

Flight and Rescue: How Unitarians Helped Save Refugees in WW II
A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson
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UCV

Last week, the Conservative majority government in Great Britain defeated an immigration bill that would have led Britain to accept 3000 unaccompanied child refugees stranded in Europe. The bill was introduced by Alf Dubs, a Labour peer who came to Britain as a child in the acclaimed Kindertransport, the government-backed program that took in 10,000 child refugees from Germany in the run-up to the Second World War. The Home Office argued the bill would act as an incentive for refugees to make the dangerous Mediterranean crossing to Europe and that it would have serious budgetary implications. A handful of Conservatives broke ranks, but their numbers were not enough to pass the legislation that was backed by Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National Party. And so the world turns, and thousands of children slept rough in Europe last night. At least 95,000 unaccompanied child refugees applied for asylum in Europe last year alone.

Now, I know it would be naive of me to assert that how a nation's government, indeed, how we respond to appeals to welcome in refugees is an easy matter, readily resolved. From government's point of view, there *are* budgets to consider, the realistic carrying capacities of communities, relations with labour and other interest groups, security concerns, and then there are the deep emotions felt by many—turbulent, irrational ones—about national identity and history. All these, and more, are part of the serious calculus that comes with the vexing issue of refugees and how we respond to their plight.

And yet, in times to come, when our descendents look back at our fleeting decades, you have to wonder: how will we look to them? How compelling will our responses to something like the plight of refugees, private and collective, stand up to their scrutiny? (Oh, and by the

way, *I think there will be a future*, and people, and a reckoning—a weighing of our times and seasons.) Will we have given future generations grounds for inspiration, pride even, knowing that people such as us once walked the earth?

One thing I do need to say, just to take the pressure off a bit is this: there's no way a person can be heroic all the time; there're just too many minutes, hours, days, weeks and months in a lifetime. To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under the heavens.

It's January 1939. After seventeen Unitarian ministers had said "no," the Rev. Waitstill Sharp and his spouse Martha of said "yes" to an extraordinary request from the headquarters of the American Unitarian Association. Would they be willing to leave their three and six year old children, their ministry in Wellesley, Massachusetts, and travel to a Europe on the brink of world war to undertake a dangerous refugee relief operation? Tens of thousands of refugees—Jews, trade union leaders, political dissidents and regular folk and families—had poured into Czechoslovakia after Germany carved off and occupied the northwestern region of that nation. Tensions were acutely pitched; Germany seemed poised to invade the rest of Czechoslovakia.

These developments stunned Unitarians in North America—they had close historical, personal and institutional ties with Czech Unitarians who, in Prague, under the leadership of Rev. Norbert Capek, had established the largest Unitarian congregation in the world. Czech Unitarians had a reputation for their progressive religious, cultural and political views. Some members of their congregations were Jewish, many were involved in political work inimical to fascism; all were devoted to their young democratic republic and its President whose spouse, Charlotte Garrigue Masaryk, was a Unitarian from the States.

Robert Dexter, director of the AUA's Department of Social Relations, had recently returned from a Europe on edge, seen how things were developing, and recommended that the

Unitarians focus on the needs of unregistered refugees in Czechoslovakia. Money, well in excess to the annual budget of the entire denomination, had been raised by Unitarians and placed in the hands of Martha and Waitstill Sharp who left their children in the keeping of members of their congregation and set sail for Europe February 4, 1939. For the next seven years, the Sharps dedicated their lives to helping the victims of fascism in Europe and to getting as many children and adults as they could out of harm's way. Turns out, they were uniquely qualified for the task. They needed to be, because within weeks of their arrival in Prague, German troops occupied the rest of Czechoslovakia, and Gestapo agents fanned out to monitor and arrest pro-democracy and anti-fascist activists, foreign aid workers and Jews.

The Sharps were young, both in their early thirties; they were fearless, creative improvisers under extreme pressure, doggedly professional in their work, and willing to bend and break unjust laws and procedures imposed by occupying Nazi authorities. Let me give a few examples of the Sharp's work in those desperate months, before they too had to flee, just days ahead of arrest.

Martha's training as a social worker proved to be crucial because just two weeks after their arrival, more than seven hundred refugees were waiting in silent terror outside the doors of the office the Sharp's had set up in Prague. Within days, Martha recruited a cadre of young Czech Jewish and American university students, fluent in half a dozen languages, to staff the office and begin the process of in-depth interviews to prepare refugees to emigrate. She compiled case files, gave detailed advice on the logistics of fleeing to neighbouring countries, sprang people from prison, and ensured that visas and passports were in order. By August 1939, her staff had helped 3500 individuals and families to fill out forms and assist them in their flight from the country.

But many of these people didn't have enough money to pay for their passage. This is where Waitstill comes in: he discovered he had a knack for money laundering and black market currency manipulation. Able to travel to neighbouring countries with his American passport, Rev. Sharp deposited US dollars from Unitarian sources in banks in Brussels, Paris and Geneva. Back in Czechoslovakia, he'd drive to the outskirts of Prague to negotiate currency exchanges from Czech crowns to dollars on a sliding scale depending on the wealth of the persons involved; or he would extend dollar grants outright. Closing the transaction, he would give the refugee half a business card on which he wrote a dollar amount, and then the client would draw dollars from one of the banks abroad that had agreed to honour withdrawals to the person bearing the half business card stub.

