

**The rescue of Jews in German occupied
Western Europe**

Dr Bob Moore

Visiting Fellow, National Europe Centre

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THE RESCUE OF JEWS IN NAZI-OCCUPIED WESTERN EUROPE

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The questions of why and how non-Jews helped Jews to escape or go into hiding to avoid persecution and deportation during the Nazi period has been a consistently debated element in the wider historiography of the Holocaust ever since 1945. The study of rescue and rescuers were given an added impetus after the creation of Yad Vashem in the early 1950s and the formal honouring people recognized as 'righteous among the nations'. Research on the Holocaust continues to identify individuals who meet the criteria for the award, and the shelves of bookshops devoted to Holocaust memoirs bear witness to the continuing popularity of the topic with the book-buying public. However, the focus on rescuers as a few righteous and well-motivated individuals who helped, when others were indifferent or positively hostile, has served to create a rather skewed historiography, and one that is in urgent need of reappraisal.

In general terms, the historiography of rescue can be subdivided into four main categories. The first is the most popular and most common, namely the rescuer and survivor testimonies reprinted as collections. These are usually based on oral interviews or on the files contained in the Yad Vashem archives, and deal with individuals who have been honoured as righteous among the nations. As such, the testimonies span many different countries and circumstances, with the editors usually allowing the testimonies to speak for themselves. While they might be categorised as collected biographies, none of them represent an attempt at collective biography. The second category is based on sociological and social psychological studies that used the existence of rescue as a phenomenon and rescuers as a group to investigate the existence of pure altruism as a human response to the plight of others. Although using a comparative framework, the studies were somewhat restricted by the methodologies employed and also by the problems of interviewing surviving rescuers many years after the events in question and interpreting their responses from a wide range of languages. Moreover, the same methodology also precluded the use of other sources and testimonies that could not be gathered under controlled conditions.

Both these forms of scholarship suffer from a trait that is becoming increasingly noticeable in the field of Holocaust studies, namely a concentration on the events of the Holocaust to the point where the context of those events is completely lost or overlooked. Many of the rescuer narratives provide overwhelming evidence of humanitarian responses in the face of great dangers, but often fail to place these actions in the context of where and when they took place. Sociological studies faced with this problem have generally relied on the available national histories to provide a context, but often at the expense of ignoring possible regional, local or even particular differences. This is, of course, where the work of historians should have been evident, but most countries occupied by Nazi Germany during the Second World War have yet to provide a coherent body of social history within which rescue activities can be placed.

Three other forms of publication are also worthy of some note. First there are the very limited number of memoirs and autobiographies written by the rescuers themselves. These do have the advantage of having been written by the participants themselves

without prompts from researchers, but are sometimes marred by the same faults evident in oral testimonies, namely the time-gap between the events and their commission to record. A second type of work currently in vogue is the recent full-length biographies of certain well-known rescuers such as Varian Fry, Frank Foley and Sugihara. These range from the hagiographic to the properly analytical but do at least sometimes put the work of their subjects into a coherent context. Lastly there are a limited number of histories written soon after the war whose purpose was to reinforce and provide evidence for the 'resistant' role of the churches or specific secular organisations. In the Dutch case for example, some of these works are little more than apologies for the institutions concerned, but paradoxically, they often focus on institutional responses and omit the work of individual members or clerics that might have made their case as resistant that much stronger.

It should not be taken from these opening remarks that all this scholarship should be discarded. There is no doubt that stories of sacrifice and heroism should have a prominent place in Holocaust historiography, and in the social histories of the countries concerned. However, it is equally important that the scholarship should move on to provide a more analytical approach to the subject of rescue, both in relation to individual occupied countries and also in comparative terms. Country-specific analyses are now beginning to appear, written by historians who do understand the social context of the events they describe. Nevertheless, even these work tend to concentrate on rescue as part of the history of the Holocaust rather than as part of the social history of the occupation. Moreover, there remains a tendency in the literature to focus on individual rescuers and to downplay or ignore the role of specific organisations. To give just one example, there has been much recent interest in the career and activities of Varian Fry, who helped many persecuted intellectuals to escape to safety from Vichy France, but little or no attention has been given to the Quakers or the YMCA who were also active in the area in that period. Perhaps because they operated within the law rather than on its margins, their collective history has been deemed less worthy of study.

With these factors in mind, it seems important to stress at least three ways in which the history of rescue in Western Europe needs to be further contextualised. First of all, the actions of rescuers and bystanders need to be placed firmly in the context of the social histories of the countries concerned rather than being discussed in isolation. Secondly, it is essential to develop a general framework for the study of rescue that will allow comparison between countries, regions and localities. Finally, it is also necessary to break free from the idea that the occupation period itself has to be treated in isolation and unrelated to events before or after the war. Clearly the Nazi years left deep scars upon all the occupied countries, and some of them have yet to address all the ramifications of the period. At the same time, it is just as important to see rescue as having antecedents in previous conflicts and in the years before 1940.

