

RESCUE

The Story
of How
Gentiles Saved Jews in the Holocaust



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*In memory of my grandparents—
Samuel and Rose Richter,
and Michael and Leah Meltzer*

Rescue: The Story of How Gentiles Saved Jews in the Holocaust
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A Jewish woman tells how her perilous rescue was carried out:

Then we saw the searchlight of the German patrol boat. Everyone thought his last hour had come and was ready to jump overboard and drown, rather than be taken by the Germans. However, the passengers calmed down after the initial danger had passed and made every effort to stay calm, though every muscle was tense for fear of discovery.

The little boat had in the meantime gone off course because of the gale, and twenty-one lives lay in the hands of two fishermen. Gradually it began to grow light, but we had no idea of the boat's position. Would we land on Bornholm? Would we ever be saved? The boat approached the coast; we hoped that liberty was at hand. We were really in Swedish territorial waters. The harbor we had sailed into was full of Swedish warships on whose decks sailors waved and shouted "Valkommen!"

Also by Milton Meltzer

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EUROPE UNDER NAZI OCCUPATION



The first question that the Levite asked was, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" But then the good Samaritan came by. And he reversed the question. "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?" That is the question before you.

—FROM THE LAST SPEECH OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.,
MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE, APRIL 1968

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1 *A Darkness Everywhere*

This is a book about the Gentile men and women, and children too, who had the courage to risk their lives and those of their families in the rescue of Jews during the Nazi era. Some thousands of Jewish lives were saved. Against six million lost in the Holocaust, how many is that? Yet few as the rescuers were, they must not be forgotten.

Their stories let us know that while there were victims, there were also heroes and heroines. What they did makes us see that we need not give in to evil. There are other choices than passive acceptance, or complicity. There are human spirits who resist. They are witness to the goodness in humanity.

More than ten years ago I wrote *Never to Forget: The Jews of the Holocaust*, a book that told in considerable detail how and when the Holocaust happened. In that book I used eyewitness accounts, diaries, journals, memoirs, interviews of those who experienced the terror and the grief of that era. I concentrated on the history of hatred that led up to the catastrophe, on the processes of de-

struction, and finally on the Jews' spirit of resistance. The focus was on the central issue of what part of the world did and all of the world permitted to be done. But I said almost nothing about the people some call the "Righteous Gentiles"—the non-Jews in Germany and every country of Nazi-occupied Europe who helped many of Adolf Hitler's victims.

Now I have come to realize the great importance of recording not just the evidence of evil, but also the evidence of human nobility. Love, not hatred, is what the world needs. Rescue, not destruction. The stories in this book offer reason to hope. And hope is what we need, the way plants need sunlight.

Here I will briefly give the general background to the story of the rescuers of Jews. The following chapters will be more specific on the causes of events in the countries or regions I describe.

"The Holocaust" is the term Jews themselves chose to describe what happened to them during World War II. The term is related to the word *olah* in the Hebrew Bible. Its religious meaning is "burnt sacrifice." Over the 3500-year span of Jewish history, the Holocaust was the most massive catastrophe. Six million died, two out of every three Jews in Europe, one third of the world's Jews. But don't think of them as "millions." Do that and you miss the truth of the murder of each *individual* man, woman, and child.

The German code name for the systematic murder of the Jews was the "Final Solution of the Jewish Problem." It was Hitler's prime goal, set forth in his book *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle), a book that almost nobody took seriously when it was first published in 1925. He carried out his goal with iron will and mechanical efficiency,

even when it interfered with his war against the Allied nations.

Persecution, torment, murder were not new to the Jews. They had suffered them for millennia. So had other peoples. They were massacred for what chiefs, kings, emperors, dictators called useful goals. The victims died because those in power wanted to increase that power, to grab wealth or territory, to crush opposition, to force conversion. The powerful persecuted the weak whenever they believed it to be in their own interest.

