

Notes from underground

In 1943 a Catholic man kept Jewish families alive in the sewers under Lvov, safe from the Nazis, for more than a year. Now their story has been turned into a movie — and it's nominated for best foreign film at next week's Oscars. Ariel Leve meets Krystyna Chiger, the only remaining survivor



her narrative is that she has not been victimised by her circumstances. How does this happen?

From the outside, Chiger's house is unassuming: a modest home on a conventional suburban street. Her husband, Marian, opens the screen door on the porch and welcomes me in. He is a robust man with thick white hair and a warm manner. The living room is filled with books, art and antiques. Now 76, Chiger looks elegant, dressed in black with a beige wrap sweater that she pulls tightly around her.

She is reserved; understandably hesitant to return to unhappy memories and discuss a painful period in her life. She is a woman with strong memories, but whose memories have not diminished her.

Her story has been made into a film: In *Darkness*, unsentimentally directed by Agnieszka Holland and in the running for best foreign film at next week's Oscars. The project came about when, eight years ago, the screenwriter, David Shamoon, read a newspaper article on *The Righteous*, Sir Martin Gilbert's book about the people who risked their lives and the lives of their families to help Jews escape the Nazis. A single line caught his attention. It was about a Polish Catholic sewer-worker and petty thief, Leopold Socha. It intrigued him because Socha was an ordinary man and an unlikely hero.

"What makes someone reach out to help save a group of strangers — and Jews to boot?" he asks. "What motivates someone to do that? Where does that moral obligation come from?" Those questions led him to read *In the Sewers of Lvov* by Robert Marshall. He optioned >>>



Jews from the Warsaw ghetto surrender to German troops after the uprising in 1943. Left: Chiger at home in Long Island, where she lives with her husband

You may think there is no tale about the Holocaust that has not been told, no angle left to explore. And then you hear a story that reminds you: there is a never-ending archive.

In 1943, a group of Polish Jews sought refuge from the Nazis in the putrid sewers of Lvov, Poland. The Jews were being killed or forced into concentration camps and, when the ghetto was liquidated, the Chiger family descended underground to hide. With the help of a Catholic sewer-worker, they survived for 14 months in the city's sewer system. Krystyna Chiger was seven years old at the time and is the last survivor of that group.

I take the train to her home in Port Washington, on the north shore of Long Island, a two-hour ride from Manhattan. It is a frigid winter morning and as I walk to her house I wonder: what compels some people to overcome tragedy whereas others are broken by it? In Chiger's memoir, *The Girl in the Green Sweater*, one of the most resounding features of

the rights to the book and spent the next year getting a first draft of the screenplay written.

Socha is the focus of the film. Ten families have gone underground to hide from the Nazis and, at first, he agrees to keep them a secret in exchange for money given to him by Ignacy Chiger, Krystyna's father. But even after the money runs out, he continues to protect them — bringing them food; keeping them going.

After the film had begun shooting, Shamoon read Chiger's memoir, which was published in 2008. He told me: "Krystyna's memoir is her point of view and the details are very specific. [She is] the only living person who was there; I was very nervous screening the film for her." During the screening, he observed her whispering to her husband in Polish and, when it was over, she confirmed that's how it was. "Yes," Chiger says now. "I think it's very good and very realistic. I was happy to see it but I will not go again. It was very difficult for me to watch."

Her husband too, was emotional. He places a glass of water down on the coffee table. "I was

father would create hiding places at home so that she would know where to go. "I learnt to recognise the footsteps of the Germans. I would hide my brother in the suitcase and put the suitcase under the bed. I would go into the corner — my mother left a long robe hanging and I would hide behind it, making sure my toes were not sticking out. The Germans would come and look into the apartment and, if they did not see us, they left. If they had seen us, they would have killed us."

She still gets flashbacks. "It's so vivid," she says slowly. "The smells. Immediately I remember where I smelt this, or when I taste something that we were eating in the sewer. It was never fresh, always spoilt. The bread was from days before. We never ate fresh because we were accumulating in case Socha wouldn't be able to come and bring us food. So we would eat the oldest food first."

