

Part I Early Years



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Chapter I

Irene Gut Opdyke *Polish Partisan*



Irene Gut Opdyke was in nursing school in Radom, Poland, when Hitler's forces invaded her country in 1939. She fled to the Ukraine with the Polish army. Returning to Poland, this young Catholic girl risked her life to save Jews and serve in the resistance movement. Her story is one of extraordinary courage and compassion.

Mrs. Opdyke now lives in beautiful Yorba Linda, California. Her walls are filled with awards and recognitions, including the Righteous Among the Nations Award. This award, which Oskar Schindler also received, is given by the Israeli Holocaust Commission to people who risked their lives to aid Jews during the Holocaust.

She also received Israel's highest honor, the Israel Medal of Honor, and a special commendation from the Vatican.

A diminutive, elegant woman with warm, radiant blue eyes and delicate features, she is one of the kindest, most loving women I have encountered. She reminds one of Mother Teresa. As she spoke I often found myself choking back tears. She says, "I try to bring the love to children." As we parted, she gave me a kiss and a hug, saying, "You are like a son, I love you" – words I will always cherish.

We were five girls in my family. I was the oldest—born May 5, 1922, in Kozenice, eastern Poland. The others came about every two years and were born in different cities in Poland, as father moved for his work. Father was a builder, an architect and chemist, who made ceramic parts for factories.

I had wonderful parents. They taught us to help humans in need. There was always someone we had to help with food. For holidays like Christmas, we always had two or three chairs for invited guests. We helped gypsies in the forest, animals, anyone who needed help we were taught to help. All my sisters are wonderful, wonderful people. We brought every animal home that needed help—cats, dogs, birds. Mother ministered to sick gypsies and called the doctor if needed. She had a talent for animals. She rehabilitated birds and could get them to come to the window to be fed. She provided whatever old people needed—food, drink, or encouragement.

We were a happy and close family. We loved our parents very much. There was always music and singing in our house. Father loved to play the piano and guitar. We all loved to sing and had beautiful voices. Mother taught us cooking, baking, and cleaning. I baked very beautiful tortes. We went to church regularly and dressed nicely.

My parents taught us right and wrong. There were rules. We had to be nice to people. When we did wrong, father would correct us kindly and talk to us about being good human beings. Mother said you can marry a millionaire, but you must still learn to work. We had a maid, yet we had to scrub our wooden floor and mother checked.

Father and Mother did not distinguish among their friends—Jews, Germans, Poles—and neither did we. My parents were happy that we had many friends of different backgrounds.

We were well-to-do, not rich, but we had no worry about money. You might say we were upper echelon, Polish intelligentsia. We had a maid from the village. They gladly came to learn how to serve.

When I was a teen, we were living near the German border. Hitler was already screaming over the radio. My father had no son, but I thought I'd be a nurse to help in the defense of Poland. I left my family at the age of sixteen to study nursing in Radom, an industrial center in central Poland.

The Invasion

Poland was taken from both sides by the Germans and the Russians. The Luftwaffe bombed Radom on September 1, 1939, as I was walking to the hospital. The city was on fire, and the wounded were everywhere. I had tended the wounded at the hospital for several days when the Polish army officers asked for volunteers to go with them. I, three other young nursing students, and other nurses and doctors joined them as we fled eastward. But a Polish general said the war was over because of the German/Russian pact. So we ran to the forest in the Polish Ukraine. We had little food, and would go to the villages to barter for food. A Russian patrol truck came and I was standing watch alone. I had time to yell a warning to my friends, and then tried to run to the woods. Three soldiers got hold of me and violated me, beat me, and left me in the snow to die. Someone found me and brought me to a Russian hospital in Ternopol. After recovering, I was put to work as a nurse. There I met Dr. David, a Ukrainian Pole, who helped me to escape after the hospital administrator tried to rape me. I had hit the administrator with a bottle with all my might and was scared that I had killed him. I told Dr. David, and he helped me to escape eastward to the Russian village of Svetlana. I stayed there a year with a woman doctor who had gone to medical school with Dr. David. I believe that Dr. David was Jewish.

