

Awarding Righteous Among Nations to the Walczynski family

Kielce President Lubawski, Israeli Ambassador Rav-Ner, Mr. Bogdan Białek, chairman of the Jan Karski Society, the Walczynski family, members of the clergy, honored guests and friends,

My name is Manny Bekier. I bear a painful legacy. Much of the pain has been lifted today, as I now have fulfilled the wishes of my late father, Judka Bekerman, in seeing that Jozef and Marianna Walczynski, are acknowledged, for saving the lives of 5 Jews, one of whom was my father.

My father was always grateful to Josef and his wife, and wanted them to be recognized for their act of courage. In the 1960's my father took initial steps to see that the Walczynskis be recognized as "Righteous Among Nations". Jozef was not particularly interested in pursuing this public recognition. Perhaps, the time was not right for this kind of recognition in Poland. It seems to me, that saving Jewish lives, was not something one wished to publicly acknowledge. The hatred of Jews was still prevalent in Poland.

The medal of the Righteous bears the saying found in the Talmud: "Whosoever saves a single life, saves an entire universe". As a representative, of the sole surviving branch, of a once large family who was brutally murdered, this saying resonates with significance. The meaning of this saying can be seen right here.

Although my brother and his family couldn't be here, my wife Randy, my 2 daughters, Dayle and Julie, along with my son-in-law, Jim, and my first grandchild, Madeleine, are with me today. Here we are, four generations later, who would not be here today, had it not been for the moral courage of Jozef and Marianna Walczynski. We have traveled from our homes in the U.S. to be here with you today, for the honoring of Jozef and Marianna Walczynski, and to meet their family, also several generations.

Jozef and his wife, were fully conscious of the dangers facing them and their family, not only from the Germans, but also from betrayers within the local population. Yet, they accepted these risks. They knowingly, had to sacrifice their normal lives and courageously went against the accepted norms of the society in which they lived. In fear of their neighbors and friends, they accepted a life ruled by, dread of denunciation and capture.

In this world of theirs, in which there was a total moral collapse, there were a small minority of Poles who mustered extraordinary courage to uphold human values, and their acts of heroism must be told. This was extraordinary, because Jozef and Marianna, stood in stark contrast to the mainstream of indifference and hostility that prevailed, not only in Kielce, but throughout most of Europe. It should be noted that, 98% of all the Jews of Kielce, were murdered. Only by cooperation, or at best, indifference, by the local population, could German efficiency be so remarkably high.

My parents never shared with me their experiences under Nazi occupation. That terrible part of their lives was kept hidden. It was many years later, after my father died, that I learned that my father had kept in touch with Jozef Walczynski, and had regularly, send packages to him and his family. It took me close to 20 years to find the Walczynski family.

From documentation and interviews with other survivors, I was able to learn about my father's former family and how he was saved. My father had a wife, and a 4 year old son, 2 brothers and 7 sisters, parents, grandparents and many cousins. Except for one brother who emigrated to Brazil, all were deported to Treblinka, between August 22 -24, 1942. They were all murdered, with the exception of my father's brother, David, who escaped from Treblinka, only to be murdered, by Poles in Kielce, shortly after liberation.

Upon escaping Treblinka, David made his way to the camp in Kielce, where my father was held prisoner. Knowing what happened to our family, and the fate that awaited them, my father, his brother and three other Jews planned their escape on March 23, 1943. Armed with three revolvers, they navigated hostile territory and sought out Jozef Walczynski, whom my father knew before the German occupation. Josef and my father both worked together in my grandfather's leather tannery, in Bialogon. Jozef Walczynski knew the risks, yet he did not hesitate to take these men in, risking his life, and that of his family as well.

My father in a sworn affidavit stated: "Jozef shared with us, the last bite of bread without any payment".

They were hid by the Walczynski family in their attic, and in their basement, till Jan 12, 1945.

In a poem by Hanna Senesh, she writes:

*There are stars whose radiance is visible on earth,
though they have long been extinct.
There are people whose brilliance continues to light the world, though they are no longer among
the living.
These lights are particularly bright, when the night is dark.
They light the way for mankind.*

Jozef and Marianna Walczynski were ordinary human beings, and it is precisely THEIR humanity that touches us, and should serve as a model. They were a light, when the night was most dark. It is the actions of such people, that give us hope, and light the way for mankind.

The Righteous Among the Nations teaches us that every person can make a difference. I would like to quote Eli Wiesel, who said:

"we must know these good people who helped Jews during the Holocaust. We must learn from them, and in gratitude and hope, we must remember them."

We will always remember, Jozef and Marianna Walczynski.