

Reading 22

Deciding to Act



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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 “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:

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.¹

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 circum-

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Marion Pritchard



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 World War II.

¹ Carol Rittner and Sondra Myers, eds., *The Courage to Care: Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), 29.

stances, 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.²

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.”³

Connection Questions

1. What dilemmas did Marion Pritchard face? What choices did she make?
2. In his study of rescuers, Ervin Staub states, “Goodness, like evil, often begins in small steps. Heroes evolve; they aren’t born. Very often the rescuers made only a small commitment at the start—to hide someone for a day or two. But once they had taken that step, they began to see themselves differently, as someone who helps. What starts as mere willingness becomes intense involvement.”⁴ What inspired Marion Pritchard’s willingness to help Jews? How did that willingness become “intense involvement”? Was Pritchard a hero?
3. What range of behaviors does Pritchard identify in her account? In what ways is Pritchard’s own story difficult to categorize? What other stories of individuals or choices have you read that are also hard to categorize?
4. What is “dangerous” about oversimplification, according to Pritchard?

2 Rittner and Myers, *The Courage to Care*, 29–31.

3 *Ibid.*, 32–33.

4 Quoted in Daniel Goleman, “Great Altruists: Science Ponders Soul of Goodness,” *New York Times*, March 5, 1985, accessed May 25, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/1985/03/05/science/great-altruists-science-ponders-soul-of-goodness.html?pagewanted=all>.