



Self-Sacrifice

Jadviga Konochowicz

Jody, Poland... January 1943 – When Germany attacked the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, the Soviet Army retreated and the Wehrmacht (German army) rapidly advanced eastward. One of the towns they occupied was Jody, then in Poland and now in Belarus. Jody was a small shtetl with 1,000 inhabitants, about 700 of whom were Jewish. The Germans immediately herded the Jews of Jody as well as Jews from surrounding villages into a ghetto, a section of the town where they were forced to live, isolating them from the non-Jewish population. On December 17, 1941 – the fifth night of the Jewish holiday, Hanukkah – the Germans and their Polish collaborators massacred roughly 500 of the Jews. By the end of the month, they had captured and murdered another 100. Of the roughly 100 Jews who were still alive, some fled to ghettos in nearby towns, some wandered from place to place, and a few were hidden by Christians. The Silverman and Smuszkowicz families were among those who found shelter.

Alter Silverman and his three teenaged children, and his sister Chaiye Rivke Smuszkowicz and her three teenaged children escaped the liquidation of the ghetto by hiding with their non-Jewish neighbors. The eight relatives spent most of 1942 hidden by two Christian families – five hid with one, three with the other. Toward the end of that year, the Germans raided the farm where one group was hiding. Although the Jews were not discovered, they had to find a new place to stay.

The Silvermans and Smuszkowicz families found shelter with the Konochowicz family, who were complete strangers. The family consisted of the parents and eight children, including seventeen-year-old Jadviga, the third oldest. The two Jewish families asked if they could stay for one night. They ended up staying for more than a year. Although the Konochowicz family were poor and barely able to care for their own family of ten, they provided food and shelter for the eight Jews. In doing so, they sacrificed their own welfare and risked their lives. The punishment for hiding a Jew in German-occupied Poland was death. Often the rescuer's entire family was murdered as well. Jadviga's father, however, was a devout Catholic and felt that it was his duty to help. People were suffering and his family had the ability to do something about it, despite the danger and hardship involved.

To avoid detection, the eight Jews lived in the attic of the Konochowicz family's barn. Jadviga regularly brought them food, which they pulled up to the attic in pails attached to a rope. Jadviga hummed to let them know when she was coming, as she knew that it was too dangerous to speak to them. In June 1943, four of the Silverman and Smuszkowicz children left the farm and went into the forest to join a partisan brigade – a group of resistance fighters. A few months later, the other two teenagers joined another partisan brigade that was fighting the Germans. They continued to use the Konochowicz farm as a safe house. Jadviga continued to help by smuggling weapons and ammunition to the partisans. All eight members of the Silverman and Smuszkowicz families survived the war.

THE JEWISH FOUNDATION *for the righteous*

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Aristides de Sousa Mendes

Bordeaux, France... May 1940 – On May 10, 1940, Germany invaded the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France. The Germans attacked France through the Ardennes Forest in southeastern Belgium and swiftly advanced south through the country. Many of the Jews living in France – some of whom had emigrated from Germany in the 1930's – fled south. Most sought to enter Spain, proceed to Portugal, and then escape by ship to Great Britain, the United States, or South America. In order to cross the French border into Spain, the refugees needed Portuguese entry or transit visas. On the day the Germans launched their invasion of Western Europe, however, the Portuguese government instructed its consular representatives in France not to issue such visas, especially not to Jews. This left thousands of refugees stranded in Bordeaux, a French city near the Spanish border.

One night Rabbi Haim Kruger from Belgium, one of thousands of refugees trying to escape, approached Aristides de Sousa Mendes, the Portuguese consul general in Bordeaux, and begged him to issue visas to the more than ten thousand Jews who had fled to the area. Aristides agreed to give visas to the rabbi and his family, but said that he could not give out any more without his government's approval. Rabbi Kruger refused to accept the offer. After much soul-searching, Aristides decided that he would issue visas to all those who needed them, even though he would be risking his career and his life. As the Germans continued their push into southern France, Aristides began to issue transit visas to Jews, defying the orders of his government. With a Portuguese transit visa in hand, a refugee was allowed to cross into Spain in order to enter Portugal. Aristides issued thousands of visas before the Germans

reached Bordeaux. His wife, Angelina, took care of those who were ill, elderly, or pregnant, and his two oldest sons assisted him in preparing the visas. When German planes bombed Bordeaux on the night of June 19, 1940, many of the refugees fled to Bayonne and Hendaye, French towns closer to the Spanish border. Aristides followed and instructed the Portuguese consul in Bayonne to issue special visas to the Jews, whose situation grew more perilous as the German assault on France intensified. When Aristides arrived at Hendaye along with some of the Jews to whom he had issued visas, the Spanish officials refused to let them cross the border. They had received orders not to honor any transit visas Aristides had issued. Aristides led the refugees to an obscure border crossing that did not have a telephone. The lone guard had not received the orders, and Aristides persuaded him to let everyone through.

France surrendered and signed an armistice with Germany on June 22, 1940. Germany occupied the northern part of France and a stretch along the western coast – where Bordeaux was located – that extended down to Spain. Even after the German army entered Bordeaux on June 27, 1940, Aristides continued to issue Portuguese passports to Jews who were still stranded there, knowing that such documents might prevent these Jews from being deported to concentration camps. Once again, his disobedience angered the Portuguese government. Aristides left Bordeaux on July 8, 1940 and returned to Portugal. Upon his return to Lisbon, the capital, he was dismissed from the diplomatic service and was denied retirement and severance benefits. Aristides de Sousa Mendes died in poverty in 1954 and was survived by twelve children.

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