

# HANDOUT: The Holocaust: The Range of Responses

## A Commandant's View

In 1971, journalist Gitta Sereny interviewed Franz Stangl, who had been the commandant of the death camp at Sobibór and, later, the camp at Treblinka.

*"Would it be true to say that you were used to the liquidations?"*

He thought for a moment. "To tell the truth," he then said, slowly and thoughtfully, "one did become used to it."

*"In days? Weeks? Months?"*

"Months. It was months before I could look one of them in the eye. I repressed it all by trying to create a special place: gardens, new barracks, new kitchens, new everything: barbers, tailors, shoemakers, carpenters. There were hundreds of ways to take one's mind off it; I used them all."

*"Even so, if you felt that strongly, there had to be times, perhaps at night, in the dark, when you couldn't avoid thinking about it."*

"In the end, the only way to deal with it was to drink. I took a large glass of brandy to bed with me each night and I drank."

*"I think you are evading my question."*

"No, I don't mean to; of course, thoughts came. But I forced them away. I made myself concentrate on work, work, and again work."

*"Would it be true to say that you finally felt they weren't really human beings?"*

"When I was on a trip once, years later in Brazil," he said, his face deeply concentrated and obviously reliving the experience, "my train stopped next to a slaughterhouse. The cattle in the pens, hearing the noise of the train, trotted up to the fence and stared at the train. They were very close to my window, one crowding the other, looking at me through that fence. I thought then, 'Look at this; this reminds me of Poland; that's just how the people looked, trustingly, just before they went into the tins ...'"

*"You said tins," I interrupted. "What do you mean?" But he went on without hearing, or answering me.*

"... I couldn't eat tinned meat after that. Those big eyes ... which looked at me ... not knowing that in no time at all they'd all be dead." He paused. His face was drawn. At this moment he looked old and worn and sad.

*"So you didn't feel they were human beings?"*

"Cargo," he said tonelessly. "They were cargo." He raised and dropped his hand in a gesture of despair. Both our voices had dropped. It was one of the few times in those weeks of talks that he made no effort to cloak his despair, and his hopeless grief allowed a moment of sympathy.

*"When do you think you began to think of them as cargo? The way you spoke earlier, of the day when you first came to Treblinka, the horror you felt seeing the dead bodies everywhere—they weren't 'cargo' to you then, were they?"*

"I think it started the day I first saw the Totenlager [death camp] in Treblinka. I remember [Christian Wirth, the man who set up the death camps] standing there next to the pits full of blue-black corpses. It had nothing to do with humanity—it couldn't have; it was a mass—a mass of rotting flesh. Wirth said, 'What shall we do with this garbage?' I think unconsciously that started me thinking of them as cargo."

*"There were so many children; did they ever make you think of your children, of how you would feel in the position of those parents?"*

"No," he said slowly, "I can't say I ever thought that way." He paused. "You see," he then continued, still speaking with this extreme seriousness and obviously intent on finding a new truth within himself, "I rarely saw them as individuals. It was always a huge mass. I sometimes stood on the wall and saw them in the tube. But—how can I explain it—they were naked, packed together, running, being driven with whips like ..." The sentence trailed off.

...*"Could you not have changed that?" I asked. "In your position, could you not have stopped the nakedness, the whips, the horror of the cattle pens?"*

"No, no, no. This was the system. ... It worked. And because it worked, it was irreversible."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> G. Sereny, *Into that Darkness: An Examination of Conscience* (London: Pan Books, 1977), 200–2. Reproduced by permission of the Estate of Gitta Sereny and The Sayle Literary Agency.

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## Bystanders at Hartheim Castle

While the Nazis loudly proclaimed the campaigns to demonise and isolate Jews and 'Gypsies' (the name Germans gave to two ethnic groups known as the Sinti and Roma) in newspapers and magazines, on billboards, and over the radio, they attempted to keep secret the programme to murder mentally and physically disabled 'Aryans'. And yet by the end of 1940, most Germans were aware of some if not all aspects of the killings (see the reading '[Unworthy to Live](#)').<sup>1</sup> As historian Gordon J. Horwitz investigated the history of Mauthausen, a small Austrian town ninety miles from Vienna, he uncovered evidence of what the residents of a nearby village had known about the 'euthanasia', or medical killing, programme taking place there.

