

RIGHTEOUS AMONG THE NATIONS: MUSIC WITHOUT BORDERS

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Abstract

The Garden of the Righteous, a program presented by *Naye Strunes*, a Minneapolis-based Yiddish music ensemble, weaves together original Yiddish music and stories of fearless individuals from among the thousands of non-Jews who risked their lives to save innocent people during the Holocaust. The program gives audience members an opportunity to reflect on the extent of courage and compassion during dark times. All proceeds are given to *Médecins Sans Frontières* (Doctors without Borders), a contemporary humanitarian organization that provides medical assistance to populations experiencing crises. This article explores the concept of righteousness among the nations, particularly in the context of partnership scholarship; the history and present-day renaissance of Yiddish language, music, and culture; and *Médecins Sans Frontières* as a contemporary example of living courageously.

Key Words: Holocaust; Righteous Among the Nations; Garden of the Righteous; Yiddish Language; Yiddish Music; Klezmer; *Médecins Sans Frontières*; Doctors without Borders; Yad Vashem

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You shall not stand indifferently beside the blood of your neighbor.

Leviticus 19:16

I am convinced that courage is the most important of all the virtues because
without courage, you can't practice any other virtue consistently.

Maya Angelou (2014)

Untold numbers of non-Jews risked their lives during the Holocaust to save innocent people. A group of thousands of these courageous individuals, designated as Righteous among the Nations, have been memorialized in the Garden of the Righteous at Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem. Telling the stories of people who saved victims of the Holocaust is the focus of a project called *The Garden of the Righteous*, presented by *Naye Strunes*, a Minneapolis-based Yiddish music ensemble. *Naye Strunes* comprises Gitl Eisner, founder, composer, and violinist; Gretta Hunstiger on *fidl* (violin); Beth Albertson on cello; and Diane Benjamin and Stu Janis on *tsimbl* (hammered dulcimer). The program, featuring Eisner and Marla Okner as speakers, weaves together original Yiddish music and the stories of fearless individuals, giving audience members an opportunity to reflect on the extent of courage and compassion during dark times.

WHO ARE THE RIGHTEOUS?

There is a Jewish tradition in which the world in every generation contains 36 *tzadikim nistarim* (hidden righteous persons), whose role in life is to justify the purpose of humankind in the eyes of God. These people stand between us and the judgment we collectively deserve when we act on base motivations (Philologos, 2008).

For those who resonate with this tradition, the implications are profound:

- We need to be kind to all we meet, particularly the least among us, for we never know if the person we meet may be one of those on whom the survival of the world depends.
- We all should strive at all times to conduct ourselves with honesty and charity, for you or I might, without knowing it, be one on whom the world depends.

- The existence of the righteous persons is a call for humility, because it is not on our own cleverness, power, wit, or wealth that the community depends, but on those who are morally sincere.

The Legend of the 36 Righteous Men (2012)

A PROGRAM HONORING COURAGE

The Righteous Among the Nations, those honored at Yad Vashem and those unknown to any but the people they saved, are individuals in places around the world who risked their lives and their families' lives to save victims of the Holocaust. *The Garden of the Righteous* is a program honoring courage. We have presented our program at churches, libraries, and community centers. In each program, we tell stories, using photographs and drawings, of six individuals in various parts of the world who saved Jews and other victims of the Holocaust for no personal, monetary, religious, or political gain. Each story is followed by a musical interlude, giving listeners time to reflect on the courage shown and to draw parallels with their own lives.

Video excerpts of a musical interlude, *Hora for Gryzl der Kats*, and of the story of Žanis and Johanna Lipke, both from a *Garden of the Righteous* Program on February 23, 2019, are available at <https://eisnersklezmorim.com/> After the story segment ends, listeners learn that Lipke used his position as a contractor for the German air force to smuggle Jewish workers out of the Riga area camps. Using a variety of ploys, he was able to smuggle approximately forty people and hide them in various places, including his own farm, until the arrival of the Red Army in October 1944. The forty survivors who were rescued by the Lipkes constituted one-fifth of an estimated total of 200 Jews who survived on Latvian soil (Jan and Johana Lipke, (n.d.).

