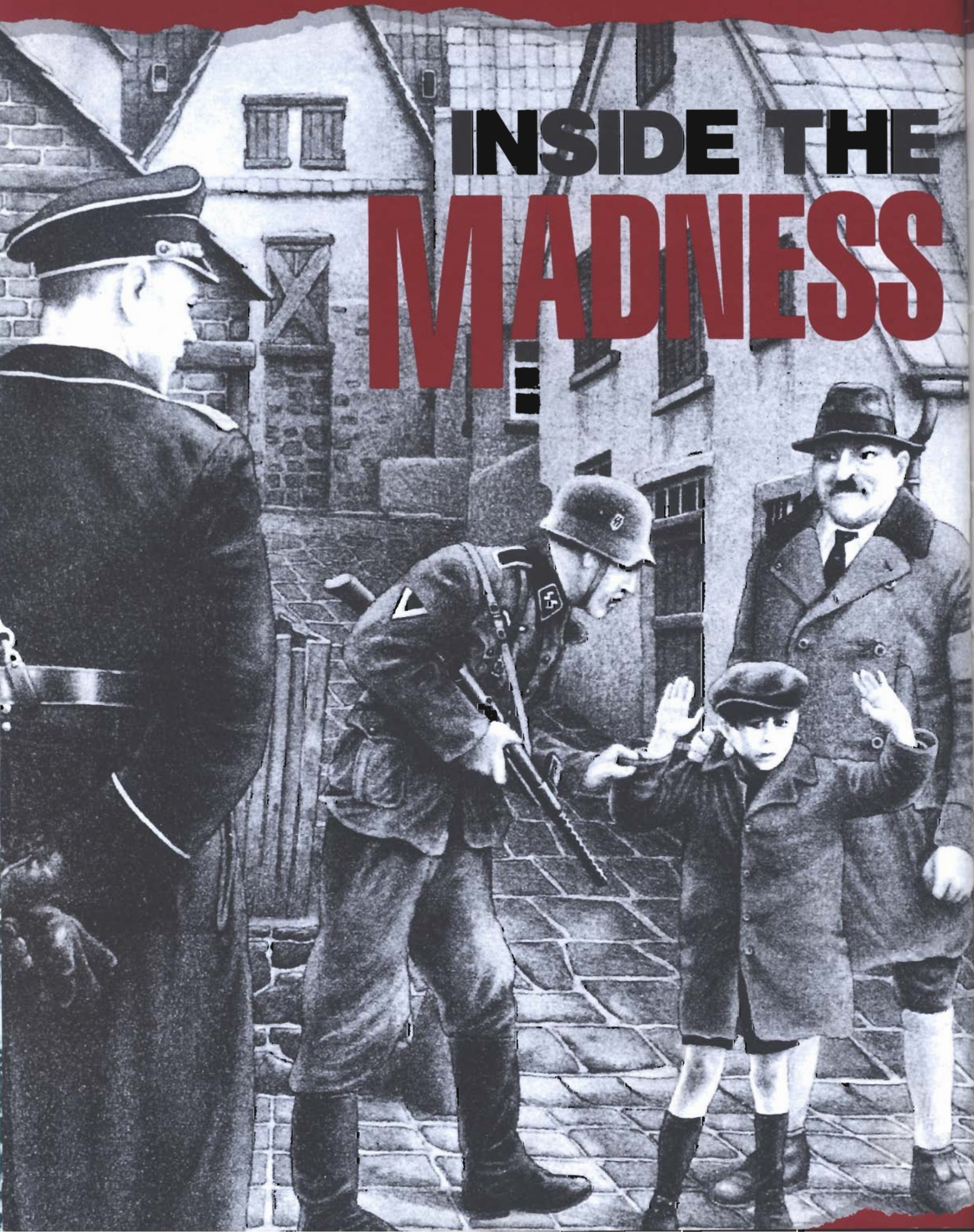


# INSIDE THE MADNESS



## A Deaf Survivor Remembers the HOLOCAUST

by Vickie Walter

**E**ugene Bergman's earliest memory is of waking from a coma to find himself in a hospital. "It was a strange experience. I saw a doctor and a nurse moving their mouths, but I could not hear anything."

