

EUGENE BERGMAN:

DEAF SURVIVOR

World War II was a tragic time in history for all people, but most especially for Jews. Of Europe's eight and a half million Jews at the end of 1939 who had lived in countries later occupied by the Germans, only two and a half million were alive by the end of the war in 1945. Jews of Eugene Bergman's native land, Poland suffered the greatest loss: of the pre-war population of 3,300,000 Jews, only 100,000-150,000 were left by the war's end. This means that 95% of the total Jewish population of pre-war Poland were systematically hunted, rounded up, and destroyed by means of murder and starvation in the ghettos and in the labor camps of Europe. From 1941-1942 alone, the Nazis killed approximately three million Polish Jews. Eugene Bergman survived. This is the story of his youth.

by Ellen Beck



L to R: Eugene, (Mother) Sarah, (Brother) Brian

Born hearing in Posnan, Poland, in 1932, Bergman was the third and youngest son of a middle-class family. His father, Pesakh, owned two fabric stores, one in Posnan and the other in the city of Lodz. Bergman lived in a Jewish neighborhood in Poznan until 1939, where he attended public schools with both Jewish and non-Jewish children. Of this period in his life, Bergman remembers that the non-Jewish students often beat up the Jewish children, but he himself was never a victim.

On September 1st, 1939, the world

changed for this seven year old child. The Germans invaded Poland. Almost immediately, proclamations, decrees, and laws were implemented to rob the Jews of their belongings and to deny them all human rights. Among the first decrees issued were orders to isolate the Jews from small towns and villages and concentrate them in designated sections, called ghettos, in the largest cities of Poland.

The Bergmans were early victims of this policy. Within a month of the German invasion, the family lost their home and their business. They, along with the entire Jewish population, were expelled from Poznan. Lodz

was one city that the Germans had designated as a ghetto, and because the Bergmans had family connections there, they decided to move to Lodz.

Shortly after arriving in Lodz, Eugene, out for a walk one day, got in the way of a group of German soldiers herding Jews through the



Sarah Bergman, Eugene's mother, in 1946

street. One of the soldiers raised his rifle and clubbed the boy in the head. The next thing Bergman remembers is waking up in a hospital after five days in a coma. He saw people moving their mouths, but heard no sound. He was deaf.

After Bergman's recovery, the family moved to Warsaw where they lived in the non-Jewish section of the city until the Jewish ghetto was officially proclaimed in 1940 and all Jews forced inside under penalty of death. Bergman, his mother, and two brothers moved into a two room apartment thirty feet from the ghetto wall. His father Pesakh, had managed to obtain false identification papers which allowed him to continue living as a non-Jew on the other side of the ghetto walls. This proved vitally important to the Bergmans inside the ghetto, as they soon found out that the Germans were trying to starve the Jews in order to solve what they considered their Jewish problem.

Pesakh was able to smuggle food into the ghetto and in this way keep his family alive. Eugene recalls that "every week he came to visit us, bringing food which he also shared with the starving people in the ghetto." To understand the magnitude of starvation and related illnesses in the ghetto, statistics from the period of January to August, 1942, show that approximately 23,811 people out of a population of some 500,000 died during this eight month period. Also, it is important to remember that every time the elder Bergman entered the ghetto, bringing food, he was breaking the German law, and if caught, he would have been tortured and killed. For this reason, Pesakh Bergman was called a "guter mensch" by the people in the Warsaw Ghetto - a good man.

Eugene Bergman doesn't remem-



Left: Brian, Eugene's brother; center, Eugene; right, Boris Mordkowitz, a wartime Jewish partisan in Poland and family friend. This picture was taken in 1945 in the Zeilsheim Displaced Persons' Camp in Germany.

ber all the details of life in the Warsaw Ghetto, but surprisingly he says he didn't often feel fear. He credits this attitude to his mother, Sarah, who never complained or showed suffering or fear to her children. Bergman does remember happy times playing with other ghetto children in a park near his home. He also remembers that all day long the streets were always thronged with people, a not surprising recollection considering there were half a million people in the Warsaw Ghetto squeezed into an area of approximately 1 and 3/5 square miles.

On July 22, 1942, a horrifying date in the Ghetto's history, the Germans decided to deport the remainder of the Jewish population to the Treblinka Extermination Camp. Conditions in the Ghetto worsened from terrible

to catastrophic, and although no one knew anything except that they were being sent "for work in the East," there was enough mistrust of these "work orders" to convince Pesakh that it was time to remove his family from the Ghetto.

