Books in Brief

A Polish Swimmer's True Story

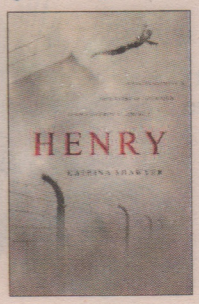
by Mary E. Lanham

HENRY: ***A Polish Swimmer's True Story of Friendship from Auschwitz to America***
by Katrina Shawver
Koehlerbooks 2017, 308 pgs.

Drawing on numerous interviews, primary documents, and photographs, Katrina Shawver presents the harrowing experience of Henry Zguda, a seemingly ordinary man with an extraordinary past. Shawver first met Henry when he was eighty-five, first interviewing him in the hopes of writing an article for a newspaper. She saw that his story was far deeper than one article could ever encompass. What resulted was the book, *Henry: A Polish Swimmer's True Story of Friendship from Auschwitz to America*, a true story about a survivor of the most notorious Nazi concentration camps, Auschwitz and Buchenwald.

Henry grew up in Krakow and as a young man joined the YMCA. Zguda was first drawn to basketball, but when he learned that members of the swim team had their fees waived he switched sports. In doing so he immersed himself into the world of competitive swimming and water polo. To earn a living, Henry took a job working for a seed company, doing everything from hauling seeds to supervising a team of women. This simple blissful of life came to an end September 1, 1939, with the Nazi invasion of Poland. Despite the oppressive regime Zguda was able to continue working to support his mother. For three years Henry lived like this until 1942 when he was arrested on suspicion of being part of the Polish Underground. After being interrogated and not producing any useful information, Zguda was sent to Auschwitz. Through smarts and luck, Henry managed to survive in the death camp, rising from a potato peeler to one of the camp's cooks.

Interspersed with Henry's stories are Shawver's descriptions of her research and her own discovery of Polish history. On her own, she visited the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum to go through archival records and tour the former concentration camp. She also delved into the National Archives in College Park, Maryland searching the original photographs from Dauchau and Buchenwald to further Henry's story.



Wisely, Shawver chose to not guide Henry in the interviews. This leads to interesting side stories, at times jumping through the years and touching on various topics from the boxing matches that the Germans organized in the camps and a secret murder plot.

He also described being able to send letters from Auschwitz.

"Once a month, or every six weeks, you could write a letter. These were official letters on camp paper. They gather us all in one room and give us like ten pencils for three hundred guys. You cannot write whatever you wanted to. Every letter had to begin with: *I feel good. I am very glad I am here* … I have to figure out what to say. How are you? How is the uncle? I had many uncles, but 'the uncle' was the phrase I used to refer to the underground."

After liberation, Henry would move to the United States where he met and married his wife in New York. In 1963 he became a citizen.

Through all his hardships Henry Zguda never lost hope or his sense of humor which is present throughout the book. This is a much-needed addition to your library.

Katrina Shawver has a B.A. in English/Political Science from the University of Arizona. She has written hundreds of newspaper columns for *The Arizona Republic* as well as various other occupations. She lives in Phoenix with her husband.