

The Warsaw Uprising 75 years on: A personal perspective

**Address by Emeritus Professor Roberto Rabel, Victoria University of Wellington
on the occasion of the 75th Anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising**

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I am honoured to be here speaking at this commemoration of the 75th anniversary of beginning of Warsaw Uprising—the first such event anywhere in world today, thanks to the international dateline.

I am especially honoured to be speaking alongside His Excellency Zbigniew Gniatkowski, an ambassador who is not only an exemplary exponent of public diplomacy but who recognises the importance of history and remembrance.

The Ambassador has painted the big picture of the Uprising in all its grimness. It is sometimes difficult to comprehend in human terms the scale of the bloodshed and war crimes committed during the Uprising. It turned Warsaw into one of most horrible of World War II's many bloodlands of East and Central Europe—one where at least 170,000 Poles were killed in the space of two months. As the Ambassador noted, 20,000 civilians were killed in one day alone—a figure higher than the death toll for New Zealand in either of the world wars. It is difficult to get a sense of individual stories in a charnel house where so many Poles were killed and over half a million displaced from a city reduced to rubble by October 1944.

With that challenge in mind, I want to quote the conclusion of Timothy Snyder's *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*: "The Nazi and Soviet regimes turned people into numbers, some of which we can only estimate, some of which we can reconstruct with fair precision. It is for us as scholars to seek these numbers and to put them into perspective. It is for us as humanists to turn the numbers back into people. If we cannot do that, then Hitler and Stalin have shaped not only our world, but our humanity."

For that reason, I would like to offer a personal perspective as the son of one of the few veterans of the Uprising, who not only survived but made the long and improbable journey from Warsaw to Wellington after the war. Alongside a few words about my father, Jerzy (Jurek) Rabel, and his Uprising Story, I will conclude with a more universal perspective on what we might take away from the commemoration of this enduringly tragic event 75 years on.

I was moved by the Ambassador's reference to Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński, the brilliant young Polish poet whose life was cut short like too many of his contemporaries in Warsaw's blood-soaked streets in August 1944. Baczyński was only six months younger than my father, who was born in Warsaw in 1920. So, they grew up in the same city as contemporaries. They could just as easily have died as contemporaries, but my father was more fortunate.

Unlike Baczyński, my father did not have a poetic bone in his body. But, like Baczyński, he had hopes and dreams as a young man that would be irrevocably transformed by the nightmare of World War II.

My father had an ordinary childhood and adolescence in Warsaw in the 1920s and 1930s. He was a good student and a very strong swimmer, who regularly swam from one side of the Vistula to the other. He planned to go to university to study mathematics.

The city he grew up in (the "Paris of the East") was a sophisticated, culturally vibrant metropolis of over a million people, with more than 300,000 Jews—making it probably the second largest Jewish city in the world at the time after New York city. My father loved that city.

But in 1939, everything changed for him and for his beloved Warsaw.

The Rabel family home was on the front line when the German forces reached Warsaw in late 1939. The Germans arrested my father and took him to Łomża. He was then being transported to Germany to a labour camp but escaped and made his way back to Warsaw. He secretly joined the underground Polish Home Army (the Armia Krajowa or AK). He learned of the plans for the Uprising just a few days before 1 August.

So, at about this time today, on 1 August 1944, 75 years ago, my father would have been waking up in the knowledge that Uprising was scheduled to begin later that day.

He was in a section of the AK that was meant to stay hidden until the Uprising was successful. At first, that appeared to be the case, so he and group of fighters set off to join the headquarters of General Bor Komoroski. He and a young woman were separated from the rest of their group during the fighting and were the only ones from their group to make it to the headquarters. Once there, they were assigned to the ‘Sewer Company’, a far cry from Baczyński’s more glamorously named Parasol Battalion. My father joined that company with the young woman whom he had met at the beginning of the Uprising. His code name or pseudonym was Jur and hers was Silvia. My father only learned her true name two weeks before the Uprising ended. Silvia was wounded but survived the war.

I don’t have many details of my father’s experiences during the Uprising. He did tell me that he carried a pistol, which he used once or twice when accosted by Germans at night after coming out of the sewers. In one incident, my father had to go back under fire to retrieve weapons left behind by his detachment, for which he was subsequently awarded a *Virtuti Militari* for bravery. His file in the Rising Museum has details of this decoration as well as other medals.