The heroes our programs celebrate, who are honored at Yad Vashem, include:

Imre Báthory, who sheltered Jews on his farm near Budapest, passing them off as his relatives (Paldiell, 2019; The Righteous Among the Nations: Báthory Family, n.d.).

Eivind Berggrav, Bishop of Oslo, who orchestrated a mass protest by the Lutheran church against deportation of Jews from occupied Norway (Robertson, 2001).

Reverend Lambertus Abraham de Groot, pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church in the town of Surhuisterveen, **and his wife Greitje**, who turned their rectory into a safe house, sheltering many *underdivers* (people who needed to hide from the Nazis, including Jews, members of the Resistance, Allied airmen who had been shot down, and Dutch men avoiding conscription into the German labor force) (personal communication, Marla Okner, March 21, 2019).

Feng Shan Ho, Chinese Consul-General in Vienna, who saved the lives of thousands of Austrian Jews by expediting exit visas to China (Katz, 2018).

Mustafa and Zayneba Hardaga and their children, a Muslim family in Sarajevo who hid their Sephardic Jewish neighbors in their home even though it was across the street from Gestapo headquarters (Mustafa and Zejneba Hardaga, Izet and Bachriya Hardaga, Ahmed Sadik, n.d.).

Žanis and Johanna Lipke, who smuggled many Jews out of the ghetto in Riga, Latvia, hiding some under the floor of their barn (Jan and Johana Lipke, n.d.).

Irena Sendler, who smuggled 2,500 children out of the Warsaw ghetto, even after being arrested and tortured (Hevesi, 2008).

Metropolitan Stephan of Bulgaria, who defied the country's king in using the authority of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church to block deportation of Jews (Forest, 2009).

Chiune Sugihara, Japanese diplomat in Lithuania who went against orders and handwrote more than 6,000 visas for refugees at the outbreak of World War II (Japanese diplomat to be recognized on Holocaust Remembrance Day, 2019).

Elisabeth Wust, who sheltered a lesbian fugitive, visited her in jail after she was arrested, and then hid three other Jewish woman in her home even though she was under Gestapo surveillance (The Righteous Among the Nations: Wust Family, n.d.).

Audiences at our programs are surprised to learn that more than 24,000 people have been recognized as Righteous among the Nations at Yad Vashem, and more are being identified and honored each year. But an unknown number of others around the world also took great risks to do the right thing. Meinhardt Amram, a Jewish salesman in Hannover, would disappear from the family's apartment when the Gestapo periodically pounded on the door; he was escaping down a back stairway to the apartment of gentile neighbors who hid him under their bed. For the rest of his long life, he protected those neighbors' identities (Amram, 2016). Frans and Mien Wijnakker, farmers in the Dutch village of Dieden, sheltered many Jews, even faking a pregnancy so that a child born in hiding could be passed off as theirs, receiving food and well-baby care. The villagers, including the priest, doctor, and nurse, all knew what was happening at the Wijnakker farm, but no one ever told the Nazi occupiers (Brounstien, 2017). And, although some historians have criticized Pope Pius XII, head of the Catholic Church during WWII, for failing to speak out publicly against deportations of Jews, many Catholic priests and nuns sheltered fugitives from the Holocaust, including thousands of children in orphanages (Graham, n.d.; Hevesi, 2008). Holocaust historian Martin Gilbert states that “[i]n almost every instance where a Jew was saved, more than one non-Jew was involved in the act of rescue, which in many cases took place over several years” (2017). He cites Holocaust researcher Elisabeth Maxwell, who wrote of the French experience, “It required ten or more people in every case, ...and that takes no account of all those who were in the know or closed their eyes and did not talk” (in Gilbert, 2017).

COULD WE BE AS COURAGEOUS?

Baruch Sharoni, a member of the committee that recognizes the Righteous Among the Nations at Yad Vashem, has said, “I see the savers as true noble souls of the human race, and when I meet with them I feel somewhat inferior to them, for I know that if I had been in their place I would not have been capable of such deeds” (Gilber, 2003, p. xviii).

