Alicja Podbielska

Podbielska researches popular memory of aid offered to Jews by ethnic Poles during the Holocaust. She analyzes the shifting Polish narrative of rescue from the immediate postwar years, through the communist period and democratization, until the present, tracing the development of the popular myth of Polish rescuers as altruistic and representative of the whole of Polish society’s wartime attitudes. Contrasting that construct with the picture that has emerged from recent historiography suggesting that rescuers may also have acted from self-interest, she explores generalizations, omissions, and concealments within memory discourse. To reveal them, she juxtaposes Jewish and Polish narratives. She also compares the highly ritualized public discourse of heroism with the “raw” unscripted private memory that emerges in oral testimonies narrated by elderly rescuers, their families, and other inhabitants in rural areas of Poland.

Podbielska engaged in intensive field and archival work in her native Poland. Her first chapter is a case study of a failed rescue attempt. The Germans murdered Wiktoria and Józef Ulma, a peasant couple, together with their children and two Jewish families they sheltered. Critical analysis of commemoration of the Ulmas examines the conceptualization of rescue within the framework of Christian martyrdom and considers the instrumental use of “the Righteous” in the current government historical policy. Her next chapter addresses the de-politicized and gendered representations of rescue through the figure of Irena Sendler. Often portrayed as a caretaker and a surrogate mother, the collaborative character of Sendler’s work – the majority of liaison officers were women, some of them Jewish – is ignored. In the collective imagination, Sendler single-handedly led children out of the ghetto. Her political affiliation with socialism, life-long commitment to social justice, and close personal relationships with Jews, are sacrificed to the sweet-old-lady-with-a-heart-of-gold image. The case of Sendler, who, as the tagline goes, “saved twice as many people as Schindler,” illustrates the fixation on numbers and competition with other nations in Polish discourse on rescue, apparent in commentary surrounding her candidacy for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Podbielska is an active participant in conferences and workshops around the globe. In spring, she presented, “Genealogical Memory of the Righteous in Poland,” at the University of Michigan Polish-Jewish Studies Workshop Generations and Genealogies. In her paper, she analyzed discourse on Polish help to the Jews as a vital part of the 1968 antisemitic campaign. During her spring visit in the US,
Podbielska held the Fred and Maria Devinki Memorial Fellowship at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. She returned to Europe to attend the UK workshop *Holocaust Studies after the Spatial Turn* where she gave a paper about Jewish hideouts as a new site of Holocaust memory in Poland. While in London, she conducted research at the Polish Underground Movement Study Trust. Having received a Yad Vashem fellowship, she conducted research in their archive. She also participated in the Third Workshop for Advanced PhD Candidates, co-organized by Yad Vashem and the USC Shoah Foundation. In September, she will attend the European Holocaust Research Infrastructure’s workshop “Polish sources on the Holocaust” in Warsaw.