

The “Righteous Among The Nations”
and Their Part In The Rescue
Of Jews
Moshe Bejski

For more than thirty years we have been endeavoring to delve increasingly deeper in our research of the Holocaust in order to understand how it was possible for a nation, which professed to be civilized, to decree the destruction and annihilation of another nation – a decree whose execution was planned with characteristic precision, and carried out with a barbarism that staggered belief. The perspective gained in the course of the past thirty years does not provide an answer. The astronomical loss of lives certainly justifies extensive research, and indeed in recent years historians, sociologists, and psychologists have completed quite a few studies which have attempted to trace the developments that preceded the Holocaust and which, in their opinion, directly caused or influenced the course of events that led to the Holocaust. Without detracting in any way from these studies, I must state that it is nevertheless doubtful that they can provide an answer to the cardinal question of how it happened, for it is doubtful that there is any rational explanation for such irrational acts.

While much research has been conducted on the vexing question mentioned above, I believe that we have not sufficiently examined another phenomenon, related to the first question, which is of crucial importance. Why was it that in the approximately twenty states under Nazi occupation or influence, which had a combined population of hundreds of millions, there were relatively so few persons who were prepared to help those who were in such urgent need of relief during that period? Moreover, it was not a matter of extending aid to foreigners; in each of the states in question, citizens or more or less equal status had their civil liberties curtailed, were persecuted cruelly, and finally deported never to return – all in full public view. This question appears just as difficult to answer as does the first, since at least from the point of view of one’s attitude toward the occupying authorities, there was reason to believe

that the local population would not respond with indifference to the inhuman acts perpetrated against fellow citizens, not to mention the humanitarian obligation an individual has toward his fellow man. Thus it would appear that it is difficult to find a rational answer for this question as well, though in analyzing this phenomenon, one can no doubt point to various factors, such as deeply rooted anti-Semitism, fear of danger, and so on.

The term “Righteous Among the Nations” was mentioned several times in the lectures and discussions at this conference. I am not certain, however, that everyone who used the expression was referring precisely to those persons about whom I intend to speak. Much has been said about the population of many nations who looked on indifferently as Jews were led to deportation and extermination. Obviously they are not included in the category of the “Righteous”. What about those who were upset by the actions against the Jews and perhaps shed a tear at the Jews’ bitter fate – is this sufficient to warrant calling them “Righteous Gentiles”? As far as I am concerned, and from the point of view of the Yad Vashem Commission for the Designation of the Righteous, the answer is negative.

The Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Law (1953), which outlined the functions of Yad Vashem did not provide an exact definition of who was worthy of the title of “Righteous Among the Nations”. It merely mentioned “the highminded Gentiles who risked their lives to save Jews”, without defining who they were. During the eleven years of its existence, however, the Commission has established certain criteria which must be fulfilled before one can be considered worthy of the title. These criteria are: extending help in saving a life; endangering one’s own life; absence of reward, monetary or otherwise; and similar considerations, which make the rescuer’s deeds stand out above and beyond what can be termed ordinary help, which is of course also praiseworthy. On more than one occasion, the Commission has been forced to make difficult decisions regarding the granting of the title of “Righteous Among the Nations”.

If all those who were labeled “Righteous Gentiles” in this conference had actually deserved the title, surely the number of survivors would have been larger, as would the number of those honored by the Commission. The fact of

the matter is, however, that to date only 900 people, who without any ulterior motives endangered their lives to save Jews, have been granted the title. In addition, there are 350 cases presently being reviewed, and undoubtedly there are quite a few others whose deeds are unknown to the Commission, whether because those who received their help were killed or have passed away, or because those who were rescued have not taken the trouble of thanking their benefactors by bringing their deeds to the attention of Yad Vashem. Moreover, there is a definite lack of knowledge among the survivors in the Diaspora about Yad Vashem's role in honoring those who rescued Jews. Yet even when one considers all the instances in which those of other nations helped save Jews during the Holocaust, the number does not exceed several thousand.

In order to undertake rescue operations, an enormous number of people were required, perhaps as many as the Jews of Europe who were exterminated. Yet under no circumstances can it be said that rescue was impossible, and in the course of my remarks I shall endeavor to demonstrate that relief and rescue were possible if there was a willingness to act, even under the most terrible conditions, even inside the extermination camps themselves. Only because such a relatively small number of people were prepared to oppose the persecution and to provide aid and rescue, were the Nazis able to execute their plans on such a large scale.

In the framework of this lecture, I will not deal with the lack of action on the part of states, and international and national organizations throughout the entire period of the Nazi persecution. My predecessors have already lectured on the topic, and others have dealt with the subject. My own remarks refer only to the actions of individuals, undertaken on their own initiative, and in most cases without any assistance from external factors; actions such as hiding a Jewish family or child in their home, providing false documents, supplying food, helping smuggle persons out of the country, or any one of a wide range of deeds and activities undertaken in order to save a Jew from death or facilitate his concealment or escape. The sad truth is that when examining the rescue of individuals by individuals, one discovers that from a quantitative point of view Jews did not receive more help from individuals than they did

from states, organizations, or groups, and the numbers I mentioned previously are instructive. On the other hand, one does find wonderful and heartwarming stories of families who over a lengthy period shared their meager fare with a Jewish family that found shelter in their home, and whom no risk could deter from aiding those in need of help.

