

MORDACAI PADIEL

INTERVIEW-Jerusalem

NOVEMBER 26TH, 2000

Victoria - Dr. Padiel, why does Israel honor those who rescued Jews during the Holocaust?

P - Israel honors non Jew who rescue Jews during the Holocaust as part of a moral obligation to seek out and point out those persons who acted in the best tradition of humanity. Especially when these actions are set in the background of one the most terrible and inhumane periods in human history; therefore; when Yad Vashem was created by law, in 1953, the legislature specified that one of the functions and obligations of Yad Vashem was to honor what the legislature called the

" Righteous among the Nations", that is non-Jews rescues of Jews, who the legislature pointed out, "Risky during the Holocaust." I want to make another point. We are talking about people who helped but in the most difficult circumstances for themselves. Helping a Jew to survive in the world, in Europe dominated by Germany, was a capital offense people could lose their lives. Not a few of the rescuers that were apprehended did in fact lose their lives. Helping a Jew to survive was of great risk to the rescuer and those thousands of rescuers who did act in this way, we think we have a moral obligation to point them out, we have an elementary obligation to acknowledge that to sight them, to thank them or the next of kin, to document these deed so they can serve as role models for educational purposes for future generations. And so we have acted since that law was legislated and for the past thirty-five years we have had this project under way. We have set up a special committee, a public committee, chaired by a Judge on the Supreme Court bench to study, examine the cases which are brought before the committee which Yad Vashem, brings before the committee in order to bestow that honor on these rescuers.

V - How does Yad Vashem or Israel honor these people?

P - Yad Vashem is a branch of the Israeli government, we are an institution by law. For Yad Vashem honors these people through several ways; the immediate way is to acknowledge them by awarding them with symbols of honor like a medal on which their name appears, a certificate of honor where their name appears again, also here at Yad Vashem, we started by planting trees for each of these persons, like the tree for the Turkish Diplomat in Rhodes. He came

here and he planted the tree on his name, and that tree is here and has grown and is beautiful. For the past ten years since we ran out of space in planting trees, we have continued this program of identifying these people and spelling out their names, inscribing their names on special walls in a garden which we call the "Garden of the Righteous" To date we have identified and honored 18,000 such people. Now, the ceremony for the people take place in their country of residence, unless the people come to Yad Vashem, and wherever we have these ceremonies, whether it be Poland, the Ukraine, Belgium, France, Germany, Norway, our diplomatic representative, our ambassadors, our consulates, are obligated by law to hold these ceremonies and honor these people publicly. We have these ceremonies with the media available with write up in the local news papers, in order to point out that the state of Israel with all the problems that it has political, military, defense etc. absorption of immigrants, we feel we have a moral obligation, even now after 55 years after the end of the war to point out these people and say, "Here are the true humanitarians of that very terrible and sad period"

V - Dr. Padiel, what was the process by which Ambassador Ulkeman was designated Righteous among Nations of the Earth? What steps must you go through?

P - The process by which Ambassador Ulkeman was honored was the same for all other cases. That is, we insist that we receive verification of the rescue story by the testimonies of the persons involved. Especially the person rescued persons, the persons who benefited from the aid of the rescuer. This is one of the basic and fundamental criteria established by this commission, the Commission for the Designation of the Righteous. In the case of Ambassador Ulkeman; when we received the testimony of, for instance Mrs. Mailed Turiel; and two other testimonies; one from a person living in Israel, a Mrs. Mizrahi and another person living in Africa in one of the countries, in which they underlined their help, their personal help, received from the ambassador and in that testimony what we seek to know was, was the rescuer simply carrying out his or was he going beyond that?

