

Jews Rescuing Jews during the Holocaust

Chana Arnon

Israel

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of Jews rescuing Jews during the Holocaust was just as widespread, if not more, than the allied event of Gentiles coming to the Jews' rescue. With the realization that the hate campaign they were subjected to was materializing into what later became known as genocide, the Jews started a self-rescue campaign which included emigration, protection by means of forged documents, and inducement of officials in their countries to desist from Nazi collaboration. The emigration movement started in the country where Jewish persecution took its inception in the early thirties: Germany. German Jews immigrated to Palestine, other European countries, the US, and South American in large percentages. Those who couldn't obtain visas or "certificates" or who simply didn't have the money to leave were desperate to have at least their children saved the cruel fate. The famous *Kindertransport*, initiated by the Dutch Gertrude Wijsmuller, took more than 10,000 Jewish children from Germany and Austria to England where they survived the war. Mrs. Wijsmuller was later awarded the title of Righteous Gentile, conferred on her by Yad Vashem, but her Jewish counterparts, and especially Mrs. Recha Freier, who worked out of Germany, were never honored in a similar fashion in this country. In Nieuwlande, a tiny village in north-east Holland, and its surrounding sister villages, three hundred Jews, among whom one hundred children, were saved by brave and worthy Netherlanders. Their leaders were two resistance workers, Johannes Post and Arnold Douwes, who received the honor of Righteous Gentile, and a third hero, a

young Jew by the name of Max Nico Leons. At Yad Vashem, the monument honoring the whole village, which has names of more than a hundred rescuers chiseled in stone, Nico's name does not appear, although he risked his life for years just as the others did. Jan Post was caught by the Germans and executed, while Arnold survived into old age and Nico is still alive. The Jewish Nico and his Gentile colleagues collaborated for one purpose only: to save as many persecuted Jews as they could.

In Chambon-sur-Lignon in southern France and its surrounding villages five thousand Jews found shelter from persecution. Their rescuers were the local Protestants and the Jews who were active in rescue in southern France, in Marseille and in Nice and many other places. The Jewish rescuers brought their charges to Chambon, equipped with forged documents including food cards and money. The teamwork and mutual assistance was striking, but only the Gentiles were awarded the honorable title of "Righteous".

The many instances of Jewish rescue, self-rescue and rescue of others, at times total strangers, are many, various, inspiring and sometimes mind boggling. They range from organized Jewish rescue based on an existing infrastructure as in France to inspired and daring activity as in the family camps in Russia, to the bribery of officials in Slovakia and to the Zionist youth movement (religious and secular) rescue in many places, notably Hungary. They range from the rescue of thousands to the rescue of single individuals. It has to be remembered that if there were Jews alive at all after the Holocaust, it was just as much thanks to other Jews as to non-Jews. The "as sheep to the slaughter" premise is an erroneous one whose refutation is still waiting to be recorded. The Committee on Jews Rescued Jews (CJRJ) was founded to document, publicize, and otherwise spread the word about the deeds of these unsung

and very often anonymous Jewish heroes about who too little is known among the public in Israel and elsewhere.

DEFINITION

The group that calls itself the Committee on Jews Rescued Jews sets its terms of reference at attempts at rescuing Jewish lives. Not taking into its ken armed resistance, sabotage, or espionage, it focuses rather on the many thousands who were active in the twilight world of document forgery, the finding of safe havens with Christian resisters and locating escape routes to neutral countries. Rescue as Resistance, as the title of a book by Lucien Lazare aptly phrases it, is the motto of our group. We chose this framework because many in our group were either on the receiving or the bestowing end of this rescue work and it was felt that it was an aspect of the Holocaust that had not been adequately covered in all the copious literature on the subject. Not only had the subject not been adequately exposed, it also left a gap in the perception of the process of mass murder that went on in the years 1941-45 in Europe and was directed mainly against the Jews. The Jews were vastly outnumbered by the hostile forces in their countries of residence and those often collaborated with the occupier in the persecution of the Jews and yet thousands and tens of thousands of Jews resisted at the risk of their lives. In fact, many of those rescuers were caught and paid dearly for their efforts. The fact that there were Jewish survivors at all, after five long years of war, is often times thanks to Jewish initiative, cunning, thwarting, and daring that have one thing in common: the overriding concern for the lives and wellbeing of others, be they brothers or strangers. This then is our definition of a Jewish rescuer.

