

# *California Holocaust Memorial Week*

*April 12 – April 18, 2010*



*Assemblymember Ira Ruskin  
21<sup>st</sup> Assembly District*



*Assemblymember Marty Block  
78<sup>th</sup> Assembly District*

## Holocaust Survivors and World War II Veterans to Be Honored At State Capitol during Holocaust Memorial Week Ceremony

**SACRAMENTO** – Holocaust survivors and World War II veteran concentration camp liberators will be honored during a special ceremony in the Capitol on April 19, 2010, at 12:00 p.m., as part of Holocaust Memorial Week. More than 40 survivors, veteran liberators and their guests from around the state are expected to attend – to share survival stories and memorialize those who lost their lives. The ceremony is part of the State Assembly’s annual Holocaust Memorial Project and will be hosted by Assembly members Ira Ruskin (D-Redwood City) and Marty Block (D-San Diego). During the event, Assembly Concurrent Resolution 31, which formally proclaims April 12 to April 18 as California Holocaust Memorial Week, will be presented on the Assembly floor.

The event’s keynote speaker is [Rabbi Denise Eger](#), founding rabbi of Congregation Kol-Ami in West Hollywood, and Vice President of the Southern California Board of Rabbis. Eger was ordained as rabbi in 1988 and has served pulpits in Canada, New York and Los Angeles. She will also serve as chaplain at the event.

This is the eighth year of the Assembly’s Holocaust Memorial Project. In addition to the ceremony at the State Capitol, each year students interview survivors and write essays about their Holocaust experiences. The essays are bound into books and distributed to ceremony participants, as well as to students and schools, survivors and veterans, legislators, libraries and community organizations. This is the first year that the book of essays includes stories of World War II veterans who liberated concentration camps.

“It’s vital that we keep and share this knowledge – that we teach our children and future generations that acts of heroism during the Holocaust serve as a powerful example of how our nation and our citizens can and must respond to acts of hatred and inhumanity,” Ruskin said.

“Preserving the memories of the six million who perished in the Holocaust and telling the stories of the survivors, indeed creating a living memorial, is not only our duty but it is how we send the message to the next generation of ‘never again’,” Block said.

During the ceremony, survivors and veterans will join assembly members at their desks. Students and other participants will be invited to sit in the gallery. A luncheon will follow the ceremony.

April 19, 2010

Dear Friends,

We are proud to present the 2010 California Holocaust Memorial Book. For the past seven years, the California State Assembly has honored survivors during California Holocaust Memorial Week in April. Through this project, California extols the lives and experiences of the survivors of the Holocaust, gives remembrance to the millions who lost their lives, and helps to ensure that people understand the horrors of genocide. We are excited to introduce a new dimension to this project; the inclusion of oral histories from World War II veterans who liberated the concentration camps in Europe.

Inside this book you will find powerful portrayals of courage and survival during one of human history's most horrific periods. Students participating in this project met individually with Holocaust survivors, veteran liberators and others throughout the State of California, to learn their stories and recount them in the essays presented here. Through interviews with survivors many young Californians gained an expanded appreciation for the courage of Holocaust survivors who bravely endured so much suffering. Others came to understand what our nation's veterans witnessed when they heroically liberated concentration camps throughout Europe. The courage of survivors and liberators will endure through the stories told in this book.

Survivors and veterans from throughout California are invited to sit with Assemblymembers on the Assembly floor during the Holocaust Memorial Ceremony.

We are honored to have had the opportunity to coordinate this project, and we appreciate the support and participation of the survivors, veterans, students and our colleagues. We are confident that this project will continue to thrive, as we celebrate those who have survived to tell their stories, promote the need for tolerance in society and ensure that the Holocaust is never forgotten.