That is because when it comes to diplomats, diplomats are not in danger of their lives. The worse that can happen to a diplomat is being recalled, being expelled. Diplomats are not in jeopardy of their lives, but they are in jeopardy of their careers if they don't act according to the rules, regulations and mandates of their countries. In the case of Ulkeman where it turned out that he was prepared to enter on the list of Turkish nationals which were not to be deported even people whose Turkish nationality had lapsed. Who had not preserved their Turkish citizenship or members of families who were not, or

who some one in the family had once been a Turkish national but not all the members of their family. He took down these names about 50 names, and went to see to see the local German commander person in the SS branch of the German military. He insisted that these people be released because they were Turkish nationals. Of course there was a bit of argument, voices were raised, and being that Germany and Turkey still had diplomatic relationship, although they were no longer on friendly terms, this was July 1944. The German commander had decided or he was instructed to release these 50 person and they were not deported, and all the others were deported to Auschwitz and killed. And so being that he went beyond the strict rule and ordinances of simply protecting Turkish nationals and included persons whose Turkish nationality was in doubt. And went so far as to stand the ground and refused to leave the room where he had the altercation with that SS officer, we felt that he met the criteria which we have established for persons like this, for diplomats to be honored.

V - You've spent two decades studying the phenomena of non-Jews who rescued Jews. Can you give us a sense of the motivation of these people? In other words why did they put their lives at risk to rescue Jews?

P - Why did the rescuers put their lives at risk to rescue Jews, this is a question, which is unresolved and will probably never be resolved. Because we are talking about human behavior and human response at the deepest level. At the deepest level. No person, in his right mind, would under normal circumstances risk his life, risk his life to help others. Except highly idealistic persons. The persons on our list, the 18,000 persons, come from all walks of life. They have never thought of themselves in the role as Mother Theresa's, going out and helping the others, they were minding their business. But what happened in the case of the holocaust, and that is we have to remember is that they were approached by persons like Ulkemen. The story of Matilde Turiel, she stopped him. Mrs. Mizrahi said she stopped his car. They approached the would be rescuer with a plea, "Help us." Now, Help us what?, help us to stay alive. So this is a call to something very deep in the human psychological constitution. We all agree, people have a right to live, whether we like them or not. But taking away of someone's life, so arbitrarily is something that goes against our basic grains. In most of the cases of the rescuers the persecuted people approached someone and said "help us by either admitting us to your home or giving us a visa." The person, who had to make that decision whether is Mr. Ulkeman or someone else, knew that his answer could spell the difference between life and death for the person standing in front of him. So at that very specific moment he had the mantle of god on him. He would decide "Would I

get myself involved and engaged, and help this person and I am prolonging his life. Do I turn him down for whatever excuse? Either I don't have the mandate to do that, or I am afraid, or I am busy. I may be actually condemning this person to death, not by my hands by somebody else. What happens to persons under such circumstances? When a person approaches you, "Help me to stay alive" because someone wants to kill me and that someone is an authority and a state and you can be that agent the actor that makes it possible for that person to stay alive. Which in normal circumstances only a Doctor who can decide on a life or death. But he's doing his duty. But here you have a choice. What happens under these circumstances we don't know, because these are inordinate circumstances it has never happened before. But the fact is there were thousands of persons who for some reason, which are mysterious and unexplainable even to themselves, they don't know today why they did it. They say it was a natural response. So maybe it was natural. May be there was something in the human behavior which makes it possible for you to respond in the most beautiful way, even if it could mean you losing you life or losing your career. It's a mystery; it's a beautiful mystery.

V - So your saying you think that the motivations of the righteous are humanitarian not political.

P - Absolutely, the motivations were humanitarian of course. What the question facing the rescuer was to help that person stays alive, to help someone to live on, that is humanitarian.

V - How did the righteous perceive themselves, how do they describe themselves today, not as mother Theresa?

P - The righteous describes themselves today, I would say in a way which sounds very naive. Not in hero terms. They see themselves as having acted in away which they think everyone else should have acted. That is a natural response to help someone else who has come to the end of the line. These people who were asking for help, they had come to the end of the line. So this is not a situation that you cannot say to yourself, I can't help you; someone else will help you. That is not a situation. If you don't help he comes to you all the other options have turned bad and you are the only person that can do that. That is the highest form of humanitarian response for you to help someone else, event if it could mean paying a very painful price, losing you life, losing your career for diplomats.

