the testimonies given by child survivors of the Holocaust, it is apparent that household servants often had earned the trust or even affections of their employers before the war. The importance of their role was understood by household members, and they were sometimes treated as if they were a member of the family. Many child survivors recall the central role in their lives played by their maids and nannies and the mutual affection between themselves and their caregivers. However, at the end of the day, even when these women were trusted and treated in a familial manner, they were still employees and a power dynamic was associated with that employer/employee relationship. The primary purpose of their relationship was based ultimately on an economic arrangement, and this shaped the basic power dynamic.

Under the Nazi occupation, this power dynamic shifted. Gentile household employees found themselves higher on the social ladder than their former employers based on their status as non-Jews. While under the Nazi racial hierarchy Slavic peoples were considered inferior to Germans, they were above Jews. Not only did the power dynamic between lower-class Poles and middle-class or affluent Jews change in the public realm, it also changed dramatically in the intimate realm in cases where former domestic employees protected their former charges. Their role changed from servant to potential savior. Former employers entrusted these women with becoming the primary decision makers in a new role in which their decisions ultimately had life-or-death consequences. The former employers were completely at the mercy of their former employees. A domestic servant had the power to attempt to protect their child, to refuse, and to betray the family at any moment once she became a part of their conspiracy. Sometimes a former domestic servant was the natural choice for this role, based on the prewar relationship she had with her former employers, and sometimes she was just the only choice.

In the case of Abraham Foxman's protection by his former nanny, Bronisława Kurpi, this household employee did not begin working for the family until after the outbreak of the war.⁴⁵ When the Germans ordered that Jews move into the Vilna ghetto, the maid approached the couple and asked what they would do with the baby. His mother, Helen Foxman, replied that the baby, then thirteen months old, would go with them into the ghetto and what happened to them would happen to the child. Kurpi proposed that the family

allow her to take little Abraham instead. Helen Foxman said that when Kurpi offered there was no time to think about it.⁴⁶ With no time for discussion, Mrs. Foxman looked to her husband, who replied, "Okay, take him," and she accepted this under the assumption that he knew better than she did and the decision was for the best.⁴⁷ The couple gave Kurpi all their possessions, with the exception of 180 rubles, so that she could sell them to support herself and the child; and Mr. Foxman promised he would continue to support them from the ghetto.⁴⁸ At Kurpi's request, the couple gave her a statement saying that they were giving her the child as her own; and Kurpi had the child baptized as Czesław Kurpi, registering him as her own offspring.⁴⁹ Both parents continued to earn money while confined in the ghetto and continued to pass funds along to Kurpi to care for their child. Once a week Helen Foxman would slip away from the ghetto to go check on the child in Kurpi's home in Vilna, and Kurpi would continually pressure Mr. Foxman for money. The child recognized Mrs. Foxman, but thought she was his aunt. The baby knew Kurpi as his mother, and Mrs. Foxman was not allowed to hold or kiss him when she visited.⁵⁰

Kurpi, when she was employed by the Foxmans, had acted as the child's caregiver on their directives; but now in this new situation, she held all the power and dictated the terms of when the couple could see their child, how they were to behave around him, and how the child should understand who they were. When Kurpi requested that they sign the document stating that they gave her their child, they complied. The Foxmans were a religious family, and now under this new social situation and time of need, they felt they had to comply with Kurpi: allowing their child to be baptized and raised as a Catholic, and giving up control of their child's spiritual life, along with all other decisions about his upbringing and health.⁵¹ This is a powerful example of how the power dynamic changed under this new situation. This maid, marginalized through her sex and class status, now dictated the new terms of this relationship with her former employers.

In her testimony, Mrs. Foxman stated that Kurpi threatened her husband, telling him that if he refused to pay she would go to the Gestapo and turn in the circumcised child.⁵² Given her attachment to the child, this may have been merely an attempt to secure more money from the couple. The couple at one time also demanded that the child be returned, but Kurpi refused. Joseph Foxman testified that he realized then that the nanny who was raising their baby was, in fact, blackmailing them.⁵³ This former employee, rather than acting as a conduit of the parents' values, controlled their access to their own child. The parents had no say in his upbringing anymore, and the child's survival was left in the hands of this woman.

