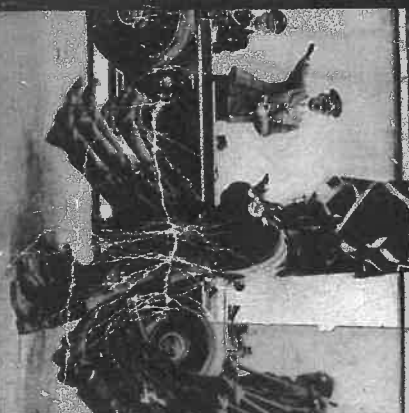


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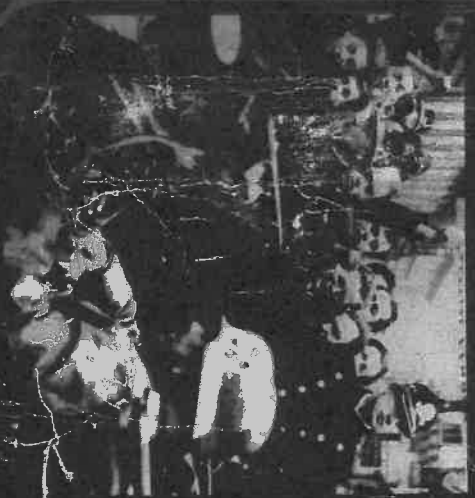


# A PLACE TO HIDE

True Stories of  
Holocaust Rescues



by Jayne Pettit



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# Contents

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## 6 "Look at Your Feet and Keep on Walking!"

### Madame Marie

Odette Meyers was seven years old when the Germans began their roundup of almost 13,000 Jews in Paris on July 16, 1942. A pretty little girl with thick, wavy black hair and inquiring eyes, Odette was the only child of working-class parents who had emigrated from Poland during the 1920s.

At the time of the roundup, Odette and her mother were living in an apartment in a building run by a woman known as Madame Marie. Although the Meyers family was Jewish and Marie and her husband were Catholic, a friendship had developed, particularly after Odette's father had been captured by the Germans and the mother and child were left alone.

Early on the morning of the raid, Madame Marie heard the rumbling of German trucks and

the screams of Jewish neighbors being taken from their homes. Running upstairs to warn Odette and her mother about what was happening, she ordered the two to follow her to her own apartment, and hurriedly shoved them into a broom closet seconds before the Germans appeared at her door.

With no time to lose, Marie greeted the soldiers with a flourish of hospitality, uncorking a bottle of wine and showing them to her kitchen table. As the search team emptied their glasses, the Frenchwoman thanked them repeatedly for their actions in getting rid of the Jews and pretended to be grateful for what they were doing.

While Odette and her mother huddled in the tiny closet, Marie poured a second glass of wine for the Germans who, by now, had started asking questions about the two Jews they had come to arrest. Marie responded with a stream of anti-Semitic insults about Odette and her mother. And all the while, she continued to pour the wine.

Then, one of the Germans began threatening Madame Marie and demanded to see the Meyers' apartment. Flying into a tirade, Marie insisted that they would not want to step into such a filthy place. And besides, she grumbled, the Meyers had left for a vacation in the country, something she herself couldn't possibly afford.

As the last of the wine was emptied, the Germans staggered to the door and left. Marie listened as the soldiers moved on down the hallway and then ran to the phone to call her husband,

Henri. Like Odette's mother and many others, Henri was active in the French Resistance and had helped many Jews find safety in the countryside. Hurrying home from his job, Henri told Odette to follow him immediately.

Outside on the street, the Germans were everywhere. Henri held Odette's trembling hand while the two passed a line of trucks filled with captured Jews.

"Look at your feet and keep on walking!" the tall Frenchman whispered to the little girl. And so the two continued, until they reached a deserted subway that led them to the main railway out of Paris.

Odette Meyers spent the duration of the war in hiding, passing as a Catholic child and attending a convent school in a small French village. Marie and Henri found hiding places for many other Jews.

After the German defeat, Odette and her mother were reunited and eventually came to the United States. A university professor and a poet, Odette now lives in Berkeley, California, grateful to Madame Marie for saving her life — and her spirit also.

