

### **In the Search of the Forgotten Rescuer: A Psychoanalytic Perspective**

In writing this paper, why do we need to invoke the concept of the search for the rescuer? The answer to this question lies in the very way the figure of the rescuer is conceived and experienced: as so evanescent, so fleeting, and often so self-contradictory. It is hard to get a hold of and to make it into a steady fixture.

And I am specifically not speaking here of the thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of European Christians and Muslims (in Albania), who either as members of a resistance movement, or acting completely on their own, steadfastly gave refuge and protection to Jewish children and families, risking their own lives in doing so. Those of whom we know, and they may be a minority, have been honored by Yad Vashem and named as "Righteous among the Nations" (צדיקים גוים). (ד"ר אהרן יצחק)

As a compelling example of the above, I shall mention the Huguenots, under the leadership of pastor André Trocmé, in the French village of Le Chambon Sur Lignon, a town which, while under Nazi control, was able to give shelter to 5,000 Jewish refugees, by simply refusing to hand them over to the Gestapo.

What I shall try to do is to highlight the search for the lesser known and less clearly identified rescuer: his recognition, his disappearance, and his subsequent reemergence in memory – in addition to the conflicts involved in such remembering and forgetting. I shall focus mostly on phenomena specific to Germany, because that is where my data comes from.

Let me invite you now to join me on this journey. I accidentally almost found the rescuer with a case vignette from my practice as a psychoanalyst. This particular patient was the son of an Auschwitz survivor father and of a mother who was a *Mischling*, i.e. the "mixed-blood" offspring of a German mother and a Jewish father. There was a story in the family that at some

point, while they were living in Berlin, the Gestapo came and arrested the Jewish grandfather. The grandmother, who came from Prussian nobility, marched down to the Gestapo office, pounded her fist on the desk, and said to the German officer, "I am a better German than you are; free my husband at once." The Gestapo officer became frightened and started nervously clicking his ballpoint pen. I thought to myself, "*there were no ballpoint pens in 1942-43*," an observation that reflects my skepticism when I first heard this story in 1989. The officer then said to the grandmother, "Take him, take him, just go away." Well, at that time, I knew of nothing written in history books that would support the possibility of such an occurrence, so I treated it as a family myth. I said to my patient, "Why don't you try to look it up in the histories written by Hilberg or Davidowitz? If you find accounts of events that resemble that of your grandmother, we will consider it a true memory." As neither of us was able to find any such corroborating historical material, we worked for a number of years with this story, as it pertained to psychoanalysis – as a family myth: examining the powerful image of an Aryan grandmother who was protective and rescuing. We simply considered it, with respect to its veracity, merely as wishful thinking.

In 1992, at a family event, a distant cousin of mine who is a history professor at Long Island College, mentioned to me an article recently published on German resistance in the *Atlantic Monthly* of September, 1992.<sup>1</sup> And there they were, the three known instances of German communal resistance. The third incident was a group action taken in Berlin in March 1943, by hundreds of Gentile women whose husbands and children had been arrested for transport to Auschwitz so as to make Berlin *Judenrein* as a present to the Fuhrer for his fifty-fourth birthday on April 20. The final roundup began on February 27<sup>th</sup>, 1943. Ten thousand Berlin Jews, working in ammunition factories, were arrested. Seven to eight thousand were sent

to camps, primarily Auschwitz. Two thousand of the arrested men were husbands of German wives and were instead interned along with children of mixed marriages in the former social welfare center of the Berlin Jewish community, located at Rosenstraße 2-4. The Gentile relatives of the detainees demonstrated day after day, chanting: "Give us our husbands back." They dispersed when machine guns were trained on them. After they ran away, all the gates in that neighborhood were locked. Within ten to fifteen minutes, however, the women all came back. They repeatedly returned, day after day, until every single one of the two thousand men had been freed, including 23 out the 25 who had already been sent to Auschwitz. These men were returned and forced "to sign statements that swore them to secrecy concerning their Auschwitz experiences" before being brought back to a "work-education camp" near Berlin.<sup>1ii</sup> The release of these prisoners began on March 6<sup>th</sup>, 1943.

I realized that what we had interpreted as a myth in my patient's story might have a genuine historical dimension to it. When I pursued the matter, I found out how little had been known or published on the Rosenstraße demonstrations until the late 1980s and 1990s.

