

Bozenna Urbanowicz-Gilbride: A Profile

She sensed she was losing her audience. She thought for a moment, then looked out at the roomful of young Jewish students and told them, "I am a Polish Catholic Holocaust survivor." Then, pausing, she repeated herself "I am a Polish Catholic Holocaust survivor." The students' teacher broke the silence. "Do you understand what she's saying?" the woman asked. "If she had not told you who she was, the story would still be the same."

This is perhaps the most compelling way Mrs. Bozenna (translated Bernice) Urbanowicz-Gilbride has ever found to illustrate the need for educating people, especially young people, about the full story of the Holocaust. That story deals not just with the deaths of 6 million Jews, but with the total of 11 million* Jews and Gentiles killed during the Holocaust. Among survivors of the Holocaust, she says Jews are much more outspoken, while Gentiles have been slow to go out and tell the whole story. Mrs. Gilbride hopes to change this. She wants people to abandon the notion that the Holocaust is "just a Jewish problem," as some students have been quick to say. She hopes that by sharing her story, she can provide a tangible identity to the nameless, faceless 5 million "others" who 'also' died.

Bozenna Urbanowicz was just seven years old when her village was invaded and occupied by Soviet troops. On several occasions, her father was arrested for hiding Jews on the family farm. At age nine, Bozenna's family escaped from their burning village. They were later captured and sent to a Nazi slave labor camp where they remained until American troops liberated the camp in 1945. Knowing that Bozenna's father faced possible arrest should he return to Poland again, the rest of the family contacted and were sponsored by relatives

in America. They emigrated to the United States in 1947.

However, in 1944, the Gestapo raised accusations against Bozena's mother and had her sent first to Ravensbrück Concentration Camp where she was sterilized and then to Gross-Rosen Concentration Camp. After Gross-Rosen was liberated by Soviet troops, she returned to Poland in search of her family.

After years of searching, Bozena's family received word in America that their mother was alive and in Poland. The rule of the Communist government made her emigration to America difficult, to say the very least. For eight years, her mother tried everything from a Polish underground group to government visas to reunite with her family. Finally, in 1957, a year after Bozena was married, and six months after her younger sister married and her 18-year-old sister joined the convent, her mother sent a telegram to notify the family of her arrival.

The woman who got off the plane bore no resemblance to the image Bozena held from her childhood. She was frail, her once black hair was a washed-out brown and her skin was yellow and wrinkled. As they sat in the car on their way to the family's home, Bozena realized she didn't know what to say to her mother. "How do you speak to one another?" she said. Her memory of her mother was that of a nine-year-old. Bozena's mother likewise had difficulty talking to her now-married adult child. The war had robbed so much of their lives.

As with most anyone who's childhood has been marred by the horrors of war, Bozena has many terrifying stories from her wartime and Holocaust experiences. "You don't know in wartime who your friends are," Bozena said. "You don't know who to trust." Poland was the only country where even the accusation of helping or concealing Jews was immediately punishable by death. "It was very easy if you had, say, a neighbor you didn't like to get rid of them," she recalled. No trial was necessary to hand down the conviction or the sentence – death

by a bullet in the head.

Food, as a necessary means for survival, was often a source of conflict and challenge. "People who are starving will do terrible things," she said. And she described the incredible lengths to which she sometimes went to provide herself, her family and others with even the most meager amount of scavenged food.

No matter how often Mrs. Gilbride shares her story, it is always extremely painful. According to Brother Syriac, S.M., a member of the Catholic League and a teacher at Chaminade High School in Mineola, New York, a student of his once asked Mrs. Gilbride if sharing her story over and over affected her. She told the young man she has nightmares for days afterward, but counts that as the cost necessary for the truth to be told. She compares sharing her Holocaust experiences in so public a manner with "going to confession naked." And sometimes even she doesn't know what's going to come out of her mouth. "I get angry when I reveal things," she said. Personal things, things she never meant to share with anyone, let alone in a public forum. But she finds it difficult sometimes to separate the public from the private.

Ironically enough, Bozena had always intended to keep her Holocaust experience private. Though she sometimes talked to her mother about what they had each endured during the war, she is perhaps more familiar with her mother's story because of a journal she kept during their talks. Among her siblings the subject is never discussed. She kept her Holocaust experience almost a secret from her friends, as well. One encounter with this warm and wise woman and it's easy to see why she would not want to burden her friends with the details of her childhood experiences. But reflecting on all she has done to educate people as to the truth of the 11 million, Bozena said she believes her mother "would have liked that (she) spoke out."

In teaching people about the Holocaust of 11 million, she hopes to begin to eliminate the "quagmire of negatives" she finds so common in society. Among the Jewish students she has spoken to, the common reactions are ignorance and surprise when told that the total number of people who perished was 11 million, Jews and Gentiles alike, not 6 million Jews alone. Among Catholic and Christian youth, there is an air of cockiness that says the Holocaust is not their problem, that it didn't happen to them. The cockiness fades as she shares her story. "Our children, and people in America, are so isolated," she said. "They have a hard time understanding what it's like to be so afraid, so scared."

