



Lady Sue Ryder of Warsaw

1924 - 2000



Sue Ryder's work started during WWII, helping people displaced from their homes as a result of war. After the war she widened the scope of her work, supporting people with complex needs and life-threatening conditions across the UK and internationally. When she died on 2nd November 2000, she left behind a legacy for charities around the world, notably the charity named in her honour, who continue to provide care based on her principles: compassion and the relief of suffering.

Margaret Susan Ryder was born in 1924 in Leeds. As a young girl, her mother would take her around the under privileged, overcrowded streets of the city. This obviously gave her a taste of what her life's work would be.

Depression hit in the mid 1930's causing the once prosperous family to leave their farm and relocate to a small cottage in Suffolk. When World War II broke out, she volunteered to join the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry. As she was only 15, she lied about her age and seems to have maintained this deception for the rest of her life!

She was soon assigned to the Polish section of the Special Operations Executive. In this role, Ryder's job was to drive SOE agents to the airfield where they would take off for their assignments in Europe. In 1943 she was posted to Tunisia and later to Italy. It was during her time in Poland that she developed an abiding admiration for the country, so much so that when much later she was elevated to House of Lords in 1979 she took the country's capital as part of her title.

Ryder, who once thought she would become a nun, did in fact marry a young naval officer at 18. He was killed in the war several weeks later.

After the war she worked in camps for displaced persons, sometimes organising trips to British holiday houses for survivors of concentration camps.

During relief work in France, she exhibited a typically stubborn belief in her own abilities. A truck she was driving laden with stoves and drugs to treat tuberculosis and typhus broke down mid-journey. With the help of passers-by she pushed the vehicle to the side of the road and proceeded to clean the carburettor and replace the spark plugs before continuing with the journey.

In 1953, using a small inheritance and some borrowed funds, she founded the Sue Ryder Foundation. The foundation was dedicated to the memory of those who had been killed in the two world wars and its symbol, rosemary is a sign of remembrance. The first Sue Ryder Home, for disabled people opened shortly afterwards. By 1965 Ryder had opened 30 homes for those bearing the scars of war, enabling them to live in comfort and without restriction in England, Greece, Poland and Yugoslavia.

She travelled 50,000 miles a year, often driving, carrying supplies across the continent, supervising home building and visiting refugees. Throughout the years her organization continued to expand. In Britain alone the organization has 2,500 employees.

In 1959 Ryder married for a second time, Group Captain Leonard Cheshire, a war hero and holder of the Victoria Cross. It was truly a meeting of minds, Captain Cheshire had his own charitable foundation and they met when she visited one of his homes for the disabled. Her husband was elevated to the House of Lords as a life peer in 1991 but sadly died the following year.



In 1979 the Sue Ryder Foundation Museum was opened with exhibitions that included Lady Ryder's war uniforms. Lady Ryder insisted that the museum was not a tribute to her, but 'to all those who suffered and continue to suffer. It is intended to show the misery in the world and the needs which exist more vividly than the written word could do. It is not dedicated to me.'

A small woman of indomitable energy who ate sparingly and often got out of bed at 4:30 a.m. liking to supervise her dozens of projects herself and delegate as little as possible, Lady Ryder was gripped by the notion that she had a moral mission to help the less advantaged - the poor, the sick and the displaced.

She had a religious view of suffering and grace, once telling an interviewer, 'I believe that to be with people who are suffering, whoever they are, makes one humble.'

Her name is familiar to the British public through the 500 or so Sue Ryder charity shops in cities and towns across the country. Sales from the stores, which volunteers run and sell both new and used goods, are used to raise money for the Sue Ryder Foundation, the group that runs the Sue Ryder centres. Lady Ryder bought her own clothes from the stores.



What Sue Ryder saw and experienced during the war almost inevitably resulted in her committing the rest of her life to relieving suffering. She lived by a simple ethos: do what you can for the person in front of you.