To account for the small number of individuals who helped Jews, the justification is often offered that it was not easy to aid Jews during that period because of the great risk involved. Whoever concealed a Jew endangered both himself and his family, and there were indeed instances in which the rescuers were executed or imprisoned for many years in labor and detention camps. While this fact is undoubtedly true, it does not serve as a sufficient answer to our question, because precisely in those countries where there was a more marked tendency on the part of the local population to help Jews, the reprisal measures taken by the Germans were less severe. Moreover, even if it were true that only fear of reprisals prevented many from undertaking rescue, the question of why the non-Jewish population extended so little help during an earlier period when no risk was as yet involved still remains unanswered. I am referring to the period before the outbreak of the war, when tens of thousands of refugees from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia sought shelter in vain, and also to the initial period of the war itself, before stringent laws were promulgated against those assisting Jews. I shall only note one matter, which for some reason has not yet been mentioned at this conference. When the conference of the representatives of 32 states was convened in Evian in 1938 – a conference whose main objective was to find a haven for the tens of thousands of refugees whose absorption in any state whatsoever would have meant their rescue – no one yet faced any danger. All that was required to solve the problem was to find countries willing to admit the refugees. The conference was opened with great ceremony and speeches were made about the need for relief and rescue. The replies received from various countries to justify their refusal to accept refugees are not even worth mentioning because they are an insult to human dignity. In fact, the conference achieved no concrete or practical results except for the resettlement of several hundred Jews in the Dominican Republic.

In my opinion, events which took place after World War II demonstrate that the claim that it was the danger alone which prevented people from helping Jews is not accurate. After the war ended, helping a Jew did not involve any risks. Moreover, the relief in question was not the same kind as was needed during the deportations, but rather help in facilitating the absorption of the survivors. Nevertheless, displaced persons' camps still existed in Germany in 1952 to absorb the refugees who had been streaming out of Eastern and Central Europe since the end of the war – refugees who were compelled to leave their birthplace because of the hostile attitude of the local populace, which made it impossible for them to resettle in their former homes.

These wretched refugees, survivors of the camps, could not stake a claim – even for a transition period – in those states where anti-Semitism had always been deeply rooted. In Poland, for example, quite a few pogroms were carried out by the local population, such as the one in the city of Kielce in 1946, which was staged in order to prevent the resettlement of a small number of Jewish survivors. Of the 15,000 Jews who had originally lived in the small town of Dzialoszyce, about 90 returned after the war. When the Poles murdered three of them one night, the remainder did not wait for dawn, and left under the cover of darkness, never to return. There were many such incidents, and they indicate the population's attitude towards the Jews. It would certainly be too much to expect anti-Semitic Poles, Ukrainians, and Latvians, who for generations had sought to be rid of the Jews in their countries, to help Jews in times of trouble and to aid in their rescue. While in theory the citizens of the occupied countries could have been expected to resist every edict of the occupying authorities, including those decrees which forbade extending aid to Jews, in practice the situation was quite different. In various countries undergrounds were organized to fight against the Germans, but when it came to helping and rescuing Jews, even the underground fighters (not all of them, it is true) identified more with the Nazi occupation authorities than with their Jewish neighbors who were born in the country and were full-fledged citizens. (Yesterday a few episodes were related which reflect on the hostile attitude of the non-Jewish partisans to the Jewish fighters).

As far as Eastern Europe is concerned, there was always a sizeable portion of the populace which sought to get rid of the Jews. Then the Nazis appeared and perpetrated deeds which, although unpopular, included actions likely to bring about the disappearance of the Jews – a policy which was approved by at least part of the country's population. In this respect, the response was not of indifference, but rather of a certain degree of satisfaction that the Jews might disappear forever.

We do indeed receive a different picture from the lecture delivered by Dr. Yahil, but no contradiction is involved. No uniform criteria exist as far as the rescue of individuals by individuals is concerned, nor can a comprehensive generalization be made which could include all the Nazi-occupied territories. The situation in Denmark was different from that in Poland, and the conditions in Holland were not the same as those in the Ukraine. The people were different, the backgrounds and circumstances varied, and, most important, there were differences in the attitude of the populations of the various countries toward the Jews, both in normal times and during the occupation. Dr. Yahil attributed the rescue of Danish Jewry to the attitude of the remnants of the Danish Government toward the Jews. The attitude of the Danish authorities toward the persecution of Danish Jewry is not in question. Ever since the end of the war we have extolled it and pointed to it as a model of exemplary behavior, but I think we may be permitted to doubt whether even the Danish authorities would have succeeded in saving the Jews had it not been for the attitude of the citizens of Denmark and their willingness to mobilize themselves en masse for the great rescue operation. Without the many Danes who were prepared to endanger themselves, it is doubtful whether it would have been possible to organize and execute the transfer of 7,200 persons across the sea to Sweden on the three nights between September 29 and October 1, 1943. Indeed, there were only a few days in which to carry out the rescue operation. It is almost inconceivable that such an operation could have been effected in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, or the Ukraine. Although various types of rescue activities were carried out in these countries, there was a basic unwillingness to extend help, not to mention a lack of readiness to organize a larger operation or undertake any risks.

