

Dzien dobre, (good morning) ...

... I am very happy to be here with you today in Timaru, because for me this is about visiting a place that is close to my heritage.

My mother Teresa Ogonowska and my Aunt, Irena Ogonowska went to school here over 70 years ago, in the late 1940's and early 1950s, back when Sacred Heart College was on this site.

My mother and her sister were Polish orphans.

They were among the group of Polish children displaced in the Second World War who were welcomed to New Zealand by the government led by Peter Fraser as Prime Minister, in 1944.

It had been a difficult journey for the two sisters to get here to New Zealand.

Both my Mum Teresa and her sister Irena were born over 17,000 kilometres away in Poland, in the Second Polish Republic and were deported from their home, a farm in Ulanowoszczyna, by the Russian army in early 1940, after Stalin's Russia invaded Poland on 17 September 1939.

After a long and harrowing journey of over a month, over nearly 2,000 kilometres in freight trains and other transports, the family was eventually taken to Yeglets exile settlement, a labour camp in Archangel, Siberia.

Can you close your eyes and picture these two young Polish girls and their family, being forced by Russian soldiers to leave their home, being taken in dirty freight trains to a freezing cold labour camp in Archangel Siberia, being scared, hungry and unsure of what would happen to them.

In the camp the family survived in a hand to mouth existence until Stalin granted a general "amnesty" to all deportees in 1941 when Germany invaded Russia, although despite their release being called an "amnesty", the Ogonowski family had committed no crime when they were forcibly taken from their home over a year earlier.

In September 1941, like hundreds of others, the family left the camp travelling south through Central Asia toward the Caspian Sea where the Polish army was reforming, on irregular freight trains with the Soviet authorities providing no food or help.

During this long and arduous journey more tragic events happened within the family. Their father Antoni died, frozen to death on the back of a train, people were infested with fleas and lice, many were sick with typhus, all were very hungry. People who were ill were left at the side of the railway tracks to die.

This is what probably happened to their mother Jozefa, their brother Boleslaw and their sister Leonarda.

Miraculously, Irena and her sister Teresa somehow survived the journey. They were reunited in Isfahan in Iran, in October 1942, which was the main care centre for Polish orphans. Many of the children who reached Isfahan were painfully emaciated and malnourished. Most had lost their families or family members. All had been through traumatic experiences.

In 1943 the Polish Government in London accepted an invitation from the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Peter Fraser for about 700 children, including Irena and Teresa Ogonowska, to travel to New Zealand for the duration of the war. They were meant to return to their home country, but when the iron curtain descended on Europe, they made New Zealand their home

After their arrival in November 1944, the children stayed at Pahiatua Camp and were later sent to Catholic secondary schools throughout New Zealand.

My mother and her sister were welcomed here in Timaru by the Mercy Sisters at Sacred Heart College, on this site before Roncalli College was established.

I'm telling you this story because courage, hardship, and faith in adversity are the reasons why I am here today. My mother Teresa and her sister Irena survived incredible hardship, the loss of their home, their parents and most of their siblings. But they survived. Had the history I have just told you not occurred; I would not be here to tell it you.

In their new life in New Zealand both sisters did well in their secondary school education here in Timaru, they trained at Teachers College and became committed and passionate teachers. Both women met and married Kiwi men and had families. Throughout their lives, Irena and Teresa saw education as an integral part of a person's development and contribution to the world.

The Ogonowska Education Charitable Trust was established to remember the life and work of these two Ogonowska sisters and to acknowledge and assist excellence among students in schools.

Today, I would like to acknowledge Dorothy Wilson and Trey Cosgrave for their focus in education, their personal qualities and their contribution to the cultural and spiritual life of Roncalli College community. Both students have been granted awards by the Ogonowska Education Charitable Trust.