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Local books: Who we are and what we represent

A granddaughter preserves her heritage through her grandfather's heroic story



(Photo courtesy of Stephanie Naumann)

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It was a story that had to be written. He knew it, having spent much of his life living it and nearly 20 years writing it. Yet, while it had a stunning conclusion, he was unable to get there before he died. That's when his granddaughter, Stefanie Naumann, picked up his pen and brought it to the ending that had made it possible for her mother's and her own life to begin.

Next Naumann wrote a preface, giving context to the story and honoring her grandparents, grateful she'd been able to hear her grandfather's voice in his journal, in his recorded interviews and in the love letters he had written to his wife.



“My grandfather, Tadeusz Haska, started writing his memoir in the early 1990s,” said Naumann, “but he had not finished it at the time of his passing in 2012, at age 93. I had two motivations in publishing this book. First, I believe that preserving eyewitness accounts is critical to learning about WWII and its effects on civilians. Second, after the death of my dear mother, Christine Haska, in 2017, my last direct connection with Poland, I became even more determined to honor my Polish heritage.”

“How Languages Saved Me: A Polish Story of Survival,” was published in 2019 through Koehler Books Publishing.

Growing up, during her first five years in Monterey, to which she later returned for a month every summer to visit her grandparents, Naumann remembered folks often asking her grandfather questions about how he had survived WWII on the run and how he'd come to live in Monterey. As she became older she, too, began to ask for her grandparents' story.

What had happened? What had been so harrowing, she wondered, that more than 60 years later, people were still asking to hear the tale told? A story that begins with “Nobody believes me” and continues with the smuggling of his young wife out of Poland, tucked into a coffin stowed on an all-male naval ship, is going to warrant a constant retelling.

Haska was born in 1919 in Poland, where he was raised until age 13. Both his parents had died by then, so he and his younger brother lived completely alone. The church gave them free food in exchange for serving as altar boys. Ultimately, he received a scholarship and enrolled in college.

“My grandfather was Catholic, not Jewish,” Naumann said, “but he grew up to become an intellectual, an enemy of the Nazis who realized the educated could lead the uneducated to rise up and rebel.”

During the entire war, Haska went without his eyeglasses for fear of appearing educated.

“The Nazis did not like Poles to be professors, doctors, or highly educated,” he wrote. “Polish people were only supposed to know how to count to 10 and work as slave laborers. Hitler didn't care if we know how to write because he only needed Poles to behave like working cattle. He decided Polish people eventually would be eradicated.”

Haska wrote that he believed he survived the war by becoming a rabbit, jumping from one hole in the ground to another, trying not to be noticed by anyone, constantly changing his place of residence.

Anything for life, liberty and love

After the war, Haska was working as a teacher at the junior college in a beautiful seaside town where his colleagues, aware of his pro-Democracy stance, suggested he run for office in January 1947.

“My grandfather had recently been married. The couple moved into a big, beautiful home in Derlow, Poland and soon his wife, Jadwiga, was pregnant with their child. In December,” said Naumann, “he announced his candidacy against the communists, who arrested him.”

Haska's book describes how he escaped from jail, made his way to Sweden, and learned the language.

“I know a lot of languages, eight at the time,” he wrote, “but English was much more difficult. I ordered a Linguaphone course from Stockholm and they sent me a set of records and a manual. I bought a Gramophone to listen to the records and start studying.”

Meanwhile Jadwiga was sending her husband newsy, encouraging, romantic letters, sometimes with a photograph enclosed. On the back of one she wrote, “Remember that somewhere far away there is a heart that beats only for you and awaits for you with great longing.” In another letter, she wrote that she had lost their baby.

“Ultimately, my grandfather smuggled my grandmother out of Poland inside a coffin on all-male ship,” Nauman said. “Fellow sailors were aware of this but not the captain, who couldn’t tolerate smuggling because he would have lost his license.”

In 1948, Tadeusz and Jadwiga Haska immigrated to the United States. After standing in many lines on behalf of jobs for which he was overqualified, he landed a position with an insurance organization for immigrants. There, he saw a flyer on his boss’ desk seeking a teacher of Polish at an Army language school in Monterey.



(Photo courtesy of Stephanie Naumann)

Language and liberty

Haska earned his PhD at UC Berkeley in Linguistics, using English, his ninth language. He went on to teach and serve as chairman of the Polish Department at the Defense Language Institute for 35 years.

“When my mother, Christine Haska, was growing up,” said Naumann, “my grandparents spoke only Polish to her. So even though she was born in the United States, English, which she didn’t learn until she went to school, was her second language. I, too, learned to speak fluent Polish, but over time, I’ve lost the ability.”

Naumann said the point of this book is revealed in the title, “How Languages Saved Me: A Polish story of survival.”

Naumann is a professor of Management in the Eberhardt School of Business at University of the Pacific, in Stockton, where she has taught for 20 years. She earned her Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology from Tulane University, and her PhD in Business Administration with an emphasis in Organizational Behavior. In the next couple of years, she plans to retire to her late mother’s home in Monterey. But first, this summer, Naumann will present a guest lecture on her book during a Viking Cruise to the Baltic. The cruise ship will dock in Gdansk, Poland, where her grandfather effected his heroic plan to smuggle his wife out of Poland.

“The last thing I would like you to know about my grandfather,” Naumann said, “is that I was the apple of his eye. I felt like the luckiest girl in the world to be his only granddaughter. He never asked for my hugs first, but my first hugs were always for him. He never pushed me academically, but he applauded the loudest. He was the first generation in our family to earn a PhD and, because of him, I was the third.” Her late mother, Christine Haska, was second.

“How Languages Saved Me: A Polish Story of Survival,” a first-place winner of the Royal Dragonfly Book Award for historical nonfiction and memoir, is available via www.stefanienaumann.com and Amazon.

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