

Author Joseph Stevens, left, with  
Political Science Professor William Baum





# Survivors

## Story

*Holocaust survivor Joseph Stevens' relationship with Grand Valley began 13 years ago with a guest lecture in Prof. William Baum's class. Now, his account of daring deception of the Nazis has become the first university-published book.*

**T**here was a time when Joseph Stevens, a young Polish Jew confronted with Hitler's death grip on Europe, didn't expect to live to see another day. He would have been astonished to have known that he would not only survive the Nazi Holocaust, but would also eventually move to the American Midwest, start a successful company, and live long enough to enjoy grandchildren.

Now 83 and having accomplished all of the above, Stevens again has reason to be surprised: this time by the interest generated by a memoir he wrote detailing his resistance to the Nazis — first by refusing to wear the Star of David, and eventually through direct sabotage missions — and the building of a new life in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

"I was telling [sons Richard and Jack Stevens] the story and they said, 'Why don't you put it down on paper?' So I sat down and started writing," Stevens said. "It was for the kids, for my family and myself. I thought, 'No else is going to be interested.'"

He was mistaken. That memoir, now titled *Good Morning*, has become Grand Valley's first university-published book and has received widespread recognition as another valuable perspective on the tragedy of the Nazi years.

"*Good Morning* is an important contribution to literature on the Holocaust," said GVSU President Emeritus Arend D. Lubbers, who initiated the publishing effort. "The author and the subject make it an important first publication for Grand Valley State University."

Stevens' relationship with Grand Valley began 13 years ago when a mutual friend introduced him to William Baum, a GVSU political science professor who had recently begun a Holocaust class. Stevens tentatively agreed to share his own World War II memories.

"When I spoke to his class in February 1988, it was actually the first time I talked about it publicly," Stevens said.

In the ensuing years Stevens became a regular guest speaker in Baum's classes and at other area colleges, churches, and organizations. In 1990, Grand Valley honored Stevens with the establishment of the Joseph Stevens Freedom Endowment, which is used to bring speakers to the university to continue the dialogue about freedom.

### A Jew among Nazis

*Good Morning* begins in 1938 when Stevens (then Szczecinski), a student at the Federal Graphic Institute of Learning and Research in Vienna, Austria, had the unnerving experience of attending a speech by Adolf Hitler, whose screaming condemnation of Jews and other "enemies" was met with ecstatic approval from the crowd. Fortunately, Stevens' blonde hair and *ausländer*, or foreign, status excused him from close scrutiny. That year he also witnessed the growing persecution of Jews, including those forced to clean the streets on their hands and knees using toothbrushes and clothing items — but nothing prepared him for what was to come.





Józef Szczecinski, right, with two Underground recruits in a photo taken by a German soldier.



Szczecinski family, c. 1936. Abraham, Lila, Józef (right), and parents Helena and Jacob.



*“There was a time in my life when, upon awakening in the morning, I considered it a blessing to greet someone with*

Stevens returned to his hometown of Kalisz, on the German-Polish border, to work in his family’s printing plant, but not long after he was inducted into the Polish military and was sent to Vilnius, Lithuania. In 1941, as Nazi troops began their march into Lithuania, Stevens again found himself in danger. Fearing that wearing the yellow Star of David, as ordered, would likely lead to death, he escaped to a small village outside of town.

Stevens’ narrative is a detailed account of daring, deception, and survival in the face of great odds. Baum, in the preface to *Good Morning*, describes Stevens as “brilliant” and “tough” in his many face-offs with danger — both as a Jew among Nazis and later as a member of the Polish bourgeois among Russian communists.

“He’s one of the great con men of all time,” Baum said of his friend. “Over the years, while hearing Joe tell his story to my classes, I have been intrigued by how much his survival was dependent upon his own striking intelligence.”

Conscripted into the Polish underground resistance movement, Stevens helped lead nighttime guerilla raids on German troops: hijacking trucks, cutting communication lines, dropping grenades, and stealing weapons.

“We fought like cat and mouse. The only way to win was to surprise the Germans and act in the areas that they least expected,” he said in a 1990 *Grand Rapids Press* interview. “It sounds like ‘Hogan’s Heroes,’ but when you were inside of it you had an entirely different feeling. It was no farce.”

By day, Stevens worked in a fishery, where he befriended German soldiers and gathered valuable information about troop movements to pass on to the underground. At all times, concealing his Jewish identity from both the Germans and the Lithuanians, many of whom disliked Jews almost as much as

they hated Nazis, was crucial. He pulled the disguise off so well that a local priest asked him to teach catechism classes.

