

Chapter 11: Time Running Out

“Volunteers” for Bread— August–September 1943

By mid-August the Nazis had cleared much of the Warsaw ghetto. They worked in orderly sections and sent 190,000 people to their deaths at Treblinka. The open-air street markets had disappeared and only a trickle of food made it into the Jewish Quarter through underground channels. During the first three weeks of deportations, many of the remaining Jews had eaten little to nothing. Throngs of people went willingly to the loading platforms for one reason: the Germans had changed tactics and promised six pounds of bread and two pounds of jam to those who “volunteered” for relocation.

The smell of freshly baked bread but a few yards down the street proved irresistible. So what if death awaited them in the east, people reasoned? A certain death from starvation awaited them here.

At the *Umschlagplatz*, hundreds queued, waiting patiently for days, before getting a chance to get on the train. A witness reported, “The trains, already leaving twice a day with 12,000 people each, are unable to hold them all.”

Once in a great while, on a train headed east to Treblinka, someone might get a chance to cheat death. Was it luck? The good fortune of better health and stronger muscles? Or a fierce will to live? Probably all these things had to fall your way, as they did for Regina Mikelberg, after she was loaded at the *Umschlagplatz* onto one of the death trains that summer. As the door sealed shut on the dozens trapped inside the fetid cattle cars, Regina grew frantic. When the cars rolled slowly away from Warsaw, the cries of fear and the rising stench were too much for the slender thirty-year-old woman. She had a sister still in the ghetto. She had her family. And she knew about Irena’s network. She had been at the university with Janka Grabowska and Irena. If only she could get free, Janka would find somewhere to hide her. In the sweltering heat of the railway car, where body pushed against body, a dim ray of light shone through a small, dirty ventilation window. It was a narrow opening. Regina, though, was thin and determined. She pulled herself up toward the opening and a man below let her put a foot on his shoulder. His sad, knowing eyes

urged her to risk it. With a mighty push, Regina threw herself through the window and onto the hard tracks below. Without looking back, she ran and ran into the darkness.



Jews marched to the *Umschlagplatz* for deportation at the end of the Jewish ghetto uprising, Spring 1943. *National Archives and Records Administration, College Park Instytut Pamięci Narodowej Państwowe Muzeum*

In the ghetto the roundups continued, and the Jews who remained behind went into hiding in their attics and basements. Even those with work papers or Judenräte protection knew better than to risk being seen when a neighborhood was emptied. But, to the

world beyond the walls, the Nazi extermination of the Jewish population remained largely and conveniently invisible. Jews in Warsaw and the people in Poland helping them knew that their only hope would come from abroad. Would the British and the Americans send help in time?

The Question of Baptism

As August passed, too quickly turning to September, Irena and her friends worked at a ferocious pace. She had no qualms knocking on doors and begging Jewish families to trust her with the lives of their children.

Ushered into their cramped apartments, Irena made her plea to families in despair. Disagreement over sending the children away often splintered relationships. Fathers would say yes.

Grandparents would say no. Mothers wept inconsolably. The choices were appalling. Irena could not guarantee safety, and furthermore, most of the Jewish children were hidden from the Nazis by taking on Catholic identities. It was the easiest way to protect them, especially the babies.

With baptism came a new set of authentic church records and documents that did not have to be faked or manufactured.

Many parents threw aside questions of religion. *Save my child*, they told Irena. *Do what you must to save my daughter*. But when Irena explained what might have to happen, some

Jewish parents shook their heads and refused to give her their children. “Jewish religious law is clear,” some

Orthodox fathers told her. “We cannot exile our children from the Jewish nation simply to save them now.” Sometimes she would try again the following day and find everyone in the building had been taken to the *Umschlagplatz*.

Irena knew that Jewish families across the ghetto debated this and called upon the rabbis to guide them. The Nazi plan for Polish Jews could not be denied, and she understood the rabbi’s quandary. “If more than 300,000 Jews are to be annihilated in Warsaw, what is the use of saving several hundred children? Let them perish or survive together with the entire community.”

Irena saw the agony of parents compelled to agree to the erasure of their children’s identity. The scenes replayed themselves in Irena’s nightmares. She made her peace with a solemn promise to the parents—despite the dangers it created, she kept a list of the children’s real names and families, a list that continued to grow longer.



