



Moral Courage

Zegota: A Time
To Remember
Teacher's Guide

"...Highlighting acts of moral courage by individuals or groups who have helped to change the events within their community or country."

The Foundation for Moral Courage,
in partnership with South Carolina ETV,

presents

Moral Courage

*A seven-part series
“highlighting acts of moral courage
by individuals or groups
who have helped to change
the events within their community or country”*

Zegota: A Time to Remember

**Featuring an exclusive interview
with Jan Karski**

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Suggested Grade Levels
5th–12th

Subject Areas
Social Studies, U.S. History, World History,
Language Arts, Character Education

Moral Courage

Moral Courage identifies ordinary people who became extraordinary through their acts of great personal courage, and underscores the importance of a shared commitment to universal human values. These seven television documentaries focus on the unique lifesaving stories of rescue extended to Jewish fugitives during the Holocaust period.

The series consists of the following programs.

TREASON OR HONOR

(1998) *Narrated in English by Uta Hagen and in German by Anna Rosmus.*

This program introduces six German nationals, recognized by Yad Vashem, who found it possible in the center of Nazi tyranny to hide and protect German Jewish fugitives. Why they accepted the risk of defying German law is as important to understand as how they rescued these people. [28 minutes]

IT WAS NOTHING...IT WAS EVERYTHING Reflections on the Rescue of Jewish Fugitives in Greece During the Holocaust

(1997) *Narrated by Irene Papas.*

Highlighting the almost total destruction of Greece's Jewish community, this program offers dramatic archival footage and Ladino music to complement interviews with rescuers and a few who were rescued in Thessaloniki, Athens, Crete, and in other important locations. [29 minutes]

ZEGOTA: THE COUNCIL FOR AID TO JEWS IN OCCUPIED POLAND, 1942–1945

(1997) *Narrated by Eli Wallach.*

This is a story of the desperate plight of the Jews of Poland and the conditions of terror under which Zegota rescuers tried to help. Zegota participants, Jewish survivors, and Polish and Jewish historians recall and reflect on the unparalleled crime of genocide committed by Nazi occupation forces, and on the extraordinary courage of people who risked—and some of whom sacrificed—their lives trying to save some Jewish fugitives. [28 minutes]

A DEBT TO HONOR

(1995) *Narrated by Alan Alda.*

In spite of the fact that Italy was allied with Nazi Germany until its surrender to the Allies in September 1943, 80 percent of Italy's Jews survived the Holocaust. Many found safety and friendship with the clergy and others with ordinary citizens, both groups becoming heroic through their far-reaching rescue efforts. [29 minutes]

RESCUE IN SCANDINAVIA

(1994) *Narrated by Liv Ullmann.*

Thousands of Danes and Norwegians found it possible to guide Jewish fugitives across their borders to safety in Sweden. Raoul Wallenberg's and Count Folke Bernadotte's stories of rescue are told in this film, along with the unique story of protection extended by the government of Finland to its Jewish community while that country was allied with Nazi Germany in their common war against the Soviet Union. [55 minutes]

ZEGOTA: A TIME TO REMEMBER

(1992) *Narrated by Sy Rotter.*

The highest percentage of almost 20,000 "righteous gentiles" honored by Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Remembrance Museum in Israel, for their having rescued Jews during the Second World War are Polish. Their efforts are highlighted in this program, which includes an epilogue by Jan Karski. [52 minutes]

THE OTHER SIDE OF FAITH

(1991) *Narrated by Sy Rotter.*

In the town of Przemysl, Poland, it was possible, even under the strictest Nazi occupation regulations, for a 16-year-old Polish girl and her younger sister to successfully hide and nurture 13 Jewish fugitives—men, women, and children—for over two years. This is their inspiring story. [27 minutes]

How to Use *This Guide*

Guide Components

- **Pre-Teaching Material**
 - People
 - Places
 - Vocabulary
- **Timeline: Important Events of World War II**
- **Historical Background**
- **Maps**
- **Video Synopsis**
- **Classroom Activities**
 - Participatory Lessons
 - Classroom Discussion
 - Handouts
- **Selected Resources**
 - Bibliography
 - Videos
 - Web Sites

Moral Courage is delivered in seven programs. The guide for each program contains the components pre-teaching material, historical background, video synopsis, and classroom activities. Some programs contain specific bibliographies, videos, and Web entries. The instructor may use these components in a variety of ways.

