



**Sam (Rakowski) Ron stands next to a cattle car.**

## **Sam's inspirational story of hope and resilience**

**BY STEVE MARANTZ([HTTPS://JEWISHJOURNAL.ORG/AUTHOR/STEVE-MARANTZ/](https://JewishJournal.org/author/Steve-Marantz/))**

**September 7, 2023**



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Sam Ron turned 99 in July, lives independently with his wife in Boca Raton, Fla., and plays poker three days a week.

“He’s just a forward-motion guy,” says his cousin and author, Judy Rakowsky. “He still has his license to drive in Florida and it wasn’t

until very recently that he stopped. His wife is giving their car away.”

Sam, born Shmuel Rakowski, one of a dwindling cohort of living Holocaust survivors, is the central character in Rakowsky’s book, “Jews in the Garden,” in which she explores his resilience. Together they made several visits to his Polish hometown of Kazimierza Wielka, to learn the fates of murdered relatives, but also to re-connect Sam to his youth.

“That’s one of the dynamics that propelled me through the research ... I wanted to understand how people survive psychologically,” Rakowsky said in a recent interview.

“One of the takeaways from Sam’s experience is that he learned to walk away from doom and gloom. People would say, ‘We’re going to die tomorrow,’ and he would say, ‘Well, if that’s true, why start today?’ Why be completely suffused with dread?

“Sam has been good at compartmentalizing. But there’s something else he passed on to me. You connect with individuals. He remembers the individuals who did brave things to save him. I think he saw that bitterness itself was corrosive. To hold on to anger was not good for him, in order to survive.

“And also, going back and seeing him there, he never has lost sight of his happy childhood and how good his life was before this horrible event. He continues to feel the goodness of that. Some people would look at the same set

of facts and say, 'But we lost it all.' He doesn't, and he has every right to. It's astonishing that he can still enjoy that memory and say, 'we were an important part of the community, not just the Jewish community.'

"Another thing is that both of Sam's parents survived, and how rare is that for any survivor? Sam lost his brother – I'm not minimizing that – but to have your parents afterward, and to still have them active and vibrant, where they started over and had productive successful lives – that has to be part of the picture."

Sam's family ran a successful lumberyard in Poland before the Holocaust. The book details Sam's harrowing Holocaust journey, from hiding in a barn, to the Krakow ghetto, to the Plaszow concentration camp, to the Sachsenhausen camp near Berlin, to a forced march where he ate bark off trees and drank from puddles.

After the war, his parents resettled in Ohio, where they were helped by Rakowsky's grandfather, and eventually started a homebuilding business. Sam went first to Israel, where he fought and was wounded in the 1948 war of independence, met his wife Bilha, changed his last name to Ron (Hebrew for joy), and eventually resettled in Ohio. He made a comfortable living in the family business and retired in his late 70s.

"Jews in the Garden" is the first book authored by Rakowsky, a former news reporter at three newspapers, correspondent for People

Magazine, and journalism instructor at Boston University. Reader feedback, she says, has been mostly positive, with particular interest in the fate of 16-year-old Hena, a cousin who survived but vanished after the war.

“Millions died, but people understand the enormity of loss through the loss of a few whose circumstances they can actually picture,” Rakowsky said. “We knew about Anne Frank in the attic, but we didn’t know about whole families hiding in a tiny cavern under a barn for 18 months. When you put yourself in someone’s shoes like that, that’s how we learn about history.”

A few comments on social media, she noted, suggest that she “hates” Polish gentiles, because her narrative implicates Polish partisans and bandits in the murders of her relatives.

“Nothing can be further from the truth,” Rakowsky said. “Obviously my book talks about the very grim truths we discover, but that doesn’t mean you apply the acts of some to the whole country. Which is very relevant today with our siloing of people and polarizing politics. I have strong connections and relationships in Poland. You can’t just close the door on somebody who is different from you, or who comes from a different background, or even comes from a community where people killed your relatives.

It’s a waste of energy to hate everybody.” ☹

# One Response

**Jody  
Fisher  
Treu**  
says:

September 9, 2023 at 12:25 pm  
(<https://jewishjournal.org/2023/09/07/sams-inspirational-story-of-hope-and-resilience/#comment-17859>)

I just finished listening to your book Judy, and learned so many things I had never known about Poland and the Holocaust. I have read 100s of books about Jewish history but I haven't ever cried at the end like I did because it was over. I want you to find Hena before Sam leaves this life (WOW – 99 and still going!). I know she doesn't want to be found but am praying that she will have a change of heart. What a beautiful book – especially to listen to – I am grateful that you wrote it. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for telling the truth and in a way that we don't lose history.

Reply

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