

Revealing the Good

Recognizing the Righteous Among the Nations

by Irena Steinfeldt

■ At first, the case of Roger and Esther Perret seemed like any other. Claude Marx had contacted Yad Vashem in 2006 requesting that the Perrets, who had hidden him during the Holocaust, be recognized for their act. When the name of the French town—Buzancais—where the wartime events had occurred came up during a session of the Commission for the Designation of the Righteous, no one noticed the reaction of Dr. Ehud Loeb, Commission member since 2004. He too had been hidden in Buzancais, though by a different couple, Jules and Jeanne Roger, who had been recognized as Righteous Among the Nations in 1989. Dr. Loeb was further astonished to learn that, just like his own rescuer, Roger Perret had been a butcher by trade.

After the Perrets had also been granted recognition, it came to light that Roger Perret and Jules Roger had in fact known one another. It is possible that during the war they met up occasionally, and it is reasonable to assume that they spoke of their families, about the difficulties of life in wartime, and about the cost of meat. But it seems almost certain that neither man ever raised one topic: the fact that he was hiding a Jewish child in his home.

Forty-five years ago, the Commission for the Designation of the Righteous was charged with the task of deciding who is entitled to the highest honor bestowed by the State of Israel on non-Jews. This year, as Israel celebrates 60 years of independence and Yad Vashem recognizes the contribution of Holocaust survivors to the State, it is fitting to pay particular attention to the role played by those survivors who, rather than sink into vengeance, sought to extract something positive from the horrors they endured. It is they who provided much of the impetus to establish this honor, and who continue to work for this important project to this day.

Commission members, who volunteer their time and services, together speak some 17 languages, and bring with them an enormous knowledge of the history of the Holocaust in different locations, a wealth of life experience and a great deal of humanity. They devote many hours to examining the files. They interview or correspond with witnesses, investigate the circumstances and, at the end of the investigation, submit their recommendation



■ One of the earliest meetings of the Commission for the Designation of the Righteous.

before the Commission. Unlike historians who analyze the complex human situations of the Holocaust and describe the different points of view, Commission members must draw a clear line through the multi-faceted and complex spectrum of human behavior. They are required to raise a hand and decide whether the actions described before them will grant an individual the right to be called a Righteous Among the Nations.

Over the years, the Commission has developed a set of defined and detailed criteria, but every rescue situation was unique, and their circumstances often bring about difficult deliberations on how precisely to apply the rules. Should the fact that a family deeply loved the child they were hiding and didn't want to give him back at the end of the war prevent them from being recognized? What about those who started out as members of Nazi or fascist organizations but who ended up rescuing Jews—should the act of rescue negate their previous heinous actions?

In addition, most Commission members are themselves Holocaust survivors; some were rescued, while others encountered only apathy or hostility on the part of their neighbors. Delving into the cases often brings nightmares to the surface, and probes still-open wounds. Personal memories flicker through Commission discussions, but great efforts are then made to redirect the discussion to the cases at hand. Conversely, insisting on staying strictly on topic is also unacceptable, since Commission

Every rescue situation was unique, and their circumstances often bring about difficult deliberations

members constantly remind each other of the sharply different context in which the rescuers and rescued had to operate, compared to the comfortable and safe room in which they are discussing their stories.

Understanding the enormity of the challenge, from the outset of the program Yad Vashem has appointed a Supreme Court Justice to chair the Commission. Today, retired Supreme Court Justice Jacob Türkel devotes much of his time to steering the Commission's work, reviewing the minutes and examining its decisions.

Simha Rotem (Kazik) has been working on the Commission since its inception. "What brought me to the Commission was the feeling that this was the least we could do for those who rescued us," he explains. "I knew some of the Righteous in Poland during the Holocaust, I am aware of the danger their acts of rescue entailed, and I know that no one could give more than they gave. Recognizing the Righteous Among the Nations is a sacred commitment, and I could never excuse myself from this mission."

The author is Director of the Department for the Righteous Among the Nations.