How did a 9-year-old boy outwit the Nazis?

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Born in the summer of 1932, Leon Ginsburg grew up in an east Poland town with a Jewish population of roughly 5,000.

By the summer of 1945, you could count the Jewish survivors of Maciejow on two hands: nine adults and one child.

Ginsburg was that child, a preternaturally self-sufficient 13-year-old whose father had died of a respiratory ailment when Ginsburg was a toddler, and whose mother and siblings fell victim to the Nazis.

"My survival is not typical," says the Lake Worth resident. "I don't want people to get the idea that you got captured and you ran away, you got captured and ran away. It didn't work like that.

"You got captured once, and you were dead."

But Ginsburg eluded almost certain death multiple times over the course of many close-call years.

"That's what makes his story unique - that he was so very young and so very resourceful," says Rosanna Gatens, director of Florida Atlantic University's Center for Holocaust and Human Rights Education, where Ginsburg is a member of the speakers bureau.

When Ginsburg recalls his life before Sept. 1, 1939 - when 1.8 million German troops invaded Poland - his memories are happy ones.

He had many friends, a brother who was two years older, a sister who was four years older and a close-knit extended family. His mother ran a fabric store, and his grandparents were in the shoe business.

The young boy had his first real inkling that his world was being upended in the summer of 1941, when the German army marched into Maciejow, which had been under Soviet occupation. Within a few days of their arrival, the Germans ordered all men between the ages of 16 and 60 to report to the center of town.

Curious, Ginsburg went to see what would happen. "I noticed one of my parents' friends. His face was so scared - white like lime. When I saw his face, I got scared and got away from there. Then I heard shots coming from that area, and I saw Ukrainian men with shovels going in that direction."

'You're kaput. You're dead'
In 1942, Ginsburg himself came face to face with the threat of violence. With a group of SS men haunting the streets, Ginsburg and his family sought refuge at his grandfather's house. The women in the family hid in a corner of the attic, while Ginsburg and his brother remained downstairs with their grandfather, who was sick in bed.

A knock at the door. Ginsburg tentatively opened it, and "these two giant SS officers burst in with flashlights and started asking where my aunts and sister were."

Ginsburg said they'd already been taken away, and he asked the men if they knew where they might be. The officers searched the cellar, then asked if anyone was in the attic. Ginsburg said, "No."

One of the men raised his revolver. "He cocked it and put it to my forehead and said, 'If anyone is up there, you're kaput. You're dead.' Again, I said, 'No.'"

The other officer climbed into the attic to investigate but failed to discover the women. When the men finally left the home, "that's when my teeth started chattering and I started shaking," says Ginsburg. Where did he find such courage at the age of 10? "My mother and my sister, and my aunts were up there," he says. "I don't think I could live with myself if I gave them away. It was not a possibility for me to betray them."

'We were going to be next'

In September of 1942, word spread that the Germans were killing Jews in a town near Maciejow. "We knew that we were going to be next," Ginsburg says. The family retreated to a cousin's basement that was serving as a hideout for roughly 50 people. "Hiding was a way to survive when something lasted a week or so," Ginsburg says. "But here, this was the end game."

The Germans were aided greatly by the local Ukrainian population. "The situation was so vicious," Ginsburg says. "It was not just the German SS after you. The local population was also against you, and without local people helping you, you cannot survive."

A Ukrainian policeman discovered the group in the basement and ordered everyone out.

Ginsburg's mother hid him behind a boarded-up area, and the young boy grasped two protruding nails to hold the board against him, while his mother dove between a mattress and some bedding. That's where she was discovered. Ginsburg never saw her, or his sister, again.

Ginsburg remained behind the board for a few hours, until he recognized a Jewish neighbor who'd come into the basement to look for galoshes. He followed that man to a nearby house and retreated to an attic. Again, a Ukrainian militiaman swept the house and took the older man away.

"Now what do I do?" Ginsburg remembers thinking. "I'm in a situation where, if I stay there long, somebody's going to spot me and I'm captured. It's a situation where you cannot figure out the right move."

New name and new religion
But, with the Nazis and their collaborators on his heels, Ginsburg was able to figure out move after move - from basement to attic, from town to village, from forest to farm, hiding wherever it took to stay alive, moving on whenever necessary.

"He knew his town, he knew the people, he knew who he could trust," Gatens says. "He learned very quickly all these different jobs that he could do, and people gave him a chance to do them."

He found work, for example, pasturing cows for a Polish Catholic family. And one of his employers, a farmer, arranged for official papers that gave him a new name and a new religion: Stanislaw Kwiatkowski, a Catholic.

In the summer of 1944, Russia liberated the area of Poland where Ginsburg was living. He spent the next 2 1/2 years in a displaced persons camp in the American zone of Germany.

He emigrated to the States as part of a transport of orphans in December 1946 and went to live with a great aunt in Brooklyn. A graduate of Brooklyn Technical High School, he earned a degree in electrical engineering from City College of New York and developed equipment for dental labs.

Ginsburg married a fellow Holocaust survivor, and they moved to Florida six years ago. One of his daughters is a psychiatrist in New York; another is a Web designer in San Francisco. His son works in finance in London.

The boy who was alone during so much of the war is now grandfather to seven.