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1993

The Path of the Righteous

Gentile Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust

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KTAV Publishing House, Inc.
Hoboken, New Jersey 07030

in association with

The Jewish Foundation for Christian Rescuers / ADL
New York, New York 10017

CSJ 193 B1516

1993.

Foreword

The Moral Art of Memory

A fascinating tale told by Jorge Luis Borges in his *Funes the Memortous* is cited by Yosef Hayyim Yerushalmi in his *Zechor*. As a result of a fall from his horse at the age of 19, Ireneo Funes discovered that he could forget nothing, absolutely nothing. If you and I perceive three wine glasses on the table, Funes would see all the shoots, clusters, and grapes. "... in effect, Funes remembered not only every leaf of every tree of every wood but every one of the times he had perceived or imagined it."

Funes possessed an astounding retentiveness, but his gift of memory was hardly an unalloyed blessing. The scholar S.D. Luzzatto observed, "To remember much is not necessarily to be wise." Memory is not a camera indiscriminately recording everything. The art of memory is selective. Remembering the past, it has an eye on the future. Undifferentiated, memory may be a blessing or a curse, an ally of wisdom or of folly, a supporter of hope or despair.

We are mandated to remember; the Hebrew verb *zachar* appears no less than 169 times in the Bible. Before us is the mandate not to forget the Holocaust. But the question of our time is not whether to remember but what to remember and how to transmit our memory to our children and our children's children. "Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life: but make them known unto thy children and thy children's children" (Deuteronomy 4:9).

How shall we remind them of the Holocaust? My children were not even born during those fateful times. Still they must know the awesome truth. In Cicero's words, "Not to know what happened before you were born

is to remain forever a child." It is irresponsible to raise a child who is fatally ignorant.

There are many reasons not to forget the Shoah (Holocaust). Memory is a warning, a protest, and an act of fidelity to the martyrs. More personally, I want my children to know the Holocaust so that they may better understand me, my fears, my anxieties, and, if you will, my hard-earned paranoia.

For me and my generation, the Holocaust remains the dominant psychic reality of our lives. Without knowledge of that reality, my offspring will have difficulty understanding my reactions to events that others seem to take in stride: my heightened sensitivity to the vandalizing of skinheads, the xenophobic rantings of rappers, the presentation of the Passion Play at Oberammergau, the rhetoric of David Duke and Louis Farakhan, the poisonous nativism of Jean-Marie Le Pen, the resurgence of the Fascist Ustashi movement in Croatia, the antisemitic stirrings of the People's Russian Christian Orthodox movement and the Pamyat.

To remember that past is painful. Perhaps it is to overcome our resistance to such memory that we are so often enjoined not to forget. To view, even on film, the charred skeletons, the mass graves, the excremental assault on the dignity of human beings is frightening and humiliating. To show it to our children's children is harder yet.

Every annual Yom Ha-Shoah commemoration brings new testimony of the previously forgotten: nightmares told by friends, congregants, survivors, and the children of survivors. A few years ago a psychiatrist, friend and congregant, shared with me his memories of Kristallnacht—the long, dark night of November 9, 1938, during which two hundred synagogues were destroyed, seven hundred Jewish businesses ransacked and burned, and twenty thousand Jewish men thrown into concentration camps. His father, a prominent physician in Frankfurt, was arrested by the Gestapo on Kristallnacht, dragged and thrown into a dark room, and seated before a large table. On the table were ten decapitated Jewish heads upon which the Nazis had placed ten skullcaps. They taunted him, "Here, Jude, is your minyan!" His memory is now mine. Shall I pass it on to my children?

At school assemblies annually memorializing the Holocaust, a short story by the Hebrew writer Hayim Hazaz, entitled "The Sermon" comes to mind. In the story Yudka, normally an inarticulate member of a kibbutz who rarely speaks on such occasions, startles everyone at the kibbutz meeting when he rises to declare, "I want to state that I am opposed to Jewish history." His stammering gives way to fury. "I would simply forbid teaching our children Jewish history. Why the devil teach them about our ancestors' shame? I would just say to them: boys from the day we were exiled from our land we've been a people without a history. Class dismissed. Go out and play football." There are times when I ask myself how wise it is to lay a stone upon the hearts of children, to crush their trust

and hope with such morbidity. I am tempted to echo Yudka's "Go out and play football." And yet I know that we are morally mandated to keep that memory, though "the past weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living" (Sartre).

