

# BookREVIEW

## "Until Our Last Breath: A Holocaust Story of Love & Partisan Resistance"

**Springfield native tells love story of his partisan parents**

**Reviewed by Lauren Kramer**

There's no denying it, "Until Our Last Breath" is a painful, exhausting book to read. Describing a love story between his parents that developed in the confines of the Vilna Ghetto in Lithuania, author Michael Bart takes readers on an extensive journey through the experience of Vilna's Jewish community.

His descriptions of life before and during the ghetto are so vivid that they draw the reader reluctantly into the story – reluctantly because you cannot help but know the outcome for most of the Jews. With the foreknowledge that their fate is sealed, reading of their desperate fight to believe in the future is upsetting and disturbing. But if you foster any interest in the Holocaust and the psyche of those who perished during that time, this book will enlighten you considerably.

Bart's own personal journey of discovery began in an unlikely place: at his father's

funeral. As the last shovels of dirt were being added to the grave of Leizer Bart, a mourner approached his son with a cryptic reference to the Freedom Fighters of Nekamah, a group that Bart had never even heard of.

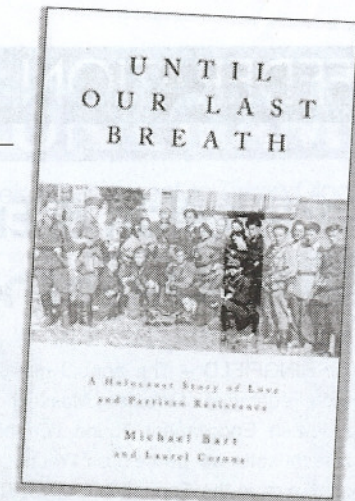
This reference was the impetus for a decade-long research process during which Bart interviewed other survivors and delved into archives, learning about his parents' unlikely romance under the grimmest conditions imaginable. He also learned of their heroic service as members of the Jewish resistance – first within the walls of the ghetto, and later, when it became obvious there was nothing left to do in the ghetto, in bunkers in the Rudnicki Forest, nearby.

The partisans' rebellion involved blowing up railway tracks to disrupt the flow of Nazi army services to the front lines, obtaining food from nearby villages – a risky enterprise during which Leizer was once sabotaged and shot, and helping to care for and organize other members of the

resistance under the leadership of Abba Kovner.

When Vilna was finally liberated, Leizer and his wife Zenia returned to their former hometowns to find that their families had been murdered by the Nazis. Their fight was over, and the only family either had remaining in Europe was each other. Zenia sunk into a deep depression, recovering only slightly when a doctor informed her that by continuing on this path, she would be helping Hitler accomplish his goal of destroying the Jews. A family member in Springfield helped the couple make their way to the United States, where they gradually began a new life and had children of their own.

It must have come as a big surprise to Bart, who knew his mother as a homemaker and his father as an American immigrant who supported the family in a regular job and built a safe home for the family. He had heard a little about his father's partisan



**"Until Our Last Breath: A Holocaust Story of Love & Partisan Resistance," By Michael Bart and Laurel Corona; Published by St. Martin's Press, 2008, \$29.95**

experience over the years, but to understand the full picture of his parents' lives in makeshift bunkers in a forest eating swamp soup to survive, would be quite a history to swallow.

Bart was born in Springfield, relocating to the West Coast in 1966 because Leizer's health required a warmer climate. "My parents didn't talk much about their wartime experiences until 1994, when they started sharing more details with me," he says. "It was interesting, but I didn't have a way to connect the dots. Then, at my dad's funeral in November 1996, my life changed."

In the course of his research, Bart bought every English book on Vilna, the ghetto and

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the partisans that he could find. He went through his parents' papers, called names in their old telephone books and started networking with survivors all over the world. "Organizations started helping me and this project just developed a life of its own," he says.

He also visited Lithuania twice, journeys he found personally difficult given his research. "Most of the 70,000 Lithuanian Jews killed in the Holocaust were killed by Lithuanians who were collaborating with and under the supervision of the Nazis," he says. "They were pleasant enough to me but I carried that weight with me, of the intimacy of their involvement."

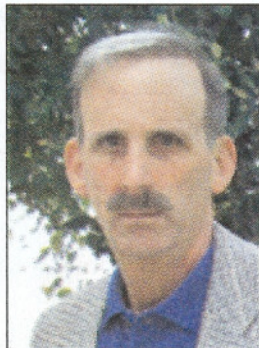
Developing *Until Our Last Breath* was a massive undertaking for Bart and required an enormous amount of emotional capital, an investment for which he credits his wife for constantly buoying his spirits. "My wife always encouraged me, saying this story was too important to quit," Bart says. "At bumps in the road it would have been easy to say I can't do this anymore. If not for her, this book would never have been done."

Rickie Leiter, 56, is a Longmeadow resident and

cousin of Bart's who grew up with his family. "Zenia was like a second mother to me and she and my mother were like sisters," she recalls. Over the course of her childhood, she recalls that Leizer, typically a very quiet, shy individual, was very animated with her father.

"He would share his stories about what happened during the war with my father, and as I became a teenager my parents shared more of his story with me," Leiter says. "They made it clear that Michael and Bruce, Leizer's sons, did not know these details, but felt it was important for me to understand what had happened to these two wonderful people in my life."

Leiter feels confident that Leizer and Zenia would have been extremely proud of Bart's portrayal of their lives in his book. "Michael was able to share not only the love and travails his parents went through, but also the beautiful history, the richness of the Jewish history of Vilna," she reflects. "His book really captured both of those stories, and for me, to have known these people, makes me very proud of Michael."



**Michael Bart**

## Local students awarded nearly \$57,000 in scholarships

SPRINGFIELD – The Jewish Endowment Foundation (JEF), a division of the Jewish Federation of Western Massachusetts, Inc., awarded almost \$57,000 to 51 local students from the Springfield Council of Jewish Women Scholarship Funds of the Jewish Endowment Foundation of Western Massachusetts. The students were recognized at the annual scholarship breakfast held June 11 and hosted by the Springfield Council of Jewish Women Scholarship Committee of the JEF. Scholarship recipients included high school seniors who were awarded scholarships for the first time, and current college students receiving new and renewal awards.

Over the years, the program has awarded more than a million dollars to financially assist local students in their pursuit of higher education. Currently a part of the Jewish Endowment Foundation of Western Massachusetts, there are more than 30 scholarship funds from which awards are distributed annually.

The Springfield Council of Jewish Women Scholarship Fund of the Jewish Endowment Foundation of Western Massachusetts scholarships are available to all qualified students regardless of race, religion, or gender. Applicants must be residents of Springfield, East Longmeadow, Longmeadow, Wilbraham, Hampden, Agawam or West Springfield. Scholarship recipients are chosen based on a combination of academic performance, financial need, and community involvement. Applications are available at the high school guidance offices and online at [www.jewishwesternmass.org](http://www.jewishwesternmass.org)