GEOGRAPHICAL DIFFERENCES

The phenomenon of Jewish rescue is widespread and covers all countries under German occupation. The differences between countries lie in the type of occupation (civil, military or a combination of the two), the latent anti-Semitism present before occupation, Jewish organized life before 1940, and the like. Nevertheless, statistics tell us that attributes such as democracy, western liberal regimes, or Protestant versus Catholic do not corroborate time-honored assumptions. Each country in Europe had

its own specific combination of factors resulting in differing impacts of the Nazi “final solution” plot.

Let us now look at some “stories” of individuals from different countries who will serve as paradigms for the whole rescue initiative. Even though these are personal histories, the individuals in question are linked to organizations which are linked to other organizations and thus form a network of rescue. In a later chapter, we will give some stories of individuals who acted totally on their own.

MUSSA ABADI AND ODETTE ROSENSTOCK FRANCE

Mussa, born in Damascus, and Odette, his fiancée, had fled in 1940, from Paris to Nice, in the South of France. The persecution of Jews in this area started after the fall of Italy to the Germans, in September 1943, which brought Nice and Cannes under German occupation as well.

Odette and Mussa started by picking up Jewish children whose parents had already been deported or were hidden. Once in their protection, they began to look for safe hiding places for them aided by the bishop of Nice, Bishop Raymond, who supported the Abadis in their rescue efforts and opened up Catholic institutions as well as allocating a small office for Abadi to produce forged ID cards and baptismal certificates.

Abadi also sought and received support from the Protestant ministers in the area as well as working with Jewish underground organizations such as the OSE and the Joint (JDC) who gave him financial support. Odette did check ups on the young fugitives. During the period of their illegal activity the “*Marcel Network*”, as they were called, *saved the lives of more than five hundred children (527 to be exact).*

ORGANIZATIONS

OSE -OEUVRE DE SECOURS AUX ENFANTS, FRANCE

OSE is an international Jewish organization devoted to caring for the health and welfare of Jewish adults and children, mainly refugees from Eastern Europe. With the rise of Nazism in Germany the organization moved to France. In 1938 80% of the work done by **OSE** was devoted to children for whom children's homes were set up, creating an infrastructure that was of immeasurable importance during the war. In 1940, the **OSE** moved to southern France, under the Vichy government. OSE, using volunteers, was active, among others, in the spirited away of children from the concentration camps of Gurs and Rivesaltes in Southern France where more than 600 children from six to sixteen were rescued. By 1942 there were 1200 children sheltered in 14 OSE homes. *In 1942, with the occupation of southern France, OSE went underground.* Georges Garel headed the underground activities of the OSE from August 1942.

All the homes were closed in 1943. The children were taken individually to hiding addresses with non-Jewish families or to other, non-Jewish institutions while some were spirited away to neutral Switzerland or Spain. Historians estimate that by the end of the war, OSE had saved between 6,000 and 9,000 of the children in their care among whom more than 1,000 children in neutral countries. In all during the war 32 OSE staff members lost their lives, and approximately 90 OSE children died.

YOUTH MOVEMENTS IN HUNGARY

**MOSHE ALPAN (ELEPHANT) 1918, EPHRAIM AGMON
(TEICHMANN) 1922, DAVID GUR (GROSS), 1926**

MOSHE ALPAN (ELEPHANT) (born Slovakia), nicknamed "Peel" because of his last name, was a member of the Hehalutz resistance command group created by the Va'ad ha-Ezra ve-ha-Hatsala (Relief and Rescue Committee) of the Zionist Organization. First in charge of underground shelters, he was put at the head of the *Tiyul* escape organization which spirited people across the Romanian border from Slovakia and Poland for further escape to Palestine. *"The Tiyul, a project undertaken by two Jewish communities under occupation, Slovakia and Hungary, for the rescue of a third, the Polish, is a phenomenon that has no equal in the history of the Holocaust. The risks taken were enormous and the rescuers were aware that the enterprise's success would not earn them any direct benefit. Feelings of solidarity, sympathy*

and even compassion for the last remnant left in Poland impelled these activists to seek to save what could be saved. The majority of Jewish fugitives, who reached Hungary in this context, arrived after July 1943." (Robert Rozett, Yad Vashem, Research Collection, XXIV) **Moshe Alpan** also supervised the production and distribution of forged documents and helped create children's homes that saved the lives of 5,000 children and youths. Moshe Alpan lives in Israel (2003)

