



Henry's stories help save history

Sixteen years ago, a great story found me via an unexpected phone call.

At the time I wrote as a community columnist in the *East Valley Arizona Republic*.

I regularly sought out interesting people, events and organizations to report about. I did not know then that single phone call would change the direction of my life and lead to years of researching Poland and Polish history.

The caller gave me the contact information for Henry Zguda. I knew only that he was Polish and had survived both Auschwitz and Buchenwald concentration camps during World War II. He lived a half mile from my house in Ahwatukee. Thoroughly intrigued, I called him immediately.

I found Henry mentally sharp, exceptionally nice, and still lean and fit from a lifetime of swimming. I barely noticed his thick Polish accent. We "clicked."

In one visit he related snippets of history I had never heard. Following publication of a brief column, Henry's experiences nagged at me. He had no siblings or children to leave his story to and had instructed his wife, Nancy, to throw out all his papers and artifacts when he was gone because "no one cared about his story."

Based on gut instinct, a healthy dose of impulsiveness and a passion for history, I called Henry and suggested we combine forces to write his story.

I still had no idea the full extent of what he would tell me. He agreed, and we immediately began twice-weekly interviews. At age 85, how many more years did he really have?

In the process, we became good friends. A year later Henry passed away suddenly. I mourned the loss of a good friend and found myself the sole keeper of a man's life story and untold history.

His widow, Nancy, and I subsequently became close friends. She made me laugh and often called me her "angel from heaven." We could talk about anything, usually over a glass of wine. She died in 2013 and I miss her dearly.

In 2002, I knew little of Poland and Polish history. Poles were the first arrested, imprisoned, and murdered following the 1939 dual invasions of Russia and Germany. Henry was arrested, starved, beaten and imprisoned for three years for one reason only: he was Polish at a time that Germany and Russia had both sworn to destroy all of Poland.

Yet, the universal response I received when I mentioned Henry's story was "What? He wasn't Jewish? Why was he arrested? There were only Jews in the Holocaust."

The story of Poland during World War II is far larger than the German occupation. Six-million Poles were murdered. Three million were Jewish and

three million were Christian.

Sadly, the story and full extent of devastation to Poland falls outside the definition and scope of Holocaust education as taught for three generations and so remains widely unknown.

It took years of chasing down facts and translating documents to verify Henry's stories and historical data. I traveled to Poland and Germany. The trail of substantial evidence never ended, and the right people continued to come into my life at the right time.

Henry's story serves as a first-person witness to the Holocaust, evil committed during war by all sides, and speaks to resilience of the human spirit.

Today, many people judge Poland during World War II without full understanding of just how much the country and Poles fought and suffered.

Anti-Semitism is on the rise and one in five Millennials never heard of the Holocaust. History is taught less and less. Knowledge is critical to understand ethnicity and nationalities different than ourselves.

I truly believe this: The past actually happened, but history is only what was written down and taught.

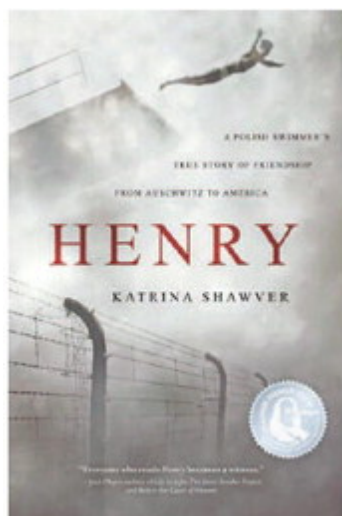
Every year there are fewer survivors to tell their stories. Fortunately, I met Henry Zguda at the right time, before his tale and artifacts were lost to history.

Katrina Shawver was a contributor to community editions of The Arizona Republic from 1997-2008. In 2017, she published "HENRY: A Polish Swimmer's True Story of Friendship from Auschwitz to America." For more information visit katrinashawver.com.



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Katrina Shawver Guest columnist



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