## Irene

Irene Opdyke was a young nursing student when the German army marched into Poland in 1939. For three weeks, stretchers carrying

wounded Polish soldiers filed past her in the crowded wards of the hospital where she worked. Then, with the collapse of the military, Poland fell to the Germans. Irene's hospital was evacuated and villages in the surrounding area were occupied by the enemy.

Joining the army in the hope that her nursing skills would be useful on the battlefield, the young girl soon found herself on the run as pockets of the military fought against the German onslaught. Escaping into a forest that bordered the then-Soviet Ukraine, she and a small band of soldiers and nurses started the Polish underground. Weeks passed and the number of freedom fighters increased. Hiding out in the forest by day and moving into villages at night to launch raids on the Germans, Irene was often left to guard an area while others in her group searched for food.

One night, as Irene stood watch, a truckload of Soviet soldiers rumbled into town and headed in her direction. Suddenly, the soldiers began jumping off the truck and running toward her. Irene raced for the forest, but the men quickly overtook her. In an instant, they knocked the young woman to the ground, where she was beaten and left by the roadside.

Hours later, Irene awoke to find herself in a Soviet prison hospital, tended by a woman doctor who treated her wounds and offered her compassion and understanding. When Irene had recovered, the doctor assigned her to nursing

duities, where she worked long hours in wards filled with disease but little medicine to treat the wounded.

In 1941, the Germans and the Soviets exchanged prisoners and Irene was sent back to German-occupied Poland to an area that was within a short distance of her family's home. On her way to the village where she hoped to find her parents, the young woman stopped into a little church to attend mass.

Suddenly, the church was surrounded by Germans and everyone inside was rounded up. A prisoner once again, Irene was assigned to a munitions factory that was located next to a walled-off Jewish ghetto.

One morning, as her group was being transported to the factory, Irene and the others saw a long trail of Jews on a forced march from the ghetto. Gestapo guards were shouting orders to the sick and the elderly, kicking and shoving rifle butts into those who couldn't keep pace. Irene watched as an old rabbi, clutching his Torah, hobbled alongside a woman in the final months of pregnancy. Children screamed and clung to their mothers' skirts. Later that day, Irene discovered what had happened to the people. Walking to the center of the town, she found masses of open graves filled with bodies. As she moved along the graves, she made a vow that she would find a way to help the Jews of the ghetto.

A short time later, the chance to help came.

Transferred to the officers' dining rooms, Irene soon met twelve Jewish men and women who had been ordered to work in the laundry rooms. She could see that they were half-starved and exhausted from long hours of labor, so she began smuggling bits of bread and other leftovers out of the dining rooms. From time to time, Irene passed information to the Jews from conversations she had overheard.

Eventually, Irene and the Jews formed a news network that warned people in the ghetto about scheduled raids, allowing them time to find a way to hide. Soon, more than three hundred Jews had managed to escape. Angered, the Germans ordered the liquidation of the ghetto and deportations to the death camps began.

Irene was afraid for her Jewish friends, but felt powerless to help. What could she do?

And then one day, an elderly major she had waited on in the dining rooms asked her if she would become his housekeeper. Irene accepted the offer and immediately sent word to the Jews that she would leave a basement window in the major's villa open for them. Soon, one by one, her friends arrived.

For three years, Irene acted as a housekeeper for the major, hiding the Jews in the coal room of the cellar and supplying them with food from upstairs. And then, one day, it happened.

On a trip to the village to do errands for the major, Irene and a number of other people were



rounded up by the local Gestapo and ordered to watch the hangings of several Polish families and the Jews they had been hiding.

Some time later, Irene was allowed to return to the villa, but she was so upset that she forgot to leave the key in the door so that, if the major returned suddenly, he would not be able to open it himself. Walking to the kitchen, she found four of the Jewish women who frequently came upstairs to help her when the German was away.

Suddenly, the front door opened and the major walked in. Seeing Irene and the others, the officer was outraged.

How could she do this? Did she know what could happen to her? Yes, Irene answered, she had just been to the village. But no one had the right to murder because of someone's religion or race. And these people were her friends.

