

Recalling the heroics of 'Righteous Gentiles'

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Reviewed by David Lee Preston
It took 20 years for scholars to begin addressing the subject of the "Righteous Gentiles" — non-Jews who risked their lives, without expectation of reward, to save Jews during the Holocaust.

Apart from a cedar-lined alcove at the entrance to the Yad Vashem museum in Jerusalem honoring the rescuers, they received virtually no recognition and, in some instances, died unacknowledged.

Voices about the Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg, whose case was known to American authorities since the late 1940s, began appearing only in this decade. And an international study of altruistic behavior during the Holocaust, directed by California sociologist Samuel Olinz — himself a Holocaust survivor who was saved by non-Jews — got under way only 2½ years ago.

In one sense, as Nechama Tec points out in her excellent book *When Light Pierced the Darkness*, this ordering of history has put the Holocaust in accurate perspective. To have placed undue emphasis on the minuscule numbers of rescuers would have diminished the tragedy, the guilt of the perpetrators and collaborators, the martyrdom of the victims and the pain of the survivors.

Tec, a sociologist at the University of Connecticut at Stamford, was herself rescued by Christian Poles. She wrote extensively about topics such as Swedish gambling and American adolescent marijuana use before she began, after 30 years, to address her own past and the subject of Righteous Gentiles.

When *Light Pierced the Darkness* achieves an important synthesis of the available published and archival material on the subject, and Tec's 45 interviews with both rescuers and rescued. Of the interviews, 17 took place in Poland — all but three of those with Christian rescuers — and she deserves high praise for her courage in returning to that country of so many awful memories to conduct her intensive research.

Not only is Tec's book the first thorough treatment of the subject but it is also charged with a poignancy that only a survivor can summon.

For Jews who tried to pass as Christians, she writes, "the possibility of having sad eyes became an ever-present threat, a threat most Jews were aware of, Jews were known for their sad eyes. They could be recognized just by the sadness of their eyes. Many were." This is followed by two specific examples of the phenomenon, culled from her interviews.

Religious, economic and political rationales for persecuting the Jews had existed in Poland for centuries. Tec reminds us, and random massacres were commonplace long before the Nazis overran the country in September 1939. Furthermore, Poland was the only country in which the Nazis imposed a mandatory death penalty for those harboring Jews. And Poles received rewards for denouncing Jewish fugitives.

Most striking about Tec's research is the extent to which she discovered anti-Jewish sentiment among certain rescuers.

All of these elements lend context to the story of the German engineer Herman "Fritz" Graebe, the protagonist in Douglas K. Haneke's *The Moses of Romno*.

In a 1941 photograph included in Haneke's book, Graebe is seen in a



Herman 'Fritz' Graebe, a German engineer, was responsible for saving many Jews

WHEN LIGHT PIERCED THE DARKNESS
Nechama Tec
Oxford University Press
262 pp. \$29.95

THE MOSES OF ROMNO
Douglas K. Haneke
Dodd, Mead, 208 pp. \$17.95

carefree mood, his grin broad, his hands without tension. He had just arrived in Germany in 1946. As in the previous picture, he wears a coat and tie, and his hair is parted in the same place, but here he appears gaunt, wearing the troubled expression of a man whose soul has been seared by horror, he has witnessed. He hardly looks like the same man.

It is to Graebe's eternal credit that the events he experienced between those years did, in fact, change him. He watched massacres of Jews in the cities of Romno and Izbica in Nazi-occupied Poland in 1942, and made a sacred

covenant to save as many Jews from a similar fate as he could. For four years, he risked his life to provide cover for hundreds of Jews, under the aegis of the construction firm. Many survived the Holocaust because of him.

Again and again, using bluff and bluster, Graebe challenged the Nazi hierarchy when his workers were threatened and even withstood the efforts of suspicious superiors in the company who tried to thwart him. His efforts disrupted his family life, damaged his career and almost destroyed his health, but in the end his only regret was "that I could not have done more."

The detailed records that Graebe compiled — and, at great pains, safeguarded — became part of the proceedings at the Nuremberg trials, during which Graebe was a key witness because of his firsthand knowledge of mass executions. Ironically, as the book shows, his conscience and testimony made him a marked man in his own country, compelling him to move his family to the United States. He lives today in San Francisco.

Haneke, a California Presbyterian minister drawn toward Holocaust studies, tells Graebe's story admirably. He succeeds in making several scenes so vivid that they inevitably give rise to anticipation of a movie.

Particularly memorable are Graebe's drive from the town of Graefath to Düsseldorf, Germany, on the morning



Nechama Tec

after Kristallnacht in 1938 (the night when Jews were attacked, their stores vandalized and synagogues burned); the Romno and Izbica massacres; Graebe's surrealistic showdown with an SS major in the Romno town square, for which a German officer gave him the sobriquet that serves as the book's title.

These and other powerful scenes convinced *The Moses of Romno* as an important contribution to the literature of the Holocaust. And because the

book presents a positive role model in a world gone mad — and offers conclusions about the character traits that set Graebe apart — it ought to be included in every high school curriculum.

The book displays some unfortunate writing (the night of the Romno massacre resounded like "a symphony of slaughter" during which "graves flew like wingless bats"), and one chapter is marred by referring to the German magazine *Der Spiegel* as a newspaper. In addition, readers would have benefited from a map covering the area from Germany to the Ukraine. (Without a map, for example, how many Americans can appreciate the proportions of Graebe's 500-mile solo train ride from Warsaw to rypin his Jewish workers in Kirovograd, or his placement of Jews in a row office in Poltava, well beyond the Dniester River?)

But these are trifles when considered against Haneke's earnest and often passionate narrative. Where Graebe's own words of reflection are instructive, Haneke inserts them. Most often, this technique does not so much disrupt the flow of the story as provide authentic insight, as in Graebe's consideration of a Jewish father committing his son by pointing to heaven before the two were machine-gunned into a mass grave at Dabrowa.

I believe that the Jews had not fared enough — that is why they did not resist. I too would comfort my son, point to heaven, and say to him: that was a better future than here.

Although the author consulted several sources in preparing the book — science, after all, that it is really Graebe's voice and not Haneke's that echoes throughout *The Moses of Romno*. As such, the book engenders an empathic appreciation of Graebe's struggles and anguish. Haneke confronts the question of his own objectivity by presenting the challenges raised in Germany in 1985 to Graebe's version of events.

Fritz Graebe was not the only person who saw Nazi SS men, Ukrainian militiamen and local police volunteers exterminate the Jews of that region. But he was among the precious few who tried to intervene, there and elsewhere in Eastern Europe.

Late Wallenberg in Budapest, Hungary, and the German industrialist Oskar Schindler in Krakow, Poland. He took advantage of his position to challenge the Nazi machinery of death. With *The Moses of Romno*, Graebe takes his rightful place alongside those two honorable Christians as a monumentally heroic figure of the Holocaust.

Most of the heroes of *When Light Pierced the Darkness* operated on a more modest scale. That does not diminish their greatness. It only underlines that the high quality of Tec's interviews — the best thing about her book — is tainted by her promise of anonymity to her sources.

Ironically, the price we pay for their candor is that we cannot know too much about them. Tec plans to donate the tapes and transcripts of these interviews to the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York with one stipulation: Their identities must not be revealed for another 30 years.

David Lee Preston, an Inquirer reporter, is writing a book about how his mother survived the Holocaust by hiding in a Löss sewer for 14 months — she was saved by Christian sewer workers. His father, a survivor of the Nazi camp Auschwitz and Buchenwald, is a native of Romno.

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davidleepreston2001
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