

# THOSE WHO DARED TO RESCUE



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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?<sup>1</sup>



- Elie Wiesel

Rescue of Jews by non-Jews was the exception rather than the rule during the Holocaust. The atmosphere of antisemitism, fear of severe punishment for aiding Jews, and deep suffering caused by the war led most people to never consider helping Jews, who were mostly abandoned to their fate. Even so, it is estimated that of nine million Jews under Nazi domination, tens of thousands were rescued during the Holocaust by non-Jewish people.

The fact that thousands of people found the courage to become rescuers demonstrates that some freedom of choice existed, and that saving Jews was not necessarily beyond the capacity of ordinary people. Some performed acts of compassion based upon religious beliefs or moral codes. Some acted in the spur of the moment, offering help to someone they had never seen before. Others acted out of loyalty to people they already knew well. If caught by the Nazis or betrayed by members of their community, those who helped Jews were sent to prisons or concentration camps or immediately executed, depending on the country and their specific situation. Rescue put both the immediate family and sometimes even the rescuer's entire community at risk. Given the dangers involved, acts of rescue by those who cared represent remarkable acts of decency and courage.

## WHO WERE THE "RIGHTEOUS AMONG THE NATIONS"?

To date, almost 28,000 non-Jews have been recognized by Yad Vashem as "Righteous Among the Nations"—people who chose to rescue Jews at great risk to themselves. 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. Some made failed rescue attempts and perished along with those they tried to help. Others

were successful, but their names forgotten over time. For these reasons, we can assume that there are more rescuers than history can recall.

The Righteous are Christians from all denominations and churches; Muslims and agnostics; men and women of all ages. They come from all walks of life: highly educated people as well as illiterate peasants, public figures as well as people from society's margins, city dwellers and farmers from the remotest corners of Europe. They were university professors, teachers, physicians, clergy, nuns, diplomats, simple workers, servants, resistance fighters, policemen, peasants, fishermen, a zoo director, a circus owner, and many more.

Scholars have attempted to identify the motivations and shared characteristics of these Righteous. Some claim that their only common denominator is the humanity and courage they displayed by standing up for their moral principles. Others claim that the Righteous exhibit shared traits such as empathy, acceptance of others, and non-conformity.

One historian studied Dutch rescuers and found three common elements:<sup>2</sup> (1) They had a role model in their childhood who went out of their way to help or include others; (2) They were independent thinkers who could make their own choices and even go against popular opinion; and (3) They did not overthink their choices, which enabled them to act with confidence. Rather than seeing Jewishness in the people they helped, they saw human beings who might die without their support.

When asked, almost all rescuers responded that they did not think of themselves as special or as heroes. Many explained themselves saying to the effect: "What I have done is what I should have done."

## HOW DID THE RIGHTEOUS HELP JEWISH PEOPLE?

### HIDING JEWS IN THE RESCUERS' HOMES OR ON THEIR PROPERTY

Some Jews were saved when they were hidden by non-Jews in and around their homes. Hiding places included attics, cellars, barns, underground bunkers, forest shelters, cemeteries, and even dog houses – anyplace where they could be kept out of sight. Hideouts were often dark, cold, airless, and crowded. In addition to the threat of death that hung over them, these conditions often made life unbearable for Jewish people in hiding.

Hiding Jews in towns, cities, and on farms required extreme caution. Because of food rationing, feeding extra people was not only difficult, but dangerous. Obtaining food beyond the normal ration was highly suspicious. Getting medical care for sick people also involved many risks. Anything that looked questionable could lead to neighbors reporting to the authorities and the discovery of hiding places and their inhabitants. Yet despite the perils, many rescuers acted with boldness.

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 André Trocmé, sheltered several thousand

Jews. When the local French authorities demanded that the pastor halt his activities, his response was clear-cut: “... I do not know what a Jew is. I know only human beings.”

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, Wiktoria, and their six children in the town of Markowa, Poland. In 1942, during a period when Jews in the area were actively being hunted by the Nazis, the couple agreed to shelter members of two Jewish families. During the night of March 23/24, 1944, German police discovered the Jews who were hiding and shot them to death. Afterwards they murdered the entire Ulma family: Jozef; Wiktoria, who was seven months pregnant; and their six small children— Stanislaw, Barbara, Wladyslawa, Franciszka, Maria, and Antoni. The eldest of the Ulma children had just begun to attend classes in primary school. The fear brought about by the execution of the Ulmas led a number of other non-Jews nearby to murder Jews who they were hiding themselves.

