

INSIGHT

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The first time I saw Maria Wizmur Kaslow holding court with well-wishers in the lobby of our hotel in Budapest, Hungary, last summer, I was convinced she was a member of a royal family. Her regal bearing, exquisite clothes and obvious command of several languages made it clear she was not the typical tourist.

Much to my surprise, I learned that this elegant woman and I were in Budapest for the same reason. I was there to report on a three-day series of events sponsored by the Emanuel Foundation for Hungarian Culture marking the 50th anniversary of the Hungarian Holocaust. Maria was there to receive an international award from the foundation recognizing her work in helping to save the lives of thousands of Budapest Jews.

Over the next few days, Maria, 67, who now lives in Englewood, N.J., told me her story.

Born in Stanislawow, Poland, where her family was in the oil business, Maria studied classical literature and foreign languages, and met leading Jewish intellectuals who frequented her parents' spacious villa.

In 1941, her world turned upside down when, after annexing Austria, Czechoslovakia and the Sudetenland, the Germans occupied Poland.

The Nazis forced Maria's family into a ghetto, killed the town's leading citizens, and organized a Jewish police force.

Maria's family survived the initial massacres because of their influence. But, on Oct. 12, 1941, the Germans searched the ghetto for older people. They found Maria's grandmother and seized the entire family. The Nazis gathered more prisoners as they went, finally forcing their captives to a cemetery where a mass grave had been dug.

"They shot and shot until nightfall," remembers Maria, who was 13 at the time. At the beginning of the horror, she heard her younger sister call her name, "Mania! Mania!" over and over. Maria never saw her or her parents again.

"When the shooting stopped, I was miraculously still alive — naked and covered with blood," she says. Maria crawled out of the grave, wrapped herself in rags, and ran back to her deserted apartment in the ghetto.

Staring at her reflection in a mirror, she clenched her hands, and asked, enraged, "Why are you still alive?"

In the ghetto, Maria saw wagonloads of Jews being trundled down the street. Once, she recognized her father's best friend sitting upright in a cart. She thought he was on his way to a labor camp and then realized all of the passengers were dead. They were swollen from starvation and were being transported for disposal.

Remembering her mother's prophecy, "You will be the only one to survive," she plotted her escape.

She secured Christian identification papers from a businessman, paying for them with her last possessions of jewelry and fur. Maria planned to escape to Cracow with a friend. But just before they boarded the train, Maria's friend vanished.

In despair, Maria got on the train anyhow, taking a seat in a car filled with Ukrainian guards who worked for the Gestapo.

One of the guards invited Maria to spend the evening at his apartment and she accepted. "I had no money and no place else to go," she explained.

Polish heroine cheated Nazis out of thousands of victims



Maria Wizmur Kaslow, pictured above in 1943 and at upper right, today, was rescued by a Ukrainian Christian, Nicholas Skilskyj (lower right). It was the beginning of a friendship that has lasted over 50 years.

The soldier's room was filled with pictures of Nazis and Ukrainian killers, she remembers. Her host began stripping off his clothes and tried to undress Maria.

"I still remember his lilac-colored flannel underwear," she shudders. "I fought him off like a tigress."

Just then, Maria recalls, the key turned in the lock and "a very young, very nice soldier walked in."

The newcomer, who also lived in the apartment, was Nicholas Skilskyj. He forced Maria's attacker to leave, inviting her to remain as long as she wished.

Their meeting was the beginning of a friendship that would endure for over 50 years and culminate in Nicholas being honored at Yad Vashem as a Righteous Gentile.

"He was a good-hearted person. Like a good piece of bread — simple and wholesome," Maria recalls fondly.

After four weeks, Nicholas insisted that Maria look for work, explaining the Gestapo would start questioning her presence.

One morning, while Nicholas was shaving, Maria put a piece of paper in front of him that said, "I can not get a job. I'm Jewish."

"Nicholas turned as white as the curtains and rushed out, disappearing for three days," Maria recalls. Finally, he returned, confessing that he had fallen in love with her.

Passing her off as his sister, Nicholas used his connections to get Maria a job working at the local post office. The post office was happy to hire her, she explains, because she was fluent in so many languages. She worked there for ten months, processing political telegrams. She had been ordered to alert the Gestapo whenever she received a message detailing the progress of the war.