Exchange

In January of 1941, I learned that Poles could now return to their families by going back through Ternopol for processing. I wanted to go home so I took a train to Ternopol, where somebody recognized me from the hospital. I was arrested and repeatedly interrogated with threats of Siberia and torture. The hospital administrator had accused me of being a dangerous Polish partisan and spy. I hid my train ticket in my bra. They tried to discover the identity of my friends who helped me escape from the hospital and hide. I escaped from a guard and ran through back alleys and yards back to the train station. The time was now past for my train to leave. However, I learned that the train had been delayed for two days and I boarded it. Crossing into German-held Poland, the passengers were placed in a quarantine camp. I was suffering from influenza. A German guard thought I was German because of my blond hair and blue eyes, my German-sounding name, and the fact that I spoke German. That helped me. He got the doctor. At last I recovered and continued on to Radom, where my aunt lived.

Radom

By now, my shoes were falling apart and my coat was to the floor. I could not find my way in the ruined city with new German street names. A man in a buggy took pity on me. He said he had four daughters and didn't mind that I couldn't pay him. After traveling for some time, I recognized the house. When I got off I found that all my family was now at my aunt's house. My father had left everything in Oberschlesien, ousted by the Germans. Now he was making black market slippers. I told my father about my experience at the hands of the Russian soldiers. He said, "Child, that should not ruin your life. During war, men are animals. You didn't freeze in the forest. Someone found you. That means God has something for you to do."

Soon thereafter, the Gestapo picked up my father because they needed to make changes in the machinery in a factory that he'd built in Oberschlesien. We had no way to make a life. Pretty girls were put in soldiers' casinos and brothels there. So Mother decided to take the three young girls and go be with Father. Janina and I, the oldest, stayed in Radom. We cried for loneliness. Later I learned that the youngest girls became slaves in the clay mines.

One Sunday at church, the doors opened and we found that the church was surrounded by the Gestapo and Wehrmacht. They took the young boys and girls. I was sent to work in the ammunition factory. I was weak from malnutrition and anemia and fainted at my station. When the Major Rügemer came to inspect, he saw me and yelled at the soldiers for using sick people. He asked me my name. I answered in German. He asked if I was German. I said, "No, I am Polish and Catholic." He said I spoke good German. I said I had learned it in high school as a second language since we lived near the German border. He said he would assign me to serve meals to officers and secretaries who were

quartered in a large hotel in town. I was assigned to work with the cook named Schulz. He was Wehrmacht, a good man. When we were introduced, he said I was skinny, and gave me food to eat.

Once I was setting tables in an upstairs ballroom of the hotel. There were heavy velvet drapes. I heard shooting, dogs barking, and screaming. I opened the curtains to look. I saw the Gestapo running after people in the Jewish ghetto, dogs biting, dead bodies. I stood paralyzed with my mouth opened. I asked Schulz, "What is happening? Why are they doing that?" He put his hand over my mouth, and said, "Shhhhhh. Don't let the officers know that you feel sorry."

There was a small space between the hotel and the Jewish ghetto. The ghetto was surrounded by a fence with barbed wire on top. I dug a hole under the fence with a spoon. I filled a metal box with bread, butter, meat, and whatever other food I could steal and placed the box under the fence. The next day the box was empty. That was the first thing I did to help. I continued to do that each day.

I asked Schulz if my sister Janina could come to work in the hotel because I wanted to be near her. I asked him for a job away from the German soldiers, working as a secretary. The Major approved this. By this time the Germans were fighting the Russians. Ironically, the whole plant moved east to Ternopol! Before we left Radom, the Jewish ghetto was bulldozed.

In Ternopol, I again prepared food and served officers quartered in a hotel. I saw hangings. As we walked by, the Gestapo would force us to watch. I saw the killing of men, women, and babies.

