

# OBITUARIES

## Pearl Harbor's hero priest identified after 75 years

BY MICHAEL E. RUANE  
THE WASHINGTON POST

The remains of a courageous Navy chaplain who helped shipmates escape from the stricken battleship USS Oklahoma after it was torpedoed at Pearl Harbor have been identified almost 75 years after he perished in the attack.

The bones of Lt. j.g. Aloysius H. Schmitt, a Catholic priest from St. Lucas, Iowa, were identified by experts with the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency as part of a project to put names with the remains of those who died on the ship Dec. 7, 1941.

Father Schmitt's corroded chalice, with a cross etched in its base, and his waterlogged Latin prayer book were recovered from the wreckage months after the attack.

But his body and the bodies of most of the sailors and

Marines recovered were too jumbled and decomposed to be identified at the time.

The Oklahoma's loss of life at Pearl Harbor — a total of 429 sailors and Marines — was second only to the 1,100 lost on the USS Arizona, which remains a hallowed historic site. The Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor plunged the United States into World War II.

Father Schmitt, one of 10 children in a rural farm family, will be buried Oct. 8 at Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa, the college said. He graduated from Loras, then called Columbia College, in 1932.

He will be laid to rest inside Christ the King chapel, which was built after the war as a memorial to him. (Then-Chief of Naval Operations and war hero Fleet Adm. Chester W. Nimitz attended the chapel's dedication in 1947.)

"Just amazing," Steve

Sloan of Dubuque, a great-nephew of Father Schmitt's, said Monday. "December 7th it'll be 75 years. It's been a long time."

"The interest in his story, and the interest in the whole event, is far bigger than I ever anticipated," Sloan said in a telephone interview. "The calls we're getting, the people who are talking about it."

Father Schmitt, 32, had just said Mass that Sunday morning when the Oklahoma was hit by at least nine Japanese torpedoes and grazed by several bombs, according to reports in the National Archives.

The battleship, which had a complement of about 1,300, quickly rolled over in 50 feet of water, trapping hundreds of men below decks.

Thirty-two were saved by rescue crews who heard them banging for help, cut into the hull and made their way through a maze of darkened, flooded compartments to reach them.

Others managed to escape by swimming underwater to find their way out. Some trapped sailors tried to stem the rushing water with rags and even the board from a game. One distraught man tried to drown himself.

A few managed to escape through portholes — saved by brave comrades such as Father Schmitt, who is said to have helped as many as 12 sailors get out of a small compartment.

He was posthumously given the Navy and Marine Corps Medal for heroism.



US DEPARTMENT OF NAVY

The battleship USS Oklahoma after it capsized following the Dec. 7, 1941, attack at Pearl Harbor.

The medal citation states that after helping several shipmates to safety, he got stuck in the porthole as other sailors tried to pull him through.

"Realizing that other men had come into the compartment looking for a way out, Chaplain Schmitt insisted that he be pushed back into the ship so that they might escape," the citation says.

"Calmly urging them on with a pronouncement of his blessing, he remained behind while they crawled out to safety," it says.

Most of the dead were found in the wreckage during the months-long salvage operation, especially after the Oklahoma was righted in 1943, according to the Ar-

lington, Virginia-based DPAA. They were eventually buried as "unknowns" in a cemetery in Hawaii.

Last year, the Pentagon exhumed the remains of what are believed to be 388 of them. Sixty-one rusty caskets were retrieved from 45 graves. Numerous caskets contained the remains of several individuals.

And with the help of enhanced technology and techniques, experts have been gradually making identifications. More than a dozen have been made since the project began. The remains are being studied at special labs in Hawaii and Omaha.

Father Schmitt was identified with the help of DNA

that was retrieved from a skull bone and matched with that of a relative, the DPAA said.

Word of his identification first came from the college and news outlets in Dubuque this month. The DPAA said it planned to make the official announcement Friday.

The priest's chalice and prayer book are at Loras College. When the book was found in the ship, it was still marked with a page ribbon for Dec. 8 readings, including the Old Testament's Eighth Psalm in Latin:

Domine, Dominus noster, quam admirabile est nomen tuum in universa terra!

O Lord, our Lord, how awesome is your name through all the earth!



US DEPARTMENT OF NAVY

One of 45 graves at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Hawaii, containing the unidentified remains of 388 sailors and Marines killed on the USS Oklahoma battleship during the Dec. 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor.

## Creator of 'One Life to Live' and 'All My Children' dies at 93

BY VALERIE J. NELSON  
LOS ANGELES TIMES

The grand dame of daytime television drama, Agnes Nixon liked to say that "everyone's life is a soap opera." For proof, she offered up her own.

She had an "abandonment complex" because her parents divorced soon after she was born. Growing up in an Irish-Catholic enclave in Nashville in the 1930s and 1940s, she felt painfully different because the other children all seemed to have fathers. Hers was "nearly psychotic" and schemed to crush her post-collegiate dream of being a writer.

