
The Righteous among the Nations: Analysing the Heroes of the Holocaust

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Abstract

This dissertation paper considers why a minority of civilians risked their own lives to save the persecuted of the European Holocaust, whilst the majority of Europe's citizens either actively engaged in the persecution or became bystanders. Conventional biological, social and psychological explanations for behaviour are each discussed. In conclusion, childhood learning is found to be an important pre-requisite for the development of moral identity and altruistic behaviour.

Introduction

Regard for others is considered to be a value in most human societies. Yet, throughout history the world has been filled with groups marked out for special cruelty. WW2 brought a new dimension of evil to the world. As the paradigm evil event, the Holocaust stands as radical counter-testimony to the redemptive claims of both Judaism and Christianity. Millions of defenceless civilians were killed, but Jews were its special victims, they were defined by the Nazis as outside humanity and collectively targeted for death. At least six million were murdered; more than sixty percent of all Jewish men, women and children living in Nazi-occupied Europe (Oliner & Oliner 1988: 1).¹

The extermination of the Jews – the 'Final Solution' – is as accessible to both representation and interpretation as any other historical event. But it was an event that tests our traditional conceptual and representational categories,

an event at the limits of our comprehension. The Nazis' success was due to the relentlessness with which they pursued their prey; the collaboration, apathy or moral indifference of native populations, and the fact that most of the world's governments simply stood by.² It is the aftermath of the Holocaust that we are forced to address, as so many human beings died and so much evil was done.

Three participant groups of the Holocaust are readily identifiable: the murderers, the victims, and the bystanders. Most people know how they care to remember the perpetrators of this genocide; they were a monstrous aberration of humanity, so we can distance ourselves from them and their guilt. This allows us to believe that they have no place in our future identities.

The victims are also separate from most of us, but in different ways. Rarely do we realise that it is only the favourable odds of finding oneself in the majority that saves anybody from discrimination. We can be comforted by saying 'I am not Jewish', or 'I was not alive then'. So how can we possibly feel what they felt or understand their terror and hopelessness? Realistically, should we care how they felt? The concentration camps have crumbled away, and most of the perpetrators are old or long since dead. Our world is still so full of suffering that it is possible to feel weary or even bored by past events. Surely, it is natural to look to the future and draw a veil over the shameful past? But to feel jaded and uninterested, whether retroactively or currently, is not to simply look away; it is an active disinclination to feel. It is true that we can never understand how the victims felt, but we must recognise that this does not allow us to forget. Belatedly, the British government marked the first national Holocaust Memorial Day, on January 27, 2001. Prime Minister, Tony Blair announced,

As the Holocaust survivors age and become fewer in number, it becomes more and more our duty to take up the mantle and tell each generation what happened and what could happen again (Travis, 2000).

The third group, by far the largest, was the 'innocent' bystanders. Perhaps we can identify with this group more easily? Bystanders, by definition, cannot be charged with any evil act, they only watched as evil proceeded. Commentators argue about their degrees of entanglement within the Holocaust and their

levels of commitment against it.³ Perhaps they knew what was happening, perhaps not. Whatever view we accept, we must consider the bystanders not as stereotypes but as individuals: their countries were at war, perhaps they were simple patriots, they were suffering too, they were weak, they were poor, they were intimidated themselves and rightly frightened. They were just ordinary people who cried 'But what can I do?' The bystanders turned their backs on the victims because whatever their own problems were, they made indifference to the sufferings of others a viable option. If indifference is a way of sheltering from evil, then should we accuse these people of contributing to evil too? The bystanders can be considered culpable because the act of turning away is an act in itself. Not to help a persecuted minority is to persecute them by association. It was only because there were so many bystanders that they became the norm. They defined what was common and what was uncommon behaviour. They defined what was heroic and what was cowardly. Cynthia Ozick writes, 'Only when a continent is filled from end to end with the compliant, we learn what heroism is' (cited in Block & Drucker, 1992: 17). The bystanders' guilt is further displayed when we realise that the percentage of the Jewish population killed in different European countries varied greatly. There is a direct link between the countries occupied by Germany or allied to it, the behaviour of the population, leaders, and institutions (the churches and government), and the levels of Jews killed. For example, in Denmark, the resistance of the Danish population and government, including the king, against treating the Jews any differently from other Danes meant that most of the Jewish population in Denmark survived (Staub, 1989: 152-154). Where the populace and institutions looked away, the killing was far more severe.⁴

Finally, there was another group of people, statistically, much smaller in numbers. Yet numbers do not matter when we measure this group; they had an importance that was entirely disproportionate to their size. These people were not perpetrators, victims or bystanders – they were the rescuers. Rescuers were people who were able to see and to judge the situation. They knew what they could do; they realised the gap between knowing and believing, and acted upon it. I shall question why they risked their own lives and often the lives of their families to save Jews and other victims of Hitler's

genocide. Some saved friends and neighbours but others saved strangers, often they saved people who they did not like and fundamentally opposed in their beliefs.

I will take two case histories into account. The first is that of Mrs. Ellen Nielsen, who lived in a town near Copenhagen, was widowed in 1941, and became a fishmonger on the Copenhagen docks to support herself and her children. One day she was asked by two brothers to help them find a fisherman who would take them to Sweden. They explained that they were Jewish, and that the Germans had begun arresting Jews. She offered to hide the boys in her home until a safe passage could be arranged for them. Through the fishermen, the Danish underground heard of this and asked for her help. She accepted, and over one hundred refugees passed through her home on the way to Sweden during the following weeks. At one time, she had over thirty refugees in her home at the same time. The Gestapo arrested her in December 1944, and for three months she was held in Vestre Prison, where the Gestapo tried unsuccessfully to get her to reveal the names of her contacts. The Nazis knew that she had saved the lives of Jewish children, and eventually sent her to Ravensbruck concentration camp (*Ellen Nielsen Story*, September 30, 1999).

