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## ***Sidney Shachnow, 83, Is Dead; Holocaust Escapee and U.S. General***

By **Richard Sandomir**

Oct. 12, 2018

Maj. Gen. Sidney Shachnow, who escaped a Nazi labor camp in Lithuania as a boy and later rose through the ranks of the United States Army, eventually leading its forces in Berlin at the end of the Cold War, died on Sept. 27 in Pinehurst, N.C. He was 83.

His daughter LeeAnne Keister confirmed the death, at a hospital near his horse farm in Southern Pines, N.C. He had Parkinson's disease, atrial fibrillation and polycythemia vera, a blood cancer, she said.

His path to becoming a major general began in Kaunas, also known as Kovno, a major city in south-central Lithuania, where he was born Schaja Shachnowski on Nov. 23, 1934, to Leon and Rose (Schuster) Shachnowski. His father was an engineer; his mother, a homemaker and seamstress.

The Shachnowskis were relatively prosperous Jews. But their lives were altered dramatically when they were uprooted from their home and herded into shoddy housing in a nearby ghetto that had been sealed off by the Germans. They became forced laborers for their occupiers.

The ghetto was a de facto concentration camp, General Shachnow recalled many years later. Though it had no gas chambers or crematories, he said, nearly everybody there died.

"Our camp did things the old-fashioned way," he said in a speech at Elon University, in North Carolina, in 2014. "Several bulldozers would dig a ditch; people would be asked to move to the edge of the ditch. In most cases they were naked. Automatic weapons would kill them. They

would fall into the ditch, some wounded and not dead, and if you were lying on the ledge, an individual would throw you into the ditch.”

After three years of escalating brutality (in one instance a guard beat him with a shovel), his family devised an improbable but successful escape plan for him. Leaving behind his weeping parents one morning before dawn, 9-year-old Schaja hid under his Uncle Willie’s long coat as the uncle, with Schaja moving in rhythm with him, walked through the gates, passing guards and a work detail that was often sent outside the ghetto. Shortly afterward, children at the camp were liquidated.

When he and his uncle reached the streets beyond the gates of the ghetto, he said, his uncle gave him a prearranged signal to emerge from under the coat and find his contact, a woman wearing a red kerchief. Following the route he had been given, Schaja found her and followed her to temporary safety — in a storage room of a building with a table, chairs and a toilet.

She locked the door, and he wondered, he later recalled, if he had traded one imprisonment for another.

“I had escaped from hell!” General Shachnow wrote in his autobiography, “Hope and Honor” (2004), written with Jan Robbins. “Or had I?”

Afterward he was taken in by a Roman Catholic family and lived with them for several months. He was then reunited with his mother, who had escaped from the camp, and his younger brother, Mula, who had been smuggled to safety disguised as a girl. For a while they lived in the family’s house in Kaunas with Soviet officers; the Red Army had by then taken control of Lithuania.

But fearing that the Communists would seal the country’s borders after the war, Schaja left with his mother and brother on a 2,000-mile trek by foot, wagon and train through Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary before settling in Furth, Germany, near Nuremberg, in the fall of 1945. His father, who had been fighting the Germans with partisans, rejoined them, and they charted a path to the United States.



Maj. Gen. Sidney Shachnow in an undated photo. As a commander in Berlin, he was confronted with a delicious irony as a Holocaust survivor: His headquarters had been those of Hermann Göring, and his residence had once belonged to Fritz Reinhardt, a finance minister under Hitler.

U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, via Associated Press

In 1950 the family left Germany on a Navy transport ship and arrived in Boston. Schaja, his parents and brother settled in Salem, Mass., where relatives had preceded them to America. As they sought to assimilate — he did not speak English at first — Schaja became known as Sidney and his brother as Stanley.

Sidney attended high school but dropped out in 1955 and joined the Army. He married Arlene Armstrong — a Jewish-Catholic union that his parents opposed.

“Join the new world,” he recalled telling his parents. “America, the melting pot. Have you even taken a step into this world? You both live in the past!”

Starting as an infantry private, he rose to captain in the Special Forces, or Green Berets, in 1962 and fought in Vietnam, twice receiving the Silver Star for valor.

Transferred to West Berlin in 1970, he was given command of Detachment (A), an elite Special Forces unit that conducted clandestine intelligence missions in Eastern Europe. He led it for four years.

“They served on the front lines of the Cold War and never fired a shot in anger,” General Shachnow told Task & Purpose, a national security news website, last year. “No force of its size in history has contributed more to peace, stability and freedom.”

After other postings, including as director of the United States Special Operations Command in Washington, he returned to West Berlin as the Army’s commanding officer in 1989, when events were unfolding that would lead to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany.

As a German-speaking combat veteran, General Shachnow was well suited to serve in Berlin. But as a Holocaust survivor, he was confronted with what he felt was delicious irony: His headquarters had been those of the powerful Nazi official Hermann Göring, and his residence had once belonged to Fritz Reinhardt, a finance minister under Hitler.

“Here it is, the very capital of fascism and the Third Reich,” General Shachnow once told The Fayetteville Observer in North Carolina. “The very buildings and streets where they were goose-stepping and Heil-Hitlering, and the very system that put me in the camp and killed many people.”

After leaving Berlin, he was appointed commander of the Special Forces and commanding general of the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School at Fort Bragg, N.C. While in the service he received a bachelor’s degree from the University of Nebraska and a master’s degree in public administration from Shippensburg State College (now Shippensburg University) in Pennsylvania.

He retired from the Army in 1994.

During the 2016 presidential campaign, General Shachnow helped organize an endorsement of Donald J. Trump by 88 retired military leaders. They said they believed that Mr. Trump would make a “long overdue course correction in our national security posture.”

In addition to his wife and his daughter LeeAnne, he is survived by three other daughters, Sheree Gillette, Michelle Batiste and Denise Smith; 14 grandchildren; 14 great-grandchildren; and his brother.

General Shachnow said that flexibility, tenacity and assertiveness were among the qualities that had helped him survive the Holocaust.

“Unavoidable suffering can give you meaning in life,” he said in the Elon University speech. “For me, my military experience, my experience in a concentration camp and my relationship with my wife gave me meaning.”

***Correction: October 14, 2018***

***An earlier version of this obituary misstated the surname of one of General Shachnow's daughters. She is LeeAnne Keister, not Meister.***

A version of this article appears in print on Oct. 13, 2018, on Page A26 of the New York edition with the headline: Sidney Shachnow, 83, Dies; At 9, He Fled Nazis' Camp By Hiding in Uncle's Overcoat