He wanted his daughter to follow him into his burial garments business and arranged for her to meet Irna Phillips, a pioneering writer of radio serials her father was certain would "set me straight" regarding the foolishness of a writing career, Nixon often said.

And then Nixon invariably inserted a soap opera staple into the story — the plot twist. During the meeting, Phillips looked up from reading the sample script that was Nixon's resume and asked, "How would you like to work for me?"

"It was one of the greatest moments of my life," Nixon later said. "It was freedom."

Nixon, who went on to create such enduring daytime TV dramas as "One Life to Live" and "All My Children," died Wednesday at a senior living facility in Pennsylvania. She was 93.

Although her characters were inevitably embroiled in melodrama, Nixon was repeatedly honored for elevating soaps during a television career that spanned more than 60 years. She pioneered socially relevant themes and dealt with them seriously, bringing attention to such once-taboo topics as racism, AIDS, lesbian relationships and teenage prostitution.

In 1962, Nixon wrote a story line for "The Guiding Light" on CBS about a character who develops uterine cancer and has a life-saving hysterectomy. The network and show sponsor Proctor & Gamble agreed to the plot only if the words "cancer," "uterus" and "hysterectomy" were not used.

"I thought, well, hmmm,



Agnes Nixon

that's a little tough," Nixon told National Public Radio in 2010, so she had the doctor tell the patient that she had "irregular cells, rather than possible cancer. ... It was very successful, and that hooked me."

When "One Life to Live" debuted in 1968, it featured a complicated story aimed at making viewers confront their prejudices, Nixon later said. It involved a young black woman that the audience is led to believe is white; she plans to marry a white doctor, but later falls in love with a black resident.

A man in Seattle wrote "to protest that white girl kissing that black resident," Nixon recalled in the NPR interview and laughed. Then he said: "But I am getting confused. If she turns out to be black, I want to protest her kissing the white doctor."

When Nixon was recognized in 2010 with a Daytime Emmy for lifetime achievement, the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences said that she had "totally changed the traditionally escapist nature of daytime serials while straining to make the world a better place."

She wasn't trying to "break barriers," Nixon said in 1999 on the TV biography "Intimate Portraits," but thought it was insane "to say that entertainment and public service can never be in the same story."

In 1981, the television academy had given Nixon its highest honor, the Trustees Award, for "distinguished service to television and the public." She was the first woman to receive the distinction, joining an elite group that includes Edward R. Murrow and Bob Hope.

## Holocaust 'avenger,' who plotted reprisal against Nazi POWs, dies at 91

BY EMILY LANGER  
THE WASHINGTON POST

Joseph Harmatz, a Lithuanian Holocaust survivor who led a band of self-proclaimed "avengers" in poisoning 3,000 loaves of bread for German prisoners after World War II, an act that he regarded as rightful retribution for the Nazi slaughter of 6 million Jews, died Sept. 22 at his home in Tel Aviv. He was 91.

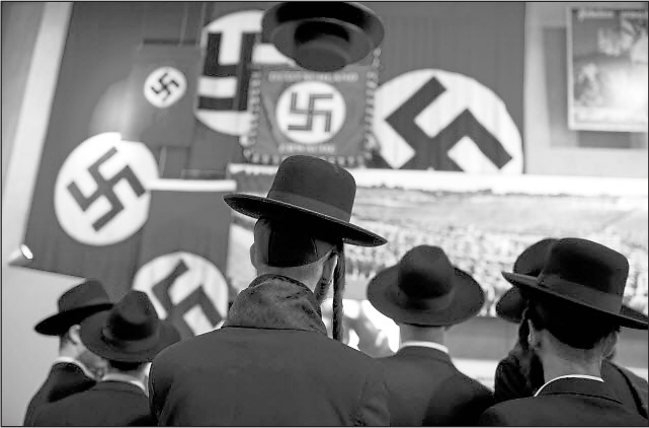
The cause was a heart ailment, said a son, Ronel Harmatz.

For decades, Harmatz did not speak publicly about the act of sabotage that he helped organize near Nuremberg, Germany, in April 1946 — a plot that sickened thousands but produced no confirmed fatalities, and that was perhaps the most dramatic act of its kind in the aftermath of the Holocaust. He had lost most of his family to Nazi persecution and then re-established himself as a civic leader in Israel, a life that he believed did not permit discussion of his postwar activity.

Only in the 1990s did he reveal his association with Nakam, a group formed by the Jewish partisan leader Abba Kovner and that operated across Germany after the war. The name meant "vengeance" in Hebrew, but Harmatz and his comrades did not necessarily seek revenge, observed Dina Porat, chief historian of the Yad Vashem Holocaust remembrance center in Jerusalem. "They wanted justice to prevail after a horrible injustice was inflicted upon the Jewish people," she wrote in an email, "so that no one would dare raise his hand against them again."

