

Tiburon writer draws on family history for novel about fighting fascism in 1930s New Jersey

Uncle was boxer backed by Jewish mob to break up pro-Nazi events

By **EMILY LAVIN**

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Leslie Barry grew up hearing stories about her mom's childhood in Newark, N.J. Esther Kaplan was one of five children born to Orthodox Jews who had emigrated from Russia, and Kaplan often shared her memories of living through the Great Depression and World War II with family.

But a few years ago, Kaplan shared a story Barry hadn't heard before. The extended family had gathered to celebrate Kaplan's 90th birthday, and talk among Kaplan and Barry's cousins turned to Kaplan's brother and Barry's uncle, Harry Levine.

Levine had been a champion boxer while in his 20s, even winning a Golden Gloves tournament at Madison Square Garden in 1936. That much Barry knew.

"Then they started talking about, 'Remember when Harry used to come home from beating up the Nazis?'" says Barry, who lives in Tiburon. "I said, 'What do you mean, beating up Nazis?'"

Barry quickly learned her uncle had been a member of the Newark Minutemen, a group of boxers backed by the Jewish mob that formed in the 1930s to combat the pro-Nazi groups popping up in Newark as Adolf Hitler rose to power in Germany. The Minutemen took to breaking up pro-fascist meetings, using force when necessary.



RACHEL SIMPSON / FOR THE ARK

Barry says she felt like she had stumbled onto a slice of history that wasn't widely known.

"I became possessed with understanding the story," she says.

Now Barry, 58, is aiming to share that story with a larger audience through her first novel, "Newark Minutemen," which tells the story of fictional 1930s Jewish boxer Yael Newman as he's recruited into the Minutemen and joins the fight against the rise of fascism in America. The book is inspired by Barry's uncle and based on her research. She notes about 85 percent of the book is based on fact, with some added conflict and romance that are pure fiction.

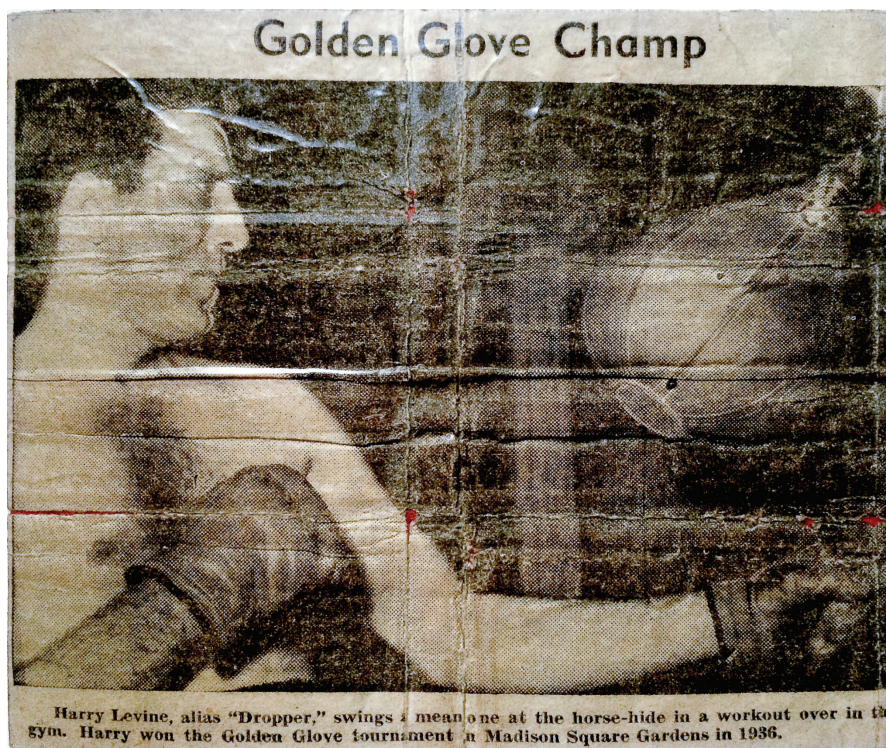
The e-book is out now, with the paperback due to be published by New York-based Morgan James Publishing in December.

Though Hitler's reign and the events of World War II are well documented in history books, often less discussed is the rise of Nazism in the U.S. in the years leading up to the war.

After Hitler became chancellor of Germany in 1933, pro-Hitler groups started forming across America, targeting and attempting to intimidate Jewish communities. Those groups included the German American Bund, led by German-born American citizen Fritz Julius Kuhn, which by 1939 was big enough to fill Madison Square Garden with a rally of 20,000 U.S. Nazi supporters.

Newark, which at the time had a large German-American population, was a hotbed for pro-fascist activity, with supporters of Hitler marching in the streets, screening anti-Semitic films and organizing boycotts of Jewish businesses in the city.

However, the city was also home to the powerful Jewish mob boss Abner



VIA LESLIE BARRY

Leslie Barry's 'Newark Minutemen' is based on the true story of her uncle, a boxer in Newark, N.J., who in the 1930s joined a covert group that aimed to break up pro-Nazi gatherings.

