

In My Hands: Memories of a Holocaust Rescuer Study Guide

In My Hands: Memories of a Holocaust Rescuer by Irene Gut Opdyke

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Summary

A former resident of Poland tells her experiences first helping rescue Jews from Hitler's regime then as a partisan fighter for Poland during the time of World War II in the book "In My Hands" by Irene Gut Opdyke. A central image in the book is that of a baby thrown into the air and shot by a German officer. Despite the cruelty going on around her during the time of war, Irena took advantage of her free will and chose to help those around her. With her care, thirteen Jews were saved directly from Nazi cruelty while dozens more were indirectly helped by her warnings of coming raids and offerings of food and supplies.

Irena began her experience as a Holocaust rescuer while in nursing school in Radom during the beginning of World War II. With the Germans bearing down on the city, Irena volunteered to go when the Polish army asked for doctors and nurses to travel with the retreating troops. A few days later, Poland was split between the Germans and the Russians and Irena learned she was part of a people without a country. She had little choice but to stay with the now illegal Polish army living and hiding out in the woods. During a trip to town for supplies Irena was raped and left for dead by Soviet soldiers. Different soldiers found her and she was taken to a hospital where she was treated for her injuries. Considered a prisoner of war, she was forced to work in the hospital in Ternopol once she recovered. One of the doctors, Dr. Ksydzof, took offense to Irena and attempted to rape her one night. She fought him off and reached out to another doctor in the hospital who helped her to escape.

For a year she lived and worked with Miriam, a country doctor in Svetlana, but when an opportunity arose for her to be reunited with her family, she jumped for it. In her attempt to get a train ticket more quickly, she passed herself off as German, but she was recognized in the park at Ternopol and was arrested as an escaped prisoner of war. The doctor who tried to rape her had spread rumors that she had been involved in a dangerous group of Polish partisans. Hoping that they would be able to catch her group of resistors, the Russians allowed her the freedom of spending the night with a friend after several days of interrogations. Irena gave them a fake address and ran for the train station as soon as she was able. She learned the train for which she had a ticket had not yet left.

Once she reached the town of Radom, she found her family living with her Aunt Helen. For a short while the family enjoyed a reunion but soon the Germans called for Irena's father, wanting him to teach them how to run a factory he'd set up in their hometown. Both Irena's mother and father went back to Kozlowa Gora and take the three younger girls but left Irena and Janina with Aunt Helen.

Around this same time, because she could speak Polish, Irena was given a job working with Herr Schulz, the overseer of the mess hall and living quarters of the German soldiers in Radom. It was after Irena saw a mass shooting in the Jewish ghetto outside the dining hall of the German army's quarters that she became actively involved in helping to save the Jews. Her first act of defiance came in the form of a metal box of



food that she pushed beneath the fence that separated the ghetto from the rest of the city. In those times, this act was a capital crime punishable by death. Irena did not stop there but promised the Jews in her employ in the laundry facility of the German base that she would keep them safe. She eavesdropped on the German leaders' conversations during meals and passed along information when she learned of a coming raid or scheduled extermination. It was during this time that Irena went with her friend Helen to try to see Helen's husband, who had been captured by the Germans, that Irena saw the baby thrown into the air and shot by the German soldier, a vision to which she refers several times in the book.

Meanwhile, plans were being made to clear Radom of Jews and Irena put herself in danger to protect those she swore she'd help. After a call for them to return to their camps for extermination, Irena hid them first in a secret space in the laundry room, then later in a vent in a German major's bathroom. This same German major decided to move into a nearby villa and employed Irena as a housekeeper. This house had a basement, formerly used as servant's quarters, in which Irena stowed six of her Jewish friends, along with Helen's husband and three of his friends. One day the major learned about two of the female Jews being hidden in his basement. He was angry, but agreed to keep Irena's secret if she would be his mistress.

This arrangement continued until higher powers in Germany demanded the major give up his Polish mistress. At this point, Irena transported her Jewish friends to the forest where other Jews were living in a dugout shelter. The pregnant Ida Haller was hidden at the home of another man who was helping the Jews. In an attempt to keep her safe, the major took Irena to Kielce where she ran away from him and joined the partisans. These partisans fought against anyone trying to harm Poland. Irena fell in love with and was to marry Janek, the head of the group, but he was killed just days before the wedding. After months of resistance work with the partisans, Irena contracted pneumonia. It took her months to recover. Once she was better, the war was over and Irena decided to go searching for her family again. She started in Radom but her Aunt Helen had heard nothing from the family recently. Irena then moved to Krakow hoping to meet up with some of the Jewish people she saved. She met Fanka who got her in touch with the others. Irena was happy to learn that Ida's baby had been born safely and was well. It was when she attempted to visit the baby that she was arrested by Russians. For days she was forced to work and was interrogated by the Russians about her work in the partisan movement. They seemed to think she was the leader of the group of partisans in their area. She was finally able to escape and was taken to Krakow for her safety.

Irena spent time in a camp for displaced persons where she was interviewed by William Opdyke about her experiences as a holocaust rescuer. Opdyke told her that she would be welcome in the United States. In America she got a job in a factory and learned English. Later, she and Opdyke met up again and are married.



Tears - Part One: Before the Storm

Summary

Irena Gut Opdyke's work in helping the Jews during the holocaust directly saved the lives of at least thirteen Jews while it was unknown how many lives she might have saved indirectly. As an older woman she was recognized by Israel's Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial for her heroism and was honored as one of the Righteous Among the Nations. In her book "In My Own Hands" Irena tells the story of her life during World War II.

In the introduction "Tears," Irene writes of a bird that was shot above a wheat field. She indicates what she had actually seen was not a bird in a wheat field, but she doesn't have the words yet to describe what she had really seen. She pens her concern that if she begins writing the heart of her story too quickly, the reader will not believe what she has to say. She speaks of the tears of trees that once became amber, a substance Polish smugglers could have been put to death for trying to get out of the country. She compares this smuggling of amber to the smuggling of Jews that took place when the Germans took charge of the country in 1939.

In the first part of her novel "I Was Almost Fast Enough," Irene starts her story by telling how her parents met in the chapter "Lilac Time." They met during a customary launching of boats by single girls in 1921. The two were married and Irena was born May 5, 1922. At one year old, Irena was saved from falling into the river by the family dog. The family's priest told Irena's mother that God had plans for Irena. Irena writes of her four sisters and their love of doctoring sick animals. One of these animals the girls rescued and doctored was a stork that they named Bociek. Her family was close, loving and deeply spiritual. Irena remembers believing that with God watching over the country that Poland would never fall.

In the chapter "Before the Storm," Irena writes that in 1934, Adolf Hitler had become president and chancellor of Germany. Irena didn't pay much attention to her father's political talk and didn't see the Germans as a threat. In their village of Kozlowa Gora they were six kilometers from the German border and didn't think much about crossing the border or interacting with the Germans. Because the family's last name was Gut, many people thought the family was German, but they were instead fiercely devoted to their Polish ancestry. They were aware that many countries were jealous of the rich farming land and guarded their country closely.

As a teen, Irena was not interested in boys, but imagined herself being involved in great heroic feats and sacrifices. Irena's grandmother, one Christmas, read her future by pouring wax into cold water. The resulting blob looked like a ship with a crucifix on its prow. Irena believed she was bound for righteous adventures. Meanwhile, Irena's mother and father encouraged her to help others, so she joined the Red Cross as a candy striper. She admired the nuns she met in the hospital and considered joining this



religious service but her father encouraged her to train as a nurse first. Four years after Hitler took charge of Germany, Irena began studying at the nursing school of St. Mary's Hospital. She took her studies very seriously and didn't go to parties like the other girls. In her youth and innocence, she was embarrassed by the male patients with whom she worked in the men's ward of the hospital.

During her nursing school, Irena became aware that Hitler wanted to reincorporate Poland into Germany. Her parents asked her to come home, believing war was coming. She decided to continue her studies so she could serve Poland if needed. It was when Irena visited her home for the first time since she went away to school that she noticed the changes in the people and the town. People who were once loyal Poles were claiming Germany as their home country. She was seeing signs of persecution of the Jews. Irena began to realize that despite the strides Poland had made as a country, Hitler believed the people there were good only for manual labor and for this reason, wanted to destroy them.

Analysis

Irene's introduction to this book uses a good deal of imagery. She doesn't dive right into the ugliness of the things she saw during her work in World War II, but instead writes about them in terms of birds and jewels. Birds are creatures used often in the book and seem to carry significant meaning for Irena. It is in the very first sentence of her book that Irena begins this theme of incorporating images of birds into her book. This particular bird is one that is scared and made to fly up, or flushed, out of a field so that a hunter could shoot it for food. Irena makes it clear it wasn't the simple shooting of the bird that had caused her so much agony, but she isn't ready to describe what she had really seen yet.

Another important bird mentioned in this section of the book was the stork, Bociiek. Irena and her sisters found this stork suffering with an injured wing. With their mother's nursing skills and the girls' care, they kept him in the cellar during the winter, intending to free him in the spring when he was healed. Bociiek will be mentioned again later in the book.

While reading this book, it is important for the reader to keep in mind that it is non-fiction. That means the events that Irena describes in the book really happened. The content of her book is based upon a truly terrible time in human history when both the Jews and the Poles were abused and killed by the Germans. Also note that Irena includes information about her home and family life before the war began. They lived only a short distance from the Poland/German border so the family thought nothing of moving freely between the two countries and had pleasant interactions with the Germans. This freedom of movement and pleasant relationships with the Germans would later be starkly contrasted with the hate the Germans developed for those of Polish descent. Although Irena had a German appearance and a last name that could have been German, giving them opportunities later to avoid perhaps avoid some of the abuse they suffered, she and her family were very proud of their Polish heritage.



Another theme introduced in this section of chapters is that of God's mercy that was shown to Irena. As a baby, she wandered out to a river near her home where she very well could have fallen in and drowned if not for the action of the family dog. This dog grabbed the back of Irena's diaper and kept her away from the river until her mother noticed what was happening. At the time, the priests at the church where Irena's family attended told her parents that God must have great plans for her in order to allow her to be saved in this way.

Free will is another theme introduced in this section of chapters. Remember that at this point, Irena and her family don't really know how bad the war will get. The reader has the benefit of knowing the outcome of the war and the cruelty it will inflict on the people. With her religious background and desire to help, Irena decided to stay on in Radom even though her parents wanted her to come home because they feared war was coming. Irena exercised free will when she choose to stay in Radom where she believed she would be able to serve her country instead of going back to her family.

Vocabulary

unnatural, mingled, fortress, smuggled, bewitching, coursing, lavished, migrate, dabbled, basilica, oblivious, fanatical, cronies, bountiful, abstract, fantastical, munitions, immigrants, imminent



Part One: The Lightning War - The Hospital

Summary

In the chapter “The Lightning War,” just after Irena returned to school after summer vacation, the Germans and Russians signed a non-aggression treaty. The people of Poland wondered what would happen to their country. On Sept. 1, Irena was walking to the hospital when she heard planes and explosions. One of the interns from the hospital pulled Irena out of the middle of the street as she stood in shock. The hospital was crowded with civilians and members of the military wounded by the German attack. Irena worried about her family.

The Polish army began to retreat from Radom, and Irena joined them when the officers asked for volunteer nurses and doctors. The plan was to blow up the bridge once the Polish soldiers crossed the Wisla River. They reached a hospital and began unloading the wounded soldiers but when they got word that German forces were crossing the river on pontoons, they were forced to move again. A soldier told Irena they would go by train to Kovno. Once they reached the train station, the bomber planes began dropping bombs on the station. Irena helped load one of the wounded men, and then the train began to move them toward Russia.

In the chapter “Mother Russia,” once in Kovno, Irena sat outside a military warehouse with the soldiers. A general told them that their country had been divided up between Russia and Germany. Poland no longer existed. The soldiers took supplies from the military warehouse and headed for the woods. Irena went with them. Eight soldiers and officers killed themselves the first night. The remaining men set up a hierarchy and decided to move toward Lvov. Irena was not sure why it was decided to go to Lvov. During their move, Irena was startled by a bird being flushed out of the woods by a soldier in her group and shot for food. Living in the forest took its toll on Irena and she became anemic and weak. In early January, Irena was sent on a bartering mission. She was left alone to stand watch. As she waited for the others, a Russian patrol drove down the road and spotted her. She tried to run for cover but the Russians caught her. As she ran, she thought of herself as having the ability to fly away from the Russians like a bird.

In the chapter “The Hospital,” Irena detailed how the Russian patrol members beat and raped her. She was left for dead, but another patrol found her and took her to a hospital. A doctor later asked her name and age. She told Irena that she was in a hospital, but was a prisoner. The doctor, Olga Pavlovsaya, told Irena she would heal in time. After that she would work at the hospital. Dr. Pavlovsaya was kind to Irena. Irena remembered the doctor touching her face and saying a word in Russian that sounded like bird when they first met. Irena was given the chance to bathe and a fresh gown, and then shown her bed in a nurse’s dormitory. She met her roommates, Galla and Maruszka, and began to learn Russian from them. The papers were full of news about



the Russian capture of Poland and the nurses were forced each night to listen to Communist propaganda. Irena was lonely and anxious for news about her family.