Sincerely,



MARTY BLOCK  
Assemblymember, 78<sup>th</sup> District



IRA RUSKIN  
Assemblymember, 21<sup>st</sup> District

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*Is honored to present the story of*  
*Holocaust survivor*

*Robert Geminder*

*Interviewed by Yevgeniya Sosnovskaya*

*Robert Geminder*

*By Yevgeniya Sosnovskaya*

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Holocaust through the Eyes of a Child

A child does not see the world through the same eyes as an adult. He absorbs the world around as a giant playground: forever expanding, always changing and full of excitement. A child cannot perceive war and death. He cannot understand murdering people for their ethnicity; he does not even know the meaning of the word 'ethnicity.' He knows that he is a Jew because his parents, his neighbors and his friends tell him, but he does not know that it is his ethnicity that makes him different from others.

Robert Geminder was only four years old when World War II began. He was born on August 3, 1935, in Wroclaw, Poland. He and his older brother George were growing up in a wonderful family, surrounded with love and attention of many relatives and friends. And then came the year 1939. Most likely, George and Robert did not notice any changes. Being young boys, they could not read the signs "Jews and dogs not allowed" on the doors of cafes and restaurants, and did not know that their mother could not buy food anywhere because nobody would sell her, a Jew, anything. They did not understand why one day their parents packed in a hurry, and they had to leave their house, filled with toys, memories and familiar colors and smells. (But they certainly saw that the adults were scared and it made the kids scared, too.) It was then that they first heard the words "war", and "Nazi" - but those were just words for them, just empty shells. Those shells became filled with meaning later: when their family was running from the Germans; when their grandfather was taken by Gestapo; when their father, Mano Geminder, died a day before the German army occupied Stanislawow. In that very city of Stanislawow, on October 12, 1941 the empty shells of the words "Nazi" and "death" must have turned into horrible monsters for two young boys.

On that day, twelve thousand Jews were murdered in the city cemetery by the order of Gestapo. In the early morning, the Germans burst into the houses where Jewish families lived and kicked them out to the streets. As Robert's mother remembered later: "thousands and thousands of people. Sick and young, the very old and babies..." Families with children were put on the trucks, others walked behind. Very soon people began to realize that the road they followed was the road to the cemetery. What were they thinking then? Who can tell now? The enormity of the genocide – mass murder of people just for the reason of their ethnicity – can not be comprehended by normal human beings. Most likely, till the very last moment those men, women, children – did not believe the reality of what was happening. Bertl Geminder remembered: "They took the people all day. The people in the front, who came last, were first to die. When it got dark... We heard that whoever is left can go home... All of a sudden we felt that we were squeezed together. The Germans were holding hands around us, what was left ... about 3,000 people, and they were squeezing us until one fell on top of the other, like a pyramid. I saw both of the boys falling to the ground... but I could not move a finger out of my position. I was falling to the ground on a heap of people..."

Miraculously, the Geminder family survived that horror. The boys lost consciousness, and their mother could not find them under the bodies. She was forced away by her brother from that awful place and left, almost sure that her mother and two sons were dead. But her boys survived: Robert's grandmother found them and brought them home. It was truly, a miracle. The Jews, who lived through the massacre, were locked in the Stanislawow ghetto. Two little boys now lived a very different life - in a tiny, crowded, filthy apartment, in the room that they had to share with several other families, with no food to eat and very few clothes to wear. George was eight years old, and Robert was six. Children in ghetto were a hindrance. They could not work, they were no use. Periodically, Germans would raid the ghetto with dogs, looking for children and killing those they found right on the spot. The brothers had to learn many of new things: how to stay motionless for hours and how to hold their breath - when their grandmother hid them in the pantry during such "purges"; how to eat little crumbles of food that their mother managed to bring from her work outside the ghetto; and how to walk in the ghetto and stay invisible from the Germans. During such short walks they could see the bodies of Gestapo victims, hanging from lamp posts, scattered on the streets...

