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## **Files of the Polish Welfare Committee Kraków-Miasto as a source for studying women's history in 1939–1945**

Examining the time of the Second World War and the German occupation from the female perspective is not a new subject, especially in Europe. The subject has been researched by Polish historiography, yet its achievements can hardly be recognised adequate given the scale of problems and issues that still remain unaddressed.<sup>1</sup> Although the circumstances change, systematic scholarly research concerning women concerns time before September 1939, its interest only being rekindled in the post-war period. The period of the Second World War when Poland was occupied has received less attention. Most of the works published concern female inmates, Jewish women, and women serving in the Home Army, mostly

- 1 The fact that “Polish research on women’s history develops within two separate and to some extent competitive trends that can be roughly referred to as classical academic historiography and feminist historical humanities” makes an additional impact on the status of women’s history”. See: D. Kałwa, *Historia kobiet—kilka uwag metodologicznych*, in: *Dzieje kobiet w Polsce. Dyskusja wokół przyszłej syntezy*, ed. by K. A. Makowski, Poznań 2014, p. 14.

in connection to Warsaw and the Warsaw Uprising. Moreover, some publications are of a popular nature and/or concern individual women, eminent personalities and outstanding individuals, and by that token not typical of the cohort of women at the time of occupation. Among the plethora of subjects concerning war and occupation, what was most common, namely the everyday experiences of people living in the area encompassed by hostilities and grappling with what occupation involved, still eludes our focus. In this way, so does the women's perspective.<sup>2</sup>

Dobrochna Kałwa, researcher of women's history remarked that "the subject of women participating in the Second World War is one of the unquestioned and internalised elements of the Polish remembrance discourse and historiography". Nevertheless "the gendered canon of presenting the experience and participation of women in the war has made it hard to broaden the reflection on war by questions about the gender-related considerations of experiencing war and violence, and also about the post-war consequences of social and psychological nature/type".<sup>3</sup> Therefore, we are still in the phase of looking for adequate research questions and strategies (partly inspired by the development of women's history research in other countries) and studies of the archives.

Looking for sources to research women's history, it is worthwhile to take a closer look at the documents that have not been used for that purpose. Such documents include the files of a relief organisation that operated as the Polish Welfare Committee Kraków-Miasto (Polish name: Polski Komitet Opiekuńczy Kraków-Miasto, acronym PolKO). These files are a highly valuable source for researching the reality of life under

2 Joanna Dufurat conducted a review of research on the history of women. See: J. Dufurat, *Stan badań nad dziejami kobiet w Polsce—I wojna światowa, okres międzywojenny, II wojna światowa*, in: *Dzieje kobiet w Polsce. Dyskusja wokół przyszłej syntezy*, ed. by K. A. Makowski, Poznań 2014, pp. 123–131. Post-2014 publications include volume 26 of "Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość" from 2015 dedicated to the history of women and gender in Second World War, see "Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość" (2015) No. 2, ipn.gov.pl (Aug 3, 2022); M. Röger, *Wojenne związki. Polki i Niemcy podczas okupacji*, Warszawa 2016; M. Grądzka-Rejak, *Kobieta żydowska w okupowanym Krakowie (1939–1945)*, Kraków 2016; J. Ostrowska, *Przemilczane. Seksualna praca przymusowa w czasie II wojny światowej*, Warszawa 2018.

3 D. Kałwa, *Przemoc i zapomnienie. Druga wojna światowa z perspektywy płci kulturowej*, in: *Kobiety i historia. Od niewidoczności do sprawczości*, eds. K. Bałżewska, A. Korczyńska-Partyka, A. Wódkowska, Gdańsk 2015, p. 29.

occupation, and one of the archival collection whose potential is not being fully exploited by researchers. Let me gloss over the lack of a monographic work presenting the entire scope of the Committee's operation in Kraków by comprehensively covering structures, people, capabilities, scope of activity, scale of assistance provided, etc. Instead, I would like to draw attention to an obvious fact that entering new queries into known sources can achieve new and far-from-obvious results. The purpose of this review is therefore an attempt to show the potential that the PolKO files contribute to the study of women's history and its interdisciplinary potential.

The Polish Welfare Committee Kraków-Miasto was a local branch of the Central Welfare Council (Rada Główna Opiekuńcza, RGO) that, beginning with July 1940, remained the only Polish welfare organisation in the General Government (GG) whose operation was permitted by the Germans.<sup>4</sup> It is worth emphasising that due to the clear limitations imposed by the Germans, the RGO could only aid Poles.<sup>5</sup> The name Polish Welfare Committee Kraków-Miasto came into force on 7 July 1941, however, it is accepted as the name of the archival resource encompassing the whole period of occupation, as the committee continued the operation of several organisations operating earlier, providing continuity of purpose, personnel, and, to a large extent, of organisational structure.<sup>6</sup>

- 4 The informal activities of the Central Welfare Council began in February 1940, which was granted the articles of association in May of the same year (the General Governor approved the texts of the articles of association and the rules and regulations of the Central Welfare Council on 29 May 1940). See: B. Kroll, *Rada Główna Opiekuńcza 1939–1945*, Warszawa 1985, pp. 59–64.
- 5 As the Polish concepts assumed that the Central Welfare Council would extend care over both Polish and Jewish population, participation of Jews in the Council and its territorial branches was envisaged. However, by the decision of the occupying power, official charitable activities in the General Government for individual nations were separated, splitting relief into that for Poles, Jews, and Ukrainians. The Central Welfare Council and its subordinate Polish Welfare Committee (PolKO) were to carry out their tasks exclusively for the Polish population, and keep away from individuals of other nationalities, for whom separate relief structures were developed. See: B. Kroll, *Rada*, pp. 63–64, 68. On the scope of relief and cooperation with Jewish communities, see: B. Kroll, *Rada*, pp. 223–229.
- 6 Z. Wenzel-Homecka, *Polski Komitet Opiekuńczy Kraków-Miasto w latach 1939–1945 i jego akta*, "Archeion. Czasopismo Naukowe Poświęcone Sprawom Archiwalnym"

