

REVIEW

Suzanne Vromen

Hidden Children of the Holocaust: Belgian Nuns and Their Daring Rescue of Young Jews from the Nazis

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Reviewed by Alan L. Berger, Florida Atlantic University

Suzanne Vromen's important study is a welcome addition to the literature dealing with hidden Jewish children and their rescuers during the Holocaust. She focused on Belgium, and interviewed 28 former hidden children (16 women and 12 men); eight nuns and one priest who hid them; two surviving members of the Belgian resistance; the President of the Association of the Hidden Children; and various persons involved in commemorations. The result is a new appreciation of the complexity of rescue as well as the lasting trauma of those whose lives were saved. Her interviews with the nuns, a group typically omitted from this research, is especially significant.

Vromen, an Emerita Professor of Sociology at Bard College, fled Belgium with her family in 1941 and subsequently studied in a convent school in the former Belgian Congo. She writes with the empathy of experience and the insights of a scholar while treating both psychologically and sociologically charged issues. She explores heartbreaking topics, such as parents' giving up their children to people they did not know; Jewish youngsters suddenly plunged into a Catholic environment where they had to assume new names; the discrepancies in memories between the nuns and the now-adult children; the crucial role played by mothers superior; and the distinction between "grassroots clergy [who] played an important role [in rescue and] the higher echelons of the Church hierarchy [who] maintained a cautious silence" (p. 110).

The book is a valuable resource for those wanting to know more about the experiences of Jewish children hidden in places that were historically and theologically hostile to Judaism. Vromen intelligently touches on theological matters in this regard. To take one example, she discusses the issue of baptism, which for the Catholic tradition is sacrosanct, observing that the ritual served a dual purpose: it created faithful Catholics, as some nuns desired, and it concealed the children more fully. Moreover, she notes the inherent tension between nuns' "rescue mission" of Jews and "their beliefs" that the baptized Jews were now Catholics (p. 5). After the war, this issue became even more heated when some of the hidden children were kept by Catholic leaders and laity either from their biological or extended families or from the Jewish community. These include the rescuer Fernande Henrard, who "became notorious for her fanatical efforts to ensure that Jewish children who had been baptized during the war" not be returned (p. 25). Vromen refers to this as a struggle to "save" the children from being Jewish. This amounted to what she terms a "double annihilation" (pp.137-38).

The situations of the hidden children varied, depending on both the convent in which they were hidden and the views of those hiding them. Some nuns were openly antisemitic, while others were empathetic and caring. Moreover, attitudes of nuns in the same convent frequently were

diametrically opposed. One rescued girl, Camille, recalls that Sister Louise and Sister Ida were very mean, while Sister Clotilde occasionally addressed her in Yiddish and, after Gentile children had received snacks from visitors, gave her candy as well. The mother superior at one convent told Alice, another hidden child, that she should pass as a Protestant so that she would not be required to take communion. The entire matter was, however, fraught. Some Jewish girls, impressed by the order and relative safety offered by the convents, wished to be baptized and to receive communion. Others adamantly refused. Some mothers superior spared the youngsters from making this momentous decision by ruling that children could only be baptized with parental consent. Furthermore, the mothers superior often had a mother-daughter relationship with the nuns, which helped to convince reluctant nuns to feel that hiding Jewish children was essentially God's will.

Rescue efforts were part of the broader resistance to the Nazi occupation of Belgium. The Jewish resistance Committee for the Defense of Jews (CDJ) played a crucial role in escorting Jewish children, including infants, to places of hiding. Vromen stresses the importance of women in this process. For example, only women could push a baby carriage without drawing unwanted attention. Moreover, the CDJ was one of the few rescue organizations in which women had crucial decision-making roles. The author interviewed the only two surviving escorts, Andrée Geulen-Herscovici and Paule Andriessse-Renard. Their mission was to contact parents and convince them to send their children into hiding. Paule remarked on the help given by the Catholic Church, especially by the convents: "They considered it a duty. It came from the bottom, not from the top" (p. 87). Two important exceptions to this rule were Monsignor Jean-Louis Kesthoff, Bishop of Liège and Linburg, and Father Joseph André in Namur. André kept secret notebooks containing the names of the 2,571 children placed by the CDJ.

Hidden Children of the Holocaust also sheds light on the patriarchal nature of the Church. Quoting the work of historian Paul Wynants, Vromen notes that in Church histories until the 1960s nuns were typically [mis]portrayed as "docile auxiliaries of the clergy or cogs in the ecclesiastical apparatus" (p. 76). This had a great impact on post-war commemorations. Vromen argues that since convents are "gendered institutions" and women were sometimes seen as inferior by Church leaders, there was "little incentive to underscore the important roles that mothers superior and their institutions played" in hiding the children (p. 79). On the other hand, priests played highly visible roles and received recognition soon after the war ended by Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority. One in particular, the above-cited Father André, responded both during and after the war with exemplary behavior. Mothers superior and sisters themselves, however, remained "quasi-invisible" until the hidden children, as a group, emerged in the wake of the 1991 Hidden Children Conference, held in New York City (p. 130).

Discussing the issues of memory and commemoration, Vromen notes the intersection of what she terms "social drama" and "social repair" (p. 127). These are sociological concepts articulated in the work of Robin Wagner-Pacifici. Specifically referring to Holocaust commemoration, Vromen states that "In the Holocaust drama that Yad Vashem memorializes, destruction and its victims predominate. However, by creating and honoring the Righteous Among the Nations, the institution provides an opportunity to repair in some measure the devastated social fabric" (p. 127). The formerly hidden children have emerged as the chief attestors of the life-saving activities of the nuns and mothers superior. In the process, the now-adult children "by recounting their lives...have changed from silent victims into witnesses and actors engaged in a dynamic re-configuration of memory" (p. 122). The Appendix lists 52 nuns, 19 of whom were mothers superior, who, based on the hidden children's testimonies, have been designated "Righteous Among the Nations."

This excellent study is, however, not without a fundamental irony. There is no mention of reflection by the nuns on the role of the Church's centuries-long "teaching of contempt" for Judaism in preparing the soil, so to speak, for the Holocaust. There is also little discussion of the nuns' apparent lack of awareness of the ongoing extermination of the Jews. Nevertheless, this book is crucial reading for anyone interested in understanding the situation of both the children and the rescuers under the Nazi reign of terror. The author wisely refrains from any uplifting ending, noting that "the Catholic Church never formally commemorated the rescue of children by Belgian convents. Instead, it has followed...the politics of silence" (p. 133). More dreadful is the fact that twice as many Belgian Jewish children under the age of sixteen were exterminated than were saved.