**Walking on heroes’ ground in Poland**

By Maxine Dovere/JNS.org

WARSAW—“Zegota,” the official unit of the Polish Underground Army tasked with helping Jews in German-occupied Poland from 1942-1945, was commemorated on the occasion of its 70th anniversary earlier this month in Warsaw.

Codename for the Polish Council to Aid Jews, Zegota was honored for its dedication to the protection of the Jewish population mainly in Warsaw and Krakow. Ninety-one-year-old Wladyslaw Bartoszewski, one of its founders, received the honor on behalf of his comrades at a momentous event in the auditorium of the Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk’s Office in Warsaw.

Honoring the “Righteous among the Nations”—one of the highest honors bestowed by the Israeli government, given to non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust—raises a plethora of emotions, for both the benefactor and the beneficiary. Walking on the streets where such heroes stepped in Warsaw itself, those emotions are fully realized.

The Righteous among the Nations title has been awarded since 1965. Most of those recognized have been Poles. At the Dec. 4 ceremony in which Zegota was honored, Israel’s ambassador to Poland, H. E. Zvi Rav-Ner, directly addressed the unit’s co-founder, Bartoszewski.

“So many people, so many different worlds saved,” the ambassador said, calling the group’s activities “a holy mission,” one to which Israel “will continue to pay tribute.”

“We have to ask who would do that,” Rav-Ner said of the Zegota unit’s actions. “Would I be able to take the risk for myself, my family or my neighbor?”

The ambassador emphasized that Poland was the only country where the penalty for those who supported or saved Jews was death. The diplomat noted that Zegota was a government organization—an organization of individuals who made the decision to be humane to the other. Members of the unit “made a most important and difficult decision: to save someone else, even people they did not know,” Rav-Ner said.

“This is a decision made by a human being, a representative of mankind,” he said. “It is our holy mission in Israel—a fundamental thing to remember—and important not only for the Jews but for Poland and the Poles, and people globally. The main message to be communicated from here is that as long as there is such an organization such as this, as long as there are people like this—all just ordinary people—as long as we will have such people, we might continue to hope in the most difficult and challenging situations.”

Bartoszewski is the Secretary of State for International Dialogue in the Chancellery of the Chairman of Ministers Council. At the beginning of World War II, he was interred in the Auschwitz concentration camp, and remained there as a political prisoner for almost a year. As the only living co-founder of Zegota, he accepted the award and vowed that he is “determined to assure that what happened is remembered by the younger generation.” In 1963, he journeyed to Israel with a wartime compatriot, Maria Kann, to plant a tree along the Avenue of the Righteous Among the Nations at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem.

“This was a tree not for ourselves but for the concept of Zegota,” Bartoszewski said.

“Some,” recalled the elderly veteran, “were simple fighters for freedom, amateurs, very young people who had only one single program: humanity.”

Bartoszewski, who was a university professor, delivered a forceful and vigorous address, even amid his 90-plus years.

“I was lucky to live to see what I have seen,” he said. “What is extraordinary is the State of Israel. No other state in the world would honor the aid provided to those entitled to hold Israeli citizenship. No other state would give honorary citizenship, as awarded by Israel’s 87th resolution of the Knesset. No other country has paid tribute to the noble deeds of Poles—not only those involved in Zegota; more than 7,000 others have received the title of ‘righteous.’”

“I have great pride and respect for the bravery and courage of the State of Israel… great satisfaction that young people can recall these wonderful things,” said Bartoszewski.  “In the unique case of Zegota, we forgot about all internal divisions… I recall the years when people respected each other regardless of their ideology. Only the idea of who is from my homeland and who is a human being were important.

“He who saves a single life,” quoted the professor from the Mishnah, “saves the whole world—this is the significance of the moral order of the whole world.”

The oresentation of a short, intense film on the history of Polish Jews at the ceremony noted that occupied Poland had about 400 ghettos. Once transports started, and information about the fate awaiting Jews at the end of their journey became known, escapes intensified. Seventy years ago, a coalitions of activists formed Zegota. They existed in an atmosphere of terror, always fearful of blackmailers and spies.

During this afternoon in Warsaw, an additional group of Righteous among the Nations was recognized. Several families had traveled from Israel to honor the individuals or their descendants who had been their saviors. Helena Godlewska’s honor was received by her son, Leon Godlewski; the award to Micah and Maria Golba, who saved the parents of Rami Safri and Nechama Lind, was received by their grandson Stefan Spala; Liliana Wierzbinska received the honor bestowed on her parents, Antoni and Leokadia Jastrzab; Stanisalwa Olewnik’s award was received by Jan Olewnik, Mayor of Grodzisk Mazowiecki; Aniela Woronieckia and Roza Chimielewski’s awards were received by five of their nephews, Adam, Gustaw, Juliusz, Tytus, and Zynmunt Czartoryski.

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