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Centenarian David Sroka shares his story of survival



By **Linda Chase**
Contributing Editor

Holocaust survivor David Sroka along with five other centenarians was recently inducted into the Goodman Jewish Family Services' inaugural Centenarian Club. I met with David in his Hallandale Beach home.

"I was born May 10, 1923 in a small town in Poland located near the German border. My father's name was Shalom and my mother was Fremata. My father, a fifth-generation butcher, owned a kosher butcher store. I was the fourth of five children. I had four sisters, however only my oldest sibling survived the Holocaust. My sister and I were separated when the war began in 1939. We reunited when I visited her in Germany in 1960. Prior to the war we were one big happy family. My maternal grandmother lived with us. Sadly, my grandmother had poor vision and died from injuries she sustained when she fell down the stairs. I attended public school in the morning and cheder (Jewish school) in the afternoon. Life for Poland's Jews changed abruptly when German troops invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, triggering the start of World War II. I was 16 when the war began and I remember that the Germans practically burned down our entire town. In an attempt to escape, my family headed north. Unfortunately, the German soldiers caught up with us and sent me and my family back to our town. Miraculously our building was still standing, so we were able

Holocaust survivor David Sroka. PHOTO BY LINDA CHASE

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to temporarily live in our home. My uncle's building burned down and he moved in with his family. Three months after the war began, the Germans turned our town into a ghetto and my family was forced to live there. While living in the ghetto I was permitted to work during the day. I helped deliver supplies to surrounding towns with a man who owned a horse and wagon. The Germans arrested my father and I never saw him again. One day I was selected along with a group of 50 people to work in the Posen labor camp. Posen was one of the first camps established in occupied Poland. It was located about 50 miles from my hometown. I recall that sometimes we had to walk three or four miles as we worked. I remember passing a bakery named Sroka. It was spelled the same as my name, but they were gentiles."

David recalled being imprisoned at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

"After spending a few years in one labor camp or another, I was transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau in September 1943. Auschwitz-Birkenau was originally an army barrack that was converted into a concentration and extermination camp following Germany's invasion of Poland. After I arrived by train, I was deemed healthy to

undergo forced labor and was marched to the Birkenau section of the large complex. The next morning I was stripped of all my clothes, completely shaved of all hair, disinfected and showered before being tattooed with a registration number. I was given the number 143634. I was then issued the infamous striped uniform and clogged shoes to wear for the strenuous work. The Nazis had a classification system for identifying its prisoners. The badges sewn onto prisoner uniforms enabled SS guards to identify the alleged grounds for incarceration. Jews were identified by a yellow star (a perversion of the Jewish Star of David). Other triangle classifications included: red for political, green for criminals, pink for homosexual, purple for Jehovah's Witnesses and black for nonconformists, vagrants and other groups. Every morning I lined up and was assigned a work detail. My work included paving the roads within the complex and working with surveyors when the crematoriums were being constructed (which I was not aware of at the time). When I worked on the roads I would pick up cigarette butts off the ground and trade the tobacco with Polish prisoners for scraps of bread. One of my worst experiences I can recall during my imprisonment occurred only days after my arrival. I was accused of urinating in my shoes and another man was accused of stealing a piece of bread. Our punishment: we had our hands tied

behind our backs and suspended from a tree with our feet dangling. After a while, they let us down. I often hid from Dr. Josef Mengele, the infamous Nazi doctor, to avoid being selected for one of his experiments. Once I was hiding near Mengele's feet and a man hid me so I wouldn't be discovered. It turned out that the man who saved my life was a Polish priest. Another responsibility I was given was making people feel calm as they were placed in one of two lines after disembarking the trains. When an unaware prisoner would ask if the smoke coming from the chimneys was a bakery, you had to keep your mouth shut or you would be killed. I remember a woman (whose father was a rabbi) lived in my town and recognized me. I insisted that she let her daughter go on line with her husband so that the child might be saved from death, but the mother wanted to have the child with her. Separated from my own family, I could relate to that family's anguish. I found out after the war that my mother and three of my sisters were murdered. I was smart and resourceful, that's how I survived my imprisonment in the camp."

David reflected on his liberation.