Meanwhile, on the strength of her passport, and with paperwork in hand arranged through British sources, Martha escorted a group of thirty-five refugees across international borders to the UK during which she bluffed their way past guards and customs officials by brazenly announcing that her group was under the protection of the US government.

Eventually, the Gestapo threw all the Unitarian office furniture into the streets of Prague. The Sharps knew their hotel room had been repeatedly searched. So they moved their staff and operations into multiple clandestine apartments, burned their papers, and worked with deliberate speed. That work included rescuing two top figures in the Czech resistance; under Rev. Sharp's watch, one was smuggled out of a hospital morgue in a body bag and then spirited by car across the border. And Martha Sharp, after eluding a Gestapo agent tracking her down in the late night streets of Prague, contacted and then escorted a resistance leader past three separate military check points, waving her US passport, announcing they were Rev and Mrs Sharp and had an

appointment with the British Ambassador, she thus presented Mr X safely across the threshold and into the British Embassy.

I could tell you all kinds of stories about this extraordinary couple. But I haven't even gotten to September 1, 1939 and the outbreak of World War II! The Sharps had to return to the States, and this, only days before the War. Now it's important to try to imagine, and keep in mind the following. During the next six years, there were essentially two major theatres of operation for Unitarian refugee relief efforts. The first was North America. Here Robert Dexter led the newly created Unitarian Service Committee. The work of the Committee was to publicize the plight of refugees in Europe, raise funds for relief efforts, lobby government bureaucracies to loosen up highly restrictive immigration quotas, coordinate relief efforts with other organizations: especially the Friends Service Committee, the YMCA, the Red Cross and the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, and to encourage people here—and Unitarians in particular—to actually sponsor refugees and fill out the essential paper work. There would have no daring rescues, no lives saved, no burdens eased if this kind of essential, unglamorous kind work had not been carried out on the home front. I can't underline that fact enough.

The second site for Unitarian work was, of course, war-torn Europe. By July 1940, much of Europe had been occupied by German forces. France had capitulated and a French fascist government, willing to collaborate with the Nazis, administered the Central and Southern regions of the country. Portugal remained officially neutral throughout the war. The Sharps returned to Europe in June 1940, sent back by the USC to set up offices in Lisbon, Portugal and Marseille, France. These places became the principal locations for Unitarian refugee relief work.

Lisbon was packed with refugees from all over Europe. Most of them had arrived there safely in the summer of 1940 due to the heroism of Aristides de Sousa Mendes, the Portuguese

consul in Bordeaux, France who, in a nine-day fit of sustained religious stubbornness and professional honour, personally granted 30,000 visas to Jewish and other refugees. Within days, De Sousa Mendes was immediately recalled to Lisbon, drummed out of the diplomatic corps, levied an enormous fine that stripped him of his life's savings and reduced him and his large family to penury. He spent his final days in Lisbon eating at a soup kitchen run by a Jewish organization. He died in 1954; and then, thirty years later he was voted by the Portuguese people as one of the three most admired, important persons of their nation in the 20th century

Many of the de Sousa Mendes refugees in and near Lisbon became the Unitarians' clients for the next four years. The Sharps joined up with Rev. Charles Joy sent by the USC to man the Lisbon office. Together, and with a hand-picked staff, their task was to reassure frayed nerves, secure housing, food, and immigration paper work for more than 9000 refugees directly in their care. They patiently negotiated with government officials and shipping companies to secure passage to any nation that would accept their refugee clients—notoriously difficult work in those dark days—all the while trying to keep police and security authorities at bay from rounding up and deporting foreign refugees.

At the same time, while all this is going on Rev. Joy and the Sharps opened a medical clinic and refugee offices in Marseille. From that clinic, staffed by Drs. Rene Zimmer and Zina Minor, the USC offered medical care, again to thousands of refugees scattered throughout the city and in the nearby countryside. Many of them were Jews hiding out underground from the French police who, if apprehended, would deport them to concentration camps in the North. One of those persons saved by the clinic was a young Jewish Czech woman who collapsed in the streets from stress and hunger. Nursed back to health in the clinic, and then smuggled to Portugal via rail on an underground Marseille to Lisbon route devised by the Sharps, Lotta

Hitschmanova vowed that if she survived, she would work for the Unitarian Service Committee for the rest of her life.

The clinic and the Marseille office also coordinated relief services in the internment camps in Rivesaltes and Gurs, France where tens of thousands of refugees were imprisoned. That work included installing windows in camp huts, setting up kindergartens for hundreds of interned children, providing medical care and distributing food, bedding, medicines and clothing to people in desperate need.

