SURVIVORS URGE WORLD TO NEVER FORGET

Sorrow, hope mark Holocaust Remembrance Day

The Blade: Sunday, April 11, 2010

By RYAN E. SMITH
BLADE STAFF WRITER

Living through the Holocaust was one thing. Remembering it is another.

Clara Rona still remembers the smell of human flesh being incinerated at Auschwitz, seeing smoke wafting through the air and knowing it was somebody's mother.

She won't allow herself to forget a moment — not the beatings, the hunger, or the baby who was killed in a toilet in her presence. At age 89, the West Toledo woman still talks openly about the horrors of which humanity is capable.

And yet.

"I wish I had dementia," she says, pleading in her Hungarian accent. "I don't want to remember."

Between 150,000 and 170,000 survivors of the Holocaust probably remain in this country, according to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and there are fewer than a dozen believed to live in the Toledo area. All face the same dilemma: How to balance the responsibility of being the last living threads to the systematic killing of 6 million Jews with the pain of memory.

Today is Yom HaShoah, or Holocaust Remembrance Day. Now and in the days to come people will gather at events to urge the world, "Never again! Never forget!"

But Rena Mann won't be among them.

The 83-year-old has never opened up to anyone — not her late husband nor her children — about what she endured in two concentration camps during World War II. Maybe it's because it hurts too much. Or maybe it's because she's afraid the world doesn't want to know.

"Do people care?," the Sylvania Township woman asked. "On the one hand I don't want it to be forgotten, and on the other hand I feel that people are really, in the future, not going to care."

Pain and suffering

Born in Berlin, Mrs. Mann was 12 and living in Poland when the war began. After her mother died of blood poisoning and her stepfather was trapped in a newly formed ghetto, she was sent to stay with family in another town.

This was no death camp, but already the terror had begun. She remembers being awakened in the night and sent to the market to watch Jews being hanged. Their crime? Baking bread, which was forbidden.

"As an example they were hung, and we all had to watch it," Mrs. Mann said.

Before she turned 14, Mrs. Mann was sent away to a factory and forced into slave labor. It was hard work involving water and spools of flax that left her fingers and feet frostbitten.

Mostly what she remembers is the hunger. There was a bit of bread that was supposed to last three days and some potato soup at night that might not have any potato at all.

Clara Rona survived time at the death camp Auschwitz.

"We got, like we used to say, too much to die from and too little to exist," Mrs. Mann said.

Two years later she moved to another camp, where she slept in an abandoned factory with broken windows, no water or privacy, and vicious guards who would kick and push. A Polish song written by her girlfriends still resounds in her head. It concludes:

Who knows if I'll ever see / My mother's tender home. / This is a song of despair, / Of Jewish pain and suffering.

"That song is always with me and I don't want to take it with me to my grave," Mrs. Mann said.

She never talked about the four years she spent in camps before being liberated in 1945. No one really asked.

"I am actually a coward," she said. "It's true. Because I am pushing it away, or have been pushing it away."

Maybe now, though, after all these years, the pain is far enough behind her that she can let it out.

Eyewitnesses

Mrs. Mann isn't alone in her hesitation, according to Arthur Berger, senior adviser at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. But as survivors continue to die at a rapid rate, it becomes more and more crucial to record their stories — in print or on video but also in person, he said.

"Nothing compares to a real person telling you about their own lives," Mr. Berger said. "No one can replace the survivors. No one can replace the eyewitnesses to history."

Rolf Hess, 75, of Holland was one of those

eyewitnesses, but he never spoke of what happened during the war until last year when a granddaughter interviewed him for a school project about his experience as an immigrant.

"That sort of opened up a can of worms on my part," he said. "It has been in the past, and it still is, a very difficult thing.

The native of Germany was not even 5 years old when the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939. Yet he has vivid, emotional memories of being separated from his mother after they were taken to a camp and split up from his father.

Rena Mann never spoke of her Holocaust experience.

"We were at a train station, just my mother and I," he said, voice cracking. "That I remember. And she gave me a little book that I still have with some pertinent information, with my birth date."

To this day he doesn't know what happened to his family. All he remembers is rummaging through garbage at a children's camp looking for food and being scared to death, even after escaping to America in 1942 with other children as a refugee.

"I can remember in Cleveland where I was out in the backyard and I heard an airplane and I scurried underneath a bench for protection," he said.

Only recently has he started investigating his own past to fill in the gaps of his memory.

"I finally have come to grips with the whole situation," he said.

'Dying in slow motion'

For Dr. Aron Wajskol, 85, of West Toledo, the question has never been whether to share his horrible story — the way his starving father died in a ghetto, how his mother perished at the death camp Auschwitz, how he nearly succumbed to the bone-crushing work of concentration camps.

