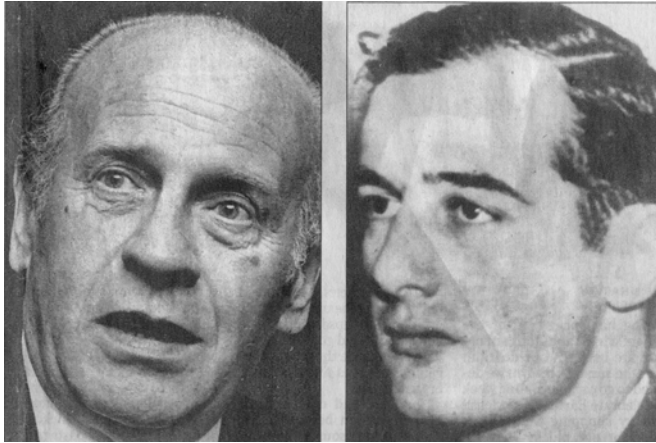


Gentiles who rescued Jews honoured as 'Righteous'

During the Nazi era, they risked their own lives
'Basic humanity and decency motivated them'

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Businessman Oskar Schindler, left, and Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg have become famous through books and films, but other non-Jews who saved Jews remained anonymous long after WW II.

From 1941 to 1944, Josef Balyk sheltered and fed three Jews in a small shed on his farm in Nazi-controlled Romanivka, Ukraine, now part of Poland.

Expressing daily reassurance with some humour — "He would sing he was coming with potatoes," says Betty Kagen, now living in Nassau County, N.Y. — Balyk would deliver the potatoes as promised, always with a smile on his face.

Kagen was only 2 when — fleeing Velyki Birky, a Jewish ghetto — she first met the Christian man and his extended family who rescued her and her parents.

In 1995, the Balyks were officially designated as "Righteous Among the Nations," a title given to gentiles who risked their lives to protect Jews during the Nazi era, when it was a capital offence to help a Jew.

On Monday, Holocaust Memorial Day, Kagen will remember the singing farmer who prevented her family from being among the estimated 6 million Jews and 5 million non-Jews killed in the Holocaust.

"It is important for us to acknowledge these persons, to show that in spite of the Nazis, it was possible to maintain the human dignity, the moral principles upon which civilization is built," says Mordecai Paldiel, head of the Department for the Righteous at Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority.

"There were thousands and thousands of people from all walks of life who stood up to this moral challenge and helped others to survive."

Since the project was initiated in 1963, 21,310 people from dozens of countries have been recognized as the Righteous. Honours have been given every year, with the largest single group of rescuers coming from Poland.

In the Jewish tradition, it is believed if someone saves a single life, it is as if he saved an entire world. To be designated a Righteous Gentile by Yad Vashem, one must have sheltered Jews, provided false identities or arranged escape to safe havens.

There are no precise figures on the number of Jews saved by non-Jews, or on the rescuers. Some of the Righteous have become famous through books and films, such as Oskar Schindler, Chiune-Sempo Sugihara and Raoul Wallenberg. Others remained anonymous long after the war.

"Most of the rescuers were able to keep their rescue secret, for the sake of the Jew they were hiding and for their own sake," Paldiel says.

It is also believed that many are unknown because their efforts to save Jews failed.

"Basic humanity and decency motivated them to risk their own lives to save someone else's life, to defy the Nazi annihilation of other human beings — not only the Jews, but also gypsies, homosexuals," says Nechama Ariel of Brooklyn, N.Y.

Jews believe if someone saves a single life, it is as if he saved an entire world

She and her mother Rukhtsa Singer were hidden by two teenage brothers, Nikolai and Mikhail Vavrisevich, in Vladimir -Volynsk, a Ukrainian town captured by the Nazis in 1941 when they invaded the Soviet Union. "They believed strongly in God, and they believed strongly that that God helped them to do a good deed," Ariel says.

What many rescuers have in common is modesty. Guido de Gorgey seemed reticent when asked about his rescue of a Jewish girl in Budapest.

"During the German occupation of Hungary, I did what I felt that every normal person should do," he says.

A lieutenant in the Hungarian army when the Germans occupied Hungary in March 1944, de Gorgey hid Ann Stricker, 15. He found a place for her in the capital, then moved her to western Hungary. When the Russians approached, de Gorgey moved her into a convent in Budapest before he, a member of the underground resistance, was forced into hiding.

He was surprised and proud to be recognized by Yad Vashem. "It means a lot to me," says de Gorgey, who lives in Staten Island, a borough of New York City. But, he adds: "You just do what you should do. Frankly, I didn't think I would be honoured."

Those recognized as the Righteous are awarded a specially minted medal, and their names are inscribed on the Wall of Honor in the Garden of the Righteous at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, a philanthropic organization in New York, provides financial assistance to nearly 1,500 needy Righteous Gentiles in 30 countries.

Some designations had to overcome uncomfortable hurdles. This was the case of Hans von Dohnanyi, who was a member of the Abwehr, the German military intelligence organization. In 1942, von Dohnanyi orchestrated the rescue of 14 Jews, sending them to Switzerland under the guise of German "spies."

The Swiss would not permit entry of Jews without funds for their maintenance. When von Dohnanyi, who already was suspected of anti-Reich activity, transferred Nazi funds for the Jews to a Swiss bank, he was charged with foreign-currency violations.

In one of the Nazis' final purges of the German resistance, he was executed in April 1945.

Von Dohnanyi was recognized by Yad Vashem in 2003.

"This could have been done 20 years earlier," says his son Klaus von Dohnanyi, the former mayor of Hamburg, adding that Yad Vashem hesitated to honour him because of his position in the Reich.

Although the delay grates, Klaus von Dohnanyi says he understands the hesitation. The recognition, he says, is important for his family. "It is a way of remembering his person, his life, at a very valuable place."

In Israel, a committee composed primarily of Holocaust survivors and headed by an Israeli Supreme Court judge evaluates nominations for the recognition, using survivor and witness testimony and, when possible, official evidence, such as German court records for those prosecuted for aiding Jews.

The committee reviews the circumstances of the rescue, the risks faced by the rescuer, and verifies that the rescuer did not demand compensation. The title can be given posthumously.

Although it is more than six decades since the end of World War II, more than 500 people a year are still being designated as the Righteous, based primarily on the testimony of Jews who were rescued as children, says Paldiel, whose own family was rescued in 1943 by a French parish priest, Rev. Simon Gallay.

"These are people who acted in the best tradition of humanity," Paldiel says. "They should serve as role models to show others that the individual person, unarmed, without weapons, can still make an important decision of great significance."