Given a choice, Mrs. Gilbride favors working with high school students above all others. She feels they're old enough to handle the information, and young enough to still be forming opinions on the subject. One of the early projects Mrs. Gilbride was involved in brought together Catholic youth with the Jewish community for Yom Hashoa. On that day, known as Holocaust Remembrance Day, both groups gather on the steps of the Supreme Court in Mineola, New York, to read off the names of Jews and Gentiles who perished in the Holocaust. In a lot of ways, this demonstration epitomizes Mrs. Gilbride's ultimate goal-to bring about a common understanding among all people of who the victims of the Holocaust were, and to remind everyone, young and old, to love your neighbor as yourself and yes, you are your brother's keeper.

She is not on a campaign. She does not march, protest, yell loudly or carry a placard. But in her own quiet and utterly captivating way, Mrs. Bozena Urbanowicz-Gilbride, a member of the Catholic League since 1991, is spreading her message of love, unity and acceptance. Her message deals with the "others," the nameless, faceless victims of the Holocaust so often forgotten. More important, perhaps, is the education of those who cannot remember the Holocaust for themselves, so that they will understand, and so that this may be one period

in history which never repeats itself.

**Editor's note: Some scholars such as R.I. Rummel, professor of political science at the University of Hawaii-Manoa, put the total number killed in the Holocaust at 20,946,000.*

Bozena Urbanowicz-Gilbride speaks Out... gets involved...and is heard

1988

- * Speaks publicly for the first time on Holocaust experience in home parish of St. Anne's, Garden City, Long Island.
- * Received commendation from Nassau County for participation in remembrance of Kristallnacht.

1989

- *Joined the Nassau County Holocaust Commission. Responsible for getting four more Christians appointed to Committee.
- * Began teaching the "Holocaust" in schools
- * Invited to participate in Polish Community Participation Day in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

1990

- * Continued educating young people about the Holocaust in public and private schools

1991

- * Received Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights Award for devotion and dedicated efforts to explain the Holocaust.
- *Organized Catholic participation in reading names of Christian Holocaust victims along with the Jewish community who read names of Jewish victims of the Holocaust for Holocaust Remembrance Day, Yom Hashoa.
- * Received training in Washington, D.C. for, filming, "Living Oral History" in Poland. Then spent six weeks in Germany, Poland and the Ukraine filming Oral History and visiting Auschwitz, Majdanek, Ravensbrück and Gross-Rosen; collecting many items for the museum.

- * Received Citation from Nassau County Executive for her educational efforts.
- * Consultant for the documentary film "Zegota," a film depicting the Polish underground organization that helped save thousands of Jews in Nazi occupied Poland.
- * Participated in a three-day seminar in Flemington, N.J. sponsored by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum for the purpose of instructing those who are involved in teaching about the Holocaust.

1992

- *Received "Woman of the Year" award for "Humanitarian" contribution, from the town of Hempstead, Nassau County, Pathfinders Organization.
- * Presented Holocaust exhibit at Hempstead Town Hall. Opening speaker was Polish Consul General Jerzy Surdykowski
- * Presented first annual "Holocaust-A Mosaic of Victims" exhibit at the Polish American Museum in Port Washington, NY. Film "Zegota" is shown.

1993

- * "Holocaust-A Mosaic of Victims" exhibit is shown in several Long Island museums and libraries.
- *Received "Citizen of the Year" award from the Polish American World newspaper for being an outstanding spokesperson for all those who suffered and perished and all those who suffered and survived the Holocaust.
- * Participated in the First Conference of Christian Rescuers/ADL in Warsaw, Poland. Visited Auschwitz Birkenau Concentration Camp and arranged a meeting with Carmelite Nuns for all those on tour.
- * Invited by the ADL to a discussion on "How to Teach the Holocaust to Teachers," a curriculum being prepared for schools.
- * Became the first Polish Catholic to receive the prestigious Louis E. Yavner Award from the New York State Education Department, Board of Regents, for Distinguished Contributions

to Teaching about the Holocaust and other violations of Human Rights. *Bro. Lawrence Syriac of the League's Long Island Chapter played an important role in the nomination and in documenting her efforts.*

- * Received a citation from Congressman David A. Levy, Congress of the United States, for dedication in explaining the Holocaust.

- * Received a Citation from Senator Kemp Hannon for Distinguished Contribution to Teaching about the Holocaust and Other Violations of Human Rights.

Member:

- *Kosciuszko Foundation

- * Polish American Congress

- * American Polish Council

- * Holocaust Documentation Committee (P.A.C.)

- *Nassau County Holocaust Commission

- * Polish American Museum Catholic League

Affiliated:

United States National Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C.

Mrs. Bozenna Urbanowicz-Gilbride has another dream she'd like to see realized. Since participating in the recording of oral history in Europe, she has had a desire to videotape all the remaining Catholic Holocaust survivors located near her, in the New York Metropolitan area. If you are a Catholic Holocaust survivor, or if you know someone who is, please write to Mrs. Gilbride, c/o The Catholic League, 1011 First Avenue, New York, NY 10022.