



THE  TIMES

Schindler honour for hero housekeeper



Maria Turnsek smuggled Franz Leichter, a Jewish boy, to safety Doreen Turnsek

Lianne Kolirin

Published at 12:01AM, November 9 2015

When Austrian housekeeper Maria Turnsek agreed to smuggle a young Jewish boy out of Nazi-occupied Vienna, she had no idea of the price she would pay. Betrayed by a former friend, she was accused of kidnap and could not get back home to her own seven-year-old son, Helmut. It would be nine years before they met again.

By continuing to use the site, you agree to the use of cookies. You can change this and find out more by following this link.

Accept Cookies

Now, almost 60 years after her death, Irma Maria Turnsek, who arrived in Britain in the 1930s and was known as Maria, is finally being recognised for her heroism. She will be posthumously awarded the title of Righteous Among the Nations at the Israeli Embassy in London next week.

Administered by Yad Vashem, the Holocaust centre in Israel, the title is awarded to non-Jews such as the German industrialist Oskar Schindler and Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish architect, who risked their lives to save Jews during the Second World War.

Yet had it not been for a curious social worker, Maria may have been overlooked by history. For more than 50 years, her son Helmut had shared little about his story with his wife and children — preferring not to burden them with the traumas of his past. But in the late stages of lung cancer, Mr Turnsek opened up to Anne Mossack, a visiting social worker from the North London Hospice. At his home in Finchley, north London, Mr Turnsek told her about his mother's heroism and his desire to see her recognised.

In 1938, Maria, a Catholic, worked as a housekeeper in Vienna for Käthe Leichter, a Jewish sociologist. The women, both members of the banned socialist party, had young sons who played together and were friends. As the situation worsened, Mrs Leichter, who as a Jew was banned from travel, begged her housekeeper to take her son, Franz, to join his father in Paris. After agonising deliberations, Maria agreed to smuggle the boy out of the country by passing him off as her own. Once Franz was with his father, she intended to return to Helmut, who was being cared for by his childminders.

The women were betrayed by an informant. Mrs Leichter was arrested and sent to Ravensbrück concentration camp, where she died in 1942. Wanted for kidnap, Maria was unable to return and so fled to England. Nine years passed before she saw her son again. In the interim, Helmut's childminders died, and he was sent to a series of orphanages. It was only through the Red Cross that mother and son were able to exchange twenty-five words every six months.

Soon after arriving in London, Maria was taken on as a housekeeper for Geoffrey Hutchinson, a prominent lawyer and Tory MP who later became a life peer. Maria was helped by her employer to get her son, who was a displaced person, out of Austria. Mother and son rebuilt their lives in London. Helmut married, qualified as a lawyer and went on to become deputy legal adviser to the Crown Estate.

After his mother died in 1956, Mr Turnsek spoke little of his past.

Decades later, he confided in the social worker that he had contacted Yad Vashem about his mother – but nothing had come of it. Mrs Mossack then decided to contact the centre herself.

She recalled: “I had to see if I could try to get Maria the recognition she deserved.” Yad Vashem tracked Franz Leichter down in New York, where he had lived since 1940. Like Mr Turnsek, he was a lawyer and later went on to serve as a state senator. The two men got in touch via email.

“All this really borders on the miraculous!” wrote Mr Turnsek to his childhood friend.

Mr Leichter replied: “I feel indebted to you, who suffered because of your mother’s heroic and generous act in taking me out of Austria as her son.”

In April 2014, Mr Leichter flew to London for an emotional reunion. Sadly, Mr Turnsek died a week later.

His widow, Doreen, told *The Times*: “When Franz walked into the house after all those years he said to Helmut: ‘I owe you my life’. She added: “Maybe he was holding on to meet Franz, maybe he let go knowing his mother’s story would be told.”

Now, 18 months after his death, Mr Turnsek’s mother will be added to the Wall of Honour in the Garden of the Righteous at Yad Vashem. Mr Leichter and his family will return to London for the ceremony. “I wouldn’t miss it,” said Mr Leichter, speaking from New York. “Irma risked her life to save me. Crossing through Germany at that time was very dangerous. If anyone had questioned her papers she would have been arrested and, at the very least, sent to a concentration camp.”

Irena Stienfeldt, director of the Righteous Among the Nations department, said: “Yad Vashem is deeply committed to commemorating the rescuers. In this case, we were able, more than 70 years after the events, to trace Franz Leichter and obtain his testimony.”

Comments are subject to our community guidelines, which can be viewed [here](#).

3 comments

 Lianne Kolirin

2 people listening 

+ Follow

Post comment

Newest | Oldest | Most Recommended

SurreyBadger

November 09, 2015 17:02

such courage.

Recommend Reply

morticia

November 09, 2015 10:53

How very sad that her helping a Jewish child led to a separation from her own child.

What a brave lady.

3  Recommend Reply

Mr P Main

November 09, 2015 01:25

If there is Salvation for Mankind, only people like Maria point to its possibility.

2  Recommend Reply

Livifyre

