

Vera Krukziener – Speech, UN International Holocaust Remembrance Day 2022
Auckland War Memorial Museum

Honoured Holocaust survivors and members of their families;
Minister for Diversity, Inclusion and Ethnic Communities, Priyanca Radhakrishnan
Members of Parliament David Seymour and
Melissa Lee;
Mayor of Auckland Phil Goff;
Major General John Boswell, the Chief of Army;
Members of the Diplomatic Corps;
Members of the New Zealand Order of Merit;
Interfaith leaders;
Distinguished guests, mokopuna

My name is Vera Krukziener and I was born in Budapest, Hungary in 1938. I was six-years-old in 1944 when German forces entered and occupied my hometown.

Today I'd like to tell you about the people in my life whose acts of bravery and resistance against the Nazis saved my life. From 1940 to 1944 my father was called to serve for two or three months every year in labour camps, as all other Jewish men over the age of 30 were. Many of these men were never seen again. From 1943 my mother didn't know where he was. I can still remember the feeling.

In the autumn of 1944 my mother and I were ordered to move out of our apartment and to shift into a C house for Jews only. By that time if you were Jewish, you had to wear a yellow star. It was a license for anyone to have permission to abuse us.

One day we were ordered to go from Buda to Pest, carrying all our belongings. We finally arrived at the synagogue at Dohany Street. We spent the night on the floor. The next morning we were herded onto a train that ordinarily transported cattle. This time it was Jewish people. We were like animals, except instead of two or three cattle, there were 50 or 60 of us. We could hardly breathe.

We were taken past a brick factory to the field that surrounded it. There was a lot of commotion. Soldiers stood there with machine guns. Hundreds of people were arriving as the Gestapo started to set up gates to segregate us. My mother often wore a brown scarf with dots like most women from the villages and her features and dark blonde hair didn't betray the fact she was Jewish.

My mother put on her scarf and took my hand. She said: "We're going to walk out of here." I said: "What if they shoot us?" My mother said: "It's a better fate than if we stay. Don't act suspiciously. Walk quietly and relaxed." Walking slowly we passed the soldiers with machine guns and we simply walked out. How on earth they didn't stop us is something that I'll never understand.

Thanks to my mother we left that fate behind us. Then we were on the street and we looked at each other. We had nowhere to go. My mother contacted a distant relative who sent us to a nunnery to look after us. They gave us new names. My name was Maria. The Camelite nuns would wake us in the middle of the night and ask my name and told me to recite the Lord's Prayer. For a long time, I was more familiar with Catholic prayers than the Jewish ones.

In the meantime my father was on a train on his way from a work camp to one of the extermination camps. He jumped off the train and escaped. Through my mother's relative, he found us at the nunnery. He ordered us to leave the nunnery immediately, against my mother's wishes. He felt that something terrible was going to happen. We left that afternoon and learnt later that that night bombs flattened the nunnery. There were no survivors.

My father then took us to a friend who wasn't Jewish. We stayed for one night. The next morning he said to my father that he couldn't sacrifice his own family. He knew they would all be shot if they were caught hiding Jews. So we were back on the street again and went back to my mother's relative. This time we were sent to a safe house organised by Raoul Wallenberg. That was our home until the Russians liberated Hungary in February 1945.

There are a few events which stand out while we were in hiding in the Raoul Wallenberg safe house. Don't forget, I wasn't even seven years old. One was when my mother decided to bake bread. So it was her job to get the flour. When she went out, she was shot. When she came back to the safe house, she had a huge hole in her coat that would have killed her if it wasn't for the bag of flour in her coat that stopped the bullet.

One afternoon a horse died in front of our safe house. I didn't know until that night that horse meat is sweet.

The night before we were liberated, an angry SS officer walked into the safe house and accused my father of killing a German officer. He was sure the man responsible was my father. My father pointed out it had been raining for days and because his shoe soles were dry, it couldn't be him. The officer was satisfied and left.

My parents and I remained in Budapest after the war but life under the Russians was hard. Communism forbade Jewish people from practising their religion and did little to quell rampant Antisemitism which still existed in Hungary. In 1956, we snuck across the border to Austria and were eventually resettled in Australia by a Jewish organization called the Joint.

I met my late husband Bram in Melbourne. He was a Dutch Holocaust survivor who had spent the war in hiding with his parents and brothers in Holland. I followed him to Auckland and my parents later joined us. In Auckland we felt safe to be Jewish. Bram and I made a wonderful new life and had our two children Andrew and Lisa and our gorgeous grandchildren. Louis, Axel, Sofia, and Solly. I am so thankful to New Zealand for the new start we were given.

I never got a chance to personally thank Raoul Wallenberg but his fearless actions saved not only my parents and me, but thousands of other Jewish Hungarians. Raoul Wallenberg was one of the courageous people whose resistance saved my life. He and the nuns resisted the Nazis, knowing full well the risks they were taking to save Jewish people. And they paid for it with their lives.

My parents, like Raoul Wallenberg and the Carmelite nuns, refused to accept the Nazis' plans to exterminate the Jews. Both my parents intuitively knew the grave danger we faced from early on in the war. They had the ability to make quick, practical decisions that had a profound impact. The resistance of my parents, and that of Raoul Wallenberg and the Carmelite nuns, continues to amaze me to this day and I will be forever grateful for their actions.



Vera with her mother. Photo supplied.