He was then 7 years old. Five days earlier, Bergman could hear. Now he was deaf. Five days earlier, he had been walking down a street in Poznan, Poland, his hometown, when he encountered German soldiers herding a group of Jews through the streets. A soldier hit him in the head with a rifle, and that was the end of Bergman's memory of his previous life.

It was also the beginning of six years of persecution, moving from town to town, living in the Warsaw Ghetto, surviving in the streets, being separated from his family, seeing death and destruction all around him. It was that bleak period in history when more than 6 million Jews throughout Europe were rounded up and systematically slaughtered by the Nazis. It was a time when only 100,000 to 150,000 of Poland's more than 3 million Jews survived.

Bergman, now an assistant professor of English at Gallaudet University, is a survivor. More than that, he is a winner: master of five languages, the first deaf person ever to earn a PhD in English, co-author of the play *Tales from a Clubroom* and author of the book *Art for the Deaf and Hearing Impaired*, among other accomplishments.

Although the memory of his first seven years was wiped out, Bergman has many memories of the years between 1939 and 1945, the years when

95 percent of the Jewish population of pre-war Poland was destroyed.

About his life up to the age of 7 he learned from his older brother, Bronnek, who survived the war with him. Born in 1932 in Poznan, Bergman was the youngest of three brothers. David was seven years older; Bronnek (now called Brian), five years older. Their father, Pesakh, owned fabric stores in Poznan and Lodz.

The Germans invaded Poland on Sept. 1, 1939. Pesakh's stores, along with those of other Jews, were confiscated, and Jews were ordered to leave Poznan. Shortly after Bergman's recovery in the hospital, his family moved to Lodz to stay with relatives.

In the spring of 1940, Bergman and his family moved to Warsaw. "I remember that we traveled in a horse-drawn cart to get there," he recalls.

For about five months, the family lived in the non-Jewish section of the city. Bergman, who did not learn sign language until he arrived in the United States many years later, managed to communicate using some lipreading and writing on paper.

"But most of the time I lived in a fog," he says. "I could not hear, did not know what was going on around me. I lived a very sheltered life. My family was luckier than most; my father saw to it that we got enough food so we didn't go hungry."

Eventually, Bergman, his parents and his brothers were forced to move to the Warsaw Ghetto, an area set aside by the Germans especially for Jews in 1940.

Still, life was not yet that difficult for young Bergman. He played in the inner courtyard of his tenement with other children. He lived in a two-room apartment with his mother and brothers while most people in the ghetto lived 10 to a room. His father, who had obtained false Aryan identification papers, lived outside the

ghetto. Others went hungry, but once a week Bergman's father would secretly enter the ghetto with a sack of food for his family and other hungry people.

"I was scared, of course," says Bergman. "The Germans were bogeymen to me. Just to see them scared me." But his mother, Sarah, and his father provided much-needed stability. "My mother did not show her feelings of fear," he remembers. "My father, either."

Bergman's relatively secure life ended abruptly on July 22, 1942, the date that the Germans decided to deport the remainder of the Jewish population of the Warsaw Ghetto to the Treblinka extermination camp. Suddenly, the crowded streets became empty as raids began. Short months before, half a million people had been crowded into an area of slightly more than one-and-a-half square miles. Between July 22 and Oct. 3 of that year, 310,000 Jews were deported to Treblinka and killed.

Five days of terror began for Bergman and his family. They hid in a secret cellar in his apartment building while around them people were dragged out of their homes and carried away.

"The Germans and the Askaris [Ukrainian and Latvian auxiliaries] surrounded individual houses and dragged everyone out to deport them," Bergman remembers. "They broke open doors of apartments and shot everyone who would not go down to the courtyard. Sick people, cripples—they were shot dead in their homes."

Two memories during those five days stand out in Bergman's mind:

"An open car entered the ghetto with a German standing in it. He had a beefy, thick face. He took out his pistol and started shooting at people.

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Everyone started to flee into buildings at the sides of the streets. I felt pure terror. He shot at people as if they were rabbits. He seemed to enjoy it—he was smiling. I never forgot that.”