Their documented words contain many common threads. To the first person he saved (a young man across from him on a train, being menaced by *gendarmes*), Imre Báthory said, “I know that you are a Jew in trouble, don’t worry, I’ll help you” (*The Righteous Among the Nations: Báthory Family*, n.d.). Franz Wijnakker said often, “What is happening is not right” (Brounstien, 2017). Metropolitan Stephan wrote to King Boris of Bulgaria, “Do not persecute, so that you, yourself, will not be persecuted. The measure you give will be the measure returned to you. I know, Boris, that God in heaven is keeping watch over your actions” (Forest, 2009). Irena Sendler wrote, “Every child saved with my help and the help of all the wonderful secret messengers, who today are no longer living, is the justification of my existence on this earth, and not a title to glory” (Hevesi, 2008). Chiune Sugihara said, “[I]t was a matter of humanity...Anyone else would have done the same thing if they were in my place” (Wolpe, 2018).

What characterized these righteous people? What drew them to act when others stood by or acquiesced to evil? In *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe*, Oliner and Oliner (1988) report that, as a group, these people had a general proclivity toward inclusive connections to others, as well as a sense of personal efficacy, allowing them “to recognize a choice where others perceived only compliance” (p.191).

How did these righteous, these rescuers, come to be such people? According to the Oliners, a critical influence on their development was the way in which their parents

disciplined them, characterized by benevolence and relying on reasoning. These authors state that “inductive reasoning is particularly conducive to altruism, focus[ing] children’s attention on the consequences of their behaviors for others. Children are thus led to understand others cognitively...and are thus more inclined to develop empathy toward others” (p. 192).

In this way, they and their families were counter to the societies in which they were living. Societies orient on a continuum between partnership and domination, in their family and childhood relations, gender relations, economics, and narratives and language (Eisler, 2018b). The core characteristics of domination systems are: 1) authoritarian rule in both the family and the state or tribe, with strict hierarchies of domination; 2) rigid male dominance and a devaluation of “feminine” traits and activities such as caring, caregiving, and nonviolence; 3) a high degree of socially approved, even idealized, abuse and violence; and 4) stories and language that present domination, as well as the violence needed to impose or maintain it, as normal, moral, and inevitable (Eisler, 2018a).

On the other side of the societal spectrum are partnership systems, characterized by 1) a democratic, egalitarian structure in both the family and state or tribe, with hierarchies of actualization in which power is used to empower rather than disempower; 2) equal partnership between women and men, with value given in both genders to qualities and activities such as caring, caregiving, and nonviolence; 3) a low degree of built-in abuse and violence in both families and the state or tribe, as they are not needed to impose or maintain rigid rankings; and 4) language and stories that present relations of mutual respect, accountability, and benefit as natural, and that do not normalize or idealize abuse and violence (Eisler, 2018a).

In the Holocaust, the people who grew up to be what the Oliners call rescuers tended to come from households that could be characterized as partnership-oriented rather than domination-oriented, so they saw what they were doing as only natural. Their

Resistance networks were hierarchies of actualization in which skills predominated and gender distinctions were de-emphasized. Their attitudes toward state authority and cultural hegemony demonstrated partnership. Their stories have much for us to reflect on. One of the main lessons we learn from them is that we all have the capacity to act upon evil or good. Both traits are part of human nature. It is free will that determines how we choose to behave, to contribute to or alleviate suffering. As Americans we must use our voices to stand against injustice and hate, especially prejudices such as anti-Semitism, racism, sexism, and homophobia. We also need to recognize that our overconsumption is a major contributor to natural disasters, epidemics, warfare, and displaced people, especially in the developing world.

GITL EISNER: FINDING MY HOME IN YIDDISHLAND

The concept of borders has fascinated me since childhood. Staring at maps has been a pleasant pastime. I see weird shapes and colors which fit together like a jigsaw puzzle. The black lines representing borders, however, still elude me. Are they permanent? What exactly do they mean for human beings? Are they checkpoints with scary men in sunglasses wielding machine guns? Are they walls? Are they rivers, mountains, canyons? Or are they nothing but a sign saying “Welcome to -----”.

