

*The Heart Has Reasons: Holocaust Rescuers and Their Stories of Courage*  
by Mark Klempner

Beginnings

We need to know people who have made choices that we can make, too,  
to turn us into human beings.—Richard Bach

This book is about ten Dutch men and women who helped save the lives of thousands of Jewish children during the Nazi occupation of their country. But this chapter is chiefly about how I came to record their stories, and what those stories have meant to me personally. The importance of any rescuer's testimony as a historical document speaks for itself. But my interest in these particular accounts is not only historical but—unabashedly—inspirational. As the son of a Holocaust survivor, I found that these narratives helped me come to terms with my family's past; as an American trying to navigate the challenges of our times, they've helped me to find my ethical bearings. In short, working with these people, recording their experiences, and getting to know them over the past ten years has changed my life. I hope that their example may do the same for others.

Fifteen years ago, I was a Los Angeleno with fraying nerves and a rapidly plummeting attitude. As I drove around the congested city, I wondered what had gone wrong. How had we, citizens of the most prosperous nation in the world, become so mistrustful, so incapable of caring about one another? Even the best of my fellow Los Angelenos seemed to be living in fear, on edge—the wealthy in Beverly Hills sequestered on gated estates with surveillance cameras and grounds security; the poor in East L.A. making do with deadbolts, chains, and barred windows.

Though I was doing all right as a musician, the self-aggrandizing nature of the music business was getting to me. All the individual acts of selfishness I had

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witnessed began to blur together, leaving me vulnerable to becoming another burned-out L.A. cynic. I suspected that if I spent another decade in “the industry,” I might turn into someone I didn’t recognize, someone I wouldn’t have wanted to know when I was younger.

I had come of age in the early 1970s, and like many Americans at that time, I took Eldridge Cleaver’s words seriously, “You’re either part of the solution, or you’re part of the problem.” In October 1969, my father, recognizing an unjust war when he saw one, announced to the family that he was going to join the upcoming march on Washington. My sister and I, though barely into our teens, convinced him to let us come along. Upon our arrival at the national mall, he hoisted me up on his shoulders, and I surveyed the seemingly endless multitude united in their opposition to the war in Vietnam. It was at that moment, I believe, that I first became moved by the spirit of activism, “the power of the people” to effect social change.

As Richard Nixon’s malfeasance became exposed in the years that followed, I rallied and campaigned for causes and candidates I believed in; I stuffed envelopes, circulated petitions, and knocked on doors. I worked as a crewmember on the *Clearwater* to help clean up the Hudson River. Later, I answered a suicide prevention hotline. My spiritual studies had led me to believe that all life is connected, that everything I did, no matter how small, affected the whole. Through both my attitudes and my actions, I tried, as Todd Gitlin puts it, “to bend history my way.”

By the early 1990s, however, the United States had changed in ways that I couldn’t have imagined, and so had I. I see my personal changes as a sobering

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lesson in the power of society and culture to affect and mold an individual. Like Anne Frank, I'd always felt that people were basically good, but being a studio guitarist in Hollywood during the '80s had eroded my capacity to believe even that. This was a dangerous development, for once you stop expecting people to be good, you'd be surprised at what they begin to show you.

How do you continue to care about others when they only seem to care about themselves? That was a question I found myself increasingly unable to answer. Then, in 1992, someone set fire to my neighbor's car in the middle of the night; I awoke to the sound of the windshield exploding. The next day I learned that the perpetrator also set fire to a homeless person sleeping in a nearby alley. What lack of human connection could have resulted in such horror, right at my doorstep?

One year later, I was living in Ithaca, New York attending college for the first time, having left the music business after the L.A. riots. At Cornell, the answer to Rodney King's question, "Can we all get along?" seemed to be a resounding *yes*, but I knew I was in a rarefied environment, far from the drive-by shootings, brutal policemen, and the world-class greed of my former home. Life in Ithaca, a small university town, is strongly influenced by both the idealism of many of its inhabitants and the rugged beauty of the natural world that surrounds it. I remember thinking, as I wandered amid its waterfalls and gorges, that here I might actually get back my peace of mind.

While at Cornell, I applied for the Conger Wood Fellowship for Research in Europe—mainly, I admit, because it would mean a trip to Europe. But as soon as

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I started brainstorming about what, exactly, I wanted to research, my thoughts swerved in a serious direction: I would interview people who had rescued Jewish children during the Holocaust. Immediately the project occupied some large psychic space, but I didn't yet recognize that the rescuers might have—or be—the answer to the crisis of meaning and purpose that had overtaken me in L.A.

Rather, I was drawn by the peculiar attraction and repulsion I had to my family history, a history that now seemed a little more imaginable whenever I pictured that homeless person on fire.

I'll never forget how anxious I made my grandmother when, as a child, I unknowingly drew a design that resembled a swastika. My mother, seeing my bewilderment over this unexpected reaction, explained to me that my drawing reminded Grandma of something terrible. At that age, I couldn't understand how a mere set of lines on a page could make someone so upset. Later, I learned that she had lost nearly her entire family to the Nazis: she had come to the United States in 1936, while her parents and ten brothers—all of whom were studying to become rabbis—had remained behind.