More than the pedagogic question of how to transmit the Shoah to children troubles me. The memory of the Holocaust taunts my faith. So much of our tradition is based on the theological humanism drawn from the root belief reiterated in Genesis, "And God created the human being in His own image; in the image of God, male and female, created He them. God formed the human being and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the human being became a living soul" (Genesis 1:27). It is the human being whom the psalmist declares to be "but a little lower than God." Characteristic of this religious humanism is the rabbinic interpretation of a verse in Deuteronomy that admonishes us not to allow a criminal to hang overnight because to do so is "a reproach unto God." Why is it considered a reproach unto God? The rabbinic commentators answer through a stunning parable: A noble king had a twin brother who was caught committing a crime, sentenced to death, and hanged in the public square. When the people passed by the hanging corpse of the king's twin, they cried out, "See the king is dead." In this rabbinic metaphor, God and man are twins. To defame man is to disgrace God. Divinity and humanity are inextricably bound. When asked to explain the wretched condition of the world, Rabbi Aaron of Karlin declared, "Either God is God and we are not helping Him or God is not God and it is all our fault." In any event, the dignity, power, and responsibility of the human being in the tradition is central. Either as partner with God or alone in the world, the integrity of the human image must be preserved.

Yet staring at the tortured image of Holocaust history, the tradition of theistic humanism is shaken to its foundation. The evidence of the betrayal of allies, the merciless neutrality of churches and states, the predators and the passive onlookers grind faith in the divine image into the fine dust of homiletic fantasy. Neither the arguments of Kant nor of Feuerbach are as devastating to belief as the stark statistics of the Holocaust. One and one-half million children murdered because of their Jewishness; nine of every ten European rabbis killed; ninety percent of East European Jewry decimated; two out of every three Jews living in Europe murdered; one third of a people condemned to death.

The memory of the Shoah further exacerbates the painful dissonance between history and theology, between memory and faith. Observing the deformed image of man, who can sustain praise of the image-maker with a straight face? Who can speak of the human being as the crown of His creation? Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk once said, "All my life I have struggled in vain to know what man is. Now I know. Man is the language of God." After Auschwitz, what language are we to use?

My teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "If you ask me how to

begin teaching children the conception of God, I would tell you to begin by teaching the conception of human nature." I ask myself how, in the wake of the Holocaust, human nature is to be taught? Is the Holocaust anything but a baleful confirmation of the denigration of human nature, a dark ratification of the pessimism and cynicism found in Hobbes, Machiavelli, Nietzsche, and Freud? Is not this sorrowful judgment reflected in our literature, in the theater, in movies, and on television? The negative characterization of human nature finds voice in a statement by the playwright Tennessee Williams: "The only difference between man and the other beasts is that a man is a beast who knows that he will die. . . . the only honest man is an unabashed egoist. . . . the specific ends of life are sex and money, so the human comedy is an outrageous medley of lechery, alcoholism, homosexuality, blasphemy, greed, brutality, hatred, obscenity."

I confess that I am drawn to the phenomenon of altruism carefully documented by Mordecai Paldiel in this remarkable book on rescue behavior not for the sake of historiography, or sociology, or psychology alone. I am drawn to his documentation of moral heroism for the sake of morality and morale and the future of civilization. In this record, we are presented with another glimpse of history.

History is not our enemy, and Yudka's stand in opposition to history cannot and need not be ours. We need not counsel our children to escape history on the playing field. The history of evil need not be suppressed in order to serve my wishful thinking. History must not be bent to fit into hopeful theological convictions. The role of memory need not and should not be blurred to save ourselves from the terrible revelations of ugly truths.

But if memory bears a responsibility for the future, if it is more than an open camera, it may not ignore the moral and morale implications of its teachings. Here enters the spiritual and educative significance of the Jewish Foundation for Christian Rescuers and of Paldiel's definitive study.

In the rescue behavior of ordinary men and women, valuable historical data – long buried in anonymity – are a treasure of information that must be unearthed from incidental footnotes and raised into the body of the text. This growing body of empirical data must be integrated into an honest transmission of the past.

The options before us are not those of either Cassandra or Pollyanna. The choice is not between reality and illusion. The goodness of rescuers is not wishful thinking or desperate fantasy. Before us is a documented reality of rare and precious power. While the evidence of goodness cannot and should not be used to counterbalance the record of evil quantitatively, its qualitative goodness may enable us to walk more confidently through the valley of the shadow of death. The episodes of tens of thousands of non-Jews who risked life and limb to protect doomed people of another faith are as real as the fires of the crematoria. The fact of heroic benevolence is indispensable for the transmission of sacred memory.

Our quarrel is not with history. Our quarrel is with the abuse of history that transmogrifies the incomparable tragedy into a polarizing metaphysics. History should not be manipulated into a metaphysics of despair and cynicism. The evidence, collected and still being collected, of rescue behavior by tens of thousands of men and women, contradicts the Manichean metaphysics surreptitiously imposed upon history and destiny. I refer to the schismatic Weltanschauung that views the world as primordially fissured into "them" and "us." This fatalistic view of history interprets the horror of the Shoah as confirmation of a dogma of the eternal recurrence of hatred against Jews. The history of the Holocaust directed by this dichotomous metaphysics serves to immortalize the divisiveness between peoples. Consciously or not it visits the curses of the past onto the future. It filters down a pessimism that forecloses the possibilities of the future, and paralyzes the human will to repair. It robs the post-Holocaust generation of that singular virtue that Erik Erikson identified as indispensable for vitality: "basic trust"; not Pollyanna naivete, but "the favorable ratio of basic trust over basic distrust." This basic trust, in religious vocabulary, is called *emunah*, "faith." It brings no honor to the victims and martyrs of the Holocaust to distort the character of human nature so that any and every evidence of human decency and moral courage is a priori dismissed as so much homiletical cant. It is no honor to religion to see men and women turn to God not out of love but out of revulsion for His human creation.