Like many of Nakam's several dozen members, Harmatz had proved himself in the Jewish resistance, enlisting at 16 while confined to the Vilna ghetto. During the liquidation of the ghetto, Harmatz escaped through the sewers and fled to the swampy Rudniki Forest outside Vilna, where Kovner, later a prominent Israeli poet, named him chief of special operations.

During the war, the partisans attacked railways, bridges and telegraph lines to thwart the German war effort. But Harmatz's most noted actions came later, when Germany was defeated but remained, in his



REUTERS FILE

Ultra-orthodox Jews visit Yad Vashem's Holocaust History Museum in Jerusalem in 2015. Israel marks its annual memorial day in May commemorating the 6 million Jews killed by the Nazis during World War II.

view, insufficiently punished for its crimes against the Jews.

"The Germans here were taking their children out in little prams, they had milk to feed them and still they complained that the level of fat in the milk was not high enough," Harmatz observed in comments cited in the book "Endkampf: Soldiers, Civilians, and the Death of the Third Reich" by Stephen Fritz.

"They, on the other hand, grabbed our children and babies by the legs or by the hair and threw them against telephone poles and into the furnaces," he remarked. "Many of us became nihilistic. Life was not important, neither your own nor anyone else's."

Harmatz took command of a Nakam cell in Nuremberg, where it made him "sick," he said, to sit through the minutiae of the war crimes trials administered by the Allies. The group contemplated but abandoned a plan to gun down the Nazi defendants in the courtroom.

Regarding German guilt as pervasive, the fighters plotted an attack in which they would have poisoned the water supply to Nuremberg. Kovner went so far as to secretly obtain the poison in Palestine but was discovered en route by ship back to Europe and threw the toxins overboard, according to accounts published by the London Observer and the Associated Press.

Nakam then formed the plan to poison the bread provided to Nazi prisoners at Stalag 13, an American-run camp in Langwasser, outside Nuremberg. The group infiltrated the bakery, eventually hiding supplies under

floorboards. On the appointed night, operatives sneaked in and coated the 3,000 loaves of black bread with arsenic mixed with glue so that the substance would adhere to the bread like flour.

They knew that each loaf would be divided among four prisoners, and that the poison might therefore reach 12,000. The goal, Harmatz told The Associated Press in an interview last month, was to kill as many Germans "as possible."

Harmatz claimed that the attack killed 300 to 400 Germans, but the figure could not be substantiated. According to a 1946 news report, more than 2,200 Germans were sickened. Porat said that there were no known deaths. It was speculated that prisoners tasted something amiss in the bread and declined to finish their rations.

Nakam soon disbanded, and Harmatz shifted his efforts to Bricha, the effort to illegally shepherd Jews from Eastern Europe into what was then the British mandate of Palestine. Although there were individual acts of revenge against Nazi perpetrators, the Nuremberg plot was the "only episode on record" of large-scale retaliation, Andrew Nagorski, a journalist and author of the book "The Nazi Hunters," said in an interview.

"It's not surprising that some survivors would try to mount" such an act, he said, but "what's perhaps more surprising is how quickly how many Holocaust survivors and people who are called 'Nazi hunters' began to focus not so much on revenge but on trials," as well as the historical documentation of the events of the Holocaust. But until the end of

his life, Harmatz saw his actions as justified.

"We didn't understand why it shouldn't be paid back," he told the AP in August.

Harmatz, known by Yulek, was born in Rokiskis, Lithuania, on Jan. 23, 1925. His father was a prosperous wholesaler.

Yulek belong to a youth communist group and said he was enlisted to help guard Vilna after the Soviet Union annexed Lithuania in 1940. The next year, Nazi occupiers arrived and embarked on a killing campaign that would destroy 90 percent of the Lithuania's Jewish population, one of the highest rates in Europe, according to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Of Harmatz's immediate family members, only his mother survived the war. His father committed suicide in the ghetto. One brother died serving in the Soviet army, and another brother perished in a concentration camp.

Outside the ghetto with the resistance, he told an interviewer, "I first met people who'd escaped from concentration camps. They told me of the atrocities. I decided I wouldn't rest until I got revenge."

After the war, Harmatz ran a shipping company in Israel and became a high-ranking director of World ORT, a nongovernmental organization that provides educational and vocational training.

In 1998, following his retirement, he published a memoir of his time with Nakam, "From the Wings." A German court later investigated him and an associate but declined to prosecute them "because of persecution experienced by the two involved and their family."

Harmatz's wife, the former Gina Kirschenfeld, whom he married in 1950, died in 1987. Survivors include two sons, Ronel Harmatz and Zvi Harmatz, both of Tel Aviv; and three grandchildren.

According to Porat, about eight of Harmatz's former comrades are living today.

"We were the Avengers," he told the Observer in 1998. "Unfortunately, we did not do more. Our ultimate intention was to kill 6 million Germans, one for every Jew slaughtered by the Germans. ... And I don't feel any differently today."