- To provide a map through the program, as the pre-teaching material is organized in the order in which it is viewed or mentioned.
- To guide student viewing of the program. A written outline for students to follow can keep them focused and enhance student understanding.
- To assure that students are paying attention to the programs by having them listen for and define/identify the content of these sections, as basic factual questions do not do enough to challenge students' higher-order thinking skills.
- To set up the scenes and provide historical background for the lesson before viewing.

Note that the classroom activities and the classroom discussions for each program contain activities that may be used with many of the other videos.

The selected resources—bibliography, videos, and Web sites—can be used by both the instructor and the students. These are *selected* and are not meant to be all-inclusive.

Parts of this guide are taken wholly or partially from discussion guides prepared by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) for The Foundation for Moral Courage. Those parts are in italics.

Zegota: A Time to Remember

Using archival photographs and film footage, together with interviews of participants, this film tells the story of the desperate plight of the Jews of Poland and the conditions of terror under which the Zegota rescuers tried to help. Zegota participants, Jewish survivors, and Polish and Jewish historians recall and reflect on the unparalleled crime of genocide committed by Nazi occupation forces. They also dwell on the extraordinary courage of people who risked—and some of whom sacrificed—their lives trying to save their Jewish countrymen.

Pre-Teaching Material

People (in the order viewed and/or mentioned)

Adolf Hitler: German leader and author of the “Final Solution.”

Josef Stalin: Leader of the Soviet Union, changed sides during conflict.

Ambassador Wladyslaw Bartoszewski: Original member of Zegota.

Zofia Kossak: Conservative Catholic and cofounder of Zegota.

Wanda Krahelska Filipowicz: Socialist activist and cofounder of Zegota.

Roman Jablonowski: Original member of Zegota and member of the Polish underground.

Tadeusz Rek: Original member of Zegota and member of the Polish underground.

Stanislaw Jankowski: Original member of Zegota and member of the Polish underground.

Halina Grobelnia: Original member of Zegota and member of the Polish underground.

Jan Karski: Polish underground’s courier to Allies.

Dr. Marek Edelman: Jewish underground army veteran.

Miriam Pelez: Jewish representative on Zegota’s Council.

Stanislaw Dorowolski: Chairman of Zegota.

Teresa Prekerowa: Zegota participant.

Leon Feiner: Zegota vice-chairman.

Adolf Berman: Zegota vice-chairman.

Jan Nowak: Forger who created papers for Jews.

Father Marcelli Godolewski: Created birth certificates for Jews.

Sister Superior Matylda Getler: Hid Jewish children in Catholic orphanages.

Irena Sendlerowa: Zegota participant tortured for her secrets.

Elzbieta Fixowska: A hidden Jewish child; mother was a Zegota agent.

Professor Alexander Gieysztor: Zegota liaison with the Home Army of Liberation.

Henry K. Wolinski: Zegota participant.

Jerzy Lemski: Courier from Zegota to the Polish underground.

Dr. Yisrael Gutman: Director of the Holocaust Research Center.

