The Righteous Among the
Nations at Yad Vashem

MORDECAI PALDIEL

When reflecting upon the immensity of the Holocaust, of the Nazi terror machine and its clockwork efficiency, one sometimes wonders how persons nevertheless managed to survive, as is testified in encounters with thousands of survivors all over the world. There are, of course, those who made it by sheer luck; that is, they somehow withstood the terrible inhumane brutalities inflicted on them in the concentration camps, and came out terribly harmed but alive – without really knowing how it was so. Chance, or divine intervention, they say, decreed that in spite of their weak bodily constitution, and tortuous treatment at the hands of their tormentors, they should survive. At the same time, there is at least an equal number of survivors who owe their survival to the good fortune of having benefited from a helping hand during a pivotal moment in their long and dolorous itinerary in the kingdom of hell. That helping person, moreover, could in the final account only have been a non-Jew, as defined by the Nazis. While such stories of help number in their tens of thousands, clearly, they were not sufficient to stem, nor their authors strong enough to derail, the well-oiled Nazi murder machine which had at its command the most advanced technology and weapons of destruction at the time, and the servile compliance of an obedient bureaucracy. Nevertheless, if one is to measure historic events not merely statistically, but also qualitatively, the thousands of

Mordecai Paldiel is the Director of the Department for the Righteous at Yad Vashem, Israel. He is the author of several works relating to Gentile rescuers of Jews including Sheltering the Jews: Stories of Holocaust Rescuers (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

PUBLISHED BY FRANK CASS, LONDON
stories of rescue of Jews by non-Jews is to be assigned an importance beyond its (not so insignificant) mere numbers.

To put it differently – any Jewish person trapped in Nazi-dominated Europe during the height of the Final Solution between 1942 and 1945, who was not consigned to a ghetto or a closed and segregated Jewish residential area, nor in a concentration or other Nazi camp – that is, not under direct supervision by the Nazis and their helpers; nor was he/she a member of a clandestine military organisation, operating against the enemy from mountain outposts or forest lairs – he was none of these, and yet was at liberty or circulating freely, then it could only be because he was being helped to remain free and out of reach of the Nazis by a non-Jewish person. That person was aiding the helpless Jew either by hiding him in a most secretive place, feeding him, removing his bodily wastes and keeping his spirit up; or helping him assume a new identity, so the victimised Jew could pass as a non-Jewish without arising suspicion; or perhaps, assisting him to flee to a safer region, out of reach of the Nazis; or finally, in the case of children, arranging his adoption or care by others, or himself taking the child in his household for safekeeping. That non-Jewish rescuer, moreover, was with few exceptions, a born and baptised Christian, who whether he professed his faith or not, was risking his life to save a Jew from others, also born and baptised Christians, who wished to destroy the Jew for no other reason than because he was born.

Criteria Used in Defining Righteous Among the Nations

Many, but not all, of these helpers have been identified and honoured as Righteous Among the Nations, under a Yad Vashem-sponsored programme, based on the fulfillment of certain criteria. The initial and most fundamental prerequisite is the element of risk. That is, in contrast to other known examples of altruistic help where the helper undergoes a certain amount of discomfort to himself, in this case the Righteous title is only awarded to rescuers who knowingly and in full conscience were prepared to risk their life and personal freedom in the attempt to help one or several Jews to survive. Several more criteria were added, and these can be summarised as follows:

- A non-Jewish attempt of whether
- At a time rely on the
- And in the
- And did not moneta
- But acted
- And had physical
- There be rescued

Such a rescuer the Nation:

The presence there is not in the case initiative, the what constitute who holds the enemy rescuer who Jewish, or rescued person: his testimony issues I have

Risk to the

As stated all the life of rescuers when they under con instance, n
THE RIGHTEOUS AMONG THE NATIONS

- A non-Jewish person who is personally involved in a serious attempt to help at least one Jewish person to survive, irrespective of whether the rescue operation succeeded or failed;
- At a time when the Jewish person was totally helpless and had to rely on help by others;
- And in that undertaking, the rescuer placed his own life and safety in jeopardy;
- And did not precondition such aid by any reward or compensation - monetary, tangible or other;
- But acted mostly out of humanitarian considerations;
- And had not, before, during and after the rescue operation caused physical harm to Jews and/or other nationalities;
- There being evidence of this, principally through evidence by the rescued party, and/or other incontestable documentary proof.

Such a rescuer is deemed to be worthy of the title Righteous Among the Nations, the highest award by the State of Israel to non-Jews.

The previous criteria sometimes raise complex questions which there is not the space to explore fully here; for example, what to do in the case of a person who assisted a Jew, not through his own initiative, but because ordered so by a clandestine organisation? Or, what constitutes monetary reward? Also, how do we classify a rescuer who holds anti-Semitic viewpoints; a rescuer who collaborates with the enemy or publicly espouses a pro-German political orientation; a rescuer who saved his Jewish spouse; a rescuer who is himself partly Jewish, or a baptised Jew, or of a similar personal background to the rescued person; a rescued person who was an infant at the time – is his testimony (which is probably based on hearsay) acceptable? These issues I hope to address in a separate article.

