

## President Obama to Speak at Righteous Among the Nations Ceremony Wednesday

### Event Posthumously Honoring American and Polish Citizens who Risked Their Own Lives to Rescue Jews during Holocaust to take place at the Israeli Embassy in Washington

(January 25, 2016) On January 27, 2016, [International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust](#), a unique ceremony honoring Righteous among the Nations will be held at the Israeli Embassy in Washington, DC. **President Barack Obama** will participate in the event. The event, jointly hosted by the Israeli Embassy, Yad Vashem and the American Society for Yad Vashem, marks the first time that a ceremony presenting medals and certificates of honor to American [Righteous among the Nations](#) will be held in the United States.

The Righteous among the Nations, Americans **Roddie Edmonds** and **Lois Gunden** and Polish citizens **Walery and Maryla Zbijewski**, were all recognized by Yad Vashem for risking their lives to rescue Jews during the Holocaust. Yad Vashem, located in Jerusalem, is the world center for Holocaust research, documentation, education and commemoration, and is tasked by the State of Israel to recognize the Righteous among the Nations.

The medals and certificates of honor will be accepted on the Righteous' behalf by their next of kin. **Holocaust survivors** who were rescued by the Righteous, will also be present and speak at the event. In addition to President Obama, Israel's Ambassador to the US, **Ambassador Ron Dermer**, **Rabbi Israel Meir Lau**, Chairman of the Yad Vashem Council and himself a Holocaust survivor who was rescued by Righteous among the Nations, and **Leonard Wilf**, Chairman of the American Society for Yad Vashem, will offer remarks.

Yad Vashem Chairman **Avner Shalev** noted that the thousands of men and women recognized over the past six decades as Righteous among the Nations stood up in a way that went against the active evil or passive silence that dominated their surroundings. Instead, they fought for the universal values that help our common civilization endure and prosper. "Often acting alone, and in secret, the strength of the Righteous among the Nations was deeply embedded in their morality and value system. These attributes form the common thread that binds members of this select, diverse group of people from many nations. The choices and actions of these individuals set an eternal example for humankind as they stood against the barbaric evil of the Nazis and their collaborators," he said.

**Leonard Wilf**, Chairman of the American Society for Yad Vashem said, "As a son of Holocaust survivors who dedicated themselves to furthering Holocaust remembrance and commemoration, my family and I are committed supporters of continued Holocaust research and education. I believe that this event – honoring American heroes on American soil – has special and unique significance. Not only do we give due honor to these incredible men and women; we also proclaim that despite the years that have passed, these stories carry timeless lessons for us all."

**Ambassador Ron Dermer**: "It is a great privilege to recognize, on behalf of the Jewish state, the heroism of those to whom the Jewish people owe the highest debt of gratitude. I also deeply appreciate President Obama's acceptance of our invitation to speak at this historic event. It will be a worthy tribute to the worthiest among us."

#### The Rescue Stories:

■ Master Sergeant **Roddie Edmonds** of Knoxville, Tennessee, participated in the landing of the American forces in Europe and was taken prisoner by the Germans. In January 1945, the Germans ordered all Jewish inmates in the Stalag IXA POW camp to report the following morning. Understanding the imminent danger in which this would place his fellow Jewish prisoners, Master Sergeant Edmonds ordered all the POWs—Jews and non-Jews alike—to report together. When the German officer in charge saw that all the camp's inmates standing in front of their barracks, he said: "They cannot all be Jews." To this Edmonds retorted: "We are all Jews." Edmonds did not waver, even when the German took out his pistol and threatened to shoot him. "According to the Geneva Convention," said Edmonds, "we have to give only our name, rank, and serial number. If you shoot me, you will have to shoot all of us, and after the war you will be tried for war crimes." The German finally gave up and left the scene, and the Jewish POWs were saved from certain death. Paul Stern, one of the Jewish POWs saved by Edmonds recalled: "Although seventy years have passed I can still hear the

words he said to the German camp commander.” According to Edmonds’ diary, these events took place on January 27, 1945.

■ In 1941 **Lois Gunden**, a teacher of French from Goshen, Indiana, volunteered to work for the Mennonite Central Committee in southern France. She established a children’s home in Canet Plage, which became a safe haven for a number of children, including Jewish children whom she helped smuggle out of the nearby Rivesaltes internment camp. Gunden pleaded with the parents to separate from their children and give them to her in order to save them from deportation. Ginette (Drucker) Kalish, one of the children saved by Lois Gunden, told Yad Vashem: “At the time I was 12 years old and certainly scared, but Lois Gunden was kind and passionately determined to take me and these other Jewish children... to protect them from harm.” Gunden fearlessly protected the children when the French police arrived at the home, and ran the children’s center even after the United States entered the war and she became an enemy alien. She continued her work until January 1943, when she was detained by the Germans, only to be released in 1944 in a prisoner exchange.

■ On July 22, 1942, the Germans began mass deportations from the Warsaw ghetto. By September 21, Yom Kippur, some 260,000 inhabitants of the ghetto had been deported to the Treblinka extermination camp, where they were murdered. Janina Ferster and her daughter Elzbieta managed to flee the ghetto and go into hiding. After staying for two months at the home of acquaintances, Tadeusz and Eugenia Kucharski, who also received recognition as Righteous, Janina brought her daughter to the home of **Walery and Maryla Zbijewski**, until she was able to rent an apartment under a false name and take her daughter back. Despite the enormous danger – the Germans publicly announced that helping Jews would be punished by death – the Zbijewskis cared for Elzbieta and protected her until her mother was able to collect her.

The Righteous Program:

Over 60 years ago, when establishing Yad Vashem, the State of Israel made a point of remembering the rescuers, the non-Jews who stood by the Jewish people’s side in their darkest hour. Thus, the law establishing Yad Vashem as a center of Holocaust commemoration, documentation, research and education, added another mission to its tasks – to pay tribute to the non-Jews who risked their lives to rescue Jews during the Holocaust. Since 1963, a public commission, headed by an Israeli Supreme Court Justice, has been responsible for making the decision as to who will be recognized as Righteous Among the Nations. Thus far, some 26,000 individuals have been recognized as [Righteous among the Nations](#), including five Americans and more than 6,500 individuals from Poland, which was at the heart of the Final Solution.

More information about the Righteous among the Nations, including background stories and the Database of Righteous, can be found [online here](#).

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*Yad Vashem, located in Jerusalem, is the world center for Holocaust research, documentation, education and commemoration.*

*The American Society for Yad Vashem works to support the efforts of Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and to spread the importance of Holocaust remembrance and education throughout the United States.*