It seems to me that as far as individual rescue is concerned, it was not necessarily the government's attitude that was the determining factor, but the attitude of the individual toward his fellow citizens, and an examination of the numbers of Jews rescued by individuals in each country lends support to this contention. For example, let us take the case of Italy, where a fascist government was in power from the beginning of the 1920's. Under German pressure, racial laws were promulgated in Italy, and one might have assumed that Italy would follow Germany's lead in "solving" its Jewish problem. Yet of the 57,000 Jews living in Italy prior to the outbreak of the war, 42,000 survived. Moreover, it is particularly noteworthy that a large number of Italian Jews found shelter with individuals, and many were hidden in churches. The fact that their country was ruled by fascists did not prevent Italians from endangering themselves in order to help Jews – which they did to a far greater degree did citizens of other countries that fought against the Nazis.

In Holland, many Jewish families were hidden by people whom they did not even know. A referral by the underground, which kept a list of hiding places, was sufficient. In fact, there was a village in Holland in which every single family concealed at least one Jew. Moreover, the operation was organized by the residents of the village without any external assistance. In Poland, on the other hand, the situation was entirely different. Possibilities of rescue by individuals did not exist to a lesser degree in this country than they did elsewhere. The best proof of this is the actions of those "Righteous Gentiles" who hid Jews and extended help in various forms. The number of those who did so in Poland, however, is relatively small.

It is unnecessary to expound upon the attitude of the Polish population toward the Jews during the occupation period. The facts are known and have been recorded. Dr. Arad added many details yesterday on the attitude of the Polish underground organizations toward the Jewish partisans, many of whom were killed by the Poles. These fighters who fled to the forests in order to fight the common enemy, were murdered solely because they were Jews. As to the relative number of those rescued, the situation is no different. While it is true that in terms of absolute numbers Poland had the most survivors, it would be a mistake to credit their rescue to the Poles. The truth is that only a handful of

Polish Jews were saved thanks to the help of individual Poles. Most of those Jews who survived were in Russia during the war – 170,000 returned to Poland during the first repatriation in 1946 and an additional 19,000-20,000 returned in the second repatriation from Russia in 1956. In addition, there were those who had survived the labor, concentration, and extermination camps – Jews whom the Germans had employed as a labor force as long as they had the strength to work. Other survived year of fighting as partisans in the forests, and a small group managed to live through the hardships of the war with forged Aryan papers. The smallest category of survivors consists of those Jews who were saved because they were hidden by Poles. The fact that they do not number in the thousands does not of course detract from the merit of the Polish “Righteous Among the Nations”, who did not conform to the general behavior of the population. It is even possible that due to their activities they endangered their lives more than did the “Righteous” in other countries, because the risk of being denounced for hiding Jews was much greater in Poland, where informing was common practice.

The case of Poland is not the only example. In the majority of the occupied countries one finds a direct relationship between the Germans’ success in implementing the Final Solution and the attitude of the local population toward the Jews. Italy is a case in point, and the same applies to Denmark. In Bulgaria as well, the attitude of the population and the intervention of individual officials contributed to the survival of the 50,000 in that country. In Latvia and Lithuania, on the other hand, the figures were reversed. Only about 10,000 of the 95,000 Jews who lived in Latvia before the war survived, and in Lithuania only about 15,000 of a community of 160,000 were saved.

Individual rescue undoubtedly entailed a certain degree of danger. Before a person considered the extent of the danger, however, he or she had to have the desire and the readiness to help a Jew. Unfortunately, the majority of the inhabitants of the occupied countries never even considered the nature of the risk involved because the willingness to help Jews was lacking. Moreover, it should be noted that the events proved that the dangers involved in helping Jews were in inverse proportion to the number of people in each country who were willing to do so. Thus the Nazi occupation authorities adopted a far more

severe attitude toward those who extended help to Jews in Poland and Lithuania than they did toward those who did so in Denmark and Holland. Moreover, the more hiding places there were, the less dangerous it was to conceal Jews, as it was possible to transfer Jews from one hiding place to another as the need arose.

In theory, the greatest danger lay in hiding a Jew in one's own home. Sometimes it was for a period of months or even years and thus the risk renewed itself daily. There were, however, modes of help which entailed far less danger, such as supplying false papers or rations cards, finding places of employment, enlisting in the underground, and other actions which could bring about rescue. Yet even these actions were undertaken by few individuals.

Unfortunately, no study has yet been carried out on the motives of those who, despite the risk involved, did not bow to the edicts of the occupying authorities or conform to the behavior of the general population and extended help to Jews. In each case the motives are different, but there is a common denominator among the "Righteous" – the humanitarian motivation which dictates a charitable attitude toward one's fellow man. Hostility toward the occupying authorities and opposition to the cruel acts they perpetrated against the Jewish population were certainly important, but even in these cases, the humanitarian motivation was dominant. Very often religious conviction motivated individuals to help Jews. This is paradoxical, as it is known and it has been confirmed at this conference, that the Church qua Church did almost nothing to induce its adherents to extend help to the persecuted Jews. Nevertheless, quite a few cases have come to our attention in which it was the individual's profound religious feeling that motivated him to fulfill the command: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself". Of course personal acquaintance and friendship between the rescuer and the rescued also constituted a motive for extending help in time of trouble. We have already mentioned those of the "Righteous Among the Nations" for whom acts of rescue constituted an integral part of their underground activities.

