

Remembrance Day is unique to the individual

Written By KIRA WRONSKA DORWARD

Though this year's Remembrance Day ceremonies had added unifying significance of the anniversary of the Armistice that ended the Great War, every Remembrance Day is unique to the individual. Each person, even those of younger generations who never saw conflict, are still touched and shaped by the events that affected their ancestors. Every family, every person, has their unique story, and is in some way a byproduct of the global conflicts of the 20th century.

The repercussions of the Second World War had a significant impact on both sides of my family. Without the advent of the War, I realized long ago I would never have been born. Now that I am alive as a consequence of that event, I have devoted a good part of my life to the study of that history, earning two degrees in it from the University of Toronto. The War made me, and also made who I am.

One side of the family is simpler in some ways to explain. They were Canadian, moved to England while my grandfather, David Morgan Dorward fought in the British army, and my grandmother lived with my English cousins during the Battle of Britain, under heavy bombing in Southampton. My grandfather, blinded by friendly fire in the Battle of Sicily, wrote a book, *The Gold Cross*, about his Odyssey to return to my grandmother, Venta Janosik-Wronski in England from the North African hospital the British Army left him in while losing the paperwork that explained where he was. Literally the blind leading the blind, he led the forgotten soldiers of that hospital in a mad quest to get back to civilization and their families, which they eventually did.

My mother's Eastern European side is less straightforward. Half Latvian, half Polish, her parents were forced to vacillate between Nazi and Soviet control of their countries before fleeing the inevitable as the Iron Curtain came down. My grandfather, a Lieut. in the Polish army and member of the Polish nobility, knew his days were numbered and strangled his guard to get out of a Russian prisoner of war camp, narrowly escaping the massacre at Katyn by doing so. Shortly after trying to rejoin the Polish Resistance, he was recaptured by Germans and spent the remainder of the War in prison.

My grandmother lost everything during her War years. Her country, her language, her social status, her job, most of her family, three husbands, and a baby. But after years in a German refugee camp, an impromptu proposal by my grandfather received on steamship to Canada, she pulled together her inner resolve to start anew in a foreign land. In her own words, "I, in the end, gained a new country and a new life. We were pioneers, your grandfather and I. We came from lives filled with expectation, then disappointment and despair, and carved new lives. We struggled to establish ourselves in a foreign land, whose residents more often than not had no understanding of where we had come from and who we had been. In our struggles we created you and the world you know."

The words she left me in the form of a memoir and a recording at Halifax's Pier 21 Oral History Department inspired my graduate degree work at UofT, and to explore that part of myself and my heritage that was a direct result of global conflict. I, in fact, am a direct result of that global conflict. As I put together my thoughts and research for a novel based on her life and experiences, I can only express my complete admiration for the generations that came before and went through hell to form our world today.

Without them, and the solemn yearly reminder on Nov. 11, the organizations, systems, checks, and balances on world powers we have today would not exist. Without the constant reminders, the stories we share with each other about the deeds of our ancestors, people would forget. It's our job to tell these stories and keep the memories alive. Lest we forget.