

## BEGINNINGS



*We need to know people who  
have made choices that we can make, too,  
to turn us into human beings.*

—Richard Bach

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT TEN DUTCH MEN AND WOMEN WHO HELPED SAVE the lives of thousands of Jewish children during the Nazi occupation of their country. But this chapter is chiefly about how I came to record their stories, and what those stories have meant to me personally. The importance of any rescuer's testimony as a historical document speaks for itself. But my interest in these particular accounts is not only historical but—unabashedly—inspirational. As the son of an immigrant who narrowly escaped the Holocaust, I found that these narratives helped me come to terms with my family's past; as an American trying to navigate the challenges of our times, they've helped me to find my ethical bearings. In short, working with these people, recording their experiences, and getting to know them over the past ten years has changed my life. I hope that their example may do the same for others.

Fifteen years ago, I was a Los Angeleno with fraying nerves and a rapidly plummeting attitude. As I drove around the congested city, I wondered what had gone wrong. How had we, citizens of the most prosperous nation in the world, become so mistrustful, so incapable of caring about one another? Even the best of my fellow Los Angelenos seemed to be living in fear, on edge—the wealthy in Beverly Hills sequestered on gated estates with surveillance cameras and grounds security; the poor in East L.A. making do with deadbolts, chains, and barred windows.

## THE HEART HAS REASONS

Though I was doing all right as a musician, the self-aggrandizing nature of the music business was getting to me. All the individual acts of selfishness I had witnessed began to blur together, leaving me vulnerable to becoming another burned-out L.A. cynic. I suspected that if I spent another decade in “the industry,” I might turn into someone I didn’t recognize, someone I wouldn’t have wanted to know when I was younger.

I had come of age in the early 1970s, and like many young people at that time, believed “you’re either part of the solution, or part of the problem.” In October 1969, my father, recognizing an unjust war when he saw one, announced to the family that he was going to join the upcoming march on Washington. My sister and I, though barely into our teens, convinced him to let us come along. Upon our arrival at the national mall, he hoisted me onto his shoulders, and I surveyed the seemingly endless multitude united in their opposition to the Vietnam War. It was at that moment that I first became moved by the spirit of activism, “the power of the people” to effect social change.

As Richard Nixon’s malfeasance became exposed in the years that followed, I rallied and campaigned for causes and candidates I believed in; I stuffed envelopes, circulated petitions, and knocked on doors. I worked as a crewmember on the *Clearwater* to help clean up the Hudson River. Later, I answered a suicide prevention hotline. My spiritual studies had led me to believe that all life is connected, that everything I did, no matter how small, affected the whole. Through both my words and deeds I tried to “make a difference.”

By the early 1990s, however, the U.S. had changed in ways that I couldn’t have imagined, and so had I. I see my personal changes as a sobering lesson in the power of society to affect and mold an individual. Like Anne Frank, I’d always thought that people were basically good, but being a studio guitarist in Hollywood during the ’80s had eroded my capacity to believe even that. This was a dangerous development, for once you stop expecting people to be good, you’d be surprised at what they begin to show you.

How do you continue to care about others when they only seem to care about themselves? That was a question I found myself increasingly unable to answer. Then, in 1992, someone set fire to my neighbor’s car in the middle of the night; I awoke to the sound of the windshield exploding. The next day I learned that the perpetrator also set fire to a homeless person sleeping in a nearby alley. What lack of human connection could have resulted in such horror, right at my doorstep?

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One year later, I was living in Ithaca, New York, attending college for the first time, having left the music business after the L.A. riots. At Cornell, the answer to Rodney King's question, "Can we all get along?" seemed a resounding *yes*, but I knew I was in a rarefied environment, far from the drive-by shootings, brutal policemen, and the world-class greed of my former home. Life in Ithaca, a small university town, is strongly influenced by both the idealism of many of its inhabitants and the rugged beauty of the natural world that surrounds it. I remember thinking, as I wandered amid its waterfalls and gorges, that here I might actually get back my peace of mind.

While at Cornell, I applied for the Conger Wood Fellowship for Research in Europe, mainly, I admit, because it would mean a trip to Europe. But when I started brainstorming about what, exactly, I wanted to research, my thoughts swerved in a serious direction: I would interview people who had rescued Jewish children during the Holocaust. Immediately the project occupied some large psychic space, but I didn't yet recognize that the rescuers might have—or be—the answer to the crisis of meaning and purpose that had overtaken me in L.A. Rather, I was drawn by the peculiar attraction and repulsion I had to my family history, a history that now seemed a bit more imaginable whenever I pictured that homeless person on fire.

