

White Rose Essay

Krystyna Chiger

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“We must make sure that their [victims of the Holocaust] deaths have posthumous meaning. We must make sure that from now until the end of days all humankind stares this evil in the face...and only then can we be sure it will never arise again.”

-Ronald Reagan, 40th president of the United States¹

During the Holocaust, one of the greatest atrocities the world has ever seen, the Nazis exterminated a vast part of an entire religion, putting a twisted scar on the history of mankind; thus, as a new generation, it is our duty to learn from and remember what happened, ensuring that it never transpires again. During Adolf Hitler’s persecution of the Jews, called the Final Solution, many Jewish parents beseeched non-Jews to shelter and defend their children’s lives.² Some parents hid with their children, as Krystyna Chiger and her family did. After escaping the liquidation of their ghetto by hiding in the sewers, the Chigers stayed underground for nearly fourteen months.³ Although the Chigers were concealed, many others were not so fortunate; by the end of the war, the Nazis succeeded in killing nearly two out of every three European Jews.⁴

Hitler promoted anti-Semitism early on as Chancellor of Germany.⁵ He and the Nazi regime stripped the German Jews of their rights, marked them with the Star of David, imposed

¹ "United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: 10th Anniversary Annual Report 2003-2004." USHMM. Last updated 2004. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 5 Mar 2009 <<http://www.ushmm.org/museum/press/annualreport/2004/report.pdf>>.

² "The 'Final Solution'." The "Final Solution". Last updated 11 Mar 2009. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 5 Mar 2009 <<http://www.ushmm.org/outreach/fsol.htm>>.

³ Bülow, Louis. "The Chiger Family: Saved by Leopold Socha." The Chiger Family. 2008. Shoah. 1 Mar 2009 <<http://www.shoah.dk/Courage/Chiger.htm>>.

⁴ "The Holocaust." The Holocaust. 7 Oct 2008. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 7 Mar 2009 <<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005143>>.

⁵ "Germany: Establishment of the Nazi Dictatorship." Germany: Establishment of the Nazi Dictatorship. 07 Oct 2008. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 7 Mar 2009 <<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005204>>.

strict curfews, confiscated Jewish properties, and created separate schools for the Jewish children to attend.⁶

At this time, seven-year-old Krystyna Chiger lived quite peacefully with her family in Lvov (Lviv), Poland.⁷ Then *Die Endloesung* (German for “The Final Solution”) commenced.⁸ Everything turned upside-down after the Germans invaded Lvov, breaking the German-Soviet Pact.⁹ As the Nazis tightened their control over Polish Jews, Krystyna saw, from the safety of her home, German soldiers marching around, randomly removing Jews and their belongings. Being so young, Krystyna could not comprehend why these “Germans in their black boots” were taking their possessions, but seeing how anxious her parents were, she knew something was wrong.¹⁰

The discrimination against Jews quickly evolved into actions of rounding them up and dumping them into ghettos. In December of 1941, 150,000 Polish Jews (excluding the Chigers) were deported to Juden-Lag, a Lvov ghetto that kept Jews who had not yet been executed.¹¹ Sensing danger now from being so isolated, Krystyna’s father moved the family to the outskirts of Juden-Lag, but they were soon forced into the ghetto as well.

Within the ghetto, as family members were taken by Hitler’s police forces, known as the SS, Krystyna’s mother and father risked their lives daily when traveling outside the house just to work for very little money. But the risk was worth it, for her father once said, “Money will buy

⁶ "Germany: Establishment of the Nazi Dictatorship." Germany: Establishment of the Nazi Dictatorship. 07 Oct 2008. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 7 Mar 2009 <<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005204>>.

⁷ Chiger, Krystyna. The Girl in the Green Sweater. 1st. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008.

⁸ "The Final Solution." The Final Solution. 7 Mar 2009 <<http://frank.mtsu.edu/~baustin/finlsol.html>>.

⁹ "Lvov." Lvov. 07 Oct 2008. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 7 Mar 2009 <<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?ModuleId=10005171>>.

¹⁰ Chiger, Krystyna. The Girl in the Green Sweater. 1st. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008.

