

KEEPING THE PAST ALIVE

Chicagoan Israel Starck has written a book to tell today's tweens how he endured the Holocaust and maintained his Jewish faith

By George Castle

Special to Chicago Jewish News

The positivism in Israel Starck flows both ways.

The 86-year-old Starck always made friends easily. More recently, children clamor to hear his every word. Meanwhile, he often perceives the sliver of light where others only witness darkness.

"He was never effusive," said daughter Miriam Miller. "He doesn't use emotional language. However, he's very charismatic, a very lovable full-of-life personality."

Starck must give off some kind of aura. Even an apparent enemy engaged him. Calculating to stay alive day by day, week by week in a Nazi concentration camp in February 1945, a teenage Starck doffed his cap as was custom when a German officer passed by. Only this time the passing officer was not an SS official with death head's identification, but a Luftwaffe officer in his "meticulously starched uniform and warm coat," by Starck's description.

"Halt! Drei sich nicht um," the officer ordered the youth, then known to all by his nickname "Srulek." Translated, the unaccompanied airman told Starck to stop, but not turn around and not face him.

"Es wird nicht mehr lange dauern, halte es aus wenn du kannst!" the officer added. Starck was astounded by the admission and advice offered: "It will not last much longer...hold out if you can."

A German displayed a shred of humanity to a Jew, speaking to him as a person he desired to stay alive, not a disposable *untermensch*. The positive Starck became the recipient of the message of hope.

Constantly trying to encourage his friends and fellow prisoners to live for another day, Starck immediately reported the news. He was initially not believed. But his role as a clear chronicler of history was foreshadowed by this one encounter. In some strange, cosmic way, Israel Starck emerged late in life as a chosen one to convey the day-to-day experience of the Holocaust to today's generation and generations to come.

"My [inner] constitution is that I believed," Starck said. "I didn't give up. I trusted in G-d. Some people may have silently determined there is no G-d, how could there be a G-d who would

let such things go on? But I depended upon G-d. I knew that I could see anything day to day, whatever happened to me was pointing toward one thing. Just trying to get through one day, one week, one month. Just surviving."

Miller confirmed that her father's faith and upbringing gave him a strong grounding going into his confinement.

"Part of it is his personality," she said. "I have a brother who has a bit of his nature. Also, as my mother says, he had a very wholesome and loving upbringing with excellent values and good role models. He was doted upon. You do not hear the negative stuff. It's quite a miracle. I heard that from other survivors. One was a little girl who was raised by non-Jews 'till 18, but she never forgot she was Jewish. The roots of the Jewish family are extremely strong and powerful."

Born Yisroel Storch in the Czechoslovakian city of Munkacs, Starck's pastime as an octogenarian are his memoirs via media as old as the printing press and as new as video technology just being invented.

In collaboration with Miller, who put his words into text, Starck has self-published an autobiography aimed at those in their tweens. 'A Boy Named 68818' fills a need for age-appropriate Holocaust literature for both Jewish and non-Jewish readers.

After the elaborately-illustrated book went to press, Starck was recruited to participate in a new-age Holocaust chronicle. In a cooperative program between the Illinois Holocaust Museum and U.S. Shoah Foundation, he is one of 12 survivors taping their memories for holographic video presentation (see accompanying story). With the raw content already archived, Starck and his fellow survivors' remembrances will be converted into technologies both under development and as yet not invented. Near- and far-future students will be able to question the holographic images to trigger compatible answers.

It's a better late-than-never situation for a man whose persona seems to play 25 years younger than his age during a conversation in his spacious West Rogers Park home.

Starck had a steel-trap mind, filing away the daily play-by-play of his ordeals. "I recalled most things perfectly," he said. "As far as recall, even now it's perfect at my age – even though

I might forget where I put my car keys an hour ago."

His only weakness was names and some dates. He did not suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder or any similar emotional aversion to recalling his journey to hell and back.

"I believe that I am very fortunate that I did not suffer from any nightmares or terrible recalls, although I witnessed many things that I probably would not speak publicly about," he said. Starck endured no catharsis by recounting his experiences.