Charity was organised in wartime Kraków since the first days of September 1939. The Civic Relief Committee (Obywatelski Komitet Pomocy, Polish acronym OPP) was established on 4 September with the aim of supporting the victims of the war—refugees, displaced persons, prisoners of war, and locals forced out of employment. At the time, there were still associations operating independently, notably Caritas, while the Polish Red Cross (Polish acronym: PCK) conducted a broad range of activities. Beginning with December 1939, the German authorities demanded that community welfare activities were coordinated. The reason was the need to create a uniform charity organisation due to the opportunity of receiving foreign aid (mostly from the US) and, primarily, the occupant's eagerness to control that realm. RGO, established for the purpose, was intended to coordinate the activity of Polish organisations of what was known as “voluntary community welfare”, and develop its operation locally through the municipal and county councils it oversaw. In the spring of 1940, the organisation of the Municipal Welfare Council (Rada Opiekuńcza Miejska, ROM), which absorbed the relief initiatives previously operating in the area, began. At the same time, by the resolution of 23 July 1940, the authorities of the General Government dissolved with immediate effect all Polish associations, with the exception of the Polish Red Cross, Fire Brigade, and obviously the RGO. Thanks to the endeavours of people involved in the development of the RGO, some of these organisations were included into ROM, for example catholic associations that from that moment operated under the umbrella of Caritas, which, retaining high level of independence, became one of the sections of ROM.<sup>7</sup> When ROM was transformed into the Polish Welfare Council in July 1941, the PolKO structure was complicated, when compared to analogous territorial committees (of which there were 61 in April 1943), as it was an amalgamate of earlier organisations that transformed into its sections. By principle, welfare committees were developed for individual counties. The only exception were metropolises, Kraków with its two committees—one for the residents of the city and the other of the

41 (1964), pp. 326, 339.

- 7 This was made possible through close contacts between representatives of the Central Welfare Council and Archbishop Adam Sapieha and was an extraordinary solution in the structures of the Central Welfare Council. Caritas operated highly independently, although it received subsidies and submitted general reports. See: B. Kroll, *Rada*, pp. 82–83.

county—included. To tell them apart, the first was referred to as PolKO Kraków-Miasto (City), and the other PolKO Kraków—Powiat (County).

The structure of all PolKO Kraków-Miasto consisted of the Headquarters (Centrala) and the work divisions: Relief for Displaced Persons and Refugees, Relief for Employees of Civil Services and Employees of Legal and Free Professions (offering relief for the civil servants and officers, representatives of free professions and artisans stripped of means sustenance in the wake of war and occupation), Relief for Inmates and Families, popularly known as “Patronat” (i.e. Patronage), Relief for the Disabled (for persons who were disabled in 1939), Relief for Farmers (for displaced landed gentry, manorial personnel and staff, and, to a certain extent, also for peasants), Caritas, whose activity was intended to encompass what was known as “regular poverty” i.e., not caused by war, Relief for Children and Youth and the Work Division: Orphanages which encompassed kindergartens and orphanages ran by both monastic orders and secular institutions. Moreover, PolKO encompassed the Interest-Free Loans Bank and Radź Sam Sobie publishers of a series of self-help guides (teaching how to mend clothes, make soap, and exterminate insects), as well as the Hospital Section and the Children’s Unit organised in October 1944 after the Warsaw Uprising. The individual sections enjoyed plenty of autonomy that in many cases resulted from their members’ long term of activity in the given area, while the Headquarters only supervised them formally. After Kraków’s borders were expanded midway through 1941, PolKO was also extended by adding “delegations”—territorial structures that had previously operated in the villages now annexed into the city. Unlike the work divisions, which were organised according to the scope of competences, their prerogatives were purely territorial.<sup>8</sup>

Attempts at extending aid to the broadest possible spectrum of people in need (prisoners, children, etc.) resulted in activities moving far beyond the limits set by the German authorities.<sup>9</sup> It is certainly worth adding that the border between the legal and illegal proved remarkably elastic during

8 Z. Wenzel-Homecka, *Polski Komitet Opiekuńczy*, pp. 326–335; B. Kroll, *Rada*, pp. 82–83.

9 I provide a more extensive treatment of the subject in the article: A. Czocher, *Czy dobroczynność wymagała odwagi? O działaczach Polskiego Komitetu Opiekuńczego Kraków-Miasto 1939–1945*, in: *Cena odwagi. Między ocaleniem życia a ocaleniem człowieczeństwa*, eds. A. Bartuś, P. Trojański, Oświęcim 2019, pp. 193–208.

the occupation. PolKO also engaged in illegal activity, which for obvious reasons only finds marginal reflection in the documentation.