The second case is unusual as it involved a whole community. Le Chambon was a small Protestant town in southern France. Although under the control of the Vichy government and situated near a division of the Nazi SS, Le Chambons' villagers, led by their clergy, organised to save thousands of Jewish children and adults. The pastor, André Trocmé, his wife Magda and the villagers together created a community in which it would be unthinkable to turn away a refugee. It is estimated that 5,000 Jews, including many children, were hidden in the village (Hallie, 1979: xiii; Glover, 1999: 385-387; Staub, 1989: 165). These case histories are clearly different in the numbers of people saved but both are equally important. As William Shakespeare wrote, 'How far that little candle throws his beams! So shines a good deed in a naughty world'⁵ (cited in Buckley, 1979:468).

What is most important about anecdotal stories of rescue is that they test our definitions of what it is to be ordinary. Traditional ideas about morality, being grounded in the autonomous rational subject, leave out an alternative

model exemplified by the altruism of the rescuers. How can we define what constitutes an appropriate response to the fact of mass destruction? Who was ordinary in their response, the rescuer or the bystander? Were the rescuers ordinary people who did extraordinary things? If so, then acts of compassion and responsibility for others are exceptional acts and indifference is the normal response. Perhaps it is easier to assume that the rescuers were extraordinary because there were so few of them.

In Jerusalem there is a memorial called Yad Vashem, dedicated to the six million victims of the Holocaust. It is primarily a place of mourning for the victims but it is also a place of celebration. There is a grand row of cedar trees on a wide avenue, each one planted to honour a rescuer and inscribed with their name. It is called the Avenue of the Righteous Among the Nations. Since 1962 the Yad Vashem Institution has honoured over 9000 rescuers, presenting each with a medal inscribed, 'Whoever saves a single life is as one who has saved an entire world' (Tec, 1986: 4)

If we can not only honour these rescuers, but also understand what made them so very extraordinary, then perhaps we will know which group we truly identify with. Furthermore, by understanding some of the attributes that distinguished rescuers from the onlookers and perpetrators, perhaps we can deliberately cultivate them. Then we will be able to answer the questions 'What would I have done?' and 'Would I have been exceptional too?' with more certainty.

Who were the rescuers?

They came for the Communists, and I didn't object –

For I wasn't a Communist;

They came for the Socialists, and I didn't object –

For I wasn't a Socialist;

They came for the labor leaders, and I didn't object –

For I wasn't a labor leader;

They came for the Jews, and I didn't object –

For I wasn't a Jew;

Then they came for me –

And there was no one left to object.

– Martin Niemöller ⁶

Initially, it is not easy to establish any central factor that unites the rescuers detailed in any studies. Gay Block and Malka Drucker write, 'Many helped strangers, some saved friends and lovers. Some had humane upbringings, others did not. Some were educated, others were barely literate. They weren't all religious and they weren't all brave' (Block & Drucker, 1992: 31). If the definition of rescue is limited to those who risked their lives without monetary compensation, then the figure of 50,000 is reasonable. But even the highest estimates of a million represent less than one half of one percent of the total population under Nazi occupation, (Oliner & Oliner 1988: 2).

Whatever scale we chose these people were certainly very rare indeed. The costs of helping in this situation were extremely high and the rescuers must have been aware of this. If the Nazi authorities discovered the rescuers, the loss of liberty was certain and the loss of life was probable. Ervin Staub writes that many of the rescuers got involved to help a person that they knew then, once involved, they continued their rescue activities (Staub, 1978:133). Other research shows that more than half of the rescuers had no pre-war acquaintance with any of the Jews they helped and almost 90 percent helped at least one Jewish stranger (Oliner & Oliner, 1992: 81).

A possible motive for the rescuers' actions would be underlying deeply religious convictions. Nechama Tec asserts that the evidence for this is unclear. She argues that, for a Jew, religious affiliations did not make it possible to predict who would and who would not help (Tec, 1986: 185). There is some validity to this argument, as religious beliefs and values were far from uniform. Even the clergy interpreted the formal teachings of the Christian church in many different ways, ranging from denouncements to self-sacrifice.⁷ There is evidence that most of the aid initiated by the churches was directed towards Jewish children, moving them into monasteries and convents. This led to these children being baptised and the claim that the church was more concerned with converting these children than saving their lives (Tec, 1986: 186-187). The German Protestant pastor Martin Niemöller wrote in 1946 that the Church became a compliant helper of Nazi Jewish policy.

Christianity in Germany bears a greater responsibility before God than the National Socialists, the SS and the Gestapo. We ought to have recognised the Lord Jesus in the brother who suffered and was persecuted despite him being a communist or a Jew [...] Are not we Christians much more to blame, am I not much more guilty, than many who bathed their hands in blood? (cited in Goldhagen, 1996: 114).

It can be argued that, since unlikely candidates such as avid anti-Semites became Jewish saviours, it is futile to expect to find some special characteristics common to all (Tec, 1986: 99-109). Some rescuers may have felt that the guiding force behind their good deeds was their religious convictions, but this cannot be taken as an overarching reason for all rescuers and, therefore, cannot provide a definitive conclusion. It is only possible to say that religion *per se* did not have a great effect on individual actions.