Months into Irena's capture, Dr. Olga was transferred and the new administrator, Dr. Ksydzof, hated Irena. She felt that Dr. Ksydzof personally hated her and planned to bring her work at the Ternopol hospital to an end. One night, Dr. Ksydzof went to Irena's room with the intent of raping her. She hit him with a bottle, and then ran for help fearing that she had killed Dr. Ksydzof. She found Dr. David in the emergency room. He went to check her room and found no one. Irena told him it was Dr. Ksydzof who tried to attack her. He agreed the man was now her enemy and came up with a plan to get her away from the hospital.

Analysis

Birds continue to dot the landscape of these chapters of Irena's book. One of the first mentions of the bird in this section of chapters is similar to that one in the beginning of the book. Irena was walking alone and the sound of her steps frightened a bird. When the bird flew up, it was shot by one of the former Polish soldiers for food. Irena was shocked at the sudden killing and sad that it was she who caused the bird's death. Notice also Irena imagined herself turning into a bird and flying away as she tried to run from the Russian patrol. Even though she willed herself to take flight, she was not able to do so. A final mention of the bird in this section occurs when Irena was in the hospital. She had just woken up and was being examined by a doctor who spoke only Russian. She remembered this doctor saying something that sounded like bird.

After the war began and Radom was attacked, Irena seemed to follow the crowd as she followed the illegal soldiers into hiding in the woods instead of using her own free will to make her choices. Notice, however, that she had chosen, consciously, to go with these soldiers, hoping to be able to help the war movement.

Notice Irena's hesitation at including information about her rape by the Russian soldiers in her memoir. She writes that she was a good Catholic girl who had never had a boyfriend and had never even been kissed. However, the details of what the Russians did to her are too important to the story for to have not included them. Although Irena admits in her writing that it was hard to say, she includes the details of her rape and beating to show to her readers that she, too, suffered a great deal of injustice at the hands of the Russians. Irena also writes about the new hospital administrator who came to work at the hospital. This man took an immediate and personal dislike to her because she was Polish. He tried to rape her but she was able to fight him off. Although it seemed Irena might have escaped the man's cruelty when she escaped the hospital, he continued to cause problems for her.

Note during Irena's time working in the Ternopol hospital, she and the other nurses were forced to listen to Russian propaganda. Although Irena was able to get newspapers, she didn't take the news she read at face value. She realized that the Russians were putting their own spin on the war efforts in order to manipulate the people. She continued to



worry about her family, who was living in the part of Poland that had been taken over by Germany.

Vocabulary

speculating, detonations, carnage, aloft, parapets, transports, incendiary, quavered, pelting, shrapnel, denial, insignia, pandemonium, commandeered, exiles, caricature, scavenging, anemic, haven, compatriots, mutely, propaganda, naïve, recoiled, forge, conferring



Part One: Svetlana Year - Through the Gate

Summary

In the chapter "Svetlana Year," Irena got off the train in Svetlana and was greeted by Dr. David's friend, Miriam, who worked as a doctor in that small town. For her time in Svetlana, Irena took on the cover of Miriam's cousin, Rachel Myer, who had come to learn from Miriam. She learned much from Miriam, who was paid mostly in food and labor from the poor people she treated. As she read newspaper reports of the war, which she didn't completely trust, Irena wonders what was happening to her family. In January, nearly one year after Irena's arrival, Dr. David learned Poles separated from their families would be allowed to cross battle lines in the spring. She was to go to Ternopol even though Miriam warned her that it would be dangerous for her there.

In the chapter "Through the Gate," Irena arrived in Ternopol and headed for the marketplace. Once she got close, she saw a line of people stretching for blocks. They were Poles, like her, waiting to register for a transit pass. As she looked for a restroom, Irena found a shorter line for German citizens and Polish citizens of German descent. She decided to try to pass herself off as German. At the table, she learned that the town where her family was living had been taken over by Germany. Irena decided it would be best for her to go to Radom where she would try to locate her Aunt Helen to find if she knew where the family was. She got a pass for the train but did not go to the train station right away. She instead lingered in a park where she was recognized by two Russian soldiers.

Analysis

Although Irena had become a fugitive from Russian captivity, and was staying with Miriam in Svetlana under an assumed identity, this time in Irena's life seemed almost peaceful. She learned much from Miriam and had time to rest. However, trouble was brewing for her in Ternopol as Dr. Ksyzof, the man who tried to rape her, had been spreading rumors that she was part of a Polish partisan group, a group of Polish citizens who rejected the command of both Germany and Russia. These rumors were not true, but made it more difficult and dangerous for Irena when she had to return to Ternopol, the same town as the hospital in which she had been held captive, in order to get a pass to go back to her family.

Again, Irena exercised her free will when she decided to go back to Ternopol. Miriam had begged her not to go back to that city. The reason why Miriam asked her to stay there was for her safety as well as Irena's. Had Irena mentioned Miriam's or Dr. David's names to the Russians, they could have been arrested also. Miriam also understood the circumstances under which Irena left Ternopol. She knew the danger of Irena being



spotted and arrested in that city was high. In reality, Irena could have chosen to stay with Miriam and waited until the war was over to try to find her family but her connection to them was so strong she wanted to take to first opportunity to be reunited with them.

Although it pained Irena, she took advantage of her German appearance and her German sounding name to get a train pass more quickly. She assumed that since she had been living a lie for a year that the end result of being with her family would justify the need to lie. The theme of the ironies that Irena notices in the war is introduced in this section as she notes that she must pretend to be German in order to be Polish again.

Vocabulary

kiosk, provincial, concocted, furor, receded, languidly, undulating, poise, repatriated, converged, waif, monotonous



Part One: My Heart, Like a Netted Bird

Summary

In the chapter, “My Heart, Like a Netted Bird,” Irena sat in an interrogation room, praying and waiting. The title of the chapter came from this experience as she described her heart hammering like a netted bird. She was finally taken to the commissar’s office where she was searched and frisked, and then asked questions. The commissar was obsessed with Dr. Ksydzof’s story that Irena was planted in the hospital by the partisan party and that she knew of the partisan’s plans. She was taken to a cell, then back to the commissar’s office and questioned again. She lied about where she had been for the past year. She knew the officers didn’t believe her. The third time she was taken for questioning, the commissar was eating breakfast in front of her. She refused to change her story. The fourth time, Irena was taken to the commissar’s office, he was kind but Irena knew the kindness was fake. He offered to let her go and stay with friends to get some rest. When Irena named a “friend” the commissar was interested but angry when she couldn’t come up with a last name or an address. He sent a guard to walk Irena to the house as she said she knew how to get there. She took the guard to a strange house. He left without making sure she went in. Irena took off for the train station on foot. At the station she learned the trains had been delayed and her train had not yet left.

Once the train entered German occupied land, the occupants were herded off into a quarantine camp. Jews were taken away. Prisoners were forced to work for room and board. One day, Irena was too sick to leave her bunk. When she spoke to the guard in German, he was shocked because he believed a German citizen had been wrongly sent to a Polish camp. He allowed her to be taken to the infirmary. Several months later when Irena was finally well, she and other prisoners were loaded into a cattle car. As they travel, she saw the lilacs blooming in the fields.

Since she had been gone for two years, Irena found Radom had been completely changed. Streets had been given German names. Irena tried to orient herself by identifying the buildings she once knew by their ruins. A man in a buggy asked if he could help her. He knew the Polish names of the streets and took Irena to her aunt’s house. She recognized her little sister, Bronina, standing by the gate. Her mother and father come from inside the house. Irena writes that her heart flew up when she saw them, like a bird released from a net.

Analysis

Irena continues the theme of the avian images in this section of the novel. The chapter entitled “My Heart, Like a Netted Bird” refers to her brief captivity by the Russian patrol, also referred to as the Red Army. Irena describes her heart as hammering during her experience, somewhat like a bird caught in a net. In this instance, the description was



fitting because birds are generally innocent and have done nothing to deserve their capture. Similarly, Irena had not done what the Russian commissar believed she had done to deserve her captivity and interrogation. Despite her innocence, Irena seemed strangely adept at handling her interrogator. She does not mention either Miriam or Dr. Davis to the commissar. It was important that she not mention them as they could have been imprisoned or killed if the Russians had learned they'd helped Irena escape from the hospital and had given her a place to stay. Irena also lied to him about where she'd been the last year. She knew the commissar didn't believe her but was consistent with her story. Perhaps it was because she seemed so innocent and gullible that the commissar gave Irena the chance to escape. He seemed to believe that she would lead the Russian patrol to the headquarters for the partisan activities. Instead, she tricked the officer by giving him the fake name Lalka when he asked for the name of a friend. She led the officer sent to walk her to Lalka's home to a house she'd never seen before. She'd chosen this house only because she saw an escape route in the back yard. He left without watching to be sure she went inside and she took the opportunity to run for the train station.

Irena experienced first hand the cruel ways in which the Poles were being treated by the Germans when her train took her to a quarantine camp instead of straight to Radom as she had expected. The German officers separated the Poles from the Jews and took the Jews away. Irena did not know where they went but it was important that she mention the separation to let the readers know how widespread the persecution of the Jews was. This experience of Irena's time in the quarantine camp also lets the reader know that the Russians and Germans aren't above tricking the Jews and Poles to get what they want from them. As Irena describes it, almost appeared as if the Germans were enjoying the frustration and fear they caused the Poles where they stopped at the camp and unloaded them. They made the people work for their room and board.

Interesting in this section is the German guard's reaction when Irena spoke to him in German. She was too sick to leave her bunk to work and the man had been sent to make her get up. Instead of continuing his cruelty when she spoke to him in German, he instead got a doctor, believing she was a German citizen who had been mixed in with the Poles. Even though Irena did not use her German appearance or her ability to speak German intentionally to get special favors, these traits did earn her the privilege of getting some form of medical care.

Note again the reference to the netted bird at the conclusion of this chapter. When Irena saw her mother and father, she described feeling as if her heart were flying up to the sky, somewhat like the captured bird might do if released from its net.

Vocabulary

commissariat, laboriously, fixated, sham, fervently, partisan, quarantine, segregation, efficiency



Part Two: When I Thought I Could Be Happy - Major Rugemer

Summary

In the chapter, "When I Thought I Could be Happy," Irena was overjoyed to be with her family again. She learned they have been making carpet slippers to earn some money. Her father had lost his job and the family fled east when Germany overtook Kozłowa Góra. Even in this part of Poland, the Polish were treated like prisoners. He mentioned the death penalty for helping the Jews, explaining these people were not wanted by the German government. His explanation was interrupted by the arrival of Janina. The family was thankful because they were together. After the younger girls had gone to bed, Irena told her family what happened to her in the time since they had last seen each other. Her father insisted that it was because God had plans for her that he did not let her die.

The next day, Janina took Irena around the city. Irena noticed the Germans were spreading propaganda blaming the Jews for the predicament in Poland. Because they were Poles, Janina and Irena were forced by law to step off the sidewalk to let Germans pass. Janina took her to a Glinice, a Jewish ghetto where all the Jews were forced to live. Janina stopped, under the cover of fixing Irena's collar, to let her get a good look at the guards and dog guarding the gate to the ghetto. Irena wanted to know what was happening, but Janina told her they didn't know or understand themselves.

Irena worked first in a German-run restaurant but was fired when the owner's wife caught the owner trying to kiss Irena. She next worked in a Polish run shop near Helen's home. She and her family members believed that if they could just hold out until the end of the war, things would get better. But soon, they learned Germany and the Soviet Union were engaged in combat with each other. In July the family's happiness was destroyed when the Germans took Tatus away to teach them how to make the ceramic factory he designed in Kozłowa Góra work. Irena's mother decided to take the three younger girls and go back to Kozłowa Góra. Irena and Janina were to stay with Helen because their mother had heard that young Polish girls with Germanic features were being put into brothels in Kozłowa Góra.

Meanwhile, conditions got worse in Radom. There were acts of rebellion against the Germans to which the Germans reacted by killing people on the street at random. Polish men were gathered up and trucked out of the city to a destination of which none were quite sure. More and more Jews were trucked into the city and forced into the two ghettos. Food was scarce.

One day at church Irena watched as a pigeon tried to escape the building through one of the windows in the nave. Suddenly, the service that Irena was attending was interrupted by German soldiers. They herded the parishioners into the street, and then



separated the elderly and children from the youths and middle aged. They were forced into transport vehicles and taken to a camp where they were told they would be taken to Germany and forced to work. A Nazi major arrived and picked out ten people, including Irena, to go with him.

In the section, "Major Rugemer," Irena and the others were brought back to Radom and put to work in an ammunition factory. Irena worked there for two weeks until she was sick and tired. One day the major visited the factory and she passed out in front of him. She woke in the major's office. He was surprised she spoke German and even more surprised when she told him she was Polish. He told her he admired her convictions for claiming Poland as her home land as so many Polish people were claiming German descent. He gave her a job in the officer's mess and allowed her to go home to her family.

