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ILENE PERLMAN

Michael Gruenbaum survived the Terezin concentration camp as a boy because his mother was ordered to sew teddy bears for Nazis' children. Now his grandson has made an animated film version of Gruenbaum's story to educate younger generations about the Holocaust.

‘Humanity lost its way’: A Holocaust memoir brought to life in animation

Gruenbaum is a master storyteller, with a narrative that's raw and riveting.

By **LINDA MATCHAN**
JOURNAL STAFF

FOR ALMOST 70 YEARS, Michael Gruenbaum of Brookline kept silent about his childhood Holocaust experience, saying little – even to his own children – about the Nazis' invasion of his native Prague, his father's arrest and murder, and the two and a half years he endured in the Terezin concentration camp.

But a few years ago, when he was 85, he started to talk. And write. And give presentations.

Now, he's narrated a new animated film about his own experience in the Holocaust atrocity. Called “The Teddy Bear,” it was made by his grandson, Ben Gruenbaum, and produced by Deborah L. Coltin, executive director of the Beverly-based Lappin Foundation. It is intended as an educational resource for children ages 11 and older, the first of a series of animated accounts of Holocaust survivors produced by the foundation.

The 12-minute animated version of Gruenbaum's life story is spare in detail but powerful in impact.

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It's told in the understated voice of the 92-year-old Gruenbaum. The narrative begins with him as a 9-year-old boy, a carefree child with lots of friends who loves soccer and dreams of being a professional player. But then comes the Nazis' invasion of Prague.

With his parents and sister, Marietta, he is forced into a ghetto, where their few remaining possessions vanish, one by one. Nazi officers wear shiny black boots and are the size of tanks; their dogs resemble wolves, with fangs for teeth and fearsome barks. The Terezin concentration camp has “mighty walls to keep us in,” Gruenbaum tells us – except when Jews are loaded like cargo into cattle cars, and “the squealing sounds of steel on steel” begins as some 18,000 people are transported to Auschwitz and the gas chambers.

“The Holocaust happened because people allowed it to happen,” Gruenbaum says in the video. “Humanity lost its way.”

Gruenbaum is a master storyteller, with a narrative that's raw and riveting. A Nazi officer ordered Gruenbaum's artistic mother, Margaret, to sew teddy bears for his children and his friends' children for Christmas. As the war neared its end, Hitler ordered the remaining Jews exterminated, and Margaret received a summons for a transport. She “pulled a rabbit out of her hat,” as Gruenbaum says, and told her boss that the order he gave for teddy bears wouldn't be filled if she wasn't there to make them.

The family was spared. “I am here because of this teddy bear, Sasha,” Gruenbaum says in the video, cradling a small fuzzy bear in a plaid jacket. “Sasha saved my life during the Holocaust.”

On a recent morning, the real Sasha – now about 75 years old and still nattily dressed in the jacket meticulously crafted by Gruenbaum's mother – is lying on a pile of books in the sunny living room in the Brookline home he shared



BEN GRUENBAUM

Michael Gruenbaum, 92, is the narrator of an animated film about his Holocaust experiences. He and two other members of his family were spared at Terezin because his mother sewed teddy bears for Nazis' children.

with his late wife, Thelma, until her death in 2006. His mother took it from Terezin after liberation, and carried it with her first to Prague, then Paris, then Cuba, where they lived for two years before moving to the United States in 1950. Gruenbaum inherited Sasha after his mother's death in 1974.

Gruenbaum is a gracious host, dressed in the same blue, red, and gray wool sweater that his animated self wears in the video. (He says he wears it whenever he speaks about the Holocaust.) On a coffee table are keepsakes that hold pieces of his story – the memoir he wrote, “Somewhere There Is Still A Sun,” published in 2017 and available in 18 languages; and the book his wife Thelma wrote in 2004, “Nesarim: Child Survivors of Terezin,” which features the testimonies of 10 men – including Gruenbaum – who were confined together as boys in Room 7, Building L417 in the concentration camp.