The files of the Polish Welfare Committee Kraków-Miasto are stored in the National Archives in Kraków (collection 29/553) and have been open to research for years. In the 1960<sup>s</sup>, they were processed by Zofia Wenzel-Homecka, who published the results of works connected to the preparation of the introduction to the archive inventory in the academic journal *Archeion* in 1964. The collection has survived in parts and consists of the files of the Headquarters and the work divisions: Relief for the Displaced Persons and Refugees, Relief for Employees of Civil Services and Employees of Legal and Free Professions, Relief for Inmates and their Families, and the records of the branches.<sup>10</sup> There are also archival records on the operation of PolKO in the collection Doradca Rady Głównej Opiekuńczej na okręg krakowski (Advisor to the Central Welfare Council for the Kraków district) stored in the National Archives in Kraków (collection 29/554) and in the collection Rada Główna Opiekuńcza. Biuro Centrali w Krakowie (RGO. Central Office of the Kraków Headquarters) stored in the Central Archives of Modern Records (AAN) in Warsaw (collection 2/125). The two bodies supervised and controlled PolKO. The Advisor served as the intermediary between the committees and the RGO Headquarters, and represented the committees before the German authorities of the district. That activity is reflected in the preserved records.

The documentation that partially reflects illegal relief activities and some documentation that can be described as commemorative remained in the hands of individual members of PolKO staff. Not all its elements have been transferred to the National Archives in Kraków and included in the PolKO files collection. Thus, e.g., the roll of prisoners of the police prison on Montelupich street in Kraków, maintained clandestinely since 1941, is currently in the Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance in Warsaw (ref. No. IPN GK 165/339 vols 1–17), while the photo album of the Charity Section of the Polish Welfare Committee in Kraków (later work division: Relief for the Displaced Persons and Refugees) is in the Barbara Purtak Central Archive of Polish Nursing in Warsaw.

The records produced by the committee, albeit incomplete, reflect the main courses of activities these institutions undertook. This makes them a source of data that allows to study a vast spectrum of

10 Z. Wenzel-Homecka, *Polski Komitet Opiekuńczy*, pp. 337–339.

problems concerning the Polish community in the occupied country. Their advantage, important in the context of women's history, is their relatively high representativeness. As the relief provided by PolKO was addressed to people from different social strata, the documentation contains information about the condition of heterogeneous groups and environments.

Time has come to try to answer the question about the potential that PolKO records have as a source for researching women's history and the reasons they can be useful for scholarly queries concerning the issue.

During the German occupation, official charitable activities became the domain of women. Falling back on prewar associations and committees, and also as part of private initiatives, women operated charity from the first days of war. Women were joining the ranks of wealth and relief organisations accepted by the occupying power while their structures were crystallising. However, participation of women in the highest levels of management of such organisations was minimal. These were men who set the tone of charity, holding the highest posts. These were also men who contacted German authorities, laid the foundations for the organisation, created the formal and legal framework for welfare activities, and conducted control activities. An exception in the Kraków PolKO was Róża Łubieńska, a prewar Catholic activist.<sup>11</sup> The situation at the lower rungs of the organisational structure was reverse, as women were the majority among PolKO Kraków-Miasto personnel and cooperating individuals. According to a list of committee employees drafted towards the end of occupation, women accounted for 58.3% of the staff.<sup>12</sup> Women were absolutely dominant in the facilities supervised by the work divisions, where they performed strictly focused relief activities. For example, women accounted for 100% or nearly 100% of the personnel in centres for nourishing children, Unit for the Children of the Street reporting to the work division: Relief for Children and Youth, and the kitchens reporting

11 Róża Łubieńska was the only woman to join the Central Welfare Council first and later the management of the ROM (June 25, 1940). After the German occupation authorities banned her from sitting on ROM boards in June 1941, there were no women in the management of the ROM Headquarters, and subsequently in PolKO.

12 National Archives in Kraków, collection: Polski Komitet Opiekuńczy Kraków-Miasto, ref. No. 29/553/28, Letters on Personal Matters of PolKO Employees, 1940–1945, pp. 1131–1143.

to Caritas division.<sup>13</sup> In division Relief for the Displaced Persons and Refugees, women accounted for around 80% of the personnel, while the units for children, the kitchen, the hub at the train station, the repairs workshop, house care, and clothes warehouse only employed women.<sup>14</sup> Of the 25 employees of the section assisting prisoners in 1942, only four were men: an accountant and three blue-collar workers.<sup>15</sup> In the remaining sections, women were members of boards, secretaries, and heads of units.<sup>16</sup>

The wartime circumstances also made women a majority among the committee's beneficiaries. The statistics indicate that the number of women assisted by PolKO was nearly twice as high as that of men. They were majority of adult beneficiaries in every work division, with the exception of relief for the disabled (relief to disabled veterans).<sup>17</sup>

Analysing the PolKO records, you find information concerning both individual women's motivation for embarking on charitable activity, the nature of work they performed, and the degree of involvement on the one hand, and reasons for poverty, and the types of support expected and delivered on the other.

Information concerning women involved in relief work can be found in the documentation concerning employment—both the employed

13 National Archives in Kraków, collection: Polski Komitet Opiekuńczy Kraków-Miasto, ref. No. 29/553/28, Letters on Personal Matters of PolKO Employees, 1940–1945, pp. 133, 745–747.

14 National Archives in Kraków, collection: Polski Komitet Opiekuńczy Kraków-Miasto, ref. No. 29/553/28, Letters on Personal Matters of PolKO Employees, 1940–1945, pp. 263, 779, 1119–1127.

15 National Archives in Kraków, collection: Polski Komitet Opiekuńczy Kraków-Miasto, ref. No. 29/553/28, Letters on Personal Matters of PolKO Employees, 1940–1945, pp. 267.

