

Jews Saving Jews – Individual Initiatives During the Holocaust, 1939-1945

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Abstract

The focal point of this paper is Jews acting on their own initiative to save lives while trapped in the Nazi regime during the war years 1939-1945. By analogy to the Righteous Among the Nations, the Jews who tried to save other Jews are defined in this paper as those whose actions were targeted at saving Jews with no direct family kinship, while putting themselves at risk for no personal benefit. In cases where rescuers belonged to organizational rescue machinery, but went beyond their original task by personal risk, and/ or did not make use of option to rescue themselves, they are included in the category of individual rescuers. Because rescuers are those who stand at the center of this paper, and not the survivors, there is no distinction between successful rescue operations and failures of rescue attempts. The theme of individual Jews acting to save other Jews hardly drew attention as a stand-alone topic. The compiled data unravels a phenomenon surprising in scope which points to a vast array of intentional and systematic initiatives. This is the basis of the initial presumption that these events should be treated as a phenomenon and not as a random collection of local incidents. This phenomenon deserves to be researched independently alongside other forms of Jewish reaction during the Holocaust such as armed resistance, mutiny or organized actions of rescue.

The paper presents a complete picture of this phenomenon by reviewing and classifying separate events of rescue initiatives by individual Jews: Educators and care givers who tried to save children; Functionaries in the camps who used their positions to save others; Rescue initiatives of medical crews; Private initiatives to rescue through smuggling and immigration; Rescuing in family camps based in forests and the rescue activities of individual prisoners targeted at fellow prisoners. Among these groups, the paper focuses on the group of doctors by examining their actions in two facets. A wide-ranging facet which examines the doctors' actions in the various conditions prevailing under the Nazi occupation: in the ghettos, the concentration camps, the partisans in the forests, and prisons. The second facet is an in depth examination of two Jewish doctors in the Auschwitz concentration camp.

Unlike other rescue initiators, the Jewish doctors were forced into making fateful decisions and take part in actions that risked their lives vis-à-vis not only the Germans but also their colleagues. Hence, their professional future was at times at risk after the war as well. The Jewish doctors treated all prisoners, regardless of religion, and here lies their distinction. Prima facie, it was their commitment as doctors. Since not all doctors fulfilled that, those who did, stand out even more by risking their lives and future beyond the necessary in order to remedy and save whenever possible. This is how Doctor Perl described it: "The Hippocratic Oath for me was the holiest of things, my

conscience's decree and every word of the oath was engraved deep in my heart.”¹. Despite being an observant woman faithful to her people, this statement expresses precedence of The Hippocratic Oath over Jewish solidarity. The statement points to the fact that the terms rescue and Jewish solidarity are not identical, terms often misused interchangeably. It is time to name this phenomenon of rescue initiatives by Jews properly - Rescuing and research it further.

¹ Translated by N.G. from:

גילה פרל, יישבועת היפוקרטסי וסידור התפילה,י, זכור – קובץ תיעוד למסירות נפש בגיא ההריגה (תשמ"א), עמ' 88-90.