

# OUR TOWN

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**"THE GREATEST GENERATION"**

# A horrific era ...and keeping its memory alive

By Daryl Lubinsky

Robert Geminder starts his math class on the first day of school the way he always has for the past four years. He introduces himself to the class. He shows pictures of his family. He shows pictures of his dog, Charlie. And he tells the students he's a Holocaust survivor.

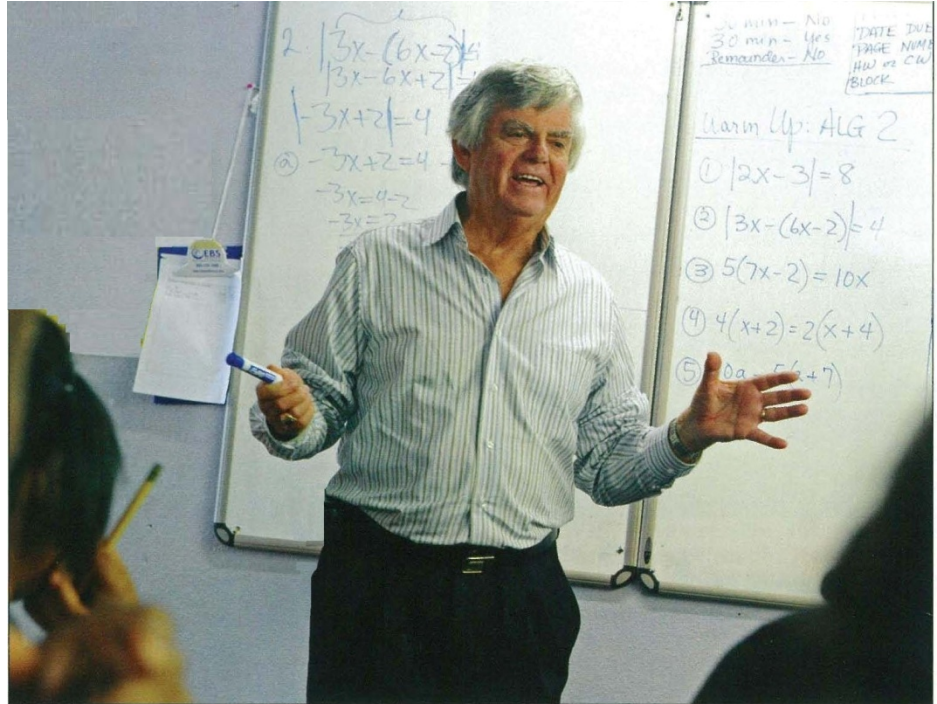
"I like talking to kids about the Holocaust," said Geminder, a math teacher at *Opportunities Unlimited Charter High School* in Los Angeles. "I want to make sure it's never forgotten."

Geminder, a Rancho Palos Verdes resident who as a child endured the six years of the Holocaust from 1939 to 1945, has given numerous talks about his Holocaust experience throughout the past 30 years. He has spoken to children at just about every school in Palos Verdes and at schools in other locations. Geminder has given presentations to adults in many other settings. He tells these attentive audiences that he was born in Poland in 1935, and his father made a comfortable living as the owner of several apartment buildings. He was 4 when Germany invaded Poland in 1939. Soon after the start of the war, Geminder and his Jewish family -his father, Mendel; mother, Bertl; and older brother George - were given an hour to gather their belongings and leave their home.

"We left everything basically," he said. "You take things like gold, jewelry and diamonds, which later became very useful because my mother was able to buy her life several times with those diamonds and gold. I left all my toys, everything."

Geminder was still 4 or 5 years old when his family eventually settled in the Polish city Stanislawow, which is now in the Ukraine. Not long afterward, the Germans bombed Poland using an all-out war method called the Blitzkrieg. Geminder and his family put mattresses against the windows of their apartment to protect themselves from flying glass caused by the bombs. At one point during the bombing, his father died of a heart attack.

Geminder was about 5 years old at the time. "I



Brad Graverson, Staff Photographer

**Robert Geminder**, a Holocaust survivor, got his teaching credentials in his 70s. He now teaches math at *Opportunities Charter High School* in Los Angeles, and continues to speak to groups and students about his experiences during the war.

remember doing the windows and trying to help, as little as I was and whatever help that meant, but I do remember my father dying at that time," he said. "The next day, the Germans came into town. That's when the cemetery incident occurred."

All of the Jews in the city, about 18,000 of them, were rounded up and brought to the city cemetery. For about 12 hours, about 12,000 Jews were shot and killed. "We survived by pure luck," Geminder said.

