

Behind The Headlines Of Bravery, Humanity And Survival

By Susan Birnbaum

NEW YORK (JTA) — It was an evening that will long be remembered. It was an evening of recalling memories of the Holocaust, of bravery, of humanity and of survival. It all happened at the David Yellin Award Dinner last month.

A Jewish family and their friends, all Holocaust survivors, along with a Polish Christian couple that saved them from certain death at the hands of the Nazis, participated along with 300 people in the award ceremony.

The ceremony, which was originally planned to honor Zahava and Robert Burack for their long-time contributions to the David Yellin Teachers College in Jerusalem, was enlarged in scope to include a special ceremony for the Polish couple. The story behind the story of the ceremonies took place over 40 years ago.

Polish Couple Hid Jews

Three Jewish sisters -- Miriam, Sarah and Goldzia Radca, whose present married names are Miriam Oginski, Sarah Weiner and Zahava Burack -- were hidden during World War II under the floorboards of the house owned by the Polish couple, Stephania and Jozef Macugowski.

For saving the three sisters, along with their parents, a cousin and unrelated people, the Macugowskis were presented at the award dinner with Yad Vashem's designation of "Righteous Among the Nations." The honor was bestowed upon them by the Israel Consul General in New York, Moshe Yegar.

Zahava was the lone family member to immigrate to Palestine after the war. She remained there for 12 years, serving in the Haganah and the Israel Defense Force. Afterwards, she came to New York to rejoin her family and devoted her life to Jewish and Israeli causes.

Another sister, Rita Nussbaum, was separated from her family when they escaped from the line of Jewish citizens of the town of Nowy Korczyn, near Cracow, who were being transported to Bergen-Belsen. She was imprisoned in the concentration camp, where she escaped death several times, and was a slave laborer in a munitions factory. After the war she came to the United States with her family.

Nussbaum was present at the award dinner, along with a cousin, Sarah Back, now a resident of Petak Tikvah, Israel, and a man not related to

them, Alan Kupfer of Chicago. The two of them and the three sisters had shared the space under the floorboards, an area that was 5 feet 7 inches wide and 18 inches high. At one time or another, nine people shared what was a living grave at one time.

Days Turn Into Years Of Hiding

The Macugowskis were long-time friends of the sisters' parents, Liepke and Gitl Radca. In April 1942, just before the Jews were rounded up for transport to Bergen-Belsen, Jozef Macugowski told Liepke, "If I can ever do anything to help you, let me know."

The night of the round-up, Liepke told his family to stay together until he gave a signal, when they would simply walk off the line and follow him. They did this when they got to the street where the Macugowskis were living, and, unnoticed by the Nazi guards, went to the Christian couple's house.

The Radcas thought they would have to be hidden for a night or two. But the nights turned into weeks and the weeks to two-and-a-half years, hidden under the floorboards, lying silently and cramped on their sides or hands or knees. The Polish couple brought them bread and water two or three times a week, and removed the pail they used in lieu of a toilet. Miriam, who was five years old when they went into hiding, said at the award dinner, "When one turned on his side, the others would have to do the same."

Jozef Macugowski went to great lengths and distances to help the Jewish family, traveling to far away villages to get bread for them so as not to arouse suspicion for the increased amounts his family seemed to need. The Radcas, growing more despondent as they lay under the floorboards in terror and discomfort, sometimes begged the Macugowskis to give them poison "to end our torture," said Zahava. But the Polish couple told me, "No, hold on. As long as we are alive, we are going to keep you alive."

The Situation Worsens

The situation went from treacherous to deadly

when, early in 1945, the German High Command decided to make the Macugowskis' house their headquarters and ordered the family out of their own home. Jozef Macugowski refused to abandon his Jewish friends. He convinced the Germans to allow him to stay on as caretaker.

They agreed, and then, once a week, Jozef miraculously was able to sneak food and water to them and attend to them the best he could. The family lay there petrified as the sound of German footsteps and voices reverberated above them.

At one point, the German officers said they were searching for one last Jewish family rumored to be hidden somewhere in the town. But soon afterward they stopped their search because they heard that the Radca family had drowned, their bodies found in the Wista River -- a rumor that Jozef Macugowski himself had spread from another town.

One night, after the town was liberated by the Red Army in 1945, Jozef led the family out of the house and took them to a town miles away where no one knew them. There, he made them promise they would never tell anyone their story, never reveal their benefactors.

Some time after the war, the Radca family lost tract of the Polish couple but relocated them again last September. Last month, the Buracks, with the help of the David Yellin College, brought the elderly Macugowskis to New York, where the sisters adopted them as their parents and publicly honored them for their extraordinary deeds.

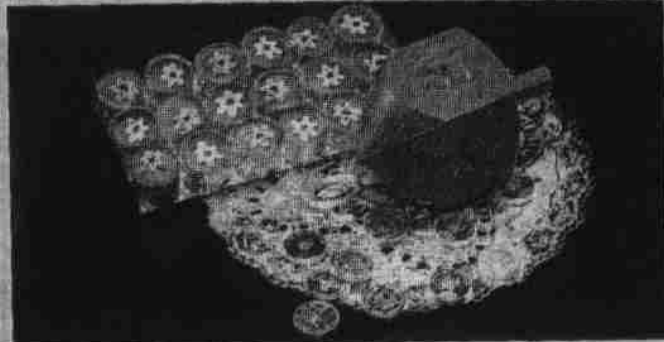
Honored For Bravery and Dedication

Yegar, speaking on behalf of the State of Israel, told the guests at the award dinner that he had heard many, many stories about Righteous Gentiles helping Jews during the war, but that "Never have I heard such a story as this."

Yegar said that in recognizing the

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