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A survivor thanks the Nazi who saved him

Decades after being saved by a Wehrmacht soldier, a survivor living in Israel managed to find the man's family and express his gratitude.

By Ofer Aderet | Apr.08, 2013 | 2:24 AM

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A photograph of a Nazi soldier on the wall of a Holocaust survivor's home is not a common sight. But recently, Yisrael Fruman, an 84-year-old survivor who lives in Haifa, hung such a photo on his wall. Fruman's grandchildren first saw the photo in a feature published in Haaretz five months ago, titled "How a Wehrmacht soldier was recognized as Righteous Among the Nations."

The feature told the unique story of Gerhard Kurzbach, the commander of a workshop for the repair of military vehicles east of Krakow, Poland, who saved many Jews of the nearby Bochnia ghetto from deportations to the camps by hiding them in the workshop. Last December, Kurzbach's family received, on his behalf, the medal and certificate honoring non-Jews who saved Jews during the Holocaust at the Israeli embassy in Germany.

"I'm alive thanks to him," Frumer said last week, "due to Kurzbach, of blessed memory, if one can say that about such a person." Seventy years later, Frumer still remembers vividly the events of August 23rd, 1942, when he was 14 years old.

"Kurzbach drove a military truck into the ghetto and started rounding up people. He screamed at us. We were really scared of him. Only later, we understood that the screams were a sort of alibi. He pretended not to be a 'Jew lover,' no one knew he was using his uniform in order to save us," Frumer recalls. "He pretended to look at a list and screamed at me in German 'What's your name?' To this day, I don't remember clearly if I climbed on the truck or was hurled on it. Everybody crowded onto the truck."

Frumer spent the night with part of his family at Kurzbach's workshop. The gates were locked so nobody could go back. In this way, hundreds of Jews were saved from the deportation that was taking place at the ghetto. They returned the next day.

Several months later, at the end of 1942, the Nazis dealt with Kurzbach. Frumer is probably the only living witness to his arrest.

"He [Kurzbach] arrived in his official uniform, including a gun and long sword. I opened the door [to the workshop], he came in, and I immediately shut it," Frumer, who was a messenger boy in the ghetto at the time, recalls.

Half an hour later, Frumer saw five armed German soldiers approaching. The most senior soldier walked up to Kurzbach and disarmed and arrested him. Nobody knows what happened next.

"There were rumours that the Germans court martialed and shot him," Frumer says.

Frumer's parents and two of his brothers were murdered in the camps, and only he and his sister survived. After being saved by Kurzbach from one deportation, he survived another one by hiding in a bunker. After the Bochnia ghetto uprising was quashed, Frumer was sent to the Szebnie concentration camp near the town of Jaslo in Eastern Galicia and survived despite being abused by the camp's notoriously sadistic commander, Grzymek. Frumer says that after the war, when Grzymek was tried for war crimes and imprisoned in Dachau, he managed to "spit in his face" before he was hanged.

Before the war ended, Frumer was imprisoned in Birkenau, Jawischowitz, Buchenwald and Terezin. His tales of the time are full of horror: "I ate birds, cooked weeds and stole dog food from kennels," he says, recounting his suffering in detail.

Frumer immigrated to Israel in 1948, fought in the War of Independence, married and raised a family. His daughters, Irit and Rohama, were named after two of his sisters who were murdered. He has eight grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

Following the Haaretz feature, Frumer wrote Kurzbach's family a letter last February: "Dear Kurzbach family, I will be 85 next summer. I have always been grateful to the man who saved me from death. I owe my life to staff sergeant Kurzbach from Bochnia. He saved me, my parents and my younger brother from deportation to the concentration camps. Thanks to his courage we, and other Jews, were saved from certain death."

Frumer added, "I was the only witness who saw the armed Wehrmacht soldiers enter the ghetto and the building where I worked." The letter was signed, "Gratefully yours, Yisrael Frumer."

Sandra Vite, an employee of the Israeli embassy in Germany was able to locate Kurzbach's family. "One can't put in words how emotional they were when I called them, Vite told Haaretz. "None of them knew Kurzbach, but they burst out weeping."

Kurzbach's daughter died at the beginning of 2012, but her son and daughter were located, as was Kurzbach's nephew, Michael Sholl, a resident of Mainz, Germany. After being contacted, he sent Yad Va'shem photos of his uncle as well as a rare document – a letter Kurzbach's wife received after her husband disappeared, written by Jews he had saved: "200 people are mourning his departure," they wrote. "We lost not only our supervisor, who we loved and respected, but also a person who was a father and good friend, and each of us is grateful to him."

Frumer's letter was delivered to Sholl, with the help of Haaretz, Yad Va'shem and the Israeli embassy in Berlin. "I want to tell you how happy I was to receive your letter," Sholl wrote Frumer's granddaughter. Next month, Frumer will meet Sholl in Israel.

"Kurzbach was a person who truly deserves to be called a human being, Frumer said. "That is all"