Places (in the order viewed and/or mentioned)

Poland

Warsaw

Vocabulary (in the order used in the video)

German “living room”

Ghetto

Extermination camps

Zegota

“Aryan side”

Allies

Timeline: Important Events of World War II

- 1921 July 29:** Adolf Hitler becomes the leader of the National Socialist "Nazi" Party.
- 1930 September 14:** The Germans elect the Nazis; it is the second-largest political party in Germany.
- 1933 January 30:** Adolf Hitler becomes the chancellor of Germany.
March 12: The first concentration camp opens at Oranienburg, outside Berlin.
March 23: The Enabling Act gives Hitler dictatorial power.
April 1: Hitler orders the Nazi boycott of Jewish-owned shops.
May 10: The Nazis burn books.
June: The Nazis open the Dachau concentration camp.
July 14: The Nazi party is declared the only party in Germany.
August 19: Adolf Hitler becomes the führer of Germany.
September 15: The Nuremberg Laws take away Jewish legal rights.
- 1936 February 10:** The German Gestapo is above the law.
March 7: German troops occupy the Rhineland.
- 1938 March 12/13:** Germany announces "Anschluss" (union) with Austria.
October 15: German troops occupy the Sudetenland; the Czech government resigns.
November 9/10: Kristallnacht (The Night of Broken Glass)
- 1939 March 15/16:** Germany takes Czechoslovakia.
September 1: Germany attacks Poland from the west; the Soviet Union attacks Poland from the east.
September 27: Poland surrenders to Germany.
October: Germany begins euthanizing the sick and disabled in Germany.
- 1940 April 9:** Germany invades Denmark and Norway.
May 15: Holland surrenders to Germany.
May 28: Belgium surrenders to Germany.
June 10: Norway surrenders to Germany.
June 14: The Germans enter Paris.
July 10: The Battle of Britain begins.
October 7: German troops enter Romania.
- 1941 April 17:** Yugoslavia surrenders to Germany.
April 27: Greece surrenders to Germany.
June: German SS Einsatzgruppen begin mass murder of Polish Jews.
July 31: Göring instructs Heydrich to prepare for the Final Solution—the murder of all European Jews.
September 1: Germany orders Jews in Germany to wear yellow stars.
September 3: The first experimental use of gas chambers at Auschwitz occurs.
September 19: The German army takes Kiev.
- September 29:** The German army murders 33,771 Jews at Babi Yar, near Kiev.
- December 11:** Germany declares war on the United States.
- 1942 January 20:** The Wannsee Conference to coordinate the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question" convenes.
June: Mass murder of Jews by German forces, by gassing, begins at Auschwitz.
July 22: Deportations from the Warsaw Ghetto to German killing centers begin; the Treblinka death camp opens.
- 1943 February 18:** The Nazis arrest White Rose resistance leaders in Munich.
April: Jewish resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto begins.
May 16: Jewish resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto is crushed by German troops.
June 11: Himmler orders the liquidation of all Jewish ghettos in Poland.
- 1944 June 6:** D-Day landings.
July: The Polish army-led uprising against the German army begins in Warsaw.
July 24: Soviet troops liberate the first concentration camp at Majdanek.
August 4: Anne Frank and her family are arrested by the Gestapo in Amsterdam, Holland.
August 25: Liberation of Paris.
October 2: The Warsaw Uprising ends as the decimated Polish Home Army surrenders to the Germans.
October 30: The gas chambers at Auschwitz are used by the Germans for the last time.
December 17: German Waffen SS murder 81 U.S. POWs at Malmedy.
- 1945 January 26:** Soviet troops liberate Auschwitz.
April 12: The Allies liberate Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen concentration camps.
April 29: The U.S. 7th Army liberates Dachau.
April 30: Adolf Hitler commits suicide.
May 7: Germany signs an unconditional surrender to the Allies.
May 8: V-E (Victory in Europe) Day.
August 6: Hiroshima, Japan, is the target of the first atomic bomb.
August 9: Nagasaki, Japan, is the target of the second atomic bomb.
August 15: The Japanese government surrenders; V-J (Victory over Japan) Day.
September 2: The Japanese sign the surrender agreement.
October 24: The United Nations is officially born.

Historical Background

Before World War II, the largest and most distinctive Jewish community in the world lived in Poland. The presence of Jews in Poland is noted in the earliest written historical records of Poland a thousand years ago. In 1264, their rights were guaranteed by law in the Statute of Kalisz, which protected life, property, religion, and equality before the law, including the right to take the oath on the Torah. This legislation, an exemplary protection of minorities even by the standards of today, also included some provisions to regulate the behavior of the Christian majority towards the Jews. Under these favorable conditions, and because of the widespread persecution of Jews in the rest of Europe, Poland's Jewish community grew into the largest in Europe, with a distinctive culture not only with its own religion but also its own language, customs, dress, and manners.

