

The German Righteous Among the Nations

Daniel Fraenkel

The subject of this volume is a small group of German men and women who were recognized by Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust Remembrance Authority, as "Righteous Among the Nations." Active solidarity with persecuted Jews was a strictly circumscribed phenomenon in German society under Hitler. The comparative figures of the Righteous in Yad Vashem are representative in this respect, though far from exhaustive. As of the time of writing, the title of "Righteous" has been conferred on some 17433 individuals, amongst them 5373 Poles, 4289 Dutchmen but only 336 Germans. It should be noted, however, that the criteria of Yad Vashem, which pertain only to a select circle of strongly committed rescuers, leave out of consideration a sizable penumbra of helpers and sympathizers who manifested their solidarity with the persecuted Jews in various ways: by closing their eyes to the presence of "illegals", by contributing food coupons, by mediating information. It is only fair to assume that most of those Jews who were able to escape deportation to the death camps by hiding 'illegally' in Germany – 3,000 survivors according to a commonly accepted estimate – were assisted at some point by the non-Jewish population.

There is no simple answer to the question what kind of risk the German Righteous took upon themselves in helping persecuted Jews. Undoubtedly the degree of risk incurred changed both in relation to the evolution of Nazi Jewish policy over time and to the type of help rendered. The position of a Wehrmacht sergeant who smuggled arms to the Jewish underground in Belorussia was probably much more immediately life-threatening than that of a prominent German industrialist in Stuttgart who provided in 1938 secret funding for Jewish emigration. While the Wehrmacht NCO could only expect summary execution if caught, the industrialist still left himself some maneuvering ground, insofar as his action was compatible with the 1938 objective of pushing the emigration of Jews from Germany. The sizable corpus of laws, decrees and ad-hoc regulations that made up the Jewish *Sonderrecht* (special law) in Nazi Germany did not include a single reference to help rendered by Germans to Jews. The closest thing was a decree by the Head Office for Reich Security, dated October 24, 1941, that prescribed "on educational grounds" up to three months imprisonment in a concentration camp to persons of German blood who openly displayed friendly relations to Jews. This should be contrasted with the situation obtaining in Eastern Europe, where after October 1941 Poles caught helping Jews had to reckon with the death penalty – often together with their entire household. The Nazi masters of Germany tended to be more lenient with their own offending *Volksgenossen* (national comrades). In practice, the punishment meted out to Germans caught helping Jews inside Germany could vary in severity from a warning or money fine to a term of internment in a concentration camp. The latter could indeed lead to the death of the person concerned. *Judenhelfer* (Jew helpers) or *Judenfreunde* (Jew friends) who were brought to trial could be indicted on different counts, like an offense against the Insidiousness Law (*Heimtückegesetz*), financial corruption or even tuning in to foreign radio programs.

However, it would be worse than pointless to try to assess the significance of the German Righteous in terms of the severity of the Nazi penal code. Their deeds should be judged against the moral darkness that enveloped German society under Hitler, the unprecedented “collapse of collective moral consciousness and individual civil morality.” “It was,” in Ian Kershaw’s words, “above all the absence of a choice against evil.” Because antisemitism was so crucial and so central to the Nazi racial *Weltanschauung*, any act that tended to thwart the Nazi murder design, even when it took place on the non-political and non-heroic level of every-day-life, deserves to be recognized as an act of resistance. This is all the more so because of the overall weakness of the resistance movement in Germany and the fact that rescue of Jews was not a top priority on its political agenda, including the conspirators of July 20, 1944. The national conservatives were themselves infected by antisemitism, though not of the kind that sanctioned murder. In Germany, the vision of “another Germany” was preserved – if at all – only in the private realm of the individual. The German Righteous had to rely on his own courage, his own sense of right or wrong to guide him in his dilemma.

The non-political, every-day context of rescue, made the rescuers particularly vulnerable to the ubiquitous phenomenon of denunciations. Because help to Jews took place in the private, non-public sphere of home and work, the only way that the authorities could get wind of it was through denunciation. Indeed, informing on one’s neighbors and colleagues, though not solely or necessarily out of antisemitic motives, became a true hallmark of German society under Hitler. The Gestapo’s well-earned reputation as a pervasive instrument of terror did not depend so much on its own efficiency as on the willing collaboration of the masses of ordinary Germans. In this sense it is justified to talk about ‘self-policing’ and ‘self-surveillance’ by the German population.

