

IDENTITY AND RESCUE

GOAL

To introduce students to the topic of rescue during the Holocaust and the actions of several individuals who helped Jews at the darkest of times. Students will begin to understand the history of the Holocaust as an event in which choices exercised by individuals – choices to act or not to act – had had a momentous impact on many lives.

CHARTING IDENTITY: A PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY

After reading Rescue During the Holocaust: Student Reading (p. 4), students work independently or in small groups to consider the relationship between individual identity and moral decision-making.

HERO IDENTITY CHART

Create an identity chart for somebody you consider to be a hero. Include biographical informal, personality traits, strengths, weaknesses, motivations etc.

Record your answers to the following:

- » What is a hero?
- » What action did your hero take?
- » What motivated your hero to act?
- » What obstacles did your hero face?



Oskar Schindler standing with some of the people he rescued. Munich, Germany, 1946.

HOLOCAUST RESCUER IDENTITY CHART

Create an identity chart for one of the individuals found in the Rescuer Profiles: Student Reading (p. 5-7).

Record your answers to the following:

- » What action did the rescuer take?
- » What motivated the rescuer to act?
- » What obstacles did the rescuer face?
- » What choices did they have? Try to think of at least three courses of action open to the rescuer.

CLASS DISCUSSION

Share your findings with the class and discuss:

- » Do the Holocaust rescuers share common identity traits?
- » How do the Holocaust rescuers compare to your ideal heroes?
- » What do you think motivates some people to help others?
- » What prevents others from doing so?
- » Do you think these values are innate or learned?

VICTIMS, PERPETRATORS, BYSTANDERS AND RESCUERS

Define the following terms: *victim*, *perpetrator*, *bystander* and *rescuer*.

Identify an example of each term from: 1) the Holocaust and 2) your life or community.

Identify a historical or contemporary situation where an individual moved from a bystander role to become a perpetrator.

Identify a historical or contemporary situation where an individual moved from a bystander role to become a rescuer.

What could cause an individual to move from one part of the spectrum to another?

WITNESSING DISCRIMINATION: STUDENT ESSAY

Pre-visit: Write a short essay reflecting on the following prompt:

Think about a time when you witnessed the unjust, biased or prejudiced treatment of another person. Describe the event and the circumstances related to it. How did the event affect the person targeted by the injustice? How did it affect the person responsible for the injustice? How did it affect you or other witnesses?

Post-visit: Following your visit to the VHEC, review, discuss and/or rewrite your essay, identifying the roles of those involved and the steps that could have been taken to prevent the unjust occurrence.



A German policeman checks identification of Jews in the Kraków ghetto

REENA VIRK CASE STUDY: POST-VISIT DISCUSSION

In 1997, fourteen-year-old Reena Virk was bullied and beaten to death in Saanich, British Columbia. Two sixteen-year-olds were convicted of murder, and other teenagers were charged in the assault. Several other students were bystanders. Although, not directly involved in Reena's death, they were aware of the ongoing intimidation and bullying and did nothing.

For additional information visit: <http://cbc.ca/insidecbc/newsinreview/may2000/Reena/>

Discuss:

- » Who shares responsibility for the death of Reena Virk?
- » What could the bystanders have done to prevent the tragedy?
- » Consider incidents of bullying that have occurred in your school or community. What do these incidents have in common?
- » What can students do to move from a position of bystander to one who helps in a safe and realistic manner?

Write or debate about the following statement:

Bystanders are as responsible as perpetrators for the harm done to victims of injustice.

RESCUE DURING THE HOLOCAUST: STUDENT READING

The act of rescue was rare during the Holocaust. Less than one-half of one percent of those under Nazi occupation helped Jews. Why some people chose to help while others remained indifferent in the face of Nazi efforts to exterminate European Jewry challenges our most basic assumptions about human nature. Those who helped were not saints, but rather ordinary people capable of making ethical decisions and acting on them at a critical moment in time.

