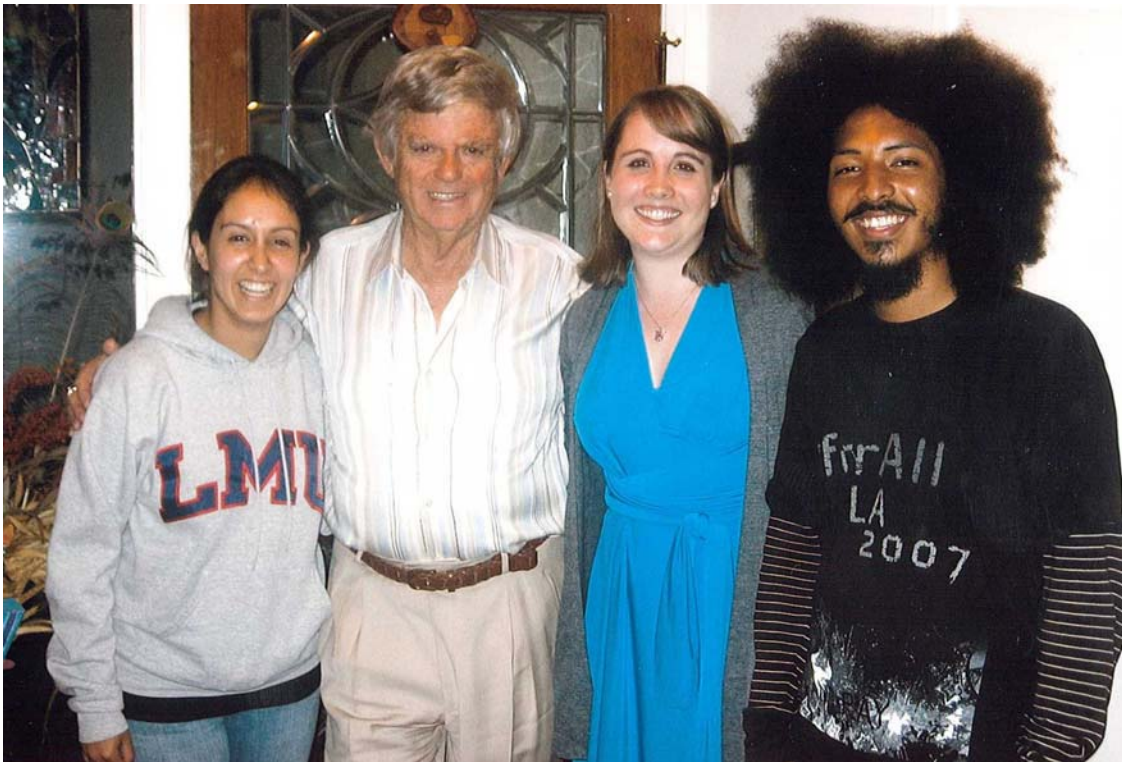


Luck

A Survivors Story



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May, 2010

It was summer in Wroclaw, Poland. Saturday August 3rd, 1935 Robert Geminder was born to Mano and Bertl. His brother George was two years older than Robert, and the Geminder's were very wealthy. Robert and his family helped to make up the 3 million Jewish people living in Poland in the 1930's.

In 1939, the Second World War started and the Jewish people were discriminated against by the German Nazi party. Robert was just 4 years old when he and his family had to move.

The Nazi's came into their house, uninvited. They didn't even knock. "You have 30 minutes to get out."

"No sweetie, you can't take your toys." Robert's mother told him. Robert followed his parents out of his house, with just his little suitcase.

Then the walk started. They had to walk to Warsaw. Whenever they could, Roberts father would lift him onto the back of a wagon and they could ride for a little while. But then they had to walk again. It took them several months to complete the journey.

The family settled in Stanislawow.

"Robert, you come here." His grandmother Golde was also staying in Stanislawow. His uncle, aunt and cousins on his mother's side were also staying there. The family felt much safer if they were together. They lived there until 1941 when Germany decided they wanted Russia out of Poland.

The bombs and bullets where flying.

"George, go help your mother." His father said. Mano was trying to cover the window with a mattress. "It will keep the shattered glass out." He explained. Robert went over to help him, little hands pushing at the bottom, larger hands pushing at the top. But then the larger hands fell away as Mano clutched at his chest.

"Moma!" Robert called. Bertl ran into the street, any where to find a doctor to help her husband. But it wasn't any good, Mano suffered a heart attack and died. Outside the window, the Germans goal to take over Poland succeeded.