Perhaps we should look only at a special kind of religion, individual conscience. Magna Trocmé indicated this, 'I do not hunt around to find people to help. But I never close my door, never refuse to help somebody who comes to me and asks for something. This is my kind of religion' (Glover, 1999: 386).

It may be that class affiliation and political involvement could account for the help given. Perhaps lower-class individuals, because of their own disadvantages, could more readily identify with the suffering of Jews. Similarly, one could assume that intellectuals, more aware of the grave implications of Nazi success, were more willing to protect Jews. However, this was not the case. Proportionally there were just as many middle class helpers as any other social group (Tec 1986: 119, 127). Therefore, any class-based links are weak. Similarly, many rescuers were politically inactive. Although leftist inclinations did facilitate help to Jews they in no way accounted for the bulk of helpers (Tec 1986: 120-123). So if the explanations of religion, class or political affiliations do not provide any answers, then perhaps we should look to more personal attributes.

Nature or nurture?

The biological argument

If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being [...] it is after all only because of the way things worked out that they were the executioners and we weren't. (Alexander Solzhenitsyn)⁸

The assumption that human beings are inherently evil is a recurring theme in philosophy and its influence extends to present-day psychological theory. Thomas Hobbes described people as hedonistic, motivated to seek pleasure and avoid pain, a view that goes back to pre-Socratic Greeks (Staub, 1978: 17). The pessimistic account of human's nature gained expression at a later time in social Darwinism, the view that life consists of persons struggling against others; the 'survival of the fittest' (Staub 1989: 112; Rushton 1980: 12-15).⁹ This view is represented in one of the most influential psychological theories, psychoanalysis. According to Freud, the sexual and aggressive impulses are the foundation of human nature, the 'Id'. In Freud's Augustinian view of human nature, no true altruism exists and behaviour that seems to be altruistic is likely to be the result of a reaction formation to neurotic needs. Therefore, the rescuers must have had some hidden motivation, some extraordinary explanation for such unusual behaviour (Oliner & Oliner 1988: 9; Rushton, 1980: 1; Staub, 1978: 30).

If we accept this restricted approach, then are we in searching for an explanation of the motivations of the Righteous among the Nations,¹⁰ implying that their behaviour was not normal? Is acting altruistically so unusual and at odds with peoples' characters that we need to search for explanations for this outlandish behaviour? Or is it conceivable that such behaviour is as natural to our psychological basis as the egoistic one we readily accept?

Geneticists and biologists are also concerned with the origins of morality and altruism. A number of psychologists and biologists have proposed that altruism is genetically determined, and they have used the theory of evolution to show at least the possibility that this can be so.¹¹ If altruistic behaviour has

survival value for the species, it is reasoned that it is likely to have been favoured by natural selection, increasing the frequency of altruistic genes in the population.

Three ways have been proposed through which altruism might have become part of a person's genetic makeup: group selection, kinship selection, and the development of reciprocal altruism (Staub 1978: 5; Reber 1995: 26). Group selection and kinship selections are conceptually similar, but kinship selection is a more acceptable view because of the greater commonality of genetic makeup among close relatives.

Kinship selection refers to a person engaging in an altruistic act, even a self-sacrificial one in order to contribute to the survival of closely related individuals. This may reaffirm and help to explain close family ties but it does not offer an explanation of the evolution of a genetic basis of altruism applicable to unrelated individuals. The rescuers may *naturally* have saved family members first, then friends, but how would this account for the saving of strangers? Perhaps the most important criticism of kinship selection is that some rescuers risked their own family member's lives for strangers. For example, Ellen Nielsen had six children, all of whom were put at risk by her rescue activities (*Ellen Nielsen Story*, September 30, 1999). The villagers of Le Chambon also risked their own children's safety by hiding Jewish refugees (Hallie, 1979: 126). Samuel and Pearl Oliners' research found that 84 percent of the rescuers lived with other persons, 27 percent with children ten years or under, all of whom were endangered by rescue activities (Oliner, 1992 p.40). The fact that rescuers risked their own families' lives by their actions directly contradicts the principles of kinship altruism.

This confusion is further compounded when we examine the denunciatory reports to the Gestapo from the general public. Arnold Peukert writes,

The Gestapo and the Special Courts had to deal with a flood of reports directed against neighbours, drinking companions, chance acquaintances met on train journeys, *and relatives*. The thinly veiled purpose of many of these denunciations was to invoke the aid of the Gestapo in settling a private grudge. (Italics added) (Peukert, 1993: 238).

Richard Lukas also states that Jews collaborated with the Germans and informed on each other. In one notorious case, a secret Jewish court in the Warsaw Ghetto executed fifty-nine Jewish collaborators connected with the *Zagiew*, a Nazi-sponsored Jewish militia to spy on the Jewish underground (Lukas, 1986: 117-118).

Robert Trivers explained the development of reciprocal altruism. He listed three conditions from which this could have become part of humans' genetic inheritance. Firstly, that there should be a large number of situations in which actors can be altruistic. This was certainly evident during the Holocaust. Secondly, that there should be a large number of interactions involving a relatively small group of individuals. Thirdly, a distribution of symmetrical situations where the actors are in roughly equivalent roles as recipients and altruists in their turn (cited in Staub, 1978: 29-30). This third precondition was evidently lacking in the case histories. The altruists could not envisage any reward for their behaviour. Leaving aside the possibility of financial help, (these helpers have not been included as 'true rescuers'),¹² then the possibility of reciprocity was negligible.

It may be that some behaviour is affected by a combination of genes rather than a single gene. However, at best, the evidence would indicate that the capacity of human beings for altruism is only genetically based in that genes may create a predisposition that enhances the probability that certain kinds of *learning* will take place.