"Maybe it's because of my psychological outlook on it," he said. "I did not have difficulty." A request for Starck to pose with his final camp uniform with the number 68818 was immediately accommodated. He did not scowl in the presence of this artifact. Starck has long come to terms with his personal history. If his photo was being taken, he naturally smiled.

But through the many decades, Starck declined to initiate the recounting of these details. Replaying horrors never was central to his life after he emigrated with his boyhood buddies in 1947 to the United States. A U.S. Army contingent had liberated Ebensee, in Austria, the last of the four camps in which he was confined for a total of 13 months.

"I did not carry a sign that I'm a survivor," he said. "If somebody learned about it and approached me, I was glad to answer it. But I never volunteered."

Starck was too busy living his life to verbally flash back. After the Simon Goldsmith family took in the teen-age refugee on the South Side, he graduated from Hyde Park High School.

One of his first jobs was synergistic with his persona – a Good Humor Man, outfitted with bicycle and white uniform. Stark gave away plenty of sugary treats to "old ladies in the park." He then established himself in the diamond profession, working a traveling circuit radiating 300 miles outward from Chicago. All the while, he started a family that grew to seven children, 40 grandchildren and 10 great-grandchildren. Like so many other survivors, he continually inflicted the final defeat of his old oppressors through his expanding family tree.

Even though he withheld his Holocaust chronicle unless asked, Starck had an underrated talent for storytelling.

"My earliest memory of him was at story time," said Miriam



Israel Starck

Miller. "He didn't use to tell us stories of his life. Instead, he'd read us these picture books, but he used to read it in his way. He didn't read [the published] words. If he ever reads a story to our kids, it's captivating."

Starck began revealing his personal files by popular demand. "My grandchildren heard about [his survivor's status]," he recalled. "Many asked, 'Zaide, can you please come to school to me? We want you to be show-and-tell.' My wife [Ethel] eventually named me 'The Relic.' That was how my talking about these experiences came about."

One thing led to another. Soon Starck embarked on a series of school talks about the Holocaust. The talks further expanded to a U.S. military commemoration of the Holocaust in 2012 and a National Labor Relations Board event. Starck proudly retains medals honoring him for the military and NLRB chats.

But as a man with a platoon of children carrying his bloodline, Starck was most amazed at the reaction of his youthful audiences.

"They were hungry and thirsty to hear more about it," he said of both Jewish and non-Jewish students. "I always insisted to leave some time for a question-and-answer period afterward. I learned more from their questions than anything else. I learned how they think, what is important for them. It amazed me how little boys and girls, 10, 11 and 12, the questions they could come up with. It required analyzation and deduction."

"What really touched me was the fact non-Jewish organizations and non-Jewish schools said the young kids showed an interest in what I said."

Starck wasn't finished when he answered his final question in

each session. He'd go to each school's library to determine if age-appropriate Holocaust material was stocked. Invariably, the librarian would come back with "two or three pamphlets, 25 or 40 pages," he said.

His natural positive nature kicked in. Instead of passively accepting the situation, Starck shifted into forward gear in 2010 to start the work on 'A Boy Named 68818' with the goal of placing the book in schools that offer Holocaust studies to the middle grades.

"I felt I must do my share and tell my story," he said. "I felt I had to write it down and it should be able to be digested by younger minds."

When an association with a Chicago writer did not work out, Starck turned to Miriam Miller, who had made *aliyah* at 17. In addition to starting her own large family in Israel, Miller obtained a master's degree in clinical psychology to qualify for family-therapy work while dabbling in her own book project.

"He used to travel [to Jerusalem] a few times a year," Miller said. "I overheard him mentioning the book and the fact it didn't work out with writer. I was totally enthralled. I also had a secret dream to spend more quality time with my father, because he was always busy with his business. I always admired him from afar. I was the fourth child, so I was a little shy around my parents. I'm a behind-the-scenes-type of personality. I was very much taken by the notion of working with my father."

Starck and his daughter had a running start in assembling material, between his own memory and their videotaped 2004 trip to his childhood haunts in Munkacs.

Even though the work was

non-fiction, Starck decided to install an imaginary sidekick for his younger self. The recurring character is a white dove – traditionally a symbol of peace – named Taibele. The young Srulek would have many philosophical conversations with Taibele in almost all parts of the narrative.