When the couple felt they had to leave the ghetto in order to survive, Mr. Foxman went to stay with a Polish family and Mrs. Foxman stayed with Kurpi.

She was initially "afraid to go to the *goya*," since Kurpi was already sheltering the child and Mrs. Foxman did not want to upset the situation there and was not even sure if Kurpi would agree to take her.⁵⁴ According to Mrs. Foxman, the two women got along fairly well while Mr. Foxman was away before the war; but once he returned, there was conflict in the household.⁵⁵ Kurpi agreed to shelter Mrs. Foxman and helped her obtain papers so she could work, and Mrs. Foxman in turn passed as a gentile working to pay for her upkeep. Kurpi found a place for the two women and the child to live on the outskirts of Vilna. Joseph Foxman wrote, "Even while Helen stayed with Bronia she suffered from her outbursts," and every so often Kurpi would force Mrs. Foxman to leave, occasionally along with the baby.⁵⁶ Mr. Foxman states that, "On the whole, Bronia treated the child well. She fed him and kept him clean, but if he made any sign of even leaning toward Helen, Bronia would spank him."⁵⁷ Despite this, the child was very close to his caregiver and displayed his affection toward her with hugs and kisses.

The relationships between the Foxmans and Kurpi were complicated. Both Helen and Joseph Foxman recognized that without her efforts their child would have not survived and likely neither would they, as her care for the child freed them initially to focus on their own survival. Kurpi also sheltered Helen Foxman when she left the ghetto herself, and this relationship was extremely tenuous. Helen Foxman stated that Kurpi did "plenty of harm" to her during the time she sheltered her.⁵⁸ She described Kurpi as "a sick, vicious woman."⁵⁹ Helen had to work at 6:00 a.m., and Kurpi would keep her awake at night, would not allow her to so much as touch her own child even though he slept in the bed with Kurpi right next to her own bed, and frequently threw her out of the house. Helen Foxman had to deal with being relegated to being her own child's "aunt" and lived in constant fear that their protector would betray them. We do not have access to Kurpi's version of events or her motivations for her actions. After the war, she did not want to surrender Abraham to Helen and Joseph Foxman. This is evident in her attempts to obtain legal custody of the child and her attempted kidnapping of the child when legal means failed her. Kurpi wanted to continue in her role as the boy's mother after the war, so it can be assumed that this conflict over her desire to be Abraham's mother complicated her feelings toward Helen Foxman. However, she also did extend aid to this woman, even while her behavior was sometimes erratic and cruel.⁶⁰

This case is illustrative of the extreme shift in power that took place when a former household employee took on the role of rescuer, even when it was not as pronounced as it was in this particular case. In the interwar period, domestic employees were clearly subordinated to their employers; but in the new social order of the Nazi era and in this new role of rescuer, these women had an unprecedented level of power over their former employers. Sometimes

the former employee had fond or even familial feelings toward the parents of the charges they took, but this was not always the case, as we see evidenced in the Foxman/Kurpi case. Even when relations between the parents and caregiver were strained, their collaboration was nevertheless often vital for the success of the rescue. Kurpi received financial support from the Foxmans, easing the financial burden of caring for a small child during extremely difficult economic times. This collaboration between Kurpi and the Foxmans was strained, but it nonetheless had them all laboring toward a common cause — to keep this young child alive and safe during a time when his very existence was outlawed by the ruling regime.

