Choosing to Rescue

This reading comes from the resource Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior.

Introduction

In Germany, the government imprisoned anyone caught sheltering a Jew. In Poland, the penalty was death. Yet, about 2 percent of the Polish Christian population chose to hide Jews. They did so in a nation with a long history of antisemitism. After the war, sociologist Nechama Tec interviewed a number of the rescuers. One factory worker told her sadly that she had done very little during the war. She had saved only one Jew and she had rescued that person only by chance. As her story unfolded, Tec discovered that Stefa Dworek had gone to incredible lengths to save a stranger.

It all began in the summer of 1942, when Stefa’s husband, Jerezy, brought home a young Jewish woman named Irena. A policeman involved in the Polish underground had asked him to hide her for a few days. The woman looked too “Jewish” to pass for a Christian. So the couple decided to keep her concealed in the one-room apartment they shared with their infant child. To shield her from unexpected visitors, the Dworeks pushed a freestanding wardrobe a few inches from the wall. The space between the wall and the wardrobe became the woman’s hiding place.

A “few days” stretched to a week and the week, in turn, became a month and still the unexpected guest remained. The policeman was unable to find another hiding place for her. After several months, Jerezy Dworek demanded that Irena leave. His wife Stefa, however, insisted that the woman stay. The quarrel ended with Jerezy stomping out of the apartment and vowing to denounce both Irena and his wife. What did Stefa do?

I called Laminski [the policeman]... [and] he went to talk to my husband. He told him, “Here is my pistol; if you will denounce them you will not live more than five minutes longer. The first bullet will go into your head.” After that my husband stopped coming... This ended my marriage. But Ryszard Laminski continued to come, helping us, warning us about danger. He never abandoned us.

Was Stefa aware of the danger to herself and her baby?

Sure I knew. Everybody knew what could happen to someone who kept Jews... Sometimes when it got dangerous, Irena herself would say, “I am such a burden to you. I will leave.” But I said, “Listen, until now you were here and we succeeded, so maybe now all will succeed. How can you give yourself up?” I knew that I could not let her go. The longer she was there the closer we became.

Then in 1944, the people of Warsaw rebelled against the Germans. As the fighting spread, it became too dangerous to stay in the apartment. So Irena bandaged her face and Stefa introduced her to neighbors as a cousin who had just arrived in the city. When the Germans finally put down the uprising, a new threat developed. Irena later described it to a commission:

https://www.facinghistory.org/for-educators/educator-resources/readings/choosing-rescue
Before the end of the war there was a tragic moment... We learned that the Germans were about to evacuate all civilians. My appearance on the streets even with my bandaged face could end tragically. Stefa decided to take a bold step which I will remember as long as I live. She gave me her baby to protect me. (The Germans did not evacuate mothers with young children.) As she was leaving me with her child, she told me that the child would save me and that after the war I would give him back to her. But in case of her death she was convinced that I would take good care of him... Eventually we both stayed.  

Poles constitute the largest national group within the Righteous Among the Nations recognized by Yad Vashem. Poland’s Jewish community was by far the largest in Europe in which only about 10% of its Jews survived. At liberation, around 50,000 Jewish survivors were on Polish soil. It is estimated that about 30,000 to 35,000 Jews, around one percent of all Polish Jewry, were saved with the help of Poles.

What motivated Stefa Dworek? “I know I could not let her go. What could I do? Even a dog you get used to and especially to a fine person like she was. I could not act any other way... I would have helped anyone. It did not matter who she was. After all I did not know her at first, but I helped and could not send her away. I always try to help as best as I can.”

Connections

1. How does the dictionary define the word altruism? What does the word mean to you? Was Stefa Dworek altruistic?

2. In his study of rescuers, Ervin Staub states, “Goodness, like evil, often begins in small steps. Heroes evolve; they aren’t born. Very often the rescuers make only a small commitment at the start— to hide someone for a day or two. But once they had taken that step, they began to see themselves differently, as someone who helps. What starts as mere willingness becomes intense involvement.” Write a working definition of the word hero. Was Stefa Dworek a hero?

3. Nechama Tec and Ervin Staub discussed the sociology and motivations of rescuers at the Second Annual Facing History Conference. Both agreed that the decision to rescue Jews had little to do with the rescuer’s religion, nationality, schooling, class, or ethnic heritage. Most rescuers were independent individuals who refused to follow the crowd. They also had a history of performing good deeds and did not perceive rescue work as anything out of the ordinary. How does Stefa Dworek fit their description? A video of their joint presentation is available at the Facing History Resource Center.

4. Both Tec and Staub benefitted from the help Christians gave Jews during the Holocaust. Nechama Tec relates her personal experiences in her memoir, Dry Tears. She also described those years to a group of Facing History students. A videotape of that talk is available from the Resource Center. See Elements of Time, pages 45-49 for a brief portrait of Tec. The book also contains a bibliography and study questions. Ervin Staub has explored ways of using information about rescuers to help students become more caring adults. The Resource Center also has video presentations of his talks at Facing History Summer Institutes.

End Notes


2. Ibid., 56.

3. Ibid., 176.


Additional Resources

Inge Deutschkom, a Jew who was hidden along with her mother during the war, attributes her survival to German Socialists who created a network to help Jews. Members took unbelievable risks and even sacrificed their own ration cards to feed hidden Jews. Her story is recounted in Outcast: A Jewish Girl in Wartime Berlin, available from the Facing History Resource Center.