Soon after Austria became part of the Third Reich in 1938, the Germans built a labour camp for political prisoners in Mauthausen. As the camp expanded, German officials took over buildings in a number of nearby villages. One of those buildings was Hartheim Castle, which was a home for children with a mental disability. In researching the history of Hartheim Castle, Horwitz discovered a letter written by a man he identified as 'Karl S.' The letter recalls events in 1939.

*[The] house of my parents was one of the few houses in Hartheim from which one could observe several occurrences. After Castle Hartheim was cleared of its inhabitants (around 180 to 200 patients) in the year 1939, mysterious renovations began which, to an outsider, however, one could hardly divine, since no [local] labor was used for it, and the approaches to the castle were hermetically sealed. Following completion of the renovation work, we saw the first transports come and we could even recognize some of the earlier residents who showed joy at returning to their former home.*

Karl S. watched the buses arrive from a window in his father's barn. He recalled that groups of two or three buses came as frequently as twice a day. Soon after they arrived, 'enormous black clouds of smoke streamed out of a certain chimney and spread a penetrating stench. This stench was so disgusting that sometimes when we returned home from work in the fields we couldn't hold down a single bite.'<sup>2</sup>

A woman called Sister Felicitas, who had formerly worked with children kept in the castle, had similar memories:

*My brother Michael, who at the time was at home, came to me very quickly and confidentially informed me that in the castle the former patients were burned. The frightful facts which the people of the vicinity had to experience first hand, and the terrible stench of the burning gases, robbed them of speech. The people suffered dreadfully from the stench. My own father collapsed unconscious several times, since in the night he had forgotten to seal up the windows completely tight.'*<sup>3</sup>

Horwitz notes, 'It was not just the smoke and stench that drew the attention of bystanders. At times human remains littered parts of the vicinity. In the words of Sister Felicitas, "when there was intense activity, it smoked day and night. Tufts of hair flew through the chimney onto the street. The remains of bones were stored on the east side of the castle and in ton trucks driven first to the Danube [River], later also to the Traun.'"<sup>4</sup>

As evidence of mass murders mounted, Christian Wirth, the director of the operation, met with local residents. He told them that his men were burning shoes and other 'belongings'. When they asked about the strong smell, he told them it came from a device that turned old oil and oil by-products into a water-clear, oily fluid that was of 'great importance' to German submarines. Wirth ended the meeting by threatening to send anyone who spread 'absurd rumors of burning persons' to a concentration camp.<sup>5</sup> The townspeople took him at his word. They did not break their silence.

The castle at Hartheim was one of six facilities, most of which were hospitals, that the Nazis outfitted with gas chambers and ovens in 1940 and 1941 in order to murder physically and mentally disabled people and burn their remains. Between May 1940 and May 1941, 18,269 patients were murdered at Hartheim.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> C. Poore, *Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 87. <sup>2</sup> Quoted in G. J. Horwitz, *In the Shadow of Death: Living Outside the Gates of Mauthausen* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 59. <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 60. <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 60–1. <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 61–2. <sup>6</sup> R. N. Proctor, 'Culling the German Volk', in *How Was It Possible? A Holocaust Reader*, ed. P. Hayes (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 267.

## Deciding to Act

In 1942, Marion Pritchard was a graduate student in German-occupied Amsterdam. She was not Jewish, but she observed what was happening to the Jews of her city (see the reading [Waging a Racial War](#) in Chapter 8). One morning, while riding her bicycle to class, she witnessed a scene outside an orphanage for Jewish children that changed her life:



Marion Pritchard holds Erika Polak, one of the children she saved from the Nazis. Working with the Dutch resistance, Pritchard helped to save more than 150 children during the Second World War.

