

THOSE WHO DARED TO RESCUE

"In those times there was darkness everywhere. In heaven and on earth, all the gates of compassion seemed to have been closed. The killer killed and the Jews died and the outside world adopted an attitude either of complicity or of indifference. Only a few had the courage to care. These few men and women were vulnerable, afraid, helpless—what made them different from their fellow citizens?"¹

Rescue of Jews by non-Jews was the exception rather than the rule during the Holocaust. Most people never considered helping Jews. The brutal repression of those who helped and fear of such repression, the culture of conformity, the prevailing atmosphere of antisemitism, and in many times and places, the profound suffering engendered by the war, all contributed to an attitude of caring only for “me and mine” and the general abandonment of the Jews to their fate. Nevertheless, it is estimated that out of nine million Jews under Nazi domination, tens of thousands were rescued during the Holocaust by non-Jewish people.

Many rescuers acted out of a sense of altruism, that is, an unselfish desire to help those who were being persecuted. Some performed acts of heroism based upon deeply held religious beliefs or moral codes; others acted in the spur of the moment, offering help to someone they had never seen before as soon as they realized the person was in need. Yet others acted out of loyalty to people with whom they had developed close personal ties. If caught by the Nazis, those who attempted to provide aide to Jews were sent to prisons or concentration camps or immediately executed, depending on the country in which they lived. Rescue put both the immediate family and sometimes even the entire community of the rescuer in peril. Some rescuers survived with their charges until the end of the war, only to be murdered by their neighbors for having had the audacity to help Jews.

To date, over 25,000 non Jews have been recognized by Yad Vashem as “Righteous Among the Nations”—people who chose to rescue Jews with great risk to themselves. Following are a few of their stories.

A very significant rescue group—*Zegota*—was formed in occupied Poland. *Zegota* took care of thousands of Jews who were trying to survive in hiding. The group sought to find safe hiding places, and helped pay for the upkeep and medical care of the Jews being hidden, despite the death penalty imposed on Poles who aided Jews. In particular, *Zegota* successfully placed thousands of Jewish children in safe houses, orphanages, and convents. One of its main activists was Irena Sendler, a young social worker, who at great personal danger, devised means to enter the ghetto and help the sick and dying Jews. She managed to obtain a permit from the municipality that enabled her to enter the ghetto, allegedly to inspect the sanitary conditions. Once inside, she established contact with activists of the Jewish welfare organization and began to assist them in their work. She helped smuggle Jews out of the ghetto to the “Aryan side” and helped set up hiding places for them. After the Warsaw ghetto was destroyed, Sendler was appointed director of *Zegota*’s Department for the Care of Jewish Children. Sendler, whose underground name was “Jolanta,” exploited her contacts with orphanages and institutes for abandoned children to find refuge for Jewish children, telling the institutions that they were Christian. She rescued many hundreds of children and made a great

¹Elie Wiesel, in Carol Rittner and Sandra Meyers, *Courage to Care - Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust* (New York University Press, 1986), 2.

Famous Diplomats to Rescue Jews



Raoul Wallenberg



Chiune-Sempo Sugihara



Sousa Mendes

effort to keep a record of their true identity.

Some rescuers were diplomats who took the initiative to issue thousands of visas and letters of protection that allowed Jews to immigrate to other countries or enjoy diplomatic protection until immigration became possible. Among the most famous of these were Raoul Wallenberg, Chiune-Sempo Sugihara, and Sousa Mendes from Sweden, Japan, and Portugal respectively.

After Germany invaded France in 1940, American journalist, Varian Fry, was sent by a private American relief organization to help prominent anti-Nazi refugees who were in danger of being arrested by the Gestapo, among them many Jews. Fry's network forged documents, used black-market funds, and created secret escape routes. Artists Marc Chagall and Marcel Duchamp, and political scientist Hannah Arendt were among the famous cultural figures he helped. In September 1941, Fry was expelled from France because his activities angered both the US State Department and the Vichy government.

Oskar Schindler was a businessman and a member of the Nazi Party. He took over a factory formerly owned by Jews outside of Krakow, Poland. At one point he began protecting his Jewish employees from deportation and death by creating a list of workers "essential" to the German war effort and paying the Nazis money for each person on the list. As time passed he took on more employees with the idea of bringing them under his protection. Schindler is an example of an individual who made a dramatic personal change during the course of the war. At the beginning, he was an opportunist who succeeded in making money by exploiting Jews. Once he realized that the Nazis were deporting Jews to murder them, he decided to risk all he had in order to save the Jews he had once exploited.

