

***The Heroes of the Holocaust:  
Those that Risked Their Lives to Save Jewish People***

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It is estimated that almost six million Jewish people were exterminated during the Nazi Holocaust of 1933-1945. There were also another 5 million Poles, Russians, Ukrainians, clergy, Gypsies and members of other groups also killed in the killing factories and policies of the Third Reich. Many German and other national Christians turned their backs on the Jewish people or participated in aiding in the killings. However, there were some that resisted the policies and practices of the Nazis in order to save the lives of Jewish men, women and children. This section of the *Christian Peacemaking in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* page will celebrate the risk and sacrifices of some of those that offered compassion and help to the Jewish people during their ordeal. The people that this section will discuss are honored as members of the *Righteous Among the Nations* in the *Vad Vashem*, the memorial to the Holocaust victims in Israel.

**Profile of rescuers**

Rescuers were peasants and nannies, aristocrats and clergy, bakers and doctors, social workers and storekeepers, school children and police officers, diplomats and grandmothers. They were from many countries—the Netherlands, the Ukraine, Poland, Germany, France, Hungary, Denmark, Italy, Greece, Belgium and other nations. Rescuers viewed Jews and other victims not as the enemy, but as human beings. Generally, rescuers were able to accept people who were different than them. They also held the conviction that what one person did could make a difference.

Each rescue story is different. Yet, what rescuers had in common was a combination of awareness, resourcefulness, empathy, vigilance, inventiveness, courage, compassion, and persistence. First, a rescuer had to recognize that a person was endangered, something that was not always clear because of the propaganda and the secrecy of the Nazis. Many rescuers today recount that witnessing one horrifying incident between Nazis and their victims propelled them into becoming rescuers. Next, rescuers had to decide whether or not to assume the responsibility of helping and risk the potential consequences. Public hangings, deportation to concentration camps, and on-the-spot shootings were very real consequences of helping enemies of the Third Reich. After the rescuers found ways to help, they took action. Sometimes the entire transformation from bystander to rescuer took just seconds, and, in certain cases, was not even a conscious decision.

People rescued others for various reasons. Some were motivated by a sense of morality. Others had a relationship with a particular person or group. Some were politically driven and were adamantly opposed to the Third Reich. Other rescuers were involved at work, as diplomats, nurses, social workers, and doctors, and continued their involvement beyond their professional obligation. Many children followed in their parents' footsteps and became rescuers.

The scope of the rescuing activities varied, from leaving food regularly by a ghetto fence, to hiding someone within one's house for several years, to creating a bureaucracy that allowed thousands of Jews to emigrate.

Rescuers possessed an inner core of unshakable values and beliefs that enabled them to take a stand against the horrific injustices Hitler perpetrated during his twelve years in power. As social psychologist Dr. Eva Fogelman explains in *Conscience and Courage*:

**It was a reign which, nearly half a century later, still challenges our understanding. Evil was rewarded and good acts were punished. Bullies were aggrandized and the meek trampled. In this mad world, most people lost their bearings. Fear disoriented them, and self-protection blinded them. A few, however, did not lose their way. A few took their direction from their own moral compass.**

In 1953, the Knesset legislated that Israel would build a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust that would be called the *Vad Vashem*. Eventually the memorial would include those that helped to save some of the Jewish people from the horrors of the death camps during the Holocaust. To be inducted in the memorial as one of the Righteous a person had to meet the following criteria:

The very attempt by a non-Jewish rescuer, including his, or her, personal participation in a serious attempt to help at least one Jewish person to survive, irrespective of whether the rescue operation proved successful or not;

At a time when the Jewish person was helpless and, in order to survive, had to rely on help by others;

And in that undertaking, the rescuer placed his, or her own life and well-being in jeopardy;

The rescue act not having been preconditioned on the receipt of a substantial monetary or other tangible reward and compensation;

The humanitarian motivation proved to be the rescuer's principal incentive;

The rescuer not having, before and during the rescue operation, been in a position to directly or indirectly cause physical harm to Jews and/or other nationalities;

Verification of the story exists through elaborate and convincing testimonies by their rescued party/or incontestable documentary material.

