

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

When the stakes are high, will we do the right thing?



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In the 1940s, the family of Ignacy Chiger survived for 14 months in the sewers underneath the Polish city of Lvov. As the Nazis were killing thousands of Jews, this family dug a tunnel under the floor of their home down to the sewer system in order to escape from the onslaught.

Hoping it would be just a few days before they could exit this underground refuge, they then realized that Nazis had set up patrols and were shooting anyone coming out through a manhole. A Polish sewer worker discovered them and, rather than turn them over to the Nazis, found that he could make some extra cash by bringing them food, and so he began to take care of them.

Soon the cash ran out, but Leopold Socha, the sewer worker, continued to bring food and water to Chiger, his wife and two young children ages 4 and 7.

A recent book by Robert Marshall, "In the Sewers of Lvov: The Last Sanctuary from the Holocaust," describes the terrible existence they endured for months.

At one point during their ordeal, they were in a section of the sewer near the municipal toilets where, Marshall describes, "every time the toilets were flushed, a new wave of excrement passed down the trench and sometimes overflowed across the floor. They settled down on the stones, shivering in a howling wind, while rats scuttled about their feet."

Socha found them a better place to hide, but now, when there were heavy rains, they almost perished by drowning. The 7-year-old daughter, Krystyna (now a retired dentist living in the United States), describes being held up to the ceiling by her father as the waters came up nearly to his neck. She also recalls Socha as someone who became a trusted friend and who would comfort her during times of depression. In her words, "He sat me on his lap and he began talking to me, quietly. He just told me stories and told me not to worry."

Socha told her, "Someday soon, you will breathe the air and you will see the daylight. It won't be long, you'll be like the other children. ... I will help you, don't worry. I am always with you." His encouragement and care probably saved her life during this time, which did turn out to be a long 14 months. Krystyna's mother called him "an angel sent by God to protect us."

Socha was a devout Catholic and eventually saw this effort as his mission. Following their liberation from the sewer, Socha would say, "This is my work. These are my Jews." Tragically, Socha died two years later at age 36, when the bicycle he and his daughter were riding was accidentally struck by a Russian military vehicle.

The Chiger family entered their sewer hiding place in May, 1943, and did not emerge until July of 1944, after the Russian army lib-



Leopold Socha helped a Jewish family survive the Holocaust in the sewers of Lvov, Poland.



Krystyna Chiger was 7 when her family fled into the sewers, and Socha's encouragement and care helped save her life.

IF YOU GO

'Character Gap' Book Discussion Group

Group meets alternate Thursdays at 7 p.m. in Grand Rapids

More information: email interfaith@gvsu.edu

erated the city. In a city with nearly 150,000 Jews, only a few hundred survived. Leopold Socha and his wife were recognized in 1978 as one of the "Righteous Gentiles" by the World Holocaust Remembrance Center, Yad Vachem, in Jerusalem.

Their story and the role of Socha has been told numerous times, including a 1990s BBC program and a New York Times article in 1991. Marshall's book was also the basis for the 2011 Polish film "In Darkness," which was nominated for the Best Foreign Language Film for the Academy Award. Krystyna, the only surviving member of the Chiger family, published her book in 2008 titled, "The Girl in the Green Sweater: A Life in Holocaust's Shadow."

I first learned of this story from the book "The Character Gap: How Good Are We?" by Christian Miller. This book addresses the mixture of virtues and vices that reside in each of us. Socha's story is an example of someone who began his efforts simply as a way to make some extra cash but soon developed a commitment to do what was right in spite of the danger to himself.

Miller also reports and analyzes cases where people do not live up to their self-image and fail to do the right thing. He explores numerous psychology studies that test this phenomenon and challenge our assumption that we would act in a manner consistent with our stated values.

Miller will be our Grand Dialogue speaker in March, and there is a book discussion group beginning to meet in preparation for his visit. It is not too late to join us. For further information, contact us at interfaith@gvsu.edu.