



Assembly honors Holocaust survivors

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Assemblywoman Bonnie Lowenthal also holds event for five residents.

By Mary Scott, Peninsula News

Uri Urmacher cannot remember his mother's face but, to this day, can see clearly the bombs that fell from the Polish sky in 1938.

After living in Nazi-occupied France, **Marthe Cohn** joined the French resistance and spied on German troops. Two daring escapes — one from a Polish ghetto and another from a train headed to Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp — saved the lives of **Robert Geminder**, and his mother and brother.

Dr. Gunther Bauer and Steve Kovary were rescued through the work of humanitarians Carl Lutz and Raoul Wallenberg.

The aforementioned Palos Verdes residents are survivors of the Jewish Holocaust. Between the late 1930s and 1945, approximately 6 million Jews were put to death by Germany's Nazi regime.

Commemorating the lives lost and those of the remaining survivors, the California Assembly hosted California Holocaust Memorial Week, the week of April 12. Four of the five residents traveled to Sacramento for the Assembly's annual Holocaust Memorial Ceremony, held on April 19.

"It's an opportunity to acknowledge the devastation of lives ... and at the same time know that we have survivors with us that want to and need to let their story be known, so that it will never happen again," said Assemblywoman Bonnie Lowenthal, D-Long Beach.

This year, the program included American World War II veterans, who liberated the concentration camps. The veterans were invited by Assemblyman Dan Logue, whose father was a liberator.

"[Logue] said his father always wondered what happened to the people that they found in the camps as the war ended ... This is a way [for them to] see that many did go on with their lives but didn't forget what happened there," Lowenthal said.

Lowenthal also honored the five survivors in a local ceremony on Friday at the Los Verdes Golf Club in Rancho Palos Verdes. "I wanted to give them the recognition and respect that they deserve on behalf of the people of the 54th Assembly District," she added.

Survivors were paired with high school students, who interviewed them and wrote an essay about their experiences. The Assembly published the stories in the "2010 Holocaust Memorial Book," which will be available in all three Palos Verdes Library District libraries.

"It is extremely important that young people are involved ... In listening to our stories, these students have understood the consequences of intolerance," Cohn said. Cohn published her memoir, "Behind Enemy Lines,"

in 2002, a couple of years after receiving the M/daille Militaire from the French government.

Fearing for their lives, **Cohn** and her family moved from Lorraine, France, to Poitiers, a town 400 miles away from the German border. They were not to escape the war for long.

In May 1940, Germans bombed the town. Instead of running, Cohn joined the French resistance as a spy.

Being fluent in German, the blonde-haired Jewish girl crossed the lines to learn about troop movements and reported back to the Allies. Most of Cohn's immediate family survived the war. Her older sister Stephanie did not. She was arrested and sent to Auschwitz. She was never heard from again.

"We can only guess what happened," Cohn said.

It was only 14 years ago that Cohn began to talk about the war. "It's very difficult to talk about these events to people who have not participated," she said. "Because they couldn't understand that." "When I arrived in the United States in 1956, which was 10 years after the war, not one person asked me how I survived," she continued. "Not one."

Urmacher was a small child at the start of the war. His hometown, Siedlce, Poland, was bombed for two days in 1938. "Even today, I see the bombs coming. I was 3 years old," he said.

His family fled north to Russia and stayed with his father's cousin. The Russians captured the family and put them in a camp. His mother died there of cholera.

"I see her in the corner ... and I'm trying to get to her, but she doesn't let me go near her," he said of his last memory of her. His father remarried. Soon after, his stepmother and father took Urmacher and his sister to an orphanage, where the siblings were separated for nearly five years. As a child, Urmacher scavenged for clothing and was witness to several massacres.

"One day we were on a train, and the Polish attacked us; not the Germans, the Polish!" he said.

After the war, Urmacher was put on an American ship called the Exodus, which was headed for Palestine. The ship was intercepted off the coast by the British, and after a fight, was turned around. The more-than-4,500 Jewish survivors aboard the ship were sent back to Germany.

The incident captured international attention. Because of what happened to the passengers aboard the Exodus, the United Nations divided Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states, he said.

Like Cohn, Urmacher did not talk about what happened to him during the Holocaust. He instead focused on studying and work.

"I was excellent in my work, and there is only one reason ... I was hitting the books. I could not go to sleep," he said. "I do not like to go to sleep. Because when I go to sleep, I have nightmares. Terrible nightmares."

Geminder was 4 years old when the war began. He and his brother, George, were growing up in a large, loving family in Wroclaw, Poland. Life changed in 1939, when the family began running from the Nazis. His grandfather was captured by the Gestapo, and his father, Mano, died the day before the Nazis occupied Stanislawow, where the family stayed. The Nazis killed 12,000 Jews that day.

The rest of the family survived but were separated. Geminder's grandmother found him and his brother, and

brought them home to their mother. Stanislawow then became a locked ghetto.

Realizing they would be terminated soon, his mother orchestrated an escape for her and her sons. They stayed on the run, moving from town to town, leaving before anyone realized they were Jewish.

The Germans caught up with them and forced them on a train to Auschwitz. Again, his mother planned an escape. "I'm just lucky to be alive [because of] my mother's bravery and luck," Geminder said. "When we were shipped to Auschwitz, she made sure we got on a train that was open on top. Most of them were closed cattle cars; this one was open on top. "As luck would have it," he continued, "the train stopped about a 100 yards from Auschwitz."

Geminder was lifted over the top of the train car. He unlocked the door, allowing his family to get out. They ran. Of his family, only Geminder, his mother and his brother survived the war.

In Hungary, many Jewish people were saved through the efforts of Wallenberg, the Swedish counsel general, and Lutz, the Swiss ambassador.

Both **Bauer and Kovary** were "beneficiaries" of these men, Kovary said.

"I owe my life to the gentlemen, one of whom paid for it with his life," Kovary said, adding that Wallenberg and Lutz were responsible for the largest percentage of survivors in Eastern Europe. The two men, along with the Japanese ambassador to Hungary, stood up to the Germans and saved many lives. Wallenberg was trapped by the Russians and executed.

"Stalin was equally anti-Semitic and hated Jews as much as Hitler," Kovary said.

Kovary was put into a Red Cross safe house, although, he said, it wasn't that safe.

"Many children were taken and never seen again," he said.

Bauer, too, was placed in a safe house. He was taken there when his father was forced into a labor camp.

When the Hungarian Nazis raided the safe house, he was "herded" into another house in the Budapest.

The teenager escaped the ghetto using a Boy Scout identification card that stated he was a Lutheran. He then became a food runner, bribing guards to let him bring food to the people who still lived there. He used a cart for carrying the dead to transport the food.

Kovary never shared his experiences except with Bauer, he said, who had a similar experience.

Kovary said it's time to speak up. "How will the legacy live on?" Kovary asked. "How do we pass on this history?"

Geminder has been active for about 30 years in talking about the Holocaust to students and community members. "I feel drained when I'm finished, but I feel good about getting the word out," he said.

Today, the memory of the Holocaust is under attack in Arabic parts of the world. Leaders in the Middle East have stated publicly that the Jewish Holocaust is a hoax.

For Cohn, Urmacher, Geminder, Kovary and Bauer, the Holocaust was real. They lived through it and they won't forget the atrocities and loss of family members.

"For survivors, it's not easy," Urmacher said. "The memories, all the time, are there."

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