LIBERATION

The war had changed relations and relationships between caregivers and charges, former employers and employees, and Polish Catholics and Polish Jews. Abnormal became normal; safety was turned into insecurity. The end of the war did not bring an end to these changes or to the connections between these particular groups of Poles and Jews. Aid providers and recipients were forever changed by their experiences. Children and their caregivers became closer through their participation in their mutual conspiracies, although their relationships became far more complicated. Caregivers suffered consequences for their decision to shelter children and had to reaffirm their decision day after day as new difficulties arose. Children lost track of their prewar identities and aspects of those identities, and suffered emotional damage even when they were in the care of someone who loved them so much she was willing to risk her own life to try to keep them alive. When the Nazis were pushed out of Poland, the happy endings still did not come. Children were emotionally scarred, and their protectors were reluctant to have their wartime secrets exposed. Many of the children they had risked their lives to keep were reclaimed either by family members or Jewish organizations, leaving the caregivers grieving.⁶¹

The caregivers took great risks participating in rescue and aid activities. Entering the ghettos, passing goods into the ghettos, or ferrying children out of the ghettos; obtaining housing, legal documents, or employment for Jews living clandestinely outside the ghetto walls; or concealing or passing off a Jewish child as their own were tremendously risky endeavors. These activities required a great deal of knowledge, the ability to seek out and take advantage of resources, and the ability to exploit a situation when needed. Sometimes when these women were essentially caught, their brazenness and quick thinking were all they had to rely on. This could mean feigning outrage or becoming aggressive when confronted by someone suspicious of their activity, being able to stick to a story under extreme stress, or knowing whom

to contact when they needed emergency aid. The women who engaged in this behavior had already become empowered to some degree as a result of leaving their families of origin and assuming responsibility in their employers' home, but this new situation pushed them even further.

The act of rescuing and protecting a Jewish charge built on this newfound independence, empowering former domestic servants even further. This would result in a new set of expectations for their postwar lives. Many of these maids would come to believe they had earned the right to raise the children they protected independently and that the extended families of these children should be grateful to them for their efforts, but often this did not happen. Former maids who had been working in other capacities may have also felt as if they had transcended the social barriers that kept them in the lower class before the war, but when they went abroad they were expected to become maids again.

Former domestic servants who had saved their charges were also disappointed when after the war they were often not allowed to keep the children they had protected. In the case of the Foxmans and their nanny, Bronisława Kurpi, both parents survived; so they had a natural claim to the child they had placed in her care, even though she felt justified in keeping him. In cases in which a child's immediate family was murdered during the Holocaust, many Jewish children were still removed from their wartime rescuer even though she was the only parent figure they had left. Sometimes they would be sent to extended family members, but other times they were removed from the care of their rescuers to be placed in an institution either in Europe, Palestine, or the United States. Prior to the Holocaust, there were roughly a million Jewish children under the age of fourteen in Poland.⁶² According to a report of the Central Jewish Committee of Poland, only about 3 percent of those children survived. Polish Jews were among the hardest hit of all of the victims of Nazi persecution, with only about 10 percent of the once thriving community surviving.⁶³ Children were especially hard hit in the Nazi death tolls, and so the recovery of these children by the Jewish community was a top priority.

The women of this chapter and my larger study knew their charges from before the war and then expended a great deal of energy protecting them from harm during the Nazi occupation and Holocaust. They risked their own lives and sometimes the lives of their friends and family. They sometimes had to cut ties with people they cared about and lived with the stress of knowing they could be caught at any moment. Often, the bond between the caregivers and their charges grew even stronger as a result of their participation in this conspiracy. Many of these women felt like mothers to these children, and their separation was heartbreaking.

These women, who went to great lengths to thwart the Nazi authorities and

hide their activities from potential denouncers, could not freely talk about their experiences after the war. Joanna Michlic argues that in the postwar period dedicated rescuers were unable to reveal their wartime activities because it would result in stigmatization for their efforts.⁶⁴ During the interwar period, ethnonationalistic press labeled ethnic Poles who defended the rights of the Jewish minority against antisemitic violence or persecution as "Jews," "Jewish uncles and aunts," or "Jewish protectors and Jewish saviors."⁶⁵ These people were, according to Michlic, perceived and treated like traitors to the Polish collective by ethnonationalists and were thought to have violated cultural codes.⁶⁶ She argues that during the war, aid to Jews was perceived in the same fashion.

