

## **Interview to Agnes Grunwald-Spier**

*author of the book "The Other Schindlers" and Trustee of the UK National Holocaust Memorial Day Trust*

1. What cultural impact do you think it can have and what cultural purpose it can serve in the United Kingdom?

In writing the book I wanted to write for the general reader – not the academics. I wanted to give that reader a flavour of the Holocaust – explaining the horrors without dwelling on them. I also wanted to honour the memory of my parents and others who physically survived the Holocaust but were damaged by it – my Father was so embittered by his experiences as a forced labourer that he wouldn't have any more children after the war and committed suicide in 1955 when I was 10. I don't have any siblings and after my Mother died in 1991, I don't have any relatives but my sons in this country. My parents experience was not the common one with my Father a forced labourer and my Mother sent to the Budapest Ghetto. My Mother was not so badly effected but she lost her *joie de vivre*.

I find there is a tendency to assume the Holocaust happened at Auschwitz and I wanted to show that was not the case – the Introduction to the book explains a lot of this. I have been overwhelmed by the response to my book by people in the UK – profound respect and interest. Because I ask people to consider the risks of being a rescuer and whether they could do it, people really consider the issues and think about the subject deeply. I think this has a cultural impact because we are a very acquisitive society – a me, me culture. I think the book makes people think about ethical issues rather than shopping. I also refer to some shocking incidents in the UK – you can look them up in the Index – Richard Whelan and Diane Pilkington. These make people realise that the lessons of the Holocaust and the rescuers do have relevance today.

2. You wrote you were interested in the Righteous' motivations, what did you discover about them?

I divided them into 4 categories based on what reasons they provided – religious faith, loyalty, being in the Resistance and humanitarian reasons. However I concluded that actually they were all humanitarians because for instance there were many religious people who did nothing – they all had something within their hearts which moved them to risk all to help a fellow human being in a dire situation. They ignored the vile propaganda about Jews and put their hand out. As Yehuda Bauer wrote – when you heard 'thy brother's blood is calling' you answered 'I am here'.

3. Is there any story that impressed you more than others?

Not really, they all have their own specialities and idiosyncrasies - they were all such different, wonderful people.

4. You mentioned the problem of the passing away of the Righteous and witnesses. What do you think it will happen after the last witness has died? What would you suggest to keep Memory alive or maybe to enhance it?

That was another reason for writing the book – it will be there after I am gone and many of my informants have already died since I contacted them but now their stories are recorded for posterity. The stories must be kept alive within families and parents must discuss these issues with

their children and this must be re-inforced in the schools and Universities.

At the bookshop last night there was a group of students who were very well informed and I asked them this question specifically because of this 'interview'. They expressed the view that the Holocaust was so recent, so vast and so truly awful that it would never be forgotten. They had studied other genocides, in particular Rwanda, but the comparison was always with the Holocaust and as you will see I do discuss Rwanda and Darfur in my book. They also commented on the amount of literature on the subject and how this would ensure its memory.

5. You also mentioned the Righteous' lessons for our present time, could you list some?

I always talk to groups about the fact that the rescuers did what they knew was right and ignored the propaganda. They listened to their inner voice telling them what to do – the rescuers were very humble about what they did. Many refused to accept awards, even from Yad Vashem, because they said they had done nothing special – they had only done what any other human being had done. This is of course untrue – if everyone had done it there would have been no Holocaust with 6 million victims. They did what they knew was right even risking all to help Jews.

6. What do you think of the idea of broadening Memory to encompass the Righteous of all genocides and forms of totalitarianism?

I think I have covered this already. I am a Trustee of the UK national Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and whilst the Holocaust is the centre of our attention we always refer to subsequent genocides.