

Our family is honored to sponsor the High School Division of The Art & Writing Competition in memory of Raphael ("Rafi") Schwartz, a Holocaust survivor and longtime resident of the Detroit area. Rafi taught hundreds of metro-Detroit students, both as a b'nai mitzvah tutor and as a teacher at the United Hebrew High School. As a teacher, he would have appreciated the willingness of students to engage personally with the history of the Holocaust.

Rafi Schwartz (formerly Berger) was born in 1932 in Ludmir, Poland. Even before the war, Rafi's family faced antisemitism. In 1938, when Rafi was six years old, the family's Polish neighbors protested outside Yitzhak and Esther's grocery store, urging customers not to patronize Jewish businesses and harassing Jews in the street.

The Germans invaded Ludmir in 1941, establishing a ghetto there in 1942. Twenty-five thousand Jews were forced into a few blocks fenced with barbed wire, an area which shrank as Jews were rounded up, taken to the forest, forced to dig large pits, stripped, and shot. In two weeks that September, the Germans killed 15,000 Jews. Ten year old Rafi and his older brother were forced to sort through the clothing of those who had been shot.

The Germans killed all but seventy Jews in Ludmir. Among those seventy, only Rafi's family and one other survived intact. Even so, Rafi, his older brother Yaakov, and his parents, Yitzhak and Esther, lost almost everyone they knew before the war. Rafi lost his four grandparents, his aunts, uncles, cousins, and all his classmates, neighbors, and friends.

Rafi and his family survived by moving from one hiding place to another, sometimes together and sometimes separately, in root cellars, barns, and haystacks. The boys often escaped under the barbed wire fence, going in and out of the ghetto to survive. Ultimately, the family spent months lying in the dark in a small pit they had dug underneath a large building.

After the war ended there were still violent attacks against Jews, so the family changed their name from Berger to Biernatzky and pretended to be Catholic. Esther's two sisters in Palestine managed to send immigration certificates bearing the name "Schwartz." In 1947, Yitzhak, Esther, Yaakov, and Rafi arrived in Palestine aboard a Greek ship.

Although Rafi had only a few years of elementary education, he graduated from an Israeli high school in 1952. He served in the Israeli Army as a Lieutenant and then came to Detroit to study engineering. He said that America was the only country to which a person could come with only the clothes he was wearing, without knowing the language, and become successful. He graduated as a mechanical engineer in 1963 and worked at Chrysler for his entire career.

Despite everything, Rafi lived a good life. He married, had three children, and six grandchildren. He loved sailing and going to the beach at Kensington Metropark. He retired to Florida and almost immediately began teaching Hebrew at a local synagogue. Rafi died of COVID in 2020.