On February 28, 1944, German authorities raided an apartment at 19 Rue Franklin in Brussels and arrested 10 Allied aviators and six members of the Dutch-Paris Escape Line. The raid was part of a round-up of Dutch-Paris members in Belgium and France. The Germans’ goal was to disrupt what some historians consider to have been the most efficient and effective escape line for Jews, resisters, and downed Allied aviators fleeing Nazi-occupied territories during World War II.

How the Nazis knew where these pilots were hiding is a still a mystery. However, it may not be a mystery much longer. The story of the Dutch-Paris Escape Line is being uncovered by World War II scholar Megan Koreman, who in 2008 was commissioned by the John Henry Weidner Foundation to write the complete history of Dutch-Paris. This book will be the first fully documented account of how this World War II underground escape line was organized, managed, and supported from the summer of 1942 to the late summer of 1944.

The Dutch-Paris story will also reveal how a young Dutch Seventh-day Adventist textile merchant living in Lyon, France, acted on his religious beliefs to become one of the most-decorated and honored heroes of the war. The manner in which this young man organized more than 300 individuals and families to rescue a thousand Jews, aviators, and other fugitives is a powerful example of human beings acting unselfishly and at great risk to themselves and their families.

The Dutch-Paris Escape Line evolved from a desire by John Henry Weidner, the son of a Seventh-day Adventist pastor, to assist Dutch nationals interned in French refugee camps. His visits to the refugee camps began in 1940. By 1942, his work had expanded into more serious resistance work as he...
was asked to protect individuals and families who were being pursued by the Nazis. He soon established safe routes for Dutch Jews, resisters, and other refugees to safety in Switzerland or Spain. Weidner spoke French, Dutch, and English and, as a natural organizer, was perfectly suited to oversee the complex escape route that ran through the Netherlands, Belgium, and France.

Weidner’s skills as a rescuer quickly caught the attention of the Dutch military attaché General W. A. van Tricht in Bern and Willem Visser’t Hooft, general secretary of the World Council of Churches in Geneva. With their financial support, Weidner began moving more fugitives as well as microfilms with information needed by the Dutch government-in-exile in London.

Weidner and the Dutch-Paris Line participants did not discriminate among those coming to them for protection. They helped anyone needing hiding or support, regardless of their ability to cover expenses or personal, religious, and political associations. The Dutch-Paris organization itself was composed of hundreds of courageous men and women of various faiths and of many nationalities.

Although the line transported about 150 Allied aviators to safety, its primary mission was to protect fleeing Jews. This is because Jews were the ones in the greatest danger from the Nazis. Their only crime was having been labeled by the Nazis and by anti-Semites in their home countries as enemies of the state. In addition to Jews, the line helped young Dutch Christian men who were trying to avoid compulsory labor service established by the Nazis to replace Germans recruited for the army as well as those who wanted to join the Allied armies. The line was also used by resisters who were keeping one step ahead of the Gestapo, including such notables as Charles de Gaulle’s brother, Xavier, and the future Nobel Prize winner Gerrit Jan van Heuven Goedhart, aka “Colonel Blake.” Among the rescued Dutch pilots, few were as famous as Bram van der Stok, who escaped from Stalag Luft III, popularized in the movie The Great Escape.

Weidner paid a price for his resistance leadership. Under constant surveillance by the Gestapo, he was captured twice during his underground activities. In 1943, for example, Weidner was arrested on a mountain trail near Collonges and taken to Gestapo headquarters in Lyon, where he was brutalized with electric and water torture before being released. The next year, he was arrested by the French Milice (paramilitary force), at a café in Toulouse, ironically because he was mistaken for someone else. He was imprisoned, tortured, and scheduled for execution by the Germans the next morning. His escape was clever, harrowing, and heroic.