The next morning Herr Schultz, for whom she was to work, gave her food. As he prepared her a plate, he told her that he needed her help translating the Polish of those with whom he now worked. She found that Schultz was a good man. Irena was in charge of helping him serve three meals a day in the officers' dining room and often helping to clean up. Schultz sent food home with Irena for her aunt and sister. Irena was almost happy in her new placement until one day while she was in the upstairs ballroom setting up for a banquet she saw what was actually happening in the Glinice ghetto. She was busy setting tables when she heard gunfire. She looked out the windows and witnessed SS men pouring into the ghetto, shooting the Jews. Just as Irena was about to scream, Schultz clamped a hand over her mouth. He warned her not to say anything about what she had seen, as she would be termed a "Jew lover." He reminded her that bad things happen to Jew lovers. He sent her home to recover from her shock. Irena realized she's just seen the Germans' answer to what they believed was the Jewish problem.

Analysis

The theme that God had been showing his mercy to Irena and had specific plans for her life was furthered in this chapter when Irena told her family about what the Russian patrol who captured her had done to her. Her father told her that if God had not had specific plans for her, He would not have allowed her to survive her beating and rape by the officers. Although it wasn't specifically noted as such, God was also merciful to Irena as she was put to work for a kind man who allowed her to take food home to her family. It was because of Schultz's help that she, her sister and Helen do not suffer as many other Poles did during that time period with lack of food and malnutrition.

It is in this section of the novel that Irena realized what it was the Nazis planned to do with the Jews. She had noticed the increasing signs of persecution of the Jews, but she and her family hadn't really known what the Germans had in mind for these people. First, the Germans were spreading propaganda blaming the Jews for all of the problems being faced by the Polish people. This propaganda was intended to make the Polish blame the Jews instead of the German for the persecution they were being forced to



undergo. As Herr Schulz told Irena, she doesn't want to be labeled as a Jew lover. Notice that while on their walk around the city, Janina made a point of making Irena look at the entrance to one of the Jewish ghettos. However, she was careful to do this under the cover of fixing Irena's collar so she doesn't draw attention to the fact that she was letting Irena get a good look at the ghetto. Notice also that Schulz protected Irena after she was shocked by what she saw taking place in the ghetto.

He clamped his hand over her mouth to keep her from screaming out loud and drawing attention from any German military in the building to her distress. He warned her that if she showed any regret or empathy for the Jews, she would be labeled as a "Jew lover."

Although the Polish in Radom were considered "free" they were still ruled cruelly by the Germans. For instance, when the Germans decided they needed Tatus to help them run the ceramics factory that he designed in Kozlowa Gora, they took him by force. Similarly, when the Germans decided they needed workers for their factories, the Germans stormed a church service Irena was attending. They separated the people by those who would be useful in service and those who wouldn't and take those who would be useful away without even allowing these to contact relatives to let them know what had happened. The description of this storming of the church service is included to let the readers know just how little the Germans thought of the Polish. They weren't considered people with any worth and value besides that of their ability to work.

Notice also in this section the mention of the bird that Irena saw in the church building just before the service was interrupted by the Germans. It was just as the benediction was about to begin that Irena noticed the pigeon, trapped in the main portion of the church, fluttering at the windows, determined to escape. Irena felt she needed to do something to help the bird escape but her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of German soldiers outside the church. Suddenly, all of the parishioners were like the bird, trying to escape from the church.

Vocabulary

awl, anew, caricaturing, depravity, fluency, brothels, adamant, sabotage, arbitrary, conscripts, denunciation, arbitrary, rote, solace, sacristy, desecrators, tangible, cynical, deport, ferocity, malevolence, labyrinthine



Part Two: A Drop in the Ocean - Only a Girl

Summary

As the chapter “A Drop in the Ocean” starts, Irena describes having the feeling that she had to do something to help the Jews. She decided to slip a box of cheese and apples under the fence around the ghetto. The next morning, the box was empty. Irena knew her actions called for punishment by death. Meanwhile, Janina had lost her job. Learning that her younger sisters in Kozłowa Góra were being forced to work in the mines, and not wanting the same work for Janina, Irena asked Schultz if her sister could work at the officers’ mess as well. He agreed. The operations, however, would be moving to Ternopol in the spring, she learned.

When the radio in the mess hall was tuned to German news, Irena thought Hitler sounded like a madman as he railed against the Jews. She didn’t understand how he thought these people were a threat to him. One day on their way to work, Irena and Janina saw bulldozers destroying the remains of the Jewish ghetto. Radio announcements declared Radom was Jew-free. Irena felt as if she had lost someone dear.

In the chapter, “But It Was Not a bird,” Irena describes how she was not unhappy to leave Radom, the place where she realized what it was Hitler planned to do with the Jews. One day at a church service in Ternopol, Irena and her sister met Helen Weinbaum and her mother. Helen’s husband had been taken to the work camp Arbeitslager. Helen heard some of the prisoners were being held in a village near them. Irena and Janina agreed to go with her to see if they could find him. They arrived at the marketplace and saw the SS men dividing the men, women and children. A guard shot at the people lining the fence looking for loved ones. Irena and the others ran, taking cover in an empty house. They realized it was a Jewish house that had been raided. From an upstairs window they watched the Jewish officers force the Jews to march, shooting those who didn’t move fast enough. Finally, Irena was the only one able to continue watching. She watched an officer throw something into the air like a bird. He shot it with his pistol while in the air. It fell to the ground next to its mother whom he also shot. After the trucks left with the Jews loaded on them, Irena and the others followed those trucks. Before they had gone far, they begin to hear shooting. Irena believed they have witnessed the worst things that man can do to another.

In the chapter, “Only a Girl,” along with her other duties from Radom, Irena was also put in charge of the laundry facility once they arrived in Ternopol. Twelve men and women from the Jewish work camp were employed at the laundry. They told her how miserable life was in the camp. Irena promised to look after them and bring them food when she was able. One man questioned her intentions, telling her she couldn’t do much because she was only a girl. That night during dinner, Irena met the infamous Rokita. Although



she was rattled by meeting this man who had such a cruel reputation, she went ahead and asked Schultz if she could have extra workers. Her request was allowed and she got 10 more workers. Because she was only a girl, nobody paid much attention to her while she was serving. She was able to overhear stories of the progress on the front from the officers. She was also able to listen to Rokita plan his days to “punish” the lazy Jews and arrange raids in the ghettos.

Analysis

These two chapters “A Drop in the Ocean” and “But It Was Not a Bird” seem to be the pivotal chapters in Irena’s story. It is in these chapters that Irena committed her first capital offense in her attempt to help the Jews. This capital offense came in the form of a tin box of food she had pushed under the fence of the Jewish ghetto. Irena felt as if she had lost members of her family when the Jewish ghetto was cleared and demolished and Radom was declared to be free of Jews.

Also in this section of the book, in the chapter “But It Was Not a Bird” Irena finally revealed to her readers what it was that she saw thrown up in the air and shot by the German officer. This was the image that has haunted Irena for so long. She described what she had seen as a bird because from a distance, it looked like the soldier had thrown a fat bird into the air. Irena was horrified when she realized that it wasn’t a bird but instead a Jewish baby. After killing the baby in such a merciless way right in front of its mother, the officer shot the mother as well.

The theme of the ironies of the situations in which Irena found herself is developed in this section of the novel. First, she discovered that she would be sent back to Ternopol as the German forces would be moving their headquarters to that city. This was ironic as Irena had run in fear for her life from Ternopol twice, yet her destiny seemed to keep returning her to that town. Also ironic In her chapter “Only a Girl” is that Irena was able to use what others believed were disadvantages to work in her advantage. One of the old Jewish men who worked in the laundry under Irena told her she could do nothing to help them because she was “only a girl.” Irena soon learned that her seeming lack of influence and power was an advantage as she was able to discretely eavesdrop on the conversations going on at the officers’ tables during dinner without being noticed. She found ways to get the information she gleaned about coming raids and exterminations to the Jews in hopes that they could escape before they were killed.

Note also in this section that despite the horrible things that Irena had seen thus far during the war, she was really very comfortably set with her job in the German headquarters. This is another instance where God has shown his mercy to Irena. Remember that her parents had been reduced to making carpet slippers out of bits of old tires and carpet to make money. Irena, and her sister as well, were employed by a kind boss who saw to it they had the things they needed to be well nourished and comfortable. While many of the Polish in this time period were in great need of food and supplies because of rationing, Irena and Janina were relatively well off.

Vocabulary

conscripted, fallow, reprisal, emaciated



Part Two: Stealing from Rokita - Puszczu Janowka

Summary

In the chapter, "Stealing from Rokita," whatever Irena overheard in the dining room, she shared with the Jews in the laundry room. One morning, her friends in the laundry were crying. Irena noticed Fanka Silberman was not there. She learned Fanka had been given a pass to visit her parents the day before and had not come back. Irena pretended she needed uniforms back from Fanka and managed to get a pass from the major. At the Silberman's house, the door was open. She called for Fanka but got no answer. As she walked to the staircase, a hand grabbed her ankle. Fanka told Irena her family had been taken. Although Fanka wanted to die, Irena told her she must live for her family. Back at the laundry, Irena swore to herself that the Germans would never take Fanka.

In the chapter, "Falling from My Hands," as the weather got colder, Irena asked Herr Schulz if she and her sister could have extra blankets for their beds. Schulz brought her a tall stack of blankets telling her that she must ask him if she ever needed anything. Irena got the feeling that Schulz knew what she was doing. The ladies in the laundry cut the blankets up and made coats out of them. Although the Nazi party recognized no religion, there were detailed plans being made for a Christmas party. Because they would be even busier with serving, Schulz told Irena that Janina would be needed to help with serving. Rokita noticed Janina right off. Irena warned Janina that Rokita was an evil man even though he was handsome.

During the evening of the party, Rokita's girlfriend burst into the kitchen claiming she wanted to meet Irena. She saw Roman, one of Irena's Jewish friends, whom she had dated at one point. She had sworn to get back at him for breaking up with her. The next day Roman and his wife, Sozia, did not report for work. Irena assumed the girlfriend had the couple killed. Meanwhile Rokita continued to ask for Janina. The major put him off. Finally, Irena asked the major to allow Janina to go back to Radom. He agreed, but told her that she must stay.

In the chapter "Puszczu Janowka," Irena's one consolation was that Helen Weinbaum had moved to a nearby farm. Helen had learned her husband was being forced to serve as Rokita's valet. As the Russians made progress against the Germans, the German army began speeding up its execution of Jews. Jews were beginning to flee to the woods to hide and live. Irena helped some of the men get to the woods safely by transporting them, as well as supplies, to a safe place. As she was on the way to the forest with her friends hidden in the back of a wagon, Irena saw an old priest whose smile gave her courage. Coming back from her second trip to the forest, she stopped at the priest's church. As she listened, she realized the priest was encouraging the members of his small flock to resist the Nazis and help the Jews. She stayed and talked



to the priest afterward. He did not rebuke her as she feared. The priest told her only that God knew her heart and knew what she was doing.

Analysis

As Irena became more bold in eavesdropping on the dinnertime conversations and using the information she gleaned from these conversations to her friends' advantage, she also began to manipulate the favor that she had found with the major. The first favor she asked of him was a pass allowing her to go into the Jewish ghetto to retrieve her worker who had not shown up for the day's work. The major probably did not fully understand that Irena was upset not just because Fanka had unfinished work with her, but also because Irena considered Fanka a friend.

Irena also used her friendship with the major to keep her sister safe. Rokita, the officer who was in charge of killing the Jews, had been making moves toward Janina. Recognizing how cruel he was and knowing her sister would have no choice if the man decided he wanted to take advantage of her, Irena asked the major to allow her sister to be transferred out of Ternopol. The major granted her request, but Irena had to stay where she was.

Notice that Irena points out the death's-head ring that Rokita wore. Although even she found the man attractive, she used that death's-head ring as a way to remind herself how cruel he was and how many deaths he had caused.

Helping to develop the theme that God was being merciful in his treatment of Irena, is the instance where Irena met an old priest at a small church near the woods to which she smuggled some of her Jewish friends. She stopped in to listen to the man deliver a message and was surprised that he seemed to be telling his people that God would want them to help the suffering Jews. Irena talked with the priest after the message. Although she wasn't able to tell him all that she was doing, she was surprised when the priest suggested that it was God who prompted Irena to stop at that church and hear that particular message. Irena became teary eyed because it had been so long since she'd thought that God had his eye on her at all. Also significant in this encounter with the priest was that he didn't rebuke her for what she was doing to help the Jews. Instead, he seemed to encourage her activities.