We have not yet made a study of the social origins of the "Righteous" recognized by the Commission. While we have honored individuals from all classes of the population, my distinct impression from years of work on the

Commission has been that the majority were from the lower classes – poverty-stricken common folk, poor people who had difficulty providing for their own families yet found it possible to share their meager fare with those whom they took under their protection. The limited time at my disposal does not permit me to relate the stories of those wonderful farmers and other persons who were so poor that they could not even buy bread and potatoes for their families, yet shared the little they had with the people they were hiding. Moreover, when we add the fear of the authorities and the apprehension lest they be denounced by anti-Semitic neighbors, informers, and collaborators, then we shall be able to properly appreciate the nobility of spirit of the handful who did not blindly follow the general line and reached a high degree of humanity. There were also those who were true heroes, such as the farmer's wife whose husband was murdered by the Germans before her eyes because he refused to divulge the hiding place of seventeen Jews who were hiding in the forest and whom he had helped feed for a long time. This is a supreme level of sacrifice which is unsurpassed. Indeed the reward of the Commission members who hear of such cases from time to time is that these stories of rescue inspire the feeling that in a sea of malevolence and darkness there were wonderful human beings! There were, however, very few such individuals.

I hope that Yad Vashem will publish the details of the deeds of each of the "Righteous Among the Nations" so that the episodes of individual rescue will not remain the exclusive preserve of the rescuer and the rescued; not only because these episodes are the sole source of light in a world of atrocities and the loss of the image of God, but because we owe it to the rescuers. Moreover, the publication of these episodes will prove to the whole world what could have been done in terms of help and rescue if only many people had made the effort.

I would like to devote a few words to a special class of "Righteous Gentiles". So far I have dealt mainly with those who extended the most common types of relief, such as concealment in the rescuer's home, supplying papers and food, help in escape and smuggling persons out of the country, and similar actions. I have already noted that there was, in fact, no place where help of this sort

could not have been extended in order to save individuals or at least to ease their suffering. The cases that have come before the Commission indicate that, given the appropriate initiative and willingness to help, it was possible to provide relief for those in the ghettos and even for the inmates of the concentration and extermination camps. This help usually eased the burden of the persecuted Jews and enabled the rescue of individuals. Not many people could be concealed in one apartment or in a particular hiding place, and an escape organization could only be made up of individuals.

There were, however, rescuers whose actions were above and beyond what was customary during the Holocaust – those who were not content with saving one life or the lives of a single family. They felt obligated to act within broad frameworks, so that they, the individuals, could become rescue institutions which would save many lives. I regret that within the time allotted to me I will not be able to mention each of them and their deeds, though each is especially worthy of such mention, if only to indicate that even under the most difficult circumstances it was possible to do something if one had initiative and was willing to act. I will only mention a few of them to illustrate my point, and once again express the hope that the stories of the “Righteous” will be collected and published so that they will be brought to the knowledge of the public.

Raoul Wallenberg

In July 1944, upon the initiative of Jewish organizations, this Swedish aristocrat was sent to Budapest to serve as an attaché of the Swedish Embassy. His main goal, however, was to work together with the War Refugee Board and Jewish institutions for the rescue of Hungarian Jewry. By that time, about 300,000 Hungarian Jews had already been deported to Auschwitz. Wallenberg’s first step was to print Swedish certificates of protection, which he distributed to anyone connected in any way whatsoever with Sweden, and to extend the protection of the Swedish Government to all those who received the certificates. When he found out that the local authorities were honoring those documents for the time being, he printed more of them and expanded the operation by purchasing 32 houses and four

apartments which he converted into an “international ghetto” where he housed the new Swedish citizens. At one stage, the number of those under Swedish protection exceeded 33,000. He employed nearly 400 workers, established soup kitchens and hospitals, and provided vital services. The large number of children in these houses was particularly noteworthy. Wallenberg endangered his diplomatic status, but this did not perturb him. He worked without respite, devoting his inexhaustible energy to rescue. During the street riots when Szalási’s “Arrow Cross” seized power, Wallenberg dashed from house to house to save Jews from death, no longer checking whether those he saved had any direct connection with Sweden. When ten of thousands of Jews were expelled from Budapest in November 1944, and sent on the “death march” to the Austrian border – which meant having to walk 200 kilometers in snow and cold – Wallenberg followed the Jews with trucks and distributed food, warm clothing, and shoes. Moreover, he took everyone he could possible remove from the transport back to Budapest. At times, a meaningless scrap of paper sufficed to pull someone out of the column.

Wallenberg’s deeds proved to be contagious. Thus the Swiss, Spanish, and Portuguese representatives extended protection to a number of Jews whose ancestors had been expelled from their countries.

