



# Muslims Who Saved Jews During The Holocaust

Lesson Plan for Use with the Holocaust Museum Houston Exhibit  
On View July 17, 2009 – Feb. 7, 2010

## Rationale/Purpose for the Lesson

The history of the Holocaust is one of neighbors not helping neighbors, of friends betraying trust and of nations turning against their own citizens. While many chose the role of bystander, it is also true that a few – less than one percent of the population – chose to be upstanders and help rescue those who needed help.

One key goal of many educators is to model effective citizenship. By studying the role of rescuers as a part of a Holocaust study, the character traits of morality, courage and integrity can be discussed. Another significant aspect of studying this area of the Holocaust is to remind students that none of the events were inevitable and that choices were possible that affected the outcome of many lives. This lesson focuses on one particular life, that of Johanna Gerechter Neumann, and the decisions made by the Pilku family in Albania.

The exhibit on view at Holocaust Museum Houston is based on the work of Norman Gershman, a Colorado-based photographer who set out to collect the names of righteous, non-Jews who saved Jews during the Holocaust. His book is titled, "Besa: Muslims Who Saved Jews in World War II."

## Materials/Teaching Resources Needed

- Computer with Web site access to listen to online testimony by Johanna Gerechter Neumann.
  - o A text overview of Johanna Neumann's life may be found at <http://www.ushmm.org/remembrance/survivoraffairs/meet/detail.php?content=neumann>
  - o A video that describes Johanna's experience during *Kristallnacht* can be found at <http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/focus/kristallnacht/videos/?content=neumann> and at [http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/media\\_oi.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005201&MediaId=1158](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/media_oi.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005201&MediaId=1158)
  - o A podcast of Johanna's remembrance of the Pilku family can be found at <http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/focus/antisemitism/voices/transcript?content=20081023>
- Class set of copies of the exhibit panel about the Pilku family. (See page 4)
- Class set of copies of the Historical Background Reading. (See pages 5-7)

## Activities (1 – 2 class periods)

1. Begin the lesson by placing the information in historical context using the "Historical Background Reading," which discusses pre-war Jewish life, antisemitism and the events of *Kristallnacht*.
2. Introduce Johanna Gerechter Neumann using the text overview and then show one of the video clips regarding her experience during *Kristallnacht*. Discuss why her family would have wanted to leave Nazi Germany and some of the problems associated with leaving (download this PDF to see the documentation required to leave Nazi Germany: <http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/workshop/pdf/emigration.pdf>).
3. Discuss the following information with your students:

The European Jews, along with the other victims of the Holocaust (communists, socialists, political dissidents, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, Sinti and Roma, Poles and those physically and mentally challenged) were targeted for death or discrimination by the National Socialist regime (Nazi Germany). These people were innocent victims. Depending on time and context, citizens could choose how to respond to what they saw happening around them. They could either become a *perpetrator*, *rescuer/upstander* or *bystander*. A small percentage of the population was comprised of *perpetrators*; less than one percent made a decision to be *rescuers/upstanders*. Most people settled on the role of *bystander*.

4. Think/Pair/Share. Have students use the think/pair/share method to brainstorm a list of activities that would be considered to be rescue or upstanding. This list could include providing false identification or papers, giving food or shelter, hiding a person or participating in partisan/resistance actions.
5. Hand out copies of the exhibit text regarding the Pilku Family. Read the text aloud to the students.
6. Have students listen to the podcast of Johanna telling of the Pilku family who rescued her. Discuss the contradictions related to her rescue. Ask students what Johanna meant when she said, “I mean so she had this humanistic feeling in her, despite the fact that she knew these guys had escaped from Nazi Germany. How she reconciled it, I don’t know. We could really never figure this out.”
7. Finally, using the following questions, lead a discussion about rescue with your students. Note: This part of the lesson could be completed after a visit to Holocaust Museum Houston.
  - a. What events during this time period influenced individuals and their decisions?
  - b. Why do you believe so few decided to be *rescuers/upstanders*?
  - c. What qualities do you believe the *rescuers/upstanders* had?
  - d. How do ordinary people become *perpetrators*?
  - e. What character traits do you believe the *perpetrators* possessed?
  - f. Why do you think most people take on the role of *bystander*?
  - g. What changes do you think would have occurred during this time period if the *bystanders* had helped the *rescuers/upstanders* in the struggle against the *perpetrators*?
  - h. Why do you think people often assume the role of *bystander* when faced with challenging situations?
  - i. Which role do you choose when facing a conflicting situation? Why?
  - j. What would cause you to become a *rescuer/upstander*?
  - k. How do you think society can encourage people to take the role of *rescuer/upstander*?

