



Small Decencies

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Mimi Schwartz

In 1938, while synagogues burned all over Nazi Germany, a Torah was saved in my father's German village. Not by the Jews, but by Christians. I saw it almost fifty years later in a Memorial Room in Israel, built by Jews who fled after that night, Kristallnacht, and started again a continent away. I can still hear the old man in a kibbutz cap, saying: "Ja, Nazi hoodlums from outside, from Sulz, came to destroy the synagogue, but the Christians decided to save what they could for the Jews. And so we have this still!"

He was proud and I was happy. Even one small story of goodness was reassuring if, like me, you were raised on 1950s Hollywood movies of Germans in black boots, killing Jews. Were there other Germans who saved Torahs? I thought of Anne Frank's faith, even towards the end: "I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are really good at heart." I wanted to believe that too, but had never dared: so many had died because of illusory optimism. And yet this rescued Torah with its charred edges — there was even a knife gash — made me think: Maybe, just maybe. . . .

A few months later I discovered that a second Torah from the village was rescued that night. It is now in Burlington Vermont, and the widow of the man who brought it there told me that "a Gentile saw it lying in the street and thought, 'This is not right! A holy book!'" He picked it up, buried it in his garden, and brought it one night to her husband who was packing to leave for America.

I wish that everyone — the entire village — had rescued those Torahs. But most people did as they were told by a man shouting from the street to stay indoors and shut the curtains. That's what I heard from those who fled the village (the Jews) and those who stayed in this tiny place (their former Christian neighbors). They remembered how "everyone got along so well before Hitler" and that there were those who tried to maintain decency during Nazi times. Like the two Christian carpenters who fixed the broken windows of the Jews the day after Kristallnacht. And the shoemaker who continued to repair Jewish shoes without permission. And the grocer's wife who kept bringing soup at night to her old Jewish neighbor. And the farmer who stood up at a public meeting in 1940 to say that no Jews assigned to their farm would have to work on the Jewish Sabbath, Nazi orders or not.

These small acts of decency were no match for the horrors of the Holocaust — not worth mentioning when eighty-nine, one third of the Jews of this tiny Black Forest village, were deported to Riga, Teresienstadt, and Auschwitz. But I needed to hear them anyway. Perhaps because the scale of rescue and decency was so small and doable, it forced me to ask myself more soberly: "What would I have done then? And what would I do now if my neighbors were threatened?" I am not a Raul Wallenberg or Oskar Schindler, bold enough to save thousands. I

doubt I am brave enough to risk my family's lives. But I can imagine bringing soup at night or fixing windows — or even rescuing a Torah under cover of night (or a Koran or New Testament!) if it were for people I knew, had lived with in peace, had shared a history.

Especially if I knew that others do such things. Not just a few others, but lots of others, as in Billings, Montana a few years ago. When a hate group threw a beer bottle at a house with a Hanukkah menorah in the window, spraying glass on the five-year-old child inside, residents of all faiths taped photocopies of menorahs in their windows. The hate groups committed more violent acts, the residents “responded by posting more menorahs” until after a mass rally against hate groups, “the violence — and the skinheads — disappeared.” I read this in the Salt Lake Tribune; it was part of an article covering a local conference on hate crimes. But what if this story, and others like it, also appeared on Nightly News, or on page one of the New York Times, or USA Today? Would we, the timid but decent, be more inspired?

I just received an email from two German friends I met in my father's village. They were born in Stuttgart after the war ended, and knew little about the Jews until, about ten years ago, they bought a farmhouse near the old Jewish cemetery of my father's village. They looked at three hundred years of graves and wanted to know more (there are no Jews in the village now), so they joined an organization of over a hundred German Christians in the region who promote events so people will not forget what happened in Nazi times. (They also sponsor programs to help integrate Muslims now in the village.) Their email told how they just stopped a neo-Nazi rally planned in a nearby town. Exhausted but proud of their successful counter demonstration, they wrote, “We were surprised how much support we got from the people . . . with help of many local clubs, schools, and labor unions. You can have a look on our small homepage and ... you will find all the newspaper articles with lots of photos.”

If Anne Frank's faith is to have a chance, we need armies of people who, like those in Billings and in my father's village, refuse to let the silent majority be comfortably silent. And their acts of decency, big and small, need to be told and retold wherever political extremism — in Iraq, Darfur, the Gaza strip, wherever — attacks the integrity of neighbors trying to get along.

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