

United Nations International Holocaust Remembrance Day, 27 January 2021

I'm Lisa Silestean, and it is an honour to speak here this afternoon to the distinguished guests already greeted by our MC.

The definition of Child displacement is the complete removal or separation of **children** from their parents and immediate family, or settings in which they have initially been reared.

I am reading this on behalf of my mother... – EILEEN SILESTEAN

I was born in Bialystok, Poland in 1926 (the month and date of birth unknown so my passport states) and named Chaya Sierota. I was placed in a Jewish orphanage at No.7 Chesztekowska Street as a baby. The orphanage housed Jewish, boys and girls with ages ranging from babies up to about 13.

Sadly, I never knew my parents;

My time spent in the orphanage was a happy one. We were well treated.

We all went to a Hebrew School called 'Tarbut' which was situated right next door to a Catholic school. I recall many altercations because being Jewish, we were disliked. We learnt Hebrew, we spoke Polish and Yiddish, which was the main language in the orphanage. I also remember the windows being taped as there was already talk of war.

In early 1935, when I was about 9 years old, the person in charge of the orphanage, came to me to say that a nice couple (Annie and Max Deckston) wanted to bring orphaned Jewish children to New Zealand and they had chosen me as one of them. Well, they may as well have told me I was going to the moon as I had no idea of where New Zealand was. I only knew of Russia on one side of Poland and Germany on the other. At the time it was quite bewildering for me. When I said goodbye, the children presented me with an autograph book with all their names, as well as one from the Hebrew School which I still have to this day.

I was sad to leave the children in the orphanage but as a young child I didn't understand what displacement was and I saw this as an adventure.

In April 1935, I left the orphanage to meet up with seven other children from different towns chosen to travel with me. Of the eight of us, there were 3 girls and 5 boys.

Our chaperones were Reuben and Frieda Wise, and their baby son Michael, who were actually related to the Deckston's.

And so our journey began.

We boarded a train for Warsaw which was rather exciting for me as I had never seen or travelled on a train before. At the Port of Gdansk we boarded the "SS Baltonia" bound for London. My first impressions on boarding the ship were ones of terror as I thought it was a house floating on water. After sailing for 3 days we finally berthed in London where we were met and taken to a Jewish 'Shelter'. This was a stopping place for people arriving from

different parts of Europe en route to other destinations. We couldn't speak English of course but the 10 days we were in London were very exciting.

We boarded the ship the SS "Rotorua" for the next big part of our journey. The trip to New Zealand took 6 weeks. Thanks to a lovely German lady, we managed to communicate, and she was the one that told us the Polish President, had died. We all cried.

Life on board was pretty good and time meant nothing.

On June 12th 1935, we finally sailed into Wellington Harbour. My first impression was rather scary as all I could see were houses perched on enormous hills and I couldn't see paths to get there.

So, our first day began in our new country. Annie and Max Deckston met us at the wharf. They looked rather formidable to me as a child. The first thing we were told was to address the Deckston's as Aunty and Uncle. Almost immediately, Aunty instructed a Mrs Carlisle, to anglicise our names. I became Eileen Deckston.

The home in Rintoul Street, Newtown, was very big. The Deckston's kept a strict Kosher home. We had separate Milk and Meat kitchens.

Uncle took one of the boys, David, and me to Tawa one day. I can remember asking "Uncle, how far to Bialystok". He kept answering not far. I truly believed I was going back home to Poland.

We were enrolled at South Wellington Primary School which was in Rintoul Street, about 6 minutes away from our home. I was put into Standard One. My first day at school was very strange and not being able to speak the language made it even worse.

We settled down and within six months I was able to speak English.

We were not allowed to speak Polish in the home, only English and Yiddish.

Two years passed and then on the 7th April 1937, twelve more children arrived from Poland, 8 girls and 4 boys. There was great excitement and we were looking forward to meeting them as we were now proper Kiwis and spoke good English.

I will never forget how wonderful it was going to the wharf to meet the new arrivals. They were beautifully attired in beige coats with berets to match. I was so excited because Bernie Giel, who had been in my orphanage in Poland, was one of the new arrivals so I was able to get news of everyone. The new arrivals settled in well.

Life in the Deckston Home was good most of the time. We held concerts. David had a beautiful voice and sang Yiddish songs. A Mr Goldblatt from the Jewish community used to come and play the piano. We went to the Synagogue on The Terrace every Saturday. I remember my first time there when we were so warmly greeted by the community, especially on seeing so many children speaking Yiddish.

We had to clean the whole house every morning before leaving for school so we were always late. One day our Headmaster, Mr Eady, announced at assembly 'If the Deckston children come on time to school for a week, they can have half a day off'.

In 1937, tragedy struck. Alec, one of the boys, drowned in a whirlpool during a trip we all went on to Paraparaumu. It was the saddest day of my life. He was only 14 and such a lovely boy.

Despite some of the hardships, life was pretty good as we had each other to play with. We were envied by school friends, especially ones who had no brothers or sisters.

Our biggest shock came when, on September 26th 1938, Erev Rosh Hashanah, Aunty passed away aged 67. It was a terrible time for us. I remember all the children standing around her bedside, as she lay dead, to say goodbye.

Uncle passed away a year later on November 9th 1939. From 1940-1945 the orphanage continued to function with the appointed Trustees from the Jewish Community in charge.

All the children used to get mail from their families in Poland except for me. I used to cry and think why doesn't someone ever write to me.

We were all listening to the wireless one day and heard that Hitler had marched into Poland. This shocked us and we sobbed. Letters stopped arriving after that so none of the children had any news of their families until after the war.

Despite having lost my identity, and the only family I knew, I owe my life to Max and Annie Deckston who saved me from the fate of most of the children I left behind in the orphanage at 7 Chesztekowska Street in Poland, who never survived.

Looking back on my life, I have been truly blessed since, with my own family, my children, grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Speech delivered at the Parliament Reception in the Grand Hall, for UN International Holocaust Remembrance Day, Wellington.