“He had the really lovely idea of the bird,” Miller said. “The original idea was a parakeet as we had many pet parakeets. I didn’t like the idea of a parakeet because you don’t see [them in Europe]. This is a memoir and I wanted to keep it as absolutely authentic as possible. There is no such thing as using fictional element in a non-fiction story. But it is appealing to kids. The bird changed to a dove and we made the bird very human, very personified. The bird is his alter ego, a divine hand, an objective observer asking questions for the reader, and an imaginary friend, a sounding board.”

The entire research and writing process took almost four years.

“We’d have sessions together, either in person or on the phone,” Miller said. “There were times when I thought I heard everything, organized [the material] and moved on -- and he’d have another memory.”

Miller filled in holes in her father’s timeline with additional research. She was a stickler for accuracy. As an example, she changed the distance from his Munkacs home to his *cheder* by checking with Google Earth.

Crucial in Miller’s writing style was making it compatible with a middle-schooler’s comprehension level.

“One was my experience with my kids, another was experience as a teacher and also working with my editor,” she said. “Sometimes my editor would catch [language at] a higher level, and change some words. As I was working, I did market research. I gave it to some kids to read as we went along, and I wanted to get feedback.” Miller threw out her first draft because the language of Srulek and his cohorts was not authentic.

“One of my first manuscripts was all American English,” she said. “It was terrible. It didn’t have any flavor. If it’s going to be an ethnic book, you can’t do it without saying it within the culture. We put in as few footnotes as possible. Whenever it was a foreign term, we’d explain in the course of the sentence.”

Since many projected readers are non-Jewish who not understand foreign terms and the culture, a comprehensive glossary and learning guide is included after the end of Starck’s story. Mini-history lessons are included through maps. Illustrations also appeal to children. They range from the nostalgic, showing Srulek pedaling his bicycle as a boy, to the brutally realistic of a concentration camp *Kapo* wielding a whip. Also included is an image of Eleanor Roosevelt, who sponsored the program by which teen-ager survivors could immigrate to the U.S. A collection of vintage photos tell stories by themselves.

The most poignant part of the book comes when Ebensee is finally liberated on May 6, 1945. A U.S. tank led a column of vehicles that pulled up to the front gate.

“The starved prisoners ran with renewed strength and surrounded the tank, recognizing it as the beginning of their salvation,” Starck and Miller wrote. “They cheered and hugged and kissed the steel treads of the vehicle, not even noticing the jeep and ambulance that trailed right behind with a bullet-proof car bringing up the rear.”

But the Holocaust had become so twisted and otherworldly that even liberation meant more death. Noticing the emaciated condition of the prisoners, the GIs quickly set up an emergency mess line. But neither liberators nor internees realized the ingestion of heavy food would react negatively with starved and diseased digestive systems. Scores of prisoners keeled over and died, much to the horror of the Americans.

SEE **STARCK** ON PAGE 16



Israel Starck’s grammar-school class in Czechoslovakia. Starck is at far right in the second row. He was the only Jewish survivor from this class.

Answering the questions of future generations

Israel Starck’s self-published book ‘The Boy Named 68818,’ presented in one of the oldest forms of media, is being supplemented by a high-tech version of his Holocaust remembrances.

Starck’s taping of a holographic video segment coordinated by the USC Shoah Foundation and the Illinois Holocaust Museum is part of an effort to preserve survivors’ memories in a form adaptable to future generations’ needs – and just in time.

“Unfortunately, every day and every hour, there are less people able to do this,” he said. Over a recent two-day period in Los Angeles, Starck joined fellow Chicagoans, and survivors, Fritzie Fritizshall, Sam Harris and Aaron Elster in taping their stories. They are scheduled to be joined in March by Adina Sella and Matus Stolov. Eventually, USC Shoah Foundation hopes to collect 12 personal stories for its New Dimensions in Testimony program.

People watching the projected image of the survivor can ask questions, which triggers the appropriate matching answer culled from the original video sessions.

