

TO GIVE UP OR NOT

BY MARCEL DRIMER

In April of 2012 President Obama came to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) to talk about the government's efforts to fight genocide wherever it exists. He also announced awarding posthumously the Medal of Freedom to Jan Karski, a Polish hero whom we, Polish Jews, admire. The President addressed the Holocaust survivors, sitting in the front rows, as those who "Never gave up."



During one of the many Aktions in the Drohobycz Ghetto in 1943 I hid with my mother, sister Irena, and other Jews in an underground bunker, one of the 19 hiding places we used during the Holocaust. Father was at that time in a work camp, temporarily safe from deportation.

We were all constantly hungry and scared. Irena was anemic and bleeding from her nose. I was small for my age, did not talk much and looked like a hunted little animal. A Jewish woman with a child was hiding with us. She exuded an aura of superiority and self assurance being fairly well dressed and fed. She said to my mother: "Mrs. Drimer, why are you trying so hard to prolong your misery? Don't you see that your little girl will not live much longer and your son is physically and mentally impaired? Why don't you just give up?" The woman's opinion of me did not help my already low self esteem.

My mother thanked the woman for the advice and said that we would try our best to keep on living. There were many times in our miserable existence that my parents considered another option. They would have liked to get cyanide pills for all of us, but could not afford it.

I have no idea what happened to the woman, but we did survive.

After the liberation, I re-started my life trying to prove that woman and Hitler wrong. It took a few months to learn to speak normally, not in a whisper and to strengthen my atrophied leg muscles, so I could walk and run.

The years after the Holocaust were not about life and death survival. But living in a Communist, anti-Semitic Poland was a struggle. Because of the Holocaust, I had lost 3 years of schooling and had to catch up. My parents hired a tutor and I made up 2 grades, but in the 4th grade, I was still a year older than my Polish classmates. The teacher assigned me to be the president of the class. As I was distributing books, a boy tried to trip me and complained "Why do we have to listen to this kike (parszywy Zyd)?" I put down the books and punched him in the mouth. From that time, no one called me a kike. After we parted ways, whenever he saw me on the street, he very politely took his hat off to me.

In high school I seriously tried to improve my physical condition. I exercised every day at home doing countless push-ups, sit-ups and other calisthenics, but I needed some weight training to build up my

muscles. The only places that were available for that purpose were sports clubs associated with the coal mines. I signed up for boxing and trained two or three times a week lifting weights, shadow boxing, skipping rope and shortly started seeing results. The only problem with boxing was that eventually I had to get into the ring with another boxer. In the first or second round, my opponent hit my nose with a left hook. He broke a bone in my nose, so that to this day I have problem breathing. This was the end of my boxing career. I have learned a lesson that with my nose I will never be a boxer. I did give up boxing! But since that time I have been exercising regularly, lifting weights and walking.

I graduated from high school in 1953 with straight As. My sister Irena, by that time a pretty and healthy young lady, graduated a year later also with all As. In my freshman year at the Wroclaw Polytechnic Institute I could not adjust to the hard routine of engineering studies. For the first time in my life I was away from my family, living in a rented room, eating lousy food in the Institute cafeteria. I was failing two courses. While visiting my family one weekend, I suggested that I would quit and try some easier studies. My wise Father said "We did not quit in much more dire situations. You should study hard and in the worst case wait until they let you go."

I barely passed the two courses but gradually improved my grades and in my sophomore year I was on the Dean's List. Those on the list would get a little more scholarship money. Standing in a special line to receive it was like a badge of honor.

I graduated in 1957 with a BS in Mechanical Engineering. Irena graduated with an MS in Civil Engineering. Later there were many PhDs, Professors and one ambassador among my cousins who survived or were born after the war, but I was the first in my family to graduate from a university.

I retired in 1994 from the Army Corps of Engineers as Supervisory General Engineer (GS 15). After that I worked for 16 years as a consultant for the same organization. During my professional career I sponsored some highly qualified emigrants from Poland and helped others to find jobs and settle in the US.

Irena worked for many years in a high position as a Civil Engineer in the Construction Ministry in Israel and retired recently. She now lives in Israel with her husband, a retired professor of Entomology, two children and six grandchildren. My wife and I have one son, Adam, and two grandchildren. They are our pride and joy.

So much for two children; one being "physically and mentally impaired" and another predicted to "die soon".

Just before my 40th birthday on May 1st 1974, I got a letter from my parents where father wrote: "This is a special letter for your birthday. It is the 40th birthday and a special one. We should be happy that we all miraculously survived the Nazi beast and are living normal lives, because many survivors are not capable of that. My dearest son, I wish that together with your beloved Mother we will be able to wish you, Ania and your sweet little Adam all the happiness in the world for many years to come and a lot of "nachat" (pride and joy in Hebrew) from him." November 5, 2012