In Biblical times the word “nation” referred to a group of people - a tribe - rather than a government or an area defined by borders. Each group had its own particular language, religious customs, and culture. As a U.S. citizen, I often disagree with how my country views borders. Our government has a shameful history of disregarding the borders of other countries in order to change their elected leadership, influence their culture, appropriate their natural resources, import their crops at unfair prices, use their citizens as slave labor, pre-empt their land for military bases - in general, to perpetrate hegemony throughout the world.

In searching for ways to transform my identity as an American, I am drawn deeper into my Ashkenazic roots - its music (klezmer), language (Yiddish), history, dance, literature, culture, and core moral and ethical beliefs. My ancestors, the Ashkenazic Jews, lived for generations in areas of Eastern Europe that had indistinct and changing borders. They lived without citizenship and the rights which that confers. Their common language, Yiddish, was what bound them together over vast areas of land and time. Yiddish is a mélange of Hebrew, German, Aramaic, Slavic, and Romance languages absorbed from the societies they lived in. The language is fondly referred to as *mame loshn* or mother tongue. This conglomeration aspect leads to much subtlety, with many options and choices that influence meaning. Yiddish culture and language resisted borders.

In Yiddish, the phrase *a velt mit veltlekh* describes the condition of pre-Holocaust Ashkenazic Jews, who lived in their own small world within the greater world. During the late 1800s and first half of the 1900s, with a sharp rise in anti-Semitism, the idea of nationalism divided Jews. Some, as they still do today, saw Zionism as their prophetic destiny and a solution to anti-Semitism. Others saw Yiddish language and culture as a positive expression of their stateless condition, which was their strength and helped sustain them in the face of church- and state-supported hate and periodic slaughters.

The eternal struggle to maintain identity while fully inhabiting the larger world is the same dilemma faced by Jews today. Many secular Jews like myself see our role in the world as *bale-kulturnikes* - literally, owners of Yiddish culture (Strom, 2002) - who work to strengthen its language and arts. We *bale-kulturnikes* think of ourselves as citizens of a mental construct which we call *Yiddishland*.

Yiddishland has no borders. It exists in such places as the National Yiddish Book Center; Yiddish/klezmer festivals throughout the world; Yiddish *vokh* (summer camps for families and friends who speak not a word of English for a whole week); clubs such as

the Minneapolis Yiddish *Vinkl*; the Yiddish *Forverts* newspaper; new independent films in Yiddish; and online classes, blogs, videos, and discussion groups. Yiddishland is not Holocaust movies and books, or *Fiddler on the Roof*, a sugar-coated portrayal of nostalgic life in the old country.

Bale-kulturnikes inhabit Yiddishland - in Montreal, New York, Mexico City, Paris, Buenos Aires, Melbourne, Moscow, Tokyo, and Warsaw, to name only a few places. Everyone is welcome, of any age or background. There are many non-Jewish klezmorim, actors, composers, and authors today who are *shtarke* (strong) *bale-kulturnikes*. We know how precious and fragile languages are when not widely used to express diverse political and spiritual ideas. And we know how important music is to all humanity. Black gospel music is a powerful spiritual force. When I compose and play Eastern European klezmer music and speak Yiddish, I am expressing my identity and *yerushe* (heritage).

YIDDISH MUSIC: A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE IN PRECARIOUS TIMES

I came home to Yiddishland about 20 years ago when I began to seriously study klezmer music. It was a profound feeling of belonging to something far larger than myself. Ten years ago, on the advice of my instructors at KlezKanada, I began studying Yiddish. I became able to converse with native Yiddish speakers, some of whom are survivors of the Holocaust. Most of all, it deepened my understanding of the history and playing style of klezmer music.

