

National Days of Remembrance

SELECTED READINGS: RESCUE

Voices of the Times

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

“A person cannot be religious and indifferent to other human beings’ plight and suffering. In fact, the tragedy of man is that so much of our history is a history of indifference, dominated by a famous statement, ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’”

A refugee to the United States from Nazi Europe, Heschel became a fervent advocate of human and civil rights. He made this statement on behalf of Russian Jews. From “Anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation,” first published in the United Synagogue Review (Winter 1964). Used with permission.

Eleanor Roosevelt

“What has happened to us in this country? If we study our own history, we find that we have always been ready to receive the unfortunates from other countries, and though this may seem a generous gesture on our part, we have profited a thousand fold by what they have brought us.”

Roosevelt wrote this in a newspaper column supporting the Wagner-Rogers Bill, which would have allowed 20,000 Jewish children to enter the United States. Because of widespread public opposition, the bill was defeated in February 1939. From “My Day,” her syndicated newspaper column, January 23, 1939. Used with permission.

William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury

“We are confronted, as all your Lordships know, with an evil the magnitude and horror of which it is impossible to describe in words. There has, I suppose, never been so great a manifestation of the power of sheer cruelty and of the determination to wreak upon a helpless people what is not vengeance, for there is no offence, but the satisfaction of a mere delight in power such as is to be witnessed on the continent of Europe at the present time. ... We know that Hitler near the beginning of the war declared that this war must lead to the extermination of either the Jewish or the German people... He is now putting that threat into effect, and no doubt we are to a very large extent at present powerless to stop him. We are told that the only real solution is rapid victory. No doubt it is true that if we could win the war in the course of a few weeks we could still deliver multitudes of those who are now doomed to death. But we dare not look for such a result, and we know that what we can do will be but little in comparison with the need. My whole plea on behalf of those for whom I am speaking is that whether what we do be large or little it should at least be all we can do. ... We know of course that the German government will not give exit permits. What matters is that we should open our doors irrespective of the question whether the German door is open or shut, so that all who can may come. ... My chief protest is against procrastination of any kind. ... The Jews are being slaughtered at the rate of tens of thousands a day on many days. ... We at this moment have upon us a tremendous responsibility. We stand at the bar of history, of humanity, and of God.”

An outspoken foe of Nazism and antisemitism, Temple lobbied to change immigration law to allow more Jewish refugees to

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enter Great Britain. This excerpt is from a speech he delivered to the House of Lords on March 23, 1943.

Voices of the Rescuers

Faiza Abdul-Wahab, daughter of Tunisian rescuer Khaled Abdul-Wahab

“My father’s name was Khaled Abdul-Wahab. He had a farm in Mahdia, which is a little town by the coast of Tunisia. And when the Germans occupied Tunisia, he learned that a family was threatened, a Jewish family. Anyway, they knew each other because this was a very small town. So he came in the middle of the night to where they were hiding and took them to his farm where they stayed the whole occupation. And so it was a total of 24 people, different families, that were hidden in my father’s farm.

“When I asked him what happened during the war in Tunisia—did the Germans come or not come?—because I knew nothing about that. I asked him, and he told me, ‘Yes, I kept several families in my farm during the war, Jewish families.’ But I say, ‘Okay.’ You know, no big deal, because we were living all together in Tunisia—Jews, not Jews, and Italians, and French people, and Arabs. But the rest, we were Tunisians before being Muslims or Jews. Our first common link was we were Tunisian. We ate the same food; we had the same—shared a lot of things. So for me, when he said that, I didn’t know he had taken risks with his life, of course, because he didn’t tell me that. He just said, ‘Yes, I kept some—I protected some Jewish families.’ For him it was normal, and that’s all.

“I’m sure he would have been just very happy to have this recognition. And I’m very proud of him. Even the nomination is symbolically a great thing. And I hope it has an impact a little more than symbolic in people’s minds. ... And my father, he would have said that his dream was to see his—these two people come back again and live again without these problems. So I carry my father’s, what he did, I carry it for the best. I hope so.”

Khaled Abdul-Wahab was the first Arab person to be nominated for the designation of Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem. Interview from Voices on Antisemitism, ushmm.org.

Clara Dijkstra

“Let me tell you how Nettie came into my life. One spring day in ’42, I went to visit some friends and there was a woman there named Sylvia Bloch. She was very shaken up because early the next morning, she and her husband had to report to the Zentralstelle, the big Nazi office on the Adama van Scheltemaplein, to go to work in Germany. They had been given a chance to dive under, but the people who had offered to hide them wouldn’t let them bring their little daughter. ‘Why don’t you give her to me?’ I said. ‘I’ll take care of her.’ She looked at me with red-rimmed eyes. ‘What can I pay you to do this?’ she asked. ‘Nothing,’ I said. ‘Nothing at all.’

