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# Los Angeles Times



Sandy Banks

## Adding up life's many gifts In retirement, Holocaust survivor teaches math in South L.A.



Robert Geminder, 76, works with students at Opportunities Unlimited Charter School. His survival story resonates with many of the youths. (Luis Sinco, Los Angeles Times)

Robert Geminder has told the story so many times, it almost sounds like he's reading a script when he shares his memories with me.

I was born in Wroclaw, Poland, in 1935. My father was very wealthy and owned many apartment buildings. Our family of four lived very well and had a very good life. And then, in 1939, the Gestapo came. What happened after that, no amount of rehearsing can soft-pedal or tame.

His Holocaust story is not a tale of death chambers and concentration camps. His family, Polish Jews, survived years of Nazi cruelty, but escaped from a train bound for Auschwitz and made their way to America — all before he turned 13.

Geminder wields the memories as a reminder that the unthinkable happened "in our lifetime. And before long, everyone who was there and can tell you about it will be gone."

He saw the horrors through the eyes of a child: He was 4 years old when his family was rousted from their apartment and forced, with hundreds of other Jews, to relocate to a city near the Polish border.

Two years later, his father died of a heart attack as he tried to barricade their apartment during a blitzkrieg by German forces. Five months after that, Nazis stormed the city, rounded up Jewish residents and herded them to the local cemetery.

"I was only 6," Geminder recalled, "and I had to crouch and watch as 12,000 people were executed and pushed into mass graves." Those who survived — including his mother, brother and grandmother — were forced to live behind locked gates in a Jewish ghetto, tormented and brutalized daily.

A year later, Geminder's mother masterminded their survival, smuggling the boys out under her skirt when she was allowed to leave the ghetto for work. "Ten days later," Geminder said, "the Nazis killed everyone who stayed behind," including his grandmother. His mother bribed a Gentile family to take her sons, with the deed to an apartment building. She retrieved the boys months later, bleached their hair blond and tried to pass the family off as Christians. Their mother bartered for tobacco and the boys rolled cigarettes and sold them on the streets outside Warsaw.

When the war ended, they went to a displaced persons' camp, then came to the United States in 1947 to live with family members in Pittsburgh. From there, Geminder's life is the quintessential story of immigrant success: An engineering degree from Carnegie Mellon; a stint in the Army; marriage to a pretty girl he met at a fraternity party. He and Judy Strauss moved to California and had three children. He rose through the ranks at Hughes Aircraft; they bought a home in upscale Rancho Palos Verdes.

But something was missing, and it took Geminder almost a lifetime to find it.

Now, 67 years after he survived the infamous Warsaw Ghetto uprising, Geminder spends his days in what some might consider another sort of ghetto — a classroom in inner-city Los Angeles — where he passes along what he knows, about mathematics and survival.

The principal at Opportunities Unlimited Charter High School in South Los Angeles has a litmus test for the teachers she hires. She looks for more than book smarts and pedagogical skills. She thought Geminder, a newly minted teacher at 74, just might be a good fit.

"My teachers have to care about these kids. And I felt that from him," Angelique Jacques Marcoulis told me when I visited the Vermont Avenue campus this week.

The 5-year-old charter meets in a church, has 160 students and a social justice theme. Geminder, she said, is a living link to the suffering that injustice brings. I can't vouch for how good a teacher he is. When I visited his class on Thursday, the formulas scrawled on the board looked like gibberish to me. But then it took me three tries to pass high school trigonometry.

The students in his trigonometry class seemed as fluent in the language of math as their teacher. They were correcting each other and calling out answers, all over the noisy whirl of four spinning fans trying vainly to cool the sweltering classroom.

This is Geminder's third year at the school. He teaches algebra, geometry, calculus and trig. Almost every ninth-grader who enrolls at the school comes in with "below basic" math skills. So test scores are abysmally low but climbing, and higher than those of surrounding schools. This year, Geminder has 15 students and a tutor in each class. "They come into my class saying 'I hate math,'" he said. "At the end of the semester, they walk out believing they can handle this; knowing they have accomplished something."

Before he went into teaching, Geminder spent years traveling around California, sharing his Holocaust memories with students. He liked piquing their interest in history, and enjoyed the celebrity. "Kids wanted to shake my hand, take pictures with me," he said. He kept every packet of thank-you notes their teachers made them send.

But there's one memory that stands out, he said, when I asked what led him to return to college for a teaching credential at 70. He was telling his Holocaust stories to a tough crowd at a rough high school. He remembers one kid in particular, who hardly seemed to be listening. "Black kid, in a leather jacket, with his feet on the chair in front of him." Geminder finished and headed for his car. He heard footsteps approaching as he crossed the campus lot, and turned to see the boy in the leather jacket running up fast behind him. Face to face, the boy reached for Geminder's hand. "I can't thank you enough for telling your story," the teenager said. "It was such an honor to hear you."

At least that's how Geminder recalls it. And these are his memories, after all.

