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Magda Trocmé: A Mother Responds, “Hineni!”

Deborah Fox

During World War II, the inhabitants of the plateau Vivarais-Lignon amid the mountains of southeastern France shielded between 2,500 and 5,000 Jews and other refugees. Magda Trocmé, the freethinking wife of a Protestant pastor in the plateau town of Chambon-sur-Lignon, was just one of these many rescuers. However, her response to the Jewish refugees deserves study in two respects. First, her actions were not based on religious principles, but on a perceived duty to another in need. Second, her actions exemplify the feminine qualities of rescue. Magda's sense of duty towards others and her readiness to serve can best be described by the Hebrew concept *hineni*: “Here I am, send me, I am ready to serve you.” An examination of Magda Trocmé's actions and mindset reveals a woman who acted towards others as a mother answering a child's call with “*Hineni!*”

Upon Magda Trocmé's death in Paris at 94 years of age, the *New York Times* described her as “an anomaly, a freethinking woman whose life was dedicated to the curious principle that just as food is the answer to hunger the only rational antidote to violence is nonviolence.”¹ She was designated as a Righteous

¹Robert McG. Thomas, Jr., “Magda Trocmé, 94, Is Dead; Sheltered Victims of Nazis” (*New York Times* [19 Oct. 1996]: I52:1).

Gentile by Yad Vashem for her role in saving Jews in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, France, during World War II. One of the Jews whom she aided called Magda Trocmé the "motor" of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon.²

In her curriculum vitae, Magda gives a different description of her heroic life during the war years: "*Professeur d'italien*" at the Collège Cévenol.³ This simple self-description in itself reveals Magda's mindset: helping others who are in need is a life-long duty, not a role one plays for a short time. Magda saw a duty to all others in need of help, be it Jew or German, ally or enemy. She responded to those in need as a mother responds to a crying child, acting immediately with the food necessary to feed or a blanket to warm. Magda's sense of duty towards others and her readiness to serve can best be described by the Hebrew concept *hineni*: "Here I am, send me, I am ready to serve you." An examination of Magda Trocmé's life and her actions in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon reveals a woman who acted towards others as a mother answering a child's call with "*Hineni!*"

Magda's actions in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon were not those of a newly-born spirit whose outlook was awakened by exigencies of war. Rather, her ethics and morals were forged by her life experiences before the war and remained resolute and strong afterwards. Her life, almost from its start, was marked with incidents revealing her questioning mind and independent spirit.

Magda Elisa Larissa Grilli di Cortona was born on November 2, 1901, in Florence, Italy, to an Italian father and a Russian mother.⁴ Her mother, Nelly, died soon after giving birth to Magda, and Magda was tormented by this loss. Magda's father, Oscar, born of Florentine nobility, was an engineer and a colonel in the Italian army corps of engineers. He was distant toward

²Mordecai Paldiel, *The Path of the Righteous: Gentile Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust* (Hoboken: KTAV Publishing, 1993), p. 27. Le Chambon-sur-Lignon is a village situated on the Vivarais-Lignon plateau amid the mountains of southeastern France. From 1940 to 1944, the region was governed by the Vichy regime, a puppet of Nazi Germany. After 1943, Le Chambon-sur-Lignon was used by the Germans as a convalescent center. Despite the German presence and Vichy rule, the 9,000 plateau inhabitants shielded between 2,500 and 5,000 Jews and other refugees. A local historian of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, Annik Flaud, provided me with information about the history of the town and region.

³Papers of André and Magda Trocmé, Swarthmore College Peace Collection. DG 107, Series A, Box 2.

⁴Papers of André and Magda Trocmé, Swarthmore College Peace Collection. For autobiographical materials in the Collection, see *Maman, et ta biographie?: Souvenirs autobiographiques de Magda Trocmé Grilli di Cortona 1901–1995*. Also, Nelly Trocmé Hewett kindly provided me with details of her mother Magda's family history.

