Written in Green Ink: The Role of the Unpredictable and the Irrational

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Thank you for the honor you show my work with your invitation to deliver the Nooit Meer Auschwitz Lezing for 2022, and your selection of me to receive the Annetje Fels-Kupferschmidt Award. I am grateful to the Dutch Auschwitz Committee, the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust, and Genocide Studies, and the Social Insurance Bank (SVB). Most particularly, I thank you, everyone present, for your interest and your commitment to remembrance and commemoration.

My talk this afternoon draws upon my current project, a book about American relief and rescue workers. Few of the Americans who hurtled into action on behalf of the victims of the Nazis and their allies are known today. Not even now, when we face the greatest refugee crisis since the Nazi era, and when exemplars of international rescue action would prove useful.

I will introduce a couple of them to you. You will see that women figured prominently in these initiatives. Philanthropy and service had long been women's work. But *this* philanthropy and these overseas assignments offered unimagined avenues for independent action. And their experiences changed them. Their work was transformative: transformative for those they managed to help, and for them, too.

If my project pays particular attention to gender, it also plumbs the role of the unpredictable and the irrational. Historians have traditionally focused on social class,

occupation, religion, race, age, and gender. But they have shied away from the unpredictable: the importance of timing; luck; chance; fortuitous circumstance. We don't know what to do with those factors, and so we don't do much.

An example to illustrate my point. Hannah Sztarkman, then aged about twelve, was with her mother and brother Heniek in the German-imposed ghetto in the Polish city of Radom.

> One night we heard shooting. We went to the window [and] we saw people running and German soldiers shooting. We got dressed and then a couple minutes later, we heard German soldiers in the building yelling "Raus, Raus, Raus." . . . So we all went out and there were masses of people on the street. . . . You could go either to the right or to the left into the middle of the street. We stood there for, I don't know, half an hour. And then they told us to go back into the apartment house.
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> We didn't know what happened. We found out later: Radom had two ghettos, a small ghetto on one side of the town and the bigger ghetto where we were in another part of town. The Germans sent out everybody from the small ghetto to the Treblinka annihilation camp. They had a few cars, those cattle cars, train cars left. So they needed some more people to fill them. So they got all the people from the big ghetto out on the street and they counted how many people they needed. So some of our neighbors who, when they left the apartment, went to the right, were sent to Treblinka that night. And we because we turned to the left, were not sent out. The luck of the draw.
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> So later on when my brother came home from work and my neighbor's son came, he didn't find his mother and sister. My brother found us. It was just one of those things.

I am not minimizing the importance of ideology, policy, and practice. Were it not for ideology, policy, and practice, Hannah would not have been in that situation. But at that very moment, luck and fortuitous circumstance shaped her fate.

With this project, I also tackle the even messier role of the irrational: emotions, human relations. "Our Americans" were operatives of improbable courage, resourcefulness, and resilience. They were fueled by principles, to be sure. But they were fueled, too, by personal and professional ambition, eagerness to actualize their potential, a taste for adventure, and frustration with limitations. Social ties and connections counted for a lot with them. Emotions played no small role, as did irrational responses, spurring decisions and actions.

In sum, I hope to persuade you to take seriously the very factors – fortuitous circumstances, timing, emotions -- that we know shape our own lives, but we ignore in our analyses of the past. Recognizing and acknowledging the role of the unpredictable and the irrational prompts us to imagine history as a time as full and rich as our own everyday lives. It reframes the way we think about, analyze, and write history. I do not marginalize factors already identified as significant. By contrast, I wish to add another lens; to introduce what I call a new turn in Holocaust scholarship: the role of the unpredictable and the irrational.

And now, two cases to illustrate.

<u>Prague, 1939</u>

Martha and Waitstill Sharp stepped off a train into Prague's Wilson Station on a cold February day in 1939. Selected by the Unitarian leadership in Boston to travel to Czechoslovakia, they were charged with aiding the 250,000 refugees who had fled from Sudetenland into Bohemia and Moravia as result of the Munich agreement. That pact galvanized the American Unitarian Association (AUA). When the Germans had marched

into Austria half a year earlier, no one had jumped into action; the assault on Czechoslovakia, by contrast, seared the Unitarian leadership's political imagination and emotional heart.

In 1938, Czechoslovakia was home to a small Unitarian community. But ties of kinship and friendship abounded between Unitarians in the United States and Czechoslovakia, and these bonds shaped the AUA assessment of the situation. "I have just listened to the news broadcast from Prague in regard to the Czech crisis," one Howard Matson wrote to AUA president Frederick Eliot. "We Unitarians have so many connections with our fellows in Czechoslovakia [that] we have a special obligation for action."