The Jewish community enjoyed a large degree of autonomy. That is, they were free to regulate their own affairs, including the right to their own courts in matters that affected members of their community, if they wished. Individuals, however, could opt to have their case tried in a Polish court.

In 1551, the Polish king, himself elected and responsible to his electors, granted the Jews an even greater measure of self-government through an elected parliament called the Council of Four Lands. By the 1600s, Poland was the largest state in Europe, it was multicultural and religiously tolerant, and it had a wider measure of democracy than elsewhere at that time.

At the end of the 1700s, however, the absolute monarchies around Poland—Russia, Austria, and Prussia (now known as Germany)—together attacked and conquered Poland, dividing the country among themselves and canceling all Polish laws, including the new constitution, the first such constitution in Europe and the second only after the United States. Some of the generals who fought to retain Poland's independence also fought in America for the independence of the United States. These included Kazimierz Pulaski and Tadeusz Kosciuszko, the latter a friend of Thomas Jefferson's and a democrat who wrote against the evils of slavery. Kosciuszko's contribution to the struggle for American independence is commemorated by a monument in Lafayette Park, across from the White House in Washington, D.C., and at West Point. Pulaski is honored at the Fort Pulaski Memorial Monument in Savannah, Georgia, as well as in Lafayette Park.

For 125 years after the conquest and partition of their country, the people of Poland had no state of their own. Their schools were closed, the use of their language was restricted, and they were frequently arrested, deported, or killed by the occupation forces. In the 19th century, thousands of destitute people, Christian and Jewish alike, left Poland in search of a better life in America. It was not until the end of World War I, in 1918, that Poland regained its independence, in large part at the insistence of President Woodrow Wilson, who believed in the self-determination of all peoples.

During the brief span between the First and Second World Wars, the newly independent Poland struggled to rebuild social and economic structures at a time when the world was in the grip of the Great Depression. As a multi-ethnic state, it also had to deal with tensions among various ethnic communities as nationalist and pluralist ideologies competed for political dominance.

In any event, their independence was short-lived. Twenty years later, in 1939, Europe was at war again and, for the next five years, the people of Poland would endure an occupation marked by the worst crimes against humanity ever known in history.

On September 1, 1939, Nazi Germany attacked Poland. Two days later, England and France declared war on Germany in defense of Poland, but neither country was prepared for war and, at this point, theirs was only a verbal support. They did not, in fact, come to the aid of Poland or engage Germany anywhere until France was attacked in May 1940. Meanwhile, Soviet Russia, which only recently had signed a nonaggression pact with Poland, broke its promise and, in agreement with Germany, attacked Poland from the east on September 17, 1939. Once again, these two large countries partitioned Poland and began a reign of terror by arresting, deporting, and killing civilians—men, women, and children.

Hitler, the leader of the National Socialist Party in Germany, usually known as the Nazis, ordered his armies to “kill Poles without mercy, all men, women and children of Polish descent or language....all Poles will disappear from the world....it is essential that the great German people should consider it as its major task to destroy all Poles.” This, he declared, was the way that the German people would get the extra “living space” he wanted.

Tens of thousands of Polish civilians—Christians and Jews—were shot in the first months of the occupation—1,700 between December 1939 and July 1940 in Warsaw alone. Sometimes children were specifically singled out, as in the massacres of boy scouts in the city of Bydgoszcz. Hundreds of thousands of people were evicted from their homes and forcibly resettled in other sections of the country, while others were sent to concentration camps and to work as slave laborers in Germany.

Approximately 200,000 Polish children, who in appearance were considered ideally “German,” were kidnapped and given to German families for adoption. Of these, only 15 to 20 percent were returned to their parents after the war. And only in occupied Poland did the Germans establish special children’s camps; in one of them, 12,000 of the 13,000 child prisoners were killed.

