

HUMANITY IN ACTION

PRESENTS

BASED ON A BOOK BY CORNELIA SCHMALZ-JACOBSEN



TWO TREES IN JERUSALEM

THE TALE OF A COURAGEOUS FAMILY

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HUMANITY IN ACTION

ALFRED LANDECKER FOUNDATION

criteria

TWO TREES IN JERUSALEM

PRODUCED BY DR. JUDITH S. GOLDSTEIN AND IRENE BRAAM

27 minutes



WITH THE SUPPORT OF ALFRED LANDECKER FOUNDATION



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Synopsis

There are two trees in Jerusalem, one an olive tree, the other a carob. They sit about 30 yards apart, along the Avenue of the Righteous. They are two of the roughly 2000 trees in this hallowed garden. Each tree holds a story; a story of a non-Jewish rescuer from all over Europe who, in the face of the unending horror of the Holocaust, held fast to their humanity. They helped people in need, before the fear for their own lives could get the upper hand.

Who were these people, whose ethical systems remained intact? Who knew, even in harrowing situations, what is right and what is wrong? Who are these people who had the courage to act? And how have their actions impacted who we have become today?

Two Trees in Jerusalem, a new animated film produced by Humanity in Action, grapples with these questions by sharing the story behind two of those trees: one planted for Eberhard Helmrich, and the other, for his wife, Donata. Together, the pair saved the lives of countless Jews during the Holocaust. Eberhard and Donata 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 dramatically 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 member of the German Bundestag.

By moving back and forth in time, the animated documentary reveals how experiences in Cornelia's childhood impact her subsequent fight for migrants' rights in her role as the Federal Commissioner for immigrant and refugee issues during the 1990's.

As we push deeper into the 21st century, humanity faces an inflection point; the last survivors and witnesses of the Holocaust and the Second World War leave us, taking with them the first-hand memories of one of humanity's darkest chapters. It is incumbent upon us to safeguard their histories and lessons learned at such tremendous expense. Developed by an international team of documentarians, researchers and animators, *Two Trees in Jerusalem* preserves this critical story for future generations.

Production Context

Two Trees in Jerusalem is a part of a trilogy of films produced by Humanity in Action that originated in a coincidental encounter of two Judys - Humanity in Action's founder and executive director Judith Goldstein and photographer Judy Glickman Lauder. A conversation between the two following the publication of *Beyond the Shadows*, a photography book by Lauder, which depicts the story of Jews in Denmark during WWII. That conversation inspired Judy Goldstein to contact her friend Rabbi Bent Melchior, whose family was smuggled to safety in Sweden in 1943. She asked for permission to bring the story of his family's remarkable rescue to life in the form of an animated film, and generously, he agreed.

Next, Irene Braam, the experienced Executive Director of the Bertelsmann Foundation (North America), got on board and brought along writer Samuel George and director of animation Juan Pablo de Gamboa. Together they produced the film *Voices in the Void*, released in 2020. The success of this first film encouraged the team to expand the project further and produce two additional films telling related, yet different, personal stories, *Two Trees in Jerusalem* and *My Father's War* (2021).

The three films deal with this dark and horrifying time of WWII and the Shoah from three angles: *Voices in the Void* tells the story of a country that protected its Jews, *Two Trees in Jerusalem* tells the story of a German non-Jewish family that risked its life to save the lives of the persecuted, and *My Father's War* tells the story of a Dutch father-son dialogue looking at the effects of trauma on one Jewish family. In spite of the uniqueness of each story, all three carry a universal message that remains extremely relevant today. As authoritarian tendencies are on the rise in many parts of the world, these stories, with the historical and moral knowledge they provide and the sense of community they convey, allow a wide audience to empathize, learn and find inspiration for their own acts of resistance.

In order to do so, the films create a poetic yet direct line between the historical events and their impact on the future of next generations. *Two Trees in Jerusalem* reveals this in the form of portraying narrator Cornelia Schmalz Jacobsen's own life and career choices, notably her dedication to issues of protecting vulnerable minorities such as immigrants and refugees. These brave and at times dangerous choices, in her words, are the consequence of the backbone she got from her parents and the impact of their courage and their morality on shaping the person, politician and storyteller she has become.

Humanity in Action's mission, therefore, was to create a powerful visual narrative that would be truthful and represent the passion that Bent Melchior, Cornelia Schmalz-Jacobsen, and David and Peter Hein share in their own texts, and then to enable access to these stories to audiences that couldn't be reached otherwise. This mission, says Judy Goldstein, goes back to the origins of Humanity in Action, which came into being to engage young adults in issues of resistance, of courage and of hope, and its goal of strengthening democracies that support diverse societies and protect vulnerable minorities.

