

Survival of a FAMILY Lawmaker recounts gripping Holocaust story

By **PETER JONES**

Joseph Kagan was not one to take no for an answer. When the Jewish man talked, even Nazi guards would listen.

"One of the reasons he survived was he was an operator," his son Daniel said. "He was cruel, but very loving. He was a very powerful personality."

On Oct. 28, 1941, Joseph and the 20,000 other Lithuanian Jews who had been forced into the Kaunas Jewish ghetto were ordered to assemble in Democracy Square.

The elderly and infirm inmates were pushed to the right. Those who were younger and able to work were told to go left.

Sensing the worst, quick-thinking Joseph put on the charm.

"My father spoke German very, very well in a highly educated sort of accent, and the German guard was very surprised," Daniel recounted. "My father said, 'She doesn't look as strong as she really is. But she can do this, she can do that.' After a few seconds, the guard said, 'OK.' That's how my grandmother's life was saved."

Joseph would use his skillful wherewithal to outthink his Nazi captors at every step, surviving other "actions" designed to thin out the population, and eventually talking a slave-labor foreman into abetting his methodical escape plan.

State Rep. Daniel Kagan, a Cherry Hills Village Democrat, recently told the story for the 32nd annual Governor's Holocaust Remembrance Program and later spoke with *The Villager*.

April is Holocaust Awareness Month.

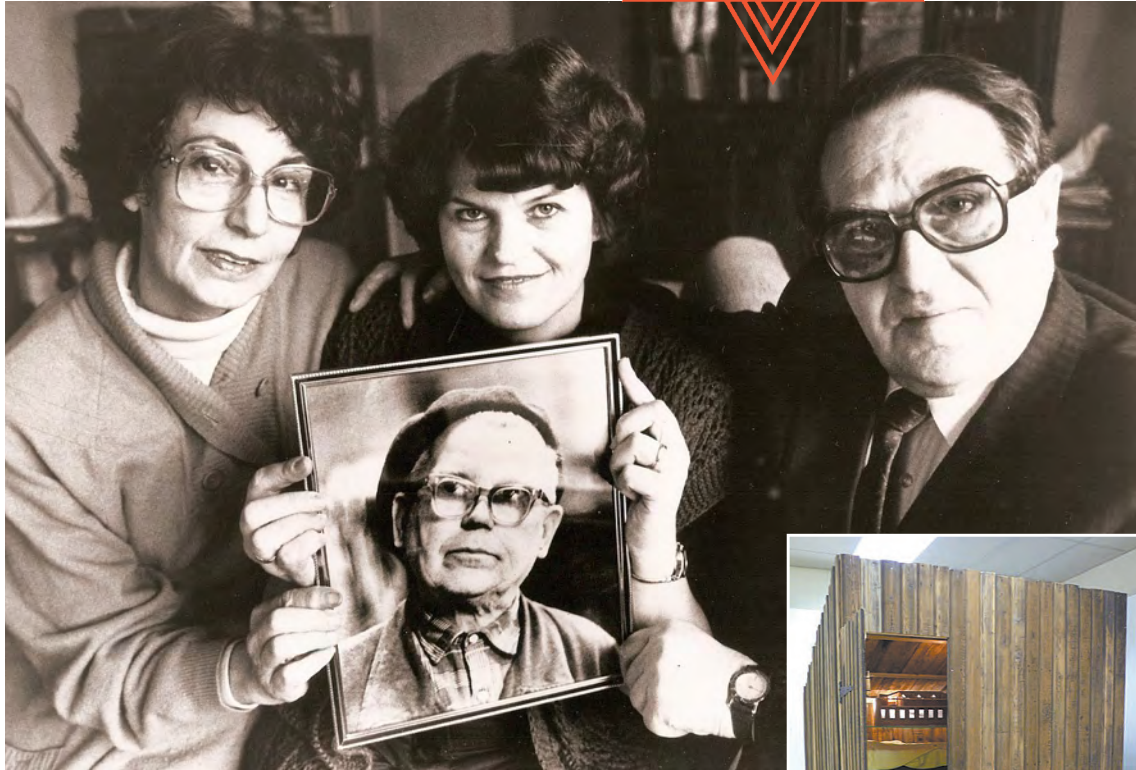
Love in the ghetto

Although Lithuania had been a Jewish safe haven for centuries, the peace abruptly ended in 1940 when Joseph Stalin's Soviet armies occupied the nation, ending a rare decade of Lithuanian independence. Many in the Catholic-dominated Baltic nation had seen fit to blame Jews for the rise of communism.

When the Nazis invaded the country a year later, their arrival was welcomed by some Lithuanians as relief from Stalinist oppression. As the Germans seized control, the Nazis took advantage of that anti-



Margaret Strom had to think twice before escaping the ghettos to join her future husband in a hiding place in a factory attic.



Margaret and Joseph Kagan, left and right, hold a picture of Vytautas Rinkevicius, the man who helped hide them during the Holocaust. Rinkevicius's daughter Vitalia is also pictured. The Kagans' son is state Rep. Daniel Kagan.

Photos courtesy of Rep. Daniel Kagan

Jewish sentiment by encouraging unofficial "partisan" groups to persecute Jews.