The western part of Poland was incorporated into Germany, the first conquered “living space” to be settled by German colonists. It was here that the largest death camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau, was built. Thousands of Poles were arrested and sent to the concentration camps already set up in Germany and Austria, such as Dachau, Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, and Mauthausen. Others were evicted and deported to central Poland or kept for slave labor.



EUROPE

Video Synopsis

Jews were treated with extreme brutality from the beginning of the occupation. Jews in the western area were either confined to the ghetto in Lodz or deported to ghettos in central Poland, simply called the General government (the word “Poland” was banned and all administration there was controlled by the German occupation forces). In central Poland as well, Jews were either evicted from homes that Germans wanted to take over, or those who were allowed to remain, at least at first, were constantly under attack. Under German rule, they lost all protection under the law—indeed, violence against them was encouraged and it wasn’t long before criminals and racists knew they could rob and beat Jews with impunity.

Although Jewish families were not broken up at first, they were soon impoverished and suffered terribly from hunger, disease, and terror. The Germans set up ghettos—districts that were designated as “Jewish residential areas”—and forced all Jews to live there. The boundaries of these ghettos were invariably set in such a way that no parks, gardens, or green spaces were within them, and eventually they were enclosed by fences or walls. Any Jew found outside a ghetto was subject to immediate execution. In the ghettos, Jews were crowded up to 12 to a room, starved, and subjected to the sadistic brutality of the German guards. Hundreds of thousands died of starvation, disease, and random murder even before the systematic killing in death camps began.

The only way a Jew could escape from a ghetto was either by pretending to be a Christian Pole or by hiding. Neither of these options was easy. To change his identity, a Jew needed documents that would identify him as a Christian: a birth and baptismal certificate from a church; an identification card with a photo, issued by German authorities; and an employment card, also issued by German authorities, showing that he had an approved job (Poles caught without these cards were immediately deported for slave labor). Besides these cards, a Jew would need a story to match, something that would “prove” that his identity was authentic, and friends and “relatives” to corroborate his story. Besides that, he would have to know enough about the Christian religion (usually Catholic) and other Polish customs to behave naturally. Most of all, he had to speak the language well enough to sound Polish, but, for the majority of Polish Jews whose first language was Yiddish, that was not the case.

Those Jews who could not take on a Christian identity and tried to live a normal, though terrifying, life in the area outside the ghetto walls (then called the “Aryan” side) could only survive outside the ghetto by getting help from non-Jews, usually by being hidden. That was another challenge altogether. Besides the obvious difficulties of hiding someone under the crowded conditions of the occupation and the constant surveillance of German soldiers and police, there was an automatic death penalty imposed on Polish Christians and their families if they were caught helping Jews. Names of the executed Poles were published to serve as a warning to others.

Yet there existed people capable of extraordinary courage and altruism who tried to help as much as they could. It required a selfless devotion to look after people in hiding. Consider the difficulties. The rescuers had to undertake total care for those under their protection. They had to procure food secretly because the Jews in their care were entitled to no rations; this food, bought on the black market (i.e., illegally), was very expensive. They had to prepare their food, wash their laundry, and, depending on the hiding place, even provide toilet buckets, empty them, and clean them. Then, there was the psychological stress of dealing with fear—their own and that of the Jews in their care.

It was under such conditions that Żegota was organized in Warsaw in 1942. It was the only government-financed organization in Europe set up specifically to aid Jews. The people who founded Żegota were all rescuers on their own, so they realized that the magnitude of the task required an organization to bring financial and logistical help, as well as moral support and encouragement, to Jews in hiding and to their rescuers. Since the founders of Żegota were also members of the Polish underground (resistance movement), they had contacts with secret organizations that forged identification documents for their own operatives. These were forgeries of the highest quality, and Żegota was able to get them free.

