

OBITUARIES

Abraham Peck, survivor of 9 Nazi concentration camps, dies at 91

BY TRAVIS M. ANDREWS
THE WASHINGTON POST

Abraham Peck had that number etched into his left forearm. From the age of 15 to 20, he heard his captors use it, and only it, to refer to him.

Peck spent almost all of World War II being shuttled around in cattle cars from one concentration camp to another, where he was forced into slave labor, suffered starvation, torture, loneliness and profound loss.

He watched his father die at the hands of the Nazis. He lost almost every friend and family member, while he clung to life, finding strength in the belief that if he perished, Hitler would win.

“He saw he was in a battle with Hitler and the only way to win that battle was surviving,” his son Jacob told the New Jersey Record. “He felt if he survived, he could tell people about the horrors the Nazis perpetrated.”

In all, he was held in nine different concentration camps.

But, as his biographer Maya Ross told New Jersey Record, for him “living was winning.”

And he did. He lived to marry, have a son, two grandchildren, three great-grandchildren and own his own business here in America.

Last Thursday, at 91 years old, he passed away from kidney failure, the New Jersey Record reported.

Before he died, though, he shared his story to educate anyone who would listen.

“Abe’s mission was to prevent this from ever happening again by teaching as many people as possible,” Ross told the newspaper.

Peck grew up in Szadek, Poland, a small town of 3,500. Of this, 500 were Jewish.

After the Nazis swept through Poland and much of

Europe, only 13 of those 500 were alive.

Peck was one of them.

According to his biography, “Abe-vs-Adolf,” his family included 90 people — four grandparents, two parents, a sister, 14 aunts, 14 uncles and 54 cousins — of whom only seven survived the war.

Peck was one of them.

The others were six cousins.

He recalled his childhood in the 1930s fondly, something out of a storybook, hanging around with a friend named Monick. Together they built a kayak for the summers, using thin plywood, nails and tar. In the winter, they built sleds.

A local farmer milked a cow directly into a pail for his family. His father tended to a vegetable garden in their yard, which he used to feed the family and stock a popular restaurant he owned in town.

The atrocities that awaited him remained unimaginable.

In 1938, he had his bar mitzvah. He remembered eating ptchka, calves feet cooked to the “consistency of gelatin,” he explained — and herring. He also remembered the growing fear for European Jews, as Hitler amassed power.

“We heard Hitler’s speeches on the radio,” he told Ross. “It was a sad time. The Jewish people were depressed and worried at the time I became a bar mitzvah.”

In late May two years later, after the Germans invaded Poland, they set up a ghetto in Szadek.

“At first the Szadek ghetto was open, but to make sure none of the Jewish people could freely come and go, the Germans soon enclosed it with a wooden and barbed-wire fence,” Ross said. “It was sealed in the summer of 1940. German police were ordered to shoot without warning any Jew who might approach the barbed-wire fence.”

During the next five years, he would be held in camps like Auschwitz, Jaworzno and Blechhammer, nine in all.

The worst moment for him came in 1942.

His father Jacob had served in the Polish army in World War I, until a bullet sliced clean through his arm. Now, years later with the world at war again, he found himself a slave at the Nazis’ Rawicz Working Camp. In the spring of 1942 he, like many others, contracted pneumonia and died.

“The conditions in the working camps were terrible,” Peck said. “Men were dying from hunger and disease. One of the men was my father.”

Peck was 16 years old, stricken with typhoid, his body burning with a 105 degree fever. But he wanted more than anything to see his father into his grave, to treat as a funeral the dumping of his body in a mass grave.

Each morning, a buggy came to pick up the bodies from the camp and bury them somewhere, though the prisoners didn’t know where. Peck asked to join the trip the morning after his father’s death.

In response, a guard slammed a rifle into the small of the sick teenager’s back, screaming as an answer, “You goddamn dog. You go back to work.”

“But there was no work,” Peck told his biographer years later. “We were just cleaning up the dead.”

He still doesn’t know where his father’s body is buried.

In April 1945, American forces liberated Peck along with other survivors at Dachau, and he learned most of his family had perished.

He spent time in mourning and anger, but one year later he met Helen Fajwelman, another survivor of the concentration camps.

“I settled down a lot when I met Helen,” Peck said in his

biography. “If I wanted to live, I couldn’t stay the way I was. I had to go with my life.”

In 1949, he and Helen had a son named Jacob. Later that year, the two immigrated to America, settling in Paterson, New Jersey. Peck found work at an upholstery manufacturing company, which he eventually purchased, renamed Jalen Corp. and ran for 25 years.

In other words, they lived.

But he also took every opportunity to share his story. By telling it, he hoped people would not “stand for any injustice in the world,” his son Jacob told the New Jersey Record. “That was a core piece of his legacy.”

When he was 88, for example, he visited Saddle Brook High School to share his story with its students.

