

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

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.”

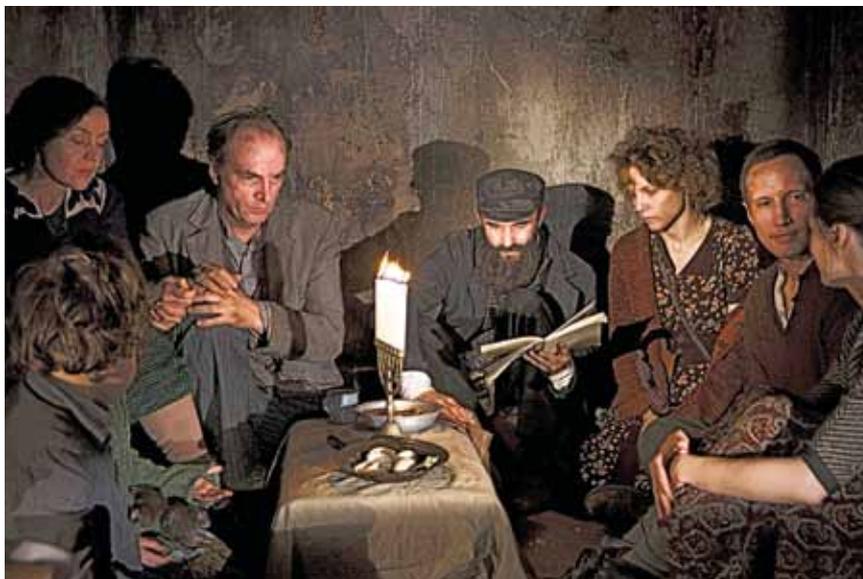
There were other adjustments to be made: life above ground was a struggle. After the liberation, the family started over again with nothing. All the money was gone. Her father found work and her mother would make *latkes* (potato dumplings) and sell them on the street. In 1945 they had to flee because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