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author:
Natalia Judzińska
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The aim of this article is to present and acknowledge the story of Rywka Profitkier, a Jewish student from interwar Vilnius. Before the formal legalization of "ghetto benches" regulations at Stefan Batory University, she took a seat on the side of the lecture hall not assigned to her. This gesture of defiance and resistance against widespread exclusion and oppression did not, however, become recognized in Poland, thus depriving her of the status of a hero. The author intends to restore the rightful place of Jewish people protesting against the national-ethnic segregation introduced by university authorities in the vast majority of Polish academic schools between 1937 and 1938. Furthermore, the article inquires into the conditions of possibility for minoritarian heroes within Polish collective memory.

Natalia Judzińska - Cultural studies scholar, works at the Institute of Slavic Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences. She is a co-initiator (with Nina Boichenko) of the group Researchers and Researchers on the Border, dedicated to the documentation and scientific study of the ongoing humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border. Her scholarly work deals with interwar anti-Semitism in universities and the Holocaust and the material dimension of the humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border. Head of the scientific project "The process of institutionalization of the bench ghetto at the Stefan Batory University in Vilnius in the interwar period" (NCN). Activist, guitarist and bassist of independent music bands, co-founder of several informal art and activist groups.

Beyond the Margins. (Why) Do We Need Minority Heroines?

Introduction

What makes a particular person a hero? What are the conditions of possibility for recognizing someone's gesture, deed, or achievement as worthy of commemoration and admiration? Although these questions might initially seem irrelevant or trivial, they need to be revisited when analyzing collective memory in the context of multiethnic, diversified societies. A gesture that creates a hero can stem from broadly respected skills (e.g. sports) or bravery (such as spiritual, political, or military leadership), but it can also be rooted in social activities. The latter, above all, provide models of acting that, according to feminist paradigms, lead to social change.

Here, I focus on a specific type of heroine: women whose defining gesture is political and who are themselves representatives of a minority. We are thereby dealing with three dimensions: gender, an element of exclusion (other than gender), and a political gesture that opposes oppression. Finding heroines and role models serves an educational function. Ekatarina Kolpinskaya and Nataliya Danilova have noted that the absence of minority heroines results in the reproduction of misrepresentation; it is not only the duplication but the perpetuation of inequality through the reinforcement of the male, white, and heterosexual role model.[1] Conversely, researchers Kristin Anderson and Donna Cavallaro propose introducing minority characters into the canon of heroism while advocating for placing greater importance on the qualities that define a hero.[2] This provides visibility, allowing minority

individuals to identify with a character similar to themselves, while teaching the majority the value of minority characters.

In November 2016, the book *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls: 100 Tales of Extraordinary Women* by Elena Favilli and Francesca Cavallo was published and quickly translated into forty-seven languages.[3] It has been licensed in thirteen further national versions and has sold well over one million copies worldwide. It includes biographies of historical women, as well as those living today, in different professions and famous for different reasons.. Thus, in the book, female athletes, academics, politicians, labor workers, and social activists are featured side by side.

Its popularity led to sequels dedicated to Black and migrant heroines. The selection is characterized by diversity in terms of ethnicity, class, race, and national origin, and is trans-inclusive; however, designating a heroine, even a minority one, carries the danger of individualizing her and abstracting her from the social fabric.

As Françoise Vergès points out, this occurred with Rosa Parks.[4] Vergès argues that Parks' narrative suffered "many erasures":

> [...] of a collective struggle, of the character of the activist, and of the racist structure of the United States. The collective aspect of the struggle, which had been essential to the development of anti-racist politics during the years of segregation in North America, is erased, as for instance the work in 1955, of the Women's Political Council (WPC), which was created to mobilize Black women in the South, and which launched the idea of a boycott of segregated buses.[5]

Vergès emphasizes that Parks' symbolic gesture cannot be removed from the entirety of the protests against racist state policies. Doing so undermines the collective work of the movement and falsely attributes credit to a single person. How, then, can we incorporate minority heroines into the canon

without depoliticizing their actions, allowing them to remain angry, controversial, and loud?