Vocabulary

exploited, inconsolably, imperious, solace, fanatical, veneration, insignia, wily, recoiled, decimated, copse, trepidation



Part Two: The Blows of the Ax - The Race

Summary

In the chapter “The Blows of the Ax,” Irena continued her trips to the forest to take supplies to her friends. At the HKP most everyone was too preoccupied to notice her comings and goings. The major was distracted because he never knew how many workers he would have in the factory because Rokita was busy killing his workers. With more and more young men coming into the HKP, the major decided he wanted to get a villa away from the complex. He voiced his frustration about all his trained workers being killed to Rokita. Irena eavesdropped as Rokita told him not to worry about workers as a steady supply of workers would be there but that he had to obey his commands to get rid of the Jews, then the Poles. He forecasted all the Jews would be gone from Ternopol by July. Irena had to leave quickly to keep Rokita from seeing her tears but her strength gave way before she got to the kitchen and she dropped the tray she was carrying. Schulz thought she was talking about the dishes when he heard her mumble that she had to “take care of it all.” In reality she was talking about saving her friends.

The next day the major told Irena he wanted her to join him at the villa as a housekeeper. She was suddenly angry, afraid she wouldn't be able to help her friends if she moved out of the HKP. After lunch, Irene and Schulz went to see the house. Irena had to tell the families that were squatting there that they had to leave. They toured the house and Irena began to get excited when she saw the basement. There was a bathroom, kitchenette and several rooms in that area. Schulz made the comment that the house would do well for the major, Irena agreed, but thought it would do for her friends as well.

In the chapter “The Race,” Irena promised her friends to find a way to smuggle them into the house once the renovations were complete. Irena contacted Helen telling her they must warn the Jews in the ghettos they were about to be obliterated. Helen believed the command had been made to hurry the extermination of the Jews because the Russians were advancing and the Germans were afraid they might liberate the Jews. When she returned to the HKP, the major waved at her. Seeing the gesture, a man in the guardhouse made a rude comment. She suddenly realized everyone believed that she was the major's mistress. With this new realization, she knew there was nowhere in the HKP she would not be allowed to go, including the major's office. She swiped several passes from the major's desk and spent the next few days riding around the town warning the Jews to run. She smiled and showed her passes to any guards who stopped her. Meanwhile, Schulz gave her the freedom she needed to move around the town.

On the fifteenth of July, Rokita visited the mess hall again. He announced that by the twenty-second of the month Ternopol would be free of Jews. Irena made it to the kitchen



before she dry heaved into the sink. Schulz asked what was wrong. When he saw the look in her eyes, he turned away without waiting for her answer. The next day, Irena told her friends what had happened. She told them that on the twenty-first, they should make plans not to go back to the camp. She promised to find some way to keep them safe.

On the twenty-first, Helen came to Irena, telling her that Henry had been ordered back to camp. She was afraid he would be killed with the others. Irena sent the address of the villa to Henry through Helen. He was to go there and enter the basement through the coal chute. At the end of the day, Irena had her six Jewish friends hide in the secret space they'd prepared in the laundry room. Back at the hotel, she learned there was a concert and party that everyone in the hotel would be attending, so supper wouldn't be served that night. While she was still in the kitchen, a guard came for the laundry workers. Irena told the man they had already gone, but offered to let him look. As she was trying to come up with a new plan for her friends, Irena tidied up the major's rooms at the hotel. She noticed a grate in the wall above the toilet. Irena believed the space was big enough to hide six people.

Analysis

It is in this section of the novel that Irena learned of and made full use of the knowledge that others believed she was the major's girlfriend. She went freely into his office and took passes which she planned to use during her rounds to warn the Jews of the coming executions. While she first believed the major's desire for her to work as his housekeeper when he moved to his own villa in the town would be bad for her plan to keep her friends safe, it quickly turned out to be a good thing as Irena learned the villa had a basement fixed up as servants' quarters. Irena believed her friends could easily hide in this basement. Again, God was showing his mercy on Irena, giving her the ability to help her friends with a blessing she had not even expected.

Through these chapters, two of the things that stand out are observations that Irena made about the Germans. First, she noticed that the Germans believed they were entitled to whatever they wanted. For instance, when the major decided he wanted to live in a villa off the military compound, he was instructed to just go and commandeer any one he wanted. The villa that he choose was not being lived in by its actual owner. A Jewish family and a Polish family were squatting there. Irene was surprised how easy it was for the major to demand they leave.

A second observation that Irena makes about the German people was their habit of working against their own people. The major and Rokita, for instance, worked in opposing jobs. It was the major's job to keep the factory running and the soldiers supplied with plenty of ammunition but at the same time the Jews and Poles forced to work for no pay in the factory were being killed off more quickly than the major could get them trained and working efficiently. By Rokita doing his job, he was actually making the major's job harder, a point that the major made to Rokita one night. Rokita did not seem to appreciate the major's concern, only bragged that he would have the Jews



exterminated from Ternopol faster than expected. Irena noticed that the major seemed almost offended by Rokita's attitude toward the people and the offhanded way he bragged about killing them.

Meanwhile, Irena had to find a place to keep her friends safe until she could hide them away in the major's villa. It was while cleaning the major's bathroom that she discovered an air duct which she believed might be a suitable hiding place. It was ironic not only that Irena plan to hide the Jews in the basement of a Nazi major's home, but almost more so that she chose his bathroom as a temporary hiding place for her friends.

Vocabulary

petulantly, cosseting, futile, confiscated, inevitable, lascivious

Part Two: Aktion - The Villa

Summary

In the chapter, "Aktion," Irena got her friends tucked away in the duct. She was still awake in her room when the drunk partyers began returning. Irena finally slept, but was awakened by gunfire. She cried as she realized it was the sound of Rokita's final Aktion. At breakfast, the German staff was hung over and irritable. They didn't care about the Jews who were dying. After breakfast, she ran to check on her friends and was surprised when a German officer walked in on her in the bathroom. He left without searching the room, but Irena was uneasy the rest of the day. At the villa, the tenants had finally left. Irena checked the basement over carefully, deciding it would be perfect for her friends. She now only had to figure a way to get them out of the HKP to the villa.

She decided to steal the major's key to the back door of the hotel, one that was not well guarded. Luckily for her, the major decided to take a sleeping pill that night. After everyone had gone to sleep, she took the keys from his room and escorted her friends out. They left with instructions to enter the house through the coal chute and wait for her until the morning. Before she went to sleep, Irena had a surge of pride as she thought that she had foiled Rokita's plan to rid Ternopol of Jews.

In the chapter, "The Villa," Irene found her six friends, Helen's husband, plus three strangers who were friends of Henry, in the basement of the villa the following morning. She moved them to the attic of the house where they would stay until the painting was finished. The major and the painters arrived soon after the Jews are hidden. As they were working, Irena heard one of the painters refer to her as the major's girlfriend.

As soon as the basement was finished, she moved the Jews downstairs. They rigged up a warning system and find a tunnel in the basement that led to a bunker under the garden gazebo. Schulz provided Irene with enough food to feed all of the people in her care. She continued to wonder if he knew what she was doing. When the major moved in, Irene learned he had plans to allow his orderly to live in the basement. She begged him not to do so, telling him about her rape just after the war started. He took pity on her and agreed not to let the man live there as it would make her afraid. She almost felt bad about using the major's affection for her against him, but knew it was the only option she had. In order to keep the major from walking in on her friends if they happened to be upstairs, Irena told the major she felt more secure if the door to the villa was locked during the day. He understood and agreed to ring the bell instead of just walking into his own house.

One day when the major was away at Lvov for the whole day. Irene made plans for Helen to visit her husband at the villa while she went to the forest in Janowka to check on her friends there. She learned one of women, Miriam had a cold, but the rest are well. When she drove up to the villa, Irene realized how alone she was with no family or



friends. She also felt overwhelmed with the responsibility for the people she was trying to save from the Germans.

Analysis

Again in this section of the novel, a reference to Irena being the major's girlfriend. This time it was by one of the men who are painting the villa. It is also in this section of the novel that Irena once again took advantage of the man's affection for her to help her friends. She had learned he was planning to move an orderly into the basement of the house, the part she planned to use as the hiding place for the Jews. She begged him not to do so, telling him about her rape and the fear she would feel if there were a strange man in the house. Irena uses this same fear to rationalize to the major why she kept the door to the house locked during the day.

Ironic in this section is the final Aktion against the Jews taking place the day after the Germans' big Christmas party. Irena pointed out that the Germans did not claim a religious affiliation but still took advantage of the Christians' holiday of joy and giving to have a party. The day following this party, the Jews in Ternopol are slaughtered, the very opposite action called for by the holiday they'd just celebrated. Although there were people dying just feet away from them, all these Germans can think of was the misery of the hangovers that they brought on themselves. They seemed unaware that very close to them, innocent people were suffering and dying.

Vocabulary

detonation, sabotage, rendezvous, vigil, contrived, farce, codger, farcical, pantomime



Part Two: The Forester's Cottage - The Coming Darkness

Summary

In the chapter, "The Forester's Cottage," Irena writes she had become confident in the safety of her friends. One day in late August there was knocking on the door. It was SS officers wanting to search the house. They had heard a rumor there were Jews living there. When they learned the house belonged to the major, he was called. The major arrived and told the men to search the house, but they were able to find nothing.

Irena went to meet a man who lived in the Janowka forest whom Helen believed was part of the resistance. Irena rode her bike out to where the man lived, pretending to look for mushrooms. As they talked about their past and experiences in the war the man, Zygmunt Pasiewski, realized that he was in the part of the Polish army with which Irena had traveled. He had been one of the ones that had gone to the village the night Irena was captured. She told the major she had discovered a cousin living in the forest, giving her a cover to continue going to see the Pasiewskis and visiting her friends in the forest. There was reserve in Irena's conversations with Pasiewski as she was not sure if he was sympathetic to her cause but she was more and more sure he was working with the resistance. One day when visiting the Jews in the forest, Abram Klinger whistled for her attention. He took her to their shelter where he told her they needed a better roof. Her troubles mounted when she returned to the villa to learn that Ida Haller was pregnant.

In the chapter, "The Coming Darkness," Clara told Ida they'd all decided Ida's pregnancy must be ended and began to tell Irena what medical supplies they would need but Irena begged Ida to wait. The following day Schultz arrived with tarpaper to cover the windows of the villa as blackouts for bombing raids. When they finished covering all the windows, Irena asked permission to keep the remaining roll of tarpaper, saying she had a cousin in the woods who needed it for roofing. At that moment, the major came to the villa in a horse drawn sleigh, wanting to take a ride to visit Irena's cousin. He agreed to carry the tarpaper along.

When she returned to the farm later, Irena told Zygmunt that she needed the tarpaper for some people living in the forest. Zygmunt had already guessed what Irena was up to and had wondered when she would tell him for sure. Once she arrived in the forest with the paper, she learned from Abram that Miriam was very sick. When Irena realized how sick Miriam was, she had the men wrap Miriam up in a blanket so she could take her to the villa. As she hurried the horse home, Irena prayed that the major would not be home yet when she arrived and that she could get Miriam in the house by herself.



Analysis

The theme of irony continues in this chapter as the SS received a tip that there were Jews hiding in the major's house. While Irena was frightened and angry, she tried not to feel sorry for the person who might have told on them. None of the Jews were discovered as the SS men did not really search the house closely when it was discovered a German major lived there. It was almost humorous how embarrassed the soldiers who were sent to search the house were once they learned whose house it was to which they had been called. Ironic also was Irena's discovery that the forester Helen told her about was one of the men with her the night she was captured and raped by the Russians. Irena became friends with the family, a connection to her past.

Significant in this section was the discovery that Ida was pregnant. Irena was already facing significant dangers hiding the adult Jews who know how much their safety depends on their obedience. They knew they had to be still and quiet when the major was in the house or there was company. A baby, however, could not be forced to be still or quiet when needed. A baby crying would have easily given the location of the hidden Jews away. Irena, however, believed that if Ida aborted her baby, it would be just another life that the Germans had taken. Despite the danger, Irena encouraged Ida to keep her baby.

Irena was again on pins and needles in this section when the major decided to take her for a sleigh ride to her "cousins" house. Luckily for her, Zygmunt played along and did not give her secret away to the major. Among the positive outcomes of the trip were that Zygmunt and Irena finally revealed to each other that they were, indeed, working to help the Jews.

Note also Irena's lack of hesitation when she decided Miriam must be taken to the villa to get medical care for her illness. The woman was so weak she could barely walk to the dorozka, or wagon, Irena has been borrowing from Helen to transport supplies. As she made her way back to the villa with the sick woman, Irena asked God for His mercy to help her get Miriam into the house without drawing any attention to them.

Vocabulary

amorous, imperiously, chagrined, despondent, emphatically



Part Two: The Punishment for Helping a Jew - Into the Forest

Summary

In the chapter, "The Punishment for Helping a Jew," Irena happened to see a family of Jews, as well as the Polish family who had been harboring them, killed by the German army one day while on her way home from the warehouse. Inside her own home, she thoughtlessly opened the basement door without locking the front door or checking to see if the major was home. Fanka and Clara came upstairs, exclaiming over her state as the major came in through the kitchen door. The major saw the three women, went out through the kitchen door and closed himself in the library. Irena followed him and begged him not to turn them in. She asked him to punish her, but to let her friends escape. The major told her he needed time to think. In the meantime, Irena told her friends not to leave the house. They were to stay in the bunker for three days. If she hadn't returned at that time, they were to escape through the coal chute and try to make it to the forest.

