

Humanity
Amidst
Hardship:
Jewish Rescue
Stories in the
Baltic States



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Žanis Lipke Memorial - RIGA





Žanis Lipke and his wife Johanna, daughter Aina and son Zigfrids. 1945

In a world of total moral collapse there was a small minority who mustered extraordinary courage to uphold human values. These were the Righteous among the Nations. They stand in stark contrast to the mainstream of indifference and hostility that prevailed during the Holocaust. Contrary to the general trend, these rescuers regarded the Jews as fellow human beings who came within the bounds of their universe of obligation.

The righteous few were behaving in a way that a norm based upon economic calculations of personnel welfare was regarded as irrational.

Understanding the Holocaust is our chance, perhaps our last one, to preserve humanity. That is not enough for its victims. No accumulation of good, no matter how vast, undoes an evil; no rescue of the future, no matter how successful, undoes a murder in the past. Perhaps it is true that to save one life is to save the world. But the converse is not true: saving the world does not restore a single lost life.

The evil that was done to the Jews — to each Jewish child, woman, and man — cannot be undone. Yet it can be recorded, and it can be understood. Indeed, it must be understood so that its like can be prevented in the future.

BLACK EARTH, The Holocaust as History and Warning. Timothy Snyder

In the darkest of times and places, a few people rescue Jews, for what seems like no earthly reason. These standard to be people who in normal times might seem to take ethical and social norms a bit too literally, and whose fidelity to their expressed principles survive the end of the institutions that supported and defended them.

If these rescuers had anything in common beyond that, it was self knowledge. When you know yourself there's little to say. This is worth brooding upon, as we consider how we who know ourselves so poorly, and have so much to say about ourselves, will respond to the challenges to come.

Most of the several hundred million Europeans under Nazi rule either kept silent and stood by, or collaborated with the murderers. Some extended a helping hand, trying to save Jews from the Nazis. At Yad Vashem, Israel's national Holocaust memorial, close to 24,000 persons from 45 countries have thus far been identified and honored, under a program created by law (1963).



Recognition of the Righteous is based on the following criteria:

- Aid was extended by non-Jews in situations where Jews were helpless and threatened with death or deportation to concentration camps.
- The rescuer was aware that in extending such aid he was risking his life, safety and personal freedom (the Nazis considered assisting Jews a capital offense).
- No material reward or substantial compensation was exacted by the rescuer from the rescued as a condition for extending aid.
- Such rescue or aid is attested to by the rescued persons, or substantiated by first-hand eyewitness reports and, where possible, by bona-fide archival documentation.

Many types of help were extended to Jews by individual non-Jews; but usually the help took one of the following four forms:

- Sheltering a Jew in one's home, or in lay or religious institutions, shielded from the outside world and concealed from public view.
- Helping a Jew pass as a non-Jew by providing false credentials or baptismal certificates (issued by the clergy as a means for obtaining bona fide credentials).
- Aiding Jews to flee to a safer location, or across a border to a safer country. This involved accompanying adults and children on surreptitious journeys over distances inside occupied territories to a border, and negotiating safe crossings of such borders.
- Temporary adoption of Jewish children (for the duration of the war).

Anna Borkowska, a Polish nun in a Dominican convent outside Vilnius, Lithuania, helped Abba Kovner and other resistance fighters by hiding them in her convent, even smuggling arms to them in the ghetto.

Anna Borkowska was the mother superior of a small convent of nine Dominican nuns located near Kolonia Wilenska, on the road leading from Vilna to Vileika. When the killing of the Jews in Vilna began, Borkowska opened the convent's gates to a group of 17 members of the illegal Jewish Zionist pioneer underground movements. Despite the enormous difference between the two groups, very close relations were formed between the religious Christian nuns and the left-wing secular Jews. The pioneers found a safe haven behind the convent's walls; they worked with the nuns in the fields and continued their political activity. They called the mother superior of the convent *Ima* (Mother in Hebrew).