Her voice is low and she speaks without inflection, considering every word. She clears her throat. "It always stays with you. Some people don't want to talk about it. Some people want to push it aside. But I always talked with my family. And I talk to my children and

WE HAD TO FOOL OURSELVES INTO BELIEVING WE WERE STILL HUMAN

shaking," he recalls. "To tell you the truth, I was even crying. Even though I know the story." He departs for the other room, leaving the two of us alone.

On May 30, 1943, the night of the final liquidation of the Lvov ghetto, Chiger wrote: "Together we spilt into the sewer, hoping to find sanctuary among the rats and the filth." The family entered through a hole her father and other men had dug. We begin there. There is such specificity in the detail of her book. She was only a child, yet her memory appears seamless — how are there no cracks? "When I was a child, the family was always talking. I was very aware of what was going on. Always preparing how to hide and where to hide. I was a very good observer because most of the time, before the sewer, I was alone with my brother, who was 3½ and I had to take care of him. This is why I was so conscious. I paid attention to everything. Every detail. This is why I remember so well. It surprises even myself."

She describes a keen awareness of her predicament from an early age. There was always uncertainty and trepidation. Her

grandchildren. Many people asked if I went to psychotherapy. Never. I think that by trying not to make it such a tragedy — it was terrible — but I took it how it was and I talk about it. I think it helped me."

Her book displays the spectrum of emotions and daily life that occurred below ground. There was anguish and despair, love, laughter, birth, death — and Chiger adapted. "At first, I didn't want to go," she says. "I was crying and my father was pushing me, saying, 'Everything will be okay, hold my hand, everything will be fine.' I got used to it. I never complained. I understood that this was the situation. Some grown-ups were complaining. Some left — but this was a big mistake because then they got shot by the Germans or the Ukrainian police. We knew the only thing that would keep us alive was to be patient and adjust to the situation."

Even to the rats? She laughs. "You'd be surprised. We played with the rats. Especially my younger brother. He was never frightened. In the beginning it was the worms," she pulls a face of disgust. "This is what was shocking



for me." In her book there is a cringing description of rats licking her ears at night while she slept. She rationalised that they would not hurt her and had a child's innocent view of them as pets. But what about the fear of being discovered, or killed?

Chiger pauses to consider this. "It stays with me and it will always be with me. But I try to use it in a positive way. If I have something to do and it's very difficult, I will not quit. I say if my father could do [what he did] — in such a time — then I can do it too." The burden is not how it has affected her, but a sense of grief for a



Above: a scene from the film *In Darkness*, with Robert Wieckiewicz (front) as the sewer worker Leopold Socha. Far left, with Milla Bankowicz, playing Krystyna. Left, the Chiger family (from left): Pawel, Ignacy, Krystyna and Pepa

lost childhood. "I couldn't go outside and play. This is what I always envied. That I didn't have the opportunity. It was taken from me. I became a grown-up very early."

The family lived in a chamber of the sewer that was underneath a church. Chiger could hear the bells on Sunday and the voices of children singing. She would hear children playing on the street above and would ask her mother when she would be able to play with them. Her mother would tell her she had to be patient. "We knew where we were and what was around us, but we had to fool ourselves,

like you didn't see it. Pretend you were outside in the theatre, to give you human feelings."

There is a line in the book: "We had to fool ourselves into believing we were still human." "Yes. Can you imagine a human being living in a cave full of sewage and rats? It is a place for animals, not for human beings. But you have to prove you are human — that you are higher than the rats. And my father understood this very well." They passed the time inventing and performing plays and satires, but she never lost sight of what was going on; nor was it ever kept from her. When Socha brought food, he

would bring a newspaper and often stay and talk with her father about the war.

"He used to come, and in the beginning he would bring the food and leave. Then he would stay five minutes longer. Then a few hours. He was talking to my father and asking for help and what to do about problems. My father was advising him. He became part of the family. He told us everything that was going on upstairs."