All of those listed below fit or come close to the aforementioned criteria.

**Kurt Gerstein**

### ***The German SS Who Attempted to Expose the Horrors***

Born in 1905 to a nationalist-minded father, Kurt Gerstein received his university degree in 1931 in mining engineering. He was also very interested in religious matters and had considered studying for the ministry in the Protestant church. It came as surprise to many that only five months after the Nazis came to power he joined the Nazi party. Soon after his joining the party he began to have doubts about the Nazis as a result of their continued efforts to infiltrate the Protestant churches. His efforts to prevent some of this from happening ultimately led to his being expelled from the party in 1935.

Gerstein became interested and involved in the Confessing Church of Germany, which consisted of those Protestant ministers who refused to take an oath to Hitler and opposed the Nazification of the churches. In 1936 he was arrested and a search of his home revealed thousands of pamphlets of the Confessing Church, critical of Nazi anti-Church policies. He was later release due to the efforts of his father. In 1938 Gerstein was arrested again and spent six weeks in a concentration camp. Sometime later he reapplied to become a Nazi party member but was refused. In 1940 he applied to the SS in order to gather information on whom was responsible for the mass killings of the Jews being performed by the SS. On March 10, 1941 he was admitted to the Waffen SS.

Gerstein was assigned to the SS Hygiene Department, in Berlin, where he headed a project dealing with constructing and improving decontamination facilities in prisoner-of-war and concentration camps. He found out that over 10,000 a day were dying in the camps of Belzec, Treblinka, Sobibor and Maidanek. In Belzec, he witnessed the mass gassing of Jewish men, women and children. He noted that many were murmuring their last prayer as they were whip-lashed into the dark gas chambers. He noted in his post-war testimony the following:

***I pray with them...and cried out to my God and theirs. How glad I should have been to go into the gas chambers with them! How gladly I should have died the same death as theirs! Then an SS officer in uniform would have been found in the gas chambers. People would have believed it was an accident and the story would have been buried and forgotten. But I could not do this yet. I felt I must not succumb to the temptation to die with these people. I now know a great deal about these murders.***

The following day he related what he saw to a Swedish diplomat and begged him to tell the Swedish government and the Allies about the atrocities in the camps. Later he tried to destroy shipments of Zyklon B gas that would be used for the extermination of thousands of Jewish people.

Though Kurt Gerstein has not been award the title of *Righteous*, he stands as an example of what one person could do in the midst of the horror of the times.

**Stefan Sawa**

The following story is of a Polish rescuer whose humanitarianism resulted in his assassination at the hands of his own people. Sawa was a Polish national and Catholic that helped Jews that were held in the Kielce Ghetto in Poland during the Holocaust. He would smuggle food and clothing to the Jewish people in the ghetto. In 1942, the Germans liquidated most of the Jews of Kielce, allowing only a small group to survive to serve as laborers in a German factory. It is at this time that Stefan Sawa began to hide Jews in safe houses.

In early 1944, a unit of the Polish underground headed by a man known by the code name "Barabash" searched the house where some Jews were hiding. Stefan Sawa had placed the Jews in this home. The Polish underground told Sawa that he would have to expel these Jews from the house because if the Nazis found out that they were there the village would suffer reprisals from the SS. The men of the Polish underground left but returned to find the Jews still in the house. They set fire to the building and all the occupants died in the inferno.

Stefan Sawa was accepted as a member of the *Righteous* by the Vad Vashem who was referred to as "a Polish knight of the spirit of the highest caliber".

### **Marie Taquet-Mertens**

Marie Taquet-Mertens ran a home for Jewish children. She was appointed an administrator of the facility with her husband by the head of the Brussels government. She and her husband help to save many Jewish children from deportation to the death camps during the Holocaust period. The Chateau du Faing was located in the village of Jamoigne-sur-Semois, some 10 kilometers east of Florenville.

The Chateau was a welcome haven of safety for the Jewish children during the war. Mrs. Taquet-Mertens made each child feel welcome and would steer the local Gestapo away from the Chateau in order to guard the identities and safety of the Jewish children. In September of 1943 the Germans arrived at the home looking for Jewish children. Mrs. Tanquet-Mertens refused to acknowledge that Jewish children were on the premises and worked to see that no German patrols would find out about the children. During the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944, she hid all the children in underground caves tending to each one of them with affection and care.