Jewish child in hiding poses outside in a garden wearing her First Communion dress, 1943. *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Alicia Fajnsztein Weinsberg*

The day came when Irena had to tell Bieta Koppel’s family the infant would be baptized. She knew the baby’s father, Josel, was gone. He had been shot on the platform of the *Umschlagplatz*, when he refused to board the cattle cars to Treblinka. But Bieta’s mother, Henia, and grandfather, Aron Rochman, were still alive in the ghetto at the end of the summer.

Bieta had stayed hidden at the home of Stanislaw Bussold, who’d made up some story to explain to nosy neighbors how a woman in her late fifties happened to suddenly have at home a

crying six-month-old. Soon, in the normal course of things, Bieta would move on to permanent shelter. When she did, no one but Irena would know where Bieta was going and that Henia and Josel Koppel were her parents. It was a chain of knowing as fragile as Irena's life and a flimsy bit of paper, but it was for Bieta's safety.

Irena continued keeping lists of the children's real names and their new identities as well as their current addresses. If the lists fell into the wrong hands, well, that didn't bear thinking about. This information had to be kept for the children's families to find them after the war. The space on that scrap of paper, next to the entry "Elzbieta Koppel," where the baby's new Polish name would go, had remained empty.

Back in the ghetto, still working in Toebbens's factory, Henia ached for her daughter. A few times she found a telephone in the ghetto and called Stanislaw's apartment. Henia asked nothing in those moments except that Stanislaw hold the telephone close, so she could listen for a few moments to Bieta coo and babble. On the distant end of the line Henia wept quietly. Though Henia knew the wild risk to herself, her baby, and Stanislaw, once or twice she could not help herself. She slipped out of the ghetto for a few hours to hold her baby.

In early autumn, Irena learned a Catholic identity had been found or forged for Bieta and she would be baptized. On the scrap of paper, next to the entry "Elzbieta Koppel," would be penciled "Stefcia Rumkowski." Irena knew that cutting off Bieta from her Jewish faith and ethnicity would make the loss of the baby even more painful for Henia and Aron. But she could not keep this news from them. It was important for her to be honest with these families who were losing everything.

On a crisp morning, Irena stood outside the checkpoint where the slave labor gangs left the ghetto on their way to work in German factories. Bieta's grandfather sometimes joined this sad column of men, who labored long days for small bits of food. Yes. There was Aron, eyes down, marching briskly at the shouted commands of the guards. Irena walked along, pretending no interest in the workers. The Nazis did not allow Poles and Jews to speak to each other. She caught Aron's eye and in a quick rush of words she told him Bieta would be baptized. *I had to tell you.* Aron looked away. There on the street, amidst the footsteps of strangers and the ruin of war, Irena watched, thinking her own heart would break, as the older man broke down and

cried for the loss of his granddaughter. She longed to reach out for Aron's hand, but she did not. She did not want to endanger him any more than she had. She turned and walked away with heavy steps.

A few days later, Stanislawka told Irena a package had come for Bieta. Inside lay an exquisite lace christening gown and a bright gold crucifix for the baby, wrapped carefully in tissue paper. There was no note. There was no need for one. This gift, so costly in heart, as well as zloty, was a family's good-bye to its precious baby, and an expression of hope that beyond the terrors of the ghetto, lay a future.

Ala Golab-Grynberg

By early September, Ala was heartsick beyond what she had thought a human could bear. The ghetto was nearly empty. She believed the Nazis planned to kill the entire Jewish population of Poland. Knowing that Rami was safe on the Aryan side was her consolation. She continued her nursing at the hospital on Leszno Street. And when ambulances trundled across the checkpoints, filled with supplies and linens, Ala packed in stowaway children as well. Sometimes those children were sent on to Irena and Jan Dobraczyński. But Ala had contacts in the underground with other people running other rescue operations.

On September 6, at the Leszno medical clinic, the skeleton staff called an urgent meeting. Ala was tired. She leaned against the wall and listened. The doctor's voice rose with panic as he explained the latest German orders. Everyone in the ghetto, even the patients in their crowded wards, must report that day for a final registration at the *Umschlagplatz*.

Ala gasped. The sick and bedridden patients could not march to the railway platforms. Neither could the elderly and children. Doctors and nurses had tried to save their own elderly parents and small children by registering them as patients. Patients they would now have to help deport. The realization dawned on one nurse's face, and she broke down crying. Once again, Ala scoured her brain for ways to keep these innocent people out of the Nazi's murderous hands. Before she could do anything, the SS and police stormed the building, ready to liquidate the hospital population. Ala stood frozen. She turned to a young nurse with big, fearful eyes, and she

could not reassure her. *Oh, God . . .* It would be Dr. Korczak's walk to the *Umschlagplatz* all over again.