Risk to the Rescuer

As stated above, the fundamental criteria for the Righteous title is risk to the life of the rescuer. This proviso removes from consideration all rescuers who were immune from any threat to their personal safety when they extended aid to Jews, such as persons in countries not under control of the Germans and their allies. In England, for instance, many families opened their doors to children evacuated
from Germany and the Czech provinces in the nick of time, months before the start of the war in September 1939. While they certainly merit appreciation and thanks, this cannot be done within the framework of the Righteous programme because of the ‘risk to one’s life’ clause.

It was not meant by the originators of this programme to belittle the help extended by such persons, only to highlight the significance of those who were prepared to risk one’s most cherished possession—life itself. The dangers for would-be rescuers were terribly real in Nazi-dominated Europe. In Poland, for instance, large posters plastered on bulletin boards in the major cities warned the local population of the death penalty which would be imposed on anyone helping Jews in any way whatsoever. This message was replicated in similar warnings in the press or over the radio in other German-occupied countries. The following public warning, one of many, posted in Przemysl, Poland, on 19 November 1942, stated in no uncertain terms:

Every Pole or Ukrainian, who admits a Jew in his home, or affords him hospitality, provisions and refuge, will be shot. (2) Every Pole or Ukrainian who assists in whatever way a Jew who is found outside the Jewish quarter, will be shot. (3) Every Pole or Ukrainian, who even attempts to commit items 1 and 2 will be shot.

Similarly, in Warsaw, the population was warned that the death penalty would be applied to persons who not only afforded ‘overnight lodging and nourishment’ in their homes to Jews but also to those who gave other ‘assistance; for instance, accompanying them in a vehicle of whatever sort, the purchase of Jewish goods, etc.’

Yad Vashem archives contain documents of Poles sentenced to death for the above mentioned offences, such as Jan and Stanislaw Kurdziel, executed for helping two Jewish women leave the ghetto in Zarki, or Jakob and Zofia Gargasz, likewise sentenced to death for sheltering an old Jewish woman in their home in Brzezow. Rescuers in other countries fared no better. In Germany, Heinrich List, a farmer, was sent to Dachau camp in 1942, where he died the same year, after it had been disclosed that he had sheltered a Jewish acquaintance on his farm. Also in Germany, Ilse Totzke was deported...
THE RIGHTEOUS AMONG THE NATIONS

to Ravensbrück camp after being arrested while trying to help a Jewish woman flee to Switzerland. In Italy, Giovanni Palatucci was also sent to Dachau, where he perished, for aiding Jews and other persons sought by the Nazis in Fiume. In Denmark, Henry Thomsen was arrested and sent to Neuengamme camp, where he died, for his involvement in ferrying Jews across to Sweden. Father Jacques (Lucien Bunel) was arrested in his Catholic seminary in Avon, France, after it was discovered he was sheltering three Jewish boys. He was sent to a concentration camp, where he also died. Suzanne Spaak, deeply involved in the rescue of Jewish children in the Paris region, was executed by the Nazis on the eve of the liberation of the city in August 1944. In the Netherlands, Joop Westerweel, Jaap Musch, Joop Woortman and Albertus Zefat were executed on Dutch soil for their involvement in the rescue of Jews. Other apprehended rescuers were sent to a concentration camp. Sometimes merely showing sympathy with Jews could land a person in a concentration camp. Adelaide Hautval, who complained about the treatment of Jews in a French prison, was dubbed a 'friend of the Jews', and deported to Auschwitz, which she survived. These are but a few of many examples of rescuers who suffered martyrdom or severe physical damage to their health because of their attempts to help Jews elude the Nazi dragnet.3

Much as the rescuers outside Germany feared the German occupiers, the danger did not only stem from them but also from their own kinsmen who, for a variety of reasons, lent a hand to the Nazis in their plan to be rid of the Jews. With the exception of Poland, all German-dominated countries sported collaboration movements, supported by paramilitary units, who, for mainly political and ideological reasons, threw their lot in with the Germans and committed themselves to a German victory. Cementing such an alliance also meant helping their overlords in the implementation of the Final Solution. These collaborators posed a serious threat to rescuers of Jews. In Hungary, in one of many examples, Paula Einetter was apprehended by the Fascist authorities on the suspicion of sheltering several Jews. The hidden Jews were not found and she was released, but she remained under constant surveillance and her movements were severely restricted. Even underground movements, which resisted the German occupiers, were at times no less zealous in
taking advantage of the situation by lending a hand in the killing of Jews. Some elements in the Polish underground (Home Army) were notorious in this regard, and many Jews who fled the Nazis were killed by units of this widespread and otherwise courageous force. In Lithuania, Jonas Paulavičius and Mykolas Simelis were killed after the war by Lithuanian anti-Semites, after it was learned that these two persons had sheltered many Jews in their homes. 

There was also an additional category of betrayers – the professional informers who were neither interested in political and ideological issues nor were necessarily anti-Semitic but simply wanted to cash in on the plight of the Jews, by turning them and their benefactors in to the Germans, in return for a promised reward. In Nice, France, for instance, the notorious SS officer Alois Brunner, disappointed at the meager results of his SS unit’s Jew-snatching, upped the reward price to would-be informers. Finally, one also had to take into account persons who had an axe to grind against a rescuer, or his Jewish ward, and took the opportunity to settle accounts by informing on them to the Germans. Any would-be rescuer had to take into account the threats to him emanating from all these possible sources before deciding whether to challenge the ruling Nazis by extending help to a fleeing Jew. Those who stood up to this test and did not waver in their commitment toward their wards are considered by Yad Vashem to be worthy of the title of Righteous Among the Nations, a term, incidentally, which Jewish tradition reserves for non-Jews who act according to universal standards of justice, above and beyond the prevailing norms in their society.