Many thousands of Jews were rescued thanks to Wallenberg’s initiative and extraordinary action. Moreover, his deeds constitute proof of how much a courageous individual, with a profound feeling for his fellow man, could accomplish under difficult conditions.

Unfortunately, Wallenberg met a tragic fate. He was last seen on January 17, 1945 (following the liberation of Hungary) en route to Marshal Malinovsky’s headquarters to discuss plans for those under his protection. His last words were: “I don’t know whether I’m going as a guest or a prisoner”. Wallenberg was never see again, and only in 1957 did the Russians admit (after unceasing pressure from the Swedish Government) that he had died of a heart-attack in 1947 in the Lubyanka Prison in Moscow. It later turned out that this “admission” was also not true.

Wallenberg’s aged mother has so far refused to accept the medal granted by the Commission for the Designation of the Righteous because of the lack of

certain knowledge about his fate. We have honored her wish. Nevertheless, Raoul Wallenberg stands in the front rank of the noble-minded individuals whose actions to rescue Jews surpassed all expectations.

Dr. Adelaide Hautval

This wonderful doctor was imprisoned in France in April 1942 because she traveled (to her mother's funeral) from Vichy to the occupied zone without a permit. She was originally confined in the Bourges Prison, where several Jews were incarcerated. When she saw how badly the Jews were treated, she protested to the Gestapo, which forced her to wear a yellow badge with the words "friend of Jews" written on it, and threatened her that her fate would be the same as that of the Jews. After suffering hardships in various camps in France, she was sent to Auschwitz, where she was put to work as a doctor in Block 10. Dr. Hautval realized that the Jewish women in her block were being treated much worse than herself, and she began to lovingly take care of them. The female prisoners of the block called her "the saint", and only those who were there can describe the extent to which they were helped by Dr. Hautval. When a typhus epidemic broke out in the block, it was obvious that all the women who contracted the disease would be sent to the gas chambers. Dr. Hautval, the only doctor in the block, decided not to tell anyone about the epidemic. She hid those who were ill on the upper level of the bunks, and treated them with motherly devotion. She used to say to those around her, "Here we are all condemned to death – let us behave like human beings as long as we are still alive". The chief doctors, S.S. officers Dr. Agrad and Dr. Wirths, demanded that she assist them in the experiments they were conducting on the detection of the initial manifestations of cancer of the uterus. Dr. Hautval, however, had doubts about the type of experiments being performed, and informed Dr. Wirths that she would not participate because she believed that no one had the right to decide the fate of his fellow man. She also refused to administer anaesthesia or perform sterilizations. Moreover, when Dr. Wirths asked her whether she perceived the difference between these people and her own world, she retorted: "I have indeed perceived people different from myself and you are one of them". Dr. Hautval

did her best to protect the Jewish women prisoners and in her capacity as a doctor she was truly “the angel in white”.

In the famous trial held in London in 1962 in which the Polish gynecologist Dr. Wladislaw Dering sued Leon Uris, the author of Exodus, for libel, Dr. Hautval testified for the defense about the thousand of sterilization experiments performed on Jewish women in Auschwitz. She made an extraordinary impression at the trial, a fact which found expression in Judge Lawton’s verdict:

Dr. Hautval, you may think perhaps one of the most impressive and courageous women who has ever given evidence in a court in this country, a most outstanding and distinguished personage. We know what happened to her. She very early made a stand, and not once but I think it was a total of four times all together. She made it quite clear what she was prepared to do and what she was not prepared to do... Summoned for this she gave a reply to Dr. Wirths which I expect will live in your memories for many, many years – a devastating reply.

Judge Lawton was not exaggerating in the least, and whoever meets Dr. Hautval is indeed thus impressed. Her friendship for the Jewish people and the State of Israel is profound and sincere. It is only because I did not receive her permission, that I will not read you the moving letters she wrote on various occasions such as the outbreak of the Six Day War and the Yom Kippur War. These missives are faithful testimony to an extraordinary concern for the world’s attitude toward the Jewish people. Dr. Hautval’s deeds are perhaps the most conclusive proof that even under the difficult conditions which existed in the inferno called Auschwitz it was possible to ease the suffering of others and to help; and people such as Dr. Hautval did so.

Elisabeth Abegg

The “Righteous Among the Nations” found ways of helping Jews even in the nerve center of the Nazi regime. Thus, for example, Mrs. Elisebeth Abegg helped a large number of Jews in Berlin during the years 1942-1944. Her home was open to persecuted Jews and whoever received her address found help and succor. Allow me to quote from the testimony of Mr. Yitzhak Shverzantz of Haifa:

I found Mrs. Abegg to be a person whom we could turn to in any distress, and indeed we did so. Besides offering spiritual help and succor, which in itself was so important at that time, Mrs. Abeg also provided material help. Thus, for example, she kept the young girl Eva Fleishmann in her home and found hiding places for others including myself. When Eva Fleishmann was forced to leave Berlin, she found a hiding place for her with a family of farmers in Eastern Prussia. Besides finding lodging and hiding places she also saw to it that we received hot meals. I would come to her house to eat a hot meal about twice a week, and I was not the only one to do so, as she also invited children from our group to her house to eat a hot meal. Besides she provided us ration cards without which it was totally impossible to obtain food. In addition, she also gave us financial assistance. Mrs. Abegg was undoubtedly in contact with other people. Thus is clear to me from the number of food cards she collected and the sums of money she obtained for us. She also contributed her own funds – and thus for example she financed my escape to Switzerland by selling her own jewelry...

