

Unit Five: Rescuers – Introduction

Background Information for Teachers:

The murder of millions of European Jews did not begin with mass shootings or gas chamber executions. It began with attitudes of prejudice, acts of discrimination, and a denial of civil rights and human dignity. As the Nazis and their collaborators intensified the persecution, Jewish people struggled to confront the worsening situation. In most cases, it was difficult for them to find reliable allies. Many found that former friends and acquaintances were unsympathetic to their plight. In fact, most people reacted toward them with indifference, or even hostility. Others, who may have been sympathetic, were paralyzed by fear. In every country where the Holocaust occurred, however, there were some people who recognized a moral obligation to engage in rescue efforts. The degree of risk varied according to location and situation, but the danger was real. All faced the possibility of arrest, incarceration in a concentration camp, torture, or even execution. In spite of this, most rescuers did not see themselves as heroes. They believed that anyone would have acted as they did under similar circumstances. They did not see themselves as unusual, but their actions proved that they were the exceptions to the rule. They demonstrated that it was possible to live up to the highest ideals, even in the midst of the Nazi terror.

No study of the Holocaust would be complete without recognizing the significance of rescuers. By remembering them, we choose to honor their legacy and establish a lasting memory of their deeds. Though there were few rescuers, their stories provide an unparalleled opportunity for students to reflect upon qualities of character and moral leadership. Our challenge is to learn and apply the lessons of the rescuers today.

As your students study the topic of rescue, help them to keep the following points in mind:

- Some rescuers had to act alone and in complete secrecy. Others were members of groups or communities acting together. Most rescuers lived under Nazi occupation, but the occupation was much harsher in some areas than others. Some rescuers enjoyed the protection of foreign governments. “Diplomat Rescuers” such as Sempo Sugihara, Aristides de Sousa Mendes, and Raoul Wallenberg are examples of the latter type. The identity, location, and circumstances of rescuers had a huge impact on what they could accomplish.
- Most rescuers did not seek out their first rescue opportunities. They were usually confronted unexpectedly with a person needing help and could not refuse. Their first efforts often emboldened them to continue.
- Accounts of rescue are inspirational, but they are not the main story of the Holocaust. They are exceptions to the overall pattern of destruction. Most victims of the Holocaust had no rescuer. Students shouldn’t be left with the impression that most people were rescuers or that rescue saved large numbers of people in comparison with the number who perished.

Rescuers – “The Courage to Care”

There were thousands of people who acted as rescuers during the Holocaust. This may seem like a large number but, in comparison with total number of people who might have helped, it is not. Nevertheless, the rescuers demonstrate what was possible. For this reason, they present teachers and students with unique opportunities to study concepts such as altruism and social responsibility. They also challenge us to apply the lessons we learn from their experiences in our lives today.

Objectives:

Students will:

1. View interviews with rescuers and the people they helped.
2. Ascertain the motives of rescuers and how they came to be involved in rescue activities.
3. Analyze the difficulties rescuers faced.
4. Evaluate moral and ethical questions that arise from the rescuers’ experiences.

Materials:

1. The video Courage to Care (29 minutes)
2. The handout entitled, “Courage to Care: Worksheet and Discussion Questions” (Handout 1)

Procedures:

1. Begin by informing students that they are going to be hearing from people who helped others during the Holocaust. Also tell them that they will be hearing from some of the rescued as well.
2. Pass out the worksheet. Students are to jot down responses in the chart during the film, but should answer the rest of the questions afterward.
3. Show the video. Give students time to answer the questions after the video.
4. The questions beneath the chart are designed to encourage discussion. They can be done individually, or used in a small group or “think, pair, share” format.
5. Complete the activity by sharing responses with the full class.

Extension Activities:

1. There is a longer video in the trunk that deals with the subject of rescue. It is entitled, The Avenue of the Just. It contains more interviews with rescuers and some of the people they helped. Students may be particularly interested in the interviews with Otto Frank, Meip Gies, and Victor Kraler.
2. There is an excellent article by Nechama Tec in the Social Education magazine in the trunk. It is entitled, "Altruism and the Holocaust". The article may be too lengthy and complex for most middle school students, but you could summarize the "six characteristics of rescuers" found in the conclusion as a prompt for class discussion.

