

Thank you for the incredible honor of taking part remotely in this event. Eighty years ago on April 19, 1943, Jews took up arms in the Warsaw Ghetto and fought Nazis to prevent being deported to concentration camps. They battled heroically for nearly a month before being crushed. The surviving Jews were murdered in Treblinka or killed by shooting in the Nazi "Operation Harvest Festival" at the Lublin/Majdanek concentration camp in November of that year.

90% of Polish Jews were murdered in the Holocaust. 90%. I am a descendent of two of the surviving 10%.

When my mother was 16, the Nazi's gathered all the Jews from her hometown in the town square. She and her older sister were selected to go to slave labor camp. The rest of her family, mother, father, brother, younger sister, were selected to die in concentration camps. My mother was in slave labor camp until she was 19. She endured mistreatment, malnutrition, and long hours of forced labor.

In her later years, she always had butterflies on her clothing, as jewelry, and as decoration in her home. She told us that in the few moments she once had to stand outside and breath fresh air, she saw a butterfly flit between the wires of the three rows of barbed wire and electrified fencing surround her prison. She wished she were that butterfly so that she could fly away to freedom.

My mother was an intelligent woman and a gifted writer. I have a placemat she made during arts and crafts at her assisted care facility. It has a butterfly. And she wrote, "To have freedom is a privilege. To enjoy freedom is a gift to be cherished."

My father was a newly graduated mechanical engineer. He and his father, my grandfather, joined a line of refugees trying to get to Warsaw after the war started. The line of refugees was strafed by a Nazi fighter plane. They were separated. My grandfather never knew that his son had survived. My father joined a partisan unit and spent the war as an underground soldier fighting the Nazis. He came upon a Nazi newspaper in a Nazi headquarters they captured in a small Polish town. The paper included a story about a Jew who committed suicide in London. That man was his father, my grandfather, Szmul Arthur Zygielbojm.

My grandfather was a socialist leader in pre-war Poland. He was a labor leader and on the city councils of Lodz and Warsaw. He was later appointed to the Judenrat, a Jewish council organized by the Nazis to help them control and communicate with the Jewish population. He argued against the creation of the Warsaw Ghetto. The SS didn't like that. He was invited to come to SS headquarters for "high level discussions." He was marked for death.

The Jewish underground tried to get him out of Poland to Holland. He travelled by train from Warsaw through Germany to Holland and was denied entry. Fortunately, his friend, the prime minister of Belgium managed to get him the right documents to travel to Belgium. He then went to Portugal and traveled to the United States. Sponsored by Jewish groups, he traveled this nation telling the story of what was happening to the Jews of Europe. He even gave a talk less than 350 km from where I am now sitting.

In 1942, my grandfather was asked to travel to London to become one of the two Jewish representatives in the Polish Government-In-Exile. His job was to receive intelligence from Poland about what was happening to the Jews – the killings and deportations. He was charged with telling

the Allies – especially the British and American governments – about the horrors in Europe so that they would do something to save Jews. He was met by disbelief and the opinion that what might be happening to the Jews couldn't distract from the larger effort to fight the Nazis.

One of the spies he communicated with, Jan Karski, a Polish Catholic, brought him a letter from the leaders of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. The letter said that the last remnants of Jews were being killed. It demanded that my grandfather take any action he could to inspire the Americans and British to try to save the Jews.

My grandfather met with British and American representatives. They listened politely. They didn't want to believe things were as bad as portrayed. They gave many reasons on why they could do nothing.

During the night of May 11, 1943, eighty years ago next month, Szmul Arthur Zygielbojm committed suicide in the hope that this would shock the Allies into action. While his suicide was noted in newspapers, there was no mention of the death of thousands in the Warsaw Ghetto.

The Russian poet, Yevgeny Yevtushenko wrote about the killing fields outside of Kiev, Ukraine, where 24,000 Jews were slaughtered,

“Over Babi Yar rustles the wild grass. The trees look threatening, like judges, and everything is one silent cry.”

My grandfather's suicide letters said, “I cannot be silent... By my death I wish to make the final protest against the passivity with which the world is looking on and permitting the extermination of the Jewish people.”

It heartens me that through events like today's commemoration, his cry is not silent.

The Holocaust was beyond horror and killed 6 million Jews and 6 million other people from various ethnic groups, the handicapped, those with mental illness, and homosexuals.

But the Holocaust is but one of the 15 genocides that killed 100,000 or more people since 1900. In particular let me note that in the early 1930's nearly 7 million Ukrainians were starved to death on the order of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin.

Genocides are not limited to Jews.

As Jews, we are admonished to “Never Forget”.

We recognize and feel a sacred obligation to honor the memories of millions of Jews who died during the Holocaust.

We also commit to help prevent future Holocausts and genocides. So, while we must “Never Forget”, there are things we must “Always Remember”.

Think deeply about this scenario. What if, as happened in Germany and Poland, a squadron of soldiers come to take away your neighbors because they are part of an ethnic group or because they hold an opinion contrary to the current government. Are you ready to risk your life and the lives of your family to protect your neighbors and friends?

It is far better to defend democracy when the seeds of its disintegration are planted.

Always remember that the Holocaust didn't start overnight. The Holocaust was enabled by over a decade of messaging, banning books, controlling information, taking discriminatory actions, and making changes in law and in government structure. Most Germans were good people who, like most of us, believed in the fair treatment of others. They were mesmerized by distortions of fact, by the creation of false dangers, and the promise of easy answers to eliminate those dangers. By the time they realized the truth, it was too late for them to take action without risking their lives and the lives of their families.

Sadly, we are confronted with false information and misleading easy answers in our politics. This is true in the United States and many other countries, especially those where the political pendulum has swung far to the right.

We must Always Remember to seek truth, fact, and real solutions to real problems. If we don't, we will become like those good Germans – surprised when we've lost our freedom, our fortune, and the dreams we have. As my mother wrote, "To enjoy freedom is a gift to be cherished."

Always Remember that any action that discriminates against any group of people, Jews, Blacks, transgendered, handicapped, any group of people, represents the proverbial slippery slope that will eventually hurt all of us.

Along with Never Forgetting, we must Always Remember to celebrate the survivors. We need to celebrate that Jews not only survived but that we continue to contribute to all facets of human endeavors – the arts, medicine, science, engineering, law and justice, and so many fields.

Celebrate the strength of Jews like my grandfather, those who fought in the many uprisings including in the Warsaw Ghetto, and the strength of courageous people who tried to help the Jews, like Jan Karski, the spy, and the many Germans and Poles who hid Jews.

Let me close by noting that in the horrible desperation of my grandfather's last moments, in those very last minutes of his life, he wrote, "I wish that the remaining handful of several millions of Polish Jews could live to see the liberation of a new world of freedom and justice... I believe that such a Poland will arise, and that such a world will come."

Listen to the message. A statement of hope.

That is the essence of my grandfather.

That is the essence of our people.

Cherish hope. Cherish freedom.

For they, too, are sacred obligations.