

# Celebrating the Work of Martha and Waitstill Sharp



*We realized that we were living at the front lines against Nazism. We had never felt such an urge to act before it was too late — to serve these brave people, to help them save their world and our own.*

**Martha Sharp**

reflecting on the Sharps' arrival in Prague, Czechoslovakia, on February 23, 1939, shortly before the Nazis marched into the city



*The original design of the flaming chalice for the Unitarian Service Committee as designed by Hans Deutsch in 1941 (top), and the UUSC chalice design today (bottom).*

**THE FLAMING CHALICE**, the official seal of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee and symbol of Unitarian Universalism worldwide, was created by an Austrian artist, Hans Deutsch, in 1941. Its story is intertwined with that of the early Unitarian Service Committee (USC), as Deutsch, a Jewish refugee from Paris who escaped to Portugal, worked for the newly founded USC for six months before leaving for the United States.

In Lisbon, Deutsch met the Rev. Charles Joy, director of the USC's Lisbon office, who was deeply involved in helping refugees escape. As a new and unknown organization, the USC needed a visual identity to function as an easily recognizable symbol of those working on the side of the refugees.

Joy thus asked Deutsch to create a design for the USC's papers "to make them look official, to give dignity and importance to them, and at the same time to symbolize the spirit of our work.... When a document may keep a man out of jail, give him standing with governments and police, it is important that it look important." Deutsch's flaming chalice design was made into a seal for papers and a badge for agents moving refugees to freedom.

The symbol of a flaming chalice was born in a time of oppression but stood for hope and service. To this day, this symbol represents faith in action — and the good work of people like Martha and Waitstill Sharp, as well as those who worked with and followed them, who have dedicated their lives to helping others in need.



*The flaming chalice became the symbol of the Unitarian Service Committee and was used on signs and badges for identification, as seen in this circa 1942 photo in a medical clinic in the Hotel Bompard internment camp.*

“ I found a taxi in the early darkness, and noting that the driver had a companion in the front seat, gave an address which was near but not actually the one which was my destination. The ‘extra cargo’ tried to engage me in conversation, but I parried his questions. Arriving at the place, I hastily paid the driver [and walked] around the corner, hiding in the first doorway to watch and see whether I was being followed. The ‘companion’ came around the same corner, looked up the street, down an alley or two and then walked along the street. The driver honked. My heart raced as I realized that my follower must be a Gestapo agent. I flattened myself against the entrance and, in the darkness, he walked right by and then headed back toward the cab. ”

**THIS DRAMATIC DESCRIPTION** of the prelude to a daring mission could have come from a spy novel or a movie script. But in fact it is part of the story of Martha Sharp, who, in Prague, Czechoslovakia, on March 15, 1939 — the day the German army marched into that city — secretly guided an anti-Nazi leader to asylum at the British Embassy. Martha’s husband, the Rev. Waitstill Sharp, had also volunteered to help an important anti-Nazi activist escape that day. Both succeeded in those and numerous other highly dangerous missions, and the story of this period of their lives reads more like a work of fiction than real life.

Yet the heroic accomplishments of this couple from Wellesley, Massachusetts — sometimes against extreme odds — were very real, especially for the many hundreds of adults and children they helped escape from Nazi persecution during World War II.

The Sharps’ daring acts of witness and bravery are also part of the story of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC), whose forerunner, the Unitarian Service Committee, they helped found. Now the Sharps’ courage and humanity will be celebrated worldwide, as the couple have been honored by Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority in Israel, as Righteous Among the Nations.