Reading about Rescuers

Rescuers had to operate under the specific conditions in which they lived. There were many possible variations. Some lived in the city, others the countryside. Some were well off, others very poor. Some could trust their neighbors; others had to act in complete secrecy. These diverse circumstances make it difficult to make blanket statements that apply to all rescuers. Nevertheless, all rescuers faced obstacles and dangers, but sought to help the needy anyway.

Objectives:

Students will:

1. Read accounts about several rescuers and their efforts to help people threatened by the Nazis.
2. Analyze the circumstances under which rescue occurred to ascertain risk factors and strategies for success.
3. Assess the motivating factors involved in rescue and their applicability in our society.

Materials:

1. Tell Them We Remember by Susan Bachrach
2. The Holocaust: A History of Courage and Resistance by Bea Stadler
3. Worksheet: "Rescuers: Reading Questions" (Handout 2, two pages)

Procedures:

1. Introduce the topic by reading pages 64 and 65 aloud from Tell Them We Remember.
2. Introduce the lesson by informing students that they will be reading more about the Danish rescue of Jews and also about other rescuers who were active elsewhere. Tell them also that they will be answering questions designed to help us learn from the rescuers' experiences.
3. Pass out The Holocaust: A History of Courage and Resistance textbook and assign chapters 16, 17, and 18. Reading may be done silently or aloud.
4. Pass out the worksheet and allow students time to complete the questions. They may work individually or in groups.
5. Discuss the students' responses to the questions in class.

Extension Activities:

1. Number the Stars by Lois Lowery is a popular fictionalized account of the rescue of Danish Jews. Many students will have read this book in the fifth grade, but if not, class sets may be borrowed from the Holocaust Center to supplement this lesson.
2. Several other excellent books and videos about rescue are available. Many may be borrowed from the Holocaust Center. Some are inexpensive enough that you may want to consider them for purchase. Several catalogs are also included in the trunk to help you identify titles and vendors.
3. Tell students the story of Bishop Chrysostomos of the Greek island of Zakynthou. When asked by the local German commander to provide a list of the Jews on the island, he wrote his own name on a piece of paper and handed it to the officer. Ask students to guess the likely outcome of this act of defiance. This brief story, and many others like it, can be used to deepen understanding of the possibilities of resistance and rescue. This story can be found on page 130 of Sheltering the Jews: Stories of Holocaust Rescuers which is included in the trunk.
4. Map # 25 of Maps and Photographs shows the number of “Righteous Gentiles” honored by Yad Vashem. The map clearly shows that rescuers could be found in all countries. Students could be asked to brainstorm possible reasons for the wide variation in the number of rescuers from place to place.

The Allies: What did they know? What should they have done?

The questions that make up the title of this lesson are some of the most controversial of the entire Holocaust era. There is no single appropriate response to the issues raised. This history is complex and resists being reduced to simplistic generalizations. You may help students begin to wrestle with these questions by starting with some qualifications.