Mano and Bertl: Married 1931

The Jews of Stanislawow numbered close to 20,000. After the Germans came in, Robert got his first taste of what the Nazis were doing to the Jews.

"Get into the square. All Jews into the town square." The Germans rounded them up and made them start marching.

"Moma, where are we going?"

"Hush George. Don't stand out." Bertl whispered as they were pushed to the back of a cemetery. Robert clutched his mother's hand, Grandma Golde and the rest of the family were with him. He couldn't see over all the grown ups in front of him, but he knew something was wrong. Then the gun shots started, rapid fire, and the people in the back dropped to the ground.

12,000 Jews were dead by midnight. Everyone lifted their head to peek around, all trying not to be seen moving.

"Everyone else, leave." Was demanded harshly. Suddenly the cemetery was full of life, people running toward the back away from the guns. Robert's hand slid out of his mother's. He looked around the forest of long legs until he saw the shorter ones of his brother.

"George." George didn't know where Bertl was either. They grabbed their hands to not be separated. Suddenly they were separated and the mad rush of people pulled them to the ground and they passed out.

"Boys, you come with me." It was Grandma Golde. She too had been separated from the family and when looking for her scarf found the boys. The crowd around them was thinning. Grandma Golde walked them down the streets of Stanislawow until they were on the family's street.

"Moma!"

"George! Robert!" Bertl clung to her children amazed they were still alive. The family had thought the three were dead.

Three days later, the Nazis were back. They had to leave again.

"Moma, why are there fences?" George asked. Robert had also never seen the fences and didn't understand them.

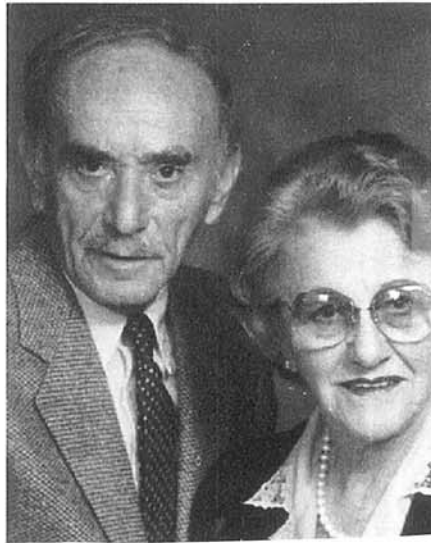
The ghetto his mother called it. All of the Jews that were left in Stanislawow, about 6000, were packed into the ghetto, only sixteen blocks wide. George and Robert were not allowed to play outside. It was not safe, as the Germans patrolled the ghetto and killed people daily.

Everyday Bertl and the grownups were marched out somewhere and Robert and George were left with Golde.

One night, Bertl came home with her friend, Emil. He had a plan to get them out of the ghetto, but Golde wouldn't listen. It was too dangerous to her to defy the Nazis. But Bertl wasn't going to let her kids stay in such a place. Emil had known something bad was going to happen.

Golde, the grandmother, was watching the boys one day while Bertl was working. The Germans came in with dogs. Golde knew that the dogs could find kids who couldn't help. She acted fast and shoved Robert and George in the closet. The boys heard things

being stacked against the door. There was muffled talking, sniffing and ten minutes of terrorized silence in the closet. Then Golde's face appeared. She had stacked raw wood against the closet and the dogs could only smell the wood; not the boys. They were safe.



Emil and Bertl

Two weeks later, Robert was under his mother's skirt. George was under the skirt of a family friend and they were marched out of the ghetto with Bertl to go to work. They were in the middle of the pack, no one noticed the two extra pairs of tiny feet. Bertl found an abandoned closet.

"You wait here, until I come back. Do not move. Do not open the door. Stay here. I will be back." She closed the door. Robert and George stayed in the dark all day.

"George, I'm scared." Robert said.

"Sh. Moma said she would be back. She will be." George was so confident in voice. They stayed there forever. Then, the door creaked open.

"Come now. Quietly." Bertl ushered them out of the closet. The streets were empty of people. Emil met them at the train station and they left Stanislawow. The train ride to Warsaw was long, but they stayed unnoticed.

Twelve days after they left on the train, the German's killed everyone in the ghetto; Grandma Golde was gone.

Emil's sister lived in Warsaw, that is why they went there. She was Jewish as well, but nobody knew because she married a non-Jew; they called them gentile. They moved into Warsaw and blended in. They acted Catholic. They were not expected of being Jewish. But then, Robert got typhus.

The only way to save him was to take him to the hospital.