*Waitstill and Martha Sharp sent this photograph as a postcard from Prague, Czechoslovakia, to Robert Dexter, a colleague from the American Unitarian Association who had visited Czechoslovakia some months before. Wrote Waitstill on July 10, 1939, “We send this as evidence of our well-being. ... Going out to London and Paris on 18th & will write you from there our opinion of future work here.”*

## Background



*German troops returning from Poland and France in 1940 march through the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. The Nazis invaded Prague on March 15, 1939, while the Sharps were working there.*

Jews, and other refugees from Germany and Austria pouring into the Unitarian church in Prague. Robert Dexter, director of the American Unitarian Association's (AUA) Department of Social Relations, recalled, "I knew there would be untold suffering in the Nazi-occupied territories, and I was equally convinced that something should be done about it by those of us who felt we had an obligation to aid our friends who had been so betrayed."

## Bearing Witness

**WITHIN A WEEK OF THE MUNICH TREATY**, the AUA passed a resolution to explore a relief enterprise for refugees in Czechoslovakia. Shortly thereafter, Dexter sailed for Europe to assess the situation, which led to his recommendation that the Unitarians focus on the needs of unregistered refugees — especially Jews and anti-Nazi Germans from the Sudetenland, Austria, and Germany. Armed with more than \$40,000 raised to support the newly formed Commission for Service in Czechoslovakia, the AUA selected the Rev. Waitstill Sharp, a young minister from the

**IN THE UNITED STATES**, the time between the world wars was one of disillusionment and difficulty for religious liberals. Both Unitarian and Universalist values were needed in an era characterized by isolation and intolerance. Thus, when the denominational magazines *Christian Leader* (Universalist) and *Christian Register* (Unitarian) spoke out about the plight of the Jews in Germany after the rise of Hitler and editorialized against fascism in Spain and Italy, they were taking an unusually prophetic stand.

The capitulation at Munich in 1938, which gave Hitler part of Czechoslovakia, only added to the flow of political dissidents,

Wellesley Hills Unitarian church, and his wife, Martha, an experienced social worker, to bear Unitarian witness to the horror that would only later come to be known as the Holocaust.

Compelled by their faith and their moral outrage, the Sharps made the difficult decision to accept the charge, leaving their two small children in the care of close friends in the congregation. On February 4, 1939, they set sail for Europe. Stopping several times en route to Prague, the Sharps set up a network of volunteers and agencies that assisted them over the next six months as they traveled in and out of Prague registering refugees, bringing applicants to the attention of embassies, finding the scholarships or employment necessary for emigration, securing releases from prisons, and arranging travel to safer destinations in London, Paris, or Geneva. They faced enormous bureaucratic hurdles at every step.

The Sharps' work was divided, as it would be for the following six years, between relief and emigration assistance. Much of their activity involved individual cases, but on one occasion Martha escorted 35 refugees — among them journalists, political leaders, and two children whose parents had committed suicide — to England, and on another arranged for a group of children to leave in cooperation with the organization British Kinderaktion.

On the night the Nazis entered Prague in early March 1939, the Sharps burned their notes and kept no further records. Their personal peril increased when the Gestapo closed down their office at the end of July, but the Sharps were committed to completing their mission. Waitstill left Prague in



*The Sharps set sail for Europe from New York on February 4, 1939.*

*If we were to serve even a fraction of the most acute human need, we were in duty bound to carry on two lines of work: first, emergency relief measures, chiefly refugee feeding in Prague; second, emigration case work with those individuals who could escape in time to save their lives and souls in a foreign land.*

**Waitstill Sharp**

recalling the focus of the Sharps' mission after the Nazis invaded Prague



*The Gurs transit camp, as seen from the water tower circa 1940, housed thousands of Jewish and other refugees. It was one of several internment camps in France.*

early August for a conference in Switzerland but was prevented from returning to Czechoslovakia. Martha departed from Prague alone a week later, learning only afterward that she had escaped capture by the Gestapo by one day. Reunited in Paris, the couple sailed together for the United States at the end of August.

## Fighting Oppression

**AFTER THE SHARPS' DEPARTURE** from Europe, the AUA's Robert Dexter and his wife, Elisabeth, embarked on a 10-country fact-finding mission that would lead to the establishment of the Unitarian Service Committee (USC). Neither the Sharps nor the Dexters understood then that the doors that were open to refugees at that moment were beginning to close.

