



המחלקה לתסידי אומות העולם
The Righteous Among the Nations Department

Paying the Ultimate Price

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When Yad Vashem was established to commemorate the six million Jews murdered in the Shoah, the Knesset added yet another task to the Holocaust Remembrance Authority's mission: to honor the Righteous Among the Nations - those non-Jews who had taken great risks to save Jews during the Holocaust. The Righteous program is an unprecedented attempt by the victims of an unparalleled crime to search within the nations of perpetrators, collaborators and bystanders for persons who bucked the general trend of indifference, acquiescence and collaboration.

The motivation for the establishment of this unique program was a deep sense of gratitude toward the minority that stood by the Jewish people, but there seems to have been an added dimension. In a world where Auschwitz had become a real possibility, the Jewish people and the survivors needed to hang on to some hope for mankind, something that would enable them to maintain their faith in human values and rebuild their lives after having witnessed an unprecedented moral collapse.

During the Holocaust the mainstream watched as their former neighbors were rounded up and killed; some collaborated with the perpetrators; many benefited from the expropriation of the Jews' property. Only a small minority felt that the persecuted Jews were part of their universe of obligation and that it was their duty to act.

Help and rescue of Jews took many forms and required varying degrees of involvement and self-sacrifice. Manifestations of sympathy and maintaining social contacts with the Jewish outcasts, providing moral encouragement, food, housing or money, warning about upcoming arrests or razzias, offering advice as to hiding possibilities are only some of the forms of help that survivors describe in their testimonies.

ALTHOUGH THESE humane and generous deeds were often crucial to the Jews' ability to survive, the Yad Vashem law used a more restrictive characterization. By defining the Righteous as persons "who risked their lives to save Jews," the lawmakers delineated a small group within these wider circles of men and women who helped and supported Jews in the darkest hour of Jewish history.

The Righteous according to this definition were people who not only helped the Jews, but were willing to leave their relatively safe positions as bystanders; people who were prepared, if necessary, to pay a price for their stand and even share the victims' fate; who felt that an unprecedented crime required



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exceptional responses, and that faced with ultimate evil, mere manifestations of sympathy were no longer sufficient; they believed that the situation required more than just doing the right thing - that there was something that superceded their personal safety.

The challenge facing the Commission for the Designation of the Righteous, therefore, is to draw a clear line through a spectrum of multifaceted human behavior and situations. This is, no doubt, a formidable task. When the Commission for the Designation of the Righteous was established in 1962, the program's founding fathers must have realized that the newly formed body would face extremely complex questions, and therefore decided to nominate a Supreme Court justice as the commission's chair. In the 47 years of its existence, the commission has strictly observed its independence under the guidance of the commission's successive chairs.

Each case is meticulously researched before it is submitted to the commission. Based on the documentation gathered, the commission then goes on to discuss the case and to examine if the rescue involved risk and if it accords with the other criteria that the commission developed over the years. This was also the case when the file of Khaled Abdelwahhab from Tunisia was submitted to the commission's decision.

ACCORDING TO THE testimonies on hand, Abdelwahhab hosted the extended families of Boukris and Ouzzan on his estate during the period of German occupation in Tunisia. Annie Boukris described the kindness and protectiveness of Abdelwahhab, who allowed her family to stay in his farm after their house in Mahdia had been billeted by the Germans and they had moved to an oil factory. This was no doubt a most generous gesture on the part of Abdelwahhab, who took pity on the Jewish family.

A close examination, however, revealed that as much as his deed was admirable, in doing so he broke no law and the Jews stayed on his farm with the full knowledge of the Germans. According to Boukris, the men continued their forced labor service under German supervision, and on Thursdays, to prepare for Shabbat, the family would join the other Jews of Mahdia who had been evicted from the town and concentrated on a Jewish-owned farm in Sidi Alouan, not far from the Abdelwahhab estate.

Edmee Masliah (Ouzzan), the second witness, also has vivid memories of that period and describes Abdelwahhab as a noble and generous person who supported her family at a time when they had been stripped of their rights and property. Like Annie Boukris, she describes the fear and hardships her family experienced during the German occupation, but then goes on to explain that the Germans would come from time to time to Abdelwahhab's estate and check if they were all present; she describes how when seeing the Germans approach, they would put on their yellow badges and wait for the Germans to count them.

The picture we gain from these testimonies matches the historical facts and the evaluation of historians that were consulted in the course of the investigation of this file. From its inception the



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Commission for the Designation of the Righteous took note that the risk in helping Jews during the Holocaust differed from one country to another and from one period to another. In Eastern Europe, the Germans executed not only the people who sheltered Jews, but their entire families. Generally speaking punishment was less severe in Western Europe, although there too, after the beginning of the deportations, the consequences of hiding Jews could be very serious and some rescuers even lost their lives.

Had the German occupation lasted longer, Tunisia's Jews would no doubt have shared the fate of their brothers and sisters in Europe. Walter Rauff was sent to prepare the ground for the murder of the Jews in North Africa, but fortunately for Tunisia's Jews the German occupation lasted only six months and the plans were never implemented. Nor was there a regulation or law preventing Abdelwahhab from hosting the Jews on his estate, and he therefore never had to face the ultimate test. Although he certainly acted nobly and generously at a time when few others did, the commission concluded that in the absence of the element of risk, he was not eligible for the Righteous Among the Nations designation.

The commission's decision in this case reflects its commitment to evaluating cases without prejudice and without ceding to outside pressure or foreign considerations. Should we now close the file and forget about this case? This is by no means Yad Vashem's intention. The moving account about this noble Tunisian's solidarity with the Jewish victims deserves our deep appreciation. It should be remembered and will certainly inspire people worldwide. Indeed, Yad Vashem's publications department will be a partner in publishing Dr. Robert Satloff's book in Hebrew, which includes the chapter about Abdelwahhab. Yad Vashem is committed to preserve and impart this and other stories, and to continue its search for the rare moments of humanity in the darkness of the Holocaust.

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