

Discovering the heroes among us

A few years ago my wife and I were sitting in the kitchen having a cup of coffee and then we came to talking about that time. I said, "I still can't understand how we'd be so crazy to risk our lives for those strange people." And my wife said, "Yeah, we'd never do it again, would we?" "No," I said, and she looked at me and we laughed. She said, "You know just as well as I do we would do the same thing over."

— Johannes DeVries
of Dutton, Ont.

OUTSIDE Presentation House in North Vancouver it is damp and dreary. And I am looking at photographs of elderly people — Dutch, Belgian, French, German, Polish, Czech, Hungarian, Yugoslavian, Bulgarian, Russian, Ukrainian — who, during their youth, saved Jews during the years of Nazi terror.

Handwritten above, beside and underneath the portraits by Gay Block are interviews with these Rescuers of the Holocaust (the name of the exhibition) as recorded by Malka Drucker. I had expected to feel sad at best. Instead there is something in the warmth of the photos and in the words that surround them that makes me just a little more optimistic than I usually am about human nature. Sometimes I even smile to myself.

At the back of my mind, at least at first, are three thoughts. One is that, almost inevitably for someone who writes about these things, I will be getting mail from those who want desperately for everyone to believe the Holocaust is a hoax, that it never happened. Another is that we have heard the figure of six million dead so often that it is



PETER WILSON

rapidly becoming as meaningless as if the historical revisionists had had their way in any case. Finally there is the realization that those who were actually rescued were such a tiny, tiny proportion of the Jews who were in mortal danger.

And then, gradually, other thoughts take over. I begin to read the stories and wonder if I would have been able to make the same decisions they did. We all like to think we're good, decent people. But being a hero (as some of these people surely are) is easy in a well-lit, warm room on a February afternoon in North Vancouver.

Not that all the rescuers performed acts of perfect altruism, and there are some who, having done it once, would indeed never do it again. But still, the exhibition — combined with a moving display of film stills, historical photos and inscribed burial texts, entitled *Kaddish*, by Vancouver artist Nomi Kaplan — says something about the willingness of at least a very few humans to put their lives into danger for one another, and do it day after day for year after year.

When I saw a piece on the same two exhibitions by art critic Ann Rosenberg in *The Sun's* Saturday Review section, I had the usual arts reporter's thought: the story's been



HEROIC: Janke, Johannes DeVries (right) saved two Jewish children (above)

done and once is enough for anything when there are thousands of shows every year that don't get covered even a single time. But I decided that if a small presentation about ordinary people could move me this much, then it was worth a second mention.

It wasn't the enormity of the Holocaust that made me read almost every word on the walls, but the plain statements of the people themselves.

Take Joe DeVries, quoted at the beginning of this column. At the end of his own interview, he talks about having friends over for a visit and his telling them of what happened during the war in Holland:

"... and this fella said, 'You people think you did a very big deed. Well, you committed a very big sin. Those Jews, they killed Jesus.' I said: 'You haven't read your Sun-



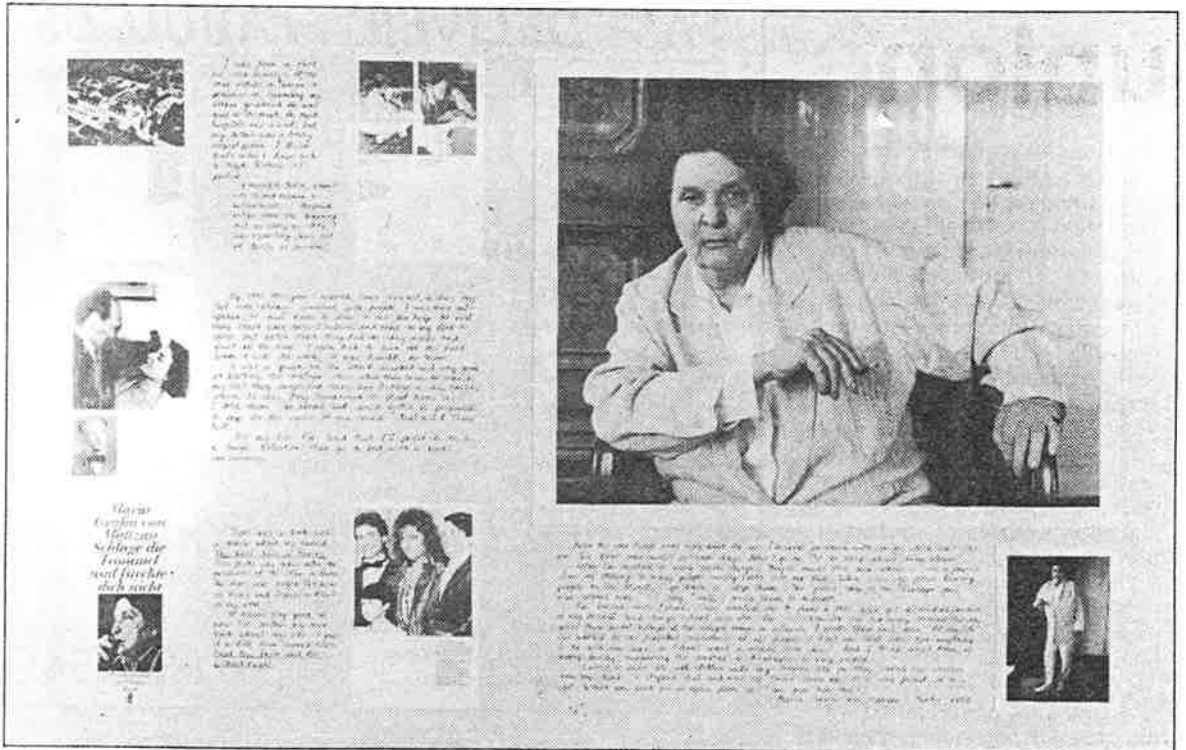
day school lessons very well, because it was the Romans who killed Jesus, since Jesus was a Jew himself.' But I went to the closet and took out his and his wife's coats and I told him, 'Here's your coat, you better go and never come back.' My wife cried when they left. I could have killed him."

