

British Embassy Warsaw remembers British Heroes of the Holocaust

The British Hero of the Holocaust award is reserved for those who did the extraordinary and through their actions saved Jews, as well as other persecuted groups, from the Holocaust.

The award, which was announced in April 2009, recognises British citizens who helped rescue Jews during the Second World War. The award is open to any British citizen who saved Jews, or any other persecuted group from the Holocaust. Since 2010 there have been 41 recipients of the award.

These are the stories of British citizens who have received the award. In some way, all these individuals have links to Poland either through the location of their activity, the nationality of the person/people they saved, or through their own fate as a result of their heroic actions.

Ten British POWs in Stalag 20B: Stanley Well, Roger Letchford, Bert Hambling, George Hammond, Bill Keeble, Tommy Noble, Willy Fisher, Bill Scruton, Jack Buckley and Alan Edwards

In January 1945 British soldier, Stan Wells, who was a Prisoner of War at the Stalag 20B camp found a young Jewish girl hiding in the barn of a farm to which he was assigned to work. The girl's name was Sarah Matson (later Hannah Sarah Rigler). She was a 16 year old, Lithuanian Jew who had escaped from a death march in which Jewish prisoners were forced to walk from Stutthoff concentration camp (east of the city of Danzig/Gdansk) towards the Baltic coast. Wells found her starving and exhausted from the terrible conditions she had endured, he gave her some food and brought her to his fellow British prisoners at the camp.

The ten men decided that they would smuggle Sarah into their camp and hide her in the hayloft of a barn, from where they would help nurse Sarah back to a health,. There they took turns bringing her food and looking after her. They tended to her frostbite and applied paraffin to her hair to get rid of the lice. With a police station based very near the barn, and the police horses housed just below where Sarah was hiding, the risk of discovery was high.

When the British POWs discovered that, with the German evacuation from Poland, they were to be moved to a different camp in Germany, they entrusted the care of Sarah to a local woman. Sarah stayed in her care until the arrival of the Red Army and the end of the Second World War. Discovering that she was the only member of her family who had survived the war, she settled in the US, taking on her deceased sister's name, Hannah.

Only 25 years after the war was she able to locate her rescuers, with who she resumed contact. All 10 of the men who helped rescue Sara have been recognised by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations. During the 2013 and

2015 presentation of the award, the 10 British POWs were posthumously recognised as British Heroes of the Holocaust.

Lena Łakomy

Lena Łakomy, born Helena Bankier on 20th November 1917, came from a well-off, Jewish, Warsaw family. With the Nazi-German occupation of Poland during World War Two, Lena and her family ended up in the Warsaw Ghetto. While in the ghetto she married Symcha Mańkowski, shortly afterwards they were transported to a ghetto in Białystok, from where they were deported to Auschwitz in February 1943.

Lena's husband was sent to the gas chambers on arrival at the camp. She gave her name as Lena Hankowska and thanks to risks taken by Polish prisoners during the registration procedure, they convinced the German officers that she had been wrongly registered as a Jewish prisoner. Due to her 'Aryan looks' she was re-categorised as a non-Jewish Polish political prisoner and sent to the Polish block. Lena was assigned to work as a nurse at the camp hospital. It is while she was in this role that she saved another prisoner, Hela Frank, from selection to the gas chambers.

Lena herself was saved by a Polish political prisoner, Maria Koterba. Lena came to call her 'Mateczka' ('Mother'). Maria looked after Lena when she was very ill, bringing her extra rations of food and sneaking her medicine. Maria also managed to arrange lighter and easier work for Lena through bribing a guard. In January of 1945, Lena, along with the other surviving Auschwitz prisoners were sent on a death march to Ravensbrück concentration camp. Maria managed to find Lena here and once again looked after her after she found Lena sleeping in the snow. The Red Army liberated the camp in May 1945.

Following the war, Lena married Polish officer, Władysław Łakomy. They settled in the UK and had three children. In this time, she became a British citizen. In the 1960s she began looking for Maria Koterba and in 1997 discovered that she had died in December of 1956. Lena successfully pushed for Maria to be recognised by Yad Vashem as a Righteous Among the Nations, with the title being granted to Maria on 18th September 2005.

Lena passed away on the 21st November 2010, aged 93. For her actions in saving Hela Frank, as well as proffering medicines and delivering coded messages, Lena was posthumously awarded the British Hero of the Holocaust in 2010.

Rabbi Solomon Schonfeld

Solomon Schonfeld, son of a rabbi, was born in North London on February 21st, 1912. His family originally came from Hungary. Schonfeld studied in Yeshiva in Austro-Hungary, and received a doctorate at the University of Albrecht in East Prussia. In Nitra, he became a student and lifelong friend of Rabbi Michael Ber Weissmandl, who inspired him to his later rescue operations.