After supper that night, the major told Irene he would keep her secret, but asked her to willingly sleep with him. The next morning, Irene was shamed, but the major told her that he loved her and wouldn't let any harm come to her or her friends. After he left, she called her friends from the bunker and told them a plausible story that didn't include the major's request for sex. Although she wanted to talk to Father Joseph, she couldn't make the trip that day so she went instead to a church in town. The priest there refused to absolve her of her mortal sin of having sexual intercourse outside the bounds of marriage even though she was doing so to save lives. Irena was chilled because the priest seemed to have bought into the propaganda that the Jews were less important than other people. Irena believed that although she had not received the consolation she had wanted from the priest, God understood what she was doing and why she was doing it.

Things became very strange for Irene when the Major came home one day and told her that Clara and Fanka need not stay cooped up in the basement any more when he was there. Upstairs, the major introduced himself and suggested to the girls that they all be friends. They played the piano, sang and danced. Irena felt as if they were safe for the first time that evening, but shuddered as she went upstairs to the Major's bedroom.

In the chapter, "Into the Forrest," Irena continued to sneak supplies to her friends whenever she could. She brought Hermann, Miriam's husband, back to stay with his wife, bringing the total of people in her basement up to 12. Irena was overjoyed when she got a letter from her sister, Janina. As the fighting got closer, people began leaving Ternopol. In the mess hall, there was talk the factory would be closed. It was also said that Hitler had begun acting paranoid and unbalanced.



One day the major told Irena that leaders in Berlin had discovered he had a Polish girlfriend. He told her she had to get rid of the people in the basement and that she was to be fired. A trip to Lvov would take him out of town for several days. The Jews had to be gone when he returned. Irena told her friends she would take the men to the forest first so they could begin enlarging the dugout. The women would go when the work was complete. Irena made two trips in the sleigh to transport all of the men.

Despite the work the men have done on the dugout, Irena knew Ida could not stay there. She asked Zygmunt for help. He told her she could use a room he had hidden between the walls of the cottage that was big enough for Ida and another woman to help her. Zygmunt told Irena that if she had no place to stay, she should stay with them as well.

The day the German personnel were to move out of Ternopol, the women left the villa, taking with them anything they might have needed in the forest. They did not attract attention because they looked like everyone else who was fleeing the Russians. Helen took the wagon and left Irena, telling her that she would see her soon. She wouldn't leave Ternopol as long as Henry was there. Irena sensed she wouldn't see Helen again. She does know, however, that her friends were now free since the Germans were moving out of Ternopol. A week later, the Major and Rokita came for Irena. The major told her they were going to Kielce and she had to go with them. She didn't want to go but agreed because it was closer to her family. Zygmunt advised Irena to run away from the major once they reached the city and find his brother-in-law. He would advise her how to join the partisans.

During the trip, Irena was hidden beneath a blanket in the car. She was surprised that Rokita was allowing the major to sneak her out as she was sure it was illegal for them to transport a Polish citizen. The major got Irena a hotel room once they got to Kielce. He left her there alone for the night and she made her escape early the following morning.

Analysis

Significant in this section is the major's discovery that Irena was, indeed, hiding Jews in his house. Consider the way in which Irena was "found out." She had just come from her work where she had been forced to watch the hanging of a Polish family who had hidden a family of Jews. All members of the families were killed, including the children. Irena had not gotten over this fresh reminder of how much the Germans hate the Jews and the cruel methods they would use to punish those who help these people when she arrived home. In her anguish she opened the door to the basement before checking to see if the major was home. He saw her standing with two of the Jewish ladies. Irena believed at this point that her life as well as the lives of those people she was harboring were over. It was important that Irena include in her story the scene she had just seen with the Jews being killed to help the reader understand her mindset when she arrived at home. This fresh reminder of what can happen to a person who harbored Jews made Irena even more panicked when the major saw the Jewish ladies.



It is also in this section of the novel that Irena's use of the major's affection for her to gain privileges to help her Jewish friends blew up in her face. He agreed to keep her secret, but demanded that she be his mistress. Irena was confused by his demand as she had always thought he was kind even though he was working for the German army. She seemed to interpret his actions as being unkind to her when in reality, she had been toying with his emotions all along. However, it was interesting that when the major did agree to help Irena keep her secret and keep her friends safe, he also made friends with the two Jewish ladies whom he knew were living in the basement. At times, it had seemed that the major's heart wasn't really in the war effort. For instance, at one point he described the war as being "stupid." It could be that he was secretly against what the Germans were doing to the Jews and just wasn't willing to say so.

Note also in this section that the tables are turned on Irena when the major's higher-ranking officers discovered that he had a Polish girl as a mistress. They demanded that he get rid of her. Remember, the plan of the Nazi forces was to rid the area of Jews, then to get rid of those of Polish descent. In this context, it was not be proper for a major to be having an affair with a Polish women, even if she did appear to be German.

Even though his relationship with Irena has gotten him into some trouble, the major still took her with him when he left Ternopol. This time, it was Irena who had to hide from sight under blankets as she rode in the backseat of the car. Just as she had been hiding the Jews she transported, now Irena was being hidden as an undesirable person.

The theme of God's mercy for Irena is continued in this section of chapters as she was able to transport all of her Jewish friends to their safe places without being seen or stopped by any German patrols. Consider also Irena's talk with the priest at the church in Ternopol. He took a different view than Father Joseph when he told Irena that unless she stopped the affair with the Major, she will not be allowed absolution, basically meaning she would not be allowed into heaven when she died. The priest did not consider the fact that Irena was having the affair in order to help save twelve other people. Note that when Irena left the church, she put her life and future into God's hands, believing that he knew and understood why she was acting as she was.

Vocabulary

calamity, ashen, penitence, celebrant, absolution, consolation, docile, scavenge, augmented, elude, haggard, wanly



Part Three: To Fight - Flight

Summary

In the chapter "To Fight," Irena asked directions to Owocowa Street and located the Ridels' house. The lady who answered the door seemed hesitant at first, but pulled Irena inside when Irena mentioned Pasiewski's name. She fixed weak tea and chatted with Irena, telling her that she had heard that Ternopol had been freed by the Russians. Irena talked about the people she'd cared for during the past two years. Marek Ridel came in, learned Irena was there about the Mercedes-Benz, and then went back out again. Irena felt alone as she talked to the woman about her family, realizing she had given them up to care for others. When she saw Janek, who was the leader of the group of partisans, she fell in love at first sight.

She began working with his cell of partisans, being given first small tasks, then being moved to bigger projects. The goal of the group was to antagonize and run off both the Germans and the Russians, the enemies of Poland. They hear rumors that SS officers were defecting from the military and pretending to be Jews to try to save themselves. She knew the men she worked with had killed both Germans and Russians. Although she was not comfortable with killing at all, Irena reconciled her conflicting emotions when she remembered the image of the baby being thrown into the air and shot by the German officer. Also, she was finally actively fighting for her country, Poland.

Irena became an official member of the partisans in April. She was given the name "Mala" and a capsule of poison in the case she was captured by Germans or Russians. On the same day of the ceremony when she was made an official partisan, Janek proposed to her. A few days before her wedding, Janek's mother was pinning up her wedding dress. Janek came to tell her he planned to be part of a raid on a German transport that night. Irena asked him not to go but he insisted since he was the leader. He was killed in the raid.

The only thing that gave Irena peace in the following days was the knowledge that the capsule of poison could reunite her quickly with Janek. Father Tadeusz helped Irena rebound from her deep grief by reminding her of God's love for her and the mercy he had shown her in the past. Irena threw herself into her work. As she had done when helping the Jews, she used her attractiveness to distract the German officers whose job it was to stop and check citizens who might be doing any wrong.

In the chapter, "Flight," by the end of December, Irena had pneumonia. She was taken to the Ridels' home to recover. She spent three months getting better. By that time, all of Poland had been liberated from German forces and turned over to the Soviets. A month later, Hitler killed himself as the Russians bombarded Berlin. Irena decided it was time to start looking for her family again.



As she traveled through Poland, she saw signs asking partisans to turn themselves in. Irena realized the requests were traps. During her travels, she also saw first hand what the Germans and Russians had done to Poland. She learned about the scale of the Nazi extermination camps. She felt Poland had become a land of death. Once she was across the country, Irena went first to Radom where she found her Aunt Helen. Helen, however, had heard nothing from Irena's family since Janina had gone back to them. She did not think they were in Kozłowa Góra any longer. Irena decided to go to Krakow as she learned that many Jews from Ternopol had migrated there. She finally was successful in finding Fanka, who was working for a tailor. She learned Ida and Lazar's baby had been born safely and was healthy, but they were living in Katowice.

After visiting with her friends for some time, Irena traveled to Katowice to see the baby. She was so excited she didn't notice two Soviet officers following her until she had been arrested. She was suspected to be the leader of the partisans and was interrogated for days. Although she told her story of being wronged by the Germans, the Russians are not convinced by her story. She wondered if her luck had run out. She was forced to work during the day, then questioned at night until she was exhausted. She thought of the stork, Bociek, and accidentally said his name out loud. The interrogator asked if he was a leader. The questioner left her in disgust when she told him that Bociek was a stork.

One morning Irena had been taken to a second floor wing to clean. She had been directed to clean a room where ten or fifteen men were dressing. Angry and embarrassed, she ran out of the room where she found herself alone. She made her escape by climbing through a second floor window and jumping to the ground. Her feet were swollen from the landing by the time she reached the Haller's apartment building. Finix, Haller's brother-in-law, met her at the door and carried her inside. He took her to a basement laundry room to hide. Ida told her she must get away to somewhere safe, Finix brought a car and took her away before she was able to see the baby. Before she left, Irene asked Ida to help her find her family.

Finix took Irena to a couple saved by Irena's early warnings to the Ternopol ghetto. Meanwhile, the other Jews that Irena had helped search for information about Irena's family. It was discovered that her father had been killed because he refused to step off the sidewalk for Germans. Her mother and sisters had been arrested because Irena was considered a dangerous fugitive partisan. She mourned because she had lived on the hope that one day she would be reunited with her family. It appeared that she would not be able to see them again because of her activity with the partisans. Later fresh news came to Irena that her family had been freed, but had gone into hiding. She knew it would be dangerous to them to seek them out. As she healed and rested, Irena wondered where she could live that she would feel safe.

Analysis

When she visited with the Riddels, Irena recalled how lucky she'd been to have plenty to eat. Most of the Polish people had been suffering with a shortage of food since the



beginning of the war. An example of this food shortage was the lady's act of using tea leaves that had already been brewed several times to get more tea out of them. Irena described what they wound up drinking as hot water, not tea.

Another instance that supports the theme of the irony of the war found in the book comes to light in this section of the novel. Although the Germans had been prosecuting and killing the Jews, they are now pretending to be Jews, who were finally free, in order to escape the Russian persecution. Irena noted it was easy to identify a German pretending to be a Jew as these Germans couldn't recite any of the Torah, the Jews' holy book.

It is also in this section of the novel that Irena seemed to be pulled from the mercy that God had blessed her with thus far in her life. He had kept her safe through many trials, imprisonments and close calls with death. At this point in her life, the person she loved most was taken away from her. Through all her struggling to keep her faith and continue to pray and believe that God had her and her friends' best interests in mind, the death of her fiancé was the biggest challenge she had faced yet. She considered taking the poison capsule she had been given and killing herself. She took a sort of comfort in knowing it would be that easy for her to be with Janek again. It was the priest who worked with the partisan group who convinced Irena that God still had plans for her. He worked with her day by day, helping her to remember all of the times that God had shown His mercy to her. He helped her to understand God still had plans for her.

To clarify, Irena was given the capsule of poison by the partisan group in the case that she was ever captured by either the Germans or the Russians. This capsule was meant as a last ditch way for Irena to escape torture and interrogation by the enemies of the partisans. This practice is similar even to some modern day military maneuvers where soldiers are given a pain free way to kill themselves if they happen to fall into enemy hands.

Through her grief, Irena threw herself into her work with the partisans. It was almost as if she felt she was getting revenge for Janek's death. As she had when she worked with the major, Irena used her femininity and attractiveness to distract the German and Russian officers with whom she had come in contact from her work as a partisan. She knew they'd pay attention to her blonde hair or pretty smile instead of looking at or searching what she was transporting in her bike basket if she played up these features. She noted that even while she was smiling at these officers, she was imagining them dead.

Again in this section of the novel, Irena's path in life was determined by her own free will. She chose to run away from the major once he left her alone in a hotel room. She chose to become part of the partisan party and fight for Poland despite the detriment to her health and reputation among both the Russians and Germans. She also chose to try to visit Ida's baby even though that journey was dangerous. Because she was recognized in her attempt to see Ida, Irena was again imprisoned by the Russians, she also didn't get to see the baby she helped to save. Meanwhile, Irena learned that the choices she'd made had led to negative consequences for her family. Her mother and



sisters were imprisoned because of Irena's work with the partisans. Irena had been grieved because if she were to try to contact her family, it would cause them even more trouble. As the Russian army was looking for information about the partisans, if it was suspected that Irena had tried to contact her family, they could again be taken into prison for questioning. Irena had dreamed that when the war was over, she would be reunited with her family. It seemed, however, that the help she'd given to others and to her country would perhaps keep her from ever seeing her family again. It is sad that after putting so much effort and enthusiasm into helping others that Irena had been left so alone. Notice that although Irena felt alone without the members of her biological family and her fiancé, she had another family that bonds together to help her. The work that she had done for the Jews had not done in vain of these people return the favor by protecting her when she was in danger of being killed.

