

# British Heroes of the Holocaust

## Secondary lesson plan



HOLOCAUST  
MEMORIAL  
DAY TRUST

This activity explores the stories of seven British people, from very different backgrounds, who all took risks and showed great courage and determination in order to save the lives of Jewish people during the Holocaust. Each have now been awarded a medal as a 'British Hero of the Holocaust' by the UK government.



### Key question:

What motivated these British heroes to take a stand?

### Learning objectives:

- **All** students will **identify** reasons for the actions of some British heroes.
- **Most** students will **make inferences** about why some people became rescuers during the Holocaust.
- **Some** students will **evaluate** the stories and **draw conclusions** about what we can learn from them.

### Key terms:

- **Kindertransport** - A programme helping Jewish children to escape from the Nazis. It ran between November 1938 and September 1939.
- **Concentration camp** - Places where the Nazis kept many people as prisoners. In the camps people were forced to work as slaves or they were killed. There were many camps like this in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s.
- **Gestapo** - The official secret police of Nazi Germany and Nazi-occupied Europe.

### Background knowledge:

This activity would work well for a secondary student group (Key stage 3 and 4 or equivalent) with some basic background knowledge of the Nazi persecution of Jews in the 1930s and the Holocaust.



## Activity:

1. Divide the class into up to six groups.
2. Allocate each group with a short biography sheet (see below) of each of the British heroes. Ask each group to read the story of their hero and then complete a character map (at the end of this lesson plan) to draw out the key points of their story and what motivated them to take the actions they did. They can do this individually on the sheet, in pairs, or on a large sheet of paper in their groups.
3. Once the character maps are complete, ask each group to put theirs up on the walls around the classroom. Ask the students to move around the room finding out about the other stories and complete the final section of the character map: the 'feet'. These questions can work well as an extension activity – encouraging students to develop a more evaluative and detailed response – perhaps in the form of a judgement paragraph to answer question 3.

## Plenary:

Ask students to consolidate their learning with a 3 – 2 – 1 recap: 3 things you have learned about British heroes; 2 questions you want to ask; 1 thing you would like to find out more about. These can be shared in pairs or groups.

## Important note for teachers - after the lesson:

Share what you and your students have done to mark HMD by emailing [education@hmd.org.uk](mailto:education@hmd.org.uk) or by adding it to our interactive map. You can mark your event as private if it is not open to outside visitors. Visit [hmd.org.uk/letusknow](http://hmd.org.uk/letusknow) to complete the short form.

This helps us to know how our school resources are used, and your school may be featured as a case study when we talk about the range of activities taking place across the UK for HMD.

Feel free to contact us on [education@hmd.org.uk](mailto:education@hmd.org.uk) if you have any questions.

## Take the learning further:

For more rescuer stories, you can explore our collection of life stories (some with easy-to-read versions) at [hmd.org.uk/lifestories](http://hmd.org.uk/lifestories). The Veseli Family life story may be of particular interest.

There are many more free teaching resources available on our website, including assemblies, tutor time activities, lesson plans and projects to get involved with. Visit [hmd.org.uk/schools](http://hmd.org.uk/schools).

Find out more...

Holocaust Memorial Day Trust: [hmd.org.uk](http://hmd.org.uk)  
Discover resources for educators and other materials for  
your activities: [hmd.org.uk/resources](http://hmd.org.uk/resources)

## British Hero one: Sir Nicholas Winton

In December 1938, at the age of 29, Winton cancelled a planned skiing holiday after being urged by a friend, Martin Blake, to go to Prague, in Czechoslovakia, where thousands of Jewish refugees were living in appalling conditions in camps. Winton travelled to Czechoslovakia and quickly realised that something had to be done to rescue the children who were caught up in the situation. Winton created an office in his hotel room in Wenceslas Square and asked the British government to allow Czech children to come to Britain alongside the German and Austrian children the government were allowing to the UK



in a programme called the *Kindertransport*. The government agreed to Winton's request for Czech children but on the condition that each child was matched to a host family who would care for the children until they were 18, and each child had to have a guarantee of £50 paid by their family.

