Eugene Bergman's earliest memory is of waking from a coma to find himself in a hospital. "It was a strange experience. I saw a doctor and a nurse moving their mouths, but I could not hear anything."

He was then 7 years old. Five days earlier, Bergman could hear. Now he was deaf. Five days earlier, he had been walking down a street in Poznan, Poland, his hometown, when he encountered German soldiers herding a group of Jews through the streets. A soldier hit him in the head with a rifle, and that was the end of Bergman's memory of his previous life.

It was also the beginning of six years of persecution, moving from town to town, living in the Warsaw Ghetto, surviving in the streets, being separated from his family, seeing death and destruction all around him. It was that bleak period in history when more than 6 million Jews throughout Europe were rounded up and systematically slaughtered by the Nazis. It was a time when only 100,000 to 150,000 of Poland's more than 3 million Jews survived.

Bergman, now an assistant professor of English at Gallaudet University, is a survivor. More than that, he is a winner: master of five languages, the first deaf person ever to earn a PhD in English, co-author of the play Tales from a Clubroom and author of the book Art for the Deaf and Hearing Impaired, among other accomplishments.

Although the memory of his first seven years was wiped out, Bergman has many memories of the years between 1939 and 1945, the years when 95 percent of the Jewish population of pre-war Poland was destroyed.

About his life up to the age of 7 he learned from his older brother, Broniek, who survived the war with him. Born in 1932 in Poznan, Bergman was the youngest of three brothers. David was seven years older; Broniek (now called Brian), five years older. Their father, Pesakh, owned fabric stores in Poznan and Lodz.

The Germans invaded Poland on Sept. 1, 1939. Pesakh's stores, along with those of other Jews, were confiscated, and Jews were ordered to leave Poznan. Shortly after Bergman's recovery in the hospital, his family moved to Lodz to stay with relatives.

In the spring of 1940, Bergman and his family moved to Warsaw. "I remember that we traveled in a horse-drawn cart to get there," he recalls.

For about five months, the family lived in the non-Jewish section of the city. Bergman, who did not learn sign language until he arrived in the United States many years later, managed to communicate using some lipreading and writing on paper.

"But most of the time I lived in a fog," he says. "I could not hear, did not know what was going on around me. I lived a very sheltered life. My family was luckier than most; my father saw to it that we got enough food so we didn't go hungry."

Eventually, Bergman, his parents and his brothers were forced to move to the Warsaw Ghetto, an area set aside by the Germans especially for Jews in 1940.

Still, life was not yet that difficult for young Bergman. He played in the inner courtyard of his tenement with other children. He lived in a two-room apartment with his mother and brothers while most people in the ghetto lived 10 to a room. His father, who had obtained false Aryan identification papers, lived outside the ghetto. Others went hungry, but once a week Bergman's father would secretly enter the ghetto with a sack of food for his family and other hungry people.

"I was scared, of course," says Bergman. "The Germans were bogeymen to me. Just to see them scared me." But his mother, Sarah, and his father provided much-needed stability. "My mother did not show her feelings of fear," he remembers. "My father, either."

Bergman's relatively secure life ended abruptly on July 22, 1942, the date that the Germans decided to deport the remainder of the Jewish population of the Warsaw Ghetto to the Treblinka extermination camp. Suddenly, the crowded streets became empty as raids began. Short months before, half a million people had been crowded into an area of slightly more than one-and-a-half square miles. Between July 22 and Oct. 3 of that year, 310,000 Jews were deported to Treblinka and killed.

Five days of terror began for Bergman and his family. They hid in a secret cellar in his apartment building while around them people were dragged out of their homes and carried away.

"The Germans and the Askaris [Ukrainian and Latvian auxiliaries] surrounded individual houses and dragged everyone out to deport them," Bergman remembers. "They broke open doors of apartments and shot everyone who would not go down to the courtyard. Sick people, cripples—they were shot dead in their homes."

Two memories during those five days stand out in Bergman's mind: "An open car entered the ghetto with a German standing in it. He had a beefy, thick face. He took out his pistol and started shooting at people.
Everyone started to flee into buildings at the sides of the streets. I felt pure terror. He shot at people as if they were rabbits. He seemed to enjoy it—he was smiling. I never forgot that.”

