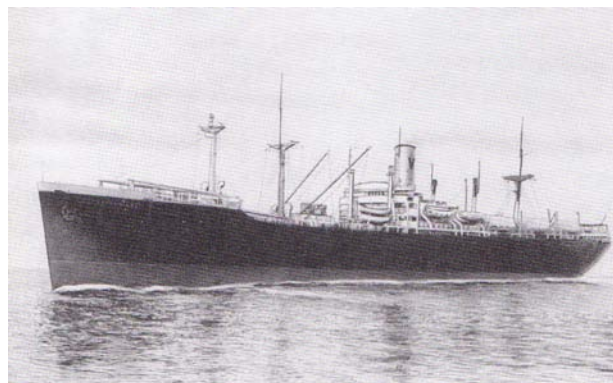


## “Conquering Hitler”: The remarkable life of Regina Zielinski



*Portrait of Regina Zielinski, 1946, and the 'Castellbianca', the ship that she arrived in Australia on. Reproduced with permission.*

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*Happy is the one who finds wisdom,  
the one who gains understanding,  
For its fruits are better than silver,  
its yield than fine gold.  
It is more precious than rubies  
No treasure can match it.*

- *a verse from the Gates of Prayer, a Jewish prayer book*

At first glance, she looks like any other kindly grandmother. Bespectacled, petite, with a warm smile. She grips the back of a chair with old, withered hands. Hands which have in the course of one lifetime, slaved in cold water, washing for Nazi concentration camp officials through Poland's unforgiving winters. These same hands, have held an Australian grandchild in Adelaide's beachside suburbs. Despite celebrating sixty years living in Australia this year, silkily smooth Polish undertones continue to be woven into her accent, a symbol for an enduring connection with her heritage. "I'm happy to speak to you today," she says, in a soft and gentle voice. In a light-hearted manner she adds, "I may not be here next year!"<sup>1</sup>. Everyone laughs, but all know the reality behind her remark. At the age of eighty-four, Regina is part of an ageing generation of not only Holocaust survivors, but also post-Second World War immigrants. As each year progresses, the importance of retelling her story to the wider community becomes even more relevant – for it is an essential piece to the complex puzzle of Australia's heritage, each piece just as unique as the next. Regina's story is a plethora of extremes, emotionally harrowing to comprehend, yet at the same time, absolutely awe-inspiring. In a story riddled with adversities which have continued to mount, here lie lessons of hope, acceptance and understanding – lessons which are just as relevant to the current generation of Australians, as they were for Regina's generation of immigrants.

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<sup>1</sup> Extract from an address by Regina Zielinski to the History Teachers' Association of South Australia, 12<sup>th</sup> June 2009

Regina Zielinski has lived in Australia since her arrival on a converted Italian naval ship, the *Castellbianca*, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August 1949<sup>2</sup>. Despite a traumatic past, as with many immigrants' stories, Regina continues to work with, rather than against her memories - "We left all our problems behind [in Europe]"<sup>3</sup>. Regina Zielinski was born Regina Feldman, in Siedliszcze, Poland, 1925. A Polish Jew, she was one of five children and had a substantial extended family<sup>4</sup>. As it was for most Jewish families, this "happy"<sup>5</sup> existence was to be short-lived. The invasion of Poland signalled life-changing events for Regina, the closing of her school, the forced relocation of her family into a ghetto, the tragic death of her older brother Max, and most prominently, the sudden transport into the notorious Sobibor death camp; her family subsequently becoming split up and never seen again alive. Regina worked under horrific conditions in the camp until the momentous breakout on the 14<sup>th</sup> October 1943<sup>6</sup>, where she was one of only a handful of survivors – and the only one now in Australia. Regina was the only member of her large family to survive the camp. Why she did, and so many did not, remains a mystery. "We can't live without hope," she says. "My attitude has always been, tomorrow is going to be a better day"<sup>7</sup>.

The question which seems to resonate strongest is, how, after such disturbing events, did Regina form such a peaceful life? Why can she continue to recount these ghastly memories, to a considerable number of schools each

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<sup>2</sup> Extract from an interview with Regina Zielinski, 7<sup>th</sup> September 2009 [transcript available]

<sup>3</sup> See *ibid*.

<sup>4</sup> Zielinski, A, 2003, *Conversations With Regina*, Hyde Park Press, Adelaide, p. 30

<sup>5</sup> See *ibid*, p. 36

<sup>6</sup> Extract from an interview with Regina Zielinski, 7<sup>th</sup> September 2009 [transcript available]

<sup>7</sup> See *ibid*

year? How does she accept this past? It is clear that her childhood experiences continue to be a part of her life today, defining her beliefs and identity. While forgetting such events may sever a connection with the horror, at the same time, it breaks a connection with herself. "I never wanted to forget.... It would have meant that nothing happened to my family"<sup>8</sup>. What is shocking for Regina is that Holocaust deniers continue to preach their falsehoods. As the only Sobibor survivor in the country, Regina stands as a witness to the 250,000 death toll at Sobibor<sup>9</sup>, which is a cold, hard fact, still resonating today. But what is inspiring, is that these dark memories have never consumed her to the point of bitterness. She reads the Jewish prayer quoted at the beginning of this essay, and continues to say, "Hate is a disease. Hate can eat you up. I never forgive, I never forget, but we have to accept it and live."<sup>10</sup> – a sterling sign of her determination to acknowledge and accept the past, but always look forward to the future.

