

ERes for HONORS 290C: Philosophy and the Holocaust

"Irene Opdyke," in Gay Boock and Malka Drucker, Rescuers: Portraits of Moral Courage in the Holocaust (Holmes & Meyer, 1992): 192-196

IRENE OPDYKE

Irene Opdyke was once an interior decorator, and her stylish townhouse in Lomita, California, reflects her attention to her surroundings. Her attractive appearance, Zsa Zsa Gabor accent, and sense of drama make her a popular and compelling speaker about the Holocaust. Furthermore, her story of rescue in Warsaw would make a riveting film, and the ending, where she saved all eighteen Jews, is one of success. Unlike some rescuers, she is not shy about talking about her deeds, feeling it is her responsibility to tell children about the price of hate and the courage of a few.

I never talked about what I did during the war, and I still wouldn't be talking about it if I hadn't read that article in the newspaper in the early seventies that said the Holocaust didn't happen. That started my Polish blood cooking and I said, "Well, I have to speak out." And that's the reason I put my time, my heart, and my feelings into speaking about the war, to so many groups, all over the country.

If someone would say I had to go back to do the same things to be able to help people, I'd do it without question. I was born in Poland in 1921. My family was Catholic, and my mother was such a strong influence. She didn't have much schooling but she was smart, and she never turned away anyone from her doorstep. We five girls were always bringing in animals which needed help!

I always wanted to be a nurse, to help people. In 1939, when I was eighteen years old, I was 200 miles from home in central Poland in nursing school. I joined the Polish army with other nurses. One night we were captured by Russian soldiers who had also invaded Poland. Three soldiers beat me and the next thing I knew I was on a truck to a Russian hospital. Later I was able to return to Poland on an exchange between Russia and Poland, and I began working in a munitions factory

that supplied the German front. One day, because of the fumes, I fainted at the feet of a German major. I looked German because I was blond and blue-eyed, but when he asked me if I was German, I said I wasn't. He liked that I was honest, so he gave me a job working in the kitchen and serving meals to German soldiers.

One day I was running an errand and I found myself in the ghetto. There were all kinds of people, pregnant women, children screaming "Mama, Mama!" Then I saw a woman with an infant in her arms. With one movement of his hand, the SS man pulled the baby away and threw it to the ground. I could not understand. But later on I realized that God gave us free will to be good or bad. So I asked God for forgiveness and said if the opportunity arrived I would help these people.



Irene Gut Opdyke as a nursing student at the age of eighteen, 1939.



Irene with some of the Jews who worked in the Gestapo laundry room.



Soon the German major was transferred to another Polish town, Ternapol, and he took me with him. There I met twelve Jewish people who worked in the Gestapo laundry room. We became friends. They had been people of means, businessmen and women, a medical student, a lawyer, a nurse. I thought we were all the same: we were all in trouble and the Germans were our enemy. One night

when I was serving dinner I heard the German officers making plans to raid the ghetto. The Gestapo man said, "Herr Major, Thursday or Friday don't count on the Jews to come to work." I realized that was the day they would make the raid on the barracks. I started getting the message to the laundry room and they got the word around. Many people were able to escape.

Then one day I heard them making plans to wipe out the whole ghetto in Ternapol, and I knew this meant my friends in the laundry room would be killed. I didn't know what to do. Then a miracle happened. About three days later the major called me and said, "I have a villa and I want you to be my housekeeper." I knew then that could be the place I would hide the Jews.

They stayed in the attic when the major was downstairs and in the cellar when he was upstairs. Then we had a real problem to deal with. One couple was expecting a baby and we knew the child would cry and make too much noise. They said they'd give up the child, but I said, "Ida, please, wait, don't do anything. We'll see—you'll be free." Then one day in the middle of the marketplace they hanged a Polish couple with their two children and a Jewish couple with their little child. They forced us to stay and watch to see what happened because there were signs on every street corner saying they would do that if you helped Jews. I ran home to my friends. Three of my friends were in the kitchen and I was so shaken that I forgot to leave my key in the lock after I locked the door. This was the way I would protect us from the major coming in unexpectedly. We were talking and all of a sudden the major was standing in the kitchen. He was looking from one to another, trembling, and he didn't say one word. He went to his library.

