

Prisoners during a roll call, wearing striped uniforms with coloured triangular badges and identification numbers, Buchenwald. (USHMM)



Did altruism save more than just the victim?

When teaching about the Holocaust, it is difficult to focus on examples of moral life, especially, altruism. In 1830, philosopher Auguste Comte coined the term altruism as the “act of selflessly caring for others”.¹ This paper examines altruism in the concentration camps.

Survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Bremen, and Bergen-Belsen camps Magda Herzberger said “As a survivor of the Holocaust I have witnessed and experienced the tremendous efforts the Nazis made to destroy us, not only physically, but psychologically, by trying to take away our dignity, self-esteem, and humanness. But they failed because there are many instances of inmates who have maintained their principles and their dignity and have committed acts of selfless generosity towards their fellow prisoners”.² In the confines of a concentration camp, the concept of altruism could make absolutely no sense. Why would you endanger your

own well-being to an even greater degree for someone else? In his book *Stealth Altruism* Arthur B. Shostak attempts to answer this question and tells of “secret, non-militant, high-risk efforts by Carers, those victims who tried to reduce suffering and improve everyone’s chances of survival by such acts as sharing scarce clothing and food rations, holding up weakened fellow prisoners during roll call, secretly replacing an ailing friend in an exhausting work detail, and much more”.³ These extraordinary acts of altruism, when examined, remind us of our own inherent longing to do good and to love, even in situations of extreme brutality.

A neurological explanation could be that an altruistic act activates the pleasure centres of the brain.⁴ Small acts that may seem insignificant today would have meant the difference between life and death in the camps. Johannesburg based survivor Don Krausz was in three



Don Krausz, Holocaust survivor.
Photograph: Julian Pokroy

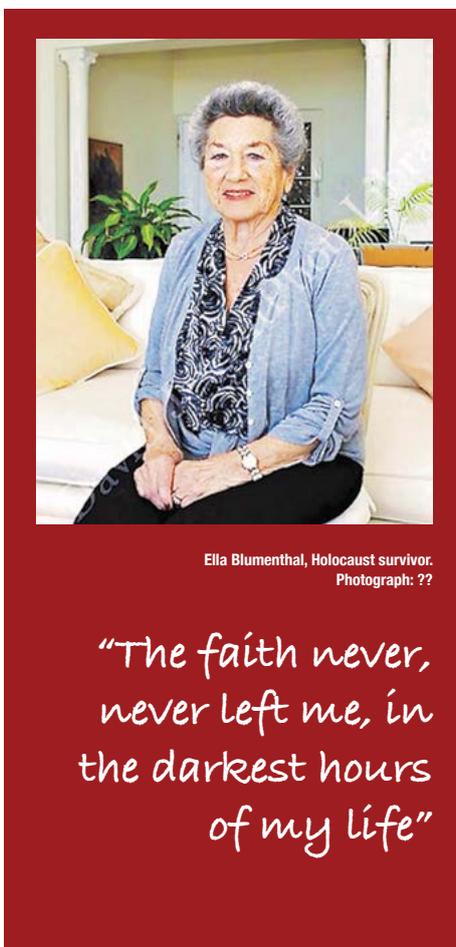
“Then something happened for which I had seen prisoners being shot dead.”

1. Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton, 2005. *Altruism World Religions*. Georgetown university press, Washington DC. 2. <https://www.amazon.com/Stealth-Altruism-Forbidden-Resistance-Holocaust-ebook/dp/B0747SNKD3>
3. Arthur B. Shostak, 2017. *Stealth Altruism: Forbidden Care as Jewish Resistance in the Holocaust*. Routledge, New York City, New York. 4. Klimecki OM, Leiberg S, Singer T, 2014. *Differential Pattern of Functional Brain Plasticity After a compassion and Empathy Training*. Soc Cogn Affect Neurosci. 9(6): 873 -9

concentration camps and tells how in 1945 Dutch prisoners saved him and his friend Otto during the 'death march' from Sachsenhausen, carrying the two children when they had no strength left to march. Don recalls: "Then something happened for which I had seen prisoners being shot dead. Suddenly three Dutchmen broke rank and walked back towards us. One picked up Otto and carried him. Two others each got hold of one of my arms and pulled me along. They saved our lives."⁵

