



Ethics in an  
Age of Terror  
and Genocide

Identity and  
Moral Choice

Kristen Renwick Monroe

# Ethics in an Age of Terror and Genocide



IDENTITY AND MORAL CHOICE

*Kristen Renwick Monroe*

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But what else could I do? They were human beings like you and me.

—Rescuer of Jews during the Holocaust

But what could I do? I was one person, alone against the Nazis.

—Bystander, World War II

## CONTENTS



<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
<b>PART 1. THE PUZZLE</b>	1
<b>CHAPTER 1. Introduction</b>	3
<b>CHAPTER 2. The Holocaust and Genocide</b>	9
<b>PART 2. A STUDY IN CONTRASTS</b>	32
<b>CHAPTER 3. Tony: Rescuer</b>	35
<b>CHAPTER 4. Beatrix: Bystander</b>	92
<b>CHAPTER 5. Kurt: Soldier for the Nazis</b>	114
<b>CHAPTER 6. Fritz: Nazi Propagandist</b>	138
<b>CHAPTER 7. Florentine: Unrepentant Political Nazi</b>	160
<b>PART 3. CRACKING THE CODE</b>	187
<b>CHAPTER 8. The Political Psychology of Genocide</b>	189
<b>CHAPTER 9. A Theory of Moral Choice</b>	248
<b>CONCLUSION. The Psychology of Difference</b>	301
<b>METHODOLOGICAL AFTERWORD</b>	321
<b>APPENDIX A. What Is Narrative and How Reliable a Tool Is It?</b>	323
<b>APPENDIX B. Glossary of Terms and Central Concepts</b>	347
<i>Notes</i>	353
<i>References</i>	405
<i>Index</i>	433

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



WE ALL HAVE MEMORIES of events so important that we can identify exactly where we were when they happened, who was with us, what we wore, or where we sat. I remember the day my father told me about the Holocaust. We were sitting in the car—an old Chevrolet Biscayne, blue, with plastic seat covers that cracked in the cold, made you sweat in the heat, and crinkled whenever you moved—driving from the small midwestern town in which we lived to St. Louis for my weekly piano lesson. I can no longer recount precisely what my father said, but my memory remains fresh with a sense of horror so overwhelming I could hardly breathe. And then Daddy told me, “You must always remember that there are no depths to which man cannot sink, but there also are no heights to which we cannot soar.”

My father was a judge who took seriously the majesty and the integrity of the law and believed passionately that law should serve humanity in the search for justice. I adored my father and, for many years, intended to follow in his footsteps and become a judge. Eventually, I took another path, but much of my father's passion and his concern for moral values nonetheless are reflected in my professional life, as in this book. Daddy loved people and was never happier than when talking about important issues with them, and this, effectively, is what I have built my career on: talking with people about what matters in their lives, trying to understand how ordinary human beings respond to the suffering of others, how they make sense of the world around them, and how they navigate the moral terrain of both the everyday and the unexpected events that sometimes challenge them to reach moral choices. I am grateful to my father—to both my parents—for giving me this awareness of the important issues of the world and for encouraging a young girl to believe she could play a small part in that world, and that her involvement might matter. It is a gift I wish for my own children and for my students.

I never dreamed I would meet the kind of people I have been privileged to know as part of the research for this project. I was privy to intimate conversations with an extraordinary and an extraordinarily wide range of people, from those who rescued Jews to bystanders and Nazi supporters. Effectively, these people allowed me to walk around inside their heads as they reflected on what drove their moral choices. The conversations were close-to-the-bone and extremely personal; I hope I have honored the trust of the speakers, most of whom have since died and have left their stories with me. To protect their privacy and that of their families, I can thank them only anonymously.<sup>1</sup>

The first interviews for this book were conducted in 1988, and I have thought and talked about this project a great deal over the years. My thanks to all those who listened and shared their insight thus must be extensive, and I apologize that space constraints restrict my ability to mention all of those who were so kind and helpful.

I have presented numerous papers on parts of this book at meetings of the American Political Science Association (APSA), the International Society of Political Psychology (ISPP), and the ISPP's Caucus of Concerned Scholars: Committee on Ethics and Morality (the Caucus). Parts of this book were presented as the 2010 Ithiel de Sola Pool Lecture to the APSA, the 2005 Guetzkow-Heyns-McKeachie Lecture at the University of Michigan, at a series of visiting lectures in 2010 at Uppsala University (Sweden), and as my presidential address at the annual meetings of the ISPP in Paris, July 2008. Parts of chapters 8 and 9 appeared in two separate issues of *Political Psychology* or in *Political Research Quarterly*; I appreciate the journals' permission in allowing me to reprint parts of these articles here. A version of the Pool Lecture will appear in *PS: Political Science and Politics*, and the APSA plans to stream some of the videos via the APSA website. Special thanks go to ISPP members Janusz Reykowski, Suzanna Smolenska, Tereza Capelos, Cheryl Koopman, Bruce Dayton, Radell Roberts, David Winter, Jerrold Post, Ervin Staub, Gerd Meyer, Catarina Kinnvall, Rose McDermott, Shimon Samuels, Sam McFarland, Paul Nesbitt-Larking, Anne Birgitta Pessi, Fred Alford, David Sears, and Jim Glass for generous comments. Chloe Lampros-Monroe, Alexander Hart Lampros, and Jane Guo gave invaluable technical assistance in many of these professional presentations, and Nicholas Lampros generously edited his mother's deathless prose.<sup>2</sup>

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