I believed in God. I had been taught by my parents. But there I threw a tantrum against my Maker. I said, "I don't believe in you. How could you not help? They were little angels." I cried in my bed with visions of these children in my soul. I awoke with an answer in my heart that "I am your God and will help; I will be with you always." I asked Him to help me to help. I said I am still young. I don't know much. I believed so strongly that God said to me that he would be with me always, and that's what I felt.

I was also put in charge of a laundry facility. Twelve Jewish men and woman from the local work camp were brought by truck each day to work there. I had asked Schultz to bring them, pretending that I needed the help. They were afraid of me because they thought I was German. I wanted them to understand that I was their friend. Every day after dinner I put leftovers in a clean towel in a laundry basket. Pretty soon they realized I was a friend. From then on I took care of them. When it was cold and they were freezing, I asked Schulz for a few blankets for my sister and me. Schulz gave me many. I felt that he knew what I was doing, but didn't want it known that he knew. We made a hiding place behind the shelves in the laundry room in anticipation of a time it would be needed.

The Villa

One of the men I served food to was an icy SS battalion commander, Sturmabführer Rokita—the head of the Gestapo. He was always bragging of liquidating the ghettos and the killings in the concentration camp. He said that soon there would be no Jews left in Ternopol, which I told my friends in the laundry room.

The Major wanted to commandeer a big villa to entertain officers from Berlin, and he wanted me to be the housekeeper. My Jewish friends knew that the villa had been built by a Jewish architect. There was a rumor that it had a secret hiding place. The Major sent Schulz and me to see it. I saw that it had servants' quarters in the basement. I told my friends in the laundry room that we would hide them under the Germans' noses, and that with God's blessings this would be possible. In the meantime, Rokita is doing the liquidation. I took six of the 12 in the laundry room to the forest by hiding them in a hay wagon. I left them in the forest. I felt like a bad mother to leave them there.

They lived in a hole under a tree. The summer was not too bad because there were berries and mushrooms, and I brought supplies as often as I could.

While serving dinner, I overheard Rokita tell the Major that this was the week when Ternopol would be free of Jews. The Major protested that he needed the workers. When the Gestapo came with a wagon to pick up the workers, I hid them behind the shelves and told the soldier that they had left to sleep in their homes. He looked in the laundry room and did not see them. That night there was a big

party in the hotel. Fearing that the Gestapo would return and search more thoroughly the next day, I brought all six to the Major's apartment. I hid them in an air vent above the bathtub. The idea to use that vent as a hiding place had come to me that day all of a sudden when I needed a solution. I was cleaning the Major's room when light from a window shined on the vent that I had never before noticed.

The next day the Ukrainian family that was staying in the villa moved out, so I could now move my six Jewish friends there. That night the Major retired early because he had a headache from the previous night's party. He took a sleeping pill and was snoring. I entered his room and let my friends out from the air vent. I stole his keys and opened the hotel doors, permitting them to escape into the night. They found the villa and entered through the coal chute.

The next day I ran to the villa. I went downstairs and saw my six friends plus four others whom I hadn't met before. Now there were ten people in my keeping.

I learned that the Major would paint the villa that day, so I hid them in the attic until I could safely return them to the basement. Altogether, they stayed safely in the basement more than seven months. I also smuggled another with pneumonia back from the forest along with her husband.

A married couple, Ida and Lazar Haller, discovered that she was pregnant. They decided they must end the pregnancy to save everyone from being discovered. I asked them not to do this. In the forest, I spoke to a Polish freedom fighter named Zygmunt. He told me to bring her to his house in the forest. There he had a hidden room, from which he communicated by radio with England. I took valuables from the villa and smuggled them to Zygmunt, along with other supplies. My excuse to the German soldiers was that I was going to visit my cousin in the forest.

One day, returning from the warehouse, SS men were hanging a Jewish family and the Polish family that had been hiding them. The SS made us watch. I stumbled back to the villa. I was so stunned that I did not lock the door behind me as usual. I could not tell my friends what I'd seen, but they knew something was terribly wrong and were comforting me. Just then, the Major came in. He was furious as I pleaded with him to spare their lives. Eventually he said that he would keep my secret if I gave myself willingly to him. I could not tell my friends about this.