It was different with Hitler and the Nazis. They wanted to kill all Jews solely because they were Jews. Their crime? They were accused of living, of having been born. Such a crime had no precedent. The murder of Jews had nothing to do with their faith, or lack of faith. Hitler hated them because of what he called their "race." The Nazis said the Jews were "inferior" and therefore had no right to live in the same world with their "superiors," the Germans.

Jews are people like any other—good, bad, gifted, stupid, cheerful, sad, weak, strong, greedy, generous. But to Hitler that didn't matter. All that mattered was that they were Jews. And his policy demanded their total annihilation as a people.

The mass murder that followed was a crime against all humanity. That the Jews were the victims was the outcome of a long history of anti-Semitism in Germany, in Europe, in the world. But what Hitler did was to make the possibility of suffering a Holocaust a reality for any group of people. As a result, ever since the Holocaust no group has been able to feel it can never know the same fate.

To put the story in perspective requires a look back in

history for the roots of anti-Semitism. Its religious base lies in the Christian Gospels: the accusation that the Jews were to blame for the crucifixion of Jesus. When "Christ-killer" became a synonym for Jew, persecution inevitably followed. For many centuries both church and state took steps to punish Jews and to ensure their misery. Decrees kept them from farming the land or practicing the crafts. The Crusades that began in 1096 marked the beginning of an oppression the duration and intensity of which would not be equaled until Hitler's time. The Crusaders who set off to free the Holy Land from the Moslem infidels began by killing the Jewish infidels they encountered passing through Europe. Christians massacred Jews on a stunning scale. From 1215 on, the church forced Jews to wear a distinctive badge on their clothing. They were blamed for anything that went wrong. But when money made from the occupations they were restricted to—trade and banking—could be sluiced into the treasuries of kings and nobles, they were tolerated. When that usefulness was gone, they were expelled. They were forced to live behind ghetto walls. Some migrated to the New World or settled in Eastern Europe.

In the sixteenth century, when Martin Luther founded his new faith, he championed the Jews. But when he failed to win them to Protestantism, he revived all the old charges. Jews were called ritual murderers, usurers, poisoners, parasites, devils. He urged the burning of their synagogues, the seizure of their books, and their expulsion from Germany.

As the Industrial Revolution developed in Western Europe, new ideas about the rights of man emerged. The movement for Enlightenment promised civil rights for

the Jews. Young middle-class Jews wanted to break free of the ghetto; they answered eagerly to the call for liberty, equality, fraternity. They devoted themselves to modern education and began to make their mark on Western culture. After the French Revolution of 1789 Napoleon's armies carried the banner of freedom into other countries, and Jews became citizens with full rights. But only briefly, in many places.

In Germany, the defeat of Napoleon and the rise of nationalism made Jews outsiders again. Their political rights were reduced or taken away completely. Germans created a "science" of anti-Semitism, based on racial identity. It held that Jews were born a "slave race," while the Germans or Aryans were the "master race." Nature, it was held, had created all Jews physically and morally inferior.

A stream of anti-Semitic books and pamphlets polluted German culture. "Good" Jews? "Bad" Jews? What difference did it make? All Jews were considered the same. Even the baptized and assimilated Jew was worthless to the anti-Semite. For it was no longer a question of religion. The Jews' "race," their "blood," condemned them.

This vicious nonsense became powerful political propaganda. By the time Adolf Hitler was born in 1889, anti-Semitic political parties were polling hundreds of thousands of votes and electing many deputies to the German Reichstag. "The Jews Are Our Misfortune" was a slogan blazoned on banners and spread in print. One prominent German philosopher, Karl Eugen Dühring, wrote that the Jews are "inferior and depraved. . . . The duty of the Nordic peoples is to exterminate such parasitic races as we exterminate snakes and beasts of prey."

That deadly conviction became an article of German faith. When Hitler built his Nazi party in the 1920s, he used anti-Semitism brilliantly, if insanely, to cement together workers and industrialists, land barons and peasants, fools and intellectuals, atheists and preachers, young and old. It was the magic formula to solve all of Germany's social problems. He made it a weapon against all opposition. The Jew was no longer merely a scapegoat. He was the cause of every problem, the essence of all evil. And nothing could redeem the Jew. He was born sub-human. The only solution to this "Jewish problem," said Hitler, was to destroy them all. They had no right to live.