The medium of animation, though usually associated with younger people, resonates with people of all ages due to its unique ability to add emotional depth to informative narratives and provide insights

into the emotional world of the protagonists and into why people act as they do, in spite of the often heavy price they have to pay for staying true to their convictions. In addition, the multiplicity of the thousands of images that are manipulated to express emotion takes the viewer into another world, allowing them to imagine more than is seen. Through the dissolving and reemergence of time, the relevance of these historical narratives today is brought to the foreground. With this, the film series aims to reach, move, and inspire younger and older audiences to take action in the face of injustice In our own times of growing instability, uncertainty and change.

The Righteous Among the Nations

The Righteous Among the Nations, honored by Yad Vashem, are non-Jews who took great risks to save Jews during the Holocaust. Rescue took many forms and the Righteous came from different nations, religions and walks of life. What they had in common was that they protected their Jewish neighbors at a time when hostility and indifference prevailed.

Often it was a gradual process, with the rescuers becoming increasingly involved in helping the persecuted Jews. Agreeing to hide someone during a raid or roundup - to provide shelter for a day or two until something else could be found – would evolve into a rescue that lasted months and years.

The price that rescuers had to pay for their action differed from one country to another. In Eastern Europe, the Germans executed not only the people who sheltered Jews, but their entire family as well. Notices warning the population against helping the Jews were posted everywhere. Also in Western Europe the consequences could be formidable and some of the Righteous Among the Nations were incarcerated in camps and killed. Rescuers and rescued lived under constant fear of being caught; there was always the danger of denunciation by neighbors or collaborators. This increased the risk and made it more difficult for ordinary people to defy the conventions and rules. Those who decided to shelter Jews had to sacrifice their normal lives and to embark upon a clandestine existence – often against the accepted norms of the society in which they lived, in fear of their neighbors and friends – and to accept a life ruled by dread of denunciation and capture.

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.

Bystanders were the rule, rescuers were the exception. However difficult and frightening, the fact that some found the courage to become rescuers demonstrates that some freedom of choice existed, and that saving Jews was not beyond the capacity of ordinary people throughout occupied Europe. The Righteous Among the Nations teach us that every person can make a difference.

(adapted from Yad vashem, "[about the righteous](#)")

Film Stills



Cornelia as a child with her mother Donata



Donata tells six-year-old Cornelia the story of The Golden King to explain the political situation



The November Pogrom, 1939 (Kristallnacht)



Eberhard's rescue operation in Poland



Hiding Jews in a secret room on the farm



Cornelia as the Federal Commissioner for Foreigner Affairs



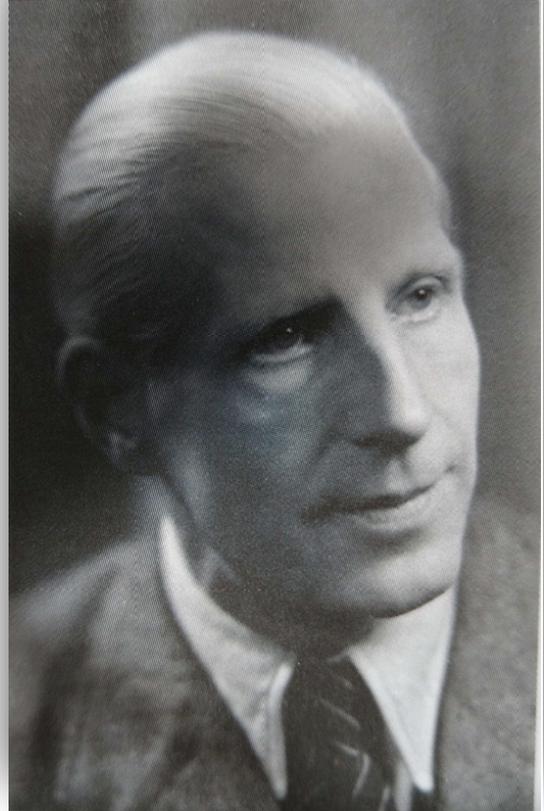
Roma immigrants arriving in Berlin in the 1980s



Cornelia and her son Tilo planting a tree in honour of Donata in the Avenue of the Righteous, in Yad vashem, Jerusalem, 1987

About the Protagonists

DONATA AND EBERHARD HELMRICH



“It is better for the kids to have dead parents than coward parents”

Eberhard Helmrich

Donata Helmrich was born in 1900 in Dresden as Donata Hardt. Her mother, Polyxeni, the daughter of an upper-middle class Greek family, studied art history, and her father, Ernst, was a play writer and literary translator. When Donata was a toddler, the family moved to Weimar. Ernst was appointed the director of the Weimar National Theater and later, after his divorce from Polyxeni, who started a career as an art dealer, was appointed the head of West Germany’s broadcasting service in Cologne.