That encounter made him think about how much he had in common with kids like these, beginning with a resilient, resourceful single mother. He realized that his life was more than a history lesson; it was a mirror of the sort of challenges faced by many families in Los Angeles. His stories resonated beyond age and race because they carried themes familiar to immigrants, outcasts and refugees.

Geminder remembers the postwar taunts of German boys shouting, "Jews should go to Palestine!" He knows what it feels like to arrive in this country, a 12-year-old who speaks no English and has never been inside a classroom. And his students, from poor neighborhoods and broken homes, know what being an outsider means. In Thursday's class, Geminder shared a bit of his Holocaust story.

He drew a diagram of the gated enclave where his grandmother was killed, and asked if students knew what a "ghetto" was.

"Yeah," one girl called out. "It's like the projects." Some of her classmates laughed. But their teacher didn't smile back. It was time to move on to math.

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Saturday, Oct. 15, 2011

### Adding up life's many gifts

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#### Tributes:

- What a great man and story! What a wonderful life, to survive such horrors, including the destruction of your people, so many other great people, your family, and have to live under such horrible conditions, but then transform your life to become a teacher. A teacher changes lives every day, giving hope and care to students who need it, skills to create a new life for themselves. Robert does this, and instead of retiring, he puts his energy and life into each day, living it fully. That is what we can learn, as well as more about the bigotry and hatred of the Holocaust and events now in our time. What are we doing to make the world a better place for all?  
Mindy Geminder
- Oh that is a gorgeous piece. Thank you to your dad! I've got tears streaming down my face. What your dad had to live through was horrifying and gives me a strong sadness, but the part that makes me really cry is your father's kindness. Thank God for people like your father who reach out to care for others who are in hard times! Blessings upon your family. You are a special lot!  
Love, Serena
- Congratulations--having the article in the paper is great, but what you do, I believe, is better. congrats on showing and teaching, keep hope alive, mike
- WOW>.....was just going to write you. Sat down with my raisin bagel for my Sat morning read of LATimes. Always my favorite is inside front cover feature. And there is your dad. What a man. What a story. Can't wait to share it with my mom who is in NYC and had dinner with Ruth and Don Kisner who are visiting Aaron. And with my dad who is far away in Borneo. They will be so impressed. Hope you are well. And that Fall is wrapping its arms around you. We have stacks of pumpkins, costumes, fog machines and are ready. Jeremy LOVES Halloween.  
Take care Yvonne

- What a nice article. I have always been proud of you and your family and very proud that my family was part of your family's life's journey. (I can still picture your house at the Jewish Home in Pittsburgh and my childhood memories of your family and our times together are still vivid.) It's a shame that we now live 3000 miles apart and don't get to see each other. I do think of you often, and all the Chotiners were saddened by Judy's passing. I hope that this New Year will be a healthy and happier one for you. Keep your spirits up, and keep up the marvelous work that you do.  
Love, Bennett
- Bob,  
What an amazing story. You are touching so many lives and they will remember you as one of the greatest persons with whom they came in contact.  
On another note, I am so sorry about Judy. May her memory be for a blessing.  
Love, gail
- Dear Bob,  
Thank you very much for sending this very fine article. I forwarded it to my niece, my sister Lore's daughter and she wrote that she has written to you. Susi too is a Geminder and she was very pleased to receive the article. She will share with my sister Lore who does not use the computer very much these days.  
Regards, Irene
- WOW! Thank you Mr. Geminder. We are famous!  
That's incredible. I am so proud of you and your family.  
Thanks again, OfeliaR
- What an absolutely beautiful article about such a beautiful man. It brought tears to my eyes.  
Thank you for sharing! Margot
- Dearest Ellen, Thank you for your email. I had read it earlier this morning. Bobby is such a dear man. G-d willing he should stay healthy. How fortunate he is to have such loving and caring children. Hang on tight to the ones you love. Shabbat shalom, Have and Irving
- Really nice article. Not surprisingly, I cried a little when reading it. Your dad was right . . . Judy would have been proud. It was great to see you both last night!  
Paige Hayes
- What an awesome article! I just love your Dad...he is such a remarkable man...just like your Mom. How are you? I have been meaning to get in touch...we were in Va. visiting my Mom for 10 days and then I got sick last week. Are you coming home to PV any time soon? Would love to see you. I will try and call you soon or please feel free to call whenever you want.  
Love, Morgan
- Wow. Thanks for sharing that, Mindy. I didn't know your dad had that history. My dad came from Vienna and he remembers the Kristalnacht. He came to the US at the age of 9 with his mother and brother. His father didn't fare as well--with a Polish passport, he couldn't get a visa and was murdered at Auschwitz.  
It's a blessing that we're here today to tell their stories as well.  
Shana Tovah, Susan
- That was a very inspiring article to read. I didn't realize that's what your dad has been doing over the past few years. He sounds like a really amazing man. I enjoyed reading about him and how exciting that he was in the LA Times! With warm thoughts, Amy
- Bob and I read with pleasure the article today in the L. A. Times. I am a retired elementary music teacher in LAUSD. When I retired in 1999, I had taught at 38 schools in the city. My daughter, Valerie Quandt was in school with your girls. She is now the principal of a middle school in Santa Cruz. I am remembering the

involvement we had together when our children were in school together. It was very inspirational to read your story again. Keep up the good work!

