

THE FEAR AND SUSPICION OF GOODNESS

By Harold M. Schulweis

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William Shakespeare (Julius Caesar, Act 3)



"I Set Before You This Day. . . ." detail from a sculpture by George R. Anthonisen honoring those who risked their lives to save Jews. Sculpture in bronze, 37" x 29" x 48". 1979-1987.

Why is evil immortalized while goodness is buried in anonymity? Why the widespread ignorance of the heroism of tens of thousands of rescuers from all walks of life, and in every country occupied by or allied with the Nazis? Why is so little known about non-Jews who transcended narrow interests, going beyond their anti-Semitic neighbors to enter the world of the condemned? Why, four and a half decades after the end of World War II, are the names and exploits of these people not studied and widely heralded by Christians and Jews alike?

Why do we feel so little responsibility to protect the living rescuers, many of whom are pariahs in their own homelands, ailing or impoverished? Why are those who are interested in developing moral character not as concerned with *unde bonum*—whence goodness?—as they are with *unde malum*—whence evil? Why have survivors, haunted by the pitiless savagery of the Holocaust, had no greater hand in recognizing and celebrating goodness?

I have long wondered about the conventional explanations for the half-hearted response to goodness. I hear repeatedly the argument, "There were so few rescuers." The number of non-Jewish rescuers, estimated between 50,000 and 500,000, pales in comparison with the millions of predators and bystanders. Yet this relatively small number underscores that their acts are all the more worthy of acknowledgment.

There has rarely been an active, systematic search for goodness. Identifying rescuers has been left almost exclusively to the rescued. As Sybil Milton, a historian and archivist of the Holocaust, has stated, "The names of the rescuers are largely unrecorded and their good deeds remain anonymous and unrewarded, except in the emotions of those they saved."

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The debates over whether the number of "righteous Gentiles" is significant, as contrasted to the number of killers, collaborators and bystanders, strikes me as all too similar to the quantitative obsessions of those who seek to rob the Holocaust, itself, of any significance. Some play down the Holocaust by contending that "only" four million Jews, not six million, were murdered; that not one and a half million children, but "only" tens of thousands were killed. Such number games trivialize both the brutality of the Holocaust and the magnificence of altruism.

Some people feel that the recognition of goodness, the evidence of activities which saved hounded Jews, somehow detracts from the gravity of the tragedy, as if these sparks of light would overcome the darkness. But whoever hears or reads accounts of rescue must realize that there are no heroes without villains, that even a small light in a cave vividly illumines the predators' dark designs. When those fearful of entering the "kingdom of night" experience its immense evil through the eyes of the good, this may fortify them as they take their first steps into its darkness.

Another possible reason for the widespread silence about the rescuers may be that, ironically, it is easier to measure one's moral stature according to the standards of evil rather than goodness.

Compared with the demonic villainy of Klaus Barbie, I am a saint. Would I act as Mengele did? I am quite sure that I would not. But goodness confronts me with a more difficult challenge to my moral self-image.

When Herman Graebe, a German engineer credited with saving hundreds of Jews at the risk of his life, is asked, "Why did you do this?" he responds, "And what would you do?" Whether or not Graebe intends it, his words penetrate my private world. Would I unlock my door, invite fugitives from Nazi sadists into my home, share with them my food, risk the security of my children? Would I take upon myself the protection of this sick man, that pregnant woman, these frightened children? Would I seek medical aid for those I hide, knowing that everywhere are not only Nazi killers but also *szmalcowniki* (blackmailing

informers)? Would I dispose of the excrement of those who live with me or bury their dead? Would I do those things knowing that they threaten my very family's life and limb?

Consider burying the dead. I recall Nechama Tec's account (in *When Light Pierced the Darkness*) of an old Jewish woman dying in the home of Stefa Krakowska, a Polish nurse who hid 14 Jews. Haunted by the fear that her death would doom the others, she kept whispering, "Oh my God, my body may bring disaster to you. What will you do with my body? How will you manage?" She died at night. Secretly, and in stages, Krakowska dismembered her body and buried it in the garden.

