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TOP STORY

Book on Ahwatukee concentration camp survivor earns plaudits

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Special to AFN

Ahwatukee author Katrina Shawver has received international accolades for her book on a late resident's harrowing experience in a Nazi concentration camp and his heroic journey to America.

Shawver's book, "Henry: A Polish Swimmer's True Story of Friendship from Auschwitz to America," was posted by Poland's Consulate General to its website under the heading "Books from Poland and on Poland – in English."

“This posting is indeed a huge honor and recognition as it is the first addition to their recommended reading list in four years,” said her publisher, Koehler Books.

The recognition is one of many that have been accorded the book, which details the life of Ahwatukee Lakes’ Henry Zguda, who was one of millions of Poles sent to concentration camps during the Nazis’ purge of Poland.

Six million Poles were killed during the nearly six years the country endured World War II. Three million were Jewish and another 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.

Shawver met Zguda when he was 85 and spent untold hours with him

Before his death on Thanksgiving Day 2003, Zguda was a well-known figure around the Ahwatukee Recreation Center, but also an accomplished athlete throughout 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 for three years 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 visited Poland, collected more than 80 original documents and photos in chronicling both Zguda’s life and the larger picture of Poland’s decimation by the Nazis.

The Arizona Talking Book Library already has chosen “Henry” for its collection of recorded books for the blind and disabled. Once production is complete, about an eight-month process, it will be uploaded to the Library of Congress and made available nationwide.

Praise for the book has come from a variety of sources.

“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,” said The Polish American Journal.

“Everyone who reads ‘Henry’ becomes a witness,” said Jack Mayer, author of “Life in a Jar: The Irena Sendler Project” and “Before the Court of Heaven.”

Shawver spent 15 years researching WWII, Poland, Auschwitz and the Holocaust.

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

Information: KatrinaShawver.com.