There is something else to what I have said before. Most of our behavior is usually by certain pressures, social pressures, what we do in every day life, in

many ways things that we are influenced to do and act in certain ways, there are very few instances in where a person acts strictly as an individualists, strictly by himself. I think in making that very crucial decision to get involved and saving someone by admitting him into you home. This is helping him in other ways, like in the case of Mr. Ulkeman by putting them on a list, a special protection list, and saving them from deportation. I think these are one of the few instances in a person's life he's really being honest and truthful to himself. No one tells him to do that; it's not that he's doing that so he can be applauded by others. He doing that because he feels that basically the essence of his being is to respond in that way. So that is one of the moments of ones life where person can be honest and true to his deepest essence as a human being.

V - You currently have Ambassador Kent under research and review.

P - We have Ambassador Kent under research and review, yes.

V - And what did he do?

P - Well, the story of Ambassador Kent is one of the most fascinating stories, which we are now trying to verify through at least one or several eyewitness accounts. Here was a person who was a diplomat, in Marseilles. He was a consul or vice consul there. One of his functions is to protect Jews who or persons who claim to be Turkish nationals. One day he is told that a group of Jews, some of who claim to be Turkish nationals, have been apprehended, have assembled on its way to concentration camp. Now another diplomat in his place would have lodged protest with the authorities, with the German authorities. Typed a nice paper and sent it out and gone about his business. Here we see the difference between a person who simply does what he is supposed to do and a person who goes beyond that. Now, according to the story, Kent walks off to the train station, and he says to whoever the local commander is, "There are person's here who are Turkish nationals and I would like them to be released." The local commander tells him "Well, with out you lodge a protest, the train has to leave." He says "No the train cannot leave I want my persons" They say no. He makes that decision. When he makes that decision which if the story can be verified, automatically places him within the ranks of the "righteous". He decides to board the train, he goes into the wagon. "I won't leave the wagon unless you release my persons of Turkish nationals" The German commander says, "You have to get out because that trains is on it's way up to wherever it has to go." "He says I won't get off." "In that case you go with them." He says, "OK, I'll go with them." Soldiers come lock the door and the train moves out of Marseilles and begins to move north. But the Germans realize that they have a problem on their hands, this is a Turkish diplomat. Turkey and Germany still

have diplomatic relations. They can't allow this to happen. Immediately there are phone calls between the German commanders and the authorities, when the train reaches the next stop in Arles, the train stops, and the wagon door swings open, that wagon where the Ambassador or Consulate Kent is. The German commander comes up to him and says "OK Mr. Kent take your persons off the train so we can go ahead and not hold up the train" He takes his group, nobody checks to see whether these are actual his persons, he takes them off and goes to the phone, calls his office in Marseilles, orders to bring several vans and these people are brought back to Marseilles. He saved, we don't know 50, 70 persons. If this can be verified by one or several witnesses, preferably persons who were on the train; then that person would join together with Ulkeman to be the second Turkish person to be on the list of "Righteous". As I pointed out before the verification process, calls for either eye witness accounts by the persons held or documentation. If for instance, someone could produce a German document in which a German Document from the German military or SS or what ever German Document about this incident where this Turkish diplomat refused to get off the train. That too would be bonifide documentation and we would be able to honor this man as a Righteous Among the Nations.

V - Do you have any other Turkish cases under review?

P - We don't have at the moment other Turkish cases under review. However, we have received information, which have not been able to corroborate about Turkish diplomats who were stationed in various parts in Europe, in Bucharest and Budapest, perhaps in Paris, who also extended their assistance to Jews who claimed Turkish nationality. We are trying to find out whether they simply did what was their diplomatic duty, to help Turkish Nationalists as any diplomat would do likewise to help the nationals of his country, or they went beyond that and they falsified lists or they went beyond that and placed themselves in certain forms of jeopardy. Vis a Vis the people they were facing. We hope that we can identify some more of these diplomats.

V - Have there been many rescuers from neutral countries honored by Yad Vashem? Turkey being a neutral non-belligerent country.