## Extensions

1. Visit the following Web sites to learn more about rescue and resistance.
  - a. Yad Vashem/The Righteous Among Nations:  
[http://www1.yadvashem.org/righteous\\_new/about\\_the\\_righteous.html](http://www1.yadvashem.org/righteous_new/about_the_righteous.html)
  - b. Jewish Foundation for the Righteous: <http://www.jfr.org>
  - c. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum / Flight and Rescue Online Exhibition:  
[http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/flight\\_rescue](http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/flight_rescue)
  - d. Jewish Partisans Educational Foundation: <http://www.jewishpartisans.org>

### Assessment of Student Learning

There are a variety of ways to informally assess this lesson. For formal assessment, options include using the questions listed above or the quote listed below as journal prompts or assigning a biographical report about a rescuer or resister. If visiting Holocaust Museum Houston, have students write a reflection about their visit.

And so we must understand that ordinary people are messengers of the Most High. They go about their tasks in holy anonymity. Often, even unknown to themselves. Yet, if they had not been there, if they had not said what they said or did what they did, it would not be the way it is now. We would not be the way we are now. Never forget that you too yourself may be a messenger. Perhaps one whose errand extends over several lifetimes.

Lawrence Kushner in the dedication to

*Rescuers: Portraits of Moral Courage in the Holocaust.*



## Family of Njazi and Liza Pilku

My brother and I were young boys during the war. My father, Njazi Pilku, was a devout Muslim who had designed mosques.

In 1942, my parents sheltered a Jewish family in our home in Durres, hiding them for almost four years. They were the Gerechters from Hamburg, Germany. They sought refuge in Albania after *Kristallnacht*.

My mother, Liza Pilku, was German so the Nazis often visited our seaside home. We introduced the refugees as our relatives from Germany. Once, in Durres, the Gestapo cordoned off the streets and searched with dogs for Jews. My mother came out of the house and scolded the Gestapo in German. She told them never to come back, to remember that she was German, too. The Gestapo left.

After the war, we lost all trace of the Gerechters. The communists took power and forbade contact with anyone from the outside world.

Since the fall of the communists, we have made contact with the Gerechters' daughter, Johanna, who now lives in America. She gave testimony of her family's rescue, and my parents were recognized by Yad Vashem as Righteous among the Nations.

*Edip Pilku, holding picture of his father, Njazi Pilku, and certificate honoring Njazi as Righteous Among the Nations.*

# Historical Background Reading

## From the Holocaust Museum Houston Publication “Where Is My Family?” (DVD and Curriculum Guide)

### The Holocaust

The Holocaust was the systematic, state-organized persecution and murder of nearly 6 million Jews by Nazi Germany and its collaborators. Two-thirds of Europe’s Jews, one-third of the world’s Jewish population, were killed in the Holocaust. More than half of the dead came from Poland, where the Nazi annihilation effort was 90 percent successful. The Holocaust hit Jewish children especially hard. While the Nazis were in power, from 1933 to 1945, they murdered up to 1.5 million children, the overwhelming majority of them Jewish. Of the European Jewish children alive in 1939, only 11 percent survived.

The Nazis believed that Germans were racially superior, and that every threat to their racial “purity” had to be wiped out. Nazi Germany’s antisemitic and genocidal policies made Jews the primary victims. But more than 200,000 Roma and Sinti (Gypsies) and about 250,000 mentally or physically disabled Germans and others also were murdered between 1939 and 1945.

Millions of other defenseless people were persecuted and murdered by the Nazis for racial, ethnic, nationalist and other reasons. More than 3 million Soviet prisoners of war were killed. Tens of thousands of Slavs marked for slave labor lost their lives. Homosexuals and others whom the Nazis called “antisocials” were harassed or imprisoned and many were murdered. Thousands of political and religious dissidents — communists, socialists, trade unionists and Jehovah’s Witnesses — were oppressed and put to death as well.

Nazism scorned democracy’s ideals and values by denying human rights and committing ruthless aggression. Unfortunately, its legacy includes various neo-Nazi groups whose racist and antisemitic propaganda perpetrates hatred and incites violence. These groups are not confined to Germany. They can be found worldwide. When we ignore them, we do so at humanity’s peril.

### European Jewish Culture

When Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) and the Nazi party came to power in Germany on Jan. 30, 1933, approximately 9 million Jews lived in the European countries that Nazi Germany would occupy during World War II.

These Jews and their ancestors were people who loved their families, celebrated their traditions, worked in different professions and trades, served their country in the military and other civil offices and practiced their religion. They laughed and cried, experienced happiness and disappointment, pain and joy in ways that each of us can understand and appreciate. Yet all of them were targeted for death by Nazi Germany and its collaborators — not for anything they had done, but simply because they were Jews.

In 1933, the German Jews numbered approximately 566,000, or about one percent of the German population. Like Jews in other western European nations, the German Jews usually adopted the culture of their non-Jewish neighbors. More than 100,000 Jews served in the German army during World War I. Many were decorated for bravery. Fourteen of the 38 Nobel Prizes won by Germans between 1905 and 1936 were awarded to Jews.

