

*As a child, Samuel Oliner came face to face with evil.
He has spent the last 10 years studying human kindness.*

Can Goodness Be Taught?

Samuel Oliner has as much reason as anyone to think the worst of humankind; yet, he has spent the last decade studying what makes people good. Nearly 50 years ago, Oliner's family and friends were slaughtered by Nazi soldiers; yet today he firmly believes in people's capacity for kindness and compassion. Sound unlikely?

Much about the life of this professor of sociology at Humboldt State University in Arcata, Calif., is unlikely.

The first improbable event took place on Aug. 14, 1942. Before dawn, German trucks rolled into the walled Jewish ghetto in Bobowa, Poland. Soldiers leaped out, fired rifles into the air and yelled, "All Jews outside!" The terrified people were beaten, herded onto trucks and driven off into the dark. Only a 12-year-old boy remained, hiding on the roof of his house, so frightened that he wasn't sure whether he was alive or dead. That boy was Shmulek Oliner.

In late afternoon, Shmulek climbed down. There was no sign of life. He could not know or suppose that his parents, grandparents, brother, sister, other relatives and all of the thousand other Jews of Bobowa (who had been forced to leave their hometowns, then herded into this ghetto by the Nazis) had been machine-gunned and lay in a pit in the nearby forest. Shmulek knew only that he needed to find help.

The blond, blue-eyed boy looked like a Christian Pole, so he was able to hike unhindered toward Bielanka, his native village. Fiercely hungry, he begged for bread; the peasant who fed him told Shmulek, chuckling, what had happened to the Bobowa Jews. Numb by such malevolence, Shmulek plodded onward to the home of the only Christian he felt he could trust; a peasant woman who had bought cows from his father. He timidly knocked on her door.

Balwina Piecuch welcomed the sobbing boy. "Don't cry, my child," Balwina said. "The Lord will help you." She set out food, then sent him to the attic to sleep. Later, Balwina tutored Shmulek to pass as a Christian and advised him to go north lest he be recognized here.

Shmulek found a job some miles away with a couple who had taken over a Jewish farm. He led a bitter life, without family or friends, and worked all the time—forever fearful that a slip of the tongue or reaction to an offhand remark about the extermination of Jews would expose him.

Sometimes this nightmare seemed the only life he'd ever known. Then, in March 1945, Russian troops entered Poland, and he was free. The 15-year-old orphan was sent to England by a refugee committee and educated there. He eked out an existence as a cabinetmaker's apprentice while trying to locate relatives in America. Finally, he found a distant cousin in New York, who sponsored his immigration.

Shmulek anglicized his name to Samuel when he entered the U.S. in 1950. He was drafted into the Army, served in Korea and then, thanks to the G.I. Bill, went to college, where he discovered sociology and the fascination of finding out what makes people behave as they do. But it took close to 20 years of part-time study—while running a drapery business in San Francisco to support himself, a wife and three sons—before Samuel Oliner received his Ph.D. in 1971 and an appointment to the faculty of Humboldt State University.

Despite his ascent and happy family life, Oliner maintained a bleak view of humanity. In his early 40s he was still, he says, "wary of people and mistrustful." Says his wife, Pearl: "Sam didn't really deal with his past until he began teaching about the Holocaust at Humboldt."

That was in 1978. At that time, certain anti-Semitic groups here and abroad began denying that the mass slaughter of the Jews had ever happened. Oliner felt compelled to defend the truth and, that fall, he began teaching "On Causes and Consequences of the Holocaust." Doing so unleashed a flood of painful memories: his teenage sister weeping the night Gestapo officers raped her; his grandfather being shoved against a hot stove by a Nazi officer, then knocked to the floor; the screaming throughout the ghetto the day his family and the others disappeared.

Oliner's work brought another unexpected turn: the empathy and anguish of his students. One day, a fearful young woman came to him after a lecture and, in a heavy German accent, said: "Professor Oliner, I'm quitting class. I can't

stand the guilt over what my people did."

Oliner, pained, tried to reassure her: "But it wasn't all your people. It was some of them." There were people like Balwina Piecuch, he said. Heedless of the danger to themselves, they had rescued Jews. As he spoke, Oliner realized how one-sided his lectures—and his own view—had been. There was a good side to human nature; he had to study it.

Oliner began reading about people who had rescued Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe. As a social scientist, he wanted to understand what had created the altruistic nature of these people. In 1982, a grant from the American Jewish Committee enabled him to launch a study of the surviving rescuers.

For the next five years, Oliner gathered 600 detailed stories from aging rescuers from Poland, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, as well as Germany. He and his staff also interviewed 200 people from the same areas and of the same age, class and background who had done nothing to save the Jews. Then they analyzed the differences between the two groups. Among the findings, which cast light on how compassion can be built into human nature, are:

- People who rescued the Jews were not particularly adventurous or self-confident; nor were they more religious than the "bystanders," as Oliner calls those who did nothing. But they were more empathetic, more caring and had a much greater sense of responsibility for others. How did the rescuers become compassionate? In part, by having lived among people who were not of their own faith and background, they had learned to see others as fellow human beings.

