

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 prison-

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

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."

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 papers 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