Realizing that the ghetto would be terminated soon, the boys' mother, Bertl, took a giant risk and managed to take her children outside of the ghetto. Her girlfriends hid them under their skirts and they passed the checkpoint, unnoticed. Bertl brought the boys to her work place and hid them in the closet where Robert and George had to stand silent and still for hours, with no food or water. After work, Bertl retrieved her boys and they fled to Warsaw, where they had to live as gentiles. However, both Robert and George still were under a constant threat, because with their dark hair and eyes they looked Jewish to many people. Bertl, striving to ensure the survival of her two boys, found a couple who lived on a farm outside of Krakow. She made a deal with them: after the war they would receive two apartment buildings that she owned in Germany, for the guaranteed safety of her children. The couple agreed, and the children were once again separated from their mother, and forced to live with a family they did not know and adapt to customs they did not understand, including going to catholic mass every Sunday. They must have felt so alone, only having each other in the whole world. But even that was to be taken away from them.

Once, when Robert and George attended mass on Sunday, George forgot to remove his hat, and instantly, rumors began to spread that the boy was Jewish. The scared farmers now wanted to send the boys back. Their mother, however, could not take both. She came and picked up only George, leaving Robert behind. At the peak of the war, in 1942, a seven years old Robert was left all alone, forced to hide in a cramped attic, forbidden to come out for the fear of people recognizing him as the brother of a Jewish boy.

Robert remained trapped in that attic for two and a half months, often left without food or water for days. At nighttime he sneaked out of the attic window and picked fruit from nearby trees and ate eggs from the chicken coop. Finally, Robert's mother returned for him. The boy was filthy, with lice in his hair, and the dirt and grime crusted onto his skin, but - alive. She took Robert back with her, to a town just outside of Warsaw. From then on, the family was forced to move from town to town, from city to city, always too afraid to stay in one place too long, because at any moment

somebody could recognize them as Jews. In 1944, the Russian army was approaching Poland. Bertl and her second husband, Emil, decided that the family would be safer in a large city, so they moved to Warsaw. At this point, the Polish underground in Warsaw rose up against the Germans. The Poles could not hold out and eventually Germans took over the city. Robert and his family were caught up in the rebellion and Germans sent them to Auschwitz along with thousands of others.

Bertl knew that Auschwitz meant certain death for any Jew. When they were brought to the train station, she noticed that one car of the train did not have a roof. She rushed to that car with her family and they managed to squeeze in, hoping for the miracle. And the miracle happened. Not reaching Auschwitz, the train made a sudden stop. Robert's step-father helped him out over the wall of the roofless car, and told him to open the door, locked from the outside. Little Robert managed to do just that and the family ran, never looking back. They found refuge in a farmhouse belonging to a Polish gentile family. Later, they went to yet another town and found a place to live. In 1944, the Russian army liberated that town. Soon after that, the Geminder family moved to Czechoslovakia, and from there – to Germany, to the American territory. They stayed in the American camp for refugees for awhile and then, in 1945, immigrated to the United States. Their new life began. In this new life there were many events and many people and also – there were memories.

And yes, it's true that a child sees the world through different eyes than an adult, but these children – survivors of the Holocaust – were not children anymore. After all they had experience, after all the horrors they had seen – their eyes were not children's eyes anymore. And their memories were not children's memories. For many years Robert Geminder kept these memories and shared them others. He prepared a publication consists of interviews with his mother, in which she tells her story of survival, day by day. He accepted numerous invitations to speak about Holocaust at schools, libraries, colleges and other venues. He spoke – and continues to speak - of his childhood that never was. His story, through the years, we hear the voices of millions of little boys and girls who wanted so little – just to be children – but whose lives were destroyed by the Holocaust. We must keep these voices in our memories and tell our children about them.

In 2008 Robert earned a master's degree in secondary education after he worked as an electrical engineer for 48 years. He currently teaches math at Opportunities Unlimited Charter High School in Los Angeles. He was inspired by the interactions with children and decided to change career as a way of giving back to the educational system and making positive difference in students' lives.

For more on Robert's holocaust experience refer to his web site: [www.geminder.us](http://www.geminder.us)

Visitors of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. can not miss the plaque with the words on it: "Thou shalt not be a victim. Thou shalt not be a perpetrator. Above all, thou shalt not be a bystander." Nobody's eyes – no adults' and no children's – must see another Holocaust. But history does not happen by itself. We make it happen.