



Lesson Plan

Righteous among the Nations

Case Studies of Two Women: Miep Gies and Bep Voskuijl

Ages: **Students in Grades 9-12**

- **Didactic Objectives**
- **Introduction**
- **Historical Background**
- **Miep Gies**
- **Elizabeth (Bep) Voskuijl**

"One who saves one life saves an entire world" – The Talmud

Didactic Objectives

- Students will learn to justify and express opinions with the use of a variety of sources.
- Students will develop an understanding of what it meant to be a "Righteous among the Nations" – inclusive of its ramifications.
- The role of women will be illuminated through an assessment of female action
- Students will understand the dire situation of Jews living in hiding during the Holocaust

Introduction

Definition of Righteous among the Nations -*Chasidei Umot HaOlam*, in Hebrew

Non-Jews who behaved heroically, risking their lives and the lives of their families, during the Holocaust in order to save Jews from being deported and slaughtered by the Nazis. To date over 21,000 people have been recognized by Yad Vashem.

In order to have the title "Righteous among The Nations", bestowed, the following information must be provided:

In general, when the data on hand clearly demonstrates that a non-Jewish person risked his (or her) life, freedom, and safety in order to rescue one or several Jews from the threat of death or deportation to death camps without exacting in advance monetary compensation, this qualifies the rescuer for serious consideration to be awarded the "Righteous among the Nations" title. This applies equally to rescuers who have since passed away.

A committee convenes in an effort to assess:

- How the original contact was made between the rescuer and the rescued



- A description of the aid extended.
- Whether any material compensation was paid in return for the aid, and, if so, in what amount.
- The dangers and risks faced by the rescuer at the time.
- The rescuer's motivations, in so far as this is ascertainable; e.g. friendship, altruism, religious belief, humanitarian considerations, or others.
- The availability of evidence from the rescued persons (an almost indispensable precondition for the purpose of this program).
- Other relevant data and pertinent documentation that might shed light on the authenticity and uniqueness of the story.

Question 1:

Why were Miep and Bep given the status of Righteous among the Nations?

Note for the Teacher:

In order to assist students to answer the above question, we suggest teachers access Yad Vashem's main Righteous among the Nations webpage. To view, [click here](#).

Historical Background

Prior to World War II, The Netherlands had a Jewish population of one hundred and forty thousand. Seventy-five thousand Jews lived in Amsterdam.

Germany invaded the Netherlands on May 10, 1940. Four days later, the Dutch Army surrendered. A series of anti-Jewish measures were implemented in Fall 1940. In September, almost all Jewish newspapers were shut down and in November, all Jewish civil servants were fired.

Miep Gies

Miep Gies was born in Vienna, Austria, in 1909. Her given name was Hermine Santrouschitz. On the outbreak of World War I, Miep was five years old. Owing to the serious food shortages, she soon became undernourished and for health reasons, her family sent her to The Netherlands to live with a Dutch foster family in Leiden. Young Miep thrived in her new Dutch home, and she came to love her new family very much - five children, not much money, but great kindness. They taught her generosity. She elected to remain in the Netherlands.

In 1933, she was hired as an office assistant by Otto Frank, who had come to The Netherlands from Germany with his Jewish family in order to escape the Nazis and reestablish his business in Amsterdam.

Miep soon became very good friends with the Frank family - Otto, his wife Edith, Margot and Anne. Life went on as usual, the business was successful, and the Frank family felt secure, until 1940, when German troops conquered Holland and the daily lives of the Jews began to be severely restricted.

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Eventually, Otto Frank realized that the situation of the Jews in Holland was deteriorating and with great foresight he decided to create a hiding place in the annex behind his office in 263 Prinsengracht Street. The entrance was to be hidden by a moving bookcase, which could open and close.

Realizing he would need help, Otto Frank turned to his loyal employee and friend Miep Gies and asked if she would be willing to take care of the family when they went into hiding. She answered without hesitation that she would do this, in order that the family would be saved from deportation and certain death. For two years, she gave no thought to her own personal safety. Miep, her husband and three other members of the Dutch underground committed themselves to risking their lives daily in order to bring food to the hidden Jews, and keep them in touch with the outside world.