Thanks to Mrs. Abegg's efforts, the approximately 25 children under Mrs. Shverzantz's care were successfully hidden during the most difficult period of the war. It is superfluous to point out to what extent she endangered herself. Suffice it to say that her activities were carried out in Berlin, where not only the Gestapo was on the lookout, but even the concierge of her house constituted a threat. Mrs. Abegg and other "Righteous", however, viewed helping the persecuted and the needy as their main obligation. Thus the danger they took upon themselves stemmed from an awareness that it was their duty to act as they did.

Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz

In her lecture on the rescue of Danish Jewry, Dr. Leni Yahil told of the operation in which 7,200 Jews were transported from Denmark to Sweden. For some reason, however, she failed to mention an individual who in my opinion deserves to be noted in this connection, a man who achieved recognition through a deed which was of great importance in the rescue operation. I am referring to Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz, the attaché for shipping affairs in the German Legation in Copenhagen.

Duckwitz assumed his post in Denmark in 1939. He continued to serve in this capacity during the occupation, but he had no connection with any of the

political or military departments. Until he issued the famous warning, Duckwitz had had no direct contact with any Danish Jews, but he was in touch with non-Jewish Danes, and it was known that the information he had provided on various occasions had proven completely reliable. On September 28, 1943, Duckwitz warned that the deportation of the Jews was to be carried out within a few days. Although frightening information had previously been received on a number of occasions, this warning was believed and taken seriously because it was received from Duckwitz. Thus it was obvious that a comprehensive rescue operation had to be undertaken at once, and it was undoubtedly Duckwitz's warning which galvanized all the factors into immediate action a few days before the deportation was to take place.

Concerning the significance of Duckwitz's warning, I would like to quote from two sources. The first is Prof. Aage Bertelsen, who made the following comments at a reception held in his honor by the World Jewish Congress on March 24, 1971:

I now wish to explain something which also concerns you. You are grateful to the non-Jewish Danes. I wish to say, however, that if there is any justification for the use of the word heroism in this context, it is only applicable to two people, one of whom is the German Dr. Duckwitz, who is entitled to it for his deeds on behalf of Danish Jewry. At the time, when I published my book on this subject, I spoke with Dr. Duckwitz, then an ambassador of his country, and what I heard from him was then considered confidential in view of the post he held. It has been known since 1943, however, that it was Duckwitz who several days before the deportation conveyed the news of the danger through a friend of his so that the Jews would be informed ahead of time of what was about to occur. The information was indeed relayed and this time everyone was convinced of the extent of the danger because the information came from Duckwitz.

A few days previously Duckwitz had realized what was about to occur, and he went to Berlin for talks with the Foreign Ministry in order to prevent the deportation. When he found out that he was too late, he went to Stockholm to talk to the Swedes and ask their advice on what to do when the deportation was carried out. Afterwards he had to operate in the underground. Duckwitz was declared *persona non grata* and in fact might well have been executed by a firing squad. When I later pointed out the danger he had taken upon himself he replied: "Everyone should see himself in the situation in which he, too, like his fellow man, might find himself. I do not think that my life is more important than the lives of 7,000 Jews".

Dr. Leni Yahil, who is an authority on the history of Danish Jewry during the Holocaust, write in her letter of February 24, 1971.

There is no doubt that Duckwitz played an important part in the rescue of the Jews by the Danes. His warning about the deportation, which was to be implemented two days later, enabled the Danish individuals and organizations to warn the Jews ahead of time. The flight and concealment of the great majority of the Jews prevented their seizure on the night of the roundup and prepared the way for their being smuggled across to Sweden. In the period that the deportation was still being prepared, Duckwitz also attempted to enlist the aid of the Swedish Government for the rescue operation, and this actions was also of importance. Just as the entire episode in Denmark was unusual even within the framework of rescue operations (such as in Bulgaria), so Duckwitz action is unique. We know of no other senior German official who fulfilled a rescue mission of this kind, which certainly involved self-imperilment...

The case of Dr. Duckwitz is different from those in which the “Righteous Among the Nations” extended help directly to individuals, and it proves that rescue was possible under all circumstances whenever there was initiative and a willingness to help.

Oskar Schindler

Oskar Schindler arrived in Cracow, Poland in late 1939 and took charge of a factory for the manufacture of kitchen utensils. Until the end of 1942, he employed several dozen Jewish workers who came to the factory from the Cracow Ghetto. From the beginning, he was sympathetic toward his Jewish employees and protected them from the hardships of the ghetto. In fact, during “actions” they would remain in the factory so as not to be exposed to the danger of deportation. The number of Jewish workers in the factory gradually increased and by the time the ghetto was liquidated on March 13, 1944, Schindler was employing several hundred Jews.

