

Unit Title: **Rescue****Holocaust Education - Historical Notes and Teaching Suggestions for Educators:**

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 relatively 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 Chiune 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.
- The success of rescue activities depended on multiple factors. The most important of these were the relative severity of German occupation policies in a given area, and the attitude of the general population toward Jews in general and rescue efforts in particular. In places where the German occupation policies were less severe and the general population was more supportive of rescue efforts, the more Jews were saved. The courage of individual rescuers was always a factor, but was not less evident in areas where rescue was more difficult. In fact, rescuers in these areas faced the greatest risk and acted in spite of the extreme danger.
- 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 Holocaust victims in comparison with the number who perished.