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Longtime local rabbi remains forever grateful for 'sparks of holiness' during a dark time

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By EMILY SINER/For The News-Gazette

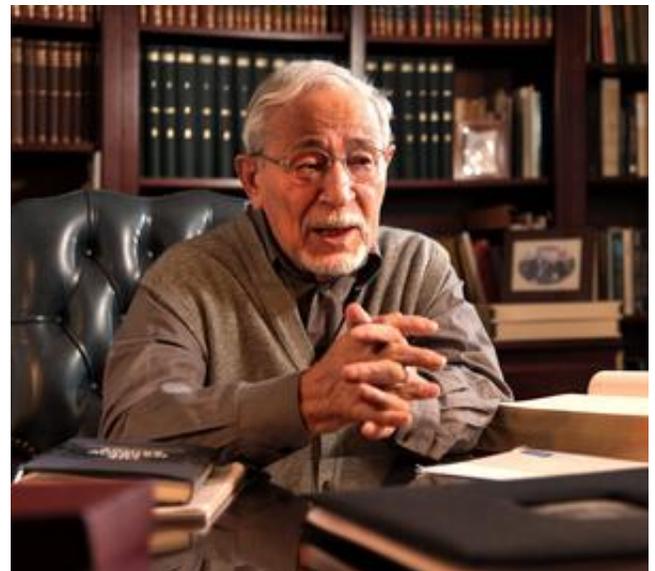
Some things he wants to remember; some things he tries to forget.

Isaac Neuman remembers a pretty woman who prepared the meals for the supervisors at St. Martin's cemetery, an early Nazi camp in Poland. She took a liking to Isaac. "Stomarek," she called him, a reference to the "one hundred marks" he had tried to hide from his captors. When they found the money, he had received a vicious beating.

"Hey, Stomarek, come here," she said and handed the 18-year-old leftovers from the supervisors' meal. She would do this for him over the next year and a half. When he talks about her today, his eyes light up and his face breaks into a smile.

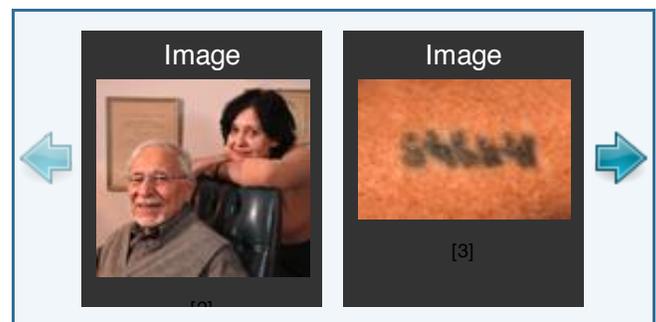
He laughs when he recalls a man named Joel Zolna, who sat next to him on a train to one of the last camps where he was imprisoned. The train slowed as it curved around a mountain. Isaac was too weak to jump and run, and Joel couldn't flee with his identification numbers painted on his coat. Isaac's coat had the numbers sewn on, so he ripped them off and switched coats with Joel, who jumped off the slowing train and escaped. After the war, Joel would take Isaac out to nightclubs and concerts.

These are things Isaac, who is 90 now, wants to remember. He wants to remember every person who did something to lessen his pain.



[1]

Photo by: John Dixon/The News-Gazette
Isaac Neuman talks about his life's journey in his study at his Champaign home.



"Sparks of holiness," he calls them.

They lit the world in its darkest days.

Yet some things he can't forget. He can't forget the death and ugliness he saw as he was shipped from camp to camp, nine times. He can't forget the boxcars or the beatings, the stifling heat, the burning cold. He can't forget the cruelty that people showed. He can't forget that they killed his brother, parents, six sisters, grandmother, mentor, aunts, uncles, and countless cousins and friends.

The world was full of brutality and misery and stench. But despite it all, those sparks of holiness — they never died.

"Ani ma'amin," he says in Hebrew.

"I believe." ::

At the back of his house in Champaign, with a corner window overlooking a pleasant pond, is the study where Isaac spends most of his days. It is the study of a scholar: glossy leather armchairs, a wide desk in disarray, ten columns of built-in shelves holding books with titles such as "Sermons for the Seventies" and "The Rescue of Danish Jewry."

His rabbinic diplomas line one wall. He sits on a leather couch facing a TV and a picture of his son, David, shaking President Ronald Reagan's hand. Piers Morgan is on CNN talking about taxes and gay marriage.

Isaac, who moved to Champaign in 1974 to be the rabbi of Sinai Temple, used to have more visitors. He has stopped encouraging them to come. It's so hard to entertain anymore, and he has enough in his house to keep busy. He has his wife, who stops in his study for short conversations and a kiss on the cheek, and a caretaker who answers the phone when he's busy ("Neuman residence") and pours him mineral water or wine.

But most of all, he has his books. He takes them off the shelf as if they are old friends and stacks them on a side table. Reading takes his mind off the aches of his body, more so than whatever the doctor prescribes.

Yes, his body aches. His hands shake. It's funny, when he was 60, he thought he was going to die in his 70s. He figured a human could only endure so much trauma and pain without skimming off a few years.

