

"I just need to tell people what happened, and to pray for all the lost life."

ELZBIETA GURTLER-KRAWCZYNSKA, slave camp survivor



T. LEVETTE BAGWELL / Staff

Elzbieta Gurtler-Krawczynska (center) enjoys sharing her Polish culture with others. The Norcross woman and her grandmother (below) were deported to Russia while her mother, labeled an enemy of the state, was imprisoned during World War II.

Hidden Holocaust

'Forgotten Odyssey': Poland's occupation in World War II spawned countless war crimes, and a new film tells the stories of many Poles who fell into Soviet hands.

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The little girl tried to reach back through the barbed-wire fence for her mother. A soldier prodded at her with the barrel of his rifle, ordering her to leave. It was the last time the 8-year-old would see her mother for eight years.

This is one of the enduring memories of early childhood for Elzbieta Gurtler-Krawczynska. Now, more than 60 years later, she lives in a comfortable home in Norcross and holds a research faculty position at Emory School of Medicine.

In 1940, though, she and her mother and grandmother were



among 1.7 million Polish citizens deported via cattle car to slave-labor camps in Russia. They lived to tell the story of their hidden Holocaust: About two-thirds of those forced into the wastelands of Kazakhstan and Siberia died or never returned to their homeland.

Back then, few cared. Now, few remember.

"I just need to tell people what happened, and to pray for all the lost life," she said.

In an effort to keep this story

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Odyssey: Film recounts Poles' suffering

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alive, the Polish Catholic Apostolate of Atlanta, of which Gurtler-Krawczynska is a board member, will sponsor a screening April 13 of the British-made documentary film about the mass deportations titled "A Forgotten Odyssey."

The free screening of the film will be held at the parish hall of St. Marguerite D'Youville Catholic Church in Lawrenceville. A Mass will be offered at 8 p.m., before the screening.

The deportations happened in one of modern history's most chaotic times.

On Sept. 1, 1939, German forces invaded Poland from the west, touching off World War II. Edward J. Gurtler, Elzbieta's father and a journalist working in Warsaw for a government ministry, joined the Polish army to fight the Nazis.

Her mother, Maria Tomaszeweska-Gurtler, took the girl to the home of her maternal grandmother, Aleksandra Tomaszewska, in Nowogrod, a city in eastern Poland.

On Sept. 17, the Russian army invaded Poland from the east. Germany and Russia had signed a secret agreement giving Russia the right to occupy more than one-third of what was then Polish territory.

"The Russians came claiming to be liberators of the Polish peasants," Gurtler-Krawczynska said. What

really happened, she said, was that two criminals — Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin — had agreed to carve up a sovereign nation.

Her recounting of her family's experience is based on what her mother and grandmother told her. She was 2 when the family was deported.

The deportations began in February 1940. The midnight pounding on the Tomaszewskas' door came in April. The women of the house were ordered to pack for a long journey that would begin immediately. When her grandmother started to pack some suitcases, the military officials told her she could bring only what she could bundle into a bedsheet.

They were loaded into a cattle car with about 60 other people for what would be a four-week journey. The only heat came from a small stove in the center of the car. The only toilet was a hole in the floor. Once a day, soldiers would open the doors and give the prisoners some black bread and hot water or some thin soup.

"I don't know how they kept me alive," she said.

Their train's first destination was a collective farm in the steppes of Kazakhstan. Her family was assigned to a small hut with a dirt floor. Though her mother was a physician, she was first put to work operating heavy farm machinery. "She broke the machines," Gurtler-Krawczynska said.

Then, a Russian official



Gurtler-Krawczynska family photos

learned her mother was a doctor and transferred her to a military hospital in a larger city, named Aktjubinsk. Although her services were needed, her mother also was identified as an enemy of the state, primarily because she refused to accept Russian citizenship.

Her mother was arrested and jailed briefly, but her life probably was spared by a major shift in war strategy by Poland's other enemy, Hitler. In the summer of 1941, Germany broke its pact and invaded Russia, which then declared an "amnesty" for the deported Poles.

In the winter of 1942, Gurtler-Krawczynska, her mother and grandmother boarded a train bound for the refugee camps — but they were ordered off before the train departed.