Personal relations clearly triggered a response. So did another emotion: rivalry. The Quakers had a service committee, the Unitarians could, too. "We are a body somewhat larger than the Quakers. We are a body that is at least as wealthy as the Quakers and for almost a quarter of a century the Quakers have pioneered in this field of dealing with people in distress," Robert Dexter, director of the AUA department of foreign relations, pointed out to the board of directors. The Quakers' service work augmented their stature; the Unitarians could develop their public profile, too.

The AUA board agreed and dispatched Dexter to Europe. He was joined by Robert Wood, a Philadelphia Quaker. Refugees crowded into Prague; many needed to emigrate immediately, they reported. To the best they could ascertain, "92,000 refugees have registered from the Sudetenland and Silesia, and the estimates are that there are over 150,000 more scattered in private homes and small villages who have not registered." Jews in particular sought to make themselves invisible. "They fear if they register as refugees

they may be expelled from the country," Dexter and Wood explained. And where would they go?

Faced with this assessment, the Unitarian leadership did not dither: they looked for a minister and his wife to serve as field representatives of a new Commission for Service in Czechoslovakia. According to Martha, seventeen pastors (men) and their wives were approached. All declined. She and Waitstill were the eighteenth couple, and they accepted. They sailed for Europe two weeks later; she was 33, he 37. They took $41,000 in relief funds. And they left their two-year-old daughter Martha Content and their seven-year-old son Hastings with family friends. Waitstill wanted Martha as his partner in this endeavor, and she wished to undertake the work. Still, parting with her children stood contrary to gender role norms and hinted at an ambition to make her mark beyond the home.

Grave challenges loured. Reports from Czechoslovakia had alerted them to the increasingly desperate situation of refugees pouring into the city and, more ominously, of Gestapo infiltration and unexplained individual disappearances. Arriving in Prague, the Sharps' primary goal was to offer relief, helping to feed and clothe thousands of destitute people. Emigration of persons at risk loomed large, too. With the help of trilingual Czech students, Martha processed dossiers of people needing to escape, particularly German Social Democrats and Jews.

The situation grew urgent after the Germans marched into Prague on 15 March. The Einmarsch (invasion) was a turning point. Germany jammed BBC transmissions. There were no newspapers. The Sharps, like many others, were subject to constant surveillance in the street and elsewhere. The couple's focus shifted. "With the German occupation our entire project had to be changed with the main emphasis on emigration," they reported.

But whom to help? This question plagued relief and rescue workers throughout the Nazi era. "We are a service committee, not a major relief organization," Robert Dexter emphasized. "Please bear in mind what has been our major aim from the very beginning . . . namely, the salvaging of worthwhile people who are in danger in Europe because of their democratic attitudes." Or, as Waitstill put it, "These, then, were to be snatched from the burning: intellectuals—editors, social workers, professors, clergymen, research specialists, lawyers, physicians –– whose political records made it necessary for them to flee."

The Unitarians' mission was clear in principle: save leaders (Jewish or gentile) with liberal values who would return to their countries of origin when the Third Reich fell to rebuild democratic states. They were the "worthwhile people." Mostly male, universally well-educated, and predominantly middle class. But life on the ground widened the Sharps' scope. And when an opportunity opened not ten days after the Einmarsch to lead a convoy of 35 desperate people to safety in London, Martha took ownership instantly.

Friday, 24 March 1939. Waitstill was in Brussels when Tessa Rowntree, an English Quaker representing the British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia (BCRC), tapped Martha to conduct a group of refugees traveling to England. Their papers were in order: the adults had British visas identifying them as domestic workers and they had German exit permits (Ausreisen). Rowntree would accompany some fifty on a train departing at 4:00 that afternoon; would Martha take the rest on the 4:30 train? Martha was an American and a minister's wife. Those were factors in her favor. She did not have an Ausreise but, as she had arrived before 15 March, she could get one locally; she did not need to apply to Berlin. Martha understood that the mission was fraught with danger and risk. "I knew that the 'household workers' included some of the most wanted 'politicals,'

ardent and well-known anti-Nazis. If the Gestapo should charge us with assisting the enemies of the state to escape, prison would be a light sentence; torture and death were the usual punishment." But, she calculated, "saving endangered people seemed worth the risk."

