

# Holocaust rescuers



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When confronted with the idea of a rescuer, most memories drift back to childhood superheroes like Superman saving the damsel in distress, but rarely are thoughts given to ordinary people risking their lives, to provide even the smallest comfort to those in need, during the Holocaust. However, when actually faced with the notion of risking one's life to save that of a stranger, most shudder away in fear; but not that of a rescuer.

These selfless individuals were far and few between in the times preceding and throughout the horrific acts of the Holocaust. In Nazi occupied countries, those who are considered rescuers represented a minority of less than one-half of one-percent of the population (Oliner). The rescuer is an individual who undertakes a mission to save those who are suffering, unfortunate, and deprived of basic human rights. Altruism, in its grandest form, is a word that very clearly represents the level of caring and compassionate nature of the rescuer.

Without any expectation of external reward this minority represented an altruistic act of the highest level- facing the threat of death to themselves and their entire family. Yad Vashem began an organization to honor those one-half of one-percent, translating to 23, 226 individuals (Yad Vashem), on behalf of the State of Israel and the Jewish people. Vashem recognizes non-Jewish rescuers and awards those meeting his strict criteria with the title of “Righteous Among the Nations.”

If a person nominated had active involvement in saving one or more Jews from death or deportation to a death camp, risked his or her life, liberty, or position, his or her initial motivation was without personal gain, and if there

is testimony of those whom were helped they qualify for this title of “ Righteous Among the Nations (Yad Vashem). ” Rescuers are in a group of their own and it comes as no surprise that most share overlapping characteristics to explain such selfless behavior.

Nehama Tec and Pearl Oliner have both have conducted research and arose to conclude many qualities of the “ rescuer”: They are non-conformists, very independent, have a long history of doing good deeds, never saw their deeds as extraordinary — just as something that needed done, they identify with victims of injustice and see beyond race and ethnicity, possess a strong personal moral compass, uncanny ability to live a double life, firm and spontaneous decision making, have stronger attachment to people in immediate environments, powerful feeling of responsibility to those outside of immediate familial circles, strong values relating to care and empathy, and take a deep rooted sense of personal responsibility (Tec & Oliner).

A strong emphasis towards the love or tolerance of Jews, according to Oliner, were made from good Jewish-related experiences which helped in the development of their personality, external situations such as opportunity and availability of resources, and values also contribute to those who choose to rescue (Oliner). It is then fair to say that those who possess these traits should be respondent in similar ways to the rescue of their fellow man regardless of age, sex, or other factors including those of religion.

But this is simply not the case as part of the pent up hostility of the Christian population towards the Jewish community. Of those rescuers who possessed the characteristics outlined by Vashem, Tec, and Oliner, there was a varying

in the degree in which the rescuer was religious and also the level of religion contributed to a distribution in characteristics. The question is then asked, did the strength of ones religion contribute to being a rescuer?

Alexander Donat was a Dutch protestant whom we can categorize under the highly religious category as a rescuer because he regarded his religion as a major source of meaningful associations and beliefs gearing him towards becoming a rescuer. He harbored conventional social, economic, and religious prejudices towards Jews, but still viewed them as “ God’s special people (Oliner). ” This thinking predominated over contradictory resentments and theological prejudices. In the years following the Holocaust, he did what a highly religious Christian would do ? ry and convert Jews to Christianity by going door to door.

During this time he had few that would listen to him, so when Heindrik Levin invited him in to talk it left an everlasting impression, even though he rejected his plight politely. When the rounding up of Jews for deportation began, Donat attests to sitting at dinner reading Isaiah 58, “...Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter- when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?... ” which inspired him to be a rescuer.

He wrote a letter to Heindrik Levin in which he requested he come stay with him and his family, but Levin declined saying that they were safe because his wife was too ill to be deported and that his brother Jacob may take him up on the offer. Donat eventually ended up hiding Jacob Levin and his family (Oliner). Very religious rescuers take their ethical responsibility very

seriously because, allegedly, they minimize materialistic concerns whilst encouraging other believers to place their own needs second to the needs of others. Donat is a perfect example of an individual with an intrinsic and extrinsic nature of his faith commitment.

Intrinsically, Alexander internalized his perception of religion by connecting with what was being taught and said through The Bible. In a way he connected extrinsically because he was aware his minister was hiding Jews as well and often consulted with him. Although ministers, priests, and other religious figures influenced most highly religious individuals, rescuers stood from the crowd in being able to act, despite the silence or often hostility of these figures. Highly religious people were more inclined to stand up for their beliefs (religion, personal, and political in that order) before the war began than the moderately religious.

This is likely because they were not flexible or wavering in their beliefs. As compared with the irreligious and moderately religious, the highly religious ranked higher in many aspects: “ sharing factor” in which they were more likely to join together with others and commit resources for others welfare, valued involvement rather than detachment, had the strongest sense of social responsibility, a fervent sense of empathy for those in distress, and were more likely to perceive themselves as persons of integrity.

