



HMD 2006 Theme: One Person *Can* Make a Difference

"Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world."
Talmud

Making Moral Choices:

During the years of the Holocaust everyone had to make moral choices. Some people became perpetrators, others were bystanders. A small minority chose to help the persecuted – these are the rescuers and helpers. This was an extraordinary selfless choice. It meant risking not only their own lives but the lives of their own family and children. Many paid with their lives. None succeeded in halting the Holocaust but many Jews were enabled to survive as a result of their efforts. Each chose to defy the power of the Nazis and their collaborators – mostly single-handedly. Mostly we think of them as non-Jews who helped Jews but we should not overlook the many acts of kindness and support between persecuted Jews as well. That choice made a huge difference to many individual lives. More importantly they showed the power of the individual and provided hope in otherwise hopeless circumstances by demonstrating the importance of moral courage in action.

Individuals who make moral choices and act upon them can and do make a difference. They demonstrate that those who actively oppose prejudice, racism, persecution and murder can make a difference. Making such moral choices is challenging for individuals and many were fearful but persevered in spite of their fears. Their example shows that learning to use one's voice to enhance positive human values turns good intentions into real actions. It is about making the choices to do what is right rather than what is expedient. It sets out to dispel the argument, 'I am only one person, what can I do?', and shows that one person can achieve a great deal, however modest their actions might initially appear.

History:

David Gushee, an ordained Baptist minister, who has written widely on rescuers has provided useful statistics on rescuers. He says Mordecai Paldi of Yad Vashem calculates about 100,000 European non-Jews helped Jews in the Holocaust. 20,757 of these had been recognised by Yad Vashem as *Righteous Among the Nations* by 1 January 2005. Gushee states that approximately 300 million European non-Jews lived under Nazi occupation during the Holocaust and therefore merely one tenth of 1% of Europe's gentiles did something to help Jews during the Holocaust. This minority therefore becomes even more remarkable.

Thus during the Holocaust the vast majority of people were not perpetrators, but bystanders. We know that fear was a major contributing factor to the success of Nazi policy generally and the genocide of Jews, and the persecution of Roma and Sinti, Black, disabled and lesbian and gay people specifically.

But there were courageous people who stood out from time to time. These were found in every Nazi-occupied country and were drawn from all walks of life. What is clear is that most of these people were very ordinary people, making individual choices of conscience. Their actions demonstrated that true heroes are often just ordinary people acting on their convictions. Many were surprised that what they had done was deemed to be exceptional.

The Nazis were brutal in their reprisals against anyone caught trying to assist. Bystanders therefore had good reason to be concerned for their personal safety. The response of the bystanders is arguably the most natural one – to protect you and your family's safety. This in turn makes the actions of those who did resist the more remarkable. Their actions, were selfless, but no less calculated. They knew the potential risk, but took the risk anyway.

Rescuers and Helpers Actions and examples:

During the Holocaust there were many different ways that people made a difference. Some hid people in their homes, their cellars or their outhouses. Some smuggled people to safety, arranged papers, transport or safe passage. Some people simply left food on a doorstep at night. The following are some of thousands of examples of acts of support that meant an enormous amount to the persecuted. They may not have been physically rescued by them, but the support given made their survival more likely and gave them hope:

- **Trude Levi** relates how every morning she would arrive at her workstation in the munitions plant as a slave labourer. Each morning there would be a sandwich wrapped in newspaper from which she derived much needed sustenance, timely news information and a sense of comradeship. She never spoke to the German worker that brought it in everyday. It would have resulted in severe punishment for both. To this day she does not know his name. He made the difference between despair and hope, loneliness and friendship.
- **Pastor Hermann Maas**, a Heidelberg pastor, helped many Jews flee the Nazis and one of his most courageous acts was to fix a Mezuzah to the door post of his home, so that any passing Jew would know that they would be safe in that house. He wrote: "...with full consciousness I at that time wove my own life and fate closely into that terrible fate of the Jewish people."
- **Rabbi Leo Baeck** was incarcerated in Theresienstadt when one day he received a parcel. The contents of the parcel had been removed before he received, so all he really got was an empty cardboard box. Although the sender had used a false name, he recognised the handwriting of a Christian friend. He felt enormous joy that even though he had been exiled, someone had thought about him and tried to help him.
- **Charles Fawcett**, an American, who now lives in London, had paper marriages with six different Jewish women in camps. Once they were married to him they had US nationality and were released.
- **Gisele Reich**, was a little Belgian girl aged about 5 in 1941 at Malines (Mechelen) transit camp with her parents waiting to be deported. She was a sickly child and the Nazi officer telephoned neighbours of the family, called Van der Velde, who collected Gisele by car and she lived with them until she was married.
- **Gad Beck** was 18 in 1941 when he took a leadership role within the Zionist resistance in Berlin. He was open about being gay, and when Manfred Lewin his first boyfriend was detained along with his family, Gad disguised himself as a member of the Hitler Youth in order to rescue him. In 1943 he became leader of the Chug Chaluzi, responsible for hiding, feeding and rescuing the remaining Jews in and around Berlin.
- **Robert Wagemann** and his family were Jehovah's Witnesses. Robert's hip was injured when he was born in 1937 leaving him with a disability. Nazi physicians had begun systematic killing of those they deemed physically and mentally disabled in autumn 1939. When Robert was five, he was ordered to report for a special physical. His mother overheard staff comments about putting Robert "to sleep". In order to rescue him, Robert's mother grabbed him and ran from the clinic, taking him into hiding. (Robert's mother's name is not known.)

Those regarded as rescuers, some of whom have been recognised as Righteous by Yad Vashem, may have hidden someone for a few hours, overnight or two or three years. Some such as Frank Foley, a British Righteous Among the Nations, rescued thousands by diplomatic means, others just one or two. Whatever the scale the deed was as significant as the Talmud reminds us.

What Do We Learn: People need to know that they *can* make a difference and they have moral choices. Young people need to be encouraged to recognise this and act upon it and make it part of their philosophy of life. The significant issue to learn from the actions of the rescuers is about standing up and being counted when it might be easier and safer to keep quiet. People often express the view that an individual is powerless against the forces of evil but HMD 2006 can use the stories of the rescuers to demonstrate this is untrue. The concept of one person changing the course of history is an essential lesson of the Holocaust. HMD 2006 can explore what made this minority of people sufficiently clear about their convictions to respond in these ways and what their actions teach us about individual responsibility and the ways in which individuals can make a difference. The real lesson is that even a small gesture can have an enormous impact.

It Affects Us All: Our conscience often guides our behaviour. People of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds become role models when they do not see barriers but act on their own values. Every genocide has its rescuers and people who made a difference, as opposed to those who were merely bystanders. In Rwanda there was Paul Rusesbagina who was working in a hotel in Kigali and saved people from being murdered. Additionally the Quakers did marvellous work as rescuers both during the Holocaust and other catastrophes. The emphasis on everyone being able to make choices has its own inclusivity factor because we are all therefore equal and capable of saving the world by our actions.

Action: Do what you can, however insignificant it may seem, to encourage everyone to identify something in which they were not previously engaged and to make a difference to that cause. Examples could be:

- supporting asylum seekers in their community;
- engaging in some local multi-cultural activity;
- offering time to assist some current prevention such as making their voice heard over Darfur;
- challenging racism and bullying;
- supporting moral courage awards.

This theme offers every single person in the country the opportunity to challenge their own current behaviour and moral choices. It can initiate debate and discussions on all levels and amongst the young and old from whatever background. It should build on the enormous impact of HMD 2005 which dwelt on the horror of Auschwitz and what was done there, by focussing on what can be achieved when people make a moral choice to disobey orders and ignore propaganda. Everyone can make those choices.

5th September 2005