"I let them all go unchecked," she says. "I thought maybe it would do some good."

Finally, the Gestapo started asking questions about Maria's activities. "I told them you're not Jewish," Maria's post office supervisor informed her. "I told them you don't smell of onions."

In February of 1943, Maria learned the Gestapo was planning to arrest her at

Through the underground, Maria met Raoul Wallenberg, the heroic Swedish diplomat.

work. She sent word to Nicholas, and the pair immediately fled. Disguising themselves as peasants, they boarded a train for a town on the Hungarian border which was considered safe.

The pair debarked near the town and walked for hours through waist-high snow, knocking on doors when they arrived. At the third house, a young boy reluctantly admitted them. Maria's boots had frozen to her legs, and Nicholas had to cut the leather away with a knife.

Exhausted, Maria and Nicholas fell asleep. When they awakened, a priest was standing over them. Nicholas pleaded, "Father, this girl is Jewish. Can you help me save her?"

The priest responded with offerings of food, then bought Nicholas and Maria train tickets to Budapest, where his sister lived.

After a perilous journey, Nicholas, now 18, and Maria, 14, arrived in Budapest. They stayed with the priest's sister for two weeks, then sought refuge in internment camps.

Shortly afterwards, they were adopted by a wealthy Christian couple. Still concealing her Jewish identity, Maria found work with a Budapest furrier, making white fur jackets for Nazi soldiers which camouflaged them in the snow. Nicholas was sent away to school.

During their separation, Nicholas vis-

ited Maria often. Each time he returned to Budapest, he went to the German identification bureau, taking the papers of a Jew seeking permission to leave Hungary. Assuming they were for Nicholas, the officials stamped the papers, which Nicholas then returned to their Jewish owners.

"Each time, Nicholas would dye his hair, put on a hat, grow a moustache or otherwise alter his appearance," Maria says. "Sometimes he went twice (to the bureau) in one day."

In this manner, he saved the lives of 11 Jews. Once he finished his schooling, Nicholas rejoined Maria in Budapest, where he worked with her and her future husband in saving even more Jews. After the war, those he helped rescue sent letters to Yad Vashem so that Nicholas could be honored as a Righteous Gentile. He now lives in Caracas, Venezuela, and he and Maria correspond regularly.

In 1944, Maria joined Budapest's Jewish underground, serving as a spy and courier. One of her jobs was to familiarize herself with the soldiers' hiding places in order to deliver ammunition.

"With my small hands, I carried big bags of pistols to the bunkers. I wasn't afraid of anything in the world. I did whatever was necessary."

Through the underground, Maria met Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat and scion to a banking dynasty, who helped rescue approximately 100,000 Budapest Jews.

"He was very young and very handsome. He was so taken by his job; it was the only thing he wanted to do," Maria remembers.

The young courier was in touch with Wallenberg regularly. Maria's primary job was finding out who needed *schutz passes* (passes for safe transport out of Hungary) and getting them into the hands of Jews.

She and her future husband, Mietek Wizmur, would don *Arrowcross* (Hungarian army) uniforms, carry fake German identification papers, enter the ghetto and rush from house to house shouting, "Raus, Raus, Juden! (Out, out, Jews!)"

Then Maria and Mietek would lead the Jews to safe hiding places and provide them with false identification papers obtained from Wallenberg.

Even after the Swedish diplomat mysteriously disappeared in 1945, Maria continued her dangerous exploits. Friends begged her to accompany them to Sweden, but the underground "had ... become my family and I could not leave them. I had created a new world for myself and I had no one else."

When the war ended, Maria and Mietek lived in Vienna and then Munich, waiting for permission to emigrate to the U.S. In Germany, Maria worked for an import-export firm. The couple arrived in the U.S. in 1953 with their 7-year-old son.

She was widowed soon afterwards. Now married to her second husband, Maria is a successful interior designer. She devotes much of her time to raising funds for Women's Division of American Technion and the Emanuel Foundation.

Why did she risk her life hundreds of times to help others, when she so easily could have ridden out the Holocaust using her Christian papers?

Maria says she was driven by guilt because she and an uncle were the only members of her family to survive, out of a total of 35 relatives.

"I knew I would never get rid of my suffering, but I tried to make sense out of my life by helping others."