This dilemma of the would-be-rescuer was compounded by the fact that the persecution of the Jews in Germany did not emanate from a foreign, occupying power, but was the official policy of a regime accepted by the vast majority of Germans – regardless of whether or not they had initially supported the Nazi party – as legal and legitimate. The root criminality of the anti-Jewish measures was further disguised by the elaborate cloak of sham legality with which the regime took care to clothe them. The Third Reich has been strikingly characterized as “*legalisierter Unrechtsstaat*” (a legalized State of injustice – Wolfgang Benz). The Jewish victims of the regime, it has been remarked, did not only have to contend with situations of extreme privation and deprivation but had to bear the additional psychological burden of knowing that behind this all stood the legalized will of the legitimate state authority (*die legitime staatliche Obrigkeit*). This, however, did not only constitute the peculiar psychological agony of the victims, but also part of the dilemma of the would-be rescuer or resister. One has only to remember how deeply ingrained in German society and culture were the values of obedience and submission to the authority. We should also take note of the fact that the German populace inside Germany was geographically removed from the scene of the mass-killing sites in the east. The physical torture and maltreatment of the Jews took place outside the immediate sphere of experience of the ordinary German living *inside* Germany. More than his counterpart in Eastern Europe, the typical German rescuer had to rely on inference, hearsay and imagination to grasp the true import of the deportations to the east.

2

An important dimension of the historical context of rescue in Germany has to do with the identity of the first victims of Nazi persecution: the German Jews. More than 70% of all rescue acts documented in the German Righteous files took place on German soil, concerning for the most part Jews from Germany. About 525,000 Jews lived in Germany in its pre-1937 borders on the eve of Hitler's rise to power. German Jewry was one of the oldest established Jewish communities in Europe, widely regarded before 1933 as a model case of the success of emancipation, and the creative interaction of the Jews and their non-Jewish environment. The integration of the Jews proceeded here much further and deeper than in the Eastern European countries, where the Jewish population kept apart from the non-Jewish environment. Jewish and non-Jewish Germans were intermeshed with each other in almost every conceivable way: as neighbors (because unlike the situation in Poland there were no separate residential quarters for Jews), as employers and employees, as business partners and colleagues, as teachers and students, as class mates, as doctors and patients, lawyers and clients, as comrades in the First World War. Especially in the big city conurbations of Berlin, Frankfurt, Munich, Hamburg, where Jews and non-Jews intermingled with each other daily, the social interaction gave birth to the phenomenon of mixed couples. It has been estimated that three out of ten marriages of Jews in 1932 were to non-Jewish partners.

Soon after the Nazis came to power, they began to mount a vicious and ever-escalating assault on the foundations of Jewish existence in Germany. The operative aim of Nazi policy during the first years was not yet the physical annihilation of the Jews but rather their social and economic displacement and their removal from German soil. In pursuing these goals, the regime was still subject to some internal and external constraints that restrained the brutality of its antisemitic measures. Most of the anti-Jewish campaign was carried out in the full glare of world publicity. Its typical manifestations were discriminatory legislation, economic deprivation, public defamation, administrative harassment, and social ostracism rather than physical torture and murder.

A distinctive feature of Nazi policy before the war was the confusing interplay between repression and normalcy, the constant tightening and untightening of the antisemitic pressure. spurts of intense antisemitic activity were buffered by prolonged periods of deceptive stabilization. The pogrom of November 1938, which marked a radical departure from the mostly non-violent methods of the first years of persecution, prompted a panic exit of Jews from Germany. As of July 1939, all Jews, including the so-called "racial Jews" had to belong to the *Reichsvereinigung der Juden in Deutschland* (Reich Union of the Jews in Germany), the Nazi-imposed organization which succeeded the voluntary *Reichsvertretung* set up by the Jews themselves at the outset of the Nazi regime. Those who remained in Germany after the outbreak of war in September 1939 were driven into ever more desperate straits, deprived of their money and living, confined to 'Jew-houses,' victims of constant harassment by Nazi police. An unceasing barrage of humiliating prohibitions poured upon them: their telephone connections were cut, their radios confiscated, their use of public transport restricted, they were limited to specific hours and specific shops in their food purchasing, and so on and so forth. Perhaps the most bitterly felt blow of all, was the order of September 8, 1941, directing all Jews over the age of six to wear a yellow Star of David, sewn to the upper left front of their clothing. The duty to wear