"This was a concocted plan," Daniel Kagan explained. "First, get the locals to do your dirty work and after you've stoked up anti-Jewish feeling in the area, offer the Jews a safe haven in the ghetto and the Jews will flock voluntarily."

Although 27-year-old Joseph Kagan had flocked like the rest, the brash young man was not about to let Nazi occupation cramp his lifestyle. Armed with a record player and an impressive stash of vodka, Joseph set his sites on 17-year-old Margaret Strom, the pretty daughter of a one-time well-heeled government official.

Margaret accepted Joseph's invitation for a date at his place on her stated conditions of good vodka and a spin of Tchaikovsky's 4th *Symphony*.

"Done," Joseph replied.

Hatching a plan

As new romance blossomed in the ghetto, things were getting worse for the Jews. When the call came that the Nazis were looking for 500 well-trained Jews for cushy office jobs, Joseph became suspicious.

"Those people were taken away and shot," Joseph's son, Daniel, explained. "That was the Germans' way of getting rid of the most highly educated people who might be the core of a rebellion. It was diabolically clever."

After his mother narrowly escaped execution, Joseph began hatching a plot to escape – or at least temporarily avoid certain death.

His plan finally came to fruition in 1943 while the dismal civilian-operated ghetto was be-

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— State Rep. Daniel Kagan

ing reconfigured as a Gestapo-run concentration camp.

Joseph's plan took shape about a mile from the ghetto walls at the iron factory where he was being transported for daily work. The final straw came when Joseph witnessed a particularly brutal beating of a factory worker.

"My father did notice that the foreman saw this beating and winced like he was pretty upset about the way this Jewish inmate was treated," Daniel said. "He made a split-second decision, 'OK, this is the guy I'm going to trust.'"

That foreman, Vytautas Rinkevicius, would secretly help Joseph build a false wall in the attic of the factory in hopes that Joseph, his mother – and maybe even Margaret – could stay there until the end of the war, if she accepted his proposal. "Marry me, go into hiding with me and survive – or don't marry me, stay in the ghetto and get murdered by the Nazis," Joseph proposed. "Which would you rather do?"

It was not necessarily an easy decision for Margaret.

"It took her a long time to decide which fate was worse," Daniel said. "My father always said, 'Your mom never knew whether she made the right decision.'"

A box to hide in

With the help of Rinkevicius, the Kagans moved into their new home, a 6-foot-by-6-foot hiding place. If that were not small enough, the closet included a still tinier box where all



A replica of the 6-foot-by-6-foot box where the Kagans spent most of nine months in 1944.

three would lie down during the day, unable to move or talk.

By night, the family left the smaller box – and sometimes even the building to get water from an outdoor tap, taking hours to crawl backwards on all fours, covering their tracks to evade a night watchman, often abandoning the mission midway.

Rinkevicius would sometimes arrive, using a secret knock. He would bring food – and news, often the bad kind.

One day, the factory's bookkeeper, the only other person to know of the hiding place, disappeared. As it happened, the bookkeeper had been caught harboring a Jewish boy who was soon killed by the Nazis. The Kagans took their chances and decided to stay put at the urging of Rinkevicius.

Plans changed in 1944. As the Allies were closing in, word came that the Germans planned to destroy the factory and everything in it. It was time for the Kagans to make their exit and somehow eke out survival until the end of the war.

As it happened, Margaret's mother had committed suicide after being moved to a second concentration camp, but Margaret's younger brother Alec had been smuggled out of the ghetto to live with a nearby Lithuanian family.

By amazing kismet and course of events, it was eventually arranged for Alec to play a part in the Kagans' final escape from the doomed factory.

"It was agreed my uncle would come to a ridge that was visible through a peephole," Daniel said. "If he came with a goat, they knew it was time to leave."

Tearful reunions

The Kagans – without Alec, who would stay in Lithuania and Joseph's mother, who immigrated to Israel – eventually made it to England, where the couple raised a family and ventured to put their lives back together.

"They had to come to terms with the fact that both sides of their families had been wiped out. It was a traumatic time," Daniel said.

In 1965 under threat of possibly never coming back to England, Margaret visited Lithuania, which the Soviets had since retaken, to see her brother and Rinkevicius, the man who had saved her life two decades earlier.

"It was a highly emotional experience," Daniel said.

Joseph would reconnect with Rinkevicius years later.

All three lived to a ripe old age. Margaret was the last to die in 2011.

Daniel says, unlike many Holocaust survivors, his father – and eventually his mother – were willing to discuss their incredible experiences.

"My father talked about it all the time," he said. "It was his way of dealing with it. He was very keen on what these noble people had done, risking their lives for people they didn't really know."

For his part, the Colorado state representative said the family story was a large part of his own inspiration for fostering change as an elected official.

"All I heard during my youth was how politics affects not only how well off you are, but whether you live or die," he said. "The political winds can chill you to death. My father and mother survived because they made the right decisions to accommodate the political times. The freedoms that we have are very fragile."



State Rep. Daniel Kagan of Cherry Hills Village would not be alive today were it not for Vytautas Rinkevicius, a factory foreman who helped his parents hide from the Nazis during World War II.

Photo by Peter Jones

