

National Days of Remembrance

April 15–22, 2012

choosing to act STORIES OF RESCUE

The US Congress established the Days of Remembrance as the nation's annual commemoration of the Holocaust and created the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum as a permanent living memorial to the victims. This year's Holocaust remembrance week is April 15–22, 2012. The Museum has designated **Choosing to Act: Stories of Rescue** as the theme for the 2012 observance.

Confronted with the persecution and murder of Europe's Jews, witnesses had a choice of whether or not to intervene. Getting involved meant running the risk of severe punishment, and most people—even those who disagreed with the Nazis' policies and practices—opted to do nothing. But the fate of the Jewish residents of Zakynthos, Greece, is a powerful example of what can happen when an entire community chooses action over indifference, despite the risks.

In September 1943, Nazi officials ordered the island's mayor, Loukas Karrer, to hand over a list of the 275 Jews living in Zakynthos. Karrer turned to Greek Orthodox Bishop Chrysostomos for help. While the bishop negotiated for their lives, most of the island's Jews fled into the remote mountain villages, where they were hidden by non-Jewish residents. When the Nazi commander again made his demand, Chrysostomos presented a list with just two names—his own and the mayor's. "Here," he said, "are your Jews." A year later, the two men defied another German demand to deport the Jews of Zakynthos. Thanks to the leaders' continued courage and the villagers' steadfast refusal to betray their Jewish neighbors, all the Jews of Zakynthos survived the war. In the rest of Greece, more than 80 percent of the Jewish population was killed in the Holocaust.

Other examples from across Nazi-occupied Europe reveal that Jews had a greater chance of survival when citizens, as in Zakynthos, decided to help rescue them. Some are well known: the Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg in Budapest; the German industrialist Oskar Schindler at his factory in Poland; Miep Gies, who hid Anne Frank in Holland; and the Danish resistance fighters who ferried almost all of Denmark's Jews to safety in Sweden.

But most stories of rescue are less familiar. These rescuers were ordinary people who acted in extraordinary ways: a government official who forged identity papers, a Benedictine monk who helped establish an extensive network of hiding places for children, a housewife and her daughter who hid a family in their attic. The risks associated with their actions were real, and the consequences could be severe. In many places, sheltering Jews was a crime punishable by death. Such was the case for Anton Schmid, a German army sergeant stationed in Vilna, Lithuania, whom the Nazis executed after discovering he was providing supplies, transportation, and forged papers to Jews in nearby Ponary. A Polish social worker, Irena Sendler, also faced execution for smuggling 2,500 children out of the Warsaw ghetto. She managed to escape from her Nazi captors and, after assuming a new identity, continued to help Jews.

Today we think of these individuals as heroes, but many rescuers did not see themselves this way. The villagers of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, France, for example, refused to accept praise for hiding 5,000 Jews and smuggling many of them across the Swiss border. "How can you call us 'good'?" one villager asked. "We did what had to be done."

The motivation of rescuers varied widely, from opposition to Nazi racial ideology, to compassion, to religious or moral principles. Some even had antisemitic prejudices but still chose to rescue Jews. In their uniqueness, stories of rescue remind us of the wide range of choices that we as individuals are capable of making. And that our actions in the face of injustice or hatred always matter, as examples from recent genocides demonstrate. To cite just one, Damas Gisimba, an orphanage director in Kigali, Rwanda, chose not to turn a blind eye as the 1994 genocide unfolded there and helped save the lives of 400 people.

We must never forget, however, that for each person who was rescued and survived the Holocaust, countless more were killed. As we remember stories of rescue, therefore, we must first honor the memory of Holocaust victims by countering indifference with vigilance and apathy with action.