“She’d been almost hysterical, but now she calmed down. She left right away, saying she would bring her child to my place as soon as she could. A little while later she appeared at my front door with two-year-old Nettie. She had brought her stroller and all her clothes. When Sylvia was leaving, the child was crying ‘Mamma! Mamma!’ But after a while she settled down, and took a nap.

“When my husband came home, he looked at Nettie asleep in the stroller, and said, ‘What’s this?’ ‘She’s ours,’ I said. ‘I’ll take care of her; I’ll handle everything. If the Germans come, just let me do the talking.’ My mother wasn’t happy either. She said, ‘Don’t do it! Don’t do it! You worry me so!’ But I told her, ‘Mother, I love you, but it’s already done. We have a child, a Jewish child.’ Then she said, ‘Good for you.’”

Nettie’s parents survived and reclaimed her after the war, but Nettie remained close to Dijkstra throughout her life,

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nominating her for recognition by Yad Vashem as a Righteous Among the Nations. This passage is from The Heart Has Reasons, Mark Klempner.

Varian Fry

“As long ago as last September, the Marseilles authorities let the consul know that they would be pleased to have me leave France. I have to admit that I am proud to have stayed, as I did, nearly a year after that first demarche was made. I stayed because the refugees needed me. But it took courage, and courage is a quality I hadn’t previously been sure I possessed.”

An American journalist, Fry worked with American and French organizations to help almost 2,000 Jews escape occupied France. This passage is from a letter of September 14, 1941, to his mother, published in the Holocaust Encyclopedia, ushmm.org.

Pieter Meerburg

“So in ’41 a group of us got together with the aim of resisting in some way. We figured that those who struggle can lose, but those who don’t struggle have already lost, so we carried out protests, circulated petitions, did some sabotage ... And after about six months of this, Jür Haak found his way to one of our secret meetings. He was in contact with the Utrecht Kindercomité (Committee for Children), and they were already busy hiding Jewish children. So he said to us, ‘They’re sitting in Utrecht, while you’re here in Amsterdam where there are so many Jewish children. Would you like to help them?’ And that’s how the child rescuing started ... There were so many children who needed to be saved, but we could only save a few of them—we knew that. By the end of the war, about 350 children had passed through our hands, and several other groups were able to rescue about the same number, bringing the total up to about eleven hundred children. But what’s that out of one hundred forty thousand people? It’s infinitesimal; it’s not enough. One of the things that I regret very much is that we couldn’t do more. I mean, we really worked very hard at it, as hard as we could—it was all we did for three years. But still, I think it’s such a tragedy that so few people helped. It’s a shame for humankind. Half of the children should have been saved, or if not that, at least a third of them.”

A Dutch law student, Meerburg, and his acquaintances started a resistance movement in Amsterdam and rescued about 350 Jewish children by finding foster families for them. This passage is from The Heart Has Reasons, Mark Klempner.

Kees Veenstra

“There was a raid on our little village of Bussum in autumn of ’44, and a section of the town was closed off. But a man came bicycling down our street trying to escape. He rode up to me, panting, ‘I’m a railway man, and they’ll shoot me if they find me.’ I said, ‘Come with me.’ My father and I had dug out a makeshift hiding place beneath the floorboards in the hallway of our kitchen. There was a big cupboard there, and you had to go through the lower door of the cupboard to get down below. We had sawed the floorboards, so they could be lifted up at that spot.

When we heard the Germans approaching, we opened the cupboard, pulled up the floorboards, and crawled under. Then my mother put the boards back, threw a piece of linoleum over them, and put a vacuum cleaner on top of it all. A few slivers of light came through the slats, but besides that, it was pitch dark. That railway

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man and I lay beside each other on the clammy ground, listening to the sounds from the street; we could hear German soldiers yelling, and every now and then, a burst of machine gun fire.”

“Soon the Nazis were at our house, banging on the door with the butts of their rifles. My mother let them in—six or seven soldiers. At that moment, she remembered that there were some illegal newspapers on the dining room table—stupid, for we never left those lying around. The Germans were about to search the house, but my mother said, ‘Here, let me make you something to drink.’ So she crumpled the illegal papers and lit the wood stove with them. We had no gas anymore, so that was perfectly plausible. Oh, she was clever, and not afraid! Meanwhile, we were lying under there with nothing between us and the jackboots of the Nazis but the floorboards. We listened as the commander questioned my mother. ... All the while, that railway man’s heart was pounding like a hammer in his chest—boom, boom, boom. Could they hear it? Thankfully, no. But I must say, my mother was very brave, don’t you think?”