Symbolic biography or Romantic memoir? Points of reference

In the monograph *Hero, Conspiracy, and Death: The Jewish Lectures*, Maria Janion, a Polish literary scholar specializing in Romanticism, points out that the process of making a person a hero follows a strictly defined pattern.[6] Janion analyses writings on Berek Joselewicz, the commander of the Jewish light cavalry legion at the Battle of Praga (during the Kościuszko Uprising of 1794), who died a "heroic death" near Kock in 1809. The condition for Joselewicz to enter the pantheon of Polish heroes was his military merit; consequently, he fit into the national imaginary despite the fact that he was Jewish. As Janion notes, such narratives perpetuate old divisions. Joselewicz was framed not simply as a great hero, but as more valorous than other Jews, almost as courageous as other, non-Jewish legionaries – an exception who won the respect of the majority because his gesture fit the center of the majority narrative: he fought for Poland.

How does one write about minority heroes and heroines to avoid reproducing this pattern – to avoid unnecessarily romanticizing the struggle or exoticizing those outside the social norm? Françoise Vergès noted that for Rosa Parks to be canonized, she had to be presented not as a rebellious activist with past ties to the communist movement, but as a calm, balanced woman standing alone. This abstraction dilutes activist structures and suggests the injustice was personal to Parks rather than an issue of systematic segregation.[7]

In 2008, Sterling Juvenile Publishing published Ruth Ashby's *Rosa Parks: Courageous Citizen*, a biography that centers on Parks' civil rights activism. One learns in detail how her gesture of

defiance, in not giving up her bus seat to a white man after the driver restricted the number of rows for People of Color, gave rise to huge protests, including the key Montgomery Bus Boycott. Parks was arrested, and after her release from custody she was still an activist. Her bold gesture became an inspiration to other racialized women and men in the United States. Parks pursued activism and, after her death, became the first Black woman (and the second non-white person) to have her coffin displayed at the Capitol. Schools, youth shelters, places of social activity, and also city parks are named after her. She even has her own museum. The author shows how the turn of events made Parks an icon.[8]

Less than twenty years before Parks, in Central and Eastern Europe, another person, Jewish-Polish student Rywka Profitkier, made a very similar gesture. She demanded to keep her seat in a lecture hall, a seat designated for non-Jewish students. Upon her refusal, she was forcibly removed and brought before an academic court. Her deed nearly went unnoticed. In order to trace Profitkier's heroism without abstracting her resistant gesture from the entirety of the struggle of the Jews in interwar Poland in the face of antisemitism, I will outline the broad context of her becoming a rebel.

Pre-context: ghetto benches

"Ghetto benches" was an ethnic segregation system introduced in Polish universities before the Second World War. The term originated in the Yiddish press in 1930s Poland. Annual "festivals" of anti-Jewish violence led to bold demands for institutional and systemic discrimination. Immediately after the restoration of Polish statehood, antisemitic demands also began to appear in academic settings. First, the "Aryan paragraph," introduced in the 1920s, prohibited the admission of

Jews into academic associations. By the mid-1930s, the vast majority of associations had such a clause.[9]

Based on this grassroots practice, non-Jewish students pressured university authorities to introduce legitimized and legalized exclusion. Following amendments to the Higher Education Act in 1937, rectors issued "orderly measures" sanctioning the segregation of Jewish students to one side of the lecture hall.[10] These regulations were introduced in most institutions, with the exception of the University of Poznań, which had already established a*numerus nullus* (zero admission for Jews) in 1936.

The ordinary girl

Rywka Profitkier was born in Białystok on November 28, 1905.[11] Archives[12] indicate that her family were tailors living on Kupiecka Street – renamed after the Holocaust for Icchok Malmed, a Białystok ghetto fighter. Today, there is only one wooden house left on the street, designated in 2023 for demolition. Nothing is known about Profitkier's early childhood, and her educational path becomes visible in the archives only when she enters the Jewish Teachers' Seminar in Vilnius in 1921 at the age of sixteen. This was the first school of its kind in Poland, training staff for CISzO (secular Yiddish) schools.[13] These schools were co-educational, secular, and embraced modernity. Students lived together and traveled to kibbutzim near Vilnius to learn agriculture, oriented toward building Jewish life among the Diaspora, far from Zionist ideas.



Photo documentation of the exhibition Familiar Strangers, Center of Fine Arts Bozar, 2025, Brussels, Belgium (curator Joanna Warsza). Photo: Kuba Celej /IAM

The Jewish Teachers' Seminar had a further feature – it was supposed to prepare secular schoolteachers for their work.

