

Olga Medynska recognized as "Righteous Among Nations"

by Andrij Wynnyckyj
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Olga Medynska (left) with Ben Chartan, cousin of Dziunia Ben Sasson, and Israel's consul general in New York, Colette Avital, after the official ceremony esconcing Mrs. Medynsky in the ranks of the "Righteous Among Nations."

New York — Olga Medynska, 72, a native of the village of Savaryn, near Brody, Ukraine, and today a resident of Wethersfield, Conn., was formally recognized on July 18 at the Israeli Consulate here by Yad Vashem, the official Holocaust remembrance agency, as one of the "Righteous Among the Nations" for her part in helping Jews escape Nazi persecution. Yad Vashem has recognized more than 12,000 men and women as "Righteous."

Making the formal presentation of the ceremonial medal and certificate on behalf of Yad Vashem and the Israeli government was Consul General Colette Avital. "It is not often that we have the opportunity to salute courage and say thank you," the envoy said. "We are a people with a long memory," Ms. Avital continued, "and now, after 50 years have passed, we see not only the tragedy [of the Holocaust], but also some of the moments of solidarity."

On a confidential note, the Israeli official added, "I was deeply moved as I read the personal story of Dziunia, whose life you saved when she was a young girl of 14 years... Her father had died, all her family had been found in that bunker [where they hid unsuccessfully]. She gets to the first house that she knows — and even though there is so much risk involved — here is a human soul, and a couple that did everything not only to save her, to feed her, to clothe her, but then also to continue, at personal risk, to transfer her to a place of safety and security."

"Then, as I read I also discovered," continued Consul General Avital, "that you did this not only once, but with other people..."

"Even though it is 50 years later, still it is timely and still it is important to thank you, and to say, on behalf of the state of Israel, on behalf of the family that is well represented here... and also on behalf of the Jewish people, that we are grateful, that we are glad that you are among us today to accept this very small token of our appreciation."

"Yad Vashem is the martyrs' remembrance authority," Consul General Avital explained, "but it is also the authority that commemorates those who save other people's

lives, those who, for us, are known as the Righteous." She then read the text of the certificate, issued on March 18, 1993.

"The [Yad Vashem] Commission has accorded [Mykola and Olga Medynsky] the medal of the Righteous Among the Nations," the certificate read. "Their names shall be forever engraved on the Honorable Wall in the Garden of the Righteous."

On July 14, Sen. Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut sent Mrs. Medynska a letter of congratulations.

Also attending the ceremony was Dr. Menachem Ben Sasson, a professor of humanities at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, the son of the woman Mrs. Medynska saved — the woman whose testimony led to the award. The survivor could not travel to the U.S. herself to attend the ceremony because she had been taken ill.

In his word of thanks, Dr. Ben Sasson said, "Here beats a heart that saved actually not only my mother, but saved humanity in all of our eyes. We were brought up to think that people are not evil and that wickedness is only part of Man's nature. The main part of humanity is like the Medynsky family."

Dr. Ben Sasson recounted that his mother would often tell him how she, on that fateful February evening in 1944, struggled through the snow, tapped at the window of a house where the people took her in, then took her, hidden under a blanket in a carriage, to a safe house in the neighboring town of Pidkamin through a gauntlet of German troops.

He then personally thanked Mrs. Medynska, and on behalf of all of his mother's grandchildren, whom he enumerated, added, "No word of thanks can ever be sufficient for actions such as yours, but when a state [Israel] takes on this responsibility, the meaning of an individual event acquires a scope that concerns the whole world."

A disarmingly modest, charming woman, Mrs. Medynska said she did not consider her actions, and those of her late husband, Mykola, extraordinary. Pressed to admit that she did something worthy of recognition, Mrs. Medynska said, "We are all God's creatures, and it was the only humane thing to do. I believe that most would have behaved the same way, and I know that many more did. I am sure there are many more such stories."

Roma Wasylciw, a close family friend of Mrs. Medynska, also in attendance, said, "For all these years we just thought of her as our kind-hearted aunt; we never suspected anything like this — she just never talked about it."

Mrs. Medynska added, "I really don't like all this parading around and bragging. But what can I do, Dziunia submitted her testimony... After a while I began to feel sorry for these people — they've gone to such trouble."

Indeed, Mrs. Ben Sasson went to considerable lengths to reunite with her benefactor. In the summer of 1992, she traveled with her son to Ukraine to try to find her. As the grateful academic related, "we came to the town, looking for houses that my mother could place in her memory, but she couldn't even remember [Mrs. Medynska's] name. By a stroke of luck, we found her sister. She took out a photo album, and soon enough, the familiar face leaped out."

The traveling pair then learned that the object of their search was living in the U.S. Incredibly, Mrs. Medynska had visited her sister just a week before. Since Dr. Ben Sasson visits the U.S. fairly often, it was easy to track Mrs. Medynska down. As they parted in February 1944, Olga had said to Dziunia, "God willing, we'll see each other some day." They still haven't met face to face, but 49 years later they spoke on the telephone.

Ukraine's consul general in New York, Viktor Kryzhanivsky, also was present. In a brief statement, he assured those assembled that the individuals being celebrated that day were not unique. He added that "This kind of joint effort should continue, and I am sure that many more people will find each other."

Among the Ben Sassons' relatives who live in New York state is Boris Chartan, a cousin who hid with Dziunia during the war, and who came to the ceremony together with his wife.

Others who came to the Israeli Consulate that day were Don Gartner of the American Society for Yad Vashem, and Stanlee Joyce Stahl, director of the Anti-Defamation League's Jewish Foundation for Christian Rescuers.

Ms. Stahl's foundation provides pensions for just under 100 "Righteous" currently living in Eastern Europe, including Ukraine, issues publications and produces films recounting instances of heroism in the maelstrom of World War II. Noting that she was encouraged by the lifting of the Iron Curtain, Ms. Stahl said her organization could now more readily help those who should be rewarded. "Time is running out, these people are getting old," she said.

After the formalities, Consul General Avital concurred, "Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Ukraine's borders have opened up. Many more people from Israel and the U.S. have had a chance to go back and. revisit the places where they lived, and so there is a much better chance that these cases will turn up."

Ms. Avital was heartened by good relations between the governments in Tel Aviv and Kyiv. "We are now at a point where we can put the historical hostility and misunderstandings behind us," the diplomat said, adding, "These acts of good will between our peoples can be a signpost toward a much better future."

On that Monday afternoon, after the ceremonies were over and the dignitaries dispersed, the son of the rescued woman said to Mrs. Medynska, "so tell me Olga, how was it that night, I have never heard the story from you..." And so, the Righteous woman and the grateful succeeding generation talked of bygone times.



At the Israeli Consulate in New York, Olga Medynska looks at photos of her native town with Dr. Menachem Ben Sasson, the son of a woman she rescued from the Nazis