After the war, there was still this stigmatization for dedicated rescuers for their attachments to Jews. Rescuer accounts of their activity served as a reminder that rescue was a minority activity among ethnic Poles and a reminder of Polish persecution of their Jewish population (and their Polish helpers) by many while under Nazi occupation.⁶⁷ Violent acts of antisemitism occurred regularly in Poland after the war, such as the Kielce pogrom that was perpetrated on July 4, 1946. As a result, rescuers likely would have perceived that it could be dangerous to talk openly about their activities during the war, which meant that they had to continue keeping secrets from people and masking their wartime lives and suffering. More practically, hiding a Jewish charge during the occupation put others at risk, including members of a household. Sometimes these household members were a part of the conspiracy, and sometimes they did not know they were actually hiding someone. Many Poles saw the idea that a Pole would knowingly put their own family at risk to save a Jew as questionable behavior. In short, though rescue and aid activities did serve to thwart the aims of the Nazi occupiers, the majority of Poles did not see rescue in the same way as other clandestine resistance because it was associated with the protection of Jews, not ethnic Poles.

Many rescuers were disappointed with their treatment after the war. They were disappointed either because they were expected to resume their lives as domestic servants as if nothing had changed, or because they were separated from their charges after the war, or because after the war they had to continue to carry the burden of their clandestine activities for years to come.

NOTES

1. Videotaped testimony of Elizabeth Grotch, file no. 26284, tape 1, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, 9:14, Los Angeles, California.

2. Grotch had just turned four when she was removed from the ghetto, so this was likely in 1942. Videotaped testimony of Elizabeth Grotch.

3. Lwów was invaded by the Soviets in 1939 under the terms of the Nazi-Soviet pact. The Germans would invade the Soviet Union and take Lwów in June 1941.

4. Videotaped testimony of Elizabeth Grotch, file no. 26284, tape 2, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, 25:12, Los Angeles, California.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Videotaped testimony of Elizabeth Grotch, file no. 26284, tape 3, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, 2:17, Los Angeles, California.

7. The testimony does not indicate where the baby was sent.

8. *Ibid.*, 2:52.

9. Videotaped testimony of Elizabeth Grotch, file no. 26284, tape 2, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, 27:48, Los Angeles, California. The death of Grotch's mother was likely quite upsetting for Zillow, as she had assumed a mothering role toward her employer before the war.

10. Videotaped testimony of Elizabeth Grotch, file no. 26284, tape 3, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archives, 3:25, Los Angeles, California.

11. See also Maria Hochberg-Mariańska and Noe Grüss, eds., *The Children Accuse* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1996); Wiktoria Śliwowska, ed., *The Last Eyewitnesses: Children of the Holocaust Speak*, vol. 1 (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998); Jakob Gutenbaum and Agnieszka Latała, eds., *The Last Eyewitness: Children of the Holocaust Speak*, vol. 2 (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005); Elaine Saphier Fox, ed., *Out of Chaos: Hidden Children Remember the Holocaust* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2013); Kerry Buglass, ed., *Hidden from the Holocaust: Stories of Resilient Children Who Survived and Thrived* (London: Praeger, 2003); Emunah Nachmany Gafny, *Dividing Hearts: The Removal of Jewish Children from Gentile Families in Poland in the Immediate Postwar Years* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2009); Nahum Bogner, *At the Mercy of Strangers: The Rescue of Jewish Children with Assumed Identities in Poland* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2009); Joanna Michlic, "Rebuilding Shattered Lives: Some Vignettes of Jewish Children's Lives in Early Postwar Poland," in *Holocaust Survivors: Resettlement, Memories, Identities*, ed. Dalia Ofer, Françoise S. Ouzan, and Judy Tydor Baumel-Schwartz (New York: Berghan Books, 2012); Joanna B. Michlic, "Who Am I? Jewish Children Search for Identity in Postwar Poland," in *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, vol. 20: *Making Holocaust Memory*, ed. Gabriel Finder, Natalia Aleksion, Antony Polonsky, and Jan Schwarz (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2008); and Joanna B. Michlic, *Jewish Children in Nazi-Occupied Poland: Survival and Polish-Jewish Relations during the Holocaust as Reflected in Early Postwar Recollections* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2008).

