

Rite of passage comes 60 years late

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There was a little trouble on the way to Henryk Gurmans high school graduation.

It was called World War II.

Sunday, one of the wars little loose ends was tied up when Woodbury High School, during commencement ceremonies at Aldrich Arena, bestowed its first honorary diploma on a beloved 77-year-old substitute teacher. Sixty-one years after 16-year-old Henryk Gurman — two days away from high school graduation in Poland — was arrested and sent to a prison camp, Henryk finally got his sheepskin. It was just the latest chapter in an amazing story. Here's a sketch of Henryk Gurman's life: a refugee from the Nazi invasion of Poland, incarcerated in a Soviet labor camp. A decorated and wounded veteran of a rear-guard campaign fought against the Germans by the Polish Army (under Soviet control). A displaced person who immigrated to America, married a New Yorker, became an accountant, moved to Minnesota and, in his mid-70s, went back to school and became a much-loved substitute teacher whose wit and wisdom — not to mention life experience — wows the kids.

But today, you can just call him an honorary member of Woodbury -High's Class of 2001.

If you wanted proof that persistence pays off, this is it. Persistence earned Gurman a medal for helping hold off a Nazi attack when other soldiers were retreating. Persistence got him to America and, years later, persistence got him a substitute teaching position at an age when most people are getting ready to call it quits.

Not him. Henryk Gurman never quits.

A knock on the door

He was born in 1924 into a wealthy manufacturing family in Warsaw, Poland. When Adolf Hitler's armies invaded in 1939, Henryk and his parents fled eastward to Lvov, a small town in a part of Poland subsequently occupied by the Soviet Red Army. Henryk was dreaming of a life as a mathematician, hoping to become a professor, and was scheduled to graduate from the People's Seventh Middle School (what we call a high school) June 30, 1940.

Two days before the ceremony, Russian secret police knocked on the family's door. The Gurmans, who had been declared "socially dangerous elements," were arrested with other Jews and Polish refugees and sent to a forced-labor camp in Russia. During the nightmarish 14-day train trip, the family was locked in a boxcar with 40 people and no toilet. When Gurman's mother, Miriam, saw the cockroach-infested barracks where the family would be confined, she broke down and began to slam her head into the barracks wall.

Henryk, who had been slapped and called “Jew boy” in Warsaw when he was the only Jewish child in his school, was made to cut wood 10 hours a day. Soon, he says, his soft hands were covered with calluses.

“I was a spoiled brat,” Henryk says now. “But I was about to change.”

The Gurmans survived for two years on bread and weak potato soup until, in 1941, with the German army advancing, the Soviets released the camp inhabitants.

A year later, 19-year-old Gurman enlisted in a Polish division of the Red Army, winning a decoration for valor during the three-day battle of Lenino, where he and his comrades held off a strong Nazi attempt to cross a river. Eventually Gurman became an artillery officer and was wounded when shrapnel ripped into the base of the thumb on his right hand, which still bears the scar.

“I really got off cheap,” he says with a shrug.

When the war ended, Gurman discovered that most of his extended family had died in Nazi concentration camps and that a favorite cousin had been shot in the streets of the Warsaw ghetto. With his parents, in their mid-60s by that time, he decided to flee Stalin’s Russia and head for freedom in America. It was a perilous journey, traveling under false names and with forged documents. At last they crossed into Allied territory in West Berlin and were put in a displaced persons camp until they got permission to go to New York to live with Gurman’s sister, Anna. In 1946, at the age of 22, he got off the boat in New York City with \$5 in his pocket.

Encountering anti-Semitic wisecracks while working as an office assistant, Gunman changed his name to Henry Harvey, hoping to disguise his Jewish identity. Like Anne Frank, he says, he had begun to ask himself why the Jews had suffered so much, and to disguise his Jewishness. He was Henry Harvey until 1991, when he took a class on “The Art of Being Human” at Lakewood Community College and decided that his name change had been a form of symbolic suicide. He changed his name back to Renryk Gunman.

Living in Minnesota, where he has encountered a tolerance and a civility he had not known before, he says, has healed Henryk Gurman. In a paper for the class, Gurman wrote:

“It has been the spirit and atmosphere of tolerance and acceptance and sense of charity which I believe to be indigenous to Minnesota that has given me the courage and compulsion to put an end to the shame and self-denial of my identity.”

Recovering his youth

Sundays honors marked the first time Gunman ever attended his own graduation, from any school.

A certified public accountant, he got a business degree magna cum laude from the City College of New York in 1951. But his father died of a heart attack the morning of graduation day, and Gunman missed the ceremony. After working as an accountant, he and his wife, June, came to Minnesota in 1967 when Gurman was hired as vice president of finance for a

locally based company. He retired in 1987 and went back to school, studying math, history, American literature and other courses at a variety of Local colleges, including the University of St. Thomas and Hamline University. Then, three years ago, he started pestering Dr. Dana Babbitt, the principal of Woodbury High School, where Gurman's daughter, Marcia, had graduated in 1978.

"He called me up a number of times and told me he had taken every math class they had at St. Thomas and that he wanted to be a substitute teacher in my building and that he'd do it for nothing if I just gave him the opportunity."

Babbitt didn't take Gurman seriously until Gurman asked Babbitt about an obscure mathematical concept called Merten's Conjecture. Babbitt, a math major in college, thought the conjecture was true; Gunman told him it had been proven false since Babbitt was in school. Impressed, Babbitt helped Gurman get certified as a substitute teacher.

Gurman has been working at Woodbury ever since, loping down the corridors between classes with surprising energy for a 77-year-old, nodding to the kids and teachers who, with Midwestern familiarity, call him "Henry" or, sometimes, "Grandpa Henry."

When Babbitt learned that Gurman missed his high school graduation, he worked with the Class of 2001 to give Gunman the school's first honorary degree.

"The kids like Henry," Babbitt says. "He's very knowledgeable, he's great on teaching about the Holocaust and he brings a nice flavor to the school. He's young beyond his age. And he's doggone persistent. That's why he's here."

Persistence.

"I'm an old soldier and I still march," Gunman said to me the other day as I struggled to keep up with him as he strode rapidly down the high school hallway. "Of course, sometimes I march to my own drummer. The reason I relate so well to teens is that I missed my own teens. At the age of 15, all of a sudden I grew up and I became an old man. My teen years were taken away. So now I live them vicariously."

And so, at 77, with a world at war behind him, Henryk Gurman, a teen-ager at heart, finally got his high school diploma. As he said to Dr. Babbitt:

"This could only happen in America:'

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