

June 26, 2013

Survivor: Robert Geminder

BY JANE ULMAN

http://www.jewishjournal.com/lifestyle/article/survivor_robert_geminder/

In the early morning of Oct. 12, 1941, German authorities ordered the Jews of Stanislawow, Poland, to report to the town square. Six-year-old Robert (Bob) Geminder huddled there with his mother, grandmother and brother, George. The group of approximately 20,000 Jews was then marched to the nearby cemetery. Bob and his family, among the early arrivals, were shoved toward the cemetery's back wall, where they crouched down. "If you stood up, they would shoot you," Bob remembered. Meanwhile, people in the front were marched forward toward large pits in the ground, then shot. As they fell into the gaping earth, more Jews were ordered forward. This systematic killing continued all day, until falling snow and darkness halted the massacre of 12,000 or more.

When the Germans released the remaining Jews, pandemonium broke out. In the melee, Bob and his brother were separated from their mother and grandmother and knocked to the ground, where they lay unconscious. As their grandmother exited, she too was pushed down. Searching for her scarf, she recognized Bob lying nearby and then found George. The trio returned to the apartment. "My mother was in total unbelievable disarray when she saw us alive," Bob remembered.

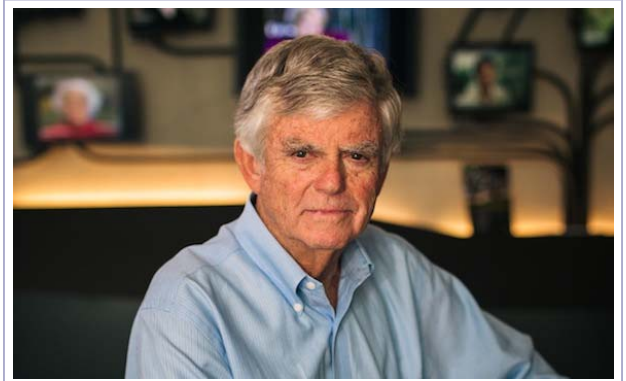


Photo by David Miller

Bob Geminder was born on Aug. 3, 1935, in Wroclaw, Poland, to Mano and Bertl. George, his older brother, was born May 31, 1933. The family owned five apartment buildings and lived very comfortably.

But soon after Germany invaded Poland in early September 1939, the Gestapo knocked on the Geminders' door. They were given half an hour to pack and depart by train for the eastern half of Poland that was then under Soviet control, a result of the Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact signed on Aug. 23, 1939.

Bob and his family traveled from town to town, eventually settling in Stanislawow (now Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine) in early 1940. They rented an apartment, supporting themselves with the jewelry and cash they had brought and living relatively normally.

But on June 22, 1941, Germany attacked the Soviet Union, and by fall 1941 the Germans were bombing Stanislawow, which was under Soviet control. One day, as the family protected themselves from broken glass by stacking mattresses against the windows, Bob's father suffered a heart attack and died.

Bob's family returned to an empty apartment after the Oct. 12 massacre; the place had already been cleaned out by local Poles. All that remained was a bucket of water with a false bottom that Bob's grandfather had made, inside of which Bob's mother had hidden her valuables. "It was a key point in my survival," Bob said.

In December 1941, the Jews were forced into the ghetto. Bob, George, his mother and grandmother lived in one room in a small apartment they shared with two other families. During this time, Bob witnessed babies thrown against walls and people hanging from telephone wires.

In the ghetto, Bob's widowed mother became friendly — and later romantically involved — with Emil Brotfeld, a single man living in the building. He had been born in Stanislawow and "was a fantastically brave guy," Bob said. He helped her obtain a job outside the ghetto, where she cleaned houses and managed to trade jewelry for bread.

One day, Bob's grandmother peered out the window to see German soldiers with dogs. Knowing they randomly killed children, she quickly hid Bob and George in a closet and stacked wood against the door to mask the boys' scent. The Germans entered the room, but soon left. "It was the second time our dear grandmother saved our lives," Bob said.

In March 1942, Brotfeld learned that the Germans planned to liquidate the ghetto. Escape was their only hope, but he worried that Bob's mother would not leave her mother and other family in the ghetto. They consulted a rabbi, who told them to save the children. Bob's mother listened, but, according to Bob, "she felt guilty until the day she died."

A few days later, Bob's mother and her best friend, Lola, left the ghetto for work, walking out among hundreds of workers, each of them hiding a boy under her skirt. Bob's mother hid the boys in a closet, then took them to the train station at night.

They traveled to Warsaw, where they stayed with Brotfeld's sister and her non-Jewish husband. In midsummer 1942, however, once the family obtained false papers, they left Warsaw, moving around in various farm areas. "We were always hungry," Bob said.

Seeking a better chance for survival, Bob's mother found a farmer near Krakow who agreed to hide the boys in exchange for one of the family's apartment buildings.

But some months later, when George put on his hat in church, rather than removing it, there was an immediate buzz in the pews, and the farmer's wife panicked. She got word to Bob's mother to pick George up.

Bob stayed, but the couple hid him in a tiny attic, and mostly ignored him. At night, Bob often sneaked out a window to eat the pigs' leftover food or raw eggs from a single prolific hen. When his mother arrived 10 weeks later, she found him filthy and lice-infested, talking to his shadow.

The family kept moving. But in early 1944, with the Russians approaching, they returned to Warsaw, to the apartment of Brotfeld's sister and brother-in-law.

On Aug. 1, 1944, the Warsaw uprising began. But on Oct. 2, when the Germans defeated the Polish resistance, the family was rounded up, along with thousands of civilian Poles and marched to the train station, where cattle cars awaited them. Bob's mother spied an open boxcar, which the family managed to board.

A short distance outside Auschwitz, the train stopped suddenly. Brotfeld lifted Bob over the side to unlatch the door, allowing the four of them to escape. "Run, run," Brotfeld yelled.

The family hid one night in a farmhouse, and the next day found an apartment, where they remained until January 1945, when Russian troops liberated the area.

They then traveled to Bielsko, the hometown of Bob's mother, who hoped to find surviving relatives. Only one cousin returned.

One day, several months later, Bob and his brother saw the movie "Gunga Din." Afterward, several Polish boys chased them, yelling and throwing stones. When they arrived home, their mother announced they were leaving immediately.

They traveled through Czechoslovakia to a displaced persons camp in Aglasterhausen, Germany, where Bob was introduced to bananas, bubble gum and English swear words, and where his mother married Brotfeld.

In February 1947, they left for the United States, settling in Pittsburgh. Bob graduated Carnegie Mellon University in 1957 with a degree in electrical engineering. He then joined the U.S. Army, serving in the Army Reserves for seven years. In the spring of 1958, he moved to Los Angeles and worked for an aerospace company.

Bob married Judy Strauss on Aug. 23, 1959. They have three children: Mindy born in 1964, Ellen in 1965 and Shia in 1969.

Judy died in August 2011.

Bob left engineering to work on a teaching credential, which he earned from Loyola Marymount in 2005, at age 70. He took a break from teaching math for an engineering project, but hopes to return to the classroom.

Bob has spoken about his experiences during the Holocaust at schools and synagogues for the past 30 years. He serves on the board of the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust and maintains a Web site (geminder.us) to teach others about what occurred.

"I attribute my survival first to luck and second to my mother's smart decisions and bravery, and later my stepfather's," he said.

© Copyright 2013 Tribe Media Corp.

All rights reserved. JewishJournal.com is hosted by Nexcess.net. Homepage design by Koret Communications. Widgets by Mijits. Site construction by Hop Studios.