



For the Living

Part 2: Friends of Zion – The Righteous Among the Nations

By [Brigitte Chaya Nussbächer](#)



Despite darkness, Jew-hatred, and persecution, there have always been people in every country who showed extraordinary courage and stood up for the Jewish people. Today, they are known as the “Righteous Among the Nations”.

Their stories serve as an example for all time.

Friends of Zion – The Righteous Among the Nations



These people thought differently – and above all, they acted differently. In a world of total moral collapse, there existed this small minority. The stories of some of them are told at the Friends of Zion Museum in Jerusalem. They were individuals who kept alive the vision of the Jewish people’s return to their ancestral homeland and actively worked to make the dream of a Jewish state a reality. Others took great personal risks – militarily or diplomatically – to support that same cause.

Friends of Zion Museum in Jerusalem Photo: Private

From Lord Balfour, who pledged to support the Jewish people in establishing a homeland in Zion, to Orde Wingate, who trained Jewish forces in defense tactics, to Winston Churchill, who repeatedly advocated for a strong Jewish presence in Palestine and supported Jewish immigration despite political tensions.

A special tribute is given to the “Righteous Among the Nations” – men and women who, often at the risk of their own lives, rescued Jews during the Holocaust.



All of these individuals can serve as inspiring examples for us. They are living proof that, in the end, each person makes their own choices – and is therefore responsible for them. That no mass movement, no ideology, and no persecution can ever be so powerful as to render the human spirit incapable of distinguishing between good and evil or of taking a stand.

No one expressed this more clearly and convincingly than the Viennese Jew, neurologist, and psychiatrist **Viktor Frankl**, who survived the concentration camps. Although he lost his parents and his wife, he wrote the deeply life-affirming book “*Man’s Search for Meaning*”. It is an authentic source of courage, showing that even in the most difficult circumstances and up to the last moment of life, a person still has countless possibilities to make life - despite suffering - meaningful and valuable. Frankl wrote that “*man is the being who decides what he is.*” Even in a concentration camp, “*everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms - to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances*”. He reminds us that “*to live*” ultimately means “*to bear responsibility - to answer correctly for one’s own life, to fulfill the tasks set before each individual, and to meet the demands of the moment*”. The Righteous Among the Nations show us that each of us is responsible for our actions - and for our inaction - but also that each of us can make a difference, and that every act counts.

The Talmud teaches in *Sanhedrin 37a*: “*Whoever destroys a single soul of Israel, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world; and whoever saves a single soul of Israel, it is considered as if he saved an entire world.*” This has often been paraphrased as: “Whoever saves one life, saves the entire world.”



Following this principle, Yad Vashem established the Avenue of the Righteous to personally honor these individuals. To date, a total of 29,968 Righteous from 57 countries worldwide have been recognized: non-Jews who risked their lives during the Holocaust to save Jews. This may not seem like many compared to the world population, but it is enough to show us that we are never alone when we stand alongside Israel.

[The Righteous Among the Nations Are Role Models for All Time. Photo: Shutterstock](#)

I have brought a few of these examples for you. Similar to Yad Vashem, I want to contrast the crimes of antisemitism and the horrors of the Holocaust with the people who embodied love, compassion, hope, and rescue - those who were a true blessing.

There were diplomats like **Raoul Wallenberg**, **Carl Lutz**, **Aristides de Sousa Mendes**, and **Chiune Sugihara**, who were able to save tens of thousands of Jewish lives. Also, the German diplomat in Denmark, **Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz**, who helped nearly 7,200 Jews escape to Sweden. Communities hid thousands of Jews. **Oskar Schindler** saved over 1,000 Jews in his factories. The **Zabinski couple**, directors of the Warsaw Zoo, smuggled over 300 Jews out of the ghetto and hid them in the zoo.



The stockbroker **Nicholas Winton**, through his initiative and organizational skill, arranged rescue trains and foster families from scratch, bringing 669 Jewish children from Prague to England. (The 2024 film “One Life” tells this moving story.) The Dutch resistance fighter **Joop Westerweel** organized the escape of around 300 Jews. German teacher **Elisabeth Abegg** and German doctor **Maria von Maltzan** provided hiding places and papers to Jewish families in Berlin.

Or take the Polish nurse **Irena Sendler**, who smuggled more than 2,500 children out of the Warsaw Ghetto and placed them with foster families. She kept careful records of their real names, so that after the war they could be reunited with their families - which succeeded for over 2,000 of them. Even after being captured and tortured by the Gestapo, she never betrayed those she had saved. The moving story of one of these rescued children is told in the SCM novel “*The Medallion*” by Cathy Gohlke.

There was **Stefanie Podgorska**, an ordinary woman who hid more than a dozen Jews. **Jeanne Daman**, a Belgian teacher, smuggled 2,000 Jewish children out of Brussels and found foster homes for them. Danish fishermen risked their lives to save 95% of Denmark’s Jews by ferrying them to Sweden. **Marie-Rose Gineste** warned Jews of impending raids and helped them escape. The lawyer couple **von Dohnanyi** assisted dozens of Jews with false papers and escape routes.

Irena Gut, a penniless forced laborer, had nothing but her courage and her heart - and that was enough to save twelve Jews, whom she hid in the cellar of the German major whose household she was forced to manage in Poland. There was **Miep Gies**, whose help became known to the world through the diary of Anne Frank, and the Polish farmer **Franciszka Wyrzykowski**, who hid Jews after brutal massacres.

And there was **Ada Schiel** from Transylvania. She was my grandmother.

I would like to share her special story with you, because it is such a beautiful example of the truth that those who bless Israel will themselves be blessed. For that, I will take you with me - to Transylvania.