My father, at the age of eleven, escaped Europe on the last boat out of Poland. On August 25, 1939, he and his two brothers, one sister, and his parents, boarded an ocean liner bound for New York. One week later the Nazis invaded, and all sea travel became *verboten*. My grandmother, Lillian Klempler, once sat me on her lap, and, turning the pages of photo albums from the Old Country, showed me wedding pictures, sepia-toned young couples, smiling women, and plump children in their little white shoes. "Hitler took them all," was all she said.<sup>1</sup>

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And so I am among those people in their 30s and 40s, who, as writer Daniel Mendelsohn has noted, are the last generation to be directly touched by the Holocaust. “There is, in our relationship to the event,” he writes, “a strange interweaving of tantalizing proximity and unbridgeable distance. . . . the dead are close enough to touch, yet frustratingly out of reach.”<sup>2</sup> As with many members of this “hinge generation,” the Holocaust was not spoken of in my home, but, rather, was conveyed by strained silences and disconnected emotions.<sup>3</sup>

Psychologists note that children of survivors often feel compelled to express the suppressed feelings of parents and grandparents, having inherited the original trauma as a “wound without memory.”<sup>4</sup> This has been true of me. I grew up in a well-lit world of modern conveniences, TV dinners, and expectations of upward mobility that were realized when my family moved from the Bronx to Schenectady, New York when I was eleven. In a split-level house with a neatly trimmed lawn, over a hundred miles from our relatives in Brooklyn and Queens, the past had been left behind and assimilation was in full swing.

But the shadow of the Holocaust is long. That overarching emptiness seemed to hold the key to the legacy of woundedness I felt in my family. Whenever I tried to open the door, though, some kind of emotional force field stood in my way. I would get hold of a book on the subject, but then one glance at a picture from the death camps would send me back to my “normal” life. Still, I couldn’t stay away forever.

Only after I undertook this project did I realize that interviewing people who risked their lives to save the lives of others, those who radiated hope during that time, rather than fear, might be a way to finally face the void rather than be

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driven away by it. I also found myself looking to the project for answers to my own moral quandaries. I had watched myself grow more angry and suspicious while living in Los Angeles; how was it that the harrowing ordeal of the Nazi occupation had unleashed such altruism and courage in the rescuers?

Upon having the good fortune to receive the grant from the Cornell Institute for European Studies, I wrote to Yad Vashem, the institution established by the state of Israel whose mission includes locating and honoring those people who selflessly aided Jews during the Nazi years. I asked Mordecai Paldiel, the director of the Righteous Among the Nations program, if he could supply me with names and addresses of the Dutch “righteous.” From a list of eighty rescuers, approximately half agreed to be interviewed; these, in turn, often directed me to friends who were also rescuers.

Many people associate Holland with rescue attempts after reading the diary of Anne Frank. I soon learned, however, that the Jewish survival rate in the Netherlands was the worst in Western Europe: different estimates by historians place it between 11 and 36 percent, as compared to about 60 percent in Belgium, and 75 percent in France.<sup>5</sup> The physical terrain, the strong Nazi presence, and the gradual, covert way the Nazis went about implementing the Final Solution in the Netherlands proved to be particularly deadly when compounded with the Dutch inclination to seek consensus and accept compromise. The vast majority of Dutch people cooperated with their Nazi occupiers and complied with the avalanche of Nazi regulations, paving the way for the eventual murder of their Jewish co-citizens. As members of the Dutch legal system stood by and the mass of Dutch citizens remained silent, the Nazis ran roughshod over the country’s constitution,

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trampling all the protections and privileges that the Jews had enjoyed for centuries.

Those who decided to help Jews in Holland had to be willing to disobey the Nazi measures and resist the Nazi machinations to relegate Jews to sub-human status. They had to cross the line from being law-abiding citizens to enemies of the state. They had to act from the heart, come what may.

Who was willing to do it? The women and men who speak in the pages of this book. They are never boastful, but proud in some quiet way, and reticent to varying degrees. Their explanations of their actions often make it sound as if what they did was the most natural thing in the world. Most of them continued to be morally engaged after the war, as well, offering through their example a luminous alternative to the empty materialism and superficial values in which so many of us have become enmeshed.

Spending time with the rescuers was, for me, a transforming experience. They welcomed me into their homes as if I were someone special—a characteristic inversion—and showered me with hospitality and kindness. I soon was looking at them not only as people who had made history, but also as people who could teach me a different way to live. I've come to think of them as the radiant specks around the black hole of the Holocaust, and they've become a radiant presence in my own life as well.

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Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *Hitler took them all* Readers may hear my grandmother tell stories and sing snippets of Yiddish songs from pre-WWII Poland in the documentary *Image Before My Eyes* (New York: YIVO Institute/Axon Video Corp., 1981).

<sup>2</sup> “*a strange interweaving*” Daniel Mendelsohn, “What Happened to Uncle Shmiel?” *New York Times Magazine*, 14 July 2002.

<sup>3</sup> “*binge generation*” This expression is used by Eva Hoffman in *After Such Knowledge* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> “*wound without memory*” Nadine Fresco uses this expression in “Remembering the Unknown,” *International Review of Psychoanalysis* 11/4 (1984): 418-419, 421.

<sup>5</sup> *Different estimates by historians* Compare: Presser, 539; J. C. H. Blom, “The Persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands in a Comparative International Perspective,” *Dutch Jewish History 2*, Jozeph Michman, ed. (Jerusalem: Graf-Chen Press, 1989), 273; B.A. Sies, “Several Observations Concerning the Position of the Jews in Occupied Holland during World War II,” *Rescue Attempts during the Holocaust*, Yisrael Gutman, Efraim Zurof, ed. (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1977), 527-528; Gerhard Hirschfeld, “Niederlande,” *Dimension des Völkermonds. Die Zahl der jüdischen Opfer des Nationalsozialismus*, Wolfgang Benz, ed. (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1991), 165.