

Grandson relates Holocaust story

Grandmother tells WW II experience

By Mary Thurman Yuhas
Special Correspondent
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Like most grandmothers, Celie Halzel, 67, of Delray Beach has passed down family stories to her grandchildren.

But hers include the years she and her family spent in the Mogilev detention camp for Jews in Romania during World War II.

Last January, her oldest grandson, Matan Halzel, 12, of Memphis, Tenn., inspired by his grandmother's strength and courage, entered a writing contest, "The Grannie Annie — A Family Story Celebration."

"I think it's important for kids to pass down their family stories," said Matan, who will be a seventh-grader this fall at the Bornblum Solomon Schechter School in Memphis, where his father, Avi Halzel, 39, is the principal.

Matan's 500-word story was selected to be one of 24 published in the first volume of the *Grannie Annie, Vol. I*. "I had a feeling, because I thought it was such a great story," he said.

"How thrilled I was he wanted to do it," his grandmother said.

Two St. Louis children's book publishers, Fran Hamilton of Portico Books and Connie McIntyre of Thumbprint Press, collaborated to form what will be an annual literary celebration of family.

The contest is for children from the fourth through eighth grades, Hamilton said. The only guideline is that the children interview an older family member and write what they learned.

She said Matan's story about his grandmother was "so compelling." The book is due out in October, Hamilton said.

Halzel was 2 when her middle-class family was forced to live in the camp. She lived there from 1942 to 1946. At first, it was with her parents, Moshe and Reisel Lackner, her sister, Blanca, 5, and her aunt, Pearl Apel, she said.

Her father died almost immediately because he was diabetic and had no insulin, she said. Her mother died during a typhus epidemic.

For four hard years, she and her sister and their aunt lived in a little hut. One cold day, after standing in line for hours to get their daily ration of food, a bowl filled with potato skins cooked in hot water, Blanca slipped on the ice and spilled it. Already starving, they didn't eat that day.

That part of Matan's story was especially touching to her, Hamilton said. Matan said for him, it was when the threesome were boarding a train that would have taken them to a death camp. Quick thinking by their aunt saved them. She gave the guard a gold coin and some jewelry, and he let them get off the cattle car. They remained at Mogilev until the end of the war.

"My grandmother was the youngest person in the camp. I'm really amazed that she lived," Matan said.

Halzel said they waited in Romania for two years after the war, until they were able to board a ship with 2,000 other refugees headed for Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, where they had relatives.

"I found it difficult to tell my story for many years, but I felt it was important for children to know," Halzel said.

Since moving to South Florida, she has spoken about her experience at Temple Anshei Shalom west of Delray Beach, where she and her husband, Michael Halzel, 65, attend services.

Her life since the war has been a good one, she said. She has been married to her husband for 44 years and taught for 43 years as a master Hebrew and Judaic studies teacher in Jewish day schools and afternoon Hebrew schools in Halifax, Boston, San Diego, New York and Miami.

Halzel and her husband retired to Delray Beach three years ago."

I made a wonderful life, but my biggest disappointment is it's not a better world," she said.

Matan's mother, Rayna Halzel, 40, and father said this experience has brought their son closer to his grandmother and given him a better understanding of what she has gone through. The couple also have a daughter, Aricla Halzel, 10.

Despite his mother's difficulties growing up, she is "caring, giving, thoughtful and kind," Avi Halzel said. "I take it for granted because I grew up with her, but my wife is amazed."

"She's such a special person, because she went through so much as a child and never really let it bring her down," Rayna Halzel said.

For information on the 2007 Grannie Annie writing contest, call 888-641-5353 or visit www.TheGrannieAnnie.org.