In the first five years after Hitler's ascent in 1933, an estimated 150,000 refugees from Germany emigrated to North and South America, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. But between Pearl Harbor and the end of World War II, only 21,000 refugees were allowed into the United States, which was less than 10 percent of the quota for those years.

*There just aren't words to express my feeling of admiration and deep respect for what you two people have done and for what you are. My dream for the USC centers on you, and it is a very big dream.*

### **Frederick May Eliot, May 1940**

Eliot, president of the AUA, asked the Sharps to go to France to continue their work with refugees, this time under the auspices of the newly formed USC.

Thus, the Sharps, the Dexters, and Unitarian minister Charles Joy — considered the five founding staff members of the Unitarian Service Committee — struggled mightily to overcome the U.S. and other governments' reluctance to admit refugees from the Nazi terror. Each delay, they knew, would exact a dramatic human cost.

## Saving Lives

**IN MAY 1940**, Frederick May Eliot, president of the AUA, wrote to Waitstill and Martha Sharp in Wellesley asking them to go to France as the Unitarian Service Committee's "ambassadors extraordinary." The Sharps agreed once again to carry out this important work. But before they could implement their plan to establish an office in Paris, the city fell to the Nazis. The couple then set up the first USC office in neutral Portugal, where throughout the war Lisbon remained the last hope for refugees trying to find passage to safer ports.

During these years, the Sharps, the Dexters, and Joy each staffed the USC's Lisbon office and, in collaboration with many other individuals and organizations, helped several thousand people escape. The Unitarians focused on political refugees — people who had spoken out against Nazism in Germany or fascism in Spain and whom other organizations were reluctant to help — as well as academics, scientists, and intellectuals.

Among those the Sharps directly helped escape was the internationally known German Jewish novelist Lion Feuchtwanger. Waitstill Sharp himself sailed with Feuchtwanger and his wife, Marta, to New York — a trip ultimately made possible when Martha Sharp gave up her ticket to ensure passage for Feuchtwanger.

The Unitarians also opened an office in Marseilles, which was the primary port in unoccupied France from which refugees were fleeing. During this time, USC staff worked closely with Varian Fry, a U.S. citizen sent to Europe by the new Emergency Rescue Committee (the forerunner of today's International Rescue Committee) in New York. Fry asked Waitstill Sharp to be the ERC's representative in Lisbon, and he himself established the ERC office in Marseilles. In the early years of the war, the USC



*One of the Sharps' first accomplishments after arriving in Lisbon in 1940 was to arrange for a trainload of milk to be shipped to Marseilles and then to a distribution center in Pau, France. Because the Nazis were requisitioning all fresh milk for their own needs, babies and young children were at great risk. To this day in Pau there is a room in the city hall dedicated to memorializing that milk delivery, and the city awarded its Medal of Honor posthumously to Martha Sharp (second from right, above) in 2003.*



*The six Theis sisters were among the children aided by Martha Sharp. They arrived in New York on December 23, 1940, with several other refugee children.*

focused on securing U.S. visas and procuring the many travel documents needed by each refugee to cross borders. They also assisted some of Fry's clients in negotiating the French-Spanish border, or more commonly, with travel arrangements or a small stipend when they reached Lisbon.

One of Martha Sharp's earliest projects in Marseilles focused on helping children emigrate, and she doggedly battled numerous bureaucracies to secure exit visas, transit permits, and identity papers for 29 children and 10 adults. She sailed from Lisbon with two of the children and four adults in early December 1940; the others followed on a second voyage. One of several Jewish children

on this trip was 14-year-old Eva Rosemary Feigl, who, in 2005 — 65 years later — still remembered arriving at the Port of New York on December 23, 1940, and finding Martha Sharp there at the dock to meet them. It was "a day I will never forget," she said.

