



Christians and the Holocaust

| Gilbert, Martin

Sir Martin Gilbert, Jewish historian and biographer of Sir Winston Churchill, gave a detailed account of Christians who rescued Jews during the Holocaust at an Annual General Meeting of the CCJ UK.

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By Martin Gilbert *

It is a great honour to be asked to speak to you. The Hall at Church House holds a very special place in my work on Sir Winston Churchill. It was here in the early months of 1941, before the members of Parliament were able to meet in the Lords chamber, that Churchill made some of his very greatest war speeches. This became temporarily, the chamber of the House of Commons.

The topic of my remarks is "*Christians and the Holocaust*" - Christians not Christianity. I am not a theologian and I am not a person given to theorising,

but I want to talk about Christians and the Holocaust. Christians as churches, and Christians as individuals.

For the Jews, the Holocaust was unique in its scale and intention. Yet during the Second World War and throughout the Second World War, there were not only Jewish victims, but non-Jewish victims on a vast scale. At least 3 million Poles, almost all of whom were Roman Catholics, were murdered. At least 3½ million Soviet prisoners of war were murdered, many of them Muslims, some of them secret Christians in the dark night of Communism. In addition to the 3½ million Soviet prisoners of war murdered, were several million Soviet prisoners who were not Jews. More than a million Serbs, mostly Greek Orthodox. Hundreds of thousands of Greeks. Certainly more than a quarter of a million gypsies.

And one should never forget at least 150,000 Germans. Those who were judged to be by the

standards of
Nazism, unfit for life
- the mentally ill, the
crippled, the
disabled. Catholics;
Orthodox Christians
of various rites;
Protestants;
Evangelicals,
indeed Christians of
every denomination
were among the
12-15 million civilian
victims of that short
but terrible period of
Nazi domination,
over so much of
Europe.

Only a few months
ago I was in a small
town in Eastern
Europe, and came
across a memorial
to eleven Catholic
nuns, all the nuns of
a small monastery
who had been
seized one evening
in July 1943, held in
a cellar over night
and taken the next
morning, five
kilometres from the
town, where they
were shot. Their
crime was that one
of them was
accused of having
bound the wounds
of an injured
partisan, for which
all eleven were
killed.

Each European
nation bears the
scars of the
slaughter of its
civilians, during the
war years. Although
the Jew was
Nazism's particular
enemy, Nazism was

also the enemy of not only Jews and Judaism, but of true Christianity, and of all liberal, ethical and moral values, totally opposed in everything it did to the Judaeo-Christian ethic.

Christian Rescuers

Furthermore, it is important to remember that, despite the terrifying dangers of helping Jews during the war, there were many, many Christians who risked their lives and many who suffered death for trying to help.

There was an effort in every town, in every countryside that I have been able to study or read about. An effort by individual Christians to practice not only Christian values, but to risk their lives for people who are not of their faith.

Even in Berlin there are dozens of examples, actually hundreds of examples, of Christians who hid Jews at the risk of their own lives, or smuggled them through Germany to safe houses or even

out of Germany.

The Pope himself, Pius XII, whose Vatican is greatly criticised these days for inaction and failure, gave his personal order on the eve of the German deportation of Jews from Rome, to open the sanctuaries of the Vatican City to all Jews who could reach it. Within a few hours as Gestapo units scoured the city rounding up Jews, 477 had found shelter in the Vatican, in its enclaves and a further 4,000 were given sanctuary in the monasteries and convents of Rome, thereby saved from deportation to Auschwitz.

As a result of the Pope's order and of the Catholic clergy's rapid response in Rome, of Rome's 6,700 Jews only 1,015 were actually deported, of whom only sixteen survived the war. The Papal action, which I do not find mentioned in the current "J"Accuse"-style debates, saved more than 4,000 lives.

Ukraine

Perhaps the most extraordinary example of what could be done took place in the strongly anti-Semitic Ukraine, where the Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky, head of the Ukrainian Uniate Church, then aged 77 and partially paralysed, not only hid dozens of Jews himself, but persuaded many other clergymen to do likewise. He was joined in his work of rescue by his brother, Father Clement, the head of the church's monastic order and by his sister Josepha, the Mother Superior of the Uniate Order of Nuns. Several thousand Jews found sanctuary in this way. And the penalty for giving sanctuary was in those countries, death.

In writing or speaking about the Holocaust, so grim were the elements of collaboration, of betrayal, of bystanders doing nothing, that what was done that was positive and helpful and remarkable and courageous, has become overlooked and as it were, dropped on the cutting room floor of historical writing.

Jane Haining

Some twenty years ago, I published the story of Jane Haining, and I have yet to find any other history book in which her story appears, even those totally relevant to the story. She does not even appear, unfortunately, in the several text books now circulating on the Holocaust in British schools.

Jane Haining was a 47-year-old Scottish woman, the matron of a girl's home in the Budapest mission of the Church of Scotland. Her charges were Christian children of Jewish parents or Jewish grandparents. When the Germans occupied Hungary in 1944 and occupied Budapest, her children were not deported because by the time the deportation of Budapest Jews came, there had been such an outcry in the world, including from the British Government and the Vatican, that the deportations were halted.

But Jane Haining had been accused of working among

Jews and of weeping -- she had been reported by some bystander. She had been reported weeping when she had to sew on the yellow stars onto the dresses of her girls. And so she was punished. Her punishment was deportation to Auschwitz. Her charges remained in Budapest and she was sent to the death camp.

