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TOP STORY

From Auschwitz to Ahwatukee: Local man's life detailed

By Paul Maryniak, AFN Executive Editor

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If she is not the first, Ahwatukee journalist Katrina Shawver certainly is one of very few to accomplish what she has with her new book, "Henry – A Polish Swimmer's True Story of Friendship from Auschwitz to America."

Not only is it a rare book about an Ahwatukee resident by a virtual neighbor, but it also is a rare painstakingly documented historical look at the Nazis' political persecution of Polish people simply because they were Polish.

Before his death on Thanksgiving Day 2003, Henry Zguda was a well-known figure around the Ahwatukee Recreation Center, but also an accomplished athlete through virtually his whole life.

“At one point he worked at the reception desk and knew everyone,” Shawver said. “He was in the bocce league. He swam near daily and played a lot of tennis....He was also very active in Arizona Senior Olympics – I believe in swimming – and also in seniors tennis. His office contained a whole bookshelf of tennis trophies and medals earned over the years, all while in Arizona.”

In his youth, he was a champion swimmer – but that was interrupted by his internment in two Nazis concentration camps, Auschwitz and Buchenwald, as a Polish political prisoner.

He and a friend defected from Communist Poland in 1956 at the height of the Cold War with the help of friends he met in Buchenwald,” Shawver said.

He and his wife, Nancy, who died in 2013, moved to Ahwatukee in 1980, and lived in the same house near 48th Street and Warner Road until their deaths.

Shawver and then-85-year-old Zguda met in 2002, a year before his death, in the course of her work as a columnist for the Arizona Republic.

She became so enthralled with his story that she set out to write a book – a labor of love that took her to the two concentration camps where he had been held prisoner.

Besides, his “lack of children, siblings and extended family played a huge part in my impulsive offer” to write his story. “Truly, there was no one else to care about or capture what instinct told me was an incredible story,”

Although family issues prolonged Shawver's project into a 15-year effort, she eventually returned to it, determined to finish it.

“I knew in my heart of hearts I could not live with myself until I finished and held the book in my hands,” she said, adding that she even hired translators for German and Polish documents she had unearthed both among Zguda's possessions and in her trips to Germany.

“So many stories and details came into focus and even greater historical significance than I first understood in 2002,” she said.

“Finishing this book is an incredible life accomplishment for me. I have followed my instincts the entire time, and I truly believe a higher power has helped propel the project to where it is today, and continues to open amazing doors.

“I outlived Henry, but now his story will outlive me.”

“Henry” is available for purchase in hardcover, paperback and eBook formats on most online book sites worldwide.

It also is available at both Changing Hands bookstores, one of which will host one of her two appearances next month.

She will be signing books 2-5 p.m. Nov. 18 at the Barnes & Noble in Chandler Fashion Mall and at 7 p.m. Nov. 28 at Changing Hands in Tempe, 6428 S. McClintock Drive at Guadalupe Road.

AFN recently asked her about her research and the book:

Question: As an interview subject, how was he?

Answer: Henry was easy to talk with, had always been a good storyteller with a sense of humor and was very likable. He was very sharp and had an excellent memory. English was his fifth language so he spoke in heavily accented Polish and often mixed up verb tenses. I always understood him. Sometimes he only remembered objects and names in German or Polish, as he knew them then. He always patiently spelled out the complicated Polish spellings, and joked that “Polish is easy; it’s English that’s hard.” He used to tell me, “You should learn Polish, then we could really talk.”

Q: Did you have to do other research in conjunction with this book?

A: Absolutely. When I began, I had never interviewed a concentration camp survivor, nor was I Polish, Jewish or Catholic. I knew very little about Poland. I needed to comprehend the social fabric and cultural biases of a pre-war Poland, and a country at war.

The research component began with reading similar memoirs and biographies of the time as well as the history of Poland and the Holocaust. I have amassed a small library on the topics. It then grew to visiting the university library, combing websites for credible museums and institutions, and locating ever more resources. While in Auschwitz and Buchenwald I met with the lead archivists to verify facts and stories, and walk the steps Henry did.

There I learned things I could only have learned by being there. There is no substitute for visiting a concentration camp in person. None.

An unexpected find came in 2014, when I discovered 130 documents with Henry's name on file with the International Tracing Service. I think many people use the service to locate deceased relatives. For me, I found verification of stories told to me personally by someone who was there. It was a WOW moment to locate those documents"

Q: What makes this story different from most other accounts of the time?

A: It offers a different viewpoint of the camps, that of a Polish political prisoner. This view of the Holocaust through Polish eyes is a perspective not commonly known or written about outside the Polish community, for multiple reasons. I hope people have their 'aha' moments in reading it.

Second, this story is related in Henry's voice and told on a very personal level, akin to the interview format of "Tuesdays with Morrie" ... The story continues after WWII to reveal a life lived without regret.

Third, this book contains more than 80 original documents and photos, most not printed elsewhere. There are Henry's personal letters written on Auschwitz and Buchenwald stationery, transport lists, registration paperwork, Henry's personal photos, and others from museums. They add a visual to the substantial research that is included."

Q: What makes this story a significant contribution to WWII history?

A: This account is far more than one man's story. It honors the millions of Poles who were arrested, and so many who were frankly executed. Six million Poles were killed during the nearly six years the country endured World War II. Three million were Jewish, 3 million were Christian. In Auschwitz alone, 150,000 Poles were executed or died from starvation, disease, and mistreatment. Two Catholic saints were martyred in Auschwitz.

Additionally, no country suffered more, endured more, or lost more than Poland during World War II. The country was invaded by two genocidal leaders: Hitler and Stalin, both of whom were determined to destroy all things Polish.

Even worse, Poland fell under the rule of Russian Communism until 1989. For three generations of Poles, it was forbidden to teach Polish history or honor Polish heroism. Subsequently, there are far fewer accounts from the Polish viewpoint, especially in English. I have gained a huge and lasting respect for Poles.

Few of Henry's accounts can be found in history books, yet they are verified."

Q: What makes this account so relevant today?

A: Henry witnessed perhaps the most extreme example of anti-Semitism: the calculated, strategic murder of millions of Jews. Today, there is a rise in anti-Semitism, hate crimes and swastikas...

This book also serves as a historical reminder that no group of people was safe from being targeted. There is danger if no one is allowed to disagree with their government without fear of retribution... Today, it is hard to discern real news from hidden agendas, and I wonder how many people truly question their information sources.

Even social platforms like Facebook use algorithms to determine who sees what. History is taught less and less to younger generations, or distorted or "softened." I hope this book causes readers to pause, think, and consider the lessons of history.

Q: Who will this book appeal to?

A: I consider Henry an intelligent read for discerning adults, especially those interested in European history, World War II and the Holocaust. A reader's discussion guide is included for book groups. It is also ideal for college-level courses on WWII or the Holocaust. I have received a lot of support from the Polish community, and definitely anyone of Polish heritage or connections will appreciate it.

Q: What will you remember most about him, not his story?

A: Henry's attitude about life. He had witnessed and lived through the absolute worst of mankind, and preferred to look ahead rather than behind. He was one of the most positive and wise people I have ever known. For Henry, each day was a blessing, a gift denied to so many others."