

## **RG 50.493.0063**

### **Summary**

Irene Opdyke, a well-known rescuer, was born in Poland. She found out in 1984 after a visit to Poland that her father was killed by the Nazis and that her two sisters survived. She met them for the first time since the war during her visit to Poland in 1984. We don't know what happened to her mother.

We come into Ms. Opdyke's narration of her rescue when she was hiding out six, then twelve, Jews, in a house in Radom, Poland that was occupied by a major in the German army. Opdyke emphasized that he was part of the Wehrmacht, not the SSD, and was a kind man. For many months he did not know that she was hiding these Jews downstairs in the laundry and kitchen and that they helped with cooking and laundry. Opdyke was a young woman of 21, spoke German, and was well-liked by the major. She told of many occasions when SS and regular army men were visiting the house. During these times and when she was acquiring food and other supplies for the Jewish victims she risked her life to keep the Jews, who she called her "friends", hidden. One day, near the end of the war, she forgot to lock the front door when the major went out. He returned unexpectedly and found several Jewish women and four children. The major demanded to know how Irene could do this to him. She begged the major to forgive her and not to expose the hidden Jews. He went to his study and came back drunk a few hours later. He told her that if she would be willing to have a sexual relationship with him he would not expose the Jews to the SS or kick them out. She thanked him and agreed. Though he was much older (68) than she, she felt it necessary to save her "friends". As the Russians are closing in the major had to leave the house, and, at the risk of her life, Opdyke takes them a few at a time to hide in the forest. She joins them and joins the Polish resistance as a courier. She never hears from the major again. All twelve of her Jewish "friends" survive, including a baby born to one of the Jewish women who Opdyke convinced to keep the fetus rather than abort it.

As the war ended, she was arrested by Russian partisans for helping Polish partisans. Some of the Jews she saved were able to smuggle her out and took her to a Displaced Persons camp in Germany. She studied Hebrew and planned to go to Israel but got very sick so they had to leave without her. Later, she was interviewed by personnel from the UN because of her rescue activities. One of the interviewers praised the United States and in 1949 she emigrated to the U.S. Many years later she would meet one of these interviewers and end up marrying him.

At first, Opdyke did not speak of her activities during the Holocaust. But when Holocaust deniers started speaking out she felt it necessary to bear witness, which she has done numerous times in synagogues, schools and elsewhere to Jewish and non-Jewish audiences. Asked why more Poles did not help rescue Jews she defended them by saying Poland was also a victim of the Nazis and that many Poles were scared to risk their lives, especially if they had families. She helped because she believed that no one has a right to kill another human being, that we are all equal, that when confronted with Nazi crimes she had to help, and because she had the opportunity. Opdyke was recognized by Yad Vashem and the Avenue of the Righteous in Jerusalem. She also appeared in the 1984 film "Courage to Care."