In the grim lunacy of those days, because Jane Haining was a British citizen and passport-holder, the Church of Scotland was sent her death certificate from Auschwitz itself, together with a covering note that she had been arrested and I quote: "On account of justified suspicion of espionage against Germany". The espionage that emerged only after the war were her tears of sewing on the Jewish stars.

I could easily fill many hours with such a recital of groups and individuals who risked their lives to save Jews. After forty years, research still proceeds on a daily

basis, principally in Jerusalem, to find and honour those who saved Jews. And as with so much of the history of this era, the research may never be completed. For every incident of which some record survives or of which some eye witness survives, there must be many more, perhaps a hundred-fold more for each one we know of, for which all the evidence has disappeared.

Tens of thousands of Jews survived because of Gentile help. Given sometimes for money and sometimes for love of mankind or decency. And it was not always easy, even when there was a determination. I used to go to the ceremonies at which those who received the awards of Righteous Gentile, as it is called, were present and where possible, I would get into conversation and talk and take notes of the stories. And once I went to a ceremony at the Israeli Embassy in London in Palace Green, where a number of Poles living in London

received the award.
There was one
Polish woman
whose story it
seemed to me to be
remarkable.

Heroism and Distress

She had taken the
child of one of her
university friends,
the child had been
literally thrown at
her by her friend as
the friend was taken
off to her death and
she had looked after
this child and found
it a home and was
so getting this
award rightly. I
asked her if I could
drive her back to
Ealing where she
lived and hear the
full story.

And when we got to
her home she made
me tea and
suddenly she
dissolved into tears
and I was quite
surprised. She
seemed very
distressed, very
agitated. And then
she told me that the
whole story was of
course true. She
had saved that
child, the child of
her university friend.
But she said, "I
have to tell you that
three months later, I
had already found
that child a
permanent home
with another family,
three months later

another girl whom I'd known quite well came up to me at another of the deportations. She too had a child. And she said: "Please take my child" and I turned away. I could not face the responsibility, burden and danger a second time." And so this girl who had done such good was herself tormented by something she had not done.

There is another group of Jews that link Christians and Jews in unbreakable bonds. They are the people who are now called the "Hidden Children". They have only recently emerged as an identifiable and self-conscious group, with their gatherings and reunions and newsletters. As many as 25,000 Jewish children, including many hundreds of tiny babies, were saved as a result of hiding. Some hiding in attics, cellars and woods, being brought food by Christian neighbours. Others surviving in Christian families as Christians, going to church, learning the catechism and behaving in order to

survive as Christian children.

These former hidden children are determined, almost desperate, that the Christians who saved them should be recognised for what they were -- people of courage and humanity. They have begun, rightly in my view, to try and get historians like myself, to take into account their story. Some hidden children were hidden by many different families and individuals. I have looked many times through their directory which they are preparing of their experiences and I see one girl, Lottie Mameus of Holland, who lists twenty-two different Dutch families with whom she was hidden over the period of 1942 to 1944.

In one case, a Polish girl who was hidden by two German soldiers, both Christian, both devoted Christians stationed in Poland, disgusted by what they saw around them and determined to make some gesture. The gesture was to save this girl and a number of others, with great difficulty.

Institutions

I have tried in my research to also look into the work of institutions. For some reason, which I do not fully understand, not all those institutions who took in Jewish pilgrims and saved them, have come forward. One of the strangest stories of reluctance to come forward, is one which perhaps I can tell with a certain wry humour.

A Polish priest was approached by a Catholic woman in his town and she came to see him in the privacy of the confessional. She said that she had at home a Jewish child, who had been given to her by its parents who had been murdered. She had looked after this child since 1942. It was now 1946 or 1947 and she asked the priest whether she could bring the child up as a Catholic.

The priest said "What did the parents wish?" and she said that their very last wish before they left, before they were taken away and murdered, was that the child should be

told at some point that it was a Jewish child, and should then be allowed to determine its own religious future.

The priest said "Well then, you must follow the wishes of the parents. Although it is clear that it is going to be very painful and difficult for you, because the parents do not exist and the child has no memory, except of you and your Catholic upbringing."

I wrote a number of times to this priest because I wanted to publish this story in my general history of the Holocaust, to ask him if he could confirm this story. I finally got a letter from a senior member of his secretariat, to inform me that he could be excommunicated were he to reveal what had passed in the confessional. As the priest was the present Pope, I did not feel that I -- a Jewish historian -- could be responsible for his excommunication!

But one result of this correspondence was that I was sent some interesting material about

different institutions with which I was able to make contact, who had given succour to Jewish children. They included Catholic institutions all over Europe.

One of the hidden children, a young Polish boy called Abraham Foxman, who subsequently after half a century became the very distinguished head of the Anti-Defamation League in the United States, has written as follows:

"We hidden children had a mission, a mission to proclaim and recognise goodness. For the first fifty years after the Holocaust, survivors bore witness to brutality, evil and bestiality. Now is the time for us and our generation, to bear witness to goodness. For each one of us is living proof that even in hell, in the hell called the Holocaust, there was goodness, there was kindness, and there was love and compassion."

This too, is a memory of the Holocaust.

* In a memorable address to the Annual General Meeting of the Council of Christians and Jews (UK) at Church House, Sir Martin Gilbert, historian and biographer of Sir Winston Churchill, gave a detailed account of Christians who rescued Jews during the Holocaust. His speech has been edited for Common Ground.

Source: Common Ground 1998/2.