

# My Thanksgiving Holocaust Lesson<sup>i</sup>

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On my most memorable Thanksgiving, a pair of shoes preached to me in a rabbi's office.

While pastoring in the Los Angeles area, I had been invited to take part with ten other clergy in an ecumenical Thanksgiving eve service at the local Jewish temple. The week before, the rabbi had confided to me over lunch that, as a special surprise, he planned during the service to honor a Dutch man, recently discovered living nearby, who had saved 37 Jews during the Holocaust by hiding them in his home.

At once, I began looking forward to seeing such a man.

Thinking about the supreme nobility of his courageous act, I recalled a picture in my seminary textbook of German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer—martyred by the Nazis—standing in his spectacles before a Gothic seminary building, cradling a book against the vest of his three-piece suit.

It never occurred to me that I might actually meet this heroic rescuer of Jews, any more than I expected to meet my favorite tennis pro after watching him play a match or a politician I greatly admired after seeing him speak. Such celebrities just appear from another realm, perform marvels, and then leave you awed.

On the night of the Thanksgiving service, I arrived early at the rabbi's office carrying my robe. Entering the room, I was surprised that no one else had arrived yet. Turning to hang up my robe, I caught myself as I noticed a small, balding, white-haired man sunk deeply into the couch off to one side.

A glance told me he was not a clergy. His three-button, tiny-lapel suit was clearly tailored out of another time and place, yet so unwrinkled as to suggest it hadn't been worn often, if at all. Uncertain, I nodded courteously and he smiled quickly, as if embarrassed.

Puzzled, and wondering what this man was doing at our ministers' gathering, I hesitated. Uncertain amid the otherwise empty room, I turned from my robe and sat down opposite him.

"Are you...from around this area?" I offered.

"For some years now, I have lived near here," he replied, naming his neighborhood with a distinct European accent. His home was not far from where we sat—an older community of small, wood-frame houses sandwiched between a large boulevard and hillside estates.

The man offered no further conversation, and in the awkward silence, I dropped my eyes—where my gaze was drawn immediately to his shoes. Thick, roughly-hewn leather, cracked and overlaid heavily with dark brown polish, marked these shoes as unlike any a machine might make or store might sell.

The shoes were wide and worn, clearly designed without thought for fashion but quite unabashedly for lifelong wear, still sturdy upon uneven layers of added sole. The suit seemed wholly imposed. But protrusions above the shoes' big toe showed they had stretched variously to fit the intimate warp and woof of the wearer's foot.

Suddenly, the door opened and the rabbi entered. Quickly—and not without relief—I turned my gaze from the shoes and stood to greet him.

"So you've met Bert?" the rabbi exclaimed, gesturing graciously across from me toward the couch.

“Well..., yes, actually..., we’ve greeted each other,” I allowed.

“Bert is from Holland—didn’t you visit Norway yourself recently?”

“That’s right,” I replied, turning as several clergy colleagues entered the room, robes-in-arm.

A chorus of greetings rang out and I joined in for the next few minutes as others arrived amid handshakes, embraces, and a flurry of robes.

“Saw your article!” one pastor called out to me as he adjusted his stole. “Really enjoyed it!”

“Which one?” I called back.

“You got more than one published?”

Smiling and nodding graciously, I stepped through the crowd of flowing cloth to elaborate. Turning to avoid bumping into another pastor, I glanced aside and was surprised to see the old man still sunk deeply into the couch, smiling nervously. *Didn’t he know someone here to talk to? If not, what was he doing here?*

Shrugging my shoulders, I was about to push ahead to talk about my articles when my eyes again caught his shoes ... those uneven but sturdy shoes. “From Holland.” The rabbi’s words leapt into my mind, and at once the background chatter ceased in my ears.

I stopped.

*But no. Surely not!*

Then the rabbi was calling for our attention, asking us to gather in a circle for prayer before the service. Quickly, I checked to see if my stole hung evenly. Beside me, the Monsignor straightened his wide red sash against his jet-black cassock. I noted another’s light blue crosses on navy velvet and thought to compliment him afterward.

“I want to introduce you all to a very special man,” the rabbi was saying, “whom we will honor tonight with great thanksgiving.”

He then turned to the man on the couch and reached out his hand.

Slowly, with difficulty, the man grasped the rabbi’s outstretched arm. Raising himself up with a determined tug, he limped forward hesitantly into our circle. Smiling quickly, he dropped his eyes and looked at his shoes.

“This is Bert Bochove, a furniture upholsterer by trade, from Holland, who we recently discovered has been living in our community for the past 30 years. Bert saved 37 Jewish lives during the Holocaust.”

I stared awe-struck.

Steadying himself, the man looked up and smiled obligingly.

*A furniture upholsterer?*

Surely, this could not be the man who had outwitted Nazi intelligence, risking the lives of himself and family to save 37 others!

“Bert told me he would be uncomfortable speaking in front of such educated men as ourselves. But I want to take this opportunity to tell you that when I recently met him for the first time, I asked him, ‘Bert, why did you do it? You could’ve just kept your nose clean and not had anything to worry about.’

“And you know what he answered me? ‘Because I am a Christian,’ he said; ‘that’s how I was brought up.’”

My mind was reeling. “Because I’m a Christian”? That’s all? No carefully constructed rationale, no analysis, no sermon? I pictured a small old house in his nearby neighborhood and shook my head in disbelief.

*But this man was so... so humble! How could anyone so humble possibly do such a great thing?*

Then the rabbi was calling us to bow our heads. As he prayed a Thanksgiving blessing upon us all—“especially our brother Bert Bochove,” I struggled to make sense of what I had just seen and heard.

Moments ago, I had wondered if this man were important enough to walk to the altar with us clergy. Now, I knew that none of us was worthy of walking with him. My respectable position, my robe, my Master’s degrees, my articles—what were such chaff compared to this man’s life-threatening act of humble courage?

Astounded by my very thoughts, I was seized by an urge to look at him. With my head bowed into the circle, I opened my eyes--and saw again his shoes. At once, a strange fear crept over me: *Who among us pastors would dare to walk in those shoes?*

“Amen,” the rabbi said, and I looked away.

Gingerly, I filed out with the others into the darkened reception hall, and took my place in line behind the large wall-curtain which separated us from the sanctuary.

As the organ strains of Irving Berlin’s “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee” arose before us, the rabbi took Bert’s unsteady arm and helped him to the front.

And then I knew: Only someone so humble is capable of so great a deed. The rest of us would balk, thinking, “I’m too important to risk my life like that.” I thought of myself and so many others who have at times said, “I don’t feel like I’m doing anything significant with my life.”

At last, I knew why: because we haven’t been humble enough.

The words of another, ancient rabbi leapt into my mind:

Whoever makes himself great will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be made great. (Matthew 23:12)

Louder now, the organ was calling our procession forth. Ahead of us, the curtain parted and the lights of the sanctuary broke upon us, dazzling eyes which had become accustomed to the darkness.

Slipping the worship program into my Bible, I gripped it tightly and took a deep breath. Then gently, relentlessly, a dam burst and tears rushed into my eyes as together, slowly, we followed the man in the old, old shoes.

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<sup>i</sup> From *The Adventure of Pastoring: Pioneering the Frontiers of Ministry*, by Gordon Dalbey (to be published)