Naye Strunes is modeled after the typical 19th century klezmer *kapelye* (band), which consisted of 2 *fidl* (lead and *sekund*), *tsimbl*, and cello or bass. The great Yiddish author Sholem Aleichem, in his novel *La Stempenyu*, says, “It [the music] spoke, pleaded, crooned tearfully, in a Jewish mode, with a force, a scream from the depths of the heart, the soul” (In Feldman, 2000, p. 9). Traditional Yiddish music reflects the deep influence of synagogue modes, though many Jews were secular rather than religious

(Feldman, 2016, p. 375). *Klezmorim* (professional musicians) traveled from town to town, mostly to play for Jewish weddings. However they were not parochial or ethnically closed-minded. In the Pale of Settlement, despite Orthodox Judaism being a natural part of everyday life, *klezmorim* also played for less religious and secular Jews, as well as for gentile audiences and non-religious occasions such as national holidays (Strom, 2002, p. 250). They readily accepted new melodies from non-Jews, especially from Russian, Ukrainian, and Roma people. These melodies had a familiar spirit, even when they lacked the typical Yiddish *nusah* (style). It is important to note that the Nazi genocide had a devastating impact not only on Yiddish music, but on the music of many great classical composers who were inspired by folk music.

CONTEMPORARY RIGHTEOUS AMONG THE NATIONS: DOCTORS WITHOUT BORDERS

When we share the music of *Naye Strunes* and tell these true stories of courageous acts in the face of doom, we see the most loving and most fearful extremes of human nature thrown into sharp relief. For those of us whose own lives exist on a continuum somewhere between these two extremes, our situation may never demand of us such a test of will. At the beginning of each program we pose a question, to our audiences and always to ourselves: Would I be willing to sacrifice my own safety, possibly my life, for the lives of others? Not only my life, but the lives of my family members and friends? This sets the stage for the stories that follow, with this question lingering in our hearts.

One way we answer this question with our *Garden of the Righteous* program is that 100 percent of the donations we receive from attendees and sales of CDs are donated to the humanitarian organization *Medecins Sans Frontiers* (MSF), (in English, Doctors without Borders). By helping to support the work they do, we seek to uphold this spirit of courageous action in response to human suffering.

MSF operates in more than 70 countries, providing medical assistance to populations experiencing crises. The focus of MSF is direct medical aid - their goal is not to change the cultures or health care systems of the people they help. Their 45,000 members agree to honor the guiding principles of MSF's charter: neutrality and impartiality; universal professional medical ethics irrespective of race, religion, or political affiliation; and independence from all economic, political, and religious entities. Their teams of health professionals and logistical support staff work in areas of armed conflict, epidemic, and natural disaster. Some risk their lives and health; others sacrifice comfort and security. Most spend months or longer apart from their loved ones.

When *Naye Strunes* perform *Garden of the Righteous* presentations, the group wears *Medecins Sans Frontiers (MSF)* T-shirts with the words Doctors without Borders in 13 languages. If Yiddish were one, it would say *doktoyrim on grenitsn*. MSF medics travel to dangerous places where people desperately need help. They are contemporary Righteous among the Nations, examples of living courageously and not standing indifferent to the suffering of our neighbors.



DRC 2018 © John Wessels

November 2018, Bunia, Democratic Republic of Congo: Health workers hug each other as they get into their personal protective equipment, ready to enter the red zone of the newly-built Ebola treatment centre.

CONCLUSION

Back to the question that begins our programs: Would I be willing to sacrifice my own safety, possibly my life, for the lives of others? Not only my life, but the lives of my family members and friends? We hope that no one reading this will have to answer that question. But there is another question: What can I as an individual do? Here are some answers: Reject white supremacy, paternalism, anti-Semitism, and hegemony. Join with others in action. Support contemporary exemplary groups and individuals. And honor those from the past who lived righteously.

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Gretta Hunstiger, BA, MN(c), grew up in Minneapolis, Minnesota and received a Bachelor of Arts in Global Studies from the University of Minnesota. She has studied the violin for twenty years and has played professionally in several local groups. She holds a special reverence for the timeless melodies and expressive modes of Klezmer music and loves learning and performing Klezmer tunes with Judith. She is honored to be part of the effort to keep this beautiful musical tradition alive. In addition to performing with *Naye Strunes*, Gretta recently embarked on a long-anticipated career change and is currently completing a Master of Nursing degree, with an interest in global health.

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