Her daughter Cornelia describes the atmosphere in Donata’s childhood home as liberal, culturally stimulating, devoutly democratic and progressive, and her mother as “temperamental, empathetic, quick as lightning in thought and action.” Donata completed her education as a French and English teacher and in 1922 married her first husband, with whom she had three children. The couple

divorced soon thereafter and Donata met her second husband, Eberhard Helmrich, in 1931, while working as a secretary and interpreter to support her family.

Eberhard Helmrich was born in 1899 in Hamburg. He came from strict merchant family, who never accepted his marriage to a divorcee with three children. He studied agriculture in Munich and worked as an agricultural management advisor. Eberhard is described by Cornelia as “a silent man with a quiet smile and a quiet voice that did not fit his physic as a man of 1,94m. A gentle giant with a surprising amount of natural authority”.

The couple married in 1933, moved to a house in Berlin’s far Westend and a year later, Cornelia was born. Even during the war years, the house was always open to neighbours and visitors, and was full of laughter and music.

Already in 1930s, Donata and her mother assisted Jewish friends by smuggling jewellery across the German border. Donata opened her home to Jewish acquaintances in danger, used her connections to help Jews escape Germany and even “lost” her ID several times so other women could make use of it. In 1941, Eberhard was drafted to the Wehrmacht and was sent to occupied Poland as an agricultural expert. There, he provided work to about 130 young Jews from the ghetto, and a hiding place for them and their families during Aktionen in the ghetto. He also used his position as an officer to organise false papers and smuggle Jewish fugitives out of the country. One destination for this smuggling operation, suggested by Donata in 1942, was his family’s home in Berlin. There, Donata received Jewish girls disguised as Arian peasants from Ukraine and arranged for them to work as maids in German homes. It is unknown how many lives were saved by the Helmrich family, but estimates range between 70-200.

After the war, Eberhard could not find work in Berlin and had to move to Hamburg. The couple divorced, and he moved to New York in 1948 with his new wife, where he lived modestly until his death in 1969. Only a year before, in 1968, he was invited to Yad Vashem to plant a tree in his honour in the Avenue of the Righteous. Donata resumed her work as an interpreter for the German government, working for renowned politicians such as Konrad Adenauer, the first chancellor of West Germany and German President Theodor Heuss. She resigned from her position after realising there were “too many Nazis around”, but continued working as a freelancer international interpreter until the age of 82. She moved to the island of Sylt, where she had bought a little cottage. Donata passed away in 1986. She did not live to see her own tree planted by her daughter Cornelia and grandson Tilo in 1987.

"If they both had to die, but had saved two people beforehand, then they would be ‘even with Hitler’. Every further rescue, however, would be a ‘net profit’ on their credit side.”

Cornelia Schmalz-Jacobsen recalling a comment
by her mother, Donata

CORNELIA SCHMALZ-JACOBSEN



[Cornelia Schmalz-Jacobsen](#) (nee. Cornelia Helmrich) is a Berlin native, having studied Music and Languages in Berlin, Perugia, and Rome. She has worked as a journalist for radio, TV, and the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*. She has also published books and short stories, such as *Zwei Bäume in Jerusalem* (“Two Trees in Jerusalem”), which tells the story of her parents who saved some hundred Jewish lives and has been made into an animated short by the same name. Yad Vashem, Israel's official memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, honoured her parents as “Righteous among the Nations” by planting a tree for each of them in its *Avenue of the Righteous*.

In the late 1960s, Ms. Schmalz-Jacobsen started her political career as member of the liberal German *Free Democratic Party* (FDP). She started as a member of the City Council of Munich and was later appointed Senator for Youth and Family of the State of Berlin from 1985 to 1989 and General Secretary of the FDP from 1988 to 1991. In 1990, she was elected to the German federal parliament, the Bundestag. One year later, the federal government appointed Ms. Schmalz-Jacobsen as a Commissioner working on immigrant and refugee issues. She left Parliament in November 1998. For many years since then, she has held a variety of positions in several public organisations, including serving as chairwoman of *Humanity in Action Germany* and as a member of the Board of Trustees of the

Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom. Currently, she is the deputy Chairperson of the *Association Against Forgetting - For Democracy, the Honorary Chair of Humanity in Action Germany* as well as an honorary board member of *Humanity in Action, Inc.*

Cornelia's books:

Two Trees in Jerusalem (2015)

"They simply wanted to be normal in a time when normality was 'out to lunch,' as my mother would say." Cornelia Schmalz-Jacobsen in her touching account tells about the resistance of her parents, Donata and Eberhard Helmrich, against the horrors of National Socialism. For them it was normal to help persecuted, hunted Jews, and save as many lives as they could. Their unfaltering personal courage shows, that even in times of dictatorship and murderous regimes, it is possible to save lives. The Israeli Memorial site in Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, honored them as "Righteous among the Nations" each with a tree. These two trees commemorate the courageous German couple, the Helmrichs. The book, originally written in Germany, has been translated to English, Hebrew and Danish.

