Book Review

Beverly Chalmers and Dana Solomon, *Holocaust Heroines: Jewish Women Saving Jewish Children*, Tolworth, Surrey: Grosvenor House Publishing Limited, 2024, 228 p., ISBN: 978-1-80381-981-5.

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Despite the centrality of Nazi crimes in European remembrance culture and decades of Holocaust scholarship, considerable gaps persist in both historical understanding and public awareness. Recent studies indicate a steady decline in Holocaust knowledge (Walter et al. 2025, 56), while dominant narratives continue to depict Jewish victims as largely passive and devoid of agency (Gruner 2023, 2). Acts of resistance, particularly those carried out by Jewish women, remain underrepresented in historiography and Holocaust memorialisation alike. This marginalisation contrasts sharply with a growing scholarly interest in agency, gender, and remembrance discourses (Stoltzfus et al. 2021, 6). At this intersection, Beverley Chalmers & Dana Solomon's 2024 volume *Holocaust Heroines: Jewish Women Saving Jewish Children* offers a timely and long-overdue contribution to the field. The book focuses on Jewish women who, between 1933 and 1945, not only resisted the Nazi regime across occupied Europe by rescuing Jewish children but also supported them in rebuilding their lives after the war. While previous research has extensively explored initiatives such as the *Kindertransport* (e.g. Niven and Williams 2023, 2), the specific role of Jewish women in rescuing Jewish children has received comparatively little attention.

The concise yet meticulously sourced volume opens with a haunting portrait of a young girl drawn by Friedl Dicker-Brandeis during her imprisonment in Theresienstadt. More than a symbolic gesture, the image encapsulates the book's central concern: to restore visibility to Jewish women who, themselves victims of Nazi persecution, "went to extraordinary lengths to attempt to save the lives of Jewish children" (Chalmers & Solomon 2024, 1). As the authors note, "few of these women have been recognised or honoured" – a gap they seek to redress "by sharing the stories of 108 Jewish women who saved large numbers of children" (p. 1). Combining longstanding expertise in Holocaust research and structural inequality, the mother-daughter duo blends empirical rigour with a clear and accessible writing style. While the authors' interdisciplinary approach at times departs from conventional historical methods, it complements the volume's detailed archival research and fosters a

nuanced understanding of the individual experiences recounted. At its core, the study poses three guiding questions: How did Jewish women rescue children under Nazi persecution? What ethical dilemmas did they face? And why have their morally courageous acts remained marginalised in postwar memory? These rescue activities are framed not only as responses to an existential threat but also as expressions of moral agency shaped by gendered expectations.

The book traces these rescue efforts across three key phases – before, during, and immediately after World War II. While the chronological narrative begins in Chapter 4, the preceding chapters provide important contextual background. Although only about 10 % of the approximately 1.5 million Jewish children in Europe survived the Holocaust, and fewer than 0.5 % of non-Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe are estimated to have helped save Jews, institutions like *Yad Vashem* have historically focused on honouring "Gentile rescuers". This emphasis marginalised Jewish efforts to save children: "Jews saving Jews was regarded as Jews doing their duty" (p. 14). In this context, the authors justify their use of the term "heroic" rather than "righteous", arguing that Jewish rescue activities were ethically motivated and equally deserving of recognition as those of their non-Jewish counterparts. Gender biases further contributed to the underrepresentation of Jewish women's actions and their remembrance in Holocaust memory – an oversight only gradually addressed since the mid-1980s. By shedding light on these forgotten contributions, the authors bring out the "extremely difficult moral, ethical, and personal dilemmas" (p. 21) faced by parents, rescuers, and children across all three sections of their monograph.

In their examination of the prewar period, Chalmers and Solomon underscore that few Jews fully grasped the impending scale of Nazi persecution prior to 1939. Nonetheless, they draw attention to several early rescue initiatives led by Jewish women, particularly efforts to facilitate the emigration of children to destinations such as British Mandatory Palestine and the United States. A notable example is the work of Gilbert and Eleanor Kraus, who succeeded in rescuing 50 Jewish children by securing unused U.S. visas initially intended for others. At the same time, the authors point to the ambivalent legacy of programmes such as the *Kindertransport*, which – despite saving many lives – also exposed refugee children to inadequate protection.

