



Episode 5 Transcript Rescue in the Sewers Leopold Socha

Hello and welcome to “The Human Spirit in the Holocaust”, an Echoes & Reflections podcast, in which we uncover remarkable stories of courage during one of the darkest periods in human history. Echoes & Reflections is a partnership of the ADL, USC Shoah Foundation and Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem. Our podcast is produced by Yad Vashem.

I’m your host, Sheryl Ochayon.

[KRISTINE KEREN]

“I was so scared because I saw nothing, only you know, a dark, big hole. And my father said, ‘Don’t be afraid,’ and he pushed me. He pushed me down and somebody caught me, and then he pushed my brother and my mother, and he by himself he left. And it was so scary, the moment when I landed there. It was dark. And the water – the noise of the falling water – it was so strong for me it was like Niagara Falls, the sound of the water. And people were screaming, voices of people screaming because other people were coming to the sewers to hide, too, from different directions. And I asked my father, ‘Where are we going?’ And he said, ‘Don’t be scared, don’t be afraid.’ He took me on his back and he told me, ‘Hold me tight...’”

Krystyna Chiger was only seven years old when she and her family went down into the sewers to hide from the Nazis. Along with almost 20 other Jewish people, they lived there for 14 long, dark and difficult months. They would never have survived if they hadn’t had the help of three brave sewer workers. This is a true story of light in the darkness.

Krystyna, today Dr. Kristine Keren, grew up in Lvov. It was then the third largest city in Poland though today it is in Ukraine. It was multicultural – Poles, Ukrainians and Jews all lived there. It was a city of cobblestone streets, flowers and fountains. Kristine grew up like a princess in a storybook with dolls and toys. But her fairytale existence didn’t last long. When she was 4, World War II began. The Russians occupied Lvov under the terms of a non-aggression pact with Germany. Two years later, in June 1941, Nazi Germany broke its pact and invaded. That summer thousands of Jews were beaten and murdered. In November, 1941 the Germans imprisoned the remaining approximately 110,000 Jews of Lvov in a ghetto. Conditions were harsh. Jews were forced to perform slave labor for the Nazis in the horrific labor camp of Janowska. By March of 1942 the Nazis began deporting the Jews of Lvov to Belzec, one of the first death camps.

While Kristine’s parents toiled for the Germans, she and her little brother Pawel, 3, spent long hours alone, frightened and silent. In one ghetto apartment, their father, Ignacy, created a hiding place for them beneath the window ledge. Sometimes if Kristine heard the Gestapo coming, she stuffed her brother into a suitcase under the bed and hid in the closet.

By early 1943, close to 100,000 of the Jews of Lvov had been murdered or deported to camps. The Chigers were running out of hiding places, and out of time. Kristine's father had the idea of hiding in the sewers that ran beneath Lvov, that were like an underground city. Together with some other men they dug an ingenious escape route through the floorboards of their barracks into the sewer and made a trial run. In the blackness of the sewer, with the water rushing through the canal, it was so dark that they couldn't even see each other. But suddenly they saw a powerful lantern. They were paralyzed with fear – had they been caught by the Gestapo? Their great luck was that they had been found by three sewer workers, Leopold Socha, Stefan Wroblewski and Jerzy Kowalow, who told the frantic Jews that when the ghetto was liquidated, they would help them, for a price.

On the evening of May 31, 1943, the ghetto Jews heard the sound of trucks pulling up outside the barracks, the thudding of boots and the sound of shooting in the streets. The Jews all understood: this was the end of the ghetto. They had no time to lose – they had to climb down into the sewer.

Clinging to each other, Kristine's family and almost 20 others were rescued by Socha, who made sure they were safe. Hundreds of desperate Jews tried to escape into the sewers that night, but almost all of them died in the raging waters or were killed by grenades thrown into the sewers by the Nazi Germans and their Ukrainian collaborators. Others ultimately starved to death because they could not leave the sewers to get food.

[KRISTINE]

"It was wet and slimy and very slippery, and it was dark. It was a sewer. You know, everything what is coming from the bathrooms come through the sewers where we were walking. The rats and the spiders' webs. We had to pull it back, the spiders' webs. It was terrible. And the smell!"

Socha, Wroblewski and Kowalow knew that if they turned the Jews in to the Gestapo they would be rewarded, but if they tried to help and were caught, they and their families would be shot.

Amazingly, they decided to take the risk. Why?

Socha was the driving force. He came from a very poor background. He was forced out onto the streets to fend for himself when he was very young, and made a lot of bad choices. He began to steal at the age of ten. He was arrested again and again. The older he got, the more daring he became. He robbed a bank, he held up an antiques store. By the time he reached his mid-twenties, he had served three separate prison terms for robbery.

Socha met and married Magdalena, a woman who convinced him to turn his life around. They went to church. He prayed. He came to believe that he needed to repent for all the crimes he had committed when he was younger. In his heart he had faith that if he saved this group of Jews, which included the Chiger family, Halina Wind, the Margolies family, and Jacob Berestycki, maybe he could save his soul. In addition, he was horrified by the German atrocities against the Jews. Rescue became the greatest mission of his life.