16 Women were absent from the management of the sections for the Relief for Employees of Civil Services and Employees of Legal and Free Professions, the Orphanage Section (managed by male clergy), and the Credit Union section. See: National Archives in Kraków, collection: Polski Komitet Opiekuńczy Kraków-Miasto, ref. No. 29/553/28, Letters on Personal Matters of PolKO Employees, 1940–1945, pp. 35, 261, 273, 277.

17 National Archives in Kraków, collection: Polski Komitet Opiekuńczy Kraków-Miasto, ref. No. 29/553/33, Monthly reports, XI 1940–IV 1945, pp. 246, 346, 444, 626, 768, 845.



personnel and persons cooperating with the committee. As an employer, PolKO was quite strictly controlled by the German authorities, which is why the documentation on the staff reflects plenty of formalities that had to be completed in relation to the employment. The documentation contains exchange of letters with the Labour Office and Social Security, employee sheets informing about the posts held and work performed, period of employment, wages, and family situation (that is the dependants of individual employees; in case of women these were often the elderly and ailing relatives, mostly parents—mothers). These records make it possible to analyse the women's wages and the benefits they were entitled to, and also to compare them to men's. Sociological studies concerning age, education, and marital status of the employed women are also possible.<sup>18</sup>

Interesting information can be found in applications for entering and terminating employment. They contain the information on who and why was looking for work, which positions were the most attractive and in greatest demand, and how people tried to obtain them. In case of employment termination, the documents demonstrate the reasons of termination or abandonment, and the applicable procedures.<sup>19</sup>

RGO and its committees paid modest wages resulting from the wage level regulations introduced by Germans early in 1940 and defining the wages and salaries depending on age, pay grade, and sex.<sup>20</sup> The churn among the employed was quite high. This in no way did influence the

18 The RGO and its individual committees were obliged to submit various lists of personnel to the occupation authorities. They included such data as age, addresses, periods of employment, positions in RGO structures, salary, family relationships, education, and occupation(s) before the war. Employees also filled in forms related to employment and applications for rationed products

19 See e.g.: Central Archives of Modern Records, collection: Rada Główna Opiekuńcza. Biuro Centrali w Krakowie, ref. No. 2/125/0/1.4/205, Application for termination of employment at RGO, 1942–1945.

20 A. Weh, *Prawo Generalnego Gubernatorstwa w układzie rzeczowym z objaśnieniami i szczegółowym skorowidzem*, Krakau 1941, B 370 and B 380. This status quo is confirmed by the description given by Adam Ronikier, president of RGO: “wage standards based on German rates could not at all be applied, as they did not even cover the budget of even the humblest clerk. We coped by helping our staff with food rations that were then not included in administration costs but were entered into the ‘helping the population’ line”. See A. Ronikier, *Pamiętniki 1939–1945*, Kraków 2001, p. 161.

fact that a job in the structures of RGO and PolKO was in great demand and was often, especially in the case of white-collar workers, obtained through patronage. There were several factors that contributed to such a *status quo*: employment certificates, social insurance, and work among the Polish community. RGO and PolKO employed women and created a protective umbrella over the women: both the young who were only entering the labour market (often prematurity, for example because they could not continue education) and the older ones who had had no professional experience yet were forced into employment by war. An especially important aspect in the case of young girls with little life experience was the guarantee of working in an environment that provided them with proper care and guardianship. Such motivation finds reflection in both applications and recommendations, for example: “the deliverer of this letter [...] would love to work, even as an unpaid volunteer in Social Welfare, to avoid the risk of potential deportation to labour abroad”.<sup>21</sup> There were also volunteer jobs (*etaty honorowe*) with persons holding them receiving no remuneration for their work. These jobs were taken by people, including a large number of women, who became engaged in relief work primarily for ideological reasons. Many people were employed at PolKO Kraków-Miasto throughout the whole or nearly all periods of occupation (according to the list of employees from the early 1945, there were altogether 71 persons employed from 1939 or 1940, a number that included 44 women).<sup>22</sup>

The conditions of relief work were often hard. People worked wherever people in need were found, where food was stored, prepared, and distributed along with clothing and other benefits. Women were primarily employed in kitchens, where they served hundreds of meals a day,<sup>23</sup> 23 railway station tearooms (kiosks issuing hot drinks and dry provisions), clothes warehouses, hospitals, guest houses, orphanages, and institutions,

21 National Archives in Kraków, collection: Polski Komitet Opiekuńczy Kraków-Miasto, ref. No. 29/553/28, Letters on Personal Matters of PolKO Employees, 1940–1945, p. 911.

22 National Archives in Kraków, collection: Polski Komitet Opiekuńczy Kraków-Miasto, ref. No. 29/553/28, Letters on Personal Matters of PolKO Employees, 1940–1945, pp. 1131–1143.

23 For example, approximately 20,000 meals were issued daily in the kitchens and tearooms managed by PolKO in 1941. See: H. Matoga, *W kręgu opiekuńczego czepka*, Kraków 1999, p. 57.

visiting the beneficiaries in their places of residence. The beneficiaries, notably the refugees, often required comprehensive assistance, and were troubled by such conditions as contagious illnesses, lice, scabies, dirt, and trachoma. Performing heavy physical, also night-time, labour, women often had to grapple with inclement weather (frost and heat), and obstacles from and harassment by the occupying authorities, while expectations of their charges were not always attainable and at times downright unjustified.

Similarly diverse information can be found in the documentation on the beneficiaries of the committee. Reports from the operation of individual divisions provide further insight into the comprehensive picture of the condition of the society. They contain information on the changes of circumstances at the time of occupation, as well as on the needs, deficits, and tribulations that the Polish society was forced to face. Individual applications and requests for relief provide a reflection of the wartime poverty of women and personal problems they grappled with.

