

Righteous Gentiles and Courageous Jews

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In 2002, discussing the role of non-Jewish rescuers of Jews, Holocaust historian Nechama Tec wrote the following. “Why had I overlooked the rescue of Jews by Jews? Did I think that self-preservation, as a basic drive, would take precedence over everything else? Historically Jews have been viewed as victims, and not as rescuers, not as heroes. Had I unconsciously assimilated these perceptions? Had I assumed that victim and rescuer were incompatible roles?... I myself tacitly accepted the view that those who face overpowering threats are incapable of helping themselves and, by extension, offering protection to others.... [But] hope and a strong desire to live can translate into the determination to protect other victims. [Jewish] rescuers recalled that it was their suffering more than anything else that prompted them to help....” She illustrates this by two examples: of Oswald Rufeisen and the Bielski brothers, who both acted in Byelorussia, a place of unspeakable horrors for Jews during the Holocaust.

Nechama Tec, “Reflections on Rescuers.” In: Michael Berenbaum & Abraham J. Peck, *The Holocaust and History*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University, 2002; 651-662; pp. 657-8.

The “Righteous Among the Nations” program, to honor non-Jewish rescuers of Jews, launched by Yad Vashem in 1962, was based on the Yad Vashem 1953 law passed by the Knesset—the Israeli Parliament—that stipulated that the honoring of non-Jewish rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust was one of the basic obligations of the newly-founded national memorial institution. A Commission presided by a Supreme Court justice was designated in 1962 and invested with the authority to decide whom to award the prestigious title of “Righteous Among the Nations” (Chasidei Umot Ha-

Olam). Certain working criteria were designed, the initial and most fundamental one was the element of risk; that is, that the Righteous title was to be awarded only to non-Jewish rescuers who had been consciously prepared to risk even their own lives in the attempt to help at least one or more Jews to survive. This qualification became especially important when the Nazi regime during the height of the Holocaust warned that any help extended to Jews would meet with severe punishment, including the death penalty. Several more criteria were added, such as that that the rescuer did not precondition his or her aid on the receipt of any reward or compensation—either monetary or payment in kind—but acted primarily out of humanitarian considerations. Of great importance is the criteria that the rescuer’s aid be clearly and unequivocally documented by the rescued party in the form of a written testimony, or through the presentation of some other incontestable documentary evidence. Such a rescuer would then be deemed worthy to bear the title of “Righteous Among the Nations.”

There were four principal types of aid for which the Yad Vashem-sponsored Righteous title was to be awarded to non-Jewish rescuers of Jews. These include, first, sheltering and hiding fleeing Jews; second, helping Jews to dissimulate their presence by assuming non-Jewish identities; third, helping to transport fugitive Jews to safer locations; and fourth, helping to hide Jewish children after they had been separated from their parents for their own safety. Persons involved in the rescue of Jewish children included those who traveled long distances to make the proper arrangements, to escort the children to their new homes, and to make routine inspection visits to make sure the children were well cared for. Also included were the host families themselves, who took the frightened children into their homes and showered them with affection, love, and patience. As is known, tens of thousands of

such children survived the Holocaust by living under new identities for lengthy periods of time with adoptive parents, or in institutions, such as religious orphanages, many of these stories also appeared in the Hidden Child bulletins, over the years.

During the period when I headed the Righteous Department at Yad Vashem (1982-2007), I take pride that some 17,000 names were added to this honor roll from an original 4,000 names, and to date, some 23,200 non-Jewish persons from all European countries have been awarded the Righteous title, and the figure keeps increasing by several hundreds each year, as additional requests are received at Yad Vashem by survivors who were helped by non-Jewish rescuers.

The deeds of the Righteous may lead us to draw certain lessons, one of which is to reaffirm our confidence in goodness as a potential strong human trait, such as attested by Holocaust chronicler Primo Levi with regard to his rescuer Lorenzo Perrone, an Italian civilian worker whom Levi accidentally met in Auschwitz. In his post-war book, *If This Is a Man*, Primo Levi wrote:

Why I, rather than thousands of others, managed to survive the test, I believe that it was really due to Lorenzo that I am alive today; and not so much for his material aid, as for his having constantly reminded me by his presence, by his natural and plain manner of being good, that there still existed a just world outside our own, something and someone still pure and whole, not corrupt, not savage, extraneous to hatred and terror ... for which it was worth surviving.... Thanks to Lorenzo, I managed not to forget that I myself was a man.

* * *

At the same time, not to be overlooked, is that closely allied to the heroic deeds of the Righteous Gentiles are those of many Jewish rescuers, who through their efforts and clandestine organizations, exerted superhuman efforts and braved redoubled risks to themselves in order to enable non-

Jewish rescuers to partake in this humanitarian endeavor. In truth, one cannot properly speak of rescue undertakings during the Holocaust, especially in countries such as Belgium and France, without mentioning the role of Jewish rescuers—at least the principal ones who acted above and beyond the norm to save numerous of their brethren. We therefore have to ask why this important facet of rescue operations has not been given proper exposure, and why has it been overlooked by many Holocaust historians and institutions?