There is a photocopied version of a scrapbook his mother made, with documents she collected in Terezin, including the 1944 typed order from the Transport Department excusing the family from being sent to Auschwitz. The original scrapbook is part of a collection he donated to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

“That's why I'm here today, because of a little piece of paper,” he says.

Gruenbaum's postwar life has taken some remarkable turns. Just eight years after liberation, he'd learned English and graduated from MIT. He was drafted into the Army during the Korean War; studied urban planning at Yale; and took a job at the Boston Redevelopment Authority, publishing a book in 1968 called “Transportation facts for the Boston region,” which also sits in the pile beneath Sasha. Eventually, he formed his own consulting firm. He and Thelma, who shared a passion for music, wrote a children's book, “Tell Me About Beethoven,” which was published last year. Its theme is resilience and overcoming hardships in life.

He also wrote a children's book about his Holocaust experiences, as yet unpublished, called “Sasha the Bear.”



ILENE PERLMAN

Sasha, one of the teddy bears crafted by Gruenbaum's mother in Terezin, sits atop a copy of a scrapbook she made with documents she collected in the concentration camp.

"I realized that the burden of telling the story was now on me," he says, "as everyone else was passing away."

He and Thelma had three sons and four grandchildren including Ben, 23, a graduate of Rhode Island School of Design, now living in Seattle. A few months ago, he got an email from someone he didn't know named Debbie Coltin, the executive director of the Lappin Foundation, which among its other responsibilities serves as an educational resource center for programs about Jewish culture and heritage, including the Holocaust.

Coltin, a longtime Jewish edu-

icator, had read about Gruenbaum's time at Terezin and invited him to speak at an International Holocaust Remembrance Day event last January. They stayed in touch, and he continued to work with her, giving presentations to students in Massachusetts including Danvers and Peabody.

"Debbie kind of fell in love with Sasha," he says.

"He kept telling me he wasn't a speaker," Coltin says. "He's an incredible speaker."

One day he proudly told her about a video animation his grandson had made about an orphaned child survivor of a Nazi concentra-

tion camp who used a spoon to pry open a train window in order to escape.

Always on the alert for creative and engaging ways to teach students about the Holocaust, she reached out to Ben. Would he make an animated video about his own grandfather?

He was eager to do it, especially since it had a solid starting point – a script his grandfather had been refining. It also would have an audience. "One of the most exciting things about it is that Debbie has a specific distribution plan to get it into classrooms," he says.

It was clear to him from the

start that Sasha would be central to the narrative. "I think the teddy bear was a fundamental way I learned about the story," he says. He remembers that it sat on a table in his grandfather's house. "Growing up, I did kind of find it a little creepy, this battered old teddy bear with small, beady little eyes. So it was interesting to reevaluate my relationship with it, from not understanding it to having a really deep appreciation of it."

Animated Holocaust stories are a fairly new platform, though their lineage can be traced back at least 30 years to Art Spiegelman's graphic novel, "Maus," which won a 1992 Pulitzer Prize. The Holocaust Memorial Museum recently has produced its own series of animated educational stories about the Holocaust.

"It's a way of meeting students where they are," says Gretchen Skidmore, director of the museum's education initiatives. "A way for us to reach students in a genre that is familiar to them, feels accessible to them, and feels like a comfortable

starting point to begin to learn about the history. We're very excited about these opportunities."

The Lappin Foundation's Coltin said her greatest hope for the film is that it will foster empathy in children. "Empathy leads to kindness and the world is in desperate need of kindness."

"I think it's going to be very useful to younger kids," said Gruenbaum, who was thrilled to work with his grandson on the video. "Another advantage is: You don't need me. They can watch the video any time they want."

What was it like to see his personal story rendered in animation?

"I was blown away," he says. 📺

"The Teddy Bear" was funded with support from the Robert I. Lappin Charitable Foundation and the Dr. David M. Milch Family Foundation. To view, go to lappinfoundation.org and click on "Holocaust Education."

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BEN GRUENBAUM

Margaret's boss explaining the value of the teddy bears to a Nazi officer in "The Teddy Bear."