Succumbing to poverty affected women far more than men during the occupation. The reasons must be sought among factors of community nature, the main one being the loss of the breadwinning man to death, imprisonment or detention in the camp, and severance whether caused by the war (staying abroad, forced labour) or unrelated to it (separation, abandonment). An example can be a request for support written in June 1941 by the wife of a stoker at St Lazarus Hospital drafted to the army in the summer of 1939:

My husband [...] was captured by the Germans, and is still held a prisoner of war (POW). I've been left alone with three children [...] without means of subsistence. I have no movable or immovable property, nor do I receive benefits from any institution. Despite my best efforts, I cannot find any employment [...] By now I have sold the less necessary items, yet in the face of prices soaring so high, these have run out, so that I have been left in a hopeless situation.<sup>24</sup>

The tone of the application of the wife of a commissioned officer detained in a POW camp was similar:

24 National Archives in Kraków, collection: Polski Komitet Opiekuńczy Kraków-Miasto, ref. No. 29/553/28, Letters on Personal Matters of PolKO Employees, 1940–1945, ref. No. 29/553/54, Applications and other communication regarding relief for people. Children's camps project, 1941, p. 815.

For three years, I have been forced to earn my living and that of two underage children [...]. The loss of all property, constantly aggravating difficulty of making the ends meet, and finally the loss of the job [...] all these have made me unable to buy the most necessary clothing and children's boots for the winter.<sup>25</sup>

Another factor exacerbating poverty was the inability to work due to illness or the need to care for family members—underage children, the sick, and/or elderly relatives. Such situations excluded women from seeking regular employment, leaving only the options of occasional jobs and cottage industry work open. Moreover, illnesses, especially severe and chronic, ruined the budgets of previously well-off households. This is reflected in requests for relief: “Due to a condition of a hand, for some time now I have been unable to earn a living by sewing, to buy the most essential necessities and pay the rent”<sup>26</sup> and “the treatment of my son costs a fair bit of money, which I used to draw from selling my late husband's old clothes; as it has come to an end, there is no hope for our future survival.”<sup>27</sup>

It is worth noting that PolKO employees tried to verify both the actual circumstances of individuals seeking assistance and the motivations of those offering cooperation. Exchange of letters on the subject provides an excellent source for illustrating the material condition of city residents, which differed greatly also during the occupation. Complaints regarding the children's health camp organised by PolKO (a project addressed to children from impoverished families and orphans, as well as to children whose parents, mostly fathers, were in captivity, imprisoned, or working in the Reich) can serve as an example. Quite characteristic was the evaluation by the director of one of the camp sessions in Rymanów in 1943:

25 National Archives in Kraków, collection: Polski Komitet Opiekuńczy Kraków-Miasto, ref. No. 29/553/28, Letters on Personal Matters of PolKO Employees, 1940–1945, ref. No. 29/553/55, Applications and other communication regarding relief for people. Children's camps project, 1942, p. 684.

26 National Archives in Kraków, collection: Polski Komitet Opiekuńczy Kraków-Miasto, ref. No. 29/553/28, Letters on Personal Matters of PolKO Employees, 1940–1945, ref. No. 29/553/55, Applications and other communication regarding relief for people. Children's camps project, 1942, p. 135.

27 National Archives in Kraków, collection: Polski Komitet Opiekuńczy Kraków-Miasto, ref. No. 29/553/28, Letters on Personal Matters of PolKO Employees, 1940–1945, ref. No. 29/553/55, Applications and other communication regarding relief for people. Children's camps project, 1942, p. 291.

It would be deluding ourselves to think that children from well-off homes did not find themselves in slightly poorer conditions here. Running a farm [...] to a level matching their habits resulting from prosperity would be impossible. Such better-off children are the cause of assorted ferment, which, however, never occurs among less affluent children. [...] Hence the conclusion that you should be prudent in selecting the children you send us.<sup>28</sup>

In turn, the argument for refusal to grant additional assistance to one of the beneficiaries goes as follows:

The mother is unable to manage the money she has. For instance, having sold her possessions to feed her children, she bought them fountain pens, leaving herself penniless again. [...] She is a habitual complainer, constantly dissatisfied with everything.<sup>29</sup>

The PolKO records consist of formal documents, and the applications and requests were submitted for a specific purpose—to obtain material support. Nevertheless, these records have the potential to serve as a source for studying emotions, feelings, and moods. Treated as research categories, affects, emotions, and feelings have become a subject of interest in the humanities and social sciences. They emphasise the collective nature of feelings and their impact on historical events and processes. Emotions are construed as a supra-individual phenomenon with its roots in social relationships and cultural conditioning.<sup>30</sup> It is also worth noting the Anglo-American methodology of studying affects

28 National Archives in Kraków, collection: Polski Komitet Opiekuńczy Kraków-Miasto, ref. No. 29/553/101, Organisation of Childrens' Camps, 1941–1944, p. 65.

29 National Archives in Kraków, collection: Polski Komitet Opiekuńczy Kraków-Miasto, ref. No. 29/553/54, Applications and other communication regarding relief for people. Children's camps project, 1941, p. 165.