Also in Marseille, the Sharps and Rev. Joy began an extraordinary collaboration with the American journalist Varian Fry of the Emergency Rescue Committee. Fry's agenda in France was to rescue hundreds of Europe's most esteemed artists, writers and other cultural figures on French police and Gestapo arrest lists. Those people included Hannah Arendt, Marc Chagall, Andre Breton, Marcel Duchamp, Arthur Koestler, Lion Feuchtwanger, Claude Levis-Strauss, Victor Serge, Nobel science laureate Otto Meyerhold, Heinrich Mann and Thomas Mann's family, and Alma Mahler, wife of the deceased composer Gustav Mahler, who showed up with a suitcase packed with her late husband's handwritten symphony manuscripts.

Working with Fry, the Unitarians devised secret routes—both by rail and on foot—to successfully convey these eminent refugees and several thousand other less renowned people like us—individuals, children holding teddy bears, families—getting them out of Occupied France, across hostile Spanish territory and on to neutral Portugal, and from there, with visas and passports supplied by the Lisbon USC office, to sanctuary in North and South America.

The work entailed tracking down sympathetic local officials, the liberal distribution of bribes to border and customs guards, and securing French, Spanish and Portuguese guides willing to brave the possibility of arrest and prison; the Sharps themselves, sometimes in

disguise, guided numerous individuals and groups to safety. This kind of work entailed mastering details like an underground tunnel, in one French border city, running directly from a nearby hotel to a railway platform to help their charges elude detection. It took knowing that there was a ladder propped up against the back of a cemetery wall in a small French border town. Refugees, coached and aided by clergy, showed up dressed as mourners, then slipped away from funerals as inconspicuously as they could, climbed the ladder and over the wall where, on the other side they were met by guides who conveyed them to the nearby Spanish border. I won't soon forget the picture of other groups of refugees, supplied by locals with working clothes and pruning hooks, masquerading as grape harvesters, who were then guided through vineyards toward a low ridge topped with seven pine trees beyond which were intrepid guides and a route to freedom.

700 Czech soldiers stranded by the Occupation were spirited out of Marseille by the Sharps, with help from the YMCA. Can you see them, Martha and Waitstill, down in the harbour, literally buying fishing boats and paying crews to boatlift these Allied troops out of France to North Africa and freedom from imprisonment? Or Martha, working with midwives in the Southern French city of Pau working to identify children most in need of milk and food from the shipments by rail that the USC was able to purchase and send to that city overwhelmed by refugees. Over 800 infants and children were saved by this shipment of milk and food from the USC in the desperate summer of 1940. And Martha Sharp, again, battling the bureaucrats of four nations, secured exit visas and safe passage for 29 children she personally accompanied to the US and safety. Most of those children were Jews, some were orphans, others sent along by desperate parents who, in parting, knew that they would probably never be re-united again.

I could tell you these stories all day. Many of them are tragic, including the callousness of US State Department officials and those of many other nations who wanted no part in saving the lives of people at the end of their tether, officials all the way up to the White House and our own House of Commons who turned a deaf ear to the entreaties of the Unitarian Service Committee and other refugee relief organizations in those dark years of World War.

Several thousand lives saved; we still don't, and will probably never know, the number. Not many, it could be said, when compared to the tens of millions who were killed between 1939-45. But then again, it says in the Tractate Sanhedrin 37a in the Talmud:

“Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world.”

There's no way I could have done what Martha and Waitstill Sharp and others did during those difficult years. I'm not made of that kind of stuff. I would have been one of those seventeen Unitarian ministers who, in 1939, would have said no to the invitation to leave my children and family to travel East to Europe, into the very maw of hell on earth, while everyone else was desperately trying to get out of there.

That said, there are things I, and we, can do to assist *now* in the work of refugee relief. We don't have to be heroes, but we don't have to stand idly by. First, we could write a short letter to our MPs and support the efforts of our Federal government to make Canada a welcome refuge for those seeking a haven in this heartless world of ours. If you don't know who your MP is, tell me, and I'll find out. Second, we can continue to generously support the work of our own Refugee Committee here at UCV—a multicultural committee whose members hail from our congregation and from Jewish, Quaker and Islamic communities. In the past year alone, and

working with other refugee organizations, they have sponsored and help settle Palestinian, Syrian, Tibetan, and Eritrean refugees in Vancouver. That group includes Muslims, Roman Catholics, Baptists, Tibetan Buddhists and Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. Going back to 70s, our Refugee Committee has rendered extraordinary service to this congregation and the scores of individuals and families they have helped welcome to this country. I encourage all of us to continue to generously support their work through financial support, lunches, thrift sales, joining the committee, and responding to their appeals for volunteer help as need arises. They're doing an enormous amount of work behind the scenes; they are upholding the spirit of our tradition and making our religion real. I think we owe them all our sincere thanks and support.

In closing, I repeat the words from the Talmud: *“Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world.”*

May we, as best we can, be numbered among those who help save worlds, one life at a time.

For an excellent, in-depth account of Unitarian refugee work during the Second World War, see: Susan Elisabeth Subak: *Rescue and Flight: American Relief Workers Who Defied the Nazis*, University of Nebraska Press, 2010)