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Stephen M. Felton M.D.

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Holocaust survivor,
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and founder of
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proudly heads into
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DR. STEPHEN FELTON—HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR, GROUNDBREAKING OPHTHALMOLOGIST, AND FOUNDER OF PRINCETON EYE GROUP—PROUDLY HEADS INTO RETIREMENT CONFIDENT THAT HIS PRACTICE IS IN GOOD HANDS.

A Lasting Impact

by **MATT COSENTINO**
photography by **ALISON DUNLAP**



The story of Stephen M. Felton, M.D., Ph.D., is impressive enough even without knowing any of the details about how he ended up in America in the first place. He was 30 years old by the time he decided to attend medical school, and 38 when he founded Princeton Eye Group by himself, working out of a single office in a colleague's ENT practice.

From those humble beginnings, Dr. Felton—together with Michael Y. Wong, M.D., and all the other ophthalmologists who subsequently joined the group—built a thriving practice with three locations and a surgical center. Dr. Felton has been an innovator in the field of ophthalmology and become a beloved physician who has impacted generations of patients. With his retirement in September capping a long and distinguished

career, it is only natural to look back on those accomplishments. Yet they only tell part of the remarkable journey he took to get here.

Born in 1942, amid the chaos of World War II, Dr. Felton was the son of Jewish parents living under German rule in the Warsaw ghetto in Poland. At 10 months, he and his mother were smuggled out because of the escalating danger for Jews, with plans for his father and half-brother to later join them. They never made it; following the Warsaw ghetto uprising, they were taken to Auschwitz and executed.

Dr. Felton and his mother were assisted by a good friend and his family, the Mataczes, who helped them avoid detection by the Germans. She even posed as a Christian, dyeing her dark hair blond and learning

Catholic prayers. Dr. Felton has scattered memories from his youth—of moving from place to place, of playing in the neighborhood with other kids, where they stumbled upon a shed filled with dead bodies.

Against all odds, they somehow managed to survive the horrors they faced. After the war ended, Dr. Felton's mother remarried and they came to the United States in December 1947, greeted by the welcoming sight of the Statue of Liberty.

"There was a huge snowstorm and the ship had to dock in Gravesend Bay, right outside of New York Harbor, for a couple of days," he says. "My mother and all the other passengers would be out on the deck where they could see the Statue of Liberty, and the emotions were unbelievable, coming from where they came from, the Holo-

caust, to this country.

“My sister, who was born here, became a pediatrician, and I became an ophthalmologist,” he continues. “We went to school, we learned, we survived, and we managed to make a life for ourselves, and it’s all because of America. Everybody believed in America, and it really came true.”

Dr. Felton is still surprised at how his career unfolded and the impact that Princeton Eye Group has had for the past 40-plus years.

“When I started the practice, things were slow,” he says. “I still have my appointment book from my first day and I had three appointments, all friends of mine. Now we have three locations plus a surgical center, and we’re very busy. It grew far beyond my expectations.”

Along the way, Dr. Felton embraced the advances in ophthalmology. He was the first doctor in central New Jersey to use intraocular implants during cataract surgery, and later the practice was among the first in the area to offer radial keratotomy, a refractive surgical procedure used to correct nearsightedness. The practice even purchased a YAG laser to assist with cataract surgery before it was approved for reimbursement by Medicare.

“We were at the forefront and provided services that were beneficial, regardless of what the reimbursement was,” Dr. Felton says. “I had an interest in research and basic science, and I wanted to provide the most comprehensive and up-to-date care that I could.”

Dr. Felton is confident that Dr. Wong and a team that now includes 10 ophthalmologists and four optometrists, will continue to provide high-quality care for the communities they serve. He plans on spending retirement with his wife, children, and grandchildren, and pursuing hobbies such as golf, bridge, and travel.

He has made three trips back to Poland, including one in which the Mataczes were honored by the Yad Vashem, Jerusalem’s World Holocaust Remembrance Center, for their brave protection of Dr. Felton and his mother. On another trip with a group of cantors, he visited Auschwitz, where his father and brother were killed, and took rocks from a crematorium at Birkenau, which he later placed at his mother’s grave in Israel.

“That whole trip was extremely meaningful,” he says. “My son, and my daughters have all been there too; they’ve all had some personal involvement in my history, so that’s very special.”

It was around that time when Dr. Felton



started sharing his story more frequently. Although he still gets choked up speaking about his experiences during the Holocaust, he continues to share. His mother never liked talking about it until later in her life, when she gathered her memories for a manuscript. *I Shall Lead You Through the Nights: The Holocaust Memoir of Eva Feldsztein Wasserman*, was published in 2013 with the help of Dr. Felton and his sister.

“Holocaust education is something that’s important because [some] people are denying that there ever was a Holocaust,” Dr. Felton says. “I have tremendous sympathy for what’s going on in Ukraine because people are trying to live their lives in a normal fashion and they’re getting killed for no reason. That’s exactly what happened during the Holocaust in Poland and elsewhere. It’s important for future generations to realize this can happen, and if there’s something we can do to prevent it, we should.”

As for the end of his ophthalmology career, Dr. Felton has mixed emotions. While he looks forward to retirement, his thoughts will remain with his patients, some of whom he has been seeing for 40 years.

“It’s like they’re part of my family and I’m part of theirs,” he says. “It’s sad to say goodbye. Ophthalmology is that kind of a practice: Some patients are seen on a regular basis because they have a condition such as glaucoma, and some just come in for regular eye exams because it’s a good thing to do, to make sure nothing is going on. I’ve seen patients for a long time, and I will miss them.” ■

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For more information on
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including details about
its locations in Princeton,
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New Jersey, visit
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