Gunmen stomped through the wards. Going bed to bed they executed the delirious and immobile. They lined up patients who could walk. They'd walk in their flimsy hospital gowns to the *Umschlagplatz*, or as far as they could make it. Nurses and doctors rushed into rooms ahead of police, desperate to save their own children and parents from this final terror. Hands shaking, they poured precious doses of cyanide into the mouths of sons and daughters. They would die in Treblinka, or on the way. Cyanide allowed them to die quietly. One doctor, weeping, turned to a nurse and asked her to administer the fatal dose to his father.

But Ala wasn't ready to give up yet. Racing to the children's ward, she whispered to a duty nurse, *Run, tell the kitchen we are coming*. She needed them to fill a truck with food and empty vegetable boxes. *Tell them to hurry!*

She clapped her hands. *Children! We must line up now, quickly*. Ala maintained her best calm face, urging the children to move fast without scaring them. Nurses carried two or three infants at a time. Daisy chains of toddlers and bossy four-year-olds held each other's hands and followed Ala down the back staircase and into the kitchens. They loaded thirty children in and among the wooden potato boxes. The cook jumped in the cab of the truck and drove, disappearing around the street corner. Hundreds of little tykes in the hospital could not be saved, but for now, Ala chose to think about the ones who got away.

With the hospital empty, Ala joined the ranks of Jews working for the Germans. Those with strong constitutions, capable of surviving hours of grueling labor, had a chance at life by working in German workshops, work gangs, and factories. Ala joined baby Bieta's mother, Henia Koppel, and Nachum Remba in Walter Toebbens's factory.

Of the 450,000 people sent to the ghetto, Ala heard a rumor that the Nazis planned to keep some 30,000 Jews for slave labor. Another some 30,000 residents, including those in the Jewish resistance, and many with children, had burrowed into cellars, attics, burnt-out buildings, and even dug secret tunnels in hopes of surviving. The deportations paused in mid-September, but everyone knew the soldiers wouldn't stop until they had rooted out the Jews burrowed in the

ghetto. The hunt for Jews who had fled to the Aryan side geared up. Posters tacked across the city offered amnesty to people who turned in Jews they were shielding.

Chapter 12: Crisis

As Irena and her network raced the timetable of rail cars rumbling east from the *Umschlagplatz*, crisis struck. There were many expenses to hiding people: food, rent, medical supplies, even bribes to be paid. Irena knew that soon, no matter how brave any of them were, saving more children would be impossible because money was running out.

The families and institutions protecting the children needed financial support for the basic costs of food and clothing. Wealthy ghetto parents had paid for the support of their children in advance and trusted Irena with the money. She felt morally obligated to account for that money and make sure it was spent according to the parents' wishes.

People on the Aryan side of Warsaw were allotted a ration of 699 calories per day, a starvation diet. Irena hated to ask people to take in the children of strangers without offering them money to buy additional food for their family on the black market. Two or three extra kilograms of black-market butter, or double that amount of sugar, cost nearly five hundred zlotys. The cost of those goods had increased fifteen-fold under German occupation, but the workers' wages had not kept up.

For some families, a couple pounds of butter would cost an entire month's salary. Despite the financial hardship, half of Irena's foster families refused to take money from her. Others could not survive without payment. The last inhabitants of the ghetto were financially ruined, and Irena and her friends did not have vast incomes. When Irena looked at the account books, she could see everything they had worked so hard to accomplish unraveling.

One day in early December, Irena sat in her office stewing. Her old metal desk was scattered with notes and bits of paper, and there was hardly room to move her chair around in the small office, where she spent her days jammed in among the file cabinets. In the corridor of the welfare office, the *tap-tap-tap* of someone's sturdy heels came and went, and Irena thought that whoever it was hesitated outside her doorway for a moment. Irena realized she was biting on her pencil. She was stressed. It was worse than that, Irena told herself sharply. Stress didn't even

begin to cover it. The wind battered the window glass, and Irena pulled her sweater closer around her. She was facing disaster.

She had her lists—those bits of tissue-thin paper with the names and addresses of hundreds of hidden children—safely hidden. She would never work on those in the office. But she couldn't help trying to work out some troubling sums on a piece of scrap paper. When Irena looked at the figures she had scratched out, there was no way to make it all add up.