Winton, alongside a few volunteers – including his mother – worked very hard to arrange everything the children needed, including finding host families and raising funds to cover the travel expenses of the children. He was able to arrange for 669 children to come to the UK over the next few months, the majority of whom were Jewish. The last train of children was scheduled to leave on 1 September 1939. It was cancelled because war broke out; Winton believed that 'none of the 250 children on board was heard of again', which was an awful feeling for him.

Although many of the children hoped to be reunited with their parents and families after the war, the majority of them discovered that their parents had been murdered in the Holocaust. It was Winton's actions, and those of his colleagues, who compiled lists of the children and travelled with them on the trains, that saved their lives.

Winton did not hide what he had done, but it was not well-known publicly because Winton did not think he had done anything extraordinary. Years later, Winton was trying to donate his papers, identifying the children, and matching them up to families, to an archive or museum. Shortly afterwards, he was invited to appear on *That's Life!* a television show where, to his surprise, he was reunited with some of the children he had helped. For most of the children, it was the first time they found out who had rescued them, and felt it was a real honour and privilege to come face to face with their rescuer.

## British Hero two: Frank Foley

In 1930s Berlin, Frank Foley was working as a British spy, undercover as a 'passport officer'. Eyewitnesses recall Mr Foley as an unassuming hero – a small man with round glasses. However, Foley was in fact Britain's most senior spy in Berlin. He used his role in the Passport Office as a cover for his real job as an Intelligence Officer working for the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), later called MI6. This made his efforts on behalf of the Jews even more dangerous.

He was aware of the persecution of Jewish people by the Nazi regime and saw the effects it had on their everyday lives. As a result he decided to risk his life by helping Jews leave Germany, saving them from death.

From his base at the British embassy, Foley broke many Nazi laws, for example, he went to concentration camps such as Sachsenhausen and presented visas to those in charge, allowing Jewish prisoners to be free to travel and therefore to escape. He used his secret service skills to help the Jews obtain false papers, forged passports and visas, which again, was breaking the law – breaking and bending the immigration rules to make it possible for hundreds to get out of Germany before being arrested by the Gestapo. For years he did this, making no money and seeking no recognition or praise for his efforts. He even went further and hid Jews in his own home. It is estimated that he saved around 10,000 Jews during his time in Nazi Germany in the 1930s.

During his lifetime, Foley received no recognition for his actions in the UK, but has since been hailed as 'Righteous Amongst the Nations' (a title awarded by Israel to non-Jews who took risks to rescue Jews during the Holocaust) and in 2010 he was recognised as a British Hero of the Holocaust.



## British Hero three: Sister Agnes Walsh

Clare Walsh was born in Hull and joined a Catholic organisation called the Daughters of Charity, becoming Sister Agnes. During World War Two she worked as the assistant of the Mother Superior at the St Vincent de Paul Convent in Cadouin, France. This area of France was invaded by the Nazis in 1940 and Jews in the area were therefore under threat as the Nazi persecution spread through occupied France.

In December 1943 there were manhunts for Jewish people living in the area and Pierre Cremieux, a French Jew, approached the nuns and asked them to hide his wife, seven-year old son and four-month-old baby twins. Sister Agnes was touched by the plight of the family and she pleaded with her Mother Superior to agree to shelter them, regardless of the danger this could pose if the Nazis discovered what the nuns were doing. The Mother Superior, Sister Granier, eventually agreed and the family were hidden and looked after by Sister Agnes at the convent throughout the war. They provided a safe and peaceful home for the children and treated them with devotion and care.



After the war the children kept in touch with Sister Agnes, visiting and writing to her throughout their lives. It was the testimony of these twins, in 1990, that led to her gaining official recognition as a hero of the Holocaust – firstly as 'Righteous Among the Nations' in Israel in 1990 and then also as a British Hero of the Holocaust.

