

## The Righteous Gentiles

*"There's One Word in Every Language that Evokes an Immediate Response/JEW," stated a poster issued in May 1990 by the Institute for Jewish Learning in Toronto.*

The response to the Jews often expresses itself in anti-Semitism:

In Windsor, Ontario the homes and businesses of two well-known Jewish families were subject to graffiti vandalism.

In the Belz community of Val Morin, Quebec, vandals broke into a camp synagogue and threw over 300 sacred texts into the toilets and nearby lake in.

In France, Arab youths have harassed French Jews, burning synagogues, and desecrating Jewish cemeteries.

Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has become infamous for his anti-Semitic diatribes and threats. He calls for the destruction of Israel. But he is not the first Iranian leader voicing his hatred toward the Jews. "Death to Israel!" has been a rallying cry for the past quarter-century. In his speeches Mr. Ahmadinejad has quoted the late Ayatollah Khomeini's call on October 26, 2005, for genocidal war against Jews. Khomeini said decades ago, "The regime occupying Jerusalem must be eliminated from the pages of history." Mr. Ahmadinejad lauded this hideous goal as "very wise."

The terrorist organization Hezbollah, which is supported by Iran, also pursues a second Holocaust of the Jews. Therefore it makes no secret of what it intends. Its 1985 manifesto contains a section entitled "The Necessity for the Destruction of Israel" that spells out the evil it seeks: "Our struggle will end only when this entity is obliterated. We recognize no treaty with it, no cease-fire, no peace agreements."

Has the Holocaust become a dim memory? It has been said that when a person loses his memory, he's senile. I wonder whether anti-Semites, some of whom even deny the reality of the Holocaust, are plagued by senility?

We may not sweep the Holocaust into the dustbin of historical amnesia. Historians estimate that six million Jews lost their lives during World War II. Six million Jews - the mind reels, for it is impossible to comprehend the full scope and magnitude of the slaughter!

How does one acknowledge the past and carry on with the present when the past is so horrendous? Why were men, women, and children tortured and killed for no other reason than for being Jews? How can we forget their horrific suffering? We must remember the Holocaust, that is part of our human condition after World War II. We have not been given a choice, any more than we are given the choice to see sun in the morning. The Holocaust is there, rooted like a poisonous tree in history.

## **The Final Solution**

Anti-Semitism didn't originate with Nazism

Long before the rise of Hitler, there was a glorification of the so-called "Aryan " race. Anti-Semitism had been a part of German cultural life for centuries and a significant dimension of right-wing German political and social thought since the late 1700s.

But it required a peculiar combination of forces in the late 1920s and early 1930s to create an opening for the ascension to power of a representative of the radical anti-Semitic right. As early in 1922, Adolf Hitler had advised Germany that the nation could not survive with a Jewish presence, for "the Aryan alone can form states and set them on their path to future greatness... The Jew is seeking to disintegrate the national German spirit." *In Mein Kampf* Hitler referred to Jews with a pathological loathing. Hitler also said, "The Jew is the creature of another god, the anti-man...He is a creature outside nature and alien to nature."

Hitler used prevalent anti-Semitic feelings to unify the Germans and to make them willing tools in the hands of the Nazi leaders. Nazi leaders declared that whoever is a Jew is an enemy of Germany. They went so far as to say that all who opposed Germany, whether America, British or Russian should be classified as Jews. British diplomat Eric Mills commented in 1935 of Nazi policy: "The Jew is to be eliminated and the state has no regard for the manner of this elimination." This devilish Nazi ideology was fundamentally anti-Christian as well as anti-Jewish, and those who led the way in the murder of the Jews were not acting on Biblical grounds. They acted in the spirit of the anti-Christ.

Throughout Europe, the Nazis directly inflamed the already powerful anti-Semitism through propaganda and their own brutality toward Jews. They endlessly played on every source of anti-Jewish sentiment- religious, economic, political, and broadly cultural. For example, the Nazis published a book called *The Jewish Ritual Murders*. It was a collection of ritual murder legends and others propaganda which incited some to direct collaboration and helped others to quench instincts of sympathy towards the Jews.