### **Oskar Schindler**

Oskar Schindler (1908-1974) was born on April 28, 1908 in Svitavy (Zwittau), Moravia, at that time a province of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. An ethnic German and a Catholic, he remained in Svitavy during the interwar period and held Czech citizenship after Moravia was incorporated into the newly established Czechoslovak Republic in 1918.

After attending a series of trade schools in Brno and marrying Emilie Pelzl in 1928, Schindler held a variety of jobs, including working in his father's farm machinery business in Svitavy, opening a driving school in Sumperk, and selling government property in Brno. He also served in the Czechoslovak army and in 1938 attained the rank of lance corporal in the reserves. Schindler began working with the *Amt Auslands/Abwehr* (Office of the Military Foreign Intelligence) of the German Armed Forces in 1936. In February 1939, five months after the German annexation of the Sudetenland, he joined the Nazi Party. An opportunist businessman with a taste for the finer things in life, he seemed an unlikely candidate to become a wartime rescuer. During World War II, Schindler rescued more than 1,000 Jews from deportation to Auschwitz, Nazi Germany's largest killing center.

Following the German invasion and occupation of Poland, Schindler moved to Krakow from Svitavy in October 1939. Taking advantage of the German occupation program to “Aryanize” and “Germanize” Jewish-owned and Polish-owned businesses in the so-called General Government (Generalgouvernement), he bought Rekord Ltd., a Jewish-owned enamelware manufacturer and converted its plant to establish the *Deutsche Emalwarenfabrik Oskar Schindler* (German Enamelware Factory Oskar Schindler), also known as Emalia, in November 1939. While Schindler operated two other factories in Krakow, only at Emalia did he employ Jewish workers who resided in the nearby Krakow ghetto. At its peak strength in 1944, Emalia employed 1,700 workers; at least 1,000 were Jewish forced laborers, whom the Germans had relocated from the Krakow ghetto after its liquidation in March 1943 to the forced labor camp and later concentration camp Krakau-Plaszow.

Although the prisoners deployed at Emalia were still subject to the brutal conditions of the Plaszow concentration camp, Schindler intervened repeatedly on their behalf, through bribes and personal diplomacy, both for the well-being of Jews threatened on an individual basis and to ensure, until late 1944, that the SS did not deport his Jewish workers. In order to claim the Jewish workers to be essential to the war effort, he added an armaments manufacturing division to Emalia. During the liquidation of the Krakow ghetto in March 1943, Schindler allowed his Jewish workers to stay at the factory overnight.

After the SS re-designated Plaszow as a concentration camp in August 1943, Schindler persuaded the SS to convert Emalia into a subcamp of Plaszow. In addition to the approximately 1,000 Jewish forced laborers registered as factory workers, Schindler permitted 450 Jews working in other nearby factories to live at Emalia as well, saving them from the systematic brutality and arbitrary murder that was part of daily life in Plaszow. Schindler did not act here without risk or cost; his protection of his Jewish workers and some of his shady business dealings led SS and police authorities to suspect

him of corruption and of giving unauthorized aid to Jews. German SS and police officials arrested him three times, while he owned Emalia, but were unable to charge him.

In October 1944, after the SS transferred the Emalia Jews to Plaszow, Schindler sought and obtained authorization to relocate his plant to Brünnlitz (Brnenec) in Moravia, and reopen it exclusively as an armaments factory. One of his assistants drew several versions of a list of up to 1,200 Jewish prisoners needed to work in the new factory. These lists came to be known collectively as "Schindler's List." Schindler met the specifications required by the SS to classify Brünnlitz as a sub-camp of Gross-Rosen concentration camp and thereby facilitated the survival of around 800 Jewish men whom the SS deported from Plaszow via Gross-Rosen to Brünnlitz and between 300 and 400 Jewish women from Plaszow via Auschwitz.

