

■ HIDDEN CHILDREN ■

ESTHER'S RESCUERS ARE HONORED

Esther Gutman was born in 1924 in Lodz, Poland. After the Nazis invaded in 1939, her family took refuge in a nearby town. In 1942 the Germans began rounding up the town's Jews, including Esther's father. Esther had a friend, Ezjel Lederman, who had gone into hiding with his family in the home of Christian friends, the Zals. Esther asked them to take her in too, with her mother and sister, but her mother and sister were arrested before she could return for them; she never saw them again. The Zals hid Esther and the Ledermans for 22 months.

Bogdan Zal is one of two surviving members of the Catholic family who saved Esther and the Lederman family from arrest and murder by the Nazis. Years later Esther asked Bogdan to write a chapter for her memoir, *Hiding for Our Lives* (2007). His narrative is excerpted here.

___ In Bogdan Zal's Own Words ___

At the outbreak of World War II in the fall of 1939, I visited the Lederman family in Chmielnik, about 20 km [12 miles] from my home in Grzymala. At that time I met his parents and his younger brother Ezjel. We formed a close friendship. We agreed with the Ledermans that in case the situation for Jews in Chmielnik becomes unbearable and dangerous, due to the new acts of persecution by the Germans, they should feel free to come to our home through back roads and wait out the crisis. They did that on a number of occasions in the years 1940-1942. They would always return to Chmielnik after the situation became calmer.

I remember exactly that on October 2, 1942, the whole Lederman family came to our home upset that the Germans were preparing some drastic action against the Jews. It turned out to be the total liquidation of the ghetto. The Germans collected the Jews in the market place and led them to the railroad. They took them to Jedrzejow and from there to Treblinka [concentration camp]. After the total evacuation the Germans checked the vacant dwellings in Chmielnik and killed any Jews they found hiding. The Germans issued an edict that the punishment for hiding Jews is the execution of the offending family and burning of the property. One was obliged to report any Jews hiding in the forest or other places.

Our family together with the Ledermans finally decided to make the hiding places in the village, in the old [family] house. We had to organize in secrecy so that strangers saw and heard nothing. In the beginning the Ledermans found themselves in the attic, then in the pantry, under which there was a potato cellar. An entrance to the cellar was created, where a box was built and covered with potatoes.



Esther Gutman



Bogdan Zal (left), with his cousin Wieslawa, and Ms. Zalewska

Our decision to save the Lederman family was entirely spontaneous. We couldn't stand by and not offer help.

A few days later an 18-year-old girl with false papers as a Catholic showed up unexpectedly asking for help—Esther Gutman. She claimed to be a friend of Ezjel who told her our address and told her she could count on our help. She asked for help for herself as well as for her mother and sister who remained in Chmielnik.

Esther did not know that the Ledermans were already hiding with the Zal family. She left our home and found shelter in a nearby village. The citizens of that village suspected her of being Jewish and she was afraid to remain there. Under cover of darkness Esther found her way to our home again and told us that her [false ID] papers were in the hands of the mayor of the village. Jozef, our brother, went to that village immediately and retrieved the false ID, which could not be allowed to fall into the hands of the Germans. Esther was sent to the forest for the night. The next day, after a meeting with the Ledermans, it was decided that Esther would go into hiding together with the Ledermans.

In the evening we took Esther to the attic. She got frightened that there was someone there, but after recognizing the Ledermans she calmed down and was delighted. Now the family in hiding consisted of five people.

Now, our immediate goal was to keep the fact that we were hiding a Jewish family in strictest secrecy from our neighbors and numerous other people coming to the house. We had activists from various resistance groups! Peasant Battalions, Land Army, National Armies Forces, reporters from the underground press, all meeting at our house and discussing policies. Nobody knew or got any inkling about the hidden Jewish family. Ezjel showed the greatest initiative in the planning of secret hiding places. A hiding place was dug out under the floor in the empty chamber. The entrance was covered by a box of dirt. Air was being brought through a duct from the outside. His hiding place was used frequently as a result of rumors circulating of German raids.