Escape

The Russians were approaching now. The Major said that rumors were spreading and that I must get rid of my friends. I smuggled them out to the forest in a wagon at night, dressing one of the men in the Major's uniform. Then the Germans retreated westward to Kielce. There I escaped from the Major. Zygmunt had given me the address of a partisan couple. I went there and said the code word, Mercedes-Benz. I joined the partisans. I met their son Janek, who was very handsome. That was the first time I fell in love. The parents were very happy and we were so happy. As partisans, we had to plan to marry in the forest. His mother was making my wedding dress and I was full of pins when he walked in and took me in his arms to dance. He said, "You are so beautiful. I love you." I was counting on the wedding. He was going that day to ambush a German transport that had much-needed ammunition. I begged him not to go, but he said he was the leader. That night I heard a knock on the door. I knew Janek was dead. I felt like taking poison to join him.

Now I had no fear of death. I knew that God was looking over me and helping me. I was a messenger girl for the partisans. I carried money dropped from planes from England. I hid messages in my hair when I talked face to face with German guards. My excuse was that I was taking my bike to see my family. I became very sick with pneumonia from living in the forest, and stayed with Janek's parents. They wanted me to stay, but the war was ending and I wanted to find my family. I was twenty-three and feeling so old and exhausted. As I was traveling homeward, I first went to Kraków to see if I could find my Jewish friends from the villa. I had heard that many Jews from Ternopol had gone there. Through the temples and synagogues I located many of them. I learned that Ida Haller had borne a son, Roman, at Zygmunt's home. I thanked God for "my baby." As I was walking to the Haller's, two Soviet military policemen arrested me. I was known as a partisan, and was suspected of being a leader. I was interrogated for days. Because I was so thin, I was able to squeeze through the bars of a window and escape. From the Jewish underground, I learned that my father had been killed

by the Nazis. I was being hunted by the Russians. After being arrested because of me, my mother and sisters had been released and were now in hiding.

Repatriation

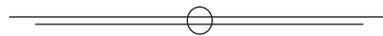
I could only flee the country. My Jewish friends died my hair black and smuggled me to a Jewish repatriation camp in Germany. I contracted diphtheria there. I was there three years when in 1949 a United Nation's delegate came to interview me. His name was William Opdyke and he was American. We spoke through a translator. He was moved by my story, and said that he would be glad to help me come to the U.S.

I came to the U.S. without a family. The second day I found work in a factory. I learned English. I was grateful to be in the U.S. and felt entitled to nothing. It was hard and lonely without a family. I was a citizen when I met Bill again in a coffee shop in 1956. He asked me to dinner, and six weeks later we married. A year later we had a little daughter. God gave me a family of my own.

In the 1970s, friends in a Jewish organization went to Poland. I learned that my mother died of a stroke shortly after the Nazis killed my father. But my sisters were still alive. My sister Janina wrote, "Come, I am waiting for you." Although I was afraid of the Russians, I flew to Poland because my desire to see my family was so great. I have been three times now to Poland.

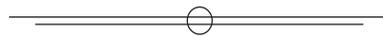
We raised our daughter in Yorba Linda. We had orchards. My daughter has two children and lives on a horse farm in Washington. I have been talking all over the world for the last twenty years.

The Hallers never knew what I did to help them. How could I tell them? After the war, they lived in Munich. They went to see Major Rügemer, who had become fond of my friends in the villa. His two sons were Gestapo, so he had been ostracized and had no home. The Hallers helped him to get a home. Roman, the Haller's son, played with him. I met Roman when I went to Israel in 1982 to receive an award.



PTSD Symptoms?

I did not have PTSD. I made it my mission in life to help. I kept busy and filled up my time. I had no time to be distressed. Thank God everything passed away. Sometimes in dreams you can see things. It is still hard to discuss some things and I still want to cry. You can not help this. I'm a good speaker because I speak from my heart. I don't use notes. I've been in thousands of places.



