

**First place Elementary School**  
**Bryan F. Metcalf, 4<sup>th</sup> Grad**

**Teacher: Mrs. Lerner**  
**Florida State University School**

### **Three of the Unknown Heroes of the Holocaust** **May They Always Be Remembered**

When it comes to the heartbreaking story of the Holocaust, there were countless Holocaust heroes. Each has their own legacy. Yet, many are unknown in this time period like lost explorers on a deadly expedition. You probably know the story of Anne Frank, but have you heard of Primo Levi, Celia K., and George Mandel?

Primo Levi is a survivor of the brutal time of the Holocaust. He was a prisoner in Auschwitz where he experienced the hatefulness and prejudice of being under Hitler's control every day. Yet, one day, he met a girl named Frau Mayer. She would surprise him in a way that no other German would. Primo was working in a prison chemical factory, and the chief asked him to unplug a blocked drain so Frau Mayer, the lab technician, would not get dirty. Frau Mayer thanked him, and then asked if he could fix her flat tire on her bicycle. Levi accepted the request, however, he was worried. If he was caught socializing or repairing the bicycle, he would be beaten. In return, she offered a hard boiled egg and four lumps of sugar. Then, Frau said, "Christmas will soon be here." Primo later remembered how she was just trying to be nice or cheerful. He also remembered the weird thought of a German telling a Jew that Christmas is around the corner. Mayer treated him equally. To us, it is a little thing. To him, she was his hero.

Celia K. is a survivor of the lethal times of the Holocaust. When Celia was captured, she was transported to a harsh ghetto. Not long after, she made an amazing escape to a farm. The owner was a Polish farmer who was willing to help her hide from the iron fist of the Nazis. However, he was very worried about the Nazis discovering him helping a Jew. The farmer dug a two foot wide hole for her to hide in. She rested and hid in the tight ditch. If she went down to one position in the tight hole, she would stay like that for days or a week. She remained at the Polish farm for approximately three months. She then got a hold of the group she was with in the wilderness. She learned to shoot pistols and raid villages for any food they could get and to kill Germans. Celia stated, "mercilessly we killed ." They wanted the Germans to have a tough

time retreating. One average day, the commander gave her a young German, however, he was not a Hitler youth. She could not kill a teenage boy right in front of her, face to face. Instead, she fed and took care of him. Celia was a hero because she was compassionate and brave, and so was the farmer.

George Mandel was not captured, although he was Jewish. He saved many fellow Jews not physically, but mentally by his clever idea. Colonel Jose Castellanos, a Salvadoran diplomat, appointed George as Consul General. George changed his last name to Mantello since it was Spanish. He changed thousands of Jews' birth certifications to El Salvador. Decades later, a woman found a chest with a lock. When she flung it open papers flew out like tickets to freedom. Those papers were bunches of Jews' birth certifications. George was a hero because he was dedicated to his idea of saving thousands of Jews, and he had to risk his own life.

There are so many unknown Holocaust heroes in this world. Some courageous heroes aren't even Jewish. Some are rescuers, heroically saving groups of Jews. Primo, Celia, and George each have their own unique stories about their experiences as heroes in the Holocaust, but they still have the same traits - bravery, character and compassion. This helped them survive the horrifying Holocaust. They teach us to judge people by their character rather than the way we look. During the Holocaust, Nazis despised diversity in religion and looks. Some Jews and supporters fought against the hateful idea of killing off the Jews in Europe. They are the unknown heroes of the Holocaust.

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**First Place Middle School Winner**  
**Alexis Patty**

**Teacher: Nikki Allen**  
**Ft. Braden School**

## **Rescuers and the Traits That Made them Heroes**

Just as we should never forget the horrors of the Holocaust, we should also never forget the heroes of the Holocaust. The stories of the rescuers show that despite risk to their own lives and the lives of their family members, during the Nazi occupation of Europe, there were some who emerged from the horrors as heroes by displaying acts of goodness and selflessness. There is a lesson in the story of the rescuers. A lesson of choices and decisions. Most of the victims had no control or choice of their destiny. The rescuers on the other hand had choices. They could have chosen to look the other way just as many around the world did. But not the heroes. They made a decision. They chose to risk their own lives, the lives of their families and they often risked their homes and their own comfort to save Jews. Through their incredible stories of courage and humanity we can look at eight traits that many of the rescuers possessed within themselves. Traits such as courage, ingenuity, cooperation, integrity, compassion, social responsibility, moral leadership, and self-sacrifice were qualities that made the rescuers heroes.