Social Factors

Rescue those who are being taken away to death;
Hold back those who are stumbling to the slaughter.
If you say, "Behold, we did not know this"
Does not he who weighs the heart perceive it?
– Proverbs 24: 11, 12¹³

To comprehend the importance of any social factors, we must assess how much ordinary civilians knew of the Jews' plight. It has sometimes been

thought that most Germans did not know what happened to the Jews and others who were taken away. 'Most Germans had no more than fragmentary knowledge of Hitler's crimes' (Hoffman, 1988: page not numbered). However, as previously discussed, there is clear evidence that many civilians were willing to contribute to the pogrom, and many others knew what was being done. There may have been a degree of local revulsion, but people who expressed concern for the victims sometimes seemed more concerned for themselves. One woman near Mauthausen saw people who had been shot taking several hours to die. She wrote to protest,

One is often an unwilling witness to such outrages. I am sickly and such a sight makes such a demand on my nerve that in the long run I cannot bear this. I request that it be arranged that such inhuman deeds be discontinued, or else be done where one does not see it (Glover, 1999: 379-380).

Ian Kershaw writes 'Most people in fact probably thought little and asked less about what was happening to the Jews. The Jews were out of sight and literally *out of mind* for most' (italics added, cited in Niewyk, 1997: 234). Kershaw makes a telling point when he states that the Jews were 'out of mind'. We can always *hear* what is happening but the information is only assimilated and truly understood if we care about the victims. Care for human beings must be part of the recognition of the evilness of Nazism in the first place.

Critics had a terrible moral choice - they could acquiesce in genocide or they could speak out, but this might add their own family to the victims while saving no one else. *The Nazis – A Warning from History*, televised by BBC 2 on October 18, 1998, quoted Erwin Massuthe who was a witness to the deportations from Berlin. 'People were crammed into cattle sheds and taken away. We didn't pay much attention.' He was asked, 'But were there people who resisted?' He answered, 'Yes, if you risked your own life, or at least your job'. An interesting point is that in the Oliners' sample, only 4 percent of rescuers, in contrast to 13 percent of non-rescuers, reported that they hadn't known if there were any Jews in their vicinity before the war (Oliner & Oliner, 1992: 25; 1988: 150). This indicates that the rescuers did not distinguish between Jews and Gentiles in any way. Therefore when they heard about the

atrocities, they did not discount these as happening to 'others'. Jonathan Glover draws an analogy to the attitude of General Groves¹⁴ who said that the atomic bomb 'went with a tremendous bang', although he was thousands of miles away from its victims (Glover, 1999: 407). In the same way, for the bystanders and collaborators of Europe, being dehumanised psychologically distanced the Jews.

It is probable that during war, economic factors may become more important than at times of peace and plenty. *The Guardian* newspaper on November 5, 1998 made the point that many Germans in villages and small towns knowingly profited from buying up the household chattels of their deported Jewish neighbours. Ian Traynor's article, *Inventories of Genocide*, refers to documents unearthed in Cologne. He quotes Professor Dressen, 'These files show that literally everybody was involved and knew what was going on. They also knew that the family would not be coming back to make demands.'¹⁵ Self-interest was an important consideration for the bystanders. Some profited from jobs, others from business take-overs (Staub, 1989: 118-119). So, as the rescuers did not gain financially – indeed they had everything to lose – this makes their behaviour more extraordinary.

Perhaps it is better to consider the intervention process itself. The most frequently studied form of social influence has been 'modelling'; that is the exposure to the positive or negative example of someone followed by the opportunity to behave 'prosocially.'¹⁶ Ordinarily, we would expect that the more people present the more likely they will intervene. The Holocaust shows that the opposite can apply. Bibb Latané and John Darley write that, 'The presence of other people serves to inhibit the impulse to help', and 'The greater the number of other people present, the more possibility there is of losing face' (Latané & Darley, 1970: 38, 40). Perhaps, when others are 'looking the other way', the behaviour is sanctioned and more easily adopted. Yet, adversely, when individuals see altruistic acts being legitimised they are more likely to undertake these positive actions themselves. Dennis Krebs summarised why modelling may have this effect. 'At the most elementary level, models make behavioural alternatives salient,' (cited in Staub, 1978: 199). This was exemplified in Le Chambon. The extent of the villagers' rescue activities grew out of small, early acts of insurgency by André Trocmé, who was a pacifist and

a strong anti-Nazi. His first act of resistance was in response to an order from Marshal Pétain, who proposed schools should have a daily ceremony of saluting the flag. Trocmé refused to conform to the order, others followed, and the numbers who complied with this demand dwindled as the majority refused. Later, another order came from Pétain, that Pastor Trocmé should ring the church bell as part of a Vichy celebration. Again Trocmé ignored the order (Glover, 1999: 385-387; Staub, 1989: 165). These small acts of rebellion were witnessed by the villagers, and psychologically prepared them for the larger, more dangerous, resistance activities. The villagers as a whole had to rely upon one another, as any individual could have reported the refugees, and the whole community would have put in jeopardy. The phenomenal response of these villagers shows, that when one or more people behave prosocially, then the possibility for this course of action becomes apparent and conceivable.

This type of learned or copied behaviour is also echoed in the observations made about people's ability to control fear. The element of fear is central to the case of rescue and surely constitutes an important part of why rescue activities are admirable. Stanley Rachman writes, 'There is a functional connection between our ability to control potentially threatening situations and the experience of fear' (Rachman, 1978: 7). If fear diminishes as a result of repeated exposures then this would explain why rescuers like Ellen Nielsen and the villagers of Le Chambon continued, and extended their actions. However, if the Le Chambon community experienced a sense of safety in numbers that reinforced and legitimised their actions; even to the extent that it diffused their fear, then this is a feasible sociological explanation, but it does not explain the altruism and courage personified by Ellen Nielsen. She was acting alone, without the support of her neighbours. To account for solitary actions we must consider far more personal qualities – psychological alternatives.

