

Denise Bergon – A story of Courage

She asked the archbishop just one question: Is it acceptable for a nun to lie to save Jewish children?

The archbishop's written reply was just a few words long: "Let's lie, my daughter, let's lie."

With that blessing, a 30-year-old French nun named Sister Denise Bergon transformed her quiet convent school into a secret sanctuary.

The year was 1942, and Nazi troops were rounding up Jewish families across France, dragging parents and young children onto trains headed for concentration camps. Nearby, terrified Jewish children were hiding alone in the woods, starving and freezing.

Sister Denise was the Mother Superior of Notre-Dame de Massip in southwest France.

She had already quietly taken a few children in, pretending they were ordinary Catholic pupils. But she knew that to save more, she would have to build a massive web of deception.

She would have to lie systematically, for years, to the Vichy regime, the Gestapo, and even to most of the other nuns in her own convent.

Desperate for guidance, she secretly wrote to Archbishop Jules-Géraud Saliège of Toulouse. He was one of the very few French religious leaders who had publicly condemned the Nazi persecutions, famously declaring that the Jewish people were brothers and sisters to Christians.

His simple reply gave Sister Denise the courage she needed to act.

Resistance couriers and desperate relatives began smuggling children to her gates. Little girls like 12-year-old Annie Beck and Hélène Bach arrived, traumatized and exhausted.

Eventually, Sister Denise was hiding 83 Jewish children.

To keep them safe, she only told three other people in the convent the full truth. The other 11 nuns were told the children were war refugees from another region. But Jewish children didn't know Catholic prayers or how to cross themselves, which risked exposing them.

Sister Denise came up with a brilliant cover story: she told everyone the children came from strict communist families who rejected religion entirely.

Whenever the children made a mistake during Mass, people just assumed they had never been taught.

The danger was constant.

When Nazi and local police forces came to search the convent, Sister Denise greeted them with absolute calm, showing them around the classrooms while the Jewish children hid in secret cellars right beneath the chapel floor.

At night, while the convent slept, she went out into the garden and buried the jewellery, cash, and identity documents Jewish parents had left with their kids, marking the locations only in her memory.

She also kept a secret ledger of their real names, determined to reunite them with their families after the war.

Her bravery paid off.

For 20 months, she ran this high-stakes operation under the noses of the Gestapo. When the war finally ended, the tally was miraculous: every single one of the 83 children had survived.

Sister Denise didn't just keep them alive; she protected their dignity. When surviving relatives came to reclaim them, she handed back every child alongside every single piece of buried jewellery and cash, completely untouched.

For the orphans, she worked tirelessly to find safe homes with relatives abroad.

Sister Denise never sought fame or wrote a memoir. She stayed at her quiet convent for the rest of her life, passing away in 2006 at the age of 94.

Decades after the war, the garden where she once buried stolen valuables in the dead of night became a place of beautiful reunions.

Elderly survivors, now in their 70s, would travel from all over the world back to Capdenac. They sat in the shade of a cedar tree planted in her honour, drinking tea with the woman who had risked everything for them.

They brought their own children and grandchildren to meet her—living proof of her incredible courage.

Looking at the generations of families gathered around her, Annie Beck smiled and spoke for them all, saying, "She was like a mother to us. She saved our lives."

True story from the book 'We Are Human Angels'. The book that has spread a new vision of the human experience and has been spontaneously translated into 14 languages by readers.

Questions

1. In what circumstances could it be right to lie? Give evidence from this story.
2. How many people did she tell that the children were Jewish? Why do you think she told only a few trusted nuns and not all the nuns?
3. How did she cover the facts that Jewish children did not know Catholic prayers and were therefore at risk of being discovered.
4. How many children did she save?
5. How did she keep the children's family possessions safe?