She spent her waking hours preoccupied with finding money to keep her hidden children alive. She'd begun this venture by diverting welfare supplies and money in the city offices. Even now, if she could fiddle the paperwork, municipal resources could continue to pay for the needs of the Jewish children. But that was becoming harder and harder as the city coffers dwindled.

Irena knew that the Germans had become suspicious of her and they were watching. They had found irregularities in the social welfare offices and clamped down on funding. So far, they had not discovered Irena's and Irka's falsified records, but for some other misdemeanor, real or imagined, the director of their division of welfare services had been shipped to another German death camp, named Auschwitz.

As Irena deliberated, a shadow fell over her and she shivered. She looked up to see her colleague Stefania Wichlińska at the office door. *Do you have a moment?* Irena slid her scrap of figures into a budget file, then threw up her hands in mock despair at the many files on her desk. Stefania smiled and dropped into the rickety little chair across from her. After a few minutes of small talk, Stefania bent and spoke hushed, quick words in Irena's ear. Irena kept her face blank. Stefania stood to leave, but waited, holding Irena's gaze. A long moment passed before Irena nodded. Stefania walked away and Irena went back to the files in front of her.

She couldn't remember what she'd been doing, and the only thing on her mind now was a question. A huge question. Should she follow Stefania's instructions? Could whispered words be a trap? The Nazis had ways of turning people against one another. Under sufficient pressure, friends and neighbors went along with Gestapo fishing schemes, helping the enemy catch people harboring Jews.

Stefania had given Irena very little information and no way to verify the source of the instructions. In this warped world of Nazi occupation, with Warsaw's people ripped apart by

brutality and deprivation, both friend and foe would communicate like this. A short cryptic message.

Should Irena trust Stefania? That was the question. And she had little time to decide the answer.

Code Name Żegota

Dark comes early in Warsaw winters, and it was falling when Irena walked toward Żurawia Street a day or two after Stefania had whispered the address in her ear. She'd decided to trust her coworker and follow the directions. She would not second-guess herself now, when she was approaching number 24 Żurawia Street. She let herself in the apartment building and walked up to the third floor, number 4.

Irena rapped a quick knock on the door. A woman's voice asked, *Who's there?*

Trojan, said Irena.

That was the password she'd been given. The door opened. Irena stepped into the dim apartment. All the shades were drawn tightly over the windows. The gray-haired woman who let her in appeared nervous, her face flushed. There was a man, too. He beckoned Irena, and she followed the two through a series of doorways to a small room at the back of the apartment.

There Irena met a second man, who was introduced as Trojan. She was introduced as Jolanta. Irena kept her face stony as she faced him, determined to reveal nothing. But her mind was racing. Trojan was a stocky man, with a thick neck and a dark beard, and his eyes gleamed with intelligence under a pair of wild and bushy black eyebrows. The moment of truth had come. If these people were informers, she'd incriminated herself just by coming here. A terrible gamble.

Irena remained silent. Trojan spoke. In low tones he described a secret network, code name: Żegota. It had been called the Council for Jewish Relief until the group decided the word "Jewish" was too dangerous. Żegota had been founded by two women, a far-right Catholic nationalist like Jan Dobraczyński, and a left-leaning Catholic Socialist more like Irena. From opposite sides of the political spectrum, they came together in condemning the genocide of the Jews, and trying to do something concrete to help their Jewish countryman. Żegota had

connections with the Polish underground. Were Ala and Nachum also working with this group? There was something familiar here.

Would Irena and her network join Żegota? Trojan's question hung in the silence.

Seeing her hesitation, the man jumped in to say no one in Żegota would interfere in Irena's current operations. She liked the sound of that. Her greatest concern was the safety of her operatives and the hundreds of children in hiding. Then Trojan mentioned money, and Irena sat up and listened. He explained that Żegota's funds came from agents in London, dropped into Poland by parachute. To heck with the risks—she needed money.

Yes. Irena looked him squarely in the eye and stuck her hand out to shake on it.

Trojan laughed. "Well, Jolanta, we're striking a good deal together. You have a team of trusted people, and we have the necessary funds to help a larger number of people."

With Żegota's funds Irena immediately started paying monthly stipends to foster families, and she made plans to expand operations. Her friend Adam had escaped the ghetto, but had grown restless with being cooped up in hiding. Irena put him in charge of managing money for her network and keeping track of the growing volume of identity papers. Not her secret lists of the Jewish children's real names, but the paperwork for their new identities.

