

Son of Holocaust Survivor Recalls Courage & Compassion of Polish Catholic

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Christians, Jews and those of other faiths joined together to remember those who died in the Holocaust

Well-known Sydney barrister, Irving Wallach paid tribute to the memory and courage of Polish grandmother, Maria Jalowiec who saved the life of his mother, Rivka during the World War II Holocaust and the mass slaughter of millions of Jewish men, women and children in Nazi death camps.

At the 22nd Sho'ah Memorial Service organised each year by the NSW Council of Christians and Jews and held in the Crypt of St Mary's Cathedral, Irving Wallach was keynote speaker.

For the Catholics, Anglican choir, members of the Jewish community and those of other faiths who attended the Memorial Service, it was a moving time to remember those who died in the Holocaust.

The story of Maria Jalowiec who was responsible for his mother's survival is remarkable. Despite being aware of the risk to her own and her family's lives for sheltering two Jewish women, she fed and hid Rivka and her friend Genka for two years from 1942 to 1944.

Secreting them in the roof of her barn, Maria showed not only courage and compassion but unlike many during those terrible years, she did all she could to ensure the daughter of her neighbours was not taken by the Nazis to die in one of Hitler's notorious death camps.

Irving Wallach's grandparents Hersh and Shaindl Reiss and their six children were neighbours of Maria's but when the Nazis invaded, as happened to most Jews in Poland, the Reiss family were rounded up and forced onto a truck and driven away from their home and the village where they lived. Rivka somehow managed to escape by jumping from the back of the moving vehicle. Hiding out in the forest with a group of Jews, the young woman endured two bitterly cold Polish winters, before breaking her leg on the ice and being forced to seek help. This was when she and her friend Genka returned to the village where they had grown up and were immediately given help, food and shelter by Maria who then hid them in the roof of her barn.

Sydney barrister Irving Wallach told the story of his mother and her survival during the World War II Holocaust

Two years ago, Irving Wallach and his wife Ronni Kahn made a journey to Poland where they not only visited Opacionka, the village of his late mother, but where they met with Maria's grandson, Tadeusz Jalowiec who was eight years old and living with his grandmother during the time Rivka and Genka were hidden in Maria's barn.



Now in his 70s, Tadeusz told Irving and his wife how he remembered noises coming from the barn roof and being told by his grandmother it was "just cats." He also recalled how Maria had given him good food to take to the barn, instructing him to leave it on the floor for the cattle. He found this puzzling but nevertheless obeyed and also faithfully followed her instructions to "never to look upwards towards the roof."

One day, catching sight of the feet of two women hiding in the straw, the boy realised they must be Jews hiding from the Germans but despite his age, and understanding at last why food was regularly left on the floor of the barn, he never breathed a word of what he had seen, not even to his grandmother.

There were close shaves during this time including a period when German soldiers camped at the farm and demanded food from Maria, while the two women she was hiding huddled together in the roof no more than five metres away. Finally in 1944 when the Soviet Red Army entered Poland and the Germans evacuated the village, Maria arranged for a new hiding place for Rivka and Genka. Aware a Catholic priest was hiding 14 Jews in a church at nearby Lubcza, Maria asked the cleric if he would take the two women she had been hiding as well. He smiled and nodded saying; "I may as well be shot for 16 Jews as for 14!"

At the war's end, Rivka discovered only she, her brother Josef and her sister Renia had survived. Her parents and three other siblings had all died in the camps. Sent to a displaced persons camp near Milan, Irving Wallach says this is where Rivka met his father, Jakob. They fell in love, married and immigrated to Australia where Irving and his sister Sabina were born. But Rivka never forgot her saviour and as a child Irving Wallach remembered how he had helped her pack large parcels full of clothing along with a tin of coffee and American dollars to send to "someone in Poland."

Irving's mother died in 1970 after a series of strokes and Maria Jalowiec died nine years later, aged 92. But their story lives on and was a remarkable and powerful account of courage, compassion and caring at this year's Sho'ah Memorial Service.



Sr Giovanni Farquer RSJ was one of the narrators at this year's Sho'ah Memorial Service

What began as a small interfaith service at Rookwood Cemetery in 1991, initiated by the late Sister Lenore Sharry of the Sisters of Our Lady of Sion, as a tribute to those who lost their lives in Nazi concentration camps has become an important annual tradition. Moved to the Crypt at St Mary's Cathedral in 1992 where the service has been held ever

since, the commemoration not only remembers those who lost their lives during the Holocaust but hopes to ensure that such horrors can never happen again.

Taking part in this year's service as some of the narrators for the commemoration service were Sister Giovanni Farquer, Executive Director of the Archdiocese of Sydney's Commission for Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations and Sister Marianne Dacy, founder and senior archivist of the Australian Judaica Archives at the University of Sydney's Fisher Library. Leading musician, David Angell performed a moving viola solo and Rabbi Jeffrey Cohen lead those present in the Mourners' Kaddish.