A sample of how the system works can be viewed on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xd7pcdcUQE>

“I felt this is acknowledging [a process that is] very new and very sophisticated,” said Starck, born in 1929 when TV was still in the laboratory. “I have this sort of simple approach of how this will affect the future. This will get into schools and colleges and yeshivas. This is an image of you that will do the same thing, be able to give answers to the questions.”

Heather Maio is the concept developer of the New Testimony program. Experienced with two decades of Holocaust chronicling, Maio conducts the interviews with the survivors. The goal is to have their testimony far outlive them with core content that can adapt to the yet-to-be invented technology of future decades.

“The key was to film them in the most advanced way we could so that data would be future-proofed,” Maio said.

But the content produced will always outrank the video special-effects bells and whistles.

“The most important thing about the project is not the tech behind it, but using tech to get the content and put the survivors in an environment in which the visitor feels they have a conversation,” Maio said. “It is to allow a level of comfortability in having a



Israel Starck sitting on the set in Los Angeles where he taped the holographic segment.

discussion with Holocaust survivors about their experience.” Under development is a system in which a visitor can do a 360-degree walk-around the holographic image.

Three software systems are “married together,” in Maio’s words, starting with a voice recognition system, to allow a wide variation of questions to prompt the appropriate response.

“The intent is to have as natural a transition as possible,” she said. “Once the survivor starts speaking until he is finished [in the taping sessions], no one in that video will be edited or manipulated or animated. It will never be made into a virtual character like an avatar. The Shoah Foundation is very adamant about keeping the integrity of the survivor’s voice and exactly what they said.”

Some questions may not have a matching response. But the system has that angle covered.

“The survivor has a number of off-topic responses,” Maio said. They include, ‘I don’t have an answer to that question’ or ‘I was not asked for that project.’ Or ‘I don’t know.’”

Starck was his own toughest critic.

“Once I got through with it, I felt maybe I should have studied more, maybe I should have been more prepared than I was,” he said. “I felt maybe I could have been more effective.”

Maio won’t accept Starck being hard on himself. All the interview subjects were “extraordinary.”

“It’s an extremely exhausting emotional ride for them,” she said. “We ask them a lot of questions not typically asked of them. We asked them to go places not typically asked by the general public.”

Starck stood out by devotion to his faith.

“What was particularly interesting was most survivors for one reason or another did not choose to remain as Orthodox as he has chosen to be,” Maio said. “Most of them would say they believe in G-d and are somewhat religious, spiritual or grounded in Judaism. Not many of them say they live an Orthodox life.

“He was taught G-d won’t forsake us, even when they were going into this situation. He still believed that even when he personally saw so many of his friends and fellow prisoners die, to still believe in a G-d that’s all-powerful and benevolent.

“The question was how does he juxtapose that now, given what he went through? Does he still maintain that blind faith that G-d will protect him and stick with him? It’s a difficult conversation to have. A lot of survivors have a difficult time talking about that and understand where was G-d during the Holocaust.”

Miriam Miller, Starck’s daughter who collaborated in writing ‘The Boy Named 68818,’ said she is of “two minds” about preserving her father on high-tech video long past his lifetime.

“The Talmud said the righteous people in their death are considered alive because of their righteous deeds,” she said. “But I have a hard time with these holographic issues. He’s frozen in a certain space and time. You think you’re asking him a question, but you’re asking a computer a question. There’s something mechanical about it. I have a hard time digesting [the concept of] putting my father in formaldehyde.”

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Starck

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Soon the lethal rations were replaced with kettles of soft farina mixed with powdered milk, enabling the remaining survivors to start their recoveries.

"I could write another book just about liberation," Starck said. He met then-Supreme Allied Commander Gen. Dwight Eisenhower at a displaced-persons camp. In the last year, he tracked down an address for a GI that was part of the Army group that liberated him. But Starck fears that veteran has passed on, too late to be sought out for appreciation.

"I was very much interested if he took pictures at the camp," he said of the GI. "They all took pictures."

His own oral history is even more compelling than the printed word in 'A Boy Named 68818.' The time and place comes alive in an even more engrossing manner when Starck gets into storytelling mode.

In addition to his loving, tradition-based upbringing, he grew up in a part of Czechoslovakia, later incorporated into Hungary, that was not occupied by the Nazis until the spring of 1944. "That saved us to a certain degree," he said.

