



But I Live Educational Resources

Handout: Holocaust Hero—Lena Küchler-Silberman

The following excerpt is from an article written by Dr. Sharon Geva and published by Yad Vashem. See more here: <https://www.yadvashem.org/articles/general/kichler-silberman.html>.

Lena Küchler-Silberman was a teacher, educator and psychologist, but more than anything, she was a mother. She was born in 1910 and grew up in Wieliczka, Poland. After completing her studies in the Hebrew gymnasium in Kraków she went on to study philosophy, psychology and pedagogy. During the Holocaust she lost her own daughter and saved the children of others from death. After the Jews in her city were deported to Bełżec, she managed to make her way to Warsaw where she lived under an alias, which she used to help smuggle children out of the Ghetto. A well-known story tells how in June 1942 she found a live baby lying on top of the corpse of its mother. Tucking the baby under her coat, she smuggled it out of the Ghetto. She found it refuge in a monastery, even though they initially refused to accept a circumcised child.

After the war, she travelled to the Jewish council in Krakow where she met young children who had lost their families. She took them in, giving them a home in a house she found in Zakopane. From there they made their way to Czechoslovakia, France, and finally, in 1949, Israel. There the children were taken in by Kvutzat Shiller. Lena lived in Tel-Aviv, where she taught psychology and education. She kept in touch with her adopted children even after they had grown up. In 1987, Lena passed away.

In studies of women in the Holocaust, figures such as Lena Küchler-Silberman are referred to as “surrogate mothers”: women who took the place of absent biological mothers, assuming a mother’s basic, traditional roles: feeding, caretaking, supporting, educating and above all showing unconditional love. While Lena Küchler was not the only “surrogate mother” in the Holocaust, she was certainly the most famous. These mothers included educators, doctors and guides. They included figures such as Fritzi Zucker who dedicated her life to the children of Theresienstadt, and Dr. Tova Samhowitz, a doctor from Warsaw who established a children’s and women’s hospital in the Drancy concentration camp in France and who devoted herself to her children, even joining them in their deaths. Some women have passed into the realm of myth: for example, Stepha Vilchinska, the famous educator in the orphanage of Janusz Korczak who also stood by her pupils and met her death at their side. These women were all surrogate mothers: some for hours, days, or months—others for just a minute. Most have been forgotten.