



## The Face of the Other:

### Reflections on the Motivations of Gentile Rescuers of Jews

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The deeds and behavior of those we term Righteous Among the Nations, that is of non-Jewish Holocaust rescuers of Jews honored by Yad Vashem, have undergone certain scrutiny from sociological and psychological disciplines. Three of the most important studies in this field are of Nechama Tec, Samuel & Pearl Oliner and Eva Fogelman.<sup>1</sup> While they each suggest different interpretations to explain the uniqueness of the behavior of the Righteous, they all concur in locating the formative nexus of the Righteous' behavior during the childhood years. In this paper, I submit that the inordinate response of the rescuers to the plight of the Jews is perhaps predicated on the presence of a deeper and more primal predisposition, perhaps rooted in our genes, which causes some of us to respond instinctively and instantaneously when placed before a situation that is so upsetting to our senses as to constitute a traumatic experience. This is especially so when the would-be rescuer is witness to a situation in which the principle of the right to life is called into question, as it was true for Jews on the European continent during the Nazi reign of terror. Hence, altruistic responses under ordinary circumstances should not be compared with similar responses in times of chaotic upheavals brought about by massive onslaughts on the ethical values governing civilized life. Here, one is led to seek explanations of human responses that lie hidden in the subconscious strata of our mental mind, and which may provide answers to the two extreme poles of behavior witnessed during the Holocaust – the perpetrators and the rescuers; in this paper – the rescuers.

When seeking explanations to the behavior of non-Jewish rescuers of Jews, the following elements should be taken into consideration, which revolve around the extraordinary circumstances in which the rescue operation took place.

To begin – in most such cases, it is not the rescuers who seek out the people who need to be rescued, but quite on the contrary. Rescuers are suddenly confronted with a direct appeal for aid, and they comply. To repeat – in the majority of cases, rescuers are first approached and sought out; they are chosen by the victim. It is this encounter that triggers the response. This is especially so in Eastern Europe, where the Jew fleeing for his life approached the rescuer, a person whom he may have known, or a total stranger, and pleaded to be helped. In one such example, in Poland, 21 year-old Felicia Zaltsenberg fled from Hrubieszow, together with her sister and two brothers, on the eve of a German killing raid, in August 1943. Not knowing where to turn, she suddenly thought of Włodzimierz (Wladek, in short) Kozaczuk, a pre-war acquaintance, with whom she once shared bike rides, and who lived in a village some five kilometers away. "We thought of him as the only person we could turn to," Felicia stated in her deposition. Together with her siblings, they walked in pitch darkness until they arrived at Kozaczuk's village home. Wladek was not home. His father immediately turned off all lights, and told the frightened arrivals to remain calm until Wladek's return, when it would be decided what to do with them.<sup>2</sup> In Warsaw, Jerzy Lando, after secretly fleeing the Warsaw ghetto, in autumn 1942, and wandering the streets on the Aryan side of the city, decided to approach Boguslaw Howil, who owned a large leather goods retail store, and with whom Jerzy's father had once done business. As Jerzy hesitatingly opened the store door and approached Boguslaw, the man looked at Jerzy "as if he saw a ghost." In Western Europe, it was still, in the majority of cases, of the rescuer being approached, either by the rescued person or by a clandestine organization, who solicited the would-be rescuer's help.



This initial setting places the rescue operation in a totally different perspective by contrast to rescue and aid operations which are initiated by the rescuer; persons who seeks out those whom he wishes to assist. During the Holocaust, in the majority of cases, it was the victimized Jew who took the first step and sought out his or her would-be rescuer.

This dramatic meeting is understandably a face-to-face encounter, often involving a direct exchange of gazes between the hapless victim and the intended rescuer. The importance of this proximity and eye-to-eye contact between both sides as a triggering event cannot be overestimated, especially so in Eastern Europe where the Jew fleeing for his life tremblingly approaches his hopeful rescuer. The desperate situation of the victim, as glaringly manifested in the look of his eyes and expression of his face, as exemplified in the Howil story, cannot be mistaken by the one whom the victim, at this eleventh hour, has placed his fate in the other's hands. The victim has fled either from a sudden raid on his home by the one of the Nazi security agencies, from a ghetto in the throes of its violent dissolution, from a cattle wagon train on its way to a death camp, or from a massive execution raid in front of open pits. In Sorginau, East Prussia, the German farming couple Albert & Loni Harder are awakened by a knock on their door, on a freezing January 1945 night. In front of them stood several women, who recently escaped from a massive execution raid by the Germans, on the shores of the Baltic sea. These three women who waded in the sub-zero waters of the Baltic Sea, passing as dead, until the Nazi guards had left, had stumbled upon the first house in this village, and stood facing the Harders in their disheveled appearance with only rags on them. In Western Europe, the eye-to-contact between rescuer and rescued could take place in less frightening but still near-traumatic situations. In Ghent, Belgium, the Podgaetzki couple approached their family doctor to seek advice on where to place their two daughters (aged 6 and 2), to avoid their deportation, in late 1942. As Dr. Jean van de Velde stared into the troubled faces of Zeilie and Ghitlen Podgaetzki, he was suddenly gripped by an urgent need to make an on-the-spot decision. Picking up the phone, he called his wife to consult with her. After a brief phone conversation, he told the two eye-starred persons in front of him, that his wife and himself had just decided to shelter free of charge the two daughters in their home, and add them to their own two children. It was an on-the-spot decision, occasioned by a face-to-face encounter, at a time of large-scale deportations of Belgian Jews.