Types of Help Afforded by the Righteous

There were four types of aid for which the Righteous title may be awarded to rescuers of Jews: sheltering, dissimulating, moving, and helping children. When the intended victims suspected that the Nazitouted ‘resettlement’ reserved for them a far more bitter fate than originally foreseen, they naturally panicked and some began to seek ways to somehow camouflage their presence; that is, to disappear from public view and to all intent and purpose cease to exist. This often meant finding a place where no one would suspect that a living...
soul could live, and to remain there, totally helpless, for an indefinite period. This also meant being fed and cared for by others, without being certain that these benefactors would not experience a change of heart; to be dependent on them even for the removal of bodily wastes. It takes much imagination to visualise a grown-up person, with pride and personal achievements, suddenly having to submit to such a state of affairs, and be reduced to utter helplessness.

Hiding-places varied in size and the personal discomfort they offered. It could be a dark corner in an attic; a shaft under the rescuer's home with only mice and insects as close companions; or worse, a hole under the barn or pigsty, where one had to bear the terrible stench. In several isolated cases, people hid in tombs, after moving the coffins elsewhere, such as in the Manko Szwierczyszak story, where three people huddled in a tomb in Buczacz, Poland, for more than eighteen months. Less unpalatable circumstances included a dark corner in the rescuer's home, hidden from outside view by a piece of furniture; an unused section of a business storeroom, such as was the case with the Anne Frank family in Amsterdam, Holland; or inside a large double wall or ceiling; or, as in the case of Reverend Gerrit Brillenburg in Utrecht, Holland, in the garret of a church (where an absolute silence had to be maintained during services). All this, and sometimes for an indefinite period: some people were hidden as a temporary arrangement lasting only days or weeks, others for perhaps several months, and, in some cases, people were hidden for as long as two and a half years — that is, until the danger had passed and that particular area had been liberated from the Germans.

This form of help by non-Jews became the most prevalent form of rescue. Of the many stories on hand at Yad Vashem, I should like to mention the case of Jonas Paulavicius in Panemune, Lithuania, a carpenter by profession, who hid 14 persons in three separate underground shelters outside his home. Each group was told nothing of the existence of the others, so that in the case of detection and torture they would not be able to betray the presence of other hidden persons. Jonas and his family exerted themselves considerably in the care of their wards, especially in providing food for so many mouths in spite of the food rationing that prevailed under the severe wartime conditions. Jonas fell victim to an anti-Semitic individual who could
not forgive him for having saved so many persons, including two escaped Russian prisoners-of-war.

For people not prepared to remain in a state of total isolation for extended periods of time, and be at the total behest of others, another alternative presented itself – to try to pass as someone else, as a non-Jew. This was easier said than done, for before contemplating making a step in that direction one had to take a good look in the mirror to ascertain whether one had what was perceived to be a ‘Jewish looking’ face or not. This is not an issue one could take lightly, for the slightest mistake could mean the difference between life and death. To pass this initial test meant not having pronounced ‘Jewish features’ but also be well acquainted with the local customs, proper language inflection, folk mannerism, jokes, and religious beliefs; in short, everything needed to dissimulate one’s otherness and to make it easier for one to mingle with the local population. On top of these requirements, one also needed ‘proper’ credentials: a false identity card, a false birth certificate, a proper address and place of work, and persons who would speak up for the dissimulating Jew in case of questioning.

Hence, anyone trying to pass as a non-Jew, and there were thousands of such individuals across Europe, needed other persons to assist him, first with obtaining proper credentials, then with moving to a new location, arranging living quarters and a place of work. These three separate needs were not necessarily met by one and the same person. But all who participated in this operation may also qualify for the Righteous title.⁶

Another form of dissimulation was to be registered as a vital worker in a war-related industry under German supervision. Berthold Beitz employed more than 1,000 non-qualified Jews through the ruse that they were needed to run the oil refinery installations in Drohobycz, Poland. Julius Madritsch and Alfred Rossner did similarly for many Jewish workers in the military uniform firms in Cracow and Bendin. The most celebrated case in this category is that of Oskar Schindler, who claimed that his 1,200 Jewish workers were involved in vital work in producing ammunition in his factory in Brunnlitz, Moravia when, in fact, they did not produce a single shell during the whole eight months of the firm’s operation. In all these undertakings, the rescuers underwent serious risks to their lives.
Through a combination of personal charm, bonhomie and bribery, Schindler was able to deflect a close inspection of his company's operation. The more straightforward Rossner was less successful in protecting his workers or himself. He was arrested and executed in January 1944, and he too is listed as a Righteous.

A third form of deception was to claim that one was a national of a foreign country with which Germany entertained friendly relations and should therefore not be harmed. Such protective letters were widely issued by the ambassadors of neutral countries in Budapest in 1944 and were thus responsible for preventing the deportation of thousands of Jews. Included among this group of rescuers are: Raoul Wallenberg, on behalf of Sweden; Giorgio Perlasca, an Italian who claimed to represent Spanish interests; Carl Lutz and Harald Feller, representing Switzerland; and Monsignor Angelo Rotta, the papal nuncio. Each of these diplomats utilised the 'protective pass' ruse to try to save, in combination, tens of thousands of Jews in Budapest during the most critical phase of the Holocaust in Hungary.