The obstacles to rescue were many. Fear was pervasive in most of the countries under Nazi domination. In Poland, the Nazis made it very clear that death was the punishment for any Gentile (non-Jew) who assisted Jews. To help a Jew meant risking the lives of one's family, neighbours and fellow townspeople – a daunting prospect for the most heroic of individuals. Historical anti-Semitism (hatred of Jews), deeply rooted in Western culture, also played an important role in discouraging sympathy for the Jews.

Those that have studied rescue during the Holocaust have not been able to identify traits shared by helpers or rescuers. Nechama Tec has characterized rescuers as having had a high level of individuality and a commitment to helping the needy. Samuel and Pearl Oliner have suggested that rescuers were more likely to have had close family relationships and a caring, non-authoritarian upbringing. Altruism – unselfish regard for the welfare of others – does not appear to be linked to factors such as age, sex, class, education or religion.

Although the term “rescuer” and “helper” are often used interchangeably, in reality, only a few people were in a position to successfully rescue Jews. Most could at best only help. They helped by hiding Jews, falsifying documents and securing food and clothing. Yet, despite the helpers most valiant efforts, betrayal by suspicious or fearful neighbours was a constant threat.

Smuggling Jews into neutral countries generally required the concerted efforts of organized groups, or even a nation as in the case of Denmark. Some helpers joined resistance groups or other underground organizations, but many acted independently. Some individuals, such as Oskar Schindler, are well known but most are known only to the individuals they rescued.

Churches and foreign diplomats were often permitted relative independence by the Nazis, putting them in the best position to help. As a result, many Jews were issued life saving visas and other safe passes or found asylum in churches, convents and orphanages. Geography, political climate and other external factors also played a role in the act of rescue. Jews found refuge more readily in the more sympathetic countries of Belgium, Denmark and Italy than in Poland, where the death penalty for helping a Jew was more severely enforced by the Nazis.

It appears that most individuals did not seek out opportunities to rescue but responded when faced with desperate need or a direct request for help. Some rescuers may have been motivated by friendship with Jews, some by financial gain and others simply by moral or religious conviction.

Most who helped are reluctant to acknowledge that what they did was in any way extraordinary or heroic. It is common for rescuers to assert that they only did what they had to, that it was their duty and that they simply could not have acted otherwise.

People's actions during the Holocaust challenge us to think about the responsibility of individuals, groups and nations today. The stories of rescue tell us something about the nature of human response during moral crisis and provide evidence that opportunities to fight injustice did and can exist.

- Adapted from by “The Role of Rescuers” in *Diplomat Rescuers and the Story of Feng Shan Ho*, produced by the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre in partnership with Visas For Life: The Righteous Diplomats and Manli Ho.

RESCUER PROFILES: STUDENT READING

I. OSKAR SCHINDLER

Oskar Schindler, a Catholic German living in Czechoslovakia, joined the Nazi party in 1939. Following the German invasion of Poland, Schindler moved to Kraków and took over the operation of two formerly Jewish-owned enamelware factories. Through army contracts and the exploitation of cheap Jewish labour from the Kraków ghetto, he amassed a fortune. In 1942 and early 1943, the Germans began to kill and deport the ghetto's population. Several thousand Jews who survived the ghetto's liquidation were taken to Plaszów, a forced labour camp run by the sadistic SS commandant Amon Göth. Moved by the cruelties he witnessed, Schindler arranged to transfer his Jewish workers to barracks at his factory, away from the brutality of the main camp. In late summer 1944, through negotiations and bribes from his war profits, Schindler secured permission to move his workers and other endangered Jews to Brännlitz, near his hometown of Zwittau in Czechoslovakia. Each of these Jews was placed on "Schindler's list." Schindler and his workforce set up a phoney munitions factory, which sustained them in relative safety until the war ended.