*The Germans were loading the children, who ranged in age from babies to eight-year-olds, on trucks. They were upset, and crying. When they did not move fast enough the Nazis picked them up, by an arm, a leg, the hair, and threw them into the trucks. To watch grown men treat small children that way—I could not believe my eyes. I found myself literally crying with rage. Two women coming down the street tried to interfere physically. The Germans heaved them into the truck, too. I just sat there on my bicycle, and that was the moment I decided that if there was anything I could do to thwart such atrocities, I would do it.*

*Some of my friends had similar experiences, and about ten of us, including two Jewish students who decided they did not want [to] go into hiding, organized very informally for this purpose. We obtained Aryan identity cards for the Jewish students, who, of course, were taking more of a risk than we were. They knew many people who were looking to ... “disappear,” as Anne Frank and her family were to do.*

*We located hiding places, helped people move there, provided food, clothing, and ration cards, and sometimes moral support and relief for the host families. We registered newborn Jewish babies as gentiles ... and provided medical care when possible.<sup>1</sup>*

The decision to rescue Jews often led to other difficult choices. Pritchard described what happened when she agreed to hide a Jewish family:

*The father, the two boys, and the baby girl moved in and we managed to survive the next two years, until the end of the war. Friends helped take up the floorboards, under the rug, and build a hiding place in case of raids. ... One night we had a very narrow escape.*

*Four Germans, accompanied by a Dutch Nazi policeman came and searched the house. They did not find the hiding place, but they had learned from experience that sometimes it paid to go back to a house they had already searched, because by then the hidden Jews might have come out of the hiding place. The baby had started to cry, so I let the children out. Then the Dutch policeman came back alone. I had a small revolver that a friend had given me, but I had never planned to use it. I felt I had no choice except to kill him. I would do it again, under the same circumstances, but it still bothers me. ... If anybody had really tried to find out how and where he disappeared, they could have, but the general attitude was that there was one less traitor to worry about. A local undertaker helped dispose of the body, he put it in a coffin with a legitimate body in it. ...*

*Was I scared? Of course, the answer is “yes.” ... There were times that the fear got the better of me, and I did not do something that I could have. I would rationalize the inaction, feeling it might endanger others, or that I should not run a risk, because what would happen to the three children I was now responsible for, if something happened to me, but I knew when I was rationalizing.<sup>2</sup>*

In reflecting on her choices and those made by others during the war, Pritchard was troubled by a ‘tendency to divide the general population during the war into a few “good guys” and the large majority of “bad guys.” That seems to me to be a dangerous oversimplification ... The point I want to make is that there were indeed some people who behaved criminally by betraying their Jewish neighbors and thereby sentencing them to death. There were some people who dedicated themselves to actively rescuing as many people as possible. Somewhere in between was the majority, whose actions varied from the minimum decency of at least keeping quiet if they knew where Jews were hidden to finding a way to help when they were asked.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> C. Rittner and S. Myers, eds, *The Courage to Care: Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), 29. Reprinted by permission from New York University Press. <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 29–31. <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 32–3.

## Le Chambon: A Village Takes a Stand

All over Europe, a small number of individuals tried to save Jews. But in Le Chambon, a village in southern France, the entire community became involved in rescue. Le Chambon was a Protestant village in a predominantly Roman Catholic region, which before and even during the war was a centre of tourism. Now its residents turned their tiny mountain village into a hiding place for Jews from every part of Europe. Between 1940 and 1944, Le Chambon and other nearby villages provided refuge for more than 5,000 people fleeing Nazi persecution, about 3,500 of whom were Jews.<sup>1</sup> Magda Trocmé, the wife of the local minister, explained how it began.



Jews living at a children's home in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, France, with their director, Juliette Usach, 1941. The people of Le Chambon and surrounding villages hid nearly 5,000 people fleeing Nazi occupation.

*Those of us who received the first Jews did what we thought had to be done—nothing more complicated. It was not decided from one day to the next what we would have to do. There were many people in the village who needed help. How could we refuse them? A person doesn't sit down and say I'm going to do this and this and that. We had no time to think. When a problem came, we had to solve it immediately. Sometimes people ask me, "How did you make a decision?" There was no decision to make. The issue was: Do you think we are all brothers or not? Do you think it is unjust to turn in the Jews or not? Then let us try to help!<sup>2</sup>*

Jews living at a children's home in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, France, with their director, Juliette Usach, 1941. The people of Le Chambon and surrounding villages hid nearly 5,000 people fleeing Nazi occupation.