Another form of help was assisting Jews to flee from an endangered place to another location; either within the occupied regions or across frontiers to countries out of reach of the Germans and not embroiled in the war, such as Switzerland, Sweden, Spain and Turkey. Even in areas under German domination, conditions for Jews varied. In France, for instance, it was somewhat easier to survive in Vichy, the so-called 'free' zone in southern France, where the anti-Semitic measures were applied with less severity than in the German-occupied north. Conditions were even more favourable in south-eastern France, in the districts under Italian administration, where Jews were not mistreated at all. Similar conditions prevailed in other regions under Italian rule, up to September 1943, in western Yugoslavia, Albania and the Italian zone in Greece, which included Athens. In Poland, conditions were poor and dangerous everywhere; although, for people trying to pass as non-Jews, it was safer to do so far away from one's hometown, so as not to be recognised on the streets. Some persons also wished to flee from one ghetto to another, where it was felt life was relatively more tolerable, such as in the Warsaw ghetto up to summer 1942, as compared with the Lwow ghetto. In Ukraine, persons close to the Romanian zone of occupation tended to flee there because of the less severe conditions
prevailing for Jews after the initial period of widespread pogroms by the Romanian military. The Romanians were also known to be somewhat less keen than their SS allies further north in rooting out all Jews. In Ukraine and Belarus one could also try fleeing into the deep forests, to join up with friendly partisans fighting the Nazis. In Greece, after the whole country came under Nazi domination in September 1943, Jews sought to escape into the hills, or by boat to Turkey where they were permitted to land, or enlisted with the partisans. Similarly, in Norway and Denmark, thousand of Jews escaped either by boat or by negotiating tortuous paths through the hills to Sweden where they were welcomed. In France, after the whole country, including the Italian zone, came under direct Nazi control after September 1943 Jews sought to flee either to Switzerland or to Spain. In all these endeavours, the problem for fleeing Jews was that the use of public transportation and public accommodation was forbidden to them. To make the escape a success, aid was needed from non-Jews for travel by train and bus, or to negotiate border crossings without being apprehended by guards and run the risk of being handed over directly into the hands of the Germans, as the Swiss did in many instances. Here too, non-Jews who risked their lives to help Jews move from one place to another, without exacting monetary reward, may qualify to the Righteous title.

Of the many examples in this category, only three will be mentioned here. Tadeusz Soroka spirited nine Jews out of the Grodno ghetto in Poland, which was about to be liquidated in March 1944, and after making them jump on a departing German military train, he accompanied them on a long night ride to Vilnius where they experienced a respite from the killings. Moreover, from there it was felt to be easier to join up with the local partisans. In Italy, Father Beniamino Schivo moved a Jewish family through several locations and past German lines, hiding them in a monastery dressed as nuns, until he had seen them to safety with the arrival of the allied army. In France, the clergymen Marius Jolivet, Jean-Joseph Rosay and Simon Gallay, who lived close to the Swiss border, facilitated the flight of many Jews into Switzerland. Rosay was arrested and deported to a camp where he perished. Several diplomats also facilitated the flight of many Jews out of German hands: Aristides de Sousa Mendes, the
Portuguese Consul-General in Bordeaux, France, issued thousands of Portuguese transit visas to Jewish refugees in the city on the eve of its surrender to the Germans; Jan Zwartendijk and Sempo Sugihara, the Dutch and Japanese consuls in Kaunas, Lithuania, likewise issued transit visas to thousands of Jews stranded in that country. Finally, Paul Grüniger, the Swiss police border officer in St. Gallen, Switzerland, issued false entry permits to several thousands of fleeing Jews who appeared at his border outpost. These high officials, who acted in contravention of instructions from their superiors and were penalised by their governments, were awarded the Righteous title.

The fourth and final category pertains to the rescue of children, and the persons involved in that endeavour. Saving children presented a special problem. In most cases where adult Jewish persons had to fend for themselves in hiding places where silence and strict discipline were of the utmost importance it is understandable that children below a certain age could not be included. The same is true for persons who were passing under assumed identities and had to fabricate new biographies. Children could hardly, in this instance, be part of the conspiracy of subterfuge. If both parents and children were to be given a chance to survive the terrible Nazi ordeal, a sad and excruciating decision had to be taken – the two sides had to separate, perhaps never to see each other again. For a parent this meant turning over one’s child for an indefinite period for safekeeping or adoption in either a children’s home or with a private family. Children who had already mastered the use of certain words, and were old enough to distinguish between their natural parents and the adopted ones, had to be ‘reprogrammed’; that is, told to forget their erstwhile parents and their own earlier names, forget their Jewish affiliation and religious customs — all this for reasons not fully, if at all, understood by these tender minds — and readapt to totally new filial and group relationships, and new cultural and religious environments. For many of these children, the trauma of such separation has left indelible scars.

