

## Lesson Three: Refugees and Rescuers

### Unit Essential Question:

- In times of crisis, what does it take to move from knowledge to action?

### Guiding Questions:

- What approaches did Americans take to try to save Jewish refugees? What challenges did they face?
- How did circumstances of time, place, and opportunity factor into the options available to refugees and rescuers?

### Learning Objectives:

- Students will analyze, discuss, and evaluate the range of options and strategies available to Jewish refugees who tried to escape to the United States and to the American individuals or organizations that aided them.
- Students will understand that circumstances of time, place, and opportunity in many cases limited the ability of Americans to help and the refugees' ability to escape, while also recognizing the crucial role that individual Americans and organizations played in helping Jewish refugees.

### Overview:

In the first and second lessons of the unit, students examined sources like public opinion polling, editorials, newsreels, and the debate over the Wagner-Rogers legislation, exploring the many factors that influenced Americans' will and ability to respond to the Jewish refugee crisis. In the third and final lesson of the unit, students will explore the intertwined personal stories of Jewish refugees who attempted to flee to the United States and the American rescuers who intervened on their behalf. Using a [Jigsaw](#) strategy that will allow students to delve deeply into the story of one refugee, students will come to understand how circumstances of time, place, and opportunity in many cases limited the ability of Americans to help and refugees' ability to escape. Students will also recognize the crucial role that individual Americans and organizations played in helping Jewish refugees. By challenging students to think about both the missed opportunities to intervene and the impact of those few individuals who did, this lesson will prompt students to reflect on the role of civic participation in confronting today's similarly complex social and political problems. They will continue this reflection in the Assessment of the unit (located at the end of this lesson), as they participate in a Socratic seminar or create a writing product using the role-audience-format-topic (RAFT) strategy.

### Context:

Immigrating to the United States was not a simple process in the 1930s. It required clearing many bureaucratic hurdles as well as having personal connections, good timing, and a certain amount of luck. Potential immigrants to the United States had to collect many types of documents, including proof of identity, police certificates, medical clearances, tax documents, a ship ticket, and exit permits, prior to obtaining a visa. Most also had to find an American financial sponsor who had the resources to guarantee that they would never become a burden on the United States. This was often the most difficult obstacle to overcome, since the German government established severe taxes—in effect, taking the majority of an emigrant's net worth—prior to granting permission to leave the country. The financial sponsor had to submit tax returns, bank statements, and employer letters to prove they could support an immigrant so that immigrant would never become a “public charge” (immigration officials used this term to refer to a

person who was considered primarily dependent on public or private welfare).

The US government made no exceptions for refugees escaping persecution, and it did not adjust the immigration laws during the refugee crisis of the 1930s and 1940s. As a result, the waiting lists for US immigrant visas grew as hundreds of thousands of Jews attempted to flee Europe. When the United States entered World War II, it became more challenging for Jews to escape. The State Department instituted additional restrictions on immigration in 1941, citing national security concerns. Among these was the announcement that any refugee with close family still in enemy territory would be ineligible for a US immigration visa. American consulates in Nazi-occupied territory closed in July 1941, cutting off many applicants from the US diplomats who could issue visas. At the same time, the State Department announced that all visa applicants had to be approved by an interdepartmental visa review committee in Washington, DC. This decision lengthened the delays for refugees who had managed to make it to southern France or Lisbon, Portugal, the only places in Europe from which they could still sail to the United States. In addition, the United States and other Allied forces prioritized military victory over humanitarian aid during World War II. Although the United States could have done more to aid the victims of Nazi Germany and its collaborators, large-scale rescue by Americans was impossible by the time the United States entered the war.

