

perhaps two.” “Thank you,” again just the voice – the little man could not have been much taller than the railings – thanking me, in heaven’s name, for two miserable days of grace. I loathed myself utterly as I went back to the house to fetch the cellar key.<sup>26</sup>

## CONNECTIONS

Is there a difference between rescuing someone you know and saving a stranger? Is there a difference between refusing to rescue someone you know and refusing to save a stranger?

How did Christabel Bielenberg define her “universe of obligation”? What were the consequences of that definition? How did they contribute to her feeling that “I loathed myself utterly?” What other options did she have? How were they different from the choices she could have made earlier?

## READING 8

ותראן המילדות את הא-לקים

### *Choosing to Rescue*

In Germany, the government imprisoned anyone caught sheltering a Jew. In Poland, the penalty was death. Yet, about 2 percent of the Polish Christian population chose to hide Jews. They did so in a nation with a long history of antisemitism. After the war, sociologist Nechama Tec interviewed a number of the rescuers. One factory worker told her sadly that she had done very little during the war. She had saved only one Jew and she had rescued that person only by chance. As her story unfolded, Tec discovered that Stefa Dworek had gone to incredible lengths to save a stranger.

Goodness, like evil, often begins in small steps. Heroes evolve; they aren't born.

It all began in the summer of 1942, when Stefa’s husband, Jerezy, brought home a young Jewish woman named Irena. A policeman involved in the Polish underground had asked him to hide her for a few days. The woman looked too “Jewish” to pass for a Christian. So the couple decided to keep her concealed in the one-room apartment they shared with their infant child. To shield her from unexpected visitors, the Dworeks pushed a freestanding wardrobe a few inches from the wall. The space between the wall and the wardrobe became the woman’s hiding place.

A “few days” stretched to a week and the week, in turn, became a month and still the unexpected guest remained. The policeman was unable to find another hiding place for her. After several months, Jerezy Dworek demanded that Irena leave. His wife Stefa, however, insisted that the woman stay. The quarrel ended with Jerezy stomping out of the apartment and vowing to denounce both Irena and his wife. What did Stefa do?

I called Laminski [the policeman]... [and] he went to talk to my husband. He told him, "Here is my pistol; if you will denounce them you will not live more than five minutes longer. The first bullet will go into your head." After that my husband stopped coming... This ended my marriage. But Ryszard Laminski continued to come, helping us, warning us about danger. He never abandoned us.

Was Stefa aware of the danger to herself and her baby?

Sure I knew. Everybody knew what could happen to someone who kept Jews... Sometimes when it got dangerous, Irena herself would say, "I am such a burden to you, I will leave." But I said, "Listen, until now you were here and we succeeded, so maybe now all will succeed. How can you give yourself up?" I knew that I could not let her go. The longer she was there the closer we became.<sup>27</sup>

Then in 1944, the people of Warsaw rebelled against the Germans. As the fighting spread, it became too dangerous to stay in the apartment. So Irena bandaged her face and Stefa introduced her to neighbors as a cousin who had just arrived in the city. When the Germans finally put down the uprising, a new threat developed. Irena later described it to a commission:

Before the end of the war there was a tragic moment... We learned that the Germans were about to evacuate all civilians. My appearance on the streets even with my bandaged face could end tragically. Stefa decided to take a bold step which I will remember as long as I live. She gave me her baby to protect me. [The Germans did not evacuate mothers with young children.] As she was leaving me with her child, she told me that the child would save me and that after the war I would give him back to her. But in case of her death she was convinced that I would take good care of him... Eventually we both stayed.<sup>28</sup>

What motivated Stefa Dworek? "I knew I could not let her go. What could I do? Even a dog you get used to and especially to a fine person like she was. I could not act any other way... I would have helped anyone. It did not matter who she was. After all I did not know her at first, but I helped and could not send her away. I always try to help as best as I can."<sup>29</sup>

## CONNECTIONS

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How does the dictionary define the word *altruism*? What does the word mean to you? Was Stefa Dworek altruistic?

In his study of rescuers, Ervin Staub states, "Goodness, like evil, often begins in small steps. Heroes evolve; they aren't born. Very often the rescuers make only a small commitment at the start – to hide someone for a day or two. But once they had taken that step, they began to see themselves differently, as someone who helps. What starts as mere willingness becomes intense involvement."<sup>30</sup> Write a working definition of the word *hero*. Was Stefa Dworek a hero?

→Nechama Tec and Ervin Staub discussed the sociology and motivations of rescuers at the Second Annual Facing History Conference. Both agreed that the decision to rescue Jews had little to do with the rescuer's religion, nationality, schooling, class, or ethnic heritage. Most rescuers were independent individuals who refused to follow the crowd. They also had a history of performing good deeds and did not perceive rescue work as anything out of the ordinary. How does Stefa Dworek fit their description? A video of their joint presentation is available at the Facing History Resource Center.

→Both Tec and Staub benefitted from the help Christians gave Jews during the Holocaust. Nechama Tec relates her personal experiences in her memoir, *Dry Tears*. She also described those years to a group of Facing History students. A videotape of that talk is available from the Resource Center. See *Elements of Time*, pages 45-49 for a brief portrait of Tec. The book also contains a bibliography and study questions. Ervin Staub has explored ways of using information about rescuers to help students become more caring adults. The Resource Center also has video presentations of his talks at Facing History Summer Institutes.

Inge Deutschkorn, a Jew who was hidden along with her mother during the war, attributes her survival to German Socialists who created a network to help Jews. Members took unbelievable risks and even sacrificed their own ration cards to feed hidden Jews. Her story is recounted in *Outcast: A Jewish Girl in Wartime Berlin*, available from the Facing History Resource Center.

