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Holocaust survivor delivers anti-bullying message

Vaughan Road Academy students hear from woman forced into concentration camp as a teen

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Hedy Bohm was about the age of most of the students she visited Monday at Vaughan Road Academy when her sheltered life was turned upside down.

"I never encountered racism and anti-Semitism in my life," said Bohm, growing up as an only child born in Oradea, Romania. "The first time was when my mom sewed a yellow star on my coat."

That was 1944. In March of that year when Bohm was in Grade 10, her principal sadly told the Jewish students in the school there would be no more class for them. A month later, her family was forced out of their home and transported in a cramped boxcar for days without food and water to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Bohm is a Holocaust survivor. More than 60 years later, the attentive students at the Oakwood Avenue and Vaughan Road school listened to her story in honour of the 31st annual

'I want to tell you how important it is to be aware and not to be a bystander when you see prejudice, racism, bullying.'

— Hedy Bohm

Holocaust Education Week.

"I want to tell you how important it is to be aware and not to be a bystander when you see prejudice, racism, bullying," said Bohm, warning otherwise the consequences can be severe, even today. "It can escalate like it did in my time."

She told the students that no one wanted to believe the rumours about how the Jewish population in surrounding countries were being treated by the Nazis during the Second World War.

ARRIVED IN AUSCHWITZ

But in the spring of 1944, when Bohm arrived in Auschwitz, she learned the hard truth.

"We became second and third

class citizens, then no class at all," Bohm said.

German Nazi soldiers with guns and dogs on leashes separated the men from the women.

"I didn't even have time to say goodbye to my father," said Bohm, who never saw him again.

Then the women were separated. Bohm never saw her mother again, either.

The group she was in had been stripped naked, pushed into a room and given a cold shower. The other group of women and children, she learned later, didn't survive.

"They were taken into similar rooms, told to undress. When they did, it was poison gas, not water. They suffocated," said Bohm, who, for the first time in her life, was alone. "I had to find a way to survive."

She endured the early mornings, standing for hours during the daily roll calls. She drank the soup that was "worse than dish water" and had gravel and stones in it just to get whatever nutrients were available to keep her strength up.

Three months later, Bohm was selected along with her aunt and two cousins to be transported to a German factory where V2 rocket parts were assembled.

It was there she received a glimmer of hope, receiving a note by a French prisoner of war who wrote to keep hope because the Allies were advancing.

"That was the first and only news we had since we left our homes," said Bohm. "I never forgot his kindness."

LIBERATION

And the day finally came on April 14, 1945 when they were liberated by the Americans – a second birthday for Bohm from that day forward.

After decades of trying to forget her horrific past, she decided to speak out to educate

the next generation who she believed can make today's society a better place to live in.

"Not everyone was a Nazi, but there were too many bystanders, too many people afraid to stand up," Bohm addressed the students.

"Don't be like that."

Dylan Ungermer Sears said she learned a lot from hearing Bohm's story.

"Standing up to any hatred is very important," said Dylan, who is in Grade 12 and currently the president of the school's Jewish Culture Club.

Her younger sister Ilana, a Grade 10 student, said it really helped her understand the Holocaust experience and was amazed how Bohm was her age now when she was taken to Auschwitz.

Principal Joe Santalucia commended the students for inviting Bohm in time for Holocaust Education Week.

"It was a very powerful message," he said.

"This year, thanks to the kids, we're hoping to raise the awareness."

Community

AUCTION ACTION AT YORK WEST

ON THE BLOCK: At far right, Pamela Somers showcases a pair of candle holders up for bidding during a fund-raising auction at the York West Active Living Centre Friday afternoon. Above right, Marilyn Thaxter takes bids. Lower right, Cathy Cope displays a book for sale, one of the new or re-gifted items on the block.