At times, people sense a certain discomfort in confronting acts of goodness, so that they detach themselves from them. The example of good people challenges our moral self-image. Wouldn't we rather be free of the implied obligation which the rescuers' example imposes on us?

Aside from silence, one way that goodness is fended off is by treating it as something more or less unnatural. For Freud, father and daughter alike, and many other psychologists, goodness was suspect. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud stated that humans "are not gentle, friendly creatures wishing for love. . . . Rather, a powerful desire for aggression has to be reckoned as part of their instinctual endowment." The impression he left is that a neighbor is a potential object of aggression and exploitation, be it using his capacity for work without recompense, abusing him sexually without his consent, seizing his possessions, humiliating him, causing him pain, or torturing and killing him. "*Homo homini lupus*" (man is wolf-like to his fellow man). Who can dispute this Hobbesian observation in the face of his own life's and history's evidence?

Yet I wonder what Freud would have done with the growing evidence of altruistic behavior, with the empirical testimony of those who, at great risk, protected and saved others from the sadists? Would those who risked their safety and wealth be dismissed as "deviants," unnatural, egotists? Would Anna Freud have analyzed their goodness as projections of frustrated desires, as "altruistic surrender"? Would her father have maintained that altruism is an artifice, an epiphenomenon masking the ugly truth

of man's voracious nature? This kind of scholarly bias, which dismisses altruism's genuineness, has affected the mass media. The media have helped make evil believable, natural, and primary, while goodness is regarded as incredible, unnatural, and disingenuous.

This bias is so widespread as to present a major obstacle to character education. We have something to learn from the rescuers, whose characteristic response concerning questions of motivation is that what they did was quite natural. Over and over, they ask, "Why the fuss?" They wonder why empathic feeling and helping behavior seem so strange. In this they may be expressing more than modesty. They may be touching the bias lodged in much of our religious and secular beliefs.

To correct the warped view of human nature does not mean turning a Cassandra into Pollyana, or replacing Hobbes's "*homo homini lupus*" with Spinoza's "*homo homini deus*" (man is god-like to man). Human beings are simultaneously more immoral and more moral than they believe.

The testimony of rescuers and rescued affords us an opportunity to balance these conflicting views of human nature. Altruistic behavior should not be placed beyond emulation because of an inadvertent "canonization" of rescuers. The rescuers are people of flesh and blood like yours and mine, not saints, superhumans or deviants. We are better served by Aristotle's modest view of human virtues in the *Nichomachean Ethics*: "The virtues therefore are engendered in us neither by nature nor. . . in violation of nature. Nature gives us the capacity to receive them and this capacity is brought to its proper completion by habit."

Goodness is as teachable as is evil. If association with evil people may prove contagious, association with good ones may be equally so. Human nature is not innately evil or good. As the anthropologist Ashley Montagu concludes, "Human nature is what humans learn."

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Who would anticipate that men and women raised in anti-Semitic families and communities could emerge as protectors of Jews? Eva Fleischner, in her study of French Catholics who saved Jews during the Holo-

caust, reported on interviews with a number of rescuers whose families came from the pro-fascist, anti-Semitic *Action Francaise*. Fleischner found that rescuers, whose family background, faith, and actions coincided with the rescuers' empathy and openness, were, in fact, the exceptions: "Backgrounds and upbringing are not necessarily or absolutely determining. Each person lives his or her history in a unique way, subject to external circumstances as well as to personality and character."

I find revealing her report of a resistance fighter who approached a Protestant pastor in order to find out if he would be willing to hide Jews. The pastor looked straight at the inquirer and said, "My dear sir, I'll tell you something. I can't stand Jews. But I am a Christian, and if you bring me a Jew, I'll give my life for him." The record shows that many followers of Vichy leader Marshal Petain and other French collaborators saved Jews. In spite of their enmity toward Jews, many people took enormous risks to save them.