EPHRAIM AGMON went underground in Budapest in 1943 and devoted himself to resistance activities within the movement. He joined the *Hehalutz* youth movement's resistance. His first major task was to "Aryanize" the members of the Hungarian youth movement and to help bringing them to the capital. It was an attempt to rescue the Jews in the towns and villages far from the center and also those who had been conscripted into the work units of the army scattered all over the country. Ephraim Agmon lives in Israel (2003)

DAVID GUR born in Hungary. Joined the Hashomer Hatzair movement in Budapest, by now illegal. At the occupation of Hungary by the Germans on March 19, 1944, he went underground with Aryan documents, joined the underground workshop team for forging documents and in due course took over the chief authority for the continual operation of the workshop. This workshop served the clandestine activities of all of the Jewish youth movements and of the Zionist Organization and unaffiliated Jews as well as most of the non-Jewish resistance groups. At the end of December 1944, he was arrested and all the contents of the workshop confiscated. He was liberated from the central military prison. David Gur lives in Israel (2003)

JEWISH COUNCIL ENSCHEDE, HOLLAND

SIG MENCO & GERARD SANDERS & ISIDOR VAN DAM

Three leaders of the Jewish Council in Enschede took the initiative, against the advice of the Jewish Council of Amsterdam, of urging their community to go into hiding and not to answer the call-up of the Germans for "labor in the East". They were in a position to support these directions to their flock since they had access to funds, to power in the community and to a well-developed underground movement headed by a prominent Protestant minister, Leendert Overduin. At the end of the war, the community in Enschede had lost relatively fewer of their members than the death toll in the general Jewish

population of the Netherlands: 500 Jews out of a population of 1,300 were saved (38.5%) whereas the survival rate in the Netherlands was less than 20%.

YOUTH ALIYA
RECHA FREIER JOSEF INDIG
GERMANY

In the summer of 1932, *Recha Freier*, a Berlin rabbi's wife and social activist, was made aware of how anti-Semitism affected the lives of Jewish adolescents of Eastern European as well as German background. She decided the solution was to bring these youngsters to Palestine. Her vision and astute foresight was to develop into a substantial rescue operation for Jewish youth in the whole of Europe. Thus *Recha Freier* founded the *Aliyat Hanoar*, (*Youth Aliyah*), still functioning today. Up until September 1939, the outbreak of WWII, some 5,000 youngsters had emigrated from Germany and neighboring countries to Palestine.

Kindertransport, started by Gertrude Wijsmuller, a Dutch Righteous Gentile, brought trainloads full of children across Europe to England. Recha Freier managed to have candidates from Youth Aliyah included. In the period from November 1938 (*Kristallnacht*) and until May 1940, the invasion of Western Europe, more than 10,000 children and teenagers thus arrived in England.

Recha Freier continued with her rescue work until the end of 1940, when it was no longer possible for Jews to get out of Germany. Daringly, at the end of 1940, Recha took a group of over 100 children, including her 11-year old daughter, on a rescue operation to Yugoslavia. With British certificates for Palestine, Recha left by train from Zagreb, reaching Palestine after a long and arduous journey.

Thirty children, **without certificates**, stayed behind under the care of *Josef Indig*, a member of Ha-Shomer Hatsa'ir, who boarded with all 30 children the **last train on July 1941** arriving at Villa Emma. In 1942 he shepherded them by illegal ways to Italy and from there, after the German occupation of Italy in 1943, across the border to Switzerland. In 1945, Indig was able to take his charges to Palestine.

Almost all of them had survived the war.

Filderman, Wilhelm 1882-1963, Romania

Filderman, born in Bucharest, held a doctoral degree in law from Paris. He was able to practice law in Romania, having obtained Romanian citizenship in 1912, a rare accomplishment for a Jew.