Vocabulary

larder, antagonize, succumbed, blatant, hostels, defiled, formidable



Part Three: On German Soil - Postscript

Summary

In the chapter, "On German Soil," it was Irena's friends who arranged for her to go to one of the repatriation camps for displaced people that were set up by the Allies. In order to pass her off as a Jew, for safe passage, they dyed her hair black and gave her the fake name of Sonia Sofiertein. As Irena rode the train to Hessich-Lichtenau, Germany, she realized she was not just running from the Russians, but also from the memory of the baby thrown into the air and shot. She saw from their faces that the other people in the train car were haunted by their own terrible memories as well. At this point in the book, seven years had passed since the beginning of the war.

Once she had arrived at the camp and had been accepted by the Jewish Historical Committee, she was allowed to shed her alias. She tried to fit in and be useful in the camp. After being there only a short while, Irena became sick with diphtheria. It was months before she recovered and the disease affected her heart rhythm, making her unable to go to Israel as she had hoped. Despite her sickness, Irena realized she and the others in the camp were healing emotionally. Some were going back to their old homes, but Irena believed her place was in the camp. After she had lived there three years, the rabbi asked her to speak to William Opdyke, a U.N. delegate.

Although the two knew six languages between them, they had none in common besides the language of laughter. Using a German interpreter, Irena told Opdyke her story. After an hour of telling the horrors she had lived through and things she had done, Irena was surprised when Opdyke told her that America would be honored to have her as one of its citizens.

In the section entitled, "Amber," Irena looks back over her life from the vantage point of her age and realizes what a gift her free will was. She compares it to an amber bead. While others made choices that had evil consequences, Irena made her own choices. She still occasionally sees the vision of the baby thrown into the air, but wills herself to change it to the image of a bird, released from a cage.

In the section, "postscript," Irena's story is tied up as it is recorded that she traveled to America in 1949 where she was assisted in finding a place to live in Brooklyn. She got a job in a garment factory and learned English. She met up with Opdyke in a coffee shop and the two were married a few months later. Irena also became a United States citizen. She and Opdyke had a daughter, named Janina. She learned the major had been cared for by the Hallers until his death after he was ostracized by his family. She also learned that her mother died shortly after the end of the war. In 1982 when she traveled to Israel for a recognition ceremony as one of the Righteous Among the Nations, she finally was able to meet Roman Haller. In 1984 she was able to return to Poland where she was reunited with her sisters and their families.



Analysis

The theme of the use of images of birds is completed in this section. Irena shares why she describes her experience of seeing the baby shot as seeing a bird shot at the beginning of the book. She describes the horror she still feels when this image comes to mind. As she rode on the train to the DP camp she saw the same horror she felt on the faces of those with whom she rode. After some time passed, to give herself peace, Irena began to train herself to imagine the baby transforming into a bird that flew away after it was shot. She has come to the realization that instead being allowed to live through even more horrors, this baby had been freed from the pain it would have suffered at the hands of the Germans.

Not necessarily ironic, but still interesting was Irena's act of seeking shelter in Germany disguised as a Jew. In Irena's case, she had the blessing of her Jewish friends in taking on the identity of one of their own so she could be safe. She had to use this disguise because as she was still in Russia, Irena was in danger of being arrested by both the Russians and the Germans for the work she had done with the partisan party.

Also ironic in this section was the Haller's act of taking care of the major because his family disowned him for having a relationship with Irena, and helping the Jews in a second hand way. The Hallers were among the Jews who took refuge in the basement of the major's villa. Although there were twelve Jews living there at one point, the major knew about only two of them. He was never aware that Ida became pregnant with her baby while she was living in his basement. Even so, the Hallers are grateful enough to the man to take care of him in his old age when his own family members turn their backs on him.

The postscript and chapter entitled "Amber" were important sections for Irena to include because they give the reader closure for Irena's story. She was not left in the DP camp wondering if she would ever feel safe again. Instead, she was given a new job and a new life in America. She was also finally acknowledged for the selfless acts that she performed during the war to keep the Jews that she could save. Closure is also offered in this section when Irena finally met Roman Hollar, the man who lived because of her help. Getting to meet Roman brought closure also to Irena, as her life had been haunted by the image of a baby she could not save, the one shot by the German guard.

Vocabulary

transit, feral, rudimentary, predicament, ostracized



Important People

Irena Gut Opdyke

Irena Gut is the main figure and narrator of this story. In the book, she was a young Polish woman who worked to help the Jews during World War II. She directly saved 13 Jews from death in the Nazi concentration camps as she harbored them inside the house where she lived. Indirectly, Irena may have saved many more through her work of warning these people of coming raids and executions by the Germans. She additionally devoted herself to taking food and supplies to Jews hidden in the woods near the town of Ternopol where she was working at the German headquarters.

Irena began her activities in the war when she volunteered to travel as a nurse with the men of the Polish army when they retreated from Radom, the city where she had been studying to be a nurse. When the country of Poland was split between the Russians and the Germans and the Polish army dissolved, Irena lived in the forest with the remains of these soldiers until she was captured by Russian patrols who raped and beat her. As a prisoner of war, she worked in a hospital in Ternopol until a doctor there tried to rape her. She escaped and spent a year living under an assumed identity helping a country doctor in Svetlana.

Irena returned to Ternopol for a pass to cross the Russian-German border so she could see her family. While there, she was recognized and arrested, but was able to escape. When she arrived in Radom after being detained in a quarantine camp, Irena was reunited with her family. They were together until the Germans demand her father move away to help them run a ceramics factory he designed. Irena's mother and three younger sisters moved to be with Irena's father.

Irena and her next oldest sister, Janina, stayed in Radom where they both got jobs working for the German military headquarters. It was at this point that Irena began helping the Jews in a nearby ghetto by secretly supplying them with food. When the German headquarters moved to Ternopol to be closer to the fighting, Irena and Janina went with them. Irena requested Janina be sent away as a powerful German SS leader was showing interest in her. The request was allowed but Irena was required to stay there. It was in Ternopol that Irena promised to help the Jewish people whom she oversaw in the laundry facilities. She followed through with this promise by harboring 12 of them in the basement of the major's house. The Jews were discovered by the major but he agreed to keep her secret if she would be his mistress.

The tables turned on Irena, however, and her relationship with the major was forced to an end by his higher-ranking officers because, as she was of Polish descent, she was unfavorable. The major took her out of Ternopol as the German army pulled out of that city near the end of the war. Irena ran away from the major and joined the partisans who work against both the German and Russian armies. She was briefly engaged but her fiancé was killed in an ambush just days before their wedding. When the war was over,



she located her Jewish friends and tried to find out what had happened to her family. It was when she tried to visit one of the Jewish ladies who became pregnant while Irena was hiding her that Irena was recognized as a member of the partisan party and arrested again. Once again, she was given an opportunity to escape. Her Jewish friends saw to it that she was taken to safety.

Irena finally wound up in a camp for displaced persons as she tried to make a new life for herself. One day, she had the opportunity to tell her story to a delegate of the United Nations. After listening to her story, he told her that she was welcome in America. In the United States, Irena got a job in a factory and began learning English. She met up with the U.N. delegate again after she had moved to America. The two were married.

Major Eduard Rugemer

Major Eduard Rugemer was a major in the German army to whom Irena became a mistress in order to keep him from ousting the Jews she had hidden in the basement of his villa. Irena had noticed the major took special notice of her before he asked her to be his housekeeper when he moved into a villa, but never thought anything of it until one of the German soldiers made a rude comment to her about being the major's girlfriend. Irena realized this position, which was not even a reality at that time, gave her special privileges. She took advantage of these privileges to help her friends. It was when the major learned there really were Jews hiding in his basement that he demanded that Irena let him have his way with her in order to keep her secret. Irena describes the major as a kind man who seemed frustrated by the cruelty of the war and the demands that Rokita, who wanted the Jews exterminated but at the same time wanted the factories, which run on the labor provided by the captive Jews, to keep running. It was up to the major to keep these factories going. In his later years, the major was cared for by Ida and Lazar Haller, two of the Jews who took refuge in his basement during the war.

Janina Gut

Janina Gut was the sister next in age after Irena. When Irena returned to Radom after her time of captivity in Ternopol, Janina was living with the rest of the family at Aunt Helen's house. At that time, she was the only member of the family who had a job. During a walk through the city, Janina showed Irena the ghettos where the Jews were being forced to live. When Tatus was forced to go back to Kozlowa Gora, Janina and Irena stayed in Radom because their mother had heard young girls with Germanic features, like those of Irena and Janina, were being put to work in brothels. After Irena was secure in her job at the German headquarters, she requested that Janina be allowed to work with her so she could keep an eye on her. The two worked for some time in Radom where Janina helped Irena when Irena would sneak food to the Jews in the nearby ghetto. When the German headquarters moved to Ternopol, Irena and Janina both went there to work but Irena requested Janina be sent away from Ternopol after she noticed that Rokita was showing undue attention to her sister.



Zygmunt Pasiewski

Zygmunt Pasiewski was one of the people who was with Irena during her original stint with the Polish soldiers at the beginning World War II. He told her the men looked for her when she went missing from her post but were unable to find her. They met again when Irena's friend, Helen, told her that Zygmunt might be sympathetic to their cause. Although she could not tell at first, Irena finally shared her secret about her hidden friends with Zygmunt on the trip when she was accompanied by the major to Zygmunt's house. Zygmunt agreed to hide the roll of tarpaper that Irena had brought with her as roofing material for her friends in the woods during that visit. Zygmunt told her he'd wondered when she would finally tell him about what she had been doing. He also offered his home as a place for Ida Haller to hide and deliver her baby when Irena and the others were forced out of the villa.

Dr. Ksydzof

Dr. Ksydzof was the new administrator at the Ternopol hospital who seemed to take a personal and vindictive dislike to Irena. He went to her room in the nurses' dormitory one night with the intention of raping her but she knocked him over the head with a bottle of tea next to her bed. Believing she had killed the man, Irena went to Dr. Davis for help. That doctor discovered that Irena did not kill Dr. Ksydzof but agreed it was not safe for Irena to stay at the hospital any longer. After Irena escaped from the hospital, Dr. Ksydzof spread rumors that Irena had been placed in the hospital by a group of Polish partisans. He describe her as a threat to the Russians. When Irena was arrested when she returned to Ternopol to try to reunite with her family, it was because of the lies and rumors that Dr. Ksydzof had spread about her.

Sturmbannführer Rokita

Strumbannführer Rokita was the German SS officer in charge of the concentration camp Arbeitslager. He believed it was his job to make the Ukraine free of Jews. He was in charge of getting all of the usefulness out of those of Jewish descent, then killing them. The workers in the laundry told Irena they believed "the man has nothing but ice where his heart should be." Rokita attempted to flirt with Irena when they first met. She was struck by how attractive he was but also realized how dangerous he was. One key to his personality was the death's head ring that he wore. Later, when Rokita began to make moves on Irena's sister, Janina, Irena requested her sister be moved to another location in order to keep her safe. When the German forces were moving out of Ternopol and the major came to pick up Irena to move her out of the city to safety, Rokita was with him. Irena wondered how much of her story Rokita knew.



Helen Weinbaum

Helen Weinbaum was a friend who Irena and Janina met at church. They enjoyed being able to speak Polish with each other. Although Helen was apparently a Catholic, her husband, Henry, was Jewish. He had been captured by the Germans and was being held in the work camp Arbeitslager. There was news that the Jews from Arbeitslager were being held in a village near Ternopol and Helen asked Irena to go with her to see if she could catch a glimpse of her husband. It was during this trip that Irena saw the German soldier throw the baby into the air and shoot it. Helen assisted Irena in her attempt to help the Jews by providing her with a wagon when she needed to deliver supplies. In return, Irena housed Helen's husband in the villa with her other Jewish friends.

Herr Schulz

Herr Schulz was the man who was Irena's direct overseer in the German military compounds both in Radom and Ternopol. She helped him with the serving of meals, and worked as a translator between him and the Polish speaking workers. Irena was never completely sure if Schulz knew and approved of what she was doing to help the Jews or not. She did notice, however, that he generously gave her anything for which she asked. For instance, when she asked for extra blankets for her bed, he gave her a stack of blankets. He also kept the villa stocked with much more food than was needed for Irena and the major. Whatever his intentions, Schulz gave Irena the things for which she asked without asking questions, not implicating himself but neither denying her any help he could give.