It provided tools, teaching methods, and social networks; course participants – as a researcher working on a subject of CISzO schools, Anna Szyba, pointed out – remained in close contact even after graduation.[14]

In 1931, however, the Board of Education in Vilnius closed the seminary due to accusations of spreading communism, a lack of loyalty, and revolutionary inclinations.[15] Students were prevented from passing their matriculation exams at the school – that is, the matriculation exams were held, but the government did not recognize them as equivalent to the matriculation examination. The school tried for some time to meet all the requirements – those known and those appearing after the fulfilment of previous ones – unfortunately, without success. The alumni were forced to pass their final exams at an external school in June 1932.

After graduating, Rywka Profitkier started teaching. For a while, she was head of the Władysław Medem school in Szczebrzeszyn, a small town in south-east Poland – the building still stands on a hill above the river on the road leading to Zwierzyniec. She also taught at some of the CISzO schools – Izaak Leib Peretz school in Zamość, the Sholem Aleichem and Dvoira Kupersztejn school in Vilna, and the school in Pinsk. There are no records available on what kind of teacher she was or whether she was inspiring for her students.

Own Space

What makes Rywka Profitkier a heroine is her disagreement with social injustice. On February 26, 1937, Profitkier, then a third-year chemistry student at Stefan Batory University, took a seat on the right-hand side of the lecture hall. She was violently pushed out by non-Jewish students, but refused to take a seat designated for her, and kept standing in the space between the benches until the lecture ended. Profitkier recounted that she

was pulled by her clothes and hair; she refused to be pushed off until an unknown male student grabbed her from behind:

> Before the lecture started, I took a free seat on a bench where only one student, known to me personally, was sitting. After a while, a student whose face I remembered, approached with the words: 'Get off the seat now!' I refused.
>
> The student called out to some colleagues. However, they had not managed to approach when one of the Polish female students sitting on the bench in front of me [...] spoke to them: 'Go away, we will do it!' She called several female students [...] and together they began to push me from my seat, pulling me by my clothes and hair and twisting my arms, at which point I was scratched. I didn't let myself be pushed off, holding onto the bench with my hands. When I felt my sweater being ripped, I slipped my left arm out and scratched one of my attackers in defense. Then, an unknown male student grabbed me from behind and, with the help of the aforementioned female students, managed to violently push me off the bench.[16]

Yet it was the victim, not the aggressors, who was found guilty by the academic court, and she was suspended for a year. This deprived her of the opportunity to take her exams, receive social benefits, and use the university canteen or even the library. And the ghetto benches, the forced assignment of seats on the left-hand side of the lecture hall (as in the universities of Vilnius and Warsaw) or at the back of the auditoriums (as in Kraków and Lviv), did not legally begin to function until the beginning of the following academic year.[17] What, then, was so unusual about Profitkier's gesture?

Her gesture declared a symbolic order by occupying the space "in-between," the space of resistance. The Yiddish term *Tzvishn* [between] describes the space Polish non-Jewish society offered Jews. Variations of this concept can be found in academic

discourse and in literature.[18] One such term is *sublokatorstwo* [subtenancy], introduced by Elżbieta Janicka and Joanna Tokarska-Bakir via Hanna Krall's semi-autobiographical novel *The Subtenant*.[19] It refers to the dependence of minority groups on the dominant group. While the constitution guaranteed Jews full participation, their subtenant status meant that this access was conditional and could be withdrawn. A good subtenant does not demand equality; Profitkier, by executing her rights, violated the "subtenancy contract." Although she was legally allowed to take any seat in the lecture hall – ghetto benches were not officially introduced until half a year later – she was nevertheless found legally responsible for the "disruption of order" at the university. Here is how Krall summarizes this condition in another work, *Szczegóły znaczące* [*Significant Details*]:

> Subtenants are divided into 'good' and 'bad' ones. Both can be called to order, but it is more pleasant to deal with good subtenants.
>
> A good subtenant knows his responsibilities, respects them and doesn't make a fuss. When a good subtenant wants something, he asks for it. Under no circumstances does he demand, as a troublesome subtenant can do.
>
> A good subtenant will not think of violating the subtenancy contract and talking about something like equality. At the very worst, he talks about tolerance, and if he knows he has gone too far, he apologizes with a pleasant smile.[20]

The academic, writer, feminist, and queer activist Gloria Anzaldúa introduced the term *nepantla* (Nahuatl for "in the middle") into critical reflection.[21] She defines this as a temporal, ambivalent position, but also an affirmative space of struggle. To create such a space is to create a visible site of rebellion. To create such a space for oneself is thus to create a visible breach, a conflict with majoritarian rule, disagreement with one's status

as an exception. Anzaldúa also points to its transitional nature – from subordination to the symbolic reclamation of space. This happens, of course, under conditions of violence; nevertheless, what is important is that *nepantla* in this meaning also expresses rebellion, thus resisting oppression.