Throughout the war years *Filderman* maintained contact with senior officials, cabinet ministers and Premier Ion Antonescu. The Romanian leaders were forced to accept *Filderman* as the authentic representative of the Jews. The Jewish Council, which he headed, sought ***to save the Jews of Romania from deportation*** to Poland and to alleviate the daily life of the Jewish population, then suffering from the effects of countless anti-Semitic laws and regulations.

Although he failed in his plans to prevent the deportation of the Jews to Transnistria, he played a decisive role in foiling the plans to deport the entire Jewish population of Romania to the extermination camps in Poland, fall of 1942. For two years, from the end of 1941 to the end of 1943, *Filderman* ***persisted in a struggle for the right to send aid to the Jews who had been deported to Transnistria*** and he followed by campaigning for their repatriation to Romania, meeting with partial success. He saved the Romanian Jews from deportation to the extermination camps by persuading the leaders of the regime that compliance with the German demand for deportation would be a violation of Romanian sovereignty. (Encyclopedia of the Holocaust, 1990)

“Most Jews of old Romania survived...because of Romanian self-interest, national pride, realpolitik ***and the fearless stand of the Jewish leaders***”. (Bauer, *History of the Holocaust*, 309)

GISI FLEISCHMAN & MICHAEL DOV WEISMANDL, SLOVAKIA

In the early months of 1942, a new group of Jewish activists started operating in Slovakia. ***Fleischman*** was one of the

founders of this new group, simply called “Action Committee”. **Rabbi Michael Dov Weismandl** was the other founding member. “The Working Group mobilized all its resources to avert the danger through *massive bribery*...Led by Fleishmann, they were managing to provide a responsible leadership for the remnant of Slovak Jewry.” (Bauer, *Jews for Sale*, 182)

After the beginning of deportations from Slovakia in March 1942, the Committee struggled to stop the process by bribing Dieter Wisliceny, the Nazi governor of Slovakia. In order to raise money for this purpose, Fleischman called on the Hechalutz movement and the Joint in Switzerland. ***A halt in deportations was achieved from October 1942 to September 1944*** and this raised morale among the Committee members and motivated them towards a more audacious activity, the so-called ***Europa Plan***. “What is amazing in this story is that the underground leadership of a remnant of a Jewish community in a satellite state should have tried to rescue not just itself, but all the Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe in a daring plan of ransom negotiations with the murderers. In the light of traditional attitudes, it is significant and interesting that this effort should have been led by a woman, at the head of a group in which practically all the divergent ideological Jewish trends of our times were represented.” (Bauer, *idem*)

In the beginning of October 1944 Fleischman was sent in one of the last trainloads to Auschwitz. She was executed upon arrival there. Weismandl died in 1952 in the US, a broken man, having lost his wife and five children.

ZERAH WAHRHAFTIG-, 1906-2002 Lithuania

Dr. Wahrhaftig, was a leader of the Zionist Mizrachi , the Chairman of the Hechalutz Hamizrachi and vice-chairman of the Palestine Office in Warsaw. When the Germans invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, and divided the country between them and the Soviet Union, about 10,000 Jews in the eastern part of the country fled to the still neutral Lithuania. Vilnius, better known among Jews as Vilna, was the seat of the most

distinguished Talmudic academies of the preceding two hundred years. It now became the last safe refuge for Polish Jews, not yet German, not yet Soviet. Wahrhaftig was the leader of the exodus, encouraging thousands to undertake the arduous decision to escape while possible.

In the weeks preceding the Soviet take-over of Lithuania, Wahrhaftig and some of his collaborators knew how to exploit a number of lucky coincidences and in the process *some seven thousands Jews* were saved from extinction. He heard about the possibility to get a stamp in a passport with a statement from the Dutch authorities that admission into Surinam, Curaçao and other possessions of the Netherlands in the Americas, did not require an entry visa. This stamp, although meaningless in itself, served as the basis for visas of entry to Japan which were issued by the Japanese consul in Kaunas (Kovna), Chiune Sugihara, and were a ticket to the rest of the world. Within the short time of 4-6 weeks, Sugihara gave thousands of such visas apparently without the permission of his government.