In 1984, when historian Nathan Stoltzfus started researching the events that took place in the Rosenstraße, he found that professional and non-professional essays that covered that period of time, or were on that topic, either did not mention the events at all, or summarized them in several sentences in a few small paragraphs – at most, one page. He had a sense that the story might be going extinct. It was regarded as a fluke in history that did not need to be explained. No scholars, except for Raul Hilberg, paid attention to the fact that 95% of German Jews who survived in Germany were intermarried: there were 28,000 of them. They were exempted,

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<sup>1</sup> Stoltzfus writes: The Jews married to Aryans "survived the war, officially registered with the police, working in officially authorized jobs, and officially receiving food rations."

according to Hilberg, because their deportation would have jeopardized the secrecy of the whole destruction process.

Stoltzfus, despite being told that the last eyewitnesses had died, proceeded to look for eyewitnesses to the Rosenstraße demonstrations through newspaper and radio announcements. He found dozens of people who were willing to give testimony. He published his findings from these interviews and the names of the people who testified in an essay in *Die Zeit* in 1989. A German television documentary and a fictional account written by Gernot Jochheim,<sup>iii</sup> who also interviewed the witnesses, followed shortly thereafter. Stoltzfus' own book, Resistance of the Heart: Intermarriage and the Rosenstraße Protest in Nazi Germany,<sup>iv</sup> was published in 1996 in English. Finally, in 2003, Margareth Von Trotta produced a film about the events based on Stoltzfus' original research.

I decided to go to Berlin myself in 1995. I found the Rosenstraße and the buildings 2-4. No plaque, at the time of my visit, indicated what had transpired there. I entered a nearby bookstore and asked for Gernot Jochheim's book. It was sold out, I was told, and could not be ordered. I looked around and found the 1995 edition of the official city guide to Berlin – Droste's *Berliner Städte Chronik* – which extensively chronicled week by week the major events that took place in the city during World War II – including March of 1943. The *Städte Chronik* described the fierce Allied bombings that pounded the city that month, but had not a single word to say about the women's demonstrations in the Rosenstraße.<sup>v</sup> When I was about to give up, I found a small feminist publication by Claudia von Gélieu: Frauengeschichte Entdecken Berlin.<sup>vi</sup> Inside, there was a one-page description of the Rosenstraße demonstrations.

The question arises as to why this courageous historical act remained so obscurely known for so long: Jochheim's book was not published until 1993 and von Gélieu's not until 1995 – the

same year that a small monument was installed in Berlin at the site of the demonstration. How can one understand the initial forgetting of the event in historical memory, its subsequent episodic rediscovery in the 1960s and 1970s, and then its being forgotten again until the late 1980s, when Stoltzfus' work reached public awareness? These questions, surrounding knowing and forgetting, permeate the inquiry into the search for the rescuer.

In November of 2008, I had the privilege of meeting Professor Nathan Stoltzfus himself at a "Lessons and Legacies" conference in a suburb of Chicago, Illinois. I told him how I had come to be familiar with his work. He informed me that the debate regarding the memory of the women's demonstration in the Rosenstraße was still ongoing. The Rosenstraße protest, and its effect, was not only disputed as historical fact; it had actually evolved in recent years into a full-fledged *Historikerstreit*. In his published dissertation of 1997, and in several essays and books published since, historian Wolf Gruner, under the guidance of Wolfgang Benz, insists, all evidence to the contrary, that the round-up of the Jews in the Rosenstraße was not for the purpose of their deportation, but was rather in order to select from among them 225 replacement workers for the other Jews that were going to be deported. Therefore, it was not the women's demonstration that did, or could have, brought about their release. This is an ongoing, highly prolific debate. Even the movie that was made in 2003 about the demonstrations, *Rosenstraße*, by Margareth von Trotta, drew sharp criticism from historian Wolfgang Benz.

To this day, it appears to be anathema in Germany to remember and openly speak of the acts of civil disobedience that proved to be effective in the Third Reich. It is possible that there were many more rescuers whose deeds will forever remain unknown. While iconic rescuers, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, are firmly entrenched in German societal memory, it is the place of the undistinguished rescuer, who comes from the ranks of "ordinary people," which is

controversial and highly contested. It is as though no space is allowed for the acknowledgement and remembrance of normative rescuing behavior.

Another rescuer, who may very well have been lost to German history, is found in the story of Sergeant Anton Schmidt, who had helped Jewish partisans in Poland, by supplying them with forged papers and military trucks from October of 1941 until March of 1942, when he was arrested and executed. His life and his story would have remained unknown, had Yad Vashem not publicized his story, had partisan-poet Abba Kovner, who had met Schmidt in person, not testified about him in the Eichmann trial, and had Hannah Arendt not mentioned him in her book, Eichmann in Jerusalem<sup>vii</sup>, a report on the trial. It was only after the year 2000 that a German army barrack was given his name in memoriam.