Despite the lack of support for wide-scale governmental intervention on behalf of Jewish refugees, American individuals from many religious backgrounds risked their lives to help Jews. Rescue efforts ranged from the isolated actions of individuals to organized networks both small and large. A variety of US-based organizations (both religious and secular, Jewish and non-Jewish) engaged in rescue efforts. The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, the National Refugee Service, the [Emergency Rescue Committee](#), the [American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee](#) (JDC), the [American Friends Service Committee](#) (Quakers), the [Unitarian Service Committee](#), and other groups coordinated relief activities for Jewish refugees in France, Portugal, Spain, and elsewhere throughout the war.

These private relief agencies helped refugees navigate the US immigration system, explained the required paperwork, located potential financial sponsors, and purchased ship tickets. For those fortunate enough to enter the United States, the agencies assisted with explaining American cultural norms to immigrants and securing employment and housing for them. These agencies, both Jewish and non-Jewish (though many of the non-Jewish agencies were funded through Jewish philanthropy), also provided food, clothing, and medicine for those still in Europe; some relief workers even worked directly in French internment camps. These relief agencies and the individuals who acted for them operated under tremendous strain. Often, their endeavors involved significant risk. Some of the organizations toiled strenuously in public and private to raise money and provide assistance for refugees. Others advocated within the existing government bureaucracy to keep the country's doors open in the face of public antagonism toward immigrants.

One area of focus for relief agencies was the immigration of child refugees. Numerous organizations and individuals attempted to bring unaccompanied children, mostly German Jewish children, to the United States between 1933 and 1945. Two organizations, the German Jewish Children's Aid (GJCA) and the US Committee for the Care of European Children (USCOM), [coordinated the largest efforts](#) to bring children to the United States. As explored in Lesson 2, the US government proposed a few large-scale child immigration plans, including the Wagner-Rogers Bill and a 1942 attempt to bring thousands of children from France, but neither was successful. Nevertheless, as a result of the organized efforts, more than 1,000 unaccompanied children escaped Nazi persecution by immigrating to the United States as part of these organized efforts.

Two years after the United States entered into World War II, the US government became officially involved in refugee rescue efforts through the establishment of the War Refugee Board in 1944. Though the board's first director, John Pehle, later called their work "little and late" in comparison with the enormity of the Holocaust, it nevertheless played a crucial role in the rescue of tens of thousands of Jews.

Roosevelt tasked this organization, nominally headed by the secretaries of state, war, and the treasury, with carrying out an official American policy of rescue and relief. The War Refugee Board staff worked with Jewish organizations, diplomats from neutral countries, and resistance groups in Europe to rescue Jews from occupied territories and provide relief to Jews in hiding and in concentration camps. They organized a psychological warfare campaign to deter potential perpetrators, opened a refugee camp in upstate New York, and released the first details of mass murder at Auschwitz to the American people.

The War Refugee Board, along with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), also sponsored the work of Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish businessman sent to Budapest as a diplomat to assist Hungarian Jews. Wallenberg helped save thousands of Hungarian Jews by distributing protective Swedish documents. Because Sweden was a neutral country, Germany could not easily harm those under Swedish protection. Wallenberg also set up homes, hospitals, nurseries, and soup kitchens for the Jews of Budapest.

As the war came to a close, Allied forces discovered and liberated concentration camps, freeing hundreds of thousands of Holocaust survivors, many of whom had no homes or families to return to. More than two million Europeans were displaced, including 250,000 Jews. American, Soviet, British, and French occupying forces set up displaced persons (DP) camps to house them. In 1948, Congress passed the Displaced Persons Act, authorizing 200,000 displaced persons to enter the United States without being counted against the immigration quotas. The act did not include any special provisions for Jewish DPs.

Between the establishment of the DP camps in 1945 and the closure of the last camp in 1957, approximately 140,000 Jewish Holocaust survivors immigrated to the United States.

### Notes to Teacher:

#### 1. Teaching This Lesson as a Standalone Lesson

- If you choose to teach this two-day lesson by itself, make sure that you've read the context section for [Lesson 1](#) beforehand. Lesson 1 provides critical historical background information on the German Jewish refugee crisis and Americans' responses to that crisis. Based on students' prior historical knowledge, you may want to provide that information before they begin this lesson, or simply use it to answer questions that may arise.