Anti-Semitism under Hungarian rule exploded. "Nevertheless, we slept every night in our beds," Starck added. "Until then, we were not touched."

Even after he was taken to the camps, Starck noticed fleets of Allied bombers winging their

way to their targets both day and night.

"We looked up at them and it sort of warmed our hearts," he said.

"I didn't have a radio, I didn't have a newspaper. But I knew one thing. There was a war going on. And I also knew when I was taken into camp in 1944 at Pesach time, I knew basically the war was lost [for Germany]. It was after Stalingrad. The only thing I didn't know about was the Normandy landings. Many times we also noticed by watching our oppressors, watching their faces. They were not very happy. We felt this. All of this helped us."

His youth, enabling him to work at slave labor rather than be sent for immediate extermination, was another factor. The 13 months of captivity and one winter were hellishly long, but he had just enough inner strength to keep going until the tank pulled up to the gate.

"I tried to encourage others," he said. "We sang when everybody cried. We cried when nobody saw us."

They could not cry after the war ended, taking stock of decimated families and not even knowing exactly when or where loved ones died. Rabbis advised the survivors their only course was to resume their lives as best as possible.

"We have no other way," Starck recalled of the mindset of the day. "We have to immediately start rebuilding our lives, creating schools, starting families, based on the Torah that was given to us. Many people did that. Survivors said we have no choice but to get back to our upbringing and live accordingly. Otherwise, [the Nazis] won."

They went back to hoped-for ordinary lives. But, somehow, in a spiritual way the survivors no longer were ordinary people. They were sought out not for their memories, but also for a deeper quality.

"A rabbi once said if you want a blessing, do not go to a rabbi, but to a survivor with a tattoo," said Starck. "Some people approached me out of the blue and asked can you give me a blessing?"

He protested. He was not a holy man. He was just a man determined to survive.

"But people insisted," Starck said.

Motivations for writing books come from a thousand different angles. Starck's might be the most unique – and the most positive.

'A Boy Named 68818' is available on Amazon.com, at the Illinois Holocaust Museum, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., and in more than 70 store locations across the world. More information can be accessed at www.aboynamed68818.com.

Death Notices

Tamar E. Bronstein, nee Blumenfield, age 81. Beloved wife of Rabbi Herbert Bronstein. Loving mother of Rabbi Deborah R. Bronstein, Miriam Bronstein and Rabbi Daniel Mosheh (Sari Fensterheim) Bronstein. Proud grandmother of Lev and Samuel. Dear sister of Rena (Richard) Klotz and Naomi Diamond. Born and bred in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago, she made a substantial contribution throughout her life to the composition, arrangement,

publishing, performance and enjoyment of Jewish music. Already as a college student in Cincinnati Ohio, she first led synagogue religious school music programs. She later served as music director of Temple Brith Kodesh in Rochester, NY and ultimately as music director of North Shore Congregation Israel in Glencoe, IL. She was also a published poet. Physically energetic, she engaged in active sports, travel and all forms of cultural experience. She was an

active member and leader of her local Democratic Party. She enjoyed and flourished in her role as a rabbi's wife. Memorials in her memory to Chicago Botanic Garden, 1000 Lake Cook Road, Glencoe, IL 60022, www.chicagobotanic.org or New Israel Fund, PO Box 96712, Washington, DC 20090-6712, www.nif.org would be appreciated. Arrangements by Chicago Jewish Funerals-Skokie Chapel 847.229.8822, www.cjfinfo.com.

Caryn Beth Goode, nee Friedman, 63, of Northbrook. Died Feb. 21. Beloved wife of Mark Goode. Loving mother of Matt (Jamie) Goode and Keith Goode (Fiancé Karina Rifkin). Proud Grandmother, "Grandma C," to Ian and Chloe. Dear sister of Bruce (Barbara) Friedman, Joel (Iris

Friedman, Lisa (Michael) Radin and sister-in-law to Steve (Judy) Goode. Cherished daughter of the late Ronald "Booby" Friedman and the late Sally Friedman and daughter-in-law of the late Irving (the late Lorraine) Goode. Lifelong loyal Cubs fan, avid golfer and trusted

friend to many. Memorial contributions may be made to Lungevity Foundation, 228 S. Wabash Ave., Suite 700, Chicago, IL 60604, www.lungevity.org. Arrangements by Chicago Jewish Funerals - Skokie Chapel, 847.229.8822, www.cjfinfo.com.

