

AGNES GRUNWALD-SPIER is a well-known presence at many communal events. A long time representative on the Board of Deputies of British Jews and a volunteer for many causes, in her 60s she became a writer. She tells JUDITH MIRZOEFF how it came about

Through Thomas Keneally's book *Schindler's Ark* and the film *Schindler's List* based on it, we know that Oskar Schindler saved over a thousand Jews in Poland from the camps during WW2. But Schindler was only one of many non-Jews who were humane enough and brave enough not to turn aside but to try and help. In her carefully documented history, *The Other Schindlers – Why some people chose to save Jews in the Holocaust*, Agnes Grunwald-Spier tells about 30 rescuers, both humble and influential, many of whose stories have only just come to light.

They include the popular singer, Vali Rácz, known as the Hungarian Marlene Dietrich, who hid Jews behind a false panel in a huge wardrobe; the American Charles Fawcett, who married six women in three months (on paper), to get them out of the camps. Among diplomats who issued piles of entry visas to help Jews escape was Aristides de Sousa Mendes, Portuguese consul in Bordeaux, who saved more than 10,000, to the detriment of his career.

Agnes herself was one of those saved, almost by chance. "One morning in Budapest during the autumn of 1944, an unknown official in charge of deporting Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz sent all the women accompanied by children back to their homes. My mother, Leona Grunwald, was one of those women and I was a tiny baby in her arms," she explains. "I have no means of knowing who that official was and what his motives were ... but it is chilling to think that but for his actions, on arrival at Auschwitz, I would have been tossed into the fires with other babies – murdered before I was aware of life."

I asked Agnes how long she remained in Europe and what were her earliest memories.

"We were liberated in January 1945, my



Descendants of rescued and rescuers join Agnes Grunwald-Spier (far right)

DOCUMENTING

mother went back to her flat, my father came home from forced labour in March and we moved illegally to Vienna in 1946 and stayed for a year. My earliest memory is of the train that took us from Vienna to England. My father brought with us some tins with chocolate powder in and a night light underneath. You poured water in and lit the nightlight and after a time you got wonderful hot chocolate. They were American Forces surplus, I think.

"We settled first in Southgate, living with my mother's sister who had signed the papers to let us in to the country. We moved to Sutton when my father, a manufacturing jeweller, got some work there, but he committed suicide in 1955 when I was 10. The old 11-plus did me proud and I got a place at Sutton High School." The next stage in Agnes' education was an external London University degree, a BSc in economics, but she concentrated on her main loves, history, and politics. The book acknowledges her debt to her history teacher.

"I didn't really know what I wanted to do, so the civil service seemed a good place to go. As a young woman, I wasn't very ambitious – I've got more ambitious as I got older. I dealt mainly with the allocation of radio frequencies, bizarrely, for eight years, preparing for an international conference in 1971. In 1975 my then husband was made a partner in his firm in the Birmingham office and we moved to a village in Worcestershire and lived there for 16 years. I really enjoyed village life. I started a local history society, which still functions, and was elected to the Parish Council. Jewish people don't always understand that the Parish Council is the



THE RESCUERS

lowest form of local government, and has nothing to do with the Church. The village was threatened with an extension of the orbital motorway, the M42, so I set up a Motorway Action Group. That was a major undertaking, not resolved when we moved to Sheffield in 1991.”

Agnes still has a base in Sheffield although since her divorce she divides her time between there and London. It was in Sheffield that she first became active in the Jewish community. “We hadn’t been very involved in Jewish life, although we belonged to the Singers Hill synagogue. After the warm neighbourliness of village life, I found Yorkshire people not particularly friendly but the Sheffield Jewish community was very welcoming. It was quite small and they were looking for people to fill jobs. I was asked if I’d like to be secretary of the Representative Council in which the synagogues and other major bodies in major cities meet to discuss matters of concern and provide a contact point for the wider community. I worked particularly hard on the interfaith aspects. I had time because I was then a traditional housewife and mother and could go to daytime meetings. In future all organisations are going to suffer because this pool of keen middle class women with time to spare is not going to be there.

“I also became a magistrate in Bromsgrove through sitting next to the Chairman of the neighbouring Bench in Kidderminster at a dinner. He advised me not to wait until my sons were a bit older, ‘the younger the better’, he said. He supported my application when I was 40.

Vali Rácz, one of the rescuers, courtesy of Monica Porter

“I took over as the Sheffield member of the Board of Deputies after volunteering to go to London meetings in place of the existing Deputy who was finding it difficult to get to the meetings. I was elected as no one else seemed to want the job.

“It really opened the door to a lot of what I do now. I have one of the three places for Deputies on the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. I’ve stopped being the Deputy for Sheffield, because I plan to move to London, and I’m now the Deputy for World Jewish Relief.”

In 1994 the Sheffield City Council was bringing in the Anne Frank Exhibition, and Agnes felt that the Jewish community should be represented on the committee. “I wanted to be that representative because I was a Holocaust survivor,” she remembers. “Through it I got to know a woman in Sheffield University who was setting up an MA in Holocaust Studies and signed up, which led eventually to the book. You know, I’m not very good at standing on the sidelines, I think it’s partly because I’m quite bossy by nature, some would say because I know I’m right. I’ve got a logical mind and have been blessed with an old-fashioned commodity which is common sense.”

The book is published to coincide with the 65th anniversary of the liberation of the camps, even though it was only finished in January. “The issues still have great relevance today”, says Agnes, “and I hope the book makes people think about them.

“My direct inspiration was the dissertation on Varian Fry that I wrote for my MA, after finding out about him through a BBC documentary. Fry was then the only American listed by Yad Vashem among the righteous among the nations for helping to rescue Jews from the Holocaust. After France fell in 1940 he agreed to go to Marseilles and rescue artists and writers for America’s Emergency Relief Committee. He was given 200 visas, but ended up rescuing thousands of people, because of a love of literature and direct experience of the Nazis in Berlin in the ‘30s. His story made

me wonder what made people risk so much, and gave me the urge to find out more. I discovered a range of motivations. Some rescuers, including Quakers, acted from religious conviction, some from humanitarian motives. Others simply tried to help Jews who had been neighbours for years. These followed their hearts rather than what they had been told to do. However, most people were bystanders, indifferent to the fate of the Jews and often denying they knew what was happening even when they lived close to the camps.

“That is why it is important to record these stories of heroism. Rwanda and Darfur have shown that genocide is still tragically happening.”

How did she go about finding all these people with stories to tell? “I advertised in the magazines of the Association of Jewish Refugees and the Council of Christians and Jews, and I found some stories in the Jewish Chronicle and in the Times. “

Conferences on the Holocaust and the European Jewish communities also helped with publicity. Other cases were discovered by remote chance, like that of an EU driver in Brussels. On hearing what Agnes was researching he revealed that his own mother had been saved from transportation to Auschwitz when she was five because a Nazi officer took pity on her – he had never told this to anyone before.

Everyone is said to have one book in them. Will Agnes ever write another? “I do feel that I shall get new information that might make part two; there are so many unheard stories out there. I’d also like to write a memoir one day.”

I was left with the impression that if this energetic woman believes that something ought to be done, it won’t be long before she gets on with it.

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