#### 2. Adapting the Lesson for Different Reading Levels

- In this lesson, students will independently read packets of primary sources detailing the experiences of Jewish refugees who tried to escape to the United States, as well as accounts of the American individuals or organizations that aided them. For students struggling with pacing, vocabulary, and comprehension, you might want to alter this activity. Rather than reading independently, students could work in heterogeneous pairings, with struggling readers coupled with more confident readers. In addition, you might choose to apply the [Jigsaw](#) strategy with the readings, giving each student an overview (Document 1 in each packet) and one or more readings from the packet. If you choose to go this route, you will need to plan in advance how you will assign readings, as each set contains six to nine documents.

### 3. Preparing to Teach Emotionally Sensitive Material

- The personal stories in this lesson provide an unflinching look at the experiences of Jewish refugees who sought to escape the Nazis by immigrating to the United States. While an in-depth examination of one refugee's life deepens students' engagement with this history, it also heightens the emotional intensity of the lesson. This is especially true for students who investigate the lives of Dr. Flora Hochsinger and Franz Goldberger, two Jewish refugees who were unsuccessful in their quest to flee to the United States and did not survive the Holocaust. That said, you should carefully consider each of these suggestions before engaging with this material with your students:
  - Teachers know their students best. Preview each resource in this lesson before you share it with your students. Let students know in advance when they are about to encounter material that some may find upsetting.
  - Briefly review the class contract with students before beginning the lesson. This will help to reinforce the norms you have established and reinforce the idea of the classroom as a safe space for students to voice concerns, questions, or emotions that may arise.

#### Duration:

Two 50-minute class periods

#### Materials:

- Handout: [Personal Stories Worksheet](#)
- Handout: [Bridging the Gap between Sympathy and Action](#)
- Handout: [Marianne Winter / Jane Bomberger Packet](#)
- Handout: [Dr. Flora Hochsinger / Harriet Postman Packet](#)
- Handout: [Franz Goldberger / American Friends Service Committee Packet](#)
- Handout: [Thomas Doepfner / American Friends Service Committee Packet](#)
- Handout: [Herta Griffel / German Jewish Children's Aid Packet](#)

#### Teaching Strategies:

- [Exit Cards](#)
- [Pick a Number](#)

#### Activities:

#### Day 1

##### 1. Reflect on the Motives that Influence Individuals to Become Rescuers

- Explain to students that in previous lessons, they've looked at American policy and public opinion regarding Jewish refugees, focusing especially on why the rescue of Jews did not become a priority for most Americans. But in this lesson, the class will be looking at the stories of Americans who took extraordinary action to help and will be thinking about some of the factors that motivated them to do so.
- Begin by asking students to spend a few minutes responding in their journals to the following prompt: *Describe a time when you knew about something that was wrong and chose to respond in some way. What factors encouraged or made it possible for you to take action?*

- While students may not wish to share their responses in full, you might use the [Wraparound](#) strategy to provide each student with the opportunity to name a factor that encouraged or made it possible for them to act. For instance, they might say “close relationship” or “I knew I could stop it.”