After the Uprising, my father was being taken to a POW camp, but he escaped. He briefly returned to Warsaw but advisedly did not stay—thus avoiding the sad fate of so many other Uprising veterans at the hands of the post-war Communist regime.

My father eventually made it to New Zealand in 1950 as a displaced person on the *Hellenic Prince*. He met my mother, who was a displaced person from the Italo-Yugoslav region and they married but divorced when I was four. He then remarried to one of Polish children.

In his later years, my father’s thoughts often went back to those dark but dramatic days of August 1944 and he was very preoccupied by the medal, which he believed he had been awarded. He only returned once to Poland—for the fiftieth anniversary of the Uprising in 1994. During that return to Warsaw he was interviewed by a newspaper and I believe he even met with Silvia again for the first time in fifty years. He also asked about his medal but there was no record of it in Polish government files. On his way back to New Zealand, he went to

the Polish Resistance History Institute in London, which also had no record of his medal. But they contacted another organisation in Germany, which was able to produce a copy of an order by a Home Army General from 1944 awarding my father the *Virtuti Militari*. The Medal arrived in New Zealand one week after he died on 8 May 1995 (the 50th anniversary of VE Day). However, my father knew that the medal was on its way and that knowledge was a source of solace for him in his final days.

Jerzy Rabel was very much an ordinary Pole, like so many others, swept along by the tides of history. At the time of uprising, he was only 24, around the age of my younger daughter who is in the audience today. My father's story is one of courage and of luck, but also of profound loss—of shattered dreams, of gaps and buried secrets. He left behind his home country and never did fit comfortably in New Zealand. However, as the Ambassador noted in his remarks, my father fared so much better than the majority of Warsaw Uprising fighters.

75 years on, what is there to make of the meaning of the Warsaw Uprising.? Obviously, it's very personal for me—it's why I'm here as a New Zealander of mixed European descent.

More generally, it's a reminder of the need to fight evil—and there were two evils that terrorised Poland: Nazism and Soviet communism. The first was costlier in Polish lives but the other had a crushing impact on Polish life for over four decades. The cruel irony of these two totalitarianisms was expressed well in 1944 by one Home Army soldier. In a bleak poetic observation as the Nazis burned his city, while Stalin's Red Army could be seen across the Vistula, he wrote: "We await you, red plague / To deliver us from the black death."

When it comes to Polish history, it is easy to be bitter.

But we need to look to the better angels of our nature, as Abraham Lincoln urged his fellow Americans to do at the onset of the Civil War.

What should resound today about those dark days in Warsaw is the humanity of history, not the inhumanity. Yes, the Nazis massacred millions of Poles—Jewish & non-Jewish. They razed Warsaw to the ground. Yet, in the longer run, the world is very different.

In today's world, we remember and dignify the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto, we remember & dignify the Polish fighters and civilians of the Warsaw Uprising. We do not dignify their tormentors and murderers, whose acts will always remain amongst the greatest examples of national and international shame.

We can also celebrate what Warsaw is today. A free city. A city of culture, of cuisine, of beautiful parks (with open-air Chopin concerts), of education—a very European city. And, yes, it is a city of memories too. We should value those memories, but we must use them to continue to memorialise and dignify what was being fought for. And we should do so not to highlight what was being fought against, but to counter any prospect of its resurgence.

Like my father, we must fight against inhumanity. We must strive for justice and freedom, but we must never let that struggle be cast in equally constraining, narrow nationalism. Nazism showed what the extreme embodiment of nationalism can do to ordinary people, so we must be measured when it comes to national pride. To see some Poles and other Europeans today veering in extreme directions is to dishonour everything the Warsaw Uprising should stand for. The Uprising was an act of defiance carried out by flawed human beings fighting other flawed human beings, who were often caught on opposing sides because of the accidents of birth. The evil resided essentially in regimes and ideologies, not in every one of the people caught up in that maelstrom. Post-war Germany and Japan have shown that redemption is possible for countries; Russia too is capable of redemption

We must always call out challenges to human rights, equality and tolerance in whatever guises they appear because we never want to face again what my parents' generation faced. That is the lesson of the Warsaw Uprising and of World War II 75 years on.

And for me, for all his flaws, that is the legacy of my father's greatest life-challenge, which came in August 1944. By rising to it, he was on the right side of history. Thankfully, he was not alone. I am hopeful that those upholding the principles of human decency, freedom and tolerance are also not alone in today's world, whether it be in Poland, New Zealand or elsewhere—so that when we look back on our own lives, we can know that we also tried to be on the right side of history.