

# Responding to Refugees: Lessons from the Past

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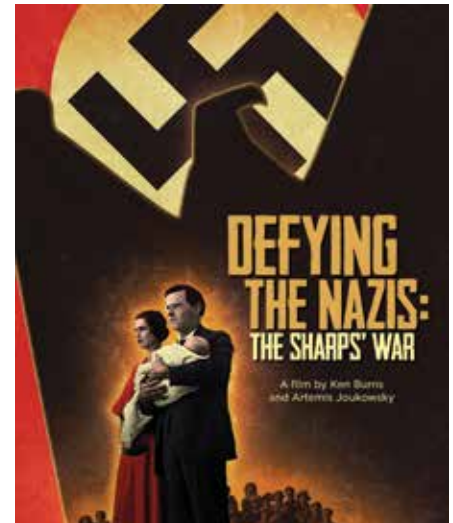
Major documentary films don't often have their genesis in high school homework assignments, but in many ways the making of *Defying the Nazis: The Sharps' War*, a new film from Ken Burns coming to PBS in September, began 40 years ago, when co-director Artemis Joukowsky was in the ninth grade. Joukowsky writes,

It was 1976, and I was a freshman attending the Allen-Stevenson School in New York City. One afternoon I casually mentioned to my mother that John Pariseau, my history and social studies teacher, had assigned a class report on the subject of moral courage. He said our papers were to be built around a personal interview. My mother just as casually suggested that I talk with her parents about their adventures in Europe during World War II. "They played an important role in rescuing Jews and other people from the Nazis," she said. "Their story would make an interesting paper." What? I was momentarily speechless—rare for me. "Mummy Mummy and Grandpa Sharp?" I blurted. "You're kidding me!" "Not at all," she answered. "Go talk to them. They'll tell you."<sup>1</sup>

Over the course of several conversations with his grandparents, Joukowsky learned their story. In 1939, Waitstill Sharp was serving as the minister of the Unitarian congregation in Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts, while Martha, his wife, assisted in the parish and took care of their two young children, aged 3 and 8. The mood in the United States at the time was generally isolationist, but American

Unitarians—members of a liberal, free-thinking faith with roots in Christianity—had fellow congregations in Europe who alerted them to the danger and suffering caused by Nazi Germany's growing totalitarianism, aggression, and persecution. In January 1939, Unitarian church leaders asked the Sharps to undertake a relief mission in Czechoslovakia. Over 250,000 refugees had already fled to Prague from the German Reich, and local Unitarians had pleaded for help, urging "Don't send money—send Americans." Boston Unitarian leaders had already approached 17 other couples, and all had refused. Europe seemed balanced on the edge of war, and it was simply too dangerous.

The Sharps decided to accept the mission. Just weeks later, having found neighbors who would look after their children, they sailed for Europe. Their work in Prague would include assessing the scope of the crisis—which only grew once German troops occupied the whole of Czechoslovakia shortly after their arrival—as well as providing food, shelter and support, and ultimately helping hundreds of people to escape the Reich or to get out of Europe entirely. The vulnerable included not only Jews, but also communists, dissidents, cultural figures, and Czech political leaders who were opposed to Nazism. The Sharps had to master the intricacies of emigration regulations and activate a network of contacts who could provide sponsorship, job offers, and financial support to refugees. They also learned skills more common to spies than to clergy, including how to keep sensitive records in code, how to avoid being followed, and even how to launder money. Waitstill later



said, "I knew it was illegal, but I did it because I had no other choice. I was beyond the pale of civilization. I owed no ethics to anybody. I owed no honesty to anybody at all if I could save imperiled human lives."<sup>2</sup>

The Sharps carried on for nearly eight months even as the dangers of their work increased, returning to the United States only when they learned that they faced imminent arrest by the Gestapo. They were on board a ship sailing to New York in September 1939 when World War II was declared. But just months later, the Sharps were back in Europe for another tour of duty, this time in Vichy France. They spent most of 1940 continuing their relief and rescue mission. Waitstill worked with Varian Fry to bring prominent intellectual and cultural figures to the United States, and Martha led a children's emigration project that allowed 27 children from dissident or Jewish families to escape to the United States. The Sharps were among a small group of individuals and organizations that defied American public opinion and national policy in their efforts to assist refugees.