the *Judenstern* finally dispelled for the Jews of Berlin the largely psychological protection of the anonymity of the big city. But there was an even more sinister implication. The names and addresses gathered through the community's role as distributor of the badges could be used to fill out the lists of those slated for deportation.

Altogether, some 350,000 German Jews had managed to escape out of the Nazi death trap before the official ban on emigration was imposed by Heydrich on October 24, 1941. At that time there were still about 150,000 Jews in Germany. The mass-deportations to the east began in October 1941 and were over by spring 1943. The first transport left Berlin on October 18, 1941, with 1013 persons in the direction of the Lodz ghetto. In the last big roundup of Jews in Berlin beginning on February 27, 1943 – nicknamed *Fabrikaktion* – Jews were arrested at their work places in the factories. However, no sooner was Germany declared *judenrein* (clear of Jews) than Jews from the east began to be brought in as forced laborers and as participants in the infamous death marches that crisscrossed the German country-side in the final months of the war.

3

How did “ordinary” Germans react to the ever-escalating campaign of defamation, discrimination and ultimate extermination waged against their Jewish compatriots, neighbors and colleagues? While antisemitism – both of the virulent *völkisch* strain and of the more traditional kind – was a pervasive presence in German society before Hitler, the “Jewish Question” as such did not play a major role in the voting decision of the Nazi voters. For the vast majority of the German population, the Nazi voters among them, the “solution of the Jewish problem” never assumed the paramount, obsessive importance that it had for Hitler and the hard core of radical Nazis.

Although the sources do not allow a statistical breakdown, it would seem that, by and large, attitudes signifying support or indifference and acquiescence predominated over attitudes signifying criticism and disagreement. This dominant pattern, which was typical of much of the prewar period and reached its climax in the response to the Nuremberg Laws of September 1935, was shattered by the events of the *Kristallnacht* pogrom of November 1938. A majority of the German population was critical of the pogrom but for the ‘wrong reasons.’ The antisemitic excesses were not rejected because they were regarded as morally wrong and intrinsically criminal, but because the open display of violence and vandalism in the streets threatened the bourgeois sense of law and order.

After the outbreak of war, a process of escalation and radicalization took place. Two contradictory trends may be discerned. On the one hand, the image of the Jew had undergone a process of progressive dehumanization and “depersonalization,” signifying internalization by the public at large of the antisemitic stereotypes of Nazi propaganda. The progressive “abstraction” of the Jewish problem was helped by the fact that physical contact with the Jews became rarer as they were increasingly segregated and confined to “Jew houses.” On the other hand, the Jewish problem was increasingly displaced from the consciousness of the majority of the population, which became preoccupied with other matters such as the daily struggle to secure food and living, the safety of one's relatives at the front, the escalating air-warfare. This notwithstanding, and despite the pat rationalizations of the postwar period, there is indisputable evidence for widespread awareness of the fate of the Jews deported to

