

Rutgers dean asks why gentiles rescued Jews

Lecturer examines neighbors' behavior during the Holocaust



Douglas Greenberg, executive dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at Rutgers University and a Holocaust scholar, spoke at the university's Kristallnacht commemoration.

Photos by Debra Rubin

by [Debra Rubin](#)

NJJN Bureau Chief/Middlesex

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Reviewing centuries of Christian anti-Semitism, a Holocaust scholar wondered not why there were so few rescuers of Jews, but why there were as many as there were.

While most people were “passive bystanders,” who neither helped nor actively participated in the Holocaust, said Douglas Greenberg, hatred of Jews had been passed down by Christian clerics from the pulpit and by parents to children.

“The Nazis didn’t invent anti-Semitism,” said Greenberg, speaking Nov. 20 at Rutgers University. “They perfected it.”

Greenberg is executive dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at Rutgers University and former president and CEO of the Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History. He addressed the theme of rescue and culpability in a program commemorating the 70th anniversary of Kristallnacht, the Nazi rampage on Jewish people and institutions in Germany and Austria that is considered the start of the Holocaust.

The commemoration, which brought about 400 students and adults to the university's Busch Campus Center in Piscataway, was attended by Rutgers president Richard McCormick. It was cosponsored by the School of Arts and Sciences and the Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life.

In his talk, "They Were My Neighbors," Greenberg recalled the fear of pogroms and attacks that plagued Jews who lived in Eastern Europe before the Shoa. Such fears were so ingrained that his own grandfather, even when living in America, wouldn't leave his apartment on Easter, a time when Christian attacks against Jews were more likely to occur in his native Ukraine.



Rutgers dean Douglas Greenberg spoke after the program with some of the 400 people attending the university's Kristallnacht commemoration.

"Even in the United States the memory of what happened in Ukraine was all too real," said Greenberg.

But it was not only in the shtetls of Eastern Europe, but in the big cities of Paris and Amsterdam that neighbors turned on Jews or ignored their persecution. Against this backdrop, that "Righteous Gentiles" would risk their lives to save Jews is even more remarkable, said Greenberg, knowing they "would be lined up against a wall and shot" if discovered.

“One answer is they were paid to save Jews,” he added. “There were some wealthy Jews who were willing to do anything to save themselves and their families, and there were many gentiles willing to take their money.”

More compelling, however, were the actions taken for moral reasons. And just as church teachings helped create a climate of anti-Semitism, many Righteous Gentiles considered themselves to be good Christians whose motivation was their religious values.

“It is a Christian value to love they neighbor as yourself,” said Greenberg. “Many nuns and priests were rescuers. These were men and women who could not stand silently by while Jews were being killed.... The thought that Jews were being murdered was intolerable.”

Greenberg is a Highland Park native and Rutgers graduate who took over as dean of the arts and sciences school in September, 40 years after leaving Middlesex County.

In the interim he has had a distinguished academic career specializing in the history of early America and American law. He has also written extensively about the Holocaust, comparative genocide, and Jewish identity in the post-Holocaust United States.

He spent the previous eight years at the Shoah Foundation, housed at the University of Southern California, which was established by director Steven Spielberg to carry on the documentary work sparked by his 1994 film *Schindler's List*.

At the Rutgers program, Greenberg showed foundation interviews with several survivors who were helped by Righteous Gentiles. He expects that the foundation archives, now available at 15 universities nationally, will become accessible at Rutgers in about a year.

Frances Malkin of West Orange was one of a handful of audience members who stood up to recount their own wartime survival stories. Malkin, who was only five at the time, and her family were among 20 people hidden in Sokol, Poland, by a non-Jewish woman. Last year Malkin, her family, and a film crew from Penn State University went to Sokol, now located in Ukraine, along with her rescuer's two granddaughters, who live in Connecticut, to film a documentary.

First-year student Khusbu Patel was one of three classmates who attended the program as part of a requirement for a sociology program.

“I've never seen these stories before,” said Patel. “I think it should be required for everyone to take a Holocaust course.”

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