In 1933, he became the rabbi of the Adath Yisroel Synagogue in North London and replaced his father as the headmaster of the newly formed Jewish high

school. He was the Chief Rabbi of the Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations and the head of the National Council of Jewish Religious Day Schools in Great Britain. Already in the 1930s, when the extent of the required rescue help became apparent, Schonfeld started to work with aiding Jewish rescue. Schonfeld met the Ministry of the Interior requesting that rabbis and synagogue officials were issued visas so that they could come to Britain with their families.

After the Kristallnacht, in the autumn of 1938, the communal leader in Austria, Julius Steinfeld, called Rabbi Schonfeld, begging him to organise a child transport to England for the Vienna Orthodox Jewish Youth. Rabbi Schonfeld agreed to help Steinfeld and arranged a Kindertransport to England for nearly 300 orthodox young Jews. He got involved in Kindertransports organized by the British government and also arranged several transports independently. When the Jewish youth arrived in England, he provided many of them with kosher homes, Jewish education, and jobs.

At the end of the summer of 1942, he convinced the Colonial Office to allow Jews to find a safe haven in Mauritius. Schonfeld raised £10,000 and bought Stranger's Cey, an island in the British Bahamas; he assumed that he would be able to bring Jews fleeing from Europe there. However, the Colonial Bureau department withdrew its initial support for the plan.

After the war, he travelled to Europe (including Poland), to bring children survivors of the Holocaust to England. Rabbi Schonefeld managed to save about 1,000 children who found themselves in refugee camps after the war. It is believed that in the years 1938–1948 he personally saved the lives of thousands of Jews in Central and Eastern Europe. He is considered to be one of the least known, but remarkable, heroes of the Holocaust. He died in 1984, and was awarded the British Hero of the Holocaust award posthumously in 2013.

Jane Haining

Jane Mathison Haining, born 6th June 1897, was a missionary of the Scottish Church in Budapest, Hungary. Haining gave her life during World War II to protect Jewish school girls in Hungary.

In 1932, she became a guardian of a girls' home at the Jewish Mission School in Budapest, Hungary. At the outbreak of World War II, Jane was on holiday in Cornwall, but decided to immediately return to her responsibilities in Budapest. In 1940, for her own personal safety, she was ordered to return to Scotland. She refused and continued her work in Budapest. She once again refused to leave the country after the Nazi invasion of Hungary in March 1944.

Jane Haining was arrested by the Gestapo in April 1944. She was accused, among other things, of working among Jews, listening to the BBC, and of crying when the stars of David were sewn on the uniforms of her pupils with the inscription "Jude". A month later, she was sent to Auschwitz concentration camp, where she was assigned prisoner number 79467. She died on July 17, 1944, probably due to starvation and serious illness, becoming one of about ten Scots killed in Nazi death camps.

For her notable bravery and efforts to aid and help the Jewish girls in Hungary, Jane Haining was titled a Righteous Among the Nations on 27th January 1997, by Yad Vashem. In 2010, the British Government named her a British Hero of the Holocaust.

Joan Stiebel MBE

Joan Stiebal, born 23 April 1911, was a Jewish relief worker who as part of the Central British Fund for Jewish Relief and Rehabilitation (now World Jewish Relief) gave a lifetime of service to the Jewish community.

In May 1933 she became a secretary to a City stockbroker, Otto Schiff. Just as Joan Stiebel started work with Schiff, he became Chairman of the Jewish Refugees Committee, of which she became the secretary just over a month before the outbreak of WW2. Between 1933 and 1945, the JRC aided some 85,000 refugees from Germany and Central Europe, including nearly 10,000 children on the pre-war Kindertransports and 700 child camp survivors who came to Britain in August 1945.

As joint secretary of the Care of Children from the Concentration Camps after the war, Joan Stiebel help a group of orphaned child camp survivors. She met them when they landed near Carlisle and organised their further journeys to hostels and homes. She remained in contact with the group, attending reunions for as long as her health would allow.

She was involved in the formation of Jewish Child's Day in 1947, and became its general secretary in 1951. She remained active within this charity even after stepping down from her role. Stiebel also became joint secretary of the Jewish Relief Fund in 1958. Her dedication helped secure admission to Britain for Jews fleeing turmoil in Poland, as well as Hungary, Egypt, Algeria, Aden, Iraq, Lebanon, Iran, Chile and Argentina.

For her lifetimes work to aid Jewish refugees she was appointed MBE in 1978. She passed away in London on 25th January 2007. She was one of the most recent recipients of the British Hero of the Holocaust, receiving the award in May 2019.