

HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR

Details story of survival, revenge in new book

By LORIN McLAIN

The Daily Courier
lmcain@prescottaz.com

Though almost two years had passed since the Germans invaded Poland, villagers of the town of Zhetel, on the Russian border, didn't really grasp the implications of the German army marching into the town for the first time in the late spring of 1941.

As if it occurred yesterday, Harold Minuskin remembers German soldiers marching down the street, occupying the town for a couple of weeks to no significant effect.

Two weeks later, six Jewish residents were shot and soon after, the occupiers rounded up about 120 town leaders, rabbis and other influential individuals for what they were told was a work project outside of town.

The work, however, was digging open graves for their executions.

Minuskin, a local semi-retired NASA researcher, details the event and the ensuing insurgency against the Nazis in his book, "My Children, My Heroes - Memoirs of a Holocaust Mother," written from his translations of his mother's memoirs and his own recollection of living with partisan fighters and families in the forests of Byelorussia.

Minuskin's story bears similarity to others of the Jewish resistance that affected the war effort all over Europe, similar to the struggle of the Bielski brothers told in the recent movie, "Defiance," which occurred 30 to 40 miles from where Minuskin's tells his story.



Courtesy photo

The U.S. authority in the Displaced Persons camp in Frankfurt took this picture of the Minuskins for their U.S.A. Certificate of Identity in Lieu of Passport in 1946. The author stands directly left of his father. His book is available in the Prescott Fine Arts gift shop and Temple B'rith Shalom.

When survivors of neighboring villagers warned Zhetel residents what the Nazis were doing, many brushed it off in denial.

"We couldn't believe it. 'The Germans are civilized people. They wouldn't do that,'" Minuskin recalled.

But some, like his father, had the foresight to know otherwise. Minuskin's father hid the family under an outhouse as the Germans rounded up hundreds to implement the "Final Solution."

Three days and three nights passed, while Minuskin, then 3-years-old, hid with his mother, brother and eight others in

a tight space with no food or water while his father tried to rendezvous with others to fight.

When the shooting and screaming ceased, they sought refuge with gentile villagers who turned them away out of fear of Nazi retribution, and ended up hiding in wheat and cornfields before organizing in the forest.

His grandmother and aunt numbered among half the escapees shot and killed, he said.

His father met a different fate, rounded up with other captives in a synagogue awaiting execution, but in the confusion, escaped by hiding in the

building's rafters.

For three years the family lived in the forests with other survivors, struggling to survive and to organize against the Nazis.

"There were no facilities. We had to endure the Russian winters. It was bitter cold. The only food we could get was from nearby peasants, and they were reluctant," Minuskin said.

His mother, like others, would venture out at night, sometimes walking 10 to 12 miles to get a loaf of bread or some milk.

What strength they gained in survival, apparently, transpired into a potent thirst for revenge, as the resistance held on long enough to obtain help from Russian paratroopers. Encountering the renegade fighters, Red Army paratroopers helped train them in hit-and-run tactics against German convoys, enabling them to obtain medical supplies, additional weapons and ammunition, and food.

"We were very intent on extracting revenge, because most of the people who made it into the forest had seen their families shot before their eyes," Minuskin said.

Minuskin wrote the story as a tribute to his mother who passed away in November at the age of 102, most of which is taken from his mother's memoirs written in Yiddish while the family lived in a camp for displaced victims in Germany immediately after the war.

"The message I want to get through in the book is my mother's determination to keep her two young children alive," he said.