"I was liberated by American soldiers near Munich, Germany in 1945 when I was

21. I found work as a driver for a Jewish organization that helped people board ships immigrating to Israel. I also drove people from one displaced persons camp to another. Then I worked as a driver for HIAS, the Jewish American nonprofit organization that provides humanitarian aid and assistance to refugees. Determined to move to America, I left Munich and went to France where I boarded the Queen Mary and arrived in New York one day after Passover ended on April 29, 1951. My first job in New York was in a butcher shop making \$25 a week. I soon sent for my future wife who I met while living in Munich. We were married in December 1952 and enjoyed 72 years together until her death. She was a comptroller at the Hotel Astor, a luxury hotel on Times Square in Midtown Manhattan. She worked there until the property was closed in 1967. She also worked for banker David Rockefeller on Wall Street. We moved to Florida in 1974 where I worked in the beauty supplies business. I was also a handyman in my younger days."

David shared his words of wisdom.

"You have to be nice and respectful towards people and try to be helpful. If you help someone, it all comes back."

MorseLife Hospice and Palliative Care expands throughout Palm Beach County

Staff report

After helping patients and families in the MorseLife Health System community navigate the end-of-life journey, MorseLife Hospice and Palliative Care is expanding throughout Palm Beach County.

"As one of the nation's preeminent providers of senior services for nearly 40 years, MorseLife Health System celebrates life, and that is never more evident than in our hospice and palliative care programs which serve people of any age," said MorseLife President and CEO Keith A. Myers. "We respect the individual and family's wishes, treating everyone with dignity in meaningful, positive ways."

MorseLife Hospice and Palliative Care was recognized by the Florida legislature as the State's only teaching hospice as Palm Beach Hospice by MorseLife in 2018. As a teaching facility, MorseLife Hospice stays at the forefront of new ideas and the creation of best practices. Three years ago, it launched its "Rest Assured" program which provides a compassionate caregiver or volunteer to be a reassuring presence during the final hours of anyone in its hospice care.

It is typical to contact hospice when

a physician determines that an individual has a life prognosis of six months or less. However, a 2019 nationwide survey conducted by MorseLife found 40% of respondents incorrectly believed that the sole purpose of hospice is to sedate terminally ill patients to provide pain/anxiety relief.

MorseLife Hospice and Palliative Care offers pain and symptom management, medication, specialized equipment, psychology and spiritual support for the patient and family as well as grief support and ongoing bereavement and counseling.

The 2019 survey also found that 87% of Americans support the use of medical marijuana as a treatment option for terminally ill patients. MorseLife is the only senior living provider in Florida authorized to make cannabinoid-based therapies available among its numerous other treatment options in a variety of care settings.

MorseLife Hospice and Palliative Care provides services wherever an individual lives: at home, in a hospital, skilled nursing or assisted living venues.

For more information, please call 561-868-6573 or visit morselife.org/hospice/

Moving is hard to do

By Judith Levy

Special to the Journal

When you're young and it's time to move, your parents handle the situation and you just go along for the ride. It's difficult to say goodbye to your friends and to change schools but somehow youngsters adjust and life goes on. Moving when you are older, when you are the parent and have to do all the decision-making and comforting your youngsters who may be unhappy to change their location, that's one thing, but when you are older, perhaps a widow and everything seems to fall on you, then moving becomes emotionally trying.

Have you chosen an independent living situation? Do you wonder if you will like it, will you make friends, is the apartment or the room smaller than you are used to? Will your furniture fit? What will you have to throw out? And who will come to take what you consider precious and they will consider old and out-of-style? If you don't get a charity to take the furniture, you might have to pay to have your precious belongings hauled away. The buyer of the apartment or house you're leaving wants everything gone and swept clean. Suddenly you realize you've been a collector and a clutterer for years and now you've got to downsize and throw out or else.

Going through your things and packing is a herculean task. You'll find stuff you didn't even remember buying. Some clothes might still have tags on them and you're not that

size anymore.

Here's my advice. Pretend you're moving now and each week throw away or give away some of the unwanted things you've collected. If you haven't worn something in two years, get rid of it, you'll never wear it again anyway and someone else could put it to good use. The IRS wants you to hold papers for five years but you have documents going back decades, so have them shredded. Don't throw anything away that has your social security number or bank account number on it, you never know who might use your information and if they do, you're in for lots of trouble, so be careful.

Once you've moved, you'll spend weeks trying to find where something that was packed is hiding. But, when you get organized, you'll swear that you'll never move again and then it's time to reach out and make new friends. Smile, be friendly and realize everyone who has moved is in the same boat as you and they too want to adjust to this new time of life and enjoy what it has to offer. If you're moving, I feel for you, so just put the mezuzah on your new door and I wish you lots of good luck.

Judith Levy is the New York Times best-selling author of GRANDMOTHER REMEMBERS and the mega best-seller GRANDFATHER REMEMBERS published by HarperCollins. Both books are available on Amazon and Barnes & Noble.