The appeal of the victim is not to help him get through a difficult situation; it is to help him stay alive; as his is in danger through the arbitrary and senseless decision of others, who unfortunately hold the reins of power. What is at stake here is no-less than life itself, the life of the victimized Jew and all of his co-religionists. In the aforementioned cases, it is clear in the mind of the would-be rescuers what is in store for the victim. In Poland, the massive killing of Jews, and the presence of death camps, make it clear to all Poles that the Jewish population is being decimated. In Belgium, Jews are violently picked up in their homes and deported to an unknown destination. Similarly when 15 year-old Felix Zandman showed up in front of the forest cottage home of Jan & Anna Puchalski, outside of Grodno (today in Belarus) – it is the second time he had sought refuge from a Nazi killing raid. On this occasion, he lost his parents to the Nazis. Felix luckily escaped and was now seeking refuge in the home of former caretakers of his family's summer cottage homes. In this highly charged atmosphere, the would-be rescuer may consciously or subconsciously ask himself: "Without regard to my personal feelings and prejudices on this person's ethnicity (assuming that these are not always positive) – does this living person standing in front of me have the basic and minimum right to continue to live – a privilege heretofore enjoyed by all living creatures, and now, for the first time, contested by a malevolent human agency"

Before giving himself an answer to this question, the would-be rescuer is sensibly conscious that this confrontation with the hapless victim is taking place in highly inordinate



circumstances. Surrounding him, life is threatened with chaos, as arbitrary decisions are made on who is to live and die. The rescuer may reflect that whatever the justification of certain measures against the Jews, there is no reason and excuse to warrant the murderous violence against them, without regard to age and sex. This simply does not make sense; persons living under Nazi tutelage cannot fit what they witness with their ordinary sense of life. Conditions prevailing under Nazi rule, especially the Nazi appropriation of the arbitrary decision on who of the conquered populations is to live, be enslaved or die, is so irrational that it cannot be integrated with the categories one has for making sense of the world. Life has become a cheap commodity, as the accumulated values carefully cultivated over two millennia are trampled upon and discarded. This results in a trauma and emergency situation for both the rescuer and the rescued. In France, John H. Weidner, who spirited many Jews across the border into Switzerland, related a sight he witnessed at a railway station, in Lyon. "A Jewish woman was holding a baby in her arms, and the baby started to cry. The SS man took the baby, threw it to the ground, and crushed its head with his boot. "I can never forget the sight and the sound of that baby," Weidner related.<sup>3</sup> Similarly Marion Pritchard-van Binsbergen, related the incident, in Amsterdam, which prompted her to change course and get involved in the rescue of Jews.

*One morning on my way to school I passed a small Jewish children's home. I saw the Nazis loading children, from babies to about eight years old, onto trucks. They were all crying, and when they didn't move fast enough, a Nazi would pick them up by an arm or leg, or even hair, and throw them onto the trucks. I was so shocked by this treatment that I found myself in tears. Then I saw two women coming down the street try to stop them, and the Germans threw them into the trucks, too. I stood frozen on my bicycle. Before this I had known of the threats but I hadn't actually seen the Germans in action. When I saw that, I knew that my rescue work was more important than anything else I might be doing.<sup>4</sup>*

Similarly, in Poland, Jan Karski, on the eve of a mission to London on behalf of the Polish underground, was shocked by what he witnessed in the Warsaw ghetto. In his words, it was clear to him, that for the Jews, "this was the end of the world." The two Jewish leaders he met secretly told him bluntly that "you other Poles are fortunate. You are suffering too. Many of you will die, but at least your nation goes on living. After the war Poland will be resurrected. Your cities will be rebuilt and your wounds will slowly heal... We [Jews] will be dead... The Jewish people will be murdered... Our entire people will be destroyed. A few may be saved, perhaps, but three million Polish Jews are doomed." As Karski sat riveted in his chair, he felt "a painful, oppressive kind of reality that no nightmare ever had... I sank into my armchair. My whole body felt chilled and sore. I was shivering and I felt the pulses in my temples pounding." A few days later, inside the Warsaw ghetto, secretly witnessing the violent roundup of Jews, "everything there seemed polluted by death, the stench of rotting corpses, filth and decay." This confrontation with a world turned upside down, which left him in a state of stupor and shock, had a shattering effect on Jan Karski, and resulted in his mission being transformed into a rescue mission of the doomed Jews of Europe.<sup>5</sup>

The would-be rescuer tells himself that he has not chosen this responsibility. He may reflect: "I have not decided that I want to go out and rescue the other. The other person has either thrust himself upon me, or quite unintentionally I happened to be confronted with a plea by the victimized person. That person's life is now paradoxically in my hands. I can either respond favorably or turn him away to face an almost certain death. I am called to play God." This terribly frightening dilemma prevailed in many such encounters between rescuers and rescued, but particularly more so in East European countries under German dominance. An particular extreme example of this is when, in May 1942, six-year-old Janena Svirska was pushed out by her mother from a column of Jews being led to be murdered, on the outskirts of Rovno, in the Wolyn section of