By the end of December 1941 the pioneers decided to leave the safety of the convent and to return to the ghetto in order to establish the resistance movement. Borkowska tried to dissuade them from leaving, but in vain. A few weeks after his return to the ghetto, Abba Kovner was called to the ghetto's gate. Borkowska had come and said that she wanted to join the Jews in the ghetto: "God is in the ghetto", she said. Kovner dissuaded her from taking that step. When she asked what they needed, Kovner told her that they needed weapons. **It was Borkowska – the nun who was committed to spirituality and non-violence – who smuggled the first grenades into the ghetto.**

In September 1943, as Nazi suspicions of her mounted, the Germans had Anna Borkowska arrested. The convent was closed and the sisters dispersed. Eventually Borkowska asked to be dispersed of her monastic vows, but remained a deeply religious woman. Borkowska's helping hand was never forgotten by the Zionist pioneers who had immigrated to Israel after the war, but only in 1984 was contact with her reestablished. By that time she was 84 years old and living in a small apartment in Warsaw.

The same year Yad Vashem awarded the title of Righteous Among the Nations to Anna Borkowska and six nuns of her convent, and Abba Kovner planted a tree in her honor in the Avenue of the Righteous on the Mount of Remembrance.

Abba Kovner traveled to Warsaw to present Anna Borkowska with the medal. "Why do I deserve this honor?" asked Borkowska, to which Kovner answered: "You are Anna of the angels". He went on to explain:

"During the days when angels hid their faces from us, this woman was for us Anna of the Angels. Not of angles that we invent in our hearts, but of angels that create our



Sunday, 12 November 1944

Robert is grim-faced again today. His tone is bossy. When he is in a bad mood, he is dangerous. He yells and makes a racket. When someone tries to calm him down, he yells even more and says, "I want to yell so that the whole house hears! Let the police come on my account! Let it cost me my head and your heads, too." I had already lost my respect for him for his earlier behavior alone. [Our survival] depends solely on his mood. On the fronts, no change.

Tuesday, 5 December 1944

Riva has completely lost her nerves. She gets agitated over every little thing and immediately begins to cry to the point that she cannot speak. Yes, the cellar wears upon one's nerves...

Tuesday, 6 February 1945

Robert is terribly nervous. This whole business [of caring for us] is dragging on too long. If he had known, he would have considered it very carefully. I understand him very well, but how are we to blame?



Kalman Linkimer war time diaries:
<https://www.baltictimes.com/news/articles/11878/>

Roberts Seduls, a former seaman and boxer, worked as the janitor of a building in Liepaja, Latvia.

Following the German occupation he promised David Zivcon, a Jewish resident of the building with whom he was friendly, to help him in a time of need.

Little did Seduls know that he would eventually become the rescuer of 11 Jews.



Helping the Jews during the German occupation was one of the most risky acts imaginable. The punishments for the help were different in every country. It was the strictest penalty: not only the rescuer, but also his family, were at risk of death. Despite the threats, the morals of the Righteous were stronger than fear. By percentage, the Righteous of Lithuania are in second place in the world in terms of number. According to the official data of Yad Vashem, there were 924 Righteous person in Lithuania. This number is growing yearly due to newly obtained testimonies.



Lithuanian librarian **Ona Šimaitė** took food to Jews in the Vilna ghetto, helped hide many Jews outside the ghetto, and saved valuable Jewish literary and historical materials. Vilna, 1941.



- The numbers of Righteous recognized **do not reflect the full extent of help given by non-Jews** to Jews during the Holocaust; they are rather based on the material and documentation that was made available to Yad Vashem.
- Most Righteous were recognized following requests made by the rescued Jews. Sometimes survivors could not overcome the difficulty of grappling with the painful past and didn't come forward; others weren't aware of the program or couldn't apply, especially people who lived behind the Iron Curtain during the years of Communist regime in Eastern Europe; other survivors died before they could make the request.
- An additional factor is that most cases that are recognized represent successful attempts; the Jews survived and came forward to tell Yad Vashem about them.

Jewish rescue stories from the Baltic states during World War II offer poignant examples of bravery and humanity in the face of immense danger. While the Holocaust brought unimaginable suffering to Jewish communities across Europe, there were individuals and groups who risked their lives to save Jews from persecution and extermination, particularly in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.

These stories provide powerful lessons about courage, compassion, and resistance against injustice.

What small act of kindness can you perform today to make someone else's day better?



