

Notes for International Holocaust Remembrance Day 27 January 2023

Ngā mihi nui ki a koutou katoa, ki tēnei wāhi tapu, ki te tangata whenua, Te Ati Awa me Taranaki whānui me ngā manuhiri kua tae mai nei. Tēnā koutou katoa. Shalom. Pozdrowienia dla was wszystkich. Greetings to you all.

I speak to you today in my capacity as a board member of the Holocaust Centre and a Second-Generation Holocaust survivor. Today's theme honours the 80th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. It's entitled "On their Own Terms: Heroism and Sacrifice" and highlights the resistance activities coordinated and orchestrated by youth movements.

I would like to share some of my family's experiences. My grandmother, Tuska was born in Warsaw in 1904. My grandfather, Naum was born a year later. At that time, Poland was not recognised as an independent country. Instead, it was partitioned between Prussia, Austria and Russia with Warsaw being in the Russian part of the country and was ruled by Russian Tsars. During this period, thousands of Jewish people were massacred in frequent pogroms. Jewish people were excluded from attending universities and had no expectation of attaining any qualifications.

After World War 1, all that changed. Poland was recognised as a country and miraculously, the doors were opened to Jewish people attending university and pursuing professional careers. Earlier, my great grandfather established a private school, the Magnus Krynski High School, which had advanced teaching methods based on student enquiry.

In the 1930s, both my grandparents attained legal qualifications from Warsaw University, were admitted to the Polish bar and had commenced promising careers. My father, Tomas Goldwag was born in 1937 in Warsaw. He was two years old when WW2 broke out.

In 1939, they took their summer holidays in a place called Bialystok in Eastern Poland. Around this time, Russia and Germany signed a non-aggression pact which enabled them to partition Eastern Europe including Poland. A week later, Nazi Germany invaded Poland. On 17 September 1939, Josef Stalin ordered the Russian invasion of Poland. The Russian army removed my grandparents and my father “to safety” behind enemy lines, 5,000 kilometres behind enemy lines to an isolated forestry camp near Archangel right up in the Arctic Circle. The conditions at the camp were awful.

Professor Norman Davies of London University suggests that the Soviet terror exceeded that of the Nazis in that half of the two million Polish civilians who were deported there died within a year of their arrest.

My family survived these conditions for 7 years before being repatriated to Poland. The hardships they endured are impossible to describe. The conditions in the camps included:

- A scarcity and monotony of diet. Forced to deal with constant hunger.
- Needing to survive harsh winters required my family to make fuel bricks out of manure and mud without tools.
- Living next to a pond of night soil; i.e. human excrement.
- Constant risk of arbitrary arrest and execution.
- Total absence of any cultural life.

The key to survival was living by your wits and adopting a chameleon-like invisibility...and sheer good fortune, for example my grandparents changed their surname to Godlewski in order to not be identified as Polish.

On one occasion, my father became seriously ill with pneumonia and my grandfather had to carry him 10km through snow on foot to the nearest hospital.

Eventually and incredibly, Naum Goldwag secured a job as an accountant for a chicken farm collective. This was incredible because he was a lawyer and knew nothing about accountancy. But he found a book in English on double entry book-keeping and taught himself. Securing this position meant relocating further south where living conditions were less hostile.

At the end of the war, they were repatriated to Poland. It soon became apparent that communist Poland would not be an easy place in which to live – a relative who was a senior diplomat was recalled and liquidated. My grandparents decided that the time was right to emigrate to Aotearoa New Zealand via Australia.

Other relatives were not so fortunate. My great grandfather and great grandmother lived in the area of Warsaw which became known as the Warsaw ghetto. An area of 3.5km surrounded by 10m walls which contained as many as 450,000 inhabitants – comparable to the entire population of Wellington. Over a period of three years, approximately 100,000 people died, primarily from starvation and epidemic diseases.

One of my grandfather's cousins, Edwarda was active in the Warsaw ghetto resistance movement. She organised false papers for her younger sister, Marysia, and helped her escape the ghetto not long before the uprising in 1943.

This was indicative of the culture of resistance which emerged in response to the universal battle against hunger and disease. The ghetto uprising has been described as heroic and tragic: the ghetto fighters achieved their two basic objectives – to fully participate in the war against Nazi Germany and to shake the conscience of the world by protesting against genocide.

Today is a day to bear witness and remember these atrocities and to celebrate the acts of resistance which have ensured better living conditions for the fortunate few who managed to survive the holocaust.

Family Testimony of John Goddard

**For the United Nations International Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony
at Mākara Cemetery**

27 January 2023