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How watchmaking skills saved 3 Jewish brothers from the Nazi death machine

Riveting memoir tells story of brothers' survival — two of whom settled in St. Louis

BY ROBERT A. COHN
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF EMERITUS

Every Holocaust survivor story is both a miracle and a curse. The miracle for any Jew in Nazi-occupied Europe between 1939 and 1945 is the fact that they managed to escape the merciless, ruthless and efficient Germans at all. The curse is survivors' trauma, often compounded by the torment of guilt.

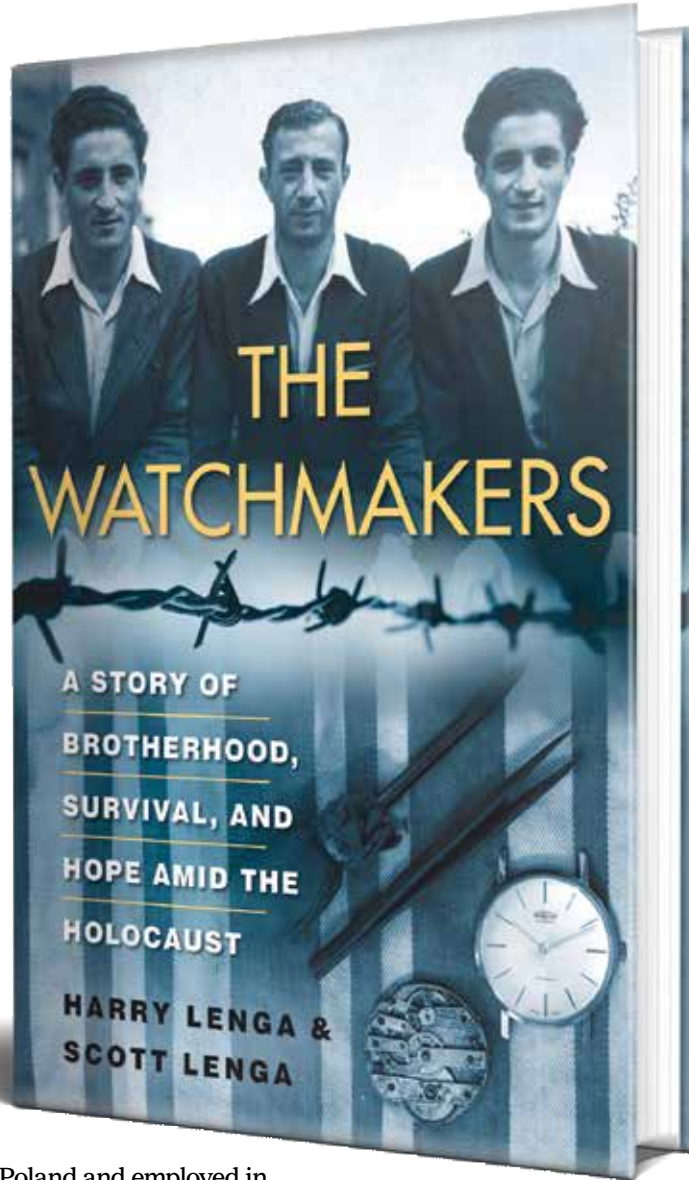
"Why did I survive when hundreds in my family, neighbors perish in hell holes like Auschwitz, Buchenwald and Mauthausen—six million Jews in all?

"The Watchmakers," by Harry Lenga and his son Scott Lenga, is not an easy book to read, and yet it is a must-read, especially as vicious atrocities appear in real time daily on TV and social media from Ukraine and places like an elementary school in Texas.

"The Watchmakers" is a gripping true story chronicling the harrowing experiences of Harry Lenga and his two brothers, Mailech and Moishe (they would later go by Marcel and Morris, respectively), who learned the high-skill trade of making and repairing watches from their father, Mikhoel Lenga. Little did these three Hasidic yeshiva *bokhers* know that the skills learned from their dad would literally save them from the gas chambers when they were imprisoned after the Nazi invasion of Poland on Sept. 1, 1939.

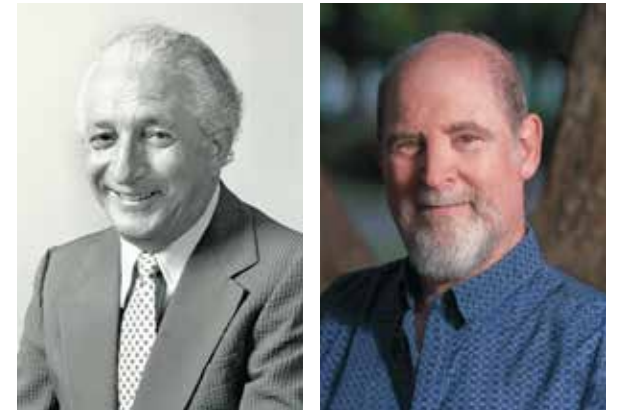
To describe "The Watchmakers," which will be published June 28, as "gripping" or "stranger than fiction" are understatements. The manuscript is derived from the oral history that survivor Harry Lenga recorded for the St. Louis Holocaust Museum (now the Kaplan-Feldman Holocaust Museum), at the behest of his son Scott, a St. Louis native who now resides with his wife in Israel. Longtime Holocaust Museum docent Vida "Sister" Prince interviewed Harry Lenga and transcribed the recordings, which are the primary source for this powerful book. Scott Lenga lovingly curated Harry's straightforward memoir based on those transcriptions, which constitute a precious legacy.

