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Rescuers remembered

Sheldon Kirshner
Staff Reporter

The simple plaques engraved with the names of the rescuers in Hebrew and English, are scattered around the grounds of Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority.

As I wandered around the Garden of the Righteous Among the Nations and the Avenue of the Righteous Among the Nations, dedicated spaces that have been allocated to commemorating the decent, courageous souls who risked their lives and that of their families to save Jews during the Holocaust, I randomly stopped at three of the plaques.

Honouring Varian Fry, Lucyna Pelikan and her son, Zbigniew, and Petronela and Wladyslaw Ziolo, they are among the 23,788 people, mainly European Christians from 45 countries, whose selfless deeds have not gone unnoticed.

Fry, the first American to be designated as a gentile rescuer, was a newspaperman who witnessed Nazi abuse against Jews in Berlin in the 1930s. Disturbed by what he had seen, he began working for the Emergency Rescue Committee. Based in Marseille, France, it is credited with saving more than 2,200 Jewish refugees, including the filmmaker Max Ophuls, the painter Marc Chagall and the philosopher Hannah Arendt.

The Pelikans, Polish Catholics from Warsaw, rescued Nina Einhorn, a Jewish woman who escaped from the sealed ghetto. At first, they charged her for room and board. But after they became friends, they let Einhorn live in their apartment for free. Einhorn lived with the Pelikans for over a year, until the 1944 Warsaw uprising. After the war, she moved to Sweden.

The Ziolos, Polish Christian farmers from the outskirts of Sandomez, saved the life of a Jewish toddler named Joe Gottdenker, the current vice chairman of the Canadian Society for Yad Vashem.

Yad Vashem was established in 1953, but a decade elapsed before it got around to paying recognition to rescuers like Fry, the Pelikans and the Ziolos and forming a commission charged with honouring righteous gentiles.

"There was a need to remember the good people," said Irena Steinfeldt, the director of Yad Vashem's Righteous Among the Nations department and the co-editor of *The Holocaust and the Christian World*. "It helped survivors find meaning in the darkness of the Holocaust."

The task of the commission which was staffed by survivors and initially headed by a Supreme Court justice who presided at the 1961 war crimes trial of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann – was to deter-

mine criteria for naming rescuers.

To the commission, a rescuer was defined as a person who rendered sustained assistance without the expectation of financial gain, except for normal expenses incurred, and who did not try to convert a Jew.

Rescuers came from all walks of life, social classes and age groups, Steinfeldt said.

They may have been illiterate peasants, university professors, sewer workers, lawyers, circus performers, zoo directors or soccer players.

Typically, rescuers extended four kinds of assistance to Jews.

They hid them in their homes or on their property. They provided them with false identities and documents. They smuggled them out of ghettos and prisons and helped them cross borders into safe havens. They rescued children given away by their Jewish parents in desperation.

Designating a rescuer is sometimes a dicey proposition, Steinfeldt noted.

"Oskar Schindler saved Jews, but he was a card-carrying Nazi party member who went to Poland to make money."

Feature



Plaques that honour rescuers
[Sheldon Kirshner photos]



Due to his problematic background and motives, he was initially rejected for membership in this exclusive club.

"If the motivation was exclusively payment, we do not recognize a person as a Righteous Among the Nations. But a rescuer would not be penalized if he accepted money to buy food for the person under his protection."

Citing another possible conflict of interest, Steinfeldt mentioned the touchy issue of conversion.

If a Jewish child was converted to Christianity, no recognition is possible. But if a conversion was performed to protect a child from persecution or death, recognition is acceptable. Steinfeldt proceeded to tell the story of a Jewish woman, now a resident of Tel Aviv, who is so grateful to her rescuer that still wears a crucifix today.

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Program will continue as long as names received

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Steinfeldt, whose job it is to decide who may qualify as a Righteous Among the Nations, said that some nominees will probably never be chosen.

Chabad-Lubavitch, for example, has nominated Wilhelm Canaris, the director of German military intelligence from 1935 to 1944. Secretly an anti-Nazi who attempted to topple Adolf Hitler in a series of plots but who was executed as a traitor, Canaris may have played a role in the rescue of the Lubavitch rebbe in wartime Warsaw.

According to Steinfeldt, Canaris is not likely to be nominated. "This is not a very strong case," she explained. "I don't know if his resume will ever be submitted."

To date, Yad Vashem has designated more than 400 Germans as Righteous Among the Nations. Apart from Oskar Schindler, they include Gustav Schroeder, the captain of the St. Louis, and Hans von Dohnanyi, a member of the anti-Nazi resistance movement.

Poland, home to 3.3 million Jews before World War II, has contributed more names than any other country, 6,266, to the roll of Righteous Among the Nations.

Poland is followed by the Netherlands (5,108), France

(3,331), Ukraine (2,363), Belgium (1,584), Lithuania (800), Hungary (764), Belarus (555), Slovakia (522), Italy (498), Germany (495), Greece (307), Russia (173), Serbia (131), Latvia (129), Czech Republic (108), Croatia (102), Austria (88), Moldova (79), Albania (69), Romania (60), Norway (47), Switzerland (45), Bosnia and Herzegovina (40), Denmark (22), Bulgaria (19), Britain (14), Armenia (19), Sweden (10), Slovenia (6), Spain (4), Estonia (3), United States (3), Republic of China (2), Brazil (2) and Portugal (2).

The following countries have each contributed one Righteous Among the Nations: Chile, El Salvador, Japan, Ireland, Georgia, Luxembourg, Montenegro, Turkey and Vietnam.

In case you're curious, the Vietnamese honoured by Yad Vashem was Paul Nguyen, who protected his Polish-Jewish wife in German-occupied France.

According to Steinfeldt, the Righteous Among the Nations program will be continued as long as nominations are submitted and supported by irrefutable evidence.

But given the passage of time, most rescuers are awarded Righteous Among the Nations status posthumously.

On a darker note, she made two points.



Irena Steinfeldt



Joe Gottdenker, centre, with his parents, Ben and Bina
[Yad Vashem photo]

Some rescuers, having been branded "Jew lovers," were murdered by right-wing nationalists after the war.

The names of six Righteous Among the Nations have been revoked since the program started 48 years ago.

"One man, for example, demanded sexual favours," she disclosed.

But a man who was heard to have uttered antisemitic comments after the war was not disqualified as a rescuer.

"He kept his status because of his actions during the war," she said.

She added, "The situations are not always simple."

On behalf of the **Ontario Liberal Party**
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