Though classified as an armaments factory, the Brünnlitz plant produced just one wagonload of live ammunition in just under eight months of operation. By presenting bogus production figures, Schindler justified the existence of the sub-camp as an armaments factory and thus facilitated the survival of over 1,000 Jews, sparing them the horrors and brutality of conventional camp life. Schindler left Brünnlitz only on May 9, 1945, the day that Soviet troops liberated the camp. After the war, Schindler and his wife Emilie settled in Regensburg, Germany, until 1949, when they immigrated to Argentina. In 1957, permanently separated but not divorced from Emilie, Schindler returned alone to Germany. In 1962, Yad Vashem awarded Schindler the title "Righteous Among the Nations" in recognition of his efforts to save Jews during the Holocaust at great personal risk. Emilie was similarly honored in 1993.

Schindler died in Germany, penniless and almost unknown, in October 1974. Many of those whose survival he facilitated-and their descendants-lobbied for and financed the transfer of his body for burial in Israel. In 1993, the United States Holocaust Memorial Council posthumously presented the Museum's Medal of Remembrance to Schindler. Rarely presented, this medal honors deserving recipients for extraordinary deeds during the Holocaust and in the cause of Remembrance. Emilie Schindler accepted the medal on behalf of her ex-husband at a ceremony in the Museum's Hall of Remembrance.

## **André Trocmé and Le Chambon**

An important story of nonviolent resistance during World War II, a story that should be taught and retaught by the Church, involves the Protestant community

of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon in central France, a Huguenot town of about 3,000 residents, during its occupation by Nazi Germany in 1940-1944. Villagers in Le Chambon placed their lives on the line in order to offer safe haven to Jewish, Eastern European, and other refugees from the Nazi campaign of extermination. These people of faith serve as a model of Christian discipleship in a time of peril.

Upon Marshal Philippe Pétain's signing of the Armistice in 1940 – a treaty that created the Vichy government of France following its military defeat by Germany – André Trocmé, the pastor of the Huguenot community of Le Chambon, preached to his congregation that “the duty of Christians requires acts of resistance through weapons of the spirit.” Instead of accepting Vichy collaboration with the Nazis, Trocmé encouraged the Chambonnais to refuse to “give up their consciences, to participate in hatred, betrayal and murder.” The community responded by reaching out to their Jewish brothers and sisters.

### **Beginnings**

Trocmé and his wife Magda moved to Le Chambon in 1934 and founded a secondary school promoting peace in 1938. As Pastor, Trocmé used his influence to teach his belief in the God-given dignity of all human persons. According to Trocmé, Jesus taught the basic truth: “Because of the importance of the human person... Jesus (a) sacrificed his earthly life for one man in the street and (b) sacrificed his perfection in order to save one single man. Salvation has been accomplished without any regard to the moral value of the saved man.” He asserted that he “did not know what a Jew was; he knew only men.” Trocmé viewed the human person as being reflective of God's generous love in creation. He attested that the main distinction among people is between those who believe that those in need are as precious as they themselves are, and those who do not believe this. Trocmé argued that “decent” people who fail to respond to the humiliation and destruction of others around them because of indifference or cowardice pose the most dangerous threats to the world. Aware of the immediate and real suffering around him, André Trocmé regarded assisting Jews as part of God's work.

For the Chambonnais, responding to the Jewish plight came naturally, in part because of their own history of persecution by the French king and the Catholic Church. In the first half of the 16th century, Huguenots had begun to arrive in Le Chambon, a place of security for Protestants.

The Chambonnais, led by the Trocmés, however, did not veer from their commitment to nonviolence. Although other resisters to the Nazi regime, such as the Communists, regularly condemned the Chambonnais for their nonviolent philosophy, André Trocmé responded that violence contributed to the force of the enemy: “Why in war—and we are in a state of war with Vichy and Germany—that's aiding and abetting the enemy! You're peddling the same old opiate of the people that has kept the masses from moving forward to social justice.” Looking to Jesus as the embodiment of forgiveness of sins, André Trocmé refused to act as an agent of violence.