Defining what constitutes rescue activity is somewhat problematic, but it can be generally grouped under two distinct headings, namely help for Jews trying to leave occupied Europe for the safety of neutral or Allied countries, and assistance to those in hiding inside Nazi controlled territory. Yet even these categories mask a huge range of activities and involvement. Individual escape lines often had tens if not hundreds of workers, most of them unknown and unseen both by those they rescued, and even by each other. Apart from the leaders who masterminded the networks there were

‘conductors’, people who led groups and individuals on train journeys or across borders, those who operated safe houses for those in transit and many others who provided the essential services for the fugitives. In addition to those directly involved, there may have been many more who were implicated by their knowledge of what was happening. Help to those in hiding also often stretched well beyond those who provided shelter in their homes. Again, conductors were an essential part of the operation, as were the suppliers of food, money, false papers and ration cards. All of these people, as well as close friends and relatives who might also be implicated, carried out this work at some considerable personal risk. Everything they did was in breach of German ordinances against aiding Jews, but other aspects of their work would, in normal times, also have been regarded as breaking the law. Rescuers were not the only citizens of occupied Western Europe to become law-breakers in the interests of maintaining what they considered the norms of their society, but it should be remembered that rescuer often found it essential to use the services of professional criminals such as forgers and thieves, or engage in such activities themselves. Not all of those involved in rescue had led entirely blameless lives before the occupation, nor did they stay on the paths of righteousness after the war was over. This perhaps highlights the fallacy of assuming that all rescuers had been solid upright citizens in the period before 1940. Crooks and criminals were part of the picture, as were members of communist and extreme left-wing parties and their various front organisations who were operating outside the law even before the occupation began.

The sociological and social psychological studies on rescuer, together with many of the published oral histories focus heavily on the motivation of individual rescuers. This is undoubtedly a key issue in understanding some people acted in the way they did, but inevitably tends to focus on positive elements that fit well with prevailing western cultural norms. Of these positive motivations, Christian belief is by far the most commonly cited and there are many examples of individuals whose religious principles led them into rescue work at some point during the Nazi period. However, most of these people are discussed as individuals, in spite of the fact that they almost invariably ended up involved in some form of network system. Rescues carried out by one individual or family for the entire occupation period were the exception rather than the rule.

Much has been made of the activities of ‘minority’ religious groups in both France and the Netherlands. In this context, the efforts of pastor Trocmé at Le Chambon are probably the best known. The idea that minority religions saw parallels between their own perceived plight and that of persecuted Jewry was commonly expressed by Calvinist Protestants, but it should be pointed out that the same views were held by Roman Catholics in the Netherlands, who also regarded themselves as a minority in the country as a whole. It is also worth noting that in specific centres or regions where rescue activities were most common, these ‘minorities’ were often the majority social group.

The uneven spread of religiously based rescue activities also raises some questions. If an overriding belief in the need to help others existed among these particular confessional groups, why could there be large numbers of Jews sheltered in one parish and virtually none in an apparently sociologically identical one? Here the focus on the individual gives some clue as to the reason for this. Trocmé and his counterparts in the Netherlands and Belgium relied on trusted friends within their churches’ network

to make contact with those in peril and to provide additional help and shelter as the numbers increased. Inevitably, those involved tended to approach people whom they knew and could trust; friends from seminaries or from schools who would be likely to offer help. The precise nature of these linkages is sometimes masked by the outward behaviour of many clerics. Thus protestant pastors and Roman Catholic priests as the religious leaders of their communities may well have been instrumental using personal contact to create or enlarge networks, but often then delegated the day-to-day work of organisation to chaplains and *capelaans* in order to protect the church community as a whole from being implicated. Their role would often be to make oblique suggestions about the Christian duty of their flock in sermons and then to see who came forward with offers of help. The pastors and priests would also know their parishioners and could both recommend likely helpers to the actual network organisers, and suggest that others otherwise willing individuals were unsuitable for the tasks involved. At a different level, bishops and archbishops within the protestant and Roman Catholic communities who were positively disposed towards the idea of rescue were also likely to maintain a low profile.

In Belgium and France, Roman Catholic religious institutions played a major role in sheltering Jews, both adults and children. To some extent, their degree of involvement was based on the wishes of leading prelates. Thus the incidence of rescue activities could vary enormously between one diocese and another. In the Belgian case, there also seems to have been a marked difference between the relatively positive response of the Walloon (French) speaking areas and the less accommodating attitude of their Flemish speaking counterparts.

One of the key interpretative problems in highlighting these religious rescuers as examples of altruism comes in assessing their motivation. While the desire to help may have been uppermost in their minds, both Catholic and nonconformist creeds stress the importance of good works as aids to salvation, or indicators thereof. Thus making assessments of true motivations, even from the personal testimonies of those involved, becomes notoriously difficult. Another aspect of Christian rescue also requires some attention. Many of the networks created to help Jews in hiding specialised in finding homes for children and in many of these operations there seems to have been an undercurrent of attempted conversion. Again the Christian creeds made this a religious obligation and the accounts of children in hiding suggest that this was a common occurrence. Certainly, one of Calvinist founders of the main Dutch network, the *Landelijke Organisatie*, was on record as saying that this was a part of their purpose. However, the accounts of children being forced to learn the catechism or the Lord's Prayer need to be taken in context. Although not required to have identity cards, their cover was usually that they were orphans or evacuees being looked after by members of their own family. Thus it was essential that they conformed to the religion of that family and were taken to church on Sundays. Thus some basic grounding in the faith was an essential attribute. The fact that children who were moved around and came into contact with different religions meant that they were often 'converted' more than once.

