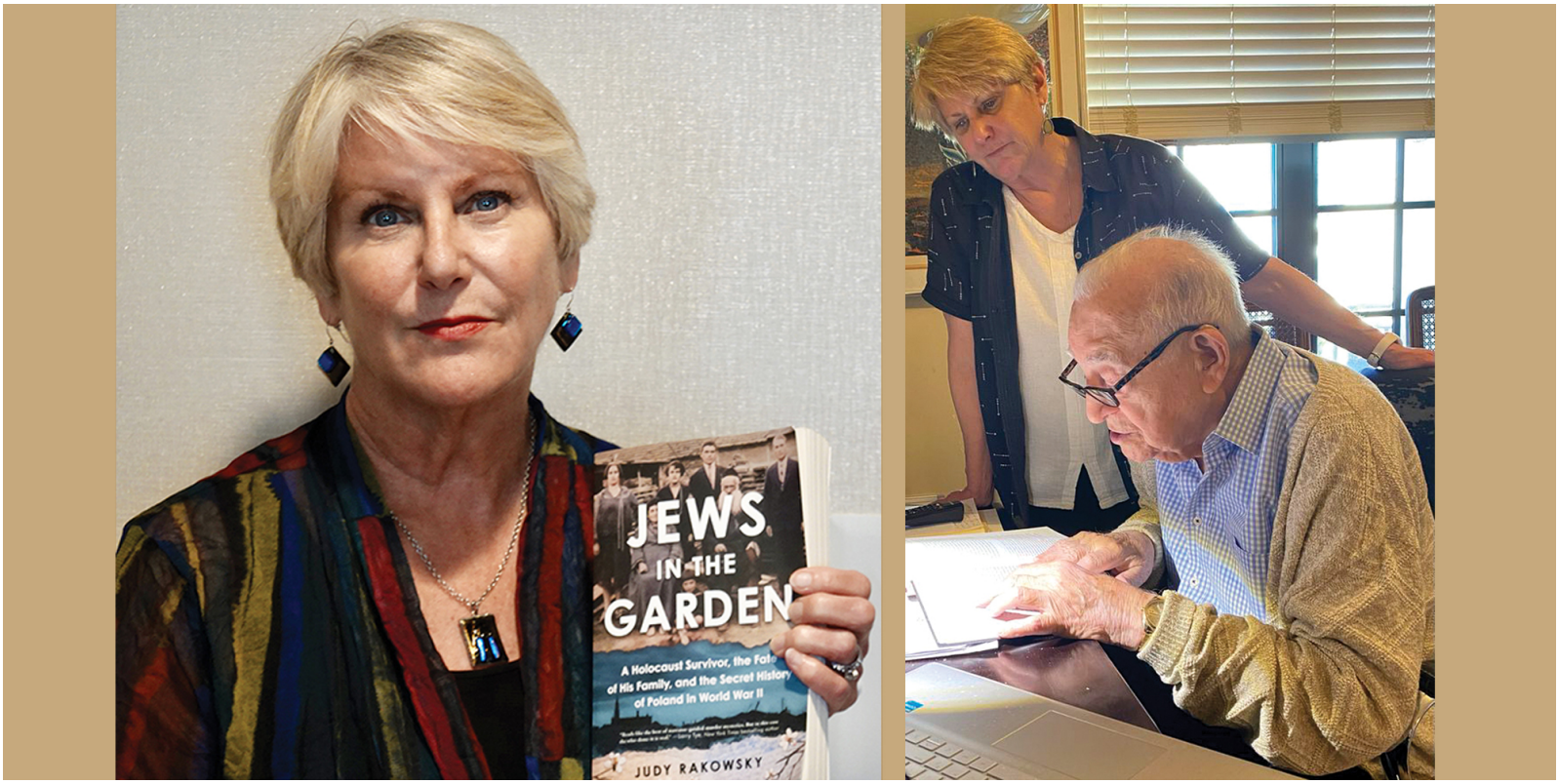

Judy Rakowsky with a copy of "Jews in the Garden." At right, Rakowsky looks on as her cousin Sam (Rakowski) Ron translates a Polish account of the murders of their relatives./SAM MENDALES

A spellbinding search for relatives murdered by Polish citizens during the Holocaust

BY STEVE MARANTZ(HTTPS://JEWISHJOURNAL.ORG/AUTHOR/STEVE-MARANTZ/)

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Holocaust history must, in essence, be dark. "Jews in the Garden," a new entry in the vast canon, is no exception. The title borrows on a phrase used casually by gentile residents of a small Polish town to denote where murdered Jewish neighbors were buried.

It tells of Jews murdered in Poland not by German Nazis but by Polish partisans and bandits, of the scorn and ostracism

experienced by gentiles who helped Jews, and of the Holocaust denial that infects modern-day Poland.

Yet “Jews in the Garden” is not entirely bleak. Uplifting are the personalities and indomitable spirits of Samuel Ron, a Holocaust survivor, and his first cousin’s daughter, author Judy Rakowsky.