the East. J. P. Stern's formulation encapsulates the issue: "The population knew as much and as little as it wanted to know. It did not know that which it no longer wished to know for understandable reasons. However, not to want to know something pre-supposes that one knows enough in order to know what one no longer wants to know." As demonstrated by his published diary notes, even an unsophisticated observer like Karl Dürkefalden, a master craftsman from Lower Saxony, could, working by hearsay and inference, arrive at a surprisingly accurate appraisal of the nature and extent of the mass murder in the East. The files of the Righteous provide further illustrations. Thus, it was his knowledge of the rumors circulating about the terrible fate of the Jews in the East that prompted Hubert Pentrop, a Catholic farmer from Nordkirchen, to warn his prewar acquaintance, the Jewish cattle-dealer Spiegel, not to go to the East at any cost. When Spiegel asked in despair: "But what can I do?" Pentrop answered promptly: "Come to me, I shall hide you!" Erna Segal, a Jewish social worker in Berlin, was addressed in February 1942 by a stranger who had noticed her yellow badge while traveling on the bus. The stranger, a uniformed soldier, followed the Jewish woman to an isolated alley and then began telling her excitedly of the terrible fate that awaited those Jews being deported to the East. He urged her to inform foreign consulates and advised her to hide. In the wake of this encounter, Segal decided to go into hiding.

4

One may wonder: what made the Righteous behave so differently from the overwhelming majority of the German population? Was their willingness to risk themselves on behalf of the Jewish victims of Nazi persecution rooted in their different upbringing, social background, political, and religious views? The most striking feature of the rescuers as a group is in fact their utter "ordinariness": they were both "ordinary men" – especially ordinary women – and "ordinary Germans" in the truest sense of the word. In their broad spectrum of differing social origins, religious beliefs, political affiliations and occupations they appear to constitute a veritable cross-section of German society: housewives, soldiers, laborers, industrialists, artists, medical doctors, scientists, peasants, city dwellers, country folk, clergymen, nuns, atheists, lesbians, conservatives, communists, social democrats, etc. In fact, we would be justified in inferring – tautologically in a way – that the only common characteristic that **decisively** separated the Righteous from the rest of their German compatriots was their readiness to risk themselves to rescue persecuted Jews from destruction.

While far from complete, the Yad Vashem database of the German Righteous enables us to make some quantitative and qualitative distinctions that define the historical context of rescue in Germany. By far, most of the deeds that figure in the files of the Righteous date from later than November 1938, especially after the beginning of the systematic deportations to the East in September 1941. Nevertheless, two notable exceptions to the overwhelming acquiescence of the German public in the prewar antisemitic campaign, were identified by Yad Vashem as deserving of special recognition. Dr. Albrecht Tietze, the son of a well-known surgeon from Breslau/Silesia, worked as an internist at the municipal hospital in Westend in Berlin. When, on the day of the general Nazi boycott of April 1, 1933, the director of the institution assembled all the employees and demanded that all Jewish doctors leave the hospital grounds at once, Dr. Tietze expressed his solidarity with his Jewish colleagues and demonstratively left together with them. A few days later, the poet and

writer Armin Wegner wrote an open letter (*Sendschreiben*) to Hitler expressing shock at the treatment of the Jews. Since no German paper would publish it, Wegner sent the letter to the “Brown House” (the headquarters of the Nazi party) in Munich, with the request that it be forwarded to Hitler. Instead of an answer, Wegner was arrested a few days later by Gestapo thugs in Berlin and thrown into the dungeons of the infamous Columbia House, where he was tortured and brutalized until he lost consciousness.

More than a half of all cases inside Germany occurred in Berlin. This is only to be expected given the demographic concentration of the Jewish population in wartime Berlin and the better prospects for hiding that the anonymity of the big city offered to Jews going underground. It is also a tribute to the strength of the liberal and working-class traditions of the population of Berlin, which made it a relatively safer place for hiding Jews. More than 65% of all rescuers inside Germany were women. This again is hardly surprising, considering that most men of military age were away from home. However, the fact that so many of the rescuers inside Germany were German housewives also reflects on the predominantly non-political context of rescue. The gender factor may also have played a part in the relative leniency of the punishments meted out to rescuers inside Germany. By contrast, the majority of the German Righteous active outside Germany were men. A large proportion of the rescuers in the occupied countries were uniformed members of the German Armed Forces. Most of them, however, belonged to the older age group – 30 and older – indicating that their period of socialization did not coincide with the time of the Third Reich. Major Max Liedtke honored by Yad Vashem for helping Jews in Przemysl in southern Poland, was over 45 at the time; his adjutant, Alfred Battel, was over 50. *Oberleutnant* Dr. Fritz Fiedler, who in 1942, as the local military commander at Horodenka/ Ukraine saved some 50 Jews from deportation, was at the time 46 of age.

