



Edwarda Opatowska Saved My Life!: The Real Life Story of Jewish Holocaust Survivor Esther Schiff (A BOOK by ME)

A Book by Me, Michael Bowen

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I was born Esther Stiller in 1925 and was only nine months old when my father died. My brother, sister, and I were raised by our mother with help from the very supportive Jewish community in Kalisz, Poland. In 1940, at age fifteen, I had a new dress which was sent as a gift from relatives in America. This was special and not something that happened every day. I wanted to show my girlfriend, so I went to her home, and as teenagers sometimes do, she wanted me to sleep over. While I was away with my Christian friend, the Jewish families were herded together and locked up in a single large room—similar to a gym—of a multi-storied building. The next day, I was able to slip away to a nearby farm, where people gave me food and allowed me to stay. I told them I had come from Warsaw, which by that time had been bombed by the Nazis. I gave them a typical gentile name, Edwarda Opatowska, and pretended to be Catholic. Something told me not to ask what had happened to my family and the Jews of my city. I wandered around not knowing what to do—I was 15 years old, alone and afraid. At the railroad station, I saw a large group of about 300 Poles, who I learned were being taken to work in Germany. I knew they were not Jews, so when they boarded the train, I filed on with them. At Breslau we got off the train and were lined up to receive physical exams and shots, then given work assignments. When my turn came, I gave my assumed name of Edwarda Opatowska and told them I had lost my identification papers. Although I was very frightened, there were no particular problems as they proceeded with the exam and the shots, assigned me to farm labor in Germany, and arranged my transportation. I never stopped wondering what happened to my mother, brother, and sister. I only knew [what I heard from] German propaganda. If the Nazis won the war, I was thinking of taking rat poison and killing myself. Being with Catholic farmers, I went to church with the rest of the workers. From the religion classes in Poland's public schools, I had learned enough about liturgy and ritual to convince the Germans and my fellow Poles that I was Catholic. When the priest saw tears in my eyes, he thought it was because I was devout in my faith, but I was really feeling guilty about making believe I was something I wasn't. An average day on the farm began at 4:30 a.m. and didn't end until 10:00 p.m. Just as the Jews were forced to wear the Star of David sewn on their clothing, the Poles were required to wear a "P" on their clothes so the townsfolk would know we were from Poland. Some local people considered themselves better than us and treated us horribly. One day the priest saw what was happening and gave them a piece of his mind. It felt wonderful to have someone stand up for us.

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