Germans used to come to demand farm products like grain, livestock, and dairy products. They also organized raids to hunt down healthy young individuals for forced labor in the Reich. During the raids the Ledermans were urged to stay in the special hiding places.

In our village there were many underground activists. Germans tried to get them arrested. There were raids and searches in homes of people whose names were on the Gestapo lists.

There was a lot of optimism and hope in the underground press, and a large number of these secret publications passed through our home. Ezjel was the main commentator of the progress of the war in Europe. He marked the progress of the Allied armies in the east, west, and south, as well as in Africa and Italy.

Esther kept writing postcards to her father, who was doing forced labor in an armament factory in northern Poland. We would mail these cards from neighboring

Esther Lederman: *We would stand at the window, our only fragile link to the outside world, for long spans of time and watch chickens pecking at the ground, dogs chasing the chickens, cows ambling by, horses being driven to and from fields, birds in search of worms, worms wiggling away from the birds. They were all free; they could do as they pleased, they could search for their own food, defend their own lives. They could fight for their own existence, enjoy the sunshine, and even look for shelter in cold and rain.*

We could not do any of these things. We were not allowed to actively participate in the act of living. We were passively dependent on other people's charity, mood, goodwill, and circumstances. We could only eat food given to us, drink the wisdom of centuries encapsulated in books given to us, and wait for fate to be kind to us.

towns so the Germans could not trace the place they came from, or who was sending them. It turned out that Esther's father did indeed keep receiving them, and after his liberation told us they gave him hope and courage to survive.

Days and weeks were passing in expectation of liberation from the German occupation. We lived constantly in fear of the Germans storming into the house and finding the hidden Jewish family. Finally in July 1944 the Soviet army approached the River Vistula and created a beachhead at the town of Baranow. The area around Grzymala was freed from the Germans. I clearly remember the moment in August at dawn when the Ledermans alighted from the bunker telling us that they heard the Russian language most certainly coming from the Soviet soldiers. There was great joy that finally the nightmare was over.

At that time I had a crystal-powered radio which I put together and tried to get some detailed information about the situation in our area. This radio aroused suspicion in the Soviet military. This was a war zone and it could indicate a secret spy station.

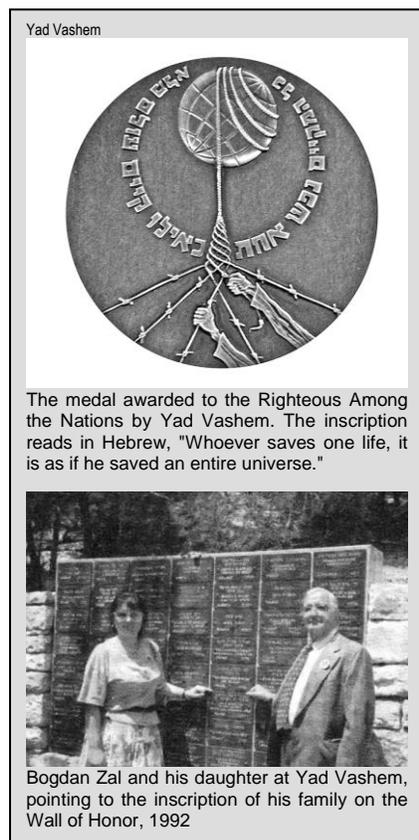
Captain Schneidklotz came to arrest me but I was in the old house. He took my father hostage and left for Grzymala to arrest me. I managed to hide since my brother Jozef came to warn me. Mme. Zalewska took Captain Schneidklotz to the Lederman family and explained to him that I could not be a spy for the Germans. I saved a whole family. Captain Schneidklotz saw that the saved family was Jewish.