"But the doctors will know Bertl." Emil said. "Only Jewish boys are circumcised. They will know and they will turn us in." But Robert's life was more important. Bertl only cared for her children lives. They were going to continue the family. She checked him into the hospital under a fake name; Robert Kaminsky.

"Speak only Polish." Bertl said to him. "Not German, or they will know." Robert knew, he was supposed to blend in. But the doctors and nurses knew. Robert heard them in hushed tones, whispering so the other patients wouldn't know.

They didn't turn him in. Once Robert got well enough, he would help the nurses care for other patients.

"You take care of him." The Nurse told Bertl as Robert was going home. "Keep him safe." The hospital staff loved the cute little boy too much to risk his life by turning him over to the Nazis; that was almost certain death.

"Keep him safe" the nurse had said. That was what Bertl intended to do. She knew of people who were willing to keep the children on their farm. They were a Catholic family.

"You keep my children safe, and I will give you one of our land holdings in return." Robert and George listened outside the door. Their mother was leaving them here to keep them safe. The family agreed to the deal.

The boys blended into the Catholic family, going to church with them every Sunday. They played on the farm with the children and didn't worry about the Germans.

But George made a mistake one day in Church. Instead of taking his hat off for prayer, like the Catholics do, George kept it on, like the Jewish do. People noticed.

"You must come and get them. They are drawing attention to themselves." The family wrote to Bertl and she came back. But she could only take one boy at a time.

Since George started the suspicion, he left with Bertl first.

"I will come back for you." She whispered to Robert. He nodded and watched them walk away.

"You can't stay in the house. It's too dangerous." The family said. Robert climbed the ladder into the hay loft and stayed hidden there.

Robert was 7 years old and stuck in a hay loft. He was very bored. He could only play so much up there and he wasn't allowed down during the day. One night, the family never brought him food, and he was very hungry. Robert looked out the window.

"No one will see me." He thought, and he climbed down the ladder. In the dark, he was free to wander the farm looking for food because he was very hungry. The pigs hadn't eaten all of their dinner, and it was the only food he could find; so he ate it. This was the first of many nights that the family forgot about him. One he took eggs from the chicken coop and he ate them raw.

Robert stayed in the hay loft, coming down at night to wander when it was safe. He didn't bathe, he barely ate, and he was very bored. Ten weeks later, his mother came back.

"I had to wait Robert. To make sure it was safe." Bertl said as Robert climbed down to meet her. "Ach! You are filthy. The lice are jumping off you." Bertl scrubbed Robert clean and took him back home to Warsaw.

That winter in Warsaw, they put a Christmas tree up in the window to appear more Catholic.

They needed a way to make money, and Bertl always had a plan. She was always making money some way on the black market. One day she got a lot of tobacco; the boys helped rolling cigarettes to sell. Also, because the money was tight Robert and George would borrow potatoes from nearby farms. The family somehow found food. It was 1943.

In 1944, the Russians were coming to take Poland back over. There were stories floating around the Warsaw community of the viciousness of the Russian Soldiers. They stormed through Poland, causing terror and mayhem. But they stopped across the river from Warsaw, and waited.

Bertl had moved the family to Warsaw because she thought they would be safer from the Russians, and blend in better in a larger city.

But the Polish underground rose up against the Germans. They wanted Poland back to themselves. The battle was the worst Warsaw had seen. Most of the city was destroyed by the Germans fighting the underground. Eventually, the Germans won and cleared Warsaw of its population.

They were put into Cattle cars.

"Wait Robert. Wait until I say." Emil said as Robert joined the crowd to enter the train. They waited while Poles and Jews alike were packed into the train.

"That one Emil." Bertl said. The car had no ceiling on it. "At least we will be able to breath." She said, holding Robert and George's hands as she climbed into the train. Robert stayed by Emil on the train ride. Day after day they rushed through the Polish country side.

"Emil. They are taking us to Auschwitz." Bertl said. Robert looked up at her. There was no room to sit or lay down. Everyone had to stand the entire time. Emil nodded.

"I have a plan." He said. After standing for a very long time, Robert was very tired. He was only 9 years old and hadn't sat down or really slept in a very long time.

Then the train slowed down.

"We are arriving." Bertl said. But then, the train stopped. The gates to the camp were 100 yards away still, yet the train wasn't moving.

"Robert." Emil bent down to talk to him. "I am going to lift you out of the car, you have to open the door." Robert nodded, knowing that Emil wanted to save them. He had been with them for years and had saved them multiple times.

"Careful Robert." Bertl said. Emil lifted him and Robert could see the country side in front of him. He bent over and grabbed the handle to the door. Somehow, he got it open. He was not very strong, and very weak from the train ride, but he got it open.