Harry Lenga (1919-2000) was a native of Kozhnitz,



Poland and employed in Warsaw when the Germans stormed into Poland. At great personal risk, he was able to escape from the hellish Warsaw Ghetto in 1941 and reunite with his family later that year in Kozhnitz. That town was not a refuge for the Lenga family; they escaped before the Nazis murdered its entire Jewish population.

According to Harry Lenga's memoir, the watchmaking band of brothers survived the rest of the war in a series of infamous Nazi labor, detention and death camps. In heart-pounding detail, Harry's memoir describes how they



'The Watchmakers' by Harry Lenga (above left) and Scott Lenga (above right); Citadel Press, 315 pages, \$27.95.

managed to survive through the very skills in watchmaking they had learned at their father's workbench.

They arrived in a nearby Polish labor camp "with a suitcase full of watchmaking tools and watch parts from their father," a decision which literally saved their lives.

From the first labor camp, the three brothers from 1942 and 1945 to the camps in Wolanow, Starachowice, Auschwitz, and the Austrian camps of Mauthausen, Melk and Ebensee.

In what the book aptly describes as a "bold strike of audacity," Harry Lenga approached "cruel, sadistic foreman named Cornibus," who was wearing a broken wristwatch with no internal mechanism. Cornibus was stunned when Harry presented him with a fully operational restored watch. Cornibus set the brothers up so they could make and repair watches for Nazi camp officials. The Lengas were literally "buying time" by making or repairing time pieces.

The three brothers stayed together in camp after camp, still "buying time" with the skills they learned from their dad.

The Lenga brothers were liberated from Ebensee on May 6, 1945, led by an American tank commander named Robert Pensinger, whose testimony is quoted in the book.

Harry and brother Morris immigrated to St. Louis in 1949. Harry married and had three children, including Scott Lenga, whom we thank for making sure the story of his father and his two brothers is now and forever told in this stunning book.

AMY FENSTER BROWN

Nominations are open for Amy's Mom Awards

BY AMY FENSTER BROWN

As I write this, I'm watching the Tony Awards, where Broadway artists are honored for their outstanding work. I love awards shows so much: the celebrities, the fashion, the speeches in which the winners act like they're surprised to be revered because they're just everyday normal people.

I miss my original comedy hero, Joan Rivers, of blessed memory, and her half-interviews/half-roasts on the red carpet. She was the master of putting on a friendly face (that she paid a whole lot of money for) to ask, "Who are you wearing?" and then ripping the stars' fashion choices to proverbial shreds when they walked away. I should be so gifted.

If ever I were on a red carpet and was asked, "Who are you wearing?" the best answer I could muster up would be "Lane Bryant."

Today, I did three loads of laundry, which included bedding, so that chore involved the aerobics of stripping the sheets and putting them back on to make the bed. I also emptied the dishwasher, ran

to two grocery stores and cooked dinner. And now I am writing this column. Working parents know the deal. Chores have to get done, work has to get done and family time is the fun stuff in between the tasks. We don't get awards, but we should.

I wish the ghost of Joan would float into my life and present me a medal for "Momming So Hard" while she tears into me for wearing a shapeless *schmatta*.

What if moms did win awards? Like, just for being moms. Imagine some of the fun categories.

Best Public Meltdown — Also known as "The Karen Award" (sorry friends named Karen, Karin or Karyn). The nominees in this category:

- The mom stuck in the carpool line behind a yenta mom who is chatting an extra-long time with her kids' preschool teacher.

- The creatively frugal mom at the grocery store where the cash register did not ring up her order as a BOGO and instead charged her full price.

- The mom who ate her entire salad and then realized the dressing was not fat free

as she had ordered and these workers can't get anything right because you can't find good help anywhere these days.

Most Embarrassing Sideline Performance

- The sports mom whose child was barely tapped during a game and she screamed, "Sweetie! Are you OK? Ref, are you blind? I'm going to kill that other kid!"

- The theater mom who fake-coughed obnoxiously loud when her child appeared on stage, so said child would know where said mom was in the audience so said child could "play directly to her."

- The mitzvah mom who mouthed every single word RuPaul Drag Race performance style of her *bubbeleh's* speech while standing right next to him on the bimah, then winced when he messed up a word.

Meanest Mom

- The horrible mom who bought store brand sandwich cookies instead of actual Oreos, knowing there is a huge difference in flavor and now there is nothing at all to eat in this house.

- The lazy mom who had the nerve to

Columnist Amy Fenster Brown is married to Jeff and has two teenage sons, Davis



and Leo. She volunteers for several Jewish not-for-profit groups. Fenster Brown is an Emmy Award-winning TV news writer and counts time with family and friends, talking and eating peanut butter among her hobbies.

ask her sons to put their cups in the dishwasher when she could have done it herself instead of interrupting their heated debate over which one of them could actually beat a cheetah in a foot race.

- The buzzkill mom who wouldn't allow her 15 year old to go out late because he had an early start the next day but he says it's because he went out last night and accuses her of "not wanting him to have fun two nights in a row."

I hope you'll enter yourself in a couple of these categories. And even if you don't win, remember, it's an honor just to be nominated.