Apparently the initial planning for the Final Solution, the extermination of Jews from the face of the earth, occurred in July and August of 1941. The next nine months were spent in the spawning of a new thing in human history - the death camps, which ultimately produced thousands of corpses a day. By 1942 all the elements were in place; several death centres equipped with gas chambers and crematoria would now systematically and rapidly destroy the Jews, who would be shipped by train from the four-corners of Europe to their deaths.

A young woman who worked in the kitchen camp of Bergen-Belsen, where in March 1945 more than 18,000 deaths were registered, asked the quarter master, if there would be bread for the next day. She was told, "If 1200 people die tonight, there will be bread... And on the next terrible day, there was bread for the camp."

## **The Dutch Jews**

In Germany from September 1941 onward the yellow six-pointed Star of David emblem had to be worn on the garments of the Jews as a badge of pariahdom. It had to be worn by Jews wherever Nazism triumphed. By the end of 1941 their personal identification card had to carry a J. On April 28, 1942, all Dutch Jews were ordered to wear a star, which had to be visible at all times. I can still remember seeing Jews walking down the street in Amsterdam with their yellow star. They were easy targets for Nazi sadism.

In June 1942 the Jews in Amsterdam were forbidden to do their shopping in "Aryan" stores. They were only allowed to shop in Jewish stores and markets that had few supplies for the 85,000 Jews in the city. Furthermore, they were only allowed to shop between three and five o'clock in the afternoon.

When the Nazis began their extermination program, the heart of Amsterdam was gone. The city never fully recovered from its devastating loss of a significant and vibrant sector of its population. On July 14, 1942 the first transport of 4,000 Jews had to leave Amsterdam. Some fourteen thousand Dutch Jews were sent to their death between January and April 1943. Then, week after week, transports left until the beginning of February 1944, often with more than a 1000 and sometimes 2000 at the time. Even in 1944 while the Nazi experienced one military defeat after another, Dutch Jews, including Anne Frank and her family, were sent to the death camps.

Once the trains with their Jews "cargoes" were on the way to Germany and the "Final Solution" had begun in earnest, help from Gentiles was usually indispensable for Jewish survival. Thus many (but not all) Jews begged their long-time friends, neighbours, colleagues, and schoolmates for help. They asked their fellow Dutchmen to defend them as fellow citizens. How to respond to the plight of the Jews became an intense moral crucible, a testing of the Dutch citizens of all persuasions, of their principles, character, and courage. It was a trial by fire. By all accounts most chose to do nothing.

Unfortunately, when power is unequal, doing nothing aids the more powerful; thus neutrality eased the task of the Nazi murderers. A fairly small but dangerous minority (not so small in some places) seized the opportunity to help the Nazi killers destroy the hated Jews. One group active in aiding the German Nazis was Holland's Nazi Party (NSB) which claimed 30,000 members before the war. During the war many of them contributed significantly to Jewish suffering and the ultimate death toll. And some citizens betrayed Jews for the love of money.

Some pastors openly opposed the "Final Solution:" Rev. Bakker of Rotterdam was arrested because on April 3, 1942, he had prayed for the Jews and Jewish Christians for the Queen and her return, and also for the destruction of tyrannically powers.

Execution could be expected - often particularly cruel, often public - not only for the rescuer but often for his or her whole family or even village. Those who managed to survive the Nazi propaganda assault with sympathy for the Jews intact faced this powerful deterrent to acting on such sympathy.

## **The Rescuers**

Those who did act had many different motives for their efforts: love for the country, faithfulness to the queen and legal government, reaction to the persecution of innocent Jewish citizens, hatred toward the Germans and so on. Many were motivated by their Christian faith. In October 1940, representatives of the six major Protestant denominations in the Netherlands cited the fact that Christ was born of the Jewish people as one reason for their protest against the dismissal of Jewish civil servants. In 1943 the Dutch episcopate forbade Roman Catholic policemen from helping to hunt down Jews.