Persons involved in the rescue of Jewish children included those who travelled long distances to make the proper arrangements, escorted the children to their new homes, and made routine inspection visits to make sure the children were well cared for. This is not to overlook the host families who took the frightened children
into their homes and showered them with affection, love and patience, and helped them to regain trust in people under the difficult circumstances of those days. Several tens of thousands of children survived the Holocaust by living under new identities, with forged papers and adoptive parents, or in institutions, such as religious orphanages, for long periods of time. Also included under this category, are persons who led children across great distances and difficult terrain to cross frontiers.

Of the many examples, one may mention Andrée Geulen who worked as a courier for the Jewish Defence League, a clandestine Jewish organisation in Belgium, which was responsible for the rescue of several thousand children; also Yvonne Nevejean, who as head of Belgian’s national child care agency, opened the doors for many Jewish children on their way to host families. In France, Dr. Rita Breton dispersed several hundred children in the Normandy countryside, while Denise Bergon sheltered children in religious institutions. Rolande Birgy, who worked on behalf of a Catholic youth organisation, and the Quaker-affiliated Helga Holbek and Alice Synnestvedt spirited many children across the Swiss border. In Poland, Sister Mątylda Getter sheltered many Jewish girls in her religious orphanage in Pludy and other locations.

The Procedure in Selecting Righteous Among the Nations

The process and procedure by which non-Jewish rescuers of Jews are honoured by Yad Vashem, is an operation handled by a special section – the Department for the Righteous – which gathers personal testimonies by both sides of each rescue story, supplemented whenever necessary with archival material. Cases backed by proper documentation are then referred to a special public committee, set up by Yad Vashem in 1962 to delineate guidelines for the attribution of the Righteous title. The Commission for the Designation of the Righteous, which is chaired by a Supreme Court judge, holds regular meetings (48 during 1997, for example) to deal with the many cases placed on its agenda by the Department for the Righteous. Committee recommendations are either to award the Righteous title, to seek further information, or to deny the title, and instead either approve the sending of a courtesy letter of thanks to the rescuer or
his/her family, or to shelve the case. Yad Vashem management reserves the right to give final approval to the Commission’s recommendations, or seek a further evaluation of a specific case.

Persons awarded the Righteous title (or their next-of-kin) are given a medal and certificate of honour. This is usually done through the diplomatic representatives of Israel in the rescuer’s country of residence at ceremonies attended by public officials and the media. At Yad Vashem, the rescuer’s names are immortalised in the Garden of the Righteous, through the inscription of their names on special walls of honour. The initial custom of planting trees for the Righteous at Yad Vashem was discontinued after the planting of close to 2,000 trees for lack of additional space. Of equal importance, Righteous persons in need of financial and medical assistance, are helped by two voluntary organisations in the United States and Switzerland. The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, in New York, assists some 1,400 ‘Righteous’, mostly in Eastern Europe, with monthly stipends. The Anne Frank Fund, in Basel, assists several hundred Righteous with difficult-to-acquire medicine and other necessities in their respective country of residence. At Yad Vashem, a multi-volume Lexicon is currently in preparation, which will tell the individual stories of all rescuers who have been honoured with the Righteous title.

Statistics

How many Righteous have so far been identified? During the 36-year period since the inception of the programme in 1963, some 16,500 men and women from all European countries have been awarded the title. This, however, should be considered only a representative sample of the real number of rescuers who remain undocumented. To elucidate this point we can take the Netherlands as an example: some 105,000 Jews out of an overall Jewish population of 140,000 perished in the Holocaust, which represents 75 per cent of the nation’s Jewish population and is considered the highest toll for a western European country. At the same time, some 22,000 Jews either went into hiding or lived under assumed names and, consequently, we must assume that at least a similar figure of 22,000 Dutch persons were involved in these rescue operations. Examining the case of France, 78,000 Jews were deported to the camps in the
East, whereas over 200,000 remained on French soil. Admittedly, their rescue is to be attributed to a variety of political and geographical factors, but one must not rule out the active help of many Frenchmen to this large population of Jewish survivors. In Italy, some 35,000 Jews survived the 18 month German occupation. Turning to eastern Europe, in Hungary close to 100,000 Jews survived largely through the aid of foreign diplomats stationed in Budapest. In Poland, some 40,000 Jews are estimated to have been living in hiding or by passing as non-Jews. This figure is overshadowed by the awesome number, close to 3,000,000 of Polish Jews who perished. At the same time, the Polish figure of rescued Jews alone is much larger than the total number of Righteous from all European countries so far identified by Yad Vashem. If we add up the number of Jews saved while under Nazi domination, the figure is well over 200,000. True, not all were the recipients of direct aid; some may have been overlooked by the Nazis due to a lack of manpower (such as was the case in France) and others paid stiff sums to be rescued. None the less, people in their tens of thousands were saved through the active intervention of non-Jews, for mainly humanitarian motivations.

The reason for the relatively small figure of rescuers listed at Yad Vashem, may be attributed to the following factors:

- Not all authors of rescue operations are awarded the Righteous title, for reasons enumerated earlier;
- In contrast to research in other areas of Holocaust studies, rescue stories are dependent on personal testimonies from the parties involved rather than on official archival documentation. No such information flows to Yad Vashem from certain European countries, due to a lack of proper personnel to help with eliciting such information;
- Many of the rescuers and rescued died in the post-war period and hence, their personal rescue narratives remain unknown;
- Many of the surviving witnesses are not aware of the programme currently under way at Yad Vashem and consequently do not come forward with their personal rescue stories;
- Finally, many Holocaust survivors find themselves psychologically inhibited from reliving past traumatic events by talking about their
terrible experiences during the Holocaust. Many prefer to postpone the painful disclosure of the dehumanising experience they endured, and some prefer to take the whole tale, including their own rescue story with them to their grave (not always choosing to tell their immediate loved ones).