This allowed Irena to focus her efforts on the practical aspects of caring for the hidden children. Irena went from leading a network of old college friends, prewar political comrades, and coworkers, to heading a large web connected with the Polish underground.

Jaga, Irka, Ala, and Jadwiga remained the base of her network, but it had expanded with the help of dozens more couriers and operatives. Maria and Henryk Palester, the couple who had refused to move into the ghetto, offered their apartment as a standby point in Irena's network. The apartment also sheltered Maria Proner and her twelve-year old daughter Janina. Janina was best friends from school with Maria and Henryk's daughter Malgorzata.

The Polish nurse Helena Szeszko organized a number of doctors, including Dr. Majkowski, who had given Irena her ghetto pass, into a system of medical hideouts. This allowed for Jewish children and adults to get long or short term medical care without risking a trip out in the open where they might be recognized. Most of Irena's cohorts knew nothing about Żegota because she was the only point of contact.

Jan Dobraczyński's signature allowed hundreds of Jewish children into Catholic orphanages. Jaga Piotrowska arranged these transports, often to rural areas hundreds of miles away. More than two hundred children would go to the Father Boduen Home, where Władysława Marynowska and Irka Schultz were now the primary operatives. Jadwiga Deneka crisscrossed Warsaw and much of central Poland, checking on the youngsters' welfare and delivering the financial support. Many families opened their homes as emergency shelters for the Jewish children, taking an immense risk with the safety of their own children and family members. Irena's apartment became a last-resort emergency safe house.

Irena's budget added up to a fortune each month; some months she handled some 250,000 zlotys (about three-quarters of a million of today's dollars). The money came from sources in the Polish government in exile in Britain and from the Jewish-American community. Conscious of the sacred trust placed in them, she and Adam kept careful records of every zloty. The money enabled them, by January of 1943, to count more than a thousand names on the growing list of rescued children. They'd truly been snatched from the rail cars of death, and every single child Irena had hidden was still alive, a winning streak that could easily end any day.

Jaga Piotrowska

Jaga had worked alongside Irena and Jadwiga since the first meeting at Irena's house three years ago. They had seen nights of frantic action rendezvousing with fresh escapees and guiding them to Irena's emergency rooms, or safe houses for the children in their first hours outside the ghetto. Jaga had turned her own house on Lekarska Street into one of these, though she lived on a busy street near a hospital for German soldiers. People came and went from her house at all hours without raising suspicion because there was a door at the back and front. But the operation was at greatest risk when Jaga transported a child through the streets in daylight, which she sometimes had to do.

Jaga paid close attention to every movement when she was out and about on the Aryan side with younger children. Handling the three- or four-year-olds sometimes felt like handling explosives. Too young to censor themselves, in a single moment they could blow their

cover—which is exactly what happened one day on her way to deliver a youngster to a safe house. They had boarded one of Warsaw’s trams, which were small boxy cars that rattled along tracks across the city. The boy, small and skinny, was nervous, his eyes darting around. As the tram clanked to one stop and the next, he grew more skittish.

Jaga worried as the tram filled with passengers and more than a dozen people crammed into the small boxcar. She and the boy sat at the front of the car and Jaga hoped the view would distract him. When he started to cry, Jaga talked to him in a low soothing voice, but he only sobbed louder and then with no warning, began calling for his mother. In Yiddish.

One by one, conversations died until the tram fell silent. Jaga registered the startled looks in her direction, the dawning horror of those jammed in the streetcar with her. *Yiddish. That child is Jewish.* Jaga dared not look around, as she sensed the growing fury of the woman next to her. Should the Germans happen along, everyone on the tram would be complicit. Jaga could see the tram driver understood this, too.

With a rush of fear, Jaga’s world narrowed to one thought. At the next stop, would someone betray them to the police? It was too likely. A vein of anti-Semitic feeling ran through many of the Polish citizens of Warsaw, and blackmailers abounded, waiting for just this type of opportunity.

Jaga tensed. Her panic rose. She reminded herself that she had to be brave for the child’s sake. She leaned near the tram driver. *Please, help me,* she whispered.

He did not take his eyes from the track stretching in front of him. Jaga felt the weight of what would come. She and the boy might be shot right there on the tram. She thought of her daughter, not much older than this boy. A moment later the tram jolted. Everyone inside the vehicle lurched through several more jolts before the car screeched to a stop. Shopping bags tipped. A piece of bruised fruit rolled under the benches. A man swore quietly and turned to help an older lady right herself. Jaga calculated her chances of fleeing with the child. She would not get far.

