



Reviews

EDITOR: John Nicholls, 17 Upper Trinity Road, Halstead, Essex, CO9 1EE. Tel. 01787 473089; email: jgmicholls@btopenworld.com

Gentiles who helped the Jews*

John Nicholls

SIR MARTIN Gilbert's writings are well known in the Brotherhood, in particular his atlases to do with Jewish history. He has written many other books: on Jerusalem; on the Holocaust; on recent Jewish history; biographies, including the official biography of Sir Winston Churchill; and a three-volume history of the twentieth century. Although his literary output is prodigious, his books are all meticulously researched and contain references to the original documents used. He is Jewish and a fellow of Merton College, Oxford.

The particular book under review is an account of those non-Jews from all over Europe who assisted the Jews of German-occupied Europe to escape from the Nazis, at the risk of losing their own lives and those of their families. Much of the source material comes from Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum and archive in Jerusalem, but Gilbert also cites other books, and letters and conversations he has received from and had with Holocaust survivors.

Scripture itself contains references to Gentiles who defied tyrannical régimes intent on destroying the Hebrew people in their midst. Pharaoh's daughter did not perhaps place herself much at risk when she plucked Moses out of the Nile (Ex. 2:5,6), but the widow of Zarephath certainly risked her life to shelter Elijah from Jezebel, who was hunting for him at least three-and-a-half years (1 Kgs. 17:8-16). The book under review contains hundreds of stories of people and organisations who risked much, some paying with their lives and the lives of loved ones, in order to shelter Jews from deportation to the death camps of Nazi Germany and elsewhere.

The Holocaust is an event of such magnitude that Jews today are still unable to comprehend why it happened and why God allowed it to overtake them. Scripture prophesies the horrors of the Shoah, as the Jews call it. Deuteronomy 28:64-67 surely refers to the uncertain existence the seed of Jacob has led since the scattering

among the nations after A.D. 70. Jeremiah 30:6,7 describes the time of Jacob's trouble, with verse 11 explaining why these things happened: "I will correct thee in measure, and will not leave thee altogether unpunished". Jeremiah 16:16-21 describes how the Jews would be hunted out from every hiding place, and the prophet Amos describes the guilt of the Jews in uncompromising terms, showing how God would seek them out to punish them (9:1-10).

Martin Gilbert, of course, does not mention these remarkable prophecies, but what he does do is document in detail some of the ways a few Jews were rescued. Taking each country where the Holocaust victims came from, he records some heroic and selfless acts of goodness. A Jew, Idel (Jack) Kagan, told him, "Very few [Polish] farmers wanted to risk their lives and the lives of their families to save a Jew. The penalty for just having contacted a Jew was death. But there were some good farmers who risked their lives and hid children or entire families".

Kagan describes how a baby, Bella Dzienciolska, was saved: "Her parents had entrusted her to the farmer to hide. She was blonde and she did not look like a Jewish child, but at two years old she already spoke Yiddish. So the farmer made a hole under the floor and kept her there during the day for a year until she forgot to speak Yiddish. He then took her out and told the neighbours that a relative's child was staying with them". Bella Dzienciolska survived the war, thanks to that unknown farmer. Fifty years later she was to return to the farm, and found under the floorboards the hole in which she had been hidden.

Here are some other examples given by Gilbert:

* *The Righteous: The Unsung Heroes of the Holocaust*, Martin Gilbert, Doubleday, 2002, £25.00, ISBN 0 385 60100 X.

- Leopold Socha of Lvov was a professional thief who became a sewer worker; he hid twenty-one Jews in the sewers for over a year after the final roundup of the ghetto Jews in June 1943. He bought them food and washed their clothes each week. Ten of them survived.
- A Pole called Pietrusiewicz hid a husband and wife underneath the outdoor dog-kennel behind a shed in his back yard. The family would bring them food every day, making it look like they were feeding the dog.
- Janek Weber was in the Cracow ghetto with his parents when it was surrounded by the SS as a prelude to the deportation to Auschwitz of the last 2,000 Jews living there in March 1943. He never saw his father again after he was smuggled out of the ghetto in a suitcase. He was sent to the Wierzbickis, Christians who concealed Janek from their three children in a locked room in total silence for two years. He forgot how to speak for a time after his release, and was reunited with his mother in 1945.
- William Donat was smuggled out of the Warsaw Ghetto and his parents tried to place him on the Aryan side, which was very difficult for boys. He wrote: "I had blond hair and blue eyes, and we spoke only Polish at home, but still, I was a Jewish boy bearing the sign of the covenant". He was eventually taken into an orphanage run by nuns, where he was baptized, said his daily prayers and went to mass, being liberated after two years.

Gilbert's book recounts stories of Germans who helped Jews, and includes an account of Oskar Schindler, the German owner of a factory in Cracow where kitchen utensils were manufactured. He and his wife Emilie saved hundreds of Jews. Jews were saved in France, but at the end of the chapter describing this there is a sad comment from Serge Klarsfeld, a hidden child during the war: "Between 1942 and 1944, 11,402 children aged seventeen and under (some tiny babies) were deported, many of them without their parents. Only three hundred of those children survived. These harsh facts make the acts of rescue that did take place all the more remarkable, whilst raising the ever-present question: What if more people had been able to take the risk of hiding Jews?"

In some occupied countries Jews fared much better than in Poland, Germany and France. In Norway and Denmark there were church pro-

tests and the police refused to support the Germans in rounding up the Jews. In Holland the population was more polarised between the Nazi sympathisers and Nazi haters. In Italy there were some priests and nuns who protected and concealed Jews, and Gilbert gives several instances. The Holocaust did not come to Hungary until 1944, and many of the Jews survived in Christian homes and with various organisations. Raoul Wallenberg worked in the Swedish Legation in Budapest (Sweden was a neutral country in the war) and saved many hundreds of Jews.

The risks involved in hiding and caring for Jews were considerable. Some Gentiles were killed by their fellow countrymen because their hatred of the Jews ran so deep. Quite often the families of Gentiles suffered because of the scarcity of food in the war conditions. A Lithuanian, Jan Pauvlavicius, protected several Jews in his cellar, but was murdered after the country was liberated by Lithuanians, who hated him for saving Jews.

Another Lithuanian, Mykolas Simelis, hid and fed fourteen Jews on his farm when he could barely feed his own family. His five small children could no longer play with the neighbourhood children because they had to be on the lookout to warn of the approach of neighbours and strangers. In 1944 Mykolas's wife Jadvyga died of complications after the abortion of their sixth child. In July 1945, Mykolas Simelis was murdered by Lithuanian nationalists who were convinced that anyone who rescued Jews must be a Communist. Their children grew up in an orphanage.

Many other stories from many other countries are included in this book, and interested readers are strongly recommended to read it in detail for themselves. Gilbert's final chapter, "Afterword", is thought provoking, as the author examines the motives of those who tried to save Jews from deportation and death. For some it was their Christian principles; others acted out of friendship for those they had known before the war; yet others acted purely out of humanitarian decency, even though many of them did not like the Jewish people as a group. Social and national characteristics also had an influence.

As Christadelphians we know that the nations will once again rise up against Israel and the Jews before the salvation of God's people by Jesus, and there may well arise similar challenges for us. Martin Gilbert concludes this fascinating book with words which all can take to heart:

“Each of the nineteen thousand and more known stories—like each of the several hundred stories in these pages—must lead each of us to ask: ‘Could I have acted like this, in the circumstances;

would I have tried to, would I have wanted to?’. One can only hope that the answer would have been—and would still be if the occasion arose—‘yes’”.