In her study of Christian rescuers in Nazi-occupied Poland, Tec concluded that "motivations are rarely . . . directly deducible from actions." Two Polish Catholic rescuers, the Horskas, had been members of the National Democrats, an anti-Semitic party, before the war. Hela, a nurse, and her husband are credited with saving 14 Jews and extending help to many others. Likewise, Marek Dunski, a Catholic writer who, through his political activities and writings was clearly identified as an anti-Semite, helped save over 300 children.

In his paper, "The Altruism of the Righteous Gentiles," Mordecai Paldiel of Yad Vashem noted the varieties of behavioral traits and frames of mind among rescuers. Some exhibited independent thinking, others "allowed themselves to passively become involved in circumstances beyond their control and wound up risking their lives for Jews in ways unimaginable to them at the outset." Their behavior lacked the kind of initiative which some social psychologists and sociologists believe characterized rescuers.

Regarding all the theories on the motivations of altruistic behavior—from good parental upbringing to assertive personality traits—Paldiel pointed to an equal number of counter-examples. He found several rescuers with a "lack of strong parental identification; or belonging to a non-

marginal group; or an absence of a spirit of adventurousness; or of not being adept in a particular skill; or not exhibiting stamina and competence in a particular field."

It would be wrong if the mystery about the causes of goodness were used as a reason for giving up the search for clues to altruistic behavior. The development of moral character clearly requires many tools, audiences, and venues—the home, church or synagogue, and school—both religious and secular.

As the temptation to canonize rescuers (to view them as superhuman heroes) may backfire, so may a focus on radical altruism (behavior based on ultimate sacrifice of self and family). Altruism should be viewed as part of a spectrum, a wide range of benevolent attitudes and actions. An exclusive emphasis on radical altruism would eclipse other forms of benevolent behavior.

Not all altruistic behavior involves matters of life and death. For example, speaking out against the Nazis' anti-Semitic edicts was not the same as smuggling weapons into the ghetto or hiding Jews in one's home. The German protest against Hitler's euthanasia program was not as risky as other acts. Altruistic character is expressed variously, "precept by precept, line by line, here a little, there a little" (Isaiah 28).

Societies project a level of moral expectation. We are affected by what the community considers ideal behavior. In Goethe's words, "If we treat people as they are, we make them worse. If we treat them as they ought to be, we help them become what they are capable of becoming." But

moral expectations must be reasonable and accessible.

Radical altruism may well involve "the farthest reaches of human nature." As Abraham Maslow argued in a book of that name, if we want to know how tall the human species can grow, it is wise to pick out the tallest and study them. If we want to know how fast a human being can run, it is best to measure the Olympic gold medal winners, and "if we want to know the possibilities for spiritual growth, value growth, or moral development in human beings, then I maintain that we can learn most by studying our most moral, ethical, or saintly people."

The rescuers were not saints, but they showed that there were, and are, alternatives to passive complicity. They exhibited behavior that makes us consider seriously American philosopher Frederick J. Woodbridge's statement: "There are times when one ought to be more afraid of living than of dying."

One of the most distinctive features of the rescue phenomenon is that the rescuers almost never belonged to the same faith or faced the same fate as those they rescued. The otherness of the rescuers' faiths is important.

An autobiographical reference: I am a son of Polish-Jewish parents who had good reason, and many occasions, to inform me of the depth of Polish and German anti-Semitism. Their conclusion, one that oppressed minorities often share, was that the Jewish condition essentially is unique. "We" are alone, and "they"—all of them—are either our enemies or their silent co-conspirators.



Caring for people in need of protection: Zofia Pucowicz in 1944, with Jureczek Pohkranc, the Polish-Jewish child she sheltered from 1942 to 1945.

Courtesy of Elzbieta Pucowicz

It is hard to overcome the generalizations that come with repeated historical traumas. But my encounters with Christian and other non-Jewish rescuers—the Roslans of Poland, the Graebes of Germany, the Damanns of Belgium—helped me survive in a world divided between “them” and “us,” in a world among “them” where there are no allies for me and mine.