On July 5 1942, the Frank family moved into the hidden annex. Overall, eight people attempted to live secretly in the small hidden rooms – The Frank family, Herman and Auguste Van Pels and their son Peter, and Miep's dentist, Mr. Pfeffer.

Miep was especially close to Anne Frank, bringing her notebooks, when her diary pages were full, and other items a young girl would enjoy, such as her first pair of shoes with heels and flowers, which Anne could give to Peter. Sometimes she was just a sympathetic ear – someone to listen to the thoughts and feelings of those trapped in the hideout.

Miep is referred to many times in Anne's diary - *"Miep has so much to carry she looks like a pack mule. She goes forth nearly every day to scrounge up vegetables, and then bicycles back with her purchases in large shopping bags. She's also the one who brings five library books with her every Saturday [..]"*[1]

These visits to the hideout were made at great danger to herself and everyone else, had she been discovered.

One night, Miep and her husband, after repeated requests from Anne, agreed to sleep the night in the hiding place. Biep felt first-hand what it was like to be imprisoned behind locked doors for days and weeks on end, without any respite. Biep could come and go as she pleased, but Anne and her family were unable to enjoy that freedom.

Question 2:

How did Miep's actions contrast with the daily activities of the general population?

An especially exciting occasion was St. Nicholas Day. Miep and Bep made plans to make a festive St. Nicolas Day for those in the hiding place.

"Hannukah and St. Nicholas Day nearly coincided this year [..]. During dinner Bep and Miep were so busy whispering to father that our curiosity was aroused and we suspected they were up to something. Sure enough, at eight o'clock we all trooped downstairs through the hall in the pitch darkness [it gave me shivers, and I wished I was safely back upstairs!] to the alcove. We could switch on the light, since this room doesn't have any windows. When that was done, Father opened the big cabinet. 'Oh, how wonderful!' we all cried. In the corner was a large basket decorated with colourful paper and a mask of Black Peter [..]. Inside was a little gift for everyone, including an appropriate verse [..]. I received a Kewpie doll, Father got bookends, and so on."[2]



Question 3:

What elements of Miep's actions and behavior can be considered "extraordinary" and how did this place her in danger?

On August 4, 1944, the Jews hiding in the Annex were betrayed and the hiding place was discovered. The family was arrested by the Nazis, and Miep and Bep became under suspicion and their lives were in great danger. Later, Miep found Anne Frank's diary and notebooks lying among the debris scattered around the secret hideout. She gathered them when nobody was looking, and decided to keep them safely, not realizing their importance. Later she gave the diary and notebooks to Otto Frank, after he survived Auschwitz, and when it was clear that Anne and her sister had not survived.

In addition to helping the eight people in the annex, Miep Gies and her husband hid a young Jewish student in their apartment. His name was Karel. It is not certain what his fate was.

Miep Gies is still alive. She is now aged 97 and still replies to correspondence from children. She can be contacted **c/o THE ANNE FRANK HOUSE, P.O. BOX 730, 1000 AS AMSTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS**. Though it may take a little time, she'll always answer letters ... with pleasure.

Elizabeth (Bep) Voskuijl

Bep was born on July 5, 1919 and died on May 6, 1983.

She was the eldest of eight children. All the children in her family, including Bep, were educated in a devout Christian school and home.

Bep's younger sister Willy states that:

"Bep worked at different sorts of jobs. She worked as a servant, in a restaurant, and in a workshop sewing. But she didn't like any of these jobs, so she studied nights to better herself and to become a qualified clerk."

Question 4:

How did the pre-war life and cultural background of Miep and Bep influence their actions?

For a period of ten years, Bep worked for Otto Frank.

In June 1942, Bep was informed of the hiding place in the attic and agreed to help hide the Frank family and others.

Bep's role in maintaining the hiding place centered on providing daily requirements for those in hiding – both tangible and intangible necessities.