The standard response often advanced by Jews is that a Jew helping a fellow Jew was merely doing what he or she was obligated to do; hence, such behavior was and remains unremarkable. By contrast, gentiles helping Jews were engaging in behavior not expected of them; their behavior therefore merits special recognition; not so Jewish rescuers. There is nothing more intellectually absurd than such an argument. Indeed, a much celebrated non-Jewish rescuer in Holland, Marion Pritchard-van Binsbergen, a recipient of Yad Vashem's Righteous title, has offered a trenchant criticism of this position. As Pritchard-van Binsbergen maintained in a private communication to me in 1997, “Not recognizing the moral courage, the heroism of the Jewish rescuers, who if caught were at much higher risk of the most punitive measures than the gentiles, is a distortion of history. It also contributes to the widespread fallacious impression that the Jews were cowards, who allowed themselves to be led like ‘lambs to the slaughter.’” She adds that “Nothing is farther from the truth.”

One possible explanation why the trivializing of the role of Jewish rescuers has proved so tenacious is connected to the ideology and creation myths associated with the birth of Israel, in a bloody confrontation and a military stand-off that is still ongoing, and the continuous threat to the country’s very existence that necessitates a constant military preparedness

and vigilance. Yad Vashem, situated in Jerusalem, has to be viewed within the larger context of the historic interpretation, or reinterpretation, that accompanied the creation of the state of Israel.

The Zionist ethos, before and during the formative period of Israel's history, was to minimize, dilute, and even dismiss the significance of Diaspora Jewry and Judaism, throughout the eighteen centuries of exile and persecutions. It was explained that in order to survive the ongoing explosions of anti-Jewish rage in the various countries inhabited by Jews, the wisest course of action was to remain passive and submissive, in the hope of weathering the storm, and the way to do that was to avoid any self-protective aggressive steps or counter-measures that would provoke even greater threats to Jewish survival. According to this interpretation of Jewish history, this theory is best exemplified by the record of Jewish behavior during the Holocaust, that has been described as a mixture of confusion, helplessness, and submissiveness to a bitter fate, over which Diaspora Jews had little or no control. The sole exceptions to this hapless situation were, among Jews, the few who took up the struggle against the enemy, in the form of ghetto and partisan fighters, and among non-Jews, the Righteous Gentiles, who risked their lives to save one, or more Jews. Only these two categories merit the appreciation and thanks of the Jewish people – so it was claimed.

To compensate for the losses during the Holocaust, continuing with this interpretation, the full bloom of Jewish self-assertiveness came to fruition with the creation of Israel that necessitated an armed struggle. This emphasis on the heroic record of military successes against more numerous and powerful enemies, bent on the destruction of Israel, lasted for many decades after the creation of the state in 1948. Ignoring the role of Jews who did not necessarily fight the Germans, but who acted above and beyond the norm and took

extraordinary risks to save their brethren in Nazi-occupied Europe, went hand in hand with minimizing Jewish self-assertion in the Diaspora.

Let us not forget that Yad Vashem was established by a special parliamentary legislation in 1953 during the “Maccabean” period of Israel’s history. It is therefore also a reflection of the ideological mindset that prevailed during the difficult years of Israel’s rise, which was marked by ongoing military struggles with neighboring Arab states. Legislators at that time felt no need to give positive marks to Diaspora Jewish non-combat assertiveness, by mentioning, let alone highlighting, the unusual role of Jewish rescuers who exerted superhuman efforts in attempting to stem the tide of the Nazi slaughter, in which they solicited the help of non-Jews—many of whom have been hailed and celebrated by the state of Israel, through Yad Vashem.

I don’t know how many of you are aware that in Israel the very idea of erecting a memorial for the Holocaust was not initially viewed with favor, to say the least, and the leaders of the new-born state did not see it as a high priority. As pointed out by Israeli diplomat Eliahu Eilat: “Nations are in the habit of erecting monuments not to the memory of failures or sufferings but rather to victories and acts of glory.” That is why Mordechai Shenhabi, the originator of the Yad Vashem monument idea, proposed a much greater emphasis on “heroism” (*gevurah* in Hebrew), in the sense of Jewish military activism during the Holocaust. Shenhabi had in mind the heroism displayed in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, of Jews who joined the partisans, as well as Jews who engaged the enemy in battle by fighting in the Allied armies. Interestingly, when the Yad Vashem law was brought before the Knesset for approval, Education Minister Ben-Zion Dinur underlined that Israel’s recent War of Independence was a direct continuation of the war of the partisans and the underground fighters, as well as the struggle of “more than a million

and half of our soldiers,” that is, Jews in various Allied armies who fought the Nazis during World War II. Former partisan fighter Abba Kovner added to the emphasis of Jewish passivity during the Holocaust, by repeatedly stating that Jewish victims had gone to their deaths like "sheep to slaughter.”

