

Courage and Sacrifice: The Story of Waitstill and Martha Sharp

Sermon delivered on 10/23/2016 by Polly Peterson

[Opening Words] *There are stars whose radiance is visible on Earth though they have long been extinct. There are people whose brilliance continues to light the world though they are no longer among the living. These lights are particularly bright when the night is dark. They light the way for humankind.* –Hannah Szenes (1921–1944)

[Sermon] About a month ago, on September 20, a documentary called *Defying the Nazis: The Sharps' War* aired on PBS. Perhaps you watched it. The words you have just heard members of our congregation speak are from that story. If you missed it on TV, we now own a copy of the DVD, so you'll have a chance to see it here. *The Sharps' War* has special meaning for Unitarian Universalists because it is the story of a Unitarian minister and his wife who were sent on a secret mission to Europe by the American Unitarian Association.

The story of their courageous work began on a Sunday night in January, 1939, when Waitstill Sharp received a telephone call at his home in Wellesley, Massachusetts. His friend Everett Baker wanted to meet with him to discuss a mission to help save refugees from the Sudetenland, a region of Czechoslovakia that had recently been annexed by Hitler's Germany.

Imagine yourself in a similar situation. You are sitting comfortably at home when the phone rings. It is a friend and colleague asking you to give up your comfortable life in order to go abroad to help refugees escaping from Libya,

Yemen, Syria. Imagine that the work you are asked to do is very dangerous, but you will have a chance to save hundreds of lives. Would you go?

So far, 17 ministers had turned Everett Baker down. None had wished to take the risk.

Waitstill Sharp and his wife Martha had both been involved in social justice work for years, and in recent weeks, they had been leading discussion groups about the Nazi threat. Before she married Waitstill, Martha had worked as a social worker at Chicago's Hull House, a settlement house founded in the 19th century to help immigrants from Europe adjust to American life. Waitstill, too, had done community outreach beyond his congregation. They were motivated to serve. But they were also the parents of two young children.

Sensing Waitstill's willingness to go, but Martha's reluctance, Everett Baker said, "If you would be willing to go for just a few months, to get the program started, you could give the Commission the momentum it needs. Meanwhile, we could look for replacements."

Waitstill said, yes, they would do it. He insisted that Martha come, too, and she had little choice but to agree. On February 4, they sailed for England, leaving their 6-year-old son and two-year-old daughter at the parsonage under the care of family and friends.

In England they learned the skills necessary for clandestine operations—skills such as how to create false documents and how to send communications without exposing their mission. Finally, on February 23, they arrived in Prague.

Martha later wrote, “What madness has brought us, a Unitarian minister and his wife, from the easy security and pleasant life living in Wellesley Hills, [...] to come to this tense, politically torn country in the heart of Europe? [...] Perhaps it was our free thinking, democratic New England Unitarianism that now tied us to the Czechs [...] As Unitarians we felt a strong kinship with the Czechs when we attended their church services and heard more about their ancient leader, Jan Hus, and his battle for liberal religion, humanitarianism, and freedom of ideas.”

Thousands of Czech people were desperate for exit visas. The Sharps were faced with the difficult decision of which people to save. They had to match refugees in Prague with jobs abroad. It was a difficult task made more difficult because the Gestapo monitored their mail. Documents and communications had to be carried out of the country secretly by people who had permission to travel. One day, when Martha was taking papers to the airport, she saw a Kindertransport for the first time. The Kindertransport was a program for taking Jewish children out of Nazi-occupied countries to safety abroad. The sight of these parents and children saying farewell, quite possibly never to see each other again, affected her deeply.

The Sharps had been in Prague less than a month when all of sudden, Czechoslovakia fell entirely under German occupation. As the tanks rolled in, their work suddenly became much more dangerous and more urgent. The Sharps quickly destroyed documents in the furnace. They were now on the front lines against the Nazis. They knew that their own lives were at risk, as well as the well-being of their children back home, but they also knew they could not leave. The lives they could save outweighed all other concerns.

Meanwhile, in the United States, anti-immigrant sentiments and deep anti-Semitism were causing requests for safe haven to be ignored. In June, a ship filled with Jewish refugees was turned away from Cuba, the United States, and Canada. It was sent back to Europe, where more than 200 of its passengers were murdered in death camps. In a world that did not welcome Europe's Jewish refugees, it took enormous ingenuity and courage on the part of people like the Sharps to find paths to safety for as many people as they could.

Soon their work became too dangerous, the threat too great. The Sharps escaped to London and left for the United States. While they were crossing the Atlantic, Britain declared war with Germany. Their ship became a war target. It was a terrifying crossing.

Back in the United States, they faced a startling contrast. People were watching ball games, planning social events, seldom thinking about the war. The Sharps reunited with their children and readjusted to the comforts of home. But the situation in Europe became worse than ever. Refugees they had settled in France were now in danger again. The AUA requested that the Sharps return to Europe. Martha said no. She would not leave her children again. But Waitstill announced in church that they were going – and as a dutiful minister's wife, she went.

They had been assigned to the Unitarian office in Paris, but France fell to the Nazis, too, and they went to Portugal instead. While Waitstill

accomplished some daring missions getting refugees out of France, Martha made the welfare of children her primary mission. Waitstill took a group of refugees by ship to America, but Martha stayed behind, working to feed and rescue children. Eventually she accompanied a group of 27 refugee children and 10 adults to the United States. She arrived home in December, 1940.