A heroine's rise

By refusing the space on the left, Profitkier halted at least some of the violence directed against her. If she had not been killed during the Holocaust, would she have become a role model? Would she have become a well-known and recognized social activist? Would she, rather than Irena Sendler (Polish social worker and nurse, a member of the Polish Underground Resistance during World War II in Warsaw, who saved the lives of numerous Jewish children), have been the first to come to mind when one remembers acts of resistance against the genocidal racism and violence?

Her gesture has been noticed and recognized, but with a delay of more than eight decades. Her act was exactly what *nepantla* refers to: a struggle for dignity in precarious conditions. Today, her resistance frames Piotr Rowicki's play *This Is Not Your Place* (2022), awarded the Gdyńska Nagroda Dramaturgiczna. The play was staged at the Museum of Mazovian Jews (a performative reading directed by Olga Chajdas) and at the Academy of Theatre Arts in Bytom. Marika Kornacka, the actress playing Profitkier, defended her master's thesis on the role in 2025.

Profitkier inspired the artist and performer Zuzanna Hertzberg to create a tribute banner for the exhibition *Familiar Strangers. The Eastern Europeans from a Polish Perspective* (curated by Joanna Warsza) at the BOZAR in Brussels (2025). The work, from the series *Jewish Shmates* [*Rags*], depicts Profitkier on recycled cotton – floor rag material – surrounded by dandelions,

set against a photo of an empty, segregated lecture hall at Vilnius University between the two world wars.

Both works position Profitkier not as an isolated individual, but as part of the greater struggle against oppression, antisemitism, segregation practices, and violence toward minorities. Neither of them abstracts her from the historical or contemporary contexts of struggle. On the contrary, her character becomes a kind of complement to all the struggles Jewish students faced in Polish universities in the interwar period, and to Jewish-Polish citizens within Polish society and collective memory. Interpreting Profitkier's gesture as a form of subversion and dissent against social injustice enables the undermining of the canon of national heroes and the narratives about them. Following Janion, I believe the disruption of old canons and the creation of new ones leads in itself to widespread social change.

I am convinced that an act of social protest[22] such as the one presented by Rywka Profitkier demands memory – not only artistically framed, but socially practiced. It might then undermine the dominant narrative – that protests against the ghetto benches were mostly organized by non-Jewish citizens. Profitkier could rightfully be restored to her place in Polish historical memory, and at the same time offer the representatives of minorities today the opportunity to identify with her act and with her as a heroine. On the other hand, the story of the deed could also allow members of the Polish majority – those identified with the "grand narrative" of national heroism – to rethink their participation in violence and segregation, their complicity, if only in the narrative.

Coda

More than eighty years after the official introduction of the ghetto benches at the Polish universities, only one of them, the University of Warsaw, decided to commemorate those who fell victim to the ethno-religious segregation and antisemitic practices.[23] On May 22, 2023, a marble plaque was placed on a wall in the university's main courtyard. Its inscription reads:

> On 5 October 1937, a ghetto benches system was introduced at the University of Warsaw. The Jewish community of our university was subjected to segregation. In memory of the victims, so that antisemitism and nationalism may never again poison the academic community. The Rector – Senate – Community of the University of Warsaw.

In his speech, the Rector recalled those who had objected and refused to comply with segregation. He mentioned those Jewish students who would rather stand during classes and those Polish students who stood with them in the act of solidarity, and he urged the community to stand with the oppressed and against discrimination.

1 Ekataryna Kolpinskaya and Natalia Danilova, "Heroes as Harbingers of Social Change: Gender, Race, and Hero Choice in the USA and Britain," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* vol. 37, no. 3 (2024): 331–351, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-023-09465-y.

2 Kristin J. Anderson and Donna Cavallaro, "Parents or Pop Culture? Children's Heroes and Role Models," *Childhood Education* vol. 78, no. 3 (2002): 161–168, https://doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2002.10522728.