Bergman also remembers a janitor in his apartment building who sold candy from a kind of cigar box with a string around his neck. The janitor sold candy by the piece. Before July 22, the candy cost 1 zloty apiece. “On July 22, it shot up to 50 zlotys. On July 23 you could not buy it anymore.” And what happened to the vendor? “Chances are the same thing that happened to 99 percent of the people in the ghetto—gassed in Treblinka.”

For the first time in his life, Bergman felt hunger. Because the number of guards around the ghetto increased, no one could get in, including his father. During the mornings, when the Germans came to take people away, the Bergmans hid. In the afternoons, he and his family were able to go out into the streets.

Although the situation was bleak, people in the ghetto had no idea that their friends and relatives were being taken to the camp to be gassed. “The Germans followed their usual policy of deceit,” says Bergman. “They forced some deportees in Treblinka to write postcards to their friends and relatives in the ghetto saying they were treated well and got work. Then they gassed them.”

“Nobody could conceive what was happening. Nothing like that had ever happened before in history. I still don’t understand. Nobody under-
ing by the Germans, hunger and lack of water,” he recalls. “We became colder and colder.”

Finally, on Oct. 1, the insurgents surrendered and Bergman, along with the others, became a prisoner of war. He was taken to the Lamsdorf POW camp in Silesia.

“We were always hungry,” he remembers. “They gave us one-eighth of a loaf of black bread apiece each day.”

But one memorable day, he did receive a whole loaf of bread, which he credits to Tolstoy. The 50 youngest prisoners between the ages of 10-16 were separated from the others. Across the fence from the youngsters was a group of French prisoners. One day, in desperation, Bergman wrote a note in fractured French and threw it over the fence. It said, “Je suis faim. Donnez moi pain”—“I am hungry, give me bread.” In return, the French prisoners threw a loaf of bread over the fence to him.

How did a 12-year-old deaf Polish boy know French? He learned it in the Warsaw Ghetto. Although education in the ghetto was forbidden, there was a lending library, and young Bergman took out many books. “I didn’t understand half of what I read, but I kept reading,” he says. Some words of French, culled from the French phrases in works by Tolstoy and others, remained in his memory.

Bergman was in the camp less than a month before the 50 youngsters were transferred to a secret German aircraft factory in Saxony near the city of Meissen. There he drove rivets into aircraft fuselages from 6 a.m. until 6 p.m. He lived in the factory in a barracks guarded by the Germans for about six months, until they were liberated by the Russians on May 2, 1945.

Bergman remembers that a Russian soldier drove up to the factory on his motorcycle, and when he saw his Russian-style blouse and the red star on his cap, he knew that they were free. Eagerly the prisoners surrounded the Russian. “But he just stood there like a Martian, poker-faced, uttering a phrase or two, and then drove on.”

Bergman returned to Poland on a train provided for refugees and sought out his old apartment in the Aryan section of Warsaw. It had been half destroyed, and the ghetto, too, no longer existed.

Two months later, still in Warsaw, Bergman read in a newspaper that a Jewish committee had been established. He went to ask about his family and was given the address of his mother in Lodz. Provided with a free meal and money to take the train to Lodz, he was finally reunited with his mother and brother, Broniek, in July 1945.

Bergman says that his mother, who died about three years ago, never knew what happened to her husband and her oldest son, David. “But my brother later told me privately that he met a fellow tenant of our old apartment who saw the Germans shoot my father and older brother in the neck.”

The surviving Bergman family moved to Germany in the fall of 1945—“a big adventure to me”—and lived for two years in a displaced persons camp until, with the help of an uncle, they were able to come to the United States.

Looking back on his experiences, Bergman recalls the generosity and support of his family but emphasizes that the war deprived him of a normal childhood.

“The lessons I learned were of no value to me in the normal world,” he says. “It was all so pointless. To survive in that jungle world, I had to lie, cheat and be rude. In that world the laws and rules were designed to oppress, exploit and ultimately destroy human beings, even children like me. Its rulers were what the Canadian poet A.M. Klein terms ‘robbed fauna with tubes and shears.’ Fauna? I won-