

3.13 Young Women Who Made A Difference

In 2011 the United Nations General Assembly declared October 11 the “International Day of the Girl Child” to recognize the unique challenges girls still faced in the 21st century. Girls and young women have been activists and change agents throughout history. Joan of Arc was only 18 years old in 1430 when she led French forces in defense of the city of Orléans. These five women were between the ages of 11 and 20 when they put their own lives at risk, becoming young women who made a difference.

A) Truus and Freddi Oversteegen: Dutch Anti-Nazi Resistance Fighters

Sources: Ellis Jonker, “Freddi and Truus: Sisters in Arms,” in *Under Fire: Women and World War II* (E. Buchheim and R. Futselaar, ed., 2014:141-151); Harrison Smith, “Freddie Oversteegen, Dutch resistance fighter who killed Nazis through seduction, dies at 92,” *Washington Post*, September 12, 2018.

Questions

1. Who were Truus and Freddi Oversteegen?
2. Why did they join the Dutch anti-Nazi resistance?
3. How did the Oversteegen sisters fight the Nazi occupation of The Netherlands?
4. As teenagers, the Oversteegen sisters made some difficult choices. Do you think you would have made similar choices in a similar situation? Explain.



Freddi Oversteegen's Identity Card

As teenagers in German-occupied The Netherlands, Truus and Freddi Oversteegen were part of the Dutch Resistance. In May 1940 Germany invaded The Netherlands, a neutral country that offered refuge to many Jews fleeing Nazi anti-Semitism. Germany occupied the country until May 1945 when it was finally defeated by allied forces.

Truus and Freddi grew up in a politically active “leftist” family. Their mother was a communist who instilled a sense of social justice and activism in her children. They made dolls for children who were suffering in Spain during its civil war and volunteered with International Red Aid, a communist version of the Red Cross that helped political prisoners around the world.

After the German invasion, Truus and Freddi's mother opened their home as a hiding place for a family of Jewish refugees, but the refugees were moved because of concern that the Oversteegen's were suspected of anti-German sentiments. They later learned that the Jewish family was captured, deported, and murdered by the Germans.

When the Oversteegen sisters were recruited as saboteurs and assassins, Freddi was fourteen years old and Truus was sixteen. According to Truus, “Freddi was so very young, she also looked young, like a twelve year old – she had braids. The Germans never saw her as an adult.”

The initial assignment for the Oversteegen sisters was to distribute leaflets designed to rally resistance to the Nazi-occupation. They roamed the streets of Haarlem, their home town in northern Holland, on bicycles with guns hidden in the basket. Sometimes they hid in the woods as lookouts during resistance operations.

The leaflets they distributed bore slogans like “The Netherlands have to be free!” and “Long Live the Queen!” When Germany posted signs to recruit Dutch workers for German factories, the sisters would glue notices over them saying: “Don’t go to Germany! For every Dutch man working in Germany, a German man will go to the front!’ And then we’d hurry off, on our bikes.”

As the war and German occupation continued, the sisters, along with Hannie Schaft, a law student who was a little older than they were, began to sabotage bridges and railroad lines with dynamite. Sometimes they met German soldiers or Dutch collaborators in local taverns or bars, encouraged them to “go for a stroll” in the forest with them, and then assassinated them. They also smuggled Jewish children out of concentration camps and took them to safety.

According to Truus, Freddi was the first member of their resistance group to shoot and kill someone. “It was tragic and very difficult and we cried about it afterwards,” Truus said. “We did not feel it suited us — it never suits anybody, unless they are real criminals . . . One loses everything. It poisons the beautiful things in life.”

Many years after the war was over, Freddi Oversteegen told an interviewer that the sisters felt they had no choice but to become assassins. “It was a necessary evil, killing those who betrayed the good people.” But she also reported that the experience continued to haunt her dreams long after the war ended.

After the war ended, Truus became an artist. She painted and made sculptures inspired by her years with the resistance. She also wrote a popular memoir, “Not Then, Not Now, Not Ever.”

Freddi coped with the traumas of the war by getting married and raising a family. In 2014, the Dutch Prime Minister awarded the sisters the Mobilization War Cross, a military honor for service in World War II.

