

FROM NAZI-OCCUPIED POLAND TO THE U.S.

# Rhineland man celebrates a century of adventure

BY MATT PERSIKE

**RHINELANDER** – A longtime resident of Rhineland is now in league with rare company.

Paul Haftarski, born in Poland in 1924, celebrated his 100th birthday on Saturday, April 27 – an age only about one-fortieth of a percent of the United States population reaches. However, Paul defied the odds by even making it to age 21.

Haftarski was born in Warsaw in the aftermath of the First World War. For over a century prior to the war, Poland was partitioned and its parts were shared, won and lost by various states under many names. By 1924, Poland's territory had been won in a series of border wars, and its independence was confirmed by the Treaty of Versailles. For the first 15 years of his life, Paul enjoyed a life typical of any Western nation of his era.

Haftarski excelled in school, but said after secondary school his father sent him to a technical school.

"I was there for three days. Because the war start," he explained; a definite Polish accent detected.

After the occupation of Poland began at the start of WWII, people who were employed were allowed to return to work. As a 17-year old student, Paul had no such employment. He was sent, along with legions of Poland's unemployed, to Germany to work where



Paul Haftarski, center, sits with his son, John and daughter-in-law, Donna, in Paul's home. Haftarski celebrated his 100th birthday on Saturday, April 27. **Photo by Matt Persike**

hands were needed. As may be expected, these workers were subjected to the most dangerous tasks afforded to wartime laborers in Germany. He ended up at a shipyard where he was working with a crew of divers who worked underwater repairing shores and performing subaquatic maintenance.

"We were welding under the water, with flames like this," he said, spreading his arms. "At least."

When winter came and the water froze, Haftarski and a group of some 15 men were told that they were going home.

"They take us on the

train, they even give us sandwiches, you know," Paul said. Although he didn't know what would be waiting for him at home, falling asleep on the train must have been a relief.

"Then I wake up in Berlin," he said, before clarifying, "Not home."

Because of wartime blackouts, Paul and company could hardly see as they were led through a factory in the early morning. He remembers the noise of the men at work with their hammers and the fire that was their only light source. "We looked around and said, 'where we are, in Hell?'"

In fact, they had been sent to an iron factory, where Paul was tasked with making horseshoes – about a thousand a day, he said. This is how he spent the next three years until the end of the war.

Though combat had ceased, Poland post-WWII was vastly different from the country where Paul grew up. His family was gone – he didn't know where – and besides, they'd have no home to return to. After the Warsaw Uprising in 1944, Poland's capital city was evacuated and burned to the ground.

Paul would be put on a ship back to this strange,

new Poland than the one he remembered from his childhood. Now under Soviet control, life was permeated by an omnipresent air of paranoia. He spoke of a friend who disappeared during this time, showing up seven years later.

"He made a joke about Stalin in a tavern. He didn't even make it home," Paul said. "KGB was everywhere. People were scared to talk to each other. Same thing in Germany. Germans talked with us (Poles) but not to each other. They couldn't trust each other."

It was striking how much detail Paul recalls from the years during the war and the daily tasks to which he was assigned – not for the fact of his recollection, but because once he returned to Poland, the story seems to skip a few chapters. He simply said, "I was in Poland about 20 years under this Russian occupation."

During those two decades, his sister married an American soldier and brought her mother along to the United States.

In the mid-60s Paul finally tracked them down in Milwaukee, applied for a Visa to live in the U.S. and two years later made it to Milwaukee. It was another six months to send for his wife and children.

Paul would spend his career in technology and engineering. He can recall schematics and intricacies of radios he built while working in Poland and will

go on at length about circuits. He so excelled with electrical work that his U.S. employer helped him receive his green card earlier than is typical so that he could work on government projects. To this day he tinkers constantly, repairing chairs for friends, building contraptions out of wood, carving and finishing decorative seahorses and birds and spinning tops, even taking apart and rebuilding desktop computers.

He is also active in his church in Rhineland, which is where he met Lottie, who was his companion until her passing in 2021.

When asked for a secret to longevity, Paul's son, John, jumped in: "three women," a joke about Paul's three life partners, all of whom he outlived. But Paul was reticent to respond to the question.

"Oh, I don't know. I didn't think I would be here." He began to tell a story of the three separate times he was declared or believed to be dead, but this was shut down by his daughter-in-law. After more deliberation, he said, "purpose."