The ability to transcend reality and root oneself in times that were happy, and moral could have been an incredibly powerful survival mechanism. Cape Town based survivor Ella Blumenthal tells how in Auschwitz when they were all starving, telling stories about family meals during the Jewish High Holy Days empowered them to go on. When asked if she thinks having faith in yourself helped her survive, Ella answers: "The faith never, never left me, in the darkest hours of my life: I knew that there is a God above us and I knew that he's going to... that maybe he will help me, he will keep me alive. I had faith, strong faith"⁶. Having a sense of self and of moral significance gave people a purpose and guidelines on how to act – in a place where most moral signposts had disappeared.

Moral life was not easy, yet it existed in the camps. Not many victims would have survived without a helping hand. Some people clung to morality and empathy as an act of defiance and resistance. This resistance may not have won the war, but it was an incredibly empowering act. It shows that hope was not dead, that the "resister" had some control, no matter how small. Johannesburg based survivor Irene Fainman, who was eight years old when imprisoned in Ravensbruck, tells about how her mother covered her eyes and blocked her ears to protect her from the cruelty around her. Holocaust



Survivor and writer Arnošt Lustig survived Theresienstadt, Auschwitz and Buchenwald and escaped to return to Prague and take part in the May uprising against the Germans. In Shostak's book, Lustig recalls an 18 year old prisoner named Ernest Braunstein, who on his arrival to Auschwitz-Birkenau, saw a semi-conscious prisoner hanging by his wrists, bound behind him, on a pole high above the ground. When Braunstein heard the prisoner's cry for water he rushed over and held up a cup to him. The SS guards beat him and strung him up on an adjacent pole. After about three hours, unconscious Braunstein was released and the other prisoners took him to one of the barracks. For several days, these prisoners kept him hidden, shared their scarce food with him and kept him alive; he survived the Holocaust. Lustig recalls other such acts that he described as 'triumph for humanity' by brave prisoners that will never be known.

Altruism in such an environment was in direct opposition to the rule of the camp's law. To be kind and empathic was a form of passive resistance. This resistance may not win the war, but it was an incredibly empowering act. The conditions in the camps were appalling – and yet – the empathy and altruism shown by those who, themselves, had so very little, kept the hope in human nature alive. People found that their survival was due to many acts of kindness despite the overwhelming hatred around them. Altruistic acts saved more than just one – it unintentionally saved the person being altruistic too. Whether spiritually, mentally, or emotionally, altruism has a power that is further reaching than it initially seems. It is at this particular trajectory in our humanity's survival and health-crossroads that the words of philosopher Michel de Montaigne are even more poignant "He who does not in some degree live for others, hardly lives for himself"⁷. CATHY WILSON

FURTHER READING:

Stealth Altruism: Forbidden Care as Jewish Resistance in the Holocaust.
- Arthur B. Shostak
Available online [here](#)

Altruism World Religions.
- Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton

To learn about the Holocaust is to learn about life as well as about death.
- Lawrence Sutin

To struggle with the Holocaust is to wrestle with the meaning of our lives and times.
- Gerald K. Markle

5. Don Krausz Testimony - JHGC Collection 6. Ella Blumenthal Interview - CTHGC Collection

7. In *Stealth Altruism: Forbidden Care as Jewish Resistance in the Holocaust*. Arthur B. Shostak. 2017. Routledge. New York City, New York. Accessed at: <https://books.google.co.za/books?id=IR8uDwAAQBAJ&pg=PT46&dq=Michel%20de%20Montaigne%20He%20who%20does%20not%20in%20some%20degree%20live%20for%20others%2C%20hardly%20lives%20for%20himself&pg=PT46#v=onepage&q=Michel%20de%20Montaigne%20He%20who%20does%20not%20in%20some%20degree%20live%20for%20others,%20hardly%20lives%20for%20himself&f=false> Klimecki OM, Leiberg S, Singer T. Differential Pattern of Functional Brain Plasticity After a compassion and Empathy Training. Soc Cogn Affect Neurosci. 2014; 9(6): 873 -9