Ukraine. The mother told the numbed girl: "Janutzka, run over to Katia," the woman who was standing not far from the marching column. This person (Yekatarina Shidlovskaya) realized that Janena's mother had thrust her daughter into her arms, for a very basic and elementary reason – of saving the child's life. And so, indeed, it was. In nearby Poland, 19-year old Haim Bzezinski fled with a friend from a liquidation raid in Semiatycze on a cold December 1941 night, to his acquaintance Roch Kosieradzki. When Roch opened the front door, he felt terribly frightened, and did not know how to react. On the one hand, his family had been friends with Haim's family. On the other hand, they were frightened of the consequences to themselves in the event of the disclosure of Jews in their home. To Haim's plea to allow him to hide just for a little while, Roch left to consult with his wife and children, and returned stating: "I am risking my family's life, but I must help you." Haim and his friend were then led to a potato storage room, where the two remained hidden for a long period. The two had thrust themselves on Kosieradzki, who in a dramatic face-to-face encounter, with the issue on hand being life itself -- responded affirmatively.

In this encounter, the rescuer was perfectly aware of the powerlessness of rescued person. Facing him, he saw the other's vulnerability and his helplessness – similar to an infant child. To survive, the person facing him desperately needed the other's help. In all of the aforementioned stories, the rescued person had come to the end of the line. At the moment of the eye-to-eye contact, his life is practically speaking in the hands of the would-be rescuer. In Berlin, Germany – to give another example – Kurt and Ursula Reich had tired of hopes of finding hiding places for themselves. "After finally running out of any possible additional hiding places by the end of August 1943,<sup>6</sup> we had no choice but to give up to the Nazis." However, they wanted at the very least to save their little daughter, Monica, born the previous December. Through trustworthy people, they contacted Otto and Hedwig Schroedter, who agreed to keep the child and promise to return it to its parents, should they survive the war. As Monica's mother bid a tearful goodbye to her baby daughter, Mrs. Schroedter suddenly remarked that there were was an additional couch in their home, and invited Ursula Reich to move in. To Ursula's inquiry whether her husband could join her, the Schroedters consented. For 19 months, the three Reichs were sheltered in the Berlin home of the Schroedters, whose son Herbert was away fighting in the German army. The helpless situation of the Reichs, who were on the point of turning themselves over to the Nazis, had triggered Schroedter's invitation to stay with them.

The rescuer also sensed his irreplaceable situation – that is, if he doesn't act, it is highly unlikely, that someone else will, for the victim had come to him when all other escape avenues were closed before him. He was now at the last stretch, and needed desperately to be helped in order to survive. The rescuer may think to himself: "I cannot hand over the task to someone else. There are no alternatives to my acting. The person's life is in my hands, and mine only." When 20-year old Moshe Olshevitz, together with his brother, sister and parents finally showed up at the home of Aleksander Wyrzykowski, after fleeing a German liquidation raid on the Lomza ghetto Jews, it was after much wandering in the cold and freezing weather of November 1942, in Poland. When Moshe's family felt it could no longer go on, they decided on a last gambit – to seek temporary help with an old acquaintance. Aleksander readily agreed to the request for a piece of bread, and for a night's stay in his home. In the morning, as the Olshevitz family made ready to quit and continue their aimless wandering, Aleksander and his wife Antonina suddenly stopped them with the words: "Don't go, children. Whatever we eat you will also eat. Whatever will happen to you will also happen to us. We cannot allow ourselves for you to fall in the hands of the Germans." In the words of Moshe: "We fell at their feet, and with tear-drenched words thanked them for their sacrifice." The Wyrzykowski couple (who had two children) cared for the Olshevitzes for two and a half years, who remained hidden in an underground shaft. Made uniquely and irreplaceably responsible, since the Olshevitzes had nowhere else to turn for help, the Wyrzykowskis responded



by extending a one-night stay, indefinitely – in fact, until the area's liberation, two and half years later.

Whether he was consciously aware of it or not, when he assumed the mantle of a rescuer, he was as though a divine messenger, in the sense of willy-nilly having to decide on the fate of the defenseless person facing him. At this crucial moment, the victim's life was in his hands, and he was called to play God. In deciding to save, he acted in accordance with God the creator – in making possible an extension of life; verily, a new life to the victim. To arrive at such a crucial decision, there was, however, little time to reflect. The decision to intervene had to be taken within the shortest possible time. Facing the distraught women, in their bedraggled clothes, who had escaped from a German massive execution action, the German Harder farming couple knew they had to act quickly; indeed, on the spot – allow them in or not. Similar, when Michal Majercik heard the footsteps of the Gestapo, leading down the stairways a young Jewish girl, in Zilina, Slovakia, in order to deport her to the camps, his response was instantaneous. Wishing to save the girl, he waited until he heard a Gestapo agent order the 12-year old Janka Fisch to walk down alone the several floors, in order to be met by another Gestapo man on the ground floor. As Janka passed Michal's apartment, the door suddenly swung open, and in a split-second two hands grabbed Janka and yanked her inside the Majercik home, where Michal and his wife Anna immediately hid her under the crib of their infant baby – in time for the expected Gestapo visit, who rummaged through their home to find the missing girl. Here, too, to save the life of this young girl, the decision had to be taken literally within a few brief minutes, perhaps only seconds.