¹¹ Chiger, Krystyna. The Girl in the Green Sweater. 1st. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008.

our continued freedom”.¹² During the day, in order to evade the SS’s unpredictable searches of Jewish property, Krystyna and her three-year-old brother hid in tiny compartments in the walls of their home. In her book, *The Girl in the Green Sweater*, Krystyna stated that the days spent hiding and waiting for her parents to come home were the worst part of the war; she wrote, “In this way, I had my childhood taken from me. The Germans, they did not take me, but they took a part of me. This part.”¹³

On May 30, 1943, Juden-Lag’s last few thousand inhabitants were removed after the rest had previously been deported to the Belzec death camp.¹⁴ As this liquidation took place, the Chiger family escaped into Juden-Lag’s sewers.¹⁵ There they stayed, undetected, as the Nazis emptied the ghetto above. But a few days later, three sewage workers, led by Leopold Socha, discovered them.¹⁶ Socha, a staunch, religious Polish patriot who had been arrested several times for burglary, thought that if he saved the Jews’ lives, God would forgive him of his past sins. After agreeing to conceal the fugitives, the men came each day through different manholes (to avoid suspicion) and brought the Jews food as well as news of the war. They tried to enliven the refugees by making jokes and having light-hearted conversations. When Krystyna fell into a state of melancholy, it was Socha who told her amusing stories day after day until she recovered.¹⁷ It was the workers’ love and kindness that eventually saved the escapees.

Although Socha and his men tried their hardest to make life in the sewers easier, rats *still* stole the Jews’ food, horrible stench *still* came from decomposing wastes, and maggots *still*

¹² Chiger, Krystyna. *The Girl in the Green Sweater*. 1st. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008.

¹³ Chiger, Krystyna. *The Girl in the Green Sweater*. 1st. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008.

¹⁴ Bülow, Louis. "The Chiger Family: Saved by Leopold Socha." *The Chiger Family*. 2008. Shoah. 1 Mar 2009 <<http://www.shoah.dk/Courage/Chiger.htm>>.

¹⁵ Chiger, Krystyna. *The Girl in the Green Sweater*. 1st. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008.

¹⁶ Paldiel, Mordecai. *The Righteous Among the Nations*. 1st. Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Publishing House Ltd., 2007.

¹⁷ Paldiel, Mordecai. *The Righteous Among the Nations*. 1st. Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Publishing House Ltd., 2007.

were everywhere. In a post-war interview, Krystyna described how truly awful the sewers were: “Water seeped from the walls and it smelled bad. I saw large, red rats which ran by us just like chickens. At first I was very afraid, but later I got used to it.”¹⁸ Furthermore, Krystyna remembered dreaming about the sunshine, fresh air, and flowers of the outside world. Being engulfed in danger, children in hiding could only deal with their seemingly unlivable conditions while dreaming of happier places and times. The Nazis not only deprived those children of their toys, but their freedoms and childhoods as well.

“One day we heard a strong knocking on the sewer grates,” continued Krystyna in her interview, “These were our sewer workers who told us that we were free.”¹⁹ The date was July 27, 1944.²⁰ As the children climbed out one by one, they no longer looked like children: their skin ashen, limbs thin, and cheek bones protruding from their faces; they were skeletons. But all in all, Krystyna and her family could truly celebrate— they had survived.

Krystyna’s experience in refuge accurately demonstrates how systematically and brutally the Jews were massacred, how desperate times became, and how close the blade of death reached Krystyna and her family. Hiding in the waste and refuse of the sewers for fourteen months was an astounding feat for a seven-year-old girl; instead of being energetic and jubilant like a normal girl, she had to become unnaturally quiet and subdued. I cannot even begin to envision myself residing in those vermin-infested conditions, surrounded by disgusting sewage and bacteria. In my opinion, hiding in the culverts would be the hardest obstacle to surpass in order to escape persecution. For Krystyna, however, the hardest impediment to overtake was the time spent hiding in the crevices at home with her brother. In *The Girl in the Green Sweater*, Krystyna

¹⁸ Holender, Maria. "Children of the Holocaust: The Survivors Speak." *Krystyna's Story*. 1999. Anti-Defamation League. 4 Mar 2009 <http://www.adl.org/children_holocaust/story_krystyna.asp>.

¹⁹ Holender, Maria. "Children of the Holocaust: The Survivors Speak." *Krystyna's Story*. 1999. Anti-Defamation League. 4 Mar 2009 <http://www.adl.org/children_holocaust/story_krystyna.asp>.

²⁰ Chiger, Krystyna. *The Girl in the Green Sweater*. 1st. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008.

stated that hiding underground was much more tolerable than hiding at home; perhaps she believed that because, while in the sewers, she was with her family and knew they were safe. When hiding at home, she had no idea when or if her parents were coming home, and whether or not German soldiers were going to storm in and capture her brother and her. She must have had so much anxiety and stress to bear during those times; the fact that she remained sane is simply mind-boggling. I have come to respect Krystyna in a new, brighter light, and by learning from her journey, I can do my part in knowing the mistakes made and learning from them. With each small step of remembering this past, history will never be repeated.

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