It turned out that he was also Jewish. There was tremendous surprise, greetings, laughter, and crying for joy. The captain sent his adjutant for food, vodka, and we had a feast. He wanted to meet me and thank me personally for saving a Jewish family. This was the beginning of a great friendship between our family and the captain.

Our decision to save the Lederman family was entirely spontaneous. We couldn't stand by and not offer help. We realized the peril our action would bring in case of discovery. The Germans killed everyone caught hiding Jews.

At this time [2005] I and my sister Janina on our side, and Esther on the Lederman side, are the only survivors. We developed the kind of relationship which is much deeper than any in families. I derive great pride and joy in Esther's children's accomplishments. Esther always tells me that these are my children and my grandchildren, since thanks to me their parents and grandparents were saved from annihilation and were able to create this kind of a generation.

Esther Lederman: *It was August 3, 1944, when the Russians, our liberators, arrived. But now what? How to get out of the Zals' house? How to leave the house without tipping off the neighbors to the fact that five Jews had been hidden there throughout a 22-month period? How to sneak out without exposing the Zals to the response of their neighbors, who considered it a crime to harbor Jews? This was no imaginary danger. We understood full well that if the neighbors found out about us the Zals would come to harm.*



Yad Vashem

The medal awarded to the Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem. The inscription reads in Hebrew, "Whoever saves one life, it is as if he saved an entire universe."

Bogdan Zal and his daughter at Yad Vashem, pointing to the inscription of his family on the Wall of Honor, 1992



I can proudly state that my family was awarded the medal of “The Righteous Among Nations,” and a tablet was installed on the Wall of Honor in the Garden of the Righteous in Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. I also received honorary citizenship from the State of Israel.

In 1984 the Zal family—Jan and Maria Zal, their sons Jan, Antoni [Bogdan], and Jozef, and their granddaughter Wiesława Wasowicz, were given the honored designation of “Righteous Among the Nations” by Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Israel.

Esther was reunited with her father after the war, and they left Poland with the Ledermans to stay in a Displaced Persons camp in Germany. She and Ezjel married in 1946 and arrived in the U.S. in 1949, living in New York where Ezjel practiced medicine. They have four children, seven grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren. In 2004 Esther moved to Chapel Hill, NC, to be near one of her daughters. She continues to speak to students and other groups about her Holocaust experience.



ONLINE RESOURCES

- “Hiding for Our Lives: Esther Lederman’s Story,” 2015 (Center for Holocaust, Genocide, and Human Rights Education of NC/Holocaust Speakers Bureau, Chapel Hill, NC)
 - ◆ Video: 29 min. (three parts)
 - (1) youtu.be/J1mvWa2ky5M (2) youtu.be/ZuXXjKpg-4c (3) youtu.be/F3mbBLXRSAM
 - ◆ Lesson and Power Point www.holocaustspeakersbureau.org/videos.html
- The Righteous Among the Nations (Yad Vashem: The World Holocaust Remembrance Center, Israel)
 - ◆ www.yadvashem.org/righteous.html
 - ◆ The Zal family, honored as Righteous Among the Nations
 - db.yadvashem.org/righteous/family.html?language=en&itemId=4039840
 - ◆ Online exhibition: I AM My Brother’s Keeper: A Tribute to the Righteous Among the Nations
 - www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/righteous/index.asp
 - ◆ Photo gallery: The Bond between Rescuers and Rescued
 - www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/righteous/gallery.asp

Excerpted and adapted from Esther Lederman, *Hiding for Our Lives: The Wartime Memoirs of Esther Gutman Lederman and Ezjel Lederman*, Booksurge Publishing, 2007. Reproduced by permission of Esther Lederman. Ellipses omitted for ease of reading. Names Esther and Ezjel used here in place of original Polish names Ezdia and Salek. Family photographs reproduced by permission of Esther Lederman. 2018 photograph of Ms. Lederman courtesy of Marianne Wason.

