Fertile Question: *How could I be a true hero?*

Core Content Area 2: Heroes and cultural identity

**TOPIC 2.2 Honouring and remembering heroes**

Depthing Understanding: **Yad Vashem-Righteous Among the Nations**

In this lesson students will explore how the Righteous Among the Nations are remembered at Yad Vashem in Israel.

**Teachers: Before You Start!**

1. Read the background information provided with this lesson and decide the best way for your class to work with the information.

2. Familiarise yourself with the other resources.

**For students to explore how the Righteous Among the Nations are remembered at Yad Vashem, select from the following activities:**

1. **Investigate what it means to be called Righteous Among the Nations.**
   
   a. Examine information about Yad Vashem and the Righteous Among the Nations.
      
      i. Read the document in *Useful Resources, Righteous Among the Nations* either individually or as a class and answer the following questions: What is the Holocaust and when did it occur? What is meant by the terms collaborated, perpetrators, bystanders, rescuers, deportation and expropriation? What were some of the dangers faced by the rescuers? What sort of people became rescuers and what were their motivations? What is Yad Vashem? Who are considered to be Righteous Among the Nations? How are the Righteous Among the Nations honoured and remembered?
      
      ii. Take a Virtual tour of the "Avenue of the Righteous Among the Nations" and the "Garden of the Righteous", at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem to see how the Righteous are commemorated at the site. List the ways that the Righteous have been remembered and honoured at Yad Vashem.
      
      iii. Choose a story of one of the Righteous from the list on the Yad Vashem website. You can search by country or by topic, eg "Rescue of Children", "The Ultimate Price" and "Churches". Read the story and answer the following questions: Who was the saviour and who was saved? Why did this person feel obligated to save Jews? What were the risks involved in saving the lives of the Jews in this particular story? How do you think this person acted as a hero in the situation they faced?
      
      iv. Create Peoplescapes of the Righteous in the stories identifying their name and their heroic characteristics. As a whole class or in small groups analyse the Peoplescapes by identifying similarities and differences between the characteristics and the contexts.

   b. **Reflect on the courage needed to have been a rescuer of Jews during the Holocaust.**
      
      i. In small groups, read the poem "The Righteous" by Hayim Chefer in *Useful Resources* and answer the following questions:
          
          a) What information can be gained from the poem about its author?
          
          b) What struggles does the poet say these ‘Righteous’ faced?
          
          c) What words or phrases does the poet use to show the difficult circumstances the ‘Righteous’ experienced? e.g. “Sea of hate”.
      
      ii. Reflect on the stories you have heard from the Holocaust. Imagine yourself in the place of the author of the poem and your possible response/s to the question – “Could I have done the same if I was in their place?”
      
      iii. Create a visual response to the poem or the stories of the Righteous that you have heard.
Righteous Among the Nations (adapted from http://yadvashem.org/)

During the Holocaust, attitudes towards the Jewish people mostly ranged from indifference to hostility. People watched as their former neighbours were rounded up and killed. Some people collaborated with the perpetrators, and many people benefited from the *expropriation* (the politically motivated and forceful confiscation and redistribution of private property outside the common law) of the Jews' property. There was a small minority though who showed extraordinary courage and sought to uphold human values. These are now known as the “Righteous Among the Nations”.

Most rescuers started off as bystanders but became rescuers. In many cases this happened when they were confronted with the deportation or the killing of the Jews. Some had stood by in the early stages of persecution, when the rights of Jews were restricted and their property was confiscated, but there was a point when they decided to act. There was a boundary they were not willing to cross.

Faced with Jews knocking on their door, bystanders needed to make an instant decision. This was usually an instinctive human gesture, taken on the spur of the moment and only then followed by a moral choice. Often it was a gradual process, with the rescuers becoming increasingly involved in helping the persecuted Jews. Agreeing to hide someone during a raid or roundup, to provide shelter for a day or two until something else could be found, could evolve into a rescue that lasted months and years.

The price that rescuers had to pay for their actions differed from one country to another. In Eastern Europe, the Germans executed not only the people who sheltered Jews, but their entire family as well. Notices warning the population against helping the Jews were posted everywhere. As a consequence, rescuers and the rescued lived under constant fear of being caught. There was always the danger that they would be handed in by neighbours or collaborators. This increased the risk and made it more difficult for ordinary people to defy the conventions and rules.