"Come with us. You have to run." Bertl told to the others in the train. "They must not be Jewish." She said, jumping off the train with George.

"Robert, come on." Emil said. Robert jumped the six feet to the ground, and fell. His knee hurt.

"My knee." He said, clutching it. But there was no time to stop. He followed his family, leaving the door open and the rest of the people in the car standing there. The four of them knew the stories of Auschwitz. They were going to kill all the people on the train. So Robert ran, even with his knee hurting.

"That house Bertl." Emil said. A farm house was in the distance. Bertl banged on the door.

"Yes?" An old man answered.

"We are part of the Polish underground... we need your help. We have to hide." Emil said. Robert knew he didn't tell the farmer they were Jewish.

"Come this way." The old man let them in and moved a rug in the living room. Robert watched as he pulled up the floor boards to reveal a stair case.

"Neat." George said as the four of them went down the stairs.

They heard the Germans come in.

"We are looking for fugitives of the train. They ran away." The Germans demanded to search the house. These were train workers, and they didn't have dogs. Soon, they left the house empty handed.

"Moma, the dogs would have smelled us." Robert said. He knew they were saved because there were no dogs.

One month later, the Germans surrendered. Liberation came and the four of them left the farm house, thanking the man that saved their lives. They stayed in the general area for a while. People saw them as the heroes of the Warsaw uprising.

"I don't want to stay here, Emil." Bertl said. The government in Poland had changed since liberation. Bertl didn't like it. "Let us go to Germany and then to the United States." Times were too hard in Poland.

They had to go to Czechoslovakia. That was easy. The hard part was getting into Germany. Emil hired a guide who got them across the Czech German border and into the United Nations controlled Germany. But, they had no place to live. They were considered Displaced Persons.

"We have a camp, we call them DP camps that house displaced persons. You can live there."

They settled into the camp.

"What is this Moma?" Robert asked. It was long and yellow.

"It's a banana. You eat it." Robert and George had never tasted a banana before. They ate well at the camp. Better than they had in years. And they no longer had to "borrow" potatoes.

One day in the camp, Emil and Bertl got married officially. Emil was now George and Robert's stepfather. He had been with them since the ghetto and was a large reason they were still alive.

A year and a half after living in the DP camp, they got their papers and Bertl announced they were going to America.

"I have relatives in Pittsburgh, they are going to sponsor us to come over and live with them." Robert was 11, George was 13.

They had to make sure that they were healthy, otherwise at the docks, the Americans wouldn't let them in. But they were healthy and they traveled to Pittsburg to be near family.

Their cousins got Robert and George enrolled in school, where they were forced to learn English. Robert ended up even graduating early.

Bob, as Robert was now known, attended Carnegie Melon University and graduated with a degree in Engineering. He and his wife Judy met in Pittsburgh at a party one night. Judy's date, who wasn't Bob, wasn't able to take her home. Bob drove both his own date and Judy home.

Bob and Judy (he calls her "Judy Baby") were married four years later on August 23rd, 1959 and now live in Palos Verdes California with their bearded collie Charlie.

Bob quit engineering and went back to school at Loyola Marymount University and he graduated in 2007. He now teaches math at Opportunities Unlimited Charter High School, and speaks at many different schools about his Holocaust survival story in Poland.

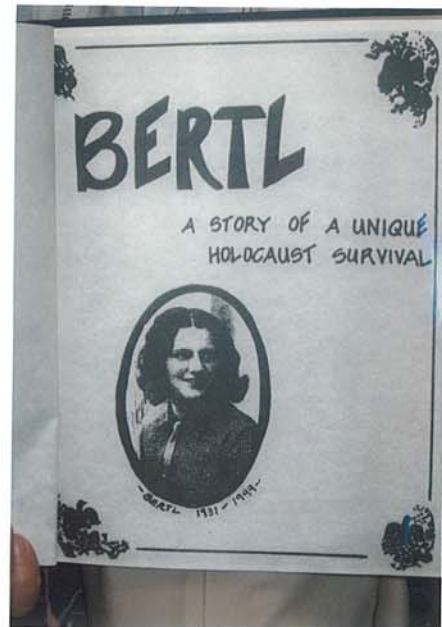


Judy and Bob

For more information about Bob's life, visit his web site: www.geminder.us
The site is dedicated to the Holocaust.



Judy interviewed Bertl
and Bob put a book together



Bob and their dog Charlie

Luck A Survivors Story was based on the true story of Robert Geminder and authored by Sara Locke, Luz Jimenez and Christopher Collazo