

If the Nazis had not invaded Poland, I would have been content with a quiet life.

I came from Otwock, a town about 24km southeast from Warsaw. I was baptized on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1917. My parents were both active members of the Polish Socialist Party. We were also Catholic.

There was a small Jewish community in Otwock. My father was a physician. In 1917 there was a typhoid epidemic and my father treated the poor, including Jews, free of charge, until he himself succumbed to typhoid and died when I was still a small child. But the work my father did and his values and beliefs lived on in my mother and in my own practice and in my heart.

As a young woman I studied law for two years and then Polish literature at the University of Warsaw. There were problems at University so I took a break from my education from 1932-37 after being disciplined for defacing my 'non-Jewish' identification on my grade card and for opposing the 'ghetto bench' system whereby Jewish students were forced to sit to the left, separate from the rest.

By the outbreak of World War 2, I had submitted my magister degree thesis but had not taken the final exam. I was repeatedly refused employment in the Warsaw school system because my academic records ascribed me as a 'radical leftist'.

In 1939 after the German invasion, I began aiding Jews in the Ghetto. I helped to create false documents for over 3,000 Jewish families and joined the Zegota, Poland's underground resistance. I became the head of Zegota's children's division. I managed to obtain special access to the Warsaw Ghetto through the Social Welfare Department, to conduct typhoid inspections. And it was this access that allowed me to do the work that needed to be done.

'Heroes do extraordinary things.' What I did was not an extraordinary thing. It was normal. You see a man drowning, you must try and save him, even if you cannot swim.

We began secretly transporting babies and children from the Ghetto by hiding them in ambulances with false bottoms; sometime baskets, coffins and even potato sacks. Once they were out of the Ghetto, I arranged for them to be given false identity documents, and they were placed with Polish families or orphanages. I kept records of all the children that we rescued. These papers would have been a fatal disaster if they got into the wrong hands, so I kept the list in glass jars that I buried in secret locations, in the hopes that after the War I could dig them up and possibly reunite the children with their legitimate families when it was safe.

After I rescued more than 2,500 children, I was caught and arrested by the Gestapo. They tortured me and sentenced me to death. I was on my way to my own execution, but Zegota cohorts were able to bribe the German guards; and now it was my turn to be secretly smuggled to safety. ... I remained in hiding for the remainder of the War but continued to work for Zegota under a false name. After the war we gathered the jars, naming the true identities of the children, that we had placed in hiding. Almost all of the children's parents had been killed in Treblinka extermination camp or listed as missing.

After the War I remained politically and socially active in Warsaw and joined to United Workers' Party. I organized orphanages, nursing homes, welfare facilities. I couldn't help myself: helping others was what I knew best how to do. I died on May 12<sup>th</sup> 2008 in Warsaw; I was 98 years old.

If not a quiet life, at least it was long.

**Irena Sendler**

**David Rhodes**