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Local authors underscore acceptance and share uncommon bond

By John T. Miller



Fritz Tubach and Bernie Rosner at Sonoma State University in 2008. Photos provided

Members of the Lafayette Rotary were quite moved by a presentation from Holocaust survivor Bernie Rosner at a recent monthly meeting. Rosner related the tale of not only surviving the Holocaust, but also of writing a double memoir with his German friend, Fritz Tubach.

The title of the book, "An Uncommon Friendship," describes how a Jewish man who survived internment in concentration camps became friends with a former recruit for the Hitler Youth.

Both Rosner and Tubach found success in life after immigrating to America. Rosner became the top lawyer with Safeway, while Tubach was a professor of German at UC Berkeley; they ended up living near each other in Orinda.

Their wives met one day in line at the Kaiser Hospital pharmacy and realized they were in the same class at a high school in Southern California. They started talking and found they had many similarities, so they arranged to have dinner together with their husbands.

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The two men struck up a friendship that was much stronger than the prejudices and injustices that ruled the lives of their childhood. They played tennis together and socialized often. When they retired, they decided to tell their stories together.

Rosner, however, had built a wall between his current self and the boy who suffered the trauma of Nazi Germany; he had created a distance from it and asked Tubach to write his memories in third person. Rosner said, "I considered that part of my life done with, irrelevant, and focused on the present and the future."

A turning point came in Chapter 3, when Tubach shared what he wrote about the Rosner family's deportation to Auschwitz. As a 12-year-old child, the humiliation of seeing his mother strip searched by a Nazi guard was captured so perfectly in Tubach's prose that Rosner suggested they combine their memoirs and try to publish them for a larger audience.

Published in 2001, the book has been translated into German, Italian and Dutch, selling more than 20,000 copies. A second edition came out in 2010.

The book is a well-written and fascinating chronicle of their separate lives: from before the war in their respective villages - Rosner in Hungary and Tubach in Germany - to their involvement in World War II, and the circumstances that brought them to America. The book is available on Amazon.

One of the more notable chapters in Rosner's life concerns his rescue from the refugee camps in post-war Europe. Hoping to get a piece of candy, Rosner would carry bags for the GIs. One of them happened to be Charles Merrill, Jr., the son of the founder of Merrill Lynch. The two of them established a bond, and Merrill eventually sent Rosner a plane ticket to America and invited him to live with him.

"Merrill was the most important person to me," says Rosner. "Any way you look at it, luck played a huge part in my life."

The enduring friendship of Rosner and Tubach is even more remarkable as they don't always agree politically, yet they have never fought or argued about it.

Rosner is conservative, and "doesn't really like to get into politics," while Tubach is progressive, having taken the side of the students in the Berkeley Free Speech movement while a professor there. "It was my way of dealing with fascism," he says. Without mentioning any current president by name, he added, "I have negative reactions to a country run by hyperventilating alpha males."

They have held approximately 200 speaking engagements - both together and separately - including an appearance on Bryant Gumbel's Morning Show, NPR, local radio stations, and promotional tours. In addition to many local high schools, and numerous civic groups, they spoke in about 20 different venues in Germany.

According to Tubach, audiences have many times mistaken the two, thinking that he was Jewish and Rosner

was the German. Could there be a better way to debunk stereotypes?

"I rarely turn down requests," says Rosner, noting that "the end is much closer than the beginning, and Holocaust survivors are a dwindling crowd."

The main message Rosner wants to get across? "The fact that Fritz and I could surmount walls of distrust and become friends speaks volumes for the resilience of the human spirit," he said.

Tubach, for his part, says, "Empathy is the most important human emotion you can have. It has been a great adventure of the mind and heart to tell our stories together with Bernie."

Rotary member Robert Shusta, a retired police captain, heard Rosner speak before and asked him to come to the Rotary Club. "He received a well-deserved standing ovation from the 45 members in attendance," Shusta said.

(Author's Note: It was my distinct pleasure to speak with both men at length about their lives. This article represents only a small percentage of their remarkable stories. Both men were gracious, articulate and humane.)

Reach the reporter at: john@lamorindaweekly.com

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