

Lesson 7 Rescuers and Non-Jewish Resistance

STUDENT HANDOUT – Those Who Dared to Rescue

“What I have done is what I should have done.”

These words were spoken by Necdet Kent, a Turkish diplomat who rescued from certain death about seventy Turkish Jews living in France by preventing their deportation to the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp. Kent’s simple statement of “doing the right thing” was typical of many rescuers.

Rescue of Jews by non-Jews was the exception rather than the rule. Because of a long tradition of antisemitism in many parts of Europe and the dangers involved in helping Jews, most people were unwilling to assume the role of “allies” to Jews. However, it is estimated that tens of thousands of Jews in Nazi-occupied countries were rescued during the Holocaust by non-Jewish people. These non-Jews risked their freedom and lives, as well as the freedom and lives of their families, to save Jews from Nazi persecution. Many 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 on the spur of the moment, offering help to someone they had never seen before as soon as they realized the person was in need. Those caught by the Nazis were sent to prisons or concentration camps or immediately executed, depending on the country they lived in and the German racial attitude to its citizens. Often their families and sometimes an entire village would be punished. 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.

Forms of rescue varied greatly. Individuals and partisan groups aided Jews in fleeing from German persecution by providing escape routes into the forests, or through mountains and across bodies of water to neutral countries.

In the wake of the *Kristallnacht Pogrom* in November 1938, the British, who had severely limited Jewish immigration to Palestine, offered to let 10,000 Jewish children and youth into Great Britain. In

1939 and 1940, many groups of children came to Britain in what were known as the Kindertransports. Parents or guardians could not accompany the children. About 7,500 Jewish children from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia arrived safely in Britain before the Germans successfully closed off sea routes in 1940. About half the children lived with foster families. Others stayed in hostels and on farms throughout Britain. After the war, these children became citizens of Great Britain or emigrated to Israel, the United States, Canada, and Australia. Most of them would never see their parents again.

A large-scale rescue through escape took place in Nazi-occupied Denmark. Upon learning in the autumn of 1943 that the Nazis planned to deport Jews living in Denmark, the Danish resistance organized operations to ferry about 7,200 Jews to safety in Sweden. A very significant rescue group, Zegota, formed in occupied Poland. Zegota furnished many Jews with false papers, money, and safe hiding places. Despite the death penalty imposed on Poles who aided Jews, Zegota members successfully placed thousands of Jewish children in safe houses, orphanages, and convents. Some rescuers who helped Jews to escape were diplomats who provided thousands of visas and letters of protection so Jews could immigrate to foreign countries or enjoy diplomatic protection until immigration became possible. Among the most famous of these diplomats were Raoul Wallenberg, Chiune-Sempo Sugihara, and Sousa Mendes.

After Germany invaded France in 1940, an American journalist, Varian Fry, was sent by a private American relief organization to help anti-Nazi refugees who were in danger of being arrested by the Gestapo. Fry’s network of accomplices forged documents, used black-market funds, and created secret escape routes. Both Jews and non-Jews who opposed the Nazi government were able to escape from France. Among them were some famous people, such as artist Marc Chagall and writers, Franz Werfel and Leon Feuchtwanger. In September

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1941, Fry was expelled from France because his activities angered both the U.S. State Department and the Vichy government.

Oskar Schindler, a member of the Nazi Party, who became the Aryan owner of a factory formerly owned by Jews outside of Krakow, Poland, protected 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. Schindler is an example of a person who made a dramatic personal change during the course of the war. At the beginning, he was a member of the Nazi Party — 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.



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Oskar Schindler (second from left) with his Jewish and Polish workers, Cracow, Poland, 1940

Some Jews were saved when they were hidden by non-Jews in and around their homes. Hiding places included attics, cellars, barns, and even underground bunkers. 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. Hiding Jews in towns, cities, and on farms required extreme caution. Neighbors might report to the Nazis suspicious activities and the hiding places would be raided. There were serious difficulties in feeding extra

people at a time when food was rationed, and medical care for ill people could not be obtained. Even burying dead bodies presented a problem. Genowefa Nowak, a Polish rescuer recalled matter-of-factly that “if they had caught us, first they would have shot my children right before my eyes, then the child we were hiding, and then they would have killed us. But we didn’t think about the danger. We just wanted to save the child.” The child, Ephraim Gat, then five years old, spent two years crammed into a small closet.

A number of non-Jews 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 that family. Often to protect the children and themselves, the children had to take on the lifestyle and church-going habits of their new families. Most of these Jewish children later reclaimed their Judaism; others remained in the religion of their new families.

Some rescuers were farmers who would leave food and water at their gates or on the edge of the forests for hungry Jews they knew were hiding in nearby forests. Some Jews were saved by the simple kind act of advance warning by neighbors that Jewish lives were in jeopardy. Renee G., a Holocaust survivor of the Losice ghetto, in Poland, wrote, “[My family] had a very good friend, a Polish farmer who risked his life and decided to take us out [of the ghetto]. [That farmer] was shot after the war by Polish underground because he was helping the Jews. He was a wonderful guy. All the way through, he helped us, for no money at all.”

There were rescuers who gave their own identification papers to Jews so that they could live as “Aryans” under assumed identities.

A select group of non-Jews tried desperately to draw attention to Nazi plans to exterminate Jews. Jan Karski, a courier for the Polish government-in-exile met with Jewish leaders in the Warsaw ghetto and then sent their reports of Nazi mass killings to Allied

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leaders, including President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Nothing was done.

The rescuers came from all backgrounds. Scholars have not been able to identify a common thread. They were 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. “What I have done is what I should have done.”

Yad Vashem, up until the present, has conferred the honor of “Righteous Among the Nations” upon approximately 21,000 individuals. However, the number of rescue attempts was larger than the number of those recorded. There were in fact additional rescuers who were not given the title because their activities have yet to come to light. Some, who tried to rescue Jews, failed and perished along with the person they were trying to help; the stories of both may never be discovered. Research has shown that the number of rescuers was often equal to the number of Jews rescued and sometimes

outnumbered them. Frequently, it took many more than one person to help a Jew survive the war.



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A photograph of a “Righteous Among the Nations”
Raoul Wallenberg