The members of Żegota could also coordinate their resources. They could contact underground doctors who were willing to risk their lives to attend to Jewish patients. They were in touch with helpful social workers and with orphanages and convents that would take in Jewish children. Żegota actively sought accommodations, offered help building secret hiding places, and even acquired a few apartments that served as temporary emergency quarters for Jews who had just escaped from the ghetto. Żegota agents escorted Jews who came under their protection to their new hiding places. The underground received money sent to Żegota by the Polish government-in-exile in England via parachutists, and Żegota couriers delivered this money and documents to Jews in hiding or to their caregivers. Żegota's leaders published underground appeals asking Poles to overcome their fear, to defy the death sentence, and to help Jews. This, they wrote, was both a civic duty and a moral obligation.

Beyond that, Żegota tried to fight the terrible scourge of the blackmailers and denouncers who preyed on the defenseless Jews who tried to escape. These people, whether common criminals or racists, were responsible for the deaths of many Jews as well as the deaths of Polish Christians who were helping them. Thanks to Żegota's intervention, the underground issued a death sentence on those who denounced Jews. When such sentences were carried out, the names of those executed were published as a warning. Jews and their rescuers were also betrayed by people who broke under torture by the Germans, and by children who revealed information without realizing it. Still others were caught during routine searches by German soldiers or police.

Social welfare was Zegota's primary concern, but since the organization had established contact with Jewish activists, Poles were also in a position to transmit messages from Jewish leaders to the outside world. The Polish underground used secret radio transmitters to beam the news about the atrocities committed against the Jewish people and, in 1942, their couriers carried news about the genocide to leaders in England and the United States. The most famous of these couriers was Jan Karski, now an American citizen, who personally met with political leaders and journalists in England and the United States, including President Franklin Roosevelt, and pleaded for their intercession. However, no help came. Many Jews were killed by starvation and mass shooting; millions of others—men, women, and children—were transported to Nazi death camps, where they were gassed and cremated. The enormity of this crime is unparalleled in history.

By the time the war ended, 6 million Polish citizens had been killed—half of them Jews and the other half Christians. Although Poland had fought together with the Allies (Britain and the United States), it was liberated from Germany by the Soviet Union, the same country that had initially invaded it as Germany's ally in 1939. The Soviets then imposed a Communist regime on Poland and many of the men and women who had been in the Polish resistance against the Nazis were once again arrested, deported, or killed. Among these were members of Zegota, including founding member Wladyslaw Bartoszewski, who had been a prisoner at the Auschwitz concentration camp during the German occupation and then spent seven years in prison under the Communist regime.

It was a long time before the Polish people could openly speak or write about their wartime experiences. Although Zegota was recognized and honored for its rescue work by the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial Institute in Jerusalem, Israel, in 1972, it was not a story generally known in the West. In 1995, a monument was erected in Warsaw by the American Friends of Zegota to honor these extraordinary people who went beyond personal resistance and were prepared to lay down their own lives so that others may live.

Classroom Activities

Participatory Lessons

- Before viewing, use the map handout to locate the sites mentioned in the video, review the vocabulary words, and give students the names mentioned in the program. Use the timeline and historical background to set the stage for the video. This preparation will broaden students' viewing experience.

- Use the Jigsaw method of collaborative learning to allow students to “teach” other students about the information below.

- *What were Hitler’s war aims in Poland? What did he mean by “living space”? What is meant by an “incorporated territory” and by “occupied territory” or “occupation”? What is “genocide”?*

The word “genocide” was first coined in 1944 by American scholar Raphael Lemkin, who defined this crime as the “coordinated plan...aiming at the destruction of the foundations of life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves.” Such a plan would include the destruction of “the political and social institutions of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and even the lives of individuals belonging to such groups.” This definition was used as the foundation for the United Nations’ Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948).