Ramona Gifford

- Hi Bob--I read it first thing this morning! It's a wonderful article that really highlights the important work you do. I'm really glad they seemed to get it.  
Shana tova, Holli
- Hi Bob  
That was a very nice article! And bless you for working with the kids that truly need the help. I bet it brings you a lot of personal fulfillment.  
I hope you are doing OK. I suspect you are. Your sunny disposition and optimism have sustained you through some very awful times.  
You stay busy and take care of yourself now. You are in my thoughts.  
Hugs, Diane
- Thanks for sending this. Your Dad is really an amazing man!! Unbelievable what he survived and how strong his mother was. I feel sick just imagining what they loved through. But he is definitely a survivor in every sense of the word. How amazing to start such a challenging new career at his age!! Really admirable. At a time when he could retire and take it easy he's using his deep empathy and strength to help and inspire in such a challenging setting. D
- Hi Bob,  
Loved seeing you enjoying the work you are doing, which literally changes people's lives. I learned this by going to the talks Jack gives to 7th and 8th graders as well as High School students They understand the importance of education and SURVIVAL and are inspired by your stories making them realize if people like you and Jack can survive and achieve their goals it gives them the courage to know they can better their lives too..  
LIFE IS not easy for the children from inner city schools and your stories give them the courage to follow their dreams. I taught 2nd grade in a so-called Deprived 4 story school in Brooklyn.....the children hid in the stairwells at night to keep warm. We had to line up in the school yard even if the temperatures dropped into the teens, I did not mind the cold temperatures because I was dressed for it but the "kids" wore skimpy cotton clothes and were "freezing" I realized then I would have to bring food and clothes, visit their homes , to try to understand them better.  
So dear Bob take care, is healthy and enjoy the blessings you have.  
Love Joyce and Jack
- Hi Bob,  
Yes, I saw the wonderful article about you and shared it with my husband. I also cut it out to share at our upcoming team meeting.  
Congratulations for being recognized for your passion, compassion and dedication.  
See you soon, Denise
- Bob,  
I sent your article below to my Mother. She asked for it. And I sent this to some friends also. Amazing story. Many holocaust survivors shut out the world. You embrace life and keep the traumatic story alive for others to know. I really admire you. Shocking to see some of the negative comments to the article -- in 2011. But I see Mindy came to the rescue. :)  
Best regards, Greg
- Sent: Wed, Oct 26, 2011  
Subject: RE: Great Article  
Thank you for sharing your story with me. I've received a lot of good feedback. I'll send you a few of the best emails when I get off deadline this week. And I'm passing your contact info along to a couple of people interested in having you speak.  
I think your story was a wonderful antidote for readers sick of all the bad news these days.  
Sandy Banks / Columnist Los Angeles Times

- To: Banks, Sandy  
Belated Comments

I always read and enjoy your columns and apologize for taking so long to compliment your good work. Your strong words today about LAUSD hit home and are appreciated. I'm a retired elementary school principal, although I still work as needed in interim assignments; I enjoy the work and believe strongly in public education. Thank you.

Thank you also for Saturday's moving and uplifting column about Bob Geminder. He's a close friend of good friends who live two houses up from my husband and me. We've met him on several social occasions. He's a very gentle man. We were unaware of his Holocaust experience. Amazing and awe-inspiring. Again, many thanks for your fine work.

Anne Elder

- To: Banks, Sandy  
Subject: Adding up life's many gifts

Sandy, Thank you so much for the wonderful story about the life of Robert Geminder. It was very personal and inspiring to me. I am not a holocaust survivor, but I lived in Poland as a very young boy in 1938. I am American born (like you in Cleveland]. My mother was born in Poland. At the time I was her only child. My father brought her over after their marriage. She became very homesick for her family that she left behind and was able to convince my father let her go back for a visit. She took me of course and I believe were there, in Krakow, for nearly two years?

In any event I became very attached to her loving family; grandmother, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, etc. To make a long story short, with very few exceptions I never saw the vast majority again - you guessed it; as Jews they were all murdered.

The Holocaust, the horrible deaths of my family, anti-Semitism in Cleveland during the war years, as well as anti-Semitism I had to put up while in the military has weighted heavily on me. To deny that man is basically has been difficult for me. My attitude affected my marriage. Yet here is a man; Robert Geminder, who suffered a most terrible childhood, an almost unbelievable one, who not only survived, but now lives a life of helping and giving to students. What a wonderful human! So very inspiring! Thank you again for the story. Would like to see you someday. I read all your excellent stories.

Marvin Warren