What Helped You Cope?

I am very thankful to God for the opportunity to save lives. What could be better than that? There's no time to feel sorry for myself.

Our parents taught us to be self-reliant. When Mother took the youngest sisters on vacation, Janina and I were left to take care of Daddy. We learned responsibility.

CALM UNDER PRESSURE

I could not be influenced by pressure if I was to be helpful. I was afraid not for myself but for my friends in the villa. I felt anger at Rokita and wanted to hit him with a tray, but I had to keep it under control because I was responsible for others.

When the Russians interrogated me, I had to stay calm. They asked for the names of the friends who had sheltered me. I said, "I don't remember." "You don't look that stupid," they said. I said, "There is a war, and I'm without my family." I gave them my dog's name.

I hate Hitler with all my heart and soul, but in a way to be able to speak as I do you must forgive, too. Without forgiveness I cannot live. Schulz made it difficult to hate the Germans. He showed me pictures of his wife and children. He knew what I was doing. When I escaped from the Major I had already forgiven him. The Major was an old man, quiet. I never expected him to want me. But like my father said, war makes people animals. He allowed my sister to come to work at the hotel and then go back home when Rokita became interested. He was good to my friends in the villa. I couldn't speak and love children if I held grudges. Forgiving was a decision, even though it was difficult to do. It was the only way I could stay alive.

RATIONAL THOUGHT PROCESSES

In Svetlana, there was a beautiful Christmas tree. I'd remember the good things. I'd focus on the good things, and not the bad. Despite the terrible things people did, there were also so many people who were good and brave.

Prayer helped me through. I asked God for help: "I am so young, and don't know much and I want to help." I had the feeling that He always put me in the right place at the right time.

I get upset when people blame others in an over-general way. For example, a young rabbi once blamed all of Poland for mistreating the Jews. I kindly corrected him. I had the courage to explain that that was true of some, but not all.

When times are tough, I have to do what I *can* do. In the war I did what I could do. In the U.S., I found a job in a factory making bras and corsets.

For my mistakes in the war, I can't feel sorry because I was trying to help. Today when I speak I don't worry that I make mistakes in the language. I know people will understand.

SOCIAL SUPPORT

I have no enemies. People, especially children and youth, like me. They hug me. On the streets after I speak to them they come after me for another hug because I love them and they feel that. American children are hungry for love—the love of parents and grandparents. Parents must set time to talk, to know them. Children are running off most of the time. They don't come home from school. Young people will listen when they feel love.

People are just people—not Jews or Germans. If not taught to love, they hate. I feel sorry for those who hate because they are not happy. I have many Jewish and Christian friends today. It makes no difference. I love them all.

The love of my family was very important and sustaining. Since the war, family has been very important. I was to go this Christmas to Poland to spend it with my sisters, but the doctor said no. Instead, my youngest sister came here to take care of me.

I loved my husband very much.

I have kept contact with and reunited with several of the people I helped. I gave one a ticket from New York to California so that she could stay with me in my home. I helped collect money for Israel. The Haller's baby was born in 1944. Even though I wanted to see my family, I first saw my friends and their baby. I am still in contact. They called just a few days ago to wish me Happy New Year.

COMFORT WITH EMOTIONS

I am not afraid to show emotions if they come naturally. I *am* emotional when I speak. The pictures are before my eyes and heart like a kaleidoscope, so how can you be unemotional? I allow feelings to come out. I tell young people, "I am here because I love you. I want you to understand that the future is in your hands and you must love and help each other. Hate accomplishes nothing. It ruins your lives, your families, and your country. We all belong to one human family." I still can cry. I have the feeling.

I wrote my book so that we wouldn't forget and so that young people would know what war was like. I am happy with the book. In a very personal way it makes the Holocaust live. It puts names to people. I cried many times in writing my book, but afterward felt better.

SELF-ESTEEM

I always felt I had something to contribute. As a youth, I studied to be the best to make my parents proud. I didn't date or go to movies while in nursing school. I felt I had something to accomplish. I didn't know what, except to be a nurse to help people defend against Hitler.