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
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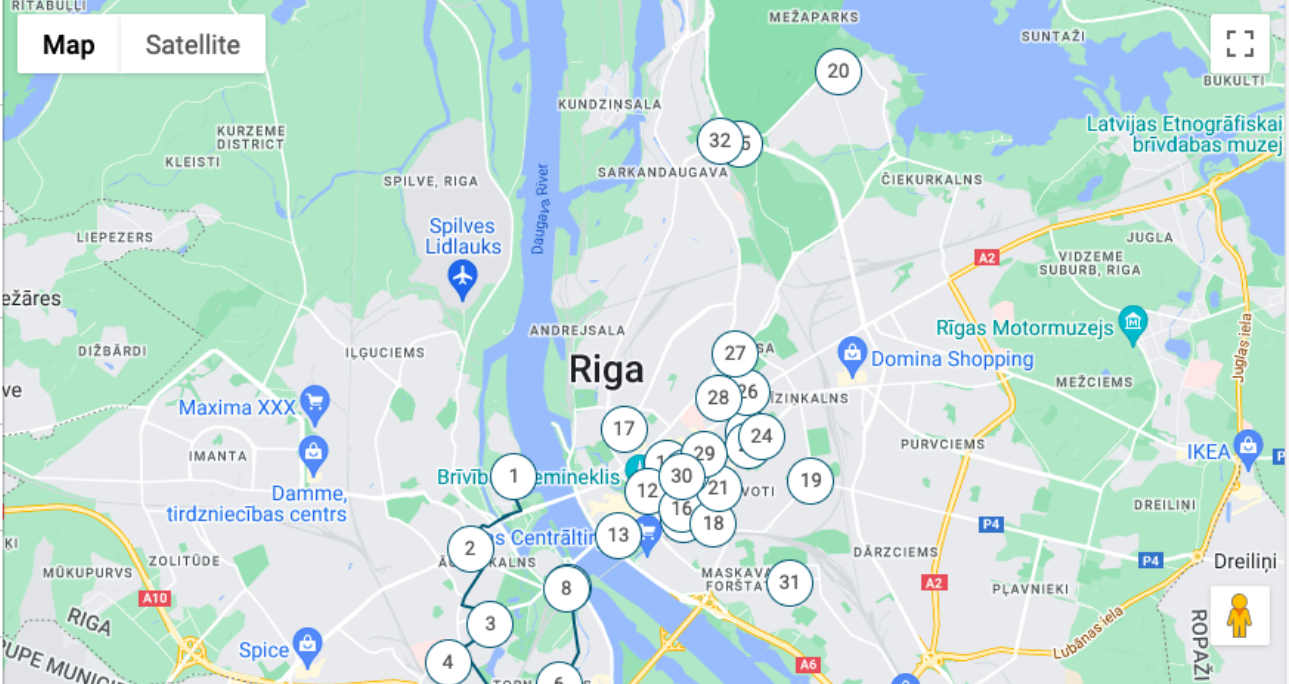


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Some thought-provoking questions about Jewish rescue choices during the Holocaust that teachers can use to stimulate discussion and critical thinking among students:

1. What factors influenced individuals' decisions to rescue Jews during the Holocaust? How did personal beliefs, societal norms, and historical circumstances shape these choices?
2. How did the level of risk involved in rescuing Jews vary across different contexts and regions, such as urban versus rural areas or occupied territories versus neutral countries?
3. What moral dilemmas did individuals face when deciding whether to rescue Jews? How did they weigh the risks to their own safety and the safety of their families against the imperative to help others in need?
4. What role did collaboration with Nazi authorities play in shaping rescue efforts? How did collaborationist governments, local police forces, and civilian populations impact the ability of individuals to rescue Jews?

5. How did cultural, religious, and ethnic identities influence attitudes towards Jews and perceptions of Jewish rescue efforts? Did pre-existing social divisions exacerbate or mitigate the challenges of rescue?
6. What forms of resistance were employed by individuals and groups who chose to rescue Jews? How did acts of resistance, both large and small, contribute to the overall effort to save lives?
7. How do survivor testimonies and historical accounts of Jewish rescue challenge or confirm popular perceptions of heroism during the Holocaust? What complexities and nuances emerge from these narratives?
8. What are the ethical implications of judging individuals' actions during the Holocaust from a contemporary perspective? How can we reconcile the complexity of historical circumstances with our moral judgments?
9. What lessons can we learn from the stories of Jewish rescue for contemporary issues of social justice, human rights, and collective responsibility?
10. How can studying Jewish rescue efforts during the Holocaust inspire us to confront injustice and make morally courageous choices in our own lives?