In such highly charged situations, there were several responses open to the would-be rescuer. It could be: "I am sorry, I cannot help, because I am afraid for myself or my family. So please leave right away." Or: "leave after a brief rest." Or, still, "after one night's sleep and some food." A person captive to his stereotyped opinions could exclaim that he will not help because of his hatred of Jews, or because what is happening to the Jews does not concern him. Finally, the response could be in the form of an invitation to step and take shelter in the rescuer's home for the time being, until an alternative plan could be visualized for the fleeing victim. In the case of Shoshana and husband Shelomo Gon, they were sheltered for a while by an Ukrainian farmer, in the Dubno region. One day, overcome with fear, the farmer told them: "Here's a piece of bread. Leave! The danger is great." The two Gons continued to a nearby village and, seeking work, tried to pass as Polish refugees. One man told them: "You're Jews! I already have some people like these." He gave them a piece of bread, and said: "Go on; I have no additional place for people like you." They then accosted a Czech couple, who told them: "We know you're Jews. It is dangerous to take you in. Go hide in the cemetery; at nightfall we will come to fetch you." So, indeed, it was. In the words of Shoshana: "These poor people, whom we never met before, took us into their home, and allowed us to stay in their attic for months."<sup>7</sup> In the Tarnopol region (today in Ukraine), nine-year old Tova Zehavi-Willner and her mother found temporary refuge in the home of a Polish farmer whom they knew from before. Due to fear of betrayal by neighbors, the farmer asked them to leave. They then found temporary shelter with another farmer, and were again made to leave. After a while, they learned that a relative was hiding with a certain farmer. Approaching the man, he adamantly denied he was hiding a Jew, but suggested that perhaps the two women had in mind another farmer, with a similar name as his. Totally exhausted, they reached the other house. There, too, they were told that no Jewish person was hiding with them. Before having them leave, the farmer asked his wife to warm up some milk and food for the two women. As the two ate the precious food, the farmer secretly slid off to an underground bunker, to where the women's uncle and 4 more persons were hiding. He wanted them to verify that indeed the woman upstairs was one of the hiding men's sisters. The hidden persons asked the farmer, named Michaylo Bomok, to converse loudly with the two women, so that one of the hiding persons could judge whether one of



the women was indeed his sister. Bomok's suspicions were allayed when this man ventured out of the hiding place to embrace his sister. The two women remained hidden at the Bomok home until the area's liberation. In these stories, we sense the varieties of responses by would-be rescuers to the pleas of help – responses conditioned by prejudices, fears and uncertainties.

In acting to help, the rescuer was confident of his ability to undertake a rescue operation and tip the balance in favor of the fleeing victim. This is to be contrasted with the passive non-rescuer and his feeling of powerlessness to effectuate a change, as well as his aloofness from the constraints of others around him. The rescuer may initially have thought of a rescue operation limited in time; that it would only last for a short while until some other plan was figured out. The rescue may have started in small steps, and was then extended, as the rescuer gained confidence in himself, learned to master his fears, and cement his commitment to the others whose lives depended on him. Jonas Paulavicius, in Panemune, Lithuania, was first approached with a request to shelter a Jewish child from the nearby Kovno ghetto. As the child was constantly weeping, Jonas suggested that its parents join the child. Jonas' son, Kestutis, then asked his father to save a Jewish youth from the ghetto who was very adept at the violin. Thinking of the benefit this would accrue to his son (free violin lessons), Jonas readily consented. He was then approached with a request to add several more people; his response was for his interlocutors to find professional persons (doctors, engineers), who were worth saving, since they would be capable after the war to restore a viable Jewish community life. As the number of sheltered Jews kept adding up, Jonas built several underground hiding places outside his home, located on the banks of a river, carefully discarding at night the excess soil dug out from the ground into the river. It then struck him that he could add several more Jews in his hiding place. To find the additional persons, he placed himself at road intersections to accost fleeing Jews. One such lucky person was Miriam Krakinowsky, who in July 1944 fled from a forced labor column and was taken (at first against her will) by Jonas to be joined to the other persons hiding in and near his home. All told, twelve Jews had escaped death at the hands of the Germans, thanks to a nondescript carpenter who, at first, only thought of saving one Jewish child. One small, hesitating, step eventually led to giant steps, as the rescuer gained in self-confidence and his ability to save more persons. In Buczacz, Poland, Manko Szwiarsczak, at first sheltered Jews for short intervals in a cemetery house, where he worked as a janitor, during Nazi killing raids on the ghetto Jews. As the ghetto entered its death throes, he agreed to shelter five persons for an indefinite period, inside a tomb, which had been emptied of its coffin, and enlarged, and with Manko secretly providing them with food and comfort for a long period. Here too, a small step in the beginning led to more daring undertakings, as the rescuer felt reassured in his ability to withstand the difficulties and fears associated with the rescue operation.