I wrote my book because I wanted to share my life with young people. Even though I am getting old, there is time to do things before I die. I am not afraid to die, but I want to accomplish as long as possible to speak and have my movie come out. Not for money or for glory, but to encourage people not to be afraid to love, help, and learn.

ACTIVE, ADAPTIVE COPING

I could not be passive and help. I am determined. What you start you must finish. Rokita had said that Ternopol would be Jew-free. But I had to take action to ensure that it was not, that my friends lived. Shuffling my friends around the hotel was very hard; there were Gestapo living there. I had help from the Almighty.

I knew I was young and couldn't shoot, so I asked God for strength to help me to help. Then I kept thinking up ways to help. I told Schulz that we needed more help and obtained Jewish workers from the ghetto. Once when a worker in the laundry did not return, I feared an SS raid. So I told Major Rügemer that the worker had taken some of the secretaries' dresses to the ghetto to work on a special sewing machine. He gave me a pass to go to the ghetto, where I found her hiding, and brought her back. The SS had raided her home and taken her family.

When the Russians were asking me all those questions, I kept my mind on an injured stork that we had nursed as children. The stork was formidable, it fought back although it was captured and weak. Then it flew away at the first opportunity. Thinking of that image gave me courage. It gave me a way to find words and not reveal names of the partisans. When I saw the first chance, I escaped, too.

I saw a German soldier throw what looked like a fat bird into the air and shoot it. It was not a bird. It was a child. That was a haunting vision. Later, with the help of Jennifer Armstrong, who helped me write my book, I actively changed that vision; I came to view it as a bird flying away, in freedom.

Rokita was taken with Janina. She was very beautiful, statuesque. Finally, I had the courage to talk to the Major. I told him I didn't want him to take advantage of her. I asked if he would allow her to leave. So he wrote a permit for her to go to Radom. In the hall, Rokita asked me where my sister went. It came to me to tell him that she had tuberculosis.

The war was awful and difficult, but I was there to help, even if I should lose my life. If you witness what I witnessed you must be moved to action.

SPIRITUAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL STRENGTHS

God

God is someone who is for me and for everybody. He loves us all. When you pray and ask with a clear heart, you will be helped. I believe in that very much. When I cried, "Why did you not help?" I awoke with the knowledge in my heart that "I am God. There is evil." I prayed constantly and just asked to find a way to help, and did. I went to church during the war, and still go now.

After I had to give myself to the Major I felt very, very bad. In a church there was a young priest. He said I had to let all my friends go and leave the Major myself. He didn't understand. There was a war and I couldn't, so I did not, and he didn't give me absolution. In the U.S., after I was married, I told a priest my story. I was crying. The priest said, "My child, you were very young. There is no guilt in you because you did what you did to save others." That has helped me to this day.

Meaning and Purpose

I felt from a young age that my life had a purpose. As a baby, our dog saved me from falling into a river by biting onto my diapers. The priest told my mother that God had a purpose, a plan for me. After the Russians mistreated me, Father told me that I had survived for a purpose, to accomplish something. I knew as a teenager that I was destined to save lives.

In the war, I knew that my purpose was to save my friends and the unborn baby. Standing on a balcony of the villa, I spoke to God. "I don't know much. Should I feel guilty that I gave myself up to save the lives of my friends and an unborn baby?" A peace came over me. I knew that I was not alone. I depended on God. I also knew that my purpose was to disrupt the Germans as much as I could, and return to my family. If I had to die I hoped to do so with the least possible pain.

Morality

I was raised to be honest, but I had to deceive and cheat in order to survive and save others. I told the Major and Schulz that it is not right to kill innocent people in war. Maybe because of that they trusted me. I feel bad that I violated their trust, but I had to in order to save my friends from the concentration camp. I decided to do right, even though it was difficult.