P - Rescuers from neutral countries, we do have a hand full of rescuers from neutral countries. We have about two dozen person from Switzerland, was a neutral country, but most of the persons from Switzerland, they acted in places outside of Switzerland. Similarly to Ambassador Ulkeman we do have honorees from Sweden. You are all familiar with the name Raul Wallenberg. We have some more Swedes like Langler who represented the Swedish Red Cross in Budapest.

So we have a hand full of diplomats from neutral countries, we have one American, Varian Frye, who acted in France at the time America was not at war. America was still a neutral country and we have a Japanese, by the name of Suki Hara. At the time when he gave out visas to Jews in Lithuania, Japan was still outside the sphere of war with the United States and the Western Allies.

V - Is there considered any similarity between Varian Frye, as I understand it, He tried to get talented people, top people in their field, with what Attaturk did, when he invited in the '34 the Jews who could no longer teach or practice medicine, brought over 140 for the University reforms?

P - I will admit my ignorance of Turkish policy vis a vis, refugees. I don't know what the policy of Attaturk and the Turkish government, up until WW2 or during WW2. I am not proficient at that. But Varian Frye went to France on a mission to get 200 people out of the country. Once he came there he realized he had a bigger job on his hands than the 200, eventually he got several thousand people out of the country.

V- What was his criteria for rescue?

P - He used the most unorthodox and illegal methods. Falsifying documentation, smuggling people across borders, working with underworld figures in Marseilles to get people on boats to various destinations. It came to the extent the French had to expel him. With paradoxically, the encouragement of his own government, because at that time the United States and France, that is Vichy France, that part of France which was a puppet government, at that time The United States and Vichy France still entertained cordial relationship. Varian Frye was considered an embarrassment and so he was expelled. Before he was expelled he was also arrested and interned on French soil.

V - Turkish Diplomats provided Jews of Turkish origin or even Jews distantly related to Turkey with certificates attesting to the fact their cases for citizenship were under review in Turkey to try to save them. How important were these documents to their survival, what was their value in German occupied France or even Vichy France

P - In so far as Turkish Diplomats, who would issue documentations, specifying that these people who are claiming to be Turkish nationals, are under study. If we could receive verification Turkish diplomats were active in this way then we would be far ahead. We know other diplomats, neutral diplomats, especially in Budapest, Hungary did act in that way and did claim

that these people who were claiming whatever nationality, that is under study. In the meantime these people were placed under that particular government. That saved their lives. The Italians acted in that way, Greece and some other countries. So as I said previously, we like to receive more information of cases where Turkish Diplomats acted likewise.

V - What surprises you in the study of rescuers in your years of study, what surprises you the most?

P- what surprises me in the study of the rescuers is that it shows us that we can surprise ourselves and be better than we think we are capable of being. It is a common place notion that we, I say we, the human species, we are basically egotistical beings. We basically care about ourselves, we flex our muscles to move up the social and economic ladder, when we are philanthropic and help to others, as long as it doesn't disturb us too much discomfort. And basically we are interested in our own well being. This is common place. To be faced with stories of people who would throw their lives in jeopardy to save others towards whom they have no personal obligation. By persons who are not cut out to be altruists or rescuers. These persons in other instances of their lives may be egotistical and may not display the pleasant characteristics. But here at this specific moment, they could rise above themselves and do the most beautiful act that a person could do, save a life and make the choice that is the most inspiring thing. That show us that if he can so it, or she can do it, maybe I can do it to. I hope I will never be faced with that choice where a person turns to me for help and my response could make the difference between life and death of that person. I hope we never have such situations as existed. But it shows that we are capable of responding in the most elevated and beautiful way that human beings can respond, so that is very encouraging phenomena, so every time I come to stories like this it supprises me for the good for the better part. That in no way diminishes also our caution that people are capable of committing the most heinous, evil deeds. So there is a left hand and a right hand in the human responses. But both of them are within the human mind we are capable of out doing ourselves, both in evil and in goodness, the choice is ours.

V- So can then you give us enough sense of the proportion between the perpetrators, bystanders and the rescuers, some sense of a way to put the rarity of the rescuers deeds in perspective to the way others were acting at the time?