At the same time, in deciding to shelter one or several Jews in his home, the rescuer was fully conscious of the enormous dangers facing him, or her. Not only from the Germans, who made public their threats to deal harshly with anyone trying to prevent the elimination of the Jewish population, but also from elements within their own people – collaborators, antisemites and betrayers, of various sorts and colors. The earlier-mentioned Jonas Paulavicius was murdered by a Lithuanian antisemite, immediately after the war. In Poland, Jan & Stefania Sosnowy were beaten by a unit of the Polish underground, after they learned that he was sheltering a Jew on his farm. Refusing to disclose the whereabouts of the hidden Jew, Jan & Sosnowy were taken out of their home, to be shot. The hidden Jew, Eli Ashenberg, notes, in his testimony, that had either one of his rescuers "decided to confess and give up the Jew (me) to be killed – that would have been the end of it. Unlike the Germans, Poles generally would not kill their fellow Pole who gave up the Jew he was hiding." After about 15 minutes, Jan & Stefania were released from their ordeal. The death threat was not carried out; perhaps the raiding party believed the Sosnowys who denied harboring a Jew. "I said to Stefania that after this I would have to leave. Stefania said that after all



they went through to save me, she could not consent to my leaving.” The threat emanating from these quarters was open-ended; that is, without a specified time limit, as the rescuer could not tell how long the war will last, nor know, whatever his own hopes, who would be the winner.

An additional factor to take into consideration is that the Holocaust rescuer of Jews cannot be associated with the hero-type who is lauded by society. Above and beyond the fact that the rescuer's action was done in secret; that is, that once the action was uncovered, it could no longer continue – his action is not one which had the approval of his surrounding society, in a whole host of occupied nations. This was especially so in East European countries, with its history of anti-Jewish pogroms, and where the prevailing view was that the elimination of the Jewish presence in their midst was not an event to be regretted. In addition, most heroic actions, lauded by society, have a foreseen finality. Not so for the Holocaust rescuer; he knows when his rescue operation began, but he cannot be sure how long his commitment to help will last, and whether he will survive this dangerous test. The earlier-mentioned Włodzimierz (Wladek) Kozaczuk did not tell his grown-up children, who lived separate from their parents, of the presence of Jews in his home. Wladek's father, who had penchant for hard liquors, promised not to touch a drop during the 11 month period the four Jews hid in the attic of their barn, so as not inadvertently spill out the secret, and bring tragedy upon his family as well as the hidden Jews. Stanislaw Nowosielski, in Poland, who came upon two Jews who had jumped a train taking them to the Treblinka death camp, hid them on his farm. With the exception of his wife, none of his family knew of this rescue conspiracy, which lasted for 15 months. In the conduct of a behavior which did not accord with prevailing social norms – secrecy was of prime importance.

All these factors lead us to differentiate between the motivations of the Holocaust rescuer with those affecting the altruistic personality, whose actions take place under normal circumstances. What we commonly term as an altruistic personality has a history, which evolves over time, and expressed itself in a certain pattern of behavior. When he decides to embark on an altruistic course of action, this is done after much reflection and careful consideration of a type of action which the agent considers most meaningful to his life. Our rescuer does not fit this pattern, as he did not choose this course of action. He does not seek but is sought out, or has been confronted by a situation, unanticipated by him, placed before a moral dilemma and challenged to become a rescuer, and he has little time to decide.

Bearing all this in mind, how is one to explain the Holocaust rescuer's sudden decision to become a saver of lives; a decision which at times came as a surprise to the author of the rescue operation. Let us recapitulate one of the basic elements in the dramatic encounter between would-be rescuer and victim: the issue at stake is life itself – the animating breath of a living person – in this case a Jew; a life which the rescuer shares as a living being. This life is now being threatened with extinction; not brought about through age or sickness, but by the arbitrary decision of a human agency as to who is to live and die – a privilege, which to a believing person, belongs only to a transcendent and divine figure, to God himself. In this very peculiar face-to-face encounter, where life itself is at stake, the behavioral patterns of both rescuer and rescued recede to a primal level of their existence, which is linked to life itself and its preservation – a life which both parties share. Life is, after all, the foundation and ground of all one's human possibilities, including the possibility to experience and make sense of life. Without life, nothing else is possible. Hence, the talmudic motto of “whoever saves a life saves an entire world.” As such, most people inherently feel that life is sacred, and should not be easily taken away. However, now life itself is being called into question, and this undermines the very possibility of making sense of human existence. The affirmative response by the rescuer is, consequently, an affirmation of life as the foundation of everything, including of making sense of life. Thus, in risking his life for the other, the rescuer



reverts to a primal feeling of a common bond which links all human beings. The rescuer experiences an identity with the other; in this case, a hunted Jew. In risking his life for the other, he shares with the other the sense of life as something that is at risk, that cannot be taken for granted, and should be spared. Understood thus, in saving the life of a Jew, the rescuer is saving his own life, in the sense of reaffirming the primacy of life over all other ideological considerations, including the merits and demerits of the victimized person, as in the following story. In a farming village, near Wengrow, Poland, Sevek and Lonia Fishman asked Jan Wikel whether he could lodge them just for one night. A month earlier, Sevek, a tailor by trade, had cut a suit for Wikel. It was now Spring 1943, and the killing of Jews in Poland by the Germans had entered its final stages. To Sevek's plea, Jan responded with an offer of payment in return for Sevek's cutting a suit for Jan's son. To which Sevek said he did not want money but a place to hide for himself and his wife. That evening, Jan learned that on that day the Germans had discovered hidden Jews in a neighbor's home. The house, with its Jews, was torched, and all perished. This traumatic experience transformed Jan Wikel's decision. He no longer asked them to leave on the following morning, but insisted they stay for as long as it may take. Sevek and Lonia Fishman remained hidden in a shaft in Wikel's home for 18 months. During that long a period, a "very strong" relationship developed between both sides – in the words of the Fishmans:

*They comforted us, washed us, and fed us. We became a family. Our love for each other grew, for if we were discovered all of us would die. No one ever found out. We stayed buried all day and the only time we came out for fresh air or to bathe was late at night. The Wikels would take turns watching so it would be safe.*

What started as a one-night stay – in light of frightening realization of the senseless and criminal destruction of lives, a tentative business arrangement was transformed into an open-ended rescue operation, lasting until the area's liberation.