“I feel very strong that the young generation should know that there was an evil that killed 6 million people and that it can happen again,” Peck told Patch.com.

He didn’t hold any details back.

“Every day living in a camp, every hour was like an eternity,” Peck told the children, according to the website. “If the guard man didn’t like the way you looked at him, he would tell you, ‘Get me the [gun],’ and he would shoot you. We were not human.”

“What I learned from my terrible ordeal is not ever to give up hope,” Peck wrote in a statement that one teacher later read to the students at Saddle Brook High School. “It is up to all of us to speak up when we encounter injustice. Do not allow yourself to become a victim or a bystander. We must love and respect our fellow human beings regardless of differences in religion, nationality or color. With hope, let each of us take responsibility to build a better world. One life at a time. One day at a time.”

Czech gymnast Caslavka, Olympic great dies at 74

BY JAN LOPATKA AND
JASON HOVET
REUTERS

PRAGUE — Czech gymnast Vera Caslavka, her country’s greatest Olympian and a powerful voice in its struggle against Soviet occupation, has died aged 74 of pancreatic cancer.

One of only two women to win back-to-back gold medals as best all-round gymnast, Caslavka took seven golds in all at the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo and the 1968 Games in Mexico City.

In the latter she competed against and beat Soviet athletes just weeks after Warsaw Pact tanks led by the Red Army swept into then Czechoslovakia to put down attempts to reform Communist rule.

“We went to Mexico determined to sweat blood to defeat the invaders’ representatives,” she told news website Aktualne.cz in a 2014 interview.

A lasting memory of those games is Caslavka’s silent protest of bowing her head on the podium when the Soviet anthem played — echoing the more celebrated image of U.S. sprinter Tommie Smith’s Black Power salute in solidarity with African American civil rights.

“Vera was a fighter. She was diagnosed last year in the spring,” said Czech Olympic Committee President Jiri Kejval, who announced her death.

“When she did not come with us to [the] Rio [Games] it was clear the situation was bad,” he told Reuters by telephone, adding Caslavka had died in her sleep.

Caslavka’s other medals included back-to-back golds

in the vault in the 1964 and 1968 games. She also won the beam in 1964 and the uneven bars and floor exercise in 1968.

Her main rival in Tokyo, Ukrainian-born Larisa Latynina, was the only other female gymnast to win successive golds in the all-round competition, in 1956 and 1960.

Competing for the Soviet Union Latynina, who finished second in 1964, recalled Caslavka with affection on Wednesday.

“She was a phenomenal sportswoman,” Latynina told Reuters. “Vera and I were friends and we would give each other presents. We would also swap vinyl records.”

Caslavka almost failed to make it to the 1968 Games after warnings she might face arrest sent her into hiding, forcing her to train in a forest for three weeks before state authorities allowed her to join the team in Mexico.

Following her triumph there, Caslavka was expelled from the Czech sports union and ostracised for criticising the 1968 invasion and refusing to withdraw her signature from the Prague Spring protest movement’s “Manifesto of 2000 Words” against Soviet interference.

From 1974 she trained other gymnasts at home and, between 1979-1981, also in Mexico.

When Communist rule ended in Czechoslovakia in 1989, new President Vaclav Havel made her his adviser for sport and social issues. She also led the Czech Olympic Committee from 1990 to 1996, and was a member of the International Olympic Committee between 1995 and 2001.

Retired park ranger, museum curator Susan Kraft dies

BY BONNIE L. COOK
THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

Susan V. Kraft, 55, formerly of Coatesville, Pennsylvania, a retired park ranger and museum curator for the National Park Service, died Tuesday, Aug. 16, of complications from a glioblastoma brain tumor at the Livingston HealthCare Hospital in Livingston, Montana.

Her career spanned 15

years and included work as a park ranger at Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia, Valley Forge National Historical Park, and at Salem Maritime National Historic Site in Salem, Massachusetts.

She then entered a three-year training program to become a museum curator. The training took Kraft to Gateway National Recreation Area in Monmouth County, New Jersey, and

Acadia National Park in Maine.

She moved to Yellowstone as the park’s first full-performance museum curator, overseeing collection, curation, and preservation of cultural and natural history specimens and many documents.

At Yellowstone, she met Lindsay C. Robb. The two married July 4, 2001, while vacationing in Maine. They made their home in Pray, Montana.

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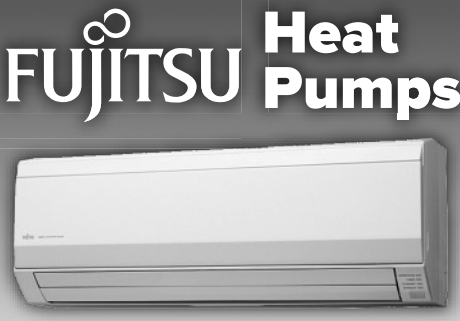
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