- The most important influences were parental: How the rescuers had been disciplined as children was crucial. The bystanders were more likely to have been beaten and abused by their parents. The rescuers' parents, on the other hand, used reason to discipline, thereby instilling values as well as compassion.

- Parents' behavior toward others was a major influence. Kind, caring parents were the model for kind, caring children.

Oliner discovered that 500,000 Christians had risked their lives to save a million Jews from death. His work had other rewards: The research, intimates say, helped heal Oliner. Rabbi Harold Schulweis, a close friend, says: "He found the spark of decency in human beings."

At 60, Samuel Oliner is now a man at peace with the past and hopeful for the future. He says, "The notion that we are each other's keepers is gaining. Maybe we've reached a point where another Holocaust is unimaginable." He pauses, then adds: "It's because of the people who cared that I'm here. There are such people in the world—and we can teach our children to be like them."

Morton Hunt adapted this article from his book "The Compassionate Beast: What Science Is Discovering about the Humane Side of Humankind," just published by William Morrow and Co.

B Y M O R T O N H U N T

A language spoken only by believers

Charlotte, N.C. ■ To their neighbors in the upscale Wessex Square subdivision, Charlie and Joyce Brown embody the middle-American ideal. He's a successful traveling salesman who plays golf and wears Top-siders around the house. She drives a station wagon and cares for their three children. With a two-car garage, charming youngsters and a VCR in the den, they seem like the family next door on "The Cosby Show."

But there is a difference. Joyce and Charlie Brown speak in tongues.

"Sometimes we'll do it together at night," says Charlie, 38, leaning across

For one suburban Southern family, charismatic religion is the sure route to a heaven where Jesus is president

alone, driving down the highway," explains Charlie, who claims to have received the gift of prophecy but not the gift of healing. He suddenly lolls into a high-pitched, rhythmic chant, eyes closed and face uplifted. It is part incantation, part melodic hymn. Only the words are incomprehensible.

The Browns are part of an unlikely

Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. They also watch the television evangelists. Charlie likes John Ankerberg, the Tennessee talk-show evangelist who has sided with Jimmy Swaggart in the Bakker controversy. "He's fun but informative. He's the Phil Donahue of religious TV."

Joyce, 39, prefers "The PTL Club," lately known as the "Jim and Tammy TV Ministry Hour." She says: "I like the music, the guests and the ministers. I like Tammy. She's fun, and she ministers to you. I'm inspired. I feel joy and full of love for the Lord."

Chrissie is the proverbial all-American teenager whose current goal in life is

to become a cheerleader. Yet this summer, she will spend 10 days in Jamaica, not on the beaches but as part of a youth mission to a poor quarter of Kingston, the island nation's capital. While she says she cringes at Charlie's early-morning prayer walks in their neighborhood—he prays aloud to himself—she nonetheless eagerly sings in the church's special youth choir.

The Brown family got where it is not through the satellite ministries but by growing apart from their own religious upbringings. Charlie and Joyce were raised as Southern Baptists, then gradually turned to even more conservative churches. Both were divorced. They met when Joyce began attending the singles group Charlie had organized in a charismatic church that he discovered while attending college in Charlotte.

Humor is not absent in this intensely spiritual household. The indomitable Charlie teases Joyce about wanting to go to heaven for the perfect suntan and Chrissie for wanting to drive a Porsche when she meets her Maker. He speaks unabashedly of heaven as a real place—"not floating around on a harp in some ethereal nowhere"—that will have Jesus as its president. "He'll come rule the show. I'll have a job. I'll play golf. I'll do wonderful things throughout the galaxies of time that will please God."

by Peter Ross Range



In Charlie and Joyce Brown's family, speaking in tongues is not just the language of angels

the counter of their early-American kitchen. "We'll hold hands before going to bed and pray for someone."

Speaking in tongues is one of the practices of such charismatic denominations as the Assemblies of God, the church in which Jim and Tammy Bakker carried out their ministry before their abrupt resignation two weeks ago. Charismatics, including Charlie and Joyce Brown, believe that a Christian can become filled with the Holy Spirit, which then speaks in an unknown language through the individual.

"Most of the time, I do it when I'm

new breed of American believers who are middle class, college educated—and evangelical. They defy the stereotype of unlettered rustics inhabiting the novels and movies about Elmer Gantry and other tent ministers of the past. There is an intense belief in the literal word of God as written in the Bible.

Ministerial preferences

The family attends three or four church meetings a week, including youth activities and Charlie's Friday-night study group. Shaun, 6, is a Royal Ranger, while Mandy, 3, is a Rain-bow—fundamentalists' answer to the