Her affection for Socha is evident — her voice softens when she speaks of him — and not just because he was her saviour.

"The moment I saw him for the first time, his face and his smile, I liked him. I was in the basement, hiding, and suddenly I saw a face, bright and smiling — I felt immediately that he was someone I would like. I knew he was rescuing me and helping me survive."

Throughout the 14 months, her mother and father were always optimistic. The will to survive never wavered. Despite not knowing how long they would be down there, the near-fatal floods, dysentery, lack of natural light and fresh air, and the impossibility for the adults even to stand up straight, there was never any giving in to despair. "We always had hope," she says. "We were always hoping that we would survive." This unfaltering tenacity has stayed with her all of her life. But one lasting effect stands out.

"When I was hiding in the ghetto I would swallow my tears — because I did not want to make a noise. I swore it. I never cried and neither did my brother." She pauses. "Even now, to this day, I don't cry."

What separates those who can move forward from those who cannot? Anger is often a blockade. "I don't feel angry," she shrugs. "I feel maybe sorry. If I were angry, would it help me? It would only make me more agitated. Did that take work, or was it part of her nature? "I think it was both. I'm not an angry person." It helps her to know she wasn't alone, and she has no lingering resentment towards Germans. "I don't feel any anger towards the younger generation. They shouldn't suffer because of what their grandparents and parents did."

She takes a sip of water. "Of course, I would be angry if I met someone who was SS — but someone young, in his twenties? No. I don't think it would be fair to keep the anger against him." Her ability to separate the intellectual from the emotional sets her apart. It wasn't always this way. She tells how years ago, in 1968, she stopped over in Berlin to visit friends. "I was supposed to be there for 10 days and ➤

I stayed for two. I had to leave. It was too fresh. I looked on the street and divided the people — over 50 was SS, and if he was younger he was Hitler youth... but that was 44 years ago.”

One of the most powerful moments in the film is when, after the Chiger family had lived in darkness for 14 months, Lvov is finally liberated and they, with other survivors, emerge from below. They crawl through the pipes and lift up the manhole cover. She tells me of the shock of seeing daylight for the first time in so long.

“I saw red and yellow, and had to [wait] for a while until my eyes adapted to the sunlight. The sunshine was like a red ball. I saw everyone in red — it was foggy, not clear. My brother was so scared when he came out. He started to cry and told my mother he wanted to go back. ‘I want to go home, I want to go home,’ he cried. This was his home — the sewer. He was so young. In 1944, he was 4½. He had forgotten that life existed before that.”

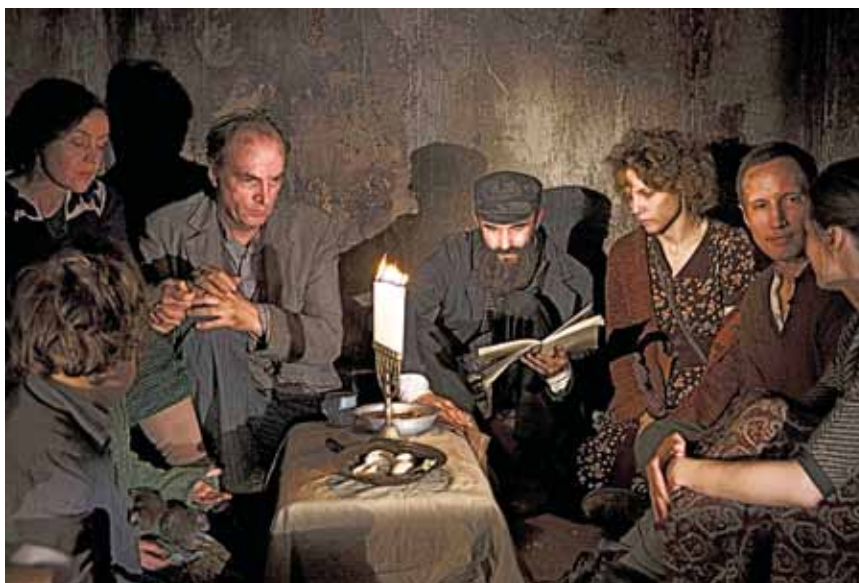
There were other adjustments to be made: life above ground was a struggle. After the liberation, the family started over again with nothing. All the money was gone. Her father found work and her mother would make *latkes* (potato dumplings) and sell them on the street. In 1945 they had to flee because with the new communist government came a new wave of anti-semitism.