## READING 9

ולא עשו כאשר דבר אליהן מלך מצרים  
ותחיין את הילדים

### *Links in a Chain*

In their book *The Altruistic Personality*, Samuel and Pearl Oliner quote Johan, a Dutch teenager who rescued Jews. "My father said the world is one big chain. One little part breaks and the chain is broken and it won't work anymore." The Oliners went on to observe, "Rescuers did not simply happen on opportunities for rescue; they actively created, sought, or recognized them where others did not. Their participation was not determined by circumstances but their own personal qualities. Chance sometimes provided rescuers like Johan with an opportunity to help, but it was the values learned from their parents which prompted and sustained their involvement."<sup>31</sup>

Rescuers did not simply happen on opportunities for rescue; they actively created, sought, or recognized them where others did not.

The experiences of Marion Pritchard, a graduate student in 1940 – the year the Germans invaded the Netherlands – confirms the Oliners' view that the decision to rescue was a conscious choice. One morning in 1942, as she was riding her bicycle to school, she passed a home for Jewish children. What she observed that day changed her life.

The Germans were loading the children, who ranged in age from babies to eight-year-olds, on trucks. They were upset, and crying. When they did not move fast enough the Nazis picked them up, by an arm, a leg, the hair, and threw them into the trucks. To watch grown men treat small children that way – I could not believe my eyes. I found myself literally crying with rage. Two women coming down the street tried to interfere physically. The Germans heaved them into the truck, too. I just sat there on my bicycle, and that was the moment I decided that if there was anything I could do to thwart such atrocities, I would do it.

Some of my friends had similar experiences, and about ten of us, including two Jewish students who decided they did not want to go into hiding, organized very informally for this purpose. We obtained Aryan identity cards for the Jewish students, who, of course, were taking more of a risk than we were. They knew many people who were looking to *onderduiken*, “disappear,” as Anne Frank and her family were to do.

We located hiding places, helped people move there, provided food, clothing, and ration cards, and sometimes moral support and relief for the host families. We registered newborn Jewish babies as gentiles... and provided medical care when possible.<sup>32</sup>

Somewhere in between was the majority, whose actions varied from the minimum decency of at least keeping quiet if they knew where Jews were hidden to finding a way to help them when they were asked.

The decision to rescue Jews had great consequences. Pritchard described what happened when she hid a man with three children.

The father, the two boys, and the baby girl moved in and we managed to survive the next two years, until the end of the war. Friends helped take up the floorboards, under the rug, and build a hiding place in case of raids. These did occur with increasing frequency, and one night we had a very narrow escape.

Four Germans, accompanied by a Dutch Nazi policeman came and searched the house. They did not find the hiding place, but they had learned from experience that sometimes it paid to go back to a house they had already searched, because by then the hidden Jews might have come out of the hiding place. The baby had started to cry, so I let the children out. Then the Dutch policeman came back alone. I had a small revolver that a friend had given me, but I had never planned to use it. I felt I had no choice except to kill him. I would do it again, under the same circumstances, but it still bothers me, and I still feel that there “should” have been another way. If anybody had really tried to find out how and where he disappeared, they could have, but the general attitude was that there was one less traitor to worry about. A local undertaker helped dispose of the body, he put it in a coffin with a legitimate body in it. I hope the dead man’s family would have approved.

Was I scared? Of course the answer is “yes.” Especially after I had been imprisoned and released. Then were times that the fear got the

better of me, and I did not do something that I could have. I would rationalize the inaction, feeling it might endanger others, or that I should not run a risk, because what would happen to the three children I was now responsible for, if something happened to me, but I knew when I was rationalizing.<sup>33</sup>

## CONNECTIONS

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In reflecting on her decision and the choices others made during the war, Pritchard is troubled by a “tendency to divide the general population during the war into the few ‘good guys’ and the large majority of ‘bad guys.’ That seems to me to be a dangerous oversimplification... The point I want to make is that there were indeed some people who behaved criminally by betraying their Jewish neighbors and thereby sentenced them to death. There were some people who dedicated themselves to actively rescuing as many people as possible. Somewhere in between was the majority, whose actions varied from the minimum decency of at least keeping quiet if they knew where Jews were hidden to finding a way to help them when they were asked.”<sup>34</sup>

Why do you think Pritchard sees the oversimplification as dangerous? Would Christabel Bielenberg and her neighbor agree? Do you agree?

Pritchard says of her own decision: “I think you have a responsibility to yourself to behave decently. We all have memories of times we should have done something and didn’t. And it gets in the way of the rest of your life.” She notes that she has always had “a strong conviction that we are our brothers’ keepers. When you truly believe that, you have to behave that way in order to live with yourself.” Whom does she include in her “universe of obligation”?

How was Pritchard’s decision similar to that of Stefa Dworek? How did it differ? Was Pritchard altruistic?

The Oliners contrast Nazi resisters with rescuers.

For most rescuers... helping Jews was an expression of ethical principles that extended to all of humanity and, while often reflecting concern with equity and justice, was predominantly rooted in care. While other feelings – such as hatred of Nazis, religion, and patriotism, or even deference to an accepted authority whose values the rescuer shared – influenced them, most rescuers explain their actions as responses to a challenge to their fundamental ethical principles. This sense that ethical principles were at stake distinguished rescuers from their compatriots who participated in resistance activities only. For these resisters, hatred of Nazis and patriots were most often considered sufficient reasons for their behaviors; for rescuers, however, such reasons were rarely sufficient.<sup>35</sup>