To give just one recent example of the last point, a witness at the Demyanuk trial, after he had gathered the mental strength to disclose to a packed court his terrible experience at Treblinka camp, gave testimony to Yad Vashem about the Polish rescuer Jan Tulwinski, to whose home he fled after his escape from that notorious camp. Tulwinski kept him hidden in his farmer’s hut for eight tense months, sheltering him not only from the German authorities, whose armed men roamed the countryside in search of the small band of escapees from Treblinka, but also from his own brother, who as a member of the underground carried a revolver and threatened to harm the Jew at the first opportunity.

Thus, it is best to view the 16,500 rescuers so-far identified as Righteous not as a representative figure of the actual number of Jews saved in each individual country but rather as a representative sample of the variety of rescue operations launched on behalf of Jews by non-Jews during the Holocaust, in which a much larger number of persons participated.

Motivations for rescue

Of even greater interest than the figures is the question of the possible motivations of the rescuers. Laymen and scholars probe the mystery of the ulterior motivations which prompted ordinary and unassuming people to place their life at risk in order to save people towards whom they had no personal obligation. What is it, we wonder, that made them suddenly decide to brave the risks to themselves for the sake of others? Although none of the theories advanced have satisfactorily cleared up this enigma, two of the more recent studies deserve special attention.

Nechama Tec, in her study of Polish rescuers, distinguishes between two fundamental types of behaviour, which she labels ‘normative’ and ‘autonomous’. Whereas the ‘normative’ type is a
behaviour pattern which is sanctioned and rewarded by society, the 'autonomous type' of behaviour runs the risk of social ostracism. The Polish rescuers in her study tended to be nonconformists and highly individualistic, which caused them to stay somewhat aloof from their immediate society; in fact, their individualistic temperament made it difficult for them to blend with the surrounding larger group. Moreover, in an examination of their past, one finds a high level of independence and self-confidence, and a reliance on their own moral imperatives, not those set by the society.7

Samuel and Pearl Oliner, in their study of Righteous from various European countries, arrived at different conclusions. They found that a significant number of rescuers had fully integrated the social norms of kindness, helpfulness and tolerance, which others only pay lip service to but hardly apply in their daily activities. They term this type of behaviour 'normocentric', that is, a behaviour which is motivated by the social group rather than the individual person. Within the rescuers identified, these social norms were so strongly internalised that their behaviour appeared to be self-induced when in fact it was not.8

Both Tec and the Oliners place the rescuers on a high pedestal; they are special, out-of-the-ordinary, highly self-reliant and strongly self-motivated persons. In addition, they are described as having possessed exceptionally strong moral qualities, a commitment to helping others in need even before the war and a universalistic perception of the needy. According to the Oliners, they were people with broad social commitment who evaluated themselves positively and sought out challenges.

The traditional term 'altruism' is perhaps not fitting to describe these rescuers. Coined in the nineteenth century by the French philosopher August Comte, it came to denote the antithesis of egoism: behaviour that was directed toward the benefit of others, and which had the good of other less fortunate people as its object rather than social acceptance or material rewards. Accordingly, altruistic persons were perceived as having internalised higher and more universal standards of justice. This description of the altruistic person, which agrees with the characterisation of the Righteous in the studies by Tec and the Oliners, implies a special mode of behaviour which is guided by rational principles and which the
THE RIGHTEOUS AMONG THE NATIONS

rescuer has arrived at after a certain amount of thought and reflection. Such a person then chooses a course of action and behaviour which coheres and harmonises with his philosophy on life, in our case, by committing himself to the welfare and good of others in need. Given that such persons are to be found in all societies, do the Righteous in our study embody the aforementioned attributes? Are they the deeply emotive persons, who through a process of reasoning and moral self-education attained a level where they placed the good of others as their primary goal, and not necessarily their selfish good and prosperity? Hardly so!

To begin with, the Righteous did not have the luxury of reflection over an extended period before deciding on a course of action. Many were, so to speak, minding their own business, when suddenly the question of intervening to help others in distress was forced upon them; that is, they were challenged to get involved or not, to help someone survive or decline that person’s request for immediate help (in many cases the needy person was literally standing before the prospective helper and begging for help). We are therefore concerned here less with altruistic persons but rather with altruistic deeds by persons who otherwise did not perceive themselves as being particularly inclined to benevolent actions to a greater degree than others. Many of them, especially in eastern Europe, simply responded to the confrontation with persons pleading for help to be allowed to live. In other instances, especially in western Europe, the decision to help was spurred for many people by the sight of the brutality of the Nazi conquest and the inhumane treatment of the Jews in their midst. This led to the resolve to oppose the occupying enemy in whatever way possible, including giving help to Jews. Or, again in western Europe the decision was in many instances prompted by theological considerations and categorised as helping God’s elect people, who although they may have ‘sinned’ by not accepting the Christian faith, were nevertheless an integral and indispensable part of the divine dispensation for the salvation of mankind. In the face of the Nazi plan to root out all Jews, which was taking place before their very eyes, devout Christians, according to this thinking, had a religious obligation to preserve the Jews at all costs.