The largest Jewish population was in Eastern Europe, where many lived in predominantly Jewish towns called “shtetls.” The eastern European Jews were less assimilated than those in Western Europe. Yiddish — a mixture of Hebrew, German, Polish and Russian, overlaid with local dialect — was their common language. Their Orthodox religious practices were more old-world than those of Jews in Western Europe.

European Jews maintained their traditions, sustained a vital cultural and religious life and contributed impressively to Western civilization wherever they lived. Nevertheless, the Holocaust would leave European Jewish life in ruins. How did that disaster happen?

## Antisemitism

A racist German journalist named Wilhelm Marr coined the term “antisemitism” in 1879. But antisemitism — discrimination and hatred against Jews — is many centuries older, growing out of the practice of anti-Judaism, repression of Jews for religious purposes.

Jews in European countries have always been a minority whose religious and/or cultural traditions were different from the majority. Depending on the times and circumstances, they prospered and found social acceptance or they experienced persecution and isolation. In periods of social and economic stress, it was sometimes convenient to blame Jews for causing the problems. Although Christianity grew out of Jewish teachings (Jesus himself was a practicing Jew), the Church remained antagonistic toward the Jews, because Jews did not accept Christianity. Jews were often called “Christ-killers,” even though they were not. This accusation of deicide was used to create anger and hatred of Jews.

Extreme violence against Jews was common. They were expelled from England in 1290, from France in 1306 and from Spain in 1492. In other countries, Jews were often shunned as aliens.

In 18th-century Western Europe, the liberalizing trend of the Enlightenment changed the status of the Jews. Its ideas about human equality, religious toleration and civil rights enabled Jews to become almost equal citizens under the law. Eastern Europe, however, lagged far behind the West in accepting such views. Despite these liberal currents, antisemitism continued to persist in Eastern and Western Europe. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, anti-Jewish riots and outbreaks of mass violence, known as pogroms, erupted in Russia and Poland. This brutality led to a flood of emigration, and great numbers of Jews came to the United States and more western parts of Europe. Some historians attribute this movement of people to increasing antisemitic beliefs and practices in Germany in the years prior to the Holocaust.

Over the centuries, antisemitic actions have taken different but often related forms: religious, political, economic, social and racial. Jews have been shunned, hated and killed, because many prejudiced non-Jews advanced biased stereotypes. Without this lengthy tradition of antisemitism, the Holocaust could not have happened.

## Life Before the Holocaust

Jewish life in Europe before World War II was as diverse as Jewish life is today in America. European Jews lived in large cities, in towns, in small villages and in shtetls. They were professionals, store owners and farmers. Many Jews were secular (nonreligious) and had, in many cases, assimilated into the culture of the community in which they lived.

Nevertheless, their outward diversity did not obscure the Jewish religious values that many Jews shared. Wherever they lived, whatever their occupations, their families stood at the center of their world. Jews cared for the poor and disadvantaged in their communities. They visited the sick, and they made certain that the dead were buried with dignity.

Their values were transmitted to new generations by teachings in synagogues, in schools and in the home. Holidays and family celebrations enhanced the richness and diversity of their lives. But above all, Jews who lived in Europe before the Holocaust were human beings, individuals and families living normal lives.

## Kristallnacht

On Nov. 10, 1938, the *Houston Chronicle's* headline announced: "Jews Attacked in All Germany." What caused that front-page story?

Herschel Grynszpan, a 17-year-old Jewish student in Paris, received a desperate letter from his parents, Polish Jews, who had been deported from Germany and stranded in the border town of Zbaszyn. He decided to take revenge. On Nov. 7, he fatally shot Ernst Vom Rath, a minor German embassy official in Paris. When vom Rath died, a massive pogrom erupted during the nights of Nov. 9–10, 1938. This anti-Jewish violence broke out throughout Germany and Austria. Austria had become part of the Third Reich after its annexation, or Anschluss, by Germany in March 1938. The pogrom seemed "spontaneous," but it had been planned by the Nazis, with Hitler's blessing. Unbeknownst to its Jewish citizens, Germany's police and fire officials had been ordered not to respond, except to save non-Jewish property.

Within 48 hours, more than 1,000 synagogues were aflame, while German fire brigades did nothing to help. Seven thousand Jewish businesses were looted without intervention by the German police. Jews were beaten, and their homes were plundered.

Thirty thousand Jewish men were arrested and sent to the newly enlarged concentration camps at Dachau, Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen. This pogrom became known as *Kristallnacht* — "Crystal Night" or "Night of Broken Glass" — because of the shattered glass from synagogues and store windows that littered the streets. A fine of 1 billion marks (equal to one-sixth of the value of all Jewish-owned property in Germany) was imposed collectively on the German Jews. Even though they had insurance, Jews received no compensation for the damage to their property. Instead, German insurance companies were required to pay damage compensation to the Nazi state. *Kristallnacht* showed that no Jew could expect to live a normal life under the Nazi dictatorship.

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