Considering the relative small percentage of the Dutch population was orthodox Reformed, the latter had an important role in the Dutch resistance movement. They realized that in the harsh and cruel actions of the Germans, anti-Christian ideology and power were at work. They were deeply convinced of the religious character of national Socialism which was in conflict with their Christian faith. Their convictions formed by church attendance, catechism and young people's societies made them aware of the dangers of the Nazi-ideology and their responsibility to engage in a struggle to oppose it. The existence of Christian organizations was also of great importance for the building of the resistance movement. The Reformed believers knew how to organize. They ministered in word and deed, provided shelter, food, clothing, and encouragement at great risk. Churches organized to help seek for addresses of hiding places. Collections were held. Many women were involved -their deep Christian faith motivated them to carry on with the rescue work. The Reformed Christians were reminded about the debt they owed to the Jews through whom God had given and kept His revelation. Many rescuers seriously nurtured in the Calvinist tradition retained a profound and morally constructive sense of God's continuing and unique relationship with the Jewish people. It is well known that Calvin found more continuity between the Old and the New Testament than many other Christian theologians. Calvin wrote, "God exhibits to us nothing in his only begotten Son but what he had formerly promised in the law." Thus, Christians are enjoined to search the Old Testament with all diligence for revelation concerning Christ, who is the very foundation of the Scriptures. These beliefs gleaned from the Scriptures amply demonstrate that Jews in desperate need found a profound respect and solidarity among many Calvinist Christians precisely because they were Jews.

One rescuer said, "My background is Christian Reformed; Israel has a special meaning for me. We have warm feelings for Israel." The Christian Reformed Churches (GKN) always had a special affinity with Jews. Already in 1875, the GKN had decided to do mission work among them. In 1916 Rev. J. Van Nes was the first missionary called for mission to the Jews by the GKN in The Hague. In the beginning of World War II there were three missionaries working among them. There was also a literature ministry. Despite Nazi opposition, this work continued on during the war. Through this mission work more and more congregations were reminded for the responsibilities they had toward the people of Israel. This Jewish mission work laid a favourable basis for the loving attitude thousands of CRC members had for the Jews during the Holocaust. Jews were also from the seed of Abraham.

The autobiography of Corrie the Boom *The Hiding Place* helps to illustrate some way why Reformed Christian became rescuers of Jews. She gives a vivid account of her efforts to protect Jewish people from the horrible designs of the Nazis. She was willing to risk her

life to work for their physical safety, even if those efforts did not afford opportunities to lead them to Christ. Her rescue work and that of her family were strongly influenced by orthodox Calvinist theology and practice. One important factor was clearly the extensive Bible reading that occurred in their home. Corrie emphasizes that the Old Testament was deeply cherished in their home, and immersion in it contributed to the family's profound sense of religious kinship with Jews. It is also important to note Corrie's father Casper's oft-repeated belief that the Jews are God's chosen people, "the apple of God's eye." "Corrie, anticipating the need to help Jews, prays, "Lord Jesus, I offer myself for Your people. In any way. Any place. Any time."

## **The Righteous Gentiles**

Jewish survivors of the Holocaust did not forget their benefactors. After World War II, they have recognized those non-Jews who were neither perpetrators nor passive bystanders but instead risked their lives to save them. These rescuers are known in Jewish life today as the "Righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust" and "Christian rescuers." Most Jews consider them as heroes.

In 1953, Israel established in Jerusalem Yad Vashem. It was founded to provide an appropriate "place and name" (the translation of the Hebrew Yad Vashem) for the victims of the Holocaust and to serve as a central location for ongoing research on the European catastrophe. The law that established Yad Vashem also mandated remembrance of that tiny minority of "high-minded righteous who risked their lives to save Jews. Undoubtedly the most attractive feature of Yad Vashem is the collection of several thousand evergreen carob trees that line the short stretch of road that one walks to reach the main Holocaust memorial hall in the Jerusalem hills. This area is known as the "Garden of the Righteous." Each tree in the garden is planted in recognition of a Gentile who helped Jews survive the Holocaust; whenever possible the planting has been by the rescuer himself or herself. A plaque with the name of the honoured rescuer is placed at the base of each tree. When my wife and I visited Yad Vashem we recognized some of the names of Dutch Reformed Christians. A moving experience!

## **Conclusion**

Why rehearse the well-known history of the Holocaust? Because we may never forget our affinity with the Jews who suffered so much during World War II and whose very existence as a nation is now threatened and as anti-Semitism is prevalent once again. Their enemies constantly make them their scapegoats. This is quite obvious from the anti-Semitic rhetoric so prevalent in the Middle East. It is especially important that we as Christians speak out against the rising tide anti-Semitism in the Western world and make our voices heard. We must take an active role in these hazardous times of proliferation racial tensions and Jew-hatred. This concern should rank high in our prayers and on our agenda.

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