## 2. Explore the Stories of Refugees and Rescuers

- Divide the class into five groups, and assign each group one of the following individuals and/or institutions and the corresponding packet:
  - [Marianne Winter / Jane Bomberger Packet](#)
  - [Dr. Flora Hochsinger / Harriet Postman Packet](#)
  - [Franz Goldberger / American Friends Service Committee Packet](#)
  - [Thomas Doepfner / American Friends Service Committee Packet](#)
- Explain to the class that today they will be collaborating with their group members to learn about the stories of Jewish refugees and American rescuers by analyzing primary sources (such as photographs, letters, journals, and other artifacts) and then reflecting on the stories these tell about rescue. Each member of each group will share his or her findings with peers in the next class period.
- Distribute one of the packets to each group, along with the handout [Personal Stories Worksheet](#) for each student. Tell students that they will first read through each document in the packet independently and annotate the documents, either by underlining key information and asking questions in the margins or by using an annotation system with which they are familiar. Then explain that they will be discussing the questions in the [Personal Stories Worksheet](#) in order with their group and recording their group’s answers on this handout.
- Once groups have finished reading and annotating their packets and answering the questions on their worksheet, bring the class back together as a whole group. Ask a volunteer from each group to briefly summarize their group’s story (name, person or organization that helped, outcome) and share what stood out most to them from the documents they investigated. Then discuss the following questions as a class:
  - What challenges did refugees(s) and/or sponsor(s) face in the process of immigrating to the United States? How do these challenges reflect what you’ve already learned about this period in American history?
  - How did circumstances of time, place, and opportunity factor into the options available to refugees and rescuers?

## 3. Use Exit Cards to Invite Further Reflection

- Because many of the personal stories that students examine in this lesson are emotionally intense or troubling, it is a good idea to give students some time for reflection. You can gain perspective on students’ current thinking by closing the lesson with an [exit card](#). On their exit cards, ask each student to write the following:
  1. One insight or takeaway from today’s lesson
  2. One question or idea for a follow-up conversation they would like to have as a class

## Day 2

### 1. Acknowledge Exit Cards

- Begin the second day of this lesson by acknowledging the exit cards that students completed at the end of the previous lesson. Point out any patterns that you noticed. It can be helpful for students to know that others had similar responses to emotionally challenging material they encountered. Hearing some of their peers' questions can also help to promote more thoughtful and sensitive contributions from students as they proceed together into emotionally and intellectually challenging material.

## 2. Discuss How to Bridge the Gap between Sympathy and Action

- Using the [Pick a Number](#) teaching strategy, assign a number to each of the quotations on the handout [Bridging the Gap between Sympathy and Action](#) and post them around the room.
- Give students a few minutes to circulate around the room silently to read each quotation. Once students have read each quotation, ask them to choose one that especially resonates with them. Once students have chosen a quotation, they should stand next to its poster. Make sure each quotation has been selected by at least two students. (You might need to encourage some students to line up near their second choices.)
- Students should now turn to a partner at the same poster, ideally someone who examined a different personal story in the previous lesson. Students should spend about three to five minutes interviewing each other, discussing the following questions:
  - How does this quote resonate with the personal story you examined? What parts of the rescuer's story did you see reflected in this quote? What parts differed from this quote?
  - What does this quote tell us about what it takes to bridge the gap between sympathy and action?
- Once students have had time to discuss with two people at their poster, regroup as a class. Lead a class discussion in which students report on their discussions. Ask students to comment on ideas and perspectives from their classmates that felt relevant to their discussions. What similarities and differences did they notice between the various discussions that occurred?

## 3. Extend the Conversation about Civic Participation in Times of Crisis

- Once students have had the opportunity to share their Day 1 stories with each other and connect to larger themes of rescue and participation, invite students to deepen the conversation with a whole-group discussion of the following prompts:
  - What motivated the people you studied in class to bridge the gap between sympathy and action?
  - What did they need in order to take action?
  - What are you motivated to act on? What are some ideas you've learned from this lesson about what that action could look like?
  - What questions does this history raise for you about the challenges of taking action and how to overcome those challenges?