Wahrhaftig went to all the Talmudic academies, the *yeshivot*, urging their heads to encourage the students to escape from Europe. Only the Mir Yeshiva answered the call and survived the war intact, as did a number of eminent Talmudic scholars from the Telshe and Longa Yeshivoth in Poland.

COMITE DE DEFENSE DES JUIFS BELGIUM

It began its activities in September 1942. The initiative for its creation was taken by Ghert Jospa, who established contact between representatives of the Jewish Communists and the Front D'indépendance and various Zionist activists across the political spectrum.

The CDJ had important ties with the general resistance organizations as well as with the AJB and *it played a central role in the rescue and resistance operations* during the period

from 1942 to 1944. The organization's main purpose was to find hiding places for Jews; its children's section succeeded in *hiding four thousand children*. Large numbers of Jewish adults also had the CDJ's help in finding a place to hide.

Jewish armed resistance operations (some of which had no connection with the CDJ) had some impressive successes. On two occasions in the summer of 1942, the target was the AJB (the Belgian Judenrat). In one instance, the purpose was to seize the card index that the AJB maintained in its office, and in another the attack was directed at Robert Holcinger (murdered by a Jew), the official in charge of sending out the call-ups for deportation.

The single most significant resistance operation carried out by the Jewish underground in Belgium was the attack on a deportation train on the night of April 19-20, 1943, containing a transport of Jews from the Mechelen camp (transport #20) headed for Auschwitz. This was the only recorded instance of an armed attack in Europe on a train taking Jews to their death.

In the attack on Transport #20, 231 Jews escaped of whom 23 were shot to death by train guards. Most of the escapees jumped from the train as soon as they could. One group of 17 Jews was saved by the outside help of three persons – none of them affiliated with any organization – headed by a Jew.

TUVYA BIELSKI, 1906-1978 BELARUS

Full-scale persecution in Belarus began when the Germans invaded in June, 1941. In the first six months, between June and December, 1941, 38% of the Jewish population, 130,000 souls, were murdered, and in the second wave of violence, from March-December, 1942, another 50%, or 170,000, were submitted to the same fate.

One of three surviving brothers, Tuvya was the dominant one. A born leader, intelligent, and charismatic, Tuvya paved the way for a rescue operation which ended up saving the lives of more than 1,200 Jews. "I wanted to save people, not kill them...I

noticed that Jews don't listen to each other, but they listened to me, they respected me. I therefore had to save them", Tuvia said. Though they participated in military engagements against the Germans, preservation of life remained the Bielski otriad's (unit) primary mission.

In the forest they built themselves permanent hide-outs, two-thirds underground, the rest protruding, pyramid-style, wooden structures. In the fall of 1943, there were 700 fugitives, men, women, children and elderly people. The Bielski camp grew in numbers and in scope. A viable settlement was built, nicknamed the "Bielski Shtetl", which contained not only dwellings but also workshops, a public kitchen and dining room, a clinic and two hospitals dug into the earth, a bakery, a flour mill, a bath house, school, stables, a cowshed, a slaughterhouse, a sausage producing plant, and more. Its number grew to 1200.

Organization inside the camp was painstaking; the camp even supplied the surrounding partisan camps with bread and sausage, tool production and repair.

In July 1944, the Bielski camp marched out of the forests in a triumphant march to the city of Novogroudok.

Walter Susskind, Holland

Walter, a thirty-nine year old former company director, was a member of the Jewish Council (Joodse Raad) in Amsterdam. As such he became a member of the *Expositur*, a department of the Jewish Council which was supposed to coordinate the emigration of Jews from the Netherlands with the German authorities. Emigration was a euphemism for deportation and this started in Amsterdam at the Amsterdamsche Schouwburg, the theater in a well-to-do section of the city which was the round-up place.

Walter is especially well-known as the driving force behind the rescue of Jewish children from the round-up center. Across from this theater, where Jews were awaiting deportation, there was a daycare center for children, the creche, where children under a certain age were being held prisoner. From this creche, Walter was able, with the help of a devoted staff and the cooperation of an SS watchman who himself was detected and died in

a concentration camp, to spirit children away to hiding places. Dutch resistance organizations, many composed mainly of university students, would come to pick up the children, some in baby carriages or strollers, others in potato sacks, and take them to previously arranged hiding places in far away provinces, some to Limburg or Friesland, others less far away. Between 750-1000 children were saved this way.