This sense of responding out of the depth of one's primal existence is reinforced by the sense of individuality and loneliness which the rescuer found himself after committing himself to the rescue act. This is predicated from the distinction which we draw between the ethics of one's immediate society and the ethics of rescue. Most people, indeed, see themselves as ethical, but it is an ethics dictated by society, of "following the rules." Most of the moral decisions we make in our daily lives are not strictly individual but group-programmed norms and rules of behavior; an ethics which is relative to society – the determiner of our behavior. However, societies can be decent, or like the Nazi society, they can be murderous. Social ethics cannot, therefore, guard us against the moral collapse of society. By contrast, the rescuer's behavior is not externally and socially imposed, and not colored by social approbation. Its content is not determined by prevailing social mores. There is no expectation of social reward for this type of action (as contrasted with participating in underground activity against the enemy). Ethics, as a set of social standards, therefore has no inherent content. On the end of the spectrum – the deeds of the Holocaust rescuers, who acted independently (or even against) society's standards, are rooted in an ethical content which appears to be inherent and, consequently, the rescuer's action is the closest a person can come to pure individuality.

In the rescue operation, this special relation between rescuer and rescued, between one individual to another, is absolute. It is as though the totally Other intermingled and was absorbed by the totally I – perhaps consciously unbeknownst to the rescuer, since it took place on a subconscious level. Moreover, this unique relationship and bond between the I and the Other, especially against the terrifying background of Nazi terror, individualized the rescuer in a special way – as though a new, and second, person had emerged in the rescue act, even if only for a





limited period – a new I, which, as further explained, had already been potentially present in the rescuer's mind. This new I – the one who saves and sustains life, now predominates over the other I – the one with a whole baggage of personal fears, angers, feelings, tendencies, idiosyncrasies, prejudices and stereotyped opinions – which is presently in abeyance.

This may explain the inability of the rescuers to express in everyday terms and motivations what they did. Explanations such as: “anybody would have done what I did,” seem to point to a course of action done without premeditation, almost instinctively. It may be that the trauma of the senselessness of the situation pushed them to a primal and precognitive level in their response to it.

The significance of a personal ethics, rooted in one's relation to others, occupies an important place in the philosophical thinking of Emmanuel Levinas. According to him, the ethical responsibility toward others should be the starting point and primary focus for philosophy; in that “ethics precedes ontology” (the study of Being). That the search for one's true Self is possible only with its recognition of the Other, a recognition that carries responsibility toward the other person. That other person, in Levinas' thought, is irreducibly different from one's own selfhood, and yet is part of you, in the sense that a true evaluation of one's individuality is only possible by integrating within oneself the presence of the other person, without necessarily trying to control and dominate him. In this context, “ethics begins with the face of the other,” which includes a recognition and respect of the other's selfhood or, in Levinas' words, the other's Alterity. This recognition of one's relation and obligation to the other is what allows a person to attain a full individuality – of being at one with one's Being. According to Levinas, the face-to-face encounter is the beginning of a personal and authentic ethics which exists beyond every form of a socially-conditioned ethics. So viewed, the face of the Other has a special metaphysical and moral significance. The tangible presence and proximity of the Other's face evokes, on a pre-cognitive level, the realization of the Other's and one's own mortality, coupled with a recognition of every person's self individuality, and the preclusion of turning the other person into a tool for the fulfillment of one's egotistical needs. It also evokes the realization of the primordial importance of life itself.

An additional element in Levinas' thought is the importance of speech as a catalyst in the pre-cognitive realization of the importance of the Other's existence and Selfness. Hearing the voice of the other person facing you, and responding to him, is the ground of an authentic relationship based on a common responsibility of one to another, with both sides respecting the Otherness and separate individualities of each other. In the words of Levinas, responsibility is the essence of speech.

In addition, paradoxically, on a very deep level, the other person's face is a reflection of an Otherness (or “alterity” is Levinas' language) that is within me, coupled with a realization of one's own mortality. As phrased in philosophical language by one interpreter of Levinas' thought, the Other “is my standing- outside- myself- calling- myself- into- question.”<sup>8</sup> The face of the other, coupled with an authentic relationship with the other, the stranger, integrates his presence inside yourself, and makes him an “insider”, a part of my own worth and self-estimation – or my Being. This, without my being able to fully apprehend that other person. This constitutes the ongoing rupture of phenomenology, a rupture that I experience as the face continually “tears itself away” from my representation, for I cannot fully grasp it. At the same time, insofar as the Other is within me; that is, an element of my consciousness, this inability to fully comprehend the other person is also part of me. It expresses itself as a limitation of my ability to completely synthesize, grasp, and objectify the other person. As long as I engage in the face-to-face encounter, it prevents my



objectification of the other from ever reaching the status of a stereotype. Stereotyping makes the other an outsider, and easily an object for my domination and exploitation of the other person.<sup>9</sup>

A true ethics, according to Levinas, begins with intentionality, which is a turning towards and responding to the Other, since I am only true to myself as long as I carry the other's presence in myself. This encounter with the Other makes possible a true self-dialogue with one's conscience – the soul's dialogue with itself. That takes place when I question myself in light of the Other, who is somehow also present in me, in my consciousness, yet is not of it. My grasp of myself necessarily includes a grasp of the Other who is in me, although as an other than me.

