

A triumph of spirit

New book profiles New Bedford man who survived Holocaust

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NEW BEDFORD — Arriving in New Bedford with his wife Freida in February 1950, German immigrant and Holocaust survivor Abraham W. Landau felt lost, like a beggar. Yet he knew he and his family had to move forward.

"And so we did. Out of nothing, we built a future," Landau says at the end of his biography, "Branded on My Arm and in My Soul: A Holocaust Memoir," which after years of research and fundraising will be available today online and in bookstores.

Published by Spinner Publications, in collaboration with the Jewish Federation of Greater New Bedford, the book follows Landau's journey from his childhood in Wilczyn, Poland, through his internment in 13 Nazi labor and concentration camps and to his post-war life as a tailor and activist in his adopted community of New Bedford.

Readers will discover how Landau, who died at age 77 in 2000, kept his faith in humanity despite suffering through unspeakable atrocities at the hands of the Nazi war machine, said Joseph D. Thomas, publisher of Spinner Publications, who edited the book with Marsha L. McCabe and Jay Avila.

"Abe was robbed of his education, his musical talents, his family ... Yet he was never bitter. It's just unbelievable. He was a kind, caring positive force in the community," Thomas said.

"I really feel the book is a triumph of the human spirit," McCabe said.

Landau devoted his later years to sharing his Holocaust experiences with the public. He spoke to civic groups and school children throughout the region. He also fought to establish the city's Holocaust Memorial, which is located in Buttonwood Park.

"I think Abe's biggest concern was that the Holocaust never happen again, and that we would be aware of what happened," Thomas said.

"The school kids were absolutely mesmerized about what he went through. It made a very big impression on them," said Cynthia Yoken, the chairman of the Jewish Federation of Greater New Bedford's Holocaust Education Committee.

Yoken and Marsha Onufrak, a member of the Holocaust Education Committee, organized fundraisers, developed a study guide to accompany the book, and organized community support for the project, which will be unveiled at a 2 p.m. kickoff event today at Tifereth Israel Synagogue in New Bedford.

"People I met while I was raising funds for the book would say they remembered Abe Landau, that he often wouldn't charge them for the tailoring work he did. He was a very generous man," Yoken said.

"We talked about how important it is for the non-Jewish community to understand how acts of intolerance and prejudice can escalate and turn into such a horror," Onufrak said.

In 1941, just less than two years after the Nazi invasion of Poland, SS troopers burst into



Abe Landau looks out his tailor shop window in New Bedford.



Abe Landau and other concentration camp survivors, photographed in Germany in 1947.

PHOTOS COURTESY SPINNER PUBLICATIONS

Landau's family home and threw him on the back of a truck bound for a labor camp in Inowroclaw. He last saw his mother being mowed down by machine gun fire as she tried running after the truck.

Landau spent the next five years in concentration camps. He built railroads in Poznan, mined coal in Gleiwitz, paved roads at Buchenwald and ran errands for death doctors at Auschwitz Birkenau.

Landau completed the "Death March" from Auschwitz to Gleiwitz in 1945, and rode the death train from Dora to Bergen-Belsen before the Allies liberated the camp in April 1945.

"I think people are going to be amazed at the incredible amount of work that went into this book," said McCabe, who wrote the epilogue summarizing Landau's life in New Bedford, his tailor shop at 520 Pleasant St., and his service as a cantor, among other details.

Telling Landau's story began in 1982, when he was interviewed by UMass Dartmouth professors Yale Magrass and Robert Michael. The Jewish Federation of Greater New Bedford had contracted them to record his personal memoir for publication.

In 1993, Landau, who had also been interviewed by Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation, approached Thomas with a 400-page manuscript, asking if he wanted to publish his memoirs. Thomas was interested, but the manuscript was put aside because Spinner was working on other projects at the time.

After Landau's death in January 2000, which was followed four months later by Freida's death, Eddie Rudnick, Landau's longtime friend, approached Thomas to revive the book project, and vowed to do anything to make it happen, from raising funds and assembling a research and editorial team.

When Rudnick died in 2003, Thomas said he grew determined to finish the book in their memories.

Fundraising events were held, and grants secured. The research team was assembled and began transcribing 12 hours of Landau's interviews with the UMass professors.

"We had to transcribe all the material, and that was a lot of hard work," Thomas said.

"Abe spoke in a heavy Polish accent. He got some of the facts confused, which is understandable. It's hard to remember specific facts at a time when you were starving. Also, sometimes, he was confused about what experiences took place at which camps."

To iron out the details, the Spinner research team visited concentration camps in Germany and Poland. They pored through Germany's national archives to verify facts and dig up references to a small camp Landau recalled at Rabinek in Poland.

"I'm most proud of the fact that we were able to add something new to the historical wealth of the Holocaust," Thomas said, adding that the Nazi takeover of Germany still holds important lessons for today.

"That German society, which was so advanced in the areas of philosophy, music, arts, culture, could succumb to the Nazi machine, whose manifesto was to slaughter people, exterminate entire segments of society they didn't think were worthwhile, is an important lesson to remember," Thomas said.

"I think the message we grabbed onto putting this book together was that of tolerance. In the world today, we're still being tested, in terms of religious conflicts and ethnic cleansing.

"I felt this was a good time to tell the story again and reawake in people the recognition that we need to guard against systemic hate on the part of human beings," Thomas said.