Psychological explanations

Societies are not made of sticks and stones, but of men whose individual characters, by turning the scale one way or another, determine the direction of the whole (Socrates).¹⁷

The recognition of the needs of others is the prerequisite of helping. The Oliners' research again confirms that the vast majority of citizens were aware of the stigmatisation of Jews. They had heard of, or witnessed acts of expulsion of Jews from their homes, physical abuse, and murders (Oliner & Oliner, 1988: 4; Niewyk, 1997:240).¹⁸

Three different ways of reacting to this situation can be distinguished. First, there were people for whom this information was simply factual; stored in their memories as a record of events. The concept of somebody in need was apparently not salient in their interpretation of these events. Another type of reaction consisted of emotional arousal, feelings of compassion, horror and evaluative judgements. These reactions were common but did not lead to the formation of a prosocial goal, and thus had practically no consequence. Both these categories could be labelled as 'bystander' reactions. The third type of reaction was typical of those who rescued Jews. It consisted of interpretation of the situation as a kind of demand, a recognition that other people are in need. To be moved to action, the rescuers would have had to mentally transform the situation into one with action possibilities – to generate a 'goal image'. (Oliner & Oliner, 1988: p.133) In most cases the formation of a prosocial goal image was facilitated when a victim approached the would-be rescuer, defining the need for them.¹⁹ For example, strangers who asked for her help directly approached Ellen Nielsen. She had the cognitive ability to transform the existing situation into another one – a prosocial goal.

But what motivated the rescuers to chose these behaviours? Zuzanna Smolenska and Janusz Reykowski identified three different major groups of motives that instigated the rescuing. One group of motivations was identified as 'allocentric'. Typically, the rescuers' attention would be focused on the persecuted person or persons. When asked for their main reason for helping, this group gave answers such as 'We didn't have a choice', or 'When I saw a mother with a child, how could I refuse? The child made up my mind' (Smolenska & Reykowski, 1992: 217-218).

Another group of motivations was called 'normocentric'. These motivations originate from the activation of a norm of helping. The norm could be interpreted religiously (e.g., the Christian prescription 'love your neighbour')

(Smolenska & Reykowski, 1992:218). This motivation could have been important for the villagers of Le Chambon, as the leaders of their church initiated the rescue activities. However, normocentric motivations can also be interpreted in secular terms, rooted in a reference group, such as a family or political organisation. This could also apply to the villagers of Le Chambon, as their behaviour was reinforced by the social support they provided to each other. As they acted as a community they reinforced their sense of solidarity. This again confirms the sociological proposition of 'modelling'. From this affinity to the main socialising institutions an internalised sense of commitment develops. This allows people to act independently; believing that the institution with which they are associated is approving of their action. This could then be interpreted as an internalised belief in one's own character, or the individuals' self-concept. Some rescuers attributed feelings of obligations to their own 'nature'; i.e., the helping norm was regarded as part of their self-identity. These people regarded themselves as independent from any specific authority; their 'normative compass' lay within themselves (Smolenska & Reykowski, 1992: 218). For the first helping act, the majority (52 per cent) of rescuers, responded to a normocentric expectation, rooted in one of the above sources (Oliner & Oliner, 1988: 199).

The last group of motivation was called 'axiological'. These appear to derive from the actualisation of moral principles, such as 'justice' or 'sanctity of human life', but do not rely upon institutional influences. 'A defining characteristic of principles is their independence from external opinions and evaluations' (Smolenska & Reykowski, 1992: 219). Axiological motives, since they are based upon moral convictions, sensitise people to discrepancies between their principles and reality. The main goal of action is to re-affirm the principles; therefore, actions guided by principles can be executed individually. People who exhibited axiological motives would explain their behaviour; 'The reason is because each person is equal' or 'It was plain murder and I couldn't stand that, they took innocent people and I wanted to help' (Oliner & Oliner 1988: 142). Ellen Nielsen may be classified within this group as she acted independently, without the motivation of a formal institutional belief.

These main categories of motives can be regarded as abstract, 'ideal' types in the sense of the term provided by Max Weber.²⁰ So, it may be

simplistic to explain rescuing action by referring to the motivational processes alone. A significant area to discuss is *why* the rescuers acted upon the motivations at all. Were there any specific personal qualities that facilitated the helping?

A close-range analysis of the helpers reveals a cluster of shared characteristics. Perry London conducted extensive interviews with people who were involved in an underground system set up to save the lives of Jews and other persecuted individuals in Nazi Germany. London concluded that the rescuers possessed three characteristics prior to them becoming rescuers; a strong conscious identification with moral parents, adventurousness, and a sense of marginality in relation to the community (cited in Staub 1978: 49). This concurs with the findings of other researchers. Jacqueline Macaulay and Leonard Berkowitz wrote that the rescuers exhibited a spirit of adventurousness, an intense identification with a parental model of moral conduct, and a sense of being socially marginal (Macaulay & Berkowitz, 1970: 245). Block and Drucker agree that rescuers were, pre-war, unlikely to have blended into their communities. They were independent in thought and also deed, refusing to 'follow the crowd' in any circumstance without consideration (Block & Drucker, 1992: 32). Those who are on the periphery of their community are not strongly controlled by it. Almost by definition those who stand out and do not blend within their environment are freer than those who are well integrated. The relative independence, strength, and freedom of these rescuers suggests that they were able to act in accordance with their personal moral imperatives which involved a strong desire or a compulsion to stand up for the needy and the persecuted. Most important was a clear belief that help was to be given to anyone in need, regardless of who they were. The rescuers saw their obligations in the broadest terms, for at times they saved Jews for whom they had neither respect nor liking (Tec, 1986: 189).