Magda, for he suffered from the loss of his wife. Magda turned to her maternal Russian grandmother, Varia Poggio Wissotzky, for affection and guidance. Varia, who had left her husband in Russia and moved to Florence with her three daughters, was a strong, independent woman who served as a role model and source of affection for the young Magda. Varia was born in Siberia, where her Decembrist father Alessandro Poggio had been exiled by the Czar. Varia was a Russian Orthodox Christian who converted to Protestantism. She volunteered with the Salvation Army and was very active in caring for others.

Magda developed a very keen sense of empathy from her altruistic role model, Varia. She also exhibited the same qualities of strength, independent thought, and action that Varia possessed. These characteristics shaped Magda's mind and spirit at an early age and allowed her to continue to grow as an independent woman even when subsequent events threatened to confine her to a more rigid orthodoxy.

Several years after the death of his wife, Magda's father married an Italian Catholic woman, and they had three children. While in elementary school, Magda had been attending the Waldesian church, but her step-mother placed her in a Catholic convent school. Magda made efforts to belong to the school and church community and tried to practice the Catholic teachings. However, Magda could not outwardly conform to practices that belied her inner beliefs and principles. She hated pretense and eventually gave up participating in practices, like confession, that she found hypocritical in that absolution seemed to be routinely dispensed. Even as a young girl, Magda was wary of the "ready-made" opinions of others and preferred to make up her own mind. Even Magda's marriage to a Protestant pastor did not smother her skepticism regarding matters of religion.

Magda attended the Magistero, an elite institute in Florence, where she studied Italian. In 1925, she attended the New York School of Social Work at Columbia University under a scholarship. While in New York, she met André Trocmé, then a student at the Union Theological Seminary, and they were married in 1926. André Trocmé was a conscientious objector who espoused nonviolence and was regarded by some in the French Reformed Church administration as a rebel for these views. In 1934, he was sent as pastor to Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, a remote Protestant village that had a long history of tolerance.⁵ André and Magda resided in the village until after World War II.

⁵His nonviolent activities and rescue efforts there during the war earned him the designation of Righteous Gentile.

The war years in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon put Magda's ethics and beliefs to a test. She was not found wanting.

The war brought refugees to the plateau region, regarded as a haven for the oppressed since the sixteenth-century persecutions of the Huguenots.⁶ Some of these refugees found their way to the Trocmés' presbytery door, often because the church was a central hub of village life and a sanctuary.

While Magda and André worked as a team in marriage and service to others, Magda's beliefs and actions remained her own. She operated according to her own ethical mindset and beliefs, which often differed markedly from those of her husband. André was very much the pastor, and he used words and ideas as inspiration and impetus to action. Magda quite simply acted.

And acted she did, tending to the needs of refugees who came to her and fulfilling the other roles of her life. Magda worked tirelessly finding housing and resources for the refugees, while tending to duties as a pastor's wife. Magda had four children to raise, at times as a single parent while her husband was imprisoned at a Vichy internment camp and when he went into hiding. Magda taught Italian at the Collège Cévenol and took in boarders for extra income. Magda was involved with the education of the young women of the church, teaching them mothering skills and also opening their minds to the outside world. When Magda's ashes were interred in 1997, these women, now grandmothers, served refreshments at the ceremony.⁷

Magda performed the role of a mother, both to her own four children and to those who came to her door needing those things a mother provides: food, drink, warmth, rest, and clothing. She was most concerned with the physical needs and comforts of others. This concern manifested itself from the

⁶The inhabitants of the Vivarais-Lignon plateau region were also recognized by Yad Vashem as Righteous Gentiles for their rescue work, having shown a communal spirit of bravery and righteousness on behalf of the Jews. The rescue efforts of the inhabitants of the plateau were not organized; in fact, the strength of the "conspiracy" was that it was dispersed. There was no "head" of the effort, no one person directing. The rescue efforts of the inhabitants were varied and lasted throughout the war. Patrick Henry has written for *Shofar* an excellent account of these efforts in "Banishing the Coercion of Despair: Le Chambon-sur-Lignon and the Holocaust Today," *Shofar* (Winter 2002). I also recommend Pierre Sauvage's film *Weapons of the Spirit* (Los Angeles: Chambon Foundation, 1989), which recounts many stories of rescue by plateau inhabitants.