Zwillman, who began smuggling whiskey into New Jersey during Prohibition and later expanded his operations to include illegal gambling, prostitution and labor racketeering.

As pro-Nazi groups in American began to get more aggressive, the U.S. government sent a New York state judge to Meyer Lansky, the head of the Jewish mob in New York, Barry says.

"They said, 'We need your help. There's these German-American Nazis that are creating the same kind of policies here as in Germany, and we need to stop them but we can't because of First Amendment rights,'" Barry says.

In response, she says, Lansky started a group of Minutemen in New York, but

their actions earned them some bad press, and they were ultimately shut down by authorities.

Barry says Lansky went to Zwillman and encouraged him to organize a group in Newark. The Newark Minutemen formed, backed by Zwillman and led by former professional boxer Nat Arno. Other boxers were soon recruited to the group, including Barry's uncle.

Barry noted the job market was tough for children of immigrants — particularly children of Jewish immigrants — during that time, as the Great Depression took its toll on the country.

"You could not get a job, you could not go to college, so what boys did, they boxed," Barry said. "And they got \$100

if they won.”

Another common way for young Jewish men to make money was working side jobs for the local Jewish mob ring, Barry said.

“The group that had the money to give people jobs was the mafia,” Barry says.

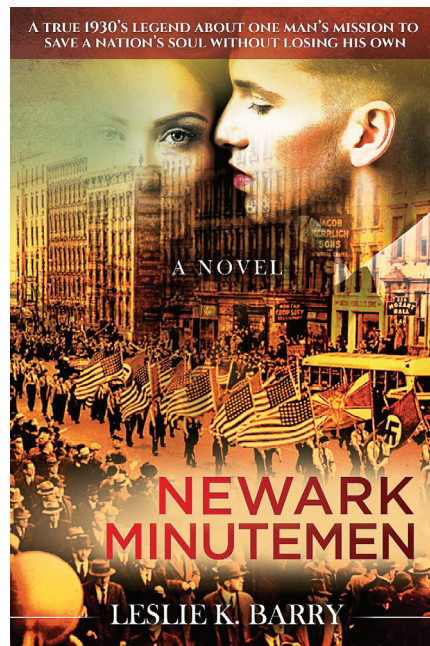
Levine was active in the Minutemen from about 1936 to 1939 and would go on to become a military police officer, Barry says. The Minutemen operated under the radar in Newark from about 1933 into 1941, when the U.S. entered World War II.

Barry pursued a variety of avenues in researching the Minutemen and the time period. She combed the archives of the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, where she was able to access FBI documents as well as personal diaries belonging to John Metcalfe, a Chicago Times reporter who went undercover as a Nazi stormtrooper to gather inside information about the movement in America. She was also able to connect with the relatives of some of the members of the New Jersey crime syndicate that backed the Minutemen and relatives of those who were in the group.

And of course, she relied on accounts from various family members, including her mom, who is now 95 and living in Maryland.

“I mean probably the greatest thing I took out of the experience was the hundreds and hundreds of hours I spent with my mom just trying to understand that time of life,” Barry says.

Barry, who has lived in Tiburon for nearly three decades with her husband, Doug, and their four kids ranging in age from 19 to 29, spent most of her career in entertainment, including a stint working for Turner Broadcasting. She first wrote



read the book

To learn more about “Newark Minutemen,” or to buy the e-book or pre-order the paperback, visit newarkminutemen.com.

the Minutemen story as a screenplay, which she has since sold to London-based production company Fulwell 73.

She says the process of writing the screenplay flowed pretty naturally.

“It just felt like it had always been inside of me,” she says, though she notes she relied on her network of friends in Tiburon for advice about the project and to help her make the needed connections to pitch and sell the screenplay.

After doing that, she says, she decided to write the novel — and that process was a little trickier. She notes it was a challenge to translate the 90-page screenplay into a 350-page book in which she had to more fully articulate the characters.

“That was the biggest thing, getting what the characters were thinking and feeling and their struggles and all of that,” she says.

She had been planning for the book launch in December, but shortly after the coronavirus pandemic began to spread across the U.S., Barry says her publisher called her with a request to launch the e-book in April.

Putting a launch together in a few weeks ended up being a learning experience and a good trial run for the paperback launch in December, Barry says. She focused on promoting the book on social media, did a few virtual book talks in areas around Newark and hosted a virtual discussion for the Jewish sorority one of her daughters belongs to at Cal State Northridge.

She says the latter talk was especially affirming, as it allowed her to see how younger people would respond to the book. Though the book is rooted in American history, Barry says its larger theme is a warning against complacency, a message she notes is strikingly relevant amid America’s current political and social struggles.

“We have to make sure that we’re asking enough questions and we understand the truth, which is hard these days with so many different messages,” she says. “And back then, too, there was so much propaganda.”

Barry says she also hopes readers take away a more personal lesson from reading the book.

“Interview your parents,” she says. “Talk to them, get your history and the history of other people around you before it’s too late, because the stories are amazing when you really get to know them.”