



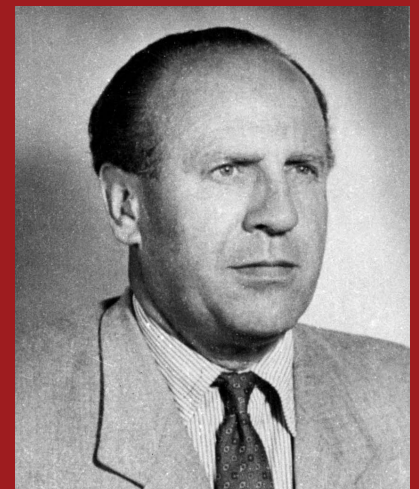
The "Choices and Dilemmas" space at the JHGC permanent exhibition. Visitors are encouraged to think critically about the choices made by individuals and institutions during the Holocaust.

The Psychology of Rescuers during the Holocaust

“The Holocaust was not a historical accident, It did not simply happen like a bolt from the blue”,¹ it happened because individuals and governments made choices that not only legalised discrimination but also allowed prejudice, hatred, and ultimately mass murder to occur. However, within this history, there were a small number of people who risked their lives, and that of their families, to rescue Jews. This paper, will explore the question of ‘why’ did they do it, and what learning about this rescuer behaviour can teach us about the power and impact of the choices we make within our lives in the present.

Human behaviour can be explained by broad social forces, such as political, economic, or family upbringing which shape us into the people we become.² These forces are fluid and can change the way people behave over time, for example the case of Oskar Schindler, who started as a Nazi perpetrator but in the end saved about 1,200 Jews from death in Nazi killing centres.³ For us in the present, it is important to gain insight into what motivated rescuers, such as Schindler, and to appreciate the difficult choices that such people made in challenging circumstances. The behaviour of rescuers provides future generations with the hope that even in times of turmoil, there are people who choose to rise above the norm of that society to preserve the dignity of humanity.

Generally, within a country’s system we are obliged to conform to the rules governing the country, this was even more so within the context of Nazi Germany, which left people almost powerless as individuals. Rescuers on the other hand appeared to have the strength and courage to use an inner power to resist the forces around them in a most selfless act of altruism.



Oskar Schindler
(28 April 1908 – 9 October 1974)

“I did what I could, what I had to do, what my conscience told me I must do. That’s all there is to it. Really, nothing more.”

1. Downing, D. 2005. *Origins of the Holocaust*. Gareth Stevens Publishing LLLP, Pg.6. Online. URL: <https://books.google.co.za/books?id=5ABiYqYTyhYC&pg=PA6&dq=the+holocaust+was+not+an+accident&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewif67jz4MPsAhWCThUIHfY0BxEQuwUwAhoECAIQBw#v=onepage&q=the%20holocaust%20was%20not%20an%20accident&f=false> Accessed on 20 October 2020

2. Oliner, S. P., & Oliner, P. M. 1988. *The altruistic personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe*. Free Press

3. Crowe, D. 2007. *Oskar Schindler: The Untold Account of His Life, Wartime Activities, and the True Story Behind the List*. Hachette UK. Online. URL: https://books.google.co.za/books?id=aMQ_DgAAQBAJ&printsec=front-cover&dq=oskar+schindler&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewiip5y178PsAhXCuHUHTe8BdYQuwUwAhoECAUQBw#v=onepage&q=oskar%20schindler&f=false Accessed on 20 October 2020

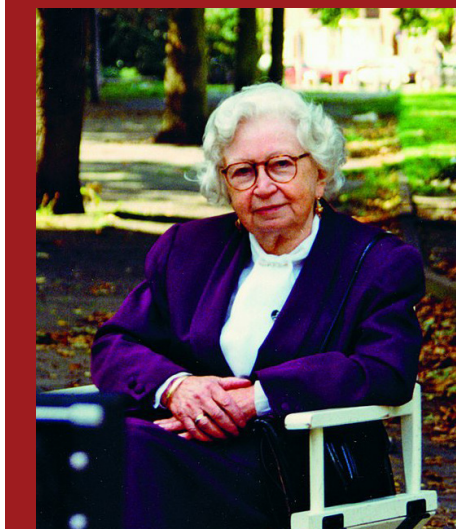
In 1830, philosopher Auguste Comte coined the term altruism as the “act of selflessly caring for others”.⁴ Durkheim, a French Sociologist believed that no society could exist unless its members acknowledge and make sacrifices on behalf of each other. He says “that altruism is not merely a sort of agreeable ornament to social life but it’s fundamental basis.”⁵

Rescue of Jews under Nazi rule was a rare behaviour. From a population of 700 million living in German occupied countries there were only tens of thousands who risked their lives to rescue them.⁶ The majority remained passive bystanders, while many collaborated with the Nazis. One cannot make a generalisation about rescuers’ motivation. Various theorists have delved into this question and have made an analysis about their family backgrounds, personalities and social situations to try gain an understanding of what motivated them to take life threatening risks to save the lives of ‘others’.

