

Rede von Dr. Bill Begell, New York

My name is Bill Begell. I am 78 years old. I am an engineer, a nuclear engineer by profession and education. I am working as a publisher and I am a linguist, although I do not speak Hebrew. I found out what the word „holocaust“ means many years after the end of World War II. I also found out what the words „Yad Vashem“ mean at about the same time, as I understood what holocaust means.

However, I have known the words that stand for HKP and Major Karl Plagge since I was a teenager in the ghetto of Wilno and that was over 60 years ago.

I am a survivor of the Wilno ghetto.

I am a survivor of the holocaust.

I am a survivor of the HKP 562 Forced Labor Camp.

I have survived all of them because of Major Karl Plagge, the man we are honoring here today.

Needless to say my feelings are mixed, very mixed. The celebration makes me happy, very happy, while the holo-caust whose enormity be-comes so vividly visible at Yad Vashem makes this a tragic occasion, very tragic. There were about 1.000 Jews at HKP 562 on Subocz Street in Wilno of which about 250 survived. Of these, about 200 survived by hiding out in so-called melines, and about 50 sur-vived by actually escaping from the camp. I am one of those who escaped by jumping out from second story window, the night after Major Plagge warned us in no uncertain words that we would be killed.

I jumped at midnight, at the moment the SS-filled trucks drove into the camp. About 20 minutes later, the SS men discovered the window and the removed steel grating. The Jews trying to escape after the discovery were immediately killed.

I was lucky and brave and foolishly young to do what I did, but I did survive because of the words of Karl Plagge, warning me that we will all be deported to „safety“ by being escorted by the SS, an organization - he said loud and clear – created especially for the protection of refugees. Fluechtlinge, he said, and his words ring as clearly in my ears today as they have been every day since then. Today, we honor him for warning us and thus saving us.

I got to HKP because the Jewish head of the ghetto, Joseph Gens, who knew our family, told my mother a few days after my father was killed in early September 1943, just a few weeks before the liquidation of the Wilno ghetto: „I believe that Plagge will be able to protect and save

his Jews longer than I will.“ Gens was right and Major Karl Plagge did indeed protect us and save us.

I never spoke to Major Plagge, he never spoke to me, I tried not to look the German military in the eye, being afraid to arouse any anger and I always continued to work at my vise whenever they came into our workshop. I was taught to make metal hinges from scratch and they must still fill some useless pit in Wilno today. Yet he saved us.

There is no doubt that it was his determination and honest endeavor to do everything he possibly could to save us from being killed. We stand here today, all of us, young and old, Jews and Gentiles from America, Germany, France, Lithuania and Israel to honor this gentle hero of the war, our savior, our quiet friend.

It took the emotional, intellectual and historical curiosity of the second-generation holocaust survivor, Dr. Michael Good, to achieve this moment.

The University of Darmstadt, in the person of Dr. Marianne Viefhaus, has played a very important and special role in our search and has helped us tremendously in establishing and providing the documentation and proof for the roots and motivation of Karl Plagge. Professor Woerner, the President of the Technical University of Darmstadt, has been a great supporter and advocate and I thank him profoundly. The University has erected a beautiful plaque for Karl Plagge and I invite all of you to visit and see it.

The City of Darmstadt and its Mayor may name a street for Karl Plagge and we think of it as a very important and proper gesture. We visited yesterday the local synagogue and understand that the City of Darmstadt and its citizens have built it and have been supporting it. The synagogue is an outstanding architectural and religious symbol and we thank you for it.

Major Karl Plagge is one of the very few German military men who were honored by the title of Righteous Among the Nations. All of us are, as we should be, very „stolz“ of it. The German Ambassador to Israel was touched by it and is supporting the idea of naming one of the German Bundeswehr Kaserne, the Karl Plagge Kaserne. We all support it and stand ready to give any testimony, any time, any place to achieve it. I personally will even speak German for the occasion, if invited.

I want to salute now Dr. Michael Good, for all he has done, Dr. Marianne Viefhaus and Joerg Fiebelkorn for their tireless work in the search and all the members of our Plagge Research

Group. I also salute all of you gathered here, and Yad Vashem for finally having realized that Major Karl Plagge was indeed a Righteous Gentile.

But most of all, I salute and bow my head in my deep gratitude and respect the man of the hour, Major Karl Plagge. Thank you.

Darmstadt, 15. April 2005