

Amidst the atrocities of World War II, thousands of unsung heroes put their lives on the line to save others. Amongst these individuals was Eugene Lazowski, a Polish medical doctor who saved thousands of Jews by faking a typhus epidemic. His actions were no doubt brave and selfless, but what could have motivated him to risk his life to save people he did not know? German Philosopher Immanuel Kant may just have the answer. Kant's categorical imperative explains Eugene Lazowski's righteous actions in the face of adversity.

Eugene Lazowski was a pacifist by nature. So, instead of fighting the German occupation with violence and weapons, he used science. Knowing that Germans feared diseases because of their easy spread during wartime, Lazowski staged a typhus epidemic across twelve Polish villages, ultimately saving the lives of about 8,000 lives.¹ Typhus, an illness carried by lice, did not have a cure at the time.² Lazowski realized that if he injected a healthy patient with the dead typhus bacteria, they would test positive for the illness without exhibiting any symptoms. Because sick Jews were simply killed off, Lazowski injected non-Jews who inhibited fevers or other typhus-like symptoms with the bacteria. When various blood samples from a village tested positive for typhus, the area was immediately quarantined, and the Germans avoided it at all costs.³ Lazowski drew suspicion away from himself by referring his patients to other doctors who were not involved with his plans. Because the patients still tested positive for typhus as the bacteria was still in their bodies, it added authenticity to Lazowski's ruse.⁴ Furthermore, if a Jew was in need of medical attention, Lazowski asked that he or she hang a white cloth on the back of his fence so that he could help in secret.⁵

Lazowski's actions were indeed very noble, and according to Kant, a product of Lazowski's own rational mind creating a universal truth for himself. Kant's categorical imperative aims to test an action's morality by applying one's own actions to the general public.

In short, one should not partake in any actions that one would not be okay with everyone else partaking in.⁶ In terms of Kant's categorical imperative, Eugene Lazowski was not comfortable with partaking in mass genocide, and thus he became a Holocaust hero by aiding Jews in their time of need. To Lazowski, compassion was a universal truth. Kant says, "act so as to treat people always as ends in themselves, never as mere means."⁷ This means that instead of manipulating others for personal gain, one should respect other people as rational beings with intrinsic value and a life of their own.⁸ Lazowski clearly believed something similar as he went out of his own way to allow others to live even though they did not have a positive influence on his well-being as they put his life at risk. His innate idea, or a priori, that the vulnerable must be protected without payment makes Eugene Lazowski a true Holocaust hero.

1. Damon Adams, “2 Doctors Used Typhus To Save Thousands in Wartime,” *American Medical News*, <http://www.amednews.com/article/20040705/profession/307059953/6>.
2. The Editors of *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “Typhus,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <http://www.britannica.com/science/typhus>.
3. Adams, “2 Doctors.”
4. “He Duped Nazis, Saved Thousands,” *The Sun-Times Company*, <http://stjoenj.net/lazowski/lazowski.html>.
5. J.J. Trivedi, “Fake Epidemic Saves a Village from Nazis,” *Holocaust Forgotten*, <http://holocaustforgotten.com/eugene.htm>.
6. Garth Kemerling, “Kant: The Moral Order,” *Philosophy Pages*, <http://www.philosophypages.com/hy/5i.htm>.
7. Kemerling, “Kant.”
8. Kurtis Brown, “Kant’s Ethics: Some Key Ideas,” *Trinity*, http://www.trinity.edu/cbrown/intro/kant_ethics.html.

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