30 J. Wysmułek, *Przyrodzone, poskramiane czy konstruowane? Dyskursy o emocjach w badaniach historycznych*, "Przegląd Humanistyczny" (2016) No. 2, pp. 82–83. As noted by its author, the purpose of the article is to outline past theoretical positions and present fundamental concepts of emotions used in historiographic discourse. Emotions in Western literature are critically analysed by B. H. Rosenwein, *Obawy o emocje w historii*, "Teksty Drugie" (2015) No. 1, pp. 358–391 (originally published as *Worrying about Emotions in History*, "The American Historical Review" 107 (2002) Issue 3, pp. 821–845).

as a separate research perspective developed in the wake of the affective turn in the humanities. The discourse of affect research plays an important role in understanding the concept of both individual and collective identity.<sup>31</sup> In Poland, research on affects is primarily conducted in the context of Holocaust studies, memory, and the trauma of war.<sup>32</sup> The PolKO records seem, in the case discussed here in conjunction with women's history, particularly helpful for researching emotion and affect<sup>33</sup> especially in relation to such "difficult" emotions as e.g., despair, fear, anger, shame, etc. The committee's documentation includes both emotional language and representations of emotional gestures, e.g., "displaced, robbed, damaged, [she] has nothing to console";<sup>34</sup> "the undersigned family are in a critical situation without means of subsistence due to their daughter being arrested";<sup>35</sup> "I am currently in a particularly

- 31 What is known as the "affective turn" was initiated in the humanities in the mid-1990s. Numerous works on the subject published since then encompass both theoretical studies of affects and ones that apply the developed methods to the study of literature, art, politics, etc. Fundamental concepts and literature on the subject can be found in e.g., M. Glasowitz, *Zwrot afektywny*, "Opcje" (2013) No. 2, pp. 24–27.
- 32 This calls for a reference to the works of the team gathered around "Nowa Humanistyka" series published by the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences (IBL PAN) (*Pamięć i afekty*, eds. Z. Budrewicz, R. Sendyka, R. Nycz, Warszawa 2014; *Kultura afektu—afekty w kulturze. Humanistyka po zwrocie afektywnym*, eds. R. Nycz, A. Łebkowska, A. Dauksza, Warszawa 2015) and publications produced under the research project The Affective Turn after 1989: Strategies and Styles of Representation in an Interdisciplinary Research Perspective conducted at the abovementioned Institute, see: <https://ibl.waw.pl/pl/o-instytucie/pracownie-i-zespoły/zespół-do-badań-nad-literaturą-i-kulturą-późnej-nowoczesności/działalność-naukowobadawcza> (Aug 3, 2022).
- 33 For a critical analysis of the relationships between the concepts of affect, emotions, and feelings, see: J. Tabaszewska, *Między afektami i emocjami*, "Przegląd Kulturoznawczy" (2018) No. 2, pp. 262–275, doi: 10.4467/20843860PK.18.017.9720.
- 34 National Archives in Kraków, collection: Polski Komitet Opiekuńczy Kraków-Miasto, ref. No. 29/553/55, Applications and other communication regarding relief for people. Children's camps project, 1942, p. 179.
- 35 National Archives in Kraków, collection: Polski Komitet Opiekuńczy Kraków-Miasto, ref. No. 29/553/55, Applications and other communication regarding relief for people. Children's camps project, 1942, p. 413.

critical situation, I am at a loss”;<sup>36</sup> “I have long had no news [from my arrested husband], so I am being tormented by the uncertainty [...] as to where he might be.”<sup>37</sup>

The documentation of PolKO reflects the social custom of the time: codes of conduct, forms of language used, ways of handling the individual matters, artifacts (such as clothing items) used, and the working conditions, including kitchen the equipment, the appearance of office spaces, warehouses, means of transportation, and the like. These become particularly evident in the photographs preserved among the PolKO records. A good example is a photograph of three women: Maria Starowieyska, Hanna Chrzanowska, and Róża Łubieńska.<sup>38</sup> Before the war, all three were Catholic social activists and key figures in Krakow's PolKO, with Maria being also a soldier in the Home Army. Two of them, Starowieyska and Łubieńska, are posing with cigarettes, which is a sign of the times. Smoking was common and, especially among women who wanted to assert their independence, it was downright fashionable. Smoking became etched into the concept of women's emancipation (“Women! Light another torch of freedom!”<sup>39</sup>). The wartime conditions promoted smoking further. This contributed to the relaxation of moral norms, as did the tobacco (and alcohol) rations, and the function of soothing the frayed nerves attributed to smoking. It is worth noting that the three Catholic activists in the photograph were independent women, well before the war undertaking innovative and progressive activities in nursing and social assistance, to mention caring for abandoned and/or neglected children and minors, caring for people living on the margins of the contemporary society (disabled children, children born out of wedlock and their mothers, prostitutes), and the provision

36 National Archives in Kraków, collection: Polski Komitet Opiekuńczy Kraków-Miasto, ref. No. 29/553/54, Applications and other communication regarding relief for people. Children's camps project, 1941, p. 807.

37 National Archives in Kraków, collection: Polski Komitet Opiekuńczy Kraków-Miasto, ref. No. 29/553/169, Letters from 1942, 1942, p. 139.

38 See: Barbara Purtak Central Archive of Polish Nursing, Virtual Museum of Polish Nursing, <http://www.wmpp.org.pl/pl/pielegniarki-na-frontach/ii-wojna-%C5%9B-wiatowa/starowieyska-maria.html>, *Album Sekcji Charytatywnej Obywatelskiego Komitetu Pomocy w Krakowie*, photo No. 2 (Aug 3, 2022).