He and his family members were among 6,000 Jews who were still alive by nightfall, when they were told to go home. Mass chaos followed, with those 6,000 people running out of the cemetery, afraid that the killing would continue.

Geminder and his brother were knocked down unconscious in the stampede. Their mother made it home, thinking her sons did not survive. But the boys' grandmother, Golde, found them and brought them home. Geminder was too young to have detailed memories about that day. "I remember being there," he said.

When he talks to his students about that time, they often ask him about what he was feeling then. "I say, 'I

was scared for six years. I was hungry for six years.' I always have to tell the kids, I was hungry, but I did eat," he said. "Fear was the biggest thing. Emotions? I don't know about emotions. I was scared to death."

He remembers that after the cemetery incident, his family lived in one of the hundreds of ghettos all over Europe. "They purposely left 6,000 Jews alive so that they could have a workforce," Geminder said.

Geminder's family lived in a small apartment with three other families. His mother worked every day in manual labor jobs while he and his brother stayed home, keeping a low profile and eating very little.

"The ghettos were like mini-concentration camps," he said. No medical services or supplies existed in the towns. "We were just fortunate that somehow we didn't get sick. A lot of people died because they got sick or starved in these ghettos."

The family heard soon afterward that the ghetto would be eliminated, along with its residents. His mother and a friend of hers hid the two boys under their skirts and sneaked out of the ghetto. Bertl hid them in a closet at work all day, every day after that.

"When you're fearful, you can do things you would never do otherwise," he said. "You can be quiet for 12 hours in the closet."

The family's difficult life continued. Boys had a tougher time surviving than girls. If the Germans were suspicious that a boy was Jewish, they could simply check to see if he was circumcised. Bertl felt she would have a tough time keeping her two boys with her, so she convinced farmers to hide Geminder, now about 7 or 8 years old, in an attic inside their house. They didn't always feed him. "I would have to sneak out at night, take food that the pigs left, find an apple or find a raw egg that a chicken laid," he said.

The entire Holocaust period lasted about six years, but "that's a long time if you are hungry." Geminder said. His mother came back to retrieve him about 10 weeks later and took the family to live in Warsaw because she thought the family would blend in better in a big city. But later the Germans defeated the Poles during a two-month battle, known as the Warsaw Uprising.

The Germans then shipped the remaining people, mostly non-Jewish Poles, to the Auschwitz concentration camp. All of the people bound for Auschwitz, including Geminder, his brother, his mother and the boys' stepfather, Bertl's second husband, Emil Brotfeld,

were loaded onto a train, packed closely together in the cars. Bertl managed to find a train car with an open top and decided the family would get into that car to get more air.

"She didn't realize that this was such a fantastic decision, because when the train stopped about 100 yards from Auschwitz, my stepfather grabbed me, picked me up over the top and told me to unlock the door. I was the smallest and lightest. That's why he had me do it. Because we were Jews, we survived. We knew what was behind the gates at Auschwitz. The rest of the people didn't."

The family tried to convince others in the train car to leave as well, but the others thought they were going to work. "The big sign at the Auschwitz gate says, '*Arbeit mach! frei*,' which translated means 'Work makes you free.' That's how they fooled people for a long time," Geminder said. "But the Jews knew better. Only we got out of that car. Then the war was over, basically. We were rescued by the Russians." He was almost 10 at the time.

The family found what Geminder called a "displaced people" camp in Western Germany. "This is where I ate oranges and bananas and I had everything," he said. "I was so skinny you could count the bones in my body." The family came to the United States, settling in Pittsburgh about a year and a half later.

Living through an experience as painful as the Holocaust, a person can survive and even thrive with perseverance.

Geminder served in the U.S. military before moving to California, where he worked as an engineer for various companies for 48 years. He has lived in RPV for 45 years. His brother died of cancer in 1987, and his mother died in 1999.

After giving so many talks to young people about his experience, Geminder realized how much he enjoyed children. After returning to school at age 70, earning a master's degree and obtaining a teaching credential, he started teaching high school about seven years ago. Three years ago he was hired to teach math at Opportunities Unlimited Charter High School in Los Angeles.

"It gives me satisfaction, because I feel like we're really helping these kids," said Geminder, who has three grown children. His wife, Judith, died this past August.

Geminder plans to keep teaching ... and keep the memories of the Holocaust alive. "I never want to retire," he said. "In the summer, one of the teachers asked me to speak to the whole school because they were learning about the Holocaust."