

## **BBC Radio 4, Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> June 2009**

One of the enduring fascinations of the Holocaust is the way individual stories of suffering and heroism are still emerging. The government here recently announced an award for ordinary British men and women who took huge risks to save Jews in Germany and occupied Europe. It's the culmination of a long campaign by the Holocaust Educational Trust to bring their stories to public attention in Britain. Those who have been honoured are all dead now, but Trevor Barnes has been hearing some of their stories.

Sofka Skipwith was born a princess in Russia and died a communist in England. Visiting her mother in Paris, she was arrested by the occupying Nazis and sent to an internment camp at the outbreak of the Second World War. Three years later, a new consignment of inmates arrived, but were kept apart in a special section of the camp at the spa town of Vittel. Her granddaughter, Sofka Zinovieff, takes up her story:

*"They were basically the very last remnants of Jews from Warsaw after the ghetto had been cleared and there were just under 300 people. Sofka immediately became very interested in their predicament, a lot of them had visas to various Latin American countries and hoped that they would be able to escape the fate of most of the other Jews from Warsaw and get there, but as a sort of half-way house they were brought to Vittel."*

Sofka helped them in every way she could, crucially smuggling out lists of names which could then be passed on to the British authorities who, it was hoped, would intervene to save Jewish lives.

*"It was quite amazing, she learnt to use a mapping pen and would take little cigarette papers and write lists of all the names of these people and where they had visas for, and then roll up the paper and put it in a little capsule or sometimes a toothpaste tube, and these would be sent out through the local resistance."*

Some fifty Jews had to her to thank for their survival.

*"It is appropriate that we be here actually, because here we have MI6 over the river and MI5 just down here and this was very much Foley's territory."* – Michael Smith, the author of *Foley: The Spy Who Saved 10,000 Jews*. A man whose exploits were largely unknown until one Benno Cohen was called upon to give evidence in the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961.

*"And, just out of nowhere, during his testimony, he suddenly started paying this tribute to this man called Frank Foley, Captain Foley, who was the pimpinel of the Jews, who saved thousands of Jews, who was, in his opinion, one of the Righteous Amongst the Nations, which is the greatest tribute that you can get obviously, which lots of rescuers got."*

Where was his motivation coming from? What impelled him to save so many?

*“Cohen said that they had asked themselves why he did it. He was a catholic - he had at one stage studied to be a priest but decide against it – and he had a very strong sense of right and wrong and he told Cohen once that he regarded the Nazi regime as the rule of Satan on earth.”*

Ostensibly a passport control officer in Berlin, Foley was also a secret service agent assigned to gather intelligence. What he knew was that in the mechanised and itemised world of the Nazi extermination machine, lists meant everything, being on one meant life or death.

*“Sheltering four or five Jews in his own flat overnight – they would stay there one night and then move on and another four or five would come in. He was going into concentration camps and there are descriptions by people who were saved by him, who had been in concentration camps and were got out by Foley who said ‘Look, I’ve got the paperwork, this man has got to go, you have got to let him’.”*

In all some 10,000 Jews were issued with life-saving visas out of Germany, aided by a man remarkable by his surface ordinariness.

*“We think of extraordinary people in some way as if they are magical people, but actually, we all have it in us, as ordinary people, if we do the right things, to be extraordinary. I think that is the one thing Foley shows, because he was, you see pictures of him, he has got glasses, he is podgy, he looks like the typical bureaucrat who might sit there and write a few notes and say no, but he said yes.”*

While thousands of Jews in Germany were being saved by a British spy, one Jew in Holland was being protected by a British housewife. June Ravenhall had settled there with her husband who, during the Nazi occupation, had been imprisoned in a Dutch internment camp. One day, members of the resistance knocked on her door and asked her to shelter a young Jewish man named Louis. Aged seven at the time, her son, Ron Ravenhall, remembers the risk she was running:

*“Here she is, in a strange town, totally exposed, an English woman whose husband was already in a concentration camp, three kids to protect, and she has got no gun, no army with her, and this lad comes along and she hides him. She hides him not for a few minutes, but she hides him for months and months and months.”*

So, why did she do it?

*“It boiled down to the fact that when confronted by the choice, and the resistance came and brought this young man, an innocent, just because he was Jewish he was going to be slaughtered somewhere or starved to death or experimented on, it was a choice between saying no, and that would happen, or hiding him. And I think because of her decency, humanity and caring about fellow human man, she said yes, even though she knew perfectly well that she was putting herself at terrible risk, and her children, and she could have been shot, she did it.”*

What all three of these stories have in common, and there are hundreds more, is ordinary men and women, in extraordinary situations choosing to do the right thing. For Ron Ravenhall, that's cause enough for celebration.

*“Amidst all the terrible evil that had been created in Europe at the time, the point of life, shining lights, examples of man's noble front as opposed to his horrible bloody backside, my mother is one of those, but she's not the kind of person that you would pick and make a film out of, particularly an American war film, guys going over the top and things, she wasn't like that at all, she was just an ordinary housewife. She was just my mum, and that's all.”*