Almost everyone in the community of 5,000 took part in the effort. Even the children were involved. When a Nazi official tried to organize a Hitler Youth camp in the village, the students told him that they 'make no distinction between Jews and non-Jews. It is contrary to Gospel teaching'.<sup>3</sup>

The majority of the Jewish refugees were children. The villagers provided them with food, shelter, and fake identity papers. They also made sure that those they sheltered were involved as much as possible in the life of the town, in part to avoid arousing suspicion from other visitors. Whenever residents of Le Chambon learnt of an upcoming police raid, they hid those they were protecting in the surrounding countryside. The values of the village were perhaps expressed best by its minister, André Trocmé, who concluded his sermons with the words, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind and with all your strength and love your neighbor as yourself. Go practice it.'<sup>4</sup>

In February 1943, the police arrested André Trocmé and his assistant, Edouard Theis. Although they were released after twenty-eight days, the Gestapo continued to monitor their activities. In summer 1943, the Gestapo offered a reward for André Trocmé's capture, forcing him into hiding for ten months. Many knew where he was, but no one turned him in.<sup>5</sup>

Historian Marianne Ruel Robins notes:

*The fact that an entire community participated (or watched and said nothing) is remarkable indeed. The silence observed by the people of the Plateau was an important condition for its success, not simply because it sheltered Jews from external threats, but also because it minimized internal dissent. To refrain from talking*

*meant that one would not shame one's neighbor for his lack of participation; it also meant that different rationales for behavior would not conflict with another, be they commitment to pacifism, nationalism, Christian charity or judeophilia. Silence did not necessarily imply that everyone implicitly agreed on the reasons for hiding Jews, but rather that most people came to agree that something ought to be done.*<sup>6</sup>

The rescuers of Le Chambon also drew support from people in other places. There was an extensive network of sympathisers throughout the region who could be called upon for help with communication and organisation. Jewish rescue organisations brought Jewish children to the area for protection. Church groups, both Protestant and Catholic, helped fund their efforts. So did the World Council of Churches. Also, a group known as the Cimade led hundreds of Jews across the Alps to safety in Switzerland.

When Magda Trocmé reflected on her choices years after the war, she said, 'When people read this story, I want them to know that I tried to open my door. I tried to tell people, "Come in, come in." In the end I would like to say to people, "Remember that in your life there will be lots of circumstances where you will need a kind of courage, a kind of decision on your own, not about other people but about yourself." I would not say more.'<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 'Le Chambon-sur-Lignon', United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, last modified January 2016, accessed 17 May 2016. <sup>2</sup> C. Rittner and S. Myers, *The Courage to Care: Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), 102. Reprinted by permission from New York University Press. <sup>3</sup> P. Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed* (London: Michael Joseph, 1979), 102. <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 170. <sup>5</sup> 'Le Chambon-sur-Lignon', United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. <sup>6</sup> M. R. Robins, 'A Grey Site of Memory: Le Chambon-sur-Lignon and Protestant Exceptionalism on the Plateau Vivarais-Lignon', *Church History* 82:2 (2013). <sup>7</sup> Rittner and Myers, *The Courage to Care*, 107. Reproduced by permission from New York University Press.

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## Denmark: A Nation Takes Action

By 1943, anyone in German-occupied Europe who wanted to know was aware of what was happening to Jews. For a variety of reasons – including fear, self-interest, passivity, and even sympathy with German policies – few in occupied nations acted to protect Jewish residents. Many government officials in the occupied countries turned over documents that allowed Germans to identify Jews quickly, and local police often helped Germans find and arrest those Jews. The exception was in Denmark.

After the Germans conquered Denmark in 1940, Hitler had allowed the pre-war government to stay in power and kept only a token military force in the nation. German policy regarded Danes as members of a superior race, similar to Germans. Nevertheless, the Danes deeply resented the occupation of their country, and some fought back with acts of sabotage, riots, and strikes. In summer 1943, the Nazis decided to retaliate. They limited the power of King Christian X, forced the pre-war Danish government to resign, and disbanded the Danish army. They also ordered the arrest of a number of Christian and Jewish leaders.

A few weeks later, the Danes learnt that the Germans were planning to deport the nation's entire Jewish population. That news came from Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz, a German diplomat in charge of overseeing shipping between Germany and Denmark. In the early 1930s, Duckwitz was drawn to the Nazis' ultranationalist propaganda and joined the party. However, as Hitler's violent intentions came to light, he became disillusioned with the party. And when the Germans took over Denmark, he sympathised with the hardships and challenges of the Danish people. When Duckwitz learnt in late September of secret orders to prepare four cargo ships for transporting Danish Jews to Poland, he immediately passed on the information to leaders in the Danish resistance. They, in turn, informed the Danish people.

