

GROWING *Together*

ISSN: 1481-9465

WHOEVER SAVES ONE LIFE ...

“For the first 50 years after the Holocaust, survivors bore witness to evil, brutality and bestiality,” says someone who escaped the fate of 6,000,000 other Jews because he was hidden by his nanny. “Now is the time for our generation to bear witness to goodness. Each one of us is living proof that even in that hell called the Holocaust, there was goodness, there was kindness, and there was love and compassion.”

One example of such goodness is that of Irene Opdyke, a Polish nursing student raised in a devout Roman Catholic home. After several harrowing adventures in the early years of World War 2, she was put to work in a laundry operated by the German army near Ternopol (now in the Ukraine). There she had oversight of 300 Jewish women from a nearby camp that supplied forced labourers. Irene’s supervisor was a German major with a delicate stomach. By preparing special meals for him, she was able to gain special treatment for her Jewish charges. This included permission for them and their families to stay at the laundry whenever the trains arrived to be loaded for the death camps.

In 1943, when the camp was scheduled for “liquidation,” Irene urged her workers to flee. She personally saved nine Jewish women by hiding them – in the basement of the major’s private residence! When he discovered what she was doing, he agreed to let the women stay, on the condition that Irene would become his mistress. She consented. Later, when she confessed to her priest about this arrangement, he insisted she put an end to the affair. Reflecting the morals and prejudices of the times, he advised her it was better to hand the women over to the Nazis – and certain death – than to continue the illicit relationship. This provoked a crisis of faith for Irene, but she soon decided to risk not only her life but also her soul in order to save the lives of the women in her care.



Once, when the Gestapo came to investigate reports of hidden Jews, Irene boldly refused them entry, saying that not even they could search the home of German army officer. As the Soviet army approached, Irene and other civil workers in the area were ordered to move closer to Germany. Instead, she hid in the basement with the Jewish women as long as she could, then fled with them to the surrounding forest. There she was able to arrange for the women to be cared for until they were liberated in March, 1944. Meanwhile, Irene joined the Polish underground. After the war, she emigrated to California, and in 1982, she was included by Yad Vashem, Israel’s official Holocaust museum and archive, as one of the Righteous Among the Nations. She died in 2003, at the age of 85.

Six million Jews were murdered by the Nazi regime, a reality of history that is almost beyond imagining. In the midst of that horror, tens of thousands were saved by people of faith like Irene Opdyke, who risked their lives for the sake of others. According to an ancient Jewish saying, “Whoever saves one life, it is as if he saved the entire world.”



GROWING TOGETHER is a series of five Sunday bulletin inserts for the ecumenical education of Christ’s faithful.

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