

The Memory of Goodness
Eva Fleischner

A number of years ago, I interviewed some French Catholics about what they had done during the Holocaust to help Jews. One woman I spoke to was an 87-year old nun who lived in a house for retired sisters near Paris. She was still formidable, despite her short stature and age. Fifty years ago she had been director of a large boarding school in Paris, where she must have been immensely impressive. Her position at the time made it relatively easy for her to take in and hide Jewish children until she could arrange to send them across the border into the unoccupied zone. Often she took them to the train herself. On one occasion she needed 15,000 francs to pay a woman who had agreed to take a Jewish baby across the demarcation line. Where did she get that kind of money? I asked her. She shrugged and said, "I don't remember, but it always came when I needed it."

She told me about a confrontation she once had with a French policeman sent to take the Jewish children away. When she refused to hand them over, the man, embarrassed, said to her: "What am I to do? I have my orders".

"If you are afraid for your skin," she told him, "give me a week to hide the children. Then come back and arrest me! What you are doing is a disgrace. How could you do such a thing? Can you really imagine that I would give you the children?" The man went away. In the week that followed, she spirited the children away in all directions: "Luckily I had the addresses of many convents," she said. The policeman never came back.

What explains her actions? As far as I can tell, not her background. Like many aristocratic families in France, her family tended to be antisemitic – although the war changed that and they began to help her. Nor did she speak in theological terms. Rather, I felt in her an instinctive response to a crisis, to a situation of terrible injustice. Her position enabled her to help, and help she did.

Another person with whom I spoke was a priest, Father Albert Gau. During the war he opened a restaurant (ostensibly run by a woman he knew), which served as a front for Jews and other refugees from the Germans. I asked him whether he had had the support of his bishop. With some hesitation he said, "Yes, up to a point". Then, he told me of the time his bishop had warned him to stop this "dangerous business." That day Father Gau's doorbell rang. Before him stood an extremely pregnant Jewish woman. He welcomed her, then he telephoned his bishop: "Bishop I have a pregnant Jewish woman here. You told me to stop, so I shall send her over to your place. You have plenty of room!" The worried bishop told Father Gau to keep the woman, and so he did. He saved the woman and her child and continued to do his rescue work.

Father Gau also spoke of his network of helpers, including a Carmelite convent outside his town. The Superior of that convent helped save a Jew sent to her by dressing him in a Carmelite habit when the Germans searched the place because he had been seen entering it. What made Father Gau act as he did?

People were not always able to answer such questions themselves when I put it to them, but two things seem clear in regard to Father Gau: He is a profoundly compassionate man – he kept referring to all that the Jews had suffered – and he is a man of great independence of spirit. As a young man, when he had decided to become a priest, he chose not to go to the local seminary because it was too provincial and narrow,

but instead to the seminary of St. Sulpice in Paris, where he was exposed to a great breadth of ideas and to great teachers.

We should not think of people who helped Jews during the Holocaust as heroes or saints, not only because they themselves refuse this label, but because it would let us off the hook too easily. If we put them on a pedestal, we deprive ourselves of the possibility of identifying with them. These women and men can become models for us – not to be admired and venerated, but flesh-and-blood creatures who embody the potential for goodness that exists in us all, the capacity we all have for what Jewish tradition calls "hesed", and Christian tradition "grace".

Some rescuers – a minority in my experience – had a real love for Jews and Judaism already before the war. Rolande Birgy is one of them. She spent much of the war in the French Alps, the Haute Savoie, because it is close to the Swiss border. She always made sure, in finding families who would hide Jewish children, that the children's faith would be respected. On the day of the week when French children were away from school in order to attend catechism classes, Rolande saw to it that the Jewish children were taught their own scriptures by a priest.

Eventually she was arrested by the French police. An official came to her cell to interrogate her, asking her why she helped "those Jews who killed Christ." Her answer was clear: "My dear sir, let me tell you something. Anyone who has had any catechism at all knows that it was not the Jews who killed Christ, but our sins." We have here an example of both "the teaching of contempt" and the overcoming of it.

On 23 August 1942, when the deportation of French Jews was under way, the Archbishop of Toulouse (later Cardinal), Msgr. Jules-Gerard Saliege, ordered a pastoral letter read aloud in the churches of his diocese. In it, he vehemently condemned the inhuman treatment of Jews. The letter caused a sensation throughout France because it was the first occasion when a bishop of the Roman Catholic Church had spoken publicly on behalf of the Jews.

Inspired by Saliege's example, the bishop of Montauban, Msgr. Pierre-Marie Theas, also wrote a pastoral letter to his diocese. Marie-Rose Gineste, a young social worker and member of the resistance, told him that if it were mailed to parish priests, it would be stopped by the censors. Consequently, she volunteered to deliver it herself by bicycle throughout the diocese, even though this meant cycling more than 100 km a day, but she did it. The following Sunday morning Bishop Theas' pastoral letter was read aloud in all the Catholic churches of his diocese.

The Catholics of Toulouse and Montauban had the support and blessing of their bishops. Others were not so fortunate. Out of eighty French bishops, only four spoke out. Should we describe these few as insignificant because they were not typical? Indeed, they were not typical. All the more reason not to dismiss them, but instead to celebrate and honor them. They are proof that human beings can overcome evil, can choose decency and compassion over apathy and hatred.

People acted for many different motives: patriotism, personal contact with Jews, obedience to authority, a sense of justice, resistance to the hated Germans, the influence of a teacher, the demands of Christian faith, and so on. One motive, however, was common to all: compassion, humanitarian concern. Again and again I was told, "They were victims, they needed help, they had nowhere to go". Everyone knew that the Jews were the most exposed of all the Nazis' victims. As such, they had to be helped. This was

usually said in a matter-of-fact manner, often without any reference to the person's Christian faith, even by priests and other religious persons.

While I am unable to draw a single profile of these rescuers, they all do have one thing in common: none of them think of themselves as heroic, as having done anything out of the ordinary. I was told again and again "I don't really have anything to tell you, I didn't do anything". Or, "We did so little, given all there was to do".

Before I started my work I knew that I would not find very many just ones, although I found more than I expected. I also knew that, no matter how many I might find, their number would still be very small, compared to the millions who stood by and did nothing or who actively collaborated. Knowing this, I found comfort in Jewish tradition, which does not measure goodness in numbers: "Whoever saves one life, it is as if they had saved the whole world". May we be inspired by their example to do likewise.

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