The two exhibitions are at Presentation House to March 8. The gallery is open Wednesday, and Friday to Sunday, from noon to 5 p.m., and Thursday from noon to 9 p.m. It's closed Monday and Tuesday.

Peter Wilson writes
on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

Now!

ART



FROM GAY Block and Malka Drucker's *Rescuers of the Holocaust*: M.G. von Maltzmann, Berlin 1988.

Testimonials of trust

Rescuers of the Holocaust: Portraits by Gay Block, at Presentation House, 333 Chesterfield Ave. Jan. 31-March 8. Wed.-Sun.: noon to 5 p.m., Thurs.: noon to 9 p.m.

THIS IS an extraordinary testimonial to the unusual courage of non-Jewish heroes of the Holocaust, many of whom are still living, some of them in Canada.

It is the story of avowed atheists, Protestant ministers, and deeply ashamed Germans, among others, who put their own lives at risk to rescue Jews from certain death in the Nazi concentration camps.

The product of the collaboration of two Jewish women, photographer Gay Block and writer Malka Drucker, *Rescuers of the Holocaust* can also be read as an expression of Jewish gratitude towards their remarkably generous-spirited gentile helpers, and the affirmation of their belief in a solidarity that transcends all prejudice.

Here is a document that goes beyond the horribly troubled history of the Holocaust itself and testifies to the possibility of mutual trust.

The exhibition consists mainly of framed panels, each containing a colored contemporary portrait-photograph of the rescuer, black and white, family-album shots of the years of rescue, and handwritten text of the testimony of the rescue operations.

The portraits are formal, candid and dignified portrayals, while the family-album pieces provide the visual history.



Archie Graham

ART REVIEW

The result is an elevated kind of scrap-book that grips our attention by virtue of the compelling directness of the documentation.

Alex Roslan, a Pole who now lives in Florida, brushed aside the danger of entering the Jewish ghetto as an outsider in Warsaw during the Holocaust years.

In fact, he had to wear the Star of David on his mission to see what was happening for himself.

Shocked by the poverty and starvation, and by the stories of the death-camps, he and his wife, Mela, undertook to save several Jewish children from the gas-chambers.

"No matter how bad things get," Alex told one of these fortu-

nate kids, "we will live through it. And you will remain Jewish."

The other-stories here are just as wonderful.

Gitta Bauer, for example, is a German woman so "deeply ashamed for my people, my country, still ashamed, deeply ashamed," that she finds it difficult to accept any credit for saving the life of Ilse Baumgart.

Andree Guelin Herscovici, a French woman living in Brussels, unpretentiously recalls how she raced against the Gestapo to rescue more than a thousand children.

Aart and Johte Vos, a Dutch couple, who refuse to be labelled "heroes," say "we wouldn't do differently than to say, yes," to those Jews who desperately needed their help, even though this meant the Voses had to endanger themselves and their children.

In the marvellous video that is part of this exhibit, rescuer Jan Karski says: "Children must understand this: do not lose faith in humanity. This is the message to Jewish children. For non-Jews they should understand, 'yesterday Jews, tomorrow maybe Catholics, yellows or blacks.'"

Karski's statement sums up the significance of this important show.

The accompanying exhibition by Nomi Kaplan is a Kaddish or memorial for the dead, dedicated to her Jewish grandparents and "the Six Million."