For him, the question was how. How do you make someone understand what it was like?

"It's like describing being on the moon," the retired anesthesiologist said. "Hearing about the facts and truly understanding the facts are different things."

The son of a textile factory worker in central Poland, Dr. Wajskol remembers the restrictions that went into effect within days of Germany invading his country. His father's job was taken away. His school was closed. Jews were forbidden from using public transportation and forced to wear Stars of David to distinguish them from non-Jews.

"Many families who could afford [to] fled Europe," Dr. Wajskol said. "Mine couldn't."

Within months, the city's Jewish population was forced out of its homes and squeezed into a tiny ghetto. It had no sewer system and little running water. People were dying in the streets of starvation — Dr. Wajskol calls it "dying in slow motion" — and corpses went unburied for days.

"Even in death it was suffering," said Dr. Wajskol, who was 17 at the time.

His father was among those wasting away, and he eventually died of tuberculosis.

All the while, Jews were rounded up and deported. At first for work, later for extermination. When Dr. Wajskol was taken to a labor camp in 1944, hauling around 110-pound sacks of cement while surviving on bits of bread actually seemed like a reprieve.

"At least death wasn't surrounding us," Dr. Wajskol said. "We knew they needed us. We were productive for them."

To keep himself going, Dr. Wajskol imagined that there would be an end to all of this one day, that he could go back to school, that he would see his mother and sister again. His sister managed to survive but had to watch her mother be sent to the gas chamber.

This continued for 10 months until he was evacuated to the Buchenwald concentration camp due to the Soviet advance. After spending five days locked up in a crowded cattle car with no food or water, where he had no choice but to sit on a dead body, he was released to something even more frightening: SS guards with skulls on their caps, terrifying German shepherds, and the skeletal faces of the prisoners.

"It looked like a nightmare," he said.

Here he learned the pain of standing for hours in the penetrating cold of winter without socks or underwear. In a subcamp where his first job was to even out rocks for a steam roller, he came to understand the Nazi goal of "annihilation through work."

Before long, he was on the move again, this time on foot to escape the approaching Americans.

"This was a real, real death march," Dr. Wajskol said.

They marched through patches of snow from dawn until the evening, always under the watchful eye of the SS, who were ready to shoot the slow or weak. Still, Dr. Wajskol and a friend managed to escape, dashing into the forest and running until they were out of breath.

Dr. Wajskol will never forget how he felt once the war was over.

"Feeling free after 5½ years of slavery, playing with death constantly, I can't describe it with normal language," he said.

But he tries. He has told his story to high school students and traveled to his old home in Poland with his wife and son.

“In the beginning it was very hard to revive all these things,” he said. “[But] I strongly believe that it's important to talk about it, make people aware of it, because of the enormity of what happened.”

Aron Wajskol survived a death march during the war.

Trinity of terror

As director of the Ruth Fajerman Markowicz Holocaust Resource Center of Greater Toledo, Hindea Markowicz knows about the importance of preserving this history. As the daughter-in-law of Holocaust survivors, she feels it too.

“I have worries because history in the schools is being taught so differently,” she said. “It's lucky if they have a paragraph included in the history books.”

The resource center, housed in the offices of the United Jewish Council of Greater Toledo in Sylvania, on the other hand, features hundreds of books and other educational materials. There are videos of local survivors and a book written by her father-in-law, Philip Markowicz, called *My Three Lives*, which includes his experiences during the Holocaust.

It's one thing to read about these events in books, quite another to hear about them from someone in person. That's why Mr. Markowicz, 86, of Sylvania has told his tale and why Sylvania Township resident Al Negrin speaks to students in Florida, where he spends the winter.

“I talk because I want people to know what was going on, so they have a chance, if something happens again, to prevent it,” said the 86-year-old from Greece.

Mr. Negrin — whose mother, brother, and sister went with him to Auschwitz but were immediately sent to the crematorium — recalls a trinity of terror: the German guard who stood threatening with a rifle butt, the civilian supervisor with a whip, and the fellow inmate in charge of the group armed with a stick.

“Everybody was yelling, ‘Arbeit! Arbeit!' Work! Work! Work! If you stop for a while to take a breath, one of those three objects will come over your head.”

It was not sustainable and his father eventually succumbed while moving to another camp. It was just a week before the group was liberated.

“My father was weak, could not walk. I tried to get him with my shoulders but the German guard said ‘No, you can't do that because after a while then you'll be weak,'” Mr. Negrin said.

“I left him in the side of the street. I kissed him good-bye, and that's the last time I saw him.”

He never talks about it'

Norman Gudelman, 78, went about sharing his story in another way. He wrote it down.