With the outbreak of war, legal or quasi-legal emigration from Nazi-occupied Europe became virtually impossible, prompting a fundamental shift in both rescue strategies and support mechanisms. Chalmers and Solomon identify three primary forms of intervention: hiding children, smuggling them across borders, and providing emotional care. Hiding children, whether with host families under false identities or in concealed spaces such as closets and hidden rooms, posed exceptional logistical and moral challenges. The authors provide a country-by-country overview of Jewish

organisations and rescue networks, interweaving individual biographies of rescuers. Although predominantly descriptive, this approach conveys the breadth of the strategies employed and offers a glimpse into the transnational networks of aid. Another major strategy was the clandestine transport of children across borders, with neutral countries such as Switzerland and Spain serving as key destinations. One striking case is that of Mila Racine, who joined the resistance in southern France and participated in the *Zionist Youth Movement* (MJS) to help children reach safety in Switzerland. Captured during one of these missions, Racine was deported to Ravensbrück and likely died during an Allied air raid in March 1945. Once children were in Nazi custody, emotional support became a crucial form of care. Through art and painting sessions with children in Theresienstadt, Dicker-Brandeis helped more than 600 young people "to cope with their feelings of loss, sorrow, fear, and uncertainty" (p. 99).

Even for those who survived the Holocaust, suffering did not end with liberation. Many Jewish children had been orphaned or baptised into Catholicism. As Chalmers and Solomon show, retrieving these children after the war was fraught with profound challenges: emotional attachments to foster families, loss of Jewish memory, internalised antisemitism, and the trauma of surviving parents complicated their return. For many, the overriding objective was to restore the children to Judaism, thereby ensuring that "Hitler's goal of eradicating the Jews from Europe" (p. 110) would not be fulfilled. These postwar endeavours often represented a direct continuation of their wartime resistance. One notable example is *The Marcel Network*, led by Moussa Abadi and Odette Rosenstock, which hid more than 500 children in France and later supported their search for family members. Like many others engaged in such efforts, they remained unrecognised for decades.

In their concluding reflections, Chalmers and Solomon revisit the complex ambivalences of memory and the deeply entwined moral dilemmas surrounding the rescue of Jewish children. Invoking Superman – a cultural icon shaped by Jewish refugee creators – the authors call for greater recognition of Jewish women as heroines, emphasising the exceptional ethical burdens they bore: "Holocaust heroes and heroines faced far more difficult ethical challenges than their comic strip and film counterparts" (p. 151). Even under extreme duress, they argue, questions of moral legitimacy remain urgent: Was it ethically justifiable to remove Jewish children from loving foster families, inflicting further trauma? Could the killing of a crying newborn be deemed a lesser evil to protect the concealment of an entire group? How authentic were Catholic rescue efforts predicated on baptism? Rather than prescribing answers, the authors stress the imperative to grapple with these moral complexities. While safeguarding children is inherently righteous, the unprecedented conditions of the Holocaust rendered ethical judgements profoundly fraught. Ultimately, these tragic dilemmas were imposed by the Nazi regime, compelling rescuers into impossible choices.

It is within this context that *Holocaust Heroines: Jewish Women Saving Jewish Children* undertakes the vital and commendable task of recovering and honouring the rescue efforts of Jewish women. The work is both deeply committed and empirically grounded, shedding light on a previously underexplored intersection of gender, resistance, and memory. Through carefully selected case studies, the authors illuminate not only the lived experiences of these women but also the ethical tensions and existential dilemmas that shaped their actions under extreme conditions. The book's chronological structure enables a nuanced understanding of both structural constraints and individual agency. One of the volume's major assets lies in its interdisciplinary approach, particularly in the integration of psychological insights with historical analysis. In doing so, the book opens an innovative pathway: How can we adequately capture individual scope for action and collective structures under conditions of existential threat – without smoothing over the moral ambiguities that such situations entail?

That said, from a scholarly historical perspective, the book's overall thrust would have benefited from a more explicit analytical and methodological reflection, which would have enhanced the transparency and traceability of the research design. The criteria used for selecting the 108 Jewish women, as well as the definition of "larger groups of children" (p. 1), remain insufficiently specified, leaving both the basis for selection and the scale of rescues unclear. Similarly, the consistent use of the term "heroines", though meant to counteract historical erasure, risks imposing a normative lens that may obscure ethical complexities or valorise rescue based on individual success. As scholars such as Laura Hobson Faure have cautioned, an uncritical emphasis on "heroism" can flatten the ethical challenges and structural limitations that defined rescue work under genocidal conditions. Rather than searching "for heroes", Hobson Faure (2025, p. 3) urges us to seek "humans, in all their complexity". These conceptual tensions sometimes disrupt the volume's structural coherence, resulting in chapters that read more like separate case studies than a fully integrated analysis. Yet this openness may also be among the book's numerous strengths: it is easily accessible to both an academic readership and a broader historically engaged audience, while it offers fertile ground for further research – be it in the realm of transnational rescue networks, the history of emotions, or the postwar trajectories of survivor aid. As a scholarly contribution and as an act of remembrance, it foregrounds the political, emotional, and ethical dimensions of Jewish women's rescue efforts. Rather than offering definitive answers, Chalmers and Solomon underscore the importance of sustained critical inquiry. In this way, *Holocaust Heroines* does more than recover neglected histories; it sets an agenda for Holocaust research and the ethical engagement with the past, reminding us that remembrance itself must remain an open and critical, yet morally attentive process.

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