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/0996403000>

Russian Summer- My Memories of Liberation from the Nazi Regime (2016)

Germany 1943. The bombs are falling in Berlin, and Cornelia's parents, who are committed to fighting the Nazi regime, are in great danger. With heavy hearts, they decide to send their daughter, who is just eight years old, alone to the Baltic Sea - to safety. On the Darß with Aunt Maria and Uncle Friedel, the little girl experiences a summer she will never forget: The Russian army is getting closer and closer, people are afraid, but Cornelia is looking forward to liberation. She forms a friendship with three young Red Army soldiers that she will remember for the rest of her life - and in the end even uncovers an old family secret.

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.de/Taschenbuch/Russensommer/Cornelia-Schmalz-Jacobsen/Penguin/e532737.rhd>

About the Filmmakers



Executive producer **Dr. Judith S. Goldstein** received a Bachelors degree from Cornell University in 1962 with a concentration on European and American history. As a Woodrow Wilson Scholar at Columbia University, she then studied for a Masters degree in European history. In 1972, Judith completed her doctoral studies at Columbia University after writing her dissertation on “The Politics of Ethnic Pressure: The American Jewish Committee Fight Against Immigration Restriction: 1906-1917.” This work was the beginning of a sustained concentration on immigration and diversity in America and Europe. She then continued to work at Columbia University over 10 years by focusing on an oral history project on Ethnic Groups and

American Foreign Policy. In 1992, William Morrow published her book *Crossing Lines: Histories of Jews and Gentiles in Three Communities*. In 2006, Rutger University Press published *Inventing Great Neck: Jewish Identity and American Dreams*.

Judith worked as the Executive Director of *Thanks To Scandinavia*, started by the Danish pianist Victor Borge to acknowledge Scandinavians who resisted Nazism and protected Jews during the Second World War. In 1997, Judith founded *Humanity in Action* and has served as its Executive Director ever since. Programs have included fellowships and internships in Europe and the United States, annual publications, photography exhibitions, films, and conferences. Over 23 years the organization has engaged over 2,500 college and university students in its programs and raised over \$31 million. Judith serves on the Board of *The Frances Perkins Foundation* and the *Somes Pond Center*, and is a member of the *Council on Foreign Relations*.



Executive producer **Irene Braam** joined the Bertelsmann Foundation (North America), Inc. as Executive Director in April 2016. She is also the first vice president and board director of the Foundation’s Board of Directors. Since joining the Bertelsmann Foundation she has overseen the transformation from a traditional Washington think tank to a pioneer in tackling complicated policy issues on film. During that time, she executive produced 12 documentary films.

Irene is an experienced lawyer and media expert, and worked for over ten years with the Bertelsmann company. She began as director of government relations of the Brussels Liaison Office in 2005 and became senior vice president of government relations in 2011. After studying law at Maastricht University, the Dutch native began her professional career in the music industry. Irene was head of international, legal and business affairs at Naïve Records in Paris, in charge of business development for Midbar Tech Ltd. in Tel Aviv, and served

as both director of public policy and government affairs, and director of legal and business affairs at the Universal Music Group in London and Brussels.



Producer **Antje Scheidler** has been with Humanity in Action since 2001. Her understanding of the power of images dates back to when she experienced the fall of the Berlin Wall as a teenager in East Berlin. Antje studied English and American Studies and Social Sciences at Humboldt University Berlin and the University of Toronto. She became very interested in migration related issues and matters of social cohesion, inclusion and identity formation. Apart from heading the German chapter of the organization, Antje also oversees the international programs of Humanity in Action.



Director of animation **Juan Pablo de Gamboa** is a seasoned storyteller with a special interest for animated documentary films. With more than 20 years of experience writing, directing and producing stories all around the world, he has developed a distinctive approach to the creative process that makes his films stand out. Powered by passion, inspired by the ordinary, Juan Pablo has developed an international network of artists who collaborate consistently across many projects, always with a clear goal in mind: to make every film unique.



Writer **Samuel George** is a documentary filmmaker, writer, and analyst of international affairs. His films bring viewers up close and personal to people and communities facing the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. From the Turkish-Syrian border, to the maquiladora districts of Juarez, Mexico, to incipient political movements in Naples, Italy, George's films offer candid reflections of daily life that allow viewers to draw their own conclusions. Serving as the Bertelsmann Foundation's Global Market & Digital Advisor, his recent documentaries include *Out to Vote*, *Go-Go City: Displacement & Protest in Washington, DC*, and *Swing State Florida*. His written projects include the graphic book *The No Collar Economy*, and its follow-up, *Our Digital World*. George is currently completing a PhD in international politics and economics at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies.

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