

Help Offered Persecuted Jews in Nazi Germany 1941–1945

The focus of this Ph.D. thesis is on individuals who supported Jews in their flight from deportation, thus helping save them from certain death in ghettos, labor camps, and death camps. Estimates point to several tens of thousands of people facilitating the survival in illegal circumstances of persecuted Jews within the area of the “Old Reich,” which is to say Germany within its 1937 boundaries. Starting in the 1960s, historians have inquired into the sources of this unusual behavior, frequently emphasizing the courage and specific personalities of different helpers while refraining from analyzing the social context of their efforts. The present work inverts this perspective: instead of centering my attention on the personality features displayed by individuals, I closely consider the circumstances at the base of their action. To this end, the thesis is methodologically grounded in the instrument of the collective biography. Using roughly fifty biographies of these helpers, I examine the ways their social relations, preliminary experiences, and everyday habits contributed in an essential way to the aid they offered. In addition, I offer an overview of the extent and forms of assistance offered, evaluate the existent research literature on the topic, and discuss the shift in public memory concerning the theme of “quiet heroes” from the late 1940s until the present.