Rescue initiatives depended upon many factors: luck, chance, fortuitous circumstances, trustworthy persons, timing. Martha raced against the clock to get the papers she needed. She turned to the US Legation which phoned the Gestapo on her behalf to ask for exit and re-entry visas. The officer agreed to issue them -- in ten days. Martha hurried to the Gestapo office to press the process forward in person. It was closed for lunch. The doors opened again at 2:00, but she had to wait for a superior officer. Martha finally got the documents signed at 3:30. "I had just time to get back to the office, pick up some papers and to leave a note for Waitstill explaining that I was going to London with Tessa's refugees." A Czech colleague caught her at the door and, learning she was about to leave for England, asked her to take on another clandestine task: the colleague's mother needed an operation and the sale of her gems abroad would cover the costs.

Suitcase in tow and jewelry in her traveling case, Martha arrived at the station where she found Miss Bull, the BCRC secretary, compiling a list of the convoy participants as they appeared; she used a fountain pen filled with green ink borrowed from one of the men standing near her. Often, refugees came out of hiding just in time to board a moving train. And indeed, in this case, two newsmen, one from the United Press and the other from the Associated Press, jumped on at the last minute.

Martha's charges occupied one train car. The journey proceeded fitfully. Finally nearing the Dutch border, the convoy was ordered to disembark for customs inspection. Martha's effects were given only a cursory glance; the jewels went undetected. But the

Germans robbed the refugees of all their valuables, "even their wedding rings off their fingers," Martha fumed. Waiting to ensure everyone got back on the train, she heard a cry from the rear of the customs shed. "I ran back and opened the door before the guards could stop me." There were the newspaper men stripped to their waists, bags torn apart. She spied a letter bearing an official US seal. "'This letter puts this man under my protection as an American citizen,' she thundered. 'You see the seal of the United States?'" Then, waving Miss Bull's notes in the air, she declared, 'They are all on the list.'" Against all odds, she prevailed, and the newsmen were allowed to rejoin the group.

The train soon reached the border and Martha surrendered Miss Bull's list to the Dutch officials to check against the refugees' visas and passports. But, having jumped on the train at the last minute, the newsmen had not been registered by the BCRC secretary. The Dutch authorities barred their entry. Martha reached for a solution. "I ran along the car looking for the doctor with the pen filled with green ink," she recalled. "With the pen, I wrote the names of the men on the reverse side of 'the list' and just before the train was to pull out I found the passport officer." He quizzed her: "'I am sure the names were not there before.'" But she insisted, and they were allowed to board. It was the second near disaster. And she marveled: "Such a thin line between life and death!"

Were it not for German policy, ideology, and actions on the ground, there would not have been a convoy. And social class, gender, age, religion, and profession were key factors in determining who was in the group. Still, training a close lens on this rescue initiative as it unfolded yields additional information. It makes visible what is obscured in a larger picture: the role of the unpredictable. The fortuitous circumstance first of the letter with an official American government seal, and then of that unusual green ink saved those

newsmen from detention and interrogation (at the least) and enabled them to proceed. The chance factors of a seal and of green ink, in short, afforded the margin of credibility the situation required.

If rescue initiatives turned on unpredictable factors such as fortuitous circumstances and timing, they also turned on irrational prompts. Within a fortnight of the Einmarsch, Martha had chosen to put herself in danger in order to save lives. She knew what she risked and the possible consequences. It was a principled decision. And it was an impulsive decision, spurred by loathing for the Nazi regime and appreciation for bold action. Now she and Waitstill committed to the rescue of as many Nazi targets as possible.

Shortly after Martha returned from London to Prague, the Germans summarily evicted the Sharps and their staff from their offices. Undaunted by the sight of their files and furnishings on the ground, Martha (Waitstill was in Paris) soon found new quarters and resumed operations. The staff she had hired continued to work with her. Comprising four young Jewish couples, they interviewed clients and identified people with a special claim to Unitarian support. "Students at all levels of the humanities in the great historic Charles University began to turn up, seeking aid to get out of the country," Waitstill recalled. "Young intellectuals, the Kulturträgers of the future." In Waitstill's estimation, "this may have been the most valuable single thing they [the staff] did before their martyrdom at the hands of the Nazis."

Waitstill erred; they were not martyred. They were murdered. No one saved those young couples and they could not save themselves; the Jewish staff "all went to the gas chambers, every one of them." Including one couple, the Wellers, who had passports, but

young Mr Wellers's middle initial D had been incorrectly recorded as O, and that discrepancy prompted the British government to deny him entry.

