THE first NEWS
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Gone but not forgotten: Warsaw's largest hiding place for WWII Jews remembered

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The Kozia Kurkow was the largest hiding place for Jews outside the Warsaw Ghetto, the largest ‘caring and the largest revenge operation’ carried out in occupied Europe.
Photo courtesy of Muzeum Warszawy

In March 1944, a team of ‘jew hunters’ from the Gestapo descended on a 28-metre square at the back of a tenement in Warsaw's Ochota district and flushed out 38 cowering Jews who had found shelter there.

Three days later they were taken to the Sobibor remains of the Warsaw Ghetto and then to the death camps. The Poles who had organised and supplied the bunker shared a similar fate.

These barbaric murders brought to an end one of the most extraordinary stories of Poles who risked their lives to save Jews from the Holocaust.

One of those who sought shelter there was the Polish-European Kopelman, who had with his wife Justyna and his 14-year-old son Emil.
Photo courtesy of Muzeum Warszawy

The Krysia bunker, named after the Polish word for hedgerow ‘krzyewia’, was the largest hiding place for Jews outside the Warsaw Ghetto, the largest ‘caring and the largest revenge operation’ carried out in occupied Europe.

The scale of the operation to build the bunker, hide the Jews and supply them with food was staggering.

The first group of 16 operations, from 1942 to March 1944, to save the rest of the War in Warsaw, made its discovery and the extermination of its inhabitants and organisers all the more crushing.

The area in which the bunker was located - photo from late 1945
Photo courtesy Muzeum Warszawy

The Wolski family lived in a ten-storey house which had a factory of land adjoining it at the back. The Scott Terrible the operation was Marcyniów, who lived in the house with his mother Małgorzata, two sisters Halina and Wanda and his nephew Janusz.

The genesis of the family's efforts to save Jews from the nearby ghetto happened when Halina brought home a young Jewish girl to hide in the house.

She stayed for a month and returned to the ghetto, but she retrained soon with a proposal from her Jewish teacher Lidia Ingrassia to hide in a hiding place under the greenhouse and smuggle Jews out of the ghetto to hide there.

Digging out and completing the shelter was beyond the capability of the Wolski family by themselves, so several young Jews were smuggled out of the ghetto to build it.

Sketch of the bunker from the book by Chris Lagor
Joseph Kopelman's family

Some of the equipment to be fitted in the bunker was built in the ghetto they smuggled out into the ‘Aryan’ side.

The end result was the largest hiding place for Jews in Warsaw outside the ghetto. It was equipped with bunk beds, tables, a cooker, lighting and running water.

The Jews who sheltered there used buckets as a toilet, which were taken out every evening by Marcyniów's nephew Janusz and Szymon, one of the Jews from the bunker.

In order to conceal large food purchases for the hiding Jews, the Wolski family opened a grocery store on his property.

The hiding place was equipped with bunk beds, tables, a cooker, lighting and running water.
Joseph Kopelman's family

During the two long years, around 40 people from 10 families hid in the bunker, predominantly from wealthier Jewish circles who could afford to pay to stay in such a well-equipped bunker.

The costs of maintaining the shelter and supplying its inhabitants were covered partly by Zegota, the Polish underground organisation set up to help Jews.

The remaining costs were funded by the living Jews, who deposited 10,000 zlotys each with the Wolski family upon arrival. They also had to be able to make regular payments to cover food and other expenses.

One of those who sought shelter there was the historian Emanuel Kopelmilion, who hid with his wife Justyna and his 14-year-old son Yitzk.

During his stay in the hiding place, Kopelmilion wrote several works on the fate of Jews in occupied Poland, including his famous essay on Polish-Jewish relations during World War II.
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Life in the bunker was described by one of its inhabitants Ursa Jagur, who left the bunker a few months before it was discovered.

In a book she published in the 1990s, she described that the life of the bunker's residents took place at night while others slept and no one was working in the garden. During the day there was a strict rule of absolute silence.

When the children forgot to remain silent, they were told that the Germans would come and kill everyone. This led to the children's favourite game being ‘Germans attack the shelter’.

The Scott Terrible the operation was Marcyniów, Wolski, who lived in the house with his mother Małgorzata, two sisters Halina and Wanda and his nephew Janusz.
Photo courtesy of Muzeum Warszawy

Marcyniów Wolski visited the bunker every evening and reported the news of the day that he had heard listening illicitly to Allied radio broadcasts.

Although compared to other bunkers, Krysia was relatively comfortable, the cramped conditions were still tough to endure. The temperature was often unbearably high and the cramped hide-out crawled with bugs.

The group tried to keep their spirits by organising small celebrations on holy days. However, the extreme psychological pressure eventually took its toll when a 15-year-old girl called Basia committed suicide.

The whole Wolski family was involved in the operation. Marcyniów's nephew Janusz would guard the hideout, warning the Jews if there was danger nearby. In the event of danger, he would whistle the first bars of a popular song.

A tribute to the Germans, called Hans in November 1942, at its height as many as 400,000 Jews were transported from Warsaw to Treblinka death concentration camp in Poland.
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Wanda Wolska then dashed the food and other supplies and helped Janusz throw away rubbish and waste.

Marcyniów's other sister Halina produced the supplies, and his mother Małgorzata cooked the food in a ‘communal’ kitchen up and down the apartment block. She made efforts to establish contact with relatives for as long as that was possible.

Ursa Jagur recalled that Marcyniów shared his hopes for after the war with the group. He remembered him saying that when the war over and the Germans were gone, the inhabitants of the bunker would walk out into the sun and live like free people.

He fantasised that he would be famous because he defied the Germans and saved 40 people from death. He said that the shelter would be a monument and a warning for the future and that it would be visited not only by Poles and Jews but also by tourists from all over the world.

Today the site on Kozia Street is home to a shopping centre.

These dreams were brutally dashed when the Germans arrived at the entrance to the bunker on March 7, 1944.

They lived down into the air and threatened to flood the bunker with poisonous gas. All the Jews left their hiding place apart from one, the lawyer Tadeusz Kleiger, who committed suicide by swallowing cyanide.

Despite being beaten severely, Wolski convinced the Germans that his mother and sisters did not know about the hiding place.

However, he was unable to save his nephew Janusz, who was taken out of the shelter together with the Jews.

The site today of the rooms of over 75 years ago is a small plaque on the wall of the 35-storey block of flats built on the site after war.
Joanna Pierz

The Germans made sure there were no other people hiding by throwing grenades into the dark interior.

Wolski claimed that the bunker would become a symbol visited by people from all over the world but has also not been fulfilled.

The bunker does not exist anymore and there are no tourists.

The only sign of the events of over 75 years ago is a small plaque on the wall of the 35-storey block of flats built on the site after war.

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