⁷Nelly Trocmé Hewett kindly provided me with many stories and descriptions of her mother Magda's private life and experiences, as well as family stories. I am grateful to her for the time she spent talking and writing to me about her mother and for her very patient help.

first time a Jewish refugee came to the Trocmés' door in the winter months of 1940/41. As Magda told the story:

I remember the arrival [at the presbytery] of the very first Jew—a woman. It was at the start of the hunts for foreign Jews; she arrived at my door, saying she was Jewish, and German, and had nowhere to go. It was the middle of winter, and all she wore were flimsy shoes that were soaked through. She was panic-stricken. I warmed her as best I could near the wood fire, and reassured her.⁸

After the woman was settled and warmed, Magda tried to get help from the mayor (who later left the town), but was told to send the woman away. When Magda returned to the house, she found that the woman's flimsy shoes had burned in the fire. Magda spent the night hunting for shoes, a rare commodity during those years, which she somehow found.⁹ However, Magda once described this encounter, which was her first wartime extension of aid to a Jew, as a "failure," since she sent the woman to another place in the morning.¹⁰ As she once wrote about this incident, "What did she [the Jewish woman] think of a Christian community, [while she was] walking in the snow without knowing where she was going?"¹¹

Magda's abhorrence of hypocrisy and of faith without works, which she had expressed since a girl in the convent school, is evident in these words and in her tone. Her anguish at what she regarded as a failure reveals a belief that commitment to helping must be total, that the help given must fulfill the needs of the rescued person as much as possible. Such a belief is also inherent in viewing her rescue efforts as an extension of mothering, for a mother does not abandon her child. Before sending the child into the world alone, a mother tries to fulfill her child's needs as fully as possible, to the point at which the child can care for him or herself. From Magda's maternal point of view, she felt that she had sent the woman away without the assurance that the woman was venturing safely back into the world. This incident served to strengthen Magda's innate resolve to help.

In describing her rescue efforts, Magda states, "There was a Jew at your door. If you opened the door you realized that the Jew was hungry, and after a few words you realized also that he needed clothes and shelter."¹² What is

⁸Amy Latour, *The Jewish Resistance in France* (New York: Waldon Press, 1981), p. 139.

⁹Magda describes the incident in a letter to a "Mr. Hassler," which is included with her papers at the Peace Collection.

¹⁰Latour, *The Jewish Renaissance*, p. 139.

¹¹Letter to Mr. Hassler.

¹²Letter to Mr. Hassler.

a mother's role? If a baby is hungry, she must feed it; if naked, clothe it; if exposed to the cold rain, shelter it. A mother does these things immediately, on instinct, without thinking. She takes care of the body, the physical needs first.

An analogy can be drawn between certain types of rescue and a rebirthing process. When Magda and many of the other rescuers hid, fed, and sheltered the refugees until it was safe for the refugee to emerge once again into the world, the rescuers were acting as a mother who puts herself totally in service to her unborn child. This action on behalf of the rescuer represents the most intimate of duties. This type of rescue is indeed a replication of the first human bond each person experiences, the bond between mother and child.

These basic human needs of a refugee were urgent. Hunger, thirst, and discovery were immediate threats to life. Magda took care of these physical needs for those refugees in her care, and she did so immediately. When asked about the ethics involved in her rescue efforts, she answered, "When we started the work of saving the Jews in occupied France, we had no time to sit down and discuss ethical problems."¹³ She once said,

It was not decided from one day to the next what we would have to do. There were many people in the village that needed help. How could we refuse them? A person doesn't sit down and say: I'm going to do this and that. We had no time to think. When a problem came, we had to solve it immediately. Sometimes people ask me, 'How did you make a decision?' There was no decision to make.¹⁴

In a taped interview with the late philosopher Philip Hallie,¹⁵ Hallie asked Magda how she felt upon meeting the Jewish woman who came to the door. Magda gave him a similar response.¹⁶ She answered that she did not feel

¹³Letter to Mr. Hassler. In this letter, Magda chided readers of *Fellowship Magazine* who expressed reservations about the ethics of lying to save a life. The magazine is a publication of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, an international organization devoted to peace and non-violence.