Let there be no misunderstanding. Paldiel's presentations of the evidence of altruism in no way deny the terrifying capacity of human beings to hurt and torture innocents, to seek out scapegoats, to salve the angers and frustrations of the predators. But the evidence of human goodness, of moral courage by tens of thousands caught in the vise of life-and-death choices, helps puncture the monolithic bias against human nature – *homo homini lupus*, man is to man a wolf – that prejudice which led even John Stuart Mill to dismiss altruism as an "egoisme à deux, à trois, à quatre".

A word about numbers. On a quantitative scale, altruism weighs in light. But some things small in number are great in consequence. The goodness we recognize is not a matter of numbers nor even of grand acts. Goodness in the hell of the camps was as simple as a boiled potato, a piece of bread, a mashed strawberry given to a starving and forlorn fellow inmate. I think of Primo Levi's account of Lorenzo, the non-Jewish Italian civilian worker who brought him a piece of bread and the remainder of his ration every day for 6 months in the concentration camp. Levi writes, "I believe 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 exists a just world outside our own, something and someone still pure and whole, not corrupt, not savage . . . something difficult to define, a remote

possibility of good but for which it was worth surviving. Thanks to Lorenzo I managed not to forget that I myself was a man" (*Survival in Auschwitz*).

We and our children need to know the something and someone, the reality of good for which it is worth surviving and that reminds us that we are men and women. We and they need to know names and places and the flesh-and-blood farmers, priests, nuns, and soldiers, the believers and nonbelievers, the old and the young from every background in every land who made the impossible possible.

It is important that children know everything. Why should our children and our children's children know only and exclusively the betrayals and cruelty, and nothing of the secret pacts of goodness, of simple men and women who, in the prophet Isaiah's words, "turned themselves into hiding places from the wind and shelters from the tempests"? Children who are not to be denied exposure to the facts of sadism and villainous exploitation ought not to be deprived of the tears of joy from the tales of the decency of ordinary people who shielded the hunted with their bodies. Reading this book, we are reminded that there are no heroes without villains, no rescuers without the estranged.

It is immoral and foolish to extinguish the few rays of light lest they brighten the darkness of the cave. If anything, the moral heroism of the rescuing minority illuminates the desecration of the majority. There are no heroes without villains. There were villains. But there were heroes. The post-Holocaust generation must know of those moral heroes who through their lives gave the lie to the alibi that there was no alternative to passive complicity with the enemy.

The witness we possess is particularly important in our times. For everywhere on this globe—in Europe, in the Middle East, in our home neighborhoods—there are ominous signs of a growing parochialism, a xenophobic nativism whose justification of corporate selfishness resonates with the insular ethos of Sodom and Gomorrah: "Mine is mine and yours is yours."

We must not lose sight of the singular character of altruism that drives the efforts of the Jewish Foundation for Christian Rescuers. It is not only the recognition of goodness that sacrifices self-interest for others that demands our attention, but the uniquely transcendent morality of the rescuers who risked their selves for others beyond their church, beyond their people, beyond their co-religionists.

In an era of moral isolationism in which the ethics of universalism is derided, it is all the more important to recall how many rescuers saw in the victims of hatred they protected not a believer or disbeliever, not a partisan, not a Jew, but, as the rescuers have so repeatedly stated, a human being, a man, a woman, a child of God.

The behavior of the rescuers has something important to teach us to counter the growing insularity of our times. They teach us the need to define or redefine the biblical meaning of "neighbor." Who is the neighbor

define or redefine the biblical meaning of "neighbor." Who is the neighbor I am to love, against whom I must not bear false witness, who I must not defraud, and before whose blood I must not stand idly by nor hate in my heart? The rescuers defined "my neighbor" with the lexicon of their bodies. "The neighbor is not confined to the four cubits within my religious or ethnic jurisdiction. The neighbor is not restricted by my color or my catechism, but embraces those who stand outside the circle of our own faith and fate." Goodness must be searched for. It enjoys a poor public relations. Goodness must be studied. It has too long been held in abeyance. Theologians have spent much energy wrestling with the whence of evil—*unde malum*. They must turn some of their attention to *unde bonum*—whence goodness. Goodness is no less a mystery than evil. In my tradition, God is said to declare, "I am God only when you are My witnesses. If you are not My witness, I am, as it were, not God." Our memory calls for dual testimony: "Remember the evil and do not forget the good." Memory is an ambiguous energy; wisely used it is a life-affirming art, a blessing for our civilization, a gift of hope for our children. Distorted, it favors malediction and death. The Jewish Foundation is proud to co-publish this comprehensive work of scholarship which uncovers the sacred spark buried in the hell of darkness.

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