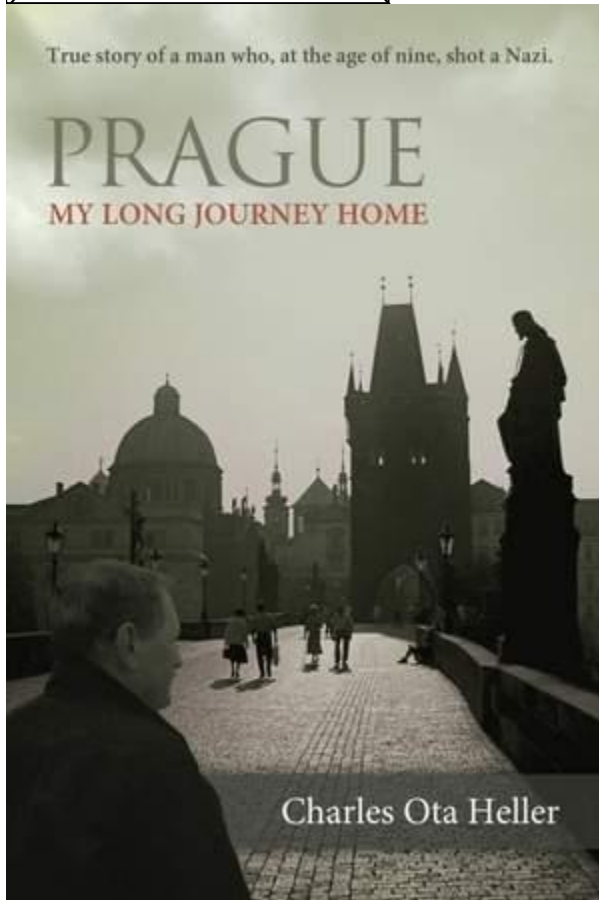
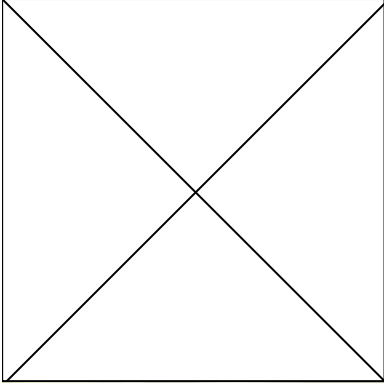


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Former Morristown resident writes about surviving war in Europe



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Written by

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Special to the Daily Record

Charles Heller was 9 years old when he shot a Nazi in Czechoslovakia. The son of a Jewish father and Christian mother, Heller was in hiding at a family friend's farm on the outskirts of Prague. It was 1945, and the war in Europe was coming to an end — so much so that Nazi soldiers were tossing their weapons to the ground so they could be captured unarmed, Heller, 76, formerly of Morristown, writes in "Prague: My Long Journey Home," his memoir published by Abbott Press. Heller found a discarded Walther pistol, and it was loaded.

"I boasted to the kids, 'I'm going to shoot a German,'" Heller said. "There were some Germans stationed in the village where I was hidden."

Heller wandered onto an estate with some of his friends and was hiding in the bushes watching two Nazis load up a truck, apparently getting ready to flee.

"This one kid said to me, 'Well, are you going to do it?'" Heller said. "I reluctantly stood up, and as I had seen in cowboy movies, I aimed at him and squeezed the trigger and shot him. The gun recoiled and I flew back into the bush. The same kid said, 'You got him.'"

It would be years before Heller realized the man he shot was indeed a Nazi — a Czechoslovakian native who sympathized with the Nazis and joined them.

"I saw the guy laying on the ground," Heller said. "A woman was screaming in German. I ran like hell. I expected someone to follow me ... I never had an adrenaline rush before. I felt that I had single-handedly won the war."

Heller's book isn't solely about his encounter with a Nazi — who, based on Heller's research, likely survived but was badly wounded. It recounts his time growing up during the war, and more or less repressing that he was part Jewish.

Prior to the upheaval in his own life, Heller began noticing something.

"The rest of my family started to disappear without me knowing why," he said. Heller was only around 6 years old at the time, and his mother deliberately withheld from him that his family members were being murdered. He lost 15 members to the death camps.

His father, Rudolph Heller, joined the British Army to fight in the war. His mother, Ilona Heller, was detained and sent to a slave labor camp with other Christian wives of Jews. Unlike many families, Heller was able to reunite with his mom and dad after the war. They stayed in Czechoslovakia until 1948, when Communism began to take a hold. The family eventually made its way to the United States.

His father told him to forget everything that happened to him in Europe, and that it was time to start over, to become assimilated as an American as quickly as he could. Heller was self-taught and home-schooled while in Europe. His first formal education began at the Alexander Hamilton School in Morristown, in the eighth grade, he said. Not only did he graduate from Morristown High School while playing baseball, basketball and tennis, he met his future wife, Sue Holsten, there.

“That’s really where I became an American,” Heller said. “Where I learned to play sports, speak English. It was my first home in America, and I still think about it very fondly and still visit, and still enjoy coming to Morristown.”

The second half of Heller’s memoir focuses on his life in America, where he went to college at Oklahoma State, and eventually wound up working in the aerospace industry before becoming a C.E.O. for two software companies, and then becoming a venture capitalist.

He began writing the book more than a decade ago, and while he repressed a lot of his childhood memories, he returned to Prague to do research for his book.

“I learned a lot about my family,” he said. “I really didn’t know very much beyond my parents, and the family members who lived with us when I was very small. I was really lucky — my great-grandfather was actually my best friend when I was hidden. But beyond that, I didn’t really know that much about my father’s side of the family.”

Heller said he learned more about himself, his ethnic origins and the Jewish part of his family.

Heller never told his father about the Nazi he shot, but did tell his mother before she passed away. Heller was a Catholic then, and still is. He said he struggled over whether he didn't actually know he was Jewish, or was just denying it.

"Part of it was to search where I really came from and why I didn't realize some of these things, and why I didn't really previously honor the (members) of my family who were murdered by the Nazis," he said.