Another example is found in the rescue of Wladyslaw Szpilman by Wehrmacht officer Wilhelm Hosenfeld. Szpilman originally wrote his memoir in 1945, based on his life in Warsaw ghetto from 1939-45 in Polish.<sup>viii</sup> It was not well known, perhaps due to its difficult subject matter: describing a wartime world in which the lines between good and bad – oppressed and oppressor – were somewhat blurred. The memoir was republished in 1988 in German by Szpilman's son, and brought further into public consciousness by Roman Polansky's 2002 movie, "The Pianist."<sup>ix</sup> The movie recounts the events of Szpilman's experiences: Hosenfeld, the German officer, protected Szpilman after Nazis raided and requisitioned a building that Szpilman was hiding in. This relationship, between Hosenfeld and Szpilman, led to Szpilman's ultimate survival. Had it not been for the biographical movie, made over fifty years after the original event, the details of this rescue may have easily become forgotten to history – despite both the extensive information contained within the anti-Nazi correspondence Hosenfeld's family was in possession of, Szpilman's own autobiography that had existed since 1945 and the fact that

Hosenfeld had rescued other people too. For these acts of rescuing, almost lost to history, Wilhelm Hosenfeld was also recognized as "Righteous among the Nations" (יְדִישׁוֹת תּוֹמוֹת מְלִצְוֹת) by Yad Vashem, posthumously, in 2008.

When the truth is rejected, a myth usually replaces it. An example of this process is described in the book A Past Without A Shadow, written by Israeli scholar Zohar Shavit.<sup>x</sup> The book is a compendium of reviews of approximately 300 children's storybooks that were written in Germany between 1945 and 1995. The way in which the Jewish persecution is described in them is as follows: The German people were hijacked by a clique of ruthless leaders. German citizens tried to alert and warn their Jewish neighbors of their impending doom, but the latter refused to heed their warning, thus not only causing their own peril, but also placing an enormous burden of guilt on their would-be German protectors. The aforementioned example seems to demonstrate that when the solitary rescuers are erased from memory, a multitude of imaginary rescuers takes their place.

Germany was not the only country in which the memory of the rescue of the Jews failed to maintain its integrity. In contrast to Denmark, the rescue of Bulgaria's Jews was credited to the communist resistance, when in fact it was the church, under the leadership of metropolitans Stefan and Cyril, with the massive support of people from all walks of life, including parliamentarians, which was instrumental in protecting the country's over 40,000 Jews from deportation. Additionally, in neighboring Albania, not a single Jew was turned over to the Germans.<sup>xixij</sup> The number of Jews in Albania may have swelled to a thousand, because of the influx of refugees from the European countries. Muslims and Christians refused to obey German orders, a stance which they considered a matter of honor, turning down any compensation

offered for their deeds. All of this sank into oblivion during the reign of the post-WW II radical Communist regime.

To complete this very partial review of the forgotten rescuers, the case of Sir Nicholas Winton is quite startling. Winton, a London stockbroker of Jewish descent, during the spring and summer of 1939 organized the transfer of 669 children, mostly Jewish, from Czechoslovakia to foster homes in England.<sup>xiii</sup> He essentially replicated the operation "Kindertransport," which rescued about 10,000 Jewish children from Austria and Germany. Extensive advertising in newspapers, churches and synagogues was employed in order to find the required foster families and to raise the required funds. Eight transports of children (one via airplane, the other seven by train) made it to England; the ninth, which included 250 children, never left the station in Prague because of the news of the German invasion of Poland. It is most likely that none of those children survived the Holocaust.

Yet, despite the inevitable and widespread publicity Winton's efforts must have gained, nothing was known of it after the war. Winton himself told no one about it, because he did not find his rescue efforts to be unusual. It was only when his wife, Greta accidentally found a scrapbook in their attic "detailing lists of names,"<sup>xiv</sup> photographs, and letters – all documents related to the rescue operation – that the information came to light.

The path out of obscurity for Winton's rescue effort was also through the mediation of public figures: first, Dr. Elizabeth Maxwell, a Holocaust historian, along with her husband, newspaper magnate Robert Maxwell, publicized the story, then a BBC television program picked up it up, and finally two award-winning films were produced. It was only then that Sir Nicholas Winton received the recognition he deserved. He also had the chance to be reunited with some of the children he had saved – by now not only now full-grown, but already grandparents. One



cannot help but wonder at what psychological forces are at work to ensure that extraordinary events of this magnitude remain unknown and unacknowledged for so long; what forces keep them buried, hidden, or otherwise lost to the record of history.

