

By Angela Bianchi

Seventy-two-year-old Holocaust survivor Ben Mandelkern says writing a book about Nazi-occupied Poland has brought back some painful memories.

"Hitler did not manage to kill me physically," the Willowdale resident says, "but he poisoned me mentally. This is what Hitler left me. I'm trying to overcome my problem, but it's hard."

Mandelkern examines his feelings in his soon-to-be-published book about his life in Poland from 1939-'45.

He writes about how the Nazis raided his hometown, Parczew, in June, 1942, and herded his family off to concentration camps. He was spared because he was a "valuable laborer in the sawmill."

Daring escape

Months later, 26-year-old Mandelkern was put on a cattle car headed for the Treblinka concentration camp, but he managed to escape with two cousins after he unlatched the railcar door with a penknife, his sole possession, and jumped.

"I found my way to the Jewish ghetto at Siedlce," says Mandelkern, "but on my way back to my hometown, bandits robbed me of my clothes and my penknife."

Mandelkern says writing about his experiences came about accidentally.

"My grandson loved to hear horror stories, so I'd tell him stories about living in Poland under the Nazis. Then I wrote down the stories to give to my daughter. At first I wrote 10 pages and ended up with 500 pages."

Mandelkern showed his work to North York Central library author-in-residence Heather Robertson and she put him on to James Lorimer publishers. The book is expected to be out by this fall.

He began writing his book back in 1983 but stopped after his wife, Helen, died in 1984. He picked up writing again in 1985 and finished the book in 1987.

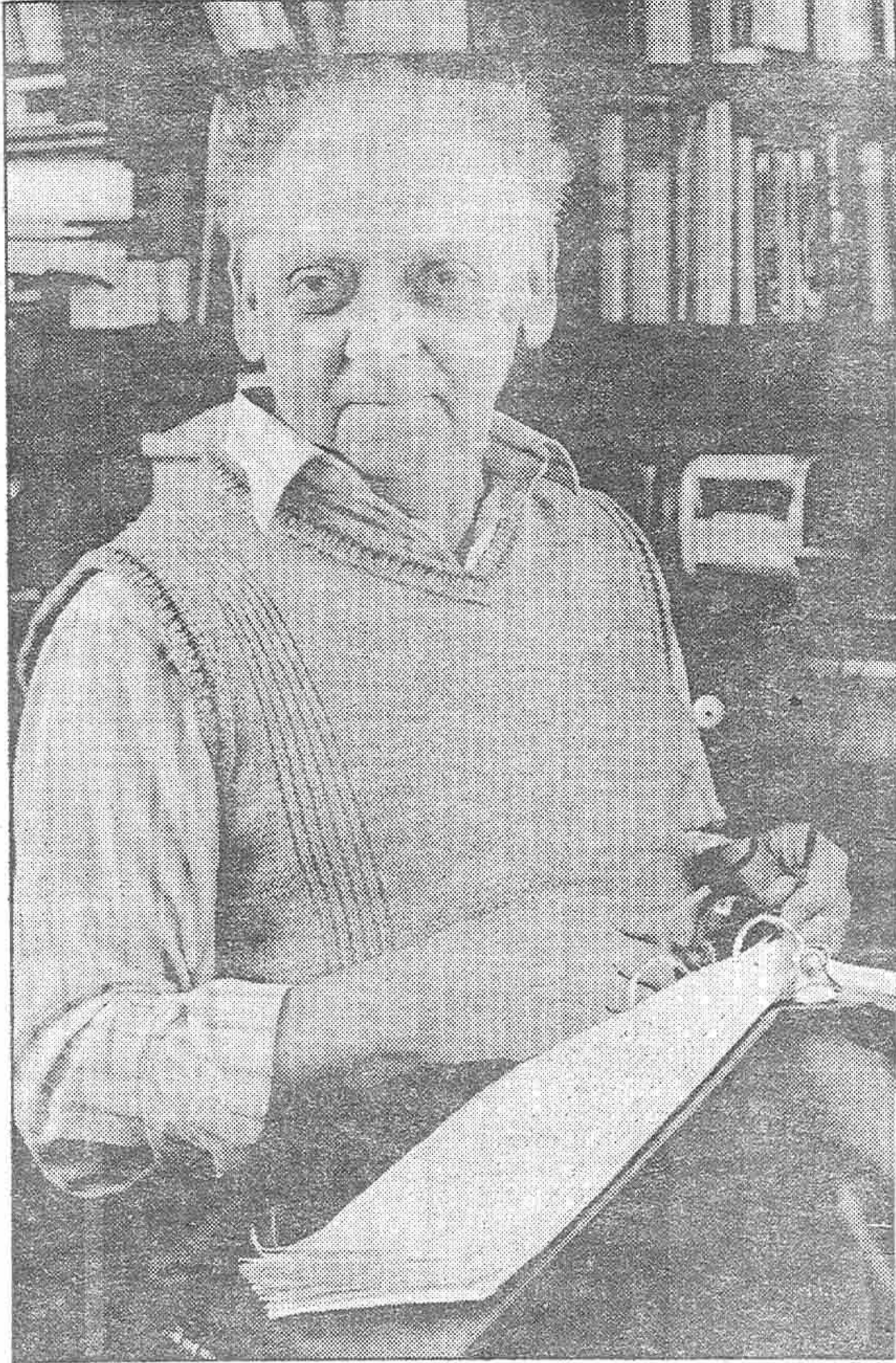
"Became obsessed"

"I became obsessed with the book," Mandelkern says, "I'd write five hours daily starting early in the morning. I found it emotionally hard to write at night."

The book is different from other books on the Holocaust, he says. There are no graphic scenes of concentration camp horrors. Instead, it tells a series of stories about his family, the Nazis and the gentiles who helped him hide.

"I wasn't afraid to die, but afraid of torture," he says. "The one thing I intentionally brought out in my book were the names of gentiles who fed me and gave me work during the war," Mandelkern says.

"These were people I didn't know before the war, but they were willing to help me and my wife. I still keep in touch with two of them in Poland. I send them \$10 a month. For me it's nothing, but for them, it's half their monthly wage."



JIM RUSSELL/TORONTO STAFF

Kept in touch: Author Ben Mandelkern still remembers those who helped him survive the horrors of Nazi-occupied Poland. He sends one couple \$10 a month. He and his family came to Canada in 1950.

Mandelkern's book is a blend of history and romance. It's full of dates and names, but it's his relationship with his wife that captures the reader.

Separated from wife

Married in 1940, Mandelkern and his wife were frequently separated during the war. The longest period was in 1944 when his wife, three months pregnant, was taken from Warsaw during the Aug. 1 Polish National Underground Uprising.

"We were separated for six months," says Mandelkern. "There was no communication between us. I had no idea if she was still alive."

He returned to Parczew in January of 1945, and his wife found him there a month later.

"I saw her standing in the doorway. I couldn't even hug her she was so big. That night, Feb. 3, 1945 at 4 a.m., my wife gave birth to my eldest daughter, Rae. It was the happiest time of my life. That's why I decided to end the book there."

The Mandelkerns immigrated to Canada in 1950. They lived in Montreal for 18 years with their three daughters and in Toronto for 20.

A retired businessman, Mandelkern says he's found his greatest fulfilment in Canada.

At the moment, Mandelkern is completing a list of conclusions to be inserted in his book that deal, among other subjects, with his relationship with Germans yesterday and today.