

## Rescue of Children

Efforts to rescue Jewish children who were living in areas under Nazi domination. Soon after Adolf Hitler and the Nazis came to power in early 1933, they began persecuting the Jews of Germany. During the late 1930s the Nazis took control of several new territories, including Bohemia and Moravia and Austria; the Jews in those areas were also subjected to severe anti-Jewish measures. In response, great efforts were made to help get Jewish children out of Europe even before World War II broke out in the fall of 1939.

Most of the children's rescue operations were conducted by Jewish groups. One of the earliest rescue efforts was Youth Aliya, a program that took children out of Europe and brought them to Palestine. Youth Aliya, which was launched in 1932 by Recha Freier, the wife of a Berlin rabbi, was later taken over by the Jewish Agency. Before the war broke out, Youth Aliya succeeded in helping more than 5,000 Jewish children make it to Palestine. Youth Aliya continued its efforts throughout the war, as well: more than 9,000 children reached Palestine in spite of the British Mandatory immigration restrictions, while another 15,000 were sent to Western European countries, most notably via the *Kindertransport* to Great Britain.

Other Jewish groups also facilitated the rescue of Jewish children in the pre-war years. One example was the German Children's Jewish Aid. This group, which was set up in 1934 in New York, succeeded in bringing several hundred children into the United States, despite the US government's strict immigration regulations.

After the war broke out in Eastern Europe, many parents were desperate to save their children from Nazi persecution. Often, these parents made plans to save their children on an individual, informal basis, smuggling them out of the ghetto and hiding them with non-Jews who promised to take care of the children until the war's end. Of course, leaving their children with strangers was probably one of the hardest things Jewish parents were forced to do. Besides the misery of being separated from their children and feeling uncertain about their fate, the parents feared that their children might be

raised as Christians, abandoned, or even worse-turned over to the Nazis by fake rescuers. However, in most cases the rescuers were truly motivated to help the children for humanitarian or moral reasons, and they put their lives in serious danger by doing so, as hiding a Jewish child was a crime punishable by death.

Besides this type of individual rescue effort, there were many networks and organizations that attempted large-scale rescue efforts. In Poland, the Council for Aid to Jews (known as *Zegota*) took care of some 2,500 Jewish children. *Zegota* was founded in Warsaw and later spread to other Polish towns. Its major goals were to help Jews living in non-Jewish areas and to supply Jews in hiding with forged identity papers. In July 1943 *Zegota* established a special department dedicated to helping children; the children's department placed Jewish children in non-Jewish homes or in institutions.

In France some 7,000 Jewish children were saved during the Holocaust due to the efforts of various groups. One major rescuer of children was the international children's health care and welfare society, the *Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants*, which set up an underground children's rescue network known as *Circuit Garel*. In addition, when the Nazis began deporting the Jews of France in 1942, many local groups also helped in the rescue of Jewish children. Catholic and Protestant church leaders, regular French citizens, and underground groups rescued children from internment camps and placed them in the safe havens of private Christian homes or in institutions. They provided the children with necessary supplies, including false identity papers. From 1942 to 1944 many children were smuggled into neutral Switzerland and Spain.

After the Germans occupied Hungary in the spring of 1944, Zionist activists set up children's homes which were under the protection of the International Red Cross and several of the neutral countries with representatives in Budapest (see also Red Cross, International). Over 6,000 children were safeguarded in these homes and lived to see Budapest liberated by the Soviet army in early 1945. Thousands of other children were rescued in Budapest by members of the Protestant and Catholic churches; many of them were hidden in convents until the war's end.

In the Netherlands and Belgium resistance movements also managed to rescue thousands of Jewish children by hiding them in monasteries, hospitals, and boarding schools.

Hiding children from the Nazis was an extremely difficult feat-both for the rescuer and for the child. As mentioned above, hiding a Jewish child was punishable by death. In general, the child had to be hidden from the rest of the world, so as not to cause any suspicion amongst outsiders. Children who came from afar and could not speak the local language, boys who were circumcised, proving their Jewish identity, and children without forged identity papers were at great risk of being discovered and turned in to the Nazis. (Rescue organizations tried to provide the children with new papers, especially birth certificates that used a new name and stated that the document's bearer was Christian.) The children themselves were often very disoriented and quite miserable about having to leave their parents. They needed to pretend all the time and memorize new facts about themselves, sometimes even new names. In many cases the children became very close to the families with which they lived, creating great problems after the war when their real parents or relatives came to claim them. Much effort was made to locate Jewish children who had been placed in the hands of Christian rescuers. Although most of these children eventually returned to Jewish family or friends, some rescuers and even some children refused to give up their new families, having gone through so much together.