

IRENE GUT-OPDYKE

BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE



ECHOES & REFLECTIONS

TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST. INSPIRING THE CLASSROOM.



Irene Gut was born on May 5, 1922 in Kozienice, Poland to an upper middle class Catholic family with five daughters.

Irene's father was an architect and owned a factory. She had a happy childhood and was exposed to people from different religions and nationalities. Her parents taught Irene and her sisters that there is no difference between people, and that they should be good to others. Her father had a business partner who was Jewish and the children of both families were close friends.

At age eighteen, Irene enrolled in nursing school in central Poland. When WWII began, she was captured by Russian soldiers and endured many traumatic experiences. Ultimately she was able to make her way back to her hometown, which was under German occupation. She reunited with her family for a short time.

After her father's arrest by the Germans, Irene and one sister went to live with an aunt in Radom, Poland. They were forced by the Germans to work in an ammunition factory. In the factory, Irene understood that Jews were being taken away by the Germans to be killed. Irene also witnessed Germans murdering Jews, including babies, in the streets of the Radom ghetto. These experiences had a great impact on her.

Irene caught the eye of Major Eduard Rügemer, a German officer, who took Irene with him when he was transferred to the town of Tarnopol, Poland (today Ukraine). Working in the laundry room of the officers' club, she met and befriended a group of twelve Jewish people. Irene began to pass along information she overheard from German officers at dinner parties where she worked as a waitress, such as when raids and arrests would take place. When this information was spread, many Jews were able to escape capture. Irene also smuggled out food and travel permits to aid Jewish escapees.

On one occasion, Irene overheard plans to evacuate the ghetto and transport the Jewish residents there to concentration and extermination camps. She was desperate to help her Jewish friends in the laundry room, but didn't know what to do. She considered it a miracle when, a few days later, Major Rügemer informed Irene they would relocate to a villa where she would be his housekeeper. Irene helped the Jews – including a pregnant woman – hide in the basement of the villa. For this and for her earlier help, Irene knew that if caught, she could be put to death.

After many months of successfully hiding the Jewish people and keeping this secret even from the Major, he found out. Irene pleaded with him to help her and he agreed in exchange for her becoming his mistress. Despite the difficulty, Irene went along with the arrangement for months, knowing that twelve lives depended on her.

As the Russians advanced and the Germans began retreating from the area, Irene and the Jewish people she was hiding fled to the forest. In March 1944, shortly before the Red Army liberated the area, the Gestapo arrested Irene, but she escaped. That May, the pregnant woman who Irene helped to hide gave birth to a baby boy. Irene considered this her payment for the hell she went through.

In 1949, Irene immigrated to the United States. She married a United Nations Relief Agency worker, William Opdyke, whom she had first met in a displaced persons camp after the war. In 1957 they had a daughter.

Irene's parents perished during the war, but her sisters survived. In 1980, Irene began speaking publicly about her experiences and published two books, *Into the Flames: The Life Story of a Righteous Gentile* and *In My Hands: Memories of a Holocaust Rescuer*. Irene passed away in 2003.

In 1982, Yad Vashem recognized Irene as Righteous Among the Nations. At the time of her interview in 1995, Irene resided in California.