Moshe Bejsky, one of the Jews saved by Schindler, said after the war: "Schindler was the first German since the beginning of the war that did not fill me with fear... Here is the man who not only managed to save 1,200 people, but who over the years was able to listen and to solve thousands of daily problems that our lives depended on."

Some Jews were saved when they were hidden by non-Jews in and around their homes. Hiding places included attics, cellars, barns, underground bunkers, and even dog houses were used as hiding places for weeks and months. Some Catholic and Protestant clergy hid Jews in churches, orphanages, and convents. In France, the Protestant population of the small village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon led by Pastor Andre Trocme sheltered several thousand Jews. When the local French authorities demanded that the pastor ceases his activities, his response was clear-cut: "... I do not know what a Jew is. I know only human beings."

Hiding Jews in towns, cities, and on farms required extreme caution. Because of food rationing, feeding extra people was not only difficult, but dangerous since obtaining food beyond the normal

ration was highly suspicious. Getting medical care for ill people also entailed many risks. Anything that looked questionable could lead to neighbors reporting to the authorities and the discovery of hiding places and their inhabitants.

Dr. Giovanni Pesante and his wife Angelica, from Trieste, Italy, hid Hemda, their daughter's Jewish friend, for over a year. When one day Hemda suggested that she leave so as not to jeopardize them, Dr. Pesante said to her, "I beg you to stay with us for my sake, not yours. If you leave I will forever be ashamed to be part of the human race."

Jozef Ulma was a farmer who lived with his wife Wiktorina and their six young children in the small town of Markowa, Poland. In the fall of 1942, while the hunt for Jews was going on in the entire area, a Jewish family by the name of Szall came to Markowa to find shelter. When they asked Jozef and Wiktorina to hide them, the couple agreed, and took them in along with two Jewish sisters. Although the Ulma house was at the outskirts of the town, the Jews' presence on the farm was soon discovered. During the night of March 23/24, 1944, German police came to Markowa. They found the Szall family on the Ulma farm and shot them to death. Afterwards they murdered the entire Ulma family: Jozef; Wiktorina, who was seven months pregnant; and their six small children—Stanislawa, Barbara, Wladyslawa, Franciszka, Maria, and Antoni. The eldest of the Ulma children had just begun to attend classes in primary school.

Among the rescuers were those who agreed to adopt Jewish children and raise them as their own. This involved falsifying identification papers to prove that the child had been born into the host family. To protect the children and their host families, the children had to take on the lifestyle and church-going habits of their new families. After the war, some children were lucky to be rejoined to surviving family members, and others were found by representatives of Jewish organizations and returned to Judaism. Some hidden children who were never found, remained in the hands of their rescuers as Christians, and the youngest among them never learned their true identity.

A select group of non-Jews did not engage in rescue directly on the scene, but instead tried desperately to draw attention to Nazi activities to exterminate Jews. Jan Karski, a member of the Polish underground, met with Jewish leaders in the Warsaw ghetto, visited the Izbica ghetto and reported personally to Allied leaders, including President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Although his report did not lead to direct and concerted action, it was important in changing the attitude in the Western world and contributed to various rescue initiatives that came into being toward the end of the war.

The rescuers came from all backgrounds. Scholars have not been able to identify a common thread. They were men and women, young and old, rich and poor, peasants and intellectuals, devout Christians and atheists, Socialists and conservatives. When asked, almost all of them responded that they did not think of themselves as heroes. Many explained themselves saying to the effect: "What I have done is what I should have done."

Yad Vashem has conferred the honor of "Righteous Among the Nations" upon over 25,000 individuals. The process of recognition is ongoing, and each year hundreds of additional stories are verified and the honor granted. Undoubtedly there are many stories that will never be discovered since there are those who tried to rescue Jews but failed and perished along with those they were trying to help. In many of their testimonies and memoirs, Jewish survivors attest to the fact that they received help from more than one individual, even though they may not always remember all them. So for this reason too, we can assume that there are more rescuers than history can recall.

What is known, however, is that among the hundreds of millions of people living under Nazi domination at the time, only a select few took profound risks to rescue Jews. The light of their deeds shines forth through the overwhelming darkness of the war years.