Courage is the state of mind that enables one to face danger, hardship, or uncertainty with composure and resolve. Rescuer Marion Pritchard a student who worked with the Dutch resistance displayed courage while helping to rescue over 150 Jewish children. She also hid a Jewish family for over two years and had to kill a Nazi in order to protect them. We also see courage in the actions of Irena Sendler who, working with Zegota entered the Warsaw ghetto several times while helping to smuggle over 2,500 Jewish children out of the ghetto and into hiding. After being denounced, she was arrested and tortured by the Germans, but never disclosed any information about the workings of Zegota or the locations of the children in hiding.

Ingenuity is inventive skill or cleverness in confronting a challenge. By dressing a Jewish brother and sister who were about to be arrested as Muslims, and obtaining fake identity documents for them, Olga Kukovic was able to save the lives of the pair whom she then helped to escape to safety in Italian occupied territory. The ingenious schemes of Oskar Schindler allowed him to outsmart the Nazis and transfer his nearly 1,100 “indispensable” workers to a new factory in Czechoslovakia, saving their lives.

Cooperation is working together toward a common goal or purpose which was ever present in the rescue of the Dutch Jews. Preben Munch Nielson was a teenager during the war and joined a resistance group that worked together to hide Jews near the coast of Denmark and then smuggle them

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by boat to Sweden. In less than a month they were able to save some 1,400 Jews by ferrying them across the water to Sweden. In Bulgaria, Dimitar Peshev worked together with his colleagues in parliament to protest the deportation of Bulgarian Jews, which led the king to halt the deportation which saved nearly 50,000 Jews.

Integrity is firm adherence to a moral code, especially in the face of adversity. Polish nun Eugenia Wasowska ran a Catholic orphanage who took in 13 Jewish children and passed them off as Catholics. She continued to conceal their identity while providing them with food, shelter, and schooling. Although the Japanese government was against it, diplomat Chiune Sugihara ignored the orders of his government and issued visas permitting thousands of Jews to escape through the Soviet Union to other countries.

Compassion is a feeling of sympathy for the suffering of another and the desire to alleviate it. Armenians Itasmik and Tigran Tashtshyan who lived in the Ukraine along with their parents, sheltered the two children of their Jewish neighbors. The Tashtshyan family had escaped genocide decades earlier and were willing to come to the aid of their friends.

Social-responsibility is a sense of obligation to ensure the welfare of others. We see acts of social responsibility in American Varian Fry. While in France she became aware of the hurdles preventing emigration to America and set up an organization that helped more than 1,000 Jews and non-Jews escape, most to the United States. Prisoner of war being held in Auschwitz, Jerzy Radwanek took it upon himself to smuggle food and medicine to Jewish inmates within the camp as well as helped to document the cruelty and suffering he witnessed there.

Moral leadership is the ability to influence others to accomplish a goal arising from a sense of right and wrong. It shone brightly during the Holocaust in protestant French pastor Andre' Trocme' who urged his villagers to uphold their Christian values to help their Jewish neighbors in need. By the end of the war the villagers from the area had succeeded in saving approximately 5,000 Jews. Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg used his leadership position to issue passports to Jews and created safe houses to shelter them in. With a staff of hundreds and the help of other diplomats, he was able to save tens of thousands of Jews from deportation.