- *What was Nazi Germany’s policy toward the Jewish people?*

*Long before Hitler was elected in 1933, he had written a book, **Mein Kampf**, in which he expressed his hatred of Jews. The first concentration camp, Dachau, was built in Germany in 1933; the Nuremberg Laws passed in 1935 deprived German Jews of their civic rights; and, in 1938, the Nazi party organized a two-day wave of terror known as Kristallnacht (the Night of Broken Glass), when bands of German thugs smashed, burned, and looted homes, synagogues, and businesses, and beat and even killed Jewish men, women, and children. Although all this was known when German armies crossed into Poland and their brutality against Polish Jews began immediately, no one imagined that their atrocities would reach the point of systematic mass murder. In some areas, mass murder was committed by German death squads, who shot their victims, but the Nazis also constructed special death camps where Jews from all European countries were brought to be executed in large, specially constructed gas chambers. The most infamous of these camps was Auschwitz-Birkenau, which was located in former Polish territory that had been incorporated into Germany after the conquest. Altogether, 6 million European Jews were killed by the Germans and their accomplices during the Holocaust.*

Have students start to “gather” 6 million of something—string macaroni, paper clips, etc. When you start this process will determine how far your class will get in a year. The “collection” can be added to each year—moving the students closer each year. Even without completing the project, the visual will be an effective lesson for everyone.

- *What is meant by “Aryan,” “gentile,” and “ghetto”?*

According to the Nazis’ racial theories, the “Aryan” people were superior to other races. “Aryan” was the name given to people of northern European stock and this group they further graded, ranking themselves at the top. Jews and Gypsies were classified as nonhuman and were condemned to death. Slavs and the people living to the east of Germany, including Poles, Ukrainians, and Russians, were classed as nonhuman. In Poland, to enforce compliance with the Nazis’ orders, German policy included killing all the better-educated people through starvation and brutal working conditions as well as mass executions. In practice, even the poorest and least-educated Polish people fell victim to these policies in the German drive to take over territory and suppress resistance.

A “gentile” is a non-Jewish person, not necessarily Christian.

During the occupation, German authorities segregated the Jewish from the gentile population. They evicted Jews from their homes and forced them to live in ghettos—that is, small, overcrowded sections of towns or cities that were enclosed by fences or walls. Christians living in these areas were expelled and resettled elsewhere to make sure Jews were totally isolated within their designated ghettos.

- *What would happen to Jews who escaped from the ghetto? What was the penalty for Polish Christians who helped Jews?*

Jews found outside ghettos were summarily executed by the German forces. The penalty for giving help to Jews was also a death sentence, which in Poland was applied to entire families, even infants, and sometimes to neighbors and entire villages.

- *The following questions could be assigned to students to answer as they watch the video. They could be given to all students or divided into questions for various groups.*

- *What kind of help did Jews need in order to survive?*

Jews who could “pass” as Poles—that is, they knew the language and customs well and they did not “look” Jewish—could, by obtaining forged identification papers, live on the “Aryan” side. They required help to get these documents and then needed assistance to obtain a place to live and a job. Jews who could not “pass” needed a hiding place. Most Jews in Poland did not speak Polish or spoke it with an accent, they dressed differently, and they were not familiar with the customs of the Christian population. To hide them, someone had to be willing to risk his or her life

and the lives of their families, as well as look after all their personal needs. Since Poles themselves were reduced to an allotment of 669 calories per day (as opposed to 2,613 calories per day for Germans), secretly obtaining extra food was difficult, dangerous, and expensive.

□ *What kind of people helped?*

Individuals from all walks of life and all types of religious and political persuasions helped Jews. Catholic clergy played a special role in that priests provided false birth certificates, and convents and monasteries took in Jewish fugitives. Convents and secular orphanages took in children. There is no known case of a convent refusing refuge to a child.

□ *Why was Żegota organized and what kind of help did it provide?*

Żegota was set up by people who were already helping Jews individually and who knew the great difficulties with which rescuers had to cope. The founders were also members of the Polish underground and had contacts that enabled them to provide specialized help. Żegota's primary purpose was to provide social welfare, such as money, housing, and medical aid—not military help.

