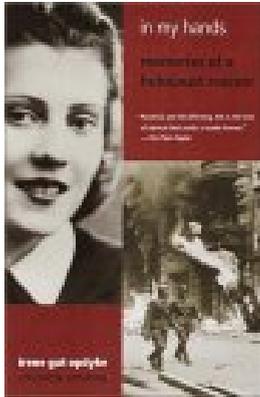

In My Hands: Memories of a Holocaust Rescuer by Irene Gut Opdyke with Jennifer Armstrong (1999), 275 pages.



Jennifer Armstrong is actually the ghostwriter of this autobiographical book. She was obviously fascinated by the dramatic adventures in Gut's youth. The heroine and her family have been residing in California for many decades. Armstrong treads carefully through the maze of the often confusing history and complicated geography of Eastern Europe. There are some gaps and occasional errors.

It is a very inspiring story. When the war began in 1939, Irene Gutówna was seventeen years old, the oldest of five sisters. Notwithstanding their German-sounding name, her parents were Polish Catholics, dividing their residences between Upper Silesia (near Katowice) and the Radom district (near the Vistula River). Her father was a chemist. Irene was an assistant nurse in an army hospital, rapidly evacuated east as German divisions overran western Poland. She wound up in Tarnopol near Równo (*Pol. Równe*), which the author mislabels as Kowno in Lithuania. A harrowing return to German-occupied Poland (via Kiev!) is the first part of her story.

The main theme, begins with Irene's capture by a German "*łapanka*" (a popular term describing random arrests by the police, often used to catch young people for forced labor). She was compelled to work in a munitions factory, which in 1942 was moved from the Radom area closer to the German-Soviet front. Of all places, she ended up in the same town of Tarnopol. (Here a correction of one spelling error: the name of the munitions factory could not possibly be the "Herres-Krafa-Park" but, most likely, the "Heeres Kraftwagen Lager", camouflaging the true function of the place).

Amazingly, this young Polish girl dared to challenge the evil of Hitlerite terror as soon as she was reassigned as a maid to a German officer. She began hiding Jewish workers (those who worked in the factory or in a large laundry place), one at the time, in nearly unbelievably places: in an air duct of the villa where she worked; in the attic; and even in German major's bathroom. When the situation became too dangerous, she evacuated her entire group of twelve charges to a nearby forest by caring out a daring escape plan. Subsequently she supplied food for them for many weeks by brazenly raiding the supplies of her masters. It is hard for the reader to fathom what induced Irene to take such risks: one false step would have resulted in her immediate execution. Was it then faith? Perhaps, but what of the priest who only offered lukewarm advice? Was it her anti-German attitude? But what of her comments about some decent Germans she met? Was it her high calling as a nurse who felt compelled to help people in dire distress? One must conclude that Irene Gutówna is a most compassionate, exceptional human being. The reader is glad to learn that all those whom she rescued survived the war and have had an opportunity to attest to her courage.

Her return once again in 1944 to central Poland as the German armies retreated, landed her in the forests near the town of Kielce, the hiding places of Polish partisans. She was serving as a liaison girl. Her fiancé was killed. Irene found herself the victim of post-war persecution with the communist police looking for her. Her father was killed, her mother passed away, and she faced only one real choice: to get away from the world which brought misery to everyone she knew, including herself. Thus she escaped to the West, ultimately to America. We note with a sigh of relief that both the Vatican and the Israeli authorities recognized her exemplary deeds.

George Suboczewski