B) Mardini Sisters: Syrian Refugees Who Help Other Refugees Survive

Source: Richard Perez-Pena, “She Was Called a Hero for Helping Fellow Refugees. Doing So Got Her Arrested,” *New York Times*, September 28, 2018, A10.

Questions

1. Who are Sarah and Yusra Mardini?
2. Why were the Mardini sisters honored as heroes?
3. How did Sarah Mardini go from being a hero to a “criminal”?
4. In your opinion, are the Mardini sisters heroes? Explain.



Sarah Mardini, age twenty, and her seventeen-year old sister Yusra were competitive swimmers living in Syria. During the summer of 2015, their family decided they had to flee from their war-torn country. The Mardini sisters found themselves on an inflatable dinghy with eighteen other people trying to cross the Aegean Sea from Turkey to the Greek island of Lesbos. The boat’s motor died, it began to fill it with water, and it looked like everybody on board would die. At that point the Mardini sisters climber overboard into heavy seas and swam along side the dinghy guiding the boat for several hours until its passengers were safe in Greece.

Because of their efforts, in 2016 Germany awarded the Mardini sisters as heroes and Yusra participated in the Summer Olympics in Brazil as a member of a refugee Olympic team. Yusra competed in both the 100-meter freestyle and butterfly events. Other members of the nine-member Olympic team were refugees from Syria, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Ethiopia. Yusra wrote a book about her experiences, it is being made into a movie, and became a “good-will” ambassador for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

After surviving their own ordeal, Sarah and Yusra Mardini committed themselves to aiding other refugees. Sarah attended college in Germany and worked with a migrant aid group in Greece until she was arrested in August 2018 by the Greek police and charged with espionage, violation of state secrecy laws, and criminal enterprise. If she is tried and convicted she could be sentenced to decades in prison. The Greek government charges that Sarah and other members of the refugee aid group used radios, telescopes, and WhatsApp message groups to help refugees evade the Greek Coast Guard while making the difficult passage from Turkey to Greece.

C) Malala Yousafzai, Student, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate

Sources: <https://www.huffingtonpost.com/author/malala-yousafzai>; <https://www.malala.org/>

Malala Yousafzai was born in 1997 and grew up in the Swat Valley in northern Pakistan. When she was eleven years old, she wrote an anonymous blog for the BBC describing life in her area of Pakistan under Taliban rule and her beliefs on the importance of education for girls. In response to her activism, in October 2012, Malala was shot by Taliban fighters while traveling home from school. Because of her bravery and dedication to education for girls, Malala received the Nobel Peace Prize and in 2013 Time magazine named her one of “The 100 Most Influential People in the World.” Malala also received Pakistan’s first National Youth Peace Prize, the International Children’s Peace Prize, and Amnesty International’s Ambassador of Conscience award. She is the author of the international bestseller *I am Malala*.



Malala’s Nobel Peace Prize Speech (Excerpts)

“This award is not just for me. It is for those forgotten children who want education. It is for those frightened children who want peace. It is for those voiceless children who want change. I am here to stand up for their rights, to raise their voice... it is not time to pity them. It is not time to pity them. It is time to take action so it becomes the last time, the last time, so it becomes the last time that we see a child deprived of education . . .”

Education is one of the blessings of life—and one of its necessities. That has been my experience during the 17 years of my life. In my paradise home, Swat, I always loved learning and discovering new things. I remember when my friends and I would decorate our hands with henna on special occasions. And instead of drawing flowers and patterns we would paint our hands with mathematical formulas and equations. We had a thirst for education, we had a thirst for education because our future was right there in that classroom..

But things did not remain the same . . . I was just ten that more than 400 schools were destroyed. Women were flogged. People were killed. And our beautiful dreams turned into nightmares. Education went from being a right to being a crime. Girls were stopped from going to school. When my world suddenly changed, my priorities changed too. I had two options. One was to remain silent and wait to be killed. And the second was to speak up and then be killed. I chose the second one. I decided to speak up.

Questions

1. Who is Malala Yousafzai?
2. Why was she honored as a hero?
3. In your opinion, is Malala Yousafzai a hero? Explain.