

Son of Holocaust 'partisans' to speak Monday

By **LARRY MITCHELL**
Staff Writer

CHICO — Like most children, Michael Bart listened to his parents talk about their youth.

The stories told by his father and mother, Holocaust survivors Leizer and Zenia Bart, concerned an aspect of history not well known.

Bart said he began a quest to learn more about this history after his father's funeral in 1996. At the funeral, an elderly man told him that he should have inscribed on his parents' grave markers the Hebrew word "Nekamah."

The Barts were members of a Jewish band of guerrilla fighters in Lithuania during the Holocaust. The group called themselves "Nekamah," which means "Avengers."

Over the next decade, Bart did research and wrote an award-winning book, "Until Our Last Breath."

He will be in Chico Monday to speak at the community Holocaust Memorial Day service. It will be held at 7:30 p.m. at Congregation Beth Israel, which is at 14th and Hemlock streets. All are welcome.

Also, at the service, Bert Schapelhouman of Magalia will be honored for his efforts in Holland during the Holocaust. He



Submitted Photo

The Partisans of Vilna (photo taken July 13, 1943) include the parents of Michael Bart, Holocaust survivors Leizer and Zenia Bart.

wound up in a concentration camp after he and other family members were caught hiding Jews in their home.

Bart, in a phone interview, said his father, fleeing the Nazis, emigrated from Poland to Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. There he met and married his mother.

In 1941, the Nazis captured Lithuania and established a ghetto in Vilnius, where 35,000 Jews, including his parents, were forced to live. After it became apparent that the ghetto's entire population would eventually be killed, 150 Jews escaped the ghetto and went to live in a vast forest outside Vil-

nius. Bart's parents were among them.

Bart said they obtained weapons (sometimes from the Soviets) and engaged in guerrilla fighting against the Nazis. They blew up trains and military plants, dismantled railroad tracks, and ambushed and killed German soldiers. They were fighting for just under a year.

Their life in the forest was incredibly hard. They had to steal food from local villagers, and



Bart

they never had enough to eat, Bart said. To quell hunger pangs, they would eat something called "balanda," a mixture of boiled swamp water and flour. They slept in huge underground bunkers to keep warm in the frigid winter.

Referring to this group of fighters, President Eisenhower remarked that "the partisans of Vilnius" had a significant impact, Bart said. They were among a number of bands of "partisans" that fought throughout Europe.

About two-thirds of the group survived the war, Bart said. In July of 1944, when the Soviet Army and the Polish resistance army took Vilnius from the Germans, the Avengers joined in the fight.

Bart, a real-estate investor in San Diego, said his parents moved to the United States in 1948.

He has felt the effects of the Holocaust all of his life, he said. Not only did he hear about it from his parents, but because of it, he never met his grandparents, his uncles and aunts or any of his first cousins, he said. They were all killed.

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