Highly religious individuals were ranked the lowest of the irreligious and moderately religious in terms of economic competence by choosing to not focus on matters relating to work or money. These attributes are credited to the environment that they were raised in; usually highly religious and

politically affiliated (Oliner). “ I am not at all religious—not since I was eighteen have I been to church regularly – but I do still believe in human beings,” spoken by Zofia Baniceka an irreligious rescuers (Zofia Baniecka).

Although Zofia once attended church regularly due to her parents sending her to a catholic school, she has always been an Atheist. She was brought up in a very liberal home in which anti-Semitic behavior was always condemned. Being independent, patriotic, and sympathetic to the needs of the Jewish population, it is only natural the she and her family would become very involved in the Resistance of Warsaw. They started immediately rescuing Jews from the ghetto and being involved in the Polish underground.

When her father died in an air raid it left her and her mother alone to continue in the fight. Her mother stored and delivered armory to members of the resistance and Zofia acted as a courier, relaying orders and distributing underground newspapers in the provinces. At one time they were hiding fifty Jews including a family of ten. It was described that they “ kept guns in one part of the apartment and Jews in another (Malka Drucker). ” Surprisingly enough irreligious rescuers share many qualities of the highly religious rescuer.

Irreligious rescuers were also more likely to stand up for what they believed in before and during the course of the war – though more readily through public action—and were not flexible or wavering in their beliefs. Irreligious rescuers were focused more on political values than anything else. Due to their liberal attitudes they were more inclined to support the less privileged and fight for minority rights but had a very weak “ sharing factor” when

compared with the highly religious. They had the weakest family ties, which may contribute to their tendencies to be less tenderhearted than the moderately and highly religious.

The irreligious also had a low pro-social factor and lowest perception of themselves of being someone of personal integrity (Oliner). Irena Sendler self-identified as being “ somewhat religious”: “ My family taught me that what matters is whether people are honest or dishonest, not what religion they belong to (frontline). ” Her father was a physician and cared for Jews of a low socioeconomic standing. In turn she developed many close relationships with Jews. She was an active member in the Council of Aid to Jews, or the “ zegota,” and, the higher-ranking organization, Council for Aid of Jews, which were Polish underground organizations.

She began working to alleviate the sufferings of many of her pre-war Jewish friends but soon expanded to helping any Jew that she could; “ I myself had eight of ten flats where Jews were hiding under my car. ” She was employed by the Social Welfare Department of the Warsaw municipality which granted her a special permit allowing her to visit the ghetto area at all times in the thoughts of combating contagious diseases, but she used this as an opportunity to bring clothes, medicine, and money.

Under the code name of “ Jolanta” she arranged for children to be smuggled out of the ghetto. In October of 1943 she was captured and tortured by the Gestapo for information on the Polish Underground. She refused to offer up any information so she was scheduled for execution, but when the day arrived she was released because the members of her organizations bribed

the Gestapo. She was forced into hiding for the remainder of the German occupation but she still managed to organize rescues (frontline).

The moderately religious represented the largest portion of rescuers, but this comes as no surprise because they are the most highly represented in the population. The moderate person has admirable qualities such as prudent, careful, and reasonable, but also possess a negative connotation such as compromising, conservative, or “ fence-sitting. ” The moderate person in general is less passionate about their beliefs and do not possess a readiness to act simultaneously, thus less likely to assert their beliefs publically- this is especially true when it comes to self-sacrifice.

For those who were able to overcome their moderate behavior, they were less open to outsiders and usually began by rescuing those who they knew. Moderate rescuers were also very financially conscious and conformists (Oliner). They were of an extrinsic nature of faith commitment in which they used religion to enhance sociability and status. These attributed can explain reasoning for why the majority of the population did not act: they were moderates were more inclined to be bystanders by default. Those that were able to overcome this natural moderate behavior were few.

The differences between the highly religious, irreligious, and moderately religious are vast, but the important thing is that there were individuals in each group that fulfilled their duty to the human race by being a rescuer. As it is seen, religion did not play a vital role, but the ideals in which the rescuer did. But there are question that arise, such as whether or not the actions of religious figures were the determining factor for the somewhat religious and



the highly religious rescuers. As in the case of Donat: if his minister weren't housing a Jew, would he have been as inclined to be a rescuer?

Or if more Christian religious leaders were housing Jews would the moderately religious individuals conformed, based on their personality traits, and been rescuers? And the biggest question of all: If the church had taken a clear stance in supporting the Jewish population, would the Holocaust ever have occurred? Of course these are impossible to answer, but it's a probable assumption that religion could have made a huge impact on the number of highly religious and moderately religious who became rescuers and perhaps changed the course of the Holocaust. ?