"Bep had a nervous fit last week because she had so many errands to do. Ten times a day people were sending her out for something, each time insisting she go right away or go again or that she'd done it all wrong. And when you think that she has her regular office work to do, that Mr Kleiman is ill, that Miep is home with a cold and that Bep herself has a sprained ankle, boyfriend troubles and a grumpy father, its no wonder she's at the end of her tether. We comforted her and told her that if she'd put her foot down once or twice and say she didn't have the time, the shopping lists would shrink of their own accord."[3]



Bep also interacts with those in hiding in a natural and colloquial manner:

“Bep is not part of our annex family, although she does share our house and table. Bep has a healthy appetite. She cleans her plate and isn't choosy. Bep is easy to please and that pleases us. She can be characterized as follows: cheerful, good humored, kind and willing.”[4]

Moreover, Bep attempts to promote the children's education in hiding. For example, *“Bep's ordered a correspondence course in shorthand for Margot, Peter and me. Just you wait, by this time next year we'll be able to take perfect shorthand. In any case, learning to write a secret code like that is really interesting.”* [5]

Anne maintained a strong awareness of the favors Miep and Bep did for her, constantly mentioning her appreciation in writing:

“Miep made a delicious Christmas cake with ‘Peace 1944’ written on top, and Bep provided a batch of cookies that was up to prewar standards.” [6]

“Bep had a picture postcard of the entire Royal Family copied for me [...]. It was incredibly nice of Bep, don't you think?” [7]

Anne sometimes referred to Bep as Elli in her diary, in order to protect her.

Bep's presence in the attic, allows Anne to further formulate the structure of her day and contextualize each of the individuals and their function in her life.

“Five –thirty. Bep's arrival signals the beginning of our nightly freedom. Things get going right away. I go upstairs with Bep, who usually has her dessert before the rest of us. The moment she sits down, Mrs Van D. begins stating her wishes. Her list usually starts with ‘oh, by the way, Bep, something else I'd like [...]’ Bep winks at me.” [8]

Question 5:

What aspects of Miep and Bep's actions reflect a motherly role?

After the war, Bep remained relatively quiet about her role in hiding people in the attic. Her sister, Willy, recalls, *“She went through things with the Frank family as if it was her own family. Not that she talked a lot about it, she actually never did, but the fact that she named her daughter after Anne Frank shows that Bep reserved a special place in her heart for Anne.”*

The Anne Frank Magazine published an interview in 2001 with Bep's daughter Anne: *“My mother felt that what she did was nothing special. If you find yourself in such a situation that's what you do. She never wanted attention; also not at family celebrations. But within the family, she was certainly not silent. She was calm and thoughtful. But she also had the most wonderful laugh.”*

After the war, Bep testified in a Holocaust denial case, where she confirmed the authenticity of Anne's diary.

Question 6:

What dilemmas did Miep and Bep grapple with through their involvement?

The Righteous

by

Hayim Chefer



I hear this title and it makes me think
About the people who saved me.
I ask and ask, "Oh, my dear God,
Could I have done the same thing?"
In a sea of hate stood my home,
Could I shelter a foreign son in my home?
Would I be willing along with my family
Constantly be threatened by certain evil?
Sleepless dark nights watching out for noise
Hearing footsteps of certain evil.
Would I be able to understand every sign,
Would I be ready for this, could I walk like this
Among those who would betray
Not one day, not one week, but so many years!
There a suspicious neighbor, there a look,
and here a sound --
For that one -- warm -- brotherly clasping of my hand...
Not having any pension -- not having anything for this.
Because a person to person must be a people.
Because a people comes at this time through--
So I ask you and ask you once more --
Could I have done the same if I was in their place?
It was they who went to war every day.
It was they who made the world a place for me.
It was they, the pillars, the Righteous brother,
Who this day this world is founded by.
For your courage, and for your warm extended hand
In front of you, the Righteous, I bow. [9]

Question 7:

Read Hayim Chefer's poem aloud, and discuss how the poet attempts to relate to and understand the Righteous.

[1] "The Diary of Anne Frank" p. 108

[2] "The Diary of Anne Frank" p. 75

[3] "The Diary of Anne Frank" p. 137

[4] *ibid.* p. 126

[5] *ibid.* p. 48



[6] *ibid.* p. 153

[7] *ibid.* p.155

[8] *ibid.* p. 131

[9] Reprinted by kind permission of Hayim Chefer, Israel