*Matt Persike is a library services assistant at Rhineland District Library. In conjunction with RDL and WXPB public radio, he produces the podcast, "If These Woods Could Talk: An Oral History of the Northwoods," available at www.tinyurl.com/mry5bdyy. Watch for Paul's full interview coming soon to the podcast.*

## Colorful Costa Rica November 2024



### 9-DAY JOURNEY

#### TOUR HIGHLIGHTS:

- San Jose • Poas Volcano National Park
- Coffee Plantation Visit • Arenal Volcano National Park
- Sarchi Artisan Village
- Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve
- Selvatura Park & Hanging Bridges
- Butterfly Garden & Hummingbird Gallery
- Manuel Antonio National Park
- Carara National Park • Orchid Garden Tour
- Jungle Crocodile Safari Cruise

#### TOUR INCLUSIONS:

- Roundtrip Airfare - ORD/MSP/MKE
- Int'l Air Departure Taxes, Fuel & Fees
- 14 Meals: 8 Breakfasts & 6 Dinners
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## News Briefs

### National Day of Prayer event

The Associated Clergy of Tomahawk will hold a National Day of Prayer event at Veterans Memorial Park in Tomahawk on Thursday, May 2 at 10:30 a.m. The public is invited to attend. The Color Guard will be present, the St. Mary's Children's Choir will sing, Pastor Carolyn Rauschert will lead prayers and attendees may choose to walk the neighborhoods near their church after the ceremony.

### Grace Lutheran blood drive

A blood drive, sponsored by the American Red Cross, will be held at Grace Lutheran Church, 108 W. Somo Ave., Tomahawk, on Tuesday, May 14 from 11:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Appointments are recommended, but not necessary. To schedule an appointment, call 1-800-733-2767 or visit [www.redcross-](http://www.redcross-blood.org)

[blood.org](http://blood.org). A photo ID or Red Cross ID is required.

### Lincoln County road construction

Lincoln County Interim Highway Commissioner Jason Lemmer advises that road construction will take place on the following roads through Monday, July 15: County Rd. K from Larson Lake to U.S. Hwy. 51; Tug Lake Rd. in the Town of Rock Falls from Woodenware Rd. to Resort Ln.; and County Rd. A from the City of Tomahawk to U.S. Hwy. 8. Roads will be closed to through traffic. Local traffic only. Expect lengthy delays.

### Lincoln County chip sealing

Lincoln County interim Highway Commissioner Jason Lemmer advises that the following roads will be closed for chip sealing operations from Monday, July 1 through Wednesday, July 3,

weather permitting: County Rd. B, from State Hwy. 17 to County Rd. D; County Rd. H, from County Rd. D to County Rd. A; County Rd. A, from U.S. Hwy. 51 to the Wisconsin River; County Rd. A, from Mail Route Rd. to the Lincoln County Line; County Rd. Q, from County Rd. K to Joe Snow Rd.; and County Rd. Z, from County Rd. Q to Fairview Rd.

### Open Arms Community Meal served Tuesdays

Open Arms Community Meal is served each Tuesday at St. Mary's Corpus Christi Center, 320 E. Washington Ave., Tomahawk. The Corpus Christi Center opens at 4 p.m., and the meal begins at 5 p.m. All are welcome to come and share fellowship with old and new friends. To volunteer at the Open Arms Community Meal, call 715-224-3306 and leave a message.

## Tomahawk Public Library seeking community participation in Great Wisconsin Birdathon

### FOR THE TOMAHAWK LEADER

TOMAHAWK – The Tomahawk Public Library (TPL) is asking the community to take part in the Great Wisconsin Birdathon.

This year's Birdathon kicked off on Monday, April 15 and will run through Saturday, June 15.

The Natural Resources of Wisconsin Foundation said the Birdathon is the state's largest fundraiser

for bird conservation.

"It's like a walk-a-thon style fundraiser, but instead of logging miles, our participants are logging bird sightings," the Foundation's website says. "Each year, bird enthusiasts from across the state raise support and awareness for bird conservation by forming a team or donating to a team."

Funds raised will go toward adding material to

TPL's collection that focuses on caring for and/or learning about birds and will benefit the Foundation's bird conservation projects.

Birdathon participants can birdwatch anywhere in Wisconsin and log their sightings at [www.wisconsinconservation.org/great-wisconsin-birdathon/](http://www.wisconsinconservation.org/great-wisconsin-birdathon/).

To learn more about or to contribute to TPL's efforts, visit [www.tinyurl.com/4h83bmvf](http://www.tinyurl.com/4h83bmvf).