



## Righteous among the Nations

Official title given to non-Jews who risked their lives in order to rescue Jews during the Holocaust. The name comes from a Talmudic phrase: "The righteous among the nations of the world have a place in the world to come."

In 1953, Israel's parliament passed the "Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance (Yad Vashem) Law", giving Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, the responsibility to establish awards and a memorial for those "Righteous Among the Nations who risked their lives to save Jews." Since the early 1960s, a Commission for the Designation of the Righteous has worked under the Yad Vashem Remembrance Authority. This committee is in charge of bestowing the "Righteous among the Nations" title. In its early years of existence, the committee was chaired by Moshe Landau, who later became the president of Israel's Supreme Court.

When the name of a rescuer is submitted for recognition, the committee carefully investigates evidence of the rescuer's actions and motivations. The survivor or group of survivors involved must testify as to the rescuer's deeds, and the committee gathers corroborative documentation from European historical institutions regarding the course of events in question. The original law itself did not specify an exact definition of the term "Righteous among the Nations." As it has been used throughout Jewish history, the title refers to a moral person who offers empathy, compassion and aid to Jews, in times of trouble and persecution. However, with regard to the Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Law, it is clear that a person had to have been extraordinary to receive the official title, "Righteous among the Nations." Thus, the committee attempts to determine the candidate's motivations for rescuing Jews, and asks questions such as: Was the rescuer given money to help Jews? What sorts of risks and dangers did the rescuer face? Did the rescuer's motivations include friendship, religious belief, etc.? In general, to qualify for the title, a person had to have risked his or her life, safety, or personal freedom to rescue a Jew from deportation without asking for money in exchange.



In some cases, the issue of "risk" or "danger" is difficult for the committee, as there were rescuers who had diplomatic immunity from persecution in the countries where they were working, and thus did not put themselves in actual life-threatening situations. For example, Aristides de Sousa Mendes, the Portuguese consul in France who gave Jews entry visas to his country; Sempo Sugihara, the Japanese consul in Kovno who did the same; and Paul Gruninger, the Swiss police captain on the Austrian border who let hundreds of Jewish refugees enter Switzerland - all disobeyed the official instructions of their respective governments, in order to save Jewish lives. However, they also all had a special diplomatic status removing grave danger. Even so, they did lose jobs or reputations and suffered due to their humane activities, and thus the committee chose to honor them. Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who saved tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews, also had diplomatic immunity, but that did not keep him from being arrested by the Soviets after the liberation of Budapest.

In many cases, it was not diplomats, but "ordinary people" who saved Jewish lives during the Holocaust. People who chose, against all odds, to hide one or more Jewish people in their homes or yards. Often, the rescuer would build a bunker for the victim, who would stay there for weeks, months, or years, hardly seeing the sunlight. Food was very scarce during the war, and the rescuer would share the few pieces of bread he/she had with the Jews he/she was hiding from the Nazis.

There are also cases where groups of people, rather than individuals, rescued Jews. In the Netherlands, Norway, Belgium and France, underground resistance groups helped Jews, largely by finding them hiding places. One very special group of people lived in the small Dutch village of Nieuwlande. In 1942 and 1943, the villagers decided collectively that every household would conceal one Jewish family or individual. All 117 inhabitants of Nieuwlande were designated as "Righteous among the Nations." Another instance of a group of rescuers was in the French village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon. The village's pastor, Andre Trocme, prevailed upon the members of his community to provide hiding places and assistance for Jews running from the Nazis. In



Denmark, ordinary Danes transported 7,200 of the country's 8,000 Jews to Sweden in a daring fishing boat operation.

Some other famous cases of rescue by Europeans during the Holocaust are those of Oskar Schindler, the German businessman who rescued over a thousand Jews from the Plaszow camp, by employing them in his factory and Miep Gies, the gentilen-Jewish lady who helped the family of Anne Frank while they hid in the "secret annex."

The number of Jews saved by non-Jews during the Holocaust is not clear. Some Jewish people assisted by a non-Jew died later during the war and thus no one remains to give testimony or even submit the rescuer's name to the committee. Sometimes, the rescuer himself/herself died along with those Jews they attempted to save. In other cases, rescuers chose to remain anonymous even after the war. Just having done what their consciences told them was the right thing to do, while millions of other Europeans stood by and did nothing. By the year 2000, over 17,000 men and women had received the honor and title. Until the mid 1990s many "Righteous among the Nations" planted trees around Yad Vashem to commemorate their acts. In 1996, a special memorial garden was founded including the names of all the recipients of the award and to which recipients' names are added as the people are accorded recognition.

The many instances of rescue by the "Righteous among the Nations", show that rescue was indeed possible, despite the dangerous circumstances. The recipients of the title not only saved Jewish lives, they also helped restore our faith in humanity.