It seems feasible that the rescuers motivations originated from allocentric, normocentric or axiocentric sources, and that they undertook their rescue activities because of their ability to recognise need, and their independence of thought. However, this still does not provide a full answer. Surely, we must consider *how* they came to think and act so independently.

A possible explanation may come from the groundbreaking research of Theodor Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswick, Daniel J. Levinson and Nevitt Sanford. Following the end of the war, efforts to explain the success of Nazi ideology led Adorno et al to explain prejudice as a result of an 'authoritarian personality'. This theory states that certain types of people are more inclined to be prejudiced and punitive in their attitudes towards out-groups.²¹ Adorno believed that the origins of this lie in their childhood experiences, as such people have parents who exert a rigid and unyielding discipline. This produces a 'reaction formation', which means that they need to perceive things in black and white terms. They find ambiguities hard to cope with so they are likely to be intolerant of people who are different, or do not behave in what they consider to be a normal fashion (Hayes, 1996: 632).

Essentially, the authoritarian personality traits are the antitheses of the rescuers' behaviours, but Adorno's theory is still revealing when considering altruism because people who exhibited rescue behaviours also had a similar childhood to each other. However, their families valued entirely opposite characteristics. Generally, their parents encouraged empathy for others, even to the extent of encouraging their children to rebel against authority (Rushton, 1980: 121-126).

The Oliners agree that many of the rescuers came from close family relationships in which the parents modelled caring behaviour and communicated caring values. Parental discipline was lenient and frequently perceived as imperceptible. Also, these children were given explanations and reasoning from their parents, often with reference to the consequence for others. The parents set high standards for their children, especially with regard to caring for others (Oliner & Oliner, 1988: 249-250, 259-260). Emilie Guth, who hid Jews in Marseilles, explained, 'When children see people in the house helping others, it makes them want to help. The things you learn in your own house are the things you grow up to do' (cited in Glover, 1999: 382). This is not a new proposition, indeed, the 4th century Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote, 'It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather *all* the difference'.²²

The question of child discipline provides an interesting comparison. Krzysztof Konarzewski writes that although both rescuers and non-rescuers reported that their parents used punishment of various sorts, but the former more often mentioned that the parental disapproval was accompanied by the verbal explication of their reasons (Konarzewski, 1992: 26; Oliner & Oliner, 1988: 249). Giving the reasons for parental disapproval encourages a child to take a reflective attitude towards every claim before they accept it. This, therefore, adds to the child's independence of thought, and possibly validates prosocial actions. Out of such behaviours children learn to have confidence in those around them and feel more comfortable dealing with people who are different to them, seeing the connections rather than the differences.

These influences are made all the more remarkable when we consider the political climate of Europe between the wars. Presumably, the people who acted altruistically had witnessed the same anti-Jewish propaganda and discrimination towards minorities as their bystander counterparts. Yet, they were able to disregard these negative influences. The liberal approach towards 'others' taught by the rescuers' parents, was the more powerful authority, enabling them to grow up to act in ways that *they* felt was right and natural for them. London quotes a rescuer as saying, 'My Mother always said, When it comes the day you have to make a decision, make the right one. It could be a hard one. But even the hard ones should be the right ones' (cited in Macaulay & Berkowitz, 1970: 247).

Conclusion

Was the Holocaust so different from what preceded it that an entirely new set of moral categories is required for its analysis? In many important aspects, the Nazi genocide was not unique, as the Jewish people had suffered pogroms before.²³ Nor could we deny the prevalence of other atrocities committed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, or that these were restricted to Jews.²⁴ For example, in sheer numbers killed, Stalin and Mao each surpassed Hitler.²⁵ Yet the geographical scope of the Germans' exterminationist drive against the Jews has no parallel, certainly within the twentieth century. The Holocaust was a watershed in human history; not only because of subsequent radical,

political, technological and social changes, but also because it raised profound questions about good and evil.

Over one hundred years ago, Immanuel Kant wrote of two things that filled the mind with admiration and awe: 'The starry heavens above me and the moral law within me' (cited in Glover, 1999: 1). At the start of the twentieth century, many reflective Europeans saw human viciousness and barbarism as in retreat. Then the Holocaust reminded the world of the precariousness of any group that may have the misfortune to be cast as the 'other'.

Staub writes that it is currently fashionable to argue that cultures and historical periods create the psychological processes that categorise people (Staub, 1978: 430). Cultures may emphasise the importance of positive social behaviour in different realms, and to different degrees, but this argument also implies that our understanding of psychological functioning is limited to a particular culture and historical period. It is clear; the villagers of Le Chambon confirm it, that the importance cultures place upon one's worth as a human being may have direct influence on positive behaviour. At the other extreme, cultures may emphasise individuality, conflict and antagonism. In particular, children's learning may take place more by certain principles than by others. It is possible that the immediate parental influences are paramount, but we need to look towards a greater integration of personality development, social environment and behaviour and to understand how these varied influences contribute to our children's development. Many groups teach their members individual moral responsibility and, to the extent that socialisation clearly teaches this, it is reasonable to hold people responsible for their moral decisions and actions. However, there is a possibility of ambiguous or conflicting standards. Loyalty to the group is esteemed and often defined as obedience to the group's leaders. Modelling in its most negative manifestation is sanctioned as loyalty. The tragedy of the Holocaust was that loyalty and obedience were exalted over individual responsibility. If it is through the influence of our parents, teachers, friends and communities that we can learn goodness or evil, then the central lesson to learn is that a sense of moral identity is not enough. Moral identity needs to be rooted in the human responses rather than, as with the Nazis, adversarial to them. As Glover writes, 'It matters that people keep their humanity alive and retain their

scepticism in the face of leaders or theories telling them otherwise' (Glover, 1999: 397).