## Righteous Among the Nations

**THE FOUNDERS OF THE UNITARIAN SERVICE COMMITTEE** neither wrote their memoirs nor were they widely recognized for their courageous work. But Artemis Joukowsky III, Waitstill and Martha Sharp's grandson, remembers hearing the stories of their daring exploits when he visited them as a young boy. It is through his perseverance, and that of his brother Michael Joukowsky, in uncovering their grandparents' history in archives in Boston, New York, Washington D.C., and London that it became clear that the Sharps were indeed Righteous Among the Nations.

In June 2006, in the Garden of the Righteous at Yad Vashem in Israel, the names of Martha Sharp and Waitstill Sharp will be engraved among those of the nearly 21,000 other individuals who have been awarded the title of Righteous Among the

Nations. Martha Sharp is the first woman from the United States to be so honored; the Sharps are only the second and third U.S. citizens to receive this title.

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Even before the world realized the true nature and horrors of the Holocaust, the Sharps and their Unitarian colleagues saw human suffering and knew that people were in danger. Inspired by their faith, they rose to the occasion. They didn't ask, "Will we succeed?" or "What will we accomplish?" They ignored risks to their own safety and their very lives and did what they could in the face of overwhelming odds, living out their belief in the worth and dignity of every person.

Let the recognition of their heroism stand as a renewed call to action. Let us join together and rise up to help those who face persecution today. Let us vow to serve this century's brave, oppressed people and help them save their world and our own.

*UUSC hopes the story of the Sharps' selfless acts of courage will inspire others to look into their own hearts and ask, "Who are the Righteous Among the Nations today? Who will take risks on behalf of unknown others facing genocide in this century? Who will speak out and bear witness to the inhumanity of this era?"*



*Thousands of refugees lined up at the U.S. consulate in Marseilles, as in this photo from late 1941. Many USC clients were able to secure documentation for travel to the United States through the efforts of the Sharps.*

**Charlie Clements, 2005**

President, Unitarian Universalist Service Committee



*The Diamant triplets, shown here with Martha Sharp, arrived in the United States on December 23, 1940, on the same ship, SS Excambion, as the Theis sisters shown on page 6. Originally from Vienna, the Diamant sisters are still alive.*

## Yad Vashem

Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, was established in Israel in 1953. Yad Vashem is "entrusted with documenting the history of the Jewish people during the Holocaust period, preserving the memory and story of each of the six million victims, and imparting the legacy of the Holocaust for generations to come through its archives, library, school, museums, and recognition of the Righteous Among the Nations."

In 1963, Yad Vashem began a project to grant the title of Righteous Among the Nations to "non-Jews who acted according to the most noble principles of humanity by risking their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust." As of January 2005, 20,757 people had been recognized as Righteous Among the Nations.

*We can choose between hating our neighbors or feeling kindly toward them. We can avenge or forgive. We can participate in political life; we can also leave politics to the demagogues. We can help the suffering, the ill, the unfortunate; we can let them die. We can encourage the search for truth and free expression of ideas or we can join in the clamor for suppression of all with which we disagree. We can work toward a united world community, or we can work for American dominion or isolation. These are all fateful choices, and it is our duty to choose.*

### **The Rev. Howard Brooks, 1949**

Rev. Brooks worked for the USC in Marseilles and Lisbon in the early 1940s and was associate director of the USC from 1944 to 1949.

This remembrance has drawn heavily from *Roots and Visions*, by Ghanda Di Figlia (1990), published on the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee; *To Try the Soul's Strength: A Woman's Participation in the History of Her Time*, by Ghanda Di Figlia (unpublished manuscript, 1998); and "At the Gates of Catastrophe: Unitarian Rescue 1940–1944," by Susan Subak (unpublished manuscript, 2005). UUSC gratefully acknowledges these authors' fine work and the assistance of Susan Subak, as well as the support of the Joukowsky family.

**Cover background photo:** In 1940, Martha Sharp escorted 29 children to Lisbon, from where they sailed to safety in the United States. The children all wore tan berets so they could be easily identified.

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