Veenstra was the son of a leading Dutch newspaper editor. The family hid Jews and distributed false identification documents. This passage is from The Heart Has Reasons, Mark Klemperer.

Sir Nicholas Winton

“I mean, after all, you didn’t need any special knowledge to bring children out. You needed a lot of effort and work and initiative and dealing with authority and all that, but that was general knowledge. It wasn’t any particular knowledge. Not like the workings of the stock exchange where you had to know how it worked and what the commissions were and what you had to do and when you had to do it and for whom you had to do it and what the price was and remember the price while you were doing something else. It was nothing like that in dealing with children. No, it was quite different.”

Winton organized the rescue of almost 700 Jewish children from Czechoslovakia, arranging for their safe passage and finding foster families for them in Great Britain. This passage is from “A Rescuer’s Reflections on his Choices,” ushmm.org.

Voices of the Rescued

David Bergman

“When we arrived, I had already passed out ... three out of the 150 there survived. They were all ... the rest of them just lay dead. And what they did is, they picked me up ... with the hands and somebody else with the legs and then they threw me in a stretcher ... getting ready to take me to the crematorium. That’s where they took ... that’s where their objective was. And somehow, ... somebody who was carrying me noticed a hand moving, that I was still alive. So at a risk to his life, he took me into a barracks. It was actually like a shower room. And I was dazed at that time, virtually, I had no idea. ... And when I came to in the bathroom there, it was ... I woke up, and I ... I thought I was dead. It was like I was in another world. ‘What are these people doing here? Where am I?’ And I thought, I ... I ... I was totally dazed. I couldn’t figure out even where I am. And then somebody came over and told me what happened, explained to me that ‘You were just a few seconds away from being thrust into the crematorium, and they saw that you were still alive.’ They said, ‘You’re the first youth that age who actually made it alive.’ And then they took me and they hid me, you know, secretly in their barracks. So I was not even supposed to have been there. And I became like, to them, like a hero. That here are these fathers

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who said, well, if I made it then maybe their children would have made it through. And ... since I didn't get any rations, because I was ... The ration was there like a piece of bread—enough to keep them alive till they were actually ... were going to be taken to the crematorium. And each one would take a piece of bread they would get, break off a piece and make up a slice for me, so that I could survive. And they said, 'David, you must survive and let the world know what happened.'"

Bergman was among 150 inmates transported to Dachau in a cattle car from another concentration camp; he was one of three who survived—rescued by fellow prisoners in Dachau shortly before he could be taken to the crematorium. His story is one of the personal histories in the Holocaust Encyclopedia, ushmm.org.

Hetty d'Ancona Deleeuwe

"It's impossible for people to understand how hard it is to just leave your home, your parents, and know that you most likely [will] never see your parents again. Leave everything that was everything to you, just behind, just close the door behind you. ... It's hard to explain how difficult that was, and being a parent myself now, I don't know how my parents could have done it. It's ... it's ... it's so painful. It's so painful to say good-bye to your one and only child, and don't know where she is going to. My parents didn't know where I was going. They had this connection with the man who I later found out saved 250 Jewish children, and who perished himself in Bergen-Belsen. He was caught at the end of the war and he perished himself—not being a Jew, but being treated as a Jew because he helped the Jews. And he found a place for me all the way on the other side of the country and ... I will see ... showed my parents the picture of a lady who's gonna come the next morning to take me away. And I had to take all the stars off my clothing, and this stuff was very yellow, and very poor quality—was no quality, you can't even call that quality, and it ran through all your clothes. So you had to be very, very careful that people couldn't see that a star had been on my coat and a star had been on my dress, and ... uh ... had to brush it off very, very carefully. So when I left the house early in the morning, I was scared to death, of course, that my neighbors were going to see me leave the house. I don't know how I made it to the ... to the tram because we went on the tram to the railroad station. And there she handed me over to a young man in his very early twenties, and with this young man was a young boy, maybe eleven, ten, something like this, and the two of us went on the train. Uh ... it was awesome. It was very, very scary because I had no name. I had no papers. I didn't know who I was. I didn't know who the man was that was taking me. I didn't know the child that was with me. I didn't know anything."

Deleeuwe was bidden with a family in the southern Netherlands. She and both her parents survived. Her story is one of the personal histories in the Holocaust Encyclopedia, ushmm.org.