12. Videotaped interview of Sarah Wall, file no. 42189-1, tape 1, June 14, 1998, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Los Angeles, California.

13. *Ibid.* Rodziewicz offered to take the child's mother with her; but her mother believed that the more people Rodziewicz had to hide the greater the danger, so she declined this offer.

14. *Ibid.*, 18:30.

15. Videotaped interview of Sarah Wall, file no. 42189-1, tape 1, June 14, 1998, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Los Angeles, California.

16. Genia Olczak also passed off her charge, Gabriel, as her illegitimate child, as did Janeczka Ziemiańska. See the interview of Genia Olczak, Warsaw, Poland, October 4, 2005, translated and transcribed by Bianka Kraszewski, who had interviewed Olczak and provided the author of this chapter with a copy of the interview. Introduction to interview, Bianka Kraszewski, February 1, 2006, provided by Paul Zakrzewski. Anita Lobel,

No *Pretty Pictures: A Child of War* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998). Videotaped testimony of Bernhard Kempler, file no. 33193, September 12, 1997, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Los Angeles, California.

17. *Ibid.*, 22:49.

18. *Ibid.*, 27:40. She actually says, "Never was there a time when I felt like I wasn't treated like I was the most important person both in my nanny's life and my mother's life," when recollecting her childhood and the bonds she would feel all her life with both of these women.

19. *Ibid.*, 27:58. She clarifies: she did not learn these ideas from the family or her caregiver, but rather from the neighborhood kids she played with.

20. Videotaped interview of Sarah Wall, file no. 42189-1, tape 2, 26:10, June 14, 1998, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Los Angeles, California.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Maria Hochberg-Mariańska and Noe Grüss, eds., "Karolina Sapetowa," in *The Children Accuse* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1996), 277-79.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*, 278.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*, 278.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*

31. Michlic, *Jewish Children in Nazi Occupied Poland*, 89-91. Sapetowa was declared Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem.

32. Hochberg-Mariańska and Grüss, "Karolina Sapetowa," in *The Children Accuse*, 277.

33. Videotaped testimony of Elizabeth Grotch, file no. 26284, tape 3, 7:14, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archives, Los Angeles, California.

34. Videotaped testimony of Bernhard Kempler, file no. 33193, tape 2, September 12, 1997, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archives, Los Angeles, California.

35. Videotaped testimony of Bernhard Kempler, file no. 33193, tape 2, 8:32-9:00, September 12, 1997, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archives, Los Angeles, California.

36. *Ibid.*, 9:09. Kempler's caregiver was actually suffering from cancer at this time.

37. *Ibid.*, 9:39.

38. *Ibid.*, 9:55-10:00.

39. *Ibid.*, 10:07-10:28.

40. Anita Lobel, *No Pretty Pictures: A Child of War* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998).

41. This work contributes to the existing scholarship on Holocaust rescuers not only by shedding light on motivations, but also by depicting these rescuers in a much more human and less heroic fashion. For further reading on rescuers, see also Martin Gilbert, *The Righteous: The Unsung Heroes of the Holocaust* (New York: Holt, 2003); Mordecai Paldiel, *The Path of the Righteous: Gentile Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust* (New Jersey: KTAV Publishing, 1993); Carol Rittner and Sandra Myers, eds., *The Courage to Care: Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust* (New York: New York University Press, 1986); Mark Klempner, *The Heart Has Reasons: Holocaust Rescuers and Their Stories of Courage* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006); Ellen Land-Weber, *To Save a Life: Stories of Holocaust*

Rescue (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Nechama Tec, *When Light Pierced the Darkness: Christian Rescue of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Samuel P. Oliner and Pearl M. Oliner, *The Altruistic Personality: The Rescue of Jews in Nazi Europe* (New York: Macmillan, 1998); Patrick Henry, *We Only Know Men: The Rescue of Jews in France during the Holocaust* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007); Eva Fogelman, *Conscience and Courage: Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust* (New York: Doubleday, 1994); and Malka Drucker, *Rescuers: Portraits of Moral Courage in the Holocaust* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1992).