Weidner’s family members also paid a price. In an attempt to get Weidner to turn himself in, the Gestapo arrested his sister, Gabrielle, on February 26, 1944, while she was attending Sabbath school in Paris. According to Dr. Koreman, “Gabrielle appears to have been part of the courier system involving the Meyer brothers [Adventist pastors], which circulated mail and packages between the occupied and unoccupied zones in France. She also prepared and sent packages to Jews in internment camps for John Weidner and sheltered fugitives coming through Paris. She was a point of contact for the various agents in Dutch-Paris, meaning that she kept and delivered messages for them. She also kept microfilms that one courier had dropped off for another.” In one of the more agonizing decisions of his life, John Weidner was forced to choose between continuing his rescue work or surrendering himself in exchange for Gabrielle’s freedom. He chose to continue his work. Gabrielle Weidner died in the Ravensbrück concentration camp in northern Germany on February 15, 1945.

How did the line complete so many rescues before being shut down by the Nazis? In large part, the Dutch-Paris Line succeeded because of its flexibility and complexity. The Line was a clandestine “community of rescuers” that involved hundreds of people, both helpers and those seeking to escape: Dutch, Belgian, French, Swiss, Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, Allied airmen, students, innkeepers, diplomats, and children. The line utilized hundreds of waypoints: train stations, hotels, homes, mountain huts, and border crossings. The individual line members were bound together by shared resentment of Nazi occupation and brutality, a commitment to discretion, their shared risk, and compas-
sion toward those whose lives were in danger.

The Dutch-Paris Line also avoided the Gestapo by altering its routes as necessary. If one branch was threatened, the Dutch-Paris Line joined forces with similar but smaller groups such as the Comet or Burgundy lines, which used different routes to the same destinations.

John Weidner’s recruiting of the Collonges College faculty and staff offers another insight into how he reduced the line’s exposure to the Gestapo. A number of them were friends of John Weidner: including Roger Fasnacht, Jean and Anna Zurcher, Frederic Charpiot, Jean Lavanchy, and Raymond Meyer and Paul Meyer. Some of them accompanied refugees from Lyon, Annecy, Annemasse, and St. Julien to the seminary campus near the Swiss border, after which Jean Zurcher took them into Switzerland. Zurcher was both a teacher at Collonges and a student at Geneva University. As such, he had a pass that allowed him to cross the border daily and sometimes many times in a single day. This made it possible for Zurcher to guide some of the refugees into Switzerland using false identification documents that he had obtained in Switzerland. If papers were not available, he crossed the border where he knew the Swiss guards, many of whom helped the refugees get through the barbed-wire fences.

As with other line members, the Collonges rescuers opened their homes to people trying to escape, providing them with food and clothing despite the prospect that their actions could result in the Nazis closing the seminary, confiscating the property, and jailing its faculty, or worse.

The Collonges faculty who assisted Weidner were unaware of other Collonges faculty and staff who were also serving the Dutch-Paris Line. Thus, if one faculty member was arrested, he or she could not provide the names of other Collonges faculty members involved with the line.

To this day, memories of World War II resistance activities are vivid at Collonges. Now called the Campus Adventiste du Salève, the college recently paid tribute to those faculty and staff who assisted Weidner some 70 years ago. At a 2006 event, Jewish leaders, community leaders, faculty, staff, and students recalled the unselfish and principled behavior of the World War II faculty. The college administration memorialized Weidner and the Dutch-Paris line by dedicating a plaque listing the college’s Dutch-Paris participants.

With the liberation of Holland and Belgium in 1945 and the return of the Dutch government to The Hague, the flow of refugees subsided. The Dutch Army then recruited Weidner to identify Dutch citizens living in France who had collaborated with the Nazis. Weidner pursued these collaborators with the same zeal and courage that he had shown in managing the Dutch-Paris Line.

In 1955, he immigrated to the U.S., where he and his second wife, Naomi, established a chain of health-food stores in southern California and attempted, without much success, to evade the spotlight.