¹⁴Magda Trocmé, "Magda Trocmé," *The Courage to Care: Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust*, ed. Carol Rittner and Sondra Myers (New York: New York University Press, 1986), p. 102.

¹⁵Philip Hallie wrote the ground-breaking work on the rescue efforts in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of the Village of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There* (New York: Harper and Row, 1994) and also wrote about Magda in *In the Eye of the Hurricane: Tales of Good and Evil, Help and Harm* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1997).

¹⁶Magda's responses to Philip Hallie are captured on audiocassette tapes that are part of the Trocmé Papers in the Swarthmore Peace Collection. Whenever possible for this study, I used Magda's responses from the audiotape in order to hear Magda's own voice and

anything or think anything. Magda told Hallie that if the problem is there, one has to help, and very quickly. One has to solve the problem in a “worldly” manner, she continued. In an exchange that reveals the practical nature of Magda, the mother and rescuer, she said to Hallie, “Even if you do not want to help somebody and there’s somebody in your house, how do you get rid of him? You have to do something.” When Hallie suggested that “you can kick him out,” Magda responded that “it is hard, it is hard.” On tape she sounds surprised, as if she had never before considered the idea of turning someone away. Why was it hard for Magda Trocmé to kick someone out, to close that door in the face of a stranger asking for her to risk her life and that of her family? She said, “[W]hen people come to my door, I feel responsible.”

Why did Magda feel responsible? She rejected religious imperatives as the impetus for her actions. Despite being a pastor’s wife, Magda did not speak of following Christ or the Bible. She did not believe in many Christian teachings. Magda once reproved an American minister who told her that he was looking forward to meeting her husband André in heaven. In response, Magda “scoffed and promptly retorted that she didn’t believe in such things.”¹⁷ However, Magda did have her own sense of a superior being or force. In her memoirs, Magda describes that sense:

My children were wrong to think I was an unbeliever. If there weren’t somewhere a source of hope, justice, truth, and love, we would not have rooted in us the hope of justice, truth and love that we find in every religion and every degree of civilization. It is that source that I call G-d.¹⁸

Magda told Hallie that she was “not a good Christian at all,” but that she did have a “kind of principle.”¹⁹ First, she believed in her husband and was faithful to his projects. It is insightful to note that Magda did not say that she was faithful to André’s religious beliefs or teachings; rather, she was committed to him as a person and to his works. Second, she did not “hunt around” to

inflections. The relevant tapes in the Collection are in Box Appendix A, nos. 3,4,5,21,22, and 23.

¹⁷In researching Magda, I received several emails from people whose lives Magda touched in some way. This particular anecdote was provided by Charles Phelps Anderson, son of the minister.

¹⁸Papers of André and Magda Trocmé, Swarthmore College Peace Collection. This quote is from the volume *Maman, et ta biographie?: Souvenirs Autobiographiques de Magda Trocmé Grilli di Cortona 1901–1995*, pp. 56–7.

¹⁹Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood*, p. 152

find people to help. "But," Magda told Hallie, "I never close my door, never refuse to help somebody who comes to me and asks for something. This I think is my kind of religion. You see, it is a way of handling myself."²⁰

If Magda Trocmé's "way of handling herself" was not rooted in religious principles, what was the foundation for her belief that she had to act? Magda speaks in terms of helping as an imperative in itself, a duty. "There was no decision to make," she once said.²¹ If the relationship between a rescuer and the rescued person is seen as replicating the primal, maternal bond, then the life of the rescued is held by the rescuer, while the rescuer places her or his life at the other's service. Is there a duty inherent in that bond?

Magda believed that when a person needed her, she had a duty to that person. In order for a duty to exist on the part of one person to another, the duty-holder must view his relationship with the other as involving an obligation or a service. Helping the other is not beneficence if it is a duty. Helping is not a choice; it becomes a "must," an imperative. Magda found it difficult to describe why she felt this duty, but her attempts at explanation are similar to the ideas expounded by the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas examined the origins and attributes of this duty we owe to one another in his work *Otherwise than Being*.²² Just as Magda believed that the appearance of a refugee created a duty, Levinas posited that the existence of the other simultaneous begets duty in oneself to that other.