Hitler won power in January 1933. In the next several years he solidified his dictatorship over Germany and sowed the seeds of the Holocaust. He abolished all political parties but his own, wiped out the labor unions, and jailed their leaders. He eliminated unemployment by a program of vast public works and rearmament and by drafting youth into the armed forces. He took total control of all the media and the financial institutions. A poisonous mixture of Nazi schooling, youth organizations, and propaganda convinced the young they were a race of "true" Germans. "It is my duty," Hitler said, "to make use of every means of training the German people to cruelty, and to prepare them for war. . . . A violently active, dominating, intrepid, brutal youth—that is what I am after. Youth must be all this. It must be indifferent to pain. There must be no weakness or tenderness in it."

Hitler made sure that the top command of the army would follow his orders. His Gestapo agents (the secret police) spied on the public's everyday behavior, monitored party and government functions, ran concentration camps, and later carried out mass killings. His black-

shirted security police, the SS, led by Heinrich Himmler, shaped an elite of Nazi fanatics into another major instrument of terror. Concentration camps were built to confine anyone suspected of active or potential opposition.

With full control of power, Hitler began step by step to isolate and terrorize the Jews. How many were there in the Germany of 1933? Only half a million, less than 1 percent of the population. No matter how few, the Nazis daily repeated the lie that the Jews had dominated industry, finance, government, and that this must end.

The Jews were expelled from the civil service, the army, the schools, the professions. The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 and the decrees that followed took away their citizenship and restricted their housing, their shopping, their schooling, their every movement. Violence against the Jews grew. When beatings and killings made the foreign press, the Nazis watched for public and governmental reaction. When little of consequence happened, the Nazis knew they could attack Jews with impunity.

Growing ever bolder, in 1936 Hitler violated the Versailles Treaty that ended World War I by placing troops in the Rhineland region; no one tried to stop him. That summer he played host to the Olympic Games in Berlin; no countries refused to participate. In March 1938 he sent troops into Austria and made the country part of "Greater Germany"; no one interfered. In September of that year he played on popular fear in England and France of another war and got their government leaders to sign a pact at Munich that put Czechoslovakia in his hands. The West gave thanks in the false hope that "peace in our time" was guaranteed.

And the Jews in Germany? Stripped of citizenship, rights,

work, property, dignity, they had only one way out: emigration. By late 1937 about 130,000 had fled. But three quarters of Germany's Jews still remained. Hitler tried to dump them across his borders, but "almost every state in the world has hermetically sealed its borders against the parasitical Jewish intruder," complained the German Foreign Office. It was true. The non-Nazi countries of Europe and the United States took in some Jewish refugees, but pitifully few in relation to the desperate need. Even so, some German Jews still hoped they would survive somehow, that a decent, democratic, moral government would replace Hitler's and make Germany once again their safe home.

In 1938 that illusion was smashed. The assassination of a minor officer in the German embassy in Paris by a refugee Jew triggered a nationwide pogrom in Germany on the night of November 9. The *Kristallnacht* (Night of Broken Glass) foreshadowed the extermination of the Jews. Most of Germany's synagogues were burned, thousands of shops destroyed, hundreds of homes looted. At least 1,000 Jews were murdered and 26,000 flung into concentration camps. That horror drove another 50,000 Jews out of Germany.

A year later it was too late to leave: The war Hitler started in the fall of 1939 cut off all exits. And at the same time Hitler invaded Poland, he pushed his war against the Jews to another stage. In a speech given shortly before the invasion Hitler had promised "the destruction of the Jewish race in Europe" when war began. With Poland quickly defeated, the Germans took complete control of millions of that country's Jews. Six months later Hitler conquered Denmark and Norway. Then Holland, Belgium, and France fell to the German armies. Only Britain