### **Jewish Survivors' Struggle With Memories of Rescue**

The question becomes even more intricate when we look into how survivors themselves deal with their memory of being rescued. The dilemma surrounding remembrance is exemplified by the work of the late Dutch-American psychoanalyst Louis Micheels, who was an Auschwitz survivor himself. In his memoirs and public presentations, he continually pointed out how two Nazi physicians, both stationed in Auschwitz, repeatedly saved his life.<sup>xv</sup>

The first physician who had helped him, Edward Wirth, was the chief medical officer of Auschwitz. He carried out selections himself and chaired military tribunals who passed death sentences. Upon arrival at the Auschwitz camp, Micheels addressed him as "colleague Doctor" in order to report the numbers of the dead in the cattle car that brought him there. Wirth asked him to step aside and wait, which prevented him from having to go through the selection and probably saved his life. On a later occasion, Wirth again removed him from a situation which might have ended badly.

The other physician was the head of the Hygienic Institute in Auschwitz – Dr. Charles Munch – the only Nazi physician who refused to carry out selections. Munch was acquitted in his trial after the war, and a sizeable portion of Robert Jay Lifton's book, The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide,<sup>xvi</sup> is based on his conversations with Munch (called 'Ernst' in the book). Micheels worked in his lab for years and thus was protected from the realities of camp life.

In 2008, however, I heard the filmed testimony of a survivor whose sister did not return from an experiment carried out in that institute (at Auschwitz). When the survivor recently confronted Munch directly, his answer was that he indeed remembered her sister. Furthermore, Munch informed her that “that young girl” could not be allowed to return because she “knew too much.”

One can imagine the emotional strain Louis Micheels took upon himself by choosing to keep the memory of his so-called Nazi rescuers alive. Micheels himself wrote a paper “Der Geheimnisse Traeger” (*The Bearer of Secrets*),<sup>xvii</sup> on the unspoken covenant between the SS and their Jewish victims, which was never to divulge to anyone what had transpired in the camps. I wondered what motivated him. I came to speculate that it was the survivors’ ubiquitous yearning for a human response from their persecutors, for traces of empathy in the death camps, which came to be the driving force behind the belief in the aforementioned covenant and the multiplicity of anecdotes of Nazi “kindness” to be found in survivors’ testimonies. Typical of such a memory was the account of a man who had been selected for gassing and was kept waiting in a barrack. The survivor remembers that while the SS man counted the people assembled in the barrack waiting to be gassed, tears rolled down his cheeks. The witness was indeed saved because of the very count; because there were 42 instead of the 40 inmates who had been selected to be sent to the gas chambers, in that barrack. I did not, however, believe that the tears that were rolling down the SS man’s cheek were real. In my opinion they were nothing but wishful thinking on the part of the doomed.

Yet my disbelief in Nazi empathy notwithstanding, it is very important to take full notice of the rare exceptions of Nazi rescuing actions. An example of such rescuing actions was found in the interviews with survivors, carried out in 2005-6, who had performed slave labor in

Auschwitz and in other camps. During those interviews, I came across two incidents of women camp guards who had indeed saved the lives of Jewish girls. In one incident, a 13-year-old girl, who claimed to be 18 in order to be selected for labor and sent out of Auschwitz, suddenly realized she was completely alone, confessed to her lying, and wanted to return to her mother and brother. The guard took her to a separate room, gave her a glass of chocolate milk, and explained to her that there was no longer anyone to return to, and that she had to go on in order to survive. In another incident, a guard took a girl who had fractured her leg to a hospital for an x-ray and a cast, and proceeded to employ her as a "translator" in order to protect her from being sent back to the death camps.

### **Conclusion**

In reflecting back over the evidence gleaned from these anecdotes, two observations come to the forefront. The first, the Nazi as persecutor and the German as rescuer are two representations that must constantly be held in tension in the memories of survivors. Perhaps it is too difficult for public consciousness to hold such ambiguities in tension with one another. It is also likely that it is easier for Germany to forget its history of individual rescuers than to publicly and historically hold them in tension with the Nazis who chose to murder and to destroy. Further, perhaps, it is even more difficult for survivors to hold this tension in their own minds. They, in turn, create the image of the empathic Nazi, as a potential rescuer. The myth of the empathic Nazi, of the potential total rescuer, is more effective in maintaining emotional survival, than the meager, yet true memories, of German helpers are.