Socha and the other sewer workers did, at first, take money from the Jews they rescued. But when the money ran out, Socha refused to abandon them. To prevent the other sewer workers from figuring out that

no money was left, Socha thought up a charade: he secretly gave money to Kristine's father so that he could make a show of giving Socha the daily payment with Wroblewski watching. But even after the charade was exposed and the money really did run out, the help continued.

Kowalow was the lookout aboveground. But Socha and Wroblewski, who spent time with the group underground, developed real ties with them. Indeed, what they did went way beyond mere "rescue."

Socha brought the group newspapers. He helped them keep their Jewish traditions: he brought them a prayer book that he found in the ghetto. He brought candles for Kristine's mother, Pauline, to light on Friday nights. And for Passover, a holiday when Jews do not eat bread, he managed to smuggle a sack of potatoes into the sewer. Socha and Wroblewski even celebrated the Jewish New Year with the group. Their wives did the laundry, ridding the group's ragged clothing of lice.

Life in the sewers, surrounded by filth and contamination, was difficult. Kristine's father, Ignacy, battled off the rats who tried to eat the group's limited food. Kristine remembered Socha's kindness in sharing his own sandwiches:

[KRISTENE]

"His wife used to make sandwiches for him, and I will never forget the taste of those sandwiches – they were so good. It was bread with cold cuts. And when he came he shared with us. He gave half of his sandwich, or part of his sandwich to my brother, and part to me. and the taste I will never forget. It was so delicious. Maybe if I would eat it right now it wouldn't be so delicious, but at that time when I didn't have anything to eat only that black piece of bread that was terrible; but Thank God for this that we had this. This was for me, his sandwich, it was unbelievable, it was so good."

There were other things that Socha did that went far beyond rescue. Knowing that her parents were trying to teach Kristine to read, Socha brought her paper, pencils and an alphabet book. After the first snow, he brought a snowball. When little Pawel was sick and needed eggs so his mother could make a home remedy, Socha crawled for miles through narrow sewer pipes, gingerly carrying four eggs in a knotted handkerchief that he held in his teeth.

However, as a 7-year old child, it was very difficult for Kristine to live in the darkness of the sewers. A remarkable gesture by Socha saved her.

[KRISTINE]

"I remember that after a few months that we were in the sewer and I didn't see the daylight, and I didn't know this is the night or the day; everything was the same. And I could hear only through the manhole the voices, children's voices and birds singing, and I was in this, sitting in this sewer and not able to, to enjoy this. And I got very depressed and I refused to, to eat, and I refused to talk. I didn't want to talk to anybody and to eat anything. And my mother tried to persuade me, and my father, and Socha came one day. He knew that this is going on, and one day he said to me, 'Come I will show you something.' And he took me, crawling, to another part of the sewer that the manhole was a little bit bigger and a little bit closer. He took me on his hands and he pulled me up that I could see the daylight. And he said, 'You see, you can see the daylight and you can hear the voices, and one day, you will be able – like the other kids – to run like they're running and to be outside. But you have to be very strong and you have to believe it that one day you will be like the other kids.' He took me back, he was holding me on his lap and telling me other stories. And when he left,

you know, I slowly started to accept food, and I started to answer when my mother was asking me something or my father, and slowly I came back to and behaved normally. Yeah, but it was very difficult time probably for me because I was in this age that I understood already. But this helped me. And I made it.”

The group dwindled. Some could not stand the filth and claustrophobic conditions and left the sewer; others died of the damp, the cold and the hunger. From 21 desperate Jews, the group shrunk to only 10 who managed to survive 14 long months in the sewer.

And when liberation finally came, in July of 1944, it was Socha who brought them out of the sewer and celebrated. He organized food, clothing and a place for them to stay as they began the slow process of healing.

The three sewer workers jeopardized themselves every day. Kowalow disappeared after the war. But in appreciation of their remarkable courage, the State of Israel recognized Socha, Wroblewski and their wives as Righteous Among the Nations. This title is awarded to non-Jews who risked their lives during the Holocaust by actively trying to save Jews from the threat of death, and did so without seeking any payment or other reward. Sadly, Socha was killed in May 1945 as he tried to protect his daughter from being run over by a Russian truck. As the Jews he saved paid their respects at his grave, they heard someone say, “This is God’s punishment for hiding Jews.” It was a sign of the great risk Socha had taken and the terrible antisemitism that was still pervasive in Poland post-war.

This incredible story of rescue in the sewers is, literally, a story of light in the darkness. Socha was a petty thief whose great humanity led him to save a group of hunted Jews with nowhere else to hide. Kristine’s mother always said he was their guardian angel. He remains forever in Kristine’s heart.

[KRISTINE]

“He was a great person, he really was. I loved him like I loved my father. He was for me, everything.”

Thanks for listening. For more podcasts about the human spirit in the Holocaust, please see the Echoes & Reflections website, at EchoesandReflections.org. For more information, you can find Kristine’s testimony among the thousands in the USC Shoah Foundation visual history archive.