### Extensions:

#### 1. Explore the Story of Herta Griffel and Kindertransports to the United States

- Herta Griffel escaped Nazi-annexed Austria at seven years old, boarding a US-bound ship with nine other unaccompanied Jewish refugee children in 1940. As an extension to this lesson, you could ask students to investigate Griffel's story through the documents in



the handout [Herta Griffel / German Jewish Children's Aid Packet](#). You may wish to use the following questions to guide students' analysis:

- Which document, photo, or artifact had the most impact on you? How does exploring this personal story help you better understand the actions taken by Jewish refugees in response to the threat posed by the Nazis?
- What does Herta Griffel's journey to the United States teach you about the decisions individuals and families had to make in response to the threat posed by the Nazis?
- What do these documents reveal about the complexity of the US immigration process?
- (Optional question for students who've completed Lesson 2:) How does Griffel's personal story deepen or shift your understanding of the Wagner-Rogers Bill debate that you studied in Lesson 2?

## 2. Contextualize This Lesson within the Larger Arc of World War II

- Displaying a [timeline](#) of World War II and the events of the Holocaust on the wall will provide for a fuller experience, as students can see how the narrative of the refugee they are studying fits into the complex layers of events. As a possible addition to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's "[Timeline Activity](#)" lesson, students could create a layer of the timeline that represents various turning points in the story of the refugee they are studying, then place the new cards on the timeline.
- This [video](#) shows, in a video timeline format, the passage of ships carrying Jewish refugees from Europe to the United States between 1938 and 1941, as well as the atypical voyages of the MS *St. Louis* in 1939 and the SS *Quanza* in 1940. As an opening or closing activity, it provides context for either this lesson or Day 1 of Lesson 2.

## Assessment

The suggested activities below provide guidance on how to implement two different forms of summative assessment: a Socratic seminar discussion or a role-audience-format-topic writing assignment (RAFT).

### Assessment Option 1: Socratic Seminar

In this Socratic Seminar activity, students help one another understand the ideas, issues, and values of the unit through a group discussion format; it is collaborative in nature rather than a debate in which participants must take sides. Refer to the [Socratic Seminar](#) teaching strategy for guidance on implementing the Socratic Seminar in your classroom. During the seminar, you can root the discussion in the questions below or use them as a jumping-off point. Ask students to prepare answers to these discussion questions in advance of the seminar:

- In this unit, you explored how competing definitions of American identity, priorities, and values shaped American responses to the refugee crisis of the 1930s and 1940s. What does America mean to you? What parts of the unit reinforced your vision of America? What parts diverged from your vision? Where do you see these competing ideas about the meaning of America reflected in today's public debates?
- This unit demonstrates that immigrating to the United States was not a simple or inexpensive process; it required securing many documents, including proof of identity, police certificates, medical clearances, tax documents, a ship ticket, and exit permits. What effect did that have on Americans' motivation and willingness to help? How might it have shielded a wide range of people—from government officials to average citizens—from a sense of moral accountability?

- Based on his study of rescuers during the Holocaust, Professor Ervin Staub writes, “Goodness, like evil, often begins in small steps. Heroes evolve; they aren’t born.” What “small steps” did you notice in the actions of American rescuers? What resources, conditions, and qualities assist someone in taking moral action, sometimes at great personal risk?
- One of the key lessons of this unit is that multiple factors, including antisemitism, xenophobia, isolationism, and the Great Depression, limited American responses to the refugee crisis. Why is it necessary to confront this chapter in American history? How can it inform our understanding of contemporary debates about responsibilities to refugees?

For students who have not participated in a Socratic Seminar or find it difficult to phrase responses, you may want to allow them to use the [Socratic Seminar Stems](#) handout. This handout has response and questions stems which will allow them to respond to comments and questions from classmates in an authentic, appropriate manner and may increase participation.

### Assessment Option 2: RAFT Assessment

The RAFT (Role, Audience, Format, Topic) writing assignment gives students the opportunity to choose the role and format that most appeals to them, while also providing teachers with uniform evaluation criteria: the use of primary and secondary historical evidence. The RAFT structure enables students to think about the major themes and lessons from the unit as a whole while also empowering them to apply their knowledge to a practical, contemporary context. When implementing the RAFT assessment in your class, be sure that you give students adequate time to read and understand their assignment and that you also explain the [Rubric for RAFT Assessment](#) and evaluation criteria.

