

Holocaust Remembrance

An estimated nine million people were killed during the Holocaust. Of that, six million were Jews. Nearly a quarter of a million gypsies were killed. The remaining victims were homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Communists, the mentally disabled and other minority groups. In the period before the war began, discrimination against Jews was rampant, German towns would vie with each other in expelling Jews, some hanging banners reading "Jews are not wanted here" Other towns banished Jews to second class citizenship going as far as segregating park benches as for Jews only.

Approximately 20,757 people have been named "Righteous Among Nations"; by the Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust Memorial. This number of heroes actually is an underestimate of the number of people who helped. To be considered "righteous" Yad Vashem requires an honoree to have put his/her life in significant danger to save Jews. Below are profiles of those who helped saved Jews and others targeted for death.

Zivilcourage -- The Courage of Conscience

Despite the irony of the situation, some of the Holocaust rescuers were actually German soldiers and officers. Anton Schmid was a German soldier who refused to participate in human rights abuses in the Vilnius ghetto. A sergeant in the German army, Schmid was executed by the Nazis in 1942 after he disobeyed orders and helped Jews in the ghetto. Along with Schmid, Major Karl Plagge sheltered about 1,200 Jews, giving them jobs in a repair facility for German Army vehicles. Plagge told his superiors that keeping families together would boost the workers' motivation. Plagge and his workers survived the war.

The Morning Star

Vasilis Perseidis (Avgerinos, "the Morning Star") was a Greek lawyer turned soldier in the Greek resistance movement during WWII. After having fought as a soldier, he took on a new job in the resistance; between 1943 and 1944, his primary job was to help hide and house Jews traveling north from Athens as they waited to escape across the Aegean Sea to Turkey. He and his compatriots would scrounge for food for the refugees and persuade villagers to hid Jews. More than 65,000 Jews were killed in occupied Greece during the war but the resistance helped 1,500 or more to escape. He was arrested and tortured for his work with the resistance. He survived the war.

Frank Foley

Frank Foley, a former MI6 British agent, was head of the passport and visa section of the British embassy in Berlin when Hitler rose to power. Disregarding regulations, he issued thousands of visas to Jews for them to escape. He is credited with having saved 10,000 Jews.

Sir Nicholas Winton

Nicholas Winton, then 29 in 1939, smuggled 669 boys and girls out of Czechoslovakia. The children were destined for Nazi concentration camps. Winton persuaded British families to put up money then care for the children until they were 17. Winton was knighted at age 93 in March 2003.

Aimee Stitelmann

When Switzerland closed its borders in 1942, Aimee Stitelmann, then only 16, began smuggling Jewish children over the border from France. She rescued 15 Jewish children, many of whom had parents to die in concentration camps. She led them across the fields at night or she took the

train and hid the children under the seats or under coats. Aimee Stitelmann was imprisoned for 15 days for breaking Swiss immigration laws. It would be 60 years before the Swiss government would pardon her for helping Jews get into Switzerland. After her conviction and imprisonment, the Swiss regarded her as a convicted criminal, and for four decades they monitored her activities including her phone calls.

Chiune Sugihara

Chiune Sugihara was a Japanese diplomat stationed in Lithuania. He requested permission from the Japanese authorities to grant visas and was denied four times. He was a career diplomat in the Japanese society for which disobedience often was a disgrace that could be absolved only by death. Discussing the ramifications with his wife and children, he made his decision. For 29 days, the summer of 1940, Mr. and Mrs. Sugihara sat for endless hours writing and signing visas by hand. They wrote up to 300 visas a day, normally a month's worth of work for the consul. His wife, Yukiko, helped him register the visas. At the end of the day, she would massage his fatigued hands. Jan Zwartendijk, the acting Dutch consul, helped with getting permission to stamp their passports with entrance permits. In the end, thousands of Lithuanian and Polish Jews escaped. They were able to emigrate to China and live. Sugihara also lived but his career in the diplomatic service was over. (based on wikiencyclopedia website's profile)

Aristides de Sousa Mendes

Aristides de Sousa Mendes, a Portuguese diplomat, began issuing visas to Jews. De Sousa Mendes drove to the border town of Hendaye and there, in the streets, handed out hundreds of visas, scraps of paper, stamped with his official seal and his signature. The scraps of paper were honored at the Spanish border and allowed the refugees to enter Spain en route to Portugal for asylum. In June 1940, the Portuguese ambassador arrived and declared the visas null and void. De Sousa Mendes made one last journey to the border area to help refugees then he was recalled to Portugal. He died in poverty after the war.

Nanking Datusha (Great Nanking Massacre)

The atrocities of WWII were not limited to the Germans. Another Holocaust took place at the hands of the Japanese. The Japanese engaged in genocide in Korea, the Philippines and China. Instead of gas chambers, Japanese soldiers routinely bayoneted babies and shot dead villages. In Nanking, babies were thrown into vats of boiling water. In the four years before Pearl Harbor, the Japanese Imperial Army killed an estimated 350,000 people, hacking many of them apart. An estimated 80,000 Chinese women and children were raped and their genitals mutilated. Compounding the tragedy, Japanese soldiers would take souvenir pictures of the rapes and murders. John Rabe was an unexpected savior of the Chinese people. Rabe was an ardent Nazi supporter living in China. In late 1937 Rabe headed the international committee that negotiated the Nanking Safety Zone, a neutral area of the city where foreigners and Chinese civilians would be safe. Rabe protested in vain as the Japanese occupation turned brutal. He saved thousands of Chinese by sheltering them in the safety zone. Rabe wrote to Hitler asking him to stop the killing and Rabe was recalled to Germany in February 1938. He was arrested by the Gestapo after he continued to publicize the Japanese atrocities. He survived the war and died in 1950.