Even the date set aside for the national commemoration of the Holocaust was also a subject of intense debate. Former ghetto fighters and partisans insisted that it be on the date to coincide with start of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, and that it be known as "Holocaust and Ghetto Fighters Day" in order to emphasize Jewish combative heroism. This idea was rejected so as not to conflict with the traditional Passover festive holiday that took place on that very same date; a holiday that celebrates not destruction but liberation. It was finally decided to insert the date, on Nissan 27, into the interval between the end of Passover (Nissan 21) and Israel’s Independence Day (Iyyar 5), in order to underline the important tripartite symbolic message of Passover=deliverance, Holocaust=catastrophe, and Israel=redemption. The title chosen for this day was “Holocaust and Heroism Memorial Day,” and this emphasis on Jewish activism is also alluded in Yad Vashem’s subtitle: “The Holocaust Martyrs and Heroes Remembrance Authority.”

It took many years for this Maccabean “heroic” concept associated with the Holocaust to be transformed into a more realistic perception of what actually took place. The Eichmann trial in 1961-1962, followed by two wars—the Six-Day War in 1967, and the traumatic Yom Kippur War in 1973—were milestones in the rise of a new thinking that gave special attention to other forms of Jewish resistance in the ghettos and camps, as well as outside them, including rescue attempts by Jewish individuals and organizations.

The tide is still continuing to turn, with many in Israel prepared to take a second look at what some brave Diaspora Jewish individuals and

organizations did on their own, without any guidance by recognizable Jewish leaders, to save their brethren under extraordinarily difficult circumstances. These Jewish rescuers succeeded in saving thousands of lives.

We should remember that when speaking of Jewish rescuers, we do not have in mind the rescue of one or a handful of Jews by individual rescuers, as is the case of non-Jewish rescuers of Jews, but of major undertakings, either by individual persons or Jewish clandestine networks, for the rescue of dozens, hundreds, and perhaps many more Jews. In Belgium and France, in particular, thousands of Jewish children survived by being hosted in non-Jewish homes and in religious and secular children's institutions. The Jewish children's welfare organization OSE, in France, and the CDJ in Belgium, were very active in moving hundreds of Jewish children across the length and breadth of both countries, to find secure places for them in non-Jewish homes. Speaking of France, the following two examples will suffice, In Nice, two Jewish rescuers Moussa and Odette Abadi created their own network, and with the help of the local bishop, Msgr. Paul Rémond, they placed over 500 Jewish children in mostly religious homes and orphanages. While many of the non-Jewish rescuers in this endeavor—including Msgr. Rémond—have been awarded the Righteous title, their Jewish affiliates remain unacknowledged. As for Georges Garel, who worked for the Œuvre de Secours aux Enfants (OSE), a Jewish children's welfare organization, he organized a secret network in southern France to assist some 1,600 Jewish children to find a safe haven. The transfer of these children was entrusted to a group of female escorts. This, I am sure all will agree, is quite a heroic feat for a single network's undertaking in a country under German occupation.

Some of these Jewish individuals paid with their lives in order to carry out these efforts. Such as the story of Marianne Cohn. She volunteered to lead

successive groups of children across the French-Swiss border clandestinely. During one of these rescue escapades on 31 May 1944, she was arrested while accompanying a convoy of twenty-eight children, and she was imprisoned by the Germans in Annemasse. Her underground Jewish friends had planned her escape, but she declined, fearing Nazi retribution against the children who were also under arrest. She underwent torture at the hands of the Gestapo to make her reveal the names of her clandestine affiliates, but she stood firm and kept her silence. In the meantime, the children were fetched by Annemasse mayor, Jean Deffaugt, who used ruse and subterfuge to extract the children from the hands of the Germans, and they remained safe until the liberation, a short time later. From her cell, Marianne Cohn penned the following moving poem:

Tomorrow, I will betray, not today. Tear out my nails today, I will not betray. You don't know how long I can hold out but I know. You are five rough hands... You have hob-nailed boots on your feet.... Today I have nothing to say. Tomorrow, I will betray.

On 8 July 1944, Marianne Cohn was taken out to a nearby forest and brutally murdered. In 1968, Jean Deffaugt was celebrated at Yad Vashem with the title of “Righteous Among the Nations,” and he was honored with a tree in his name. Marianne Cohn, who risked her life on numerous occasions in order to lead Jewish children to safety in Switzerland, and ultimately paid for her daring with her life – does she not also deserve a place of honor in the literature of the Holocaust. Other persons as well. Such as Gisi Fleischmann and Rabbi Michael Dov Weissmandl, in Slovakia; Walter Süskind, in Holland; the Zionist youth movement in Hungary; the Bielski brothers in Belarus, and Vladka Meed in Poland – to mention only a few more important names.

Including the stories of Jewish rescuers within the context of rescue endeavors during the Holocaust will not detract in the slightest from the unique role of non-Jewish rescuers of Jews, who are rightly designated as “Righteous Among the Nations.” On the contrary, it will correct an historical injustice and contribute to promoting greater Jewish self-esteem. Not everywhere during the Holocaust did Jews go to the slaughter “like sheep,” as is often claimed. Major attempts were made by Jewish organizations and individuals to stem the Nazi mass slaughter of Jews, and saved thousands of Jews -- they too deserve an honorable place in the Jewish pantheon.

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