This book was initiated at the international conference titled "Theoretical and Social Implications of Rescuing People in Extreme Situations: Another Look at Altruism," held in Radziejowice (Poland) in June 1989. The purpose of the conference was to discuss the implications of studies concerning the capability of human beings to perform brave, enduring altruistic actions. The inspiration for such an approach came from the Altruistic Personality Project—the large-scale study originated and directed by Professor Samuel Oliner. The project focuses on people who were willing, despite grave risk and consequence, to help others—to rescue Jews during the Holocaust—and it was supposed to shed new light on the psychological and concomitant social implications of such actions. It was based on a sample of approximately seven hundred rescuers, nonrescuers (controls), and rescued survivors in various countries under Nazi occupation, and provided a large database concerning the social and family background of the subjects, their childhood experience, their social relations before and after rescuing actions ensued, and many other related factors. The results of the project were presented in the book written by Samuel P. Oliner and Pearl S. Oliner titled *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe* (Free Press, 1988).

It should be kept in mind that reflection about human nature is heavily influenced by the studies uncovering its various flaws and imperfections. One of the first great sources of disillusionment about human nature was Freud's discovery of the unconscious, with its primitive sexual and aggressive urges. Subsequent studies on the authoritarian personality, prejudice, Machiavellianism,
“crimes of obedience,” cognitive biases, etc., contributed to the reinforcement of a rather unflattering picture of the human being. There were, though, some attempts to look at human nature in different ways—the proponents of humanistic psychology claimed that an individual, freed from imposed constraints and undue pressures, will manifest a capacity for empathy and creative self-realization. But the foundations of this claim were rather shaky. In fact, it was more an expression of the personal convictions of its authors than a proposition supported by some kind of scientific evidence.

Nevertheless, over the last two decades there has been an increasing number of empirical studies focusing on the "positive" forms of human behavior—on the psychological mechanism of prosocial actions: helping, sharing, and caring for others. Many of these studies were conducted in laboratory settings. But their real significance could not be fully appreciated as long as there was not enough data linking laboratory situations with real life. The studies of real-life altruism provide this missing link. They show the phenomenon that in the laboratory may have a rather elusive and "ghostly" existence, but that under certain conditions can become very robust; prosocial forces can sustain themselves under the most adverse conditions.

The studies of altruism indicate that the idea that empathy and altruism as a natural propensity of a human being must inevitably appear, if the conditions that suppress it are eliminated, is rather simpleminded. The real mechanisms of prosocial action are apparently much more complex. As the understanding of these mechanisms grows, many of our old views about human beings may require major revisions.

This was, in fact, the basic assumption of the organizers of the conference. They believed that through the analysis of these mechanisms we could shed new light on a number of issues: on theories of personality, social attitudes, and culture; on family relationships, education, and public policy; on moral, philosophical, and religious considerations. Of course, one cannot in the framework of one conference exhaust all the possible considerations dealing with this topic. Its major goal was therefore more modest; it was to instigate thought about the implications of the studies on altruism for our approach to different spheres of social life. And this is also the aim of this book, which is the outcome of that conference.
appreciation to the following institutions, which by offering their generous support made the whole undertaking possible: the Institute of Psychology of the Polish Academy of Science, the Altruistic Personality and Prosocial Behavior Institute, and the Institute of Noetic Sciences.