Self-sacrifice means giving up personal wants and needs for the sake of others or for a cause. The idea of self-sacrifice resonates with the story of Jadviga Konochowicz and her family. Although they lived in poverty, Jadviga, her parents, and seven siblings sheltered a Jewish family on their farm for more than a year putting the welfare of the eight Jewish strangers before their own. It is also displayed in Portuguese diplomat Aristides de Sousa Mendes who risked his job to save Jews. Working in France he

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issued visas to thousands of Jews so they could travel through Spain to Portugal. When the Portuguese government became aware of his actions he was dismissed from his post

When we study the stories of the rescuers it is at times difficult to determine why they chose to do what they did. When asked, many will give the response that it was just the right thing to do. There is not one single description that defines all rescuers. They did, however, have one thing in common. They all possessed within them many of these distinctive character traits that allowed them to make decisions that saved lives. By remembering their stories of heroism we not only give recognition to their efforts, but are also able to bring to the forefront these traits in which we should all strive to possess within ourselves.

**First place High School**  
**Adam McCabe**

**Teacher: Linda Davey**  
**Maclay School**

## **Heroes of the Holocaust**

Yehuda Bauer once described the Holocaust as "one of the darkest times, if not the darkest, in the history of mankind. It is a time of overwhelming terror and enduring grief. It appears there was no trace of human kindness to lighten that darkness. It is said to be the ultimate expression of man's inhumanity toward man". Yet, there were deeds of courage and compassion during the Holocaust from which we can take some comfort about our past and hope for our future. Many men and women stood up against the Nazi ideology and stood up for the equality of all men. Although there wasn't one single person who was the "Hero of the Holocaust", there were many individual courageous acts of kindness and leadership by people who knew what the Nazis were doing was inhumane. Not only were these people the "Heroes of the Holocaust", but the Jews themselves played a major role as they resisted the Nazis both spiritually and physically as they stood up for themselves, their people, and their own beliefs.

The Holocaust specifically targeted the Jews in what the Nazis termed as the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question." Other victims of the Nazi regime included gypsies, religious groups, the mentally and physically disabled, homosexuals, prisoners of war, intelligentsia and political activists, and races that were deemed inferior. Considering all the victims of Nazi persecution, the total number of casualties is estimated to be between nine and eleven million, including six million Jews and two million Poles, absolutely making World War II the costliest war in terms of human lives. But throughout the Holocaust, there were many individual efforts to save the Jews by people who saw that what the Nazis were doing was wrong. These people demonstrated a huge amount of courage and can truly be seen as the "Heroes of the Holocaust".

The French Protestant Pastor Andre Trocmé was the spiritual leader of a small town in France and was a man driven by ethical and religious convictions. He often spoke out against the discrimination coming from the Nazis and also on the equality of all men. When the Nazis occupied France, "he and his wife arranged for the rescue of three thousand to five thousand

Jews fleeing the Nazi persecution. They located many private families willing to take in Jewish refugees and children” (Bauer). When forced to produce a list of Jews in the town, Trocmé is famous for saying “We do not know what a Jew is; we know only men.” This quote shows how Trocmé believed in the equality of all men. He was very courageous to stand up and say something like this to German officials, but he believed in the fact that all humans are created equally and should be treated equally. He believed that we are all the same “beings” and that we just have different skin colors, religions, and ways.

Oskar Schindler, a German Industrialist, was an unlikely rescuer of the Jews, as he was all too flawed. He was a Nazi, and an opportunistic businessman motivated by greed. He saw the opportunity to profit by hiding wealthy Jews and employing around one thousand cheap Jewish slave laborers for his factory in Poland. However, appalled by the immense brutality of Nazism, he began shielding his workers without any regard for cost. "He smuggled children out of ghettos and used his connections in high places to request for hundreds of Jews to be moved to another factory"(Bauer). While he died penniless, he gained the perpetual gratitude of his Jews, whom he affectionately referred to as “my children.” He is the only Nazi to be buried in a cemetery in Jerusalem. Schindler was able to realize that what he was doing was wrong and saw the true evils in the Nazis. He made the major change from being a Nazi to opposing and standing up against the Nazis. Many Nazis saw Schindler as a traitor but he was actually a hero; he didn’t go along with all the other people and become a “follower”. He became a leader as he stood up for the Jews and saved as many lives as he could. At this time, it was very dangerous to “hide’ Jews and Schindler would have been sentenced to death if people knew of the “operation” he was running. But this didn’t frighten Schindler at all because he would rather go down fighting for what he believed in than standing there, doing nothing at all.

