

# St. Louisan Harry Lenga beat the Nazis by fixing watches to survive

[Jordan Palmer](#)



On this, Holocaust Remembrance Day (Yom HaShoah), we honor the victims, remember the survivors, and educate the community about the history and lessons of the Holocaust. One such story has become a book, which will be released later this summer. "[The Watchmakers: The Story of Brotherhood, Survival, and Hope amid the Holocaust](#)" is written by former St. Louisan Scott Lenga, and tells the story of his father, Harry Lenga, and the Lenga family. It is a first-person account of Harry's childhood, the lessons learned from his own father, his harrowing tribulations, and his inspiring life before, during, and after the war.

Scott Lenga is the featured speaker for this year's presentation by the [St.](#)

[Louis Kaplan Feldman Holocaust Museum](#). Lenga will discuss the book and his father's remarkable story.

## Harry Lenga

Harry Lenga was born in 1919 to a family of Chassidic Jews in Kozhnitz, Poland. The proud sons of a watchmaker, Harry and his two brothers, Mailekh and Moishe, studied their father's trade at a young age. Upon the German invasion of Poland, when the Lenga family was upended, Harry and his brothers never anticipated that the tools acquired from their father would be the key to their survival.

The night before the Germans murdered its entire Jewish population—including his remaining family members—Harry and two of his brothers escaped Kozhnitz to a nearby Polish-run labor camp with a suitcase full of watchmaking tools and watch parts from their father. From there, the three brothers were transported between 1942 and 1945 to the camps in Wolanow, Starachowice, and Auschwitz, and then to the Austrian concentration camps of Mauthausen, Melk, and Ebensee.

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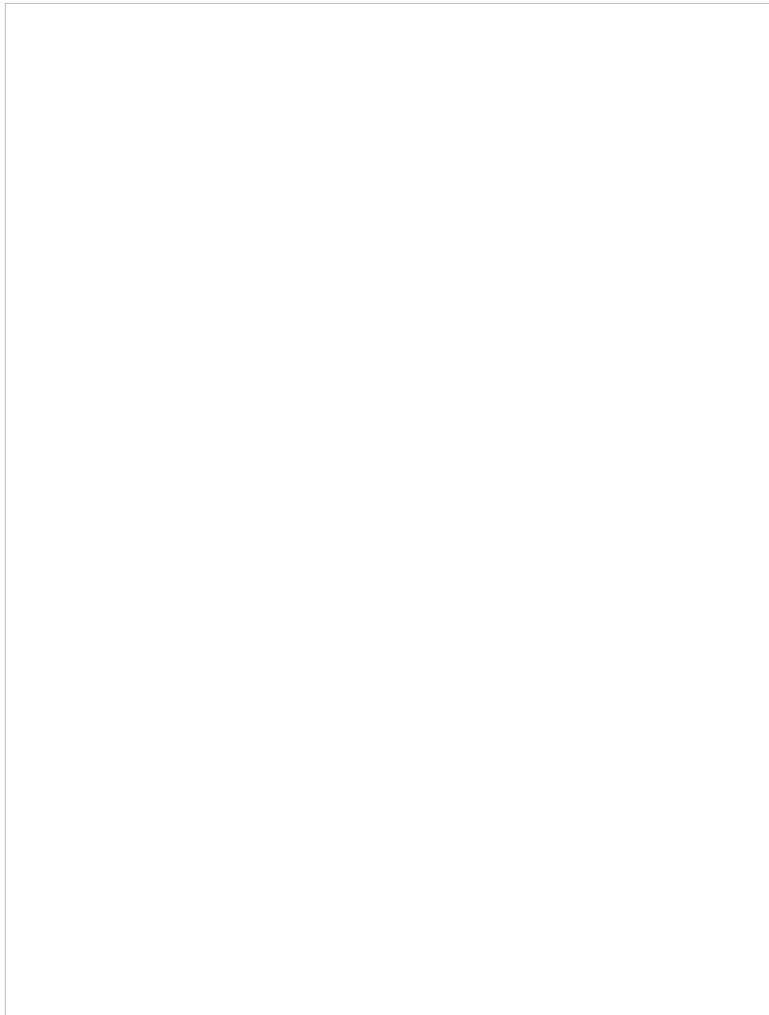
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Watchmaker's screwdriver and tweezers, made in Auschwitz from materials available in the camp by Chaim Shtatler, a Jewish prisoner. Photo by Scott Lenga.

In a stroke of brave audacity in the Nazi slave labor camp of Wolanow, Harry Lenga dared to offer his watchmaking services to a cruel, sadistic foreman named Corbinus, who was overseeing operations at a German construction site and was wearing a broken wristwatch. Corbinus responded with the life-or-death challenge to repair a watch with no mechanism inside. When Harry somehow succeeded in fixing the watch, Corbinus brought Harry more broken watches from other Germans. The Lenga brothers played this card to influence their fate in each successive camp, including Auschwitz, by looking for a well-timed opportunity to bet their lives on their watchmaking skills. Over and over again, they survived horrific circumstances, psychological and physical abuse, and close brushes with death, keeping their vow to stay together, even if it meant dying together.

## "The Watchmakers": The Book



Derived from more than a decade of interviews with Harry Lenga, conducted by Scott and others, *The Watchmakers* is Harry's heartening and unflinchingly honest first-person account of his childhood, the lessons learned from his own father, his harrowing tribulations, and his inspiring life before, during, and after the war. It is a singular and vital story, told from one generation to the next—and a profoundly moving tribute to brotherhood, fatherhood, family, and faith.

"*The Watchmakers* tells the true story of my father's upbringing in a Chassidic family of watchmakers in the 1920s and 30s, and how watchmaking skills and an oath among brothers enabled three brothers to

survive the Ghettos and camps in German occupied Poland," said Scott Lenga.

## **Connect with your community every morning.**

Scott Lenga curated his father Harry's first-person account that was recorded before his death in 2000, keeping alive this vital biography that sweeps from pre-war Poland to the German concentration camps to post-war Europe and St. Louis, MO. "Nobody would be able to tell my father's story the way he could," says Lenga. "His simple, straightforward voice has graphic power and deeper meaning that would have been lost in a third-person narrative."

The book also includes the testimony of Robert Persinger, the U.S. Army Tank Commander who liberated Ebensee on May 6, 1945, where the Lenga brothers were among the masses of starving prisoners who had somehow survived death and unimaginable degradation.

In 1949, Harry immigrated to St. Louis, Missouri, where he married, had three sons, and went on to have three granddaughters. He continued working as a watchmaker for nearly thirty years before retiring and later moving with his wife to Israel.

Harry never stopped telling his story and instructed his children to tell their own children so they could understand the warning signs and dangers of tyranny and anti-Semitism. He died on January 2, 2000, at the age of eighty.

[The book is available now for pre-order and is expected to be released in June.](#)

## **"The Watchmakers": 1985-86 interviews**

As part of their efforts to preserve the local histories of St. Louis Holocaust survivors, the St. Louis Kaplan Feldman Holocaust Museum, then known as the St. Louis Holocaust Education Center conducted the following interviews with Harry Lenga in 1985 and 1986.

**Harry Lenga Survivor Interview-STLHC 1985-86**