P - The rescuers in most cases were persons, either they were approached and they were faced with a moral challenge, a moral challenge, they could respond in either way, yes or no, or perhaps. They had the freedom to respond they

could help if they wanted. A person in uniform, a man in the SS who was in a uniform, would not have the freedom to respond. He had to act in certain ways. Rescuers are persons, who could, if they wanted respond in a positive way or not respond. That is respond negatively. It all depends on the person's background training, his feelings at the moment. The perpetrators during the holocaust were in most cases persons in uniform or they acted in unison, they were carrying out orders. It is very interesting what perpetrators say when they are asked, "Why did you kill, or why did you do such things?" Their answers are a mixture of the following: I did it, I had to obey orders, I personally had nothing against these people, and even some of my friends were Jews. I am not responsible for that. I happen to be in that situation and I was there and everyone was doing it, I was a soldier or I was part of this unit and we had to obey orders. So they are passing the buck. Someone else is guilty. The rescuers talk differently, they say "I did it." No one told me to do it was my responsibility and my decision. I would do it over again. It is the most beautiful thing, helping someone else to stay alive. To answer your question about the perpetrators, bystanders, and the rescuers. I would say let's be careful here. The persons who saved were the persons who were approached in most cases. The persons who were saved had the possibility of saving. They could take a Jew into his home or a diplomat could devise a ways and means to put the Jewish persons under the protection of his government. They all had to make a moral choice. It depended on them. We don't know statistically, how many persons were approached and responded negatively. I would say that for every person that responded positively there may have been another person that responded negatively. The persons who responded negatively perhaps they were overcome with fear, or they felt they couldn't do it, or they were overcome with prejudices and stereotypes, they hated the people standing in front of them. The persons who responded positively, it doesn't mean they loved the Jews particularly, but they saw the human being standing in front of him or her and they decided they had a duty as a human being to help these persons stay alive, the humanitarian predisposition came before, surfaced and took hold of that person at that moment.

V - Have any efforts been made to designate then Monsignor Ron Calli as a Righteous of the Nations of the World?

P - In so far as Monsignor Ron Calli is concerned the future Pope John the 22nd , I believe, the 23rd, Pope John the 23rd. Before relating to that I'd like to point out another Monsignor we did honor that was stationed in Budapest, Monsignor Angelo Rota. Here the reason that we honored Rota again, that he went beyond the strict letters of appointment and mandate as Enuncio of the

Holy See in Budapest and saved literally thousands of Jews in Budapest by putting them in protective homes and by putting them on list of persons who supposedly were converting to the Catholic religion. In so far as Monsignor Ron Calli is concerned, he was the apostolic delegate of Istanbul. Istanbul was a listening post then. He was I believe responsible then for the Balkans, the area of the Balkans, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania. From the sources that we have here, we know that he had a very friendly disposition toward the plight of Jews in Nazi occupied Europe. He did urge the other apostolic delegates in their various stations in the Balkans and even in Hungary to exert themselves to help. What we are still examining is whether he himself issued documentation's such as baptismals where Jews were listed as having been baptized, of course falsely, thereby saving their lives, appearing as non Jews as Catholics. Whether he himself did that or urged others to do so that. And what else he did, the stories about him are very favorable, but we have no corroborative evidence. Therefore we have written to the Secretary of State of the Vatican and we have asked the Vatican make available to us the documents relating to the activity of Monsignor Ron Calli when he was the apostolic delegate in Istanbul. Especially the crucial years between 1943 to 1944 in the Balkans. We hope to receive a positive response. We hope to receive the exchanges, the letters between, the then Secretary of State. This will give us an education as to how far Ron Calli, went himself personally and extending aid to Jews and that will allow us, that is the commission, which evaluates these cases. That will allow the commission whether Ron Calli will be included among the Righteous Among the Nations.

V - What were his deeds in during WW2 or supposedly, or how would they qualify?