Inexorably linked with accepting one's past, lies a greater understanding of oneself. In Regina's case, identity was a confusing concept. After her escape from Sobibor, she was lost in every sense of the word; "That was the hardest time.. when I realised I didn't have a country, I didn't have a name, I didn't have a home, I didn't have anybody in the world, I was all alone. I wasn't even twenty years old."<sup>11</sup>. This feeling of lost identity has been a hurdle which has extended through to her life in Australia. In the remaining years of the war, she worked as a nanny for a Catholic family in Frankfurt, becoming a Catholic

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<sup>8</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Zielinski, A, 2003, *Conversations With Regina*, Hyde Park Press, Adelaide, p. 147

<sup>10</sup> Extract from an interview with Regina Zielinski, 7<sup>th</sup> September 2009 [transcript available]

<sup>11</sup> See *ibid.*

girl, knowing “more about Catholicism than Judaism”<sup>12</sup>. Clearly, this assimilation into solid family life was a welcoming prospect, it promised security and safety, despite the fact that it was a false security. This assumed identity of Catholicism continued for years, until she began talking with a priest at her church in Sydney. During the war, he had served as an army chaplain in Israel. “He helped a lot of people... he helped me out of the ditch”<sup>13</sup>. The ditch which she refers to, an image out of a dream where a priest lifts her from a hole, stands as a metaphor for her encouraged return to Judaism, ironically by a member of the Christian faith. Without any papers to prove her Jewish roots, “one Friday night”<sup>14</sup> Regina was introduced to a synagogue in Parramatta, and once again became a part of the community - a significant turning point in a life full of fragmented relationships, a brave step towards reconciling with her past. Her reacquaintance with her Jewish roots is epitomised by her journey to Jerusalem in 1982. “My mother always wanted to go... so I did it for her. I’ve never dreamed that I could be there, I had this feeling of getting renewed, the ability to forget about anything else around me.”<sup>15</sup> This event confirmed a triumph over the attempted annihilation of her people and her religion. This pilgrimage was perhaps not only for her mother, but for all the other 250,000 who perished in Sobibor, for all of her six million fellow Jews, for whom the Passover promise of “next year in Jerusalem” was never fulfilled.

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<sup>12</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> See *ibid.*

It is clear that Regina has mastered the balance between looking back, yet at the same time moving forward. When asked if the transition between a Polish and Australian nationality was at all difficult, she responded without hesitation, "As soon as we were naturalised, we were Australian. I'm an old Aussie with an accent, an older Aussie than most of your teachers are!"<sup>16</sup> Her ability to adopt a new nationality and culture with such enthusiasm is certainly one to admire. Her siblings never had the opportunity to forge a family of their own, so Regina keeps the Feldman line very much alive. She has two children, her son Andrew, born in Germany, daughter Marie, born in Australia, and a grandson, Nicholas, whose photographs fill her bedroom dresser. "The next generation is the most important thing here, it's the future of Australia"<sup>17</sup>, she muses. Her comment epitomises the diversity of Australian culture: a collection of many families from across the world, a considerable number of whom have encountered a difficult past. It is their children who are a testament to their success in forming a new life, and contributing to the wondrous amalgam of different cultural heritages. For Regina, her grandson Nicholas, who is a true "Aussie", symbolises yet another success. She describes this continuation of her family line as having "conquered... I conquered Hitler, I managed to be on top"<sup>18</sup>. Nicholas looks and sounds like any other Australian child, but as it is for many of this generation of Australians, he would never have had the opportunity to exist, had it not been for his grandmother's extraordinary survival. He symbolises a victory over the Nazi Party's policies of all those years ago. He is Regina's legacy.

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<sup>16</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> See *ibid.*

Regina Zielinski's story is one of many Australian immigrants' experiences. Beneath her tiny frame and gentle voice, lies an extraordinary tenacity to withstand almost insurmountable forces. She is living proof of humanity's capacity to conquer evil. She is a quiet reminder that the greatest of historical events are made up of ordinary people's stories, each story as important as another. She is a lesson to us all, that living within a modest house in Adelaide's suburbia, there was a remarkable story. The day before the prisoners' escape at Sobibor, their leader, Alex Pechersky stated, "Everybody by themselves. Even if only one survives, the escape is going to be a success. The success is to tell the story." "After I survived," Regina says, "I thought, I'm not going to be quiet. As soon as I know the English language I'm going to talk."<sup>19</sup> And as she talks, she not only tells the story of Sobibor, but an inspiring story of determination, hope and courage.

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<sup>19</sup> See *ibid.*



## Annotated Bibliography

### **Primary Sources**

Address by Mrs Regina Zielinski to the History Teachers' Association, 12<sup>th</sup> June 2009.

*My first encounter with Regina, this speech triggered my research into Regina's extraordinary life.*

Interview with Mrs Regina Zielinski, 7<sup>th</sup> September 2009.

*This lengthy interview formed the core of my research, allowing me to become involved at a high personal level.*

Photograph of the *Castellbianca* ship, reproduced with permission.

*This image of the converted naval ship allowed for a greater level of understanding as to the conditions throughout the journey.*

Photograph of Mrs Regina Zielinski, 1946, reproduced with permission.

*Seeing how young and delicate Regina was as she dealt with the ordeals of Sobibor and the war, further emphasises her amazing tenacity.*

### **Secondary Sources**

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*While it does not cover Regina's experience, the film displayed a very useful depiction of the nature of the escape and the harsh conditions of the camp.*

Jupp, J, 2001, *The Australian people: an encyclopaedia of the nation, its people and their origins*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

*A comprehensive insight into Australia's diverse population, valuable for establishing a sense of historical context.*

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*Written by Regina's son Andrew, this book provided an excellent introduction into her life story, as well as his own personal experiences of growing up as a new Australian.*