## Acts of Resistance

André Trocmé's preparation of Le Chambon as a safe haven for Jews began with his encounter with Burns Chalmers, a Quaker responsible for helping secure safety for Jewish refugees during the French Occupation. Trusted by the Vichy government to care for victims of war, the Quakers also brought supplies and consolation to people in internment camps. Meeting Chalmers in Nîmes in December of 1940, André Trocmé expressed his interest in working with the Quakers in the camps. Instead, Chalmers persuaded Trocmé to prepare Le Chambon to be a bastion of security and freedom, and offered financial support from the Quakers and the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

Magda Trocmé described her family's resistance activity as quite normal. According to her, "helping Jews was more important than resisting Vichy and the Nazis." Noting her husband's role in preparing the community to resist Nazi brutalities, Magda wrote, "Even before the war, we already knew the truth about what was happening to Jews and others... Little by little, André tried to prepare the population, preaching to them, preparing them to stand fast."

André Trocmé urged his community to "obey God rather than man when there [was] a conflict between the commandments of the government and the commandments of the Bible." As Vichy increased its persecution of Jews in 1942, Trocmé faced increased pressure to provide names of protected Jews in Le Chambon. Georges Lamirand, head of the General Secretariat for Youth, drafted an order requiring André Trocmé to name and locate the Jews in his community, but Trocmé refused. His response: "No, I cannot. First, I do not know their names, and I do not know who they are. And second, these Jews, they are my brothers." The community shut off streetlights and warned Jews to go into hiding. As the police searched the houses of the community, Jews fled into the wooded countryside, aided by the Chambonnais.

From the making of counterfeit cards to providing food and shelter, the resisting Chambon-nais worked day-by-day to help the refugees. In contrast to the maquis groups, which used arms in acts of resistance, Le Chambon used secrecy as their weapon against Vichy and Nazi forces. As Magda Trocmé noted, the decision-making process to partake in the resistance began in the kitchen. She asserted, they "did what had to be done." Inviting refugees into her home, Magda Trocmé dismissed the danger at her doorstep. There was no alternative. She notes: "How could we refuse them? A person doesn't sit down and say I'm going to do this and that. We had no time to think... It was not something extraordinary."

In February of 1943, André Trocmé wrote, "In the course of this summer we have been able to help about sixty Jewish refugees in our house; we have hidden them, fed them and often, we have taken them to a safe country..." In the course of the Occupation, 5,000 Jewish refugees of all age groups came to Le Chambon. Some of the refugees were French Jews fleeing from Northern France; others came from Eastern Europe and others from Germany and Austria.

On February 13th, 1943, two policemen arrived at the Trocmé home to arrest André. As he was not yet home, Magda offered the police supper while they waited for her husband's arrival. A neighbor who happened to stop by the house learned of André's arrest and spread the word around the village. People from the community began arriving at the Trocmés' home with presents—candles, sardines, soap, toilet paper—to give to their beloved pastor. Taken to a Vichy detention camp, André was later released because he was considered more of a threat inside the camp than out of it.

Having returned to Le Chambon, André worked with an ecumenical staff to establish and maintain places of safety for Jews and other refugees, funded by world organizations including the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Quakers, the American Congregationalists, and certain Catholic groups. Unfortunately, while a few Catholic families of Le Chambon participated in rescue efforts for the refugees, most of the dozen Catholic families in the village did not, partly because the Catholic priest had no interest in working with Protestants.

### **Gold Tested in Fire**

Despite the relative success in Le Chambon, some members faced deportation and death. At the end of June 1943, the Gestapo made its only successful raid in Le Chambon at the House of Rocks, which housed and schooled children. Daniel Trocmé, André's cousin, was arrested and executed on April 4th, 1944, at Maidanek in Poland. Daniel's nephew, the son of Magda and André, pledged his revenge, but Magda reminded him of André's words: "If you do such a thing, someone else is going to take revenge against you. And that is why we are never finished. We go on and on and on. We must forgive, we must forget; we must do better."

André Trocmé, a man of deep faith, was accompanied by his wife, Magda, in leading their community to be one of good conscience and action. Their model of faith and action, inspired by the life and death of Jesus Christ, charges us today to examine the ways in which our quickness to resort to war brings ongoing peril to men, women, and children around the world.

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