This apprehension of the Other necessitates a commitment, of caring for the other person's needs, when such a necessity arises. This obligation is non-symmetric, in the sense that my help to him is not conditioned by a similar reciprocal obligation by the assisted person. According to Levinas, this concern for the Other is, from a religious perspective, the most authentic form of obeying God's will. God as a transcendent Being is unapproachable, except through the encounter with the Other; with another human being; an encounter which imposes an obligation upon one of the parties. This, according to Levinas, is the essence of a true religious life – the concern for other's well-being occasioned by the face-to-face encounter.<sup>10</sup>

For a good illustration of how a fleeting face-to-face encounter with victimized Jews, against the setting of unspeakable brutality, transformed an innocent bystander into a grand rescuer of Jews, I have chosen a story which took place, not in Eastern Europe – where conditions for both Jews and the local populations were extraordinarily cruel – but in Belgium, Western Europe, where the German occupation was, relative to Eastern Europe, less harsh. In late 1942, Alice Van Damme was riding a tramway in Antwerp when, as it approached the central train station, it was suddenly stopped by the Germans, and all occupants were ordered to evacuate the tramway, and line up against a wall for an inspection of their credentials. Curious to know the reason for this, Alice slipped toward the station entrance, and saw lorries lined up. She witnessed an indescribable tumult, as Germans forces separated weeping parents from their children, then forced the parents on the lorries. A crowd watched helplessly and in shock the horror unfolding in front of their eyes. In the confusion, Alice heard one Jewish person shout out a plea to help a certain Dr. Content, including his address. Returning home, in the nearby town of Belsele, visibly shaken, she decided to look up this stranger Dr. Content on the following day. The man gave Alice the address of two persons needing immediate assistance. Rushing to the first place, it was too late; the Gestapo having already picked up the residents. Continuing to the second address, Alice met Mrs. Sobolsky, whose husband had already been deported, and who remained with her mother-in-law and her two children, Marcel (4 years) and Johnny (18 months). That same day, Alice brought Mrs. Sobolsky with her two children to her parents home. Content that her children were safe and secure, Mrs. Sobolsky voluntarily returned to her Antwerp home. "From this moment," Alice stated, "I went each week to Antwerp, with provisions for the two women, who did not dare leave their homes." Two weeks later, Mrs. Sobolski asked Alice to try help another family in distress. From that day, Alice began caring for the Horowitz family, in their self-imposed isolation, with food parcels. Then, Mrs. Simonne Horowitz was hidden with Alice's sister, Laura, in nearby Lokeren. A week later, Alice took on an additional assignment – sheltering two children, Henri & Sylvain Grunstein, who were placed with Alice's brother Gaston, who as a married man lived separately. Two weeks later, two more Jewish women were added to Alice's beneficiary list – Mrs. Karfiol and her mother-in-law. The two were sheltered with Alice's mother, who was already caring for the two Sobolsky children (whose mother and the latter's mother's-in-law were eventually deported).



In the meantime, Alice married on February 26, 1943. Hardly a week later, she was summoned by the Antwerp prosecutor's office to submit to an intensive interrogation on her help to Jews. Returning home, she learned that little Johnny Sobolsky had taken ill and needed to be hospitalized. With the consent of her newly-wed husband, Alice declared Johnny to be her out-of-wedlock son, thus allowing him to be properly registered and admitted in a hospital for surgery. That same year, Alice's parents were betrayed and arrested. A year later, came the turn of Alice's sister Maria to be arrested, together with the two sheltered children, Marcel & Johnny Sobolsky. After a fortnight, Maria was freed; the Germans placed the children in a children home, and their deportation was temporarily halted. Alice's mother Leontine and her sister-in-law Adrienne (Gaston's wife) were incarcerated in an Antwerp jail. Leontine remained there until Belgium's liberation, in September 1944, whereas Adrienne was deported to Ravensbruck camp, which she luckily survived. Of the sheltered Jewish persons, those who survived the Nazi ordeal, thanks to Alice's and her family's intervention included: Henri Grunstein, who remained imprisoned on Belgian soil, and was reunited with his brother and parents, and the Sobolsky brothers, who left to be adopted by an aunt in the USA. Thus, the sudden and accidental confrontation with hapless Jewish victims of Nazi brutality, transformed an innocent onlooker, first herself, then her relatives, into an extended family of rescuers of lives, with some of the rescuers suffering incarceration in Nazi jails and concentration camp. It was all caused by the shrill cry of help by one of victims; a plea to look up a certain Dr. Constant, during a tumultuous face-to-face encounter with a world of ethical values turned upside down, as mothers were being torn from their children, before their deportation to the camps. Such dramatic face-to-face encounters did not necessarily originate in all rescue situations – though in many, perhaps most.