42. Videotaped interview of Sarah Wall, file no. 42189-1, tape 2, June 14, 1998, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archives, Los Angeles, California.

43. Videotaped testimony of Elizabeth Grotch, file no. 26284, tape 3, 3:51, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archives, Los Angeles, California.

44. The children were first imprisoned in Montelupich and then sent to Płaszów, where they were protected by their aunt and uncle; later they were transported to Ravenbruck and then Auschwitz.

45. Second Generation of Long Island Collection, interview of Helen Foxman, tape 1, July 6, 1983, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, RG 50.205*0028, Washington, DC.

46. Brana Gurewitsch, ed., "Helen Foxman," in *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters: Oral Histories of Women Who Survived the Holocaust* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 35.

47. *Ibid.*

48. Second Generation of Long Island Collection, interview of Helen Foxman, tape 1, July 6, 1983, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, RG 50.205*0028, Washington, DC.

49. Joseph Foxman, *In the Shadow of Death* (New York: Yad Vashem and Holocaust Survivor's Project, 2011), 17.

50. *Ibid.*, 18-19.

51. Many wartime protectors obtained baptismal certificates for their charges because it was necessary. This allowed the children to pass as Polish Catholics.

52. Translation of testimony of Helen and Joseph Foxman, RG 301/ file no. 3605, March 17, 1947, Jewish Historical Institute [Yiddish] in Foxman, *In the Shadow of Death*, 72.

53. *Ibid.*

54. Helen Foxman interview, tape 1, July 6, 1983, Second Generation of Long Island Collection, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, RG 50.205*0028, Washington, DC.

55. The source of this conflict is not readily apparent in any of the sources, but in her testimony Mrs. Foxman attributes it to Kurpi being a lesbian.

56. Foxman, *In the Shadow of Death*, 20.

57. *Ibid.*

58. Gurewitsch, "Helen Foxman," in *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters*, 41.

59. *Ibid.*

60. There was very little housing available, so when Joseph found an apartment, the entire family lived there with Kurpi. Joseph wrote in his memoir, "After having saved the child, she was regarded as a part of the family" (21). See Foxman, *In the Shadow of Death*.

61. For the postwar plight of children, see Gafny, *Dividing Hearts*; Bogner, *At the Mercy of Strangers*; Michlic, "Rebuilding Shattered Lives"; and Michlic, "Who Am I?" For the postwar plight of rescuers, see Joanna Michlic, "The Stigmatization of Dedicated Polish

Women Rescuers during the Second World War and Its Aftermath," *East European Memory Studies*, no. 13 (2013), 1–6 (journal of the Memory at War project, Digital Humanities Network, Cambridge University, UK).

62. Bogner, *At the Mercy of Strangers*, 15.

63. *Ibid.*

64. Joanna B. Michlic, "Daily Life of Polish Women, Dedicated Rescuers of Jews during and after the Second World War," in *Ethics, Art, and Representations of the Holocaust: Festschrift in Honor of Berel Lang*, ed. Caroline S. Gould, Simone Gigliotti, and Jacob Golomb (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 215–23.

65. *Ibid.*, 215–20.

66. *Ibid.*

67. In Jan T. Gross, *Fear: Antisemitism in Poland after Auschwitz: An Essay in Historical Interpretation* (New York: Random House, 2007). Gross argues that the guilt and shame of Polish behavior toward their Jewish cocitizens was manifested by acts of violence toward the Jews who survived the Holocaust and remained in Poland immediately after the war. He credits these feelings of guilt and shame as the real root cause of the Kielce pogrom on July 4, 1946.

AFTER THE WAR

REBUILDING
SHATTERED LIVES,
RECOLLECTING
WARTIME
EXPERIENCES