

Saved from the German 'death march,' he returned to thank his Polish rescuer

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WILCZA, Poland (RNS) On January 22, 1945, a woman from this small village in southern Poland was riding her bike when she saw a sickly looking man and his son dressed in flimsy striped uniforms approaching cautiously from the nearby forest.

Suspecting the two had escaped from a German-run prisoner camp, the Polish Christian woman made a split-second decision to help them. It was an act of bravery at a time when Poland was occupied by Germany, and Poles who helped Jews, Roma, and other "undesirables" were shot on the spot.

"The woman said, 'Come with me, I will take you to a friend who, I hope, will give you food and shelter,'" recalled Shalom Lindenbaum, the son, who was 18 at the time, during an emotional visit to the village last week, which coincided with the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

This woman's actions, and the decision by her friends Katarzyna Froehlich and her 20-year-old daughter, Dorota Froehlich Kuc, to hide the Jewish father and son "saved our lives," Lindenbaum, now 88, said, squeezing Kuc's wrinkled hand as she sat on the sofa in the home she shares with her son and daughter-in-law. "Had they refused us, we wouldn't have survived."

When the war ended weeks later, the Lindenbaums left the village stronger and better nourished. But the friendship the younger Lindenbaum, now a retired professor of Hebrew literature from Israel's Bar-Ilan University, forged with Kuc, now 90, continues to this day.

Over the years, he sent spending money tucked into more than 100 letters for Kuc and her mother, whose village, like the rest of Poland, was under the control of repressive Soviet regimes from 1945 to 1989.

“During the first years after the war I didn’t contact them because I was afraid of endangering their lives,” Lindenbaum said, referring to the Stalin regime’s prohibition against ties with the West. “Life was very hard for them under the Soviets, so once Stalin died I gave them a little help to buy potatoes and other staples.”

After the fall of the former Soviet Union, Lindenbaum returned to Wilcza for the very first time.

“This is a picture from our reunion,” he said, grasping a photo showing them embracing.

Lindenbaum said he has made “at least three or four” subsequent visits to the village, the latest with his grandson, Eilam. He also hosted Kuc during her one and only visit to Israel.

He recalled how Kuc, a devout Catholic, likened the shimmering lights of Tel Aviv to a Christmas tree after she landed in Israel.

But last Wednesday (January 28), Lindenbaum recalled his horrific World War II ordeal. In 1944, when he was almost 17, Lindenbaum was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau along with his mother, father and sister.

Lindenbaum and his father were then transferred to nearby Buna-Monowitz, a sub-camp of Auschwitz, while his mother and sister remained at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

On January 18, 1945, during the final stages of the war, Lindenbaum and his father were among 1,500 surviving prisoners from their camp sent on a death march into the forest, starving and freezing.

With the Soviets advancing from the east, and the British, French, and Americans from the west, the Germans began frantically moving prisoners out of camps. Over about four months between January and April 1945, an estimated 80,000 camp prisoners were forced to march westward across Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Germany in extreme winter conditions. Thousands of people died on those marches.

“I told my father we should climb into a tree and stay there until it was safer to leave but he said that in the clothes we were wearing we would freeze to death,” he said. “He was right. Later we saw other escapees emerge from the forest, their limbs rotting with frostbite. They begged people to shoot them and put them out of their

misery.”

Kuc recalled what she saw when she opened the door on that frigid day.

“Shalom and his father were dressed in striped uniforms,” she said. “It was January and incredibly cold. To try to stay warm they had placed some towels over their ears but they were covered in icicles.”

When her mother arrived home and learned that her daughter had taken in two strangers, probably Jews, the mother ran to the village priest.

“The priest said, ‘If they have survived this long, God probably wants it so,’” the daughter recalled.

Kuc said her decision to hide the Lindenbaums from her neighbors, German soldiers, and even some members of her own family, was inspired by her Christian faith.

“I was taught that Catholics help the poor and those in need,” she said. “Clearly Shalom and his father were in need.”

In 1992 Yad Vashem, Israel’s Holocaust center, approved Lindenbaum’s request that Kuc and her mother be designated “Righteous Among the Nations.” To date nearly 26,000 gentiles from 50 countries have been accorded this honor.

“The decision to hide a Jew had very far-reaching ramifications,” said Irena Steinfeldt, director of the Righteous Among the Nations department at Yad Vashem. “It meant you’re taking the responsibility to protect a person or family and putting yourself and your family in enormous danger.”

Steinfeldt emphasizes that many of those who risked their lives to help Jews during the Holocaust will never be identified.

“Rescues are usually carried out secretly and don’t leave a paper trail; sometimes the survivors didn’t know their rescuers’ names or they died before submitting an application,” she said. “For many, remembering this time is very difficult and they didn’t have the strength to do it. Some thought that if their rescuers had died they couldn’t be honored, or they simply lost contact with their rescuer.”

For Lindenbaum, losing contact with Kuc was unthinkable.

“Had it not been for Dorota, her mother, and the woman on the bicycle, I and my family wouldn’t be alive today,” he said.