



Courage

Marion Pritchard

Amsterdam, the Netherlands... 1942 – Marion Pritchard was studying to become a social worker when Germany invaded the Netherlands in May 1940. Amsterdam, the city in which she lived, was home to more than 75,000 Jews. The Germans began deporting Jews from Amsterdam to the Buchenwald and Mauthausen concentration camps in February 1941. Most Dutch citizens opposed Germany's assault on their country and the persecution of their Jewish neighbors, but they felt powerless in the face of German brutality and military might. Many reluctantly accepted the Nazi presence, and some, including Dutch officials, collaborated with the Germans. Others, like Marion Pritchard, chose to resist and to help Jews.

At the beginning of 1942, the Germans started concentrating Jews in Amsterdam; many were forced to relocate from the countryside. The growing Jewish population was then confined to certain areas of the city. July of that year marked the beginning of mass deportations to the killing centers in occupied Poland, mainly to Auschwitz. One day, Marion Pritchard witnessed Germans throwing young Jewish children onto a truck for deportation. It was a shocking sight, and Marion was overwhelmed with rage. The twenty-two-year-old student decided then that she would do whatever she could to rescue Jewish children.

Working with friends in the Dutch resistance, Marion began to bring food, clothing, and papers to Jews in hiding. She also performed more complicated missions when called upon, often putting herself in danger. Once, a friend asked her to deliver a "package" to a home in the north. Marion went to the handoff site, and a stranger gave her a baby girl. Marion traveled all day by train only to find that the people she was supposed to

meet had been arrested. Another man took Marion and the baby into his home. He and his wife decided to care for the child even though they were not involved in the operation.

In addition to carrying out short-term assignments, Marion hid a Jewish man and his three children from the fall of 1942 until liberation in 1945. Marion's friend, Miek, asked her to find a hiding place for his friend, Freddie Polak, and his children, ages four, two, and newborn. When Marion could not find a place, Miek persuaded his mother-in-law to let Freddie and the children, Lex, Tom, and Erica, stay in the servants' quarters of her country house. For the first year in hiding, Marion visited the family every weekend. When she finished school in November 1943, she moved into the home and took over the fulltime care of the children.

Miek had built a hiding place under the floor in case the Germans came looking for Jews. All four of them could fit in the space. One night, three Germans and a Dutch Nazi came to search the house. Marion had put the Polaks under the floor, but had not had time to give Erica, the baby, her sleeping powder. The search party left after failing to find any Jews. The baby started to cry, so Marion let the children climb out. The Dutch Nazi returned half an hour later; he saw the children sleeping and the hiding place uncovered. Marion knew she needed to act quickly. She reached for a gun that Miek had given her and killed the Dutchman.

The Polaks stayed with Marion until the end of the war. During the German occupation of the Netherlands, which ended in the spring of 1945, Marion Pritchard helped save approximately 150 Jewish children.

THE JEWISH FOUNDATION *for the righteous*

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Courage

Irena Sendler

Warsaw, Poland... 1942 – When the Germans invaded Poland in September 1939, Irena Sendler was working in the Social Welfare Department of Warsaw’s Municipal Administration. Warsaw was home to 375,000 Jews, the largest Jewish community in Europe and nearly thirty percent of the city’s population. The Germans began to persecute the Jews of Warsaw from the beginning of the occupation. From the outset, Irena Sendler used her position to provide financial and material assistance to Jewish families who were affected.

On October 12, 1940 – the Jewish holiday, Yom Kippur – the Germans issued a decree calling for the establishment of a ghetto, a section of the city where the Jews would be forced to live, isolating them from the non-Jewish population. About 400,000 Jews from Warsaw and the surrounding region were forced to move into an area of 1.3 square miles. In mid-November, the ghetto was sealed, surrounded by a brick wall over ten feet high and topped with barbed wire. A few heavily guarded gates permitted access to the ghetto, but the Jews inside were forbidden to leave. On account of the cramped conditions, poor sanitation, and very limited food and medicine, disease and starvation claimed thousands of lives each month. Ghetto inhabitants also fell victim to random acts of violence by both German and Polish authorities.

In July 1942, mass deportations of Jews from the Warsaw ghetto began. Most were sent to the Treblinka killing center northeast of the city, where they were murdered in gas chambers. Horrified by the Germans’ persecution of the Jews, a group of Polish citizens formed an underground organization called the Council for the Aid to Jews, or *Zegota*, in September 1942. Irena Sendler became the head of *Zegota*’s Children’s Bureau. She and a colleague, Irena Schultz, obtained

documents that allowed them to enter the ghetto, and the two young women began to smuggle children out.

Irena Sendler, who used the codename “Jolanta,” and the members of *Zegota* used creative methods to get children out of the ghetto. They led some out through the underground corridors of a courthouse and through a tram depot. They sedated some infants and carried them out in potato sacks or coffins. A church located on the edge of the ghetto also became useful. It had two entrances, one inside the ghetto and one on the Christian side of Warsaw. With *Zegota*’s help, some children entered the church as Jews and exited as “Christians.”

In addition to smuggling children out of the ghetto, Irena Sendler found safe places for them to hide – often with non-Jewish families in the Warsaw area. Children were also sheltered in convents, hospitals, and orphanages. To Poles who struggled under the added financial burden that came with hiding a Jew, *Zegota* gave money to help pay for food, clothing, and medicine.

The Germans learned of Irena’s activities. On October 20, 1943, she was arrested by the *Gestapo* (German secret state police) and taken to the Pawiak prison. Irena was tortured brutally, but she refused to give any information about *Zegota* or about the children she had placed in hiding. She was sentenced to death. Members of *Zegota* bribed one of the *Gestapo* agents, and on the day Irena was to be executed, she was permitted to escape. She had to go into hiding for the remainder of the war but continued to coordinate her rescue work. By January 1945, when Warsaw was liberated by Soviet troops, the Children’s Bureau of *Zegota* had saved more than 2,500 Jewish children.

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