**Bekanntmachung**  
Beit - Todesstrafe für unbefugtes Verlassen der jüdischen Wohnbezirke.

In der letzten Zeit ist durch Juden, die die ihnen zugewiesenen Wohnbezirke verlassen haben, in zahlreichen Fällen nachweislich das Fleckfieber verbreitet worden. Um die Mordart der Bevölkerung des hiesigen Gebiets abzuwenden, hat der Herr Generalgouverneur verordnet, dass in Zukunft ein Jude, der den ihm zugewiesenen Wohnbezirk unbefugt verlässt, mit dem Tode bestraft wird.

Die gleiche Strafe trifft diejenigen, die diesen Juden sämtlich Unterschlupf gewähren oder in anderer Weise (z. B. durch Gewährung von Nachfragen, Versteigerung, Mithilfe auf Fahrzeugen aller Art usw.) den Juden beistehen.

Die Aburteilung erfolgt durch das Sondergericht Warschau.

Ich weise die gesamte Bevölkerung des Distrikts Warschau auf diese neue gesetzliche Regelung ausdrücklich hin, da namentlich mit erheblicher Strenge vorgegangen wird.

Warschau, am 10. November 1941.

ges. **Dr. FISCHER**  
Gouverneur

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**Obwieszczenie**  
Dotyczy kary śmierci za nieuprawnione opuszczenie żydowskich dzielnic mieszkaniowych.

W ostatnim czasie rozpostrzmił tyfus, który opuszcili wyszczepione im dzielnic mieszkaniowe, w licznych niedoświadczonych wypadkach tyfus planisty. Aby zapobiec przysomiu w ten sposób niebezpiecznemu dla ludności, rozporządzał Generalny Gubernator, iż tyfus, który w przyszłości opuszcza nieuprawniony wyszczepione na dzielnic mieszkaniowe, będzie karany śmiercią.

Tę samą karę podlega ten, kto takim tyfusz odciela jednemu schronieniu lub im w inny sposób pomaga (np. przez udzielenie nocnego, utrzymania, przez zabranie na pojazdy wszelkiego rodzaju itp.).

Opuszczenie nastąpi przez Sąd Specjalny w Warszawie.

Zwracam całej ludności Okręgu Warszawskiego wyrażenie uwagi na to nowe postanowienie ustawowe, ponieważ od tej chwili będzie stosowana bezlitosna surowość.

Warszawa, dnia 10 listopada 1941.

(-) **Dr. FISCHER**  
Gubernator

**A 1941 Nazi flyer (in German and Polish) that threatened the death penalty for Jews found outside the ghetto in Warsaw, Poland and for Poles who offered any assistance to Jewish people<sup>3</sup>**

**Announcement**  
Regarding: [Death penalty for illegally leaving the Jewish residential district.](#)

Recently, in many documented instances, Jews, who have left the residential districts designated for them, have spread typhus\*. To safeguard the population against this dangerous threat, the General Governor has ordered that any Jew, who in the future illegally leaves the residential district designated for him, will be punished by death.

The same punishment will apply to whoever consciously shelters Jews mentioned above or in any other way assists them (for instance, by providing overnight accommodation, or sustenance, by giving a ride in any kind of vehicle, etc.)

The sentence will be imposed by the Special Court in Warsaw.

I explicitly draw the attention of the whole population of the Warsaw District to this new regulation since henceforth it will be applied with merciless severity.

Warsaw, 10 November 1941

Dr. Fischer, Governor

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*\*Notice how propaganda about Jews as spreaders of disease is used to justify the Nazi order.*

## PROVIDING FALSE PAPERS AND FALSE IDENTITIES

Many Jews survived by pretending to be Christians. To do this, they needed false papers and help establishing an assumed identity. Rescuers in these cases were officials who produced false papers, clergy who faked baptism certificates, and others who forged documents. Some were diplomats who issued thousands of visas and letters of protection. These documents allowed Jews to immigrate to other countries or enjoy diplomatic protection until immigration became possible. Often this was done against the instructions of their country's government, putting many diplomats in extreme danger. Among the most famous of these rescuers were Raoul Wallenberg from Sweden, Chiune (Sempo) Sugihara from Japan, and Aristides de Sousa Mendes from Portugal. Hundreds of thousands of people alive today are the descendants of those who received travel visas from these brave diplomats.

