

# Yom HaShoah – What the Holocaust Can Teach Us

Learning from the life of Henry Ramek

By Laurie Snyder



Henry Ramek and Eve Gordon-Ramek

Photos provided

*"We remember because it is an unthinkable scar on humanity. We need to understand what human beings are capable of."* – Raye Farr, "Why We Remember the Holocaust," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Reading about the Holocaust is never easy, but there is something particularly heart-breaking about doing so during the spring – the time of Passover and Easter – a time when modern day Druids also hold revels to celebrate life. But reflect we must because spring is also the time of Yom HaShoah – America's Days of Remembrance – the Congressionally-designated period to honor all who suffered, as well as those who protected and liberated the persecuted.

This year, the Orinda City Council will issue a proclamation April 22, encouraging residents to stand as one against hate. But hearts will be heavy because of killings in Kansas City – and be-

cause, in March, the East Bay lost a man who survived not one, but three death camps to change the world for the better.

Born the ninth of 12 children in Mlawa, Poland in 1918, Orindan Henry Ramek was a rabbi by the time he was a teenager and, at 30, the only one of 63 family members to survive the Holocaust. He became a beloved community leader and great-grandfather – but not before nearly dying as a teen, explains his widow and memoir collaborator, Eve Gordon-Ramek. Nazis "knocked him off his bike, beat him up," and took him to Treblinka. "They gave Henry a shovel and said, 'Now, you're digging your own grave.'" He was spared because he'd arrived just before the work day was over. "They put him in a shack, and said he'd be the first to be shot the next day."

Breaking through the shack's rotting wood, he ran and found a

farmer to take him to Płońsk where his brother, Yaakov Ramek, headed the Judenrat which distributed food and assigned work to thousands jammed into the mid-1941 ghetto. Many were persecuted by Heinrich Vogt, a member of the Kripo (German criminal-police).

"The brutality assaulted us in every aspect of our lives," wrote Henry Ramek. Vogt "came into the ghetto every morning at 8 o'clock on the dot. Each day he would kill four young people. He would point and call out, 'You, you, you, and you!' and then he would shoot them down. He would kill them in cold blood on the street for everyone to see and then just walk away. I saw it with my own eyes." While there, Henry Ramek met the future Mrs. Ramek – Anna Gutner.

During the Dec. 16, 1942 ghetto liquidation, Yaakov Ramek, his wife and children were sent on the final train from Płońsk to Auschwitz – to the gas chambers.

Henry Ramek was also sent there – his second death camp. "He found out right away that the best place to work was the laundry. The people who had to go out and walk around in the snow ...

they had no protection from the wind," says Gordon-Ramek. "These camps were for killing people." He got Anna a job cleaning toilets, and helped Polish Partisans, who freely entered and left as day laborers. "They gave him a shoe with a hollow heel; he kept a slip of paper in there, and would take them numbers of who and how many were arriving on trains," says Gordon-Ramek. "They would take it and give it to the free press."

Transferred briefly to Stutthof, he returned to Auschwitz. In 1945, he went three days without food or water on a death march before collapsing in Marburg. The Nazis covered him with a blanket and fled because the U.S. Army was nearby. American nurses saw the blanket move, and saved his life.

For five years afterward, Ramek used his fluency in multiple languages to help the Army track down Nazis. "It was kind of a transition from the pits of hell back into civilized society," says Gordon-Ramek. When he spotted Heinrich Vogt, he physically subdued him until soldiers came and arrested the former ghetto tormentor. When Vogt escaped by bribing two soldiers, Ramek

helped recapture him, gathering "30 other survivors to identify Vogt as a Nazi and testify about his cruelty and crimes."

After locating Anna in Bavaria, the Army helped them emigrate in 1951. They settled in Oakland, and he began work making sausage. Married at Temple Beth Jacob, they welcomed twin boys in 1953. He took over an Oakland shop, which became Oakland Kosher Butcher. Known for his kindness, he'd give a little extra to customers who were struggling, and instituted free chicken Fridays for students.

After cancer took Anna's life in 1995, Ramek married Eve Gordon. Together, they supported various philanthropic causes, and published Ramek's 2014 memoir, "My Will to Live – My Story of Surviving the Holocaust."

That "will" is perhaps best expressed by Estelle Laughlin, another survivor: "It's not enough to curse the darkness of the past. Above all, we have to illuminate the future. On the Day of Remembrance, the most important thing is to remember the humanity that is in all of us – to leave the world better for our children and posterity."



Henry Ramek with his great-grandson, Yaakov (Jacob).

## Yom HaShoah – Days of Remembrance

4:30 p.m. Sunday, April 27

Temple Isaiah, 945 Risa Road, Lafayette

Say no to hate by joining with your neighbors at the county-wide Days of Remembrance. Everyone is welcome. Excerpts from Jake Heggie's opera, "Another Sunrise," will be performed. This moving short work captures the life of Krystyna Żywulska, a Polish resistance fighter and Holocaust survivor, as she struggles to tell her story during a sleepless night. Presented by Festival Opera, this free program is being underwritten by the Jewish Federation and The Jewish Community Foundation of the East Bay in partnership with local congregations and Jewish organizations.

## It is never too late to learn:

### Books:

- "All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs" (1996): Elie Wiesel
- "The Druggist of Auschwitz: A Documentary Novel" (2011): Dieter Schlesak
- "The Liberators: America's Witnesses to the Holocaust" (2010): Michael Hirsh
- "The Nuremberg Interviews: An American Psychiatrist's Conversations with the Defendants and Witnesses" (2004): Leon Goldensohn
- "Survival in Auschwitz" (1995): Primo Levi

### Film:

- "American Experience: The Nuremberg Trials" (2006 PBS Documentary)
- "The Boys from Brazil": Gregory Peck, Laurence Olivier, James Mason (R; 1978)
- "Conspiracy": Kenneth Branagh, Stanley Tucci (R; 2002)
- "Inheritance" (2008 PBS Documentary)
- "Judgment at Nuremberg": Spencer Tracy, Burt Lancaster, Marlene Dietrich, Judy Garland, Maximilian Schell (NR; 1961)

### Web/Digital Resources:

- Southern Poverty Law Center (Hatewatch and Teaching Tolerance Resources): [www.splc.org/](http://www.splc.org/)
- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (Holocaust Encyclopedia): [www.ushmm.org/](http://www.ushmm.org/)
- USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive: [http://sfi.usc.edu/scholarship/archival\\_access/](http://sfi.usc.edu/scholarship/archival_access/)
- Yad Vashem – World Center for Holocaust Research: [www.yadvashem.org/](http://www.yadvashem.org/)



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