- Since the Holocaust developed over time, the responses of other countries must be evaluated according to what was happening at the time, not what was going to happen in the future. What was known in 1943 was not clearly foreseen in 1933 or even in 1938. When asking the questions above, we must take this into account.
- The war didn't begin until 1939. Countries deal with each other differently in peacetime than they do during times of war. Western nations did protest the treatment of Jews and other persecuted minorities, but it is unlikely under any circumstances that they would have started a war over the issue. It remained for Nazi Germany to start the war. Had Britain or France decided to attack Germany in the early 1930's, they would have done so for military or political reasons. Humanitarian concerns were considered to be diplomatic issues, if they were considered at all.
- The United States was not a "superpower" in the 1930's. At the time World War II began, Germany was militarily much stronger. Even if this had not been the case, there were strong feelings of isolationism in the U.S. that made direct involvement in a European crisis unlikely. As it was, the U.S. didn't join the fight in World War II until attacked by Japan at Pearl Harbor.
- The main complaint about the response of other nations in the 1930's was that was that they did not allow large numbers of Jewish refugees to enter their countries. This was true. Many countries, including the U.S. had strong anti-immigration feelings and strict quotas on the numbers of immigrants allowed each year. Anti-Semitism also played a role in thwarting attempts to change the status quo. As a result, it was difficult for Jews to leave Germany even while the Nazis still allowed emigration.
- Once the war began, the main attitude of the Allies was that their first goal must be to win the war. Great Britain and the U.S. publicly announced that they would prosecute those guilty of crimes after the war, but it is unlikely that this had much impact on German policy. It has been suggested that the Allies should have bombed the killing facilities, but this was not acted upon. Some claimed it wasn't possible. Others said it would do more harm than good. Limited rescue schemes emerged from time to time, promoted by interested individuals and organizations, but none received official endorsement. The U.S. War Refugee Board, formed in 1944, helped to save about 200,000 Jews, but it came too late to help most. There was considerable foot-dragging even before that limited step was taken.

This topic will probably be a source of argument for some time to come. "What should the Allies have done?" is a good question, but don't expect unanimous agreement with any answer.

With these observations and qualifications in mind, students will benefit from studying the issue by reading and interpreting newspaper articles from the Holocaust era.

Objectives:

Students will:

1. Read selected newspaper articles that reveal the extent of information available to Americans about the persecution of Jews and others.
2. Consider possible obstacles to the reception of this information.
3. Evaluate the impact of this information on American citizens and their leaders.

Materials:

1. Tell Them That We Remember by Susan Bachrach
2. “The Record” Newspaper (from the trunk) 1 copy per student
3. The “Newspaper Activity Sheet” (Handout 3)

Procedures:

1. Introduce the topic by reading pages 26-28 and page 66 from Tell Them That We Remember or summarize the content.
2. Tell students that they are about to read about the Holocaust in newspaper articles that were written at the time.
3. Pass out “The Record”. Explain to students that this publication contains more than just old newspaper articles. It also has articles and book quotes from recent times. It has background information, a chronology, a glossary of terms, and discussion guides. During this lesson, students will be using only some of the articles from the 1930’s and 40’s. Also note that some of the information in the articles is not entirely correct. Newspapers publish the news quickly. They don’t always have all the facts, nor do they always get the entire story correct.
4. Pass out the “Newspaper Activity Sheet”.
5. Allow students time to complete the activity. They may work individually or in groups.
6. Discuss the student responses to the activity questions.

Extension Activity:

There is an excellent lesson plan for a newspaper-based activity in the “Classroom Focus” section of Social Education: Teaching About the Holocaust. It requires accessing microfilm records of old newspapers, but should be well worth the effort. Interested students could also search microfilm records of local papers at the public library to see what news was printed about

Rescuers - Liberation

The defeat of Germany meant liberation for the victims of Nazi tyranny. The victorious soldiers of the Allies brought freedom and hope. No two prisoners experienced liberation in exactly the same way, but for all it had been a moment that was eagerly anticipated. Nevertheless, its arrival was bittersweet. Survivors of the Holocaust were at the beginning of a new struggle to assess their losses and to rebuild their lives. They knew that, for the most part, their homes, communities, and loved ones were gone. The occupying authorities only dimly understood their plight, and in some places they even faced renewed anti-Semitic violence (ironically, from others who had been freed from the Nazis). As a result, liberation was a major milestone for the victims of the Holocaust, but certainly not the end of the story.

Objectives:

Students will:

1. Read accounts of liberation from a survivor and also from an American soldier.
2. Recognize the dire, life-threatening conditions that constituted the setting for liberation accounts.
3. Interpret the accounts to analyze the challenges that faced the newly freed prisoners.
4. Evaluate the significance of the liberation experience as expressed by the writers of the selected passages.

