

Yom Ha'atzmaut 2010 – Sydney NSWJBD

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In 1945 when my grandfather walked out from the concentration camp, he discovered that most of his family, including his wife and 3 year old son had been murdered by the Nazis in the most horrible place on earth, Auschwitz.

I have always wanted to ask my grandfather what gave him the determination to survive. What gives a man who was in hell, the strength to carry on with his life and to open a new chapter? But I can never ask him this, because my grandfather died when I was still a small child.

However, these questions have been in my head for years, especially when I visited in those places in Poland where my grandfather and his family were.

Places with no smile, with no laughter, with no hope...

A few years ago I found a quote by Primo Levi that helped me understand my grandfather better.

Levy describes his rescuer, Lorenzo Perone by writing: "I believe that it was really due to Lorenzo that I am alive today; and not so much for his material aid, as for his having constantly remind me by his presence, that there still existed a just world outside our own, something and someone still pure and whole, for which it was worth surviving."

Ladies and gentleman, tonight, when we are celebrating the anniversary of the state of Israel, a state that rose from the ashes of the Nazi concentration camp of Auschwitz to be a leading democratic state, it is my honor to introduce Vivienne Ingram and her brother Christopher. Tonight we will acknowledge their late mother, Mrs Irena Szumska-Ingram for her compassion, bravery and her choice to obey nothing but her humanity, by honoring her memory with the prestige award of "The Righteous among the Nations".

As a young woman, Irena worked at an office in Taranpol, Poland. Bernard Hellreich, a Jewish GP, had finished his medical studies in Bologna Italy in 1937 and relocated to the same city. The pair met after Irena suffered a fainting spell at work, and Bernard was called to tend to her.

Taranpol was occupied by the Soviet Army in 1939 under the Ribantropp Molotov agreement, and then recaptured by the Germans. Soon after, a ghetto was built by the Nazis, and the deportations of the Jewish population began. However, with the help of Irena, who had the blessing of her mother Anya, Bernard was able to escape the ghetto walls, and she housed him in secret in the 2 room apartment she shared with her mother and sister. After the first round of deportations ceased, he returned to the ghetto, only to be sent to Hluboczek labour camp to work as a Doctor.

When his life was threatened in the camp, Irena came to his rescue once more, finding him refuge with Marian Golbiovski, a mutual friend from university, in Nowy Sasz, not far from Taranpol. She would visit him often, and their friendship grew stronger. However, when the threat of discovery became too great, Irena and Marian found a new hiding place for Bernard in the village of Jaslo, in another friend's house.

Working as a medical student under a fake ID, procured by his friends, Bernard lived in Jaslo with Irena's help. Unlike many other Holocaust stories, this one has a unique and hopeful end. When Jaslo was liberated by the Red Cross, Bernard returned to work there as a Doctor, and finally married the woman who saved his life, and he and Irena immigrated to Australia in 1948, raising their two children, Vivienne and Christopher in Newcastle, where Bernard worked as a GP.

In his powerful testimony, he recounted how Irena risked her life for him, as the pair shared everything they had – food clothing and money. There was never any financial or formal agreement, and Bernard said the contribution of Irena to his survival, both emotional and physical was invaluable. Whatever her reason, he testified, her acts of bravery and selflessness was never hesitant, and from the day the war began until it ended, she endangered her life for him daily. In 1989, his friend Marian Golbiovski was officially recognized as Righteous Among the Nations for his efforts to save Bernard's life, and Bernard and his daughter, Vivienne traveled to Israel to participate in the award ceremony.

In his testimony, Bernard discusses his reasons for nominating his wife so long after his friend, Marian Golbiovski. When she was alive, he said, she refused him permission. Irena passed away

in 2003, and Bernard nominated her for as Righteous Among the Nations in 2006. 5 days prior to his passing in 2008, he signed his testimony, so that Irena would finally be awarded.

It is with regret that we cannot present the award in his presence this evening, but we have the honor to have here tonight with us, Irena and Bernard's family, Vivienne and Christopher Ingram to receive the award.

One of the principal duties of Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust Museum, is to convey the gratitude of the State of Israel and the Jewish people to those non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. This mission was defined by the law establishing Yad Vashem, and in 1963 the Remembrance Authority embarked upon a worldwide project to grant the title of Righteous among the Nations to the few who helped Jews in the darkest time in their history. Those recognized, receive a medal and a certificate of honor and their names are commemorated on the Mount of Remembrance in Jerusalem.

I now wish to invite, The Honorable Kristina Keneally, Premier of New South Wales, to present the medal, Ambassador Yuval Rotem to present the certificate and Robin Margo, President of the New South Wales Jewish Board of Deputies to represent the Jewish community.

In his self-published autobiography, *Unfinished Symphony*, Bernard Ingram described this woman who saved his life.

"Irena was a person of exceptional beauty and courage, of fascinating personality. Defying the odds, she decided to swim against the strong current of Nazi hatred and the unfriendly indifference of the democratic world. Without her, I would have been destroyed, crushed, forgotten – another abstract, anonymous addition to the list of millions of victims of the Holocaust. She gave me life. My infallible, uncompromising, determined war leader – Irena, my wife and companion."

Ladies and Gentleman please welcome to the stage tonight, Vivienne and Christopher, to accept the award on behalf of their late mother, Irena Szumska-Ingram, a woman who showed great courage in choosing the path of righteousness and morality.