

GROUP 7  
**MARIA OLT**



Maria Olt

"I could never have forgiven myself if I had acted differently in those horrible days. They were days of fear and dread, but because there was no time to ponder what would happen if we were caught, we ceaselessly continued our rescue activities." How did Maria Olt, who in 1944 was just 22 years old, become utterly intertwined with several Jewish families, to the extent that she was willing to risk her own life and the lives of her family for their sakes?

In the spring of 1944, the German occupation of Hungary had only just begun, but already Jews were persecuted. In March, Dr. Laszlo Kuti, a Jewish gynecologist who worked at a maternity hospital in Budapest, and his wife Miriam Kuti-Nevo gave birth to a daughter. Great fear and uncertainty accompanied the outbreak of war. Miriam later recalled, "The atmosphere at the hospital and throughout the city was difficult. We were despondent. Some of the hospital staff committed suicide." In April, Jews were ordered to sew the yellow star on their garments, the familiar, humiliating sign of being placed apart from general society."

During this time, Maria Olt came to be treated by Dr. Kuti. Seeing the doctor wearing a yellow star shocked Maria greatly. The doctor saw her open concern and told her about his sense of uncertainty and fear of what would become of him, his wife and newborn daughter, Anna. A man in great distress stood before Maria. She got up and declared, "I want to save the baby."

That same day Maria came home to her village holding their baby in her arms. Her husband immediately expressed his concerns. Hiding a Jewish child? Now? What sort of an idea was that? This could endanger the entire family. And for who, strangers? But Maria did not respond to his outbursts. She was a pious Catholic, and as a believer she felt obligated to show kindness to the oppressed. After some time, her husband left her and moved to a different city. Her father Jozef Lang, on the other hand, saw what his daughter had done and decided to help her and other Jews in need. A few days later, Maria returned to the city. This time it was to take Miriam, the baby's mother. She brought her back to the village and introduced her to all as a Gypsy who had given birth to a daughter out of wedlock and needed to hide to avoid revenge. The following week she brought Dr. Laszlo Kuti back to her village. He hid with Maria's father in the small cellar of a vineyard that Jozef owned.

Now Maria Olt was responsible for three people, including a baby. The danger was great. The general atmosphere in the village was one of anti-Jewish sentiment, and certainly of opposition to hiding Jews. Each day contained the fear of being discovered, informed upon

or turned in. Maria managed to transfer little Anna to a family living in a small village near the Czech border. Maria obtained forged documents for Anna, and she was passed off as a Christian child, which protected her life and the lives of the family members hiding her.

One day, one of their greatest fears became a reality. The village midwife recognized Miriam. She had studied at the maternity hospital in Budapest and Miriam's face was familiar to her from there. The midwife quickly realized that she was the Jewish wife of Dr. Kuti, rather than a Gypsy, as she had been introduced. She immediately requested to denounce Miriam to the village police. Maria was stunned. Not only was Miriam's life in danger, but also that of her husband, her father and herself. Maria immediately decided to smuggle Miriam to a different village, where she could stay with relatives, far from those who wanted to turn her in.

But in this other village, the atmosphere toward Jews was hostile as well. One evening, she heard people gleefully describing how the farmers had ripped apart a Jewish storeowner limb from limb. Maria and Miriam continued their wanderings, with no documents – even Maria no longer had documents, as she had given them to an acquaintance of the Kutis, a Jewish woman who had needed a certificate declaring her to be Christian in order to escape. The two went from place to place, looking for food and a place to rest. Their fates were intertwined.

One day, in the course of their difficult journey, they came across a train transporting Jews to Poland – to Auschwitz. The train stopped for a moment not far from where they were. Miriam felt an urge to join the passengers and end her suffering once and for all. Maria caught her hand and said: "If you go on that train, I will follow." Years later, Miriam remembered: "It was her bravery that kept me from taking that step and instilled in me the strength to continue hiding until the end of the war." The days passed, and Maria miraculously managed to borrow enough money to rent Miriam a room in the village. Not long afterward, Maria arrived at the village in her father's cart. Underneath a pile of hay, Dr. Laszlo Kuti, Miriam's husband, was hiding. The two reunited and together waited for the fury to subside.

Miriam continued helping other Jews. Each time a scared person came to her, Miriam initiated a rescue attempt. Some of the Jews hiding in one of the villages received weekly visits from Maria, who looked after their needs as best she could. Her rescue activities continued until Budapest was liberated in 1945. After the war, the people Maria saved scattered around the world. Miriam, who immigrated to Israel in the 1950s, maintained regular contact with the woman who had rescued her and her son. Thirty-four years after promising to meet one another in Jerusalem and then going their separate ways, the two

managed to fulfill this wish. In a ceremony held at Yad Vashem, Maria said: "I felt a need to help the persecuted. An inner voice spoke to me in those days and guided my behavior without thinking about the dangers around me. I would never have forgiven myself had I acted differently."

### Discussion Questions:

What motivated Maria Olt's acts of rescue?

Describe Maria Olt: age, gender, political and religious outlook, etc.

What difficulties and dangers did Maria face?

Was the rescue a result of a one-time decision or perhaps was Maria called upon to take responsibility for rescuing at several points? If the latter, what were they?

