

REVIEW

Two Commemorations at the Holocaust Centre of New Zealand In May and June 2018 Ann Beaglehole

Between 19 April and 16 May 1943, Jews imprisoned in the Warsaw Ghetto fought against the Nazis in what became known as the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. In 1944, the Polish Underground fought for 63 days to liberate Warsaw from Nazi occupation in the Warsaw Uprising. Some of the Jewish fighters from the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising joined the Warsaw Uprising one year later. Both uprisings were commemorated at the Holocaust Centre of New Zealand (HCNZ) recently.

HCNZ marked the 75th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising on 27 May. The event, organized by HCNZ's Rick Sahar, included the showing of two short films: 'To Live with Honour and Die with Honour' and 'There was no hope', produced by the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews.

The second commemoration, of the Warsaw Uprising, was held on 24 June. The event was the outcome of a conversation between Rick Sahar and Victoria University academic Roberto Rabel about his father's experiences in the Warsaw Uprising. The HCNZ and the Embassy of Poland jointly organized the commemoration which attracted many members of the Wellington Polish community and the Polish Association. Several of the over 700 former Polish refugees, who had arrived as orphaned children in 1944, were present.

The Ambassador of Poland (His Excellency Mr Zbigniew Gniatkowski) and the Israeli Ambassador (His Excellency Dr Itzhak Gerberg) attended. The Polish Ambassador opened the commemoration. He paid tribute to the heroes of both uprisings, noting their acts of 'defiance against Nazi ideology'. It was, he said: 'our duty to remember the heroism and martyrdom of the Polish and Jewish people during World War Two.' The Polish Ambassador said that under the German occupation, Jews had faced 'the most tragic fate'. The 'heroic act of armed resistance' by Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto was the first among civilians in occupied Europe. The commemoration, the Polish Ambassador said, was a chance to remember Polish people, such as Irena Sendler, who had rescued Jews, and to say: 'Never again' to hatred and intolerance. In addition to the opportunity to recall 'our joint struggles to fight for freedom and dignity during the dreadful wartime', the commemoration had enabled some members of the Polish community to visit the Holocaust Centre, 'a unique institution telling the history of the Holocaust', for the first time.

The Polish Ambassador was followed by a speech from Emeritus Professor Roberto Rabel of Victoria University of Wellington. Professor Rabel spoke about his father's participation in the Warsaw Uprising. Many decades later his father had received a medal for his bravery during the uprising. After the two main speeches, there were several heart-felt remarks from the floor in which the speakers shared personal memories of the tragic events during the war.

I attended both commemorations and found them moving and worthwhile. I am aware, though, that some people may have thought the commemoration of the

Warsaw Uprising (which, as far as I know, was taking place at HCNZ for the first time) puzzling, or even inappropriate. In 1981-82, I worked as a community worker with the Inter-church Commission on Immigration and Refugee Resettlement to help Polish refugees from the Solidarity uprising settle in New Zealand. In that role, I encountered plenty of disapproving voices in the Jewish community about someone Jewish working with Polish people. 'How can you help them after what they did to us in the war?' Many Jews in the 1980s saw Polish people primarily as perpetrators of atrocities against Jews, not as victims of the Nazis and, in some cases, as rescuers of Jews. It seems to me right that 75 years after the war HCNZ is able to take steps to build relationships with new generations of Polish people.

Facing the facts about history does not happen overnight. A joint commemoration is perhaps controversial still, not least because of recent contentious legislation in Poland ruling it a criminal offence to accuse the Polish state of being responsible, or complicit, in Nazi crimes. A few days ago, the Polish government retreated in part from the earlier legislation, removing the threat of jail from those who attributed the crimes of Nazi Germany to Poles. Anyone who accused the Polish state of Nazi crimes will now be guilty of a civil, rather than a criminal, offence. The Polish government's actions are a concern because there is a need for honest conversation about the fraught events of the past. This is made more difficult to achieve if punitive legislation makes open discussion illegal.

The two commemorations marked heroic acts of resistance in Nazi-occupied Poland during the Second World War. I was struck by the warm atmosphere (helped by shots of vodka and refreshments) at HCNZ on a cold Wellington winter day. It is impressive and heartening that today Jewish and Polish people are, on occasions, able to mark the tragic events of the past together.

Ann Beaglehole is a writer and historian, currently researching for Waitangi Tribunal district inquiries. She has held senior analyst roles in the public service, including Te Puni Kokiri (Ministry of Maori Development) and the Office of Ethnic Affairs.

Her publications include: "A Small Price to Pay" and "Facing the Past" about refugees from Nazism settling in New Zealand; "Far from the Promised Land" about being Jewish in New Zealand; and "Refuge New Zealand", a history of New Zealand's response to refugees and asylum seekers.