In the spring and summer of 1939, however, the staff identified those likely to make a cultural contribution "if we could save their lives." To that end, Waitstill granted 10,000 crowns to each young person "fleeing now simply because the Germans consider Checho a vast concentration camp." Their clandestine escape route took them to the coal fields of Moravska Ostrava where they sought out the tipples, great steel structures with wheels atop; these signaled the entrance to a mine. The young people descended and there, below ground, met with Polish student resistors. The Czechs doffed their clothes and donned a Polish railway or postal worker uniform. They then walked through the underground mine galleries until they passed the Polish border. Exiting into Poland, they were taken to the seaport of Gdynia and spirited onto British submarines. And, landing in England, they were greeted by British army, navy, and air force recruiting officers.

Dedicated as the Sharps were to rescuing political leaders with liberal values and humanitarian intellectuals, by this point they recognized that Jews stood at special risk. "Whereas Jews in Germany and Austria could escape to Czechoslovakia, Jews in the Protectorate now have no place to go, save concentration camps from which only foreign aid can liberate them," they pointed out. Indeed, in the Sharps' view, "The Jewish question has become a moral problem for the whole of Europe."

Most immediately, however, it became a flashpoint between the Unitarians and the Quakers. As the stakes mounted, so did rivalries. United in their commitment to relief and rescue, the Unitarians and the Quakers nevertheless differed with regard to philosophy and ideology. The Unitarians sought to save politically liberal leaders as well as the intellectual

and artistic elite. The Quakers claimed not to discriminate. The Unitarians pursued a staunch politically democratic program, proved willing to engage in illegal transactions, and did not blink at covert operations. The Quakers, by contrast, pursued a staunchly humanitarian project, embraced pacifist neutrality, and were punctiliously law-abiding. Then too, organizational reputation and prestige were at stake, and each wanted the public acclaim that would accompany success.

These clashes offer insights about relief and rescue efforts. They betray the operatives' overwhelming uncertainty, anxiety, and the pressure they felt. The discord encourages us to appreciate anew that while the operatives' choices, the courses they pursued, seem straightforward in retrospect, no such clarity existed at the time. Confusion reigned. Grappling with an ever-changing situation with which they had no prior experience, no one knew the best way forward. And tempers flared. Then too, perhaps these antagonisms suggest something about the people who undertook this work. Perhaps placid people stayed home.

In any case, little time remained for the Sharps' mission; they were due to return to the US in August and the other foreign refugee organizations had received official termination notices, effective 25 July. Waitstill left to speak at a youth conference in Switzerland on 8 August. Martha remained in Prague winding up her emigration cases until a friend sent her a message advising her immediate departure: "'I have heard that you are to be arrested on Wednesday.'" She left on the Tuesday (14 August); she learned later that the Gestapo did in fact come to arrest her the following day. According to the AUA, Martha had handled the emigration of 3,500 families. But we will never know the precise number, or what percentage managed to escape, and then to survive the war.

Martha and Waitstill's efforts proved transformative. They saved lives through their legal and clandestine emigration aid. Martha and Waitstill were changed, too. Martha's tenure in Prague was but the beginning of a previously unimagined professional trajectory. Waitstill broached the prospect of Martha's possible opportunities with her. "You will be returning from this experience abroad with, I believe, a good deal of prestige," he predicted. At the same time, he asked her to take a short break from the work that earned her this esteem in order to go on holiday with him in Switzerland when he spoke at the youth conference. But her emotional center rested on rescue activities. Writing to Waitstill, she admitted, "Somehow I seem to have dried up emotionally spiritually – and every other good way – But I send you my best – such as it is."

Waitstill held little hope that Martha would agree to join him, but he pressed her again. "Now the time has come to decide finally whether or not you are going to Arcegno. There is no use making a reservation if you are intending to stay by your beloved cases." "My darling Waitstill," she replied. I am terribly lonely without you . . . I think that the experience here has made me realize how much I love you . . . We need more quiet times together when we aren't really rushed to death by the clock. Somehow, we've got to begin to tell the world where it gets off."

She didn't. Nor did he. I fast-forward through the war and their work in France and Portugal, their individual decisions to leave the Unitarian Service Committee for other relief and rescue organizations, to the Democratic party's invitation to Martha to run for a House of Representatives seat in 1946. At that point, Martha was in Massachusetts with the children, but often on the road as a key fundraising speaker for Hadassah and Youth Aliyah.

Waitstill had returned to postwar reconstruction work in Prague. "I can't see much prospect of rootage with the family in the mad glare and dash of public life," he wrote her.

