

Shalva Ginsparg
Hollywood, Florida

Heroes Choose to Act

If the Holocaust bears testimony to man's capacity for evil, then surely the triumphant acts of heroism and decency performed in the face of that evil testify to man's inherent goodness. As Elie Wiesel asserted in an interview with the American Academy of Achievement, "there is more to celebrate than to denigrate in man." And so, though the Holocaust is often characterized by denigration, to lose sight of the celebration, the glimmering tales of heroes and heroic deeds, is to ignore the piece of the Holocaust that affirms man's intrinsic decency and goodness. The lessons of the Holocaust must be imparted to today's children to warn them of their power to destroy and to afflict, to ensure that a Holocaust does not repeat itself. However, perhaps an equally essential message of the Holocaust for our new generation is that humans are not pawns in the hands of evil forces and evil men; when confronted by the rising currents of hatred and dissent, we can transcend the tide and effect real, positive change of our own.

Though he is now known as the "Japanese Schindler," Chiune Sugihara "occupied an obscure footnote in history-until survivors who had been rescued by Sugihara began to emerge from the silence of their post-Holocaust shock and started telling his story" (Halberstam, 1997, p. 132). Born in 1900, Sugihara joined the Japanese foreign ministry and served in the consular office in Kaunas, the temporary capital of Lithuania. When thousands of Jewish refugees appealed to the consulate for Japanese transit visas, Sugihara "wired Tokyo for permission to grant the visas" (Gottfried, 2001, p. 71). Three times his request was denied, the third refusal bore the added directive "transit visas...absolutely not to be issued." Sugihara, however, would not be deterred; in August of 1940, he signed countless visas and distributed them to the winding queue of refugees in front of his home each day.

When Sugihara was forced to depart from Kaunas on September 1, 1940, he continued to hand out visas from his train window. In fact, Martin Gilbert notes in his “The Righteous; The Unsung Heroes of the Holocaust” that Sugihara “enabled more than two thousand Jewish refugees from Poland to cross the Soviet Union en route for Japan, Shanghai and the Americas” (2).

Like Sugihara, King Christian X of Denmark reflects mankind’s ability to transcend evil and effect positive change. Unlike Sugihara, Christian X was a powerful king who could have easily capitalized on the vulnerability of his Jewish citizens. However, “the welfare of the Danish Jews was of great importance to the king and the Danish government” and “at no time was the wearing of the Star of David one of the German demands on Denmark” (Werner, 2002, p. 15). When probed by a Nazi officer about the “Jewish Question,” the King replied, “there is no Jewish question in this country. There is only my people” (Fremon, 1998, p. 70). And so when the Danish government gained knowledge of a potential German raid, it notified Denmark’s leading rabbi, Marcus Melchior, enabling the Jews to escape. Jewish Danes fled to their neighbors’ homes, where they received both shelter and provisions. Christian X’s genuine concern for his Jews was again manifested in 1944, when a man from the Danish foreign ministry approached the “spiritual leader of the Danish Jews in Theresienstadt,” Rabbi Friediger, and relayed the King’s “best regards.” Rabbi Friediger wrote, “the King sends his best regards! Was it not a blessed country where a king sends regards to a Jew?” (Werner, 2002, 114).

Yet, goodness in the Holocaust was not a commodity restricted to political figures or individuals we typically associate with influence and power. Bronislawa Kurpi was a nanny. Her four year old charge, Abraham Foxman, would later become National Director of the Anti-Defamation League in the United States. But in his youth, in Vilna, Abraham’s life rested in the hands of the young Roman Catholic woman, who put herself in harms way to secure his future. Kurpi brought the boy to her home and raised him as if he were her own, changing his name to

Henryk Staniskw Kurpi. Abraham would later say, “even in hell, even in that hell called the Holocaust, there was goodness, there was kindness, and there was love and compassion” (Gilbert, 2003). So desirous was Abraham to shine a light on the heroes of the Holocaust that he “exhorted the Jerusalem gathering of ‘Hidden Children’ in 1993 to bear witness to the goodness of those who had saved and cared for them” (Gilbert, 2003, p. 76).

Elie Wiesel once remarked, “a profession is to be a human being, maybe. That’s a very noble profession.” Sugihara, King Christian X, and Bronislaw Kurpi imbued their lives, their professions even, with nobility; the examples they set and choices they made should serve as a powerful testament to the virtue of mankind. The devastation of the Holocaust must be conveyed in classrooms and in textbooks but students must be reminded of the shreds of decency and humanity to emerge from the depths of the Nazi inferno.

Today’s youth encounters evil with every delivery of the Sunday paper and primetime news sequence. Terrorists, Taliban, individuals who care little about human life, pepper our collective conscience. We are the generation of 9/11, of prolonged airport security, of anthrax scares, of violent harangues from foreign despots. With such an exposure to evil, who could blame us for losing hope in mankind, for giving up on ourselves and each other, for perceiving our ability to turn the tide and effect real change as feeble and minute? And so, if students of the Holocaust learn one lesson and one lesson alone let it be that just as evil can triumph over man, man can triumph over evil. Only if we perceive ourselves as harbingers of positive change, can we empower our generation to combat prejudice, discrimination, and hatred. Victims can only react; but heroes, with their infinite capacity for good -- they can choose to act. The difference lies in self-perception.

Indeed, Anne Frank, while still sequestered in the “Secret Annex” at the hands of Nazi brutality, wrote, “It’s really a wonder that I haven’t dropped my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart” (Frank, 1967, p. 263). If Anne Frank could believe unwaveringly in man’s goodness, despite all she had endured, then what right do we possess to think otherwise? And if we do elect to think otherwise, then we have allowed evil to defeat us.

References and Work Cited

American Academy of Achievement. Interview with Elie Wiesel. 29 June 1996.

Gilbert, Martin. *The Righteous; the Unsung Heroes of the Holocaust*. New York: Henry Holt and Company. 2003.

Gottfried, Ted. *Heroes of the Holocaust*. Brookfield: Twenty-First Century Books. 2001.

Halberstam, Yitta and Judith Leventhal. *Small Miracles*. Holbrook: Adams Media Corporation. 1997.

Frank, Anne. *The Diary of a Young Girl*. New York: Bantam Books. 1993.

Fremon, David. *The Holocaust Heroes*. Berkeley Heights: Enslow Publishers, Inc. 1998.

Werner, Emmy. *A Conspiracy of Decency*. Cambridge: Westview Press. 2002.