P - The deeds of Ron Calli during WW2, these deeds have not yet been verified. As I said before, we have received information by other persons who were stationed in Istanbul and who had contacts with him that he did urge his colleagues in their various stations to be helpful to Jews. We also know that he did transmit through the Vatican Mail, certain documentation's from the then Jewish Agency, the Jewish Agency representing the Jewish community in Palestine then to a certain address in Budapest, so he served as a mailing service in that case. That we do know. But we would like to know what else he was personally involved in helping Jews to survive. That we are still investigating and that we hope we will be helped by the Vatican archives to receive those very crucial exchanges of letter between Ron Calli and his superiors in Vatican and the Holy See, which to us will help us to evaluate his activity as the apostolic delegate in so far as helping the Jews. In other words, was simply urging others to do, was he friendly, did he commiserate with the

suffering, did he occasionally transmit a letter to his diplomatic mail? Which is all nice and good and got merit and recognition or did he go beyond that? Was he personally involved as his colleague Angela Rota, in Budapest in helping Jews ? Was he involved beyond simply being friendly and was he involved in such a way that person could figure for a candidate for the Righteous title. That we have not yet established.

V - In speaking with the current priest at St. Esprite, there's been some talk that he used diplomatic pouches, you mentioned Budapest, that papers went out to the nuns of Notre Dame, Is that what you were referring to?

P - I was referring to the diplomatic pouches in one case that we know, has been verified by the Vatican. One diplomatic pouch which was directed to the apolistic nuncio in Budapest. I am not familiar with other instances of diplomatic pouches to other directions in Eastern Europe, or Southeastern Europe.

V - Have you heard any information come about, a rather strange relationship between Ron Calli and the German Ambassador Von Pappen, and that Von Pappen's wife was coming and sweeping the floors in the church, that she would have had some influence.

P - I have only recently heard about this very special relationship that Ron Calli had with the German Ambassador Von Pappen. The uses made of that relationship to be of help to persons persecuted by the Nazis especially of Jews. I have picked this story but we have nothing yet to corroborate it. It would be interesting to know more about this. There is still more that is unknown about Ron Calli so far than what is known.

V - We also came across some people who are saying he did not issue "Baptismal certificates", that would have been crossing the line. That he issued papers saying this person is a part of the Christian community. Has that come up at all?

P - Any thing that Monsignor Ron Calli did in so far as issuing a Baptismal Certificate or any other form of documentation which were evidently not legit or were not true. But in the purpose of helping Jews, that is of great importance to us. We'd like to verify that, to know whether these were isolated cases or these were done on behalf of many people. Again, the case of Angela Rota in Budapest, He issued Baptismals to hundreds, to even several thousand perhaps

persons, without knowing them personally. This is not an isolated individual case. We still don't know where to place Monsignor Ron Calli there. Of course we cannot compare Ron Calli to Rota. Rota was in Budapest, a city under German occupation, a government that was pro-Nazi, Rota acted after October 15, 1944 in a country which was ruled by the Iron Cross, who were vicious Fascists, murdering Jews on site. Ron Calli, his post was in the quite and relaxed atmosphere of Istanbul, a country neutral, he didn't have to fear for his life or his position. Rota did have to fear from the Iron Cross. They arrested priests; they manhandled persons of religious faith, Catholics and Protestants. Ron Calli did not have that thing to worry about. His position was safer, but still we would like to know what he did personally. In so far as issuing what ever sort of documentation, which were patently false but they were issued and sent to certain destinations in order to be handed to persons, for the purpose of saving their lives. We would like to know more about that because we think if he did that then he deserves recognition by the Jewish people, by Yad Vashem. In whatever form. Either in the form of title of Righteous Among the Nations or then it can be done in another form of acknowledgement and appreciation. Anyone who went out of his way to help Jews to survive deserves to be pointed out, to be recognized and to be applauded. Be he a Bishop, a parish Priest, be he a believer or a non-believer, be he blue collar or white collar, be he literate or be he illiterate. In the spirit, if I am addressing a Christian community, be he a Good Samaritan. Anyone who went out of his way to make possible other people, Jews to survive, needs to be acknowledge and his deed needs to be documented, written down, used as role models of behavior for future generations.

<https://collections.ushmm.org>

Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection