

# Holocaust survivor brings message to youngsters

By DANIEL SCHWAB

More than 60 years after it happened, Windsor resident Magda Berger can still vividly retell the story of her experience as a Jewish girl in a Nazi concentration camp.

Silence fell over the group of two Grade 7 classes at Holy Name School Nov. 30, as Berger provided a detailed account of her struggle to survive the Holocaust.

"I was just a little bit older than you kids," said Berger, a small, be-spectacled woman with gray hair.

One April night during Passover in 1942, 14-year-old Berger and her family were woken up when soldiers arrived at the door of their home in Hungary, she told the students.

They were told to pack up whatever belongings they could carry and leave.

The family, along with other Jews from the area, were then loaded into trucks and taken to a nearby ghetto.

Unable to leave, Berger could no longer attend her Catholic school and her parents were no longer allowed to go to work. The family was forced to survive on whatever rations were provided.

Berger stayed in the ghetto for six weeks, living on very little food and sharing a room with six to eight people.

"We were like slaves," Berger said. "We worked without pay. It was unbelievable how bad it was."

Then, during the late hours of one night in May, police guards came and took Berger, her parents, and her three siblings to a nearby train station.

"There was nothing you could do," Berger recalled. "There was a whole line of cattle cars. We didn't know what that was for. We later learned it was for our transportation."

As many people as possible were packed into each car, leaving no room to sit and barely any room to stand, Berger said.

The family wasn't told where they were going.

Without food, many didn't survive the trip, including elderly people and babies, Berger said.

Two days later, they ended up in Auschwitz, the largest concentration camp in Poland.

When the doors of the train were opened, a line of Nazi SS officers carrying machine guns met the captives.

After stepping off into the camp, Berger was hit by a horrible stench.

"It was unbelievable," she told the students. "We soon found out this was from the ovens. They were built for systematically burning people. I don't know if you kids ever smelled burning skin or hair, but you can't imagine how sickening it is."

They were then told to undress, had their hair shaved off



Holocaust survivor Magda Berger shows students at Holy Name School photographs from her visit to Auschwitz, Poland in 1992. Berger shared with students her experiences as a young Jewish girl in a Nazi concentration camp.

and taken inside a room to shower.

"One had water and the others had gas," Berger said. "Those people not strong enough to work went to the gas chamber. I was young and healthy enough I guess so I didn't get gassed. But for others, that was the last day of their lives. That was the last time I saw my father."

The rest of the family stayed in Auschwitz for three

months, surviving on meager meals of bread and black coffee.

From there they were taken to different factories to work.

Three weeks later, Berger's mother was taken away. She would be unsure of her fate until after the war.

Berger and her sister were then taken to another concentration camp in Krakow, Poland.

Wearing rags for clothes and wooden clogs for shoes, the girls were put to work building an airport runway.

Berger described to the students the daily horrors the workers sustained while at the camp.

"SS men were always there with dogs," she recalled. "One time, there was one officer, I don't know if he was drunk or having fun. He counted out every ten people in line and shot them. That was the type of conditions we were living with every day."

After the runway was finished, the girls were transported back to Auschwitz and then to an ammunition factory where they stayed until the end of the war.

They reunited with their mother and two brothers and headed back to their home in Hungary.

But the devastations of war had left few opportunities for work in the area and the family decided to start a new life in Canada.

A day after arriving in Windsor, Berger met her future husband, Harvey.

Harvey, a Polish Jew, spent five years in concentration camps and was the only member of his family to survive the war.

In 1992, the couple joined a group of Holocaust survivors and revisited Auschwitz.

"I have to tell you, it was very hard to go back to the camps," Berger told the students. "There's plaques that tells you what went on there, but nobody that wasn't there can really comprehend or imagine what it was like."

Asked by one of the students about how she lives with the horrors of her past, Berger said, "It takes time. You can either go through life hating people or eating your heart out thinking about why it happened...I chose not to go through life hating."

After telling students her story, Berger had a message for the youngsters.

"We have to stand up for each other, we only have one world," she said. "If we're quiet when people persecute each other, we're not going to have a world."

Holy Name School Grade 7 teacher Laura Andreozzi said she hopes the students will be able to walk away from the presentation with bigger hearts and a stronger awareness about the dangers of stereotypes.

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