The type of behaviour peculiar to the actions of our Righteous is therefore not to be linked to altruism in the common sense of the
word. I term it a confrontational type of altruism — one is challenged and respond affirmatively, and unbeknownst (even to the surprise) of oneself, one discovers as much of a capacity for charitable deeds as any self-proclaimed altruistic person. Let us not forget that the first move was usually not from the rescuer but from the rescued person — totally helpless, fleeing for his life, and desperately in need of a helping hand.

At the moment of confrontation with a person pleading for help, there are some questions that may have crossed the mind of the potential rescuer and which caused him to respond in one way or another: is the situation really that serious (for the first prerequisite for helping is to define the situation as an emergency); will my personal intervention make a difference (the answer to this must be positive); if I don’t help, will someone else do it? At this point, a new self-worth and self-confidence is born or given added strength. This description of the rescuer’s response is particularly true for rescue situations in eastern Europe. The examples of the Righteous, consequently, have shown us that persons not of the altruistic temperament, nor necessarily uniquely individualistic, highly self-reliant and outgoing people, are nevertheless capable of acting in a highly altruistic manner — perhaps because this type of action is potentiality endemic in human behaviour and shared by most people, but only comes strongly to the fore, and assumes concrete form, in unique, irregular and highly inordinate human situations, such as during the Holocaust.

The Significance of the Righteous Programme

The Holocaust can easily be used to substantiate the claim that man is a brutish creature, a proposition voiced by many philosophers, theologians, psychologists and social scientists in Western society. Sigmund Freud gave expression to this running thread in Western thinking by stating that man is characterised by his aggressiveness; that the hostility of each against all and of all against each stands behind every form of inter-relationship. Man, he stated, is no less than ‘a savage beast to whom consideration towards his own kind is something alien’. Hence, the ‘commandment to love one’s neighbour as oneself ... runs ... strongly counter to the original nature of man’.
THE RIGHTEOUS AMONG THE NATIONS

Does this subsume, we ask, all there is to say about man? Is there nothing else other than his innate aggressiveness to explain the totality of his behaviour? Then how does one fit the Righteous Gentiles into this depressing picture? Are the accounts of their deeds of no consequence to our knowledge of human behaviour? Or do the Righteous teach us that there is yet another potent element active in our psyche, one that runs counter to our innate aggressiveness; a force strong enough to lead us even to place our lives in jeopardy in the fulfillment of a strong benevolent and charitable drive? The deeds of the Righteous should cause us to ponder this positive aspect of human behaviour.

Another important point to consider is whether a too greater emphasis on the evil of the Shoah may unwittingly drive home, in the minds of students of Holocaust education, a totally negative and counterproductive message; that is, that life is regulated by the law of the jungle: the strong rule and the weak submit or go under. An overriding emphasis on the evil in human relations without the compensatory addition of the goodness risks undermining the Judaeo-Christian ethos which professes that man has the ability to choose between good and evil. In a recent statement, Holocaust scholar Michael Berenbaum has pointed to this feeling of suspicion and distrust engendered by the Holocaust: ‘To teach you about the Holocaust is to challenge your sense of security in the world, to increase your suspicions about education and socialisation, to burden you with a baggage that we are unable to lighten’. True enough, in the Holocaust an important line, a rubicon, was crossed; we set the clock back. We discovered something frightening about ourselves — that we are capable of committing crimes previously unthinkable. This realisation has left us in a state of continuous shock, and we risk losing hope in ourselves as meaningful beings. This is the pitfall lurking behind all Holocaust education — the debilitating and paralysing effect it has on our senses and self-confidence. Hence, a proper corrective balance must be found between the two — to remember the evils and depredations of the Holocaust, as a lesson and a warning, and at the same time tell the stories and capture the spirit of the Righteous — as an antidote to the depressing legacy of the Holocaust. For civilisation is, after all, grounded in faith, hope, optimism and progress. We dare not allow the bitter aftertaste of the
Holocaust to cripple our belief in the attainment of a better world. For this, we need the message and the spirit of the Righteous.

Holocaust education should not end on a despairing note, but show that man has a choice and can assert himself in the cause of humanity even under the most trying circumstances imaginable. We have to demonstrate that man can be a caring being; that he is the possessor of an inherently creative intelligence, that knows and comprehends the difference between ultimate right and wrong – the gist of our biblical teaching. The Holocaust demonstrates how man can become beastly when he abdicates his individuality and places himself at the behest of others, and becoming a subservient tool for the misdeeds of the deranged leaders at the helm of the country. The example of the Righteous suggests that when confronted and challenged, ordinary men and women have the capacity to grasp and hold on to acts of goodness, for its own sake.