> Perhaps none of the rest of you three [Martha, Hastings and Martha Content] want any rootage, but I suspect that two out of the three of you do – and want it with thoughts too deep for tears. Seven years ago at this hour you and I were getting off the train here in [Prague's] Wilson Station, and all our world has been different ever since. . . .
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> I don't believe that you have ever taken in the continuous sinking feeling that beset the parsonage when you were headed outward. It was so real you could have weighed it. . . . We finally could not count on any time you wouldn't be off to a talk or a tea or a committee meeting or across the Continent . . .
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> There have been times out here when I have been almost desperate between the amount of work to do . . . and the loneliness. I can't touch a woman; I see nothing but men's things in my wardrobe. I smell no perfumes. . . . Seven years ago tonight we stepped off the train into Wilson Station – and into a new world.

Their marriage limped on for another eight years. Martha and Waitstill divorced in 1954. Many husbands and wives divorce. Even in 1954. My point is that this particular couple divorced because of the ways in which Martha's experiences had changed her. She had outgrown her role of The Minister's Wife.

The second case: Marseille, 1942

The Quaker Service Committee set up their headquarters in Marseille, where they were well situated to serve the transit camps in the south of France and to undertake emigration initiatives. The Quakers teamed up with the United States Committee for the Care of European Children (USCOM) to sponsor groups of children to immigrate to the U.S. In the

meantime, the French Jewish philanthropic organization OSE managed to obtain the release of a number of youngsters from the transit camps and sheltered them in its children's colonies.

The ubiquitous question arose: Whom to help? OSE pressed their Quaker colleagues to give adolescents special consideration, as they would be re-interned at age 17. Preparing a transport, Marjorie McClelland of the Marseille office reflected upon her calculus of decision making. "It has all to be done in a terrific rush," she wrote (22 April 1942) to Margaret Frawley in the Quaker home office in Philadelphia. "When your cable came . . . suggesting that I be given responsibility for selecting the children, it called for some deliberation. . . . I had hoped, originally, to spend several days in each colony . . . observing the children at work and play, and talking to their teachers." But she had no time for any of this. "The realities of my procedure were far different from my plans, because with the necessity for speed it was necessary for me to make a lightening tour of the colonies, choosing the children after only the most superficial consideration."

Marjorie set certain criteria. "I had in mind two basic considerations—the necessity for *e*migration and the desirability of *i*mmigration, of each child. I wished to satisfy myself (in so far as was possible under the circumstances) of the child's desirability as an immigrant to America—that he was a normal, at least averagely intelligent, adaptable child, who would be able to fit into an American family without too much difficulty." But life on the ground in Europe carried weight, too. "I also took into consideration the situation of the child here in France, for obviously not all cases were similar. I considered the children . . . who were all alone without any family . . . and therefore have greater need for emigration to America."

Thoughtful and rational as those considerations were, the essentially emotional nature of her decisions courses through Marjorie's short biographies of each of the fifty children she selected for the convoy that left Marseille on 14 May 1942. Henri and Miriam Mass, aged six and eight respectively, serve as an example. Polish by nationality, they were born in Antwerp, where their parents owned a small restaurant. The family had fled to the south of France after the Germans had occupied the Low Countries in May 1940. The father, Samuel, was put to forced labor in January 1941, and the mother, Regina, and children were interned in Rivesaltes; Marjorie met them there. Regina Mass "seemed like a very nice, simple, earnest woman, very much concerned over her children. I thought it remarkable that she was so clean in the midst of the camp where cleanliness is so unbelievably difficult to achieve." And what if Regina Mass had been a slob?

Marjorie McClelland sympathized deeply with the victims. She cared about them and was sensitive to the assaults they had endured. She worried if she "erred too much in my choices." Still: It fell to her to choose. She applied the rational calculus that she laid out for Frawley. Yet irrational factors played a role, too. Sometimes even tipping the scales.

At the safe distance of eighty years, we assume social workers such as Marjorie McClelland relied upon a logical rubric. Her record offers a lens on the many layers of her decisions and choices. Age, gender, religion, social class, degree of peril: all of these played a role in her selection calculus. And so, too, did her feelings about and connections to the people who sought her help.

To return to the beginning: It has been my pleasure to introduce you to a few of my Americans. I hope I was able to convey something of the role of gender, as well as how our Americans both shaped and were shaped by their rescue actions. Most important, I hope that I have persuaded you to include the unpredictable and the irrational in your analyses of the past; to reframe the way we think about and write history. Not to marginalize factors already identified as significant. But to restore life's complexity to the past.