Rakowsky, a former Boston Globe reporter who grew up in Lima, Ohio, researched the grim fate of her extended Jewish family, guided by the resilient and buoyant Sam, who grew up in the rural village of Kazimierza Wielka and emigrated first to Israel and then to America after the war. Together, they made several trips to post-Iron Curtain Poland in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Of Sam, the survivor and her inspiration, Rakowsky writes: “Sam’s personality emerged like a relief sculpture over the course of working together on the story. Recovering and reconnecting his memories, however grim, seemed to spark satisfaction from talking about them. Learning from him, a living survivor, was exciting. It fired my imagination and curiosity far beyond the dramatic experiences of anyone else I’d written about. I got caught up in telling Sam’s story as the origin story of my family and the tragedy of a people. He was a miraculous survivor and reliable witness with an infectious deadpan humor who also brought me closer to my forebears, revealing traits that resonated in my branch of the family.”

The seed for the book was planted in 1983, at a Passover dinner at Sam's home in Canton, Ohio, when Rakowsky heard of his first journey back to Poland. "His excitement about being back to his hometown really stuck with me," Rakowsky said during a presentation this summer at the Jewish Community Center of the North Shore in Marblehead, moderated by Jeremy Burton, executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston.

"I was working as a reporter in Providence, and I had heard Elie Wiesel speak, and he said, 'Listen to the survivors,' " Rakowsky said. "And I thought, 'Well, let me check out Sam.' I started to travel back to Ohio to interview him. It was the first time he had talked to anyone about what he went through."

The book was inspired, Rakowsky said, "because Sam is a miracle in himself. For anyone to describe the Holocaust, more than one miracle has to happen … his survival stories … the voice in the back of his head telling him to do one thing or another. To know this person is related to you … I think we've all thought we could have made it through these experiences, so I thought if he could do it maybe I could have."

Sam (Rakowski) Ron is interviewed in Poland in 1996.

In 1991, Sam and Rakowsky made their first of several trips together to Poland, the epicenter of the Holocaust. Six notorious death camps – Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Auschwitz-Birkenau and Majdanek – were built on occupied Polish territory by the Nazis. Half of the six million Holocaust victims were Polish Jews. Forty-five years after the war, Rakowsky found that Poles had a callous attitude about the atrocities.

“I was really struck by the enormity of the Holocaust,” Rakowsky recalled. “Unmarked graves all over the place and the attitude was, ‘Yeah, they’re buried in the root cellar.’ It was like, ‘What, did I just hear that?’ ”

The duo’s mission was to learn the fates of their extended family, which meant reconnecting with the longtime residents of

Sam's village. It also meant trying to get restricted government and court records, for which Rakowsky drew on her skills as a crime reporter.

"I spent a lot of time knocking on doors and not expecting a welcome," she said. "What amazed me was that Sam was willing to walk up to anyone and talk. I was at a disadvantage because I didn't speak Polish, and he did.

"I felt a great privilege not only to learn the story but to travel with my cousin and see it through his eyes and how delighted he was to be in his hometown no matter what happened there … to be in the place he was from was so powerful to him."

The grim details of what they learned, of cold-blooded executions of relatives, of a 16-year-old girl – Hena – who survived and then vanished behind the post-war Iron Curtain, are at the heart of Rakowsky's story, which unfolds – with journalistic rigor and elegance – like a detective mystery.

Her story also takes a relevant and cautionary turn. Poland has struggled with Holocaust ambiguity, as it intermittently acknowledges and refutes complicity, choosing to glorify its resistance to the Nazi occupation. Denial was codified by the far-right government in 2018 with the so-called Memory Law, which made it a crime to assert Polish involvement in Holocaust atrocities, despite extensive evidence to the contrary.

Poland's Memory Law is mirrored in the Florida State Board of Education's new guidelines – issued this year – on the teaching of African-American history. The guidelines assert that Blacks benefited from slavery by learning useful skills – a revision that softens the true scope of horror and brutality, according to its critics.

"I think it's important not only to tell the stories of our relatives about what happened but also to learn from what happened," Rakowsky said. "And that's what really motivated this book. Because to have a law that says you can only have one kind of memory is really challenging to the way a lot of us were brought up."

Of the Memory Law's potential impact on Polish youth, Rakowsky writes, "What the next generation will learn about that true history is strongly in doubt."

The roller coaster of Rakowsky's story ends on a hopeful note. She was invited to Kazimierza Wielka in 2021 to speak at a first-of-its-kind celebration of Jewish culture. In her speech, Rakowsky invoked prophets of the Old Testament; saluted Sam, who had declined to make the trip as a concession to his 97 years; and thanked descendants of the gentiles who had helped her family.

Her epilogue cites the grandson of a farmer who had hidden and sheltered her relatives until they were found out and murdered by Polish partisans. That grandson, Dominik

Ogorek, now himself a father, told Rakowsky what he planned to do with Poland's Memory Law.

Said Dominik: "My son will know the truth." Θ

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