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Book Review: Churches and the Holocaust: Unholy Teaching, Good Samaritans, and Reconciliation

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Book Review

Paldiel, Mordecai. *Churches and the Holocaust: Unholy Teaching, Good Samaritans, and Reconciliation*. Jersey City: KTAV Publishing House Inc, 2006. 443 pp. Bibliography, notes and index.

Yad Vashem was created in 1953 by the Israeli parliament as a memorial to the Holocaust. Since its inception over 21,000 non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews from the Nazis have been singled out as “Righteous Among the Nations.” Mordecai Paldiel has been the director of the Department for the Righteous at Yad Vashem for the past twenty-five years. His position has allowed him to monitor the investigations of cases in which men and women are nominated for recognition in saving Jewish lives. The work has opened his eyes to a new aspect of human behavior; caring for someone else, even risking ones own life for the benefit of another with no tangible ulterior motive. Mr. Paldiel, believing that these accounts can have an impact on the way subsequent generations view the Holocaust, has publicized many of these rescues. He stated in Harry Cargas’s *Voices from the Holocaust*, “The greatest sin would be to allow these stories just to gather dust and do nothing with them. If we see so much of evil on T.V., in the movies, and in stories, and if we write so much about Mengele and Hitler and the Damjanyuks and so on, wouldn’t it be a measure of justice to be fascinated by those who did acts of goodness?” Paldiel’s books include *The Path of the Righteous: Gentile Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust* (1993), *Sheltering the Jews: Stories of Holocaust Rescuers* (1997), *Saving the Jews* (2000), and in early 2007 he released yet another book entitled *The Righteous Among the Nations: Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust*.

This review focuses on Paldiel’s 2006 publication, *Churches and the Holocaust: Unholy Teaching, Good Samaritans and Reconciliation*. In this book, the author confronts the motivation and religious background of approximately 600 of the “Righteous.” These men and women who rendered aid were all members of the Christian clergy. As such, they had shared beliefs and a significant level of indoctrination and commitment to their faith. Many were also leaders in their communities.

In the first chapter Mr. Paldiel explains the foundation and establishment of Christian anti-Jewish teachings and why so many have persecuted and blamed the Jews for deicide throughout the ages. Traditional theology taught that the Jews were responsible for murdering Jesus. This offense was supposedly passed down through the ages upon all the Jewish people and became the justification for any maltreatment they received. Paldiel gives an overview of many Christian clerics who were cursing the Jews prior to World

War II, one of which was Martin Niemöller. This German-Protestant leader may have regretted not speaking up for the Jews after the war, but beforehand he was damning them. "The blood of all the righteous men who were ever murdered because they testified to the holy will of God against tyrannical human will has come upon its [the Jewish people's] head, as well as the blood of Jesus and the blood of all his messengers." (p. 41)

After this introductory primer, the author organizes the accounts of the 600 "Righteous" clergy by nation. His style in presenting the rescue stories is candid and without adornment, giving just enough of the setting in each country to familiarize the reader with the Jewish perspective. The narratives may be a bit stark, but this is consistent with the author's style. He is true to the actual events and doesn't glorify the actions of the "Righteous." Rather, he presents their deeds as simple acts of kindness that are conceivably within almost anyone's realm of possibility.

Despite Switzerland's historical religious toleration, there are only four Swiss clerics listed in the index who claim the title of "Righteous." Consequently, the chapter recounting the Swiss Republic's religious leaders is limited and recounts those clerics who publicly condemned Switzerland's border regulations. Such brief recognition is misleading. Many of Switzerland's "Righteous" performed their acts in another country and are indexed accordingly.

For example, one account of a Swiss cleric is found in the chapter on France. Pastor Roland De Pury was born in Geneva but living in Lyon at the time of the war. Soon after the fall of France, he publicly condemned the Jewish persecution and used his home as a staging area for planning rescue activities for Jews. Because of his Swiss connections, he was instrumental in helping many cross the border from France into Switzerland, sometimes escorting them personally. In May of 1943, De Pury was arrested by the Gestapo and imprisoned for five months. He was released in exchange for German spies and spent the remainder of the war in Switzerland (p. 121).

There are numerous other stories of rescue involving Switzerland as a destination of refuge. One of these is about the author as a young boy. In 1943 his family fled the Italian-occupied zone in France when the Germans took it over. French priests and nuns assisted the family in their flight and to cross the border into Switzerland. Two of these priests, Abbé Albert Simond and Abbé Pierre Mopty of Evian, also saved the local synagogue's Torah scrolls from being torched and concealed them in their church until after the war (p. 96).

Although the author presents the rescue stories of the 600 "Righteous" clerics in a frank manner, they represent an aspect of human behavior that is complicated and unusual. These men and women risked their lives with no thought of reward or compensation to save someone of another faith. They went against centuries of tradition that condemned the Jews. It is only since the holocaust that the churches have revisited these teachings, and even then, many individuals still cling to the idea of blood guilt. Mr. Paldiél tackles this and possible future problems in his final chapter. Although positive steps have been

taken by many churches since the holocaust, “The negation of Jewish existence is lodged so deeply in Christian doctrine, and so far below the level of awareness, that Christian teachers and theologians sometimes unwittingly endorse and repeat it” (p. 368). It is Paldiel’s hope that these stories of “Righteous” clergy will serve as role models for future constructive dialogue between Christianity and Judaism.

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