Notable among the occupational categories of German rescuers, were, in addition to housewives, clergymen and former theological students, teachers and medical doctors. Over-represented among the rescuers *inside* Germany were members of the Confessing Church – mainly clergymen – and minority religious sects like the Quakers and Jehovah’s Witnesses – themselves persecuted by the Nazis. At least eleven of the Righteous were, or had been, formal members of the Nazi Party a convincing proof that there was no *necessary* congruence between such membership and hatred of Jews.

The most common type of life-saving help afforded to Jews inside Germany was the provision of accommodations, a condition that made both helper and helped particularly susceptible to denunciations by inquisitive neighbors. By contrast, the dominant type of help afforded by German rescuers active in occupied countries was through offering to Jews employment in various “war-essential” jobs. The most celebrated cases are that of Oskar Schindler, the wartime owner of a mammoth enamel and ammunitions production plant near Cracow, employing some 800 men and women; Berthold Beitz, business-manager of the Beskidian Oil Company in Boryslaw/Eastern Galicia, which employed many hundreds of Jews; and Hermann Graebe, a large-scale construction contractor in Volhynia/Ukraine. All three men went far beyond the bounds of (Nazi) legality in their efforts to shield their Jewish workers and their families from deportation, putting themselves under great personal risk in the process. Let us pause here briefly on the less well-known case of Alfred

Rossner, one of the few German rescuers who paid with their life for help rendered to persecuted Jews. Exempted from military service on account of his medical condition – he suffered from hemophilia, a proneness to excessive bleeding – Rossner arrived in Bedzin in Upper Silesia a few months after the outbreak of war. The German authorities at that time were appointing German *Treuhänder* (trustees) to take over the management of plants that had been confiscated from Jews. In contrast to other German industrialists, who were acting as private entrepreneurs, Rossner worked directly under the SS. His chief workshop (or *Shop*), the so-called *Schneidersammelwerkstatt*, which produced uniforms for the Wehrmacht, belonged to the SS economic organization under General Heinrich Schmelt. Production there was considered essential to the German war effort, and, therefore, the Jews who worked there were entitled to the protection of a special pass (*Sonderausweis*). After the onset of deportations from the ghetto in May 1942, the Rossner special pass – blue in color – became a much-coveted possession, as it provided a measure of insurance against deportation for the bearer of the pass and his family. Rossner stood out from other German *Treuhänder* by virtue of the kindness and humane treatment that he exhibited toward the Jews under his command. He defended them and their families against the SS by giving them prior warnings of impending swoops and by sending his German staff to free them at the last moment from the deportation train. Following the final liquidation of the ghetto, in August 1943, the situation of Rossner and his much-decimated Jewish work force became more and more precarious. In December 1943, he was arrested by the Gestapo, and one month later was executed by hanging. The exact course of the proceedings and the nature of the charges that were brought against him are not clear, but there is little doubt that *Judenfreundlichkeit* (friendliness to Jews) figured prominently in them.

Despite an almost bewildering variety of rescue situations and rescuer types it is possible to suggest a sort of rough and ready classification which, without claiming to be either systematic or exhaustive, divides the rescue acts performed by the German Righteous into three possible categories. The three categories are analytic – as distinct from descriptive – and are not to be construed as mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, they should give us some notion as to the relative weight of each factor in the motivation of the rescuer.

- **The Personally Motivated Rescue**

In this type of rescue, the dominant impetus for action, or the main predisposing factor, was some personal connection to the rescued persons. In more than 40% of all cases of rescue that took place inside Germany, the rescuers had some prewar connection to the person they helped – a reflection of the intense interaction of the German Jews with their environment. Indeed the social closeness of Germans to Jews functioned during the Holocaust as what Gerhard Paul has aptly termed “the central violence-retarding factor, fractures, as it were, in the process of radicalization” [*das zentrale gewaltretardierende Element, gleichsam die Bruchstelle im Radikalisierungsprozess*]. It is as if the unreflective, natural solidarity springing out of close personal contact acted in these cases as a buffer against the ideological and emotional contamination by National Socialism. The personal ties in question could vary widely in quality and intensity and could range from intimate personal friendships, romantic ties, through mainly business partnerships to passing acquaintances. It is only fair to add, however, that in the great majority of cases ‘those

relationships had not, before the war, reached a level of intensity and commitment in which either party would consider risking their lives for the other as obvious moral obligation.’

