

An unprivileged childhood

by Paul Browning

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Robert Geminder, his escape from the death trains



Robert Geminder at his new career as math teacher at Calle Mayor School, Torrance.
Photo by Mary Jane Schoenheider

Robert Geminder crouched down in the back of a sprawling cemetery in Stanislawow, Poland, with his mother, brother, grandmother and 20,000 other Jews to avoid being shot by snipers. Near the front of the graveyard, German soldiers systematically executed close to 14,000 men, women and children. They pushed the lifeless bodies into mass graves as they ate ham sandwiches.

As the sky began to fade, and snow started to fall, the Germans decided to send the remaining 6,000 people back to their

apartments.

"I only survived because we happened to get to the cemetery first. Survival for Jews during this war was about luck. Arriving first put us way back. They started killing the people in the front of the cemetery first," says Geminder, now 70 and a 41-year resident of Rancho Palos Verdes. "The difference between living and dying, that day, was when you got there."

World War II began in 1939, two years before the cemetery massacre. At that time Geminder was only four years old and living in a "nice house" in his hometown of Bielsko in Southern Poland. On August 30, 1939, the day before Germany launched the war with its Blitzkrieg into Poland, nonstop bombing devastated the small town.

During the relentless bombing, Geminder and his father Mendel Mano Geminder attempted to barricade the windows of their house. Overcome with fear and stress, his father suffered a heart attack and died. The Blitzkrieg was a success, enabling the Nazis to take Poland in just one month. Warsaw surrendered on September 28, 1939.

As the troops invaded, his grandfather was executed on the street, leaving Geminder, his mother Bertha, grandmother Golde Glotzer and brother George homeless, but far from helpless.

Fleeing east from the Germans, they attempted to cross into Russia but were turned away. They stayed in Stanislawow until 1941. A ghetto was established in the city to control the Jewish people. Many were refugees from other cities. The Nazis created nearly 300 ghettos during the war, scattered throughout countries such as Poland, Hungary and Rumania. Before the war roughly three million Jews called Poland home, the largest Jewish population

in the world at that time. Approximately 97 percent of those people were killed.

"The Germans put us in the ghetto. I saw daily hangings, children being killed — thrown against walls. Fortunately, all four of us were still together," says Geminder. "The Jews served as a work force for the Germans. My mother would go out of the ghetto every day through the gates and work. It was slave labor. Somehow she was able to snatch a piece of bread, or a potato ... something she could hide on her body and bring us to eat. Food was extremely scarce. I was hungry for six years straight."

More than intuition

Driven by her survival instinct, cunning and unimaginable fear, Geminder's mother and grandmother risked their lives to protect the two boys on a daily basis. Teamed with dogs, soldiers often searched the ghetto for those they considered undesirable. Geminder's grandmother knew the Germans were coming one evening. She had the boys hide in a pantry, then piled wood in front of the door. The wood disguised the boys' scent and saved their lives.

"Close to one-hundred incidents like this happened to me from 1939 to 1945. Each incident had to be a 'yes,' because if one thing was a no, I wouldn't be talking to you today," Geminder says. "Everything had to always turn out just right. That's why the probability of survival was so low. If my grandma didn't take the time to pile the wood, I wouldn't be alive."

In 1942 his mother heard news that the entire ghetto was going to be "liquidated." She quickly devised a plan to escape.

"My mother hid me under her skirt and put my brother under her friend's skirt. Then they walked out of the ghetto to go to work," says Geminder.

"She hid us in a closet all day while she worked. In the evening we escaped, never to return to the ghetto. When I lecture about the holocaust at schools, kids they often ask me, 'How can a six and eight-year-old be quiet all day in a closet?'"

"That's a good question," Geminder said he thought at the time. "I couldn't even keep my own children quiet for 10 minutes. Fear changes everything."

One positive thing did happen for his mother Bertha while in the ghetto. She met Emil Brotfeld, Geminder's stepfather and an essential character in their survival. He escaped from the ghetto by bribing the German guards. His stepfather was a "tremendous blessing." Occasionally, the Germans would catch him and put a gun to his head.

"Shoot me, I don't care," he would say, according to Geminder. "The Germans would let him go because he was so brave."

Tragically, Geminder's grandmother's "extremely intelligent" mind and wit was no match for the Nazis' evil plans. She died when the ghetto was liquidated two weeks after her family escaped.

Out of the ghetto, Geminder, his mother, stepfather and his brother lived as non-Jews in Warsaw, constantly moving from place to place, trying to stay away from the Germans. Bertha's fair complexion and red hair aided in their discretion, though there were many occasions that their covers were nearly blown.

Final escape:

The family was caught in 1944 in The Warsaw Uprising, a 63-day armed struggle by the Polish Home Army to liberate Warsaw from Nazi rule. Nearly 300,000 Poles perished, most in mass executions conducted by advancing German troops. After the uprising failed, the Germans decided to destroy Warsaw's remaining population, Jew and non-Jew alike. Trains were packed with people for transport to Auschwitz, the infamous concentration camp where the Nazis engaged in genocide, killing an estimated 2.5 million people.

"Once again my mother saved all our lives. She held us back when everyone was rushing for the trains. Because we were Jews, we knew what was going to happen. The rest of the Polish people didn't know. This was one of the very few times back then when it was good to be a Jew," says Geminder. "My mother noticed that one of the cattle cars was opened on top, so we rushed in there. When the train stopped about 100 yards from Auschwitz, my stepfather lifted me over the open ceiling. Somehow I was able to reach over, pull up a heavy steel latch and open the door. We all four escaped."

The family took refuge in a farmhouse. The Russian Army liberated Poland a few months later on its way to Berlin. Eventually, the family crossed into Slovakia, then into West Germany, which was a bit of a challenge, where they made their home in a Displaced People Camp run by the United Nations. By 1947 they had arrived in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where American members of their family lived.

Geminder entered school in the seventh grade when they reached the U.S. After years of fighting to survive every day, now his only major concern was figuring out how to speak the language.

"The only English I knew were four-letter words that I learned in the Displaced People Camp," he says. "But I was able to catch up and graduate high school at the proper age of seventeen."

After high school Geminder attended Carnegie Mellon University and studied engineering. He worked as an electrical engineer until the age of 69. Deservingly, Geminder's mother and stepfather enjoyed long lives. They passed away in the late 1990s. His brother George died from cancer in the late 1980s.

"A little bored" and wanting to try something new, Geminder started substitute teaching and enrolled at Loyola Marymount University (LMU) last year to get a Master's Degree and teaching credential. He believes nearly 15 years of lecturing in many local schools about surviving the holocaust guided him toward his new career.

Geminder now teaches science and algebra full-time at Calle Mayor Middle School in Torrance and is in his second semester at LMU. His wife Judy is a former business owner on the Peninsula. Their three children are daughters Mindy and Ellen and their son Shia.

"I once spoke at Washington, a tough school in Los Angeles. There must have been four classes in the audience," he says. "They later told me that they have never seen the kids so quiet for 45 minutes. 'How did you do it?' they asked. Something like that interests everyone. The kids were spellbound."