Materials:

1. Tell Them We Remember by Susan Bachrach
2. Handout: "Liberation Quotes: Two Voices" (Handout 4, two pages)
3. Worksheet: "Liberation: Two Voices – Questions" (Handout 5)

Procedures:

1. As an introduction to this topic, read pages 76 – 79 from Tell Them We Remember.
2. Pass out the three quotations of the handout, "Liberation Quotes – Two Voices".
3. Tell students that they are going to read an account of liberation as written by a Holocaust survivor. Then they are going to read an account of liberation by an American soldier. The third quote is a funeral message written by the survivor who wrote the first account.

4. **DO NOT** tell students that these two quotes are actually describing the same event. Some students will figure this out, but for those who don't, it comes as a nice surprise. Don't give any more information about the story or the writers than is revealed in the quotations.
5. Have the students read the selections silently, or read them aloud as a group.
6. Pass out the question sheet and allow time for students to answer the questions. They may work alone or in groups.
7. Discuss the students' responses in class.
 - At the end of the lesson, reveal the three surprises about these quotes:
 - The two quotes are describing the same liberation event.
 - The American soldier, Kurt Klein, was a German Jew who managed to emigrate to the United States in 1937. He left Germany because of increasing danger from the Nazis. When the U.S. entered the war, he enlisted as an American soldier and participated in the defeat of Nazi Germany. Unfortunately, his parents, who had not gotten out of Germany in time, perished in Auschwitz.
 - On June 18, 1946, Gerda Weissmann and Kurt Klein were married in Paris. They enjoyed a long family life together. The last two quotes were taken from their recent book, The Hours After: Letters of Love and Longing in War's Aftermath, St. Martin's Press, New York, 2000.

Extension Activities:

Students may learn more about Gerda's experiences in the Holocaust by reading her autobiography, All But My Life. Class sets of this book may be borrowed from the Holocaust Center.

There is also an award winning video about her story entitled, *One Survivor Remembers*.

Courage to Care – Worksheet and Discussion Questions

Directions: After viewing the video and reading the handout, answer the following questions. If you need more space, use the back of this sheet.

During the film, write down every reason someone gives for helping in the left-hand column. Write down every danger, problem, fear, or dilemma that they mention in the right-hand column.	
Reasons for Helping	Dangers, Problems, Fears, Dilemmas

Can you think of anything else (not mentioned in the video) that you would add to either column?

1. The film is entitled “Courage to Care”. This implies that in order to be a rescuer, you needed both courage and caring. Which do you think is most important? Why?

2. Sometimes rescuers had to do things to help the Nazis’ victims that they would not normally have done (i.e.- lie, steal, kill, etc.). Do you think this was wrong? Explain.

3. Rescuers generally say that they were not heroes, but they were. They acted with great courage in dangerous times. How can you be a hero and not even know it?

4. Most rescuers didn’t plan in advance to become rescuers, but acted when the opportunity arose. How can you prepare now to be ready to do the right thing in a time of crisis?

Reading about Rescuers – Discussion Questions

Directions: After reading chapters 16,17, and 18 of The Holocaust: A History of Courage and Resistance, answer the following questions. Use the back of this sheet if you need more space.

1. Why do you think the people of Denmark acted as they did?

2. List some of the specific acts of rescue mentioned in this chapter.

3. Read the proclamation of the Danish Freedom Council. What role do you think a statement like this played in the rescue efforts?

4. What kind of assistance did the Danes need from outside of their country? How might events have been different if they had not been able to obtain it?

5. Briefly describe the activities of the following individuals:

- Joop Westerwill:

- Oskar Schindler:

- Staszek Jackowski:

- Hans Fritz Graebe:

- Aristedes de Sousa Mendes:

- Raoul Wallenberg

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- Andre and Magda Trocme and the village of LeChambon:
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6. Describe some of the differences between these rescuers.

7. In what ways were these rescuers similar?

8. What type of action did Irene Harand take against the Nazis?

9. Irene Harand did not save Jews in the same way as the people described in the last chapter. Can she be considered a rescuer? Explain your answer.

10. Irene Harand took her stand against the Nazis earlier than anyone else described in these three chapters. Why do you think this was so?

11. In spite of the heroism of resistors and rescuers, the Nazis were not stopped until they were defeated at the end of World War II. Could the Nazis have been stopped any other way? Explain your answer.