When the remaining Jews of Cracow were sent to the notorious Plaszow camp, Schindler saw to it that his Jewish employees were not deported, and he obtained a permit to accommodate them in cabins he built near the factory, which were considered a branch of the Plaszow camp. Those who worked in Schindler’s factory were truly privileged. They enjoyed humane living and

working conditions and were spared the atrocities of the Plaszow camp. Moreover, even in the few instances when S.S. men from the camp command sent several Jews to Plaszow, Schindler always found a way to rescue them, whether through his connections with the S.S. or by bribery. Indeed, in over four years, not one of his employees was harmed. The main part of his rescue work began, however, with the approach of the Russians in the summer of 1944, when a result of the liquidation of Plaszow and its various branches, transports of inmates were sent almost daily to Auschwitz, Mauthausen, Sachsenhausen, Ravensbrück, and other death camps.

Schindler obtained a permit to convert his factory into a plant for the manufacture of armaments, move it near the town of Brännlitz in the Sudetenland (his birthplace), and employ 1,100 Jews. In addition to the approximately 500 Jews who had worked for him in Cracow, Schindler added the names of some 700 men, who had been prisoners at Plaszow, to the list of employees. Among them were the leaders of the Zionist movement, whom he requested on the basis of their professional training as engravers, locksmiths, technicians, and the like, even though in reality they had no connection whatsoever with these professions. Thus 700 men arrived in Brännlitz via the Gross-Rosen camp.

In the course of the liquidation of Plaszow, most of the women were sent to Auschwitz. Schindler managed, through unusual and extraordinary efforts, to do what no one had ever done. He extricated 300 women from Auschwitz – the wives, daughters, and mothers of the men he had brought to Brännlitz. No one can describe the joy and excitement at Brännlitz when the 300 women arrived from the place of no return to be united with their families. This appears to be the only case during the entire Holocaust period in which 300 women were released from the “planet” of Auschwitz.

Schindler’s concern for his workers constitutes a separate episode, which I shall not describe here. Not only did he spend his own money to supply them with extra food, but he also took care of hundreds of their everyday problems, and provided the workers with medicine, clothing, and even eyeglasses. Schindler forwarded letters to Poland, to places where children were being hidden, and even provided arms in the event that the prisoners might be

forced to go on a “death march” in the course of the liquidation of the camp. Schindler was willing to listen to everyone’s problem and to try to solve them. The conditions in his factory were completely different from those in the other camps during the fifth year of the war. In fact, Schindler did not allow the S.S. command or the camp guards to enter the factory, and he was not particularly strict about work productivity.

In February 1945, Schindler learned that two railroad cars with Jewish prisoners from the recently-liquidated camp at Goleschau, who were transferred from camp to camp and had been without food or clothing for about two weeks, were at the train station at Zwittau. Without receiving any authorization, he moved the cars to his factory. When the cars, which arrived covered with ice, were soldered open, a dreadful sight was revealed – sixteen frozen corpses and about 100 musketeers, not one of whom weighed more than 80 pounds.

A hospital of sorts was established in a special wing of the factory, and a team of doctors began intensive treatment of the survivors, while Schindler’s wife Emilia prepared special food from the extra rations he had allotted. The survivors of Goleschau were treated for weeks, and the majority recovered – despite the wrath of the camp commander who found it intolerable that people who were worthless as workers should be cared for. Schindler even paid their salaries to the S.S. authorities.

The camp commander Lejbold ordered the cremation of the frozen corpses. Schindler, however, granted the request of the prisoner Yitzhak Stern, who was one of his close friends, and arranged for a plot to be set aside in the local cemetery and obtained permission for a minyan of prisoners to accompany the dead, with one of the prisoners, Rabbi Levertov, reciting Zidduk ha-Din. Thus we see that Schindler was even anxious to care for the deceased. (The documents on these two railroad cars are in the Yad Vashem Museum. All the stations they passed are crossed out, while their final destination, Schindler’s factory in Brännlitz, was written in Schindler’s own handwriting).

Schindler promised the Jews that he would remain with them until the end of the war, and he kept his word. Only after the S.S. guards had left the camp at midnight on May 8, 1945 did he depart, accompanied by about a dozen Jews. After the war, a special phrase coined – “Schindler Juden” – in reference to the 1,200 Jews who were rescued thanks to his special care, constant concern, and incessant efforts on their behalf. Schindler remained in contact with those he rescued throughout the world, and for the past seventeen years he has visited Israel (where 250 of those he rescued live) on the anniversary of their liberation.

On October 9, 1974, Oskar Schindler passed away in Germany. He was buried in Jerusalem at the Latin Cemetery on Mount Zion on October 28. Over 400 of those he rescued, together with their families, came to accompany their benefactor on his final journey.

Paul Grueninger

Paul Grueninger served as Chief of Police in St. Gallen, Switzerland. After Austria was annexed to the Third Reich, many Jews sought to flee in order to escape Nazi persecution. Orderly emigration was difficult, and time was pressing. Thousands attempted to cross the border into Switzerland, but the Swiss authorities opposed their entry. As the number of those fleeing increased, the Swiss closed the border hermetically.