At one point, however, Stevens disregarded the risk of being recognized as a Jew. Hearing stories about the “liquidation” of Jews by the thousands, he volunteered to deliver a wagonload of hay to a Jewish ghetto in Vilnius, “wanting to see for myself if the situation was as hopeless as people had been relating.”

“When I drove in, the scene was indescribable and haunts me to this day,” Stevens wrote. “I had planned to ask many questions and make many inquiries, but once I entered, my mind went blank. I did not see people, but miserable ghosts dressed in rags.”

As the war was ending, Stevens returned to Kalisz to look for his family, “hoping for the miracle that I might be reunited with them.” Instead, he found strangers occupying his family’s apartment and learned that his parents, Jacob and Helena, and younger sister, Lila, had been sent to the Warsaw ghetto. They later died at Auschwitz. Stevens believes his older brother, Abraham, died in a labor camp. His aunts, uncles, and cousins perished as well.

“In the town where I was born, there were 27,000 Jews,” Stevens has said. “After the war, there were 300 scattered all over the world. I was one of the lucky ones.”

Scholars estimate that more than 11 million Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, political activists, and sick and mentally impaired children died in the Holocaust.

*Good Morning* also chronicles Stevens’ 1949 immigration to the United States and the revival of his career at a printing plant in Detroit. In 1956 Stevens moved to Grand Rapids, where he founded National Correct Color Service. Now retired, he divides his time between residences in Grand Rapids and Tel Aviv, Israel.



Professors Roger Gilles, Dan Royer, Robert Franciosi, and William Baum at the book signing.



Readers waited for more than an hour to meet Stevens and get his autograph.



*‘Good Morning,’ to spend another day on this tragic earth. Each day was to me the most precious gift. I was sure that I would not come out of the war alive.”*

Even 40 years after World War II ended, Stevens said it was difficult to begin talking about his experiences, mostly because of his own losses and the atrocities he witnessed — he removed 20 pages from his manuscript because he thought they were “too gruesome” — but partly because of the complexity of the account.

“In one hour, you couldn’t explain five years’ experience. It was chaotic,” he recalled.

Forums such as Baum’s Holocaust classes, however, were more receptive. “I enjoyed that because the students were prepared by Dr. Baum. They knew the subject matter, and they wanted to learn,” he said.

Stevens’ talks throughout West Michigan inspired Grand Rapids City Historian Gordon Olson to tape interviews with him, from which transcripts were used as a springboard for Stevens’ memoir.

### The making of a book

The transformation from manuscript to book began, inauspiciously enough, with a dinner conversation between Lubbers and Hank Meijer, co-chairman of Meijer, Inc. Meijer, a longtime friend of Stevens’ son Jack, had read a copy of the rough manuscript.

“I mentioned to Hank Meijer that I hoped Grand Valley could some day have a press,” Lubbers said. “Not long after, he suggested that the university make its first publication Joe Stevens’ memoir.”

Lubbers approached Roger Gilles, now chair of the writing department, who read the narrative and found it compelling.

“I became convinced it would work [as a book] because Stevens was a good storyteller,” said Gilles. He became the project coordinator for the book’s publication along with Robert

Franciosi, associate professor of English, as editor, and Dan Royer, assistant professor of writing, as designer.

Franciosi, who teaches a class called Culture and the Holocaust, has read many Holocaust memoirs. What sets *Good Morning* apart, he said, is that it recounts the terrible history from a different perspective.

“There are no concentration camps, no train cars, yet at the same time it’s very much that sort of story,” Franciosi said. “What I most liked about it is that Joe is hiding his identity, but by being active in the resistance he is not hiding. The easiest thing for him to do would have been to stay in the background, and he could have done just that in the village he was living in. But he took risks.”

Franciosi edited and reorganized the manuscript; then Royer designed the book, which includes eight pages of photographs. The 240-page book is available at local bookstores and at Amazon.com. The cost is \$20 for hardcover and \$10 for paperback, with all proceeds going to the Joe Stevens Freedom Endowment. (Production costs were funded by a private benefactor.) The book is also being sold at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., and at Yad Vashem Holocaust museum in Israel.

On May 16, Stevens introduced *Good Morning* at a public signing at Schuler Books & Music in Grand Rapids. More than 150 people attended the standing-room-only event and many waited in line for an hour to have the author sign their books. Stevens later reported that many who didn’t wait showed up on his doorstep, books in hand.

For Stevens, seeing *Good Morning* on bookshelves reinforces the reason he began sharing the painful memories in the first place: “I feel that everybody should know what happened because any history should be a lesson for the future.”

**WEB**

— by Nancy Willey