Bergman remembers that his father "sent a message hidden in a loaf of bread, telling us to get out. We bribed a German soldier and joined my father on the Aryan (non-Jewish) side." The Bergmans were fortunate to escape when they did, because from July 22 until October 3, 1942, 310,000

in the apartment except at night when he occasionally ventured a walk.

In April 1944, the family suffered the agony of watching the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto from the relative safety of their apartment in Aryan Warsaw. Eugene remembers that "every night, for several weeks, the sky was illuminated by flames from the Warsaw Ghetto" where the 50,000 remaining Jews fought the Germans from April 19 - May 16, holding out one week longer than the entire Polish nation had done when the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939.



David, Eugene's oldest brother, in 1938. There is a story behind this picture. It was kept along with a few other photographs by the boys' Polish nanny and returned to Mrs. Bergman after the war. These photographs are the family's only prewar possessions to have survived the war.

Jews in the ghetto were deported to Treblinka where most were gassed, burned, starved or worked to death.

After their timely escape from Warsaw, the Bergman family moved to another ghetto in Poland, the Czestochowa Ghetto. By August, however, the Germans began deporting the Jewish inhabitants there also. Again the family escaped, this time by climbing over the ghetto wall at night. They moved back to Warsaw, where Pesakh obtained false papers for the entire family. These papers allowed the four members of the family who did not look Jewish to move freely about the city. One brother, David, however, did look Jewish and had to remain hidden

On August 1, 1944, the parameters of Eugene Bergman's life changed yet again when the Poles of Warsaw revolted against the Nazis. On this memorable day, Bergman was swimming alone in the Vistula River. Suddenly seized with cramps in both legs, he was near drowning when he was saved by a Polish boatman. The boatman quickly suspicious that the boy was Jewish, ordered Bergman to take his pants off to see if he was circumcised. The boy, terrified, couldn't so the boatman began removing the boy's pants. Bergman then told the boatman that he was deaf. This saved his life as the boatman took pity on the boy and let him go.

This traumatic day was far from over, for when Bergman stepped onto the quay to walk home he noticed swirls of dust rising at his feet. Thinking nothing of it, he continued walking. Seconds later he was confronted by a bearded man aiming a revolver at him. Belatedly, he realized that the dust had been caused by gun shots aimed at him because his deafness prevented him from hearing the man's shouts to stop.

After the necessary explanations were made, it was decided that Bergman would join the man's detachment of insurgents fighting the Nazis in the Powazki district of Warsaw. The Wola quarter, where Eugene's family lived, stayed occupied by the Germans throughout the uprising, so Eugene knew nothing of their fate.

Of this time in his life Eugene remembers sleeping in bombed out buildings and on the street. He ran errands and searched for food for his detachment. In this way 12 year old

Eugene survived 63 days of house to house street fighting between the Poles and the Germans, severe food and water shortages and almost continuous air and land bombardment.

The Poles fought valiantly, however, they were insufficiently armed, and in the end, starving, so on October 1, 1944, the Poles surrendered to the Germans. For his aid to the Poles, Eugene Bergman became a prisoner of war in early October.

Bergman was taken by freight car to the Lamsdorf POW camp in Silesia, a camp where mass graves were uncovered after the war. Bergman was once again lucky, for shortly after his arrival, he, along with 50 other boys, aged 10-16, were transferred to a civilian factory in Brochwitz, in Saxony. In Brochwitz, a German factory supervisor discovered that Bergman was Jewish, but humanely decided not to expose him. In May 1945, Eugene Bergman was liberated by the Russians.



Eugene and his wife Claire in 1978

After the liberation, Bergman went back to Poland to find his family. Pesakh, and his oldest brother, David had disappeared. The surviving members of the Bergman family then moved to Germany, living in a displaced persons camp until 1947, when an uncle sponsored the family's trip to the United States.

There are elements of the miraculous in Eugene Bergman's survival. Deaf, he lived through a time when deaf people were targets for extermination by the Nazis for being, like the Jews, inferior. In fact, all 16 institutions for the deaf in Poland were "cleared out" by the Nazis during the war. Bergman survived. Against all odds he survived both being a Jew and being deaf.

Eugene Bergman today is not a bitter man. He is cheerful, self-confident, a bit cocky, much as he must have been as a child living through the Holocaust: years in Europe. Deaf since seven, he is the master of five languages, and he is the first deaf person to have earned a Ph.D. in English.

Assistant professor of English at Gallaudet College, author of a book, *Art for the Deaf and Hearing Impaired*, co-author of a play, *Tales from a Clubroom*, and co-editor of an anthology of deaf related literature, *The Deaf Experience*, Eugene Bergman is a living example of all that a person can achieve and contribute to society, in spite of, or perhaps because of youthful deprivation and persecution. ■

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