

# Eleonora Sipos

The passengers of the Hungarian train travelling from Debrecen to Budapest in 1944 were terrified when they were abruptly confronted by a band of aggressive German soldiers.

Among the crowded mass of families fleeing the eastern border town after the Nazi occupation was a homely looking woman named Eleonora Sipos protectively looking after a young pregnant Hungarian and her two daughters.

Mrs Sipos, Czechoslovak by birth, but a Budapest resident, was Roman Catholic. Her charges, especially the girls, looked suspiciously Jewish.

As the German soldiers at the stop near Budapest began their rigorous “examination” of the passengers, Mrs Sipos quickly took control.

Approaching a soldier, she asked in fluent German for help. The children had cried all night, had not slept, and only now were dozing . . .

They should not, she said, be disturbed.

The soldier gently took one girl in his arms and led the group to a carriage beyond the scrutiny.

If he had known she was not a bona fide traveller, but a “rescuer”, helping a Jewish family named Meir to relative safety in the big city, it is likely she would have been shot.

The benefice continued. Mrs Sipos harboured the mother in her own apartment under the artifice that she was a Yugoslav woman whose husband was in the army – and was therefore willing to work for her as a maid.

She found homes for the children in another town.

The family and their father who had begged for help, survived the war. Mrs Sipos died in New Plymouth, New Zealand, in August 1988.

The story might pale before many examples of courage that the war spawned if not for the many letters of commendation that flooded to the Israeli authorities 15 years ago and led to her being awarded the rare Medal of the Just as a “righteous Gentile”.

Stories of other rescues by Mrs Sipos, a wealthy businesswoman, began to unfold.

On one occasion a young Jew who had escaped internment and was living under a false name in Budapest asked if Mrs Sipos could help bring three children to him from a Debrecen ghetto.

She disguised the mother in peasant costume, telling her to pose as her maid, carrying all the luggage, while she led the two older children clinging to her skirts and carried the two-week-old baby.

They had crept through the town at night to avoid the ubiquitous German patrols and Hungarian police before catching the train.

Just as in the other instance, Budapest itself was the stumbling block, with everyone to be searched.

In desperation Mrs Sipos, with her Aryan pass, walked up to a German officer and asked if he could help her and her “family”.

The officer, it was later related, had smiled, taken one child in his arms, and led the way through the dense crowd which opened “like the pushing back of the waters of the Red Sea”.

The difficulties had continued in Budapest. Although the children were told never to speak of their parents, the oldest looked very Jewish and was frequently peppered with questions.

After she once answered: “I am not a Jew. I don’t have a yellow star; only my mummy and daddy have them”, Mrs Sipos found them a new place of safety.

On another occasion, when a rescue bid – led by a man she had earlier helped – was made for 19 Jews hidden in a cave in the Carpathians, she personally made the long journey to bring the necessary money.

Later she was the contact for the Jews in hiding.

Why did she do it? Although Czech by birth, Mrs Sipos had grown up in the Hungarian border city of Szabadka. After World War I, when Austria-Hungary was divided, her town came under Yugoslavian rule and was renamed Subotica.

She married a wealthy lawyer and entered business herself, becoming a chartered accountant and then the manager of a travel agency.

Life was rosy, till Hitler’s troops over-ran the country – quickly followed by the Hungarian army.

As a Slav, Mrs Sipos was frequently harassed, her home on numerous occasions searched. For a time she was imprisoned.

When her husband joined the Yugoslavian army, she fled to Budapest where she bought a majority share in a large timber trading business and was soon ironically supplying the Hungarian army.

She did not forget the injustices, watching with horror as the local Jews were herded into ghettos.

Asked in 1979 why as a Roman Catholic she risked her own safety to help save Jews, she had replied: “First, because I felt a great injustice was being done against the Jewish people who had no country of their own, nowhere to go.

“I had, and have, many good Jewish friends.

“Second, I am a Christian and a human being. All my life I have helped other people, individually and through movements such as the Red Cross, regardless of religion . . . one must do what is best.”

After the war the new Communist rulers confiscated all her properties.

“My husband died – from despair, I think,” she once said. “There was no food – people were literally starving to death and I could see there was only one thing for me to do, abandon everything and become a refugee.”

Mrs Sipos fled to Vienna and in 1950 was selected as an emigrant to New Zealand.

In 1978 a letter arrived from the Commission for Designation of the Just of Yad Vashem telling her that “after due deliberation” it had been decided to bestow upon her the rare Medal of the Just.

Her brief citation said it was “for the bravery and human kindness you showed in risking your life in order to save Jewish lives during the Holocaust . . . please accept our best wishes and our gratitude.”

Mrs Sipos’s story has survived because of her association with the Red Cross, which this year mounted in its New Plymouth offices a permanent exhibition of photographs, medals and certificates.