I'll never forget how anxious I made my grandmother when, as a child, I unknowingly drew a design that resembled a swastika. My mother, seeing my bewilderment over this unexpected reaction, explained to me that my drawing reminded Grandma of something terrible. At that age, I couldn't understand how a mere set of lines on a page could make her so upset. Later, I learned that my mother's side of the family had nearly all been killed in Hungary; I never got the details, but I do know that my maternal grandfather, the practical, business-minded son, emigrated to New York in 1936 seeking new opportunity while his parents and ten brothers—all in Yeshiva studying to become rabbis—remained behind and perished.

My father, at the age of eleven, was on the last boat out of Poland. On August 25, 1939, he and his two brothers, one sister, and his parents, boarded an ocean liner bound for New York. One week later the Nazis invaded, and all sea travel became *verboten*. My father's mother, Lillian Klempner, once sat me on her lap and, turning the pages of photo albums from the old country, showed me wedding pictures, sepia-toned young couples, smiling women, and plump children in their little white shoes. "Hitler took them all," she said.

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And so I am among those people in their 30s and 40s who, as writer Daniel Mendelsohn has noted, are the last generation to be directly touched by the Holocaust. “There is, in our relationship to the event,” he writes, “a strange interweaving of tantalizing proximity and unbridgeable distance . . . the dead are close enough to touch, yet frustratingly out of reach.” As with many members of this “hinge generation,” the Holocaust was not spoken of in my home, but, rather, was conveyed by strained silences and disconnected emotions.

Psychologists note that children of survivors often feel compelled to express the suppressed feelings of parents and grandparents, having inherited the original trauma as a “wound without memory.” This has been true of me. I grew up in a well-lit world of modern conveniences, TV dinners, and expectations of upward mobility that were realized when my family moved from the Bronx to Schenectady, New York, when I was eleven. In a split-level house with a neatly trimmed lawn, over a hundred miles from our relatives in Brooklyn and Queens, the past had been left behind and assimilation was in full swing.

But the shadow of the Holocaust is long. That overarching emptiness seemed to hold the key to the legacy of woundedness I felt in my family. Whenever I tried to open the door, though, some kind of emotional force field stood in my way. I would get hold of a book on the subject, but then one glance at a picture from the death camps would send me back to my “normal” life. Still, I couldn’t stay away forever.

Only after I undertook this project did I realize that interviewing people who risked their lives to save the lives of others, those who radiated hope during that time, rather than fear, might be a way to finally face the void rather than be driven away by it. I also found myself looking to the project for answers to my own moral quandaries. I had watched myself grow more angry and suspicious while living in Los Angeles; how was it that the unbelievably harrowing ordeal of the Nazi occupation had unleashed such altruism and courage in the rescuers?

Upon receiving the grant from the Cornell Institute for European Studies, I wrote to Yad Vashem, the institution established by the state of Israel whose mission includes locating and honoring those people who selflessly aided Jews during the Nazi years. I asked Mordecai Paldiel, the director of the Righteous Among the Nations program, if he could supply me with names and addresses of the Dutch “righteous.” From a list of eighty rescuers, approximately half agreed to be interviewed; these, in turn, often directed me to friends who had also been rescuers.

Many people associate Holland with rescue attempts after reading the diary of Anne Frank. I soon learned, however, that the Jewish survival rate in the Netherlands was the worst in Western Europe: different estimates by historians place it between 11 and 36 percent, as compared to about 60 percent in Belgium, and 75 percent in France.

The physical terrain, the strong Nazi presence, and the gradual, covert way the Nazis went about implementing the Final Solution in the Netherlands proved to be particularly deadly when compounded with the Dutch inclination to seek consensus and accept compromise. The vast majority of Dutch people cooperated with their Nazi occupiers and complied with the avalanche of Nazi regulations, paving the way for the eventual murder of their Jewish co-citizens. As lawyers, legislators and judges stood by and the mass of Dutch citizens remained silent, the Nazis ran roughshod over the country's constitution, trampling all the protections and privileges that Jews in Holland had enjoyed for centuries.

Those who decided to help their Jewish neighbors had to be willing to disobey the Nazi measures and resist the Nazi machinations to relegate Jews to subhuman status. They had to cross the line from being law-abiding citizens to enemies of the state.

Who was willing to do it? The women and men who speak in the pages of this book. They are never boastful, but proud in some quiet way. Their explanations of their actions often make it sound as if what they did was the most natural thing in the world. Most of them continued to be morally engaged after the war as well, offering through their example a luminous alternative to the empty materialism and superficial values in which so many of us have become enmeshed.

Spending time with the rescuers was, for me, a transformative experience. They welcomed me into their homes as though I were someone special—a characteristic inversion—and showered me with hospitality and kindness. I soon was looking at them not only as people who had made history, but also as people who could teach me a different way to live. I've come to think of them as the radiant specks around the black hole of the Holocaust.