Levinas equates being oneself to the "state of being a hostage" to the other.²³ Magda believed herself responsible for the refugee at her door. But this state of being "hostage" to the other was not a limitation on her being, just as a mother is a willing "hostage" in service to a child. Rather, as Levinas wrote, "Responsibility for the other, this way of answering without a prior commitment, is human fraternity itself, and it is prior to freedom."²⁴ Levinas explains,

²⁰Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood*, p. 153.

²¹Magda Trocmé's statement is from her film interview in the documentary *The Courage to Care*, which was directed and produced by Robert Gardner (United Way Productions, 1985). Magda's drive and personality is captured in the film. This excellent documentary contains accounts from many rescuers of Jews in World War II.

²²Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2002).

²³Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 117.

²⁴Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 116.

It is through the condition of being hostage that there can be in the world pity, compassion, pardon and proximity—even the little there is, even the simple “After you, sir.” The unconditionality of being hostage is not the limit case of solidarity, but the condition for all solidarity.²⁵

One of Levinas’ central concepts is contained in the Hebrew term *hineni*. The term is usually translated into English as “here I am” and into French as “me voici.” But *hineni* is more than a statement of location or identity. The word “indicates readiness, alertness, attentiveness, receptivity, and responsiveness to instructions.”²⁶ In the Bible, *hineni* is the response of many of the Prophets to G-d, particularly Abraham. When G-d calls, the Prophets answer *hineni* in the sense “Here I am, at your service, ready to do Your will, send me.”²⁷ Levinas refers his readers to Isa. 6:8, where Isaiah answers “*hineni*” to G-d’s call. Levinas translates “Here I am!” as “send me.”²⁸ This readiness to serve is seen in Magda Trocmé’s response to the needy refugees who appeared at her door.

This readiness is also heard in the response of a mother to a child. A mother answers the crying wails of a newborn with the reassurance of “*Hineni!* I am here, with whatever you need.” With a newborn, the needs are basic: sustenance and shelter. Magda, as did many other rescuers throughout the plateau Vivarais-Lignon, answered “*hineni*” to the refugees at her door with food from her table and warmth from her fire.

This ethic of duty, this mother responding “*hineni*,” is exemplified by Magda Trocmé’s treatment of the *gendarmes* who came to her house to arrest her husband in 1943.²⁹ Two *gendarmes* came to the presbytery to arrest André. They arrived right before dinner was to be served. Magda said, “There we were, and it was time to eat, so I said to the *gendarmes*, ‘Sit down and eat.’”

Magda’s feeding of the *gendarmes* often provokes amazement from those who do not understand her sense of obligation to the other. To Magda, the choice was simple: “It was nothing at all. We always said, ‘Sit down,’ when somebody came. Why not say it to the *gendarmes*?” Magda did not judge the

²⁵ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 117.

²⁶ Commentary to Gen. 22.1–9, *Jewish Study Bible* (Jewish Publication Society, Tanakh Translation, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler [New York: Oxford University Press 2004], p. 45).

²⁷ *Hineni* is used in this sense in Gen. 22:1 and Isa. 6:8. This concept is also at the core of the Christian hymn, “Here I am, Lord.” The refrain is sung, “Here I am, Lord, it is I Lord/I have heard You calling in the night/I will go, Lord” (Schutte).

²⁸ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, note 10 to Chapter V.

²⁹ Recounted by Magda in *Courage to Care*, p. 104.

other to whom she owed a duty, nor did she divide those she regarded as worthy of her help from those not worthy. Magda did not look past the need of the other whom she would serve. If a hungry man appeared before her, she offered him food. If a woman needed warmth, she sat her near the fire. Magda did not inquire about the intentions in the other's mind or about the emotions in the other's heart. She did not ask what the other would do or not do afterwards. She had a duty to fill the other's needs if she had the means to do so, regardless of the identity or intentions of the other. She did not even ask why. She saw a need that she must fulfill. So she filled it, simply filled it. A person in need was simply a person in need. Magda was a mother, not a judge. A mother responds, "*Hineni*."