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Remembering the Warsaw Uprising

This Sunday Gerhard Schroeder will attend a ceremony to mark the 60th anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising, when the Polish Home Army tried to regain the city from the Nazi occupiers. Mary Sibierski reports on how the Poles are remembering 1944's bloody events.



By the age of 14, Irena Polkowska-Rutenberg had already been smuggling guns for the Polish Home Army (AK) resistance in Nazi-occupied Warsaw for two years.

"I loved doing it — once I actually carried a grenade," recalls Polkowska-Rutenberg, now a 75 year-old New York artist who still pays frequent visits to her native Warsaw.



Nazi forces levelled the city until more than 80 percent was rubble

Many of the smuggled weapons went over the wall into the Warsaw Ghetto in preparation for the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto uprising, she says.

But the firearms were also being distributed to AK partisans planning a rebellion to repel the Nazis from the city and so liberate it ahead of the advancing Soviet Red Army.

Fought in a bid to secure Poland's post-war independence, the Warsaw Uprising was launched by AK commanders loyal to the Polish government-in-exile in Britain on 1 August 1944 by a largely unarmed force of nearly 40,000 Polish partisans.

Despite minor victories, the rising was crushed by the Nazis after 63 days of fierce fighting. Nearly half of the AK insurgents and at least 100,000 civilians were slaughtered. The rag-tag partisan units had fought a well-armed force of 50,000 German troops of whom some 16,000 died in action.

The battle is widely regarded as the bloodiest in Poland's turbulent history.

Days into the fighting, Irena's mother began work as a nurse at a makeshift hospital at Podwale Street 23, located near the red brick fortifications surrounding the heart of Warsaw's medieval Old Town.

Barely 15, Irena cared for mortally wounded partisans, many of them also children.

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"There was a little boy, about 14. He was brought wounded from the barricades with a hole in his head the size of a quarter," she says.

"He kept on calling for his mother. They put him in my charge — this was such a shock for me."

"His name was Kubush."

The boy died, one of more than 9,000 children and teenagers who took part in the 1944 uprising in boy and girl scout units known as the "Szare Szeregi" (Grey Ranks).

The youngest were just 12 to 14 years old. Grouped in a unit known as the "Zawiszacy", they provided first aid and worked as postal couriers and weapons smugglers.

Another traumatic event came 13 August when a tank booby-trapped by the Nazis exploded near the makeshift AK hospital. Some 500 insurgents died, many of them children.

"We ran out to the street to see what had happened. We were in the middle of bodies, hundreds of human bodies," Irena recalls.



The Warsaw Uprising Memorial commemorates the partisans and their escape

"The smell of burning flesh was the same as what I smelt in 9/11," she observes, having also been an eyewitness to the tragic September 11, 2001 al-Qaeda terror attack on New York's World Trade Center in which more than 2,700 people perished.

Later, as the uprising was close to collapse, both Irena and her mother were among several thousand partisans who escaped the besieged Old Town through the city's sewers. Cramped and filled with putrid sludge and corpses, the canals were a common — if often deadly — escape route between Warsaw's besieged districts.

An AK captain, Irene's father Roman Polkowski was executed by the Nazis. Although both Irene and her mother survived the war, they ran a double risk of death under the Nazis; they were AK partisans and they were Jewish.

Without Allied support, the uprising was crushed by 2 October 1944. On orders of Adolf Hitler, Nazi forces subsequently began to level the city until more than 80 percent was a smouldering heap of rubble.

Between 600,000-700,000 Warsaw residents, many of them Jews, perished under Nazi occupation between 1939-1944. The capital boasted a population of more than 1.3 million before 1939. All told, six million Polish citizens, roughly half of Jewish ancestry, died in World War Two.

Historians note that without Allied support, the uprising's failure was a foregone conclusion. Stationed only a few kilometres away from the fighting on the opposite bank of the Vistula river, the Soviet Red

Army was ordered by Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin to wait as the Nazis massacred the Polish resistance. Western Allied forces also failed to help.

The uprising's collapse is therefore also viewed as having paved the way for the post-war Soviet take-over of Poland and, ultimately, the beginning of the Cold War.

With Poland's post-war communist authorities bent on trivializing the Home Army's wartime drive for Polish sovereignty, the uprising was relegated to the margins of history until the demise of communism in 1989.

For more than 40 years, the regime branded it a hopeless suicide mission for anti-Nazi resistance fighters, "irresponsibly" ordered by Poland's wartime government-in-exile in Britain.

But 60 years on, one of the most dramatic episodes in Polish history is finally being appropriately documented and explored in the new 1944 Warsaw Uprising Museum. Under construction in Warsaw, a partial opening is scheduled for 31 July, the eve of official 60th anniversary ceremonies, which will be attended by German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, US Secretary of State Colin Powell and Britain's Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, as well as 2,500 Polish Home Army veterans.

Museum designer Miroslaw Nizio promises a modern, interactive venue, but also one filled with priceless historical gems such as tiny wreath of dried flowers and a dried slice of bread dating from the uprising and kept safe for more than half a century by survivors.

A working replica the "Blyskawica" ("Lightning") clandestine short-wave radio station used by the AK resistance for broadcasts during the uprising will also be featured alongside maps, firearms, helmets and partisan armbands.

Radoslaw, a 24 year-old studying English and German in Warsaw is keen to visit the new venue, but notes the 1944 uprising was not the first time Poles fought to the death for freedom knowing the chances for victory were more than slim.

"In our history there were many such uprisings — it was definitely something typical of the Poles and I am sure that if we were now under occupation we would do the same thing again — it's in our blood."

July 2004

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Subject: Warsaw Uprising, Second World War



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