What did the Allies Know? What Should They Have Done? – Newspaper Activity

Directions: Quickly peruse the seven newspaper articles listed below and answer the following questions:

- First Interview with Reich Chancellor Hitler – 2/15/1933 (page 5)
- Jailed for Failing to Salute – 1/8/1935 (page 6)
- Reich Court Takes Children from Parents – 11/30/1937 (page 6)
- The Pogrom: Kristallnacht – 11/10/1938 (page 7)
- Nazis Order Jews Over Six Labeled – 9/7/1941 (page 7)
- Goebbels Threatens Extermination of Jews in Reprisal for Bombings – 6/13/1942 (page 10)
- 2,000,000 Murders by Nazis Charged – 8/8/1943 (page 10)

1. These were just a few of many articles that appeared in the U.S. over the course of the Holocaust era, but most were not on the front page. Why do you think this was so?

2. Which of the first six articles do you think Americans would have found most troubling? Explain your answer.

3. How is article seven different from the rest?

Do you think most readers would believe it? Explain your answer.

4. Why do you think some Americans were uninformed about these events?

5. Many Americans say they didn't know much about the Nazis' crimes until they saw newsreel films at the movie theaters (after the war). Why do you think this was so?

6. This cartoon about the Evian Conference appeared in the New York Times on 7/3/38.



Compare this method of communication with a newspaper article. Which do you think is more effective at capturing the plight of Jewish refugees? Explain your answer.

Liberation Account: Gerda Weissman – Holocaust Survivor

I called to the other girls that some Americans were coming. The soldier on the left made a motion to the driver who stopped the vehicle a few feet from where I was standing. The soldier jumped out and walked toward the barracks. He wasn't the one who had come the day before. Shaking my head, I stared at this man who was to me the embodiment of all heroism and liberty. He greeted me. I must tell him from the start, I resolved, so that he has no illusions about us. Perhaps I had acquired a feeling of shame. After all, for six long years the Nazis had tried to demean us.

"May I see the other ladies?" he asked.

"Ladies!" my brain repeated. He probably doesn't know, I thought. I must tell him.

"We are Jews," I said in a small voice.

"So am I," he answered. Was there a catch in his voice, or did I imagine it?

I could have embraced him but I was aware how dirty and repulsive I must be.

"Won't you come with me?" he asked. He held the door open. I didn't understand at first. I looked at him questioningly but not a muscle in his face moved. He wanted me to feel that he had not seen the dirt or the lice. He saw a lady and I shall be forever grateful to him for his graciousness.

"I want you to see a friend of mine," I remember telling the American, and we started to walk toward Liesel. On the dirty, straw-littered floor Lilli was lying, covered with rags. As we tried to reach Liesel, she looked up, her eyes enormous,

burning in their sockets. She looked at my companion and her face lit up with a strange fire. I heard her say something in English, and saw how the American bent down closer and answered her. Her hands were shaking as she gently, unbelievably touched the sleeve of his jacket. In the exchange that followed, I made out the word "happy." I understood that word. Then she sighed, released his hand and, looking at him, shook her head and whispered, "Too late."

We moved on to Liesel. Liesel just smiled, and said nothing. She didn't seem to care much. I looked back at Lilli; her eyes were fixed on the American, a solitary tear ran down her cheek. An ant was crawling over her chin. Shortly afterward, Lilli died.

I heard the American give commands in English. He seemed furious that things weren't moving fast enough. He explained to me in German that a hospital was being set up for us. Then he asked me:

"Is there anything I can do for you in particular?"

"Yes, there is," I said. "If you would be kind enough, and could find the time. You see, I have an uncle in Turkey. Could you write to him, let him know that I am alive, and that I hope he has news from my parents and my brother?"

He took out a notebook, and removed the sunglasses he had been wearing. I saw tears in his eyes. He wore battle gear with a net over his helmet. And as he wrote, I looked at him and couldn't absorb enough of the wonder that he had fought for my freedom.