Bergman also remembers a janitor in his apartment building who sold candy from a kind of cigar box with a string around his neck. The janitor sold candy by the piece. Before July 22, the



**Eugene Bergman (center) stands with his brother, Brian (left) and Boris Mordkowicz, a friend and wartime Jewish partisan in Poland. The photograph was taken in 1945 in the Zeilshheim Displaced Persons' Camp in Germany.**

candy cost 1 zloty apiece. “On July 22, it shot up to 50 zlotys. On July 23 you could not buy it anymore.” And what happened to the vendor? “Chances are the same thing that happened to 99 percent of the people in the ghetto—gassed in Treblinka.”

For the first time in his life, Bergman felt hunger. Because the number of guards around the ghetto increased, no one could get in, including his father. During the mornings, when the Germans came to take people away, the Bergmans hid. In the afternoons, he and his family were able to go out into the streets.

Although the situation was bleak, people in the ghetto had no idea that their friends and relatives were being taken to the camp to be gassed. “The Germans followed their usual policy of deceit,” says Bergman. “They forced some deportees in Treblinka to write postcards to their friends and relatives in the ghetto saying they were treated well and got work. Then they gassed them.

“Nobody could conceive what was happening. Nothing like that had ever happened before in history. I still don't understand. Nobody under-

stands why, despite all the explanations offered.”

After five days, Bergman's father was able to smuggle in a loaf of bread with a message telling his family to get out of the ghetto. Bergman's brother Bronek had fled a couple of days previously. His brother David approached a Jewish policeman and bribed him. “The Jewish policeman then talked with a Polish policeman, and the Pole talked with a German guard,” says Bergman. “Money changed hands.” Finally his mother, brother and he approached the German guard with some papers, and the guard let them exit from the ghetto.

When they left the ghetto, they walked to the one-room tenement apartment where his father was living. He recalls, “We opened the door. Father was inside. His hair in those five days had turned completely white. He was only 37 years old at that time. I was 10.”

Bergman and his family stayed with his father for several days, but the tenants became suspicious. Pesakh took Sarah, young Eugene and David to another ghetto in Czestochowa. Bronek, who did not look Jewish, stayed with his father.

But a few weeks later, when the Germans began deporting the Jewish inhabitants of Czestochowa as well, David escaped and took the train to Warsaw to get his father. “He returned with my father and they waited for us outside the wall,” says Bergman. “My mother and I climbed over.”

Sarah, David and Eugene next went to the city of Kielce. By the time they arrived, the city was already “Judenrein,” cleared of Jews. Bergman remembers walking along the streets with his mother and seeing piles of belongings left behind by Jews who were “removed.”

A month or two passed, and the family returned to Warsaw in the winter of 1942-43. Bergman's father had obtained false papers which allowed his family to live outside the ghetto. David, however, had to remain hidden because he looked too Jewish. “Some evenings when it was dark, David and my father would go out for walks,” remembers Bergman. “He would wear a scarf that hid half his face.”

In April 1944, the remaining Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto revolted. For almost two months the fighting in the ghetto continued, until it was destroyed in May. From their apartment

in the Aryan section of the city, Bergman watched. “I remember at night seeing the flames of the burning ghetto from the window of our home,” he says.

Bergman was swimming in the Vistula River the following Aug. 1, 1944, when the Polish uprising against the Nazis began. Seized with leg cramps and almost drowning, he was rescued by a Polish boatman. But the boatman suspected that Bergman was Jewish, and ordered him to take off his pants to see if he was circumcised. Bergman remembers pointing to his ears and saying the Polish word for “deaf,” and the boatman let him go. His deafness may have saved his life then.

He never made it home, however, and did not see his family again until after the war. For, walking home, he noticed dust rising around his feet. He continued walking and was soon confronted by members of a Polish insurgent unit who had been shooting at him. He had not heard the guns.

“They challenged me and asked for my papers, and when they found out I was deaf they let me stay with them,” says Bergman. “I could not go home. There was shooting everywhere.” His family was living in a section of the city occupied by the Germans, so he could not get through to them.