But even after his second coronary bypass surgery at 73, he kept going. Always another birthday. Always another reason to keep living.

He moves to the kitchen for dinner: salad, chicken, peas, rice. He pushes up his sleeves before the meal and says a short prayer over bread. There, on his left forearm, are six numbers in dark ink: 143945. A souvenir from Auschwitz. ::

He was born in 1922 in Zdunska Wola, a Polish town of about 8,000 Jews living alongside 12,000 Poles and ethnic Germans. For the first 17 years of his life, Itsekel, as he was called, grew up as a pious boy studying Torah, Talmud, Midrash and any other Jewish text he could get his hands on.

His teacher and mentor was Rabbi Mendel, a former soldier in the German army in World War I, legendary in Zdunska Wola for his wisdom.

The rabbi taught Itsekel about Judaism and life. He once told a Talmudic story, one of a second-century rabbi who stopped in the ruins of Jerusalem to pray. Elijah, the mystical Jewish prophet, met him outside and reprimanded him for praying in ruins. The story was supposed to warn readers to stay away from ruins because they might be unsafe. But Rabbi Mendel taught Itsekel his own interpretation. If you stand at the ruins of your civilization, he said, do not dwell. Your prayer should be short. Be careful, for it is hallowed ground.

Itsekel's family fled Zdunska Wola when the German army invaded in 1939. They were less than 35 miles away when they turned back — escaping to Russia would be too difficult with eight children, they decided. They returned to a shattered world: broken windows, burned factories, ruined homes. Rabbi Mendel had been arrested and executed for studying Torah under the new Nazi rule. ::

Isaac was sent to his ninth and final concentration camp of the war in Ebensee, Austria, in April 1945, one month before the Americans came.

He doesn't remember much about the liberation. He was dying from starvation and tuberculosis. He weighed about 80 pounds.

He remembers the Americans setting up hospitals for the former prisoners and putting the new prisoners — the Nazi soldiers — in charge of caring for them.

Isaac was brought back to health by doctors and nurses who had worn swastikas just a few weeks earlier. It was weird. At one point, the doctors sent him to the hospital psychiatrist, a former German officer, because Isaac's hands wouldn't stop shaking. The officer boasted that he had been trained in psychology by a disciple of Sigmund Freud. The Nazi officer, trained by an Austrian Jew. Isaac wasn't sure if the officer realized the irony.

Some of the nurses assured him they had never hurt a Jew during the war. Someone asked: Did you ever care for Jewish patients? Well, no, they said, the Jewish patients never were brought to them. They only did what they were told.

Twenty years later, as a rabbi in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, Isaac wanted to attend Martin Luther King Jr.'s civil rights march in Selma, Ala. The board members of his synagogue tried to convince him not to go. They didn't understand why he should risk his life for black people in the Deep South.

Isaac reflected on his Biblical knowledge, his companion since the age of 3. There, in Exodus 12:49, he found words that rang deep inside him, clear as the Ten Commandments: "One law shall be given to you and the stranger who lives among you."

Didn't he know what it was like to be treated like a stranger in his own land? Didn't he know what happened when fear stopped good people from speaking out? He didn't want to be like the nurses at Ebensee, like the silent, good Germans.

He went to Selma. ::

Sometimes, people ask him: "Where was God?" Where was Isaac's God between 1941 and 1945, in Junikowo, St. Martin's, Fuerstenfelde, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Fuentfeichen, Gross-

Rosen, Mauthausen, Wels, and Ebensee?

What God would give Isaac dreams almost 70 years later about frantically trying to escape from guards and killers? What God would extinguish entire families, generations of memories?

People ask: "Where was God?"

Isaac believes God was in the sparks of holiness that radiated through the darkness, in the people who maintained their humanity in the brutality and misery and stench.

There is good and there is evil in the world; that cannot be changed. He believes it is our job — not His — to seek the good and stop the evil.

People ask: "Where was God?"

Isaac asks: "Where was man?" ::

It is said that during the Holocaust, some Jewish prisoners sang this Hebrew text on the way to death camps: "Ani ma'amin, ani ma'amin b'emunah sh'leimah" — "I believe, I believe, with perfect faith." Sitting on his leather couch, Isaac sings this song in the traditional melody, the one that his congregation at Sinai Temple sings every year on Yom HaShoah, the day of remembrance for the Holocaust.

Isaac knows it is hard for those who were not there to remember it well. He knows that the best way to remember is to listen to the stories of witnesses. Yet so often people only remember the cruelty. Yes, the cruelty must be present in every story, but Isaac wants to warn people: Be careful not to dwell on it. The Holocaust is hallowed ground. It is the ruins of a civilization.

He wants the world to remember it the way he does: Despite the hunger and thirst, brutality and death, ani ma'amin — "I believe."

In the sparks of holiness.

They light the world even in its darkest days.

Emily Siner is a University of Illinois journalism student. This story was done in a version of Professor Walt Harrington's literary feature writing class during the fall 2012 semester that included students and News-Gazette staffers. Funding came from the Marajen Stevick Foundation.

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