Beyond the religious groups and the religiously motivated individuals, there were also other rescuers. Many Jews going into hiding were helped by friends and neighbours. The incidence of such rescues seems to have depended in large part on the degree of social or business contact between Jews and non-Jews in particular communities. The

greater the contact there was, the more chance of friendships leading to an offer of help. These forms of individual help, while common at an initial stage, seldom remained a straightforward relationship. When the Nazi deportations began in Western Europe in the summer of 1942, there was no possible way of knowing how long the German occupation might last. Thus offers of help at this stage were essentially open-ended commitments. Arrangements made for financial and/or material help had to change as conditions worsened. People on the run and without ration cards had to be fed either by sharing the rations of others or being provided for via the black market. Those in hiding were often asked or offered to make a contribution to the costs of their upkeep, essentially to pay for board and lodgings. Yet their resources were inherently finite. Few people in hiding had, or had access to unlimited funds. In this context, those charged with identifying the righteous among the nations have to make a decision as to how much was reasonable in such circumstances. Payments for food and the provision of forged papers could be given an approximate monetary value, but was it reasonable to charge for the risks involved as well, and if so, by how much? There was no open market in such transactions and they were almost invariably made on an individual basis and in secret.

This serves to highlight another less savoury aspect to the rescue process, namely the profiteering from the plight of the persecuted. In some cases, this may always have been the intention, on other occasions it may have occurred over time as the hosts realised the resources that their guests possessed. Threats and blackmail were easy to employ to extort money, although the reality of such actions, for example in evicting those in hiding, could have detrimental consequences, not least if the effects fugitives were subsequently caught by the Germans and betrayed their former hosts. A more extreme method of escape was to effect the betrayal personally and gain credit or even monetary rewards from the authorities. There were nonetheless examples of successful rescues, in that the Jews involved survived the occupation, but only after paying a small fortune to their hosts.

These were the cases that were not celebrated after the occupation was over. In addition, property and belongings given in trust to third parties by Jews on the run were not always returned by their custodians. Without proper documentation, there was little in the way of legal remedy. Lest this paints too bleak a picture of the situation, it should be remembered that most hosts ultimately had to find help from networks in order to continue their work. It is also worth noting that, unlike the Frank family, a majority of Jews in hiding were moved from place to place and did not stay in the same place for more than a few weeks or months. Thus they became aware of conditions elsewhere, as did the network organisers. This may have helped to moderate some of the more extreme demands being made.

Beyond the profiteering and the forced conversions, there were two other elements that emerge from the testimony of survivors in hiding and both relate primarily, although not exclusively to the rescue of children. There were undoubtedly cases where childless couples volunteered to take in Jewish children with a view to adopting them as their own. With no state welfare organisation to oversee such fostering arrangements, the problems really arose after the war was over when the birth parents or the surviving Jewish community attempted to reclaim the children concerned. In itself, taking in children was certainly no crime, and most cases where they were hidden from the authorities after the war related to Christian conversions.

However, the fact remained that there were no controls over the foster parents and this could and did lead to cases of exploitation – as unpaid house servants, physical and in some cases sexual abuse. Accounts of this nature do appear in survivors’ testimonies, but of course they do not figure among the publicised stories of successful rescues.

This is by no means an exhaustive categorisation of all forms of rescue, but is intended to show that there was also a less-heroic side to the process. Although exposing the less salubrious sides of rescue is a suitable counterweight to the commonly held public perception, it is only one element of the analysis. An examination of rescue work in the Netherlands suggests that the rescue of Jews was always a task carried out by particular organisations and individuals, and largely separated from other forms of resistance. The only exceptions to this were the communist organisations that made no distinction on racial and religious grounds. This pattern does not seem to have been repeated in either Belgium or France, where there was far more mixing of tasks within organisations and also a greater degree of co-operation between Jewish and non-Jewish organisations, as well as a better organised Jewish underground. For example, escape lines were used to evacuate resisters, Allied airmen and political fugitives as well as Jews. Moreover, the organisations themselves often contained a mixture of Jews and non-Jews. At least part of the explanation for these differences has to lie with the social structures of the countries and regions concerned.

For Belgium, there is an even more telling factor. As the only western European country to be more-or-less totally occupied during the First World War, it has long been understood that there were continuities in the relationship between the occupying Germans and the Belgian civil authorities. However these continuities do not end with the processes of accommodation. Initial research suggests that there were continuities in resistance groups between the two wars and also in terms of rescue activities. In the First World War it was not Jews but escaped prisoners and deserters who were the fugitives, but at least some of the activists, motivated by anti-German sentiments, recommenced similar activities when the Nazis arrived in 1940.

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Bob Moore
Reader in Modern History
Department of History
University of Sheffield
UK