Judy Anne "Nudge" Halpern, 68, of Chicago died Feb. 18; Beloved daughter of the late Sylvia and Israel Halpern; sister to Richard (Carol) and the late Andrew (Betsy). Aunt to Stacey, Ben (Kim Selkoe), Michael, and Beth (Micheal

Carathers). Great aunt of Atacia, Max, Carina, and Sadia. Adored the symphony, reading, current events, and spending time with family. Loved travel, from an Alaskan cruise to trips to see Oregon family. Hospital re-

ception work gave her a great sense of self worth. In lieu of flowers, donations to American Heart Association, 3816 Paysphere Circle. Chicago, IL 60674. Arrangements by Lakeshore Jewish Funerals, 773-625-8621.

Irwin William "Bill" Horwitch, 79. Beloved husband of Linda nee Mank. Loving father of Matthew (Judy) Horwitch and Stephen (James Sullivan) Horwitch. Proud grandfather of Jack and David. Dear brother of

Robert M. (Barbara) Horwitch and brother-in-law of Edward H. Mank. Memorials to Congregation Sukkat Shalom, 1001 Central Ave., Wilmette, IL 60091, www.sukkatshalom.com or Northwestern Brain Tumor Insti-

tute, Galter Pavilion, 675 N. St. Clair St., Chicago, IL 60611, www.braintumorinstitute.org would be appreciated. Arrangements by Chicago Jewish Funerals - Skokie Chapel, 847.229.8822, www.cjfinfo.com.

Maurie Katz. Loving husband of Hannah Katz. Devoted father of Jeffery Katz. Proud grandfather of Joshua and Samantha Katz. Dear brother of Harold and the late Judy Katz. Cherished uncle of Jack (Bonnie) Katz, Larry (Janet)

Katz and Lila Katz (David) Butbul. In lieu of Flowers memorials in his memory can be made to Northbrook Community Synagogue. www.northbrookcommunitysynagogue.com or to The Illinois Holocaust Museum and Edu-

cation Center 9603 Woods Drive Skokie, IL 60077. www.ilholocaustmuseum.org g. Arrangements by Chicago Jewish Funerals - Skokie Chapel, 847.229.8822, www.cjfinfo.com.

Paul Mitchell Kravitz, 51. Beloved husband of Dayri nee Pineda. Loving father of Zach, A.J. and Max. Dear brother of

Carol and Jenine. In lieu of flowers, memorials to your favorite charity would be appreciated. Arrangements by

Chicago Jewish Funerals - Skokie Chapel, 847.229.8822, www.cjfinfo.com.

LaVerne Shavel, nee Freeman, age 86, of Morton Grove. Died Feb. 15. Beloved wife of the late Marc L. Shavel. Loving mother of Steven, Ross "Buddy" and the late Scott who died of

leukemia. In lieu of flowers, memorial contributions to Temple Beth Israel, 3601 W. Dempster Street, Skokie, IL 60076, www.tbiskokie.org or Leukemia Research Foundation, 191 Waukegan Road,

Suite 105, Northfield, IL 60093, www.allbloodcancers.org would be appreciated. Arrangements by Chicago Jewish Funerals - Skokie Chapel, 847.229.8822, www.cjfinfo.com.

Dr. Donald H. Singer, age 87. Beloved husband of Ruth Singer, nee Horwitt. Loving father of Karen Singer, Michael Singer, and Jonathan Singer (Dina Grinshpun). Proud grandfather of Sophie,

Maya, Benjamin, and Moses. In lieu of flowers, memorial contributions may be made to Beth Emet, www.bethemet.org or American Heart Association, 208 S La Salle St., Ste 1500, Chicago, IL

60604, www.heart.org. Arrangements by Chicago Jewish Funerals - Skokie Chapel, 847.229.8822. www.cjfinfo.com.

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