Most rescuers were ordinary people. Some acted out of political, ideological or religious convictions; others were not idealists, but merely human beings who cared about the people around them. In many cases they never planned to become rescuers and were totally unprepared for the moment in which they had to make such a far-reaching decision. They were ordinary human beings, and it is precisely their humanity that touches us and should serve as a model.

**Rescue stories**

The stories of the rescuers are a shining example of the most selfless sacrifice. Those people who rescued Jews in places like German-occupied Poland were alone, and often deprived of their pre-war means of livelihood. Many were expelled from their farms, factories, businesses, offices and even homes, and most of them lived in dire poverty. They found it virtually impossible to earn a living. They were under no legal obligation to risk their own lives and, even more, those of their families and neighbours, for the Jewish people who came to them. Their help most often lasted days and nights, weeks, months, even years, always in secret, and always risking discovery.
To save one Jewish person sometimes several dozens of people risked their lives.

“If I were to fail, to turn away and thus permit the death of this person whom I could perhaps save, only because I was in danger myself, I would be committing the same error as the entire German people ...The people who ordered and implemented these horrible deeds were not so many. But infinitely many others let it happen, because they lacked the courage to prevent them.”

From the testimony of Dr. Ella Lingens, Righteous Among the Nations, who was a prisoner in Auschwitz.

**Remembering and Commemorating**

*Yad Vashem*, the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Jerusalem, has recognized Righteous among the Nations from 44 different countries and nationalities. There are Christians from all denominations and churches, Muslims and agnostics; men and women of all ages. They come from all walks of life. There are highly educated people as well as illiterate peasants; public figures as well as people from society’s margins; city dwellers and farmers from the remotest corners of Europe; university professors, teachers, physicians, clergy, nuns, diplomats, simple workers, servants, resistance fighters, policemen, peasants, fishermen, a zoo director, a circus owner, and many more..

**The Criteria for Righteous Among the Nations**

The term “Righteous Among the Nations” (*Chasidei Umot HaOlam*) was taken from traditional Jewish literature. The lawmakers took the existing term of ‘Righteous’ and added new meaning to it. The *Yad Vashem Law* went on to characterize the “Righteous Among the Nations” as those who not only saved Jews but risked their lives in doing so. This was to become the criterion for awarding the title. The basic conditions for granting the title are:

1. Active involvement of the rescuer in saving one or several Jews from the threat of death or deportation to death camps
2. Risk to the rescuer’s life, liberty or position.
3. The initial motivation being the intention to help persecuted Jews: i.e. not for payment or any other reward such as religious conversion of the saved person, adoption of a child, etc.
4. The existence of testimony of those who were helped or at least unequivocal documentation establishing the nature of the rescue and its circumstances.

Persons recognized as a “Righteous Among the Nations” are awarded a specially minted medal and a certificate of honour – both bearing their name – as well as the privilege of their names being added to the Wall of Honour in the Garden of the Righteous at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.
The Righteous by Hayim Chefer

I hear this title and it makes me think
About the people who saved me.
I ask and ask, "Oh, my dear God,
Could I have done the same thing?"
In a sea of hate stood my home,
Could I shelter a foreign son in my home?
Would I be willing along with my family
Constantly be threatened by certain evil?
Sleepless dark nights watching out for noise
Hearing footsteps of certain evil.
Would I be able to understand every sign,
Would I be ready for this, could I walk like this
Among those who would betray
Not one day, not one week, but so many years!

There a suspicious neighbour, there a look,
and here a sound –
For that one -- warm -- brotherly clasping of my hand ...
Not having any pension -- not having anything for this.
Because a person to person must be a people.
Because a people comes at this time through —
So I ask you and ask you once more –
Could I have done the same if I was in their place?

It was they who went to war every day.
It was they who made the world a place for me.
It was they, the pillars, the Righteous brother,
Who this day this world is founded by.
For your courage, and for your warm extended hand
In front of you, the Righteous, I bow.

Other images courtesy of Yad Vashem and Vanessa Hall, Education Officer, Brisbane Catholic Education.