4-10-15

SMITH, IRENA BARBARA

PROVIDENCE



SMITH, IRENA BARBARA ZEIGLER

94, passed away peacefully in her sleep, on April 10, 2015 at her residence, Epoch, 1 Butler Avenue, Providence RI. She was one of the few hundred remaining Jewish survivors of the Holocaust.

Born in Lvov, Poland, Irena was the daughter of Dawid Zeigler and Gizela "Gusta" Reiter, who perished along with Irena's sister, Miriam, during the German occupation. Irena, a college senior, escaped capture by fleeing to Krakow, the site of a Nazi command headquarters. She "hid in plain sight," working as a secretary for an attorney who provided her with forged identity papers. When an SS officer became suspicious, she boarded a train for Berlin, from where she was eventually pressed into forced labor in the Rosenthal China manufactory in Selb. There she endured the life of a slave and the relentless assaults of Allied bombers.

With the end of conflict in the European Theater, in April 1945, she found employment in Bamberg, Germany with the 16th Division of the First Army ("The Big Red One"). Her fluency in a half dozen languages made her a valuable asset in the care and disposition of displaced persons, including survivors of Nazi death camps. When she was assigned to combat veteran, Frank Hoxie Smith, a reporter for the First Army's newspaper, they travelled widely in search of stories that included an interview with the widow of Claus von Stauffenberg, a leader of the plot to kill Hitler. After a sojourn in Paris, romance led to marriage. During a visit to the Rosenthal factory, the manager gave them a 24-place setting of exquisite hand painted china.

It was out of this backdrop of terror and liberation that Irena and Hoxie arrived at the Smith family homestead in rural Southern Illinois. The lingering traumas of war led to a failed marriage and a lengthy separation from her newborn child, George. After moving east, making her home in Providence and reuniting with her four year old son; she decided to put aside painful memories and devoted her life to helping others

She earned a Masters degree in social work from Boston University, and worked at the Governor Medical Center. She was the chief of social work at the Dana M. Swan Guidance Center, Bradley Hospital. A compassionate and intelligent psychotherapist, she worked successfully with children and adults. She was a skilled teacher and supervisor of social work students. Staunchly liberal and outspoken in her political and social views, she was ecumenical in her friendships, which included colleagues, students, neighbors and multi-generational members of her former husband's extended family.

She leaves behind her son George, his wife Susan and their children David and Giselle, whose names carry forward the memory of their grandmother's parents.

A memorial service is planned for May 16 at 10:30 am at the Hamilton House, 276 Angell Street in Providence, where Irena had served on its board. If people wish to honor her memory with gifts, donations to Hamilton House will be appreciated.