“Lvov was under Russian occupation. The secret police — the NKVD [precursor to the KGB] — found out that before the war we owned a textile business, and if you had private business, you were bourgeois. They wanted to take us to Siberia. Someone came to my father and said, ‘Run away today because they will take you’, and we left with nothing. It was cold, winter, and we went to the railroad station and hid, then escaped on the cattle cars to Krakow.”

Her mother had an uncle and they got in contact with him. They found a room to live where there were other refugees.

“My mother signed me up to school and I pretended to be Christian. The principal of the school and the priest knew we were Jews, but they kept it a secret. I knew it was a game to save me. Inside, I knew I was Jewish.”

Her father, always industrious, found work as an accountant and soon moved to a higher position, becoming director of commerce. Chiger went to dental-technician school in



In *Darkness* depicts the terror and claustrophobia of the sewers, but also the sense of hope that pervaded. The Chigers lived in a chamber beneath a church and could hear the singing of children

Krakow, but to go on to medical school and study to become a doctor was forbidden under the communist regime: “Children of the intelligentsia were not permitted.” Her father wrote letters to ministers that allowed her to continue studying to be a dentist in Poland.

“Finally, they gave me a condition — if I took the exams and got A-plus, I’d be accepted to the school. My father took a suitcase and books, and sent me to a village with only peasants. He said, ‘Here you stay and study — you have one month.’” A month later, he picked her up; she took the exams and passed.

In 1957 the family emigrated to Israel, where she continued her dentistry studies. At a party she met her husband, Marian, who she met when they were on the same swimming team in Krakow. They had been friends, but when she met him again in Tel Aviv she was surprised. “I didn’t know he had moved to Israel,” she says. He, too, is a Holocaust

complaining or looking for pity.”

The legacy she has passed on is to avoid making a victim of herself or her children. To look forward is essential.

“This is what we went through. It is a part of my life, but now I have a new part. I am free.”

Six years ago, Chiger returned to Lvov. She was invited by the faculty of Jewish history at New York University; the professor knew her story and she went with her husband and a group of students. “I showed them all the places. It was easier the second time. I was very satisfied that it resonated — that people will know, and by knowing what happened will try to avoid what happened again.”

Several hours have passed, and Chiger’s husband comes back into the room. He asks if I read the memoir before seeing the movie or afterwards. It turns out that he is keen for me to highlight Chiger’s father’s tremendous part in their survival. “He found the sewer, he had the

HER PARENTS WERE OPTIMISTIC. THE WILL TO SURVIVE NEVER WAVERED

survivor. By the time she graduated in 1961 they were married with a child — her oldest son, Doron. The name means “gift” and he is a dentist as well. “By choice!” she states.

A second son was born in 1975, after they moved to the United States. She took further exams, and began her practice. That same year, her father died. And her brother? Her voice lowers to barely above a whisper.

“He was in the Israeli army and got killed. He was 39. He was on an exercise.” After his death, in 1979, she brought her mother to the States. “She became an American citizen,” Chiger recalls, smiling. “She was so strong.” Chiger talks about her sons — her

money to pay Socha,” she says with conviction. “If not for him, we would not have survived.”

There is a photo in her book, taken in 2006 in front of the Neptune fountain in Lvov. She wanted to see the place where her father had fetched fresh water for them to drink. “There was a crack and he would stand below and collect the drops of water.” She wants it to be known that her father was a hero too ■

In Darkness is released in cinemas on March 16



To see a trailer of the film *In Darkness*, about the story of Krystyna Chiger, visit: www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/indarkness