I ran out after him and he was screaming at me, "I trusted you. How could you do this behind my back, in my own house? How? Why?" I cried. I said, "They are my friends." I was kissing his hands, holding his knees. He said, "No! I am an old man. I have to go now. I'll give you my decision when I return." After a few hours he returned and said he'd help me for a price. He would keep my secret but I had to be his—and willingly, too. There was no other way. I won't tell you it was easy. Not only because he was an old man, but I still remembered the Russians raping me. But I knew there were twelve lives depending on me. This went on for several months until the Germans started losing.

Everyone left the villa and we fled into the forest. We had a radio and we knew the front was coming. Then the Russians came and we were all free. And on May 4,

1944, a little boy was born in freedom! That was my payment for whatever hell I went through—seeing that little boy. His name was Roman Heller.

After the war I joined the Polish Partisans hoping to find my family, but instead I was arrested by the Russians. Some Jewish friends helped me escape to Germany. I went to a Jewish displaced-persons camp with all the Jews who were homeless after the war. From that camp



Clara Bauer, Same Rosen, and Agie Marx with Irene in Cracow, 1947.

they helped people settle in Allied countries. A group of men came from the United Nations to the camp. One was American and he interviewed me and said America would be proud to have me. So I came here in 1949, to the United States, alone. I didn't know a word of English. I worked in a union shop, sewing, and then I met a Polish-Jewish woman who gave me a job, and we've been friends ever since. One day in New York, a man came up to me on the street and he said, "Irene, you don't remember me, but you brought me shoes in the forest." There were so many of these people I didn't really know.

So for five years I lived alone, working. Then one day I went to the U.N. to have lunch in the cafeteria and I started talking with a man and all of a sudden I realized he was the man who had interviewed me. At that time he was a widower. He asked me to go out to dinner, six weeks later we were married, and two years later, in 1957, we had a daughter.

I was busy working as an interior designer, and raising my daughter, and traveling a lot with my husband, but I still missed my family in Poland. One night my husband brought a woman home for dinner and she stayed for fourteen years. Her name was Vivian Bennett. She was a wonderful lady and she was going blind. She had no one to help her through eye surgery so I told her she could stay with me. She spent her last \$1,500 on the surgery, and from then on I took care of her. She was so intelligent; there wasn't a subject she didn't know about. She was like my mother. I learned so much from her. Yes, she needed me, but I needed her, too. She helped me start my book. I never told her anything about what I did until I returned from Israel in 1982, and then she helped me write speeches. But she didn't finish the book. I could see at the end she was clinging to life so she could finish it. She was in such agony. Finally I told her, "Vivian, you don't owe me anything. Please, rest in peace." And she died that day. I still miss her.

But I always thought of my family in Poland. What had happened to them? In 1982 I was honored by Yad Vashem. I went to Israel and planted my tree on the Avenue of the Righteous. There was a lot of publicity, and my family in Poland found out that I was still alive. In 1985 I went back to Poland to see my sisters. We went to Auschwitz, and even after so many years there is still a smell of death. I never saw the ovens at Auschwitz. I was like a mother hen sitting on her eggs all during the war. But I was so ashamed for the human nation that genocide of this proportion could happen.



From left: Irene, Harry Marks (a tailor), and Pola Marks, 1946.

In 1975 I heard a neo-Nazi say that the Holocaust was a hoax, and I decided I had to start talking. I think another Holocaust could happen if we don't mingle together to try to understand one another and not be ignorant. It's my duty to tell the truth about what I saw. So for the last ten years I've been telling my experiences to many groups all over the country, and now I do it so much that I'm only at home about five days each month. My favorite groups are the children. They give me standing ovations, and then the big, macho boys come and give me a big hug and kiss. This is the most important thing for me now, to reach the young people. I tell them, "You can do what I did! Right now! Stand up when you hear name-calling, when you see skinheads. You are the future of the nation." I don't tell them what to do; I tell them I believe in them, that they can do it. They're the last generation that will hear firsthand accounts of the Holocaust. They are the future. We all have to reach out to know we're not alone in the world. You have to give not just money, but you must give of yourself.