He stayed with the insurgents for two months, carrying equipment, searching for food and sharing what little food was available with the resistance fighters. “There was bomb-



**Fifteen-year-old Bergman relaxes outdoors in Frankfurt, Germany. The year is 1947.**

ing by the Germans, hunger and lack of water," he recalls. "We became colder and colder."

Finally, on Oct. 1, the insurgents surrendered and Bergman, along with the others, became a prisoner of war. He was taken to the Lamsdorf POW camp in Silesia.

"We were always hungry," he remembers. "They gave us one-eighth of a loaf of black bread apiece each day."

But one memorable day, he did receive a whole loaf of bread, which he credits to Tolstoy. The 50 youngest prisoners between the ages of 10-16 were separated from the others. Across the fence from the youngsters was a group of French prisoners. One day, in desperation, Bergman wrote a note in fractured French and threw it over the fence. It said, "Je suis faim. Donnez-moi pain"—"I am hungry, give me bread." In return, the French



**Bergman's mother, Sarah, lived in a displaced persons camp in Germany when this photograph was taken in 1946.**

prisoners threw a loaf of bread over the fence to him.

How did a 12-year-old deaf Polish boy know French? He learned it in the Warsaw Ghetto. Although education in the ghetto was forbidden, there was a lending library, and young Bergman took out many books. "I didn't understand half of what I read, but I kept reading," he says. Some words of French, culled from the French phrases in works by Tolstoy and others, remained in his memory.

Bergman was in the camp less than a month before the 50 youngsters were transferred to a secret German aircraft factory in Saxony near the city of Meissen. There he drove rivets into aircraft fuselages from 6 a.m. until 6 p.m. He lived in the factory in a barracks guarded by the Germans for about

six months, until they were liberated by the Russians on May 2, 1945.

Bergman remembers that a Russian soldier drove up to the factory on his motorcycle, and when he saw his Russian-style blouse and the red star on his cap, he knew that they were free. Eagerly the prisoners surrounded the Russian. "But he just stood there like a Martian, poker-faced, uttering a phrase or two, and then drove on."

Bergman returned to Poland on a train provided for refugees and sought out his old apartment in the Aryan section of Warsaw. It had been half destroyed, and the ghetto, too, no longer existed.

Two months later, still in Warsaw, Bergman read in a newspaper that a Jewish committee had been established. He went to ask about his family and was given the address of his mother in Lodz. Provided with a free meal and money to take the train to Lodz, he was finally reunited with his mother and brother, Bronek, in July 1945.

Bergman says that his mother, who died about three years ago, never knew what happened to her husband and her oldest son, David. "But my brother later told me privately that he met a fellow tenant of our old apartment who saw the Germans shoot my father and older brother in the neck."

The surviving Bergman family moved to Germany in the fall of 1945—"a big adventure to me"—and lived for two years in a displaced persons camp until, with the help of an uncle, they were able to come to the United States.

Looking back on his experiences, Bergman recalls the generosity and support of his family but emphasizes that the war deprived him of a normal childhood.

"The lessons I learned were of no value to me in the normal world," he says. "It was all so pointless. To survive in that jungle world, I had to lie, cheat and be rude. In that world the laws and rules were designed to oppress, exploit and ultimately destroy human beings, even children like me. Its rulers were what the Canadian poet A.M. Klein terms 'robed fauna with tubes and shears.' Fauna? I won-



**Today, Bergman is an assistant professor of English at Gallaudet University. "I still don't understand," he says of the Holocaust.**

der, because not even wild beasts or the Cambodians of Pol Pot would process the hair of their victims into mattress stuffing and the fat of their victims into soap. This is the essence and the mystery of the Holocaust and that is why I say I will never understand it.

"Kindness and courtesy were identified with weakness, and strength with selfishness. Thus, when the war was over, I was not fitted for normal society. The values I had learned in the war were a handicap to me, and I had to unlearn them."

Jewish and deaf during a time when both Jews and disabled people were persecuted, Bergman is one of a minority of individuals to survive the Holocaust. But he refutes the idea that he had to be strong to survive: "I was not strong. It was a matter of luck. The Germans could not exterminate every Jew; some had to survive.

"No, the strongest, the bravest, were the dead heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. They were stronger and braver than I.

"But they did not survive." □