As a final observation, I should like to point out the importance of the stories of these Holocaust rescuers, recognized by Yad Vashem as "Righteous Among the Nations," as a therapeutic antidote to the unhealed wounds of the Holocaust. These knights of the spirit represent an affirmation of life – contra death; their stories – a tool to want us to go on and hope, rather than despair. Primo Levi stated it best in his praise of the Italian brick-layer in Auschwitz, with whom he had a crucial face-to-face encounter, and who thereafter him with additional food, and communication with his mother, who was hidden in Italy. In the charnel house which was Auschwitz, Primo Levi's life was saved through the intervention of this stranger, whom he met accidentally when he was assigned to help out a group of Italian workers who had been contracted to erect a building. After the war, Levi pondered on the meaning of his miraculous rescue at the hands of Lorenzo, initiated by a face-to-face encounter, and drew the following conclusions.

*However little sense there may be in trying to specify why I, rather than thousands of others, managed to survive the test, I believe that it was really due to Lorenzo that I am alive today; and not so much for his material aid, as for his having constantly reminded me by his presence, by his natural and plain manner of being good, that there still existed a just world outside our own; something and someone still pure and whole; not corrupt, not savage, extraneous to hatred and terror; something difficult to define, a remote possibility of good, but for which it was worth surviving... Thanks to Lorenzo, I managed not to forget that I myself was a man.<sup>11</sup>*

In line with Primo Levi's thoughtful words, one ventures the hopeful thought that thanks to the thousands of Lorenzos admitted by Yad Vashem in the Righteous Hall of Fame, whose intervention on behalf of the victimized Jews of the Holocaust was the result, in most cases, of a



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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Nechama Tec, When Light Pierced the Darkness; New York: Oxford Uni., 1984. Samuel & Pearl Oliner, The Altruistic Personality. New York: Free Press, 1988. Eva Fogelman, Conscience and Courage; New York: Doubleday, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all rescue stories and their authors appearing in this paper are listed in alphabetical order in note 12.

<sup>3</sup> Gay Block and Malka Drucker, Rescuers: Portraits of Moral Courage in the Holocaust. New York: Holmes & Meier, 1992; page 55.

<sup>4</sup> Block & Drucker, page 34.

<sup>5</sup> Karski Jan, Story of a Secret State; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1944; chapter 29.

<sup>6</sup> This was several months after Nazi Propaganda Minister, Josef Goebbels, had triumphantly declared that Berlin was Judenrein – cleaned out of Jews.

<sup>7</sup> The rescuers were Jozef and Luba Kasper. For many generations, a sizable ethnic Czech community inhabited the Rovno area. After the war, they were repatriated to Czechoslovakia.

<sup>8</sup> James Mensch, "Rescue and the Fate to Face," St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada (unpublished), page 12.

<sup>9</sup> James Mensch, p. 12. Also, by same author, "Death and the Other: A Shared Premise (unpublished). I am particularly indebted to Prof. Mensch for his insightful interpretation of Levinas' thought.

<sup>10</sup> For more by Levinas, see Emmanuel Levinas, Total and Infinity. Pittsburgh: Duquesne Uni., 1969; also: Alterity & Transcendence. London: Athlone, and New York: Columbia Uni., 1999. Also, Ze'ev Levy, "The Concept of 'the Other' in Levinas' Ethics," Daat (Hebrew) 30, 1993; 21-40; Elisabeth Goldwyn & Yoram Verta, "Toward the Other: Emmanuel Levinas," Shadmot (Hebrew) 10, 1999.

In interpreting Levinas' philosophy, Mensch advances the interesting observation that it is God that the Holocaust rescuer confronts in the face to face meeting. The God that cannot be represented, the God that transcends the natural world, appears in the form of the Jew who knocks on the door. God's being, as totally other-worldly, can only appear as a lack of worldly content (such as poverty and persecution). Such worldly privation is God's manifestation – in the guise of the abandoned, the unfortunate, and the wretched. It is the God who appears as an appeal, and a call to respond. This God was present during the Holocaust; "he appeared each time the Jew knocked on the door." However, only a precious few, the rescuers, recognized this. Mensch, "Rescue and the Face to Face, page 10. Compare with Pastor John Cazalis' christological perception of his help to Jews in France – the Jew in the form of the Crucified. "In everyone of them, whoever he was, it was the Christ who came toward us, in the form of the rejected one, the condemned and crucified. In loving them, it is His love that we received. When they invaded our homes and lives..., it was His mercy and joy that came into play... On each occasion as well, we knew afterwards that He had blessed us." Georges Casalis, in Emile C. Fabre, ed., Les Clandestins de Dieu; Paris: Fayard, 1968; pp. 203-204.

<sup>11</sup> Primo Levi, If this is a Man. London: Orion, 1959; pp. 127-8.

<sup>12</sup> Rescue stories appearing in this paper are based on the following files at Yad Vashem, Dept. for the Righteous: Bomok Michaylo, 8987; Harder Albert & Loni, 225; Howil Boguslaw, 5780; Kasper Jozef & Luba, 6712; Kozaczuk Wlodzimierz, 4034; Kosieradzki Roch, 7269; Majercik Michal & Anna, 2086; Nowosielski Stanislaw, 4995; Paulavicius Jonas, 2472; Puchalski Jan & Anna, 3466; Schroedter Otto & Hedwig, 5870; Shidlovskaya Yekaterina, 8296; Sosnowy Jan & Stefania, 5950; Szwierszczak Manko, 5950; Van Damme Alice, 7048; Van de Velde Jean, 1447; Wikiel Jan, 2034.