Moments went by. Finally, the major spoke. He could not do that to her, he said. He couldn't just let her die after all she had done for him.

Falling to her knees, Irene grabbed the German's hand and kissed it. Not for herself, she would say many years later, but for the Jews of the villa and for all the people in hiding who depended on her.

Weeks later, with the Germans in retreat, the major deserted the villa, leaving Irene and her friends behind. Together, they waited for the war to end, moving into the Ukrainian forest and offering aid to Jews and freedom fighters who

needed them. When the Russians moved in, the Jews were freed and Irene was sent to a displaced persons camp. In 1949, she came to the United States and settled in California. But she never lost touch with her Jewish friends.

Not long ago, Irene was asked what lessons could be learned from what she had done.

We must teach that we belong together, she said. We all live by one God....

## John

John Weidner grew up in the little French village of Collonges, close to the Swiss border. His father was a minister of the Seventh Day Adventist Church and taught Latin and Greek at the local academy.

In the home where John and his older sister, Gabrielle, grew up, prejudice against Jews was not permitted. The children were taught the words of the Hebrew prophets and were often reminded that Christ himself was a Jew.

After graduation from the University of Geneva, John moved to Paris, where he went into business for himself. Then, in June of 1940, the Germans took control of France and began their persecution of the Jews.

One day, while waiting for a train, John Weidner saw a group of women and children who were being deported to the camps. In the confusion, a baby began to cry. One of the soldiers guarding the Jews ordered the infant's mother to make it

stop crying. Then, suddenly, he reached out for the child and threw it to the station floor.

Sometime later, John returned to his family home in Collonges determined to find a way to smuggle Jews across the border and into Switzerland, a neutral country. Working by himself at first, he soon found he needed the help of his parents and his sister, Gabrielle. Soon, he had built an underground organization that became known as Dutch-Paris. John and Gabrielle headed the group, working out an escape route through Holland and Belgium, and onto France and Switzerland.

Eventually, the sister-and-brother team had nearly three hundred volunteers, each with assignments so dangerous that only the barest facts were known to anyone.

John and Gabrielle faced enormous hazards in their rescue efforts. Travel was a problem during the cold winter months, and hiding places along the network of stations leading from one country to another had to be changed frequently to avoid discovery. John's old school in Collonges became the last stopover before the escape into Switzerland, and he and the others often had to cross on skis. Then there was the problem of raising enough money for bribes and false identification papers.

One night, a young woman working with the rescuers was captured. Arrested, interrogated, and tortured, the woman broke down, confessing the names of one hundred fifty people in the

underground. All were arrested and shipped to concentration camps. Gabrielle was among those who never returned.

A short time after, John was arrested and sentenced to death. On the day before his execution, one of John's guards noticed a small, pocket-sized Bible in his jacket. Taking the young prisoner to the third floor, the guard pointed to a small window that overlooked a hidden courtyard. John jumped, landing uninjured on the ground below. Moving quickly into a thick stand of trees, he found his way to a friend's home. Later, with the help of the French underground, John reached London and met with the Allied Command to plan the rescue of more than two hundred Allied soldiers and airmen in Europe.

Despite the loss of so many people, the members of Dutch-Paris continued their work until the end of the war. John is modest about the work he did. In a recent film about the rescuers, John said that the most important thing in life is to have a heart that is open to the sufferings of others.

### Germaine, Liliane, and François

Germaine Belline was a young mother when the German Army marched into Belgium in May of 1940. During the early months of the occupation, her husband was taken prisoner and shipped to Germany, leaving Germaine to carry on the family's tailoring shop in La Louvière, a



factory town thirty miles southwest of Brussels.

By 1941, the Nazis had begun the deportation of Belgian Jews to the camps of Eastern Europe. And it was during this time that a town house in the middle of La Louvière became a haven of rescue.

The first to arrive at the Belline home were two orphaned Jewish boys. Later, Germaine took in other Jews. Once, when friends learned that they were about to be arrested, Germaine supplied them with false ID papers, ration cards, and a hiding place. Elza, the couple's only child, went into hiding in the Belline home.