All through the remaining war years, the Sharps continued to help refugees, but their marriage was coming apart. Martha had outgrown the confines of her role as a minister's wife. She wanted to make a bigger impact. When the war ended, she ran for Congress. She did not win the election, but she continued to work for social justice and was appointed to a job in the Truman administration. The Sharps eventually divorced. They had succeeded in saving hundreds of imperiled political dissidents and Jewish refugees fleeing the Nazi occupation in Europe, but they had sacrificed their marriage in the process, and their children never fully recovered from the sense of abandonment they felt.

It is unsettling to recognize that the most important work we do might come at so high a personal cost.

Defying the Nazis was the brainchild of Martha and Waitstill's grandson, Artemis Joukowsky, who partnered with Ken Burns to make the film. He didn't know his grandparents when he was young, but when he was in the 9th grade, he had to interview a person of moral courage for a school assignment. His mother suggested he interview his grandmother, and what he learned during that interview changed his life. He became determined to understand and tell the remarkable story of the Sharps' role in WWII. After Martha's death in 1999, he found boxes containing original documents

pertaining to more than 100 of the rescues, and he was able to track down some of the people she had saved to learn more. He also found letters that Martha and Waitstill had written to each other. Martha remarried and became very active in Jewish causes, but she never boasted of her earlier work. Waitstill, who also remarried, remained in the ministry, and didn't speak about his rescue work.

This reluctance to speak of wartime heroism is not uncommon. A chasm exists between two disparate worlds—the world of deprivation and ever-present danger and death in a war zone and the safe and ordinary world most of us know here at home. It is a chasm hard to bridge. But even more, people like Waitstill Sharp are haunted by the memory of all that was not possible—the memory of thousands upon thousands of lives NOT saved, visions of inhumanity and injustice too painful to relive. Despite having saved many lives, his wartime work left him regretful and sad.

So now the question remains: Would you go? What risks would you take to help people in danger? It is a difficult question to answer.

Today's refugee crisis is the worst since WWII. In fact, some people are already calling it WWIII. Children are starving, cities are being reduced to rubble, families are escaping to Europe in shabby, overcrowded boats, choosing the chance that they might survive the crossing rather than the certainty that they will die if they stay. I know there are brave people like the Sharps out there helping where they can. But where will these millions of people live, and who will help them find new livelihoods abroad?

Our president has pledged to resettle 10,000 Syrian refugees in the US, but some governors have pledged to block them from entering their states. So far, we have resettled only a small number of them.

The plight of refugee children is of particular interest to me because one of my mother's friends, a woman named Ruth David, was saved from the Nazis by the Kindertransport in 1939. Ruth's family had felt comfortable and fully German, with many friends and all the normal activities of German village life, until Hitler came to power in 1933. Over a short span of years, she lost her right to go to school, play with non-Jewish children, or feel safe as she walked to her uncle's house. As the situation became more and more impossible, her parents told 10-year-old Ruth that she would be going to England. It was devastating for her to lose her family in this way. Her parents died at Auschwitz, and her siblings were scattered far and wide throughout the world.

Through Ruth, I have become acutely aware that saving a life is only the very first step. What comes next is so very crucial. Ruth was a lonely and traumatized child, struggling to learn a new language and find a place for herself in a country where she felt she was not wanted.

Eventually she married and had children, but she didn't talk to them about her childhood. At their urging, she finally wrote a memoir in 2003. The introduction to her book is a letter to her son and daughter.

"Because mine was not a normal childhood, I never wished to burden you with my sadness as you were growing up," she wrote. "Therefore I told you little. Because you are thoughtful and sensitive, you did not persist in

questioning me. Perhaps we were at fault in this suppression. I now feel I should have spoken more; this would have helped me to come to terms with feelings of hatred and resentment. It might have been good for you and others to hear from me how my life was. My childhood was not unusual for my time in history; what was unusual was my good fortune. One-and-a-half million children like me are not able to indulge in their memoirs today. I was not gassed, burnt, shot, or used for medical experiments. Nor did I have to suffocate under the weight of the dead in a massacre or mass grave. [...] Through the human goodness and the vision of some, and with the practical help of others, my life was saved. As a child I found it difficult to be grateful for this. I yearned to be with my family, wherever they were, whatever their danger. I did not want to be in a distant land among strangers. As I grew up, I recognized my good fortune but wondered, why me? Why was I saved when so many were not?”

Mindful of today’s worldwide refugee crisis, Artemis Joukowsky has said he hopes the story of his grandparents will inspire people to action. “I feel very gratified as a Unitarian that this story is going to be told,” he said. He envisions communities of people who dare—people who take a pledge that they will take risks for others. “Let’s use the film to take more risks to help people who are in danger,” he says.

I hope this may happen. But I’m going to make a more modest proposal. Let’s pledge to be more aware—let’s pay attention to the plight of refugees. And let’s pledge to be kind. Fifty-one refugees, displaced by war and terrorism from all parts of the world, are scheduled to resettle in Northampton in the coming year. Is there anything, large or small, that we

can do to ease their sadness? As I wondered about ways to help them feel welcome, the words of Fred Rogers, America's very best neighbor, came to mind. We need to let them know that we **want** to be their neighbor and that we like them just the way they are.

Never doubt that your smile, your words of encouragement, your willingness to take the time to really listen, may be the light that helps a displaced person see a happier future here in this foreign land.