INDIVIDUAL STORIES

HANAN MAYER, POLAND

Born 1914, Borislav, Poland, died 29-12-02 in Haifa

Hanan was from a large family in eastern Poland. When he took charge of his family's fate in 1942, he was twenty-eight years old. His family was comprised of: Hanan's mother; Joseph, his oldest brother, married to Frida, with three boys, Haim, Zeev, Arik; Munish, the second one, married to Genia, with one son, Maitek-Shmuel; Tsila, his sister, married to Zonia Finkelstein, mother to two daughters, Ada and Leah; (a third brother, Shmuel, had made aliyah to Palestine in 1930); and his sister, Regi, who was a student in Lvov.

Bit by bit, Hanan's relatives came from Borislav to Lvov and found shelter with their brother. This was the beginning of a long period, lasting almost three years, in which Hanan protected his family by using his sharp mind.

In February 1943, Monish, Hanan's brother and Genia's husband, was able to escape to Lvov and join the family. Rega, the beloved sister, who was abducted at the end of May that year, betrayed by someone who knew her from her student days, was one of 3000 women shot and killed in Lvov on June 1, 1943.

Making a living was an all-important task. The family decided to take as model what their father had done in WWI: Rethreading large spools of thread to make small ones of 25 meter for retail business. Although at first the profits were small, in time the family became more adept and started making larger profits. The work was performed at home. From 6AM to 7 or 8PM every day the whole family worked to dye the thread, prepare the spools, and wind them on cut construction paper using a small machine bought for the purpose. Hanan was the person working outside the house, buying the construction paper as well as the other raw materials and marketing the spools afterwards. This was the most dangerous part of the business. Hanan, with his non-Jewish appearance

and his fluent Polish managed to cultivate good relations with his customers, who became permanent buyers and in time the business flourished. At the peak of production, the family had an output of 1000-1200 small spools per day. The earnings kept them alive on bread and potatoes.

On July 27, 1944, Lvov was liberated. Hanan had saved his family, eleven people in all. He was a true Jewish rescuer.

DORA YARMULKOVSKA – Born 1922 Warsaw

In 1939, Dora finished high school and was accepted into the pharmacology department of the university, one of only very few Jewish students to be accepted. But then the war broke out on September 1, 1939, and her life changed beyond recognition. First living in the ghetto, Dora, with the help of her Polish governess, Helena, moved out into the Aryan part of Warsaw and set herself up in a rented apartment. Although only twenty years old, Dora found ways to support herself, sometimes selling chickens and meat bought in nearby villages, sometimes from other kinds of small business enterprises.

At the end of the autumn of 1943, Dora was approached by the Zagota underground group. At first she refused to take in a Jew and hide him. However, after repeated requests, she gave in and agreed to take an older man. He came to stay with her in December, 1943, and stayed with her until January, 1945, when the Russians entered Warsaw. Wisely, she told the caretaker of the house that the man who was living with her was her husband. Neither the caretaker nor the fugitive knew that she was in reality a Jew herself. Dora's protégé was in fact married and his wife was also hiding. He got 500 zlotys from the underground every month and this helped them along. Dora, who had an Aryan ID, was not getting anything, of course, and had to make a living by working. Her "hider" helped her by producing cigarettes which she sold in the city. She did business with everyone, including German officers sitting in cafes, among them the [Mocca](#) café, which was for "Germans only". In the months following, Dora had a chance of protecting her protégé's wife and a hospitalized cousin for whom she provided food on a daily basis. When the Warsaw uprising started in August 1944, Dora and her protégés fled the city on foot, reaching a nearby village where she had some connections and where they were sheltered until the end of the war.

When the war ended, on January 17, 1945, still no one knew that Dora was Jewish herself. The admission that she was Jewish was first made to her protégé. He was completely flabbergasted. When he recovered from

his surprise, he said: “If this is true, then you are a real heroine! If a Pole takes on such a project, he knows that he is endangering himself, but a Jew! A person who has no rights and nevertheless you did live and even had an apartment of your own!” He might have added that she used her privileged position to save his life but he didn’t and never afterwards gave tribute to her. Nevertheless, Dora was a courageous Jewish rescuer.