

In my book, *The Righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust: A Christian Interpretation* (Fortress, 1994), I reflect on that tiny minority of European Gentiles who risked their lives to rescue Jews during the Holocaust. Far too few Gentiles rescued Jews, and their actions in no way mitigate the evil or the horror of the Holocaust. And yet, fifty years after the end of World War II, many Jews and Christians find that these "Righteous Gentiles" are worthy of celebration; more importantly, of careful examination. Much can be learned that is of value for the reconstruction of Christian morality after the Holocaust and, perhaps, for the healing of Jewish-Christian relations.

By now, a considerable body of evidence concerning these rescuers is available, though much has been lost forever to the chaos and carnage of the war. There appear to have been between 100,000 and 250,000 Europeans who acted to rescue Jews. Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust research center, has identified and honored over 11,000 by name. A considerable number of would-be rescuers died in the attempt, while others have not been located. Rescuers contributed to the survival of tens of thousands of Jews; some by saving one person, others, like the now-famous Oskar Schindler, by rescuing hundreds. Their myriad creative, cunning, and courageous strategies for rescue are explored in detail in my book.

Over a dozen researchers have worked directly with rescuers (some have also used control groups of non-rescuers) to learn what set rescuers apart from their non-rescuer neighbors.

For example, research on rescuer demographic characteristics shows that they represented a cross-section of European society at mid-century. They were male and female, rich and poor, young and old, from all social classes and occupations. Who would become a rescuer was not predictable from any sociological measure. The overwhelming majority of rescuers were baptized Christians, but so were non-rescuers; research reveals that no measure of religiosity distinguishes rescuers from non-rescuers. Moreover, only a minority of rescuers name Christianity explicitly as even one of the reasons why they rescued Jews.

Exploration of the childhood socialization of rescuers has yielded some tantalizing clues. For instance, the Oliner study finds that rescuers tended to be treated with more warmth and affection, to be closer to their parents, and to be disciplined less harshly, than non-rescuers. Rescuers also were more likely to report that their parents taught and often modeled caring responses to those in need as well as outrage at injustice. But this finding emerges from a relatively small sample group, and plenty of counter-examples can be found. These sometimes overlapped.

Some rescuers cannot give a reason for their actions; rescue, even of complete strangers and at great risk, seemed to them the perfectly natural thing to do. Indeed, rescuers are sometimes angry that anyone would consider their deeds extraordinary or would devote time and effort to study them. As one Danish rescuer said, "As a matter of course we helped. When a neighbor's house is on fire

everybody helps to fight the flames.” From this point of view, it is the non-rescuers who ought to be researched.

I devote considerable attention to the particular motivations of those who cite Christian faith as a reason for rescue. These findings are, from the perspective of the moral well-being of the Christian church, some of the most significant in the book. For example, one motivation for rescue was a special sense of religious kinship with Jews. Members of the Christian Reformed Church in the Netherlands were most likely to cite this motivation. For those of us engaged in the ongoing work building healthier Christian theological understandings of Judaism and the Jewish people, this is an exciting discovery, worthy of further exploration.

Some Christians recoiled at the irreconcilability of Christianity with the ideology-theology of Nazism, and in response moved to rescue the Nazis’ primary victims. Still others found in a history of religious persecution a wellspring of sensitivity and compassion toward another persecuted group. Basic biblical teachings concerning Christian moral obligation are named again and again by devout rescuers. Teachings of Jesus, such as the Good Samaritan and the Golden Rule, did what they were supposed to do — move Christians to loving deeds on behalf of persons in grave need.

H. Richard Niebuhr once wrote that Christian faith is tested in the “laboratory of history.” For European Christians, the Nazi occupation and the effort to destroy their Jewish neighbors was a test of their faithfulness to Jesus Christ, and of the moral and theological health of Christianity.

As we know, the overall results were dismal. We must learn from that failure. But perhaps we can also learn from scattered successes, from occasional examples of decency, compassion, and love of neighbor, from sparks of courage and goodness. To a certain extent the conduct of rescuers is a mystery that will never be penetrated. We cannot unlock the genetic code of moral goodness, cannot patent a formula for courage and compassion.

Even so, the “Righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust” have much to teach humanity. In particular, they have much to teach the church — if, that is, we are willing to stop talking for a change, willing to listen for awhile, to those whose lives speak truth.

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