It took more than six decades and some prodding from his wife, but he finally took his suffering and made it tangible. The result is a sprawling letter to his children on the occasion of his 75th birthday. It covers everything from his youth in modern-day Moldova to his escape to Palestine after the war to his arrival in America.

Mr. Gudelman of Sylvania Township remembers being carefree as a youth, despite the anti-Semitism that was prevalent around him. His restaurant-owning parents shielded him from the world's hate, at least until the Soviets arrived in 1940, arresting and executing Jews and banishing others to Siberia.

When Romanian forces returned in 1941 with the Germans, things were no better.

“Romanian soldiers came to our house, and ordered all the Jews out,” Mr. Gudelman wrote in his letter. “Start walking. Leave the home, the business, our possessions and go.”

He was 10 years old then. Today, Mr. Gudelman is happy to talk about his experience during the war, but there's a sense he'd prefer to defer to his written statement than relive — yet again — what happened in too much detail.

“He never talks about it,” said his wife, Fanny. “I don't ask questions. I want it [to] come from him.”

When he does speak, Mr. Gudelman can tell you about how the group marched endlessly from one camp to another, begging for food when there was a chance to slip away. In the camps, they crowded into windowless rooms and slept on cement floors.

“They wanted to get rid of us,” he said.

It worked. He and his sister were orphaned within a year or two

That may be what saved them. When the Soviets returned and chased the German and Romanian armies out, orphans were sent to ghettos to stay with Jewish families, Mr. Gudelman said. From there, he eventually made his way to the future state of Israel. Thanks to a relative in Toledo, Mr. Gudelman ultimately came here and became president of State Paper & Metal Co., Inc.

He decided to write all this down for posterity, he said, because, “sooner or later I'm going to forget, or sooner or later I'm going to pass away.”

His letter's message is simple: “Maybe in your lifetime you will read books about the unbelievable cruelty of those times. Believe them.”

Finding hope

Then there's Mrs. Rona, who insists on picking away at the scabs of the past.

“I want to remind myself,” she said. “They say I'm a

masochist — my friends, my psychologist."

Her reminiscences rarely come without a few tears, but maybe it's for the best.

"When I'm crying, really it's good for me," she said.

The only child of a butcher in Pecs, Hungary, Mrs. Rona wanted to be an art teacher, but those plans were scuttled when the Germans invaded. Her family was relocated from its large house, and at one point they were living in a stable. Later they were among those taken to Auschwitz, 80 people squeezed into each rail car.

Mrs. Rona was 23 — tough, young, and strong — but also naive. All she brought was a change of clothes and a bottle of cologne, which she used to wash her mother when she fainted. Mrs. Rona still regrets that she never traded the latter for water despite her mother's pleas.

"I feel guilty," she said. "I cannot forgive myself."

It was night when they arrived and they were divided into two lines. Her mother and aunt went to the left — "straight to the gas," Mrs. Rona said. Her father was transferred to another concentration camp and later died.

Mrs. Rona divided her time between several camps and remembers it as a dazed experience.

"You think about food, but nothing else. You become like an animal," she said. "One spoon of soup means one day's survival.

"There was electric wire. Some people ran into it because they couldn't take it and they got killed," she continued.

Mrs. Rona, who found out after the war that she could not bear children, is certain that it is the result of her treatment during the war. None of the women in the camp menstruated, she said.

When one woman gave birth to a child in the camp, Mrs. Rona said she was forced to be present as it was put in a toilet by fellow prisoners. Otherwise, both the mother and baby would have been executed, she said.

When the camp was evacuated in April, 1945, as the end of the war approached, Mrs. Rona said she was in no shape for walking. Desperate, she and another woman hid in the rain under some bushes and simply waited for the group to head off before dawn.

When she finally made her way to safety in Prague, Mrs. Rona estimates that she weighed about 50 pounds. She went back home hoping to find her father, but he was gone forever — along with more than 50 other family members. Only three cousins survived

"I was so angry," she said. "Still the anger, it's burned me."

Even as she left for Palestine and made her way to Toledo, where she worked with children at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Toledo, that anger never left.

How could it when there were mass killings in the former Yugoslavia? Rwanda? Darfur?

"I thought after, when we got freed, the world will be so beautiful. They'll learn," she said. "They didn't because it's repeating the same things somewhere else in a different way."

And yet.

Mrs. Rona still speaks, making public her private hell. She does this because 65 years after the Holocaust she still has something that can offset the pain:

Hope.

ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST

•**WHAT:** The state-sponsored systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators. The Nazis believed that Germans were "racially superior" and that the Jews, deemed "inferior," were a threat to the so-called German racial community.

•**WHEN:** Between 1933 and 1945

•**WHO:** An estimated 6 million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust. Other groups persecuted by the Nazis included Roma, the disabled, some Slavic peoples, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and political dissidents.

SOURCE: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum