

CHALLENGING THE MYTH OF "OBEDIENCE OR DEATH"

TWO TREES IN JERUSALEM

RESISTANCE DURING AND AFTER THE HOLOCAUST IN GERMANY

**LESSON PLANS AND INSPIRATIONS
FOR AGES 14+**

Published in 2022

Seventy-seven years after the fall of Nazi Germany, the Holocaust stands as a staggering crime against humanity, and the world continues to grapple with the deep void of the millions of souls lost.

Yet, in the face of unfathomable horror, fleeting moments of bravery and generosity remind us of our capacity for courage and compassion even under the most harrowing circumstances.

Two Trees in Jerusalem is a part of Humanity in Action's short film trilogy [Traces – Portraits of Resistance, Survival and Resolve](#), developed by an international team of researchers and animators. The three films, narrated by their protagonists, don't just tell histories of the past. They serve as lessons - learned at a tremendous expense - that help us address today's social and ethical challenges.

In the following, you will find lesson plans based on *Two Trees in Jerusalem*. They were developed to offer educators inspirations and tools for creating meaningful, thought-provoking and engaging exchange with and among the students.

CONTEXT & INTRODUCTION



AVAILABLE CLASS RESOURCES

27-minute digital animation film

"Two Trees in Jerusalem"

4 short interview clips

with Cornelia Schmalz-Jacobsen of 30-75 seconds each

1 film clip

10-second clip from the film "Two Trees in Jerusalem"

3 handouts

"The Helmrichs" | "De-Nazification" | "Sophie Scholl"

1 Book

Two Trees in Jerusalem

([available for purchase](#))



THE FILM

27 MINUTES

1

To prepare for a discussion in class, students watch the [digital animation film](#) as their home assignment.

Two Trees in Jerusalem profiles the remarkable history of Eberhard and Donata Helmrich, who together saved the lives of countless Jews during the Holocaust. The pair worked as a husband-and-wife team in the eye of the storm, in Berlin and the blood-soaked fields of Eastern Europe, devising ever-more daring gambits to save any life they could, even as death surrounded them.

The history is narrated by the couple's daughter Cornelia, who was called into her parents' confidence as a young child, and was imbued with an inner-strength that guided her work decades later as a politician and Commissioner for immigrant and refugee issues during the 1990's.



THE FILM TRAILER



2

To recap the home assignment, watch [the film trailer](#) at the beginning of class to create space for the students' reflections and exchange.

1:40 MINUTES

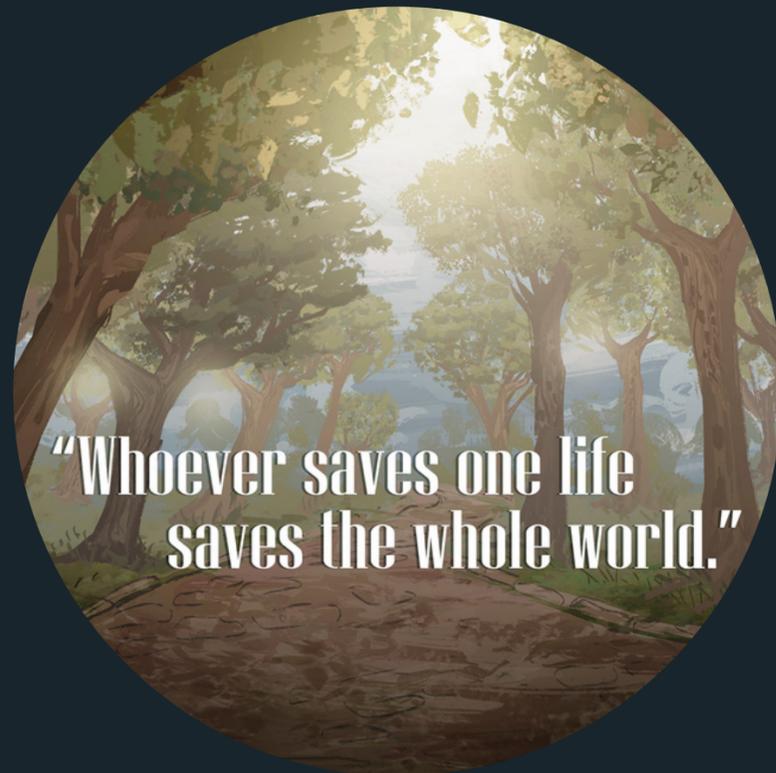
TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION



- A** To The Righteous Among the Nations: Obedience or Death?
Approx. 75 minutes
- B** The Price of Resistance
Approx. 45 minutes
- C** Critical Thinking and Propaganda: How to Resist?
Approx. 60 minutes

A

THE RIGHTEOUS AMONG THE NATIONS



Definition:

"Non-Jews who behaved heroically, risking their lives and the lives of their families, their freedom and their safety during the Holocaust in order to save Jews from being deported and slaughtered by the Nazis. To date, over 27,000 people have been recognized by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations.

The Garden of the Righteous Among the Nations is part of the Yad Vashem complex in Jerusalem. It honors those non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews by planting one tree for each rescuer."

SOURCE: YAD VASHEM

A

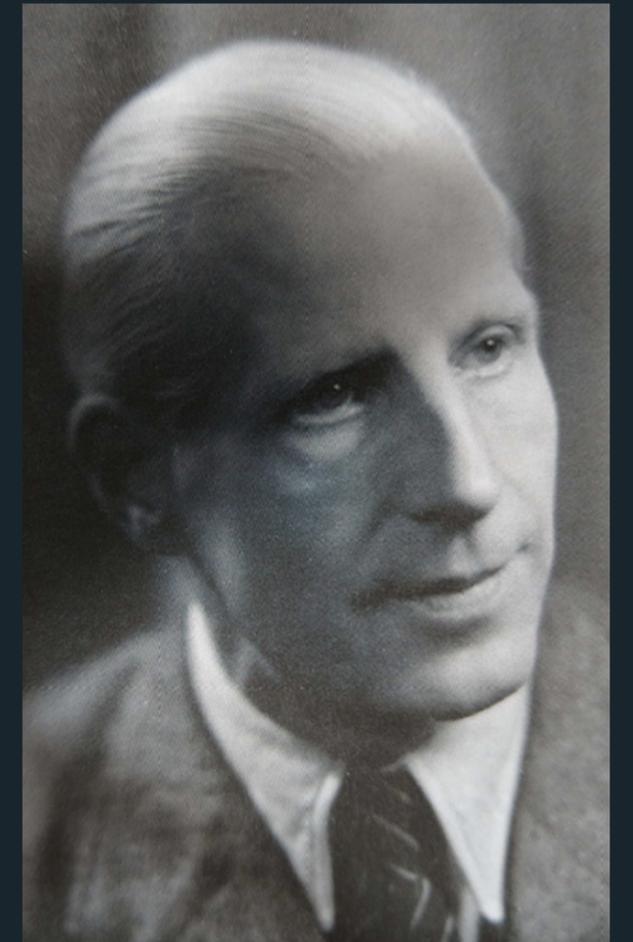
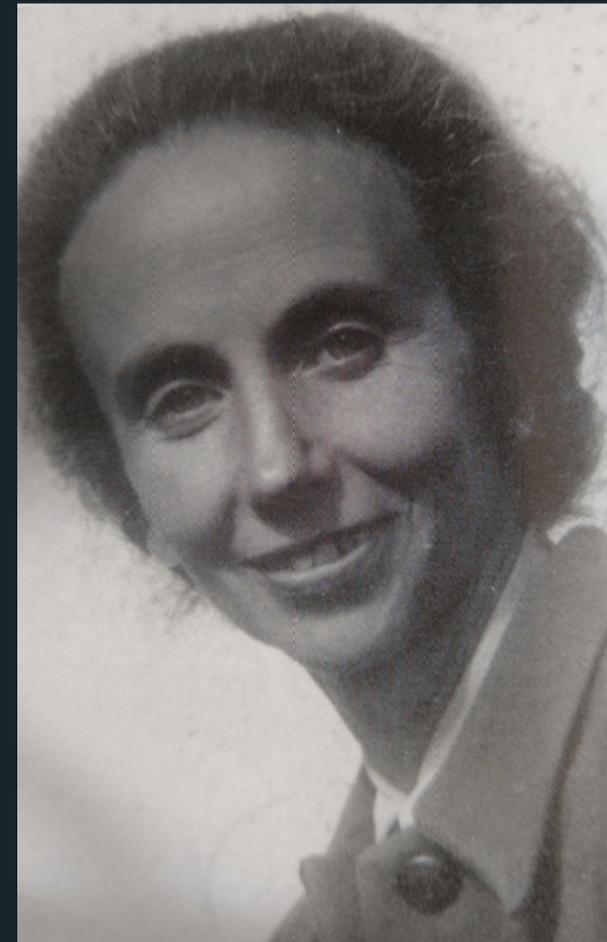
WHO WERE DONATA AND EBERHARD HELMRICH?

Suggested: 10 minutes for reading the handout and making the list followed by 10 minutes group reflection:

- List factors that the righteous might have in common.
- What do you think made the Helmrichs willing to take risks for their own lives and those of their four children?

3

[Handout "The Helmrichs" \(2 pages\)](#)



A

THE RIGHTEOUS POEM BY HAYIM HEFER



Hefer wrote this poem for an evening honoring the Righteous Among the Nations, which was held at a theatre in Tel Aviv in 1987.

It addresses questions at the heart of the discussion of **human behavior in trying times**.

Haim Hefer was a Polish-born Israeli writer and poet who passed away in 2012.

*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 clasp 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.
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.*

A

DISCUSSION: WHAT WOULD I HAVE DONE?



- Is it possible to answer this question? Why yes, why no?
- What responses is Haim Hefer suggesting in his poem?
- What circumstances affect our decisions (not) to act? Consider factors such as a person's family situation, location, age, social networks, work etc.

Suggested: 15 to 20 minutes

A

ADDING CORNELIA'S PERSPECTIVE TO THE DISCUSSION



4

34 seconds interview clip:
What made your parents take action?

Interview with Cornelia Schmalz-Jacobsen, 2022



"In a world of total moral collapse there was a small minority who mustered extraordinary **courage to uphold human values**. These were the Righteous Among the Nations. They stand in stark contrast to the **mainstream of indifference and hostility** that prevailed during the Holocaust. Contrary to the general trend, these rescuers regarded the Jews as fellow human beings who came within the bounds of their universe of obligation [...]

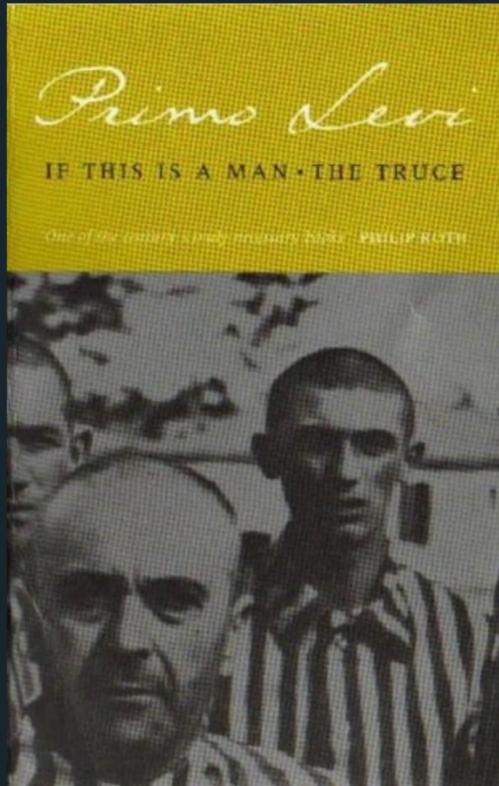
Most rescuers were ordinary people. Some acted out of political, ideological or religious convictions; others were not idealists, but merely human beings who cared about the people around them. In many cases they **never planned to become rescuers** and were totally unprepared for the moment in which they had to make such a far-reaching decision.

The Righteous are Christians from all denominations and churches, Muslims and agnostics; men and women of all ages; they come from **all walks of life**; highly educated people as well as illiterate peasants; public figures as well as people from society's margins; city dwellers and farmers from the remotest corners of Europe; Teachers, physicians, clergy, diplomats, simple workers, servants, resistance fighters, policemen, peasants, fishermen, and many more."

SOURCE: YAD VASHEM

A

ADDING ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE



"I believe that it was really due to Lorenzo that I am alive today; and not so much for his material aid, as for his having constantly reminded me by his presence... that there still existed a just world outside our own, something and someone still pure and whole... for which it was worth surviving"

The Jewish-Italian author and Holocaust survivor Primo Levi describing his rescuer, Lorenzo Perrone, in the book "If This Is A Man," published in 1947.

Still from the film. In this scene, Irene shares the memory of how meeting Eberhardt Helmrich made her feel seen as "a real human being again."



A

DISCUSSION: WHAT MAKES A HERO/INE?

heroism

[noun] /'her·oʊ·ɪz·əm/

- What does "heroism" mean to you?
- Can you think of examples of hero/ines?
- Do you think the actions of the Helmrichs fit into the definition of heroism?

Suggested: 10 minutes

The noun heroism comes from the Greek *hērōs*, which referred to a demigod. A person who shows **great courage and valor** is referred to as a hero/ine, and their actions are considered to be acts of heroism.



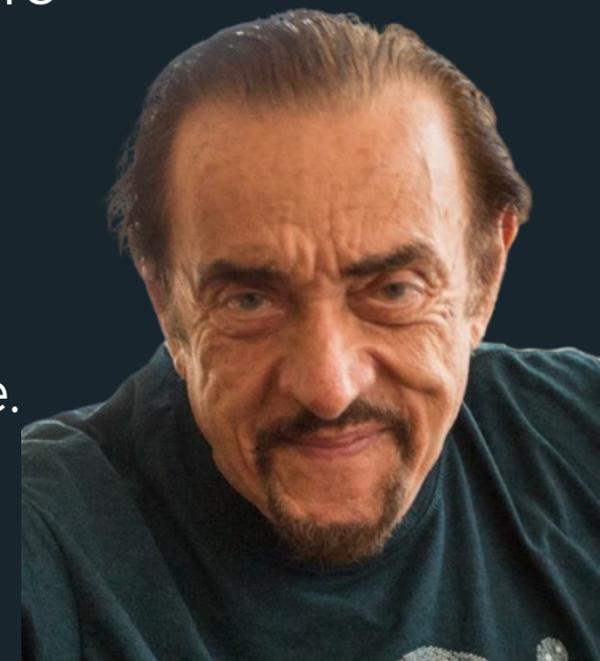
SOURCE: VOCUBALURY.COM



According to renowned psychologist Prof. Philip Zimbardo, the key to heroism is a "concern for other people in need – a concern to defend a moral cause, knowing there is a personal risk, done without expectation of reward."

Key insights from Prof. Zimbardo's research on heroism:

- The very same situations that inflame hostile imagination in some people, making them villains, can instill heroic imagination- a focus on one's duty to help and protect others- in other people, prompting them to perform heroic deeds.
- There's often no clear line between good and evil. People can cross back and forth between the two.
- Humans are not born good or bad but with a capacity to be anything. They are shaped by circumstances, such as family, culture, time period, place of birth, socio-economic factors and more.
- Few people act in an evil ways and fewer act heroically. Between these extremes are the masses- the bystanders.
- Heroes are most effective in a community. It's usually through forming networks that people have the resources to bring their heroic impulses to life.



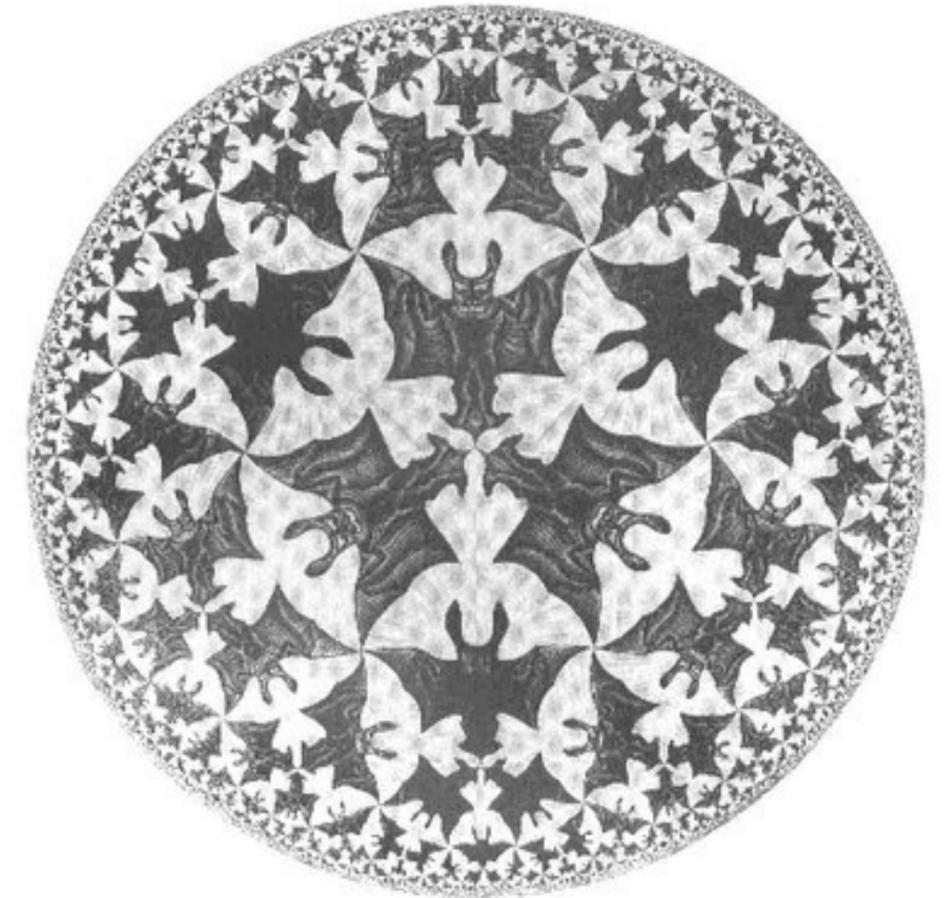
A

"When you squint and focus on the white as the figures and the black as the background, you see a world full of angels [...] But now focus on the black as the figures and the white as the background: Now it's a world full of demons.

What Escher's telling us is that the world is filled with angels and devils, goodness and badness, and these dark and light aspects of human nature are our basic yin and yang. That is, **we all are born with the capacity to be anything.**

Because of our incredible brains, anything that is imaginable becomes possible, anything that becomes possible can get transformed into action, for better or for worse."

P. Zimbardo



Lithography by
Dutch graphic artist M.C. Escher

A

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION



Suggested: 15 minutes

How does the fact that some people found the courage to become rescuers under the most harrowing circumstances demonstrates that some **freedom of choice** existed, and that saving Jews during World War II was not beyond the capacity of ordinary people throughout occupied Europe?

- What are current examples of persecution and resistance?
- What lessons can we apply from the Righteous to the present-day refugee reception crises in Europe, the war in Ukraine, etc.?



THE PRICE OF RESISTANCE

5

What did Eberhard mean by saying he kept paying the price for his actions years after the war?

Suggested: 10 minutes

10 seconds film clip:
The price



B

POSSIBLE ANSWERS:

- Mourning all those he could not save, feelings of helplessness in the face of the horror
- Acting alone so as not to endanger others
- Suffering psychological effect of long-term stress and fear
- Having to keep secrets for a very long time

And after the war:

- Being surrounded by Nazis, unrecognised for his resistance: Rescuers were regarded as traitors to their people (“Volksverraeter”) by the majority society that did not resist
- Separating from his family and immigrating to America
- Having to restart his life in a foreign country



B

ADDING CORNELIA'S PERSPECTIVE TO THE DISCUSSION



6

60 seconds interview clip:
[Better Dead than Cowerd](#)

Interview with Cornelia Schmalz-Jacobsen, 2022

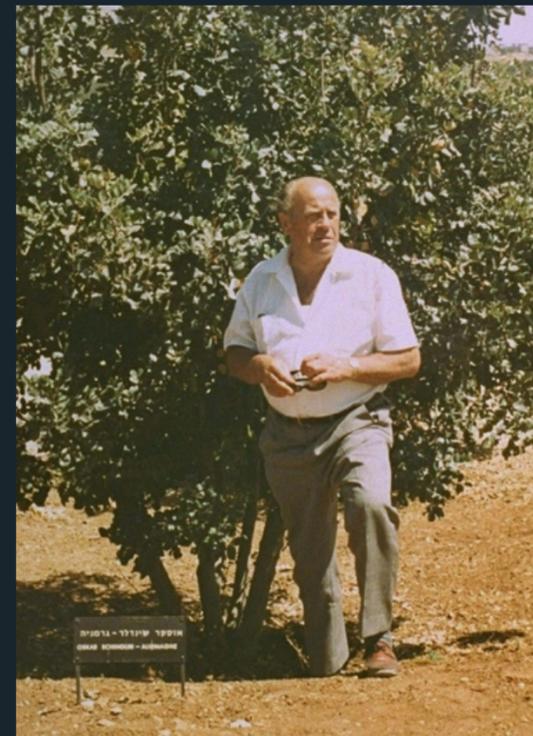
B

ADDING ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

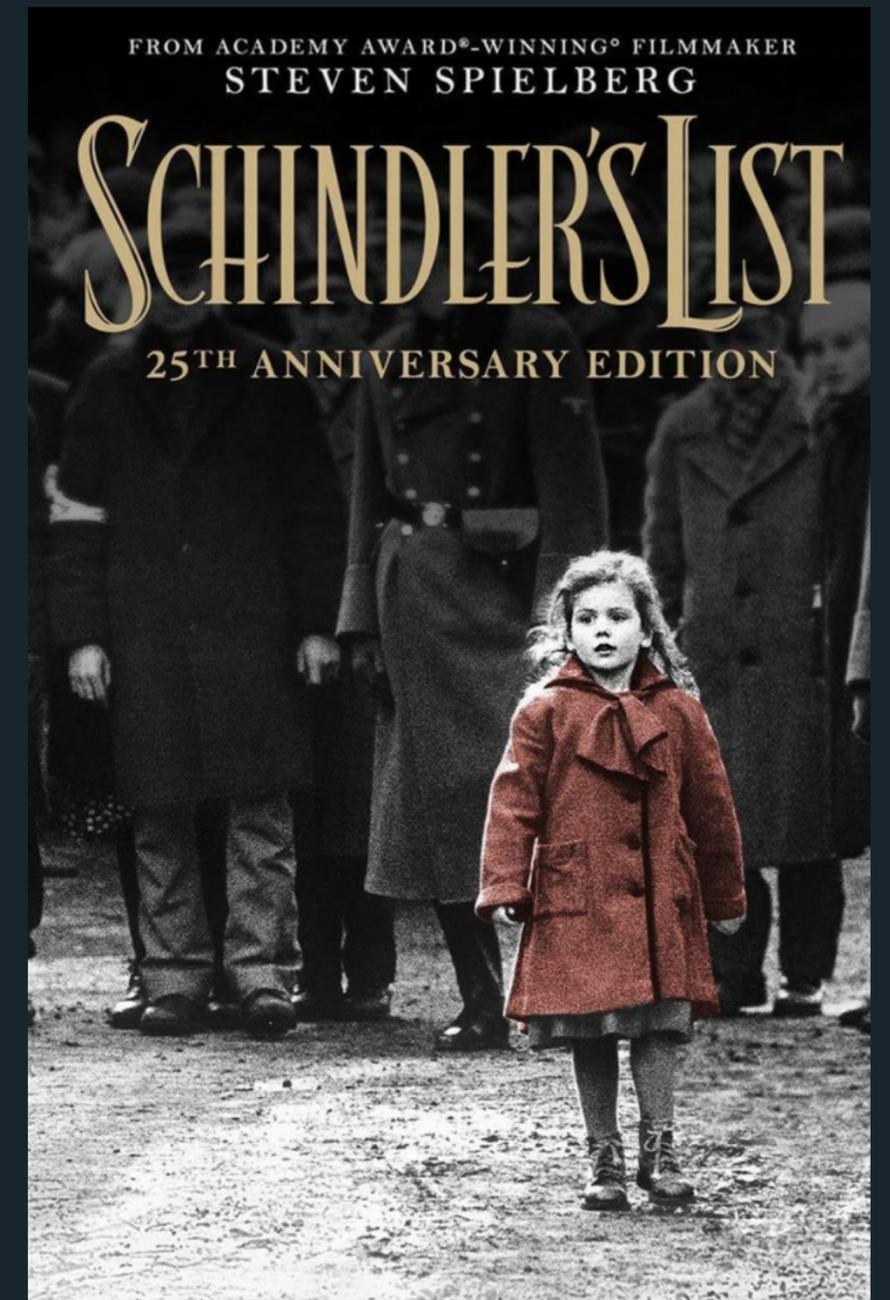
Suggested: **20 minutes**

- Are you familiar with the stories of other rescuers?
- If not, why do you think that is the case?
- Why do you think Cornelia decided to write a book about her parents?
- Research task: Find and present another story of rescue in the Yad Vashem database

Option: **select "Names of Righteous by Country" to focus on your national context**



Oscar Schindler at Yad Vashem





Many rescuers remain anonymous. Many chose to stay anonymous to avoid retribution and re-living their trauma. There were often no testimonies because the hidden Jews were captured and murdered. In some cases the rescuers were murdered as well. In other cases, young children were saved who could not identify their rescuers. Furthermore, after the war not many people wanted to hear these stories of suffering and rescue.

B

DISCUSSION: THE IMPACT ON CORNELIA

- How did the moral choices of Cornelia's parents affect her as a young child?
- Was there a price that she had to pay as well for those choices?
- How did those choices affect her life later on as an adult?

Suggested: 10 minutes





POSSIBLE ANSWERS:

- Having to keep a major life-and-death secret for years and not being able to confide in anyone outside her family circle
- Receiving little attention and affection from her parents
- Being separated from her beloved father during and after the war
- Fearing for the lives of her parents and siblings, as well as her own fate
- Having to pretend and play along with Nazi propaganda at school and in public
- Maturing too early due the burden of responsibility

But also...

- Developing independence and resilience
- Having a strong sense of right and wrong

And after the war:

- Becoming an independent and opinionated woman
- Dedicating her career to helping people in need (i.e. refugees and immigrants)
- Staying true to her moral compass in the face of external pressures



B

ROLE PLAY ACTIVITY: TAKING AN IMPOSSIBLE DECISION

Divide the group into pairs. **Suggested: 20 minutes**

Within each pair, one person takes the role of Donata Helmrich and the other takes the role of Eberhard Helmrich. The two are discussing the risks of taking action and whether or not they are willing to take those risks. One person has 5 minutes to present arguments for taking action, and the other has 5 minutes to present arguments against it.

Follow with a class reflection on the activity.

! **Trigger warning: Some students might find this type of activity triggering**



SUGGESTION FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

De-nazification in Germany:
Did it really happen after the war?

[Handout: De-Nazification \(4 pages\)](#)





CRITICAL THINKING AND RESISTING PROPAGANDA

Propaganda in the words of Adolf Hitler (1924):

“The task is not to make an objective study of the truth, in so far as it favors the enemy, and then set it before the masses with academic fairness; its task is to serve our own right, always and unflinchingly.”



OPENING DISCUSSION

- How does Hitler perceive "The truth"?
- What does he mean by "our own right"?
- How does the quote relate to contemporary terms of "alternative facts" and "post-truth"?

Suggested: 10 minutes



The Nazis effectively used propaganda to win the support of millions of Germans in a democracy and, later in a dictatorship, to facilitate persecution, war, and ultimately genocide. The stereotypes and images found in Nazi propaganda were not new, and were already familiar to their intended audience.

KEY FACTS

- 1.** The Nazis were skilled propagandists who used sophisticated advertising techniques and the most current technology of the time to spread their messages.
- 2.** Once in power, Adolf Hitler created a Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda to shape German public opinion and behavior.
- 3.** Nazi propaganda played an integral role in advancing the persecution and ultimately the destruction of Europe's Jews. Propaganda further incited hatred and fostered a climate of indifference to the fate of the Jews.



MOBILIZING THE POPULATION

The Nazi regime used propaganda effectively to mobilize the German population to support and justify its wars through racial ideology and territorial conquests until the very end of the regime.

Nazi propaganda and its distortion of truth was likewise essential to motivating those who implemented the mass murder of the European Jews and other victims of the Nazi regime. Propaganda also served to secure the acquiescence of millions of others—as bystanders—to racially targeted persecution and mass murder.

SOURCE: [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#)





ADDING CORNELIA'S PERSPECTIVE TO THE DISCUSSION



8

01:27 minutes interview clip:
Keeping the family secret

Interview with Cornelia Schmalz-Jacobsen, 2022



RESEARCH TASK: CONTEMPORARY PROPAGANDA

Suggested: Split class into two groups, each group focuses on one case, and compare findings in the discussion based on the following questions.

a) Rohingya genocide ([source page](#))

OR

b) Russia's war on Ukraine ([source page I](#)
and [source page II](#))





DISCUSSION: CONTEMPORARY PROPAGANDA

- What techniques and approaches to propaganda seem to be effective for governments today? (e.g.: dehumanisation, us vs. them narratives, scapegoating)
- What role did propaganda play in the persecution of the Rohingya / War in Ukraine?
- How was the propaganda spread? What were the consequences?
- How are the two examples similar/ different?
- How can citizens protect themselves from propaganda and disinformation?

Suggested: 15-20 minutes





FIGHTING DISINFORMATION AND FAKE NEWS



KEY QUESTIONS

How did you come across the information?

Trace the source of information: where and when was it originally published? Who wrote it? Is there evidence linked to credible data?

How did it make you feel?

Fake or extremely biased, agenda-driven news is often meant to incite. The more upset, fearful, or vindicated you feel, the more likely you are to click through or share something.

Who stands to benefit from it?

What person or organization seeks to benefit from the original post?



FIGHTING DISINFORMATION AND FAKE NEWS

KEY QUESTIONS

Have you checked your confirmation bias?

It's much harder to call out lies when the writing supports your own preconceived opinions than when it opposes your point of view. This is called "confirmation bias".

Have you checked with others?

Are other publications reporting on this news? How are they doing so?
When in doubt, ask an expert (e.g. teacher, librarian).



For more information: [Haravrad Guide on information pollution](#)



ADDING CORNELIA'S PERSPECTIVE TO THE DISCUSSION



52 seconds interview clip:
[The bystanders](#)

Interview with Cornelia Schmalz-Jacobsen, 2022



CONCLUDING DISCUSSION: CRITICAL THINKING & RESISTING PROPAGANDA

How can knowledge of the events in Germany and Europe before the Nazis came to power help citizens today seek truth and resist threats of mass atrocity fostered by propaganda in the world?



10

SUGGESTION FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

Sophie and Hans Scholl and the White Rose: Youth resistance to the Nazi Regime ([Handout: Sophie Scholl, 5 pages](#))

What can we do to prevent the spread of propaganda and disinformation today?

HUMANITY IN ACTION

The project "Two Trees in Jerusalem" was generously funded by The Alfred Landecker Foundation



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