Żegota distributed about 50,000 sets of false identification documents that were provided by secret forgery units of the underground. Żegota agents looked for homes and hiding places, including emergency shelters, to enable escaping Jews to get off the streets as quickly as possible. They also had a network of underground doctors who were willing to risk seeing Jewish patients or to offer temporary shelter in hospitals, often by diagnosing a communicable disease and putting the person in a hospital isolation ward.

One section of Żegota was organized to get children out of the Warsaw Ghetto after locating homes for them. The children also required false documents and stories to match. If they were old enough, they had to memorize new identities. Żegota rescued about 2,500 children in the city of Warsaw.

A network of couriers carried secret messages, documents, and money to Jews in hiding and to their helpers.

Couriers of the Polish underground and secret radio broadcasts informed the outside world of the Nazis' genocide of the Jews of Europe. The reports were given to the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) and to journalists, politicians, and community leaders in England and the United States, including the prime minister of England and the president of the United States.

Zegota also involved the Polish Home Army in decreeing a death penalty on those Poles who blackmailed or betrayed Jews. When these sentences were carried out, the Home Army published the names of the executed as a deterrent to others.

- *What were the difficulties and risks involved in helping Jews?*

The greatest obstacle to overcome was fear and the grave responsibility of endangering other members of one's family, including one's children. There were also logistical problems—that is, finding suitable hiding places, secretly buying food for people who, theoretically, did not exist, and the daily strain and stress of living with such danger.

No one knew who could be trusted. Not only were there criminals or racists to contend with, but there was always the risk that someone would break down under torture and reveal hidden Jews and their protectors. Sometimes people were simply tricked into saying something that would make the police suspicious. It was particularly risky where children were involved.

It was heartbreaking for Jewish parents to be separated from their children, especially since no one could actually guarantee the safety of the children or their rescuers. Already traumatized by brutal conditions, Jewish children suffered further pain by being taken away from their parents. Jews who knew where relatives or friends were staying could also reveal this information under torture. Christian parents had to deal with the moral dilemma of risking their children's lives, including those of very young children who were not able to understand the situation.

- *What does Bartoszewski mean by “sins of omission”? What are the moral implications of not offering help to people condemned to such a cruel death? Allied leaders felt their priority was to concentrate on their fight against Hitler and Nazi Germany strictly from a strategic point of view. Should they have changed some of their priorities to bring help to those people in greatest peril by bombing the death camps' gas chambers and crematoria or by at least bombing the train lines?*

Among those who helped, including one of the founders of Zegota, were people who had been known as anti-Semitic before the war. They decided to help, they said, because the Nazi policy under the occupation was a moral issue—not a political or economic one. The majority of Polish Christians and Polish Jews did not know one another—oftentimes they did not even speak the same language.

Classroom Discussion

- *Discuss anti-Semitism and racism and the importance of bridging separations between communities, getting to know one another, respecting our common humanity, and respecting one another's differences.*
- *Although the United Nations Organization did not come into being until after the war, the term "United Nations" was officially used for the first time in the "Declaration by United Nations," signed by 26 allied governments in January 1942. That year, the Polish government-in-exile published a booklet addressed to the United Nations, titled "The Mass Extermination of Jews in German Occupied Poland"; but no action was taken to help them. Discuss the responsibilities of the United Nations during World War II and, since then, towards peoples who face persecution and the threat of genocide.*
- *Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis has written that "Goodness is as teachable as evil. Putting a human face on altruism is essential." Altruism, defined as having concern for others, is a guiding principle in human behavior. Zegota members say not enough was done to help, but they do not condemn those who didn't help because they were afraid—only those who could have done something but did nothing. Discuss the altruism of Zegota members and what more could have been done to help.*
- *How should we honor the Zegota participants in our own communities—even today, 55 years after their service to humanity?*
- *Although the death penalty for helping Jews existed in other occupied countries, only in Poland was this sentence ruthlessly administered. Entire families were immediately shot, hanged, or burned alive, yet some people continued sheltering Jews in their homes. Discuss this terror and the possible motivation for defying the death penalty. Can you imagine what your decision would be under such circumstances?*

Selected Resources

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