Adam Grant references the work of Robert Glazer, the CEO of Acceleration Partners who had found that imposing

“Rescuers said their parents explained to them why they were being disciplined providing them with moral lessons rather than punishment.”

rules amongst team members he manages is counterproductive.⁷ It works much better if you create a positive, team driven culture, by focusing on and reinforcing core values. Glazer found support for this approach in a study done by two sociologists who analysed the actions of Non-Jews who saved Jews during the Holocaust, knowing they would be risking their own lives. The study revealed that what differentiated rescuers from non-rescuers was the way in which their parents disciplined bad behaviour and in turn praised good behaviour. Rescuers said their parents



Miep Gies, photographed in 1992, Anne Frank House

explained to them why they were being disciplined providing them with moral lessons rather than punishment. Grant notes that by explaining moral principles, parents of rescuers taught the importance of complying voluntarily with rules that align with critical values and of questioning rules that don’t. They succeeded in encouraging critical thinking and reasoning in their children. The result showed that rescuers were three times more likely to reference moral values that applied

to all people, emphasising that their parents taught them to respect all human beings.

In 1996, Mark Klempner worked with Dutch rescuers of Jewish children to try understanding how they made such courageous choices.⁸ He found they had three things in common. Firstly, nearly all rescuers said that in their childhood they knew somebody, usually a parent or relative, who had gone out of their way to help others. They learned through example from a role model. In addition, they were taught not to exclude people and draw lines between

“But even an ordinary secretary or a housewife or a teenager can, within their own small ways, turn on a small light in a dark room.”

‘us’ and ‘them.’ Miep Gies who was one of the helpers of Anne Frank and her family recalls that as a little girl she was the recipient of a humanitarian programme established after WWI in the Netherlands to help starving children whose families were war victims . Miep reflected on the direct connection between her receiving help and giving the much needed help to the Frank family.

Secondly, Klempner found rescuers could think for themselves and act independently on their convictions. They were able to disregard public opinion and make their own choices.

Lastly, he observed that rescuers had been taught to think for themselves, yet they had also learned not to overthink things too much. If they had analysed and thought too much about their actions, chances are they would not have acted on their initial feelings.

Further research done by professor of sociology Nechama Tec,⁹ found that one of the standout features was a sense of individuality. Rescuers tended to be people who didn’t blend in and conform but rather stood out in various ways. They lived by and acted according to their own set of values and operated independently. She found that most of them possess ‘prosocial behaviour’, the

4. Neuser, J & Chilton, B. 2005. *Altruism World Religions*. Georgetown University Press, Washington DC. Online. URL: <http://press.georgetown.edu/book/georgetown/altruism-world-religions>

5. Durheim, E. 1973. *On Morality and Society*. Chicago University. Pages 5-6

6. Fogelman, E. *The Rescuer Self: Yad Vashem: The Righteous Among the Nations*. Online. URL: <https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/resources/the-rescuer-self.html>

7. Grant, A. M., and S. Sandberg. 2016. *Originals: How Non-conformists Move the World*. New York, New York: Viking.

8. Klempner, M. 2006. *The Heart Has Reasons: Holocaust Rescuers and Their Stories of Courage*. The Pilgrims Press.

9. Nechama Tec. *Facing History*. Resource Library: Nechama Tec discusses her research on rescuers. Online. URL: <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/video/nechama-tec-discussing-rescuers>

intention to benefit and help others. Rescuers tended to have a universalistic perception, that was not only about helping Jews but about helping people who were helpless and would probably have died unless they received help.

Eva Fogelman identified certain characteristics in about 300 interviews she conducted with rescuers.¹⁰ Her findings revealed that they displayed a heightened sense of empathy, came from loving homes that did not fear authority, and could think independently about what was the right thing to do. She concluded that 90% of rescuers she interviewed had learned tolerance and acceptance of difference from their parents and 80% had an altruistic role model.

Samuel Oliner and Pearl Oliner, Professors at Humboldt State University who also run the Altruistic Personality and Prosocial Behavior Institute, interviewed hundreds of rescuers in Germany and found that their parents' methods of discipline was based on reason and explanation, and physical punishment was used sparingly. Oliner and Oliner found that rescuers tended to come from families whose parents



A guide engages with a group of learners in the JHGC permanent exhibition - exploring the roles and consequences of 'choices' during the Holocaust

“I did everything from my heart. I didn’t think about getting something for it. My father taught me to be this way.”

were affectionate and prosocial role models whereas bystander families were generally less cohesive, less affectionate and had stereotypical views of Jews and other ‘out groups’. One rescuer said, “I did everything from my heart. I didn’t think about getting something for it. My father taught me to be this way. I still feel the same way now. I cannot refuse if somebody needs something. That’s why I still help people. I will do it until I don’t have the strength to do it anymore.”

As we remember and honour the victims of the Holocaust, we must also honour the rescuers whose actions saved lives. It is clear that rescuers displayed emotional and cognitive

types of morality, having a strong sense of right and wrong developed from early childhood. From all the various work devoted to rescuer behaviour, it becomes clear that altruism is something that can be learned. The parents of rescuers appeared to be role models who displayed active kindness, moral discipline, tolerance and encouraged their children to think independently. This value system became ingrained within the rescuers and their belief was that they had to do what they did in order to remain true to themselves and their upbringing. At the same time, we must remember that each rescuer was unique, and it is the moral choices which they made that nurtured this type of behaviour.

KARYN KADISH

FURTHER READING:

David Crowe, *Oskar Schindler: The Untold Account of His Life, Wartime Activities, and the True Story Behind the List.*

Eva Fogelman, *Conscience and Courage: Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust.*

Mark Klempner, *The Heart Has Reasons: Holocaust Rescuers and Their Stories of Courage.*

Jacob Neuser & Bruce Chilton, *Altruism World Religions.*

Samuel & Pearl Oliner, *The altruistic personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe*

Arthur B. Shostak, *Stealth Altruism: Forbidden Care as Jewish Resistance in the Holocaust.*