When leaders of the Danish church were told of the Germans' plan, they sent an open letter to German officials. On Sunday, 3 October 1943, that letter was read from every pulpit in the nation.

*Wherever Jews are persecuted because of their religion or race it is the duty of the Christian Church to protest against such persecution, because it is in conflict with the sense of justice inherent in the Danish people and inseparable from our Danish Christian culture through the centuries. True to this spirit and according to the text of the Act of the Constitution all Danish citizens enjoy equal rights and responsibilities before the Law and full religious freedom. We understand religious freedom as the right to exercise our worship of God as our vocation and conscience bid us and in such a manner that race and religion per se can never justify that a person be deprived of his rights, freedom or property. Our different religious views notwithstanding, we shall fight for the cause that our Jewish brothers and sisters may preserve the same freedom which we ourselves evaluate more highly than life itself.<sup>1</sup>*

The Danes responded in the following weeks with a plan to keep Jews from being deported by hiding them until they could be evacuated to nearby Sweden, a neutral nation. It was a collective effort – organised and paid for by hundreds of private citizens, Jews and Christians alike. Fishermen, many of whom could not afford to lose even one day's pay, were paid to transport the Jews to Sweden. The money was also used for bribes. It was no accident that all German patrol ships in the area were docked for repairs on the night of the rescue.

Not every Jew was able to leave. Some were captured as they waited for a boat, while others were picked up at sea. But, in the end, the Nazis were able to deport only 580 of Denmark's 7,000 Jews to the Terezín camp-ghetto (see the reading [Terezín: A Site for Deception](#)), and the Danish government constantly inquired about their status. No Danish Jews were shipped to a death camp, and with the exception of a few who died of illness or old age in Terezín, all of them returned safely to Denmark after the war.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in L. Goldberger, ed., *The Rescue of the Danish Jews: Moral Courage Under Stress* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 6–7.

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## Protests in Germany

By 1942, people living in Germany were increasingly aware of the mass murders in places to the east.

Some of the first Germans to speak out against Nazi injustices were a group of students at the University of Munich. In winter 1942, Hans Scholl, his sister Sophie, and their friend Christoph Probst formed a small group known as the White Rose. Hans, a former member of the Hitler Youth, had been a soldier on the eastern front, where he witnessed the mistreatment of Jews and learnt about deportations. In 1942 and 1943, the White Rose published four leaflets condemning Nazism. The first leaflet stated the group's purpose: the overthrow of the Nazi government. In the second leaflet, the group confronted the mass murders of Jews:

*We do not want to discuss here the question of the Jews, nor do we want in this leaflet to compose a defense or apology. No, only by way of example do we want to cite the fact that since the conquest of Poland three hundred thousand Jews have been murdered in this country in the most bestial way. Here we see the most frightful crime against human dignity, a crime that is unparalleled in the whole of history. For Jews, too, are human beings – no matter what position we take with respect to the Jewish question – and a crime of this dimension has been perpetrated against human beings.<sup>1</sup>*

In February 1943, the Nazis arrested the Scholls and Probst and brought them to trial. All three were found guilty and were guillotined that same day. Soon afterward, others in the group were also tried, convicted, and beheaded.

In March 1943, German author Friedrich Reck-Malleczewen wrote in his diary:

*The Scholls are the first in Germany to have had the courage to witness for the truth. ... On their gravestones let these words be carved, and let this entire people, which has lived in deepest degradation these last ten years, blush when it reads them: ... "He who knows how to die can never be enslaved." We will all of us, someday, have to make a pilgrimage to their graves, and stand before them, ashamed.*

Although the Nazis were able to destroy the White Rose by executing its members, they could not keep its message from being heard. Helmuth von Moltke, a German aristocrat, smuggled the group's leaflets to friends in neutral countries. They, in turn, sent them to the Allies, who made thousands of copies and then dropped them over German cities. As a lawyer who worked for the German Intelligence Service, von Moltke had been aware of the murders for some time but had taken no action. By late October, he was asking, 'May I know this and yet sit at my table in my heated flat and have tea? Don't I thereby become guilty too?'

<sup>1</sup> 'The Second Leaflet', The White Rose Society, accessed 24 May 2016.