Erika Eckstut (Neuman)

"I remember the time in the Czernowitz ghetto when I used to take off the star from my coat, leave my ID, and go out to look for food. I was always hungry and scared. I went to a store that sold food to the clergy, because I knew my father had a priest who was an old schoolmate. It was easy for me to go out since I was blonde, blue-eyed, and spoke German fluently.

"One day I saw a German soldier beating a man on the ground who was bleeding. The soldier was on crutches and his chest was full of decorations. He stood on one of the crutches and with the other he beat the man. I

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approached the soldier and in my perfect German lectured him on how wrong he was to beat a man who did not defend himself. As I was busy giving my lecture, people stood around listening. All of a sudden a policeman touched my arm and said, ‘That will be enough little girl; let’s go home.’

“At that moment I realized, ‘I can’t go home. If I take him to the ghetto my whole family will be killed.’ So I took him to an opera singer who lived not far from the ghetto. She was, of course, a gentile. When we arrived at the door and rang the bell a beautiful lady opened the door and I said, ‘Mama.’ The policeman at the same time said, ‘Is this your daughter, Madame?’ She ignored him, and pointing a finger at me, she said: ‘I told you once, I told you twice, home and homework.’ The policeman in the meantime kept repeating his question, and, in desperation, she started hitting me in the face. It was so painful that I hardly cared what happened at this point. Then, as if in a dream, I heard the policeman saying, ‘Keep her, keep her, just stop hitting her.’ After the policeman left, she took me inside, gave me a hug, and asked, ‘Are you from the ghetto?’

“I have forgotten so many names from during the Holocaust, but I still remember her.”

Eckstut’s family survived the Holocaust. She is a Museum survivor volunteer; this interview is from the Memory Project, US Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Renee Schwalb Fritz

“I was put into a convent that was also located in Belgium, and some man came and picked me up, who I had never seen before. That scared me slightly. And he told me on the way that the reason for all the things that were going on was because I was Jewish which, of course, didn’t mean anything to me. I was just too young to understand what ‘Jewish’ meant. But that I was going to go and live in a school. And when I got there I saw nuns, which scared me a little bit because in Europe, of course, not like today, the nuns were all in habits, and it was a very, very strict order. And he took me to the Mother Superior, and the Mother Superior tried to explain as much as she felt that I could understand, that I was going to be at the school and that I was going to be living with other children there during the day. However, those children leave at the end of the day, and I was going to be taken care of by the nuns. I was also told that I was going to be taught religion and that my name would be changed to Suzanne LeDent, and this was the name that I would ... that I can only answer by. I have to forget my other name, that there was no more name like that, because this was going to be something totally new and I just have to follow these rules. So I ... I did. And she handed me some medals and, with a safety pin, and she told me every time that I memorized what each medal meant that I would get a new one. And I did. I started memorizing different prayers for medals and she gave me a rosary and she taught me how to do the rosary and this went on for periods of time. I think the most frightening part of the experience was the evenings because I was taken to what seemed like a dormitory that had miles upon miles of just corridors and they were just all partitions in between and I was put into one of these partitions that had a bed, a sink, and a huge crucifix, and one of the nuns was in charge, and I was left in this dormitory at night. That was rather scary. And I would just say my prayers.”

Renee was hidden there for two years, until the Germans became suspicious. The underground took Renee to a Protestant family’s farm, and then to an orphanage. After the war she was reunited with her mother, who had survived Auschwitz. Five years later they joined her father in the United States. Her story is one of the personal histories in the Holocaust Encyclopedia, ushmm.org.

Jerry von Halle

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“When I got back to Amsterdam, I got on the phone and I called my teacher; it’s the only person I knew. Not the only person I knew, but the only person I knew who might be able to help us. And the teacher ... I called him on the phone and I said, ‘Here we are. This is what happened. My father was arrested; my mother and I are here.’ And again without, without thinking for one second, he says, ‘Come right over.’ So this is 1943. We are walking clear across Amsterdam from the railroad station, and we wind up, we wind up back at Mr. In’t Hout’s home. Here again, this little, this little apartment—it’s a, it’s a city apartment—we were there and we stayed in one room. My mother and I stayed in that room for two and a half years. Never left the room. Never saw ... never saw fresh air. And it’s, it’s a strange feeling. You know even a prisoner is allowed every day to exercise.”

Von Halle’s father and brother were murdered in the Holocaust; he and his mother survived in hiding. His story is one of the personal histories in the Holocaust Encyclopedia, ushmm.org.