To fulfil ideals such as altruism towards other human beings, people must develop strong separate identities. They must be capable of standing apart from society, of using their independent moral judgement and, if necessary, opposing the group. Ellen Nielsen epitomised this independence, displaying it until the last.²⁶

If this theory of altruism is correct – that internal characteristics are taught in the early years to children, then we are left with many implications. If experiences of childhood are so important, then this brings into question the prevailing view of the authority of the family. It is clear that the only recurring precondition for the majority of the rescuers was that they had families who respected their children, and taught that all human beings are responsible for one another, without prejudice. 'When the 'external environment' of Nazi oppression confronted the rescuers they naturally made the decision to help' (Oliner & Oliner, 1992: 171). The rescuers were willing to help because this was *their* nature. However, the evidence suggests that it was a nature that had been imbued from external influence, not a gift of genetics.

Humans are the only creatures in the world that are capable of using abstract concepts such as race, religion or politics to mentally divide their species into groups. We are also a social species, able to assess personal risk and still engage in numerous acts of helping and exhibiting loving behaviours for no recognisable gain. These constructions are the bonds of 'we' and the barriers of 'they'. Because of this dichotomous behaviour, it is simplistic to assume that humans are by nature and without explicit teaching intrinsically altruistic. Conversely, humans are not generally vicious, although they can be coerced to be. The truth seems to lie somewhere in the middle ground; that is, people are born as *tabula rasa*,²⁷ or 'natural' bystanders. Our experiences in childhood and the examples we are shown determine our adult actions more than any other influences. They categorise us into perpetrators, bystanders or rescuers. Because of these arbitrary differences, it is difficult for those of us who had no part in the Holocaust to be condemnatory. We may hope that we would emulate Ellen Nielsen or the villagers of Le Chambon. Secretly, we may also fear that we would be bystanders and look the other way. It is easier to

hope that we will never be tested. If it were not for the Holocaust, the rescuers might have continued on their independent paths. Had they not been put into such terrible situations, perhaps they would have pursued unobtrusive lives and been remembered only by their families. The Holocaust did occur and nothing would have been easier for them than to have joined the silent majority, but the rescuers refused to abdicate their responsibilities to fellow humans. Because of this great catastrophe they became exemplars of great humanity and they were undoubtedly extraordinary people. The rescuers' legacy is an optimistic one. We have the knowledge that courage is not only the province of intellectually superior thinkers but is available to all through the virtues of commitment and the quality of relationships developed in ordinary human interactions. Through these the human spirit evolves and moral courage is born.

Notes

- ¹ A map by Martin Gilbert that gives a breakdown of the numbers of Jews murdered by the Nazis, country by country claims approximately 5,800,000 dead (*The Mechelen Museum Conclusion*, October 5, 1999).
- ² *Tourists of the Revolution* (BBC2, March 18, 2000) interviewed Nicolas Mosely, the son of Sir Oswald Mosely, who said 'There is always a residual anti-Semitic 'thing' in this country [...] my parents were no more anti-Semitic than other people.' The commentary added, In Britain there was a powerful wish to believe that Nazi Germany was just another State. Memory of the last war, and fear of another, was only part of the complex policy of appeasement. Appeasement was both a policy and a culture. It was tinged with indifference to Nazi brutality and in some cases a toleration of it.
- ³ Ian Kershaw quotes a woman from a 'Special Court' case of 1943, 'Do you think then that nobody listens to the foreign broadcasts? They have loaded Jewish women and children into a wagon, driven them out of town, and exterminated (*vernichtet*) them with gas.' She was sentenced to three years in prison for making this statement (cited in Niewyk, 1997: 236). Walter Stier, Ex-member of the Nazi Party, former Head of the Reich Railways, Bureau 33, said, There were more 'special' trains commissioned by Department 33 during the war than before or after. We called them resettlement trains. We did not know who was being resettled. Unless you were tired of life it was best not to mention it [...] even people today deny it. I don't know – Is it true? (From *Shoah* video, Volume 1 edited by C. Lanzmann. A Nazi propaganda film which was widely broadcast in cinemas prior to, and during the war, stated, These are the types of Jews who flooded Europe's cities after the last war, parasites, undermining the host nation, threatening thousand year cultures and bringing with them crime, corruption and chaos. A dirty, dishevelled, staggering people. (From *The Nazis' A Warning from History*, BBC2, October 18, 1998.)
- ⁴ Ian Kershaw writes, 'The "Final Solution" would not have been possible without the progressive steps to exclude the Jews from German society which took place in full view of the public, in

their legal form met with widespread approval, and resulted in the depersonalisation and debasement of the figure of the Jew' (cited in Niewyk, 1997: 240).

⁵ From *The Merchant of Venice*, Act V, Scene 1.

⁶ Martin Niemöller (1892 - 1984) German Protestant Pastor, (*Martin Niemöller Poem*, September 30, 1999).