Peace! Peace! That great word that holds within it the meaning of life, the breath of freedom. Freedom! I welcome it in the rays of the golden sun, and I salute you, brave American soldiers. To us you are not ordinary men, but mythical heroes who fight to liberate us and who meet us with outstretched arms. Your sympathy is great, but we cannot speak the unspeakable and you might not understand our language. You are a people of freedom – and we? Are we human still – or again?

They have tried to drag us to the lowest level of existence, demeaned us, treated us worse than animals. Yet something has remained alive within us, for it stirs anew. It is a soul sensitive to the beauty of blossoming spring. The heart that beats in our breast pulsates with feeling. Slowly, the petrified shell under which the cruel barbarians have cut deep wounds is breaking, leaving a vulnerable, newly healed heart.

Words of farewell for you were whispered by my friend's dying lips: "Welcome them, welcome our liberators. I won't live to see them so greet them for me, they who liberate you!"

Gerda Weissmann, May 10, 1945

Read by the Fifth U.S. Infantry Division chaplain
at the funeral of Gerda's companions.

When, in the waning days of World War II, I approached the small Czech village of Volary, then known by its Sudeten-German name of Wallern, I could hardly have imagined that in a sense I was keeping my own “rendezvous with destiny.” White flags were flying from the rooftops of houses, indicating that the largely German-speaking population of the town was ready to surrender to our unit, the Second Regiment of the Fifth U.S. Infantry Division, part of General Patton’s Third Army.

My driver and I were two of a small force of six specialists assigned to take the surrender, each two-man team dealing with a different aspect of the formalities: civilian, military, and medical. What we did not realize was that a very special situation awaited us in town: One of the last Nazi atrocities of the war had been played out in Volary, final stop along a route SS guards had marched one of two groups, each comprising two thousand young Jewish women slave laborers, a distance of 350 miles, throughout the bitter winter months of 1945. We now came face-to-face with the pitiful remnants of the one contingent, the other having taken a different route. Of the 120 survivors, more than 30 were to die in the days to come. They had been locked up in a vacant factory building, and their tormentors had tried to destroy the evidence of their inhumanity in an abortive attempt to blow up the structure.

The following morning, amid a scene of surreal horror, I had an encounter that was to change the course of my life. Approaching the factory building, accompanied by a full medical unit, I became aware of the slight figure of a young woman standing next to the doorway that led inside. Trying to absorb the scene before me, I saw that she was completely emaciated, her hair matted and grayish; nevertheless a spark of humanity had somehow remained that made her stand out among her companions, those hollow-eyed automatons I had just seen shuffling across the factory courtyard. We had an exchange in German, and as she led me inside, she pointed toward the figures of her skeletal and dying companions, and I was stunned by the words she uttered next: “Noble be man/merciful and good. . . .” In that place, and at the end of her physical strength, she had been able to summon the lofty words the German poet Goethe had written almost two centuries earlier, admonishing humanity to retain the divine that is innate in us. They lent their own irony to the depth of deprivation and degradation to which these young women had been subjected.

From that point on I was to be continually impressed by this young woman, by her bearing, her composure under those unspeakable conditions, and later by all she expressed, verbally and in writing, even after she fell critically ill and hovered between life and death in the makeshift field hospital in that small Czech town.

What I witnessed at Volary, shocking and unprecedented as it was for me, did not come as a surprise; rather, it was the confirmation of my worst fears, based on my own understanding of the Nazi mentality.

Name: _____ Date: _____ Period: _____

Liberation: Two Voices

Directions: Read the quotations and answer the following questions:

1. What was Gerda’s impression of the American soldier who greeted her?

2. How did Gerda feel about herself at this moment?

3. Why was she surprised by the soldier’s attitude toward her?

4. Why did Lilli say “Too late.” to the soldier?

5. List three problems facing the survivors revealed in this quotation.

6. From the soldier’s account, how does he describe the prisoners he encountered?

7. What did the young woman mean when she quoted the words of the German poet Goethe, “Noble be man/ merciful and good...”?

8. Read the funeral oration written by Gerda Weissmann. What do you find most moving about her message?
