

Irene Opdyke, a Righteous Gentile Speaks to Charlotte Jewry

By Audrey Krakovitz

In early May, Irene Opdyke, who was awarded the title of "Righteous" by the Commission for the designation of the Righteous, spoke to a number of different Jewish groups during her stay in Charlotte. The title is given to Gentiles who risked their lives to save Jews. Opdyke's visit was sponsored by the Women's Division Education Committee of the Jewish Federation.

Her Charlotte stay began with a Saturday evening Education Committee dinner meeting at the home of Marilyn and Mike Tuckman. Then, on Sunday morning, Opdyke spoke to the 4th through 7th grade classes of both temple Israel and Beth El. She related to the wide-eyed audience, her experiences while saving Jews during World War Two. The manner in which she told her story to the children was captivating and spell-binding. After her presentation, the children asked her many questions.

At lunch, the 25 students of the Consolidated High School listened as Opdyke told her story, beginning at the time when she was a teenager, similar in age to the students. Afterwards, students gathered around her for hugs, pictures, and of course, more questions.

Dinner brought Opdyke to a special Lion of Judah and Pace-setter Dinner chaired by Lee Blumenthal. With nods of approval from the guests, Opdyke explained that she was an Honorary Lion of Judah as a result of her fund-raising efforts on behalf of UJA and Israel.

The evening found Opdyke at an open community desert re-

ception at Temple Beth El, which was attended by more than 200 people. Once again she cast her spell over the audience as she related in gripping detail, her role in saving and helping hundreds of Jews during the Holocaust. After her presentation, Opdyke signed copies of her book, "Into the Flames."

The reception was organized under the leadership of Ann Langman and Judy Kaufman and carried out with the help of Women's Division Education Committee members Dorothy Ashendorf, Wendy Helms, Susie Lepow, Linda Levy, Nancy Tarbis, Marilyn Tuckman and Marci Willenzik. Special thanks to Roz Taranto for home hospitality.

Opdyke's final Charlotte speech was given to the Uptowner's Group chaired by Steve Garfinkel, Judi Van Glish and Peter Levinson. Twenty Uptown Charlotte business people gathered to hear her inspiring and heroic tale.



Opdyke and Sheila Kritzer hold hands and exchange feelings.

photo by Donna Foster



Students from both temples surround Irene Opdyke.

Irene Opdyke — Another View

By Harvey Cohen

The sun was shining brightly from an untroubled spring sky and made the air comfortably cool and pleasant. The weather exactly reflected Irene Opdyke's personality, the person we were to interview. One morning in early May, three people sat in the lounge at the JCC; Irene Opdyke, a reporter from the Charlotte Observer and me. Today, secure inside the walls of the JCC, Opdyke fairly sparkled throughout the interview as she recalled better times and the good things that happened to the people she helped. But her mood changed instantly when she recalled some of the horrors.

What strikes you first about Opdyke are her eyes. They are a deep, rich blue when she smiles or laughs, but turn dark and ominous when she speaks of a past filled with terror. As the interview went on, the mood shifts were transparent through her perceptive, penetrating eyes. Even if we couldn't have heard her words, we could tell how she was feeling by looking at her eyes.

I didn't want to report just her dramatic story of saving Jews, so my questions were different than Brian Steiner's, the reporter from the *Observer*. Space doesn't permit publishing all the questions and answers covered during the interview. What follows are some select questions

to which Opdyke responded.

CJN: Why did you feel responsible to help Jews despite the risk of being killed?

O: Because of my upbringing. My mother was a very strong woman and felt it was our duty and responsibility to help others. She helped gypsies when others turned their backs. She taught us that we must help others no matter what and it was a lesson I learned well. There was never a question in my mind of not helping.

CJN: What about those who could have helped but didn't?

O: I don't blame those people, after all, most people had families and if they helped and got caught, they would be killed; their families would have nothing or they too would have been killed. I only had myself to consider, I had no family. People act out of fear but when you're not afraid, you do what's right. No, I don't blame people for the fear they had.

CJN: What did you think of the movie "Schindler's List"?

O: One thing that needs to be cleared up is that in the movie, Schindler said he took Jewish workers because they didn't have to be paid. That's true, but what's not true is that Polish workers were paid. They weren't! They too worked as slave labor.

CJN: How do you feel about what's going on in Bosnia?

O: After all these years, we haven't learned anything. What happened to the Jews started like a Bosnia (ethnic cleansing). The world is closing its eyes. When are we going to learn, when are we going to learn?

CJN: What can be done about all the hate in the world?

O: Hate is not something any of us are born with. We learn hate in many different ways. But I think in order to overcome hate, we must reach children when they're very young. We must teach them that there are no differences in any of us although I may believe this and you believe that. We are all one people and we must teach that lesson or history will repeat itself. There are people who now say the Holocaust never happened. That's why we must tell that story over and over again or history will be re-written! It won't be long before all the Holocaust survivors will be gone. Then who will tell that story?

After more than an hour, this hearty 70 year-old lady had to rush off to yet another speaking engagement. I will share with you one last question I asked her.

CJN: Because of your avowed deep feeling for Jews, have you ever considered becoming Jewish?

O: I'm often asked that question by adults, but more often by children. My feeling for the Jewish people couldn't be any deeper and stronger, but I feel deeply about all people. If I have any one message to deliver to people today it is that whether you're Jewish or Catholic or whatever, there really is no difference between any of us. In my heart and in my soul I am as Jewish as can be.

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