⁷ Pope Pius XII did not declare support for the Jews, nor did he condemn Nazi atrocities. Tec suggests that the Pope's official silence suggested a tacit approval of the Nazis' policies. However the truth is ambiguous as Tec also adds that the Pope has been credited with personally helping Jews (Tec, 1986: 138).

However, the article, 'Why was the Pope Silent?' argues that the Pope and the Catholic church were fully informed about the extermination process, but did nothing to stop the murders, or to warn the Jews in advance (*Holocaust Education – The Silence of the Churches*, October 5, 1999).

⁸ From *The Gulag Archipelago* (cited in Glover, 1999: 401).

⁹ Glover highlights the link to Nietzsche's version of amorality, 'Nietzsche despised the majority' (1999: 15).

¹⁰ The Yad Vashem Institution bestowed the title 'Righteous among the Nations' upon the rescuers.

¹¹ See the research of Wilson (1975) Dawkins (1976), (cited in Hayes, 1996: 916-919); and Rushton, (1980: chapter 2).

¹² This dissertation has used the following interpretation of altruistic behaviour: (a) behaviour directed towards helping another; (b) accompanied by no external reward; (c) involving a high risk to the actor; (d) behaviour which is voluntary (Oliner & Oliner, 1988: 6). Yad Vashem uses the same criteria for recognition.

¹³ *Holy Bible*, Revised Standard Version, Reference Edition, (1952: 695).

¹⁴ Brigadier-General Leslie R. Groves of the American army supervised every aspect of the atomic bomb, from its construction to the final delivery in Japan (Gilbert, 1995: 363).

¹⁵ Tens of thousands of wartime documents have been unearthed in Cologne. They show how many Germans in villages and small towns eagerly bought up the household chattels of their deported Jewish neighbours on the cheap. The files include court records, bailiffs' orders, and removal firms' invoices.

See also, *Shoah* video, Volume 2 that includes several interviews with Poles, who still live in the homes evacuated by the Jews. They acknowledge that they knew the Jews were taken away to be killed, and that they immediately appropriated their property.

¹⁶ Prosocial acts are defined as a) acts performed for the sake of another, b) acts guided by moral values and principles, d) acts one ought to do – 'thou shalt' (Staub, 1978: 3).

¹⁷ From Plato, *The Republic* (cited in Glover, 1999: 349).

¹⁸ The Oliners' sample shows that 69 per cent of rescuers lived among Jews, compared to 52 per cent of non-rescuers. This would suggest that a higher number of rescuers had the opportunity to witness the crimes against the Jewish population. Also, significantly more rescuers had Jewish friends before the war, 59 per cent, as opposed to 16 per cent of bystanders, (Oliner & Oliner, 1988: 114).

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- ¹⁹ Sixty-seven percent of 'first time' rescuers waited to be asked for their help, (Oliner & Oliner, 1988: 135).
- ²⁰ Max Weber, (1864-1920) German economist, historian and major classical sociologist. The element of 'idealisation' is a feature of any use of general concepts. It is possible to argue that the use of 'ideal-type' analysis is inappropriate as it involves the study of specific cases (Jary & Jary, 1995: 305; 725).
- ²¹ Various scales were developed during the 1940s and 1950s to assess the hypothesised aspects of the authoritarian personality. They were: (a) the A-S scale for anti-Semitism; (b) the E scale (ethnocentrism); (c) the P-E-C scale (politico-economic conservatism); and (d) the F scale (originally for fascism, later called anti-democratic) (Reber, 1985: 71-72).
- ²² From *Nicomachean Ethics* (cited in Glover, 1999: 349).
- ²³ The Jews had lived in Germany for over 2,000 years. European Christians became hostile towards them with the crusades of the 11th century, as the Jews refused to accept Christ as the Messiah. This often resulted in violence, massacres and expulsions. After the Church prohibited Christians from charging interest, it left the Jews the money lending business so vital to commerce (Geier, 1998: xiii).
- 'Medieval tradition associated Jews with the devil and the Christian stereotype of the Jew corresponded closely to the portrayal of the devil, who was also seen as a kind of pedantic infernal treasurer, hoarding stockpiles of gold' (Webster, 1996: 325).
- ²⁴ The Korean War, 1950-1953 involved 2 million deaths; During the Vietnam War, 1961-1975 1.7 million people died, including 600,000 non-combatants; and in Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge were responsible for 1.6 million deaths between 1975 and 1979. The 'ethnic cleansing' in Bosnia has resulted in at least 200,000 deaths since 1992 (*Mass Killing*, April 10, 2000).
- ²⁵ Joseph Stalin's regime was responsible for the deaths of over 20 million Soviets between 1936 and 1953. In China, Mao Zedong's regime was also responsible for over 20 million Chinese deaths between 1949 and 1965 (*Mass Killing*, April 10, 2000).
- ²⁶ When Ellen Nielsen was held at Ravensbruck concentration camp, her assignment was to carry those Jewish infants too young to walk into the gas chambers. She was also made to carry the infants, once gassed, into the crematorium to be burned. When she refused to continue at her job, she was condemned to death and was herself placed three times on the line leading to the gas chamber. The first time she saved herself by bribing a guard with a bar of soap, which she had received in a Danish Red Cross parcel. The second time, bribing another guard again saved her. The final time, she was waiting on the line, stripped naked. Suddenly, guards informed her that she had been saved as all the surviving Danish concentration camp prisoners were to be shipped to Sweden for internment (*Ellen Nielsen Story*, September 30, 1999).
- ²⁷ 'A Latin term meaning blank tablet. The term refers to the philosophical view that humans came into this world unencumbered (and unassisted) by particular innate ideas [...] the environment writes its message upon the pristine mind' (Reber, 1995: 782).

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