INTRODUCTION

Lawrence Baron

In situations where the dangers facing a person or group are the result of state-sanctioned policies, individual and collective attempts to aid those in peril have broad political and sociological implications. The historical context of this kind of rescue determines the risks involved in helping the victims and how legitimate their persecution seems to the general population. In turn, these factors affect the incidence of rescue, first by providing common positive or negative reasons either for protecting or abandoning those in need, and second by facilitating or inhibiting rescue based on the perceived and real dangers it might entail. Moreover, the prevailing values within a particular society or subculture influence the motivations that rescuers cite to explain their behavior. Finally, how one defines an act of altruism relates to the historical conditions and national or regional culture in which it occurs.

Richard Hovannisian's pioneering chapter about Turks who saved the lives of Armenians during the Genocide of 1915 attests to the culturally relative meaning of altruism. He documents many cases of Turks who acted upon a variety of humanitarian motives, but observes that these motives often were commingled with what appear to us today as less-than-noble ulterior motives such as the adoption of children by barren couples, the conversion of the rescued to Islam, and the exploitation of the rescued for their labor. Nevertheless, he discerns shades of altruism among these motives. Regarding the employment of the rescued Armenians, Hovannisian reminds us “to look at rural societies and realize that even in the most humanitarian of families, labor is a way of life for all family members.” Similarly, in the minds of devout Turkish
Lawrence Baron’s chapter tries to identify what was distinctively Dutch about the motivations of Dutch rescuers of Jews during the German occupation. Despite Holland’s tradition of religious tolerance, the Jews suffered higher numerical and proportional losses there than in other West European nations under Nazi rule. Baron attributes this to a variety of causes: Holland’s location and topography, the repressive regime imposed on the Dutch, the crushing of early opposition to Nazi anti-Semitism, the compliance of the Dutch civil service and Jewish officials in the administration of racist policies, and the time lag between the first deportations and the development of a national rescue network. Once that network was operational, however, rescuing Jews became an integral part of resistance activities, unlike in countries like Poland, where Jews were never fully accepted as fellow citizens and political anti-Semitism was much stronger. Baron contends that the frequency of rescuers saving Jews whom they already knew was probably higher in Holland than in many other nations as a result of the higher degree of Jewish integration in Dutch society. He attributes the pronounced philo-Semitism among Dutch Calvinists who rescued Jews for theological reasons to Calvinism’s relatively positive views of Jews and Judaism and to the political role Dutch Calvinism had played in its country’s history.

By contrast the historical circumstances in wartime Poland were far less conducive to the mass rescue of Jews. There the Nazi regime brutally wielded its power to implement the “Final Solution” and enslave and terrorize the native gentile population. Even though some factions within the Polish resistance defended the Jews, others refused to do so, reflecting the virulent anti-Semitism pervading many Polish Catholic and nationalistic movements. The Polish nuns depicted in Ewa Kurek-Lesik’s article not only jeopardized their convents and lives to hide Jewish children, but also frequently had to “suppress this anti-Semitism, or rise above it in the name of a higher ideal.” “Motivated by a Christian duty towards others"
and by their fidelity to the ideals” expressed in their religious vows, they focused on the humanity and suffering of their wards and overlooked their Jewishness. The distrust between Polish Catholics and Jews was symbolized by the controversy over whether to christen the Jewish children being hidden in the convents. While many nuns felt baptism was essential for concealing the real identity of these children, orthodox Jews suspected the nuns of trying to convert their children permanently and preferred their children to be martyrs for their faith rather than apostates.

Rachel Hertz-Lazarowitz firmly roots the altruistic and political evolution of Dov Yirmiya in Israeli political culture. Dov hailed from a pioneering Zionist family and identified with the socialism of the Mapam party. Although he fought for his country’s independence and security, he also recognized that Israel’s victories had resulted in injustices against the Palestinians, who either lost their homes and lived as refugees in neighboring countries or encountered official discrimination if they stayed as citizens in Israel. His revulsion over what he witnessed during the 1982 Lebanon War heightened his empathy for their plight and prompted his political intervention on their behalf. Thus, he organized volunteer relief services for them, while simultaneously supporting a call for Israeli soldiers to refuse military service in the Occupied Territories. Hertz-Lazarowitz argues that the trauma of the Holocaust and Israel’s struggle for survival have created a culture where there is “a close proximity between personal and collective boundaries.” Thus, Dov’s altruistic response to the suffering of the Palestinians could not be confined to remedial acts of charity and led to political activism to change the policies he believed were the source of their ordeal. She adds that his actions and views have been expressed in dramatic terms because he self-consciously plays a role on the political stage of his country. As in all of the selections in this section, the highly personal decision to embrace the despised other in his or her hour of need has public causes and repercussions.