Her name was Gitta Bauer, and her decision was life-changing.

Growing up in a simple, conservative family, she had opposed the Nazis from the beginning. Though German herself and from Berlin, Gitta had experienced her share of turmoil, imprisonments, and prejudice by the brutal regime that outlawed her Catholic faith in 1935. Mercy was all but extinct for those who didn’t wholeheartedly support Adolf Hitler, and by the year 1942 Gitta was arrested on false charges of being a Communist.

By 1943, the weight of tyranny was descending on Germany’s citizens. The Fatherland was in full-fledged defense mode fighting off the Allies’ air raids, scrambling to retreat in Italy, and continually deporting Jews in order to “perfect” the Aryan standard. Gestapo seizures were commonplace and more dangerous than ever. As a young woman resolved to do what was right, Gitta chose to hide her close friend Ilse Baumgart in order to prevent her death by the malevolent hands of the Nazis. Ilse, Jewish and living under an assumed name, had been working as a secretary in Berlin, when an offhand question about the July 20th plot’s success brought the vengeance of the swastika upon her. Without the fifteen minutes granted by a sympathetic officer, Ilse would have surely been arrested, deported, and murdered in a concentration camp like the millions of others who didn’t fit into the skewed vision of the Nazis.

Ilse escaped, fleeing for her life and ending up at Gitta’s house. When asked many decades later about her risky choice to hide her friend, Gitta responded with a simple statement:
“This was no big moral or religious decision. She was a friend and she needed help. We knew it was dangerous, and we were careful, but we didn’t consider not taking her.”

For nine months, Gitta Bauer and her family were in mortal danger. By choosing to shelter Ilse, they placed everything on the narrow line between death and safety. If Ilse was discovered in their home, she would have been immediately deported to a concentration camp along with the entire Bauer family to die a horrible death in the gas chambers; other potential consequences the Bauers faced were public execution and burning of all possessions. Yet, Gitta resolved to help Ilse. One life was too important to let slip by, to ignore, or to selfishly turn away. One life mattered, even though it could have cost everything. One life was worth it.

Because of that one choice, Ilse was saved. Her life was placed in the hands of someone who valued morality over security. Gitta never backed down from her anti-Nazi stance and Catholic faith, willing to act on what she believed. She stood up for what was right, not popular, and in doing so defended another who was deemed “not worth it”. Gitta protected Ilse, who, being Jewish, could not protect herself at the time. The value placed on her life by those around her was next to none, but Gitta, through her actions, told her that she was important, valuable, and worth saving.

In 1984, Gitta was asked to accept the Yad Vashem medal for saving Ilse’s life during the Holocaust. She took time to think it over and shared her doubts as to why she deserved it; she had only saved one person. Looking back on her actions, Gitta felt as though more could have been done. After all, there were those like Oscar Schindler, the people of Denmark, the Raoul Wallenbergs of the world who had saved thousands; what had she done that deserved a medal and a title like “Righteous Among the Nations”? What did it really matter?
But, Gitta Bauer accepted the medal. Though she did not specifically mention it, I believe that she came to recognize the power of what she had done. Gitta may not have hidden a hundred Jewish children or liberated Buchenwald or taken Berlin. She may not have led the Allies at Normandy or hunted down Mussolini or driven Hitler to his death. Yet, there was one very important thing she did do: Gitta saved someone.

It sounds so simple, but every day we (myself included) miss the mark. Opportunities are constantly presented to encourage, defend, and fight for someone else. Daily is the chance to protect the intrinsic value of our fellow man, declared by God Himself. What does that look like? It may not necessarily involve risking my life as Gitta did, but perhaps I see a freshman being harassed and bullied in the hallway. I can choose to ignore it; after all, I am an upperclassman and have more pressing issues on my mind. I can choose to listen to what society says, that this is just natural selection and survival of the fittest. I can choose to just walk away. However, looking to Gitta as an example, I can also choose to make a decision that will risk my own standing and safety but impact another’s life. Within that decision, I can hold to what I believe as a young Christian woman who has come to understand the affirming value God has placed on every human being as discussed by King David in the 139th Psalm.

Gitta Bauer did not let that opportunity slip away. She chose to protect one person, and although it may not have seemed like a huge, world-changing decision in light of what was happening at the time, her choice affected and altered the course of another human being’s life forever. People—whether one or one million—matter, not because of what the world around us has to say or because of some dictator’s rules, but because of the importance our Creator has set upon us. Famed poet John Donne once wrote, “No man is an island entire of itself. / Each is a
piece of a continent, a part of the main…” We are all humanity, we are all valued in the eyes of God, and we all possess worth. Gitta Bauer realized that and made her choice; I can too.

Works Cited