Soon, Germaine was protecting and feeding thirty-one Jewish refugees with the help of her daughter, Liliane, and her son, François. During this time, food was scarce and the roundups of the Jews in La Louvière increased.

Late in the war, Germaine's husband, Charles, escaped from the German prison camp and became an officer in the Belgian underground.

Until the end of the war, Liliane and her brother, François, worked in countless rescue efforts with their parents, smuggling guns, food, and false IDs to Jews in hiding. Often, they played with children of Nazi sympathizers, so that their underground activities would not be suspected. At night, they frequently led Jewish refugees to hiding places in remote villages outside of town. Each evening, the people of La Louvière would drape their windows with heavy, black air raid blankets. In the Belline home, this was the signal

for silent games with the Jewish refugees and a chance for hushed conversation.

There were many crises during those years. Two babies were born, with Germaine and the other women acting as midwives, since no doctor could be called to the house. And there was the evening when three German soldiers on patrol suddenly burst into the Bellines' living room. Germaine startled the soldiers by lifting up her skirt, making it look like she was dressing. The embarrassed soldiers made a fast retreat. Liliane was once arrested by the Gestapo and questioned, but her quick-witted answers finally led to her release.

After the war, the Belline family moved to the United States, but they continued their friendship with the refugees. François, once an eight-year-old smuggler of guns and Jews, became an ace test pilot. Liliane is now a languages professor at a New Jersey university. Of the family's wartime activities, she has said that their mother didn't give them any choice. They were simply told not to tell a soul about what the Bellines were doing.

### Willy

By September of 1944, Germany was suffering heavy losses, not only on its Eastern European Front but at home as well. With millions of young men on the battlefields, there was a desperate need for workers in the industrial plants and mu-

nitions factories. Trains began arriving from Auschwitz and other concentration camps, loaded with prisoners who were immediately put to work. Most of these were lame, sick, and half-starved. Ray Kaner was among them.

After five years at Auschwitz, the young seventeen-year-old girl was so thin that her stunted growth made her look like a small child. When she arrived in Hambieren, Germany, she was ordered to a construction site, loading heavy sacks onto wagons and hauling equipment up steep hills and down into ravines that were full of mud and garbage.

One evening, after Ray returned to her prison block, a sixty-year-old guard named Willy Minke took pity on her and left his post to smuggle food from the officers' dining room. Returning to Ray's barracks, he located the young girl and offered her the food. Then, while Willy stood guard at the window, Ray crawled under her cot and ate.

As the months wore on, food at the Hambieren camp grew scarce. Despite this, Willy continued to smuggle scraps of leftovers from the dining room. Soon, he found lighter work for Ray in the officers' barracks.

In January of 1945, the prisoners of Hambieren were marched to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, and Willy was ordered to go with them. Arriving in Belsen, he found conditions to be the worst he had seen. Soon, Willy and Ray, along with the others, were stricken with typhus

and dysentery. During the time that they were ill, the two lost contact with each other.

Finally, in June of 1945, Bergen-Belsen was liberated by the Allies. Ray was among the survivors.

After months in a hospital, Ray Kaner located her friend, Willy, and his wife. She discovered that Willy had been arrested during the liberation, but was later released on the testimony of other Jewish prisoners he had helped.

Willy and his wife continued their friendship with Ray Kaner long after she had emigrated to America, a friendship that lasted until Willy's death.

### Jonka

Jonka Kowalyk still finds it hard to talk about her activities during the war. Remembering how afraid everyone was, she adds that there was never a time when they weren't waiting to be arrested.

Jonka had good reason to be scared. From 1942 until 1944, she and her widowed mother hid fourteen Ukrainian Jews in the attic of their home in a small farming village that bordered a Nazi labor camp.

One of ten children, Jonka worked as a seamstress, making barely enough money to pay for food for herself and her mother. Often, as she sat at her window, she would see the lines of Jewish



prisoners as they were marched to and from their work sites. Jonka smuggled food into the camp when she could. One time, she was shot in the leg by an SS guard who had warned her to stay away.

When Jonka's mother became very ill, she walked back to the camp to persuade a German officer to send an inmate doctor to her mother's bedside. When the Jewish physician arrived, he treated the mother and then begged Jonka to find him a hiding place. Without stopping to think about the consequences, Jonka told the prisoner that, if he could find a way to escape, she would hide him in the attic of her home.