The Story of a Remarkable Woman During World War II

During World War II, Romania was initially one of Germany’s allies. Ion Antonescu, the then Prime Minister and Marshal of Romania, established a military dictatorship in 1940 and entered into a military alliance with Hitler, hoping for material and personnel support to strengthen the Romanian army.

As a result, Hitler sent a German military mission to Romania, leading to the stationing of many German soldiers in Transylvania. Antonescu’s policies were also marked by radical antisemitism, and during his rule, hundreds of thousands of Romanian Jews fell victim to the Holocaust through massacres and forced labor camps.



My grandmother came from the prominent family of Dr. Carl Ernst Schnell, the former mayor of Brașov (then Kronstadt), a city in Transylvania. Because of their factories and wealth, the family held not only political but also economic influence.

My grandmother's home on Burgasse had always been a social gathering place, a hub of cultural exchange - and it remained so even during the stationing of German troops. Since Transylvania had belonged to the Habsburg Monarchy for centuries (and was only awarded to Romania after the end of World War I), both of my grandparents had been born in Transylvania as Austrian citizens and had studied in Austria and Germany.

[My Grandmother Photo: Private](#)

German officers who arrived in Kronstadt were pleased to find German culture and language in my grandparents' home. What they didn't know was that my grandmother had Jewish friends and was not willing to abandon her friendship. When she realized how dangerous the persecution of Jews had become in her surroundings and foresaw the fate that awaited them, she acted quickly.

In great haste - knowing that every day of delay could mean the deportation of her friends - she built a hidden room in the cellar of her house, concealed by a door camouflaged with a bookshelf. Piece by piece, she moved small furniture, folding beds, mattresses, blankets, dishes, clothing, and everything else necessary into the secret space. In the large house, fortunately, this went unnoticed. Once everything was ready, she sheltered her friends there.

Somehow, she managed to do all of this without anyone else finding out. From that point on, she secretly provided for the Jewish family. I don't know the fears she endured - she never spoke of them. Of course, she understood the danger she and her entire family were putting themselves in, but it seemed natural to her to stand by her Jewish friends when they were persecuted and in danger.

She led a double life: outwardly, a lady of society, mother of small children, and hostess to many - and in secret, someone who used her strength and creativity to protect her friends.

While German officers in the salon kissed the hostess's hand and praised her hospitality in the guestbook, saying she made them forget "the harsh business of war", downstairs in the cellar, her Jewish friends waited for her nightly visits, during which she brought them food, news, reading material, and everything they needed to survive.



Although - or perhaps precisely because - German officers regularly came and went in the house, no one suspected a thing. Even the increased use of food went unnoticed among the many guests. The Jewish family was never discovered - and survived!

What a blessing! But this is only the first part of the story...

My Grandmother's Former House in Winter 2024 Photo: Private

In 1944, everything changed. The defeat of the German Reich was becoming apparent, and on August 23, King Michael of Romania ended Ion Antonescu's military dictatorship and Romania's alliance with Germany through a coup. Romania switched sides in the middle of the war, fighting from then on alongside the Allies, and the Soviet army advanced. With Antonescu's fall, the systematic persecution of Jews also came to an end.

Despite the change of sides, Stalin demanded "reparations" from Romania in the autumn of 1944 to help rebuild the Soviet Union - as compensation for Romania's former alliance with Germany - in the form of 100,000 "voluntary" laborers. The German minority in Transylvania was particularly targeted.

Starting in January 1945, able-bodied ethnic Germans from Romania (men between 16 and 45, women between 18 and 30) were forcibly taken by Russian and Romanian troops, loaded into cattle cars, and sent to forced labor. Town entrances were sealed by the military and police, telephone, telegraph, and railway connections were cut off, and mixed Romanian-Soviet patrols went house to house with prepared lists. Most of the time, this happened at night. Those taken had one hour to prepare for transport - without knowing their destination or how long they would be gone. Only one piece of luggage was allowed. No consideration was given to those left behind, including children who were orphaned.

My grandparents were both part of the German minority. My grandfather was still at the front, and my grandmother, 28 years old with three small children (6, 2, and just over 1 year old), was in Kronstadt. Every night brought fear; every day was only a temporary reprieve. Then, one night, the patrol came to her door, and she too had to pack her suitcase. But at the same time, she did something else: she sent her Hungarian maid to the Jewish family she had befriended and saved, who, since Romania's change of sides, was now free again.

Within a very short time, her Jewish friend appeared. He spoke with the Romanian and Soviet soldiers and told them how my grandmother had saved his family's lives and cared for them for years. Only he knows what words he used to convince the men. But he succeeded: my grandmother was removed from the deportation list - without ever being sent away. Although she and her family lost all their property through the



expropriations carried out by the Romanian communists in the following years and were forced to live in a tiny backyard apartment, they themselves remained unharmed, and her three children did not grow up orphaned. What a blessing! “Blessed is the one who blesses you, O people of Israel.”

Decades have passed since then. My grandmother never saw Israel, and she never reunited with the friends she had saved, who emigrated there, because she lived behind the Iron Curtain in Romania, isolated from the rest of the world. Yet, even she contributed a tiny piece to the miracle that has unfolded in Israel over the past 100 years.

When I walk through the streets of Israel today, my heart warms. Zechariah 8:5 has been fulfilled: “*Old men and women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of great age; the streets of the city shall be filled with boys and girls playing in its streets.*”

My grandmother made the contribution she could - and in doing so, left a legacy for me. I want to continue the line of blessing and, like her, be a blessing for Israel.

Each of the Righteous Among the Nations has their own moving story. Our challenge is to draw inspiration from them and discover how we, today in 2026, can make a contribution that truly makes a difference.

[Continue reading in Part 3.](#)