## British Hero four: Princess Alice of Greece

Princess Alice was a member of the Royal Family – a great-granddaughter of Queen Victoria and mother of Prince Phillip, the Duke of Edinburgh. She lived in Athens during World War Two, but was in a difficult situation as Phillip was in the British Royal Navy during the war and she also had sons-in-law fighting on the German side. She worked for the Red Cross, organising soup kitchens and even flew to Sweden to bring medical supplies back to Athens, under the cover of visiting her sister Louise, who was married to the Swedish Crown Prince.

Athens was occupied by the Nazis from 1943-1945, and so Jews in Greece became under threat of deportation to concentration camps as the Gestapo began to hunt for them. The Greek royal family knew the family of Haimiki Cohen, a Jew and former member of the Greek parliament. In 1913, Haimiki Cohen had helped King George I of Greece and in return George offered him any service he could perform as a return of the favour. Cohen did not ask for any help but in 1943, after his death, his wife,

Rachel, and their five children were in need of a hiding place to escape arrest and deportation by the Nazis, and so they asked Princess Alice for help. The four male children wanted to travel to Egypt but the journey was too dangerous for Rachel and her daughter, Tilde, and so Princess Alice offered to shelter them in her home, honouring King George I's promise. Later one of the boys also joined them as he had been unable to make it to Egypt.

They stayed in Princess Alice's home until the liberation of Greece. At times it was very dangerous as the Gestapo became suspicious of the Princess and even interviewed her. As she was deaf, she used this to her advantage, pretending she could not understand their questions until they gave up and left her alone.

In marking her heroic actions, Prince Phillip said of his mother: 'I suspect that it never occurred to her that her action was in any way special. She was a person with deep religious faith and she would have considered it to be a totally human action to fellow human beings in distress.'



## British Heroes five: Stan Wells, George Hammond, Tommy Noble, Alan Edwards, Roger Letchford, Bill Keeble, Bert Hambling, Bill Scruton, Jack Buckley and Willy Fisher

Stan Wells was a British soldier who was captured early in the war in 1940, when fighting against the Germans in France. He became a prisoner of war and was taken to a camp in eastern Europe, near the Baltic Sea. Stan and the other prisoners from his camp worked on German farms in the nearby area, doing a variety of different tasks.

While working in a barn, Stan found a 16 year old girl, who had collapsed in there after escaping a death march. During death marches concentration camp inmates were forced to walk huge distances in order to move them away from advancing Allied armies, which resulted in many dying on the way. The girl, Sarah Matuson (who later became Hannah Sarah Rigler), had been imprisoned at Stutthof concentration camp, when, in January 1945 she and the other inmates were made to leave the camp and start marching towards the Baltic coast. They were a group of 1200 women, who were very weak from life in a concentration camp and were now being forced to walk each day through snow and in bitterly cold conditions, wearing only rags and wooden clogs. They were given no food and were often hit by the SS guards in charge. Hundreds of women died on the way. Sarah was with her sister and her mother, who begged her to try to escape, thinking it would be Sarah's best chance of survival. Eventually Sarah decided to escape the march to try and find food for her family. She slipped away unnoticed and hid in a barn where she collapsed and was discovered by Stan Wells.

Stan found her exhausted, starving and very weak. He gave her some food, wrapped her in a blanket and brought her to nine other British prisoners of war (named above). Together, the 10 men hid Sarah in a hayloft and took it in turns to care for her. They washed her, brought her food and nursed her back to health – helping tend to her frostbite and putting paraffin in her hair to stop lice from spreading.

The men took great risks helping Sarah. There was a police station just by their living quarters and the hayloft she was hidden in was above the stables for the police horses. When the British prisoners were moved they arranged for her to be looked after by a local woman who agreed to do all she could to keep her safe. She survived the war and 25 years on she succeeded in tracking down the 10 British men who saved her life. All 10 men have now been recognised as heroes by both Britain and Israel after Sarah wrote a book to tell the world her amazing story.