Several weeks later, the prisoner, Dr. Solomon Berger, and thirteen other inmates, escaped from the camp while it was being liquidated and the inmates deported. Unable to turn the people away, Jonka and her mother found room for all of them in the attic of their little cottage. That night, as deportation lines passed in front of the Kowalyk home, Jonka ran out and grabbed a three-year-old child, taking him to Kraków to stay with a relative of hers.

During the two years that the Jews were in hiding, there were constant dangers. Gestapo patrols often moved through the village and carried out inspections. Suspicious neighbors sent the secret police to check on the Kowalyks' activities. More than once, Jonka and her group owed their lives to an old mandolin and a wooden flute. Keeping the instruments close at hand, the

woman would run into her garden whenever the Nazis approached and begin playing. The music distracted the patrols and signaled the Jews upstairs to find places to hide.

There were other threats. Once, as the Germans broke into the attic seconds after the Jews had escaped to an underground bunker beneath the house, they found a dish of freshly snuffed-out cigarettes and a set of playing cards. Jonka's nine-year-old nephew, who had followed the soldiers upstairs and who knew of the conspiracy, tugged on the arm of an officer.

"Don't tell my mother," the boy whispered frantically. "*She'll kill me!*" he said, explaining that he and several friends often hid in the attic to smoke and gamble in secrecy. The child was so convincing that the officer believed his story and called off the search.

As the weeks and months dragged on, Jonka and her mother faced one crisis after another. When one of the Jews became ill and died, there was the question of how to dispose of the body. Another time, one of the children crept out of the house to play with some children, and told them where she lived. Always, the simplest duties were difficult to carry out. Chamber pots and garbage had to be removed every day, and medicines had to be found for people who became sick.

Through it all, Jonka and her mother continued their work. Jonka made clothes for the people and shared her meager food rations with them, often going hungry so that they might eat.



After the war, Jonka received an anonymous letter threatening her life and warning her to leave the country. No longer safe, she left her family and went to the United States. For a short time, she was married to Dr. Berger, the physician who had treated her mother. But the marriage didn't last and Jonka was alone once again.

Eventually, Jonka Kowalyk found work as a seamstress in New York, saving bus fare by walking two hours each day to and from work so that she could send money to her family in Russia each month. Later she skipped meals in order to bring her young nephew and his wife to America. This was the same nephew who had once bravely fooled the German officer on the day of the raid. When it came to helping others, Jonka Kowalyk always found a way.

## Epilogue

**P**hilip P. Hallie, author of *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, the story of the rescuers of Le Chambon, wrote:

*Rescue is not always accompanied by blaring guns and blaring bugles. Sometimes the quiet kind can be just as effective — and just as dangerous.*

When we think of the quiet courage of Miep and Henk Gies, the people of Le Chambon, and all the others who refused to turn their backs on the Jews of the Holocaust, we ask ourselves how it happened that these few men, women, and children gathered the strength to face the risks they had to take. Who were the rescuers, and why did they do what they did?

Nechama Tec, a well-known sociologist and herself a hidden child, suggests that the Holocaust rescuers were people who acted out of a deep moral conviction to respond to the suffering of another human being. Because of this conviction, the rescuers did what their consciences told them they had to do. And because of these singular acts of goodness, more than two million people were saved from the gas chambers.

During the years following the war, many rescuers did not want their identities known, particularly in countries where anti-Semitism was strong. Rescuers were often thrown into jail, shot by a neighbor, or simply disappeared. Many, like Oskar Schindler and Hermann Graebe (the only German to testify against the Nazis at the Nuremberg trials) were forced to leave the country. Elie Wiesel, a survivor of the camps and a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, talks of the moral obligation to protect the welfare and the rights of others:

*Let us not forget, after all, that there is always the moment when the moral choice is made. Often it is because of . . . one person (that) we are able to make a different choice, a choice for humanity, for life. And so we must know these good people who helped Jews during the Holocaust. We must learn from them, and in gratitude, we must remember them.*

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