Ida and Lazar Haller

Ida and Lazar Haller were a married couple, two of several Jews whom Irena met while working in the laundry at the HKP in Ternopol. This couple was among the Jews Irena later hid in the basement of the major's villa. While hiding in the basement, Ida became pregnant. At first, she and the other refugees decided to abort the baby as it would be too dangerous for them to care for a pregnant woman and baby in hiding. Irena refused to allow them to carry out their plan and begged them to wait. After the Jews were forced to leave the safety of the major's villa, Ida was hidden at the home of Zygmunt Pasiewski where her baby was delivered. Ida and Lazar later cared for the major in his old age after he was ostracized by his family because of his acquaintance with Irena and the help he gave her in hiding the Jews.

Maria "Mamusia" Rebies Gut

Maria "Mamusia" Rebies Gut was mother to Irena and her four sisters. Mamusia was Irena's name for her mother. The last time that Irena saw her mother was when the family was living with Mamusia's sister, Helen, in Radom. Shortly after Tatus, Irena's



father, was forced back to Kozlowa Gora to help the Germans with the ceramics factory, Irena's mother moved back as well. Through her Jewish friends, Irena learned years later that her mother had been arrested because of Irena's activities with the partisans. Although her mother had been let out of jail, Irena knew it would put her mother back into danger to try to see her or contact her. Shortly after the war, Irena learned that her mother had died.

Wladyslaw "Tatus" Gut

Wladyslaw Gut was father to Irena and her four sisters. Irena called her father Tatus. Tatus moved his family to live with his wife's sister, Helen, in Radom when the war began. It was in Radom that Irena was reunited with her family. However, the Germans needed Tatus to show them how to make a ceramics factory he had designed in Kozlowa Gora function so they found him and took him back to that city. This was the last time that Irena saw her father. She later learned he was shot by German officers because he refused to step off the sidewalk for passing Germans, a courtesy that had become required by law for Polish citizens.

Aunt Helen

Aunt Helen was Irena's mother's sister who lived in Radom. When Irena was able to return to Radom the first time during the war, she was able to find her family living with Aunt Helen. Irena and Janina continued to live with their aunt even after their mother and father were forced by the Germans to move back to their town of Kozlowa Gora. When Irena returned to Radom again after the war was over, she was sad to learn that her aunt had heard nothing from her family. Aunt Helen's first husband was killed in the war but she had remarried when Irena saw her the last time.

Fanka Silberman

Fanka Silberman was one of the Jewish women who worked with Irena in the laundry. One day, when Fanka did not come from her home in the Jewish ghetto for work, Irena went after her. She discovered that Fanka's home had been invaded with Fanka the only survivor. Fanka was one of the Jews that Irena hid in the basement of the major's villa. Fanka was one of the hidden Jews who was standing with Irena when the major discovered that Irena really was hiding Jews in the house. Later, the major made friends with both Fanka and Clara.

Adolf Hitler

Adolf Hitler was an important person to the Irena's story because he was the one who started World War II. He, also, was the one who demanded the extermination of the Jews. During the course of Irena's story, Hitler had his downfall as Allied troops stormed



Berlin and bombed it. As the bombing took place, Hitler committed suicide in his military bunker.

Dr. Olga Pavlovskaya

Dr. Olga Pavlovskaya was the first doctor who Irena saw when she woke in the Ternopol hospital. She remembered the lady being kind to her and making her feel as if she were with her mother. It was Dr. Pavlovskaya who allowed Irena to stay and work in the hospital even though she was a prisoner. When Dr. Olga was transferred out of the hospital, her position was filled by Dr. Kzydzof.

Janek Ridel

Janek Ridel was the man to whom Irena was engaged. He was the son of Marek and Pani Ridel. Just before Irena left Ternopol with the major, she was told by Zygmunt to find Mercedes Benz and join the partisans. It turned out that Janek was the one who went by the code name Mercedes Benz and was the leader of the partisan party that Irena joined. Three days before Janek and Irena were to be married, Janek was killed when an ambush on a German transport went bad.

Myszka

Myszka was the dog who kept Irena from falling into the river when she was a 1-year-old baby. This dog was considered a miraculous hero by the priest in the parish in which Irena's family lived. He believed the dog's act of saving the child meant that God had great plans for Irena's life.

Marysia, Bronia and Władzia Gut

Marysia, Bronia and Władzia Gut were Irena's youngest three sisters. Although all the girls were close as they were growing up, Irena seemed closest to her next younger sister, Janina. At one point after the family was forced to move back to Kozłowa Góra to be with their father, Irena learned that her three younger sisters had been put to work in the mines.

Dr. David

Dr. David was a Ukrainian Pole who was head of the surgery department of the Ternopol hospital where Irena worked as a prisoner. It was to Dr. David that Irena went the night that Dr. Kzydzof tried to rape her. Dr. David arranged for her to escape the hospital and stay with Miriam, a friend of his who lived in Svetlana.



Moses Steiner

Moses Steiner was one of the men who worked for Irena in the laundry. When she promised her workers that she would look after them he questioned her, asking what she could do as she was only a girl. Irena took this question as a challenge. She learned to actually use her lack of power and feminine qualities as an advantage to help her cause.

Ramon Haller

Ramon Haller was the baby born to Ida and Lazar Haller. Ida became pregnant with Ramon when she was in hiding in the major's villa. Although Ida and Lazar first believed they should abort the baby, Irena encouraged them not to do so. It was with her help that both the Hallers were saved and Ramon was born safely.

William Opdyke

William Opdyke was the U.N. delegate who interviewed Irena at the DP (Displaced Persons) camp in Hessich-Lichtenu after the war. When he heard Irena's story he told her that the United States would be honored to have her as a citizen. The two later met up in America and are married.

Father Tadeusz

Father Tadeusz was the priest who performed the ritual to make Irena an official member of the partisan group. It was Father Tadeusz who helped Irena recover from her grief when Janek was killed.

Miriam

Miriam was the friend of Dr. David with whom Irena stayed for a year after she escaped from the hospital in Ternopol.



Objects/Places

A Bird

The image of the bird is an image that Irena uses often in the novel. It appears at the beginning of the novel as a representative of the baby she saw thrown into the air and shot by the German officer.

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact

Germans and the Soviets signed this non-aggression pact saying that neither country would make war against the other.

Red Army

The term Red Army refers to the Soviet Armed Forces.

Carpet Slippers

After they moved in with Aunt Helen, Irena's family earned a little bit of money by making carpet slippers.

Lalka

Lalka was the fake name that Irena gave the jailors when they suggested she could go stay with a friend. Irena used this opportunity to escape from jail.

Tin Box Filled with Food

Irena slid this box full of food under the fence of a Jewish ghetto near where she worked. It was her first act of aid to the Jews.

Silver Death's-Head Ring

Irena noticed Rokita was wearing this ring. She believed it was a symbol of his real personality.



Dorozka

A dorozka was a wagon or carriage that Irena borrowed whenever she could to transport supplies to the Jews she knew were hiding in the woods near Ternopol. She also used this wagon to transport the Jews themselves when it became too dangerous for them to live in the villa any longer.

Rolls of Tarpaper

Irena asked Herr Schultz for the left over rolls of tarpaper after they covered the windows in the major's villa. She planned to take the paper to her Jewish friends in the woods for them to use to reinforce the roof of their shelter. The major, however, decided to come with her on this trip so Irena had to make up a lie that the tarpaper was for her cousin's roof.

A Capsule of Poison

When Irena joined the partisans, she was given this capsule of poison to take in the case that she was captured. After he fiancé was killed, Irena took comfort in the poison, as she knew she needed only to take it to be with him once again. Irena never took the capsule.



Themes

Images of the Bird

An image that is presented over and over throughout Irena's story is that of a bird. She uses one of these innocent creatures to describe the terrible scene of a German officer shooting a baby. She also uses them to represent feelings of fear and entrapment. Ultimately, however, the bird represents freedom.

When Irena begins her book, she tells the story of a bird that flies up from a field and is shot by a hunter. It is learned later in the book that this imagery actually represents a Jewish baby being thrown up in the air by a German officer at a concentration camp, and then shot. This haunting image appears throughout the book as Irena believed when she saw the shooting of the baby that she'd witnessed the most cruel thing a person could do to another. After the war was over and Irena was faced with dealing with the cruelty she had seen, she forced herself to imagine this baby as a bird that flew away after the officer shot it. In this way, she remembers that the baby was actually freed from its prison the moment that it died and was granted freedom.

Another bird important in the story is the stork, Bociek. Bociek was a bird that Irena and her sisters found with a broken wing and nursed back to life. Years later when being interrogated by the Russians, Irena distracted herself from things she does not need to think or talk about by thinking instead about this ungrateful bird that bit her, leaving a scar, even though she took care of it.

When there was some circumstance from which Irena hoped to escape, she often uses avian imagery in her book to describe these scenes. For instance, when she was running from the Russian patrols for the first time in Ternopol, Irena imagined herself being able to fly away, like a bird. She was not, however, able to do so. Netted or trapped birds also occur frequently in Irena's writing. When being questioned by the Russians, Irena indicates that her heart beat like a netted bird. She also compares her thoughts of running away and escaping her possible punishment when the major discovered she had Jews living in his house as thrashing in her like netted birds. One final example of a trapped bird that occurs in Irena's writing is that of the pigeon that was flying about in the nave of a church just before German officers entered that church and took the parishioners captive.

Along with the images of trapped birds, Irena also includes a few instances of birds set free. For instance, in her revised image of the baby being shot, it turns into a bird that is able to fly freely. There is a girl, perhaps Irena, who feeds it breadcrumbs. Another image of a released bird occurs when Irena was reunited with her family again in Radom. She indicates she was so happy to see her parents and sisters that her heart flew up to the sky like a bird.



God's mercy

There are several instances in which God showed mercy on Irena. One of the first of these happened when Irena was a baby and the family dog kept her from drowning. Another came when she stopped to hear a message from a priest who seemed to encourage his congregation to help the Jews. After Irena's fiancé was killed, it was these evidences of God's mercy that kept her going.

Irena had always imagined that she would do something great for mankind with her life. It seems God also intended Irena to do great things as the family dog kept Irena from falling in the river one day when she toddled out to the water as a baby. The parish priest told Irena's parents this miracle was a sign that God had plans for their daughter. He told them they must watch to see what Irena would do with her life.

Later, when Irena was reunited with her family in Radom, she had the chance to tell her parents what really happened to her in Ternopol. It was her father who told her that it was because of God's mercy that she was not killed. He indicated that God has kept her alive because he still had work for her to do.

It seems that in instances where Irena became discouraged there was some showing of God's mercy, no matter how small. One day while transporting supplies to her friends in the forest, for instance, she stopped at a small church where she heard a priest telling his congregation they should help the Jews. Similarly, when Irena was grieving over the loss of her fiancé, another priest reminded her of all the times that God had shown mercy on her life as a way to encourage her to keep going.

Irony

There were several instances in Irena's war experiences where the irony of what was happening around her makes Irena shake her head in disbelief. These can be seen in the way the German armed forces seemed to work against each other in the war effort as well as the number of times she ran from, then was sent back to, Ternopol. Irena also saw irony in the way the different nationalities of people took on the identities of others to try to stay safe or earn favors during the war.

One of the major ironies of the war that Irena points out in her story is that of the way that the Germans seem to work against each other in their war efforts. Rokita, for instance, was tasked with killing the Jews. The major, however, was responsible for keeping the ammunition factories running at peak performance. The major depended on the free labor that the Jews provided. By doing his job, Rokita was keeping the major from doing his job and actually hampering the war efforts, as ammunition wasn't made as quickly as the troops needed it. The major, in turn, worked against Rokita when he allowed Irena to keep several Jews harbored in his home. Ironic also is the idea that these Jews who were staying in the major's house, were being fed with food provided by the German army, the very men who wanted them dead.



An additional ironic situation in Irena's story is the number of times she had to return to Ternopol. It was in Ternopol that she worked in a hospital as a prisoner of war. During this time, one of the doctors tried to rape her and then began spreading rumors that she was a member of a dangerous partisan party in retaliation. She ran from Ternopol the first time to avoid this doctor. She had to return to Ternopol in order to get a pass to return to her family. While in Ternopol this time, she was arrested by Russian patrols because they believed the rumors the doctor had spread about her. She escaped the Russian jail and ran away from Ternopol only to learn she must return to that city when the Germans moved their headquarters to that town.

Finally, Irena noticed during different stages of the war, people tried to take on different identities to keep themselves safe. At the beginning of the war, for instance, some Poles tried to pass themselves off as German because they believed they would be more likely to get more fair treatment if they were German. At the end of the war, however, the some Germans were pretending to be Jews, the very people they persecuted, to keep from being killed by the Russians. Irena indicates it was easy to tell these fake Jews as they could not recite any portions of the Torah.

Only a Girl

One of the Jewish men whom Irena promised to help questions her what she could do for them as she was 'only a girl'. Irena took the question as a challenge and used her feminine qualities to her advantage. Unfortunately, her use of her feminine qualities did backfire on her in one instance.