After Germany invaded France in 1940, many important anti-Nazi refugees were in danger of being arrested. The American journalist, Varian Fry, was sent by a relief organization to help them. Fry and his network forged documents, used black market funds, and created secret escape routes. Some of the famous people he helped include the artists Marc Chagall and political scientist Hannah Arendt. In September 1941, Fry was expelled from France because his activities angered both the U.S. and the Vichy government (the collaborationist regime in Nazi-occupied France).

## RESCUING CHILDREN

Before and during the war, some parents made the agonizing decision to separate from their children in the hope of increasing their chances of survival. The Kindertransport program allowed for the passage of about 10,000 children from Germany, Austria, and

Poland to Great Britain, where they were placed with foster families and in other settings. No adults were permitted to accompany the child refugees.

Some parents gave their children to Christian families, who agreed to care for them, and even to adopt and raise them as their own. These Jewish children had to protect their secret by attending church and taking on the lifestyle of their new families. After the war, some children were reunited with surviving family members. Others were found by Jewish organizations and returned to Jewish communities. Some hidden children were never found and remained with their rescuers as Christians. Some were too young to remember their birth families and never learned their true identity or only learned it as adults.

Many children were left alone after their parents were killed. Some of these children were taken in by families or convents. Sometimes an individual decided to take in an orphaned child. In other cases, there were underground organizations that found new homes for children. They raised money for travel, food, and medication, and made sure the children were well cared for.

One of these organizations, Zegota, cared for Jews in occupied Poland who were trying to survive in hiding. The group found safe hiding places for many Jewish children in safe houses, orphanages, and convents. Irena Sendler (whose underground name was "Jolanta") was a social worker and activist with Zegota. She got a permit to enter the Warsaw ghetto by claiming she would inspect the health conditions there. Once inside, Sendler made contact with Jewish organizations and helped them with their work. She smuggled Jews out of the ghetto and set up hiding places for them. After the ghetto was destroyed, Sendler used her connections with orphanages and institutes for abandoned children to find shelter for

### FAMOUS DIPLOMATS TO RESCUE JEWS

Left to Right:  
Raoul Wallenberg;  
Chiune (Sempo)  
Sugihara;  
Aristides de Sousa  
Mendes



Jewish children. She told them these children were Christian and made sure to keep records of their true identity. In this way, Sendler risked her own life to rescue hundreds of Jewish children.

### OTHER FORMS OF HELP

Some rescuers helped Jews get out of zones of special danger and escape to less dangerous locations. They smuggled Jews out of ghettos and prisons and helped them cross borders. Jewish refugees fled to countries unoccupied by the Nazis or into areas where the persecution was less intense – for example to neutral Switzerland, into Italian controlled areas where there were no deportations, or to Hungary before the German occupation in March 1944.

A select group of non-Jews called attention to Nazi persecution rather than providing direct aid to Jewish people. Jan Karski was a member of the Polish underground. He met with Jewish leaders in the Warsaw ghetto and visited the Izbica ghetto in Poland. He then reported on the experiences of Jews there to Allied leaders, including President Franklin D. Roosevelt. His report did not lead to direct action. However, it was important in changing attitudes in the Western world and contributed to rescue activities that took place toward the end of the war.

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.”

The rescuers profiled here represent the select few – among the hundreds of millions living under Nazi domination – who took profound risks to rescue Jews. The light of their deeds shines forth through the overwhelming darkness of the war years.

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### SOURCES

1. Elie Wiesel, in Carol Rittner and Sandra Meyers, *Courage to Care - Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust* (New York University Press, 1986), 2.
2. Klempner, M. 2006. *The Heart Has Reasons: Holocaust Rescuers and Their Stories of Courage*. The Pilgrims Press.
3. Archives of Institute of National Remembrance (IPN), Warsaw, “Death penalty for Jews outside ghetto and for Poles helping Jews anyway,” 1941, <https://bit.ly/2QAxr05>.