3 See https://www.rebelgirls.com/products/good-night-stories-for-rebel-girls.

4 Françoise Vergès, *A Decolonial Feminism*, trans. Ashley J. Bohrer (Pluto Press, 2021).

5 Vergès, *A Decolonial Feminism*, 60.

6 Maria Janion, *Hero, Conspiracy, and Death: The Jewish Lectures*, trans. Alex Shannon (Peter Lang, 2014).

7 Vergès, *A Decolonial Feminism*, 60–61.

8 Ruth Ashby, *Rosa Parks: Courageous Citizen* (Sterling Juvenile Publishing, 2008).

9 See Monika Natkowska, *Numerus clausus, getto ławkowe, numerus nullus, „paragraf aryjski". Antysemityzm na Uniwersytecie Warszawskim 1931–1939* (Żydowski Instytut Historyczny. 1999).

10 Natalia Judzińska, *Po lewej stronie sali. Getto ławkowe w międzywojennym Wilnie* (Krytyka Polityczna, 2023); Izabela Mrzygłód, *Uniwersytety w cieniu kryzysu. Nacjonalistyczna radykalizacja studentów Warszawy i Wiednia w okresie międzywojennym* (Fundacja na Rzecz Nauki Polskiej, 2025).

11 I have researched Profitkier's biography for my book *Po lewej stronie sali. Getto ławkowe w międzywojennym Wilnie* [*On the Left Side of the Lecture Hall: Ghetto Benches in Interwar Vilnius*].

12 Those documents are held in the Lithuanian Central State Archives in Vilnius (Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas): LCVA, F. 172, ap. 1, b. 720 – Rytų Lenkijos ir Vidurio Lietuvos vadovaujančios švietimo institucijos [Leading educational institutions of Eastern Poland and Central Lithuania] – Korespondencja w sprawie zmiany statutu i funkcjonowania Żydowskiego Koedukacyjnego Seminarium Nauczycielskiego; LCVA, F. 172, ap. 1, b. 2688 – Kuratorium szkolne woj. Wileńskiego [School Board of the Vilnius Province]; LCVA, F. 175, ap. 1 (I) A, b. 505 – Zaburzenia studenckie [1936/37] [Student disturbances]; LCVA, F. 175, ap. 1 (I) A, b. 545 – Antysemickie zaburzenia studenckie [Antisemitic student disturbances]; LCVA, F. 175, ap. 1 (I) A, b. 606 – Sprawa dyscyplinarna R. Profitkierówny [R. Profitkier disciplinary trial]; LCVA, F. 175, ap. 6 (VII) C, b. 33 – Akta personalne Pr-Py [Personal data].

13 CISzO – yid. [illegible]n.

14 Anna Szyba, "New Year, new troubles. One must dump on comrade Golomb again," *Autobiografia* no. 8 (2017): 151–169, https://doi.org/10.18276/au.2017.1.8-11.

15 Bella Szwarcman-Czarnota, "Mir kumen on. Pamięci Abe'a Brumberga," *Cwiszn* no. 3 (2010).

16 LCVA, F175 ap. 1(I)A, b. 606, 9.

17 See among others, Ewa Bukowska-Marczak, *Przyjaciele, koledzy, wrogowie? Relacje miedzy polskimi, żydowskimi i ukraińskimi studentami Uniwersytetu Jana Kazimierza we Lwowie w okresie międzywojennym (1918-1939)* (Wydawnictwo Neriton, 2019); Natalia Aleksiun. "Together but apart: University experience of Jewish students in the second Polish Republic," *Acta Poloniae Historica* no. 109 (2014): 109–137, https://doi.org/10.12775/APH.2014.109.06.

18 Karolina Szymaniak, "Wstęp. Cwiszn, czyli projekt kulturowej dywersji," *Cwiszn* no. 1–2 (2010): 3.

19 Hanna Krall, *The Subtenant / To Outwit God*, trans. Jaroslaw Anders, Lawrence Weschler, and Joanna Stasinska (Northwestern University Press, 1992).

20 Hanna Krall, *Szczegóły znaczące* (Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2021), 55.

21 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (Aunt Lute Books, 1987).

22 Donatella Della Porta and Olivier Fillieule, "Policing Social Protest," in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, eds. David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi (Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004), 217–241.

23 https://www.uw.edu.pl/odsloniecie-tablicy-upamietniajacej-ofiary-getta-lawkowego.

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