Even more so than in the other categories, the typical personal rescuers were women. Let us examine more closely some representative examples. Marie Grünberg was the “Aryan” wife of a Jewish husband. Ursula Büttner’s research on mixed couples – as indeed Viktor Klemperer’s published diary – gives us some insight into the human cost involved in keeping faith to your Jewish partner under the conditions of the National Socialist regime: the daily humiliations and petty harassment, the social ostracism, the turning away of former friends and acquaintances, the disapproval of your own “Aryan” relatives. As if all that were not martyrdom enough, Marie Grünberg did not only keep faith to her Jewish husband, but was also instrumental in the rescue of four other persons, including her brother-in-law. The Grünbergs owned a summer house with an adjacent garden, in Berlin-Blankenburg, but were officially reported to the authorities as living at a ‘Jew-house’ in the inner city. After the big Gestapo roundup at the end of February 1943, Marie, by alternating between the two addresses, managed to rescue four “illegal” persons.

With Johanna Eck, the personal relationship to the family of the person she rescued went back to the First World War. Heinz Guttmann’s father, Jakob, and Eck’s husband were frontline comrades in World War I. They belonged to the same combat unit and when Eck’s husband fell in action, it was the Jewish Jakob who first notified Johanna of his fate. In March 1943, Jakob was deported to Auschwitz. Young Heinz alone had barely managed to escape arrest but everybody he turned to for help refused to have anything to do with a Jewish “illegal.” Eck alone of all his non-Jewish acquaintances stood by him in this difficult moment, offered him refuge at her home and shared with him her meager food allowance.

Another type of personal connection that withstood the test of Nazi racial defamation and persecution originated in a doctor-patient relationship. The Gehres, a working-class family from Kottbusser Ufer in Berlin, had been for many years patients of the Jewish physician, Dr. Arthur Arndt. In January 1943, at the peak of the deportation of the Berlin Jews, the Gehres offered Dr. Arndt refuge in their small apartment and kept him hidden in a pantry there until the end of the war. The story of Tony Grossmann is a variant on the same theme, though with a tragic end to the Jewish woman she tried to help. After the beginning of the deportations from Berlin, Grossmann put up her former Jewish doctor, Ilse Kassel, and her little daughter in her own home in Lemberg in East Prussia. The Gestapo, however, managed to track them down, whereupon Dr. Kassel committed suicide and her little daughter was deported and murdered. Although most of the personal relationships that served as the initial impetus for help pre-dated the war, this was not necessarily always the case. Ismar Reich, a Jewish youth on the run in wartime Berlin, first met Erika, the daughter of his and his mother’s rescuer, Peter Friedrich, at an apartment where he exchanged/purchased black-market food. The two young people fell in love at the very time that the Jews of Berlin were being deported to their death in the east. In the case of Dr. Irene Block, professional counseling on foreign currency matters that she gave in October 1941 – in contravention of all regulations – to a Jewish client, Johanna Fulda, developed into a life-saving mission and a lifelong friendship.

- **The Principled Rescue**

With the principled rescuers, the initial impetus for action was not a personal relationship to the persecuted person, but a well-articulated ideological stand against Nazism, that was rooted in a religious faith or a secular *Weltanschauung*. The principled rescuers did not wait for somebody to turn to them for help; they were driven by a sort of inner compulsion to act in face of the appalling barbarism around them. One outstanding example is Elisabeth Abegg, a retired teacher and Quaker, who at the age of 60 turned her Berlin apartment into a center of an informal rescue network for hiding Jews. Another example of a religiously motivated network was the *Bruderrat* (fraternal council of pastors) of the Confessional Church in Württemberg. In the fall of 1943, the *Bruderrat*, meeting in the house of pastor Alfred Dilger, took a decision in principle to offer refuge to racially persecuted persons. Dilger and other pastors later provided shelter to the Krakauers and other Jews on the run.