39 A. M. Brandt, *Budowanie świadomości konsumenckiej w XX wieku*, in: *Dym. Powszechna historia palenia*, eds. S. L. Gilman, Z. Xun, Kraków 2009, p. 341.

material and moral support to prisoners during and after their sentences, and support for their families.<sup>40</sup>

In occupied Kraków, efforts were made to improve organisation of labour and working conditions, and to exploit the available amenities. It must not be forgotten, however, that this was not a straightforward matter in wartime reality. The Germans requisitioned modern buildings and equipment for their own needs, and work, such as serial preparation of meals, required determination and physical endurance. The PolKO records show how the organisation of relief evolved: from individual, private initiatives mostly of women, which started in September 1939 to strictly organised forms, from one-off and campaign-driven actions to their optimisation.<sup>41</sup> The wish to improve and facilitate relief activities is evident from information provided by Maria Zazula recorded in the minutes of a session of the department for Relief for Inmates and their Families held on 9 February 1943:

The 'Wilk' machine for mincing meat and vegetables has already been assembled, which greatly facilitates work resulting in reducing the number of ladies needed for assistance in the kitchen. For that reason, a decision was reached to draft a list of ladies assisting in the kitchen, specifying days and hours of work, which they undertook to adhere to strictly by signing an appropriate declaration. A separate set of regulations was to be drafted for the ladies helping in the kitchen. These ladies, admitted at the meeting, could receive a work certificate.<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, the opportunities that the PolKO records offer for research into language are also worthwhile. They contain officially created documentation that at the same time addressed glitches and hitches caused by the war and the repressive policy of the occupiers. For that reason the documentation can serve as the grounds for tracing

40 M. Świętecka, *Róża Lubieńska i jej działalność społeczna*, "Nasza Przeszłość. Studia z dziejów Kościoła i kultury katolickiej w Polsce" (1979) No. 51, pp. 151–154.

41 National Archives in Kraków, collection: Polski Komitet Opiekuńczy Kraków-Miasto, ref. No. 29/553/41, Various Reports of the Committee and Departments, 1939–1944, p. 93.

42 National Archives in Kraków, collection: Polski Komitet Opiekuńczy Kraków-Miasto, ref. No. 29/553/199, Minutes of the Meeting of the Department: Relief for Prisoners and Their Families in Kraków on 9th February 1943, 1943, p. 86.



the “real-time” descriptions of the causes of poverty and the line drawn between openly writing about the wrongs experienced and leaving the reasons for particular situations, especially concerning German terror, unsaid. Seeking support, women wrote about detentions and/or deaths (mostly men) in the family, materially ruinous evacuations, and the like. However, the information they gave is impersonal and focuses on the facts that occurred and their consequences without specifying the culprits and reasons for such a state of affairs, for example, “Widow of [...] a lieutenant of the Polish Army (in reserve) who died in Tomaszów Lubelski on 20 September 1939”,<sup>43</sup> “my husband recently died in a concentration camp”,<sup>44</sup> and, “My husband, working as a stoker at the St Lazarus Hospital in Kraków, was drafted to the army due to the wartime events and was captured by the Germans, and is still held a POW.”<sup>45</sup>

Given the significant presence of women among both the employees of PolKO and individuals cooperating with it on the one hand, as its beneficiaries, examination of the use of the feminine gender nouns in language is interesting from both semantic and cultural research perspective.<sup>46</sup> Linguistic changes accompanied the intensifying process of women’s emancipation in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Heated debates were waged between supporters of two views: the “traditional one, which recommends distinct formal names for female professions, and the innovative one, which advocates retaining a common, grammatically

43 National Archives in Kraków, collection: Polski Komitet Opiekuńczy Kraków-Miasto, ref. No. 29/553/54, Applications and other communication regarding relief for people. Children’s camps project, 1941, p. 1015.

44 National Archives in Kraków, collection: Polski Komitet Opiekuńczy Kraków-Miasto, ref. No. 29/553/54, Applications and other communication regarding relief for people. Children’s camps project, 1941, p. 759.

45 National Archives in Kraków, collection: Polski Komitet Opiekuńczy Kraków-Miasto, ref. No. 29/553/54, Applications and other communication regarding relief for people. Children’s camps project, 1941, p. 815.

46 Research on gender and language draws attention to the asymmetry between feminine and masculine forms in many areas of the Polish language (and other gendered languages), including word formation, vocabulary, phraseology, and grammar. See: P. Krysiak, *Feminytywa w polskiej tradycji leksykograficznej*, “Rozprawy Komisji Językowej. Wrocławskie Towarzystwo Naukowe” 42 (2016), pp. 83–84; D. Kałwa, *Historia kobiet—kilka uwag metodologicznych*, p. 25.

masculine, form for the two genders.”<sup>47</sup> The issue had not been settled by the outbreak of the war, which is reflected in the documents from the wartime period. The titles and names of professions held by women include terms such as *urzędniczka* (female clerk) as well as *urzędnik* (clerk, grammatically masculine), *kierowniczka* (female manager) and *zastępczyni kierowniczk*i (female deputy manager), as well as *kierownik* (manager, grammatically masculine). Other examples include *obieraczka* (female peeler), *likwidatorka* (female liquidator), *delegatka* (female delegate), *uchodźczyni* (female refugee), and *ochroniarka* (construed as a female caregiver in an orphanage).<sup>48</sup> This diversity is visible in documents produced by women and ones pertaining to them, as well as in official documentation. However, a cursory review of the records allows to conclude that masculine forms to describe professions performed by women are much less common and tend to be associated with terms related to education and positions of a managerial or prestigious nature, e.g., *absolwent* (graduate, grammatically masculine) but also *absolwentka* (female graduate), and *asystent pocztowy* (postal assistant, grammatically masculine).<sup>49</sup>