In promoting the programme of the Righteous Among the Nations, Yad Vashem wishes first to acquit itself of the elementary obligation to express the Jewish people’s thanks and appreciation to those among non-Jews who assumed the mantle of humanity, when others abdicated their responsibility, and were prepared to risk their lives for the sake of an important human principle: the sanctity of life. At the same time, a few more lessons may be drawn. During the Holocaust it was possible to save Jews at the individual level, in spite of the risks involved. It has been shown that the individual person, left to his own devices, can decide to act morally and can make a difference, and thereby serve as an example and role model for the behaviour of others.\(^\text{10}\)

Helping others in distress may be one of the most intensive forms of a natural and free expression of one’s human nature at its most elevated form, the parallel of Buber’s I-Thou as against an I-It relationship. As demonstrated by the deeds of the Righteous rescuers, helping others in distress is a natural, not coerced, human behavioural mode, and represents man at his best.

An added dimension to the uniqueness of the behaviour of the rescuers is when their responses are contrasted with that of the perpetrators. The perpetrators generally state ‘I did not do it exactly as described’. ‘I was forced into it, for orders have to be obeyed’. ‘Personally, I have nothing against Jews, and I am not responsible for
the righteous among the nations

my deeds’. Rescuers, by contrast, generally say: ‘Of course I did it, and I would do it again, if called upon’. ‘I take full personal responsibility for my deeds’. ‘I was not coached into it, and no one forced me to do it’. ‘It was the most natural thing’. Herein, is the moral abyss separating these two types of human conduct. The example of thousands of Righteous who risked their lives to save Jews from the Nazis is evidence that the human spirit is not only very much alive but also a potent creative force. In the words of the Talmud (a motto etched on the Righteous medal): ‘Whosoever saves one life is as though he has saved an entire world’.

notes

1. Yad Vashem (YV), Audio Video Department.
2. Cases of rescuers highlighted in this article are based on files in the Department for the Righteous at Yad Vashem. The following is an alphabetical list with file numbers: Beitz, Berthold: 299; Bergon, Denise: 1807; Birgy, Roland: 2613; Breton, Rita: 2290; Brillenburg, Gerrit: 48; Einetter, Paula: 4639; Feller, Harald: 8575; Gallay, Simon: 4363; Gargasz, Jakob & Zofia: 1622; Getter, Matylda: 3097; Geulen, André: 4323; Grüninger, Paul: 680; Hautval, Adelaide: 100; Holbek, Helga: 2142; Jacques, (Bnuel Lucien): 3099; Jolivet, Marius: 3507; Kugler, Victor (for the Anne Frank story): 706; Kurziel, Jan & Stanislaw: 5134; List, Heinrich: 5525; Lutz, Carl: 46; Madrutsch, Julius: 51; Mendes, de Sousa Aristides: 264; Musch, Jaap: 2083; Nevejean, Yvonne: 99; Nicollini, Giuseppe (for the Viterbi story, see note 3, below): 1235; Palatucci, Giovanni: 4338; Paulavicius, Jonas: 2472; Perlasca, Giorgio: 3911; Rosay, Jean-Joseph: 3580; Rossner, Alfred: 6239; Rotta, Angelo: 7690; Schindler, Oskar: 20; Schivo, Beniamino: 3362; Simelis, Mykolas: 2530; Soroka, Tadeusz: 2693; Sosnowy, Jan: 5950; Spaak, Suzanne: 62; Sugihara, Sempo: 2861; Synnestvedt, Alice: 2142a; Szwiersczak, Manko: 2644; Thomsen, Henry: 471; Totzke, Ilse: 6335; Talwinski, Jan: 5482; Wallenberg, Raoul: 31; Westerweel, Joop: 32; Woortman, Joop: 20851; Zefat, Alberthus: 731; Zwartendijk, Jan: 7793.
3. See, for instance, the example of Jan Sosnowy (YV 5950), who was threatened with death by Polish patriots if he did not disclose the two Jews thought to be hiding on his farm. They eventually relented after severely beating him.
4. Nechama Tec, in her study of Polish rescuers, tells of a Polish rescuer who feared her husband's anti-Semitism. ‘My husband hated Jews... Not only was he willing to burn every Jew but even the earth on which they stood. Many Poles feel the way he did’. When the Light Pierced the Darkness: Christian Rescue of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p.54.
5. Exceptions to the ‘risk to life’ rule are the isolated cases of diplomats and officials in positions of authority, who flouted or disregarded instructions from their immediate superiors and helped hundreds and thousands of Jews to survive. The loss of their careers coupled with rescue of numerous Jews makes them eligible for the Righteous title.
6. In the town of Assisi, Miriam Viterbi passed as a native of Lecce, which had recently been liberated by the Allies. Her false credentials were made out accordingly. Never having been in Assisi, Miriam studied all the important sites in that city. Lecce was
chosen because the language inflection there is not dissimilar from Assisi; choosing a location further to the south, would have meant speaking a different dialect (Nicolini file, YV: 1233).

10. Moreover, the individual has the capacity to call forth, to borrow a Jungian term, the 'archetype' of goodness which, like other 'archetypes' including aggressive behaviour, is part of our mental constitution, and perhaps rooted in our very genes. Carl G. Jung defines an archetype as not the fruit of individual experience but a universal primordial image, which has a 'numinous' life-like quality, and is at the centre of our psychic energy. Various archetypes are likely to be manifested in critical circumstances, either through an exterior event or because of some inner charge. See Henri F. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (New York: Basic Books, 1970), pp.705–12. I have also recently found Emanuel Levinas' idea of 'the Other' as helpful in evaluating the uniqueness of the behaviour of the Righteous.