I think morality means to be good to others, to help others, and to live virtuously. If married, you have one husband and are faithful. In Poland it was taken for granted that girls married before living with boys. After the war, morals haven't improved. Television does not put wholesome images before children. They see stories about witches, not angels.

Love

I am very comfortable loving. Most of all, my life is to love children. If I could just convince everyone that there is goodness, that they should not hate each other, I will accomplish much. That's what I pray I might do if I can live.

Optimism

I am not sitting. When you speak to kids and see their young faces, they have so much before them. I tell them: "I believe in you. You can be what you want to be. Learn, study, stay together. Don't fight. Fighting brings hate, war, and persecution."

Even though I saw much cruelty, I also think there is much good in the world. In the war I knew, in spite of all the troubles, that we would survive. Now, I am not afraid to die. We pick up our crown up there.

Humor

We all laughed at times. For a big party at the villa, I told the Major that my mother was a great entertainer, and asked him to put me in charge. So I went with Schulz and bought all the food needed, plus more for the people in the forest. There was a secret tunnel from the basement of the villa to a bunker under the gazebo. During the party, my friends were hiding under the gazebo when Rokita took a fräulein there. I was scared he'd hear Ida cough. I took a tray with glasses of wine and hors d'oeuvres and yelled, "I have something for you and the lady." He was so mad. He was improperly dressed. The people below could hear this and were laughing. Later they told me I had interrupted something.

It was farcical, almost funny, to think of hiding my friends under the commandant's nose, and feeding them with his food. To escape the Russians, I was disguised as a Jew, the only Catholic in a Jewish camp.

I use humor when I speak. Sometimes you must break up the heaviness. For example, I mention that my husband and I spoke six languages when we first met, but had none in common.

Long View of Suffering

Knowing all I went through, people ask if I would do it again. Yes, without even thinking about it. It is such a wonderful feeling to know I helped to save lives. It makes me happy inside. I saw my mission through to completion. Now Roman's son is a lawyer in England. I am sorry the war happened; it was horrible. But I am thankful to God that he helped me to help. I learned to depend on him. I am thankful for my life in the U.S.

Maintaining Balanced Living

I never drank in my life or smoked. If I had, I would not be alive today. I always exercised. I loved to swim. I like lots of milk, cheeses, bread, fruit, and vegetables. The thing I like least is meat. Normally, I have gotten ten hours of sleep; early to bed and early to rise.

I now balance between speaking and home, but speaking is my life. I travel and speak often. I've been too busy to realize that I'm getting old, until I look in the mirror. I speak to people of many different religions. I don't see any difference. I speak to many organizations around the world – schools, temples, churches, Holocaust Museum. I love to speak. I speak from my heart, never with prepared notes. I love the people I speak to. I love young people and would do anything for them. I am hugging them and they chase me and ask for another hug. They are hungry for love.

I read many books. I became, without formal training, an interior decorator, to help with bills. But I would play hooky and take my grandsons to the beach. I enjoyed them. I had a breast removed in 1984. I forgot about the surgery and caught a grandson falling out of a tree, and that was painful.

When my husband was alive I cooked and had parties. When my husband was ill with Alzheimer's, Jewish friends took him into a nursing home without charge, to repay me. He was the only non-Jew in the home.



Advice to Younger Generations

First of all, be a friend. Try to understand that we all belong to one family. We have only one God; no matter what language you speak, he will understand. Love, don't hate, because hate brings disaster – war, persecution, Holocaust. The world is so beautiful. If people love each other it will look better, more beautiful, warm. So love each other. There is a goodness in people. We must work hard to try to love and speak to everyone, explaining to people that hate will ruin you, your family, and your country. The most important thing is to love and stay together. Discuss things before trouble starts.

Listen to your heart. Youth can make a difference, fighting evil. You can accomplish most wonderful things if you learn and study – you can be anything you want to be if you are honest and aware of others, and if you draw strength from God and people's goodness.



William and Irene Opdyke



Irene at home in Yorba Linda, California



Still fearing the Russians, Irene, lower left, returns to Poland to reunite with her sisters, circa 1984