The Holocaust: assessing responsibility and conscience

Rescuers: Irena Gut Opdyke

Born in Poland to Catholic parents, Irena Gut joined the underground shortly after WWII began. Captured by the Russians who beat and raped her, she eventually was sent to work at a hospital for wounded Russian soldiers. At the first opportunity she fled the hospital only to be captured by the Germans who sent her to work in a munitions plant.

While working for the Germans she caught the eye of an elderly SS officer (Rugemer) who found her easier work in the army mess hall. The mess hall was in close proximity to a Jewish ghetto and Irena soon became familiar with the plight of its inhabitants.

When Rugemer was transferred to the Ukraine he took Irena as his housekeeper. While there, she hid 12 Jews in Rugemer’s villa. She fed and clothed them until he accidentally found them one day. Terrified for all their lives, Irena begged the officer to allow her friends to escape, saying she would take the punishment of death for them all if necessary. After debating his answer, Rugemer told Irena that he would keep her secret, but for a price – she would have to become his mistress. This she agreed to.

As German forces retreated in the face of the Soviet offensive, Irena and the Jews she had protected, fled to the relative safety of the forests where they survived.

In 1949, Irena immigrated to the United States eventually marrying and establishing a home in Southern California.

In 1982, Irena Gut Opdyke was recognized by Yad Vashem, the Israeli national Holocaust memorial, as Righteous Among the Nations.

1. What inspires some people to risk their lives and those of their families for people they do not even know?

2. Are there situations for students today when they can choose a course of action that could be hurtful to them? What inspires the students to do the right or the wrong thing?