## British Heroes six: Ida and Louise Cook

Ida and her sister Louise were opera fans who would travel to many different countries, including many visits to Austria and Germany to see their favorite singers. In the 1930s, an Austrian conductor, Clemens Krauss and his wife, the soprano Viorica Ursuleac told the sisters about the persecution of the Jews in Nazi Germany, and asked them to help some people escape to England.

Jews were allowed to leave Germany and Austria at this time, but they were not allowed to take any money or possessions with them, and Britain would not allow Jews in without a guarantee of their financial status and so in reality it was very difficult for Jews to flee the persecution and find a country to be allowed into.

From 1937 to 1939, using their passion for opera as a reason for their frequent travel, on their return from watching a performance, the sisters would smuggle into England many expensive items such as jewellery, fur coats and other valuables belonging to Jewish families. These were then used to fulfill the financial requirements and enable the Jewish families to be allowed into Britain.

Ida and Louise also worked hard to ensure that British officials signed the visas for Jews to use to escape Germany. In this way, they helped 29 Jews to escape, and they used the money Ida was earning as a fiction writer to pay for this. They also rented a flat in London to shelter homeless European families.

They were named as British Heroes of the Holocaust in 2010.





# Character map

## British Hero of the Holocaust:

### Head:

What would they be thinking about when they started rescuing/saving?

### Eyes and ears:

What did they see or hear to make them chose to start rescuing Jews?

### Mouth:

What might they have said to others who stood by and did nothing?

### Arms:

What actions did they take – what did they DO to save Jews?

### Heart:

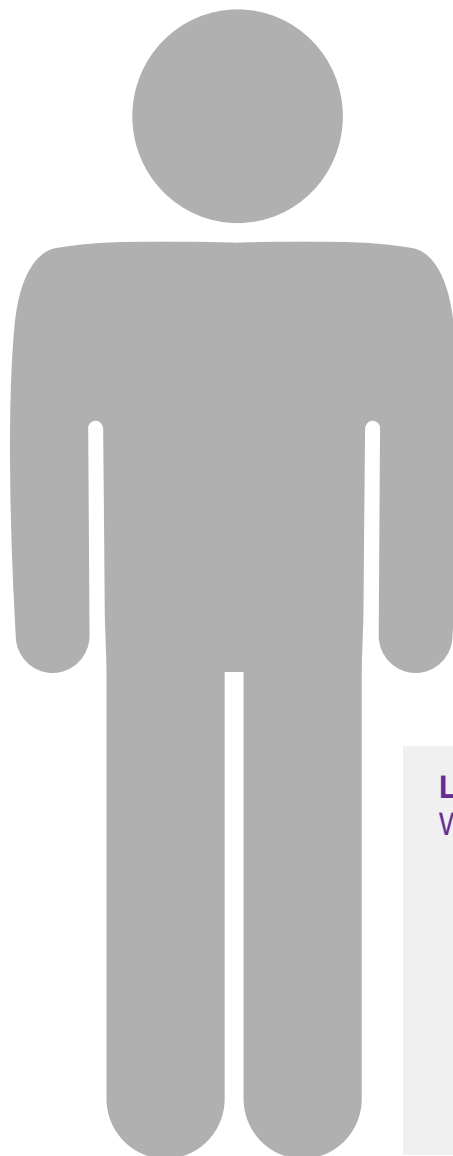
What were they passionate about? How did that help in their rescue work?

### Hands:

What were the enabling factors which meant they could carry out their rescue work?

### Legs:

What may have worried them?



**Feet:** Walk around the classroom and read the other stories ...

1. What role did religious belief/money/position in society play in enabling these people to take heroic actions? Do we expect more or less from different individuals and why?
2. What can we learn about the Nazi regime and the attitudes of the British authorities from these stories?
3. What lessons can we learn from the stories of these British heroes? How can we apply these to our own lives?