Her mother was arrested again, charged with being an enemy of the state and sentenced by Communist officials to 10 years of hard labor. Part of the case against her mother was that she gave medicine to suspected anti-Communists, who happened to be sick.

Gurtler-Krawczynska and her grandmother were allowed to move in with a relative who lived in Russia, and that's where they spent the rest of the war. Before they returned to Warsaw in 1946, they were allowed to visit her mother in the prison camp. This was the visit terminated by the soldier with the gun.

Her father was unable to join them in Warsaw. Like many other Poles, he remained in England, fearful

of arrest if he returned home.

During these years, Gurtler-Krawczynska wrote letters to Stalin, to Churchill, to Eleanor Roosevelt, beseeching them to aid in releasing her mother from the camp. No one helped.

Later, her mother told her about life in the Soviet prison. "She was a little woman with a big faith," she said. Although the prison inmates were criminals as well as political prisoners, they seemed to respect the female doctor who often prayed openly, she said.

Once, when her mother was recovering from a bout of pneumonia, she caught some sparrows and cooked them in a soup the inmates made for her, she said.

When she finally returned to Poland in 1954, her mother was assigned by Communist authorities to work in a hospital in northern Poland. In 1958, the daughter and later the mother were allowed to visit Gurtler in England. He returned to Poland in 1960, and he and his wife spent eight years together before he died. Her mother lived long enough to see Poland become a free nation again, dying in 2001.

Gurtler-Krawczynska became a physician, like her mother. She married and moved with her husband to the Atlanta area in 1984.

The stories of hundreds of children from families like the Gurtlers were preserved in statements taken by Polish army officials after the 1941 Russian declaration of amnesty. Many of these were preserved in a book titled "War Through Children's Eyes,"

compiled by Jan T. Gross, formerly of Emory University and currently a historian at Princeton University.

These children give eyewitness testimony of the brutality they endured, telling how they watched their relatives being shot, starved, dying from exposure or disease, and having their bodies tossed out of the cattle cars into the snow.

In a recent phone interview, Gross said that current-day Russian authorities still block Polish historians from making a proper investigation of the atrocities of the early war years. Also, the Russians have neither fully acknowledged their responsibility for what happened, nor have they apologized, she said.

"When the deportations were taking place, no one [in the West] bothered to pay attention. It was viewed as an internal matter in Russia," Gross said, noting that by the middle of World War II, Russia was an ally of the West.

There are few left to tell the stories of the hidden Holocaust. Gurtler-Krawczynska was among the youngest of the deportees — she was 2 when shipped to Russia, and she is now 66. The screening of the documentary film is one way to ensure that these stories will not be forgotten.

Gurtler-Krawczynska said her prayers at the memorial Mass will be for the families of those who were lost. She said she will also pray for something more personal: "Please give us the grace to forgive."

► **ON THE WEB:** For more information about this topic: www.pcaaa.org, www.aforgottenodyssey.com

At the outbreak of World War II, Elzbieta Gurtler-Krawczynska (below) was taken by her mother, Maria Tomaszeweska-Gurtler (at left, second from left), to live with her grandmother in eastern Poland. Later, her mother was imprisoned and her grandmother, Aleksandra Tomaszewska (at left, on right) and the girl were deported to Russia.



Dates for a sad journey

► **Sept. 1, 1939** — Germany invades Poland; World War II begins.

► **Sept. 17, 1939** — Russia invades Poland under secret pact with Germany.

► **February 1940** — Mass deportations of Poles to Russia begin.

► **June 1941** — Germany attacks Russia.

► **July 1941** — Russia joins Allies, declares "amnesty" for deported Poles.

► **February 1945** — Yalta Conference: U.S. and England agree to Russian demands for post-war control of eastern Poland.

Movie screening

► Showing of "A Forgotten Odyssey" on April 13 at St. Marguerite D'Youville Catholic Church, 83 Gloster Road N.W., Lawrenceville. The film will be preceded by a memorial Mass, given in Polish, at 8 p.m.

Elzbieta Gurtler-Krawczynska became a physician, like her mother. She married and moved with her husband to the Atlanta area in 1984. She holds a research faculty position at Emory School of Medicine.



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