Perhaps the cultural propensity to obscure the real rescuer, and the associated polarities of experience in such remembrance is similar to strategies often employed by millennial religious

sects. Leon Festinger, in his writing about experiences of cognitive dissonance, explores types of millennialist religions in order to observe their reactions to failed prophecy (of the apocalypse, second coming of the Messiah, et al.). His research into such religious sects uncovered more than simple religious or cultic practice: he uncovered the power of denial that is disguised by, but firmly embedded within "belief." For the millennialists, when the apocalypse did not arrive, it did not encourage members of the cults to re-examine their beliefs. Though there were some who defected from the cult, it was more often the case that many members simply increased their fervor, belief, and devotion to the faith.<sup>xviii</sup> Even in the face of overwhelming reality – the continued existence of the world – among the millennialists who remained faithful, their beliefs left no room to consider the possibility that the apocalypse would not come. This was no cognitive space for any other possibility: all who expectantly were waiting for the apocalypse assumed they simply needed to wait longer. The same may hold true for those who lived through the Holocaust, be it as witnesses or as victims.

No matter the heroism of the rescuer the memory had to be obliterated because of its dissonance with the evil that was the Holocaust. The imaginary, compensatory memory took its place.

There is no room in such compensatory imagined memories for the experience of ambiguity – moral or otherwise. The "helping Germans" present in children's storybooks and the myth of the empathic Nazi serve as examples that illustrate this process. These fantasies serve to combat the deadliness – the real and experienced murderousness of the Nazi – that casts a lasting shadow on their fellow countrymen and left survivors changed for life.

Psychoanalytically speaking, the extremity, the boundless brutality and the absoluteness of Nazi murderousness invaded, ravaged, and occupied the psychological space of those who

experienced it, in such a totalitarian fashion, that no room was left for the "Rescue Experience." Rescue was not even imaginable at the epicenter of Nazi destructiveness. And now, more than a half a century later, the rescue memory is still eclipsed in the internal representation landscape of individuals and of societies, by the indelible marks, the persistent presence, of what German psychiatrist Tilman Moser called, *Dämonische Figuren*, "the demonic figures" of the Nazi past.

<sup>i</sup> Stoltzfus, Nathan, "Dissent in Nazi Germany," *Atlantic Monthly* (September 1992): 87-94.

<sup>ii</sup> Stoltzfus, Nathan (1996). Resistance of the Heart: Intermarriage and the Rosenstraße Protest in Nazi Germany. W.W. Norton. 89

<sup>iii</sup> Jochheim, Gernot (1993). Frauenprotest in der Rosenstraße: "Gebt uns unsere Männer wieder," Hentrich, 1 Aufl. Edition.

<sup>iv</sup> Stoltzfus, Nathan (1996). Resistance of the Heart: Intermarriage and the Rosenstraße Protest in Nazi Germany. W.W. Norton.

<sup>v</sup> Holmsten, Georg (1990) *Die Berlin Chronik*. Droste's Städte Chronik. Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag Düsseldorf.

<sup>vi</sup> von Gélieu, Claudia, Frauengeschichte Entdecken Berlin. Elefant Press, 1995.

<sup>vii</sup> Arendt, Hannah (1963). Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil, Viking Press, New York, New York.

<sup>viii</sup> Szpilman, Wladyslaw (1945). Smierc Miasta (Death of a City).

<sup>ix</sup> Das wunderbare Überleben (The Miraculous Survival)

<sup>x</sup> Shavit, Zohar, (tr. Jaffe, Aaron & Atarah). (2005) A Past Without a Shadow, Routledge, New York, New York.

<sup>xi</sup> Ed. Wyman, David S. (1996) The World Reacts to the Holocaust, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London. 256-290.

<sup>xii</sup> Sarnier, Harvey, (1997). Rescue in Albania: One Hundred Percent of Jews in Albania Rescued from Holocaust, Brunswick Press, Cathedral City California.

<sup>xiii</sup> Retrieved November 2, 2009 from <http://www.powerofgood.net/>

<sup>xiv</sup> Namm, Leisah. Retrieved November 2, 2009 *Film documents 'power of good':* <http://www.jewishaz.com/jewishnews/020201/power.shtml>.

<sup>xv</sup> Micheels, Louis J. (1989) Doctor 117641: A Holocaust Memoir. New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University Press.

<sup>xvi</sup> Lifton, Robert Jay (2000). The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide. Basic Books, New York, NY. 303-336

<sup>xvii</sup> Micheels, Louis, (1985). *The Bearer of the Secret*, *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 5:21-30.

<sup>xviii</sup> Festinger, Leon, Riecken, H., Schacter, S. (2006). When Prophecy Fails. Pinter and Martin, Ltd., London UK, 201.