An example of a politically motivated rescuer was the Social Democrat activist, Wilhelm Daene (b. 1899). After January 1933, Daene, as an active Social Democrat of some prominence, was persecuted by the National Socialist regime. In 1933 he was placed for half a year under “protective custody” and in 1934 was incarcerated again for six weeks. He then entered the Teves works at Berlin-Wittenau as a turner and in June 1941 became the manager of a department with 120 Jewish women. With the beginning of deportations, Daene tried at first to intervene with the Gestapo to defer the expulsion of the Jewish women under his command, and when this no longer availed, provided those going underground with forged documents. After Wilhelm Daene was arrested, in 1944, on account of his membership in the underground organization of the Teves firm, his wife continued to look after three Jewish ‘illegals’ that he had been sheltering.

Another example of a politically persecuted rescuer was Ludwig Wörl, who spent eleven years of his life as a prisoner in Nazi concentration camps. In 1942, he was sent to Auschwitz together with 17 other male nurses to deal with an outbreak of typhus, which threatened not only the prisoners but also the German camp personnel. Appointed as the *Lagerältester* (the camp elder) of the hospital barracks, Wörl, against the express orders of the SS, employed Jewish doctors, thus saving them from certain death.

- **Situation-determined rescue**

A third distinctive category of rescue acts performed by Germans occurred only at the last stage of war and involved help to escaped concentration camp inmates or death march survivors. It is distinctive on a number of counts:

1. The Jews involved – harking for the most part from Poland and other eastern countries – were total strangers to the rescuers.
2. The help extended was usually of short duration, in no case lasting more than a few weeks
3. The German rescuer was confronted with a situation for which he was totally unprepared.

The main catalyst for action was thus situational: the immediate, irresistible impact of the sight of a brutalized victim of Nazi maltreatment. Erna Härtel, one of those last-

minute rescuers, operated a busy roadside inn at Sorgenau on the Baltic coast, not very far from Palmnicken, renowned for its amber (*Bernstein*). From the end of January 1945, to the end of the war, she provided refuge to a Jewish girl from Poland who was conducted to Härtel's house after having escaped from a death march. Elli Fullmann, a young war widow and a mother of four, harbored in her house during the last three weeks of the war, a Jewish woman prisoner who had jumped off an evacuation train to Flossenbürg.

Conclusion

To conclude, there is nothing to suggest that the Righteous as a group stood out from their environment either before or after the rescue. They were ordinary human beings who dared to act humanely in a society in which racial persecution culminating in state-organized mass-murder had become the perverted norm. It is in a sense easier to account for the apathy, acquiescence and complicity of the overwhelming majority than to explain the goodness of the few. The presumption of constructing an all-encompassing theory of rescuer personality, which would also serve as a sort of educational blue print for preprogramming altruistic personalities in the future, seems dubious at best. We can perhaps educate individuals towards becoming more useful members of a better society; we can hardly train them to become rescuers of human beings in critical times. Though some of the most notable rescuers were indeed unique and distinctive in their personality, many others would have been indistinguishable from their environment and fellow countrymen in more normal times.

The German Righteous are too isolated and small in number to redeem the moral collapse of German society during the Holocaust. It is best to regard them as a sort of natural control group against which we can test the compliant, acquiescent, collaborative stance of the German populace at large. The historical significance of the rescuers is that in their self-transcending conduct they give the lie to the self-exculpating claim of impotence and inability to act in the face of a totalitarian, terroristic regime, a claim that was so often reiterated after the war. "People thought of themselves as powerless, poor people who could do nothing to counteract the horrors of the regime" – this is how Frances Henry sums up the postwar reactions of the non-Jewish citizens of so-called Sonderburg, reflecting back on their experiences during the Nazi regime. As against this, the example of the rescuers shows how much could and should have been accomplished by ordinary people. They are proof of an irreducible human capacity for compassion and decency even in the midst of an unprecedented outbreak of radical evil.

(from the Lexicon of the Righteous Among the Nations, Yad Vashem 2007)