

WW2 commemoration, Gąbin POLAND Wednesday, 4 September 2019

On 1 September several members of the Gombin Society were invited to attend events in the town to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the Nazi invasion of Poland that sparked the outbreak of the Second World War. I was asked to deliver a short speech on behalf of the Society. I started with some general comments, then told the story of how my mother's cousin, Wiejsza Wandt, survived the War.

Speech for WW2 commemoration, Gąbin 1 Sep 2019

On behalf of the descendants of the Jews of Gąbin, my friends and I would like to thank you for including us in this commemoration.

Today we join together with you in honouring the memory of all those Poles, both military and civilian, of all religions, who risked their lives, and in many, many cases died, in defence of all the citizens of Poland.



Jews lived in Gąbin for several hundred years. There was already a substantial community by the beginning of the 18th Century - for the Great Wooden Synagogue was built in 1710. For over 100 years, up until the 1920s, Jews constituted half the population of the town. Our ancestors lived, laughed and loved here, they studied, worked and played here. They died and were buried here.

My own grandfather was born here in Gąbin, in 1892. Marlene's mother was born here in 1917. Vicky's grandfather was born here in 1890, Scott's grandmother in 1905.

1 September 1939 marks a fateful day in the lives of all of us here. In particular, for the Jews of Gąbin, it was a day of no return. Very few of the Jews who were in the town on that day survived to see the end of the War.

My friends and I are very conscious that we are the lucky ones. We are only alive today because our parents and grandparents emigrated before the outbreak of the War. Almost all of our aunts, uncles and cousins who stayed here were killed, including at least 25 members of my mother's family.

The young Jewish men were sent to the forced labour camp at Konin, and were later killed there. All the others - over 2000 men, women and children - were sent to the extermination camp at Chelmno nad Nerem, where they were gassed to death within hours. Only a handful escaped this fate.

Of course, it was not only the Jews that suffered the Nazi onslaught. The three great prayer houses of Gąbin were all destroyed - the Synagogue was burnt down, and the Catholic and Evangelical Churches were destroyed by bombing. We would like today to pay a special tribute to those people who risked their own lives to help Jews in danger during the War. They were truly heroes. I will speak of just one such incident, there were many more.

So let me tell you about my mother's cousin Wiejsza Wandt. It was 1941 or 42, she was 8 years old. She was shot in the street, and badly wounded. We presume she was shot by German soldiers. One of the soldiers carried her home. He told her mother that if she wanted her child to survive, she would need to leave the Ghetto. "Give me a name and address, and I will take her there", he said. Wiejsza's mother gave him the name of a non-Jewish friend. The German soldier put the girl in a bag so no-one would see her, and carried her there. A daughter of this family, about the same age as Wiejsza, had recently died.

At great personal risk to themselves, this family took the little Jewish girl in as their own child, and gave her their daughter's identity. Wiejsza became Bronislawa. She survived the War. Her mother did not. We give our heartfelt thanks to all those who resisted the German occupation, in whatever way they could. Some of their efforts succeeded, some sadly did not. They were all heroes.

We would like to finish with a poem by Rajzel Zychlinski, who was born in Gąbin in 1910. She wrote her poems in Yiddish, the language spoken by the Jews of Poland. Today Scott, who is a descendant of the Zychlinsky family, will read the poem in English, and Wojtek will follow with the Polish translation. [*poem to be added*]

Thank you.

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