While the passengers gathered their wits, the tram driver bellowed, “Okay, everyone out! The tram is broken, I’m returning to the depot.”

He opened the doors and waved the passengers out. Jaga lifted the child to her hip, preparing to step down into the street and take their chances. The odds were against them. The driver shook his head. *Not you. You stay.* He gestured for her to get down, and she obeyed. He put the empty train into gear and they rolled forward along the tracks, not stopping until they reached a quiet neighborhood with modest houses and small gardens. The driver slowed the tram to a stop. “You’ll have to get off here,” he said. “Good luck.”

Jaga slumped for a moment as her tension slipped away. “Thank you.” He shook his head and gave her a sad smile as she and the boy descended from the tram. Jaga never saw the driver again, nor learned his name.

Teens in the Resistance

Many teenagers in occupied Poland risked their lives, too, stepping up for responsibilities well beyond their years. Both boys and girls joined the armed resistance in the ghetto and in the Home Army. Orphanages couldn’t take in Jewish teenagers, and in foster homes, teens stood out more than younger children, raising dangerous questions. They lived on the streets, worked on farms in the country, or stayed completely out of sight like Jewish adults running from the Nazis. Many holed up in the ghetto, willing to fight to the death if it came to that. A number of Jewish teenagers joined Irena’s network as couriers.



Krzysztof Palester (right), the teenaged son of Irena’s friends Maria and Henryk Palester, with two female medics during the Warsaw Uprising.
Photograph by Joachim Joachimczyk
[public domain image]

After the deportations ended in mid-September, guards controlled the checkpoints with alacrity. The Nazis discovered the courthouse escape route on Leszno Street, halting the flow of contraband there, both food and people. The options for escaping from the ghetto narrowed to a dangerous trip through miles of city sewer. Irena's teenage couriers guided families out through the underground pipes, and they carried in messages and money.

That winter the Polish resistance gathered strength across Warsaw and the Polish countryside. Many young people joined the guerrilla bands bent on harassing and sabotaging German forces. The Palesters' teenage son Krystof joined an elite squad of young people, whose missions included assassinations. The courts of the Polish underground tried and sentenced local Nazi functionaries and Gestapo collaborators. Every day brought news of three or four people executed by the resistance, and some of the most fearsome assassins were young women.

Jerzy

Irena's collaborators found a safe house for two teenage boys, now going by the names Jurek and Jerzy, in Otwock—the village of her childhood. One day they narrowly escaped a Nazi roundup in the building where they had been staying, and now they were homeless. Hanging out in one of the city's downtown squares, they saw two teenage girls. Jurek stared at the pretty one with soft brown hair, hoping to catch her eye. When he did, their connection felt electric. They started talking and soon they were flirting. The girl's name was Anna, and when it came time for her to head home, not wanting to end the good time, she invited Jurek and Jerzy to come along.

When Anna came bouncing into the apartment with the two young strangers, her mother's face showed raw horror. Maria Kukulska turned and disappeared into the back bedroom. The teenagers heard murmurs of conversation and then a heated argument carried on in hushed voices.

Adam Celnikier, Irena's Jewish friend handling the accounting of Żegota funds, had been concealed at the Kukulska's apartment, and at this time the family was also shielding another Jewish man. Long minutes of awkward small talk passed before the bedroom door opened. A tiny blond woman with blazing blue eyes stepped out and greeted the boys. Anna's mother marched her into the bedroom, and Jurek could hear that she was in deep trouble. Her mother

sounded furious. Then the small woman commanded his attention. Who were they, and what were they up to?

An old man in the ghetto had told Jurek the way to survive on the Aryan side was to forget who he had been. Forget everything Jewish and act as if he were unconcerned. He mustered a brazen acting ability and hinted he and Jerzy were resistance fighters. The boys told the woman they had just narrowly escaped a Gestapo roundup of a safe house on Idzikowskiego Street. That much was true; they had survived by crawling out a rooftop window.

Perhaps the woman believed their story. Maybe it was obvious they were Jewish boys on the run from the ghetto. She listened to them, and then she nodded. That's all it took. The boys were allowed to stay, and introduced to Adam and the other Jewish man. Soon they were like part of the family. The woman was Irena.