

Jews Rescuing Jews

by Dr. Robert Rozett

Helping some part of the Jewish people survive was not only an act of brotherly love and solidarity, it was an imperative to ensure that there would continue to be a Jewish people

■ The subject of Jews assisting other Jews during the Holocaust is far from new. From its inception, Yad Vashem has dealt with the issue, including it, like much of the mainstream scholarship about the Holocaust, in topics such as “Jewish solidarity,” “Jewish leadership,” “*Judenrat*” and “Jewish resistance.” By the late 1970s in Israel, graduate students were routinely learning about Jews who helped their fellows. The topics they researched included: the Zionist Youth underground in Budapest and their allies, who deftly safeguarded Jews, especially during the fall of 1944; the Working Group in Slovakia, which did just about everything possible to facilitate mass rescue, but ultimately had little success; the diverse Jewish undergrounds in France that generally engaged in fighting and rescue; and the grassroots organizations in the Warsaw Ghetto that tried to ameliorate the pervasive suffering inside the ghetto walls.

Despite the shattering force of the Holocaust, a picture of Jews helping their fellow Jews quickly emerges. Within the family unit, although help was not universal, it certainly was ubiquitous; the tradition of family responsibility is inherent in Jewish culture. At the community level as well, rendering aid to people in need is a deeply entrenched norm. In the Holocaust, when helping was exponentially more difficult than in normal times, assistance was still frequently proffered at the community level as long as it was possible to do so.

It can be said that in almost every survivor account, there is an aspect of aid given to or received by other Jews. Moreover, it is clear that any exploration of the Holocaust from the perspective of Jewish history must include discussion of how Jews helped one another, as is clearly evident in Yad Vashem’s Holocaust History Museum and other activities.

Of course one must be careful not to idealize the story. Certainly there was a breakdown in normative behavior in the crucible of the Holocaust, such as that of Jewish policemen in the ghettos, although like all generalizations, there were many exceptions.

The notion of Jews rescuing Jews is frequently equated to the Righteous Among the Nations. Upon inspection, however, it is



■ Jewish children smuggled from occupied France standing beside a train in Lisbon, Portugal, 1941.

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clear that they are quite different. The Righteous came from either the ranks of the persecutors or, for lack of a better term, the bystanders, and they constituted a small minority in a vast sea of people. They had nothing to gain by helping Jews, other than the satisfaction they earned by acting morally at a time when ethical behavior outside the Jewish community was rare. Clearly they had much to risk, since Nazi punishment was draconian. For these reasons, the Righteous Among the Nations constitute points of light in the bleak Holocaust landscape.

In contrast, Jews who helped fellow Jews were acting within their “family,” in the broadest sense. The same sword of Damocles threatened both rescuers and those they aided. Helping some part of the Jewish people survive—whether dear ones, acquaintances or strangers—was not only an act of brotherly love and solidarity, it was also an imperative to ensure that there would continue to be a Jewish people.

That lately the concept of Jews rescuing Jews has emerged into public consciousness is certainly heartening. Knowing that even in the worst of times a great many Jews did not abandon their fellows, but made efforts to help them, not only speaks to the nature of the Jewish people, it is also a beacon in the darkness and a source of guidance and inspiration.

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