

## A Cause Greater than Mortality

The worst betrayal of all comes from those you trust, when the mask of companionship is lifted and the worst of humanity reveals itself. On July 10, 1941, the local Poles in the small town of Jedwabne turned on their Jewish neighbors. Over a thousand Jews died that day after being forced into a burning barn by a mob of Polish civilians. This event is known as the Jedwabne Massacre. It is difficult to believe that any sort of goodness could exist among all the hateful fervor and fear. However in the midst of the frenzy, salvation came in the form of Aleksander and Antonia Wyrzykowski when they harbored six Jewish refugees in their home just outside of Jedwabne for three years.

Szmul Wasersztejn, Mosze Olszewicz, Lea Olszewicz, Dov Olszewicz, Jakub Kubran, and Lea Kubran escaped the ghetto of Lomza on November 2, 1942. After stumbling through the frost-ridden wilderness, the group found their way to the Wyrzykowskis, who offered them food and shelter. They stayed in a bunker concealed by stacks of hay. Every day the Wyrzykowskis would provide two kinds of sustenance for the six Jews: a meal for the body and nourishment for the soul.

People like the Wyrzykowskis defy basic human nature, which is to choose a course of action based on the logic of cost-benefit. The only reward for people who resisted the Nazi regime or helped Jews was a barbed-wire camp. Torture and death were the par. The war stretched on and on with no sign of it ever ending. Obviously, the cost to them, which was to risk their own lives, outweighed the gain.

The question that immediately comes to mind is: “Why? What drove the Wyrzykowskis and other rescuers during the Holocaust to perform these acts of altruism?” Above all else, the Wyrzykowskis were devout Christians. Part of their faith

dictated that man should be good one another, no matter their status, nationality, or religion. The Wyrzykowskis honored their beliefs by harboring the Jewish refugees. The power of their religion led them to choose compassion over self-preservation. *“Don’t go. You are merely children. What we eat – you will eat. What happens to you – happens to us. We cannot let you fall in the hands of the Germans”* (- Aleksander and Antonia Wyrzykowski). The Wyrzykowskis did not give in to the injustice of their neighbors. They put aside all prejudice and came to the conclusion that there was no good reason to exterminate the Jews.

In my own life, I relate to the events of World War II through my grandfather. He was 11 years old at the time and lived in Malaysia during the brutal Japanese occupation. The Japanese offensive was nearly as appalling Hitler’s Holocaust. There were hundreds of labor camps, acts of torture, rapes, and innumerable executions. But while the Poles betrayed their own community, the Malays supported each other through the hard times. When food became extremely scarce, my grandfather’s parents were not able to feed their entire family of ten children. A kindly neighbor took my grandfather in, cared for his needs, and kept him safe throughout the war. He and others like him survived because of the kindness shown by the people of Malaysia.

I feel that writing is my calling, and the stories of the Wyrzykowskis as well as of my grandfather inspire me to advocate for equality and respect through my words. There are atrocities committed in remote and far-away places like Darfur and Tibet that generations ago no one would have heard about. Today, we are aware of those horrific events through the writing of journalists and human rights activists. The power of their words has mobilized large-scale protests as well as calls for peace and respect for human

rights. I want to be part of that movement, which inevitably poses its own set of risks and ethical choices.

The Soviets liberated Jedwabne on January 22, 1945. The Waserszteins, the Olszewiczs, and the Kubrans were freed. To this day, the Jedwabne Massacre is still considered one of the most tragic events of the Holocaust. No German soldiers took part in the slaughter. The greatest cruelty and barbarism of that day stemmed from the people that allowed themselves to become immersed in Hitler's lies. But the Wyrzykowskis never lost sight of their conscience amidst the pressure to do otherwise. The Poles who participated in the Jedwabne Massacre lost their humanity when they tried to take it away from the Jews. In contrast, the Wyrzykowskis stood their moral ground and taught us the value and sanctity of life.

## Reflections

1. Moral courage is to advocate or take action for basic laws like human dignity and life itself without the promise of reward, without the promise of living another day, and without the promise that your actions will make a difference.
2. The most inspirational aspect of the Wyrzykowskis' story is how they preserved their honor and respect for life even when their neighbors mindlessly killed hundreds of Jews in the Jedwabne Massacre. Why did they bother to harbor six Jews? What difference did it make? I look at myself and at what kind of person I am and ask, "Could I have done the same?" My honest answer is no.
3. We must always remember the Holocaust and the lessons that are drawn from it. One of the teachings that I can apply to my own life is morality in the face of peer pressure. I have a tendency to be apathetic. In the Holocaust, apathy killed Jews. I need to take a part in doing what is morally just.

“Jedwabne – A Noble Family in the Midst of Murder and Betrayal”. The Righteous Among the Nations.

[http://www1.yadvashem.org/righteous\\_new/poland/wyrzykowski.html](http://www1.yadvashem.org/righteous_new/poland/wyrzykowski.html)

Mosze Olszewicz. “Testimony of Mosze Olszewicz, Buenos Aires, 30 June 1964”. The Righteous Among the Nations. Published 30 June 1964.

[http://www1.yadvashem.org/righteous\\_new/poland/wyrzykowski\\_testimony3.htm](http://www1.yadvashem.org/righteous_new/poland/wyrzykowski_testimony3.htm)

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