The Jews themselves showed great courage through physical and spiritual resistance. They can be seen as heroes as they tried their hardest to live, which the Nazis saw as the greatest form of resistance, since all the Nazis wanted was the extermination of all Jews. There are many types of physical and spiritual resistances. Spiritual resistance refers to attempts by individuals to maintain their humanity, personal integrity, dignity, and sense of civilization in the face of Nazi attempts to dehumanize and degrade them. Most generally, spiritual resistance

may refer to the refusal to have one's spirit broken in the midst of the most horrible degradation. Spiritual resistance can be anything from singing, dancing, praying and writing in a diary to attending a school in the ghetto. Physical resistance was much more brutal and common. Often the people of the ghetto would fight with Nazis or German army officers. When Jews were asked to be deported, many would refuse deportation and make the lives of the Nazi/German Army much harder. Jews found out that the sewers were an accessible way to leave the ghettos (for a short period of time before the Nazis learned they were being used), so they would escape the ghettos through the sewers. In the Warsaw ghetto after January 1943 "the whole ghetto resisted". This meant that all the people in the ghetto, somehow, in some form resisted the Nazi/German Army. If you were able to fight, then you fought against the armies in the ghetto, but if you couldn't fight (not physically strong enough), then you would run away and hide from the officials. Resisting as a group could create a major dilemma for the Nazi/German Army as it did in the Warsaw Ghetto.

Mordecai Anielewicz was a famous hero of the Holocaust. He is known for his leadership during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943. After entering the Warsaw ghetto, he became the leader of the ZBO and made Mila 18 the secret "hiding" place for this group. This Jewish Fighting Organization was known for its heavy resistance against the German Army. "On January 18, 1943, Anielewicz was instrumental in the first act of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, preventing the majority of a second wave of Jews from being deported to extermination camps. This initial incident of armed resistance was a prelude to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising that commenced on April 19." (Bauer). One of Mordecai's major philosophies was never to let the German Army kill you their way, but to fight back and die in honor, by fighting for what you think is right. He refused to accept people walking into gas chambers to their deaths without putting up a fight. So it is assumed that he took his own life on May 8, 1943, along with his girlfriend and many of his staff, creating "his" own way of death instead of being killed by the carbon monoxide sent into Mila 18 by the German Army (after they found out this was their hiding place). More important though, word of Mordecai and the whole ghetto's actions spread across Europe and other ghettos and some camps started mass resistances also. In a letter by Mordecai before his death he wrote on how proud he was of his followers in his ghetto and also

of the other ghettos which had started to resist. He stated that these people were filled with much courage and that they were doing the right thing by taking action.

Also, there were some countries that did try and help out the Jews and/or stood up against the Nazis. Unfortunately, the United States didn't become involved with helping the Jews until 1944. After Holland was taken over by the German Army, the Jews of Holland were forced to wear the Star of David. The people of Holland disagreed with what the German Army was doing, so they rose up in opposition against wearing the Star of David. In Belgium, there was a big country wide effort to support the Jews. The stock market in Belgium refused to sell stock that was taken away from the Jews by the German Army. If a Jew was kicked out of his house, the Belgium people would not buy that property because they saw it still as the property of the Jew who was "kicked out". The people of Belgium saw this as stealing these items which were Jewish property. As well, the police in Belgium were very uncooperative with the German Army and often "threw" missions. In Norway, the Norwegian police sabotaged the Nazi attempt to get "heavy water" and the history teachers refused to teach what the Nazis ordered them to teach. Denmark is known for the Legend of King Christian. All of Denmark helped in transporting as many Jews as possible to Sweden, which at this time was a neutral country in the war. The efforts by these countries made a huge difference in the survival of Jews, and helped provide life to future generations.

All in all, the Holocaust was a time that many humans don't want to remember, as they turn their backs on the horrible event, images, and ideas that were present during the Holocaust. Hopefully the people in today's society have learned from the hatred that almost killed an entire population of people. No race, religion, or sex deserves that type of punishment at all, and we owe a big thanks to those who stepped up to fight for what they believed in, and stood up against the Holocaust; thanks: "Heroes of the Holocaust".

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