Grueninger could not reconcile himself to the bureaucratic directives. He knowingly endangered himself by exceeding his jurisdiction as Chief of Police in order to enable many refugees to cross the border and find shelter in Switzerland. There are no exact figures on the number of refugees who entered Switzerland thanks to Grueninger’s help, but they certainly number at least several hundred.

Grueninger’s actions were discovered by the Swiss authorities, who considered him a criminal for having disobeyed his orders to bar the entry of refugees to Switzerland. Following an investigation, he was tried for failure to fulfill his duties and falsifying documents and, in accordance with the indictment, was found guilty by the District Court in St. Gallen in December 1940. Grueninger was dismissed from his post and lost his pension.

Grueninger did not even seek recognition for his deeds. For many years he lived quietly in St. Gallen, barely supporting himself as an assistant instructor. In fact, most of those who entered Switzerland thanks to his efforts did not even know to whom they owed their lives. It was only in 1969 that knowledge of his action reached Yad Vashem, and he was granted the title of “Righteous Among the Nations”. Moreover, when the Swiss media began to publicize and praise his deeds, the state authorities could not remain indifferent, and thus in 1969 he was awarded official rehabilitation.

Paul Grueninger died in 1973 at the age of 82.

Aristedes de Sousa Mendes

Aristedes de Sousa Mendes served as Portuguese Consul in Bordeaux France. Following the German occupation of Northern France, masses of refugees, among them many thousands of Jews, fled from the occupied zone to Vichy. Nearly 10,000 Jews were concentrated in Bordeaux alone, and they were shunted about in the markets, squares, and streets. All of them had one desire – to escape to Spain via the Pyrenees, and from there to Portugal. From May 10, 1940, however, the Portuguese Government refused to grant entry visas, and especially not to Jews. The consulate did not reply to inquiries and there was a general order not to stamp visas.

The Consul, Aristedes de Sousa Mendes, a lawyer and a devout Catholic (he claimed to be a Marrano descent), was unable to remain indifferent to the refugee’s suffering and torment. He admitted many of them – including Rabbi Chaim Kruger of Belgium and his family – to his house, and the entire floor and all the passageways were crowded with the children and women who slept there. Moreover, thousands waited on line in front of his house, in case the edict were rescinded. The consul went out to speak to them and told them that, “My government has rejected the refugees’ request for visas, but I cannot let these people die. Many of them are Jews and our constitution states that the religion and political views of a foreign subject shall not constitute grounds for their being refused asylum in Portugal. I have decided to act in the spirit of this principle. I shall give anyone who desires a visa... Even if I am dismissed from my post I cannot act but as a Christian, faithful to the dictates of my

conscience”. Thereupon, he sat down to stamp visas for those in front of his home, with his wife, his two children, and Rabbi Kruger helping him. For three full days they worked indefatigably, until he was physically unable to continue. When word of his action reached Lisbon, two officials were sent to bring the consul back to Portugal. De Sousa Mendes packed his belongings and set out in his car. While passing through Bayonne, he saw that here too the refugees were milling about in front of the Portuguese Consulate. In reply to his question, the local consul told de Sousa Mendes that according to the directives received from Lisbon he was forbidden to grant visas, especially to Jews, and that he was carrying out the instructions of his superiors. Mendes turned to the consul and said: “I have not yet been dismissed from my post and I am still your superior”. Thereupon he issued instructions to grant the visas, and began to stamp them himself, working at it for a full day.

Continuing on his way to Lisbon, Mendes passed the Spanish border town of Hendeye, where he found that the border had been closed by agreement with Portugal. For a moment it appeared that all his efforts had been in vain. Mendes understood that the Spanish authorities expected the refugees to cross the border at this station, and therefore had issued orders to bar their entry, and stationed guards on alert. He therefore instructed the refugees to proceed to a nearby border station, and indeed no instructions forbidding crossing had been received there. Mendes identified himself as the Portuguese consul, and the refugees were permitted to enter Spain.

In Lisbon, Mendes was asked to account for his behavior and bear the consequences. A committee of inquiry investigated the case, and he was dismissed from the foreign service for disobeying orders. His struggle to regain his post did not prove successful, and he also lost his property. He did, however, preserve his human dignity, and the lives of several thousand Jews. Aristedes de Sousa Mendes died in Portugal in 1954. To his dying days, he was convinced that the sacrifice he had made was insignificant in comparison to the rescue of the lives of those in distress.

The time I was allotted does not permit me to even mention the names of other “Righteous Gentiles”, whose deeds must become public knowledge. If I mentioned only a few. I did so merely to demonstrate that in every place and

under all circumstances there were possibilities to extend help and rescue. Only the willingness and initiative were lacking. Unfortunately, the number of the “Righteous Among the Nations” was totally out of proportion to the needs of the times, and as a result the number of those rescued was also very small. We owe a moral debt to these few individuals. The commemoration of their deeds is the least that we are obligated to do.

Source: Moshe Bejski, “Rescue Attempts During the Holocaust, Proceedings of the Second Yad Vashem International Historical Conference”, Yisrael Gutman and Efraim Zuroff, (Eds), Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, pp. 627-647.