Looking into the eyes of those who supposedly came from “the enemy camp,” listening to the testimony of Jews whom they saved, relieves my bitter belief that there always was and will be an unbridgeable chasm between “us” and “them.”

A second illustration, one involving a well-known German from the Nazi era, Max Schmeling. The second Joe Louis-Max Schmeling heavyweight championship fight was portrayed as the battle of the Aryan versus the Black, a Manichaean struggle of evil against good. I experienced a vicarious triumph when a helpless Schmeling fell in the first round after a savage pummeling by Louis.

Only recently did I learn that Schmeling, during the Kristallnacht pogrom of November 1938, hid two Jewish brothers named Lewin, whom I had come to know years later in San Francisco as hotel headwaiters. That knowledge spoiled the enjoyment of the fight I had once felt. The Schmeling who protected Jewish youngsters from the Nazi fury was far from the demonic monster I had wished destroyed by the “Brown Bomber.” He was revealed as a friend from the enemy camp.

Heroes from the other side, more than theoretical arguments, helped convince me how facile generalizations about “them” are. They can also help others overcome the thinking that “we always suffer at their hands, and they always hate us.”

I found the logic of identification with the hero from the other side expressed in Spinoza’s dry, rationalist philosophy. In



Marie Jacquet of Belgium reunited two years ago with David Inowlocki, the child she had rescued.

Proposition 46 of his *Ethics*, he wrote: “If someone has been affected with joy or sadness by someone of a class or nation different from his own, and his joy or sadness is accompanied by the idea of that person as its cause, under the universal name of the class or nation; he will feel love or hate not only to that person, but [to] everyone of the same class or nation.”



Max Schmeling, left, billed as “the Aryan” in his June, 1938, rematch against Joe Louis, secretly hid two Jewish boys during Kristallnacht, five months later.

Heroes from the other side challenge our dismissive generalizations about “them.” But finding our way back requires the will and wisdom to search for goodness even among long-standing enemies. To find goodness, one has to look hard. “There is no immaculate perception,” Nietzsche observed.

Whites need Black heroes; Blacks need white heroes; Turks and Armenians, Irish and English, Israelis and Palestinians—all need heroes from the other side.

The gap between ethical theory and moral practice is hard to bridge. None of us knows how he or she would act when confronted with particularly hard choices. But “rehearsal”—private imaginative performance preparatory to a live situation—can present us with options we may never have thought about before. Heroes of flesh and blood help us realize what has been done in the past, and what can be done under extreme circumstances.

The imitation of goodness is made more feasible by the record of its ordinariness. Verified accounts and publication of the rescuers’ deeds are important; that is one vital function of the Jewish Foundation for Christian Rescuers.

For moral development, habits more than knowledge are important. Remember Aristotle’s insight: None of the moral virtues arises in us by nature. We obtain moral virtues by exercising them. “By doing the acts that we do in the presence of danger, and becoming habituated to feel fear or confidence, we become brave or cowardly. It makes no small difference, then, whether, from our youth, we form habits of one kind or another; it makes a very great difference, or, rather, all the difference.”

Aristotle’s emphasis upon habit, and his distinction between intellectual and moral virtue, is echoed in a conclusion by Sam and Pearl Oliner to their study, *The Altruistic Personality*: “Altruistic predispositions are learned—cultivated, nurtured, and nourished in primary relations; beyond parents, institutions—schools, synagogues, and churches—must be informed models of experiences of caring.”

The Jewish people bear a double witness, one of unspeakable atrocity and one of loving-kindness. Both testimonies are vital for morality and the morale of the post-Holocaust generation. Children of all ethnic and racial groups need knowledge of both. For the sake of their vitality, health, and creativity, children in a post-Holocaust world need balance; they require what Erik Erikson brilliantly summed up as “the favorable ratio of basic trust over basic distrust.”

Without basic trust, the future is condemned to a baleful repetition of an inglorious past.