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Spotlight

Charles Ota Heller, One of WWII's "Hidden Children"

When Hitler's troops marched into Czechoslovakia in 1938, Charles Ota Heller (Ph.D. 1968) was 3 years old. For this child of a Roman Catholic mother and a Jewish father, the next years would bring torment as the Nazis put a chokehold on the country. Fifteen members of his family disappeared almost overnight. His father, a well-to-do clothing manufacturer in Prague, escaped and joined the British Army. To save Charles's life, Heller's mother hid him on a farm just before she was taken to a slave labor camp.

The story of his survival through World War II, and his life in then Communist-controlled Czechoslovakia, until he finally arrived in America is told in his 2011 memoir *Prague: My Long Journey Home*. Publication of a second volume focusing on his adult years as a successful businessman, entrepreneur, and engineering educator is planned... He is currently president of Annapolis Capital Group, a management consulting and investment firm. In 2002, he received the CUA Alumni Achievement Award.

As a "hidden child" during the war — hidden because of his Jewish roots — Heller said he lived in constant danger of discovery. But in May 1945, the Nazis began to flee.

"The end of the Second World War was only days away," he said. "Retreating German occupiers filled every north- and west-bound road out of Prague"

And so it was that while witnessing this exodus, he saw an opportunity to contribute to the Nazi defeat. The retreating soldiers were throwing down their weapons. He picked up a loaded Walther revolver from the ground, found some escaping Germans, aimed, and fired. A man went down. Heller was 9 years old.

"I did not know if I had really killed the man, but I hoped that I had," he continued. "For most of my young life, I had been running and hiding. Now, finally, I had struck back."

His jubilation over that victory "soon turned to trauma," as he dreamed of the incident night after night. He vowed to tell no one, not even his parents, who had both survived the war. He eventually revealed it to his mother two years before her death in 2006, but she comforted him. "You did good," she told him. He later discovered from a friend in Czechoslovakia that the man, probably a Czech collaborator, survived.

Upon the family's emigration to the United States when Heller was 13, his father told him to forget everything about his childhood. They were Americans now. His parents changed his name from Ota Karel Heller to Charles Ota Heller.

He returned to Czechoslovakia as an adult to rediscover his past. Now a grandfather of three, he decided to write his story. Fortunately, he said, a great grandfather kept a journal while in a concentration camp, which provided additional information on his family.

He has remained Roman Catholic, but said he holds a deep appreciation for Judaism and his Jewish ancestors and takes pride in telling the true story of his family. “As one of the survivors, I said I’ve got to leave a legacy.” —JC