Share with students the following instructions for each role:

**Artist-in-residence:** You’ve been commissioned to create a work of art for the entrance of a museum’s new exhibition on Americans and the Jewish refugee crisis of 1938–1941. The topic is completely unfamiliar to most museumgoers. To clarify your task, the museum has shared with you the following quote by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks:

History is information. Memory, by contrast, is part of identity. . . . Memory is the past as present, as it lives on in me. Survivors, witnesses, the descendants of those who lived this history, and all those who learn about it today face the question of how to remember the past and how that memory might shape our understanding of ourselves and our present world.<sup>1</sup>

Your artwork can take many forms (e.g., drawing, painting, graffiti stencil, Photoshop image), but it should inspire museumgoers to think about this history as more than mere “information.” The piece should prompt viewers to think about what it might look like to make this history (unknown to most Americans) part of their own identities as individuals and communities. As such, it should creatively represent what you believe are the key themes and contemporary lessons of this history, while also sparking museumgoers’ interest in the topic. The piece will be accompanied by a 300- to 500-word artist’s statement that describes the overall message and the artistic choices you made. Because many people will not know this history, the statement should provide some

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *Rabbi Jonathan Sacks’s Haggadah: Hebrew and English Text with New Essays and Commentary* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 29.



insight into how your artistic choices connect to important themes from the history of the refugee crisis of 1938–1941. You should also include at least one primary source or reference to a primary source, either in the artist’s statement or in the piece itself.

**Vlogger:** You are a vlogger with a large following of young people. You’ve recently studied the history of American action during the refugee crisis of 1938–1941, and you’ve been inspired to create a video explaining the topic to your followers. In a five- to seven-minute video, you’ll highlight some of the actions of American rescuers during this period and describe the lessons your followers can learn about taking action in their own lives. You should also be sure to spend time describing what motivated these individuals and organizations, as well as their most effective strategies. At the end of the video, you should spend some time discussing what young people can learn from these stories. For example, you might want to relate the many issues on Americans’ minds during this period to the challenges presented by social media and the 24-hour news cycle, and explain how young people can cut through the noise to inspire each other to act. Your video should reference what you learned by investigating primary sources from the period, and it should also provide some historical background information for people who are completely unfamiliar with the topic.

**Media critic:** You are an expert on American involvement in the Jewish refugee crisis of 1938–1941. You’ve seen many echoes of this history in the news lately, and you would like to write a letter to the editor of the *New York Times* introducing readers to this history while also connecting its lessons to contemporary events. You’ll select two to three major stories from the newspaper and write an 800- to 1,000-word letter to the editor explaining why the history of the refugee crisis sheds light on these news stories and why this history still matters today. When selecting your articles, you can choose stories that show direct similarities to the refugee crisis (e.g., coverage of a contemporary refugee crisis or persecution of a marginalized group), or you can think more abstractly (e.g., stories about divisions in American society or the persistence of “us” vs. “them” rhetoric). Your letter to the editor should also provide historical background on the refugee crisis of 1938–1941 and include primary source evidence to support your argument.

**College activist:** You are a student on a large university campus and belong to a group that is interested in humanitarian causes. Recently, you learned about universities in the late 1930s that were offering scholarships to refugee students in order to help them leave Europe. In many cases, the scholarships, such as Tom Doeppner’s at McPherson College, were completely funded by students. Your group has been trying to think of ways to help those in need, and you think that funding a scholarship for a refugee might be appealing to your peers. In your speech to the group, you will be asking them to contribute to and fundraise for a student-funded scholarship for a contemporary refugee. You should draw on historical precedent to make your argument, citing past debates over immigration, challenges faced by refugees seeking to immigrate, and the benefits of bringing refugees into the community. Be sure to include primary source evidence to support your argument.