Joukowsky learned the outlines of this exceptional story for his "moral courage" report—which earned him "the only A I ever received in high school"—but uncovering the full depth and complexity of his grandparents'

work would be a journey of many years. He assembled a vast archive of Martha and Waitstill's papers, tracked down the children Martha rescued, interviewed scholars of the period, and won recognition for his grandparents as Righteous Among the Nations at Yad Vashem—the highest distinction accorded by the state of Israel to non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during World War II. The Sharps are two of only five Americans to be so honored. Joukowsky also grew determined to share his grandparents' story on film, ultimately involving famed documentarian Ken Burns in the project, as well as actor Tom Hanks, who provides the voice of Waitstill Sharp. With narration drawn entirely from the Sharps' own journals and letters, the film explores the risks the Sharps took, the commitments that motivated and sustained them, and the stories of those they helped.

In telling his grandparents' story, Joukowsky writes, "My purpose, naturally, would be to learn from the example of Martha and Waitstill and their lives, but I also wanted to rescue their example as an object lesson for a new age."<sup>3</sup> Yet when he began this project, Joukowsky could not have predicted how powerfully *Defying the Nazis* would resonate at a moment when Europe is facing its largest refugee crisis since World War II. The International Rescue Committee estimated that conflicts in the Middle East had sent more than one million refugees and migrants to Europe by the end of 2015.<sup>4</sup> In scenes that have evoked dark memories of the 1930s and 1940s, refugees crowd European train platforms and wait in grim reception camps, as nations around the world struggle to respond to the humanitarian emergency. For many viewers, *Defying the Nazis* will be a lens that sharpens our perspective on the dilemmas—and the opportunities—that both individuals and nations face in the present, even as it also presents a previously unknown story from the past.

Director Ken Burns called the Sharps' tale "a truly American story,"<sup>5</sup> and the film offers teachers of U.S. history an



Martha Sharp presents a train load of powdered milk to the Mayor of Pau, France. 1940

opportunity to enrich and complicate students' thinking about the United States' response to Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. All teachers of the period will appreciate the way the film presents this complex history as the story of real people making difficult choices and illuminates the interplay of individuals, institutions, and governments. Accompanying educational resources created by Facing History and Ourselves provide deeper historical context, offer entry points for reflecting on how individuals and nations define their responsibility to people in need, and invite students to explore the attitudes, skills, and other qualities that allow an individual to make a difference. For Ken Burns, "Who are we?" is the animating question in the work I do, and this is a story that woke me up."<sup>6</sup> He writes,

It is clear that nothing gets done except by individual acts of courage, individual initiative. When someone risks his or her own life to save a stranger's life, you get a sense of what real heroism is...Through their existential commitments and

actions, Waitstill and Martha help us understand our own fundamental obligation to one another. Martha once said that neither she nor Waitstill saw themselves as anything but ordinary, that anyone else in their circumstances would have acted in the same way. It's hard for me to believe that's true, but their remarkable story shows us why we should at least try.<sup>7</sup>

#### Notes

1. Artemis Joukowsky, *Defying the Nazis: The Sharps War* (Boston: Beacon Press 2016), xi.
2. *Ibid.*, 83.
3. *Ibid.*, xiv.
4. International Rescue Committee, "Europe Marks 1 million Refugees," <https://www.rescue-uk.org/international-news/europe-marks-1-million-refugees>.
5. Ken Burns, Preface to Artemis Joukowsky, *Defying the Nazis: The Sharps War* (Boston: Beacon Press 2016), viii.
6. Film trailer/promo at <http://www.defyingthenazis.org/>
7. Burns, Preface to Artemis Joukowsky, *Defying the Nazis: The Sharps War* ix.

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The 90-minute film, *Defying the Nazis*, premieres on September 20 at 9PM EDT (check local listings) on PBS and will be available to stream on pbs.org for two weeks after broadcast. Facing History and Ourselves has created a series of lessons using streaming video clips from the film, available at [facinghistory.org/defying-nazis](http://facinghistory.org/defying-nazis). Additional information about the film and the accompanying book is available at [defyingthenazis.org](http://defyingthenazis.org).