One of the first activities at which Irena proved she was adept was eavesdropping on the officers as they dined each evening. She learned when the Rokita would be performing Aktions - or raids - on the Jewish ghettos and camps, killing people. Irena passed this information along to the Jews with whom she worked to spread the word of the coming raids in the camps.

Next, Irena learned that it was rumor around the HKP that she was the major's girlfriend. Although this was not the case at the time, Irena used the rumors to enter the major's office so she could steal a stack of passes. These passes gave her the ability to move about the city freely, without having to explain her intentions.

Irena also used the major's affection for her to keep him from allowing an orderly to move into the basement of the villa. She told the major that if the man were to move in there, it would cause her to live in fear as she had been raped by the Russian officers. The major took pity on her and agreed to not allow the orderly to stay there. After the major realized that Irena had been harboring Jews in his basement, he required that she become his mistress.

Even as Irena worked with the partisan party, after her fiancé was killed, Irena continued to use her attractiveness in her favor. She talks of smiling and flirting with the German and Russian officers even as she wished they were dead.



Free Will

In the final section of the Irena's memoir, Irena praises God for his gift of free will. She compares free will to a piece of amber, a jewel once found in Poland. While she knows it isn't always the case, Irena chose in her life to use her free will to help people, even as others were using theirs to hurt people.

One of the instances in which Irena exercised her free will was in her decision to stay in Radom, studying in school, even though her parents wanted her to come home when war seemed about to begin. Irena reasoned that it was in Radom that she could be trained to help in the war efforts. She did not know how bad the war would actually get.

Irena also used her free will when she decided to go with the Polish army after Radom was attacked. Again, her goal was to help the Polish army as much as she could. She had no idea that just a few days later, Poland would no longer exist.

One of Irena's greatest acts of exercising her free will took place when she stood up against the German army and refused to allow Ternopol to ever be free of Jews. Though her work for the Jews could have cost her her own life, it was a chance that Irena took for her friends.



Styles

Structure

This book is broken into three major parts. Part one covers the circumstances under which Irena's parents met and her early childhood through her time as a prisoner of war in the hospital in Ternopol, and stints in the Russian prison and quarantine camp. This first part ends with Irena being reunited with her family in Radom. It is in the second part of the book, which represents the lion's share of the text, that Irena details her work with the Jews, including her first act of disobedience by putting the box of food under the fence at the Radom ghetto up to her act of harboring a dozen Jews in the basement of a villa belonging to a major in the German military. The final part of the book details the time that Irena spent with the partisan group as well as her own attempts to come to terms with the horrors she had seen in the war. It is in this section of the book that she describes her emotional healing and the circumstances under which she met her future husband.

The book does not depart from the chronology of the actual events of Irena's life. While the book does tell about significant bits and pieces of Irena's childhood, then her time after the war, the intent of her story is to tell of her actions during the time of World War II.

Perspective

The book is a memoir written in first person from Irena's memory. The pace of the book is well adjusted. Enough details are given for events to make sense to the reader but there is not so much emphasis given to any one instance that the reading drags. Irena's story is told as if she is telling it to a friend, much as one might imagine she told it to William Opdyke when she gave her story to him that day in the DP camp. Irena emphasizes the things that were important to her as a child, nature and religion. She describes things in terms of nature and often refers to occurrences in nature, like the blooming of the lilacs, in conjunction with significant experiences, like her parents' original meeting. Irena describes herself as being only a girl and being not terribly well read when it comes to politics. Despite these shortcomings, Irena is able to serve her country and the people of her country in a great way.

Irena details her life during the war in surprising detail for the amount of time that has passed since World War II. She describes the day the first bombs were dropped on Radom with such detail, describing sofas tumbling into the street and children sitting on steps that had once led up to a house, that the reader feels he has experienced what she has experienced. The worst image of the book, that of the baby being shot, almost ties the book together as it is introduced in the beginning of the book under the cover of a bird being shot. The image is described in detail about midway through the book. Then it is used in the conclusion of the book where Irena describes to her readers the



way she has had to force herself to imagine the baby turning into a bird and flying away to its freedom.

Tone

The book's tone shifts between disbelief, uncertainty, grief, fear and hope. As Irena learned the true horrors of the Nazi's intentions for the Jews while working at the German headquarters in Radom she felt grief for the innocent Jews and disbelief that one man could actually do the things the Nazis were doing to other men. This disbelief continued as Irena watched the final Jews from Radom killed and their homes bulldozed. In Ternopol, Irena voices a fearful hope as she promised the Jews who work with her in the laundry that she would keep them safe. This hope was fulfilled when she learned that the Russians had overtaken Ternopol and freed the remaining Jews.

Grief overtook Irena when her fiancé was killed, then again when she learned the work she did for her Jewish friends and the country of Poland had put her family in danger. After having spent the past years fighting for what is right, Irena was not able to be reunited with her family because it would put them in further danger.

Despite the content of the book, which could make it overwhelmingly dark and depressing, Irena's story comes across of being one of hope. Although her way was difficult, she tells a story about what one person, even if that person is a seemingly powerless female, can do in the lives of others.



Quotes

It was easy for me to believe that with such a powerful guardian, Poland would never fall.

-- Irena (Part One, Lilac Time paragraph 35)

Importance: Irena had been raised with a strong Catholic background. She believed that with the Madonna, the Virgin Mary, and her Child, Jesus Christ, watching over them and protecting them, Poland would never fall to the Nazis.

In my fantasies, I was always caught up in heroic struggles, and I saw myself saving lives, sacrificing myself for others. I had far loftier ambitions than mere romance.

-- Irena (Part One, Before the Storm paragraph 6)

Importance: Even as a child, Irena saw herself as dedicating her life to helping and saving others. She was not interested in having boyfriends, and felt she was much less attractive than her sisters, so she dedicated herself to work and study. It is almost chilling how correct Irena's aspirations for herself as a young girl turned out to be.

My family was in the west. Kozłowa Góra, only six kilometers from the old border, was now trapped inside Hitler's Germany. With phone service out, I had no way to contact Tatuś and Mamusia. I had no way of knowing if they were safe, if my sisters were alive and unhurt. I worked in a daze of grief for Poland and for myself. I feared I would never see my beloved family again.

-- Irena (Part One, The Lightning War paragraph 13)

Importance: After the bombing of Radom, Irena worked in a daze as she worried about her family. Although they were not very far away from where she was, she had no way to get in touch with them to know if they were okay. Additionally, the town in which they live, Kozłowa Góra, had been taken over as part of Germany, putting her family in a different country.

But the Polish army is through. I have just learned that the Germans and the Soviets have divided Poland between them. Even now, we are standing in Soviet territory. We are not a country any longer. There is no more Poland.

-- An Unnamed Polish General (Part One, Mother Russia paragraph 4)

Importance: Irena was with the remains of the Polish army when an unidentified Polish general informed them that Russia and Germany had taken over Poland and divided it between the two countries. It was in this way that she learned that she was now without a country.

Under Dr. Olga's authority, I had known I was a prisoner, but I had felt safe. Now, as a nurse of the renegade Polish army, I knew I attracted Dr. Ksydzof's personal vengeance.

-- Irena (Part One, The Hospital paragraph 35)



Importance: Irena sensed that Dr. Ksydzof, the new administrator at the hospital where she was being forced to work, had decided to take his anger out on her because he knew she served as a nurse for renegades from the Polish army. Dr. Ksydzof later tried to rape her, then spread lies about her part in the resistance. It was mostly because of the lies and rumors that he spread about her that caused her to be arrested when she returned to Ternopol in an attempt to go home to her family.

My heart thudded in my ears as I picked up the box. I had put food on the ground, and was now in danger of capital punishment. Without looking back, I entered the kitchen, and went back to work for the Nazis.

-- Irena (Part Two, A Drop in the Ocean paragraph 6)

Importance: This act of sliding a box of food under the fence that surrounded the Jewish ghetto near the hotel where she worked was Irena's first act of defiance toward the Nazi government.

As I pressed against the glass, I saw an officer make a flinging movement with his arm, and something rose up into the sky like a fat bird. With his other hand he aimed his pistol, and the bird plummeted to the ground beside its screaming mother, and the officer shot the mother, too./But it was not a bird. It was not a bird. It was not a bird.

-- Irena (Part Two, But it was Not a Bird paragraph 34)

Importance: It is in this quote from the book that Irena finally shares with her reader what it really was that she wrote of seeing in the introduction to the memoir. While she describes her vision as being a bird flushed out of a field, in reality, she saw a German officer throw a baby into the air and shoot it.

Moses Steiner, a stooped and gloomy man, made a small shrug. 'You're only a young girl. What can you do?'

-- Moses Steiner (Part Two, Only a Girl paragraph 11)

Importance: Although Moses Steiner intended his question as a discouragement to Irena, she seemed to take it as a challenge as she used her anonymity and seeming lack of power in her favor as she tried to help the Jews.

I was now twenty-one years old, and I had been a fighter on and off for four years. Those four years should have been spent in school, or in falling in love and starting a family, or in working at a job, or in a hundred other ways. But that was not to be. For four years I had been in the middle of war, and I had different hopes and expectations now. I only wanted not to die in too much pain, and to foil the Germans as much as I could before I went.

-- Irena (Part Two, Puszcza Janówka paragraph 12)

Importance: Irena's life had turned out much differently than she thought it would. Her goals in life were much different from typical girls her age.



This was the sort of crazy and self-defeating policy that was typical of the Nazi leaders. They wanted to get rid of the Jews, but they wanted the factories to run nonstop to provide weaponry and ammunition for fighting the Russians and the Allies.

-- Irena (Part Two, The Blows of the Ax paragraph 4)

Importance: Although the Germans depended on the Jews as free labor in their factories, they were also killing off these people as quickly as they could be trained to do their jobs. Irena found this practice senseless.

Beyond these walls, people were dying, but the officers and secretaries cared only that the noise hurt their heads, and that work would be hard enough today without disruptions from the SS.

-- Irena (Part Two, Aktion paragraph 21)

Importance: Irena draws a picture of the callousness of the officers and secretaries in the German military compound in which they work. Even though there were people just outside the walls who were being worked, starved and beaten to death, the workers for the Nazis cared nothing for them, and didn't see them as fellow human beings.

As long as I could help it, Ternopol would never be judenrein.

-- Irena (Part Two, Aktion paragraph 61)

Importance: Irena swore to herself that she would not allow Rokita to achieve his goal of making Ternopol free of Jews.

My God, I know you, Irena. I was part of that group, too. I was in the village that night you were captured. We tried to find where you'd been taken, but you were gone.

-- Zygmunt Pasiewski (Part Two, The Forester's Cottage paragraph 39)

Importance: It was in this quote that Irena learned that Zygmunt Pasiewski, the man who she befriended and believed was working with the resistance, was among the Polish soldiers with whom she traveled after the original bombing of Radom.

But I had banked on his affection for me for too long, used him for too long. I could not be surprised now that it had come to this accounting.

-- Irena (Part Two, The Punishment for Helping a Jew paragraph 48)

Importance: When the major learned that Irena had been hiding Jews in his house, he agreed to keep her secret, but demanded that she have sex with him willingly in exchange for his silence.

But I placed myself in God's hands all the same. God had saved my life so many times that I had to believe there was a reason.

-- Irena (Part Two, The Punishment for Helping a Jew paragraph 60)

Importance: Irena tried to get absolution for having unmarried sex with the major from a priest in the town where she lived. The man told her that he could not absolve her as



long as she continued the affair. He did not seem to care that if she stopped the affair, the lives of ten people would be in jeopardy. Instead of being crushed, Irena placed her life in God's hands, believing he had a reason for the situation in which she had found herself and would forgive her considering the circumstances.



Topics for Discussion

Irena's Beginning with the Resistance

Is there any one instance that got Irena involved in the resistance fight? If yes, what is it? If no, how did she get involved? Use examples from the book.

The Baby

Why did Irena encourage Ida Haller to carry her baby to term? Do you think this was the best idea? Why or why not?

Irena's Decision

Consider Irena's decision to go with the Polish army after the bombings of Radom. How did this decision change the course of her life?

Sacrifices

In what ways did Irena sacrifice herself in order to help save the Jews? Discuss some of the sacrifices that she made.

The Effect of Irena's Work on Her Family

Consider Irena's relationship with her family and the affect her work with the resistance had on them. Do you think she caused any of the problems that her family faced? Why or why not?

Irena's Faith

How did Irena's faith in God carry her through her determination to help the Jews?

Religious Approval

Compare and contrast the differences in Father Joseph's opinion of what Irena was doing and the opinion of the priest from the church near Chopin Street. With which opinion do you agree? Do you think it was more important for Irena to be pure, or for her to help save her Jewish friends?



Imagery of Birds

Discuss the author's use of images of birds in the book. How often do bird images appear? What do they seem to indicate?

Free Will

Why does Irena compare her free will to a treasure given to her by God in the last section of this book? Why does she describe it as a piece of amber? What is the importance of this material?

Irena's Guilt

Consider Irena's feelings of guilt when she realizes she had put her family in danger in order to help her friends. Is Irena at fault in the situation in which her family was placed? Should she feel she had sacrificed her family to help others?