

Flight & Rescue - Overview Lesson

Overview

As Nazi domination of Europe spread, so did Nazi terror and oppression of Jews. Jews desperately searched for ways to leave their home countries, only to find that other countries were closing their borders to Jewish refugees. Once leaving was no longer an option, many Jews went into hiding.

Despite the indifference of most Europeans and the collaboration of others in the murder of Jews during the Holocaust, individuals in every European country and from all religious backgrounds risked their lives to help Jews. Rescue efforts ranged from the isolated actions of individuals to organized networks both small and large.

Rescue of Jews during the Holocaust presented a host of difficulties. The Allied prioritization of "winning the war" and the lack of access to those who needed rescue hampered major rescue operations. Individuals willing to help Jews in danger faced severe consequences if they were caught, and formidable logistics of supporting people in hiding. Finally, hostility towards Jews among non-Jewish populations, especially in eastern Europe, was a daunting obstacle to rescue.

Over half of the German Jewish population fled Germany in the 1930s. Families with young children and elderly or sick relatives had particular challenges. The costs were high, travel could be hazardous, and many anticipated that conditions would eventually improve.

Most countries, including the United States and Britain, put up obstacles to immigration and strictly limited how many Jews could be admitted. Searching for ways to leave became a full-time job. Many Jews escaped to neighboring countries only to have Germany soon invade and occupy their new homes. The Nazi campaign against the Jews spread quickly. When escape was no longer possible, many sought places to hide. A small percentage of non-Jews risked their lives, and the lives of their families, to help Jews to survive.

Holocaust Survivors - Video Clips

The survivors featured below live or have lived in Washington State. The country listed in parentheses is the country in which they were living during the Holocaust. These survivors, with their history and stories, have shaped our community, contributing to its richness and diversity.

They challenge us to understand history through personal narrative - to see complex human beings behind the facts.

Susie Sherman (Czechoslovakia) - <https://youtu.be/bL1MzaH4eqQ>

My father made the decision—I think it’s the reason I’m here today—that his family of four would leave. The rest of the dear, dear family, for their own reasons, stayed. And he went to the Gestapo to get the two documents needed to leave the country. You needed *Durchlassen*, permission to travel through, and—ironically, after they had taken everything you owned—you had to prove that you paid taxes to the Third Reich. And my dad was met with great hostility in trying to get those two documents. He was abused verbally and physically, and the door opened and somebody recognized him. It was a Czech man who was now working for the Nazis. And he said, “Oh, just give him what he wants. His father always sold us good cars, and the family always gave to charity.” And so with that stroke of luck, my dad was given the two documents enabling us to leave.

Steve Adler (Germany) - <https://youtu.be/c-0xj4Y2zVA>

We got to London and we were taken to the reception center, where all the kids were met by somebody. There were uncles and aunts and cousins and other relatives that were meeting these children arriving in a strange country. And they would be taken away to some family reunion, except for one kid from Prague, and for me. The two of us had nobody. My uncle stood me up. I never found out why. I needed badly to be met by a kind relative who would welcome me and say something comforting, and he wasn’t there.

Robert Herschkowitz (Belgium) - https://youtu.be/1x_fc4Lbi_4

It was a risk to take because from the 250,000 Jews who tried to get into Switzerland during the war, only 25,000—so, 10 percent—were allowed in. The other ones were turned over at the border and usually shot the same day or sent to a concentration camp. So during five, I think it happened, from what I gathered, three days and two nights, we traveled only through the night, we slept in the forest. And I thought it was very cool, it was my first camping trip and I really loved it. My brother was less comfortable because they had put tape, what they called *sparadrap*, tape over his mouth so he won’t cry and alert the German and French patrol, border patrol. Now, my father was the worst navigator in the world. Plus, he never asked [for directions]. At one moment, the *passeur* told us, “Okay, you go straight ahead, and you will be in Switzerland. When you see a fence made out of barbed wire, that’s the border.” And we walked, and we walked, and we walked. We never saw the fence, but we saw a

little house. And my father said, “Oh, that’s the Swiss border guard!” And he knocks on the door, and who opens the door? It’s a French *gendarme*. My god, we had turned into a circle and we were back in [France]. And, he looked at us, and saw who we were, and he said to my dad, you know what he said? “I know who you are. I know what you’re doing.” He said, “I’m not going to do anything about that.” And he showed with his finger, he said, “You see those two little hills? Go through those hills and you’ll be in Switzerland.” So we went there, and we found ourselves in front of barbed wire. And on the other side, there was a group of Swiss soldiers and they were nice enough to lift the wire, we went in, and we were safe into Switzerland.

Peter Metzelaar (The Netherlands) - <https://youtu.be/j2zG38M-aHs>

After a couple of days of digging, we ended up with a hole in the ground, three by three by six feet; a cave, if you will. Klaas cut, out of the area, some small trees that he made a roof over this hole. He made a trap door in front, made it out of twigs and you could stand in front of this thing and never even know there was any activity there whatsoever. And now, again, when the trucks came down the road, mom and I would run out the back of the farm and we would hide in this cave. We would just barely fit in, the two of us, and I remember many, many times, a very scary experience. Sometimes dirt came trickling down the side. I was always fearful if that thing might cave in. But more than anything else, I think, I became aware—by this time I’m nine years old, nine-and-a-half years old—and I became aware of the fact that we were hunted. And although we were in this cave that was maybe 150, 200 feet away from the farmhouse itself, we could hear the German soldiers hollering, convinced somebody was being hidden in that farmhouse, except we couldn’t look out. And there was always this frightening feeling of, “Is it this time they’re going to come and find us? Are they going to come to the forest and find our hiding place?” It was extremely, extremely frightening because you couldn’t see anything, and it was this unknown. By this time, I was aware that our lives were being threatened most of the time.

Henry Friedman - <https://youtu.be/pTr7fwdNpwc>

We found space above the animals in a barn. The house was kind of divided into half. Half of the house, the Symchucks lived in. The other half, they had animals. We were put above the animals. When morning came, we found ourselves in complete darkness because we were surrounded by hay. Our space was about the size of a queen-size bed. Little did I know at that time that I would have to spend 18 months in this space without ever raising my voice because all I could do is whisper.

Questions

- 1) A) What pressures and motivations may have influenced the decisions of rescuers? B) Are these factors unique to this history or universal?
- 2) How can societies, communities, and individuals reinforce and strengthen the willingness to stand up for others?
- 3) A) What possible reasons can you think of that caused countries other than Germany – including the United States – to close or strictly limit their borders to Jewish refugees? B) What reasons underlie today's U.S. policy strictly limiting the number of refugees allowed to enter this country? C) Do you believe the U.S. should be more – or less – willing to welcome more people forced to flee their home countries due to human rights violations, war, persecution and natural disasters? Why/why not?