A quiet, modest man, Weidner was “discovered” in 1963 by Haskell Lazare, director of the Southern California branch of the American Jewish Congress, who recognized Weidner as the man who, since the war ended, had been honored by President Truman with the United States Medal of Freedom and had received the Military Order of the British Empire from King George VI, the Order of Orange-Nassau from the Dutch Queen Wilhelmina, and both the Croix de Guerre and the Médaille de la Résistance from the French government.

Lazare contacted the State of Israel, which entered Weidner’s name among the Heroes in the Golden Book of Jerusalem and in 1978 recognized Weidner as one of the Righteous Among the Nations. In 1993, John Weidner was honored at the opening of the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C.

Looking back over his wartime activities, John Weidner reflected on why he subjected himself to this ordeal. He said, “During our lives, each of us faces a choice to think only about ourselves, to get as much as we can for ourselves, or to think about others, to serve, to be helpful to those in need. I believe it is
important to develop our hearts, to have a heart open to the suffering of others.”

The John Henry Weidner Foundation is continuing to honor the courage and commitment of John Weidner and all the men and women of the Dutch-Paris Line by commissioning a detailed history of their heroism. Using newly opened archival files in the Netherlands, Belgium, and France, Dr. Koreman is discovering how Weidner and his assistants recruited trustworthy line members and how they produced false identification papers and transit visas necessary for a journey across five countries. Koreman will describe how Weidner and his “lieutenants” developed a system to provide food, clothing, contacts, code words, and instructions to the refugees specifically designed to avoid detection by the many Nazi and Vichy security organizations.

During Koreman’s six months of research in various European archives, she found many World War II files on Dutch-Paris operations that were recently declassified. At the Red Cross archives in The Hague, for example, she discovered a gold mine of information on Dutch-Paris participants who were arrested and sent to concentration camps in Germany and Poland. These files and discoveries at other European archives were supplemented by interviews with surviving line members. Further information came from researchers and World War II scholars who contacted her at her blog (http://www.dutchparisblog.com).

John Weidner died in California in 1994. One of the speakers at his funeral, Rabbi Harold Schulweis, founding chairman of the Foundation to Sustain Righteous Christians, spoke of the meaning of the Weidner experience and the practical role it can play in our community:

“Confronting goodness may be more painfully challenging than confronting evil. It is one thing to study and condemn the sadistic behavior of a Klaus Barbie but quite another to study and acknowledge the rescue behavior of a John Weidner. The latter presents us with a hard mirror.

“Would I rescue a pregnant woman, a hungry or homeless child, an aged, frightened couple—provide them with food and shelter, dispose of their refuse, and care for them in their sickness—knowing that doing so might bring disaster upon my family from Nazi pursuers and their informers?

“The rescuer’s goodness shakes the foundations of my claims to virtue. The behavior of flesh-and-blood rescuers compels me to think long and hard about my own goodness and to imaginatively rehearse my choices in analogous situations.”

Ordinary Heroes: The Dutch-Paris Line is scheduled to go to the publishers this fall. You can play a role in its completion. Should you have information about those who served on or were rescued by the line, please contact Dr. Megan Koreman at her blog site (http://www.dutchparisblog.com). You can also learn more about the Weidner Foundation, the Weidner Archives, and the Weidner Chapters at U.S. colleges and universities by going to the foundation Website at http://www.weidnerfoundation.org.

The entire 100-box Weidner Ar-
chives collection is now housed at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University in California, which contains one of the world’s largest collections of World War I and World War II documents and is an important resource for historians and researchers.

Finally, you can hear and see John Weidner in a 1967 documentary produced by Dutch documentarian Dick Verkijk by going to YouTube and typing in *Meer dan 1080.*

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**Kurt Ganter, Ed.D., is the Executive Director of The John Henry Weidner Foundation. He has served as an educator and health-care executive. He lives in Phippsburg, Maine.**

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**REFERENCES**

1. Information on the role of Collonges in the Dutch-Paris Escape Line from the January 2011 Monthly Report to the Weidner Foundation Board of Directors by Megan Koreman.


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**For Additional Reading**


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**JAE Continuing Education Credit Options**

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