Each year during our Yom Kippur musaf service, the tradition is to add a section on Martyrs of the past. The traditional texts include the stories of Rabbis who defied Roman oppressors in the second century. All of those stories are about men whose lives come to violent ends.

From Roman persecutions after the destruction of the Second temple, to the Jews of Europe killed as Crusaders marched toward Jerusalem to take the Holy City from Muslim hands to the Inquisitions of Spain and Portugal and Italy where Jews were given the choice of conversion or death to the Chelmnicki massacres of the 17th century in regions of Poland and Ukraine, Jews have sadly been the object of persecution, violence and martyrdom. Many have died as testament to their faith in God and in their attempts to preserve Jewish life.

Today we mark the life of a forgotten heroine. Maria Schmolka is responsible for saving thousands of young Jewish lives. Born to an assimilated Prague Jewish family, Schmolka married late and was widowed early. She was a diabetic whose own health was precarious. Maria was known to have great organizational talent. As a Social Democrate she was involved both in social work and high-level politics. During a trip to Palestine she became an avid Zionist.

Schmolka stepped up her work on behalf of refugees in 1938 as the Germans began accessing land and oppressing minorities. She was the sole Czech representative on the League of Nations Commission for Refugees. Czechoslovakia had originally welcomed Jewish refugees but soon became suspicious and viewed these foreigners as Nazi agents. With the annexation of Czech territory, and countries refusing asylum to refugees, relief organizations were unable to cope with the humanitarian crisis. Schmolka collected evidence and pleaded with foreign dignitaries to accept refugees. No free country was willing to take Jewish refugees but for Great Britain and then only unaccompanied children. With the help of British contacts, Schmolka was able to bring Sir Nicholas Winton to Prague. Together they devised the now famous Kindertransport, saving thousands of Jewish children from extermination.

While Schmolka had opportunities to accept asylum abroad she remained in Czechoslovakia until March 1939 when the Nazis completed their annexation. Imprisoned and then tortured, Schmolka was then sent by Adolf Eichmann to Paris to demand more efficient Jewish emigration. Schmolka made her way to London but died 6 months later of a heart attack at the age of 46.

Maria Schmolka features prominently among the women and men who stood up to fascism and brutality. Her weapons were kindness, selflessness, and an appeal to humanity. While she died in a free country, she sacrificed all that she had to make a future safe for others.