Quite obviously, the examples quoted above do not exhaust the potential of information vested in the records of the Polish Welfare Committee Kraków-Miasto. All they do is to suggest the possible uses for that information. It must also be borne in mind that the war and occupation made a direct impact on the operations of PolKO, and the rhythm of charitable activities was to a large degree a consequence of wartime events (including the successive waves of refugees and repressive actions) and the attitude of the German administration towards these relief efforts that

47 Z. Klemensiewicz, *Tytuły i nazwy zawodowe kobiet w świetle teorii i praktyki*, in: Z. Klemensiewicz, *Składnia, stylistyka, pedagogika językowa*, ed. by A. Kałkowska, Warszawa 1982, p. 742.

48 National Archives in Kraków, collection: Polski Komitet Opiekuńczy Kraków-Miasto, ref. No. 29/553/29, (1). Employee lists and personal sheets. (2). Employee lists (for rations), assignment of “Bezugschein”. (3). Lists of contributions to social insurance and income tax deductions, 1940–1944, pp. 311, 501, 605–606, 999, 1153, 1161, 1297, 1305.

49 National Archives in Kraków, collection: Polski Komitet Opiekuńczy Kraków-Miasto, ref. No. 29/553/29, (1). Employee lists and personal sheets. (2). Employee lists (for rations), assignment of “Bezugschein”. (3). Lists of contributions to social insurance and income tax deductions, 1940–1944, pp. 1187, 1217, 1303.

influenced the issuance and withdrawal of permits for specific activities and repressive measures against the staff. Performing a query in such records, it is important to remember that PolKO was an institution under the control of the occupying authorities. Generally, a researcher can find no reflection of illegal activities and comments going beyond the circumstances directly related to the actions taken. Some of the records, especially those intended for the occupying authorities, were pragmatically adjusted to their recipients. Nevertheless, the scale of activities undertaken by PolKO, the diverse communities supported, the high percentage of women participating in the committee's work, and the fact that the documentation was created in real time during the occupation make these records a valuable resource for researchers, particularly ones exploring the history of women.

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## Abstract

Anna Czocher

*Files of the Polish Welfare Committee Kraków-Miasto as a source for studying women's history in 1939–1945*

Files of the Polish Welfare Committee Kraków-Miasto (Polish name: Polski Komitet Opiekuńczy Kraków-Miasto, acronym PolKO) are stored in the National Archives in Kraków and have been open to research for years. These files are a highly valuable source for researching the reality of life under occupation, and one of the archival collection whose potential is not being fully exploited by researchers. The purpose of this review is therefore an attempt to show the potential that the PolKO files contribute to the study of women's history and its interdisciplinary potential. The Polish Welfare Committee Kraków-Miasto was a local branch of the Central Welfare Council (Rada Główna Opiekuńcza, RGO) that remained the only Polish welfare organisation in the General Government whose operation was permitted by the Germans. The records produced by the committee, albeit incomplete, reflect the main courses of activities these institutions undertook. Why can they be useful as a source for researching women's history? During the German occupation, official charitable activities became the domain of women. They were the majority among PolKO Kraków-Miasto personnel and cooperating individuals. The wartime circumstances also made women a majority among the committee's beneficiaries. Analysing the PolKO records, you find information concerning both individual women's motivation for embarking on charitable activity, the nature of work they performed, and the degree of involvement on the one hand, and reasons for poverty, and the types of support expected and delivered on the other.

### **Keywords:**

German occupation, women's history, charitable activities, everyday life, General Government

# Abstrakt

Anna Czocher

*Akta Polskiego Komitetu Opiekuńczego Kraków-miasto jako źródło do badań historii kobiet w okresie okupacji niemieckiej 1939–1945*

Akta Polskiego Komitetu Opiekuńczego Kraków-miasto (PolKO), przechowywane w Archiwum Narodowym w Krakowie i od lat udostępniane, stanowią bardzo cenne źródło do badania realiów okupacyjnych, a jednocześnie przykład zespołu archiwalnego, którego potencjał nie został przez badaczy w pełni wykorzystany. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest próba pokazania możliwości, jakie niosą akta PolKO dla badania historii kobiet oraz interdyscyplinarnego potencjału tych dokumentów. PolKO był lokalną placówką Rady Głównej Opiekuńczej (RGO)—oficjalnie działającej na terenie Generalnego Gubernatorstwa polskiej organizacji charytatywnej. Akta powstające w wyniku funkcjonowania Komitetu, choć mocno zdekompilowane, odzwierciedlają główne kierunki działań podejmowanych przez tę instytucję. Dlaczego mogą być przydatne w badaniach dziejów kobiet? Podczas okupacji niemieckiej oficjalna działalność charytatywna stała się domeną kobiet. Kobiety stanowiły większość pracowników i współpracowników PolKO. Jednocześnie okupacyjne uwarunkowania spowodowały, że przeważały także wśród podopiecznych Komitetu. Zatem analizując akta PolKO, możemy dotrzeć do informacji odnoszących się zarówno do motywów podjęcia działań charytatywnych przez poszczególne kobiety, charakteru wykonywanych prac, stopnia zaangażowania, jak również przyczyn ubóstwa, rodzaju oczekiwanego i udzielanego wsparcia.

## **Słowa kluczowe:**

okupacja niemiecka, historii kobiet, działalność charytatywna, życie codzienne, Generalne Gubernatorstwo