USHMM

2. MIEP GIES

Miep Gies was born in 1909 in Vienna, Austria to a poor Christian family. In the 1930s she was employed by Otto Frank and often would speak of how strongly she disagreed with Nazi policy. When the Nazis invaded Amsterdam, Otto enlisted the help of four of his employees, including Miep Gies, to hide his family in an annex of one of his businesses. For two years, these protectors were the Frank family's only source of support, bringing them food and news. While in hiding, Otto's daughter, Anne Frank, kept a diary. In August 1944, the hidden family was betrayed by an anonymous phone call to the Nazis. After they were taken away, Gies went back to the annex and found Anne's diary, which she saved in the hope of returning it to the family after the war. Of all those hiding in the annex, only Otto survived.



www.annefrank.org

3. CHIUNE SUGIHARA

Chiune Sugihara was born in January 1900 to a Japanese Samurai family who instilled in him a strict code of ethics, including values of love for family and children, internal strength and resourcefulness. Three weeks before all the consulates in Kovno, Lithuania were to be closed down in August 1940, Jewish representatives approached Chiune Sugihara, the Japanese consul general, for help in obtaining Japanese transit visas. Though the Japanese government rejected the proposal, Sugihara decided to grant visas to Jewish refugees at the risk of his own career and personal safety. During the weeks before he was scheduled to leave, he issued at least sixteen hundred visas to Jews. Some of those rescued by Sugihara eventually moved to Vancouver.



www.25.0038.net/~sempo/

4. RAOUL WALLENBERG

Raoul Wallenberg was the son of a noted Swedish family who studied law in France and architecture and engineering in the United States. He met Jewish refugees while working in Palestine and his business partner was a Hungarian Jew whose family was stranded in Nazi-occupied Hungary. In the spring of 1944, Nazis began the deportation of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz. The Swedish Foreign Ministry, with the support of the American War Refugee Board sent Wallenberg to Budapest to help protect those Jews that remained. Wallenberg issued several hundred Swedish passports to Hungarian Jews and established Swedish “safe houses” where Jews could seek refuge in Hungary. His language skills and self-assured manner enabled him to remove persons from trains destined for Auschwitz. Wallenberg was later arrested by the Soviets on suspicions of being a spy and disappeared in a Soviet prison. Wallenberg is honoured as one of the Righteous Among the Nations, and Canada has named Wallenberg an honorary citizen in recognition of his actions during the Holocaust.



<http://www.judiska-museet.se>

5. VILLAGE OF LE CHAMBON-SUR-LIGNON

Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, a village in the mountains of south-central France, was the home of Protestants who had suffered persecution as a religious minority in Catholic France. The village's residents empathized with Jews as the people of the Old Testament and, under the leadership of their pastor and his wife, André and Magda Trocmé, felt it was their duty to help their "neighbours" in need. Five thousand persecuted Jews found refuge in Le Chambon, even though hiding Jews was punishable by death. The town's people hid Jews in their homes for up to four years providing them with forged identification and ration cards and helped them escape to safety in Switzerland. According to Magda Trocmé, "None of us thought we were heroes, we were just people trying to do our best."



Children saved by residents of Le Chambon.

6. LEOPOLD SOCHA

Leopold Socha was a petty criminal and a sewer worker in Lvov, Poland when he discovered a group of Jews hiding in the rat-infested tunnels of the sewer in the summer of 1943. They had fled there as the Nazis murdered the last Jews of the Lvov ghetto. The Jewish men, women and children could not leave the sewer and had no way of obtaining food, water, clothing etc, and one of the women was pregnant. Socha knew that helping Jews was punishable by death and that if he betrayed the victims' whereabouts the Nazis would reward him. The Jews spent 14 months in the sewer and Socha brought them food everyday. Although the Jews did pay him, the amount did not even cover the cost of providing food and clothing. He also brought them a Jewish prayer book and Sabbath candle sticks from the remnants of the destroyed Jewish community of Lvov.



The Saviors of Lvov, by Robert Marshall,
courtesy Dr. Kristine Keren